

Odsox

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We were just about to get down to business when the phone rang. Typical, you would have said, had you ever had the kind of luck I've been having. A week of it would be enough for most people, but for some reason the fates have decided to litter my path with rotting banana skins for an uncommonly long period; so far three months and counting.

So I carefully zipped up my (seconds earlier unzipped) red leather knickers and made for the phone. It was 02:16 a.m. and a Sunday, so it was sure to be important. That it turned out to be the shrill squawking of a fax did not improve my mood. I hung up with forced self-control, barely suppressing the urge to smash the telephone to pieces, pushed my hands slowly through my hair and shuddered the nasty, alien noise out of my skin. I then sighed a deep and purposeful sigh and turned round to return to Jonno, who thankfully was still there.

Three more calmed and gentle steps later the phone rang again. I stopped mid-stride, but it carried on ringing, despite my menacing pause, known to make the mighty quake.

“Who the fuck is it?!” shouted Jonno from the bedroom.

“A fax machine!” I intoned, the strained melody of my voice reminding me of my brittle and humourless mother, whose sudden and unwelcome presence in my thoughts had the strange effect of making me pick up the phone again, and indeed even say ‘hello’ to the frantic, high pitched cackle of the fax, which was obviously set to some rapid-redial mode. Confused by my own behaviour I hung up, but before I could even begin to release my fingers from the handle, the damn thing rang again, snapping my temper.

“Fuck the fuck off!” I raged into the mouthpiece, but was met with silence, followed by a little, just audible intake of breath, and then the noises of someone hanging up.

‘Hmm’ I thought to myself. Do I really want to find out at whom it was I just so violently swore?

I was mulling over doing a 1471 – something about that little breath was eerily familiar – when the phone rang again.

“What in the name of all things holy is going on?!” shouted Jonno. I couldn't answer him though – I was wondering whether or not to pick up the phone. I wanted it to be the fax and not the person I suspected the other caller to have been. The phone was strangely loud. “Just pull the fucking cable out of the wall and get your huge, lardy arse back over here. Where it belongs!”

Though I wanted to, I couldn't move. I might have just done something a little stupid and perhaps even damaging. I desperately wanted it not to be so – it would mean an end to the evening's unplanned debauchery – but my merciless senses were telling me that was indeed the case. I was frozen between two impulses. A highly unusual state of affairs for such as me, I can assure you.

Now would be a good time to list the events of the last three or four months. My car was stolen, my

flat was broken into, I was fired from work, divorced and had a custody decision go against me, and I turned forty. But not in that order. I can barely remember the order and I'm not going to try. Oh, and my daughter, my only child, just turned thirteen. And um, I missed her party. Not good. And I think that was her on the phone. Because yesterday was her birthday, and last night was the party. And, there you have it – I am a terrible person.

And then I caught sight of myself in the mirror, which nowadays I try to avoid. Automatically I breathed in and inflated my chest, trying to make my breasts less droopy and my stomach less saggy. My little red leather knickers were too skimpy (or perhaps scampi?) to contain the rich profusion of my pubic hair, and too tight to allow me to conceal from myself the effect wine, peanuts and beer have had on my gut over the decades. Ordinarily I blame my daughter for my prematurely aging physique, but the urge to be charitable where she was concerned was at that moment very strong.

Anyway, the phone was still ringing. I took my third deep breath of the evening and snatched the receiver to my ear with a tension in my system equal to that before jumping into an icy lake. It was the fax and I was mightily relieved to hear its screeching. Amazing what a complete change of mood can do for a sound, don't you think? I hung up, grateful for the moment's reprieve.

After a few seconds of doing nothing but calming down, I realised the fax's auto-redial had run its course, and went back into the bedroom. I patted Jonno's rather wonderful penis, which was still, bless it, semi-erect. "Time for you to go," I purred, and pulled on a very long t-shirt. Of course he complained that he had only just arrived (sort of true), and that a shag had been promised (true), and did I always treat people so shoddily (no comment), and how could a freak fax come between us (so sweet!) and so on. But I insisted and had him dressed and gone inside ten minutes. I was looking around me, wondering what to do next, when the phone rang again. I froze, knowing postponement was no longer a viable alternative to biting the bullet.

Walking as slowly as I could without it being ridiculous, I made my way to the phone. My hand hovered just above it for what seemed like a few seconds, but then, in a burst of irritation with myself, I answered it and uttered the gentlest hello of my life.

The observant amongst you will have noticed that I am unlikely to be a fan of this greatly overrated gentleness thing, this never saying 'no' to your children and negotiating with them and engaging with them on their level etc., and it's true, I'm not. However, under the influence of guilt and remorse I am capable of contrition, and have even been known to be sugary. This was probably going to be one of those moments.

"I hate you!"

It was, I grant you, an unimaginative start, and under other circumstances I would have been quick to point this out to my daughter, but at least it was, in the way of young teenagers, a heartfelt and well delivered utterance, to give her her due. During the short silence that followed we listened to each others' breathing, and I knew she was waiting for me to start explaining myself, and knew too that no

explanation would suffice, but also that, perversely, any might do the trick. The question was which one, or rather, which manner of explanation would be the most effective. Instinctively I opted for honesty.

“I met a man and we ended up here.” My fingers were playing with the dangling zipper-puller of my knickers through the fabric of my t-shirt. I put an immediate stop to their nervous fiddling. I hadn’t used the S word yet, and didn’t intend to – never apologise, never explain. It’s the ‘never explain’ half of that famous dictum I have trouble with. “I was all toggled up and on my way to your party and decided to stop off for a quickie and got talking to this rather large chap by the name of Jonno and we got on like a house on fire and time flew and then we were here and well I forgot, I suppose–”

“– about me.” She said what I did not have the guts to say, but I agreed with a little ‘yes’ that would have had me vomiting, had I heard it come from someone else’s mouth.

“You like sex and booze more than me.” I could hear the hurt in her voice, and the very aching need for me to prove to her it was not so. But though I am many things, I am not a liar.

I said: “It sometimes seems that way, and yes, sometimes I do choose those things over your needs, but they are not more important to me than you. You are, after all, still alive.”

That was my mistake. As usual I got carried away with what felt like a damn fine sentence, full of honesty and cleverly concealed – yet revealed – sympathy and understanding, and had to add the hard sentiment at the end. Like I said, I am no fan of gentleness. It breeds wimps. As I always like to say of my ex, he is The Daughter of all Wimps, and look what happened to us! And we live in a country where today a man of his highly questionable back-bone can win custody of a child in plain need of a firm hand. But if I go on about all that, I shall get angry, and now is not the time. My daughter was about to hang up on me.

“For your information ‘fuck the fuck off’ is not grammatically correct and yes, I am still alive, but from now on I may as well be dead to you!”

And she hung up. I told you she would. But more importantly she had been slurring her speech. I had the clear impression she was drunk. I felt strangely proud of her. You see, as she is a molly-coddled little thing, my principle worry for the girl is that she will flower into some whiny variety of limp-wristed, tree-loving wimp, unready and ill equipped for the harsh and uncaring world, and under the tutelage of The Daughter of all Wimps, since the court’s decision against me (!), this seemed the most likely outcome. My lapse of memory regarding her party was therefore a poor show – particularly considering my concerns and the intentions that have arisen from them – and needed to be rectified. But there was hope. She had somehow managed to get alcohol past her father, and had even imbibed enough of it to get drunk. Go girl!

Of course the immediate dilemma was whether to call back right away or give it a couple of days, or minutes perhaps, or even forget about her entirely. Forever, I mean. After all, there are many

miserable teenagers in the world, and the vast majority of them make it through somehow – so odds on she would too – and seeing as mine had just come between me and what had promised to be a great shag – I know a nice cock when I see one – punishment was not, now that I dwell on it a moment, an unthinkable course of action.

So after tugging myself free of my new knickers, I went to bed and slept like a snake's eye, an expression which needs perhaps an explanation: I did not sleep a wink. As soon as I thought her father was awake, I called and told him I would be taking my daughter out for the day. He objected, I insisted, and in the end he relented. By nine I was in my new second hand car and on my way there at the dizzying average speed of about eight miles per hour, trying in vain to maintain some kind of a positive mood, but on no sleep and two strong coffees that kind of undertaking is beyond even me, especially on Sunday-driver drenched Sundays. Thank you very much, London.

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Hi, I'm Natasha and I just turned thirteen.

I suppose my Mum's gruff charm, brutal "honesty" and frankness have already won you over. They always do. That's why I'm here adding my voice to the mix, to bring some kind of balance to the story. I hope you've noticed she hasn't even told you her name, which is hardly polite, is it? That's what I'm here for, to keep things balanced. So I'll start with some small bits of information. I'll start with the basics. While she was married to my dad she was Heather Wilson, but now they're divorced she's reinstated her maiden name – St. John.

So now you know my name too – Natasha Wilson. It's not an ugly name, but it doesn't have much flair about it. Heather St. John has weight, looks good at the bottom of cheque books and credit cards, and she has this huge, flowing signature that she has a hard time keeping in that narrow strip they have on their backs. She always complains about that – "the whole world is being redesigned – at great cost – to accommodate the meek!" (I took the liberty of removing the swearing.) How she gets from narrow signature strips on the backs of credit cards to the meek I'm sure I will never know.

Anyway, when Dad came in and woke me with the news that Mum was on her way over and was to take me out for the whole day, I could only mumble an acknowledgement that I had understood him. And to be honest I had a hard time reacting at all – I was suffering from the effects of my very first hangover. Dad didn't know about it – Emma (a friend of mine) had sneaked in a big bottle of vodka. I wanted nothing more than to stay in bed forever.

It was odd that I had heard nothing of their telephone call, seeing as they are normally very loud and stressful affairs. I must still have been deep asleep, which I suppose is therefore a positive to a hangover, or at least to drinking lots of vodka – it filters out your parents.

So I was still in bed when I heard her impatiently shouting out my name from downstairs. The effect on me of her arrival was immediate – I stumbled to the loo and threw up a disgusting and very bitter

pale green bile. She obviously heard my efforts, because she came bounding up the stairs and burst in on me. I was still on all fours with my arms around the cold white porcelain of the loo, regretting not having had the presence of mind to have locked the door.

“You *have* been drinking!” she whispered dramatically, her voice sounding strangely triumphant.

Of course this was none of her business, and I told her so, my voice sounding odd, ringing in the porcelain. I then got up, rinsed my mouth with water, pushed her back out of the bathroom with as much dignity as I could muster, and told her to go and enjoy my father’s company while I took a shower. She managed to tell me that my breath stank before trundling downstairs to irritate Dad. Lovely way to speak to your daughter, don’t you think? Especially having just forgotten the most important birthday of my young life.

I don’t know where she got the idea she was invited to the party – Dad wasn’t even invited, he just hung around in his study all night, emerging occasionally to ask us to keep the noise down. I mean, do you know a single teenager who wants their parents at their birthday party? All I wanted was for her to show up at some point during the day, give me a gift, wish me happy birthday and then disappear. Hardly a tall order. But she couldn’t even be bothered with a card, or a call for that matter, and with me turning the tricky and delicate age of thirteen (especially for girls), you would have to call that a serious dereliction of her mothering duties. And I don’t care what you think of her so far – she deserves my hate for that. Come to think of it, a day out with her might prove a lot of fun. And then I remembered our telephone conversation – there had been an audible tone of guilt in her voice. Yes, despite my fragile health, it could be a very fun day indeed.

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Something about the sight of my daughter driving the porcelain bus put me in a good mood, which really is quite something, if you consider I was in a real stinker when I arrived after that hour long battle with all those idiot Sunday-drivers. Yes, we have them, even in London, although they’re probably all tourists. My ex did not say a word as he opened the door to me, but I nevertheless greeted him warmly upon seeing him for the second time of the day, after having seen my daughter so wonderfully prostrate before the Altar of Vom. I even called him darling, a word I had not used in about eight years. He was, of course, instantly suspicious.

“What’s put you in such a good mood?” he wanted to know.

That was an easy one to counter. “If you had the first clue about your daughter at all, my dear, you wouldn’t have to ask.”

Well that got him where it hurts. He is particularly proud of his relationship with his one and only special person, which isn’t surprising, considering his training. He turned primly on his heel and marched off into the kitchen, to busy himself with what sounded like tea-making. I called out, rather provocatively I admit, that I would love a cuppa too, but strongly doubted I would receive one. I was

wrong. He came in bearing a tray laden with teapot, two cups, a bowl of white sugar-lumps and a little yellow jug of milk, all perfectly arranged. He was smiling at me beatifically.

“So how are you?” he asked, before turning to put the goodies down on the coffee-table. His voice was as calm and distant as a mountain lake.

Now, The Daughter of all Wimps knows surprisingly little about the black arts of human psychological exchange, and what he does know is mostly bunkum – he’s a child psychologist by trade and was the curse of our daughter’s childhood (he used to take notes while observing her at play) – so I was quite surprised by the degree to which he had mastered himself after my little dig. Just four or five months ago we would have been in the middle of a blazing row by now, which would, all things being equal, have ended with him in tears and me calling him the wimp that he is. Not so today. I was actually impressed, but was hardly going to let him know that. I told him I was in top form, and that I was very happy indeed to see him looking so ‘together’.

“Thank you for saying so,” he said, and then added, a little churlishly I thought: “See how easy it is to just nicely get along with one another?”

The words ‘bull’, ‘red’ and ‘rag’ sprang instantly to mind, and were not unaccompanied: “What I have never understood,” I said in honeyed tones, “is why people nowadays are so fond of *niceness*. I mean really, could there be anything more tedious, and more drab than ‘good old niceness’? Why do people want so much of it? Can *you* help me understand?”

He looked at me like I was raving mad, and his right eye actually twitched, something I have never before seen in him. I thought of bunny rabbits’ noses. Then, after a few seconds of silently gawking at me, rodent-eyed, he simply leant forward and poured two cups of tea. I couldn’t help myself – I pointed out that it probably wasn’t yet strongly enough brewed for my taste, the liquid having a very pale colour to it. He carefully put the teapot back on the tray and calmly said that it wouldn’t kill me to drink a not quite long enough brewed cup of tea, which is, of course, true. Nevertheless, I politely informed him that I would not touch a drop of the liquid until it received a good deal more time in the pot with the teabags. I got up and took the lid off the teapot, and began to pour my tea back in. From the corner of my eye, I saw him slump slightly with a little sigh, as is his way, but then, which was unusual, quickly stiffen. And then, like the child that he is, he shot out his hand and grabbed my wrist so suddenly and aggressively, that half the cup’s contents were spilled, mostly on the tray, but some of it went on my hand, burning it. With a yell I let go of the cup, which dropped, smashing itself into two pieces and chipping the sugar-lump bowl, into which trickled the remainder of the tea.

“If this is niceness, then give me more!” I shouted, watching the reddening welt on the back of my hand. “*This* is what I call fun!”

“You had to push it, didn’t you!? You just can’t help yourself. You’re nothing more than a huge child addicted to ... to getting kicks from this pointless ... m-meaningless, nihilistic contrariness!” He had to fight to get the right words out and sounded a lot less effective than he might have, were he not at base

such a wimp.

He was anyway talking to my back, which was on its way with me into the kitchen, where I held my hand under cold running water. I felt surprisingly calm, considering what a burn can do to one's adrenalin levels, and heard myself replying to his mini-tirade with the following rhetorical: "You're really not very fucking good at all this, are you dear!" It worked like a charm.

When he finally snaps, he cries. It's not sobbing, or even weeping, really – his eyes water and he sort of shakes – and it's really rather entertaining. It was exactly the state he was in as he marched into the kitchen to drag me out of the house. I had to spend the next twenty minutes in the car, waiting for a hung-over teenager to finish her shower and spruce herself up for her day out with me. I found myself in the best mood of recent months. Perhaps my run of bad luck would finally come to an end.

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When I got downstairs Mum was nowhere to be seen, and I could hear Dad pottering in the kitchen. I went in and asked him where she was, to which he replied, without looking at me, that she was in the car, waiting. From the tone of his voice I could tell they had been fighting, and was glad not to have heard any of it. The noise of the shower must have drowned out their shouting. I poured myself a glass of water from the fridge and surreptitiously downed the two aspirins I had taken from the bathroom. I said a quick 'adiós' to Dad, grabbed my bag and joined Mum in the car. Before buckling up, I pointed out that an apology for the psychological abuse of last night had not yet been offered, to which she merely agreed, congratulating me on my perspicacity. 'Perspicacity' is one of her favourite words. She then looked at her watch and said it was high time for a drink, started the engine and headed off for her favourite pub. She of course had not asked me what I might like to do.

"There's a Heath Ledger film playing," I said, conversationally.

"Really," she replied, "sounds like an accountant's name. Is he boring?"

"Er, *no* Mum, Heath Ledger is *not* boring."

I could feel her thinking away beside me and knew guilt was in there somewhere, nudging and worrying. "Do you know when it starts?" she finally asked. I didn't, but said I could find out and retrieved my mobile from my bag. There was an SMS. It was from Emma, and she was in trouble with her Dad. She hadn't been able to completely conceal her drunkenness from him and the shit had hit the fan. I guessed Becky and Chris had also been found out, which meant Dad would be getting a few angry calls from angry parents. I would have to stay out with Mum as long as possible and hope the heat would cool a little.

"Is there anything those bloody things can't do?" Mum wanted to know. She was looking at my mobile and obviously trying to read the SMS. "What kind of fucking language is that? I can't make head or tail of it." (Sorry about her swearing. She just can't stop herself.) Twisting my mobile away from her prying eyes I told her to keep her attention on the road and her nose out of my business. She

shouted “shit!” and slammed on the brakes. We skidded, there was a thump, and then we stopped, all within about a second.

“Oh fuck,” she said, quietly and nervously.

“What was that thump?” I asked, suddenly scared. She said she thought it had been a cat, and after pausing for a moment climbed out of the car. I didn’t follow. I waited anxiously, while a queue of cars squeezed by ours, carefully navigating the small gap left by us in the narrow street, some of the drivers taking the trouble to shout obscenities at us. It was a wonderful moment, but somehow typical, too. After a few long minutes of this, Mum climbed back in and shut the door.

I gave her a long, hard look. For a while nobody spoke.

“Well I’m not going to knock on all the doors of this street holding up a dead cat for the possible owners to inspect until I find the right one, am I! And since no one came out claiming I’d killed their little kitty, there’s really nothing I can do. So I just kicked it into the gutter, where it now lies between two parked cars.”

“Mum! That’s disgusting! Are you sure it was dead? I mean, vets can work wonders nowadays. My best friend, Becky—”

“The front tire still has bits of cat skull stuck to it. The ugly thing’s head was completely squashed. It’s dead.”

I thought I was going to throw up again, but my retching and gagging produced nothing more solid than noise.

“Don’t you dare be sick in the car! I’ll skin you alive, I just got it a few weeks ago!” screamed Mum, frantically trying to find some tissues, which of course she couldn’t, because there were none in the car. When I was myself again, I told her it was OK and not to panic and could we please get going now.

(You see it’s good I’m here telling you all this, because if Mum was left alone to do all the talking, you’d have no chance of getting the whole picture. I can just imagine how she would tell the story of the squashed cat – it would be the fault of modern technology and poor civic pride and too many cars on the streets and the streets are too narrow and poorly designed and full of Sunday drivers and who in their right mind keeps a cat in a city anyway, and so on and so on. Thanks to me, you know the simple, ugly truth: she was not looking where she was going.)

We spent the rest of the drive in silence. By the time we got to the pub my nerves were back in order, and I remembered I had yet to find out when Heath Ledger’s film started, but my mobile was no longer on my lap. It was between my feet, so must have flown from my lap as Mum broke just right for squashing that poor cat’s head. I bent forwards, picked it up, then got out to follow Mum into the pub. Because my attention was on my mobile, I didn’t see where Mum was standing right away, and

so was completely unprepared for what happened next.

Of course I thought she'd be at the bar ordering our drinks, so was surprised to hear her voice coming from my left. She was calling me over to where she was standing, beside a table where what looked to be a father and his fifteen year old son were sitting. I froze. I know my mother and therefore knew that what was about to follow was very unlikely to be pleasant, for anyone. Anyone that is, except Mum.

"Muum!" I said, trying desperately with that one loudly whispered word to communicate both my fear, and reluctance to go over to her. If she had understood my meaning at all, she certainly didn't act on it.

"Natasha! Stop being so silly *and rude* and come here before I lose my temper." I had no choice. If Mum chose to make a scene ... Well, I had no choice. I shuffled over and stopped to stand slightly behind her.

"Natasha, don't you think it's a handy coincidence that there should be a father and son in the same – how old are you?" she suddenly asked the boy.

"Fifteen," he mumbled.

"Very good. Where was I? Ah yes, in the same pub as a mother and her teenage daughter? I mean, maybe you two young ones might like to—"

"Mum!"

"What!? By the time I was your age I had already indulged in a lot more than kissing—"

I grabbed her arm and pulled her as hard as I could away from the table and towards the bar.

"Natasha!" she said, in her strictest voice (which unfortunately is quite loud), "It's not like you haven't got tits! What *is* your problem?"

She is a large lady, so when she decided to stop our joint motion, I found I could pull her no further. She was glaring at me. I glared right back at her. Then I pulled myself to my full height, tiptoes included, and whispered in her ear. "You owe me," I said. She softened, I felt it. Her whole body gave up its battle mode and softened.

"Let's get something to drink," she said, to my great relief.

Well what on earth was I thinking, telling myself it was going to be a fun day! Controlling Mum was like trying to control a landslide on legs. If I was going to get any joy out of her guilt at all, I had better get my skates on.

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I understand the world less and less, I really do. Forget mobile phones and the Internet and rap music, it's the people that are getting stranger and stranger. I suppose if I made the effort I could learn to use

all these modern gadgets that are supposedly so useful, but seeing as I'm one of the only normal people left alive on the entire planet, they just don't appeal to me. I think I can honestly say I have never so much as touched a mobile phone, and, you'll have noticed, I'm none the worse for it. ('L8er'? What sort of a word is that? A French misogynist perhaps? I mean, really!)

So, being normal, I have less and less in common with a world going batty. It's enough to knock the hope clean out of you. However, I am not a quitter and I'll be damned if I'm going to leave my daughter to rot in the world's cesspool. Although, truth be told, there are times when I ask myself if it's really worth the effort. The way she responded to my perfectly reasonable suggestion... Actually, come to think of it, I wasn't even allowed to finish communicating my idea, before it was rejected without discussion. How can you reject a thing if you don't know what it is? But I digress. My daughter's cowardly reaction to a perfectly reasonable suggestion was cause for concern. That she seemed not to have the stomach for a healthy bit of horse-play worried me, and worrying is not something I like to do for any extended period of time. Something had to be done. The court's stupid decision to grant custody to my ex seemed more than ever an act of rampant lunacy, however in keeping with modern times it might be. But there I was getting angry again, while my daughter was getting her mobile to make all sorts of beeps and squeaks. I suppose I could start by getting her attention away from that fucking phone.

I remembered she had talked of going to see a film, but for the life of me could not remember the name of the actor she had mentioned. I asked her about it.

"Heath Ledger," she replied.

Ah yes, I thought, the accountant.

And then she said, "Orlando Bloom's in it too. You like him, don't you?"

A film starring an accountant and a Venetian flower, I could hardly wait. I took another sip of my gin and tonic, and told her I had no idea whom she was talking about.

"Oh Mum," she said, having the cheek to sound exasperated, "you know! The guy who played Legolas!"

"Legolas," I said, feeling foolish to have even uttered such a noise, "is not a name I recognise."

"Lord of the Rings, Mum? The biggest film ever made? Won like eleven Oscars or something? Nine hours long? Ring any bells?"

She was so cheeky I had half a mind to cuff her around the ear, but needs must, and you can be arrested for that sort of thing nowadays. Anyway, she had said 'nine hours', and 'ring' so all I could think of was Wagner. "Dragons and swords and magic?" I said.

"That's the one, Mum."

“Hmm,” I said, somewhat under my breath, “I don’t remember anyone called Legolas.”

It wasn’t going well. We had had a conversation (well, almost) but I wasn’t at all sure if we were both talking about the same thing. It certainly didn’t seem that way. Her attention was back on her mobile phone and mine had drifted to my gin and tonic, as well as snaking its way back to that rather dishy father of the fifteen year old, who himself wasn’t so bad either, for a young pup anyway. Full of erections, fifteen year olds, bursting out of their pockets. Can hardly control themselves. Sadly it doesn’t stay that way forever. Take my husband. Please. We could compare notes, if you could be bothered to make any. He most definitely did. I’m digressing again.

And then, without prompting, my daughter put her phone into her bag, apparently having had enough of all that beeping. I know I had.

“The film starts at quarter past three this afternoon at the Empire, so we can chat until about two, when we ought to make a move.”

“What about food,” I asked. “Aren’t you hungry? You haven’t even had any breakfast.”

“Coke’s enough,” she said, before taking her first sip (for all I knew it was her first sustenance of a day which was already quite a bit older than eleven hours).

The amount she imbibed looked to be so small, I doubted, had she been blindfolded, she would have been able to determine what the liquid was. Which brings me to her appearance, or what little of it there is. Let me put it like this; she has less fat on her than a stick of chalk, and that’s being generous. She walks with all the grace of a newborn giraffe and could probably wear my wedding ring around her waist, if I knew where it was. The wedding ring that is. How she makes it through each day I’m sure I will never know. And where she gets her super thin genes from I can’t tell you either – neither her father nor I are skinny, and I have yet to meet a skinny relative on either side of the family. The whole thing’s a complete mystery.

She opened her mouth to say something but, before the beginning of any noise could escape, her phone rang. There is simply no getting away from the thing. Her mouth shut again, and she bent to reach into her bag to retrieve the phone. She looked at it for a second, pushed a button and put it away again, saying, seemingly to no one in particular, that she didn’t want to talk to that person right now. I didn’t ask her who it was. She looked at me again, her eyes busily formulating a question, and also a little buggy (from nerves I think).

“Why can’t you apologise for forgetting my birthday?” she finally asked.

Ah. Nice and direct. Easy to understand, difficult to be evasive in the answer. I had to think before answering, which meant not shooting from the hip, which meant I felt very uncomfortable indeed, and I’ll be blown if the little devil didn’t notice my suffering and smile.

“Have you got a boyfriend?” I asked, and then her phone rang again.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation, which I sensed was more at my question than at the singing mobile, reached down, beeped the jangling device, said she had turned it off, and looked at me. Her look had its hands on its hips and wasn't going to take any nonsense. Her insubordination riled me. I asked my question again, this time kindly enunciating each word clearly for her, to which she replied that one ought not to answer a question with a question, something, I am loathe to admit, I often say to her. So I said I was going somewhere with that question that would help her understand my impending answer to her question. She blinked twice, sorting out the grammatical contortions of my plea and then wondered out loud whether she should believe me, seeing as I had already sullied my word by forgetting her birthday.

“Touché,” I said, “but you can trust me on this one.”

I was after all sitting opposite her and was hardly going to run away. She paused and reached for her glass of coke, but merely stroked the condensation on its surface, not deigning to lift the black, bubbling liquid to her mouth. Her ‘no’ was so small and yet so loaded with conflicting emotional messages, I made a mental note to ask her about it again one day in the not too distant future. It was at least an indication that she was a human. For the time being however, it was the answer I had hoped for and I leapt on it.

“Well then you couldn't possibly understand the train of events that led me to take a man back with me to my flat, could you? I don't want to go into the gory details – you do know about sex don't you?”

“Of course I do Mum! I have you for a mother, don't I?”

She sounded strangely disappointed. “Well, good,” I continued, a little uncertainly, “so you have some small sense of the kind of forces, the drives we are talking about here. I don't trust – and neither should you for that matter – anyone who can resist their sexual urges. Why on earth should you? Very unhealthy. Look at your father.”

I do, don't I, tend to nail something unnecessary on to the end of my explanations. I can't recall it ever having helped me, but I do it over and over again. Ah well, best not to get mired in self-doubt about such things. Anyway, it seems my stick-like daughter is rather fond of her old man, despite his strange style.

“There's nothing unhealthy about Dad,” she said indignantly. “At any rate, the courts certainly found him a more stable human being than you! At least he's there when you need him, at least he was there for my birthday and got me a present!”

She briefly showed me her left wrist, which as well as being about as meaty as a twiglet, was also sporting a gold Omega watch. I assumed it was his gift to her. It dangled there heavily for a moment, far too big for her, and was then snatched back to its hiding place under the table. I wanted to say it was probably a fake, but bit my tongue. It was turning into a strange day.

“I get you things,” I said, surprised by the hint of indignation in my voice. But unfortunately she has

the memory of an elephant.

“The last thing you got me was a crumpled up ten pound note, which you drunkenly pushed into my hand eleven days after my twelfth birthday.”

“Well you can get what you want then. Money is a very practical gift. So much for gratitude!”

“Oh this is pointless!” she said, and swivelled sharply away from me on her chair, her long legs swinging out backwards. She could not have picked a more inopportune moment, for just then the fifteen year old boy was walking by. Of course he tripped over her feet and fell flat on his face. It was really very amusing and quite deflated my holier than thou, stick-insect daughter, who hadn’t even had the time to fold her arms (her favourite posture when seeking to silently communicate hurt outrage) across her chest. I don’t know who was the more embarrassed, my daughter or the pocket-erection – they both apologised profusely to one another in a stream of incomplete and overlapping sentences, until finally he found the courage to continue on his way to the gents. To masturbate, I assumed. Fifteen year old boys have to do battle with an almost permanent erection. A quite wondrous state of affairs. His trousers were too big for him, I couldn’t help noticing as he walked by, trying desperately to look unaffected. But you see these laughably oversized clothes everywhere nowadays. What are boys trying to tell us with their fashion choices? And do they think we’ll believe them?

Where were we? Ah yes, my daughter had had a perfectly justified huff aborted by a frightful moment of clumsiness and I was trying to conceal my delight at the turn of events. However, despite my best efforts, she noticed my joy. Her face darkened, switching quickly from its tense, embarrassed look. She scowled at me.

