

'Warm, funny
and moving'
ROSIE WALSH

THE

'Utterly
gorgeous'
RUTH JONES

People on

'Full of original
characters and wisdom'
KATIE FFORDE

PLATFORM 5



Nobody speaks to strangers on the train.
What would happen if they did?



Every day at 8:05, Iona Iverson boards the train to go to work. As a seasoned commuter, there are rules to follow:

- You must have a job to go to
- Don't consume hot food
- Never speak to strangers on the train

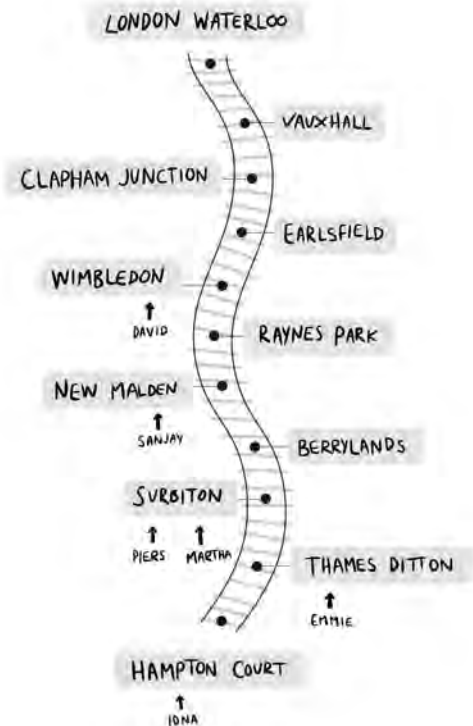
Iona sees the same group of people each day, people she makes assumptions about and gives nicknames to, but never ever talks to.

Then, one morning, Smart-But-Sexist Surbiton chokes on a grape right in front of Iona. Too-Good-To-Be-True New Malden saves his life, and this one event sparks a chain reaction.

With nothing in common but their commute, an eclectic group of people learn that their assumptions about each other don't match reality. But when Iona's life begins to fall apart, will her new friends be there when she needs them most?



THE
People on
PLATFORM 5
CLARE POOLEY



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Iona

08:05 Hampton Court to Waterloo

Until the point when a man started dying right in front of her on the 08:05, Iona's day had been just like any other.

She always left the house at half past seven. It took her an average of twenty minutes to walk to the station in heels, which meant she'd usually arrive fifteen minutes before her train left for Waterloo. Two minutes later if she was wearing the Louboutins.

Arriving in good time was crucial if she wanted to secure her usual seat in her usual carriage, which she did. While novelty was a wonderful thing when it came to fashion, or film, or even patisserie, it was not welcome on her daily commute.

Some time ago, Iona's editor had suggested that she start *working from home*. It was, he'd told her, all the rage, and her job could be done just as well remotely. He'd tried to cajole her out of her office space with sweet talk of an extra hour in bed and more flexibility, and, when that didn't work, had attempted to drive her out by making her do something awful called *hot desking*,

which – she learned – was corporate speak for *sharing*. Even as a child, Iona had never liked sharing. That little incident with the Barbie doll was still seared in her memory and, no doubt, her classmates' as well. No, boundaries were necessary. Luckily, Iona's colleagues quickly became familiar with which was her preferred desk, and it morphed from hot to decidedly frigid.

Iona loved going into the office. She enjoyed rubbing shoulders with all the youth, who taught her the latest lingo, played her their favourite new tracks and told her what to watch on Netflix. It was important to keep at least one finger plugged into the zeitgeist, especially in her profession. Bea, bless her, wasn't much help on that front.

She wasn't, however, looking forward to today very much. Her latest editor had scheduled a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree appraisal, which sounded altogether too intimate. At her age (fifty-seven), one didn't like to be appraised too closely, and certainly not from every angle. Some things were best left to the imagination. Or not thought about at all, to be honest.

