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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paris Lees was born in Hucknall, Nottinghamshire. She is a Contributing Editor at British *Vogue*, and has written for the *Guardian*, *VICE* and the *Telegraph*. She has received multiple awards for her journalism and work as an anti-bullying campaigner – and an honorary doctorate from the University of Brighton. She was the first openly trans woman to present on BBC Radio 1 and Channel 4 and also the first to appear on *Question Time*. This is her first book.

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What it Feels Like for a Girl

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For Mister Duck

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Be thou the rainbow to the storms of life!
– Lord Byron

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TWENTY ZERO ONE

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YOU DON'T KNOW ME

The vicar sez Lord Byron worra bit of a gay boy an' I had to bite ma tongue so I din't burst out laughin'. Sez he worra right bogger. After we left, Old Mother 'ubbard guz, "He din't mean what you're thinkin', duck. He meant he worra rogue. A ladies' man. Someone wi' loose morals." I thought, OK, but they do say he were bisexual. An' he were into that black magic. Serves 'em right for namin' me after 'im, eh? I were born on the exact same day as 'im, two hundred years later. We're Capricorns.

It's a nice name, innit? I wonder where they could possibly have got the idea from. Oh yeah, I forgot. Everythin's called Byron round here. Byron Taxis. Byron Cinema. Byron Bingo. At the end of our road there's even a pub called – wait for it – The Byron. Smanfa's brother guz, even though he's only just turned sixteen. They don't check or nowt. It gets dead busy at weekends. Blokes always come an' piss outside our house comin' back from the boozer on Friday nights. I watch 'em through the net curtain an' try an' gerra good look. It's bad, innit?

Lord Byron's buried in the Parish Church of St Mary Magdalene in 'ucknall – an unbelievably, indescribably, mind-bendingly borin' town in the Nottinghamshire countryside that folk say got shut down wi' the mines in

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the eighties. The people are small-minded an' the streets are paved wi' dog shit. He were menna go in Westminster Abbey with all the other important people, but they said he were too risqué. So they brought 'im back here, to slowly rot away wi' the rest of us. I think about 'im sometimes, in 'is crypt, an' 'is tattered old clothes. He were dead pale-lookin'. I reckon he'd make a great vampire.

He'd be in good company. Most people round 'ucknall look like they've lost the will to live. They just shuffle about like the livin' dead, goin' on about kitchens they're too skint to do up or marriages they're too scared to leave. Not that there's owt else to do. There's a Wilkos an' a flea market, an' that's yer lot. Nothin' ever happens – an' no one ever leaves. But d'ya know what I hate most about people round here is? They lack aspiration. Mammar Rita sez I'm "precocious" when I talk like that. Mammar Rita's ma dad's mam. Mammar Joe's me mam's mam – but I call 'er Old Mother 'ubbard coz she's always "runnin' low on supplies", apart from Giro day. Gaz sez, "There's no need to gi' yersen airs an' friggin' graces just coz yer a clever clogs," but I don't even reckon I am that clever. I just think everyone else round here's stupid.

Ben Caunt's buried in St Mary's too. He worra famous boxer in Victorian times. They named Big Ben after 'im. Gaz sez he's a local hero. OK so how come he died in London? An' how come Lord Byron died in Greece? They say 'is heart's buried out there. He said England could have 'is body, but yer heart's what makes ya who ya are. So it is possible to escape. He were rich, though. An' Ben Caunt were the strongest man of 'is time. Last

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time I checked, I'm neither. Mary Magdalene were mates wi' Jesus, but Mammar Joe sez she were just as bad as Byron. She worra prostitute! So how come they named a friggin' church after 'er?

