

**EVERYONE
AND
EVERYTHING**

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**PANTERA
PRESS**

PROLOGUE

It's still dark as I walk through the park towards the water. I don't need to see, my feet have muscle memory. They quicken as I pass the children's playground, where the swings seem to oscillate no matter how still the weather.

When I reach the locked gate there are already two women waiting. We half-smile, in silent agreement that it's too early for chats.

I'm still new to this dawn business. A few months ago, I would have found the thought of getting up at fuck-off am to swim in the ocean laughable. I've always been a night person.

'You joining us, Miss Yael?'

A broad Australian accent. Cropped black hair and a red tracksuit.

Lynne, one of the volunteers, is standing at the gate waiting for me to come through.

'Sorry, Lynne.'

'Have a good dip!'

She's way too chirpy for this hour.

I walk along the concrete path and past the change rooms towards the ocean. I dump my bag on a patch of grass and peel off my shorts and t-shirt. I'm wearing one of my million black swimsuits, a gravity-defying one-piece with a low back. As I look down, it strikes me as ill-suited for a sunrise swim at a women's-only ocean pool.

In the crevices of the rock wall that buttresses the pool, a cast of crabs go about their crab business.

'Good morning, friends,' I whisper, before hopping in.

The other women do proper laps while I splash around like a child. My sunrise swims involve less actual swimming than the phrase implies.

'Here it comes!' Lynne shouts from her post and I look out to sea.

A rush of oranges and yellows roars up from beneath the ocean and slowly turns on the sky. Immersed in water as the sun announces its arrival, I feel weightless. I feel free.

It's how I imagine other people feel all the time.

And then it's over.

JANUARY

‘So, what are our options?’ Liora asks.

It’s late. We’re in my psychiatrist’s office.

‘There are three options,’ Priya says. ‘She can go to a private rehab clinic, she can move in with you or she can stay at home. I’m not sectioning her, so legally it’s her decision.’

‘Sectioning?’

‘Remanding her to a public ward, or any ward, without her consent. I don’t think it’s in her best interests.’

I don’t remember coming here.

‘What are the pros and cons of a rehab clinic?’ Liora asks, ever the pragmatist.

‘The next week or so is going to be brutal. I’m stopping all her medications and starting her on new ones tomorrow. No weaning, we don’t have time. This will probably make her quite sick physically as her body adjusts. At a clinic, she’d be cared for 24/7. She has private insurance, yes?’

‘Yes.’

Usually, I hate being talked about like the cat’s mother, but right now I’m hoping they don’t talk to me at all.

I don't want to talk. I don't know if I can talk.

'The clinic is about an hour from here, but it's the best.'

Liora nods slowly, daunted.

'And what are the negatives?' she asks.

'Once she checks in, I can't have contact with her. The treating doctors can change her medication as they see fit. They generally don't, but it's a possibility. And there are people there for all sorts of reasons, many in far worse states than this.'

There are far worse states than this?

Priya tightens the shawl around her shoulders. She's always cold.

'I'm not sure it would be the best environment for her,' she says. 'It can make it hard to come back.'

'What about staying at my house?'

I close my eyes.

'That's an option. She wouldn't be leaving her normal surroundings, so she wouldn't have to reintegrate. But it would be a big strain on you and your family. I know you have small children. It would be confronting for them – for you and your husband, too.'

'And if she stays in her apartment alone?'

'I don't think she should.'

I open my eyes.

'What about Julia Louis-Dreyfus?'

They both look at me like they've forgotten I'm here.

I guess I can speak.

'Remind me again, who is Julia Louis-Dreyfus?' Priya asks gently.

'My cat.'

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I love cats, but I had no intention of getting one when I accompanied my oldest friend Margot to the pet store after Pilates one day.

As an adopt-don't-shop kinda gal, I generally avoid pet stores, but Margot said this one had rescue cats, so I tagged along.

We walked past the display cases of designer dogs, with schnoodles, cavoodles and labradoodles as far as the eye could see. It's the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney – if you didn't have a poodle cross, what were you even doing?

I waved at the pretty pups as I followed Margot to the back of the store. There were three big cages, each with a few cats lolling about or trying to destroy each other.

