

Short Story Portfolio

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This is a collection of short stories that I have written for my university assignments over the past three years, each one is a maximum of 2500 words and there was no set brief.

Hopelessly Devoted (Pages 1-9)

Hopelessly Devoted is a Young-Adult love story, that follows two girls, Jo and Hannah. The two had met at a summer camp the previous year and fallen in love. A year later, they are at camp again and sharing a cabin, and must cope with having the lead roles in that year's musical, as well as last year's feelings being rekindled. The story is loosely based on the plot of the musical *Grease*, and this is the musical that is performed at the summer camp too.

In the Middle of a Long Cold Winter (Pages 10-17)

In the Middle of a Long Cold Winter is a medieval fantasy story, with the present-day narrative being intertwined with folk-tale. A small town was cursed when a group of adventurers entered and killed one of the two dragons who guarded the town and controlled the changing of the seasons. The remaining dragon became bitter and cursed the town to live in an eternal winter, which has left the residents struggling for food. Every year, a small group of people are sent up to the dragon's lair to present offerings, in the hope that the dragon will remove the curse. When attempting to bargain with the dragon, Tamora is told that the only way the curse can be lifted is if she gives up her love, Ashlei, and lives in the cave with the dragon, knowing what it is like to have your love taken from you. Tamora is the first person in 350 years to agree to

these terms. She sends her wife Ashlei back home with the rest of their group and, after a year of living with the dragon, the curse is lifted and summer returns to their town.

A Realisation (Pages 18-25)

Jess and Sam are friends and roommates who live in a small English town. After deciding that the world view of their town is too narrow, Jess starts a book club with Sam where they read books that reflect the real world. During the story, they read Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a memoir in the form of a graphic novel, that shows Alison's relationship with her father, a closeted gay man, and her own coming out as a lesbian. When introduced to these new ideas, Sam realises that she is a lesbian, and discovers that Jess began the book club as a way to come out herself.

Just Breathe (Pages 26-32)

Just Breathe follows a third-year university student who, overwhelmed with deadlines and discussions of her future, runs away to the seaside for a break. She uses the week to calm her anxieties about university, taking the time to look for fun things to take photos of to send to her Mum and her friend. Eventually, she comes across a small bookshop, which happens to be hiring. She falls in love with the town that she is staying in and applies to the bookshop, as well as looking for a flat in the area. Now that she has a plan for the future, she feels less overwhelmed and returns home, ready to finish her final university assignments.

Hopelessly Devoted

I'd barely had the chance to settle in when she walked through the door. I'd been thinking about her constantly since last year's camp. I hadn't heard from her in months though, school and distance making it difficult to keep in touch with her and the others. When the door first creaked open, I turned around hoping to see Sam or Evie, who had been my cabin mates since our first year. I knew Hannah would turn up eventually. I'd checked the lists when picking up my keys and saw her name next to mine. I was hoping that I'd have more time with Sam and Evie to figure out exactly what I was feeling.

"Hey Jo," she said, her mouth curling up into a small smile. I'd forgotten how pretty she was. My insides twisted when her brown eyes met mine. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back into a single plait, the same way she'd worn it every day last year.

"Hannah." I needed to pull myself together, fast. "It's good to see you again."

She shuffled past me so that she could start unpacking, dumping some of her stuff on her bed, which was the bunk above mine. "How have you been?"

"Good. Busy. You know, A-Levels and stuff. You?"

"Pretty much the same." She took a deep breath. "Listen, about last year—"

"Well look who it is! The gang's back together!"

I had never been so grateful to hear Evie's voice and to turn around and find her and Sam walking into the cabin. I'm not ready to talk to Hannah properly. I pulled my friends into a

hug and we caught each other up on our lives as we unpacked. When Hannah had turned her back, Evie turned to me and raised her eyebrows and mimed a kiss. I glared at her and she flashed me a grin before going back to her suitcase. Hannah turned around and caught the glare that I'd thrown Evie's way, glancing between us.

"I'm going to go outside for a bit, see who else is here," I said, stuffing the rest of my clothes into the drawers next to my bed.

I let out a breath as I stepped outside. That cabin was suffocating me, and it was only the first day. Who knew how I would survive the next thirteen days? Especially if Evie was set on meddling.

At the end of the row of cabins was a picnic area, so I sat on one of the benches and enjoyed the sunshine whilst waiting for the others. I couldn't believe that this would be my last year at this camp, that from next year I would be too old to come back. I took in my surroundings, enjoying the calm before the chaos.

After a while my friends came and joined me, Hannah's laugh breaking me out of my memories. I watched her as they walked down the path, her smile lighting up her face. She turned from Sam and looked at me, catching my gaze. I glanced away quickly, embarrassed to be caught staring.

