

In her milky netherworld, without the reason of sleep, an idea occurred to Oona.

The rota.

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‘Cross the street at the lights then turn left.’

Though Logan could vaguely recall a time of A-Zs and folded town maps, she now relied entirely upon Citymapper’s crisp voice to guide her to any unfamiliar location. As this certainly was. She sped across the London suburb, with its charity shops, vape outlets and Tesco-lites, heading for...she checked Oona’s message: ‘The Owl and the Pussycat Café.’ Obviously, it was convenient for Oona – dear, messed up Oona – but no one else.

She tugged the door open and staggered back from the thick pungent air and wall of sound. A clattering of dropped cutlery, the wailing of disappointed toddlers and a recording of...what? That wasn’t Rolf Harris singing ‘Tie Me Kangaroo Down’, was it? Surely, he’d been cancelled years ago, even out in Zone 5. The room was bright yet dingy, every surface covered in spilt drinks, changing bags and biscuit crumbs. Babies squirmed in high chairs or were restrained in pushchairs like recalcitrant patients. The youngest unconscious specimens dozed in prams the size of dodgem cars. Logan fought the urge to retreat – she could run to the station and be back in town in no time. No, she had promised Oona. She inched forward, slightly nudging the handle of a Rolls Royce quality pram. The presumed birther of the infant passenger glared at her.

‘Logan, over here!’

Sitting at a central table, alone except for a laden and occupied pram was Oona. Not Oona as she was before, but this new, alien Oona, who must be treated with kid gloves and kept at arm’s length.

‘Oona, you look great!’

‘Considering. Right?’

‘No, no. Great.’

Oona made a dismissive gesture. She didn’t look *terrible*, just odd. Her loose jersey top was probably disguising all kinds of birth-related horrors and her hair might have been clipped with blunt kitchen scissors, but the basic material was promising. Who knows, she might be presentable in some form again one day. They hugged awkwardly, arched over the pram, Oona’s skin emitting a primitive sweet and sour odour.

‘ I got here early to make sure we got a good table. This place gets absolutely packed post-school time. You can see why. Cute, isn’t it?’

Logan gingerly took off her jacket and draped it over the back of her chair, calculating how likely it was to be hit by a missile from the warring siblings behind them. ‘I could really use a drink.’

‘I got you one.’ Oona thrust a Capri juice carton at her. ‘There’s a straw.’

‘Thank you. Uh. I was hoping for a real drink.’

‘ They do cappuccino, babycino, puppycino – basically all the cinos. Not only family-friendly but dog-welcoming too.’

‘You didn’t get a dog as well, did you?’

‘No!’

‘Because that would really be overkill.’

Oona straightened her back. ‘Where are your manners?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Have you still got your work head on?’

‘Perhaps?’

‘Aren’t you going to greet him?’

‘Who?’

‘Aiden.’

Logan stared at the pram.

'Isn't he sleeping?'

'He'll feel it if you exclude him.'

Logan gamely leant over the pram where a pale, wormy baby in a dinosaur onesie reclined. His eyes were closed, his lashes sparse. There was some shiny ooze near his nose. She forced a smile.

'Hi there, Aiden.'

'Not so loud, you'll wake him.'

'If he can sleep through all this noise, I don't think...'

'Just acknowledge him - gently.'

'Oona, I don't know how to talk to a sleeping seven-week...

'Eight-week-old...

'Eight-week-old baby.'

'Just coo and smile at him. Isn't he gorgeous?'

'Who?' Logan looked around the café. The waiter with a goatee was okay, but gorgeous?

'Aiden! Tell him he's beautiful.'

Logan attempted another greeting while Oona observed her.

'Aren't you just a sweet, sleeping little boy, who is a credit to his mother? Go you!'

Logan went on like that for a while until she eventually sat back, exhausted. 'Okay, Oona, about your message, what can I do for you?'

'For me! Nothing. It's what I can do for you.'

'You don't need to do anything for me. God, I know you have your hands full with...'

'Being a single mother is no picnic, it's true.' Oona cocked her head. 'Funny, aren't they playing Teddy Bear's Picnic?' Logan tuned in, it was that creepy song she remembered from her own childhood, 'Today's the day, the teddy bears have their...' She pictured zombie-eyed teddies plodding towards her.

Oona clapped her hands. 'Aiden's favourite song – it's a sign!'

'Of what?'

'That this is an excellent idea.' Oona pulled out a tablet which had been nestled under her changing bag 'Look at this.'

'It's a spreadsheet.'

Oona, triumphant, exclaimed, 'Yes!'

'I look at spreadsheets all day. I don't find them particularly fascinating.' Logan sneaked a peak at her mobile – three new messages.

'I didn't expect you to be so dismissive. I put a lot of work into this.' She nodded at Logan's mobile. 'Do you need to be somewhere else?'

'No, I'm here. For you.'

'And I'm here for you. For all the girl gang – as I always have been. So, I have come up with a plan which will benefit us all, giving us a shared stake in the future.'

'Sorry, I'm not with you. Have you started some multi-level marketing scheme?' Logan imagined endless evenings of being pitched vitamin skin creams and organic candles.

'No, silly, I'm talking about Aiden. I've created a rota so we can all share looking after him.'

Logan stared at the rota with its columns and colours and dates and names and hours....

'It's a fortnightly schedule,' Oona explained.

