
Opening Extract from...

I Left My Tent in San Francisco

Written by Emma Kennedy

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I Left My Tent in San Francisco

A tale of breathtaking ineptitude

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For Mouse and Mikey. I love them so.

Contents

Chapter One

Up, Up and Away

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I was crouched in a bush, a stolen sign tucked under my arm, I was drunk and a police car was prowling. My bike was abandoned in the road and my best friend Dee was hunched next to me. 'Do you think they've gone?' she whispered, tugging at my sleeve.

'Definitely gone,' I said, words slurring. 'Let's get out of the hedge.'

I pushed my way onto the pavement, a broken twig in my fringe, and crawled on all fours towards my bike.

But they weren't gone. As Dee and I stumbled over each other to pick up our bikes, there was a screech ahead of us. The patrol car that had passed us at a slow creep moments earlier had made a loop at the top of the street and come back. I blinked and looked up. The car came to a crunching halt, at an angle, and two police officers leapt out and bore down upon us.

'Sorry…' I began, 'our lights aren't working. I think they must need new batteries,' but the burly officer before me wasn't interested.

'What's that?' he asked, pointing at the small plastic sign still tucked under my arm.

I looked down at it and swallowed. Twenty minutes earlier, in a moment of end-of-term high jinx, Dee and I had

unhooked it from the top of a used Lexus on a garage forecourt. 'It's a prop?' I asked, looking over at Dee for some assistance.

'For a play?' she chipped in, eyebrows raised in hope.

'No,' answered the police officer. 'It's not a prop for a play. You've stolen that from a garage in Summertown, haven't you?'

'Oh yes,' I nodded. ' I forgot.'

The police officer gestured to his colleague, a short woman with an intense face, who came towards me, reaching for her handcuffs. She looked as if she might punch concrete for fun and, if anything, seemed vaguely thrilled. A small injection of hilarity shot through me. Here I was, slightly worse for wear, about to be taken down for nicking a small plastic sign that read USED CARS. GREAT DEALS.

'I am arresting you,' she began, coming closer, 'on suspicion of theft. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you may later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?'

I shot a quick, incredulous stare in Dee's direction.

'Can't we just take it back?' Dee asked, pointing towards the offending sign. 'It's only up the road. We can cycle there and put it back.'

'No, you can't.' said the female officer, still coming at me with the cuffs. As she took my right hand, I did something that many might have thought foolish. I looked up, threw her a cheeky grin and adopting a cod, 1950s' mockney accent said the one phrase I had been longing to say all of my life. 'It's all right, officer,' I said, holding up my other hand in supplication. 'I'll come quietly!'

Dee rolled her eyes. We were bundled into the back of the police car. We had to be at Heathrow in five hours. This was not the start to the rest of my life I'd been hoping for.

It had been something of a personal struggle to get in to the university of my choice. Nobody thought I could do it. My teachers said things like 'We're just concerned that you're going to feel terribly let down,' while my parents pulled anxious faces and made thin, whistling noises along the lines of, 'You can only do your best.' The message was loud and clear. Not a single person thought I would ever be accepted at Oxford.

I was from a state school and hadn't had the advantage of tuck boxes, ridiculous school mascots or science blocks donated by a passing prince in a barouche. All we had were slightly mouldy netball bibs and lunches so dense it was a mystery they didn't appear on the periodic table. Nevertheless, I was determined and nothing and nobody was going to stop me having a crack. Occasionally, I would meet up with my History teacher in a small cupboard of a room normally reserved for sacking members of staff but other than that, a pat on the back and a wave from my parents, I was flying solo.

