



Tick Tock

‘Oh, come on now. In all fairness, how long does it really take to get from Highgate Village to here? I mean, if you *say* you’re going to be here in ten minutes, why do ten-minute chunks keep on zooming by and your ugly red mug still hasn’t appeared?’

Realising her audience was growing in size, Amelie Holden sighed and put down her cumbersome shopping bags, coat, scarf, gym bag, overnight bag and birthday presents. She leaned against the bus shelter at Highbury Corner and rolled her eyes at the tramp sitting next to her, who raised his one o’clock can of beer back at her in amusement. Oh sod off, she chided him inwardly. Just because you haven’t got to be somewhere in an impossible amount of time. Again.

Why, reasoned Amelie, must the ‘Countdown’ machinery always lie so? Why must it keep saying Old Street 10 minutes, when time is definitely passing? I *know* time is passing, I can see the seconds skipping by on my

watch, mocking Me and My Lateness. And yet still the malicious infra-red display says Old Street 10 – oh no, what’s that? 14 minutes! Can time be getting *slower*? Is the bus going *backwards*??!

Amelie fumbled with her bags and fought to locate her mobile. She hastily composed a quick text message, while struggling to keep her eyes at the top of her head so that she could monitor the progress of the bus that would take her into Hoxton.

Clairey – it’s not like I didn’t really try this time. Truly was going to be on time – early even. But literally been waiting at godforsaken bus stop for invisible 271 for at least 6 years. Be there as soon as humanly poss. If you need to eat, order without me. Will just grab peanuts again. Am x x x

She clicked send but nothing happened. Of course. Her credit was all out and she hadn’t had time to get any more.

‘Bollocks,’ she said. ‘Where is the Tardis when you need it?’

A Number 43 pulled up and Amelie had an inward debate about whether to get it and at least be some of the way there, to at least be *moving*. But no, she had made that mistake before and got so lost looking for Hoxton Square from the alien bus stop that she had been even later than if she had waited for the 271. No, this way she would be late but not lost, flustered and overheated.

At least she had the presents all wrapped up; she wouldn’t need to get out Sellotape and scissors on the bus. That was something. Oh, but the card. I can be writing the card while I wait, she thought, and began rummaging

through her handbag, rifling through tissues and Post-its and make-up, looking for where she had put it. She could feel where it was with her fingers, buried underneath layers of things which she began removing. Squatting for a moment, she reached into her over-stuffed handbag and pulled out a pair of mismatched brown gloves (one suede, one velvet), a notebook (with no empty pages left in it), a pink mini iPod (with a flat battery) and a hairbrush (and its broken handle), and laid them all out on the pavement next to her. Now that the birthday card was more visible, she was about to try and retrieve it when she felt the people around her start to move. Evidently, Old Street 14 minutes had also been a lie. Suddenly, miraculously, the 271 had appeared at the bus stop.

Frantically, she raked all of her things together and began hastily stuffing everything back into her handbag. On the third attempt to zip it up she admitted defeat, left everything hanging, and stood up. Seeing an old lady climb aboard, she realised with astonishment and fury that the doors were about to close in front of her face. And not because the bus was too full. But because this particular bus driver was from the 'I'm not insured if there are any more than two people standing' school of bus-driving, and was refusing to let any more passengers on. As the old lady with her shopping-bag-on-wheels took her seat gleefully, she smiled back at the girl who was next in line: an irate twenty-six-year-old named Amelie Holden, whose bag-laden arms were flapping in the air angrily, watching in astonishment as the doors closed, almost skimming her nose as they did so. In one final attempt to win the driver round, Amelie bashed the window with her hands, but the bus began to pull away.

‘Bugger,’ Amelie said, stepping back and slumping down on the bus-shelter bench. Sodding, bastard bus drivers, she thought, but didn’t say, knowing deep down that she would be on the bus now if she hadn’t tried to multi-task at such an ill-chosen moment. Happy New Year! she thought, feeling her two-day hangover surge back into life.

Half an hour later, Amelie was bounding into Shish Bar & Grill, her cheeks rosy and her curly brown hair flying in hyperactive tendrils around her face.

