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Written by C. J. Skuse

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Sweetpea

CJ Skuse



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For my cousin, Emily Metcalf.
For the years I spent at your mansion while mine was being decorated.

Sunday, 31 December

1. *Mrs Whittaker – neighbour, elderly, kleptomaniac*
2. *'Dillon' on the checkout in Lidl – acne, wallet chain, who bangs my apples and is NEVER happy to help*
3. *The suited man in the blue Qashqai who roars out of Sowerberry Road every morning – grey suit, aviator shades, Donald Trump tan*
4. *Everyone I work with at the* Gazette *apart from Jeff*
5. *Craig*

Well, my New Year has certainly gone off with a bang, I don't know about yours. I was in a foul mood to begin with, partly due to the usual Christmas-Is-Over-Shit-It's-Almost-Back-To-Work-Soon malaise and partly due to the discovery of a text on Craig's phone while he was in the shower that morning. The text said:

Hope you're thinking of me when ur soaping your cock – L.

Kiss. Kiss. Smiley face tongue emoji.

Oh, I thought. It's a fact then. He really *is* shagging her.

L. was Lana Rowntree – a kittenish 24-year-old sales rep in my office who wore tight skirts and chunky platforms and swished her hair like she was in a 24-hour L'Oréal advert. He'd met her at my works Christmas piss-up on 19 December – twelve days

ago. The text confirmed the suspicions I'd had when I'd seen them together at the buffet: chatting, laughing, her fingering the serviette stack, him spooning out stuffing balls onto their plates, a hair swish here, a stubble scratch there. She was looking at him all night and he was just bathing in it.

Then came the increase in 'little jobs' he had to do in town: a paint job here, a hardwood floor there, a partition wall that 'proved trickier' than he'd estimated. Who has any of that done the week before Christmas? Then there were the out-of-character extended trips to the bathroom and two Christmas shopping trips (without me) that were just so damn productive he spent all afternoon maxing out his credit card. I've seen his statement – all my presents were purchased online.

So I'd been stewing about that all day and the last thing I needed that New Year's night was enforced fun with a bunch of gussied-up pissheads. Unfortunately, that's what I got.

My 'friends' or, more accurately, the'PICSOs' – People I Can't Shake Off – had arranged to meet at the Cote de Sirène restaurant on the harbour-side, dressed in Next Sale finery. Our New Years' meal-slash-club-crawl had been planned for months – initially to include husbands and partners, but, one by one, they had all mysteriously dropped out as it became a New Years' meal-slash-*baby-shower*-slash-club crawl for Anni. Despite its snooty atmosphere, the restaurant is in the centre of town, so there's always yellow streaks up the outside walls and a sick puddle on the doormat come Sunday morning. The theme inside is black and silver with an added soupçon of French – strings of garlic, frescos of Parisian walkways and waiters who glare at you like you've murdered their mothers.

The problem is, I need them. I need friends. I don't want them; it's not like they're the Wilson to my skinny, toothless, homeward-bound Tom Hanks. But to keep up my façade of normality, they're just necessary. To function properly in society,

you *have* to have people around you. It's annoying, like periods, but there is a point to it. Without friends, people start labelling you a 'Loner'. They check your Internet history or start smelling bomb-making chemicals in your garage.

But the PICSOs and I have little in common, this is true. I'm an editorial assistant at a local snooze paper, Imelda's an estate agent, Anaïs is a nurse (currently on maternity leave), Lucille works in a bank, her sister Cleo is a university-PE-teacher-cum-personal-trainer and Pidge is a secondary-school teacher. We don't even have the same interests. Well, me and Anni will message each other about the most recent episode of *Peaky Blinders* but I'd hardly call us bezzies.

And it may look like I'm the quiet cuckoo in a nest of rowdy crows but I do perform some function within the group. Originally, when I first met them all in Sixth Form, I was a bit of a commodity. I'd been a bit famous as a child so I'd done the whole celebrity thing: met Richard and Judy; Jeremy Kyle gave me a Wendy house; been interviewed on one of those *Countdown to Murder* programmes. Nowadays, I'm just the Thoughtful Friend or the Designated Driver. Lately, I'm Chief Listener – I know all their secrets. People will tell you anything if you listen to them for long enough and *pretend* you're interested.

Anni, our resident Preggo, is due to drop sometime in March. The Witches Four – Lucille, Cleo, Imelda and Pidge – had spared no expense on the nappy cake, cards, streamers, balloons and booties to decorate the table. I'd brought a fruit basket, filled with exotic fruits like lychees and mangoes, starfruit and ambarella, as a nod to Anni's Mauritian heritage. It had gone down like a whore on a Home Secretary. At least I wasn't driving, so I could quaff as much Prosecco as my liver could cope with and snuggle my brain into believing I was having a good time while they were all clucking on about the usual.

