

The Life You Want

Emily Barr

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Extract

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chapter one

I think I am having a breakdown, and nobody has any idea.

It is preposterous. I am lucky; incredibly lucky. There is no reason for me to have a breakdown. I have the perfect life; I have it all. A strong marriage, two beautiful children, freelance work I do because I want to, not because I have to. Security of every sort. I am, therefore, happy. I remind myself of this, all the time.

There are times, however, when something overwhelms me. It happens without warning, in the most ordinary of situations. Today, for example, I am sitting on a tiny table, an ungainly giant in a world made for little people, and having an innocuous conversation with my son's teacher, when my vision starts to cloud over, and the ringing sounds in my ears.

I hear his words as if through a tunnel. ' . . . not Beijing, though,' he is saying. 'I have a bit of a yen to spend some time in some of those places where you're days and days away from the nearest city, and it gets light at ten in the morning.'

It always starts this way. I don't say a word. I grip the edge of the table as hard as I can, with both hands. At home, I would slump down and close my eyes and surrender, but if I let that happen now, Mr Trelawney would call an ambulance.

So I screw my eyes tight shut, and listen to my heart pounding. It bounces around inside my chest like a dying fish. Then my throat constricts. I gasp for breath, as inconspicuously as I can. I open my eyes briefly, in an attempt to look normal. There are

childish paintings of pirates all over the walls, and when they start rushing towards me waving their cutlasses, and shouting obscenities in Devon accents, I shut my eyes.

Then I realise that it has never been this bad before, and that I am going to die. I need him to call the ambulance. I am leaving my body, slipping away. I am vaguely aware that I am falling down, and choking on nothing, and having a heart attack. I am taking myself out of my life.

And it is exciting. At least something is happening. The world turns to stars and I give up trying to breathe, and drift away, grimly grateful, knowing that this is for the best.

‘Tansy!’ He is shaking me. ‘Bloody hell! What happened?’

When I open my eyes, I expect, briefly, to find myself in hospital, being cared for. It seems, however, that I am on the floor of Toby’s classroom. The wild heartbeat and the hysterical breathing have stopped. As soon as I was absent from myself, my body easily reverted to its usual automatic plodding.

‘I’m OK,’ I realise. ‘Sorry. How long has it been?’ As I speak, my eyes focus again, and I look from his beautiful, baffled face up to the clock on the wall. It is still twenty to four. I feel stupid.

‘Don’t move,’ says Mr Trelawney, and he leans over me, his curly hair hanging down. I struggle to stand up, and he puts his hands on my shoulders and looks into my eyes. I look back. I am too weak even to make myself look away, as I normally do.

‘I guess you fainted,’ he says. ‘Look, you shouldn’t get up yet.’

I shake him off, more violently than is necessary. He pulls his hand back, as if I were on fire.

‘No, I’m really fine,’ I insist. ‘Sorry. Happens occasionally. It’s nothing. So, what were we talking about?’

He is full of wariness. ‘China,’ he says, looking furtively at me, waiting for more grand crazy behaviour. ‘Look, at the very least, grab a seat. You can’t go anywhere. Does this happen a lot? Have you seen a doctor?’

‘Yeah,’ I lie. ‘It’s nothing.’ I try to think of a plausible diagnosis. ‘Low blood pressure,’ I add. It sounds convincing to me. I bustle about, pick up Toby’s book bag, and push my hair behind my ears.

‘Tansy! Let yourself recover.’

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I sit gingerly on the edge of the table, and wait for my legs to solidify.

Toby saunters back into the room, and stands there, wholesome but scruffy in his green uniform. I am still shaking, so I ram my hands into my coat pockets, purse my lips to stop them trembling, and march over to my poor little firstborn.

‘Hey, there,’ I say, applying a big smile and making an effort to let it reach my eyes. I lean down and kiss his hair, keeping my hands in my pockets. ‘Let’s go fetch your brother.’ The ringing has almost stopped. This will be all right.

Toby is skinny, lanky, six. He is wearing grey shorts, even though it is a chilly autumn day, because I keep him in shorts until the pavements turn icy, to avoid him standing on the backs of his trousers and making them ragged. Such are my concerns, these days. One of his socks is baggy around his ankle, and his green school sweatshirt is stained with splashes of lunchtime yogurt.

