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Cold Calling

Written by Russell Mardell

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COLD CALLING

Russell Mardell



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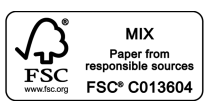
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For Mum

Because you asked me to try and write something a little bit nicer.
Here you go. Best I could do.
x

I'm a bowl of bruised fruit
Inside a chapel of shiny apples
Tear up the photograph!
'Cause it's a bright blue sky.

Chapel Song, Augustines

The First Call

RAY

'I've never understood chess,' I told him, before stopping abruptly.

When I'd started speaking I had known the point I was trying to make, I'd got the analogy square in my mind and felt pleased with myself about it, yet somehow, after those first four words, I had completely forgotten what it was.

It just went.

'I mean…'

What the hell did I mean? I had no idea.

It had sounded good, somewhere at the back of my mind. I ploughed on anyway. I decided that if I kept on talking then perhaps I wouldn't have to explain myself. My counsellor, Dr Phillip, was used to this behaviour and he never knowingly tried to stop me from making a fool of myself. Idiot or sage, he got paid regardless. Which certainly makes him more intelligent than I am.

'I mean…well…you see…there was a point when I was a kid when I had convinced myself that I got it, chess, but I never really did, I don't think. I feel I should have learned to play it by now. I'm thirty and I never learned to play chess. I learned to drive before I learned to play chess. It never seemed to matter back

then, but it sort of does these days. It's like a basic failing. If I can't get the basics right, then what hope have I got for love, right?'

He shrugged at me, and I prattled on, trying to find the start of my point instead of the fumbled conclusion.

'Because that's where you keep leading me, Doc, that's what you keep dangling in front of me, isn't it? Love. This universal need, this great unfathomable mystery that we all have to try and work out. Well, if love is the meaning of life, if that's the great answer that we are all searching for, then I'm screwed, aren't I? I can't even play chess.'

He leaned forward to speak, but I blundered all over his efforts.

'And the Rubik's Cube, that was a bloody mystery to me as well. My school friends all got it, did it, but not me though. I never worked it out. So that's why I've messed up my relationships, isn't it? That's the real reason.'

'Because you can't do the Rubik's Cube?' he asked, eyes narrowed, forehead creased. 'Or play chess?'

'Not that exactly, but what those two things represent, right?'

'What do they represent?'

'You're the professional here, you tell me.'

'You're the one in therapy, Ray. You should tell me.' Dr Phillip sat back, nestled into his comfy chair, his fingers steepled under his neat little beard and just stared at me in that way that he always did. *Carry on*, that look said, *this is your time, Ray. Carry on. Carry on making a complete twat of yourself.*

So I did.

'You're a therapist, so you must think it's all about love, right? You do, don't you? Love is the answer. Love is the answer to everything, the great world cure-all?'

Dr Phillip shrugged and nodded me on again.

'It's not, though, Doc. It's a need. I will give you that. It's a need, yeah, but it's not an answer. Yet even though it is a need, it isn't a universal need, so how can it actually be anything other than selfish? And if it's selfish, then how can it actually be a need? It's a desire really, isn't it? Like a nice car, or a conservatory. Some people think they need it and some live a whole life without it and never think they are missing anything. It's a desire. It's a drug. Some people use it, some abuse it and some just let it pass them by.'

'And some let it consume them and kill them?'

'Quite.'

He was talking about me, of course, the sly little bugger, but I didn't pick up on it at the time. In the months since Danny had convinced me to start seeing him, everything Dr Phillip said or implied or made me think about always came back to my Katie and me in the end. He would turn everything around to that somehow, as if what had happened between us defined my very existence. He had no idea, and I was paying a hefty chunk of change for the privilege of experiencing his ignorance. One of us was in the wrong job. I should have stopped going after the first few weeks, but I've never been that decisive, I've never been that proactive. That was pretty much the only thing he got right about me.

'Do you need it, Ray, this drug?'

'I need faith,' I told him, getting my thoughts back on track.

'Religion?'

'No. Faith in people. I need to invest in something with answers. My perpetual confusion is the only thing that really makes sense any more.'

'You have all the answers. We all do. Deep down.' His fingers moved off his chin and then crossed together in his lap, and still he stared at me with that same expression, his compact facial fuzz twitching slightly as he briefly considered a smile. 'Does that surprise you?'

'If that's the case, what am I doing paying you an hourly rate?'

'I'm a conduit, maybe. A sounding board. I'm what you need me to be to enable you to find your own answers.'

'You religious?' He looked the sort – neat beard, knitwear and sturdy shoes.

'I believe in people.'

'That always sounded like a decent concept.'

'Try it. You might be surprised.'

'People break things, Doc.'

'Sometimes.'

'It's what we do best.'

'What have you broken recently, Ray?'

I had thought at the time that he was referring to Anya Belmont and the phone call we'd had, because he had been going on about that just before the wonderful chess analogy came and went. As it was, he was actually talking about my Katie. I should have realised. Of course he was talking about Katie, because

he always was talking about Katie – everything was about her, and me, and what happened, so why should then have been any different? The man was fixated on it, on us, my Katie and me. Maybe he had slept with her as well. She always did like a beard.

'Anya, you mean? You're talking about the phone call?' I asked, grabbing the wrong end of the metaphorical rope he was dangling in front of me, just so I could hang myself all over again. He shrugged, half-smiled, and nodded me on. 'It was just a phone call, just a conversation. It doesn't really mean anything.'

'Then why did you tell me about it?'

He had me there.