My first brush with the university I was so obsessed with came on a damp Saturday morning in 1984. My teachers had urged me to apply to a college called St Catherine's on the sole basis that they'd taken someone from my school six years previously and they 'might remember'. One thing was troubling me greatly. Not my impending interview, for which I was considerably nervous, but the college itself. It was modern, built in 1962, and despite its relaxed location on the banks of the Cherwell, the glass and concrete buildings were reminiscent of a New Town shopping centre. This was not

the Oxford I had dreamed of in my bedroom: the glorious spires, oak-lined rooms with sash windows, and packed with old leather sofas that eminent writers and poets and politicians had once sat on. This was somewhere you might find yourself if you were looking for an unappetising cheese pasty or getting a boil lanced. Still, beggars can't be choosers. I was at the Findus Crispy pancake college and I had to do my best to try and get in.

I was interviewed by two men wearing tweed jackets. They both sat in high-backed padded armchairs. The room smelled of coffee, and sitting on a low table in front of me there was a plate with a half-eaten biscuit on it. I stared at it. It was a custard cream. I perched on the end of the wooden chair that had been presented to me, clutching my knees, my heart thumping in my chest. If I did well, I thought to myself, then my life would take a magical course. The world, I naively dreamed, would be a generous hamper of opportunity from which I could pick things at will. The possibilities seemed endless – I could be an eccentric philanthropist, a radical philosopher or I might end up ruling the Universe – a bit like Ming the Merciless, but with considerably shorter fingernails.

We discussed the Treaty of Versailles, the rise of Nazism and the miners' strike that had been raging through the latter part of that year. Twenty pits faced closure and the Thatcher government, determined to crush the unions once and for all had stock-piled coal and converted power stations on the quiet. The miners were doomed, the unions would be destroyed and Britain's workforce would never be the same again. I talked about it eloquently, repeating word for word a conversation I had had with my Communist grandfather a week before over half a Guinness in a pub in Battersea. The fellows nodded and occasionally raised their

eyebrows. I nodded and raised my eyebrows back at them. This felt *good*.

Two weeks later, I had a letter in which I was offered a place to read History, conditional on me getting two As and a B. Everyone around me was wide-eyed with disbelief. As moments go, it was right up there, pipping the previous top spot winner – the rain-soaked netball match where my school, Hitchin Girls' School, locally known as the Whorehouse on the Hill, had finally beaten the hated Dame Alice Harper, or Posh Twat High as we liked to call them. Every single time we encountered them, they thrashed us and in five long years we had never come close to equalising, let alone winning. It was galling. They would swan in, beat us and then waft off in their air-conditioned coach, stuffing their faces with just-baked iced finger buns. We fucking hated them.

But one soaking Saturday in November 1983, we were facing them again and suddenly, somewhere in the early moments of the second half, we took the lead. It was a bit like an overweight, asthmatic pub team going one up against Manchester United. Sensing our moment of destiny had finally come our blood was up. Our PE teacher, Miss Nettell, the prettiest and most glamorous teacher at our school, then almost threw a spanner in the works by inexplicably attempting to abandon the match because the rain was ruining her new hair-do, but we flat refused and carried on. We held on by the skin of our teeth and as the final whistle blew, we were a goal ahead. Victory was ours. It was a triumph for the comprehensive schooling system and to celebrate, we went crazy on lemon squash and jammy dodgers. I never thought a greater moment would come. But, with the arrival of this letter, it had.

And then disaster struck.

*

It was March 1985, and a milky sun was peeping out behind the dull, grey clouds that had lingered for much of that week. I was in the middle of a Latin lesson, sitting at the desk in front of my teacher, a small, well-presented woman with kind eyes and a hairstyle that hadn't budged a millimetre in six years. I had a terrible headache and my throat was tight. I was sweating and a sudden dizziness sent me slumping forward, head in hands, across my desk. My teacher took one concerned look at me and sent me home.

Hours later I was found by my parents, crouching in the corner of my bedroom, half crazed with hallucinations. I thought I was a sparrow, my mother thought I was dying. I had been struck down by the curse of the sixth former, glandular fever, and it was so bad it cast a shadow over the rest of the year. Extremely unwell, I ended up having to take a month off school. Reports from teachers came home, practically tear-stained, bewailing my condition and saying things like 'the most important thing is that Emma gets better' and 'I do not know if Emma's health can withstand the next few months. It will be tragic if it doesn't.' It was all rather alarming. My parents would huddle conspiratorially and I would have a go at walking down the garden and back again.

