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As she tugged the sleep mask from her eyes, Phoenix's first thought was that her sick leave had now officially expired. Over a decade of high-school teaching and a work ethic that propelled her to never let anyone down had resulted in a cumulated forty days' worth of leave. But now they were all gone. Pecking at her phone, she discovered the anticipated email notification. There she was, right on cue – Evelyn Godfrey, fearsome principal. Phoenix always fancied that Evelyn could have starred in the likes of a Roald Dahl children's book, with her piercing, interrogative eyes, unnerving ability to materialise from shadows, and a robust intolerance of any perceived weakness – from parents, students or teachers.

The principal had been 'pulled off the bench' at the beginning of the school year as an emergency (and entirely opposite) replacement for Levi Backhurst, a young and progressive-minded principal with a meteoric rise to the top, followed by a spectacular fall from grace over a buck's night incident involving underage

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strippers and a pocket full of pills. The media had cashed in on the clickbait for weeks and Evelyn had made it her personal mission to restore St Clementine's to a conservative, squeaky-clean, top-shelf girls' school of choice. And, as she repeatedly told staff and students alike, nothing would stand in her way.

Phoenix debated whether or not to open Evelyn's email now and get it over with, or put it off till later. She reached behind herself to click on the string of LED-light sunflowers adorning the crest of her bedhead, optimistic that their golden glow could shield her from the darkness she sensed was lurking in that message. If she didn't do it now, she would pace all day. Holding her breath, she tapped it open.

Phoenix

Your attendance is required for a discussion ASAP about your return to school. I'm sure you can appreciate how difficult it is to run a first-class institution when staffing is inconsistent and uncertain. Today? Monday at the latest. Email Linda to arrange a time.

Evelyn

'Coffee's on,' Zack called.

Phoenix heard him depress the toaster lever then pull out the frypan. Zack ate three fried eggs on toast washed down with two coffee chasers every morning, without fail.

'Coming,' she said, but didn't actually move, resisting the cold air of the early September morning in their unrenovated postwar rental house in Brisbane. It had fibro walls, bandy-legged stumps and a small chain-wire fenced yard with a rusting Hills Hoist at its centre. It also had numerous draughts. Her hands were frozen already, simply from holding her phone. She was also frozen on the inside, rendered immobile by Evelyn's summons.

The Wonderful Thing about Phoenix Rose

Could she go into school today? She hadn't been back since *the incident* that had led to the forty days of sick leave. She knew that, schools being the festering gossip mills they were, all manner of shaming things would have been discussed in the corridors till they spilled over into the classrooms, texted between parents and sneered about by students. To stop herself from imagining all the terrible things that would have been said about her (nutjob, breakdown, weirdo), she navigated to Pinterest instead.

A soothing wash of yellow greeted her, calming her nerves. She pinned a magazine-worthy image of a glass filled with pale lemon curd mousse, a rich toffee-brown biscuit crust, tiny white flowers at the top. Her mouth watered at the sight of it. The photo now sat in her 'lemon board' collection, a visually balanced, inspiring layout of foods that made her feel, if not happy, at least hopeful.

Two months of intensive research since the day of her diagnosis – no, correction, her *identification* – with over a dozen books read, three online courses completed, and rabbit hole after rabbit hole of websites explored, meant she now had an entire catalogue of vocabulary to decipher her behaviour. Right now, this Pinterest organising activity was one she did when she was *dys-regulated* and needed to *self-soothe*.

For a moment, her mind flicked back to a time when her mother's work as a festival coordinator had dried up and they'd temporarily stopped following the arts trails around the state. The two of them had stayed with Jac's sister, sleeping in the spare room of Jessie's ramshackle house, which was filled with dust, boxes of LP records and disused macramé plant hangers. While her mother drew the curtains against the daylight and tapped ash into an empty Coke can, Jessie and Phoenix lay on a blanket under the enormous lemon tree in the backyard and gazed up at the bounty of bright yellow fruit, pendulous and robust, like joyful party lanterns. It

was the year Phoenix ate lemon butter and mayonnaise sandwiches for lunch every day. It was her year of calm. Jessie's two bedraggled orange chooks would sit on the blanket with them and snatch at Phoenix's fallen crumbs and Phoenix decided that no matter what she did with her life, no matter where she ended up, the only thing she wanted was a huge lemon tree, like Jessie's.

Until then, she had Pinterest.

'Coffee in bed this morning?' Zack arrived at her doorway, a steaming mug in one hand and a squishy stress ball in the other.

'Hey, you're looking rather fine,' she said, giving him a flirty smile and a suggestive raise of an eyebrow. For a moment, his frown smoothed and the corner of his mouth lifted, a gesture he reserved solely for her. He held her gaze for a second, fleetingly free of the stress he'd been carrying of late. But his worries were back a moment later.

'I've really got to go.'

