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Opening Extract from...

THE PLUS ONE

Written by **Sophia Money-Coutts**

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THE PLUS ONE

Sophia Money-Coutts



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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To my family, who are madder than any
of the characters in this book.

But that's why I love you all so much.

I BLAME SENSE AND SENSIBILITY. I saw the film when I was twelve. A very impressionable age. And more specifically, I blame Kate Winslet. She, Marianne, the second sister, nearly dies for love. That bit where she goes walking in a storm to look at Willoughby's house and is rescued by Colonel Brandon but spends the next few days sweating with a life-threatening fever? That, I decided, was the appropriate level of drama in a relationship.

I consequently set about trying to be as like Marianne as I could. She was into poetry, which seemed a sign because I also liked reading. I bought a little book of Shakespeare's sonnets in homage, which I carried in my school bag at all times in case I had a moment between lessons when I could whip it out and whisper lines to myself in a suitably dramatic manner. I also learned Sonnet 116, Marianne and Willoughby's favourite, off by heart.

'Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love, which alters when it alteration finds...'

Imagine a tubby 12-year-old wandering the streets of Battersea in rainbow-coloured leggings muttering that to herself. I was ripe for a kicking. So, yes, I blame *Sense and Sensibility* for making me think I had to find someone. It set me on the wrong path entirely.

I

IF I'D KNOWN THAT the week was going to end in such disaster, I might not have bothered with it. I might just have stayed in bed and slept like some sort of hibernating bear for the rest of the winter.

Not that it started terribly well either. It was Tuesday, 2 January, the most depressing day of the year, when everyone trudges back to work feeling depressed, overweight and broke. It also just happened to be my birthday. My *thirtieth* birthday. So, I was gloomier than anyone else that morning. Not only had I turned a decade older overnight, but I was still single, living with Joe, a gay oboist, in a damp flat in Shepherd's Bush and starting to think that those terrifying *Daily Mail* articles about dwindling fertility levels were aimed directly at me.

I cycled from my flat to the *Posh!* magazine offices in Notting Hill trying not to be sick. The hangover was entirely my own fault; I'd stayed up late the night before drinking red wine on the sofa with Joe. Dry January could get stuffed. Joe had called it an early birthday celebration; I'd called it a wake for my youth. Either way, we'd made our way through three bottles of wine from the corner shop underneath our flat and I'd woken up feeling like my brain had been replaced with jelly.

Wobbling along Notting Hill Gate, I locked my bike beside the *Posh!* office, then dipped into Pret to order: one white Americano, one egg and bacon breakfast baguette and one berry muffin. According to Pret's nutritional page (bookmarked on my work computer), this came to 950 calories, but as I hadn't actually eaten anything with Joe the night before I decided the calories could get stuffed too.



‘Morning, Enid,’ I said over my computer screen, putting the Pret bag on my desk. Enid was the PA to Peregrine Monmouth, the editor for *Posh!* magazine, and a woman as wide as she was tall. She was loved in the office on the basis that she put through everyone’s expenses and approved holidays.

‘Polly, my angel! Happy Birthday!’ She waddled around the desk and enveloped me in a hug. ‘And Happy New Year,’ she said, crushing my face to her gigantic bosom. Her breath smelled of coffee.

‘Happy New Year,’ I mumbled into Enid’s cardigan, before pulling back and standing up straight again, putting a hand to my forehead as it throbbed. I needed some painkillers.

‘Did you have a nice break?’ she asked.

‘Mmm,’ I replied vaguely, leaning to turn on my computer. What was my password again?

‘Were you with your mum then?’ Enid returned to her desk and started rustling in a bag beside it.

‘Mmmm.’ It was some variation of my mum’s dog name and a number. *Bertie123*? It didn’t work. Shit. I’d have to call that woman in IT whose name I could never remember.

‘And did you get any nice presents?’

Bertie19. That was it. Bingo.

Emails started spilling into my inbox and disappearing off the screen. I watched as the counter spiralled up to 632. They were mostly press releases about diets, I observed, scrolling through them. Sugar-free, gluten-free, dairy-free, fat-free. Something new designed by a Californian doctor called the ‘Raisin Diet’, on which you were only allowed to eat thirty raisins a day.

‘Sorry, Enid,’ I said, shaking my head and reaching for my baguette. ‘I’m concentrating. Any nice presents? You know, some books from Mum. How was your Christmas?’

‘Lovely, thanks. Just me and Dave and the kids at home. And Dave’s mum, who’s losing her marbles a bit, but we managed. I overdid it on the Baileys though so I’m on a new diet I read about.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘It’s called the Raisin Diet, it’s supposed to be ever so good. You eat ten raisins for breakfast, ten raisins for lunch and ten raisins for supper and they say you can lose a stone in a week.’

