



Jenny
COLGAN

Talking
to
Addison

'Sheer indulgence from
start to finish'

SOPHIE
KINSELLA



JENNY COLGAN

Talking to Addison

HARPER

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Dedication

This book is dedicated with love
to my truly fantastic and long-suffering
parents – Mum, sorry I didn't take
my accountancy exams, Dad, sorry about all the swearing.

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Part I

One

A famous arctic explorer once said that polar expeditions were the most successful form of having a bad time humans had ever devised. Of course, he'd probably never answered an ad for a flatshare with a bunch of complete strangers. Although if it hadn't been for them I would never have met Addison. Hmm. Which, when I think of it, is kind of like saying, OK, I lost all my fingers and toes to frostbite but I met some very sweet penguins along the way...

Thirty-six hours after I moved in to 12a Wendle Close, Harlesden, I realized I'd made a terrible mistake. Tiptoeing around someone *else's* home is weird enough, particularly if it's just after a late night and you can't remember their name or where they keep the Sugar Puffs or, say, you're a convicted burglar. Tiptoeing around your own is discomfiting to say the least. But here I was, creeping into my own house and closing my bedroom door extremely quietly, heart pounding, after my very first quick jaunt to the shops, to make friends with my newsagent and see what flavours of Skips he had.

If I pressed my head against the thin wood veneer of the door I could just about hear my new best friends in the nearby ghastly open-plan Formica kitchenette.

'Well, I think we need a special *long-term* rota too. For cleaning the shower curtain and the drawers. And washing the skirting boards.'

'That's a great idea, Carol,' came another voice, deep with awe. 'Maybe we could do one big job every Saturday night and make an event of it. We could even get takeaway pizza!'

'And don't forget the nets!' screeched the unfortunately named Farah, who was about two foot tall and was always being mistaken for a monkey, or Martin Amis. 'I'll get my coloured pencils out and start drawing it up. This is going to be *such fun!*'

They all mewed.

'Didn't I just hear Holly coming in?' asked Laura, who was stolid and sat down a lot. 'That sounded like her bedroom door ...'

Damn.

'No!' I attempted to telepathically send to them. 'It must have been the wind. That ... mysterious indoor wind.'

'... Why don't we go and ask her what she'd like to do?'

I inhaled sharply.

'Yes, let's!' yelled Farah. And there was a pounding at my door.

'Holly? Holly, are you there?'

Carol, official leader of Scary Clean Freaks Incorporated, put her head round the door assertively. Was it only a week ago I had checked out her ankle chain and pondered whether we'd ever get on? She looked at me sneerily. I sensed that she secretly knew of the scientifically proven inverse relationship between me and housework (the more messy things were, the less inclined I was to do anything about them), even though I'd attempted to be pristine for my first few days.

'We were just wondering ...' she hissed.

Laura sniffed, noisily, behind her. Laura sniffed *all the time*. I always wanted to tell her that it was OK; no one was about to make her do double PE any more. Carol shot an evil sideways glance like a viper.

‘Ahem. We were just *wondering*, given that we’re – ha – divvying up the rota, if there was anything you particularly liked doing?’

I eyed her steadily, not about to be intimidated by someone who ringed their lips with dark lipstick and pencil on their skin.

‘How about I take lightbulb-dusting and big spider removal?’

‘Ooh, that sounds good,’ screeched Farah from somewhere beside my knee. Carol dispensed another one of those Robert de Niro-to-doomed-gangster stares.

‘We thought you might prefer loos, sinks and floors,’ she said pointedly.

‘Oh ...’ I said. ‘You mean, *all* of it.’

‘Ha,’ she smiled. ‘Don’t get around to much cooking, do we?’

I realized I’d been outmanoeuvred.

I counterattacked. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’m going to co-ordinate,’ she said. Laura nodded happily.

‘Oh, *tough* one.’

‘... that means I buy all the cleaning materials, arrange the rota, organize the external cleaning contractors, e.g. the carpet shampooers I’ve got coming in, arrange everyone’s telephone hours and oversee everyone’s painting choices. So we’ve all got *quite* enough to be getting on with, don’t you think?’

I wanted to try one last stance – perhaps suggesting that Farah take the floors, after all, she was closer – but all I could say was, ‘*Telephone* hours?’

‘I know, I thought of it,’ Carol said proudly.

‘It’s a *great* idea,’ said Farah, standing between Carol’s legs.

‘Basically, it means you can only use the phone or get phone calls at your set time each night. Then, when we get the bill in, you pay for all the calls in your time, and nobody lies about the expensive numbers.’

I stared at her.

‘Well, that’s going to cut down on my sex-line income.’

Laura’s eyes widened with shock. Carol laughed politely, to show me that if I felt like fighting her she was up to it.

‘What’s to stop me making phone calls on other people’s time?’

‘We’re going to have a phone-lock that can only be opened by me. You come to me when you want to use the phone and I’ll see if it’s your hour or not. Really,’ she said, shaking her head, ‘your chores are *much* easier than mine, believe me.’

‘Oh goodness me, I think I just heard my *mobile* go off,’ I announced in a flurry.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, when they showed no sign of backing away from my door, ‘I just have to ehrrm, excuse me ...’ Fortunately, the henchmen stuck next to Carol and backed away when she gave the signal, as my next move would have been to scream ‘Fuck off! Fuck off! Fuck off!’ whilst shoving them out of the door and pulling a hose on them.

I slammed the door behind them and sat on the bed. My mobile wasn’t going off, naturally, but I took it out anyway and thanked this little machine. How could I ever have thought they were only used to wankers on buses who thought that someone not on a bus might want to know when they were on a bus? Oh – and how the fuck was I going to get out of here?

Some people pick the wrong men all the time. I pick the wrong places to live. Well, OK, I pick the wrong men too, but anyway. So it was that after finally getting totally creeped out by my last landlord in Hackney, who smelled of piss and used to turn up at random hours of the night to ‘inspect’ things,

(my knicker drawer included) – which followed the three girls in Dulwich who had all joined a bearded-weirdy religious cult and refused to allow men over the threshold, except for the cult leader whom they all slept with whenever he wanted them to – I had ended up here, in a new house-share with three banana brains who all worked in the local hospital as phlebotomists. Apparently this meant they took blood samples from people. I assumed in Carol’s case she simply bit them.

