

Prologue

17 November 2016

Olivia

CAPE BEACH, MONROVIA, LIBERIA, 1.03 A.M.

. . .

Olivia knows what they are doing is stupid. If seen, they will be sent home – possibly to a tribunal. Never mind that to touch him could be life threatening. But who will see them? The beach is deserted and so dark she can just see a few feet into the inky sea. The only sound is the swooshing drag of the waves. She is acutely aware of the tiny gap between their elbows, as they walk down to the surf. She wants to say, ‘We shouldn’t do this,’ except they haven’t done anything. They still haven’t broken the No-Touch rule.

The evening had begun in the beach bar, with bottled beers and then heady rum and Cokes. They had sat under its corrugated iron roof for hours, a sputtering hurricane lamp between them, as the sky flared bronze. They had talked about going home for Christmas in five weeks, and how they both wanted to come back to Liberia. She told him about Abu, the little boy she had treated and then sobbed for on this beach the day he died. And then they’d talked about where they’d grown up, and gone to medical school, and their families. His home in Ireland sounded so unlike hers. He was the first to go to university, and to travel. She tried to explain how medicine represented a rebellion of sorts to her parents, and his eyes widened – as they had when she confessed to volunteering at Christmas, to

avoid her family. She had noticed his eyes when they first met at the treatment centre – they were all you could see, after all, behind the visor. They were grey-green, like the sea in Norfolk, with such dark lashes he might have been wearing make-up. She kept looking at his hands, as he picked the label on his beer. Like hers, they were rough from being dunked in chlorine. She wanted to take one and turn it over in her palm.

By the time the bar closed the stars were out, spilt sugar across the sky. The night air was weightless against her bare arms. ‘Will we walk?’ said Sean, standing up. Usually she stood eye to eye with men, but he was a head taller than her. And then there was a second, lit by the hurricane lamp, when they looked straight at each other, and something swooped in her insides.

Now, ankle deep in the surf, their sides are nearly touching. Phosphorescence glimmers in the foam. She loses her footing as a wave breaks over their calves, and he turns so that she half-falls into him. His hands reach to steady her and then circle around her waist. She turns in his arms to face him, feeling his palms on the small of her back. The inches between his mouth and hers ache to be crossed. And as he lowers his head, and she feels his lips graze hers, she knows this is the stupidest thing she has ever done.

THE BUFFALO HOTEL, MONROVIA, LIBERIA, 2.50 P.M.

Sipping bottled water to quell her stomach (why did she have that last drink?), Olivia waits to Skype her family. It is strange to be in a hotel lobby, a little bastion of plumbing and wi-fi – though there is no air-con, just a fan to dispel the clingy heat. And even here there is a sense of danger, and caution. In the bathrooms are posters headed SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF HAAG VIRUS, with little

cartoons of people vomiting. The barman dropped her change into her palm without contact – guessing, rightly, that most white faces in Monrovia are here for the epidemic, to help with ‘Dis Haag Bisniss’. Another aid worker paces the lobby, talking loudly on an iPhone about ‘the crisis’ and ‘supplies’ and then hammering his MacBook Air with undue industry. He’s wearing a Haag Response T-shirt and expensive-looking sunglasses, and has a deep tan. He’s probably with one of the big NGOs, thinks Olivia. He doesn’t look like he’d ever brave the Haag Treatment Centre or a PPE suit – not like Sean. Last night keeps replaying in her mind. She can’t wait to see Sean on shift later, to savour the tension of No-Touch, of their nascent secret. Anticipation drowns out the voice telling her to stop, now, before it goes further. It’s too late to go back anyway.

Olivia realises she is daydreaming – it’s five past three and her family will be waiting. She puts the call through and suddenly, magically, there they are crammed onto her screen. She can see that they’re in the kitchen at Gloucester Terrace, and that they have propped a laptop up on the island. Perhaps it’s her hangover, but this little window onto Camden seems so unlikely as to be laughable. She looks past their faces to the duck-egg cupboards and gleaming coffee machine. It all looks absurdly clean and cosy.

Her mother, Emma, cranes towards the screen like a besotted fan, touching the glass as if Olivia herself might be just behind it. Perhaps she, too, can’t fathom how a little rectangle of Africa has appeared in her kitchen. Olivia’s father, Andrew, offers an awkward wave-salute, a brief smile replaced by narrowed eyes as he listens without speaking. He keeps pushing his silver mane back from his face (Olivia’s own face, in male form), frowning and nodding – but he is looking past her, at the Buffalo Hotel. Her mother’s large hazel eyes look slightly wild, as she fires off chirpy enquiries. She wants to know about the food, the weather, the showers, anything – it seems – to avoid hearing

about Haag. There is a lag between her voice and lips, so that Olivia's answers keep tripping over Emma's next question.

