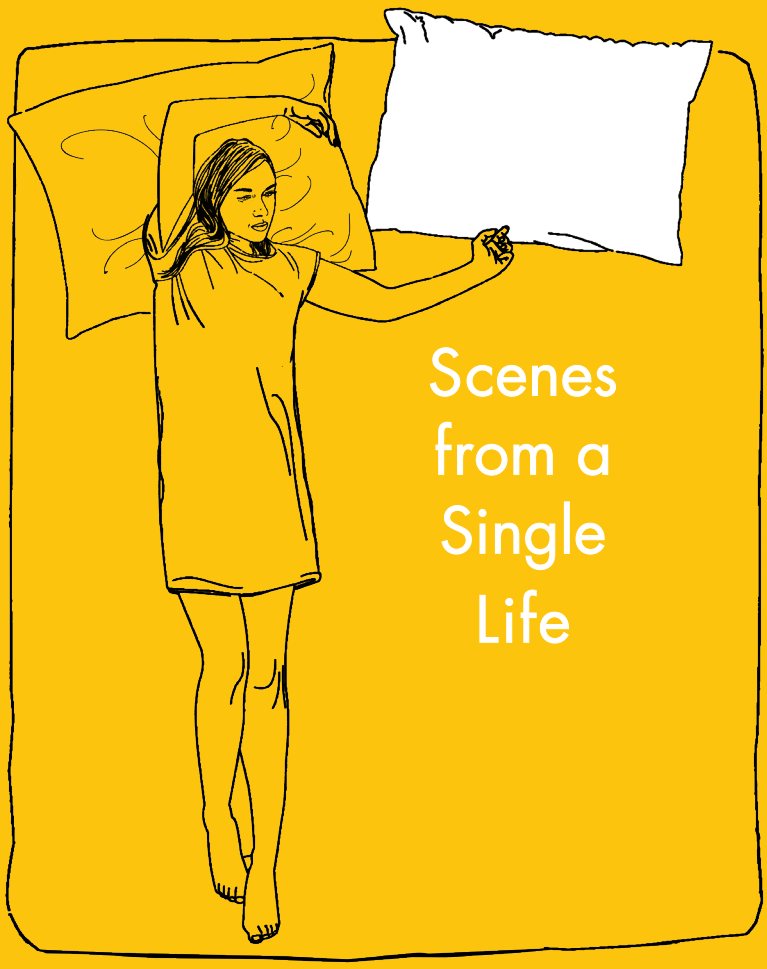
EMMA JOHN



Scenes from a Single Life

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To Geneva and Becki
and Alex and Jenny
and Tessa and Karen
and my cousin Jen.

CHAPTER 1

The house was full of people I didn't know. I didn't know the house that well either.

Laura and Mark had moved into it five years ago and I had been only an infrequent visitor. It was in a remote suburb on the wrong side of the city, a three-change journey that made me feel tired before I'd even left my flat. They had never attempted it in reverse. It was impossible with the kids.

I negotiated a passage through the living room, elbows folded in, lifting my feet to avoid the more sedentary tots. The entrance hall promised breathing space and somewhere to put down the sausage rolls that were threatening to tumble from my paper plate. By the time I reached the doorway, however, a man in a casual shirt and blue chinos was propping himself up against the frame.

I was now obliged to speak to him; turning back or struggling past to sit alone on the stairs would appear rude. So I introduced myself and he bobbed his head, putting his hand to his mouth as he swallowed a piece of cake. 'Hi,' he replied. 'I'm Steve.' I made an over-bright smile, in lieu of a handshake, that pulled at my cheek muscles.

'How do you know Mark and Laura?' I asked.

'Our kids go to the same school. That's one of ours

just there.' He gestured toward a small blonde bundle sitting on a rug swiping at an iPad. Her clothes looked much more expensive than mine.

'Ah,' I said. And then, because my first response didn't seem enough: 'Nice.'