Anya Belmont came into my life as just another name on a long list of strangers in a database at work. She was merely another cherished customer (or friend, if I'm following the diatribe Mr Evans likes to lay down) of Babbidge Insurance in north London. Her husband had a policy with Babbidge, and was due a courtesy call, a little "how-the-hell-are-you?" from the firm that likes to say, 'Your family is our family!' Obviously once we had made them feel special, broken down their defences with our charm and disarming sense of humour, we were then to convince them that their policy was no good and that they needed a new one. Break them with charm, bombard them with words, baffle them with figures, or if all else fails, guilt usually managed to tilt the scales. That was my job. Us phone assassins at Babbidge aren't so far removed from those charity muggers you see in the high street with their clipboards and their earnest charitable concerns,

cornering people with their youthful effervescence; five minutes of your time turning into half an hour's verbal barrage before relieving you of your bank details and a soul of repressed guilt you never knew you had. That was really what we were, too – but without the noble motives, though where those chuggers tend to have to look young and lithe to trap you, those of us behind the phones at Babbidge could get away with being as ugly as sin and as miserable as a bar room prophet catching sight of the sun. Which was just as well for Pat Bollard. It's a terrible job, there's no glossing over that particular weighty life turd, but rather ironically, considering my natural antipathy towards the human race, I found I was actually rather good at it. 'The coldest cold caller in north London,' Danny dubbed me. The little ginger tosspot.

Anya had answered my phone call without actually answering. I could hear her breathing, and that's all we ever really needed. Just one sign of life and we jump on in there with our diatribe: 'Good afternoon, my name is Ray English and I'm calling from Babbidge Insurance. I wonder if I could have a moment of your time?'

'Whatever,' she replied.

'Mrs Belmont? How are you this afternoon?'

'Indifferent.'

I found myself laughing at that. You get so used to people's responses when you make these calls, that when you get a new one it's hard not to admire it. There are usually only ever two sorts of responses we get from people – the hanger-uppers (or the Triple-Nos, as we call them, as invariably they never hang up straight away,

but first blast you with their excuses and justifications: not convenient, having tea, just leaving the house. We worked out once that on average their reasoning is repeated three times before they have the courage to hang up), and the other sort is the complete opposite: those that roll over for you immediately, those without the fortitude to blast through the cheery barrage of guff and just let you hammer them with your patter. They may not be taking it all in, they may well just be waiting for enough of a gap to jump, but that's not really a problem for us; we still get paid whether they bite or not. Our role is essentially tentative foreplay for another person's pleasure. Looking at it any other way would be to suggest that I cared. Three years into that job, and that sure as heck never happened.

It was fair to say that Anya Belmont had me at her indifference.

'Well, yes, Mrs Belmont, tell me about it!' I replied through a cheery voice and a laugh that I actually meant.

'Really?'

'Sure, why not?'

'You make a living either way, I suppose?' she asked.

'If you want to call it a living.'

'Hard to care enough to call it anything, Ray. What is it you're selling?'

'Nothing, no, nothing at all,' I lied. 'This is merely a courtesy call to make sure Mr Belmont and yourself are happy with everything.'

'Not so much. Life is shit.'

'Well, I actually—'

'Yes, I know, it wasn't really a general chitchat. You just want me to fall for your friendly patter and open my arms to whatever it is you're trying to push. I, for my part, have been brought up well enough not to hang up on people. So here is the impasse, Ray. Who will yield first?'

'I'm really not trying to sell you anything, Mrs Belmont.'

'Of course you are.'

'Honestly, I'm not.'

'So you really are just phoning to see how I am?'

'I have to…it's—'

'Your job? Well, tell me, Ray, what on earth are you hiding from in life to make this your job? Was this always the dream, or did you just fall away at some point? I do hope she was worth it.'

She had me tagged good and proper. To Anya Belmont I was an open book with big print and pictures, and she was idly thumbing through my story with all the disinterest of a mother reading a fairytale to their child for the thousandth time.

'That's a bit presumptuous, isn't it?' I asked with a tinge of fake hurt.

'Am I wrong?'

'No.'

'Look at us then, presumptuous and predictable. Quite the double act.'

'Sorry, Mrs Belmont, I was labouring under the impression I was unique.'

'Lucky me.' She chased the words with a little laugh, and it sounded good. You don't hear laughter much in this job – not genuine laughter, anyway. In

office jobs you hold on to laughter as tightly as you do the comfiest chair. Though I must have been holding on too tightly because I couldn't think of what else to say from that point. Here was something new: Anya Belmont wasn't a Triple-No, nor was she likely to roll over anytime soon. She, rather incongruously as it seemed to me, actually wanted to have a conversation. 'Not thinking of hanging up on me are you, Ray?'

'Of course not, Mrs Belmont.'

'You've been brought up the right way too then, that's good to know. We have something in common. Look at that. From such sturdy foundations do worlds collide.'

Dr Phillip was still staring at me. I had forgotten what he had asked me. Had we been talking about Anya or Katie? Had he asked me a question?

'Yes?' I found myself saying to him, hoping that was some sort of answer.

'You still miss Bertie?'

I wanted to pull him up on that. No one called my granddad Bertie except me. It was our little thing he always told me, and I didn't like the doc jumping on that. Plus Bertie would have given him small change for being so familiar, and I felt I should make that known. I didn't though. Of course I didn't.

'Yeah. Course I do.'

'But you still go to the nursing home?'

I gave him an affirmative in a half-hearted shrug.

'Do you miss your parents, Ray?'

'They are only in Spain. Not exactly the other side of the world.'

'See them much?'

'No.'

Dr Phillip gave me another smile, another nod and then gently brought his slightly effeminate hands together. 'That's us for today. To be continued, I think. I want you to tell me about this mystery lady.'

'She's not mysterious. Her name is Anya. She's just a voice on the phone. End of story.'

'Okay. Did you bring the list of things I asked you to jot down?'

I had forgotten about that. That stupid bloody list. Pointless. He had asked me at our last session to list five reasons why I had loved Katie. He used the past tense too. I had done it, begrudgingly, just to shut him up, but still saw no reason for it. I had no idea why I loved her, and told him that such things shouldn't be understood. I said that the moment you realise why you love someone then the magic goes, and when the magic goes you are solely reliant on nothing more than your personalities, and that is far too dangerous in a relationship. I agreed to compromise and write a list of five things I liked about her instead. I took the list out of my coat pocket, along with my money and placed both on the table between us, tucked underneath the edge of the box of tissues that always seemed to be there.

