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Opening Extract from...

Seven Days of Us

Written by Francesca Hornak

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Prologue

17 November 2016

Olivia

CAPE BEACH, MONROVIA, LIBERIA, 1.03 A.M.

. . .

Olivia knows what they are doing is stupid. If seen, they will be sent home – possibly to a tribunal. Never mind that to touch him could be life threatening. But who will see them? The beach is deserted and so dark she can just see a few feet into the inky sea. The only sound is the swooshing drag of the waves. She is acutely aware of the tiny gap between their elbows, as they walk down to the surf. She wants to say, ‘We shouldn’t do this,’ except they haven’t done anything. They still haven’t broken the No-Touch rule.

The evening had begun in the beach bar, with bottled beers and then heady rum and Cokes. They had sat under its corrugated iron roof for hours, a sputtering hurricane lamp between them, as the sky flared bronze. They had talked about going home for Christmas in five weeks, and how they both wanted to come back to Liberia. She told him about Abu, the little boy she had treated and then sobbed for on this beach the day he died. And then they’d talked about where they’d grown up, and gone to medical school, and their families. His home in Ireland sounded so unlike hers. He was the first to go to university, and to travel. She tried to explain how medicine represented a rebellion of sorts to her parents, and his eyes widened – as they had when she confessed to volunteering at Christmas, to

avoid her family. She had noticed his eyes when they first met at the treatment centre – they were all you could see, after all, behind the visor. They were grey-green, like the sea in Norfolk, with such dark lashes he might have been wearing make-up. She kept looking at his hands, as he picked the label on his beer. Like hers, they were rough from being dunked in chlorine. She wanted to take one and turn it over in her palm.

By the time the bar closed the stars were out, spilt sugar across the sky. The night air was weightless against her bare arms. ‘Will we walk?’ said Sean, standing up. Usually she stood eye to eye with men, but he was a head taller than her. And then there was a second, lit by the hurricane lamp, when they looked straight at each other, and something swooped in her insides.

Now, ankle deep in the surf, their sides are nearly touching. Phosphorescence glimmers in the foam. She loses her footing as a wave breaks over their calves, and he turns so that she half-falls into him. His hands reach to steady her and then circle around her waist. She turns in his arms to face him, feeling his palms on the small of her back. The inches between his mouth and hers ache to be crossed. And as he lowers his head, and she feels his lips graze hers, she knows this is the stupidest thing she has ever done.

THE BUFFALO HOTEL, MONROVIA, LIBERIA, 2.50 P.M.

Sipping bottled water to quell her stomach (why did she have that last drink?), Olivia waits to Skype her family. It is strange to be in a hotel lobby, a little bastion of plumbing and wi-fi – though there is no air-con, just a fan to dispel the clingy heat. And even here there is a sense of danger, and caution. In the bathrooms are posters headed SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF HAAG VIRUS, with little

cartoons of people vomiting. The barman dropped her change into her palm without contact – guessing, rightly, that most white faces in Monrovia are here for the epidemic, to help with ‘Dis Haag Bisniss’. Another aid worker paces the lobby, talking loudly on an iPhone about ‘the crisis’ and ‘supplies’ and then hammering his MacBook Air with undue industry. He’s wearing a Haag Response T-shirt and expensive-looking sunglasses, and has a deep tan. He’s probably with one of the big NGOs, thinks Olivia. He doesn’t look like he’d ever brave the Haag Treatment Centre or a PPE suit – not like Sean. Last night keeps replaying in her mind. She can’t wait to see Sean on shift later, to savour the tension of No-Touch, of their nascent secret. Anticipation drowns out the voice telling her to stop, now, before it goes further. It’s too late to go back anyway.

Olivia realises she is daydreaming – it’s five past three and her family will be waiting. She puts the call through and suddenly, magically, there they are crammed onto her screen. She can see that they’re in the kitchen at Gloucester Terrace, and that they have propped a laptop up on the island. Perhaps it’s her hangover, but this little window onto Camden seems so unlikely as to be laughable. She looks past their faces to the duck-egg cupboards and gleaming coffee machine. It all looks absurdly clean and cosy.

Her mother, Emma, cranes towards the screen like a besotted fan, touching the glass as if Olivia herself might be just behind it. Perhaps she, too, can’t fathom how a little rectangle of Africa has appeared in her kitchen. Olivia’s father, Andrew, offers an awkward wave-salute, a brief smile replaced by narrowed eyes as he listens without speaking. He keeps pushing his silver mane back from his face (Olivia’s own face, in male form), frowning and nodding – but he is looking past her, at the Buffalo Hotel. Her mother’s large hazel eyes look slightly wild, as she fires off chirpy enquiries. She wants to know about the food, the weather, the showers, anything – it seems – to avoid hearing

about Haag. There is a lag between her voice and lips, so that Olivia's answers keep tripping over Emma's next question.

