

MIKE GAYLE

HALF A
WORLD
AWAY



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THEN

30th November 1992

Dear Jason,

I've done a lot of mad things in my life but I definitely think writing a letter without knowing if it'll ever get read has to be one of the maddest! And yet here I am doing just that!

The reason I'm writing to you is simple. My name's Kerry Hayes and I'm your sister and even though I haven't seen you since you were tiny, I love you more than anything in the world.

Yesterday I turned eighteen, which means I'm an adult and I'll be leaving Milread Road soon. (Milread Road, in case you don't know, is the children's home I've lived in for the past six years. It's okay, I suppose, but I'm not going to miss it.) Anyway, because I'm leaving care the social is going to set me up with a flat and everything, and I'll be able to do what I want when I want (not that I don't already!).

In a perfect world, getting a place of my own would mean that you could come and live with me. But you and I both know that the world isn't perfect. I don't know where you are. No one's ever told me. When I asked my social worker to help me find you she said that because of some stupid rule they've made up, she's not allowed to tell me where you are. I don't know if you're in London or in Liverpool. Or even if you're still in the country. The only thing I can do is write letters to something called the Adoption Contact Register and they won't even pass them on to you. Instead I have to wait until you get in contact with them and that might not be for years.

You must be ten now, and living with your new parents. Have you got any brothers and sisters? Part of me hopes not because

I hate thinking that you might have forgotten me. You haven't, have you? You still remember me, don't you?

We used to have so much fun together, Jason, you and me. I used to make you laugh all the time pulling silly faces and playing the clown. You were never happy unless I was with you. You used to call me 'Keh-wah' when you were small because you couldn't say my name properly. If I wasn't with you, you'd run around the flat shouting, 'Keh-wah!' at the top of your voice until I came.

Anyway, I'll write and let you know my new address as soon as I move in.

I miss you, Jason.

I miss you so much.

Please, as soon as you get this, write back so that I can know for sure that you're safe and happy.

It's all I ever want for you.

All my love, always,

Kerry xxx

NOW

PART 1

I

Kerry

Friday, 26th February

I'm belting out 'All I Want For Christmas Is You' at the top of my lungs as I pull up in front of the house. I absolutely love that song. It's such a banger! I don't care that it's the end of February, that Christmas is nothing but a memory and that we're now closer to Easter than the festive season. It could be Mother's Day, Saint Patrick's Day or even Yom Kippur for all I care because whenever that song comes up on my *Best of Mazza* playlist, it's officially Christmas again. I forget all about how hard it was to get out of bed this morning, the miserable drivers who cut me up left, right and centre on my way over here after school drop-off, in fact I pretty much forget about every crappy little thing that tries to rain on my parade. Instead I belt out my favourite song in the world proper diva-style: all-in, no shame, hogging the limelight like there's no tomorrow. I love Mariah Carey, I really do. She. Is. Amazing. She don't take no crap from anyone, does what she wants the way she wants and no one says a word to her because do you know what? She. Is. Mariah. Bleedin'. Carey!

Waving my hands in the air and squeezing my eyes shut like they do on *X Factor*, I'm giving the final chorus my all when I hear a knock on my side window. I get a right shock when I open my eyes to see some old dear with her face pressed right up against it. She looks really miffed.

I wind down my window.

'You all right, love? You lost or something?'

She gives me the evil eye. 'I know exactly where I am, thank

you very much, young lady! I've been trying to get your attention to tell you that you're blocking the way!

I look around and sure enough she's right. I've been so lost in Mariah Town, I've completely forgotten to open up the gates.

I apologise to the old dear, then dip my hand into my bag, whip out the remote and press the big button on it. Hey presto – the huge black metal gates in front of me slide back just like magic.

With Mariah still crooning away I give the old woman a little wave, mouth 'I'm really sorry,' and then pull up on to the drive, grab my things out the back and practically skip to the front door. Rummaging around in my bag again, I pull out the front door keys and do a little Mariah-style dance as I step inside. Unbuttoning my jacket, I start slipping it off my shoulders but as I catch sight of the state of the hallway Mariah shuts down sharpish.

