

## THE SINGLES CHAMPION

By ELIZABETH HAN

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*I stopped going to therapy  
because I knew my therapist was right  
and I wanted to keep being wrong.  
I wanted to keep my bad habits  
like charms on a bracelet.  
I did not want to be brave.  
I think I like my brain best  
in a bar fight with my heart.  
I think I like myself a little broken.  
I'm ok if that makes me less loved.  
I like poetry better than therapy anyway.  
The poems never judge me  
for healing wrong.*

“I Stopped Going To Therapy” – Clementine von Radics

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Just after Stojanović struck the lineswoman with his errant forehand, Harry said the look on the Serbian’s face resembled a smashed scrambled egg and scallion pancake, as the reigning Australian and French Open champion, gunning for his first Golden Slam, covered his mouth with the hand which was not still gripping the racquet. The chair umpire frowned, but only said thirty-fifteen. The crowd murmured and hushed again, while the lineswoman held up her hand to indicate she was okay.

“Close shave,” Harry said, whistling. “Remember Dubai?”

Lydia adjusted her sunglasses against the three-p.m. sun drumming down on her walnut hair, wishing she had brought a hat. She reached for her glass. “Do I,” she said.

A finger of amber liquid remained inside, just covering half of a shrivelled strawberry, the pink umbrella the drink had arrived with discarded to the side of her salad and casting a shadow shaped like a mushroom on their table. She made quick work of the cider. Then she picked up the coaster beneath the glass and twirled it for a moment, examining the one side, fire-engine red, and the other, vivid green, each stamped with the infinity logo of the rooftop bar at the center in gold filigree. She replaced it, red side up. She wanted to rub at her stomach, which still hurt from going to the loo a minute ago, but desisted, not wanting Harry to ask again if something was wrong.

When they had first arrived at the Oval Space, after the disaster of Box Park, and Harry had stood the opening round, the bearded server had planted each of their pints, a Kopparberg pear cider for her and a Redchurch stout for Haz, on a cardboard paddle and explained that if they wanted a refill of the same, they could turn it over and leave it at the corner of the table to indicate their preferences—green meaning *‘nother bevvy, please*, and red meaning *good for now—bugger off*. She thought it was quite smart, the system. But as soon as the man moved to the adjacent tables, Haz snickered and called the coasters out as an affectation and another sign of the incurability of the neighbourhood. Harry had always hated drinking in Bethnal Green. Only the previous month, in a Camden-based indie rock magazine to which he still subscribed even while at Yale, in order to, he claimed, “feel more English,” Haz had learned that Peckham was the new Dalston, a statement with which he concurred and hoped to verify during this three-week summer break back in London. He was constantly looking for the next big end to drink in, and

felt he had personally discovered and turned the fortunes of two particular alehouses in New Haven, where he had just completed the first year of a program supposedly leading towards a doctorate in cellular biomechanics, studying how fluid flow over something called an osteocyte excited calcium channels and made a bunch of things light up when viewed under a microscope. No matter how many times he explained it to her, the project still sounded like a whole lot of gibberish to Lydia.

Haz, stretching out his long legs beneath the table, reapplied some sunblock in a stripe over his nose from a small bottle he carried in the pocket of his new chinos, and finished by smearing it towards his ears and slightly overgrown curls. Lydia watched him out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to pinch his cheek, right at the dimple, digging her fingernail into it. And to inform him that Nantucket Red was the most shambolic colour for a pair of trousers she'd ever heard. She didn't even want to go in on the Sperry topsiders for which Haz had traded in the typical round-toe derbies he had donned every summer since sixth-form in pursuit of the Sloane Square look.

"Why isn't he disqualified?" she asked.

"It wasn't on purpose," Harry said.

"Neither was Dubai."

"But this is during a point, not between. In Dubai, he clearly swung in anger. Down a set, seventh deuce on a break point to get back on serve and he double-faulted. Come on, Lyddie," Harry said, pushing her shoulder with a palm that still smelled cloyingly of sunblock. "I thought you said you remembered."

Lydia batted at a fly that crept a bit too close to the remains of ribs on his plate. "I think racquet abuse is worse," she said.

"You would make any excuse for Ollie," he said.

"As you would for Niko."

"Sure. Except I don't just pull for Niko because I think he's fit," Harry said, shaking his head.

There had been no possibility at all of squeezing into Box Park that day to watch the much-anticipated championship match. Those well-off enough, of course, watched it in person from Centre Court at SW19 with sparkling Pimm's cups and strawberries peaked with cream, and some paid the twenty-five quid for access to the grounds and the humongous screen on Henman Hill. But all of the rest of the nation had, it seemed, collectively descended upon the rooftops and patios of the city to witness the first and third seeds in the Gentleman's Singles competition, also ranked number one and two in the world currently, slug it out over the best three of five sets. Not a spare seat was to be found in any establishment furnishing a telly with drinks, and Box Park, recently named the most fashionable row of pop-up shops in the city, had swelled and swarmed with swearing half-clothed revellers like a welter of wasps, its coal-black second-floor railings squeezing imprints into suntanned, tattooed skin as the crowd kept clamouring for entrance near a dour-faced bouncer at the bottom of the steps. As they had agreed over Skype while he was packing for his flight home, Harry and Lydia had met an hour before the match was scheduled to begin. Haz had hailed a black cab from the King's Road and she had Tubed down on the Northern Line from her shared flat at Brent Cross, both in high spirits, only to find, on arrival, that the queue to get up stretched around the block. The owners of the storefronts at street level, despite also closely following the score on their mobiles, could be heard whingeing to one another. The crowds were blocking access to their designer natural-fibre garments, hand-painted stoneware, and ethically-sourced coffee grounds, they cried. *All this just for tennis*, for two blokes in Wimbledon whites whacking a fuzzy yellow ball over a net on fortnight-worn grass courts. No wonder the country was going to bits. And never mind that one of them

could become the first British gentlemen's singles champion since Fred Perry in 1936, even if he was Scottish and did not really count.

With her mobile jammed between her ear and shoulder, Lydia had yanked her arm out of the vise-like grasp of Harry, who had been beckoning her to join the queue, while checking with Olivia for somewhere else to watch the match. Liv, with whom Lydia and Haz had roomed while at Reading for uni, always knew the good spots. She had directed them to the bank of the canal, and from there, to a disused parking lot outside a graffiti-painted warehouse-looking structure. Knocking five times at a door lacking a knob and whispering BUDGE when it swung open had granted them entry past the grotty lower levels, still bearing confetti and discarded cans of lager from gigs during the week, and up three narrow flights of stairs, finally opening up to the hipster secret that was the Oval Bar.

"Can't see the screen that well," Harry said.

Lydia, too, had noticed the screens lacked protection like the giant umbrellas at Box Park, as though the owners at Oval had set everything up to make as much quid as possible when they realized after semi-final day that Ollie Budge might actually win. Each time the sun thwarted a cloud, the glare pulled the spectators closest to the action out of their seats, and in so doing, towed everyone behind along with them. She was thankful that Harry stood well over six feet and sometimes gave her a lift so she would not miss the finish of a crucial winner skidding off the grass. At least he remained a gentleman that way. Apart from that occasional annoyance, the venue held a certain shabby charm that Lydia had come to love about East London since finally moving to the city for postgraduate studies, honouring the childhood pact they had made. Warm frosted fairy lights and flower pots spewing daffodils and morning glories hung from hooks against walls of unvarnished wood all the way towards the kiosk where the servers poured the drinks. Atop this makeshift circular bar, alongside pitchers of pre-mixed Pimm's, chalkboards displayed a menu of hot dogs, burgers, short ribs, watermelon with feta, and deep-fried courgette strips, the latter of which Haz had ordered to start while Lydia, acid tickling the base of her esophagus, had asked whether a house salad could be constructed off-menu. The majority of the clientele, including the two friends, sat in the center at round pub-style tables, but other late arrivals had squeezed onto rows of shiny bleachers someone had had the foresight to cram into one corner. Against the smoggy sulphuric sky, the twin iron cages of the Bethnal Green gas containers surveyed the dining space like unimpressed sentinels. Left over from the intermittent showers the day before, wide continent-shaped moisture patches still marked its artificial grass turf, but the forecast was less of a bother to fans now that the new retractable roof at Wimbledon meant no more weather delays at Centre Court—not like the afternoons after school in the mid-00s when Haz and Lydia had formed a single bump in his living room in Wokingham under a blanket to watch the matches and root for Tim Henman. She remembered the ball boys running the tarp in a line across the court, the players cramming their gear in duffels to brood over either maintaining or manhandling the momentum in their changerooms. Haz getting up to piss, saying that they should switch to football until it stopped. He had always been too nervous to listen to the rain commentary, especially when the score ran against Tim.

"I can't see who's serving," Harry said, standing up, making a show of placing his hand against his prominent eyebrows, and sitting down again. "What's the score in the set?"

"Five-all? Or it could be three-two, Stojanović serving. Forty-fifteen. Might have to check on your phone," Lydia said. "At least we can hear the commentary."

