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Nina is Not Ok

Written by Shappi Khorsandi

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NINA IS NOT OK

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For Andrew:

Keep travelling with me.

CHAPTER ONE

The burly bouncer was holding me by the scruff of the neck. I always thought that was a figure of speech, but he had my scruff in his hand and was marching me towards the exit.

An hour before, I'd flirted with this man and he'd let me, Zoe and Beth into the club with our dodgy IDs. Now I was being 'frog marched' by him. I held my head up high the way the very drunk do when they are trying not to seem very drunk.

I stumbled, of course. He put one hand under my arm to steady me. I was yanked up and dragged towards the exit like a haughty marionette. This was ungainly. No amount of front could hide from the other clubbers that I was being booted out.

We'd been drinking before we got there. It's loads cheaper if you get drunk at home. We'd had some wine – me and Beth – as we got ourselves ready. Beth had lent me her crazy, black minidress with crucifixes on it. It was gothy (Beth is a not-quite-committed Goth: a Demi-Goth) but had this scrunchy middle bit that somehow made my waist look tiny.

Zoe had also come over with a bottle of vodka and we'd had shots. Zoe had just come back from holiday and looked

even more gorgeous than usual with her hair all tousled and sun-kissed. It sounds mad but with a tan she looks even taller.

It's Zoe who gets us into clubs, past the queues. Girls that look like Zoe never have to wait in line for anything. The bouncers come and get her, then me and Beth scuttle alongside her to the front. No door Nazi has ever said 'no' to me and Beth when Zoe has been with us.

She's smoking hot but has absolutely no sense of humour. I mean she doesn't get jokes. *Ever*. Beth cracks me up all the time and Zoe just smiles like we're both mad. She doesn't see what we're laughing at, and just goes, 'What are you two on?!' She's nice, though, never an arsehole to anyone.

Beth wondered if Zoe was a snob at first – she goes to our college but we only really got to know her last summer when we all worked at Pizza Paradise – but she's not a snob, she's sound; she's just not silly like we are. Zoe reads a lot and isn't a div like girls as pretty as her can be. Me and Beth have a theory that girls who are really pretty are often dull. They get attention without having to develop a personality. We've been friends, me and Beth, since we were ten.

We were all nicely tipsy by the time we got to the Boulevard. It was our last night out before term started on Monday and we wanted to make the most of it.

The reason I was thrown out was fairly clear. It was definitely something to do with me unzipping that bloke's fly by the bar and burying my head in his lap.

I'm not even a slag. I've only ever shagged Jamie White and I was *his* first too, so not slagginess at all from either side.

'Nina!' Beth had said. 'That guy over there won't stop looking at you.'

He was gorgeous. No doubt about that. He looked like a Benny Boy.

The boys from St Benedict's never usually looked at girls like me. They liked cool, tall, blonde girls like Zoe who don't say much and flick their hair. I'm short and have got crazy curly hair. It's long and never behaves unless I spend hours straightening it. I'm not ugly, I'm alright looking. My dad was half-Moroccan so I've got olive skin and big Arab eyes but my mum's thin English lips and my Auntie Jeanie's ski-slope nose. On a good day, I'm Pocahontas; on a bad day – most days – I'm a cavewoman.

This guy was tall, good-looking, with dark eyes and sexy, floppy indie-band hair. Guys who don't have the confidence to go for Zoe tend to go for me. I'm a fairly decent plan B. This guy definitely had confidence, but Zoe had nipped to the loo. I had to nab him before she came back.

I downed my Southern Comfort and Coke. He came over, or did I go over? Don't know. Someone went over to someone and then I don't remember what we said or did but the next moment we were in a dark corner, on a velvety sofa, and I was fumbling with his fly.

I had only given a handful of blow jobs before, mostly to Jamie White, my boyfriend. *Ex*-boyfriend. Jamie had left after his A level results and gone to live in Hong Kong for a year with his dad. He'd promised he'd write to me every day but I'd heard nothing for over two weeks. After I'd called and left a million messages and spent HUGE amounts of time crying to

Beth, he'd messaged, eventually, saying he'd met another girl out there called Marcia. This had been pretty devastating and so out of the blue. We'd planned a whole future together. I was having issues 'accepting' the break up, apparently.

I'd sent him endless emails. In one I'd call him a total bastard for five pages; in the next I'd send him seven pages of how much I loved him, how he was my hero and begging him to call me and get back with me. I'd texted him endless lists of what I missed about him.

