

Lost for Words

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Extract

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Dear Maggie,

Thank you so much for approaching Paddington Press with your manuscript, which I have read and enjoyed.

Initially, I couldn't put it down. I loved the concept, and I was gripped by the early exchange of emails between Gladys and George. From day one, when he successfully bid for her old Teasmade on eBay, through the weeks of online banter, until he finally plucked up the courage to ask her out for tea, I followed their ensuing romance with a keen eye. But I'm sorry to say that for me (and others may well disagree) this soon wore off. So much so that, by

the time they married in Darjeeling, I felt the tension and energy had all but died, and I didn't feel I cared as much about the characters as I'd hoped to.

It might be that there's something missing. More bite? A quicker pace? Or is it that we've all just seen enough in the way of cyber-borne romance lately? Either way, in this increasingly cut-throat women's fiction marketplace, I'm sorry to say that we won't be able to find a slot for *Sold to the Highest Bidder: Sex and the eBay Generation*. That said, I do think your concept is an interesting one, and I wish you much luck with finding a suitable home for your work.

With the very best of wishes,

Daisy Allen
Editorial Assistant
Paddington Press

Rereading the letter one more time for good measure, she hit 'Control P'. She waited for the printer to make its beeping and clanking noises, and began tidying the already immaculate stationery on her desk. Then, having counted thirty seconds in her head, she walked over to the other side of the office. Picking up her tenth rejection letter of the day from the printer, she took her black Parker pen and made three small, elegant strokes across the page, before returning to her desk and adding the letter to the ever-increasing pile.

She smoothed back her ruler-straight strawberry-blonde hair and checked the clock: 11.38 a.m., Monday.

Hurrah. Halfway into her to-do list, and it wasn't even lunchtime. She picked up a red pen and ticked off tasks here and there. With glee, she remembered a job she'd completed before even adding it to the list. Looking behind her to check that none of her workmates were close enough to see, she took a glisteningly sharp HB pencil and quickly added the task to the end of the list. Then, picking up her red pen again, she drew a thick line through the newly added and already completed task, revelling in the satisfaction, although deep down she could hear a scathing voice in her head chanting, 'Daisy Allen, you really, really need to get out more.'

She jumped up as her phone buzzed with a text message. Maybe it was Miles, she tried not to think, as she picked up her new mobile and fought her way through the befuddling new technical functions to her inbox.

'Disaster. Total. Utter. No credit. Drop everything, ring me ASAP. Bx'

It was Belle – identifiable by her punchy, panicky style, rather than by her phone number. She was forever losing her phone and having to buy a replacement. It was 11.39 on Monday; what predicament could Daisy's sister possibly have managed to get herself into already? Looking around to check her boss Belinda was still in her Monday-morning catch-up, Daisy picked up her work phone and hit number one on her speed dial.

'What's happened this time?' she asked when Isabella Allen screeched hello. Daisy's sister was two and a half years older than her, but this made no difference to the fact that she was forever getting herself into pickles.

'It's horrendous. I've ruined everything. And it was going so, SO well!'

‘Slow down. Deep breaths, my love. What’s happened?’

‘Do you remember last night, after my date with the curious George? How phenomenally well it went? How I simply couldn’t wait to see him again and was literally counting the hours, thinking he could be The One?’

Daisy thought back to the night before. She’d been nursing a pot of Ben & Jerry’s cookie dough, glued against her better judgement to the new series of *Lost*, and finding it to be both gripping and infuriating in equal measure. Belle had come bursting in, full of romantic anecdotes from her evening out with George: *the* enigmatic man of the moment whom she’d diligently been pursuing for as long as four days. A long time for Belle, who, unlike Daisy, became very easily restless when it came to men.

‘I remember. Why, what’s gone wrong? Have you met someone else already?’

‘Worse. I’ve made a textual error that only the most sympathetic god of telecommunications could possibly fix. This morning, I was half asleep, lying in bed deciding which temp agency to ring and pester, when, instead, I thought I’d bash out a quick text to Hannah and tell her how amazing the date had been. So in my half-asleep state I wrote a message entirely unfit for male consumption . . . all about how unbelievably sexy George was, what lush eyes he has . . .’ Belle paused for breath, as though the trauma of recounting her tale was becoming too much, ‘. . . how he’d been the perfect gentleman to me all night, and that I couldn’t wait for us to spend more time together – I pretty much said I couldn’t stop thinking about him, that . . . I wanted to have his babies.’

Daisy tried not to laugh. ‘So? I don’t quite see what the

problem is, love. What you've said is – reasonably – normal behaviour. Hannah's your friend, I'm sure she can take that kind of language from you. Can't she?

'Well, yes, so you'd think. If only I hadn't been thinking about George when I sent it. You see – instead of actually sending this God-awful pervy text to Hannah, I actually fucked up. Royally. I was scrolling through my address book, saw George's pretty face in my head, and then instead of clicking Hannah, I went and sent it to George . . . he's the name right before hers in my phone, you see?! I mean . . . I may as well just go and become a circus freak now, be done with it – probably less painful in the long run.'

Daisy sighed. She could have seen this one coming. From Belle, this was entirely normal behaviour. Hardly a week went by when Belle wasn't ringing Daisy, in near hysterics, asking her to bail her out of another fine mess.

'Right. When was this?' Daisy said efficiently, getting to business.

'About two minutes ago. I've been sitting here in a state of shock since then, desperately trying to cancel the sending by pressing 'C' over and over, which apparently my phone is now completely immune to. Then I tried turning it off, throwing it across the room. Stamping on it. Nothing helped. I turned it back on, and there it was. Sitting smugly in my sent items, twiddling its thumbs, like it *knew* the trouble it had caused, and it *loved* it!' Belle stopped, hearing Daisy laugh.

