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# Ralph's Party



WITH A BRAND NEW  
INTRODUCTION  
FROM THE AUTHOR

# LISA JEWELL

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## Ralph's Party

'Deliciously enjoyable . . . although there have been many books trying to decipher the new rules of engagement, Jewell's is one of the most refreshing: addictively readable without being irritating or glib' *Times*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Jewell's first novel, *Ralph's Party*, was published in 1999 and was the bestselling debut novel of the year. Since then she has published another twenty-one novels, most lately a number of dark psychological thrillers, including *Then She Was Gone*, *The Family Upstairs* and *None of This is True*. Lisa is a number one *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* author who has sold over ten million books worldwide and been published in over thirty languages. She lives in north London with her husband, two daughters and a lovely dog called Daisy.

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*For Jascha and Yasmin*

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## An Introduction by Lisa Jewell

In October 1996 I was a twenty-eight-year-old out-of-work secretary sitting in my boyfriend's flat in Kilburn in front of a big fat plastic computer monitor typing some words into a big clunky plug-in keyboard. I was lucky to have access to a home computer at that point and without access to a home computer, it's unlikely I'd have taken up my friend Yasmin's challenge, made drunkenly on holiday the week before, to write the first three chapters of the novel I'd just drunkenly told her I wanted to write.

I'd been made redundant from my job as the PA to the marketing director of a shirt-making company the week before my friend's challenge and had given myself a month to write the three chapters, but then I would need to get a job. After leaving a five-year starter marriage, I was living at the time with my sister and her boyfriend and I had rent to pay and a busy social life to support.

But little did I know that as I started writing tentatively about a boy called Ralph who lives in Battersea with his friend Smith and is about to meet a girl called Jem, that I was in fact writing my first novel. Three chapters, that was the agreement, and then back to business as usual. But my friend Yasmin read the three chapters I passed her under the table of an Indian restaurant one Friday night and emailed me to say: this is brilliant. You have to send it out to some agents!

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It seemed little effort at the time; I titled the (as yet unwritten) book ‘Third Person’, wrote a covering letter, and a synopsis (even though I had no idea what the book was actually going to be about), took it all to the copy shop and asked for ten sets which I shoved in ten envelopes and sent off to ten agents selected at random from a copy of the Writers & Artists’ Yearbook (bought via a brand new online book retailer called ‘Amazon’.)

Over the next few weeks, the rejection letters trickled in. One was very encouraging and praised my voice and made some suggestions to improve the work. I took them on board because I was so tickled to have a real-life literary agent talk about my work as if it was something serious and real. But still, it all felt like a thing I’d done that was now over, and I took on some temping jobs and went back to the path I thought my life was on.

Little did I know what vast life changes were just around the corner for me.

In January 1997, two months after I’d received my 9<sup>th</sup> rejection letter, the 10<sup>th</sup> agent wrote to me. She told me that she’d enjoyed my work, but that it was ‘going to need a lot of work’ and that she didn’t like my font. She also included a photocopy of some guidelines for layout and punctuations, as apparently my commas and apostrophes were all over the place. But she said she wanted to see the rest of it.

But there was no ‘rest of it’. That was all there was. My instinct at that moment was to tuck her letter away in a drawer to show to my grandchildren. ‘Look,’ I could say, ‘I nearly had a literary agent once, but I was too busy going out drinking with my friends to finish writing the book.’

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Luckily my boyfriend had different ideas.

‘Do you know how few people get a letter like that from a literary agent?’ he said. ‘You have to finish the book!’

He told me I could move into his flat and use his computer, that he’d cover all my drinking expenses and I could stop paying rent and work part-time.

And so that’s exactly what happened, I moved in with my boyfriend and I got a job working two and a half days a week for a recruitment consultancy in the west end. The other two and a half days I sat at my boyfriend’s huge computer and wrote a book.

I thought it was going to be edgy, possibly thrillery, certainly dark. Certainly that was what the synopsis I’d sent out to all the agents had suggested. But the book that came out of me during 1997 was none of those things. Inspired by the cultural zeitgeist of the late 90s, I channelled Nick Hornby, I channelled the TV show *This Life*, I channelled Britpop and Radiohead, I channelled the nights I spent with my boyfriend and his mates in Firkin pubs and eating late night Peking duck in Chinatown, the other nights in friends’ flatshares getting stoned and watching stupid late night TV shows, I channelled the feeling of being in love in your twenties in the coolest city in the world during the coolest time to be in that city. I used the setting of one of the many London neighbourhoods I’d lived in during my young adulthood, Clapham Junction, and replicated the house I’d lived in there, and then I thought about who else might have lived in that house in the flats above and below, I thought about the views of the backs of London houses from the trains I sat in to get to my

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office jobs. A boss at one of my temping jobs told me about a young lover of his who'd messed him about and I put her in the book. My landlord when I was sharing bunks with another girl in Holland Park had taught Ceroc and I put that in there. My boyfriend and I on one of our very first dates had bought fresh bird's eye chillis from Chinatown to make a Thai curry and ended up having a raw chilli-eating competition (it was a draw) which I also put in there. And yes, I did once strike up a conversation with a Mancunian butcher in Chinatown.