Anyhow, what did he know? Much like policemen and doctors, her editors seemed to get younger and younger with each passing year. This one, believe it or not, was conceived after the World Wide Web. He'd never known a world where phones were tethered to the wall and you had to look up facts in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Iona thought back, somewhat wistfully, to her annual appraisals when she'd first started at the magazine, nearly thirty years ago. They didn't call them 'appraisals' then, of course. They were called 'lunch', and they happened at the Savoy Grill. The only downside was having to politely remove her editor's fat, sweaty hand from her thigh on a regular basis, but she was quite adept at that, and it was almost worth it for the sole meunière, deftly detached from the bone by a subservient waiter with a French accent, and washed down with a chilled bottle of Chablis. She tried to remember the last time someone – other than Bea – had attempted to grope her under a table, and couldn't. Not since the early nineties, in any case.

Iona checked her reflection in the hall mirror. She'd gone for her favourite red suit today – the one that shouted *I mean business* and *Don't even think about it, mister*.

'Lulu!' she called, only to discover the French bulldog already sitting right by her feet, ready to go. Another creature of habit. She leaned down to attach the lead to Lulu's hot-pink collar, studded with diamanté spelling out her name. Bea didn't approve of Lulu's accessories. *Darling, she's a dog, not a child*, she'd said on numerous occasions. Iona was quite aware of that. Children these days were rather selfish, lazy and entitled, she thought. Not like darling Lulu at all.

Iona opened the front door and called up the stairs, as

she always did, ‘Bye bye, Bea! I’m off to the office. I’ll miss you!’

The advantage of boarding the train at Hampton Court was that it was the end of the line, or the beginning, depending, of course, on which way you were travelling. There was a life lesson there, thought Iona. In her experience, most endings turned out to be beginnings in disguise. She should make a note of that one for the column. So, the trains were always – as long as you arrived early enough – relatively empty. This meant that Iona could usually occupy her favourite seat (seventh aisle seat on the right, facing forward, at a table) in her favourite carriage: number three. Iona had always preferred odd numbers to evens. She didn’t like things to be too round or convenient.

Iona sat down, putting Lulu on the seat beside her, and began arranging her things in front of her. Her Thermos filled with green tea, just chock-a-block with age-defying antioxidants; a bone china cup and matching saucer, because drinking tea out of plastic was beyond the pale in any circumstance; her latest mail and her iPad. It was just ten stops to Waterloo, and the thirty-six-minute journey was the perfect opportunity to prepare for the day ahead.

As the train became busier and busier with each stop, Iona worked happily in her little bubble, wonderfully anonymous and blending into the background. Just one of

thousands of identikit commuters, none of whom paid her the blindest bit of attention. Certainly, no one would talk to her, or to anyone else. Everyone knew the Second Rule of Commuting: you may nod to someone if you've seen them on a significant number of occasions, even – *in extremis* – exchange a wry smile or an eye-roll at one of the guard's announcements over the tannoy, but you never, ever talk. Unless you were a nutter. Which she wasn't, despite what they said.

An unfamiliar noise made Iona look up. She recognized the man sitting in front of her. He wasn't usually on this train, but she often saw him on her return journey, on the 18:17 from Waterloo. She'd noticed him because of his exquisite tailoring, which ordinarily she would have admired, but it was rather ruined by an extraordinary sense of entitlement which only really comes with being white, male, heterosexual and excessively solvent. This was evidenced by his penchant for manspreading, and talking extremely loudly on his mobile phone about *the markets* and *positions*. She'd once heard him refer to his wife as *the ball and chain*. He'd always get off at Surbiton, which struck her as a little incongruous. She gave all the passengers she recognized pet names, and he was Smart-But-Sexist Surbiton.

Right now, he did not look quite so pleased with himself. If anything, he seemed in distress. He was leaning

forward, clutching at his throat, and emitting a volley of sounds somewhere between a cough and a vomit. The girl sitting next to him – a pretty young thing, with red hair in a plait, and dewy skin that she no doubt took for granted but would, one day, remember fondly – said, rather nervously, ‘Are you okay?’ He was, quite obviously, not okay. He looked up, trying to communicate something to them, but his words seemed jammed in his throat. He gestured towards a half-eaten fruit salad on the table in front of him.

‘I think he’s choking on one of his strawberries. Or maybe a grape,’ said the girl. This was obviously an emergency. It hardly mattered precisely which piece of fruit was involved. The girl put down the book she was reading and patted him on the back, between his shoulder blades. It was the sort of gentle pat that was often accompanied by the words *good dog*, and not at all what the situation required.

