

Dedication to come

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Sweet Sixteen?

I'd almost convinced myself that the worst of it was over when Dad started winking at the waitress.

Grunt glanced up from his horseradish and blueberry ice cream, observing my twitching parent with post-ironic satisfaction and flashing me a 'pleasure in your pain' twinkle before I could escape back to my book.

'You'll never bag a boyfriend like that, Beth,' said Dad, aiming for light-hearted banter, but scoring at least 9.6 on the 'Irritate Your Daughter' scale.

'Like *what?*'

'All that reading. This is a Michelin-starred restaurant, not a public library. The least you can do is try and make polite conversation. Isn't that right, George?'

'Dunno really,' grunted Grunt, wiping his mouth on his Kraftwerk T-shirt.

I *could* have pointed out that *Le Grand Meaulnes* is one of the great coming of age novels (especially in its original French) or that I didn't want to go to his stupid fancy restaurant in the first place. But something was bugging me even more. 'What makes you think I want a boyfriend?'

'I don't know,' said Dad, still directing his middle-aged Tourette's symptoms at the short-skirted twenty-something working the espresso machine. 'There must be someone at school who's vaguely presentable.'

I *could* have pointed out that the testosterone-fuelled half of St Thomas's Community College was an acne-ravaged, technophile rabble with all the maturity of a tank of frogspawn. But four words covered it perfectly. 'You must be joking.'

Grunt pushed his bowl across the crisp white tablecloth and burped.

'How should I know anyway?' said Dad. 'I see so little of you these days.'

'Yes. And whose fault is that?'

'I have to work, Beth. You know that. What are a few days away each month if it means you can go to a decent university?'

It suited us both, and deep down I think we knew it. I mean, I loved my dad, but we hadn't exactly been hitting it off for the best part of half a decade. Now he was flying long haul, it meant having the house to myself sometimes – especially since I'd managed to persuade the lady from over the road that I was quite

capable of preparing my own meals and she'd stopped 'popping in' every five minutes. It wasn't like I wanted to party all night or anything, but I could eat whatever I wanted, read a book without a lecture on the benefits of aerobic exercise or watch a movie with subtitles. What *he* got up to in LA or Barbados I wasn't sure, although from the way he was leering at that poor waitress, I had my suspicions.

'Will you *stop* doing that, please? You're just embarrassing yourself. You do realise how old she is.'

'What are you talking about?' said Dad. 'I was only . . .'

Albert Camus (the great thinker and one-time goalkeeper of the Algerian football team) once claimed that the only serious philosophical problem was suicide. I'd never quite understood what he meant, but it made perfect sense when I realised that Dad wasn't hitting on the waitress at all, and the full horror of the situation dawned on me.

Sadly, topping myself wasn't an option. The only alternative was to stare at the remains of my passion-fruit soufflé and wish my life away. How could Dad do this to me? And today, of all days.

'Happy birthday,' he said, as the flaming circle of Belgian chocolate humiliation glided inexorably towards me. The Sunday-night diners smiled sportingly, perhaps just a tiny bit grateful that it wasn't heading in their direction. Cheeks burning brighter than all sixteen candles (surely a discreet token would have been

far more appropriate), my heart sank when Dad and the waitress launched into an auto-tuneless duet of 'Happy Birthday'.

'Nice,' said Grunt satirically. A moment later he was filming the tragic scene on his mobile, doubtless intending to tweet it to all twenty-six of his followers.

'Aren't you going to blow your candles out?' said Dad.

Personally, I can't think of anything more disgusting than spreading germs all over something you're about to eat. But I didn't want to disappoint the elderly couple by the window and, four puffs later, sixteen wisps of white smoke were drifting towards the ceiling.

Dad applauded, like I'd just won the Nobel Peace Prize. 'I can't believe my little girl is all grown up. It seems like only yesterday when—'

I grabbed a knife, desperate to stop him before he could make a speech. 'I'll cut it, shall I? Thanks, Dad, this is really . . .' I plunged the knife into the thick, gooey chocolate. 'How much do you want?'

