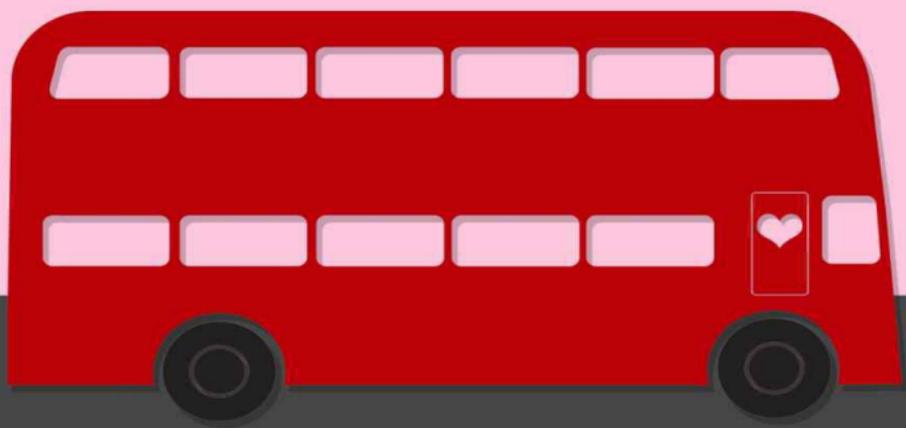


NIGHT BUS



FRANCES M THOMPSON

NIGHT BUS

By Frances M. Thompson

First Edition: Published April 2014

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. It may not be re-sold or given away to others and it contains material protected under International Copyright Laws and Treaties. This book or any portion of it may not be reproduced, copied or used in any matter whatsoever without the express written permission of the author or publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a review.

Thank you for respecting and supporting the author's work.

Copyright © Frances M. Thompson

“Is all that we see or seem

But a dream within a dream?”

Edgar Allen Poe

“All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake up in the day to find it was vanity, but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible.”

T.E. Lawrence

“Dreams, if they’re any good, are always a little bit crazy.”

Ray Charles

Chapter One – The Beginning

It felt like someone was calling her.

“Tilde... Tilde...”

She woke and listened, squinting into darkness. They'd even said it right, rolling the 'T' up to the 'L' and making the 'E' sound more like an 'A'. For Tilde isn't a common name, even in the country it comes from. Not that it matters to Tilde, an English woman whose very Irish parents gave her a very Swedish name. Tilde often thought how well this peculiarity described her parents, her upbringing and her outlook on life. In other words, Tilde was never quite sure of herself.

Tilde lay still and waited to hear her name again, but silence surrounded her. Besides, she already knew that she was alone, just like she was every morning. Except for the two cats she lived with, of course, though they'd never liked Tilde very much, which she put down to their being men. Tilde often thought how well this described her love life. In other words, Tilde was thirty-six years old and had forgotten what waking up in the arms of a man felt like.

It must have been a dream... Tilde felt herself think and that seemed the best explanation.

She felt herself move through a series of familiar motions: switching her bedside lamp on, pushing the covers away, placing her feet in pink slippers and rubbing her eyes as she stood.

“Bert! Ernie! Breakfast time!” Tilde called out as she walked to what she liked to call “the cooking corner” of her maisonette. Other people considered her maisonette a “bed-sit”, but few had said that to her face. Whatever it was called, it was a small but cosy space, comprising one big room and one smaller room. The small room was her bathroom and the big room was her everything else with corners for sleeping, working, dressing and cooking.

Tilde’s maisonette was found on a road called a “mews”, which, should Tilde ever meet you she’d be happy to tell you that this means that in a much older version of London her road was once a row of stables.

There was a bus stop at the end of her mews and the bus that stopped there took Tilde to and from her work in Regent Street. With no vehicular access and hundred year old cobbles under foot, as soon as Tilde turned the corner into her mews at the end of a long day at work, she felt like one of the lucky ones, tucked away from the noise, nonsense and nastiness of London that sometimes threatens to be too much. For Tilde regularly told herself, and anyone else who asked, that her private mews and the nearby bus stop more than made up for the absence of more rooms in her maisonette.

“Bert! Ernie!” She called again, feeling too much air around her ankles where her cats should be.

The phone began to ring and Tilde felt herself drift over to answer it

“Hello?”

“Hello, is that Tilde O’Hara?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Ms O’Hara, my name is Detective Constable Howes, I’m a police officer. I’m afraid I have some bad news.” He sounded very serious.

“Oh no! Is it about my cats?” Tilde’s hand covered her mouth.

“Your cats?”

“Yes, my cats. Bert and Ernie. Do you know where they are?”

“No I’m afraid I don’t. I’m not calling about your cats. It’s about your friend, Mr Stephen Dukes.”

“Ste?”

“Yes, Mrs O’Hara. I’m afraid he was in a terrible accident last night and he’s lost both his arms.”

“What?!”

“It was a traffic accident. Sort of. Somehow he managed to have both of his arms out of the windows on the top deck of a double decker bus. He says he was trying to wave at someone. Unfortunately, he didn’t see that there was another double decker bus travelling towards him on the opposite side of the road. It took his arms right off.”

“Oh my... Is he okay?”

“Well, apart from losing his arms, I suppose, yes, you could say that he’s okay. At least, the doctors say he will be.”

“How could he...? What was he doing with his arms out of the window?”

“He said he was waving to you.”

“To me?”

“Yes,” the policeman said. Tilde heard the soft rustling of paper pages being turned over. “He said ‘I saw my friend Tilde Jane O’Hara walking down the street and she looked a little sad, a little alone and a little lost. So, I reached out of the window to try and get her attention’. Those were his exact words.”

Tilde stayed quiet and she was aware of her brain trying to choose which question to ask next.

“What bus was he on?”

“The number 94.”

“That’s my bus!” Tilde exclaimed.

“*Your* bus?”

“Yes. That’s the one I always get. But I wasn’t out walking last night, so... No, I don’t think he saw me...” Tilde tried to account for her whereabouts last night but she found it very difficult to do so. Her eyes kept wandering around the room, looking for her cats.

“Are you still there, Mrs O’Hara?”

“Yes. Sorry. When exactly did this happen?”

“Last night. At around eleven o’clock. He gave us your name and contact details in the hospital. We assumed you were his next of kin or at least, somebody important to him.”

“Well, yes, I suppose I am important to him, but I doubt I’m his next of kin.”

“Oh, I see. Do you know who is? We should probably let them know about his... accident.”

“I assume it’s his mother. If you hold on a moment I’ll just fetch her address.”

“I’ll wait. Thank you, Mrs O’Hara.”

“It’s Miss O’Hara, actually.”

“I see, Miss O’Hara.”

Tilde felt herself float over to the desk in the working corner of the big room, all the while wondering why something didn’t feel right.

She relayed the information back to the police officer who thanked her.

“Detective Howes, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Miss O’Hara.”

“What does one do when one loses two cats?”

“How do you know they are lost?”

“Because I cannot find them.”

“But they could come back?”

“Yes, but they’ve never gone missing before. Not like this. Not at breakfast time.”

“I think they’ll probably come back...”

“But what if they don’t?”

“They sound very important to you, your cats.”

“They are. They are my boyfriend substitute.” Tilde felt the words leave her body, and it was impossible to put them back.

“Oh, I see.” Detective Howes’ voice seemed a little changed.

“Yes... Well, I’m glad you do.”

“Now, Miss O’Hara. May I ask *you* a question?”

“Certainly, though I really must get going. I’m late for work.”

“I’ll make it quick. Why do you have *two* cats as *one* boyfriend substitute? Is it because you’d actually like to have two boyfriends?”

Tilde felt a heat peak in her cheeks.

“No. It’s because they’re brothers, the cats, and I couldn’t pick which one to get when I went to buy them. I also thought perhaps I’d get bored of just one. But now they’ve *both* left me...”

“Oh dear, Miss O’Hara. I hope they show up.” The police officer said before hanging up.

Tilde opened her mouth to call for her cats but the only noise she heard was the doorbell ringing, which was strange because she didn’t think she had one. She felt herself move to the door, wrapping her pink dressing gown around her body. She wondered if maybe it was her cats returning, or perhaps it was Ste come to show her his new armless body, but then she remembered that neither her cats nor Ste would have been able to reach a doorbell. Instead, she was quite astonished when she saw her boss, Mr George Embers, standing in front of her.

