

Sunday at Lime House Kitchen

Caragh Medlicott

Kiera agrees to meet me at Victoria — in fact, she insists on it. The coach station is a sputtering of engine fumes and over-stewed Starbucks. I dodge gnarled pigeons with my suitcase and spot her in one of the coach bays. She's grinning up at a rogue bus pulling in, a vivid figure amongst the monotone of waiting chairs and commuter zombies. She's waving at the bus now, manically, her Tate canvas bag slipping off her shoulder in the effort.

"I'm already off the bus, dummy," I say, approaching her from behind.

She twists from the waist and pulls me into a hug, "Riley, there you are. I was totally lost, it said your bus was coming into bay six. Well it doesn't matter now, hello — how are you?"

"I did text you," I mumble and half-peck her cheek; she returns the kiss fully, on both sides.

"Ah, so you did. Oh well. Let me look at you." She holds me at arm's length. I take her appraisal flatly. We've managed to fashion ourselves as opposites — me, blonde and in tailored grey and black, her, brunette and in wide-leg mustard trousers and clashing turquoise top. Her bold face, a collage of wide, ethereal features, arranges itself admiringly.

"Just beautiful," she sighs before touching my lips. "Oh. I thought you might have had these done, you know, from your last few posts?"

"FaceTune," I say.

"*Ah.*"

We walk out to the street. The roads are a tangle of traffic lights and car horns, pedestrians dashing over unmarked crossings with neon shopping bags and take out coffee cups.

"So, back to mine to eat?" She asks, taking my suitcase.

"Oh thanks. Um, actually I thought maybe we could get lunch out?"

"Sure. Pret okay?"

I wrinkle my nose. "Sure."

"Unless you had somewhere else in mind?"

"I don't mind, I mean, I think I saw there was like this place that does really great buddha bowls nearby?"

She laughs. "Of course, lead the way."

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Our table is surrounded by hanging plants, we're nestled in the corner by the window. The café is called *ZENCOFFEZ* and has a lotus flower logo. I look at Kiera who is poking her shredded carrots. The whole bowl has been capsized by her fork which she's using to tussle and toss the food, turning everything over and inside out, all without raising a single bite to her mouth.

"Can I borrow your flat white?" I ask.

"Sure," she says without looking up, her expression fully engrossed in the small maelstrom she's still stirring.

"Thanks."

I position it at an angle to the side of my bowl, straighten out some tomatoes which have strayed into the watercress, then kneel up on my chair and take the photo from above. One, two, three. *Got it.*

"Did Buddha really eat this shit?" Says Kiera, her expression puckered.

"What?" I say, pushing her flat white back over to her and taking a sip of my americano, dark and bitter.

"I'm sorry, Riley, I can't eat this."

"You don't like it?" I ask.

"Do you?"

I shrug. "It's nourishing."

"You're meant to *line* your stomach before a night out."

I shrug again.

"Well, I guess I'll just make beans on toasts when we get back." She pushes the bowl away from her. I have to make a point of eating my own food now, keeping my expression neutral as the mouthfuls crunch and crunch without ever seeming to get smaller.

When we eventually leave, my tongue feels like wet tissue paper. I check my phone. It's been 15 minutes, 124 likes and counting.

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We get the tube to Ealing. I keep my handbag clutched inside my jacket the whole way; Mum has made me excessively paranoid about London's pickpockets. When we arrive at Kiera's flat she realises that she has left her keys. We stand outside on the path while she calls her alternate flatmates over and over.

"Leave your keys again?" Asks the one who finally makes it to the door.

"I know. If you had a pound..."

The girl moves so we can both get in. She is either effortlessly chic or surly and gothic, I can't tell which. Her face is bird-like, etched with straight eyebrows and completed with a small cherry mouth.

"Hi," I say to her.

"Oh yes—" Kiera butts in "—Gita this is my cousin Riley. She's coming out with us tonight."

"I know, Kiera. Hey Riley, you're the one who's like, Insta famous right?" She doesn't say it unkindly, but I still feel a flash of heat pass over my face.

"Ha, hardly," I say and take my shoes off for an excuse to turn away.

There are stairs leading up to the rest of the flat; they're carpeted and bluey-green, like spilled petrol. The hall smells of stale cornflakes. Kiera leads me into the living room where Gita has already plonked herself down on the sofa. The blinds are closed and the lights switched off. The room is illuminated by the flickering blue of the half-fried TV, its picture pixelated.

"Laura, this is Riley, my cousin I told you about."

"Riley! Great to meet you!" An excessively lanky ginger girl springs up from the carpet with scissors in one hand and the other outstretched towards me.