“What are you smirking about? You still haven’t apologised for my birthday!”

She was painting me into a corner. Did I want to soil my feet or say the dreaded S word? She had me by the short and curlies. Why did I think I had chosen to spend the day with her anyway? What did I expect? Actually, come to think of it, I had hoped that my act of motherly generosity was contrite enough, that knowing me as she does, she would have recognised my actions as being an implicit apology and have had the grace and maturity – having recently become a teenager – to silently accept them as such. There I was wasting away a Sunday futilely chatting over childish irrelevancies, staring at a further two hours in the company of Messrs. Ledger and Petal, following which was most likely an expensive meal somewhere in Chelsea – in short spending money and time on my daughter like there was no tomorrow. Yet there she sat, like a wounded refugee, ignoring my efforts and demanding an apology for what was in the end nothing more than a slip of the mind, and that under the effects of alcohol and sexual desire. What did she take me for? A nun? Did she not, after thirteen long years of exposure, yet know her own mother? Putting it like that, I realised I of course had every right to tell her where to stuff her apology.

“Natasha,” I said, “I’m not sure I appreciate your attitude.”

*

I have to come in here, but not because she has been waffling on and on for ages now without even pausing to breathe. I just want to make the point that she is a dragon and that just because she's sort of funny and talks like she's the queen of the universe or something doesn't actually mean she's nice, or right. I really, really hope you can see how childish she is, and how mean she is too. Remember, it's me she's talking to, and I'm only thirteen. Dad says this is a really difficult age, and that my emotions have never been more unstable, and that all sorts of powerful changes are taking place in my body. *Dad* listens to me. *Mum* only listens to herself. I just thought you ought to be reminded.

Anyway, I'm sure she's bursting to tell you what happened next.

*

“You don't have a job so I don't expect you to understand *everything* about the real world, but surely you have enough years behind you now to notice that this isn't all for free! Here we are in a pub having drinks, soon we'll be in the cinema with popcorn and more drinks, and then there'll be a meal in a nice restaurant. If that isn't generous mothering, then tell me what is! *And* I've been more than honest with you in explaining what happened last night – other people lie when things like this happen – and I know, if you but tried, you could understand enough about me to not go on and on about this. You are not the only pebble on the beach, my dear.”

She hunkered against the table, looking somewhat like a cat on the verge of a leap. “I'll tell you what good parenting is,” she whispered passionately. “It's knowing when you've done wrong and being mature enough to own up to it *and apologise*.”

I could tell she was upset because she stood up and ran out of the pub, bursting into tears as she pushed the heavy brown doors open. Skinny *and* sensitive. Her father's a very sensitive man – she's definitely his daughter. I am sure about that. He would have told me, were he to have been in the pub with us, to follow her and apologise. But I was angry too. I was very angry, and when I looked up people were looking at me disapprovingly. I shouted at them to mind their own fucking business and drained the rest of my gin, then went to the bar to get another one. The bar tender wanted to know if I was going to follow her. I wanted to know if I was ever going to get any fucking peace, and said the fresh London air would do her good. But he put his hand on mine and said again that I should follow her.

“Of course I'm going to follow her, you fucking asshole!” I said, looking at his small, elegant hand. He was probably a student. “After a quick G&T! She needs a little time to calm down. Now please, pour me my drink.” He hesitated a little, but did what he was told. I drained it in two swallows and went outside to find my daughter.

She was standing with her back to me, facing the Sunday traffic, her mobile phone held to her ear. I simply can't believe the difference between how I was as a child and how she is now. My parents were

not perfect by any standard you might care to use, but I hardly felt at liberty to criticise them, should they make a mistake, let alone put on some hysterical, solipsistic performance in a public place, making some demand I had no right to make. Such a scene would have been unthinkable thirty years ago, but there I was being told by all and sundry how to be a mother to a girl who seemed not to have the first clue about manners and respect. What is the world coming to?

I walked up to her and asked whom she was calling. She simply turned on her heels so that her back was once more one hundred percent to me. “Young girl,” I said, “do you honestly believe you can get away with that sort of behaviour?” I put my hand on her bony shoulder to turn her to face me. She shrugged it free. “Natasha!” I said, almost at the end of my patience. She burst into tears again, howling that her father was not answering the phone, and where could he be. I told her to calm down – tears weren’t going to help anyone.

“How would you know,” she sobbed at me over her shoulder, “you never cry!”

It’s true. I can’t remember the last time I cried. I just don’t see the point. But it was the first compliment she’d paid me in months, perhaps years and, like most compliments, was not ineffective. “Yes,” I said, “and you can see how in command of myself I stay.”

Her crying suddenly gave way to a burst of forced, sarcastic laughter, and she turned to face me. “That’s right Mum, you’re as cool as a cucumber, a real James Bond.” She was trying to be cruel.

“Look,” I said, but before I could utter another word she screamed ‘APOLOGISE’ into my face with such volume and passion, I actually took a step back from the sheer force of it.

“I have apologised!” I shouted back, and before I could police what my mouth had in mind, this came out: “What on earth do you think today is? An accident perhaps? I slipped when I got out of bed and slid all the way to your door, and then accidentally asked you to spend the day with me? Is that what you think?” Something in me regretted saying it, but nevertheless her posture changed – she relaxed and then after a little struggle with her cheek muscles actually smiled a small and charming smile. There was an awkward silence. We were looking at each other, directly into one another’s eyes, unable to turn aside our stares, unable to think of anything to say. Slowly the charge that sustained our exchange faded and finally Natasha said, quietly and without emotion, ‘sorry’, took a tissue from her bag, dried her eyes, made some small efforts to fix her hair and then made her way back into the pub, saying that she had yet to finish her coke. I followed, not knowing what else to do.

She was already sitting down, sipping at her drink, and I could tell even from her back that she was now in a Good Mood. Half of me wanted to recover and then hold onto my anger, half wanted to at least enjoy the day, if such was possible. And then it suddenly struck me that I had handled the crisis with quite some aplomb. A moment ago an hysterical teenager had exploded out of the pub little more than bone and tears, but now, after my skilful (let’s give credit where credit is due) attentions, had returned, calm and happy, fully restored you might say, glowing even. Not bad for a part-time Mum. Not bad at all.

I went to the bar and ordered another G&T. Perhaps this was going to be a good day after all.

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Finally it's my turn again.

I don't want you to think I wimped out and that I should have stood my ground. But if you do think that, then your mum is nothing like my Mum, and you don't know my Mum well enough. But that's OK, I don't mind – you've only known her for a few hours now. If you look carefully at what happened, you'll see that my actions actually worked, and that she did in fact apologise. I know she didn't say 'sorry', and she didn't say 'I apologise', but as far as I can remember she never has. I truly believe she would rather die. Seriously. So you see, in explaining why she had come to pick me up, she apologised. That's what that was – her apology. I knew it, and she knew it too.

Even better, and to my surprise, when she sat down opposite me again with her second G&T, she was in a very good mood. She even told me a disgusting joke about why women have legs (I am NOT going to tell you the answer) and actually the rest of the day went really well. When Dad called again, I handed Mum my mobile saying it was for her. She didn't know what to do with the thing, so I told her to press the green button, which she couldn't locate. I reached over and pressed it for her, and quickly went to the loo. When I came back Mum was smiling from ear to ear and, while handing back my mobile, gave me a look I simply can't explain, except to say it made me feel good. I decided not to ask about the look or the conversation with Dad. Then we chatted for a bit, went to see the film, which turned out to be quite brutal and really sad, but I enjoyed it a lot. Mum said she quite liked it, but that the acting was awful (the acting is really good by the way). She said Orlando Bloom looked like the perfect toy boy and that Heath Ledger had a good smoulder. Then we ate at the Hard Rock Café, where she embarrassingly asked to have the music turned down – twice – (she had not enjoyed the hour long wait in the queue outside at all), then asked to see the Manager and made quite a scene. Thankfully we weren't kicked out, and more thankfully, she backed down, sat back down and ordered a burger, which she ate and even enjoyed. I don't think the Hard Rock Café was really her thing though, but I thought it was pretty cool.

I suppose you're getting a pretty good idea of how sheltered a life I've led. It was my first time at the Hard Rock, and my first taste of vodka was only on my thirteenth birthday, and I don't have a boyfriend. In fact I've never even kissed a boy! Some of my friend's say they've had sex, but I'm not going to tell you who.

Anyway, I did very well. I got a film, a jumbo sweet popcorn, and a trip to the Hard Rock Café, all on Mum's guilt, which I think is record winnings, and I deserved every penny and minute of it. Of course a cat had to die and I had to suffer in the pub a little, but all in all it was a good day's work. I was proud of myself.

In the car on the way home Mum reminded me that she was taking me for a long weekend to Granny and Grandfather's. They live in the countryside near Cheltenham in a little cottage near a farm. I used

to really enjoy it there, but recently Granny and Grandfather have seemed a little senile and don't seem to know very much about anything any more. They're quite strange people. Still, I hadn't been to visit them for a few months, so I couldn't object. And actually, when I thought about it, I realised I was looking forward to it. Mum's sister's family were going to be there and it's been a while since I've seen them, and I had just had a great day with Mum.

Normally when Mum drags me to the country, she thinks I need time amongst "real" people, and need to have "real" discussions about "real" things, do "real" things like ride horses and milk cows etc. It basically means she thinks I need straightening out, firming up and so on. She must think I'm weird or something. I think she interferes too much.

Mum dropped me off, but didn't come in. It was almost midnight, and I was feeling really tired and groggy, and seeing as I had just woken from a deep car-snooze, I was not at my sharpest. Dad was sitting in the living room with his arms folded across his chest, and wanted to know (in a very crisp voice) where Mum was. He simply said 'hmm' when I told him she was already on her way back to her flat, and then told me that he was not at all happy with me. Apparently he knew everything. I told him I was really tired and reminded him that tomorrow was a school day.

"Don't take that tone with me young lady," he said. "Sit down. We have to have words."

'Have to have words'? Well, I already have words. Lots of them. So many I can't even count them, and I assume Dad has more than me, so his order made no sense whatsoever. Because he was in his pink stripy pyjamas – he does not look very intimidating in them – it was difficult to take him seriously. But he was obviously cross, so I sat down and resigned myself to a couple of minutes of acting like I was sorry.

He wanted to know what I was thinking smuggling alcohol into the house, and did I think he was an idiot, or that my friends' parents were idiots and blah, blah, blah, quite frankly. He soldiered on, saying I had made a lot of people angry and worried. Did I know how dangerous and strong vodka was. Did I know that an old friend of his once had to have his stomach pumped in hospital and had almost died. Did I know it was illegal at my age. And so on for twenty minutes. I sat there and said 'yes' and 'no' and 'sorry' and 'I won't do it again' and 'yes I really mean it', until finally he got up, reached over and pinched at the fabric of my black woollen tights. He had been eyeing one of my hairs which had slumbered on my knee during his concerned speech and could stand it no longer. He simply had to pluck it off, had to correct the ugliness. He carried it to the kitchen, where he carefully dropped it into the pedal-bin and from there said that that would do for the night, and I could go to bed now. His words floated to me through the dimly lit room like tired pieces of rag, but they were the ones I wanted to hear. I went to bed and slept like an angel. Getting up for school the following morning however, was not in the least bit heavenly.

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On the sofa-bed in Mother and Father's cottage early on Saturday morning, I was remembering with

some relish sex with Jonno two nights earlier. He had actually called me up, which in all honesty I hadn't expected of him. But it turns out he's one of life's few remaining real men. But don't dash to the bathroom with your fingers diving for your fanny, imagining he looks like that pansy Arnold Schwarzenegger – over-inflated and of a deeply disturbing colour – because he doesn't. If that's your type, go and fantasise elsewhere, and not on my time either. For your information, Jonno's balding, has a beer-belly and his feet are seldom clean. On top of that he drinks like a fish, smokes like a chimney, and enjoys kebabs and curries. He has a nice, chunky willy, good stamina and a healthy sex drive. He comes round, we have sex, we chat, he goes home – good, clean, simple fun. On Thursday night we happen to have had our best sex yet.

(WARNING! The faint of heart should now skip to the next bit.) Our sexual compatibility was already plain, but on Thursday he introduced me to an appetite I did not know I had. Without warning he started to growl and bark at me and, already naked (as was I), dropped suddenly to all fours and started howling like a wolf. He's a pretty convincing wolf, actually. He certainly snarls very well. He then crawled heavily over to where I was standing (we weren't in bed yet, in fact we were still in the living room) and bit me on the ankle, right on the tendon. My skin didn't break and there was no blood but fuck me if it didn't hurt like buggery, worse than buggery, truth be told. (In fact I'm still limping.)

The pain of it was, in the very first instant, highly unpleasant, but the adrenalin that subsequently flooded my blood did not make me angry. Not a bit of it. It just turned me on all the more. I too dropped to all fours, facing him. I turned my head to one side to offer him my neck, and whimpered a little, like a timid bitch. He bit there too. And now I know it's true what is said about pleasure and pain, because I almost came on the spot. Then he crawled round to my arse, snuffled and licked around a bit, then mounted me and fucked and humped me fast and furious, growling and barking in my ears all the while. We both came, Chernobyl style, two quick and intense minutes later. You should try it sometime. I can't recommend it highly enough.

Well, as you can probably imagine, in recalling all this (sorry, if you've skipped to this bit due to your faint-hearted disposition, perhaps you had better skip to the next one too) I had spread my legs and was busily rubbing away at my inner circle when, wouldn't you know it, Mother walked in.

She had heard my moans and wanted to know if I had a stomach ache, and should she fetch some Settlers! Fortunately I am a robust woman and don't embarrass easily, but before I could tell her to go away, her walkie-talkie buzzed.

I should explain at this point, that my parents are probably certifiable. They communicate via walkie-talkie most of the time – unless they are in the same room of course – and say 'roger that' and 'over and out' and so on. Apparently Daddy had lost track of time and was impatient to know what was wrong with me.

"She hasn't responded to my enquiry yet, over," said Mother.

"Roger that," crackled Daddy's voice, "keep me posted though. Over and out."

Well if that doesn't put you off sex, then nothing will – in which case you should probably see a psychologist, preferably Freudian. I told Mother I had had no idea I was moaning and that it must therefore have been a dream, because my stomach was fine. She reported this to Daddy, who wanted to know whether it had been a nightmare or a wet dream.

“I don't remember and even if I did I'm hardly going to tell you!” I shouted, and further told him to keep his nose out of my business. Mother went back to bed. With a beginning like that, the weekend was sure to be a real cracker.

That put an utter damper on my sexual reminiscences, and so my thoughts turned, as if by prior programming, to The Daughter of all Wimps, who had been rather prickly of late, by which I mean more so than usual. This has of course made relations with him difficult in the extreme. It started when I had reacted in a less than bothered way to the news that our daughter had been found out as a vodkaholik and liquor smuggler.

My opinion is that any fuss about such a trivial, normal matter – we're talking about a teenage party for fuck's sake – would be a storm in a teacup, and told him as much. He said he couldn't believe how childish and irresponsible I was and thank goodness the courts of the land finally have enough intelligence to award custody to the wiser partner, regardless of their sex. He would be raising the matter with his lawyer, who would then seek to limit my access to Natasha to once a month, seeing as I was such a negative influence.

“Tiger, darling,” I said, using that horrible endearment for the second time that day, suddenly overjoyed to discover that his grip on reality was as weak as it was, “do you honestly believe anyone can prove me a negative influence? I mean, there isn't a single scrap of evidence.”

He humphed and harrumphed and spluttered a whole lot of nonsense about me never having been there and no support for a growing girl and so on, until I cut him off with the news that Natasha was on her way back from the loo and we should hang up. I squinted at the mobile phone and saw a red coloured phone icon, which I depressed. It worked. I was very pleased with myself and on the strength of that, and on the back of my ex's evident imbecility and my new-found mothering skills, thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the day. Well, the Hard Rock Café was a bit much (the noise of that place!), but otherwise, the whole day was not bad at all.

But yesterday's drive west was awful. The traffic on the M25 and the M4 was indescribably slow. I almost ate the steering wheel in my frustration. There is simply nothing you can do about it, and on top of that, Natasha was snoring away beside me – for a beanpole she manages a strangely deep and pervasive snore. She had fallen asleep seemingly as soon as the passenger door had closed, so I had no one to talk to, and what passes for entertainment on the radio nowadays is best not discussed, unless you want to hear me ranting, which I imagine you don't. So I had arrived in a foul mood, to be greeted by Mother and Father who were in their usual panic. They looked like dotty, long retired policemen – they have these leather holsters for their walkie-talkies which hang off their hips like weapons –

rushing out of their thatched cottage at the sound of my car in their slow and doddering way, weapons wobbling at their sides like loose, black bones, proclaiming themselves relieved to see we were alive and no harm had come to us. Sleepy woke finally at the sound of all the wailing and gnashing of teeth, and asked why they hadn't simply called her on her mobile. Their faces relaxed. They laughed, and then it was rolled eyes and forehead slapping, and 'silly us' this and 'senile us' that and I was left to carry in the bags – no one noticed I was limping – as Natasha and the batty Peelers (sounds like a 60's pop group) smiled and laughed their way inside.

My mood made falling asleep on the thin-mattressed sofa-bed a struggle, so I was happy to have finally found a little relaxed time to myself in the early morning light, and then correspondingly pissed off to have had it interrupted, first by my mother and then by thoughts of my ex. I got up and made me a coffee. The plan for the morning was a group shopping trip to Waitrose to acquire the food needed for the family feast for Sunday lunch. As you can well imagine, I was not looking forward to it. I had wanted to thrust my daughter back into the robustness of country living, if even for two short days, and having envisaged her milking cows and riding horses, did not want some extended family festival to eat away at Natasha's limited time. But the Joneses were coming and that was that. My elder sister, a curious mixture of nerves and feistiness, would be there, whether I liked it or not, with her husband and their son. Her husband is very successful and mildly Australian, their son untrustworthy. He is charming and good looking and somehow permanently tanned. He has something of the snake about him. The Germans have a wonderful word for it – 'aalglatt'. If you don't know what that means, you can go and look it up. It'll do you some good to get out of the house.

Shopping was sure to be interesting. My parent's walkie-talkies come into full force in large supermarkets, and their conversations on them can be very entertaining, as can the expressions of those not yet exposed to their wee idiosyncrasy. So after a bland breakfast – during which my stomach and its supposed tenderness was raised as a topic of conversation no less than four times (geriatrics have the memories of goldfish) – we bundled into my car and went shopping. When we arrived and stood staring at the colourful cornucopia of fruit and vegetables that greet all happy shoppers, it became quickly apparent that no one (my parents that is) had decided what was to be cooked. "Meat first," announced my Father and wobbled resolutely in the direction of the meat section. We followed and were all soon hotly discussing whether it should be lamb or beef. I think Natasha mentioned chicken, but she was effortlessly ignored. Lamb's inherent Englishness won the day, so a huge joint of lamb was acquired, after which Mother was dispatched back to the vegetables with Natasha, and I went with Daddy to the wines. A few seconds later his walkie-talkie crackled. Mother wanted to know if there was enough fresh rosemary in the garden.

"You're the garden guru Eunice, you should know, over."

"Well I've obviously forgotten, haven't I. Are you going to answer the question, or just tell me what I know and don't know? Over."

"If I knew, don't you think I would have said so already? How long have we been married now?"

Over.”

“Forty six years, Derek, and heaven only knows how we managed it. So I’m to take that as a ‘no’ am I? Over.”

“Roger that, Eunice. How does a Rosso Piceno sound, 1999? It’s red. Over.”

“You’re the wine guru, Derek, why don’t you decide. Over and out.”

Daddy was handing me bottle after bottle of Rosso Piceno to put in our trolley when his walkie-talkie crackled again. “Does Ian like sprouts? Natasha says she can’t remember. Over.”

“How the hell should I know? I only see him once a year. Over.”

“Don’t be so touchy, I was only asking. Over and out.”

And so it went on. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

When we got home, however, Mother noticed we had forgotten the breakfast materials, and asked if I would be a dear and pop back to get bacon and eggs and butter and bread and tomatoes. I told her I could think of nothing more wonderful than that, and got back into the car. My sister and her family were arriving just as I pulled away.

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The drive down had been very easy and passed quickly – Mum’s new car is really comfy. I slept well in Mum’s room too, even after Mum had put up a fuss about having to give it up. I woke up and had a pleasant breakfast, then went shopping with everyone and had fun listening to Granny and Grandfather arguing with each other on their walkie-talkies in Waitrose. And then David arrived with his mum and dad, Aunt Helen and Uncle Ian. Because they’re Joneses his name is David Jones, which is David Bowie’s real name. He doesn’t look like David Bowie, but he is good looking, and it’s fun to have him around. He had already texted me, saying we should go out on Saturday night into Cheltenham and have some fun, now that I was a teenager, and I was really looking forward to it. I was in a good mood and it was sure to be a great day. We only had to get through Saturday lunch, and then David would make the request in his (hopefully) irresistible way.

When they arrived, Mum had just gone back to Waitrose to get the breakfast stuff, and I was with Granny in the kitchen unpacking the shopping. I knew they had arrived because I heard David shouting “Where’s the damn beer? This man needs a drink!” Granny and I went to greet them.

“I didn’t know you were eighteen already,” Granny said to David. David just smiled and said that times were changing, and hadn’t she heard of alcopops. Granny had not heard of alcopops. David and I laughed, and Aunt Helen piped up that alcopops were a range of dreadful, sickly sweet new alcoholic drinks aimed at today’s youth. They had names like Colaholic and Flodka Ice and were revitalising the drinks industry. Granny didn’t want to hear another word about it, and hoped very much that David

and I would not indulge. Her old fashioned reaction to the topic worried me a little – maybe she wouldn't let me out with David, and even worse, maybe Dad had called her and told her about the vodka episode. But that couldn't be. Dad never calls Granny, and there's no way *Mum* would have said anything about it. I relaxed and returned to the kitchen with Granny. David followed us and wanted to know how it felt to finally be a teenager.

“No big deal,” I said, “what's it like being sixteen?”

He smiled and his eyes sparkled. He leaned towards me and whispered “sex and drugs and rock ‘n roll” into my ear. I got goosebumps down my neck and over my left shoulder. Then Uncle Ian must have finally finished his conversation with whoever had been on the other end of his mobile, because he suddenly shouted that David should shift his arse and haul his bag upstairs.

For lunch we went to The Sheep's Head, my favourite pub in England. It wasn't long before Mum was grilling David about his trousers. She wanted to know what all that space was for. Aunt Helen twittered something about shoplifting, and started to laugh hysterically at her own joke. David rolled his eyes. He was sitting next to Mum, who was staring at his trousers with a look of intense study on her face.

“The trouser crotch is hanging over the edge of your seat, and when you walk I can see your underwear because your hips aren't really wide enough to hold up the trousers' waist. The legs are far too long for you too. To me your trousers speak of endless insecurity about the size of your meat and two veg. Am I on the right track?” She looked up at David, her face unreadably flat.

“You could not be further from it,” he answered, equally calm. “I doubt any of the wise old members of this family gathering have noticed,” he continued, “that neither Natasha nor I have made any comments about anyone else's fashion choices, all day. Believe me, we could if we chose to. We choose not to, however, because we are polite. Right, Natasha?”

“I can never think where to start,” I said. David laughed, but everyone else's face was stony. Aunt Helen went instantly on the offensive, her voice wobbling and cracking under the strain of her mighty emotions.

“Well isn't it just like you to claim exclusive ownership of good manners. I mean sixteen years old and already an expert in the ways of the world. I hate to break it to you kiddo, but you have been, since you were born, just about the cheekiest so and so on the entire planet. Isn't he Ian?”

“You got that right, darling,” said Ian, whose mobile had just started to ring again. He stood up and went outside to get better reception. Aunt Helen repeated ‘he is, you know’ a few times to anyone who might listen – although aiming the words at her knees – but because nobody was listening, her voice faded gently away.

Mum's large face was radiating that she was not yet finished with her inquisition. She started up again as soon as silence had settled again. “And how do you manage that permanent tan, David? You look

like a minor television personality.”

David, without batting an eyelid, came up with the best response I think I could ever imagine (you really have to admire his nerve). “If I have tanned more often than others ,” he said, “it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants.” I’ll never forget it, and it actually made Mum smile. It was difficult not to like David, even for her. She asked, grinning slightly, if that had been a deliberate or accidental misquote. In answer, David directed her to enquire after the costs of his schooling and, based on that information, to make a decision for herself. He added that he knew she was a lady who was comfortable with, and indeed preferred, her own opinion, and the forming of it too. Mum had nothing further to say on the matter after that, which is absolutely amazing, and I detected a certain softening at the corners of her eyes in response to David’s well aimed flattery.

That was lunch and that is David. He was always cool, but recently he seems to have reached new heights. As time went on I was getting more and more nervous, wondering how David would ask if we could go out. The alcopops discussion had not faded from my memory, and Aunt Helen’s emotional outbursts were slowly convincing me she would not be happy with any activity that would make David happy. My worries were not necessary. David had come up with the idea of offering to take me shopping, seeing as that’s what girls love to do. Initially Mum was against the idea. She had hoped to take me riding, and had already booked two hours at the riding school. This was rather insulting. I reminded her that I enjoyed riding about as much as homework, and that horses smell funny, *and*, had she forgotten I was no good at it? What would I do with two hours sitting on a horse’s back? Besides, she hadn’t even asked me what I wanted to do with my time, which is of course typical, and quite frankly, at thirteen I think I can fairly say I have had enough of it.

David joined the attack. “Aunt Heather,” he said, “you can’t possibly keep a girl as pretty as Natasha locked up and young, like Rapunzel in a tower. She’s thirteen! She needs to be out and about, mixing it up, learning about the cut and thrust. Thirteen year olds know what they want and where to go to find it. OK, I grant you, Cheltenham is not the centre of the universe, but I’m sure a girl of Natasha’s instincts will find her way unswervingly to where the best stuff is. And I’m sure the stables would understand if Natasha were to be unable to ride due to say, a sudden attack of diarrhoea.” And then, noticing the gentle relaxation of muscles taking place in Mum’s face, added; “I promise I will take good care of her.” Mum did not answer immediately, which meant she was thinking, which meant she was indeed wavering, which meant being thirteen might not mean just being twelve plus one. She hesitated, and then hesitated a little bit more and then, oh wonderful world, said I could go! I suppressed the burst of excitement that exploded in my tummy like a firework and carefully took another sip of coke, watching my hand shaking with energy.

This was incredible. It was the first time in my life Mum had been talked out of anything, and David had managed it at the age of sixteen. Dad had never managed it, and he’s almost fifty! I could hardly wait to get going. David turned to his dad and asked him to spot him some dough. Uncle Ian fished two fifty pound notes out of his wallet and, with a proud grin and a ‘there you go champ, good work,

go break a leg', handed them to David. I could hardly believe my eyes and had the strong impression Uncle Ian was somehow involved in his son's pulling off of a minor miracle. He was certainly grinning very broadly. It was turning into the best day of my life. Then, when I was standing up to go, mum pushed some money into my hand. It was thirty pounds! Like I just said, it was going to be the best day of my life. The forty minute walk into town felt like a few seconds.

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'Aalglatt' is the word! – the boy is unnaturally charming. If I weren't his aunt I'd want into those oversized trousers of his. I don't recall ever having been talked out of a plan before, and liking it. And if someone like that didn't know how to look after Natasha on a Saturday in Cheltenham, then my name isn't Heather St. John. Besides, wasn't this precisely what I wanted for her anyway? Although I instinctively distrusted my nephew, it was, were I to be true to my principles, up to Natasha to navigate those rather interesting, sparkling blue waters, with as little interference from me as possible. If I wanted her to grow up, she should be allowed the space and chance to do so. And regardless what you might think of her age and me as a mother, my own history as a teenager was evidence that thirteen year olds are perfectly capable of handling plenty of things solo. So I went back to the cottage with the others, happy with the thought that my daughter was out there in the thick of things, becoming a woman. It was also nice to think that my husband would have disapproved of my actions in the strongest possible terms. Which gave me an idea.

Next morning I took Natasha for a walk. I wanted to talk to her in private to put my idea to her and grabbed the first opportunity after breakfast to do so. I had watched with pleasant surprise as she tucked a considerable amount of bacon and eggs away and had noticed too, that she was positively glowing. I haven't mentioned this yet, but she has her father's eyes. They are, like his, large and doe-like, with the obligatory long black lashes, and though a deep brown colour, they sparkle. On Sunday morning they were shining. Reasons for concern you might think; young teenage girl out with good looking teenage boy for the best part of ten hours of a Saturday, and the good looking boy in question happening to be her cousin. Well then be concerned, if you think it helps anything (admit it, you probably enjoy the drama), but speaking for myself I found the signs encouraging. There is simply no replacement for life experience, and if I was reading things correctly, then that is exactly what she was getting. Besides, and more importantly, it might very well be just the sort of mood she would need to be in to help get my plan realised.

So there we were walking along side by side, more or less in silence, me wondering (again) how best to lay my idea before her, she obviously lost in her own thoughts – although commenting from time to time on how pretty everything looked. I chose the direct route (at least I started out with the intention of speaking directly).

"Natasha," I said, "I have yet to get you a birthday present, and without wanting to sound too dramatic, and indeed to my considerable surprise, I have actually been feeling a little bad about it." I was prattling away like an idiot and had even lied – I most certainly was not feeling bad about it – I

had spent a small fortune on her since forgetting to go to her party. (It should have made me suspicious as to my deeper motives, but strangely, it didn't.)

“Don't worry about it, Mum,” she said, plucking a dandelion and blowing its seeds into the mid-April air, “I've completely forgotten about the whole thing.”

