

Maxomatic

The plastic bunting was refusing to stick. Standing on a chair, Max tried to blu-tac it to the ceiling. The bunting slipped from Max's hands and tangled itself around Max's body. It wrapped tighter and tighter. Max struggled to breathe. What kind of event used bunting like this? Max craned to read the flags. P – R – P – S – E. Porpoise? Max looked again.

Purpose.

Max felt a ripple of fear and awoke, swaddled in sweaty darkness. Their phone glowed. It was six-fifty am on Saturday morning. A message had arrived in the night.

How are you doing? I'm at Jorge Chávez airport about to fly home. Back in the office on Monday! Six months went too fast. Nicki had put a crying emoji with a line of tears dripping from both eyes. *Will you be in? x*

Six months and two weeks ago, Max and Nicki bonded over goat's cheese and chutney sandwiches at the staff away day. Two weeks later, Nicki went on a six-month sabbatical to Peru. She posted regular Instagram updates of herself holding monkeys or standing by large expanses of water with mountains in the background. Max replied with wow emojis and counted the months with wavering patience.

Max put down the phone and slept again, dreaming of Nicki beside a waterfall decorated with bunting that read Courage. A few hours later Max woke to the buzz of the bathroom fan, stretched to unplug their phone and opened Instagram.

The first Instagram story was Nicki's. It showed sun and clouds through a plane window. She had typed *chau chau* and placed a heartbreak emoji over the image.

'Patricia! She's coming back!' Max called through the wall to their housemate.

Muffled in house socks, Patricia padded out the bathroom and stood in Max's doorway. 'Finally!' she said, fists raised in triumph.

It wasn't just that Max and Nicki both approved of the upgraded cheese and pickle at the away day lunch. At Nicki's leaving drinks there had been a vibe – a hand rested on a thigh and lips brushed against a cheek – and Max had come out to Nicki as non-binary. The following morning, Nicki messaged to say she would listen if Max ever needed someone to talk to. After six months of internet-enabled communication, Nicki was transformed into what Patricia called Max's burning, pulsating, passion, and what Max called 'a potential for romance'.

Patricia and Max were trying out a new brunch place. They sat on mismatched wooden chairs at an old school table. Autumn whipped in carrying auburn leaves whenever the door was opened.

'I wouldn't mind,' Patricia said, as Max looked up from reading Nicki's latest message, 'if what I'd said had been incredibly dull. But it wasn't, and I won't repeat it, and you'll never know what it was.'

'Sorry, sorry,' Max replied, turning the phone face-down on the table. 'Nicki just asked if I want to go for a drink after work on Monday.'

'That is interesting,' Patricia said, lowering her cutlery.

Wearing a freshly ironed white tee shirt the next day, Max half-heartedly scanned emails and whole-heartedly checked the time. The office was large, to accommodate ninety employees, and the only decoration was the Peruvian flag bunting which hung across the ceiling, a leftover from Nicki's leaving party. Max sat next to the window. It had started to rain.

At ten o'clock, the office doorbell rang and Nicki was shaking out an umbrella and hugging the office manager. She had been trekking up mountains and hiking in the jungle, lying on golden beaches, eating ceviche and drinking maté. All this, while her colleagues had boomeranged from bed to tube to desk and back again. The strip lighting, which made everyone else look like death, seemed to make her glow. Her very presence was incongruous with the drizzly October day and now she was coming to greet everyone at their desks.

Max had daydreamed, more often than they would like to admit, about touching Nicki, about the warmth of her body and the scent of her neck. Regretting the white tee shirt against their already pale skin, Max instinctively tidied, moving the empty coffee mug and cafetière to the edge of the desk and straightening the keyboard. Courage.

Nicki was stood beside Max, hugging Anoop.

'Nicki?' Max said. The name felt familiar on Max's tongue.

'Oh, hi!' Nicki said. She smiled and rested a hand on the back of Max's chair. 'Anoop and I have a meeting now in Purpose. Speak later.'

The meeting rooms at Max's office were named after the company's values: Courage, Integrity, Purpose and Resolve. This led to questions such as 'Have you got Resolve?' or the statement 'Courage is unavailable'. New employees found this odd, but Max had grown to like it. The abstract made solid. It was important not to worry about what 'speak later' meant.

