

FROM
DUSTY
WITH
I. LOVE



Nina Whyle

FROM
DUSTY
WITH
L. VE



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FROM DUSTY WITH LOVE
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To our furry companions,
Potter, Lolly, Bean and Smudge.

A source of great companionship and amusement - and so easily bribed with treats.

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Nina Whyte

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‘Express yourself, don’t repress yourself.’—Madonna

CHAPTER ONE

Does life follow some sort of GPS? If so, mine has pre-set to an agonisingly slow journey with tolls and a few trolls along the way, ETA undetermined. Surely there is more to life than watching the minutes tick by, and I don't think working as a receptionist at Port-A-Privy, 'For All Your Intimate Occasions', is it!

I wonder if you can actually die of boredom? I bet there's a link between boredom and premature death.

1.35 p.m ...

I can almost feel my brain cells shutting down, the life being sucked out of me while my boss, Geoffrey Monks, stomps about like he's the CEO of some multinational corporation, the stock markets hanging in the balance with every decision he makes, a global crash if he doesn't get the next outdoors event tender. My boss takes the world of mobilising poop holes seriously.

Did you know the average person spends approximately two hundred and forty days on the loo in their lifetime? (According to my boss, that's estimating one poop a day until the age of seventy-nine years old.) There's also a World Toilet Day: 19th November. I asked Geoffrey, 'Is that because of the rise of irritable bowel syndrome?' He wasn't amused.

Turns out World Toilet Day is no joking matter. There are around four point two billion people in the world who do not have toilets or access to clean drinking water. Shocking, isn't it?

But we can all feel better knowing that Matt Damon is leading the global crusade for safer water and sanitation. If Jason Bourne can expose the horrors of Operations Treadstone and Blackbriar then he's definitely the man to persuade governments to sort out the world's water crisis. If not, I'd suggest he karate-kick their privileged behinds at the next G8 summit.

But working for a Portaloo-for-hire company is not the destination I had in mind when I came to London. I was heading towards a leading role in the West End or a top TV show. Except real life has a way of crushing dreams. And my only notable acting credit to date is a TV commercial about IBS.

Before I slip further into a black hole of negativity, I get up from my seat and walk over to the vending machine. I don't really want a coffee, but it passes the time and stops me wallowing in self-pity. I select a cappuccino. As I wait for the noxious liquid to fill my cup I casually glance up—and jump backwards with fright. My boss, Geoffrey Monks, is peering down at me from his lofty view on the balcony at the top of the stairs. A shiver goes through me. How long has he been standing there?

I give the vending machine an affectionate pat on its side, just in case my boss is in any doubt why I am not at my station. He turns away and stomps back to the hole whence he came, but not before I imagine whacking him on the head with an invisible wand and watching him tumble down the stairs.

A-LAR-tey WHACK-ih-mah-TOE-sey!

This is another thing I like to do to pass the time. Pretending to have wizard powers helps me get through another mind-numbing day at work. Whenever a member of staff materialises on the stairs, I decide their imaginary fate. Those who have been nice get a bubble and I float them safely down the stairs. Those who have been mediocre, melancholic, or downright rude get an invisible lead bar to the back of the head and come crashing to the ground.

I think it's weird though, how my boss always knows when I'm not sitting at my desk. It did cross my mind that he had the chair alarmed. It isn't. I've checked. I'm not even allowed to go to the first floor to make a proper coffee, and if I want to take a pee, I have to telephone first. What's that all about? My theory is he's keeping tabs on everyone's toilet habits for some weird presentation we'll all be privy to one boring afternoon.

I return to my desk and sit down. I blow into my cup, staring glumly into the cheap plastic vessel. There's really nothing else to look at except the giant clock on the grey building opposite. Not only does my clock-watching drive me insane, it's magnified whenever I look up.

1.49 p.m. ...

I slump forward and press my forehead against the desk. My life is heading down the toilet. Literally.

I must have dozed off because an unfamiliar ping wakes me. I jerk up at the sound and look up in surprise as the main front door opens and an actual customer walks in. My gaze shifts to the time on the computer screen.

1.59 p.m. ...

Wow, I napped for a whole ten minutes.