'It's not funny,' Belle wailed, in between her sister's cruel cackles, 'Anyway, after catatonically staring at my phone for another whole minute, I decided to ring you. Dais – what the hell am I going to do? George will

think I'm a psychotic freak! It's not fair! I really LIKE this one!

'OK – there might still be time.' Daisy thought quickly. 'Have you thought about calling him? He could be away from his phone. He could be asleep. What work does he do again?' Daisy paused while she leafed through the logistics in her mind. 'He might've left his phone at home. Lost it. It could be out of battery, out of signal. There are just sooooo many variables – any one of them could save your ass here. Deep breaths. Let's think positively'. We can fix this. Where does he live?'

'Oh, love you, Daisy chain. Where would I be without your logical brain? He – Oh, I don't know where he works! But he's a bouncer in the evenings, which means he could still be asleep. Hold on – maybe I could go round to his? He left me his card which has his home address on – somewhere in Dulwich, I think. But what if he's got the text already? He won't want to see me, he'll probably be on the phone to his lawyer, filing for a restraining order already . . .'

Daisy could hear the click-clock of her boss's three-inch heels on the wooden floor approaching the editorial department. 'B – I've got to go. But listen. Try his phone. If it's turned off, you're in with a chance. But! Don't do it from your mobile – do it from a payphone or something. Then peg it over there, try and get to his phone before he does.'

Just then Belinda appeared, a tower of manuscripts balancing precariously in her arms. She looked meaningfully at Daisy, just in time to allow Daisy's voice to change down a pitch. 'No, we don't have those in yet. Just typescripts at the moment. But I'll let you know when we have proofs, if you can give me your number and address?'

'Daisy! Don't go all Little Miss Efficient on me!'

shrieked Belle from the other end as Daisy wrote down these fictional details on to her notepad. Belle persisted squealing, ‘Hon – can’t you call him from your work phone for me? My nearest payphone’s two miles away!’

‘No, I’m afraid not. But thank you so much for your interest. I’ll call you as soon as they’re in. Best of luck with your article.’

As Daisy hung up the phone, Belinda eyed the receiver suspiciously. Daisy smiled saccharinely, and clicked on to her PC to check her already checked emails.

‘Any messages for me?’ Belinda asked.

Daisy shook her head. Belinda strode off towards her own very large corner office, dusted off the sign on her door marked Belinda Bancroft, Head of General Fiction, and closed the door firmly behind her. Daisy picked up her pen and straightened out her black-rimmed glasses. She looked at the ever-increasing piles of unread manuscripts, which seemed to grow in proportion to how many letters went out. She leaned over, grabbed a bunch of them, and began to read.

It never got any easier. Despite all her best attempts to be cold, hard and ruthless, Daisy couldn’t help but find it terrifying, having this amount of responsibility and power over people’s dreams. Although she loved being an editorial assistant, she still struggled with the rejection side of the job. There was always the same twinge of guilt that accompanied the ritualistic sealing of a ‘No Thank You’ envelope. Every day she spent crushing the hopes of budding authors, young and old, from all over the world, still it didn’t seem to get any less disappointing – she always felt desperately sorry for the ones that got away – still wished she could publish them all.

Belinda's advice on the matter was simple. 'Oh, grow up, dear,' she'd barked on Daisy's second day, 'You can't go around being all oversensitive like that. You'll get tougher. You'll have to, if you're going to survive.'

But that was almost two and a half years ago. Daisy was still waiting for this much-fabled resilience to kick in. Maybe it just wasn't in her nature? Maybe it never would be. Much as she tried not to be, she'd always been something of a fragile, pathetic soul, perpetually teased by her peers for feeling sorry for the smallest of things. At school, for having to leave the room on the day of frog-dissection. On holiday, on the last day of her trip to Morocco, for giving her whole bag of shopping away to a beggar in Marrakesh. Belinda Bancroft, on the other hand, had a much thicker skin, after twenty-five years at the helm of the Paddington Press 'Just Say No' academy of publishing. Admittedly Paddington was just one meagre imprint of the Mercury Group Ltd., one of Britain's largest publishing conglomerates. But as one of the most senior women in the company, Belinda could happily make or break an author with one fell swoop of her pen, and felt no remorse when yet another batch of hopeful manuscripts went slushing towards the recycling area.

When she'd first arrived at the large revolving double doors of Mercury, fresh-faced and wide-eyed, her literature degree from Durham still wet on the page, Daisy hadn't realised how many soul-crushing letters she was going to have to write to budding authors. Worse, she'd never imagined quite how many budding authors in need of soul-crushing letters there really were out there. Despite having sent out twenty-three rejection letters this week alone (each of them a teeny bit different; she always

tried to make them seem as un-template-like as possible), the pile of unread wannabe books still continued to grow with increasing speed. For every three letters she sent out, another five stacks of double-spaced, neatly typed manuscripts would come shooting into the vast post room at Mercury, itching to be read and to be deemed worthy of a publisher. ‘Pick me, pick me,’ she could hear them all weeping to themselves. Still, one of these days she hoped to discover something different. She hoped to stumble across some beautifully choreographed words – something unique and inspiring that she’d be able to put forward for consideration. In her darker moments, she’d go as far as imagining the moment itself. She’d be working late on her own, and she’d suddenly sit bolt upright like people on television when they’re having nightmares, and she’d just know, with tingling certainty. This was something special. Until then, back in the real world – the world where people like Francis Slydewell from Clacton-on-Sea were convinced they’d written the world’s first bestselling intergalactic chick-lit novel, told in the style of an alien’s diary – until then, Daisy would keep on reading the slush pile, patiently sorting the mediocre from the diabolical.

‘No, sorry, we don’t do children’s books . . . Yes, yes I know that’s what we’re called. But we’re named after Paddington the PLACE, not Paddington THE BEAR. I know . . . yes . . . it *is* very confusing, isn’t it? Yes . . . right . . . indeed, it might be silly, but it wasn’t me who thought it up. Yes, I’ll pass that on . . . thanks very much.’ Daisy hung up the phone, resisting the urge to release a loud ‘Arrrgghhh’ kind of noise, and went back to compiling her third to-do list of the day.