'A schedule of what?'

'Your auntie duties: shopping, sitting, special days outs.'

'You can't mean for any of us to be alone with....' Logan indicated the baby.

'Of course, there's nothing to it.'

'Our gang? Molly who works sixty-hour weeks, Tolu who's on the road most of the year, Jenny who's going through a car crash divorce, Ellie with her *many* health things and Kate – oh my god, you can't be thinking of Kate! She hates children.'

'I was always there for all of you with your break-ups and makeovers and fresh starts and good causes. Marching for this, signing for that, endlessly go-funding. I never said no. When I need it, why can't you support me?'

'We do.'

'As little as you can only at your convenience. Why not have a schedule?'

'Because it's a commitment.'

'You like to pretend to care rather than really making a difference. It's all happening somewhere out there and not near to home. I know you are all child-free and ambitious...'

'As were you until...'

'Fate stepped in. Logan, haven't you ever thought about having a child yourself?'

'No, well, sometimes, just recently, we've been talking, Jack and I, possibly in the future, the distant future...'

'Then think of this as work experience.'

'No. Just...I don't know how to say this. No.'

'What you're saying is that Aiden and I have no place in your lives anymore.'

'No, not at all. We all love and treasure you.'

'Then why are you excluding me.'

Logan shifted guiltily. 'We're not!'

'Then why create a WhatsApp group without me when arranging a spa weekend?'

'It was a child-free hotel.'

'Why choose that one?'

'It was nice,' Logan mumbled.

'How do you think that made me feel?'

'I'm sorry.'

'And I was invited to Clare and Penny's wedding in July.'

'Wonderful, right?'

'I can't take a baby as young as Aiden on a boat. Think of the hazards.'

'Couldn't you get a babysitter? Other people manage somehow. Don't they?'

'Look at who's the big expert. I see now what the future holds. You all leading your adventurous lives while I'm tethered to him by the breast.'

An image of a grown man sucking on Oona's breast fleetingly presented itself to Logan. 'That doesn't go on forever, does it?'

'I was speaking metaphorically,' Oona snapped.

They sat in awkward silence as a nearby table finished a desultory version of Happy Birthday to a be-crowned thuggish three-year-old.

'Okay, talk me through the rota,' Logan conceded.

Immediately brightening, Oona launched into a Dragon's Den style pitch. 'You will have to do NOTHING from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday – I can work from home, batch cook, no problem.'

Logan nodded. So far, so reasonable.

'However, shopping can be tricky, so I've arranged for girl gang members to do drop offs on Monday and Thursday, after work. See, it's Becky on Monday and Molly on Thursday this week.'

'Okay.'

'Saturday mornings, I will need four hours of babysitting so that I can get back to the gym and get in shape – don't think I didn't notice how you just looked at me.'

'I didn't –'

'Plus a sauna and fortnightly massage. Everyone says some Me Time is vital for a mother's mental health. And Friday Night is date night from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. for grown up socialising...'

'You want us to be alone with Aiden for hours'

'Of course. It happens all the time – how else would the species survive. Cave Mum couldn't just sit fireside all day – she had to do a little hunting and gathering herself, when Cave Man took off. Don't look so frightened. I've created a manual with hyperlinks.'

'What if he cries?'

'What do you do if anyone cries.'

'Buy them a drink.'

'Silly. It's all in the manual.'

'And if he,' Logan searched for the right word, 'does a...you know...?'

'Poos? If you have the right equipment, it's easy, you'll get the hang of it.'

'Oona, I mean this with love, I can't imagine anyone agreeing to this.' Logan's mobile vibrated.

Oona glared at her, 'What's more important than Aiden?'

'Nothing. To you.'

'You're meeting with them tonight, aren't you?'

Logan looked down. 'Yes.'

'So, is this the end of our friendship?'

'No.'

'If you can't even do this for me.'

Please don't cry, Logan thought, I couldn't bear it.

Oona's eyes were shining. 'It's for you too. Can't you imagine how wonderful it would be to have someone who cares about you in the future – who will call you auntie and visit you when you're decrepit. And, after four years, when Aiden is in reception, it would be your turn to have the rota, and then the next person.'

'Would that even work out mathematically? Wouldn't the last of us be 70 by the time it was their turn?'

'Not everyone will want a baby. Kate, for instance.'

‘True.’

‘But everyone should want a stake in the future. Where are you meeting them?’

‘A new tapas bar on Clapham High Street,’ Logan admitted. ‘It’s been a really tough week for us all.’

Oona stood up. ‘Tell me about it. Look at the rota, it’s your turn tonight. I’ll be back in....’ She felt her breasts, appraisingly, ‘in three hours.’

‘No, I can’t, I don’t know....’

‘It’s all in the manual. My spare flat keys are in the changing bag. Take Aiden back there and bond.’

‘Seriously, Oona, no.’

Suddenly a new Oona stood before Logan, backlit by the afternoon sun through the café’s glass door. A warrior Oona, locking arms with centuries of implacable mothers: Boudica, Clytemnestra, Queen Margaret, the Empress Livia. Straight-backed and relentless. Oona strode towards the door.

With one backwards glance, she shouted, ‘It takes a village!’ Then she was gone.

A noise pierced Logan’s ribcage. The infant wailed. She stared at the pram. Like women before her, Logan’s fate had been decided. Somehow, she was part of all this now.