A woman emerged through the muddle of bodies in the next room, wearing the kind of blouse-skirt combo that made me wonder whether I was a real adult. 'Darling, do you have the changebag? Jojo wants to put on his Spiderman outfit.'

'You said to leave it in the car.'

'Well, I haven't got the keys.'

'They're in my jacket.'

'Then can I have them please?' A micro-flicker of irritation passed between them, followed by the keys.

'Sorry, I'm Rebecca, hi.'

'Nice to meet you. I'm Emma.'

'Oh yes, I've heard Laura talk about you – you're an old college friend, right?'

'Yes.' A bubble of gratification worked its way to my brain. I had, family aside, known Laura longer than anyone here.

'We *love* Laura, don't we Steve? They've been such good friends to us since we moved here. And Amy is just adorable, of course.'

I could hear Amy from the kitchen, wailing with the

urgency and modulation of a 1950s nuclear attack siren.

'Shall I go and get Spiderman, then?' Steve took back the keys and trudged to the door, while Rebecca rolled her eyes in the universal signal for what-are-men-like. We settled into small talk, the left-right feint of where I lived and what I did, then the inevitable shot to the body. 'And are you married?'

In the split-second that followed, I rattled through my available responses.

A simple 'No' would sound abrupt and rude, as if I'd taken the question personally or was harbouring a deep hatred for the institution. I tended to save that for people I found really objectionable.

'No, I'm not,' would, in my experience, elicit the question 'Do you want to be?', which I found painfully intrusive. (Older men tended towards the jocular and knowing 'good for you!', and well-meaning marrieds sometimes countered with the wistful-yet-patronizing 'I *miss* being single'.)

Rebecca seemed perfectly pleasant so I went for my softest option: 'No, not yet.' It was too ambiguous, however, and she looked intrigued.

'But you're with someone?'

'No, not yet,' I repeated, with a laugh I hoped would suggest nonchalance at both the question and my relationship status.

It didn't work. A jet of awkwardness had been released and now hung in the air like aerosol spray in a downstairs toilet. Rebecca gave a sympathetic smile and said something about it only being a matter of time, and I nodded encouragingly and told her I was in no rush. 'I'm quite happy with my life,' I reassured her. Making people feel less uncomfortable about my singleness was a skill I had long practised.

And so I allowed Rebecca to tell me how she had been single for the *longest* time before she met Steve, how you just couldn't force these things and it *always* happened when you weren't looking for it, while I patiently waited my turn to explain that I *wasn't* worried, that I *loved* my independence and planned to make the most of it while I still had it. What neither of us said, or even implied, was that it might also be OK to go an entire life without finding a partner at all.

Laura's voice cut through the living room hubbub, announcing cake. I had already started for the kitchen when I was overtaken by a miniature stampede and realized the invitation wasn't meant for me. The kids held their plates above their heads at the tall counter, then walked back to their seats with exaggerated care. It was the most discipline they had shown all day.

During the church service they had hared up and down the aisles, trailed by the occasional father dispatched to

ensure they didn't brain themselves on the end of a pew. When I was a child, church services were choreographed routines that alternated singing with silence. A stern glance from a schoolteacher or a Guide leader or a mother – be it mine or anyone else's – was enough to maintain a respectful hush.

This christening, however, was blessed throughout with the urgently vocalized thoughts and desires of its youngest participants. It was hard to feel spiritual when, with the congregation bent over in prayer, an unmodified voice brayed that it wanted its Star Wars Lego back.

And yet the service had still made me cry. I had developed a Pavlovian response to baptisms. It wasn't the devil-rejecting and the evil-renouncing that got me, or the dunking at the font, but the moments after, when the priest held the baby and thumbed a symbolic cross on its forehead. I only had to start speaking the words 'Fight valiantly. . .' to feel the prickle behind my eyes. The next five minutes of liturgy were always spent clamping my jaw and willing away embarrassing tears, erasing them with a sneaky tissue. By the time the congregation was joyfully welcoming the newcomer into the Lord's family, my voice would be cracking under the strain of concealment.