On New Year's Eve, 1997, I typed *The End* and early in 1998 I handed my complete manuscript to the agent who'd wanted to see it (and yes, I'd changed the font) and I thought at that time, I really did, that it was terrible and that at the very most she might be able to sell it to a small publisher for a few hundred pounds and that a few people might read it and think it was quite quirky and cool.

But that is not what happened. What happened is that the agent called me into her office and told me she was going to put the book into a bidding war with five of the top publishers. She also told me it was good that the book was set all over one season as it 'made the film rights easier to sell.'

I still sometimes walk past the bus stop in Chalk Farm where I stood after this seismic meeting with the literary agent and I remember, vividly, standing there, twenty-nine-years-old, in a fake fur coat from Dorothy Perkins, my cheeks burning hot, wondering what on earth had just happened to me. I'd gone into the agent's office a secretarial temp who'd written a book for a bet, and I'd come out as a

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writer. It felt unreal and unlikely. Had it even happened I wondered? Was the agent maybe a little mad?

But the agent was not a little mad. She told me to rewrite the last third of the book, which I dutifully did, and now it ended with a party, which had not been there in the first draft. ‘Let’s call it Ralph’s Party,’ she said. So we called it *Ralph’s Party* and she sent it out to some of the biggest publishers in the UK and got me a big fat two-book deal from Penguin, no less.

It was published with a bang on May 6<sup>th</sup> 1999 when I was thirty years old. It was reviewed on the *Late Review*, a highbrow late-night review show on BBC2; it was reviewed in all the broadsheets; I was interviewed on the radio and the TV. It hit the bestsellers at no. 3 and it sold 250k copies in its first year. The whole thing was all a ridiculous fairytale and my feet barely touched the ground for a year or two afterwards.

But the real magic has happened since. Somehow I managed to live beyond the hype of that insane debut publication experience and built a career that is still going strong, if not even stronger. I now write the sort of dark psychological books that I thought I’d write back then, in the 90s, and wonderfully, many of the people who read *Ralph’s Party* back then when they were young and finding their way in the city, or even younger still and stealing books off their parents’ nightstands, have stayed with me and are reading me now, twenty-five years later, having grown up alongside me. They even bring their daughters to my book events!

But now it’s time for Ralph and Jen and Smith and Cheri and Siobhan and Carl to find their way into new

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hands of new readers and see how they stand up in this very different world. So many things have changed – nobody in this book has a mobile phone, nobody uses a computer – but so many other things have changed not a jot. People still live in cities and look for love and get drunk and cry and obsess over things they cannot have and find ways to turn things round. They get on buses and share flats and have terrible jobs and get stoned and kiss people they don't want to kiss. They still live their lives to a soundtrack of music that moves them, they dance and dream and eat raw chillis and stick their heads in the fridge (except now they'd film it and put it on TikTok!).

So I hope you enjoy this old book that so many people loved so much back in the 90s and that it resonates still, even in the high-tech, high-stress 2020s.

All my love

Lisa Jewell

6<sup>th</sup> February 2024

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... IT IS ALWAYS LIKE THAT AT PARTIES, WE NEVER SEE THE PEOPLE, WE NEVER SAY THE THINGS WE SHOULD LIKE TO SAY, BUT IT IS THE SAME EVERYWHERE IN THIS LIFE ...

– *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust

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# Prologue

Smith put the phone down and glanced around the living room. A few people had already been round that night, and the flat was still relatively tidy after an earlier blitzing.

He picked up empty mugs and glasses and carried them through to the kitchen. It was strange and vaguely unsettling to think that these objects still carried the lip marks, the fingerprints, the traces of saliva and microscopic organisms left there by the strangers who had been into his home that evening, strangers he had shown his bathroom, who had seen his grubby dressing-gown hanging behind his bedroom door, strangers who had sat on his sofa in unfamiliar clothes with unfamiliar mannerisms and names and lives, strangers who had been given the opportunity to peer into other strangers' private lives.

Ralph and he had reached decisions quickly and cruelly. It would be obvious in a moment that someone was unsuitable, but they all got the tour: 'And this is the kitchen – you'll be pleased to hear we've got a dishwasher *and* a washer-dryer!'; the talk: 'Smith's up with the lark during the week but we both like a lie-in at the weekends'; the interview: 'What do you do for a living?'; and the conclusion: 'Well, there's still a few more people to see the flat – give us your phone number and we'll let you know.'

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Always the full fifteen minutes, so that the unwanted stranger would leave feeling like he'd been in the running, like he'd been given serious consideration.

Jason had sounded hopeful on the phone but turned out to be looking for a ready-made social life. 'I just want to live somewhere that's got a bit of life – d'you know what I mean?' he'd said, his eyes wide and overkeen.

'Erm, maybe you could explain?' Ralph had asked, thinking of the nights that he and Smith spent hopping mindlessly through forty-seven cable channels without talking and going to bed, stoned, at midnight.

Jason sat forward on the sofa and cupped his kneecaps with his hands. 'Like, for example, where I live at the moment, all that happens is I get home from work every night and nobody wants to do anything. It pisses me off, d'you know what I mean?'

