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Acknowledgements

This book took an embarrassingly long time to write, also my short-term memory isn't what it was – apparently this is what happens when you're perimenopausal (not menopausal, I should stress; that's still decades away, and by the time it happens I'll be grand again and back winning *Mastermind*) – so there's a very good chance that someone may have given me invaluable help at an early stage in the book and that I've now completely forgotten. If you are that person, I am truly sorry.

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As always, thank you to my beloved Tony, without whom none of this would be possible.

A quick explanatory note: part of this book is set in the unattractive, broken-veined world of Irish politics and I've taken the liberty of changing the names of Ireland's two main political parties from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to the Nationalist Party of Ireland and the Christian Progressives. This wasn't an attempt to avoid a libel suit – I really do think Irish politicians are as hideous as they appear in these pages, *worse*, if anything – it was just an attempt to make pronunciation, etc., a bit easier for non-Irish readers. Also, the acronym TD (short for Teachta Dála) indicates a member of the Irish parliament (called the Dáil). (Which is located in Leinster House.) (Finally, most Irish governments are coalitions.) (This is probably all the explanation you'll need.)

While writing this book I had to do tons of research, which I absolutely hate, but people were incredibly generous with their time and patience. Any mistakes are mine. Thank you to Martina Devlin, Mary O'Sullivan, Madeleine Keane, Barry Andrews TD (see, TD, you know what that

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What! You too? I thought I was the only one.

C. S. Lewis

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‘Everyone remembers where they were the day they heard that Paddy de Courcy was getting married. I was one of the first to know, what with working in a newspaper when word came in from David Thornberry, political correspondent (and tallest man in Dublin), that de Courcy was calling it a day. I was surprised. I mean, we all were. But I was extra surprised and that was even before I heard who the lucky woman was. But I couldn’t act upset. Not that anybody would have noticed. I could fall down dead in the street and people would still ask me to drive them to the station. That’s what life is like when you’re the healthy one of a pair of twins. Anyway, Jacinta Kinsella (boss) needed a quick piece on the engagement so I had to put my personal feelings to one side and be a professional.’

Grace Gildee

‘It would have been nice if you had asked me first.’

Alicia Thornton

*‘I was on the net, checking e-bid for owl handbag (by Stella McCartney, not just any ‘oul’ handbag) for a client to wear to a wildlife charity thing when I saw the headline. **De Courcy to Wed.** Thought it was a hoax. The media are always making stuff up and faking cellulite on girls who don’t have it and taking it off girls who do. When I discovered that it was true, I went into shock. Actually thought I was having heart attack. Would have called an ambulance but couldn’t remember 999. Kept thinking 666. Number of the beast.’*

Fionnola ‘Lola’ Daly

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'Don't you dare be happy, you bastard. That's what I thought when I heard. Don't you dare be happy.'
Marnie Hunter

De Courcy to Wed

Women throughout the land will be donning black armbands with the news that Ireland's most eligible politician, Paddy 'Quicksilver' de Courcy, is to hang up his gloves and settle down. Over the last decade, de Courcy, a popular figure in the VIP rooms of Dublin's hot nightspots, and often said to physically resemble JohnJohn Kennedy, has been linked with a number of glamorous women, including the model-turned-actress Zara Kaletsky and Everest mountaineer Selma Teeley, but, until now, showed no signs of making a permanent commitment.

Not much is known of the woman who has won his notoriously wayward heart, one Alicia Thornton, but she's certainly no model or mountaineer - the only climbing she seems interested in, is social. Ms Thornton (35), allegedly a widow, has been working for a well-known property agency but plans to give up her job once married, in order to 'devote herself' to her husband's burgeoning political career. As the wife of the famously ambitious 'Quicksilver', she'll have her work cut out for her.

De Courcy (37) is the deputy leader of New-Ireland, the party founded three years ago by Dee Rossini and other TDs disaffected with the culture of corruption and croneyism prevailing in Ireland's main political parties. Contrary to popular opinion, de Courcy is not one of NewIreland's

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founding members, but joined eight months after the party's inception, when it became clear that it was a viable prospect.

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Lola

Day Zero. Monday, 25 August 14.25

The worst day of my life. When the first wave of shock released me from its fiendish grip, I couldn't help but notice that Paddy hadn't called me. Ominous. I was his girlfriend, the media was going wild that he was getting married to another woman, and he hadn't called me. Bad sign.

Called his private mobile. Not his ordinary private one, but the private private one that only I and his personal trainer have. It rang four times, then went to message, then I knew it was true.

End of world.

Called his office, called his home, kept ringing his mobile, left fifty-one messages for him – counted.

18.01

Phone rang – it was him!

He said, 'You've seen the evening papers?'

'Online,' I said. 'I never read the papers.' (Not relevant, but people say the oddest things when in shock.)

'Sorry you had to find out in such a brutal way. Wanted to tell you myself but some journalist –'

'What? So it's true?' I cried.

'I'm sorry, Lola. I didn't think you'd take us so seriously. We were just a bit of fun.'

'Fun? Fun?'

'Yes, only a few months.'

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'Few? Sixteen of them. Sixteen months, Paddy. That's a long time. Are you really marrying this woman?'

'Yes.'

'Why? Do you love her?'

'Of course. Wouldn't be marrying her if I didn't.'

'But I thought you loved me.'

In a sad voice, he said, 'Never made you any promises, Lola. But you are a great, great girl. One in a million. Be good to yourself.'

'Wait, don't go! I have to see you, Paddy, please, just for five minutes.' (No dignity, but couldn't help myself. Was badly distraught.)

'Try not to think badly of me,' he said. 'I'll always think fondly of you and our time together. And remember . . .'

'Yes?' I gasped, desperate to hear something to take edge off the terrible, unbearable pain.

'Don't talk to the press.'

18.05 to midnight

Rang everyone. Including him. Lost count of number of times, but many. Can be certain of that. Double, possibly triple figures.

Phone was also red-hot with incoming calls. Bridie, Treese and Jem – genuine friends – offered much comfort even though they didn't like Paddy. (Never admitted it to me, but I knew.) Also many fake friends – rubberneckers! – ringing to gloat. General gist: 'Is it true that Paddy de Courcy is getting married and not to you? Poor you. Is terrible. Is really, really terrible for you. Is so humLIating. Is so MORTifying. Is so SHAMEing! Is so –'

Kept my dignity. Said, 'Thank you for kind wishes. Must go now.'

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Bridie came to see me in person. 'You were never cut out to be a politician's wife,' she said. 'Your clothes are too cool and you have purple highlights.'

'Molichino, please!' I cried. 'Purple makes me sound like a . . . a teenager.'

'He was too controlling,' she said. 'We never got to see you. Especially in the last few months.'

'We were in love! You know what it's like to be in love.'

Bridie had got married last year, but Bridie unsentimental. 'Love, yes, very nice, but no need to live in each other's pockets. You were always cancelling on us.'

'Paddy's time is precious! He's a busy man! I had to take what I could get!'

'Also,' Bridie said, 'you never read the papers, you know nothing of current affairs.'

'I could have learnt,' I said. 'I could have changed!'

Tuesday, 26 August

Feel the whole country is looking at me, pointing and laughing. Had boasted to all friends and many clients about Paddy and now they know he is marrying someone else.

My equilibrium destroyed. On a photo-shoot in the Wicklow Hills for Harvey Nichols Christmas catalogue, I ironed oyster-coloured silk bias-cut Chloé evening dress (you know the one I mean?) at too high a heat and burnt it! Scorch mark in the shape of the iron on the crotch of iconic dress worth 2,035 euro (retail). Destroyed. Dress was intended to be the pivot of the shoot. Was lucky they didn't charge me (i.e. bill me, not have me arrested, but could be either, actually, now that I think about it).

Nkechi insisted on taking control – she is an excellent assistant, so excellent that everyone thinks she is my boss

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– because my hands were trembling, my concentration was in ribbons and I kept having to go to portaloo to vomit.

And worse. Bowels like jelly. Will spare you the details.

20.30–0.34

Bridie and Treese visited me at home and physically restrained me from driving round to Paddy's apartment and demanding audience with him.

3.00

I woke up and thought, Now, will go! Then noticed Treese was in bed beside me. Worse, was awake and prepared to wrestle.

Wednesday, 27 August 11.05

Constant loop in my head: He is marrying another woman, He is marrying another woman, He is marrying another woman. Then every few hours I think, What? What do you mean, he is *marrying another woman*? As if discovering it for the first time, and SIMPLY CANNOT BELIEVE IT. Then am compelled to ring him, to try to change his mind, but he never picks up.

Then the loop starts again, then the surprise, then I have to ring him, then I get no answer – again and again and again.

Saw picture of this so-called Alicia Thornton. (In the newsagent buying a Crunchie when I saw it on the front page of the *Independent*.) Snapper had caught her coming out of her Ballsbridge offices. Hard to be certain but looked like she was wearing Louise Kennedy. Said it all. Safe. Elegant but safe.

Realized I recognized Alicia Thornton – she had been photographed four times with Paddy in glossy society pages

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over last few months. Caption had always read, 'Paddy de Courcy and companion'. When photo number three appeared, I had felt emboldened enough to question him about her. He accused me of not trusting him and said she was a family friend. I believed him. But what family? He has no family!

12.11

Call from Bridie. 'We are going out tonight.'

'No!' I cried. 'Cannot face world!'

'Yes, you can! Hold your head up high!'

Bridie is very bossy. Known as Sergeant-Major to her nearest and dearest.

'Bridie, I'm in shreds. Shaking and everything. Cannot go anywhere. I'm begging you.'

She said, 'Is for your good. We will take care of you.'

'Can you not come over to my flat?'

'No.'

Big long pause. Pointless putting up a fight. Bridie is the strongest-willed person I've ever met.

I sighed. Said, 'Who is going?'

'The four of us. You, me, Treese, Jem -'

'Even Jem? He got a pass from Claudia?'

Claudia is Jem's fiancée. Very possessive of him, even though she's good-looking and thin.

'Yes, he got pass from Claudia,' Bridie said. 'I fixed her.'

Bridie and Claudia shared much mutual antipathy.

Jem was great friends with me, Bridie and Treese, but oddly he wasn't gay. Not even metrosexual. (Once he actually bought a pair of jeans in Marks & Spencer. Saw nothing wrong with it, until I gently pointed out the error of his ways.) We lived on the same road when teenagers, him and me. Bonded at cold bus stops, on rainy mornings, in duffel

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coats, on our way to college. Him to be brainy engineer, me to get diploma in fashion. (Just for the record, my duffel coat was electric-blue vinyl.)

20.35

Café Albatross

Shaky legs. Nearly fell down the stairs into the restaurant. Stumbled on the bottom three steps and almost made my entrance skidding across the floor on my knees like Chuck Berry. Worse, didn't care. Couldn't possibly be more of a laughing stock than I currently am. Bridie and Treese were waiting.

Bridie – like always – was working a most peculiar look. Her straight blondy-red hair was gathered into a low granny-style bun and she was sporting an astonishing green jumper – shrunken, lopsided and embroidered with tiny jockeys. The oddest taste, she always had – right from her first day at school, aged four, when she insisted on wearing tights the colour of dried blood. But she couldn't care less.

Treese, a fund-raiser for a big charity, was much more chic. Flaxen hair in screen-goddess-of-the-forties waves and wearing an impressive dress-and-jacket combo. (From Whistles but on Treese you might mistake it for Prada.) You would think if you worked for a charity you could come to work in beige cords and a hoodie but you'd be wrong. Treese's is a big charity working in the developing world (not third world, cannot say that any more, not PC). Sometimes she has to meet government ministers and ask for money, sometimes she even has to go to The Hague and ask EU for cash.

I asked, 'Where's Jem?'

Was sure he had cancelled because it was a very rare occasion when all four of us managed to get together, even

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when the arrangement was made several weeks in advance, never mind a mere matter of hours, as in this case. (Had to admit that in recent months I'd been the worst offender.)

'Here he is now!' Bridie said.

Jem, rushing, briefcase, raincoat, pleasant roundy face.

Wine ordered. Drink flowed. Tongues loosened. As I said, I'd always suspected that my friends didn't like Paddy. But now that he had publicly shamed me, they could speak freely.

'Never trusted him,' Jem said. 'He was too charming.'

'Too charming?' I said. 'How can you say he was too charming? Charming is a wonderful thing. Like ice-cream. No such thing as too much!'

'There is,' Jem said. 'You can eat a litre carton of Chunky Monkey, then a litre carton of Cherry Garcia, then get sick.'

'Not me,' I said. 'Anyway I remember that night and it was the doobie, not the ice-cream, that made you sick.'

'He was too good-looking,' Bridie said.

Again I expressed incredulity. 'Too good-looking? How can such a thing be? It's impossible. Goes against laws of physics. Or laws of something. Laws of land, maybe.'

And had I been insulted? 'Are you saying he was too good-looking for me?'

