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As Good As It Gets

Written by Fiona Gibson

Published by AVON

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FIONA GIBSON

As
GOOD
as it
GETS?

AVON

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February 14, 1997

Dear Fraser,

Happy Valentine's Day! Sorry this is late. You see, a few of the girls at work got flowers today and that made me think of you.

It also made me wonder why your phone number's unavailable. Perhaps it's broken? And maybe you've injured your hand and haven't been able to write? If so, I sympathise. I know you don't handle pain well. I'm still smirking at the memory of you being agonisingly constipated after wolfing that massive bag of toffees on the train to Amsterdam.

Surely, though, phone issues aside, you could have got in touch somehow? You know – just to tell me you're okay and haven't died (maybe you ARE dead? But then, wouldn't someone have tracked me down and let me know?). In fact I don't really think of any of that. You know what I do think?

That you're scared, Fraser. You're a terrified boy who – despite all your promises – has decided to run away.

BLOODY COWARD!!!

Honestly, I didn't expect this from you. 'It'll be fine,' you told me, that day when we drove down to Brighton. 'It'll be amazing. I'm so happy. Please don't worry about a thing.' Do you remember saying all that? The ensuing silence suggests you were lying through your very nice, very posh teeth.

So I've made a decision. I've stopped hoping you'll get back in touch at some distant point and throw me a crumb of support. I'm not scrabbling around like a fat pigeon, waiting for your scraps. You were right – our baby and I will be just fine. We don't need you.

Goodbye, Fraser.

Charlotte

PS Actually, I wish I could be a pigeon for just long enough to shit on your head.

February 19, 1997

Dear Charlotte,

I hope this finds you well. My name is Arlene Johnson and I am Fraser's mother. After receiving your charming letter he wishes to have no further contact with you. I trust you will find both the enclosed cheque and small gift useful, and sincerely

hope that there will be no further correspondence between yourself and my son. Please remember that he is only 19 years old and has a promising future ahead of him.

*Yours,
Arlene*

Enclosed:

1 cheque for £10,000

1 packet Chirpy Nut and Seed Mix For Wild Birds

February 23, 1997

Dear Arlene,

That was kind of you, trying to pay me off. Thanks, too, for reminding me of Fraser's age. I am aware of how old he is. I'm only 21 myself and some might say I have a promising future too. The last time I saw him, we drove down to Brighton in the middle of the night and sat on the seafront watching the sun coming up. He seemed very happy about the baby. We both were. It might not have been planned but we decided we could make it work and that we wanted to be together.

Obviously, he's had a change of heart. I'd be grateful if you could ask him to contact me. I know he's a very capable boy and I'm sure he could manage to write a letter himself instead of getting his mummy to do it for him.

Charlotte

Enclosed: 1 torn-up cheque. Perhaps you could use it as confetti, when Fraser marries a more suitable (preferably un-pregnant) girl?

*

February 28, 1997

Letter returned to sender. No further correspondence.

Chapter One

Present Day

‘Hey, beautiful!’ the blond boy yells, nudging his friend. They watch, admiring, as the shopping crowds mill around us. There are more glances as we walk: some fleeting, others more direct. All this attention isn’t for me; Christ no, that hasn’t happened since Madonna vogued in a gold conical bra. Even then, it pretty much amounted to a bloke up some scaffolding yelling, ‘Your arse looks like two footballs!’ I’d adored my stretch jeans until that sole cruel comment killed the love affair stone dead. Not that I’m the kind of woman to take any notice of construction workers’ remarks. I mean, I’ve only festered over it for *twenty-three years* . . .

Anyway, of course it’s not me who’s causing virtually every young male in this over-heated shopping mall to perform a quick double-take. I am thirty-eight years old with wavy, muddy brown hair that’s supposed to be shoulder-length but has outgrown its style, yet isn’t properly long – it’s just long-ish. That’s what my hair is: *ish*. I am also laden with copious bulging bags, like a yak. Judging by the odd glimpse in mirrored surfaces, I note

that I have acquired a deathly pallor beneath the mall's unforgiving lights. I also have what the magazines term 'a shiny breakthrough' on my nose and cheeks.

