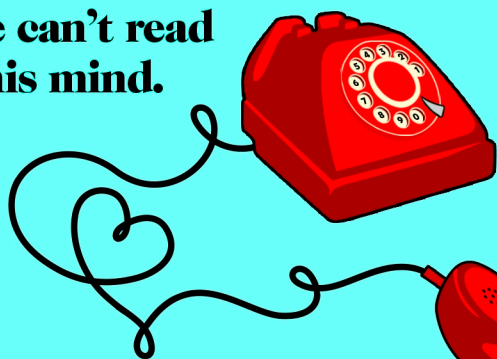


The iconic '90s *Sunday Times* number one bestseller

Come Together

**She can't read
his mind.**



By the
authors of
YOU&ME
YOU&ME
YOU&ME

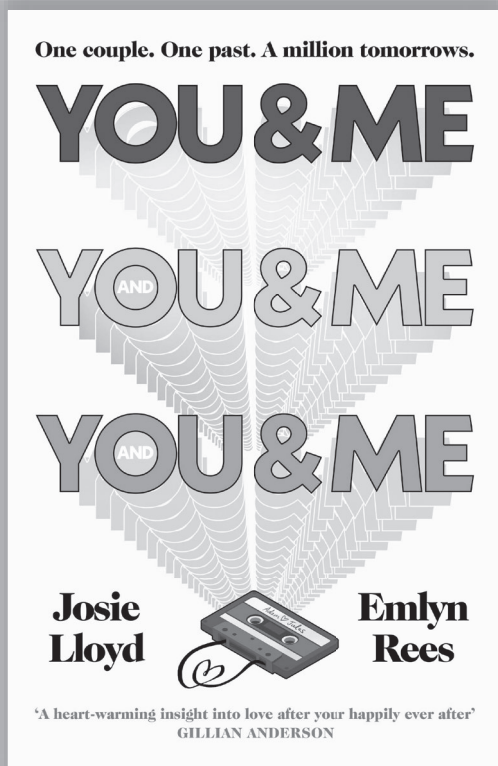
**He can't
read hers.**

**But you can
read both.**



Josie Lloyd
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Adam and Jules have been married for 25 years when they discover a time machine in their shed – can it bring back their romantic spark? Or will it unravel everything?

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Come Together

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For our sisters, Catherine and Kirsti, with love

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Author's Note

A long time ago (well, the nineties) in a galaxy far, far away (OK, West London), one night after too many beers, we came up with the idea of writing *Come Together*, a romcom about the perks and pitfalls of modern love, which we'd take turns telling in alternate chapters to give the different viewpoints of the two main characters, Jack and Amy.

Back then, we were both 'twenty-something singletons' ourselves – to use the buzzwords of the time – and close confidantes, and the book was pitched as 'What might happen if Nick Hornby met Bridget Jones at a party thrown by the cast of *This Life*.'

Come Together would change everything for us. It hit number one on the *Sunday Times* bestseller list in 1999 and was translated into twenty-seven languages. Fast forward a quarter of a century and here we are now, having just celebrated our silver wedding anniversary with our three grown-up kids.

But our lives aren't the only things that have changed. The world has too. Rereading *Come Together*, we've marvelled at how we even functioned before the internet and mobile phones. The way people date and attitudes towards relationships have changed radically too. As well as laughing out loud at so many jokes that we'd forgotten even writing, there are other throwaway lines that are very much a product of the culture back then that we wouldn't have written today. **Copyrighted Material**

We've just written our new joint novel, the first in twenty years – a romcom called *You & Me & You & Me & You & Me* about a midlife couple who find a time machine in their garden shed. In many ways, *Come Together* now feels like something of a time capsule too. A snapshot of an age now gone.

But equally, we hope there's still a lot to love about Jack and Amy's story as they stumble through nineties London trying to make sense of it all and each other. The book's original strapline still rings very true for us: 'He can't read her mind. She can't read his. You can read both . . .'

We're grateful to our agents at Curtis Brown and Marjacq and our publishers at Harvill for reissuing *Come Together*. It's a book that remains close to our hearts, because it was only through writing it that we got together ourselves. We hope you enjoy reading it as much today as we enjoyed writing it back then.

Josie & Emlyn
Brighton, 2025

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Chapter One

Jack

The Ideal

Say you're a girl. Say you're a girl and you're at a party, or in a pub, or in a club. Say you're a girl and you're at a party, or in a pub, or in a club, and I come up to you.

Say you've never set eyes on me before.

Some things you'll know immediately. You'll see that I'm just under six feet tall and of average build. If we shake hands, you'll notice that my grip is strong and my fingernails clean. You'll see that I have brown eyes which match my brown hair. And you'll see that I have a scar across the centre of my left eyebrow. You'll guess that I'm somewhere between twenty-five and thirty years old.