Some time later, Daisy felt a presence behind her.

‘Excuse me.’

Daisy turned around to see the words FCUK staring right at her. Attached to these words were some stylish black oblong spectacles. Peering at her through these was a tall, slim brunette with a seasonable outbreak of freckles on her face. Daisy smiled, but no smile came in return. Instead, the girl declared grumpily, ‘I’ve been sitting at this desk out in the hall for two hours, but no one’s come to give me any more work,’ she said, flapping a wad of A4 papers about in her hands. ‘I mean, I’ve finished this odd little grid that Belinda gave me, so I don’t know what else you want me to do . . .’ she paused, before adding the immortal words, ‘My time’s not worth nothing, you know. I *have* got a master’s degree from the London College of Printing.’

Daisy smiled apologetically at this classic yet understandable case of ‘workie’ frustration. ‘I’m really sorry. It’s just been manic this morning. I’ll find you something meatier to do soon, I really will. Why don’t you go on your lunch break now? Take as long as you like, and I’ll have something prepared for you when you get back.’

The girl was unimpressed. ‘Fine. But I have to say, I was much better treated at the last work experience I did.’

‘Really. Thanks for letting me know. The canteen’s on the first floor – do you need me to show you where it is?’

The girl shook her head. She wrapped her pink pashmina firmly around her, picked up Daisy’s copy of *The Bookseller* magazine, and mooched sulkily away.

Daisy turned to face the window by her desk and looked out at the smoggy, unromantic vista of this particular corner of West London. She glanced at the sprawl-

ing, ugly bridge that was being constructed over the road, threatening to intrude further into her already soulless view. If only there was a touch of greenery to look out over, she lamented, then her working environment would be perfect. For the last two years, Belinda had maintained that she was allergic to plants and therefore couldn't possibly condone having any in the office. This, combined with Mercury's dilapidated air-conditioning system, left Daisy and Hermione – the older and relatively more glamorous assistant editor who worked with her – little in the way of non-stifling air to breathe. But she couldn't complain. She still woke up every morning feeling lucky to be able to come to work, loving what she did. Yucca or no Yucca, not many people could say that about their jobs, she reasoned.

Moments later Daisy clicked on to her PC to see if Miles had replied. She'd sent him a Chardonnay-enhanced email late on Friday afternoon, casually enquiring if he was back from LA. (By her own rough calculations, it had been six weeks, four days and three hours since he'd left, and he'd quite clearly said he was only going for five weeks.) But now, faced with nothing but a deafening silence, she was beginning to deeply regret having made the first move towards communication. Maybe he'd met someone else. Some curvy big-breasted Pamela Anderson clone. Or maybe he'd just finally decided that, once and for all, he really was bored with her. Either way, she knew Miles must *surely* be back by now. Especially if his computer was anything to go by – there had been a distinct lack of an 'Out of Office' auto-reply to her email – in itself a depressingly reliable indicator. Or, on the other hand, she considered with a new wave of optimism, perhaps he was just waiting until he was less busy? Saving himself for when he'd have

time to write a nice, well-thought-out email, rather than a glib, rushed one. Yes, that was definitely the more likely option, she decided hopefully.

Anxiously checking her inbox a whole minute later for emails labelled Mmetcalfe@Agassociates.com, Daisy's heart sank. There was instead, a concise email from her friend Heidi, sent at exactly 11.59 a.m.: 'Girls. Am marvin. Can we go to lunch now – please? Park weather? Meet you down in the canteen in 3. Hxxx'

Half an hour later, Daisy was sitting out in the tiny park around the corner from their building with her good friend Heidi Black, who worked as a press officer in Mercury's publicity department. The pair were hunched together on the cramped little patch of lawn. Kew Gardens it wasn't, but since it was the only few square metres of greenery in this corner of West London, it was often surprisingly busy at lunch times. It was only June now, but as Daisy surveyed the sprawling crowds basking in the already hot sun, she wondered to herself how long it would be before they'd need to employ a 'one-in-one-out' policy to control the hordes of needy sunbathers.

Heidi, slumped on the lawn in a tailored purple summer dress, squinted her blue eyes at the unconvincing vegetable lasagne on her lap, and began picking at it gingerly. 'Already wishing I'd gone for the safe option,' she commented drily. 'I mean, you always know where you are with a spud and salad, don't you?' She laughed, then stopped, having spotted something in the distance. Daisy followed her gaze and saw their friend Amelie walking into the park. She was wondering around the little patch of lawn looking lost and flustered, her fizzy brown hair bobbing around her shoulders as she walked.

‘Over here, Am!’ shouted Heidi loudly. Amelie Holden walked over to them and sat down, fumbling with her red shoulder bag and multiple plastic carrier bags, arranging them around her in little heaps. Once seated, she began unwrapping her pick of the canteen cuisine – home-made vegetable korma. Opening the large grey polystyrene box, Amelie held up her plastic cutlery and got to work on her curry.

‘How’s the korma, Amelie?’ asked Daisy moments later, smelling the spices wafting towards her.

‘Mmmmm . . . Doubtful. I’ve almost certainly made the wrong choice,’ Amelie said, shovelling the food into her mouth regardless.

