



Lio's drawing of his leaving hospital.

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Part 1

As a friend of mine once wrote: How is a flower beautiful? It's beautiful because it says: I am going to die. Is this transience a key to understanding beauty? As Whitman said: 'What indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?'

I have just returned from bright red poppies; random, and beautiful. But even the poppy, the flower of slaughtered lives, did not call me to death. Instead it called me to colour: vibrant and bold. The flower is not conscious of death; it cannot speak death. Consciousness of death is no part of the flower, but of ourselves. And you may say the piquancy of colour comes in the knowledge of its fading, of its mortality – but still, this was not what I thought in the moment, in the warm sun.

– Sasha Roberts

In the Mountains

That was it. That was the moment – the moment for both of us. It was love at first throw. I couldn't have imagined what a couple of ridiculous hours in a field with bats and balls might set in motion. No one ever told me precisely how that match came about, but I'm sure lots of alcohol was involved. Apparently a professor in the English department at the University of Sussex, where I was studying, had challenged one of his mates at the University of Essex. When the prof from Sussex sobered up, he realised that there was no way he could find a team that had the slightest chance of doing well. So instead of trying to win, he decided to seize the moral high ground and field a team of women and foreigners who had never played the game before. He asked me to be his bowler and Sasha to be his wicketkeeper.

It was a sunny and warm afternoon when our cars parked along the edge of a green quad on the Essex campus. Before our captain sent us out to the field, he passed out small wax-paper cups and poured us all a good measure of not-bad whisky. We cheered and toasted our impending defeat.

'I hope you're not as clueless as I am about all this,' I said to Sasha.

She smiled shyly, tucked a lock of long, blonde hair behind her ear, then threw herself in. 'Oh, come on. I'm sure you've seen cricket on the telly once or twice.'

'I'm afraid it's mostly American football where I come

from.' I stepped closer to tune out the noise of everyone else.

'That's the trouble with you Yanks. No sense of the big wide world over the sea,' she teased, now grinning fully.

'And you Brits are so much better, are you?' I tried to give like I was getting. 'Can you tell me the difference between tight end and a wide receiver?'

'Are you being rude?' she said, with a quizzical look.

'Not at all,' I replied, my own smile now uncontainable. 'Maybe one day I'll draw you a diagram.' I had made her laugh for the first time. 'No, really,' I continued. 'At least give me some idea of what I'm supposed to be doing so I don't look like a total fool.'

'Just keep your arm straight when you throw me the ball and remember to bounce it in front of the wicket and you won't embarrass yourself,' she said and headed off to the pitch. Then she turned with a smirk and added, 'And if you throw it straight, I won't embarrass myself either.'

We got trounced, of course, but I'm proud to say we outdrank the other side by a huge margin. The silliness of this first proper encounter was something Sasha and I would dine out on for the rest of our lives.

Fifteen years later, at around 8.30 on the morning of 7 September 2006, Sasha drove me to the train station near our home in Lewes, a town with medieval cobbled streets, a castle and a Georgian brewery. Our quick-witted son Lio (pronounced like 'Leo' in English but just spelled an Italian way) was in the back seat. As his sun-bleached hair bobbed and his eyes (the same sky-blue as his mother's) darted from flint houses to chalky cliffs, he was happily naming everything he saw. I had a conference to go to at the University of Sunderland in the north of England and Sasha was going to work at the University of Kent in Canterbury to unpack her office after it had been

redecorated over the summer. She was full of excitement at the thought of new shelves and desks and cabinets and paint.

We had just got back a few days earlier from a fabulous summer holiday in Italy and France. We were tanned, fit and happy. As we pulled out from the parking space in front of our house, Lio said, '*J'ai froid*' ('I'm cold'), in a very nice little French accent. He was extremely good with languages and would often introduce himself by saying, 'Hello, my name is Lio and I speak five languages.' This was a bit of an exaggeration, of course; however, he did speak excellent four-year-old English, excellent four-year-old Italian, a smattering of French phrases and just a few words of German and Spanish. But even considering that we had just come back from France, the earnestness and the seriousness in his voice as he was telling us he was chilly seemed odd. The morning was fresh, but not really cold. It didn't matter, though. Sasha and I smiled to each other, proud of our little boy's skills.

Sasha parked in front of the red-brick station and, as I was getting out of the car, I told Lio I loved him and that I would see him in a few days. I was about to close the door, but something made me turn around, get back in and put my hand on his cheek.

