

CINEMA LUMIÈRE

CINEMA

Lumière

HATTIE HOLDEN EDMONDS



RedDoor

Published by
RedDoor
www.reddoorpublishing.co.uk

© 2014 Hattie Holden Edmonds

The right of Hattie Holden Edmonds to be identified as author of this Work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

ISBN 978-0-9928520-8-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, copied in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise transmitted without written permission from the author

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Cover design: Scarlett Rugers Book Design

Typesetting: typesetter.org.uk



printed on FSC-certified paper

Printed in the UK by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

To my Dad, with love and hindsight

Chapter 1

‘Nellie, that’s disgusting.’ I jerk my head off the pillow as a guff of foul air hits my nostrils. ‘What on earth have you eaten?’

Nellie, whose face is about four inches from mine, opens one eye. She glares at me then lets out a cross little fart. The eye closes, there’s another guff and a bubble of drool slithers from the side of her mouth.

I sigh. It’s pointless trying to reason with Nellie so instead I haul myself out of bed and stumble across the room towards the kitchen. My feet and fingers are freezing and my toes have turned that mortuary blue you see on television corpses. In fact they’re so bad this morning that for a sleepy split-second I wonder if maybe I died during the night. Maybe I’m just a ghostly shadow drifting back and forth from bedroom to kitchen, trapped for eternity between a gaseous bedmate and last night’s pile of dirty plates.

The kitchen floor isn’t helping – it’s gravestone cold. I shuffle towards the fridge and feel something sticky underfoot. The bin, which is usually under the sink, is lying on its side with a selection of half-gnawed pizza boxes and shredded crisp packets spilling from its open mouth.

Nellie, I think.

I pick up the rubbish and lay out Nellie’s breakfast in her bowl on the sideboard. Then I flick open the child’s safety

catch on the fridge and reach inside for the milk. My eyes blink to adjust to the light that shines from behind the out-of-date sausages, and it's only now that I remember my dream. Although it wasn't really a dream, it was more of a mini film, whose images were brighter and more vivid than anything I've seen before:

In it, I was sitting alone in a cinema on a red velvet seat. It was dark but I could make out the thick crimson curtains drawn across the screen in front of me. From the projectionist's booth behind my chair came the whirring and clicking of film reels being changed.

'Hannah!'

I jumped at the sound of the voice and twisted round to see a familiar figure standing behind the shaft of light streaming from the booth.

'Victor!' I said, both elated and astonished to see him.

Victor smiled from his elevated position and pointed towards the screen. Seconds later I heard the soft muffle of the curtains drawing apart. When I turned back, I saw that the screen was blank, except for one bright red feather in the top right-hand corner. There was something mesmerising about the feather and I watched it float downwards, gently swirling back and forth as though blown by an unseen breeze.

The moment it touched the bottom of the screen I awoke.

I close the fridge door and try to shake from my head the image of Victor high in the projectionist's booth. Why is he still hanging around the edges of my mind, sliding unbidden into my dreams at night? It's been over two years now, why can't he just leave me alone?

Nellie is still asleep when I carry in her breakfast so I waft the bowl past her nose to coax her from her morning coma. She opens both eyes and rearranges her mouth into something resembling a grin.

‘Nellie, have you been in the bin?’ I say.

Nellie looks at me as if I’ve suggested she’s eaten the television.

‘Yes, you,’ I say. ‘No breakfast till you come clean.’

Torn between greed and an admission of guilt, a variety of expressions flit across Nellie’s face before her cheeks puff outwards with what I assume is a begrudging sigh.

Although a lot of people say that British bulldogs look like Winston Churchill, or vice versa, that’s not the case with Nellie. With her soft pendulous cheeks, wide brow and crooked mouth, through which several teeth protrude at odd angles, she looks more like Les Dawson – only with a furry face and in dire need of a trip to the dentist. And like Les, she has quite a repertoire of expressions, which after a little practice, aren’t too difficult to decipher.

‘You’ll make yourself sick again,’ I say.

Nellie pointedly ignores me and eyeballs her bowl of breakfast.

It’s not worth pursuing the argument because Nellie and I have been over the same ground since she arrived, and I always lose. So while I plunder the wash basket for a cleanish skirt to wear for work, I listen to the sound of her eating, gums slapping together like wet nappies. By the time she’s finished, it’s already eight thirty and we’re late for the morning walk.