‘Sorry, sweetie, happy birthday! Sorry, the bus was a catastrophe. I did try and call but the phone was being unreasonable about credit.’

‘Still on Pay as You Don’t, are you?’ asked Claire, her oldest friend, as they exchanged kisses. Amelie was meeting Claire and her boyfriend Dan for a late birthday lunch, just before they went away on their romantic mini-break to Paris.

‘Yep, any day now I’m getting a contract. Any day. Drink?’

‘We’ve got a bottle of Pinot already,’ said Dan. ‘Grab a glass and join us. We’ve just ordered garlic bread, so you still have time to browse the menu – just try not to take too long deciding, love. We do have a train to catch.’

Amelie was used to comments like this; they happened a lot. She was painfully aware that if there was an Olympics for Indecision, she would almost certainly win gold medals in all the rounds, particularly coming up trumps when it came to the Choosing Food in Restaurants round. ‘No, no, I’ll be quick as anything, I promise. I know what I want already, really. Just need to take a look at what else there is.’

Amelie strolled through the menu, thinking she was definitely in a Niçoise Salad kind of a mood. But what were the others having? This made all the difference.

‘I’m having a Four Seasons pizza. Dan’s having steak,’ Claire informed her hastily, knowing that this would make all the difference.

‘Well, in that case, I’ll have the pasta. Or the lasagne. No, no – the Niçoise Salad. Absolutely. That’s me decided.’

The waiter was at their table. They ordered the food, Amelie first. When the waiter, a shy Italian boy of not much more than fifteen, had finished noting it all down, he read it back to them.

‘Yes, that’s great, thanks,’ said Dan. The waiter smiled and started to move away.

‘Oh,’ said Amelie, suddenly reminded of her two-day hangover by the voice in her stomach that was chanting ‘*Carbs*’ over and over again to anyone who would listen. ‘Hold on,’ Amelie said to the waiter. ‘No. Sorry to be a total pain in the arse, but please can I switch mine to the pizza instead? The Quattro Stagione, please,’ as though saying it in the waiter’s native language and smiling might somehow be less irritating for him.

Claire and Dan rolled their eyes at each other in affectionate impatience. Dan grabbed Claire’s hand under the table and squeezed it warmly. ‘So, Amelie. Back at work tomorrow, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Don’t remind me. While in only a few hours you’re going to be in Paris! How jealous am I.’

‘Isn’t that Australian hot-shot starting this week as your new creative director?’

‘Again, don’t remind me, please. Duncan and I are dreading it.’

‘Oh, it won’t be so bad,’ said Claire optimistically. ‘You never know, a bit of new blood might help the agency. But anyway, how was your sister’s New Year’s Eve party?’

‘Really great,’ replied Amelie. ‘Shame you guys couldn’t make it in the end. Proper, proper alcohol poisoning the day after, though. Spent all of yesterday in bed, and haven’t been able to eat a thing until this morning. Don’t know what Lauren put in that punch, but it certainly wasn’t fit for human consumption – I can still feel it doing odd things to my stomach, even now!’

‘Try some of this garlic bread, that should sort you out,’ said Dan, munching away and pushing the basket towards Amelie.

‘So, any nice men at the party?’ Claire asked.

‘No, not that I can remember. I’m not looking at the moment anyway,’ Amelie said, wanting to shrug the conversation off as quickly as possible.

‘But that’s when it happens, isn’t it? When you stop looking,’ Claire pushed.

‘No, this year I’ve made a New Year’s resolution,’ Amelie said proudly.

‘What’s that, then?’ asked Dan, while Claire looked faintly concerned.

‘Well. I’ve decided not to do things by halves any more. I read this article on New Year’s Day which got me thinking. It was saying that, instead of doing lots of little things all at once in your life, it’s actually way more constructive to channel all your energy into one area of your life in one go. So, this year is the year of my career, and I’ll mostly be doing . . . work. Obviously I’ll still see friends and family, but the job will be the main priority.’

Claire and Dan exchanged knowing glances. Amelie

took a sip of wine, felt her hangover breathe a sigh of gratitude, and went on.