Although Amelie hadn’t been working in her job in the marketing department for very long, she’d already caused quite a stir. She’d broken records for punctuality (or lack thereof) and also for her habit of unwittingly depositing her possessions in various places around the building. So far she’d mislaid her mobile phone in the building no less than eight times in the three months she’d been there. Daisy had been the first to discover one of Amelie’s phones. She’d stumbled across it in the ladies’ loo on the third floor, having heard it ringing from underneath an issue of *Campaign* magazine and a broken hairbrush. Being her usual, zealously helpful self, Daisy had decided to answer the phone. It turned out to be a husky Australian voice going by the name of Josh, who’d also been trying to locate Amelie since the day before. Having reunited Amelie with these items later that day, Daisy had felt compelled to take her under her wing. She saw a ditziness in her that reminded her of her sister Belle. Daisy wasn’t sure why, but her whole life she’d gravitated towards dippy, scatty

people; had felt the need to shepherd them in some way, sympathising with them and their unfortunate deficit of sensible, logical genes, of which she had an overabundance.

Since this meeting, Daisy, Amelie and Heidi had become good friends; united by their hopes that one day, somehow, Mercury Publishing would start employing more men (ideally of the young, unmarried variety). For it was a truth universally acknowledged that the British publishing industry at large was insufferably understocked when it came to men. More worryingly, Mercury in particular was notoriously biased towards women. Last time Daisy had checked, the ratio was at an industry record of 80 per cent women versus a dire 20 per cent men. Daisy and Heidi often reminded themselves, in times of drunken panic at launch parties, of the theory that most women meet their future spouses at their place of work. If this were true, it left them with Nige, the company's facilities manager – all three hundred pounds of him. Failing that, twice a week there was the opportunity to talk to Freddy Rhubarb, the after-hours security guard – notorious for his Jurassic dreadlocks and overtly sleazy behaviour. All other Mercury men, sadly, fell into one of three categories: a) gorgeous but married, b) friendly but gay, and c) charming but approaching octogenarianism. None of these were any good for Heidi and Daisy, who were in their late twenties and relentlessly discerning.

Amelie stood up abruptly, brushing some flecks of mud and leaves off her red summer dress. 'Um . . .' she began, 'the grass is a bit skankier than normal today – will would it be terrible if we sit on this manuscript?'

Amelie reached into a branded carrier bag with a big

red Mercury Publishing logo on it. She retrieved a couple of new manuscripts, hot off the press and loosely tied together with elastic bands that were threatening to ping at any point. Amelie grabbed a wad of pages from a book-in-progress entitled *The New History of Bus Shelters*, preparing to sit on them.

Daisy shook her head and said, 'Am, sweetie, you can't – that's someone's work. It's their livelihood . . .'

'Oh. No one will know, will they?' put in Heidi in defence. 'Actually, hon, have you got anything else I can sit on? My bum's getting a little dusty too – I'd hate to get grass stains on this new dress.'

'Sure – what have I got in here?' said Amelie, rifling through her bag, 'Oh, it's James Federot, another new crime writer we're launching. I'm meant to be coming up with a shout-line but I can't seem to get into it.' Amelie put the manuscript down on the grass, then ungracefully placed herself on top of it. 'I'll see if it works better as a seat – maybe that will give me some inspiration!'

Daisy was still shaking her head, shocked at their lack of respect for an author's work. 'Just as long as the author never sees you doing that, is all I can say.'

'It's fine, sweets – if it gets trashed we can just run off another printout,' offered Heidi, gathering up her wavy blond hair into a rough ponytail in an attempt to cool herself from the heat.

Daisy was about to say that this would then be a waste of paper and therefore damaging to the environment, but she held her breath, knowing they would move to an opposite corner of the park away from her if she did.

'So . . . how're both your love lives going?' asked Heidi,

whose love of gossip was far more evolved than her love of reading.

‘Um, really good actually,’ said Amelie. ‘We’re thinking of going away together soon.’ Her blue eyes sparkled the way they always did when she got to talk about her current beau, whom she’d been seeing since her last job.

‘Oh really? That’ll be your first “mini-break”, won’t it?’ gushed Heidi, who was very open about the fact that she was perpetually trapped in Bridget Jones’s dialect.

‘Where to?’ enquired Daisy, traces of envy in her voice. ‘I wish Miles and I were in a position to be going away together.’ The truth was, they were on a mini-break of their own. Before Miles had left for LA, he’d vaguely requested some ‘space’, so he could work out what he wanted, leaving Daisy wondering where they were at, and in doubt over what kind of a future they had together – if any. ‘Well, who knows,’ she began, ever the optimist. ‘Maybe when he gets back, things will be different . . . once he’s had some time away.’

Heidi and Amelie locked eyes and exchanged knowing looks. ‘I wouldn’t get your hopes up, sweets,’ Heidi said cynically. ‘I’m sorry, but all those fuckwittish things he said about being afraid to be exclusive . . . to be honest, I can’t believe you’re actually waiting for him! That boy is so not good enough for you. If you ask me, you should just call it a day with him; use this time while he’s away to just get him out of your system, once and for all.’

Daisy looked uncomfortable. ‘But you don’t know him like I do! I just keep hoping that this time away will make him realise, that he can’t stay in that his can’t-commit-won’t-commit state he’s in for ever. And also, in fairness, he *has* just started a new job. He just needs some time to focus on

that before he can decide what he wants with us.'

Amelie and Heidi were unimpressed. 'Hon, it sounds to me like he'll always be in that place of vague non-committalness,' said Heidi. 'Didn't he once say that thing about how he can't even dare to commit to a gym? That he'd rather just play the field, even on that one?'

'Um, possibly,' admitted Daisy reluctantly, 'OK, yes it's true. He once said to me that he didn't like the idea of tying himself down to one particular gym, in one particular area of the city. He was like, "London's so big . . . I'm always on the move, so I need to be able to go wherever the wind takes me – whether it's the Queen Mother in Victoria, or the Fitness First in Soho. I'd rather pay more each time than have to be tied down by one big membership fee somewhere . . ." ' she trailed off, smiling and embarrassed, when she saw the other girls laughing at her.

'Can't you see?' screeched Amelie, 'It's the perfect metaphor! He's giving himself a get-out clause! You know he was basically saying to you that he'll never, ever want to commit, don't you? Not to you, not to a treadmill, not to anyone! I mean, is he *really* worth holding out for?'