I watched over my computer screen as Enid counted out raisins from a little Tupperware box.

‘Morning, all, Happy New Year and all that nonsense. Meeting in my office in fifteen minutes please,’ boomed Peregrine’s voice, as he swept through the door in a navy overcoat and trilby.

Peregrine was a 55-year-old social climber who launched *Posh!* in the Nineties in an attempt to mix with the sort of people he thought should be his friends. Dukes, earls, lords, the odd Ukrainian oligarch. He applied the same principal to his wives. First, an Italian jewellery heiress. Second, the daughter of a Venezuelan oil baron. He was currently married to a French stick insect who was, as Peregrine told anyone he ever met, a distant relation to the Monaco Royals.

‘Where is everyone?’ he said, reappearing from his office, coat and hat now removed.

I looked around at the empty desks. ‘Not sure. It’s just me and Enid so far.’

‘Well, I want a meeting with you and Lala as soon as she’s in. I’ve got a major story we need to get going with.’

‘Sure. What is it?’

‘Top secret. Just us three in the meeting. Need-to-know basis,’ he said, glancing at Enid. ‘You all right?’ he added.

Enid was poking the inside of her mouth with a finger. ‘Just got a bit of raisin stuck,’ she replied.

Peregrine grimaced, then looked back at me. ‘Right. Well. Will you let me know as soon as Lala is in?’

I nodded.

‘Got it,’ said Enid, waving a finger.



An hour later, Lala, the magazine’s party editor, and I were sitting in Peregrine’s office. I’d drunk my coffee and eaten both the baguette and the muffin but still felt perilously close to death.

‘So, there’s yet another Royal baby on the way,’ said Peregrine, ‘the Countess of Hartlepool told me at lunch yesterday. They have the same gynaecologist, apparently.’

‘Due when?’ I asked.

‘July,’ he said. ‘So I want us to get cracking with a quick piece which we can squeeze into the next issue.’

I wondered if I’d live as far as July given how I felt today. Some birthday this was. ‘What about something on the Royal playmates?’ I said.

Peregrine nodded while scratching his belly, which rolled over his waistband and rested on the tops of his legs. ‘Yes. That sort of thing. The Fotheringham-Montagues are having their second too, I think.’

‘And my friend Octavia de Flamingo is having her first baby,’ said Lala, chewing on her pen. ‘They’ve already reserved a place at Eton in case it’s a boy.’

‘Well, we need at least ten others so can you both ask around and find more posh babies,’ said Peregrine. ‘I want it on my desk first thing on Friday, Polly. And can you get the pictures of them all too.’

‘Of the parents?’ I checked.

‘No, no, no!’ he roared. ‘Of the babies! I want all the women’s scan pictures. The sort of thing that no one else will have seen. You know, real, insidery stuff.’

I sighed as I walked back to my desk. *Posh!* was now so insidery it was going to print pictures of the aristocracy’s wombs.



My Tuesday evenings were traditionally spent having supper with my mum in her Battersea flat and tonight, as a birthday treat, I was doing exactly the same thing.

It was a chaotic and mummified flat. Mum had lived there for nearly twenty years, ever since Dad died and we'd moved to London from Surrey. She worked in a curtain shop nearby because her boss allowed her to bring her 9-year-old Jack Russell to the shop so long as he stayed behind the counter and didn't wee on any of the damask that lay around the place in giant rolls. Bertie largely obliged, only cocking his leg discreetly on the very darkest rolls he could find if Mum got distracted by talking to a customer for too long.

It was the curtain shop that had landed me a job at *Posh!*. Peregrine's second wife – the Venezuelan one – had come in to discuss pelmets for their new house in Chelsea while I was in there talking to Mum one Saturday. And even though Alejandra had all the charm and warmth of a South American despot, I plucked up the courage to mention that I wanted to be a journalist. So, because I was desperate and Peregrine was miserly, he offered me the job as his assistant a few months later. I started by replying to his party invitations and buying his coffees, but after a year or so I'd started writing small pieces for the magazine. Nothing serious. Short articles I mostly made up about the latest trend in fancy dress or the most fashionable canapé to serve at a drinks party. But I worked my way up from there until Peregrine let me write a few longer pieces and interviews with various mad members of the British aristocracy. It wasn't the dream role. I was hardly Kate Adie reporting from the Gaza Strip in a flak jacket. But it was a writing job, and, even though back when I started I didn't know anything about the upper classes (I thought a viscount was a type of biscuit), it seemed a good start.

