

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



In the Rooms

Tom Shone

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About the Book

You meet everyone in the rooms...

English literary agent Patrick Miller came to New York dreaming of joining the big league, only to find himself selling celebrity dog books.

But when he spots the legendary novelist Douglas Kelsey on the street and follows him into an AA meeting, a world of opportunity beckons. Patrick enters a den of sex addicts, junkies and pill-poppers, all rubbing shoulders with the reclusive Kelsey.

Who knew that sobriety offered such networking possibilities? Or that the women would be so attractive?

There's only one small problem. Patrick doesn't have a problem - not with alcohol, nor with drugs, just with that little thing they call the truth. As everyone is beginning to find out...

Part Nick Hornby, part Jay McInerney, with a dash of vermouth, *In the Rooms* is a warm, sharply observed comedy about sex, lies and second chances.

About the Author

Tom Shone was both deputy literary editor and film critic of the *Sunday Times*, before becoming a writer at *Talk* magazine. He is the author of *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* (Simon & Schuster). *In the Rooms* is his first novel. He lives in New York.

ALSO BY TOM SHONE

*Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and
Love the Summer*

In the Rooms

TOM SHONE



WINDMILL BOOKS

For my father

Fixed myself a nice glass of NyQuil.
Dragged a chair over to the window.
Where I watched a pale moon struggle to rise
Over Cupertino, California.
I waited through hours of darkness with NyQuil.
And then, sweet Jesus! The first sliver
Of light.

‘NyQuil’, Raymond Carver

‘Fake it ‘til you make it.’

Alcoholics Anonymous slogan

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS A cold, clear morning, the sun low in the sky, casting long shadows which stretched the length of the pavement. Closing the door of my apartment, I tightened my coat around me and fell into step behind a man in a Burberry raincoat, a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* under his arm. Always a safe bet – a man in a Burberry raincoat and a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* under his arm. After nearly nine months in the city, I'd learned to steer clear of anyone with a dog on a leash, a camera around their neck, a baby in a pram, or a map in their hand, any of whom were capable of all manner of traffic violations – pulling out in front of you, changing lanes without warning, or else just stopping on the street right in front of you. Just stopping dead, to gawp, or talk, as if it was their living room. Nobody *stopped* in New York. The one reason to stop was if you had reached your destination; that was the only real reason – the only valid excuse. Otherwise, you kept going. The people you didn't have to worry about here, funnily enough, were the elderly. The elderly in New York were nothing like the elderly in London, inching along the pavement in their layers of wool and nylon; they were wiry, feral creatures, their haunches sprung like marathon runners, their instincts honed by decades pounding the streets. In my first week in the city I had been expertly cut up by a silver-haired old lady in lime-green Lycra jogging shorts and fluorescent sneakers (there was no elderly look, either; the elderly looked like the young, only older) who zoomed past the end of my nose, missing me by a whisker. I could only gaze in admiration as she disappeared into the midday

crowds, elbows pumping. Get behind one of *those*, I figured, and it would be like tailing a fire engine or a police car as it hurtled down the avenues.

Slowing to a halt on the corner of Seventh Avenue, I caught a faceful of vapour from one of the big orange cones that vented steam up in to the street – what were they *doing* down there? – and was just considering cutting north when my phone rang.

Fishing it out of my pocket, I saw Caitlin's name flash up in blue on the little LED screen. What did *she* want? For a few seconds, I toyed with the idea of not taking the call, then flipped the phone open.

'Hello?'

'Hi, Patrick, listen ... I just wanted you to know that I shouldn't have sent you that email and I'm sorry.'

The email, terse with sarcasm ('Liked your profile on simpatico.com, Caitlin') had been the first thing in my inbox that morning. Across the street, the lights changed. I stepped out briskly, in the hope that the conversation would follow suit.

'It's OK,' I said. 'It must have been a shock seeing me on that thing. It's not what you think. I haven't been using it to go on any dates. It's just window-shopping.'