I live at 26 Annesley Road, 'ucknall, an' ya can see St Mary's from here – an' quite a bit of it if ya happen to be havin' a sneaky fag out the back window in the attic, like I am. It's five to five an' when the bells start I'm gonna see if I can run downstairs before the last one. You've literally got five seconds. I nearly did it the other day. Mammar Rita sez I'm gonna end up breakin' ma neck if I'm not careful an' she might be on to summat, but I can't miss the start of *Ready Steady Cook*, canna? It's ma favourite programme. Well, after *Big Brother*. Ya can watch 'em in the shower if you've got the internet! Which we don't, obviously, coz Gaz don't seem to realize there's bin a cyber revolution an' a new Millennium an' that.

No wait – it's *Absolutely Fabulous*. That's ma favourite TV show ever.

I've gorra change this shirt, though. I've got coal stains on it again. I lost ma key last month so I've had to climb in through the coal grate for the past fortnight. If I go to the shop or take the dog out I leave the back door on the latch an' hope he don't notice, which so far he an't. I'm not tellin' 'im. He'd go mental.

That's 'im now, pullin' up outside the DIY store next-door-but-one. He drives a black Golf GTI. Ya can hear it comin' down the road from a mile off, screechin' or purrin' dependin' on what mood he's in – if he slams the door, yer in real trouble. Ya don't mess wi' Gaz Lees, not

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if ya wanna keep hold of yer teeth, ya don't. He's the 'ardest man in 'ucknall. And, unfortunately, *ma father*.

Gaz is thirty-three an' spends 'is weeknights weight-liftin', badger baitin' an' findin' things that have fallen off the backs of lorries. On weekends he starts fights outside the Wine Bar, 'ucknall's most sophisticated drinkin' establishment. Gaz is the 'ead bouncer. He's under the impression that people round here respect 'im, but they're just scared of 'im. He thinks it's the same thing. 'Is favourite film's *Braveheart*. That's how he sees 'issen.

Gaz has three kids wi' three women, an' possibly more we don't know about, accordin' to me mam. They all "respect" 'im too. He's always gerrin people pregnant, sometimes two at once. Mam sez it's the only bit he seems to like about parenthood. Ma lil' brother's mixed race. He's an equal opportunities womanizer, our Gaz, an 'orrible bastard no matter who ya are.

Gaz never guz to parents evenin', which is funny coz he's always goin' on about how "Education is the key ter the world" – like he'd know owt about that! I don't even think he can read an' write. I know he don't write ma birthday cards coz ya don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to recognize Mammar Rita's handwritin', an' the nice messages are a bit of a giveaway, too. No, I reckon the closest Gaz Lees has come to gerrin a certificate is havin' 'is name put in the cane book. Mr Smith remembers 'im. Mam's in there too, claim to fame or what? God knows why they think I'm gonna behave any better than they did!

I'd better open this window a bit wider. I don't tell Gaz nuffin, although he must know I smoke coz I'm

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always goin' in 'is leather jacket an' nickin' 'is Benson an' Hedges. They come in a gold packet so they're quite posh for 'im. I think they're the ones ya put in them cigarette holders they used to have in Olden Times, ya know, like what Joan Collins'd smoke. I've always wanted one. An' them long gloves they had, dead glamorous an' that. I get Superking Blacks usually coz they're big an' ya can have half an' save the rest for later. I tried a Menthol at break once – like Dot Cotton off of *EastEnders* – an' ended up runnin' outta German five minutes later an' throwin' up in the yard.

Gaz knows ma mates smoke. He come back once after we'd bin smokin' weed an' were like, "What ya on with in here, then?" I blamed Smanfa. Smanfa's ma best mate. 'Er name's actually "Samantha Bennet", but no one calls 'er that, like how no one sez the H in 'ucknall. He were like, "Yo' must think Ah fell off a friggin' Christmas tree", so he must be on to me coz he's not completely completely stupid an' I'm sure I've heard 'im tell Mammar Rita he's tried weed before, an' yer'd *never* forget the smell o' that, would ya? So if he knows I smoke da reefer, he must know I smoke fags. He don't know where I get the money for 'em, though.

