



## As it is laid out before you

Ruby Bryant

The package had arrived while she had been out running errands. They had left it propped against the front door, out on display in the rain. Delivery drivers were getting more lax with how they left parcels nowadays. She was lucky that it was still here waiting for her. The cardboard had gone soggy, grit sticking to the underside.

Hopefully, the contents had survived.

She ordered it online over a month ago and started to believe that it was a scam and that nothing would arrive. It was a gimmick anyway, made by algorithms produced by scouring Facebook. The advert had claimed that they could compile every photo ever taken of you, even ones you didn't know existed, and print them into a book. For over two months the ad had popped up everywhere online, every third Instagram post endorsed it, Youtube had it before every video, and the banner flashed over most websites. It was morbid curiosity that had finally reeled her in. The thought of something so dystopian being readily available was enticing. She supposed it was a sign of the world evolving once more, maybe even a sign of her ageing.

Lightning flashed as the soggy cardboard packaging peeled away without any effort. She flipped the book over in her hands, still standing on the dripping doorstep. It was a hardback glossy square. No inscriptions, titles, or authors decorated the outside. It was thicker than she had initially expected, though she supposed it was meant to carry over twenty-five years of photos. Another abrupt strike of lightning sent her inside.

She placed the book in the centre of the kitchen table, fighting the urge to instantly flip through. She took off her coat and boots and made a cup of tea. The book watched her the entire time. She watched it too.

As she took her seat in front of the book, the rain got louder and louder. It was howling against the brittle window frames, each hit of lightning sounded closer than the last. The woman had thought the rain odd, the week had been sunny, but that lightning hadn't stopped all week. She imagined it to be some kind of electrical storm.

### **Page one.**

A grainy still from the corridor CCTV of a hospital the day she was born. Then a selection of Polaroids from the delivery room, and more CCTV outside the hospital. She wondered how they managed to get hold of the Polaroids, they were all kept in a scrapbook her mother had made. None of them were online, and no copies had been made. Though it was possible her parents had scanned them in, and she hadn't noticed, it wasn't likely.

### **Page ninety-three.**

She continued. Family photos, Christmas parties, walks in the park, her first passport photos, and more CCTV coverage of her hometown. Then there was her first school picture, she was probably about three years old and in preschool. More of the same style of pictures followed. The school photos were a good indicator of the passage of time.

### **Page four-hundred and thirty-six.**

She was now around ten years old, gap-toothed and dishevelled with the excitement that only a child of ten could have. This was the year she got a phone. She smiled as all of the silly selfies she took after school with her friends started to filter in. Sleepovers, weekends in the park, trips to the beach, somebody's birthday party at the bowling alley. Then there were photos of other people, people she didn't recognise. Maybe they had been put in as a mistake. But there, in the backgrounds, she could see herself. The only thing that made it

clear she was looking at herself was the backpack she had used all through high school. She didn't even know where this photo was taken. The older she got, and the more autonomy she had to leave the house, the more she appeared in the backgrounds of strangers' pictures.

**Page one-thousand eight-hundred and sixty-three.**

This was when the pictures from nightclub photographers started to appear. Her eighteenth birthday. Pictures taken by the girls from her college who used to bully her. Then a mortifying number of lewd pictures in the bathroom that she had taken for no one in particular.

The next seven years weren't too surprising; most of them were still fresh in her mind. Work events, passport renewals, weddings, funerals, walking by in the back of a news report. Her tea had long since gone cold, and the rain and lightning raged.

**Page three-thousand and five-hundred.**

All of it had faded out of her mind as she closed in on the last few hundred pages. It was like a directory of everywhere she had been in the last twelve months. She scoffed, this was the death of privacy. It certainly didn't sit right that everywhere she had gone was right here; nothing was sacred anymore.

**Page three-thousand seven-hundred and eleven.**

She cringed at the uptick of voyeuristic pictures on public transport after she'd cut her hair, then laughed at the ones of her hungover on more than one walk of shame through the city.

**Page three-thousand eight-hundred and ninety-eight.**

Her heart stopped dead when she turned the page. Last weekend. Photos taken from outside her high-rise hotel room. She hadn't bothered to be careful about closing the curtains - why would she? She was so high up that it shouldn't have mattered. There she was arriving, then getting out of the shower, changing for dinner, returning to the room, and sleeping on top of the covers.

**Page four-thousand.**

The photos continued. Lightning struck again. They had followed her out of the hotel, into the taxi, through the airport, and even on the plane. They had sat six rows behind her. The exterior of her house, bedroom window, office, car, and corner shop down the road. The rain. Oh fuck. The rain. She was unlocking the door, holding onto the book.

There were only three pages left.

She licks her lips, delaying what she knows she is about to see. Her fingers are trembling uncontrollably as she turns the page.

Lightning flashes once more. Now she is looking as she takes off her coat. Then as she makes her tea.

Then with her head buried in the book.

Shaking with abject horror, she lifts her head once more.

And the camera flashes.