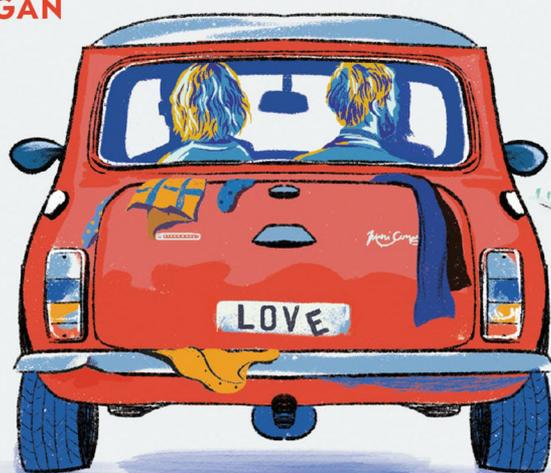


ONE CAR. FIVE PEOPLE.
A WHOLE LOT OF HISTORY

THE ROAD TRIP

'JOYFUL'
SHEILA O'FLANAGAN

'PERFECT'
ROSIE WALSH



BETH O'LEARY

**THE
ROAD
TRIP**

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Quercus

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For my bridesmaids

NOW

Dylan

‘The road of friendship never did run smooth, is what I’m saying,’ Marcus tells me, fidgeting with his seat belt.

This is my first experience of a heartfelt apology from Marcus, and so far it has involved six clichés, two butchered literary references and no eye contact. The word *sorry* did feature, but it was preceded by *I’m not very good at saying*, which somewhat undermined its sincerity.

I shift up a gear. ‘Isn’t it *the course of true love* that never runs smooth? *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I believe.’

We’re by the twenty-four-hour Tesco. It’s half four in the morning, the air thick with duvet-darkness, but the bland yellow light from the shop illuminates the three people in the car in front as if they’ve just moved into a spotlight. We’re close behind them, both following the slow, rattling path of a lorry ahead.

For a flash of a second I see the driver’s face in the rear-view mirror. She reminds me of Addie – if you think about someone enough, you start to see them everywhere.

Marcus huffs. ‘I’m talking about my feelings, Dylan. This is agony. Please get your head out of your arse so that you can actually listen.’

I smile at that. ‘All right. I’m listening.’

I drive on, past the bakery. The eyes of the driver in front are lit again in the mirror, her eyebrows slightly raised behind squarish glasses.

‘I’m just saying, we hit some bumps, I get that, and I didn’t handle things well, and that’s – that’s really unfortunate that that happened.’

Astonishing, really, the linguistic knots in which he will tie himself to avoid a simple *I’m sorry*. I stay silent. Marcus coughs and fidgets some more, and I almost take pity and tell him it’s all right, he doesn’t have to say it if he’s not ready, but as we idle past the bookie’s another flash of light hits the car in front and Marcus is forgotten. The driver has wound the window down, and she’s stretched an arm out, gripping the roof of the car. Her wrist is looped with bracelets, glimmering silver-red in the car lights’ glare. The gesture is so achingly familiar – the arm, slender and pale, the assertion of it, and those bracelets, the round, childish beads stacked up her wrist. I’d know them anywhere. My heart jolts like I’ve missed a step because it is her, it’s *Addie*, her eyes meeting mine in the rear-view mirror.

And then Marcus screams.

Earlier, Marcus gave a similarly horrified scream when we passed a Greggs advertising vegan sausage rolls, so I don’t react as fast as I perhaps otherwise would. As the car in front stops sharply, and I fail to hit the brakes on the seventy-thousand-pound Mercedes that belongs to Marcus’s father, I have just enough time to regret this.

Addie

Bang.

My head whips up so fast my glasses go flying backwards off my ears and over the headrest. Someone screams. *Oww, fuck* – a pain shoots up my neck, and all I'm thinking is *God, what did I do? Did I hit something?*

'Shit the bed,' Deb says beside me. 'Are you all right?'

I fumble for my glasses. They're not there, obviously.

'What the hell just happened?' I manage.

My shaking hands go to the steering wheel, then the handbrake, then the rear-view mirror. Getting my bearings.

I see him in the mirror. A little blurred without my glasses. A little unreal. It's him, though, no question. He's so familiar that for a moment I feel as if I'm looking at my own reflection. Suddenly my heart's beating like it's shoving for space.