Well I wasn't expecting her to react like that – she could at least have sounded enthusiastic about finally receiving a gift. The change in her mood of exactly two weeks ago was astounding, and I had not reckoned with it. My biggest fear had been that she would know exactly what she wanted, and it not correspond to what I wanted to give her. I brushed the dandelion seeds from my jacket as if they had been her unexpected words and continued as if she had been happy to hear mine.

“Yes,” I said, “exactly. So what do you think of kittens?”

I sounded like a politician. I hate politicians. Something unusual was happening, and I was obviously determined not to notice. Well, Natasha simply adored kittens. They were so cute and cuddly and fun, and was I really thinking of getting her one as a birthday present? Amazingly she had seemed to forget an important fact, which meant, having teetered mere seconds earlier at the edge of my plan's collapse, I had apparently been able to seal the deal with next to no effort. It was at that moment I noticed my hands were sweating, which hadn't happened to me for decades. Upon the news that I was really going to get her a kitten, she jumped on me and gave me a huge hug and said I was the best mum she could have. At those words I felt the first flutterings of butterfly wings in my stomach. Ignoring them, I told her not to tell anyone yet, let's first see if the people (whose advertisement I had read in Waitrose) still had some kittens left to give away. We would stop off at their address on our way home on Monday.

Monday came on the heels of a Sunday littered with the collusive giggling and snickering of two teenagers enjoying one another's company. Helen was on top form, which means she barely shut up for a minute. She's not in any way a stupid woman, but she really can be, circumstances permitting, a fucking idiot. Obviously she had noticed David and Natasha getting on so well together, and obviously she could sniff the sexual quality of their play, but she is so uptight, I don't think she has the wherewithal to consciously accept such a thing is both possible and natural. For Helen, anything having the remotest thing to do with incest should be mercilessly beaten out of town and never mentioned again. I surprised myself (for the second time that day) by staying largely quiet and leaving her to her periodic outbursts. Ian looked more and more like the stereotypical henpecked husband, refusing with ever decreasing patience to humour her tirades, so that by the time they left, just before dark that day, I was convinced he was either having an affair, or would start one soon. I even felt a little sorry for Helen, though she brings it on herself without help from anyone else. What can one do, in the final analysis, about a character flaw? Or several character flaws, for that matter.

In the car, heading off towards the family with the kittens, Natasha suddenly and inconveniently remembered what she had so amazingly forgotten the day before.

“Isn’t Dad allergic to cats?” she suddenly said.

Hmm. Thank goodness I had pondered addressing this already, and had some ripostes to hand that should help. They went like this, all coming out together like a list. Yes he was, but only mildly, and these things are anyway very treatable nowadays. I hadn’t forgotten about it, she mustn’t think that. Furthermore, I was sure the benefits to her would outweigh the few bouts of snuffles her father would have every now and again. I was silent for a couple of seconds, but seeing as she didn’t respond, I carried on. I said it’s a good thing to have something for which you are completely responsible, that you have to take care of – it builds character, puts breasts on your chests and hairs on your fanny. I was obviously warming to the theme and was aware that with her laugh at my joke she had acquiesced. Should there be a kitten left that she liked, she would be taking it home with her. I was delighted.

The address was of a thin, weak looking house on an ugly, modern estate. I remember there being lots of brown. We were greeted at the door by a frazzled looking woman, who appeared to be in her early twenties, holding what looked to be a two year old boy on her hip. It turned out that he was a twin and that the poor mother was at her wits’ end trying to keep the two two year old boys away from the kittens, which were now being frantically gathered from various corners of the poky living room for us to inspect. There were five of them. I asked how many she had managed to give away so far, to which she replied “None”, adding we could take them all if we wanted. “That won’t be necessary,” I said. “Shame,” she said. There were toys scattered everywhere, but neither of the two young rascals demonstrated the slightest bit of interest in them. I started to wonder about the mother’s sanity when she shouted at her sons and I discovered they were called Bill and Ben. Perhaps she was too young to remember the flower pot men. There was that hope. The boys were starting to get quite rough with the little kitten shaped bundles of fur. The harassed mother picked them both up and summarily dropped them in the corridor, closing the door to the living room to keep them out. The rest of the transaction was conducted to the sound of two screaming toddlers, the decibels only slightly reduced by the thin plywood door and walls. I pressed Natasha to pick one she liked. She pointed at the only black one. Its back left paw and lower leg was white and the shape of the mark made it somehow look like the kitten had got the limb tangled in an oversized sports sock that was only barely staying in place. Natasha picked it up, and it was obvious to all with eyes it was love at first cuddle.

“It looks as if Natasha has made her decision,” I said, and asked, with a polite smile, where the nearest pet shop might be.

“I’m going to call her Odsox,” said Natasha once we were in the car again. I told myself she was just thirteen and not to make a comment about the name, but wanted to know how she knew it was a girl. Her answer was practical and to the point. “She hasn’t got a willy,” she said. It seems my daughter has some sense after all. Who knows, I might in time even come to like the girl.

At the pet shop we equipped ourselves with a cardboard carrier-box, a catnip toy, a milk bowl and a food bowl, some tins of kitten food, litter and a blue litter-tray and then drove home, which mercifully

didn't take too long, because after about five minutes the ruddy furball started mewling and wouldn't shut up. I'd forgotten how loud the little things can be. Pulling up at my old house I was most uncharacteristically a bag of nerves, hoping that my ex would not be at home yet, and breathed an inner sigh of relief when I discovered he wasn't. I accompanied Natasha in and helped with the placement of the litter-tray and gave advice about not letting the kitten outside for at least two weeks and to keep the food bowl very clean. Then we saw the note from Natasha's father. It told us he was out for the whole night and would not be back until Tuesday after work. Well if that wasn't food for thought, then nothing was.

The sparseness of the information stank of guilt, so my first instinct was that the sneaky bastard had, in the few months since we separated, found himself a little something (with a skirt I hoped) on the side. No, I was not in the least bit angry, and nor indeed was I even remotely jealous, so you can put those sordid little thoughts out of your heads right now. That some silly little strumpet at work, or wherever it happened to have been, had fallen for his baby browns was no business of mine. I only hoped for her sake she found out sooner rather than later, what a pernicky little fusspot he is. And then it struck me that I had not seen Jonno since last Thursday, and that it was high time for a shag. I said goodbye to Natasha and headed for Jonno's local, my fanny already beginning to drool with anticipation.

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Mum left in a real hurry after reading Dad's note, without even kissing me goodbye, and actually, now that I come to think of it, without looking me in the eye either. In fact, she had been agitated the whole day in an oddly quiet way I had never seen before. And now I suddenly found myself alone with a black kitten called Odsox, facing the first night of my young life without the presence of either parents or grandparents to keep me safe. Why was Dad not here, where was he and what was he doing? And why did Mum dash off in such a hurry? There was something about Dad's note that made it clear he did not want to be contacted, which was also a first and made me feel very strange. I picked up Odsox and sat on the sofa with her playing in my lap, and suddenly felt very sad. Yesterday I was as happy as I have ever been, but now... Well, I started crying. One of my tear-drops fell on Odsox's head with a fat 'plop' and she looked up at me, her eyes as uncomprehending as mine were weepy, a moment, had a skilled photographer been present with all equipment set up, which would have translated to a very cheesy poster for Athena. It didn't bear thinking about.

There was only one thing for it. Call David Jones. As soon as he answered the phone I started bawling my eyes out! I told him about Odsox and Mum dashing off and Dad being out for the whole night and that I'd never been alone before and that I was scared and I didn't know what to do. I felt like such a kid but he was so sweet. He didn't laugh at me, he just gently told me to relax and breathe easy, and then said he would grab a bunch of DVDs and some coke and some popcorn and come round to keep me company. That made me feel much better. I took Odsox to the kitchen and gave her some milk, left her toy near her bowl and then dashed upstairs to take a shower.

It's so nice having a warm and friendly cousin who just happens to be about as cool as Brad Pitt as

well. Saturday was really wonderful. First off, he got these older boys to buy some drinks from an off licence for us, and then we went to Montpellier (which is like this little arcade in Cheltenham) and hid behind this building and drank until we were a little bit drunk. I only had one bottle but David drank three. He says he's been drinking already for a few of years now and is quite used to it. He said he thought it was really cute how quickly I got tipsy, and then said I had better watch out with my eyes because they're really sexy. I never knew I had sexy eyes. Then we went shopping, and I bought jewellery and make-up, and we could even afford to buy me a warmer top – it was getting cold – and have money left over for a film and a meal later in the evening. David likes Jennifer Lopez because she's curvy and her bum's so big. He says he likes women with flesh. I don't have a big bum, and I don't have much flesh either, but he said that's nothing a few pizza's couldn't cure, and added that he could see I have a great shaped figure that time is going to turn into something really hot. When the evening was done, we took a taxi back to the cottage and managed to get in just before midnight. Only Uncle Ian was awake. He was working at his laptop doing something important, while Mum was snoring away on the sofa-bed. He took his earphones out when he saw us arrive and had a quick chat with us. He was polite and brief, only asking if we had had a good time and was happy to hear we had. It didn't seem important to him to know what we had been doing during our ten hours together.

The first thing David did when he arrived, was to take both of my hands in his and ask me how I was feeling. I said I was feeling fine now that he was here, and that I was so grateful that he could come and keep me company. He asked where Odsox was and added it was a great name. I didn't know, so we went round looking for her, calling out her name. Just as I started to get nervous that she had somehow found her way out of the house, we found her half way up one of the curtains. She looked like a crazy, semi-exploded fluff-bomb. Her fur was standing on end because of the all the static her manic scrabbling up and down the curtains had generated, and she had this wild look in her green eyes. We had to literally tear her off the curtains, so that we could put her back on the floor where we could better watch her. She just sort of stood stock still for a moment and then suddenly, for no reason whatsoever, leapt backwards and sideways through the air like a ninja cat defending herself against some unseen evil foe, landing quite elegantly, considering the suddenness and size of her jump, but then sprinted off towards her catnip toy, only to stop inches before reaching it to sink to a tense, vibrating, hunter's crouch.

“Odsox is the *perfect* name for that nutty cat,” said David, scratching his head.

“It's the catnip,” I said. “It makes her crazy.”

“Yeah! Legal drugs for cats,” said David, “what could be cooler! Unfortunately, though, I haven't brought any humannip with me, so coke's gonna have to do. That and a line of popcorn, if you're ready for the gnarly stuff.”

“Yeah, I do coke, I'm hip. And I've even done popcorn, truth be told. So... What films did you bring?”

David took off his backpack and pulled out 'Enough' and 'Blackhawk Down'. "One for the girls and one for the boys," he said.

It was so nice. We snuggled up together on the sofa and munched the popcorn and slurped the coke and watched the two films, chatting every now and again about nothing in particular. Both of us had already seen the films, so there was probably more chat than film-watching, but that just made it all the more enjoyable. I was so relaxed I completely forgot that Dad was out for the whole night.

When the films were finished we realised we were hungry for some proper hot food, so David had a hunt through the kitchen and ended up cooking a scrummy pasta dish with a mushroom, white wine, cream and pepper sauce. (Is there anything he can't do?) After we had finished eating and *not* done the dishes (I said Dad could do them seeing as he had left me alone without warning), David asked where I thought Dad might have gone. On hearing that I had no idea, he asked if my Dad had recently been talking about any women at work, or wherever. Not that I could think of. Didn't I at least think it might be a woman that had dragged him away so suddenly and uncharacteristically? I hadn't wanted to give it any thought, but now David put it like that, I could think of no other explanation. And it made me feel strange to think of Dad in someone else's house, sleeping in someone else's bed – actually I didn't want to think about it at all. And then I remembered what Mum had said about bringing a man back to her flat, when I had called her after my party, drunk, and told David about it. It didn't surprise him one little bit, he said he had always thought Aunt Heather was a bit of a goer. That wasn't what I wanted to hear. Suddenly, it seemed I had two sex mad parents who wanted to screw everybody in the world, except each other. Neither of them was good looking, both were overweight *and* over forty and what the hell was going on! Couldn't they at least have waited more than a couple of months?! David said I should calm down and get used to it. He reckoned it was perfectly normal, and that even ugly people have sex, and like it, and that now my parents were officially divorced, they were perfectly within their rights to play the field. He offered to take me on a tour through the Internet one day, so I could see what was really going on out there in the big wide world. Well, all I could say was 'yuck!' and that my parents could at least try a bit harder to keep that sort of thing to themselves and out of my face.

"At least your parents are divorced," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I was starting to get angry, and didn't want to be.

"I think my Dad's having an affair," he said, his eyes looking surprisingly happy about it.

"You are joking!" I said, but then screamed out in pain. Odsox was climbing up my leg, kindly proving to me that her little claws were as sharp as knives. I reached down and pulled her up into my lap as quickly as I could, but in doing so made no effort to safely extract her daggers from my tights, which were subsequently laddered in four different places.

David looked at my legs and pointed out that they were bleeding, fetched a tissue from the box on the coffee table beside him, and leaned across my lap to dab at the little wounds. Odsox had to scabble up

my chest to get away from his oncoming bulk. After a couple of seconds gently dabbing away the small beads of blood, during which I felt his heart beating strongly against my thigh, he sat back upright and handed me the tissue in case I needed it further. He carried on with his announcement as if nothing had happened.

“I’m not joking. I think my Dad is having an affair, and from the way he talks about his secretary, when Mum’s not around anyway, I’d put big money on it being her – not that they’re running that bet at Ladbrokes or anything...”

I was shocked. “That’s disgusting,” I said. “Poor Aunt Helen. I had no idea Uncle Ian was such a bastard.” But David didn’t seem to be affected in the same way I was.

“I don’t know,” he said, his accent suddenly slightly Australian, like his Dad’s, “Mum can be pretty annoying sometimes. You’ve heard what she’s like. It’s been non-stop now for about a year. That sort of pressure can wear anyone down.”

“Well I think she’s sweet. I mean, I know her voice is a bit, well, grating sometimes, and she goes on and on about things no one else cares about as if they were the most important thing –” but David cut me off, tickling me in the ribs saying, ‘admit it, you can’t stand my Mum’ over and over again. Odsox, who had been on my shoulder for a while, jumped off me in shock at my sudden squealing and wriggling to get away from David’s insistent fingers. When he stopped he said in a low voice that even I would probably have an affair with my secretary if I were married to his Mum. I said he was probably right, but only if my secretary happened to be Heath Ledger.

“Bingo!”, he said, looking at me like he knew a secret about something that he was just about to tell me. But he didn’t say anything about it.

“It’s getting late,” he said suddenly, changing the mood completely with three simple words.

I hadn’t thought about him leaving, and the idea of suddenly being alone and getting ready for bed was not at all appealing.

“Oh please don’t go. You can sleep over if you like, there’s plenty of bed space free. It’s not too late to call your parents and ask.” He just grinned at me, pulled a toothbrush out of his backpack, and said no one had said anything about going home, just that it was getting late. Of course he was going to look after me till the morning, what sort of a cousin did I think he was!? So we went upstairs and brushed our teeth, side by side, looking at each other in the bathroom mirror. Then he got changed in my parent’s room and I changed into my long nightie in my room, and then met in the hall. I was about to say goodnight when I remembered Odsox. We went downstairs to fetch her and found her squatting in the litter doing her first poo in our house. I was so proud of her. Her little black tail was out straight and quivering with the effort of it all. When she was finished and had carefully pawed some litter over her poo, I picked her up and we went back upstairs. David followed me into my room and sat on the edge of my bed after I had climbed in. We started chatting again and a few minutes later he lay beside

me. I put my head on his chest and listened to his heart while we talked a bit more, and then at some point I fell asleep. Neither of us had said goodnight. When I awoke it was already morning and my head was still on David's chest – he was still sleeping – and Odsox was asleep at my feet, curled up and unbelievably tiny.

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Jonno had thankfully been at his local, as I had hoped – attending to his liquid needs – and had been happy to see me walk in. I had a few drinks with him and then we went back to my flat, where we had high-tempo, aggressive sex. After he left and I was alone again – and remember all this was directly after the bustle of the family weekend – I looked around for something to do, but nothing struck me as interesting. The flat was suddenly an empty place. I felt lonely! Even the normally pleasant ache of recent sex was of no comfort, in fact it only exacerbated the situation.

I quickly left the flat and walked around aimlessly for a while, finding my way eventually to a petrol station. I perused the magazine racks and purchased a 'Cosmopolitan', which I have only done at one other time in my entire life. That was, poignantly enough, after splitting up with my first boyfriend. He was sensitive and gentle and not much beyond seventeen, and though I now know he is not my type, there was something about his daydreamy eyes that I found alluring at the time. Of course, after a couple of weeks of his umming and aahing about everything and everyone, I got fed up with him and ditched him. Nevertheless, and I have always put it down to my youth, being single after having been part of a couple, if only for a few weeks, put me at a loose end. My mood had led me to a Cosmop and the Cosmop had helped, in its own special, patronising way. Well, this time round I had not exactly split up with a boyfriend, and neither was I young, so the cause differed somewhat, but if my hands had grabbed a Cosmop, then my hands could have a Cosmop, content be damned.

So there I was in bed, washed, scrubbed and de-peed, with a glossy mag in my lap, leafing through the shiny pages, trying to find something helpful or interesting to read. 'Good luck, girl' I'm sure the wise amongst you would say, and you'd be right. I learnt that David Beckham is Britain's sexiest man and claims to be a tiger in bed – I could snap that boy in two with one well-timed clench of my thighs. Then there was advice on how to have an orgasm 'every time', but seeing as no one pointed out that you have to be ruthless and selfish in bed to get what you want (partner permitting – this free advice is moot if you find yourself coupled with some wimp or other), I couldn't really take their wee pearls of wisdom seriously. There were pages upon pages of ads and a lot on summer salads and fruits and healthy living, an interview with a novelist I had never heard of and something on J Lo's new fashion line and so, on the whole, it was a waste of money and paper. Shiny paper too – no good for arse wiping.

After I had turned the back page over and sat staring for a few moments at the ad (again J Lo) I was suddenly overcome with a violent rage. Without thinking I hurled that stupid glossy magazine at the opposite wall, but despite my best efforts to destroy it with one mighty heave, the damn thing, pages fluttering out daintily into the perfect wind-brake, fell to ground before it hit the wall. Well, there was

no way on earth I was going to let that piece of shit get the better of me, so I leaped out of bed with a wordless shout and attacked. But I quickly discovered it is difficult – in any reasonably satisfying way – to take revenge on a magazine. I picked it up and (foolishly) tried to tear it in two. Were advertising illegal, I could easily have managed it, but with hundreds of the asinine things littered through its bland pages, I stood no chance at all. After a couple of grunting attempts, both doubled over and stretched out to full height from the strain of it, I saw it was pointless. That didn't help my mood at all, but tearing my way through it page by page would be ridiculous. So I carried it to the kitchen, slammed it on the sideboard like a side of beef, grabbed the biggest, sharpest, shiniest knife I could find, and stabbed at it with the frenzied enthusiasm of a lunatic.

Only sex is better. If any of you out there detect within you even the tiniest inkling of rage or hatred for that glossy, smarmy, holier-than-thou, know-it-all magazine, I cannot recommend a well directed stabbing fit highly enough. When I was finished with it, it looked beautifully brutalised and dead, and I, upon returning to bed, duly slept like a baby, with marvellous images of papery, swanky models stabbed to bits, peppering my dreams.

On Tuesday, though, I was listless again. Looking through the papers for a job was not in the least bit uplifting (can it ever be?), my coffees seemed to dull my wits, and after half-heartedly ringing a couple of jobs with no intention of pursuing them whatsoever, I found myself staring at the wall with no particular desire to do anything.

This is an unusual state of affairs for me, possibly unique in my lifetime. I like getting things done, being involved, and in recent months there had been a lot to do and a lot to do battle with. Suddenly that was all behind me, and it was becoming clear that drinking with Jonno in the pub, indeed sex with Jonno, was losing its lustre. I realised, somewhat reluctantly, that that was my life. More importantly, it was obvious it wasn't enough. But I turned my attention back to the paper like a good girl and carried on with forced hope – but also somewhat absent-mindedly – turning over the pages, until an ad for a film by the name of 'Thirteen' caught my eye. The photograph of the young girl (who looked a lot older than thirteen) reminded me of Natasha, plus make-up and with paler hair and eyes. Without thinking about it I got up, grabbed my bag and jacket, and went to see it.

As I left the cinema blinking at the bright April sunlight, I suddenly remembered a summer's day about a decade ago. I had, in a bit of a stink after an annoying argument with Harry, put on a favourite CD to cool off to, when I was joined by a stark naked Natasha, who, with an excited shriek, proceeded to run circles around the living room. At each cycle she jumped over my outstretched legs, as happy as a three year old can be. Her uncomplicated happiness made me forget the impulse to bellow out a question as to why she was naked again. Warm sunlight was pouring in through the windows, tickling out of her skin the most wonderful, laughing, youthful glow.

It's a simple enough memory, humdrum even, but a pleasant one nevertheless. If you have children you will know how their untroubled joy can, weather permitting, turn a dark mood bright. This was just the right memory to pop up after the film, because it was a powerful reminder of how time flies

and how quickly children grow. Of course I don't know if you have seen this film and I'm not going to comment on it in detail, but I will just say that it is certainly food for thought, and the particular thoughts it set in motion for me were of my past with Natasha, and perhaps a little more surprisingly than that, of being the mother of a nuclear family, and also – in the interests of transparency – the merest suggestion of my missing that past.

I have never had much time for the idea that life begins at forty. You are, as far as I can make out, free to start your life whenever you feel like it, and even that makes not too much sense. Baldly speaking, life starts when you are born and finishes when you die. A monkey could tell you that. However – and let's for now just call it coincidence – it seemed to me, particularly after having seen 'Thirteen' and having recently turned forty, that my age and new circumstances – that is being at a loose end on all possible fronts – have coincided in such a way as to give new life to that old chestnut. Furthermore, my current musings and feelings, for which I have never had too much time or patience, were hinting at, dare I say it, new beginnings.

'New beginnings'! Did I just say that!? Something is not altogether right with this and I'll be damned if I'm going to spend any more time mulling it over. But seeing as we are already on the subject, the other thing that struck me about 'Thirteen' was the lack of structure that must characterise a society that could produce it. The girls depicted in that film were indeed out of control, but needed nothing more than a sound hiding and a short, sharp dose of discipline. The familial structure they lived in was morally bankrupt and incapable of offering any guidance or support at all. No wonder the young heroines were off doing drugs and instigating orgies and disobeying orders left, right and centre. The whole thing is in fact a sorry reflection of a general state of affairs, almost as evident here in England as over there in America, where what passes for parenting means children grow up rude, selfish, poorly educated and lazy. And there I was starting to feel sorry for myself, forgetting that my own daughter is now being raised under the guidance of a man who would watch the world rot away in the manner of that film and not notice it, indeed he would probably condone it as some manifestation of some psychic truth about repressed collective psychological processes and dynamics. (Don't worry, I have no idea what that means either.) I simply must not forget my duties in this regard as someone who clearly sees what's going on and has a chance, at least as a mother of one thirteen year old, to do something about it. Big things have little beginnings, you know.

I hope you are not getting mixed messages about my attitudes to sexual promiscuity and under-age sex. When I talk about moral bankruptcy I am not talking about some namby-pamby, politically correct, arms folded across the chest, tight-lipped abhorrence of all matters physical. What I am talking about is structure and honesty and discipline. And I am all too aware that an opinion such as mine is not currently in vogue and that I am, I admit it, something of an anachronism. But that has never meant it is not right, nor indeed that I am not right – since when was vogue the prime indicator of reason and good sense? For me, and for anyone else with half a functioning brain cell, there is a whole world of difference between exploring the world 'out there' as a young man or woman and

keeping it largely to yourself – in short growing up politely in private – and rubbing your petty teething problems and selfish concerns defiantly and rudely in the face of your parents and teachers and elders generally, and then on top of all that demanding equal rights and “face time” and respect, alcohol and drugs etcetera, whilst behaving like a spoiled brat.

The film had evidently touched a sore spot. It was high time to go home and have a large gin and tonic. Harry always used to tell me to watch my temper and of course my reaction was invariably to tell him to fuck off and mind his own sodding business, but as I heard his voice in my head on my way home I actually paid attention to it for the first time in my life, and tried to slow and deepen my breathing. Standing in the tube (I had forgotten that London’s rush-hour stretches virtually throughout the entire day) and holding on to one of those black dangling balls, I closed my eyes and focused on each in and out breath. After a few moments of that I felt my heartbeat slow down and my mood calm. It was as easy as stopping to think. Blow me if *The Daughter of All Wimps* didn’t have a point after all. But then again, why not get angry? I mean for Christ’s sake, there actually are things out there to get angry about, there are real reasons to yell and swear and heavens knows we are only human! My heartbeat accelerated again and, almost automatically, I closed my eyes, counted quietly to ten and concentrated on my breathing. This weird see-saw of emotions accompanied me the whole way home, so by the time I finally arrived I really needed that drink.

At seven thirty the door bell rang. The thought that it might be Jonno was not a happy one, and that surprised me. However, I was even more surprised to see *The Daughter of All Wimps* standing there. He didn’t say hello, but sneezed into the soggy hanky he held at the ready in his right hand.

“Come in”, I said, as he pushed his way passed me into the living room, sneezing twice more before turning to speak.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing, getting a cat for Natasha!? You *-atishoo!*- know full well the effect cat hair has on me!”

He blew his nose. “Would you like a fresh handkerchief?” I asked, wrinkling my nose at the sodden white clump in his paw while walking past him and into my bedroom. I fished a clean white hanky from my chest of drawers and turned to find him already standing behind me – he can, if he chooses, walk so quietly you hardly even know he’s around. He took the hanky with a small, polite ‘thank you’ and sneezed into it three times in quick succession, before blowing his nose again with a loud trumpeting. He was quite a sight for sore eyes, just what the doctor ordered in fact. I took a luxuriant swig from my drink and informed him it was high time Natasha started growing up, and that being responsible for another living creature was as good a way to start as any.

“Well of course you’re right! Why didn’t I think of that earlier? And who on earth am I to question Her Royal Highness. I had obviously forgotten that you are, simply by virtue of the fact that you are you, always right! How could I have been so stupid?! When have you ever even once – ONCE! – been wrong? Even about the slightest, most insignificant little thing? I’m trying my best, but I can’t think of

a single time. Can you?” His eyes were on fire with a burning, accusatory sarcasm, bulging out of their sockets with what was probably years of pent up frustration with a superior, dominant partner (poor thing). Uncharacteristically he was not stumbling over his words at all. He was in full flow and I was enjoying every moment of it.

“Wipe that stupid smile off your face you smug bitch!” he suddenly screamed at me, lunging and grabbing a handful of my hair in each of his hands in one swift, snake-like attack (and this despite his being quite portly). Then, with a loud feral growl, he started shaking my head violently back and forth.

This was exciting stuff – I had never known him to be so passionate and violent in all our eighteen years together – amazing what a little unannounced pussy can do to a man (will you ever forgive me that cheesy, over-signposted pun?). But the yanking hurt, and my anger exploded in me like a phosphorous flare.

“Get your hands off me!” I shouted, and tried to stamp on one of his feet. The sly fox anticipated this somehow and made a mini-shuffle backwards so that his angle to me became a little more acute. I carried on stamping and kicking out at his shins as he shook my head like a rattle, trying – without being able to look down to take decent aim and holding onto his straining forearms (which would not budge) – to keep my balance, as my angle to the floor became as acute as his, until the inevitable happened and we fell over. He landed on top of me, still holding on to my hair as if for his very life, but the loud, jarring impact my head made against the floor as he slammed it down with his fists, shook his rage clean out of him. His fingers slowly uncurled and let go of my hair.

He looked into my eyes for a long time – his face still red and animated, his full lips parted to ease his heavy breathing – obviously unable to think what to do next. I suggested he get off, seeing as he was now finished with his little bit of fun.

“Of course, of course ...” he mumbled, and rolled off me. But my head was yanked to the side with his movement and it turned out that some of my hair had become tangled in his right shirt-cuff button. Neither he nor I could work it free, but in our poorly coordinated efforts to do so, with many a “sorry” and a “hold on a second” mumbled, his arms and chest were rubbed repeatedly against my breasts, and I noticed he was getting aroused. The lascivious old goat was actually getting turned on! Well, they say there’s nothing like forbidden fruit to get the sap rising, but this was a little bit odd. During the last years of our marriage, sex had only managed the briefest of bit-parts, barely a cameo appearance really, so you had to wonder what motivated the old codger. Slightly confused as to how I felt about the situation, I said we should get the scissors from the bathroom to cut me free, but as we were clambering to our feet the doorbell rang. I knew who it was without having to look, and purposefully dragged Harry to the door with me. He didn’t utter a single noise of protest.

“Hullo Jonno”, I said brightly upon opening the door, smiling warmly at his look of puzzled curiosity.

“What the fuck’s going on here?” he asked, switching his bemused gaze repeatedly from me to my ex. I made the introductions (for various reasons they didn’t shake hands) and asked if Jonno would be so

kind as to fetch the scissors from the bathroom, as my ex-husband had managed to tangle some of my hair in his shirt-sleeve button. Jonno, with a slight hesitation, did as requested, and Harry and I, in as synchronised a fashion as we could manage, turned to watch him, Harry's right arm still bound to my head by a clump of my knotted hair. Jonno was displaying the most magnificent Dagenham cleavage, something Harry was bound to notice (actually you'd have to be blind to miss it), and I know exactly how he would have felt about that black 'Whitesnake' t-shirt. Jonno accurately followed my directions to the scissors and returned to cut us free. We both said 'thank you' at exactly the same time, sounding, to my ears at least, a little like school children who know full well they are about to be punished. But Jonno, despite his appearance, is no idiot, and noticing the still open door, mumbled an undecipherable excuse and left.

"So who's Jonno then?" asked my ex nonchalantly, as soon as the front door had closed on Jonno's hairy buttock sandwich.

I answered him with a question of my own; "So who were you with last night?"