'Happy birthday, darling, kick my boots out of the way,' Mum

shouted from upstairs when I pushed her front door open that night to the sound of Bertie barking. There was a pile of brown envelopes on the radiator grille in the hall, two marked 'Urgent'.

'Mums, do you ever open your post?' I asked, walking upstairs and into the sitting room.

'Oh yes, yes, yes, don't fuss,' she said, taking the envelopes and putting them down on her desk, where magazines and old papers covered every spare chink of surface. 'I've made a cake for pudding,' she went on, 'but I've got some prawns in the fridge that need eating, so we're having them first. I thought I might make a risotto?'

'Mmm, lovely, thank you,' I replied, wondering whether Peregrine would believe me if I called in sick because my mother had poisoned me with prawns so old they had tap-danced their way into the risotto.

'Have you had a nice birthday?' Mum asked. 'How was work?'

'Oh, you know, Peregrine's Napoleonic tendencies are as rampant as ever. I've got to write a piece on Royal babies and their playmates.'

'Oh dear,' said Mum vaguely, as she walked towards the kitchen, opened the fridge and took out a bottle of wine. In the four years I'd worked at *Posh!*, I'd learned more about the upper classes than I'd ever expected to. A duke was higher than an earl in the pecking order and they were all obsessed with their Labradors. But Mum, a librarian's daughter from Surrey, while supportive of my job, wasn't much interested in the details.

She poured two glasses of white wine and handed me one. 'Now, let's sit down and then I can give you your present.'

I collapsed on the sofa whereupon Bertie instantly jumped on my lap and white wine sloshed over the rim of my glass and into my crotch.

'Bertie, get down,' said Mum, handing me a small jewellery box and sitting down beside me. She stared at Bertie and pointed at the floor, as he slowly and reluctantly climbed off the sofa. I opened the box. It was a ring. A thin, delicate gold band with a knot twisted into the metal.

‘Your dad gave it to me when you were born. So, I thought, to mark a big birthday, you should have it.’

‘Oh, Mum...’ I felt choked. She hardly ever mentioned Dad. He’d had a heart attack and died at forty-five when I was just ten years old. Our lives changed forever in that moment. We had to sell our pretty, Victorian house in Surrey and Mum and I moved to this flat in Battersea. We were both in shock. But we got on with our new life in London because there was no alternative. And we’d been a small, but intensely close, unit ever since. Just us two. And then Bertie, when I left for university and Mum decided she needed a small, hairy substitute child.

I slipped the ring on my finger. It was a bit tight over the knuckle, but it went on easily enough. ‘I love it,’ I said, looking at my hand, then looking up at Mum. ‘Thank you.’

‘Good, I’m glad it fits. And now, listen, I have something I need to chat to you about.’

‘Hmmm?’ I was trying to turn the ring on my finger. A bout of dysentery from prawn-related food poisoning might not be the worst thing, actually. I could probably lose half a stone.

‘Polly?’

‘Yes, yes, sorry, am listening.’ I stopped fiddling with the ring and sat back against the sofa.

‘So,’ started Mum. ‘I went to see Dr Young last week. You know this chest pain that’s been worrying me? Well, I’ve been taking my blood pressure pills but they haven’t been doing any good so I went back on Thursday. Terrible this week because the place was full of people sneezing everywhere. But I went back and, well, he wants me to have a scan.’

‘A scan?’ I frowned at her.

‘Yes. And he says it may be nothing but it’s just to be sure that it is nothing.’

‘OK... But what would it be if it wasn’t nothing?’

‘Well, you know, it could be a little something,’ said Mum, breezily. ‘But he wants me to have a scan to check.’

‘When is it?’ I felt sick. Panicky. Only two minutes ago I’d been worrying about the sell-by date on a packet of prawns. It suddenly seemed very silly.

‘I’m waiting for the letter to confirm the date. Dr Young said I’ll hear in the next couple of weeks but the post is so slow these days, so we’ll see.’

‘It might help if you looked at the pile of post downstairs every now and then, Mum,’ I said, as gently as I could. ‘You don’t want to miss it.’

‘No. No, I know.’

I’d always told myself that Mum and I had done all right on our own over the years. Better, even, than all right. We were way closer than some of my friends were with their parents. But every now and then I wished Mum had a husband to look after her. This was one of those moments. For support. For help. For another person to talk to. She could hardly discuss the appointment with Bertie.

‘Well, will you let me know when you get the letter and I’ll come with you? Where will I be?’ I asked.

‘Oh there’s no need, darling. You’ve got work. Don’t fuss.’

‘Don’t be silly, obviously I’m coming. I work for a magazine, not MI6. No one will mind if I take a few hours off.’

‘What about Peregrine?’

‘He’ll manage.’

