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opening extract from

Back to Life

written by

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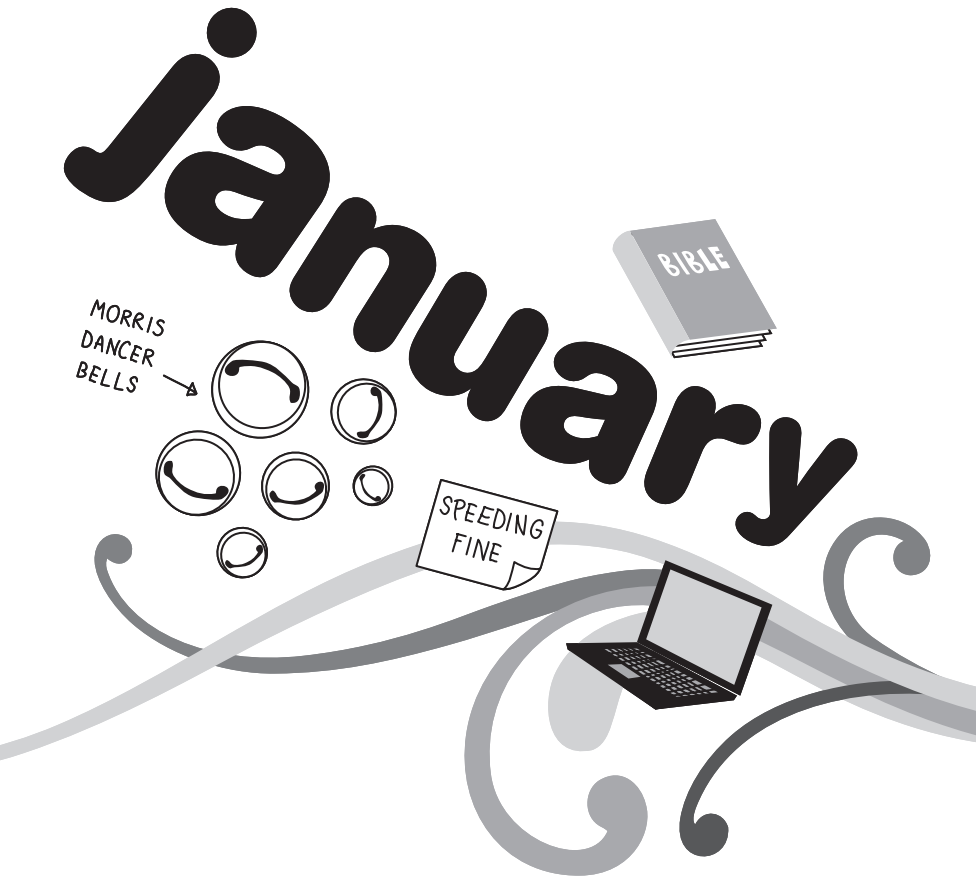
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january
MORRIS
DANCER
BELLS
BIBLE
SPEEDING
FINE

Tuesday 1

New Year's Day

1 p.m.

This is utterly the worst start to a New Year ever.

How things change. This time, last January, I was nestled in warm cocoon of love with Braintree College rock god and potential ONE Justin Statham. Whereas today am alone in non-cocoon-like John-Lewis-decorated bedroom, with borderline hangover. Is not even warm as dog has eaten radiator knob and heating is stuck in off position. It is utter metaphor for life. Am wretched outcast like Joan of Arc. Or Amy Winehouse.

It is all so-called best friend Scarlet's fault. As usual. She has, yet again, snogged the object of my desire. This time it is potential future first-ever black Prime Minister Hilary Nuamah. It is an utter betrayal, not just of me, but of our anti-snogging sisterhood pact of abstinence thing. Which would have said last night only was so in shock immediately downed several glasses of punch. Then, fuelled by experimental vodka and eggnog mix, had brilliant idea of going to Justin's house for midnight kiss. But, when I got to the mock-tudor mansion, I could clearly see him grappling Sophie Microwave Muffins Jacobs against the mock mahogany DVD shelving unit, underneath the mock mistletoe, so had utterly missed boat again. So, drowned sorrow immediately in five Marks & Spencer cherry liqueur chocolates, which had brought along for energy-giving purposes (no Kendal

mint cake to be found), then had next brilliant idea to go back to party to snog Jack, Scarlet's brother, who have kissed previously to some effect (admittedly onstage in questionable production of *Bugsy Malone*, and in dare during mind-slippage episode at Glastonbury, but there was definite frisson, and even thought was possibly the ONE for a while). But when I threw arms around him and said, 'You may kiss me now, Jack Stone,' he did not seem too excited at all. In fact, his exact words were, 'You've been at bloody Justin's, haven't you. I am sick to death of being your sloppy seconds, Riley.' Or words to that effect, as memory may be slightly impaired by alcohol intake. Anyway, outcome is same, i.e. the sisterhood, and my love life, are in tatters. Plus had to watch Scarlet entwined with Hilary in the seventies wicker loveswing thing until Sad Ed offered to walk me home out of pity.