"None of your business," came the prim reply, as he began to uncoil my hair carefully from his shirt button.

"My point exactly," I said.

There was a pause while he fiddled fixedly with my hair. And then it struck me that I was no longer holding my gin and tonic.

"Shit," I said, "where's my drink," and marched off into my bedroom to find the glass and its contents all over my duvet. Harry followed me in.

"Your silly little temper tantrum has made a mess on my bed." I said, and turned to face him. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Don't pass the buck Heather, and don't change the subject either." He had finished with his button-cleaning and had rediscovered his earlier fixity of purpose. "We have yet to finish our discussion about what to do with that kitten, and until we have, I'm afraid your duvet will just have to stay wet and, I presume, alcoholic." Now he was the smug one, and his face, so very capable of irritating one to the point of psychotic rage, was doing a great job of just that (old habits really do die hard, it seems). Spurred by my own newly rekindled temper, and without taking my eyes off him, I bent over sideways, took hold of my duvet and yanked it with one tug off the bed. The glass tumbled to the floor with a soft thud.

"First I have to finish my drink," I announced with a verbal swagger, and still holding his stare, fumbled for the wet spot which I, upon finding it, rammed into my mouth, and began greedily sucking on.

"Heather my dear, you have finally lost it. You have my pity." His expression did not speak of

sympathy, though. It radiated this disgusting, stomach churning, holier than thou triumph. The fool seemed suddenly to believe, that he had finally got the better of me, after years and years of pathetic, failed attempts. But he had not yet reckoned with the depths of my fury. I took the sucked portion of duvet from my mouth and with a girly pout said:

“Oh me oh my, if it isn’t almost as big as Jonno’s magnificent cock.”

I puckered my lips and gave it a loud, wet kiss, then looked deep into his eyes, and began to give the lucky piece of cloth very tarty and exaggerated fellatio, moaning ‘Oh Jonno’ over and over. His mouth actually fell open, but quickly shut again. He watched me intently as I watched the expression in his eyes change from shock to deep hunger in about three blinks. To my utter astonishment, he undid his trousers and let them drop to his ankles.

“Suck on this, bitch!” he commanded. I couldn’t help it – I dropped the duvet and looked down. He was sporting the biggest erection I think he has ever had. He put his hand on the top of my head and pushed me down to my knees. I acquiesced and started sucking, aware of no choice to do otherwise (honestly!). I certainly had not planned this, and my head was spinning too much to be able to report what I was thinking – in truth I was not thinking at all, as it was all rather animal and rapid. Less than a minute later he pulled me to my feet, threw me onto the bed, ripped off my trousers and knickers, and fucked me like a jack-rabbit. He groaned, came explosively inside me, got up, cleaned himself off with the handkerchief I had given him – which he then threw on the bed – got dressed and left, leaving me panting there on my back, naked from the waste down, like a whore.

Honestly. I did *not* plan it. And did you notice? He hadn’t sneezed once since grabbing my hair. Allergic to pussies my arse!

*

When Dad got back from Mum’s, he paused in the hall to watch me and Odsox as we played on the floor in the sitting room, tried to say something to us, didn’t manage a single word, blinked a couple of times, shook his head as if disappointed, then went upstairs to his room. And I had spent three hours terrified about what was going to happen when he got back – terrified I was going to lose Odsox as he had threatened before storming out. But nothing happened. Dad just stayed quietly in his room for the rest of the evening and didn’t emerge until the following morning. Even then he only exchanged a few polite pleasantries with me before hurriedly disappearing for work. Without sneezing.

He had started sneezing almost immediately after walking through the door on Tuesday evening, even before he knew Odsox existed, even though I spent hours after school Hoovering up every cat hair I could find. Actually, he reacted so fast to Odsox I wondered if Mum had given me a cat to get at Dad for something – I wouldn’t put it past her. But strangely, since returning from Mum’s, his cat-hair allergy no longer seemed to be bothering him – I haven’t heard him sneeze once since. So Mum was right after all, which meant she was up to nothing and therefore had actually been nice to me! Unless of course she hadn’t expected him to recover so quickly. Maybe she *wanted* him to go to her flat

sneezing and raging. She likes fighting, and loves fighting Dad.

So, Odsox and I had some stress-free freedom to get to know each other, and I got to learn how to look after a cat. It's not like I'm an expert or anything, but I think Odsox is special. She has yet to make a mess anywhere except in her litter, eats all the kitten food and drinks all the milk I give her, and hasn't broken a single thing. She's been no problem at all. I was really proud of myself for being such a good cat owner – not that Dad was around to notice!

However, while it is true that I was happy being under no pressure on the Odsox front, Dad's new *quietness* was becoming a bit of a worry, and not only because it was so unlike him. He had driven over to Mum's in a rage to 'have words', sneezing like mad, and had come back looking calm and then, as far as I could tell, not sneezed since.

But because Mum had not called, and Dad had said nothing about it, I didn't have a clue what had actually happened in Mum's flat. And because my daughter's intuition was telling me not to rock the boat by asking either of them about it – there was *no way* I was going to risk losing Odsox, and something else I couldn't put my finger on was making me cautious too – I was informationless, wanting to know everything, but not daring to ask anything.

I was happy being left alone with my kitten, but a little confused about my parents. Was something going on? It was time to put my pondering hat on, to see if I could make sense of my troubled state of mind.

Dad's a child psychologist and knows sort of technical stuff about what makes kids and families tick, and consequently, having been exposed to the rough and frightening side of family life, is very protective of me and concerned about my welfare. He's sort of nurturing and caring. Mum ran a mergers and acquisitions department in an investment bank and couldn't care less about emotions and psychology. She's just always enjoyed bossing people around, and organising and shouting and 'getting things done'. We watched that Wall Street film together – she wanted me to see it. There's this scene where Charlie Sheen is starting to feel bad about all the capitalist greed he's become involved in, and asks Michael Douglas why they have to take this particular company to bits. Michael Douglas has no time for such doubts and bellows: "Because it's wreckable, alright!?" Mum agreed. She said: "Exactly, as long as it makes financial sense to do so." She didn't seem to care that Charlie Sheen's dad was going to lose his job thanks to his son's actions.

Anyway, as you can imagine, Mum thinks Dad is a wimp, and Dad thinks Mum is a pig-headed bully. Mum never gives in under any circumstances, and Dad just wants peace. Whichever way you look at them, you see conflict and strife. But I know them really well and can still clearly remember the times when they did get on, when they had fun together, and I believe that if they worked at it we could be a nuclear family again.

Mum says she fell for Dad's expressive, dark brown eyes and his famous chicken in honey, tarragon and mustard concoction, and, being about eight years her senior, she found his maturity and

experience attractive. He had been a writer and had travelled the world, but no one wanted to publish his work, which is why he started studying psychology. Mum found all that rather interesting, although you wouldn't think it now. Dad says he was fascinated by Mum's self-confidence and brutal honesty, and enjoyed her hearty appetite. Apparently he likes big women too. They make him feel safe (that's what Mum says anyway). I'm not sure about Mum's taste in men (Michael Douglas, perhaps?), because she doesn't really watch movies or MTV with me and besides, for about three years leading up to their divorce, she wasn't home all that much.

I know it's hard to tell at the moment, but they used to be able to make each other laugh like mad. They took ballroom dancing lessons once and I remember them practising the waltz together, Mum trying to lead Dad, and Dad complaining about it and trying to assert his authority. But because they were both enjoying themselves so much – neither of them can really dance, so they weren't taking it seriously – they didn't take each other's criticisms as personal attacks, and ended up in a heap on the floor, laughing hysterically. And sometimes when Mum teased Dad, instead of sulking or snapping back at her, he would react with this really inventive sense of humour he has, and they would gee each other on to quite dizzyingly complex exchanges (which could be quite something to hear). Dad's a great cook too, and Mum's a great eater, so that worked well. Oh and they both like canasta, which they used to play with Aunt Helen a lot. OK, OK, I know it's not much, but it's not nothing either.

When they told me they had decided to get divorced – Dad trying to be gentle and considerate, Mum wanting to lay her cards on the table without fuss and ceremony – I wasn't surprised, because I had heard them threatening each other with it for months, but I'd be lying if I said I had wanted them to separate. A part of me can accept that they don't want to live together, but another part of me just doesn't care, and wants them to stay together, no matter what. It just seems wrong any other way. They are my parents and they should be in our house bringing me up. But that's not something they want to hear. Dad explained carefully, that even though they're my parents, they are also ordinary people, and that sometimes things go wrong and love fades away until there's nothing left but a child to keep two people together. When a couple believe that staying together is worse for their child than separating, then the time has come to part. Dad was very fixed on this. I tried to point out that maybe all their fighting wasn't doing me any damage really, and that divorce would hurt me more, but Dad, as a professional psychologist, politely told me he knew better and that I was his responsibility and he would always look out for my well-being. I looked over at Mum and her face was completely resolute, like stone. She said that the divorce was going to happen, and that if I thought about it, it was no big deal. I would be sad for a while, and then I would get over it. That's life. I got up and ran to my room, from where I heard them fighting about what Mum had said – the usual things about wimps and insensitivity and so on – so I put on my Walkman to drown them out. As a child you're basically powerless in those situations. When it's your own parents that are divorcing, that's not a nice feeling at all. You can only look on helplessly, as the world you grew up in splits down the middle and tumbles into two bad tempered, bickering halves.

I don't know. The more I look at it, the less I see that I like. My parent's are divorced, my Mum never calls, and now, for the first time in my young life, Dad is hardly ever here and I'm beginning to realise how much I want them to be back together again. But should I want what I want? I don't know, but I sure do.

Then Saturday came, and with it a strange and surprising question from Dad:

“What do you think of your mother, Natasha?”

To my inexperienced teenage ears, he sounded like a boy asking his sister about a girl he fancied – his voice had this guarded, trying-oh-so-hard-to-be-casual quality to it, and he wasn't looking at me at all either. How do you, as a thirteen year old girl, answer your recently divorced father, when he puts a question like that to you? I couldn't think of a thing to say, so just stared at him as he pointedly read his newspaper. About thirty seconds of silence ticked by, after which he uttered a gently prodding “Hmm?”, as if to remind me he had not forgotten his question, and was still expecting some sort of an answer. Odsox jumped up onto my lap at that point and started playing with one of my shirt buttons.

“She's alright, I guess,” I said, distracted by Odsox's play for a moment.

“You get on with her?” was his next weird question.

How could he not know how his daughter and wife get on together? But I had already answered one question, so why not the second and besides, the whole thing was so weird I couldn't think how not to.

“She can be fun sometimes, and sometimes not. You know...”

“Hmm, yes. You're right about that.”

He was still fixedly studying his newspaper and sounded like he was not at all interested in the conversation that he himself had started, and in fact that proved to be it. He asked no further question on the subject, and the rest of the breakfast was silent.

When I was finished, I got down from the table and told Dad I was going to Becky's for the day, and that I was taking Odsox with me – Becky has a rabbit and we thought it would be fun for them to meet each other. He mumbled some sound that I instantly recognised as ‘OK off you go then have a nice time see you later’, so I got ready, put Odsox in the cat-carrier and went over to Becky's. Once out of the house it felt like I finally had the mental and emotional space to think about Dad's weird questions, and no sooner had I turned my mind to them, than I got butterflies in my stomach. They were fluttering around like crazy. In a flash of what can only have been divine inspiration I realised that Mum and Dad were getting back together again! I recalled that he had spent the night out for like the first time ever last Monday, and how quickly Mum had rushed back to her flat after dropping me off at home. Had they somehow arranged to spend the night together while we were in Cheltenham? Were they having a secret love affair? And what happened on Odsox Tuesday? And why was Dad late home every night of last week? Of course they would have to keep it secret, because it might all go wrong

and they didn't want to hurt me all over again, which explained why Dad was so quiet and Mum never called – they were too preoccupied with the strangeness and fragility of the situation. I was so happy, I started skipping along the road like an eight year old, until Odsox started complaining about the violent swinging. The poor thing was probably getting carrier-sick. Then my mobile beeped and it was an SMS from David, asking if I wanted to go to a party with him two Saturdays from now. If I liked, I could bring a friend along too. My heart almost burst with excitement. It was all I could do to stop myself from running all the way to Becky's.

Becky is borderline anorexic. She has a sweet face with lovely blue eyes and is very gentle. Her rabbit is called Arthur and is grey with a white tummy and tail. He spends most of his time in their spare room (it's his room, actually), which has an unused fireplace and no carpet, and has been turned, over the years, into Rabbit Paradise. Becky's Mum is a carpenter. She took night classes in furniture restoration a few years ago and it went on from there. She loves Arthur, and so the room became the focus for most of her creative impulses with wood. The most impressive and eye-catching creation is a sloping, curving bridge-tunnel thing that leads up to the window sill, to a table top resting spot, where Arthur can sit and enjoy the view of the street and the passers-by. The fireplace is like a straw carpeted bedroom, with a sleeping area built into one corner. The room is full of adapted old armchairs that have tunnels bored through them, allowing Arthur multiple entry and exit points, and on the door, which they keep closed, there is a bell at rabbit height. He rings it when he wants attention. He is one happy rabbit.

When I got to Becky's I immediately told her all about Dad and breakfast and my ideas about Mum and him getting together again and she was so happy for me, which is really like her – generous, thoughtful and unselfish. Her father died of cancer when she was only seven, so she lives with her mother, Sally, who hasn't found another husband since. Then I told her about David's party and asked if she would like to come along, and she said of course she would, then shouted to her mum to ask. Her mum wanted to know if we thought we were already old and wise enough to go to a teenage party, and had we forgotten the vodka incident so quickly? She watched our faces drop. She stared at us, thinking deeply. Then she smiled, a really warm and affectionate smile, and asked whose party it was. I told her everything (well, almost) about David, about him being my cousin and how nice he was and please, please, please could we go? After giving Becky another long penetrating look, she finally said yes, but that we must not betray her trust in us, because we are special, wonderful girls and that's the most important thing. Becky and I jumped around the room hugging and shouting until we were interrupted by Odsox meowing from inside her box. I had forgotten all about her.

Becky's mum really wanted to meet Odsox, and we all wanted to introduce her to Arthur, who was still just sitting calmly in the fireplace, twitching his whiskers every now and again. He had proven impervious to our shouting and jumping, and now also to the strange sounds of meowing emanating from the cardboard box. Sally suggested we make the introductions slowly and carefully, seeing as Odsox was still so young, so we gently tipped the box onto it's side and opened the roof, so that Odsox

could get her first sight of a rabbit from the safety of her little house.

As soon as Odsox caught sight of Arthur she sank instantly into her quivering huntress's crouch, but just stayed there for ages, apparently too frightened to pounce. Becky, Sally and I were all laughing, but neither the cat nor the rabbit seemed aware of us at all, and Arthur seemed oblivious to everything. About another minute of quivering readiness and human laughter passed by, until finally Odsox exploded from the box at top speed, sprinting headlong for the rabbit. But sadly her courage failed her at the last moment. She tried to stop her momentum by skidding the remaining distance on her hind legs and bum (the floorboards are very smooth), drifting slightly sideways to Arthur in the process, and came to a squat halt a little distance from his tail. Once stationary, she stood up and stretched her head slowly forward to sniff gingerly at Arthur's haunches. Arthur, with all the cunning of a fox, chose the precise moment of Odsox's maximum extension to turn his head around and calmly examine the strange little creature at his rear. The rabbit's curiosity and twitching nose proved too much for Odsox, who panicked and sprinted back into her box. In her haste to escape the strange monster, she hit the box's back wall with a little kitten-sized thump, but when we peeked in to see if she was alright, she was already casually cleaning herself as if nothing had happened. We left her alone for a while, wondering what she might do next. After less than a minute's washing she caught sight of Arthur again – from her reaction it was as if it were her first sighting of him – again sank quickly to her tigress's crouch, a minute later repeating her earlier pathetic attack right down to thumping the back wall of the box in full flight from the rabbit-monster.

We humans enjoyed the show. Sally even said it was the most fun she had had in years. At one point I noticed that Odsox was looking for her litter and we decided to take her to the garden, which was secured to prevent Arthur's escape. Odsox padded her awestruck way into the big wide outside world of Becky's garden to do her first pee on soil. It wasn't until I got home that I realised I had yet to ask Dad about David's party. But he wasn't in when I arrived – at about supper time – and he didn't turn up until I was in bed falling asleep. When I made tentative enquiries about the party the next day, he said of course I could go, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Then he disappeared again for the rest of the day. Apparently he and Mum were going for it hammer and tongs!

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I am a woman with two lovers, and one of them happens to be my ex-husband. I never thought I'd say such a thing and it not be a joke, but I have said it, and it is no joke. I think about the situation all the time, but can arrive at no clear idea about whether it's a bad or a good thing, or whether something should be done about it. It is simply happening. It simply is, and at the moment there appears to be nothing I can do about it. Actually I think it more true to say I don't *want* to do anything about it.

There was a little stretch of time about two weeks ago, shortly before my ex-husband and I became lovers, during which I was becoming bored of Jonno, my other lover. (What a funny thing to say, 'my other lover'!) He seemed somehow too straightforward, or too obvious, or something limiting anyway, because I had the clear impression that he wasn't enough. Harry changed that. Sleeping with Harry in

this clandestine manner has spiced Jonno up somehow, or perhaps has added another dimension to my life that fills it up that little bit more, casting Jonno in a richer light. What's truly incredible is that neither Jonno nor Harry seem to mind what's going on. They both know about each other, of course – not that we've talked about it much, certainly not with Harry anyway, and I remember Jonno briefly hinted at the topic and suggested all was fine with him – so I am under no immediate moral pressure to give up one or the other man. But there is nevertheless this feeling nagging away at me, that it can't carry on like this forever, and maybe – in the interests of transparency – there's even a sense of guilt lurking around in me somewhere, peeping out from the shadows at night just before I fall asleep.

When Harry turned up on my doorstep for the second time last Saturday at around eleven thirty, he looked at me with such desire in his eyes, that there was no need for words at all. He strode through the doorway as if he owned the place and pressed himself against me, in so doing pushing me back into my flat, closed the door behind him, kissed me long and passionately about my mouth, neck and ears, and somehow managed simultaneously to nudge me into my bedroom. We tumbled together onto the bed and had very fast, intense sex, after which he got up and left without a word.

I found his perfunctory and business like manner both satisfying and, at the same time, unsatisfying. The uncomplicated, unmessy quality of such fun and games is something, at the age of forty, I find quite refreshing. However, after I had showered and got dressed again, I realised I wanted something else and, somewhat to my surprise, found myself calling Jonno. We agreed to meet at the pub for drinks and a chat and ended up back at my flat after closing time, quite drunk, and had long and playful sex. Two men in one day! And enjoying it!

What am I turning into? 'A whore', I hear you cry as one. My response to that baseless slander is that I am taking no money for it, nor home, nor shelter of any kind. Unemployed I may be, but I am also independent and uncoupled. In short, I am free to do as I choose. I have become an independent woman. I think I like it.

Anyway, after that rather bohemian Saturday passed three correspondingly uneventful days, filled with television, books and newspapers, and of course those accursed job applications, and then Wednesday came, and with it an unexpected lunchtime visit from, and quick fuck with, Harry, who yet again managed the whole affair without the use of words. It is becoming clear that the less we talk the better we get on, although at the beginning of our relationship, when we were falling in love (was that really what it was?) the opposite was true – we could talk the hind legs off a donkey, and we used to make each other laugh too. I hope you'll excuse this platitude, but isn't it funny the way things turn out? I mean, had I known that there hid under that fastidious, prim exterior of his the beast who now visits and fucks me with such self-confidence and command ... well, it doesn't bear thinking about.

So, it seems a pattern is emerging. Harry again put me in the mood for Jonno, but this time something made me hold off, some inner wavering prevented me from picking up the phone and calling him, until the next day at least. He came round that Thursday evening and did his wolf routine – you'll be pleased to hear I didn't get injured this time, although the pain was quite deliciously severe. And no, I

am not going to go into the details – this is not pornography, so don't expect me to launch, at every possible opportunity, into lengthy descriptions of my love life. You've had quite enough of that from me already – and believe you me, I am no porn queen to look at – enough to get across what needs to be got across, anyway. If you want porn, there's plenty of other places to go and get it from.

Today is Friday and despite my stormy sex and love life, I have just managed to arrange my first job interview since I was sacked over two months ago. One of my applications seems finally to have found fertile soil in that barren ground out there. I have never been out of work before, so this has been quite an unusual time for me (not to mention all the other first-time experiences that have been arriving at my door by the truckload) – there have been moments when I have actually contemplated the purpose of my life, an activity for which I have had up until recently no time whatsoever, and after a brief foray along those rather ill-defined, misty byways, I would have to say the whole exercise is a complete waste of time. If anyone should ever happen to chance upon their “purpose”, it can only be blind faith that convinces them they have found it. Found on a different day or under different circumstances or even while on different drugs, I'm sure the discovered “purpose” would also be different. But I digress. The interview is a week from now and I have to admit I am really looking forward to getting back to work as soon as possible, so it hasn't come a minute too soon. I have no doubt that I will get the job. I don't do doubt.

After a couple of hours in the company of a novel by J. P. Donleavy (*The Onion Eaters*, if you want to know) it occurred to me that I had not spoken to my daughter since dropping her off with that kitten two Mondays ago. While I am not one for daily conversations with all and sundry, nigh on two weeks without any communication with your own teenage daughter is possibly pushing things a little far. I checked the time – she was certain to be back from school – and called her up. She was at home playing with Odsox, and sounded in good form. The kitten was apparently as good as gold, never peed nor poed anywhere except in her litter, followed Natasha around like a puppy, and to top it all, her father seemed to be allergic to cat-hair no more.

“Now there's a thing,” I said, my uncharacteristic choice of expression betraying my sudden fear of being forced to chat about the subject of Harry's miraculous recovery. My cunning little daughter instantly smelled a rat.

“So what happened when he went to your flat last Tuesday, Mum? Since then he's been really quiet and is hardly ever home.”

What was I supposed to say? Unfortunately I could think of nothing, but also didn't want to lie either. On the other hand there was something odd about talking to your own daughter about having sex with your ex-husband, who was also her father. My mind was racing, fumbling madly for something deflecting, something honest but deceiving, to say. There was nothing. I mumbled the first bland words available to me.

“Oh, you know, we talked and er ... Is he really not allergic to cats now?” I asked, hopefully buying

some time. Strangely, Natasha dropped the topic like a hot potato and sounded bright and breezy again when she next spoke.

“He certainly doesn’t seem to be. But anyway, I’m going to a party next week with David and Becky.”

“Oh,” I said, trawling my memory banks, “Becky is that shy, funny looking girl, isn’t she? Very skinny? And her father died when she was young. I remember her.” I was relieved Natasha wasn’t pursuing her earlier line of enquiry and had consequently leapt on the new conversation thread, but was slightly suspicious about her change of heart too. (You just can’t trust teenage girls these days. You never know what they’re up to.)

“Mum! Becky is a really nice girl. You must promise to never say those sorts of things to her face, she’s really sensitive.”

“Well of course I wouldn’t! What do you take me for!?”

“I take you for what you are, Mum, the only way you’d have me take you.”

Hmm. Now what on earth did that mean?

We finished our conversation and agreed that I would pick her and Becky up on Saturday evening after the party, and that she would spend the following Sunday with me. But as I stood there with my hand still on the telephone, pondering all we had said, I began to suspect Natasha might be putting two and two together and coming up with five. She knew that Harry had come to see me, sneezing and angry, but had returned apparently cured and reluctant to speak of what had taken place. Before leaving he would most probably have said that the cat couldn’t stay in their house, and that I had behaved very poorly in giving her Odsox in the first place. And yet, upon return from his “battle” with me, he had said nothing further on the topic, and now Natasha and Odsox were good friends, suddenly free from the earlier promised threat of enforced separation. On top of that, he was now spending next to no time at home. So of course she was starting to imagine her father and I were getting back together again! What was she supposed to think?

And then it occurred to me that Harry hadn’t really been with me all *that* much. I quickly calculated how much time he had spent here since that Tuesday, and came up with a lot less than one hour, and some of that was a Wednesday lunchtime while Natasha was at school, so she couldn’t possibly have known about that one. If he was now hardly ever home and hardly ever with me, that could only mean he must have someone else as well.

The bastard was sleeping with two women and only one of them was me! It was high time my ex and I had words, but I could not reach him, either at work or on his mobile, and the last thing I wanted to do was to call Natasha again and ask her to tell him to call me. Her teenage imagination was already cooking up a rich and heady brew and needed cooling down, not more steam.

As luck would have it – actually, as I expected – Harry made his appearance without me having to

request it – like a tom cat at one of his regular peeing posts – shortly before noon the very next day. He is nothing if not a creature of habit and, as if switched on by this uniquely unsexy mixture of habit and punctuality, his face was a picture of salivating, pavlovian lust. Today, however, he was to find no echo of it in me, which dawned on him slowly as his kisses and pressed caresses met with no response. He released me from his clutches, stepped back, gave me a searching look, and, though I'm absolutely positive my facial expression was as readable and clear as a Peter and Jane book, somehow managed to misinterpret all the signs and lurched at me anew, emboldened by god knows what and at the cost of a swift knee to the fence-post. He collapsed, with a puffed grunt, like Enron (I've always thought there was something of the accountant about him), ending up curled on the floor at my feet, moaning lightly. I stepped over him to close my front door, but saw Jonno (another creature of habit) ambling down the path towards me. I shook my head 'no' at him, and he, after catching sight of my foetal husband in the hall, raised his in that short, sharp, yet paradoxically dim-witted gesture of acknowledgement, and turned and walked away. He is, despite his gruff exterior, really very sweet, a must for the modern working girl.

"So Harry," I said to the softly moaning lump on the hall floor, "I suppose you're wondering what brought my knee into your family jewels today, and why I am no longer going to be your tart." I ignored the mumbled beginnings of a response and carried on. "Don't you think it just a little arrogant and presumptuous of you to think you can turn up here as and when you like, and expect a quick fuck without so much as a 'by your leave'? Do you realise we have said nothing to one another for almost two weeks, despite seeing more of each other than ever?" He got on to his hands and knees and slowly crawled towards my bed. "Uh uh uh uh uh," I scolded, in that patronising, sing-song way, "it's the sofa for you my boy!" I pushed passed him and led him to the sofa. He climbed aboard and flopped heavily onto his back, a little green about the gills.

"Heather," he said, still breathing heavily, "in case you haven't noticed it already, you are a stupid, blind, hypocritical cow. Whatever it is that's going on in that garbled head of yours, there is simply no way I deserved a knee in the groin. The sex we've been having, however brief and unloving, has been *consensual*. Consensual because, as far as I could tell – and I think I know you pretty well – you gave no indication whatsoever that you objected. Not once. In fact I'm sure you've been enjoying it as much as I have. So yes, I am indeed wondering what 'brought your knee', as you so corporately put it, into my groin today. Tell me Heather, why did you try to injure me?"

This was not the Harry I knew and loved. This was not the Daughter of all Wimps addressing me, and to be frank, his never-before-heard tone of voice, it's brand new gravitas and calm, it's earthy masculinity, quite took the wind out of my sails. Speechless, I sat down in the armchair opposite him, which gave a deflated little sigh as it reluctantly accepted my weight.

We looked at each other in silence. His face was steady and calm, not showing a single sign of tension or strain. Mine felt like a nervous, twitching jelly, my head completely emptied by the stranger – whom I had known for over twenty years – sitting opposite me. A long minute ticked by. It was Harry

who finally broke the silence.

“This is silly,” he said with a shake of his head, and then got up from the sofa, apparently healed. He walked to the door to leave, but before disappearing turned and said: “You know what, Heather? Right now, sitting there in your favourite leather armchair, you look like a big, spoiled baby who has just realised she can’t have everything her own way any more. I suggest you try to make use of the opportunity. It might just do you some good.” And with that he was gone.

I am not a liar. I have been open and honest with you since this whole thing started, and in that vein I want to say the following: Shortly after he left, with the sound of the slammed door still rattling through my skeleton like a goods-train, I remembered there was a time when he was like that, right at the start of our relationship, but I couldn’t for the life of me work out how and when things had changed, nor why I hadn’t noticed it.

And I hadn’t even managed to ask him about his other woman.

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I had had exactly one week since last Saturday to ponder Dad’s secret dalliances with Mum, and had come to the following conclusions: it was a good thing; I was happy about it; it explained why Dad was hardly ever at home and hardly ever spoke to me any more; they would need a few weeks before telling me about it; and I should keep my nose out of their business until they spoke up, or at least until something else happened to force me to do otherwise. Becky agreed with me on every point. We were both very excited and thought it was really sweet that it should take a divorce to show two people that they couldn’t live without each other. We thought it would make a great film too, with Matthew McConaughey as my Dad and Tilda Swinton as my Mum (I know, it’s a bit of a stretch, but Hollywood is all about fantasy).

On the negative side, Becky pointed out, we had no hard evidence that Dad was at Mum’s the whole time, but felt we could at least assume that no one else would find Dad sexy (he doesn’t look a bit like Matthew McConaughey, by the way, more like Alfred Molina, the actor who played Doctor Octopus in Spiderman II), and we had no other way of explaining the Miracle of the Cat-hair, nor his change in behaviour. Our hypothesis neatly explained all phenomena. Despite the lack of hard evidence, we were confident we were right.

Like I said, it was Saturday again. I was pulling Odsox off the curtains when Dad walked in a couple of hours after having driven off.

“I’ve just been at your mother’s,” he said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and walked over to me, as if he had something to say.

My heart started to race – this was all happening far quicker than Becky and I had calculated. He was about to tell me that he had been spending a lot of time with Mum over the last couple of weeks, and that things were going really well, and would I mind if they tried to make another go of it. He looked

funny though – kind of distracted and focused at the same time – and gave my hair a gentle little tousle with his hand and stroked my forehead with his thumb. He hadn't done that for years and it made me feel like a kid again.