The PICSOs themselves like talking about five things above all others:

1. *Their partners (usually to slag them off)*
2. *Their kids (conversations I can't really join in with 'cos I don't have any, so, unless, it's cooing over school Nativity photos or laughing at Vines of them wiping poo up the walls, my contribution just isn't called for)*
3. *IKEA (usually because they've just been or are just going)*
4. *Dieting – what works/what doesn't, what's filling/what isn't, how many pounds they've lost/put on*
5. *Imelda's wedding – she only announced it in September but I can't actually remember a time when it wasn't on our conversation rota.*

In my head I'm usually thinking about five things above all others…

1. *Sylvanian Families*
2. *My as-yet-unpublished novel, The Alibi Clock*
3. *My little dog, Tink*
4. *When I can go to the toilet and check my social-media feeds*
5. *Ways I can kill people I don't like… without getting caught*

Before too long a tray of drinks came over: Prosecco and a selection of slightly smudged glasses.

'What's this?' Imelda asked.

'Compliments of the gentlemen at the bar,' said the waiter, and we looked over to see two types leaning against the counter, evidently looking to score with the nearest friendly vagina. The one wearing gold-hoop earrings and too much gel raised his pint in our direction – his other arm was in a sling. His friend

in the Wales rugby shirt, and sporting tattooed forearms, a cut on his left eyebrow and a protruding beer gut, was unashamedly salivating over Lucille's ridiculous breasts. She says she 'doesn't do it on purpose'. Yeah, and I don't bleed from my crease every month.

'How marvellous.' She smiled, swooping into the bread basket. We each took a glass and 'cheersed' the men, before continuing our conversational merry-go-round – babies, boyfs, IKEA, and how draining it was just generally having tits.

Anni opened her presents, all of which she thought were either 'amazing' or 'so cute'. Of all of them, I found Anni the least annoying of the PICSOs. She always had an anecdote to share about someone brought into A&E, with a Barbie doll shoved up their arse or a motorcyclist with his head hanging off. This was at least mildly entertaining. Of course her baby would come soon and then there would be nothing left for us to talk about other than Babies and What Fun They Are and How I Wish I Had One. That's how these things usually went.

We all ordered steaks, in various sizes with various sauces, despite the rainbow of diets we are all on. Mel's on the Dukan, or GI, I forget which one. Lucille's on the 5:2, but today was a five day so she had three rolls and twenty breadsticks before her meal hit the tablecloth. Cleo 'eats clean', but she's had Christmas and New Year off. I'm on the Eat Everything in Sight Until 1 January Then Starve Self to Death diet, so I ordered a 10oz sirloin in a béarnaise sauce with triple-cooked French fries – I asked for the meat to be so raw you didn't know whether to eat it or feed it a carrot. The taste was unreal. I didn't even care if the cow had suffered – his ass was delish.

'I thought you were going veggie?' said Lucille, tearing off another hunk of complimentary bread.

'No,' I said, 'not any more.' I couldn't believe she remembered me saying that about eighty-five years ago. It was actually my

GP who told me to give up red meat to help with my mood swings. But the supplements were doing their job so I didn't see the point of going full McCartney for the sake of a few bitch fits. Besides, I always find earwigs in broccoli and sprouts are the Devil's haemorrhoids.

'Did you get anything nice for Christmas?' Cleo asked me as the waiters brought out a selection of lethal-looking steak knives.

'Thank you,' I said to the guy. I always made a point to thank waiting staff – you never knew what they were stirring your sauce with. 'Some books, perfume, Netflix voucher, Waterstones voucher, Beyoncé tickets for Birmingham…' I left out Sylvanian stuff – the only people who understand how I feel about Sylvanians are Imelda's five-year-old twins.

'Ooh, we're seeing Beyoncé in London in April,' said Pidge. 'Oh, I know what it was I wanted to tell you guys…'

Pidge started this inexorably long speech about how she'd gone to six different pet stores before she found the right something for her house rabbits – Beyoncé and Solange. Pidge's conversation starters were always somewhere between Tedious and Prepare the Noose; almost as dull as Anni's midwife appointments or Lucille's Tales of the Killer Mortgage. I zoned out, mentally redesigning the furniture in my Sylvanians' dining room. I think they need more space to entertain.

