

Fairytale of New York

Miranda Dickinson

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MIRANDA DICKINSON

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A V O N

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Chapter One

This city is not mine by birthright: I was born over three thousand miles away in a sleepy town in the heart of England. But ever since the day I set foot on its sidewalks, I have felt caught up in the biggest, most welcoming embrace by every street, store and tree-lined avenue. I don't know if a city can make a heart decision, but if it's possible then New York *chose* to make me belong. And even though some of my most difficult and painful days have taken place here, somehow this city has always softened the blows – just like a good friend who sits you down with a cup of tea and tells you to be patient because things will turn out OK in the end. And you know they will. Eventually.

My friend Celia tells me that I'm a 'Frustrating but Adorable Optimist in the Face of Overwhelming Evidence to the Contrary'. If you think this looks like a dramatic newspaper headline then you'd be on the right track: Celia writes a column for the *New York Times* and she's lived here all her life. She was one of the first true friends I made in the city and she watches out for me like a slightly neurotic older sister. She won't mind that description of her – come to think of it, that's probably one of hers anyway.

Celia's apartment is on the second floor in an elegant

Upper West Side brownstone residence just off Riverside Drive on West 91st Street, and every Saturday morning we meet there to put the world to rights over coffee. Sitting at her maple table by the large picture window, I can see out to the street below. ‘Sit for long enough in New York and you’ll see everyone in the city walk by,’ Mr Kowalski always used to say. He was the original owner of my florist’s shop, before he retired to his beloved Warsaw with his daughter Lenka, where he lived until his death, just over five years ago. Mr Kowalski was another of the first true friends I made in my adopted country.

‘Rosie, you have *no* idea how blessed you are to have History in England,’ Celia declared one Saturday morning as she appeared from the kitchen with the coffee and a basket of warm muffins. As usual, we had entered a conversation a little way in from the start and continued as though we’d been there from the beginning. I couldn’t help but grin at her as she flopped down into the chair beside me.

‘Ah, *history* . . .’ I replied in a learned tone.

‘I mean, you Brits just don’t appreciate the *awesome privilege* of having kings and queens going back *centuries*. I can’t say that my ancestors were walking in New York in the tenth century. I can’t say that my family is born-and-bred American. I mean, heaven only knows where my family came from. I’m probably four-sixteenths Ukrainian with a touch of Outer Mongolian thrown in somewhere along the line.’

I was about to say that there is actually no such thing as a true English person either, and remark that my family probably came from Moravia or somewhere originally, but I could see this was a serious topic of concern for Celia. So I stayed quiet and poured the coffee instead.

‘Why are you so hung up about it, mate?’ I asked.

Celia's troubled countenance softened and she reached for a muffin.

'It's my column for the *Times* next week. I'm thinking about the importance of history for humans to find their place in the world. The more I consider it, the more I realise it's a non-starter. Most of us don't know our own history here – save for what we learn at school. We're a hotchpotch of immigrants, convicts and dreamers, all clamouring for some damn utopia that doesn't exist. We want to belong, yet we don't know *what* we want to belong *to*.'

Somehow, I suspected those sentences would appear in her column soon. This is a regular phenomenon; in fact, I think our Saturday morning chats must be the best documented in history. If, in a thousand years' time, historians want to know what things twenty-first-century friends were discussing, all they will have to do is to examine the archives of Celia's column at the *New York Times* (which will, by then, be thought-transmitting to its readership, I suppose).

'You are such a *writer*,' I smiled. 'Every word beautifully crafted . . .'

'Honey, *everything* is copy. My father always said that.' She picked up a teaspoon and frowned at her reflection. 'And *I* am starting to look like my *mother*.'

I couldn't help but smile at her. 'You are *not*.'

It has to be said, Celia is a good-looking lady, immaculately turned out at all times and with one of those complexions that most women would walk over burning coals (or inject odd bits of animal into their skin) to achieve. To look at her, you could never guess her age; despite her strenuous denials of the fact, she can easily pass for an early thirtysomething, when in reality she's nearer the middle of her forties than she would ever admit. She has a style that seems to exude from deep

within her – a quality my mum would call ‘effortless’. Even that morning, when her only appointment was in her own apartment for coffee with me, her jeans and blue linen shirt looked a million times more elegant than they would have done on anyone else.

‘So, my Authors’ Meet next Tuesday night . . .’ she said, discarding the subject and brandishing the next with a warp-speed that would impress even Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship *Enterprise*, ‘I thought Café Bijou in TriBeCa would be ideal. It’s new but worth a risk, so I’m told.’