“So you're Odsox,” he said, suddenly looking down at the kitten in my arms, “let's have a look at you then.”

He held out his hands for her and took her from me as I passed her to him, went over to the sofa and sat down. It was the first time he had touched Odsox, possibly the first time he had tried to stroke a cat ever, and not surprisingly he wasn't a natural at it. A few seconds later Odsox jumped down from his knee, shuddered the memory of his caresses out of her fur, and trotted off somewhere else.

“Oh well, you can't be good at everything,” he said, and looked up at me, his eyes bright and happy. “Natasha,” he said.

“Yes, Dad?”

I tried to sound relaxed and casual, but chose to sit down opposite him in case my legs started to shake. You see, I knew what he was about to tell me.

“Do I seem different to you, in any way?” he asked. An hysterical laugh burst from me like a sneeze – my emotions had got the better of me for a moment.

“Well, you just played with Odsox!” I managed.

“Exactly!” he shouted, leaning forward and pointing at me excitedly with a wagging index finger, nodding his head enthusiastically. “Exactly. The thing is, I've heard about this sort of thing – I mean I engineer it in people at work, in children anyway – but I've never experienced it myself, you know, first hand. I should be sneezing by now, but look ... nothing!” He beamed at me, now more distracted than focused. I tried to remind him about what he actually wanted to say.

“So you were at Mum's then?”

“Yes. Yes that's right. I just got back a moment ago. How did you know that?”

“Er ... because you just told me?” It was turning out a little stranger than I had anticipated.

“I did? Oh. Well, no matter. Anyway, the thing is, I've had therapy, when I was still in training, I mean – and then of course there are those regular sessions with peers to sort of clean the pipes – but that's not the point. The thing is, the therapy I had wasn't really all that eventful. Nothing earth-shattering actually happened. No tears, no primal scream, no exploding light-bulbs, no buried secrets unearthed. It just combed out a few psychological knots you see, and then I was given my clean bill of health and, well, became a psychologist. But just now, just about an hour ago, I had a fight with your Mum and actually *won* it. Effortlessly. That's what I call a transformation! The thing is, even with all my training and experience, I can't explain it. Isn't that wonderful?” He looked delighted with himself.

“Oh Natasha, you should have seen the look on her face! And I’m not talking about winning the argument logically or getting some maths sum right while she floundered with her pencil on the shores of algebra like a beached whale. I’m talking about a total, psychological, emotional victory! Physically she got the better of me with a knee to the groin, but that doesn’t count ’cos men are sensitive there, and anyway it’s beside-”

“But what were you doing there in the first place!?” My voice was louder than I had wanted it to be, in fact I really shouted the question out, but I was getting worried, and I didn’t really understand what he was talking about. I wanted to hear about him and Mum. I really needed to hear about how they finally realised they still loved each other and what they were going to do about it. But his smile faded and his face changed from self-involved pride to concern for me. I didn’t like it one bit.

“I’m sorry Natasha, I got a bit carried away with myself there. Are you alright? You look very worried.”

“Of course I’m alright!” I barked, and then: “No! No I’m not alright ... I mean I want to know what’s going on between you and Mum! You’re never here, Mum never calls me, you’re not allergic to cats any more ... Once you were going to throw Odsox out and nowadays you don’t even mention it! Just now you even had her on your knee! And anyway, why should I care that you just had an argument with Mum!? You’ve always had arguments with Mum, ever since I can remember! What I want to know is why you go to see her all the time and why you’ve been keeping it secret from me!”

He was looking at me with his eyes full of love and sympathy. It was a look I know so well, and normally it was like being cuddled, but this time it melted my resolve and I started crying. “Are you and Mum getting back together? Are you? Tell me what’s happening? Why are you always at Mum’s?”

“Oh my poor darling,” he said, and came and sat beside me, and took me in his arms. “I’m so sorry, I should have seen what you’d make of all this, but I didn’t stop to think about it. Since your mother and I divorced, I’ve been thinking about myself, doing things *I* want to do ... too much it seems. It can happen to men at my age and ... well, all I can really say is that I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you everything, Nats. I just can’t. I hope you can forgive me.”

He was rocking me back and forth, trying to calm me down, but I didn’t want it. I didn’t want him to feel sorry for me, I didn’t want him to have secrets, I didn’t even want his arms around me. I shrugged off his embrace and stood up.

“I don’t want this! I don’t want any of it. I don’t want to know anything, except that your divorce was a mistake, a selfish little mistake made by two stupid, selfish adults who couldn’t even give me a sister! Oh why can’t the pair of you just grow up!?”

I turned and ran out of the house and slammed the door behind me. I wanted the house to fall down on top of him, on top of everything I knew, and bury it all. But it didn’t and I just ran. I ran without

thinking where I was going, until I realised I was standing in front of Becky's door, ringing the bell. Thank god she was there and answered. I fell into her arms in a flood of tears and told her everything that had just happened. She listened, like she always does, without a word, and patiently waited for me to finish. She then led me into the living room, sat me down with a tissue and a cushion to hug, and went to make a pot of tea. She's my best friend and I don't think I could live without her.

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When I walked in to the meeting room early on Friday afternoon, the first person I saw – of the three who were to interview me – was Roland Brooke, a small, tubby man with a small, grubby mind, a man nevertheless convinced of his own importance. I know this because we used to work together at my last job, where, much to his smouldering chagrin, I had direct authority over him. He's the sort of man who touches up the pretty secretaries under the guise of friendliness. I had lost my job during a downsizing round and he hadn't, so I was very surprised to see him sitting there – it had been a little under four months since I last saw him – and more than a little annoyed because, and I admit I have no evidence for this, I think he had a hand in my dismissal.

Preparations for the important event had started badly. I was just stepping out of the shower when the doorbell rang. It was Jonno and, unusually for him, he wouldn't leave me be, despite my telling him I was in a rush, getting ready for my job interview. He insisted that what he had to say wouldn't take long, and he sounded serious about it too. I let him in. I was so distracted and anxious to get going that I didn't read the signs. He was shuffling on his feet, looking around him nervously like a schoolboy in a headmaster's office. I stared at him, wondering for how long he would be standing there, and whether I would be ready in time for the taxi. I urged him to get a move on.

“Heather,” he said, finally focused on the task at hand. “Heather, I didn't want to do this over the phone, that's not my style and it's not the right way of doing it either. I'll be brief. We've had fun and the sex has been good, but I've given it a lot of thought these last few days and well, to put it bluntly, I don't like the fact that you're sleeping with your ex-husband, as well as with me. There's something about it that just isn't right. It also troubles me that it doesn't trouble you. Basically Heather, and not to put too fine a point on it, I'm breaking up with you.” He nodded once, indicating that he had finished and that he'd said all that needed saying. He waited a few seconds for me to say something, then, on hearing nothing from me, said: “That's it then,” and left, without allowing me any time to respond.

But what could I have said? It was certainly a bolt from the blue. I was absolutely positive he had made it clear at some point that he didn't mind about my ex, so it was ironic that he chose to leave me a week after Harry had also, more or less, finished with me – if that's what he had done. It was all rather dramatic and I confess to being somewhat at sea in all this. It had taken me days to recover from Harry's successful attack last Saturday. To my surprise I found I actually *needed* a period alone, so I had not contacted Jonno, and had even turned down the offer of a chat in the pub with him on Wednesday evening. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps he'd had the impression I was spending more time

with my ex than with him – he was always bumping into us. But I had no time to give it any serious thought – the taxi was due to arrive in half an hour, so I had to get ready.

In the back of the taxi, however, my thoughts returned to the love (ha ha) triangle of ex, Jonno and me, and the first thing that hit me (why am I so slow these days?) was that I was alone once more, with endless amounts of idle-time on my hands, a state of affairs not suited to my nature. *That* I can now say that with full certainty, thanks to the edifying effect of these past illuminating weeks. (Thank god for the impending job. Without it I would have nothing except my flat and my sometime daughter, which is not a warming thought.)

What surprised me most about this latest turn of events was that Jonno had turned out, against all expectations, to be a lily-livered jelly of a man, who had withered feebly under the bright glare of open infidelity, when finally confronted with it. I was ashamed to think that I had trusted him, was livid with him for not being the man he had suggested he was, the man he had promised to be. (Were there no real men left out there!?) And the infuriatingly unresolved puzzle of Harry's road to Damascus transformation was still gnawing away at me, refusing to yield to my explanations. It could not have been a performance; that's really not Harry at all. I also simply refused to believe he suddenly, after a simple knee in the bollocks, had become a man – although it was a pleasant and amusing thought. Perhaps it had raised his testosterone levels by sheer force of impact like that sledgehammer challenge at funfairs, ping the bell at Real Man, but I'm not sure of the mechanics in the biological version. Then there was the sex; that rough, loveless, high-tempo rutting that I actually missed. And I was still positive that the little shit had something on the side, but had been unable to extract a confession from him. (And do please drop this childish and unimaginative insistence of yours that I'm jealous, because I'm not. Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm far too old for all that nonsense. There are other explanations you know.)

I felt as if I were being harassed and harangued by a moaning mob of speculative worries that gained mass and gravity proportionate to my time alone. It was enough to drive me crazy. No wonder the unemployed always look so glum

I was in a state of confusion and doubt, unique in my lifetime. Harry and I hadn't spoken since last Saturday, so there was still, on top of everything else already mentioned, that highly irritating element of uncertainty about the way he had departed. Had he communicated in some way that he was through (so soon) with this new phase of our relationship? He had not used any words that would suggest it.

Oh! All this tedious, self-indulgent ruminating was really getting on my tits. Fuck it! What difference does it make? The world goes on with or without you. A simple sequence of events was about to sort me out, and it would happen roughly in this order: Get a job; regain my equilibrium; work hard and make lots of money. Everything would start to fall back into place with the interview. I would knock their little black socks off. I screwed up my resolve and mercilessly shovelled all those pointless thoughts out of the taxi's window.

But Roland Brooke's face was not what I wanted to see. It's first effect on me was to resurrect the troubling – and in an interview utterly unwanted – suspicion that fate has, for some unfathomable reason, decided to hate me. A negative atmosphere does not help when you are seeking employment in an industry that lives and breathes aggression and risk. So I put that thought out of my head too.

Roland was the first to speak. "Heather Wilson, it's nice to see you again." But before he could introduce me to his colleagues, I corrected him on my name. "St. John?" he said with what sounded to me like forced surprise, "I didn't know you'd reinstated your maiden name. I hope you and Harry are still ..." He let his voice drift off.

"We split up a few months ago," I said, aware that my blood was starting to boil, "but I don't see what that has to do with this interview."

"It has nothing at all to do with this interview. I was just concerned for an old friend, that's all. There's no need to get aggressive." He smiled at me, then turned to his colleagues. "Heather is one of life's real fighters. Loves to scrap does our Heather, a real asset in this line of work. But where are our manners?" He gave me a mock conspirator's smile and wink, and introduced me to the two men, who seemed to be enjoying our little tête-à-tête. The balding man was Simon Jeffrey (of whom I had heard) and the younger looking one, who can have been no more than thirty years old, was Anthony Burrows (of whom I had never heard). We shook hands and sat down.

Roland was going to be leading the interview it appeared. Perhaps he had finally found the position of authority he had always dreamed of.

"So. Here we all are. Why don't we begin with what you've been doing since your last job. Just give us a rough idea of how you've filled these last four months." His smile was like the silver lining of a coffin.

I took a deep breath. "I've been busy with personal matters relating to my divorce, and of course looking for work." All three of them nodded, perfectly synchronised, with that peculiar mix of fake sympathy and boredom particular to bankers. To my surprise they wanted to hear more.

"Go on," said Roland. But it was none of their business, and Roland knew that. I was beginning to suspect his motives.

"Forgive me, Roland, if I fail to see why my personal life is so relevant, but I don't. Have you got any pertinent questions for me, or are we just going to indulge in idle chit-chat?" I didn't bother smiling.

"Heather Wilson," he said, clapping his hands together in delight, "you haven't lost an iota of your feistiness, have you."

"My name is Heather St. John. I thought we'd already covered that." The prick laughed out loud, as if enjoying the antics of a child.

"You're right, you're right. Forgive me. But seriously, I never understood why the fools at Kleinwort

Benson let you go, I really didn't. That's why I was so excited to see your CV on my desk last week. I would have to be a fool to pass up the opportunity of recruiting a star like Heather St. John. I've told Simon and Anthony all about you, by the way. They're as keen about you as I am." But they didn't look keen. They looked amused, and despite my own very real and highly motivated keenness to get back into the thick of things, it was becoming clear to me that Roland had set this whole thing up for his sick amusement. Hope and optimism gave way, like a collapsing dam, to a flood of anger.

There was no way in hell I was going to let a cunt like Roland Brooke get the better of me, no matter which side of his shiny black table I was sitting at.

"You just couldn't bear being my underling, could you Roland." He was still smiling, but now there was a wobble to it. "And, of course, it was for the predictable and oh so boring reason that I am a woman, wasn't it. What is it about men like you? Why can't you just accept the obvious superiority of a female? What is so threatening about us? Oh don't worry, I'm not expecting an answer. Someone like you has neither the cock nor the balls to face up to the truth." But he was in the position of power this time, and held all the cards. He turned to his colleagues, calm and collected, despite my onslaught.

"And there you have it gentlemen, as volatile as I remember her. It took less time than I expected to goad her into the sort of personal attack of which she is so fond, and for which she is so famous, but there it was." He turned to address me for the last time. "Heather, you are talented, and yes you were my superior, but you were, and seem most likely still to be, a nightmare to work with. Thank you for taking the time to come and see us, and, of course, for obliging us with such a splendid display."

I took the tube home. I didn't want the debacle to cost me a penny more than absolutely necessary. When I got home I was still seething, but I had no one to talk to. I was alone with it, trapped by it. I raced through the papers at my kitchen table, looking for another job offer, but could see nothing. I got up and paced around, unable to think, aware only of my boiling blood and my empty hands that were starting to twitch at my sides, desperate for something to do, for something to grab or strangle or stab or smash. Instead, they reached for the gin.

*

It has been the worst week, as bad as when Mum and Dad divorced at the beginning of the year. The only thing that kept me going was thinking about the party at David's friend's on Saturday (today!). Dad and I have spoken often about our fight – almost every night actually – but despite his most skilled handling of my emotions and profound insights into my teenage thoughts and concerns, something is missing. It doesn't seem to matter how professional he is, nor how carefully and sympathetically he deals with me, I still feel that he doesn't get it, that he's not really seeing *me*. I know that might sound spoilt – I've worried about that too – but in the end that's the way I feel. I can't help it. His own parents are still happily married, so his only way of understanding what I'm going through is from his job, not from his own life. Somehow, there's something about that that puts a distance between us. And though it makes me feel sad when I remember how close we used to be,

there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it now. He let me down, he lied to me, and it hurts. What I don't know is whether he sees how I feel about him now. A huge gulf has opened up between us that wasn't there before, and I'm not sure it can ever be bridged.

Much as I hated the thought of it, my parents seemed to have found new partners – *suspiciously* quickly after separating – which to me means they hadn't loved each other at all, that they weren't suffering since the divorce like I wanted, *and* that they cared more about their sex drives than me. Besides all that, it was disgusting to think of them rolling around in strange beds with strange people. Their parenting was on the decline as well. Mum forgets to call me, Dad is always home late and refuses to discuss why, and they haven't got two nice words to say about each other. And they let me go to teenage parties! Surely they know what goes on at teenage parties? I mean, they were once teenagers too, right?

The funny thing is, despite Mum's equal involvement in all this, I miss her. So I'm actually glad it's her who's picking me and Becky up from the party, and not Dad, and I'm really looking forward to our Sunday together too. We should have spent last Sunday together, but what with my reluctance to put my nose in to what I thought was Mum and Dad getting back together, and Mum almost never calling me, it just never happened. I know Mum is selfish and aggressive, and about as sensitive as Hannibal Lector, but at least she told me about the man who came between her and my birthday. Whatever else about her that's bad, she is at least honest.

I guess I'll never know what happened between Mum and Dad. Neither of them has told me what took place on that fateful Tuesday night, and Dad hasn't explained what he was doing there last Saturday either, so the mystery of the Cat Hair Miracle has remained just that. Maybe Mum's flat will one day become a shrine, like Lourdes, and people with allergies will come from the world over on pilgrimage to Hammersmith to be cured by whatever it was that Mum did to Dad.

But one thing has become crystal clear to me; adults have not got a clue what they're doing. If any of you listening in on this happen to be roughly thirteen years old and in an even slightly similar situation, you can take it from me; don't bother yourself with what your parents get up to. It's not worth it. They're just morons who are better at hiding it than we are. I mean, you try and get across some simple, reasonable point about preferring to have your parents stay together rather than divorce, and they just don't listen. They don't even pause to consider it. It's like "helloooo! Could you maybe even address the point just a little bit!?". And it doesn't even occur to them that they *chose* to get married, which is a lifetime's commitment, and that they *chose* to have a child – without any help or influence from the child, I might add – which is also a lifetime commitment, more or less. Despite their years of experience in the role, despite their promises of undying love and being prepared to die for you, and that they would do anything for you, they actually, when it comes down to it, can't be bothered to summon up the energy and discipline required to stay married on your behalf. So when the shit finally hits the fan, they scarper, leaving you to clear up their mess. It's pathetic. And Dad's a psychologist for fuck's sake! He should know that kids are scarred for life by divorce, that they go on

to find lower payed jobs, are far more likely to divorce themselves, and are more likely to suffer from depression and so on. What about suicide!? I imagine the list of negatives is almost endless. Dad just ignores all evidence that doesn't support his selfish impulses – to bed some other woman, apparently – and blankly insists he knows best. But I've discovered something. When an adult says they know best, they're actually saying 'shut your mouth, I've made up my mind on this and I'm not changing it for you'. It's got nothing to do with wisdom, and everything to do with power and/or desire. Well, I've had enough of it. From here on in I'm taking the cynical approach. I'm not going to trust anyone over twenty. Sorry about that swear-word.

Thank god for the party, that's all I can say. Thank god for Becky, too. And David, of course.

Oh, I ought to confess one thing – something good has come out of my fight with Dad. He gave me (guilt-)money for a new dress, for the party tonight. It's red, tight, and quite short – about half-way down to my knees – and I look sooo grown up in it. I cannot wait to see his face.

Right now I'm standing in front of the long mirror in my room, checking out how the dress looks. Dad didn't go out today – he's downstairs in his study, reading I think. Reading and brooding. We haven't really spoken since yesterday, but I don't care – the dress looks really good on me. It did in the shop and it still does now. For some reason I'm thinking about what David said, about my eyes, but I can't see what he seems to have seen. They just look like my eyes to me, like they've always looked. Maybe with some eyeliner they'll look different. But I'm not going to put on too much make-up – I don't want to look tarty – lipstick and eyeliner will do. I have decided, however, not to wear a bra to the party because, well, it's cool not too, and there's no way I'm going to look like some innocent little kid who's never been to a party before. Besides, I think I look pretty good without one. Like Mum, I got my period when I was ten so I've got nothing to be embarrassed about when it comes to my body. It's all developed and womanly already, and I've decided I quite like it. 'Wear it with pride', they say, so I'm going to. And anyway, it's time I started growing up. More importantly, it's time I finished getting ready! It's already seven, and I'm meeting Becky at the tube in half an hour!

I got to Hampstead tube five minutes late, but Becky didn't mind. She looked nice. She was wearing white jeans and a loose, blue blouse and looked really pretty, even without make-up. When I opened my coat to show her my red dress, she screeched:

“Oh my god, Natasha! What are you doing?! You look twenty-one or something!”

“You should have seen Dad's face,” I said.

“Why, what did he do!?” Becky was as eager to find out as I was to tell her.

“Well, he didn't *say* much, that's for sure! He sort of stuttered a bit – that is, when he had managed to get his mouth back together again – and asked me if I was sure I knew what I was doing. So I asked him if he was sure he knows what he's been doing these last few weeks. And then he said, in a bit more of a Dad-voice: “Natasha, I'm an adult – it's different.” “I don't think so” I said back to him, and

got my coat and left. How cool is that!?”

Becky thought I was in trouble for sure.

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said, “but he’s got a long time to cool down, ‘cos I’m not seeing him until tomorrow night. And anyway, he deserved it; keeping secrets from me, hiding the truth, sleeping with some other woman, divorcing Mum against my wishes like it somehow has nothing to do with me. I can’t be a goody two shoes forever, you know.” I could tell my rebellious mood troubled Becky, but she didn’t say anything about it.

Since my fight with Dad I’ve felt different, like I’ve suddenly grown up or something, or like I’ve finally opened my eyes and seen the world for what it really is. Becky and I are such close friends, there’s no way she wouldn’t notice. But Becky, even though she turned thirteen in November last year, is still quite young compared to me. She’s obedient, polite and really helpful and I love her to bits, but sometimes I worry that she’ll get hurt. And she’s really shy too. I was going to look out for her at the party, and make sure she had a good time, a task I should manage with my hands tied behind my back – I was in the best mood since I can remember. It was a gorgeous, cloudless, early May evening, and the walk to Hampstead tube was beautiful, so I was spilling over with happiness and excitement, easily enough for the two of us.

During the long, rattling tube ride to Sloan Square, Becky and I talked about our parents, and what I’ve been going through this whole year, and about David, whom she’d never met. I told her that he thought his dad was having an affair with his secretary, and that it didn’t seem to bother him. She thought that was horrible, and how could someone do such a thing, and I said that’s how I had reacted too at first, but since my fight with my Dad I wasn’t so sure. Maybe love and marriage and all that stuff were just dreams sold to us by magazines. Becky didn’t want to think like that at all. She said her mum still loved her dad, even though he was dead. I didn’t say what I thought, that her mum still loved him *because* he was dead. Becky still really misses her father, so I said that maybe her mum was one of the very few lucky ones.

When we finally got to the house, which was large and beautiful, Becky was in a good mood at last – the excitement must have got to her – and it was about half past eight. We rang the bell, both feeling nervous, not knowing what to expect. A tall, slightly tubby, dark haired boy with big brown eyes answered the door. He was dressed like a rock star in a white vest and black leather trousers, with what looked like rabbit feet and fox tails hanging from his legs and arms, and had quite a lot of make-up on. More than me anyway.

“And who might you two early, yet lovely girls be?” he asked.

“I’m Natasha, and this is Becky, but we’re not early. It’s already half past!”

He smiled at us. “How sweet. Party-virgins! We just love party-virgins here – pigeons to some – there’s nothing quite like breaking in new blood. But please, come in, come in. You’re David’s cousin,

aren't you?" I nodded. "I'm Charlie and I live here. I'm throwing this party, by the way. My father owns this place. He's a famous novelist, but you probably haven't heard of him. Follow me, we're going downstairs. To the basement." We followed him downstairs. To the basement.

The basement turned out to be three rooms, one large one, and two smaller ones. The large one had sofas and chairs in it, and a table on which a loud stereo stood beside a glowing computer. The first of the small rooms, which we passed on our way into the large one, looked to be a kitchen – because I could see a fridge – and was empty of people. The second smaller room, where we found David, was like an unfinished bedroom – there were three mattresses on the floor, and an empty bookshelf which carried one lonely, empty bottle of beer. In one of the room's corners, a jacket was heaped on the floor. But that seemed to be it. There were just the four of us. I wondered if there was going to be a party at all.

"David, your cousin and her friend have just arrived," said Charlie. "Obviously," said David, "no one could overlook two such good looking girls as these." He smiled at us and came over to say hello. "So you're Becky. I finally meet Natasha's best friend. I hope you're in the mood for a wild evening!" Then he offered to take my coat (Becky wasn't wearing one). But I was really nervous and suddenly wished more than anything I had not worn that dress, and even more that I had worn a bra. On the other hand it was too late to do anything about it – I could hardly keep my coat on all evening. I handed David my overnight bag and took my coat off.

"Fuck me!" blurted David when he saw what I was wearing, "you're a woman! I mean I know you're female, I'm not an idiot, but, you're all grown up and ... everything." And then, in true David-style, he quickly recovered his composure. "You look great, Natasha, seriously ... good. But how on god's green earth did you get past your Dad wearing a dress like that?" I was sure I was blushing – Charlie was grinning from ear to ear, and his eyes were tracking up and down the length of my body – but fortunately the room was only dimly lit, so probably no one could tell my cheeks were on fire.

"Dad and I sort of came to an understanding," I said.

David took my coat, wrapped the bag in it and flung the parcel, without looking, on top of the lonely jacket, which was behind him and to his right. With a big smile, and with his arms up in a wide gesture of openness, he said: "I love your Dad! I've never felt the need to admit it up until now, but when one man does another a favour of this magnitude ... well, at the very least, gratitude is in order. Wouldn't you say so Charlie?" Charlie just nodded. He wasn't actually drooling, but it looked like he might at any moment. David put his hand to his chin, affecting a pose of deep contemplation. "Maybe I should send Uncle Harry a bottle of something..." he said, apparently more to himself than anyone else, but then winked at me.

I looked over at Becky. She looked very uncomfortable. I took her hand in mine and asked if there was anything to drink. "Is there anything to drink!?" repeated Charlie in loud, mocking tones. "What sort of a host would I be, if I couldn't provide my guests with liquid refreshment? But, because you ladies

are looking so fine tonight, I will forgive you your impertinence.” He bowed magnanimously, with an expansive flourish of his arm. But somehow, it was not a nice gesture. It shouldn’t have been possible, but it gave me the creeps. “What’s it to be?” he asked. I turned to Becky, and suggested coke to her. She agreed. “With ice and a slice?” asked our host.

“Yes please,” we both answered.

“David, you look dry my friend. Can I get you another Rock?” David nodded. Charlie padded off to get the drinks.

“Whose Jacket is that under my coat?” I asked. “It looks so crumpled and ignored.”

“Don’t worry about the jacket,” answered David, “it’s mine. There is no way it’s gonna mind having *your* coat on top of it. Besides, that will, over the course of the evening, become The Jacket and Coat Pile, and *we* started it, trend-setters that we are.” He looked over at Becky. “So how long have you known Natasha then?”

Becky lowered her eyes before answering. “Since primary school I guess. Since we were about seven.”

“And were you two instantly best friends, or ...?”

Becky turned to me, but carried on talking. (I was really happy that David was engaging her – he’s such a considerate boy.) “More or less, yeah, straight away I think. Right at the start of summer term there was this running race and Natasha and I finished joint first – we’ve got these long legs you see –”

“You two share your legs? That’s pretty impressive. You have got to show me how you do it, it must be an amazing trick! C’mon, I’m waiting...” Becky and I laughed, Becky even more than me, and I could see that she had quickly forgotten all about her earlier conviction that David can’t possibly be a nice person. Then Charlie came back with our drinks.

“Glad to see you’re all having such a good time.” He handed us our cokes, and David his beer, and then said he was going to go and fetch his sister, who must surely be ready by now. Becky and I took a sip of our drinks. They tasted funny and I instantly recognised the spiky flavour of vodka. Becky looked at me and I could tell from her face that she had recognised the taste too. We both burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” asked David.

“Nothing,” we both chimed, and started laughing again.

“I like it this way,” he said with a small frown, “boys aren’t supposed to understand girls anyway. Cheers,” he nodded in our direction, and then took a swig from his beer.

Five minutes later Charlie came back and said his sister would be down any second now.

“Are there any more people coming?” I asked, seeing as it was almost nine o’clock and we were still the only ones there. Now it was David’s and Charlie’s turn to laugh.

“*Pigeons*,” said Charlie to David, “how I love them! They’re so nervous and cute.” He turned to me with his explanation. “Don’t worry Natasha, this place is gonna be kickin’ later on. People will start turning up in large numbers around ten, although a fair few are sure to trickle in before that. Then of course the older guys and girls will arrive after the pubs have closed, sort of before midnight.”

It was depressing to hear, but I didn’t ask why the party had had a start time of eight. Mum was going to pick us up at midnight, and I had had to bargain real hard to get it as late as that. How much fun could we have if we only managed an hour of real partying? But I couldn’t think of any way to postpone Mum’s arrival. Becky and I were just going to have to make the best of what time we had.

“Are you enjoying your drinks, girls?” Charlie suddenly wanted to know.

“Yes,” we both answered, as one.

“Very happy to here it,” said Charlie, with a cheesy smile. And then a girl I guessed to be his sister walked in.

She was wearing lilac, skin-tight hipsters, and a white belly-button-revealing (it was pierced, and had a little sapphire ring through it), tight t-shirt. It was clear that she was not wearing a bra, which made me feel a lot better about my own decision. She had very nice boobs too, and obviously wanted everyone to know about it. She walked up to us without saying a word, looking very determined about something, grabbed Becky and I by the hand and pretty much dragged us out of the room, up four flights of stairs and finally in to what was obviously her bedroom. There were lots of posters of Leonardo DiCaprio on the walls. The first thing she said to us was: “We have got to get you two tarterd up, as a matter of urgency! Thank god I got to you before the party did!” She turned out to be a very chatty girl. She turned first to Becky.

