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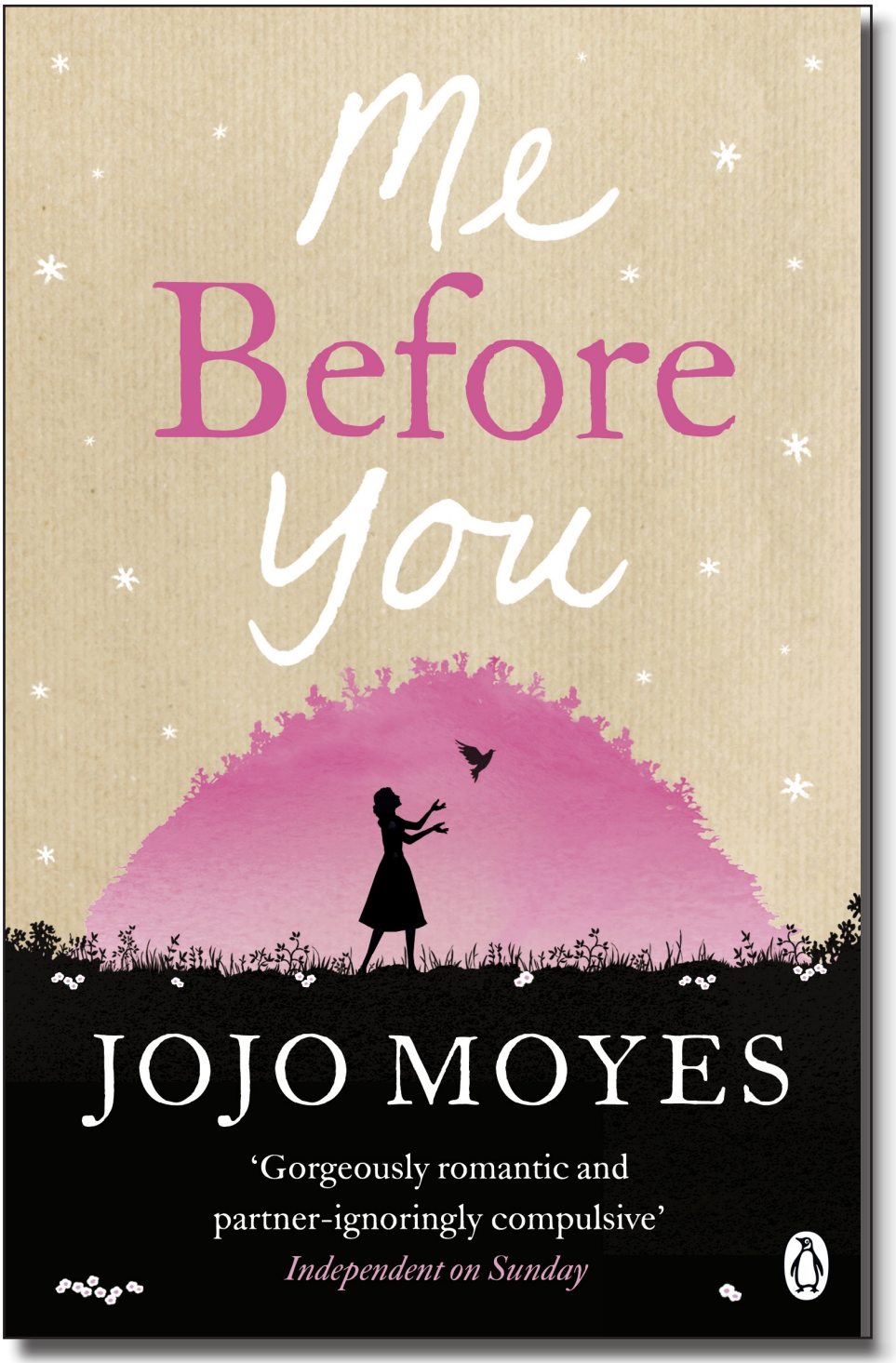
Written by Jojo Moyes

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Me Before You

by

Jojo Moyes

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Prologue

2007

When he emerges from the bathroom she is awake, propped up against the pillows and flicking through the travel brochures that were beside his bed. She is wearing one of his T-shirts, and her long hair is tousled in a way that prompts reflexive thoughts of the previous night. He stands there, enjoying the brief flashback, rubbing the water from his hair with a towel.