Say you like what you see enough to talk to me.

We'll chat and, if things go well between us, you'll find out more. I'll tell you that my name's Jack Rossiter. If you ask me about the scar, I'll tell you that my best friend, Matt Davies, shot me with an air pistol when I was twelve years old. I'll tell you that I was lucky not to lose an eye and my mother wouldn't have Matt in the house for a year. I'll tell you that Matt is less volatile these days and that I'm comfortable with the situation to the extent that I now consider it safe to live under the same roof as him. I'll tell you that he works for a City law firm, but few would tell you that he owns the

house and I pay him rent. You'll ask me what the house is like and I'll tell you that it's a converted pub in west London and that, yes, we have kept the pool table and dartboard and bar, but, no, we haven't given visiting rights to the violent alcoholic who used to sit scowling in the corner. I'll also tell you that the garden is large and wild.

You'll ask me what I do for a living now and I'll tell you that I'm an artist, which is true, and that I make a living from it, which isn't. I won't tell you that I work in a small art gallery in Mayfair three days a week to make ends meet. You'll look at my clothes, which will probably be Matt's clothes, and wrongly assume that I'm rich. As I won't, throughout all this, mention a girlfriend, you'll probably correctly assume that I'm single. I won't ask you if you have a boyfriend, though I will check your finger to see if you're engaged or married.

Say we end up going back to your place or mine.

We'll have sex. If we're lucky, we might even enjoy it. If we enjoy it, we might even do it again. And then we'll sleep. The next morning, if it's your place, I'll probably slip away before you wake. I won't leave a number. And if it's my place, you'll do the same. You won't kiss me goodbye. Whoever's left in the bed will finally wake up. And they'll find that they're alone. But this will be good, because this will be what they want.

* * *

Confessions: No. 1 Contraception

Place: the toilet between carriages B and C on the 2.45 p.m. Inter-city train from Bristol Parkway to London Paddington.

Time: 3.45 p.m. 15 May 1988.

Behind the toilet door, a young man, aged seventeen, was standing in front of the mirror with his trousers and boxer shorts round his ankles, holding a curry-flavoured novelty condom in one hand and an erector penis in the other.

I can be accurate on this. Not because I was sitting in carriage C, staring at the TOILET IN USE sign, bladder threatening to burst, wondering what kind of person could be selfish enough to hog the bog for the best part of twenty minutes. And not because the track vibrations on the approach to Reading became so intense that I marched up to the toilet door and gave it a good kick and saw what was going on inside. But because that young man was me.

OK, so right now it would be fair enough to assume that I could be any one, or possibly all, of the following:

- a) A pervert
- b) A curry-lover
- c) A lunatic

And, on the information disclosed so far, these are fair enough assumptions. Any jury would probably have convicted me on all three counts. Though on the curry-loving charge, the fact that I could barely touch my knee with my mouth, let alone any other part of my anatomy, may have raised a reasonable doubt.

So bring on the defence.

Seventeen-year-old men, as any man who's successfully, and no doubt gratefully, evolved beyond that age can vouch for, are strange creatures. Stretched between adolescence and maturity and doused with hormones by the bucketful, it's an age of self-discovery, where questions are asked, answers are sought, and frequent masturbation is indulged in on the side. It was no different for me. I asked the usual questions. Does God exist? Can there ever be world peace? Why does pubic hair have a finite length, thereby denying the possibility of pelvic topiary? And wouldn't it be gross if boil-in-the-bag was just what it said? And I waited in vain for the answers. And, in between waiting, I jerked off.

A lot.

There were probably prize dairy cows whose yield was less than mine (but, considering the fact that they would only have

been milked twice a day, this isn't so astounding). On average – i.e. excluding fire, flood, earthquakes and other acts of God – I jerked off three times a day. And variety was the spice. I spanked the monkey over the bathroom basin. I choked the chicken under the duvet. I bashed the bishop during *Songs of Praise*. I jerked, I squirted, I wanked, I tossed, I tugged and I glopped. But throughout this period of onanistic experimentation, there was one thing I'd never tried: the Rich Man's Wank.

For anyone unfamiliar with this term, the RMW is simply performing the act of masturbation whilst wearing a condom. Precisely what this has to do with rich men, I'm not sure. I can only assume it's a habit brought on by having too much time on their hands. (Too much something, anyway.) For me, though, on 15 May 1988, in the far from erotic environment of the British Rail toilet between carriages B and C, it served another purpose. It was the condom itself, not what it was designed to act as a barrier against, that interested me.