For a while, it had the desired effect. Dad never reminisced with his mouth full, and if Grunt was pigging out ironically, it was his subtlest performance yet. In fact, the chances of making it through to the bill without further mishap looked fairly promising until Dad started groping under the table.

'Almost forgot,' he said, handing me a small package, trussed up in ribbon. 'I didn't really know what to get you, so I hope you like it.'

'I'm sure I will.' I tore suspiciously into the pink-

ballooned wrapping paper and tried to sound like I meant it.

Dad nodded at the waitress, scrawling his signature in the air with an imaginary Biro. 'I got you a decent contract as well; two thousand minutes and unlimited data.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

'That is class,' said Grunt, who was shockingly sincere when it came to reclusive German synth combos or state-of-the-art gadgetry. 'Do you want me to set it up for you, Beth?'

'Yeah, thanks.'

'I can't believe how light it is. Makes *mine* look like an elephant.'

'Everyone wants one, apparently,' said Dad. 'The chap in the shop said they were queuing all the way to Starbucks the day it came out.'

Grunt almost wet himself when the screen lit up. 'The colours are so clear. And the wireless technology's amazing.'

'That's nice,' I said, willing the waitress to come across with the bill.

'I might as well update your contacts manually – shouldn't take too long,' said Grunt.

'How about a family photograph?' said Dad. 'Sorry, George, would you mind?'

'No problem,' said Grunt. 'Maybe later we could try panorama mode.'

Dad slid his chair towards mine and Grunt prepared

to immortalise us in eight glorious megapixels.

‘Gorgonzola,’ said Dad, like he always did when he had his photo taken.

I forced my features into an improbable grin.

‘Let’s have another one, shall we?’ said Dad. ‘Maybe Beth could smile this time.’

You probably hate me already. But if I sound like an ungrateful brat, let me at least talk you through the photograph and try to explain. It was almost four years since Mum died. I could just about cope with Christmas, but my birthday (Jan the second) brought on a creeping melancholy that never lifted until the first signs of spring. Hence the long face. I think Dad felt it too. Look carefully and you’d probably detect a sliver of sadness in his muddy grey eyes. Not that he ever talked about it. In fact I sometimes had this terrible feeling he was starting to forget.

So why all the fuss about an expensive new phone? Well for a start, I already had one in a drawer somewhere. No matter how sleek or packed with processing power, the latest smartphone seemed about as desirable as head lice. If that made me the sociopath they thought I was at school, fair enough. (Actually no one at St Thomas’s had ever called me a sociopath; insults rarely rose above two syllables.) But what I hated most about Dad’s presents was that they were such graphic reminders of how little he knew about me.

And what about the photographer? I’d known Grunt since . . . well, forever. Our mums took it in

turns to meet us from Warmdene Infants. He was plain George Grant back then. It wasn't until Year Six that his reluctance to speak in fully formed sentences earned him his nickname. I suppose that suited me for a while, which is probably why it was the one friendship that survived. We still walked home together, and more often than not he'd pop back to my place and watch *Countdown* or mess about on the iPad Dad gave me. But something had changed. It was starting to feel – I don't know – awkward. He was talking more: sarcasm mainly, and feeble jokes that would have disgraced a Christmas cracker. That comment about updating my contacts (*shouldn't take too long*) had really hit home. If Grunt was my only friend, what did that say about me?

Does a thought like that creep up on you, or can everything change in the flash of a photograph? Whenever I look at that picture in the restaurant (I've often thought about deleting it but, for some reason, I just can't bring myself to) it certainly feels that way. Because that's when it hit me: if things were ever going to improve, *I* was the one that needed to change. Not totally reinvent myself, like some dumb Hollywood movie where the heroine starts dressing like a pole-dancer and hanging out with the local bad boy, but at least get a life that didn't look quite so pathetic.

I hadn't a clue how to go about it, of course. Unfortunately for me, the answer was just around the corner.

Out with the In-crowd

‘Oh God,’ said Grunt, pulling down his *Wayne’s World* cap. ‘That’s all we need.’

They were spilling onto the pavement outside Pizza Express: about fifteen of them, the girls hugging out mascara-stained farewells, the boys punching each other’s shoulders and making animal noises, their warm breath mingling in the lamplight.