'Look at the bubbas!' cooed Margot, a grown woman with a PhD. 'I love them.'

Margot's partner is allergic to cats, so this is how she gets her feline fix.

'Why don't you just dump Josh and get a cat?'

'Then who would make me ramen and put the kids to bed?'

That was when I saw her, in all her glory. A grey-and-white tabby with a hint of ginger and a Marilyn Monroe beauty spot, living her best life despite the micro-imprisonment. Her paws were wedged into the top of the cage and she was hanging off the bars like a gymnast commencing an uneven bars routine. She looked like an idiot. A tiny, beautiful idiot.

'Oh my god, come look,' I squealed at Margot. 'I love this one!'

'Of course you love that one,' she said. 'It's batshit.'

'Hey!'

'It's the cat version of your mate, he who shall not be named.'

'Please refrain from insulting my cat.'

'Oh, it's *your* cat, is it?'

'Maybe. Maybe? I guess I could get a cat. Could I get a cat?'

'Do you want me to ask if you can hold it?'

Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it.

'Yes!'

Margot got a stoned teenage pet store employee to come over and get Nadia Comănesci out of her cage. She started purring.

'She loves you,' Margot said.

'I love her. Is she a her? Are we still gendering domestic animals?' I looked at the baked kid.

'Totally.'

He didn't care.

'What's her name?' I asked.

'Beauty,' he said. 'You know, like, 'cause of the spot. On her face.'

'Yeah, I get it. Margs, I can't just get a cat. Can I?'

'Do it! Do it! Do it!'

She slow-clapped for emphasis.

'You're no help.'

'We can hold her for twenty-four hours if you want to think about it,' the teenager said slowly.

Oh boy.

'Okay, let's do that.'

The next day I officially adopted Julia Louis-Dreyfus, formerly Beauty, feline gymnast, tiny idiot, she/her.

Priya and Liora hesitantly agree I can keep living at home. Priya doesn't believe I'm 'a danger to myself' and Liora doesn't have anywhere to put me. Or Julia Louis-Dreyfus.

But there are rules:

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1. Liora comes over tonight and takes away all the pills.
2. I check in with Priya every day, twice a week in person.
3. I spend minimal time at home alone.

‘I don’t know how much time I can take off,’ Liora says. ‘What should she do when I’m at work or with the kids?’

I don’t want to see people. I don’t want to see people. I don’t want to see people.

‘Try and be at her apartment as much as possible while she adjusts to the new meds. She won’t be able to do much. Beyond that, it’s best she goes to places where she’ll be surrounded by people, but not forced to interact with them. The beach, the cinemas. And gyms. Even if she just walks slowly on a treadmill or sits in the sauna. Yoga is great, too, if she’s up to it – I know she likes it – and same for dance classes and that new ballet thing I don’t understand.’

Barre.

‘And when she’s ready, she can see her friends.’

I can’t imagine ever wanting to see anyone again.

Liora looks at me.

‘Are you okay with this? Maybe you and Julia should just move in with us. We’ll make it work.’

I hate it when she doesn’t say Julia Louis-Dreyfus’s full name.

‘I want to stay at home,’ I whisper.

Liora makes the face she makes when she’s torn between two items on a menu.

‘Let’s see how it goes and reassess day by day,’ Priya says. ‘If it’s not working, we’ll reconsider your house or a clinic.’

‘Okay, sounds good.’

We’re nearly out the door when Priya almost shouts.

‘Wait!’

We turn.

‘No sad books, no sad TV, no sad films and especially no sad documentaries. Basically, none of the depressing crap I know you love. Also, no news. And absolutely no politics.’

I nod.

‘Comedies and fluffy crap only. Rom-coms, sitcoms, all the coms. No documentaries. No *Four Corners*. Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

‘If I could control your Netflix, I would.’

Liora laughs and immediately looks like she got busted talking in class.

I just want to go to sleep.

Liora is panicking in her giant soccer mum car. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her panic before. She’s the most balanced person I know and not prone to public displays of emotion.

There are only three and a half years between us, and as kids we were pretty close, but once she went to high school we grew worlds apart and increasingly resentful of each other.

