

The Good with the Bad

Friday 5 February

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you just can't disappear. There's nothing you can do to melt back into the crowd around you, no matter how hard you wish you could.

The tube carriage rattles and jolts around us as we clatter along the tracks deep beneath the streets of London. And I feel it again, the familiar tug of the stranger's eyes on me, staring.

I've been in their house. Or at least they think I have, but I don't know them. We're friends already, or we're enemies, but I don't know which. I'm part of some story they love or hate. I'm part of the story of who they are. They've rooted for me, cried with me, we've shared so much, and now I am right here

in front of them. Of course they're going to stare. I'm the unreal made real.

On the fringes of my awareness I feel the figure finally break the connection, and whisper to the person beside them. I try to focus on my novel, to let my breath deepen, and the story wash over me once more.

All those gazes, like robins alighting on me and fluttering away, wary but interested. I know people always stare at each other on the tube. But these days it's different.

The carriage rattles on shuddering around us.

Since the show started airing, four weeks ago, I'm lucky to get through any journey without some kind of interaction from strangers. A shy smile. A tap on the shoulder. A selfie. A handshake. A late-night drunken gush. Or a hastily scrawled note. And sometimes even, quite confusingly, a scowl.

I don't mean to sound ungrateful; I love my job. I genuinely can't believe how lucky I am. But sometimes it feels like I'm at the wedding of a couple I don't really know. My face aching from meeting so many well-meaning and complicated strangers, whilst all the time, all I want to do is bob to the bathroom so I can get away and finally relax.

I don't feel threatened by the attention, exactly, I know I'm safe.

Although, of course, it's not always safe. I learnt that the hard way, a month ago, when the police showed up in my living room after countless calls and emails, finally taking notice when my agent stepped in.

He'd been waiting outside the theatre, every night. Not particularly strange or concerning. Just an ordinary man.

I'd leave the stage door tired from work. I'd gone straight from filming on *Eyre* into *The Doll's House* in the West End. At first, he just wanted a signed programme, and then a chat, and then longer chats that got harder to leave until finally he was following me to the tube station still talking. I had to start leaving with friends. I had to be chaperoned. One day he couldn't stop crying, this stranger

in his fifties. He just walked behind me and my friend, silent tears dripping down his slack face. His name was Shaun. I'd tried to sort it out with the police myself but it wasn't until my agent received a package that they took it seriously. He was just a stalker. Not even a stalker really, just a lonely man trying to make friends. I told the police that, of course, but they insisted on following it up, issuing an official warning. I think his wife had died recently.

They wouldn't tell me what was in the package he sent. I jokingly asked if it was a head, and they all laughed, so I guess it can't have been a head. I felt guilty about what happened; the friendlier I had been, the worse it had got and I only strengthened his perceived connection to me. I hope he's doing better now. I wish they'd just told me what was in the package straight away, because instead I spent a week imagining the absolute worst. Weird photos. Skin. Teeth. Something his wife had owned. It was just a stuffed toy in the end and a slightly unsettling poem. But it's hard not to think the worst when you're trying not to think the worst.

I know not everyone is strange. But some people are.

At the next stop as I gather my things and disembark, a few eyes follow but when I surface at Green Park and the cold January air hits me, cooling my flaming cheeks, I chalk today's trip up as a success. No incidents this time, no drunken football chants demanding I, 'Say it! Say it!'

Who knew *Jane Eyre* had a catchphrase?

Who knew Arsenal supporters read Brontë?

And, yes, in case you're wondering – much to my shame – reader, I said it.

'You're late,' my agent, Cynthia, smirks as I plonk down into the restaurant seat opposite her.

'Sorry. Tube,' I counter.

She's already ordered us two glasses of champagne. I eye the chilled bubbles in front of me greedily. 'Are we celebrating

again?’ I half-joke as I shrug off my coat but her silence makes me raise my gaze.