‘OK. If you’re sure, that would be lovely. The appointment will be at St Thomas.’

‘Good, that’s sorted,’ I said, trying to sound confident, as if the scan was a routine check-up and there was nothing to worry about. ‘Now let’s have a sniff of those prawns.’



By Friday afternoon, I had six posh babies and their scan pictures. Where the hell were another four going to come from? My phone vibrated beside my keyboard and a text popped up from Bill, an old friend who always threw a dinner party at the end of the first week of January to celebrate the fact the most cheerless week of the year was over.

Come over any time from 7! X

I looked back at my screen full of baby scans. Jesus. A baby. That seemed a long way off. I hadn't had a proper boyfriend since university when I went out with a law student called Harry for a year, but then Harry decided to move to Dubai and I cried for about a week before my best friend, Lex, told me I needed to 'get back out there'. My love life, ever since, had been drier than a Weetabix. The odd date, the odd fumble, the odd shag which I'd get overexcited about before realizing that, actually, the shag had been terrible and what was I getting so overexcited about anyway?

Last year, I'd had sex twice, both times with a Norwegian banker called Fred who I met through a mutual friend at a picnic in Green Park in the summer. If you can call several bottles of rosé and some olives from M&S a picnic. Lex and I drank so much wine that we decided to pee under a low-hanging tree in the park as it got dark. This had apparently impressed Fred, who moved to sit closer to me when Lex and I returned to the circle.

We'd all ended up in the Tiki bar of the London Hilton on Park Lane, where Fred ordered me a drink which came served in a coconut. He'd lunged in the car park and then I'd waited until I was safely inside my cab home before wiping off the wetness around my mouth with the back of my hand. We'd gone on a couple of dates and I'd slept with him on both those dates – possibly a mistake – and then he'd gone quiet. After a week, I texted him breezily asking if he was around for a drink. He replied a few days later.

Oh, sorry been travelling so much for work and not sure that's going to change any time soon. F

'F for fucking nobody, that's who,' said Lex, loyally, when I told her.

So, that, for me, was the total of last year's romantic adventures. Depressing. Other people seemed to have sex all the time. And yet here I was, sitting in my office like an asexual plant, hunting for scan pictures, evidence that other people had had sex.

I squinted through the window up the alleyway towards Notting Hill Gate. It was the kind of grey January day that couldn't be bothered to get properly light, when people hurried along pavements with their shoulders hunched, as if warding off the gloom.

Whatever. It would be six o' clock soon and I could escape it all for Bill's flat and a delicious glass of wine. Or several delicious glasses of wine, if I was honest.



At one second past six, I left the office, winding my way through the hordes of tourists at Notting Hill Gate Tube station. They were dribbling along at that special tourist pace which makes you want to kick them all in the shins. Then, emerging at Brixton, I walked to the corner shop at the end of Bill's street to buy wine. And a big bag of Kettle Chips. 'Let's go mad, it's Friday, isn't it?' I said to the man behind the till, who ignored me.

Bill lived in the ground-floor flat on a street of white terraced houses. He'd bought it while working as a programmer at Google, though he'd left them recently to concentrate on developing an app for the NHS. Something to do with making appointments. Bill said that it was putting his nerd skills to good use, finally. He'd never tried to hide his dorkiness. It was one of the reasons we became friends at a party when we were teenagers.

Lex had been off snogging some boy upstairs in the bathroom (she was always snogging or being fingered, there was a lot of fingering back then) and I'd been sitting on a sofa in the basement, tapping my foot

along to Blue so it looked like I was having a good time when, actually, I was having a perfectly miserable time because no boy ever wanted to snog me. And if no boy ever wanted to snog me then how would I ever be fingered? And if I was never fingered how would I ever get to have actual sex? It seemed hopeless. And, just at the moment when I decided I might go all *Sound of Music* and enter a convent – were there convents in South London? – a boy had sat down on the other end of the sofa. He had messy black hair and glasses that were so thick they looked double-glazed.

‘I hate parties,’ he’d said, squinting at me from behind his double-glazing. ‘Do you hate parties too?’

I’d nodded shyly at him and he’d grinned back.

‘They’re awful, aren’t they? I’m Bill by the way.’ He’d stuck out a hand for me to shake, so I shook it. And then we’d started talking over the music about our GCSEs. It was only when Lex surfaced for air an hour or so later, gasping for breath, mouth rubbed as red as a strawberry, that I realized I’d made a friend who was a boy. Not a boyfriend. I didn’t want to snog Bill. His glasses really were shocking. But he became a friend who was a boy all the same. And we’d been friends ever since.