At twelve-thirty, Max avoided a group of colleagues eating meal deals to sit alone, took out a homemade falafel wrap and opened Instagram.

Whether to bring lunch had been the subject of some discussion the night before.

'You could invite her to that food market and get her on her own?' Patricia had suggested as she folded her laundry.

But from Nicki's messages her first day was going to be busy and Max wondered if she would even take a lunch break.

'You are going for a drink later. Make something wholesome and earthy.' Patricia said. 'Queers love chickpeas.'

'That is not true. Vegans love chickpeas.'

'All queers are vegan.' Patricia said, throwing a pair of socks at Max.

'I'm not,' Max said, dodging the socks.

'Behold!' Patricia said, 'The only non-vegan queer in London-dom.' She draped a tea towel ceremoniously over Max's head.

Max tucked the tea towel behind their ears and stood on a stool. 'I am ruler of them all!' they declared with arms outstretched.

Pretending to be overwhelmed, Patricia fanned herself with a cushion.

Max contemplated, not for the first time, whether to try falling in love with Patricia. As if she'd heard, Patricia let out a huge, unchecked fart, dropped the cushion and laughed hysterically.

Max had just taken a bite of the wrap when Nicki sat down at the bar. No longer able to eat, Max placed the wrap back on the plate. Resolve.

'How are you?' Nicki said. 'Everything has gone to shit. Anoop cried in our one-to-one. I can't wait for our drink later. Still up for it?'

Max nodded, finding it hard to breathe.

'Great. I've got ten minutes before my next meeting – save me,' she said, and ripped open the wrap she'd bought. 'Jealous of yours,' she said, looking at Max's plate. 'I'm going

to start making lunch from tomorrow. I couldn't face it last night.' Chewing frantically, she ate in quick bites.

'I could make you one,' Max offered. 'I'll be making my own anyway.'

'Would you?' said Nicki. 'You're too nice. I'd love that.' She wiped her mouth with a serviette and gathered up the packaging. 'I quit smoking while I was away but, you know what, fuck it. I'm having one now. You don't smoke do you?'

Max did not. The thought of being alone later with Nicki was both unbearable and sweet, like Haribo Tangfastics. Max looked at their phone. A message from Patricia.

Chickpea and chard curry tonight? She followed this with a tongue emoji.

I won't be back till late. Drink with N remember!

Oh yes! Show her your moves. Ninja emoji. I'll leave leftovers for you

At four-fifteen Nicki came over to Max's desk. 'Could we go to the pub now? Just for a quick one. My meetings are finished.'

The pair left through the revolving doors and crossed the damp road. The pub was quiet this early in the evening. A bartender stopped stacking glasses to serve them. Max paid for both their drinks and led Nicki over to a booth. Resolve.

Nicki took a sip of her large white wine. 'It's just fucking hard you know. You're so much stronger than me. That office is suffocating. Everyone was so open and friendly in Peru. ¿Hablas castellano? I got practically fluent. I really came out of my shell, you know? I'm not saying I found myself, just I did new things. I did things I never thought I'd do and met such wonderful people.' She took a second, bigger, sip of her wine. 'I almost didn't come back, but obviously that would be a terrible idea. I'm getting out of this job soon though. It's a fucking shitshow.'

A notification lit up Nicki's phone. She stopped talking to read it.

Max tried not to be too curious about who the message was from. The only people Max had been communicating regularly with over the past six months were Patricia and Nicki. Max wondered whether to remind Nicki that Anoop was always crying. But then, everyone struggles with life in their own way before collapsing nightly under duvets and the weight of the world. Purpose.

Max's phone was in their bag out of reach. Still waiting for Nicki, Max watched the bartender serve an older man. The man settled on a barstool and scanned the room. His eyes lingered too long on Max before returning to his Guinness.

'It'd be sad if you left.' Max said. 'I didn't know you were thinking of it.'

Nicki raised her head from her phone. 'We'd stay in touch.' She reached and held Max's hand.

Max kept as still as possible. All their attention was on the sensation of Nicki's skin against their own.