I miss stuff about you that you don't even know I loved about you!

1. *The way you texted me in the mornings to tell me stop hitting 'snooze'.*
2. *Your Superman pants.*
3. *Your radish and tuna melts.*
4. *How sweet you always were with your mum when I am always ratty to mine.*
5. *The way you wrote down each book you lent people and demanded they give it back exactly two weeks later because 'if they haven't read it by then they can sod off'.*
6. *The way you always said 'when WE have kids, when WE go travelling, when WE become famous writers'.*

And on and on and on – to nothing, no replies. Silence. Then he'd posted pictures of them together on Facebook.

Beth had said, 'Well, that's a kick in the cunt.' But it hadn't been like that. It had been like a thousand kicks in the

cunt and a giant fist around my heart, squeezing until it burst, again and again and again.

They'd been on a balcony on some fancy lit-up building. She's American. She's skinny with long, dead-straight blonde hair, and pretty. Not madly pretty, just normal pretty.

I'd stared at the picture. How could he love her more than he loved me? How is that possible? He'd always said that I was his exotic, dusky Arab beauty, even though I can't speak Arabic and have never been to Morocco.

Beth and Zoe had rushed round to my house because I'd been so upset. I'd showed them the picture, wanting them to slag this girl off, but Beth is a feminist and doesn't believe in pulling other women down just to cheer her friends up. She'd told me not to torture myself, to unfriend Jamie, to move on. Zoe is not a feminist and had said, 'Oh my God. He chose her over you? Well, he's blind as well as stupid!'

So this (probably) Benny Boy's hand was on my head, pushing it down into his lap, and I dutifully bobbed up and down. I don't know where Zoe and Beth were. Off dancing probably.

I remember hoping I was giving a good blow job. I read a thing in one of Zoe's magazines ages ago that to give a good one, you had to seem like you were really enjoying yourself and keep your teeth well out of the way.

Beth thinks glossy magazines telling you how to have relationships are trash but they are actually quite useful because how else do you *know* what makes a good blow job? You can't just ask, 'So how does sir like his cock sucked?' without him thinking you're mental.

So anyway, I think I was moaning a bit with pleasure (which is really embarrassing, but I was drunk, whatever) and wrapping my lips over my teeth. I must have looked like total granny porn.

Then I remember the commotion of the bouncer coming over.

Music and lights swirled around me, everything was blurry as I was manhandled out. This is what they did to blokes fighting; this did not happen to seventeen-year-old girls who had been predicted AAB in their A levels (As for English and history, the B is for philosophy which, if I'm honest, I find bloody boring and I wish I'd taken French instead but it's too late now).

Suddenly I was outside of the club with no coat and no phone.

I was cold, really cold, down to my bones cold. I needed to find Beth and Zoe. I tried to explain to the men on the door – the men who were disgusted with me – that I needed my friends, my coat, but I couldn't. My words were too slurred for them to think I was anything other than scum. Even though I was so drunk I could barely stand, I felt huge shame. I'd just given a bloke a blow job inside a club. Who does that?

'He's my fiancé!' I announced to the security guys, who had increased in number; the management did not want to risk me taking my whoriness back in there. 'We're getting married in a month,' I insisted. Yes. If they thought I had a steady relationship with the man I'd just fellated in public, they would judge me less harshly and let me go back in and find my friends. This was a stupid, stupid night.

My fake fiancé came out of the club to look for me. That was nice of him. He must really like me. Proof we were in love. The door staff would be ashamed of themselves now as he put his arm around me and giggled something to his friend. Why had he brought his mate? Perhaps they could lend me a phone. If I had a phone I could call Mum to pick me up. They were posh boys, both of them. They'll be from nice families, I thought, as he cuddled me close to keep me warm. Why was his mate following us? We walked – they walked me – a little way down the road, to the alley. My legs were so unsteady that the boys sort of carried me. Where was my other shoe?

Later – an hour later? Five minutes? – I was in a taxi. The guys were in charge, being sweet, making sure I knew my address and had enough money. I heard his mate call him Alex. They wandered off, back towards the club, back to the darkness, the music, the steamy bodies writhing oblivious to the outside world. I slumped in the back.