The plain fact of the matter was that I'd never tried one on before. My contact with them had so far been restricted to watching with admiration as my school friend, Keith Rawlings, had performed his then legendary party trick of stretching a condom over the top half of his head and hyperventilating through his nose until the condom swelled up like a Zeppelin and finally went the way of the *Hindenburg*, exploding to a round of astounded applause. Now, whilst I could see the impressive theatricality of such a feat, it wasn't a party audience I was planning to impress that day. It was Mary Rayner, a girl I'd met at a party at Matt's parents' house the weekend before, a girl who lived in London, and a girl who'd invited me to stay with her whilst her parents were away in Majorca. A girl, in other words, who I had high hopes would be charitable enough to relieve me of my virginity. Hence the curry-flavoured condom. In the toilet. On the train.

In less than two hours, there was the possibility that I might be called upon to use one in games. The moment I'd mentally and

physically prepared for, developing a wrestler's grip in my right hand into the bargain, was almost upon me. So what did I do? I did what all red-blooded, self-confident seventeen-year-old men do: I panicked. Good and long. I sat there in carriage C, drumming my fingers on my wallet, thinking of the three sealed condoms that I'd hurriedly bought from a machine in a pub. What if they didn't fit? What if they were too small, or – excruciating – too big? What if they split or fell off? I'd end up lying next to Mary, apologising profusely, that's what. And if that happened, chances were Mary would never give me another chance. I'd remain a virgin. Christ, I might even die a virgin. I squirmed in my seat, visualising my epitaph: HE DIED AGED ONE HUNDRED WITHOUT A SINGLE SHAG TO HIS NAME. RIV – REST IN VIRGINITY. So I picked up my wallet and hurriedly walked up the aisle to the toilet for a dry run before the main event.

And there the defence rests.

Mary, however, I'm pleased to report, didn't. Rest, that is. From the moment we reached her bedroom and stumbled across the floor and tumbled into bed, rest was the last thing on her mind. This was my first experience of the feeling I'd later come to call 'In'. I was In with her. I was In bed. And soon I was In her, too. The feeling of In flooded me, right up to the point where it flooded out.

* * *

The Beginning

It's Friday morning, June 1998, and I have a problem.

Worse, I can't remember her name.

She sighs and mutters something incomprehensible in her sleep, rolls over to face me and wraps her arm around my waist, leaves it there, sweating against my skin. I glance at the LCD display on my alarm clock on the bedside table: 07.31. Then I look at her: a tapestry of brown hair obscuring everything apart from her

nose. It's not a bad nose, as noses go. I stare back at the ceiling, caught in a crossfire of conflicting thoughts.

On the one hand, this isn't an altogether bad situation to be in. Here I am, heterosexual and single, lying in bed next to a naked woman, who, though the information at my disposal is limited to the shape of her nose and a collection of drunken memories, is reasonably good company and reasonably good in bed. To the best of my knowledge, nothing overly weird took place last night: no shacklings, breakdowns or expressions of undying love. We met at a club, danced and flirted, and cabbed it back here in the early hours of the morning.

The sex was good. A sweaty parcel of rolling eyes and heavy sighs. We moved well together, considering we hadn't before. There was no speaking. Sometimes I like it like that. No voice contact. No mind contact. The situation was stripped as bare as we were. There was no pretence that what we were doing was anything other than physical. And afterwards, as we sat there sweating it off, drinking from the two pint glasses I'd filled up with water from the bathroom tap, The Ideal continued to hold true.

Proof of this lay in the fact that she didn't:

- a) Squeeze my hand
- b) Stare lingeringly into my eyes
- c) Ask me how come I didn't get lonely not having a girlfriend
- d) Go for the intimate route by sharing my cigarette like a spliff
- e) Suggest we get together again soon

Instead, she:

- a) Kept her hands to herself
- b) Stared at the ceiling
- c) Told me that the best thing about sleeping around was that no two guys were ever the same

- d) Lit her own cigarette
- e) Told me that she was going to Australia travelling for three months

Then we stubbed out our separate cigarettes and I hit the light and we slept.

So far so good. The perfect one-night stand. A few minutes ago, when I woke, I felt good about myself. Or maybe smug is more accurate. All the usual Single Fears had been swept away. Yes, I was still capable of pulling. Yes, I was still capable of having sex with a stranger. In other words, yes, I still had what it took.

On the other hand, this isn't exactly a good situation either. It's a Friday morning and – I check the clock again and see that another two minutes have flicked by – I have things to do. As easy as it would be to nestle here in post-coital comfort, maybe even lift her hand from my stomach and hold it, protract the illusion of intimacy a little while longer, the time has come for us both to get up and get on.