“We’ll start with you, ‘cos there’s more work to do in your case. You’re the shy type aren’t you?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but I don’t think Becky would have answered had she waited. “I know...” she carried on, affecting temporarily an American accent. “You didn’t put on no make-up, cuz deep down you think you’re not pretty. Well fuck that. I’ve known a lot of girls like you, but babe, I’m gonna let you into a little secret; that’s what make-up’s for!” She smiled a big, sunshine smile, and waved a bottle of something at Becky. “Girl, I’m going to show you where your good looks have been hiding all these years, and how to drag them, kicking and screaming if need be, out of the closet and into the light. Come here and sit yourself down.” Becky, after a moment’s hesitation, did as instructed, and took the seat at Charlie’s sister’s dressing-table. The girl crouched down at Becky’s knees and looked up at her. “Let’s have a closer look at you. Hmm. Well, you’ve got really pretty eyes and nicely shaped lips – there are a lot of models who’d kill to have them.” Becky blushed. “They’re your best features, and we have to bring them out.” She turned round to her dressing table and opened some drawers and fumbled around for the desired items. “Always start with the foundation. Now, please

close your eyes... Oh! We don't know each other's names! I have been at defcon five from the moment I laid eyes on you, and forgot to introduce myself. I'm Nicole." Becky and I introduced ourselves. "OK then Becky, close your eyes please. I'm just going to lightly brush some of this sparkly foundation on your face." Becky closed her eyes, and Nicole immediately started dusting her cheekbones with a large make-up brush. "This will look lovely in the gentle light downstairs. There, you look better already. Now for the eye-liner. With some flair I think – there's no harm in a little artistic flamboyance at a party." She put it on quite thickly, and painted Asian curls at the corners of each eye. "So, let's have a look at you so far. Wow! Just look at those eyes! You look great, babe. But I'm not sure if we should put on some shadow to bring out that gorgeous blue... What do you think?" Nicole turned round and looked at Becky's reflection in the mirror. Becky studied her reflection too, and I could see that she felt a little uncomfortable with the whole thing, although I did feel Nicole was making Becky look prettier. I think Nicole sensed Becky's discomfort too. When she spoke again her voice was softer. "No, no eye-shadow. It's not necessary, especially with eyelashes like those. Mascara will be enough.

"So how old are you two? Thirteen, fourteen?" She retrieved the mascara and we both answered with an 'uh-huh'. "Virgins too – I can tell." She smiled, but at no one in particular – most of her attention was on applying the mascara. "But that's OK. I won't tell anyone. Your secret's safe with me. There, finished." She rested back on her haunches to admire her work. "Nicole," she said to herself, "you're a genius. Now all we have to do is pick out the perfect lipstick colour." She gave Becky a long, studious look, obviously deep in thought. "Bronze," she said at last, "some kind of burnished brown or deep, dark gold..." she was rummaging about on her dressing table again. "Found it!" She turned back to Becky. "This is Burnt Gold and it's just the perfect colour for your skin tone. Go like this." Nicole parted her lips slightly. "Keep your mouth loose and natural, I'll do the rest." After a few practised strokes, she was finished. "There you go!" She turned to the mirror again. "Well, what do you think?"

Becky studied her new face in the mirror. Nicole and I watched and waited. Finally, like a mouse emerging cautiously from a hole, a small but genuine smile broke over Becky's face. Nicole clapped her hands together in obvious satisfaction. "I'll take that as a compliment," she said, and then got up and went to stand behind Becky. She put her hands on Becky's shoulders and spoke to Becky's reflection in her dressing-table mirror. "You've got lovely blond hair, but it hasn't got enough body. I've got the same problem, but you can hardly tell, because I use that stuff." She pointed at a shiny aerosol can on her table. "Volume mousse. A must for girls like us. Becky babe, this stuff is going to change your life." She got the mousse, sprayed some on the palm of her hand, rubbed the blancmange into the other hand and then applied it to Becky's hair, all the while teasing and shaping and forming. She looked like a professional hairdresser busy at work, and after about thirty seconds or so, was done.

Becky looked five years older, and had I been a boy, I would have fancied her. Becky was smiling, Nicole was smiling and I was smiling too. Nicole carried on talking, feigning a voice almost breaking under the strain of the emotion of it all.

“I don’t think there are any words that can adequately describe what just happened here, but I feel I must at least try and say something ... appropriate.” She stopped to think for a moment. “Arise, Princess Rebecca, you may enter the hallowed Halls of Sexy, or something like that anyway. Welcome to the club.”

Nicole touched each of Becky’s shoulders and the top of her head, then Becky stood up and turned to face us. She was buzzing with the tension generated by being caught between the real excitement over how she looked, and that deep self-doubt that make-up alone could never conceal. Nicole gave her a big hug and then Becky came over to me and we hugged too. Then she turned to Nicole.

“Thank you. I really like it,” she said, and you could hear how much it had meant to her, even though the nervousness was still there in her voice.

Nicole turned to look at me. “Natasha, it’s your turn now. Come over here and take the hot seat.” But I wasn’t sure if I needed Nicole’s help, effective as it had been for Becky.

“I think I look OK already, Nicole.”

“You do babe, you do. You’re very, very pretty, but that lipstick colour is just way too neutral – it looks more like Vaseline. With your face, you can get away with like fire-engine red or something, so you should. Come on, come and sit down. Come over here and do the red thing.” She was so sure of herself, and such a gorgeous looking girl, it was impossible to resist. I went and took my place and she knelt down at my knees. She pulled a tissue from the box on the dresser and handed it to me, and then gave me some make-up remover. I wiped the lipstick from my lips as best I could. She was watching my mouth, and her hands were resting on my lap. “Good, it’s more or less gone. Now go like this.” She parted her lips again, like she had shown Becky. I copied her, and she applied the lipstick to my mouth. “There, that makes all the difference. Take a look, you look stunning.” We both looked at me in the mirror.

The effect was amazing. I had been proud of how I had looked before, but with that bright, toffee-apple red pouting at me from my lips, I really looked grown up and, well, sexy. I smiled and stood up. Nicole pulled me back down again. “We still have to do your hair, babe.” She got the mousse and styled my hair. When she was finished I looked like a new person – a woman in fact – and it felt really good. Becoming a woman is fun.

“What do you think, Becky, how does your best friend look now?”

“Amazing. Really amazing,” said Becky, her voice filled with awe. I got up and turned to look at her. She was smiling the biggest, proudest smile you can imagine. It was turning into one of the best days of my life, if not the best.

“Well. That’s the outside part taken care of, but how are your party skills?” She had her hands on her hips and her head was cocked to one side, studying us anew.

“Party skills?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“You know ... dancing, kissing, flirting ... party stuff!”

I looked over at Becky, unsure of what to say, but she was already looking at me, looking as blank as I felt.

“I see,” said Nicole. “Hmm. Where shall we start?” She went over to her stereo and put on a CD, and then called us over to her. “Come on, I’ll show you some simple dance moves, and give you some party tips during.”

But we didn’t get to hear any party tips, just a lot of stuff about her. It turned out she was at drama school and wanted to be a singer. She said she didn’t want to waste her time at university learning something stupid like English or Psychology because her dad was so rich that she didn’t have to worry about all that crap, and anyway worrying wrinkles your skin and makes your eyes lose their shine. She already knew someone who has a single in the charts. She’s called Sara and her video’s always on MTV and had we heard of her? We hadn’t, and she seemed a little disappointed to hear it, but said we would meet her at the party because she was coming tonight. Nicole would play her song to Sara’s agent sometime soon. There was no fixed appointment but that’s what showbiz was like. When she was famous she was just going to be known as “Nicole” and didn’t we think that it was a really cool name? And lots of gorgeous boys would be turning up later too, models and dancers and actors and so on. She had done her brother a huge favour by even coming to the party, which would have been as dull as dishwater without her and her friends coming, because Charlie only knows school boys, and they’re all boring. If you want to have fun you have to go for someone older, or at least someone with a job and a car.

We tried our best to follow her dancing while also trying to take in all her information, but it wasn’t easy, and I’m sure Becky felt as awkward about it as I did. She wasn’t really teaching us though, just sort of dancing and talking. And I’m not sure she really cared whether or not we were listening either. Then, suddenly, she stopped the CD and asked excitedly if we wanted to hear her song. We nodded. It would have been rude to say no.

She motioned for us to step back and give her some room, and then, immediately after she had her required space, struck a dramatic pose, surrounded by an audience of smouldering posters of Leonardo DiCaprio. She started singing, and her voice was really good. The song was about her ex-boyfriend I think. I remember her singing the chorus over and over again, which went: “Baby, you don’t know what you’re missing, you don’t know who I’ve been kissing, since you let me go.” It was quite catchy and when she was finally finished Becky and I clapped appreciatively. She was really good and we were sure she was going to be famous.

“Thank you, thank you, but it sounds much better with music, I could play it to you later if you like, I’m just not sure where the CD is ...” she said, quite out of breath. “Phew! Until you’ve tried it, you have know idea how much hard work it is, to sing and dance at the same time. You have to be so fit

it's incredible. Beyoncé is the fittest person in the whole world. Did you know that?" We didn't, and shook our heads accordingly. "But look at me! I'm sweating like a pig. That was a bit stupid, wasn't it! I'm gonna have to get ready all over again! Wait here while I take a quick shower. I'll be right back." She skipped off and left us alone for twenty minutes.

She returned in a white towel, her hair still wet and clinging to her head. She looked a different person, fragile and bird-like somehow. She rummaged around in her various wardrobes, cursing and moaning about how few clothes she has, and then got dressed in front of us in a thong, skin-tight burnt orange hipsters and another tummy-showing, tight t-shirt, but this time a black one that had a little pink flower beside what looked like a blue river, positioned between her breasts. Then she sat down at her table and blew dry her hair, put on her make-up and scrunched in some more mousse. Finally she was ready.

I looked at my watch. It was almost ten. As cool as Nicole was, we were missing the party, and we only had two hours left.

"What's the time, Natasha?" Nicole asked.

"Almost ten."

"Cool. The absolutely perfect time to go down! What would you two have done without me! Now we can really make an entrance. All of Charlie's uncool school friends have probably already arrived, and are starting on their childish drinking games. Shit! I almost forgot. Have you ever kissed boys?" We shook our heads 'no'. "Oh dear. Poor you. OK, I'll keep it simple. First of all try and slow things down, 'cos boys get excited real quick, and when that happens they can kiss too hard and hasty, which isn't nice. Watch out for wandering hands too, unless you like that sort of thing of course. Basically, keep it soft and slow if you can, and wait for *them* to start with the tongue. After that, well, just let your body decide. Kissing is fun, but practice makes perfect. But I'm sure you'll both do fine. As for flirting, that's up to you. That stuff comes naturally. OK, let's go."

We followed her downstairs, closing steadily in on the louder and louder music. Contrary to her bubbly personality and super-fast talking, she really took her time on the way down, so the whole descent to the basement down those four, carpeted flights of stairs seemed to take forever. We drifted serenely past the kitchen which was now filled with about four or five boys hovering around the fridge, and went straight to the doorway of the basement's main room. With Becky and I positioned triangularly behind her, Nicole threw open her arms, struck a flirty pose, and shouted out: "Hello boys! The girls are here!"

It was quite embarrassing because the music was so loud I don't think many of them heard her announcement. Those that did all turned to look, and smiled nervously. One of them even waved at us. I couldn't see David anywhere.

"I told you these sixteen year olds are boring," shouted Nicole over her shoulder. "Let's go and get a

drink or two.”

She turned and pushed past us, which gave me a clear view into the basement. It was a hot, dark pool of throbbing sound and buzz and people laughing, heads nodding to the beat, movement here and there. I was mesmerized by it, like a bee caught in honey. Some of the twenty or so boys were playing a game with what looked like a hockey stick. I was curious and stayed to watch. Apparently, you had to drink a glass of beer in one go, grab the hockey stick, plant it on the floor right in front of your feet, lower your forehead so that it touched the top of the stick and then spin around it three times. If you managed that without falling over, you had to run to the far wall and back again, so that your team mate could have his go. There were two teams, and lots of shouting and falling over. Then I saw David.

He saw me at the same time, and beckoned me over to him. He was standing beside the two teams and egging them on, obviously enjoying the game, if not actually playing it. When I got to him I shouted in his ear, asking why he wasn't playing.

“I just did!” he shouted back.

I could smell beer on his breath. We were standing so close to each other our bodies were touching. He watched me for a while, with a happy smile on his face, the loud music pressing us together.

“Where have you been!? You've been gone for ages!”

I told him we had been upstairs with Nicole, who had insisted on tarding us up, and asked if he noticed anything different about me. He leaned back away from me and had a look. It took his eyes a little moment to focus, then they widened and he smiled in recognition, pointing at his lips. Then he stepped back close to me so that I could hear him again, and our bodies were once more touching.

“That red really suits you. Goes with that hot dress. You're growing up fast, Natasha. And with that in mind, you've got to play this game!”

I shook my head no, but he dragged me in amongst one of the teams and started shouting that it was high time a girl got involved. All the boys cheered and started clapping. They were so enthusiastic about the idea they completely forgot the game they were just playing, and gathered round me. From somewhere a big glass of frothing, dripping beer was produced and passed to me. I took it but did not drink. The boys started a slow clap and chanted “drink, drink, drink!” over and over again. There was no way I could drink so much beer in one go, but, to a huge roar, I raised the glass to my lips and started drinking. The clapping got more intense as I drank, and to my great surprise, and despite the burning in my throat made by the fizz of the beer, and its bitter taste, I actually managed to get the whole lot down – to another huge roar – even though it took me a while. But before I had the chance to feel proud of myself, someone handed me a hockey stick. I burped a huge, bellowing burp – which made both my eyes water and was audible even above the music and manic shouting of instructions – for which I got yet another cheer and a round of applause, and bent over to touch my head to the top of

the hockey stick's handle. I turned around it three times, as I had seen the boys doing earlier, but when I stood up again the room seemed not to want to right itself at the same speed. I was upright – at least I think I was upright – but the room was somehow at a steep angle to me. It didn't make much sense, but before things had the chance to get themselves together again, I was pushed from behind in the direction of the far wall. I immediately understood that I was to run there and back, and so set off, certain it would be as easy as cake, but my actions did not take me where I expected to go. I veered weirdly off to the right, bumping into some boy whose face I did not see. He grabbed me by the shoulders and righted me, then pushed me on my way again. But again I quickly swung off course, despite the fact that I was staring resolutely at the wall, and despite the fact that I was even more determined than before on going in that direction. This time I lurched to the left and into another faceless boy, who again righted me and sent me on my way.

Like a lanky, laughing water-balloon I ping-ponged my way to the wall, then back to the gaggle of boys, who were clapping and cheering the whole time. The music was loud enough for me to feel it on my skin, the room was swooning around me, and everything was swaying and drifting in and out of focus, tilting to the left and right, but I made it back nevertheless. While I was “running” that race, it felt like that was what the universe was made of, and that my running was made out of noise and the shapes of strange, laughing faces and tilting walls, of the clapping and cheering, and that it took forever. But when I finally stumbled into some boy's waiting arms to a huge cheer, it suddenly seemed like it had taken less than a second. The whole event swooped into me as one rushing, completed moment, like an eagle diving for a kill, and all the fuzzy little details scattered, never to be seen again.

I was laughing my head off when David came over to me to lead me out of the room, proud that I had managed what the boys had done.

“That was FUN!” I screamed, holding onto his arm, my head resting against his shoulder. He led me to the stairs – I heard the boys protesting my absence behind me – where we flopped down together, and squeezed ourselves close to the wall so people could still get by.

“Wow, Natasha! You stole the show like an old pro! OK, granted, your performance wasn't exactly a picture of style and grace – I'm sure I detected a couple of wobbles back there – but you held the audience's attention absolutely effortlessly. That was really quite something. And what a burp! I've never heard a better one.” He paused for a moment, before carrying on. “I'm assuming you're OK after all that beer? How do you feel? Or, more importantly, how did you do it?”

The stairs and hall were still spinning, and I had to hold on to David for support. We were sitting securely on about the fifth step, but I feared I would tumble down the stairs like a new-born if I let go. “I think this little red dress had something to do with it,” I said, noticing suddenly that in sitting down it had hitched up a bit too high. I stood up, leaning on one of David's shoulders for balance, and with my free hand straightened out the dress, back down to just above my knees. Out of the corner of my eye I saw David's head move slowly over to my leg. I stopped pulling at my dress and lifted my support hand up and out of his way, curious about what he was up to. To my amazement he kissed my

leg, just behind the knee, once, very lightly. It was a nice, warm and soft sensation, but when I flopped down again beside him, neither he nor I said anything about it.

My head was beginning to clear, and with that slight change in my stability I felt absolutely fantastic, as if my blood were singing. I shifted my hips so I could look more comfortably at David. He had a light sheen of sweat on his forehead, and his thick, honey coloured hair was tousled and fluffy in places, and slick with sweat in others. He was looking at me intently, his pupils large and shining, the bright blue of his eyes reduced to sharp circlets in the clear white surrounding them. It was a face I had never seen before, but somehow I recognised instantly what was going to happen. I was neither alarmed nor scared. Slowly but steadily he came towards me, leaning in, leaning in, carefully testing the water, but also certain he would plunge. I didn't move. His eyes, coming closer and closer, continued burning into mine, until he kissed me on my toffee-apple lips with one long, gentle, delicate kiss, as his eyes, then mine, closed.

A flash of light cut through the moment like the clap of a gunshot. We pulled apart and looked to see what it was. It was like being rudely awakened by an insensitive parent ripping open your curtains to allow harsh sunshine into your dark and cosy room, and my eyes needed a second or two to focus. There was a boy with a camera standing at the foot of the stairs, grinning at us encouragingly.

"Thanks for that. It was the most beautiful thing!" he said, before moving off, back into the thick of the party.

"I was in this pub last night with some friends, and a middle-aged woman punched me in the mouth, and cut my lip. Look." David was holding his upper lip back with his index finger, and leaning back his head so I could get a better look. I couldn't understand why he suddenly wanted me to know about his fight with some woman in a pub, and why he had so dramatically changed the subject, but I looked at his lip anyway. There was a little red wound running diagonally up from where the lighter red of the lip ends, and the deep, wet red of the inner part begins.

"Oh poor you," I said, and reached out to lightly touch the sealed scar, which felt like a small, hard knot. "I didn't notice it just now," I said, remembering our kiss, but David seemed not to have heard me. "Why did she hit you?" I asked. It seemed he had been waiting for me to ask him that, because his face immediately lit up. I started to wonder if the kiss had been a waking dream.

"We were in this pub, and me and my friend were making our way to the gents. My friend was behind me as we picked our way through the chattering throng, and then, for some reason, he decided to trip me up. It worked. I fell against this large woman and accidentally knocked her drink. Some of it spilled onto her blouse. She went from naught to furious in like half a second, and starting screaming at me, calling me a clumsy little fucker, and couldn't I watch where I was going and so on. My friend, Julian, came to stand beside me. He told her it was his fault and that it was just an accident, and offered to buy her another drink. But the old bag didn't want to know. She just carried on raging at me, ignoring Julian completely, wiping and wiping at the wet patch on her blouse, calling me a clumsy

little fucker and stupid little shit, and who do I think I am coming in here and strutting around like I own the place, and stuff like that. She was frothing at the mouth for fuck's sake! So I said she should cool down and take it easy, no point swearing over spilled beer. Then she punched me, right out of the blue. I was pretty drunk, so it didn't hurt, but I touched my finger to my lip to check anyway, and saw a smear of blood on it. I just started laughing 'cos it was such a weird thing, and then Julian and I just sort of carried on, on our way to the gents. When we came back, the witch was gone – we couldn't see her anywhere. Weird huh?"

"She sounds like Mum," I said, and remembered that she was due to turn up in less than two hours. And then behind me I heard a girl's voice calling out David's name.

The girl with the loud voice squeezed past us and then knelt in front of David on the stairs. She took David's face in both hands and gave him a big, dramatic kiss on the mouth.

"You look so beautiful!" she said to him, staring at him as if he were some kind of a god. Then she turned to me, and took my face in her hands. "And who's David's little friend? She's got the most wonderful face, and such smooth skin!" Her voice was as full of wonder as it had been while addressing David. She started to stroke my cheeks. Her pupils were huge and her face was locked in a seemingly permanent smile.

"This is Natasha," said David, "my one and only cousin. Natasha, this is Emma, and she is very happy to meet you." Emma stopped stroking my face as if it had never happened, and started laughing.

"Yes," she said, "I'm very happy to meet you." Then she took my hand and shook it, her face suddenly earnest. But she couldn't hold the pose for long, let go of my hand and drifted off into the party, laughing again.

"Is she your girlfriend?" I didn't like her. She wore too many different colours and was probably on drugs or something. She was very silly too.

"No, she's not my girlfriend. I barely know her, actually."

"Then why did she kiss you like that!?"

I was watching her from behind as she made her way through the boys, grasping faces and smiling in wonder as she went.

"She's dropped a tab. People get like that on ecstasy. Get used to it, there'll be a lot of them around tonight. And anyway, she certainly didn't mean anything by it. She's probably forgotten about us already." He gave me a funny look, like he was trying to understand something. "I think it's high time we did something about this rather predictable and tedious music, don't you?" But before I could answer he grabbed me by the hand, pulled me through the big room and into the small bedroom. As he had predicted, our two coat coat-pile had grown to become a small hill of jackets and coats. He rummaged through it until he found his jacket, and pulled a CD from one of its pockets. "This'll get

things going!” he shouted, then dragged me back into the big room and over to the computer, slotted the CD into the drive and then sat down and started to copy over the hundred or so files it contained. A few clicks later and the music suddenly stopped, and then his selection started. He turned to me with a huge smile. “That’s more like it!” he shouted. “Come on! Let’s go!”

Before I knew it we were dancing to David’s songs in the middle of the big room, and people came in droves to join in. It was such fun. I was so happy I could have flown around the room a hundred times. All of the songs from David’s CD were totally cool. At one point Charlie came up to us and handed us a bottle of beer each. He leaned close to me and said he had already heard about my legendary achievement with the hockey stick, and was very pleased that I was a beer drinker. “Natasha Wilson, you are a Pigeon no more.” He put his hand on his heart, and continued in a very serious voice. “I am proud to be able to say that we broke you in at my party.” He dabbed at his eyes as if to wipe away some tears, and then carried on his way.

The next time I looked at my watch, it wasn’t because I was bored. It was because I was having so much fun that I didn’t want it to end. That thought reminded me that Mum was due to come and pick us up at midnight. It was already 11:30. Only thirty minutes left. Realising this was almost enough to ruin the evening, and then I remembered I had not seen Becky for over an hour. I didn’t want to stop dancing but I desperately needed to pee, and also wanted to find out if Becky was still OK. I asked David where the loo was and followed his directions up the stairs. I saw Becky sitting at the dining table, which was in the first room you see after entering the house. She was with a group of people who were all chatting away, but when she saw me I could tell from her look that she wasn’t having a good time. I mouthed to her that I was just going to the loo, and that I would be right back.

While I was in the loo washing my hands the booming of the music stopped. My first thought was that David must have loaded another bunch of songs into the computer. But as I left the loo and walked over to Becky, to my horror I heard Mum’s voice drifting up from the basement, and even though I couldn’t hear clearly what she was saying, my heart sank. She was half an hour early. “Mum’s already here,” I said to Becky, who said she had seen her come in, got up from her chair, and followed me as I went downstairs to see what Mum was up to.

A voice behind us sang: “Bye bye Becky.”

When we got to the bottom of the stairs I stopped and sat down, then craned my head around the bottom banister to see if I could locate Mum. It wasn’t hard. She was standing in front of the stereo with her hands on her hips, with a small crowd of apparently attentive partiers gathered in front of her, like in some kind of a weird school assembly. She certainly had the atmosphere of a headmistress about her, although she looked pale and dishevelled.

“So. Which one of you drugged up walking erections – and yes, I know all about fifteen years olds and the stiff little contents of their over-sized trousers – knows where my daughter is. She’s here with her friend, who’s called Rebecca. Where are they?”

How embarrassing can you get? I wanted to run away forever and change my identity. I couldn't believe how easily she had just shattered the optimism I had had about our Sunday together. Whenever I look forward to spending time with Mum I get burned. I wonder if I'll ever learn. She sounded drunk too. And angry. It was a disturbing combination.

"Why isn't anyone answering my fucking questions!?" She actually stamped her foot.

"Cos you turned our music off, you mare!" someone shouted back at her.

"And I will turn it back on again as soon as I get some help." Then she remembered something.

"That's a point, my nephew's here too. Where is he?" She started paying closer attention to the occupants of the small crowd in front of her, but couldn't pick out David. I couldn't see him either.

Finally someone had had enough. "Oh for fuck's sake woman, turn the music back on and go look for your daughter on your own!" A huge cheer went up, but unfortunately Mum doesn't take that sort of attack lying down.

"Who said that!? Which snotty little drip thinks he has the right to talk to me like that? Who was it!?" She moved threateningly in to the crowd.

I could bear the tension no longer. I ran over to Mum and grabbed her arm and tried to pull her to the stairs, where Becky was still sitting.

"So there you are! Where the fuck have you been!? And what the *fuck* are you wearing?!"

"I was upstairs, Mum," I whispered, desperately tugging her away from the jeering crowd, wanting more than anything to escape the forty or fifty eyes that were watching Mum's and my slow progress. Thankfully she didn't go on about how I looked and let me pull her along, and as soon as we had reached the stairs, the music went back on. Becky said hello to Mum, and then we went up the stairs and into Mum's car, finally away from the scene of my life's greatest embarrassment. Mum's car was double parked with its hazards on just outside the house. We were already sitting and ready to go when I remembered my coat. "I'll be right back," I said, "I've just got to get my coat and bag."

I just about survived the jeers and wolf-whistles as I went back through the basement. By chance I found David in the bedroom, sitting beside Emma on one of the mattresses. He got up and came over as soon as he saw me. His face had a similar look to it as Emma's; huge pupils and a spaced-out grin.

"Your mum was just here, but I didn't want to talk to her, so I hid in here with Emma. She made quite a scene."

"Yeah, she did. I've got to go now, Mum and Becky are already in the car. I just came back to get my coat." I looked back over my shoulder to see if I could see it. David took one of my hands in his.

"Hey, Natasha, I'm really glad you came. We had a lot of fun and you're a really beautiful girl."

But I didn't know what to say. I pulled my hand from his and went over to the coat-pile. I found mine

right at the bottom, put it on and returned to David, who was still standing there, watching me. “I had a great time too. Thanks for inviting us.” I felt odd, and empty. We just looked at each other for a moment, and then, with a “see you”, I left.

On my way back to the car I tried to work out why I was feeling so funny. It had been a really cool party and I had had a lot of fun with David, and although Mum had come too soon, and made a fool of herself in front of thousands of people, the strange way I was feeling couldn't be explained by that alone. But before I had a chance to figure it out, I sat down beside Becky and saw straight away that she had been crying. I looked over at Mum. She was as still and pale as a stone, and about as cuddly. I put an arm around Becky, and was about to ask her what was wrong when she burst into tears.

“There was this boy, sitting at the table where you saw me, and everyone was chatting and laughing and he just attacked me, but he was smiling and I didn't know if it was normal.”

“What boy!?” I asked, confused and angry at the same time. If someone had hit Becky I was going to tear their head off!

“I don't know his name, he was just some smiling boy with dark hair. He asked me my name and everyone turned to look at me. I said Becky and he laughed and said “Oh please don't tell us your name's 'Becky'! Everyone's called Becky! Couldn't you at least have lied and come up with something more original?” Everyone started laughing so I tried to laugh along with them. I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't understand why everyone was laughing. And then he asked me why I was laughing, so I said I didn't know. And then he asked me why I was wearing so much make-up, and if I thought it helped at all. So I said I didn't know again. He said: “You don't know much, do you?”, still smiling this great big smile, and everyone laughed at me. It was horrible. I just sat there for ages and couldn't move, and nobody talked to me any more. I was just sitting there and sitting there, waiting for midnight.”

Poor Becky. She was absolutely distraught. While I had been having fun dancing and playing games, she had been picked on and bullied by a right wanker. I felt terrible, like it was all my fault for having invited her, but before I could say anything to help, Mum swivelled on her seat to face us.

“For Christ's sake girl, pull yourself together! The last thing I want to hear is whining and bawling at the back of the car all the way back to Hampstead, just because some prick played mind games with your delicate feelings. I've had a shitty couple of days, certainly worse than *you* could ever imagine, and I have absolutely no patience left. If you want my advice, you should forget about parties and boys altogether, and save yourself the pain. You obviously haven't got the stomach for them.” She rubbed at her wrinkled forehead. “Now please, do me the kindness of keeping your troubles to yourself while I drive you home.” She turned back to the steering wheel, started the engine, and then drove off, beginning what proved to be a completely silent journey.

When I woke up on Saturday morning I was still drunk, but with a very heavy hangover. Moving was painful, so I tried to get back to sleep. That proved impossible. I lay there in the muffled sunlight thinking about what to do next, or indeed any simple thought. But the only thing my brain would do was conjure up swirling images of Roland Brooke. The room was spinning, my blood was about to burst through my skin, and I had to watch that idiot's face grinning at me, dismissing me, telling me he had had enough of me. That little runt had told me to go.

I boiled on the rough edges of sleep in that wretched mixture of nausea, rage and impotence for hours, until, at about four in the afternoon, I finally had enough strength and clarity of mind to get out of bed, and drank some water with a handful of pain killers. About twenty minutes later, I was asleep again, this time visited by a dream.

I was completely naked. Harry slapped me across the face then threw me down on a shiny black table and started to fuck me, his relentless pumping as precisely regulated as a piston's. Behind me Roland and his two companions watched, at times sneering and leering, at others drinking tea and talking to one another in incomprehensible mumbles. Harry's face was unshaven, his skin dirty and sweaty, his eyes wolf-like, their normally soft brown now feral and cold, and somehow fractured like cracked earth. His hands were pressing down onto my shoulders, thumping them against the hard of the table with each mechanical thrust. Then the three bankers behind me each took an ink pen from their jacket pockets, unscrewed and removed the bottom ends, took off their lids too, and then simultaneously raised the pens' levers to squirt their black contents all over my face and hair. I could feel it trickling down my scalp, over my cheeks and on to the nape of my neck. My hands were going numb at my sides, and my head was starting to throb painfully again, but what woke me with a gasp was not the growing pain and discomfort, it was the realisation that it was no nightmare. I had been enjoying it.

I was drenched in sweat. The pillows and sheets were sodden. I sat up with a start and the room span so violently I had to run to the bathroom. I threw up in to the basin. I can't remember the last time I threw up, but I do remember promising, like an idiot, never to do it again. Well now I'm forty, and I am doing it again. My mind is a traitor, my body is revolting (in more ways than one) and everything is strange to me. Last year I still had it all under control, but looking at my face in the bathroom mirror – pale and sweaty, with a green strand of bile dangling from the centre of my lower lip – it was clear events had taken a turn for the worse, and more importantly, that I wasn't coping with them. I could barely tell my eyes were blue, so washed out did they look.