‘Come in, come in,’ Bill said when I arrived. He opened the front door with one hand and held a pair of jeans in the other. ‘Sorry, I haven’t changed yet.’ He grinned. ‘You’re the first.’

‘Go change,’ I said. ‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘No. Leave those bottles on the side and open whatever you want. I’ll be two minutes,’ he said, walking towards his bedroom.

I opened the fridge. It was rammed. Sausages, packets of bacon, some steaks. Something that might once have been a tomato and would now be of considerable interest to a research scientist. No other discernible vegetables. I reached for a bottle of white wine and fished in a drawer for a corkscrew.

Bill appeared back in the kitchen in his jeans and a t-shirt that said

‘I am a computer whisperer’ on it. In the years since I’d met him, he’d discovered contact lenses but developed a questionable line of t-shirts. ‘I’ll have one of those please. Actually, no I won’t. I’ll have a beer first. So, how’s tricks?’ he asked, opening a bottle. ‘How was Christmas? How was your birthday and so on? I’ve got you a card actually.’ He picked up an envelope from his kitchen table and gave it to me. ‘Here you go.’

‘Being single at 30 isn’t as bad as it used to be,’ the front of the card read. I smiled, ‘Thanks, dude. Really helpful.’ I put the card down on the side and had a sip of wine. ‘And Christmas was lovely, thanks. Quiet, but kind of perfect. I ate, I slept. You know, the usual.’ I’d been worrying about Mum and her scan all week, but I didn’t want to mention it to anyone else yet. If I didn’t talk about it, I could keep a lid on the panic I felt when I woke in the middle of the night and lay in bed thinking about the appointment. I had decided to wait for the results of the scan and then we could go from there. ‘Anyway, how was yours?’

‘Terrible,’ Bill replied. ‘I was working for most of it, trying to sort out some investors.’ He took a swig of beer and leant on the kitchen counter. ‘So, I haven’t left the office before midnight this week and I’m doing no exercise apart from walking from my desk to have a pee four times a day. But that’s how start-up life is,’ he sighed and had another slug of his beer.

‘Love life?’ I asked.

‘I’m still seeing that girl, Willow. I told you about her before Christmas, right?’

I nodded. ‘The Tinder one? Who works in...?’ I couldn’t actually remember much about her. I was always, selfishly, slightly peeved when Bill was dating someone because it meant he was less available for cinema trips and pizza.

‘Interior design, yeah. She’s cool. But everything’s so busy at the moment that I keep having to cancel on any plans we make in favour of a “chicken chow mein for one” at my desk.’

‘Have you invited her tonight?’

‘Yeah. But she couldn’t make it.’

‘OK. So, who’s coming?’

Normally, Lex would be here too, and she and I would spend the night drinking wine while discussing our New Year’s resolutions. But Lex had gone away to Italy with her boyfriend, Hamish, this year. So, I was slightly nervous about who Bill had invited. Or not nervous exactly. Just apprehensive about having to talk to strangers all night.

‘Er, there’s Robin and Sal, who you know. Then a couple I don’t think you’ve met who are friends from home who’ve just got engaged – Jonny and Olivia. Two friends from business school you haven’t met either. Lou, who’s in town for a bit from America, who you’ll love, she’s amazing. And a guy called Callum I haven’t seen for years but who knows Lou, too.’ He looked at his phone as it buzzed. ‘Oh, that’s her now,’ he said.

‘Lou, hi,’ he said, answering it. ‘No, no, don’t worry, just a bottle of something would be great... number fifty-three, yep? Blue door, just ring the bell. See you in a tick.’



By 11 p.m., everyone was still sitting around Bill’s kitchen table, their wine glasses smeary from sticky fingers. I’d drunk a lot of red wine and was sitting at one end of the table, holed up like a hostage, while Sal and Olivia, sitting either side of me, discussed their weddings. How was it physically possible for two fully grown women to care so much about what font their wedding invitations should be written in? I thought about the countless weddings I’d been to in the past couple of years. Lace dress after lace dress (since these days everyone wanted to look as demure as Kate Middleton on her wedding day), fistfuls of confetti outside the church, a race back to the reception for ninety-four glasses

of champagne and three canapés. Dinner was usually a bit of a blur if I was honest. Some sort of dry chicken, probably. Then thirty-eight cocktails after dinner, which I typically spilled all over myself and the dance floor. Bed shortly after midnight with a blistered foot from the inappropriate heels I'd worn. I couldn't recall what font any of the invitations were written in.

'Polly,' they said simply at the top. Just 'Polly' on its own. Never 'Polly and so-and-so' since I never had a boyfriend. Sometimes an invitation said 'Polly and plus one'. But that was similarly hopeless since I never had one of those either. I reached for the wine bottle, telling myself to stop being so morose.