‘Just a minute, Mum,’ he says, full of enthusiasm. He pulls my sleeve, and drags me to the wall of pirates, all of whom are now behaving themselves, though I think I catch one winking in my peripheral vision. ‘This is my pirate. Look, I put shiny foil on his sword!’

‘I *love* him,’ I say. I put all the excitement I can muster into my words. ‘Well done, Tobes.’ I turn to the teacher, who is now being ostentatiously busy. ‘Why do you get them to do pirate pictures, Mr Trelawney?’ I ask, though I meant to say *goodbye*. ‘When everyone knows that pirates are bloodthirsty criminals?’

‘*Does* everyone know that, though?’ Mr Trelawney asks, looking up with the smile that makes me quiver. I wonder whether he knows what effect he has on me. ‘I mean, they’ve been fetishised out of all recognition over the years, haven’t they? It probably started with Stevenson. Arrrr, Jim lad and all that.’

‘Arr,’ says Toby. ‘Toby lad.’ He laughs to himself.

‘Captain Pugwash,’ I say. ‘Not to mention the horrors of those Johnny Depp films. Pirates have amazing PR.’

‘What’s amazing PR?’ Toby demands, and I look at him, at his big dark eyes that remind me so much of his father’s. Right now, I see Max watching me through Toby. He is guarded, wary, judging

me. I often wonder whether Max has set up some kind of portal, whether he observes my failings through Toby's eyes, whether right now he is wondering what I am doing, hanging out after school with Mr Trelawney, flinging myself on to the classroom floor.

'Come on,' I say, and take my boy by the hand. My grip is almost firm.

Mr Trelawney smiles at us both. He has springy curly hair that reaches the nape of his neck, and a golden tan, and, unlike most of the teachers, he dresses like a surfer. I tear my eyes away from him.

'Bye, Toby and Toby's Mum,' he says.

'See you tomorrow,' Toby says seriously.

As I step out into the corridor, which smells of polish, and crayons, and eternal youth, it starts to happen again. I steady myself with a hand on Toby's head. There is a strange taste in my mouth. Black splodges appear before my eyes. Toby is saying something, but I can't hear him because of the blood swirling around in my ears. I can hear my heart pumping the blood around my body. It is not a 'boom-boom' heartbeat, not the sort of tidy beat you hear in the credits of medical programmes, but a great roaring swoosh.

I make the most enormous effort, stand still for a second, and nip it in the bud.

I try to talk about it, at the boys' bedtime.

'I thought I was going to die today,' I say to Max, from the table, as he gently closes their door.

He laughs, but in a whisper. 'Die of what?' he asks.

'Well, that's just the thing. Of nothing. Nothing at all.'

Max, the smooth, clean-shaven City man, looks quizzical. He walks across the room and puts his arms on my waist. I lean into him immediately, and we fit together the way we always do. He has sideburns, and an expensive haircut. I love it that he walks in from work and instantly, automatically, puts the boys to bed. I love it that he loves them so much.

'Right,' he says. 'But you didn't.'

I bury my face in his chest and try to find the words.

'That's right,' is all I manage to say. 'I didn't.'

* * *

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At half past three in the morning, my eyes spring open. This has happened for the past four nights. Five days ago, I was living my life in a reasonably competent manner. The things that bothered me were mainly packed away into strong boxes, with lids nailed firmly down. One email has changed it all. A single, upbeat email, written with no intention of bringing my house of cards crashing down. I cannot believe it is happening: soon, I am certain, I will be sane again.

I look at the orangey light on the ceiling, from the street lamp outside. I can see the outline of the furniture, of my blameless husband.

When I met Max, when I realised that I loved him and that we would be together for ever, I was smugly amused by the fact that, in spite of my background, in spite of everything, I had ended up conforming to society's norms. I knew we would marry, that we would live in a monogamous nuclear unit, that I would accidentally be conventional. I should have known that my conventionality would be fragile.

I listen to the dull hum of traffic outside. My mother is right outside the window, taunting me for my failure.

'You're dead,' I say quietly, and she melts away. Max rolls over and mutters, but doesn't wake. The contours of his sleeping face are lit up in eery yellow. I sit up and look at him for a while. I hear his untroubled breathing, gaze at the bulk of his comatose body under the duvet. Part of me longs to pack a bag and tiptoe out of my life, to follow up Elly's idea. I will never do it. Instead, I lie down, roll up close to him. We are naked together, against each other, a picture of intimacy.

'Mm?' he says. 'What is it?'