When they reached the bench Sam and Evie sat opposite which meant Hannah had to sit next to me. Evie winked at me as she sat down, just to show that she was doing it on purpose. Maybe I needed to have a word with her, otherwise, she was going to make things

more awkward, and it was almost unbearable already. Gradually the rest of the campers arrived and the benches started to fill up. I found myself perching on the edge, my leg pressed right up against Hannah's.

It eventually got too much and I excused myself to go to the toilet block on the other side of camp. Maybe the walk would do me good.

Once I'd calmed down and regulated my breathing I left the block, only to run straight into Hannah.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. You'd been gone a while, I wanted to make sure you were OK."

My heart stuttered as she met my eyes again.

"Oh, yeah, all good. It's just a long walk across camp, you know? Enjoying the scenery." I forced a smile and started in the direction of the others.

"Jo." She caught my wrist as I walked off. I stopped and turned back, but refused to meet her eyes. "Last year we left things a bit awkward. I just wanted to clear the air so that we can both enjoy this year."

I nodded to show her I was listening.

"The kiss was, well it was good, but it meant nothing, OK? It just sort of happened. But I'd really like to still be friends with you. I'd hate to lose you over something so small."

"Right. Yeah of course. Friends is a good plan. I'd hate to ruin this year by being awkward."

If I was happy with the plan, then why did it feel like someone had just stomped all over my heart?

The next few days were a blur of casting announcements and learning lines and songs. This year we were putting on Grease and most of us knew it already, but that didn't mean that rehearsals were easy and we were all exhausted by the end of the second day. As Rizzo, most of my scenes were with Hannah as Sandy, but it was easier to be with her onstage than off it. Rizzo wouldn't think about how pretty Sandy is, therefore I didn't need to think about how pretty Hannah was.

Or I didn't have to think about it until Evie decided to intervene.

I was alone in the cabin learning my lines when she came in with a determined look on her face.

"We need to talk about Hannah."

"What? Why? I'm busy." I held up my script.

She rolled her eyes at me and then sat down on her bed, the bunk across from mine. "This time last year you were all 'Hannah's so pretty' 'guys Hannah is so funny', we couldn't shut you up. I know you've spent a year apart but I thought we'd come back to you being all cute and in love. Do you still like her?"

"I..." I sighed and closed my script. "She's very pretty, don't get me wrong, but no. We're just friends." If I told Evie that I still had feelings for Hannah then she would keep meddling,

and that would not end well. I couldn't let her make things worse and cause tension in the cabin. Not on our last year. Hannah just wanted to be friends, and if that was the only way that I'd get to spend time with her, then I'll take it. Better to be friends and see her, than try for something more and have her stop talking to me.

Evie squinted at me for a second and then sighed. "Fine. OK. I believe you, for now. But if you continue blushing whenever you make eye contact then I will have to reconsider." She picked up her script and walked towards the door.

"Wait. I don't do that. Do I? Evie!"

She stuck her tongue out at me and left.

I was doing well. By the end of the first week of rehearsals, I could make eye contact with Hannah without feeling like someone was starting a small fire in my stomach. Evie had also stopped threatening to interfere, which definitely made things easier and I felt less on edge.

Of course, this meant something was bound to happen to put me back at square one.

The shower block at camp was a grimy building with eight shower stalls and barely enough room to move around inside. The cubicle doors were flimsy and it always felt like everyone could see you. Still half asleep, I walked into the block just as Hannah stepped out of a cubicle in a tight-fitting tank top and skinny jeans. She looked *good*. Her clothes clung to her body, outlining her slim figure.

"Morning Jo," she said with a smile.

"Morning." I stood there for a second and neither of us moved. Why was she just standing there?

"Can I get past?"

Oh. Right. I was blocking her way. Embarrassed, I took a step back to let her walk over to the mirrors. She dumped her washbag on the side and started to pull her damp hair up into a messy bun. I couldn't take my eyes off her, despite trying my hardest. She caught my eye in the mirrors.

"You OK?"

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry, I'm tired, bit out of it." I practically ran into one of the open cubicles and shut the door before leaning my forehead against it.

"Ok. Fine. You were right," I whispered to Evie as I sat down in the audience. We were having a quick break whilst Hannah and Ethan practised the opening scene.

"About?"

"Hannah. I'm not over her."

Evie did a mini celebratory dance. "I knew it!"

"Ssh!" I tried to get her to calm down as a group of kids a few rows down, turned to look at us. "It's not like I can do anything about it! We have a week left and then she'll go back to being five hours away. There's no point."

Evie frowned as she thought for a second. "You can always do long distance? You are learning to drive which would make it easier to see her. Plus we're going to university in September - maybe she'll end up closer to you?"

I nodded slowly. She did have a point. Things would be easier this year. "You're assuming that she likes me back."

"Jo, she kissed you, that's a pretty clear sign if I ever heard one."

"And then she didn't speak to me for a year and said it meant nothing!"

"How do you know she's not lying?"

"How do you know she is?"

Evie paused again. "I'll do some investigating."