"God, who is that? Boris Becker? And Tim should have just stuck to coaching after retirement. What's he going on about now. Comparing the players' boxes, what rubbish."

"Hey," she said. "I happen to find that entertaining. You can tell a lot about players by their mums and girlfriends."

“You fancy Ollie’s mum too?”

“No more than you do Niko’s wife,” she shot back.

Harry snickered and shoved more ribs into his mouth. “Speaking of wives. Where’s Paddy today?” he asked.

Lydia scratched at the mosquito bite on her arm and forced smooth the crease which threatened to divide her forehead at the name. Given an opening, Haz would only smell blood and make it worse. With her sandal, she kicked at the Tesco bag under the table, where she had left the box of red velvet cupcakes for Haz as a welcome-back to keep them from melting under the sun, the ones she’d forgotten to bring him the day before when they met at South Bank to walk the river before the gig. Why must he behave this way? If she said anything, she was sure to betray what she didn’t want him to know, that Patrick had asked her to go away with him on minibreak to Paris the next weekend on the Eurostar, staying at a place his aunt had in the sixteenth arrondissement. She had told Patrick she would think about it.

“Volunteering,” she said. “For the campaign.”

“Right, our little Cameron toady. How’s the coalition?” he said. “I’ve not followed. American politics is fascinating. Have you heard of gerrymandering? It’s like—”

Lydia shushed him. “I can’t hear what Boris is saying.”

“He said the temperature is forty on court. Your boy’s going to struggle. Maybe even cry again.”

She made a face, though she secretly worried the same. They were deep into the third set. Stojanović had taken the first set fairly easily at 6-3. Ollie had tested the Serbian’s serve early, earning three break points, but Stojanović had then converted his own first break point with an ace perfectly placed in the T and cleaved to his serve, according to Haz, “like Lady Liberty to her torch” thereafter, until a lucky bounce gave Ollie the crucial advantage he needed to take the second, 6-4. Both players’ first serve percentages hovered, almost unheard-of, above seventy-five. Dastardly drop shots, overhead smashes, neat little flicking volleys traded at the net had punctuated the first twenty or so games, but as the third set drew on, grunts from both ends grew more desperate, each punishing exchange of groundstrokes pushing the players further behind the baseline. Dancing like a mosquito, Stojanović dived for a backhand with his entire body and swatted it right out of Ollie’s reach, the Scot nearly barreling into the side barrier. As the two players changed ends again, a ball girl ran Ollie a famous green and purple towel with the crossing racquets logo of the All-England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, in which he buried his face, a red prune dot covered in shine and exertion, like a sheik. The entirety of the United Kingdom knew he was knackered, partly from pressure and still recovering from a marathon five-setter with Del Estero in the semi when he had saved consecutive match points. He kept removing his cap and rejamming it over his curls, while shouting to himself, “Come on!” and Lydia felt her own fists clench each time he did so.

“Codswallop. It’s his time,” she said. The year before, against Del Estero, he had relinquished a handsome lead and shed tears on court at the presentation ceremony and through each interview and into the car, led by his famously-fierce mum, Fiona, who held a magazine over his face and screamed at the paps to leave him alone. Another trampling of nausea reared up at her navel and she winced against it, unsure if it was from the match, Patrick, or the medication, the small purple box with the gold shield on it, though empty of its blister pack, still in her purse. She should have remembered to toss it in a bin at home.

“How reasonable our little Midlands lad is,” Harry had said of Patrick, after Lydia introduced the two seven months before at Christmas holidays, in a pub in Camden Town, following a small exhibition featuring some of her paintings which one of her mentors at University College London had organized for the

students in her MFA program. He had waited till Patrick went to buy the next round and offered her a significant smile, made worse when Patrick returned and started heaping sweets onto a napkin for her while complimenting her little triptych, two self-portraits, one from the left of her face and one from the right, and a view of an outdoor yoga class downward-dogging atop Hampstead Heath, and insisting he would purchase one to hang in his office. Lydia had wished Patrick would stop apologizing for the impossibility of his getting away for the exhibition despite begging his boss and offering to work the weekend in compensation. Worse still, his effusions over her paintings derived purely from photographs she had emailed him at his request, for she would not allow anyone, except Haz of course, glimpses of her pieces in-person whilst unfinished.

“How dearly he loves your chartreuses and fuschias,” Haz had mimicked. “Thinks you’re the next David Hockney, he does.”

“How’d you two meet?” Liv had asked. She had also had not expected the late addition to their party when, fresh from the Underground, Patrick had practically spurted through the doors of the pub loaded with shopping—he had brought a small token for each of Lydia’s friends—and *fait les bises* one at a time with three sets of cheeks. Lydia couldn’t very well explain that Patrick basically invited himself everywhere.

“He cruised her in front of the Tate Britain,” Haz answered for Lydia. “Or so she claims. She was crossing the street and he was riding a Boris bike and took a roundabout back to get her mobile and stalked her for the rest of the day.”

“You were abducted,” Liv said.

“He honestly just followed me to see the Hockney,” Lydia said. “He’d never seen ‘A Bigger Splash’ and I couldn’t let that stand.”

“Who needs dating apps when you’ve the Tate Britain?” Haz said, casually checking the time on his knockoff Breitling.

At the time, Ollie had just lost the year-end tour championship to Del Estero again on hard courts in Beijing and, as was his wont, Harry had stroked it in nice and slow.

“Bottle job,” Haz said. “Niko would never.”

But Patrick’s earnest face had beamed even under the purposely-grungy light of the pub, when he had returned to their table, jostling some suited-up City Boys out of the way, balancing the tray of drinks. “I think the garbage press are hard on Ollie. They think he’s miserable and dour. They think he’s arrogant and has no personality. But I’m not of that opinion at all. Look at how he is with his mum, buying her a house.” From his trousers pocket, he pulled out and waved his rolled-up copy of the Metro, where an article pasted the Scot pumping his fist with an inset photograph of a mansion in Edinburgh, and said, “Nobody who buys their mum a house can be all that terrible!”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose.”

“Hey,” Patrick said, flipping to another page of the spread and making room for it on their table. “You hear about Caroline Lee?”

“Who? The EastEnders actress?” Liv asked.

“Yeah, she’s dead. They found her head in Regent’s Canal,” he said, pushing the page towards Lydia, who inadvertently backed away from it, as though the headline were the alleged head itself.

“Bollocks,” Liv said.

“So strange. That would never happen in New Haven,” Haz said with a laugh.

“What?” Lydia said. “You do know that total crime there is like ninety percent higher than the national average. Even worse for violent crime, and this is America we’re talking about.”

“Someone’s been Googling. Checking up on me, have you?” Harry teased.

“Never,” Lydia said, reddening.

“Anyway, there’s a million of them, aren’t there?” Liv said. “Can’t remember which one she is.”

“What, EastEnders actresses? Or murders?” Patrick said, clearly trying to be funny and failing as, beside him, Lydia felt her face inflame even harder for the both of them together.

While they drank and discussed New Year’s plans, Patrick had insisted on holding Lydia’s gin and tonic as well as her satchel for her while she went to the loo. She had allowed it, but brought her mobile as it felt strange to leave that with someone she’d known for barely three weeks, even if he had seemingly shared two lifetimes worth of details about himself with her since. Originally from Northampton and a graduate of Warwick, Patrick had worked going on nearly two years at Canary Wharf as an office assistant, helping to recruit the best hires for overseas primary, secondary, and nursery educational institutions. The first thing she noticed about him was the clip at which he smiled and how he was one of the only people Lydia knew who spoke warmly about his job though, he said, he was unsure exactly of how the teachers ended up faring at their posts. Unlike Haz, Patrick didn’t eat out or attend gigs in the evenings, usually going straight home to cook. Neither did he follow tennis nor sport in general—he only pulled nominally for Arsenal in the Premiership because his work buddies did—preferring to spend his time constructing Lego models of buildings around the world from special kits he ordered off eBay and origami animals out of leftover wrapping paper from Christmas and birthdays. On that December evening, arriving from his office via the DLR to The Hawley Arms, he had worn a short-sleeved dress shirt slightly too big with a red tie and clip and pleated trousers, an outfit practically anathema to Harry’s A.P.C.- and Kooples-obsessed taste. Lydia, catching Haz’s scanning head-to-toe look of dismay, did agree silently it did look like Patrick’s throat had been cut. She couldn’t exactly picture walking into a room with him. But to his credit, he had, within a week of their meeting, picked up a copy of Andre Agassi’s and Pete Sampras’ biographies from Waterstones and texted her regularly of his progress, that he had learned what a let cord was and the importance of footwork, very much like in boxing which he had dabbled in briefly after receiving a few blows in public school for being a bit chunky.

“I think that is his personality,” Lydia said, when she took back her satchel and rejoined the conversation a few minutes afterwards. “It’s no use trying to be the champion that others want you to be.”

“How true,” Patrick agreed quickly.

