So Good to See You

Francesca Hornak



PIATKUS

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What happens when people open
their hearts? They get better.

HARUKI MURAKAMI,
Norwegian Wood

If you called your dad
he could stop it all.

Pulp, 'Common People'

Oxford, June 2004

Three undergraduates are sitting in a beer garden, wearing black tie. On their table are tickets to St Arthur's College ball. The garden is full of other students due to attend the same event – young men interchangeable in their suits, girls' make-up too visible in the late afternoon light. The air is thick with aftershave and anticipation.

At the table, one of the three undergraduates is recounting an awkward moment with an American visiting student. The two men opposite her laugh, as her eyes squeeze shut with re-enacted embarrassment.

'Like, I've never even remotely flirted with him!' she says, one narrow palm on her sternum. Her voice is like a newsreader's on double speed, her hands fluttering everywhere like birds.

'Rosie, you flirt with everyone! Men, women, children. Cats,' says one of the men.

'Daniel Pyke! You literally flirt with mirrors.'

'Takes one to know one.'

The other man at the table, Caspar, says, 'How do I not know this American guy?'

'You do,' says Rosie. 'Nate. His room's on my landing. Curly hair. But he's never in college. He hangs out with the other international students.'

'What does he look like?' says Caspar. 'Besides hair? Is he fit?'

'He's, um, quite skinny.'

Daniel says: 'Nate Kennedy, yes sir,' in a Boston accent, narrowing his eyes and grinning. The impression is uncanny rather than cruel, as though he has briefly become another person.

'Oh *that* guy,' says Caspar. 'Gotcha.'

Another young man approaches the table, people greeting him or stepping aside so he can pass. He is very tall, and wearing Reebok Classics with his black tie. He has the same permanently surprised blue eyes as Caspar – his cousin.

Daniel opens his arms wide.

'Sergio! Last night in this dump, mate! We're going large.'

They greet one another with a mid-air arm-wrestle, clearly lifted from a film, revealing Serge's monogrammed cufflinks.

'Looking sharp, guys,' he says, surveying the table.

His gaze rests on Rosie. Her pupils dilate.

'Where's your sister, mate?' says Daniel, as Serge sits down. 'She's staying this weekend, right?'

'Still getting ready,' says Serge. 'Which could take hours. Told her to come and find us.'

He blurs some, but not all, of his private school consonants, inadvertently making them more conspicuous.

'Don't get any ideas,' he adds.

Daniel looks at him with mock affront.

Rosie pours Serge a glass of Pimm's, and tops up everyone else's drinks.

When Daniel puts his glass down only ice remains.

'Rosie just friend-zoned that American guy, Nate,' he says to Serge.

Serge raises his eyebrows at Rosie. Her face reddens.

'So then what? After he lunged?' says Caspar.

'We had tea. In my room.'

'Jesus! Now he'll think he's still in with a chance.'

'We always have tea. That's how we became friends.'

'Guess you'll never see him again, anyway,' says Caspar.

Rosie looks suddenly wistful, as if this finality had not occurred to her.

'But *can* a man and woman be friends?' says Daniel.

'Pikey's going deep,' says Serge, approvingly. '*When Harry Met Sally*.'

'Not if he went to a boys' school,' says Rosie. 'Which Nate didn't.'

'So you and I aren't friends?' says Serge, looking at her.

'Single-sex schools must be so fucked up,' says Daniel. 'I'd have gone mental without girls.'

'They are,' says Serge. 'You missed out, man. The masters would've loved you.'

'Piss off, Sergio,' says Daniel, jovially. 'So is this why *I'm* still in the friend zone?' he adds, looking at Rosie. 'Cos I went to a sink school in Essex?'

'You had your chance.'

Daniel wiggles his eyebrows, and she looks at him like a tiresome sibling.

'Wait, what?' says Serge, looking from Daniel to Rosie. 'When was *this*?'

He is grinning, but his eyes look rattled.

'Freshers' week,' says Caspar. 'At the school uniform bop. How did you not know that?'

'He wasn't there. Too cool for that shit,' says Daniel. 'Right, Sergio?'

Serge laughs and says, 'Can't believe I never knew you two got it on!'