He'd put concentrated effort into ironing his new shirt, and a new belt shone at his waist. His too-long trousers still bunched above his shoes, but that was just Zack. He was one part Phoenix's devoted partner, one part loyal employee and one part absent-minded professor. This new outfit was his attempt to lift his confidence in the face of upcoming staff changes at the centre. At the age of thirty-seven, he'd finally felt brave enough to put himself forwards for the senior radiographer position on offer, getting himself off the soon-to-end contract he was on and into a permanent role. He popped the coffee down on the table beside her.

'Oh, sorry. I got distracted.' She held out her hand and he took it, squeezing it tenderly.

'Stay there. The eggs can wait in the pan till you're ready.' He bent to kiss her, smelling of minty toothpaste. 'I've got to go.'

'You working late again?'

Zack flicked the stress ball from one hand to the other. 'Yep.'

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‘I’m old enough to remember when Thursday-night shopping was a thing. Now late-night X-rays are all the rage.’

‘We never get through the lists each day as it is,’ he said, matter-of-factly. The concept of overtime had never bothered him. His focus was one hundred per cent on his clients.

‘You’re a saint,’ she said.

‘I like to help people.’ He ran his free hand over the top of his hair. He’d attempted to brush it down but the black springs resisted, popping straight back up again the moment his hand lifted.

‘I know you do. Have a good day.’ She let go of his hand, always warm compared to hers, which were always cold. It was one of the million things she loved about him, that he was invariably happy to have her climb into his bed and put her cold hands under his shirt to warm them up, or tuck her cold feet between his legs. The man was like a furnace, even in the middle of winter. She wished she wasn’t so sensitive to light, sound and movement and could share a bed with him and actually sleep. She’d never be cold again, for one, but more than that she simply felt better with him beside her.

People keenly vocalised how weird they thought it was that she and Zack had separate bedrooms, but to the two of them it was a perfectly sensible accommodation. There wasn’t a hallway long enough in the world to keep them apart if they wanted to be together. With the rest of her life imploding right now, at least her relationship was stronger than ever before. If only Zack’s enormous love could be protection enough from Evelyn the Fearsome, she’d have nothing to worry about.

What was she going to say to the principal? If she disclosed her recent, surprising, late revelation of neurodivergence, she was bound to lose more credibility than she already had after *the incident*. Evelyn was the type of principal who rolled her eyes at

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maternity leave and was outright hostile about bereavement leave. She wasn't going to take this new information well, of that Phoenix was certain. The concept of accommodating differences was a complete waste of time in Evelyn's mind. *Shape up or ship out*, Phoenix had heard her mutter, more than once. Even if Phoenix felt able to advocate for her legal rights (which she didn't, right now), laws and the reality of workplace culture were two very different things.

Was she even ready to go back to school? No, she didn't feel ready. Would she ever feel ready again? She had no idea. She'd burnt out once; it was surely only a matter of time before it happened again. But was she ready to throw away a good career in which she'd invested everything she had? Absolutely not.

Taking a deep breath, she emailed Evelyn's assistant and told her she could meet with Evelyn on Monday. That bought her another few days to figure out what to say.

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Downunder Auties

CarlaM78: Me, trying to change a ceiling light bulb in the wardrobe, variously ignore it and worry about it for a year, finally have a good day, locate a stepladder buried in hallway cupboard and pull it out. Wait another five days to remember to put the light bulb in my bag AND to stop at the hardware. They can't find the exact match but ASSURE me the new one will fit. Procrastinate for another 24 hours, then force myself to climb the ladder and of course IT DOES NOT FIT. Need to go to bed and numb myself with Netflix. Is this just me?

MagentaMel: Executive (dys)function is the pits. ☹️

FidgetMan: I HATE changing light bulbs. I always think I'll electrocute myself or the glass will break in my hand.

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VikingMan: I hear ya, Carla. I can run a successful courier company but it can take me two years to change a bulb. It's the little things.

MissWittyKitty: I have honestly never even thought about a light bulb! Mum and Dad must do it all. I better add that to my life skills list if I ever want to move out of home.

SnoopyDancer: Hey, has anyone heard from Olga lately?

Phoenix read through the comments, smiling. She had total empathy for the light bulb struggle. As well as having a memory bank that had gone on holiday to a warm tropical island without inviting her to come along, she'd also lost the ability to make dinner. The thinking about dinner was the first awful thing, followed by planning ingredients, buying ingredients and prepping vegetables, then the cooking, the not burning, and finally remembering to turn off the stove. She couldn't count the number of times either she or Zack had walked away with a stovetop still on. Truly, how was it that she could have a bachelor's degree, a postgraduate diploma *and* a master's and still not be able to make dinner? But this group helped. She wasn't alone.

She was about to respond when she re-read SnoopyDancer's comment.

Hey, has anyone heard from Olga lately?

Phoenix narrowed her eyes, thinking. Days blurred into each other in this weird in-between life she was living – not fired, but not working, on leave but with no clear return date, not sick, as such, except she couldn't think or function any more the way she used to. It was tricky to work out when she'd last connected with Olga.