She looks up from a brochure and pouts. She is probably slightly too old to pout, but they've been going out a short enough time for it still to be cute.

'Do we really *have* to do something that involves trekking up mountains, or hanging over ravines? It's our first proper holiday together, and there is literally not one single trip in these that doesn't involve either throwing yourself off something or –' she pretends to shudder '– wearing *fleece*.'

She throws them down on the bed, stretches her caramel-coloured arms above her head. Her voice is husky, testament to their missed hours of sleep. 'How about a luxury spa in Bali? We could lie around on the sand . . . spend hours being pampered . . . long relaxing nights . . .'

'I can't do those sorts of holidays. I need to be doing something.'

'Like throwing yourself out of aeroplanes.'

'Don't knock it till you've tried it.'

She pulls a face. 'If it's all the same to you, I think I'll stick with knocking it.'

His shirt is faintly damp against his skin. He runs a comb through his hair and switches on his mobile phone, wincing at the list of messages that immediately pushes its way through on to the little screen.

'Right,' he says. 'Got to go. Help yourself to breakfast.' He leans over the bed to kiss her. She smells warm and perfumed and deeply sexy. He inhales the scent from the back of her hair, and briefly loses his train of thought as she wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him down towards the bed.

'Are we still going away this weekend?'

He extricates himself reluctantly. 'Depends what happens on this deal. It's all a bit up in the air at the moment. There's still a possibility I might have to be in New York. Nice dinner somewhere Thursday, either way? Your choice of restaurant.' His motorbike leathers are on the back of the door, and he reaches for them.

She narrows her eyes. 'Dinner. With or without Mr BlackBerry?'

'What?'

'Mr BlackBerry makes me feel like Miss Gooseberry.' The pout again. 'I feel like there's always a third person vying for your attention.'

'I'll turn it on to silent.'

'Will Traynor!' she scolds. 'You must have some time when you can switch off.'

'I turned it off last night, didn't I?'

'Only under extreme duress.'

He grins. 'Is that what we're calling it now?' He pulls on his leathers. And Lissa's hold on his imagination is finally broken. He throws his motorbike jacket over his arm, and blows her a kiss as he leaves.

There are twenty-two messages on his BlackBerry, the first of which came in from New York at 3.42am. Some legal problem. He takes the lift down to the underground car park, trying to update himself with the night's events.

'Morning, Mr Traynor.'

The security guard steps out of his cubicle. It's weatherproof, even though down here there is no weather to be protected from. Will sometimes wonders what he does down here in the small hours, staring at the closed-circuit television and the glossy bumpers of £60,000 cars that never get dirty.

He shoulders his way into his leather jacket. 'What's it like out there, Mick?'

'Terrible. Raining cats and dogs.'

Will stops. 'Really? Not weather for the bike?'

Mick shakes his head. 'No, sir. Not unless you've got an inflatable attachment. Or a death wish.'

Will stares at his bike, then peels himself out of his leathers. No matter what Lissa thinks, he is not a man who believes in taking unnecessary risks. He unlocks the top box of his bike and places the leathers inside, locking it and throwing the keys at Mick, who catches them neatly with one hand. 'Stick those through my door, will you?'

'No problem. You want me to call a taxi for you?'

'No. No point both of us getting wet.'

Mick presses the button to open the automatic grille

and Will steps out, lifting a hand in thanks. The early morning is dark and thunderous around him, the Central London traffic already dense and slow despite the fact that it is barely half past seven. He pulls his collar up around his neck and strides down the street towards the junction, from where he is most likely to hail a taxi. The roads are slick with water, the grey light shining on the mirrored pavement.

He curses inwardly as he spies the other suited people standing on the edge of the kerb. Since when did the whole of London begin getting up so early? Everyone has had the same idea.

He is wondering where best to position himself when his phone rings. It is Rupert.

'I'm on my way in. Just trying to get a cab.' He catches sight of a taxi with an orange light approaching on the other side of the road, and begins to stride towards it, hoping nobody else has seen. A bus roars past, followed by a lorry whose brakes squeal, deafening him to Rupert's words. 'Can't hear you, Rupe,' he yells against the noise of the traffic. 'You'll have to say that again.' Briefly marooned on the island, the traffic flowing past him like a current, he can see the orange light glowing, holds up his free hand, hoping that the driver can see him through the heavy rain.

