



Day Zero and Chips



My belt, nah, I need to change it. No one buckles up dead centre no more. It's got to be on the side. One smooth little twist and, yeah, the buckle's sitting perfect on my hip.

Just.

So.

This is the good luck belt, the grand-ma belt, passed down from great-gran through to me. I hope it's circled a whole load of luck over them years, because today I'm gonna need it.

My t-shirt's an heirloom too. It was grandma's band shirt, those Korean dudes she used to follow. She bought merch every time she went to their gigs and was happy to hand over a spare. She's eighty-two now and reckons she can't carry it off like she used to. It's weird, though. This shirt is from the wear-once-and-wash days. I mean, man, can you imagine it? Just one little wear and you dash off your shirt into the washing machine. And some folk even ran half-loads! Why would you do that?

This shirt is serving two purposes. First, I can throw in an opinion about my grandmother's music taste if me - and him - run out of things to say to each other. Second, I'm hoping that there's a build up of deodorant particles from all the wears that went before me. I've sniffed the armpits to check and all's good. There's no residue stink. But the sun out there is ripe and I really can't have no waft sneaking ahead of me today.

Because today, today, at last we're doing it. Me and Cruz are... hanging out. Nah, more than that. He's taking me out somewhere. He won't tell me where. He wants it to be a surprise.

Man, I won't let on that I know exactly where we're going. It's rude to break a boy's heart so soon.



DAY ZERO IS COMING

But, of course, you know what else is happening today. You can't have missed it. They've been throwing the adverts at us for months. You must have seen that plane they had flying over with a banner last week.



Today is the first Day Zero. All our taps are turned off from ten in the morning to three in the afternoon. Of course, there's exemptions, pregnant women, old people, little kids and so on. But my mother is so fierce about this she'd glue our taps shut herself even if we did have a bedroom full of screaming newborn babies and a ninety-year-old uncle gasping in the corner.

So, nothing's flowing. We've got enough water put aside for drinking and cooking, but no one's having a long, lazy shower this afternoon. Who cares if they have their first proper date with Cruz?

But it doesn't matter. My mirror is telling me that - I. Look. It.

Even my hair's spruce, though it took a while to believe Mum going on about waiting for the natural greases to kick in. They did kick in. Then they didn't stop kicking in. I am wearing it up, because it is just a bit too slick.

Last week, me and Nina made dry shampoo. Cornflour, plus some of that pretend cocoa powder stuff plus lavender oil. Just a microdot of the oil because you don't want to grease up your scalp too much. Or else what's the point?

Nina was the guinea pig. We stirred it all up in an old bowl then I had to brush it on her roots. Karen in the tutorial video made it look dead easy. When I finished with Nina, she just looked dead. There was cocoa flour everywhere, more across her face than on her head. She was pale and grey. Zombie Nina wasn't the vibe she was aiming for.

And then she started complaining that her head was itching. When she tried to run her hands through her hair, her fingers nearly got glued to her scalp. Flour plus natural greases. Mm-mmm. So we washed it all out.


A proper wash.

Not with the filter rain stuff in the barrels.

Not even the grade two drinking stuff, you know, the water where they've bleached out the sewerage and tell us it's okay for a brew.

We used old school proper water to wash Nina's hair. And we didn't even sneak it out, neither.





Mum's got our family down to 75 litres of water a day, long before the London Council put the clamp on over-using. We had the rocks in the cisterns, the grey-water butts, the water meter, the three-minute shower alarm, everything. So me, seeing all that top grade water splashing about like it was worth nothing - man, it was hard to stop myself licking it off Nina's head. I rubbed in the shampoo - the proper shop shampoo - quick before I embarrassed myself.

Nina's dad's got a whole tank full of the good stuff. He buys it up cheap from the poor folk who need the cash and the rumours are that he sells it on to the farmers at blown up prices. I don't ask too many questions, though Nina did take me into the cellar once.

Forget the water. They've got rice. Three big barrels of it. Who the hell can afford that? Hardly no one's growing it no more. Most of them countries got flooded out or knocked down with the droughts. Mum remembers it happening. She said it was weird. Everybody was grumbling about the price of rice but nobody was paying attention to the reason why their basmati was becoming a luxury. It was like they could ignore it because it was far away in Asia. We should know by now. We're all connected.

If I think about Nina's dad and his stockpile, Nina couldn't be my friend no more. As it is, she's stopped coming round to my house because she says Mum's side eye feels like it's burning off half her face. I told Mum she should go and side eye Nina's dad as he's the bad one. Then I think about Nina washing her hair, like she just don't care...



I tuck in a curl. That curl. The one above my left ear that looks like it's trying to run away and live on someone else's head.

Maybe my hair does look better down. It would need a bit of a clean. I could grab a scoop from the water butt on the garage roof. Add a splash of vinegar, maybe some orange oil, sploosh it over my head. Nah. No time. And hair down needs different earrings. And different earrings need different lipstick. And different lipstick needs...