The place is a tip.

There are kids' toys strewn across the floor, a mountain of coats draped over the bottom of the banister, piles of stuff on the stairs and even a half-eaten plum on top of the radiator.

I edge myself along the corridor towards the kitchen, scared of what I might find, and as I enter the room my worst fears are confirmed.

In spite of its handleless German engineered cupboards, polished granite work surfaces and – I kid you not – fifty-odd grand's worth of oven and hob – it looks like a bomb's just hit it. The counter is covered with spilled cereal, dirty bowls, half-drunk glasses of milk and a load of newspapers and magazines. The huge gloss-white eight-seater dining table has half-eaten bits of toast on it, half a dozen dirty wine glasses, three empty juice bottles and – get this – a pair of designer stilettos lying on their sides showing their bright red soles for all the world to see.

The cat's litter tray at the end of the kitchen island is so full that even the cat looks a bit disgusted by it, the open dishwasher is stuffed to the gills with dirty pots and pans, and there's a child's roller skate in the sink. As I fish it out and set it on the

counter, my eyes come to rest on a handwritten note that's been weighed down with a tall bottle of extra-virgin olive oil.

'Hi Kerry,' it reads. 'So, so, sorry about the mess! Had a bit of a party last night and we were in such a mad rush this morning that I didn't get round to any of the tidying I wanted to do. I'm sure with your super skills it won't take too long to sort out! All best wishes, Cathy. PS The loo in the en suite is blocked. Could you possibly work your magic on it? PPS We seem to have run out of bathroom cleaner but I'm sure you'll have some of your own.'

I take a long look around me and let out a huge sigh. I can't believe how happy and positive I'd been just a few minutes ago, and now I wish I hadn't bothered dragging myself out of bed this morning. I'm suddenly so, so, tired. Tired like I always seem to be these days. It could easily take me all the time I've got just to clean up this mess, let alone do the rest of the house. Reaching down, I pick up the note and toss it in the kitchen bin that is, of course, full to bursting. Mariah has well and truly left the building, I think to myself, and right now I feel like she's never coming back.

Like most women – and in all the years I've been doing the job I've yet to meet a single man doing this – I got into the cleaning game because I could fit it around childcare. Being a single mum with a young child made it virtually impossible for me to go out to work, but I told myself that as soon as my Kian was old enough to start nursery I'd look for something. People round my way thought I was mad when I told them my plans. What did I want to go looking for a job for, when my lad was still so little, especially when I'd probably end up worse off than if I did nothing? I told them straight though, it was exactly because he was so young that I wanted to get a job. I didn't want him growing up like some of the wasters from our estate, hanging out on street corners, nicking things to order or selling a bit of weed on the side. Some of them have never done a day's work in their lives and neither have their parents. I wanted better for my Kian. I

wanted him growing up knowing that there's a right way and a wrong way, and the wrong way is sitting on your backside all day long thinking the world owes you a living. And as for being worse off, I couldn't give a monkey's. To me, showing my son that there's another way, a better way, that he doesn't have to waste his whole life on the dole has always been far more important than being able to keep him in the latest Nikes or whatever. To me, the most important thing in the world is that he has pride in himself.

When the time came for me to start looking, it turned out that the only jobs I had a chance of getting were in retail or waitressing. Every interview I had, the bosses made out like the positions were flexible but that was rubbish. They were either all that zero-hours nonsense or they'd ask if I was prepared to work late nights and weekends as if I hadn't just told them I was a single mum with a young kid! Just as I was beginning to tear my hair out, a mum of one of Kian's friends at nursery told me about a gig she'd got working for a cleaning company, and apparently they were looking for people to cover staff holidays and the like. To be honest, it didn't sound ideal. Most of it was last-minute-can-you-go-to-such-and-such-a-place-in-the-next-half-hour type stuff, but it was cash in hand and it could fit around childcare so I asked her to give them my number. Sure enough, the following week, after a quick five-minute interview, they sent me off to my first job.