'Window-shopping,' she repeated.

'Yes. I think I just wanted some reassurance that I wouldn't feel like this for ever.'

'Reassurance that you wouldn't feel like this for ever.'

'Yes.'

'And how's that?'

'It hasn't been easy.'

She let the pause lengthen.

'Not feeling so "chipper" any more, then?'

Ouch. OK. That was embarrassing. *Word that best describes your current state of mind.* I'd been trying to strike a note of cockney insouciance. Cheeky-chappie kind of thing. Allow them to infer how dumb I thought the

question. *Word that best describes your current state of mind.* Sad? Horny? Quixotic? Nobody told the truth on simpatico. Most people I knew in New York were far too busy working like dogs to be embarking on spontaneous road trips, or cooking black spaghetti, and all the other things they said to convey the madcap three-ring circus that was their life. *I like to live each day as if it were my last.* I'd never got that expression. If I was to live every day as if it were my last, I'd spend the rest of my life in a funk of mortal fear and dread, sobbing down the phone at relatives I hadn't called in ages, with three cigarettes stuffed in my mouth. How was *that* a good idea? Or how about the 'What I am looking for' section, which was the place your last relationship went to die. It rattled with old niggles and pet peeves. '*No workaholics, passive-aggressive, brainwashed Stepford men or Republicans,* they wrote. '*No cynics or assholes, and you know who you are ...*' Reading these eerily precise diktats, you felt exhausted, as if you'd simply be slipping into place behind the last guy, picking up the argument where he left off. They really ought to post a warning, though: The first person to read this will be your ex. *Then* see how many people described themselves as 'down to earth' and 'adventurous' or said they liked to laugh a lot, mostly at themselves.

'OK, look,' I said. 'Caitlin. This is hardly fair. You broke up with me, remember? I'm just trying to move on. You told me I had to move on. That's what I'm doing.'

'So that's why you put yoga under "hobbies and interests".'

I groaned.

'Honestly, Patrick, you're incredible. After all the times I asked you to go. I mean, if the question had been "Things my last girlfriend asked me to do but I never got around to doing", that would have been an honest answer. As a profile of *me* that would have been an honest answer. And baking!

OK, here's a tip. If you're going to put baking as a hobby, then when they ask you about the items you have in your fridge, don't put "a bottle of champagne," and "a chocolate bar". You can't bake with champagne and chocolate ...'

I thought hard for a recipe that used champagne and chocolate and came up short. This conversation was wrong. It shouldn't be happening. There was a fundamental and pressing reason why it should not actually exist; I just couldn't think what it was right now. Looking up, I found myself engulfed in a swarm of schoolchildren, all holding hands in a long chain. Nobody had told me there would be *children* in New York.

'...The only reason I knew it *was* you was because you put *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* as your favourite book. You may want to do something about that. That's not the sort of thing that's going to get you a date in New York. Biographies of dead Nazi architects ...'

I spotted two schoolgirls who had lost a hold of one another's hands. Pushing through them, it suddenly came to me. But of course! How could I have been so stupid?!

'Hang on, what were *you* doing on there?'

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

'A friend of mine is a member,' said Caitlin finally.

'Ah. A *friend*,' I said, feeling the power of my new-found victimhood surging up beneath me like a submarine beneath the feet of a drowning man. 'Of course. A friend. Right. How silly of me ...'

'You can believe what you want, Patrick. I long ago gave up trying to convince you of anything. That's not why I was calling, anyway.'

I paused. 'Oh no? Why are you calling?'

'Nicky and Mark said you'd asked them out to dinner and I was wondering if ... well, the thought of it freaks me out a little. I just think it would easier if we had a clean break.'

I slowed to a halt outside a pizza parlour on the corner of Sixth, causing the woman behind me to mutter audibly. I glared at her retreating back: couldn't she see I was having a conversation?

'Meaning what, exactly? That I shouldn't call them?'

Silence.

'You mean never call them, *ever*?'