Ralph and Smith had nodded sympathetically and felt old.

Monica had been a born-again Christian – would it bother them if she spoke in tongues occasionally? – and Ruth appeared to be on the run from an abusive marriage. Her hands shook throughout the meeting, her dark eyes unable to rest on one object or hold a gaze. She explained that she and her husband were having a 'trial separation'. Ralph and Smith decided that a permanent separation from Ruth's sad but unpalatable situation would be best for them.

Rachel had the sort of skin condition that made them want to Hoover the flat the minute she'd left, and John

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smelt of Pedigree Chum. They'd just about given up hope.

'Who was that on the phone?' Ralph switched on the television and spread-eagled himself on to the sofa, the remote control poised for action in his hand.

'Someone about the flat,' Smith replied from the kitchen, 'a girl – she's on her way over now. She sounded nice.' He kicked the door of the dishwasher closed. 'Her name's Jem.'

Jem took the first turning off Battersea Rise, which brought her into Almanac Road, a small sweep of three-storey Edwardian houses, long and thin with basements – unusual for this part of South London.

As she walked down the road, peering nosily into uncurtained basement flats, she began to feel strangely like she had been here before. There was something familiar about the proportions, the width of the pavement, the colour of the bricks and the spacing between the weedy saplings that lined the road.

Jem stopped outside number thirty-one, and the feeling of familiarity increased further. She suddenly felt safe, like a child coming home after a tiring day out, to a warm house and Saturday-afternoon television.

Jem glanced down into the basement flat and saw a young man, his back to the window, talking to someone out of view. It was then that she knew she had been here before. Maybe not this exact place, but somewhere very similar. In her dreams, since she was a teenager – a basement flat in a tall house in a terrace; a view through the

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window, at night, the room lit up; a man on a sofa smoking a cigarette, whose face she couldn't see. Her destiny. Was this him?

Jem rang the doorbell.

# I

The girl standing in the doorway was tiny, about five foot two, black curly hair held on top of her head with pins and clips in some complicated but very feminine style that looked as if it should have sported ivy wreaths. She was post-coitally pretty, with cherry-red cheeks and a bitter-sweet mouth, the bottom lip drawn back very slightly under the top, and her eyes were bright and mustardy, framed by mascaraed lashes and faint but lively eyebrows. She should have been wearing wood-nymph muslins and lacy leather sandals but instead had on an equally beguiling soft flannel suit with fur at the collar and cuffs and a short skirt that would have looked obvious on a taller woman. The tip of her nose was winsomely pink.

Smith let Jem walk in front of him down the hall, watching her as she turned her head this way and that, examining the pictures on the walls, peering through half-open doors and patting table-tops as she went. She was definitely cute. She turned to Smith.

‘This is lovely, really, really lovely.’ She smiled widely and suddenly turned to face the wall, grabbing the top of the radiator with both hands and letting out a sigh of relief. ‘Sorry,’ she laughed, ‘my hands are freezing, like blocks of ice – feel.’ She made her small white hands into fists and placed one on each of Smith’s cheeks. ‘It’s so cold out there!’ Smith started and felt suddenly shy.

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‘Shall we go to the kitchen? I’d love a cup of tea.’

‘It’s just through the living room,’ offered Smith, attempting to overtake her.

‘Oh, yes. I know where the kitchen is. I saw it through the window. Outside.’ She laughed again. ‘Sorry, I’m really nosy. And I’ve seen so many horrible flats tonight I don’t think I could have faced coming in here if it hadn’t looked nice.’

They walked into the kitchen.

‘My flatmate’s around somewhere,’ said Smith, filling the kettle. ‘He’s probably in his room. He’s called Ralph. I’ll take you to meet him when the tea’s done.’

Jem was examining a rack of herbs and spices. The plastic lids of the jars were covered in a layer of greasy dust; all of them were full. ‘Do you and Ralph ever cook?’ she asked.

Smith laughed. ‘Erm, I think this speaks for itself.’ He opened the door of the fridge to reveal shelves laden with colourful packets proclaiming ‘Thai-style Green Curry’, ‘Creole Chicken with Cajun Rice’, ‘Chicken Tikka Masala’, and floppy see-through bags containing fresh pasta sauces and soups.

‘Oh, God – typical boys! That’s such an expensive way to eat!’ exclaimed Jem. ‘Cooking’s brilliant, you know – I’ll teach you. And Ralph, if you like.’ She used the name Ralph comfortably, as if she knew him. ‘I’m very good. I think. Well, so I’ve been told. I can cook a Thai curry. These ready-made things are dreadful for you – it’s all the salt they put in them to make them taste of something.’ She closed the fridge and wandered back into the living room.

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‘Do you want to ask me some questions?’ she called, picking up a paperback from a shelf and examining the back cover.

‘Milk and sugar?’ Smith called back.

‘Have you got any honey?’

Smith futilely opened and closed a few cupboards. ‘No,’ he shouted. ‘Got some golden syrup, though.’

‘This is a gorgeous room, you know. No offence or anything, but it doesn’t look like two boys live here.’