"Hi, nice to meet you, too," I murmur, feeling awkward to be shaking hands in this setting. She has very white teeth which are bared in a huge smile, almost overwhelming the well-formed nose and hooded eyes which sit above.

We all settle back down while Kiera goes to make herself food. Gita is unblinking, eyes on the TV which I now realise is playing a bizarre music video. Laura, sat on the carpet, puts her fringe between her forefingers and cuts without hesitation. I can feel a compulsion to keep checking my phone, it's like an itch on a phantom limb. I push it to the bottom of my bag and turn to Laura.

"Wow, you're so brave to do that without a mirror."

She grins at me. "I have a 50% success rate."

“It looks great to me. Very... Parisian.”

“God don’t tell her that,” says Gita, “you’re literally playing into her own wet dream. *Effortless French girl chic*.” She puts on a terrible French accent for the last part.

“Not my fault I love baguettes and garlic,” says Laura, collecting the surrounding stray hairs and dumping them in the paper bin. Gita rolls her eyes.

“Are you excited for later?” asks Laura.

“Yeah, should be fun,” I say.

“She wants to know if we can have our time in the spotlight by making it into one of your Instagram stories.” Gita gives me a conspirator’s smile.

“Is that right?”

“Don’t embarrass me, Gita,” says Laura.

“It’s okay, don’t be silly, you can — though it’s nothing to be excited about, honestly.”

Kiera walks in from the kitchen carrying her beans on toast with a pack of grated cheddar tucked under her arm. The smell is rich and homely. We all watch as she covers her plate in cheese and picks up her knife and fork, ready to devour.

We spend the remaining afternoon hours slouching in different states of stretched out drama, talking the whole time. We plan our outfits and discuss what we’re studying. Favourite courses, bad seminars, weird society members. It feels good. I forget, sometimes, how to just be. I’m so often gnawing at myself or projecting impossible things.

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We all get ready in Gita’s room, partly because it’s the biggest, and crucially because it has four mirrors. Everything is cream-coloured and cluttered, but in a sort of cool, effortless way. I complement her ceramic vase, painted with red swirls, and the little cacti lining her wide bay windows. She says thanks.

I sometimes have an odd jolt of awareness with these things. I realise how objects have transformed themselves in my head; there used to be plates, and fruit, and plants — all normal, innocuous things. But now, they are different. There are lemons in paisley bowls (good), and full green apples on chipped plates (bad, or rather, irrelevant). My gaze has turned into a sort of grid; it zeroes in on small moments of contextless aesthetics. Like real life is losing its texture, becoming flat and containable.

“Here you go.” Gita makes me jump by appearing with a giant mug which has “Best Dad Ever” printed on it in red lettering. It’s filled to the top with a heavy-handed cocktail of coke, vodka and lime juice.

We drink and listen to Radio 1 because we had a conversation earlier about how none of us listen to radio anymore. Everyone had agreed it would be sad for radio to go away. I find myself looking at the three of them over the top of my mirror. They share a kind of synchronicity that makes me jealous. The way they sit in splayed out positions. I see leg stubble apparent in the glow of the unshaded light, small rolls squishing over the bands of their jeans. I covet this. I’m so tired of always folding myself like origami.

“Why can’t I ever do my eyeliner right?” Says Kiera, her right eye a clumsy blue smudge.

“Here, I can help,” I say walking over to her.

I use a wet wipe and start the process again, edging the blue gel out into a sloping wing. She has deep brown eyes, huge and almond shaped — the blue sets them off, fashionable in a way I didn’t know eyes could be.

We all end up wearing approximations of the same outfit; barely-there heels, mom jeans and strappy bodysuits. Apart from Laura who wears leather-look trousers and a green mesh top.

By the time the Uber is booked the vodka has made us shimmery around the edges. I wee in their cramped bathroom and stare at the tiles littered with hairs and Lush products. The light is terrible, artificial and orange. My face in the mirror looks off, but I’m tipsy so I stare at myself anyway. I think, as I often do, that my face is a puzzle that needs solving. It’s an amalgamation of small errors, like an essay a few marks off an A.

“Riley, taxi!” Kiera calls up to me and I stumble down the stairs to the front door, my head spinning.

“Here,” says Kiera, handing me a packet of cheese and onion crisps as I get in the taxi, “none of us have eaten enough.”

Gita and Laura are already strapped into their seats, happily crunching and licking their lips. I take the packet from Kiera and get in, my stomach grumbling at just the sound of it rustling. As the streetlight melts into the puddles outside the window, I tear open the bag and start eating. Salty, oily, fitting comfortably into my stomach, filling the space and gone in just a few, noisy moments. I scrunch up the packet and fold it into my leather jacket pocket.