I stare at him, at his smooth cheeks, the contours of his cheekbones, the place where his hairline meets his face. I touch his cheek. Everything has been enchanted for us. That's what everybody thinks. It's what he thinks. I cannot bear to disappoint him.

'Nothing,' I mutter.

'Go back to sleep.'

I close my eyes, and try to think of nothing.

chapter two

At half past two, I have a bowl of clammy cold pasta and a drink. That is lunch. I eat it standing up, by the radiator, watching the feet go by, the phone held to my ear.

‘. . . And we went to this wine bar,’ Jessica is saying. ‘And then Jasper came in, but he pretended not to see us, and Amelia says that’s because I was sitting next to Conrad . . .’

‘And do you think that’s right?’ I say, staring at the pavement that is at my eye level. A pair of clumpy boots goes by, with delicate female legs, clad in black tights, in them.

‘Well, I’m not sure,’ says my sister. I picture her, in her tiny hall-of-residence bedroom, with sensible bobbed hair, wearing black trousers and an ironed blouse. ‘What do you think? I never thought Jasper would be one for playing games like that. But then he sent me a fish on Facebook, but he didn’t write anything with it. I mean, what’s that about? A fish? It was a pink one. I don’t even like pink, and he knows that. In the wine bar he came over in the end to ask me about torts, but he didn’t stay because some other friends of his came in . . .’

I look around, while her story continues. Our home is spacious for a two-bedroom flat, and small in every other way. It is reasonably tidy, because Max keeps it that way and because we have a cleaner, whose visit necessitates my weekly morning working in Starbucks; there is no way that I could sit around tapping randomly at my laptop while somebody’s grandmother vacuums around my chair.

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The windows are high in the walls, which Max always says gives a golden early evening light, but he is deliberately overstating the case. Occasionally a sunbeam comes in at exactly the right angle and gives us all gorgeous shadows and honeyed complexions, but it is like the place in Orkney where the light hits the altar once a year. Mostly we get no light at all. The living area is open-plan and L-shaped, with a kitchen area and a big, farmhouse-style dining table. Around the corner, we have two sofas, a chair and the television. The boys' bedroom is tucked into the square that is left by the L, and without bunk beds it could not possibly house two children. Our room, and the bathroom, are behind it. It is our burrow. We live half underground.

'... And she said, "You're not drinking the *house wine*?"' Jessica is saying. I pick up my own glass, and drain the dregs.

'Nothing wrong with house wine,' I tell her.

'Well, quite. So we said . . .'

I tune out again. The walls are so covered with stuff that their standard magnolia is barely visible. There are pictures by the children all over the place, and postcards, and, taking up more space than anything else, there is the map.

I go and stand in front of it, the phone tucked between ear and shoulder. It is next to the dining table, a part of the furniture for years and years. It shows the whole world.

'What are you doing in the holidays?' I ask, interrupting.

'Holidays? What, Christmas?'

'Next summer. Are you going away?' I stare and stare. I point to London, then fly my finger, as an aeroplane, all the way to the place I have long assumed I will never see. I imagine how easy it would actually be to do it.

'Oh, I've got no idea. Work experience, probably. In fact, I'll have to. I should start getting something sorted out.'

'Don't you want to go away? You could go anywhere.'

She is brisk. 'No, I have to work. That's the way it is, these days, you know. Holidays are for working.'

'You're making me feel very old.'

She laughs. 'Sorry. You're not very old.'

'Anyway, I have to go and fetch Toby and Joe.' I shift around,

turn my back on the world, shiver. My stomach is contracted, and when I look down, I see that my hands are clenched into fists.

‘OK. Look, we’re doing a surprise party for Dad’s seventieth.’ She laughs. ‘Now, *that’s* old. Did Mum say? I’m coming down for it. In November, on his actual birthday. We’re starting it in the afternoon so the boys can be there too.’

I imagine the scene. Family, stepfamily, friends, children. It will fill a day.

I hang up, and check my emails before leaving for school.

I have one new message, and I am rather nervous to see that it comes from GoThereNow!, an online travel agency I have been working for. Every week for over two years, I have tapped out a newsletter which has been sent to their mailing list. It is surprisingly time-consuming, and forms the basis of my tiny ‘business’. I have not started this week’s offering yet, and it is due tomorrow morning. But they should not be writing to me now: a girl called Azure has already given me all the information I need, and Bruce, the self-styled ‘Head Honcho’, never contacts me at all.