Grunt glanced anxiously over his shoulder for my dad. ‘What are that lot doing here?’

All became clear when a bare-belly-buttoned Year Eleven, festooned in silly string and an outsized badge bearing the motto *Sixteen Today!*, tottered onto the pedestrianised cobbles in her six-inch heels wailing, ‘I love you guys.’

‘Ere AJ, give us a flash,’ said a skinny-jeaned clone.

They all looked the same in their own clothes. But after they'd formed an amoeba-shaped cluster that bulged as far as the Cancer Shop, I soon realised we were in exalted company. If school was a popularity contest, then here were the winners: the boy who'd famously described Mr Catchpole as 'a sad, middle-aged loser' (to his *face*); all five members of the St Thomas's numambient house band; the girl who set fire to the Design and Technology teacher's handbag; the twenty-four-hour party people; and a smattering of sports stars – not to mention the 'geniuses' who sprinkled the Learning Resources Centre with open sachets of tomato ketchup and all-round school celebrity Duncan Fox. It was a glittering combination of the good, the bad, but *never* the ugly. Doubtless you'll be astonished to learn that Grunt and I weren't members of their ultra-exclusive coterie.

Neither was the boy in the leather jacket who stepped leeringly into the lamplight and barred our way. 'Look who it isn't,' he said. 'It's the prom queen and her bitch.'

Grunt reached instinctively for his most vulnerable body parts.

Dave Denyer was an 'in-crowd' wannabe. Now that Darren, his more illustrious cousin, was studying Advanced Thuggery (with Applied Menace) at the Sixth Form College, there was a possible opening for a trainee psychopath. 'Doing your bit for charity then, Beth?'

'Not sure what you mean, David,' I said.

He waved at the grubby mannequins in the Cancer

Shop window. ‘Now we know where you get your clothes.’

Grunt’s face unravelled with relief. The cavalry had arrived.

Dad smiled sheepishly and pulled on his gloves. ‘Sorry about that. Damned things were under the table.’ He surveyed the turbulent sea of youthful faces. ‘Friends of yours, Beth?’

‘Oh yeah,’ smirked Dave Denyer. ‘She’s best mates with most of them, aren’t you, Beth?’

Thanks to his faulty sarcasm detector, Dad looked pathetically pleased. It was unusual for him to be so insightful about his only daughter, but he’d somehow sussed out that I wasn’t exactly spoilt for friends. Things were obviously looking up. ‘Tell you what, why don’t you and George stick around for a quick chat with your chums, while I pop back for the car.’

‘It’s okay, Dad, I —’

‘I’ll see you in a couple of minutes.’

Dave Denyer watched Dad disappear in the direction of the multi-storey before turning his attention to Grunt. ‘Like your hat . . . *George*.’

Thirteen terms at St Thomas’s had taught Grunt that resistance usually made things worse. ‘Cheers, Dave.’

One or two of the in-crowd were taking a vague interest in the sideshow. It was all the encouragement Dave Denyer needed. ‘Give us it here, then.’

Grunt’s face betrayed no sign of emotion, but I knew for a fact he was working on a suitably cutting tweet.

Dave Denyer darted forward, liberating Grunt's cap with a triumphant, 'Yeooohhh.' But when his crude, internet-virally-inspired victory dance failed to crack a smile, he moved on to something more sophisticated. 'Oh my God,' he said, sniffing the inside of Grunt's cap and pretending to puke. 'It's full of pus.'

I was furious that such puerile material was actually getting laughs. Even so, I should have known better. 'Just leave him alone, you . . . idiot.'

Dave Denyer Frisbeed Grunt's cap towards a distant rubbish bin and turned to face me with a gummy grin. 'What did you just call me?'

'Nothing,' I said, praying that Dad hadn't lost his car keys again. 'We're just going anyway.'

'Oh *please* don't go,' said Dave Denyer. 'You're the hottest girl in the whole school.'

(The biggest laugh of the night so far and a manly 'YOOOOerr.')

'I just wanna get to know you, babe.' He was right in my face, beckoning at me with his fat red tongue.

'I *said* we're going.'

Dave Denyer begged to differ. 'Not until you show us what you've got behind your back.'