Before that, though, I remember wanting desperately to be just like her and copying everything she did.

Everything.

When Liora wanted to be a lawyer, I wanted to be a lawyer.

When Liora stopped eating fish, I stopped eating fish.

When she had a crush on Jason Donovan, I had a crush on Jason Donovan.

When she had a crush on Jason Priestley, I had a crush on Jason Priestley.

There were a lot of Jasons back then.

Every night for years, I wished on stars to wake up with hair just like hers. Her golden-blond, dead-straight, beautifully

thick mane was everything my dirty-blonde, curly mop was not. It didn't help that Mum called me Shirley Temple and Liora Barbie. I wanted to be Barbie. Barbie was pretty. Barbie had a convertible and a beach house. Barbie had Ken.

'I'm not sure about this,' Liora says, glancing at me as she drives. 'Maybe you should stay with us, even just for tonight. Julia Louis-Dreyfus will be okay. We'll feed her and come back in the morning.'

I shake my head.

'Okay. Should I stay with you? For a few days? Sean can deal with the kids.'

'I'll be fine,' I manage to get out.

'I could go home and get some things and grab us dinner and come straight back. Actually, I can live without my stuff for a night. I'll just order us dinner.'

'I don't want dinner.' It's taking all my energy just to speak. 'Go home. I won't do anything.'

She winces.

'Okay.' She sounds unconvinced, she doesn't believe me.

I'm not sure I believe me.

'But I'm going to put you to bed and stay till you're asleep and come back first thing in the morning. No arguments.'

I nod.

We pull into the driveway of my apartment building and she parks in a visitor spot. I hope none of my neighbours are around. There's just me and a bunch of septuagenarians living here, which I enjoy, but sometimes I want to journey from the car to my apartment without seventeen conversations about how the old gardener was better than the current one.

I walk up the stairs to my apartment and hear Julia Louis-Dreyfus crying at the front door. I've always wondered if she

does this every time she hears the building security door open, or if she can somehow magically sense when it's me.

Inside I feed her and have a glass of water. When I turn around, I see Liora sitting on the couch holding something. Reading something.

Wait, is she crying?

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I forgot about the note.

When I was a toddler, I saw a ferry sink. It was on some annual ferry day in Sydney Harbour that's no longer a thing, and by all accounts nobody was hurt, but I've had a problematic relationship with boats and open water ever since. This wouldn't have been a big deal if I hadn't grown up in a place where the quickest way to get many places was by ferry.

Mum and Dad managed to lure me onto a ferry when I was eight. We were going to the zoo with some family friends and they swore black and blue it wasn't leaving the wharf.

Those lying fuckers.

I cried and screamed from the minute the motor started to the minute we got off, which must have been fun for the other passengers. But it worked. I've been cautiously fine with boats ever since, as long I can see land at all times. This means cruises will forever be a hard pass, but that's no big loss – disease-ridden floating theme parks from hell.

So, we were at the zoo and we had reached the marine life section. Photos show I was wearing knee-length denim shorts, a yellow-and-white striped t-shirt and the white Apple Pie sneakers I'd begged for more than I'd ever begged for anything in my life.

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Spotting my favourite animal friends, I yelled, 'SEALS!' and ran over to their pool enclosure, trailed by Liora and the two boys from the other family. Back then, the seals could swim right up to the bars and sit inches away, like a prison visit.

Actually, very much a prison visit.

I stuck my hand through the bars for a pat and then screamed like a hot girl in an '80s slasher film.

'What happened?' said Liora, next to me.

'He bit me!' I said through tears, raising a bloodied hand.

Now it was her turn to scream.

'Where's Mummy?' I yelled at her.

'I don't know!' she yelled back, standing on her tiptoes. People were gathering around us and we couldn't see past them.

'We'll find her!' one of the boys said and they both ran off, pushing their way through the crowd.

A nice lady in a floral dress crouched in front of us. I was crying hysterically and Liora was trying to comfort me.

'My husband's gone to find help, sweetheart,' she said gently. 'Do you think I could wrap my scarf around wherever he got you? It would help to stop the bleeding.'