I glared at her. "Evie. I swear to God, if you make things awkward I will—"

"Hey, Hannah!"

I turned around and saw Hannah walking up the aisle towards us. "This isn't over Evie," I muttered.

She winked and made room for Hannah to come and sit down next to me. Why did I think I could trust her?

At the end of the first week, the costumes arrived. We were all sent individually to the shed round the back of the performance space to find them. Hannah was still looking through the racks when I walked in.

Seeing her standing there reminded me of last year when we'd both volunteered to put the costumes away. We had both been buzzing from the adrenaline rush of performing on stage, and I'd still been getting my head around having my first proper crush. Being alone with her in a small space really hadn't helped me to get over my feelings, particularly when her hand kept brushing mine as she reached for the next thing to hang up. Just when I thought the room couldn't feel any smaller, I'd looked up and she was standing right in front of me. Her eyes caught mine and I swear I stopped breathing. It felt like time slowed down as she moved towards me, her face inched closer to mine until eventually, we were kissing.

It should feel different now, we are just friends after all, but when she looked up and caught my eye from across the room, I felt just the same as I had a year ago. The fire in my stomach returned, getting bigger the longer she looked at me. There was a familiar look in her eyes, and I wondered whether she was thinking about last year too. She cleared her throat and glanced away.

"Your costume is here," she said, holding up a Pink Ladies jacket.

"Thanks." I struggled to swallow as I moved towards her. We made eye contact again as I reached for the hanger, my fingers grazing hers. We jumped apart at the touch.

"I should get back." Hannah took her clothes from the rail and dodged around me. I reached for her hand just as she moved away and pulled her back towards me, searching her face for the tiniest hint that she still liked me.

"Jo." There was a glint in her eye when she looked at me, and that was all I needed. "I should—"

I moved closer and kissed her. It felt like someone had just poured petrol on the fire in my stomach, turning it into a bonfire, followed by the strong feeling in my gut that I'd made the right choice. Distance be damned, I would do whatever it took just to be able to kiss her again. Hannah moved her hands to the small of my back, forcing our bodies closer.

I don't know how long we stayed like that, but it was Hannah who eventually pulled away. She rested her forehead against mine, a small smile on her face.

"We should really get back before they send a search party out." She breathed deeply and turned away, reaching for me as she went. We left the costume shed together, hand in hand.

In the Middle of a Long Cold Winter

As we trudged through the snow, the lantern that Ashlei held flickered in the wind. It reminded me of the lights we had strung up in the trees. The festival felt like months ago, but we had only been on this journey for two days now. I could still feel the warmth of the fire and hear my grandmother's voice. I remembered how she looked, eyes lit up as the fire danced before her. A small smile on her face as she took her place in front of the group of children. She'd been waiting for her moment for years, I could tell, and just like her father and grandmother, she shared our history with the youngest of our tribe.

Many years ago, when the sun was still high in the sky and the land was fresh and fertile, there lived two dragons. They lived together at the top of the mountains. We respected them and they left us alone. Twice a year, at the change of the seasons, we would make a pilgrimage up to their cave and leave offerings for them.

For Halios, the beautiful copper dragon, we would bring meat at the end of the winter. We would ask her for summer, and with her fiery breath she would melt the snow and bring back the sun. For Tharion, the white dragon with blue eyes that could pierce the soul, we brought the fruits of the summer. Her icy breath brought us the winter, but with our gifts, it was never harsh.

And so we lived our lives in harmony. We would catch glimpses of them as they spread their wings, Halios' scales glinting in the sunlight as she flew high overhead. A cool breeze would flow through the village when Tharion went out hunting, but it didn't chill you to the bone like the winds today.

The wind bit at my face as we pushed forward. The blizzard had gotten heavier as we hiked further up the mountain. Snowflakes tangled together in the gale before resting on our clothes, faces and hair.

"Over here!" Ashlei called from up ahead. She turned to the rest of us and held the lantern up so we knew where we needed to go. Once we all caught up to her, she walked forward into the dark cave, her lantern creating a small pocket of light in the overwhelming darkness. As the light bounced off the walls we saw the drawings we had been told about. Pictures were etched into the stone depicting the story we all knew off by heart. At the end of the story was a list of names of those who had made the same journey that we had just completed. We took turns holding the lantern as we scratched our names into the stone underneath the others, adding to the history that this cave held. I traced my fingers over the names of our ancestors, the weight of the journey suddenly hitting me. We weren't just delivering meat and fruits to anyone. We were taking part in a ritual that our ancestors had done every year since the village was built. I paused for a moment to take a deep breath, closing my eyes to try and control the feelings that were churning in my stomach.

Until one day, when an adventuring party passed through the town. They had been sent to kill and harvest the dragons, bringing scales and claws to their employer. The peaceful relationship that we had with them was over. Halios was killed. The adventurers carried her head through the town, holding it above them triumphantly. They claimed that they had saved us. They shouted that they'd freed us when in reality they'd doomed us. Tharion followed them

down the mountain, screaming in a way we'd never heard before. As the adventurers fled, she covered the town in ice. The crops died from the cold, and our fields became unworkable.