‘Hey there, Tansy,’ Bruce has written. ‘Can I start off by saying you have done a more-than-amazing job of our humble newsletter over the past few years. And we really appreciate it. However . . .’

The chill starts. I don’t really need to read beyond that ‘however’. I have lost my job. I have failed in yet another way.

I force myself to look at the next few lines. It is all there: ‘tough economic times’, ‘recession’, ‘making cutbacks wherever we can, just to keep our heads above water’. In short, Bruce is getting Azure to do the newsletter, to save himself a very small amount of cash.

I have no idea what I will do. I cannot bear not to do anything. I can’t afford it, either. But I cannot bear to get a job. I blink hard. This is the thing I have been fearing for two years. I cannot possibly earn the money for Joe’s childcare fees now.

Before I leave, I retrieve Elly’s five-day-old message from the deleted folder, where I keep putting it. I know it by heart but I open it again anyway.

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'Hi T, hope you're well etc. all fine here, heaps of people about, tourists everywhere, even some ozzies in the place at the mo. a rare treat to hear my accent. it's lovely and shady though pretty hot and stinky down in town. anyway, i need some help. you know, every mail you've ever sent me, you say 'anything else we can do, just let me know'. well i'm going to call you on that one. i really need another pair of hands around the place for a month or so. we have a lot going on with the kids now the orphanage is up and running. stuff happening that i won't go into now but i'll tell all when i see you. the thing is, i know you, i trust you. and that's important for what we do here. i know you have your family etc, but would you come out for a month or so? am sure max can take care of things in london and it's about time we got you back to asia, don't you think? pondicherry and all that? let me know.
E xxx'

I shake my head. I know that I cannot go to India. My life is here. I made a conscious effort, years ago, and settled down to raise a family. Yet, for some reason, I have not been able to put the idea from my head. I imagine a tin can, deep in my psyche. The email has pierced the side of it, and the worms are slithering out. Elly's innocent words have opened the floodgates.

I met Elly in Vietnam, nearly a decade ago. She has lived in India for longer than Max and I have been parents. She lives in an ashram and does charity work with children; we send her money regularly, a pittance that makes me feel vaguely better about our comfortable, bland life. Now, apparently, she needs more than my money.

I snap the laptop shut, then grab my keys, belt my coat around my waist, and set off, on an excursion into the real world.

Unless I make an enormous effort and find another source of income that will pay the nursery bill while letting me work solely in school hours, I will no longer be able to justify sending Joe to childcare. Max could pay, but it would leave us short of cash,

or Joe could stay at home and I could concentrate on being a mother.

I inhale deeply at the very idea. I wish I were the sort of woman who could happily spend all of every day with her three-year-old. Joe is the light of my life, but looking after him would drive me insane. I would not be good enough. He would grow to hate me, and at the moment he is the only person in the world who unreservedly loves me. That cannot happen. I must find a way to keep him in nursery, where he has a lovely time being looked after by patient people who have been trained for the job.

Max must have guessed that this was coming. This morning, he brought me a cup of tea in bed and sat down beside me while I was drinking it.

‘Have you thought,’ he asked mildly, ‘about getting an office job?’

I swallowed and tried to concentrate. ‘Erm,’ I said. ‘No. Why?’

He gave an undue amount of attention to the sock he was pulling on. Max dresses for work, every single day, in a very dark grey suit, a shirt which is either pale purple or white, a purple tie, and a pair of jaunty socks. He resolutely refuses to admit that the socks are a cliché. This morning he concentrated hard on the pulling-on of a Simpsons pair that Toby chose for his last birthday.

‘Oh,’ he said, not looking up. ‘Get out of the house, make some new friends, broaden the old horizons. Don’t you think?’

I could hear children’s morning television, just outside our bedroom door. The *Bob the Builder* theme came on: Joe’s turn to choose.

All I managed to say was, ‘I don’t think so.’

Our eyes met in the mirror, and I looked away. I wanted to cry.

Max and I were never about working in offices. We were always going to live our lives differently. We were going to work purely to save money for the next adventure. Eight years ago, we would have laughed long and loud at anyone who equated *broad horizons* with an office job.

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For a few seconds, I allow myself to dwell, again, on Elly's breezy request. The only way I could help out at her orphanage would be if we all went there. And that is impossible.

