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According to Yes

Written by Dawn French

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According to YES

DAWN FRENCH

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I moved my chair into sun
I sat in the sun
the way hunger is moved when called fasting.

‘I sat in the sun’, Jane Hirshfield

ACT I

Tested

Fifty-seven

Fifty-eight

Fifty-nine . . . Fuck.

Yet again, Rosie Kitto's belly was empty. No baby. Why did they bother to wait the full three minutes? As much as she knew anything, she knew there was no chance, but his darling desperate face persuaded her to see it through. Along with that second thin blue line on the pregnancy test, all trace of hope for a future with him failed to show up.

Funny how a moment so anticipated can be so fleeting and mundane in its failure. There was no mighty crash when the hope toppled, only a quiet whimper.

That hope deserved a bigger send off.

Once, it had been giant.

Landed

As if tightly choreographed by Pina Bausch, every puffy face in every serried row on the British Airways 747 is obediently upturned, staring at the seatbelt sign overhead. An elastic moment where a random group of strangers are united, some don't even breathe so suspended are they. Bing bong. The familiar cue releases them from their airline aspic, and all at once the plane bursts into a chaotic scuffle of bodies racing to grab their belongings, rushing to be first to stand still in a queue to get off. Everyone is frazzled, perhaps it's the lack of fresh air that makes people so grumpy. They all seem to have somewhere very very important to be. Somewhere that just can't wait. So, come on, hurry up. Me first. Shuffle. Push. Jostle.

In 26A, Rosie is the only person who remains seated. She gazes calmly out of the window with her forehead tilted onto the glass. She has been sitting just like this for the best part of the journey, lost in thought. No, not lost. Found in thought.

Thinking such a lot, working out how she feels about flying away from everything and everyone that she knows and starting an impetuous new adventure like this. She feels strangely calm, accepting. She has surely surrendered to her future, whatever it might bring. So why is she the only one still sitting, whilst the others have filed off the plane in an impatient orderly line, exiting past the very polite, well-rehearsed air stewardesses,

'Thank you for flying British Airways.'

'Thank you.'

'Thank you for flying with us today.'

'Thank you.'

'Have a lovely day.'

'Thank you.'

'Goodbye.'

'You're welcome.'

'Thank you for flying British Airways.'

'Cheerio.'

'Thank you.'

'Thank you.'

'Yes, thank you, yes, get off, yes, go away, sod off, goodbye.'

Why isn't she moving?

You know that tiny fragment of time, just exactly before the point of no return? The golden moment where you might . . . could . . . just maybe COULD change your mind, and reverse it all? Take it all back, say no, don't jump, be safe, go home. That

moment? That's where Rosie is. Part of her wants to remain on the plane and let it bounce her back home on its return journey with all the new crew that will come aboard, fresh faced, fresh make up, fresh hairdo, fresh smell. Spit spot. Bound for home. For home. For lovely familiar drizzly comfy old England. Where, even if she knows it's wrong, at least she knows how to *be*. That's where Rosie Kitto, thirty-eight, primary school teacher, is assuredly grown up, reliable and emotionally tuned in. This new Rosie Kitto seems to be running away like a seriously immature selfish twit. Very ungrown up.

Who is she?

Well, she is the person who, a couple of weeks ago, said no to all the even keel, and yes to grabbing life by the throat, yes to jumping off the edge, yes to what the hell's it going to be like?, yes to being afraid. YES, YES, YES PLEASE!

That's right.

So, get out of your seat, Rosie, this is New York . . . here goes . . . COME ON!!

'Thank you for flying British Airways today, goodbye.'

Met

In a new round mirror is a reflection of an old oval face. Everything is in its place here, especially on this fading face, because subtle expensive surgery has helped it be so. Glenn Wilder-Bingham has applied her make up this same way for sixty years. She could probably do it without the mirror, she could certainly do it without the actual make up, because the brushes, the pads, the puffs and the pencils have enough residue on them for a week's worth of daily applications. It is nearly done, except for the very last part of the process, which is the concealer. She clicks the end of the expensive concealer pen and draws bold lines of creamy light-diffusing liquid under her eyes, around the base of her nose, over her frown wrinkles, and along the sagging lines of her jaw. The stripes are bold and her reflection shows her a reverse negative of her face. It's light where it was dark, it's seemingly tight where it was loose. She blends the concealer with her finger and after adroitly powdering it all down, only a trained eye would notice

her renovations. Not bad for a seventy-eight-year-old Upper East Side dame.

