

BETHANY CLIFT

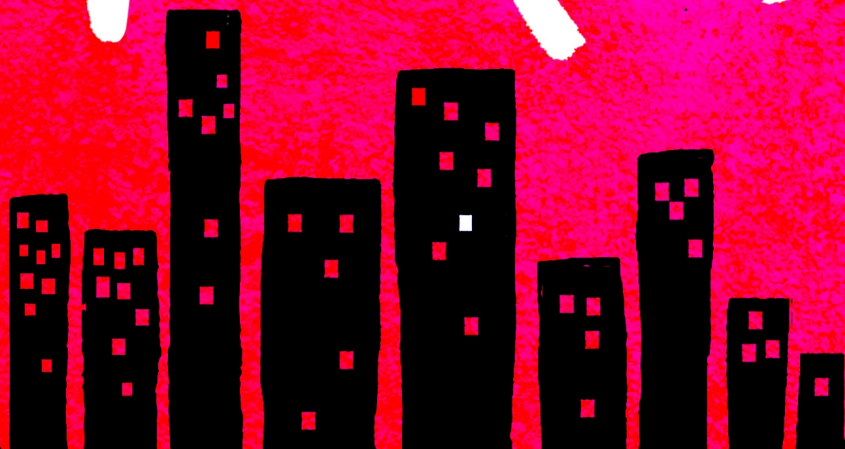
LAST

ONE

AT THE

PARTY

THE END OF
EVERYTHING
WAS HER
BEGINNING



LAST ONE AT THE PARTY

Bethany Clift is a graduate of the Northern Film School, the producer of low-budget British horror film *Heretic*, and the Director of her own production company, Saber Productions. *Last One At The Party* is her debut novel.

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BETHANY CLIFT



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For my mum, who gave me my imagination and taught me how to use it, my dad who gave me the book that changed my life and for Peter without whose love, support, guidance and childcare this book wouldn't exist. I love you all very much.

February 8th 2024

'Fuck You!'

Those are the very last words that I spoke to another living person.

If I had known that they would be my last, I would have chosen them a bit more carefully.

Something erudite, with a bit more wit.

'Fuck you' is coarse and rude and far from the sparkling repartee I have always hoped I was capable of.

But unfortunately there is no changing it.

The last person I ever physically spoke to thinks I am the sort of woman who phones them, yells abuse down the line, and then screams 'Fuck You!' before hanging up.

There were extreme circumstances that led to my outburst – their absolute refusal to bury my recently dead husband for a start – but that is probably still no excuse.

So, I am sorry Tom Forrest, Funeral Director at the Co-Op. That phone call was not indicative of who I am or, rather, who I was.

Not that it matters any more of course.

Because by now Tom Forrest is dead and what he thinks of me is of no consequence whatsoever.

I can't decide whether I am writing a diary or a journal.

I'm not really sure of the difference, or if there even is one, and I can't google it any more. The internet no longer exists.

Either way, I am writing this because there are things I think should be recorded somewhere, and I am, or was, a writer and journalist, so it feels like it is my duty to do it.

Plus, I am the only person here who can.

Because I am the only person here.

In this country.

Potentially, in the world.

I need to go back to the beginning.

October 23rd 2023

They named the virus 6DM and it began, not in China or some tiny African village, but almost exactly in the middle of the USA.

In Andover, Kansas: a small suburb of Wichita, population about 12,000.

Nobody I knew had ever heard of Andover in September 2023, but by the end of October I didn't know a single person who couldn't place it on a map and tell you about its rapidly decreasing population.

There is no record of the first infection, no official patient zero, because 6DM mutated and spread too fast for anyone to track it. But it is generally agreed that the first patients were recorded on October 23rd 2023 and by Halloween (that's irony for you my American friends) all of Andover's 12,000 citizens were either dead or dying – painfully but swiftly.

The virus having originated in such a white, suburban neighbourhood you'd have thought it would be impossible for the right-wing press to try to link it back to immigrants or a foreign country, but they did. They speculated that patient zero was likely a local high school student who'd volunteered in West Africa and returned to the town carrying 6DM with her.