Careful not to disturb her, I move into a sitting position and lift the dead-weight of her arm from my body and lay it back on the sheet. From this elevated position, I can see her clothes lying in a pile by the side of the bed. I wait for a couple of seconds, reassuring myself that she's still asleep, then slip out from beneath the duvet and quietly go through her clothes until I find her wallet in her jacket pocket. I pull on some shorts, slip out of my bedroom and walk through to the kitchen.

Matt is there, already suited and booted, his black hair still wet from the shower, perched over a bowl of dry cereal and a mug of steaming coffee. He opens his mouth to speak and I raise a finger to my lips. I sit down opposite him at the table and take a swig from his mug.

'She still here, then?' he whispers.

'Yeah.'

'What's-her-name? Chloe's neighbour?'

Chloe is a girl we went to school with.

'Yeah, what's-her-name. That's the one.'

He nods his head, taking the information in, then asks, 'Good lay?'

'Okay.'

I toast him with his mug of coffee. 'Happy birthday, by the way.'

'You remembered? Bless you, mate.'

'Even got you a present.'

'What is it?'

'You'll have to wait till tonight.'

'A.k.a. you haven't bought it yet.'

He prods the wallet with his finger. 'Memory loss?'

I open it up and flick through the ID. 'Not any more.'

'So?'

'So what?'

'So what's what's-her-name's name?'

'Catherine Bradshaw,' I read. 'Born Oxford, sixteenth October 1969.'

'Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't S&M coming round today?'

S&M is Matt's nickname for Sally McCullen, because he reckons my brain gets bruised from just thinking about how great she is.

'Yeah, at ten.'

He checks his watch, whistles low. 'Cutting it a bit fine, aren't you?'

I walk over to the thermostat control and spin it round to maximum. 'Plan A,' I say, pouring myself a pint of water from the chilled bottle in the fridge. 'Sweat her out.'

'And if that fails?'

I down the water, wipe my lips. 'It never does.'

But there's a first time for everything.

The clock display winks over from 08.40 to 08.46. The heating has been running at max for over an hour now, and I can only conclude that Catherine Bradshaw's ID has been falsified and

that, rather than being born in Oxford, she was actually born in Mumbai. In the summer. In a heatwave. Next to a furnace. At high noon. My iced water cheat has failed. With the summer sun beating down on the closed windows and the radiators boiling, I might as well be locked in a sauna. Sweat bleeds from my brow. The pillow which props up my head has transformed into a hot-water bottle, the duvet into an electric blanket. Bradshaw, however, is playing it literally and metaphorically cool. Not one groan of discomfort. Not one request for the window to be opened, or water to be brought. Nothing but the regular pattern of her breathing, and the relaxed expression of deep sleep on her face. The ice maiden.

Plan B.

‘Catherine,’ I say, sitting upright. ‘Cath?’ I guess, louder this time, shaking her shoulder. ‘Cathy?’

‘Mmmmm?’ she finally replies, her eyes still closed.

‘You’ve got to get up. I’ve got to get going. I’m running late.’

She burrows into her eyes with her knuckles and looks at her watch. ‘It’s not even nine,’ she complains, pulling the duvet tighter round her shoulders and closing her eyes again. ‘I thought you said you weren’t working today . . . I thought we were both going to take the day off . . . Pact, you know? We made a pact.’

This is true. This was the justification for extending the evening beyond the club.

‘I know,’ I say, ‘but the gallery’s just called. They’ve got an American collector interested in some of my stuff,’ I lie. ‘He wants to meet me. This morning. He’s flying back to LA this afternoon, so I haven’t got a choice.’

‘Okay, okay,’ she says, sitting up, ‘I hear you.’

By the time she has showered and dressed, it’s a quarter past nine. She walks through to the kitchen, where I’m sitting staring blankly at the surface of the kitchen table. As table surfaces go, it’s not a bad one to feign preoccupation with. It was Matt’s idea, cannibalising the pub sign that used to hang over the front door. Shame we could not have left the hanging there, but some of the

Churchill Arms' ex-locals weren't too bright, kept homing in on it and seeking lock-ins in the middle of the night. I continue to stare. Winston Churchill stares disapprovingly back. *Never, in the field of human relationships* . . . OK, OK, let's get this show on the road.

I don't offer her:

- a) Coffee
- b) A lift home
- c) Small talk

Instead, I push my mug away, get to my feet and say, 'Right, let's get going.'

I flick my memory back to her wallet as I walk to the front door and her footsteps clack across the tiles behind me. She lives in Fulham, so she can catch the tube.

'The tube's only a couple of minutes' walk,' I tell her as we step outside.

I close the door behind us and we walk twenty yards down the street until we draw level with Matt's Spitfire.

'Yours?' she asks as I rest my hand on the roof.

