

LBRIS

We know
books

ALSO BY EMMA JANE UNSWORTH

*Hungry, the Stars and Everything
Animals*

ADULTS

EMMA JANE UNSWORTH

b

THE BOROUGH PRESS

PROLOGUE

SOHO SQUARE

I sit and wait for her, my feet swinging under the bench. She'll come soon, and she'll know where.

Adrenaline. I squeeze my own arms. Tap my toes. God, I hate waiting. Is that what I've been doing all these years? Waiting, for her? Maybe all those therapists were right. Maybe therapy isn't just a bad stand-up show you don't have the balls to take on the road.

I look around, at the other people chatting and posing and repositioning themselves, whiling away this cold Friday. It's a few weeks before Christmas and the city is all lit up. People are smiling too much, drinking too much, wanting too much, wearing too much tinsel. Nothing points to the ephemeral nature of life quite like tinsel.

I look towards the north gate of the square and it's then that I see her. Dishevelled, pulling on her coat. She scans the benches, spots me and freezes. I wave. She tilts her head to one side and bats her eyes, as though appealing to some ancient understanding between us; as though this has all been a scripted episode, some kind of

brilliant shared joke. I stare at her emotionlessly. I am not playing. She stares back. It's checkmate with the old queen.

She starts to walk over. I almost don't recognise her with her clothes on. Which is a strange thing to say about your mother.

A FEW MONTHS EARLIER

HELLO, WORLD!

It is 10.05 a.m. and I am queuing at the breakfast counter of my co-working space in east London. The weather outside is autumnal but muggy and I have over-layered. I am damp at my armpits and wondering whether to nip out and buy a fresh T-shirt at lunch. I made dhal for dinner last night from a budget vegetarian cookbook I picked up in a charity shop, and let me tell you, it was astonishing. I am creating a social media post about a croissant that I am pretty sure will define me as a human.

I stare at my phone. I am happy enough with the photo. I have applied the Clarendon filter to accentuate the photo's ridges and depths, making the light bits lighter and the darker bits darker. I added a white frame for art. The picture looks – as much as pastry can – transcendental. However, the text is proving troublesome. I've tweaked it so many times that I can't work out whether it makes sense any more. This often happens. I ponder the words so long, thinking how they might be received, wondering if they could be better, that they lose all their original momentum. I get stage fright. The rest of the world has fallen away around this small square of existence. It's like that bit in *Alien 3* where Ripley says to the alien:

You've been in my life so long, I can't remember anything else. I used to think it was about motherhood. Now I know it's about social media.

I stare at the screen.

PASTRIES, WOO! #PASTRIES

Is this the absolute best depiction of my present experience?
I cross out the WOO, and the comma.

PASTRIES! #PASTRIES

I stare at it again. I try and recall the original inspiration; to be guided by that. It's the least I can do. I interrogate myself. That's what the mid-thirties should be about, after all: constant self-interrogation. Acquiring the courage to change what you can, and the therapist to accept what you can't. What is it I really *want to say* about pastries? How do pastries truly *make me feel*? Why is it important *right now* that I share this?

I delete the exclamation mark and stare at the remaining two words. They are the same word. The only difference is that one is hashtagged. Do they mean the same, or something different? Is there added value in the repetition? Is it worth leaving one un-hashtagged, so that the original sentiment exists, unfettered by digital accoutrements? It's so important to get all this right. I want people to know instantly, at a glance, that this post is about pastries in their purest form. This is Platonic Pastry.

I delete the hashtag so that the post simply says:

PASTRIES.

Full stop or no full stop? A full stop always looks decisive and commanding, but it can also look more cool and casual if you just

leave the sentence hanging there, like, Oh I'm so busy in my dazzling life I don't even have time to punctuate. The squalid truth is I over-punctuate when I'm stressed/excited. I can go four exclamation marks on a good/bad day. Exclamation marks are the people-pleaser's punctuation of choice. It makes us seem eager and pliable. Excited to talk to you! You!!!! I always notice other people's punctuation. When someone sends me a message with no exclamation marks or kisses, I respect them. I also think: are they depressed? Did I do something to offend them?

Sometimes, I see people using whole rows of emojis, and I just want to hold them.

PASTRIES

Perfect.

Yes, I think that probably says it all.

Hm.

Is it enough, though, really?

Oh god. I just. Don't. Know.

'Can I help you?'

I look up in fright. It is my turn at the counter.

'Uh . . .'

I look at the croissants on the rough stone plinth. I see now that there is a problem. I'm pretty sure – and I am very observant – that one of them is from yesterday. It looks stiffer than the rest, the way it's hunched at the front, like it's all uptight. It is a decidedly different texture and colour to the rest. I don't know whether this suggests age, or some kind of bacterial contamination, or what. How did I miss this? I know that I am definitely going to get that croissant if I ask for a croissant.