My main problem was simply staying awake. My dad would help me downstairs, proffer some toast that I would stare at, light a fire and go off to work. He'd return at lunchtime, toss the uneaten toast in the bin, wake me up and present some soup. I'd push a spoon through it. Occasionally I'd try and watch television. I could just about manage the opening credits of *Dogtanian and the Three Muskehounds* but as soon as anything approaching a plot kicked in, I was drifting off again. It was like being slowly preserved in amber.

To go to Oxford I had to get two As and a B, grades that before my illness, while challenging, felt achievable but, as the exams approached, I was still so weak and shattered that people around me began to whisper whether I should be taking them at all. I was having nothing of it, of course. It was inconceivable that I wouldn't sit my A Levels and my stubborn streak kicked in once more.

But this time, my determination was to be my undoing. During my British History paper I fell asleep and had to be nudged awake by the invigilator; during one Latin translation paper I spent most of it staring out of the window, my mind swirling like an empty void. I had nothing left to give. I was a husk. My grades fell accordingly. Oxford wrote me a polite but firm letter. I would not be reading History that year but, given my condition, if I would like to reapply then they would consider seeing me again.

I was bitterly disappointed. I was asked if I wanted to enter the university Clearing system, the mop-up net for the disenchanted, but I didn't have the heart to do it. Instead, I spent that summer washing dishes at a local hotel and being taught how to drink alcohol without throwing up by a 45-year-old Irish mother of four called Noreen. After six weeks I was promoted to vegetable peeler. I was earning £120 a week. I could afford skirts from Jigsaw. I was doing *well*.

Without noticing, thoughts of Oxford slipped away.

Mrs Graebe had been my English teacher. She had retired after my O Levels and I hadn't seen her in over two years. I had never been particularly fond of her, probably because she was one of the older teachers and although she commanded a calm authority had a dusty demeanour that fell short of

instilling a sense of excitement. I had bumped into her outside a small shop in Hitchin where sixth-form girls liked to hang out and buy joss sticks that smelled of petunia oil. She was pleased to see me; I felt a little embarrassed. There was always something excruciating about bumping into your teachers in town. Especially ones who'd left. You might have to call them by their *first name*.

'Are you off to university in September next year?' she asked me, smiling gently, assuming I was still in Hitchin because I was taking a year off before plunging into higher education.

I stared past her. It's never pleasant having to confess to failure and so I shook my head and explained my predicament. Mrs Graebe frowned and thought for a moment. She placed a hand, softly, on my shoulder. 'Emma,' she began, 'I don't understand why you wanted to read History at university. You were one of the best English students I ever had. And as for not going to university at all – are you *quite* mad? You've got a brain – use it! Here,' she added, handing me a card with her address on it. 'If you decide to have another go and you want to try for English, I want you to come and see me. Don't give up. *Never* give up.'

She strode off, her words ringing in my ears. A surge of regret coursed through me. I had lost sight of the one goal I had ever given myself. I felt the stirrings of my old determination rattling somewhere behind my ribcage. Mrs Graebe was right. *Never* give up.

Spurred on, I spent the next eight weeks travelling on the bus to Mrs Graebe's house, a rectory in the village of Kimpton, where she would give me tea and cake and we would sit discussing poetry and plays and the great novelists of the nineteenth century. I would not be re-taking my A levels, we

decided, but instead I would take the Oxford entrance exam and hope that that would be enough to secure me a place. She charged me not one penny and didn't make me call her Barbara. Her reward, she constantly told me, would be when I got in to Oxford.