Having heaved myself and 60lbs worth of sulking bulldog up the steps from my basement flat (Nellie’s not a big fan of stairs... or walking for that matter), we set off for

the local cemetery, the nearest open stretch of grass to the cul-de-sac where I live. On the way we pass the Caribbean takeaway with its rows of freshly baked patties, then the Spanish delicatessen whose windows glisten with piles of chorizo sausages. Next comes the launderette, ruled by Mrs O'Connor and her permanently crooked wig. At the end of this little stretch is the Paradise pub, named after the last line in a GK Chesterton poem *To Paradise by way of Kensal Green*.

Once on Harrow Road, Nellie and I cross over to the white pillared gates of the cemetery. 'London's Foremost Necropolis,' as it bills itself in the brochure, stretches over seventy acres and packs in more than 60,000 graves. Over the two years that we've been coming here, Nellie and I have got to know the more eccentric inhabitants. Our favourites include Thomas Hood, the poet who once mortgaged his brain with his publishers in return for a cash advance, and the Duke of Sussex, renowned for his house full of singing birds and chiming clocks and his diet of turtle soup and orange ices.

The cemetery is modelled on Père Lachaise in Paris and boasts residents from China, Chile, Italy, Egypt, Eritrea, Jamaica, Ethiopia, Hungary, Morocco and Iceland – all lying side by side, having come to rest in this little corner of the capital. Each grave, from lichen-frosted mausoleum and crumbling Corinthian column to moss-coated angel and simple wooden cross, is wreathed in ivy. Silence hangs like a fine mist, the sound of 60,000 souls between breaths.

The frozen ground crunches beneath our feet as Nellie and I traipse through the gates and the icy January fog is so thick that I can barely make out the gasworks on the far side of the Grand Union canal. After a lengthy dawdle by Trollope's grave – anything to delay my arrival at the office

– we head for the abandoned taxi which stands, inexplicably, on the edge of the Anglican side of the cemetery. I climb inside while Nellie does her usual two-minute dither before deciding where she fancies a crap.

While I wait, I gaze out of the window at the blanket of grey and try to remember the last time I saw a dazzling blue sky. According to an article I recently read, the average human eye can detect over five hundred different shades of blue. Five hundred? Me, I can't even see one.

A triumphant bark drags me from my thoughts and I look up to see Nellie squatting in the middle of the path.

'Not there,' I call. 'Go by the bush.' I am keen to avoid a rerun of the previous week's scene when Mrs O'Connor caught Nellie taking a shit on the grass and told me off for letting my dog do 'its durrty business in a place of rest.'

This was bad enough in itself without the fact that it triggered an attack of what I've come to call 'the Mentals'.

You know what, Mrs O'Connor, I said, grabbing the collar of her little woolly coat and shaking her so hard that her wig slithered down the side of her head and onto her shoulder. Nellie can crap where she wants. In fact, you're lucky she didn't shit all over your shoes.

I've suffered from the Mentals since I was a little girl, and it basically involves a very overzealous imagination picturing in great detail the worst possible thing I can do or say in any particular situation. From the outside, no one would know that it's happening, but inside my head it's all kicking off. It can get pretty bad – enough to make me change dentists once, because whenever Mr Halford bent over me to poke around in my mouth, I imagined myself shouting, 'Fuck me, fuck me,' and I was petrified that one day I might actually say it aloud.

So I didn't really say or do any of those things to Mrs O'Connor. Instead I told her I was sorry, that it wouldn't happen again, and then I picked up the warm turd in the only thing I had on me at the time – a flattened-out Hula Hoops wrapper.

'Nellie, are you listening to me?' I call out again, but Nellie pretends that she hasn't heard by staring in the opposite direction. I start to get out of the taxi so I can scoop up the shit in my handy Boots plastic bag, but something catches my eye. At first I think it's my imagination, some fragment of the dream returning, but up close there is no mistaking it. Shining out against the black vinyl of the taxi seat, its tiny filaments waving like underwater coral, is a little red feather.

Chapter 2

‘Welcome to the World of *Health and Wellbeing*,’ I say to Ian, who’s already by the office door when I arrive for work an hour later. ‘I hope I didn’t keep you waiting long.’

Ian shakes his head, stammers a hello and follows me inside. It’s his first day in the job and I can tell that he’s surprised by the size of the office. In fact it’s not really an office at all but more of a customised storage cupboard on the third floor of a crumbling building on Denmark Street. We used to have the larger workspace next door, but since the magazine has been scaled down to just three issues a year, available only in health food shops, it’s all we can afford.

‘Dump your stuff wherever you like,’ I say to Ian. ‘We’re not too fussy about tidiness round here.’