'You know I sublet my flat while I was away?' Nicki was saying. 'The tenant smashed my cheese plant! He apologised but I'd had that plant since uni. Now I'm in this flat on my own with not even Cheesy to water. It's soulless. And it's my birthday next week! You're going to come? Please come.' She squeezed Max's fingers and let go.

Max had sipped on a half pint while Nicki gulped her wine. There was an awkward pause when she finished.

'I totally blathered on at you there,' said Nicki. 'How embarrassing. I'm going to get into bed and watch Netflix now. Text me later.' She put on her coat to leave.

Back home eating curry, Max recounted everything to Patricia.

‘All I was thinking was – I’d like to get into bed with you. If only *I* was Netflix. And she said I should message her?’

‘It’s definitely happening.’ Patricia said, waving a piece of naan. ‘One – she touched your hand! That’s basically sex. And two – you’re making her lunch! That’s marriage. So. It’s her birthday next week. You have to get her a present.’

‘Oh fuck,’ said Max. ‘We shouldn’t have waited for the rain to stop.’

Patricia stood on her tiptoes to peer over the crowds. Shoppers were everywhere – three deep at the flower stalls and haggling for more greenery. Well-dressed parents pushing boat-sized buggies. Single people seeking succulents. The irony of the escapade was not lost on Max.

‘True love knows no bounds,’ Patricia said, joining the line of people edging along the pavement that ran behind the stalls. ‘Come on. And afterwards we can try out the oyster stall.’

Purpose. Belated raindrops dripped off the marquees and the puddled ground glistened in the thin autumn sun. Max paused by a chilli plant. Its fruit was round as a tomato, green smearing from orange to red. ‘Or could I get her this?’ Max said.

‘Nope,’ Patricia replied, a few steps ahead.

‘She did say the wrap I made her was too spicy,’ Max said. ‘I wonder what she ate in Peru.’

A bobble-hatted man brushed past carrying a cactus with large spines. Patricia twisted to avoid it but Max wasn’t quick enough.

‘Ouch.’

Pain spread across Max’s hand, accompanied by a rush of excitement. Max tried to ignore it. Integrity.

‘Fuck sake. The world. Full of idiots,’ said Patricia, as blood bubbled out of Max’s cut.

‘It’s not bad,’ Max said, tasting the droplets. ‘Keep going, we’re blocking the way.’

The pair continued, sliding themselves flat to get past prams filled with orchids.

‘Here.’

The cheese plants were arrayed in tiers with leaves as if they’d been sliced into frills. Max lifted a tag. *Monstera deliciosa*.

After some deliberation; Max selecting, asking Patricia’s opinion, Patricia protesting, Max choosing and Patricia overriding it, Max went for one with healthy-looking leaves. Max handed over plastic notes and waited while the trader scabbled in her belt for change.

‘Say hello to Cheesy Two,’ Patricia declared. ‘Stay there, I’ll take a picture.’

‘You’re not supposed to name gifts,’ Max said, posing next to the plant. They both peered at Patricia’s screen. ‘I don’t look bad. Shame it’s a surprise.’

‘It’ll be worth it,’ Patricia said. ‘Now for oysters.’

‘You go. It’s too busy and I’m injured,’ Max said, flapping the affected hand up and down.

‘Little shop, little shop of horrors,’ Patricia sang in Max’s ear as she left. Standing close, like a penguin guarding an egg, Max shuffled the cheese plant out the way. A

Cockapoo sniffed as it trotted along. Max made a mental note to tell Patricia, or maybe Nicki, that its hair was the colour of a flat white.

Patricia returned with two oysters swirling in clear liquid. Max told her about the Cockapoo. She laughed and brandished the paper plate. ‘You’re going to try one, yes? We can Instagram this instead.’

Max took an oyster. Patricia held her phone up, camera ready. ‘Turn around so the sun is behind you. I can see your cut if you hold the oyster like that. It’s gross.’

‘Not gross! Mysterious, hardy? More people will reply to the Instagram story.’

Patricia lowered her phone. ‘Or a certain someone?’

In response, Max tipped the oyster in, chewing a couple of times before swallowing. It tasted like it looked. Patricia raised her phone to film Max’s reaction. Max leaned against a window ledge and spat it out.