As I stood in an ancient stairwell of St Edmund Hall waiting to be interviewed for a place in the English faculty, small battered leather briefcase in hand, I thought of nothing but Mrs Graebe and not letting her down. It was quite something to have somebody believe in me and after the months of illness I had endured, I had a point to prove. This time, I was interviewed by three people: two ancient fellows – Reggie Alton, a mischievous-looking chap and Bruce Mitchell, the renowned Anglo-Saxon scholar – and a beaming blue-eyed woman called Lucy Newlyn, the youngster in the pack. The walls were lined with books and an old oak table stood to one side with a set of tea things laid on a tray. I was offered a sherry. I politely declined but instead opened my tiny leather suitcase and pulled out five essays I'd written and handed them to Bruce. 'You can read those,' I said, 'to help you make up your mind. I haven't applied anywhere else.'

Bruce seemed quite taken aback with this and, fixing me with an almost baffled stare, asked, 'And what will you do if you don't get in?'

I returned his gaze and without a moment's hesitation threw down my intent. 'I shall re-apply next year,' I declared. I was back.

A week later a heavy envelope embossed with the college crest tumbled onto our doormat. The journey to this

moment had been long and arduous. It had been a roller coaster: everyone around me doubting me, the incredible joy of getting a place only to have it snatched away because of illness, the random encounter with Mrs Graebe, the switch to English, the crawl back to good health. I sat, alone, on my bed staring at the envelope in my hands. It felt as if I was about to jump off a precipice and, depending on what lay within, I would either fly or fall. I turned it over, ran my forefinger under the seal and took out the letter from inside.

'I am very glad to be able to tell you,' it began, 'that the college has decided to offer you a place to come into residence in October 1986 to read English.'

My chest swelled, my eyes filled with tears and as my parents tumbled in through my door I was overwhelmed with emotion. It was, and still is, the greatest achievement of my life. The best bit, of course, was getting to tell Mrs Graebe. I rang her and broke the news, laughing as she hooted with joy.

A few days later, I received a volume of poems by Wendy Cope called *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*. It was from Mrs Graebe and a short inscription had been written on the inside cover.

'Dear Emma,' it read. 'Anyone can give up. That's easy. But you didn't. Never stop persevering. Yours, Barbara Graebe.'

It was advice I was going to need.

My parents, Brenda and Tony, while proud as punch that I was going to Oxford, were, at the same time, worried I was going to struggle to fit in. My mother, concerned that I

was going to be persecuted for coming from humble stock, took me to one side.

'There are a lot of people,' she began, forehead knitting itself into a frown, 'who don't like the Welsh.'

I stared at her.

'They won't give them a chance. So don't tell anyone at Oxford that your father's from Wales. Or they'll all think you're a coal hewer. And a belcher.'

My father, despite being delighted for me, was also wracked with the sort of sorrow reserved for the only surviving relative of a drive-by shooting. His only child was leaving the nest and he didn't seem to be coping. We had been to buy a bicycle for me to take to university and had gone to a small second-hand shop tucked down a side street near the railway station. It was filled with the flotsam and jetsam of a slightly bygone age. There was an old Decca record player, faded green with a chunky white plastic trim (which I purchased on the spot), a table heaped with a dusty tea set, old chairs piled high and, leaning along the walls, framed pictures stacked against each other. Sitting in the window was a bicycle painted a deep, resonant purple with a white leather seat and a fulsome wicker basket on the front. When I saw her, something clicked. She was perfect. I grinned. 'We should give her a name,' I said, patting the saddle. 'She'll be my constant companion for the next three years. She needs a great name, something noble and true.'

'You could call her Myfanwy or Gwendolyn,' said my father, clearing his throat.

I screwed my mouth sideways. 'Mum says I shouldn't tell anyone about the Welsh thing. In case I get picked on by posh people. And they think I have flatulence.'

My father looked purposeful. 'Don't ever be ashamed of where you've come from, Emma. Welsh people DO have a

lot of wind. That's true. It's the mountain air. But as my mother used to say, we all shit out the same hole.'