‘Then, next year, it will be the year of my flat. You know, I’ll get the curtains sorted finally, perhaps try a bit of DIY. And then maybe the year after that, I’ll look at romance.’

‘Amelie, where did you read such bollocks?’ asked Dan.

‘I don’t know. One of the supplements. No, seriously, looking back at all the half-wits and fuckwits I dated last year, not one of them came anywhere near to what Jack and I had going for us. Nowhere near. And when you add up all the time and energy spent choosing what to wear, deliberating over emails, text messages and the rest, it works out as a lot of hours down the drain that I could be putting to more practical use. Especially since I’m nowhere near wanting to settle down anyway.’ Amelie paused, took another sip of wine, and concluded her argument. ‘So, I’ve realised, dating: it’s just not an efficient use of my time. There’s so much I want to do with my life. I don’t have time to waste on guys who I know aren’t ticking all the right boxes straight away.’

‘Amelie,’ squealed Claire, ‘that is such a twisted load of crap! Never mind what you’ve been reading; if you ask me, you’re still living in the shadow of Jack. Babe, you need to forget him. It’s been *three years*. Try a new approach: stop looking for his clone. Stop looking for someone to give you what you had in your once perfect relationship. Just because someone is different to Jack, it doesn’t mean they aren’t worth a test run.’

‘Oh for the love of God, this isn’t about Jack! You’ve not been listening to a word I’ve been saying, have you?’ said Amelie, her eyes lighting up with relief as the food arrived at the table.

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‘It all comes down to you, Amelie.’ A few days later, and Joshua Grant’s booming antipodean drawl wrestled with Amelie’s daydream, bolting her back to the pressures of ad land. Looking up to see one of this month’s new creative briefs dancing about in front of her face, she winced as her new creative director launched further into his tirade.

‘Holden, we have a problem.’ Pausing for effect, he added, ‘We present to the client in less than four weeks. So far, all the material we’ve got to show wouldn’t convince even the most desperate, miserable spinsters to hurry up and start dating. It wouldn’t save the day if the whole population of the world depended on it!’ Pacing around the room, he shifted his speech into fourth gear.

‘Amelie, we need something from you that’s going to *blow the opposition away*.’ Getting carried away now, a faraway look in his eye, he said, ‘We need to be convincing people that they’re lonely *even when they’re not*. We need to be getting inside their hearts, their minds, their souls. Persuading them that they are sad and lonely bastards, with sad and lonely futures ahead of them . . .’

Taking a breath, and eyeing the colourful bedlam of Soho Square through the window, Josh finished with a flourish: ‘We need an ad that’s going to force people into grabbing a Mr or Mrs Right before it’s too late . . . Before they’re sprouting slippers, growing mould and sipping Horlicks by the fire into the end of their days!’

Amelie rolled her eyes at her partner Duncan, who was engrossed in an intricate doodle on his layout pad. He looked up and feigned alertness.

‘I’m hearing you, Joshua. Really, I am,’ she replied. ‘We’re on the case. But if you wouldn’t mind just leaving

me and Duncan to it for five minutes, then perhaps we'd be a step closer to devising this work of advertising genius that's going to make or break us.'

Unfazed by Amelie's impudent tone, Josh dropped the creative brief for Fast Love – Britain's latest and most ambitious speed-dating company – on to the desk and smirked. 'Well, four weeks till D-Day, so let's see what that pretty little head of yours comes up with.'

Watching him stride out of earshot, Amelie winced at Josh's condescending choice of words. As she looked on at the sleek black Armani suit fading into the distance, she wondered, for the twelfth time that year (and it was only January), why it was that Josh – the agency's newly recruited creative director – chose to speak to her in this patronising way. By contrast he seemed perfectly capable of being civil and pleasant to the five other copywriters in the agency.

'Just try not to let him get to you so much,' offered Duncan diplomatically, sensing her annoyance. 'All we can do is give it our best shot.'