'That's a good idea,' Liora said, sounding older than her eleven years. 'Can you show the lady where he got you?'

'I ... I ... I'm ... scared.'

'Of course you are,' the lady said. 'I promise I'll be very gentle.'

I looked down and saw my t-shirt covered in blood. I'd been cradling my arm, holding my hand against my stomach.

I held my hand out to her.

'Yael!' I heard Mum's voice. 'Where is she?'

'Mum! Mum! We're here!'

Liora jumped and waved.

Mum burst through the crowd, turning white at the sight of me, bloody and sobbing, a stranger wrapping a silk Ken Done scarf around my hand.

‘Oh my god!’ She rushed over. ‘What happened?’

‘I just wanted to pat him.’

‘Oh, moosh,’ she said, hugging me. ‘He must have been hungry.’

‘Where’s Daddy?’ I asked.

‘He was a bit ahead of us,’ Mum said. ‘The boys have gone to find him.’

‘Are all my fingers still there?’ I asked the lady.

‘Well, that depends. How many did you have before?’

I looked at Mum. I looked at my left hand.

‘Five?’ I said, not feeling confident.

‘Then yes, they are all still there. He only had a nibble.’

Shock and adrenaline soon gave way to pain and I started howling, my swaddled hand held tight against my chest, turning Mr Done’s pastel kaleidoscope into a crime scene.

Mum and Liora were crouching next to me, trying to comfort me.

‘Who bit my Yael?’ boomed a thick, ethnically ambiguous accent. ‘Show me the culprit.’

Suddenly, Dad appeared and lifted me into his arms, careful not to touch my hand. I buried my face in his neck.

‘Did a mean seal try to snack on you, shayna maidel?’ he asked.

‘YES,’ I wailed into his t-shirt.

‘Want me to try and snack on him right back?’

I giggled.

‘I’ll do it, I swear,’ he continued. ‘Nobody snacks on my maidel and gets away with it.’

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A golf buggy pulled up and a man ushered Mum and me onto it. Mum thanked the lady and then turned to Dad, who was now standing with Liora, hands on her shoulders.

‘We’ll have you paged or something later.’

‘Okay,’ said Dad. ‘I love you, chicken.’

‘Make sure you get this lady’s details so we can replace her scarf.’

‘Oh, that’s not necessary,’ the lady said. ‘I don’t even like Ken Done.’

‘Does anybody?’ Mum said.

And then we were off.

Priya wasn’t joking when she said it would be brutal. The withdrawal. The new meds. The withdrawal and the new meds. At the same time. Together.

There was shaking, there were headaches, there was vomit.

I couldn’t sleep for more than a few hours at a time.

My body temperature changed every five minutes. I was either too hot or too cold. No tolerable medium, no just right. Was I withdrawing from medication or entering early menopause?

I wasn’t heroin-withdrawal bad, but I wouldn’t recommend it.

I kept thinking of the scene in *Requiem for a Dream* when Jared Leto detoxes in his childhood bedroom. I wonder if that movie holds up by today’s everything standards. I’m gonna guess not, mostly because: Jared Leto.

I downplayed how bad I felt when Liora was there because I didn’t want to go to rehab.

No, no, no.

*

For the record, I have nothing but respect for artist, icon and national treasure Ken Done.

‘Welcome to the multicultural, semi-nude, body-positive utopia you never knew you needed,’ my friend Romy announces, as we arrive at the women’s baths. ‘I honestly don’t know how the fuck you’ve never been here.’

‘I blame men,’ I say quietly.

‘That’s the spirit!’

Romy insisted on taking me here after I told her about the thing.

‘It’s magical,’ she said. ‘Everyone says the water has healing powers.’

Ugh. She knows how I feel about pseudo-mystical wellness speak. She also knows how I feel about the ocean, but she promised there won’t be waves.

She takes my hand and leads me down a concrete path. ‘Oh, I forgot to tell you, entry is a gold coin donation. I’ve got you today.’

Romy and I worked together in media, but we had met long before that when she worked at a cafe around the corner from Liora’s old house. We clicked immediately, bonding over fashion, *Gilmore Girls* and hating things – the backbone of any strong union.

