

The Game is Over When One Player Plays their Last Tile

A-O-S-T: Becky's four remaining Scrabble letters are lined up before her. There are no more in the bag.

Astonishingly for this stage in the game, there's an obligingly available T on the board with space either side, so the best thing, she muses, would be to put down three of her letters to spell OATS. As Kyle has only two tiles remaining, that should enable him to play the last turn and gain the additional points that go with it.

And win.

Yet again, she's engineered the game to ensure the score's fairly equal, but it's still a really close call.

She can already picture it. He'll be ecstatic, ridiculously jubilant, performing his idiotic 'I'm a Champion' dance which once reduced her to fits of giggles. These days she has to force a smile, gouging her palms so hard with her fingernails that she often draws blood.

But it's not her only option. She could put *all* her letters down: STOAT.

Mmm. Stoat by nature, not appearance: Kyle's big, bluff, non-weaselly blondness was what first attracted her to him. She'd assumed he'd have a big, open heart to match.

Decisions. Decisions. She sighs inwardly and stares at the board, buying time.

The effort of having to play so poorly has exhausted her. It's like trying to entertain a child, keeping things down to a level instead of rising to the challenge and using her brain. But that's Kyle – a petulant toddler in grown man's clothing. Easily dispirited, easily enraged.

Last time he lost, he hurled the board into the air showering plastic tiles like confetti, and she swore to herself that she wouldn't play him again. Why would she? Kyle has no aptitude for words, yet stubbornly he persists as if the whole endeavour is a tricky car engine that eventually he *will* fix.

The main problem is that he can't spell, which isn't dyslexia, just disinterest. He doesn't read. "I like pictures, action, practical things," he says, proudly.

"So why play Scrabble?" she asked him way back when things between them were as fresh and promising as the dawn.

He shrugged, "*You* like it. You and your friends." At the time she didn't bother pressing him further, thinking such devotion was cute. A year down the line, she knows the truth: he's hell-bent on proving he can out-do her.

If you can't join them, beat them. That's what he believes.

What once seemed endearing (*Let's not visit your family, I want to keep you all to myself*) is now part of a relentless campaign to sever her from her previous life. A game that he *is* in danger of winning if she doesn't take a stand.

She looks at him and sighs. "I'm not sure..."

"Can't get your letters out?" he smirks.

No, she wants to say. *I'm not sure I can waste any more of my life on you.*

"Come on, brain-box. Admit defeat." His tone resonates like a playground bully.

Right. Decision made.

She takes a deep breath and with a steady hand, puts down all her tiles: T-O-A-S-T.

-End-