

Alphabet Weekends

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Extract

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Prologue: New Year's Eve

Natalie and Tom

New Year's Eve. It was one of those things, wasn't it? You only looked good in a bikini for one summer (after breasts, before tummy), you only ever had one first kiss (per guy, obviously), and everyone, well at least everyone Natalie knew, had honestly truly only ever had one really, really brilliant New Year's Eve. Which, funnily enough, usually coincided roughly with the looking-good-in-a-bikini and the first-kiss year. All the years after that suffered by comparison. The summers-were-hotter-when-we-were-young principle – wasn't everything a bit brighter and louder and more vivid? Wasn't I a bit thinner and prettier and more fun? Wasn't New Year's Eve an altogether better experience? Like Valentine's Day – only really good when you were fifteen and waiting for a card from the guy who sat in the back row on the school coach and wore the really thin tie and listened to Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway To Heaven' *all* the time. A one-year deal, a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

Eleven fifteen p.m. on New Year's Eve was actually a great time to be driving. Everyone else was already 'there'. At the place where they were going to pretend to have the time of their lives, when actually they were thinking about that house party they went to in Cambridge in 1988, or that time in 1967 when they were so stoned

they didn't even hear midnight chime, or the New Year in 1992 when their boyfriend proposed to them in Times Square, or any year when the same ten people sitting round a suburban dinner table with them didn't seem quite so dull, or so snappy, or so needing to get home because their babysitter charged double time after midnight.

There was no one else on this bit of road. 'Dancing in the Moonlight' was blaring out of the stereo, and Natalie changed empty lanes a couple of times in a kind of Corsa salsa. She was cheering up a bit. Good idea. Good idea of Tom's.

She'd been going to stay at home, having a sulky night. Rose, possibly the only friend who could have jollied her out of it, had announced apologetically that her boyfriend Pete had got a deal on Eurostar – two nights, three-star in Lille (not Paris, that was two hundred pounds more and he hadn't yet finished his doctorate, after all). And would Natalie be okay? *Et tu*, Brute, Natalie had thought (saying a mean, silent prayer that Rose would not come back with a ring on her finger, and instantly feeling awful for wishing it), before she had hugged her friend, offered her lingerie drawer with an ironic shrug – negligées not thongs, obviously – and said that, yes, of course, she'd be fine, she'd go to some party. She'd then, obviously, turned down the two parties she'd had invitations to. Told both hosts she'd already accepted someone else, and managed to fall off the radar (which made her simultaneously relieved and alarmed – it had been pretty easy).

Both her sisters were a waste of time. Susannah was in Marrakesh, if you please, at some sort of New Year's Eve wrap party for the film Casper had just finished shooting. And Bridget was about ten months pregnant, which made her a very unlikely source of fun this evening. She and Karl were probably already in bed, with their angelic eighteen-month-old, Christina, nestled between them, reading the baby-name book, and toasting the New Year in sparkling apple juice.

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Mum and Dad's? She'd rather be alone. A thirty-five-year-old at home with her parents on New Year's Eve in any year was bad enough, but after this last year, with the way things were at home . . . No, she couldn't have faced that. Not with everything that was going on.

She should have brought in a new flatmate when Susannah finally moved out. They'd liked it, just the two of them, after Bridget had left to get married three years ago, and the mortgage was pretty okay. Bridget had liked it, her room being unoccupied: she could still escape Karl and Christina, sometimes, for the odd night in town. But Susannah had gone so quickly, and apathy had set in. Well, not apathy. Anticipation. She shouldn't have been there much longer herself. It should have been happening to her, too.

None of it was how it should have been.

Right now, for example, she should not be bombing down the M4 listening to the radio, heading for the public house of her adolescent New Years' Eves. She should be in the Maldives, after an exhilarating day's diving, wafting fragrantly and gold-enly around in something white and linen, drinking Bollinger imported at great expense. She should be in Simon's arms.

The bastard.

The complete bastard.

She was half-way through wishing him third-degree sunburn and jellyfish-stung gonads when the tears started. Damn. She thumped the wheel. I WILL NOT GIVE HIM THE SATISFACTION. I GAVE HIM SEVEN YEARS – I WILL WILL WILL NOT GIVE HIM ANY MORE.

Her New Year's Eve – The One – had been that one, the first the two of them had shared. Skiing in Switzerland. In a chalet belonging to someone's parents. A snowy, schnapps-fuelled rave in a pretty village square. A thousand people dancing to a hundred different tunes blasting through open windows, a

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million snowflakes on them all. That big, drunken, loving crowd vibe. Simon kissing her, his mouth so hot in the cold air. Making love in the drying room because it was too cold to do it lying on the snow (and they'd tried) quietly, so no one woke up.