“Mr Embers!” Tilde felt her back pull as straight as it could go.

“Hello Tilde,” he said. “May I come in?”

“Of course. Yes. Please do.” She only hesitated for a second before moving aside.

George Embers was a short and eccentric man, prone to long story-telling conversations and famous for never being seen without a beret. Tilde saw that today the beret was black.

“Can I help you with something? Or did you just happen to be in the area?” Tilde asked for the explanations she expected from him. A picture of Ste with no arms and her two dead cats flashed in her mind and she shuddered. What a shockingly bizarre and terribly bad start to the day.

“I wasn’t in the area. I came here especially. I took the number 94 bus all the way.” Mr Embers sat in the middle of her sofa, the soft lilac of the cushions clashing with his red velvet jacket.

“The number 94! That’s my bus!” Tilde said again.

“As you know, Tilde, I’m a people kind of person. And what needs to be done... Well, it’s best I do it in person,” he said, taking his beret off and holding it in his lap.

“And what needs to be done?”

“Tilde, the partners and I, we’ve been very disappointed by your recent performance at work. Over the last few months we’ve noticed that you’ve become very preoccupied with non-work related issues and it’s started to become a problem.”

“Have I?” Tilde said sitting down next to her boss. “But I thought I’d been doing well. I’ve had two top ten bestsellers in the last six months... and you seemed so pleased about my signing Deborah Marie Knight last month.”

“Yes, but let’s be honest, Tilde. Your mind’s not been on the work has it? Ms Knight was such an obvious author to go after. She’s a carbon copy of your last two signings.”

“But you *told* me to find more historical romance authors...”
Tilde felt herself begin to slip away into a panic.

“Tilde, let’s just be honest. This job’s not right for you.”

“I love this job!” Tilde leaned towards her boss.

“No, you don’t. You don’t want this job,” he looked at her.
“You want a boyfriend.”

“No, I don’t! I want this job. I *love* my job.” She felt herself stand up. “Honestly, Mr Embers, I gave up wanting a boyfriend a long time ago!”

“Why did you give up? You should never give up!” Mr Embers was now spinning his beret around on one finger, like it was pizza dough.

“Please Mr Embers! Please don’t fire me. My job is all I have left...”

“Tilde, Tilde, Tilde.” He was standing opposite her. “Take some advice from an old man who has been around the block far too many times. You need to listen to old ladies.”

“What?” Tilde felt herself float further into a strange despair.

“When old ladies give you advice, you should take it.”

“But you’re an old *man*, not an old lady...”

“How dare you, Tilde! Did you just call me *old*?” Mr Embers took a step back and pulled his beret back onto his head.

“But you said... You just called yourself an old man.” Tilde saw her hand outstretched in front of her, pointing at him, but she knew this was just as rude as calling him an old man, which he really wasn’t. In fact, she often told Ste how much she admired Mr Embers’ youthful spirit and how well he led the publishing company he’d built from nothing.

Watching her finger shake, Tilde thought about Ste again and about how he’d never be able to point at anything ever again. How he loved to point.

Mr Embers had moved to her front door. “Well, listen to this ‘old man’ right now. You, Tilde O’Hara, are fired!”

With the words she feared most ringing in her ears, Tilde watched George Embers, a man she wanted to work with for the rest of her life, walk out of her house, and with him he took her job.

The door slammed and Tilde woke up.

Chapter Two – The Morning After

Tilde woke short of breath and full of fear.

She didn't sit up suddenly like the films would have you expect. Rather she lay very still and very rigid, opening her eyes slowly and looking into a new darkness. Tilde moved her legs around, feeling for the two cats who usually slept at the end of her bed. Only once her toes had touched two familiar lumps did Tilde exhale a long trail of air and lift the covers off her face.

It was just a dream, it was just a dream. She bounced this thought off the walls of her mind, repeating it like a mantra.

Heat began to return to her body and a sense of reality diluted her angst, but not for long. She sat up, reached for her phone and dialled her friend's number.

"Ste!" She said after the ringing stopped. "Are you alright?"

"Morning, Tilly. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Me? I'm fine!" Though she suspected she didn't sound it.

"Not even a teeny weeny bit hungover?" Tilde heard the unmistakable clatter of London traffic in the background.

“Why would I...? Oh Ste, are you alright? I called to find out if *you* were okay.”

“Well, that’s very nice of you. I’m fine, running late, as per every day of my sorry life.”

“You should jump on the 94,” Tilde offered.

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

“But you’re okay? You’re feeling well and nothing’s... amiss?”

“Tilde, we only spoke about seven hours ago. Are you sure you’re not still drunk?”

“How are your arms?” She threw the question at him quickly, like a dart.

“My arms?”

“Yes, are they both attached to your body...?”

“What the hell are you on about? You *are* still drunk!”

“I’m not drunk... Wait. Was I drinking last night?”

“Yes, you called me on your way home last night. You were on the night bus on the way home from your “Stitch and

Bitch” class. Said you’d had a few gins. You were telling me all about the characters on the bus, but you never have been able to whisper quietly so I told you to get off the phone before you got yourself in an unnecessary amount of bother.”

“I called you? What time?” Tilde had no recollection of the bus home though she could feel the blunt pressure sores on the tips of her index fingers that came from two hours of knitting.

“Must have been about half eleven, maybe later. I can’t remember; I was tucked up in bed like the good boy I’m not. What’s all this about my arms?”

“Oh Ste, I had this horrible dream... a nightmare. The cats went missing, you lost your arms and George Embers sacked me!”

“Gosh and golly. What kind of gin were you drinking?”

“I can’t remember. Ste, I can’t even remember getting on the bus,” Tilde chewed the inside of her lip and realised how dry her mouth was. She got up to get a glass of water.

“Why did Embers fire you?”

“He said... Oh.” Tilde stopped in her tracks, remembering. “It doesn’t matter; it was just a dream.”

“And the cats are okay?”

“Yes, they’re with me now,” Tilde said, feeling the air move around her ankles as they snaked around her, never so close that they actually touched her.

“Good. Well, my arms are completely fine, though they are very late for work so if you don’t mind you mad old woman, I have to get going...”

“I’m so happy you’re okay, Ste. I couldn’t imagine you with no arms...”

“Quite. What a waste of a wardrobe that would be. How did it happen, exactly? Just out of interest...”

“Well, you were on the top floor of the 94 bus and you were leaning out of the window...” She paused again. “I’m not sure why, but another bus came along and swiped them clean away...”

“How gruesome...” Ste said. “Can you imagine? Me, on a bus!”

Tilde smiled into the phone.

“Now off you go Tilly, don’t be late or you really will give Embers a reason to sack you.”

Ste said goodbye and Tilde felt a new sense of relief. She

bent down and gathered the nearest cat to her. It was Bert, the fattest and more independent of the two.

“Oh, Bertie, what has happened to me? Having nightmares and thinking that I’d lost you and Ernie... I’m turning into that crazy old cat lady already aren’t I?”

His claws extended and his back arched stiff. As soon as her grip loosened he wriggled free. Tilde let him go; she always did.

“I’m not even a good cat lady.” She said aloud. “My cats don’t even like me.”

Seeing her start to open familiar cupboards, the cats sat back on their haunches and waited, knowing what was coming next.

“So where does that leave me? Huh?” She asked them. “If I’m not good at being a crazy old cat lady, then what am I? Just a crazy old lady?”

A crazy old lady.

These words brought the missing parts of last night back to her in clear, colourful detail; the night bus home, the people who got on and off, and the woman who had sat next to her: an old lady.

“Always listen to old ladies.” Mr Embers had said in her

dream.

Tilde felt her grip loosen on Ernie's ceramic bowl and it dropped to the floor, breaking into three clean pieces. The cats jumped out of the way just in time. They walked away, looking back at Tilde occasionally, their eyes loaded with disgust.

Chapter Three – The Night Before

The bus was crowded but she managed to find a seat. Best of all, it was a good seat, on the left-hand side at the front of the bus. From here Tilde had a view not only out of the side window but out of the front of the bus too, her favourite way to see London.

The bus glided along Oxford Street, the traffic flowing free now night had fallen. Her phone was hot on her ear as she told Ste about the drunken French students behind her who were trying to guess her age.