As I turn to close the door, I see the picture, hung above the shelf where we pile the post. Max and me on our wedding day. Max grinning, tanned and far more relaxed than a bridegroom ought to be, an arm on my shoulder. Me smiling an uncomplicated smile, my hair recently bleached by the American sun, wearing a tight cream dress that suited me in a way few other clothes have ever done, looking to the future in the absolute certainty of a life full of love and excitement and unimaginable new adventures.

That day, in the Peak District, I remember laughing at the way Max looked in a suit.

'It's so not you,' I told him. He laughed, and grabbed me round the waist.

'I wish you were in a frilly meringue,' he told me, 'so I could laugh at you too, but, Tansy, you are perfect.'

The pavement is wet and slippery. Rain hangs in the air, barely there, yet making things damp. A part of me thrills at being out in the city, the shifting, neurotic place that always manages to reflect my mood, where someone is always awake and nothing is completely quiet. I put my head down, pull my mac around myself, and stomp down the road. Out of habit, I cast my eyes down to the basement windows, hoping to see someone else looking out, the way I do.

The cars are already cruising away from school, their charges coddled within. As I get closer, I start passing children in uniform, dispersing around the area. I speed up my pace, almost breaking into a run. A boy who is a bit older than Toby brushes past and doesn't look round. He is talking to his mother with such intensity that he has no idea where he is going. I hear him say, 'And Mum? Then I got the goal, and everyone cheered for me, and that meant that we won, and Mum? That was the first time I had *ever* done that!'

I hang back, in spite of myself, to hear his mother's response.

As I look at the back of his downy blond head, I can imagine the eager expression on his face.

‘Oh that’s good,’ she says vaguely. ‘I’ve made meatballs.’

By the time I reach the school, the children, in their green sweatshirts, have left the building. There are just a few stragglers, and I hurry onwards, hoping that Toby might not be the last, that there might still be a few of them at the gates, waiting. Today, more than ever before, I cannot let myself be alone in a room with Mr Trelawney.

I rush past a skeletally thin woman called Olivia’s Mum, who hurries by with the sainted Olivia grasped in one hand, and a violin case and an umbrella in the other. Olivia’s Mum clearly doesn’t eat, and her size-zero jeans are a reproach to my indulged curves every time I look at her. She throws her advantage away, however, by having rubbish hair, a home-cut greying Beatles pudding basin. She elaborately blanks me. I think it has something to do with a conversation we once had about the Gifted and Talented programme.

I have tried desperately hard to get on with the school mothers. I rehearse off-the-cuff remarks, and little jokes, but they never work. When I open my mouth, the wrong thing comes out. They have some sort of unspoken communication going on, and even when I say the exact words I have heard an accepted member of their clique use, I get wary looks and raised eyebrows. I know that my desperation must shine through, but I cannot ever manage to say the right thing. I have two friends: Sarah, and Mr Trelawney.

When Toby was in Reception, I stood at the school gates with a couple of other mothers, and laughed at what they were saying because I thought I was joining in with a joke.

‘Tabby’s actually reading at the level of an eight-year-old,’ said Tabitha’s Mum, back then. ‘We had her IQ tested and she’s almost off the scale. My husband’s talking about *Mensa*.’

‘That’s *fabulous*,’ I said. I completely believed she was messing around.

‘Of course, girls are more advanced,’ the woman added.

‘They are,’ said the woman on my other side, Olivia’s Mum.

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‘Livvy’s reading age is actually *nine*. She read the first Harry Potter book to herself this weekend. Finished it Sunday lunchtime!’

‘Well, Toby’s reading *War and Peace*,’ I said, ‘but he thinks the battle scenes are a bit facile. He preferred the Dostoevsky, I think.’

Olivia’s Mum gave me an evil glare and has not addressed a word to me since. Tabitha’s Mum looks at me in bafflement, and whispers about me. That was how I found out that they were not joking.

I sigh when I reach the gates. Toby has been taken back inside. I set off to the classroom, looking forward to seeing the gorgeous Mr Trelawney, in spite of myself.

Out-of-hours school automatically makes me nervous. There are displays stuck on boards everywhere, and as I pass down a corridor decorated entirely to a theme of Hinduism, I hear the clapping of my heels slow down. I take in the childish pictures of Shiva and Ganesh, Lakshmi and a couple of blue ones. I think of Elly’s email, of India.

Toby is sitting on a little chair, drawing a picture of the Tardis, with a blue biro.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ I say from the doorway.

‘Mum!’ he says, his bottom lip jutting in petulance.

