

"A powerful, vital gut-punch." Laura Bates

# HOLLY BOURNE

## THE PLACES I'VE CRIED IN PUBLIC



## *Can you see the girl crying?*

She's not always easy to spot. She may have her head down, pretending to be on her phone, using her hair to cover her blotchy face. Or she may be leaning against the bus window, turning into the glass so you can't see her tears.

There are telltale signs though – the odd gasp for air, her back jolting with a suppressed sob, or she'll wipe under her eyes, catching the tears and smearing them into her skirt before they give her away.

Girls cry on park benches. Girls cry in train station waiting-rooms. They cry on the dance floor of clubs. Girls cry at the bus stop. Girls cry at the back of lessons. They sit on the pavement and cry on cold concrete at two a.m., their shoes held in their hands. Girls cry in school bathrooms. Girls cry on bridges. They cry on the stairs of house parties.

This is the story of one.

What keeps making her cry?

Or is a better question: *Who?*



## A Bench by the Railway Bridge

It's half two in the morning and I'm back here where it started.

Yes, of course it's cold. It's half two in the morning, mid February, and I'm not dressed properly. I just bunged my coat on over my pyjamas and ran here in my slippers. I'm sat on this bench, shivering violently under the useless faux fur of my coat and I'm not sure why.

You see, I was in bed, doing my usual *not-sleeping* and *trying-to-figure-out-what-the-hell-happened* and *thinking-it's-all-my-fault* and *huddling-into-a-ball-and-disintegrating*, and then, tonight – half an hour ago, to be precise – it became clear.

*I needed to come here.*

My breath escapes in short puffs of crystallized fog that float down to the dormant railway tracks. It's so quiet in this

alleyway. It feels like the whole world is asleep. Apart from me and my broken heart.

I've used up so many tears on you already and it's not helping me get over this any better. So I'm sat here in the freezing cold, my jaw shaking, and I'm trying to connect the dots.

This bench may not look like much. It's got a plank missing, a grey mossy finish from years of weather, and it's plastered in offensive graffiti. But this nondescript bench is significant, because this bench is where I first cried.

Not my first *ever* cry, but the first cry I can link back to you. To the story of us. Though you and I were more of a scribble than a story.

If I can untangle the messy line of biro, if I can trace back the scribble, it might finally make sense.

Here's the starting point. I'm sat right on it.

I pull my coat tighter around myself. I close my eyes, and I remember.



"Don't worry," Mum said, watching me not eat my cornflakes.

"Everyone will be new."

She gave me that smile. The one that begged me not to make her feel guilty about it all.

"Everyone will know at least someone, whereas I know literally no one."

"You will, by the end of the day."

I didn't finish my cereal, so I had to fish the orange pulp out with my fingers before I could pour the leftover milk down the sink. "I hope so," I said, before going back to the bedroom that didn't feel remotely like mine yet. I'd not finished unpacking, which didn't help. Boxes of my life were still piled around the space, waiting for me to admit this was my life now and actually open them. I'd only removed my clothes, record player and vinyl, and, most importantly, my guitar.

I didn't have time to play it but I picked it up anyway, shrugging the strap over my shoulder and perching on the end of my bed. I strummed a chord, feeling instantly calmer. I sang softly.

"Come on, Amelie, or we'll be late," Mum called down the hallway. I still couldn't get used to us not having stairs.

I unwrapped my guitar from around myself and reluctantly put it down. "I'm coming."

I piled into the front seat of our hot car and it was like climbing into an uncomfortable hug. My legs smudged sweat onto the leather. Summer was reluctantly holding on, apparently missing the memo that it was now September. We pulled out of the communal car park and I turned the radio up.

Mum turned it down again. "Are you sure you're going to be okay walking home? Call me if you get lost."

"Mum, there are these things called phones. They have maps on them now and everything."

"Well, you can still call."