Duncan could usually be relied upon to supply a fitting verbal antidote for Amelie's turbulent temper, which had a habit of getting her into trouble. While Amelie would sometimes fret about, and over-analyse, the littlest of things, Duncan would happily smooth everything over with his laid-back optimism, diplomacy and a bottomless pit of patience.

But this time Amelie's mood was beginning to take on an energy of its own. As she swept back some strands of frizzy brown hair from her eyes, she began flicking through the creative brief. Obviously we'll give it our best shot, she thought to herself. Joshua Grant may well have been a

child prodigy back in Sydney, but that doesn't mean he has to speak to us like we're a couple of simpletons before he's even unpacked, let alone proved his creative worth.

In all her three years working at LGMK (Lewis Gibbs Myers Kirby Advertising), Amelie could scarcely remember a time when she and Duncan had not succeeded in coming up with the pitch-winning idea in the end. With her friend Duncan as art director, Amelie sometimes liked to believe that together they made one of the best creative teams that the agency had. That said, this latest creative brief did appear to have the mark of the devil on it.

'But seriously, Dunc. Just how ridiculous a name is Fast Love?' Amelie enquired, looking up from the brief. 'I mean, exactly how will we get people to take it seriously with a name like that? And tell me, do people actually go speed-dating? I thought it was just an urban myth!'

'Get with the times, Amelie. It's *the* way to meet your partner in these busy career-driven times,' Duncan quoted mockingly.

'Says who?'

'This magazine article in *Glamour*: "My Quick Fix and Why I'll Never Look Back", by "loved-up Gemma from Chiswick". And these searches I'm pulling up now are all radiating praise for it. According to this, SpeedDater UK has hitherto been the most successful brand, but it seems Fast Love is creeping up slowly, poised to take over as the number one. And, as Josh says, I guess that's where we come in.'

'So . . . Just how speedy are the dates? And how many do you get in one night?'

Looking over his notes, Duncan surmised, 'Well, Fast

Love offers three minutes, which is the standard – that’s what you get with SpeedDater too. Generally, you get about twenty-five to thirty “dates” per night. Some offer more or less, but Fast Love insists that twenty-three is the perfect amount; after extensive research has confirmed this as the optimum number. Any less and people feel short-changed, any more and the repetition just gets too much to bear!’

‘If you ask me, I’d be bored out of my brains after two. But hey, what a bargain. A quid per bloke.’

Duncan picked up Amelie’s compact from the desk and began scrunching up his messy crop of blond hair, as though assessing his appearance for its monetary value. ‘I’m worth more than a quid, surely?’ he jested.

‘Well, at that price, Duncan, you would be an absolute steal.’

As the words left Amelie’s lips she realised that despite her tone, there was an element of truth to her words. Duncan *was* very good-looking, with his warm smile, well-toned body (through no fault of his own) and chiselled features rivalling even the great Jude Law, but, for reasons his female friends could not fathom, Duncan had never been much of a success with The Ladies. When it came to approaching women, he was invariably held back by the twin evils of inertia and shyness. It was a shame – as all his female friends frequently informed him – he would make someone out there a fabulously lovely boyfriend if he only made the effort to overcome his self-consciousness.

Despite having been good friends and workmates ever since college Freshers’ Week, and even though all their friends thought they would make the perfect couple,

Amelie had always said that she and Duncan would never be anything more; that the spark between them had only ever been an intellectual one. Well, unless you counted the in-house firework displays that were sometimes generated by their differences in personality. Strangely, it was these differences between them that glued them together so tightly as a team, and gave their campaigns a creative edge over all the other teams. Because their work was invariably the end product of a ferocious argument of some sort, the resulting idea would always have at its core a dynamic; a spark that would never go out. So much so that the other teams in the agency had learned by now to start getting worried if they heard yelling from their corner. It meant that some 'shit-hot' work was about to be generated from Team Amelie and Duncan.

Amelie, blessed with alarming levels of creative intelligence, also had the relentlessly enquiring mind of a small child. Known to her friends as a loveable but endlessly scatty dreamer, she nevertheless had an indomitable mind that ran according to its own timetable. Duncan would often slope in casually to work at 10 a.m. to find her still at her desk, wide-eyed and caffeinated, having spent the whole night with an IDEA – pushing it as far as it could possibly go. 'It couldn't wait?' he would always ask. And she would always give the same bemused smile.