“28, Ste! 28! They think I’m 28. Can I put that on my CV?” She giggled.

“Ha! Finally I understand the term ‘blind drunk’,” Ste said.

By the time the number 94 bus snaked around Marble Arch, Tilde was off the phone and watching one side of London’s split personality pass her by: its nightlife. Shivering men waited alone at bus stops with their hands tucked into their pockets, chatting girls leaned into each other as they walked along the pavement and brave cyclists wearing as much neon colour as possible weaved around the bus, seemingly eager to get where they were going. Tilde began to ponder where everyone was going and who they had waiting for them when they got there.

When the bus stopped, Tilde looked up and saw an old woman totter past those who were standing. The man next to her, who Tilde hadn't paid much attention to, stood up to let the woman sit down, just like the signs tell you to. Almost as soon as she sat down, her hips knocking into Tilde's, she began talking.

"...I get this same night bus every Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday night. I like to play blackjack in the casino on Edgware Road. Have you ever been there? Bit of an old, dingy spot. I love it. They think I'm an easy ride what with my sagging skin and shaky hands, but they soon learn I know what I'm doing." The woman nudged Tilde. "As long as I leave before midnight, that's when all the drunk businessmen pour in and take over. Besides, the party continues on the night bus, doesn't it? Though I could afford a taxi, I'd never get one. Why would I when I get a free show on the way home? You wouldn't believe the things I've seen on this bus!"

Tilde liked her accent, it was just London enough to pin her to the city, but loose enough to be Home Counties, if that was what she wanted.

"Oh I believe it," Tilde said. "I get the number 94 every day, to and from work. During the day it's fairly normal, I suppose. People keep themselves to themselves. But for some reason late at night... it's like this other species of human being emerges and they all want to talk to you."

Tilde realised this could have caused offence but the

woman just nodded and asked. "Where do you live, dear?"

"Shepherd's Bush, just off Goldhawk Road."

"Well, we're practically neighbours; I live on Hammersmith Grove."

Tilde looked at her. She was petite - her feet barely touched the floor - and she had small features neatly spaced out around a slightly upturned nose. Tilde noticed that she was wearing a grey-blond wig and she could see where the woman's make-up stopped just under her jawline, but her lipstick was perfectly applied. Tilde liked how soft and warm the old woman's fake fur coat felt when she leaned in close.

"I live in a private mews," Tilde had said with a proud smile.

"A mews, eh? How lovely! And what do you think of Shepherd's Bush? I find people often have such mixed opinions of it..." The old woman had a habit of blinking on almost every word. Tilde found it a little unsettling, but not displeasing.

"Everyone knows where Shepherd's Bush is, but not many people really *know* it, if you understand what I mean?" Tilde offered and the woman nodded. "I always wanted to live in Notting Hill or Holland Park, but I could never afford it. Shepherd's Bush was my next best thing but now I like it there for other reasons. I like that it's a bit different and that

it's not perfect and that everyone seems to be from somewhere else, you know? And I like walking to the market on a Saturday morning to buy fresh flowers and cat food. They've got shops and market stalls selling almost everything there!" Tilde said.

"And it's home to the best falafel in the city too..."

"You like falafel?" Tilde turned to the woman.

"Why wouldn't I like falafel?"

Tilde had to think about this for a few seconds, until she realised it was because the woman was old. But she knew she couldn't say that.

"Just because I'm old and a little crazy, doesn't mean I don't get a kick out of things like eating falafel, spending too much money in casinos and pinching men's bottoms as they walk past me on the night bus. Watch this..."

A tall man walked by. He was dressed in matching coat and trousers and Tilde recognised the logo on the back of his jacket as that of a London tour bus company. He was so tall the old woman had to stand up to reach his left bottom cheek. As he turned around Tilde saw the woman was pointing back at her. They giggled together and the man smiled, shaking his head as he got off the bus.

"I like your nail varnish." Tilde said to the woman.

"I like yours. Though pink has never been my colour."

"Oh, it's my favourite colour."

"Don't you think it's a bit girly?"

"Yes. That's exactly why I like it."

"It must be my generation. I always used to avoid the colour pink. Actually I never used to wear nail varnish for that matter. I sort of rebelled against things like that. It was because I used to find it unnecessarily difficult being a woman so I tried not to draw attention to it. I still do find it tricky, I suppose, though I enjoy it much more. And you see the things I can get away with now I'm old... pinching bottoms, playing dumb in casinos? Yes, it's much more fun being a woman now. Do you like being a woman?"

"I'm not sure I follow you... It's not like I have much choice!" Tilde laughed but slid her hands in her pockets.

"You're right, of course, but don't you find it so burdensome and tiring? We have all these roles to play. We're expected to conform to so many stereotypes and so many of them are contradictory. We have to be daughters, sisters, friends, lovers, mothers, wives... And what do men have to be? Successful, that's all. Nobody questions a man if he doesn't get married. Nobody raises their eyebrow at a man with no children. And yet we are struck down when we fail to fill

one, let alone all, of these roles.”

Tilde listened as the bus accelerated past Lancaster Gate too fast for her to count the couples they passed.

“I’m not married and I don’t have children.” She said quietly. “In fact, I don’t even have a boyfriend.”

“And is that what you want?” Tilde realised that this woman was one of only a few people who hadn’t offered the immediate response “*But you’re still young...*” which really didn’t feel true anymore.

Tilde looked out into the dark of Hyde Park on her left. “I think so.”

“Oh dear. You poor thing.” The woman said and dipped her chin into the top of her coat.

“Being single is not so bad!” Tilde leapt to her own defence.

“Of course it’s not a bad thing. It’s a great thing to be. But you sound so uncertain. That’s what’s so sad...” The woman was rearranging the straps of her handbag which sat on her lap.

“Well, no, I’m not uncertain. I really do think it’s what I want. I’m not unhappy about it. Not really. Sometimes, maybe, but not all the time.” Tilde went from shaking her head to nodding so fast it made her dizzy.

“Let me give you some advice.” The woman tapped the fabric of Tilde’s coat lightly. “It doesn’t matter if you want to get married seven times and have a hundred children, or if you want to stay single and housebound for the rest of your life, what matters is that you have conviction and faith in your decisions. That’s the hardest part of being a woman, being determined. We women do struggle with that. You know there is nothing more powerful than a determined woman.”

“I’m very determined about other things. I have a good job - I’m a literary agent - I have two cats, and I have a great house, which I bought on my own!”

“Wonderful!”

“And I have a fantastic social life and some great friends...”

“I do not doubt it for a second.” They both sat looking straight ahead as the bus waited at traffic lights in Notting Hill. Tilde saw a young couple cross the road in front of the bus, their arms around each other, locking themselves together. Her gaze followed them as they walked away and when she couldn’t see them anymore Tilde turned back to the woman. To her surprise the woman was looking directly at her and her eyes weren’t blinking anymore.

“What about your dreams, dear?” The old lady asked.

“My dreams?”

“What do you dream about?”

“I don’t know... I dream about all sorts of things.”

“But what do you want, in your dreams?”

“Do you mean in my actual dreams? The ones I have at night when I’m asleep? Or do you mean my metaphoric dreams, as in the hopes and dreams I have in life, that sort of thing?”

“I mean what I say.” The old woman said with a level voice. “I’m eighty-four, you know, I don’t have time to mince my words.”

“But I’m confused...”

“I can see that. And as I said, that’s a problem.”

“But I don’t know what kind of dreams you mean.”

The bus wheezed down the hill into Holland Park much faster than Tilde thought was usual.

“You need to pay special attention to your dreams. They are there for a reason. Especially the ones we had as children. How often do you think about those dreams?”

“So you *do* mean my metaphoric dreams, my ambitions in life?” Tilde seized upon the possibility of clarity.

The woman seemed momentarily preoccupied with watching the small line of people walking past to get off the bus. Tilde assumed it was to check if there were any bottoms worth pinching. When the bus’ doors closed again, the old lady started to talk, but her voice sounded different now, deeper and thicker.

“You should never ignore your dreams.” She reached for Tilde’s hand.

Tilde’s frown gathered itself as quickly as the woman’s grip fixed around Tilde’s knuckles. Tilde was facing the woman’s profile now and she studied the chalky texture of her blue eye shadow sparkling in the bus’ lights.