Her sister Phoebe hovers behind their parents, holding Cocoa the cat like a shield. She is wearing layered vests that Olivia guesses are her gym look, showing off neat little biceps. At one point, she glances at her watch. Olivia tries to tell them about the cockerel that got into the most infectious ward and had to be stoned to death, but her mother is gabbling: 'Have a word with Phoeb's!' and pushing Phoebe centre stage. 'Hi,' says Phoebe sweetly, smiling her wide, photogenic smile, and making Cocoa wave his paw.

Olivia can't think of anything to say – she is too aware that she and her sister rarely speak on the phone. Then she remembers that Phoebe has just had her birthday (is she now twenty-eight or -nine? She must be twenty-nine because Olivia is thirty-two), but before she can apologise for not getting in touch, Phoebe's face stretches into a grotesque swirl, like Munch's *Scream*. 'Olivia? Wivvy? Wiv?' she hears her mother say, before the call cuts off completely. She tries to redial, but the connection is lost.

• 1 •

17 December 2016

Andrew

THE STUDY, 34 GLOUCESTER TERRACE, CAMDEN, 4.05 P.M.

. . .

SUBJECT: copy 27th dec

FROM: Andrew Birch <andrew.birch@the-worldmag.co.uk>

DATE: 17/12/2016 16:05

TO: Croft, Ian <ian.croft@the-worldmag.co.uk>

Ian,

Copy below. If this one goes without me seeing a proof, I will be spitting blood.

Best,

Andrew

PS. Do NOT give my 'like' the 'such as' treatment. It's fucking infuriating.

PPS. It is houmous. Not hummus.

The Perch, Wingham, Berkshire

Food 3/5

Atmosphere 1/5

By the time you read this, my family and I will be under house arrest. Or, more accurately, Haag arrest. On the 23rd my daughter Olivia, a doctor and serial foreign-aid worker, will return from treating the Haag epidemic in Liberia – plunging us, her family, into a seven-day quarantine. For exactly one week we are to avoid all contact with the outside world, and may only leave the house in an emergency. Should anyone make the mistake of breaking and entering, he or she will be obliged to stay with us, until our quarantine is up. Preparations are already underway for what has become known, in the Birch household, as Groundhaag Week. Waitrose and Amazon will deliver what may well be Britain's most comprehensive Christmas shop. How many loo rolls does a family of four need over a week? Will 2 kg of porridge oats be sufficient? Should we finally get round to Spiral, or attempt The Missing? The Matriarch has been compiling reading lists, playlists, de-cluttering lists and wish lists, ahead of lockdown. Not being a clan that does things by halves, we are decamping from Camden to our house in deepest, darkest Norfolk, the better to appreciate our near-solitary confinement. Spare a thought for millennial Phoebe, who now faces a week of patchy wi-fi.

Of course, every Christmas is a quarantine of sorts. The out-of-office is set, shops lie dormant, and friends migrate to the miserable towns from whence they came. Bored spouses cringe at the other's every cough (January is the divorce lawyer's busy month – go figure). In this, the most wonderful

time of the year, food is the saviour. It is food that oils the wheels between deaf aunt and mute teenager. It is food that fills the cracks between siblings with cinnamon-scented nostalgia. And it is food that gives the guilt-ridden mother purpose, reviving Christmases past with that holy trinity of turkey, gravy and cranberry. This is why restaurants shouldn't attempt Christmas food. The very reason we go out, at this time of year, is to escape the suffocating vapour of roasting meat and maternal fretting. Abominations like bread sauce have no place on a menu.

The Perch, Wingham, has not cottoned onto this. Thus, it has chosen to herald its opening with an 'alternative festive menu' (again, nobody wants alternative Christmas food). Like all provincial gastropubs, its decor draws extensively on the hounous section of the Farrow & Ball colour chart. Service was smilingly haphazard. Bread with 'Christmas spiced butter' was good, and warm, though we could have done without the butter, which came in a sinister petri dish and was a worrying brown. We started with a plate of perfectly acceptable, richly peaty smoked salmon, the alternative element being provided by a forlorn sprig of rosemary. The Matriarch made the mistake of ordering lemon sole – a flap of briny irrelevance. My turkey curry was a curious puddle of yellow, cumin-heavy slop, whose purpose seemed to be to smuggle four stringy nuggets past the eater, incognito. We finished with an unremarkable cheeseboard and mincemeat crême brûlée which The Matriarch declared tooth-achingly sweet, yet wolfed down nonetheless.