'I just don't feel OK about it ...'

'But isn't that a bit rude? I mean, what will they think if I just disappear off the map ...'

I trailed off, the memory of what I had written in the 'Why you should get to know me' section – in particular the tone of earnest entreaty and come-hither foxiness – winking at me like the light of an unexploded bomb.

'OK, OK. Whatever you say. I won't call them.'

'Thanks, Patrick. Look, I know this is hard. It's hard for me too ...'

'I know, I know. Listen, I'd better go, I'm right outside my office.'

'OK, well ... take care, Patrick.'

'You too.'

Inside Ray's World Famous Pizza, two Hispanic teenagers ladled red gloop onto waiting pizza bases. I pocketed my phone and headed north to my office.

CHAPTER 2

THE OFFICES OF the Leo Gottlieb Literary Agency are located in a two-storey, red-brick carriage house, just below Gramercy Park on West 17th Street. With its high arched windows and small cobbled courtyard, it has more than enough of a picture-book air to stop the curious; during the summer we receive a steady stream of tourists knocking on the door to see if we are anything special. A very American enquiry: *should I be interested in you?* Natalie gives them her spiel about the building being the stable of a much larger estate back in the nineteenth century; about Theodore Dreiser writing *An American Tragedy* a few doors down, in what is now a Pilates studio; and Oscar Wilde's agent working in the building directly opposite, now a Spa Belles tanning salon specialising in Brazilian bikini waxes. I'd never really got the whole American embarrassment over their lack of history. New York was settled by the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*; many of its buildings predated *Paradise Lost*, for heaven's sake. How much history did they think they needed? The English had a whole bunch of history prior to that, of course, but it was just the boring stuff: wattle-and-daub huts, chain mail, peeing in the street. If Americans wanted to get misty-eyed about that, they were welcome to it.

Natalie barely looked up as I entered. The only Asian girl I had met who had curly hair, kept back from her face with a charcoal Alice band, she sorted through the mail with quick, precise movements, a force for order in an otherwise disordered universe. Put stuff within a five-yard radius of her and it started organising itself into neat little

piles. I always wondered if it had something to do with her childhood in a Vietnamese refugee camp (her surname, Th! Nghiem, repelled all attempts at pronunciation) but was too polite to ask. On the filing cabinet to one side of her desk a poster was tacked up with perfectly measured tabs of Scotch tape: 'Hillary Clinton for President'.

'Is Leo in yet?' I asked.

'He's got the flu. He's taking the day off ...'

'Thank God,' I said, peeling off my coat.

'Morning, Patrick.'

'Oh ... morning.'

She set the mail down on her desk and looked up at me.

'Is everything OK?'

'Not really, no. Caitlin just caught me on simpatico.com ...'

'So what?'

'So what? She demolished me.'

'What for?'

'I put some stuff in my profile that wasn't exactly ... I embellished things a bit.'

'What did you say?'

I looked around. In the reception room to our right, the brown leather sofa suite sat empty, the coffee table scattered with magazines. Nobody seemed to be about. 'There was a "Hobbies and interests" section. I mean, what kind of person even has hobbies and interests, anyway? But OK, so people like that kind of thing, so I saw yoga, and it made me think of her, so I ticked that box ...'

'Yoga.'

'I'd always meant to go with her.'

'But you never did?'

I shook my head. 'I liked the fact that *she* did.'

'Well, that's why you date someone. They complete you.'

'Right. But then we broke up and ...'

'You needed completing again?'

I squinted at her, trying to determine her sarcasm levels. 'Pretty much. So I put yoga and baking. People don't cook for themselves nearly enough in this city ...'

The lock fidgeted behind us and we both turned to see Saul letting himself in; he had a brown leather briefcase under his shoulder and an umbrella, even though it had not been raining. 'Hey, guys,' he called out. 'What's up?'

He shut the door behind him.

'Patrick just got busted by Caitlin on simpatico.com,' said Natalie. 'He said he was into yoga and baking.'