'You need to call Jeff in New York. He's still up, waiting for you. We were trying to get you last night.'

'What's the problem?'

'Legal hitch. Two clauses they're stalling on under section . . . signature . . . papers . . .' His voice is drowned out by a passing car, its tyres hissing in the wet.

'I didn't catch that.'

The taxi has seen him. It is slowing, sending a fine spray of water as it slows on the opposite side of the road. He spies the man further along whose brief sprint slows in disappointment as he sees Will must get there before him. He feels a sneaking sense of triumph. 'Look, get Cally to have the paperwork on my desk,' he yells. 'I'll be there in ten minutes.'

He glances both ways then ducks his head as he runs the last few steps across the road towards the cab, the word 'Blackfriars' already on his lips. The rain is seeping down the gap between his collar and his shirt. He will be soaked by the time he reaches the office, even walking this short distance. He may have to send his secretary out for another shirt.

'And we need to get this due diligence thing worked out before Martin gets in –'

He glances up at the screeching sound, the rude blare of a horn. He sees the side of the glossy black taxi in front of him, the driver already winding down his window, and at the edge of his field of vision something he can't quite make out, something coming towards him at an impossible speed.

He turns towards it, and in that split second he realizes that he is in its path, that there is no way he is going to be able to get out of its way. His hand opens in surprise, letting the BlackBerry fall to the ground. He hears a shout, which may be his own. The last thing he sees is a leather glove, a face under a helmet, the shock in the man's eyes mirroring his own. There is an explosion as everything fragments.

And then there is nothing.

I

2009

There are 158 footsteps between the bus stop and home, but it can stretch to 180 if you aren't in a hurry, like maybe if you're wearing platform shoes. Or shoes you bought from a charity shop that have butterflies on the toes but never quite grip the heel at the back, thereby explaining why they were a knock-down £1.99. I turned the corner into our street (68 steps), and could just see the house – a four-bedroomed semi in a row of other three- and four-bedroomed semis. Dad's car was outside, which meant he had not yet left for work.

Behind me, the sun was setting behind Stortfold Castle, its dark shadow sliding down the hill like melting wax to overtake me. When I was a child we used to make our elongated shadows have gun battles, our street the O. K. Corral. On a different sort of day, I could have told you all the things that had happened to me on this route: where Dad taught me to ride a bike without stabilizers; where Mrs Doherty with the lopsided wig used to make us Welsh cakes; where Treena stuck her hand into a hedge when she was eleven and disturbed a wasp's nest and we ran screaming all the way back to the castle.

Thomas's tricycle was upturned on the path and, closing the gate behind me, I dragged it under the porch and

opened the door. The warmth hit me with the force of an air bag; Mum is a martyr to the cold and keeps the heating on all year round. Dad is always opening windows, complaining that she'd bankrupt the lot of us. He says our heating bills are larger than the GDP of a small African country.

'That you, love?'

'Yup.' I hung my jacket on the peg, where it fought for space amongst the others.

'Which you? Lou? Treena?'

'Lou.'

I peered round the living-room door. Dad was face down on the sofa, his arm thrust deep between the cushions, as if they had swallowed his limb whole. Thomas, my five-year-old nephew, was on his haunches, watching him intently.

'Lego.' Dad turned his face towards me, puce from exertion. 'Why they have to make the damned pieces so small I don't know. Have you seen Obi-Wan Kenobi's left arm?'

'It was on top of the DVD player. I think he swapped Obi's arms with Indiana Jones's.'

'Well, apparently now Obi can't possibly have beige arms. We have to have the black arms.'

'I wouldn't worry. Doesn't Darth Vader chop his arm off in episode two?' I pointed at my cheek so that Thomas would kiss it. 'Where's Mum?'

'Upstairs. How about that? A two-pound piece!'

I looked up, just able to hear the familiar creak of the ironing board. Josie Clark, my mother, never sat down. It was a point of honour. She had been known to stand on

an outside ladder painting the windows, occasionally pausing to wave, while the rest of us ate a roast dinner.

'Will you have a go at finding this bloody arm for me? He's had me looking for half an hour and I've got to get ready for work.'

'Are you on nights?'

'Yeah. It's half five.'

