

Babysitting

The worksheet in front of me displayed

$$x^2 + 3x - 18 = (x+6)(x-3)$$

I was figuring my own calculations,

Me + This 'gifted and talented' maths programme = an administration error.

Ash sat at the desk in front of me, hinging back and forth on the rear legs of her chair, her dark curls bobbing like foam as she moved. Intuitively, she righted herself just as our Head of Year walked through the door.

"Alright Year 11s, how are we? Working hard? More like hardly working if my memory of you lot serves." Mr Hillcrest chuckled conspiratorially to no one, as though the air around him knew all about our flaws as a cohort. I watched his Adam's apple bob above his collar as he performed to the silent class. His face slackened,

"Big year this one girls, and that's why I'm here to talk to you actually," he continued earnestly.

"Raise your hand if you've ever heard the word 'Bouncebackability'."

Eighteen pairs of eyes rolled skywards.

As his homily continued, Ash swivelled in her seat to face me, she pointed to the floor with her index finger, then to the door with her thumb. She pushed her palm towards me in a shrug, raising her eyebrows and I recognised the question behind the universal gesture: 'canteen for lunch or shall we get off?'. Before I could reply she swung back to face the front of the class, like a pendulum let loose. Mr Hillcrest had just mentioned the words 'weekend job'.

Later that afternoon, I was tying my lace in the courtyard when Ash bounded over to me, leapfrogging my back where I was stooped. I looked up at her, my face a question mark. She stretched her arms out by her sides, it reminded me of when we used to play stuck in the mud in primary. She twirled in a circle cheering, the hem of her heavy kilt floated on the breeze.

"Lulu", she sang my name like a cockerel announcing the time.

"You. Are. Welcome. Honestly, don't even thank me".

By this point I had pulled myself to my feet and asked her what she was on. She laughed,

"Riding the wave of financial freedom aren't I? You know that job Hillcrest was on about before, well, I've only gone and secured it for us."

She beamed at me.

“Every Saturday, 11 til 4, it's babysitting, £5 an hour and all we have to do is take some kids to the park back. Sick or what?”

“We're actually gonna be minted you know, that's like £50 a month each, what are you gonna do with it? I know I'm buying some fresh Air Forces and my mum can't say pim about it.”

In the flurry of her excitement I had already mourned the loss of my Saturday afternoons. She grinned at me and seeing her excitement, I felt my own smile break across my face.

“Alright,” I replied, “When do we start then?”

After that, each Saturday was the same. I caught the 61, hopped off and stopped at the cornershop for two Diet Cokes (two to share, never one each) and a grab bag of Wotsits. I met Ash at the end of her road, each time she would decline the outstretched packet of crisps I offered her; claiming to be ‘being good’, whatever that meant, only to end up with orange crumbs under her fingernails minutes later. Her eyes were usually red, but the reason why was the sole variable in our arrangement. Sometimes, as she rifled through her pocket for bus fare, a small plastic bag of dried leaves would fall out and I took that as an explanation. Other times, she cracked jokes and complained about us wasting our time wiping noses but I noticed a tremble in her hand when I hugged her hello.

We walked across the playing fields that separated the new-builds from the legacy estates. It was during this time that Ash would fill me in on her mum, punctuating her sentences with long swigs from our Coke can. Tracey was a hair-braider with slick hands and a slicker mouth. She was the type of best-friend/mum hybrid that we all envied, she let us have whatever makeup she didn't want and she pitched her insightful two cents on whatever gossip we disclosed around her. At Ash's 16th birthday party, she poured our drinks; tangy, sweet lemonades laced with an astringent taste that I later discovered was vodka. All three of us twirled under the multicolored strobe lights for hours that night and when my own mother picked me up the next day, she took one glance at the stale mascara smudged across my face and marched me right back to Ash's door.

“Listen love, wouldn't you rather they get it from me than that noncey fella in the cornershop?”,

Tracey offered this in lieu of the apology my mother demanded.

I smirked watching my mum's mouth oscillate silently around an arsenal of outraged responses. Ash's house was like a fairground, there, I felt free to laugh and shout and swear. We routinely ate chips for dinner just because they tasted good and as I mashed fluffy, salty globules around my mouth I imagined

what my life could look like if I never went back home. One Monday, Ash came to school with a split lip, explaining that she had got cheeky with her mum and Tracey had matched her energy.

“It’s not that deep Lu, obviously, she was just teaching me that you can’t speak to anybody anyhow in this world”, Ash justified, clearly parroting the warnings of her mother.

I nodded and changed the subject, suddenly grateful for my own mum who saw a week’s grounding as perfectly adequate punishment.

Months after the initial job offer, Ash and I were sitting on a park bench near the pond, the sun glinted off of the barrier gate, tessellating splodges of sunshine onto the ground ahead of us. Cars and seagulls crowded faintly. Nearby, Nicholas and Ben were playing a game of catch that had descended into fetch due to their lack of skill.