‘Here, do it harder,’ said Iona, leaning forward across the table and giving him a hefty thump with a closed fist, which she found rather more enjoyable than she should have done, given the circumstances. For a moment, there was silence, and she thought he was better, but then the choking sounds started again. His face had turned a mottled purple, and his lips had started to lose their colour.

Was he going to die, right here on the 8.05? Before they even got to Waterloo?



Piers

08:13 Surbiton to Waterloo

Piers's day was not going at all to plan. For a start, this was not his usual train. He liked to be in the City before the markets opened, but today's routine had been thrown completely off course due to Candida firing the au pair the day before.

Magda had been their third au pair this year, and Piers had held out high hopes for her lasting at least until the end of the school term. Then they'd returned early from a disastrous weekend away *en famille* to discover Magda in bed with the landscape gardener, and cocaine residue and a rolled up banknote on a hardback copy of *The Gruffalo*. Piers might have been able to persuade Candida to let Magda off with a warning, since she'd been off duty at the time, but the besmirching of the children's favourite bedtime story had been the final straw. *How can I read that story again without imagining Tomaso exploring Magda's deep, dark wood?* Candida had yelled.

Things had gone further downhill when Piers had finally boarded a train at Surbiton, to discover that the only free seat, at a table for four, was opposite the weird lady and her flat-faced, wheezy dog. Piers didn't usually see her in the morning, but she was an irritatingly familiar sight on his return journey. He obviously wasn't the only commuter who tried hard to avoid her, since she was often flanked by the only unoccupied seats.

Crazy Dog Woman was looking even more ridiculous than usual, wearing a crimson suit upholstered in a tweed fabric that would have been much more at home covering the furniture in a primary school.

Piers did a quick mental calculation on the pros and cons of standing until he got to Waterloo versus sitting opposite the sofa in heels. Then he noticed that the girl sitting next to the empty seat was rather gorgeous. He was pretty sure he'd seen her on the train before. Piers recognized the little gap between her two front teeth – a tiny imperfection that tipped the balance of her face from blandly pretty to captivating. He may even have winked at her – one of those silent moments of communion shared by those attractive and successful commuters who found themselves stranded in a sea of mediocre humanity, like high-performance racing cars in a Lidl car park.

She was in her late twenties, probably, wearing a tight pink skirt, which he was sure displayed a perfect pair of legs,

sadly hidden under the table, with a white T-shirt and a black blazer. She must have some trendy media job that allowed dressing down all week, not just on Fridays. Having some eye candy for the journey swung the balance in favour of sitting down.

Piers pulled out his phone to check on his key positions. He'd lost so much money last week that he needed this week to be spectacular. He sent out a silent prayer to the gods of the markets, while taking a grape from the small fruit salad he'd picked up at the convenience store by the station. He'd spent so long trying to get the kids to eat their breakfast while fending off cries of *Where's Magda? We want Magda!* that he'd neglected to eat his own. He'd hovered over the pain au chocolat in the bakery section, but Candida had banned him from eating pastries as she said he was getting fat. *Fat?!?* He was actually in remarkably good shape for his age. Still, he held his stomach in, just in case, conscious of the girl sitting next to him.

Piers goggled at the numbers on his screen. Surely that couldn't be right? Dartington Digital had been a dead cert. He took a sharp, involuntary intake of breath, then felt something lodge deep in the back of his throat. He tried to breathe, but it just settled in further. He attempted a cough, but it had no impact on the obstruction whatsoever. *Stay calm*, he told himself. *Think. It's*

only a grape. But he could feel himself being overwhelmed by a wave of fear and helplessness.

Piers banged his hands on the table and widened his eyes at the women around him in a silent plea. He felt someone pat his back in a motion that was more massage than the extreme surgery required. Then, thank goodness, a sharp, hard thump that surely must do the job? With a huge sense of relief, he felt the grape shift slightly. Before it settled back into position.

I cannot die right here, right now, he thought. *Not on this ghastly commuter train surrounded by nobodies and weirdos.* Then, an even worse thought: *If I die today, Candida will find out. She'll realize what I've been doing, and the kids will grow up knowing what a loser their father really is.*

From his position, hunched over the table, Piers could see the red suit standing up, like a volcano erupting, and a loud voice bellowed, 'IS THERE A DOCTOR ON THE TRAIN?!?' *Please, please,* he thought, *let there be a doctor on the train.* He'd give up everything he had just to be able to breathe again. *Are you listening, Universe? You can have it all.*

Piers closed his eyes, but he could still see red – either the ghost of the crimson tweed, or the blistering of blood vessels behind his eyeballs.