I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a two-bed flat in a beautiful stucco-fronted mansion in Maida Vale. I'd never been anywhere quite like it in my life. It was all white walls with horrible-looking modern-art paintings on them, stripped floorboards, and furniture that looked like it was straight out of *Star Trek*. Though none of it was to my taste, you could tell it was all dead expensive and I was almost scared to breathe in case I accidentally broke something. Still, cleaning was what I'd come to do and so that was what I did and by the time I'd finished, even the loo seat sparkled. It was a nice feeling, doing a good job like that, my little contribution to making the people who lived there just that little bit happier.

Six weeks on I was doing such a good job that they officially put me on the books working all the hours I wanted when Kian wasn't home, and I loved it, really loved it. I felt like I'd finally found my thing. My place in the world. Then about a year in I happened to see a client invoice on my boss's desk. I couldn't believe how much they were charging people for three or four hours of cleaning. I was so outraged, I wasn't sure who was being ripped off more: us girls or the clients. Still, it gave me a few ideas of my own and that same week I put up a card in a news-agent's window just around the corner from Notting Hill Tube: 'Reliable and trustworthy female cleaner available, reasonable rates, and references on request.' Within a few days I'd booked my first gig, and within the month I had enough clients to be able to hand in my notice and be my own boss, just like Mariah Carey.

When it comes to where to start when you're cleaning a house, most girls I know have rules. Some say you should always start at the bottom and work your way up because the bottom of the house is where people do most of their living and so it tends to be messier. Others say you should start at the top and work your way down because that way you can ease yourself into the job and pick up speed as you go. I've never much been fussed one way or the other, because at the end of the day it all needs doing, so I tend to let my mood decide. Today, given the state of down-stairs, I'm in a top-down state of mind. Grabbing my bucket, mop, floor sweeper, dusters and the vacuum cleaner from the under-stairs cupboard, I haul my way up both flights of stairs to the Pryors' master bedroom suite up in the loft, and then promptly have to sit down on the edge of the bed to catch my breath.

The room is decorated in what I suppose you might call a modern fashion. All the walls, floorboards, bed linen and furnishings are white, which is stylish but a bit too cold for my liking. I like a bit of colour and sparkle in a room, something a bit cheerier like orange or yellow or even a nice lime-green. Rather than normal windows, the room has got these fancy bi-fold jobs

that look out right across west London. Sometimes when I've finished cleaning the house I like to come up here and stand for a minute or two enjoying the view. I like to think about the lives of all the people whose homes I can see right into, wondering who they are, what they do and if they're happy. Today, though, I won't have time for any of that. Today's going to be hard graft right up until it's over and I'm not looking forward to it at all because my back has been aching something rotten for the past few days. I give it a rub with the heel of my palm and then stand up, pop *Absolute Eighties* on my phone, plug in my earphones and slip on my Marigolds: it's time to get down to business.

All it takes to unblock the en-suite toilet is a couple of goes with a plunger. After that I give it a good clean, followed by the sink and shower. I tidy up Mrs Pryor's make-up and perfumes on the bathroom counter and as I do, I catch sight of a middle-aged brunette looking back at me from the mirror. I look tired and my roots need doing again, but other than that I quite like what I see. I don't look half bad for a woman the wrong side of forty. Okay so there are a few little lines around my eyes, and when I tilt my head to one side in the morning to dry my hair my face does look a bit like it's about to slide off, but my skin's pretty clear, my teeth are nice and straight, and when I do get the chance to get dolled up, I reckon I could easily pass for someone five years younger. Not bad, all things considered.

In the bedroom, I run my floor sweeper over the painted hardwood flooring, make the bed (even though I've told Mrs Pryor that's not my job), and tidy away the clothes draped across the armchair in the corner of the room (also not my job). When I finally finish, the room looks like the sort of upmarket hotel suite you see in glossy magazines, which I suppose is the look they were going for, but it's taken me the best part of an hour to get it like this and I've still got three kids' bedrooms, the hallway, the family bathroom and, not forgetting, the apocalypse in the kitchen-diner to deal with too.