The cruel lighting, of course, is not detracting from my daughter Rosie's beauty. Leggy and slender, with a cascade of chestnut hair which actually *gleams*, like polished wood, she's marching several paces ahead, lest someone might assume we're together. Faster and faster she goes, on the verge of breaking into a trot, while I scuttle behind, tasked with carrying the shopping. Incredibly, Rosie doesn't seem to notice the glances she's attracting from all these good-looking young males. Perhaps, when you're so often admired, you simply become immune to it.

I stop, dumping the bags on the floor and checking my hands for lacerations while she courses ahead. 'Rosie!' I call after her. 'Rosie – wait!' While there are no open wounds, I have acquired a callus on my left palm from lugging Will's birthday presents through the mall. Sure, I could have bought them online, but when we stumbled upon a closing down sale earlier, I couldn't resist grabbing a quality turntable, headphones and speakers (yes, I am transporting speakers – i.e., virtually *furniture*) at bargain prices.

At first, I comforted myself with the thought that my husband will enjoy unearthing his vinyl collection from the loft, and be able to re-live those heady, music-filled evenings of his youth. Now, though, I'm concerned that Will, who's been without gainful employment for six months, might view my purchases as 'something to fill your copious spare time'-type gifts – i.e., faintly patronising, and not something I'd have thought of buying when he was busy being a senior person with an environmental

charity. It's his birthday tomorrow; he'll be forty-one. I have already stashed away a blue cashmere sweater and the delicious figgy fragrance he likes. Maybe that was enough. I don't want him to think I'm festooning him with presents because I feel sorry for him . . . oh, *God*. Things were so much simpler when he went off to work every day, either by Tube to his Hammersmith office or off in his car to some marshy bit of London, with his waders and big waxy jacket stashed in the boot. He doesn't even have his own car anymore. He sold it, saying, 'I don't need it, do I? So what's the point of keeping it?'

'Better for the environment anyway,' our son Ollie added, in an attempt to cheer him up.

Through the shopping crowds I glimpse Rosie in her baggy red top and skinny black jeans which make her legs even longer than they really are. They are limbs of a foal, or a sleek gazelle. She canters past Gap and Fat Face with her hair billowing behind her before performing a swift left turn into Forever 21.

Please, no – *not* Forever 21. The shop is vast, almost a city in itself, with its own transport system (about fifty escalators) and populated by millions of hot-cheeked teenagers snatching at skirts in sizes that didn't even exist (six! *four!!*) when I was that age. Size ten was considered tiny then. I'm what's commonly termed a 'curvy' fourteen: neatish waist nestling between ample hips and sizeable boobs, which aren't quite the blessing one might imagine. In the wrong kind of outfit, they make me look as if I have one of those huge German sausages – a *kochwurst*, I believe they're called – stuffed up my top. Or a bolster, like you find on posh hotel beds. Those weird cylindrical pillows you never know what to do with and end up throwing on the floor. Chest-wise, I have to be careful

with necklines so as to avoid a stern matronly look. Yes, a big rack can be sexy in the right context. Too often, though, it gives off an ‘I am unfazed by bedpans’ sort of vibe.

I peer through the enormous glass frontage of Forever 21. It’s packed in there, virtually a scrum, as if these highly-charged girls are terrified that the supply of sequinned T-shirts and iridescent leggings is about to run dry. I can imagine the pained looks I’d attract if I dared to hobble in with my sacks of stereophonic equipment, never mind tried to enter the changing rooms and try anything on. They’d probably call security and wrestle me out of the building.

I hover at the doors with my bags clustered around my feet, like someone who has unexpectedly become homeless. I’ll *never* find Rosie in there. She might as well have gone to China. Another woman, presumably a mother, loiters nearby, pursing her lips and stabbing irritably at her phone. There’s also a scattering of boys and men, all waiting, presumably wondering what the heck their girlfriends and daughters have been doing in there for eighteen hours.

After what I regard as an acceptable browsing period, I call Rosie’s mobile. No answer. I actually don’t know why she has a phone – or at least, why I pay the contract for it. It’s supposed to enable us to stay in contact. When she was younger, she’d constantly call and message me while she was out. These days, she texts me about once a month. They usually say ‘ok’ or ‘yeah’, although she does still put a kiss, for which I’m grateful.

A woman strolls by with a little girl who looks about seven years old. ‘Shall we go for ice cream, darling?’ the woman asks.

