

## A Document of Change

I have a theory that you can smell a breakup coming. It smells like bleach and fabric softener. It smells like furniture polish in a stuffy room. It's the smells that don't survive intimacy; the ones that, the moment that you touch someone, are overpowered and forgotten completely.

James said he would walk me to King's Cross. On the way, I tried to hold his hand but he pulled it back and put it in his pocket.

'Fingers cold.'

We got to the station and stared up at the departure boards. Platform zero.

James hopped the barrier and walked me to the doors of the train. He said that he was going to spend some quality time with his mum so wouldn't have his phone on him over the next week or so. *Some distance from me will do you good though won't it Chloe?* We hugged. I closed my eyes and the breakup smells overwhelmed me like a sudden loud noise. Fairy liquid and hand soap.

The train from London to Nottingham takes about an hour and a half. I tried to read but couldn't focus so I took out my sketchpad and drew. I sketched the profile of the man opposite me. He wore a North Face body warmer and was looking through the Facebook account of a pretty girl. Every now and then he would smile at his phone. At first I couldn't get his nose right. Then his eyes were off. I gave up and drew a tree instead.

At Kettering, the train sat on the platform for a long while. After a few minutes, another train pulled up from the opposite direction, blocking out the sun. People shuffled off and new ones shuffled on to it. I wondered what my parents would be doing at that moment. I had a vision of my mum making my childhood bed in the same sheets, my dad hoovering the house in preparation. They always cleaned the house from top to bottom when me or my sister visit, as though we didn't live there for decades. I'd been staring at the train next to me for so long that part of my brain thought it would never move again. When it, my stomach lurched. For a second, I didn't know if that train was going backwards or if we were going forwards. I drew a long train carriage snaking round the branches of the tree. I wrote the title on the bottom of the page; *a long train carriage snaking round the branches of a tree.*

At Nottingham, I got off the train and walked round to the Trent Barton bus stop. I rummaged in my bag for my hat. My ears get cold since I started shaving my hair off. It was always getting in my face and my eyes and in the lead up to be assignments, I was forever cleaning paint out of it. It took a few days for me to stop trying to tie up the phantom hair, to stop flicking my pretend fringe out of my eyes.

The bus arrived and the driver wished me good afternoon. Trent Barton drivers do that. They don't have any glass protecting them either. I smiled and gave him a nod. I sat towards the back, on the high seat on the wheel arch with my bag under my feet.

We stopped in West Bridgeford and a large group of old people got on at the high street. Two of them, presumably a couple sat in front of me. I recognised the man, he was the caretaker at the primary school in Radcliffe. His wife was in the window seat with her head on his shoulder. I leant forward a little to focus on what they were saying.

'I can't explain it. It's love in the little things. The small acts that you do are what I like best.'

'Like what?' He thought quietly for a while.

We passed the Gamston roundabout and sped on down the A52. The windows had completely fogged up so outside was a grey nothingness with occasional blurs of multicoloured shapes passing the other way that sounded like cars.

The man sitting in front of me cleared his throat.

'The one that always stands out to me is, you know when you get up early, before I do?'

'You mean every single day?' She rubbed his leg. My seat was higher up than theirs, perched on the wheel arch and from it I felt like a God looking down on their conversation.

'I know,' he lent his cheek on the top of her head, 'but try not to get too jealous, you're nearly retired. Anyway, when you have to get up early and do your hair and make up and all that, I like how you put a pillow over my face.'

'It's so the light doesn't-'

'Yeah I know, you always cover my eyes with it but it's never suffocating or claustrophobic. You always leave this little room for my mouth and nose but it's still dark enough for me to doze. That's when I feel cared for. You know?'

She settled down into his neck a little more and squeezed his hand. I rubbed a hole in the condensation and watched the grey fields troop past one after the other. I fiddled with my nose-ering while trying to fight the lump in my throat.

The bus rounded the big corner past the methodist and I pressed the bell. As I walked down the aisle, I tried to get a good look at the couple in front of me. They both had their eyes closed. She was smiling a little. I had to duck in to the bus shelter to cry somewhere out of the wind.

I looked for the changes that my family have told me about over the year. The Costa that's closing local businesses, the Tesco Metro that's drawing riffraff in from Cotgrave.