Lydia had pretended not to notice how he had drawn his stool closer to hers while she was away. She also didn’t comment on his placing of his jacket over the hard top of the seat, for Patrick wouldn’t hear of her sitting on “the dirty pub wood” in her new yellow dress from the Kate Moss Topshop collection. His wide, expressive face grew ruddier as he put away a Kronenbourg 1664 to keep up with the pace of the group. Behind her head he kept lifting and lowering his hand as if he had the strongest urge to pet her hair, an action of which she was fully aware as she followed the shadow lengthening and shortening across the table. Before she could bite into her cheese and chorizo sandwich, he reached into one of the bags of shopping for a tube of sanitizer and blocked her way, insisting, “Let me, Lyd.”

As Patrick squeezed a portion the size of France into her palm and massaged her hands together with his, Harry had met Lydia's eye over the rim of his pint, arching his mighty brow, the foggy glass unable to hide Haz's shit-eating grin. She had tried to grip his gaze, communicating telepathically in their way since school that he was being ridiculous. She thought she was successful, until she lost it after barely three seconds, as his green eyes were scooped by the long spray-tanned legs of a passing server in a miniskirt and cowboy boots. The edge of his tongue emerged briefly to lick his lips as he straightened the collar of his jacket and drew his ears back from his shoulders, the preparatory pose to take a shot at the pull. He had waved the girl's mobile number on a napkin later at them from across the floor, triumphantly, dimples ablaze.

Back on the screen, Niko, after sending a backhand winner down the line and waiting for the crowd to silence at the umpire's chastisement, bounced the ball twice to serve at thirty-all. The cloud cover finally removed the glare enough to show that he was ahead once more at 6-5.

Harry hissed, "Ace out wide!" and held his arms up when the exact thing occurred and the camera panned to the vaguely critical expressions in the Royal Box. "Look, I did a thing," he crowed.

Lydia stood up, the legs of her chair scraping, muffled, against the grass turf, and said, "I'll be right back."

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According to Fran, the sole term and condition for their going to New York City had been that Lydia and Harry had to arrive as a couple, and not just boyfriend and girlfriend, but husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield. Two years before, the summer between their second and third years at Reading for uni, Lydia's cousin had needed someone to flat-sit and take care of their German Shepherd for two weeks, while Fran and the kids piggybacked on her husband's business convention in Fort Lauderdale. Straightforward enough, Lydia thought. Neither she nor Haz had been to America before despite having travelled quite a bit around the Schengen Zone, and together, they had enough savings for the air tickets and a good deal of sightseeing. Yet the young family lived in one of those co-op buildings in Manhattan with a disapproving board over which Fran and her husband had done their heads in for months to impress. Fran would not hear of anything that might imperil the situation, of which apparently singledom was one.

"Technically, they can't really get upset. But you'll get dodgy looks and the old couple next door won't be pleased. They already bloody well despise Maxxie," Fran said on the phone. "So I told them you're married and you'll just be taking care of him for a week or two."

"But we're not," Lydia said. "Married, that is."

"So pretend," Fran said. "And Rita, the president, she wants to Skype the both of you first."

"For staying a bloody fortnight?" Lydia asked.

"Just ask Haz and see," Fran said.

Haz had showed up to Lydia's house dressed in head-to-toe *Comme des Garçons* for the online meeting, an hour early, so he could also root through her closet for the ideal outfit to match his. "Can't hurt to look the part," he had said, dimples darkening, as though there were a zero percent chance that a sixty-four-year-old pensioner named Rita would not recognize the genius of Rei Kawakubo.

Upon first telling him of the opportunity to go to Manhattan, she had mistaken his, "Sure, sounds like a laugh," for lack of enthusiasm, until she recognized from his behaviour that day, practically salivating as soon as the green light beside the webcam on her laptop extinguished, the interview concluded and Rita appeased, that the prospect of living out his Woody Allen and Wes Anderson fantasies had engulfed his

thoughts ever since. She knew then that they would consume the rest of their trip, and by extension—as his caprices and improprieties had all of their lives—her.

Haz had presented her with an itinerary of events based on a few days of madcap research and watching every New York-related film he could think of. They had sprawled over his bed with the maps and printouts, Lydia marvelling at his efficiency when some weekends she could barely drag him out in the morning to the farmer's market by the university before all the good produce was picked over. Among other film landmarks, they would visit the Royal Tenenbaums House on 144<sup>th</sup> street and take photographs pretending to be Gwyneth Paltrow in a wrap fur coat and Luke Wilson with his hair matted by a Bjorn Borg-esque headband. He blueprinted their paths to the best thrift shops in Greenwich, the East Village, and across the bridge in Brooklyn, booked tickets to a musical on Broadway, a private guide to take them through the MoMA, Met, and Guggenheim. Mornings they would begin with a run in the park or along FDR Drive with Maxxie where the East River dovetailed the Harlem River with Randall's Island in view. They would visit dive bars, snap their fingers along to slam poetry and improv comedy, and catch intimate shows by musicians just flittering at the frontier of major label success. She grew excited, only thrown when Fran texted her repeatedly to not fuck it up for her, though even her cousin admitted, "Shouldn't be hard for you and Haz. You're practically conjoined, anyway."

"She's right," Haz said, when Lydia told him.

"But do you think we actually need to keep it up?" she asked.

"What's there to keep up?" he asked. "S'not like I've not seen you in your skivvies, innit? I'll hold your hand, you hold mine. Don't make it weird, Lyddie. It's a laugh."

Yet how strange it was, when they cabbled from LaGuardia to Fran's place at the intersection of 104<sup>th</sup> Street and Madison Avenue, a heritage building, wedged between the Upper East Side and East Harlem and bordering the black monolith of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and Harry said, easily to the doorman, "I'm Harold Whitfield. This is my wife, Lydia. Lovely to meet you. We're pet-sitting for a while. And what a building you have, sir. What do you reckon, darling?"

She had nodded, unable to think of what to say.

"Mrs. Whitfield," the doorman had greeted her and directed them and their luggage to the lifts.

But as the fortnight went on, Lydia too, eased into their little pantomime and even, very occasionally, sampled the same syllables on her tongue. Each morning, when she woke up in the king-size bed Haz had insisted she have while he took the kids' room, he sat in the kitchen pondering the Times, coffee and pastries from a different café ready for her, and wore a new high-fashion ensemble chosen especially for the day's events. He had perhaps shopped all his life for this ultimate spectacle of his wardrobe, from an Alexander Wang matching set he had exhumed from a charity shop near Vauxhall, to a Lemaire coat a posh friend, downsizing, had gifted him for free, to his most precious Common Projects Achilles Low trainers, which he had tenderly conditioned before the trip with white shoe cream and a horse bristle brush. Lydia and Harry stuck to his exhaustive schedule for the most part, but also deviated from it, for Haz, as in Reading, could not help but make friends everywhere he went. One time, in Washington Square park, where they visited to hear the lunchtime orchestrals, as she bought herself a coke from a vendor, Harry shared a vape with a girl in dreadlocks on a picnic blanket, who invited them to a party on the Lower East Side that night. Lydia worried about losing their way on only their second day in the city, but Haz had led her block by block as though the entire state map had downloaded to his brain the instant he had seen it. Entering the Versailles-sized apartment of someone named Emily, who had tinged every wall blue and purple with Philips light bars, Lydia had searched the corners of the room out immediately for possible hiding spots while pulling her dress lower down her thighs—"Wear the red dress with the open back," Haz had urged, "You're a smokeshow in that,"—her eardrums stampeded by the LCD

Soundsystem they had heard even from the lift ride up. Harry, meanwhile, dropping her hand at the doorway, had sauntered in like he knew everyone already and, kicking through a pile of shoes, muscled two Stellas from a stack of six-packs on a shelf in the foyer, pushing one into her chest. The next instant, he had high-fived a guy in a t-shirt covered in a giant paper airplane design and started to dance, his shoulders circumducting in their sockets, elbows suspended as though on strings from the ceiling, clapping his hands slowly above his head, just shy of the beat.

Later, in the queue for the bathroom, a girl in a white denim spaghetti-strap dress and a barbell ring in her nose turned around and asked if Lydia had a tampon. She did; Lydia's mum had always told her to carry extras for that very situation, to be a good female, and had told Haz to do the same if he really wanted to impress the ladies. Lydia had bitten her tongue before she could say that Haz wouldn't have enough room in the pockets of his usually impossibly-skinny trousers alongside all his condoms.

"Thanks. Can't ruin this dress. It's a rental," the girl said. Then they both looked towards the dining table, upon which Haz perched with two other guys holding up cans of Miller High Life. After a sloppy count, keys slammed into the cylinders and frothy liquid dribbled around the sides of Harry's red mouth as he cracked the tab, his head tipping back, tossing light like alpine snow on his sloping Adam's apple. In the same motion, his shirt rode up, exposing the clean line of his hips, the hint of an Adonis cut on each side and dipping into his jeans. For a moment, she looked at him as though through blue wiggling water in a pool, Haz leisurely stroking a foot below the surface, her shadow leaning over his shape, communicating through an index of refraction. The sight hobbled Lydia's knees, a sound in her head rattling like coins in a vagrant's cup.