At the bottom of the path, under a huge umbrella, sit two middle-aged women wearing yellow t-shirts with VOLUNTEER written across them in red. They have green zinc on their cheeks and noses.

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I wonder if they've been here since 1987.

One of the be-zinced women holds out a bucket and Romy drops some coins in.

'It's her first time,' she says, motioning to me.

My heart high-jumps into my throat and I feel my cheeks getting hot. Maybe this is a bad idea.

'Welcome, love,' says the woman holding the bucket.

'Enjoy,' says the other.

Romy grabs my hand again and drags me down the rest of the path. I can see the full expanse of the baths now. There are what seem like hundreds of women, sunbaking, swimming, reading and chatting. I start to panic.

'Wait. Romy. Wait!' I say as loudly as I can manage.

She turns around and my mind goes blank.

'I ... I don't know if I can do this.'

'Fuck, sorry,' she says. 'I forgot.'

'I just don't wanna see anyone I know.'

Not many people know about the thing. I only told Romy because she kept trying to commission me for stories.

'Why don't you put on that giant hat while we look for a spot? Please stay.'

'Okay. But can we sit away from everyone?'

Romy nods and we walk towards the water. The grassy areas on both sides of the path are covered almost entirely in half-naked women. We continue down concrete steps leading out to giant rocks, where more women are splayed, like Botticelli's wet dream.

Some of my friends' cool hippie mums took them to the women's baths as kids, but I can't imagine my shy, deeply self-conscious mother lying topless on a rock in broad daylight.

We reach the rocks and Romy pauses.

‘How about over there, near that girl with the pink hair?’
She points across the rocks.

Before I can say yes, a very Aussie voice yells, ‘OI!’

I freeze.

One of the volunteers marches towards us with rage in her eyes.

‘OI! YOUSE OVER THERE! WITH THE PICNIC BASKET! NO PHOTOS! YOU KNOW THE RULES! IF I SEE YOU POINTING THOSE PHONES AT ANYTHING BUT THE WATER, YOU’RE OUTTA HERE!’

Exhale.

‘Oh yeah,’ Romy says. ‘You’re officially not supposed to take photos, but the vollies don’t mind if they’re selfies or ocean only.’

‘I don’t think I’ll be making content anytime soon.’

‘Fair point.’

We make our way over to the spot Romy pointed out, jumping from rock to rock and trying not to step on anyone. After we lay out our towels, she gets undressed and takes off her lime-green bandeau bikini top.

‘As you can see, free-boobing is allowed, nay encouraged, here. Get ’em out!’

‘Baby steps.’

I am not in a topless sunbaking place. Or a swimming place. I don’t know what place I’m in.

I apply sunscreen to every inch of my lily-white, mole-covered Eastern European skin, and suddenly feel very tired. This is my first social outing since the thing.

It’s a lot, but at least it’s beautiful.

‘Thanks for bringing me here, Rom.’

‘Any time.’

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I started writing the note the minute I decided to do it.

I agonised over it.

There were several drafts.

Various fonts were trialled.

It had to be perfect.

Liora keeps trying to feed me solid food but the thought of chewing is mildly horrifying. I have no appetite. All I want are mango smoothies.

Normally I'd be thrilled about all the weight I'm losing, but I feel nothing. Not happy, not hungry. Not even sad.

I'm nothing.

Priya says it's dissociation, a trauma response, that an emergency wall has sprung up between my brain and my feelings. She says it's temporary.

I don't really care.

Which I guess means she's right.

'I'm going to send you to Priya Hoffman,' Dr Chandra told me about five years ago, when my depression escalated and I needed more care (read: drugs) than my psychologist was legally able to provide. 'She does talk therapy.'

'Don't all psychiatrists do talk therapy?'

'No, some strictly manage medication and leave the rest to psychologists.'

'Will she change my meds?'

‘I assume so, but we’ll see what she says. I think she’s one of the best around, but she does have a reputation for being a bit tough. Some people don’t respond well to her. If you don’t like her, it’s absolutely fine, just come back and we’ll find someone else.’

I liked Priya immediately.

