

turns to brush our teeth and use the shower in a familiar routine. I don't know what it's like to know you never get to leave and go home again; that your home is lying right next to you every morning and night.

In fact, I don't know what it is to be a proper team with a partner; I've never really leaned on a romantic relationship for support or relaxed into its pace. But I've been in love and I've lost love, known what it's like to leave and be left. I hope all the rest will follow one day.

Nearly everything I know about love, I've learned in my long-term friendships with women. Particularly the ones I have lived with at one point or another. I know what it is to know every tiny detail about a person and revel in that knowledge as if it were an academic subject. When it comes to the girls I've built homes with, I'm like the woman who can predict what her husband will order at every restaurant. I know that India doesn't drink tea, AJ's favorite sandwich is cheese and celery, pastry gives Belle heartburn, and Farly likes her toast cold so the butter spreads but doesn't melt. AJ needs eight hours sleep to function, Farly seven, Belle around six, and India can power through the day on a Thatcherite four or five. Farly's wake-up alarm is "So Far Away" by Carole King and she loves watching narrative-driven programs about obesity called things like *Half-Ton Mom* or *My Son, The Killer Whale*. AJ watches old *Home and Away* episodes on YouTube (astonishing) and buys books of sudoku to do in bed. Belle does exercise videos in her bedroom before work and listens to trance music while in the

bath. India does jigsaw puzzles in her bedroom and watches *Fawlty Towers* every single weekend. ("I just don't know how she gets the mileage out of it," Belle once privately commented to me. "There are only twelve episodes.")

I know what it is to enthusiastically strap on an oxygen tank and dive deep into a person's eccentricities and fallibilities and enjoy every fascinating moment of discovery. Like the fact that Farly has always slept in a *skirt* for as long as I've known her. Why does she do that? What's the point of it? Or that Belle rips her flesh-colored tights off on a Friday night when she gets home from the office—is it a mark of her quiet rage against the corporate system or just a ritual she's grown fond of? AJ wraps a scarf round her head when she's tired—it's certainly not cultural appropriation so what is it? Was she overly swaddled as an infant and it brings her a peaceful sense of infantilization? India has a comfort blanket, a frayed old navy sweater she calls Nigh Nigh that she likes to sleep with. Why does she call it "he"? And how old was she when she decided it was a boy? In fact, I would love nothing more than to conduct a sort of literary salon in which all my beloved friends bring their comfort blankets from childhood to the table and we discuss the gender identities of all of them. I would, believe it or not, find that completely compelling.

I know what it is to collaboratively set up and run a home. I know what a shared economy of trust is; to know there will always be someone who will lend you £50 until



payday and that as soon as you've paid it back they might need to borrow the same off you ("We're like primary school kids constantly swapping sandwiches," Belle once said of our salaries. "One week you need my tuna and sweetcorn, the next I want your egg and cress"). I know the thrill of post in December and cards shooting through the letter box with three names written on the front that really make you feel like a family. I know the strange sense of security to be felt in seeing three surnames on one account when you log into online banking.

I know how it feels for identity to be bigger than just you; to be part of an "us." I know what it's like to overhear Farly saying, "We don't really eat red meat," to someone across the table or to hear Lauren say, "That's our favorite Van Morrison album," to a boy she's chatting up at a party. I know how surprisingly good that feels.

I know what it's like to weather a bad experience and then turn it into shared mythology. Like the couple who theatrically tell the story of their luggage getting lost on their last holiday, taking a line each, we do the same with our own microdisasters. Like the time India, Belle, and I moved house and everything that could possibly go wrong went wrong. The reality was lost keys and borrowing money from friends and sleeping on sofas and putting stuff into storage. The story is a great one.

I know what it is to love someone and accept that you can't change certain things about them; Lauren is a grammatical pedant, Belle is messy, Sabrina's texts are

incessant, AJ will never reply to me, Farly will always be moody when tired or hungry. And I know how liberating it feels to be loved and accepted with all my flaws in return (I'm always late, my phone's never charged, I'm oversensitive, I obsess over things, I let the bin overflow).