'Remember,' I said, 'I'll always be with you.' I wouldn't normally have done this, and as I retell it now it seems a touch over the top, but that's exactly what I said and did. We had been apart for longer periods before, but I had never felt the need to say anything like this. Lio smiled sweetly, leaned into my hand and blew me a noisy kiss. As I got out of the car a second time, I felt slightly light-headed.

As Sasha came round to give me a hug, I had an uncanny feeling about the scene. I wasn't just kissing her goodbye but also somehow watching our goodbye from ten metres

in the air. I slid my hands down her back to stroke her through her second-hand embroidered cotton blouse, a bit wrinkled and threadbare but one of her favourites and she always wore it well. As I breathed in through her lemony-scented hair, I remember thinking how extremely cold her body felt, much colder than she should have been given the sunny late-summer morning.

'I love you,' I said.

She smiled and said something a bit much for our simple, commonplace parting, a parting that had happened dozens of times before. 'Don't let these pessimistic Brits get you down,' she said.

I didn't know what she was talking about. In fact, I often thought of myself as one of the slightly cynical ones, someone who was good at managing expectations and even better at criticising foolishness where I found it. I nodded absently and smiled a crooked smile.

She kissed me again, let me go and walked around the back of our car. She got in, put the key in the ignition, smiled one last time at me through the glass and headed off. I had a strange, slightly queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach as I watched them drive up Station Street and out of sight. Usually, I wouldn't have watched them drive off – I would have simply gone into the station, got out my ticket and gone to the platform. Yet on that morning I stood still, captured by an intense desire to stop them and to insist that they come with me, to convince Sasha to put off unpacking her office and for us to find another room in the hotel up in Sunderland. Thinking she'd never go for that, I even wondered about bribery. I thought about enticing her with a little more vacation up north or promising to treat her to a spending spree at her favourite cookware shop if she'd just stay home that day. Then I imagined just taking Lio with me up to the conference and having him play quietly in the

front row of the lecture hall while I gave my talk.

That was what I thought as I stood in front of the station and watched our car disappear up the hill.

I wish I could say that it was love at first sight, but lust at first sight would be more honest. The first time I saw Sasha, some six months before our meeting on the cricket pitch, I was a twenty-two-year-old student in his first week of classes in a Masters programme. I was at the University of Sussex for a degree, but, as it was my first proper experience of living outside the US, I also wanted to taste something of the world and have a few adventures, if not simple conquests. Sasha was a PhD student and I wandered into a 'welcome to graduate school' event where she was speaking. With her waist-length blonde hair, John Lennon specs and slightly hippy clothes, I was the one who was conquered. I never really stood a chance. As she spoke, I sat in the back row and thought about sleeping with her. Over the next months, I kept my eyes open for any sign of her. I found notices for undergraduate lectures she was giving about seventeenth-century women reading Shakespeare's sonnets, about competing strands of feminism and about ornaments carved into Renaissance beds. Even though I didn't have much interest in sonnets or feminism or Renaissance beds per se, I went along.

I would sit in the back, grinning stupidly. Once or twice I even ventured a rambling question after her lecture, but it wasn't until that cricket match later that spring that I managed to have a conversation with her. And out of that alcohol-fuelled, flirty couple of hours in the sun flowed lots of other little encounters. She introduced me to her favourite pub in Brighton, the Basketmakers, and then to her favourite pub in Lewes, the Lewes Arms, where she just happened to be performing in a ludicrously bawdy charity pantomime. She was a Kate Adie-esque correspondent

trying to make sense of the very bad behaviour in Never-Never-Land. She claimed she didn't get half of the jokes written for her and invited me along to see if I could understand any better. We walked in the gardens in Stanmer Park near campus on bright mornings, laughing like ten year olds as we sprayed each other with hosepipes that the staff had foolishly left unattended.

At the end of spring, Sasha's brother Jeff was coming home for a visit. He was a musician living in Padua who taught English on the side. Sasha had told me about her family's lifelong connection with Italy and I had invented the excuse of wanting to learn Italian for academic reasons in order to get closer to her. Taking my hints, Sasha invited me to meet Jeff up in London at their parents' home the weekend he was coming back. It was a gorgeous old end-of-terrace Victorian house in Wandsworth on a street almost too leafy to be London. Her father Nigel, a bookish and quiet man approaching 60, shook my hand and looked at me curiously. When I complimented him on the house, he warmed up fast and showed me some of the nineteenth-century ornaments that he had managed to save when he had refurbished it, a mantelpiece here, some tiles there. As he gave me the tour, he told me how they'd bought the house about 30 years earlier for a pittance when it was, he suspected, the neighbourhood 'knocking shop' and about how he had worked long and hard, fixing it up from the wee hours of the morning, doing most of the work himself.