'No!' they exclaim. 'Not!'

'You are as cute as a button,' Jem said. 'Button! Easily as good-looking as him!'

'Better!' Treese said.

'Yes, better!' Bridie said. 'Just different. He's too obvious. You look at him and think, There is a tall, dark, handsome man. Too perfect! But with you, you think, There is a very pretty, medium-height, girlish woman with a well-cut bob, lovely brown colour with bits of purple –'

'Molichino, please!'

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‘– and a very neat figure considering you’re a non-smoker. A twinkle in your eye – both eyes, in point of fact – and a small symmetrical nose.’ (Bridie was convinced her nose pointed to the left. Was envious of all those with noses poking out of their fizzes with straight-ahead precision.) ‘The more you look at you, Lola, the more attractive you get. The more you look at Paddy de Courcy, the less attractive he gets. Have I left anything out?’ she asked Treese and Jem.

‘Her smile lights up her face,’ Jem said.

‘Yes,’ Bridie said. ‘Your smile lights up your face. Not like him.’

‘Paddy de Courcy’s a fake smiler. Like the Joker in *Batman*,’ Jem said.

‘Yes! Like the Joker in *Batman*!’

I protested, ‘He’s not like the Joker in *Batman*!’

‘Yes, he IS like the Joker in *Batman*.’ Bridie was adamant.

21.55

Bridie’s mobile rang. She looked at the number and said, ‘Must take this call.’

She got up to leave, but we indicated, Stay! Stay!

We wanted to hear. It was her boss (important banker). Sounded like he wanted to go to Milan and for Bridie to organize flights and a hotel. Bridie got a big diary out of bag. (Very nice bag. Mulberry. Why a nice bag but peculiar clothes? Makes no sense.)

‘No,’ she said to the boss. ‘You cannot go to Milan. Is your wife’s birthday tomorrow. No, not booking flights for you. Yes, refusing. You will thank me for this. Am keeping you out of the divorce courts.’

She listened a bit more, then gave very scornful laugh.

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'Sack me? Don't be so silly!' Then she hung up. 'Right,' she said. 'Where were we?'

'Bridie.' Treese sounded anxious. 'It's not right to refuse to book flights to Milan for your boss. It might be important.'

'Not!' Bridie dismissed it with a flourish of her hand. 'I know all that goes on. Situation in Milan doesn't require his presence. I suspect he has his eye on an Italian lady. Will not facilitate his philandering.'

22.43

Desserts. I ordered Banoffee pie. Bananas tasted slimy, like wet leaves in November. I threw down my spoon and spat the bananas into my napkin. Bridie tried my pie. Said it wasn't slimy. Nothing like wet leaves in November. Treese tried it. Said it wasn't slimy. Jem tried it. Said it wasn't slimy. He finished it. As compensation, he offered me his cold chocolate slab. But it tasted like chocolate-flavoured lard. Bridie tried it. Said it didn't taste like chocolate-flavoured lard. Chocolate, yes, but lard, no. Treese concurred. So did Jem.

Bridie offered me her apple tart, but the pastry tasted of damp cardboard and the apple pieces like dead things. Others did not concur.

Treese didn't offer me her dessert because she had no dessert to offer – once upon a time, she'd been a tubster and now tried to stay away from sugar. It was okay to eat other people's desserts but not to order one for herself.

Her overeating was mostly under control now but she could still have bad days. Example, if stressed at work because she'd been turned down by the EU for a grant for latrines in Addis Ababa, she could eat up to twenty Mars bars in one go. (Could possibly manage more but the woman

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in the shop beside her office won't sell them to her. She says to Treese, 'You've had enough, love.' Like a kindly publican. She says, 'You worked hard to lose all that weight, Treese, love, you don't want be a porker again. Think of that nice husband of yours. He didn't know you when you were stout, did he?')

I decided to give up on desserts and ordered a glass of port instead.

'What's it taste of?' Bridie asked. 'Rotting ankle boots? Maggots' eyeballs?'

'Alcohol,' I said. 'It tastes of alcohol.'

After the port, had an amaretto. After the amaretto had a Cointreau.

23.30

I braced myself to be forced to attend a nightclub, so I could 'hold my head up high' there also.

But no! No mention of nightclub. Talk of taxis and work in the morning. Everyone returning to their loved ones – Bridie got married last year, Treese got married this year, Jem was living with possessive Claudia. Why go out for steak when you've hamburger at home?

Jem dropped me off in a taxi and insisted that any time I wanted to hang out with him and Claudia, I was welcome. He is lovely, Jem. A kind, kind person.

But lying, of course. Claudia doesn't like me. Not as much as she doesn't like Bridie, but still.

(Quick aside. You know how they told me Paddy was far too good-looking for me? Well, the same could be said for Claudia and Jem. Claudia is 'leggy' – marvellous word, so sixties – tanned, blonde and has breast enlargements. She is the only person I know who's actually had them done. To be fair, they aren't grotesquely large but, nonetheless, you

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can't miss them. Also I suspect her of hair extensions – one week I met her and she had shoulder-length hair, the following week it was twenty inches longer. But perhaps she had simply been taking lots of selenium.

She looks like a model. In fact, she used to be a model. Sort of. She sat on car bonnets in bikinis. She also tried to be a singer – auditioned for *You're A Star* (reality TV talent thing). She also tried to be a dancer. (On another reality TV show.) She also tried to be an actress. (Spent small fortune on headshots, but was told to piss off for being crap.) Also a rumour circulated that she had been sighted in a queue for *Big Brother* auditions but she denies that.

But am not judging. Good lord, I only came by my own career by trial and error, failing at everything else, etc. Fair play to Claudia for her have-a-go spirit.

The only reason I don't like Claudia is because she is not pleasant. She barely bothers to speak to me, Treese and especially Bridie. Her body language always says, Can't ABIDE being with you dullards. Would prefer to be in a nightclub snorting cocaine off a newsreader's thigh.

She behaves as though we would all steal Jem from under her nose, given half a chance. But she has nothing to worry about. None of us has designs on Jem. We all got off with him when we were teenagers. His face was not as round and trustworthy back then. Had slight rakish edge.

If you want my honest opinion, sometimes I worry that Claudia doesn't even like Jem. Feel she treats him like an idiotic, repeat-offender dog, who would chew good shoes and tear open goosedown pillows if he wasn't watched with a basilisk eye.

Jem is a lovely, lovely person. He deserves a lovely, lovely girlfriend.

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Final piece of information. Jem is very well paid. Am not implying anything. Just making an observation.)

23.48

Let myself into my tiny flat. I looked around at a life that amounted to nothing and thought, I am all alone. And will be for the rest of my days.

Not self-pity. Simply facing facts.

Thursday, 28 August 9.00

Phone rang. Very friendly female voice said, 'Lola, hi!'

Cautiously I said, 'Hi.'

Because it could be a client. I have to pretend I always know who they are and must never say, 'Who's that?' They like to think they are the only one. (Don't we all?)

'Lola, hi!' the female voice goes on, very friendly. 'My name is Grace. Grace Gildee. I wonder if we could have a chat.'

'Certainly,' I said. (Because thought it was woman looking to be styled.)

'About a good friend of mine,' she said. 'Believe you know him too. Paddy de Courcy?'

'Yes,' I replied, wondering what this was all about. Suddenly I got it! Oh no! 'Are you . . . a journalist?'

'Yes!' she said, like it was all okay. 'I'd love to have a chat about your relationship with Paddy.'

But Paddy had said, No talking to the press.

'Obviously we will compensate you well,' the woman says. 'Believe you've lost a couple of clients recently. Money might come in handy.'

What? Had I lost a couple of clients? News to me.

She said, 'It'll be your chance to give your side of the story. I know you feel badly betrayed by him.'

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'No, I . . .'

I was afraid. Really quite afraid. Didn't want a story about Paddy and me in the paper. I shouldn't even have admitted I knew him.

'I don't want to talk about it!'

She said, 'But you *did* have a relationship with Paddy?'

'No, I, er . . . No comment.'

Never thought I'd have a conversation where I said the words, No comment.

'I'll take that as a yes,' the Grace woman said. She laughed.

'Don't!' I said. 'Don't take it as a yes. I must go now.'

'If you change your mind,' she said, 'give me a shout. Grace Gildee. Features writer for the *Spokesman*. We'd do a lovely job.'

9.23

Call from Marcia Fitzgibbons, captain of industry and important client. 'Lola,' she said, 'I heard you were jonesing at the Harvey Nichols shoot.'

'Jonesing?' I said, high-pitched.

'Having withdrawals,' she said.

'What are you talking about?'

'I heard you were a shaking mess,' she said. 'Sweating, vomiting, unable to do a simple task like press a dress without destroying it.'

'No, no,' I insisted. 'Marcia, I mean Ms Fitzgibbons, I wasn't jonesing. All that is wrong is that my heart is broken. Paddy de Courcy is my boyfriend but he's getting married to someone else.'

'So you keep telling people, I hear. But Paddy de Courcy your boyfriend? Don't be ridiculous! You have purple hair!'

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‘Molichino,’ I cry. ‘Molichino!’

‘Cannot work with you any longer,’ she said. ‘I have strict zero-tolerance policy on druggies. You are an excellent stylist but rules are rules.’

That is why she is a captain of industry, I suppose.

Further attempts to defend myself proved futile, as she hung up on me. Time, after all, is money.

9.26

Missed my mammy very much. Could really have done with her now. I remembered when she was dying – although I didn’t really know that was what was happening, no one said as such, I just thought she needed lots of bed-rest. In the afternoons when I came home from school, I’d get into bed beside her, still in my uniform, and we’d hold hands and watch *EastEnders* repeats. I’d love to do that now, to get into bed beside her and hold hands and go to sleep for ever.

Or if only I had a big extended family who would cosset me and surround me and say, ‘Well, we love you. Even if you do know nothing about current affairs.’

But I was all alone in the world. Lola, the little orphan girl. Which was a terrible thing to say, as Dad was still alive. I could have gone and visited him in Birmingham. But I knew that would be unendurable. It would be like after Mum died and we were living side by side in a silent house, neither of us with half a clue how to operate a washing machine or roast a chicken and both of us on anti-depressants.

Even though I knew it was a pointless exercise, I rang him.

‘Hello, Dad, my boyfriend is marrying another woman.’

‘The blackguard!’

Then he gave big, long, heavy sigh and said, ‘I just want

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you to be happy, Lola. If only you could be happy, I would be happy.'

I was sorry I'd rung. I'd upset him, he takes everything so hard. And just listening to him, so obviously depressed . . . I mean, I suffered from depression too but didn't go on about it.

Also he was a liar. He wouldn't be happy if I was happy. The only thing that would make him happy would be if Mum came back.

'So how's Birmingham?' I asked.

At least I got on with my life after Mum died. At least I didn't move to Birmingham, not even Birmingham proper, which has good shops, including Harvey Nichols, but a Birmingham suburb, where nothing ever happened. He was in such a hurry to move. The minute I turned twenty-one, he was off like a shot, saying his older brother needed him; but I suspected he moved because we found it so hard being with each other. (In fairness, I must admit I was considering moving to New York myself but he saved me the bother.)

'Birmingham's grand,' he said.

'Right.'

Big, long pause.

'Well, I'll be off so,' I said. 'I love you, Dad.'

'Good girl,' he said. 'That's right.'

'And you love me too, Dad.'

18.01

I go against every one of my instincts and watch the news, hoping to see coverage from the Dail and possibly catch a glimpse of Paddy. Have to sit through terrible, terrible stuff about seventeen Nigerian men being deported even though they have Irish children; and European nations dumping their

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rubbish mountains in third world countries (and yes, they said 'third world', not 'developing world').

Kept waiting for Dail report, for pictures of fat, red-faced, corrupt-looking men standing in a room with a blue carpet, shouting Rawlawlaw! at each other. But it never came.

Too late I remembered it was the summer holidays and they wouldn't be back in session (or whatever they call it) until two weeks before Christmas. When they would have to break for Christmas. Lazies.

Before I turned the telly off, my attention was caught by an item about the Cavan to Dublin road being closed because a lorry carrying six thousand hens had overturned and all the hens had got loose. The screen was full of hens. I wondered if my grief was inducing hallucinations. Hens are funny things to hallucinate about, though. I looked away, squeezed my eyes tightly shut, then opened them and looked at the telly again and the screen was still full of hens. Marauding gangs making for the open road, a great swathe of them disappearing over a hill to freedom, locals stealing them, carrying them away by their legs, a man with a microphone trying to talk to the camera but up to his knees in moving sea of rust-coloured feathers.

18.55

I can't stop ringing Paddy. It's like OCD. Like washing hands constantly. Or eating cashew nuts. Once I start, I can't stop.

He never answered and he never rang back. Was aware I was debasing myself but couldn't stop. I longed for him. Yearned for him.

If I could just speak to him! Maybe I wouldn't get him to change his mind but I could get answers to questions. Like,

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why did he make me feel so special? Why was he so possessive of me? When there was another woman all along.