I return my gaze to the man walking towards me. At a guess, I'd say he's early fifties. His gait is rather stiff and mechanical, but what piques my interest is the custom-made navy-blue suit he's wearing. No off-the-peg hangs that well. He is also wearing a dotty blue dicky bow. Very dapper.

No one in this building is particularly fashion-forward. My boss wears the same grey suit and cheap patterned polyester shirt day in day out. But for me, deciding what to wear in the morning is the highlight of my day. 'Good afternoon,' I say with a dazzling smile. 'Welcome to Port-A-Privy. How may I help you?'

He smiles, revealing a perfect set of pearly whites. 'Good afternoon. Could you tell me the time?'

Oh, for goodness' sake!

'It's 1.59 p.m.,' I say, through gritted teeth. But when I look at my computer screen, time has shifted an entire minute. 'Actually, it's two o'clock,' I say excitedly.

The man smiles. 'I have a meeting with Mr Monks at two o'clock.'

‘And your name is?’

‘Mr Simons.’

‘Right, um ... One moment, please.’ I dial Geoffrey’s number, but it goes straight to voicemail. ‘I have a Mr Simons here to see you,’ I say in my best business-like voice. ‘He’s here for his two o’clock appointment.’ I put the phone down and look at Mr Simons. ‘If you would like to take a seat, Mr Monks will be with you in a minute.’

I watch as he walks over to the sofa and sits down, an amused smile playing on his lips. I wonder what has amused him? Is it the cheap polyester sofa or the faint whiff of toilet cleaner? He doesn’t strike me as someone who usually seeks temporary sanitary hire. I wonder if he’s one of those elite party-arrangers for the über-rich?

Mr Simons looks up, as if he senses me watching him. I give him another smile, then quickly resume my usual façade of being happy at work—fake-smiling against all my inner demons, tapping busily at the computer when, in fact, I’m opening up Instagram. I immediately regret it. My friend Alice has posted a photo of her latest beach shoot.

Alice is a model. I was actually with her when she was scouted. We were fifteen years old and walking to our local fish-and-chip shop when a woman with large tortoiseshell glasses and a crazy hat—totally out of place in our village—jumped out of a taxi and took Alice’s photo.

Alice is six foot with shiny blonde hair, glowing skin, and legs up to her armpits. I was the hobbit in tow at a meagre five foot five with dirty-dishwater blonde hair and skin that was prone to the occasional outbreak. But that moment stuck with me. It made me realise that you never know who might be watching, and from that moment on, like a dutiful scout, I have always been prepared. Plus, I’m secretly vain.

Now, my sweet Alice is walking catwalks all over the world and I see her less and less. Although she’s ever so thoughtful, always sending me clothes in the post. It’s like Christmas morning whenever a package from Alice arrives. Honestly, I don’t know what I would do without Alice—or Jodie, for that matter. Jodie is my flatmate, the yin to my yang. We met at university and spent three years getting hammered on cheap spirits and waking up in a variety of situations, which is not conducive to attendance records.

Alice and Jodie couldn’t be more different. Alice is posh, her fortune handed down generation after generation. I think her family own some huge brewery in Cheshire—or is it Nottinghamshire? Somewhere ending in -shire. Her parents sit on a few boards from time to time and then hightail it back to their country estate. Alice always said her parents were quite lazy and vowed never to be the same. You might mock and say, ‘But she’s a model, no IQ necessary,’ but Alice is far from dumb—and *you* try working some impractical, oversized headdress while balancing on a pair of six-inch skyscrapers in sub-zero temperatures on a rock in the ocean and still looking sublime!

Between you and me, I love the idea of not having to work for a living. Just imagine it: all the money in the world and not having to lift a finger. I could just do good deeds all day and go to lovely lunches with my friends.

Jodie, on the other hand, hails from Essex, but don't go thinking she doesn't have a brain either. She works as an air hostess. Seriously, I can hear you sniggering at the back. She's actually learning to fly—so there! Her parents are filthy rich too. Her father started his business hiring out inflatable bouncy castles, then progressed into soft plays and now he owns a bunch of trampoline parks. Smart man.

They bought Jodie a two-bedroom flat for her twenty-first birthday. My parents bought me an alarm clock from a second-hand store. My mother said it was to help me initiate my life by starting the day in a timely and more orderly manner—that I might look at it when I'm older with the warm feeling of nostalgia. They've always thought I was a bit of a flake.