At this point, the shopkeeper, who had been readying himself for a sale, grimaced a little and moved away. But my dad was right.

'Well that's that then,' I added, with a nod. 'I hereby name this bike Gwendolyn!'

The car was packed to bursting. My mother had given me her old grey trunk that we'd packed with books and things I'd need for term. On top of it my father had Sellotaped a list so that we could cross off things as they went in. It read

Mugs - 4
Cutlery
A few plates
Fruit bowl
One saucepan
Tin Opener
Bottle Opener
A vase
Box of tissues
A couple of files

And that was it. These were the basics with which I needed to survive the university jungle. My mother had, at one point, toyed with the idea of getting me a sandwich maker but had quickly decided against it, arguing that 'If everyone knows you've got facilities to provide hot cheese toasties you'll never get *any* work done.'

So with Gwendolyn strapped upside down to the roof of

the car I heaved a small suitcase of clothes onto the back seat next to me and decamped to Oxford.

It was a beautifully sunny day and as we drove I stared out the window watching the long reflection of my bicycle's wheels as they spun in the wind. No one said much. For the past 19 years we had been together through thick and thin and here we were, about to be parted. Being an only child, I was incredibly close to my parents and, as much as I was longing to go to university, this was a terrible emotional wrench. Things would never be the same again. And we all knew it.

My room was in a modern annex tucked behind the sort of picturesque front quad that makes parents ooh and then aah. My living quarters were not, as my mother had assumed, the stuff of *Brideshead Revisited* but instead were an anonymous 1970s' rectangle with a pervading aroma of warm glue. There was a small tinge of disappointment that I would not be living in the romantic surrounds of an oak-lined suite but I was so excited to be there they could have shown me to a cardboard box at the back of some bins and I wouldn't have cared. Together we unpacked the contents of the trunk and set about covering the walls with posters I felt were a declaration of my intent. There was a Gerald Scarfe RSC poster of Macbeth, an enormous red and yellow Lenin, arm aloft as if he had all the answers and a large black-and-white poster of the Woody Allen film *Manhattan*, celebrating the island's magnificent outline. I stood with my hands on my hips and nodded. 'What do you think?' I asked, looking about me.

Dad was standing at my window and staring down into the dining hall opposite. 'Looks nice,' he said, giving a small nod and after a pause, 'You know you can come home anytime. I can make you cakes.'

My mother placed a hand on the flat of my back. 'Don't let anyone make you feel inferior, Emma. You got in, just the same as they did. If anything, you're cleverer because you did it on your own without loads of money. You're as good as anyone here. And don't forget it.'

I gave them both a weak smile. I *was* a bit worried about mixing with the public-school crowd. My only brush with a posh lot had been playing netball against Dame Alice Harper. 'And try not to overdo it,' my mother added. 'You've only just got yourself better.' She stopped and sniffed the air. 'That smell,' she began, nose scrunching upwards, 'heady brew. Slightly giving me a headache. Well. You're all unpacked. I suppose we should leave you to it.'

We all stared at each other. My mother, realising that my father was on the brink of an emotional collapse, took the brisk plaster-pulling approach, clasped me to her quickly and said 'Right, come on Tony, off we go!' and marched towards the door. Dad, bottom lip trembling, staggered towards me, reached into his pocket and pressed a twenty-pound note into my hand.

'In case of emergencies,' he gargled then, after a swift, python-like grip, he let out a small, strangled wail and stumbled out of the door, the strains of his tears carrying all the way down the corridor. I stood, alone, and blinked. My parents had left the building.

I was absolutely terrified.