‘Yeah,’ the girl enthuses. ‘Can we go to that place where they sprinkle Smarties on?’

‘Of course,’ the woman replies, causing a wave of nostalgia to crash over me. How excited she is, out shopping with her mum, like Rosie used to be with me. I’d only suggested coming here so we could spend some mum-and-daughter time together, because I know she prefers shopping malls with their weird, artificial atmosphere and piped music to actual streets with proper weather and pigeons and sky. But I’d imagined that we’d at least stroll around together, and stop off for hot chocolate and cake.

My phone rings, and I snatch it from my jeans pocket. ‘Mum, where *are* you?’

‘Outside Forever 21,’ I reply.

‘Come in!’ she commands.

‘It’s okay thanks, darling. I’ll wait here.’ *I would rather spear my own eye than enter the Emporium of Cropped Tops.*

‘Mum, please—’

‘I need at least a week’s warning to go in,’ I explain. ‘I have to rev myself up for it and get special breathing equipment. I’m sure the atmosphere’s thinner up at the top, the fifth floor or whatever it is, where the underwear is—’

‘Mum, something’s *happened!*’

‘What? Are you okay?’ I grab at my bags, realising it’ll be quite a feat to carry them all while clutching my phone.

‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ Rosie says.

‘Where are you exactly? What’s happened?’

‘You’ll never believe this, Mum. I’ve been scouted!’ What pops into my mind is the actual Scouts, which

Rosie chose over Guides because they did all the fun stuff like camping and cooking on fires. She was a tomboyish, outdoorsy kid who shunned pink. She never used to gallop ahead, or spend an entire morning choosing a nail polish. ‘What d’you mean, scouted? Are you *sure* you’re okay?’

‘Yeah, just hurry up. There’s someone here from a model agency and they want to do pictures . . .’

Ah, that kind of scouted. *Nice try*, I decide, finishing the call. So a random stranger’s trying to sweet-talk my daughter with that old ‘could be a model’ line? I can imagine how *that* goes. All she has to do is come along to his ‘studio’, which happens to be a dingy flat with filthy net curtains above a fried chicken shop . . .

The security man eyes me in the manner of a suspicious immigration officer as I barge my way into the store. I stride up the escalators, barely noticing the weight of my carrier bags now.

I arrive, panting, at the summit of Forever 21 and scan the floor for a man with paedo glasses, smiling too much and telling Rosie she has a *great future ahead of her*. I’m fine – well, sort of – when boys of her own age look at her. Of course they do: she’s a lovely girl. I’m aware that teenagers are supposed to find each other attractive and, while there’s been nothing serious yet, she’s never short of attention from boys. I’m okay with that – truly. Honestly. Well, mostly . . . What I’m *not* fine about is the idea of some fifty-year-old perv with nicotine fingers and winking gold jewellery thinking he can take advantage of my daughter . . .

No sign of her anywhere. My hair seems to crackle as I push it out of my face, probably due to the static electricity generated by millions of nylon knickers and bras.

‘Mum! Hey, Mum, over here!’

I turn and spot Rosie, who’s waving excitedly. Beside her stands a tall, slim and elegant woman – late-forties perhaps – in a cream linen jacket and faded skinny jeans, her ash-blond hair scooped up artfully into a tousled bun. Not quite the chicken-shop perv I had in mind, but we’ll see . . .

‘Hi.’ I stride over and look expectantly at the stranger.

‘Hi,’ she says, fixing on a wide smile, ‘I’m Laurie and I work for a model agency called Face . . .’

‘I’m Charlotte.’ I dump the bags at my feet and shake her hand.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ she goes on, ‘but I spotted your daughter a few minutes ago. We’ve been chatting.’ She casts Rosie a fond glance, in the manner of a glamorous aunt, before turning back to me. ‘I really think she has the potential to be a model.’

‘Really?’ I wipe a slick of sweat from my upper lip. ‘Well, you see, she’s still at school . . .’

‘Yes, she told me. That’s fine, lots of our girls are. I love her look, the stunning blue eyes and dark hair . . . it’s very dramatic.’ She turns back to Rosie. ‘You have *fantastic* bone structure, sweetheart. I can’t believe you’ve never been scouted before . . .’

‘I’m not really sure,’ I say firmly. ‘We’d need to think it over.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Laurie says, addressing Rosie again: ‘How tall are you, darling?’