‘Sounds promising,’ I said, watching sunlit steam rise as I broke open a warm muffin, letting the pieces fall onto my plate. ‘Who’s coming?’

‘Henrik Gund is a definite, and I’m awaiting replies from Mimi Sutton and Angelika Marshall, though of course I’m kinda confident they’ll find it hard to resist. In fact, most of New York’s finest will be there. It has the potential to be amazing . . . of course there are still a few worries to iron out . . .’ Celia paused, turned squarely to face me and smiled one of those immaculately painted, high-maintenance Jewish smiles of hers that, I have learned, always precede a Celia Reighton Big Favour.

Somewhere, way in the back of my brain, a familiar little voice began screaming, *Don’t do it! Don’t do it . . . !*

But it was too late. I had already conceded to the inevitability of surrender. With acting that would have had Spielberg arm-wrestling Scorsese for my services, I replied as if I hadn’t a notion of what was coming, ‘That’s wonderful, Celia. It sounds like everything is going to plan, then.’

‘Well . . . *almost* everything, Rosie,’ Celia replied slowly.

So, it starts, announced the irritated voice in my head. The smile was widening with every grovelling word Celia spoke.

‘It’s a little delicate, but I have to tell you . . . seeing as we’re such good friends . . . it’s just that I’ve been let down by Philippe –’ (for your information: incredibly pretentious and over-priced ‘Floral Artiste’) – ‘you know how whim-driven these people can be – And I really need some stylish table pieces.’

‘Oh, that’s dreadful, mate,’ I sympathised, mirroring her agonised tone.

You are SO on your own . . . The little voice in my head let out an exasperated sigh, packed its suitcase and caught the first Greyhound for Vegas.

‘It is *so* dreadful you wouldn’t *believe*.’ Desperation was setting in. ‘Honey, you *know* I only use Philippe because my agent is seeing his brother. His creations often verge on the vulgar, in my opinion. Did I mention how I just adored what you did for Jessica Robards’ wedding last fall?’ Celia’s increasing grip on her coffee mug was threatening to crush it completely and her smile was fast becoming a cheery grimace.

It was time to put my friend out of her agony.

‘How many pieces do you need and what flowers did you have in mind?’

‘Oh, *darling*, would you?’ Celia flung her arms around me, lifting me several inches from my chair and letting out a squeal of delight.

‘Yes, OK, I give in! You can have my great expertise at extremely short notice and, no doubt, at a sizeable discount. Now, let me go before you kill me!’

I was duly released and she fell back into her chair, giggling like a delighted schoolgirl.

‘Ooh, you’re so wonderful, Rosie! I knew you wouldn’t let me down! Well, let’s see . . . I need ten – no, make it twelve – with gardenias – no, roses . . . Or maybe both? I’ll leave it to

you to decide – after all, *you're* the designer. But I'm picturing them hand-tied, of course, with plenty of that straw stuff.'

'Raffia?' I offered.

Celia didn't hear. She was already in full artistic flow, gesturing flamboyantly with each new idea that she stumbled across. 'Well, *absolutely*, honey, that too! And baskets – ooh, yes . . . little woven rustic ones like they have in England.'

'Ah, you mean *historical* ones . . .'

Celia stopped abruptly and chastised me with a mock frown. 'You see, that's what I was saying, sweetie. You British have *so* much history that you can afford to throw it away in jest. Pity the poor American here . . .'

Once again, the conversation shifted, as New York hurried by on the street below.

Work began on Celia's displays the following Monday. The order from Patrick's Flower Warehouse was due at 7 a.m. so Marnie, my assistant and Ed, my co-designer, agreed to meet me at the store at 6.45 a.m., on the strict understanding that I would shout them breakfast in return for their loyal service. Once all the boxes were safely inside we locked the store, pulled down the shutters and walked across the street to claim our reward.

There is something ultimately satisfying about walking into a coffee house first thing in the morning. You are invited in by the cosy sofas; then, once over the threshold, wonderfully evocative scents of fresh coffee and warm pastries surround you and draw you in further. Even though the world outside scurries past, inside there is a feeling of unhurried indulgence – a chance to sit a while and enjoy the moment.

Or, in our case this morning, wake up and smell the coffee.

‘So, remind us again why we’re selflessly crucifying ourselves today?’ Ed yawned, his humour much sharper than the rest of his body at this hour.

‘It’s a favour. For Celia,’ I said.

Marnie groaned into her cappuccino.

‘Ah, *Celia*,’ said Ed, raising an eyebrow. ‘Now tell me, would this be the same Celia who got us making forty Christmas garlands for the *Times* party with only one week’s notice? Or the Celia who “simply had to have daffodils” in November?’