Sasha's mother Penny, on hearing this, teased sweetly, 'That's why the kitchen light switches give us trouble to this day.' Penny had penetrating eyes and her long, greying hair was the only sign of her age. She had been an artist all her life. She'd sold big pieces, taught at art colleges and was then running her own business with a colleague installing art in public spaces like corporate headquarters and upper-class airline lounges.

The house was very much Penny's too, and her vibrant touches lit every corner. It was cluttered with paintings and silk-screened wall hangings and odd bits of broken sculpture from around the world. To my tidy, suburban-American eye, it was eclectic and shambolic. Its decor wasn't at all upmarket, like some of the others that dazzled out through neighbouring windows, and the whole family seemed proud of that.

I liked Jeff the moment I met him. He was quieter than his sister, but had the same eyes and chin. He was introspective, and even though he was a bit preoccupied with things happening back in Italy (he was having a relationship go bad) he had this sympathetic, slightly ethereal quality about him while we chatted about Padua. As he told me about the food, about the university, about the women and about one woman in particular, he spoke with the confidence of someone ten years older than me instead of three years younger. He was deeply committed to his own vision of music and followed his own star in the rest of his life – I admired him.

Jeff told me that he and Sasha had been going to the same little Italian valley for more than 20 years. When they'd first started visiting, they'd been the only English people seen since the war.

Jeff had enjoyed himself down in Padua, but now he wanted to make a fresh start of things back in London. Before he could leave Italy, though, he needed to tie up some loose ends and find someone to take over his teaching work. Without even thinking about it, I volunteered myself there and then. I did want to see a bit of Europe. I did want to learn Italian. But I also wanted to give Sasha the opportunity to show me *her* Italy; I wanted to get to know it with her and see her enthusiasm for it first hand. Two summers earlier I had spent a couple of weeks backpacking around Italy. It was fun and I hit all the major attractions

in the usual big cities: Florence, Pisa, Perugia, Rome, Naples and Venice. But what was being offered now was an opportunity to see real Italian life, to experience something other than the crowds around the Leaning Tower and the Colosseum.

On my way into Venice during that backpacking trip, I had in fact stopped at Padua on special assignment from my mother. I remembered it as a sprawling, living city, past its prime but with the stunning Basilica di Sant'Antonio at its heart. My mother had asked me to go there and light a candle for her. St Anthony had become her patron over the decades of fertility struggles, big family stresses, illnesses and weekly lost-again-found-again car keys. While not appreciating the gesture in the same way as her, I obliged happily and called her from a phone box in front of the Basilica after I'd done it. As I weaved in and out of its shady porticoes to and from the train station, I thought that Padua was the kind of place I'd like to come back to and spend some time in properly, but that particular afternoon the Grand Canal beckoned and I was on my way.

The summer after meeting Jeff I travelled out to Padua, where I met him again, arranged to take over his teaching gig and had him help me find a place to live. Sasha drove out a few days later and met me in the apartment Jeff shared with two Italians on the outskirts of the city. As we wandered around the medieval streets, Sasha and I planned our first trip together up north into the Dolomite Mountains. Sasha had told me about the Dolomites: made of pink and orange marble, they created, she said, the most beautiful sunsets imaginable. She told me about tiny little villages that touched the clouds where they spoke impenetrably old dialects and borderless languages heard only in the mountains. And over a cool glass of prosecco at a shady table overlooking an ancient church, she told me

about her family's place in the mountains, an old mill in an unfashionable valley in between the Dolomites and the Pre-Alpi, in between the cities of Belluno and Feltre.

After a few more days of sorting out details with Jeff, Sasha and I got our things together, packed up her clunky white Peugeot and headed north one moonless evening. It was a two-hour drive and we didn't get into the mountains until well after dark. When we came out of a tunnel into the valley, I saw stars directly up above me but not at the sides.

'Welcome to the mountains,' Sasha said, smiling in the dashboard light.

'Those can't be the mountains,' I said, not wanting to be taken in. 'They can't be that steep and high.'

'That's them,' Sasha said gently.

'Impossible. They must be clouds.' I genuinely didn't believe her and was getting a bit cross because I thought she was having me on.

'Fine,' she chuckled. 'You'll see in the morning.'