'Who's for coffee?' asked Bill, standing up.

I reached for a bottle in front of me. 'I'm OK on red.'

'You're not on your bike tonight?' asked Bill.

'Nope, I'll Uber. But touched by your concern.'

'Just checking. Right, everyone next door. I'm going to put the kettle on.'

There were murmurs of approval and everyone stood and started to gather up plates and paper napkins from the floor. 'Don't do any of that,' said Bill. 'I'll do it later.'

I picked up the wine bottle and my glass and walked through the doors into the sitting room, collapsing onto a sofa and yawning. Definitely a bit pissed.

Sal and Olivia followed after me and sat on the opposite sofa, still quacking on about weddings. 'We're having a photo booth but not a cheese table because I don't think it ever gets eaten. What do you think?' I heard Sal say.

As if she'd been asked her opinion on Palestine, Olivia solemnly replied, 'It's so hard, isn't it? We're not having a photo booth but we are going to have a videographer there all day, so...'

I yawned again. I'd been at uni with Sal. She once stripped naked and ran across a football pitch to protest against tuition fees. But here,

discussing cheese tables and photo booths, she seemed a different person. An alien from Planet Wedding.

‘So, you’re a fellow cyclist?’ said Bill’s friend from business school, sitting down beside me on the sofa.

‘Yup. Most of the time. Just not when I’ve drunk ten bottles of wine.’

‘Very sensible. Sorry, I’m Callum by the way.’ He stuck his hand out for me to shake.

Stuck, as I had been, between two wedding fetishists, I hadn’t noticed Callum much. He had a shaved head and was wearing a light grey t-shirt, which showed off a pair of muscly upper arms, and excellent trainers. Navy blue Nike Airs. I always looked at men’s shoes. Pointy black lace-ups: bad. The correct pair of trainers: aphrodisiac. Lex always criticized me for being too picky about men’s shoes. But what if you started dating someone who wore pointy black lace-ups, or, worse, shiny brown shoes with square ends, and then fell in love with them? You’d be looking at spending the rest of your life with someone who wore bad shoes.

‘I’m Polly,’ I replied, looking up from Callum’s trainers.

‘So you’re an old mate of Bill’s?’

‘Yep, for years. Since we were teenagers.’

He nodded.

‘And you met him at business school?’

He nodded again. ‘Yeah, at LBS.’

‘So what do you do now?’ I asked.

‘Deeply boring. I work in insurance, although I’m trying to move into K&R.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Kidnap and ransom. So more the security world really.’ He leant back against the sofa and propped one of his muscly arms on it.

‘How very James Bond.’

He laughed. ‘We’ll see.’

‘Do you travel a lot?’

‘A bit. I’d like to do more. To see more. What about you?’

‘I work for a magazine. It’s called *Posh!*’ I said, as if it was a question, wondering if he’d heard of it.

He laughed again and nodded. ‘I know. Sort of... society stuff?’

‘Exactly. Castles. Labradors. That sort of thing.’

He grinned at me. ‘I like Labradors. Fun?’

‘Yup. Mad, but fun.’

‘Do you get to travel much?’

‘Sometimes. To cold, draughty piles in Scotland if I’m very lucky.’

‘How glamorous,’ he said, grinning again.

Was this flirting? I wasn’t sure. I was never sure. At school, we’d learned about flirting by reading *Cosmopolitan*, which said that it meant brushing the other person with your hand lightly. Also, that girls should bite their lips in front of boys, or was it lick their lips? They should do something to attract attention to their mouths, anyway. My flirting skills hadn’t progressed much since and, sometimes, when trying to cack-handedly flirt with someone, I’d simultaneously touch a man’s arm or knee *and* lick my lips and end up looking like I was having some kind of stroke.

‘Hang on, hold your glass for a moment,’ he said, leaning across me.

My stomach flipped. Was he lunging? Here? Already? In Bill’s flat? Blimey. Maybe I didn’t give myself enough credit. Maybe I was better at flirting than I realized.

He wasn’t lunging. He was reaching for a book. Underneath my glass, on the coffee table, was a huge, heavy coffee table book. Callum picked it up and laid it across both our laps.

He leant back and started flicking through the pages. They were exquisite travel photos – reindeer in the snow around a Swedish lake, an old man washing himself on some steps in Delhi, a volcano in Indonesia belching out great clouds of orange smoke.

‘I want to go here,’ he said, pointing at a photo of a chalky landscape, a salt flat in Ethiopia.

‘Go on then. And then... let’s go here,’ I replied, turning the page. It was Venice.

‘Venice? Have you ever been?’ He turned to look at me.