I hated the thought of being caught crying in church. I knew what people would think. The woman without the

wedding ring was lamenting her childlessness, keening for a baby of her own. How could I explain that this unbidden surge of emotion had nothing to do with the sight of a flailing infant and everything to do with that perfectly constructed moment of community? The promise – fragile as the flame now being gingerly handed to the godparents – of belonging.

And now we were here, in a small garden with a sandpit, where every conversation was fractured with interruption from knee-high invaders tugging at skirts and trouser legs or other halves who 'just need a minute'. I stood in a small horseshoe of first-time parents, caught in a crossfire of due dates and Mothercare wishlists.

'I definitely recommend the Ding-a-Ling-a-sling. The padded flaps are a *life-saver*.'

'Good to know… what did you do about breast pumps?' I tried to maintain an expression of absorption as they moved on to NCT classes and midwife visits. Laura slipped in next to me. 'God, this must be so boring for you,' she murmured, apologetically. 'Have you seen the others?'

I nodded. It had been more than a year since our little group had been together in the same room but my college friends were still the people I considered myself closest to. Our lives had melted together under the applied heat of higher education and mild depravity, and it was impossible to imagine them ever separating. We might have become

geographically distanced but we were still locked in a foundational molecular bond.

This afternoon, however, our atomic parts were loosely scattered throughout the assembly. Tom and Hywel were talking to a posse of doctors about their respective hospitals. Boring medical chat had been the major drawback of our undergrad life and I avoided it like hepatitis. Ally was commiserating with some women who couldn't believe how often their children needed new shoes.

Jon had found a couple who lived in East Grinstead and was mining them for information on local estate agents – I had hovered on the edge of that conversation for some time before remembering that I was never, ever going to move to East Grinstead. And Ben had foreseen all of this and found a convincing excuse not to be here.

'How are things with you, anyway?' asked Laura. 'What happened with that guy you liked?'

'Oh, you know. Usual story. It turned out I'd read it all wrong and he wasn't really flirting with me after all.'

'The guy whose goodbye hugs lasted a full 60 seconds?'

'That's the one.'

'Ugh. Bet he was just enjoying the attention. Especially from someone as great as you. Guys are the worst.'

'Well, Mark's not *that* bad.'

Laura snorted. 'You don't have to pick up his pants.'

A dad approached with an armful of baby. 'Sorry

Laura, where's your bathroom? This one's leaking . . .'

Laura led him off towards her cotton wool reserves and I felt for my phone. There was a message from Marisa – *Drinks?* To which I replied: *Yes*. God yes.

Beside me, a burly toddler rushed a smaller one on a tricycle and bundled him off it with the word 'Mine!'.

'That's not very nice, is it?' I said, bending down to his level. 'Don't you think you should say sorry?'

Burly dropped his jaw, scrunched his eyes and screamed as if I'd inflicted bodily violence upon him. Within seconds, a clutch of women had swooped upon the scene.

'What's the matter, darling?'

'Are you hurt?'

While I tried to explain, Burly bawled something indistinct and pointed at the tricycle, which the smaller toddler had been too wary to reclaim. The women looked at me with stark horror, wrapped Burly in unconditional love and told him of course he could play on the trike.

I texted Marisa again. *Now?*

I was glad I had dressed up for the christening. The bar Marisa had chosen was artfully distressed but the people inside it were not. Usually I hated showing up at a place without knowing anything about it – without, to be honest, having chosen it myself, after considerable internet research and a meticulous winnowing of multiple options.

But I knew that I could always trust Marisa's taste.

'How was Laura?' she asked, as we were directed to a booth. The banquette was so tight to the table we had to fold ourselves into L-shapes as we made our approach.

'She's OK, I think. I didn't get to talk to her that much.'

'Did little Sam behave himself for the vicar?' Marisa had never met either little Sam or Laura but she had an extraordinary memory for the peripheral details of other people's lives and could show a genuine interest in those she didn't know. It was a trait that never ceased to impress me.