Anyway, they’d advertised in *Loot* for a fourth member to join a new household in tasty Harlesden and, amazingly, I got it. Perhaps I was the only one who didn’t blanch at the interview, when Laura came in and reported obediently to Carol that she had just bleached the teacups.

‘And how often do you boil-wash the crockery?’ Carol had asked me.

‘Ehm ... I find about every half-hour just about does it,’ I’d gone for, and noticed her put a big tick on my application form, which had been broken down into sixteen handy sections. The relief of going from the dissipated seediness of Hackney – where they wanted extra rent if you got an inside loo – to a brand new ‘executive’ flat in the famous industrial waste area of North West London made it seem like a good deal at the time, but had blinded me to the obvious: i.e., all these people were mad, because they outnumbered me in the house I was beginning to think that they were right.

I began to inspect my mobile for germs, and was getting really close up when it rang in my face.

I shrieked, did a comedy clown fumble, and dropped the phone under the bed.

‘Are you all right?’ said Carol’s voice from just outside the door. She was obviously listening to everything. I shrieked again, swallowed some air, choked, coughed, and managed to wheeze, ‘Fine, thank you.’

‘It must be pretty dusty under your bed.’

‘Yes, yes it is, thanks,’ I said, sitting upright with the phone. Then I jumped – how the hell did she know where I was? I felt a cold hand of fear.

‘Hello?’ I finally choked into the phone.

‘Do you know, I haven’t made a woman scream like that for years,’ drawled the well-modulated voice.

I relaxed slightly.

‘Josh, you have never made a woman scream like that. In fact, have you ever made a woman?’

‘Oh ho ho. Yes, of course.’

‘In your country of origin?’

He paused.

‘Not precisely.’

I’d been teasing Josh about this for as long as I’d known him, which was a l-o-o-ong time. Because he was attractive and also nice to girls, most people assumed he was gay. For someone with a posh background, a good job, and a nice haircut, he did horrendously badly with the opposite sex, which I couldn’t understand – not that I’d ever wanted to shag him myself; he was so *nice*.

Anyway, thank God he’d rung me back. Worriedly searching the ceiling for CCTV, I sat back on the bed.

‘Josh, you know when you moved into Pimlico and I said I didn’t want to move there because it was snooty London and you were moving in with Kate who hates me?’

‘Um, yes.’

‘Well, you know, how’s it ... how’s the whole flatshare *thing* going?’

‘It’s going fine.’

‘Right – GREAT! Right. How’s that other guy you got in to fill the space doing?’

‘Addison? He’s just great ... Well, quiet, and undemanding.’

That didn't sound much like me.

'Uh huh. So, no one's moving out or anything, then?'

Josh sighed. 'Don't tell me. Not another Turkish Lesbian Women's Collective?'

That had been Hoxteth, two years ago. I'd been kicked out for not liking chickpeas and buying the symbol of male forced dominance, sanitary protection.

'No. Worse.'

'The cat lady?'

'Christ. No, not worse than her. But still, pretty bad.'

I heard Carol's voice:

'Holly! Would you like some tea? Because it's your turn to make it!'

I ignored her.

'Josh, this is absolutely desperate. Listen, you know that little boxroom you were going to turn into a study?'

'The one you described as a coffin?'

'Yup, yup, that's the one. Ehm, have you ...?'

'Turned it into a study? Not since you were last here. I've leased it out as a bedroom, though.'

'NOOO!'

He laughed.

'You bastard! Josh, I know this is a huge favour – and please say no if you don't want to – but please, please, please can I come and live in your coffin? I mean, boxroom?'

'You've asked me this before, Holl,' he said with a sigh.

'I know.'

'Then you always dash off and the next thing I hear from you you're on the run from the postgraduate mathematics badminton team.'

'I know. I'm crazy.'

'You are crazy. Why didn't you just move in when I bought the place?'

'Because you're rich and Kate makes me miserable.'

'I am not rich, and Kate can't help being ... Kate. Anyway, if that's how you feel ...'

'No, no! I'm sorry! Please. Please. Please.'

There was a loud knocking at my door.

'Tea, please, Holly! It's in the lease!'

'It's the Gestapo!' I whispered. 'How soon can you come and get me?'

'I'll have to check with Kate and Addison.'

'Josh!' I screeched, near to tears. '*Please.*'

'OK,' he relented. 'I'll pick you up at about seven. Have you got much stuff?'

'Just a coffinful.'

'And no diving off again, do you hear me?'

'Yes, sir,' I mumbled meekly.

I could have snogged Josh, I was so pleased to see him. I wanted to grab hold of his legs round the ankles and sob with gratitude and pour unguents over his feet. Or is that glue?

Carol had not taken the news well, particularly when I retrieved my deposit cheque from the shiny silver box to which only she had a key (I distracted her by upending her Asda coupons all over the kitchen floor then making a dive for the key when she bent over). In fact, she had advanced on me

until her face was only a few inches from mine – well, her make-up was. Her face was probably about a foot away.

‘Think you can just do what you like round here?’ she asked menacingly.

‘Yes, I do, actually. That’s why I don’t live with my parents any more.’

‘So, who’s going to take your room? You’ve got to sort that out.’

‘Ah. Yes, well ... I’m afraid you’re going to have to sue me for my friends and acquaintance. Here, I’ve written down my forwarding address on this piece of paper –’ I waved it reassuringly. ‘said: 1 Holly Lane, Hollywood, 020 8555 5555 – ‘and don’t forget to send those bills on to me!’

‘We won’t,’ said Carol grimly. Laura opened and shut her mouth like a fish.

‘Well, I think it’s disgraceful the way you’re leaving Carol in the lurch like this,’ she announced quivering. ‘All the trouble she’s been to.’

‘And me!’ piped up Farah from somewhere around my ankles. ‘I did the rotas!’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘My best friend’s got cancer. I’m nursing him till he dies.’

Laura backed away, crestfallen.

‘I’m *so sorry*,’ she muttered.

‘Oh really?’ said Carol. ‘What kind?’