‘Thank you.’ Smith was embarrassed, and slightly shocked at being referred to as a boy in his thirtieth year.

Jem quickly took note of the objects strewn around the top of the dark wooden coffee table inlaid with ornate brass work. She approved of a good messy coffee table – they held so many interesting clues to the day-to-day content and clutter of people’s lives. Smith and Ralph’s coffee table held a selection of remote controls, a satellite TV guide, an ashtray full of stubs, two packets of red Marlboro, a business card, a box of matches and a home-delivery pizza menu. Somewhere underneath it all she could make out a proper coffee-table art book, a set of car keys and, barely visible but unmistakable, a small piece of green cardboard torn from a packet of Rizlas. Jem smiled quietly at her discovery.

‘Let’s go and say hello to Ralph,’ Smith was lingering in the doorway, his face cocooned in wreaths of steam from his tea, ‘and then I’ll show you around.’

Ralph barely noticed Jem the first time he saw her. He was arguing with his girlfriend Claudia, sitting at his desk, the phone cradled under his chin as he carelessly pulled elastic

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bands into tight ligatures around his wrists in an apparently subconscious attempt to cut off his blood supply and end the painful predictability of it all.

As Smith entered he grimaced and took the phone from under his chin, holding it a foot or two from his ear so that Smith could hear the tinny drone of the unhappy woman. He hit the speakerphone button:

*‘I just feel like I’m the one doing all the work here, Ralph, d’you know what I’m talking about? No, of course you don’t. Who am I kidding? You can’t see anything beyond the remote control – as long as you’ve got a piece of technical equipment in your hand that will prevent you from doing something else, something that might, just might involve you getting up off your arse and doing something . . .’*

‘Ralph,’ whispered Smith, ‘this is Jem.’

Jem twinkled at Ralph from the doorway.

Ralph saw a small, smiley girl, tendrils of hair framing her face.

*‘Are you listening to me, Ralph, or have you put me on that fucking speakerphone?’*

Ralph smiled apologetically at Jem and mouthed a ‘Nice to meet you’ as he hit the speakerphone button again and began murmuring inaudibly into the phone.

Smith and Jem left the room, closing the door quietly behind them.

‘Claudia can be very . . . demanding. They could go on like that for hours. Poor bastard.’ Smith smiled smugly and took a slurp of tea.

‘You don’t have a girlfriend, then, Smith?’

‘Very perceptive,’ he replied ungraciously. ‘No, I don’t.’

Not for the first time since Jem’s arrival, he found himself feeling uncomfortable. He wanted to be friendly and

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welcoming, to create a good impression, but try as he might, he just couldn't, and was coming across instead as frosty and impolite. He put his hand out to grasp the antique door-handle in front of him and pushed the door open.

'This would be your room.' He reached to the left for the light switch. 'It's quite small, as you can see, but it's got everything.'

The room was tiny and L-shaped. The walls were clad in caramel-coloured wood-panelling, and the room was lit centrally by a ceiling lamp housed in a brass and glass star-shaped shade. A single bed stood at the far end, covered with a vivacious Indian throw and several large cushions with tassels and fringes. A 1920s wardrobe with mirrored front panels stood in front of it, and at the other end of the room was a single sash window hung with densely patterned heavy curtains and a small chest of black-lacquerwork drawers.

Jem turned and grasped hold of Smith's hands. 'I absolutely love it. I love it. I knew I would. Please can I live here? Please!' Her face was glowing and childlike, her hands felt small and warmed by her mug of tea.

'Let me show you the rest of the flat first and then we can have a chat.' Smith could still feel where Jem's hands had covered his. 'I need to talk to Ralph as well – lots of other people have been to see the room. I'll need to consult him.' He could feel himself blushing and turned his back on Jem.

'OK,' she said lightly. She wasn't worried. She already knew that the room was hers.

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Siobhan knew she should feel happy. I mean – ALR, All London Radio. That was something else, it really was.

When Karl had first told her, earlier on that evening, she had felt ecstatic – all his dreams come true. He was on the phone to his Irish mother and Russian father in Sligo now, telling them the news. She looked at him over the top of her book; his soft, handsome face was alive with an energy she hadn't seen for years as he explained to his no doubt bursting-at-the-seams-with-pride mother that her one and only son, her precious, sweet Karl, had just been handed a peaktime slot on London's biggest radio station.

She couldn't quite imagine it: 'Good evening, London, and welcome to the Karl Kasparov Show.' Her Karl, not some faceless, naff DJ, but her Karl, having thousands of listeners, his own jingles, doing interviews. His name would be there in the radio listings: '3.30–6.30 p.m. – Karl Kasparov.' *Drive Time*, that's what they called it, Karl's slot. Karl was going to have a *Drive Time* radio show.

Siobhan imagined a classic 'Hot in the City' scenario, a traffic jam on a steaming summer's day, bumper-to-bumper gridlocked traffic and the sound of Karl's voice purring from car radios, 'It's hot out there – so keep cool by staying tuned to *Drive Time* ALR' before seguing into 'Up on the Roof'.