There was a horrible niggling feeling that this was my own fault. How could I have believed that a man as handsome and charismatic as Paddy would take a person like me seriously?

I felt so very, very stupid. And the thing was, I wasn't stupid. *Shallow, yes, but not stupid.* There was a big difference. Just because I loved clothes and fashion didn't mean I was a thicke. May not have known who the president of Bolivia was but I had emotional intelligence. Or at least, had thought I had. I always gave great advice on other people's lives. (Only on request. Not uninvited. That would be rude.) But clearly I'd had no right to. Cobblers' children, etc., etc.

Friday, 29 August

The worst week of my life continues with no respite.

At a photo-shoot for author Petra McGillis, I'd staggered along to the studio with three massive suitcases of clothes I'd called in according to Petra's specifications, but when I opened them up she said, outraged, 'I said no colours! I said neutrals, camels, toffees, that sort of thing!' She turned on a woman whom I later discovered was her editor and said, 'Gwendoline, what are you trying to turn me into? Pistachio green? I am NOT a pistachio-green author!'

The poor editor insisted she was not trying to turn the author into anything, certainly not a pistachio-green person. She said that Petra had talked to the stylist (me) and told her her requirements and that no one had interfered.

Petra insisted, 'But I said, "No colours!" I was quite specific. I never wear colours! I am a serious writer.'

Suddenly everyone was looking at me – the photographer,

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the make-up artist, the art director, the caterer, a post-man delivering a parcel. It's her fault, they all accused me with their eyes. That stylist. She thinks Petra McGillis is a pistachio-green person.

And they were right to accuse me. No way could I blame Nkechi. It was me who had taken the call, and when Petra had said, 'No colours!' my scrambled brain must have heard, 'I love colours!'

It had never happened to me before. I was usually so good at channelling the clients' requirements that they tried to steal the garments from the shoot and got me into trouble with press office.

'I'll wear my own bloody clothes,' Petra said, tightly and tetchily.

Resourceful Nkechi made many calls, seeking an emergency care package of neutral-coloured garments, but none was available.

At least she tried, all the accusing faces said silently. That Nkechi is mere assistant but she showed more gumption than the stylist herself.

I should have left there and then, as I was no use to anyone. But for the rest of shoot (three hours), I stood by, smiling gamely, trying to bring the twitch in my lip under control. Now and then, I'd nip forward to adjust Petra's collar, to pretend I had a reason for existing, but it was a disaster, a horrible, horrible disaster.

I'd spent a long time building up my career. Was it all to be destroyed in a matter of days, because of Paddy de Courcy?

Hard to care, though. All I was interested in was how to get him back. Or failing that, how to endure the rest of my life without him. Yes, I sounded like overblown Gothic-type

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person, but really, if you'd met him . . . In person he was so much more good-looking and charismatic than on telly. He made you feel like you were the only person in the world, and he smelt so nice that after I first met him I bought his aftershave (Baldessini) and although he brought an extra-special additional de Courcy ingredient to the mix, one whiff was enough to make me feel tunnel-visiony, like I was about to faint.

15.15

Another call from this Grace Gildee journalist. Pushy. How did she get my number in the first place? And how did she know Marcia Fitzgibbons was going to sack me? In fact, I thought about asking her who else was going to sack me, but desisted.

After a certain amount of pussy-footing (on my part) she offered five grand for my story. A lot of money. Styling was an uncertain business. You could have twelve jobs one week and none at all for the rest of month. But I was not tempted.

However – I was not complete fool, despite feeling like one – I rang Paddy and left a message. ‘A journalist called Grace Gildee offered me lots of money to talk about our relationship. What should I do?’

He rang back so fast I had barely hung up.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ he said. ‘I’m a public figure. I’ve a career.’

Always about him and his career.

‘I’ve a career too, you know,’ I reminded him. ‘And it’s going down the Swanee due to my broken heart.’

‘Don’t let it,’ he said, in a kindly manner. ‘I’m not worth it.’

‘She offered me five grand.’

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'Lola.' His voice was persuasive. 'Don't sell your soul for money, you're not that kind of girl. You and I, we had good times together. Let's preserve the memory. And you know that if you're ever stuck for a few quid, I'll help out.'

I didn't know what to say. Although he was behaving like a supportive friend, was he, in fact, offering to pay me to keep shtum?

'There's plenty I could tell Grace Gildee,' I said bravely.

A different voice from him this time. Low, cold. 'Like fucking what?'

Less confidently I said, '... The ... things you bought me. The games we played ...'

'Let's make one thing clear, Lola.' Arctic tones. 'You talk to no one, especially not her.' Then he said, 'Must go. I'm in the middle of something. Take care of yourself.'

Gone!

20.30

A night in with Bridie and Treese in Treese's big house in Howth. Treese's new husband Vincent was away. I was secretly glad. I never feel welcome when he's there. Always feel he's thinking, What are these strangers doing in my house?

He never joins in. He'll come into the room and nod hello, but only because he wants to ask Treese where his dry-cleaning is; then he goes off to do something more important than spend time with his wife's friends.

He calls Treese by her proper name, Teresa, like it wasn't our friend he married but a different woman altogether.

He is quite elderly. Thirteen years older than Treese. On his second marriage. His first wife and three young children are stashed somewhere. He is a big cheese in the Irish rugby

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organization. In fact, used to play for Ireland and he knows everything about everything. No room for discussion with Vincent. He says one sentence and the entire conversation shuts down.

He has a rugby-player physique – muscles, wideness, thighs so enormous he has to walk in a strange side-to-side, just-got-off-a-horse motion. Many women – indeed Treese obviously does; she married him, after all – might find this comely. But not me. He is too butty and . . . wide. He eats phenomenal quantities and weighs about forty stone, but – I want to be fair – he isn't fat. Just . . . compacted. Very dense, like he's spent time living in a black hole. His neck is the circumference of a rain barrel and he has a stunningly enormous head. Also big hair. Gak.

21.15

Food was delicious. Treese had done a course in classical French cuisine so she could cook the type of food Vincent's rugby cronies expected. I ate two mouthfuls, then my stomach contracted into a tiny walnut and I had the taste of sick in my mouth.

Bridie was wearing her peculiar green jumper again. Even though I was obsessed with myself and my pain, I couldn't stop looking at it. As before, it was lopsided, shrunken and embroidered with jockeys. What was that all about?

I wondered if I should say something? But she liked it. She *must*. Otherwise why would she wear it? So why burst her bubble?

23.59

Many bottles of wine later, although not ones from the bottom shelf, as they are Vincent's special ones and he would be annoyed if we drank them.

'Stay the night,' Treese said to me.

Treese had four spare rooms.

'You have a dream life,' Bridie said. 'Rich husband, fabulous house, lovely clothes . . .'

'And the first wife always asking for money! And bratty stepchildren giving me the evils. And terrible worry . . .'

'About what?'

'That my eating disorder will kick in again and I'll balloon to eighteen stone and have to be cut out of the house and taken away on a flatbed truck and Vincent won't love me any more.'

'Of course he will love you! No matter what!'

But, in a secret little chamber in my heart, where I thought my darkest thoughts, I wasn't so sure. Vincent did not jettison his first wife and children in order to shack up with Jabba the Hutt.

0.27

Tucked up in Number One Spare Room. Softest pillow I'd ever laid my head on; magnificent, carved, antique French bed; brocade chairs with bandy legs; mirrors of Murano glass; weighty, lined curtains in luxurious fabric; and the sort of wallpaper you only get in hotels.

'Look, Treese,' I said. 'The carpet is the exact same colour as your hair! It's beautiful, beautiful, everything's beautiful . . .'

I was quite drunk, in retrospect.

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'Sleep tight,' Treese said. 'Don't let bugs bite and don't wake at four thirty-six a.m. and decide to sneak out and drive over to Paddy's flat to throw stones at his windows and shout abuse about Alicia Thornton.'

4.36

I awake. I decide to sneak out and drive over to Paddy's flat to throw stones at his windows and shout abuse about Alicia Thornton ('Alicia Thornton's mother blows the parish priest!' 'Alicia Thornton doesn't wash her lady-bits!' 'Alicia Thornton's father is cruel to the family Labrador!'). But when I opened Treese's front door, alarm siren started screeching, searchlights snapped on, and there was the distant sound of dogs barking. Was half expecting a helicopter to appear overhead when Treese came floating down the stairs in a silky, shell-pink negligee (nightdress) and matching peignoir (dressing gown), searchlights glinting silver on her shiny pale coiffeur (hair).

Calmly she chastised me. 'You promised you wouldn't. Now you are snared. Return to bed!'

Red-faced.

Treese reset alarm, then glided back up the stairs.

Saturday, 30 August 12.10

At home

Bridie rang. After an enquiry about my well-being, a strange little silence ensued. Expectant almost.

Then she asked, 'Did you like green jumper I was wearing Wednesday night and last night?'

I could hardly reply, No, it was the strangest thing I've seen in a long, long time.

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I said, 'Lovely!' Then, 'Er . . . new?'

'Yes.' Bridie sounded almost shy. Then she blurted out, like someone with a big, thrilling secret, 'Moschino!'

Moschino!

I had thought perhaps she had purchased it at a sale-of-work at her local lunatic asylum! Good job I didn't say so.

Although I wouldn't. Not my way. Mum always told me that if I couldn't say something nice, to say nothing at all.

'Where did you buy it, Bridie?' I was wondering how, with my encyclopaedic knowledge of clothing, I'd never before come across this item.

'On eBay.'

Cripes! Perhaps fake!

'It cost me a fortune, Lola. But worth it. Worth it, yes?'

'Oh yes, yes, worth it! Jockeys very . . . um . . . fashion-forward.'

'I noticed you looking at it, Lola.'

Oh yes, I was looking all right.

Sunday, 31 August

Articles about Paddy in all the newspapers. I bought several. (Was surprised by how cheap newspapers are compared to magazines. Good value. Funny the things you notice even when your life has fallen apart.) But the articles said nothing really. Just that he was a hunky ride, the poster boy for Irish politics.

There was no mention of me in any article. I should have felt relieved – at least Paddy wouldn't be annoyed – but instead I felt bereft, like I didn't exist.

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Monday, 1 September 10.07

A call from *Irish Tatler* cancelling a job next week. The message was clear: no one likes a stylist who destroys the collections. Word gets round.

10.22

Mobile rang. Thought I recognized number, wasn't sure, then realized it was that Grace Gildee journalist woman again. Hounding me! I didn't pick up, but listened to the message. She was pushing for a face-to-face meeting and offering more money. Seven grand. She laughed and accused me of playing hardball. But I wasn't playing any kind of ball! Just wanted to be left in peace!

Tuesday, 2 September

Worst blow to date. Alicia Thornton was on the front cover of *VIP*, with the headline, 'How I won Quicksilver's heart'.

The nice man in the newsagent's gave me a glass of water and let me sit on his stool for a little while, until the dizziness passed.

Twelve pages of photos. Paddy was wearing make-up in them. Silicon-based foundation, with silicon-based primer, so that he looked plastic, like a Ken-doll.

I didn't know who had styled the shoot, but they'd had a very definite brief. Alicia (tall, thin, blonde bob, quite horsey-looking, but not in nice way, not like Sarah Jessica Parker, more like Celine Dion. Neigh!) in a cream tweed Chanel dress and jacket. Paddy in a statesman-like suit (Zegna? Ford? Couldn't be sure) sitting at a mahogany desk, holding a silver pen like he was about to sign an important treaty, Alicia standing behind him, her hand on his shoulder, in a supportive-wife pose. Then, Paddy and Alicia in evening wear.

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Paddy in black tie and Alicia in a long, red, off-the-shoulder MaxMara. Red not her colour. Also a small glimpse of stubble under her right arm.

Worst of all, Paddy and Alicia in matching chambray jeans, polo-shirts with collars turned up, cable-knit jumpers slung around their necks and HOLDING TENNIS RACKETS! Like a cheap mail-order catalogue.

These photos managed, despite Paddy being the most handsome man alive, to make him look like a male model down on his luck.

The interview said they had known each other since they were teenagers, but had been seeing each other romantically, 'in a low-key' fashion, for the past seven months. Past seven months! I had been seeing him 'in a low-key' fashion for the past sixteen months! And no wonder he said we should be 'low-key'. He said life (mine) would be a living hell if I appeared at his side at official shindigs and red-carpet events. The press would torment me and I'd be obliged to wear a full face of make-up at all times, even when asleep, to avoid photos captioned with, 'Paddy's girl is spotty minger'. (During the summer there had been two mentions of me in gossip columns but Paddy's press office said I was helping him with clothing, and everyone seemed to believe that.) I had honestly thought he was thinking of my best interests. Instead he was keeping Alicia, his 'soul friend' (that's what he said in the interview), from finding out about me. How thick am I?