My sister got a shopping trip to Harrods for her twenty-first birthday. In their mind, they were backing the winning horse.

Even though my sister and I went to a private school, my parents have always been on the verge of bankruptcy, and our run-down family house looks like it could collapse any second. What with Grandad's care home bills and Mother's horse, Goliath, we never had two pennies to rub together. Interestingly, the paddock always had special Swiss flowers sown in and Goliath never had second-hand anything. New saddles, bridles—even his shoes got changed more than mine. Do I sound bitter? Well, you try being after a grumpy old horse in the pecking order.

On Facebook, Jodie has put a picture of a sausage and written: *Discuss*. Goodness knows what that's all about.

I start typing. *Nazi Loo Lieutenant is diverting his calls. He's probably sitting on his golden throne pawing over Loo's Monthly Magazine and the latest development in breaking down stubborn solids.*

'Miss Hall.'

My chuckle turns into a squeal when I realise my boss is standing directly behind me and, without meaning to, my hand swipes across the desk, knocking the coffee cup over. It's a coffee tsunami. 'Fuck!' I gasp, leaping to my feet. I yank open the desk drawer and grab a thick wad of tissues. 'I'm so sorry,' I say, mopping up the mess. Bollocks. It's even on the keyboard, and the mouse is submerged in a brown puddle. I lift the keyboard and give it a shake. Coffee splashes across the desk and onto my white silk blouse. I wince. 'I'm sure it'll be fine,' I say, throwing the soggy tissues into the bin and grabbing more.

My boss gives me a look of utter disdain, then lowers his gaze to my computer screen.

Panic flushes ... I mean rushes into my veins. I go to hit the minimise button, but the mouse is trashed and all I get for my effort is another splash across my blouse. Geoffrey looks at me, then turns his attention to my hand, which automatically edges toward the mouse again.

'Leave it!' he bellows. 'You've done enough damage.'

Blood throbs in my ears as he studies the screen. He might as well try minimising me.

Actually, that's not a bad idea. I could disappear into a miniscule line and pop open again when the coast is clear. I clear my throat. 'It's just a joke,' I say. 'I love my job. It is ... um ... um ... *rewarding*?' The upward inflection in my voice makes it sound like a question.

My boss holds up a sheet of paper and clears his throat. 'Just three days ago, you wrote, "If a maniac came in and shot my foot, cut off my toe, and ate it in front of me, it would still be better than working here."'

Oh, my God. How did he get a hold of my Facebook statuses?

'And the day before that, "Nazi Loo Lieutenant is on the royal rampage again. He needs to sit on his plastic throne and readjust his turd tiara."'

I stifle a giggle, and my boss glares at me. He turns the sheet over and all my Facebook statuses glare back at me in **BOLD TIMES NEW ROMAN CAPITALS**.

Is that even legal? 'How did you get that?'

'We are versed in the World Wide Web, Miss Hall.' He pulls another printed sheet from his inside pocket, and this one I'm more familiar with. It's my P45. A bit of sick travels up my throat.

I know I'm not the only person in the world who hates their job. There are literally billions of people doing a job just for the pay packet and a weekend where they get to feel alive again. I'm definitely not the only one who hates their boss either. Okay, hate is a bit strong, but he's a middle-aged grey person in a grey world with as much charisma as the product he supplies. But with that being said and done, I do not want to be fired, and my mind begins to whirl. I've had this job for six months, which in itself is a bit of a record for me. It pays more than waitressing and he does let me take time off for auditions. Now I come to think of it, it's actually a rather good job.

But it's too late.

I have no defence, no comeback to smooth this one over. No chance with an HR unfair dismissal plea. I'm also aware Mr Simons is watching. He's not even pretending not to, which I think is a little insensitive. I mean, if I was witnessing some poor girl's humiliation, I would definitely give them some privacy, or at least pretend to. I give Geoffrey a congenial smile. 'Would you like me to leave now?'

Geoffrey surveys me for a moment and for a split second I wonder if he was expecting me to beg to keep my job. I could do that.

'Now would be good,' he replies curtly.

'Right,' I say, grabbing my bag and rain mac stashed under the desk.

'I'll have your security pass too.'