Deb's getting out of the car. Ahead, the bin lorry moves off and its headlights catch the tail of the fox they braked for. It's moving on to the pavement at a saunter. Slowly, the scene pieces itself together: lorry stops for fox, I stop for lorry, and behind me Dylan doesn't stop at all. Then – *bang*.

I look back at Dylan in the mirror; he's still looking at me. Everything seems to slow or quieten or fade, like someone's dialled the world down.

I haven't seen Dylan for twenty months. He should have changed somehow. Everything else has. But even from here, even in half darkness, I know the exact line of his nose, his long eyelashes, his snakeskin yellow-green eyes. I know those eyes will be as wide and shocked as they were when he left me.

'Well,' my sister says. 'The Mini's done us proud.'

The Mini. The car. Everything comes rushing back in and I unclick my seat belt. It takes three goes. My hands are shaking. When I next glance at the rear-view mirror my eyes focus on the foreground instead of the background and there's Rodney, crouched forward on our back seat with his hands over his head and his nose touching his knees.

Shit. I forgot all about Rodney.

'Are you all right?' I ask him, just as Deb says,

'Addie? Are you OK?' She pokes her head back in the car, then grimaces. 'Your neck hurting too?'

'Yeah,' I say, because as soon as she asks I realise it does, *loads*.

'Gosh,' Rodney says, tentatively shifting out of the brace position. 'What happened?'

Rodney posted on the 'Cherry & Krish are Getting Hitched' Facebook group yesterday evening asking for a lift to the wedding from the Chichester area. Nobody else replied, so Deb and I took pity. All I know about Rodney is that he has a Weetabix On The Go for breakfast, he's always hunching and his T-shirt says, *I keep pressing Esc but I'm still here*, but I think I've pretty much got the gist.

'Some arsehole in a Mercedes went into the back of us,' Deb tells him, straightening up to look at the car behind again.

'Deb . . .' I say.

'Yeah?'

'I think that's Dylan. In that car.'

She scrunches up her nose, ducking down to see me again. 'Dylan Abbott?'

I swallow. 'Yeah.'

I risk a glance over my shoulder. My neck protests. It's then that I notice the man stepping out of the Mercedes passenger seat. Slim-built and ghostly pale in the dark street, his curly hair just catching the light of the shopfronts behind him. There goes my heart again, beating way too fast.

'He's with Marcus,' I say.

'Marcus?' Deb says, eyes going wide.

'Yeah. Oh, God.' This is awful. What am I meant to do now? Something about insurance? 'Is the car OK?' I ask.

I climb out just as Dylan gets out of the Mercedes. He's dressed in a white tee and chino shorts with battered boat shoes on his feet. There's a carabiner on his belt loop, disappearing into his pocket. It was my idea, that, to stop him always losing his keys.

He steps forward into the path of the Mercedes' headlights. He looks so handsome it aches in my chest. Seeing him is even harder than I expected it to be. I want to do everything at once: run to him, run away, curl up, cry. And beneath all that I have this totally ridiculous feeling that someone's messed up, like something didn't get filed when it should have up there in the universe, because I was supposed to see Dylan this weekend, for the first time in almost two years, but it should have been at the wedding.

'Addie?' he says.

'Dylan,' I manage.

'Did a *Mini* really just total my dad's Mercedes?' says Marcus.

My hand goes self-consciously to my fringe. No make-up, scruffy dungarees, no mousse in my hair. I've spent bloody *months* planning the outfit I was supposed to be wearing when I saw Dylan again, and this was not it. But he doesn't scan me up and down, doesn't even

seem to clock my new hair colour – he meets my gaze and holds it. I feel like the whole world just stumbled and had to catch its breath.

‘Fuck me,’ says Marcus. ‘A Mini! The indignity of it!’

‘What the hell?’ Deb says. ‘What were you *doing*? You just drove into the back of us!’

Dylan looks around in bewilderment. I pull myself together.

‘Is anyone hurt?’ I ask, rubbing my aching neck. ‘Rodney?’

‘Who?’ says Marcus.

‘I’m OK!’ calls Rodney, who’s still in the back seat of the car.

Deb helps him climb out. I should have done that. My brain feels kind of scrambled.

‘Shit,’ says Dylan, finally registering the crumpled bumper of the Mercedes. ‘Sorry, Marcus.’

‘Oh, mate, honestly, don’t worry about it,’ Marcus says. ‘Do you know how many times I’ve totalled one of my dad’s cars? He won’t even notice.’