I am paralysed. I do not know what to do. I do not feel able to ask for a specific croissant, although I certainly feel I deserve one. I

do a quick calculation. There are eight croissants there and the defective one is on my side rather than the server's, so really it's unlikely I'll get lumped with it. I exhale. I decide to go for it. I need this experience, to fulfil my . . . planned experience.

I speak. 'One croissant, please.'

The server nods, but then for some reason known only to herself, goes to take the CROISSANT OF CALAMITY from the front. I shout: 'Oh, hey! Excuse me! Could I please not have that croissant?'

I say it with fear and also with absolute rectitude.

The server's tongs twitch. She says, slowly: 'They're . . . all the same.'

I say: 'Could I just have one from the back please? Thank you!'

Everyone is looking at me.

She speaks slower still, as though I am an idiot. 'But . . . they are all the same.'

'That one is a slightly different hue, I believe,' I say, quieter.

She peers at the croissants. The person behind me in the queue comes forward for a look, too. The barista abandons the Gaggia and comes over. The cashier. They all look, and then they all stare at me.

'It was a preference really,' I whisper. 'Please, just put any croissant in a bag.'

She puts the croissant in a paper bag. It hits the bottom with a ding. I press my card on the reader and will it to bleep. Bleep for Chrissakes, bleep fucking fuckbud fucker.

It bleeps. I pelt.

I run into the Ladies, sling the croissant in the bin and have a short cry. It's fine, though. People cry in WerkHaus all the time. They have these little soundproofed booths near reception for private calls, but mostly people just use them for crying in.

When I'm done crying I take a piss. As I wipe, I check for blood, as always.

I look at my phone.

PASTRIES

The sentiment remains the same, even if the truth has turned out differently. And it's the sentiment that counts.

PASTRIES

In a way, it's perfect. Factual. But I'm still not 100 per cent. I recall something Suzy Brambles once said in her 'Incontrovertible Gram Tips'. She said: 'Go with your first draft.'

I change the words back to:

PASTRIES, WOO! #PASTRIES

Right. I feel almost ready to go on this. As a final check, I text Kelly. Kelly is my oldest friend and most trusted social media editor.

Pls will you check one thing for me before I post

No no I said no more of this

Please

No, you're driving me mad with this daily bombardment

It's not every day!

Mate, it's most days

Please I'm having the worst day already!!!! I was just served a defective pastry

No

I beg of you

I am not endorsing this behaviour

What behaviour???

This lunacy. I don't think it's healthy. Or authentic

Authentic???

You said that we 'grew up together' in a post the other day. We were 22 when we met

It made a better story! Anyway we almost did, in that we both grew up in the North!

WTF

Charlie Chaplin once lost a Charlie Chaplin lookalike competition

DOUBLE WTF

Well we inevitably put a filter on ourselves, don't we? Even as honest people moving through society

Stop intellectualising your problem. Life is not a lookalike competition

Just sent you the post, pls review and feed back

FFS

She'll read it. I know she will. She doesn't do much while she's waiting for her receptionist shift to start – other than watching blackhead-removal videos, which I think somehow give her a sense of universal equilibrium being restored.

She replies after a few seconds:

It's fine. Really don't know what you were concerned about

Thank you x

I bestow a kiss! I hope she really feels that 'thank you'. My politeness-verging-on-grace. Then after a few seconds I send:

I hope you took time to really consider it and didn't just rush off an answer?

She doesn't reply.

She does that sometimes, Kelly. Shuts down. She did a much bigger version when I was getting together with my ex, Art – back in those heady days of hard wooing – and I asked her to check the things I was sending him. Sometimes you just need a second opinion, you know? What are friends for?

Kelly's from the North, too. She's Yorkshire. The white rose to my red. She's an angel in my lifetime but she has started to publicly undermine me and to be honest it's starting to grate. Example: last week I posted a photo of a leaf-covered bench in the park with the words:

Autumn, you've always been my favourite

and she commented:

Do you think liking autumn makes you a more complex person?

A few days later I posted a charming vista of a field and she wrote, *Mate, there's nothing in this picture*

It's not the kind of thing you expect from a beloved friend. BUT – if you had to ask me who knew me best, who *loved* me best, who *I* loved best – well, I do know what the answer would be. Kelly thrills me, it's as simple as that. She thrills me. We might have drifted apart a bit of late, but we have the kind of friendship that can weather emotional distance. It's very easy-come, easy-go. Like an open marriage.

Kelly has a son, Sonny. I've known them twelve years, although

technically I met Sonny first. He's fourteen now. Kelly got pregnant with her university ex, whom she told me she swiftly outgrew. He now has a baby with another woman and is a proper truck-blocking activist. He and Kelly once stayed up a tree for six weeks, while she was pregnant, and I think it was during that time she realised the relationship was really over. It's going to be a make-or-break holiday when you're crapping in a carrier bag and arguing about who has more snacks left because there's no electronic entertainment. Kelly still has a star tattoo on her wrist from when she used to be an anarchist. (She never turned down a cheeseboard, though. I think you often find that with anarchists – they still like the small comforts.)