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A barely perceptible whimper jolted Siobhan from her train of thought. It was a quarter to eleven – they'd forgotten about Rosanne in all the excitement. She was now sitting stoically by the living-room door, aware that tonight was not a normal night and trying, without irritating, to convey the message that she still had a bladder and it was getting late.

'Oh, baby, did we forget about you?' The sympathetic tone of Siobhan's voice elicited a tentative wag from Rosanne's tail, which increased with velocity and force as Siobhan headed towards the hook in the hall that bore her lead.

'Karl, I'm taking Rosanne out for a pee. Come on, baby! Come on, we're going out!'

Siobhan struggled into her winter coat, so much tighter around her upper arms and chest than it had been last year, and Rosanne panted delightedly at the door waiting for her mistress to join her.

Siobhan was glad to be out in the cold night air. The central heating, the excitement and the champagne had fuzzed up her mind. It was a beautiful October night and the tall, elderly houses of Almanac Road looked elegant beneath a jet-black sky brightly illuminated by a huge full moon.

Rosanne seemed to sense the fullness of the moon above, uncertainly sniffing the air around her, her black coat looking extra glossy beneath the bright white light. They walked to the end of the road, Siobhan thinking hard about her feelings. She'd got so used to she and Karl bumbling along in their unimpressive lifestyle. It had never mattered to her before that she hadn't really

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worked since losing her job as a technician at a fashion college in Surrey – she'd made ends meet with the odd wedding-dress commission and handmade cushions for an interior-design shop on Wandsworth Bridge Road. And Karl's weekend deejaying at local pubs and functions, plus what he earned at the Sol y Sombra teaching Ceroc had been plenty to meet their paltry mortgage repayments and modest-lifestyle expenses.

Karl and Siobhan—a strictly small-time couple. That's how Siobhan had always seen them, and she knew plenty of people who were jealous of their way of life, and their relationship. She couldn't have wanted for any more really – they had a lovely flat which they'd been lucky enough to buy for next to nothing before Battersea had up and come, a beautiful dog, friends they'd known since university, a relationship full of laughter and ease that was, their friends informed them, the strongest they knew, an example to everyone else, a yardstick. Neither of them was going to suffer from executive burn-out. The idea that all this might change, would change, filled Siobhan with dread.

Suddenly it would matter that she was getting fat, Karl would notice that her life was going nowhere. He would get back from his *Drive Time* slot, hyped and driven, full of fame and crappy Top Ten pop songs and find Siobhan's bulk sprawled all over the sofa, glued to *Coronation Street*, her belly swollen from the enormous meal she'd eaten while he was out because she didn't like to eat in front of Karl any more, and what would he think?

Would he still drive the little black 1966 Embassy he'd shipped back from India the year after university? Would

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he still wear his old American Classics chinos with the split on the knee and the scuffed old Bass Weejun loafers he'd had since before she even knew him? Would he still put on his funny Tibetan socks with the leather soles when he got in and make them both a cup of tea and watch documentaries on the sofa with Rosanne on his lap?

Would he still love her?

It was cold now – winter had stopped knocking tentatively at the door, had forced its way in and made itself at home. Siobhan looked up in time to see a wispy violet cloud pass over the moon and then disappear back into the blackness.

‘Come on, baby, let’s go back.’

They moved briskly up Almanac Road towards the light and warmth of number thirty-one. As Siobhan felt in her coat pocket for her front-door keys she heard voices and looked down to see a pretty dark-haired girl leaving the basement flat below theirs. There'd been visitors in and out of that flat all night. She wondered what was going on.

She unclipped Rosanne's lead in the hall and the dog dashed into the living room and straight on to Karl's lap. Karl hugged her and let her lick his face and Siobhan watched the scene from the hall while she tugged at her too-tight coat sleeves. She smiled deeply and warmly to herself and allowed the scene to etch itself firmly on the slate of her mind, allowed the joy of her current life to overcome her, because, she knew for sure, it was all about to change.

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Ralph and Smith had been best friends for fifteen years. They had been enemies for four years before that, since day one at grammar school, Smith offended by Ralph's creative aura and vaguely effeminate manner and Ralph threatened by Smith's easily gained popularity and effortless academic success. They kept different circles of friends and, on the rare occasion that their paths crossed, they sniffed and snarled at each other like unfriendly dogs passing in the park, their friends keeping them at bay like impatient owners tugging on leads.

It took a girl to bring them together. She was a foreign-exchange student from Baltimore called Shirelle and she was staying with Smith and his family for two months. She arrived in London in May wearing flared jeans with turn-ups and a hairy turquoise woollen jumper with a cowl neck. Her hair was long and plain, like her face.

She spotted Ralph getting off the bus on her first morning at Croydon Grammar. His trousers were tighter than school rules allowed, his dark-blue blazer was held together at the back with a safety-pin and his hair was dirtily tousled, sticking up in meringue-like peaks sculpted with soap. He had a smudge of something black and sooty under each eye. Smith thought he looked like a right tosser. Shirelle fell in love.

Over the course of that term Shirelle became Skunk.