'I'm a nurse!' he heard from somewhere behind him.

Then, within a few seconds that felt like an eternity, two arms clenched round him from behind, and he was pulled up from his crouching position, the arms thrusting deep into his stomach – once, twice, three times.



Sanjay

08:19 New Malden to Waterloo

Today was going to be *the* day, thought Sanjay as he made his way to New Malden station to catch his usual train. The day he finally plucked up the courage to speak to The Girl On The Train. He'd even worked out what he was going to say. She always carried a book with her. A proper one, not a Kindle or an audio book. It was one of the (many) reasons he knew they'd be perfect together. Last week, he'd noted that she was reading a novel called *Rebecca*, so he'd bought himself a copy from his local bookshop, and read the first few chapters over the weekend. Which meant that today, presuming she was still reading it, he could ask her what she thought of Mrs

Danvers. The perfect conversation starter. Original, friendly and intelligent.

Sanjay looked out for his two housemates. They worked at the same hospital as him, but were currently on nights, so they often passed each other in the morning – Sanjay heading north, all fresh-faced and relatively energetic, James and Ethan going south, pale, exhausted and smelling of disinfectant. A window into his near future.

Sanjay stood at the point on the platform, near the snack counter, where Carriage 3 usually stopped, since he'd learned, after weeks of trial and error, that this was the section of the train she was most likely to be on. *Great book*, he practised in his head. *What do you think of Mrs Danvers? I'm Sanjay, by the way. Do you take this train often?* No, no, scrap that last bit. Definitely too creepy.

As soon as Sanjay boarded the train, he could see that today was, indeed, turning out to be his lucky day. There she was, sitting at a table for four with Rainbow Lady, her dog and a slightly plump middle-aged man in an expensive suit. Sanjay had spotted him several times before. He was just the type of arrogant high-flyer that Sanjay used to see being wheeled into A&E with a perforated stress-induced stomach ulcer, or a suspected heart attack brought on by a recreational cocaine habit, yelling *I have private medical insurance!* He obviously thought himself better than most mere mortals and had scant respect for the personal space of others.

Sanjay was, however, very fond of Rainbow Lady, who he'd seen many times on his journey to work, but never spoken to. Obviously. In a world where almost everyone wore black, navy or shades of grey, she chose emerald greens, turquoise blues and livid purples. Today she did not disappoint. She was dressed in a suit made from a bright red tweed that made her look like one of the strawberry creams that were always left in the bottom of a family-sized tin of Quality Street.

Could he ask her to move her dog so he could join her table? After all, the dog presumably didn't have a season ticket and having an animal on the seat must contravene every health and safety rule. The problem was, Sanjay both admired and was terrified of Rainbow Lady in equal measure. He wasn't the only one. However crowded the train, few people dared ask her to move her pet. And if they did, they didn't make the same mistake again. Not even the guard.

He stood, holding a metal pole for balance, trying to work out how to get close enough to the girl to start up a conversation. He'd never done this before. All his previous dates were with women he'd met at college, work or on a dating app where they'd exchange banter for days, tentatively swapping nuggets of personal information, before actually meeting IRL. This was old-school, and it was terrifying. There was a reason why no one did this any more.

Considering that there were around eighty people packed into a relatively small metal casing, the carriage was, as always, remarkably quiet. Just the sound of the wheels on the track, the tinny noise from someone's headphones and the occasional cough. Then, cutting through the silence like a juggernaut, a voice:

‘IS THERE A DOCTOR ON THE TRAIN?!?’

His prayers had been answered in the most unexpected and extraordinary way. He cleared his throat and said, with as much authority as he could muster, ‘I’m a nurse!’

The crowds parted deferentially, people contorting their bodies out of his path, ushering him forwards through a multitude of odours – coffee, perfume, sweat – towards Rainbow Lady, his girl and the man who was quite obviously choking. This scenario had been covered in the first term at nursing college. Emergency First Aid, Module One: The Heimlich Manoeuvre.

