



Love  
& OTHER  
U-TURNS

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LOUISA DEASEY

ARENA  
ALLEN&UNWIN

Certain names, dates and locations have been altered or merged to protect people's privacy and to maintain narrative flow.

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Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218  
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*To Jim, for teaching me the rules of the road*

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'A day without laughter is a day wasted.'

CHARLIE CHAPLIN

THIS IS THE STORY OF how fate came and called me one day with a love so unexpected, so bizarrely clad, so inappropriate, so wrong but so ridiculously right, that I threw everything away and moved into a Mazda 323 with the man who drove it.

The next year had me crossing state borders like they were tram stops, juggling internet coverage and showers in roadhouses, oil-soaked food from the bain-marie in petrol stations along the Nullarbor and sleeping by the side of busy highways, all across the country. I'd never been happier, crazier, laughed so much and learned so much, nor spent as much time looking for appropriate washing facilities.

Although my longing for Melbourne coffee never wavered, the experience of seeing beauty and love in places so rough and raw completely unravelled all I ever thought was real, imaginable, impossible and probable. I questioned everything anyone had ever told me about love, danger, safety and fun, and, most importantly, what was 'essential' in life.

Mostly, I learned that love, happiness, and even success, come walloping down at the speed of light when you let go of all your preconceptions.

Mystic Medusa, the astrologer who started all of this, put it down to the transit of Uranus on my ninth house sun.

I blame it on falling in love.

## Prologue

### Many returns

*'Happy birthday my twin-fish . . .'*

I NEVER QUITE PICTURED MYSELF living this way on my thirtieth birthday. I'm lying on a mattress on the floor of my brother's spare bedroom, wearing his clothes. The well-worn cotton of his Triumph motorcycle t-shirt is thankfully soft, so it doesn't scratch my bites. My meagre bag of clothes – actually, everything I possess made of fabric, which includes my backpack – has spent the night doing hot soapy laps of his washing machine. I even tripled the recommended dose of Omo per load, just to be sure.

I've just woken from the first night of thick, unbroken sleep I've had in an actual bed, in weeks. The smell of an easy Saturday morning drifts under my door, and I'm brought back with a thud to here, now. The plane has landed. I'm in Melbourne. Familiarity, yet it feels like a familiarity from lifetimes ago, not a mere twelve months.

Bacon frying, toast browning, my brother going about his ritual, blissfully unaware that the safety of his familiar vibe is like

an old lullaby come back from the past to comfort me. His routine feels like a faded dream, like it was always here, like perhaps I imagined the whole Big Dipper ride I just got off.

No weird strangers walking outside my door, accidentally pushing it open . . . No cars pulling up, about to throw gravel on my face, make me stand up, brush myself off, get back in that car again. I'm in a house, with doors that close.

*Phew.*

Red dust, still on my shoes, is the only visual proof that I've been walking on a different-coloured ground.

'Huckleberry Superstar! Aww he likes the fatty bit doesn't he? Eh? Eh?'

On his way out for the day, Dec knocks on my door and pushes it open. 'Hey can you wash those sheets as soon as you get up? Just in case . . .' He shakes his head, in a what-has-your-life come-to kind of way.

The night before, he'd retrieved me from the corner of Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, where I'd made a plaintive call from the footpath outside the sweaty pub where I'd spent the last two nights. After landing back in Melbourne from my outback odyssey, I'd booked into the same pub Jim and I stayed in before we left. Okay, maybe it was for sentimental reasons, but I'd been drooling over the idea of my own room for what felt like aeons. And, frankly, it was cheap.

I did wonder why the mozzies this year were particularly small, particularly itchy, and particularly silent and invisible. It wasn't until I bumped into Georgie, in the kitchen, to ask if she had any repellent for mosquitoes, showing her the trail-paths down my neck, across my stomach, in bracelet circles on my arms, and little necklace-like curlicues across my chest, that her exclamation

of, 'FUCK! I thought we got rid of 'em last time!' alerted me to the fact that the stained carpet and broken windows weren't the only reason the weekly rental was less than I'd paid anywhere, ever. By a margin.