Fear was preying heavily on my parents' minds too. My mother, for all her bravado, was convinced that Oxford would transform me into an objectionable braying Hooray Henry and that I would return to Hitchin at Christmas ashamed of the pair of them and bemoaning the fact we

didn't live in a castle. She returned home only to clamber up the stairs in a state of abject despair where she collapsed at the top of the landing and lay, face down on the carpet, wailing into the crook of her elbow. My father, after trying to pull her up and failing, had similarly fallen into a deep morass of gloom and had crawled, desolated, into my bedroom where he sat on my bed with one hand on his forehead and the other on his only child's abandoned pillow. A period of considerable and unfettered wailing then took place, after which my mother, wiping her tear-stained face, raised herself merely to shout, 'We need to get drunk!' Needing no further encouragement, my father trudged downstairs and opened the only bottle in the house, a concentrated dessert wine left by an obscure relative one Christmas that was so strong, it actually had a skull on its label. Twenty minutes later and the whole lot was gone.

As luck would have it, all students taking English had been set a small exam to see how much of the reading list we'd done over the summer so I didn't have much time to feel miserable. I had been joined by two of my stable mates – Doug, a quiet unassuming fellow who was on an Army scholarship and Andy, a thoroughly loveable young man with a penchant for heavy-knit jumpers. We had been sitting, for an hour, reading out the entries from *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* of the books that had eluded us, drinking coffee and generally marvelling at our newly conferred student status. We had just got to the more obscure writings of Daniel Defoe when a figure appeared in my open doorway. I looked up. A girl wearing a battered brown leather jacket, blue striped skirt and Doc Marten shoes was leaning against the doorframe. Over her shoulder

was slung a drawstring bag covered in cartoon dinosaurs. Her hair was cut into a light bob, out of which poked one errant ear, and her features were delicate: slightly pouting lips, chiselled cheekbones and bright blue eyes that had a spark of mischief about them. I stared at her. She stared at me. 'Is this your room?' she asked, walking in uninvited and perching herself on the arm of a chair in front of me. I nodded. She looked round and raised an eyebrow. 'Are you a Communist?' she asked, gazing up at Lenin.

I shook my head. 'No. But I went to Moscow when I was in the sixth form. Our school librarian fell down a staircase and broke her arm.'

'Did you push her?'

A small grin fleeted across my lips but I didn't reply. There was something quite arresting about this confident creature that had waltzed in uninvited. She hadn't even bothered to tell me her name and she certainly hadn't asked for mine. 'What's that?' she asked, gesturing towards a strange plaster-of-Paris figure in flowery dungarees Blu-tacked to my wall.

'That's Master Hemulin,' I replied. 'You know, like the Moomins? But actually not like the Moomins at all. I made him with a friend from school after my mother reversed into a tree in front of my school gates. She was having a driving lesson. I was mortified. So my friend, Alison Macaulay, suggested we make a small man, to take my mind off it. It took hours.'

'Was Hemulin the one that's forever wandering off and going on adventures?'

I nodded. 'He was the wild card in the pack.'

'Yes. I liked him. I like his dungarees,' she added, fingering their hem. 'Very snappy. Did you make them?'

'No,' I said, shaking my head. 'Alison Macaulay did.'

'Did you make his carrier bag?'

'No, Alison Macaulay did that as well. It's supposed to be a Sainsbury bag. Alison Macaulay didn't think Master Hemulin was sophisticated enough to shop at Waitrose.'

'Alison Macaulay sounds very capable. Which bits did you make or did Alison Macaulay do everything?'

'I drew on the face. That was all I was trusted with.'

The girl leaned back and considered it. 'Bit lop-sided, that eye there,' she mumbled, pointing. 'And the mouth slopes. Master Hemulin looks like he's had a stroke.'

I stared at Master Hemulin's pale white face. He was bald and looked a bit stoved in on one side as if someone had smashed him about the face with a large frying pan. The girl was quite right. He looked very unwell. I screwed my mouth sideways and scratched my neck. Perhaps I'd take Master Hemulin down later, when everyone was gone? Tippex his eyes out and have another go? The girl pushed herself off the chair arm and slung her bag back over her shoulder. 'Anyway, I live down the hall,' she added, heading back towards the door. 'I'm from Kent. We often have terrible snow.'