Sanjay's training took over as he clicked into autopilot. With more strength than he'd known he possessed, he hauled the man up from his seat from behind, clutched his arms around his belly and pulled as hard as he could, right into the diaphragm. Three times. It felt as if the whole train held its breath in sympathy; then, with a huge cough, the offending grape was expelled from the man's mouth with remarkable velocity, landing with a satisfying plop in the cup of tea sitting in front of Rainbow Lady.

The cup rattled on its saucer, then settled back into position, as the entire carriage erupted in applause. Sanjay could feel himself blushing.

‘Ahh, it was a grape,’ said Rainbow Lady, staring into her tea, as if this had all been part of a children’s party game called Guess The Hidden Object.

‘Thank you so much. I think you just saved my life,’ said the man, his words coming out with effort, and one at a time, as if they were still navigating their way around the memory of the grape. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Sanjay,’ said Sanjay. ‘You’re welcome. All part of the job.’

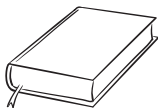
‘I’m Piers. I really can’t thank you enough,’ he said, as the colour gradually returned to his face.

THE NEXT STATION IS WATERLOO, announced the voice on the tannoy. Sanjay started to panic. He was being patted on the back and congratulated by one stranger after another, which was really gratifying, but there was only one person he wanted to speak to, and he was missing his chance. Everyone stood and started moving towards the doors, propelling him forwards, like an unwilling lemming being pushed towards the cliff. He looked back at her in desperation.

‘What do you think of Mrs Danvers?’ he blurted out. She looked totally confused. She wasn’t even reading that book this morning. She was clutching a copy of Michelle

Obama's autobiography. Now he looked like a deranged stalker. Perhaps he *was* a deranged stalker.

He'd blown it. There was no coming back from that.



Emmie

Emmie was feeling far too shaky to go straight to the office, so she ducked into her favourite independent family-owned coffee shop instead, pulling her reusable cup out of her bag.

‘Hey, Emmie!’ said the barista. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Not great, actually,’ said Emmie, before she could stop herself and replace the words with her usual, socially acceptable, *Good, thanks!* As a point of principle, she hated the idea of being one of those people who griped about their insignificant first-world problems, when every day there were people sleeping on the street, or struggling to feed their children.

The barista paused and frowned, waiting for her to continue.

‘Someone nearly died on my train this morning. He choked on a grape,’ said Emmie.

‘But he’s still alive, no?’ said the barista. Emmie nodded. ‘No permanent disabilities?’ She shook her head. ‘So, this is a cause for celebration! A cinnamon swirl, perhaps?’

Emmie couldn’t even begin to explain why she wasn’t feeling in the slightest celebratory. She’d started her day, as usual, doing her stretches and counting her many blessings, and then – *BAM!* – before she’d even got to Waterloo she was confronted with her own sense of mortality. The realization that one day, totally out of the blue, you could go from being a happy, healthy person to . . . not being at all.

And what use had she been when the man sitting next to her was dying? Emmie, who’d always thought of herself as resourceful and good in a crisis, had sat there impotently while two strangers had saved his life. When the chips were down, her gut reaction had been flight rather than fight. All she’d been able to do was think, *What if that happened to me? What if I were hit by a bus today, blown up by a terrorist or electrocuted by a dodgy computer cable? What would I leave behind? What have I achieved?*

Emmie thought about the project she’d been working on for the past month – the fully integrated digital ad campaign for a ‘challenger’ brand of loo roll. She imagined her eulogy: *Thanks to Emmie’s strategic and creative genius,*

a few more people were able to discover the luxury of a slightly quilted, lightly perfumed toilet paper.

As a teenager, she'd spent a month sleeping in a tree to protect a local forest from destruction and much of her school holidays volunteering at a soup kitchen. Her nickname had been Hermione, because her friends claimed that if they'd had House Elves at their school, Emmie would most definitely have campaigned for their liberation. Yet here she was, at twenty-nine, doing nothing that would even remotely change her corner of Thames Ditton, let alone the world, and sitting idly by while people choked to death.

Emmie remembered the nurse from the train that morning. He was so calm. So competent. So – and she forgave herself for a moment of shallowness – *good-looking*. He really *was* making a difference. Saving lives before he'd even got to work.

