

Eleven
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I

A bone-cold February night. London is being pelted with snow. The flakes dance in the neon beams of street lights and settle in scarves around the necks of parked cars.

In a car park around the back of a concrete building in the west of the city, a thin fox scuttles for warmth, leaving coquettish paw-print trails for early risers to marvel over in a few hours. Five levels up, through the steadily whiting-out windows of a radio studio, Xavier Ireland watches the fox seek out a nook in the shadow of a metal recycling unit.

'Well, I'd stay safely inside, in the warm,' Xavier advises his invisible, London-wide audience, 'and keep calling in. Next, we're going to hear from a man who's had three marriages ... and three divorces.'

'Ouch!' chips in his co-presenter and producer, Murray, in characteristically banal style, flicking a button to start the next song.

'Very pretty out there,' says Xavier.

'It'll be cer, cer, cer, chaos in the morning,' Murray stammers.

In 2003 Xavier was working for this radio station as a runner, making tea, plugging wires into walls, when he saw snow for the first time. He had emigrated from Australia only a few weeks before, changed his name – which was previously Chris Cotswold – and thrown himself into the idea of starting a new life in this faraway country, where he had lived as a baby, but never since. He was impressed, then as now, by how flimsy each individual snowflake was and the sheer number of them needed to coat a street. At the same time, though, the unfamiliar sight and the bitter cold only reminded him that most of the earth was now between him and his home, him and his friends.

Xavier graduated over time from runner to Murray's assistant, and eventually those roles reversed, so it's now Xavier who acts as counsellor to the show's large, sleepless constituency.

'I just wonder what's wrong with me,' says their current caller, a fifty-two-year-old teacher, who lives on his own on the edge of a housing estate in Hertfordshire.

The wavering mobile connection saws off some of his sentences halfway through. Murray runs his finger across his throat, to suggest they move on to another caller – this call is a good three minutes old already – but Xavier shakes his head.

'I mean, I'm a decent person,' continues the depressed teacher, whose name is Clive Donald, and who, after making this call, will claw what patchy sleep he can from the rest of the night, before waking up, putting on a grey suit, and getting into his car with thirty maths books in a weather-beaten briefcase on the back seat. 'I ... I support a charity, for example. I've got quite a few interests. There's nothing – obviously wrong with me, you might say. Why can't I make a marriage work? Why do I keep making mistakes?'

'It's too easy to assume that everything's your fault,' Xavier tells him, and all the other listeners in their homes around the city. 'Believe me, I've wasted months – well, years – reliving mistakes. Eventually, I made myself stop thinking about them.'

At last Clive, sufficiently consoled to find the will to go to bed if nothing else, thanks Xavier and says goodbye.

Murray punches a button.

'And now the joys of the news and traffic,' he says. 'See you in a second.'

Murray goes into the corridor and props open a fire door, so that he can smoke a cigarette in the stark air. The snow is coming down with an un-British ferocity, like hail or sleet instead of the pretty featheriness of what usually passes for snow. Xavier takes a sip of coffee from a yellow mug with the words **BIG CHEESE** and a picture of a slice of cheese on it. This was a Christmas present from Murray a couple of years ago, and in its rather garish functionality, its awkward size, it somehow resembles its giver.

A few miles away, a shivering Big Ben – just visible from Xavier's studio on a clearer night – strikes two.

'These are the headlines,' reads a woman miles away, her voice, almost completely toneless, appearing simultaneously on syndicated stations all over the UK. 'In a couple of hours, the country will wake to the heaviest snowfall in ten years.'

It's an odd turn of phrase, Xavier thinks to himself, 'the country waking', as if the UK were a giant, silent boarding-school eventually roused by the morning bell. In London alone, as the success of Xavier's four-hour stint testifies, there is a huge, phantom community of people awake at night for all sorts of reasons: work schedules, unusual hobbies, guilt, or fear, or illness – or, of course, simple enthusiasm for the show. Xavier looks again at the clogged windowpane and imagines the still, snowed-on London stretching for miles outside. He tries to picture Clive Donald, the maths teacher, slowly hanging up the phone after the call and boiling the kettle, instinctively taking two mugs out of a cupboard, then putting one back. He thinks of all the regular callers: the lorry drivers fiddling with the dial as the signal fades on the M1 out of London, the elderly ladies with nobody else to talk to. Then in a vague way he considers all the half-million people on London's night-shift, just beyond the boundaries of the car park with its creeping fox, its silent corners and, tonight, the building channels of snow.