I glanced at the clock. 'Actually, it's half four.'

He extracted his arm from the cushions and squinted at his watch. 'Then what are you doing home so early?'

I shook my head vaguely, as if I might have misunderstood the question, and walked into the kitchen.

Granddad was sitting in his chair by the kitchen window, studying a sudoku. The health visitor had told us it would be good for his concentration, help his focus after the strokes. I suspected I was the only one to notice he simply filled out all the boxes with whatever number came to mind.

'Hey, Granddad.'

He looked up and smiled.

'You want a cup of tea?'

He shook his head, and partially opened his mouth.

'Cold drink?'

He nodded.

I opened the fridge door. 'There's no apple juice.' Apple juice, I remembered now, was too expensive. 'Ribena?'

He shook his head.

'Water?'

He nodded, murmured something that could have been a thank you as I handed him the glass.

My mother walked into the room, bearing a huge basket

of neatly folded laundry. 'Are these yours?' She brandished a pair of socks.

'Treena's, I think.'

'I thought so. Odd colour. I think they must have got in with Daddy's plum pyjamas. You're back early. Are you going somewhere?'

'No.' I filled a glass with tap water and drank it.

'Is Patrick coming round later? He rang here earlier. Did you have your mobile off?'

'Mm.'

'He said he's after booking your holiday. Your father says he saw something on the television about it. Where is it you liked? Ipsos? Kalypsos?'

'Skiathos.'

'That's the one. You want to check your hotel very carefully. Do it on the internet. He and Daddy watched something on the news at lunchtime. Apparently they're building sites, half of those budget deals, and you wouldn't know until you got there. Daddy, would you like a cup of tea? Did Lou not offer you one?' She put the kettle on then glanced up at me. It's possible she had finally noticed I wasn't saying anything. 'Are you all right, love? You look awfully pale.'

She reached out a hand and felt my forehead, as if I were much younger than twenty-six.

'I don't think we're going on holiday.'

My mother's hand stilled. Her gaze had that X-ray thing that it had held since I was a kid. 'Are you and Pat having some problems?'

'Mum, I –'

'I'm not trying to interfere. It's just, you've been

together an awful long time. It's only natural if things get a bit sticky every now and then. I mean, me and your father we –'

'I lost my job.'

My voice cut into the silence. The words hung there, searing themselves on the little room long after the sound had died away.

'You what?'

'Frank's shutting down the cafe. From tomorrow.' I held out a hand with the slightly damp envelope I had gripped in shock the entire journey home. All 180 steps from the bus stop. 'He's given me my three months' money.'

The day had started like any other day. Everyone I knew hated Monday mornings, but I never minded them. I liked arriving early at The Buttered Bun, firing up the huge tea urn in the corner, bringing in the crates of milk and bread from the backyard and chatting to Frank as we prepared to open.

I liked the fuggy bacon-scented warmth of the cafe, the little bursts of cool air as the door opened and closed, the low murmur of conversation and, when quiet, Frank's radio singing tinnily to itself in the corner. It wasn't a fashionable place – its walls were covered in scenes from the castle up on the hill, the tables still sported Formica tops, and the menu hadn't altered since I started, apart from a few changes to the chocolate bar selection and the addition of chocolate brownies and muffins to the iced bun tray.

But most of all I liked the customers. I liked Kev and Angelo, the plumbers, who came in most mornings and

teased Frank about where his meat might have come from. I liked the Dandelion Lady, nicknamed for her shock of white hair, who ate one egg and chips from Monday to Thursday and sat reading the complimentary newspapers and drinking her way through two cups of tea. I always made an effort to chat with her. I suspected it might be the only conversation the old woman got all day.

I liked the tourists, who stopped on their walk up and down from the castle, the shrieking schoolchildren, who stopped by after school, the regulars from the offices across the road, and Nina and Cherie, the hairdressers, who knew the calorie count of every single item The Buttered Bun had to offer. Even the annoying customers, like the red-haired woman who ran the toyshop and disputed her change at least once a week, didn't trouble me.

I watched relationships begin and end across those tables, children transferred between divorcees, the guilty relief of those parents who couldn't face cooking, and the secret pleasure of pensioners at a fried breakfast. All human life came through, and most of them shared a few words with me, trading jokes or comments over the mugs of steaming tea. Dad always said he never knew what was going to come out of my mouth next, but in the cafe it didn't matter.