Perhaps she should retrain as a nurse. Was it too late? Maybe not, but the fact that she was renowned for fainting at the sight of a nosebleed or an ingrowing toenail was a probable indication that medicine wasn't the ideal career for her.

What was it Gorgeous Hero Nurse had called after her as she'd left the train? It had sounded very much like *What do you think of Mrs Danvers?* But it couldn't have been,

because that wouldn't make any sense at all. All that drama was muddling her brain.

Emmie sat down at her desk and plugged in her laptop, buzzed by the combination of caffeine, adrenaline and determination. She was going to start using all her experience and talent for something *good*. Perhaps she could pitch for a charity client, persuade Joey to let her take them on pro bono? He'd bite at that if they could win some awards with the creative work.

She pulled up her email. She'd check for anything important, write her priority list for the day, then spend some time on her new project.

Emmie scanned down the list of unread messages. One, right at the top, stood out, partly because the name made her smile. A.friend@gmail.com. The subject was *You*. Was it from a headhunter? She opened it and scanned the brief text.

THAT PINK SKIRT MAKES YOU LOOK LIKE A
TART. HOW DO YOU EXPECT ANYONE TO
TAKE YOU SERIOUSLY? A FRIEND.

Emmie swivelled her chair around, as if the author might be standing right behind her, waiting to see her reaction. But, of course, they weren't.

Emmie read the email again, her buzz from earlier drowned out by a tidal wave of anger, shame and embarrassment. She looked down at the skirt she'd picked out that morning. A hot-pink pencil skirt that had made her feel feisty, successful and sexy. Now she just wanted to rip it off and throw it in the office bin.

The open-plan space was already filled with people. Her colleagues. Her friends. People she respected, and had thought respected her. She scanned their faces and body language, looking for clues as to who could have sent her that email just – she checked the time stamp – ten minutes ago. But everyone looked just the same as they did every other day.

Emmie, however, didn't think she'd ever feel the same in this office again.



Iona

18:17 Waterloo to Hampton Court

Iona was floored by a wave of that particular form of dread that accompanies finding an HR person in your meeting with your boss. Brenda – head of ‘Human Resources’, which she still thought of as ‘Personnel’ but had been renamed at some point in the nineties – was sitting next to her editor at the meeting room table, looking officious. This, in itself, meant nothing, since officious was Brenda’s natural resting face, but it just added to Iona’s general sense of impending doom.

‘Hello, everyone,’ Iona said, cursing herself for the slight tremble in her voice. ‘Do two people count as everyone? Maybe I should have said *Hello, both* or *Hi, you two*.’ She was blabbering. She trained her eyes on her editor, in the vain hope that refusing to make eye contact with Brenda might cause her to disappear. Her editor’s name was Ed. Had he changed his name to match his job? She wouldn’t put it past him.

‘Uh, would you mind leaving the dog outside, Iona?’

said Ed, aiming his finger at darling Lulu like a member of a firing squad. Which perhaps he was.

Iona reversed out of the open door, lest one of them tried to shoot her in the back.

‘Could you possibly babysit for a few minutes?’ she asked Ed’s ‘Executive Assistant’, the modern equivalent of a secretary, but without the shorthand. She looked gratifyingly thrilled. No doubt it would make a nice change from being Ed’s underpaid and undervalued henchwoman. ‘She loves it if you scratch her in the soft bits, just behind her ears.’ Then, because she always overdid it when she was nervous, she added, ‘Don’t we all?’ along with a forced, high-pitched laugh. Ed’s assistant shrank back in her chair, looking startled.

‘Once more unto the breach, dear friends,’ muttered Iona under her breath as she walked into the room again, spine aligned, head held high, just like she used to walk on to the stage, back in the day.

‘Sit, sit,’ said Ed, gesturing at a row of brightly coloured, empty chairs around the meeting room table. Iona chose the one to the right, hoping that the combination of tangerine-orange chair and crimson suit might do permanent damage to Brenda’s retinas. She took a notebook and newly sharpened pencil out of her handbag. She wasn’t intending to make any notes, but she could always use the

pencil to stab Ed through the hand if necessary. The thought cheered her up a little.