Once we were done writing our names, we glanced around at each other. Our job suddenly felt so real. We'd been preparing for this journey for over a year, learning how to approach Tharion and keep the peace with her. Ashlei gave me a small nod, and I took my bag off my back and pulled out the metal box. The lid moved as I placed the box down and the stench of meat filled the cave.

With a final glance back to the entrance, we began our descent into the heart of the mountain where Tharion resides. Kharis pulled out the parchment that they were given with the directions. Each tunnel and fork of the cave system had been mapped out for us, with details of what lay at the end. I wondered how terrifying it would have been to be the first group of adventurers, the ones who came before the curse with their gifts. How would it feel to get lost in these caves? How awestruck would you be when you got to the centre and found two dragons curled around each other?

We finally reached the penultimate turning, the narrow tunnels opening into a medium-sized chamber. Someone long ago had left a wooden crate at the entrance of the next tunnel.

"Right. Here we are then," Ashlei took a deep breath before continuing her whisper. "Everyone put your weapons in the crate. Tamora, you take the lead now with the box. I'll be right behind you with the lantern. Everyone else, fall in line and stay quiet."

I nodded to show that I had heard her and took a deep breath. This was it. I clutched the cold box and took a few steps forward. My body was shaking, and I was unsure whether that

was from being in the snow for two days or just out of fear. Ashlei placed her hand on my shoulder, letting me know that she was right behind me.

The adventurers left us to our fate, left us to suffer the eternal winter that their actions had brought. We attempted to repair the relationship with Tharion, leaving her gifts and paying Halios tribute through our annual festival. We only know that she is still alive because the spell is yet to be broken.

Ashlei gave my shoulder a final squeeze and then stopped, her and the rest of the group pausing at the entrance of the room. Tharion wouldn't want to see a group. Only one person. And that person was me.

She reached up and kissed my cheek. "You can do this. Just remember what we've been taught."

I gave her a smile and stepped into the room keeping my head and eyes low, as I had been taught, and glanced around the room. The light from my party's torches bounced off the walls, casting strange shadows in the large chamber.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. I thought there might be piles of gold and skeletons of adventurers who had dared to trespass. The room was practically empty apart from a few bones from small animals that littered the floor.

The silver scales of Tharion's tail glinted in the firelight, and as I walked towards the centre of the room I could see more of her. There was a scar on her side, the beautiful scales broken apart by a jagged line. I could see the line of spikes that ran from the base of her neck to the top of her head, and imagined what they would have looked like before the battle. They

were probably once symmetrical and something to fear, but some of them had been snapped off. She flexed her talons and it occurred to me that she could pick me up and crush me in one claw, the same way I might reach out and squash a fly.

I was snapped back to reality as my foot kicked a skull, the noise echoing around the vast chamber. Tharion's eyes snapped open, and I caught a glimpse of her steel-blue eyes before I remembered myself and looked down at the ground.

"So it is time that you come to grovel again," her voice was warm, but her icy breath sent shivers down my spine. I could barely feel the box in my hands. "Well. Get on with it."

My mind went blank. The script I had so diligently learned over the last year was instantly forgotten.

"My name is Tamora of the Enchanted Rise tribe. I come with this gift to you," I placed the box down in front of me and took the lid off before taking a few steps back. "This is a symbol of our, uh, our apology. For the crimes others committed years ago. I ask that you are kind to us, and remove the curse that has plagued us for the last 350 years. My ancestors suffered for years because some stupid adventuring group thought only of themselves and murdered Halios. We loved and respected her, as we love and respect you, and we never wished any harm on either of you. Please consider my request." I had most definitely said the wrong thing. I had forgotten everything I was taught, but it was hard to think straight.

I felt Tharion sigh, another cold breeze blowing through my armour. "Do you know what it is to love, Tamora?"

I nodded as images of Ashlei filled my head, feeling the blush creep up my neck.

"And what would you do if you lost them, knowing that you now had to spend the next thousand years alone? What would you do if you had to watch them die, killed by greedy adventurers who have nothing better to do but ruin the lives of innocent creatures for sport?"

"I would-" I thought about how it would feel to watch her die and my eyes filled with tears. "I would never forgive them."

"Exactly. So why do your people think that a measly basket of fruits will make up for my loss? It may have been enough to satisfy me before, but not now."

"What would satisfy you? Is there anything we can do?"

"Your people ask that every year, and yet you never like the answer. I only ask that you go through the same pain that I live with. Give up your love and stay here with me for the rest of your life. After a year, I will lift the curse."