There is a gentle knock on the bedroom door, and from outside, Glenn hears the soft voice of her maid, Iva, 'She is here Mrs Wilder-Bingham. Where shall I put her?'

'The library.'

Glenn takes a deep breath and expels a huge irritated sigh, which clouds up her mirror. Yet another chore to eat up her valuable empty time. She doesn't move immediately, she's in no hurry. Glenn Wilder-Bingham is no stranger to keeping folks waiting.

Someone else looking at her reflection, in the panelled mirror of the elevator, is Rosie Kitto, but she sees something entirely different. She sees a drowned poodle of a woman. This wasn't the look she had planned for an important interview. Until five minutes ago, she was dry and fairly presentable. She doesn't ordinarily wear make up much, but she has put a little bit on today and she has wrestled with a round brush and blow-dried her naughty hair so that it looks nearly tidy. This is the Upper East Side. People here care about this stuff, so she wants to appeal, to be what her Cornish mum always called ''andsome'. Typically, Rosie wears bright and bold clashing colours with great panache. She always has, and now that she's thirty-eight,

she has found a vintagey way to wear them. She often wears a bright scarf in a big askew bow on her head and vibrant flowery blouses, with rolled up jeans that might reveal orange socks in her winkle-picker shoes, like a cheerful 40's landgirl. She finds this style suits her curvy figure and makes her happy, because it gives her the chance to rootle about in vintage clothes shops, oh joy, her favourite pastime. The pleasure a hidden-at-the-back-of-the-rail treasure can bring, and the thrill of the bargaining to boot. But Rosie is not a fool. She knows instinctively she will have to introduce any new employer to this eccentricity in stages, slowly. So for today, she has really tried to tone it down, smart navy pleated-front slacks, a yellow blouse and a light blue linen jacket. The red brogues are a bit of a risk, but she wants to be at least a *tad* honest about who she is, to anchor herself somewhat in her own authenticity.

Rosie hasn't allowed for the changeable New York February weather. It was sunny and snappy when she set out to walk the fifty or so blocks from her cheap as chips but clean hotel near Times Square. Two blocks from the imposing Upper East Side building where the Wilder-Binghams live, the heavens opened and sploshed their contents onto the head of Rosie Kitto. She has darted into doorways for shelter, but not wanting to be late she pushed on, trying to avoid the rods of unrelenting wet that hammered onto her blown dry head and her coat-less shoulders.

So now, Rosie Kitto sees a drenched frizzy-headed poodle woman looking back at her from the mirror in the elevator.

This is who her potential employer is going to meet. Not a great first impression, but Rosie is a buoyant person, a great believer in 'find the funny side', 'keep yer perk up'. Surely Mrs Wilder-Bingham will see what's happened and raise a smile? It might even be the perfect ice-breaker? Who knows?

The elevator is posh, wood-panelled and slow. The dour doorman was quick to make her feel less than comfortable. His lofty manner is uncalled for, but effective if his aim is to make sure you know you are a visitor only. Yes, you are lucky to be visiting someone in this quiet, grand, supervised building. You won't be here long. You don't really fit. But in the very temporary meantime, welcome to the intimidating lift. He has told her to go to the twelfth floor. Now that she's in the elevator alone, she realizes that she doesn't know which apartment it is on the twelfth floor. She needn't have worried. As the doors open, she realizes she is in a private hallway, with just one door in front of her.

The Wilder-Binghams don't just live on the twelfth floor. They *are* the twelfth floor. Just as Rosie reaches for the doorbell, the door is opened and standing there is a short, stocky woman of massive immediate presence. Rosie is tempted to step back to make room for the substance of her, so singularly effective is she. She hasn't spoken yet, but already she is significant. Rosie knows this undoubtedly, because unlike anyone she's met before, Rosie wants to simultaneously lean back to take her all in, and lean forward to know her better. Who is

this? She has a neat bun on the top of her head and is wearing a black dress with buttons from the neck to the knee all the way down the front, which is clearly a uniform. In an instant, she examines Rosie thoroughly from head to foot. Unlike the doorman though, Rosie doesn't feel disliked by her, she just feels scrutinized, which is actually . . . . . OK. This could so easily be Mrs Danvers, but it is actually Iva.

'Come in,' she says. She is, what? Polish?

'Thank you. Sorry. Bit . . . wet.'

