

WHO WE WERE

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VIPER

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The lock takes less than a minute, the fourth key a close enough fit, assisted with a few bumps from the handle of a screwdriver. The door pushes open into a hallway with off-white tiles laid on the diagonal. Next is an open-plan kitchen and living area, a study nook on the far side of the sofa: small desk, dated laptop, a printout of the invitation sitting atop a neat pile of paperwork.

***You are invited to the twenty-year
reunion of the Class of 2000***

Deep breath. Don't get angry. Don't lose focus.

The laptop whirrs to life, its fan sounding inordinately loud in the silent apartment. No password required, stupidly trusting and naïve. Insert the USB, click on install, twenty minutes to completion. Be calm. Be thorough. She won't be home for hours yet. Plenty of time to check her browsing history, her Facebook page and the rest of the paperwork on the desk. Glimpses into the construct of her life, the friends she holds close, her most secret desires.

Wander into the kitchen, opening and shutting cabinet doors, cataloguing the food she eats, the brand of coffee she prefers. The main bedroom is located down a short corridor. White cotton bedcovers, faux-fur cushions, the book she's reading – a bestselling thriller – open on the bedside table. Underneath it, another book, larger, sickeningly familiar.

Yearbook of Macquarie High, Class of 2000

Don't touch it, don't look at those hateful faces, don't fall for that fake innocence.

Back to the antiquated laptop. Glare at the screen as it reluctantly grinds through the final stages. Pocket the USB. Switch off the machine. Pause inside the front door, key poised, cap pushed low in case there's a security camera lurking somewhere. Listen. All clear. Bump, bump, bump goes the screwdriver.

It's happening. Their shallow lives will be blown apart. And they'll be sorry. Finally.

Name: Annabel Moore (School captain)

What you will be remembered for: Not keeping a straight face when Miss Hicks fell up the stage steps on awards night.

Best memories of high school: Year 11 snow excursion.

Worst memories of high school: Double period maths on Fridays. Torture.

What will you be doing ten years from now: Marine biologist.

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ANNABEL

The phone rings on the way to school pick-up. Annabel takes the call, even though she's almost outside the school and the conversation will have to be a short one.

'What happened to marine biology?' Grace's voice fills the car.

'What?'

'Our school yearbook. Apparently, you were going to be a marine biologist!'

'I was?' Annabel is astounded. She has no recollection of this.

'It's here in black and white.'

'What else does it say?'

'That you'll be remembered for not keeping a straight face at awards night!'

This she does remember. Miss Hicks catching the toe

of her shoe on the second step. Face-planting on the stage. Annabel trying, unsuccessfully, to quell the urge to laugh. Death stares from the principal, Mr Rowland.

She snorts. 'Well, they could hardly put in what I was *really* remembered for, could they?'

'No,' Grace agrees. 'That wouldn't have come across as well.'

Annabel Moore: the girl who was pregnant during the HSC. Her enlarged belly jutting against the exam desk. Her ankles swollen in her school shoes. No surprise that she and Jarrod got disappointing results. How could they study, concentrate, pretend that the Higher School Certificate mattered while their lives were imploding?

She flicks on her indicator and pulls into a space that isn't quite big enough. The rear end of her Ford Territory juts into a residential driveway. *It's okay*, she tells herself. *It's only for a few minutes*.

'Why are you looking at the stupid old thing anyway? Aren't your kids keeping you busy enough?'

Grace, like Annabel, is a stay-at-home mum. She has four children, all quite close in age. The strange thing is, she was never the maternal type.

'Katy Buckley wants to do an updated yearbook,' Grace explains. 'For the reunion.'

Katy Buckley. Plain and studious. Perennially mocked for being such a try-hard. Annabel feels a rush of that old derision, its resurgence taking her by surprise.

'Oh, for God's sake. What's wrong with just rocking

up on the night, getting drunk and making fools of ourselves on the dance floor? Who the fuck cares about yearbooks?’