Do not be disheartened, residents of Wingham. My hunch is that you, and your gilet-clad neighbours, will relish the chance to alternate your festive menu. We Birches must embrace a week of turkey sandwiches. Wish us luck.

Andrew sat back and paused before sending the column to Ian Croft – his least favourite sub-editor at *The World*. The Perch hadn't been bad, considering its location. It had actually been quite cosy, in a parochial sort of way. He might even have enjoyed the night in the chintzy room upstairs, with its trouser press and travel kettle, if he and Emma still enjoyed hotels in that way. He remembered the owners, an eager, perspiring couple, coming out to shake his hand and talk about 'seasonality' and their 'ethos', and considered modifying the lemon sole comment. Then he left it. People in Berkshire didn't read *The World*. Anyway, all publicity, et cetera.

The main thing was the bit about his own life. He felt he had made his family sound suitably jolly. The truth was, he wasn't much looking forward to a week at Weyfield, the chilly Norfolk manor house Emma had inherited. He never quite knew what to say to his older daughter, Olivia. She had a disconcerting way of looking at him, deadly serious and faintly revolted, as if she saw right into his soul and found it wanting. And Emma would be in a tailspin of elated panic all week, at having Olivia home for once. At least Phoebe would be there, a frivolous counterpoint to the other two.

Sometimes he felt like he and his younger daughter had more in common than he and Emma – especially now Phoebe worked in the media. Hearing about the hopeless TV production company where she freelanced, and where all the men were in love with her, always made him laugh. He was about to shout upstairs to Phoebe, to ask if she'd like to help him review a new sushi place, when an unread email caught his eye. It was from a name he didn't recognise, indicating some unsolicited rubbish from a PR. But the subject, 'Hello', made him pause. It read:

SUBJECT: Hello

FROM: Jesse Robinson

<jesse.iskandar.robinson@gmail.com>

DATE: 17/12/2016 16:08

TO: Andrew Birch <andrew.birch@the-worldmag.co.uk>

Dear Andrew,

I understand that this message may come as something of a shock, but I wanted to connect because I believe you are my birth father. My late birth mother was a Lebanese woman named Leila Deeba, who I imagine you met as a reporter in Beirut, 1980. She had me adopted soon after I was born, and I was raised by my adoptive parents in Iowa. I now live in Los Angeles, where I produce documentaries, primarily on health and wellbeing. I will be in Britain over the holiday season, researching a project, and I would very much like to meet you, if you'd feel comfortable with that.

Yours,

Jesse

PS I'm a big fan of your columns!

'Are you all right?' said Emma, coming into his study. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Really?' said Andrew. 'I'm fine. Just fine.' His laptop was facing away from her, but he shut it anyway. 'I've just filed my column. And how are you?' Andrew had always been surprised by his own ability to sound composed, even genial, when his mind was reeling.

'Fab!' said Emma. 'I look forward to reading it. I'm just nipping out to John Lewis. I need to get some last things. Well, not last, but

some more things for, um, Olivia's stocking. And I, I should get some more wrapping paper,' she tailed off, looking over his head at the clock. Andrew registered that his wife was speaking too quickly. But shock was still pounding through his body. She said something about what time she'd be back, and left.

Andrew sat, rereading the email again and again. Here it was, the voice he had been half-dreading, half-expecting. He thought back to that sultry night in Beirut, 1980, the one he had tried to convince himself had never happened. And then he thought of the strange little letter that Leila Deeba had written him, eighteen months ago, which had been forwarded from *The World's* offices. He still had it, hidden from Emma. 'My late birth mother was . . .' So the glorious, firm-bodied woman he had fucked between hotel sheets was dead. He stood up and stared out of the rain-flecked window. 'Frosty the Snowman' came floating up from the basement kitchen. How had he reached an age when a woman he had slept with could be dead – and it wasn't even remarkable? It was a bleak train of thought, and he forced himself back to the present. What, if anything, ought he to reply to this man? And, more to the point, what on earth was he going to tell Emma?

Emma

MR SINGER'S PRACTICE, 3RD FLOOR,
68 HARLEY STREET, 4.59 P.M.

. . .

Mr Singer's waiting room, high above Harley Street, seemed to have been designed to cushion the blow of bad news. Everything was soft, carpeted, beige. There was always a plate of untouched biscuits by the tea and coffee, and piles of soothingly trashy magazines. Looking at a spread of a soap star's wedding, Emma wondered whether *OK!* was kept afloat by private doctors and their creepy diagnoses. Don't hope, Emma, she kept telling herself. Ever since childhood she had made the same bargain with Fate. If she wanted one outcome, she had to make herself expect the opposite – to really, truly expect it. Then, the other outcome would come true (the one you'd wanted all along). It was like paying insurance – prepare for the worst, and all will be well. Of course, when her daughters were afraid she told them to 'hope for the best', and 'cross that bridge when you come to it'. That was what mothers were supposed to say. Although only Phoebe confided in her, these days. If Olivia had any worries, she hadn't shared them for years. Perhaps, thought Emma, she could draw her older daughter out over the quarantine.