Rosie is aware that each step is a squelch, it would seem that her marvellous red brogues are functioning as sponges. Not only are they leaking water with each step, the red dye is also running, so she is leaving little bloody pools in her wake as she follows Iva up a long dark corridor.

This corridor wasn't intended to be as dark, requiring internal lighting at all times. It's the kind of space that is supposed to have light thrown into it by the leaving open of various doors all the way along. That doesn't happen in this apartment under the rule of Glenn Wilder-Bingham. No. All doors remain neatly shut, and all the corridors off the main hallway, of which there are four, remain gloomily dark. It's not that Glenn Wilder-Bingham is a vampire, it's that she is a consummate control freak. If she could she would control all the light and doors in the world. As it is, she has to satisfy herself with the light and doors in this vast apartment only. Until she takes over the world, this will have to suffice.

Squelch squelch, Rosie trudges behind Iva. The journey to the library takes longer than you would think it was possible to walk in an apartment, giving Rosie an inkling of its sheer size. Like most British people, she would regard a big flat as about the size of a house, but on one level. Twenty steps would more than cover it, walking from a hallway to a reception room. Not here. This place is huge and strange. Eventually Iva opens a door, and inside they go.

Three large windows dominate this daunting room of books, but even those don't let in enough light, because of the profusion of flowery curtainage obscuring it. The thick expensive drapes are each caught back on one side by a giant wrap-around gold tassel that the Lilliputians might have stolen from Gulliver. The three remaining sides are covered in austere dark wooden panelling with bookcases from floor to ceiling. In the centre of the room, there are two large sofas the colour of a faded daffodil sitting opposite each other, with a marble coffee table in between them, and several stuffy lamps. Was this arrangement supposed to be conducive to reading? Or, Rosie thinks, is this a room conducive to the appearance of reading?

She makes several valiant attempts to connect with Iva, mainly by repeatedly apologizing for leaking everywhere, and by over-giggling about it to curry her favour. Rosie tries to look at her, but Iva resolutely won't be seen.

'Wait here please,' she says and leaves the room. By 'here', Rosie is in no doubt that Iva means exactly where she was

pointing to, a fixed point on the floor, next to one of the windows. Rosie obediently stands on her given mark, and waits. Drip, drip. Very soon, Iva bursts back into the room carrying a newspaper, which Rosie reaches out to accept, mistakenly thinking that this is some reading material to keep her occupied until the lady of the house is ready to see her. Just as Rosie's hand touches the paper, Iva bends over and lays it out in a neat square on the floor.

'Stand on here please.'

Rosie obeys, and Iva vacates the room once more, leaving the Englishwoman to drip her humiliation all over the *New York Times*. Rosie shivers. She is acutely aware of how quiet it all is. She hears Iva's footsteps retreating back up that awful dark corridor to . . . where? . . . the kitchen, maybe? Rosie strains to hear any other sound. Bat-like, she anticipates the footfall of Mrs Wilder-Bingham but no such sound comes. She can't even hear the noise of the street. Is this apartment hermetically sealed? There is something faint, a sound hardly perceptible, a hazy fizz . . . it could almost be the sound of dust settling. How very *un*settling.

Glenn Wilder-Bingham closes the door of her bedroom behind her, and with a click sets off along the pleasingly dark corridor towards the front hall, where she will take a gentle left

turn to pick up another artery of dark corridor, the slipstream to the library. She is dressed in wrinkle-free beige slacks, tan court shoes, a baby blue blouse. A beige cashmere cardi hangs off her shoulders, a perfectly placed cape of confidence. Around her neck is a gold chain with her tortoiseshell glasses hanging securely at the end. She strides past the gallery of well-placed black and white photographs of her family. This is a selection of photos that announces, 'we are successful, we are attractive, we are united'. It patently doesn't say, 'we are happy'. The images are all mounted on cream card and framed in lacquered black wood, giving them the air of a collection, of consolidated importance, and unquestionable class.

The first photo is almost sepia-tinted with age. It is of a rugged nineteen-year-old man in fifties American football gear, covered in dirt and proudly holding a trophy aloft, along with a few rufty tufty team mates. Their strip proudly displays the name of their college, YALE. This is the virile, young, triumphant Thomas Wilder-Bingham.

The next photo is of the same man, slightly older, and his fresh twenty-two-year-old wife Glenn, on board a wooden yacht, their hair blowing wild in the wind, their eyes squinting into the Nantucket sunshine, their faces creased up with laughter. Both of them wear shorts and shirts in watery colours, and they look like relaxed, entitled, happy Kennedy-people.