Of course, by the time the article emerged the high school student was far too dead to either corroborate or deny the story, but they printed it nonetheless.

It didn't matter anyway – people were too busy being terrified to have the time to blame or hate each other any more.

To their credit the American government acted swiftly and decisively to stop the crisis.

No one wanted to make any of the mistakes that happened in 2020.

This time they were ready.

Andover was quarantined within five days of the first death, and scientists immediately began work to discover what the virus was and develop the inevitable cure or vaccination against it.

But they were already fighting a losing battle.

By the time Andover was quarantined, cases had been reported in New York and San Francisco, both over 1,300 miles away.

The scientific community never got the opportunity to study 6DM properly, so to this day I have no idea where it actually originated or how it is spread.

The US government instigated Martial Law, closed their airports and banned international travel in or out of the country on November 2nd – less than two weeks after the first reported case.

There was mass panic and hysteria. People across the United States completely disregarded the president's plea for calm, and rioted for food, water, transport and whatever drugs they could lay their hands on, not knowing whether they would help or not.

This was not the regulated response they had had to Covid-19, this was chaos and madness.

By November 14th, America was a wasteland in the making. The few remaining international journalists reported horrific images of cities deserted, whole towns on fire, and mass graves with hundreds of bodies thrown in.

Newspapers reported the death of the president on November 18th and the collapse of the federal government on the 23rd, exactly one month after the first reported case of 6DM.

The last report on November 24th said that, with few to no government officials left, citizens were now on their own.

There have been no verifiable reports from America since then.

November 3rd 2023

By the time America was burning itself to the ground the UK government was taking 6DM incredibly fucking seriously.

We may not have known much about the virus, but what we did know was terrifying.

No one knew what the incubation period was, but it started as a head cold, then fever, vomiting, diarrhoea. Within 72 hours your vital organs started to disintegrate. Not degrade or even fail: DISINTEGRATE. If you were lucky your heart or brain went first, and you died of a massive heart attack or a stroke. Unlucky, and it was your lungs – so you drowned. Really unlucky, and your stomach lining rotted and you were essentially eaten by your own stomach acid.

There was nothing gentle or noble about dying from 6DM; it was a juggernaut of pain and suffering. Most people died in agony, begging to be put out of their misery.

Six Days Maximum. That was the number of days you could expect to survive after the first signs of infection and where the nickname originated: 6DM.

The death toll was staggering.

The virus moved so fast and was so deadly that it was impossible to keep accurate figures, but there were no reports of any one surviving it so the mortality rate was reported to be one hundred per cent.

Entire populations were wiped out. In America there were approximately 200 million dead, Japan lost nearly 70 million in just three weeks, Russia's last toll was around 110 million.

For hugely populated countries such as China and India the figure was estimated at around one billion each, before the news bulletins stopped.

Densely populated areas fared worse. Delhi's 25 million population was reportedly wiped out in just nineteen days.

For the sparsely populated and more remote countries (New Zealand, Australia, parts of Canada) things seemed more positive. Reports came in that the virus had yet to reach them or was being successfully contained.

Of course, as soon as people read this, they found whatever means of transport they had and headed straight for the 'safe zones'.

And they took 6DM with them.

The safe zones tried to repel outsiders, but were mostly ill-equipped to fight off large mobs. Have you ever heard of Canada's army? Neither have the Canadians. Australia was worst hit. Such a massive country, so much shoreline, so many flat areas to illegally land a plane. Australia went from doing quite well to obliterated in little over a month.

For us, the UK, things were different. We were almost specifically designed to survive this thing. Small, containable, manageable population, good infrastructure, good history in manufacturing and food production, strong armed forces, good healthcare. And, since the debacle of Brexit, fewer 'friends' to have to care about.

Plus our government had learnt extremely valuable lessons from 2020's disaster.

Theoretically we could close our borders, repel refugees – who were now almost exclusively upper class, rich, and trying to land their superyachts on our shore – and survive on our own indefinitely.