'Mrs Birch?' said the receptionist with the cartoonish lips (did she drop by the cosmetic surgeon on the ground floor in her lunch breaks?). 'Mr Singer's ready for you.'

Emma walked into his room. It was a grim combination of heavy mahogany furniture and medical equipment. Behind the curtain she knew there lay a narrow couch covered by a roll of blue paper, where she'd first shown Mr Singer the hazelnut-sized lump in her right armpit.

'I'm afraid it isn't good news,' he said, almost before she had sat down. 'The biopsy showed that the lymph node we were concerned about is Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma.'

Emma wondered if he had found this the most effective way to tell people that they were dying. No beating about the bush, straight out with it before they'd taken off their coat. He kept talking, explaining that further tests were needed to determine whether the tumour was 'indolent', or 'aggressive'. Funny to define tumours like teenagers, she thought, as he moved on to 'treatment options', fixing her with his pebbly eyes. Emma sat nodding as he spoke, feeling disembodied. Why hadn't she tried harder not to hope? She must have assumed, deep down, that everything would be fine, and now it wasn't fine at all.

'As I said, we need to do further tests and wait for those results before making any decisions, which is likely to be after Christmas, now,' said Mr Singer, 'but either way you'll need to start treatment in January. OK?'

'Does cancer wait for Christmas, then?' said Emma. It was meant to sound lighthearted, but it came out slightly hysterical.

Mr Singer (no doubt used to patients saying odd things) just smiled. 'Anything you wanted to ask?' he said.

Emma hesitated. 'Just one thing,' she said. 'My daughter's been treating Haag in Liberia, and she'll be quarantined with us over Christmas. Is that a risk, I mean, in my situation?'

'Haag?' said Mr Singer. For the first time she saw him look ruffled. 'Well, yes, my advice would be that, in view of the biopsy, you should

avoid any risk to your immunity – particularly something as serious as Haag.’ He shut her file, as if to signal that the consultation was at an end. ‘Have a good Christmas. Try not to worry.’

Emma pushed open the door to 68 Harley Street, with all its little doorbells for different consultants. It was a relief to leave the hot, expensive hush of the lobby, and be out in the December air. Across Cavendish Square she could see the reassuring dark green of John Lewis. She had arranged to meet her oldest friend Nicola there, after her appointment, because, as Nicola said: ‘Everything is OK in John Lewis.’ Emma had secretly thought that La Fromagerie in Marylebone would be nicer, but now that the bad news had come, dear old John Lewis seemed just right.

Nicola was the only person who knew anything about Mr Singer and the lump – the lump that had just become cancer. Emma hadn’t told Andrew, or the girls, because there hadn’t been anything concrete to tell them, or to worry about. Usually Emma delighted in department stores at Christmas. But today, the lights and window displays and people criss-crossing her path were exhausting. She just wanted to be sitting down. She had already sent Nicola a text – ‘*Bad news*’ – because she couldn’t bear to see her friend’s face waiting, poised between elation and sympathy. It took for ever to reach the fifth-floor cafe – every time she got to the top of one escalator she had to walk miles to the next one. Then they couldn’t speak properly for ages, because they had to push their trays around a metal track, like a school canteen, asking nice young men for Earl Grey and fruitcake. Nicola kept a hand on Emma’s arm the whole time, as if she was very old, and kept shooting her sad little smiles. Nicola does love a crisis, thought Emma, and then felt guilty.

At last, they were seated. ‘Right,’ said Nicola, ‘tell me.’ And as Emma explained how she was to have more tests tomorrow which

would come back after Christmas, and would quite likely need chemotherapy in the new year, she heard the diagnosis taking shape as the story of her sixtieth year (Lord, how could she be so old?). By the time she had been through it several times, her mind had stopped galloping, and she felt more able to cope. Nicola was full of fighting talk, promising Emma, as she grasped her hand, that she could ‘beat this thing’ with her friends and family’s support.

Emma swallowed a last mouthful of jammy cake and managed a smile. ‘I’m not going to tell Andrew and the girls until after the quarantine,’ she said.

‘What? Why not? But you must! You can’t be shouldering this all alone!’ Nicola’s voice shot up the scale with dismay.

‘I can’t. Olivia won’t come home if I do. I know it. He said it was a risk, to be spending Christmas with her. But I have to, Nic, she has nowhere else to go.’