Later Tuesday

VIP photo-shoot was the final blow. I spent the day analysing the photos and brooding. What had this Alicia Thornton got that I hadn't? I was flicking through the pages, studying the

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pictures of him and her, searching for clues. Again and again. Trying to believe this was real. But I ended up staring at them too much so that it didn't look like him any more, the way if you stare at your own face in the mirror for too long, it goes weird, almost scary.

Even later Tuesday

Angry. Thinking dark, bitter thoughts. Full of bad, burny feeling. Breathless. Suddenly I dashed *VIP* magazine to the floor and thought, I deserve answers!

Drove to Paddy's apartment and rang bell. Rang it and rang it and rang it and rang it and rang it. Nothing happened but I decided, To hell with it, I'll stay! I'll wait until he comes back. Even if I have to wait a number of days. A couple of weeks, even. He'll have to come home eventually.

Bad, burny feeling made me strong and I felt I could wait for ever. If necessary.

I made plans. I rang Bridie and asked her to bring a sleeping bag and sandwiches. Also a flask of soup. 'But not minestrone,' I said. 'Nothing with lumps.'

'What?' she asked, incredulous. 'You are camped outside de Courcy's flat?'

'Must you dramatize everything?' I said. 'I'm just waiting for him to come home. But it may take a few days. So, like I said, a sleeping bag, sandwiches and soup. And remember: nothing with lumps.'

She was squawking about being worried about me and I had to hang up. Short of patience.

Time passed. Bad, burny feelings keeping me focused. I was unaware of discomfort, cold and need for loo. Like a Buddhist monk.

Intermittently I rang Paddy's bell, as much for something

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to do as anything else. Then I realized bad, burny feelings must have abated slightly as I was finding this quite boring. I rang Bridie again. Asked, 'Could you also bring the new *InStyle*, a sudoku book and my biography of Diana Vreeland?'

'No!' she said. 'Lola, please! Please come away from there. You have lost your reason.'

'On the contrary,' I said. 'I've never been so sane in my life!'

'Lola, you are *stalking* him. He's a public figure, you could get into trouble! You could –'

Had to hang up again. I didn't savour being rude but I had no choice.

Entertained myself by ringing Paddy's doorbell a few more times, then my mobile rang. It was Bridie! She was at the gate! She couldn't get in because she didn't know the code!

'Have you a sleeping bag?' I asked her. 'And soup in a flask?'

'No.'

'Is Barry with you?' (Barry was her husband.)

'Yes, Barry's here beside me. You like Barry, don't you?'

Yes, but I had visions of her and Barry manhandling me into their car and driving me away. Not having it.

'Lola, please let us in.'

'No,' I said. 'Sorry.'

Then I switched my mobile off.

I continued to ring Paddy's bell, not expecting any result, when, all of sudden, the outline of a man appeared behind the textured glass door.

It was him! It was him! He'd been there all along! I was relieved, excited – then darker thoughts occurred: Why didn't he come down before now? Why must he further humiliate me?

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But it wasn't him at all! Instead it was Spanish John, his driver. Knew him well because he sometimes collected and delivered me to Paddy. Although he had never been less than cordial to me, was quite frightened of him. A big, bulky type, who looked as if he could snap your neck in two as if it were a chicken wing in barbecue sauce.

'Spanish John,' I beseeched, 'I need to see Paddy. Let me in, I'm begging you.'

He shook head and rumbled, 'Go home, Lola.'

'Is she up there with him?' I asked.

Spanish John was a master of discretion (and not Spanish). All he said was, 'Come on, Lola, I'll drop you home.'

'She is up there!'

Gently, almost kindly, he steered me away from the door and towards Paddy's Saab.

'It's okay,' I said huffily. 'I've my own car, I can drive myself.'

'Good luck, Lola,' he said. With finality.

Such finality emboldened me to ask the question which I'd always wanted to know the answer to.

'By the way,' I said, 'I've always wondered. Why do they call you Spanish John when you're not Spanish?'

For a moment I thought he would step forward and do a very painful karate chop on me, then he seemed to relent. 'Just look at me.' He pointed to his red hair, white fizzog and many freckles. 'Did you ever see anyone who looks less Spanish?'

'Ah.' I understood. 'Irony?'

'Or possibly sarcasm. Never sure of distinction.'

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Tuesday night, later still

That was it, had been turned away from Paddy's door, like a smelly beggar.

Sanity returned like a bucket of cold water thrown in my face and I was scandalized by my behaviour. I'd been like a mentally ill person. *Deranged*. Stalking Paddy. Yes, Bridie was right. *Stalking* him.

And I was appalled at the way I'd treated Bridie. Asking for a flask of *soup*. Where would Bridie get soup? Then refusing to tell her the *gate code* and hanging up on her. Bridie was a concerned friend!

I saw how mad I'd been, and the worst thing of all – while in the grip of my lunacy, I'd been convinced that I was perfectly sane. The final blow.

Couldn't go on like this, not eating, not sleeping, making a shambles of work, treating friends like servants and driving around the city without due care and attention . . .

I drove to Bridie's house. She was in her pyjamas and glad to see me.

I apologized profusely for the sleeping-bag business, then the gate-code business.

'Accepted,' Bridie said. 'Accepted. So what's up?'

'I've made a decision,' I said. 'Have decided to pack up my life and move to the end of the earth. To a place with no reminders of Paddy. You have a globe, haven't you?'

'Er, yes . . .'

(From studying geography when she was at school. She never throws anything away.)

On Bridie's globe the end of the earth (from Ireland) was New Zealand. Fine. That would do. I believed they had lovely scenery. I could go on a *Lord of the Rings* tour.

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But Bridie was the voice of reason. 'New Zealand is costly to get to,' she said. 'Also very far away.'

'But that is the very point,' I said. 'I have to get far away from here, so I don't see Alicia's picture every time I go to buy a bar of chocolate, or hear about Paddy on evening news, not that I watch evening news – God, it's so depressing, apart from that thing about the hens, did you see it?'

'What about Uncle Tom's cabin?' Barry suggested. Barry was also in his pyjamas.

Uncle Tom's cabin was a holiday home that Bridie's uncle Tom had in County Clare. Had been there for Treese's hen weekend. Broke many things. (Not me personally, just between the lot of us.)

'That's remote,' Barry said.

'It doesn't even have telly!' Bridie agreed. 'But if you go mental all on your own, you can be home in three hours, since they've opened the Kildare bypass.'

(The Kildare bypass is the best thing to ever happen to Bridie's extended family, as many of them live in Dublin but love Uncle Tom's cabin. It knocks forty-five minutes off the drive, Bridie's dad says. But what do I care? I am thirty-one and, if I don't kill myself, am likely to live another forty years. I can spend all that time sitting in a traffic jam outside Kildare and it will make no difference to anything.)

'Thank you for kindly offer,' I said. 'But I can't stay in Uncle Tom's cabin for ever. Some of your family might want to use it.'

'They won't, it's the end of the summer. Look,' she said. 'Your heart is broken and you feel like you'll never get over it. But you will and then you'll be sorry you moved to New Zealand and threw away your business here. Why not go to

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Clare for a couple of weeks to recuperate? Get Nkechi to keep things ticking over at work. How's your schedule at the moment? Busy?

'No.' Not just because jobs kept being cancelled, but because of the time of year. I'd finished all the autumn/winter wardrobes for private clients – busy, rich women, who had no time to shop but needed to look stylish, businesslike, pulled-together. The next demanding time would be the Christmas party season, which kicked off the minute Halloween was out of the way. There was no need to start on it for a couple of weeks. I mean, there was always work which could be done. I could be taking buyers from Brown Thomas and Costume and other good shops to lunch so they would earmark their best dresses for me and not for other stylists. Cut-throat business, styling. Really vicious. Only so many good clothes to go around and the competition is fierce. People don't realize. They think it's all great girly fun, wafting around with expensive frocks, making everyone look fabulous. Far from it.

Bridie said, 'And when you come back, if things are as bad as ever, then you can go to New Zealand.'

'I know when I am being humoured, Bridie. The laugh will be on other side of your fizzog when I am living in a nice little house in Rotorua. However, I will accept your kindly offer.'

Even later still

Driving home

Suddenly realized that Bridie's pyjamas were not in fact pyjamas but strange 'leisure' pants for lounging in at home. Mail-order. Would swear to it. Under normal circumstances the shock would have swerved me off the road and straight

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into a pole. Even as things were, I was pretty disturbed. Next she'll be wearing them out in public. She needed to be taken in hand. Barry should have a word but, now that I remembered, he was also wearing a pair. He was her enabler. She would never get help as long as he was encouraging her.

Wednesday, 3 September 10.00

Went to my 'office' (Martine's Patisserie). I would have worked from home but my home was too small. That was the price you paid for living in the city centre. (Another price was drunken men having grunty wrestling matches outside your bedroom window at 4 a.m.)

I ordered hot chocolate and an apricot Danish. Normally I loved apricot Danishes so much, I had to ration myself. I could eat ten in a row, no bother. But today the jammy glaze looked revolting and the apricot stared up at me like a baleful eye. Had to push it away. I took a sip of my hot chocolate and immediately wanted to vomit.

Bell tinged. The arrival of Nkechi. Everyone looked. Plenty to look at. Nigerian, excellent posture, braids hanging all the way down her back, very long legs, then a really quite large bottom perched on top of them. But Nkechi never tried to hide her bottom. She was proud of it. Fascinating to me. Irish girls' lives were a constant quest for bottom-disguising or bottom-reducing clothing tactics. We can learn much from other cultures.

Nkechi, although young (twenty-three), is a genius. Like the time Rosalind Croft (wife of dodgy rich bloke Maxwell Croft) was going to a benefit dinner at the Mansion House. The neckline on her dress was so fashion-forward that none of the jewellery was working with it. We tried everything. A nightmare! Mrs Croft was about to ring up and cancel, when

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Nkechi said, 'I have it!' And whipped off her scarf, her own scarf (that she bought in a charity shop for 3 euro), draped it around Mrs Croft's neck and saved the day.

'Nkechi,' I said. 'I am going to take a couple of weeks off and go down to Uncle Tom's cabin.'

Nkechi familiar with same. She was there for Treese's hen night. Now that I thought of it, she broke the toaster, trying to fit in an entire bagel. Quite spectacular carnage. Black smoke started spewing from the side of toaster, followed by a big whoosh of flame. Also she broke a ceramic dolphin which had been in Bridie's family for thirty-eight years. She'd been dancing drunkenly and did a big high kick which sent the dolphin flying, like a rugby ball over the bar, into a wall, where it smashed into smithereens. But it was a hen night, these things happen. At least no one ended up in hospital. Not like at Bridie's hen night.

I said, 'I know it sounds dramatic, packing up my life, but really, Nkechi, the state of me. I can't work, can't sleep, my digestive system's in flitters.'

She said, 'I think it's good idea. Take yourself out of circulation for while, before you damage our reputation even further.'

An awkward little silence ensued.

Just one slight quibble about Nkechi – she's an excellent stylist, really really excellent, but slightly lacking in TLC. Part of a stylist's job is to prevent the client going out looking like a total tit. It's our job to protect them from the gossip columnists' harsh comments. If the client has a wrinkly décolletage, we steer them away from plunging necklines. If they have knees like a bloodhound's jowls, we suggest floor-length gowns. But subtly. Kindly.

However, Nkechi wasn't always as diplomatic as I would

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have preferred. For example, the time she was dressing SarahJane Hutchinson. Poor woman. Her husband had left her for a young Asian boy. Public humiliation. This was the first charity event she was attending as a deserted wife so it was important that she looked and felt good. She tried on a very pretty strapless Matthew Williamson, but it was obvious it wasn't working. Everything going south. I was just about to tactfully suggest a Roland Mouret (gave much more support, had built-in but hidden corset) when Nkechi exclaimed, 'You can't go out with those bingo wings! You need sleeves, girlfriend!'

I said, 'Nkechi, I would appreciate it if you could take over the reins for the short time I'll be away.'

'Sure,' she says. 'Take over. Will do.'

I tried to swallow away my anxiety. Everything was under control. Nkechi would do it well.

Possibly too well.

I didn't like the way she said, 'Take over.'

'Nkechi,' I say, 'you are a genius. You will go on to be a brilliant stylist, possibly the greatest of us all. But for the moment, just keep things ticking over. Please do not do a putsch on me while I'm gone. Please do not set up on your own. Please do not poach my richest clients. Be my friend. Remember: your name means "loyal" in Igbo.'

10.47

Trailing dispiritedly home to pack when I see someone waiting outside my building. A woman. Tall, jeans, boots, hoodie, short spiky blonde hair. Leaning against railings, smoking. Two men passed her and said something. Her response was carried to me on the air. *Go fuck yourselves.*

Who was she? What fresh hell? Then I knew! It was that

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journalist, Grace Gildee! I was being door-stepped, like . . . like a drug baron or . . . or . . . a paedophile!