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YOU SEE THE TROUBLE WITH ME

D'ya remember that advert for oven chips? That little girl goin', "Daddy or chips, daddy or chips", tryna make 'er mind up coz 'er sister asks 'er which one she prefers. Well, she chooses chips, don't she? Obviously. Coz it's a fuckin' chip advert. Even though 'er dad looks dead nice an' giz 'er a kiss on the cheek. I don't know anyone whose dad's like that in real life. Gaz just knocks me about an' calls me a fuckin' poof. Smanfa's is an alcoholic.

We never have oven chips. Sometimes Gaz giz me a fiver an' sends me to the chippy up the road, but only coz he's too lazy to go 'issen. An' coz he's gorra feed me. They'd take me away if he din't, but no such luck. Ma favourite's the "special". Chips, kebab meat, chicken, salad, mayo an' chili sauce, all in this big polystyrene box. They don't do that at every chip shop, ya know, so I'm lucky to live nearby when ya think about it. Sometimes I'll have fish, chips an' mushy peas. Or fish cake. Or chicken an' mushroom pie. Oh, an' a can of Coke, if I can afford it. Gaz hardly ever cooks, which suits me coz I hate 'is cookin'. Truth told, I hate everythin' about 'im. Burra love chips!

The thing is though, chips cost money an' money don't grow on trees, accordin' to Gaz. Did I say it did? Not that I'd ever dare be that cheeky out loud, mind.

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People say money can't buy ya happiness but I'm not so sure. No one round here's got any anyway, so how the hell would they know? An' would ya rather cry yer eyes out in a massive mansion or a council house? I know what I'd prefer. Some of 'em are dead scruffy. Like next door, for example. Dirty bastards.

Mam's place is nice. It's the best house on the estate. Not like there's loadsa competition or nuffin – Amy next door sez they only have a bath once a week an' 'er little sister wipes 'er bum on 'er skirt! – but Mam keeps our place dead clean. I have to have a bath every night. I don't mind, though. I quite like it, actually. An' when I say clean, I mean clean. She's obsessed, ma mother. She's got good taste, though. We've got nice furniture an' that, although I don't live with 'er any more, unfortunately.

She cut the end of 'er finger off when I worra baby – on this big machine at some factory she worked for – an' got loadsa compensation money. Two thousand pounds, an' that were in the eighties. 'Er index finger. That's the one ya use all the time. Sliced the tip right off. She said the skin grew back, like how a spider's leg does if ya pull it off. I don't know why anyone would wanna do that, but it's amazin' what yer body can do, innit? The doctor sez she were lucky it missed the bone. So now she's got nice carpets an' one finger's shorter than the rest. An' underlay. Not everyone has underlay round here. Underlay, underlay! Speedy Gonzales!

Well, I'm not at ma mother's now – that's another thing Gaz loves tellin' me. Oh Gaz, don't I know it. He found out about ma radiator the other day. I were laid in

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bed when I noticed water comin' out of it. Turned out there worra little hole in it, so I phoned Smanfa an' she were like, "Try an' block it up wi' some chewin' gum", but it wun't stick. Ma floor were gerrin wet, so I had no choice. I had to tell 'im.

He went mental, obviously. Sez I've done it. I said how could I have done it? He guz, "Ya've bin messin' abaht up there." I'm like, "Dad, how could I make a hole in metal?" So he giz me a clip round the earhole an' tells me not to be cheeky. But it worra genuine question. He sez I've bin throwin' darts at it or summat. How could I have bin throwin' darts? I an't even got any darts. Who the fuck has darts these days? That's the sorta thing Uncle Andy'd have, from Olden Times, like dominos. I don't need darts. I've gorra Walkman for fuck's sake!

Smanfa sez he's bein' ridiculous. She wants to tell 'im I honestly din't do it, but I won't let 'er coz it'll only make 'im worse. Well anyway, the upshot is he's turned ma radiator off now coz he sez he "can't afford to fork out for a new 'un". So it's dead cold in ma room, an' it's all ma fault, of course. An' I'd better keep ma mouth shut if I know what's good for me, blah blah blah.