My heart sank. It made sense of course. Why should she be the only one to suffer alone for the rest of her life? No wonder no one else liked the answer Tharion gave. I fiddled with the metal band on my left hand and thought of my wedding. I thought of the promises I had made to Ashlei, to love her and be by her side forever and the happy life that lay ahead of us. Could I really give that up?

But then I thought of who I would be saving. The hundred or so people who every year look up at the sky, hoping that this year's offering would stop the snow. The farmers who go out to the fields every summer in the hope that one piece of ground will have thawed, and maybe this year we can grow some crops. The parents who go without a meal so that their children can be fed from the tiny rations we have.

What matters more, my happiness or the happiness of the whole village? I turned to look behind me at the flickering torchlight by the entrance, at the person who held it. I could

feel her willing me to say no, willing me to come back to her. What gives me the right to be selfish and put my feelings first?

I span back to face Tharion. "I'll do it. Do I at least get to say goodbye?"

Tharion blinked in surprise and nodded her head.

"Very well."

I turned back to the group.

"What are you doing? Why did you agree?" Ashlei choked through her tears.

"I have to. It's for the good of the town. Think of how much happier everyone will be once the curse has been lifted." I pulled her in for a hug, trying to hold back my own tears. "You have to go. You have to leave me here."

"I won't!"

I stepped back and looked towards the rest of the group for help. They all looked back at me in disbelief.

"Please. You have to."

Reluctantly, they put their arms around Ashlei, pulling her away. She fought against them, kicking and screaming.

I turned away, unable to watch any longer. I could hear the echoes of her calling my name as the group struggled to lead her out of the cave.

Many years ago, there were two dragons. After one of them was killed, a brave young girl gave up her love and her freedom in order to save our town. My Tamora's sacrifice ended the curse

and brought back the summer. Our people, who had spent years indoors sheltering from the winds, crowded in the streets to celebrate, embracing each other in the warmth of the sun. Flowers cut through the mounds of snow and the ice on the streams began to melt. Fields that had been frozen solid became soft and ploughable, and soon our town was thriving again.

A Realisation

“Here.” Jess thrusts a green and silver book into my hands.

“Thank you?” I turn it over, reading the blurb. “This isn’t like the stuff you normally recommend for me.”

“We’re starting a book club.”

I look up at her and notice that she is holding an identical book. “Is it really a book club if it’s just the two of us?”

She rolls her eyes at me, “Don’t be pedantic Sam.”

“I’m an editor. It’s literally my job to be pedantic.”

“Whatever. We’re starting a book club, and we’re going to read books that actually reflect the real world and not our tiny conservative town.”

“Right. And...” I glanced at the cover again, “*Fun Home* is going to open my eyes to a whole new world?”

“It’s going to introduce us to the lives of LGBT people because I don’t know if you noticed but everyone in this town is cisgender and heterosexual and acts like LGBT people are myths from neighbouring towns. So we’re going to read about Alison Bechdel and how she came to terms with her sexuality.”

Jess wasn’t wrong. We live in a conservative town, and my Catholic upbringing meant that I’d only ever been shown straight couples and just accepted that as the norm. Perhaps it was time to challenge my own views.

“So when do I need to have read this by?”

She claps. "I'm thinking by next Saturday? We'll get in some nice snacks, maybe order a pizza, and then we can talk about it and I'll show you the rest of the books I've got planned for us to read." She stood up and walked into the kitchen to make us a cup of tea. While she was gone I quickly flicked through the book. I hadn't realised that Alison Bechdel was a cartoonist, and she had chosen to write her autobiography in the form of a graphic novel. The book randomly landed on a panel of two women lying naked in bed together. An unsettled feeling filled my stomach but I wasn't sure why.

"Sam? Did you want some cake too?" Jess walked back into the room. Startled, I slammed the book shut.

"Uh, yeah sure sounds good." I pushed the book away as soon as she turned back to the kitchen, my heart beating loud and fast.

I had some free time that evening so I decided to start reading. I tried to take my time with it and take in each drawing. I was so used to speed reading written books that a graphic novel was a whole new genre to me.

It was an interesting read. Alison Bechdel took us through her childhood all the way up to her late teenage years. She commented on her father's homosexuality, its impact on her family, and eventually her own coming out. I eventually reached the panels I'd seen earlier, of Alison and her first girlfriend, Joan. A whole double spread was dedicated to drawings of them tangled up naked in bed together. Alison was lying on her back, laughing, her legs hooked over Joan's shoulders while Joan held a copy of *James and the Giant Peach*, balancing it gently on Alison's stomach.

I felt like I was looking at something that I shouldn't be and flipped the page quickly to avoid being caught. I don't know why these particular pages caused such a reaction in me, and I'm not sure who I was hiding from, sitting here alone in my room. I finished the chapter and put the book down, trying to push those images out of my mind as I went to sleep.