The car trundled along in the night over hills and through villages until we came to a stony forest road blocked by a steel bar. Sasha got out and raised it, and we headed up a very narrow track that twisted through maize fields and down a steep, bumpy hill. We pulled up under the roof of a barn, where at one time horse-drawn carts must have parked to unload grain and to load up polenta. We grabbed a few essentials from the boot and headed inside. Nigel and Penny were there on holiday, but they had gone to sleep already. Sasha lit an oil lamp and I lit some candles. Shadows danced across antique rough-hewn beams and the slightly dilapidated chairs and chests that had been salvaged from ruined houses nearby. It was very old and very solid, a bit cluttered and chaotic, but so perfectly Sasha and her family.

Prodded awake by curiosity, I slipped out of bed early the

next morning to have a look around. It was perfect. It was the kind of house I had dreamt about for years. It was rough. It needed some work and attention, but it was a house you could love. Thick stone walls, a small wood-burning stove, creosote-stained wooden shutters, a stone roof over the old mill room, running water but no central heating, electricity or phone. It was blissful isolation, tranquillity distilled. There were some nearby trees, but it had unblocked views of the mountains to the west, which included one of the most majestic of the Dolomites, Monte Pizzocco.

I bounced over every inch of it that morning, and when Sasha got up the first thing I said to her was, 'How on earth did you find this place?'

'For years and years we stayed on the other side of the valley,' she began after she had settled herself under a viny arbour for some breakfast. 'We had a little house that we rented every summer from when I was small. It wasn't much, a hay barn really, near San Gregorio. When Mum was in her 20s, she was the au pair for a well-off family in another part of Italy. She kept in contact with them over the years and that led to renting the barn. But a few years ago the owners decided that they wanted to take the place back for themselves.'

She broke off to pour her tea, but I was impatient. 'OK, but this place, how did you find this mill?'

'A few years ago, I was out here visiting some friends with my old boyfriend,' she went on. 'Every once in a while we'd go off and look for houses up for sale. I saw something in the window of a farm estate agent in Belluno,' she said while tearing off a large chunk of bread and slathering it with dark-purple jam. 'It was a sweet place nearby and it had a little stream, too, so I called up Dad and he flew right out.'

'But it was damp, and completely covered with trees, so

it would have been dark most of the time,' Nigel chimed in. 'And it wasn't as quiet.'

'So we asked the agent if he had anything else similar,' Sasha picked up. 'He said he had an old mill, but it was in pretty bad shape, and he didn't know if it was worth the trip to see it. But he'd made us curious and we convinced him to take us out to it.'

'I just had such a good feeling about the place when we first came down the hill. Even though we couldn't see anything around it because it was really misty on the day,' Nigel said. 'But the walls were all sound and the place was remarkably dry from the breeze that always comes off the river. I told the agent we wanted it on the spot and I flew back to England to convince Penny.'

'These two had told me what they were plotting over the phone,' Penny said with a bit of grin and a bit of a grimace at her daughter and husband. 'I had my heart set on finding some place in Tuscany – the colours of the land are much more intense there. But the mill is ours and it's beautiful. Don't you think?'

Over the next few summers Nigel, Penny, Jeff and Sasha, along with friends and a few builders they'd dragged out from England, set to work knocking down walls, mending the roof, installing windows, fitting a kitchen that Nigel had built back in England from spare pieces from other jobs, and putting in a basic bathroom. Penny boiled masses of pasta for them every night and made full English breakfasts for the builders every morning. In relatively short order, they had transformed it from an abandoned shell into a unique and quietly stunning little mountain retreat. Yet there was still lots of work to do on the place: repairing stone terracing outside, painting, plastering, putting in drains, guttering and landscaping.

From my American perspective, it was other-worldly – a 300-year-old mill surrounded by trees and wild flowers,

peeking out at the most breathtaking mountains. I was completely enchanted and asked if there was anything that needed doing. So after breakfast, shovel in hand, I started work building an earthen ramp down from the top of a stone wall to the meadow below. I had done jobs like this before: hundreds of times with my father and three brothers I had sawn and hammered and dug and wired. And this work felt as positive and productive as all those projects back in the States, even more so – I felt lightened somehow, needed somehow, by this old mill. Sasha helped me that morning shift some of the bigger stones around and I knew as we heaved and sweated together that what she and I had was more than just good chemistry. I knew then and there that she and I had a future. And I think she knew it too.