I couldn’t think. ‘Ehm, nose cancer?’

‘You’re sick,’ she said, turning to march out of the room.

‘So are you!’ I yelled after her.

She turned once more, her brutally permed hair a weapon.

‘Well, at least I’m *clean* and sick.’

Fortunately, Josh’s sporty little spitfire had turned up, and he was honking enthusiastically. Josh did *everything* enthusiastically.

I tore out of the house.

‘Where the hell am I going to *put* anything?’ I wailed, after hugging him over-affectionately then examining his two-seater.

‘I’m so sorry, darling. I meant to trade Bessie in for a Volvo but, you know, I just couldn’t find the time.’

‘Ha ha ha. Listen, would you mind sitting on my duvet?’

He gave me a look.

‘Well, it’s not like real sex, is it?’

It took us an hour and a half to crawl back into town. Even though it was only April, Josh insisted on having the roof off, so I had to hang on to everything I owned, like an earthquake refugee.

‘Freedom!’ I yelled into the air. ‘I am never going to move into a crappy flat again.’

‘Except for the one you’re about to move into.’

‘Josh, it could be a shed at the bottom of the garden, I don’t care! I’m FREEEE!’

‘OK, steady on,’ said Josh, obviously worried I was about to start leaning dangerously far over the bonnet and singing ‘My Heart Will Go On’.

There are two schools of thought concerning the children of parents who divorce nastily just as you’re approaching puberty. One school says, Well, life is like that – chin up, and maybe the seething atmosphere at home will spur you into staying late at the library and moving on to better and brilliant

things in an attempt to pull yourself out of the flotsam. Lots of famous people have divorced parents. They over-achieve for attention. That wasn't exactly my school.

The *other* school says you should instantly become über-truculent and demanding, and put everything you do your entire life down to your bad upbringing. I tended to this school, it being rather easier and low maintenance, plus it tended to mean better Christmas presents, if dodgier exam results. It had worked reasonably well during my teens, but when your friends no longer *have* to see you every day in class and are too busy off doing horrid careers and stuff – well, so, now I was twenty-eight, and it was definitely becoming less fun by the day, especially when everyone I used to know had suddenly become fascinated by MORTGAGES, for fuck's sake. I just didn't get it. Boys and pop music were fascinating. Mortgages are what you get when you look up the dictionary definition of 'not fascinating'. Hence my precipitative flat-hopping.

To make matters even worse, I was starting to realize that my anti-establishment tendencies were beginning to marginalize me – not as a free spirit, as I'd always thought, but along with the other hippies and socialist workers and people who talked about smashing the state but couldn't actually get it together to wash their trousers – ever. It was extremely depressing. I mean, nobody likes washing their trousers, but I didn't want it to define my entire existence. To make matters worse, my father, who took up bringing home blonde women full time after he left my mum, had recently brought home one my age. Who also had a mortgage. And a sports car. Sigh.

Josh had a mortgage, but he was also a complete sweetie pie who could be endlessly relied upon in a crisis, as I knew and had shamefully abused in the past.

We finally pulled up in front of his dilapidated Victorian pile in Pimlico.

'I see you've still not got the builders in.'

'No, I couldn't afford them,' said Josh, hopping out of the car without opening the door and pulling up two bin-liners of my stuff. 'Until now,' he smiled sweetly in my direction.

'Ah yes, about that ...' I followed him in, clutching my socks and pants bag, my cheese plant and Frank Sinatra the bear. One of the reasons that I'd wound up in Harlesden in the first place was that being a freelance florist and general under-achieving free spirit didn't exactly pay very much, and Pimlico was basically posh these days.

He told me, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The going rate for coffins wasn't so bad after all.

The flat was quiet inside. It was big and tatty and comfortable, and I'd always liked it. Josh had bought right at the top of the market and paid a stupid amount of money for it – apart from being infested with dry rot and woodworm and all sorts of other nasty moving things, it needed a new roof but it was a good homey home. The kitchen was large, with nasty old units, a rickety table and four chairs in the middle, cracked floor tiles, and a huge window at the back which opened on to a rustic excuse for a fire escape. I potted about in my tiny new room, mostly leaning against cupboards and getting them to shut and stuffing things under the bed.

'Umm, sorry about the mess,' hummed Joshua when I went back into the kitchen for a cup of tea. 'It's not usually ... Well, in fact, it is.'

'Great!' I said.

He smiled weakly at me. I leaned across the table.

'Josh, thank you. I'm sorry I forced you into this. I promise I'll be a good tenant. You'll see. I promise.'

He grinned back at me.

'Good. And I could do with the company, to be honest – Kate works all the time and Addison is well ...'

‘Yikes!’ I pounced immediately. ‘Tell me the gossip about Kate.’

‘Oh, she’s a complete bitch, as ever,’ said Kate, striding into the kitchen and dumping a Marks and Spencer’s bag, an enormous briefcase, a Nicole Farhi raincoat and an expensive leather handbag on one of the rickety chairs.

‘Hello, Holly. Josh left me a message on my voicemail. Which I got about ten minutes ago. But never mind, eh? Welcome anyway.’

I went to give her a hug or something, but she was already en route to the bottle opener. Josh touched her lightly on the arm.

‘How was your day, Skates?’

‘Great. Great. As usual. Two sexist comments, four reports to do this week, one irregular forecasting, and I have to be in Dublin for 8 a.m. tomorrow morning, to give a presentation on a report I haven’t even *read* yet. Then back in the office by noon to account for myself, two more meetings and a 4 p.m. deadline for the Kinley account. Oh, and then a client dinner with a bunch of ghastly old boys who’ll try and feel me up in the Met bar.’

Josh nodded sagely. Kate pulled the cork with a savage ‘pop’ and poured out three humongous glasses of wine.

‘So, Holly, what are you up to these days?’

Kate had always intimidated me. We’d only really met because the three of us were on the same corridor of student halls. We’d both stayed friends with Josh – most people did – but never really got on with each other. She was rather more of a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps-type person – she didn’t actually say ‘lickspittle’, but you could tell when she was thinking it.

She’d done business studies and got some hugely well-paid and prestigious job in the City, which hadn’t helped relations between us particularly. I always felt she was just about to offer to buy a *B Issue* off me.