“Always pay attention to your dreams,” the woman said bouncing their joined hands up and down on Tilde’s lap. “Always follow your dreams.”

Detaching her fingers from Tilde’s, the woman’s voice seemed to clear as she began a new conversation.

“So, you say you’re a literary agent?”

“Yes. I work for Embers & Feldman, a literary agency based on Regent Street.”

“I’ve not heard of them.” The woman’s eyelashes fluttered like bright blue butterfly wings as the manic blinking returned. “Say, do you think I’m too old to get an opinion on something I’ve been working on? You might like it.”

Tilde chewed her lip and watched the bus follow the curve of Shepherd’s Bush Roundabout. The woman’s stop was coming up soon.

“I never discourage people from submitting their work to us,” Tilde said, which was the truth.

“Well, I will send you something. What’s your name?”

Tilde told her and the old woman unzipped her bag. She pulled out a pen and a notebook that was so full it didn’t close flat. The woman had to leaf through several pages before she managed to find a blank space big enough to write on. Tilde watched her name join a thousand other illegible words.

“Tilde is a lovely name. Swedish isn’t it? And O’Hara? Yes, you do look a little Irish with those strawberry freckles.”

“It’s a long story.” Tilde said with a small sigh.

“I like long stories.” The woman squeezed the notebook back into her bag. “I hope you do too. I have a manuscript that I’ve been sitting on for many years. It’s long, but I think

it's got something in it.”

Tilde smiled politely, a grin that guiltily grew a little when the woman pressed the stop button. As the bus slowed, the woman shifted forward and Tilde moved closer to offer an arm as support. It was only then that Tilde spotted she was wearing cowboy boots the exact same sky blue as her nail varnish and eye shadow.

“I hope you get home safe.” Tilde said and she meant it.

“Oh I will.” The woman kept hold of the railing with one hand but her other quickly stretched back and gripped Tilde's forearm. She squeezed it as the bus' doors hissed open. “And you listen to those dreams of yours. Follow them to the letter. Write them all down, if you have to...”

Letting go, she shuffled down the short aisle to the bus' doors. She shared a few words with the bus driver before climbing down onto the pavement, her bag weighing her down on one side. Instead of walking away, she turned and waited for the doors to close. Locking eyes with Tilde, there she stood, lit up by the light of the bus stop, holding Tilde's gaze until the bus had moved on.

Chapter Four – The Morning After, Again

Tilde sat on the edge of her bed. She watched her cats wandering aimlessly around, hungry and restless. Time seemed to speed up and slip away. She wasn't sure how long she sat there watching the cats sniff around under her kitchen cabinets but it was the sound of Ernie's claws scratching the wooden doors that jolted her out of her daze.

"Ernie, no!" She called and she shooed them out of her cooking corner. She then reached for her phone and called work. She told Kate from HR that she was unwell and that she may not be in for a few days. Receiving sympathy and a promise that only urgent emails would be forwarded, Tilde felt a heady mixture of guilt and relief as she hung up.

Calling in sick was something Tilde had never done before in all of her eleven years of employment, but she was starting to think that it was a day for doing things she'd never done before. Which is why she walked to her desk to find a pen and a notebook. Tilde had many unused notebooks, full of blank pages that lay perfectly flat. Giving the old woman's bursting pages a quick thought, Tilde opened up the notebook and began to write as much detail as she could summon about last night's dream.

When that was done, she turned to the back of the notebook. For a few seconds, she stroked the empty page that stared

back at her before gripping the pen again and writing down as many of the old lady's words as she could remember.

After she'd read the words in the front and back of her notebook once, twice, three times, she let out a deep breath and closed her eyes. A meow prompted her to let light in again. She saw her two cats at the front door, climbing over one another and manically scratching at the paint.

"Bert! Ernie!" She shouted, but they kept clawing. "Stop it!"

They wanted to leave, that much was clear.

"No! You can't go. You'll get lost. Nobody's going. We're not leaving this house. Ever!" Until she said it out loud she didn't realise quite how much she meant it.

Chapter Five – One, Two, and Three Weeks Later

The first few days were the slowest. They dragged out like old, stiff elastic stretching into an unfamiliar routine. With too much time to think, Tilde tortured herself debating whether she was doing the right thing. Somehow she always ended at the same conclusion – that yes, she was - but not without digging up more self-doubt along the way.

The first time she explained it to somebody - to Ste, of course - it all sounded very far-fetched. Out in the open air the words seemed to flutter and fly away, flimsy and full of nothing she could hang reason on. But inside her head they held great weight and worth, and they kept her company at night when sleep wasn't around.

At first Ste entertained her. When she didn't leave the house for a week, he called it "a blip" and said everyone was allowed a duvet day or two.

"So you're not coming wine tasting next week?" He was calling her from a pub and the volume of the background noise unsettled Tilde.

"It will do me good. I could do with a break from drinking," she said.

“It’s like I don’t know you anymore!” He said and she managed a laugh.

When it rolled into a second week, he asked her a few more questions and repeated those that he felt she didn’t answer adequately.

“But what do you think would actually happen if you left the house?” He was calling from work and she could hear the roar of hair dryers behind him. Even a hair salon seemed a scary place to be.

“Well, I told you what happened in my dream...”

“Exactly! Dream, Tilde, *dream*. It was just a dream,”

“I suppose I can’t explain it if you’ve never experienced it.”

“I always thought one of my friends would lose it one day. So many of them are already on the edge... But I never thought it would be you, Tilly.”

It was a Saturday when he showed up on her doorstep carrying a bag of groceries and wearing a small scowl. Tilde couldn’t stop her eyes hopping from one of his arms to the other.

“Yes, they’re still here.” He groaned and pushed his way in.

“They’re such lovely arms,” Tilde said more to herself than

him.

By the time two weeks had become three, he demanded more of an explanation.

“So, you’ve still not left the house?” Ste said, depositing more groceries on her kitchen counter.

“Not really.”

“Well, have you, or haven’t you?”

Tilde didn’t reply. She looked down at her pink slippers and thought about how much they needed a wash.

“Tilde?”

“No.” She poked her head in one of the plastic bags.

“What about work?”

“I’ve told them I’m sick. I’ve been working from home so they’ve been okay about it.” The last part was a lie. Kate from HR was now sending daily emails asking for a sick certificate from a doctor and Tilde had begun to press delete without even opening them.

“People don’t stay sick forever.”

"I know," Tilde said into the fridge.

"You do realise how odd this all is, don't you?" Ste walked away and sat down on her bed. He squinted a little. "Maybe you *are* sick?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe you really are unwell. You know, mentally." Ste tapped the side of his head with his index finger.

"I'm fine." Tilde moved the bags around making as much noise as possible.

"You've become housebound because of a dream!"

"It's not just because of the dream." She explained. "It's because of the old woman."

"Ah yes. The mad old woman who goes to late-night casinos and pinches men's bottoms on the night bus home. It's quite normal to hang a life-altering decision to never leave your house on her." Ste crossed his legs and pouted. Most of the time Tilde loved how he performed everything he said, but occasionally it did rather irritate her.

"Ste, if the two things hadn't happened on the same night... well, I wouldn't be doing this. But when this woman spoke to me about "following my dreams" I couldn't work out what she meant. Did she mean the dreams I had at night or

my metaphorical dreams? And I still don't know the answer! But as soon as I woke from that nightmare - the nightmare that sliced off your two lovely arms I should add - and I remembered all the horrid things that happened in it, I knew I couldn't ignore it, or her."

Ste began to unravel the thick woollen scarf that was coiled around his neck. The weather had turned in the last week, pulling the last of the leaves off trees and stirring up a wind that whipped against the windows. Sometimes, if Tilde didn't bother to turn the television or radio on, the whistling of the wind was the only sound she heard all day.

"Tilly, darling," Ste said in a careful voice. "They are connected by a widely accepted concept called "coincidences" and life is full of them! Just yesterday I bumped into not one but two ex-boyfriends on the Jubilee line... now that was a nightmare."

"But that's not the same, Ste. There was a message in what the woman told me and there was a message in that dream. A message I'm supposed to listen to."

"And you think the message was 'Stay at home forever and ever and ever'," Ste moved to lie along her bed on his side. She thought him so lanky and elegant, her gaze lingering on his arms a little too long.