On November 3rd 2023, anyone living within a 100-mile radius of Dover was awoken at 2 a.m. by a massive explosion. Without consulting anyone outside the cabinet office, the prime minister had taken the decision to collapse the UK end of the Channel Tunnel.

The PM made a statement on the steps of Number 10 at 9 a.m. and every television channel broadcast it live.

Our borders were closed, armed police would patrol with a shoot-to-kill order for anyone trying to enter or leave the country.

If you were abroad when it happened, then tough, you should have come back sooner.

Schools and all businesses closed immediately, and a 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew was imposed. We were ordered to stay home. NHS staff would be taken to work by the police. The military would staff all food shops and ensure that food distribution was fair. Police would patrol to make sure ~~no one left their houses~~ everyone was safe.

They said there was no need to panic.

There was little to no protest or complaint. No one cared about freedom and foreign nationals when there was a very real chance they might have to watch their five-year-old die in agony.

And they needn't have bothered with the military or police. No one wanted to go out. No one wanted to leave the safety of their home.

People stayed in, hugged loved ones close, and watched horrific images on the TV while thanking God for our tiny little island.

The government was quick to take control of the new, restricted world that we found ourselves in.

They had announced that they would continue to control food distribution for the time being and were working on plans to increase production and provide citizens with the opportunity to be self-sufficient. They hadn't yet expanded on what that meant. All online shopping was closed – no Amazon, eBay or supermarket deliveries. There were rumours that armed soldiers guarded some of the bigger distribution warehouses.

All commercial TV channels had ceased to broadcast (understandably) and the government was now running BBC1 and BBC2, the only channels still broadcasting. Normal programming had been abandoned, and the channels now ran government-approved factual and news programming combined with endless nature programmes and sitcom repeats – nothing like the calming

tones of David Attenborough or a few episodes of *The Vicar of Dibley* to help you forget your impending doom.

The internet was still working, albeit slowly. Twitter had stalled on the day the Channel Tunnel was destroyed. We were assured this was just coincidence. Those posting negative or ‘controversial’ opinions and stories on Facebook or even their own websites found that their profiles and pages disappeared without warning.

People feared it was just a taster of the restrictive world to come.

Of course, that turned out to be the least of our worries.

Fourteen days after we were shut off from the world there was still no registered case of 6DM in the UK, and employers were getting restless about continuing to pay for employees who were sitting at home wondering when, and how, they could start stockpiling food.

The government had announced no interim payment process and, as money still held value, employers, employees and certain cabinet members were keen for everyone to get back to work.

Tentatively, a semblance of normality returned. Shops reopened (albeit with purchasing restrictions in place – no one would get to stockpile toilet roll this time), transport was up and running again, and most people went back to work.

People quickly returned to their pandemic routines – face masks and social distancing became the norm without any government instruction or guidelines.

It soon became pretty clear that we were going to see some major lifestyle changes now that we were literally cut off from the rest of the world.

For starters, we could only eat what we grew and manufactured. So, bread, milk, meats, root vegetables and eggs were easy to find, but sugar, fruits, salads and spices immediately rocketed in price.

There was a rumbling of major civil unrest when the public learnt there was currently only one tea plantation in the whole

of the UK, but the government were quick to quell the riots by reassuring us there were enough stockpiles to last until we planted and harvested more.

For the record, even without the buying restrictions in place, I don't think there would have ever been any food, water, or even toilet roll shortages.

6DM kills your appetite immediately and then kills you pretty soon after, so there was no need for prolonged sustenance of the population by the beginning of December.

I went back to work on November 19th.

I knew during my first hour back in the office that I would be looking for another job within a couple of weeks, and that my new job would be blue collar, much harder work, and much lower paid.

The economy might not have been completely dead yet, but most of the industries that currently supported it soon would have been.

I worked in a re-insurance company in the New Business Team. Our company insured other insurance companies, specifically those that insured big ships: transportation ships, ferries, or cruise liners. All of which now sat in docks either empty or full of dead people.