'Baking! What the hell did you put that for?' said Saul as he advanced towards us, unwinding his scarf from his neck.

'I ... It was just a way of ... Actually, you know what? I don't know what I'm even doing on that thing. It's a complete waste of time. It's not as if anybody ever uses it to really meet anybody, do they?'

'How many dates have you been on so far?' asked Saul.

'None,' I replied, tersely.

'None?'

'None,' I repeated. 'It's all virtual, isn't it? You hot-list them. They hot-list you. You send them a wink. They wink back. Then someone actually writes someone an email and the whole thing fizzles out.'

They exchanged glances.

'Well, there's your problem right there, Patrick,' said Saul. 'No wonder you find the whole thing a little impersonal if you haven't actually used it to meet someone. I hear that helps. Meeting the person. That sort of sets the whole ball rolling. Same with marriage, childbirth ...'

If there was one thing I had learned since my arrival in New York, it was that the American reputation for ironylessness was not only undeserved, but a deliberately propagated piece of misinformation designed to lull the unsuspecting into a false sense of superiority. You walked into the conversation, confident of your superior firepower – not just the cloaking device of irony but the howitzer of

sarcasm, the flame-thrower of pre-emptive disdain – only to find yourself completely outflanked and outgunned. I'd even thought Saul a little slow at first. As one of the senior agents at the firm it had fallen to him to show me around on my first day; I'd been talking to him about something – I can't remember what – and he'd got this faraway look on his face, as if probing a back molar with his tongue. He looked positively Neanderthal. It had taken me ages to work out what that look meant. He was *listening*, which was presumably the key to his success with women, despite the fact that he was short, stocky and fantastically hirsute, right down to his knuckles. I recognised his shrewdness for what it was, however: a cunning tactic designed to flush you into saying things you didn't really mean. I'd seen him in negotiations; he was lethal.

'I'll bear it in mind,' I said, moving off towards the stairs. 'This has been great. It really has. But I really should be getting to work.'

'Where's he going?' asked Saul.

'I don't know ... Patrick, where are you going?'

'Work!' I called out over my shoulder.

'It's December,' muttered Saul. 'He can't have any work ...'

'Oh, that reminds me,' said Natalie. 'Patrick, you have an eleven o'clock brunch with Ian Horrocks.'

My foot on the bottom stair, I looked her way again. 'I thought I'd cancelled it.'

'That was last week. He called back and you made another appointment, remember?'

'Can you cancel it for me again?'

'Actually, no. I cannot. You take him out. Eleven o'clock. Don't forget.'

Saul slapped me on the back as he passed me on the stairwell. 'Maybe *he'll* have some work for you ...'

'Funny.'

I made my way upstairs.

Even the car horns meant something different here. In London, a sounded horn meant someone had broken the rules: are you *mad*? In Paris, it sounded a note of philosophical despair: the whole *world* is mad. In New York, it was straight to the point: *I'm* mad. Get out of my way. My cab driver, silent and turbaned, hurtled over the potholes of Broadway at speed, weaving in and out of traffic as if each car represented a personal affront. Through the plexiglass, the buildings of SoHo receded in the morning haze, each block milkier than the last. What was that Updike quote – something about New York being the only town that glitters from afar, even when you're in it? It was true: peer up the avenues, or down the cross streets, and you were confronted with more places you were *not*, right this very second, than in any other city. Nobody hid their ambition the way they did in England. I'd been struck, sometime in my first few weeks, by a woman ordering ham at the meat counter of my local deli. 'I'll have that haunch of ham,' she'd said. That was it. No frills. No beating about the bush. In England, to want for something was to be found wanting, so you hid it behind a formulation of words that went, roughly, 'I'm sorry to bother you but I couldn't help but notice that fine haunch of ham in the window, not that I like ham myself you understand, but the husband, he does love it, and I wonder if you wouldn't mind cutting me a few slices?' The American system seemed to work better.