We drove along streets I didn't know, rounded corners I didn't know, drove past students I didn't know, who were on the way to the same college as me that I didn't know. They walked in clumps, while I shrank into my seat. We got stuck in traffic as cars struggled to find parking spaces. Exhaust smoke fugged its way through the car's air conditioning, making it smell of pollution.

"I may have to spit you out here," Mum said. "Are you going to be okay?"

I nodded, even though it wasn't the truth. It wasn't her fault any of this was happening. It wasn't Dad's either, not really. Having no one to blame for being ripped out of my old life almost made it worse.

"Hang on." She indicated and yanked the car into a space. I opened the door, readying myself for the big unknown, when Mum reached over and put her hand on my shoulder. "Are you *really* going to be okay?" she asked for the third time, in her posh accent that wasn't an accent since we'd moved down here. "I'm sorry, Amelie. I know you didn't want this."

I smiled for her and nodded for her. "I'll be fine."

She left me on the pavement in a cloud of fumes, and I watched her weave away through the thrumming cars. I wasn't entirely sure where to go so I followed the scatterings of people my age, all walking in the same direction. My skin prickled as my shyness rash erupted across my chest. Great, just what I needed on my first day in a brand-new college in a brand-new part of the country – to be Blotchy Shy Girl.

I fell into step behind two other girls and, despite the heat, did up my denim jacket to hide the worst of my red chest.

My skin got itchier as I imagined the potential hell awaiting me that day.

- Having to nervously stand around, begging people to come and talk to me with my eyes.
- Not knowing where I was going or what I was doing, and feeling insecure about how crap I was at basic human functioning.
- As a result of my shyness, probably attracting some kind of weirdo who I don't like, because they're the only one who talks to me, and then spending the rest of my life being their friend out of duty.
- Freaking about where to sit at lunchtime and ending up in the corner, alone, watching everyone else be the friendly, extroverted person I wish I could be.
- Having to introduce myself and stumbling over my words and my voice going all croaky and my rash getting rashier and everyone thinking I'm a weirdo.

The girls in front chatted excitedly, wisps of their conversation floating over their shoulders.

*"Did you see Laura on results day? She's gone full-on goth. Do you think her new boyfriend knows she loves Taylor Swift? Should we tell him?"* They giggled and my stomach twisted. I forgot how mean girls could be. Back in Sheffield, I had my own little bubble of nice people who I loved and trusted. It had taken sixteen years to find friends who got me and I them. I couldn't believe I had to start again. The girls

turned left and I copied, finding myself face-to-face with my new college, freshly painted for the new year. Streams of students trickled in through various entrances and everyone seemed to know at least someone. They launched themselves into hello hugs, asking one another how their summers had been. They were all laughing and chatting too loudly and excitedly – showing off on this fresh start of a new day. This was a small town. The most they could hope for was to “rebrand” slightly over the summer. Whereas I was entirely new. There was not one known face within this compound I stomped into, in my too-hot tan cowboy boots. And maybe that could be liberating – this chance to start over – except I didn’t want to start over. I wanted to be back in Sheffield with Jessa and Alfie.

*Alfie...*

I almost cried then, in broad daylight, before my first day had even started. Tears prickled the backs of my eyelids and sadness welled up in my intestines. And, because he knew me, because he knew me and loved me so well and so hard, Alfie sensed it.

My phone buzzed, right on time.

**Alfie: I’m thinking of you today. Just be you –  
blotchy shyness rash and all. You WILL make friends.  
Remember, only two years x x**

I stood to one side. A smile twitched across my face, though it was a bittersweet one.



**Amelie: HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT THE RASH  
HAD COME OUT? X**

A sharp bell rang out and I checked the time on my phone – 8.55 a.m. I only had five minutes to try and find room D24 and meet my new form group. I rummaged in my satchel for my map of campus. The paper shook in my hands as I managed to locate the refectory right in front of me, and, apparently D24 was in the media block to the right of it.

*There, I thought. That wasn't so bad. You are coping.*  
My phone buzzed again.

