

Layla

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Friday

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You blink. Once. Twice. Double blink. The spotlights are dazzling today, an angry bright yellow. This deliberate, or what? It's not like you have to be tortured into getting your kit off: you're five minutes away from stark naked. Or is it a mind trick, a beacon from a guardian angel sent to put you off dancing and that?

What-*ever*, it's doing your head in.

You squint and turn to shield your eyes with the back of one hand, and at the same time the other – the left one – grabs hold of the pole. Now both hands come together as you swing, arse-first, away from the glare, and you grip the cold metal column, stalking around it best you can in towering new heels – and with a right cob on and all. One step. Two. And you stumble, nearly tripping over your long evening gown, false eyelashes flickering as you glance over at Derek. He's the floor manager, yeah, stood mouthing off at the bar as per usual, jammed in by a scrum of legs, thongs and too much eyeliner.

The other girls. Flies round shit.

Deep breath, and you decide the brightness ain't a warning sign. Guardian angel? You should be so lucky. Maybe ask Derek to dim the lights, then? A minute's hesitation to suss the situation while you slither down the pole. Nah, best not – be a bit like petting a pit bull. Not gonna happen.

Instead, it's bottom lip in, boobs out, as you bring one leg up through a split in the gown in a clumsy can-can kick,

your energy lifting as a new tune kicks in. Miles away, you hum along *la, la, la* to the music, your attention wandering off from the stage. Only Derek's staring you out, looking even greyer and grimmer than usual, so you tick yourself off, geeing yourself up to focus on the customers instead.

Customers? If only.

Only the odd one in this afternoon, everyone's getting warmed up down the pub: football on the box later, England playing. As for the non-footie fans, look at them, bunch of nobby no-mates, grazing the outskirts of the dance floor, peering into the depths of their drinks, shifty and nervous like they was throwing a party and nobody showed up. You smile, putting it right on, all white enamel and bright pink lips. A suit catches your eye and winks. Loser!

And to think at one point, not long ago even, you thought all this – the red leather booths, the leopard-print wallpaper, the pockets loaded with cash – was the business. 'Classiest spot Up West,' the boss, Jeremy, said. You snort. A tenner for a topless dance, fifteen for a private nude one, twenty for a 'lesbian show'. Very classy. But you're doing it for the baby, for Connor, yeah? It will all be worth it if you can rake in more cash for him.

You mull this over while snaking down the pole in an S-shape (not as easy as what people might think), totting up the dances you've done so far today. No: fat chance. You won't cover the house fee at this rate, never mind put something aside.

You sigh, close your eyes. Not cos of the lights this time but a pointless go at blocking it all out: the heavy blanket of smoke and sweat in the air; the repetitive beats; the fingers clutching at you; the four-letter words jabbing into your ears. Anyway. End of the day, it's only money. Not like Mum leaves Connor wanting, or that just money will be enough to get him back. Funny how he pops into your head whenever,

wherever, your Little Man, as if he was lying swaddled right there on the dance floor, screwing up his eyes like he does just before he cries out, wanting you, needing you. Such a good baby, so sweet-natured – always quick and easy to settle.

You blink. Once. Twice. Double blink. Try to swallow a golf-ball-sized lump in your throat. Again, not the lights.

Christ, what's that? Out of nowhere, a commotion on the main floor. What the – ? Oh, OK, an argument, raised voices (the suit and one of the regulars) competing with the intro to a catchy tune.

'La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la.'

That's you dragged back to the here and now.

Worse luck.

You hesitate, freeze-framed in a sexy pose till you realise the song's that old one from Kylie, 'Can't Get You out of My Head', and those licks, that voice, are just enough to take the edge off the other stuff, to blot out the baby blues.

Yeah.

Sod it. Sod Mum.

You look good.

You feel good.

You're a movie star swishing down the red carpet, centre of attention, lapping it up: autograph-hunters swarming, paps snapping at you. Strike a pose. *Flash! Bam!* 'Over here, Layla! Smile for the camera.' The fancy designer gown on the Oscars Best-Dressed list. You picture the headline: 'ENGLISH ROSE IS BELLE OF THE BALL'.

But, as you hitch up the gown to show off some leg, a cramping in your stomach blows the fantasy sky-high. Oh, God, someone's having a laugh, ain't they? Not *that*? Second turn on the pole today with an audience and Aunt Flo pays a visit. First period since the –

You're a pop idol on stage at Wembley, choked up on the love of the crowd. Flushed and hoarse, the fans chant your

name: *Layla, Layla, Layla...* hands clap in time to your latest hit... tickets sold out in minutes... a cover photo on *Heat* magazine.