One of Clive Donald's pupils, Julius Brown, seventeen years old and an obese one hundred and thirty kilograms, is crying quietly in his room. Despite regular workouts at the gym, he doesn't seem to be able to combat his obesity. He went on medication for epilepsy when he was fourteen; one of the side-effects was a startling weight gain, and although no doctor can really explain it, he continues to expand almost visibly each time he eats. Every school day is full of insults: people make fart-noises as he sits down, gangs of girls laugh in their impenetrable way as he passes in the playground. He's studying three A levels including information technology and wants to design software, but expects to end up manning a helpline for thinner people whose computers won't start up. He senses the snowfall

without even looking outside: it was bitterly cold when he got the bus home from the restaurant where he works some evenings. He'd give anything for school to be cancelled tomorrow.

Others are thinking just the opposite, like Jacqueline Carstairs, the mother of a boy a few school years below Julius. She is a freelance journalist with a fast, aggressive typing style like someone playing rock piano. Her husband has agreed to take their son Frankie to school tomorrow morning, so that she can stay up late and finish writing an article on Chilean wine; provided school goes ahead, she will then have time to work in peace tomorrow as well. Sharp-eared from years of parenting, she picks up the tissue-soft, almost undetectable sound of snow landing in the plastic recycling box outside. She punches into a search engine the name of a Chilean actor, now based in the UK, who features in an advertising campaign for the wine her piece is about.

The actor's psychotherapist, Dr Maggie Reiss (pronounced 'Rice'), is sitting on the toilet in her house in Notting Hill. Originally from New York, she has practised in London since 1990, and now boasts a long list of well-known clients from the worlds of entertainment, business and fashion. Two years ago she was diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome, which she attributes to the unreasonable attitudes of many of her clients: their demands, their self-importance, even aggression, sometimes. Seated beneath a Klimt print which is a reproduction of an original found at the MOMA, she stares out of the bathroom window across the whitening roofs and chimneys. She wonders if anyone uses a chimney nowadays or if they are more or less ornamental, retained by London as part of its renowned package of eccentricities. Maggie's red silk nightgown is collected in her lap. She sighs and thinks about one of her more highly strung patients, a politician who – even at this moment – is amongst the number of Londoners committing adultery. Today, he was particularly difficult in their session, making absurd threats to sue her if she breached confidentiality. He can go to hell, thinks Maggie, her stomach churning and complaining. I don't need to feel like this. I don't care if he lives or dies.

Just a few doors down from Maggie, George Weir, a retired bricklayer, really is dying. The two have nodded to each other in the street several times, but never spoken. As Xavier sips his coffee three miles to the west, George is in the throes of a heart attack, gasping desperately for air that suddenly seems partitioned off from his mouth by some invisible screen. He writhes inch by inch towards the phone to call his daughter, but it's too late, and there'd be nothing she could do in any case. He was born in Sunderland seventy years ago this very week. He had been intending to go to his bowls club tomorrow, although in fact it will be cancelled because of the weather, and then cancelled again next week as a mark of respect to him.

One of George Weir's last thoughts on earth is a memory of having to decline a Latin verb – *audere*, to dare – and, stuck halfway, being hammered on the knuckles by Mr Partridge. More than fifty years late it comes to him how the verb was meant to go. As he fights in vain for breath he also remembers learning that Mr Partridge was dead, perhaps twenty-five years ago, and feeling a certain satisfaction that, at last, the generation of sticklers and sadists who had plagued his school days was dying out. But now George himself, unthinkable, is dying, and he will be as ruthlessly obscured by time as Mr Partridge and all the rest.

Jesus, he thinks – despite never having been a religious, or emotional, man – Jesus Christ, don't let this be it. But this is it. George will enter cardiac arrest shortly, and by the time Xavier and Murray drive home, he will be waiting, head back and mouth frozen open, for one of Maggie's neighbours to find him. In a few days' time a hearse bearing his body will pick its way solemnly through the remnants of the snow to Abbey Park Cemetery, glimpsed momentarily from his living room by Xavier, who for now continues to gaze out of the window at this canvas of tiny, unseen happenings.

'Back on air in fer, fer, forty-five seconds,' says Murray, resettling in his swivel chair and rotating gently back and forth. Xavier thinks for a moment more about his first experience of snow on that night five years ago, and then hastily turns his thoughts to the present: the chilly studio and the callers waiting for his attention.