In one hand was the box containing my new mobile, in the other my battered copy of *Le Grand Meaulnes*. He must have known instinctively which one I actually cared about, because two seconds later he was waving my prized paperback in the air. 'Le Grand *what?* Sounds disgusting – and it's not even in English.'

‘It’s a classic French novel,’ I snapped, abandoning all hopes of a miraculous escape, ‘by a guy called Alain-Fournier who died in the First World War.’

‘So try telling someone who gives a toss,’ said Dave Denyer, selecting a random page and ‘reading’ aloud in a fake French accent. ‘Ma name eez Beth. I zink a am – ’ow you say – zee dogz berllox? Burt a em murch too stupeed to —’

I flailed desperately at *Le Grand Meaulnes*, grabbing only a handful of cold air as he whisked it above my head. ‘Just give it to me.’

‘Any time, darling,’ said Dave Denyer. ‘All you got to do is say the word.’

And then Grunt, who’d finally retrieved his *Wayne’s World* cap, said something really stupid. In fact, it was so out of character I could hardly believe it. ‘You heard her,’ he said. ‘Give it back.’

Dave Denyer had a real weakness for old-school clichés. ‘Gonna make me?’

Perhaps they were enjoying it in a cool, ironic way, because the crowd was rearranging itself into a semi-circle. Even Duncan Fox had broken off from the girl who organised the fashion show to get a better view.

It was the mismatch of the New Millennium. Dave Denyer looked capable of holding his own in any number of futuristic killing scenarios. Grunt, on the other hand, was a pizza-loving Munchkin whose only experience of hand-to-hand combat was on his laptop. Even so, it didn’t stop him charging at the French-

literature-wielding thug. 'I SAID, GIVE IT BACK.'

'What's the matter; past your bedtime?'

It was all a bit retro for Year Eleven, but Denyer's audience seemed to be warming to it. 'Watch out, Dave,' said Duncan Fox. 'He's got a bun in his pocket.'

Two seconds later, Grunt was in a headlock. Dave Denyer forced him into the gutter, like a lion downing an antelope. 'Big mistake . . . *George*.'

He might have been a total lunatic, but Grunt was kind of like a (slightly annoying) brother to me. What else was I supposed to do? 'That's enough,' I said, sounding about as convincing as that Design and Technology teacher who was always off with stress. 'Just leave him alone, okay?'

'Thought you'd be pleased,' said Dave Denyer. 'I'm going to give your chubster boyfriend a French lesson.'

'What do you . . .?'

Grunt groaned as a timeless French classic began beating him about the head.

The prospect of a happy ending looked doubtful – just like the novel. Dave Denyer was warming up for the big finish. All I could think of was to grab him round the neck and start pulling.

But he seemed quite pleased about it. 'Brilliant,' he said, brushing me off like a collection of toenail clippings. 'Now I get to kill two birds with one book.' (*Two birds with one tome* would have been better, but I wasn't going to write his jokes for him.)

Whatever hilarious form of humiliation Dave Denyer

had up his blue-checked sleeve, I knew I wasn't going to like it. So I closed my eyes and tried to remember the French word for pomegranate.

But then a miracle happened.

A voice from the in-crowd cut above the expectant buzz of audience participation. I recognised it instantly. The last time I'd heard it, it was trying to sell me heroin.

'Oi Denyer, stop being a dick.'

Dave Denyer recognised it too, dropping his weapon and turning to face his critic with a half-hearted snarl. 'I was just defending myself. What do you expect?'

'Get off on it, do you,' said the voice, 'persecuting women?'

'She called me an idiot.'

'Yeah, and she was right,' said the voice. 'You're just jealous because she's so much smarter than you.'

'And that's not difficult,' said Duncan Fox, who hadn't become a major school celebrity by not knowing when to change sides.

It was the kind of voice that everyone listened to: clear and confident, but with the hint of a sexy growl. 'You're such a kid, aren't you? I can't believe you think you're funny. Why don't you go home? No one wants you here anyway.'

Dave Denyer rose from his human footstool. His audience had already turned their fickle backs on him. 'Yeah, well, I was going anyway,' he said, nodding at the keyboards player from Neologism and trying to make a dignified exit.