The cab driver was Muslim. He had one of those white skullcaps on. I clutched my knickers in my hand. They were nice ones. Part of a set from Topshop. Thank God I'd retrieved them. I wanted to put them on but I couldn't move. Why were my knickers in my hand? Did I fuck one of them? Both of them? Oh dear God no! Shit. No condoms. Not good. The gluey tang of spunk was in my hair. I wiped my mouth and pulled the gothy dress over my thighs. My eyelids were like lead. I mustn't sleep, I thought. It was dangerous to sleep. Was this even a licensed taxi? I passed out.

Suddenly Mum was on the street in her dressing gown. She was pulling me out of the cab. 'Come on, Nina, come ON!'

'She was asleep, you know? I couldn't wake her.' The cabbie must have gone to the door and fetched Mum. His Pakistani accent was soft and concerned. 'She is young. I thought I'd better get her parents, you know what I'm saying?' Later I would feel bad about thinking he might rape me.

My mother, Sandra Taylor, formerly Swanson, founder of Ealing Fields Running Society, leant me against our garden wall and began to fumble about in my handbag.

'My purse is inside,' said Mum when she couldn't find mine. She was flustered, wondering if she should just leave me propped up against the wall while she ran to get money.

'Please, miss, no problem.'

He waved away further offers of paying the fare, got back in his car and drove away.

I remember thinking 'he's too disgusted', before spraying the wall with Southern Comfort, red wine and spaghetti hoops. My shoeless foot was soaked. Everything went dark again.

Consciousness hits me like a hammer. I fly out of the black hole of the night before.

I am in my own bed, fully clothed. Good. The sun is bright. Urgh. It is a relief to be in my own room though who knows how I got here. Still, I am dressed so I can't have taken my clothes off and danced naked on a table, which is usually my worst fear when I come round after a blackout. I move a

fraction to the left. Nausea rises. My dress is wet, stuck to my arse. I've pissed myself. The room spins, I make a horrible sound then splash my bed with puke.

The door opens slowly. Through the fog of poison rising from my sheets and sweating out of my body, I see my little sister, Katie, peep round the door. 'Go AWAY, Katie!' I manage to croak. It must stink in here. I am revolting. Katie is six and my angel. Katie cannot see me like this. She tiptoes out again.

A door slams downstairs. Mum has taken Katie to ballet class. Thank God Alan is in Germany. This would be a serious lecture with slide projectors and guest speakers.

I sink back down and lie, catatonic, in my bed of piss and puke.

By noon I have shuffled downstairs. Pieces of the night have come back to me and I am filled with shame so intense I wonder how I can remain alive. I could jump off a cliff? But I've been to Beachy Head. It wasn't all that sheer. It seemed like you'd bounce to death and it would hurt and I can't cope with that, not with a hangover. I want to pick up a saucepan and hit myself on the head with it so I can get last night out. Those boys and booze, the hard cock in the corner of the club . . . I want it all out of my head. There is an elephant sitting on my chest and I want to push it off.

Every movement is a monumental effort. Shame bombs go off one by one in my memory, making me shudder and clutch my face. I remember what I did, what happened. Not the bits outside, but the bits inside the Boulevard. Who saw?

Did Zoe and Beth see? Are they speaking to me? Or are they too disgusted? Where did they go? The whole world saw what I did, didn't it? If I turn on the TV or open a newspaper they will be reporting my behaviour: SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD NINA SWANSON HAS BEEN DECLARED THE MOST AWFUL, DISGUSTING GIRL OF ALL TIME AND NO ONE IN THE WORLD WANTS TO KNOW HER ANYMORE. Stupid hangover paranoia. No one else cares, right? No one else will ever know.

Suddenly I hear my phone. My quest to find it is a fine piece of slapstick comedy I am sad no one witnesses. I actually pick up a banana from the fruit bowl to see if the phone is under it. Katie isn't here to laugh but I put it to my ear anyway. I stumble and trip and eventually find my phone in Katie's little pink handbag where it must have been last night. I have missed the call. It was Mum. I have six missed calls and thirteen texts.

The texts are mostly from Zoe and Beth. '*Are you inside? Can't find you!*' And '*Babe, where ARE you? Reeeeeeelly worried now . . .*'

There is one message from Mum: *'I'll be home at lunchtime.'* Not *'I'll pop in at lunchtime'*. 'Pop' is a friendly word. 'Pop' would mean she's not really angry, just concerned. But no. Mum will BE home. I text back *'fine x'* then call Beth.

'You're not going to die,' she reassures me. 'You went out and got trashed. Everyone does it.'