**Alfie: I miss that rash. You'll be amazing today x x**

I found myself closing my eyes. Standing there with the sun warm on my eyelids, the last dregs of late arrivers striding past me, I could picture every contour of Alfie's face. The mole just next to his left eye, every tuft of his misbehaving hair. Instinctively, I typed out a reply.

**Amelie: I love you**

I stared at my screen, watching the cursor flash next to the "u". Another surge of emotions ran through me and I deleted what I'd written. I watched the screen erase the truth, one letter of it vanishing at a time. The bell rang again. I was now late for my first day of whatever the hell my life was now.

Amelie: I miss you

I sent that one.

It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth.



I shake my head. Here, now, on this cold bench at almost three o'clock in the morning. My breath comes out as more of a pant. My body's so freezing I can't imagine ever being warm again. That warm day, not so very long ago, couldn't feel further from this cold witching hour of *everyone-else-is-asleep* o'clock.

*What would've happened if I'd sent that first message?*

That is one of the Big Ifs I've been turning over. What if I *had* told Alfie I loved him? What if I hadn't deleted that truth? What if I'd gone with my gut instinct, the primal part of me that typed out the words *I love you* – even though we had that stupid agreement? If I'd sent that first message, would it have stopped what came afterwards?

I will never know.

Because I didn't tell Alfie I loved him. I only told him I missed him. I pressed *send* and watched one tick turn into two ticks. Then I put my phone back into my bag and ran to the media block.



If you're shy, trust me when I say there's nothing worse than entering a room late. I opened the door to D24 in a flustered sweaty heap and everyone turned around like meerkats. I tugged at my denim jacket as my rash bloomed further across my body.

"Sorry I'm late," I stuttered to my new form tutor.

"Don't worry. You're not even the last to arrive. Lots of you get lost on the first day." He gestured to an empty chair in the circle. I sank into it and avoided eye contact with the people sat opposite. "As I was saying," he continued, "my name's Alistair and I'm your form tutor for the next two years." He looked young, with ginger hair and a pink shirt. "You're lucky, I'm pretty damn awesome."

The circle laughed self-consciously and I looked up to take everyone in. I just KNEW they'd all spent ages picking out today's *this-is-me* outfit and the room reeked of *trying-too-hard*. One guy sitting opposite had a political slogan emblazoned across his chest and held a leather-bound journal so we knew he Cared About The World and Wrote Things In This Special Journal. The girl next to him showed off freshly dyed pink hair, large cupped headphones like a necklace, and she wore a denim pinafore over yellow tights. Not that I could judge. I'd agonized over exactly which granny dress to wear and couldn't handle the fact it was too hot for my usual cardigan. "Even if you went to war, you'd go in an oversized cardigan," Alfie had once said, before removing my cardigan and looking at my shoulders like they were the best pair of shoulders in the whole goddamned world. My fashion style

is essentially, *If some old person has recently died in a dress, that's the dress I want to wear.* I don't even own a pair of jeans.

The door burst open and a girl with red hair and a perfect fringe appeared on the threshold. "Is this D24?" she asked, not seeming to care how everyone's heads had craned in her direction.

"It is indeed," Alistair said. "Sit down, sit down."

She walked over in her own time and smiled before sitting next to me.

"Hi," she whispered to me, just like that. "I'm Hannah."

I felt words catch in my throat but managed a "Hi" back.

Alistair made us wait five minutes for the last latecomer, but they didn't show. He proceeded to welcome us to college and explain how it was different to our secondary schools. We were allowed to wear our own clothes. We wouldn't get detentions. We didn't even have to turn up to class, though we'd get kicked out if we got less than eighty per cent attendance. Today all our lessons would be introductory, before the real timetable started the next day.

"Now, you're organized into forms based on your subjects and you guys are all specializing in the performing arts in some way," he explained. "I'm head of PA. That's why I'm your tutor." He then unexpectedly jumped onto the table and started cancan-ing and doing jazz hands while we all laughed and looked at one another in disbelief. *"Therefore I'm expecting all of you to sign up to this term's talent show,"* he sang like an old-fashioned crooner. Alistair twirled, jumped

off the desk, and landed back onto the grey carpet. "Right, let's all get to know each other."