That had been the one.

She'd forgotten about Tom. Well, not forgotten about him exactly. Tom was always there. He always had been. But she'd forgotten that he wouldn't have forgotten her.

Natalie and Tom had met in August 1977, the summer that Elvis Aaron Presley had died, when Natalie, her two sisters and their parents had moved in two doors down. Bridget had been the nesting one even then, unpacking boxes with their mother, arranging her enormous collection of Whimsies on the white melamine chest of drawers that separated her narrow single bed from Natalie's in the bedroom they were to share. Susannah had watched television for days on end – they'd showed all of Elvis's movies: *Viva Las Vegas*, *King Creole*, *Love Me Tender*. The new three-piece suite hadn't arrived so she practised the dance routines with abandonment in the living room, singing along. She would have enlisted Natalie, if she'd been given the chance, as extra chorus, but Natalie was sulking. She hadn't wanted to move. She'd liked their old house. Susannah always said she was change-resistant, and that you should embrace change. That was the sort of thing Susannah said a lot, using her long, graceful arms in expansive gestures, silver bracelets jangling.

Dad was going to be a branch manager, and that was why they had had to move. It was a promotion and a good thing and, anyway, no one had asked her.

She had been sitting on the low brick wall at the front of the house, poking at some earth with a twig, when she first saw him. Her mother had come out with some empty boxes just as

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his mother was walking by – she said they’d been into town to get him some new school shoes before the start of term, and that his feet grew like nothing else, and that he needed a new pair practically every term, and that was expensive enough before you even started to think about football boots and training shoes and wellingtons. Tom – whom Natalie judged to be about her own age but taller – looked mortified, and Natalie’s mum looked sort of stunned, and nodded and smiled a lot, slightly sideways at her when Tom’s mother said three daughters, how lovely and how lucky because their feet, girls’ feet, probably didn’t grow anything like so fast. Natalie had weirdly big feet, which seemed to grow only sporadically, incredibly quickly and usually just after her mum had bought her some new shoes. It was a bit of a family joke. He had stary eyes. Big stary eyes. And too much curly hair. Not down his neck, like a footballer, but all up on top of his head.

Natalie’s mum told Tom’s mum that Natalie was a tomboy, and Tom’s mum said Tom would like that, that there weren’t many other children his age on the street, and that they should be friends.

But, of course, it had taken weeks. Well into the new term at school. Weeks of self-consciously playing at the same thing (bikes, roller skates, toss-ups) in two gardens, two houses apart. It was Mrs Samways, the old lady in the middle, who finally got them together. She had this copper-pan thing she kept in her front room that she put sweets in and then got you to pretend that you had ‘magicked’ the sweets into it by rubbing it. Everyone, except perhaps her, knew there was no magic, but they kept going in anyway and rubbing the pan. Mrs Samways liked the company and the children liked the sweets, even if the front room did smell a bit funny, like she’d always eaten fish the night before. When she saw children in their front gardens, she would appear in her doorway, with a luridly coloured crocheted

shawl round her shoulders and say, in her thin, tremulous voice, 'Anyone feeling magic today?' and the children would smile shyly and traipse over.

One particular Sunday, when the dads were polishing their cars and the mums were washing up after Sunday lunch, and the older siblings were listening to the top forty and writing the list down to memorise before school, they both answered the reedy call. Tom let her choose first, and afterwards, when they had let Mrs Samways ask them some questions about school, he had said to Natalie, 'Wanna go for a ride?'

'S'pose.' She had shrugged.

And that was how it had been between them, ever since. Tom was the instigator, Natalie the willing participant. He was older, in Bridget's class at school. And braver. And more foolhardy, Natalie's dad always said. It was Tom who had decided they should ride full pelt down the steep road and practise skidding to the left and right inches before the waist-high brick wall and, what was more he'd owned up to the idea, somewhat tearfully, in the back of Natalie's dad's car on the way to Casualty. It was Tom who had decided they should take the bottle of Martini from the drinks table at his parents' summer do, at which they were supposed to be taking coats and handing out peanuts, and drink it in the garage. No one had to own up to that. They were very sick very privately, and no one ever missed the Martini. He had done everything first. School trip to France. Cigarettes. Snogging with the lights off at a party when the parents had gone out. O levels, A levels, university . . .