I step forward and check out the back of Deb’s battered Mini. It’s actually not looking too bad – that *bang* was so loud I would’ve assumed something serious had fallen off. Like a wheel.

Before I’ve registered what she’s doing, Deb’s in the driving seat, starting the engine again.

‘She’s all good!’ she says. ‘What a car. Best money I ever spent.’ She drives forward a little, up on to the curb, and hits the hazard lights.

Dylan’s back in the Mercedes, rifling through the glove box. He and Marcus talk about roadside accident assist, Marcus forwards him an email off his phone, and I think to myself . . . that’s it, Dylan’s hair’s shorter. That’s what it is. I know I should be thinking about this whole car crash thing but all I’m doing is playing a game of spot-the-difference, looking at Dylan and going, *What’s missing? What’s new?*

His eyes flick to mine again. I go hot. There’s something about

Dylan's eyes – they kind of catch you up, like cobweb. I force myself to look away.

'So . . . you're on your way to Cherry's wedding, I'm guessing?' I say to Marcus. My voice shakes. I can't look at him. I'm suddenly thankful for the dented rear bumper to examine on the Mini.

'Well, we were,' Marcus drawls, eyeing the Mercedes. Maybe he can't bring himself to look at me either. 'But there's no way we're driving this baby four hundred miles now. It needs to get to a garage. Yours should, too.'

Deb makes a dismissive noise, already out of the car again and rubbing a scratch with the sleeve of her ratty old hoody. 'Ah, she's fine,' she says, opening and closing the boot experimentally. 'Dented, that's all.'

'Marcus, it's going ballistic,' Dylan calls.

I can see the Mercedes' screen flashing warning lights even from here. The hazards are too bright. I turn my face away. Isn't it typical that when Marcus's car breaks, Dylan's the one sorting it?

'The tow will be here in thirty minutes to take it to the garage,' Dylan says.

'Thirty minutes?' Deb says, disbelieving.

'All part of the service,' Marcus tells her, pointing to the car. 'Mercedes, darling.'

'It's Deb. Not darling. We've met several times before.'

'Sure. I remember,' Marcus says lightly. Not very convincing.

I can feel Dylan's eyes pulling at me as we all try to get the insurance stuff sorted. I'm fumbling around with my phone, Deb's digging in the glove box for paperwork, and all the while I'm so aware of Dylan, like he's taking up ten times more space than everyone else.

'And how are we getting to the wedding?' Marcus asks once we're done.

'We'll just get public transport,' Dylan says.

'Public *transport*?' Marcus says, as though someone's just suggested

he get to Cherry's wedding by toboggan. Still a bit of a wanker, then, Marcus. No surprises there.

Rodney clears his throat. He's leaning against the side of the Mini, eyes fixed on his phone. I feel bad – I keep forgetting him. Right now my brain doesn't have room for Rodney.

'If you set off now,' he says, 'then according to Google you would arrive . . . at thirteen minutes past two.'

Marcus checks his watch.

'All right,' says Dylan. 'That's fine.'

'On Tuesday,' Rodney finishes.

'What?' chorus Dylan and Marcus.

Rodney pulls an apologetic face. 'It's half four in the morning on a Sunday on a bank holiday weekend and you're trying to get from Chichester to rural Scotland.'

Marcus throws his hands in the air. 'This country is a shambles.'

Deb and I look at each other. *No, no no no—*

'Let's go,' I say, moving for the Mini. 'Will you drive?'

'Addie . . .' Deb begins as I climb into the passenger seat.

'Where do you think you're going?' calls Marcus.

I slam the car door.

'Hey!' Marcus says as Deb gets into the driver's seat. 'You have to take us to the wedding!'

'No,' I say to Deb. 'Ignore him. Rodney! Get in!'

Rodney obliges. Which is kind. I really don't know the man well enough to yell at him.

'What the fuck? Addie. Come on. If you don't drive us, we won't get there in time,' Marcus says.

He's by my window now. He knocks on the glass with the back of his knuckles. I don't roll it down.

'Addie, come on! Christ, surely you owe Dylan a favour.'

Dylan says something to Marcus. I don't catch it.

'God, he's an arse,' Deb says with a frown.

I close my eyes.

'Do you think you can do it?' Deb asks me. 'Give them a lift?'

'No. Not – not both of them.'

'Then ignore him. Let's just go.'