Despite the ongoing gnawing fury in the centre of my chest, courtesy of Le Boyf, the meal was nice and I managed to keep it down. I noticed there were fake flowers in the vases on all the tables – which won't please the Tripadvisor fairy – but as restaurants go, I'm glad I went. It was almost worth the two hours I'd spent crowbarring myself out of the pyjamas I'd lived in since Christmas Eve and dolling myself up. Well, it was until the subject of Imelda's wedding came up. Lucille was the culprit.

'So, you got your hair sorted out yet for the Big Day?'

Now this was the rare occasion when Imelda *did* hear what Lucille said – because she had asked about Imelda or weddings or Imelda's actual wedding.

'No,' she whined. 'I want something up at the crown but not spiky. French plaits for the bridesmaids, keep it simple. Did I tell you about our photographers? We're having two. Jack found this guy from London and him and his partner – his work partner that is (cue chorus of unexplained laughs) – are coming down to see the church in May. He's going to be at the back so that he can take pictures of everyone's faces as I come down the aisle, and his mate's going to be at the altar.'

'No chance of anything being missed then?' I added.

'Exactly.' Imelda smiled, seemingly ecstatic that I was taking an interest.

'What you wearing for your night do? Did you decide?' asked Anni, returning from a third toilet break.

'Oh, the dress again, definitely.'

'You're going to have it on all day?' said Cleo.

'Yeah. It's got to be something striking. It *is* my day and everyone will be coming to check me out so… and that way, the people who didn't get invited to the day do will be able to see it then.'

'Yeah, wouldn't want *them* missing out on anything,' I mumbled, checking my phone. And again she smiled, like I was right on her wavelength.

Anni nodded, biting her lower lip. 'You'll be stunning, Mel. It's gonna be such a good bash. And I'll be able to drink again by then, too!'

I cleaned off my steak knife with my napkin. There was an abundance of veins in my left wrist. I could have ended it all right then if I'd had the balls.

'I won't be stunning,' said Imelda. 'I'll probably break both camera lenses!'

Lucille's turn: 'Babes, you're gorgeous. You'll be all princess-like and there'll be flowers everywhere and with that amazing church… it'll be like a proper fairy tale.'

'Yeah,' she scoffed. 'If I can't shift this bloody muffin top in the next six months it *will* be a fairy tale – *Shrek*!'

Cue the shrieks.

'And June's always sunny, so you're bound to have the best weather for it,' said Pidge, rubbing Imelda's arm. 'Don't worry, it'll be wonderful.'

Enough?

'Yeah, I suppose you're right.'

(Note: I have cribbed this endless ego massage here but please understand, Dear Diary, that Imelda's wedding takes up at least 90 per cent of every social occasion.)

Then she brought up the very thing I've been dreading since it was first mooted last September – the Weekend That Must Not Be Named.

'You're all coming to my hen weekend, aren't you? No buts. You've got six months' notice after all.'

Fuck it. In a fairly large bucket.

'Oh, yeah, what are we doing again?' asked Anni, swigging her orange juice.

'Not sure yet – possibly Bath for a spa day or Lego Windsor. But it's deffo Friday to Sunday.'

'Rawther!' Lucille giggled. She was matron of honour.

Then it was onto Man Bash Central – Woman Bash Central in Cleo's case – how Rashan/Alex/Jack/Tom/Amy had stayed out all night on a job/booze run to France/coach trip to Belgium/job/pub crawl/austerity protest. How Rashan/ Alex/Jack/Tom/Amy had got so unadventurous in bed these days. How big Rashan/Alex/Jack's dicks were (Cleo and Pidge always carefully avoided this subject) and finally how Rashan/Alex/Jack/Tom/Amy had given them a Rolex/flowers/Hotel Chocolat salted-caramel puddles/a

holiday/a hug just to say sorry after a row that Anni/Lucille/Imelda/Pidge/Cleo had instigated.

The only thing Craig ever gave me that meant anything was bacterial vaginosis, but I kept that to myself.

'What's Craig up to these days, Rhiannon?' asked Anni. She always brought me into the conversation. Imelda sometimes did this when vying for the gold medal at the Passive Aggressive Olympics. She'd ask, '*Any news on your junior-reporter thing yet, Rhee?*' or '*Any sign of Baby Wilkins in that womb of yours yet, Rhee?*', when she knew full well I'd have mentioned it if I had news of huge job change (please, God) and/or womb invader (please, God, no).

'Uh, the same,' I said, sipping my fifth glass of Prosecco. 'He's fitting out that shop in the High Street that used to be a hairdresser's. It's going to be a charity shop.'

'Thought there might be something sparkly waiting under the Christmas tree this year,' said Imelda, loudly to the entire restaurant. 'What's it been now, three years?'

'Four,' I said, 'and, no, he's not *that* thoughtful.'