I paused in my tracks. Where should I go? Flee, flee! But flee where? I had a perfect right to go to my flat. After all, I lived there.

Too late! She'd seen me!

'Lola?' Smiling, smiling, speedily stubbing out her cigarette with a nifty swivel of her ankle.

'Hi!'

Extending her hand. 'Grace Gildee. Lovely to meet you.'

Her warm, smooth hand was in mine before I could stop it.

'No,' I said, jerking my hand away. 'Leave me alone. I'm not talking to you.'

'Why?' she asked.

I ignored her and fumbled in my bag for my keys. Fully intended not to make eye contact but, against my will, found myself looking straight into her face.

Up close, I could see she wasn't wearing make-up. Unusual. But she had no need to. Very attractive in a tomboy sort of way. Hazel-coloured eyes and a scatter of freckles across nose. The kind of woman who could run out of shampoo and have no problem washing hair with washing-up liquid. Good in an emergency, I suspected.

'Lola,' she says, 'you can trust me.'

'You can trust me!' I exclaimed. 'You're a cliché!'

Nonetheless, something about her. Persuasive.

In a soft voice, she said, 'You really can trust me. I'm not like other journalists. I know what he's like.'

I stopped twirling my hand around the hidden depths of my bag, seeking my keys. I was mesmerized. Like being hypnotized by a snake.

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'I've known him half his life,' she said.

All of sudden, I wanted to put my head on the shoulder of her hoodie and sob and let her stroke my hair.

But that was what she would have wanted. That's what they all do, journalists. Pretend they're your friends. Like the time SarahJane Hutchinson was interviewed at the Children at Risk Ball. The journalist woman was all lovely, asking where SarahJane got her gorgeous dress. And her delicious jewellery. And who did her hair? *Trust me, trust me, trust me.* Then the headline was:

Mutton Dressed As Pig

What forty-something, recently deserted wife has lost the run of herself? Running around town dressed in her teenage daughter's clothes. A bid to recapture lost youth? Or a bid to recapture lost husband? Forget it, babes. Either way, it ain't working.

My hand closed over my keys. Thank God. I had to get into my flat. I had to get away from this Grace Gildee.

17.07

Arrive in Knockavoy! Uncle Tom's cabin is in a field, a short way outside town.

I drove down the bumpy boreen and parked in the gravel patch outside the front door.

Lime-washed cottage. Thick lumpy walls. Small windows. Red-painted latched door. Deep window ledges. Charming.

I got out of the car and was nearly blown away. Had a vision of being picked up and twirled high into the sky and out over the bay, then dashed to a watery grave in the

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Atlantic waves. Paddy would be sorry then. Would rue the day he ever heard of Alicia Thornton.

Go on, wind, I begged. Take me!

I stood with my eyes scrunched shut and my arms outstretched invitingly, but nothing happened. Annoying.

Leaning into the wind, I battled towards the front door. The air was riddled with sea salt. My hair would be destroyed. Although was very proud of my Molichino highlights, had to admit they made hair prone to dullness and breaking. Hoped they had deep-conditioning treatment in the local chemist. Cripes! Hoped there was a local chemist. All I remembered from every other visit was pubs, many pubs, and a nightclub so extraordinarily bad it was hilarious.

I unlocked the adorable red door and the force of the wind made it fly back against the wall with an almighty bang. Dragged bags in across the flagstones. Was I imagining it or did the house still smell of smoke from the broken toaster even though several months had elapsed since the hen night?

There was one big living room, with sofas and rugs and a big open fire with rocking chairs in the alcove. The back windows looked out over fields, then the Atlantic, maybe a hundred yards away. Actually I'm just making that bit up, I had no idea how far away the sea was. Only men could do things like that. 'Half a mile.' 'Fifty yards.' Giving directions, that sort of thing. I could look at a woman and say, '36C.' Or, 'Let's try it in next size up.' But I had no idea how far away Uncle Tom's sea was except that I wouldn't want to walk to it in high heels.

In the kitchen there were scorch marks on the wall behind the (new) toaster, a table with a cherry-patterned oil-cloth cover, six hard wooden chairs, yellow free-standing

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cupboards, like from a kitchen of the 1950s, and old, mismatched delph, many with faded floral patterns. The kitchen windows also looked towards the sea. I shut my left eye and squinted out at it. Still had no idea how far away it was.

My mobile rang. Bridie. 'How was the drive?'

'Good, fine,' I said. Hard to be enthusiastic.

'How long did it take?'

I couldn't remember. I hadn't been paying attention. But she had told me to time the journey. So I said, just off the top of my head, 'Two hours, forty minutes.'

She whistled and said, 'That's the fastest yet. I have to go, have to tell Dad. He managed two hours fifty in July but that was at half five in the morning. He'll be upset to have been bested. Especially by a girl.'

'Don't tell him, then,' I said. 'Why upset him? There's enough upset in the world.'

17.30

Upstairs there were three bedrooms. I chose the middle-sized one. Wasn't so up myself that I had to pick the biggest but self-esteem was not so low that I automatically gravitated to the smallest. (Good sign.) A double bed, but very narrow. How did people cope in the olden days? Was not exactly a fatso (although would have liked a much, much smaller bottom) but there was really only room for me in it. The frame of the bed was iron and at first glance the quilt looked like patchwork and I was charmed. Then I took a closer look. Not patchwork at all. Fake patchwork business that cost a tenner in Penneys. All the same, looked good from a distance.

The same white lumpy walls as downstairs and two small

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windows with red-painted frames. Cheery. With flowery curtains. Cosy.

I opened my suitcase. Shock. The clothing I'd packed was evidence of my unsettled mental state. Nothing practical. No jeans. No boots. Foolish! Was living in a field! Needed mucker-style clothing! Instead had brought dresses, spangles, ostrich feather boa! Where did I think I'd be going? The only thing that might be useful was a pair of wellingtons. Did it matter that they were pink? Did it make them any less practical?

I hung my impractical clothing in the mahogany wardrobe. Carved. Curved. Solid. Flyblown mirror on the front. Looked antique. You'd pay a fortune for that in Dublin.

18.23

Back downstairs I noticed a telly in the corner! Quite annoyed with Bridie! Rang her.

'There's a telly here! You said there was no telly!'

'It's not a telly,' she said.

'It looks like a telly!'

But, worried, I had to go closer and crouch down and check. Was I so distraught that I'd mistaken something else for telly? A microwave, perhaps?

'Yes,' she said. 'It's *physically* a telly. But it's not connected.'

'So what's the point, then?'

'You can watch DVDs on it.'

'Where will I get DVDs?'

'In the DVD shop.'

'I am a long way from a DVD shop.'

'You're not. The supermarket on main street has a good choice. Up to date.'

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'Okay. So . . . ah . . . any news?'

I meant, any news about Paddy?

'You've only been gone a couple of hours,' she said.

But had detected hesitation in her delivery. 'There is news,' I cried. 'Please tell me!'

'No,' she said. 'You've gone down there to escape from news!'

'Please tell me! Now that I know there is news, I must know. I will die if I don't know. I won't ask again, but I need to know now.'

She sighed. Said, 'Okay. In the evening paper. Date set. Wedding to be held in March. Reception in the K Club.'

Two thoughts. First one: March a long, long way away. He might change his mind. And second thought: 'The K Club? Only horsey types have their wedding reception in the K Club. He's not a horsey type. Is she?'

Bridie said, 'Well, she looks like one. A horse, I mean.'

Bridie, loyal friend.

'But don't think she is a horsey type,' she said.

I said, 'Everyone knows it's not on to hold your wedding reception in the K Club if you're not a horsey Kildare type.'

'Is tacky,' Bridie said.

'Yes, is tacky.'

18.37

Nice little town. Plenty of people about. A lot going on. More than I'd remembered. Hotel, one (small). Pubs, many. Supermarket, one. Boutiques, one. (Awful – Aran ganzies, tweed capes, crocheted bobble hats. Aimed at tourists.) Chipper, one. Surf shops, two! Internet café, one. (Yes, I know. Unexpected.) Huxtery, all-purpose, seaside-town shop, selling Jackie Collins novels, souvenirs and ashtrays

Copyrighted Material

shaped like toilets, with writing, 'Rest Your Weary Ash' (criminal!), one.

Decision. Would have my evening meal in a pub. I had no one to talk to, but I had a magazine to hide behind. All pubs advertised food so decided to choose one at random and take a chance it wasn't the place we got barred from on Treese's hen night.

(Hen nights should be banned. You're honour-bound to behave atrociously, then feel terribly ashamed afterwards. Didn't remember much of Treese's, except that the ten of us – only eight actually, as Treese had passed out in the cottage and never made it to town and Jill was in the pub toilet, collapsed on the floor – draped ourselves all over the barman, pulling at him and saying, 'Oh baby! You drive me wild!' And stuff like that. Had a vague memory of the barman begging, 'Come on now, girls. Cut it out. Is a family pub! Am asking nicely.' Remember he had seemed on the verge of tears.)

Opened the door of a place called the Dungeon and a knot of hostile male fizzogs glared up like creatures disturbed under a rock. An impression of red eyes, pointy chins and smell of sulphur. Like the video of 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. Recoiled.

Next pub, the Oak, bright lighting, upholstered seating, family groups eating chicken nuggets. Safer. No one glared.

Took a seat and a barman came over and asked, 'Have you decided?'

Realized perhaps he wasn't Irish – non-Irish accent, toffee-coloured skin, black hair and eyes like raisins (actually that makes them sound small and shrivelled, which was not the case at all. Big dark eyes. If looking for comparison to

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dried fruit, the best description was, eyes like prunes. But could not say that as prunes had unfortunate connotations, putting everyone in mind of old folk in homes, getting stewed prunes and custard to keep them 'regular'. However, once I had thought it, couldn't stop thinking of him as Prune Eyes. O! Prune Eyes, even.)

Asked him, 'What's soup of the day?'

'Mushroom.'

'Is it lumpy?'

'No.'

'Okay. And a glass of red wine.'

'Merlot?'

'Grand.'

20.25

Finished my dinner. (After the soup of the day, had had the cheesecake of the day – strawberry.) I was standing outside the Oak, wondering what to do next.

I could go for walk. It was a beautiful bright evening and there was a lovely beach down there. I could blow away the cobwebs, as people might say. (Actually don't like that saying. Makes me think of spiders. Will not say it again.) Or I could get a DVD. Yes, I decided. Would get a DVD.

20.29

Supermarket

Wide choice of DVDs. Boy and girl behind the counter (name badges: Kelly and Brandon) tried to help me.

'*Wedding Crashers* is good,' Kelly said. Quite a stout girl. Looked like she enjoyed chips. (Indeed, who doesn't?) Poker-straight, stripey blonde hair. Pink trackie bottoms pulled very low. Two inches of belly rolling over waistband.

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Gold bar through belly button, acrylic French manicure. Tacky, yet admired her confidence.

'Not *Wedding Crashers*,' I said.

'Like your highlights.'

'Thank –'

'Did you do them yourself?'

'No. Er . . . no. In hairdresse –'

'Like your jacket. Where d'you get it? Topshop?'

' . . . No . . . Got it in work.'

'Where d'you work?'

' . . . Work for self.'

'How much was it?'

' . . . Well, got it on discount . . .'

'How much would it be before the discount?'

' . . . Not really sure.'

Was plenty sure, but it was expensive. I was too ashamed to say the price.

'Shut up,' Brandon said. Like Kelly, he obviously took an interest in his appearance. Neck-chains, rings, blond hair in Tintin quiff, yellowish tinge to it, probably the result of a home-bleach job, but applauded his efforts.

'How about *Lord of the Rings*?' he asked. 'We have special extended versions.'

'No. Good film, am not saying it's not, but . . .'

'What you in the mood for?'

'Need cheering up.'

'Why?' Kelly asked.

Cripes, so nosy!

'Wee . . . Ill,' I said, suddenly mad keen to talk about Paddy. 'My boyfriend is getting married to someone else.'

'Okay,' Kelly said, contrarily refusing to take the bait. 'What about *Sleepless in Seattle*? That's sappy.'

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Frustrated! Hadn't wanted to discuss cost of jacket but wanted to splurge info about Paddy.

'Or *One Fine Day*. Also sappy. You could have a good cry.'

'No!' Brandon said. 'Get revenge film! *Kill Bill*. *Dirty Harry*.'

'*Dirty Harry*,' I cried. 'Perfect!'

23.08

Dirty Harry is a marvellous film! Was exactly what I'd wanted. There's a great bit when he gets revenge.

At one stage I looked up from Clint Eastwood and out through the back window of Uncle Tom's cabin and for a moment thought there was great big Berocca tablet in the sky. Bright orange and looked like it was fizzing, infusing the sky with health-giving vitamin B. The sunset! Suddenly glad I had come to this place. Had learnt to appreciate the beauty of nature.

Quite nice evening. Thought about Paddy non-stop, but only picked up the phone to ring him four times.