I walked back into my office and was greeted by a room full of people staring at their computer screens with absolutely nothing to do.

I turned my computer on and accessed my emails to find . . . nothing. No out-of-office replies to messages sent two weeks ago, no one chasing late work, not even pleas for help or support. Not one of our international clients was answering the phone. Our UK clients were bluntly honest; no one is insuring anything when money might not even exist this time next week.

One of the company directors gave a consolatory speech to the Senior Management Team: 'Just a blip, we can ride it out, concentrate on our domestic clients, pharmaceutical industry will need us when the cure is launched, back to normal in a few weeks.'

Office-speak rubbish.

After three days of clearing my inbox, tidying my desk, and ‘riding it out’, I went for a (now very expensive) lunch with Ginny – one of my best friends.

Ginny was the strongest and most self-confident person I knew. She had started at my work on the same pay, at the same time as me, and was now chief of staff at a bigger and more prestigious firm; a position that she had achieved and maintained while having a child, creating her own networking group for black women in banking and running a successful mentoring programme.

She bowed down to no one and was scared of nothing.

Until now.

Normally my lunches with Ginny are full of laughter, bitching about mutual colleagues, and her showing me a thousand new photos of her six-month-old daughter, Radley.

Not that day.

Ginny was breastfeeding, so I hadn’t seen her have a drink for over a year. That day, she ordered the two most expensive bottles of wine on the menu and downed four large glasses during our ninety-minute lunch.

Ginny was scared.

She didn’t want to discuss work or jobs. She said I’d have my current job for another week, if I was lucky. I already knew that, so wasn’t surprised. She said there would be no government bailout. She doubted there would be a government a few months from now – at least not one that we recognised.

But she didn’t stop there.

She started asking me questions about my survival plans. Did I have any idea how unsuitable I was for how life would become? Could I grow my own food? Make my own bread? Did I own chickens? Could I milk a cow? Did I know how to make my own clothes? Did I have any transferrable skills?

Obviously, the answer to all of these was no.

My husband, James, and I lived in a flat in central London with a ‘no pet’ clause, so the chickens and cows were definitely out of the question. We had no garden, just a window ledge with

a dying pot plant and a herb pot on it; so, unless this counted as growing food, we were also out of luck there. As for the rest I, like millions of others, was cash rich and time poor, so sourced my food, clothes and anything else I needed from those with far less money than me.

Ginny said that money would soon be worthless. That we would live in a world of survival of the fittest – provide what you could for you and yours and then beg, steal and borrow what you couldn't.

Ginny said I should get a gun. I laughed.

Ginny didn't.

She poured the leftover wine into a plastic water bottle and told me she had been stockpiling food, water and medicines since the day after the first case of 6DM had been discovered in Andover. Her husband, Alex, had family in the middle of nowhere up in Yorkshire and they were leaving to go there in three days.

They'd bought two guns to take with them.

When I told James about lunch that night he laughed and said Ginny would never survive that far from Selfridges. James promised that we would be fine, he would take care of us, like he always did.

But later, I saw him looking at our flat with fresh eyes, in the same way I had been doing since I got home, and when I looked at his phone later he had been googling '*easy vegetable growing*'.

In the end, of course, Ginny's dire prediction didn't have time to come true. There was no time for the economy to fail completely, no government collapse, no time to start growing our own food, and no need to buy a gun.

Ginny and her family are some of the hundreds of people about whose fate I know nothing.

I like to think that she made it to her Yorkshire wilderness. But I'm pretty certain that she didn't.

November 24th 2023

Britain had its first reported case of 6DM on November 24th.

We never knew whether someone with the virus had managed to sneak into the country or if the incubation period was longer than we thought and it had been here all the time.

Scotland and Wales immediately tried to separate themselves from Britain by whatever means possible. Wales blew up all the bridges of the River Severn – no one knew where they got such weapons of destruction from – and Scotland closed and patrolled all roads across their border.

But of course, it was too late.

I was at work when the first case was reported.