Actually, that wasn’t quite why we didn’t get on. Specifically, well, you know in Freshers’ Week one is often, er, tacitly encouraged to get ... Well, anyway. Originally, there were the three of us in a row on one of those grotty endless corridors that was distinctly not the Brideshead University model I’d always dreamt of. It was in Coventry for a start.

Students were still sharing showers, a good life lesson for future flatshares in how much YEUC people are actually made of, and how, just when you think you’ve seen everything, there’s always a new variety of repulsiveness.

Josh had opened his door on the very first day and sat there crudely beaming at everyone who walked past, a technique which probably wouldn’t have worked so well if he hadn’t been so blond and pretty. I wandered in there by accident, already worried by how keen my dad and Blondie had been to leave me, but faintly reassured by the seemingly enormous cheque now burning a hole in my pocket. It worked out to a lot of Caramac bars, although, as I found out four weeks later, not that many beers and taxis.

‘Hello,’ said Josh. ‘This place is nice, isn’t it?’

‘It’s a shit hole!’ I said, looking around at the regulation stained walls, stained carpet and dodgy pinboard.

‘Oh yes ...’ He took in the room. ‘So it is. Oh well – only three years to go.’

‘And a week,’ I said.

‘Of course. Hmm. What do you think the cooking facilities are like?’

‘I don’t know – what’s a cooking facility?’

Through the paper-thin walls we could hear loud, fairly dramatic sobbing. We raised our eyebrows.

at each other.

‘What is this, primary school?’ I said, a tad callously.

‘Maybe she misses her mother,’ said Josh.

I sniffed derisively, something I’d been practising throughout my teens to great effect.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘let’s go cheer her up.’

‘Ah, the beginning of my crazy university years,’ I said, but I followed him dutifully outside.

Next door, perched on the narrow bed, with the door open, sat Kate, thin and a little pinched looking, and dressed head to toe in immaculately ironed Benetton separates. Even though she appeared distraught with grief, she still had been composed enough to hang up lots of perfect shirts, I noticed.

‘Hello there,’ said Josh. ‘I’m sure it won’t be as bad as all that. When I went to boarding school I cried for my mother for four days. Mind you, I was six years old at the time.’

‘My *mother*?’ said Kate, spluttering. ‘I don’t miss my *mother*! I just can’t believe I didn’t do better in my A-levels than to end up in this shitty place!’

‘Didn’t you work hard?’ I asked her. That was my excuse.

‘Of *course* I worked hard!’ she said, looking up. ‘I had a fucking place at Magdalene.’

‘Oh, I see. They only want really tall girls, don’t they?’ I said sympathetically.

‘What the fuck’s nervous anxiety, anyway?’ Kate went on, ignoring me. ‘I’ll tell you what it is: it isn’t enough to get your exam marks upgraded. I wish I’d had a fucking full-on nervous breakdown. Then they’d have *had* to let me in.’

‘Have one now,’ I suggested. I knew she wasn’t actually shouting at me, but she was certainly shouting in my direction.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Josh kindly, touching her on the shoulder. ‘Would you like to come out with me? I’m going ice skating at the Christian Union.’

‘You’re not Christian are you?’ I said, disappointed. I’d liked him.

‘No! But I sure can SKAAAAAATE!’

So the three of us ended up in one of those forced friendships that come together extremely quickly out of necessity in early college. Kate quickly decided that Josh was her own personal property, which annoyed me. OK, so both of them had flat stomachs and good posture, but I didn’t like the assumption that as Kate was prettier than me I should butt out, especially as I didn’t even fancy Josh and in fact assumed pretty much from the start that he was gay, rather than, as I later found out, completely and utterly confused.

Kate hadn’t cottoned on to this, however, and insisted on treating me as an annoying kid sister hanging round with the grown-ups, her repertoire including: ‘You again, Holly?’ ‘You don’t mind, do you, but I’ve only got two cups?’ and ‘Sorry, Holl, but it’s only a plus-one.’ Soon their status as a monetised and classy students at a poor and common college became clear, and I started going out with a greasy sports science student who once tried to teach me kung fu and chipped my collarbone, so pretty much left them to it – which doesn’t mean to say that she didn’t really fuck me off, Kate being the accepted sucking pig to Josh’s sow and my runt. An analogy bordering on the disgusting, but that’s how it was.

In time, of course, Kate realized that simply because her and Josh went to a lot of places JUST THE TWO OF THEM, it didn’t actually mean they were a couple. But not before I got my revenge...

In a misguided attempt at collegiate unity, two socially inadequate but horrifically bouncy ‘enough officers’ – to be involved in ‘ents’ of course meaning you are anything but – arranged a ‘Corridor Convulsion’ early on in our first term. There was a good and complicated reason for it at the time, but what it meant in effect was an excuse to haul in lots of weepingly cheap alcohol and stuff it down the

faces of naïve but nubile eighteen-year-olds in the hope that they might accidentally strip their tops off and run down the corridor. Actually, maybe that was the official reason and it just sounded a little right in those days.

Josh of course would do anything of a community nature enthusiastically and Kate was still in the ‘gamely joining in’ stage, before she realized that she could dress up as a giant antelope and it still wasn’t going to make her sexually attractive to Josh, so we all trawled into the hallway to figure out what was happening.

What was happening was what happens anywhere with horribly diverse sects of shy and socially inept people away from home for the first time and unsure of their very identities: groups of twos and threes stood in small corners grunting nervously at each other and downing obscure former community bloc spirits as fast as they possibly could. A group of rugby- or aspirant rugby-playing lads started getting rowdy in the corner, and the ent’s officers gibbered around, excited yet again at the possibility of not being one of the 29 per cent of students who *leave* Coventry certified virgins. What they didn’t yet know was that 100 per cent of ent’s officers leave 100 per cent of all institutions certified virgins.

A petite, very pretty blonde girl who wore enormous fleeces and was clearly out to score with a rugby boy – Why? being the only unanswered question – became the first person, at around 10.30 p.m. and after a lot of goading, to take off her top and flee down the corridor, bouncing merrily, to massive applause. After that, about fifteen of the men immediately tried to do it with their cocks out – what about British men and being completely naked for no good reason? I’ve seen someone play the piano with his.