Marcus taps on the window again. I clench my teeth, neck still aching, and keep my eyes straight ahead.

'Our road trip was meant to be *fun*,' I say.

This is Deb's first weekend away from her baby boy, Riley. It's all we've talked about for months. She's planned every stop-off, every snack.

'It would still be fun,' Deb says.

'We don't have room,' I try.

'I can squeeze up!' Rodney says.

I'm really going off Rodney.

'It's *such* a long journey, Deb,' I say, pressing my fists to my eyes. 'Hours and hours stuck in the same car with Dylan. I've spent almost two years tiptoeing around Chichester trying not to bump into this man for even a *second*, let alone eight hours.'

'I'm not saying do it,' Deb points out. 'I'm saying let's go.'

Dylan has moved the Mercedes to somewhere safer to wait for the tow. I turn in my seat just as he's getting out of the car again, all lean, scruffy, almost-six-feet of him.

I know as soon as our eyes meet that I'm not going to leave him here.

He knows it too. *I'm sorry*, he mouths at me.

If I had a pound for every time Dylan Abbott's told me he's sorry, I'd be rich enough to buy that Mercedes.

Dylan

Sometimes a poem arrives almost whole, as if someone's dropped it at my feet like a dog playing fetch. As I climb into the back of Deb's car and catch the achingly familiar edge of Addie's perfume, two and a half lines come to me in a split second. *Unchanged and changed/ Eyes trained on mine/And I'm—*

I'm what? What am I? I'm a mess. Every time I look at Addie something leaps inside me, dolphin-like, and you'd think after twenty months it wouldn't *hurt* quite like this but it does, it hurts, the kind of hurt that makes you want to fucking *wail*.

'Shove up, would you?' Marcus says, pushing me into Rodney's shoulder. I throw a hand out and just about avoid landing it right in Rodney's lap.

'Sorry,' me and Rodney say simultaneously.

My palms are clammy; I keep swallowing, as if that'll help keep all the feelings down. Addie looks so different: her hair is cut almost as short as mine and dyed silver-grey, and her glasses – miraculously recovered from the boot of the Mini after the crash – are chunky and hipster-ish, unapologetic. She is quite possibly more beautiful

than ever. It's as if I'm looking at Addie's identical twin: the same but different. *Unchanged and changed.*

I should be saying something, clearly, but I can't think quite what. I used to be good at this sort of thing – I used to be *smooth*. I cram myself into the narrow middle seat and watch Marcus's father's car being driven away down the dark street, clinging forlornly to the tow truck's back, and I wish I could reclaim some of the cockiness I had when I first met Addie and didn't have the foggiest idea of how completely and utterly she would change my life.

'What were you doing heading off so early, anyway?' Addie says, as Deb pulls away from the side of the road. 'You hate driving early.'

She's putting on make-up, using the mirror in the sun visor above the passenger seat; I watch her blend a paste from the back of her hand into the cream of her skin.

'You're a little out of date,' Marcus says, trying to get comfortable in his seat, and elbowing me in the ribs in the process. 'These days Dylan has *very* strong opinions about why road trips absolutely *must* start at four a.m.'

I look down at my knees, embarrassed. It was Addie who taught me how much better a road trip is when you leave in the thick quiet before dawn, the day still heavy with hope, though she's right: when we were together, I always complained about how early she made us set off for a long drive.

'Well, it's a good job we started early!' Rodney chirps, checking his phone with his elbows tucked as tightly to his sides as possible.

Marcus is making no such sacrifices to my comfort: he is spread-eagled with his knee carelessly thrown against mine and an elbow half in my lap. I sigh.

'We'll be tight getting to the family barbecue as it is, now,' Rodney goes on. 'Over eight hours of driving and it's already five thirty!'

'Ah, you're coming to the pre-wedding barbecue?' I ask.

He nods. The question is a blatant attempt to work out what

Rodney is doing here, but I'm hoping it passes for friendliness. For one awful, lead-weight moment when they first got out of the car, I thought he was coming to the wedding as Addie's plus one – Cherry had said a few months ago that she might be bringing somebody. But there's no obvious sense of connection between them; Addie seems to be largely ignoring him.

She's largely ignoring everybody, actually. After those first few heart-jolting, gut-wrenching moments of eye contact, she's been studiously avoiding my gaze every time I try to snag her attention. Meanwhile Marcus is tapping a loud, inane rhythm on the car window; Deb flashes him an irritated look as she tries to concentrate on joining the Chichester bypass.