It was a Thursday and by then we had all been told that Friday would be our last day. Most people had stayed in order to earn as much money as possible, but about a quarter of the office had not bothered coming back to work once they'd received the news.

There were already signs that Ginny's tale of doom would become reality: food prices were rising steadily and most petrol stations had signs to say they were empty.

I hadn't stayed for the money (which I was pretty convinced would soon be worthless anyway), but because I was trying to delay the inevitable. Trying to delay the moment at which the comfortable little life that I had built for myself would become completely obsolete.

At about 3 p.m. on November 24th, the New Business Director opened the door to her office and stood in the doorway. I think only a couple of people noticed at first, but one by one the eighty-seven people in that massive room became aware of the increasingly oppressive silence around them and reluctantly looked up.

We saw her grey pallor, her slack-jawed, hopeless expression, and we all knew immediately.

A couple of people jumped up and left straight away, the rest of us waited for the inevitable.

‘You should all go home.’

No one asked for clarification.

The office split in two. Those with families were out the door within seconds. Those of us without kids or, in some cases, without anyone, milled about, unsure of what to do.

This didn’t feel the same as 2020. This already felt like an end of sorts. We knew that when everything shut down this time it wouldn’t be opening again.

I think it was George who first suggested it, but I can’t be sure.

In any case, someone said: ‘Let’s get drunk.’

I can’t remember much about that night to be honest.

I know we started at a pub, then a bar, and then moved on to a club for some dancing, and that is when things begin to get hazy.

I know at some point I was ready to go home, but was pretty easily persuaded to stay and go to another club.

Then it all got increasingly blurry before I face-planted on to my bed at about 4.30 a.m.

Is it weird that the pubs and bars and clubs stayed open? Is it weird that we went out and got blasted rather than going home and sealing ourselves in?

Yes.

But the city was madness that night.

It didn’t just *seem* like half of London was out to get pissed, shagged, and fucked-up; half of London *was* out to get pissed, shagged, and fucked-up.

There would be no coming out of lockdown this time.

People knew this was the last stand of humanity and our last night of freedom.

And in true Blitz fashion we were going to do our British best to mark the occasion with beer, vomit, and other bodily fluids.

I woke up at 11.30 on the morning of November 25th with 6DM.

All right, I didn't have 6DM, but I am sure what I had felt pretty close to it.

It turned out to be a three-day hangover.

I could barely leave the bed for the first forty-eight hours. I was expelling the contents of my stomach violently from both ends of my digestive tract, and my brains were slowly being pushed out of my eyes and ears by the regular *BOOM, BOOM, BOOM* of my head.

Death would have been sweet mercy.

But, by day three I could open my eyes again, and on day four I was suddenly better, starving, and desperate for chicken in any form.

I am ashamed when I look back on those three days now. Not because of my hangover, but because of what it meant for James. Maybe things would have worked out differently if I had been able to leave the bed.

Maybe not.

Either way, by the time I had showered, brushed my teeth, was pink, perky and dribbling chicken juice down my chin, the world as I knew it had changed.

Late November 2023

The last two weeks of civilisation can be best summed up by the following newspaper headlines:

22 November 2023 – *We Must Stand Strong: UK continues to repel refugees. Keep UK 6DM free.*

24 November 2023 – *FIRST 6DM CASE REPORTED. STAY IN YOUR HOMES. AVOID ALL CONTACT WITH OTHERS.*

27 November 2023 – *Government close to developing 6DM cure as number of reported cases rises to over 2.6 million.*

29 November 2023 – *Parents disgusted as Government admits there is no cure for 6DM and offers T600 ‘death pill’ instead.*

1 December 2023 – *‘Give us T600’ cry distraught parents. ‘Our children are dying in agony.’*

2 December 2023 – *Grieving families told bodies must be burnt in mass graves as death toll reaches 22 million.*

3 December 2023 – *God Save The Queen . . . and us all.*

That was the last time a newspaper was printed.

The government made T600 available without prescription on 1 December.

T600 was quick and painless. Two pills, then a deep sleep and death.