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She shaved her hair and dyed it black with a peroxide streak running through the middle. She spent her allowance in Carnaby Street on fishnets and studded belts and leather skirts. She smoked and drank snakebites and followed Ralph around like a lovesick Rottweiler. She asked him over to the Smith residence with the invitation 'Fuck me,' an offer that, although it scared him half witless, Ralph as a hormonal young man of sixteen felt he could not refuse.

Smith as a hormonal young man of sixteen was both fascinated and repulsed by these sessions and the fact that they were happening, audibly, under his own suburban roof. Any previously held notion of Ralph's dubious sexuality was well and truly rubbished by the noises that emanated from the Smiths' spare room. As time went by, his curiosity got the better of him and one afternoon, feigning interest in the phone book in the hall, he watched Ralph saunter down the stairs, tucking his T-shirt into his combat trousers in an awe-inspiringly macho way, smelling of something unfamiliar and exciting.

'So, what's going down, then, Ralphie-boy?' Smith enquired, in what he hoped sounded like a casually off-hand, sneeringly condescending manner. 'How's it going with the skunk-woman?'

Ralph glanced ceilingwards. 'Fancy a walk?' he'd said, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

And that was that. Shirelle went home at the end of term, despite her threats to stay and bear Ralph's children, bring them up in the squat they would share with the Sex Pistols and Siouxsie Sioux, take heroin and die of an overdose, and Ralph and Smith became friends.

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Theirs had developed into a friendship based around the ability to comfortably spend hours in each other's company without the need to speak or move. Now, as it had been at school, they each maintained different circles of friends and took part in different activities outside the flat, but their time together there was a precious opportunity mutually to make no effort whatsoever, a form of behaviour that they found unacceptable to themselves and their friends in any other circumstance.

Obviously they weren't always silent. Sometimes they would discuss which channel to watch, occasionally they even bickered about it and conducted small tussles over the remote control when one felt the other lacked the judgement required for captaincy of such an important tool. And sometimes they would talk about women.

Women were a pain in the arse, they were balls and chains, never pleased, always aggrieved. Smith and Ralph thought of themselves as nice blokes. They weren't bastards, they didn't have affairs or lie to women, or stand them up, or hit them, or expect them to perform menial tasks. They didn't ignore their women when they were with their mates or go out with the lads and refuse to see them; they didn't stick pictures of Melinda Messenger over their beds. They were *nice blokes*. Phoned when they said they'd phone, gave their girlfriends lifts, paid for things, didn't demand sex, even handed out the odd compliment. Ralph and Smith tried to treat women as equals, they really did, but women just kept proving to them that they weren't worthy of it – they were a strange, alien breed with a list of unreasonable expectations as long as the M1 and a feast of paranoid and insecurities that Smith and Ralph

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were expected to deal with, daily. And then of course there were the women who weren't like that. They were the ones you fell in love with almost immediately, told all your mates about, made fantastical plans for the future with and then felt surprised when three weeks later they dumped you in a pool of your own foolishness and went off with someone who *would* have affairs, lie to them, stand them up, hit them and expect them to perform menial tasks.

Ralph, blessed with an insatiable libido, couldn't do without the sex and still threw himself regularly into the fray, emerging every now and then broken and crippled, hobbling and limping, his over-enthusiastic genitalia still pointing proudly like a bayonet towards the next battle. But Smith had given up fighting this frightening nineties version of the battle of the sexes years ago and retired, bruised but intact, to his corner.

Smith was saving himself anyway, so he said. Saving himself for a woman about whom he knew nearly nothing, a woman with whom he'd never progressed beyond the occasional awkward exchange of smiles, waves and nods, a woman who, in his opinion, encapsulated in one blissful arrangement of cells, organs, pigment and genes, the absolute epitome of female loveliness. For five years he'd imagined a day when their paths would cross. He'd bestow upon her a charming smile of teeth and self-confidence, engage her briefly in witty conversation, extend an invitation to dinner at the wonderful restaurant that had just opened up in St James, smile again at her acceptance, drape his overcoat over his shoulder and walk away with a well-paced swagger.

Instead, he'd spent five years grimacing gruesomely at

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her like a socially and intellectually inept toad, sometimes raising a limp, sweaty hand to wave at her if he chanced upon her from a distance and occasionally adding yet more to his plight by tripping over obstacles, dropping fragile objects, missing steps and failing to find his door keys whenever he was within her sights. He was in love with a vision of blonde, honeyed gorgeousness, a tall, slender, toned slip of perfection that no other girl he'd encountered before or since had come close to matching in any way. He was in love with a girl called Cheri, a girl who lived two floors above in the flat at the top of the house, a girl who shared his address. Until he made her his, no other girl would do.

Smith's love for Cheri remained undiminished by her haughty arrogance, her sneering indifference to his attempts at friendliness. It remained unsullied by the frequency of middle-aged men visiting her flat, their Porsches and BMWs double-parked on Almanac Road, by the thought of wives left at home while their husbands wooed his beloved with gifts of jewellery and perfume and dinner at all the best restaurants in London. Smith failed to see beyond her beauty; all he knew was her cool exterior, the layers of self-protective skin she wore to hide the nothingness inside.