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It feels like everyone is sweating out of every pore of their body. Kiera has taken us to a grimy underground club that has no name out front. It’s £10 entry and you get ten free drinks to go with it, gifted via a paper slip with numbered tick boxes. Not that it matters, the bars are

deserted islands, built into the walls like school snack kiosks. Almost everyone on the dance floor is high with large moon pupils and flailing arms.

“Want one?” I say, waving my paper slip at the girls. They shake their heads and gesture for me to carry on. Bass is slamming through their bodies and rattling in my teeth. I tear my way through the crowds and make it to the outer hemisphere, empty, air at last.

“Beer please,” I say getting to the bar and putting my paper slip down.

“Can’t do beer.”

“What?”

The man leans across and says it louder. “Beer isn’t part of the free drink thing.”

“Oh,” the guy is looking at me with big eyes. His face is almost pretty, but also sort of alien with buzzed-bleached hair and a smirking expression, “well what can I have?”

“Any spirit and mixer.”

“Vodka coke please. Double.”

“Okay.” He pours the vodka without measuring it, mixing it nearly half and half in the small plastic cup. “There you are.” He stamps two boxes on my paper slip.

“Thanks.”

I stand to the side of the bar and taste it. The smell of the vodka burns in my nostrils and the coke tastes flat, like the cheap stuff from the supermarket. I stand still for a few minutes, taking small sips and breathing deeply, just watching the mass of bodies crashing together.

“Hey,” the guy from behind the bar has come out to stand next to me, “I’m on a break, fancy a smoke?”

“Umm,” I scan around, trying to spot Kiera, but the crowd is faceless. “Yeah, okay then.”

I follow him up some steps and out of a fire exit into a small fenced area. It smells like piss and is dark apart from a string of partially working fairy lights. We talk for a few minutes, discussing the terrible music and how, apparently, the speakers occasionally screech with inexplicable feedback.

“You should see it,” he says, “it’s like everyone is hit with some invisible alien beam, all hands on their ears.”

“It sounds horrible,” I say truthfully, but then smile at him.

“Right then,” he says pulling out a Rizla pack and producing an already rolled cigarette, fat and short. “You’re good to share, right?”

I shrug. He lights up and the strong smell of weed stiffens the air. He takes two long drags then beckons me with his finger. I lean in and he blows the smoke into my mouth. I inhale deep.

“Ever done blowbacks before?” He asks.

“No.”

“No worries, here.” He passes the spliff which I briefly bring to my lips once, twice, before becoming consumed with coughs and streaming eyes. I hand it back to him, still coughing.

“You okay?” He asks but I’m already stumbling for the door, my head pounding in the right side and a wave of nausea stirring in my stomach. I am suddenly desperate to be at home, in my own bedroom, far away from this dirty underground club with Kiera and some girls I don’t know. The concrete stairs back to the dance floor look steep and unforgiving. I can hear the bass from downstairs and the guy from the bar calling me from behind.

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“That’s right, get it all up.” Says Kiera holding my hair back as I slump over the toilet. I have a vague awareness that the floor is gross, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“Are those...carrots?” Asks Gita from somewhere behind me.

“Buddha bowl,” says Kiera.

“Naturally.” I can hear the eye roll in her voice.

Twenty minutes pass before I feel the walls start to stabilise. I stand up and Kiera cleans around my face.

“Hey, that bar guy was kind of fit,” she says dabbing my eyes with a tissue.

“Uh huh.”

“Why don’t you sort yourself out, splash your face and we can go get some food?” Says Kiera, I can feel the boredom radiating from Laura and Gita who are waiting dutifully to the side.

“That’s fine, carry on. I’ll meet you out there.”

“Okay. Just so you know I think that guy might be waiting outside.”

“Oh god.”

“Here, take my lipstick.” She smiles and hands me a gold tube which I stare at dumbly as they walk out.

I lumber over to the mirror to assess my reflection. The tap is dripping, and I look terrible. Like an orchestra going wrong, straining off key — my lipstick is smudged on my right front tooth, and my hair has gone static in its hair spray. The worst of it is my eyes, blackened and watery. I do my best to clear up and reapply the lipstick, smudging some onto my cheeks which have turned deathly white.

The guy from the bar *is* waiting for me outside the toilet. He keeps asking me if I’m okay and apologising about the blunt. It was too strong, he insists. I tell him that weed and alcohol always makes me sick and that it’s normal, which is a lie, but I despise seeming naïve. Before, it felt that there was some kind of indescribable element to our interaction, a kind of charge, but now that’s gone. He still smiles and asks for my number, but he’s looking at me differently, like he’s seeing me through medical gauze, my HD face a blur, suddenly gone terrestrial. I give him my Instagram handle.