'Would you say yes if he *did* propose, Rhiannon?' said Pidge, her face full of wonder, like she was thinking about Hogwarts. (She and Tom were planning to get married at the Harry Potter Experience in Orlando soon – I shit you not.)

I hesitated, the gnawing in my chest biting down harder. Then I lied: 'Yeah, of course–' I was about to qualify that with an *If he could stop taking Lana Rowntree up her aisle for five minutes long enough to walk me down one*, but Lucille cut me off before I had chance:

'Talking of charity shops, I bought this great vase in the one opposite Debenhams; such a bargain…' she began, launching into a new topic of conversation and leaving me behind on my Island of Unfinished Sentences.

Not that I *wanted* to talk about Craig or Craig's dull job.

Neither were interesting subjects to talk about. He built things, ate pasties, smoked the odd spliff, liked football, played video games and couldn't pass a pub without eating enough pork scratchings to fill Trafalgar Square. That was Craig – *Gordon Ramsay clap* – done.

So they were all wanging on about The Weekend That Must Not Be Named when a random bloke with bad neck zits appeared at our table, clutching a glass of lager.

'All right, girls?' said Random Bloke with Neck Zits. He produced a couple of red-wine bottles, emboldened by a six-strong gaggle of blokes with neck *and* chin zits at the bar. Surprisingly, the corks were still in the bottles so there was no danger of us being Rohipped and dragged to the nearest Premier Inn for a semi-conscious rape-fest. Yeah, I think of these things, another reason I'm a useful friend.

These weren't the same guys who'd bought us Prosecco, this was a different lot. Younger. Louder. Zittier.

'Mind if we join you?' Winks and knowing looks all round.

Cue giggles and shrieks.

I had intended to order the double chocolate brownie with clotted cream for pudding but we were at the part of the evening where we all had to hold our stomachs in so I resisted, wondering if I could get home for some leftover Christmas tiramisu ice cream before the bongs signalled the death knell of fun-eating habits.

Imelda, Lucille and Cleo made the usual ribald comments, clearly turned on by the attention. Pidge started joining in too, once a sufficient amount of wine had been imbibed. She was always too Christian to participate in either tittage or bants before alcohol allowed her to. I wasn't nearly pissed enough for either.

So the evening dragged on like a corpse tied to a donkey cart as the Seven Dorks squeezed onto our table and allowed

their eggy breaths and chubby fingers to fog our air and tweak our knicker elastic. We had Grunty, Zitty, Shorty, Sleazy, Fatso, Gropey and Mute.

Guess which one I got stuck talking to. Or rather, at.

And, one by one, the PICSOs all left me. They each did the 'you're only young once' speech and hooked up with the Dorks to go on to a club for a New Year's foam party – can't remember which one as I had no intention of following them.

'You coming, Rhee?' asked Anni, weighed down with gifted baby detritus. 'Me and Pidge are just gonna shove this lot in the car and meet them there.'

I don't know why she was so excited to be tagging along to a nightclub. She was the size of a barge and was on orange juice and bi-hourly toilet breaks. Nightclubs weren't known for facilitating either.

'Yeah, I just need the loo,' I said, sinking my wine.

I was testing them now. Testing to see who would actually wait for me. Who was the true friend? But, as I expected, nobody waited. I paid my part of the bill, stood on the doormat of Cote de Sirène and watched them all waddling and cackling up the street with the Dorks circling them like sharks around chum. Not a second thought did I get.

So there I was, alone, in the centre of town, preparing to hike the two miles back to my flat, on New Year's Eve.

But this is where my fun began.

As it turned out, walking across town went without incident. I'm not counting the tramp with a tinsel halo, pissing in streams down both legs, using NatWest as a walking aide. Or the couple shagging behind the wheely bins at the back of Boots' car park. And I'm not counting the fight that broke out inside Pizza Express then spilled onto the pavement, during which a bald man in a striped shirt yelled, 'I'M GONNA RAPE YOUR FUCKING SKULL, MATE!'

None of that was particularly noteworthy.

Whereas, what happened down by the canal, was.

It must have been about 11.30 p.m. by the time I reached the playing fields and took the short cut along the cycle path and down to the canal towpath, a mere five hundred feet from our flat. It was here that I heard footsteps behind me. And my breath shortened. And my heart began to thump.

I shoved my hands into my duffle-coat pockets and turned around to see a guy I recognised. He was the one in the Wales rugby shirt with the tattooed forearms who'd bought us the first lot of Prosecco at the restaurant.

'Where you going then, baby?'

'Home.'

'Aww, can I come?'

'No.'

'Please? We can make each other happy tonight. Still got a bit of time before the bongs, ain't we? You look sad.'