Mr Trelawney is sitting with his feet up, crossed at the ankles, on his desk, writing something on an A4 pad. I kiss the top of Toby’s head, and make sure he has his book bag.

‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘I’m really sorry, Tobes. Truly. I didn’t mean to be late *at all*.’ I say the last two words pointedly in the direction of his teacher, but without looking at him. My thing with Jim Trelawney is in danger of spiralling: I keep catching myself not mentioning to Max the wistful conversations we have had. I have saved his number under ‘Olivia’ on my phone, and I text him from time to time. The subterfuge is ridiculous, because if he were female, I would legitimately be friends with him. This is what I tell myself.

‘Why *are* you, then?’ Toby stands up, thin and wiry, staring into my face, demanding an answer.

‘Jessica phoned,’ I tell him briskly. ‘I didn’t notice the time. Sorry. Hey, Lola’s having a surprise party for Grandpa’s birthday. You know, he’s going to be seventy. Don’t tell him.’

Toby laughs. ‘Doesn’t Grandpa know how old he is?’

‘Yes. But he doesn’t know he’s having a party.’ I turn my attention to his teacher. ‘Sorry, Mr Trelawney,’ I say, swallowing hard. ‘Sorry that you had to stay behind. I think I need some timekeeping lessons.’

I realise at once that this was a bad thing to say: inappropriately flirtatious, and impossible to retract.

Mr Trelawney shakes his head, and his curly hair springs around his narrow face. His cheeks are always a little bit rosy, permanently wind-blown from his hours on his surfboard. His features are casually perfect, as if he were a movie star, but he carries it lightly. His clothes – his loose cotton trousers and his Quiksilver T-shirt – are exactly right.

‘Not a problem,’ he says. ‘I’d be here anyway. Though you can have private timekeeping tuition any time you want it.’ He folds his piece of paper, puts it in an envelope, and hands it to Toby. ‘Since you’re here, Toby,’ he says, ‘could you just pop this down into Mrs Mellor’s letter box?’

I take Toby’s arm, to stop him.

‘Give it to me,’ I say, holding out my hand. ‘We can drop it in on the way out.’

‘No, let me, Mum.’ Eager to be entrusted with a job, Toby takes the envelope and shakes me off.

‘OK, then.’ I capitulate. ‘Go to the loo on your way back. We’re going to the café and you can’t wee in someone’s garden on the way this time.’

I walk away, to the corner of the classroom, and I pretend to stare at the pirates. They do not rush at me shouting about ‘scurvy knaves’, this time. I notice that Mr Trelawney has added a note, in clear teacher’s handwriting, explaining that ‘Real pirates were bloodthirsty criminals, but today we enjoy treating them as amusing characters – me hearties!’

He follows me to the corner.

‘So, how’s Toby doing?’ I ask, in a brisk voice.

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‘He’s doing great,’ he says.

I look at him. He is standing very close to me. I should step away, but I don’t.

‘I keep thinking about my friend’s email. Elly’s. I told you about it.’

Jim grins and pushes his hair behind his ear. ‘Yeah. Does that mean you’re going?’

I look away. ‘I could only go if the whole family went. I couldn’t leave them.’

‘Take them, then. Great plan.’

I start to imagine it. I sit on a low table, and let Jim Trelawney’s words wash over me. I imagine me and Max, backpackers again. I picture the boys, in little cotton trousers and T-shirts, with golden tans and sun-bleached hair. I see the four of us, living in a white-painted house, by a beach with golden sand. We eat fish curry (the boys miraculously enjoying it), and the boys play imaginative games with local children, using cardboard boxes and sticks rather than plastic Cartoon Network merchandise. The surf splashes my face, and the sun warms my limbs.

‘Seven months in nineteen ninety-three . . .’ Jim is saying. ‘Three winters in Goa, over the years. Friend who stayed there. Just dropped out of everything and went to live on the beach. No idea what became of him.’ Then he looks at me. ‘Hey, Tansy,’ he says, in a voice that makes me feel like a schoolgirl with an unrealistic crush. I try not to respond.

Then his hand is on the back of my neck. In spite of myself, in spite of everything, I lean forward, and our lips meet. For a moment, I relish it, lose myself in him. This is something I have imagined for months. I kiss him hard. He pulls me closer, puts his hands on my waist. I pull away just in time.

The door opens, and Toby is looking at us. Jim takes a hasty stride away from me, and I breathe deeply, and realise that nothing will ever be the same.