As much as I'd like to stop in an hour's time and just leave

the kitchen in whatever state I've managed to get it to by then – or even better, invoice for the extra time it will take to get it looking spick and span – I know from experience that it's not worth the hassle. The Pryors are exactly the sort of people who, in the same breath as justifying spending a fortune on organic coconut water, will fight tooth and nail for the right not to slip me an extra tenner for cleaning up a mess I shouldn't even be asked to deal with. But I can't afford to start losing clients right now, no matter how useless they are. Recently I've had a few things come up at the last minute that have meant I've had to take either a morning or an afternoon off work, so I'm down quite a bit on my money this month. And on top of all my usual bills and outgoings, it's Kian's birthday soon. I want to get him something special, something he really wants, that will really knock his socks off, and if I know him, that won't come cheap. So if tolerating clients like the Pryors is what I've got to do to make that happen, then that's what I'll do.

While I tackle the kids' bedrooms I try and keep in mind that actually most of my clients aren't pigs. The majority are somewhere between okay – no small talk, pay on time, not too untidy – and lovely – tidying up a bit before I arrive or at the very least, realistic about just how long it actually takes to get a home clean. My favourite clients, as well as tidying up a bit before I get to them, go the extra mile. They're the sort who leave out biscuits on the kitchen counter, or put a little extra in with my regular money if the place is unusually messy, and of course, they always remember to tip at Christmas.

It's a funny thing cleaning people's houses and seeing all the things up close that they'd much rather keep hidden away. I've lost count of the times I've accidentally seen things I'm sure I shouldn't have. Everything from certain battery-operated items tucked under pillows, to packs of anti-depressants hidden away inside books. The most surprising thing I ever came across was at the home of a really quite recently married couple, both big-shot lawyers in the City. One morning I found the husband's phone on the kitchen counter and just as I picked it up to move it out

of the way, he got a text from his bit on the side asking him how the meeting with his divorce lawyer had gone. For three whole weeks I knew before his wife that he was planning to leave her and probably had never even loved her in the first place.

That's why cleaning is such an intimate job. You get to see behind closed doors where people let their guard down. You get to see who they really are. I suppose that could be why Mrs Pryor is so mean and demanding. Because for all her airs and graces, private education, good-looking tax-accountant husband, picture-perfect children and designer wardrobe, I know exactly who she is. Then again, it could just as easily be that she's a jumped-up bitch with a *Downton Abbey* complex. With women like her it's just so hard to tell.

By the time I'm finally finished at the Pryors' I'm running late for my next job, which of course has a knock-on effect for the rest of the day. I have to text Mrs Greig, my last client of the day, to let her know I'll take her ironing home tonight and drop it back first thing tomorrow while Kian is at karate. Unlike Mrs Pryor, Mrs Greig is one of my lovely clients. Even though she's a senior manager at a big telecoms company with more than enough on her plate, somehow she still manages to text me back before I've even put my phone away: 'No problem at all. I'm just grateful you're doing it. It's the one job I can't stand! x.'

After I load the last of my things into the boot of my car, I send out a few texts to rearrange my work for the following week, lock up at the Pryors' and set the alarm, before heading over to Ladbroke Grove. Parking as near as I can to Kian's school, I nip across the road to the Tesco Metro, pick up a few things for tea, and am walking through the school gates just as the bell goes.

To be honest, at ten Kian's probably a bit too old for me to still be picking him up from school. At his age I'd been walking myself to school for at least three or four years. Plus he's not the little boy who clung to my legs sobbing on his first day at school any more. He's a big lad now and streetwise with it, and most of his mates have been making their own way home alone since the beginning of the school year. But even though he's asked me a

million times if he can join them, I always say no. I tell him it's because there are too many dangerous roads to cross, or dodgy people to avoid, or kids causing trouble, even though I reckon he could handle those sorts of things standing on his head. The thing is, while he might be nearly eleven he's still my baby, and it's just been him and me for so long that it's hard to let go. I know I'll have to one day soon – we should be hearing whether he's got a place at Melbourne Park the month after next – and he can't have me picking him up from secondary school in front of all his mates – but I'm just not ready yet. One day I will be, but not yet.