Oh, what's the use? Your period's on the warpath now, making itself known with a savage ripping and roaring through your stomach. No choice but to skip out to the loos, even if it does mean a bollocking from Derek, not to mention a ten-quid fine. But – ah, good – there's Ivana, lurking on her own by the exit. You wave both hands wildly to tip her the wink – if anyone's going to steal your spot, it has to be her – and she flounces over, legs up to her perky Lithuanian boobs.

'Got to pee,' you say, hoping she'll read the urgency in your face.

'After all the trouble weev the boss this week? You taking the peess?'

You screw up your forehead. Wince. 'You know, pee...'

She doesn't seem to get it, but never mind. You help her jump up on stage and she gives your hand a squeeze. At least she's there for you, unlike the other hussies, out for themselves.

Even so, when she breathes a 'thank you' you can almost see the pound signs in her eyes.

It's OK – you understand. You're good mates, but when it comes to the hustle on the main floor it's dog eat dog, every girl for herself. So there are no hard feelings as you say, 'Thanks, babe,' though you're already scampering off by the time 'babe' has escaped your lips, rushing across the smoky main floor to the stairway, the hulking double doors marked 'Private' groaning as you push past them, your feet breathing a sigh of relief as you whip off the new shoes to take the stairs two at a time, and you arrive at the changing room puffing, panting, gasping for –

Whoah! Only, walking through the door, the breath is completely sucked out of you, and you sink like you was

drugged into the *tss tss* of deodorant cans, into cackles and crackles of laughter; tripping out on lurid fairground colours and choking back a cough brought on by a fug of glitter, talc and smoke what barely covers a rank whiff of shit (the drains must need clearing again). For a second you dither, watching them, the night shift girls jostling and preening at the front of the mirrors – hell-bent on using up the world’s supply of Rimmel Sunshimmer – before creeping past them to get to your locker where you root around for your handbag. And there, nestled at the back among your clothes, you find the scruffy bald toy chihuahua. You chuckle, in spite of yourself. But no time to say more about that right now cos your hand’s on the cubicle doorknob; you’re pretty desperate to sort yourself out, as it goes. But then – *grr!* – Celeste, your sort of friend-cum-arch-rival, holds you up, asking how you are: she’s heard that Jeremy has given you a warning, put you on day shifts.

‘You must be gutted,’ she finishes, blocking your way.

God, you wish you was invisible sometimes.

‘Nah, fine, long story,’ you mumble, not bothering to ask how she is, sweat breaking out above your top lip.

And then, as you slip past her oiled-up, half-naked orange flesh, your stomach turns over, and you’re gripped by a sense of panic what clings on till you’ve thrown the bolt across the cubicle door.

What the hell’s wrong?

Are you going to puke?

You’re sinking up down, up down, like you was on a rollercoaster, getting more spun out by the minute. With faint spots dancing in front of your eyes, you fish in the cavern of your handbag for a tammie. Four months since your last period – what are the chances? Ooh, lucky you, there’s a Lil-let Super – ‘Heavy Flow’. Perhaps you *do* have a guardian angel. Ha! But the tammie’s plastic casing is ripped,

the tampon itself glittered with make-up, shredded slightly at the tip.

Whatever. It'll do.

And so you fold down the plastic loo seat what's speckled with cigarette burns, the loo bowl decorated with a dirty rainbow of reds, browns and yellows, in a right state and all – the kind of loo what, truth be told, screams 'This Is Your Life'. But you've no choice but to yank down your G-string and pee in it, screwing up your face at the heaviness of the flow – *gross!* – then wiping once... twice... inserting the tammie, careful to tuck the cord inside, far enough so that it don't hang outside the G-string, not so far that you'll wind up on your backside spreadeagled with a mirror and a pair of tweezers later on. Been there, done that.

And squatting there over that loo, against the backdrop of chitter-chatter in the changing room, you're stung by a feeling you've got to know only too well in the past twelve months (since all the problems began). And, even though time is money and you're missing your slot on the pole, you allow these thoughts to skim through your mind. Thought it'd be well easy to come up London and find a place to stay and a job, that life'd be one long party and you could blank out all thoughts of your Little Man. Thought – silly moo – that the streets of London would be paved with opportunities: office and PA work and that. Paved with wide boys and chancers and oxygen thieves, more like. Mugged yourself right off there, didn't you?

You clench your teeth. Slide your bottom jaw to the right. Take a little bite of cheek. Throw yourself a pity party, in other words. Only to immediately shake your head, try and fill it with some sense. And, pulling up your G-string, you force yourself to tune into a typical changing room conversation instead. 'And so I says, for a sit-down, darling, it's a hundred,' someone's mouthing off outside the cubicle.

An unfamiliar voice – a new girl. Sapphire maybe? ‘Got a monkey out of him in the end.’

Yeah, Sapphire – nobody else’s voice squeaks like that.

‘Never!’ somebody – Celeste, maybe – replies.