'Does anyone ever use them?' I asked him.

'The tissues? Yes, sometimes, of course they do.' Those eyes were on me again, probing and searching. 'Did you cry when Katie left you?'

'No.' I was up and at the door before I realised he was following me out.

'Perhaps it's about time you did, Ray.'

'Make me a better person, would it?'

'It's part of the process of letting go.'

'Thanks, Doc.'

One weak handshake later and I turned out into the corridor that fed from his office, and began the all-too-familiar walk along the thick, horridly bland carpet, towards the staircase at the end, closed doors and faceless whispering on either side of me. Much to my surprise, Dr Phillip was matching me step for step.

'I say this as your friend, not as your counsellor,' he started, ushering the words in on a little cough. 'You and Katie, there's no plaster you can put on that, you know? You have to move past it. It's been five years.'

'I'm working on it.'

'She's not coming back, Ray.' He surely didn't mean the harsh snap in the words as he said them, but I replied in kind nonetheless.

'You think I don't know that?'

'Yes. I really think you don't.'

I moved out onto the stairwell, and he finally hung back, leaning against the large doorframe like the world's least intimidating bouncer, blocking entry to the world's worst party.

'You know something, Doc? You said to me weeks ago that I was grieving. Because of Katie. Do you remember?'

'You are, Ray. But I don't think it's for her any more. I think you are grieving for the person you used to be.'

'Nice guy, was he?'

'I don't know. Was he, Ray?'

Was I?

My mother always said I was such a happy baby; this fat little thing with a mop of dark hair, she said that I used to sit and smile at everyone all day long. She'd stick me in my high chair and put me in front of the window of our living room, and I would just smile and laugh and wave at all the people that walked past the house. I'd have been happy doing that all day long, she always said. I have to take her word for that. Can't see it myself. But even if what she says is true, it's not a state of being I'm hankering after. Besides, you smile or laugh or wave at people these days, you're liable to get a punch in the face. I don't want to be that sort of happy any more. That would be a different sort of unbearable. But if that was one extreme, and I'm now living the other, then surely finding a happy medium can't be so difficult?

I know I can be an intolerable little shit these days. Cynicism and self-indulgence aren't the most glorious of character traits, but I'm trying, really I am. I just can't get past it. I can't get past her. I can't get past losing that feeling in my gut, that little flutter of the heart at the beauty of the mundane, the absolute certainty of every emotion, the simple, unavoidable knowledge that, yeah, me and her, we were just so right. There were fumbles and snogs and shags before her, and there have been others since her, each more watered down and unmemorable as the last, yet nothing fitted together before her, and nothing fitted together after her. With Katie, everything snapped into place, all those little pieces of a life that makes it worth living; they all aligned with us and created something that was

right. It was just so damn *right.* Inevitable. Meant to be. Why can't she see that?

'Seatbelts, Ray. Seatbelts,' Bertie once said to me. 'Relationships are like seatbelts. Some are too tight, some are too loose, and some just get jammed. Sometimes you try and tie the seatbelt into a knot, desperate to make it have any effect, but it never does. You're looking for the perfect fit: not too tight, not too loose, something that holds you safely in place in case you crash. Them…they are the keepers.'

I asked how come then, when Katie and I crashed, I ended up so battered and bruised? He merely raised an eyebrow that seemed to suggest I knew the answer.

But he was wrong. Even Bertie was wrong about that. He had to be.

I'd never looked for 'the one'; never considered marriage, or even living together (admittedly, I think Tara Hart and I might have got married on the school playing field when we were nine, but I don't think that counts), but with Katie it was all just obvious. We were young, but still older than my parents were when they got together – older even than Mum was when she had me – and at a time when my mates were all carefree and single and going out with different people at a rate of what seemed to be every week, I was in perfect contentment with Katie. I certainly never felt I was missing anything.

'There's no rule book that tells you when you have to meet the right person,' Bertie once told me. 'They come along when they come along – it's just down to you to see it, and if you do see it, not to screw it up. See it, don't screw it up. That's the only two rules.'

He was the first person I told. He always seemed to have all the answers. I know he would be pissed at me for still being this way after five years. He would say all the right things, tell me everything I probably already knew, and just for the time we were together, he would make things better. But he would never be able to make the feeling go away.

That was solely down to me: the fat, laughing baby; the cynical, screwed-up gobshite.

And whoever the bloke was in between the two of them.

THINGS I LIKE ABOUT KATIE FENSHAW

1) Her eyes, obviously. Gorgeous eyes. Big and expressive. She also does this thing with them, a little flutter, and somehow she seems able to make them twinkle. She claims she has no idea that she's doing it, which makes it even lovelier.
2) She wears good shoes. Vital in any person, and certainly in a girlfriend. What shoes a person wears tells you everything you ever need to know about them. It was the shoe thing that got us together in a way. I inadvertently trod on her foot in our common room and then noticed we were both wearing grey Converse trainers. I made some stupid little comment about that and we got chatting.
3) Even more important than the shoes, Katie has perfect taste in music. I remember seeing her bedroom at her parents' house for the first time; the walls were covered floor to ceiling in posters – Bobbie Gentry,

Beth Orton, Aretha Franklin, Carole King and, rather peculiarly, Phil Spector. (This was her mother's fault – Katie adored Ronnie Spector, and her mother had misheard her and had cut out and laminated a full-page photo of Phil – the big hair years too – she had found in a magazine. Katie didn't have the heart to tell her she'd got it wrong and so put it on the wall.)

4) She loves her mother.

5) When I introduced her to Edward Hopper's art she got it straight away, totally understood why it was perfect.

6) She rarely breaks wind in public and on the few occasions I have heard her, it was like a little mouse squeak and was almost tuneful.

7) That thing we spoke about a couple of weeks ago. I'm not going to write that down here, and I don't think you would expect me to. But, that thing.