At first it was supposed to be rolled out on a need-by-need basis, but within two days the need outgrew the process, and

pharmacists had other things to worry about, so boxes were left on counters and in doorways for people to take.

One of the only good things about that last week is that no one abused or tried to take advantage of the T600 situation. No one hoarded boxes or stole the pills and sold them on. When I went to get mine there were plenty left, and people were only taking one or two blister packs as needed. It may have been that everyone was just too sick to take advantage, but I hope not. It felt as though it was a choice, and one that would have made me think under any other circumstances that there was hope for the future of humanity after all.

If we had had a future of course.

It seems around a quarter of the population got the breakout news on the 24th, grabbed whatever they could, then sealed themselves in their homes and never reappeared. We think flat number 11 on our floor of the building did this. For a few days we heard them moving about as normal, radio on, TV, sounds of cooking, laughter even. A few days later we heard a long, sorrowful wail. Then silence for a couple of days, before the regular moaning began. We were on the top floor of our building so had no flats above us or to one side but as the volume and regularity of the moaning from Flat 11 increased, we became aware of similar noises in other flats below us, so we started to leave music or the TV on all the time.

Those who didn't confine themselves to their homes became like ghosts. People no longer walked the streets, they darted or flitted from spot to spot, heads down, avoiding physical or even visual contact with anyone else.

In 2020 we had been advised that two metres was a safe distance, but this had now organically increased to three or even four. If you got closer than this, people bristled, shouted, and moved quickly away. No one was taking any chances this time. Everyone wore a face mask of some description: some people

had official masks, but others made do with gas masks, dust masks; even a bandana wrapped around your nose and mouth was better than nothing. Most now wore bio-terror suits, dust suits, or something homemade fashioned from plastic coveralls – even bin bags at a push.

It was ridiculous really; without knowing how the virus was transferred it was impossible to protect against it. It might have been carried by plastics or fabric for all we knew.

While I had been in bed/throwing up, James had been providing for our future.

We didn't have a car, so he took both our suitcases down from the top of the cupboard and went shopping.

Well, I say shopping, really he went polite looting.

On the morning after 6DM arrived James got up as I was going to bed and went to our local supermarket. It was 6 a.m. and the shop was due to open at 7 a.m. There were already about fifty people there, standing in silence, three metres apart, in the relentless drizzle that the British weather system does so well.

No one came to open the shop.

At about 8 a.m., the queue, which was now at least a hundred strong, started to get restless.

A bedraggled woman wrapped in black bin bags walked to the front of the queue, causing rumblings of dissent from those waiting. She looked at the closed doors and then calmly took a brick out of her shopping bag and threw it through the automatic door, shattering the glass. She picked her way delicately through the shards and took a shopping basket.

James said the queue paused for maybe five seconds and then all walked politely inside in turn. He said there was no pushing, no violence, everyone kept their distance, and there was even some polite chitchat.

It was all terribly British.

James went to five shops that morning. Two had been broken into, two had left their doors open, and one was yet to be looted, so James smashed the window himself.

He said he'd felt exhilarated and then terrified he was going to be arrested, so he came straight home after that one.

James emptied our freezer of ice cream, ice cubes and the frozen ginger I'd never got around to using, and replaced them with milk, bread, cheese, fresh fruit and veg. He got tins of beans, bags of rice and pasta, candles, matches, and huge plastic tubs to store water in.

And yes, he got toilet roll.

He had provided us with everything we needed to survive when society completely broke down.

He had provided for us.

While I lay in bed for three days, he had left the flat time and time again with only a fabric face mask for protection.

He had taken care of me, and, just like he always did, he had made things better.

Like he had been doing from the very beginning of our relationship.

I met James when I was still working as a journalist.

Well, I say journalist, I worked in a very junior position for one of the national music papers reviewing gigs and interviewing the bands that no one else was particularly interested in, so there wasn't too much research or undercover work involved.

I had blagged the job at the end of the noughties, at a time when the British print music press was just about hanging in there and there was still money to be made and jobs to be had. I was young, blonde(ish), pretty(ish), posh(ish), and had written a couple of reviews for my college newspaper, which happened to be read by someone's brother who worked for a national. That was enough.