On plus side, am not the only one livid about Scarlet and Hilary. Mum is equally incensed. It is not because she favours him as potential lover for me, it is because he was supposed to repatriate her moronic parents to St Slaughter this morning but, as yet, he has failed to reappear from Scarlet's house. She has just been in to demand that *a*) I stop malingering in bed; *b*) I call Scarlet and tell her to send Hilary home as Grandpa Clegg and Dad are locked in a no-win situation over something to do with Andy Murray's hair; and *c*) I take dog for walk as he and Bruce (offspring of dog, now owned by Cleggs) have combined to form one giant

idiotic canine force and are taking it in turns to disgrace themselves on the dining room table. It is official. My life is pants.

2 p.m.

Have called Scarlet to demand *a*) repatriation of Hilary to 24 Summerdale Road, and *b*) to know why she was snogging him last night when she was: *subclause i*) signed up to anti-snogging pact; and *subclause ii*) fully aware that I was, in fact, in love with him.

She said, *a*) no, he is spending the day in bed being nursed by her and Suzy following potential concussion due to the loveswing falling off the ceiling hook; *b*) *i*) whatever, and *ii*) I had told her I was not interested in him one bit so it is my fault for not being honest about my feelings, in fact.

I said, *a*) that will not go down well with Janet Riley i.e. my mum; and *b*) that's such a lie, you boyfriend-stealing, pact-breaking vampire.

So Scarlet said, *a*) tell Janet to take a chill pill; *b*) *i*) check your diary, you moron, and *ii*) I am not a Goth any more, I am semi-emo, how many times?

So hung up as there is no way can tell Mum to take pills of any kind, let alone chill ones (she is still reeling from the day I experimented with called her 'Janet'). Plus all the subclauses and degrees of emo-ness were getting confusing. But have checked diary and Scarlet is totally right. I did say I was utterly not into him. Which is very

annoying as now cannot officially hate her. Even though she is traitor. Am going round Sad Ed's. He will cheer me up. Or will at least be more depressed than me, which is always heartening. Will take dog. Its absence will appease Mum for the non-return of Hilary.

4 p.m.

Am back earlier than intended due to dog not fully appreciating Sad Ed's mum's many and varied Aled Jones icons. It is now being comforted on sofa by James and a box of Elizabeth Shaw mints. Mrs Thomas is on her own sofa being comforted by Mr Thomas and a CD of 'Walking in the Air'.

On plus side, at least I still have Sad Ed for company in my tortured solitude. He had also broken pact and snogged Melody Bean (apprentice witch, owner of tarantula called Arthur, obsessed with Sad Ed) but is now utterly regretting it. Not only will he have annoying Melody stalking him around John Major High for months, but he says his mojo appears to have been lost somewhere between Hallowe'en and Christmas. Apparently the snog failed to cause any trouser-area stirrings.

He is blaming the sisterhood for depleting his masculinity and says we need to burn all Wicca-related paraphernalia in a ritual sacrifice. Have agreed. It is utterly the way forward. Am going to make it one of my New Year resolutions. Along with following progessive, pro-snogging promises:

1. Tell the truth at all times. If had not lied about Hilary it might well be my lips he was glued to now instead of Scarlet's treacherous ones.
2. *Carpe diem*, i.e. seize the day! Which means utter experimenting as far as snogging is concerned. Am never going to find the ONE if just keep having accidental liaisons with Jack or ill-advised flirtations with Justin. The ONE is out there somewhere. Maybe even right under my nose. I just need to be open-minded. And open-armed. And possibly open-mouthed.
3. Find someone to return Sad Ed's mojo to its rightful state. His depression is off the scale when he is not getting some. Plus now he does not even have the option of untimely death, having spectacularly failed to drown himself in the shopping-trolley-clogged 'River' Slade last year.
4. Pass all AS level levels. Especially Philosophy as it is completely the subject of generally day-seizing experimental types. In fact might even have started new philosophical theory without knowing it!
5. Get new diary. Charlie and Lola may be ironic but have had to staple several sheets of A4 paper to page already in order to fit more than three words in the allotted space. Plus it was purchased by Scarlet and is therefore contaminated with betrayal.

Life, as they say, is what you make it. And am definitely,

no doubt about it, going to make mine fabulous. Starting now.

Wednesday 2

9 a.m.

Hurrah, it is Day One of my new, forward-thinking, truth-telling, love-embracing life. Will start by being honest with all family members.