By the time they drive home, just after four, the snow is thick on the roads. Xavier, a well-proportioned six foot three, sits in the passenger seat, his leather jacket drawn tight around his body, feet drumming on the floor for warmth. Murray, stout and bushy-haired, is ushering the car forward in fits and starts as if geeing up a reluctant horse.

'Good show tonight,' says Murray, nodding his big head of curly hair. 'That man with the three wives was a deadweight, though. Should have lost him quicker.'

'I think we had to keep him on. He sounded pretty lonely.'

'You're a good man, Xavier.'

'I wouldn't go that far.'

There is a somehow weighty silence. Murray clears his throat. The dutiful click-click of the windscreen wipers adds to the impression that he is about to say something important.

'Wer, wer, what do you think about going to a speed-dating night? Tomorrow night. It's in this place in cer, Camden.'

'What?'

'You know, speed dating. You go round meeting lots of women. And then ...'

'Yes, I'm familiar with the idea. I'm trying to work out if you're serious about us doing something like that.'

Murray rubs his nose with his free hand.

'I mean, wer, wer, we've both been single for a wer, while.' His stammer tends to gather momentum at moments of embarrassment, as if his voice were an old hard drive trying to download each word individually. 'W' is often the first casualty.

'I'm pretty happy single, mate.'

'*I*m not.'

The car makes a laboured turn around a skiddy corner next to a postbox, collection times obscured by its new coat of snow.

'I don't think I'm in an ideal position for a singles event. I can't say I'm Xavier from the radio. Imagine how embarrassing it would be if one of the women was a listener.'

'Well, use your old name. Call yourself Chris. What was wrong with that one, name in the first place, anyway?'

'Well, whatever name I say, they're still going to ask what I do for a living.'

'Make up a job.'

'So, basically, you want me to meet twenty-five strangers and lie repeatedly to all of them.'

'They'll all be lying,' says Murray, 'that's what people do to make themselves attractive.'

Murray carefully snaps the indicator, although there are no other cars on the road, and trundles shakily down the sharp hill towards 11 Bayham Road.

'Do you really think this is the way you're going to find someone?' Xavier asks. 'Hundreds of brief conversations in a noisy bar?'

'Have you got a better idea?'

Xavier sighs. Nearly anything would be a better idea. It should be obvious to Murray that, with his stammer, he is very poorly adapted to the three-minute date. Naturally, Xavier doesn't want to spell this out to him.

'Well, all right. It'll be good to cross another solution off the list, at least.'

As he pads down the path, his feet sinking surprisingly deep into the wad of snow, like candles into butter icing on a cake, Xavier glances back and exchanges a wave with Murray.

At a broadcasting-industry party last Christmas, an influential producer – short and buxom, in telescopic heels – tried to interest Xavier in leaving Murray and pitching for his own show: something which people have been doing ever since Xavier began to make a name for himself.

'You know, no offence, but he's holding you back,' she shouted, leaning up and breathing cocktail-soured air into Xavier's face. She was the sort of woman who shouted at everyone, as if, being so diminutive, she was used to having to convey her words over a great distance. 'He's holding you back ... What's his name?'

'Murray.'

'Exactly, babe.' She grabbed Xavier's wrist as if they might be about to dance, or kiss. Not being a regular at corporate parties, Xavier often finds himself taken aback by the ill-becoming intimacies of the people who wield power in his business. 'I was talking about you just the other day in a meeting.' She mentioned a couple of high-up figures. 'You should be looking at TV, I mean it, you'd look great on camera, or if you prefer radio there's all sorts of other things. But you need to be on your own.'

Xavier glanced uneasily across the room at Murray, who was hovering at the edge of a group, unsuccessfully trying to drop a word here and there into a fast-flowing conversation.

'I'll think about it.'

'Do think about it.' She pressed a business card into his hand.

He slipped the card into his trouser pocket, where it still is now, in his wardrobe. He did not, of course, relay the conversation to Murray; as always when these situations arise he said that it was just small talk.

Xavier watches Murray, with his clumsy doggedness, marshal the car up the hill in a series of grinds and jumps.

As he lies in bed in a waiting room between thoughts and dreams, Xavier finds his mind being dragged back to the conversation in the car, and remembers the day he changed his name, two weeks after landing in London. The actual process was surprisingly undramatic, a matter of filling out forms and taking them to a grey office in Essex, and waiting for confirmation by post a few days later. But the infinite choice of new names had been rather daunting.