I know what it is to hear someone you love tell a story you've heard approximately five thousand times to an enraptured audience. I know what it's like for that person (Lauren) to embellish it more flamboyantly each time like an anecdotal Fabergé egg ("it happened at eleven" becomes "so this was around four a.m."; "I was sitting on a plastic chair" becomes "and I'm on this sort of chaise longue handcrafted from glass"). I know what it's like to love someone so much that this doesn't really annoy you at all; to let them sing this well-rehearsed tune and maybe even come in with the supportive high-hat to boost the story's pace when they need it.

I know what a crisis point in a relationship feels like. When you think: we either confront this thing and try to fix it or we go our separate ways. I know what it is to agree to meet in a bar on the South Bank, begin bristly then end three hours later, weeping in each other's arms and promising to never make the same mistakes again (people only ever meet on the South Bank to reconcile or break up—I've done some of my finest dumping and being dumped in the National Theatre bar).

I know what it is to feel like you've always got a lighthouse—lighthouses—to guide you back to dry land; to feel the warmth of its beam as it squeezes your



hand standing next to you at a funeral of someone you loved. Or to follow its flash across a crowded room at a terrible party where your ex-boyfriend and his new wife turned up unexpectedly; the flash that says *Let's get chips and the night bus home.*

I know that love can be loud and jubilant. It can be dancing in the swampy mud and the pouring rain at a festival and shouting "YOU ARE FUCKING AMAZING" over the band. It's introducing them to your colleagues at a work event and basking in pride as they make people laugh and make you look lovable just by dint of being loved by them. It's laughing until you wheeze. It's waking up in a country neither of you have been in before. It's skinny-dipping at dawn. It's walking along the street together on a Saturday night and feeling an entire city is just yours. It's a big, beautiful, ebullient force of nature.

And I also know that love is a pretty quiet thing. It's lying on the sofa together drinking coffee, talking about where you're going to go that morning to drink more coffee. It's folding down pages of books you think they'd find interesting. It's hanging up their laundry when they leave the house having moronically forgotten to take it out of the washing machine. It's saying, "You're safer here than in a car, you're more likely to die in one of your Fitness First Body Pump classes than in the next hour," as they hyperventilate on an easyJet flight to Dublin. It's the texts: "Hope today goes well," "How did today go?," "Thinking of you today," and "Picked up loo roll." I

know that love happens under the splendor of moon and stars and fireworks and sunsets but it also happens when you're lying on blow-up air beds in a childhood bedroom, sitting in the emergency room or in the queue for a passport or in a traffic jam. Love is a quiet, reassuring, relaxing, pottering, pedantic, harmonious hum of a thing; something you can easily forget is there, even though its palms are outstretched beneath you in case you fall.

I had lived with my friends for five years before it came to an end. First Farly had left me for her boyfriend, then AJ left, and then India rang me one day to tell me she was ready to do the same, before bursting into tears.

"Why are you crying?" I asked her. "Is this because of how I was with Farly when she met Scott? Were you scared I was going to go mad? Do you guys all think I'm nuts? That was, like, four years ago, I'm better equipped at handling this now."

"No, no," she sniffed. "I'm just going to miss you."

"I know," I said. "I'm going to miss you too. But you're thirty this year. And it's great that your relationship is ready to move forward. It's completely right and normal for things to change." I was surprised at my own rationality on the whole thing and quietly awarded myself a CBE for services to friendship.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "You've always talked about how much you'd like to try living on your own."



"I don't know. I don't know if I'm ready for it," I said. "Maybe I should live with Belle until she decides to move in with her boyfriend. It gives me at least six months to work out what to do next."

"Dolly—you're not *The Hunger Games*," she said. "It shouldn't be an endurance test among our friends to see who can stick you out the longest."

I realized that I had been presented with an opportunity. I could wait until every single one of my friends had found a man and moved out. I could rent with strangers from Gumtree who kept shaving cream in the fridge in the hope that I'd soon find a man and move out. Or I could start a new story on my own.