'Of course, absolutely.' I unwrap the security pass from around my neck and hand it to him.

'Don't forget to take this.' He holds up my P45.

I shoot him a tight smile and thrust the P45 into my coat pocket. When I get to the main door, I'm surprised to see Mr Simons there, holding it open. 'You are wasted in this sterile environment, Miss Hall,' he says with a wink.

‘Oh ... I ... thank you,’ I reply as I step out into daylight.

The sun and his words dazzle me. I want to go back inside and ask Mr Simons for career advice, but when I turn around he’s already shaking hands with my boss. My now ex-boss.

I rummage in my bag for my sunglasses and vape stick as my brain tries to play catch-up with what just happened.

Somehow, I make it home.

I stand in the hallway and stare at the keys in my hand. I don’t exactly know what mode of transport I used—it could have been a pizza delivery moped or a donkey cart loaded with turnips. I wouldn’t have noticed. I’m a mess. I rub my fizzing temples.

At least I have a roof over my head. I should be grateful for that.

It’s a good thing I have generous friends. Have I mentioned that already? If it weren’t for them I’d be living in some flea-infested room in Hackney dressed in rags.

Jodie’s flat is in Islington and rent is très cheap. I know Jodie could easily charge triple what I pay, but she says she couldn’t live with anyone else and, besides, what are friends for? I just wish I wasn’t such a charity case.

I hang my rain mac up and sink down onto the bench, leaning my head back against the coats. A heavy sigh escapes my lips. I look across at the sunrise over sand dunes print on the wall. I wish I could be transported there, dropped in the desert and away from my life. For a moment, I close my eyes, imagine the hot sun on my face, warming my skin. I would give anything to have a holiday right now... I mentally shake myself. Like that’s going to happen.

I shuffle to my feet and head into the kitchen. Jodie’s ginger cat, Mustard, jumps down off the windowsill to greet me. I reach down and stroke the top of his head, grateful for a friend.

Mustard is a handsome cat. He can be quite affectionate but mostly he’s standoffish, but usually there’s a reason. He doesn’t tolerate being picked up. Ever. He has to put in the request himself and then, only then, do you oblige, but sometimes he can be bribed with treats. If only I could find these qualities in a man, I’d carry a pocketful of treats at all times.

I switch the kettle on, then immediately switch it off because I remember there’s an unopened bottle of wine in the fridge and I can hear its whispers in my left ear. *You need something more refreshing than brown tea after the day you’ve had. I am lovely and fruity and I need oxygenating.*

I pour myself a large glass of Sauvignon blanc and gulp it down like I haven’t drunk in days before returning to the fridge to see what else I can nab. There’s some cheese strings covered in spilt goo—it could be sauce or some new bacteria—a half-eaten sandwich in the throes of photosynthesising into a moss field, and some leftover Indian from a couple of nights ago.

What I really want is some chocolate biscuits, but those luxuries rarely darken these kitchen cupboards. If we don’t even have the basics of butter or grown-up cheese in the fridge,

we definitely won't have dried goods in stock. Last time I looked there were a bunch of random keys, a tin of never-heard-of-the-brand soup and instruction manuals older than the Dead Sea Scrolls.

I remind myself I am the proud owner of a pair of Balmain leather skinny trousers. (A gift from Alice's recent Balmain shoot. All my clothes are a gift from Alice.) I gave Jodie a stretch mini dress in lieu of rent and nabbed the leather trousers for myself, although I had to get them taken up several inches. They're absolutely gorgeous. But there's a catch—isn't there always! In order to have the pleasure of wearing such clothes, we are military-strict about diets in order to fit into the damn things.

It's pure agony. There are days when I can't imagine anything better than slobbering out and eating saturated salty fats until my belly retaliates. I'd wallow around like a trapped walrus in a duvet watching an old film and fall asleep with the remnants of sinful pizza still stuck to my face. I'm not obsessive, just mindful that two kilos of fat can look like two kilos of raw potatoes in these clothes.