‘Emma! This is silly. She’ll understand – she’s a doctor, for God’s sake. The last thing she’d want is to be putting you in danger.’

‘But – look, you know how it is with Olivia. This is the first Christmas she’s been home in years, even just home for more than a few hours. It was the Calais camp last year, Sudan before that, the Philippines before that. I want her there. I don’t care what Singer thinks. It’s only a risk – a tiny risk at that. If she goes down with Haag, my creaky immune system will be the least of our worries.’

‘But Andrew? Surely he ought to know.’

She knew Nicola was right. But she was loath to go into how little she and Andrew shared these days, or how self-sufficient she had gradually become. Ever since the psychotherapy course Nicola had taken after her divorce, she was apt to counsel one at any opportunity. And it wasn’t as if Emma and Andrew were in trouble. Whose marriage was still wildly intimate after thirty years? Easier to blame Haag again.

‘He’ll say the same – that Olivia can’t do her quarantine at home. And what if it *is* my last Christmas? I’d never forgive myself if I turned her away, and missed a chance to have one more Christmas with just the four of us. I’ve been so looking forward to it. The girls being at Weyfield again, like when they were little.’

Nicola’s eyes were moist. ‘OK, sweetheart,’ she said. ‘You know best.’

Phoebe

4TH FLOOR, THE DE BEERS CONTINENTAL HOTEL,
KNIGHTSBRIDGE, 7.10 P.M.

. . .

Here it was, Room 131, an executive suite. Phoebe knocked, the sound deadened by the thick wood and plush carpet, and stood wondering if George was looking at her through the spyhole.

He opened the door. He was wearing a white waffle robe and smiling with his lips closed and eyebrows raised, the way he did when Phoebe had proved herself endearingly incompetent. Behind him, dozens of tea lights flickered. George took her hand, leading her into the dark, candlelit suite. Crimson petals were scattered over the fortress-like bed. She decided to edit out this detail when she described the scene, as she already knew she would. Concentrate, Phoebe, she thought. It's actually happening. The thing you've been waiting for. There was George, down on one knee. From the robe pocket he took a little blue velvet box, and opened it with a flourish that she suspected might be rehearsed. The ring was a huge sapphire surrounded by diamonds, like Kate Middleton's. It looked nothing like any of her jewellery. She pushed down a surge of disappointment, and its accompanying shame for being so awful.

'Phoebe,' he said, his head level with her crotch. 'Will you – would you, be my wife?'

‘Yes!’ she squealed, hugging his head awkwardly as he staggered slightly to stand up. His knee clicked, and they kissed. ‘I’m so happy,’ she said into his mouth. ‘I love you.’

‘Me too,’ he said, taking the ring, pushing it onto her finger and kissing her hand. He began manoeuvring her towards the bed.

‘George,’ she said, ‘sorry – just I really needed to pee when I arrived.’ He rolled his eyes fondly, and she walked to the bathroom. It was palatial. She wondered how much the suite had cost.

Sitting on the loo, she studied the ring. It had probably cost loads, too. She turned her fingers in the light, thinking how grown up her hand looked. A cork popped outside. She stood in front of the huge three-way mirror, excitement pooling in her stomach, hoping she looked somehow different. You’re engaged! she told her reflection silently, as she pondered who to tell first, and whether she’d say it had been a shock, or admit that she’d suspected this when George’s text had summoned her to a hotel. Visions of an engagement party, and wedding-dress shopping, and a hen weekend in Paris, or maybe Ibiza, blossomed in her mind. She stripped to her underwear and pulled on the second white robe. Its thick folds made her look pleasingly delicate. After examining the freebies by the marble sinks, she tousled her hair and padded out. George was sitting on a pert brocade sofa, photographing two champagne flutes with his phone.

‘I had this on ice,’ he said. ‘It’s Moët Rosé. Chose it specially. To my beautiful bride to be,’ he said, offering her one of the glasses. He sipped, making the rasping noise he always did when he drank special wine. ‘Wow. Good stuff.’

Phoebe grinned. ‘You know I can’t tell the difference between this and Prosecco,’ she said, even though, after six years with George, and going to so many nice places with her dad, she could.

‘We can work on that, Titch.’ He reached over and ruffled the top of her head.

‘It’s beautiful, by the way,’ she said, waggling her hand so the ring flashed.

‘Knew you’d like it,’ he said. ‘It’s very you.’