Gonna keep the hair up.

So that's it. Hair, belt, t-shirt and the shorts I've been keeping clean for two weeks now. Got some vintage Converse scrubbed up and waiting.

I am ready to go...

And now I am ready to go, I can't shift.

Me to Brain: Move.

Brain to Me: You've been bigging up this boy for three weeks now. You expect me to work properly when all your thoughts have been squished into one big Cruz shape?

Me to Brain: This is it! It's what we've been waiting for!

SO MOVE!

I make myself pick up my bag. I make myself turn around. I make myself march out of the door and - P-thump!

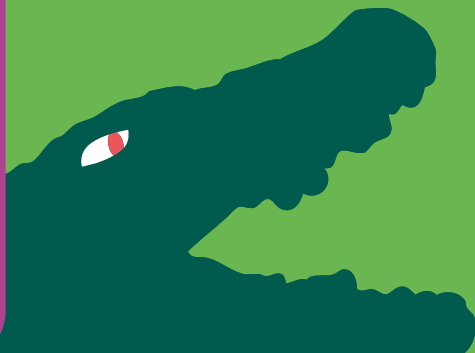
For just one second I'm flying. Then I'm splat like a dead pigeon on a windscreen.

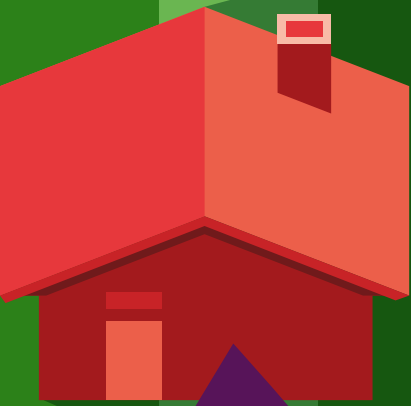
'You all right, honey?'

Am I all right? I am lying flat on my stomach in the grass. My knees hit the ground so hard they probably heard the echo in Croydon.

'Honey?' My mother is lying next to me. Of course, she is. She's like an alligator studying her prey and her prey is... grass. That is what she does all day. She lies around with a notepad and her measuring stuff and looks at grass. All that grass lore, it's a bit like the belt, passed on through our family. I come from a family of grass measurers. It's not their official name. Actually, my Mum turned her red-hot side eye on me when I was stupid enough to say 'grass measurer' in her presence. But that was the best way to explain it to Cruz.

'But it's just grass, innit?' He said.





Glass #1



Glass #69



Glass #326

That's what everyone says, but Mum's always saying that you've got to get down and dirty on the ground and look. It's like when you go to a football match and you see all the fans there in the same kit, yelling and chanting and it's one mass of the same people. But, of course, close up, everyone's different.

Grass is all different. If you ask Mum, she'll give you a guided tour of what grass likes dry, what likes super wet, what grass don't care at all. She says most folk only get interested when the big weather stuff happens. You know, the massive waves sweeping away the sea walls and the rivers bursting their banks so someone's grandma's got to be piggy-backed to safety. But Mum says grass seems little, but it's got a big voice. Listen to it and it can tell your future. It's because our family listened that we've still got green round our house when most people are staring at concrete.

But still... When Mum's doing her grass thing, she needs to buy some cones and glue them to her back. She's a danger.

She says 'sorry'. She helps me to my feet. She tries to brush me down but I stalk back inside. I can feel my hair's come loose and my knees look dented. I can't go on my date with Cruz looking like this. There's gonna be a crowd. There's gonna be security. There's gonna be cameras. If my face pitches up on the tea-time news, I want that face to look the business. Likewise my knees.

Okay.