I saw Ian before he saw me: stood propped outside the entranceway of Balthazar, smoking. He looked underdressed, as he always did, in jeans and leather jacket, his neck in desperate need of a scarf. He saw me getting out of the cab and took one last puff on his cigarette, then flicked it into the gutter.

'Just enjoying a sneaky little fag,' he said.

'You shouldn't say that here. You'll get into trouble.'

'Wouldn't be the first time,' he said, grinning, and held the door open for me. Inside, waiters in crisp white shirts

ferried silver trays to the tables and red leather banquettes. The walls, scumbled a delicate shade of faux nicotine, were hung with large mirrors, their mercury backs cracked and peeling: as perfect an imitation of an actual French bistro as could be got in the city, let down only by the courtesy levels of the staff. I was just making my approach to the maître d' when Ian pointed to the long mahogany bar; a Bloody Mary stood on the corner, half-drained.

'You don't want to get something to eat?' I asked.

'Tied one on a bit too tight last night, didn't I?' he said, shaking his head, as if trying to figure out how such a thing had come to pass. 'You can if you want.'

'It's OK,' I said, secretly relieved. 'It's a little early for lunch anyway.'

We walked over to the bar, where Ian slouched onto his bar stool, like an amoeba reverting to its natural shape. He was never the most upright of citizens: forever propping up doorways, or dropping into chairs, as if standing was a truly unnatural state for him, and recumbency his destiny, his pole star, his magnetic North. He always made me feel very stiff of spine. I ordered a coffee from the waiting bartender and took the stool next to his.

'So how are you doing, my old cock?' he said, flashing me a toothy grin. 'A little bit of this? A little bit of that?'

'Not good. I got a pasting from Caitlin this morning.'

'Oh no. Really?'

'Do you know what she told me? She said she didn't want me calling her friends. Can you believe that?'

'Were they your friends too?'

'I'll never know now, will I?'

Ian sucked air through his teeth like a mechanic inspecting a dodgy engine. 'That's the way it works out here. It's very proprietorial. Very tribal. You offend the chief. The word spreads down to the rest of the tribe. But still. After dragging you all the way out here ...'

'She didn't drag me. I came.'

'...And then to cut you loose like that.'

'I came for work, not for her,' I said quickly.

He looked at me for a few seconds then let it go. 'Of course you did,' he said. 'Well, you know what they say. "*If you can make it here...*"'

He pushed back from the bar with both arms, as if devising some new form of exercise. 'That's got a flipside too, though, have you noticed? If you make it here you can make it anywhere, but if you *fail* here, then you can't exactly say you were hanging out for the mountain views, can you?'

'Thanks, Ian,' I said glumly.

'*You're* all right. What are you talking about? You've landed on your feet. You should try *Time Out* at the moment. They're laying off people like crazy. In fact, I was wondering if I could run something past you ...'

Here we go, I thought. Fifteen minutes later and we were still there, my hand cupping my cheek as Ian expounded upon the latest idea he thought would pluck him from the ranks of *Time Out's* subeditors and thrust him blinking towards the limelight. It wasn't quite as bad as his last book idea, something called *Next!* which aimed to apply Bush's notion of pre-emptive war to the New York dating scene, but it was close: a history of applause, from the Emperor Nero through to modern German opera, where you could clap and boo at the same time, apparently. I nodded in all the appropriate places but eventually the unavoidability of delivering my opinion became apparent.

'Do you have a title?' I asked.

'*Speak to the Hand.*'

'Don't you mean *Talk to the Hand?*'

'That's the one. *Talk to the Hand.* What d'you think?'

'Here's the thing,' I said, wondering whether it was too early to look at my watch. 'The *trouble* is, that whole micro-history thing is kind of winding down right now. I mean,

we've had a history of lipstick, plastic, jeans, hair, the pencil, clouds, dust ...'

'Of course,' he said, looking crestfallen.

'But you know what? It may be more Saul's thing. Why don't you send it over and I'll see what he thinks.'