DANNY

The first year after Kate gave him the flick, Ray was intolerable to be around. He hadn't got to the morose stage in that first year – he's been perfecting that these last four since we've been living in London. (I don't think the two things are related.) No, that first year whilst we were still in Southport, he was worse; he was at the delusional, blind, pig-headed, refusing to accept it stage. He still believed he would woo her back. That she would see the huge error of her ways and knock on his door and then he would be there with open arms ready to whisk her up and carry on like nothing had

ever happened. Yet it had happened. Another man had happened. Maybe a few men had happened, if Vera's venomous tittle-tattle could be trusted. Though of course Ray said he didn't care, it didn't matter, none of it mattered – but it did and it would and there was no getting away from that. It was an intense relief to all of us that cared about the little sod when he finally progressed to putting her on street corners rather than a pedestal.

By the time we both moved down to live the big city dream, he had managed to turn her into the devil incarnate. It was an act, of course, but those months of hatred and loathing were a blessing for the rest of us. Kate was barely mentioned, no longer the centre of every thought or the full stop to every anecdote. Ray's crippling hatred and fury gave us all a lot of peace and quiet.

Those months were good for us. We bummed around the fringes of north London, moving between overpriced crummy bedsits so awful even the rats shunned them, and overpriced shared houses, occupying space with the weird, the scary and the unhygienic, all of us financially violated by shit-bag landlords trying to build castles on desperation. But back then none of it seemed to matter, because we were out and about; drinking away money we didn't have but that always seemed to be there, turning up to parties we hadn't been invited to and then spending nights with women who mattered as little to you as you did to them. We saw people and went places and did things, as ravenous for that big city dream as any young kid let out of their suffocating small-town home.

Then the screw tightened. That good old screw of reality. And when it screws down in London, it takes a hell of a lot of loosening. The money we came down with had gone and the crap jobs we had stumbled between just weren't cutting it. We both bought ties and pimped embellished CVs to anyone and everyone, it didn't matter what and it didn't matter where. It just mattered that we didn't have to go back home to Southport. Our tails were up and we didn't want them between our legs anytime soon. Ray took the best-paid job he could get away with at a place called Babbidge Insurance, which was every bit as dreary as it sounds, and I began what would become a revolving door of bar work. Not what my mother had in mind when I started my psychology degree, I would imagine. Though through that first bar job I did manage to luck out on a flat for us. A friend of a regular knew a guy who knew someone else, who might know another, and thus the mythic splendour and unobtainable majesty of a two-bedroom maisonette flat on Muswell Hill Broadway found its way down the grapevine towards us. The flat should, in all honesty, have been condemned but we bit their hands off. We could just about afford it.

I can't remember when Ray's attitude changed again, when Kate stopped being the tramp and found herself becoming a picture of perfect beauty daubed in a rosy tint. Was it time, was it distance, or was it just because Ray would never have had the energy to be bothered keeping a wilful delusion going for long? Who knows? But sometime after we first moved into the flat on the Broadway, I heard Kate Fenshaw's name

for the first time in months. Right about the same time Ray's life stalled again and I knew I didn't have it in me to help him jumpstart it any more. I let him have the misery he seemed so intent to feed off.

Now here we are, three years in Muswell Hill, four in London, five since Kate binned him off, and nearly twenty-five since Ray and I first became friends and I think we are stuck with each other. I'm not sure it is through free will and choice any more, him and me – I don't like him as much as I did, sometimes I don't like him at all, and I'm sure the feeling is mutual. But I do love him. He used to be a brother. Now he's more a wife. Our old friendship feels like a long marriage, and as with a lot of long marriages neither of us is getting much out of it any more.

'Hello, dear,' he called out, strolling in through the front door of the flat.

'All right, love?'

I was sat in the kitchen, the post scattered on the table next to me, along with the plate of mouldy toast neither of us was prepared to admit was ours (it was his), and I was turning an envelope over in my hands. Inside the envelope was the start of a conversation I was dreading having to have with him.

'If that's another bill I've moved the overflow to the drawer underneath the TV.'

'We've been invited to a wedding,' I said nonchalantly, as he set about filling the kettle and scraping something unidentifiable from a spoon. 'Isn't that nice?'

'Thrilling. Which poor unfortunate is it this time? Do we like them?'

'It's Tim.'

'Who?'

'Tim and Tamara.'

'Have you just made that up?'

'Tim from college?'

Ray's reaction had been much the same as mine had been when I first saw the invite. It had taken a good ten minutes before I twigged who Tim was, though, to be fair, it had taken two years at college to do the same. Tim was a decent guy, too decent to ever have been good friends with. Tim had been the swotty kid who envied the cool kids, who was always destined to become the rich man the penniless cool men all wished they were. He had also been Broken English's first, and I'm ashamed to say, only groupie. Our college band was no great shakes and our ability to ponce around on stage may have far outweighed our songwriting abilities, but it's a sad state of affairs when a gawky-looking pillock is more of a constant at your gigs than your drummer.

'He wants us to play at the wedding,' I said.

'Play what?' Ray replied.

'Broken English, you dickhead, what do you think? Our one and only fan wants the band to get together again and play at his wedding.'

Ray snorted his disdain and continued making his cup of tea.

'You remember the band, don't you, Ray? The little four-piece you had the humility to name after yourself during the difficult God complex stage of your frontman development?'

'It was a good name.'

'We had a good name.'

'How far do you think we would have got with a name like Climax?'

'Guess we will never find out.'

'Anyway, it's pointless, no way will he get Clive to do it.'

'But you would? If I could get Clive and Dave to agree?'

'Why would I?'

'Why wouldn't you?'

'What is this, the third wedding invite in this past year? We never went to any of the others, why this one?'

'You never went to any of the others. I did. But this is about the band, man – wouldn't it be cool to get the band together for one last dust-off? I miss it, don't you?'

'Shit, no.' Ray had turned to me and now seemed to be scrutinising the envelope, working something over in his mind. 'Hang on, that's just one envelope. Where's my invite?'

'Oh, yeah, this is…there's just this…just the one invite.'

'We're on the same invite?'

'Yeah.'