Sometimes, when I'm really hungry, I haul my ass into the bedroom and open my wardrobe to remind myself why I must not pig out, and I am immediately transported to a Narnia of well-cut fabrics, a kaleidoscope of splendour—the way the fabric drapes and the sheer loveliness of expensively crafted tailoring. On occasions, I'm tempted to stick two fingers ... up at my closet. Did you think I was going to say down my throat? I tried that and ended up with a lump the size of an egg on my forehead as I crashed into the porcelain bowl, nearly swallowing a Toilet Duck in the process, thanks to someone pushing the toilet door inwards. I also learnt about organ failure, bad breath and rotting teeth and concluded purging wasn't the way to go.

Alcohol, now that's my Achilles heel. Removing alcohol from my life is a diet step too far. I adore wine—any colour, not picky—and a full range of spirits, whatever is bought for me. I do, however, draw the line at Special Brew.

Mustard meows impatiently. Disappointed with what's on offer, I shut the fridge door and wander over to the cupboard where we keep Mustard's food.

'Want a chewy?' I pull a chicken and liver chewy stick out of the box and wave it in the air. Mustard sidles up to me, as if to say, *Hurry up and use those opposable thumbs properly*. He takes it from me and scurries over to the corner.

Before I put the treats away, I take another chewy stick out of the box and peel the wrapper. It's got quite a nice smell to it and, without giving it further thought, I pop it in my mouth.

'Eww ... argh!' I hurl myself over to the sink and spit out lumps of meat. 'Pfeu, pwer. Ew, yuk!'

Mustard watches from a safe distance.

Still unable to get the grainy, metallic taste out of my mouth, I sip more wine and swish it about in my mouth like mouthwash. I return to the fridge, grab the leftover curry and bung it into a plastic bowl, zap it for ten minutes, slug down more wine and wait for the first explosion of

curry to pop all over the microwave door. When it's ready, I take it all with me into the living room.

My stomach spasms when I take my first bite, shocked it's experiencing solids for the first time today.

I really don't know where I went wrong. It's not like I'm stupid. I have a degree, a BA (Hons) in theatre and French studies. I spent a summer travelling the home counties as part of an acrobatic troupe for a small touring circus and mastered hula-hooping. In my hoop heyday, I was hula-hooping fifty hoops in one go. Obviously, I knew I couldn't do that forever and the fortune-teller told me I was destined for dark, exotic adventures, plus my mother said they hadn't spent all that money on my education so I could be a performer in some meagre sideshow. So I convinced them to let me enrol at Jacques Lecoq School in Paris. It's a drama school with the emphasis on mime and the physical playing of the actor. My parents didn't like the idea of mime but they liked the idea of me advancing my French, so they let me go.

Those six months in Paris were très magnifique. I learnt to animate the lightest of emotional subtleties, to bring to life different masks with the use of my body.

J'aime mes cours de masques.

When I wasn't in school learning how to use my body to create a character from the top of my head to the tip of my toes, making every movement count, I spent a lot of time sitting in cafes feeling incredibly grown-up. Très chic, n'est pas?

I also met and fell deeply into an amour with Etienne. I truly flourished in those six months, but like all good things it came swiftly to an end. I found out Etienne was cheating on me, which coincided with my course ending and Jodie moving into her flat in London. I was sad to say au revoir to mes copines françaises, but I was excited for the next stage of my journey so I hopped on Le Shuttle and came back to London to seek fame and fortune.

Of course, I knew it wouldn't be easy making a living as an actress, although I secretly hoped I would be talent-spotted just like Alice. Now I realise I may never get 'spotted', never get 'discovered'. Meanwhile, my friends, my sister in particular, have developed actual skills, had promotions, and moved up the career ladder.

I sometimes get the impression my parents think I've scammed them out of their money, like some persistent cold-caller. They would definitely send me back if I was under warranty and demand a full refund. In their eyes, I should have amounted to a lawyer or a doctor or at least a professor of physics at Oxford.

I pick up my mobile and send a text: *Hey, it's me*. Then I add, *Your girlfriend*. I delete 'your girlfriend' and replace it with *Dusty x*.

Yes, that's my real name. My sister got Coco and I got Dusty. Both named after our mother's childhood horses. Dusty Hall was really setting me up to be left behind.

I don't know how long I sit there with my shoulders hunched, stabbing at the curry like a Neanderthal, wiping the tears of self-pity from my face. What does it matter if I get fat and spotty? Who even cares! I can eat and eat and eat until I'm so fat they'll need to take a forklift to

heave me out.