He settled on his new initials, XI, first. A number of things seemed to point in their direction. Firstly, *XI* was a little-known but valid word which he played to win a Scrabble tournament the same week he changed his name. Of course the letters meant eleven in Roman numerals, too, and this is a number he's always been inexplicably attached to: it was no surprise to him to end up living, as he does, at 11 Bayham Road. Xavier was one of the only first names he could think of to fit the bill; Ireland, the surname he chose, had no specific relevance either. But taken as a whole, Xavier Ireland seemed to work quite well – exotic, unique, but somehow plausible.

Changing his name had felt significant because the old one, Chris Cotswold, had had a decisive role to play in forming the key relationships of his life so far. He met his three best friends, Bec, Matilda and Russell, when the alphabetical register threw their surnames together in sequence in Fourth Grade. They were sorted into groups and given one of Aesop's fables to act out. Chris, as he then was, took charge; he cast Bec, well dressed even at nine in tights and red shoes, as the fox; Matilda, hair in plaits, as the sheep; the chubby Russell as the boat which would take them across the river. As they started to rehearse, Matilda's nose began to bleed. He will always remember the ominous drip-drip on the floor tiles, and her small, composed, freckly face a road map of dirty dark blood-trails. She sat, with a nine-year-old's indifference, the drops gliding down her nose like raindrops on a pane.

Chris rummaged in the pocket of his shorts for a scrap of grubby tissue to give her.

'I'll go and tell Mrs Hobson.'

'Don't do that. It's stopped.'

'No, I don't mean I'll dob you in. I mean – she can help.'

'Please don't tell her.'

She clutched his elbow. He stayed where he was. The two of them had just taken their first steps towards their first kiss, at a barbecue in fifteen years' time.

The group agreed, with the taciturn efficiency kids sometimes demonstrate, to gloss over the nosebleed by working extra hard on their presentation. That afternoon, Chris and Matilda, Russell and Bec walked to the bus stop four abreast, and nobody else dared to speak to them. Chris was so happy he couldn't sleep; he was in a gang.

The gang of four, as they were later to be called by mutual friends, became an institution. Bec was elegant and orderly, Matilda freckled and scruffy, always in laddered tights, T-shirts too big or small; Russell slow and ponderous, constantly needing Chris's help with homework. Russell and Bec became a couple at age fourteen: Russell's chunky face, from then on, bore the permanent expression of a man who has found a woman far beyond his reasonable expectations. Chris and Matilda took a little longer. They maintained that their friendship was too precious to risk on a romance. Nonetheless it seemed a

matter of time, because it was the only outcome that made sense. The four of them went on holidays together, took voluntary jobs together, were routinely invited to parties and even weddings as a group, as if they were one person. They were scarcely out of each other's sight for more than a day in twenty years.

After a short indulgence in nostalgia Xavier manages to drift off to sleep; but, as very often, his dream drags him back to Melbourne. He's in the Botanic Gardens with the gang of four, as well as Michael, Bec and Russell's baby son. Michael takes a few faltering steps, chasing a bird with a long beak; his small legs get in each other's way and he topples over. Everyone laughs, but Michael starts to cry in pain. Throughout this, Xavier is not quite immersed in the dream: even as he watches it, some part of his brain knows it is not really happening, could never happen, and makes a conscious effort to emerge from it.

Eventually Xavier is yanked out of the dream and the disappeared times it shakily presents by an urgent thumping on the door. He sits straight up in bed. The thumping stops and then restarts. Through the drawn curtains comes a subdued white glow, and he remembers the snow last night. Wearing the T-shirt and boxer shorts he slept in, Xavier stumbles to the front door and opens it cautiously.

At first there seems to be nobody there. Xavier looks down and there at knee-height is a three-year-old boy who, rather taken aback by the success of his door-thumping, is wondering what to do next. Xavier and Jamie – who lives in the garden flat downstairs, and will one day develop an antibody against two kinds of cancer – look at each other.

Before either can say anything, Jamie's mother has come up the stairs and onto the landing.

'Come here, Jamie! JAMIE!' she yells, and then, to Xavier, 'Oh, I'm so sorry!'

'That's fine,' says Xavier.

'What are you doing bothering the man?' she reprimands her son, who spiritedly resists her attempts to take his hand. 'Come on.'

Jamie yells something about the snow.

'Yes, we'll go out in the snow as soon as Mummy's parcel is delivered.'

Jamie shakes his head and hits a radiator with his little fist; the parcel is nowhere near a good enough excuse. He moans and skips about like a dog on too short a lead.

His mother, whose name is Mel, grimaces at Xavier.