'Like a couple?'

'Yeah, seems so, love.'

Ray spun away in disgust. 'Good God, what have we become?'

'Also, it's…erm…it's back home. The do. The wedding.' There was a loud clunk and then a smash as Ray's mug slipped out of his hand, struck the edge

of the sink and then shattered. 'But so what, right? Doesn't mean she will be there. Why do you care anyway, right? The band, Ray, wouldn't it be fun? Your shrink recommends fun, doesn't he?'

'Counsellor!' he snapped back at me. 'I'm seeing a counsellor, I'm not seeing a shrink! I don't need a shrink!'

'Either way, he's not doing you much good is he? Only thing going to sort you out is a mental enema.'

'And there speaks the psychology student. Good to see that year before you flunked wasn't wasted.'

'It wasn't.'

'You work in a pub, Danny.'

'I'm resting.'

'Gonna be a hell of a culture shock when you wake up.'

'C'mon, Ray – the band, the four of us again, what do you reckon?'

'I reckon Tom can enter marital life slow-dancing to third-rate tunes from a second-rate mobile disco like everyone else.'

'Tim.'

'Him too.'

'Tim says there's liable to be a talent scout there. Tamara's cousin. Bit of a big shot, he reckons. Gotta be worth a go, right?'

'You do it. You can sing.' Ray gathered up the broken bits of his mug and dumped them in the bin. 'Give them full Hucknall.'

'You know Clive will never allow himself to be Hucknalled*, Ray.'

'Sod Clive.' Discarding the idea of a cuppa in favour of a dramatic exit, he yanked his tie loose and flounced from the kitchen.

'One of your women called again.'

'Don't call them that.'

'Okay, one of the old loves in the nursing home called. Again. Love. A Mabel or a Maureen, or something. Wondering why you hadn't been in.'

'I was in yesterday.'

Ray's dramatic flounce had been ruined and now he hung in the doorway of the kitchen, moving from foot to foot, looking like he needed to pee.

'It's a big place, you know? Our old hometown.'

He didn't seem to hear me. For a moment he just stared at the wall above my head, lost in thought. 'You know, I spoke to this woman at work today, on the phone, and she…'

'She what?'

He looked blank, suddenly confused by his own words. A quick shrug and then he was off again, recommencing the flounce.

'Doesn't matter. Doesn't mean anything.'

*Hucknalled

The embarrassing of a music snob.

The hipster was Hucknalled by the quality of the singer's voice.

A dislike of a collective based on a hatred of an individual.

He accepted his refusal to like them was because he was Hucknalled.

Synonyms: *Bonoed, Chris-Martined*.

Look, I like Mick Hucknall's voice, okay? I will fight you, if not to death, then certainly to extreme tiredness, to defend that. It may be the ginger thing; some part of

me has no doubt developed a light bias, as it tends to do towards my redheaded brothers, but the man also has a hell of a set of pipes on him. It can't be denied. Sure, the achingly trendy twats who base their music collection on the results of the cool barometer in some self-styled this-is-what-to-like rag will never admit it. But bollocks to them. I like what I like and I like soul, and Mick's got a great soul voice. No Sam Cooke, of course, but then no one is. Except for Sam Cooke. Trend killed music. It really did. Trend and music snobs. We were never trendy, never successful either; we sang soul and blues covers – despite the other three all being shoe-gazing, *NME*-reading indie kids – and looked like we had just fallen out of the student debating society, but we held on to our principals. We were trend tramps and that suited us fine.

Except for Clive, of course. Clive and his correct shoes, his correct record collection, and his correct haircut. When we started at college there were still a few fumes left over from the fag end of Britpop, even though the Cool Britannia bubble had long since been pricked by just too many pricks, and at that time (and I have no reason to doubt, still) Clive, like so many other men, was living by the Paul Weller cut-and-paste image code. If you didn't have the right look, the right clothes, and certainly the right sort of hair, you were shunned. Particularly if, as Clive so succinctly put it, 'you like a singer with a head that looks like it should be on the end of a child's pencil'. I imagine it was not too dissimilar an attitude in the Nazi Party.

I'm an okay singer and before Ray joined us, there was talk about me fronting the band, but it was never

likely to happen. Not with our lineup. Not with Clive. Not with his bigotry and bullshit. I think the world has moved past its ginger bigotry nowadays, at least in music, but back then, when he asked me to name three good ginger singers, I was struggling. (Axl Rose, Art Garfunkel and Mick were all I could come up with.) Maybe if I had mentioned Axl instead of Mick, we may never have had this longstanding battle. Maybe he would have just accepted it and shut up. Who knows? But that argument lasted so long, longer than the band did, and neither of us was ever going to back down. I doubted that time would have mellowed Clive's prejudice. And certainly not his record collection.

EVA

Anya had dragged me out of my writer pit and forced me to join her at her coffee shop in town for our weekly caffeine and cake catch-up, a stupid little ritual she makes me indulge in when I'm between books. She's always had a bee in her bonnet about getting me out of the house in my downtime, convinced as she is that I'm liable to turn ever so slightly vampiric if I don't get aired now and again. The conversation usually goes the same way every time – she pisses and moans about Len, I piss and moan about my latest novel and then we both talk about people we haven't seen in ages and tell each other what a shame that is, without ever acknowledging the glaring truth that the reason we haven't seen them is because we don't like them.

Anya's coffee shop is, by and large, an extension of what my dearest friend has become – achingly bohemian. Not that it's a bad thing, but I could certainly never pull off the billowing skirts, tatty vests and those ghastly beads in my hair, and no one alive could get me into flip-flops. Feet should be kept safe and securely hidden at all times. Like plutonium. But all that looked good on Anya, and she wears it well and it's certainly an improvement on the dress suits and heels that her job in the city used to require of her. She was never cut out for that sort of life.

The coffee house seems to have been around since day dot, and wears its history proud – all Tudor beams, rickety stairs and wonky walls – it's the sort of place all the arty types in Salisbury gravitate to and is laid-back and welcoming, with a warm heart, just like my mate, and if your coffee shop has a warm heart you can forgive a lot of things. Except their unisex toilet; I haven't ever been able to forgive that.