"Is it so bad if I say yes? I don't want those bad things to happen. I don't want my cats to go missing, I don't want you to lose your arms and I don't want to lose my job."

“Yes, but you know one of those things may actually happen if you don’t leave the house. Embers isn’t going to let you work from home forever.”

“He seems fine with it.” Tilde filled the kettle with water.

“Of course they seem fine *now*. You’ve told them you’re sick, but what they really think is that you’ve got stress. They have to tread very carefully with that. But trust me; they’re monitoring this situation very closely. And it is not sustainable to them, no matter how long you think it can go on for. I see it all the time in my line of work.”

“I’ve never thought about hairdressers getting stress.”

Ste narrowed his eyes. “How many times Tilde? I’m a colourist, not a hairdresser. And *you’re* changing the subject.”

“But I am still working. I’m online all day, I still get all my emails, I’m reading more manuscripts than ever and I have conference calls with my authors, who are none the wiser. I’m sure Mr Embers is very happy with my current performance,” Tilde stirred sugar into one of the mugs. She could almost see her words swirl and sink into the brown liquid, not sticking around long enough to be convincing.

Ste folded up his long limbs and sat up to take his tea. “Tilly. It can’t go on forever.”

While Tilde filled her days with work, wading through the steady stream of manuscripts she asked to be forwarded to her, time flowed more slowly in the evenings. The television offered poor company and the radio kept talking about what was happening in a city she no longer felt part of. As much as she loved her mews and her maisonette, the walls had started to draw closer around her and she had begun to wish she lived on a busier road, one that would bring the ebb and flow of London right outside her window.

Eventually, thanks to boredom and a curiosity she'd grown tired of fighting, she felt moved to learn more about the source of her current situation; she began to research dreams.

In hours Tilde had read twenty, maybe thirty articles about sleep cycles and she read on learning about scientists' understanding of rapid eye movement, the deepest stage of sleep. She discovered that within five minutes of waking, only 50% of a dream could be recalled. If you waited ten minutes, 100% of that dream would be forgotten forever. And when Tilde noted that this was why some people got into the habit of writing a "dream log" immediately upon waking, she searched for articles that offered her guidance on the best way to document dreams.

After reading about lucid dreaming she returned to the notes from that original dream and she questioned whether there was a time in that nightmare she had known she was dreaming; she didn't think so. Tilde turned to the back of

the notebook, flicked past the pages she'd already written on and, with a frightening speed, she filled more pages with quotes, thoughts and observations. They grew and grew to the middle of her notebook and beyond, threatening to catch up with her notes from the original dream.

One night, Tilde stayed up to the early hours reading about Sigmund Freud's theory that dreams were a window into the unconscious mind. She nodded along with his claims that dreams are "disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes". Her head ached trying to comprehend the activation-synthesis model of dreaming, though she found it easy to accept the age-old tradition of seeing dreams as symbolic messages, a concept she had read about in many historic novels.

Writing up her findings was often the last thing Tilde did at night and it exhausted her. Grateful for tiredness, she would fall into a deep sleep, comforted also by the fact a pen and her notebook were lying next to her, ready to soak up a new dream.

Yet this was the strangest thing of all; since the nightmare that had begun it all, not a single dream had come. Her sleep was often deep and still - only occasionally was it restless and broken - but always it was empty and silent. No new dreams arrived. It was that which made her feel most alone.

Chapter Six – Three More Weeks Later

Tilde's dreamless existence continued into her favourite month, December, the one that would bring her 37th birthday and Christmas. As she stayed inside with her laptop displaying a new article about dreams, she thought about the things she couldn't see. The Christmas lights on Oxford Street would be twinkling above shoppers' heads and soon the city's Christmas Tree would arrive from Norway to tell all of Trafalgar Square and the rest of London that Christmas was on its way.

While she continued to work and keep her clients happy, Kate from HR had started calling on a near daily basis. She left short and sharp voicemail messages demanding Tilde come in for a meeting or failing that, she needed to see a letter from her doctor.

While happy to get her groceries for the last six weeks - *"Well, I don't want you to starve. Skinny doesn't suit you, darling,"* - Ste had refused to go to her doctor's surgery and enquire about another self-certificate, after the first one he'd fetched expired three weeks ago and he'd stared at her without blinking when she asked him to consider aiding her in forging the document. Seeing as her GP wasn't willing to issue one over the phone, which made a lot more sense to Ste than it did to Tilde, her only solution was making an appointment and going to the doctor's.

"But I *am* anxious now. I genuinely feel very unwell about leaving the house. Why can't the doctor see that's why I can't go to the surgery to get my certificate? Surely I'm not the only person in the world with this sort of... condition?" Tilde said to Ste. She'd phoned him after realising it had been nearly a week since she'd seen him.

"Your condition has a name Tilly: agoraphobia. Learn how to spell it, my dear, because that's what you have. And of course, you're not the only one. I looked it up. Two in every one hundred people in this country are agoraphobic, though not all are housebound. For some it's more like anxiety related to certain social situations. Two in one hundred people," Ste repeated. "That's quite a lot of people, if you think about it. But from what I've read you're the only one who can say that the source of their anxiety is a dream and a crazy old woman."

"She wasn't *that* crazy... I don't understand why the doctor won't come and see me. Why do I have to go all the way to the surgery to see her?"

She heard Ste inhale a bumpy breath of air and she closed her eyes, waiting, but no words followed. She looked down at her feet. Her slippers needed another wash already.

"Will you do it for me, Tilly? Please. Or at least consider it. I don't see what else you can do. You have to take responsibility for... for what's going on with you."

"I'm not doing this without reason. If I leave the house all

these bad things will happen. Maybe not the exact things in my dream... but really awful, horrid things. Things I'm not prepared for."

"Tilde, nothing is going to happen when you leave the house, other than a healthy dose of Vitamin D which is much needed at this present time." Ste paused before adding. "Not to mention a haircut."

"I need more time, Ste. I have to wait a bit longer."

Tilde didn't want to tell Ste that she was waiting for another dream: a dream that would tell her all was okay and that she could leave the house without tragedy striking. But the absence of not just that dream but all dreams left her bereft of clues or conviction. Instead, those long, dark, empty sleeps only made her take bigger strides towards believing that if a new dream was not forthcoming then she should continue to cling to the last one she'd had.

Chapter Seven – Tilde’s Birthday

When Tilde didn’t leave the house on her birthday, people rallied around, concerned and curious, albeit from a distance. Her colleagues sent cards and Kate from HR didn’t call for a few days. The girls from her Stitch and Bitch group sent a string of texts asking which pub she’d like to meet them in for a special round of knitting and nattering and the friends she and Ste had collected together attacked her by email. They sent numerous photos of her celebrating her birthday last year, confused about why she didn’t want that same glazed look on her face, in the same late night bar where her shoes had stuck to the floor. Ste intervened, as protective of her to them as he was critical of her “hermitting” to her. Their arguments had been getting louder and longer and Tilde noticed the silences in between had begun to lengthen. But still he arranged for a beautiful bouquet of pink roses to be delivered to her on the morning of her birthday. She spent the day arranging and re-arranging them in between reading and crying over her favourite novel, her tears dripping on to Bert and Ernie whom she pinned to her side with considerable necessary force.

The next day, a Sunday, her parents arrived.

Tilde felt a heavy load of guilt land on her when she opened the door. Her mother’s face was sallow and grey, no doubt a result of their journey to and across the big city. Her father

knotted his brow in all manner of shapes throughout the meal that Tilde had spent four hours preparing. She was getting quite good at cooking now and had built up a warm rapport with the man who delivered the groceries she now ordered online.

Before they left, her mother hugged her a little too hard and she noticed her father shaking his head as he walked up the mews' cobbles. Tilde closed the door, grateful that they hadn't pushed the matter, even though she'd known they wouldn't. Her parents managed problems like the family's finest china; they were best kept in a safe place, locked up out of harm's way.

But that same evening her father rang.

"Tilde, please come home for Christmas,"

"Dad, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Tilde, we can't come down to London to be with you. Your mother refuses..."

"So you *can*, but you *won't*?" Tilde attacked, tasting the sourness of her tone.

"Your mother doesn't enjoy all this travel. She really isn't well at all after getting all those trains and buses."