'I don't have anything written down. Not as yet.'

'Well, when you do.'

'Thanks, mate,' he said, sucking up the pulpy remains of his Bloody Mary. 'Do you want another coffee?'

My cup sat empty. 'Actually, I should probably be getting back soon. I've got an auction on at the moment.'

'Of course,' he said, putting his hand up for the bill and wiggling his fingers. 'What you doing for Christmas? You going back to Blighty?'

'Actually, no. I'm sticking it out here.'

'We should go out sometime, have a proper British booze-up.'

'I'll give you a call,' I said, reaching for my wallet.

'Don't be stupid,' he said. 'You only got a coffee, you light-weight ...'

CHAPTER 3

I'D MET IAN when I first got here, part of a circle of Brits who spent most of their time lounging around Soho House, or Tea & Sympathy, the restaurant in the Village which had a petition going to have Greenwich Street renamed 'Little England'. We didn't do identity politics very well, us Brits. The Italians came to America and they got the Mafia and Little Italy and Martin Scorsese and *The Godfather* and meatballs. The Irish got St Patrick's Day and fiery-mouthed cops and James Cagney and the railroads. The African-Americans got rap music and Tiger Woods and drive-by shootings and Michael Jordan. Even the Samoans got their flag-waving day, the Puerto Ricans their march. All the British got was the chance to look vaguely apologetic on the Fourth of July. We were the guys everyone had come here to get away *from*. We were the gooseberries who didn't get the memo, the party crashers, the Klingons, the stalkers of the American republic, waving at the window. Our mere presence cancelled out the whole point of the place.

Or maybe I just felt that way because of what happened with me and Caitlin. I'd met her in London, eighteen months ago, the night I won the 2006 Young Agent of the Year Award - a slight embarrassment, truth be told. I'd always styled myself a champion of my authors, rather than publisher's pet, but my friends had thrown a dinner party, and I'd found myself sat next to a slim, pretty American blonde in cashmere and stilettos, who leaned into me every time she talked. Caitlin was in London for just a couple of months, to launch a new fragrance for L'Oréal; I'd never

seen a woman with such high production values. They certainly didn't make them like that in England. Our romance had been fast and intense, accelerated by the knowledge of her impending return, snatching lunches midway between her office and mine before decamping back to my flat in Kensington for the evenings. Our goodbye at the airport was like the last reel of a Meryl Streep movie. We tried it long-distance for a bit - you've never seen such phone bills - but then the opportunity of a work placement came up for me in New York. The two of us talked about it, a little nervously at first but with increasing enthusiasm, I thought, imagining tearful reunions at the airport, a blissed-out cab ride back to the city, followed by weeks of horse-drawn smooching around Central Park and sex in odd places around her apartment. I think we were both a little shocked at the speed with which it all came apart. Within weeks we were having the most furious rows about stupid stuff - toothbrushes, laundry, the exact measure of altruism to showboating in Bono's charity work - made worse by the stakes we now seemed to be playing for. Two months after arriving, I moved out of her apartment and into my own, not something I had been planning to do at all, but not so bad. Spring arrived. I went to lunch, worked on my contacts, impressed Leo with some last-minute edits on an indecipherable techno-thriller of his, and at the end of the summer, he offered me a one-year contract. Much to the surprise of my friends back in London I accepted, whether out of sheer bloody-mindedness, or because America was what had drawn me all along, I couldn't have told you, although it finished me and Caitlin. The way she acted you'd think I had camped out in the lobby of her apartment building. The way I saw it, it was like the ultimate holiday romance gone bad, except I stayed on holiday.

The sun was out when I left Balthazar that morning, casting thick shafts of sunlight down the cross streets which people hurried towards, warming themselves. I decided to walk back to the office, up through Washington Square, which was empty but for a few figures crossing the grey paving stones. The trees still clung demurely to the last of their yellow leaves; on the far side of the square rose the impressive triumphal arch, between whose legs you could see the beginnings of Fifth Avenue.