'Shakespeare came here once,' Anya told me the first time I visited, just after she had taken it over, pointing out a sign proudly proclaiming the fact above our heads. 'And Pepys. He stopped in once too. Lot of history in this building.'

I told her it was a pointless thing to say after so many years. 'Unless they have whittled their signature into the tables, I really don't see the point. How does this make the coffee shop a better coffee shop?'

'It's culturally inspiring. Having such great writers pass through here should serve as inspiration to you at least. I think if I were a writer this place would empower me and make me want to create.'

'Not with a unisex toilet.'

It was a grotty, winter's end morning and the coffee shop was packed. We were up on the top floor at our usual table, looking out over Salisbury's rain-drizzled high street, and had already got through two mugs of coffee and a plate of nutty, ethically sourced something-or-other, whilst verbally tearing Mary Conroy's pitiful life a new one. We'd been at it for at least an hour and we still weren't done with her. Mary bloody Conroy, honestly, what a smug bitch.

Anya was on a roll: 'Seriously, what happened to her? Mary was such a rebel at school. She was such a laugh. She was so cool. We all wanted to be like Mary. Well, I did. Started reading Bukowski because of her, and Vonnegut. I took my first drink of alcohol with Mary, had the first spliff. We even got arrested for flyposting for that punk band she was in. The amount of trouble I got into with her, she was crazy. But she was intelligent too. She was clued up. Wasn't she the one who twatted Mr Maple with the chalkboard rubber?'

'No, she was the one who stuck it down her granny flannels to see if she could dye her pubic hair.'

'Oh, yeah. That's right.'

'I was the one who lobbed the rubber at Maple.'

Anya laughed and slapped me on the arm. 'Course you were, darling. Now I remember. Well thank God you haven't changed at least. You see that thing she posted on Facebook last week?'

'The hundreds of identical photos of her cut-and-paste kid, or the one of the turd?'

'Oh, the turd, please, what else?'

Turd-gate. It had become quite the conversation piece between the few of us in our social group on Facebook that hadn't succumbed to the sort of inane, beige-tinted drivel Mary bloody Conroy had devoted her life to spouting. She had become one of those people so empty at their core that they let all their originality dribble out of them the moment they drop a new life into the world, every action captured in a parade of endlessly tedious photos, every word tinged in faux-baby gobbledygook. Our group have lost a few interesting, once original, sometimes ferocious women to motherhood over the years, but Mary bloody Conroy is by far the worst. Why she is even a friend of ours, neither of us could say. (Anya claims I accepted her repeated friend requests first and that she felt it only right to join me for moral support, the bloody liar.) A few years back, Alice Wilson cross-invited as many of us from our year as she could find, to some ghastly 80s-themed school reunion – roller-skates, legwarmers, backcombing, Bonnie Tyler (because, yeah, those were things we were all missing from our lives) – and as such all the little homogenous, homemaking Hollies that we used to know suddenly found us and started getting in touch. 'Hey, I've got a beautiful baby, a handsome husband and a very big house, what about you?' they all might as well have said. Anya said they were probably only sending me friend requests because I was a bit famous. I'd like to believe it was that. Be horrible to think it was because we had anything in common.

So, anyway, last week Mary bloody Conroy posted about a hundred photos of one of her kids, as usual, and

then, a little bit later she posted a picture of a small turd in a potty and put next to it – *Little chubby-cheeks did this tiny poop but it looks a bit green to me. What do you think?*

Seriously. That happened. That was a thing. The Rubicon has been crossed. The shark has been jumped. Mary Conroy, the coolest girl at St Ed's, the bass-playing punk who once broke James Pickles' nose for groping her arse and decided to touch up her pubes with a chalkboard rubber, is now calling her child chubby-cheeks and posting pictures of his shit online. End times.

'It breaks me a little,' Anya was saying as we both stared down at the market-day shoppers trudging through the rain in their garish macs and even more colourful umbrellas, 'to see people change like that. I got married, but I'm the same. You got successful but you're the same. We are, aren't we? We haven't changed that much, have we?'

'We just got better, darling.' A group of school children were walking along, hand in hand in a crocodile, underneath the window, their excited gibber-jabber cutting through the air like nails down a blackboard. 'Bloody kids.'

'Probably shouldn't have become a children's author then, eh?'

She had a point.

Anya delighted in beating me with that stick; she found the idea hilarious, though the trap I had sprung for myself in my working life was, I should imagine, infinitely more bearable than the one she had found herself living. She always claimed the kid thing was no big deal for her any more. There was a time where she

yearned for it, she said, but after all that had gone on, all that business with *him*, she claimed her priorities had changed long ago. I think she probably believed it too. I didn't, but I never pushed. She wasn't likely to talk to me about her biological clock anyway. Mine stopped ticking long ago, if it had ever even started. I knew it was the anniversary of that day today though, the day Henry Gage died, and I wondered if that was why she had invited me out.

'It's today isn't it?' I asked quietly, testing the waters. 'The anniversary?'

She didn't turn around from the window, but shook her head slowly. 'Yesterday. Though, yesterday, today, what difference does it make?'

'Need to talk about it?'

'No. Of course not.'

I turned back to the table, giving her space to change her mind.

'I got this call yesterday though, from this guy, a cold caller.' Anya stopped and then looked back to me, seemingly unsure of what she was saying and why.

'I hope you gave him short shrift and told him to get a proper job.'

'Not so much, no. We got chatting.'

'Oh, Anya, when will you learn? Why do you even give them the time of day? You know they aren't real people, don't you?'

'Guess I was brought up better than you, darling.'

'No good can come of talking to these people.'

'He was just a poor little lost lamb, maybe I felt sorry for him?' she said with a wistful smile. 'I don't know. He's a screw-up, but I kind of liked that.'

'Screw-up?'