The last time I saw Sonny, a couple of months ago, I told him to stop looking at girls with long fake nails on Instagram because they were emulating porn stars. He said I was nail-shaming them. He told me his friend pressed the wrong button on a vending machine in America and got the morning-after pill instead of a drink, so what did I have to teach him? People are depressed about the totalitarian state we're heading towards – a world where our internet use will be restricted to viewing the shiny, ham-like faces of our unelected leaders – but at least it will save the kids from porn. Every cloud.

I've told Kelly that we have to respect social media more than the younger generations because we're not digital natives. We were raised in print. This shift has been a major cultural and psychological upheaval in our lifetimes. We didn't get email until we were at university. The internet can throw some curveballs. I once ordered a bureau off eBay and when it arrived it was a miniature one, for a doll's house. I thought it was a bargain at £1.99. Plus, we weren't brought up natural broadcasters. We've had to catch up, and too quickly. I remember that move towards daily (hourly; constant) documentation. Years ago a friend drove me mad on a hike, stopping to take photos all the time for her Facebook. I was very frustrated, as I wanted to keep walking. It was like being in a constantly stalling

car. Now, I'd be the one scrambling to the nearest cliff face for a signal.

Speaking of which.

It's time to bite the bullet. I add a last-minute impulse hashtag. Really going now!

#shameabouttheservice

I post the picture. The waiting begins. It's like that conundrum of the tree falling in the empty forest. Does it make a sound if there's no one there? If you put something on social media and no one likes it, do you even exist? I have calculated that with my number of followers I can measure a successful post on the basis of approximately ten likes per minute. Still, there's no formula for it – I've tried everything. One time I even arranged a day trip to Heptonstall to photograph Sylvia Plath's grave (literary, tragic, it ticked so many boxes!) and so many people lit their little hearts for it that it was worth the £100 train fare. I used to do things for their own sake, but now grammability is a defining factor.

We're almost at a minute and no—

Yes! There's one! And two! And three and four! Thank you. Now we've broken the seal, it all gets sexy. Someone comments, 'Yumstrels.' I dabble with the notion of liking the comment. It's a commitment, liking comments, because once you start you really have to follow it through and like all of them. Really it's best not to start, plus it looks less obsessive, less like you're monitoring things. I just left this here and walked away! What, you think I have nothing better to do with my day than refresh this inanity?

I'm waiting for any likes, but really I'm waiting for the women I currently admire online. It's been moving this way for a few years and recently it calcified. I want the women to want me more. I wait for a name that means something. I wait for a sign. There are certain

people whose attention I am keen to attract. Margot Ripkin. Buzzface Cruise. Wintering Marianne. Suzy Brambles. Suzy Brambles more than the rest, perhaps, because she just started following me back (two days ago! I've been following her for years), so it feels as though we are now connected. As we should be. Entwined, you might say.

Suzy Brambles. Oh, Suzy Brambles, with your hostile bob and black Citroën DS and kickboxing lessons and almond eyes and lips like you've been sucking on a frozen Zeppelin. What's not to like? And I like. I like and like and like. The first post that ensnared me was a charred corncob on a beach barbecue, with the caption: *The adventure is already inside you*. I was pretty lost on the adventure front at the time, so that corncob spoke to me on many levels. This morning, Suzy Brambles has been kicking up leaves in Dulwich. She is such a playful thing! I have watched the video five times already. Suzy Brambles only posts in black and white. This is because she has real integrity. I watch the video of her in the park again. Each time I watch it, I find something new to admire in her choice of composition, angle and filter.

I look at the time. It is almost 11 a.m. How did that—

ART SAID

'That thing is the first thing you look at in the morning and the last thing you look at at night.'

We were in bed. It was a week or so before we broke up. I was looking at my phone while we were having sex. I see now how that might have been interpreted as rude — some might even say offensive. He put his hands on my shoulders and said: 'Stop.'

I stopped.

He said: 'Jenny, somehow I just don't feel like I have your full attention.'

'You do!'

'I don't. Even when you're here it's like you're not here. It's like half your head is somewhere else.'

It was. Half my head was in Copenhagen, where Suzy Brambles was having a splendid time. The earthenware in one particular eatery was 'lickable'.

Art said: 'I feel as though this constant interfacing has become a wall between us.'

I almost said: *But does sex require one's full attention?* Eating doesn't, after all — and that is arguably as important as sex.

I looked back at my phone. I smiled at Suzy smiling.

Art pulled himself out from under my legs, sat on the side of the bed and whipped off the condom. He rubbed his face. 'Okay,' he said. 'We have a problem.'