9.30 a.m.

Am back in room. And not through choice. It is for telling Grandpa Clegg that he is deluded, prejudiced, and smells of athlete's foot powder. It is good job they are going home today as it is quite hard to be honest with Cleggs without referring to them as smelly, racist, or mad. Also Dad not amused as named and shamed him for bringing Cadbury's Roses into house (substandard chocolates, and not to be purchased under any circumstances) when he had blamed Clive and Marjory. Am now political prisoner, like Nelson Mandela, incarcerated for speaking the truth. Hurrah! Am going to phone Scarlet immediately to highlight my philosophical left-wing credentials. And also invite her to the ritual burning of all sisterhood paraphernalia tomorrow.

10 a.m.

Scarlet says I am not like Nelson Mandela and there is

nothing philosophical or edgy about telling Mum that Dad prefers Praline Moments to Quality Street Green Triangles (superior in every way, for reasons known only to Mum). Nor have I started a new philosophy by seizing the day or experimenting snog-wise etc. Apparently liberals are always doing that. Plus she has declined the invitation to the ritual burning of Wicca/sisterhood paraphernalia. She says Suzy is using the cauldron (i.e. the Nigella soup pot) to make bouillabaisse, plus burning is environmentally unfriendly and the excess CO2 could melt too much polar ice cap and drown half of Alaska. This is a lie. It is nothing to do with meltwater, it is because she is ashamed of being the one who ended the dream. That is why she is not coming to wave the Cleggs off on their return to St Slaughter in the environmentally friendly Nissan Micra either. I said she had no need to be embarrassed about her relationship with Hilary, even if it is based on lies and deceit. She said *au contraire*, she is proud of her relationship, but does not want Granny Clegg attacking her with her loaded Spar bags. She has a point.

11 a.m.

The Cleggs have finally left the environs of Saffron Walden taking Hilary and the perpetual smell of Fray Bentos with them. Mum has opened all windows and turned the Glade plug-ins on to full. Even the dog is relieved. It was being upstaged by Bruce in the hairy,

moronic stakes and has now been restored to its rightful position. It is currently licking the carpet in celebration.

The departure did not go completely smoothly though. Scarlet was right about the Spar bags because, when Hilary finally arrived, unshaven and with telltale scratch marks on upper chest, Granny Clegg smacked him round the leg with a particularly heavy one. I pointed out that it was potential racial harassment and/or employee abuse but she says it is not that he is black, it is that he has betrayed me, and her, for a commie. (She means Scarlet, who is not a commie. She is a social Marxist. Apparently they are entirely different.) I was worried she might decide to sack Hilary but she says she is going to keep him on so she can wheedle sordid details out of him and pass them on to me. I said if I wanted sordid details, which I do not, I could just ask Scarlet, but Granny Clegg says she cannot be trusted not to put a New Labour spin on everything. This is true. She has learned from the best, i.e. Suzy, who worships at the altar of Alastair Campbell. Anyway Granny Clegg cannot afford to sack him, as her new non-fortune-telling hip is still settling in and Grandpa Clegg is still weakened from his appendix operation and cannot bend down to restock the freezer with Viennetta on his own.

Before he went, Hilary asked if he could speak to me in private (i.e. the garage, the only room not infested by Cleggs or Mum and her all-seeing eye (aka James)) to say he was sorry if there was any misunderstanding about his

intentions, which were entirely honourable, that I was in no way a lesser person than Scarlet, just that their hearts both beat to the same tune (i.e. the 'Red Flag' and/or 'A New England') and that, if it was any consolation, he would always think of me as a sister. Annoyingly was duty-bound (or resolution-bound) to tell truth so said his Facebook poking was entirely misleading, that I knew as many Billy Bragg songs as Scarlet, and that no, it was no consolation at all, as it was bad enough being a sister to James, who makes the mathletes look edgy. Luckily at that point Dad came in to find Bruce (consuming bottle of ant powder) and Hilary escaped before I could maim him with a Swingball racket. I pity him now though. He has seven hours confined in a small space with the Cleggs who will witter non-stop on their preferred topics—is Stonehenge 'real' (no idea); is Bruce better than the dog (no, equally mental); and aren't the Exeter services amazing (no, unless you come from Cornwall). Whereas I am in 24 Summerdale Road, which is Clegg-free and peaceful at last. Just the 'click click' of James Googling frenetically, the 'psshhht' of Mum Cillit Banging the suspicious ring off the bath, and the 'tap, clonk, "bugger"' of Dad trying to putt practice balls into an Ovaltine jar and hitting the DVD player instead. The sweet sound of normality.