I had barely noticed the man walking up ahead of me – his hands stuffed into the pockets of his overcoat – when he suddenly leaned over and spat into the fountain. I felt a flare of disgust, followed by a jolt of recognition, tumbling into disbelief.

It couldn't be him – could it?

I killed my pace and dropped ten yards or so behind him as he made his way to the top of the square, underneath the arch, before stopping on the curb just beyond to look for traffic. I drew up behind one of the legs of the arch. His face had filled out a little but still managed gauntness, his eyes disappearing into deep creases as he squinted in the sun. He looked a lot older than I remembered, his hair slicked back in tramlines of dark grey, as if he had just gotten out of the shower, but then authors always chose younger dust-jacket pictures of themselves. My copy of *Freefall* had to be at least fifteen years old; well-thumbed and battered, it was one of the few books I brought with me when I moved here.

The lights changed; he crossed the road and turned right along the row of Flemish-style brownstones on the north face of the square. Following at a safe distance I watched as he stopped in front of one of them, pushed open the metal gate, trotted up the steps, and disappeared inside. Drawing level with the building, I found one of those handsome rust-coloured places which a century ago would have housed a Henry James heroine trapped in a loveless

marriage; stone steps led to a white portico entranceway flanked by chipped Grecian pillars, a security camera and a small brass plaque which read 'Graduate School of Arts & Sciences'.

But of *course*: he must be teaching here. The door was buzzed open before I could put a hand on it. Inside, I found a long white hallway, at one end of which a door was just closing. Halfway down, a security guard sat behind a desk, surrounded by video screens, his nose in the *Post*. COP-KILLER ran the headline.

I approached and coughed into my hand. 'I'm sorry to bother you ...'

The newspaper lowered to reveal sleepy eyes and a neatly trimmed moustache.

'... But what *is* this place, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Graduate School of Arts and Sciences,' he replied gruffly.

'And that man who just came in ... does he teach here?'

'No. He's here for the meeting,' he said, hiking his thumb towards the door at the end of the corridor. Somewhere under his desk a buzzer went off.

'What kind of meeting?' I asked.

'AA meeting,' he said, reaching under his desk. 'You coming in or going out?'

'Oh no, I was just curio—'

At which point a wave of female laughter spilled through the door, and three girls entered. They were about college age, two of them little Britney clones with sandy-coloured bobbed hair, in matching fur-lined parka jackets and pastel-coloured Ugg boots, chewing on gum like squirrels, the third darker and taller, bringing up the rear.

'... right there in the cafeteria,' one of them was saying.

'Did he put it back?'

'*No! It was sitting there on his tray!*'

'That guy is such a skeez ...'

A throaty laugh caught the attention of the guard. He put down his newspaper and beamed as they approached his desk.

‘Hey, Hannah, how you doin’ today?’

‘A lot better, thanks, Henry,’ said the third girl. ‘I am so sorry about yesterday.’

‘You gotta do what you gotta do,’ said the guard. ‘My wife is always telling me to let it all out. She says: You’re keeping it in. You’re gonna get cancer. You gotta let it *out* ...’

‘I did *that* all right,’ said the girl, with a roll of her eyes. She reached for a pen to sign her name in the logbook, holding her hair back with one hand as she did so. She was wearing grey fingerless mittens, a green and blue scarf and a thirties-style, thrift-storeish overcoat, in a herringbone pattern. Her hair was either very dark brown or black, I couldn’t quite tell; her skin was pale, her ears and cheeks pink from the cold. I’d got into trouble with Caitlin saying girls weren’t wearing make-up when they were, but if she was it was minimal: eyeliner, maybe.

‘What about you?’ she asked the guard. ‘You booked those flights yet?’

‘Got my Speedos out already.’

‘Speedos! You want trunks below the knee. They don’t want to be seeing your knobbly knees in Hawaii.’

‘No? Not even when they’re knees as pretty as these?’ asked the guard, hoisting up his trouser to reveal a few inches of pale, hairy leg.