I washed my tired, wrinkled face in cold water and went back to bed, but didn't want to get in to those cold, damp sheets again. I curled up on top of the duvet in a foetal position, and fell asleep for the third time that day.

Just before eight I woke up, feeling cold and very hungry, so I pulled on a bathrobe and went to find something to eat. In the kitchen I noticed the almost empty bottle of gin, its lid still off – I must have consumed over half a litre of the stuff. Staring at the bottle I dimly recalled a feeling of self-hatred that had driven me to carry on drinking, way past my safe limits. I briefly considered going to hospital and

then remembered I was to pick up Natasha and her friend from a party somewhere in Chelsea. I was in no state to drive. Harry would have to collect them, and let Natasha know I could not see her tomorrow. But Harry was apparently not at home, and wasn't answering his mobile either. He was probably with that fucking whore slut bitch. I refused to leave a message and smashed the phone back down into its cradle, catching my finger between the two hard pieces of plastic. I screamed out a wordless mixture of pain and rage, and enjoyed it. I did it again, louder and longer, and then again and again, until my throat hurt more than my head.

I was going to have to call Natasha and let her know what had happened, but really didn't want to talk to her at all. But then, how would she get back home if she couldn't reach Harry either? I was going to have to organise a taxi, write a letter, have the taxi driver give the letter to Natasha and then all would be well – I could recover in peace and quiet, and the girls would get safely home. No harm done. But there was only eleven pounds and twenty three pence in my flat, which wouldn't cover the costs – I would have to pay on visa. Things were getting complicated. First things first though – write that letter.

It wasn't easy, because, as you already know, I hate lying. The more I wrote, and the more pieces of paper I screwed up and threw on the floor, the clearer it became to me that I couldn't do it. There was simply no formulation, no eloquently penned paragraph, that made me feel good about not picking her up. I remembered her shouting at me outside the pub to apologise for forgetting her birthday, and the sound of her voice when she had called me, hurt and angry, after her party. I put down the pen for the last time as it finally dawned on me, that the only course of action I was going to take was to sober up and collect my daughter. I started with painkillers, and then progressed to coffee and later to bread.

A little over three hours later, I was standing in front of a bunch of recalcitrant teenagers, trying in vain to get a little information out of them. I may as well have shouted at a heap of rubble for all the help they gave me. I was still a little fuzzy, and feeling very tender too, and had just started to look for my nephew when Natasha, from nowhere, ran up to me and grabbed my arm. She was wearing a tight red dress that left absolutely nothing to the imagination, and had on enough make-up to beautify the entire chorus line at the Moulin Rouge. I watched her closely as she tugged me away from the party and realised she was growing up, that she was becoming a woman.

I felt old, very old. When she left me alone with her friend in the car – to fetch her forgotten coat and bag – and as her friend starting sobbing these sugary little chipmunk sobs behind me, trying her best to suppress them, it hit me like a cold wind – I had no future. I was just some old woman who didn't know how to be a mother, didn't even know how to be a wife and had been chased out of her career into what was most probably early retirement. All I had left was my flat, my car, and my savings. And I hadn't done the Hoovering for weeks.

When Natasha came back, her friend burst instantly into fully fledged tears, blurting out that some boy had found her name amusing. Her every word, cracked and strained under the huge emotion of it all, grated on me horribly, tapped away at my patience like the drops of a Chinese water-torture. *'Oh me*

oh my, a boy thinks my name is funny, whatever am I to do?' She had no idea the sort of blow fate can dish out when it's in the mood for blood and guts, so I turned to her, and told her in no uncertain terms that she should bloody well bite her lip, and keep well and truly out of the kitchen, seeing as the heat was patently too much for her. Thankfully my advice worked, and the two girls stayed blissfully quiet during the entire journey to Rebecca's house. For the drive back to my flat, Natasha stayed in the back seat. I asked her how the party had been, and she answered simply that it had been OK. Other than that we exchanged no information. She was probably angry with me for shouting at her delicate friend. I've survived worse.

Falling asleep on the other hand, proved to be the marathon event of my life. Considering it was the fourth time I had tried to in twenty-four hours, it was hardly surprising. Even the book I was reading couldn't hold my attention – probably due to a mixture of my delicate hung-over state, and the fact that I had never felt stranger in my life. And that's no exaggeration. So in the darkness I lay, waiting and waiting, unable to find a comfortable position, my mouth still sand-paper dry, not wanting to disturb Natasha, who was asleep on the sofa in front of the television, snoring away. For company, despite all my efforts to ignore them, I had Natasha's friend's tear-wet face, Natasha's youthful figure hugged tightly in that little red dress, and a quite horrible sense of loneliness. We were trapped together in the dark, the four of us, and had nothing to say to one another, until, at some point between the hours of six and seven, I finally fell asleep, and my companions dissolved.

Just before nine on Sunday morning Natasha burst into my room without knocking, in high panic. "Becky's mum just called me. She's in hospital! She swallowed a whole bunch of drugs but didn't die, thank god. They pumped her stomach and everything. It was attempted suicide but the doctors say she'll be OK. Mum you promised me you wouldn't say anything cruel to her and then last night, just when she was at the lowest point of her life, you go and lay into her!"

She was talking too fast for me to follow.

"Hold on. Slow down a little. Who committed suicide? Becky's mum?"

"No, Becky! Why would Becky's mum commit suicide? We have to go and see her right now, I've got the address here." She waved a scrap of paper at me. "Her mum gave it to me, and I promised her we'd be there as soon as we could."

And then something she had rattled out at full tempo finally registered in my still groggy brain. "What do you mean I promised to say nothing to her? I never said any such thing!"

"Yes you did! You bloody well did." She was starting to cry. "I'd just told you on the phone that I was going to David's party with Becky and you said 'oh you mean that skinny girl' or something, and I said 'promise you'll never say anything like that to her face' and you said you'd never ever do such a thing! How come you never remember anything?!"

And how come children remember everything? I dimly remembered a conversation about the party,

but could not for the life of me dredge up any promise about being gentle towards Becky at all costs. It certainly didn't sound like the sort of thing I'd say – I'm not the gentle type.

But Natasha was frightened and worried, and needed calming down. I sat up in bed and motioned for her to come and sit beside me. As she sat down and slowly brought her tears under control, Becky's face – as she had sat hunched in the back of my car last night, slowly registering my somewhat forceful admonition that she keep a stiff upper lip – returned once more before my mind's eye. It had the look of a stunned woodland creature, wide-eyed and motionless. Slightly to the right of Becky's, Natasha's face was visible too. It looked on, open mouthed, incredulous at what I was saying. She had one arm protectively around Becky's shoulders, the other around her friend's waist. They huddled closer and closer as I spoke. Suddenly, I felt like a beast.

For the first time in years, I put my arm around my daughter and pulled her to me. "Of course we'll go to the hospital," I said.

In the car, Natasha, never one to keep her thoughts to herself, hit me with a humdinger: "Don't you notice how much you hurt people?"

Well, in the last four months or so I think I can safely say that I've done more thinking than ever before in my life. I can't report that I enjoy it, because it's not me, and doesn't really get much done, but I think I am probably getting better at it. However, I feel strangely compelled to admit that the idea just given voice by my perspicacious daughter had never crossed my mind. I suppose you could put it down to my philosophy, that life is hard and you have to be hard to survive it. Wimps get left by the wayside. But today, not yet fully recovered from my gin-binge, enjoying the blue skies and gently warm weather, I found I didn't want to say the obvious thing, that as a more gentle and sensitive type, Becky was doomed to a life of pain and disappointment.

"Do you know what Natasha? I don't think I do."

However, there must have been some vestige of feistiness (how I hate that word) left in me, because I found myself explaining to my attentive daughter, that life does not care about anyone, that while there may well be luck, it mostly favours the brave and the strong. It was a speech I have probably made hundreds of times, but she listened patiently nevertheless. When I was finished, she had another question for me:

"And so are you happy up there at the front, with all the other strong people?"

Normally I would have snapped back that happiness is an opiate for wimps, which is probably true in one way or another, but I didn't. Today – and I think I'm going to blame it on my daughter's party dress and youthful figure – happiness didn't seem like such a bad prize after all.

We found Becky's mother in the waiting room, looking pale and anxious. She and Natasha hugged a hello, and then Becky's mother informed us that Becky was sleeping. Natasha asked if we could go in anyway. Becky's mother didn't mind, but asked that we not be long, because her daughter needed lots

of rest. I followed Natasha, not wanting to spend any time alone with Becky's mother.

So there she was, sleeping quietly in those stiff white sheets, attached to an intravenous drip, looking comfortable and content. Natasha went straight to her, sat down on a chair beside the bed and took her hand, while I hovered uncertainly at the door. I watched as Natasha began to stroke Becky's forehead and whisper things I could not make out. I am not an expert in these things, but I do know I was witnessing a tender scene. After a few minutes of such attentions from Natasha, Becky's eyes fluttered open, and she instantly recognised her best friend. She smiled a very sweet and genuine smile, and amazingly her first thoughts seemed to be for Natasha.

"Did you at least have a good time last night?" Her voice was dry and croaky, but the words were clear enough.

Natasha laughed. "Becky, Becky, you never cease to amaze me."

Then Becky noticed me standing by the door. Her face instantly fell and took on a timid, frightened look, although only for a moment. She lowered her eyes and thanked me for bringing Natasha to the hospital, adding that my daughter was a very good friend. Natasha's hand was still on Becky's forehead.

"Don't talk Becks, your voice sounds so sore. I just had to come and see you, to see that you're going to be OK, and I'm really happy that you are, but you should get some rest. We promised your mum we wouldn't be long, so we'll get going and let you get back to sleep." Becky nodded her head.

Natasha got up, but bent over to give her friend a long hug, whispering something in her ear. Becky smiled and whispered something back. I could see her lips moving, and so could make out what she had said. I don't recall ever having said that to any of my friends, but to my great surprise found that it actually moved me, if only a little. Natasha walked over and opened the door, but I made no move to follow her out. She waited in the doorway, watching me. I couldn't leave. I wanted to say something to Becky – the look on her face as she had first noticed my presence was weighing on me. I felt like an ogre who had kicked a kitten, which in the great scheme of things may very well not be all that big of a deal, but I no longer wanted to be that ogre – I didn't like the me I had seen in Becky's eyes. I wanted to say something that would make her see I'm not all bad, something that would help her understand how I was feeling. The sentence was there, but it was a sentence I had to say in private – that is, without your prying eyes bearing witness – so if you don't mind ...

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Thirteen years! I had to wait thirteen years to hear it, but it was worth the wait. And I don't mind at all it wasn't me she apologised to. In fact there is something about the receiver of her apology being Becky that makes it even sweeter.

Becky of course had no idea how amazing it was, that Mum had said sorry to her – and in such a nice way too! – but that's not the point. The point is she had said it, and meant it, so as soon as we were out

of sight of Becky's mum, I gave mine a big hug. I was so happy to have seen Becky alive, and so surprised at Mum's apology, I couldn't contain myself.

“What was that for?”

She was acting innocent, like she had no clue why I had hugged her, but that's OK – she is Mum after all. I shrugged and said nothing, and we just went back to the car. The sweetest thing though, was the look on Becky's face as Mum – who had walked up to stand right at the foot of Becky's bed – made her apology. It was as if she had reached into Becky and gently removed her self-doubt. Her whole face lit up.

My poor Becky. What she must have been feeling to swallow those pills, and how strange and scary it must have felt holding them in her hand, deciding to swallow them into her body, knowing she was choosing to die, knowing there was nothing left worth living for, that there would be no tomorrow. Had she succeeded, I would have missed her so much.

My thoughts swung back to last night and being with Becky in Mum's car, to Mum's face while she had told Becky to shut up, how Becky had sort of shrunk deeper and deeper in to herself at each word, and the complete silence of the journey home. I suddenly realised that if Mum had not apologised, I would never have spoken to her again. I looked at her beside me as she drove, her attention on the road, and tried to understand how she could have done something so cruel and heartless. She was pale, her lips were almost colourless. Her skin reminded me of uncooked pastry so much, that I had to stop myself from pressing my finger into it – I was so sure it would not recover its current form, but retain like dough my little finger-printed dent.

Mum's tough, and calls a spade a spade, and for as long as I've known her, she's never been afraid to have a go at someone. But there was something about her attack on Becky that was different. I badly wanted to know why she had done it, but just as badly didn't want to ask. Then she noticed me looking at her, and briefly glanced over at me. Despite the quickness of her glance, I noticed that her normally intense, dark, sea-blue eyes were today strangely dull. If they had been eyes in any other face, I would have said they were feeling sad – something, of course, that Mum just doesn't do. They had an expression I could not explain.

“I don't look all that good, do I,” she said, her attention on the road again. I didn't answer her, and she didn't explain why she was looking so pale.

In her Hammersmith flat we cooked and ate, talking lightly about this and that – small talk is something Mum *never* does – but after we were finished, she started asking direct, yet somehow weird, questions about Becky and me. She wanted to know if Becky was my best friend, how I knew she was special for me, how she was different from my other friends. Not only was I shocked that she knew so little about my life, I also couldn't answer any of her questions. I'd never really thought about it. I mean, you like someone because you like them, right? I don't like someone because of some check list they match up to, I like someone because I do, for whatever reason. The strange thing is,

Mum actually listened to me, I mean *really* listened to me. But I couldn't tell if anything I said made any sense to her.

In the end, despite the way it had started, my time with Mum worked out well. There was a gentleness about her, an openness, that was new and welcome. And I felt different too – grown up and somehow wiser, proud of my love for Becky, happy that Mum had apologised, and looking forward to what Mum might be slowly changing into. And that evening, back at home with Dad (who had apparently stayed in the whole weekend!) I found that my feelings for him had changed too. I had wanted them to stay mean and angry, but they wouldn't – my mood was just too good. I told him about the party and what had happened to Becky, and how Mum had been behaving. After giving me a nice big hug and asking me if I was alright, he thought a little about what he had heard, and said he would recommend a female colleague to Becky's Mum who was a really sensitive and careful psychologist.

While Dad was on the phone to Sally, all soft spoken and sympathetic, I checked my mobile again to see if David had tried to get in touch or sent me an SMS, but there was still nothing from him. I guessed he was probably still recovering from the party – I know I was feeling really tired. I kissed Dad on the cheek to say goodnight – he was still on the phone – and went to bed. Falling asleep, cosy under my own covers, I was surprised by how my thoughts revolved around only one thing. It made me feel guilty, because I knew that while I lay in comfort at home, Becky was alone in a hospital room surrounded by strange noises and smells, but much as I felt I ought to, I could not get that kiss from my head. On the one hand, I didn't know what it meant, but on the other, I wasn't one hundred per cent certain that it had even happened.

They let Becky go home on Tuesday, so I went round to see her straight after school. She was looking a lot stronger, there was even a touch of healthy colour to her skin. She told me that a woman psychologist had come to see her early that morning, so I said she must be the one my Dad had recommended, and felt happy we had at least been able to help a little. The woman was nice, but had not had much to say – apart from explaining who she was, and that she could help Becky through her troubles, if Becky let her – seeming to insist with her calm silence that it was Becky who should be doing the talking. But Becky had not really wanted to say anything, and so there had been long stretches of silence between them. Before the psychologist left, they agreed they would meet once a week on Thursdays, after school. Becky wasn't sure if she was looking forward to it, so I tried to reassure her that if you want them to, such things can be helpful, and that it was definitely worth a try.

We were finding it hard to talk too. I had one big, burning question which got in the way of anything else I might have talked about, but I didn't know whether I should ask it – I didn't want to push Becky somewhere she might not want to go, especially so soon after Sunday. But Becky, being Becky, could read my mind, and I think too she wanted what I wanted, and had the guts to go there. She gave me a knowing look that was as gentle as it was penetrating. For a highly sensitive girl there's something really brave about her. I think it's why I love her.

“I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I've decided I want to tell you what happened, and ...” She was

still looking at me, but though her expression was determined, she lowered her eyes before continuing, and watched her hands fidgeting with themselves as she spoke.

When she got back from the party she went through the motions of getting ready for bed. When she got there, however, she found she couldn't sleep. Without the distraction of brushing her teeth, washing her face, and getting in to her pyjamas – just lying there silently in the dark – she started to get scared, but had no clear idea of what. It's not that she was having horrible thoughts or anything – there was just this creeping feeling of fear that something bad was going to happen, was getting closer and closer. Looking back on it, it was weird that she didn't try to work out where the fear was coming from, or why it was there, especially considering what had happened that night at the party. But the nameless, faceless fear grew and grew, absorbing all of her attention, like a dark shape climbing up over the horizon. It got so bad, it was as if there was a buzzing noise going through her whole body. She turned this way and that, trying to escape it, to get out from under it, or ignore it, or anything to try and find some physical comfort that might bring relief, or even sleep. But it stayed.

After a while, thoughts began to emerge from out of the panic: She's ugly, she's boring, overweight, sensitive, stupid, shy, weak – but quickly raced out of control, darting in and out of focus, spinning around like leaves in a storm. The frightening thing about them was how completely they seemed to be against her, and not come from her own head. When the panic finally started to subside a little, she slowly began to realise that everything my Mum had said to her in the car was true, and found herself agreeing that it would be better if she just gave up. Suddenly, like a light going on in a dark room, it was crystal clear to her that she wasn't cut out for life, that she was just one of nature's many mistakes and had nothing to offer. But this was a nice thought, because with it came the conviction that it wasn't anything to be ashamed about, it just was that way. It happens sometimes. No big deal.

The intense fear had given birth to a new realisation, and with that realisation a strange and wonderful calm came over her, providing a complete escape from the terror that had gripped her before. She took it as a sign that the decision to give up must be the right one.

But then she stopped talking. Her voice had been growing steadily softer, and her words had been getting less and less certain, until finally her head sunk down low, and she fell into silence.

It had been hard listening to her say those things and keep my reactions to myself, to not try and help, but I knew Becky would have let me talk without interrupting had it been the other way around. I felt terrible, angry at Mum for having been so insensitive, and ashamed that she was my mother. I wanted to apologise, but something about Becky, the way she was hunched into herself, and her quiet courage in talking in such detail about what she had so recently gone through, helped keep me silent.

We were sitting on her bed, our knees touching, our legs folded. I could see nothing of her face because her head was bowed so low, and her straight brown hair hung around it like a curtain. When I finally did say something, unable to withstand the silence any longer, it was to suggest that perhaps she should wait until she felt a bit stronger before doing this, but, still looking down, she shook her

head, determined to carry on.

“I knew Mum had sleeping pills left over from her depression a few years ago, ‘cos I had found them once in the bathroom cabinet. I crept quietly into the bathroom and found them. By looking into the brown glass bottle I guessed there must have been around ten pills still in there. I opened the safety lid and carefully tipped the contents onto the palm of my hand. I still felt calm, completely clear about what I was going to do, and the funny thing is, the only thoughts I had were if it was possible to swallow ten pills in one go, and if you couldn’t, and I had to chew them, would they taste horrible? After thinking it over I decided to take them one by one, and dipped my head down to drink from the running tap each time, ‘cos I didn’t have a glass. So, eventually my hand and the bottle were empty, and I went back to bed. I think it took about fifteen minutes before I started feeling sleepy, but before I fell asleep I noticed two things. One was the time – it was 4:44, which was odd, ‘cos four is my lucky number, and the other ...”

She stopped talking, though there had been nothing about her voice to suggest she was struggling. A moment later I saw what must have been a teardrop fall on to the back of one of her hands.

“Becky don’t,” I said, as I too started to cry.

She looked up at me. “No! I have to ... What I did was wrong – wrong to Mum, and to *you*.”

I couldn’t move. I wanted to hug her so much it hurt, but I was frozen.

Becky was still staring at me. “The other thing I noticed was you! Just before I fell asleep it hit me that I wouldn’t see you again, and *that’s* what I didn’t want. More than anything I didn’t want to lose *you*. I feel so bad that I could have hurt you and was too selfish think of it. I’m so sorry ...”

But she couldn’t talk any more, and I couldn’t hold myself back another second. We leaned into each others’ arms and hugged. And cried.

After a while, still hugging Becky, I had an idea. “I think you need to spend some time with Odsox.”

Becky thought about it for a second and nodded her head. We went downstairs and checked with Sally if Becky could come over for an hour or two. Sally looked at Becky and could see that she had been crying. She put her hand gently on Becky’s cheek, and stroked it with her thumb. I could see that she had really suffered too.

“You want to, darling?” she asked. Becky nodded. “OK. But be back in time for supper please.” She turned back to her cooking.

So Becky and I went over to my house and played with Odsox. It helped. After all that emotion and confessing and crying, it was really nice to be with a little kitten who knew nothing about anything except running around and chasing things, and sometimes purring. When Becky and I said goodbye, I thought she looked a little bit lighter and breezier. Who knows, maybe I’ve discovered a new form of therapy. If you’re feeling down, just play with a kitten. I must mention it to Dad.

The next day, as I was walking out of school, I heard someone shout “cousin kisser!” behind my back. I turned round and saw a bunch of school kids all looking at something they were holding, then up at me. One of them shouted: “Incest is best!” They were grinning and laughing and making kissing noises and generally being utter wankers. I marched right up to them and asked what the fuck they were talking about (pardon my language, but some people!). One of them held up a photograph for me to study. I couldn’t believe my eyes. There was a girl in a red dress sitting beside a blond haired boy on some stairs, kissing, and printed underneath it, ‘Incest is best, keep it in the family’. The thing is, the girl was me, and the boy was David.

Without thinking I grabbed the photograph, stuffed it in my pocket, and ran. From behind, one of them shouted after me: “Don’t worry sweetheart, there’s plenty more where that came from!”

I ran and ran, and to my great surprise, found myself on the underground heading for Mum’s flat. Half an hour later, I was ringing and ringing at her door-bell.

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I had had a strange couple of days.

Recently that’s nothing new, I know. But now, since Sunday and talking to Natasha about her delicate friend, I’ve been ... well, in a daze. I have not done a single second of job hunting, and yet I have not felt bad about it. In fact, I don’t care in the least. I can’t read for any decent length of time either, and I can’t watch television – thankfully that still annoys the hell out of me, so I can’t be completely mad. But it begs the question: what am I doing? There’s a simple answer: Nothing! Am I bored? Not a bit of it.

Like I said, it’s been a strange couple of days.

I think I can best describe it as a mood. I have been having a mood. And no, it’s not that I don’t know what it’s like to be in a good mood, or in a bad mood, so I am not trying to imply that a mood per se is completely alien to me (I do have a very moody daughter remember), just that this particular one is. Its chief characteristic is, er, pleasantly distracted. I am pleasantly distracted, so much so in fact, that I haven’t been bothered to work out why, or to do anything about it. It’s all rather ... strange.

If you had told me last year, that come May of this one I’d be mooching around my own flat, unemployed, divorced, recently chucked by two men, one of whom, my ex-husband, had managed to chuck me twice in about as many months, I’d have stared at you as if you were stark raving mad. If you had added that I would actually enjoy my period of idling isolation, I would have punched you in the mouth. But god damn you, you’d have been right.

It just doesn’t add up. People don’t change like this, not people like me anyway. But there it all was, or rather there I was, mooching around doing nothing in particular and feeling quite good despite it. I have even, for example, been enjoying things like looking at the sky for heaven’s sake! Or staring at the leaves and watching the wind work its way through them! I have been walking around my new

local streets and just observing people, taking simple pleasure from their differences, from their sillinesses, and so on. You wouldn't be miles off the mark if you called me a hippy. I would scream, if I cared. Go, as the Americans are wont to say, figure.

On Wednesday evening, shortly before six, after three straight days of unbridled mooching, someone started ringing my doorbell with an urgency I associate with ... urgency. Or something. My first thought was that ... Actually, I didn't think at all, I just went and answered the door. It was my daughter still in her school gear, but I wasn't surprised. I wasn't surprised because ... well, for all of the reasons I just gave. She looked upset. Without saying anything she pushed her way past me and in to my flat, and flopped herself down on my sofa like a heavy sigh. I closed the door behind her.

"Hello," I said.

She wasn't even looking at me. I repeated my greeting and attached a friendly smile, which she didn't see, because it wasn't until after it had faded that she finally looked up. Her face was bursting with a question she didn't seem able to ask. "Take your time," I said, "I'm not going anywhere," and sat down beside her, and waited.

I could feel the tension oozing from her, but still she didn't make a sound. Then she impatiently fumbled around in one of her pockets and brusquely handed me a photograph, as if whatever the problem was, were my fault. I tried to study her face before looking at her offering, but she had swiveled her back to me. I turned my attention to the photograph. On it there was a girl and a boy engaged in a snog, on some stairs. I wasn't sure what it was supposed to mean, apart from that the kissing couple must have been related in some manner.

It was the dress that did it. Had it not been for that shocking red I would have handed back the photograph none the wiser, and then had to suffer a stream of indignant teenage sarcasm. "That was quite a party," I said. Still she said nothing. The word 'incest' looked harsher now that I realised it was my own daughter being accused of that most ancient taboo, and I felt a slight shiver at my own prescience about that cad David. I decided to try and prod her in to some sort of non-silent communication. "Quite a party indeed – Becky took a round psychological beating, and you got what looks like a rather smoochy kiss from your cousin, which has been kindly recorded for posterity. My my."

It worked. Still with her back to me, she said: "Why don't you ask where that photo came from." I asked where it came from. "From school!" came the about-to-burst-into-tears response.

Oh dear. If life at school was even remotely as merciless now as it was when I was at mine, my daughter was in for a rough ride. I remembered, as if a distant dream, my fear that Natasha would grow, cocooned from all danger by an overprotective father, into some tedious variety of wimp, but now it seemed life had other plans that had little or nothing to do with her parents. But what to say, what to say ... I decided to take a practical tack – an emotional reaction on my part would probably only confuse the situation.

“How many people have seen it?” It seemed a sensible question to me – if there were just a few witnesses, and seeing as we owned the photograph, we could easily limit the damage. My daughter’s reaction suggested she wasn’t yet on my wavelength.

“How the fuck should I know that!?”

Not only had I never heard her swear before, she also sounded so like me that I was in no position to correct her on it. I remained calm, and gently laid out my reasoning for her. “The thing is, if only a couple of people know about it, we can put the matter to bed quite easily, because *we* have the evidence.” I waved the photograph in the air with a small, triumphant smile. She turned to face me, her cheeks wet with tears. She spoke to me as if I were a child.

“That was taken with a digital camera, Mum, and even if it weren’t, there would have been a negative. But, because it *is* in digital format, that image can be emailed around the world in seconds,” she snapped her fingers dramatically, “to thousands of people. It might even be on the Internet for all I know.” She was glaring at me, her eyes a fierce mixture of fear and indignation.

Despite her tears and hot mood, she was thinking clearly. I was proud of her, but wasn’t sure how to help, wasn’t sure if I could say anything that would make any difference. My knowledge of these technical things was pitiful – I felt suddenly completely out of my depth. Then, still glaring at me, her face suddenly changed, like April weather. She spoke.

“You don’t think I’m a ... I’m a ...”

I carried on from where she did not yet want to go. “I don’t think you’re anything *bad* just for kissing your cousin, no. I mean, he’s quite a sexy young man! In fact it would be remiss of me not to congratulate you on your taste, so I can hardly blame you. To be honest, I would have been surprised if it hadn’t happened already.”

She didn’t smile, but her face suddenly wore the smiley-est unsmiling expression I think I have ever seen. It was actually quite touching. As she was wiping her cheeks dry it struck me. Was this a photograph of my daughter’s first kiss? All those weeks ago, when I had asked her about any boyfriends she might have had, she had demurely answered in the negative. Was now the right time to bring up that topic again? I was hastily trying to weigh up the pros and cons when, to my great surprise, the doorbell rang again. The timing could not have been worse.

“Shall I ignore it?” I whispered to Natasha, not sure who it could be. Natasha wanted to know who it could be. The doorbell shrilled again, this time with more than a hint of impatience. If I couldn’t work out who it was, I would not answer it. It was too late in the day to be the postman, but not too late to be Jehovah’s Witnesses, or some other variety of weirdo. I sat still and silent on the sofa, unable to make a decision, hoping my inaction would deter the intruder. I suddenly felt like a school girl, a co-conspirator in my daughter’s mild sexual indiscretion, as both of us stared at the front door, waiting. The would be intruder started knocking loudly at the door, then shouted out my name. The weirdo

proved to be my ex.

“Oh God it’s Dad!” hissed Natasha. “What are we going to do!?”

There was only one thing we could do: giggle. So we did, and he seemed to have heard it, although I don’t think he could make out what it was.

“Heather!? Is that you?! Why aren’t you opening the door?! ... Heather!?” He was still insistently banging at the door, obviously determined he would not go away. Then he started shouting and growling: “Little pig, little pig, let me come in!” (I now recognised, with a thrilled mixture of alarm and satisfaction, the thick note of sexual desire in his voice.)

There was nothing to do except let him in, before he injured himself trying to blow my house down. I turned to Natasha and shrugged, then got up to answer the door. Harry’s first act was to launch himself at me pucker first, wrap his arms around my waist, yank me against him and engage me in a passionate (yet unreciprocated) kiss.

“Hello Dad,” came Natasha’s voice from behind us, sounding as innocent as honey. I felt his whole body stiffen in shock, and his limbs spring from me as if I were made of fire. He stepped back and looked over at our sweetly smiling daughter.

“Er, oh! Hello, you two!” he said, the noise of whirring brain cogs and spinning thought wheels competing loudly with the cooking sounds of his hot, blushing cheeks. Nobody spoke. And then, a moment or two later, nobody spoke again, except this time it was much louder.