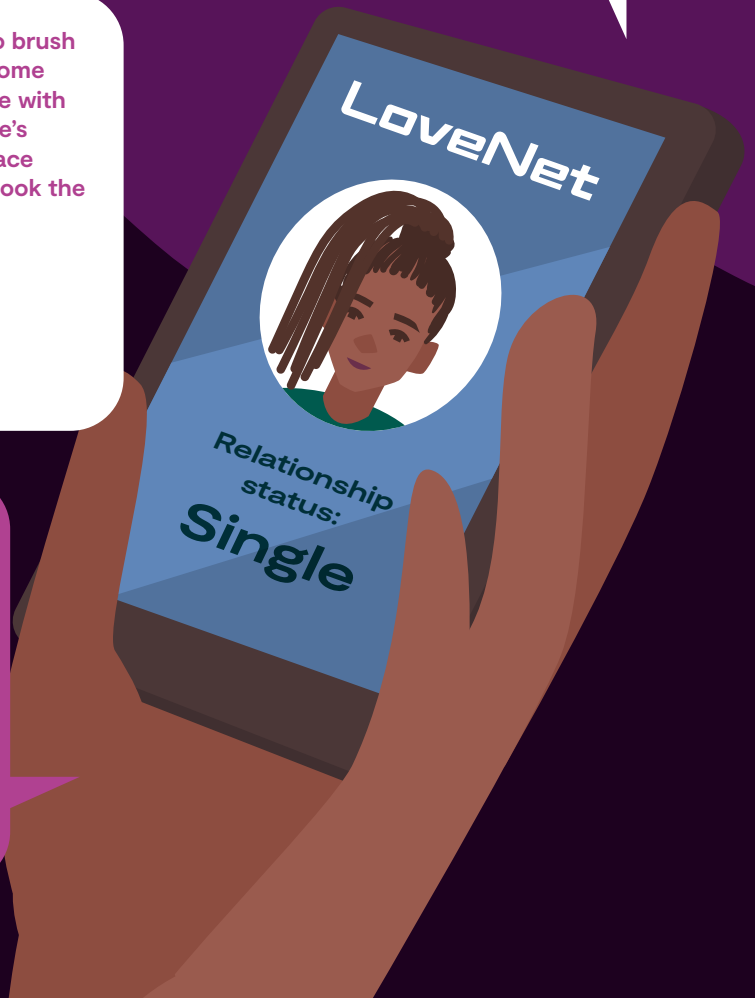
I'm gonna say this once.

Quietly, though. I don't want her to hear.

Part of me thinks Mum tripped me up on purpose.

Me and Mum are close. I tell her everything even if I don't mean to. Maybe I sounded too enthusiastic when I first told her about Cruz. It's not like me and him are gonna close down our LoveNet profiles or nothing. Everyone knows that you're supposed to be together for at least a month and really trust each other before you go that far. But Mum says that I'm only seventeen, I've got the world ahead of me and I need to leave room to meet future people.

But I've barely met Cruz yet.



Do you know what else I think? I think my Aunty Cori's been at Mum. Aunty Cori is THAT Aunty. She's the one who calls people like Cruz FILTH - Failed In Lakeland Try Hackney.

Cruz was born here in London, for God's sake, but Aunty Cori goes on about the London she knew. How she stayed and braved the pollution when everyone else was moving to their dream homes in the country. Now all those dream homes have been washed down the rivers, she says, the FILTH have come flooding back.

SAVE THE
PARK
DON'T BE A
SHARK



HELP!
SAVE
OUR
PARK

We
Love
Vicky
Park


Aunty Cori was one of the mob holding up banners when the council made plans to build over Victoria Park. Lucky, she doesn't look much like me so none of my friends made the family connection. Especially when she kept popping up on TV being asked her opinion.

What did she say? She puts on her posh voice...

It isn't personal, of course. But it's not like London's safe, is it? The Thames Barrier's been closing and opening so often it's like an airport door. When we do flood, and, of course, we will, it's going to put pressure on our already stretched resources. We don't need another two million people moving into London.

Then she does that awkward little laugh.





She told Mum she was ready to throw herself under a JCB to stop the Victoria Park development happening.

She didn't. Sadly.

And people are not FILTH. They're Londoners. And Cruz is one of them.

But - today is Day Zero. And it's Day Zero because... yeah... we are running low on water.

When the Council first announced a Day Zero, Mum's phone was so full of Auntie Cori messages I thought it was gonna burst. Mum's pretty patient with her. She says it's not Cori's fault that she inherited more than her fair share of the bitterness genes. But I can tell you, that was one day no one could trip over Mum. She'd be lying there in the grass and her phone would ping with another Auntie Cori message and a second later she'd be swearing so hard and so loud no one could miss her. When the milkman walked up our path that morning, his hair was straight. When he walked back past Mum, he had a head full of curls and a seriously astonished face. Mum's cuss words go back to the twentieth century and span several countries. They don't come out often, but when they do, they impress.

I still bet Auntie Cori's gonna get invited over for Christmas though.



May

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11 12 13 14 15 16 17

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DAY ZERO =
CRUZ DATE!




But back to today. And me and Cruz.

And what we're gonna see.

Imagine having that for Christmas. Even Auntie Cori would get a kiss from me if she magicked up that as a gift. No chance. I've heard it's been locked in a vault and kept at a special temperature. There's gonna be an armed guard, just in case. Maybe they'll carry it on a cushion with a trumpeter marching in front. Who knows?






Me and Cruz are only gonna see it on the big screen anyway. I didn't enter the lottery to be an Arbiter of Taste, where you get to be on stage and witness the whole thing. Nina's dad bought her fifty lottery tickets. She still didn't win. Yeah. I smiled when she told me. Don't judge me.