The following hour was hell's teeth. Actually, you know what? I think maybe that's making too light of it. Alistair made us stand up and freakin' *sing* three facts about ourselves. I squirmed in my chair, my rash spreading down and itching my stomach as no one else seemed that embarrassed. I guess performing arts students aren't natural introverts – in fact, I'm the only singer I've met with significant social anxiety.

*"I'm Darla,"* sang the girl with pink hair. *"I love writing songs, taking photos of sunsets, and living every day like it's my last."*

*"Hello, Darla,"* we were forced to sing back.

Leather Notebook Boy, to be fair, was not a happy bunny. "I'm George," he said gruffly. "I like books, and football, and politics, and I think I may be in the wrong form because I'm not studying any performing arts."

Alistair burst out laughing. *"Oh no, George,"* he sang, all dramatically like we'd suddenly walked into a musical. *"You may very well be in the wrong room. Let me check my notes!"* He twirled again and picked up his clipboard. *"No, your name isn't on here,"* he sang again. *"I'm so sorry, but you don't belong heeeeeeeere."*

*"Bollocks,"* George said.

Alistair skipped over and peered at George's welcome sheet. *"You're in B24, not D24,"* he sang out.

"Double bollocks."

*"Please do not swear in my classroooooom..."*

George collected his stuff, still cradling his leather notebook. "Let's sing him out," Alistair suggested, before bursting into "So Long, Farewell" from *The Sound of Music*. Everyone joined in, like this was a totally normal occurrence. Apart from Hannah, who rolled her eyes at me and mimed shooting the side of her head.

When it was her turn, she stood up, and said, "I do drama, not music. I'm not singing."

*"As you wish."*

"I am Hannah." Her voice demanded to be listened to, in a quiet, assured way. "I like drama but I hate musicals, and this, this..." She paused for effect. "This is my idea of hell on earth."

The room gasped but Alistair was totally unbothered by her criticism. "I can't believe someone in my form doesn't like musicals," he muttered. "There must be some kind of mistake."

Hannah shrugged and sat back down. It was my turn. Everyone twisted towards me and my chest tightened, my lungs drawing in on themselves.

*Pretend it's a gig, pretend it's a gig, I told myself as I scrambled out of my seat. How am I supposed to sing when I can't breathe? Okay, pretend it's a gig. You get through enough of them somehow. Breathe...breathe...*

"My name's Amelie." My voice cracked but I recovered as I sang. "I just moved here from Sheffield. And I like songwriting

*and singing and playing the guitar."*

As always, like with my gigs, the world hadn't ended. People were vaguely smiling, hardly interested.

Alistair grinned as I sat down. "You have a lovely singing voice, Amelie," he commented. Everyone turned towards me again and I essentially became just a shyness rash. I hated him for a moment – for singling me out and making me the centre of attention, even though it was a nice compliment. I slunk down in my chair and hid behind my hair until the exercise was finished.

Things didn't improve in the public-humiliation Olympics. Alistair then made us play "hilarious" ice-breaking activities. One was a game called Zip Zap Boing where we had to pass "a ball of energy" around the circle, using a series of ridiculous sounds and actions. I only zipped, which meant saying the word "zip" and passing the "energy" from one side of myself to another. Hannah only zipped too, and muttered under her breath, "This is awful and I want to die." I smiled at her widely to try and show her we were the SAME and we could BE FRIENDS. Then we were given bingo cards with things like *Favourite colour is pink* and *Likes to run* on them, and were instructed to find people with these traits. I almost considered dropping out of college right there and then, and telling my parents it wasn't for me. However, a bingo square said *Comes from another place* and everyone flocked to me right away and I didn't have to approach anyone or say anything apart from "Yes, Sheffield" multiple times. Once everyone had ticked me off, they started chatting to each other like it was

the simplest thing in the world. I stood on the edges, clutching my bingo card, my armpits sweating, missing my old life and my old friends. Then I heard Hannah's voice behind me.