23.31

Bedtime. Afraid I wouldn't sleep, so took two NatraCalms and turned off the light.

23.32

Turned on the light. Took half a Zimovane (a real sleeping tablet jam-packed with chemicals, not some namby-pamby herbal malarkey). Would be terrible if I couldn't sleep. No point risking it. Turned off the light.

23.33

Turned on the light. Took the other half of the Zimovane. Couldn't take a chance on not sleeping. Turned off the light. Pulled the fake patchwork quilt up to my chin and snuggled into the pillow. Now that I was doped up to the gills, I was looking forward to a lovely night's sleep.

23.34

Very quiet in the country. Nice. Soothing.

23.35

Comforting. Not sinister.

23.36

Calming. Not a bit sinister.

23.37

Is sinister! Too quiet out there. Menacing. Like the fields are planning to ambush me while I'm asleep! Turn the light back on. My heart was pounding. Needed something to read but was too afraid to go downstairs for my *InStyle*. Bookshelf in room with ancient paperback books. Thrillers by someone called Margery Allingham. Picked *The Fashion for Shrouds*, because about fashion designer in 1930s. Although book gone a bit damp, enjoyed it very much. Everyone in story wore hats. No one wears hats any more. Tragic. March of modernity.

Thursday, 4 September 9.07

Woken up by silence. *Is* very disruptive. Never thought would miss drunken men grunting and wrestling outside window. Life full of surprises.

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Mattress feels filled with tennis balls. How *did* people cope in olden days? Different value systems. Community and wearing hats and children being able to walk to school by themselves. No value put on high-grade mattress, nice sheets, nice pillows.

Lean over the side of the bed and grab copy of *VIP* and stare, for millionth time, at Paddy, with his grin and his tennis racket, and am astonished by how wholesome he looks. Cripes, if only they knew . . .

Trip down memory lane

Last year, Sunday in April, blustery and cold. I was visiting Mum's grave. Perched on little kerb, talking to her, telling how job was going, how Dad was – just a general catch-up, really. Funnily enough was in middle of telling her that still hadn't a boyfriend, not since gave Malachy the elbow for wanting me to be thinner (photographer, spent too much time hanging around with models), when noticed someone a few rows over, looking at me. A man. Not my type. Too grown-up. Tall. Sober, single-breasted, navy overcoat, cashmere/wool mix (at quick glance), holding armload of technicolour-yellow daffodils. Dark hair, a bit bouffed (although that could have been by-product of windy day).

Instantly felt touchy. I mean, was *graveyard*. If you couldn't talk to your dead mother there, where could you talk to her?

'Mum,' I said, 'there's some bloke over there watching me talking to you. Rudel!'

In my head her voice said, 'Maybe he isn't looking at you. Maybe he's staring into space. Give people a chance.'

I looked again. He was definitely watching me and I got

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sudden flash of his hair slick and flat with sweat, as result of having sex with me.

Sacrilegious! In graveyard. But suppose it makes sense – sex and death.

‘Well?’ Mum asked.

‘Er . . . is fine . . .’

Eventually said goodbye to Mum and walked towards exit. Had to pass Overcoat Man to get to main path and although not normally the type who challenges people, was defensive over dead mother. When I reached him, I stopped and said, ‘I’m only talking to a marble headstone because I have no choice. I’d prefer it if she was alive, you know.’

‘Your mother?’

‘Yes.’

‘Me too.’

Suddenly didn’t feel touchy any longer, but sad. Sad for both of us.

‘Didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,’ he said.

‘Well you did.’

He had strewn his mother’s grave with daffodils and don’t know why, but it touched me. Man like him could have (judging from quality of overcoat) bought big exotic bouquet, orchids and lilies and similar, but daffodils humble flower.

He said, ‘I thought it was . . . good . . . you could talk so freely . . .’ He paused, looked down, then looked up again, causing maximum impact with blue eyes. He said, ‘I envied you.’

11.08

I opened front door and took deep inhale of fresh country air. Smelt of cow-shite. Five red and white cows in nearby field lazily flicking tails at me. Culprits.

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Walked round to back of house and there was wild Atlantic. Waves and swelling and white bits and sun glinting. Smell of ozone and salt and all that. Gazed upon nature and beauty and everything and thought, I miss shops.

Was no good. Mistake coming here. Had no one to talk to, no telly to watch. Too much time on my hands to think about Paddy.

Should have done bunk to exciting, lively place, like New York, with its many distractions. But New York hotels expensive. Uncle Tom's cabin is free.

Texted Bridie:

Lonely. Mght cum hme.

Reply:

Frst day always hrdest. Stik wth it!

11.40

Ringing clients all morning, explaining 'out of circulation' for couple of weeks. Leaving them 'in capable hands' of Nkechi. Some happy enough with it. But others not. Afraid of Nkechi. SarahJane Hutchinson point-blank refuses to have any dealings with her.

Made self walk into town. Could have driven, but only five minutes' walk. Shameful to drive. Also remember what shrink used to say after Mum died. Best way to keep depression at bay is to get out and about and take short walk. Quite funny really when you think about it. Because when you're depressed, the last thing you want to do is get out and about and take short walk. Tablets far better.

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11.42

Strangest thing. Beautiful really. Tramping into town in pastel wellingtons, nearing next-door-neighbour's cottage, when through small window in the side of house, high up under the roof, caught a glimpse of sparkles and shine.

Stopped. Twisted head. Something about the direction of the window – it faced almost towards the sea – meant it was unlikely passers-by would see in. (Hard to describe. Not good at things like that. A man-type 200-yards-style description.) I had been at peculiarly angled bend in road and just got lucky.

Next thing, I saw woman in a wedding dress twirling around and around! Smooth, shiny, white satin, tight bodice, wide skirt, not risible meringue, but like exaggerated A-line, if you can imagine. Like upside-down cone. Almost certain was a Vera Wang. Arresting image. Despite self's tragic circumstances, couldn't help but be happy for her beauty and evident happiness.

White elbow gloves. Elaborate diamanté choker – might have been Swarovski, but couldn't be certain at this distance. Stunning dark hair, thick and long and smooth, swinging as she twirled, perfect little tiara perched on crown of head.

She came right up to window, mouthing words – probably practising vows – chatting away to herself, good old chinwag, then she did that thing people do in films when they suddenly realize they are standing on a crocodile. She froze, slid eyes downwards very, very sloooowly until got to my level, when she forced herself to look at me, standing in road, gazing up at her, like supplicant. Even though still too far away to be able to say if choker was Swarovski, no denying the shock,

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horror even, on her face. She backed away from the window as if on castors. Why? What is big secret?

I remained rooted in place, wondering if she would reappear, until farmer chugging along in tractor emitting evil-smelling black smoke, shouted, 'Out of the way, Jackeen!' and tried to run me off the road.

11.49

Internet café

Have BlackBerry, no real need to go to internet café but, honest admission, wanted reason to talk to someone.

Inside was a girl, smoking a cigarette, sitting on a stool, legs crossed elegantly. Very short dark hair, like Jean Seberg in *À Bout de Souffle*. Few faces can take haircut that severe. Beautiful pointy eyebrows. Dark red lipstick. Matte. Interesting choice in these glossy times.

I said, 'Er . . . hello.'

'Elo.'

She had to be French. That or cockney.

Clothes simple but beautiful. Black polo-neck, black and white skirt, almost puffball, but pulling back just at vital moment. Wide belt tight around waist. Black ballet slippers. Understated but chic. French women simply have knack. Like Irish people are skilled at being great craic and getting green freckles instead of tan.

Said, 'Can I use internet?'

'*Certainement*,' she said. 'Work away.'

Asked her, 'You local girl?' (Knew she wasn't. A conversational pretext.)

'*Non. De France.*'

Can understand now why girl in DVD shop was so forward

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last night. Only way to get kicks around here is to poke nose into other people's lives.

Said, 'I love France! In fact, *j'aime France!*'

Hoped we could talk about shops in Paris. But she wasn't from Paris. From somewhere called Beaune. Never heard of it but she seemed proud. That is French people for you. They are proud of being French, smoke Gauloises and are excellent at going on strike. Sometimes whole country does it.

Introduced myself. Hoped not coming across as too desperate.

She said, '*Bonjour, Lola. Je m'appelle Cecile.*'

Asked, 'Why you live here, Cecile?'

Reason? A man.

'Am crazy in love,' she said. 'He is surfer.'

'What is name?'

'Zoran.'

'Irish?' Thinking, Can't be.

'No. Serbian. Lives here now.'

Only one email of interest. From Nkechi. She has persuaded woman who imports Roberto Cavalli to Ireland to sell to 'us' exclusively. Is good news. Excellent news, really. All Irish women hot for Cavalli will have to be styled by me – or 'us' as Nkechi so ominously put it. Cripes. Have only been gone a day and already she is taking over the world.

12.16

The Oak

Same barman as last night. Ol' Prune Eyes. Asked him, 'What is soup of day?'

'Mushroom.'

'Okay. And cup coffee.'

'Latte? Cappuccino? Espresso?'

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'Er . . . latte.'

'Soy milk? Skinny?'

'Er . . . skinny.'

Not expecting so much choice.

Found self asking, 'So, where you from?'

Cripes! Have become irritating person who instigates conversation with everyone she meets, which I so am not. In Dublin, make point of principle to talk to as few people as possible. Especially when buying things. Have you noticed lately how shop assistants have been told to say validating bon mot about purchase when wrapping it? They say, 'Gorgeous colour!' Or, 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Always find self wanting to say, 'Actually no, dislike colour very much. One of least favourites.'

I mean, would hardly buy it if didn't like it!

But they are just doing their job. Not their fault.

'From Egypt,' Ol' Prune Eyes said.

Egypt! Multinational! Is like cast of *Lost* here in Knockavoy!

'You are long way from home!' Thinking, What a stupid thing to say. Sound like wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Then I say, 'You must miss warm weather.' Thinking, That is also stupid thing to say, and bet everyone says it.

'Yes,' he says. 'That is what everyone says. But more to life than weather.'

'Like what?' Suddenly curious.

He laughed. 'Like three meals a day. Like freedom from political persecution. Like opportunity to provide for family.'

'Right,' I say. 'I see your point.'

Feel bit better. Have connected with another human being.

Warmish glow interrupted by man at the end of the bar –

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slumped, unkempt creature – calling, ‘Osama! Enough of chat! Where’s my pint?’

I asked, ‘Is your name really Osama?’

Thinking, Cripes! That would be hard cross to bear. Even worse than Ol’ Prune Eyes. No wonder he got political persecution!

‘No. Is Ibrahim. Osama nickname from locals.’

Late afternoon

Walked home by *seafront*. Passed funny old house. Houses on either side had been modernized – PVC windows, fresh paint – but this one was weather-beaten and sort of slumped-looking. Faded blue paint on front door was coming off in handfuls. Reminded me of time I’d had chemical peel. On window sill, *sea anemones*, pebbles, sand, periwinkles. No curtains, so could see right into front room. Fishing nets hanging from ceiling, starfish shells, conches, driftwood pieces like sculpture. Name of house, ‘The Reef’.

Magical place. Wanted to go in there.

18.03

Mobile rang. Recognized number: Grace Gildee, charismatic journalist woman. Was stalking me! Threw mobile into handbag as if red-hot. Get away, get away, get away! Ten seconds later, double beep of message. Get away, get away, get away!

Deleted message without listening. Afraid. Obviously no one can make self talk if self doesn’t want to talk. But still afraid. Grace Gildee pushy, persuasive, determined. Also – possibly – nice.

Copyrighted Material

20.08

Grocery-cum-newsagent-cum-DVD-shop

Brandon and Kelly on duty again. On Brandon's recommendation, got *The Godfather*. Kelly tried to steer self in direction of *Starsky & Hutch*. She said, 'Two hunks like them, they'll take your mind off your fella getting married to someone else. So did he tell you to your face?'

She was agog to hear and I was agog to tell. As soon as I said, 'Paddy de Courcy,' she exclaimed, 'I know that name! Politician man, yes? I've seen him! In *VIP*! Get it!' She directed Brandon to the magazine rack. 'Go on, get it, get it!'

She devoured pictures. Made many comments. Said Paddy was 'way lush' 'for older man' and Alicia was 'minger'. Brandon said Alicia was 'bowler', word I hadn't come across before. Learnt it means same thing as minger. Increase your wordpower. Both of them very impressed that my ex-boyfriend was in a celebrity magazine, even if it was only an Irish one.

'Anything about him in *Heat*?' Kelly asked. 'Or *Grazia*?'

'No.'

'Well, sure, never mind. And you knew nothing about the other woman? Nothing AT ALL?'

I shook head.

'I'd have killed him,' she marvelled. 'Killed him with my bare hands.'

'You could just sit on him,' Brandon said, with unexpected venom. 'That'd do the trick. Not many men would survive being sat on by your arse.'

She responded with gusto. 'All you'd have to do is breathe on someone!'