Frank liked me. He was quiet by nature, and said having me there kept the place lively. It was a bit like being a barmaid, but without the hassle of drunks.

And then that afternoon, after the lunchtime rush had ended, and with the place briefly empty, Frank, wiping his hands on his apron, had come out from behind the hotplate and turned the little Closed sign to face the street.

'Now now, Frank, I've told you before. Extras are not included in the minimum wage.' Frank was, as Dad put it, as queer as a blue gnu. I looked up.

He wasn't smiling.

'Uh-oh. I didn't put salt in the sugar cellars again, did I?'

He was twisting a tea towel between his two hands and looked more uncomfortable than I had ever seen him. I wondered, briefly, whether someone had complained about me. And then he motioned to me to sit down.

'Sorry, Louisa,' he said, after he had told me. 'But I'm going back to Australia. My Dad's not too good, and it looks like the castle is definitely going to start doing its own refreshments. The writing's on the wall.'

I think I sat there with my mouth actually hanging open. And then Frank had handed me the envelope, and answered my next question before it left my lips. 'I know we never had, you know, a formal contract or anything, but I wanted to look after you. There's three months' money in there. We close tomorrow.'

'Three months!' Dad exploded, as my mother thrust a cup of sweet tea into my hands. 'Well, that's big of him, given she's worked like a ruddy Trojan in that place for the last six years.'

'Bernard.' Mum shot him a warning look, nodding towards Thomas. My parents minded him after school every day until Treena finished work.

'What the hell is she supposed to do now? He could have given her more than a day's bloody notice.'

'Well . . . she'll just have to get another job.'

'There are no bloody jobs, Josie. You know that as well as I do. We're in the middle of a bloody recession.'

Mum shut her eyes for a moment, as if composing herself before she spoke. 'She's a bright girl. She'll find herself something. She's got a solid employment record, hasn't she? Frank will give her a good reference.'

'Oh, fecking marvellous . . . "Louisa Clark is very good at buttering toast, and a dab hand with the old teapot."'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad.'

'I'm just saying.'

I knew the real reason for Dad's anxiety. They relied on my wages. Treena earned next to nothing at the flower shop. Mum couldn't work, as she had to look after Granddad, and Granddad's pension amounted to almost nothing. Dad lived in a constant state of anxiety about his job at the furniture factory. His boss had been muttering about possible redundancies for months. There were murmurings at home about debts and the juggling of credit cards. Dad had had his car written off by an uninsured driver two years previously, and somehow this had been enough for the whole teetering edifice that was my parents' finances to finally collapse. My modest wages had been a little bedrock of housekeeping money, enough to help see the family through from week to week.

'Let's not get ahead of ourselves. She can head down to the Job Centre tomorrow and see what's on offer. She's got enough to get by for now.' They spoke as if I weren't there. 'And she's smart. You're smart, aren't you, love? Perhaps she could do a typing course. Go into office work.'

I sat there, as my parents discussed what other jobs my limited qualifications might entitle me to. Factory work,

machinist, roll butterer. For the first time that afternoon I wanted to cry. Thomas watched me with big, round eyes, and silently handed me half a soggy biscuit.

'Thanks, Tommo,' I mouthed silently, and ate it.

He was down at the athletics club, as I had known he would be. Mondays to Thursdays, regular as a station timetable, Patrick was there in the gym or running in circles around the floodlit track. I made my way down the steps, hugging myself against the cold, and walked slowly out on to the track, waving as he came close enough to see who it was.

'Run with me,' he puffed, as he got closer. His breath came in pale clouds. 'I've got four laps to go.'

I hesitated just a moment, and then began to run alongside him. It was the only way I was going to get any kind of conversation out of him. I was wearing my pink trainers with the turquoise laces, the only shoes I could possibly run in.

I had spent the day at home, trying to be useful. I'm guessing it was about an hour before I started to get under my mother's feet. Mum and Granddad had their routines, and having me there interrupted them. Dad was asleep, as he was on nights this month, and not to be disturbed. I tidied my room, then sat and watched television with the sound down and when I remembered, periodically, why I was at home in the middle of the day I had felt an actual brief pain in my chest.

'I wasn't expecting you.'