'Can we get some music playing or something?' Marcus asks.

I know what's coming before Addie's hit play; as soon as I hear the opening notes I have to swallow back a smile. I don't know the song, but American country music is undeniably distinctive – you only need a few chords to know you'll be hearing tales of late-night kisses on porches, trips to the honky-tonk, long drives with pretty girls in passenger seats. Addie and Deb have loved country music since they were teenagers; I used to tease Addie about it, which was particularly hypocritical of me, as a man whose 'Long Run' playlist is almost exclusively populated by the works of Taylor Swift. Now I can't hear the twang of a banjo without thinking of Addie dancing to Florida Georgia Line in one of my old shirts, Addie singing along to Rodney Atkins' 'Watching You' with the car windows down, Addie undressing slowly to the tune of 'Body Like a Back Road'.

'Maybe not this one,' Addie says, hand hovering over the phone.

'I like it! Leave it,' Deb says, turning it up.

'What the hell is this?' Marcus says.

I watch Addie's shoulders square up at his tone.

'It's Ryan Griffin,' Addie says. 'It's – it's called "Woulda Left Me Too".'

I wince. Marcus snorts with laughter.

'Oh, is it now?' he says.

'It's on the Country Gold playlist,' Addie says; a pale pink blush blossoms on the skin of her neck, uneven, its patches like petals. 'And that's what we're going to be listening to for the next eight hours. So you better get used to it.'

Marcus opens the car door.

'What the—'

'Marcus, what the fuck—'

There's a scuffle in the back seat. Marcus elbows me off. The door is only open a few inches but the wind rips through the car, and Rodney is leaning over me now, trying to reach the handle and pull it closed, until there's four or five hands clawing at the car door, and we're scratching one another, Rodney's greasy brown hair in my face, my leg somehow tangled over Marcus's—

'I'll hitchhike!' Marcus is yelling, and I can hear the adrenaline in his voice, the buzz he gets from doing something stupid. 'Let me out! I can't do eight hours of this! Turn it off!' He's laughing even as I slap at his hand so hard it stings the skin of my palm.

'You're insane!' says Rodney. 'We're going at sixty miles an hour!'

The car swerves. I catch sight of Deb's eyes in the rear-view mirror: they're narrowed in grim concentration as she tries to hold her lane position. On our right cars flash by in a stream of over-bright headlights, leaving yellow-white streaks across my vision.

Addie pauses the song. Marcus closes the door. Now the music is off and the wind isn't roaring through the door you can hear every noise in the car: Rodney's laboured breathing, the sound of Deb relaxing back into the driving seat. With the rush of physical adrenaline from the scuffle comes a startling desire to punch Marcus on the nose.

'What the *hell* is wrong with you?' I hiss.

I feel Addie turn to look at me then – surprised, maybe – but she's back to the road before I can meet her eyes.

Marcus swallows, side-glancing me, and I can tell he already wishes he'd been better behaved, but I'm too irritated to acknowledge it. After a moment he forces a laugh.

'We want road-trip music!' he says. 'Put on some Springsteen, will you?'

For a long moment Addie says nothing.

'Deb,' she says eventually, 'take the next services, please.'

'Do you need a wee?' Deb asks.

'No,' Addie says. 'We need to drop Marcus off. So he can hitchhike. As requested.'

She hits play on the country song again.

Addie

It turns out there are no services for ages. When we eventually reach a petrol station, I really do need a wee. And some air. This is suddenly feeling like the smallest car in the whole bloody world.

‘Are we actually dropping Marcus off here?’ asks a worried voice from behind me.

I’m power-walking across the petrol station forecourt to the building. The aim is to move fast enough that Dylan can’t catch me up for a chat. So far I have managed to avoid direct eye contact with him since we all got in the Mini. I reckon this is a sustainable plan for the next four-hundred-odd miles.

Rodney can move very fast for such an ungainly man. I glance over my shoulder at him.

‘Probably not, no,’ I say. ‘Marcus is prone to dramatics. Best to nip them in the bud or he’ll act out all day.’

‘How do you know him?’

Rodney dashes forward to hold the door open for me as we reach the services. I blink. He’s so gawky. There’s something adolescent about him, but he’s got to be at least thirty.

‘Dylan and I used to date.’

‘Oh. *Oh*. Oh my God, how incredibly awkward!’ Rodney says, pressing both hands to his mouth.