Ian nods and removes his blue rucksack and multi-zipped anorak, both of which are better suited to scaling the north face of the Eiger rather than sitting in a dolly-sized office in Soho. Beneath the anorak he’s wearing grey flannel trousers and a blue V-necked jumper over a white schoolboy shirt, all of which make him look about nineteen even though I know from his CV that he’s almost thirty.

‘Ready for the grand tour?’

‘OK.’ Ian, who still hasn’t looked me in the eye, fiddles with the fringe of his short reddish hair, which is gelled into a row of tiny shark’s teeth.

Roz, my editor for the past six years, who interviewed him for the job, told me that he was shy, but I didn't realise quite *how* shy.

I point to the two desks squashed against the far wall by the window. 'Yours is on the right. If you twist your neck enough you can get a good view of Luigi's café and the guitar shop below.' I take the six steps over to the kettle and toaster in the opposite corner. 'And this is the kitchen,' I say. 'Feel free to knock yourself up a five-course meal.'

Ian smiles faintly, but still manages to look alarmed.

I reach over to the metal filing cabinet next to my desk. 'And this,' I say, 'is what I call "the shop".' I drag open the middle drawer and sweep my fingers over its contents as if I'm presenting a deluxe range of sparkly jewellery on the shopping channel. Ian stares down at the array of hemp snack bars, chlorella powder, 'natural' coffee, krill probiotic supplements, detox foot patches and two exfoliation gloves – all sent to us by health companies in the hope that we will feature them in the magazine.

'Help yourself to anything you fancy,' I say. 'I can recommend the hemp bars, but don't go near the natural coffee. It's made from acorns and it tastes foul.'

'OK,' says Ian. His eyes dart around the office. 'Where does Roz sit?'

'She works from home since we've downsized,' I say, 'so it's just you and me.' I'm tempted to add the word 'kid' but it will probably embarrass him even more, so I just smile.

'Right,' Ian gulps.

We both sit down and switch on our computers. Ian has been left a detailed list of instructions by our website consultant, and I've got a heap of articles to wade through. Now that *Health and Wellbeing* is only quarterly, the idea is

to build up its online presence. It's Ian's job to do this and it's my job to supply the bulk of the copy.

I turn to the pile of packages that the postman has delivered. Today's promotional freebies include two packets of low-glycemic soya crisps, an 'Energy Pot' of quinoa and buckwheat, a mini tube of fennel toothpaste and a relaxation CD entitled *Stillness and Flow*. I arrange the new additions in the shop; soya crisps and energy pot on the left side of the drawer, fennel toothpaste and *Stillness and Flow* on the right.

My first article of the day is entitled 'Are you a Catastrophic Thinker?' and was inspired by this morning's 'Maybe I'm dead' train of thought, together with a recent visit to my GP, Dr Ling, who diagnosed me with having chronic catastrophic thinking. The 500-word piece will be part of the ongoing 'Mind Matters' series which Roz has recently commissioned. The basic idea of this piece is to help readers gauge their level of optimism and trust in the world by getting them to complete a short questionnaire. But I kick things off with a quote from Einstein – 'The single most important decision any of us will ever make is whether or not to believe that the universe is friendly'. There's nothing like a few *bon mots* from the world's best-known scientist to add an air of authenticity to what will otherwise be a distinctly flakey, fact-deficient article.

Then I get cracking:

'You feel a slight tingling sensation in your right hand. Do you think:

- a) You must have slept awkwardly. It'll pass in a couple of hours.
- b) It's probably from too much time on the computer and

may signal early stage repetitive strain injury. Better take it a bit easy.

c) It's definitely the start of locked-in syndrome and by tomorrow morning your entire body will be paralysed and you'll be strapped into a hospital bed like the man in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, reduced to communicating with the outside world by blinking your left eyelid...'

I pause and read through what I've just written before pressing on:

'Your bank manager calls you in for a meeting. Do you immediately suppose:

a) He just wants a quick catch-up. He's keen on the personal customer service approach.

b) He's going to tell you off for falling behind on your monthly interest repayments, but together you'll be able to work out a viable new debt repayment plan.

c) He's just cancelled your loan, leaving you £27,000 in debt with the outstanding interest rocketing every second. After being evicted from your flat for rent arrears, you'll lose your job because you can't work after sleeping all night on the street. You're forced into sheltered accommodation but due to the capital's chronic housing shortage you'll be decanted to West Riding, where you will die from loneliness and a diet of low-quality hamburgers made from mashed-up cow's uteruses because that's all you can afford...'