Tilde wanted to shout out that it was just two trains and one

bus. Furthermore, she wanted to cry out how *she* wasn't well, but that would sound an awful lot like defeat.

"Dad, it's okay. I understand."

"But will you be on your own? I don't like to think of you on your own."

"I'm not on my own Dad... I have the cats." She looked across the room at them, sat on their haunches by the front door.

"Tilde, cats aren't people." Her father said. "You do know that, don't you?"

"Of course I know that Dad, but they're good to me. They keep me company."

"*You* keep them captive."

The word 'captive' stabbed into Tilde and she twitched against it.

"Tilde..." Her father began again.

"Yes?"

"Have I ever told you why we called you Tilde?"

“Because you met a Swedish couple on holiday in France and you liked the woman’s name.”

“Yes, but also because we wanted you to be different. We wanted you to have a name that nobody else has. We wanted you to stand out, not shrink into the background, like we do.”

“Dad, you don’t...”

“Ah, it’s the truth,” he said. “But you, we’re so proud of how you’ve put yourself out there, with your job and your maisonette in London,”

“I’m...” But Tilde didn’t know what she wanted to say and she certainly didn’t want her father to hear her voice break. Seconds passed slowly and silently until her father coughed.

“You know a new year is always a good time to take stock and make some changes,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“We want to help you, Tilde. We’ll even pay for you to see someone. Your Mum’s convinced that’s what you need. That and maybe you could do with some... you know, some drugs. Anti-depressants, I mean. Nothing else. God, no, nothing illegal.”

“I’m not depressed...”

“I think you are,” he said. “Which is not a problem... You can get better. But you will have to leave the house to do so.”

Tilde glanced at the cat calendar Ste had bought for her as a Valentine’s gift. *“It doesn’t matter that you’ve missed January because nothing really happens in January apart from debt and the breaking of New Year’s resolutions. Besides I got it half price...”* He’d said. It was the best Valentine’s present she’d ever received.

Tilde counted six days before Christmas and thirteen days until the year was over.

“I’ll think about it, Dad.” She said eventually.

“Grand. That’s grand. It’s all I ask,” he said and she could hear his smile.

As Tilde put the phone down she thought again about the world outside. Her office had had their Christmas party in the Tower of London last night. She’d spent the morning scowling at the photos of her colleagues sipping champagne within the stone walls she’d always wanted to see inside. Earlier that morning Ste had invited her to the fancy dress party he was going to on New Year’s Eve. He claimed it was a “last minute plan” but she suspected he’d known about it for weeks. She replied to his text saying she’d think about it and she signed off by asking him what he was doing for

Christmas. He still hadn't replied. For a brief moment Tilde wondered what she would do if she really did have to spend Christmas on her own. And then she climbed into bed without brushing her teeth or checking that her notebook and pen was close by.

Chapter Eight – Christmas Eve

It sounded like someone was calling her.

“Tilde... Tilde...”

She woke and listened. It was Ste’s voice and it was coming from her letterbox. His tone dipped and the ‘E’ at the end of her name drifted away from him, revealing that he was very, very drunk. She wrapped her pink dressing gown around her and opened the door.

“I’m here to tell you that it’s over.” He swayed on the spot.

“It’s over?”

“Yes, we’re over. I’m cutting you off, like your dream did to my arms.” He used the side of his right hand to attack his arms at the shoulder. As he did he leaned over to one side so far that Tilde had to stop him falling. She pulled him in and led him to her sofa.

“I just can’t do it anymore, Tilly.” He sank down. “I’m so worried for you. And sad. This situation, makes me so, so, so, so sad. I drank half a bottle of gin tonight. Just thinking about it drives me to drink!”

Tilde sat down next to him and decided to go with a gentle

joke. "Oh Ste, you can't blame me for your drinking problem."

"I'm serious, Tilly!" He slapped his hand onto her knee a lot harder than perhaps he intended. "I can't watch you do this to yourself. I don't know how to help you. You won't *let* me help you. And as much as I love you and I want to come here to see you and check you've had a shower and put a bra on, I can't do it anymore. There are only so many times I can get on the nightmare that is the bloody number 94 bus!"

"It's not a bad bus..." whispered Tilde, looking at his hand that was still lying on her leg. How she had missed physical contact.

"Tilly, it's a bad, bad, *bad* bus. It's the reason you're in this mess. If you hadn't got on that bus, if you hadn't talked to that woman, if you hadn't had that stupid drunken dream... You wouldn't be in this state."

"It wasn't a drunken dream..."

Ste grunted and slid sideways so he was lying down behind her.

"It doesn't matter if it was drunken or not. It was *just a dream*." His words bumped into one another like they were in a rush to get out of his mouth.

“But it was more than a dream. You don’t understand. I’ve never experienced anything like that before. And now I don’t dream at all. Don’t you think that’s strange? Don’t you think that’s telling enough?!” Tilde flattened her hands out in front of her as if showing Ste what she meant, but there was nothing there for him to see, just air. Besides, when Tilde turned to look at him she saw his eyes were closed.

“It was... just a dream. It wasn’t real... Nothing bad is going to happen to you...” He mumbled.

“Ste, I wish this was all different. That I could just have another dream and...” But Tilde didn’t know what was supposed to happen next. She listened to his breathing get deeper. “Ste, you can stay the night, if you want?”

“Tilde, I’m cutting you off. I’ve had... enough. That’s...” He swallowed whatever was meant to follow.

Tilde fetched a blanket and draped it over him. She took off his shoes and placed a bucket by the side of the sofa, directly under his head. She got into her own bed and she fell asleep to the strangely soothing sound of his snoring.

Chapter Nine – Christmas Day

Tilde felt herself wake to the sound of a firm repetitive knock on her front door.

Sitting up she looked over at her sofa. The bucket was where she'd left it, but a lumpy indent in her sofa now lay where Ste had been. She assumed the knocking was him returning for whatever reason. It was Christmas Day after all; he wouldn't leave her alone on Christmas Day.

Tilde swung her legs out from under her duvet and they carried her to her front door. She opened it and saw George Embers standing in front of her.

“Merry Christmas, Tilde. May I come in?” He said, smiling.

Tilde stood to the side, silent.

“I assumed you'd be on your own today.” Mr Embers walked past her and into the middle of the big room that was her home. “I see I was right.”

Tilde turned to face him but she didn't move closer.

“You know I've spent the last seven Christmases on my own. Three out of choice. The other four, well... Let's just say there are times in life when you don't have the joy of

choice.”

Tilde stood very still and watched him as he sat on her sofa. Today didn't feel like Christmas Day. It felt like a day like no other, like it wasn't real. Tilde felt her heart begin to race; this is what lucid dreaming is like. Finally, she was having the dream that had long evaded her.

“I came to talk to you.” Mr Embers said.

“I see.” Tilde closed the front door and walked towards him.

“Good. Would you be so kind as to put the kettle on?” He took off his beret and crossed his legs.

After making tea and placing a mug into his hands, Tilde debated sitting on her bed or beside her boss. He moved to his right, giving her the direction she needed.

“Do you know a woman by the name of Elisabeth Ray Chiltern?” He asked when she'd finished rearranging her dressing gown over her knees.

Tilde searched her brain, frowning. “No.”

“Well, that's where you're wrong. Let me tell you a story.” Mr Embers took a long sip of his tea.

“I first became aware of her a month or so ago when she posted something to the office. She ignored every one of our

submission guidelines and sent a large box of papers to us by courier. The box was heavy and full to the top. And it was bright pink. She'd wrapped it in fuchsia wrapping paper herself - 'I wanted to get the attention of the girl who likes pink,' she said when I spoke with her on the phone for the first time - and while she couldn't get your attention because you weren't in the office, she certainly got mine. At first I thought it might be a bomb, but after Roger the Security Guard opened it up wearing some yellow washing up gloves from the kitchen, I realised it was something I feared much more; it was somebody's life's work." Embers brushed a cat hair off his trouser leg and Tilde looked around the room, searching for Bert and Ernie. They were sitting by the front door again.

"I was ready to hand it down to one of the juniors, but that's when I noticed the name on a cover sheet inside." He flattened his beret over his knee and Tilde saw it was a rich dark green, like the colour of holly leaves. "And now I must tell you another story. Are you ready?"

Tilde slid back so she could sit up straight. She nodded, thinking how peculiar it felt to be so in control of one's body and mind while still dreaming.