I laugh, surprising myself. ‘Yeah, something like that.’

I grab a handful of chocolate bars from the end of the aisle. Me and Deb packed enough road-trip snacks for two, but Dylan eats like a horse. We’ll run out of food by Fareham if he sniffs out the treats.

‘Sorry you’ve got stuck in the middle of things a bit,’ I tell Rodney. ‘It’ll be fine, though. Dylan and I can be civil for a few hours, don’t worry.’

‘Oh, so it all ended, you know, amicably?’ Rodney asks, holding out a basket for me. I drop in the chocolate bars, plus five packets of biscuits and a bunch of grab bags full of sweets.

‘Uh, amicably?’

The night that Dylan left me, I’d screamed at him. Not in the way people usually mean it – like, yelling – but actually screaming: mouth open wide, the sound clawing at my throat. I’d pounded his chest with my fists, sobbed until my whole body was wracked with it. I didn’t eat for three days afterwards.

‘Ish,’ I say. ‘Amicable-ish.’

When we walk back to the car, Dylan’s leaning against the side, arms folded, staring off to the left. The sun is rising behind him. He looks like he belongs on a poster for something. An indie band or an expensive cologne. He’s still scruffy and dreamy-eyed, but he’s more grown-up now – his edges seem cleaner cut.

I keep my eyes on him a little too long, and he catches my gaze for just an instant before I look back down at my feet.

‘Addie,’ he says, as we approach.

He steps forward to help me with the bags. I twist aside, moving past him to the boot of the car.

‘Addie, please,’ he says, more quietly now. ‘We should talk. We’re

going to be stuck in a car together for the best part of a day. Don't you want to – you know – just . . . make it less . . . awkward?'

I slam the boot closed. I've just about fitted the extra snacks in, but there's not much visibility out the back window now. Dylan and Marcus have packed like Mariah Carey, by the looks of things, and then there's all Deb's breastfeeding paraphernalia: two pumps, the cooling bag, bottles . . .

'I'm going to go for a wander, stretch out the legs,' says Rodney. 'See you both in five minutes?'

I shouldn't have said amicable-ish. He wouldn't have left me alone with Dylan if I'd told him he ruined my life.

'Addie . . . can you not even look at me?'

I'm honestly not sure I can. Trying to look at Dylan hurts. It feels like we're two magnets with the same force skidding away from one another. Instead I look out towards the green where a few people are exercising their dogs. A little poodle going around in circles, a sausage dog in a ridiculous pink harness. The sun is inching up behind them, drawing long shadows on the grass. I spot Marcus, crouched low to say hello to an Alsatian. I hope it's an unfriendly one. I don't want Marcus to get bitten or anything, but maybe he could get growled at a bit.

'Where's Deb?' I ask.

'She got a call from your mum about Riley.'

I glance at him. 'She told you about Riley?'

His gaze is soft. 'Just now. I thought you'd . . . I thought you would have told me, you know. Things like Deb having a baby.'

'We said no contact.'

'You said. Not we.'

I raise my eyebrows.

'Sorry,' he says. 'Sorry.'

I fiddle with my bracelets. My nails are newly painted for the wedding, but they're so short they look a bit ridiculous. Little stubs of red.

'I'm really happy for Deb, anyway,' Dylan says, when I don't respond.

'And a little surprised?'

He smiles, and I start smiling too, before I catch myself.

'Aren't you going to ask who the father is?' I say.

'I assume she didn't require one,' Dylan says. 'Like Gaea, you know, when she gave birth to Uranus?'

The smile grows despite my best efforts. 'You know I don't,' I say dryly.

'Right,' he says hastily. He brushes his hair back, like it's still long enough to fall in his eyes – an old tic. 'Greek mythology, very pompous, arsey reference, forgive me. I just meant Deb's never needed a man, has she? Not that anyone *needs* a man, but . . . ah, Christ.'

'Let's get this show on the *road!*' comes a voice from behind us. Marcus barges past and opens the door to the back seats. 'You might want to start up the engine. Rodney's coming at quite a pace.'

I turn just as Deb appears, sliding her phone into her hoody pocket. She climbs in after Marcus as I move to the driving seat. I panic: does that mean Dylan is going to sit up front with me?

'What's Rodney doing?' Deb says.

I look over my shoulder, back towards the green. Rodney is running towards us in a great flail of long arms and legs, hair flying. Behind him is the Alsatian, dragging its owner by the lead.