‘No.’ Was now a good moment to touch his arm? I quite wanted to touch his arm.

‘Then I will take you.’

‘Ha!’ I laughed nervously and clapped my hand on his forearm.

We carried on turning the pages and laughing for a while, discussing where we wanted to go until the photos were becoming quite blurry. I wasn’t really concentrating anyway, because Callum had moved his leg underneath the book so it was touching mine. I glanced across at him. How tall was he? Hard to tell sitting down.

‘Right, team,’ said Bill, sometime later from across the room, draining his coffee cup. ‘I think it might be home time. Sorry to end the party but I’ve got to go into the office tomorrow.’

Callum closed the book and moved his leg, stretching out on the sofa and yawning. ‘Fun sponge.’

‘I know, mate, but some of us can’t just drink for a living. We’ve got real jobs.’

‘Talk to me when I’m in Peshawar.’ He stood up and clapped Bill on the back in a man hug. ‘Good to see you after so long, mate. Thanks for dinner.’ He was the same height as Bill, I noted. Sort of six foot-ish. A good height. The size I always wanted a man to be so I didn’t feel like a giraffe in bed next to him. That thing about everybody being the same size lying down is rubbish.

Around us, everyone else was saying goodbye to one another. ‘Thanks, love,’ I said, hugging Bill. ‘Don’t work too hard tomorrow.’

‘Welcome,’ he said back, into my shoulder. ‘And I won’t. I should be around on Sunday if you are? Cinema or something? Is Lex back?’

‘Yup, she gets back tomorrow so said I’d see her for lunch on Sunday. Wanna join?’

‘Maybe, speak tomorrow?’

I nodded and Bill turned to say goodbye to Lou behind us.

‘Where you heading back to?’ Callum asked as we stood by the open front door. I was squinting at my phone, trying to find Uber.

‘Shepherd’s Bush.’

‘Perfect. As you’re not cycling I will escort you home.’

‘Why, where are you?’

‘Nearby,’ he replied. ‘What’s your postcode?’

This never happened. Sightings of the Loch Ness Monster were more common than me going home with anyone. I frowned as I tried to remember what state my bikini line was in. I probably shouldn’t sleep with him; I had an awful feeling it looked like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

‘What’s wrong?’ he said, looking at my face.

‘Nothing, all good,’ I replied quickly. Also, I knew I hadn’t shaved my legs for weeks. Or months, maybe. So, a few minutes later, in the back of the Uber, I reached down and tried to surreptitiously stick two fingers underneath the ankle of my jeans to check how bristly my legs were. They felt like a scouring brush.

‘What you doing?’ asked Callum, looking at me quizzically.

‘Just an itch.’ I sat back in the taxi.

‘You’re not coming in,’ I said, in my sternest voice, when the car pulled up outside my flat.

‘Course I am. I need to make sure you get in safely,’ he replied, opening his door and getting out.

So, as alarmed as I was about my ape-like levels of hairiness, I let him in, whereupon he immediately started looking through my kitchen cupboards. I kicked off my shoes and sat at the kitchen table, watching him, still hiccupping.

‘Shhhhhh, my flatmate’s asleep,’ I said to his back, as he inspected the labels of five or six half-empty bottles he’d discovered in one cupboard.

‘This’ll do.’ It was a bottle of cheap vodka, the sort that turns you blind. ‘Where are your glasses?’

I pointed at a cupboard above his head.

‘I can’t drink all that,’ I said, as he handed me a glass.

‘Yes you can, just knock it back.’ He swallowed his in one and looked at me expectantly.

I lifted my glass, nearly gagged at the vapours, then opened my mouth and took three slugs.

‘Good work.’ He took the glass back as I shivered and put it down on the table. ‘I mean, why do the Russians like this so much? It’s disgusting, swallowing it makes me—’

He interrupted me by cupping my face with his hands and kissing me. His tongue tasted of vodka.

‘Which one’s your room?’

I pointed at a door, and he took my hand, pulled me off the kitchen table and into my room, where I froze. There were two embarrassing things I needed to hide: my slightly shrivelled, browning earplugs on the bedside table, and my ancient bunny rabbit, a childhood comforter, which was lying between the pillows, his glass eyes glaring at me with an accusatory air.

I reached for both, opened my knicker drawer and stuffed them in there. I felt briefly guilty about my rabbit and then thought, *You are about to have sex for the first time in five hundred months, Polly, now is not the time to be sentimental about your stuffed toy.*

Callum sat down at the end of the bed and started unlacing his shoes.

‘Hang on, I’m just going to do something.’ I picked up a box of matches on the bedside table and lit a candle next to it.

