

Silvia Saunders has a day job in a school in South London. But mostly she's working on a novel in which a girl and her grandmother bond through appearing on a reality TV show together. She's also rewriting her first novel about an au pair living in France, which had been steadily gathering dust in a desktop folder until very recently. Her work has been published in Ink Anthology. In the last few months Silvia has become infatuated with Muriel Spark.

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## The Portaloo

I hadn't seen him since June. Whenever we spoke it was sporadically and through impersonal mediums: Whatsapp, the chat option on Skype, a text when he remembered the British girlfriend he'd once fought to keep around. And then, at a time when I'd thrown myself wholeheartedly into online dating and convinced myself that our story was dead, a phone call. A real life, voice to voice exchange of words. I'd struggled to contain my glee. I was ecstatic, but wanted to appear aloof, unfazed, French, all qualities I would never possess.

*'Cou cou, ma belle,'* he said, assuming, correctly, that pet names would still be welcome.

*'Why are you calling?'* I said, and instantly regretted using such an ungrateful tone.

He made a guttural noise: a scoff dressed up as a wry chuckle. *'So I'm not allowed to speak to my girl anymore?'*

I'd never truly been treated like his girl, and he hadn't contacted me in weeks, but I said, *'of course you are. Don't be silly,'* anyway.

*'I'm coming to London next week,'* he said, and with those few words I realised that for all these months he'd been desperately attached after all, that he'd had to hold back for the sake of convenience and distance and all the other tedious obstacles that stand in the

way of true love. I tamped down mild annoyance that he hadn't thought to surprise me. He was coming to win me back and that was the only thing that mattered.

'I'm still staying with friends, though,' I said, ever practical despite my excitement.

'We'll have to get a hotel.'

'You don't have to do anything. I am staying with Joe,' he said.

'You're staying with Joe,' I echoed. 'That makes sense.'

'Are you not happy?' he said, and nauseatingly, I had to admit that yes, I was happy, even though he wasn't coming to London specifically to see me, and had never suggested anything of the kind even when we'd both been pining the most.

'I have to go, *cherie*. My mother is calling,' he said. 'I will be there Tuesday. I will text you.'

'I see my grandmother on Tuesdays,' I said, but the phone was already dead.

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I booked a preemptive bikini wax, and legs spread, bared my soul to the beautician.

'Going on holiday?' she asked.

'No,' I said, holding a section of groin taut so she could grip the hairs. 'My boyfriend's visiting. We've been doing long distance.'

'That's hard. My ex lived in Brighton,' she said, smearing too-hot wax into crevices that Florian had never touched. 'We had a lot of phone sex.'

'Brighton isn't that far,' I said.

'Turn over. That's it. Now hold this open like... this,' she said.

I did as I was told. I was always doing as I was told lately.

'So was it the distance that split you two up?' I asked, my face rammed into the faux leather of the massage table.

‘Not really. He roughed me up a bit on a night out. It made things awkward. My mum never forgave him.’

‘Oh right,’ I said. I had no similar anecdotes of my own to chime in with.

I didn’t say another word until she gave me a friendly pat on the bum and said, ‘all done! Fresh as a plucked chicken.’

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I called in sick to work on Tuesday morning, leaving a voicemail on HR’s answer phone at 7am to avoid speaking to a human person. I cited food poisoning, the one illness least likely to invite too many questions. My boss, Sabine, had IBS and sometimes told us about especially rough patches, once sharing a personal anecdote that involved the words ‘brown water,’ which I would never be able to forget. If anyone was going to ask for details it’d be her, but in preparation, I’d practiced a few brief, vague quotes to summarise my time off: ‘hellish,’ ‘tied to the toilet,’ ‘least I’ll lose some weight!’ I was toying with the idea of taking Wednesday off too. There was still a chance that, once he saw me, Florian would want to get a hotel after all.

I fell back to sleep and woke at noon to two missed calls from the office and a text from Sabine. There was nothing from Florian.

## **Sabine**

*Really worried about you. Call me when you get this. Do you need anything? XX*

10:16

I hated that I wasn’t allowed to pretend to be ill in peace. I’d never taken a real sick day, and everyone else in the office seemed to have one every other month. I deserved this.