That afternoon Sasha took me on our first real walk up beneath the mountains. We drove further north to the town of Agordo, passing a mix of farms and small industry on the way. Val Belluno had always been a working valley. It was where real Italians lived and grafted to make an honest living. Outside of the towns, with their narrow medieval streets and their ancient churches, we saw chisel plants, sawmills and eyeglass factories. Because of this hodge-podge of old and new, the valley had never been, thankfully, choked with tourists.

The cliff-faces on either side of us seemed somehow to grow taller the more the car climbed. When we reached the pass, we parked in front of Rifugio San Sebastiano (one of the small guest houses that dot the Dolomites where you can get a very good, simple meal and a bed for the night without spending too much money), strapped on our packs and headed for Rifugio Carestiatto at the base of the mountain just above. The rich smell of cows in the fields near the pass gave way to the intoxicating scent of pines further up – it was like taking a bath in Christmas trees. Huge firs framed scenes of light and cloud and orangey

mountainsides. The magnificence of it made me forget the exercise and the thinning air and before long I was giddy and breathless. Sasha, however, long used to the steep climbs with less oxygen, was bounding along like a native.

I was dripping with sweat and gasping for air as she sauntered along 20 paces ahead of me without a care. I put my hands on my knees to catch my breath and looked up at her backside swaying further and further away up the trail. I was so into this girl, I wanted her in every possible way – poor sap that I was. There was no way I was going to let her see me collapse. If she wanted to stuff a rucksack full of cheese and water and blankets and slide over scree, then I was going to do the same. If she wanted to scramble over boulders the size of houses, then I was going to do the same or break my neck trying. I would strain every muscle in my body just to wrap myself up in her whims. Hopeless.

‘Are you all right?’ her sweet voice interrupted my daydream. ‘Maybe we should take a break?’

‘No, no!’ I said, lurching myself upright. ‘I was just enjoying the view.’ I smirked inside, while I heaved another breath. ‘I’ll be right there.’ And with that, suppressing the fear of a heart attack, I leapt up the trail and caught her up.

About a half-hour later we’d found a bench out in front of the rifugio and it wasn’t long before prosecco bubbles were tickling our noses. I sat recovering, silently transfixed by snowy peaks licking the midsummer sky. I turned and squinted at the jagged tower of a mountain above the rifugio and asked, ‘Have you ever been up there?’

‘Nope,’ Sasha said brightly, ‘but I’ve always wanted to. One day, maybe.’ This pleased me and she gave my sweaty knee a light slap with the back of her hand. ‘Before I can even think about doing something like that I’ve got to improve my climbing vocabulary,’ she said and began rummaging around in her rucksack. Out she pulled a dog-eared, red-and-green translation dictionary, cracked it

open and started looking for the word for 'harness'.

'I'd have to ask the rifugio keeper if you need any special gear for that trail. Some of them around here are kitted out with steel cables that you have to attach yourself to, but maybe this is something you can just climb. Either way I think we should save this one,' she said and turned her shimmering face to me. 'I've got something else in mind for our first proper overnight walk.'

'I really should start learning *some* Italian,' I lamented.

'Of course you will!' Sasha reassured. 'Living here, it'll be impossible not to.' Then she foraged around in her bag again and pulled out a sheet of paper in a yellow plastic sleeve. 'Here,' she offered. 'This ought to get you started.'

It was a page of idiomatic expressions. I laughed and started to read: '*fame da lupo* – very hungry, *al verde* – broke (no money), *chiaro e tondo* – absolutely'. I paused, inhaled deeply through my nostrils and just let it all sink in.

Over the next few days, we tinkered with bits around the old mill, swam in the stream that ran beside it, watched cheese being made in mountain pastures, ate exquisite salami and sunbathed beside pools of crystal-clear, icy water; yet we still hadn't slept together. Somehow the unstated assumption had just fallen into place that our first time would wait until we were alone and up high in the mountains. I just knew she wanted it this way, so I forced myself not to push things physically.

Maps consulted, rucksacks packed, car loaded, rifugio booked – finally, the moment had arrived. We drove above Feltre on the western side of the valley, among sheep with floppy ears, through tunnels where icicles hung in midsummer and past crumbling little villages with balconies cascading with flowers. We parked the car down below. She knew the way and I followed. We walked in silence, plucking fruit from banks of wild alpine strawberries as we passed. The trail was steep and her breath came hard

and fast as her pace quickened; my heart pounded in my chest, and want coursed in my veins. Just on the cusp of the treeline we found a secluded little clearing well off the trail and spread out a red blanket under the dazzling mountain sun. Our lips exchanged kisses rather than words. She placed a sweet red berry on my tongue. Then we disappeared.