I was nineteen when I had my first depressive episode, or the first one that couldn’t be readily dismissed as high school angst.

I was struggling. Not with uni work – it was a BA, basically tertiary kindergarten – but with being a person in almost every other way.

I was fighting with my family constantly, which to be fair was not a new development, and I felt emotionally disconnected despite an active social life.

One-on-one I was generally fine, but group situations could render me monosyllabic at best. On nights out, I’d often end up in the bathroom, crying or trying to talk myself out of my head, or just straight-up ghosting.

It all reached a bit of a head when I came home a mute wreck from a holiday in Byron Bay with my school friends.

‘Did something happen?’ Mum asked when I refused to leave my bed or eat for several days. ‘Was someone mean to you?’

I’d just shake my head and roll over so my back was to her.

She’d return every so often, offering me food or trying to tempt me out of bed.

‘What if I got you some hot chips? Or we could make popcorn and watch *Clueless*.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ I’d say. ‘And I just want to sleep.’

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I wish I could say it hurt to treat her like that, and I wish with my entire being I could take it back, but I was numb.

Eventually, she called in the big guns.

‘Yael,’ Mum said, knocking lightly on my bedroom door. ‘Margot’s here.’

‘Can I come in?’ Margot said.

I really didn’t want to see her, but I was raised too well to refuse her request.

‘Hey,’ she said, sitting at the foot of my bed. ‘I’ve been worried about you. Everyone’s worried about you.’

I hadn’t returned calls or texts since Byron.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Yeah, I really don’t think you are, mate.’

I started crying and couldn’t stop. Margot lay down, wrapped her arms around me and didn’t leave till the next day.

Then Mum started again.

‘Just tell me what you need, moosh. How can I help you? What can I do.’

I was a mess and my parents had no idea what to do about it. Actually, they did know what to do, they were just deadset against doing it. Mum’s mistrust of mental health providers ran deep.

After a few weeks of this, Liora, who didn’t live with us anymore, came into my room and practically hissed, ‘What’s so wrong with your life? Do you know how many people have it worse than you?’

Though I took umbrage with her tone – I love taking umbrage – a quick privilege check confirmed she was right; my life was objectively easy, semi-charmed even. And while self-awareness doesn’t cure depression, it can give self-pity a good kick in the guts.

It was Liora who eventually convinced Mum and Dad to take me to therapy.

Turns out the road to treatment is paved with annoyed siblings.

I've been at the baths almost every day since Romy brought me.

I'm yet to brave the water, though. Just being here is enough.

The genius of the baths is that, despite sitting pretty between a very popular public beach and a very popular public ocean pool, it's built so deep into a cliff face that it can't be seen from either. The only possible vantage points are from the ocean and the sky, and if you go topless you just have to accept that ocean swimmers and helicopter pilots are gonna see your boobs. There's nothing anyone can do about it, so everyone just smiles and waves and hopes no TV crews are filming.

Somehow I manage to nab a coveted spot today on one of the big flat rocks closest to the pool. If I lay my towel lengthwise, I can stare out across the water and pretend nothing else exists.

I'm sharing the rock with three girls in skimpy bikinis I will never have the guts to wear. I haven't yet worked up the courage to go topless, but I love the aggressive self-confidence of the younger generations. All sizes, all genders, all sexualities, all loving themselves sick. In g-strings.

The trio are drinking Gatorade, eating hot chips and bemoaning their hangovers. They all had 'big ones' last night and they're debriefing.

I'm taken back to my twenties. Bloody Marys and big breakfasts with Margot.

I try to follow their conversation while pretending to doomscroll on my phone, but there seem to be two, if not three, men named Dan involved and it's all very confusing.

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I realise I'm staring and quickly look away.

'Do you want some chips?' the blonde one asks, thrusting a giant bag of hot chips at me.

'Oh, thanks, but I'm okay.'

I must be sick.

I love hot chips.

'Are we going to talk about the note at some point?'

I'm on the after-school pick-up run with Liora. She and her husband Sean have three kids, known collectively as the squids. Ethan is nine, Lexi is eight and Hannah is five. They are my heart.

'Which note?' I say quietly, looking over at her.