'Oh, brilliant,' I mutter, clambering into the car and fumbling to turn the key in the ignition.

Marcus whoops as Rodney scrambles into the back, breathing hard.

'Sorry!' he calls. 'Sorry! Sorry!'

Deb makes a squished sort of *oof* sound. 'Watch those hands, please,' she says. 'That one strayed very close to my vagina.'

'Oh my God, I'm *so* sorry,' says a mortified, breathless Rodney.

Dylan climbs into the front seat. He's trying to catch my gaze again.

'No harm done,' Deb says. 'I pushed a baby out of that thing, it's sturdy.'

'Oh, no,' Rodney says. 'Oh, I didn't – I'm so sorry.'

'I forgot how much I like you, Deb,' Marcus declares.

'Really?' Deb says, sounding interested. 'Because I don't like you at all.'

I pull out of the service station. I can't resist – for a second my gaze flickers towards Dylan in the passenger seat.

'Only three hundred and fifty-eight miles to go,' he says, quietly enough that only I can hear him.

Marcus is explaining to Deb that he is 'often misunderstood', and is 'actually in the process of reforming, much like a rake from a poorly written nineteenth-century novel'.

'Three hundred and fifty-eight miles,' I say. 'I'm sure it'll fly by.'

Dylan

We speed along the A34. Already the heat is as thick as honey, viscous and sweet. It's turning into a glorious summer morning: the sky is a deep lapis lazuli blue, and the fields are sun-kissed and yellow-bright on either side of the road. It's the sort of day that tastes of crushed ice and suntan lotion, ripe strawberries, the sweet head rush of too many gin and tonics.

'Chocolate's going to melt at this rate,' says Addie, turning the air conditioning as cold as it'll go.

I perk up.

'Chocolate?'

'Not for you,' she says, without looking away from the road.

I sag back in my seat. I thought we'd made a little progress – earlier she turned to me and offered half a smile, like the smallest bite of something delicious, and my heart soared. A real smile from Addie is a true prize: hard to win and utterly heart-stopping when it comes. Disturbingly, this seems to be no less true now than it was two years ago. But she's gone cold again; it's been thirty minutes since we left the services and she's not spoken to me directly until now. I have no right to object, and it shouldn't make me angry,

but it does – it feels like pettiness, and I like to think we're better than that.

I shift in my seat and she glances across at me, then reaches to turn the radio up. It's rattling out some pop song, something bouncy and repetitive, a compromise between Addie's tastes and Marcus's; at this volume I can't quite catch the inane chatter in the back seat. Last I heard, Rodney was explaining the rules of real-life quidditch to Deb, with the occasional amused interlude from Marcus.

'Go on,' Addie says. 'Whatever you want to say, just say it.'

'Am I that transparent?' I say, as lightly as I can manage.

'Yes.' Her voice is frank. 'You are.'

'I just . . .' I swallow. 'You're still punishing me.'

The moment I've said it, I instantly wish I hadn't.

'I'm punishing you?'

The air con is a slow, warm breath frittering away on my face; I'd rather crack the windows, but earlier Marcus complained about what it did to his hair, and I don't have the patience to go through that conversation again. I shift so the lukewarm stream of air hits my cheek side-on – this way I can watch Addie driving. The tips of her ears have gone red, just visible through the ends of her hair. She's wearing sunglasses now, and her other glasses are propped up on her head, pushing her sweeping fringe back from her face; I can just see the brushstrokes of her old hair colour at the roots.

'You still won't speak to me.'

'Not speaking was never about punishing you, Dylan. It actually wasn't about *you* at all. I needed the space.'

I look down at my hands. 'I just thought you'd stop needing space eventually, I suppose.'

She glances at me; her eyes are unreadable through the sunglasses' filter.

'You were waiting?' she asks.

'Not . . . not *waiting*, per se, but . . .'

I trail off, and the silence rolls ahead of us, ribbon-like, too long. I catch sight of the expression of the passenger in the car across from us on the motorway – a middle-aged woman in a cap, staring wide-eyed at our car. I glance back at the others and imagine what she's seeing. A motley collection of twenty-somethings cheerfully crammed into a bright red Mini at half seven in the morning on a bank holiday Sunday.

She has no idea. If one could harness secrets for energy, we wouldn't need petrol – we'd have enough grudges in this car to take us all the way to Scotland.