They sent me on a trial run to review *The Pain Beneath* at a small venue in Windsor. I didn't have enough money to pay for my taxi and a ticket so had to pretend to be a roadie to get in. Hilarity ensued. I wrote a 500-word review with only 25 words

being about the band ('They were good but should try looking up from the floor and at the audience some time. I especially liked the song about the hat.'). The paper loved it. I finished university and went straight into a job writing for them full-time.

And that was how I spent the next four years of my life.

I wasn't the best writer, never managed to delve that far below the surface of on-the-road antics and origin stories (hence the reason I was still a junior staff member after four years) but bands, and the people who looked after them, liked me. I was polite and friendly (but not so friendly that I shagged everyone or tried to stay past my welcome on tour), I drank (but not so much that I was a liability), I didn't take drugs (but wasn't judgmental of those who did), and my interviews could be spiky but I was never mean. I travelled the world, slept in hotels, villas, mansions, tour buses, and on a couple of floors in the beginning. I drank the best alcohol and ate the finest food.

I used any free time to work on my first novel, loosely based on my experiences: it was the tale of a young woman who falls in love with a rock star but soon learns a life of luxury in the spotlight is not all she thought it would be. It was funny, full of interesting details gleaned from my time spent with bands, and had a strong female lead. I was convinced I would soon be able to add novelist to my CV.

Those four years were free from commitment and worry. I couldn't drive, didn't own anything that wasn't small enough to put in a suitcase, and none of my relationships lasted more than a few weeks because I was always too busy travelling to my next assignment. I didn't care; I was perfectly happy in my own little carefree, commitment-free world.

But, as the decade came to a close, things started to change. Girl power was here to stay, and a new wave of female writers was emerging. Writers with ideas and unique voices. I was now in my mid-twenties, old enough to start having my own opinions, and my spiky irreverent style wasn't enough: people wanted to know what I thought about wider issues, rather than which major band was going to implode next.

I became increasingly aware of women writing powerful pieces about gender and sexism and what it meant to be a woman in the modern world. Of course, women had always been writing these pieces, but now it felt like I should be writing them too. What were my politics? Why did I wear make-up? Did I wear skirts because I wanted to, or because that was what was expected of me?

I didn't know the answer to any of it. I didn't know how to change a plug, let alone work out if I could wear lipstick and still be a feminist. I felt an increasing urgency to define who I was and commit that to paper. But I wasn't ready for that sort of commitment. I wasn't ready for any sort of commitment.

At about the same time that I was beginning to recognise the lack of any real substance in my articles, and maybe in me, my novel was being rejected for the exact same reason by literary agents across London. They 'loved the world', declared I wrote 'with vivid detail about the machinations of life on the road' but also (literally) thought 'the central character lacks substance' and that 'she just seems to drift through the novel with no emotional journey of her own'. One particularly memorable rejection note explained: 'she learns nothing about herself in the novel'.

They were polite but final – every single one declined to represent me.

Within a couple of months my easy, carefree world started to crumble. I had no coping mechanism for what was happening to me, for the changing emotions and newly developed doubts that were crowding my mind. I'd never had to think about the purpose of my life or my writing before. I don't think I really knew how to.

What I should have done is had a serious think about what I really wanted to say, what I really wanted to write about. I should have thought about my me, thought about my journey, written about not being ready to define myself, about feeling pressure to say who I was before I even knew. I should have realised that I wasn't the only one feeling like this, that I wasn't the only one who didn't feel like she had all the answers at the age of twenty-five. But I didn't.

Instead, I began to doubt myself and all of the choices I had made. Sure, I travelled the world and experienced things people only read about (in my articles) but I'd never properly paid rent or bought a TV licence. I'd gone directly from childhood home into university halls and then back to my parents' again. I should probably have moved out, but what was the point when I was hardly ever there?