There was no part of me that wanted to tell Sabine in a fake sickly voice just how very poorly I was feeling. She probably wanted to check I wasn't at a job interview or well or enjoying my life. I wondered whether I could get away with a texted reply. I tried.

**Me**

*Aw! No need to worry! Feeling pretty terrible, but am hoping that a slow, quiet day in bed will help*

12:08

Faster than seemed viable, her call came through.

'Hello?' I croaked.

'Eddie. Hi.'

'Oh, Sabine, hey,' I said, my voice quivering.

'What exactly is the matter?'

'I ate some bad fish last night,' I said. 'I can't stop throwing up.' I'd once genuinely eaten out of date mackerel so imagined I could sound more convincing if I channelled that.

'Where?'

Where was I throwing up, or where had I eaten the bad fish?

'At home.'

'Was it from a fishmonger or a supermarket?'

'Tesco,' I said.

'Was it within its sell by?'

'I'm not sure. I threw the packet out.'

This was getting silly.

'Can you still get it from the bin? You could sue them if it was marketed as being fresh,' she said, ready for a fight I wasn't asking her to be involved in.

‘Erm, I’ll have a look later.’

‘What are your symptoms?’ she said. I pictured an online healthcare forum open on her screen.

‘Sickness,’ I said, playing it safe, ‘a fever. I have a headache now too because I only slept for about thirty minutes last night. And I’m so thirsty. I can’t keep any water down.’

‘Do you have diarrhoea?’ she asked, and I looked around Bea’s empty bedroom in dismay.

‘No...’

‘Do you think it might be a cold?’

‘It’s not a cold. I can’t stop being sick,’ I repeated, indignant that my fictitious illness wasn’t being recognised as the serious ailment it was.

‘Call me tonight to tell me how you’re feeling, okay?’ she said, and the prospect of speaking to her again triggered the promise of panic.

I couldn’t enjoy my day off after our conversation. I’d tried so hard to convince Sabine that I wasn’t lying that I ended up persuading myself that I really was under the weather. Rather than taking myself for coffee, or beautifying for Florian’s impending arrival, or even fitting in a quick visit to my grandmother’s, I loafed around Bea’s flat, eating bread spread with thick clumps of Lurpak, huge spoonfuls of Nutella, and hunks of cheddar, hacked haphazardly from its packet. There were angry, raised spots on my bikini line, which I prodded with tweezers during a long, melancholy bath. I cried a little as I lathered shampoo into my scalp and then softly hiccuped for ten minutes as I dried off and put my stale pyjamas back on.

I was concerned that Florian’s plane had crashed. I Googled his flight and saw that it had landed on time at 11:25. It was 18:16 and getting dark. I braved a call. He didn’t answer. Even though the thought of having to ask him anything about Florian made the underside of my ribs itch, I tried Joe. He didn’t answer, either. Realistically, I knew I should

be pissed off, but I could only muster worry. He'd sounded so eager to see me when we'd spoken. Well, he'd sounded a bit eager, at least. He would definitely be in touch before the end of the night.

At around midnight, I drifted off, still wearing the stale pyjamas, thoughts of the call Sabine had been expecting making my eyelids flutter.

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On Wednesday morning I was sick almost as soon as I opened my eyes. Now that I had real material to draw from, I sounded much less genuine when I told Sabine my sorry tale. I'd slept through three alarms, and knowing I was too late for the grace of answer phones, had cut out the middle man and called my boss directly. She seemed unsure, but said soothing things like, 'please do try to come in tomorrow, or even this afternoon if you're feeling any better.'

I called Florian three times and Joe twice, then got back into bed and stared at the damp-damaged wall, comforting myself with thoughts of an accident: Florian had been on his way to meet me from work, bouquet of sunflowers in hand, and in his lovesick haste, hadn't seen the approaching Honda. On his bloodied phone, a couple of days after the autopsy, they would find a drafted text to me, saying, *I can't wait to hold you again, chérie*. All the best case scenarios for his silence involved fatal crashes.

When he did eventually call, he didn't offer anything nearly as excusable as a road accident.