'Beth! I went down on a guy IN PUBLIC! I got thrown out! *Everyone* doesn't do that!'

'No. They don't. You're right. But look, you've got a brilliant story to tell your grandkids. You'll be a rock 'n' roll grandma!'

I am not cheered by this.

Beth and Zoe had rung my mum to check I got home OK. I'm touched they care but Mum's lecture on 'sticking with your mates' was going to be an epic one.

'What the fuck happened? Those blokes said you got thrown out?'

'The Benny Boys?'

'They weren't Benny Boys! The one you were snogging, the fit one? He was an estate agent. He's twenty-one! He got off with Zoe after.'

'What?'

'Sorry, babe. He did though.'

'What a dick!'

'I know. Bloody rude. Not Zoe's fault though. Do you want me to come over? I finish at four today, I could pop round?'

Beth sometimes works at her dad's shop on the weekend. He has a kids' bookshop, Down the Rabbit Hole. I often take Katie there and Beth's dad is dead sweet to her. He lets her have a go on the till and he gave her a copy of *The Tiger Who Came To Tea* when she was three. He's young, Beth's dad. He's not even forty yet. My mum is forty-three. Ancient.

'No, don't worry; Mum's on her way,' I say although having Beth here might chill Mum out a bit. Beth's mum died of cancer when Beth was only two so Mum fusses over her a lot, knowing what it was like for me to lose a parent. Though at least I remember my dad. Mum thinks Beth is 'wise beyond her years'.

I strip and put my clothes straight in to the washing machine. I run upstairs, yank the sheets off my bed, shove them in too and turn it on. Mum would kill me for putting

on such a small load but I need everything to be clean again. I keep getting awful flashes, scenes from last night. My head, his lap, the bouncer, everything comes back. I know the boys walked me to the alley behind the garages then later put me in a cab; what happened in between is a blank. I don't want to know. I don't want to think. They wouldn't have an STD, would they? I freak out for a while about chlamydia, herpes and HIV. Pregnancy is the least of my worries. But I don't even remember if I should be freaking out or not. I am not drinking again. I am never drinking again.

Naked, I go up the stairs to shower. As the soapy water slips off my head, down my grimy skin and tender, hungover flesh, I feel better. I stand and pray for total cleansing. I wash off the piss and puke. I try to wash off that boy.

'Do you remember how you got home last night?'

Mum's face is stone, but she doesn't shout or rant. When things are medium bad, she blows her top. When they are off-the-scale bad, like this, she is calm. She is trying to be understanding. We both have recent enough memories of Dad to know this is not unfamiliar to her.

'It's poison you're putting in your body. You have to be aware of how much you are having, and when you're tipsy enough to have a great time, stop!'

As though, when I am drunk, I can make this decision.

Mum is a health nut now. She hardly drinks and knows all about sugar and carbs and protein. She's not too boring with it; she's pretty cool, not that I'd tell her. She looks good for her age. Her hair is long and glossy and she dyes

her greys. Her skin is smooth and fresh, not like some of her friends – the ones Alan calls 'the battle-axes'; Mum will raise an eyebrow to chastise him, but she doesn't really stick up for them. She loves him thinking she is hotter than her mates and he'll still make a lame excuse to take her upstairs on a Sunday afternoon.

'You OK down here while Alan and I have a quick nap?' It grosses me out so sometimes I say, 'Katie! Mum and Alan are going for a nap! Do you want to go too?' And Mum then glares at me and Alan turns purple.

'You're like your dad,' Mum is saying now, making me a cup of tea. 'You're a party animal.'

I like that: 'party animal'. So Eighties. Mum isn't a caner like Dad was. She is quieter, more traditional; she once told me that Dad's wild ways were what really attracted her to him.

No one ever wants to know about how sexy their parents find each other, but I can see it with Mum and Dad. Mum's family are conventional, middle class, very English. My dad and the whirlwind that came with him must have blown away what expectations she had of herself, of what her future might be like. Mum was intoxicated by Dad's charisma, his off-the-scale sense of fun, and despite everything, despite what his drinking put her through, I think she became as addicted to the excitement and drama he brought into her life as he was to booze.

With Alan, she has become boring. Though she doesn't see it like that. She has been to loads of support groups over the years and concluded that being 'loved' was a quieter affair

than what she had with Dad. Mum and Alan go to dinner and she listens to Alan's opinion of every ingredient of their meal with such interest, like he's telling her state secrets.