'Who was that?' asked Andy, as we watched her go.

'No idea,' said Doug. 'But she's very pretty.'

'*Really* pretty,' agreed Andy, mouth slightly hanging open. 'Gorgeous, actually.'

'I think I might make friends with her,' I added. 'Do you think she'll want to be friends with me?'

Andy and Doug both looked at me. I was wearing white trousers with blue stripes, a granddad shirt, an old chunky cream cardigan with bulbous brown buttons and some faded deck shoes. I looked like someone who had failed the

audition to get into Haircut 100. They said nothing. The gauntlet was down.

I didn't see her again for four days. It was the morning of Matriculation, the ceremony during which all Freshers are inducted into the university. Dressed in my black gown and mortarboard, I found myself at the back of a long crocodile of hopeful faces. We were waiting for our official photo and the photographer, a thin man in a brown jacket that was too big for him, was organising people in height order. I looked about me. This photo would probably hang in my toilet for ever and I felt a stab of anxiety that I wasn't anywhere near someone I wanted to be immortalised with.

I stepped out from the line and looked down it. There she was: the one sticky out ear, the quizzical expression, and the air of just suppressed monkey business. I grinned and waved. 'Hello,' I smiled. 'You came in my room the other day. Quick, come here,' I said. 'Come and stand next to me for the photo.' She shot me a quizzical glance as if she couldn't quite place me. I blinked. 'I was the one with Master Hemulin.'

Her head cocked slightly to one side then, unfolding her arms, she walked out of the line towards me. 'Oh yes. The one who likes adventures. The wild card in the pack.'

'That's right,' I nodded.

The photographer, seeing her break ranks, shouted over, 'No! Stay where you are, thank you! Keep the line!'

'I'm fine here, thank you,' she said, looking at him defiantly, then, turning to me, added 'My name's Dee. What's yours?'

'Emma,' I said. And that was that. We were off.

*

After the ceremony we hung out together, rattling through the preliminaries – she was reading Medicine, had gone to a posh school and had two sisters, one older, one younger. Her parents were still married and alive and she had a dog, a King Charles Spaniel, called Monty. She spoke easily and calmly and it struck me straight away that in any given circumstance, she would never lose her temper. She knew who she was and where she was going. She was, in every respect, the exact opposite of me. I was a little intimidated by her, to be honest. She was beautiful, cool and ever so slightly aloof, in the way a cat is, and as that first evening together wore on, I was slightly concerned that we had no business being friends whatsoever. And then a man in black tie came up to us.

We had gone to a post-Matriculation drinks party that was being held for Freshers in the Oxford Union, that bastion of debate where political careers aplenty had been launched. We were standing, pints in hand and still in our sub-fusc, chatting about the boys in our year. There was a foppish young man at our college reading French called Mark who we'd both noticed. He was extremely good-looking, had an ice-cream swirl of blond hair and dressed like a dandy. The only problem was that he had set his store out from the off and had been seen wandering round college carrying a teddy bear. 'Do you think he has any idea how ridiculous he looks?' I was saying. 'I mean we all loved *Brideshead Revisited* but actually carrying a teddy bear? Really?'

'Hello, ladies,' boomed a voice from behind me. I turned round. A tall, muscular man with no neck was looming over me. He grinned, displaying a set of mismatched teeth. 'What college are you from? I'm at Queens.'

'Teddy Hall,' I replied.

Ignoring me and slightly muscling me out of the way so he could have easier access to Dee, he moved forward. 'What school did you go to?'

Dee stared up at him and didn't reply. He was clearly drunk and she didn't want to engage in a conversation with him. I chipped in. 'Hitchin Girls' School,' I said, proudly.

The bloke curled up his lip. 'Never heard of it.'

'No, I don't suppose you would. It's a state school.'