‘You could say that. Yes.’ She says, grinning before pointedly sipping from her champagne flute. ‘I got a call this morning,’ she purrs, placing her glass down calmly. ‘From Louise Northfield at BAFTA. A heads-up if you will . . . Louise and I went to St Andrews together; we tend to keep each other posted – she loves you by the way. So, the word on the street is . . . though they’re not announcing the nominees until a month before the ceremony, which is in May, but . . .’ she pauses for effect. ‘You’re on the BAFTA list. Nominees. For *Eyre*. Best actress.’

For a moment her words don’t make sense to me, then they slowly shuffle into meaning. I feel the blood drain from my face, then my hands, and in its place a rush of serotonin floods in, the like of which I have never felt before, crashing through me.

‘Holy shit.’ I hear the sounds come from me, distant, as I fumble with a shaky hand for my champagne and gulp down a cool, crisp mouthful. The light-headedness only intensifies. Seven years I’ve worked for this. This is it. This is what I wanted. ‘Jesus Christ,’ I mutter.

‘That’s what I said.’ Cynthia chuckles, grinning from ear to ear. ‘Now here’s the really good bit. All the other nominees are over fifty, and they’ve all won before.’

I sober quickly, brought up short. ‘Wait. *Is* that good?’

‘Yeah, it is,’ she laughs. ‘People love *discovering* actors, even if they’ve been knocking around for years. Plus, you’ve got great credits, pedigree, even though this is your first major leading role. You’re academy catnip. A safe bet that seems like a wild card. And everyone will be rooting for you, nobody needs to see one of the “Ladies in Lavender” win another bloody award.’

I let out a nervous laugh and take another swig of my drink. Seven years of auditioning has taught me never to get my hopes up, but right now I can’t help it; my happiness bubbles up, irrepressible.

Cynthia catches the waiter’s eye.

‘Could we get a selection of everything? Just, whatever the chef thinks,’ she says airily, as if that’s a thing that people actually say in restaurants. ‘Nothing too big, just a light lunch.’ She looks to me questioningly. ‘Is that okay, hon?’ The waiter’s gaze follows suit. Both deferring to BAFTA-nominated me.

‘Ok, sure, yes, that sounds great,’ I reply and the waiter heads off with total confidence in what I’d personally consider to be a very confusing order.

Cynthia leans forward on the table, businesslike.

‘This is all going to be new for you and to a certain extent it’s new ground for me too. I mean, Charlie Redman won Best Actor in, what, 2015? But it’s different with men, they just show up in a suit. Best Actress is trickier. I’ll be fielding calls about you as soon as the press release lands in April. So, here’s my thinking, we’ve got two months to kill in the meantime. I don’t want you tied up filming, I need you free for bigger meetings with this on the horizon. We’re going to ride the crest of this. So how do you feel about a little work trip to LA so we can drum up some studio interest? Nom’s still unofficial, but we can certainly drop some hints.’

She clocks my expression and changes tack.

‘Sorry, I’m firing a lot at you, aren’t I? It’s a lot to take in. Here.’ She raises her champagne flute and clinks mine. ‘One thing at a time. Congratulations, Mia, you clever, clever thing.’

Cynthia has been my agent, advocate and therapist since I graduated. We’ve weathered some soaring highs and soul-destroying lows together over the years. In some ways we’re unbelievably close and in others we’re almost strangers. It’s an odd relationship, but then it’s an odd industry.

Her energy suddenly changes. ‘Oh, and I heard about George by the way,’ she says, her eyes searching mine, alive with curiosity. ‘That’s so exciting for him! He must be over the moon.’

I feel the smile slip from my face. I literally have no idea what she’s talking about. George? My George?

To my knowledge not much is happening for him. In fact, if anything it's slightly insensitive of Cynthia to bring it up. George hasn't had an acting job for eight months at least and he's an absolute wreck, if I'm honest.