'We had such a big night last night. It was fucking amazing.'

'Did you?'

'Joe got us these pills. They were incredible.'

'I thought you'd stopped all that?'

'I am on holiday, Edie.' The way he said my name made the two syllables more pronounced than they should be. E. D. His English was near perfect, but these little mistakes gave him away.

'I know,' I said, 'but it's a shame to undo all your hard work.'

'You never used to care.'

I tried to move the conversation on. 'Who was there?'

'Everyone.' Everyone except me.

'I called you. You could've called back.'

'I am calling you back now.'

'I'm not very well,' I said. Pathetic.

'Well, should we get together another time then?'

'No, no, I don't feel that bad,' I said, my furry tongue lying through my unbrushed teeth.

There was no point in sulking when the only person who would suffer from cancelling our meeting would be me. We made plans to meet at a grotty pub in Angel, he hung up to 'take a long nap,' and I spent three hours getting ready.

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His hair was shorter than he used to wear it, and his skin was paler than I'd ever seen it. We'd only known the summer versions of each other, but he seemed to like my adorned, made-up, hooded edition a lot more than the loose-haired, barefaced, happy me of last June.

'*T'es trop belle,*' he said, before even saying hello.

I wanted so badly to be immune to his smile, but I caught it immediately, and in smiling with him forgot the mass of soggy tissues from the day before. All that mattered

was finding a way to touch him, to make contact. A casual, pally nudge would become an embrace, which would lead to him suggesting the hotel. I would call in sick tomorrow too if it meant a whole night with Florian. I'd already called in sick for much less.

Instead, we sat companionably side by side, a friendly distance keeping proceedings appropriate and uncharged. I ordered a beer ten seconds before he ordered a pot of tea. We had different illusions of how the afternoon was going to go.

'You seem well,' he said, proving how little he knew about anything.

'You look a little rough,' I said.

'You would look the same if you had had the night I have had, *cherie*.'

Maybe if you'd asked me to join you, I'd know.

Florian had excluded me from all the most memorable moments of the summer: the night he and his old college friends slept on Florian's roof, gazing at the stars; the long weekend at his aunt's country house, from which hilarious anecdotes were recited nostalgically to this day; his brother's wedding. I'd always been his little British afterthought.

Mundainties dominated the first hour. I fed him a hammed up account of my job, and gave a cabaret performance called All the Sofas I've Slept on in the Last Six Months, which made the experience sound almost fun. It worked in my favour that he didn't know me well enough to realise that living out a suitcase was my idea of hell. Any particularly difficult, uncomfortable subjects were skirted around: Sabine, finances, my fits of gloom. I presented him with my most sparkly, charming Edie. I used my hands to tell my stories, moving each finger deliberately so that he would concentrate on my painted nails, my silver rings, parts of me that he used to nibble and appreciate. *Manoush*, he would call me. Gypsy.

He listened distractedly, head resting on an outstretched palm, the other hand busy teasing the edge of a beer mat. My dancing digits demanded a partner, but he didn't reach



for me once. When he took the floor, he mentioned work only to tell me he was at the same firm, and then whiled away the next half hour listing all the nights out he'd had since we'd seen each other last.

'Where are you taking me after this?' he said, poking the dregs of his tea with the handle of a smudged spoon.

'How long do you have?'

'I do not have to be anywhere for the rest of the day.'

A tiny miracle, one I wasn't going to waste.

'Have you ever been to Kew Gardens?' I asked him.

'Oh, I was thinking we would stay central, do some shopping?'

'Sure,' I said, already disheartened, 'it's your holiday.'

He threw his phone into his rucksack and stood up to leave. My glass was only half empty but I followed him out the door without mentioning it. Pints of beer were a luxury for me. I'd left the equivalent of £2.50 on that sticky pub table in Angel. I had to work for twenty minutes to earn £2.50. It was hard to be enthusiastic about Florian trying on a host of very similar blue shirts once I had that thought in my head. As he paraded around various changing rooms, I worked out how much I earned in half a day, a week, a fortnight, how much I should be making for all the extra hours after work, for every morning I'd come in fifteen minutes early. I didn't talk much.