"Can you pretend to like pink for me?" she asked.

I spun and smiled goofily at her. "I mean, it's *always* been my favourite colour."

"Great. Wow. What a coincidence." She marked it down on her sheet. "And, do you have any pets?"

I nodded. "Yep. A unicorn."

"Me too!"

Both our smiles grew wider and I wrote down her name in that square. "It's Hannah, right?" I asked.

"Yep. And I can pretend to have broken a bone, if you want?"

"Brilliant. Which one?"

"All of them." She shrugged. "I jumped down an elevator shaft in protest against this ice-breaker game. Broke every bone in my body. I'm a miracle of science."

We both giggled and our bonding continued.

"Do you have curly hair?" I asked her.

"I mean, when I curl it. Yes, yes I do."

"Are you left-handed?"

"Sometimes I put out my left hand to look for the L shape, because I forget my left from right. Does that count?"

"Totally counts."

"Right, my turn to tick some off. Have you ever been abroad?"

"I lived in Sheffield," I replied.



"Totally is abroad."

Darla interrupted us by yelling "BINGO!" We all clapped her and she did an actual faux Oscar acceptance speech.

Alistair then talked us through the campus, and how the timetable worked, and said we could come to him any time we needed. Despite his extrovertness, I kind of liked him. Form time would definitely never be boring. He dismissed us and everyone trickled out of the door, chatting like they were friends already.

I dawdled with my bag, taking a bit too long to fit my notepad in. Hannah was fiddling with hers and I hoped we might talk more. She zipped hers up and raised an eyebrow at me. "Well, we survived. Do you feel inducted?"

"I feel like I may need therapy for the rest of my life."

She laughed. "What have you got next?" We fell into step and pushed our way out of the media block into the sunshine. Hundreds of students hurried from A to B, stopping to check their own maps to figure out where exactly "B" was.

"English language," I said.

She pulled a pair of mirrored aviators down onto her nose. "Oh no, I'm doing lit. Otherwise we might've been in the same class. We're heading to the same block though. Have you got a map?"

I walked with Hannah all the way to my next lesson. She told me she'd chosen to come to college rather than stay at her secondary school. "It was a religious school and they banned sixth-form girls from wearing vest tops, even in the summer. I ain't staying somewhere like that." She was one of

only five students who didn't stay on. We stopped outside my classroom door, and I checked the number to ensure I was in the right place. "Some of us are meeting for coffee actually," Hannah said, adjusting the strap on her rucksack. "There's this place in town called BoJangles. You can come if you like? At lunchtime?"

I could've hugged her. Because, had it been up to me, I'd never have mentioned seeing her ever again even though I was desperate to. I bleated out yes and asked where BoJangles was.

She showed me on her phone. "It's so cute you don't know your way around our tiny town," she said. "Don't worry, it takes about five minutes to get the hang of it. Anyway," she took her sunglasses off and waved goodbye. "See you at lunch."

"Bye," I called after her, watching her red hair merge into the chaos of new students getting lost in the corridors. "Thank you," I said quietly, almost to myself.



It's so cold, I'm going to have to leave soon. There's a thin layer of ice creeping closer towards my arse. I bow my head, pull my legs up, and push my knees into my eye sockets.

Hannah isn't my friend any more.

I don't really have friends any more.



The rest of that first day went as well as it could. I managed to find all my rooms. I met my teachers. They told us how much harder A levels were compared to GCSEs. My music teacher, Mrs Clarke, seemed cool and she was the most important one. I went to BoJangles and I sat quietly as Hannah introduced me to Jack and Liv. We bonded over how the North is different to the South.

"So you say 'bAth', whereas we say 'bARth'."

"Gravy? On chips? That's the most disgusting thing I've ever heard."