A waitress came to take our order and we chose two of the wildest-looking cocktails on the menu. 'Should we get some snacks?' I said, knowing that the answer would be yes and that by the time the bill came, we would have spent as much on some bread, olives and chicken liver parfait as on a full-blown meal. But snacks always sounded like an economical move, and when I did ultimately reel into a chicken shop on my way home, the alcohol in my stomach crying out for the companionship of some filthy fried drumsticks, I would already have forgotten the cost of the olives.

Marisa asked the waitress for her recommendations. A vote for the calamari turned into a discussion about the difference between squid and octopus and soon Marisa had elicited that our waitress once worked on yachts in the Mediterranean and planned to get back there some day if

she could. One of the things I enjoyed most about going out with Marisa was how easily she made conversation with people she'd just met. It came as naturally to her as her generous smile or the Kiwi vowels that she always claimed – incorrectly – to have lost since she moved to Britain.

Even after a decade of living in London, Marisa treated the city as a foreign adventure and approached its citizens with a warmth and curiosity that made her instantly likeable. Nowhere was off limits or intimidating when you were with her because she was never striving to fit in. Her enthusiasm to learn about random strangers was entirely genuine, and under her influence I found myself becoming more interested in them, too – or at least less resentful of their presence and more patient with their life stories.

We had met a year ago. My flatmate was leaving to move into her own place and I couldn't afford to pay the mortgage alone. I had bought the flat in the mid-2000s; my parents had helped with a deposit on the understanding they would get their money back when I eventually married and halved my worldly goods and liabilities with a husband. It was a compact two bedroom at the top of an Edwardian terraced house and three flights of stairs but, as the estate agent had said, perfect for a couple starting out. My mother assumed it was only a matter of time before the dinky second bedroom became a nursery, whereas I had always pictured it as a book-lined study

with a daybed for out-of-town guests who missed the last train home.

Until then, however, I needed someone to share the bills with. I was in my thirties, I had a newspaper job and a decent salary and a series of social rounds that inevitably emptied my bank account by the third week of every month. Perhaps I could have indulged less and stayed home more but then, I reasoned, what would be the point of living in London at all? After the tortured striving of my twenties – scrambling up the sides of a slippery pit of professional anxiety – wasn't it time to enjoy some of the fruits? The thought of living alone, bored with my own company, had never appealed to me anyway.

So I posted the vacancy on a website and invited each of the respondents over to look at the flat; Marisa was the only one to refuse. 'How about we meet up for a drink somewhere instead?' she wrote. 'There's no point seeing the room unless we think we're actually going to get along.' This made her sound so much wiser and classier than me that I immediately agreed.

A few days later, we sat down in a pub for a couple of pints and what we described ever after as the greatest first date of all time. Rarely had anyone made me feel so comfortable so quickly: 'How was *your* day?' she asked, as if we were old friends meeting up at the end of our shifts. She didn't tell me her life story or ask dull questions about

how many siblings I had. She did offer me a foolproof recipe for blondies and show me the scar she'd got from a high-speed bicycle crash.

I never registered the exact nature of the things we had in common or why she seemed such a kindred spirit. I barely even noticed the tiny diamante nose stud or how she managed to bunch her long hair into the kind of cool, silky mess that looked like an A-lister's gym selfie. I was, however, aware of how much I was laughing and how when *she* laughed, she leaned her head back as if she were making more space to enjoy the joke.

It quickly became apparent that my flat wasn't right for her – the room was too small and she had pieces of furniture that would never make it up the back-breaking staircase. She shrugged it off and stayed for another drink, during which we investigated our relationships with our mothers, our thoughts about religion and our favourite uses for gin. When we discovered our birthdays were two days apart, she groaned. 'I'm gutted I'm not moving in. We'd throw *such* a good party.' I told her I was having a few friends over for a barbecue in the garden at the weekend. She said she would come, and she did.