'Of course,' Daisy denounced firmly, 'you're just talking semantics anyway. It doesn't *matter* if he's still in hiding from the tyranny of labels. Which, by the way, is just society putting pressure on people,' she said, trying desperately to sound like she meant it and was actually a deeply nonconformist Jacobin who hated such conventions as these, and hadn't spent her whole life daydreaming of a white wedding, 2.4 children and a bungalow in the suburbs. 'Besides,' she went on, 'I know a different side to him that you've never experienced. And I know he cares about me, that's all that matters really.'

Heidi and Amelie looked at each other again, both privately counting the amount of times she'd said 'that's all that matters'.

Miles: the man of Daisy's dreams. A high-flying literary agent, working for one of London's most cut-throat agencies. Tall, handsome, educated at Cambridge, he'd ticked all of Daisy's little boxes the moment she met him at her first launch party two years ago. It had also been Miles's first party since he'd joined his new agency, having worked his way up as an editor before that. This, and various tiny coincidences, had all added up in Daisy's naive and overly romantic mind, to convince her that their meeting had been pre-ordained by the stars, and that he and she were simply fated to be together. Of course, in reality, it had been an incredibly slow process of getting together, while Miles broke up with his various ex-girlfriends, played the game and generally conveyed a slow, on-off interest in Daisy. All until finally six months, ago he'd been able to admit that they might officially be 'seeing one another'. But these were trifling details for Daisy, who adored the very ground he walked on. Since they first met, he'd become a kind of mentor figure for her, offering her support and guidance in her career whenever she needed it. As a result, it had been a long time before Daisy was able to properly fathom the true nature of their acquaintance – whether it was entirely professional or something more. Only when they started sleeping together did she begin to have an inkling.

Looking back over the last year, she knew she'd learned far more from Miles about publishing than she had from her own boss. But there was more to it than just a teacher/pupil dynamic; Daisy also liked to think that she knew

Miles's sensitive, caring side, beneath the suave, cool exterior he presented to everyone else. Equally, he liked to think of her as slightly naive and malleable, and in fundamental need of his help and wisdom. So in some senses, it was a good partnership.

'So,' Heidi said challengingly, 'did he reply to your email – that one you sent him on Friday?'

Daisy shook her head, 'No, but he's really busy . . . he'll only just have got back from LA. Besides, I'd forgotten, one of his authors has just come over from Belgium. Poor thing, he'll have been chasing him around town since then . . . he won't have had a moment to himself. No, he'll be in touch when he's ready.'

Later that night, having stayed at work late to finish some urgent title information sheets for Belinda, Daisy could feel her eyelids drooping. She clicked on to her emails one last time, and then shut down her computer. It was Monday, which could mean only one thing. Treadmills. Reluctantly, wearily, she forced herself up, grabbed her gym bag from under her desk, and set off towards the large council sports centre, which was just around the corner.

Some minutes later Daisy ambled up the slope in the gym towards the locker rooms. She swiped her card and pushed through the turnstile. Fighting her way through the overcrowded, noisy changing room, she slumped down on a bench. She thought about getting undressed. She imagined herself unpacking her bag. Doing warm-up exercises. Getting all sweaty, and even more hot and bothered than she felt already, after a whole day in the overheated editorial department at work. Then suddenly she realised, for what seemed like the first time in her

organised, routine-driven life, she just *could not* be bothered. She admitted it to herself – the last thing she felt like doing was jumping up and down on a sweaty treadmill or cross-trainer, in front of all those scarily fit Lycra junkies. No, today she just didn't have the energy. Besides, she'd only joined the gym because she'd felt she *ought* to – so she could be a fitter, healthier, more well-rounded human being. It wasn't as though she *needed* to lose any weight. On the contrary, and much to the fury of her friends, Daisy had always had the appetite of a small bird, and an elfin figure to match.

After a moment's deliberation, Daisy was off. She grabbed her bag, stood up and marched out of the changing room, hoping no one would notice and be appalled at her sloth-like behaviour. Hovering guiltily at the front gates to the gym, Daisy thought about turning back, but then remembered how much reading she had to get through, and decided she'd get home to work on that instead – a slightly lesser evil than forty minutes of cross-training. She walked on, vowing to go again another day, for twice as long.

As she walked towards the tube, Daisy thought about why she could be feeling so low, and began scrolling through her mental checklists. Work was great – tick. She loved her social life – tick. Home life, fine – well, her family weren't much to write home about but that was another story in itself. So that just left her love life, which, in honesty, probably wasn't going as well as it could be. She hadn't wanted to admit this to the girls at lunch, especially after they had always made their disapproval of him so clear, but in truth she was getting tired of not knowing where she stood with Miles. Before he'd gone away, she'd

loved seeing him – more than that, she'd craved seeing him; she could never have enough of him. But each time they did meet, it would always be the same – they'd never actually plan when they'd next be seeing each other. Miles would always just say casually, 'See ya then, beautiful. I'll be in touch.' Daisy had once made the mistake of sharing this with Amelie, who had promptly released one of her raucous shrieks of laughter. '“*I'll be in touch*”?' she'd protested. 'Honestly, that's what your bank manager, or some high-powered potential employer says to you – right after they've interviewed you. I'm sorry, but that's so unromantic!'

Daisy had shrugged this off at the time, but with hindsight she had to admit, Amelie did seem to have a point. If you listened to the subtext of 'I'll be in touch', it did sound uncomfortably similar to the phrase 'Don't call us, we'll call you.'

Stepping out of the tube in Stockwell forty-five minutes later, Daisy began walking towards Union Road, where she lived with her sister in a ground-floor, converted council flat. Approaching her block of flats and grabbing her keys, she began dreaming of a long bubble bath, complete with her new luxurious Milk and Honey bath soak. She stepped into the narrow hallway of the flat, and felt her nose twitch in response to the surprising smell which greeted her. What was that, Daisy wondered. Was there a dead body somewhere, rotting slowly?