'Yeah,' I say, and moving swiftly on. 'You want to keep going to the end of the street and then take a left. The station's about four hundred yards further on.'

Instead of saying goodbye and walking off out of my life and back into her own, she scans the other side of the road. Her eyes eventually settle on the bus stop.

'It's okay,' she says, 'I'll bus it. It'll be quicker.'

'Fine,' I say, although it definitely isn't, 'I'll see you around, then.'

'Yeah?' She looks at me uncertainly. 'I've left my number in your room. On a cigarette packet. On the bedside table.'

'I thought you were going to Australia?'

'I am. But not for six weeks.'

'Oh.'

We stand looking awkwardly around for a few seconds.

'Are you going, then?' she asks.

'Sure. Right now.' Pointlessly, I pull at the door handle. I grimace. 'Keys. Forgot my keys.' I half wave at her, avoiding eye contact. 'See you around.'

'Yeah, you said.'

I walk quickly back to the house and shut the door behind me. I check my watch: twenty past. Slowly, I creep round the living room door. Using the old pub bar, which runs along the back wall, for cover, I peer out through the window on to the street. Catherine Bradshaw is now standing at the bus stop directly opposite the house. I sink to my knees and stare up at the empty row of old vodka and whisky optics. Shit. I'm tired. I'm knackered. Sally McCullen, a woman I've spent the best part of the last two weeks obsessing over, is due here in just over half an hour. And Catherine Bradshaw is waiting at one of the least-visited bus stops on the planet, without magazine or newspaper or book or Walkman, with nothing better to do than idly watch the front door to Matt's house and wait for me to reappear and drive off in a convertible, which isn't mine, to meet an American art collector, who doesn't exist.

A voice inside me is saying, *So what? So what if you don't reappear and thereby confirm her suspicion that the whole gallery/collector routine is just an elaborate scam to get rid of her? So what if she's still waiting for the bus to arrive at ten o'clock when you greet McCullen on the doorstep? We've only just met. We aren't going out. So, the voice continues, why couldn't you have been honest with her? What's the big deal? Why couldn't you have just told her thanks for last night. It was fun. But the door's that way. Wouldn't life be simpler now if you'd just done that? Well, wouldn't it?*

But a range of other voices disagree.

There's the selfish one: *she's Chloe's neighbour and mate and Chloe is your mate. Dump on Catherine, dump on Chloe by association. Carry on that way and watch your social circle collapse into a flat line of inactivity. The insecure one would not want her, or*

anyone else for that matter, going through life propagating the opinion, or even just keeping it to themselves, that you're an asshole. The decent one: you're a nice guy and nice guys leave nice girls feeling nice about themselves.

But, while I suppose all of these voices are speaking the truth, none of them is telling the core truth. In fact, the core truth has nothing to do with reasoning at all. Nothing so intelligent. It's down to conditioning, plain and simple. It's down to the way I've been programmed. Not something I consider, just something I instinctively am.

It's easy to kid yourself that when you bail out of a relationship you simply swap your couple habits for single ones. I broke up with Zoe Thompson between 6 and 9 p.m. on Saturday, 13 May 1995, between the time I returned from a weekend of heart-searching and tears at my mum's house and the time her father came to collect her from the rented flat we'd spent the past fifteen months turning into a home. We'd been going out with each other for just over two years. In the months that followed, alterations in my lifestyle and emotional habits included:

- a) Stopping using fabric conditioner and watching holes inexplicably appear in my socks
- b) No longer replacing my toothbrush every three months, so that it reached the point where it felt like I was brushing my teeth with a strip of shag-pile carpet
- c) Using my fingernails rather than nail scissors to trim my toenails
- d) Turning the bed sheet over every couple of weeks rather than washing it
- e) No longer feeling guilty for talking to someone of the opposite sex who wasn't safe (i.e. a mate's girlfriend, or a long-standing girl friend of mine who Zoe got on with, or a friend of Zoe's)
- f) Wearing condoms during sexual intercourse

- g) Sleeping with a pillow hugged between my arms rather than a person I loved
- h) Lying in bed on my own on Sunday mornings, wishing I still had someone I cared about enough to want to spend the day with her

But other habits I'd developed during the time I'd been going out with Zoe continued to thrive, despite the fact that she was no longer there to thought-police me, because they'd now become mine. These included:

- a) Going to sleep on the right side of the bed, despite the fact I now had a double to myself on which I could have sprawled at any angle I chose
- b) Doing my washing-up after each meal instead of performing a crockery and cutlery blitz at the end of each week
- c) Savouring the taste of vegetables and salads, rather than dismissing them as items made obsolete by the advent of vitamin pills
- d) Leaving the seat down on the toilet
- e) Watching *EastEnders*
- f) Attempting to steer the conversation away from football results when in mixed gender company
- g) Looking women in the face rather than the cleavage whilst addressing them
- h) Understanding that other people's egos, in spite of what outside appearances might lead you to believe, are just as fragile and easily cracked as your own