I met George on my first big job – a movie adaptation of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – six years ago and we've lived together pretty much from the get-go. We both had tiny parts in *Tess* but our scenes were with the Hollywood star they shipped in to play her and we couldn't believe our luck, and we couldn't believe we found each other. We bought our flat last spring but after that things sort of dried up for George, right around the time they picked up for me. But that never seemed to bother us. Because George isn't competitive like that.

'What do you mean?' I ask.

She looks confused for a second, then frowns. '*Catcher in the Rye*.'

My heart skips a beat – *my god* – I remember the day we taped two scenes in the spare room. That was well over a month ago. George's Holden tape. But nothing came of that. I remember the weird art house direction we took pains to create for the Dutch director we were both desperate to work with, the way the script had changed the ages of the central characters, modernized the story and transposed it into a university parable set in 21st-century New York.

I struggle to get up to speed.

George sent the tape. He got the part. And, he didn't tell me.

My mind flashes back through the last month. I think of George sitting quietly in the kitchen reading, leaving the house early to meet friends, re-joining the gym, smiling again after months of depression and . . . *shit*. He didn't tell me he got it. He knew all along and he kept it to himself.

He must have had so many meetings, and chemistry reads, and screen tests since then. He sent the tape before Christmas. Why the hell wouldn't he tell me? How the hell didn't I notice?

I realize I haven't responded to Cynthia yet. 'Yes! Sorry. Yes, I know right! He's a . . . he's a bloody genius.'

‘I couldn’t believe it when I heard. My client Zula’s in it, too. She’s only got a small part but she started rehearsals last week, said she met him yesterday at the cast read-through. Said he looked great. God, he must be so relieved. It was all looking a bit desolate there for a bit, wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah, no, I know. So great!’ The words are coming out of my mouth but all I can think is: why? Why didn’t he tell me he got the part?

And then a thought solidifies, and the answer is suddenly very clear, the solution as ludicrously obvious now as it was impossible to imagine seconds ago. ‘I forget, Cynth, who else is in it again?’ I ask as casually as I can. ‘George told me but I completely—’

‘Yes, the love interest is – god! – I’m so terrible with names. Naomi Fairn, yes. Chris Fairn’s daughter. She’s twenty-one, I think, first job since modelling. Seems good, but even if she’s not, she’ll look amazing in it. Tell George not to worry at all, she’ll hold up on camera.’

And there we go. I take a slug of champagne and try not to look like my entire life is crumbling.

‘Filming starts in, what, a week?’ she asks, oblivious to what is happening to me. ‘I bet they’re putting him up somewhere gorgeous in New York, aren’t they?’ And with that I gently push back from the table, make my excuses and head to the ladies’ room. Somehow managing to keep a smile on my face whilst I do it.

Locked in a marble-lined bathroom stall, I google: *Catcher in the Rye casting news*. Nothing announced yet. Yet. My stomach rolls.

I think of George quietly watching the TV next to me last night, the same as ever. Texting. Now I wonder who.

I google her face.

Holy shit.

Things start to fall into place.

I tap on the least glamorous shot Google image offers me in an attempt to work out what Naomi Fairn actually looks like. It’s a

make-up-free shot from an impossibly cool magazine. I study the beautiful wrinkle-free planes of her face, and I want to die.

None of those things ever seemed to matter until now.

I read on. Even her parents are cool. Both gorgeous, both actors. Her dad basically was the nineties. I think of my dad, Trevor, bicycling around the Bedfordshire countryside in an anorak.

With trembling hands, I tap out a message to George, hit send, and unlock the cubicle door. Standing in front of the vast washroom mirror, I look at myself, checking my eyes to see if it's possible to tell that my heart is cracking open just by looking.

You can't.

I guess I am a good actress after all. I straighten up my hair, reapply some lipstick and take in my 28-year-old reflection. And the face of Jane Eyre stares back at me.

I know what she's thinking, because it's what I'm thinking.

We're so fucked.