He sidestepped in front of me. I stepped away. He stepped back. He laughed.

'You followed me, didn't you?' I said.

He leered, eyeing me from head to toe with a lingering look at my crotch area, which I'll admit did look inviting in my too-tight skirt. 'Just seeing where you were going, that's all. Don't be like that. I bought you a drink.'

'I said thank you at the time.' Like, of course *that* would be enough.

He put his hands on me.

'Could you take your hands off me, please?'

'Come on. You were giving me the eye.'

'Don't think I was. Get off.' I wasn't raising my voice. I didn't need to. His molestation attempts were pathetic. A hand on my boob. A motion to his belt buckle.

'How about you get your laughing gear round my old boy then? Just for 'Auld Lang Syne', eh?'

He was strong; a prop four or something. As well as the cut on his left eyebrow, he had the beginnings of a cauliflower ear. He slathered all over my face and I let him. Nobody else was around. Even if I screamed, the nearest people over in the Manette Court complex would take five minutes to get to me. And that's if they even bothered. He'd have come in me and gone by then and I'd be another statistic, getting vaginal swabs and drinking tepid tea in some police waiting room.

No. That might be my sister but that would not be me.

'Come in here,' he gasped in my ear, taking my freezing hand inside his hot clammy one and pulling me towards the bush. An upended Lidl shopping trolley lay on its back.

I stayed rooted. 'There's no room in there.'

'Yeah, there is.' He tugged harder on my hand.

'Pull your jeans down,' I said.

He smirked like his ship had just come in – a ship with a massive hard-on. 'Oh, yes, baby girl. I knew I could thaw you out.'

Unsteady on his feet, he fumbled at his belt. Then his zip. His over-washed jeans collapsed in a heap at his ankles. So did his boxers. There were little Homer Simpsons all over them. His cock sprung out like a small Samurai, ready to do battle.

Ba-doing!

It had a bend in it. I wasn't sure whether he was pleased to see me or giving me directions to the bus station.

He stroked it upwards. Well, upwards and towards the bus station. 'All yours,' he said.

'Mmm,' I said, 'lucky old me.'

The temptation to laugh was so strong but I choked it down and made it look as though I was starting to wriggle out of my knickers under my skirt. All keen.

'Can you get on all fours?' he panted.

'Like a dog?'

'Yeah.'

'Why?'

''Cos I wanna fuck you like a dog.'

I grew breathless. 'But the ground's hard.'

'So's my dick. Get down. Go on, don't tease.'

'I'll suck you off but no more,' I said.

'That's a start,' he said, eyes lighting up. I crouched down and took his little warm Samurai in my grip.

'Shall I finger myself as I'm sucking it?' I asked, heart in my throat.

'Fuck, yeah! Dirty bitch!' he chuckled, growing harder and more veiny.

He waited for it – for my lips on his bell-end. I pulled on his dick as though about to milk it.

'Knew you were a dirty bitch.'

I saw Craig's face on his as I held the cock steady and, reaching into my pocket, I closed my fingers around the handle of the steak knife. Bringing it out slowly while stroking him into full submission, I waited until his eyes had closed and his chin tilted to the sky in ecstasy before I hacked down hard on it and started carving through the gristly meat. He screamed and swore and beat at my head with his fists but my grip was tight and I sawed at it through slipping, bloody fingers until I had yanked his penis from its roots and pushed him backwards into the murky green water. His forlorn manhood dropped to the cold canal towpath with a bloody slap.

The splash was loud and he was still screaming but, despite all the hullaballoo, no one was coming to either of our rescues.

'Aaaaaaarrrgghhh! Aaaaarrrrrrgghh!' he went, splashing around like a child at its first swimming class.

A little curl of steam rose up from the penis, lying dejectedly on the towpath. I found a spare dog poo bag in my coat and

picked the severed member up, then ran towards the footbridge, my heart still banging like a bastard on a jail-cell wall. I lost my breath completely as I reached the top and looked down over the water.

'Fucking… sick… bitch!' he gargled, flopping about.

He kept splashing, sinking under the murky water, then bobbing up again and spluttering. The last thing he must have seen in this world was my face, on the bridge, smiling in the moonlight.

Thanks to my cruel improvisation, I was feeling something I hadn't felt for a long time. That same feeling you get when you're a kid and you spy an adventure playground. Or when you poke your foot out of the bed on Christmas morning and feel your full stocking hanging there. It radiates out from a deeply exciting inner squiggle until your whole body feels electric all over. The best feeling in the world. It's an exquisite privilege to watch someone die, knowing you caused it. Almost worth getting dolled up for.