From then on, Marisa took up the role of my gamest friend. We established a habit of evenings out during which we indulged each other's best and worst excesses. I liked old-world glamour and she liked hipster chic; together

we pinballed between speakeasies and hotel bars as if we were sponsored by Diageo. We became each other's excuse for extravagance and blew our pay cheques on many a 'special occasion' joint that others might have saved for the next job promotion or the arrival of their decree absolute.

This was how I had often hoped my thirties would be. My social life had finally attained the level of sophistication I aspired to – unlike the frenzied gargle of my college days or the fretful outings of my twenties, always riddled with the fear that a better night could have been had at a different location or with other friends. Marisa and I navigated our way through the city's endlessly reconfigured drinking terrain with the assurance of veteran explorers, happiest in unfamiliar territory, hunting for new experiences.

I liked the person I was with Marisa far more than I liked the one I was at home. My new flatmate was not working out; she was almost ten years younger than me, a recent arrival in the city with an urgency to imprint herself that I thoroughly understood and an abrasive streak she had hidden well when we originally met. My cowardly personality shied away from open rows and, in the months that followed her moving in, the little flat became a staging ground for passive-aggressive warfare.

Our conflict peaked in the winter, when the hundred-year-old brickwork failed to provide much insulation. Skirmishes were fought over who was causing draughts

by leaving the doors open and a long-running hostage situation developed over an oil heater I had bought from Argos. Home ceased to be somewhere I could rest or relax, and I didn't feel particularly at peace with myself either. None of this had brought out my best side and the only way I could reconcile how poorly I was behaving to a person I was living with was to tell myself that I deserved whatever discomfort it brought. My penance, therefore, was to constantly forgive and continually endure.

Marisa, meanwhile, was a steadfast reminder that I led an enviable life. With her, I wasn't a psychological weakling or a vicious landlady or a leftover damsel waiting to be rescued by romance. When I waved over a bartender and ordered our martinis – mine extra dry, hers dirty as a used dishcloth – I felt like my own hero. All futures remained open to me: fame, fortune or grand passion.

Whenever there was somewhere I wanted to go – a film, a concert, an art exhibition – Marisa was my first call. She became so recognizable as my plus-one that a gay friend who worked in PR and regularly invited us to his bands' gigs assumed she was my girlfriend. I only realized this after I told him one night that I'd never read any of Vita Sackville-West's poetry and he boomed: 'What kind of lesbian *are* you?' I never bothered to correct him. It reflected pleasingly well on me that anyone would think I could land a Marisa.

I wished I'd met her far earlier in our London lives, back when my contacts book couldn't keep up with my need for companionship. I had not learned, at this time, that Facebook was a terrible place to post about your spare ticket to *Mamma Mia* because the sad-face emojis from everyone you knew explaining that they were already busy would be a very public stamp of loserdom.

If I had known Marisa in my twenties, I reasoned, we would now have the kind of recklessly loyal best-friendship known to female New Yorkers in film and TV, the leave-it-all-on-the-dancefloor, let-it-all-out-in-the-toilet-cubicle relationship that ran around Manhattan in stilettos and collapsed back home with its face in a jar of peanut butter. But it was too late for that; Marisa already had her own support network, including a best friend, Zoe, with whom she had now found a place to live.

And so Marisa was just my going-out friend. Sometimes when I suggested a movie, she had already seen it with Zoe and Zoe's boyfriend Dave, or else they were all feeling broke and Marisa would apologetically decline: 'Zoe and I are going to stay home and cook tonight.' I had only met Zoe a couple of times but I was already jealous of her, and the way she managed to wear her T-shirts so carelessly over her black jeans or raise one eyebrow to convey devastating irony.

It was Zoe who had tipped off Marisa about this bar,

having read about it in a magazine the day before. It struck me, after an afternoon observing the glacial movement of my friends' married lives – the crawling narrative of school years and career advancement – how sparklingly nimble ours felt by contrast. Nothing could have tempted me to trade the possibility of a spontaneous midweek happy hour for the regularity of a Saturday morning supermarket shop.