What bollocks! A hundred quid for a sit-down? In her dreams! And a weariness, an anxiety, an uneasiness washes over you, a new worry to add to the growing pile. Cos, recently, Sapphire and a group of new girls arrived, right? Gang of them from a club on some grubby industrial estate in the East End. Boss took them on ‘to get in more of a crowd’. Dirty dancers, they are, grinding and groping their way through their shifts. *So* not playing by the rules! And that Sapphire, she loves herself, forever crowing that she’s done Page Three (of the *Daily Star*, not the *Sun* – which speaks for itself) and swanning about like she was an old-timer, when she’s only been here five minutes. You bet she wishes she was an ice cream so she could lick herself, the silly cow.

Damn it, what’s wrong with you? You tell yourself to put the claws back in, to not let the period, the hormones, get the better of you.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity, the miniature bottle of JD at the bottom of your handbag calls out for you then, an old mate who’ll see you through the next couple of hours of shaking your booty and treading carpet. You swig it back, do up the straps on the high heels, kick open the cubicle door... only to catch sight of Susie. Shit (pardon your French) – you didn’t hear her arrive! She doesn’t notice you at first, thank God, cos she’s fussing over the girls, giving pep talks, handing out stockings and that. Susie, she’s the house mother, yeah? Meaning that she’s a housekeeper, mum, shrink, nurse; police, judge and jury – all those things at the same time. Though you couldn’t do without her, getting on her wrong side ain’t an option, so you swallow back the JD in one mouthful. To make the smell evaporate, right?

Her eyes narrow when finally she spots you, sneaking towards the door. She bristles.

‘Thought you were on days this week.’

‘Yeah, bang on, just...’ And you scabble about for an excuse for being away from the main floor, while she gives you the evil eye. Your thoughts spring back to her first rant at you all them months ago. *If you split up with your boyfriend, I want to know. If you have a cold, I want to know. If you get a drug habit, I want to know. If you forget to take your pill or to run it together, I want to know. And, worst of all, if you get your period...*

‘Yeah, sorry, upset tummy.’ No way you’re being sent home now, after making, like, nada quid so far today.

A flash of worry flits over her face. OK, she might have a crap job, looking after us bitches, but she’s alright really. For an old bird. What is she, like, forty or something? Same age as Mum, as it goes.

‘Well, get back out there, then, and give it some welly,’ she says, her knee bent across Celeste’s back, pulling on her corset strings, ‘Derek’ll have a heart attack if he knows you’re off the floor.’

You imagine flipping her the bird, your middle finger an inch from her crow’s feet, the other girls egging you on.

Instead, knowing which side your bread’s buttered, you channel meek and mild and say, ‘Sure, sure, I’m on my way.’

She’s blooming right, though, Christ knows how much Derek will fine you for being away this long, so you’re out of there, gone, a ghost. Only halfway down the stairs the new stiletto heel spikes the carpet, and you’re forced to look down while you dig it out, the threadbare once-floral pattern massacred by fag burns and an invasion of high heels, reminding you that Elegance is hardly the Harrods of lap-dancing establishments. Primark, more like. Yeah,

forget the ‘glamour’ shots of ex-dancers what line the wall, prisoners banged up in fancy gold frames – a dive is what this place is, no matter how much the boss tries to sugar-coat it. It’s a joke really, how you used to fancy your chances of joining the boss’s pet girls here in his pathetic ‘Hall of Fame’. Or ‘the art gallery’ as Derek calls it. You snort. Art? As if! Cos art makes people think, right, and not with their dicks...

But as you reach the bottom of the stairs you shrug off them negative thoughts, thanks to the JD mellowing you out and the muffled beats of an Ibiza classic vibrating through the walls. Gotta dance, might as well be to that – and you skip back through the double doors where there’s a bit of a crowd now, the little round tables what surround the dance floor half-filled, the pole empty, Ivana squirming unrhythmically on some dude’s lap. You snicker. Ivana the Terrible you call her (not to her face, natch), cos she can’t dance for toffee. The boss keeps her on cos she’s a dead ringer for Paris Hilton – and everyone’s leched over that *One Night in Paris*, right?

Uh-oh, you’ve just realised who she’s with: Halitosis Bob.

You lucked out with the loo trip.

Not quite ready to get back in the thick of it, you hover by the bar for a bit, watching her dance. She flexes back and forth on his lap. Flexes back and forth on his lap. Flexes... And, as you’re silently urging her to put a bit of variety into it, Bob leans away and starts looking around the room. This ain’t a good sign. She must have picked up on it, though, cos she’s now trying to bend backwards over his knees, back arched, hands trailing the floor, only – uh-oh! – this makes her blonde Paris wig slip to one side. Blushing, she lifts one hand to secure it, and – *whoops!* – her entire body rocks and she nearly falls from his lap to the floor.