'I got fed up at home. I thought maybe we could do something.'

He looked sideways at me. There was a fine film of

sweat on his face. 'The sooner you get another job, babe, the better.'

'It's all of twenty-four hours since I lost the last one. Am I allowed to just be a bit miserable and floppy? You know, just for today?'

'But you've got to look at the positive side. You knew you couldn't stay at that place forever. You want to move upwards, onwards.' Patrick had been named Stortfold Young Entrepreneur of the Year two years previously, and had not yet quite recovered from the honour. He had since acquired a business partner, Ginger Pete, offering personal training to clients over a 40-mile area, and two liveried vans on the HP. He also had a whiteboard in his office, on which he liked to scrawl his projected turnover with thick black markers, working and reworking the figures until they met with his satisfaction. I was never entirely sure that they bore any resemblance to real life.

'Being made redundant can change people's lives, Lou.' He glanced at his watch, checking his lap time. 'What do you want to do? You could retrain. I'm sure they do a grant for people like you.'

'People like me?'

'People looking for a new opportunity. What do you want to be? You could be a beautician. You're pretty enough.' He nudged me as we ran, as if I should be grateful for the compliment.

'You know my beauty routine. Soap, water, the odd paper bag.'

Patrick was beginning to look exasperated.

I was starting to lag behind. I hate running. I hated him for not slowing down.

'Look . . . shop assistant. Secretary. Estate agent. I don't know . . . there must be something you want to do.'

But there wasn't. I had liked it in the cafe. I liked knowing everything there was to know about The Buttered Bun, and hearing about the lives of the people who came through it. I had felt comfortable there.

'You can't mope around, babe. Got to get over it. All the best entrepreneurs fight their way back from rock bottom. Jeffrey Archer did it. So did Richard Branson.' He tapped my arm, trying to get me to keep up.

'I doubt if Jeffrey Archer ever got made redundant from toasting teacakes.' I was out of breath. And I was wearing the wrong bra. I slowed, dropped my hands down on to my knees.

He turned, running backwards, his voice carrying on the still, cold air. 'But if he had . . . I'm just saying. Sleep on it, put on a smart suit and head down to the Job Centre. Or I'll train you up to work with me, if you like. You know there's money in it. And don't worry about the holiday. I'll pay.'

I smiled at him.

He blew a kiss and his voice echoed across the empty stadium. 'You can pay me back when you're back on your feet.'

I made my first claim for Jobseeker's Allowance. I attended a 45-minute interview, and a group interview, where I sat with a group of twenty or so mismatched men and women, half of whom wore the same slightly stunned expression I suspected I did, and the other half the blank, uninterested faces of people who had been here too many

times before. I wore what my Dad deemed my 'civilian' clothes.

As a result of these efforts, I had endured a brief stint filling in on a night shift at a chicken processing factory (it had given me nightmares for weeks), and two days at a training session as a Home Energy Adviser. I had realized pretty quickly that I was essentially being instructed to befuddle old people into switching energy suppliers, and told Syed, my personal 'adviser' that I couldn't do it. He had been insistent that I continue, so I had listed some of the practices that they had asked me to employ, at which point he had gone a bit quiet and suggested we (it was always 'we' even though it was pretty obvious that one of us *had* a job) try something else.

I did two weeks at a fast food chain. The hours were okay, I could cope with the fact that the uniform made my hair static, but I found it impossible to stick to the 'appropriate responses' script, with its 'How can I help you today?' and its 'Would you like large fries with that?' I had been let go after one of the doughnut girls caught me debating the varying merits of the free toys with a four-year-old. What can I say? She was a smart four-year-old. I also thought the Sleeping Beauties were sappy.

Now I sat at my fourth interview as Syed scanned through the touch screen for further employment 'opportunities'. Even Syed, who wore the grimly cheerful demeanour of someone who had shoehorned the most unlikely candidates into a job, was starting to sound a little weary.

'Um . . . Have you ever considered joining the entertainment industry?'

'What, as in pantomime dame?'

'Actually, no. But there is an opening for a pole dancer. Several, in fact.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'Please tell me you are kidding.'

'It's thirty hours a week on a self-employed basis. I believe the tips are good.'

'Please, please tell me you have not just advised me to get a job that involves parading around in front of strangers in my underwear.'