We sat in our booth dipping crispy squid in a slick of something outrageously garlicky and making over-loud groans of pleasure while Marisa told me about her latest meet-up with Vish. Vish was a former colleague with whom she had unmistakeable chemistry but who stubbornly refused to act on it. They would talk for hours, sharing their deepest thoughts and fears in the manner of soulmates. Then, as they stumbled into the street at closing time, he would give her a meaningful hug, tell her she was one of his closest friends and announce that he was heading in the opposite direction.

I recognized this behaviour; the same thing had happened to me enough times to know this was never going to have a happy ending. 'What is *wrong* with this guy?' I said, with automatic outrage. 'He's *clearly* a total *idiot*.' But underneath the righteous indignation on my friend's behalf, I felt a thrum of something else: a secret, suppressed delight. I knew it was wrong but

I couldn't deny the low-level pleasure in discovering that someone as obviously great as Marisa was stalling with a guy.

This was not the first time that I had experienced irresistible relief on hearing the stories of other women's failures with men. It wasn't that I wanted them to be unhappy – not really, not in the long-term – but their woes did bring me a temporary release from the constant contemplation of my own inadequacies.

They were also some of the times I felt I could understand other women best. I was rarely electrified by the vicarious spark of someone else's romantic obsession. I didn't dissolve at their melty-eyed sharing of a sonogram. However, tell me about the brutal disappointment of a guy who liked you, but not quite enough, and you'd found something I could hum along to. I knew that tune well, from the repeated motif of missed moments and agonizing non-happenings, to the internal bassline moan of why-aren't-I-his-type?

'Do you think I should have just grabbed him and kissed him?' asked Marisa.

'Sounds like you'd have terrified him if you did. If he can walk away from a woman like you, he's clearly got trouser problems.'

'But then why does he spend so much time with me?'

My explanation failed all rules of logic but it was

delivered with enough emotion that it didn't matter: 'Because *you're* amazing and he knows deep down that he doesn't deserve you!'

Marisa sighed. 'He *doesn't* deserve me, does he?'

'No, he doesn't. And your life is far better without him slowing you down.'

We clinked our glasses and cheersed our independence. An outer ripple of relief lapped at my subconscious. I had lost enough good single friends to the blackout zone of serious commitment already.

My flatmate gave me a month's notice of her intention to leave and the siege lifted overnight. Now that we both knew the situation was temporary, we suddenly found it perfectly natural to be kind and our consideration of each other's comfort knew no bounds. She cooked me breakfast; I was happy to watch her choice of TV. The day she moved out, we carried her boxes and bags down to her dad's car together and I sprang back up the stairs.

Our tiny acts of aggression and the disproportionate pain they inflicted had been too ridiculous and shameful to share widely; I had not admitted my role in them to anyone other than my sister. She suggested I think twice before inviting another stranger to live with me.

'Why don't you wait till you find someone you know a bit better?' she said.

'Because everyone I know already has someone they live with.'

'You could afford to live alone for a bit. Especially if you weren't out every night.'

'And never see my friends?'

'Ugh, London people. What's wrong with going round someone's house and eating pizza?'

Kate was two years younger than me but had assumed the role of older sister ever since our late teens. I listened to her advice grudgingly and then, as I almost always did, I took it.

In the pause before committing to anyone new, I decided it made sense to repaint the empty bedroom. Decorating was one of many activities that seemed achievable – even fun – in the abstract but which I usually regretted the moment I was irrevocably committed. Other items on this list included clubbing, strategy-based board games and swimming, which I only remembered how much I despised when the sole of my foot made contact with a wet changing room floor.

I allocated a weekend for my redecorating project, then spent the entire Saturday morning in the aisles of the DIY shop, dithering over brush bristle types and paint roller widths. Without a car of my own, I struggled home on the bus, the heavy tins of paint cloaked in my jumper and jacket after the first driver had spotted them among my

bags and refused to let me on. I climbed the three flights to my front door, realized I'd forgotten dust sheets and went straight out again.