Rosie frowns. ‘Er, what would you say, Mum? About five-foot-eight?’

‘Yes, around that,’ I reply, noticing Laurie looking her up and down. This is more unsettling than the admiring looks she was attracting in the mall. She is sizing up my

precious firstborn as a commodity, a *thing*, tilting her head this way and that, as if my daughter were a bookshelf and she's trying to imagine if she'd fit in that corner behind the sofa.

'I'd say more like five-nine,' she observes, 'at the very least. And you said you're sixteen, Rosie?'

'Only just,' I cut in.

'Mum,' Rosie splutters, 'I'm seventeen in August. That's next month!' She cuts me from her vision. 'I'm actually *nearly seventeen*.'

'I still think it's a bit young,' I remark. 'And anyway, she has a lot on at school over the next few months—'

Rosie emits a dry laugh. 'Yeah, like the summer holidays. *That's* what I'm doing over the next few months. I've nothing planned at all. We're not even going away, are we, Mum?'

'We might,' I say defensively.

'Well, this is exactly the age we like them to start,' Laurie cuts in, delving into her tan leather bag for a business card which she presses into my palm. 'Some join us even younger, but of course they're always chaperoned on castings and jobs . . . Okay if I take a quick picture, Rosie?'

'Er, sure,' she replies with a shy smile. Don't ask me, then. I'm only her mother.

I squint at the card as Laurie takes the shot with her phone. She seems genuine; it says *Laurie Piper, Head Booker, Face Models*, not *Creepy Weirdo Who Prowls Around Shops Where Teenagers Go*. The agency is in Long Acre in Covent Garden, not some godforsaken suburb I've barely heard of. In fact, with her cool grey eyes and pronounced cheekbones, Laurie has the air of an ex-model herself. 'That's beautiful,' she enthuses,

studying the image on her phone. 'Such a fresh, pretty face.'

'Thank you,' Rosie says, blushing. Oddly enough, whenever I tell my daughter how lovely she is, she fixes me with a rather beleaguered, *you're-only-saying-that* sort of look.

'So,' Laurie goes on, 'perhaps you'd both like to think it over? Give me a call and pop into the agency sometime for a chat. You can meet the team and we'll explain how everything works . . .'

'Okay,' Rosie says brightly.

'I'm *really* not sure,' I tell Laurie, irritated now that she doesn't seem to have listened to a word I've said. 'Next year's really important for Rosie. She needs good grades in her A-levels because she's hoping to do a veterinary degree . . .'

'Huh?' Laurie says distractedly.

'Rosie wants to be a vet,' I explain.

'Mum, it's *fine!*' Rosie throws me a pleading look.

'Don't worry about that,' Laurie says. 'We can always work around school . . .' What the hell does that mean? '. . . And we nurture our girls. We're like a surrogate family really . . .'

She doesn't need a surrogate family!

'Anyway,' Laurie adds, turning back to my daughter as if I've conveniently melted into the shiny white floor, 'lovely to meet you. Do think it over, won't you?'

Rosie grins. 'I definitely will.'

'Bye then.' We watch her striding towards the escalator.

'God, Mum,' Rosie breathes. 'I can't believe you did that.'

'Did what?'

'Went on about me wanting to be a vet!'

I frown, prickling with hurt. 'I didn't *go on*. I just mentioned it. You've been saying for years that that's what you want to do. She can't just expect you to drop all your plans—'

'She doesn't. Weren't you listening? She said they *work around* school.' She lets out an exasperated gasp as we step onto the escalator. 'I can't understand why you're not happy for me.'

Oh, for crying out loud. 'I am. Of course I am. You're lovely and you'd make an amazing model. But I just think, I don't know . . .' I scramble for the right words. 'I didn't think it'd be your kind of thing.'

She blinks at me. 'Why not?' How can I put this – that I can't imagine my bright, sparky daughter fitting into a vacuous, appearance-obsessed world? Maybe that's unfair, and the truth is that I just don't *want* her to do it, because it's scary and unknown and, actually, I'd prefer things to stay the way they are. 'You think I want to be huddled over my books all my life,' Rosie mutters.

'No, I'm not saying that. But you've got loads going on, love. I don't see how modelling will fit into all of that.'