That night, I had one of the most vivid dreams that I've had for a while. I was sitting laughing with Jess and then I leaned over and kissed her, threading my fingers through her long ginger hair and cradling the back of her neck as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Her hands reached out to me, pulling me closer, and then she started to unbutton my shirt. My other hand moved to her waist, sliding up underneath her t-shirt. The dream was so realistic, I could feel the warmth of her skin under my hand as it explored her body, moving over her back and hips and up to her chest. I shrugged off my now unbuttoned shirt and her hands copied the patterns that mine were tracing on her. After a nod from me, she reached down and began to unzip my jeans, her fingers —

The alarm went off, waking me up. Three emotions flashed through me, disappointment, joy, and confusion. Images of the dream floated through my mind all day. I was disappointed that I didn't get to see what happened next, and I was confused why that mattered to me. By lunchtime, I decided that I had just read *Fun Home* too close to going to sleep and the images of Alison and Joan had morphed into me and Jess. I couldn't make eye contact with her all day and tried to avoid her as much as possible.

Jess called me out for it when we had dinner together that night.

"You're being quiet." She squinted at me. "What's wrong?"

"I'm always quiet."

“Not during Pointless you’re not. You haven’t answered a single question.”

“Maybe I just don’t know any of the answers.” I shrugged.

“I don’t believe you” She turned the TV off and span on the sofa so she was looking directly at me. “Talk to me. What’s up?”

“I... I had a weird dream.” I wasn’t sure how to continue, or if I even wanted to. Jess and I had been best friends since we were little, and we’d shared everything with each other. We knew every detail of each other’s relationships. But telling her about my first kiss with Harry felt a little different to telling her about the raunchy dream I had about her.

“Ooh what kind of weird?”

“It was... Do you know what? I don’t really remember anymore.” I forced out a laugh. “I’m going to go and get some ice cream from the shop, want some?” I picked up my coat and left the house.

I was hoping the walk would clear my head, but it just felt like it got foggier. Surely one dream didn’t mean anything? But then why was I so disappointed when I woke up, and why did I have such a reaction to those pages in the book? I eventually headed back to our flat, and it was only as I’d climbed up the three flights of stairs that I realised I’d forgotten to go and buy some ice cream. Jess had gone into her room, but she’d written a note on the whiteboard in the kitchen, telling me that she was around if I needed to talk.

I went into my room and did what everyone does after a weird dream. I searched the internet for answers. The first few articles I read told me that it was perfectly normal to have dreams about your best friend and that every woman has a sex dream every now and again, but it doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Dissatisfied with that answer, I kept searching until I came across a post that called these articles bullshit.

‘One way I found to distinguish between an identity crisis and a weird dream is thinking back over my past relationships. Did I feel more when kissing these women in the dream than I had with men? If I replaced the woman in the dream with a man, did the way I felt change? If you also answered yes to these questions, it might be good for you to consider the possibility that maybe you’re not as straight as you thought you were.’

I thought about those questions. The dream kiss had felt more natural to me than any kiss I’d had with Harry. I tried to imagine the exact same scenario with him instead of Jess. I wanted to push him away, to stop touching me. We’d never got that far when we’d dated, but I put it down to it being my first relationship and me not being ready. But thinking back on it now, I’d never really enjoyed even kissing him.

These questions swam through my mind every day. I had other dreams about other women and after every one, I had another crisis. Could I be gay? I started noticing women a bit more, particularly my reaction to them. When watching TV Jess and I would always compliment the women we saw, pointing out the ones that we thought were pretty. Our standards for male celebrities were always so much higher. I’d never really thought about it until now.

We kept our little book group going for a few months, having takeaway twice a month to talk about books and political topics. Jess continued to suggest the books that we read, but I did some of my own research too. I read the rest of Alison Bechdel’s books, as well as other books written by and for lesbians. I’d discovered a whole community online of lesbians, and reading their experiences helped me through my identity crisis. I was beginning to come to terms with the fact that I was a lesbian and recognising that I’d only ever thought I’d liked boys because

that's what my parents had expected of me. I was no longer scared or ashamed. It felt freeing to call myself a lesbian, even if it was only me whispering it to myself in the mirror at two in the morning.

I still hadn't spoken to Jess about it. I'd had a couple more dreams about her, and I wasn't sure how to navigate those. I didn't know how to tell her about my sexual awakening without bringing her into it. So I decided to avoid the subject altogether and instead wait for my brain to get over its little crush on her.

We'd just read Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* and had ordered a Chinese takeaway ready for our meeting. Jess handed me my tub of chicken chow mein and tucked into her sweet and sour chicken.

"So, verdict on the book?" I asked, before shovelling a string of noodles into my mouth.

"I liked it! It was a bit abstract in places but I really enjoyed it. Before we go any further though, I have something I need to talk to you about." Jess balanced her chopsticks carefully on the table and took a deep breath. I noticed that her hands were shaking as she placed them in her lap. I blushed when I remembered where those hands had gone in my dream the other night.

"Is everything OK?" I glanced away from her hands, pushing away the images. I was going to get over this crush, not indulge it.