But the change that hits me the most is that my sister's tree has been cut down. We liked to climb it when we were little and one day she'd gotten stuck. Since then it was *her* tree. The sky where it used to be looked bare and huge, like an empty room. I looked up at the patch of sky and I felt like I'd got off at the wrong stop.

I walked down past the Grange and I stopped to look at the stump of Jessamy's tree through the fence. Behind it, children played on the swings and the roundabout. A few parents were dotted around on benches chatting or reading their phones. Would they have cut the tree down with her still stuck up it?

I walked through the snicket and onto the top of my parent's street when my phone buzzed. It was James. He said he missed me already. What the fuck kind of a message is that? We spent the whole of last night together, as far apart as you can be on a single bed, staring in opposite directions. Once or twice I yawned or coughed and I felt his entire body tense with annoyance.

There wasn't a car in the drive. Mum must be out. I tried the door, it opened and I poked my head round it.

'Hello?'

There was no answer but there was some shuffling behind the kitchen door. The sound of cutlery being rattled in a drawer slammed closed.

I stopped in the hall, one shoe half off, hanging on my toes. The furniture in the living room was completely different. The piano was gone, the pictures on the wall had changed. Everything that used to be warm wooden colours were now painted a strange blue-green. A couple of thick rugs squatted on the laminate.

'Hello?'

The kitchen door opened and a man that wasn't my Dad stood there drying his hands. This man had short hair, was clean shaven and I'd never seen him before. He was wearing a shirt tucked into his jeans. He stood still, squinting down the house at me.

'Can I help you?' His voice was squeaky and he looked like he was sweating a little.

'Oh- Uh- I don't think I have the right-.'

'This is eight Beech Close.' He said. My parent's house.

'Yeah. Eight Beech is what I was looking for. But I don't think-'

We stood in silence. I kept looking around, as though if I double-checked and triple-checked my surroundings then they would change into home. His hands stayed wrapped in the tea towel. Then his eyebrows shot up and a look of realisation shone out from under them.

'Are you looking for the couple who lived here before, what were their names?'

'Andrew and Michelle.'

'Yes! The Fletchers! They moved up the other end, somewhere around Harlequin. Hang on I have a forwarding address somewhere.'

I slipped my shoe back on. Jesus Christ, how could I have forgotten. They made me throw out loads of my stuff in preparation the last time I visited. For about a month, is what all they talked about when I rang. Downsizing now we're both gone. Chloe, there's no point paying for a four bedroom house when only one of you is ever here.

His voice from the kitchen.

'Come on through, don't worry about the shoes. How do you know the Fletchers?'

It's my house, the home I lived in for nineteen years, but someone's coloured it in wrong. Two bowls sat by the back door, one full of water, the other of dog food. I couldn't see a dog.

'I'm their daughter.'

He laughed.

'And you forgot that they moved?'

'I've been busy.'

'They did mention they had a couple of daughters. One up north somewhere and the other in London. Which one are you?'

'I'm the London one.'

He laughed again. 'I can see that. Here it is.' He waved a crumpled piece of paper in the air victoriously. 'Thirty two Woodland Close. Does that sound about right?'

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'I don't know where that is.'

'You don't come home much do you? Not a problem. I assume you can get to the village centre?'

'Yeah, with the CoOp and stuff?'

'Yeah so from there it's up Bingham Road,' He patted his pockets and looked around. 'Do you have a piece of paper?'

I pulled my sketchbook from my bag, leafed to a clean page and handed it to him. He talked me through the map as he drew it.

He waved me off with a smile from his doorway. I never got his name.

On the walk back into the village, I studied the map that he'd drawn. His handwriting was neat and controlled. The line zig zagged up the page, through estimates of streets and past milestones. Straight on at the chemist. Left at the Flux Estate Agents. Up past the solicitors. I felt like I was intruding. Aside from literally intruding on his house, reading the map gave me a sense of who this man was as a person, the buildings that he deems noteworthy, the time he spent perfecting his handwriting.

Back in the village, I watched the people pass me. A few of them smiled and I smiled back. I wondered what their maps would look like. If their hands would shake while drawing, would their writing be legible, which places are landmarks to them and why?

I heard my phone buzz in my rucksack. Two messages. One from James. He hoped that my train journey was 'uneventful'. He also said he missed me again. I left the message on read. The other was from Mum.