As she drifted further into the flat towards the kitchen, she saw that Belle's laid-back, bohemian lifestyle had taken its toll on the flat's cleanliness once again. She and her sister Belle had, for the early years of their childhood, lived in and out of many different motor caravans and council

houses. Their parents had led a gypsy kind of life, and now lived largely out of the picture; away from their children in a commune on the west coast of Australia. As far as Daisy saw it, they were no longer her parents – just a distant memory of people who had once fed and clothed her (albeit mostly in ill-fitting hand-me-downs). If she thought hard, she could still picture in her mind the slime-green Volkswagen camper van that she'd lived in for most of her younger years, and the fluorescent mural her mother had painted on the side, with the help of a six-year-old Belle, artist-in-the-making. But she preferred not to think too hard about her childhood. Partly as her parents were no longer around and partly because, unlike Belle, she'd hated being different at school. She'd always tried to blend in unnoticed – rather difficult when every day you were dropped at the school gates in a smelly green caravan which huffed and puffed black smoke and then reliably broke down, setting off small explosive bangs as it pulled away again. Harry, they'd called it; Daisy had insisted upon giving it a human name while everyone else had been happy calling it the bogey – which essentially was what it was.

Belle had always been happy living in the shadow of their parents' carefree hippie existence, and her current lifestyle owed a considerable amount to their influence. Daisy, by contrast, couldn't wait to have her own children and give them the kind of stable, 'normal' childhood that she'd never had; even if that meant that Belle still sometimes told her off for being a narrow-minded snob.

Daisy looked around at the undone washing-up and the piles of laundry dotted around the kitchen; at the twister board that was laid out on the kitchen table – either acting

as a temporary tablecloth, or something more recreational; she couldn't tell which. She wrestled with the mental Post-it notes that were scribbling themselves as she walked through the kitchen, passed the decaying washing-up into the living room; where she saw that perhaps she had been right – there actually did appear to be a dead body of some sort. Lying, stretched out on the living-room carpet, there was a half-naked man, his olive-skinned muscular physique sprawled all over the pink sofa. He lay with one arm in the air, his legs akimbo, clad only in some boxer shorts with little penguins on them. Only one word came to mind: Belle.

As though sensing her presence, Penguin Boxer Shorts opened his eyes, a broad smile leaking out.

Daisy smiled meekly in return. 'Hello. I'm Daisy,' she said nervously.

'Tyrone. Hi . . .' Tyrone stood up confidently, wiped his hand on his boxers, and held it out to Daisy.

'Hi, Tyrone. You're a friend of Belle's, I take it?' Daisy said, shaking his hand, as he nodded. 'Can I get you a cup of tea or anything?' she asked, praying that he'd say no and leave her to get to the bathroom for some much needed R & R.

Instead, the exact opposite. 'Oh – that would be wicked, thanks. Actually, I was just about to grab a quick shower. Only I've got to be at work in an hour.'

Daisy looked dumbfounded, as he added by way of an explanation, 'I'm a bouncer, you see. Do you have a towel?'

Daisy nodded slowly, forcing her most hospitable smile. 'Of course. Let me get you one. Milk and sugar?' she asked, bottling up her rage for when Belle chose to either reappear or phone her – although the latter was unlikely;

Belle was a disciple of the Pay as You Go school of never having credit. Daisy was just mulling this over, and studying Tyrone's shorts in wonder, when she heard a key in the lock.

Moments later, Belle was in the living room, looking ruffled and rosy, and holding hands with an extremely tall man of similar build and dark good looks to Tyrone.

'Daisy, hello! I see you've already met Roney . . . Great! And' – she said, looking adoringly up at the man by her side – 'Daisy, this is George.'



Rejection

Date: Monday 12 June 2006 19.50
Sender: Mmetcalfe@Agassociates.com
To: Daisy.Allen@paddingtonpress.com
Subject:

Hello – Hi, how goes it? Sorry not to reply sooner, been manic with Gerard all weekend – he’s over here from Belgium. Hope all’s good. I’ll call you soon. Best,
M x x x

‘So?’ asked Heidi sternly, having just finished reading this aloud, slowly and carefully to an audience of Amelie and Daisy.

‘I don’t see what the big deal is,’ continued Heidi. ‘It’s a straight, run-of-the-mill email. Aloof, even.’ She passed the crumpled piece of A4 paper back to an even more crumpled Daisy.

‘But, look!’ protested Daisy in response to her friend’s noises of pessimism, and gesturing to the end of the three-line email. ‘Look, progress! He’s never, ever, put three kisses before. Always a reserved one, or on special

occasions, two. This is surely a breakthrough, no? Maybe it means he's broken through to the other side – maybe he's ready to enter a new phase with us? Maybe this time apart has had a good effect on him!' Daisy looked earnestly up at Amelie and Heidi, who looked back down at her with genuine concern. It was the following day, and the three girls were in the park eating lunch and helping Daisy try to dissect the latest instalment in her romantic saga.

'Sweetness. You need to get out more,' said Heidi sternly, 'Honestly. You simply *cannot* be counting e-kisses. It's *pathetic*! And anyway, did he call you yet?'

Seeing Daisy shake her head, Heidi added, 'See – it's just a throwaway comment, isn't it?'

'You know, she's absolutely right,' agreed Amelie. 'This obsessive email analysis has absolutely GOT to stop. From now on, you read his emails, you reply to them, and you delete them. Job done. OK?'

Daisy looked mortified. 'But! You don't understand! I'm an editor! Well. OK, not quite. All right, I'm an editorial assistant. But you see that makes it my job to analyse words. To look between the lines for meanings, you know, get involved with the text . . . do you know what I mean? I'm NOT insane, I'm just conscientious!'