Her sister Phoebe hovers behind their parents, holding Cocoa the cat like a shield. She is wearing layered vests that Olivia guesses are her gym look, showing off neat little biceps. At one point, she glances at her watch. Olivia tries to tell them about the cockerel that got into the most infectious ward and had to be stoned to death, but her mother is gabbling: 'Have a word with Phoebs!' and pushing Phoebe centre stage. 'Hi,' says Phoebe sweetly, smiling her wide, photogenic smile, and making Cocoa wave his paw.

Olivia can't think of anything to say – she is too aware that she and her sister rarely speak on the phone. Then she remembers that Phoebe has just had her birthday (is she now twenty-eight or -nine? She must be twenty-nine because Olivia is thirty-two), but before she can apologise for not getting in touch, Phoebe's face stretches into a grotesque swirl, like Munch's *Scream*. 'Olivia? Wivvy? Wiv?' she hears her mother say, before the call cuts off completely. She tries to redial, but the connection is lost.

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17 December 2016

Andrew

THE STUDY, 34 GLOUCESTER TERRACE, CAMDEN, 4.05 P.M.

. . .

SUBJECT: copy 27th dec

FROM: Andrew Birch <andrew.birch@the-worldmag.co.uk>

DATE: 17/12/2016 16:05

TO: Croft, Ian <ian.croft@the-worldmag.co.uk>

Ian,

Copy below. If this one goes without me seeing a proof, I will be spitting blood.

Best,

Andrew

PS. Do NOT give my 'like' the 'such as' treatment. It's fucking infuriating.

PPS. It is houmous. Not hummus.

The Perch, Wingham, Berkshire

Food 3/5

Atmosphere 1/5

By the time you read this, my family and I will be under house arrest. Or, more accurately, Haag arrest. On the 23rd my daughter Olivia, a doctor and serial foreign-aid worker, will return from treating the Haag epidemic in Liberia – plunging us, her family, into a seven-day quarantine. For exactly one week we are to avoid all contact with the outside world, and may only leave the house in an emergency. Should anyone make the mistake of breaking and entering, he or she will be obliged to stay with us, until our quarantine is up. Preparations are already underway for what has become known, in the Birch household, as Groundhaag Week. Waitrose and Amazon will deliver what may well be Britain's most comprehensive Christmas shop. How many loo rolls does a family of four need over a week? Will 2 kg of porridge oats be sufficient? Should we finally get round to Spiral, or attempt The Missing? The Matriarch has been compiling reading lists, playlists, de-cluttering lists and wish lists, ahead of lockdown. Not being a clan that does things by halves, we are decamping from Camden to our house in deepest, darkest Norfolk, the better to appreciate our near-solitary confinement. Spare a thought for millennial Phoebe, who now faces a week of patchy wi-fi.

Of course, every Christmas is a quarantine of sorts. The out-of-office is set, shops lie dormant, and friends migrate to the miserable towns from whence they came. Bored spouses cringe at the other's every cough (January is the divorce lawyer's busy month – go figure). In this, the most wonderful

time of the year, food is the saviour. It is food that oils the wheels between deaf aunt and mute teenager. It is food that fills the cracks between siblings with cinnamon-scented nostalgia. And it is food that gives the guilt-ridden mother purpose, reviving Christmases past with that holy trinity of turkey, gravy and cranberry. This is why restaurants shouldn't attempt Christmas food. The very reason we go out, at this time of year, is to escape the suffocating vapour of roasting meat and maternal fretting. Abominations like bread sauce have no place on a menu.

The Perch, Wingham, has not cottoned onto this. Thus, it has chosen to herald its opening with an 'alternative festive menu' (again, nobody wants alternative Christmas food). Like all provincial gastropubs, its decor draws extensively on the hounous section of the Farrow & Ball colour chart. Service was smilingly haphazard. Bread with 'Christmas spiced butter' was good, and warm, though we could have done without the butter, which came in a sinister petri dish and was a worrying brown. We started with a plate of perfectly acceptable, richly peaty smoked salmon, the alternative element being provided by a forlorn sprig of rosemary. The Matriarch made the mistake of ordering lemon sole – a flap of briny irrelevance. My turkey curry was a curious puddle of yellow, cumin-heavy slop, whose purpose seemed to be to smuggle four stringy nuggets past the eater, incognito. We finished with an unremarkable cheese-board and mincemeat crème brûlée which The Matriarch declared tooth-achingly sweet, yet wolfed down nonetheless.