Anthropologists would have had a field day with all this, given, truly, how few of us that year had yet seen another buck-naked human being we weren’t blood related to.

Finally, and it all starts to get a bit hazy around this point, pretty much everyone had done a quick streak and been accepted into the gang. Mine would have been sexier had I not stumbled over somebody’s outstretched foot and made a noise which sounded like a fart (but *wasn’t*) on my way down. Josh skipped along his, to yells of ‘faggot’, but generally good-natured ones.

And at last there was only one more person to go. Kate would clearly rather have died than take part in anything so vulgar. She had that faraway look in her eyes she got whenever she dwelt on what romantic and glistening evenings she could be having at Oxford *right now*. I started egging her on, and pointing out to people that she was the only one who hadn’t done it, just in case she got away with it.

‘Shut up, Holl,’ Kate hissed.

‘Kate hasn’t gone! Kate hasn’t gone!’ I shouted loudly to the rugby players.

‘KATE! KATE! KATE! KATE!’ they started chanting.

Kate flushed redder than ever.

‘Everyone else has,’ I said petulantly.

‘Go on, Skatie,’ said Josh, who, due to his upbringing, was completely unable to understand why someone wouldn’t want to take part in group-enforced humiliation in the name of fun. The rugby boys’ name-calling had failed to abate and formed an increasingly ferocious background.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’ said Kate, furious.

‘KATE! KATE! KATE!’

Kate pulled up her top extremely quickly and made a sprint down the corridor. Immediately silence fell. Quite simply, Kate had the flattest chest anyone had ever seen.

Of course, nowadays, that doesn’t matter. Kate Moss resembles a boy who’s been stung by two bees and nobody bats an eyelid. But when you’re nineteen and desperate to find yourself attractive ..

To cut a long story short, that was never a moment when anybody needed me to inadvertently

expostulate:

‘Christ, they look like two Pop-Tarts!’ loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Kate handed me one of the glasses of wine.

‘Sorry, I didn’t hear that ... what did you say you were up to again?’

‘Ehm, I’m ... I’m a florist.’

‘Still! My goodness. Is it ... fulfilling?’

‘Huh?’

Fulfilling? I couldn’t even conceive of what that might mean, and was standing with a confused expression on my face until I remembered that when Kate asked a question, she required a logical answer *quickly* – time being money, etc.

‘Yes, it is,’ I said. ‘The pay is shit and the hours are crap and your hands are wet all day, but apart from that it’s fantastic.’

She smiled thinly. ‘Never mind, eh? You’d probably hate a career job anyway.’

‘This is a ...’

‘Where do you work?’

‘Actually, I’m freelance at the moment ...’

Well, I couldn’t commute to Hackney Flowerarama any more, but I did have a chum at New Covent Garden who was going to let me help out.

‘Oh, so you’re like a *temp* florist? How funny!’

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I went and helped Josh, who was chopping onions for spaghetti bolognese. I could see Kate reflected in the kitchen window. She did look fantastic – tired but fantastic. Her dark hair was glossy and tied back in a chignon, and she was wearing an expensive fawn suit. I wiped my hands on my pinafore and sighed.

‘Tell me about your mystery flatmate. Is he away?’ I asked Josh.

Josh and Kate looked at each other and smiled.

‘Away?’ echoed Kate. ‘Addison doesn’t *do* away.’

‘What – you mean, he’s in the house?’

I felt nervous suddenly. I’d been stomping about merrily for two hours, singing and making loud noises in the toilet, and all along there had been an additional presence. Spooky.

‘Oh yes,’ said Josh. ‘I’ll probably leave some food out for him later on. He forgets to eat until he faints, so I put it by his door.’

Curioser and curioser.

‘Can I meet him?’

They exchanged glances again.

‘Ehm, best not.’

‘Well, I’ll have to meet him sometime,’ I argued. ‘What if he just pops up in the bathroom one day? I’ll scream the place down.’

‘You might do that anyway,’ said Kate.

‘Addison is very ... well, sensitive. He’s a computer buff, you see.’

Only Josh still used words like ‘buff.’

‘You mean, what – an anorak? A geek? Dork? Nerd?’

‘Ahem.’

Josh gave a polite cough as a shadow flitted across the open kitchen door.

‘Is that him?’ I hissed. ‘I’m going to see.’

Kate stepped in front of me and shut the door.

‘What is going on?’ I asked. ‘Is he hideously deformed, like the Elephant Man?’

Josh patted me on the shoulder.

‘Sorry, Holls. We’re not doing this on purpose. Addison does a lot of highly technical, top-level computer work, and he hates being disturbed when he’s working.’

‘But he’s in the flat.’

‘He works from home.’

‘And for about twenty-three hours a day,’ muttered Kate. ‘It’s really easy to forget a hard day’s work when you’ve got beeps and tapping going on all night next door to you.’

‘Better than some things ...’ I started to say, then remembered that Josh’s bedroom was next door to mine, and didn’t.

‘So, I mean, what’s he *like*?’ I started again. A man of mystery? Sounded good to me.

‘Oh, you tell her, Josh. I’m absolutely exhausted,’ said Kate. She took out her Psion and started stabbing at it, making me feel like a complete idiot. Then Josh and I shared our ‘it’s Kate’ glance, and I felt a bit better.

‘Well ...’ started Josh, stirring the sauce. I went and leaned on the cabinet next to him.

‘He’s quiet. Very quiet. In fact, I think he’d rather not speak at all. He was amazed when we didn’t have e-mail in every room in the house so we could just communicate that way.’

I raised my eyebrows. At the table, Kate let out a long ‘How can I be so busy and successful when there are people in my kitchen making spaghetti bolognese?’ type sigh.

‘Whenever he bumps into one of us in the hallway he acts like a startled rabbit, like he genuinely wasn’t expecting anyone to be there. And he refuses to answer the phone or the doorbell. And he never eats.’

‘Hence the food drops.’

‘Hmm? Yes.’ Josh artfully splashed a measure of red wine into the sauce, crying out ‘Whoops’ flamboyantly when he got a bit on his professional apron. I really could understand why women had a hard time taking him seriously.