'You said you were good with people. And you seem to like . . . theatrical . . . clothing.' He glanced at my tights, which were green and glittery. I had thought they would cheer me up. Thomas had hummed the theme tune from *The Little Mermaid* at me for almost the whole of breakfast.

Syed tapped something into his keyboard. 'How about "adult chat line supervisor"?'

I stared at him.

He shrugged. 'You said you liked talking to people.'

'No. And no to semi-nude bar staff. Or masseuse. Or webcam operator. Come on, Syed. There must be something I can do that wouldn't actually give my dad a heart attack.'

This appeared to stump him. 'There's not much left outside flexi-hour retail opportunities.'

'Night-time shelf stacking?' I had been here enough times now to speak their language.

'There's a waiting list. Parents tend to go for it, because it suits the school hours,' he said apologetically. He studied the screen again. 'So we're really left with care assistant.'

'Wiping old people's bottoms.'

'I'm afraid, Louisa, you're not qualified for much else. If you wanted to retrain, I'd be happy to point you in the

right direction. There are plenty of courses at the adult education centre.'

'But we've been through this, Syed. If I do that, I lose my Jobseeker money, right?'

'If you're not available for work, yes.'

We sat there in silence for a moment. I gazed at the doors, where two burly security men stood. I wondered if they had got the job through the Job Centre.

'I'm not good with old people, Syed. My granddad lives at home since he had his strokes, and I can't cope with him.'

'Ah. So you have some experience of caring.'

'Not really. My mum does everything for him.'

'Would your mum like a job?'

'Funny.'

'I'm not being funny.'

'And leave me looking after my granddad? No thanks. That's from him, as well as me, by the way. Haven't you got anything in any cafes?'

'I don't think there are enough cafes left to guarantee you employment, Louisa. We could try Kentucky Fried Chicken. You might get on better there.'

'Because I'd get so much more out of offering a Bargain Bucket than a Chicken McNugget? I don't think so.'

'Well, then perhaps we'll have to look further afield.'

'There are only four buses to and from our town. You know that. And I know you said I should look into the tourist bus, but I rang the station and it stops at 5pm. Plus it's twice as expensive as the normal bus.'

Syed sat back in his seat. 'At this point in proceedings, Louisa, I really need to make the point that as a fit and

able person, in order to continue qualifying for your allowance, you need –'

'– to show that I'm trying to get a job. I know.'

How could I explain to this man how much I wanted to work? Did he have the slightest idea how much I missed my old job? Unemployment had been a concept, something droningly referred to on the news in relation to shipyards or car factories. I had never considered that you might miss a job like you missed a limb – a constant, reflexive thing. I hadn't thought that as well as the obvious fears about money, and your future, losing your job would make you feel inadequate, and a bit useless. That it would be harder to get up in the morning than when you were rudely shocked into consciousness by the alarm. That you might miss the people you worked with, no matter how little you had in common with them. Or even that you might find yourself searching for familiar faces as you walked the high street. The first time I had seen the Dandelion Lady wandering past the shops, looking as aimless as I felt, I had fought the urge to go and give her a hug.

Syed's voice broke into my reverie. 'Aha. Now this might work.'

I tried to peer round at the screen.

'Just come in. This very minute. Care assistant position.'

'I told you I was no good with –'

'It's not old people. It's a . . . a private position. To help in someone's house, and the address is less than two miles from your home. "Care and companionship for a disabled man." Can you drive?'

'Yes. But would I have to wipe his –'

'No bottom wiping required, as far as I can tell.' He scanned the screen. 'He's a . . . a quadriplegic. He needs someone in the daylight hours to help feed and assist. Often in these jobs it's a case of being there when they want to go out somewhere, helping with basic stuff that they can't do themselves. Oh. It's good money. Quite a lot more than the minimum wage.'

'That's probably because it involves bottom wiping.'

'I'll ring them to confirm the absence of bottom wiping. But if that's the case, you'll go along for the interview?'

He said it like it was a question.

But we both knew the answer.

I sighed, and gathered up my bag ready for the trip home.

'Jesus Christ,' said my father. 'Can you imagine? If it wasn't punishment enough ending up in a ruddy wheelchair, then you get our Lou turning up to keep you company.'

'Bernard!' my mother scolded.

Behind me, Granddad was laughing into his mug of tea.

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