Seeing she was fighting a losing battle, Daisy slowly trailed off. 'I'm sorry – I know it's really sad. But it's sort of an occupational hazard. I get attached to his emails because they're his words – his thoughts – and, I don't know, I just love well-put-together words.' Seeing Heidi and Amelie's expressions of concern and disbelief respectively, she changed tack. 'OK, I know, I should stop being such a sentimental moron about everything. But I just really like him, a lot, more than any guy I've ever liked . . .'

Amelie put her arm on Daisy's shoulder and stroked her light red hair. 'I know, lovely. But these words aren't well put together, or anything. They're not even significant – especially when you consider that he's not seen you in weeks! And also, *who* says 'best' apart from when they're being businesslike and formal? It's kind of cold, don't you think? Anyway, love, I really think you shouldn't put all your eggs in this one basket. At least until he starts acting less complacent about where you stand with each other, I think you should be looking for what else is out there.'

'Yeah, like maybe at this launch party tonight,' chipped in Heidi excitedly. 'You know – I've seen the guest list – there's a fair few D-listers going; maybe your ideal husband will be one of them? You never know . . .'

Daisy looked unimpressed. 'I don't want to meet any other guys. Plus, I meant to tell you, I can't go tonight – I have a hot date with a treadmill. Don't look like that at me! You know as well as I do – the D-listers won't turn up, and it will be just the same old lot of us playing hunt-the-canapé. Face it, Heidi, there won't be any nice or available men – we work in publishing, for the love of God!'

Back at her desk a few hours later, Daisy was crafting the perfect email response to Miles. She'd written three different drafts, each taking a very different tack, and each of them carefully designed to sound carefree, aloof and spur-of-the-moment. Deep down, she knew the girls had a point; that she needed to step back from it all and stop obsessing about him *quite* so much. The trouble was, she still couldn't shake the thought that she and Miles, when you stripped away all the other consequential details, were quite simply meant to be together. He was just so lovely.

And charming. And so on her level. Like the time when they'd been watching that Trevor Griffiths play, and both cried at exactly the same point. Like the way, just like her, he'd worked in the editorial department of a large publishing house straight after university; before he moved on into agenting. And like the way that they'd both grown up in small commuter towns only a rounders ball away from one another, and had ended up going to high schools in uncannily similar areas in Suffolk, accessible only via similar school buses. Had they travelled on the same buses of a morning? This she had always wondered, but never managed to retrieve from Miles, who was relatively less interested in this bit of trivia than she was. Either way, she still couldn't ignore all these similarities – surely somehow they must be significant in some way? If not, what else *was* there? If we don't have fate, Daisy often wondered, what *do* we have?

Empowered by her own rhetoric, Daisy decided she had too much work to do to waste any more time fretting about the consequences of each email. Reluctantly, she picked one – the second aloofest of them all, and clicked send.

Hey Miles,

Thanks for your email. Don't worry, I've been hectic all weekend too. Hope it went swimmingly with Gerard; I meant to tell you that I completely adored his book. Maybe see you soon, Dx

As she watched it fire off into the ether, Workie Number Two was clearing her throat nearby.

'Hi. Hi, Daisy – I'm Siobhanna – we met this morning?'

Daisy looked up as Siobhanna was fluffing up her bushy dark brown hair, causing her bangles and gypsy earrings to jangle together noisily in time with the rhythm of her gum-chewing.

‘Yes, I remember,’ said Daisy, smiling. ‘Hi, how’s it going? Can I help?’

‘Well, no one’s given me anything to do. I’ve been here for three days now, and so far all I’ve done is stuff envelopes. And . . . well . . . I’ve got a first from Sussex, you know. I *am* capable of something slightly more demanding.’

Listening to the girl, Daisy wondered briefly whether or not she was living in a *Groundhog Day* tribute world. She looked down at the piles of undone jobs reclining on her desk. She considered which of them she could explain how to do in a few minutes, and realised that most of them would actually take far longer to explain than it would take to do the job herself. She didn’t really have time to explain that to the workie, so instead she just said, ‘I’m sorry, Siobhanna, I’ll try and find you something to do in a minute. For now . . . um, all I’ve got is these rejection letters. You can send these out, if that’s OK?’

Siobhanna looked down with disdain at the big pile of white A6 envelopes, and at the tower of rejection letters perched next to them, then looked back at Daisy. ‘Fine. I’ll get on with these,’ and she sauntered away.

Some thirty minutes later, she was back at Daisy’s desk.

‘Hi, Daisy. Sorry. I’ve finished all the work you’ve given me. So . . . Is there any slush pile stuff you want me to attack? I mean, I know most of it’s probably toilet paper, but I’d be happy to relieve you of the burden, if you like. Honestly, I don’t mind. You never know, I might end up discovering the next Harry Potter!’

Daisy was almost giddy. This girl was a towering inferno of confidence. Daisy had to suppress a smile as she leaned over towards her window sill to grab a wodge of manuscripts. ‘Here you go. If you could write me a two-page report on each of them, that’d be fab. Thanks.’

‘Great,’ Siobhanna said, clearly delighted, and went to turn away. But then quickly she swung back round to face Daisy. She spoke slowly, as though confiding in her new-found comrade, ‘You know, I’ve been here a good week or so. I was in the marketing department before this, and I did a bit of publicity too . . . I reckon I’m more than capable of a job – so if you see any going, you will let me know, won’t you? Or maybe you’re about to be promoted? I could have your job, then? In fact,’ she added, looking around, ‘I’ve been told the pay’s shocking in publishing, particularly bad in editorial . . . d’you mind me asking how much you’re on?’

Daisy masked her surprise with a smile and said sagely, ‘Well, let’s just say I’ll be paying off my student loan for a very, very long time. Anyway, I’m afraid I’ve got lots to do. But give me a shout if you need any help.’ And she turned away, slightly unnerved by this girl, and began to wonder why she wasn’t more pushy herself sometimes.