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SMACK MY BITCH UP

Jamie Draper's halfway down the field wi' that twat who looks like a pig. Don't know 'is name. Let's call 'im Pork Chop. Two years above an' I'm pretty sure he's bin expelled before. They both have. Proper little scruff-bags. It looks like they're goin' towards the jitty but I don't think they've seen me. I'm gonna slow down an' wait for 'em to piss off.

But as I turn into the alleyway they're just stood at the other end, waitin'. There's a woman with a pram comin' past, but once she's gone they're gonna start on me, I know they are. Fuck's sake. Worram I gonna do? I can't show 'em I'm scared. I'll just have to carry on walkin', won't I? But I am fuckin' scared. But it's like, why should I have to go the long way home all the time? If I turn back now though, it'll be dead obvious I'm frightened an' they'll tell everyone. Then they'll all know what a massive pussy I am. As if they don't already.

I should've just turned back before she left, I could've forgotten summat. How would they know? I should've just swallowed ma pride, coz really, who cares if they think I'm a big poof? Everyone keeps tellin' me I am, so I must be. I deserve it. I deserve to be beaten up. They block me. "Sorry, poofters aren't allowed past. There's lil' kids on this estate." I try an' play it cool, try to be matey.

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Big mistake. "Yeah, I am a big poof – so ya don't wanna be seen talkin' to me, do ya?" So then he's like, "Are ya bein' cheeky? Coz Ah'll smash yer face in, ya fuckin' bender." I'm scared, but if I try an' razz it now they'll just run after me an' trip me up, so I just stand there, shakin', not knowin' what to do. Why did I come this way?

They're laughin'. Pork Chop's got big blotchy cheeks the colour of ham. He's thick as shit an' looks like one o' them that sniffs glue, but who's the stupid one here, really? Me, for comin' this way, that's who. Thank God I an't got ma Walkman wi' me coz Jamie's goin' for ma baseball cap like, "Byron the Bender, what ya got this for?" an' knocks it off ma 'ead. "D'ya really think they'd let faggots like yo' play baseball? Mind you, yer'd love that, wun't ya? Goin' in the showers with all the blokes an' pervin' on 'em." I go to pick it up, but he kicks ma arm, an' then Pork Chop snatches it. Jamie's like, "Urgh, don't touch it, you'll get AIDS!" So Pork Chop's like, "Fuck off!" an' chucks it. An' I'm thinkin', Why are ya doin' this? Why can't ya just let me be? "Here ya are," he guz, "there's some dog shit there. Gerrit in that."

I beg 'im not to but Jamie boots me in the shin with 'is Caterpillars an' wrestles me to the ground. He's got me in a headlock an' I don't bother fightin' back coz what's the fuckin' point, eh? It'll only make 'im worse. He's shoutin' to Pork Chop, "Go on, gerrit in the shit!" Ma face is pressed into the grit. There's bits of broken glass everywhere and, at the bottom o' the hedge, an empty packet of crisps that's bin faded by the sun. I can just make out an old bloke on the other side o' the field with 'is dog, but

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he's too far away to see us. An' I'm just so angry wi' mysen coz I've got tears in ma eyes an' I've let 'em get to me. An' now they're laughin' at me, enjoyin' every minute of it.

Pork Chop kicks ma hat in the shit. Ma New York Yankees cap that Mam bought me for Christmas. That I'll never be able to wear again now. Jamie's like, "Ya wanna fuckin' fight?" So I'm like, "No, I just wanna go home, please let me go, Jamie." That just makes 'im worse. "Don't say ma name, Ah'm not yer boyfriend, ya fuckin' bender." Pork Chop's cryin' wi' laughter by now an' askin' me why I talk like a girl. Then he punches me in ma 'ead, ma face, ma eye. Ma fuckin' eye! Then he smacks me in ma nose – hard! Reckon he's gone an' broken it. Fuck's sake! Pork Chop's kickin' me too an' I try an' break free, but I just end up gerrin ma legs caught in the brambles instead.