'We didn't "get it on"! We got it out the way. It was literally a two minute snog.'

'I'm too common for her,' says Daniel, grinning. 'And too short.'

Rosie gives him the sibling look again.

'Genuinely,' says Daniel. 'I had to sit on a bar stool to reach her. I remember it well.'

Conversation moves on to the fact that freshers' week still feels recent, and the startling truth that their time at university is over. The sky flares shocking pink.

They all speak with the easy assumption they will remain in each other's lives.

PART ONE

NOVEMBER 2016

TWELVE YEARS AFTER GRADUATION

From: Caspar.Campbell@gmail.com
To: RosieLittleton81@gmail.com
Date: 13 November, 2016, 07.50
Subject: Serge

Hi hi, what's up with your phone? Can you call me? It's about Serge . . . Bummer you can't join me and Daniel tonight. Sack off your folks!

Cx

Serge's Bedroom

10 Chiltern Mansions

8 a.m.

Rosie wrote three drafts, before she was satisfied. The final note said: 'Morning . . . Had to leave for my sister's thing, didn't want to wake you. Good luck with the new film x'

She knew she could have sent these words as a text. But her phone was out of battery, and the situation – in daylight – had a sordid quality that she hoped a handwritten note would elevate. It was intentionally bland, anything more might have implied feelings or expectations.

She placed the note on Serge's bedside table, and studied his handsome face in the half-light. With his extravagant eyes closed he looked sterner than he did awake. The rim of his ear was fierily pink, like a conch shell. It still struck her as endearingly human.

The previous evening they had met at Serge's local pub. This was their first contact since he had abruptly ended their relationship, two months earlier. Rosie had broken this silence – which she had instigated – on the pretext of returning a bag of his things. It contained an A.P.C. jumper, a copy of *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* and some Bose headphones. These were the only possessions of his she had acquired, after two years as a couple. It had been a running joke that Serge never stayed at her flat.

They had settled into their preferred sofa in the pub, where it was

as velvety and low-lit as ever. After a bottle of red wine they had gone back to his flat, so that Serge could return items of hers, and started kissing in the customary spot in the kitchen. Then they had moved to his bed. Afterwards, she found that the toothbrush she used to keep in the bathroom was gone.

All of this now seemed like a memory of two different people. Looking at Serge, she knew that the evening had been a one-off. He had voiced no regrets about their break-up – not that they had discussed it. He would not want to resume their relationship, and he would assume Rosie felt the same. She had assured him, when he ended it, that she understood. The phrase 'last hurrah' floated incongruously through her mind, and she imagined couples shouting 'Hurrah!' as they orgasmed.

She looked around the bedroom, the shadows familiar from waking there as his girlfriend. The whole flat was familiar from parties she had attended, pre-dating their relationship. She remembered the heady anticipation of these evenings, when Serge was not her boyfriend but her longest standing infatuation. A melancholy feeling rose, and she turned to leave. Passing the chest of drawers, she paused. Then she suddenly swept a pair of cufflinks off its surface and into her bag.

Outside in the sunshine, she felt appalled. Her cheeks burned, and her heart was beating too fast. She had never stolen anything before, if this was stealing. She stood still on the pavement, while couples walked around her with coffees and dogs, wondering what to do. She could ring Serge's doorbell, claiming to have forgotten something, and drop the cufflinks as she pretended to retrieve it. But it was so early. Ending the encounter this way felt unwise. She would be effusive and wretched and he would be too groggy to notice – making it worse. Her niece's christening was at one, she would miss the train if she deliberated any longer. As she walked away Rosie wondered how, at thirty-five, she could be in this kind of situation.

* * *

The christening was at the church in her parents' village. Eighteen months earlier her sister Kate had been married there – as if she were checking off adult milestones. Rosie's phone was now charged, disclosing Caspar's oddly urgent email, but she still hadn't called. She sensed the information about Serge would be unwelcome, and she couldn't face telling Caspar she had slept with Serge – or not telling him. She also knew Caspar would beg her to join his drink with Daniel Pyke. She thought of Daniel this way now, after so long, a first name and surname.