*Just making sure you'd got in okay :) See you soon! xx*

I told her that the train was delayed at East Midlands Parkway so I'd be a bit later than planned.

As I'm passing the Post Office, I see a woman in a dark green coat. She's old, pushing one of those carts that old people push. I smile as I'm approaching her and she smiles back.

'Hi.'

'Good afternoon.' She's chirpy and when she smiles, it takes over her entire face.

'I was wondering if you could help me out.'

'Of course. I think I have some change in here.' She starts to open the flap on the top of her cart.

'No, no. Sorry. I'm just a little lost. I was wondering if you knew where Woodland Close is.'

She laughed a deep chesty laugh and touched the top of my arm. She smelled like cigarettes.

'Oh my dear, I'm sorry. Woodland, Woodland.'

'I know it's up Bingham Road at the top there.'

'Well don't give me too many clues, you'll take the fun out of it.'

I pulled out my paper and a pen. She used the top of her cart as an easel.

Her map is a completely different zig zag. Right at the Estate Agents, up past the schools, then left at the allotments. My Dad used to have a plot up there. He had a tonne and a half of manure delivered to it. The guy that brought it was leaning out the side of his tractor, cigar clamped between his teeth, watching us shovel it into wheelbarrows and spread it onto my Dad's plot. Every now and then he would shout that the girl should put her back in to it. My back hurt for a month.

I stopped at the Estate Agents. Turning left would mean following the first map, turning right would mean following the second.

My phone buzzed again. Mum: 'X' A single kiss. Or maybe a cross. Is this her way of saying that she's cross?

The door to the Estate Agents opened.

'Chloe?'

I stared at the girl who had spoken. For a second I thought it was Nikki's mum. Then I realised it was Nikki. I used to know Nikki pretty well. We hung out a lot but as we got older, we made friends with different people.

She'd dyed her hair blonde and she was wearing a white blouse and a black pencil skirt. It aged her.

'Chloe! I thought it was you. Fucking hell, what have you done to your hair?' She gestured at the window without waiting for me to answer, 'You looking to move back?'

'Hi! Oh, no, no. Just on my way up to my folk's.'

'Yeah! How are they finding the new place?'

'I don't-'

'Yeah, I did the walk round with them. Showed them the place. Woodland Close right? You should've seen how excited they both were. Absolutely lit up at that fabulous en-suite. Anyway, how are things with you? I heard you were at music school?'

'Art school.'

'No way!' Her hands moved a lot when she talked and I took a small step back to avoid them. She closed the distance. 'Things are good here, joined Flux Estates about a year ago. Got promoted last month and guess what?'

Once, Nikki drank too much at one of Michael Slater's house parties. There was a line for the toilet and she wet herself on his sofa. Michael only found out when, after everyone else had left, they went upstairs and he took off her sodden underwear.

'I made the cover this year! Wait here.' She rushed back inside the office. Michael had told everyone about it. Nikki's Dad caught Michael coming home from school one day. He broke Michael's nose and fractured one of his ribs.

When she emerged again, she was holding a plastic wrapped calendar. The words 'Flux Babes' in bold Impact font stretched across the top of a picture of Nikki. She was emerging from a pool in a Union Jack bikini, her tits took up most of the image.

'Well?' She looked at me expectantly.

'You look lovely,' I handed the calendar back. 'Congratulations.'

'Do you want one?'

'Oh. I- No thank you.' I smiled apologetically.

Her face fell. For a moment she looked hurt. Then angry. Then the salesman smile took over her face again.

'Oh go on, it's twelve of the sexiest ladies Radcliffe has to offer.' She held the calendar in front of her and wiggled it from side to side.

'Sexy ladies aren't really my thing.'

Her eyes darted up to my shaven head, then back to me.

'Oh. I'm sorry. Michael told me that you'd gone to music school and become a lesbian.'

'Nope,' I smiled and started walking right, up towards the allotments. 'Art school and straight. Sorry.'

'No problem at all! Great to see you again. Say 'Hi' to your parents for me!' She walked back into Flux Estates and through the window I saw her roll her eyes at another girl behind a desk.

I was halfway up, passing the schools before I realised the opportunity I'd missed. I turned around and hurried back down.