Not that Duncan wasn't as excited by the ideas as she was – he just believed there was a time and a place for work. For Amelie, ideas also had a time and a place: anywhere (the tube, a nightclub toilet); anytime, (5 a.m. or three minutes before a pitch); anyhow (written in lipstick on the back of a concert ticket stub or a Boots receipt). It

was this eccentricity in her that her friends had grown to love (and occasionally hate). Ideas were the embryo of their winning campaigns and, to Amelie, they took precedence over everything – and, sadly, everyone. This was one of the factors that had led to her mounting years of contented singledom. Although she was sociable and outgoing, her last priority when it came to fitting everything in was men.

Amelie jumped. Her Mac was pinging at her to indicate new mail:

Date: 3 January 2005, 10.20

Sender: CWilson@MarshallHopkins.co.uk

To: Holden.Amelie@LGMKLondon.com

Subject: Gay Paris!

Hello, lovely, how is Monday morning treating you?

Just a quickie to let you know that I'm back from Paris. Dan and I had the most perfect, blissfully romantic weekend. We stayed in a lush hotel overlooking the Seine, strolled down the Champs Elysee's, climbed the tower . . . It was amazing . . . Just really great, so much to tell you! . . . Actually, I don't quite know how to put this . . . we even got round to approaching the subject of . . . the 'M' word!!!

Anyway, have to fly but tell you all about it when I see you xxx

Date: 3 January 2005, 10.28
Sender: Holden.Amelie@LGMKLondon.com
To: CWilson@MarshallHopkins.co.uk
Subject: RE: Gay Paris!

Hi, babe, glad you had a great time! I've worked all weekend. Again.

A xxx

P.S. 'M word': Motorbikes . . . Moving house . . .
Maltesers? You can't mean, you surely don't mean,
Marriage. DO you?

Date: 3 January 2005, 10.30
Sender: CWilson@MarshallHopkins.co.uk
To: Holden.Amelie@LGMKLondon.com
Subject: RE: RE: Gay Paris!

Well . . . you know . . . He didn't exactly come out and say it . . . I think he is treading somewhat carefully. But, let's just say that after this weekend, I think he really might be on the verge of proposing! Isn't that the most maddest exciting thing!

Amelie, trying hard not to choke on her Innocent vanilla thickie, hastily clicked reply and began typing.

Date: 3 January 2005, 10.32
Sender: Holden.Amelie@LGMKLondon.com
To: CWilson@MarshallHopkins.co.uk
Subject: ???&*)%\$£\$?????

Claire??

Claire. Paris has damaged you in some way, done funny things to your head, yes?

Amelie paused for breath, tapping her fingers nervously on the desk while she fought to think of a more sensitive way to phrase things.

It's what . . . 10.30 . . . on a Monday morning and you come out with this?

What on earth has happened to your old saying that marriage is an anachronistic farce? A relic from the times when it was all patriarchy, knitting and housework . . . when women had no identity outside that of their husbands . . . (they were your words, lady, not mine!!).

This is a wind-up, no?

A few minutes later Claire replied.

Date: 3 January 2005, 10.38

Sender: CWilson@MarshallHopkins.co.uk

To: Holden.Amelie@LGMKLondon.com

Subject: RE: RE: Gay Paris!

Thanks for the encouragement, Miss Havisham.

Nothing has happened yet, OK? But I'm just saying it might be on the horizon, that's all. It's not before time, though . . . I've just turned twenty-seven . . . and you know what they say about 'the timetable'. Can you not – even slightly – hear your own biological clock? I can, and you know what? It's ticking like there's no tomorrow.

This last reply was received by Amelie with rising irritation. 'Biological clock, my arse,' she scoffed, lighting up a cigarette.