Next, a Madonna-like photo of a shell-shocked, milky twenty-eight-year-old Glenn in a green, green garden, hold-

ing a tiny new baby. This is her son, Kemble Wilder-Bingham. She is beaming at him as if he is a gift from God. Which for her, he is. Two pregnancies came before him, but neither had gone full term. Kemble took six years of hope and anguish to arrive. Try as they might, and they did, no other baby came after. Glenn keeps that particular sadness tucked well well away.

Here is the requisite professional photograph of a graduating young Kemble with his mortar-board hat and his robe, clutching a fake rolled-up parchment degree, flanked by his proud parents. A stilted rite of passage. A milestone. A young man who has done the right thing, for all to see.

Adjacent to this is a noticeable space, where a framed photo of a happy wedding day once was, but isn't any more.

Glenn has the recurring but fleeting thought she has every time she passes this open wound of empty wall, she really must look out a suitable replacement to plug that gap. A picture of her mother and father perhaps, when they were young?

Well, NO, not her mother.

Does she own a picture of her father alone? That might do. Except, in all the pictures she has of him, he is wearing his work overalls. Perhaps not . . .

The final photo is a black and white copy of the studio shot Glenn arranged last December of her family, to use on their most recent Christmas card. Here they all are, gathered around her. Her men.

In it she sits in a chair, front centre, cool and collected. Her husband Thomas and son Kemble stand behind her, and Thomas has his hand on her shoulder. She wishes Kemble had worn a better suit and stood more upright, but oh well. On the floor in front of her are her twin eight-year-old grandchildren, Kemble's sons, Thomas Wilder-Bingham the Third, also known as 'Three' and Kemble Wilder-Bingham Junior, also known as 'Red'. Kneeling awkwardly to the side of royal Glenn is Kemble's eldest son, the eighteen-year-old suit-begrudging photo-begrudging Edward Wilder-Bingham, also known as Teddy.

This is Glenn's kingdom. Her kith and kin. Queen Lear. Queen Herod. Queen Bee.

She sweeps past the well-edited, well-displayed gallery of her life with a great swoosh of assured click-clack.

Click. Clack. Rosie hears the approaching footsteps as she is hurriedly trying to wring out the rain from the cuffs of her sodden jacket. Her attempts to dribble only onto the *New York Times* are futile. The drops refuse to fall tidily, this is renegade rain, weather which just will not behave, even when it's debuting inside the library of a posh Upper East Side apartment.

With the immense confidence of only a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, Glenn Wilder-Bingham enters the room. She is here. Rosie tries hard to remember that this would be a good time to heed her Nan's advice to her when she was young, namely that you really don't need to show every single tooth in your mouth when you smile. She can't help herself. She

does it now, just like she did it then, to brighten matters when the moment could potentially be tricky. Rosie is a radiator, she will always risk an over-smile to channel some warmth into the room, even if it doesn't work. She is a megawatt optimist so now she *really* smiles, desperately showing lots of teeth. But Rosie has met her match in Glenn, an experienced smile withholder, who can snuff out Rosie's kind of bright joy in a millisecond.

'Hello!' beams Rosie, hopefully, smilefully. Glenn surveys the dripping Brit, nods almost imperceptibly and places herself on one of the faded daffodil sofas. Somehow, without any instruction, Rosie knows full well that she is not invited to sit down, so she remains awkwardly rooted to her square of newspaper. 'Lovely flat. Really . . . amazing . . . Lovely.'

'Yes,' confirms Glenn quietly, and adds, as a corrective footnote, 'apartment.'

'Of course, apartment, doh,' Rosie counters, generously indicating what a dolt she must appear to be.

Glenn calmly observes the apologetic display, allowing Rosie yards of rope by which to hang herself. Fortunately for Rosie, Iva interrupts the social hara-kiri by bringing in a tray of tea and placing it on the coffee table in front of Glenn, who assures her quietly, 'That's right, Iva.'

As Iva deferentially leaves the room, Glenn looks over to Rosie, 'Tea? I believe it's what you enjoy, English Breakfast.'

'Oooo yes, thank you . . . just what . . . the doctor ordered . . .'

Rosie increasingly loses faith in her own cheeriness . . . 'not that I need the doctor . . .'