So there we all were, a triumvirate of fake innocents exposed, silently regarding each other, shell shocked, mute and hesitant, waiting for someone to say something.

“You may as well come in,” I said, breaking the silence if not the atmosphere, and raised my left arm to close the door behind Harry. It was then I noticed I was still holding Natasha’s photograph in my left hand, and Harry, in turning politely to give me room to reach the front door, noticed it too. He was happy for the opportunity to grab at a topic of conversation that had nothing to do with anything that was at that particular moment so troubling him.

“A photograph?” he said, sounding so twee I almost burst out laughing. “How jolly! What’s it of?” I swear I had never heard him use the word jolly before – he must have been deeply rattled.

He reached up to take it from me, but I snatched my arm away from his clutching fingers and looked over to Natasha for guidance. He noticed this and glanced at her too, alarmed and now sincerely curious. My front door was still gapingly open.

“What?” said Harry, with all the sensitivity of a sociopath.

“I was just about to put the same question to you, Dad!” said Natasha, her face now a twitching battleground for a rich cornucopia of conflicting emotions. I can hardly imagine what must have been

going on in that thirteen year old brain of hers, and could see she was having a hard time managing the many faceted weight of the moment. Harry was switching his gaze back and forth from Natasha to me, and he too looked trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea. There appeared to be some unfinished business between them, but I had no idea what it was. At the time I didn't have enough mental space to marvel at how psychologically inept my ex still was, to have allowed such a tension to build up between him and his daughter, but heavens above, you have to wonder! In the meantime, the stale mate was proving, for some quite intense seconds, to be insoluble. I was too transfixed to make a move.

Finally Natasha yielded, or collapsed, or something. Whatever you want to call it, she gave up with a shrug and a teenage rolling of her eyes, thereby indicating her acquiescence. Her father may see the photograph. I closed the door. "Take a seat, Harry," I said, so he plopped himself down in my black leather armchair, opposite Natasha. Natasha now had her face turned away from us and to the floor, apparently having decided to withdraw herself from the proceedings. Or perhaps the sneaky little thing was plotting her next move. Whatever she was up to, I handed Harry Natasha's photograph without a word, and waited.

Without any delay at all, and without any pause for thought, my well trained yet cumbersome ex blurted out the first thing he saw. I simply don't know what has come over him recently, I really don't.

"Incest is best, keep it in the family"? What the hell's that supposed to ... Hang on a second, I recognise that dress ... " In my husband's astute brain, the penny was slowly beginning to drop. He looked up at Natasha, who was still studying the floor. He then looked at me as I slowly sat myself down beside my daughter's buckled form. I returned his stare, but offered no information. He returned his attention to the photograph. Without looking up, he said in his soft, authoritative voice: "Perhaps you can recount what happened at that party, and how it came to be that it initiated one act of incest and one failed suicide attempt. And while you're at it, perhaps you could make a stab, Natasha, at telling me why I should ever allow you to go to a party ever again, or to spend any more time with that cousin of yours." He had said 'ever' twice, but I didn't pick him up on it. It would have spoiled the moment.

"Yes *Daddy*, no *Daddy*, whatever you say *Daddy*!"

There is no sarcasm quite like teenage sarcasm, and she wasn't quite finished with it either. "Perhaps, *Daddy*, you can explain, after I have finished telling *you* everything about *me*, what *you* are doing *here*, what's going on between you and Mum, and why you think lying to me is acceptable!" She was glaring at him now, all bright brown eyes and burning emotions. Harry, to his credit, stayed calm. His lengthy training seemed to have had some purpose after all.

"I have never lied to you, Natasha, but I do understand why you see it that way. What you have to try and remember though, is that you are only thirteen, and that I am your father –" But before he could get into his stride, Natasha cut him off at the knees.

“Stop psycho-babbling me! I just want to know what’s going on, that’s all!” She had leaped to her feet and was shouting down at her father, but then turned to me. “Won’t somebody please tell me what’s going on!? I think I have a right to know!” I heard Harry mumbling defensively that he hadn’t been psycho-babbling anybody.

We were a family again. We were living through a wee crisis, maybe even two of them in one go, but, thanks to my strange, moochy calm, I felt well equipped to deal with the situation. I looked at my two, dependent dependents, and noticed they were both looking at me expectantly, with their pause buttons blinking steadily. It made me feel good. I gently took hold of the reins that were being handed to me, dimly aware that the journey would only be temporary, and probably bumpy.

“Let’s go through everything bit by bit, honestly and openly, and see what comes out at the other end. Who knows, it might even do us some good.” I smiled, and Natasha sat back down. “Harry,” I continued, “I think we ought to begin with us, don’t you? Seeing as we are, supposedly, the mature ones of the family. And I guess – seeing as I’m already talking – we may as well start with me.” I took a deep breath, and then carried on.

“As you both know, I recently had a ... a boyfriend. Yes, I think you could call him a boyfriend. He was called Jonno and we had some fun together for a while, and then he finished with me, last Friday, actually.” I paused, suddenly unsure as to how to proceed. As calm as I was, there was something about the impending subject matter that caused a palpable flutter in my stomach. The next words to leave my lips were a surprise to me, not because they were probably more honest than I had planned on being, but because of the way they made me feel. “Because of you, Harry.” As I spoke those last four words, I was looking directly into Harry’s eyes, and bugger me if I wasn’t aware of a warm inner glow. This was proving to be harder work than I had anticipated.

I turned to face Natasha, partly as a means of escape from the strange sensations kicked up by my aborted confession – actually I had had no idea I was about to disgorge a confession of that intense delicacy when I started – and partly because it made sense to. There was certainly nothing left to say on the Jonno front. “You’re thirteen, biologically already a woman, intelligent, perceptive and learning fast. You are, I’m sure, aware that something has also been going on between me and Harry, since we divorced I mean. Basically, I think you’re old enough to know. I mean, I think you *deserve* to know what it is, or perhaps what it *was*. But I’m not so sure about that side of it.” I quickly looked over at Harry, aware that I was rambling, hoping that this time his face would offer some support. What had appeared so simple a minute ago, was actually starting to make me sweat. I felt my right hand twitch, and was aware that it was trying to reach for a non-existent gin and tonic. But Harry’s face was about as helpful as the gin and tonic that I didn’t have to hand, even though, with a wee lean and stretch, I could have reached out and touched his cheek. It was clear to me that I was on my own. But then, inspired by a little spark of irritation at my own hesitancy that flared briefly in the pit of my stomach, I went for it.

“Natasha, these last few weeks your father and I have been having sex – with each other I mean – all

over again. But I'm afraid I can't tell you what it means, or even if it means anything at all." To my surprise I was looking at my knees. When I had recovered enough composure to look back up at my family, I saw that Harry too had directed his gaze downwards, but that Natasha was staring directly at me, unblinkingly. I think I detected a trace of gratitude in her mien, but mostly she looked bewildered. It reminded me of the way, a few weeks ago, she had asked me on the telephone what Harry had been doing in my flat, and how his allergy to Odsox had suddenly evaporated, and how she had quickly dropped the subject after I had evaded the question. Her expression reminded me too of how she had been so firmly against the divorce, arguing – not without reason – that it would be better for her if we had stayed together. Putting two and two together, I guessed she must have finally heard what she had for weeks wanted to hear, but was now realising it was not enough, or rather that hearing it did not do as much for her as she had hoped. I could see she suddenly feared that it would change nothing. And I knew, for the first time, that that was my fear too.

"Heather," Harry was still studying his shoes, "you're right – this is the way to go, this is better than my mildly obsessive secrecy." He looked up at me. "You've noticed that I've been ... different lately, but you don't really know what caused it, and I think you both have the right to know, for different reasons, so I want to let you" – he glanced over at Natasha – "know a little of what's been happening. I've been having an affair with a colleague – you don't know her – and without going into the gory details, the experience has changed me. I know it sounds dramatic, but it also happens to be true. I mean, look at the way my allergy disappeared! Natasha, this isn't the sort of thing you discuss in depth with your own children – it just wouldn't be right – but I now see I've perhaps been a bit little too secretive about it, to the extent that it has actually been harmful to my family, and particularly to you. I'm sorry." And then he added, with quite a change of tone: "But that's all I'm going to say on the matter. A man is entitled to some privacy, even from his own family."

So there it was. Harry had finally come clean. He had indeed been porking a fellow head-worker, on the side, while banging me on the side of that side. It was a little confusing. I didn't like being a side dish to a side dish, and I definitely didn't want to think about the strange, sick, sexual appetites two weirdo psychologists might have, so I didn't. But I understood, albeit quietly, that such an experience might have led to the new Harry I had recently come to know, and yes, enjoy. A tiny voice, deep, deep down, made the timid suggestion that just maybe I ought to be grateful. It is evidence of the quiet power of this mooch-mood, that I did not ruthlessly grind it back down into the unseen dredge that is the bottom of my mind, where it belongs.

Harry and I were looking at Natasha, who was staring deep into the middle distance, but before she could reveal to us what she was thinking (had she even wanted to), someone started hammering at the door. I instantly came to the firm conclusion that it was Jonno – I mean, who else could it be on a day like this! But a shrill, panicked, female voice started calling out my name. It was my sibling.

"Helen!?! Oh for fuck's sake, this is getting ridiculous!" I know she's my sister, and that therefore my reaction was perhaps a little uncharitable, but my family and I were having an important moment,

which had now been interrupted for the second time. Reluctantly, I let her in.

Just like Harry before her, she let fly with her intentions before taking care to peruse her immediate environment.

“Ian is having a fucking affair! And I can’t even claim to have discovered it, because *he* told *me*, just like that! Like it was the most natural thing in the world! I’m hurt and angry and all he can say is that I should grow up, and that everyone is doing it. But I’m not!”

I couldn’t tell if she had been crying, but it would have been my advice, had she asked for it. She was screwed up tighter than an uncooked piece of fusilli, and was shaking with indignation and ire. I was worried she was about to shatter. Behind me I could feel my husband and daughter frozen in their seats. Thankfully, Helen finally caught sight of them, sparing me the delicate task of pointing them out to her, after her outburst.

“Oh,” she said, and then, “Oh dear, everyone seems to be here. You could have warned me, Heather!” She glared at me, her eyes bulging.

Harry got up. “Why don’t you come in and sit down, Helen.” He indicated that she should take his seat, and then headed off to the kitchen, announcing he was going to make everyone some tea, and told Natasha to accompany him, to show him where everything was. Natasha followed Harry, and Helen took her place in my black leather armchair.

So I was suddenly alone with my sister, after having been, mere minutes ago, alone with my daughter, who was now hiding in my kitchen with my ex. I sat down opposite Helen, feeling a little dazed. Despite what she must have been going through, I couldn’t for some reason quite take it seriously.

“Poor you,” I said after a few moments of stiff silence, and tried my best to mean it. Almost my entire attention was still centred on my husband and daughter behind the kitchen door, and the delicate moment we had reached. Helen seemed to detect this.

“Typical! The fates have taken it upon themselves to time the worst day of my life with some weird Wilson family reunion. There I am, at home, having just hung up the telephone to Ian – yes, he told me over the phone thank you very much – wanting to scream and smash up the house, and I’m hit with the brilliant idea of visiting my sister, who lives alone, is divorced, and probably understands what I’m going through. What happens? I unload my deepest secrets at a family get together. Typical!”

“Has it ever happened before?” – What was wrong with me! What was I saying?!

“What!?” snapped Helen. But I couldn’t stop myself – my mind was just too ‘elsewhere’.

“You keep saying ‘typical’, so I was wondering if this had ever happened to you before.”

Helen blinked at me. I don’t think she appreciated my pedantic observation at all.

“To be perfectly frank, Heather, I had expected sympathy from my sister, not flippancy. But what was

I thinking! You've never had a sympathetic bone in your entire body." Her voice now showed real signs of impending tears. "There you sit, opposite your sister, who has just been informed that her husband is having an affair with his secretary – WITH HIS SECRETARY! – and all you can offer her is your oh so clever asides. Well thank you very much, that's exactly what I need!"

She put her hands down onto the seat of the chair to push herself up, but stopped as her right hand came in contact with something unchair-like. After a little fumbling around, she retrieved the photograph of her son and my daughter engaged in a kiss. Harry must have hidden it there in the hurried confusion of Helen's arrival. She studied it for a moment, blinking rapidly, apparently having forgotten our argument. It must have been national Copy Harry Day, because that's precisely what she did next.

"Incest is best, keep it in the family'? How awful!" I could feel Natasha shrivelling up to an embarrassed crisp in the kitchen – Helen's voice is audible through all materials, at all thicknesses. "But this looks like David! ... He hasn't got a sister."

Helen was about the only person in the family not to have seen Natasha's red dress, so she was possibly deceivable, at least for the short term. I certainly didn't want yet another angle added to this already preposterously complicated situation.

"Well, it can't be David then, can it?" I offered hopefully.

"Heather," replied Helen, "I think, even despite my recent shock, that I can still recognise my own son, even in as badly taken a photograph as this one. What I don't understand is why anyone would want to accuse him... Hang on a second, what's this picture doing here in the first place? Who took it? And why is everyone here anyway?"

Deception was not going to be possible after all. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Helen may be stupid, but she's not stupid.

I suddenly had an idea, a desperate idea for a grand distraction. Anything that might keep the effects of my sister's badly timed intrusion to a minimum was worth a try.

"Helen, I have some advice for you. Oh, and I'm sorry about my flippancy, it's just that I had a really bad run last week – awful job interview amongst other disasters – but, rather surprisingly, this really helped me when I was at my lowest. Forgive me."

I screamed at her, loud and angry, and then nodded at her, that she should do the same. She didn't. Not being married to a psychologist, I doubt she'd even heard of Arthur Janov.

"Have you gone completely mad!?" she asked, her eyes bulging anew.

I shook my head and then screamed again, perhaps with less conviction than the first, but a little longer this time, and while screaming I tried to encourage my sister to follow suit by waggling my eyebrows and nodding at her, but her gaze drifted disinterestedly from me to somewhere over my left

shoulder. I knew what she was looking at, or rather who. My scream fizzled out, and I turned round to see my husband and daughter bearing teapot and cups and saucers neatly stacked on a tray, not knowing whether to advance or retreat.

“Wrong moment?” asked Harry politely. And then the phone rang.

Saved by the bell! I wouldn't even have minded had it been a fax. In hindsight, that it turned out to be my mother was pretty much inevitable, considering the sequence of events up until that point, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind to have made a guess. Besides, she hadn't called me in weeks – the timing was simply unbelievable.

“Heather! Thank heavens you're there! Helen's not the best at this sort of thing. We have us a situation. You know your father's beloved Renault Four?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I've been on at your father for weeks to get someone to deal with our moles, but he of course has been insisting that he can do it in two shakes of a lamb's tail – never having got round to it of course – and why pay – hold on a tic ... ”

I could hear the tell tale crackle of a walkie-talkie, and then my father's distant, tannoy-like voice asking where his damned plaster was, and that he was still bleeding like a stuck pig.

“Shut up Derek, I told you not to do it, but you wouldn't listen to me. Anyway, I've got Heather on the phone.”

“What in the name of Mary can Heather do about it!? Is she going to magically pass the damn plasters down the phone line to you!? Over, by the way!” “Don't be silly Derek. Over and out. Heather, are you still there?”

I was, but it took me a while to confirm the fact. I was having a hard time trying to work out why my mother would call me in the first place. My father was right – what could I do? And so far, having only said 'hello' and 'yes', I was feeling like a buffoon, with Harry and Natasha still waiting for a sign from me, and Helen now staring intently at Natasha, who was trying nonchalantly to look everywhere except at her aunt. In reply to Mother I simply said 'yes' again, quite the conversationalist. But my taciturnity didn't seem to register with her.

“Good. Sorry about your father, he gets quite excited at times like this – hasn't got the stomach for it. He may have been in the RAF, but he was too young to fight in the war you know.” I did know. I was their daughter. As my mother carried on prattling away about Daddy, my eyes fell on the telephone's loud speaker button. Dare I press it? It suddenly seemed the perfect way out of this awkward predicament, and after all, everyone present was family.

I dared.

As Mother's voice came flooding over the telephone's speakers, everyone's attention shifted to it. The relief was palpable. Well, I could feel it anyway. I suppose I can't really speak for the others.

"I mean the man has only cut his thumb and he says he's bleeding like a stuck pig. A stuck pig?! Insects bleed more than that! I don't think I saw more than one drop drip. And *he* thinks *I'm* the idiot! But it was me who warned him it wasn't a good idea, and it was *me* who suggested we hire a professional, and he who delayed and delayed and delayed until today, then drove the bloody car into the garden four gin and tonics to the good, leaves the engine running, gets out to attach a hose to the exhaust pipe – he thinks the fumes will kill the moles, poor fool – but the car starts to roll off on the garden's slope towards the brook. He shouts, leaps back into the car like a tottery James Bond, yanks on the hand break – you remember where it is – cuts his thumb in his panic on the underside of the dashboard, and then has the gall to scream blue murder at me as if it were my fault! The neighbours are going to have a field day with this, we're never going to hear the –"

Her walkie-talkie crackled to life again, and we could all hear Daddy's quiet, tinny voice.

"Are you still talking to Heather? Over." "– end of it. Excuse me a moment Heather darling, it's your father on the talkie. Yes Derek, I am still talking to Heather. Over."

"Well then perhaps you might ask her what the hell she thinks she can do to help, or if she has any idea at all why you are talking to *her* while *I'm* bleeding to death in the front garden for all the world to see!! Over!"

"And perhaps you can tell me why you think you have the right to direct *my* conversation with my daughter after having failed to listen to the wiser partner for weeks on end! Over!"

I gently laid the receiver on the table and went to sit back down opposite Helen – my parents needed no help from me to continue their argument. Helen's face was quite an interesting study. She was middle-distancing a little, and looked as if she were fondly recalling some drippily mawkish moment from an old Lassie film. It was in no way the correct 'look' for the circumstances, but it turns out I was reading it correctly. While Daddy was demanding that his wife put an end to all her childish nonsense and finally fetch him a god damned plaster, Helen suddenly burst into tears, blurting out:

"Oh Daddy! I wanted to be like that with Ian!" and then buried her face in her hands. Behind me I could just hear my husband and daughter quietly returning to the kitchen. Mother was the first to react.

"Is that Helen's voice I just heard?"

Nobody responded.

"Hello!? Who am I talking to exactly? What's going on?"

Then Daddy's voice came through again. "Eunice, if you don't answer me soon, there's going to be trouble. Over!"

“I just heard Helen’s voice, Derek, and now apparently nobody’s there at all. There’s something funny going on. Over.”

“I thought you were talking to Heather. Over.”

“So did I Derek! She was there on the line just a moment ago. Hold on while I try and get her again. Over, and for the moment out. Heather? Helen? Will somebody please talk to me, I am paying for this call you know!”

It was such a surreal moment I almost had to pinch myself. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to respond, but for some unfathomable reason I couldn’t. My sister was still sobbing into her hands opposite me, Harry and Natasha were still hiding in the kitchen and my mouth would not form any words. After a few seconds of stasis, Helen looked up at me, her face streaked with tears.

“Well go and talk to her then.”

It was the impetus I needed. I got up and went to pick up the receiver. Mother was still emitting her plaintive ‘hello?’ over and over again.

“You’ve called at rather a strange moment, Mother,” I said.

She responded by letting Daddy know I was back and that she had indeed called me up and was therefore not going mad. Then she wanted to know if she had just heard Helen’s voice. Helen shouted:

“Hi Mummy!”, managing to sound both teary and cheery at the same time. I looked over at her and mouthed the question: “shall I tell her?” Helen shook her head and got up and came to the phone. I told Mother that Helen wanted to talk to her. Because the phone was still on loud-speaker, I was allowed to listen to the three-way conversation, and it was a little odd.

“Mummy, I’ll come right to the point. Ian has just informed me, over the phone no less, that he is having an affair with his secretary.” Helen blew her nose loudly into a hanky she had produced from somewhere on her person. I therefore noticed that she was still holding the photograph. Mother was right on the money with her heart-felt expression of sympathy.

“Well what did you expect, dear? He is Australian.”

I wondered how many gin and tonics she had had. Helen’s face was a picture of shocked indignation.

“Derek, I’ve got Helen on the line and she’s just found out her husband’s having an affair with his secretary. Over.”

And then Helen and Daddy starting speaking over one another. I think Helen complained that there was no one in the family capable of giving her any sympathy, and Daddy had the good sense to innocently repeat Mother’s observation about Ian’s spurious origins. When they were both quiet again, Mother, probably having heard most of what Helen had said, piped up with her new and improved version of motherly love.

“Helen dear, you’re stronger than you think. I’m sure you’ll be laughing about all this the day after tomorrow.”

Surprisingly, it didn’t work. “I will not be laughing about this the day after tomorrow, nor on any day after that, because it is simply not funny!”

I imagine it was the accumulated pressure of continuing uncertainty that drove them to it, because Harry and Natasha chose that ill-advised moment to emerge from the kitchen for the second time, carefully bearing their tray of untouched tea things. Helen’s eyes locked instantly onto Natasha, and she started rapidly patting the photograph in short, impatient movements against her thigh. The effect was of a cat angrily flicking its tail. The chance that we could get through today without a group discussion of Natasha’s little indiscretion had just disappeared.

“And that’s not the only unfunny thing I found out about today, Mummy, nor the only affair. It just so happens that my son and my niece are also going at it hammer and tongs. I have the photographic evidence of their incestuous love in my hand!”

While Mother was processing this little bombshell, and just before Daddy’s patience finally snapped, three small but significant things happened. Natasha did nothing, Harry did nothing, and neither did I. But the nature of our nothings was quite telling. Without any evidence of movement whatsoever, without even the slightest physical tremor, Natasha collapsed. I could see it in her eyes. Harry’s nothing was characterised by its rich quality of shame and embarrassment. And unbeknownst to me, mine marked the beginning of a delicious anger.

Then Daddy’s tinny voice burst over the phone’s loud speaker again. “Eunice, I’ve had enough! I’m coming in. Affairs and plasters and secretaries and blood and damn it all quite frankly! These moles are not going to kill themselves out of concern for our view of things! Over and sodding out!”

Mother sighed deeply. “Now your father’s angry, that’s all what we need!” She was beginning to sound desperate. “Could you run that by me again please Helen, I thought you said—”

“With pleasure.” I think Helen was actually enjoying this. “David and Natasha are having an affair,” Helen looked at the photograph again, “and judging from her tacky red dress and the lack of underwear Natasha was wearing, I think I can tell who started it.”

That was when I was first aware of my anger. I stood up and strode over to Helen. With a sharp gesture of my hand I demanded to have the phone back. She gave it to me and went to sit down in my black leather armchair, her every movement speaking of bottomless rectitude.

“Mother, it’s me again. I’ll call you back. I’m just going to sort out this mess.” Before I could hang up, we all heard her say: “But the girl’s only thirteen!”

I turned to Harry first. He was still holding that fucking tea-tray. I told him to put it down and to take a seat, indicating the sofa. I told Natasha, who was looking very worried, to come and sit beside her

father. She did so. Everyone was now where I wanted them.

“Helen, you’ve been jumping to conclusions before all the facts are in. You should really ask Natasha what happened before making those sorts of accusations. Natasha is an honest girl. If you ask her directly, she will answer you directly. There’s no need for conjecture here – she’s right there in front of you.”

Helen turned to face Natasha, but did not say a word. She looked smug enough to smack. To my daughter’s credit, she took over the reigns without any helpful prompting from her aunt, and, belying her nervous demeanour, calmly recounted the events of that fateful Saturday night, staring fixedly into her aunt’s eyes, as if in a mild trance.

“David and I were at that party last Saturday. It was at Charlie’s house and his sister, Nicole, dragged me and Becky up to her room to put make-up on us. Then we came back down and I found David playing a game where you have to drink some beer and then spin around a hockey stick. All the boys wanted me to play it, so I did. When I was finished I was quite dizzy so we went, me and David that is, to sit on the stairs so I could recover. That’s when he kissed me. It wasn’t long or anything, but just then some boy took a photograph of us, the one you’re holding, Aunt Helen. After that we just danced for a couple of hours and then Mum arrived to take me and Becky home. The photograph turned up at school today. Some kids were teasing me with it, so I grabbed it and ran to Mum’s. I was quite upset about it. That’s it really.”

I thanked Natasha for her excellent recounting and then turned to Harry – Helen did not look like she wanted to speak just yet. “So, Harry, have you got anything to say? You seemed quite bothered by all this before Helen turned up.”

He thought for a second and then shook his head.

“Good. Helen?”

My sister was obviously full of a whole mix of emotions, each one of them highly uncomfortable – she was twitching in the chair as if electricity were flowing through it. I don’t think she knew if she was coming or going. Whatever it was, there was certainly enough fire in the mix to prevent her from backing down just yet – she needed an outlet for all that outrage, and unfortunately for Natasha, Ian wasn’t to hand. With a voice made of lemon peel and sulphuric acid, she asked Natasha to explain her tarty attire.

Natasha blinked twice, and then answered. “I just wanted to look sexy.”

“Don’t get smart with me young girl – I know a whore’s –” But by now all residue of my mooching-mood was gone, and the old me was back. And angry.

“That’s enough! That is enough!! This is fucking ridiculous, not even worth talking about in the first place. It was a just a little kiss between cousins, a little, teeny teenage kiss at a party for fuck’s sake!

How can anyone except a bunch of immature school children have any kind of a problem with that!!?”

Nobody wanted to answer. I suddenly and unexpectedly calmed down – it was the quickest bout of rage I think I have ever had. I felt serene, beautiful and happy.

“Exactly, exactly. We’re not even discussing the real problem. Helen, the real issue is Ian and I’m sorry it’s happened. I’m sorry you turned up just when you did – we were right at that moment talking about the photograph and I couldn’t bring myself over to your pain with Ian quickly enough. It’s just bad luck and unfortunate timing and I’m ... sorry. Sorry.”

Yes indeed, that was a lot of apologies. They must have had an effect. Somewhere in Helen, a dam burst.

“Nobody likes me!!” she suddenly wailed, collapsing into a wild fit of tears and sobs. Like I said earlier, she may be stupid, but she’s certainly not stupid.

Surprisingly, it was Natasha who came to her rescue. She crossed the gap between them, got down to her knees and gave Helen a hug.

“I like you, Aunt Helen, I like you. Ian’s the bastard.”

It was quite a sight. I myself was moved to join them, and hugged my sister from the other side.

“It’s OK, you can get over this, we’ll all help you ... ” I said. It was what she had needed. Slowly, very slowly, she calmed down.

About an hour later I was on my own again, and had just hung up the phone after having cleared the air with my parents, who were in a real tizzy by the time I finally called back. It was approaching six and I suddenly realised I was starving hungry. While I prepared my late lunch, the bizarre sequence of events that had started with my daughter’s dramatic arrival two hours earlier replayed in my mind. As I went over the details again, I had the very distinct impression that I had been a fucking good mum and a pretty decent sister throughout the entire debacle. It was a nice feeling. A very nice feeling. I may even have been smiling while I chopped the onions.

So, life begins at forty does it? Perhaps it does, perhaps it does.

*

It wouldn’t be right to leave without filling you in on a few little details. The first and most important is that Mum and Dad didn’t get back together again. But strangely, they spend more time together now than when they were married. We often go out together as a family too, for meals and things, which hasn’t happened for ages. Living apart from one another in separate homes seems to be good for them, and I suppose good for me too. And I think Mum is getting used to having all that time on her hands. She’s certainly a nicer person nowadays, and she was just so cool about David and that photograph.

Aunt Helen has filed for divorce, and somehow I seem to have become her new confidante. She’s

always calling me up and asking my advice. It can get kind of weird, but I like it too. She told me that she's slowly coming to the realisation that she doesn't like Ian, and hasn't for years – she even called him “an arrogant little prick” once, which she said she meant in more ways than one. She's looking forward to getting her marriage to him behind her, and getting back into the world of employment, although she's not sure whether to reactivate her earlier career as a solicitor, or try something new, or even go back to university and study something like English literature.

Becky is Becky, Arthur is Arthur and Odsox is Odsox. Odsox is barely a kitten any more, but we still have a lot of fun together, and we still find her half way up the curtains from time to time. Oh and Dad's allergy hasn't returned, so it was no temporary miracle. Becky visits that woman psychologist every Thursday like they agreed, although I'm not sure how much good it's doing her. Becky's just not like other people. I think she'll always be this really sweet and sensitive girl, but I get the funny feeling too, that her brush with death was for her something quite beguiling, something a little bit magical. She really, truly loves me and her mum, but sometimes I worry about her, and can tell she's wondering what death will be like a bit too much. Somehow, she doesn't quite belong here with us – one half of her is always looking over to the other side, you know?

As for David, well, we've only talked once since the party, and that stupid kiss never even came up in the conversation. For some reason I didn't want to mention the photograph, and he didn't bring the matter up, so I don't know what's going on – maybe he doesn't even know about it. It's like it never happened. Even Helen never talks about it! If it wasn't for the photograph (which I still have by the way), I reckon I would have convinced myself it had never happened. Although, sometimes, I wonder how that photograph found its way to my school in the first place, and how the boy that took it knew who I was, 'cos I didn't know who he was, and I still don't. But one cool thing did come out of it.

There's this older girl at school, she's about fifteen and her name's Alicia Waterstone, and she had a copy. She was trying to get maximum mileage out of it, and was teasing me and calling me names and generally being the perfect bitch. Well, during lunch break one day I'd had enough. I walked right up to her and slapped her in the face, really hard. I didn't say anything – I was too angry for that – I just glared at her and then turned around walked off. No one's bothered me about it since. Mum was really proud of me when I told her. Said I was a true St John. She'd never said that before, so I guess it must be quite a compliment.

So what about David? To be honest I don't even know. He was still friendly and charming and cool when we spoke on the phone a couple of weeks ago, and at least he called me, but there was something different about him, at least during the conversation.

I think I'm going to have to put the whole thing down to experience.