"So, where exactly is Sheffield? Oh, okay. And what's the Midlands? I thought Sheffield was up north?"

"You play guitar?" they asked, once we'd exhausted all the words I say differently. "And you write your own songs? Wow."

On the whole, as first days go, it was okay. These guys all knew each other better than they knew me, but they'd gone to college to meet new people and I was a new person. Hannah clearly led this little group of defectors from their religious school, and Jack clearly fancied Hannah. He stared adoringly while she described how naff the drama facilities were at their old school. "So, why have you moved all the way down here?" Hannah asked, checking her perfect fringe in a hand mirror.

"My dad got made redundant. He couldn't find another job up north."

Hannah put her mirror away and looked at me with genuine sympathy. "Wow, that sucks." The rest of the table made

supportive noises over the foam of their coffee.

"It's okay," I lied. "My mum grew up near here, so I've been down south a few times before."

"Well, just in case you don't know," she said. "We put ketchup on our chips, not gravy."

"Heathen."

And we smiled the smiles of new friends being made.



I hadn't met you yet, of course. This was still Before You. Maybe I sensed you though – on that very first day – walking home in the sun, to the place that wasn't yet home.

All I know is that I just about felt okay as I walked back to the new flat. My phone led me down this alleyway as a shortcut, past the backs of people's gardens.



I'd have two hours to play guitar before my parents got back and snatches of new lyrics drifted into my head as I walked through the speckles of sunshine. The alleyway curved left and I emerged onto a rickety railway bridge. My phone told me to cross it, so I did, stopping in the middle to look out at the train tracks vanishing into the point of a triangle. My brain got all quiet and a lyric wiggled its way through my subconscious.

*I've got a horizon either side of me... I've got your love*

*etched deep inside of me... I want to go back, but life has other plans...*

I knew right away it was a keeper. The start of a song. I bashed the lines out on my phone as a memo note, keen to get it down before it vanished back into the ether. I'd just finished typing when my phone started vibrating in my hand.

My heart twisted over as I held it to my ear.

"Hello?" I said, even though every singing, sad part of my body knew who it was.

"Ammy! How did it go?"

Alfie's voice was the sound of safety. The sound of comfort and home. And yet it sounded so far away from this bridge.

I tried to ignore my lurching stomach. "It went okay actually. I met this drama girl, Hannah, who was pretty friendly and cool. The mixing equipment at college is good."

He laughed and I could picture him doing it – the way he always held his hand up to his chin, the way one eye closed up a little bit more than the other. "Well, that's the important thing," he said. "And I'm glad not all southern fairies are too awful."

My phone tucked between my shoulder and my ear, I walked towards this bench at the far end of the bridge, sitting down right where I'm sat now.

"I don't think I'll make any friends if I refer to everyone as southern fairies."

He laughed again. "True! But you can secretly think it at all times. In fact, we won't let you back into Yorkshire if you don't."

"You better let me back me into Yorkshire!"

Laughing in the background, the noise of a scuffle, Alfie called "HEY" and then Jessa's voice boomed into my ear. "AMELIE, WE MISS YOUUUUUUUUUUUU. COME BACK UP NORTH, YOU TWAT."

My smile split my face in half. "I miss you too."

"School was SO weird without you today. I even considered putting a cardigan around a balloon and pretending it was you."

"I'm not currently wearing a cardigan," I told her. "It's too warm down here."

"OH MY GOD, GUYS," she shouted away from the speaker. "SHE SAYS IT'S SO HOT DOWN SOUTH SHE ISN'T EVEN WEARING A CARDIGAN!"

There were sounds of disbelief from my old friends. "Pics or I won't believe it," Kimmy shouted. Then laughter and more disturbance and I found myself bent over, pressing my hand to my guts.

"Give me the phone back, Jessa. Jessa?" I heard Alfie negotiate. "I'll let you have a chip. Okay, three chips. That's more than three! Okay...hang on... Sorry, Ammy, you still there?"

"I'm still here."

"Hang on. I'll let them walk in front so we can talk properly."