‘You all right, Beth?’ said the voice, softer now, and friendlier too.

I knew her name, of course, but I was surprised she remembered mine. Hannah Taylor was in my GCSE Drama group. We’d worked together on the assessed improvisation about the drug dealer. Even so, I don’t think we’d exchanged more than a couple of sentences.

‘I’m fine thanks,’ I said.

‘Talk about immature,’ said Hannah. ‘Like most of the kids at school.’ Grunt was sniffing his *Wayne’s World* cap. ‘How’s your boyfriend anyway?’

‘Looks okay to me. Only he’s not my boyfriend,’ I added hastily.

Hannah smiled. ‘Probably for the best.’

I wanted to thank her. The trouble was, every sentence I planned in my head sounded either way too sycophantic or the words of a timid four-year-old. It’s hard to explain. Meeting her in the street was kind of like running into a movie star. She was the sort of person who made the whole school thing look like the happiest days of her life, not the grim survival exercise most of us knew it to be. Top of every guest list, the first person you’d vote for in a school election if it wasn’t a St Thomas’s tradition to elect the joke candidate, and a dead cert for the front page of *The County Times* on results day, Hannah Taylor was the complete package. She was clever, but not the kind of clever that got you excommunicated for knowing words like sycophantic – in three languages. She looked good too, but without

being so drop-dead gorgeous that everyone hated her.

But it was more than that. Hannah always seemed older than the rest of us. I'm not just talking about her period-drama cleavage – that was enviable, especially to someone as flat-chested as me – but she had a maturity about her that I coveted even more. She treated the St Thomas's staff more like equals than academic prison warders, and rumour had it that when the DT teacher threatened to kill herself, it was Hannah who walked her round the school field until she calmed down.

No wonder I was tongue-tied. 'I, er . . .'

'Is that what I think it is?' she said, pointing excitedly at my new phone.

'Yeah.'

'You are *so* lucky. I'd give my texting hand for one of them!'

Up until that moment, it was going straight in the drawer with the other one. From now on, it was definitely accompanying me to school. 'It's a birthday present from my dad.'

'Is it your birthday then?'

'Uh huh.'

Hannah glanced meaningfully at Grunt. 'That's really sad.'

I had to agree with her.

'Anyway, got to go,' she said. 'School again tomorrow – I hate the first day of term.'

'Yeah . . . right . . . Hey, Hannah, I just wanted to —'

But it was too late – she'd gone. And with typically

brilliant timing, Dad rounded the corner, smiling apologetically. 'No change for the car park I'm afraid. You don't have a spare pound coin do you, George?'

Grunt nodded.

It was the voice again. 'Sorry, Beth, I think you forgot this.' Hannah handed me my dog-eared paperback. 'Is it any good?'

'Yes, really good,' I said, trying to sound like a normal person and not a critic. 'I think you might enjoy it.'

Dad seemed keen to get in on the act. 'Hello, there. I'm Beth's dad.'

'Hello, Beth's dad,' said Hannah. 'Love the new phone by the way. She's so lucky to have a dad like you.'

I could have sworn I saw Dad blush.

'You're the pilot, right?' said Hannah.

'How did you know that?'

'Beth mentioned it when she was a drugs mule.'

'What do you . . .?'

'In Drama,' smiled Hannah. 'We're both in the same group.'

Dad laughed. 'Which way are you headed? We could give you a lift if you like.'

'No, you're all right,' said Hannah. 'I'm walking with Candice and AJ. It was nice to meet you though.'

Grunt was sulking in the back seat, metaphorically licking his wounds.

Dad on the other hand was disgustingly chirpy. 'She seemed very . . . pleasant. Who was she, by the way?'

That's what I mean about the flash of a camera. Half an hour before it would have seemed impossible; one glimpse of Grunt in the rear-view mirror told me it was just what I needed. She knew my name. That was a start. And why would she have bothered to step in like that if she didn't like me?

It was far-fetched, to say the least. So why was I so sure I could make it happen? In fact, I was already road-testing the words in the back of my head – and they sounded good. Once they were out in the open, there was no going back.

'That was my new friend . . . Hannah,' I said.