I *know* she doesn't really give a toss about the Radio Four plays he's obsessed with. They sit there in the living room, listening to the radio like a middle-aged couple in the 1940s. I have music on in the shower or while I'm having breakfast or painting my nails or whatever, but who, under the age of ninety, sits in a room *just* listening to the radio? I know that's not the *real* Mum. It's what she slowly became after Dad died.

I can't blame her, not really. In restaurants, my dad never noticed the meal; he'd order a bottle of tequila and bring on the mayhem. Though his table was always rambunctious, waiters and other diners were disarmed by his charm and wit, which never left him in public, no matter how drunk he was. It also helped that Dad looked like a movie star.

'Your dad was always a riot waiting to happen,' my Auntie Jean said to me once. Auntie Jean is Dad's sister. She's a drinker like Dad but she does it quietly, on her own mostly. She's never married or had kids. When she was very young, she was travelling and met a peanut farmer in Burma and he's the closest thing she's had to a husband. She came back after a few years and the only thing she said about it was, 'There are only so many peanuts I could take.'

I have heard about Dad's legendary nights out from his friends who stayed in touch for a while after he died. They told me about the fistfuls of cash Dad would shove in the hands

of managers of bars, and the fights he avoided with charm and fifty pound notes, when even his own buddies thought he probably deserved a kicking.

I would see him on those nights when he got home. He would be sprawled face down on the sofa fully clothed as I fetched my cereal and sat on the floor beside him and watched TV as he slept.

'But you need to know when to stop,' the Mum Lecture continues. 'The state you were in, Nina! Do you even remember how you got home? God, Nina! That taxi driver could have raped you!'

She looks straight into my eyes when she says 'raped'. Hers look terrified. She doesn't need blue eye shadow just because she has blue eyes. Why do older women think their eyelids have to match their eyes or, worse, their top?

I remember the cabbie. What must he have thought? Another pissed-up slag in the back of his car. Bit bloody judgemental. That's why I don't like religion. Other people thinking they have the moral high ground just because you get so drunk you pull out a stranger's penis in a bar and put it in your mouth.

Mum is stroking my hair. She's saying something about me being a role model to Katie. The bouncer flashes in my mind bringing with him a fresh attack of pain and guilt. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' he'd said.

What would Mum say if she knew I'd washed cum out of my hair in the shower, from a man whose name I am no longer sure of?

'I got a daughter your age!' the bouncer had added.

'Yes, and I bet you fantasise about her mates.'

I possibly shouldn't have said that. That may have been the reason he'd gotten reinforcements.

Mum would freak if I told her I couldn't remember if I'd fucked a boy outside of a nightclub or if I'd fucked his friend too. I sip my tea. I sip my tea, then run to the toilet to puke, again.

By the time she has to go back to work, Mum is happy I have 'learned my lesson' and that the way I am feeling is 'punishment enough'. She kisses my damp head and gives me a relieved smile before she heads back out to teach English to her class of immigrants and refugees.

A text from Zoe: *'BABE. YOU OK? BETH SAID SHE TOLD YOU ABOUT ME AND THAT GUY. ARE YOU PISSED OFF WITH ME? ALEX SAID YOU WEREN'T INTERESTED. ARE WE COOOOOOOL???????'*

Well, at least I remember his name now. Alex. Slimeball! He can't have told her the whole story. Zoe didn't know about the blow job. I made Beth swear not to tell anyone.

I text back: '*All cool, babe. Alex who? ;)'* Sorted. Face saved.

You should be able to be honest with friends. You should be able to say, 'Oh, actually I'm a little hurt because you're prettier than me and you always get the good-looking guys. Boys don't look at me twice when you're around. That's annoying, Zoe, when they don't bother to consider my personality.' I should also be able to ask: 'What's it like, Zoe, to just stand there and have guys fall over themselves to get to you? They never check to see if you're funny or smart or nice, do they? Does that bother you or is it a relief not to have to make an effort?'

You can't say these sorts of things. You just have to always pretend you're fine.

What if they start going out and I have to meet him again? I would die. I would literally curl up and die and they would have to roll me into a coffin to bury me.

I want to scream, 'ASK HIM IF WE FUCKED BECAUSE I CAN'T REMEMBER!'

Zoe sends back kisses.

I call Beth. I tell her about not knowing if I fucked him and how I feel like the inside of a wheelie bin.