She huffs and makes a face.

'You know which note.'

The squids go to a Jewish private school. It's not an oppressively religious or conservative school but considering Liora and I went to secular public schools, refused to attend Jewish social clubs in our teens and pretty much shunned the entire community, it's funny to me that all her kids go there now.

'Can't we just pretend you never saw it?'

'Nope. But we can leave it for now. Here come the kids.'

Three wriggly squids practically leap into the car, like clowns in reverse.

'Yay!' Hannah screams. 'Aunty's here!'

'If you love Aunty so much, why don't you marry her?' Ethan says, proving social progress is a lie.

'Yeah!' Lexi just wants to participate.

I lean my head against the window.

‘Guys,’ Liora says in a loud whisper. ‘Aunty Yaya’s still got a sore head so we have to talk quietly. I tell you what, whoever makes it the whole ride home without shouting gets a special Shabbat treat.’

Three little voices hiss, ‘Yesssssssssss.’

I’ve been trying not to cry in front of them or be too despondent, but it’s hard. It’s only been a few weeks. The squids think I’ve been having a lot of headaches.

‘I’m sorry your head is ouchy, Aunty Yaya,’ Hannah says.

‘Thanks munchkin.’ I turn in my seat to see her beautiful face.

‘Do you want to cuddle Shawarma when we get home?’ Lexi says, referring to her toy llama, not the Middle Eastern meat dish. ‘He always makes me feel better.’

‘I’d love that. Thank you.’

‘So,’ Liora says. ‘How was everyone’s second day of school?’

I drift off, not fully asleep but not quite conscious either. It’s a state I’ve found myself in a lot lately. A state almost entirely devoid of thought. I like it here.

We pull into Liora’s garage.

‘Were we good, Mummy?’

‘Who was the goodest, Mummy?’

‘What are the treats?’

‘You were all very good. Now just be good until after dinner and you’ll get treats.’

This was not part of the deal. The crowd isn’t happy.

I really fucking love hot chips.

*

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It's 11 pm and I'm in bed with Julia Louis-Dreyfus and self-pity when my phone starts ringing.

Margot.

I let it ring out.

She tries again.

I let it ring out.

She texts.

Pick up the phone, woman.

Margot moved to Tokyo two years ago with her partner and kids. She wanted them to experience more Japanese culture than she had growing up.

I miss her.

Sorry, very tired.

She texts again. Persistent bitch.

Liora told me what's been happening.

I told her not to tell you.

Well I'm glad she ignored you. I'm here. Love you x

x

Thank fuck this nightmare happened in warm weather. I must remember to have any future major life crises between November and March.

Liora and I had it pretty good as kids. Loving parents, a modest house, food and shelter, a cat. And unless I'm rose-tinting in my advancing age, we were quite fond of each other for our first decade together, give or take.

Random moments of sisterly harmony stand out to me from those halcyon days.

Choreographing what I now imagine were mind-numbing dance routines to songs by New Kids on the Block and Rick Astley, before forcing Mum, Dad and any other poor bastards who might have been present to watch us perform them, sometimes multiple times.

Playing Marco Polo, doing handstand competitions and riding inflatable bananas in our neighbours' pool, and any other pool we were allowed to dive-bomb into. I was afraid of the ocean, but pools were safe spaces.

Begging Mum and Dad to let us stay home for the few days each year that they'd make us go to synagogue, then having so much fun playing hide-and-seek and doing running races with the other kids that we'd beg them to let us stay longer when they declared it home time.

Gaining a warped and extremely premature sexual education giggling our way through countless '80s misogyny porn-lite films at our Nanna and Zeida's flat after they'd gone to sleep. Child-friendly classics such as *Bachelor Party*, *The Bikini Shop* and *Revenge of the Nerds I through IV*. Mum and Dad made them move the TV out of our sleepover room when they discovered the horrors of our viewing history.

Chopsticks fights at our favourite Chinese restaurant; non-scary rides at the Easter Show (we carry forth a long lineage of massive wusses); skipping ropes on our trampoline; falling asleep on each other in the car.

We had a good run.

Until we didn't.

It was an excellent note. I printed it at Officeworks.