'I'm really sorry.'

'It's fine,' says Xavier.

They look at each other for a few seconds, uneasy. Mel is embarrassed because this is yet another instance of her having failed to control her son. Xavier feels awkward because, even though Mel knows that he works nights, there is something shaming about having just woken up when the other person has clearly been awake and dressed for some hours. Mel feels like a poor parent because there is no father to take Jamie out in the snow, because her marriage ended in ill will last year, and she hasn't yet stopped feeling that everyone aware of this fact is in possession of a negative opinion of her.

After all these embarrassments have been played out in silence, the two of them smile at each other sheepishly and Mel disappears down the stairs with Jamie in reluctant tow.

Jamie has a track record of misbehaviour dating back to long before Mel's husband left; almost back to the night, which Xavier remembers well, when a black cab pulled up outside and the soon-to-be-separated couple triumphantly emerged with their new treasure in a Moses basket. Xavier, who had a night off from the radio show – so it must have been a Friday or Saturday – marvelled at how tiny a human could be, and how this inert thing, his fingernails almost too small to see, could have a whole complicated life mapped out ahead of him. That is, if lives *are* mapped out in advance, which Xavier often likes to believe they are.

Almost from that first night, the new resident of 11 Bayham Road began to make an impression. When Xavier came back from the show at four thirty in the morning, the lights would always be on in the garden flat, and the silhouettes of the weary first-time parents would flicker against the curtains. He would hear the husband, Keith, going leaden-footed to work in the morning, and their tired arguments in the early evening. But Jamie's specific aptitude, beyond mere noise-making, was for mischief. He ate the front page of the newly delivered phone book sitting in the entrance hall. His pudgy little fingers tweaked a dial and reset the electricity meter to zero, baffling the man who came to read it, and eventually bringing a fine on all the residents. He would lie in wait on the stairs and ambush visitors with blows to the knee from a toy power-drill or fire engine. Most alarmingly, he has recently developed a habit of darting outside, whenever the door is open, and making as if to run onto the busy road that runs past the house with its three flats stacked on top of each other.

He is trailed everywhere by his mother, always three seconds behind, scrambling to keep the latest object out of his mouth or impair his progress towards a new hazard, and grimacing apologetically at whoever is there to witness.

There's no going back to sleep now, thinks Xavier, even though he only went to bed so recently. He listens to the cries of children, a little older than Jamie, outside. Most schools in the area are closed. There is no sound from the flat above: Tamara, the council officer who lives there, would normally have left by now, clip-clopping past Xavier's door in her heels. But like more than half of London's workforce, today she will not be going in to work. Today is an unusual day.

The kitchen sink is a nest of unwashed cups and plates, the cupboards contain various food items past the peaks of their careers. Xavier has rented this flat for nearly five years, and in his hands it has, if not deteriorated, then at least fallen into a sort of torpor. Maybe if I had a girlfriend I'd make more effort, Xavier thinks, and remembers tonight's speed-dating arrangement. Boiling the kettle, he rues Murray's persuasiveness, or whatever it is, sheer pathos perhaps. The event, like all singles nights, has an anticipatory ring of grimness about it. Perhaps it'll be called off, because of the weather, but he doubts it: the sort of people bold enough to sign up for dating events are unlikely to be deterred by a freeze, he thinks, even one of this severity.

Early that afternoon Xavier leaves the flat to buy groceries. The sky is just a colourless mass hanging over London, quiescent, as if faintly embarrassed by its outburst last night. The pavements are slick with ice patches between carpets of squelchy, footmarked sludge. The air is cold to the touch like

cutlery in a forgotten drawer. Xavier keeps his hands inside the sleeves of his overcoat. The owner of the corner shop, a cheerful paunchy middle-aged Indian man who will die in three years' time, puts Xavier's items into a blue plastic bag before Xavier can say that he's brought his own. Not wanting to seem petty, Xavier doesn't mention it.

On his way back down the hill Xavier becomes aware of a disturbance on the other side of the street. From a clump of black jackets rises a hoarse chorus, the carefully modulated voices of teenage boys, who are collected around what seems to be a package of some sort on the floor. As he gets closer, Xavier can see that the package is actually another boy, wriggling and squirming as five other youths take turns to drop snow on his head. The felled boy, who is slightly smaller than the others, gives a shrill yell and tries to get to his feet, but each time he is pushed back down by one of the bullies. His yells become honking sobs of misery. One of the biggest lads steps away and bends down to pick up a two-glove load of snow, which he packs down between his hands and then dumps on the victim's head. There is a collective cackle. The victim now looks like a dismantled tent spread out at the feet of his aggressors, half-observed by chunks of snow.