Later, lying in the crook of George’s armpit, she felt herself beginning to believe she was engaged. Dinner in the Michelin-starred restaurant downstairs, and the free champagne the staff sent over, had helped. It must have been the shock, before, that had made it seem a bit unreal. Shock could numb responses, she was sure she had read that somewhere. And now that flurries of Likes and Congratulations!!!! were appearing on Instagram and Facebook, she’d started to warm to the ring, too. Maybe it was time she graduated to ‘lady jewellery’ (her friend Saskia’s shorthand for dainty, diamondy stuff). She checked her phone – the selfie she’d posted earlier captioned *Engaged! And modelling his 'n' hers bathrobes #BlindDateThrowback* had got 224 Likes, a personal best. She showed George, the little image of them clinking champagne flutes lighting up the dark suite.

‘Awesome,’ he said. ‘But I don’t get it – blind date?’

‘Duh! Cos the couples on *Blind Date* always used to wear white bathrobes, and be, like, drinking champagne and being really cheesy. Remember?’

‘Oh, right. Huh! Yeah!’ he said. She wasn’t sure he got it. Sometimes references like that went over George’s head. He’d captioned the same photo #Moët #LTD #lifegoals. Loads of people had commented on what a pretty couple they made.

‘That steak was genuinely amazing,’ said George, into the dimness. ‘Gym tomorrow!’

She didn’t reply. She was thinking how silky the sheets felt against her legs, and how much she loved hotels, and how the rest of her life, with George, would be a series of places like this.

‘I wish,’ she said, ‘someone would come and turn down my bed every night.’

‘I’m sure that can be arranged, Princess,’ he said, propping himself up on one elbow and smiling down at her.

‘You do realise Mummy is going to be an absolute nightmare over the wedding,’ she said. Her mother had sounded so emotional on the phone earlier. She’d actually started sobbing with happiness. A bit extreme, but sweet. ‘She’s probably desperate for grandchildren,’ Phoebe carried on. Usually the whole topic of babies felt off limits with George, but this evening had given her courage. She snuggled in closer.

‘No wonder, with your sister,’ said George.

‘Hey! Olivia’s saving the world. She can’t help it if she’s too busy for men,’ said Phoebe, slapping his chest. Funny, she thought, how she often moaned about Olivia herself, but didn’t like to hear her criticised by anyone else. George wouldn’t understand, being the third of four siblings whose main aim seemed to be to insult one another. Their younger sister, Mouse (real name Claire), was mostly talked over.

‘When’s she back anyway?’ he said. ‘When does lockdown start?’

‘The 23rd. It’ll be nice to have her back at Christmas, for a change.’

George did his snorty laugh.

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Has she even replied to you yet?’

‘She will. Not sure she has signal there.’

They lay in silence for a while. A strip of fake Christmas light from Knightsbridge, far below, glowed above the suede curtains. After a while, George’s breathing slowed, and his arm relaxed around her shoulder.

She looked at him, asleep. It occurred to her that her overwhelming feeling was one of relief. No more waiting. No more hoping, every

time they watched a sunset, that *now* might be the moment. No more fighting back ungenerous tears, with each engagement paraded on Facebook. At last, it had happened. She lay, fingering the jewels on her hand, trying to absorb the idea of ‘married’. The cumulous duvet was suddenly too hot, and she stood up for water from the minibar. An opened envelope on top of the fridge caught her eye. She guessed it was the bill, and teased out the sheet of paper inside to see how much George had spent. It was sweet of him to have gone to so much effort. The thought of him lighting all the candles, even strewing the tacky rose petals, was so unlike him it was touching. The paper read:

‘THE PROPOSAL’ PACKAGE:

Advance ring consultation and delivery £500

Room preparation including candles, rose petals,
Moët & Chandon Rosé champagne, fruit basket,
disposable camera and personalised chocolates£350

Executive Suite, including breakfast: £1,000

She turned, not sure if she should make a joke of it, or not. But George was snoring.

Jesse

THE GREEN ROOM BAR, LOS ANGELES, 8 P.M.

. . .

Jesse re-checked his email while he waited for Dana, his younger sister. She'd suggested they meet for cocktails when he'd called earlier – rattled but jubilant – to say he'd sent the message to Andrew Birch. That had been twelve hours ago, but there was still no reply. Could he have missed it? His birth father didn't seem like the type to miss emails. Plus Jesse knew he'd been online, because at 6 p.m. British time @ABirchReviews had tweeted: *Why must health writers invariably describe nuts as 'nutritional power houses'? Lazy and meaningless.* At 7 p.m. he'd been back on Twitter to say: *Please make Christmas 2016 quick.*

Wow. Sometimes the guy seemed so negative. Surely reviewing restaurants for a living couldn't be that bad.