It was warm inside Flux Estates and smelled of coffee. Nikki was sitting behind a desk on the right, a plastic flower and a photo frame in front of her. As I walked up to her, she was just finishing a phone call. She put down the receiver and smiled.

'Change your mind about the calendar?'

'No, I was just wondering if you could do me a favour.'

'Sure hun, what's up?' She settled back in her chair.

'You said you sold my parents the house on Woodland Close?' She nodded and smiled. 'Would you mind drawing me a map up to it? I'm not a hundred percent sure where I'm going.'

'No problem at all.' She opened her draw and pulled out a pad of pink post-it notes.

'Oh wait, would you mind doing it on this?'

She frowned but took my sketchbook of me.

I looked at her map as I walked back up past the schools. She'd used a silver gel pen and her line didn't zig zag so much as curl around the route. She had also left a little message in the bottom corner of hers.

*Great to see you. The old gang will be in The Oak on Friday. Come say Hi! XXX*

At the top of the road, just past the schools, her path split into two. The left path went past the allotments, the same as the old lady's, but the right path branched up Millionaire's Row and then left through something marked "GATE" with a little smiley face next to it. That path then brought you down the back of Woodland Close, coming at it from the opposite side than the other two maps.

I turned left, at the top and walked towards the allotments. I clambered over the fence and walked up towards my Dad's old plot. He'd given it up last year. Said it was too much work for one person and that he couldn't handle the 'feast and famine' of growing veg on a plot this size.

When it was time for the beans to be harvested, we'd have beans with every meal for a month. Then there wouldn't be any beans until next years harvest.

I got to my Dad's plot. No one had rented it after him. Weeds were higher than my waist and had strangled any vegetables out of existence. I had a rummage, flattening nettles and thistles down with my boot but couldn't find anything that looked edible. I thought of the hours after work and on the weekends that my Dad had spent keeping the weeds at bay. How he'd ordered clear plastic online and had hand cut the panels to repair the greenhouse. I thought of the day we spent shovelling shit together. I thought of James.

The inside of my parent's new house looked very similar to the old one. What if all external doors in this village lead to the same interior? I hugged them both before taking my rucksack off. As my parents gave me the tour, I thought of Nikki walking them round. I tried to imagine the rooms completely empty, Nikki with a clipboard bragging about fixtures and fittings, my parents holding hands and gasping at bay windows.

It felt alien and familiar. The same furniture, kitchenware and bedspreads of my old home but arranged in a new case. The smell of my childhood in a new house. In the garden Dad asked if I'd found the place okay and I smiled and lied.

We ate ravioli in the new living room and I was threatened with death if I made a stain on Mum's new rug.

I washed up after tea and from the kitchen, I watched my parents on the sofa. They were warmer than I remember them being. They were always either holding hands or cuddling. With boxes still in piles in the corners, the new house was already home.

After they went to sleep, I sat on the spare bed and looked around at the boxes yet to be unpacked. Half of them had my name on, the other half Jessamy's. I opened one of my boxes and lined my old books across the windowsill. Next to them, I placed a mug full of my old pens and paintbrushes. As I was doing that I looked down into the new garden. It was dark so I couldn't make out much, but the reflection of my bedroom light glinted off a stack of see-through plastic tiles piled in the corner, the ones that my Dad had used to fix up his greenhouse.

I ripped out each map and placed them side by side on the ground. On a new piece of paper, I copied them all out scaled to the same size. I even copied Nikki's note into the bottom corner, mimicking the curves and curls of her handwriting.

I wrote the title on the back with a blunt pencil. *A document of misinformation.*

When it was finished, I took a picture of it with my phone. I wrote out a message to James explaining my day, explaining the maps and then attached the photo to it. I then promptly deleted the message and instead blu-tacked my artwork to the guest bedroom wall.

I put the bedside lamp back beside the bed and went out into the garden to put back the plastic tile. The sun was starting to rise and as my eyes adjusted to the lightening dark, I spotted a patch of soil on the opposite side of the garden.

Rows of wooden lollipop sticks stuck out of the soil. My Dad's handwriting was on each one. *Lettuce. Brussel Sprouts. Purple Sprouting.* Behind each one were small green shoots pushing up into the air. I ran into the kitchen, filled a pint glass and gently trickled the water onto each shoot.