Hmmm, I think, as I scan this second option C. That's pretty extreme. It's probably a level 5 in Dr Ling's opinion. Or even a level 6. Can you be a level 6? Isn't that veering into the

‘crackers’ department? Maybe I am crackers and Dr Ling is planning to section me next time I visit. Restraining straps, straitjackets, injections filled with enough tranquilizers to fell a mammoth... a vision of Jack Nicholson, comatose and dribbling in a hospital bed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* style, fills my head.

I realise that although Roz is quite a liberal editor and most of the time leaves me to my own devices, the option C’s are probably a little far-fetched for her. So I tone them both down, before knocking out a couple more slightly less extreme catastrophic scenarios. When I’m finished, I send them over to Ian.

‘That’s from me, by the way,’ I say after the ping of his e-mail reverberates around the silent office. ‘It’s a questionnaire on catastrophic thinking.’ Good to get Ian involved in the whole process, not just the on-line side.

‘OK,’ says Ian, eyes still averted.

I glance at the office clock. It’s still only ten thirty and I’m already tired. I wonder if Ian would think me weird if I take a nap – something I’ve been doing so much recently that I may well be suffering from narcolepsy. In an effort to keep myself awake I click on my current favourite YouTube clip – ‘Christian the lion’ – and watch the eponymous Christian being reunited after a three-year gap with his former owners who rescued him as a cub from Harrods’ pet department. I play it four times back to back but the final time an advert box pops up – ‘15,000 Chinese women are looking for dates’ – which spoils it a bit.

My phone rings, making us both jump. I check the caller’s number and see that it’s my mother, so I let it continue until the answering machine clicks in. If it’s urgent, she’ll leave a message and I’ll call her later. If not,

then it can wait until my midweekly phone call. We certainly don't have the sort of relationship where I need to speak to her every day.

Seconds later, Ian's phone rings and after glancing over at me, he picks it up.

'Yes,' he mumbles into the receiver. 'No, of course I remembered. No, I won't be late.' There follows a brief conversation, during which he tugs on the shark's teeth fringe.

'Sorry,' he says after he's hung up. 'That was my mum.'

'Mothers, eh?' I roll my eyes in what I hope will be a bonding moment, but Ian's already looking back at his screen and there's a light humming from his lips. Roz has warned me about the humming.

I still have to complete this week's 'Healthy Eats' menu for the website, which basically means pinching vegetarian recipes from the internet and passing them off as my own. To avoid detection, I tinker a bit with the ingredients, so for example last week's Yugo bean soup contained borlotti beans instead of the dried haricot beans. Whether this actually works as a dish I have no idea, but it sounds like it would. This week's Healthy Eats – marinated mini tofu steaks – will have an extra tahini dip to go with it.

I send it over to Ian and glance at the clock again. I'd kill for a snooze, but then kipping on Ian's first day would be pretty antisocial, so instead I decide to engage him in some light-hearted office chat.

'Sorry there's not more of a buzzy atmosphere,' I say. 'It used to be quite lively here.' I explain that the building was once fully occupied and even had a French lift operator, but now it's just us hanging in here until the place can be sold and no doubt turned into a block of fancy flats.

‘That’s fine,’ Ian stammers, ‘I’m not really a buzzy kind of guy.’ The corners of his mouth twitch, but I’m not sure if he’s trying to smile or if it’s just a nervous tic.

‘Fancy a spelt bar?’ I nod to the open the shop drawer. ‘Or maybe a spirulina juice?’

Ian shakes his head and does that smile/nervous twitch thing again so I decide it’s probably best to leave him in peace.

At lunchtime I direct Ian to Luigi’s café but I’m still feeling tired and decide to have an in-house lunch so I can kip afterwards. I rummage around in the shop and select the quinoa and buckwheat energy pot. Removing the recyclable plastic lid I scoop up a fingerful of the claggy grey gloop. It’s utterly tasteless, but I’m not sure whether it’s the product or my taste buds, which recently seemed to have gone on an extended holiday. So I fish out a flaxseed bar from the drawer and take a bite to see if that’s got any flavour. Nope – I might as well be chewing on bits of glued-together gravel.

It’s one thirty so hopefully I can squeeze in a medium-length nap before Ian returns. Using one of the exfoliation gloves as a makeshift pillow, I rest my head on my desk. I’m just drifting off when a wisp of the previous night’s dream spirals up from the depths, like smoke curling through a crack in the wall.

It’s fitting that it was set in a cinema, given how many hours Victor and I spent sitting side by side in one. For it was he who introduced me to those landmark French directors whose films helped to forge our unlikely friendship, which began in the foyer of the building where I now work and ended four years later on a freezing December night, the memory of which I am still trying to erase.