Revised original assessment that Brandon and Kelly were boyfriend and girlfriend. Brother and sister, more likely.

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'And now you're down here in Tom Twoomey's house nursing a broken heart.'

'We get a fair bit of that,' Brandon said. 'Women. Arriving here. With broken hearts. Don't know why. Maybe they think the waves will fix them. Walking the beach twenty times a day. Often they go exploring up on sand dunes. Don't realize they're owned by golf club. Suddenly find themselves in middle of the eleventh hole, balls whizzing past their heads. Escorted off in buggy. Usually very upset.'

'Very upset,' Kelly said.

Strange pause ensued. Then both of them convulsing with laughter.

'Sorry,' Brandon said, shaking with mirth. 'Is just . . . is just –'

'– they think they're being all soulful,' Kelly said, face contorted from laughing. 'Communing with nature . . . and then . . . and then . . . they nearly get brained by golf ball . . .'

'Have no intention of walking on any beach or up any sand dunes,' I said coldly.

Is not nice to laugh at heartbroken women.

Abruptly they stopped laughing. Cleared their throats. Kelly said, 'You might start painting. Getting all that heart-break out of your system.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes, happens a lot. Painting.'

'Or poetry,' Brandon interjected.

'Or pottery.'

'But mostly painting. Let's face it, better than cutting off your man's lad with a bread knife.' Brandon gave Kelly meaningful look.

'What?' She turned and yelled into his face, 'That was an ACCIDENT!'

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Then to me, 'We have crayons and copybooks, but if you need proper paints and all, there's shop in Ennistymon.' (Ennistymon nearest proper town.)

No intention of starting painting.

Or poetry.

Or pottery.

Things bad enough.

23.59

Godfather marvellous film. Simply chock full of revenge. And quite fancy Al Pacino. Hopeful sign. All evening only picked up the phone to ring Paddy three times. Or thrice, if you prefer. Like that word. Got it in Margery Allingham book.

0.37

'Turned in' as they say in Margery Allingham. Strange saying. But so are many sayings when think about it. Example, 'Don't go there!' That is very odd saying, unless you are talking about Afghanistan, or Topshop on Saturday afternoon, two weeks before Christmas.

2.01

Jerked awake, in the absolute horrors. Gripped by terrible compulsion to get into car and drive straight across country to Dublin, to find Paddy and beg him to be with me. Began flinging things into bag. Heart pounding. Mouth dry. Waking nightmare. He was getting married to someone else? But that couldn't be!

Should I have shower? No. Should I get dressed? No. No, yes. What if I actually found him? Couldn't be like an asylum escapee in my pyjamas. What should I wear? Couldn't decide.

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Couldn't decide. Muzzy from sleeping tablet but thoughts going too fast. Whizzing past before could snag one.

Bumped first bag down stairs. Must go to bathroom to collect things. No. Leave them. Who cares? It's just stuff. Opened front door, cool night air, flung bag into car boot, back into house for other bag.

But by the time I was lugging second bag down stairs, my heartbeat had slowed. Thoughts more ordered. Saw my lunacy. Pointless driving to Dublin. He wouldn't see me. That had been his plan all along and was hardly likely to change his mind now.

I sat on front step in my pyjamas, staring out at darkness. Fields out there, couldn't see them.

Trip down memory lane

Funny thing is, when first met Paddy de Courcy in graveyard, didn't think would end up falling for him. So not my type. Previous boyfriend, Malachy the photographer, very different. Small, neat, sparkly-eyed charmer. Loved women, women loved him back. Charmed models like Zara Kaletsky into doing mad poses for him. (In fact, that was how I met Malachy. I was Zara's stylist until she left Ireland so abruptly. She fixed us up.)

Malachy not very hairy. But, as I was buffeted by icy winds that day in the cemetery, I could tell simply by looking at Paddy de Courcy's overcoat that he would have hairy chest. Picking up on subliminal signs. Dark raspy stubble on jaw. Backs of hands scattered with dark hairs. (Not like woolly mammoth King Kong paws – nice coverage.) Smooth hair-free chest simply wouldn't fit.

He asked, 'Do you come here often?'

I said, 'Do I come here often?' I surveyed marble slabs of

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death stretching out in all directions. Just goes to show, you can meet a man *anywhere*. ‘About once a month.’

‘This is slightly unorthodox . . .’ he said. ‘Graveyard and all that . . . Could come back in a month’s time hoping to bump into you, or . . . would you like to come for hot chocolate now?’

Clever. Hot chocolate the one thing – the *only* thing – I would have accepted. Safe. Totally different if he’d invited me for alcoholic drink. Or, indeed, cup of tea. Alcoholic drink – lecherous sleaze. Cup of tea – dullard with mother fixation.

Went to pub across road (Gravediggers Arms) where drank hot chocolate with marshmallows and reminisced about dead mothers.

He said, ‘Every time something good happens to me, I want to tell her, and every time something bad happens, I want her help.’

Knew *exactly* how he felt. We were both fifteen when our mums died. Was nice – glorious relief, actually – to meet someone who had lost their mum the same age I had. Talked openly, compared feelings, was drawn to him but didn’t fancy him. Actually felt I was almost doing him a favour, spending time with him, so he could talk about his mother.

He said, ‘Probably in bad taste, considering where we met, but any chance I could see you again? Promise I won’t talk about my mother the next time.’

I retreated against upholstery. Assailed by image of him looming over me, him naked, hairy-chested, hard-on in hand. My stomach did unpleasant squeeze. Excitement? Possibly not. Maybe nausea. He wasn’t my type. I thought he looked too old, also (shallow, shallow! Yes, I know) I didn’t like his clothes. Too buttoned-up, too safe. But why not give it a try?

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Wrote my phone number on ancient cinema stub.
He looked at it. Said, 'Mission Impossible? Any good?'
'You didn't see it?'
'Never get time to go to pictures.'
'Why not?'

'Am politician. Deputy leader of New Ireland. Full-on job.'
Felt had better ask him his name – is what you have to do when people say they are writer or actor or – yes – politician. Almost as if they are *angling* to be asked.

'Paddy de Courcy.'

Nodded and said, 'Mmmm,' to disguise fact had never heard of him.

He watched me shoot past in my red Mini, admiration in his eyes. I looked at him in rear-view. Even from distance could see blueness of his eyes. Coloured contact lenses? No. Coloured contact lenses make eyes strangely starey and dead-looking. Wearers look like aliens. Sometimes clients take a notion to wear them for big night out. ('I fancy being a green-eyed temptress tonight.') I always talk them out of it. Tacky. Very . . . Mariah Carey.

Wondered if Paddy de Courcy would call. Wasn't sure he would. Suspected he might be married. Also we weren't, on the face of it, a likely match. I had red Mini Cooper, he had navy Saab. I had sharp-cut, wide-lapelled, teal jacket, he had sober navy overcoat. I had angular Louise Brooks bob and Chiarascuro highlights (colour before Molichino), he had bouffy hair.

Didn't Google him. That's how interested I wasn't.

Early next morning my mobile rang. I didn't recognize number but answered because could be new client. Some woman said, 'I'm calling from Paddy de Courcy's office.'

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Mr de Courcy was wondering if you are free this evening. He will pick you up at seven p.m. I need your address please.'

I was startled into silence. Then laughed. Said, 'No.'

'No, what?'

'No, not giving address. Who's he think he is?'

Her turn to be startled. Said, 'Is Paddy de Courcy?'

'If Mr de Courcy wants to make arrangement with me, Mr de Courcy can pick up phone and call me himself.'

'... Yes ... but Ms Daly, Mr de Courcy very busy man ...'

Understand busyness. Most of my clients very busy people and usually clients' assistant, rather than clients themselves, call to set up styling appointment. But that was work. This was not work.

'Must go now,' I said. 'Thank you. Nice talking to you. Goodbye.' (Costs nothing to be polite. Also she might want to be styled at some time in the future.)

I wasn't even indignant. Simply realized had been right to think he wasn't my type. Maybe that is how some people live their lives, getting their assistants to set up romantic assignations. Perhaps it is considered perfectly fine in certain circles.

I didn't expect him to ring back and I really didn't care. When think now of the risk I ran, I go hot and cold all over. Could have blithely thrown it all away. Over before it ever started. Then realize it's all over anyway, and maybe would have been better off being spared the pain. But couldn't imagine not having had him in my life. Was the most intense experience. The most intense man. Most beautiful, most sexy.

Anyway, a few minutes later, he *did* call. Laughing. Apologizing for being arrogant asshole.

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I said, 'You politicians have totally lost touch with reality.'
(Light-hearted tone. Banter.)

'No, haven't.'

'Oh really? If so, tell me price of litre of milk?' (Once, by accident, saw programme where minister of something was shamed for not knowing that. Actually felt quite sorry for him. Not so sure of price myself. But could tell you to the nearest euro, exact cost of entire Chloé collection. Wholesale, discounted and full retail. We all have our gifts.)

Paddy de Courcy said, 'Don't know. Don't drink milk.'

'Why so? Too busy?'

He laughed. Banter going well.

I said, 'No milk on your cereal?'

'Don't eat cereal.'

'What you have for breakfast?'

Pause. Then he said, 'Would you like to find out?'

Cheesy. Remembered his bouffy hair. Didn't want to banter any longer.

'Sorry,' he said. Sounded humbled, then he asked, 'You free this evening?'

'No.' (Was, but really . . .)

'How about tomorrow . . . uh, no, can't do tomorrow. Or Wednesday. Just a minute,' he said, then called to someone, 'Stephanie, can you get me out of that thing with Brazilians on Thursday?' Then he was back. 'Thursday?'

'Let me look at appointments.' I checked, then said, 'Yes, okay for Thursday evening.'

'Thursday it is,' he said. 'I'll pick you up. Seven?'

What was this thing with seven? Why so early?

'I'll book couple of tables for dinner and you can choose.'

Bridled at way he was calling all the shots, then . . . don't know . . . stopped bridling, is best way to put it.

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'Just one thing,' I said. 'You married?'

'Why? You offering?'

Further cheesiness. I said, 'Yes or no? Married or not?'

'Not.'

'Fine.'

'Really looking forward to seeing you,' he said.

'... Yes, me too.'

But wasn't sure I was. And when I climbed into the back of his car and he was Mr Grown-up in his suit and briefcase, I thought, Oh no, terrible mistake. Stomach did that rolling, tilty nausea thing again. And, of course, things got worse in the shop. But then . . . undressing for him . . . everything changed. Started to really fancy him. Never looked back.

Friday, 5 September 12.19

Woke up. Had gone back to bed around 6 a.m., when sun was rising.

No longer felt crazed desperation for Paddy. Simply felt of no value. Wasn't good enough for him. Not good enough for anyone.

13.53

Walked into town. Sea mist hanging in air, playing merry hell with hair.

When I reached special spot on bend of road, stopped and gazed up at next-door's window, hoping to see woman in wedding dress. Intrigued. In fact, maddened with curiosity. But no sign of her.

14.01

The Oak

Soup of day, mushroom. Beginning to wonder if any other kind. Cheesecake of day, strawberry. Ditto.

15.05

Internet café

Thought would visit couple of nice sites. Net-a-porter. LaRedoute. Gazing upon beautiful things might bring sparkle back into world. But café closed! Crooked handwritten sign said, 'Gone to lunch.' Annoyed. These French people with their lunch hours! Stomped off towards home. Decided on sea-front route, to get little infusion of magic house, and who did I see, outside magic house, only Cecile! Hooked by her knees, she was hanging upside down on the railings overlooking the waves, giggling with three surf boys in wetsuits.

Her skirt was up around her shoulders, as result of gravity. Her knickers on show. Cute. Cotton. White with red poppies and red trim. Nice for her to be so uninhibited. Actually no . . . not really a good thing. Was uncomfortable with her exhibitionism . . . we're not on Côte d'Azur now.

Semi-circle of surf boys. General impression of wet sand, large bare male feet, tangled salty hair, surfboards, wetsuits unzipped, smooth bare chests, eyes bright from salt water, thin chains around tanned throats, tiny gold rings through male eyebrows. Couldn't tell any of them apart, just generic cluster of young male yumminess.

'Cecile?' I asked.

'Oui?'

'Are you on your lunch break?'

'Oui.'

'When will it finish?'

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Even hanging upside down, she managed Gallic shrug. 'I cannot say.' She giggled, giving one of surf boys a minxy glance.

Front door of magic house slightly ajar. Glimpse of bare, faded floorboards, old-fashioned banisters, white paint flaking, leading up the stairway to a magic bedroom.

Cecile would be going into magic house to have sex with one of surf boys. Terrible pang. Jealousy. Loneliness. For things lost and things never had. Wished I was young. Wished I was beautiful. Wished I was French.

19.57

Trying alternative bars to Oak. Cannot face another bowl of mushroom soup. Also didn't want to get too dependent on the Oak. It might burn down or something and where would that leave me? Look what happened the last time I depended on someone (Paddy).