But then someone's shoutin', "Oi, leave 'im alone!" an' I can see the woman wi' the pram comin' back. "Go on, pack it in 'fore I call the police!" They look at each other an' just burst out laughin', then Jamie gobs in ma face. Proper snot. I wanna throw up. Pork Chop grabs ma hat an' puts it on ma 'ead. I just can't believe this is happenin', but more fool me, eh, coz I should be used to it by now. An' I'm thinkin', You bastards. I'm gonna be rich an' famous one day, an' I hope ya read about me in the paper an' how fuckin' fabulous ma life is. "What's up?" he guz. "Ah thought ya liked shit!" Then Jamie's like: "D'ya cry when yer bummin' an' get shit on ya bell-end? Oh sorry, Ah forgot, ya prefer bein' bummed, don't ya? D'ya cry when yer gerrin fucked up the arse?" Pork Chop guz, "Nah, bet he loves it!" An' then they run off.

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CAUGHT OUT THERE

I'm shakin'. The woman pulls up with 'er pram an' asks me if I'm alright. I've gorra nosebleed. An' dog shit in ma fuckin' hair! An' I've ripped ma jeans, or rather they've ripped ma jeans. Ma Gap jeans! So I can't even keep this secret now. I'll have to explain how I've gorra hole in 'em. I wanna disappear, I want the ground to just open up an' swallow me. I've heard people say that on telly, "I just wanted the earth to swallow me whole." Well, I know exactly what they fuckin' mean now. I hate ma life, I hate livin' here an' I hate bein' me.

All ma stuff's come out ma bag so she bends down an' helps me pick it up. She sez, "What they pickin' on ya for?" So I tell 'er they're callin' me gay an' she's like, "Oh, whadda they know, eh?" but then she sees ma Vengaboys pencil case an' guz, "And anyway, so what if y'are." She's dead nice. I wish I were grown up like 'er so I din't have to deal with all this shit. Actual fuckin' shit. Dog shit! In ma fuckin' hair. I can't walk all the way to Gaz's like this, though, so I'm gonna have to go to me mam's, but I can't find ma fuckin' key. Fuck's sake.

I don't wanna sit on the front where everyone can see me, so I go round the back, but Pop's next door feedin' 'is pigeons. I don't wanna talk to 'im either, so I just stay by the side door an' hope Amy don't come out coz then

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I really would look fuckin' stupid. An' she'd tell everyone. That'd be fuckin' perfect, eh? So anyway, then Mam comes back an' starts gerrin dead upset. She's on about callin' the police so I'm like, "Please don't, Mam, it'll only make it worse."

"Alright, I'm callin' Gaz."

"No! Please don't, Mam!"

"Gaz or the police. Ya can't let 'em get away with it, Byron – I'm not 'avin' it!"

I've got blood on ma jumper an' ma nose is throbbin'. I'm sick o' this, sick of all of it. Is it not enough that I have to sit on ma own? Eat on ma own? Walk home on ma own? That *everyone* hates me? That I get laughed at an' spat on an' punched every fuckin' day? Am I gonna be tormented like this for the rest of ma life? Coz I can't stop bein' who I am, canna? An' anyway, what have I done wrong? Who am I hurtin', eh? Why can't people just fuck off an' leave me alone?

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FLAT BEAT

They split up when I worra baby. I don't remember 'er bein' with 'im. He used to come round for a bath sometimes an' sit there in a towel till I went up to bed, but that were years ago. Weirdo. The only other time I used to see 'im were when he come to pick me up from Mammar Joe's an' take me to Mammar Rita's for Sunday dinner. Aunty Ray sez I used to scream an' grab 'er legs when I saw 'is car at the end o' the road. She'd beg Mammar Joe to let me stay but she'd just say, "It's not ma decision, Ray. He's gorra go!"