I'd always thought I was strong and independent. I'd always been happy with who I was and hadn't required the approval of others. I didn't need a gaggle of girlfriends to discuss my latest purchases or conquests with. I wasn't prolific on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter, I didn't post for likes.

But now I wondered if this was all by choice. Was I alone and independent because I wanted to be, or because I had no other options?

I started poring over other people's Facebook accounts. People I'd known at school and university were settling down, getting married, having kids. They were being bridesmaids and organising baby showers. My best, and pretty much only, friend was gay and didn't believe in marriage or children, so I wasn't likely to be called upon to offer up these services anytime soon.

I began to sleep badly, drink more, and have a constant knot of fear in my stomach.

I knew I wanted to change my life, but was too paralysed by indecision to know what to do first.

It took about three months for the knot of fear to develop into low-key panic attacks, and another couple of months for those panic attacks to wear me down to the point where I thought I was going to have to admit to someone that I was having trouble leaving my room in the morning.

And just then, into my strange dark world, came James.

James was the new advertising manager for the music journal, and he became the office golden boy within a week. Good-looking but not unattainably so, funny in a sarcastic, throwaway way that was confident but also completely self-deprecating, good at his job but not so good that he made other people look bad, friendly

with the management but not so friendly he couldn't take the piss out of them.

He was ten years older than me, embodied everything that I wasn't, and had everything that I didn't: a career, a house, a car, and a washing machine that kept breaking down. He talked of long-term life plans, career trajectories, of saving for a mortgage deposit, of two-week summer holidays to places that cost half my yearly salary. He also had a long-term girlfriend whom he lived with and who was angling for a proposal, but I chose to gloss over that part of his enviable lifestyle.

His grounded and adult world made mine seem even more transitory and baseless. What was I doing with my life? If anyone had the answer it was James.

Without even acknowledging it to myself James became my reason for leaving the house each day. At least during the working week.

He was the balance to my chaos, a calming centre of normality and routine.

We discovered we got the same train into work and so started to sit together.

Those train journeys were when I fell in love.

Squashed together for forty-five minutes we talked of everything – past, present and future. We compared childhoods, school, first time having our hearts broken, our jobs, dream homes. We talked about work and how he wanted to move into something more creative. I talked about having my novel rejected – something I hadn't even told my parents.

We had absolutely nothing in common. James had started work at sixteen, wanted to work his way up the career ladder and then invest in property; I, obviously, still lived with my parents, had fallen into my one and only job by accident and spent all my spare money on going out and travelling.

But, somehow, it worked – we worked.

I memorised every physical detail of him. The length of his eyelashes and the laughter lines that wrinkled the corners of his eyes when he smiled. The way the sun would catch the lighter ginger streaks in his hair and the smattering of grey in his sideburns. How on a Wednesday he would have a layer of stubble before he shaved again on Thursday. The tan that he returned with after a two-week holiday. The smell of him in the morning, fresh from the shower, aftershave sharp and citrus. The smell of him on the way home, a slight tang of sweat, the residue of the office still on his skin. The warmth that came from him as we sat close together.

I lived for our train journeys. James got the train three stops after me and I would save the seat next to mine, frantically apologising to people who tried to take advantage of the space. Sometimes people sat there despite my protests, sometimes he wouldn't get on my carriage, sometimes he would get another train. These were dark days. But, on the days he sat next to me, he made me feel better. He made the knot in my stomach loosen and the fog lift slightly. When I was with him I didn't have to think about me because I was too busy thinking about him. When I was with him, I felt okay. I felt normal. I felt safe.

As I said, from the very beginning, James made things feel better.

James made me feel better.

Why did James get 6DM and I didn't?

Was it because he went out in those three days? Did I miss some weird contraction window? Maybe we both had it, but my disgusting hangover symptoms had expelled it from my body? If doctors had induced extreme vomiting in the early stages of the virus could they have purged it from everyone?

Maybe I really am the ultimate anomaly, the only person with immunity in the whole world. Maybe I am actually the cure.

Whatever.

James sneezed at 4.36 a.m. on December 3rd and I knew he was going to die.