‘So, before going into a detailed appraisal, I wanted to talk to you about the *big picture*,’ said Ed, steepling his fingers in front of him and looking serious, like a school-boy pretending to be a bank manager. He reeled off details of falling circulations, lower revenues, higher overheads, all the numbers floating past Iona like radioactive pollen on the breeze while she tried to look interested and intelligent.

‘You see,’ he said finally, ‘we need to concentrate more on our digital offering and pull in a younger audience, and that means making sure all our content is modern and relevant. And, to put it bluntly, we’re concerned that *Ask Iona* feels just a little . . .’ He paused, searching for the most appropriate adjective before settling on ‘. . . old-fashioned.’ Ed was apparently unable to demonstrate creative flair even with his insults.

Iona felt sick. *Stop it*, she told herself firmly. *Stand up and fight. Think Boudicca, Queen of the Celts.* So, she gathered her ragtag army, and climbed aboard her chariot.

‘Are you saying that I’m *too old*, Ed?’ she said, pausing to enjoy the sight of the HR lady blanching, which only made the line where her foundation ended and her chins began more apparent. ‘Because, as a magazine therapist,

life experience is crucial. And I have experienced it all. Sexism, ageism, homophobia.’ She dropped the words like landmines, which of course they were. If she could acquire a disability, which at her age was a distinct possibility, she’d have practically a full house of potential discrimination cases. *Navigate your way around those, Brenda-from-HR.*

‘Of course I’m not saying that,’ said Ed. ‘I’m just giving you a challenge.’ Iona understood immediately that in this context ‘challenge’ was code for ‘ultimatum’. ‘Anyhow, maybe downscaling could be a positive move for you. You’d be able to spend more time with the grandchildren.’ She gave him an extremely hard stare and cracked her knuckles, which always made Ed wince.

Brenda cleared her throat and fiddled with her lanyard. ‘Oh. No grandchildren. Of course not,’ stammered Ed. Did he mean ‘of course not’ because she was obviously too young for grandchildren, or because she was too lesbian?

‘Let’s not rush into anything. We’ll give it another month and see if you can revolutionize your pages. Bring them up to date. Make them sizzle. Think *millennial*. That’s where the future is.’ He forced his face into a smile, and it almost cracked at the effort.

‘Sure,’ said Iona, writing SIZZLE on her notepad, followed by W*****. ‘But let me just remind you, Ed, how critical the problem pages are for the magazine. People

depend on them. And I don't think I'm being too dramatic when I say that *lives* depend on them. And our readers enjoy them. After all, many of them say they only buy the magazine for my pages.' *Take that, pathetic Roman centurion.*

'I'm sure they used to, Iona,' said Ed, picking up his sword and plunging it into her heart. 'But when did anyone last say that? Mmm?'

Iona didn't go straight back to her desk. Instead, she walked directly to the toilets, eyes trained on the ugly, yet practical, carpet, still slightly tacky underfoot from all the spilled fruit punch at the last office party. She locked herself into one of the cubicles and sat on the closed seat, with Lulu on her lap, breathing in the melange of pine-fresh chemicals, various bodily excretions and dog. She started to cry. Not pretty crying, but the explosive sort that came accompanied by rivers of snot and running mascara. This job was her life. It was the reason she got up in the morning. It gave her purpose. It was *who she was*. What would she be without it? And who else would employ a magazine therapist who was rapidly approaching sixty and had been in the same job for almost thirty years? How had it gone from accolades, acolytes and awards ceremonies to this?

Iona tried to summon up some anger but was just too

weary. The old days, when she'd been ferociously busy juggling a social column and advice page with occasional restaurant reviews and travel pieces, had been tiring, but not being busy *enough* was exhausting. She was tired of exuding a confidence she'd not felt for real in years. She was tired of constantly having to look occupied, when she'd had all her responsibilities – bar her advice pages – gradually stripped away.

She'd learned to spin out every task over hours, and to angle her computer screen so no one could tell that rather than working, she was actually planning fantasy holidays with Bea on perfect coral atolls or stalking old school friends on Facebook.

Life, of course, was not a competition. But, had it been one, Iona had imagined herself well in the lead. Over the years she'd secretly mocked the life choices of her contemporaries, as – one by one – they'd pulled over on to the hard shoulder of the career expressway, in favour of popping out one child after another and pandering to the needs of ungrateful, selfish husbands who'd once looked passably handsome but had grown beer bellies, nose hair and fungal toenails.