I went to live with 'im when I were nine coz Mam cun' control me any more. They've both got tempers on 'em. Mammar Joe sez I gerrit from them. It's a pity they din't have loadsa money for me to inherit too, innit? Mammar Joe sez it's a wonder I turned out alright "wi' Lisa for a mother an' Gaz for a father", but I reckon she might be callin' it a bit too soon. Mr Smith sez he can see me goin' either way – sez I'm either gonna do summat dead good wi' ma life, or dead bad. He's just not sure which. So that's nice, innit? Mr Smith has long grey hair an' loves Queen. He's the only person I've heard say owt nice about Margaret Thatcher.

I were dead naughty when I were little. I bit Old Mother 'ubbard in Safeways once. I feel bad about it now.

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She threatened to hit me with 'er belt when we got home, but she din't. I don't think she'd ever be 'orrible like that, she's lovely to me. Mammar Joe's more like me mam than me mam. She were dead young when she had me mam, an' me mam were dead young when she had me.

Mam slept on a mattress in the livin' room for six months when I were little an' din't wanna talk to anyone or do owt, so I had to wait for Mammar Joe to bring me ma tea after school. Mam sez Primula cheese is common but Mammar Joe would say, "Ma sandwiches, ma rules", coz she knows they're ma favourite. Gaz said, "Yer mam's got some bleddy nerve", an' "Beggars can't be choosers if she can't be arsed ter feed ya 'ersen", but I don't remember 'im ever bringin' owt round. I'd sit an' look out ma bedroom window till I saw Mammar Joe comin' across the field. Always wearin' summat black an' soup-stained, like the witch in *Simon an' the Witch*. I'd go, "Don't ya get tired walkin' all that way?" She'd go, "Ner, ne' mind. Kill the owd 'uns off first, eh?" Owd's how Mammar Joe pronounces "old". She's forty-seven.

I love Old Mother 'ubbard. I stay with 'er every weekend. She gets 'er Giro on Thursdays so I go after school on Fridays an' she does me a tray with a Pot Noodle an' a Freddo an' a tangerine. Well, Mam definitely don't like Pot Noodle, but Mammar Joe sez what she don't know won't hurt 'er. She lets me stay up an' watch *Father Ted* too. We love Mrs Doyle. She's dead funny. Mammar Joe even lets me watch Graham Norton sometimes, but never *Eurotrash*. She sez I shun't be watchin' stuff like that. She sez they shun't even be airin' it.

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Mammar Joe looked after me when me mam went to live in Turkey. She come back after three months coz it had all gone wrong. Tarkan turned out to be 'orrible like Gaz in the end, an' took all 'er money off 'er. She had to save up secretly to buy a ticket back. Mammar Joe sez it's a pity me mam's superior taste don't seem to apply to men, but me mam sez men all are the same no matter where ya go anyway. Gaz calls it doin' a Shirley Valentine. He's always goin' on about it, how she's such a bad mother an' that. Like he's father o' the friggin' century! He's gorra point, though. I thought she'd left me for ever.

I don't wanna tell 'em what's happened, but how can I lie? I've bin beaten up. They want details. "Why din't ya smack 'em one back?" he guz. "Ah've told ya ter stand up for yersen." I can't look 'im in the eye, so I just stare at the telly. Summat bad's gone off in America so instead of kids TV, the news is on. They're showin' these two skyscrapers wi' smoke comin' out of 'em. I think a plane's crashed into 'em or summat, but the sound's down so I can't hear what they're sayin'. "Oi, Ah'm talkin' to ya!" Hang on, why is *he* mad wi' *me*? I'm the one who's bin beaten up here. But that's typical Gaz, innit? – of course it's all ma fuckin' fault.

Mam's goin', "He's not like you, Gary!" An' then he starts shoutin', "Yeah, an' why's that? All ma other kids are normal – it's your juices that've made 'im like this. Nowt wrong wi' ma sperm." 'Er juices! Fuckin' hell. I'm like, "Aunty Ray sez ya can't solve violence wi' violence." So he's like, "Aunty Ray talks out 'er friggin' arsehole!" which is a bit rich, comin' from 'im. Talk about the pot

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