"Fuckers. Em's mother is going to come back and kill her. I'd like a piece of that though," the girl said, and Lydia followed the line of sight to the object of her starvation, Haz grinning straight back at his childhood best friend.

"That's my husband," Lydia found herself saying.

"Lucky you," the girl said and, with her teeth, tore off the top of the tampon wrapper and spit it into an empty ice cream bucket on the floor. "Thanks for this, doll. You enjoy him for me, alright?"

It was the first time Lydia had said it quite like that, the unaccustomed tang startling her like her first slice of cake incorporating cardamom. *My husband*. When she had spoken "Mrs. Whitfield" to the doorman or to the neighbours who, as a couple in their seventies, did turn out as humorless as Fran had promised, she could hearken back to addressing Haz's mother as a child over supper at his place, getting picked up outside public school until sixth form. But no matter how many ways she tokenized the phrase in her head that night, it spelled the same thing—a boy, a teenager, a man, solid yet thin, curly-haired and impish, middle-class, and English, beside her. Many hours later, she was very quiet on the walk back to the building as Harry spun around, barely avoiding the crumpled imperfections in the pavement and singing *The National: tiptoe through our shiny city, with our diamond slippers on, do our gay ballet on ice, bluebirds on our shoulders, we're half-awake in a fake empire*. She kept rubbing at imaginary grime in her eyes. Under the bent straws of the yellow streetlamps, part of him still, somehow, tinted blue. That swimming pool, the water, and herself, far from diving in, an arrangement which she realized struck her as familiar for it resembled one of Hockney's paintings, "Pool with Two Figures." She had spoken the phrase to the girl in the white dress even though she felt as if to communicate to Harry at that moment would have required a swimsuit and a bathing cap, both of which she had failed to pack.

For the rest of the trip, Lydia did her best to match Harry's frenetic energy. She never slept before he did, pulled blankets over him when he seemed too knackered to stumble to the bed, watching him sleep, from time to time marking the moon phases through the window, the paucity of stars, the neon sign of the twenty-four-hour Duane Reade across the street. Sometimes, the garbage, the rusting pop cans, the fish bones, the walk-ups, the towers, and the brownstones, the homeless and the hipsters that she had heard

so much about, looked like part of the scenery, like the city had been formed out of tectonic plates like that, and other times more like a dung of things that had rushed too hard and died getting there. Harry, though seeing these fixtures, seemed to float on top of them on his own layer and firmament.

So preoccupied with her pursuit of parity between them, Lydia had not recognized his dissemblance too. That her energy, in compensating, had outstripped his, and that, in fact, deep inside him, some other parallel bar of it had predated hers, an express that could not cross its sibling and eventually routed in a different direction. It wasn't until Harry crumpled over a cart around the baggage carousel at Heathrow, with dusky shadows like wads of chewing gum beneath his eyes, which he tried to smother behind some oversized Wayfarers, that he finally sounded weary. No longer did he act like the fifth member of The Strokes as, swaying, he croaked to her, "Lyddie, I'm sick."

"I know," she said. "I can't wait to be back in bed either."

"I hope Mum's brought some cocoa in a thermos." Then, in a small voice, "I meant, sick for it all again."

Had he used the wrong preposition? Did he mean *of*? She didn't know then what she knew now, that he meant *for*. And that she only had feared to add the other word in front of *sick*, the one that made all the difference, the one which for her was Wokingham and one day, after graduation, should transition into the L-word. A gap which would, in the space of the following year, make him shatter his promise to her, a splatter of sick on her newly-stretched and prepped canvas.

"That was good practice for London," she said as he moaned into her shoulder that he required an ice pack like a mother. "Here—your bag's just come up. Got to move, Haz."

For the next few weeks following their return, Harry came around to the flat or her parents' house, as usual, for supper and dessert and quiz shows on telly, and brought his guitar of course—except, he played new songs whose lyrics she couldn't follow. If Lydia had overlooked the change before, she couldn't when he strummed The Velvet Underground and The Walkmen instead of The Beatles, Robbie Williams, and Oasis. Despite killing his bean plant faster than anyone else in grade school biology, Harry started growing herbs in a little basket of dirt on his windowsill like the one Fran's kids had started on their balcony of the co-op building. Without bidding and whingeing, he woke up early to go to the farmer's market with Lydia and ordered girly drinks, sucking on the pieces of fruit at the bottom afterwards until his lips shined. To cats in the neighborhood which he had never noticed before, Haz began offering chocolate biscuits, saying Popsy was the sociable one and Biscuits didn't like biscuits so that was a barmy name. He started chain-smoking again, then stopped, then ordered an electronic cigarette from the internet with a bunch of cartridges so he could cull the set to his favourite flavours, settling on spearmint. Back in New York, Harry had smoked socially as he had since age fourteen and first seen pictures of Ian Brown and Liam Gallagher, bumping shoulders with other skinny dudes in flannel and too many necklaces under scalloped awnings at shows. Now Lydia found aluminum-foil boats of ash floating in the soil of his Monstera plant in the living room, staffed by an entire crew of screwed-in butts of varying heights, as though at times he had decided on the futility of smoking a cigarette in its entirety. Harry left the window by the plant open continuously and, for hours, sat there letting the grey wispy shavings from his fags sway out, slow-dancing on the breeze. He looked at times predatory; at others, as if he had collided with something immense like religion and limped away with an injury. He spoke in fewer words and seemed to mean different things by them.

Finally, one day, after driving them back from a car boot sale from which Lydia picked up a 1950's wedding dress and Haz a jade carving of a Buddha, Lydia's mother had commented, "Haz has lost his accent a bit."

"Has he?" Lydia said. "Hadn't noticed."

“At first I thought it was a bit RP. But you know, he said banana with a weird ‘a’ today,” her mother said, pocketing her keys.

Lydia had stared at the driveway, where Haz, his Buddha forgotten on the grass, was prodding at Popsy with a biscuit again, the cat flicking its tail back and forth over his trainers.

“Nah,” she had said. “He’ll get it back. S’just a phase.”

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Wiping the sick from her mouth with a scrap of tissue, Lydia rocked back on her heels. She shut the toilet seat, and flushed it, holding the lever down for a slow count of ten. That should be enough to send the pink scum that had escaped her throat and kept bothering her since she had taken the pill. She pulled the skirt of her dress down over her bum and sat to catch her breath. Her satchel hung from the hook in the stall and she reached for it to fish out her phone, ignoring the vintage poster in a plastic frame behind it, portraying a row of WWII-era British naval officers in uniform, next to which text in an Oyster-card blue font proclaimed, “The enemy is SYPHILIS” and smaller print underneath explained, “Which, if not properly treated, can result in blindness, insanity, paralysis, and premature death.” All the hipster places loved to leverage such “art” as decoration these days, while carefully eliding the ones that depicted streetwalkers lest they trespass upon the very fine line for political rectitude.

She rolled her eyes and thumbed her phone to the browser. The real-time update on the tournament site showed Ollie had broken back late in the third set to send it to a tiebreak. Haz had been right. He was going to be insufferable now, even with Niko on the back foot.

“Again?” Harry had called to her retreating back as she headed for the entrance to the toilets tucked behind a stand of potted ferns. “You know the rules. You’re going to be there and he’s going to land the lob from heaven and we’re going to a breaker. But your loss, I s’pose.”

How different they were, Lydia thought, Harry and Patrick. So far, the three times that she had watched the Gunners with the latter so he could keep up with the boys in the office, Patrick had tended to apologize for everything from himself, to his flat, to the quality of the screen and the channel, to the match itself.

“Tell me if I get too quiet,” Patrick said to her more than once. “Or too excited. I can adjust. I’m still learning, but sometimes, I think I can understand why the lads get so absorbed. These free kicks are mighty tense.”

Lydia had offered him a weak smile. She did not point out that this was basically a throwaway match for the side. Arsenal had secured Champions League qualification and fielded a B-squad of mostly under-23s in a rash of injuries, their focus directed towards a summer rebuild and the upcoming transfer market. She looked at the whiteness of her hands and her beer bottle on the coffee table alongside four other rattan coasters with empty mugs on them. Patrick had invited others over for the match, but in the end, it had only been herself in the unfamiliar living room, watching herself watching him watching sport. She was particularly conscious of the skin over her cervical vertebra growing warm in the oblong sunlight shining from his clean casement windows, like the incorrect reflection of the man looking into mirror but only seeing the back of his own head in her favourite Rene Magritte, “Not to Be Reproduced.” Lydia had begun to notice that, on certain occasions, when she was with people, even while she was inside the moment, the sense of measuring with her fingers, pad by pad, like a seamstress, for the midpoint of a raw unhemmed edge of time, wondering when it would terminate and when she would stop having fun. If she even were having fun. And whether she should begin the mourning period shortly for some friable and glorious geometry not even quite past. It wasn’t just with Patrick. It had started to occur with everyone, ever since those two weeks in Manhattan as Mrs. Whitfield. Ever since Haz had stood from where he

waited on the stoop of her parents' house, as she arrived back from the studio, swinging the blue-edged acceptance letter from Yale and the research group which he would be joining instead of going to London, followed by a second page explaining the next steps for his visa procurement. New Haven was only two hours from Manhattan by train, just far enough to concentrate and just close enough for everything fun, he told her. He had left her that day covered, seemingly, in paper cuts from the pages.

