

~~'That mascara's shite', she says, grabbing my coat and leading me out the door. Want her to stay but she takes one look at them all snogging out of each other and she's adamant she's coming with me. As we're leaving, we pass Ian at the fire exit. He's snogging the face off 'Up the Creek of Dawn' - the mother of the bride. I knew we shouldn't have bothered coming out tonight.~~

### Lorraine

Got a call from a private number this morning. The only people who ever ring me from private numbers are people I owe money to. And even though I'd paid all my bills, I was still panicking as I answered. It was Niall. Think I would've preferred the repo man. He sounded really awkward and a bit posh. Defo didn't pick up on that before cos I would've slagged him over it. He was hoping I'd be at salsa last night but when I didn't show he asked Debs for me number. Wants to take me out to dinner, to start afresh. Fill him in briefly on the events of the last few days, now isn't such a good time. He thinks a night out could be exactly what I need. If I change my mind I've to ring back this afternoon. Hang up. Amber's standing behind me.

'Is that who kept you out late last week?'

Over the last few days I've been doing a lot of thinking. If I want Amber to open up to me maybe I should do the same with her. So I tell her.

'Some bloke I met at salsa. Wants me to go out for dinner with him.'

'When?'

'I'm not going, Amber.'

'Free dinner, Ma - so what if he's a spa?'

And I laugh at the way she makes it all sound so easy.

She picks up my phone and says: 'Go on, ring him back.'

Officially, this is my first date ever. Ray was my first boyfriend. Met him when I was fourteen. All we did was hang around parks and, as we got older, pubs. After everything I went through with him, fellas never seemed worth the trouble. Put on what I think is a lovely outfit, but when Amber sees me, she says:

'You look like Whitney dressed as Britney, go upstairs and cover yourself.'

Taxi arrives. Treated myself to one, cos I can't walk in these high heels and I've no idea where this restaurant is. Don't think I've ever been so nervous in my life. Amber walks me to the door and tells me to behave myself.

*(Rolling down the car window.)* 'Will I stay in with you?'

'No.' *(She pulls a sap face, closing the door.)*

Tell the taxi man where I'm going.

'Very nice,' he says.

'Is it?' Should've brought me pills.

'Ah, the restaurant is alright as well.'

Ask him to stop at a shop for me so I can buy an extra pair of tights. Not that I plan on getting them ripped off me or anything, just in case they snag so I've a spare pair. Queuing in the aisle when I decide to get another pair, because what if I was putting on the new pair and they laddered in the toe and it ran all the way up? Buy three pairs to be safe. Arrive early. Look for the toilet so I can fix myself one last time but Niall is already waiting at the bar. He looks really nice. His shirt is crisp and clean, not even a tiny bit damp. There's a vodka and Diet Coke waiting for me. Says he's delighted I came. Catch myself from saying: 'Unlike last week, cos it wouldn't be funny, it'd

be just mean. Sit down beside him and say: 'Tell me about yourself,' because that's what they say on the telly, that and my Xanax is kicking in. He tells me about his business and family and asks about mine. Tell him about my dad who's so ill, my ma who's so strong, and Amber who's so stupid, and how every night this week I've dreamed about breaking Paul Devlin's legs. Don't tell him about my junkie husband who stole everything I ever owned and broke my heart. Or the way I've gotten into the habit of locking every room in the house before I leave, or how I can clean until my hands are raw. Decide I'm going to do this right, which means keeping my mouth shut and my knickers on for the foreseeable future.

### Kay

Dropped into Amber and the lady on the way home. Only six weeks old and he's already onto his third name. First it was Trey, but I called him 'Shelf' one day by accident and Amber went mad, saying she'd have to change it. Then he was Marshall after some rapper fella. Lorraine and I thought that was crap and harassed her into changing it again. Finally Lorraine suggested calling him after her grandad. Amber said she couldn't call the child Gem, he'd be battered, but we meant James, his proper name. Have to say it fits him lovely. Somehow he ended up with his granda's nose, which neither of the girls have, thank God. He's gorgeous, though, a little gem. And his granda is only over the moon. Going around calling him James Neville II and James Neville Junior. He's delighted to finally have another bit of testosterone in the family. Amber's already started calling him Jaime, which will probably be changed to Jay next week. Anyway, James is on the birth cert now, so it's staying. Wanted to drop in and make sure everything was okay with Lorraine being away this weekend. The small fella surprised her with a trip to Paris. She nearly died. Met him a good few times. He's a lovely fella, well-spoken. Very fucking hairy though.

Get home about two. Asked Nancy next door to pop in at some stage. He gets narky if I ask someone over to babysit, says he's not a fucking child, but sure you couldn't leave him on his own for too long either. Nancy is sitting in the kitchen watching *Emmerdale* on the telly. Ask if Gem's okay, and she says:

'Oh, perfect, told me to fuck off and watch that shite in the kitchen.'

Always marvel how Gem's speech is crystal clear when he's telling someone to fuck off. Go into the living room to see him. He's fast asleep in his chair. He's been sleeping an awful lot lately. The ads come on and Nancy heads off. Take the chops out of the freezer, peel a few spuds and dice a few carrots. I'll read for a half-hour while the spuds are boiling. Go upstairs to get my book. Searching around the bedroom when I notice the Anna Summers bag in the wardrobe. Kermit's still in his box. Never did get around to using him. Didn't like the look of him. He's like them Cool Pops Amber used to buy when she was small. Take him out. Switch it on. Listen to the hum. It's loud enough. Switch it off, don't want to wake himself. Suppose I do have a spare half an hour. I could... Just to see... like... Marjorie keeps saying it's un-fucking-believable. Hardly, though, it's an awful-looking thing. Lie down on the bed... I'm not sure quite what to do with it. It just looks so... The zzz... zzz... sound is putting me off. I'll put the radio on. Joe Duffy is interviewing some fella about his new book. Zzz... zzz... Ah... Joe Duffy's after putting me off even more. Back up, change the station. Q102. Love songs. Zzz... zzz... Gem'd piss himself laughing at this thing. Maybe I should check on him... zzz... zzz... I did take the chops out of the freezer that time, didn't I? Zzz... zzz... Better not forget that appointment we have on Tuesday. Zzz... Why are these things so fucking noisy? Me bedroom sounds like a building site. Fling the thing across the bedroom. Zzz... It vibrates across the floorboards coming back towards me... Truth is, I can't cheat on Gem, even if it is with a six-inch piece of luminous green plastic.