‘Extremely hardy and mysterious, Max. Charming.’

Max coughed. A line of dribble caught on their fleece. ‘You can edit out this part.’

Sitting in the back of the Uber, Max asked, ‘When do you think I should give Cheesy Two to Nicki?’ The plant was balanced on Max’s lap. The glutinous taste of oyster lingered in their mouth.

Patricia looked at Max through the leaves. She was editing the video. Cartoon gifs of sea creatures flashed on her phone.

‘She’s going to the pub for her birthday. I don’t think I can give it to her there.’ Max said and brushed the topsoil of the plant as a distraction.

Patricia paused her editing. ‘I guess the thing is, how much do you like Nicki?’

Before replying, Max scrolled past adverts for plants on Instagram. ‘She’s the first person I’ve liked in ages. Since I came out. I’m pretty certain she likes me. She invited me to her birthday.’ Max dug two fingers into the soil. ‘She did invite the whole office, to be fair. Fuck. Post that video on Instagram. This is primetime. Everyone in their post-Sunday lunch slump.’

‘If you let me focus I will,’ Patricia said, selecting a bouncing cartoon shell. She used her forefinger to drag it to the righthand corner of Max’s head, resized it and pivoted the picture with finger and thumb.

‘Don’t forget to tag me,’ Max said through leaves.

Patricia started typing on the video clip. ‘What’s your handle?’

‘I changed it. Maxomatic.’

Max tapped on the notification to repost the story to their own Instagram. A warning sign popped up. Max had spent forty minutes on Instagram today. Max ignored it. Resolve.

‘Do you think plants get lonely?’ Max asked Patricia that evening. Patricia was making a red onion and goats cheese tart. The cheese plant sat on the kitchen table. Max tested the moisture of the soil and watered it with a spritzer.

‘They can be neglected, for sure. Don’t get stressed. Nicki will like Cheesy Two and think of you every time she waters it.’ She slid the tart into the oven.

A notification. Nicki had seen the video. She sent a green vomiting emoji.

It was disgusting! Max wrote, feeling guilty. *But I did see a Cockapoo the colour of a flat white.*

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The following Saturday night, Max got off the train at Hackney Central with the cheese plant in a paper bag and a stomach full of nerves. Nicki had repeated her invitation to everyone on Friday. Anoop was planning to go but Max didn't have her number. Patricia was meant to come as Max's support but had bailed at the last minute. Max's cold fingers were clenched around the paper handles. The scratch from the cactus had faded along with Max's confidence. Purpose, Courage, Resolve, Integrity. Max repeated the mantra.

The pub was brightly lit and rammed with locals. Max stepped past the security guard on the door. Voices were raised to be heard over Motown. Heart beating fast, Max pushed through the pub and looked for Nicki. She was sitting with a group of strangers and wearing a badge that read 'birthday babe'.

Nicki spotted Max and waved. Max wove towards the table, holding up the bag so as not to damage the plant. 'Happy birthday Nicki,' Max said and offered her the present.

'Max! This is so nice!' Nicki moved glasses out the way to put the bag onto the table. She lifted the cheese plant out. 'Look, everyone! It can go with the one Sammy bought me!' she said.

Max tried to work out which of the strangers was Sammy. Possibly the man in the yellow beanie.

Turning back to Max, Nicki explained, 'Sammy's so cute, she ordered one off that plant delivery service in the Instagram ad.'

'Oh,' Max said. 'I was looking for cactuses for my bathroom and I remembered you'd said you liked them. It was when I had those oysters actually.' Or was Sammy the one wearing red lipstick?

'Yeah, that video was funny,' Nicki said, admiring the cheese plant's leaves.

Feeling shy and hoping to find Anoop, Max went to the bar. There was no sign of her. Max Whatsapped Patricia. She replied immediately.

Nooo. No-one from work at all? Nothing wrong with having two plants, don't worry. Did you give her the card?

Shit. Max had taken Patricia's advice to be bold with the card.