'Oh, sure, but nothing original – just your typical spurned male, unable to get over the ex, unable to get over himself. Self-pity, self-flagellation, very little self-respect.'

'Sounds like a riot.'

Still she smiled. Then she shrugged and the smile went with an absent whip of the hand. 'He phoned about an old insurance policy Len has, I dunno, it was something like that. We never actually got to the point of the call. Still, yeah, whatever…just a phone call. Meaningless. Don't even know why I told you.'

'Yet you did.'

'I liked talking to him, that's all. Nothing wrong with that is there?'

'You tell me.' I swirled the dregs of my coffee around the cup and swallowed them in one large gulp. 'And how is dear Len?'

'Is that an accusation, Eva?'

'No, not at all.' It was, of course. 'Just a question.'

'It was just a phone conversation. That's all.'

'Yes. Meaningless. You said.'

'Yeah. Exactly.'

She turned back to the window, and I turned to my phone and the conversation disappeared into the idle chatter in the huge room at the top of the café. We had more important things to talk about anyway. Mary bloody Conroy had just posted 125 photos of one of her children eating a sandwich and, it seemed, was due a little further character assassination.

ANYA

It truly was just a phone call. It was just an impersonal conversation between two strangers and it meant nothing. Len wouldn't have even batted an eyelid if he knew. Though Len never does bat an eyelid about anything except his work and his health. Maybe I just had to tell Eva simply to reassure myself. Perhaps, subconsciously, I told her because of the ridicule and scorn I knew she would pour on it.

When it comes to cold callers or door-stepping salesmen, my dear friend has a history. Not for simply walking away is my girl Eva Cunningham. No. No way. A polite "no thanks" or a "sorry, I'm busy" is nowhere near enough for my force-of-nature friend. This is the woman who, when some poor little man came knocking asking if she wanted her drive tarmacking, told him that the uneven surface was due not to tree roots but more because of the butchered corpses of her husband and his two lovers that she had buried there. Twins they were, and Swedish, and did he know how to mend a chainsaw? This friend of mine was also the same woman that, when confronted by a canvassing politician on her doorstep, said she could never vote for him because it was a local council controlled by his party that had granted planning permission to that old busybody at number forty-two so he could fashion a giant bronze phallus in his back garden. It was blocking out the light and messing with her phone reception, and what about the children? Hadn't they considered the

children? She had heard he danced around it at night in his pants as well. Shameful. It used to be such a nice neighbourhood…

Only the other month I was at her house when she took a call from her building society asking if she had five minutes to take a questionnaire. She told them she did, but would they mind awfully waiting a moment because she was just herding in the last of the goats? She then put the receiver down on the hall table and made us both a cup of coffee. It was still there when I left. I don't know whether it is boredom or just sheer devilment with Eva, but she just doesn't seem to be able to help herself.

Even though they both seemed to share a certain cynical sensibility, Eva would have torn poor Ray apart.

The day he phoned I had spent the morning sorting through the offices, and tidying the living room (Christ, even writing that makes me feel ten years older). The birthday cards were still up in the living room, the big sparkly *40*s on the front somehow even more glittery and garish then than when I had opened them. The giant balloon with the equally giant *4* and *0* plastered in the centre that was tied to the mantelpiece had started to shrivel and droop. The watercolour set that Len had presented to me with such happiness sat unopened on the table, the ribbon he had stuck to the wrapping, hanging over one end. Limp. Pathetic. By the time I had cleared everything away I could feel tears and I had no idea why.

It had been a great day. A nice lunch out in a restaurant in the Woodford Valley, then back into Salisbury for a little bit of retail splurging and the

cinema, then a small party at the house. By small I really do mean small – Len and I, Eva, Mum and Dad, our neighbours Jackie and Dennis, and some guy that Len knew and said I did too, but I really didn't. Mum and Dad had spent the day cooking up a storm and it really was lovely. It was all so very, very lovely, but it was all so very, very small.

I had been sitting there on the sofa with Eva, listening to her wittering on about her new book and moaning about her agent, and was just looking around the room, staring at each person there in turn and then the cards on the mantelpiece, all five of them, when suddenly a cold chill ran through me and I knew I had to get out of there. I had to get far away from that room and those people. My insides churned, my head buzzed, and pins and needles prickled through me. I cut Eva off mid-rant with a wave of my empty wine glass and then bolted through the door.

I got to the kitchen but that wasn't far enough. Suddenly I couldn't breathe properly, my chest felt tight and my head was swimming away from me. I hadn't had a panic attack in almost five years, so long ago that I had almost forgotten what they were like. I was out on the front drive, steadying myself between two parked cars before my head came back to me and the tight grip of fear relented. By then Len was there behind me, his sweet smile and twinkly eyes making me feel guilty and stupid and pathetic. Wordlessly he handed me a glass of wine, kissed me on the cheek and wandered back into the house. I wanted to bawl my eyes out there and then, and I knew they would have been childish tears; uncontrollable snotty wails, and

that terrified me because I didn't know why. I knocked the wine back and then went into the kitchen and refilled my glass. By the time I rejoined everyone else my childish impulses had been well and truly subdued by the good old reliable adult suppressant.

When the phone started ringing I must have been staring at the kitchen wall for a good half an hour. Tears had dried under my eyes and my cup of coffee was stone cold. His cheesy, well-rehearsed patter was delivered with such a grating cheeriness that it gave me a headache.

'Good afternoon, my name is Ray English and I'm calling from Babbidge Insurance. I wonder if I could have a moment of your time?'

'Whatever,' was all I could muster, all I could think to say, stirring out of my fug of self-pity.

'How are you this afternoon?'

'Indifferent.'

'Well, yes, Mrs Belmont, tell me about it!'

'Really?'

'Sure, why not?'

'You make a living either way, I suppose?'

It was a strange sensation, those first few exchanges with him: I felt detached from the conversation, as if I were a ventriloquist's dummy and someone else was doing the talking for me. Probably Eva. I was aware that I was talking to him, even knew that for some reason I wanted to, yet at the start of the conversation I had no real idea what I was saying. I should have made my excuses and hung up, but something kept me there. Something kept me talking. I suppose,

right at that moment, I needed someone. Fate sent me him.

