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Everything Happens for a Reason

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To: LRS_17@outlook.com
Fri 17/2, 09:15
SUBJECT: What now?

I know what's going to happen. You see it too. I'm colouring in too hard, over and over the same patch, and the paper's falling apart.

I go round and round that day, the night, and the morning. I reach the end, go back to the start, do it four times, five, more. It takes hours, and sometimes minutes, depends what you include. I take different starting points – here, the taxi, the room – but I always go to the end. Sometimes a detail emerges, like that toddler pressing all the buttons in the lift and how we went down before we went up. It doesn't help. I can't make myself believe it, I don't want to believe it. It doesn't make sense.

They get that too. Everyone – well, not everyone. Most of them. They call (I don't pick up), they text to say how bad they feel for me, how sorry, how awful it must be. You know, telling me what I should feel but at the same time careful to say they can't imagine how I feel. All that energy poured into imagining something that they don't want to be able to imagine or don't want to tell me they can imagine or at least they imagine I don't want them to imagine or to imagine them imagining. See? I'm going fucking mad here.

Sorry, inappropriate.

Hang on, the door's about to go. Van's stopping on the double yellows, it'll be for me.

To: LRS_17@outlook.com
Mon 20/2, 18:38
SUBJECT: Invasion

Sorry, gone longer than I meant.

If you're reading these, you'll be wondering what I've been up to.

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I have that effect on people. Will from Continuity called last week, asked, 'What do you do all day?' I told him laundry – which is true. No one tells you how helpful sadness is for staying on top of housework. I have a system: socks in one load, hang them in their pairs; T-shirts in another, iron while damp. It's bad for the polar bears, but they'd understand. Two hours too late, I came up with a better line for Will. I'll have it to hand next time: 'All those little jobs I've been meaning to do for years.' If pressed, I'll say, 'Gutters, the loft, sorting photos.' They'll know I'm busy and productive and everyone will be happy.

But because it's you, I can tell you I haven't started on the gutters (too wet). The loft is not something I can do on my own and the photos would set me back months – there are 10,543 and each photo costs me an average of four minutes' preoccupation. ('That row about that driver'; 'Never again dungarees'; 'Did we know that's the happiest we'd ever be?')

What do I do? The last few days have just gone. But I can't say what with, apart from a socks and pants cycle.

I can tell you how it started though. With an invasion.

I was right, the florist van was for me. Jean and Tim, my mother's friends. You don't know them.

I was still behind the front door, picking out bits of rosemary added by some hipster florist, when the letterbox clattered open. He's a light-footed creep, that postman.

To be fair, the post's helpful. It gives the day shape. Washing machine on, coffee, post, empty machine, hang, iron. Routine's important.

If you were into that kind of thing, you could use the post to measure how much time has passed. At the start, it was almost all cards. Now, nearly three weeks on – two weeks and five days – the cards are thinning out. We're back to bills and bank statements. Except today, along with an insurance renewal for Lester and something from the taxman, sorry, tax person, there was a card. That's what it looked like at least. I won't bore you with what a Trojan horse

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is, but that's what it was. Innocuous magnolia envelope, murderous contents.

I pieced together the Bristol postmark and the handwriting – biro, bulges on the a's, b's and d's, like an elephant had sat on them. Liz.

Liz is on the you've-left-it-far-too-long list, along with cousin Jools, two women in Outreach and Vic from primary school.

I'm not unreasonable. I know some people were on holiday, or out of stamps. Some late arrivals managed to make it off the left-it-far-too-long list. But the deadline's passed for the rest. Each day they stayed silent, they made you smaller.

I stare at Liz's magnolia-clad appeal for clemency lying on the table. The kitchen table. I stopped to make coffee.

I should have known. Why expect maturity from someone who dots her i's with a daisy.

You can tell I'm stalling. I might as well tell you. Explains the three-day silence. And like I said, no one likes a long silence.

I tear the envelope – easily, it's cheap paper. Inside is a single postcard.

And this is the stupid bit, I pull it out without thinking. I drop it. It lands face up on the table, and it's too late to look away. Its glassy little eyes stare up at me.

Who the fuck sends a picture of a newborn baby to a grieving mother?

To: LRS_17@outlook.com
Mon 20/2, 19:20
SUBJECT: Plan

Didn't mean to leave you with that. He came in, with daffodils, and he doesn't know about this. You know who. But I'm not going to give him that name. There's no value in spelling this out – you of all people should see that. Let's just call him E.

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I've put him a chicken tikka in. I ate earlier. Routine.