"Not sure why they've stopped play," Patrick had said, squinting at the screen.

Patrick's flat, the second floor of a duplex at Lleyton, was spare but tasteful, with black walls and charcoal accents, sensible appliances and matching mahogany furniture, excepting the large glass display case where he placed his finished Lego models, each fronted with a 3D-printed brass plate indicating the name of the structure, location, and year it was erected.

"Offside flag," she had murmured, glancing at the art deco touches on the model labelled Empire State Building, New York City, 1931.

"Oh, very good catch," he said. "Aces. Gosh, you're clever. You know, it might become too overwhelming for me to be so attracted to you and not to be able to do anything about it. Joke—just joking, of course." The caps of his ears cascaded red and he stood up, carrying their empty bottles of Corona. "I'll get us some more. Bought tons on offer last time," he said, rushing out before she could answer.

No, thanks, she should have said then. But the words could not conform to her mouth and the kitchen had unzipped to swallow him and nothing loosened from the bank of her teeth. No, thanks, I don't want to drink anymore. Haven't really wanted for a long time. At eleven, a nip of whiskey or sherry with mum at the supper table had tickled her fancy, and at sixteen, giggling with a discman of The Stone Roses beneath an underpass with Haz, nursing horrible cheap wine and filling bushes, hedgerows, and flowerbeds with sick, had bottled buoyancy into her bones. But more and more, especially after uni and Haz's departure for New Haven, the appeal of the world cartwheeling around her, the clinks and cheers from mouths of strangers outside of dance caves, queueing for kebabs and shawarmas to soak up the alcohol, and the incertitude of tracking the correct night bus from the squiggle of the map at Highbury & Islington, or whatever neighbourhood it was that week, all the way back home, in the early light of morning over the shopping centre and at Brent Cross station, sometimes squatting to wee in a corner of the parking lot, had waned. She found herself spending more and more time in the studio, churning out canvases in creams and clays and purple rusts, soiling her clothes, and headscratching around the periods and movements that comprised learning her scales in paint.

"Don't say that about yourself," Cyril, her art professor at Reading had said, when she expressed her doubts over her painting. It had been about three years now of creating art seriously, for she couldn't say that what she and Haz did as children was truly art. Her pictures of little Harry on a swingset, tearing a brush through his curls so that he looked like Krusty the Clown, of his tiny Cocker Spaniel yapping at a squirrel in a tree, and Harry's favourite—of their mums sitting at the round kitchen table with a mortar and pestle and a package of prawn crisps between them, discussing the next pattern of meetings between their children—all of these seemed so rudimentary and unworthy of display to Lydia. She doubted she would ever refer to them again no matter which direction her art went, so much so that she had her mother store all of her early work carefully in the attic. Only the one entitled "Our Mums" Lydia had gifted to Haz, at his specific request. He had given it pride of place in his dorm at Reading and used it as an excuse to tell the story, at parties, of how he and Lydia's friendship was forged in the crucible of one of Merseyside's greatest tragedies. That after the James Bulger case broke in Kirkby when they were both two, the same age as the toddler who had been abducted, tortured, mutilated, and killed by a pair of ten-year-old schoolboys, neither of their mothers wanted their kids out alone and had arranged supervised play dates in one another's homes and gardens in Wokingham. Every time he told the story, proudly patting her hand, Lydia's mouth wavered, as though unsure of whether to laugh in corroboration or chastise him for shocking everyone. Sometimes she wanted to take the painting down and ask him to

place it in a drawer, but after he moved to America, she thought less and less of it and more of her new works now that she was reading the MFA at the UCL's Slade School.

At Slade, some of the cracked confetti of her ideas, for the first time, started to make sense, as the apocryphal Michelangelo quote went, that one must roll a piece slab of marble along a slope until all the non-essential pieces fell off and the statue emerged. Along with them, the relief of intention had cloaked Lydia like lingering outside in a fine Christmas rain. For Harry, aside from that single suffocated bean plant, who had manipulated every type of empirical meter, tested acids and bases on home-made litmus paper, and classified insects in his backyard by genus and species since practically the first time he opened a book of experiments for kids, a biomedical degree once he reached uni required about two seconds of thought on the application page. Lydia had often biked along with him to the library and laboured over texts of botany, geology, and anatomy, looking away when he dispassionately pointed at organelles and glands and nervous systems which resembled the map of the Underground and shrugging when he wondered if he could cure rheumatoid arthritis with a concoction of ginger root and black fungus. Unsure of what to study alongside him at Reading, she had taken English Literature and History, but Cyril, in an art course she had added as an experiment to fulfill an elective, said she had potential and recommended her to the MFA at UCL, knowing she wanted to move to London for post-grad. Knowing that Haz may have broken his word to her but she still intended to honour her own to herself, for herself.

She and Cyril kept in touch by email and phone these days. Whenever the time zones misaligned or Haz and Liv were out, Cyril was at home, firing and glazing pottery, slinging around gluey gesso, and preparing lectures on the many faces of Hans Holbein. It was he, of all her teachers, who had altered her trajectory when he said she should say no more often. "Most people say to say yes to more art, more everything, more ideas. But I say, reject, reduce, narrow the subject to the very slenderest neck of what you want to say. What is the ugliest, most shameful, humiliating, grieving part of you? Mine that." When he put it that way, she had begun at the first spoke on which her mind had caught; she began painting herself. She began to study the self-portraits of the masters, considering herself with a central forelock like Albrecht Dürer styling his image after a Byzantine Christ in furs, or else the two Frida Kahlos, hearts connected, holding hands, the frill of each one's skirt just brushing that of the other. And David Hockney, always Hockney, in a blue shirt, checkered trousers and red suspenders, two brushes hanging at his hip, standing at an easel whilst looking at the viewer, observed simultaneously by a nattily-dressed friend sitting with his legs crossed on a table.

"Very good," Cyril approved when she showed him her results over Skype, the selves, glaze on glaze, confronting the facts of one another. "I see the no. I feel the no. Mine the no."

But little did Cyril know that in real life, her vocabulary seemed to reject it—the two letters. No, it's never going to happen, Lydia could have probably told Patrick from the beginning. How simple it could have been avoid the Arsenal and the *bises* and the awkward hair-petting and "not being able to do anything about his attraction." No, she should never have shown him the allure Hockney's pool tableaus, explained the way Hockney painted his mum and dad in strange space and unexpected colours. No, to pointing out the artist's animalistic attraction to California—saying once, "I moved away from straight lines. All the roads are winding up there," as Patrick followed her from room to room in the Tate. No, to Patrick's invitation for coffee and dessert afterwards in the gallery restaurant. Yet instead of no's, she had stirred up a naïve latte line-drawing from which she had no aspiration of sipping. It was as though she had wriggled from the womb wired for something between yes and no, the skein of *going along* and *getting along*, and the sisters of Fate had misplaced the single pair of shears they owned to snip it.

No, she should have said, and in so doing could have painted herself into so much less trouble in every area of her life. Why hadn't she, she kept asking herself? What was so difficult? N-O. Especially the last few weeks, no would have been the handiest thing to manage Harry and the calamity in which she now found herself, bent over a toilet in a stall that smelled like lavender and lager together.

No, on the phone with him, she should have said, to purchasing tickets to the gig—The XX were Harry's latest favourite band, not hers. The night before, no to the black cleavage-baring dress that she'd bought from a boutique in a whimsy of wondering, to Olivia's cat-eye tutorial, which Liv had thought was for Patrick. No, when Haz had wanted to do more shots and move to one more pub and another and another. No, to sharing a cab and then changing the addresses to crash at his temporary rental in fucking Chelsea of all places.

No, and shoving him away, when Harry had grabbed her shoulder for purchase after slotting the key into the door and drunkenly stumbling into the coatrack. No, to when, after a split-second of swayed verisimilitude, he grabbed both sides of her jaw, so hard her ears crunched and swallowed her mouth into his, their faces catching together like old grainy gears. No, when he was crowding her into the counter of the tiny kitchenette where her head just missed the niche enfolding the microwave. No, when he pulled back her hair to land a stripe of saliva at her collarbones and dragged down the V opening of her soft wrap dress. No, to his fingers hooking in the rungs of her ribs so hard she gasped and wondered if she were being steered, and if so, in which direction this time.

No, you're soused, she should have said. No, when she knew he had been eyeing her up and down all night as she had always hoped but never dared to believe. No, and his full name to make sure he knew what she meant, instead of whispering it out like an oath as he licked into her and sucked so agonizingly slow on her tongue. No, to herself, floundering for the loops in his hand-tooled, Italian-leather belt, eyelids squeezed shut so hard she could have juiced her eyeballs. The smothering sliding over her of the kisses, her soft breast awake against his hand, sweet and easy, as her thoughts cataracted, *Okay, okay*, instead of those two little letters. She could have—

No, she stopped herself. No, she had not. Not at that time nor any other time. And she was here on a toilet in the Oval, and Ollie Budge, if he could win this breaker, was one set away from lifting the sterling Gentleman's Singles trophy over his head at Wimbledon, the first Brit in seventy-seven years. That was the situation, the still river clogged with silt. That was reality.