When Jesse had first Googled 'Andrew Birch', exactly one year ago, and found hundreds of Andrew's articles online, many with an email byline, he'd been psyched. Here was a way to get to know his birth father, secretly, safely, before making contact. Researching Andrew had become his late-night hobby. His mind now contained a bulging file of Birch Trivia, each new fact bringing Jesse a detective's thrill. His therapist, Calgary, had warned that while this research was a 'safe space', he must not confuse knowing *about* his birth father

with truly knowing him. Jesse knew she had a point. But the voice in Andrew's fortnightly restaurant reviews for *The World* magazine sounded so critical – so unlike Jesse's adoptive dad, Mitch – that the prospect of meeting his birth father in the flesh had become unduly daunting. Plus the column was a goldmine of information, since Andrew never gave the food more than a paragraph, filling the rest with glimpses of his personal life and past.

Jesse knew, for example, that Andrew was an only child, born in 1950 and raised by a single mother. She was named Margaret and had worked as an English teacher to support them both. When she died Andrew had written a moving tribute to her, as the preamble to a review of a new curry house in Willesden Green, her hometown. In it, Andrew revealed that his father had walked out on them when he was born. The piece had moved Jesse to tears, and given him hope that this absent father might make Andrew more receptive to a son of his own. Several times, Andrew had mentioned that he'd gotten a scholarship to private school and studied history at Oxford University. He'd been one of *The Times's* Middle East correspondents from 1977 until 1987, mostly based in Lebanon, at the height of the civil war. Jesse guessed this was how his birth parents had met. This phase in Andrew's career seemed to have loomed large. Whenever he reviewed Middle Eastern food, most recently a falafel truck in 'hipster Dalston', he referred to it.

Not everything Jesse knew came from Andrew's column. A quaint British website called ThePeerage.com revealed that Mr Andrew Birch had married Hon. Emma Hartley in 1983. They had had two daughters (Jesse's half-sisters!), Olivia Frances Birch, born 1984 and Phoebe Gwendoline Birch, born 1987. In his reviews, Andrew referred to Emma as The Matriarch. That was cool, Jesse thought. He liked the idea of an aristocratic stepmother.

Better still was a clipping he'd found online, from an obscure

eighties gossip column called ‘Sloane’s Snooper’. It revealed that Emma and Andrew had first met at the Royal Wedding, July 1981, where Emma was a guest and Andrew a reporter. This fact, besides being pure British rom com, was a coup. Since Jesse’s 1980 birth date comfortably pre-dated Andrew and Emma’s meeting, he felt confident he wouldn’t cause tension by making contact. Hopefully, Emma would be cool about her husband’s past. Still, he couldn’t get complacent. For starters, Jesse had no clue if Andrew was even aware of his existence. There was every chance his birth mother had never told Andrew she’d gotten pregnant. All his adopted mom and dad could tell him was that, when he was two weeks old, they’d taken him from a Lebanese orphanage. Calgary kept reminding him to limit his expectations. She said the entire Birch family would likely be profoundly shocked when they discovered that Andrew had fathered another child – even if it happened long before meeting Emma. They would need time and space to process their emotions.

There were photos to study, too, mostly of Andrew at various media functions – often with Phoebe on his arm. But beyond his height, Jesse just couldn’t see himself in his birth father. There was the shadow of his own hairline in Andrew’s byline picture, but his birth mother’s Lebanese genes were the dominant force in his DNA. Andrew had sandy, freckled colouring and wincing eyes, whereas Jesse’s high-school nickname had been Aladdin, after the Disney movie. Andrew’s hair grew straight back in a slick, silver plume – Jesse’s curls had to be tamed daily. Even his birth father’s hawk-like nose – perfect for damning an inferior Merlot – looked discerning. Jesse’s straight, Roman profile hailed from his birth mother, like the rest of his features.

He’d scoured photos of his half-sisters for some physical likeness, too, but this was even less evident. Phoebe’s Instagram and Twitter were tantalisingly private, but Jesse could see from the pictures with

Andrew that she was cute. She had a kind of imperious, English Rose face with sulky pre-Raphaelite lips, unusual green eyes and a fine aquiline nose. Nothing like Jesse. The only photo he could find of Olivia was her Facebook profile, which showed a female Andrew. They had the same long face, deep set eyes and fair skin – but on a woman, and without Andrew’s sceptical gaze, it added up to something different. Homely, Jesse’s mom would have said. Beyond this, Olivia seemed to exist in a social media vacuum. He didn’t even know what she did for a job.

Emma must be too old to show up much online – unlike her media husband. The only photo Jesse could find of her was the one on ‘Sloane’s Snooper’, from 1981. It showed a pretty, grinning brunette with big hair and shoulder-pads – a lot like a young Rachel Weisz. He could see the likeness between her and Phoebe, although Emma looked curvaceous, where Phoebe was actress skinny. But the photo was so old that he had no mental image of Emma, today.