‘It’s because Katy’s a teacher. She’s still caught up in that world. Where things like yearbooks actually matter ... Having said that, I think it’s a rather good idea ...’

‘And what did Katy Buckley want to be when she left school?’

Annabel can hear Grace turn the pages of the book.

‘President of the Wilderness Society.’

Both women burst into laughter. Explosive, unstoppable laughter that reminds Annabel of when they were younger, and half the time didn’t even know what they were laughing about. The school bell rings, the sound carrying through the open windows of Annabel’s car, bringing a distinct feeling of nostalgia.

Some children, the quick ones, are already flying through the gates. The ones to whom being first means everything. First to get to school in the morning. First out the door to lunch. Their darting eyes able to establish where queues will be formed and their agile bodies manoeuvring so they’re always at the front. Annabel used to be one of those kids.

‘Gotta go,’ she tells Grace. ‘Mia will be out any second now.’

Mia is towards the back, a dreamy smile on her face. Dearest Mia. Such a gentle soul. Such a joy. If only her brother had a fraction of her affable nature.

‘Hi, darling. Hop in quickly. We’re going straight to

the mall. We're going to buy the most perfect pair of communion shoes.'

Annabel sees him in the food court, pushing up against some other boy with his shoulder. Guffawing in that annoying horsey way that teenage boys laugh.

'What the fuck?' It's out of her mouth before she can stop herself.

Mia's eyes widen in shock. 'You swore, Mummy. You said the F word.'

'It was an accident,' she counters weakly. 'Wait here, Mia. Don't move till I get back.'

Mia stands uncertainly, clutching the bag that contains her communion shoes in one hand, and her milkshake – the reason they are in the food court – in the other. Annabel marches towards Daniel, who is so absorbed in his friends he hasn't noticed her approach. It's a mistake, she knows, to confront him like this, to publicly humiliate him, but he has obviously dodged school – again! – and if he's not going to keep to the rules, then neither is she.

'What the hell are you doing here?'

His head jerks up at the sound of her voice. Surprise registers before he holds up a McDonald's bag as though it's vital evidence. 'Just having a burger ... What's the problem?'

'You should be at school. *That's the problem.*'

'We had a free period for our last lesson.'

'Don't lie to me!'

‘Ask anyone.’ He looks carefully at his friends, as though she can’t interpret what that silent look is really saying. ‘Tell her, Jez. She’ll believe you.’

Jez is the most sensible of a bad lot. His face reddens till it blends into his strawberry-blond hair.

‘It’s true ... We were meant to have ... maths ...’

‘You’re a terrible liar, Jeremy Hughes.’

Daniel quickly resorts to anger. ‘Just go away, Mum. *Leave us alone.*’

‘You’re coming with me.’ She grabs his arm.

He shrugs her off. ‘Go away. You’re embarrassing yourself.’

‘Do you think I care? You’re coming home with me and Mia. *Right now.*’

‘You can’t make me!’ He’s shouting at her. In the middle of the food court. For everyone to see and hear.

‘I *can* make you. Have some respect, for God’s sake!’

Now she’s being no better, shouting back at him. But she’s so angry, and he does this to her, turns her into this demented stranger who people are staring at and will talk about when they get home from the mall. *Remember that woman screaming at her son?* If he would only listen. If he would only do what he’s told. When she thinks of all the things she has sacrificed for him, for all three of them. She might have laughed about it with Grace earlier, but she will never forget the humiliation of sitting in that exam hall, her ballooned belly the talk of the school, the grave disappointment of the teachers,

the disgust of the other parents, the shocked fascination of the students who once looked up to her. She didn't go to university because of the baby, because of Jemma. She never had a proper career. She got married too young – eighteen, for God's sake! – and while her friends were partying and travelling, she was stuck at home, lost in a haze of nappies, feeding and constant crying. Jemma is at college now and doing all the things Annabel herself missed out on: getting a degree, going to wild parties and travelling during the holidays. But Annabel's work is far from done. She still has Daniel and Mia to see through, and Daniel is proving to be the toughest.