They'd had one serious fight. The year Torvill and Dean won the world championships with 'Bolero' in those floaty purple outfits. He'd got off with Susannah – who did a lot of random snogging – at the school disco, and Natalie had told him she thought it was disgusting, like snogging your sister. He had

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laughed, and said that Susannah was nothing like his sister, and that maybe snogging Natalie would be like snogging his sister, but that Susannah was a different kettle of fish. He had said it with an expression on his face that Natalie hadn't seen before, and didn't like at all, and she had slapped him – not across the face, but hard, in his stomach – and flounced off, and not talked to him for a whole week, until he bought her a Terry's Chocolate Orange and said, with a very serious face, that he was sorry and that he would never do it again.

And they had had one kiss, when she was nineteen and he was twenty, and she had been dumped and he was picking up the pieces. Again. She'd been in love with some guy at college, only he'd taken this old girlfriend of his to some big London house-party instead of her, and she'd come home to mope. Tom had been home, too, getting ready to go Interrailing for the summer, and she'd sat on the floor of his bedroom watching him put pants and T-shirts into his rucksack, moaning.

'You know what your trouble is?' he had asked. 'You have to fall in love. Every single time.'

'I'm a romantic – what's wrong with that?' She had pouted.

'Bollocks! It's just a bad habit. You can't possibly be in love that many times, Nat. Love isn't like that!'

'And when did you become such an expert? There's me thinking you're reading computer science.'

'I'm no expert. That's exactly my point. I've never been in love.'

'Diddums.'

'I don't need your sympathy, honey. I'm not the one sitting there with a gob on. I've been in plenty of other things, thanks very much.'

'Like knickers.'

'Well, yes, since you're asking. A few pairs. I've been in lust, I've had a laugh, I've cared, I've even really, really liked girls.'

But love? Not yet. And I'm in no hurry either, especially if this,' he gestured at her, 'is what it does for you.'

'Boys mature less quickly than girls.'

'That's lame. You're missing my point, Nat. You're in love with love. You fall for the wrong guys, and you fall too bloody hard. And then we have to have this heartbreak fallout all over the place. It's stupid.'

Natalie had stood up, indignant. 'I'm so sorry to come round and burden you with my stupid "heartbreak fallout". How tiresome. I'll go.'

He caught her wrist. 'Shut up. I can take it. And the only place you're going is the pub, with me, now. If I can't reason you out of it, I'll have to drink you out of it.'

Several drinks later, they were lying on their backs in the garden, still talking about Natalie's heart.

'You know what your trouble is?'

Natalie's trouble at that moment was that she needed to pee, but she let her head loll to one side and looked at him. 'What, O wise one?'

'You've got the wrong criteria.'

'Huh?'

'You need to make more intellectual decisions, fewer emotional ones . . .' 'Decisions' came out a bit slurred.

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'You need to go for someone who won't let you down.'

'How are you supposed to know if someone's going to let you down or not?'

'I wouldn't let you down.'

She flopped her arm on to his chest. 'I know you wouldn't. You're my bestest friend.' Patted him. She really must get up and go to the loo.

Tom was suddenly up on his elbow. Close. Looking at her. And then he kissed her, just once, lightly, on the lips. At first she

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thought he must have missed. Maybe he was trying to kiss the cheek of the second Natalie. He had drunk three pints. But his face said otherwise. 'Shut up,' she said, although he hadn't spoken.

'I'll marry you.'

'Shut up!' A bit louder that time.

'Not now. We're too young.'

'Not ever. Never, you idiot.'

'Never is a long time.'

Natalie sat up. 'Shut up.'

'I think it's your wit and biting, incisive commentary I love most about you.' He was smiling again, and he looked more like Tom.

'Shut—'

He put his finger up to silence her. 'Okay, I will. Just remember this afternoon, Natalie. When you come back to me with another broken heart, and you're thirty and over the hill, and you've had enough of the hunt, I'll marry you.'

'Right. Jolly good. Nice to know. Thanks, Tom.'

Blimey – did we really think thirty was over the hill? Sixteen years ago it had probably seemed it. From the other side, of course, it was pretty young.

He'd been laughing at her then. Perhaps she ought to call his bluff tonight. Go down on one knee, take him up on his offer. He probably wouldn't remember – she was surprised *she* remembered herself. And it wasn't exactly the subject matter that most made her want to chuckle right now.

The pub must be heaving – there was nowhere to park. Natalie drove the Corsa up on to the grass bank that ran alongside the cricket pitch and got out. Blimey, it was cold. She pulled her coat tightly round her, tucked her hair behind her ears and trotted towards the pub door. You could hear the noise, as you got closer, and there was a sort of Ready Brek orange glow coming from inside.