Xavier takes a furtive glance around: there is no one else to intervene here. He advances towards the group. Scrambling for more snow, they pay him no attention.

He clears his throat.

'You should stop that,' he says, his normally resonant voice sounding reedy and hesitant in the cold air.

A couple of the boys look up. Xavier feels a shiver go through him: they're older and more substantial than they looked from across the street, and he'd have very little chance if they all turned on him at once.

'Fuck off,' says one of the kids.

'Leave him alone,' says Xavier.

Now all of them are looking at him.

'What are you going to do?' The ringleader, who issues this challenge, has a beginner's moustache, mean eyes, a slack, contemptuous mouth.

Xavier hesitates.

One of the other boys makes as if to charge him, taking four or five quick steps with his fist outstretched. Xavier flinches and all the boys laugh. Xavier has already had enough of this situation and wants to be out of it. He's well into his thirties, these boys are less than half his age; and yet, he thinks, irritated, I'm afraid of them.

'Just leave him alone,' he says again, but then turns and walks away, his cheeks flushing at the sound of raucous, triumphant laughter over his shoulder.

He leaves the scene as quickly as he can, not looking back to see the continued tormenting of the boy. Reaching the safety of 11 Bayham Road, he slams the door and shakes the snow off the bottom of his trousers and walks up the stairs, past the ground floor flat where Jamie is being pacified by a TV show. 'Here we go, here we go, here we go again!' Xavier hears a woman sing in a strained, hectic voice.

During the afternoon he looks back on the incident with discomfort, feeling he could have done much more. Of course, he could also have done much *less*: he might have ignored the entire scene. But perhaps that would have been better than such a half-hearted attempt. He wonders what state the boy got home in, and then immediately dismisses the speculation. He coaxes the gas hob into a spitting life and puts a pan of soup on to heat.

Perhaps trying to make a dent in the residual guilt left by the event, Xavier devotes a portion of the afternoon to catching up with some of the emails sent by his listeners. He always gives an email address after the show, for the many people who don't get through on air, and his listening duties now extend well beyond the boundaries of the show itself. Xavier always tries to limit himself to one personal reply per correspondent, to avoid getting drawn into long exchanges with people he doesn't really know, because there just isn't enough time; after that, he sends a stock response directing the writer to other sources of help. Again, perhaps he could do more, but on the other hand he could ignore the emails altogether, if he were so inclined.

Monday is the heaviest day for emails: the weekend's expanses of free time can provoke some worryingly detailed confessions, some particularly vivid expressions of loneliness. This afternoon, most of the appeals are of a more practical nature.

Xavier, what would you do if your wife was hell-bent on wearing a bikini, but you wanted to tell her – gently – that she didn't have the figure for it?

I need your help. I have debts of more than £50,000. My wife doesn't know, nor do the kids, nor does anyone.

He challenges the bikini victim to decide whether it is really his *own* vanity that's at stake; he encourages the debt victim to come clean to his wife.

Troubled people have always instinctively sought Xavier out, or he has attracted them by some accidental magnetism. He's the sort of person who always ends up hearing a taxi driver's grievances, nodding sympathetically at the woes of a suddenly loquacious stranger in a lift. Perhaps it helps that women find him handsome (there's often something seductive about confidences, even very awkward ones), or perhaps it's just that he has the rare skill of keeping quiet. In any case, Xavier was accustomed to listening to people well before it formed part of his job – indeed, the habit developed when he was still known as Chris.

Once, in his twenties, Chris talked to a complete stranger in the street for more than an hour. It was an early October night, and Melbourne was tuning up for the long summer ahead. The air was lush with the hint of heat, the sky a gently paling blue, with an even paler moon hanging lazily in it. Chris's arm was around Matilda's back: not yet an official couple, they were in a tantalizing period of affectionate touches, in-jokes and pet names. He could feel the joint of her bra through the old Nirvana T-shirt she wore. At the corner of Brunswick and Johnston Street the three of them went one way and Chris the other, to wait for a tram.