I pretended to hide behind my mug.

‘Or the Celia who booked our biggest rival for her Valentine Ball but “let us” provide all the gift roses because we were cheaper?’ Marnie added.

‘OK, OK, guilty as charged!’ I protested.

Ed and Marnie exchanged knowing glances, and then faced me with uniform seriousness.

‘See, I have this theory about the cause of the worrying symptoms our patient here is displaying,’ Ed began.

‘Why, Dr Steinmann, what could it be?’ asked Marnie with a squeaky Southern-belle accent she could only have picked up from watching too many episodes of *Days of Our Lives*.

Ed consulted his paper napkin with practised flair and turned to face her. ‘The problem here is very simple, Nurse Andersson. Our patient is a classic sufferer of *Malaise Anglais*.’

Marnie placed a hand to her heart. ‘Oh, Doctor, are you *sure*?’

‘What exactly are you trying to say?’ I giggled.

‘You’re way too *British*, Rosie,’ Ed declared with a smile.

‘You’re missing the gene that enables you to say No . . .’

‘. . . It won’t allow you to learn from each and every mistake,’ said Marnie, clearly enjoying this assault on my character, ‘and it unfortunately manifests itself in repeated attacks.’

‘Of course, it’s the friends of the sufferer that I feel sorry for,’ continued Ed, with merciless vigour. ‘Because, you see, *they* are the ones who ultimately face the hard work of providing support to the patient.’

‘But, it needs to be said, there can be benefits for them too,’ I said.

‘Such as?’ asked Ed, his blue eyes sparkling.

‘Such as, the privilege of enjoying breakfasts at the patient’s expense.’

Marnie smiled and Ed reached across to squeeze my hand.

‘Absolutely. And it *is* a privilege. We simply mock because we care, Rosie. When are you going to understand that some people are always out for themselves?’

I let out a sigh. We must have had this conversation a thousand times, but I’m never successful in getting Marnie and Ed to see the situation from my point of view. Undaunted, I began Attempt Number 1001.

‘I know it seems like Celia’s always taking advantage, but she really *is* a good friend. She’s been there for me every time I’ve needed her. I just want to repay her kindness, that’s all.’

Ed’s expression softened a little and he shook his head. ‘Rosie Duncan, we love you dearly. And if it makes you happy, we’ll gladly spend the many, *many* hours required in order for you to repay your friend.’

‘Well, thank you,’ I said, draining the last of my latte.

‘Seriously, though, you work too much, Rosie. You need to live a little too.’ Marnie’s voice was full of concern. An alarm bell began to jangle in the back of my mind: I knew where this was going. We were approaching forbidden territory. I braced myself and, sure enough: ‘You *so* need a man—’ she breathed. My heart sank and I immediately cut her off.

‘I don’t, thank you. So, the schedule for today—’

Marnie wasn’t about to be put off so easily. ‘No, I mean it, Rosie! You’re such a lovely person – if you’d just let a guy get close enough to you, I’m sure you’d be happy . . .’

Feeling cornered, I gave a too-forced laugh and attempted to lighten the atmosphere. ‘Ah-ah, no – that is a non-negotiable subject and, I need to warn you, will result in a breach of the conditions of your contract if you choose to discuss it further.’

Ed threw his hands up in surrender. ‘OK, OK, boss, we get it. We hereby pledge to pursue it no longer.’

‘Finally, they understand!’ I looked heavenwards, hands outstretched in gratitude. I could hardly believe it – had I really averted the inevitable lecture?

Nope.

‘. . . Suffice to say, that Marnie and I are committed to bugging you on a regular basis about this—’ Ed was stopped mid-sentence, by Marnie, or rather by Marnie’s hand as it clamped firmly across his mouth.

‘Quiet, Steinmann, I need this job!’ she laughed.

After a brief struggle, she let him go and they both collapsed back, smirking like a pair of naughty schoolkids. Despite my recent discomfort, I had to smile at the pair of them. Ed likes to pretend he’s the serious, surrogate older brother in this terrible twosome, yet often he’s the worse culprit. They are forever swapping jokes, winding each other up or just acting like a couple of big kids – and I love them for it. It makes me feel I’m part of something positive and gives a real, beating heart to Kowalski’s. Most importantly, I know that, behind the humour, they are fiercely protective of each other – and of me.

Ed’s eyes twinkled and he flashed a wide grin at me.

‘Suitably chastened, m’lady,’ he said, giving a little bow as we got up to return to the store. But in the doorway he grabbed my sleeve and pulled me to him. ‘However, this topic won’t go away, Rosie Duncan. It’s definitely one To Be Continued.’