But somehow, as she leaned back in her chair and looked out of the window at all the people strolling and lazing around Soho Square in the wintry sunshine, it suddenly seemed to her that an increasing proportion of those who sat laughing together over their lattes and panini were in fact couples laughing over lattes and panini. Successful, beautiful couples in their late twenties. Quite despite herself, Amelie began to wonder how long it had actually been since she'd been in a relationship that wasn't entirely dysfunctional. At the same time, but much further into the recesses of her unconscious mind, a tiny thought flickered into existence. Remembering that her twenty-seventh birthday was creeping up in just under two months, this little thought began to hit upon the idea that perhaps Amelie's oldest friend might have a point.

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‘Well, now that the vodka campaign’s finally underway, we can get cracking on this ridiculous Fast Love brief,’ Amelie said to Duncan a day later. ‘What’s say we go for a walk and grab a drink in the long wait for inspiration?’

‘That’s the best idea you’ve had in ages,’ he said cheerfully, grabbing his denim jacket. ‘Meeting Room 4?’

Minutes later they were leaning back on a large brown sofa in The Nellie, the pub just round the corner from LGMK. Being so close to the agency, The Nellie was patronised regularly by most LGMK staff. At any given moment, in any given day, you could expect to find at least one of the hundred staff sitting in the lively Nellie.

Amelie took a large sip of her pint, and her cool blue eyes darted over the creative brief for the twentieth time that day.

‘“What is the most important thing that you want this ad to say?”’ she read aloud. Then, in a mocking tone, she read on, ‘“That being lonely is no longer an option.”’

After a lengthy pause, and a long pull on her cigarette, Amelie commented, ‘Surely that’s a touch ambiguous . . . are they saying that in today’s world it is no longer possible to be single? Or that it’s too undesirable an option?’

‘Neither. I think it means that with Fast Love being so successful, so unprecedentedly brilliant, that, well . . . it’s now no longer *necessary* to be alone. Like . . . anyone and everyone can find their other half to settle down with if they really want.’

Amelie made a retching sound.

Duncan laughed at this. ‘You, the eternal cynic, and me, the unluckiest in love . . . Christ, with our combined track

record there's no chance of us coming up with a decent angle on this campaign. It's a bit of a joke really.'

'Yeah, maybe we should just sit this one out or something? I mean, I don't even buy into the basic idea of marriage anyway. The rule that you have to find one perfect person to settle down with for ever, in blissful harmony . . . It's all a fairytale. It's not reality.'

She took a big gulp of beer and looked closely at Duncan. 'I mean, just look at my parents. Between them they've had more affairs and flings than they've had weddings. And now my mum, having got married for the third time, totally certain that she'd finally met Mr Right, is discovering that he's just another Mr Wrong, and it's probably not going to work out, yet again . . .' Amelie stopped and looked out of the window for a second. 'I mean, what on earth is so wrong with just being your own person until the end of your days? At least then you won't get hurt or screwed over or humiliated . . .'

'I know,' replied Duncan, his blue eyes thoughtful. 'I hear what you're saying, but part of me still thinks maybe you or I just haven't met the right person yet.'

'Hmmm. I'll believe that when I see it. Anyway,' she said, looking at her watch, 'it's wedges o'clock . . . I'm going to get some, do you want to share them with me?' And with that she leaped up to go and order a large plate of them from the bar.

On her way back to the sofa she considered her last point again, thinking back to her last – and only – long relationship. 'I think Jack was the man for me, if ever there was one. Shame he had other ideas though,' she said as she sat back down on the sofa.

There it was, the stabbing pain to remind her of the

humiliation she had felt three years ago, almost to the day. Coming home early from work with the flu, she had had the misfortune to discover Jack – her best friend and only love – in a tacky, compromising situation with a girl called Penny. Penny, as Amelie later discovered, was a high-flying and beautiful colleague from his law firm, who, Amelie gathered, flaunted her ambition and voluptuousness in equal measure in order to get what she wanted. Prior to Amelie's discovery, she and Jack had been together for three perfect years (in her eyes), and had been living together for one. Although the wound left by this infidelity was a substantial one for Amelie, she now felt anger more than anything else. Anger at how clichéd a scenario it had been. She also couldn't help but wonder why he couldn't at least have had the decency to cheat on her with someone more interesting or dynamic. They knew so many nice, charismatic, talented girls – any one of whom would have been suitable. Anyone but his painfully dull legal-eagle partner. In a strange sort of way, it was the humdrumness of Jack's taste, the sheer lack of imagination behind his infidelity, which, even three years after the event, still left an imprint of humiliation.