'This is merely a courtesy call to make sure you are happy with everything.'

'Not so much. Life is pretty shit.'

'Well, I actually—'

'Yes, I know, it wasn't really a general chitchat. You don't really want to talk to me, you just want me to fall for your friendly patter and open my arms to whatever it is you're trying to push. I, for my part, have been brought up well enough not to hang up on people.'

'I'm really not trying to sell you anything, Mrs Belmont.'

'So you really are just phoning to see how I am?'

'I have to…it's—'

'Your job? Well, tell me, Ray, what on earth are you hiding from in life to make this your job? Was this always the dream, or did you just fall away at some point? Did life kick you in the face, Ray? I do hope she was worth it.'

Silence swallowed us up. I was staring into my cold coffee, and there were those sodding tears in my eyes again, and I felt dirty, dirty with disgust. What the hell was I saying to him? *Henry Gage.* It was probably Henry Gage that was making me say those things. It was the anniversary of that day, the day I watched him die, and despite the sharp edges of that horrid nightmare blunting year on year, there was still enough in it to cut me. Even recalling it I could still smell that dreary old pub that we called home for a year, and feel the stickiness of the blood between my fingers. That memory is a scar on my soul that all the kindness in the world can't heal. Even Len couldn't, and damn if

he hasn't tried. Maybe this would be the year I told him about it. That was what I always said to myself when the anniversary of that day rolled by. *Maybe I could tell him now.* I never had, and I knew I probably never would. I knew I was too scared.

I waited for the phone line to go dead. But it didn't. I don't know what made me assume Ray would have any dignity. For several seconds he said nothing at all, and then he gave a small laugh and it was a nice laugh, and it felt like he was there in the room with me.

'I'm sorry, Ray.'

'No need to apologise, Mrs Belmont.'

'So, am I wrong?'

'No.'

'Look at us then, presumptuous and predictable. Quite the double act.'

'I was labouring under the impression I was unique.'

'Lucky me.' I found myself laughing along with him then, and hoped he didn't think I was laughing at him. I didn't know what else to say, only that I had to say something. 'Not thinking of hanging up on me are you, Ray?'

'Of course not, Mrs Belmont.'

'You've been brought up the right way too then, that's good to know. We have something in common, Ray. Look at that. From such sturdy foundations do worlds collide.'

It could have ended there. It should have done. I should have turned him back to the point and then gone back to my cold coffee and self-pity. But I didn't. I don't know why I carried on talking to him, why I

pushed the conversation, why I still needed him. The truth was probably there somewhere, back in that old pub and that bastard Henry Gage, or maybe bound up in garish birthday cards and that ugly, lifeless balloon, hanging off the mantelpiece. Maybe I didn't see the truth because it was too close to my eyes. Maybe I just had my eyes closed.

'Want to talk about it?' I asked him.

'You first, Mrs Belmont.'

'Oh no, Ray. Most definitely you first. Go on.'

'I've done nothing but talk about it. I've said it all.'

'Not to me you haven't.'

'And who are you?'

'A stranger. Much easier to talk to a stranger about these things, wouldn't you say? Come on, what was her name? What did you do wrong?'

'You think it was me that messed it up?'

'If I was a betting women, yes, I reckon it was.'

'Go on then, let me hear it. Tell me all about my predictable life, Mrs Belmont.'

I stood and crossed to the sink. I had started to try and picture his face in my mind. Dark or blonde? Tall or short? Short, I figured, almost definitely, probably weighed down by that chip on his shoulder. I had a fleeting notion of a Kirk Douglas type. Not too tall, but chiselled, tough, and with a roughish smile and a twinkle in his eye. By the time I started rinsing out the cup and refilling the kettle he had become a young Paul Newman, the spit of Fast Eddie Felson.

'Mrs Belmont?'

'You hate all women now, of course,' I said, jumping over his words. 'Your natural self-loathing is

shared out evenly these days because you finally have someone to blame for how crap your life is.' I poured a spoonful of coffee into the cup and wiped the teaspoon clean on my sleeve. 'Yeah? Something like that?'

'That's a bit forward isn't it?' he said through another, warmer, laugh.

'You phoned me, Ray. I was perfectly content staring at the wall. Come on, fess up, who was she? I'm guessing she was a college sweetheart, is that right?'

'She was. Well done. Top marks, Mrs Belmont.'

'Well there's your first mistake, Ray. You should never settle for the first sweet from the sweet shop. Get a sugar rush from the pick and mix before you suck on your last lolly.' Eva had said that to me the day I first got married, to the bastard Henry Gage, but Ray didn't need to know that. It had always sounded good and I had always wanted to use it. Eva wouldn't care that I stole it from her. She never did mind when she knew she was right. Besides, it had made Ray laugh again, and that seemed to matter right at that moment. 'You took the same courses, I suppose? Sociology and politics, I'm thinking. Two wide-eyed optimists that wanted to change the world until you saw the hours. Am I right, Ray?'

He was sniggering like a child by this point. 'Actually, no. You're not. She sang backing vocals in my college band. That was how we were going to change the world, Mrs Belmont.'

'Any good, this band of yours?'

'Could have been great.'

'What happened?'

'Turned out we were shit.'

And then we were both laughing, and it was easy, so very easy, this stranger and I, laughing with the freedom of irrelevance.

'So?' he asked through his laughter, rather coyly, it seemed to me.

'So what?' I replied.

'So that's me. I went first. What about you, Mrs Belmont?'

'Really nothing to say, Ray. Nothing to say.'

'I think I should be the judge of that.'

'I tell you what, Ray. I will make you a deal. I will tell you my story the day you get back in the game. How about that? You get a date. Get back out there and I will tell you. Once you get over yourself and under a woman, we will have a deal. Deal?'

He paused for what seemed an eternity. 'Deal.'

I honestly believed I would never speak to him again.