Finding a one-bedroom flat to rent within my budget wasn't easy; I was taken to a number of places that had beds next to the ovens and showerheads balanced over a loo in a "wet room." There was the "spacious one-bed" that was 200 square feet big, there was the one with police tape round the front door. India came along with me to viewings, negotiating and interrogating the bluster of estate agents and asking me if I *really* believed I could manage without a wardrobe and instead keep all my clothes in a suitcase under the bed.

But, eventually, I found a place I could just about afford right in the middle of Camden. It was a ground-floor flat with a bedroom, bathroom, and living room, enough space for a wardrobe and a shower that hung over an actual bath. At the back, there was a sunken,

damp kitchen with absolutely no drawers that was so small I could barely turn in it, with a porthole window and a canal view that made it feel like I was in a boat. It was not perfect, but it would be mine.

All of us who had lived together did a "farewell flat-sharing" pub crawl on our twenty-something stomping ground. We came dressed as an element of flat-sharing in our twenties, which was just as deranged as it sounds. AJ came as Gordon, our first landlord, complete with midlife-crisis leather biker jacket, white sneakers, a short brown wig, and permanent smarmy grin. As the resident obsessive cleaner, Farly came as a giant Henry vacuum in a spherical costume with a pipe attached that dragged along the ground the more she drank. Belle came as our loud nightmare neighbor, with smudged lipstick and a Cher wig. India came as a giant bin—as emptying or relining or taking one out seemed to be the most constant motif of our time together—with bin liners tied round her shoes, a lid for a hat, and empty face-wipe and Monster Munch packets stuck to her body. I came as a giant packet of cigarettes and immediately regretted it as people kept coming up to me asking for free cigs, assuming I was some sort of promo girl for Marlboro Lights hammering the streets of Kentish Town.

We went from pub to pub before ending back outside our first yellow-brick house. We even dropped in on Ivan at the corner shop, only to find out from his colleague that he'd mysteriously "gone abroad for some unfinished business" and left "without a trace."



"The artists have gone," Belle slurred wistfully as we walked along the crescent, day turning into dusk. "Now the bankers will move in."

A week later, I packed my potted plants and paperbacks into cardboard boxes and taped them up for my new home. On the last night we lived together, India, Belle, and I drank discounted prosecco—the tippie of a bloody decade—and drunkenly danced to Paul Simon around our empty living room. As we waited for our respective moving vans the next morning, we huddled in the corner of our wine-stained carpet, our knees knocking together as we sat side by side, saying very little.

Farly, the most efficient and organized person I will ever know, came over to help me get started with unpacking the day I moved into my new place ("Are you sure you want to do this?" I texted her. "Please—this is like cocaine to me," she replied). We ordered Vietnamese food and sat on my living-room floor slurping pho and dipping summer rolls into sriracha sauce while we talked through where we should put the sofa and chairs and lamps and shelves, and where I would sit and write every day. We unpacked into the night before crashing out on my mattress pushed up against the bedroom wall, surrounded by cardboard boxes of shoes, bags of clothes, and stacks of books.

When I woke up, Farly had left for work already and there was a note on the pillow, scrawled in her rotund

childlike handwriting that hadn't changed since she wrote notes on my binder in Wite-Out during science classes. "I love your new home and I love you," it read.

The morning sun leaked into my bedroom and poured on to my mattress in a bright white puddle. I stretched out diagonally in my bed, across the cool sheet. I was completely alone, but I had never felt safer. It wasn't the bricks around me that I'd somehow managed to rent or the roof over my head that I was most grateful for. It was the home I now carried on my back like a snail. The sense that I was finally in responsible and loving hands.

Love was there in my empty bed. It was piled up in the records Lauren bought me when we were teenagers. It was in the smudged recipe cards from my mum in between the pages of cookbooks in my kitchen cabinet. Love was in the bottle of gin tied with a ribbon that India had packed me off with; in the smeary photo-strips with curled corners that would end up stuck to my fridge. It was in the note that lay on the pillow next to me, the one I would fold up and keep in the shoebox of all the other notes she had written before.

I woke up safe in my one-woman boat. I was gliding into a new horizon; floating in a sea of love.

There it was. Who knew? It had been there all along.