"When I first arrived in London, to study English Lit at King's, my pretentious poetry and I ended up falling in with a society of other serious souls and we thought we could change the world with our words. It was the 1970s, we were restless and the world was a smaller, stranger but more tangible place. I wrote more in those four years than at any time in my life. Most of it is self-indulgent twaddle that

never really got to the point, but much of it is really very effective at capturing how happy and delusional we were about the future. I miss those days very much.

“One of the reasons we were so committed to our craft was the unofficial leadership of a very famous underground poet and performance writer who we adored. She toured the dirtiest, darkest and dampest of London’s bars creating quite a stir. I remember she always had a glass of port in one hand and a notebook in the other and all she did was read out the unedited, unadulterated notes she’d made from whatever dream she’d had the night before. That was what she was famous for. Every performance was raw, unique and riddled with poor punctuation and sleep-blurred observations. She often made no sense at all but yet, her honesty, her originality and frankly the bizarre nature of her dreams, oh Tilde, we couldn’t get enough. You know it was whilst hearing her read about one of her dreams that I thought to myself ‘Somebody should write a book about her. I’d like to read that.’ It was one of my earliest agent-aspirations.” Embers leaned back and rested his interlocked fingers on the small hill of his stomach.

“Her name was Lissie Dupré, at least that’s what she called herself on the circuit. Now of course, the names are nowhere instantly similar, but there was something in the ‘S’ of that Elisabeth that sparked a flame of interest. I read the first paragraph, then the first page and I realised I was staring at the book I’d wanted to read nearly forty years ago. And what a story it is! The people she has met, the people she called friends, the people she slept with – goodness me, she doesn’t hold back. And her dreams are there too, the

ones she wrote down in small fragments and read back to us unedited all those years ago. Somehow, she has made sense of them: their symbolism; their lessons; their nonsense. Well, not all of it makes sense, of course. If everything made sense it wouldn't be true to life. Nor would it be a good story, in my opinion." He turned to Tilde with the dip of a smile on his face.

"She's the woman I met on the 94 bus," Tilde whispered shattering any stubborn illusion that she was dreaming.

"Yes." Embers said. "She's also our latest author to sign a six figure deal and yesterday I had phone calls with three publishers in New York. They want to talk numbers. Tilde, we're looking at over seven figures for that side of the pond."

"Oh..." Tilde blinked again.

"And you, Tilde. You are her agent."

"Me?"

"Ms Chiltern insisted on it. Though I wasn't about to argue. I gave up arguing with strong-willed women a long time ago. Besides, I know you'll be able to manage this perfectly well."

"But... that's a lot of money. There's a lot of work that needs to be done,"

“Yes. You’ll have to go to New York in the next few weeks. You’ll have to go alone. Ms Chiltern refuses to get on a plane; she has a very serious fear of planes and flying, apparently.”

“She’s afraid of flying?”

“We’re all scared of something.” Embers picked up his beret and stared at it as though he’d never seen it before. Then he looked up and into Tilde’s eyes. “Isn’t that right, Tilde?”

“Mr Embers...”

“Shall we go for a walk?” He stood up, twisting his beret onto his balding head.

“Mr Embers, I...” Tilde didn’t know where to start or, if she did start explaining, where she should stop.

“Ah, Christmas Day in London,” he exhaled. “You’re about to see the city like you’ve never seen it before. What’s the name of the park near here?”

“Ravenscourt?”

“That’s it! It has a beautiful walled garden doesn’t it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well, hurry up and get dressed. I’ll wait outside.” Mr Embers pulled a thin cigar from the metal case he kept in the inside pocket of his jacket. He walked to the front door, opened it slightly, and squeezed through a small gap so as to stop Bert and Ernie following, and then he closed it behind him.

Tilde drifted towards her wardrobe where she pulled clothes on with shaking hands. She then walked to where her coat and scarf had hung undisturbed for many weeks. Catching a whiff of the musty cigar smoke that was sneaking under the front door, she turned to see both her cats walk away, their noses up into the air.

“You know there’s one place more magical than London at this time of year.” Mr Embers shouted through the door. “And that’s New York. I’ve always found the Americans a little brash and brassy for my own taste - everything’s so big and over-polished, like an over-worked novel - but that city at Christmas is something else. You’ll love it Tilde, have you ever been?”

“No...” She said staring at the back of her front door, deep breaths lifting her ribcage up and out.

“It’s spectacular. All those sounds and smells hanging in the cold Manhattan air. We’ll make sure you stay downtown, near Broadway. Then you can walk everywhere and you should. You haven’t walked a mile until you’ve walked a New York mile, isn’t that what they say? It’s really nothing

like London.” Tilde heard him zip up his coat. “It’s much better organised with everything exactly where it should be. But truth be told, I wouldn’t want London to be like that. Can you imagine London without the old next to the young, without the rich next to the poor and without the white next to the black? That could never be London.”

“I’ve forgotten what London looks like.” Tilde gripped the door handle.

“It won’t have changed much,” he called back. “And then again, it will look completely different too. I’m sure you’ve missed it very much.”

Tilde turned the handle and opened the door. A cold wind rushed in and she closed her eyes against it. She thought about Ste’s arms, about the cats and about all the millions of other things that could go wrong. Then she thought about London, and about New York and the reality of a dreamless existence.

As Tilde took the first step forwards, she looked down, expecting the cats to rush out after her. Instead, they sat a few feet inside, watching her with tilted heads and thin eyes. Bert then yawned before walking back to the bed just as Ernie bowed down to lick his front left paw.

Tilde breathed out, stepped forwards and pulled the door to behind her.

Chapter Ten – Still Christmas Day

Together, Tilde and George Embers walked many London miles. They circled a very empty Ravenscourt Park, taking a few minutes to sit in silence in the walled garden. They walked all the way to Holland Park, tracking the route of the 94 bus, before the crisp cold forced them to seek a little warmth in an old pub tucked down a side street before Notting Hill Gate.

Tilde felt herself thaw from the inside out as a London she didn't recognise revealed itself. There was no traffic, there was such little noise and there were hardly any other people around. Those they did pass carried smiles on their faces and offered up Christmas wishes with a bounce in their voices. Looking into the windows of terraced houses, Tilde saw the dancing lights of Christmas trees and she watched people wearing paper crowns gather in groups around tables or televisions.

In the pub, as they waited for their food, Tilde and Mr Embers first toasted their luck that a cancellation had made way for them and they raised several more glasses to the future success of Ms Chiltern. Over Embers' shoulder she watched the other people in the pub. They were families mostly, but she also saw a few couples and one group of three men and three women, all laughing and ordering more wine. When Tilde rested her face in her hand, she felt how warm her cheeks were. She was glad not to be alone.

The conversation was exceptional. She'd known that George Embers was a man of stories - he'd made it his profession - but she had no idea how easy it was to listen to him and to feel like there was value in everything he said. It complemented the food perfectly, leaving Tilde feeling dizzily full, but still she ordered dessert and still she asked Mr Embers more questions.

When her after-dinner glass of port was empty, Tilde suggested they walk back together again. She wanted to see more of London on Christmas Day before the sun went down.

"Or we could get the bus? The 94 goes all the way back to my house." She offered when he wasn't forthcoming.

"I think I may stay here for another port. I'm starting to understand why Ms Chiltern made it her drink," Mr Embers said. "Besides, I don't believe the buses run on Christmas Day."

"Really? I thought London's buses ran every day."

"Even London's buses need a break at some point." He smiled and stood up to say goodbye. "You'll be alright getting back on your own?"

"Yes." Tilde said with a determined nod and when he opened his arms for a hug she was glad.

She walked home treasuring each step as though she'd learned to walk again. Just before Shepherd's Bush roundabout she stopped at a bus stop to see if Mr Embers was correct. As she read the notices, trying to find out if they were running, a black cab pulled up behind her.

"They're not running today. Need a taxi, love?" The taxi driver was wearing a Santa hat.

"No, thanks," she said. "I was just checking something."

"Well, get home safe, love. Merry Christmas!" he said with a warm smile before driving off. Through the back window of the taxi she noticed a small clump of mistletoe swinging under his rear-view mirror.

When Tilde got home she saw everything was exactly how she had left it. The cats were asleep on her bed. Her pink dressing gown still lay in a heap on the floor. Mr Embers' mug sat on the coffee table. For a second she wanted to cry with the relief of it all, but instead she phoned her parents.