People underestimate the power of structure. You watch them making up dinner on the fly or setting off without checking the trains, packing the day of a flight. Take Callum in Creativity, aka Mr Sorry-it's-all-I've-got-in. Started with him serving up Bolognese with rice, then he's eating cereal with apple juice and Sally walks out when he brings her a coffee with yoghurt stirred in. Next comes the mental breakdown and they think you need a Harley Street head doctor to work it out.

I've made a plan for us. It's a simple one – two strands: I tell you what I've been up to, and I give you some pointers on what you should be up to. It's amazing how many charts there are, targets, timelines, all sorts. Like now, for instance, you should be able to recognise me.

To: LRS_17@outlook.com
Mon 20/2, 21:47
SUBJECT: Unsure

E's gone to bed early. I'm waiting to take biscuits out of the oven, ginger and vanilla. No, not together. Two trays, one vanilla, one ginger, because I'm becoming someone who doesn't know what they think or want.

The daffodils started it. 'But they're your favourites,' says E.

'Were.'

The ones outside our hospital window were early, mixed in with snowdrops. My mother says the same thing every year when they appear – 'Start of new starts' – and she brings out her three daffodil tea towels, puts away the primrose ones. Bluebells come next.

They'll be gone by the time we go back for the post-mortem.

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To: LRS_17@outlook.com
Tues 21/2, 11:54
SUBJECT: Before-and-after markers

E called and said I have to remember to eat, so I went to the deli on the edge of the common, the one with rocky road.

It's when I see the sign – the way they've made the U in Lou's Beans look like a cup – that I feel it. Like being lighter, a sort of ease. If you want an image, there's this advert for incontinence pads (nappies for grown-ups). A sixty-something woman running along a beach behind a Dalmatian like neither of them will ever tire.

For a minute, that's what it was like. Because the last time I walked up that road, waited at that crossing and walked in to order a decaf skinny latte, you were with me. I knew where I was going and I would never tire.

I queued for a minute then left without ordering. The lightness had worn off. I can't be there anymore, because nothing's the same, is it? I could do that walk again and again, I could use that same non-biological washing powder and put on the same playlist – a mix of Mozart and Miles Davis compiled for your benefit – but any illusion of before will be just that. The walk's all different anyway, the trees are full of white blossom. Can you see them?

Everything's segmented by these moments that I'll call before-and-after markers. The hospital is one. The markers fall, splay themselves out on your timeline like a body across a train track, and nothing is the same. There's no crossing back over a marker. Or the only going back is the cruel kind, like this morning, a glimpse of before on a walk to a coffee shop.

And the markers bring on physical symptoms. Not just the avoidance tactics you'd expect: the deli, medical dramas, E. But symptoms inside me.

Take this one: I call it phrasal retentiveness. It's like someone built a library in my head and I now store away every trite phrase, every

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text message, every ad slogan. (The incontinence one, by the way, is 'laugh like everyone's watching.' Which comes from 'dance like nobody's watching', which in my brain has turned into 'load the dishwasher like nobody's watching', because there are upsides to being alone.)

It's all exacerbated by the fact that in the after, everyone only ever speaks to me in old borrowed phrases, scared to improvise. It's all 'deepest sympathy', 'thoughts and prayers' and 'anything you need'.

I hear them once and they are there forever, stuck on repeat and word perfect. Sounds useful, doesn't it? No doubt a career in the intelligence services beckons. But for now, the phrases are all I have for company and they're crap at it.

You need examples, don't you?

We'll start with Bristol Liz. Yes, the glassy-eyed little creature on the card was hers. Did she even tell me she was pregnant?

Once I was breathing again, I turned his face away. On the other side, she and Tom were delighted to announce the arrival of their predictably named little boy, Max. Italics proclaimed 'our little family has gotten [sic] eight pounds heavier'. She'd had them sent from home.

At the foot of the card, the elated new mother had managed to scrawl *Hey, Hope you're well, Liz xxx*.

Hope you're well. Really? How do you think I am? Never better, so well I'm running a marathon in memory of basic fucking manners.

To be fair, Liz almost certainly does hope I'm well. Everyone does. Not because they particularly care, they just want life to resume, or never to be disrupted in the first place. In the world of baby showers and families putting on eight pounds, there's no place for our story.

Stupid phrasal retentiveness. 'Hey, hope you're well' is unstoppable. Sometimes I hear it in her transatlantic squawk, sometimes in my voice and sometimes in the Bristol accent of a gentrified cider farmer drawing out the you'rrre.

This is how it will be now. Haunted by other people's clumsy

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words. Liz's 'hey, hope you're well' and the likes of 'when will you try again?' and 'at least he didn't suffer.' Sorry, you didn't need to hear that one.