'That one's nice,' I said to every one he showed me.

Once he was suitably sated with shirts and souvenirs, he suggested we take a stroll. I asked him where he wanted to go, and he said Soho. I didn't like Soho, and certainly never went there for strolls, but it was his holiday, so that's where we went. Something about the dark made Florian braver. He dropped an arm heavily onto my shoulder, and with his middle finger traced the whorl of my inner ear. More than intimate, it was presumptuous, territorial. He hadn't held my hand yet.

'I need a bathroom,' he said.

'I think there's a quiet street just down there if you want me to keep watch?' I said.

Florian looked at me with such disdain, that I laughed as though I'd been joking.

'Run into that pub,' I said, pointing at a brightly lit doorway, brimming with tourists.

The day wasn't going how it was meant to and I needed a few uninterrupted moments without him to plan how I could save it.

'But I would have to buy something. I do not want anything,' he said.

'You don't. They won't mind. They won't notice at all if you're quick.'

His finger was still resting on my earlobe. 'What if they ask me?'

'Tell them it's an emergency.'

He didn't look at all pleased about it, but he handed me his shopping bags and jogged inside. Less than a minute later, he was back, looking more pained than before.

'Let's go a bit further. I am sure there will be a public one soon,' he said.

'What was wrong with that one?'

'No paper,' he said, shrugging apologetically.

I grimaced. 'We don't really have that many public toilets in London.'

There was scorn in his face as he looked me up and down. He'd never lived here, but he assumed he knew better. 'We will see.'

Finally abandoning the ear, he began stroking the back of my neck, under my ponytail, letting his hand run up and into my hair. I'd told him a thousand times not to touch my hair, to touch anything but my hair. I shook my head to detach his groping paw.

'*Ooh la la*,' he said, 'you and that hair.'

So he did remember. Annoyed, I folded my arms and walked a few steps ahead.

'*Merde*, I really, really need to find a bathroom,' he said, catching up with me and wrapping his arm around my waist.

'What do you think we're doing?'

I wished we weren't talking about toilets when there was so much else that needed to be addressed. I was starting to get the tightness in my chest. As we walked, I noticed him growing ever more desperate, talking less, fidgeting. Both hands dropped to his sides and I knew that he wouldn't touch me again. He took the lead, ushering me down side streets, back alleys and eventually into Regent's Park. I wasn't sure what sort of location he would settle for, so I kept my mouth shut, following him meekly.

'There are plenty of dark corners,' I said, eventually.

He didn't laugh. 'I cannot go outside. I am not an animal.'

He was clutching his stomach and one side of his face was screwed up.

'If you're that desperate you'll go anywhere,' I said, officially out of patience. I really wanted to go home.

He didn't reply or even look at me. He trotted off ahead and I saw him stop a dog walker. I checked my phone for the time.

## **Bea**

*Just got home after an extremely taxing work trip to find my flat looking an absolute state.*

*Tissues everywhere, sick stains in the loo, and a sink full of plates. Thanks for that, Edie.*

*All I bloody needed.*

19:54

Fuck. I thought she was coming back at the weekend. In the time it had taken me to read my rebuke, Florian had disappeared. I gritted my teeth. I no longer wanted to go home.

What with the weight of Bea's displeasure and the unbidden worry of working my way through hundreds of work emails tomorrow, I no longer had the energy to deal with Florian's toilet troubles.

'Edie!' I heard him call. 'That guy told me there is a portaloo on the other side of the park!'

His voice expected me to be excited too. I gave him a thumbs up.

'Should I wait here?' I said.

'No, come!'

A bonding experience, a shared quest. Lucky me. He bounded off ahead, his long legs covering double the ground mine could. He was already inside the portaloo by the time I caught up. I could hear him grunting through the door. It went on long enough for me to text Bea an apology, check my Facebook, apply lip balm and bite the skin from around all the nails on my right hand. I looked again at the time; he'd been holding it in for nearly an hour.

The toilet flushed. He came out, grinning, put both hands on my cheeks and kissed me square on the mouth. The one thing I'd been waiting for all day, and all I could think about was how there almost definitely wouldn't have been any soap in that portaloo.