At the stop was a homeless old man, wearing a baseball cap and with a can of lager in his hand. Chris said a polite hello and the two of them stood quietly for a few minutes, watching trams rattle up the other side of the street. A girl was pasting posters for a rock band on a brick wall behind them. Chris thought about Matilda, whom he'd been to watch in a trampolining competition the previous day. Each time she sprang skywards, he imagined leaping up and catching her mid-air. The old man started to sing quietly to himself, glancing amiably at Chris. He seemed like a drunk, but a harmless one: one who'd had so much booze in his life that he could never really get drunk any more, but would never seem entirely sober either.

He winked at Chris.

'Had a good day?'

'Not so bad. Just went to a film.'

'A film!' The old man chuckled. 'Do you know how long it is since I went to a film?' He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'It would be twenty years, I reckon.'

Not knowing how to respond, Chris asked, 'How ... how has your day been?'

'You know,' said the stranger, 'I'm eighty years old next month. Hell of an age, isn't it!'

'It's pretty good,' Chris agreed.

'When you get to my age, there are a lot of things you don't want to think about. So what I do is, I have a vault in my brain where I put all that stuff. See what I mean?'

He fumbled with a cigarette, his hand shaking as it coaxed a worn lighter out of his jacket pocket. Chris took the cigarette and lit it for him.

'I just say to myself, that's in the vault now,' the man continued. 'And I never let myself go in there. It's locked. It's locked even to me. I don't know where the key is.' He grinned at Chris, showing a surprisingly good set of teeth.

Trams went whirring by. Over the next hour the man told Chris that his wife died young and his brother, an Anzac, was killed in action in 1944. His sons, both of them, turned out disappointingly: one could have been a football player but was too lazy, the other went to France and got into, as the man put it, 'you know, drugs and art'. The man's business, a shop selling groceries, was squeezed to death over the course of a couple of decades by the advent of chain newsagents, 7-11s and all the rest. The man realized as he got into his forties that he was attracted to young boys, and would never be able to satisfy such a craving. He embezzled a sum of money in the mid-seventies, to boost his business, and when it came to light more than ten years later it was one of his best friends who went to jail. And so on.

'Yep, pretty much most things have gone wrong,' the old man concluded with another of his toothy grins. 'And I know it all happened – I just told you all about it, right? But I don't think about it. I don't go in the vault. See what I mean?'

Chris asked, 'Are you ever going to open the ... vault? Like, to get it out of your system?'

The old man lit another cigarette and coughed and grinned.

'When I know I'm going to die,' he said, 'maybe in the last hour, I'll open it up and have a good think about everything, and I'll think well, it's over now, what the hell was I worried about?'

When the next tram came past, the old man, his eyes suddenly watery and imploring, took Chris's sleeve and asked him for a dollar. Chris gave him a ten-dollar note and boarded the tram.

As the four-way friendship became older and more complex, he was called upon more and more to be the unofficial leader of the gang of four, its most capable pair of hands. Often, it was Russell who needed help: he couldn't seem to stay in a job, not even a job where he had to dress as a carrot and hand out leaflets for a juice bar; he never had any money; Bec couldn't get pregnant. Chris's twenty-year friendship with Russell was, in many ways, good preparation for working with Murray: similar men, slightly overweight, hapless, inspiring goodwill and a certain foreboding, like sporting competitors everyone roots for but fully expects to lose.

In bed one day, Matilda claimed that during their fifteen-year period of platonic friendship, nothing had made her want to tear Chris's clothes off more than – she couldn't find better words – his sheer helpfulness.

'What, you're turned on by me being nice to other people?'

'By you being a nice man in general. Is that so strange?'

'So I could have skipped all the other stuff I did to impress you, all the clothes I bought, and trying to enjoy *Pretty Woman*? I could have just helped old ladies across the street till you slept with me?'

She laughed. 'Please don't spoil the illusion.'

Xavier looks out of the window at the cheerless early evening. The cars, still caked in snow, look like animals mooching in a frozen field. A middle-aged couple, in matching red raincoats which look too thin for the weather, cling onto one another for support, inching along the slippery pavement. Xavier wonders whether any of the women at the speed dating will notice this supposedly attractive kindness of his, and indeed, whether he still has it. He wishes that he hadn't agreed to accompany Murray tonight, and wonders if there is still a chance it might be cancelled after all.

But the event is, as he guessed all along, unaffected by the adverse weather. Six or seven people haven't made it, but a handful more have turned up to take their places, thanks to the paucity of other attractions in Central London on this snowbound night: cinemas and restaurants are closed because of staff shortages. The venue is a nightclub with plush velvet sofas and low lighting. A square of tables is laid out on what would normally be the dance floor.