Also have new diary. James agreed to swap as he got three: This Day in History, Cats and Kittens, and bog standard WHSmith desk. I went for the WHSmith one as do not like whimsical kittens (have inherited fear of

them from Mum) nor do I want such gems as *Today in 1872 Brigham Young was arrested for having 25 wives* clogging up my philosophical thoughts. James is pleased with the transaction as says he can sell the Charlie and Lola one to an impressionable Year 2 for £3 or a term's supply of first break biscuits. (He is becoming well-versed in the ways of a playground gangster. Mum is right, the sooner he is away from St Regina's menace Keanu O'Grady and lackadaisical headteacher 'Nige' the better. She is counting down the days until his secondary place offer comes through and she can purchase his St Gregory's Girls uniform.) Anyway, point is, am only two days into the New Year and it is one resolution down already. Maybe will find love of life tomorrow and will seize day and embrace him with immediate snog. Hurrah!

Thursday 3

Did not find love of life. In fact only saw two men who are not related to me. Sad Ed for ritual sisterhood burning, and former Criminal and Retard Mark Lambert (now of BTEC bricklaying fame) going in to Thin Kylie's house for a booty call, and there is no way he is my ONE. He has a Nike tick shaved into his head.

Sad Ed says I need to be patient and that love will manifest itself when I am ready. I said I am ready and, if waiting patiently was the answer, why was he so desperate to find his missing mojo that he would resort to

asking to borrow James's talking Nicola doll (fortunately deceased following extended stay in dog's intestines)? He said he did not want it for pornographic purposes, he wanted to burn it as part of the ritual as she symbolizes all that is wrong with sisterhoods (synchronized outfits, questionable hairdos, backstabbing friends). This is a lie. I clicked his internet history and he has been on the official Girls Aloud website seven times today trying to arouse himself. Obviously to no avail as he is still utterly miserable. He says he will not find inner peace until he can 'stand to attention'.

5 p.m.

Oh God. Have just had thought. What if Sad Ed is ONE after all? Should I have embraced him over the dying embers of our melted Wicca wands (broken light sabre and electric fly swat)? Maybe it is not plastic Nicola he needs. Maybe I am the one to stir his mojo. We have snogged before, after all. And even though earth did definitely not move, did not vomit either. Plus would kill two resolutions with one stone. Ooh, maybe will try it tomorrow. Yes. Will seize day and experiment with Sad Ed. Hurrah!

Friday 4

9 a.m.

Today is crucial day as may well discover I have been

living several doors away from potential ONE all along, and also that I am the answer to Sad Ed's missing mojo. Am wearing carefully calculated Sad Ed arousal outfit. It is combination of Tuesday's psycho/emo look and borderline homoerotica, i.e. excess lipstick, fishnet tights, and a Morrissey T-shirt that he left behind at Scarlet's once. One of them is bound to turn him on.

9.30 a.m.

Mum has sent me back upstairs to change. She says there is no way any daughter of hers is going out dressed like Scarlet. It is not the lipstick. It is the Morrissey T-shirt. Which says 'Meat is Murder'. She does not want Marjory next door thinking she condones militant vegetarianism in any way. On plus side have already done another resolution, i.e. was totally honest, i.e. when she said 'Where do you think you are going looking like that?' I said, 'To seduce Sad Ed.' Clearly she thinks this is either sarcasm or an impossibility as she has not batted an eyelid at my Mickey Mouse T-shirt which is age eight so very tight and bust-revealing. Anyway, have Morrissey T-shirt in bag to put on when am out of her jurisdiction and am off to seize day and fulfil several of my resolutions and Sad Ed's desires!

1 p.m.

Or not. Apparently I am in no way the answer to Sad Ed's mojo issues. Sight of Morrissey T-shirt just made

him all wistful about Tuesday because apparently she wore it the first time they did 'It'. I offered to talk in American accent and show him my bra (now 34B, official measurement) but he said he was dead, heart-wise and penis-wise, and nothing would revive him. He says he is thinking about becoming a famous celibate instead like the Pope or Stephen Fry and channel his energies into his artistic leanings instead. I said that was an excellent idea, even though he has no discernable creative talent unless you count being able to draw the Powerpuff Girls.

Anyway, left him to it and am back home, having fulfilled no resolutions or desires whatsoever. Am somewhat relieved though as finding out Sad Ed is your ONE is total double-edged sword, i.e. like discovering you are related to someone famous and it turns out to be Anthea Turner. Maybe will focus on Resolution Number 4 and read some Nietzsche instead. He is totally pro- tragedy and will no doubt find inspiration in his wise thoughts.

4 p.m.

Cannot understand a word of it. Am going to watch *Mary Poppins* with dog instead. It is strangely fond of Dick Van Dyke and licks telly whenever he comes onscreen and does unfathomable accent (Dick Van Dyke, not dog. Dog cannot speak. Obviously).