Now, I'm not a shrink and I have no way of explaining why some of these Zoe-learnt habits have stuck whilst others have dropped away. What I do know is that those that are left are for real, as much a part of me as my fingerprints. And that includes the other people's egos bit. **Copyrighted Material**

Sure, chances are Catherine Bradshaw is going to be just as glad to see the back of me as I am of her. Chances are that leaving her telephone number was probably just her way of making me feel better, or making her feel better, or both. Chances are that even if I do call her she'll probably deny all knowledge of me, or develop a hitherto unknown talent for speaking fluent Latvian the moment she recognises my voice. But, equally, there's a slim chance that she does give a damn. And that possibility means that if I treat her like crap, I'll end up feeling like crap myself. So spin it round: treat her good and feel good as a result. Selfless and selfish side by side. The perfect combination for a clean conscience.

Luckily, Matt's car keys are hanging on a dart on the board in the kitchen and so, within a few minutes, I'm waving across the street at Bradshaw, climbing into Matt's Spit, adjusting the seat and mirror and slipping the key into the ignition. Driving round the block, I ponder over the facts that I'm not insured, and that Matt might well react by holding a knife to my throat and making me eat my recently dismembered genitalia if he so much as suspects that I've taken his pride and joy for a spin. I park the Spit in a side street, well away from the bus stop, cut the engine and switch on the radio.

Four songs, one traffic update, one news flash and two cigarettes later, I risk getting out and walking up the street to take a peek. Just as I'm approaching the corner, slowing down to peer round and check that my road is now a Bradshaw-free zone, a bus drives past. I freeze, my eyes connecting through the window with those of Catherine Bradshaw. I watch as she shakes her head and raises her middle finger in salute.

There are some thoughts you don't have to be telepathic to pick up. Arsehole is one of them.

It's late afternoon. I'm leaning back against the wall in my studio, smoking a cigarette, gazing at the canvas propped up on the easel that I've just repositioned by the French windows overlooking the

garden. Sunlight fills the room with the kind of bright light you get from an unshaded bulb.

The studio's at the back of the house. Uniform white ceiling and walls, broken up by sketches and colour studies. The floorboards are unvarnished, left how I found them when I ripped up the beer-stained carpet shortly after moving in. Matt was cool about it, partly because the room was a mess anyway – little more than a storage space for the boxes he'd never quite got round to unpacking after he'd shifted all his stuff from his parents' home back in Bristol – and partly because he knew I couldn't afford to rent anywhere else. With the carpet gone and the walls repainted, only the pool table remains as a testimony to the Churchill Arms' glory days.

One thing I told Bradshaw last night was true: I don't work Fridays. Not regular pay cheque work, anyway. That happens Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, down at Paulie's Gallery. Paulie calls me his manager, but seeing as I'm the only person who works there, I don't get too power-happy about the title. What I actually do is sit at the desk at the front of the gallery and flick through magazines or novels, and wait for the phone to ring, which it rarely does – unless it's Paulie checking up on me from whatever Med-based gin palace he happens to be at. Occasionally, someone will come in and browse, maybe ask me a question or two about one of the paintings. Even more occasionally, maybe three times a month, they'll buy something and I'll run up the till and fix them with a receipt, arrange delivery or collection. But mostly it's just reading, or gazing out on to the street, watching people go by.

But Fridays, Fridays along with Mondays, I own. Fridays and Mondays, the only thing I have to manage is myself. And I try to do just that. I try not to leave the house, not unless it's vital, like popping down to LoCost on the corner to buy cigarettes and cans of Pepsi Max, or having to grovel to my bank manager over The Bottomless Hole (a.k.a. my overdraft). I try to respond to my alarm clock at the same time I would if it was

Paulie's to open it up on time (10 a.m.), I shower and, if he's there, I chat with Matt while he eats his breakfast. Then I go through to the studio and switch on the radio for company. I light a cigarette, select a brush and pick up where I left off.

All this I try, but quite often I end up getting up late and taking things from there.

I continue to gaze at the canvas. Apart from the dose of morning Bradshaw-aggro, it's been a productive day. Ten through till four, with an hour off for lunch. Everything has gone according to plan. Apart from the needing a radio for company part. I haven't. But that's been part of another plan.

'So,' McCullen asks, coming back into the studio, standing between me and the canvas, blocking my view, 'are you pleased?'

McCullen is five foot eight and slim. Her hair is blonde and hangs like straw halfway down her spine. She has a sexy laugh.