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Like a warm blanket, the voices and hands of her old friends covered her.

‘Hiya, Nat!’

‘Happy New Year!’

‘How are you?’

‘Get you a drink?’

She realised she felt a little elated. People were pleased to see her, and it was good to see them. The cast of her childhood and adolescence. Like the theme tune – sometimes you wanna be where everybody knows your name. Clever old Tom.

And there he was. He always drank like that. Arms folded, with his pint balanced on the inside of one elbow. Tipping forwards and backwards a little on his heels. He was nodding and smiling at someone, and he didn’t see her for a few moments. Then someone backed away from the bar with a metal tray of drinks over their head, and he spotted her through the space. He winked and mouthed hello, and Natalie thought suddenly that she might cry.

Patrick and Lucy

Lucy heard Patrick coming back down the stairs, and came out into the hall. ‘Thanks for that, love. Success?’

‘Sort of. Ed is finally, three chapters later, asleep, but Bella is still insisting that at the great age of eight she’s old enough to stay up until midnight.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘I told her awake was fine, that it was up we had a problem with.’

Lucy smiled. ‘Too right. This is you-and-me time. Come and have a glass of this.’ She was holding an open bottle of champagne in one hand, and a half-drunk glass in the other.

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She turned back into the kitchen. 'Grab another glass from the cabinet, will you?'

Patrick went into the front room. How long had he been upstairs with the kids? Their living room was transformed. She must have gone round like a dervish. The newspapers, which had previously been strewn across the floor, were neatly piled on the coffee-table. The kids' toys had been returned to the boxes behind the sofa, and the pine needles had disappeared from under the tree, which had been up for three weeks and was practically bald. That was how Patrick felt. Used up. Worn out by the festive season. His parents and her mother and a seemingly endless parade of friends, relatives and what he referred to silently as 'miscellaneous' had paraded through and been fed, watered and cleaned-up-after. Lucy was like Delia Smith on speed. Practically every other morning he and Ed had been despatched to Tesco with a scrawled list of obscure ingredients like saffron, vanilla sugar and goose fat, and every evening he had washed and dried the same saucepans and baffling food-processor attachments and put them away in readiness for the next day's onslaught. He had fallen into bed and into a coma every night. He'd be lucky to make it to midnight. New Year's Eve should be in March. Who the hell could be bothered now? Clearly, Lucy. She'd laid the table, two places, real napkins, candles, and put on a CD, which she almost never did.

Patrick stared at himself, pale and baggy-eyed, in the mirror above the mantelpiece and wondered if he should have tidied himself up.

'Patrick?' He grabbed a glass, one of the eight crystal flutes they had received as a wedding gift, and went back to the kitchen.

It smelt great. Lucy was stirring something on the hob, and her face was a little flushed from the heat. Two plates of gravadlax were waiting on the counter.

'This'll be ready in about twenty minutes. Give it here.' She filled the glass, then raised her own to clink against his. 'Happy New Year, darling,' she said.

'Happy New Year.' She kissed him. A kiss full of needs and promises. 'I can't believe you've still got the energy to cook, after the fortnight you've had.'

'I am pretty knackered,' she confessed, adding, 'but you're the most important. And tonight is just for us. And,' she smiled, 'it *is* from *10-minute Feasts*!'

'You're unbelievable.'

'And tomorrow Marianne's cooking for us, so I'll get a day off.'

'Is it just us?'

'Think so. Why?'

'I'd prefer it, that's all. If any more parents from Bella's class are there it'll turn into the same old thing. Teachers, curriculum, car park, cake sale . . .'

'Welcome to my world, honey!'

'I know . . . but it can get a bit tedious. It'll be more relaxed if it's just Alec and Marianne.'

Lucy didn't answer.

He drained his glass, poured more for himself and topped hers up. Then sat in a chair and watched her quietly. She didn't look different at all. Not older, or bigger, more tired or more staid. Just exactly like the girl he'd first met.

He'd followed her up and down three aisles of a supermarket. Fruit and veg. Tinned goods. Baking. She had a great wiggle. A happy walk. From a distance, filling his trolley with whatever he grabbed from left and right, he watched her talk to a couple of old ladies and a spotty youth stacking shelves, her auburn hair bouncing and shiny. He watched her take an inordinately long time to choose a handful of plums. Ludicrous though it sounded, even to him, he had pretty much fallen for her back view before

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he'd overtaken her on the corner of Toiletries and seen her lovely face, then Bella, strapped to her chest in one of those origami-like slings.