At the same time a blue bubble flashed on her phone screen. One from Haz. The other from Patrick.

"Get down here," Haz's said simply. She dismissed it.

"How's the tennis? We're doing great here. I think we're really going to do a lot of good with this thing!" With three smiley faces.

She typed back to Patrick, "Very proud," then stood up, shut the door to the stall very quietly behind her and waited behind someone else to wash her hands, using the leftover wetness of her fingers, when it was her turn, to pull strands of her hair, too long and hopefully not smelling of sick, back behind her ears.

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When Lydia returned to the main dining area and to the screen showing the umpire preparing for the breaker and the two players in their seats fiddling with their racquets and water bottles, she found Haz with his head bent close to the ear of a girl from the next table wearing a topknot and a blue jumpsuit. Boris Becker and Tim Henman, in the picture-in-picture, were availing themselves of the pause to partake in their own parfaits of strawberries and cream while Haz, from his pocket, had produced the silver baton of his e-cigarette and was slipping it directly into the girl's mouth. Her lips shone like halves of dewy apricots.

"They're a billion times more safe than conventional cigarettes. They've got less of the bad stuff," Haz was telling the girl.

Lydia knew that was definitely not true, having read articles on her own when Haz first ordered the thing. Lacking a skeleton-deep understanding of scientific jargon did not mean she was an idiot, and she had, only once, wrapped her mouth around it to see what it was like. Because Harry's mouth had been there.

"It's not that nicotine is bad for you," he continued. "It's a physiological neurotransmitter."

"How do you use it?" the girl mumbled around the reedy mouthpiece.

"Just suck it in. Blow. Just like a regular one."

"Hey, it's minty," she said.

"Right," Haz said. "That's the cartridge I've put in. It's charged by USB."

"So you've quit regular ciggies, then?" the girl asked.

"I've decided to go to a stop-smoking clinic," he said. "But it turns out that to qualify for the clinic you need to be at a certain smoking level. I've got to smoke at least five a day till Monday."

This was the first Lydia had heard of any stop-smoking clinic anywhere, at any time. As far as she knew, Haz still thought he looked cool as fuck with a Mayfair or a hand-rolled Golden Virginia and had never found the act contradictory to his biomedical bent.

"Can't you lie?" the girl asked.

"No, that's the thing," he said, taking the vape back. "You've got to take a carbon monoxide test to make sure. It's like a qualifier."

"You're kidding."

"So I'm actually smoking way more than I usually do," he said. "Which is a bit convoluted. It's an interesting dilemma. I guess they're trying to streamline programmes to people who really need help. Limited resources? I swear, I don't even want to smoke anymore."

"Then you don't need a programme," the girl said. "But go on. It's sexy."

"Thanks, babe," he said and swiped her bare arm with his fingertip, the kinesthetic escalation Lydia knew so well, had seen him practice on every girl in Manhattan. The grapefruit-like churn in her gut mounted the walls of her gut again, but this time, a jagged spindle of pain split behind her sinuses. She tasted chlorine in her mouth.

"Babe," Lydia said, walking up to them and deliberately bumping the girl's chair. "Who's this you're talking to?"

"Oh, this is—"

"Petra," the girl said, her glance immediately ping-ponging between them.

Lydia levelled her with an obvious look. Haz, slipping the e-cigarette back in his pocket, did not seem to notice. But Petra certainly did. She smoothed the bright yellow strands that had come loose from the topknot and pulled her chair back towards her friends, who had started mutterings of *Come on, Budge* and *Don't fucking bottle it now, ye Kilt*, and said, with a last glance back at his dimples, "Well, guess I'd better go back to the tennis. Chuffed about Ollie. Good luck with your programme, Harry."

On court, Ollie took three balls from the ball girl and threw one back to her, pocketing the last, and waited for the Serbian who was still towelling off his face at the service mark on the deuce side.

Lydia stood for a moment, chewing the inside of her cheek. The four o'clock sun pulled her shadow like taffy across the plates and cutlery on the table and the backs of the guys sitting at the table in front of them. The sinus pain intensified and split like a butterfly opening its wings over her face.

Haz nodded at her. "Why do you keep going to the loo?"

"Haz," she said. "Why is my plate full again? Whose fucking watermelon and feta is this? And this drink." Another Kopparberg stood beside her plate, crusted with condensation, the clean undented line of it a flashing silver that almost blinded her.

"Bought another round. You need to loosen up. Just like your boy. Must have a cramp or something as he's seizing up. Don't know why—he's a set in hand."

"I can't pay for this," she said.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Took care of it already. And order whatever food you want. These zucchini things are great. Have one."

As Harry tried to hand her a stick, the contrast of his tanned arm against the table brought to her attention the coasters underneath the cider and his stout, both the paddles flipped to green when she had left hers, a quarter hour before, on red.

Boris Becker, in his accented baritone, mentioned again the temperature on court and the advantage of the Serbian's famous conditioning, as almost simultaneously, heat stormed her body, leaving a wash of faintness.

She reached out for the edge of the chair. She shut her eyes against the anthology of images from the night before. A photoburst. Voyeuristic Polaroids—Harry's hand, slick with saliva, covering her mouth, muffling her whimpers, Harry kneading into the nape of her neck, breath scalding the lip of her shoulder, her sticky stringy underwear pulled to the side to allow him admittance. The almost rude threatening of his looking and seeing her finally, having shaken her into visibility. And then, the pair of them, at the chemist's, quiet. Bone-dry.

"What are you doing?" she said, opening them again.

"What do you mean?" he asked, shoving more batter-coated sticks into his mouth.

The umpire raised his hand for the crowd to hush and said, "Third set, tie-break. Mr. Budge to serve. Ladies and gentleman, silence please."

"I mean. What. Are. You. Doing," she said. Her heartbeat seemed misplaced, had migrated into her fingertips. And in an agonizing crawl of the next moment, she saw his hair congealing to worksmanship on her easel in bronze and bark, his face blue milk and pistachio, the eyes shining like twin wedding bands.

"Don't be weird, Lyd. And hush, sit down, he's serving."

"Stop being so nice to me," she said.

“What? Fine, I’ll eat the feta.” Harry’s voice was covered up as the crowd hissed at a first serve that flew just two inches out wide according to Henman. “Have you cut out dairy again? But seriously, I’ve got the bill.”

“I told you I wanted to split the cost of the...thing. I thought that was the end of it.” She tried not to say it in any odd way, but on the word *thing*, her voice stumbled, his profile foaming dangerously, peach and ebony and dry stamping strokes morphing alongside glopping liquid, flashing and flickering back and forth through a catalogue of expressions, mouths, foreheads, and noses from their childhood together, as though he were tricking her into her own face.

“It is the end of it,” he snickered. “Literally.”

“Harry!” Lydia picked up the can of cider and slammed it down, causing the table to jar his legs.

“Jesus! What the fuck—”

At the same time, Ollie’s second serve went in clear and the thwocks, smacks, and grunts of the rally made Harry look from the screen, to her, to the few spectators who had heard him swear and whipped their heads around, and back to her again.

Lydia couldn’t see the screen. She could only look at Harry.

“One-love. Mr. Stojanović to serve,” the umpire said.

“Harry, I need you to listen to me. Put away your fucking billfold and listen to me,” Lydia said.

When, early that morning, still pressed against the kitchen counter, her dress halfway ruched around her waist and Harry, his trousers puddled around his knees, had slipped out of her, she had reached down to touch the ooze of liquid between her still-trembling legs. She had been the one who then realized the condom had broken and whispered, “Oh my God.”

Harry had covered her shoulders in his navy sport coat as they walked down the King’s Road to the nearest chemist’s and stood in front, a few feet apart on the pavement, waiting for the keeper to arrive and illuminate the sign to *open*. An hour earlier, she had forced herself to shower at his place, though she stood there braced against the tile wall for several minutes too long just inhaling and exhaling the steam, in the hottest spray she could stand, observing the wad of hair—his, lighter, and hers, darker and reddish—caught in the drain, which he had covered with a starfish-shaped silicone protector. They had stood at the stoop in the roan light of sunrise, neither speaking, and she wore a pair of his sweats. She saw the back of her own head again, watching herself asking the chemist for the EllaOne blister pack. She saw Harry insist on paying for the cardboard box much too large for what it contained within, the rectangular reality of his Visa card, herself cut off, too tired to argue. Then at the kerb, he had called for a cab and put her in it, one limb at a time, folding her with care like Patrick’s fancy origami.

“Keep the jacket,” he had said.

“No,” she said and gave it back to him, neatly folded, even though she knew he would just put it on again.

“Lydia,” he said.