But now, she looked at their pictures of children's graduation ceremonies, multi-generational feasts around scrubbed pine kitchen tables and, even, tiny newborn grandchildren blinking with unfocused eyes at the camera, and she

wondered if, just maybe, they were winning after all. At least they weren't weeping into the neck of a lapdog on a lavatory.

Iona heard the door to the toilets open, and the sound of two sets of heels clacking against the tiled floor. She lifted her feet on to the seat, pulling her knees into her chest and burying her face further into Lulu's fur to muffle the sound of her sobbing.

'God, I hate Mondays,' she heard one of the women say.

She realized, to her relief, that it was Marina, one of the features editors. She and Marina were good friends, despite Marina being nearly thirty years younger than her. They always exchanged a bit of 'banter' at the water cooler and had even been out for lunch together a few times. Marina would fill Iona in on all the office gossip and, in exchange, Iona gave her free advice on her tangled love life. She and Marina also respected each other as fellow professionals, women at the peak of their powers. Perhaps she should come out of her lavatorial hidey-hole and confide in her friend. A problem shared, and all that. Maybe she could suggest another lunch. A restoratively boozy one.

'Me too,' said Brenda-from-HR. 'Although I hate Wednesdays even more. You know, neither here nor there.'

'Hey, was that the old dinosaur I saw you and Ed

talking to?’ said Marina. ‘Are you finally getting around to making her extinct? What are you planning? An ice age or a meteor strike?’

So much for female solidarity.

Iona was more relieved than usual to find her train home waiting for her at Platform 5, Waterloo. At least this part of the day was reassuringly predictable. She boarded at her favourite carriage, then swore to herself and accidentally squeezed Lulu, making her yelp. There was Grape Man – what was his name? Piers. That was it. He was sitting just across the aisle from the only spare seat. He was bound to want to start up a conversation, and much as she’d usually revel in someone’s profuse gratitude, right now she just wanted to sit quietly and imagine herself in a world where she still mattered.

Iona sighed, and sat down. She opened her handbag and took out her glass and flask of ready-mixed gin and tonic, along with a ziplock plastic bag containing a couple of slices of lemon. She waited for the inevitable interruption. But it didn’t happen. She looked over at Piers, who was leaning back in his seat as if he could bend it to his will, and had his thighs splayed so far apart that the old woman sitting next to him was pinned up against the window like a Roman blind. He caught Iona’s eye and she thought, for a second, he was about to speak, but then his gaze slid

away and lighted on his mobile, which he grabbed and started punching with a dictatorial index finger.

Iona felt awkward. Then annoyed at herself for allowing this . . . *oaf* to unsettle her. Surely the done thing – the *only* thing to do – when confronted by someone who, just a few hours previously, had *helped save your life* was to say thank you? Or, at least, hello? A casual nod, even? Perhaps he didn't recognize her? Not possible, surely? The only thing Iona had never been accused of was being forgettable.

'Darling,' he said into his phone, in a tone and volume that showed no consideration at all for the serenity of his fellow passengers. 'Could you nip down to the cellar and bring up a bottle of the Pouilly-Fumé and put it in the fridge to chill? No, not that one. The *grand cru*. One of the ones we brought back from that ghastly villa holiday in the Loire with the Pinkertons.'

Lulu, sitting on Iona's lap, began to growl. Iona felt the barrel of her body expand, like a set of bagpipes filling up with air, then she swivelled towards Piers and issued a cacophony of high-pitched barks.

Piers jabbed at his phone, terminating his conversation without saying goodbye, and glared at Iona.

'What on earth is wrong with that ridiculous dog?' he shouted.

Iona was used to people being rude to her, and she

could – perhaps – ignore Piers’s ingratitude and boorishness, but she was not going to let him insult Lulu.

‘Lulu,’ she said, ‘is not ridiculous. She is, in fact, highly intelligent. She is also a feminist and, as such, she calls out toxic masculinity wherever she finds it.’

Piers’s mouth dropped open, and he picked up his copy of the *Evening Standard*, opening it in front of his face like a veil. Iona was quite, quite sure that they were never going to look at each other, let alone speak, ever again. And thank the Lord for that.

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