'I don't know,' I say, and not just because I can't see the canvas, but because I've been concentrating too long. I need to get away from it for a while, rest my eyes before I can view it objectively again. 'What do you think?'

She turns round and faces me. 'I like it.'

I'm pleased; I like her too.

A lot.

We met two weeks ago at a party my sister, Kate, threw to celebrate her twentieth birthday. Kate is a student at UCL, History and Spanish. Her boyfriend's name is Phil. He does French, also at UCL. He met McCullen on his course in his first year and they became good friends, managed to stay good friends, and moved into a shared house last year. Kate and McCullen became mates. That's our connection. That's how I ended up talking to her in Kate's kitchen to begin with.

Kate had already told her a lot about me, and the painting I'd given Kate for her birthday was hanging on the living room wall, so it was easy to get a conversation going. McCullen asked me about my painting. She'd

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weekends. I asked her why she'd stopped and she blamed her parents, said they'd told her that she should keep it on as a hobby, but meanwhile get some vocational qualifications. I told her about the limited success I'd had so far – the three paintings I'd sold to collectors and the promising notices I'd got after I'd sneakily held an exhibition at Paulie's for my work a couple of months before. She asked me what I was working on at the moment and, because I was drunk, and because she was wonderful, and because she'd side-stepped all my subtle approaches and obviously had no intention of going home with me, I told her I was planning a series of life studies. I asked her if she'd sit for me and asked her to please, please, please say yes.

And, miraculously, she did.

Or, rather, she asked, 'How much?'

And I replied, 'I was rather hoping you'd do it for nothing.'

And she said, 'No way.'

And I suggested, 'Twenty pounds?'

And she said, 'Thirty.'

And I said, 'Done.'

And why not? I just had been.

McCullen walks over to the sofa, giving me a clear view of the canvas again. I look from her to it and back again. Somehow the two don't connect. Not because the painting is a bad likeness, just that during the hours I've been translating her body from three dimensions into two, I've stopped seeing her as a whole being, more a collection of contours and shades. Now that she has form again, she's resurrected. No longer an object I want to study, but a woman I want to touch. Very badly indeed.

In truth, this thought has been flashing sporadically in and out of my mind since she arrived this morning, about three minutes after I'd finished parking Matt's Spit inch-perfectly back in its space and readjusting its seat and mirror. I fixed her coffee, made small talk and showed her the studio. She undressed in the bathroom and returned to the studio with a towel wrapped round her.

I made a show of setting up the canvas, tried not to stare at her as she walked across the room, and generally tried to put her at her ease.

‘How do you want me?’ she asked.

Now. In the shower. On a beach. In an aeroplane. Covered in whipped cream and melted chocolate. The answers kept coming and in any other circumstances I’d have selected one of them and gone for it. But I was a professional, right? I was an artist and she was a model.

‘Over on the sofa,’ I told her. ‘Just lie down and make sure you’re comfortable.’

She walked over and, with her back to me, unwrapped the towel, folded it neatly on the floor, and lay down on her front on the sofa.

‘How’s that?’ she asked.

The pose, with the side of her head resting on her crossed hands, eyes towards me, looked natural, as if she were waking from a deep sleep. The light was good, too. A block of shadow slanted across the lower half of her legs. It was pretty much perfect.

‘Comfortable?’

She lay there motionless. ‘Yes, I’m fine.’

I stared, motionless too, transfixed. ‘Good.’

What can you say about obsessions? They’re the special forces of human behaviour. If being single, as I truly believe it is, is a state of siege – you create a set of demands in your mind and refuse to surrender your single status until your Uberbabe comes along – then obsessions are the fifth column who, just when you think you’re safe and in control, scale your walls and burst through your windows with their machine guns blazing. No defence is strong enough to keep them out.

And that’s how it is with McCullen. Since meeting her, I’ve suffered from an almost continuous barrage of visions of her and visions of being with her. Most worrying of all, many of these

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visions have been little short of heretical, blatant affronts to the Single Code I've chosen to live my life by. I've visualised:

- a) Walking down the street with her, holding hands
- b) Lying in bed beside her at dawn, watching her face as she sleeps, at peace
- c) Sitting opposite her at an alcove table in a restaurant, sipping wine and staring into her eyes

Not, in other words, regularly quoted passages from the Single Guy's Bible. This said, though, there are other traits of my Uberbabe I doubt she has the potential to fulfil. I can't, for example, visualise:

- a) Being separated from her for six months by circumstances beyond my control and knowing that she'll still be there for me when I return
- b) Moving into a flat with her
- c) Asking her to marry me

But, in spite of this knowledge, she comes closer to being my Uberbabe than anyone I've met since I split with Zoe. And, right now, close is close enough.