'FUCKIN' BEDBUGS! I BETCHA IT WERE THOSE FILTHY GIRLS FROM CAIRNS WHAT BROUGHT 'EM IN!'

There were bugs smaller than cells biting me – and probably living on and in all of my clothes – sucking my blood. Hitchhiking their way across my skin, and under it. It made me feel distinctly claustrophobic, like I was on a packed Greyhound bus and nobody was ever going to get off until I had. So much for that room on my own.

After that, I moved swiftly, packing up my belongings and rushing down the stairs. As I scratched my way to the front bar like someone with OCD, the manager of the pub didn't even blink when I asked for a refund.

'Is that what these are, too?' He exposed his arms to me.

Ugh. That kind of work would have taken months.

'Um, yeah, I'm pretty sure it is . . . you should wash everything. And maybe sleep somewhere else? If you can . . .'

I slithered out, feeling guilty that I had the option of calling family and friends who lived nearby, unlike these wayward drifters.

'Uh Dec, do you think I could stay at your place for a couple of nights?' I explained the bedbug situation.

'Geez Lou, you poor thing. Those slobs mustn't have cleaned ANYTHING.'

As peak-hour traffic whizzed past me, drivers craned their necks to get a good look at me sitting on my suitcase, as if they needed to memorise the scenario for a future *Crime Stoppers* episode. Clad in my jeans and a red singlet purchased twenty moons ago,

I mused, for the thousandth time in a few months, how little you can tell about someone from their outward appearance.

At last Dec's car pulled up as I scratched pathetically at my arms, his terrier, leaning out the window, panted happily in recognition.

Dec greeted my ridiculous situation with his usual daunting, military-style practicality. 'Here, put this on,' he said, throwing me a blue tarpaulin. 'And sit on this,' he covered the passenger seat of his car with a towel. His golden terrier, perched like a lion on the console, leaned in for a chin tickle.

'Don't touch him till you've had a shower,' barked Dec.

'It's okay Dec, I don't think they like dogs.'

It's morning now, and I just keep having flashes of realisation that I have nothing to worry about anymore. I know where I am. I know where things are. I'm safe.

'Don't forget to lock the back door when you go out,' Dec says, leaving.

'I won't.'

'Oh! And is it really your birthday today?'

Oh yeah, I'd almost forgotten. So this is what thirty years old looks like, hey?

I gaze down at the bites, and my pathetic little pile of belongings sitting next to the mattress. I'm so used to everything being new, frightening, challenging, confronting, exciting, that this old world, one I know by heart, is like a worn-out outfit. Familiar, but disarmingly easy.

Then I remember how much work I have to do, magazine articles and interviews to write, work I love, which has taken off over the past year, since I threw everything away and went on this wild, crazy, frightening, harrowing adventure. Work which I tried

and dreamed of getting when I was living a much more suitable lifestyle for a fashion and lifestyle writer, but somehow couldn't. Until I let it go.

And I feel a little like a madwoman, because if anyone walked in and viewed the physical aspects of my life, they would probably think I was a down-and-out hobo yet, inside, I'm filled with peace, little bubbles of abundant realisation recurring around my heart, feeling I have everything that I ever wanted.

If a little scratchy.

Staying at my brother's house is like staying at The Hilton after where I've come from. I'm used to listening with shallow breath, sussing out the sounds of shared spaces with haunted, hard and tattooed men, waiting for a silent patch when I can slip into the kitchen to fix my morning habit on a working stove, performing the whole caffeine-injection ritual as quickly and quietly as possible, for fear any host of strange souls will spring into the kitchen and catch me in my vulnerable, pre-caffeinated state.

I open up the mocha-scented coffee grounds which have travelled safely from the bottom of my bag, around Australia, to this new day. In a way, it feels like I've just walked out of a Hollywood action movie. I have to remind myself that the ride is over, no more bombs are about to go off, there are no more surprises for the protagonist. I'm home.