He greets me with his usual question: 'Have you got anything to eat?'

I roll my eyes and ask him if he thinks I was born yesterday as I dip into my bag and, like a magician, pull out a packet of salt and vinegar crisps, his favourite. He's wolfed down the lot by the time we get to the car and so he spends the rest of the journey home rummaging through the shopping on the back seat. He keeps grabbing stuff and asking if he's allowed to eat it and time after time I tell him, 'No, that's for tea,' or 'No, that's for breakfast,' or 'No, that's for your packed lunch.'

Finally he gets a cheeky glint in his eye and pulls out a box of Weetabix. 'How about one of these?' he asks, knowing full well I'll say no. So when I say he can have one his jaw drops, proper cartoon-style. 'Really?'

'Yeah,' I say with a grin, 'but if I find any crumbs back there, it'll be your job to clear them up!' I know some people might think letting your kid eat cereal straight out of the box in the back of a moving car is bad parenting but I prefer to think of it as keeping him on his toes. Every time he thinks he knows what I'm all about, I'll do something to surprise him and keep up the mystery.

If it were up to Kian we'd eat every meal on the sofa in front of the TV, but today like most days we eat tea at our tiny dining table in the kitchen. I like sitting across from him, watching him eat, seeing all the weird and wonderful faces he pulls as I grill

him about what he's been up to at school. Meal times are my favourite parts of the day, they're when we're most *us*. Our little family comes together. They're when I find out what he's really thinking or feeling, even though sometimes he doesn't say more than a few words. A mum can tell a lot about her son just by sitting across a table from him. Sometimes he tells me off for studying him like he's a tiny insect under a microscope and when he does, I always joke, 'Too right, mate! You'll never be able to hide anything from me: I see everything!'

After tea Kian heads off to his room, even though it's his job to clear the table, but before I can call him back my phone rings. I'm half expecting it to be Mrs Pryor with a complaint about something or other, because she's an ungrateful cow and that's just the sort of thing women like that love to do, but it's not Mrs Pryor. In fact it's not one of my clients at all.

When the call's finally ended, I stand by the sink shaking my head over and over again. I want to cry. I want to shout. I want to smash something and watch it shatter to pieces. But in the end I just stand there thinking how from now on, nothing is ever going to be the same again.

Noah

Friday, 26th February

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah . . . I understand all that, mate . . . GBH . . . blah, blah, blah . . . very serious crime . . . blah, blah, blah . . . let’s see what we can do about getting you bailed . . . blah, blah, blah . . . But before we get into all that just explain one thing for me, yeah?’

As he pauses, my brow furrows in anticipation.

‘You’re my brief, innit?’

‘I am indeed your legal representative.’

‘And that means I can ask you anything I like, yeah?’

My brow furrows further. Soon my entire upper face will be one huge wrinkle.

‘Is there some specific aspect of your case you’d like to talk about, Mr Nazeeb?’

‘Not about my case, about you, blood. No offence but . . . how comes you, a black geezer, talks like a posh white geezer? Is your mum the queen or something?’ He laughs heartily as though this is the funniest joke he’s ever heard. ‘Dude, you don’t sound nuthin’ like any of the black geezers from round my ends and it’s proper doing my head in. What’s your story?’

One might assume that given Mr Nazeeb is being held in custody for attacking a rival drug dealer with a baseball bat, is looking at a five-year sentence, has already had an appeal for bail turned down and is facing a second in just twenty-five minutes, he would be a tad more focused on his current situation. But to make such an assumption about the twenty-seven-year-old Asian

man sitting across the table from me (dressed head to toe in his drug-dealing street uniform of baseball cap, black North Face jacket, grey sweatshirt, matching jogging bottoms and bright white box-fresh trainers), one would need to be ignorant of a truth of which I have long been painfully aware: that little frustrates the human brain so much as an inability to immediately pigeonhole complete strangers. And for the man sitting across from me in a dingy conference room at Westminster Magistrates Court the question of why I, as a thirty-four-year-old criminal barrister with light-brown skin, Caribbean heritage and a three-piece pinstripe suit, don't drop my aitches is, it would appear, of greater priority than even personal liberty.

