

## THE SWELL

BY RUBY SOAMES

The winding, uphill trek to the school left Guy wheezing in time with the seagulls' cries. The horizon see-sawed behind lanky, yellow-ruffed palms as he checked if blooms of sweat could be seen on his shirt front.

'Y'know, he hasn't once picked the kids up from school?' Nikki had said in front of their lawyers despite him trying to explain how crucial his first months at W&A Management Monaco were in securing the job he needed to support them.

But that afternoon, not only was he there at the school gates, he was early, while she was probably preening herself for a night with whichever profile spurred her to swipe right.

A blonde by the entrance gave him a smile before taking a call. Guy reached inside his jacket to turn his phone back on—the last time he'd seen that logo, he'd been about to onboard Sykes Worthing, a billionaire saviour to WAMM's financial woes.

*Enter your SIM PIN.*

He'd just tapped two numbers when, "You're Gracie's dad? I'm Mia's mom."

*You have 1 more attempt.*

"Guy. Nice to meet you. TGIF, eh?" He was still panting from the climb. "Big weekend ahead for us. Meal out tonight, tomorrow off skiing and I've booked a helicopter to get us back for school Monday morning!"

Guy tapped out the year of his wedding on his screen.

*Contact system administrator.*

"Shit—sorry. Work histrionics," mumbled Guy, holding the building's front door open for a line of mothers. "You'd think more men would take the time to pick up their kids from school, wouldn't you?"

"Well most of them were here at 3:30 at the end of school. Only kids doing Ancient Greek stay late on Fridays."

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After claiming his silent children from the principal's office, Guy asked, "Who wants to go shopping?"

They hurled their backpacks to the ground in protest.

"OK kids, how about Chinese? But first we just need to get my phone reactivated."

Guy's findings on queues is that it's not *how many* people are in front of you, but *who*. Friday night, the electrical store in the pit of a shopping centre had drawn out every octogenarian who'd ever lost all their photographs or needed a masterclass on *Fibre Optique*.

"Le PUK number?" asked the teenage oracle, unsympathetic to Guy's overshare about his divorce and that everything he'd ever cared about was in boxes, probably lost forever along with his pension and self-respect.

By the time Security were jangling their keys and the children were lying on the shop carpet spinning a carousel of video games in brand new trainers, Guy was informed, "*C'est bloqué, monsieur.*"

"What if I bought a new phone?"

"I want a new phone too!"

"And me!"

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Guy's single-window studio hosted the unboxing and soon familiar apps started appearing on his new phone. He was almost able to breathe again until Nikki got through to the children to check he hadn't lost or injured them already. He poured himself a Japanese whisky and freed his toes from the shoes he'd bought for the Worthing pitch. Sunk in an office chair, he was transported back to Friday nights in their London flat listening to Nikki reading bedtime stories while something baked in the oven for them to eat in front of *The Wire* with a bottle of red.

"I want to go home," said Oscar, his chocolate-brown eyes swirling behind tears. Guy reached out and clasped his boy to his chest, "I do too, mate."

The children had closed the deal on their take-away choices, when *Payment Denied* popped-up.

The bank's Help Desk unhelpfully stated his card was blocked "due to unusual activity."

Over an hour later he managed to get hold of an actual tired and bored human to stress once again, "You can't block my card, I'm with WAMM!"

"The band?"

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The three trudged along the coast road to the petrol station where Guy and the kids scrambled up a dinner of M&Ms, Egg-mayo wraps and Doritos paid for with the last of Gracie's Christmas money.

"Aren't we having fun? And tomorrow—the slopes!"

On the pull-out bed, *TikTok* reels anaesthetised the children against sharp pains of hunger and sofa-bed springs until Guy turned out the only light.

He scrolled-swiped-accepted-declined, no, no, no, through cookies, contracts, prepayments, updates, no, no, no, third-party users, onboarding agreement—no, no, no, no...Then—

*Application for Worthing: Declined.*

What the...?

No!

WAMM's troubleshooting page listed a menu of catastrophes—none of them tantamount to his own professional apocalypse.

*Account no longer available.*

Spikes in cortisol pierced Guy's sternum.

WAMM's friendly chatbot was particularly hostile in insisting a new application needed to be restarted.

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His new phone rang. "Congrats on Worthing!" WAMM's CFO boomed from his Mougins country house.

Guy was pacing the tiny square of grass outside his building, phone to his ear, hearing the words he'd spent his life working for.

"Now, you said something about a little technical hitch?"

"That. Yes. Y'see, I got distracted by this woman and forgot



my SIM so then my PUK was blocked so I bought new phones but then my bank's Fraud Department suspended my card and while I was trying to sort it out, I accidentally cancelled Worthing's application, and—"

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Guy's stone bounced over seven wave crests until it vanished into the water.  
"Wow, dad! My go!"

Oscar kissed his flat stone before spinning it out to sea.  
"Four times!"  
Gracie left her pebble tower to take her father's hand.  
"OK kids, see that buoy all the way out there?"  
The children squinted at the yellow ball bobbing over the low swell in the distance. "See how far I can throw this."  
Guy engaged every muscle as he leant his torso away from the sun and drew his right arm back, and in one sharp movement fired it towards the sea.  
"Daddy—that was your phone!" 