For the next very long minute Glenn says nothing, and pours the tea exquisitely into the exquisite china cups. This is proper tea. No tea bag in sight. Glenn's hand is steady, and when the tea is poured and the milk is in (no sugar, wouldn't dream of it) Glenn rises and hands the cup and saucer to Rosie, who accepts it with gratitude and really *really* wishes it had sugar.

The rest of the conversation is conducted with Glenn on the sofa and Rosie remaining on the paper, as if she's in the cat-litter tray, juggling the cup and saucer and her handbag with some difficulty. Glenn holds her own teacup and saucer with no sign of nerves, utterly cool and collected. Rosie's cup shakes and rattles in its saucer throughout.

Rosie attempts an ice-breaker, 'Must be a big window cleaning bill,' she nods to the windows, 'Long ladders . . .'

No response. Jokes are not acceptable here. Glenn's teacup chinks on her saucer, 'You come highly recommended by the agency.'

'That's great, good. It's my first job with them.'

Glenn glances down at Rosie's C.V., which lies on the table.

'Fully qualified, experienced primary school teacher . . . Looe?'

'Yes. It's in Cornwall. Long pointy county at the bottom end of England . . . ?'

'I see. I have always believed 'loo' is British for bathroom?'

There's an uneasy pause, while Glenn continues to inspect the C.V. Rosie takes a welcome gulp of her tea, which unfortunately turns into a fairly audible slurp.

As if to make a point, Glenn sips her tea soundlessly. In every way she is superior. She decides to pry. 'So your parents live there?'

'They did, yes. Neither of my parents are alive any more, sadly,' says Rosie, honestly.

'I see.'

Rosie decides to grasp the bull by the horns, 'Are Thomas and Kemble your grandsons?'

'Yes.'

'Right. And they live with you?'

'No. They live with their mother, but we feel it's high time for them to come and live with their father, so they are moving in here for now . . .'

'I see.' Rosie reminds herself of the names, 'Thomas and Kemble, Thomas and Kemble . . .'

'Thomas Wilder-Bingham the Third, and Kemble Wilder-Bingham Junior.'

'Thomas and Kemble, Thomas and Kemble. It's that names thing about being a teacher, you have a year of looking at a whole new sea of faces, so I repeat them to get them in my head. Got a memory like a . . . like a . . . draining implement you use in the kitchen . . . with holes . . .'

Glenn ignores this renewed attempt at humour, and returns

to perusing the C.V. Rosie is hard-wired to fill the quiet with chirpy noise, but she resists, letting Glenn denote the tempo and the volume of this particularly stilted duet. She tries to sip her tea quietly, and gives Glenn all the time she wants. Which is a lot. Eventually, Glenn looks up at her. Is that a tiny disdainful smile on her face?

Rosie's inherent self-worth kicks in. Two can play at this game. The pause breadthens. No-one is giving in. At least, not overtly. But in the clod of that messy moment, a tiny shoot of mutual respect is planted. Yes, one of these women is potentially going to be in the employ of the other, but that's no reason for Rosie to surrender her backbone. Glenn is the first to cave . . . but only slightly.

'They arrive tonight. You are to acquaint yourself with them this weekend, then care for them before and after school, accompany them *to* and *from* school, and accompany them to activities on weekends and holidays, for which there is a nominal budget. You will take your meals here with the family and their father will join when his work permits.'

Rosie purposefully says nothing, just stares at Glenn, who seems a little unnerved. Eventually, Glenn asks, 'That is amenable to you?'

If you could count minute invisible molecules of power, this tiny shift might measure one out of a thousand on the status Richter scale. Minuscule, but potent, because Glenn doesn't ordinarily give away a single dot.

Rosie takes her place squarely in the centre of this rare opportunity. 'And where will *you* be?'

Glenn's face sours ever so slightly. A worthy blow. Who is this impertinent fat English upstart? The two women are locked in a game of who can be silentest longest. The cats are circling each other.

The orchids on the windowsill grow in the gap.

Then a big full pendulous waiting drip on the end of Rosie's sleeve gives up the ghost and hurtles to the floor in a sudden bid for freedom. It lands with an impressive splosh and breaks the moment. Now, Glenn has the edge, infinitesimally small though it may be . . .

Rosie says, 'I don't know what to call you.'

Glenn smirks, folds the C.V. and stands, 'Mrs Wilder-Bingham.'

'Right. Surnames. Got it.'

'Iva will show you your room and we will expect you at breakfast at seven thirty.'

And, just as assuredly as she arrived, Glenn Wilder-Bingham leaves.

Rosie remains, and drips in her right place.