I finished my comment, a simple, single red heart emoji – the classic choice; just . . . *enough* – clicked the phone to sleep and looked at him. Art said: ‘You are on that thing when we eat, you are on it when we watch TV, you are on it when we go for a walk, and now you are on it *when we are having sex.*’

‘It was a slow bit!’

‘It was sex, Jenny. Not a film.’

I looked at him and tried a cute: ‘Sometimes it’s as good as the movies, though.’

‘Mmmmmmmmm.’

It was a long sound, that mmmm. Like a door buzzer, or a hornet trapped in a jar. I watched the sunlight on the wall flicker. Summer was almost over. *First thing in the morning and last thing at night.* There was a time – even in my life – when that slot would have been reserved for a lover.

Art said: ‘Are you in love with someone on the internet?’

‘No!’ I said. Which was almost not a lie.

He said: ‘I’ve noticed a direct correlation between you growing more distant from me and closer to your phone.’

He said: ‘It’s like I can’t get to you when you’re there. Your eyes are all wide and you’re plugged in like a happy little robot.’

He said: ‘Except you’re not happy.’

‘How do you know I’m not happy?’

‘Because you’re never satisfied.’

I took his penis in my hand. ‘Maybe that’s just me.’

I WALK

back into the main office. It’s all creative types in here – advertising and media, mostly. There’s a lot of lino. A lot of dachshunds. Lots of plants that are real-imitating-plastic. You see men with visible pocket watches high-fiving over MacBook Airls and you worry about what this means for evolution.

I work for an online magazine, *The Foof*, and it is as awful as it sounds. My editor, Mia, is fucking terrifying – stupidly; admirably? – socially fearless. I think this is her seventh or eighth start-up. Art called her a ‘delectable oaf’ (not to her face). I’m anxious to please her because I’m an approval junkie and have a teacher–pupil dynamic with people in positions of authority. You should see me getting a smear test – it’s like I’m trying to *sell them* my super-clean vagina. I thought I’d offended Mia on Friday when I told her UV uplighters for teeth were imbecilic, unaware that she was wearing one (I thought she was slurring on her anti-depressants) – but then she liked one of my pictures on Sunday and I breathed a sigh of relief because I knew everything was okay. Saturday was fraught – I spent a lot of it questioning my whole life and worth. Even though I don’t respect Mia, I fear her and professionally that’s ultimately a good thing because it means I want to impress her, so I give my work my all. I’m only really effective around people I want to impress. Otherwise, my energy deadens. I’d churn out dross if I actually felt comfortable around my boss. Vague social terror: that’s my motivation.

The Foof has a permanent office here, in the loosest sense. There's a sign – *FOOFTOWERS* – in fluffy pink letters across the back wall. The sign could be taken down at any given moment. So could the wall.

I make my way across the main space to my desk. I don't come in every day so I share with Gemma, who writes the horoscopes and product reviews and is so cheerful I want to punch her. (Sorry, I don't want you thinking that just because I work in the media I'm a fucking idiot.)

I sit down and start to compose an email, which is what I do after any unsatisfactory social interaction.

DRAFTS

Subject: That Croissant

Dear Breakfast Maven, Queen of the Granola,
You know and I know that croissant was prehistoric. It was yesterday's batch, that's why you were trying to palm it off on me. I deserve a fresh croissant, do I not, for my £3.50? In America, that kind of hesitation within the service industry would be unthinkable. **JUST GIVE ME THE CROISSANT I WANT NEXT TIME, FOR THE LOVE OF COMMON DECENCY.**

Kind regards,
Jenny McLaine
The Foof (columnist)

THEY SAY

It is crucial to incorporate mindfulness into your daily routine. I like to get on it every few hours, just to be sure. After I've written the email, I take a deep breath and count to ten in Hindi. I even have an app to remind me to take time out regularly. It shouts *TAKE A BREAK, BABY!* in an Austin Powers voice (I chose the voice from six options). It's a little obnoxious, but it's good to know something cares.

I check the status of mon croissant. Thirty-five likes. Dear sweet Christ alive. You've got to be kidding. The thirties are disastrous numbers, they really are.

As I'm studying the post, I realise that I have automatically tagged WerkHaus and, while I am displeased with the morning's events, I do not want anyone losing their job on my account. I've seen *An Inspector Calls* – several times – with my mother. I know how much people in the service industry can take things to heart. My life is a perfect war zone of potential consequences.

I go into Edit Post and de-tag the location. Too late! Someone from WerkHaus – Joel from The Little Green Bento Den – has commented:

Was it the hench one with the underbite? She's a right Orc

Fucking Joel. I consider what to do. I don't want Suzy Brambles or any other notables thinking I am endorsing this bile. I also don't want to get into an argument with Joel that could last several hours and get my blood up. I've sacrificed entire emotional half-days before