I heard the crunch of Alfie walking across gravel. "Where are you guys?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from squeaking.

"Oh, the Botanical Gardens – same old, same old." I could

picture them. I knew exactly which chip shop they'd gone to, and I knew exactly which bench they'd sit on.

"What have you got on your chips?" Though I already knew the answer.

"Gravy, cheese and mayonnaise – the secret ingredient!"

"It's the mayonnaise that makes it so wrong."

"I'm before my time, Ammy, you know that..." There was a pause down the line. "I miss you," he said, eventually. "Today was weird and horrible."

I gulped and blinked up at the blue of the sky. "Two years will go quickly enough."

"That's what we keep saying." Another pause. "But, you're okay? I was thinking about you – sending you happy thoughts. Did you get them?"

One tear escaped. The beginning of this. I collected it with the tip of my finger and flicked it off. "I did. Thank you."

We both sighed, not saying it. We'd said it all before I left. "How did your first A level chemistry lesson go?" I tried to steer the conversation towards upbeat. "Were you allowed to use the Bunsen burner?"

"How many times do I have to tell you there's more to it than Bunsen burners?"

"They're the only reason you like science, and you need to stop lying to yourself."

Alfie laughed, but it was a sad one. I could hear Kimmy and Jessa arguing somewhere near him. "I'd better go," he said, "they're eating all my chips."

I did not want the phone conversation to end. I did not

want to lose the sound of his voice. But we'd agreed to get on with this, we'd agreed to accept the shitty situation for what it was. We'd agreed to put us on ice.

"It's only two years," Alfie had said, clutching my face the night before I left, my entire sixteen years of life packed into cardboard boxes. "Then we'll both be at Manchester and we can be together again."

"What if you can't wait for me that long?"

"You know I will."

"I don't want you to feel tied to me and resent me," I'd said, crying and not sure I really meant it.

"I won't. And neither will you. We agreed, remember? We're free to do anything with anyone, apart from falling in love."

"It's literally impossible for me to fall in love with someone who isn't you."

I'd certainly meant it at the time.

We'd kissed and both cried and had sex for only the eighth time, and it was bittersweet and clumsy and a bit snotty, but still lovely. Afterwards, we stayed up all night, whispering about how amazing Manchester would be.

"Okay," I said, only two weeks later – feeling like every centimetre of distance between us was an individual knife in my stomach. "Thanks for calling. I really appreciate it." Another tear splashed onto my dress before I had a chance to catch it.

"I'm so glad your first day went okay."

"Me too...thanks again."



He rang off and I looked at my phone for a very long time as a wave of grief hit. My phone wobbled in my shaking hands and a teardrop splashed onto the screen. That was all it took, visual confirmation of my sadness. On this bench, this very bench, all those months ago – when the sun was shining and I hadn't met you yet – I dropped my head onto my lap and I cried. Anyone could've walked past and seen me. The grief was too raw for me to care. My back shuddered, my dress splattered with salty tears and trails of snot.



I am on this same bench now, my bum numb from the cold. I'm sat in exactly the same place and I want to reach through a wormhole in time and comfort myself, pat my own back. I reach out with my gloved hand, like I can touch my former self. Like I can wipe away her tears. Like I can pull her hair back from her ear and whisper into it, urging me not to do all the things I was about to do. The things that led to the me I am now. This empty husk, this confused mess.

It started here.

I don't understand what happened yet, but I know it started here.

If I can join the dots, maybe I can begin to understand. Because I don't understand any of it. Nothing about the last six months makes any sense. Not how I behaved or what I've lost and how much it hurts. It's a mess within a mess.

This bench is Dot Number One. This is the first place I ever cried in public.

I close my eyes against the freezing night air. I feel Past Me rise up, like I'm sitting on my own ghost. I feel the tears on her face, the shudders of her back. I reach through time and I whisper to her:

“Oh, Amelie, you haven't seen anything yet.”

The words turn to frost and float out over the railway tracks.