'You come with me right now or I'll drag you all the way to the car, and then we'll see what's embarrassing!'

The email arrives a couple of days later.

From: admin1@yearbook.com.au

Subject: Updated Yearbook

Annabel clicks on it without much thought. That is not strictly true. If she is honest, there is a brief, quite vicious desire to topple Katy Buckley from her self-appointed role as reunion organiser.

The first thing Annabel sees is a grainy, unflattering photo of herself. Directly below there's text typed in an old-fashioned font.

Name: Annabel Harris (Née Moore)

Highest achievement at school: School captain.

What you do now: Stay-at-home mother.

Highlights of last twenty years: Nothing remarkable. Peaked at school.

Lowlights: Finding out your son smokes dope. Initially not telling your husband.

Deepest fears: That weed is a gateway drug for Daniel.

Her first reaction is horror, to the point where she actually feels sick. Then she recovers herself. This is someone's idea of a joke. The cruellest, most despicable joke. The kind of thing they'd have done twenty years ago, back when they'd time to waste, unlimited imagination, and the lines between humour and outright nastiness were blurred.

So, who sent this? Someone who knows about their struggles with Daniel, even though Annabel and Jarrod resolved to keep it within the family. Someone who wants the upcoming reunion to have a hint of mystery, and perhaps shock factor?

The photo – one she's never seen before – is fairly recent. Her hair is in its usual style – layered, blonde, shoulder-length. There are tell-tale lines around her mouth and purple shadows under her eyes: was it taken the morning after a night when she'd lain awake, listening hard to see if Daniel was moving around, sneaking out of the house? There are so many Facebook photos

she's been 'tagged' in, so many casual shots in restaurants and other gatherings, who knows where this one came from.

Will everyone else get one of these 'updates' in their inbox? Yes, that must be the plan, otherwise there'd be no joke. Annabel can't fathom who would have the time or energy for something this elaborate. Hardly Katy Buckley. Not imaginative enough. Not cruel enough. Definitely not ballsy enough. Besides, Katy would be up to her eyes compiling the real updated yearbook.

Melissa Andrews? Co-editor of the original yearbook, so maybe possessing a vested interest in the revised one? Melissa and Annabel used to be friends, before everything turned toxic during those last few months of school. Now, as Annabel allows herself to think about Melissa, the jealousy returns. It was never an ordinary jealousy; it was obsessive, powerful, insanely out of proportion. But regardless of how Annabel might feel, then or now, she knows that Melissa wouldn't be so juvenile as to do something like this. Too busy with her high-flying career.

Zach Latham? Another co-editor. Zach would do anything for a laugh and did have the propensity for cruelty. Is he still the same today?

Luke Willis? God, she hasn't thought about *him* in years. Whatever became of Luke Willis?

Annabel is shutting the upstairs curtains when Jarrod's van pulls into the driveway. COASTAL CURRENTS is

painted on the sides and rear of the van: they came up with the business name together. Annabel watches him sit there, probably listening to the end of something interesting on the radio. The fact that he clearly isn't in a rush to get inside to see his family bothers her.

A few minutes later, as Annabel is coming down the stairs, the front door swings open.

'Daddy, Daddy!'

Jarrold picks Mia up, hoisting her on to his hip like a much younger child. Mia loves it. This is the first time she has seen her father today; he was gone when she got up for school this morning.

Annabel notices two things in quick succession: at the end of Mia's dangling legs are her brand-new communion shoes; and one of them looks like it is already scuffed.

'Mia, why have you got those shoes on?'

'I'm getting used to them, Mummy.'

'You've already marked them! Take them off this instant.'

Jarrold gives Annabel a look that says he thinks she's being too harsh but he would never contradict her in front of the children. United front: that's been their parenting motto. It feels like a long time since they've put their heads together to come up with parenting mottos, business names or anything else. The last time she remembers genuine collaboration was when they built this house, four years ago, but even that was more Annabel's project than Jarrold's. Tweaking the architect's plans. Visiting the site to check progress. Making

decisions about door handles, skirting boards, wall colours.