By the time I find Kiera the crowd has swollen out and everyone looks ready to leave.

“Fancy a cold beer? There’s a nice enough pub around the corner,” says Kiera, linking my arm.

“It’ll be closed,” I say matter-of-factly, feeling zoned out.

“Idiot. It’s not even midnight yet. You’ve peaked too early.”

So we leave. The street is layered with the sound of distant sirens and the drunken hollering of groups pilgrimaging from one bar to the next. I shiver in the drizzle but feel better to be outside. Getting sick has hollowed me out; my mouth feels woolly and gross, but I’m also more settled.

We pile into the pub, which is fairly busy, groups packed into corners, most on their fifth or sixth pint. They lean over their drinks and talk loudly in each other’s faces, sometimes gesturing with their hands. I catch snatches of conversation, two men arguing about private schools, a group humming the theme tune to *The Simpsons* off-key, a girl hugging her friend and insisting that really, he doesn’t deserve her, anyway.

I now have the benefit of being the “drunk one” so I am sat down in a corner while the others go to the bar. Kiera asks me twice if I’m sure I’m okay to drink and I insist that I am. They return with four pints and the news that the bar is out of nuts and pork scratchings. We nurse our pints and warn off some drunken men in their late 30s trying to entice us with a game of pool, Kiera tells them to fuck off as I say no thank you.

Laura, emboldened by booze, asks directly if I'll take photos of them for my Instagram story. I agree, somewhat reluctantly. The three of them arrange themselves into displays of nonchalance, as if I've just happened to raise my phone while they're in the thick of fun, drunken antics. Kiera sticks her tongue out, Gita half drinks her pint while Laura kisses her on the cheek. It takes a long time, adjusting lighting and positions until everyone is happy. Then I upload it with tags to their accounts.

We get another round in and I can feel a warmer, more comfortable type of intoxication replace the haze and nausea which passed before. We chat and laugh while they each intermittently report new, incoming followers with marvelling smiles. They ask me about my ambitions and how I got started, we talk about influencers we know who have made it big; friends of friends, old acquaintances from school. I feel squeezed by the person I want to be, suffocated by competition, it's like there's no room for the actual me, the now me, inadequate and confined by the present.

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The kebab shop is warm and smells like grease. I unwittingly caused outrage in the pub by admitting that I had never, in fact, had a kebab. "*Lime House!*" they demanded in unison and now we're here. To me it looks typical, a kebab shop painted green with "Lime House Kitchen" written outside accompanied by a neon "open" sign. Yet I have been told now, multiple times, is that this is the best kebab shop in London, possibly in the UK. It's certainly busy.

We queue behind our fellow drunk people. The girls are in dregs of make-up with skewed outfits. The boys in buttoned up polo shirts with hanging arms and vague expressions. The sizzling smell reminds me of a distant holiday, one taken in childhood to somewhere warm and blue. I can feel my empty stomach, a cavern of hunger, and the others are practically salivating with eyes fixed on the salad counter. I let Kiera order for me; lamb donner, salad, chillies and garlic mayo plus chips which are actually more like seasoned fried potatoes.

Most of the customers take their food out, carrying it in yellow polystyrene boxes which they cradle protectively, almost lovingly. But we're staying in. I slip into a plastic table covered in crumbs and place down my food.

"Are you ready, dear cousin, to be initiated into a new religion, nay, a cult — one that's sole purpose is to worship at the temple of the Lime House Kitchen kebab?"

"I guess so," I say, and they all laugh. We dig in with white plastic cutlery, steam rising from containers, fingers rearranging pitas into manageable shapes. The first bite is bright, crunching with salad and freshness, the next is warm, bursting, the meat somehow both charred and tender.

"Oh my god," I say, pita still in hand.

“See?” Says Gita. I nod, I do see. We eat without talking. I take huge bites and small ones, getting to the end and slowing down, savouring with bliss the perfect harmony of flavours, the hints of citrus and the heat of chili. I finish in a reverie, an empty take out box and used napkins scattered in front of me.

“What a way to start Sunday,” I say, smiling at Gita as Kiera collects our rubbish and Laura books an Uber. Everyone is yawning and quiet as we wait outside huddled together.

Our taxi hits a traffic jam on the way back. I am full, but in a comfortable way. My mind feels weighted with exhaustion and my body is topped up, satiated. I’m aware that my head is nodding, the lights outside are becoming blurry, peripheral streaks. I lean against the window and feel my thoughts start to float away from me. I’m on the precipice of a dream, my mind pushed by a current moving beyond my control. Just before I slip out of consciousness I feel Kiera take my hand and say to someone, maybe no one, maybe me, “I enjoyed tonight.”

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