I better hurry up. Man, my knees! They need some serious body cream. If you put my knees next to a camel's in an anonymous identity parade, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

I wish... I wish... It sounds mean, but part of me wishes we were doing something else today. If I had a choice, I'd take Cruz down to the reservoir. It's not as low as last year because we had serious rain in February. So serious that the Victoria Park estate flooded. Mum said that it was because the council cut down most of the trees that used to catch some of the rain. Now, when the clouds explode every single drop hits the ground. But she made sure she said it when Auntie Cori wasn't around.

The reservoir is my peace palace. When I was little, me and Mum used to go all the time. We'd take a blanket and a box of homemade chocolate brownies and iced tea. (Though now I'm starting to wonder where she got the water she used for the tea.) She'd show me whitethroats and sedge warblers and red kites. We once saw a pair of firecrests with bright yellow mohicans. Another time a weird voice said 'hello' to us, then let out a cuss word that even my mum didn't know. Later, we found out it was a mynah bird that had escaped from a pet shop in Wickford.

Mum says everything's a bit wonky now. Sometimes the birds come before the insects wake up. She gathers up volunteers to help her make lists of what birds are coming early and to make sure there's enough food. She thinks the birds are migrating earlier every year.



The best time me and Mum went to the reservoir, though, was on my seventh birthday. We were walking towards our favourite spot, just off the main path, between the high grasses and almond trees.

Suddenly, Mum laughed.

'I know you,' she said.

Of course she did. I'm her daughter, right?

But she wasn't talking to me. She was talking to grass again. She crouched down and called me over.

'Look, honey.'

It was a tiny patch of wild strawberries. She sneaked one for each of us. And man, it was like the sweetest dream just burst in my mouth. I couldn't believe it was a strawberry. It was nothing like those things that Aunty Cori brings us at Christmas. Giant, red, damn expensive things that make my mouth taste like I just sucked air out of Mum's bicycle tyres.

The month after my birthday, there was a fire because some idiots smuggled in barbecues and didn't put them out properly. All the places where me and Mum used to hang out were scorched grass and ash. I wanted to think that our strawberries were still there, shining like treasure, but there was no chance. I've been back loads of time. Most of the stuff has grown back. Grass is tough, man! I haven't seen the strawberries again. Maybe Cruz can help me look.

So.

It really is time to go. I don't want to be late. Not for Cruz. Not for this.

Gran said this is what she used to do when she was my age, but usually not until the second or third date, when it was a bit late and you knew each other well. She said it was a teenage ritual.

But doing it like this is so different.

I've seen pictures. I know what they look like.

But I won't be able to hold one.


I won't be able to smell one.

I won't be able to taste one.



Grandma says the weather's shifted. It's either too hot or too wet. For me, it's all I've known. But I do know that the ground became too hard or too full of water, so the farmers didn't grow them no more. Mum said they used to be dirt cheap, but now the dirt won't behave itself and they became a luxury, like rice.

Did you see that fashion shoot with Chicago West? It was about five years ago. She had a massive bowl of them on her table. I wonder if she ate them. Maybe she gave them away.



And now it's this. Armed guards and a cushion and a trumpeter.

And me and Cruz, maybe hand in hand, standing in the middle of that crowd, wondering and watching as it arrives. Are we supposed to cheer? Or cry? Or sing the national anthem?

Man, we're gonna see the last ever potato brought up on to the stage.

The Lord Mayor of London is gonna make the first cut, I know that. Then I think some fancy chef's gonna take it from there. They say she's cutting it freehand, no fancy equipment. There's gonna be a team to monitor the temperature of the oil, because imagine after all this, it just gets burned? What's it gonna be like if you're one of the Arbiters of Taste, sitting there and waiting for the moment? Do you get your piece on a gold fork? Il mean, man – this is an occasion!

Gran said it was so much easier in her day.

You fell out a gig or a bar and into a chicken shop, because you could buy them there. Not just dodgy nuggets. That could never happen now. It's too late. But I'll try and picture it, me and Cruz, sat on a bench watching the river. He turns to me slowly, his hand out - like this - and he offers me his bag of chips.

The End



Natural
Environment
Research Council



HAY
FESTIVAL

Day Zero and Chips

Hay Festival and the UK Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) have joined forces again for Trans.MISSION II, a new global project pairing leading environmental researchers with award-winning storytellers to communicate cutting-edge science to new audiences.

The UK strand of the Trans.MISSION II collaboration between Hay Festival and the UK's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) features British writer and journalist Patrice Lawrence and scientists Dr Sarah Ayling, Professor Lindsey McEwan and their team of experts at the DRY project. Using the project's work as inspiration, Patrice has created a piece of creative writing to highlight the issues around UK droughts and water scarcity. The story was illustrated by Vincent Design, a creative studio based in the weald of Kent.

Day Zero and Chips was prepared or accomplished by Patrice Lawrence in her personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Natural Environment Research Council, UK Research and Innovation or the United Kingdom government.

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