Do not be disheartened, residents of Wingham. My hunch is that you, and your gilet-clad neighbours, will relish the chance to alternate your festive menu. We Birches must embrace a week of turkey sandwiches. Wish us luck.

Andrew sat back and paused before sending the column to Ian Croft – his least favourite sub-editor at *The World*. The Perch hadn't been bad, considering its location. It had actually been quite cosy, in a parochial sort of way. He might even have enjoyed the night in the chintzy room upstairs, with its trouser press and travel kettle, if he and Emma still enjoyed hotels in that way. He remembered the owners, an eager, perspiring couple, coming out to shake his hand and talk about 'seasonality' and their 'ethos', and considered modifying the lemon sole comment. Then he left it. People in Berkshire didn't read *The World*. Anyway, all publicity, et cetera.

The main thing was the bit about his own life. He felt he had made his family sound suitably jolly. The truth was, he wasn't much looking forward to a week at Weyfield, the chilly Norfolk manor house Emma had inherited. He never quite knew what to say to his older daughter, Olivia. She had a disconcerting way of looking at him, deadly serious and faintly revolted, as if she saw right into his soul and found it wanting. And Emma would be in a tailspin of elated panic all week, at having Olivia home for once. At least Phoebe would be there, a frivolous counterpoint to the other two.

Sometimes he felt like he and his younger daughter had more in common than he and Emma – especially now Phoebe worked in the media. Hearing about the hopeless TV production company where she freelanced, and where all the men were in love with her, always made him laugh. He was about to shout upstairs to Phoebe, to ask if she'd like to help him review a new sushi place, when an unread email caught his eye. It was from a name he didn't recognise, indicating some unsolicited rubbish from a PR. But the subject, 'Hello', made him pause. It read:

SUBJECT: Hello

FROM: Jesse Robinson

<jesse.iskandar.robinson@gmail.com>

DATE: 17/12/2016 16:08

TO: Andrew Birch <andrew.birch@the-worldmag.co.uk>

Dear Andrew,

I understand that this message may come as something of a shock, but I wanted to connect because I believe you are my birth father. My late birth mother was a Lebanese woman named Leila Deeba, who I imagine you met as a reporter in Beirut, 1980. She had me adopted soon after I was born, and I was raised by my adoptive parents in Iowa. I now live in Los Angeles, where I produce documentaries, primarily on health and wellbeing. I will be in Britain over the holiday season, researching a project, and I would very much like to meet you, if you'd feel comfortable with that.

Yours,

Jesse

PS I'm a big fan of your columns!

'Are you all right?' said Emma, coming into his study. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Really?' said Andrew. 'I'm fine. Just fine.' His laptop was facing away from her, but he shut it anyway. 'I've just filed my column. And how are you?' Andrew had always been surprised by his own ability to sound composed, even genial, when his mind was reeling.

'Fab!' said Emma. 'I look forward to reading it. I'm just nipping out to John Lewis. I need to get some last things. Well, not last, but

some more things for, um, Olivia's stocking. And I, I should get some more wrapping paper,' she tailed off, looking over his head at the clock. Andrew registered that his wife was speaking too quickly. But shock was still pounding through his body. She said something about what time she'd be back, and left.

Andrew sat, rereading the email again and again. Here it was, the voice he had been half-dreading, half-expecting. He thought back to that sultry night in Beirut, 1980, the one he had tried to convince himself had never happened. And then he thought of the strange little letter that Leila Deeba had written him, eighteen months ago, which had been forwarded from *The World's* offices. He still had it, hidden from Emma. 'My late birth mother was . . .' So the glorious, firm-bodied woman he had fucked between hotel sheets was dead. He stood up and stared out of the rain-flecked window. 'Frosty the Snowman' came floating up from the basement kitchen. How had he reached an age when a woman he had slept with could be dead – and it wasn't even remarkable? It was a bleak train of thought, and he forced himself back to the present. What, if anything, ought he to reply to this man? And, more to the point, what on earth was he going to tell Emma?