And here is a list of the things that happened next, which illustrates why I should never, ever be allowed to even think about having sex with anyone.

Having lit the candle, I sat next to Callum and he started unbuttoning my shirt. But then I panicked about him doing this while I was

sitting because of the fat rolls on my stomach, so I lay down instead, pulling him back onto the bed. He then undid the rest of my shirt buttons and there were a few undignified moments where I flailed around like a beached seal trying to get my arms out of it.

The tussle of the bra strap. Callum reached for it, clearly wanting to be one of those nimble-fingered men who just have to blink at a bra strap – any bra strap – for it to ping free. ‘I’ve nearly got it,’ he said, after several seconds of fiddling while I arched my back.

Getting my knickers off. This required me to waggle my legs in the air like an upturned beetle.

Callum then moved his way down my stomach until he was kneeling on the floor, his head between my legs. I wondered whether to make a joke about needing some sort of Black & Decker machinery to get through the hair and then decided it would kill the vibe. So, I started worrying about my breathing instead. It’s awkward to just lie there in silence, so I decided to start panting a bit as he used his tongue on me. But it’s quite hard to pant when, after a promising beginning, Callum – perhaps encouraged by my erratic breathing – started working harder with his tongue, like a dog at a water bowl. So, then it started hurting, as opposed to feeling remotely pleasurable, and I decided I’d lost sensation in my entire vagina and instead lay there wondering when to suggest that he came back up again. And how do you do that, anyway, without causing offence?

The worst bit of all. I tapped him on the head and he looked up. ‘Come up,’ I said, in what I hoped was a seductive, come-hither way.

He looked up from between my legs and frowned. ‘Why? Aren’t you enjoying it?’

Oh, GOD, why is sex this embarrassing? Does it always have to be this embarrassing?

‘No, no, I just want to, erm, return the favour.’

CRINGE. I thought I might die. I might actually die from cringing. So Callum crawled back up and rolled over, lying on his back,

still with his boxers on. I then climbed on top of him, trying not to slouch again so that my stomach didn't crease into rolls of fat. Then I noticed that I hadn't plucked my nipple hairs recently either. Too late. I wriggled backwards so that I was kneeling between his legs and started pulling his boxers off. Another difficult move because I had to stand up to pull them out from underneath him.

Callum's penis wasn't quite hard, so I opened my mouth and gently started sucking the head of it. He groaned. I ran my mouth slowly down it, trying to ignore the musty smell. After a few minutes, my thigh muscles started to burn. For God's sake. How much longer was this going to go on for? I wriggled my knees in a bit closer, then opened one eye and squinted at his penis. Why do they look like giant earthworms? Then his moaning started getting louder and I felt one of his hands on my head, pressing my mouth down. I'd read magazine articles before that said you should suck their balls as well, but I'd never been sure I could fit everything in my mouth at once. It would be like tackling a foot-long Subway. Or were you supposed to suck just one ball at a time?

I gagged as his penis hit the back of my throat, then he gave a sudden shout and my mouth filled with warm semen. Slightly salty, slightly sweet. I swallowed as quickly as possible. The thought of that swimming around in my stomach with the vodka was ungodly.

'Just going to get a glass of water,' I said through a sticky mouth, climbing over him and picking up an empty glass from the bedside table. In the bathroom, I wiped my mouth with some tissue and looked in the mirror. Well, that bit's done so that's something. And it's always quite gratifying to get there, isn't it? Mostly because then your thighs get a break, but also because it means that you've done something right and your teeth didn't get in the way. And anyway, I decided, filling up the glass from the tap again in case he wanted a drink, it's my turn. That's the rule. He should possibly have tried harder to sort me out first. But never mind. He could make up for it now.

‘D’you want some water?’ I whispered, walking back into the bedroom and holding out the glass. Callum was standing up with his jeans back on and his phone in his hand.

‘No, I’m good, thanks. I’m actually going to get an Uber. Got golf in the morning so I need to get home.’

‘Oh. OK. Cool. No problem,’ I stuttered.

WHAT?

‘Thanks though, that was great.’ He reached down for his t-shirt, pulled it over his head, patted his jean pockets, then – while I was still standing there, naked, cold, holding the glass of water – leant in and kissed me on the cheek.

‘Good to meet you.’

‘Er, yeah. You too. Hang on, I’ll let you out.’

‘Nah, don’t worry. I can let myself out. See you soon.’

‘Oh... Sure. OK... Bye,’ I said, still holding the glass of water, as he walked out.

I heard the front door close, put the glass down and stood naked in my bedroom thinking. Was that now a thing? Can men just Uber at – I looked at my phone – 2.54 a.m. after a blow job, having not returned the favour, and think that’s acceptable?