Murray has attacked his dense loops of curly hair with an inexpertly applied payload of gel. He wears a bright red shirt: dark patches are already collecting around the armpits. He looks relieved to see Xavier. The socializers throng awkwardly around the bar until the MC, a good-looking black man in a suit, begins to speak into a cordless microphone.

'OK, guys. You've each been given a number.' Murray is 3; Xavier 8, not 11 as he would have liked. 'In a minute I'm going to ask you to find the table with your number on. You'll be joined by your first date. Each time the siren sounds' – he gives a blast on what sounds like a car horn ripped from its vehicle – 'the guys move on to the next table. At the end of the night you write down the number of anyone you want to see again, and we'll hook you up with them. Who's up for it?'

If the MC is expecting a roar of approval in exchange for this hurried spiel, he's disappointed: the participants shuffle and mutter amongst themselves.

'Good luck,' says Xavier to Murray, patting him on his meaty back.

Over the next hour and a half they make their rounds of the room at the command of the klaxon, which sometimes comes as an interruption to the three-minute date, but more often as a welcome release. Each time it sounds, there is a collective scraping of chairs and a self-conscious mass movement and resettling at the tables. The whole thing feels like a series of pre-written transactions, like a scripted exercise rather than an exchange of emotion: which is probably, when Xavier comes to think about it, precisely what attracts people.

4: So what are your ... hobbies and interests and things?

Xavier: I play Scrabble.

4: Scrabble?

Xavier: Yes, in tournaments. Competitive Scrabble.

4: There are competitions for Scrabble?

Xavier: Yes, it's—

4: Isn't it just about who knows the longest words?

Xavier: Not necessarily. There's quite a lot of tactics. Like, for example—

4: I'm not *that* interested.

Xavier: Oh.

9: What job do you do?

Xavier: I'm, er, a film reviewer.

9: Cool. What films do you like?

Xavier: Er ...

9: Have you seen the *Harry Potter* films?

Xavier: No.

9: You should see them. So, anyway, you sound Australian, like me?

Xavier: Yes, I'm from Melbourne. But I live here now.

9: Why did you decide to leave? Prefer it here?

Xavier: It's a bit of a long story. Something happened and I couldn't really live there any more.

9: Wow. So, anyway, do you find people here are really hard to talk to?

12: I'm a professional cleaner. I work two days a week for a hotel chain. I take on one-off jobs for all sorts of corporate clients. And then I also do weekly visits on a private basis. I charge twelve pounds an hour. Which is a lot for a cleaner. But I'm an excellent cleaner. Sorry, I'm talking away here. I'm terrible for talking. Especially with someone new.

Xavier: I need a cleaner. My flat's a mess.

12: I could come on Saturday.

Xavier: All right. I'll text you my address.

12: Terrific.

Xavier: Well, we should get on with the, er ...

12: I think the horn's about to go.

22: Your voice sounds familiar. Why would I recognize your voice?

Xavier: I don't think you would.

22: Are you on the TV or something?

Xavier: No.

22: Oh. To be honest, I actually have a boyfriend. I'm just here to support a mate.

Xavier: So am I.

22: Really? Which one?

Xavier: Over there. In the red shirt. Curly hair.

22: Oh right. I had quite a nice chat with him. That stammer, though ...

Xavier: I know.

There's a palpable relief in the air when the final 'dates' are over and the event lapses into a conventional singles night, the area around the bar playing host to less constrained versions of the conversations held over the tables. A DJ starts playing club remixes of sixties classics, occasionally interrupted by the compère encouraging everyone to 'get on the floor'. Xavier finds Murray, whose shirt is now unbuttoned at the top. His hair has separated into two broad camps, some of it still held in formation by the gel, other areas springing up in sprigs of resistance.

'And now the joys of the expensive bar,' says Murray.

'How did you go?' Xavier asks him.

'Ner, ner, not bad. Couple of people der ... definitely interested. So we shall see. We shall see. You?'

'Well, I booked a cleaner. So the evening wasn't entirely wasted.'

It's ten o'clock already and they'll be on air at midnight. Xavier goes outside to arrange a taxi while Murray queues at the teeming bar for drinks. It won't be the first time they have done their show under the moderate influence of alcohol. Outside on the pavement, Xavier can still hear the bassy thud of the music inside. He thinks of the four hours in the studio that lie ahead and then perfunctorily reviews the events of the day. The argument with the boys in the snow still bothers him, but he tells himself to toughen up and stop thinking about it. He can't look after everyone in London. Besides, it's already in the past.