Ian returns from lunch, and after a brief discussion on what sort of sandwich he had (ham and salad), we both settle down to the afternoon's work.

The big article today is entitled 'The Miracle of Manifesting'. It's Roz's idea, of course, she loves this sort of stuff: *The Secret*, *The Cosmic Ordering Service*, *Change Your Life by Lunchtime...* she's read 'em all.

I cut and paste an article from the internet written by one of America's newest 'manifesting gurus', then I sit back and wonder how I manifested my own existence: thirty-six years old, writing about fennel toothpaste from a customised storage cupboard and living in a basement flat with a fat, flatulent bulldog.

Like everyone, I had dreams when I was younger, but they didn't tend to be very realistic, like the one of becoming a gymnast (inspired by Nadia Comaneci) flick-flacking around on a big blue mat. Although I remember thinking at the time that the parallel bar part looked quite painful and how Nadia must be doing herself some damage when she came crashing down against it. I just hoped that I could give that bit a miss – make up for it with something a little easier on the groin, like some extra floor work with ribbons or hoops.

When I was growing up, I just assumed there'd be something that I would love doing and for which I would get paid. Admittedly I never had a big game plan, unlike, say, Suzy Beale at primary school who knew at the age of five that she wanted to be a nurse and would march round the playground with her mini medical kit, checking children's pulses and applying plasters to non-existent grazes.

Watford Grammar School went by and still there were no clues pointing to the kind of career which would make me

happy, but I wasn't panicking. Something would turn up, surely. I only started to worry when I sat opposite my career's officer two weeks before leaving school. Frowning as she scanned my poor A-level results, she let out one of the longest sighs I've ever heard.

'Hmmm,' she said, massaging her temples rigorously.

'Any advice?' Perhaps a little foolishly, I'd pinned all my hopes on a complete stranger telling me what to do with my life.

'Have you thought about teaching?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'I'm not very good with children.'

'Oh,' she said. 'That's a shame.'

I'm still contemplating the 'how did I manifest my life?' question when my mate Megan rings. Megan's a painter but works part-time in the framing shop in Golborne Road. She often looks after Nellie on the afternoons when she's at her studio.

'We're on the Scrubs and Nellie's just eaten an old hamburger bun that she found in the bushes,' says Megan.

'Don't let her eat anything else,' I say, 'or she'll explode.'

'You hear that, Nellie?' says Megan, away from the phone. 'Hannah says you're going to explode.' There's a pause. 'Nellie says she doesn't give two shits,' says Megan into the phone again.

'What are you writing about today?' Megan's always eager to take the piss out of my job. If I believed in half the stuff that I write about, maybe I'd be offended. But I don't, so I'm not.

'The Miracle of Manifesting.'

'Run me through that one again.' I can detect the lip curl in Megan's voice.

‘Well, first you have to imagine how it would feel to be living your perfect life,’ I adopt my standard Californian accent, used for such conversations with Megan. ‘Then you do a bit of role play. So in your case, if you want to be a successful painter you have to act like one.’

‘Genius,’ says Megan.

‘So which super-successful painter are you going to be?’

‘Rothko.’

‘Excellent,’ I say. ‘With a little bit of play-acting your pictures will be selling for fifty million quid a pop and you’ll be considered one of the world’s greatest artists. Of course you’ll end up being a chronic alcoholic and slicing your arms to shreds, then bleeding to death on your studio floor, but it’s a small price to pay.’

‘Rothko it is then,’ says Megan. ‘I can start right away. The office’s just round the corner.’

After we’ve discussed several other people we could try modelling ourselves on to manifest interesting and action-filled lives (Joan of Arc, Jesus, Rihanna...), Megan says that she will drop Nellie off on her way home from Wormwood Scrubs and we wind up the conversation.

Next to me Ian is switching off his computer. It’s written into his contract that he can leave at 5 p.m. every day. He stands up and unhooks his coat and rucksack from the peg by the door.

‘Fancy a hemp bar for the road?’

‘Why not?’ He blushes, but his mouth twitches into what I now realise must be a tentative smile.

‘Oh, and here’s an office key so you don’t have to wait outside again,’ I say.

He takes the hemp bar and key and slips them into his rucksack. Then he zips up his padded North Face jacket in preparation for the treacherous mountain peaks for which Soho is famous.

'See you tomorrow,' I say.

'See you tomorrow,' he echoes faintly and, still blushing, he heads for the door.