After pouring myself a cup of steaming liquid I wander outside to the garden, breathing in the startlingly loud sounds of the inner city, still such a shock, after months in the desert.

Dec's dog pads out, looking up at me with his big loyal eyes. He shadows my movements like he can smell my DNA even though my body and soul have been through a complete washing cycle of life. He looks up at me and grins, puffing hot steams of just-eaten

PAL on my ankle. Then he lets out a little bark and licks me. Recognition. I'm still the same girl.

Just a little dirtier.

Despite being technically homeless, bug-bitten and with less than twenty dollars in the bank for a few days, I don't feel poor. I have a prop which has acted as the channel from thoughts to words to dollars no matter where or how I've been living over the past year. And I'm in the city now, where it's a hundred times easier.

My laptop sits proudly next to my pile of clothes with my mobile phone. Along with a quiet space in which to use them, these are the only necessary tools which connect me to the capacity to better my situation. And since I'm still writing a number of weekly columns for the paper, I know things are going to get better really quickly.

I revel in the space and silence of having a kitchen table to myself, a strong cup of coffee, a radio which plays jazz, and no crazy men banging on the door to groan, talk or ask for a cigarette. The paradox still floors me. That the columns I write are so far from the life I've been living for the past twelve months, even my editors have no idea I've not been living in the city to do them. I also know that without this one talisman, there's no way I could have written about silk scarves and diamond-encrusted eye shadows whilst dining on toasted sandwiches made for me by biekie gangs or showering next to a urinal while a skimpy served beers downstairs in Kalgoorlie. And no matter how many times I've cried tears of awe at Australia's landscape, felt inner peace lying next to ancient stones or melted in the presence of spaces so untouched by material needs that they sang to the most private, non-verbal parts of my soul, I also know none of it would have been possible had I not had a job which relied on these surface concerns.

Without my columns, which are all about selling the idea of the opposite, there's no way I could have earned regular money while travelling around Australia, unpinned to any specific place for certain periods. Packing like vagabonds in the middle of the night and fleeing, just because we got the urge. Following a three-thousand-kilometre tangent for a comedy gig, experiencing dawn and dusk from gulp-worthy beaches, spending twenty-four hours a day in the presence of the very embodiment of adventure in a human, and yes, having traumatic highs and lows which have seen me return, like the prodigal daughter, penniless and perhaps less sure of anything than when I left.

The beep of my phone pops my reverie. It's a birthday text message from a homeless clown from a park in Newman, Western Australia, telling me how the sprinkler system woke him up.

*Happy Birthday my twin-soul. Welcome to the best years of your life so far! The western sky says hello . . . Love you forever . . . xx*

*Jim.*

My heart slips through space in a kind of free-fall, and the gulp of longing comes back, that feeling parents must get when they've missed their newborn's latest adventure.

I still love him. Madly, deeply.

Even though the relationship saw me trade car, home, friends, family, and everything I previously knew and loved, for crass jokes, roadhouse snacks and way too much time spent in the passenger seat of an overloaded Mazda, I feel the same way about him that I did within hours of meeting him. That the universe had given me an offering, in the most challenging guise it could think of. And if I could bring myself to loosen the grip on life, and on myself – what I allowed myself to do, who I allowed myself to become – loving him and seeing the world from his car seat for a while would change everything. And once you've seen life, people, experiences, places,

for what they truly are – little balls of beauty and ugliness and miracles and horror simultaneously existing in seemingly opposing places – there’s no going back.

For a split second, I contemplate what would have happened if I’d said ‘no’ to this strangely presented man, offering me the opportunity of a lifetime, with the gift of constant laughter, but only if I squinted and looked beyond the obvious. I shudder, then look back at my bite marks anew, as if they are Olympic trophies. Some kinds of adventures are always worth the risk.

I wipe the red dust from my laptop and start typing.