We giggled as we used what was left of the water in our bottle to wash our salty faces. With the sun sliding low, we picked up our bits and pieces, tied our bootlaces and rolled up our red blanket. Relaxed and completely at ease with each other, perhaps for the first time, we strode, pinky hooked in pinky, the last mile to our rifugio above the clouds.

That night, after we finished enormous plates of meat and cheese and polenta around a large hooded fire in the corner of rustic Rifugio Boz, she said dreamily that she was so lucky that she had found someone who liked the mountains as much as she did. I nodded and laughed a bit at what she hadn't said.

At the end of my year in Padua, we faced the first of too many separations. It was one thing living on the same continent, where liaisons were only a two-hour plane ride away, but I was about to move to Buffalo, New York, to start a PhD. I had always had my eye on a career as a lecturer and, given that Sasha was an academic, it now seemed more right than ever that I pursue it. If I could make it work, our time, our schedules, our glorious summer holidays, our lives would be wonderfully in sync.

But this future would come at a price. For Sasha, getting to me (now on the snowy eastern shore of Lake Erie) was much more taxing than it used to be: eight hours in the air, followed by seven hours on the road from New York City up to Buffalo. On her first visit, a couple of months after I'd

started studying, I came down to New York to collect her at JFK. I met her down the ramp from Customs with a small bunch of flowers and a grin so big it hurt my cheeks. It was mid-afternoon, but she had already had a full day of travel; the car ride would be exhausting. She smiled when she spotted me in the crowd and our kiss had a nervous energy about it. I so desperately wanted her to enjoy her first experience of the States because, who could know, we might find ourselves living there at one point. While I was convinced we would have a life together, I wasn't sure what shape it would take. She was anxious for the same reasons.

We didn't speak much in the car on the way up. She had found the 'law enforcement' mentality of American Immigration Control irritating. As we drove, she gaped at the size of the shopping malls and the cars and the buildings. She marvelled at how quickly the city gave way to wide-open suburbs with large houses on ample plots, and at how the suburbs changed in a blink to snowy forests on rolling hills. She held my hand while she goggled out the window.

When we were approaching Buffalo, I roused her and asked her what she might like for breakfast the next morning.

'Anything, sweetheart, I'm not bothered. Maybe some fruit and yogurt,' she said. But then she added suddenly, as if she'd forgotten something crucial, 'As long as there's some tea.' I hadn't yet understood the ritual importance of the tea for Sasha. It wasn't about hydration or warmth; it was about greeting the day in a civilised fashion. Sasha was not at all formal, but she was extremely attached to the ceremonial way tea marked out her day.

'Do you have any Earl Grey?' she asked hopefully.

'No,' I apologised. 'But I can sort you out.'

'But it's 2 a.m.'

'This is America. We're always open for business,' I

grinned, as I pulled the car into Tops International Supermarket. I opened her door and told her to mind the ice. We slid through the entrance and were bathed in white fluorescent light. Sasha's red-rimmed eyes squinted and struggled to focus. 'How can they expect people to work at this hour?' she muttered. 'This place is massive, like an empty warehouse.'

I took her by the hand and skated us to the tea aisle. 'Here you are,' I said with a touch of pride. 'Find what you want while I go and grab some milk and fruit,' and I dashed off. In no more than three minutes, I turned the corner back again into the tea section. There she was, my dynamic, brilliantly clever, mountain-climbing Sasha, on her knees near the other end, sobbing faintly with a plastic-wrapped box dangling loosely from her fingers. I raced up to her, losing an apple on the way.

'I can't find it,' she mumbled between sighs. 'Look, there's Lipton and Nestlé and Brisk and Bromley.' She pulled herself up and started trailing slowly along the shelves. 'Tops Everyday Value Tea, Tops Premium Decaf, Red Rose Original, Barry's Naturally Decaffeinated, Celestial Seasonings Cinnamon Apple, Spiced Herb, Bigelow Cozy Camomile, Stash Premium Peppermint, Sweet Dreams, I Love Lemon—'

'Oh, don't worry, love,' I said, relieved, and now trying not to sound amused. 'I'll find it.'

She went on dreamily listing 'Teekane Herbal Wellness, Liquorice Spice, Tazo Herbal Infusion, Good Earth Original Sweet & Spicy' before I found her a purple box of Earl Grey, tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear and led her by the arm to the checkout.

As I got stuck into work on my PhD about writers experimenting with new technologies, I also returned to one of my old passions: radio. From when I was a young