He caught me watching him.

‘Am I being gay again?’

I smiled at him, colouring slightly. When we were at college, I used to tease him on a semi-continual basis when he’d bring his girl stories to me, but now I was his tenant, and it felt a bit uncomfortable.

‘That was a very masculine dash of wine. But I am definitely fascinated by my new invisible flatmate.’

‘Try taking the room next to his – it’ll wear off soon enough,’ growled Kate from the table, when she continued to do Very Hard Sums.

‘Oh, can I?!’ I yelped, before realizing the faux pas.

‘Sorry, darling,’ said Josh, ‘but you’re not – aha! – *coffin* up enough rent for that!’

Kate and I stared at him in disgust until he apologized.

Dinner was good. Josh liked to cook, and was good at it. He had a sinecure at his family’s ancient law firm near Chancery Lane, which required him to turn up at about ten thirty looking well groomed, tall, long lunches and impress foreign clients with his Englishness and hand-made shoes, before retiring to the senior partners’ offices at four thirty to partake of an early gin and tonic before heading home.

Which was just as well, as he wasn't the most academic of characters: you wouldn't want him defending you in a murder trial whilst simultaneously admiring the court cornicing. The only thing preventing the absolute outbreak of class war was that he didn't get paid *that* much for it. It just stunned me that such things still existed outside of the kind of stuff Rupert Graves does in all his films.

Kate ate about three bites, wiped her lips ostentatiously with a napkin then declared she had more things to do and retreated to her room with the remainder of the wine. Her good night to me was curt, to say the least.

I looked at Josh.

'What is with her?' I asked. I mean, she'd always been uptight, but this was real carrot-up-the-butt stuff.

Josh toyed with his spaghetti.

'Oh, it's that stupid job of hers,' he said. 'She works fourteen-hour days, then comes home like a bear.'

'What, pooing in the woods?'

'Grizzly.'

'Oh. Good spag bol.'

'Thank you.' Josh coloured prettily. 'So, anyway, I keep saying she should change it, do something less stressful, but she just bares her teeth at me and hisses something about me being privileged and how I would never understand what it means to fight for something.'

'Her dad's a GP, isn't he?'

'Uh huh.'

'Hmm. But she must make an absolute fortune. Why does she live here?'

Josh looked faintly amused.

'Charmingly direct as ever, darling.'

'Oh, you *know* what I mean.'

'I know. I'm not sure, really. She does make a stinking amount of money, though. Something like more in her bonus than I do in a year.'

Than I will in a decade, I thought to myself mournfully.

'We moved in together when I came down,' Josh went on, 'and she's been here ever since, so I suppose she likes it. It's only four stops on the tube, and pretty cheap.'

I remembered a rather better reason though. Well well well, after all this time. But then, even if she didn't still fancy him, I suppose if I was feeling stressed out, I wouldn't mind coming back to my nice warm flat and spaghetti bolognese and someone nice like Josh you could be rude to. Well, she certainly wouldn't get away with being rude to me.

'Would you *mind* getting out of that shower!' screeched Kate, banging her Clarins bottles on the door at five o'clock one morning (I was doing nights at the market). She carried them daily in and out of the bathroom, presumably in case I stole them.

'I don't know what can be keeping you in there *that* long. You can only smell of flowers, surely.'

She banged again.

'OK, OK, I'm *coming*,' I yelled back, frantically drying myself and wondering if I could stab her with a cotton bud.

'I have got a plane to catch, Holly,' she said. Because I have a career and you don't, she might as well have added.

‘Oh no! The Euro will fall!’ I opened the bathroom door dishevelled, wrapped in two threadbare towels which almost but didn’t quite cover all my bits.

‘Will it?’ she said, instantly alert, then relaxed as her brain realized the context. She gave a tight smile, said, ‘Excuse me,’ and slipped past me, unbelting her Liberty robe.

Bitch, I thought to myself – one of my litany of dreaded ‘thought retorts’ – and headed for bed.

Over the next week or so I started to settle in. I was working part-time shifts at the New Covent Garden market, day and night, and as Kate went to work at 6.30 a.m. and returned at 9 p.m., I normally missed her, and steered well clear of the shower in the morning.

The house, though always untidy, was clean – for me, a perfect state of affairs. Kate paid someone to come in and ‘do’ once a week, which I disagreed with in principle but thoroughly enjoyed the benefits of. It began to feel like home, despite the coffin, which was nine foot by seven. Not the kind of place you’d let a cat visit, in case its brains got bashed to bits in a nasty swinging incident.

I was used to creeping in at odd times of night, and was always amazed to hear the faint tapping of fingers on a keyboard, random beeps and small buzzing noises from Addison’s room.

I never saw him, but fantasized wildly about him. A monster? Kate and Josh’s deformed lovechild, half man half robocop? Perhaps he was blind! That was why he crept around in the dark and didn’t go outside. I had a brief romantic reverie of my being his life partner, caring for him, being his lover and his guide; ‘Holly,’ he would say, ‘you, *you* are my eyes.’ And, plus it would be a double bonus when I got to forty and wouldn’t have to bother about how I looked.

Then, ping, I realized that the Internet is in fact an almost purely visual medium, and apologized to my head to all the blind people in the world.

Finally, after about a fortnight, I cracked.

It was about 3 a.m., and the house was completely still. I’d been unpacking tulips from 11 p.m. but the work had thinned out and Johnny, my gaffer, had sent me home. It took about ten minutes to get Josh’s bicycle – in the very dead of night I would glide down hills, hands free, and have to restrain myself from shouting out loud to fill up the rare London silence.

I had crept into the house, exhilarated and pink-cheeked from the spring wind. My hair was tangled, and I didn’t feel sleepy. My hours were so topsy-turvy, I didn’t know when I slept. The television, however, was in the sitting room, which backed on to Kate’s room – so, no Channel 5 soft porn for me. I was about to head through to the chilly kitchen to make some tea when I saw the omnipresent blue glow underneath the door, the familiar tap tap tap.