'Anyway,' Duncan began, trying for Amelie's sake to steer the conversation away from the potentially maudlin direction it was going. 'At least with speed-dating it's not *only* about looking for your future spouse – it's also about finding someone to go out and have a laugh with. Well, so it seems anyway – not that I've ever tried it. But seriously, maybe that is something to think about for our strategy . . . steer away from it being about just marriage, and portray it in a more lighthearted way somehow. Any ideas?'

Just then the doors to the pub flung open, and a huge shriek of laughter came wafting towards them. Amelie and Duncan turned to see Joshua Grant coming through the doors to the pub, with his new PA hanging off his arm. A petite and pretty blonde named Fleur Parker-Jones, who had recently been promoted from the role of timid agency receptionist to the more demanding, hands-on role of being Josh's PA.

As Duncan and Amelie considered Fleur's lurid pink mini-skirt and matching nail varnish in incredulity, they both felt the phrase '80s time warp' rising to the surface of their minds. While biting into a sour-cream-drenched potato wedge, Amelie watched Fleur curiously, thinking that the recent change in her career appeared to have had a noticeable effect on her outlook, both in terms of her fashion sense – which had now become much more glamorous than before – and her overall demeanour, which was now much less humble and muted than it had been. Amelie lit up a cigarette, her eyes following Josh and Fleur to the bar. Yet another man who seemed incapable of existing outside the realm of clichés, she surmised, noting that Josh already seemed to be leading his new PA a merry dance, apparently entranced by her new-fangled clothes and power-hungry behaviour.

'Oh, how I miss Jana. Lovely, inspirational Jana, and her wonderful exotic earrings,' Amelie thought aloud, lamenting the shockingly sudden departure last year of their previous creative director, Jana Morris.

'I know,' agreed Duncan mournfully. 'I wonder how she's getting on.'

After a brief silence, and a moment spent watching Josh perform one of his trademark surfer grins for Fleur, Amelie

sat firmly upright. ‘Anyway. Sod him. Let’s get our brains together and in gear: love, romance . . . how do we bottle it and sell it in a winning campaign?’

Hours later, Amelie and Duncan emerged from the pub looking deflated; each carrying large jotter-pads bearing scribbles and mind-maps under their arms; the result of a reasonably productive afternoon’s brainstorming.

‘Well, it’s a starting point, at any rate,’ Duncan declared optimistically.

‘Yeah, I guess,’ agreed Amelie on the walk back to the office. ‘I’m not altogether convinced it’s got what it takes, though . . .’ she said, as they walked through the large glass sliding doors to the interior of LGMK, their footsteps gliding over the letters *We think, therefore you buy* – the agency’s own lovingly pretentious motto which was engraved into the floor panels.

‘You never are. I still think you should consider my idea, though,’ Duncan said, pressing the button to call the lift, and leaning against the wall.

‘No way. Over my dead body. Not in a million.’

‘But – just think about it!’ The lift opened and they stepped inside.

‘I. Am. Not. Going. Speed. Dating.’ Amelie hit the button for floor five, and the lift began its ascent. Looking at their reflections in the lift mirror, Amelie caught Duncan’s eyes and added firmly, ‘No frigging way, Duncan. Not for all the tea in China or for all the ads in Cannes. I don’t care how speedy it is, it would still last an eternity as far as I’m concerned.’

The lift doors opened, and the pair stepped out and began walking to their office.

‘But!’ yelled Duncan.

‘NO!’

‘But Bill Bernbach said—’

‘I know what he said!’ shouted Amelie, painfully aware that they could now probably be seen and heard by most of the creative department.

‘I don’t see that we have any choice, Amelie,’ said Duncan as they sat down at their desks. He looked over at the blank A3 pages on her desk. ‘I mean, have you got any actual ideas that we could really imagine running?’