While Smith waited on a fantasy that he was emotionally incapable of engineering into reality, Ralph filled his life with a succession of vacuous blondes with accommodating beds, and the two of them killed time . . . until what? Until they were too old to do anything about it? Until all the opportunities in life had gone, like unclaimed raffle prizes, to other people?

Smith knew that they needed a change. Things had

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been the same for too long. They were grinding each other down. He'd put an ad in *Loot*, one in the *Standard* and a card in the newsagent's window. And along had come Jem.

As far as Ralph was concerned, things hadn't changed too much in the week since Jem had moved in. She was out most nights, and when she was around she was barely noticeable. There were a few strange things in the bathroom, like cotton-wool balls and jumbo boxes of Tampax, and the fridge had suddenly become home to fresh vegetables, chicken breasts and skimmed milk. But apart from surface changes, it was still, to all intents and purposes, the same flat.

Except it felt different. The dynamics had changed. Ralph no longer felt comfortable walking around in nothing but his boxers; he became self-conscious about his toilet habits, which had always been protracted and unpleasant-smelling but which Smith had learned to live with a long time ago. And, more unexpectedly, Ralph was curious, very curious. Here was a stranger, in his home, a stranger about whom he knew no more than a first name, a strange woman at that, with all the exotic and delightful paraphernalia that surrounded women – knickers, bras, make-up, heels, roll-on deodorants in pink bottles, hair-brushes entangled with long, clean-smelling hairs, Pearl Drops, lacy things, silky things, fluffy things. He'd spent many hours extracting varying degrees of enjoyment from the women in his life, but he'd never, in all his thirty-odd years, lived with one before.

And now there was one in his flat. His curiosity was

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aflame and, really, he had only peeped into Jem's bedroom. He hadn't searched through her things or opened drawers or anything, just walked around a bit and looked at stuff. He was sure there wasn't anything wrong with that. If there'd been anything she hadn't wanted anyone to see she'd have put it away somewhere, out of sight. And besides, she'd left the door open. Ralph didn't like to think of himself as a snoop and was feeling slightly guilty now about his little investigation, especially in the light of what he'd seen.

Ralph had intended to spend this week at the studio. He hadn't been for over three months now. He'd made that brochure-design job for the travel company last more than a fortnight when he could have finished it in a week and had spent the last ten days or so cocooned in his room working his way through all thirty-three levels of some computer game or other. He'd reached the end this morning and, after the rapturous programme of congratulations and flattery from the computer had died down, he'd sat back in his chair and realized with some sadness that he now, officially, had nothing to do.

He'd persuaded himself that at eleven-forty it was way too late to make it to the studio but that he would definitely go tomorrow. He'd thought about the possibility of calling Claudia at work and decided against it – he always called her at the wrong time: 'Not now, Ralph, I'm in the middle of something'; 'Not now, Ralph – I'm on my way out'; 'Not now, Ralph – I've only just got in.' He imagined Claudia, in one of her silly shiny suits, busily walking in and out of the office all day, endlessly, like a film on a loop. It made him smile to himself.

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The usual cloud of boredom descended upon him, and he decided to go for a short walk. As he strolled down Northcote Road, past market stalls of jewel-coloured autumn flowers and cheap plastic toys and joss sticks and African beads he began to think about Jem. He really hadn't wanted another flatmate – he liked his lifestyle with Smith, an easy life, watching telly, getting stoned – but it was Smith's flat and so he'd gone along with it, and anyway, Jem seemed quite nice and he trusted Smith's judgement.

The first week had been a bit awkward. Smith and he weren't very good at making an effort with strangers, and he'd felt guilty ordering that home-delivery Indian without asking Jem if she wanted any and then embarrassed when he'd heard her slipping into the bathroom moments after he'd made that festering rodent-corpse smell in there. She'd offered to cook for them tonight, and although he appreciated the gesture he found himself rather self-ishly resenting this disruption of his normal routine. Monday night was his staying-in night and he liked it to be as socially undemanding as possible; when Smith was out he quite often switched on the answer-phone and ruthlessly screened his calls. But it was nice of Jem to offer and he would try to rise to the occasion.

To give his walk a purpose he went into his local over-priced 'corner shop', one of those ubiquitous upmarket chains which sell bags of imported tortilla chips for extortionate amounts of money but never stock anything you really want to eat, which sell only one kind of washing powder but at least twenty-two brands of Mexican chilli sauce. Ralph didn't know why he frequented these places – they were so obviously designed to line the pockets of

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some youthful laughing-all-the-way-to-the-bank ex-City-boy types ('Ere, Paul, let's buy some retail space and flog the yuppies a load of wine and tortilla chips for three times the recommended retail price') and they annoyed him intensely. He bought himself a packet of Marlboro, although he had two packs at the flat, and walked back to Almanac Road.

Lunchtime television consisted of a selection of cookery programmes and Australian soaps, and Ralph found himself mindlessly absorbed in some frenetic shopping-channel programme, watching a suntanned guy with a tape measure around his neck feverishly extolling the myriad virtues of a horrible acrylic tunic with beading around the neck: 'Not just one, not two, but three, *three* different types of beading. You've got the bugle beading here, the button beading around the appliqué and, look – this *beautiful* tear-drop beading on both sides!'