“I’ll see you in a few hours at Box Park,” she said and told the driver to go. It wasn’t until he dropped her off outside the flat that she found Harry had already slipped a bunch of bills into his hand without her noticing. She gave the cabbie a tip on top, besides, ignoring the man’s raised eyebrows.

Now, Lydia couldn't believe he was doing this. Haz, who should know her better.

"I suppose you think this absolves you," she said.

"The point, you're missing it. Can we—"

A roar erupted from the crowd as Niko netted an easy backhand.

"And when you were inside me, what did you think of that?" she snapped.

People were standing up all around them, clasping their hands, tugging at collars, digging palms into sweaty cheeks. "Budge Burgers, we've Budge Burgers coming out. Tenner each!" a server was yelling from the bar, as though anyone paid him any mind.

"Jesus, Lydia, not so loud!" Harry said, also on his feet, and with his eyes shifting, rolled up one shirt sleeve and the other.

"Three-love, Mr. Budge leads," the umpire said.

"Hey, Haz," she said. "Penis. Penis. PENIS." When they were children, they had played that silly game, when bored and out shopping with their mums, of taking turns repeating the word to each other, starting at a whisper, having to say it louder and louder with each turn, until one of them was too embarrassed to continue and the other was crowned the winner. "Penis!" she shouted.

"Cut it out, Lyd. I'm sorry, okay!"

"Is this how you apologize to other girls? Do you tell them to cut it out? What do you say to them, Haz?"

"What does it matter what I say to other girls if I'm saying them to you?" he shot back, as he kept looking around, but the action on screen engrossed everyone else. Little Union Jacks and St. Andrews' Crosses burst across the moss and cream pointillism encircling Centre Court.

"Everything matters," she said. "Everything."

"Is this a test? I swear, maybe you just need to eat. It's all this—art and Albrecht this and whatever. You need to be around ordinary people more."

"Ordinary people? Like Patrick?" Lydia nearly screamed. The butterfly sank its legs into her nosebridge and the wings kept beating, remorseless.

Niko clawed back two points with a doublet of aces down the line, the IBM-sponsored display showing 148 MPH for the second one in lime-green.

"Fucking hell," somebody to the left exclaimed as someone else muttered, "Bottler, bottler, bottler."

"I didn't say that," Harry said, adjusting his Wayfarers again.

"Haz, take off your sunglasses," she said. She needed to see his eyes.

"Yuck. No. I hate it when women tell me to do that," he said.

I like your eyes, Lydia thought sadly. I like your lips. I like your face.

“Who are these women?” she asked. She knew.

“I don’t know. Chicks. Long Island girls. Queens. Ithaca. Go to Cornell and shit.”

“Five-two, Mr. Budge to serve,” the umpire said. “Quiet, please. Quiet, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Harry!” Lydia grabbed his hand and finally, the fact of it, the cold clamminess of it seemed to arrow through him and, with the free hand, he plucked the sunglasses off and set them on the table. He stopped looking at the screen.

“Okay, okay! I really am sorry. I’m listening.”

Harry, a spaghetti squiggle for hair and long sticks for legs and arms and black shading everywhere else, was a crude crayon-doodle cave painting on the ceiling at which she stared. But the next moment, they were back to the pool, the same blue water. Harry had surfaced. He was looking at her with wet hair, a glistening chain around his neck. She looked down at herself and a bathing suit exposed the bright yogurt-like white of her thighs. Her bathing cap and goggles dangled from her fingers. A seashell poised on her tongue.

“Lyddie, what’s wrong?” he said softly, as though he had reached out from the pool and touched her foot.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong? Harry, what am I to you? Harry, have you ever thought of devoting yourself to one person. To not share and not want to be shared? Instead of this fucking lone wolf shite you’ve fed—”

“Now, wait a minute,” he said, still keeping his voice low. He fully turned away from the screen now and brought his chair around to face her. “In my defense, I’m not a militant...what you said, *lone-wolfer* or anything. I’m social. You’ve seen me in the woods. But I’ve also spent a bit of time alone there, when you weren’t around, painting or some other shite. Walking around, wandering, and maybe, possibly, being stalked by an actual wild boar at some point—”

“Have you ever thought about,” she said. “What if the next girl you slept with was the last?”

“—So I can say with conviction that I am a pale excuse for a lone wolf if, in fact, you’re accusing me of being one, which it sounds like you are.”

“Did it,” she said. “Mean anything to you? At all?”

“I didn’t know,” he said. “This was how you felt.”

She picked up the coaster and put it back down again, left it on green. “Now you do,” she said. Something warm slashed across her collarbone. Tears. She tried to smear them away; they were mixed with the greyish streak of eyeliner. For the first time, in their presence, Harry looked stricken.

“Jesus,” Haz said again. “Here.” He pulled out something pale green, a handkerchief, from his pocket.

She blew into it, harder and longer than necessary. The umpire repeated the score; another point had passed, but her brain had dumbed the commentary to a thrum. Bottles of beer raised higher in fists and from some mouths spit splashed and from others dropped multi-segmented sequences of curses.

“Hey,” he said. “Lydia, look at me.”

“Why?”

"I don't know. But. I've got you," he said. "I've got you."

"Have you?" she challenged.

"It's still me. It's still Haz."

"You sure about that?" She blew again. "Your accent's a bloody mess, you git."

He laughed. "You may be right about that."

She sniffled. "Of course I am."

"Lyddie," he said. "After this. Let's go to yours and we'll talk about this. How's that sound?"

"You want to have a conversation? Really? Do you know what it's going to be about? You do know, don't you?"

"Us," he said.

"I feel it," she said. "It's not going to be fun, this talk."

"Me too," he said. "And how do you know?"

"You too?" she asked. "Is it the same thing?"

Like a fly finally escaping the fine net of a screen door through a wayward gash to the outdoors, a scrap of the score finally needled her ears into sharpness, Henman saying, "5-2, Budge. Another point to put the set on his racquet."

"Any point will do," added Becker.

"I guess we'll find out," Haz said.

"Alright," Lydia said. "Alright." And she kept the kerchief pressed against her face as she heard Ollie, with a huge, "Come on!" push himself to his first set point and the stamping of feet and shouts of approval all around as the rooftop crowd ignored them, their created corner in the center of the floor.

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"Lydia?"

She breathed into the handkerchief, kept muffling her breaths, in and out and one at a time, making sure they did not overlap.

She hummed, her eyelids shut loosely, the weave of green fabric visible between her lashes like the netting on a fascinator hat.

"I said, *are you okay?*" Harry said.

"Give me a minute," she said.

"What? Ollie's serving for six-two, you crazy. Get up. I'll give you a lift."

Lydia started and the sun on the back of her neck burned. Wait a minute. The breaker was finished. Ollie had won. They were going to the fourth and hopefully final set. What had happened? Opening her eyes, she found the handkerchief was white not the pale green silk with his monogrammed initials, not a kerchief at all but a napkin, her own, the one which had arrived with some watermelon and feta, all of it still piled like fertilizer in front of her.

“You too?” she repeated.

“Me too what?” Haz asked. “No, five-two, I said.”

So he hadn't. She hadn't. Her paddle, still at green. The ciders. The huge mound of courgette. She did this sometimes, focusing so hard on the paint that she almost passed to the other side of the canvas and had to circle back around to the front and remix the colours. The skin stretched tight over her chest sweltered to flame. The fainting swooping sensation still whizzing like a small plane about her temples.

What could she say to him? Too much time had passed to ask now the same things she thought she had done already. Just over six entire points. Two times the number of letters of a city, of the call sign of an airport, of the three letters of his name. They had been together so long that very few words were needed to start a fight like the one she had invented in her mind.

Not even three words. Maybe just three letters. But she had not and she was tired.

“Right,” she said. “Right.”

On court, Ollie placed a kick serve so perfectly in the ad court that the Serbian barely got his racquet on and the answering shot went sliding to the bottom of the net. Six-two.

“Any point will do,” Becker said again.

Six more thwocks sounded and when the spectators on the bleachers in the corner stood up and high-fived and hugged, she knew, without watching, that it was one more set and victory was his. Ollie's mum and his girlfriend must be squeezing one another enough for a bodyswap, and even the soap carving expressions in the Royal Box might have mollified.

“Fuck,” Harry said. “Well, we can still get piss-drunk even if your boy wins. Speaking of, where do you want to go after this?”

“Why?”

“Hold on,” he said and pulled out his phone. “There's a party. Gazza says.”

“Where?” She seemed only capable of one-word questions now.

“Peckham.”

“Peckham,” she repeated. “Who do you know there?”

He shrugged. “Everybody.”

“Everybody,” she said.

“I do,” he said.

She thought back to his dancing, the Stellas, the apartment in New York, the Northern Line train bearing all possible Mrs. Whitfields away, dripping a comet of wet paint behind it.

“You alright?” he said.

“Whatever you want, Haz,” she replied.

Looking delighted and with both dimples showing, he started texting back.