It is a phenomenon unbounded not only by race but by class too. I have witnessed it in career criminals like Mr Nazeeb, pupils in the playground of my prep school and even senior teaching fellows at Oxford. For as long as I can remember I have been asked Mr Nazeeb's question many times, in many guises. Sometimes it's posed subtly: 'So tell me, where exactly are you from?' and sometimes delicacy goes completely out of the window: 'I don't get it, you're black, so why do you talk like a white dude?' But rarely, if ever, does the question remain unasked, which I believe perfectly illustrates a long-held theory of mine that when it comes to the employment of specious, insulting and downright racist stereotypes, no social class or indeed race has a monopoly. Everybody, whether rich or poor, black or white, educated or uneducated, is as guilty of this behaviour as everyone else.

'I was adopted at two and a half and my parents are white,' I explain perfunctorily, having learned the hard way that offering individually tailored lectures on race and social class to all I encounter is indeed the shortest route to madness.

'That explains it then, bruv,' exclaims Mr Nazeeb, and he gives me a deliberately exaggerated nod of recognition that is as smug as it is irritating.

'Right then,' I announce, returning my gaze to the brief open in front of me. 'Now that's settled, how about we return to the

matter in hand: what I can do to prevent you spending the next one hundred and eighty days of your life on remand.'

While I'd always wanted to work in law, it had never been my ambition to be a criminal barrister. I grew up in Islington, attending a nearby prestigious private school that was in truth little more than a sausage factory for the establishment, and when the time came for me to select one of the array of professional careers on offer to my peers and me (future fund managers, City whizz kids, academics, lawyers, medical professionals, senior civil servants, politicians and policy makers), it was law that seemed the best fit for me. Not only did it suit my personality (growing up I liked nothing more than a good debate), it also seemed incredibly lucrative, as confirmed by a school friend's father who worked in commercial law. Once he took his son and me out for lunch at Chez Bruce in Wandsworth and casually announced as we waited for our starters to arrive that he was now earning in excess of a million pounds a year.

So when I went up to Oxford to study, it was commercial law I had in mind to practise once I was qualified, and nothing else, because I very much liked the idea of earning a great deal of money. But then during my training for the bar I got a taste for criminal law that only increased during my pupillage. By the time I was called to the bar I had abandoned all interest in commerce and had fallen head over heels with criminal law.

The reason was simple. When it came to law, the criminal arena was not only where the stakes were highest but also where words like 'justice' and 'liberty' ceased being abstract concepts. Their application could mean an innocent person gaining their freedom and a guilty person receiving just punishment for their crimes.

Over the course of my ten-year career I've acted as a junior in murder cases where the evidence against a client has seemed so incontrovertible, only to have that very same evidence fall apart under scrutiny. I've prosecuted cases of horrendous violence and cruelty that due to my efforts have resulted in those responsible

receiving the highest sentences the law allows. In short, whether defending or prosecuting I have given my all to each and every client I have represented (even the Mr Nazeeps of this world). And I do so because as hopelessly naïve and idealistic as it sounds, I believe in justice, in the law, and in the fundamental human right to have someone defend your cause at a time in your life when you are at your weakest.

Emerging from Westminster Magistrates Court an hour and a half after my conference with Mr Nazeeb, I feel somewhat victorious, having not only secured bail for my client but also an admonishment from the judge against the Metropolitan Police for the late disclosure of some of their evidence against him. As if to temper any feeling of bonhomie, however, the bright crispness of the late February afternoon that I'd enjoyed on entering the building has given way to a cold, damp evening. With the kitbag containing my wig, gown and collar, along with a number of case files in my hands, I join the heads-down, umbrellas-up shuffle of the homeward-bound masses trudging through the rain towards Marylebone. All thoughts of my victory dissipate as I consider my destination: my home in Primrose Hill; and recall the most recent whispered row between my wife Rosalind and me this morning, while our daughter ate breakfast in the next room in blissful ignorance. It seems lately as though Rosalind and I are always arguing. It seems lately as though everything I say and do only serves to exasperate her.