"That's the best Christmas present we could hope for!" Her father exclaimed when she told him how she'd spent her day.

"Oh Tilly, you great big nilly!" Ste sang down the phone to her. He was in his local pub with his housemates "*and other festive rejects*" and it sounded like each one of them was

shouting at the top of their voices in the background. “You can come to our New Year’s Eve party now. It’s fancy dress... Christmas is the rather unimaginative theme. I know what you can be. You can be a Christmas miracle!”

It was after saying goodbye to Ste that Tilde let herself cry, each tear happier than the last.

Chapter Eleven – Another Beginning

On the morning after Christmas, Tilde woke to find neither cat was sleeping on her bed.

She called for them once, then sat up. She called for them a second time, then stood up. When she called for them a third time she realised that she was beginning to panic.

“It’s not what you think, Tilde,” she told herself aloud. “Now, you have a choice. You can panic, or you can stay calm and just forget about it. They’ll show up eventually,”

Moments later, she had left their food on the kitchen floor and she was in the bathroom taking a shower. When she returned to two plates of untouched organic salmon flakes her hand covered her mouth to catch her panic.

“Oh God, what have I done?” She sighed.

Racing around the small and big room of her maisonette she checked under her bed, behind the curtains and in the laundry basket. She was running out of places to look when she finally checked outside her front door, calling their names. As she stood there, feeling the cold prickle her still-wet skin, she saw there was a man dressed in a black uniform walking down her mews. He was a policeman and he walked straight up to her with heavy, purposeful

footsteps.

“Tilde O’Hara?”

She noticed his blue eyes first. They seemed to sparkle like the sea on a sunny day. Then she noticed how tall and broad he stood and how very square his jaw was.

“Yes,” she said.

“Good morning, Ms O’Hara. I’m Detective Constable Holmes. May I come in?” His voice was deep and it sounded familiar, but she knew she’d never met him before because she would have remembered feeling what she was feeling. She gave a quick thought to her pink dressing gown and the puffiness she felt around her eyes, then moved aside for him to walk past.

“I’m sorry to disturb you so early,” he said once inside.

“It’s okay,” Tilde felt very hot all of a sudden and it was as though panic and pleasure were fighting one another within her. “Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you.” He smiled and pleasure gained some ground.

“I think I’ll just put the kettle on for myself. Please,” she said, gesturing to her sofa.

He sat in silence as Tilde busied herself in the kitchen, checking her reflection in the glass door of her microwave as she waited for the kettle to boil. She eventually returned and sat on the edge of her unmade bed, crossing her legs towards the policeman.

“Ms O’Hara, I’m here because of your friend Stephen Dukes.”

“Oh goodness, no...” Panic made a bold reappearance as Tilde put her tea down on her bedside table. She began to search her brain for all its references to lucid dreaming, trying to remember if she’d read how to make the dream stop.

“Did you know that you were listed as his next of kin?” Detective Holmes continued.

“I am?” Tilde tucked her right hand inside the left sleeve of her dressing gown. Gripping a chunk of her skin, she pinched her fingers together.

“Well, I’m afraid he’s...”

“Oh God, it’s his arms, isn’t it?” She pinched harder.

“What about his arms?” Detective Holmes frowned.

“He lost them didn’t he? Yesterday, on a double decker bus?!”

“Ms O’Hara, your friend hasn’t lost anything apart from a lot of dignity.”

“What?”

“Stephen Dukes is currently sitting in a cell in Hammersmith Police Station sobering up after a very, very drunken night.”

“He’s okay?”

“I wouldn’t say okay... He’ll have a very sore head today.”

“Did you arrest him? What did he do?”

“Let’s just say he was very much disturbing the peace on board the number 94 bus.”

Tilde sniffed out a hint that maybe she was dreaming. “But the buses weren’t running yesterday, were they?”

“Correct. It was the first bus this morning.” Tilde watched Detective Constable Holmes pull a notebook from his pocket. He had to flick through several pages to find what he was looking for. “Around 6’o’clock this morning he boarded the 94 bus from Regent Street. By the time it reached Queensway Underground station he was pole-dancing around a stop button in nothing but a pair of leather trousers. Quite a sight to see, according to a handful of

witnesses.”

“Oh my...” Tilde whispered. “I thought he’d gotten rid of those awful trousers.”

The policeman laughed and put his notebook away. “Well, he’s certainly worked his way into our seasonal hall of fame. If only he hadn’t started pinching passengers’ bottoms, the driver may not have called us, but it was beginning to border on common assault...”

“Pinching bottoms...” Tilde fought to bury her smile.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“But you could have just called me. I mean, if you just needed somebody to come down to the station to collect him.”

“You’re right.” He stroked the rim of the hat balanced on his knee. “But you see, Mr Dukes and I had a good long chat just a few hours ago, as he was sobering up, and he sort of told me all about you and your recent... er, troubles.”

Tilde sat up a little straighter. “What did he say?”

“That you have been going through a difficult phase. That you didn’t leave the house in over two months. That you were scared to do so because something bad would happen to him, to you and to your cats. And that it was all because

of some strange dream you had.”

“He said all that?” Tilde didn’t dare to look at the policeman.

“Yes. He told me quite a story. So, was it just the drink talking?”

“Not really. I mean, I suppose, yes, it’s all sort of true,” Tilde finally let go of the skin on her arm.

“That’s interesting,” Detective Constable Holmes said before picking up his hat and leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. Tilde felt herself move towards him too, as though pulled by a magnet. “You see, by the time Mr Dukes fell asleep my shift was long over. I was just about to drive home, but I really didn’t want to risk driving as tired as I was, so I decided to have a quick nap in the office.”

“Very sensible,” Tilde said. She couldn’t say why but she felt suddenly disappointed. She had expected him to say something else, though she had no idea what.

“While I was sleeping, I had a dream about this strange housebound woman your friend Stephen had been talking about. I dreamt that she’d come to the police station to check on Mr Dukes and we’d met and, well, she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my life.”

Tilde had to remind herself to breathe out.

He continued to explain, all the while stroking his hat. "Now, I don't mean to insult you but that woman in my dream, she looked nothing like you."

Tilde lowered her chin to her chest.

"But, you *are* very pretty." He said quietly "And you don't seem to be anything like the crazy woman I thought you'd be from Mr Duke's description. So, I am glad I came to investigate... and to let you know about your friend."

Tilde finally looked up at him and saw he was smiling, his eyes brighter and bluer than before.

"It was so strange to be so bothered by a dream. I couldn't stop thinking about it," he said. "And I normally never remember what happens in my dreams,"

"I understand," Tilde smiled too and there was silence as their smiles held on to each other.

"Anyway. Now I'm here, it looks like you could do with my help..." His eyes left her to look around him.

"I could?"

"Yes, I've noticed that those two cats of yours are missing."

Tilde had forgotten about Bert and Ernie, though remembering them surprisingly didn't provoke a rush of

panic. "They'll turn up," she said.

"I'm sure they will, but let me help you look."

By the time Detective Constable Holmes - Mark - had found Bert and Ernie hiding in her washing machine - "It's not the first time I've seen this," he said, pulling them out - Tilde had mentioned to him that she was a literary agent, that she was going to New York soon and that she was single.

By the time he said goodbye to her, his phone number was written on the only blank page left in her notebook.

And by the time she left her small maisonette, walking up the mews' cobbles, she could see and hear that after a deserved day-off London was becoming its old self again, humming with inexplicable busyness.

Tilde stood at the bus stop and waited for the bus like she had so many mornings before. But this time she was waiting for a different bus, the number 266, which would take her to Hammersmith Police Station so she could rescue her friend Ste with a hug and a flask of coffee. It didn't matter that the Sunday service timetable meant the bus was going to be slow in coming. Tilde knew that it would get to her eventually and she was certain that she could wait.

Thank you for reading!

If you enjoyed Night Bus, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Night Bus is a short story taken from a full collection of short fiction coming soon in the summer of 2014. If you'd like to be one of the first to read A to Z: Short Stories Inspired by London, please [sign up to Frances' newsletter](#) or like this [Facebook page](#).

Find out more about Frances M. Thompson and read more of her books on her blog, [As the Bird flies](#).