Well, sod it, I thought to myself. Two weeks living in the same house as someone and not seeing them is simply freaky and unnatural. There could be nothing wrong with just popping in and introducing myself, for fuck’s sake. It was only ... well, ten past three in the morning. I felt strangely excited, like playing ring-the-bell-and-run-away. If I got yelled at, I could always hide and say it was Kate.

I crept across the hall, instead of walking across it like I normally did when I came in late at night so everyone would know it was me and not a burglar; steeled myself and rapped gently on the door.

The typing noise stopped. Encouraged, I tapped again. ‘Hello?’

There was no response.

Feeling like an idiot, I repeated, ‘Hello?’ leaning slightly on the door.

Clearly it wasn’t locked.

Half horrified at what I was doing, I pushed open the door.

The large room was dark, but light streamed in from the moon and the streetlights. The place was also lit up with an unearthly green glow, which I realized, once my eyes adjusted, came from a huge VDU. The room was so filled with banks of electronic equipment it was like the flight deck of the Starship *Enterprise*. LEDs lit up and monitors beeped quietly.

Sitting with his back to me was a very tall man, who resembled a normal man who'd been put on a rack and stretched out. His black spiky hair stuck up straight from his head, and I couldn't see his face.

He didn't turn round, although he must have heard me, because his back stiffened.

'Hello?' I whispered. 'Sorry to disturb you, but I saw you were still working and, well, I moved here a couple of weeks ago and my name's Holly and I thought that, you know, since we live together, we should perhaps lay eyes on one another.'

I swallowed. My voice seemed to echo in the empty room, and I felt like a complete dork. The next time he didn't reply, I started to get annoyed. It wasn't like I was demanding anything unreasonable. This was only basic human contact, for fuck's sake! The way Kate and Josh tiptoed around him was ridiculous. He needed shaking up, if you asked me. He still hadn't even bothered turning round! That was bloody rude.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't realize you were so rude. I won't bother you again. *Excuse me.*'

I turned to go. Slowly, I heard the revolving chair creep round behind me. I looked back.

A huge pair of dark brown eyes, blinking rapidly, regarded me with a mixture of curiosity and fear. I almost gasped aloud. He was ... well, just spectacularly beautiful. Just, like, *Oh my GAWD!* Not in that pretty, boyband poofy kind of way, but that chiselled, sensitive look that cries out, 'I may have been staring at this computer screen for fifteen hours, but as my physiognomy suggests, I have the soul of a poet. And not one of those ones with hair in their noses that you see in the Sunday supplements.' Even from behind his glasses you could see that his eyelashes cast long shadows on his ludicrously high cheekbones and a frown seemed to pass over his exquisitely high forehead.

I managed to quell my first urge, which was to lie at his feet and present my stomach to him to be tickled, when I noticed he was wearing a *Star Trek* T-shirt. How original of someone who played with computers all day long to like *Star Trek*, I thought.

'Excuse me,' he said. His voice was quiet and soft, with no discernible accent – not like mine. I got very London, selling flowers every day.

He looked at his hands. His fingers were incredibly long – practically prehensile. I actually sighed.

'I was a bit caught up in what I was doing.'

He sounded apologetic, and I was in one of those brain-twisting moods whereby if you meet someone who is clearly your soul mate you feel an overwhelming urge to be rude to them.

'So you don't listen to people when they come to say "hello"? What were you doing?'

He stared at his hands again and didn't say anything. I thought for a bit.

'OK, shall we start again?' I announced. 'I'm Holly, and you're Mr Addison, I presume.'

'Not mister, just Addison,' he said quietly.

'Ooh, what a great name!' I said, reaching out to shake his hand. He didn't take mine, and regarded me with some alarm. 'Addison Madison?'

What? What magic potion had I just taken to turn me into the Moron of the Western World? I cringed.

He blinked. His eyelashes practically bounced off his sweetly pouted lips. 'Ehm, no ... Addison Farthing.'

'*Farthing, Farthing* – right, of course, how silly of me,' I gushed, like I was interviewing him on

breakfast show. 'Of course.'

I was backing away and backing down big time.

'So, anyway, I thought, you know, time to say hello, pop in, have a chat ...'

Addison continued to regard me impassively.

'So, here we are, having a chat ... and it's been lovely chatting to you. Really. We must do it again some time.'

He continued staring at me as I backed out of the room.

'Great! Nice to meet you! Nice Starship *Enterprise*, by the way!' I said as I got to the door, but he was already turning back to his enormous screen and had clearly forgotten my very existence. Huge cables twisted round the table legs, heading off God knows where. The tapping started up again and he closed the door gently. Outside in the hall I leaned on the wall and let my jaw drop in wonder. Oh my God. No wonder Kate liked him locked away.

'I spoke to Addison last night,' I announced to Josh the next day. He was eating dinner and I was eating breakfast and trying to avoid his dinner – the smell of pork chops half an hour after I'd woken up made me feel a bit sick, I had discovered.

Josh looked up at me from an article he was reading in *Homes & Gardens*. I'd suggested *Loaded* as a slightly more useful manual for pulling, but it didn't quite suit him, somehow.

'And?'

'And?? AND?? Excuse me, but as landlord of this establishment, I do believe it is your duty to let me know when you're hoarding Johnny Depp in geek form on your property!'

'You never asked.'

'Why did I never think to ask?' I asked, slapping myself on the forehead. 'So many gorgeous computer geeks in the world, so little time. *Josh!* If it hadn't been for my extreme bravery last night I might never have met my future life partner! Ooh –' a thought occurred to me – 'and our kids get to be brainy, too!'

'He is very pretty, I suppose,' said Josh, a tad dreamily. I narrowed my eyes at him.

'Only in an objectively aesthetic way! Not in a romantic way! Not that there would be anything wrong with that! But I don't! Not that it's bad!'

'Stop, stop! You've got caught in the Richard Gere "I'm not gay/but it's OK" cycle of eternal justification. The only way to break free is to remove that plate of pork chops from my vicinity before I vomit on it.'

'Thank goodness for your magic spell-breaking powers,' said Josh, picking up his plate and moving over to the sink.

'You know, I must have him,' I went on. 'He will be mine.'

'But he doesn't *talk*.'

'That's OK. I can talk to you, or my mother. Addison is for *kissing* and *worshipping*.'