‘*Eww ...*’ said one of the twins.

‘Especially when they’re knees like those,’ said the girl, finishing with the log book and seeming to notice me for the first time. ‘I’m sorry – did I butt ahead of you?’ she asked, offering me the pen.

‘Oh no, not me,’ I stammered. ‘I’m not ... I’m just ... on my lunch break.’

‘Your lunch break.’

'I saw someone I knew and followed him in. To see what he was up to ... how he was doing ... these days.'

I could feel the attention of her two girlfriends like pinpricks on my cheeks.

'Where'd he go?'

I pointed to the door at the end of the corridor.

'Do you want to come in and say hello?' she asked, cocking her head, her hair pooling over her scarf.

'Oh no, no, no, no. I wouldn't want to bother him. I mean, I know him but I don't know him that well. Not personally.'

'Oh, *that* kind of friend,' she said, exchanging looks with her friends.

'C'mon, Hannah, we're going to lose our seats,' said one of them. Hannah glanced at her, then returned to me. Her eyes, I saw, were a light, flecked hazel.

'You sure you don't want to come in?'

'Oh no, no, no,' I said, raising my hands. 'I don't think so, I'm not ...'

'I know, you're just asking after your friend. Well, why don't you tell him he's welcome anytime. There's a seat waiting, as long as he doesn't throw it at anyone. Henry doesn't like it when that happens, do you, Henry?'

'Nope,' answered the guard, his grumpiness returning.

'... Although you don't much look like the chair-throwing type ...'

'*Hannah* ...' said one of the twins, more insistently.

She smiled. 'Gotta go,' she said. 'It was nice talking to you ...'

'You too,' I said dumbly.

She turned and made her way down the hallway, her two friends closing ranks on either side of her, lowering their heads to whisper. They reached the white door and disappeared inside, leaving the guard and me in that awkward silence that descends on any two men who have had their female companions removed - our source of

sunlight, laughter and swimming-trunk advice now gone. I had no idea alcoholics could be so beautiful. The guard picked up his paper and slumped down in his seat. I made my way towards the exit; although just as I pulled open the door, someone pushed from the other side; our combined force took him by surprise, dragging him into the hallway.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said, regaining his balance. He was short and scruffy, with a thick tangle of curly hair, the sort you see sprouting from the tops of chess prodigies or Russian violinists; lodged in the thick of it, I could have sworn I saw a small piece of jigsaw puzzle.

He made an elaborate bow. ‘After you.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You’re welcome ... keep coming back.’

A wave of laughter, then applause, sounded over my shoulder as I descended the steps outside. What on earth did *they* have to laugh about?

CHAPTER 4

I FOUND SAUL in his office, hunched over his desk, a pen in his hand.

'Ah, Mr Miller. The baker ...'

'Are you busy?'

'Just going over these proofs ...' he said, waving me in. 'Please ...'

His desk was even more of a mess than usual: all the pens and stationery and staplers pushed into the corners to make way for a set of unbound proofs, bearing minute markings in red pen, for a book of his called *Voltaire's Wig*, which had to do with the human capacity for optimism – how it nestled in one frontal lobe or other. Normally I envied Saul his home-court advantage with the pulse of his people, but I thought him a little off on this one. The headlines in the *New York Times* read like an End-of-the-World placard these days: melting ice caps, whale infanticides, shopping-mall abductions, bodega stick-ups, rocketing gas prices, home fore-closures. Even the comic book superheroes nursed dark sides. I had to say I rather liked this new mood of national gloom – it reminded me of Britain under John Major – but the time did not seem to be right for a book telling everyone to snap out of it.

'How was your brunch with Ian?' he asked.

'A complete waste of time,' I said, closing the door behind me. 'But listen. You'll never guess who I saw on the way back ...'

'Janet Jackson?'

'*Douglas Kelsey.*'

His eyebrows tented gratifyingly. 'Really?'