Other trivia: Phoebe worked in TV (Jesse clung to this fact as some semi-common ground) and always ordered fish when she accompanied Andrew on his reviews. She sounded fun, and witty, in a dry, British way. Emma adored dessert, and Elvis, and wanted a dog but had to make do with a cat because Andrew didn’t like dogs. This fact bothered Jesse. Who didn’t like dogs?

Today, the Birches lived in Camden (home of Amy Winehouse!), but holidayed at the gloriously British sounding Weyfield Hall. It was Weyfield that had started the whole plan to head to Norfolk in December – specifically a Christmas photo-shoot of the house on Countryliving.co.uk. When Jesse had seen the roaring fires, family portraits and dark panelling, he’d realised how badly he wanted to be part of it. He’d started to feel quite romantic about the fact that his roots were part Arabian Nights, part Downton Abbey (never mind that Weyfield was on Emma’s side). He became convinced it was his

rare, cocktail blood, and not just the fact that he was gay, that had made high school such a bitch. And so he'd told everyone that he was heading to Norfolk, England, over Christmas to research 'a confidential project'. Only Dana knew the full story. Still, it wasn't technically a lie. The journey to meet his British birth father, in a country manor house, could make an incredible documentary. It would be his first film of his own, but he had a good feeling about it. He'd already shot some preliminary footage, just of himself in his apartment, talking about his life in LA, his childhood in Iowa and his expectations of meeting Andrew in Norfolk, England.

'I was thinking, don't you find it kind of strange how Andrew's a food critic, but he's super skinny?' said Dana, as the waiter brought their drinks. 'It's like he doesn't actually enjoy food. He literally never says "that was yummy". It'll just be, like,' she put on a snooty British accent: "'The jus was *well wrought*.'" He described a sorbet as *deft* last week. What does that even mean?'

Jesse sipped his Beet Bloody Mary. He didn't usually drink, but hitting send on the email had frayed his nerves.

'I like his prose,' he said. It was crazy, he thought, how defensive he felt of Andrew already. Dana was right, though. His friends, cell phones poised over every green juice, were more into food than Andrew was.

'I'm sorry, I don't mean to be bitchy,' said Dana. 'I'm just pissed that he didn't reply yet. Anyway, now we know where your metabolism comes from.'

'Guess so,' said Jesse.

'He looks like he could be even skinnier than you.'

'Uh uh. We're identical – six foot four, 170 pounds.'

'Stalker.'

'Hey – it's all we have in common. Physically.'

‘You say that like it’s a bad thing. You should be thankful you wound up like your model birth mom.’ Dana was always teasing Jesse about his freakishly pretty face.

‘Phoebe looks nothing like him, either,’ said Jesse.

‘I noticed he mentions her a whole lot more than Olivia,’ said Dana, after a pause. ‘Do you think she’s his favourite?’

‘I think she’s just more, like, the type of person you can write about,’ he said. ‘She always says funny stuff about the food they order.’

‘Right,’ said Dana, draining her drink and avoiding his eye. He wished he didn’t get the feeling Dana was wary of Jesse’s birth father, and family. Calgary had suggested that since Dana wasn’t adopted herself, she might be reluctant to share her big brother. It made sense – he and Dana were so close that she followed him to LA after college. But her attitude still bugged him. Especially because he’d thought the exact same thing about Phoebe and Olivia himself. Only Phoebe seemed to accompany Andrew to his reviews and star in his anecdotes.

‘I can’t believe you won’t be home for Christmas,’ said Dana. She always got sentimental with vermouth.

‘We only just had Thanksgiving.’

‘When are you going to tell Mom and Dad this “confidential project” is a big lie?’

‘Once I’ve heard from him. He’s probably just working out what to say. He’s not going to write straight back.’

‘Sure,’ said Dana. ‘He has to soon, though. Or he’ll have me to answer to.’

Jesse knew Dana was only keeping his secret out of loyalty, and would have preferred everything out in the open. But it felt safer this way, in case the search ended badly like last time. Jesse hadn’t expected his mom to be so upset when he had tried to contact his

birth mother – after years of deliberation – only to find that she had recently died. Nor had he expected to be so upset himself. This time he would wait until after he'd met Andrew to tell Mom and Dad. That was better than getting everyone involved before he knew the outcome. At least his birth father was definitely alive.

But by midnight West Coast time, there was still nothing from Andrew. Surely he would reply tomorrow, thought Jesse, sitting at the kitchen counter in his briefs with the air conditioner on full. He flicked from his email back to the Virgin Atlantic website. He should wait, he knew. To book now, before he had a reply, would be premature. But flights for the holiday season were only getting more expensive. He hovered over the Purchase Tickets tab, for a second, then clicked.