‘Where’s Daniel?’ Jarrod asks, setting Mia down so she can follow her mother’s instructions.

The need to check Daniel’s whereabouts has become the underlying beat to their lives. It’s always one of the first things Jarrod asks when he comes in.

‘At Jeremy’s house, working on a project for school. Some video they need to do for PE. I’m picking him up in half an hour.’

‘I can get him if you like,’ he offers, exhaustion etched in his face. He tends to go pale when he’s overtired. Annabel knows that on an average day he deals with a series of irate inconvenienced homeowners, outdated and treacherous wiring, claustrophobic ceiling cavities, not to mention alarmingly regular electric shocks caused by ditzy apprentices who keep forgetting to follow the correct protocols.

‘No, it’s fine. Have your dinner. Here, I’ll warm it up for you.’

Much later, when Daniel has been picked up and it has been confirmed that the PE project was all that he was up to, when Mia’s maths homework has been extensively corrected and she’s tucked up in bed, when Annabel has done her level best to remove the scuff from the communion shoe, she finally sits down next to her husband on the sofa. Jarrod is watching the cricket; Australia appear to be in trouble.

‘This popped up in my email today.’

Jarrold takes the sheet of paper from her outstretched hand and skims it. 'What the fuck is this?'

She shrugs. 'I don't really know. Some kind of joke, I presume.'

He jabs it with his finger. 'How do they know about Daniel?'

Good question. Jarrold was livid when he found out about the bong. She had to tell him in the end, because although she confiscated it, Daniel lost no time finding both a replacement and a better hiding spot. Jarrold was equally livid with Annabel (for not telling him about it upfront) and Daniel (who point-blank refused to stop). The irony is, once Jarrold calmed down, his instincts were exactly the same as hers: to cover it up.

'I don't want anyone to know. I don't want people making judgements, writing Daniel off as a no-hoper,' he said at the time. 'Let's try to sort this out ourselves the best we can.'

They haven't been able to sort it out, though. They've tried the calm and forthright approach, reasoning with Daniel about house rules, his health and his future. When that didn't work, they came down heavier: limiting access to his bank account, keeping tabs on who he is with, enforcing curfews and a few sessions with the school counsellor. Daniel has responded by lying about his whereabouts, escaping from his room at night, and becoming increasingly disconnected from his family. His desire to get high, practically on a daily basis, suggests an inability to

self-regulate and the possibility of a lifetime struggle with illicit substances.

So how has the author of this email found this information? The school counsellor? Unlikely. Maybe Jarrod broke his own rules and confided in someone. Or maybe Annabel accidentally let something slip, even though she's pretty sure she didn't. For God's sake, she hasn't even mentioned it to Grace.

Now she sighs. 'I have no idea. Did you tell someone?'

'Jesus, Annie, why the hell would I do that?' His voice is loud enough to carry to the kids' bedrooms. 'Didn't we agree that we'd keep it in the family?'

'Well, I haven't told anyone either.' She shrugs wearily. 'Unless I'm losing my memory Maybe I *am* losing my mind.'

'I'm going to find out who sent this and smash their face in.'

Jarrold was known for his short temper at school, especially at sporting fixtures. On-field grievances spiralling into tussles and swinging fists. Other team members pulling him back, talking him down. Minutes later he would be laughing and joking around. These days his anger is more entrenched.

Annabel stands up, pats him on the arm. 'It's a joke, Jarrod. Just a joke.'

He roars back at her. 'Stop saying that! Do you see either of us fucking laughing?'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B.M. Carroll was born in Ireland, and spent her early career working in finance. She is the author of eight novels, her most recent being *The Missing Pieces of Sophie McCarthy*, which was described as ‘irresistibly good’ by Liane Moriarty. She lives in Sydney.