Ralph wondered what planet these presenters came from and what drugs the channel fed them to make them sound so sincerely and genuinely excited about the naff and uninspiring products they were being asked to pay homage to.

He switched off the television and felt silence engulf the room. He felt empty and useless. He had nothing to do. He picked up a mug of lukewarm tea he'd made earlier and a packet of Tuc biscuits and walked aimlessly into the hall. It was then that he found himself, almost subconsciously, pushing open the door to Jem's little room.

It was strange to see the spare room full of someone's things. He'd only ever seen it empty before. It already had an unfamiliar smell. Jem's belongings lay semi-unpacked

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in boxes around the edges of the room – empty boxes had been flattened and folded and left near the door. The bed was unmade and there was a blue cotton dressing-gown draped across it with a white Chinese dragon embroidered on the back.

Ralph stepped further into the room to examine a pile of CDs balanced on the table next to Jem's bed. He was impressed with her taste in music, like his, still stuck somewhere in 1979: the Jam, Madness, the Cure, Generation X, the Ramones – he might ask if he could borrow them. Next to the CDs was a framed photograph of Jem in a thick winter coat, her nose reddened by the cold, crouching to hug a handsome golden retriever. Ralph looked closely at the photograph, realizing that he couldn't really remember what Jem looked like – he hadn't paid her much attention – and that she was extremely pretty. Not particularly his type, though. He always went for blondes, blondes with long legs and designer clothes and attitude problems, blondes with names like Georgia, Natasha and, of course, Claudia, blondes who worked in PR or for art galleries or fashion houses, blondes who wished he was wealthier, trendier, tidier, smarter, earlier, later, cooler – someone else.

In contrast, Jem was tiny and quirkily pretty. She had good taste in music and she kept a picture of her dog by her bed. She was also nice and polite and gave the impression that she'd be a pleasure to be with. Not Ralph's type at all.

He bit into a biscuit and a large chunk fell to the floor. As he stooped to pick it up he noticed a pile of books under the table, worn and battered looking, with various

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years inscribed down their spines in gold blocking, or handwritten in pen and marker. They were diaries – and, by the look of them, not impersonal desk diaries but proper, from-the-heart, highly personal girls’ diaries. They stretched from 1986 to 1995. He wondered what had happened to 1996, the current diary, and then he saw it just peeping out from under Jem’s dressing-gown.

It was open but obscured by the gown; he could see the date – it was last Thursday’s – and snatches of handwriting, small and curly like Jem herself: ‘. . . beautiful flat . . . might be shy – I’m sure they’re not . . . this be my destiny – I’m so excited . . . Smith could be him but seems a bit . . . Ralph . . .’ Ralph stopped abruptly. What the hell did he think he was doing, snooping around in this poor girl’s room looking at her fucking diary, of all things? This really was very, very sad indeed. He almost left at that point, but his interest had been stimulated to boiling-point.

His heart was racing as he pulled the dressing-gown out of the way and his jaw dropped as he read the entry in full. It seemed Jem thought she was here because of some dream or other, she was following her destiny, she was excited because she thought that either Smith or himself would be the man of her dreams – literally. Ralph was inclined to think that Jem was some sort of fruitcake, but as he read on he found himself warming to her dream, her destiny. Not only was he in the running, he had the advantage. Look, she’d written it: ‘Smith seems a bit uptight, and he’s not really my type to be honest. Ralph seems more likely – very lean and sexy and sort of dangerous looking’ – Ralph’s stomach tingled pleasantly as he

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absorbed the compliment – ‘he seems like he’d be more fun to be with. The problem is, he’s got a girlfriend.’

This was all true, thought Ralph – apart from the bit about Claudia being a problem. He *was* more fun to be with than Smith these days. That hadn’t always been the way, but over the last few years, since his obsession with Cheri had taken over his life, Smith had lost some of his old sparkle and self-confidence.

There was no entry after that. Ralph put down the book and took a deep breath, resisting the urge to turn back the page, to read more. He placed the diary on the bed at the same angle he’d found it, painstakingly re-arranging the blue gown over it and hoping she hadn’t left a hair draped across it, to trap sad, snooping diary-readers.

He sat on her crumpled bed now, so unlike Claudia’s, which took ten minutes to make, with new bedsheets every day and complicated throw and cushion arrangements that had to be just so, otherwise she’d complain. One of Jem’s bras was folded into the sheets. It was black and plain and old looking. He picked it up and examined the label – little Jem was not so little: 34D. Where the hell had she been hiding those? Claudia had breasts that complemented her willowy stick-insect frame, small and pointy and incapable of forming a cleavage even when pushed firmly together from both sides. Ralph realized that he missed breasts, he missed that projection of soft voluminous womanliness that moved when it was touched and was always warm and welcoming. Other bits of women’s bodies sometimes felt like they might bite or strangle or constrict, but never the breasts – they were friendly and relaxed.

Ralph was disturbed to find himself running the strap

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