Stuck my head into golfing bar, called Hole in One, or some such dreadful golfing pun. Couldn't go in. Packed to gills with men (and one or two women who should have known better) exchanging posh insults about how badly the other man played. (You know how men are. Can only bond by being horrible.) Noisy. Shouty. Rawrawlawl. Like politicians in Dail. And such bad clothing! Yellow sweaters. Spats. Visors! I ask you. Not even useful, not in Ireland, not enough sun. Is . . . is . . . wilful bad taste.

Tried Butterly's. Very small place. Size of a front room. Flagstoned floors, bare wooden counter, three high stools at it. Small television on overhead shelf. Smiley old woman behind bar, looking keen as mustard. (Margery Allingham phrase.) Otherwise place empty. Wanted to back out, saying, 'Sorry, looking for chemist! My mistake!' But was too polite.

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Did running jump, like pole vaulter, to seat self on high stool. (Can't abide high stools, so uncomfortable. Too high, to begin with, and nothing to hold on to, nothing to support your back, nothing for your feet. You are quite adrift. Breakfast bars, there they are again! Why would I choose to start my day wobbling atop a high stool when could sit on a normal-height chair? And why only for *breakfast*?)

Butterly's was the oddest-looking bar had ever seen, offering most peculiar selection of drinks – all seemed to be sweet sticky liqueurs. Also sundry other items for sale, to wit: cans of marrowfat peas, boxes of matches, packets of instant custard. Like when playing shop when small. (All same, might be handy to know. Some night, might be half-way through glass of red wine and get sudden unbearable craving for custard, which needed immediate gratification.) (Sarcastic.)

The old woman was Mrs Butterly herself. Nice to be in proprietor-run establishment. Extremely chatty. Said the bar was her parlour and she only opened it when she felt like company and closed it again when she didn't.

Though my hopes weren't high, I asked, 'Do you do food?'

She pointed at strange collection behind bar.

'I meant . . . something . . . could eat now.'

Had horrible fear she would offer to heat up can of marrowfat peas. Even look of marrowfat peas makes me want to take my own life.

'Could make you little sandwich. Will see what's in fridge.'

She disappeared into other room, presume it was kitchen. Returned with processed ham piece between two slices of woolly white bread. In strange, retro way, quite satisfying. When I finished, she made us both a cup of tea and produced a packet of Hobnobs.

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I tried purchase a glass of red wine but she said, 'Don't carry wine. How about Tia Maria? Or what's this here? Cointreau?'

Closest thing to a normal drink was Southern Comfort. No ice available so had it with a dash of the flattest Sprite have ever had. From a 2-litre bottle that had been on shelf for oh, about sixty years. Not a bubble left in entire bottle.

Cajoled Mrs Butterly to join me in a drink. Invitation accepted.

Revised original impression. Mrs Butterly had woven web of charm around me. Liked it. Liked it all. Best bit of entire bar was neon green poster, saying, 'No Stag Parties!'

Stag party wouldn't fit! They would have to be refused in instalments. Would have to send delegation of two or three in to be barred, then leave and let next tranche in to be turned down.

When I was leaving, Mrs Butterly refused to take money for the food. She said, 'Only couple of Hobnobs, for the love of God.'

'But Mrs Butterly, the sandwich . . .'

'Only couple of slices of bread, for the love of God.'

Kindly. Very kindly.

But no way to run a business.

21.59

DVD shop

Wanted to ask about Kelly and the bread knife, but shop thronged. Many people visiting. Tourists for weekend, their baskets filled with frozen pizzas and six-packs of lager. I resented their presence, as if I live here.

Brandon distracted but recommended *Goodfellas*.

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0.57

Enjoyed *Goodfellas*, not saying I didn't. Don't mean to be picky. Much violence, but no actual revenge as such.

1.01

Realization. Why I felt so comforted in Mrs Butterly's. It was the flat Sprite. Flat Sprite is a convalescent's drink. Mum used to give it to me when I was sick. She used to heat it up to cleanse it of all bubbles, so it wouldn't hurt my sore throat. Flat Sprite makes me feel loved. As no one is handy to administer it to me, will do it myself.

Saturday, 6 September 8.01

Woken by slam of next-door-neighbour's front door. I hopped from bed, into other bedroom to look out front window, hoping to see Wedding Dress girl in her civvies. But no girl, just her boyfriend – fiancé, I suppose – alone. Studied him. Interested to see what kind of man had bagged the Vera Wanged beauty. At quick glance, not exactly kempt. He would need haircut before wedding. Out-doorsy-loving-style clothing: jeans and big, thick navy fleece suitable for North Pole. Footwear, however, cause for interest: trainers in anthracite colour – in fashionista circles anthracite known as 'Black for risk-takers'. He got into car – couldn't be sure what kind it was – banged door shut, drove away.

I returned to bed.

13.10

Town busy. Day-trippers. Blue skies, sunshine, heat, weather very nice for September, apart from never-ceasing, hair-destroying wind.

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My attention caught by woman on beach, walking alone. Had half-noticed her over previous few days and just knew she was one of the heartbroken painters or potters or poets. Even from distance, her face was stiff, the way heartbroken faces are. What is it about being rejected by loved ones that locks face muscles into inactivity? Special enzyme? (Possible scientific discovery. You know how dumpees don't smile? Everyone puts it down to them having nothing to smile about. But perhaps it is as result of special enzyme which means they cannot smile. This is the sort of discovery that wins prizes.)

20.10

DVD shop

Brandon recommended *Kill Bill*, vol. 1. Excellent. Revenge – 10 out of 10.

Sunday, 7 September

Ol' Prune Eyes is Muslim! Don't know why I'm so surprised. He is from Egypt, which believe has large Muslim population. Suppose I didn't think devout Muslim would work in pub. Den of alcohol.

He made casual reference to praying towards Mecca and I asked, 'You Muslim?'

And he said, 'Yes.'

No big deal but am suddenly uncomfortable ordering glass of wine from him. Feel he is thinking, Stinking Whore. Whore of the Infidel.

Also ashamed of my beloved Molichino highlights. Not only have I my hair on display but am drawing attention to it with lovely highlights. He is very friendly – seems like lovely

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man, really – but fear he is faker and in his head he is thinking terrible things about me. Maybe even muttering under his breath. Like this . . .

‘Hi, Ibrahim.’

‘Ah, hello there, Lola. Stinking whore of the Infidel. How are you today?’

‘Good. You?’

‘Excellent. Considering I’ll be going to Paradise and you haven’t a hope. What can I get you?’

‘Glass of Merlot please, Ibrahim.’

(Big, big smile.) ‘Glass of Merlot, Lola. Filthy Western whore. You will burn in hell, you alcohol-drinking, pork-eating, bare-haired unbeliever. Coming right up!’

Am I racist? Or am I only saying what everyone is thinking? The way everyone used to think all Irish people were IRA bombers. ‘Hello, yes, Paddy, come in, sit down, have a cup of Earl Grey. Tell me, were you good at chemistry at school?’

Don’t want to be racist. But undeniable clash in value system. I like Merlot. Muslims disapprove of Merlot. Would not refuse person a job because they didn’t like Merlot. Would not refuse person citizenship. But want to enjoy Merlot. Don’t want to feel afraid that I will burn in hell if have glass with my lunch.

Is it better to acknowledge how uncomfortable Ibrahim makes me? Or just pretend all is fine, no difference between me and him? What is best way to handle multicultural society? Nkechi’s big bottom, Ibrahim’s Armageddon. Such lofty worries. Cripes, don’t know. Exhausting, whole bloody thing.

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14.38

Cecile has taken over running boutique as well as internet café! Apparently now that season is officially over, owner of boutique (who is also owner internet café, which, don't mean to be picky, is not actually café at all, as you cannot buy anything to eat or drink) has gone off to Puerto Banus for a month and Cecile is running both all on her own. Or not running. I wanted to surf net but sign on café door saying, 'In Monique's.' And sign on Monique's door saying, 'At lunch.'

Between Cecile's double-jobbing and European-style lunch breaks, is a wonder anyone in Knockavoy gets to send any emails at all.

Trip down memory lane

Remembering my first date with Paddy. Got picked up at flat in car driven by Spanish John. Paddy sitting in the back, wearing a suit. Open briefcase on lap.

'What you like to do?' he asked. 'You hungry?'

'No, not really. Is a bit early.' (Was only 7 p.m. Unusually early for date.)

'Okay,' he said, 'let's go shopping.'

'For what?'

'Clothes.'

'For me or for you?'

I was wondering if he was trying to get styling from me on the cheap. On the free, in fact.

'For you.'

Didn't know what to say. Funny sort of date. Cannot usually make man come shopping with me for love nor money. Also had strange suspicion that this wouldn't be normal shopping.

Next thing, Spanish John opening car door, Paddy's arm

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on my back, ushering me up steps, discreet dark-glass door, soft carpeting, friendly woman's voice welcoming us, feel free to browse. Thought I knew every shop in Dublin. I was wrong. Pools of light highlighting dark shiny items. Closer look. Vibrator. Black satin blindfold. Spanky device. Small onyx things thought were cufflinks, then realized were nipple clamps.

Knickers, bras, suspender belts, satin, silk, lace, leather, spandex, black, red, pink, white, blue, nude, patterned . . .

Trying to behave like woman of the world – had been in this sort of emporium before; after all, had organized two hen nights, admittedly not in place of this high quality – but had to confess, felt rather uncomfortable. Anxious. Very. Hardly what had expected from first date.

Drifted over to underwear. Expected to receive mild electric shock from shoddy man-made fibres, but quality good. Real silk, satin, lace. Actually some lovely 'pieces', as we in fashion world say (when I say that, I sound light-hearted, but believe me, was not feeling light-hearted at the time). Dark blue set embroidered with butterflies, appliquéd with feathers and diamantés. Silky mulberry and black polka-dot knickers with ribbon ties at sides. Demure pink set festooned with pink roses – not embroidered but actual little roses – on bra cups and crotch. Would look terrible under clothes. All lumpy.

Surprised to see nice plain black knickers. Completely unremarkable. Then realized they were crotchless, and jumped back as if burnt. Same with low-cut balconette bra. Seemed very low-cut, so low-cut would hardly cover nipples! Then realized – cripes! – that was the whole point.

Beside me, Paddy's voice said, 'Would you like to try any of them on?'

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Froze. Stomach curdled. He was dirty pervert. Dirty pervert weirdo. Treating me as sex object. What was I doing here?

But what should I expect when I pick up man in graveyard? Hardly going to take me for pizza and Ben Stiller movie.

'Lola, are you okay? Is this okay?' He skewered me with blue gaze. Expression sympathetic, well, sympatheticish. Hint of challenge there also.

Held his look. This is the moment, I thought, where I decide to trust him, or to leave. Teetered on high wire. Looked at door. Could just go. No harm done. Would never see him again. I mean, in sex shop! On first date! I was horrified . . .

. . . but a bit excited. If left now what would I miss . . . ?

Looked back into blue gaze, may even have tilted chin upwards in attitude of slight defiance and said, 'Okay . . .'

Assistant came to help. Sort of mumsy. She looked at chest. '34B?'

' . . . Yes . . .'

'What ones you like?'

'These,' I said, pointing out pretty, most demure set could see. (Pale blue, generously cut, robust-looking crotch.)

'And maybe these,' Paddy suggested, indicating saucier stuff.

'And maybe not,' I said.

'Sure, why not try?' mumsy woman said, ferrying armload of underwear off to changing room. 'What's to be lost?'

Big changing room. Almost same size as my bedroom. Rose-coloured lighting, curly-legged brocade chair, Chinese-style wallpaper patterned with winter flowering cherry – and wire grille in wall, like in a confessional . . . What was that for?

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'Would you like your friend to wait in the anteroom?' mumsy woman asked.

'An . . . teroom . . . ?'

'Yes, just here.'

She indicated a smaller room next to the changing room, with a chair in it and a grille in wall. Same grille as in my room.

'Where he can watch you,' mumsy woman said.

Cripes! Where Paddy de Courcy could sit and watch me try on underwear. Where he could observe me take off current clothes and see me naked, like in tacky peep show! Aghast. Frozen indecision seemed to last for decades, then I crumbled. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Reasons:

- 1) Had been waxed to kingdom come. Only hair on body below waist was small square on pubic bone reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's moustache.
- 2) Pink lighting flattering.
- 3) Didn't want to seem like prude.
- 4) Was undeniably excited. Conflicted but excited.

While taking off ordinary clothes I flattened self against wall, out of view of peephole. Not sure what to do. Too self-conscious to dance, also no music. Considered walking to and fro, but held back by fear I would look like animal in zoo – lion, maybe – with cabin fever. Might start wobbling head and moaning.

However, once I stepped into teetery-high pair of white fluffy mules and very flattering black silk knickers and bra, felt like a different person. Pretended Paddy de Courcy wasn't sitting in next room watching me through mesh

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