His forehead furrowed and, taking a large gulp of beer, he turned to me and said, 'Do you realise my parents paid for your education?'

'I'm not sure your parents paid for it entirely,' I replied, frowning. 'I don't think my local authority showed them a photograph of me and asked them for a cheque. I think you're confusing me with African orphans. I come from Hertfordshire. My father's Welsh. My grandfather was a coal miner. We all enjoy belching.'

A small, wry smile was building on Dee's lips. The drunken boy, sensing he was being made fun of, blustered on. 'I think it's a disgrace that you people should be educated for free. My parents have to pay for me. So why shouldn't your parents pay for you? My parents had to pay a fortune for my education. And they did it to make sure I got here. And not only that, but their taxes paid for you too.'

'Sorry,' I replied, shaking my head a little. 'Are you saying I'm not entitled to be here because I had a free education?'

'I'm saying you should be *grateful*.'

I gazed in disbelief. Here, staring me in the face, was exactly the kind of person that my mother had warned me about.

Dee gently put down her pint glass and took me by the elbow, then, smiling up at the drunk said, incredibly politely,

'I'd be *grateful* if you fucked off. Given that my friend here managed to get into Oxford without any of your advantages that makes her vastly brighter than you. Goodbye.' And with that, she swept me effortlessly from the room.

'Arsehole,' she whispered as she walked me away from trouble. 'Probably the first time he's spoken to a girl. One that's not inflated, anyhow.'

I laughed. Dee laughed back.

From Matriculation onwards, Dee and I became inseparable. It was a friendship that was to last, through thick and thin, for the next three years. Boys came and went but Dee and I had an unbreakable bond. We had gone to balls dressed in black tie after realising that posh frocks had no practical purpose from 2 a.m. onwards. We had wandered in on my then boyfriend as he cavorted with another naked man, only to purse our lips and withdraw without saying a word. We had found a rowing boat at midnight and spent the night travelling the Isis in it. We had fought off geese during a solar eclipse. We had developed a mutual and inexplicable obsession with the Australian soap *Neighbours*, so much so, that I had physically wet myself with excitement on being taken to see one of the stars at the Oxford Christmas Panto. We had cycled to Blenheim on May morning to fill our bicycle baskets with pink cherry blossoms: I had a near-broken ankle and we ended up sleeping in a ditch in a rape field but we had hitched a ride back into the city on the back of a truck and at 6 a.m. had sat, hanging out of a window overlooking the high street where we scattered our pickings over the May Day crowds below. It was a love affair, pure and simple, a deep yet totally uncomplicated mutual adoration. We were the very best of friends. But our perfect life was about to come to a

crashing halt. At the end of May 1989, Finals loomed and before you could say Jiminy Crickets, our three years at Oxford would be up.

The goldfish bowl of university life had kept me cocooned as if life did not exist beyond the Ring Road but with Finals only days away, I knew that decisions needed to be made. Dee, who was studying Medicine, was in no such quandary. Her life was mapped out. She would be heading to London in October to take up the clinical part of her studies. The only thing I had been interested in up to that point was comedy, but for some reason, it never crossed my mind that I could leave university and make a career of it. I had spent the previous summer committed to what turned out to be a rather miserable run with the Oxford Revue at the Edinburgh Festival and my love for comedy had turned sour. I would have to knuckle down and think about what I actually wanted to do with my life. Sensible friends around me had spent the tail end of our final term going to Milk Rounds and attending career conferences. I had rode around on Gwendolyn, face upturned, flying over speed bumps pretending she was a horse. I didn't feel ready for the working world. I needed something to segue me gently from academia and youth to my adult life. Not just a holiday, something else, something more defining, and something that would give me breathing space to work out what I wanted to do.

Two weeks before the end of Finals, Dee came up with an idea. 'What about that?' she said, pointing at the poster pinned to our college Notice Board. 'Work America. It's like Camp America but with no children involved. Which is a good thing.'