Peeling off before I reach my bus stop, I duck into an upmarket florist's decorated with zinc buckets of flowers stacked on vintage wooden crates and staffed by two impeccably turned-out young women sporting striped canvas aprons. It feels like a huge cliché buying flowers in the hope of appeasing an angry wife but I'm not sure exactly what else I can do. The taller of the two women, speaking English with a heavy French accent, asks how she might help and I reply in her native tongue that I'd like some flowers for my wife. Surprised, she asks me whereabouts in France I'm from and she is further taken aback when I explain that I'm

actually English. ‘My father is half French,’ I explain, ‘and I studied French at school but the only reason I’m any good is because my wife and I regularly holiday at my in-laws’ villa in Cavalaire-sur-Mer so I get lots of practice.’

We chat about Cavalaire-sur-Mer for a while (she has family there) and eventually circle back around to the question of flowers. Still conversing in French, she asks me whether my wife has any floral preferences. I shrug and tell her that she’s fond of white and cream and she makes some suggestions that mean little to me in either French or English. I say that she should do whatever she thinks is best and when she asks what sort of budget I have in mind, I reply, somewhat decadently, ‘The sky is the limit.’

I leave the shop carrying a bouquet made up of white roses, freesias and lilies, which to my eyes at least looks wonderfully impressive. I imagine handing them to my wife, her accepting them in the spirit in which they’ve been offered, and the anger of this morning, of many recent mornings, vanishing in an instant. It feels good to believe that things will return to normal between us, to imagine the tension that’s lingered these past few weeks might disappear forever.

Whether it’s because of the flowers, which provide such a cheerful contrast to the rain, or because I know it’s Friday evening and I won’t have to think about work again until Sunday, when I’ll have to continue preparing for the aggravated burglary case I’m prosecuting first thing on Monday morning, I’m not sure, but my spirits feel sufficiently lifted that on the journey home, rather than mull over my troubles, I allow myself some time off. On the bus I manage to flick through most of the *Evening Standard*, and on alighting I even listen to most of a legal podcast that a number of colleagues from my chambers have been recommending to me for months. In fact, I’m so pleasantly distracted for the entire journey that it’s only when I finally arrive at the front door of our Primrose Hill home and remove my headphones that my earlier anxiety returns.

Clutching the flowers tightly, I stand on the pavement for a moment looking up at my home, a four-storey Georgian

townhouse. We had the painters in just two weeks ago and with its gleaming black front door, railings and dazzling white façade, its aesthetic appeal is undeniable. It's so pristine that I'm sure passers-by imagine the inhabitants must live similarly perfect lives. If only they knew.

I enter the house and call out from the hallway as I close the front door behind me. While there's no reply, I can hear the sound of the TV coming from the front room. Kicking off my shoes, I leave the flowers on the antique side table and pop my head around the door. My daughter Millie is sprawled out on the sofa, her long mane of wavy black hair spread out behind her like a cloak. Her big brown eyes are glued to the screen and she's watching some sort of reality TV programme starring unfeasibly handsome twenty-year-olds that I'm pretty sure – given that she's only twelve – she isn't supposed to be watching. She mutes the sound and tips her head back, allowing me to place my lips gently on her forehead. Even after all these years it's a delight to see myself in another human being, albeit partially. She has my cheekbones, eyes and colouring, but the rest is pure Rosalind.

'Good day?'

She shrugs. 'It was okay. Mrs Eliades freaked out in chemistry because Zoe H was watching YouTube videos on her phone under the desk, and for lunch I had vegetarian paella, which was really lovely.' She pulls a face and adds, 'Oh, and someone was sick on the bus home from school and the smell was so rank I thought I might die. How about you?'

'All good thanks, sweetie. Is Mum around?'

'I think she's in her study.'

'Have you eaten?'

She shakes her head. 'Just some fruit. Mum said something about us maybe getting a takeaway later.'

I glance at the TV again. Two handsome bare-chested young men appear to be having an in-depth conversation with two equally gorgeous young women wearing tiny bikinis.

'You do know you're too young to be watching this, don't you?'