“You know how when you look at something you love, your pupils dilate yeah? Do you reckon that’s why bud makes your eyes sting? Like, I’m just so full of love right now, my eyes must be proper stretched. No wonder they hurt.”

As she recounted this theory, Ash stared intently at the rippling waves of the pond, watching the light as it glared then smattered across the surface.

“Do you know what I reckon Ash?” I replied.

She turned to me and I noticed how smoking did in fact make her eyes come to life. Her irises grew, emerging like shy turtles peeking out from their shells, perfectly round and dark in a creamy exterior.

“I reckon, we need to take these two back, it’s almost 4” I said.

She crossed her eyes, sticking her tongue out at me, then hauled herself up from the bench and clapped her hands in a resounding drumbeat. Across the field, Ben and Nicholas in unison, beated out their own variation of the beat. They raced one another towards us and we four began the short walk back. As we waved them off, Ash turned to me “Coming to mine?” she asked,

“Obviously.” I replied.

As I stepped into Ash’s living room, I noticed how tight the air felt. It was like being sealed inside a microwave as it transforms volts into dense heat. Everything in the room was brown (Tracey thought earth tones were timeless), the once-plush, sable carpet had been trodden down so that now the surface of the floor was compact and perfectly level, like an afro trimmed into place. The air smelled sweet and

artificial due to the candles on the TV stand that burned perpetually. Their gentle glow added to the sensation that I was being cooked. Tracey was sat on the tawny leather couch staring at her phone screen, she shifted in her seat when she registered our presence, the couch squeaked at the friction. I smiled, stretching my sealed lips into a crescent, too uncomfortable to commit to including teeth. Tracey didn't register my presence. She blinked twice then flipped her phone around, showing us the screen. It was a picture of Ash, lying stretched along the park bench, her round face glowing like a bronze orb as she tilted her cheeks to the camera. Her eyes wore the same open, dazed look that they'd had earlier as she bore her teeth in a lazy smile, she looked happy. I didn't understand why the photo had clearly angered Tracey so much. In the bottom corner of the photo I spotted it. Ash's hands lay crossed over her stomach as she reclined and wedged between her fingers was a small beige spliff, smoke clearly unfurling from the lit end of it. "So my daughter is Bob Marley now? Is that it yeah?" Tracey spoke the words coolly, daring Ash to respond.

I turned to Ash, her face was expressionless, she looked almost unbothered save for the tremble that now rattled her left hand.

"Go.", "Wait for me upstairs."

As Tracey spoke, she directed her words at Ash alone. Ash backed out of the room, I heard her thudding footsteps recede up the stairs. A moment later Tracey followed. I sat down on the carpet and inspected my fingernails. The house was almost silent, when I slept over, I would lie awake in the dark, waiting for my tiredness to overpower the ringing screech of absence in my ears.

There were never any whirring light bulbs or noisy refrigerators. If I concentrated, I was sure I could hear the quickened pace of Ash's breathing through the ceiling. I noticed Buddy, Ash's dog, laying placidly on the floor beside the couch. His coily chestnut fur made him camouflage into the room. I shuffled beside him and prodded the swirling button of his nose gently, the slick moisture a soothing reminder that he was not ill, simply waiting.

"Yuh too lie! Watch your tone girl." Boomed through the ceiling. I counted Buddy's whiskers, tickling the ends and watching him flinch softly at the contact. He knew I was here didn't he? Even if he didn't show it. Nothing could rouse Buddy, not me, or the rising din of fraying family ties. He simply watched us all through opaque eyelids and waited for food to come or a lead to be jangled. He knew his place. I started to wonder if only I could see Buddy. Maybe, the jarring contrast of so many similar shades of brown had created an optical illusion or my own desire for a witness to the unfolding situation had made my mind fabricate a confidante. The ceiling above me shuddered as my brain spiralled with this thought, making me question my own existence. I put my pinky finger in my mouth and bit down hard.

"You showing off for your friend, is that it?" I heard Tracey ask accusingly.

I felt tears prick in my eyes. It was comforting to have Tracey affirm my existence in this way but the implication that mine and Ash's friendship was so frivolous that it relied on clout chasing stung. I stared at the wallpaper, noting how the damasked strips of oak trailed seamlessly from floor to ceiling. The door creaked behind me, pulling me out of my ruminations. Ash looked worn. "We should go to bed now if you're staying" she mumbled. It was barely 6pm but the sun had already dipped out of the midwinter sky. "Okay," I nodded. Following her back up the stairs, I realised I wasn't going to be able to brush my teeth that night. We piled into her bed, both of us too big to fit comfortably. Ash switched off her bedside lamp and rolled away from me. We both pretended not to notice the sobs that wracked her frame.