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Oliver Barron Budge was crowned the Gentleman’s Singles Champion at the All-England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, the forty-sixth in the Open Era, and the first Briton since Frederick John Perry, at around five o’clock that afternoon—defeating World No. 1 and top seed Nikola Stojanović, three sets to one, 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7-2), 6-0. On championship point, he did not go for anything fancy, his compact wind-up and powerful whipping forehand forcing his opponent’s answering attempt to soar long, and the split-second after the lineswoman lifted her arm, shouting OUT, the twenty-five-year-old had collapsed to his knees and kissed the grass, gathering its short tufts towards his face as though making an awkward prone snow-angel. Within another minute, he had met Niko at the net, shaken the chair umpire’s hand, and started the long summit through the stands to his box, to his mum and girlfriend. The press said the Scot deserved a knighthood.

Harold Cooper Whitfield, while soured on Niko’s loss, quickly turned his thoughts to Peckham and the party. Lydia followed him there, dragging the bag of melted cupcakes. All night, she crammed pieces of them directly with her fingers into her mouth and shared with whomever wanted some. Harry placed drink after drink in front of her and she emptied most of them. At two in the morning, Gazza dragged Haz to another party down the block to smoke skunk, and Lydia excused herself. The last Tube had long disappeared. She had never taken the night bus from Peckham. She didn’t know anyone from Peckham.

Underneath the sign of the nearest bus stop, marked by the red roundel logo, like a slitted eye, of Transport for London, two girls in very short dresses steepled their heads together and whispered between folding large sandwiches of something green and brown into their lipsticked mouths. A cool, noisy breeze swiped across Lydia, flicking goosebumps up her arms, but the last pint worked just as well as a cardigan or jacket would have. Not wanting to intrude on the girls and overhear their conversation, she stood a few meters away, pressing her arm against the glass storefront of a twenty-four-hour souvlaki house, where the menus were taped for the convenience of passerby. No more sick had sloshed in her stomach since about an hour after the conclusion of the match and she could observe the brightly illustrated dishes, unmoved. Beyond the menus, inside the shop, a young man wearing a red apron watched a television mounted high up, the channel tuned to BBC Sport, a scrolling ticker proclaiming BUDGE TAKES WIMBLEDON, FIRST BRITISH MAN SINCE 1934. The glass blocked the sound, but she touched her fingers to the interchanging images of Ollie kissing his mum, hoisting the trophy of silver gilt over his head, the Queen expressing how very pleased she was.

In her pocket, Lydia’s mobile buzzed and she retrieved the text. It was from Patrick. “You’re probably sleeping, but I just couldn’t wait. Going to be a David Hockney travelling retrospective in the Pompidou! We might be able to go see it! What are the odds?”

Lydia smiled wryly to herself. What were the odds, indeed. Purples, blues, oranges, reds, chartreuses, fuschias, the statue released from its marble, the victim and victory both of gravity at the bottom of the hill. Her own limbs tangled in a heap, bathing suit, cap, googles or no. Her two self-portraits, one from each side of her face, superimposed, still would not add to up to the whole of it, not even if someone pinned her with a gaze dead-on, eye-to-eye.

Then she hovered her finger above the button next to his name to call him back and lowered it, applied pressure, let it go.

He picked up before the first ring ended. “Lyd?” he said.

“Patrick,” she said. “How much will you give me for my pictures? And which one did you want?”

The sudden rustling on the line made her think he was straightening up on his sectional, and if he had been working on something, dropping Lego pieces previously artfully balanced on his lap to the carpet.

“Really? You’ll let me have them?” he said. “All. I’ll take them all. I’ll have to save a bit. I’ll have to *faire des économies*. You know that’s French. I’ve been learning, for when we go. That is, if you still wanted to.”

Yes, she knew. His accent was horrible. “*Bien sûr*,” she answered.

“Really? Wow, that’s fantastic! I can’t—” he began.

“You watching the telly?” she asked.

“What, Ollie, you mean? I can, if you want. Two ticks. I’ll just—”

“No, no,” she said, laughing. “Don’t bother. It doesn’t matter.”

“Where are you? Are you okay?” he asked.

“In bed,” she said. “Just in bed.”

When Lydia ended the call, the tennis coverage had switched to fan reactions back in Ollie’s hometown in Scotland, the digital clock on the corner of the screen showing nearly three a.m. It was full-on darkness in the city at that hour, and yet, she knew with certainty that in only two or so more revolutions of the clock, at that latitude, in June, a lemon-rind brightness would rim the treeline again. The Underground trains would start sliding down the tunnels, bringing suits to the City and the Inns of Court, returning the revellers back to the ruins of their rented bedrooms. Summer nights were easy to party away in London with so much natural daylight, something you couldn’t get in New York no matter how much neon and how many Philips light bars you added to your fancy *Friends*-esque walk-up. That was what she adored about living here. One of the many things.

Walking towards the bus shelter, still a bit drunk, but not too drunk to stand in her heeled sandals, Lydia squinted at the LCD display showing the next bus would arrive in twenty or so minutes. The two girls from earlier had finished their food and held out their hands, supinated, as though reading one another’s palms and no longer spoke. Lydia remembered the first time she arrived in London on the train from Reading to Waterloo Station, not as a tourist, or to visit, but to live, to stomp the staid stone pavements and to load up her brand-new Oyster card at the machine, and with no Harry at her side gibbering about how much and which zones. She had not been to afford to live close to school in Fitzrovia, so she had tried a few viewings until found the roomshare at Brent Cross, with a lady named Grace, who herself had come from away.

Grace had been doing this for years, she had told Lydia. After arriving from Ghana and working and saving for years, she had bought the house together with her boyfriend, intending to fill its four bedrooms with children, but then the economy had crashed, and it had seemed to make more sense to take on boarders in the meantime.

*And why not East London?* Grace had asked her, after showing her the basics, the room, the bathroom, the closet, the storage space beneath the staircase. *Shoreditch, Haggerston, like all the other young people, if you don't work around here?*

Grace usually rented to older women, divorcées, women starting again. She had also wondered why Lydia hadn't brought anyone to look at the flat with her, to ask the tough questions. Lydia had not said that she had only to peruse the spare furnishings and the citrus-accented kitchen and Grace excusing herself to water her little pansies in the boxes at the window from a little green can with a craning spout to sense, inexplicably, an accordion space inflate around the twin drums of her lungs. Lydia had not said that she had partied the famed Kingsland Road in Dalston and she had stumbled out of off-licenses and newsagents on Upper Street for years, drunk and together, as well as drunk and alone, and done every single thing a young English person should do, once. But that she saw herself painting in that bedroom, with her window open to the garden, the sunshine streaking in and illuminating in shadows, soft and slick, the rowhouses hewn into the hills. That she had heard the noises of those divorcées as they splashed water on their faces and applied makeup and flipped through the classifieds for better employment, and that, in those motions, her tough questions had been answered.

On the side of the shelter, the map of the route back north was a scribbling of a toddler learning fine motor skills for the first time. Lydia followed it lightly with her finger. She would have to make two changes to get to the shopping centre and the underpass from the Tesco Superstore to reach the residential heart of Brent Cross, but she wouldn't take a cab. She hoped she would never have to take cab back home again and never with anyone else's money. If she closed her eyes, she could see Sandringham Place off the Montpelier Rise, and Grace, an early gardener, would be awake when she turned her key in the lock. She might run into one of the women on the staircase. Another making coffee, a compact and mascara held to her face. On the other side of town in some posh hotel, Ollie Budge would wake up with the Wimbledon trophy, so concentrated in its metal, no longer fiction, beside his bed, though only the following week he would begin prepping for hardcourt season with a warm-up tournament at the Atlanta Open across the ocean, followed by the Montreal and Cincinnati Master's tournaments in quick succession.

It all went on and on like that, the yearly Association of Tennis Professionals circuit, like the yellow Circle Line of the Underground, though, the ATP was, fortunately for all the players, a little less prone to breaking down for no reason and rerouting every second weekend. Meanwhile, World No. 1 Nikola Stojanović, no pushover, who had gained enough points from his finals showing to retain his ranking, even with his attempted Golden Slam destroyed, would, no doubt, try to exact revenge on the Scot at the U.S. Open in Flushing Meadows, New York in a few months' time. Harry would have returned to Yale by then and would, most likely, request days off from his lab to attend Flushing in person, enticing girls from Long Island, Queens, Ithaca, and Cornell with tickets, as was his wont.

And Lydia herself would order and rip into her new stash of canvases—she would consult with Cyril, nominally—before moving on from the self-portraits. If Haz was correct about anything, maybe she did need to be around ordinary people, just a little bit more. And maybe, just maybe, in a week, in her suitcase for Paris, she would tuck into a corner, beneath thin summer layers, a bathing suit and a bathing cap. She had heard the public *piscines* in Paris were quite nice. She needn't go with Patrick and she knew he would not force the issue. Maybe she was at the precipice of readiness now, her shadow over the empty pool. Not to speak to anyone. Yell or even whisper. But to dip into the water. Share it with silence. The hollow she had made. So very little of it. Yet enough colours to stand in, calf-deep, until the wave came, the whelming lover. The bigger splash.

END