It was almost early evening when I was finally ready to begin painting. There had been a third trip to the shops when, after watching a short YouTube tutorial, I understood that I was supposed to have prepared the walls with something called sugar soap. And then a fourth when I decided the task required emergency chocolate. It was possible I should have quit while I was behind, especially given the heightened state of stress and fatigue under which I was now operating. But once the walls were sponged down and ready for action I felt a strange obligation towards them.

With no one around to dissuade or direct me, I filled a paint tray and loaded up the roller. The first thrust triggered a backspray of vinyl matt across my face and the glasses I was wearing upon it. Some say there is a state of flow inherent to manual pursuits, a hypnotic effect that encourages a mindful calm, and it is true that you can't act out your anger with a roller brush (at least, not without splattering yourself). That night was my proof, however, that you can both paint yourself into a corner and decorate yourself into a depression. The moon was high outside the window by the time I gave up. I threw myself into bed without showering, arms covered in crispy white speckles.

I woke to the dismal thought that I had to wrestle with the roller all over again, at least twice more. Then I remembered the existence of skirting boards and door frames and burst into tears. All that sandpapering! A primer *and* undercoat! Not to mention the gloss paint, a substance I could no more handle than I could nitroglycerine. No masking-tape barrier I built had ever kept it contained. My hallway carpet still bore the stain from my last attempt to touch up some woodwork.

But now I'd started the process there was no escape and no rescue team on its way. If there was one thing that sucked about being single in your thirties, it was the crappy jobs you couldn't expect anyone else to help you do. A decade ago, a painting party was a fun excuse for a hangout and making house was still a novelty. These days, everyone had enough DIY – and life – troubles of their own.

By Monday evening, I had reached a state of hopelessness; by Thursday, I was convinced I was trapped forever in this purgatory of half-finished home improvement. I had unwittingly tramped Antique Cream across my floors and the dust sheets trailed sorrowfully into the hallway, unsure whether they were supposed to be hiding the paint-prints or preventing more. Even with all the windows open – admitting a contemporary symphony of traffic, pavement confrontations and night-time helicopter visits – the fumes preferred to hang around

inside. Which of the two was causing my headaches and keeping me awake at night became an intractable puzzle.

It was on the Friday afternoon that Marisa's text arrived: *Drinks?*

By now, the concept of putting on a skirt and mascara seemed to belong in the realms of science fiction. I would surely never hold an Old Fashioned again.

Wish I could, I replied. *Out of funds, probably forever. Flatmate left and have stupidly attempted to spruce the spare room solo. If you haven't heard from me in a month, please send police to remove my turps-addled body.*

Fifteen seconds later, the phone rang.

'Mate,' she said, 'why didn't you tell me?'

'About my flatmate? Or my redecorating disaster?'

'Both! Are you OK?'

I said I was fine, even though I wasn't, because a voice in my brain warned me that you weren't allowed to be this pathetically miserable about DIY.

'I'll come round and help you tomorrow,' said Marisa. 'It'll be fun.'

She showed up the next morning with a plastic bag containing a selection of paintbrushes, plus a French stick and a giant wedge of cheese she'd brought for our lunch. She was, inevitably, both more competent and more careful than me, but even my brushwork seemed to improve with her around and time slipped by in easy increments.

I didn't dare tell my friend how blissful it was to have her alongside me or how, in the moment she offered to come over, I had felt sluice gates open and a cascade of hopefulness rush in. I did know, already, that whenever anyone admired the room, I would make a point of saying that Marisa and I had painted it together. And I suspected that this wasn't the last thing she would help me fix.

Occasionally we took a break and paused at the window, looking out over the garden. It was an uninteresting stretch of grass with one magnificent feature: a horse chestnut tree whose upper branches reached up to the top of the house. Marisa got excited when she spotted a couple of green parakeets hanging out there. I couldn't fathom what a pair of exotic birds was doing in my garden but I liked to see them, livening the place up with their Granny Smith plumage and rosy pink beaks. There were enough damn pigeons in the world already.