"Yeah! Well, I hope it will be." Another deep breath. "I wasn't entirely honest when I told you why I was starting this book group. I wanted you to read these books, particularly the LGBTQ ones because... well because I'm a lesbian. And I wanted you to understand when I

said that and not push me away because of it because you're my best friend and I would hate to lose you because of this."

I blinked at her as she rambled on. "Jess. Jess, it's ok."

"It is?" She looked up at me, tears in her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes." I let out a small laugh. "I'm really glad you told me. Thank you for trusting me." I leaned over to her and hugged her as she sighed with relief. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as I thought about what to say next. "I actually have something to tell you too."

She pulled away from me, a quizzical look on her face.

"Reading the books forced me to do some thinking about my own life and I'm gay too. I'm a lesbian." It was the first time I'd said it out loud with such confidence. It felt so good like a weight had been lifted from my heart. It felt even better to know that I was talking to someone who understood exactly how I felt. I was reminded of a quote from *Fun Home* when Alison sees an out and proud lesbian for the first time.

'But like a traveller in a foreign country who runs into someone from home — someone they've never spoken to but know by sight — I recognised her with a surge of joy.'

Just Breathe

I just need a week by myself. Without anyone talking about essays or graduation or postgraduates or careers or dissertations. Without my parents telling me about careers fairs and law conversion degrees. Without my housemates celebrating how they handed in their assignments early and found it so easy to finish them. I need some time to breathe because every time anyone speaks to me, or I go on to campus, I spiral so far down it feels like I am drowning. So I am giving myself a week in Cornwall to do nothing and to just *breathe*. And then I'll be OK and in the right mindset to figure out the future. But this week was all about taking it one minute at a time and breathing. And that's it.

I check in to the tiny flat I am renting for the week, dump my bags, find my towel and head straight for the beach. If my life was perfect, I would've been met with bright sunshine, golden sands and calm waves, with a hot girl selling ice cream in the shack that I could have a summer fling with. Instead, there are grey clouds obscuring the sunshine, the sand is damp from this morning's rain and the ice cream shack is closed.

I buy a hot chocolate from the small cafe and put my towel down on the sand. I watch the waves crashing into the sand and fall into some sort of trance, timing my breathing with the tide as it comes in and out. There is something calming about the waves rolling over each other and reaching their way up the beach, and the inevitability of it all. No matter what I do, the waves will keep on moving.

Although the more I think about it, the more I start spiralling. The waves have their life planned out for them and they follow that, the tide coming in and out every day, no matter what

else goes on around them. So maybe trying to figure out my own path was pointless, when my parents clearly have a plan that they wanted me to follow. Maybe I should just do what they want me to do, enrol in that law conversion course and become a lawyer. Sure, I'd hate it, but at least I wouldn't have to spiral about what's next for me.

Was I really comparing myself to the sea? As if the life of water and humans is in any way comparable. I rub my eyes and down the last of my hot chocolate. Perhaps I need this break more than I thought I did.

Before I leave the beach, I stop and take a few photos of the sea to send to my friends to let them know that I'm alive. I've deleted the majority of my social media apps from my phone. I am already having enough breakdowns without being reminded of everyone else's happy and perfect lives. So Izzy and my Mum get an email from me with the photos showing that I haven't crashed my car or been eaten by Cornish sharks. Yet.

Once I'm back in the flat, I put on the gas fire and warm up. I'm wondering if I can make it through the evening without another breakdown when my phone buzzes. It's a calendar notification, telling me that I only have 24 hours left to hand in an essay. I resist the urge to throw my phone out of the window and go through my calendar, adding in the two-week extensions I have for my final assignments. At least I won't be bothered by it again this week. The point was to run away from the stress of university, not have my phone ping every day to remind me just how much I'm failing.

It just all feels so pointless. Why should I write 2000 words on international business? What's that really going to achieve? OK, I need it to finish my degree but then what? I'll use this degree, which I wasn't really sure I wanted to do in the first place, to get some boring office

job somewhere where I'll continue being depressed and feeling incredibly under pressure until I can finally retire. All for what exactly? What's the point of it all? Why can't I just spend my life staring at the waves and taking photos of the cool cloud formations or the stripy shells that I find along the shore? Everyone says to do what you love, find the job that suits you and then you'll be happy. But what if I don't fit into any of the jobs that exist? What am I meant to do then?

It takes me two days on the beach to stop spiralling. I spend most of my time reading and enjoying the rays of sunshine as they briefly appear through the clouds. I start to wonder if I can just bury myself in the sand and hide from the world so that no one comes to take me away from the safe haven I've built for myself.