Lucy and Tom liked to joke that Patrick had invented supermarket cruising.

'Wish you were at the pub with Tom?' She was looking at him quizzically. His brother had called earlier in the week and invited them.

'No. Way too old for all that nonsense, aren't we?'

'Speak for yourself. I've still got a few epic evenings left in me. It might have been fun. We could have got your mum to have the kids, maybe.'

'So you're the one who wishes they were in the pub with my brother!'

'No way. Although he said Natalie was down, didn't he? I haven't seen her since the Simon thing blew up. Still, maybe she'll drop round before she goes back. And this is what we do, isn't it? It's tradition.'

'Have we got traditions?'

'Honey, we've got dozens. Hadn't you noticed?' Now she hugged him, and he smelt her perfume and her hair. He breathed deeply, and rested his chin on top of her head.

In a moment, though, she was back at the stove, stirring. 'Can you believe this is our seventh New Year together?' she said.

He smiled. 'We didn't get much peace that first night, either, did we?' Bella had been teething. He'd greeted midnight pacing the bedroom floor with another man's screaming child in his arms.

Lucy had said she would ask her mother to have her. She was embarrassed, Patrick thought, and it had made him sad. Will, her husband, had left her when Bella was three months old, and Patrick was the first man she had been with since. He'd wanted

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desperately to show her that Bella was okay with him, that her past could be part of his present and their future. He hadn't necessarily expected to prove it so utterly on New Year's Eve. It was the first time they'd made love. They were almost, but not quite, too tired by the time Bella had succumbed to a dose of Calpol, and it had been oh-so-quiet in order that they didn't wake her, and he remembered her saying that she never wanted to start another year without him there, then looking mortified, as though she had said something so clingy and so needy that he would leave immediately. He had hated how grateful she was, how reticent about her body, with its four angry red stretch-marks and its huge milky nipples. He just loved her. He didn't mind about all that. He had wanted to take care of her. He still did, all these years later. 'What are we having?'

'This,' she gestured towards the salmon, 'then king prawns in a tomato and champagne sauce – so I'll need a dribble of that, but don't worry, I stuck another bottle in the fridge – then strawberries.' She slid her arm under his shirt, and ran it lightly across his skin. 'Which you can eat out of a bowl or off me, whichever you prefer.' She kissed him hungrily. 'Mmm. It's been a while. In case you hadn't noticed.'

He had. It had been three weeks. Not since the day . . .

Anna and Nicholas

Nicholas took a handkerchief out of his pocket and rubbed it gently across the silver neck of the decanter. He had poured the red wine into it earlier this evening, through a muslin square, carefully and slowly, in the kitchen. He'd been in Anna's way, of course, although he had chosen his corner carefully, hoping not to be; she had shouted at him. But these things had to be done properly.

The table was beautifully laid. They weren't rich, but they

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were of a generation that took care of its possessions, and over the forty years of their marriage they had amassed some beautiful things. Full sets of crystal wine glasses – none chipped; a Royal Doulton dinner service; the beautiful white linen tablecloth with matching napkins. All bought by themselves. For twelve Christmases, back in the seventies and early eighties, they had given them to each other. Anna had bought him one red and one white wine glass, and he had bought her one place setting. You could mark out his career by how easy it had been to pay for it. In the early years it had been a lot of money. By the end, it was just one of the gifts they exchanged – Christmas had become a much more elaborate affair. But they still did it. The girls thought it was dull – Susannah was always trying to talk him into jewellery, Bridget favoured perfumes. But it was what they wanted, a ritual that mattered. Anna wouldn't use any of them until they'd got six, and they hadn't been able to have eight 'smart' guests for dinner until Charles and Diana had got married. They'd bought the cutlery, in its smart mahogany canteen, one year in the Harrods sale, with the only inheritance either of them had ever had: four hundred pounds from an old aunt of his. It was silver plate, of course, but it did justice to the china and glass. It hadn't ever been about showing off – Anna was no Hyacinth Bucket. It seemed to him that it had been about achievement, commitment and longevity.

The girls hadn't understood it then, and they never would. Everything was different now: Bridget had got her eight-place dinner service overnight – it was all itemised like an inventory on her wedding list. He'd spent fifteen thousand pounds on a wedding, she'd gone off on a three thousand pound honeymoon and come home to a hallway full of a ready-made life, carefully packaged by John Lewis. They laughed at him, gently, when he told them that the things you had to work for were worth more to you.