SnoopyDancer, otherwise known as Therese, was a social worker in South Australia. It was consistent of her to notice Olga's absence from their usually active group. Phoenix scrolled

backwards through posts, looking for the last time Olga had contributed to their discussions, her worry increasing with the amount of time it was taking to locate her. But as she scrolled, a notification popped up from Olga herself and Phoenix hurried to read what her friend had to say.

She had posted a photo of her old black dog, greying at the muzzle, sleeping by the fireplace.

I have cancer, her message read. Stage four. Please, could one of my friends here help me? I need to go to hospital on Monday to stay for a few days. I need help with my animals while I'm away and then, once I'm home again, to help me to find them good, new homes. I think I need you for a week? I hate to ask. I'm sorry. I've been unable to communicate. This is such a big shock. I've been paralysed with worry for my animals. But I have no one else and it's urgent. I don't care about me but my animals are my family. I worry for them. I wouldn't even be going to hospital except it will buy me some more time to sort out my affairs and make a will. You are my only friends. I need someone I can trust. Please let me know as soon as you can.

Phoenix read through the sympathies from the others in the chat group as they emerged but didn't know what she could say that could possibly help Olga. Her friend didn't need sympathy, she needed action. Pushing her chair back across the linoleum floor, she got up and paced the house – down the hallway, past the bathroom with the cracked shower screen and the leaky taps the landlord kept promising to fix, past the lounge room with the crocheted blankets and oil heaters and casement windows with arthritic hinges that would shudder open again once the weather warmed up – and back to the kitchen.

She couldn't go to Tasmania for a week, could she? Her mind was a mess and her body was in constant pain. The cold made her arthritis worse and Tasmania would be many times

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colder than here. She and Zack were each other's anchor points in the world but neither of them was a great communicator via phone. With her current struggles and Zack's promotion opportunity on the horizon, it wasn't a good time for them to be apart.

Then again, Zack was always the first person to put his hand up to help someone in need. Mud Army after the Brisbane floods? He was there, gloves on. Working extra shifts in the medical field during Covid? He was there. When his sister needed a new fence he was there the next day, tools in hand. When Phoenix's school needed volunteers to repair vandalised gardens, they made a date out of it, collecting fallen rosebuds and scattering the petals over their table for a candlelit dinner. She was sure he'd support her wish to help Olga.

Still, she was supposed to be recuperating. She'd never been a good traveller under the best of circumstances and this was a mission to help someone she'd never met in person. She'd be staying somewhere she had no control over, trying to rehome animals she knew nothing about. She was supposed to front up to the principal and assure her she was right to start work again at the beginning of fourth term, not drag herself on a stressful journey to help a stranger.

She stopped pacing. Olga *wasn't* a stranger; she was her friend. This online community of autists had saved her when she'd thought she was losing her mind. They'd taught her about herself as no one else had ever been able to do. They'd helped her piece together years of misdiagnoses and lack of support. They'd mirrored back to her a hundred inexplicable experiences they too had shared. She'd found her *neurokin*. When she was flailing with shock from a mature-aged autism diagnosis, this community had caught her and held her hand while she began to peel back the decades of masking and camouflaging she'd needed to get by in the world, and instead embrace her true self. She'd had Zack,

sure, but he was only one autistic, and a man, with a very different presentation and history. Where Zack had barely spoken till he was four, Phoenix's mother said the only time her daughter ever stopped talking was when she fell asleep, usually mid-sentence. This group had shown her the huge diversity within the autistic spectrum. They'd given her so much; it would be her honour to give something back.

She and Olga might not have met in person but that didn't discount the value or depth of the connection they'd made in daily conversations over the past two months. She knew more about Olga's childhood, fears, joys and daily struggles than she'd learnt about Anthea in the five years they'd been work buddies at school. She knew Olga must be terrified, alone, grieving for herself and her animals, and dreading the awful visit to hospital. She needed help from sympathetic friends who knew how to support her, who could help her make decisions, who understood she was non-speaking at times. She needed someone who respected her autonomy.

Phoenix needed to help. Setting up Olga's animals for the rest of their lives would allow her to end her life with as much peace as possible. It was important it was done right.

She stopped pacing and opened her laptop to check available flights, then texted Zack. His reply was swift.

You should go, as long as you feel up to it. X

Did she feel up to it? Honestly, no. But Olga needed help.

With trembling fingers, she emailed Evelyn's assistant and told her she couldn't make it into school in person on Monday but she could meet with Evelyn via Zoom, then she messaged Olga to tell her she'd be there on Sunday. She took a deep breath. A week away from home was a long time in Phoenix's life right now, but the challenges would be worth it to do this for Olga. Maybe it would even be good for Phoenix to get out of the house and feel useful and strong again instead of hiding away for fear of running into

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students or their parents at the supermarket or cinema. It might feel huge, but really it was simply an interstate flight and a week away at a friend's home.

How much could possibly go wrong?