‘Just give me a day or so . . . I know I can come up with something, OK?! Leave it with me.’

‘And if you don’t? What then?’

‘Look, Duncan, if you want to find a girlfriend, then go by yourself. There’s no way I’m lowering myself to that glorified, institutionalised meat market! At least don’t insult my intelligence by dressing it up as “research” just so I can tag along and make you look less desperate!’

At this Duncan looked genuinely dented. ‘That was below the belt. You can be a real bitch sometimes.’ Then he stormed away, leaving Amelie shocked at the levels her own temper was capable of ascending to, and wishing she could retract what she’d just said.

‘Shit,’ she said, heading to the pool room and lighting a cigarette. ‘Bollocks,’ she told herself, thinking about how she seemed to be on a roll, successfully annoying two of her friends in one week, without even trying. She slumped down on to a sofa and inhaled deeply on her cigarette, wondering if maybe there was something wrong with her. Then, on the table in front of her, she noticed this week’s issue of *Campaign*. She fought with herself, mustering all her willpower not to pick it up, to ignore what the industry

rag had to spout about this week. It was no use. She had to see what brilliant new ads were being featured. Had to see what ideas the creatives in the top ten agencies were churning out. Looking either side of her and clasping the magazine with both hands, she began leafing through it. She'd only got to page two when something caught her eye. To her astonishment, there, at the centre of the page, was a glossy, self-consciously artistic photograph of Joshua Grant, leaning against one of the immaculate white pillars in the LGMK reception. The grin he wore was a confident, happy one; his dark hair was its usual brand of slick scruffiness. Much as it pained her, she had to admit that the photo did him justice – he looked incredibly young. In fact, he *was* incredibly young to be taking over as creative director from a woman in her late forties. In that photo he didn't look a day older than twenty-nine. Looking more closely, she supposed the photo even made him look attractive, if you liked that sort of thing. Deep brown eyes, excessively suntanned, muscly, tall – the obvious surfer-type qualities.

She drank in the headline and cringed. 'Granting All Their Wishes,' it read in big black bold impact type. She read on, her heart in her throat. The article told of how Josh had been head-hunted by the executive board at the financially troubled LGMK, and was instantly dubbed as the man who would save the day, replacing the previous CD Jana Morris who had – much to her humiliation and Amelie's utter dismay – been invited to leave. The article went on to liberally sing Joshua Grant's praises. It told of how he had been a legendary force back in Sydney, breaking more records and winning more creative awards than any of his antipodean contemporaries. Amelie scrolled

down, her stomach constricting as she read about how Josh already had in mind many bold new ‘Initiatives’ and ‘Structural Improvements’ to set into place in his new post. Oh God – that was management-speak for sacking people, wasn’t it? Surely everyone knew that? Feeling even more anxious than before, Amelie realised that her job really could be in serious jeopardy now that this new creative director had arrived. Suddenly the pressure to think of something brilliant for the Fast Love brief was greater than ever.

Right, that’s it. I’m cancelling my life for the next four weeks, she decided, opening her bag and reaching for her diary. She flicked through and started to cross out social events here and there. Feeling a wave of guilt, she left in a few for now and snapped the book shut. Sensing lights being shut off around the agency, she realised that she was one of the last people left in the building – again. OK, time to go, she reasoned with herself. She picked up her bag, wrapped her scarf tightly around her, and walked out of the building.

As Amelie stepped on to the pavement in Soho Square and shuffled her feet along, she noticed that the raindrops that had been drizzling over London earlier that day had since turned into a more menacing breed of hail, and there was now a harsh wind in the air. Amelie passed a *Big Issue* seller on her left – the same old man who said hello to her every single morning, without fail. She reached into her pocket and gave him a pound coin and two twenty-pence pieces.

‘I don’t have time to read it, but here’s the money anyway.’

‘Big pitch coming up?’ the man asked, taking the coins.

Amelie stopped, stunned at his interest, and his intuition. ‘Yes . . . actually. For some reason I get the feeling it’s going to be one of the biggest pitches of my life.’