‘DAAAAAAAAAIIIISSSSSSSSYYYY!’

That was why. She just happened to have one of the most tyrannical, manipulative bosses imaginable. In all of her part-time jobs, she’d never met anyone quite like Belinda. She was only around the corner from Daisy, but instead of walking around to see if she was free, or even calling her on the phone, Belinda always preferred to holler across the quiet, library-like editorial department, at the top of her voice. Day to day, Belinda’s communication

methods ranged from the more muted, slow chanting of Daisy's name, to a more thunderous impatient roar, with a subtext of 'Drop everything now please, this is urgent'. In Daisy's experience, this most recent holler fell into the latter category.

'Yes?' Daisy called back, jumping to her feet and heading round the corner to Belinda's large air-conditioned office.

'Hello, darling. Sit down. My goodness, I haven't *stopped* today! I've been on the go since 6 a.m. – I simply must have a break or I shall wear myself out! Anyway. Thought we could have a quick catch-up. Is everything alright with you?' she fired at Daisy. Only Belinda could make a potentially warm, well-intentioned question sound snappy and aggressive.

Daisy nodded hastily, 'Yep, fine. No probs. I've almost done the stuff for the six-monthly presentations. And I've finished all those title sheets you needed.'

'Good. Good. And you've sourced those new readers and translators yet? And, you're on track with everything that we need so far for the next sales conference?'

'Um, no, not quite yet. But it's all next on my list.' Daisy angled her red and black notebook towards her boss so she could see her neatly drawn tasks.

'Right, well. You'd best action them all soon,' she said self-importantly, placing a stress on the word 'action'. 'Be sure to CC me into any of your chasing emails if that helps push people along. Especially those slugs in Marketing. Lord only knows *what* they actually do all day. That's all for now I think? Oh, except that I'd murder a smoked salmon bagel, darling . . . but only if you're going out anyway, that is. Please don't just go on my account.'

Daisy had been here before. It was almost 4 p.m., and she didn't need to go out. But experience had taught her to say that she was going out anyway, even when she wasn't. Belinda also knew this. It was just one of the many games they played. 'Fine – no probs,' said Daisy, 'I've got to pop out anyway. Thanks,' and she got up to leave, just as Belinda remembered something.

'Oh – that's right – I meant to say. Hermione's booked a new workie to come in next week, and she's just realised she now hasn't got time to look after them. You wouldn't mind another one to shepherd for a week or so, would you?'

Daisy's heart sank. A third overzealous newly grad to look after and find jobs for. 'No – not at all. Lots of jobs I can give them,' she lied.

'Great. I'll have Hermione liaise with you. Can you minute that? They'll be in next Monday.'

Returning from bagel-shopping some twenty minutes later, Daisy felt her stomach lurch. There, waiting in her inbox, a Reply From Miles. And what was this? A lunch invitation? What kind of a lunch, she wondered, her fingers almost shaking as she clicked on it hastily.

Date: Tuesday 13 June 2006 16.20
Sender: Mmetcalfe@Agassociates.com
To: Daisy.Allen@paddingtonpress.com
Subject: lastminute lunch

Apologies for the lack of notice. Will Belinda manage a lunch on Friday with Gerard and I? G's only just become free, and he's very keen to speak with Belinda

face to face while he's over here. And, as you know, he's only here for this weekend before he shoots back home. Let me know, asap if you could. Will understand if it's too tight.

Best, M

He'd done it again. Somehow, quite unwittingly, he'd managed to raise her hopes and then cut them right down again, leaving her feeling idiotic and wretched. She tried not to overreact – this was clearly just a case of the fuzzy line between business and personal, and of once again being unsure of exactly which side things fell into. But then she thought, in a throwing-her-toys-out-of-the-pram kind of way, why didn't he at least invite her to come along too? Hmmph. She'd done a heap of work on Gerard's book, ever since the manuscript had first been delivered. More to the point, though, why was he being so aloof again, and giving no mention of her own email to him?

Recalling Heidi's advice from earlier, and suppressing the urgent need inside her to call Amelie over and have her formally deconstruct his email, she decided to brush this off and to try, once again, to be less obsessive and oversensitive. She checked Belinda's calendar, and quickly bashed her own curt, short reply that yes, Belinda would love to make the lunch – would the River Café suit?

Minutes later, Daisy had buried her head in the slush pile – the absolute best form of escaping from recalcitrant yet gorgeous males. Soon she began to forget Miles, to blank out his soft brown hair; to block out his deep brown eyes, and instead focus on the half-formed novels on her desk. Opening up the first one on her pile, she read about Manuel, who told in his poignant cover letter how he'd

given up a gargantuan salary and high-powered job on the board of a financial company in Madrid, in favour of two years spent in a writers' retreat, sweating over his masterpiece in dedicated isolation – 'please find enclosed – no pressure!' She read about a zealously committed fifty-year-old from Hayes named Mirella Browne, who told of how she'd taken her children out of private school, remortgaged their house, and effectively sacrificed her whole family's well-being, to fund her dream. Reading a few pages of the ensuing novels, it was only minutes before she felt the rejection templates appearing in her mind, against all her will – would it be a 'this isn't quite right for our list', or was it more on the side of a 'we just don't have a slot for it at this time'?

As she leafed through all the prospective novels, she found once again that the most harrowing submissions were those from the writers who had written not one book, and not two, but whole tomes of work. The ones who had created elaborate, complex universes, furnishing them with newfangled political systems, whole intricate new vocabularies; spanning six generations and altogether comprising a whole trilogy of work that sadly, heart-breakingly, somehow just wasn't readable. Daisy sighed and wished she could give them all a deal. After all, she always asked herself, who was she to judge them? She was just a twenty-six-year-old girl from Southwold who loved to read; what did she know? Who had granted her the power to make or break their destiny?