We fall into silence as we leave the shop. I glance at Rosie, feeling guilty for dampening her excitement. 'I just think it'd be fun,' she murmurs finally.

'I'm sure it would be,' I say.

She musters a small smile. 'Sorry for being snappy.'

'It's okay. And I don't want to be a killjoy, you know. It's just, I didn't realise agency people worked that way . . .'

'You mean scouting girls?'

'Yes.'

'Well, Kate Moss was scouted,' she says, taking a couple of carrier bags from me without even being asked. 'That's how they find new models.'

‘What, by prowling around shops?’

She laughs. ‘Laurie wasn’t *prowling*, Mum. You’re so suspicious! She was really nice.’

‘Yes, she did seem nice, but, you know . . . we’ll have to see.’ As we make our way out of the mall, I try to figure out how to put her off modelling without spoiling what was clearly a thrilling encounter for her. The truth is, what’s so lovely about Rosie is that there’s so much more to her than the way she looks. She excels at school, even in the subjects she struggles with, because she works hard. Yes, she can be rather spiky at times, but isn’t that part of being a sixteen-year-old girl?

As we drive home, I try to imagine her dad’s reaction to today’s encounter. Will’s handsome, strong-jawed face shimmers into my mind, and it’s not awash with delight. He’s very protective, and I know he regards the fashion industry as a load of fluff and nonsense. Rosie’s too smart for all that, he’ll decide. He was pretty taken aback when she started to fill the bathroom with a baffling array of skincare and hair products. ‘She’s just a normal teenage girl,’ I explained.

Plus, while he may have been persuadable at one time, Will has become rather grumpy of late. I can guess why; he is stressed about our precarious finances. Until January, he was employed by Greenspace Heritage, a charity which protects wildlife and its habitats within the M25. Unfortunately, the new Director’s views were at odds with Will’s. While my husband felt it was all about encouraging the public to enjoy London’s hidden wildernesses – i.e., to get messy and have fun – the boss believed they should focus on negotiating corporate deals to bring in huge injections of cash. And so Will was ‘let go’ from the job he’d loved, and which had consumed him for the past decade.

‘Something’ll come up,’ he keeps saying, which is having the opposite effect of reassuring me. I’ve become conscious of treading carefully around him – of picking my moment before asking anything even faintly controversial. For instance, while I know he’s applying for jobs, are any interviews likely to happen in the near future – i.e., *at some point this year*? I can’t help worrying that his redundancy pay-off must have all but run out by now. ‘There’s enough in the joint account isn’t there?’ he asked tersely, last time I raised it. Yes, there was, just about – thanks to my full-time job. However, we both know I don’t earn enough to keep the four of us long-term.

In fact, occasionally I wonder if it’s *not* Will’s redundancy, but something far scarier that’s driving us apart: that, quite simply, he’s stopped fancying me. I caught him glancing at me the other night as I undressed for bed, and he didn’t look as if he were about to explode with desire. By the time I’d pulled off my bra – a sturdy black number capable of hoisting two porpoises to safety from an oil-slicked sea – he was already feigning sleep.

I lay awake for ages, studying the back of his head. *Do we still love each other?* I wondered, not for the first time. *Or are we only together for the kids, or because we’re too old or scared to break up and start all over again?* It’s not that I expect full-on passion all the time, not when we’ve been married for thirteen years. But, more and more often these days, I find myself wondering, is this as good as it gets?

I glance at Rosie as we make our slow journey home through the outer reaches of East London. ‘You do remember it’s Dad’s birthday tomorrow?’ I prompt her.

‘God, yes.’ She pulls a horrified face.

‘You haven’t bought him anything?’

‘Sorry, Mum. I was going to today, but after we’d met Laurie it went right out of my mind . . .’ *First whiff of modelling stardom and she forgets her dad’s birthday. Not good.*

‘Could you make him a card, at least?’

‘Yeah, of course,’ she replies, pausing before adding, ‘D’you think they’ll take me on?’

So she really wants to do this. ‘Let’s see what happens. Maybe it’s best not to get too excited about it.’

‘Why not?’ she exclaims. ‘It *is* exciting, Mum! Why are you being so negative?’

‘I’m not, Rosie. We just need to think about what it might mean for you. And of course,’ I add, trying to sound as if it’s no big deal at all, ‘we’ll have to talk it over with Dad.’