The godparents were summoned to the font, and stood in a row looking pious. Rosie thought of her own three godparents, and the ten-pound notes they sent every Christmas and birthday. Serge had seven godparents, all of them glamorous or distinguished. One was a national treasure. As she vowed to follow God she thought of the cufflinks, and felt unclean – as if her soul was itching. It was only when she held her niece that her heart rate slowed.

Afterwards, everyone walked to her parents' house for drinks.The rooms were even tidier than usual, cushions standing to attention and the carpets like creamy golf courses. She began handing round crisps, hoping nobody would be sympathetic about her break-up. This latest romantic disappointment had cemented her family role as maiden aunt, a failure her parents blamed on her career in 'the arts'. This was referred to with the same hushed dismay as if Rosie worked in pornography. She wished they understood that her job, selling foreign rights at a major publishing house, was often drearily corporate. But the combination of other languages and literary fiction still struck them as alarmingly exotic. Her father, a retired army officer, only read books about World War II.

She made an excuse to leave the conservatory, and retreated to her old bedroom. It had been redecorated, but the familiar space prompted a sense of life having stalled. She could hear Kate and her husband Matt changing the baby in the bathroom. A 'bad nappy' was still a family event.

'Kate?' she called, when the bathroom door opened. Her sister gave the baby to Matt, and lay on the bed. For a while they discussed how little sleep Kate was getting, and her daughter's various habits and difficulties. Rosie asked and listened, without giving advice. It was strange to be relegated this way, by her younger sibling. It had started with Kate's engagement, gathering pace with each stage she reached first.

'How are you?' said Kate, eventually.

'Fine. I saw Serge last night.'

'Serge? Why?'

'I had some of his stuff to give back.'

'Ah. That old line.'

'I know. But I didn't want to leave it on that note. That day on the heath.'

Serge had ended everything on a walk around Hampstead Heath, a week after her thirty-fifth birthday. She recalled sitting on a bench by the ponds while he talked about 'timing', and realising, through the wet heat of tears, that this was their first in-depth conversation about the relationship.

'Sure. I had that with James,' said Kate. 'Like, when I dumped him I was crying, I looked like shit. So we did the stuff handover, and it was kind of closure.'

Her sister always returned to her own experience, however tenuous the link or universal the situation. It was her way of showing interest.

'So how was it?' said Kate.

'Fine. I mean, a bit weird. Cos we hadn't spoken since that day. But loads to catch up on.'

'But did you talk about how he ended it? Or you two?'

They hadn't at all. Serge had behaved like an old friend meeting up to exchange news, and she had followed his lead. In his kitchen she had commented, playfully, on his enlarged biceps and then they had started kissing as if they were on romantic autopilot.

'It was more, like, a catch-up,' said Rosie.

She knew, already that she could not confess to sleeping with him. Her sister had always been suspicious of Serge.

'So he didn't say sorry, or anything?'

'He kind of did all that at the time.'

Serge had apologised for dumping her – but Rosie had apologised more for crying.

'I still think he should have got his shit together sooner,' said Kate. 'Like, don't go out with someone you've known since uni, and give them this whole impression you're up for settling down, and *then* suddenly discover you're "not ready".'

'"Too busy" were his exact words.'

It was meant to sound wry, but it came out submissive. She wondered if Serge really had given her the impression he was 'up for settling down', or if Rosie had given this impression to everyone else. It had never felt wise to demand his long-term plans.

'Too busy's worse!' said Kate.

She began advising Rosie on dating apps, her arms behind her head and her eyes closed – as if she were basking in her married status.

While Kate talked, Rosie thought about the risk she had taken by sleeping with Serge. But there had been no obvious moment to explain she was no longer on the pill, or to demand he find a condom. Perhaps, she thought, she had not wanted him to. She checked her phone, knowing he would not have called. There was only a text from Caspar.

> Hey, sorry for stalker number of msgs! I just wanted you to hear this from me, not Facebook or wherever, but Serge is seeing someone. I'm sorry, I know it's the worst thing to hear. She's actually nice (they met at work), but it still pisses me off after his spiel to you about timing. You deserve better than my Peter Pan cousin. Call me Cx

For a second, she thought she might be sick.