Nicki had made space next to her on the bench. Her leg pressed warmly against Max's. This was Max's moment. The card was in the bag on the floor. Purpose and Resolve. Also, Courage and Integrity. The woman in red lipstick leant across, lifted a wine bottle and topped up Nicki's glass.

'Nicki, I forgot, there's a card for you,' Max said.

Nicki opened the envelope. On the front of the card was a drawing of a cheese plant. Patricia had found it online and paid for next day delivery. Max took long slow breaths. Resolve.

Dear Nicki,

Wishing you the best and happiest of birthdays! You may no longer be in sunny Peru, but hopefully this plant (Cheesy Two) will bring the jungle back into your life. I think you're lovely and we should hang out outside work again. Max xxx

While Nicki read the card, Max dropped a hand down in the gap between both of their hips. This way, if she wanted to, Nicki could squeeze Max's hand.

Nicki finished reading and, moving her leg away, turned towards the red-lipsticked woman. A hot flush of shame ran through Max.

‘Immo,’ Nicki said. ‘Me and Max work together. Read this nice message.’ She passed the card to the red-lipsticked woman and stood up. ‘I’m just going to say hi to those guys.’

Max watched as Immo scanned the card. Everything was swirling very fast, or alternatively, slowly, as if the room were underwater.

‘Making moves, are you?’ Immo shouted across the table.

Max choked on lager.

‘It’s been difficult for Nicki with Sammy,’ Immo said, as if Max knew who Sammy was; as if Max should agree. ‘They are so in love, it’s tragic,’ she said.

‘Who?’ Max said, heart pounding.

‘Nicki and Sammy! Sammy is her girlfriend. Sammy is her girlfriend!’ Grabbing Max’s wrist, she continued. ‘She had a student visa here. She had to go back to Peru and Nicki went with her for six months. Nicki thought they would break up but they’ve stayed together. Didn’t you know?’

Like machinery that needed oiling, the cogs shrieked in defiance as they pulled the pieces into place. Why had Max never asked what Nicki’s trip was for? Or who took the photos for her Instagram? Or why her flat seemed so empty now she was back?

Feeling sick, Max nodded, took a final gulp of lager and set the empty glass on the table. A bartender whisked it away. Integrity.

‘Shots!’ another of Nicki’s friends shouted, bringing a tray over. ‘Nicki, shots!’

The tray was set on the table and a shot glass placed into Nicki’s hand. She tipped her head back with everyone after the count of three. The man with the yellow beanie perched on top of his head was trying to flip cards off the table and catch them.

Max headed to the bar again. ‘Double gin and tonic.’ Nicki had a girlfriend she went travelling with while Max made wraps and bought plants and behaved like a fool. A fool who internalised corporate values and assumed others did the same.

Nicki was still clutching the shot glass. She was crying.

Immo held her arms. ‘Don’t CRY on your BIRTHDAY,’ she shouted and pushed her face close to Nicki’s. Nicki’s other friends gathered around her. The yellow-beanie man kissed her cheek.

It was enough. Winding through the boozed bodies, Max fell out the door into fresh cold air.

On Wednesday Max and Nicki were in the same meeting. Max, who had avoided Nicki all week, read emails as they waited for more colleagues to arrive. Nicki tapped her phone against the table.

‘Max, thank you for coming on the weekend. Sorry we didn’t chat much. We’d all been to bottomless brunch and I was wasted. Did you hear what happened? Someone fucking stole your plant! It’s actually heartbreaking. Who would do that? I told Sammy and she said she’d send me another one, because now I’m worried about the plant she got me all alone in my flat. Isn’t that cute?’

‘It’s cute,’ Max agreed. ‘Surely someone took it by mistake. I hope they look after it.’

Max and Patricia hadn’t been getting on so well since the weekend. That evening, Max cooked a supermarket pizza and ate it in bed watching Netflix. Cheesy Two stood on the bedside table. Max switched off their phone. When the Netflix show was funny Max turned towards the plant and laughed. The protagonist hit a problem and Max squeezed the edge of

the plant's pot, flexing the plastic. Before turning out the light Max whispered a soft goodnight. And all through the dreamless night, if ever Max awoke, they saw Cheesy Two's leaves outlined in lamplight that seeped round the edges of the blind.