'Are we done for today, then?' she asks.

'Yeah. Thanks. You've been very patient.'

She picks up the towel and wraps it round her. 'So what happens now?'

A good question. And one which I've spent a considerable amount of time addressing over the last few hours. The answer I want to give goes somewhere along the lines of, 'I don't have to leave for Matt's party for another three hours, so why don't we put them to good use by hitting the sack?' But, meanwhile, back in the City of London, Planet Earth, McCullen has given no indication

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over the course of the day that this is a request she'll readily oblige. So instead, I settle for something a little more ambiguous.

'Well, we could crack open a bottle of wine . . .'

She smiles. 'No, I don't mean now as in now now. I mean with the painting. It's not finished, is it? So you'll need me to come back for another sitting, won't you?'

'Oh, right. Sure. Yeah.' Like I know that's what she meant. 'A couple more sittings should do it. If you can bear it, that is.'

'No problem. It's been fun.' She massages her shoulder with her hand. 'Apart from the aches and pains.'

'You didn't get bored?'

'No, you're good company. I suppose you're used to it, keeping people entertained while they sit for you.'

This is better. We get on. She likes me.

'Yeah, I suppose I am,' I say. 'And the wine? I've got a bottle in the fridge, if you're interested . . .'

She considers this proposition for a couple of seconds, then says, 'No, I'd better get going. Got the in-laws to deal with tonight.'

My stomach lurches. Before I can stop myself, I blurt out, 'In-laws? Don't tell me you're—'

She laughs, flicks her hair back from her face. 'Married? God, no. They're not real in-laws. Just my boyfriend's parents. It's his mother's birthday.'

The B-word. I might have known. I can't believe she hasn't mentioned him before.

'I didn't know you had a boyfriend.' The disappointment is there in my voice. I try to sound sociable, and enquire, 'Long term?'

'Three years.'

'Serious, then?'

'Guess so.'

There's a slight hesitation in her voice. Enough to make me probe further. 'I hope you don't mind me asking, but doesn't it bother him, you posing for me?'

'Well, it would if he knew'

We both smile. 'I see.'

'I mean, it shouldn't. It's not like there's anything funny going on. It's not like I'm being unfaithful, or anything like that.'

'So why not tell him?'

'Because he'd just end up getting insecure and jealous. It's just not worth the grief.'

'Do you love him?'

'Yes,' she says, crossing the room to go and get dressed, 'very much.'

OK, so matters aren't exactly following the traditional seduction script. It's more like starting on the final page and reading back. The object of my desire has gone from naked to towel-wrapped and is now getting dressed and will shortly leave. And, what's more, she's just told me in no uncertain terms that she's in a three-year relationship with a man she's in love with. And *very much* in love with at that.

This would be enough to knock most people's obsessions cold. But not mine. I focus on the one flicker of hope in an otherwise dark universe: the fact that she's prepared to deceive the man she loves to be with me. And that she's going to repeat the deception next week. Sure, as signals go, it's more of a nod in a crowded room than a red flare bursting in the night sky, but it still means I'm in with a chance. Conclusion: her turning down my offer of wine to be with her boyfriend is a bad rejection, but there's always next week . . .

And on the ego front, it's not like I haven't suffered worse before.

* * *

Confessions: No. 2 Virginity

Place: Mary Rayner's parents' house.

Time: 6 p.m. 15 May 1988.

Mary: 'Have you got one?'

Me: 'Yeah.'

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Mary: 'Well, are you going to put it on, or what?'

Me: 'Yeah, of course.'

Mary: 'It looks kind of funny.'

Me: 'It's curry-flavoured.'

Mary: 'That's disgusting.'

Me: 'I know. I'm sorry.'

Mary: 'Jesus, it stinks.'

Me: 'I said I'm sorry.'

Mary: 'Haven't you got anything else?'

Me: 'No, it's all the machine had.'

Mary: 'Okay, then. Put it on.'

Me: 'Okay.'

Mary: 'Where are you going?'

Me: 'The bathroom.'

Mary: 'What for?'

Me: 'Don't worry, I'll be back in a minute.'

Mary: 'Happy now?'

Me: 'Yeah.'

Mary: 'Come here, then.'

Me: 'Okay.'

Mary: 'Ouch.'

Me: 'Sorry.'

Mary: 'Here, let me help you.'

Me: 'Thanks.'

Mary: 'You haven't done this before, have you?'

Me: 'Yeah, loads of times.'

Mary: 'Liar.'

Me: 'Not.'

Mary: 'There, that's better.'

Me: 'There?'

Mary: 'Yeah, right there . . .'

Real-time description of the act itself: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, **Copy, eighteenth, nineteenth,** twenty—'