'So, like, there's no difference between me and your mother?' asked Josh gloomily, rinsing his plate off.

'Well, you haven't ordered me to help with the washing-up yet, so, perhaps there is.'

'Don't you have work to go to?' he asked, a tad crossly.

'Ah, *that's* more like it.'

'Fine. See you later. I'll just continue here on my lifelong mission of female identification.'

I popped my head back round the door.

‘You know, if you meant that sarcastically, you should really take that pinny off.’

He gave me the V’s.

‘Bye, Addison!’ I called out cheerily as I passed his door. There was a small break in tapping in response. I took it as a good sign.

Two

It was getting dark when I hopped on the bike and headed up to the market. Going out in the chill nights was the worst; I knew I had several hours of rushing about with my hands wet to come, and around me the nine-to-fivers were heading for home, fresh pasta and *The Bill*. And they all made twice as much as me. It didn't seem fair. Working in the market wasn't anything like working in a shop. Then, you got to choose things yourself and put them together, and if someone had been rude to you on the phone you could put a bug in their gladioli. Here, I had to check ten thousand tulips and try to work out which ones were the best.

I worked for Johnny, who was wizened and had been on the flower markets for four hundred and seventy years, as he never stopped reminding me.

'Aye, you never saw colours like that in my day,' he'd snort derisively at one of the more over-the-top hybrids.

'That's because everything was in black and white, then,' I'd point out to him. 'It was the oldest days.'

'People used to eat flowers during the war, you know.' He was quite one for reminiscing. In fact, he was absolutely, bar none, the best person I'd ever met at making up things about the war.

'Hey, Johnny,' I waved to him as I whizzed round the corner. The lorries hadn't started to unload yet, so people were standing around, smoking roll-ups and gossiping about magnolias. The flower people despised the fruit people in the next set of bays, and they in turn thought the flower people were a bunch of big pansies who couldn't lift a box of melons if their lives depended on it.

'Hey there, lass.' He regarded me critically. 'You know, when I was your age, I was selling out the back of my own van.'

'Johnny, you have no idea how old I am. In fact, I'm nine years old. And I have my own van. I do this for fun.'

'I never met a lassie who knew when to shut up,' he observed mournfully, and threw me over a pair of heavy gloves.

I'd only been there a couple of weeks, and already I hated it. It was exactly like school. The girls all wore inappropriate clothing, smoked behind the sheds and picked on me. Either that or they were so stupid they had to be reminded every day how to pick up a box of flowers without drooling on it.

So I tended to slog away on my own, pausing only to hurl abuse at Johnny or to point out things to the drooling girls along the lines of 'Box – there! ... You see box? Pick up box?'

The smoking girls teased me because I'd been to college, particularly Tash, their queen, the scrawny girl with thick black eyeliner who had a real mother-smoked-in-pregnancy look about her. Tonight she sidled up alongside me, observed my work closely for several minutes, and then said:

'Hmm, yes, I see now why that needed a degree – getting all those tulip heads in a line can't be easy.'

The rough boys all guffawed and I tried to laugh but couldn't. I hated her, and I hated being bullied, and however rude I could be to Johnny it wouldn't translate to this lot. They were rough as badgers' arses.

'Could you pass the sign-in sheet?' I hated it but sometimes I just had to talk to her.

‘Sorry, love, I’ve only got a GCSE in general studies.’

All the boys laughed again, and one of them shouted, ‘Oi, watch out, Tash, she’ll trip on the chair falling off your shoulder.’

I grimaced and pretended to join in, boiling inside, but really I felt like when I was taken by some older girls to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* when I was eleven – it was all too trashy and I just didn’t get it, but I was laughing along anyway. They were mean, mean kids. Because I didn’t blow a cigarette smoke out of my nose they called me TinBits.

‘Please,’ begged one of the lads, bending on one knee before me, ‘your exquisite virginal majesty might I just for one second peek up your skirt?’

‘She’s got her knickers welded to her bottom,’ yelled Tash.

I very nearly flashed my tits at him just to piss him off, but instead made a hasty vow to myself to apply for every florist’s job in a five thousand-mile radius.

For the rest of the night, Tash contrived to make fourteen derogatory remarks, upset my flowers four times and spend at least an hour talking about me (I suspected) on prolonged fag breaks with the other lads. I was being bullied! I couldn’t believe it! This wasn’t fair.

My shift finished at 4 a.m. and I freewheeled home as usual, down the hill back to the big house. I crept in and saw the light on under Addison’s door. The urge to see him again was overwhelmingly strong so I wandered into the kitchen and made two cups of tea. I didn’t know how he liked it, so I put three sugars in for luck as I’d never seen him eat – he probably needed the nutrition. Then I ferreted around for a couple of biscuits to add to it, but the only thing going was a very lonely Penguin – Ka allowed herself one every fortnight. I took it anyway, planning to replace it, pronto.

I knocked on the door softly.

‘Addison, it’s me.’

The soft clicking noises stopped for a second. I could imagine him desperately trying to wrack his brains for a single person he could be expected to identify from a ‘me’.

I pushed the door again and popped in.

‘I made tea!’ I announced, like a fifties housewife.

His short-sighted – oh, but beautiful – eyes swivelled round to focus on me. His glasses were sitting on top of the mother-ship console.

‘Tea!’ I indicated by holding the cups up and motioning like a lunatic.

He focused on the cup and followed its path as I went to place it beside him whilst I wondered if he was mentally subnormal.

‘Not there!’ he barked.

‘OK, OK, put the gun down. How about I hand it to you?’

Slowly he extended his arm. I placed the cup in his hand, handle facing outwards – which meant burning a hole in my hand, but I didn’t mind because when he took it, the tips of our fingers touched and I swear I felt a bolt of electricity shoot through me.

I waggled the Penguin at him.

‘Penguin?’

He stared at it for a bit then shook his head, so I ate it. After all, as he’d taken the tea, that implied a contract that allowed me to stay for a little bit.

I leaned over. His computer screen was covered in bizarre symbols, just like in James Bond films.

‘What are you working on?’

He tried to cover up the screen, but as his arms were like matchsticks, it didn’t have much effect. However, as the symbols meant as much to me as EC policy directives, it was a pointless exercise.

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