I try to take a picture every day and start looking forward to finding something to photograph and send to Mum. It's no longer just a way to show her that I'm OK. It becomes a small goal for the day. What interesting things can I find along the shore or in the small town centre? On Tuesday, I find a small rock pool. The water is slightly more green than the sea, probably thanks to the groups of seaweed and algae that wave at me from beneath the water. On Wednesday I watch a group of young families playing in the sand. The sound of toddlers laughing and shrieking interrupts my reading, but I can't help but smile as I watch the parents running into the small waves with their children, dangling their feet in the cold water. After they leave, I go over to where they had set up camp and take photos of the sandcastles, careful not to accidentally knock them over. Eventually, the tide comes in and fills in the small moat that they had dug, before destroying their handiwork, washing away the carefully constructed towers and gently placed shells.

Whenever I feel myself starting to spiral again, I spend a few minutes watching the waves and breathing, and then I go on an adventure to find something to photograph. It helps to turn my brain off. I'm no longer thinking about the crushing inevitability of life, but instead inspecting small rocks for cool patterns, or combing the beach for a particularly strangely shaped shell.

It is on one of these spiral escaping adventures that I find a small bookshop. From the outside, it looks tiny, but when I step through the blue door I am met with rows and rows of books, the shelves going from the floor to the ceiling. It feels like the shop goes on forever and I somehow end up spending hours browsing the shelves, comforted by the smell of new books. Eventually, I pull myself away, picking up two books with shiny covers that catch my eye.

"Good choice." The man at the counter smiles at me.

"Thanks! I made the mistake of only bringing one book with me, so I'm glad I found you."

"Ah, I was about to ask if you're local."

"Unfortunately not, though I'm starting to wish that I live here. I would spend far too long here, those bookshelves really suck you in."

"I find that too. But if they didn't, you wouldn't find little gems like these." He holds up the paper bag that he's carefully placed my books into. "Did you want a receipt?"

I shake my head, thank him and head out. As I'm leaving, a notice in the window catches my eye. The bookshop is looking for a full-time assistant to help run the shop.

I'm starting to genuinely consider moving here. I've never felt this calm before in my life, the sound of the water helps me sleep at night and helps me to remember to breathe during the

day. The pay at the bookshop is enough to live on. It's not the flashy high salary job that my parents want me to have, but it'll pay for a roof over my head and food in my fridge. And surely that's all a job needs to be? Maybe I'm not destined to run my own business or become a big city lawyer. Maybe all I need to do is help run a small bookshop and spend my evenings walking along the beach.

When I get back to the flat, I carefully place my new books on the bedside table and reach for my laptop. With my refusal to look at my dissertation it's been exclusively a DVD player for the last few days, and it goes into shock when I open up the browser to find a housing website. I almost go into shock when I read the average rent price. It's a lot cheaper than what I'm paying in Bristol, even after I factor in bills. I scroll through the pictures for a while until I can make a shortlist. Ideally, I want to be as close to the sea as possible and thankfully there are plenty of options for that. I discard the one that is over a fish and chip shop. I'm already bad enough at stopping myself from getting takeaway every night, and if I have to smell the chips and walk past them to get home... It won't end well for my bank account or my cholesterol.

Once I solidify my plans and send in an application for the bookshop job, I decide it's finally time to call my parents.

"I've found a really nice flat near the seafront, plus I've got an interview at the local bookshop for a full-time job in a few weeks, after the dissertation deadline."

"You'll just be so far away from us! And I'm sure you can do better than a job in a bookshop."

“I know. But it’ll be something to earn me some money while I figure out what I want to do.”

“You can always move back home. We’ll happily support you while you figure things out. And then Dad and I can be around to drive you to your interviews and things!”

I take a deep breath, “Mum, I love you, but I’m twenty-two. I need to do this on my own.”

“Do you have to do it five hours away from us?”

I pause. I’ve never been this far away from home. Even my university is only half an hour away from where I grew up. But I think about how freeing it has felt this week when I didn’t have to worry about bumping into people I knew or worrying about my parents finding out what I’ve been up to. They mean well, but they’ve always had so much control over my life. “I’m sorry, but I really love it here. You can come down and visit me once I’ve got the flat set up, and I’ll call you so you know what I’m up to.”

“OK. As long as you’re sure that this is the right thing for you.”

“I’m sure.”

“We’ll see you in a couple of weeks to help you move out of your uni flat. How are those essays going? You’re not neglecting them while you’re away are you?”

My chest tightens. “Of course not Mum, they’re all done and dusted.”

“Good. We love you, see you soon.”

“Love you too.” I lean back in my chair and let out a deep sigh. At least the hard part is over and done with.

Eventually, I have to leave the sea behind and drive back to Bristol. When I walk onto campus, I expect to feel my chest closing in on itself, but for the first time in months, I don’t feel close to

tears. I head for my favourite spot with the comfortable red sofas and settle down, taking out my laptop, books, and the all-important travel cup of coffee. I've changed my computer background to a photo I took of the sea last week. I take a moment to look at it and take a few deep breaths before I open up the document with my essay plan and finally start writing the last essays for my degree.