You cringe, hold back laughter. Bless poor Ivana – or should you say Paris? – a cardboard blooming cutout could do a better job.

God, look, can you just say something? You're not usually one of them snide gits who takes the piss out of their mates. But your period's bugging you and it's sort of like the boss's trap, playing you girls off against each other, trying to make you – whatchamacallit? – competitive and that. You shiver. Wrap your arms around yourself in a hug. Try and stop the raging hormones from getting one over on you.

And as Ivana/Paris gets her act together, stripping down to her perfect C-cups, you try to lighten up, your thoughts turning to the chihuahua. It was you who started it. Left the ugly toy dog with the googly eyes in Ivana's locker as a joke present, no gift tag, the perfect accessory for her Paris Hilton gimmick. Then the next time you was in the club you found it, without a word from Ivana, back in your own locker. Backwards and forwards it's gone between your lockers, ever since. Over your forced club expression you grin as you think of the laughs you and Ivana have enjoyed, a shared silliness what makes the club bearable, helps pass the time of day. So by the time you're back on the pole you've calmed it down a bit, the JD in full effect now and all, a warming light sending out little ripples of heat on your nearly naked skin...

You're sunbathing on a luxury private beach, getting lost, good lost, in the lazy reds, pinks and oranges of a tropical sunset... the yacht anchored not far out in the marina... champagne and oysters on ice...

Whoops...! You sway – make out like it was deliberate, try and get back into the groove.

From the crowd, a gob of bad language whistles through the air across the *thump, thump, thump* of a mighty rock anthem, and you raise one leg in a kick. The hormones rage and surge and make a nuisance of themselves. Spurred on,

you decide to give the saddos what they came in for, and, belly sucked in, you:

clamber up the pole

wrap both legs around it boa-constrictor-tight

let your arms fall to your side, flipping your top half upside down.

And as you're dangling there, right, the aftertaste of one too many JDs racing down your throat, your long, dark hair sweeping the floor, a customer's face lines up with the silky rear-end of your evening gown, a randy dog panting its hot breath on your thighs. You squeeze your pelvic floor muscles, praying for it not to be obvious; a complaint about being on your period is the last thing you need. (It's happened – though not to you.)

More to the point: three metres away? As if!

Not like the bouncers give a monkey's. Light bounces off the shining billiard balls of their heads – they've seen it all before... too busy whining about the England manager's team choice, probably, to keep an eye on things. Besides, you lose out these days if you play by the rules. Oh. Don't matter – after turning upright, you see that the customer's backed off – phew! – and that he's beckoning you to a booth on the edge of the dance floor with a chipolata finger (the tight-arse, not paying for a private dance). You follow his denim jacket, flesh creeping for a split-second, sweat beading your top lip. A familiar niggle.

But you shrug it off cos he's saying, 'Come on, gorgeous, cat got your tongue?'

You gyrate towards him. He waves a tenner in your face. Your eyes glaze over. And, as you flick a switch on the edge of the booth to time his three-minute dance, your thoughts drift off to...

Covent Garden, The Royal Opera House. You're a prima ballerina, dancing Juliet, bending over the lap of your

Romeo; it's the finale – a last pirouette and the audience are in raptures, throwing endless bouquets on –

'Ow!'

'You alright, love. Got a problem?' the guy's piped up, turning your face around in line with his, squeezing your cheeks with thumb and forefinger – hard.

'Uh, sorry?' you say, the words muffled by hollowed-in cheeks.

'Gonna look me in the eye or what?' He squeezes harder.

'Oh, sure, right, of course, babe,' you soothe in a honey voice, wondering where the bouncers have got to. You go eyeball to eyeball.

'Good girl,' he says and lets go.

Then, with his mates cheering him on (not paying for nothing, though, are they?) you pull off your evening gown, sway your hips, your gusset brushing the zip of his jeans, all the while your eyes glued to his, the real world gatecrashing in on your fantasies.

You're a nobody. A nothing. Barely human. Nearly nineteen years old and down on your luck, all undressed and nowhere to go.

INBOX: 2 new messages

FROM: REBECCA

SENT: Friday 1 June, 15.25

*Would you mind paying the
leccy bill today, like you said?
Don't want to get cut off!*

Sure thing

Today Layla

FROM: DAD

SENT: Friday 1 June, 16.37

Will you remember me in a week?

Err, Dad, of course!!!!

Will you remember me in a month?

Mmm, same answer??

Will you remember me in a year?

Dad, not being rude, but
have u been drinking?

Knock knock.

Err... u have been drinking,
haven't u? But OK, who's
there?

*See, you've forgotten me
already.*

Groan

2

The late afternoon has turned weary and grey, morphed into a sad middle-aged bloke in the thick of a mid-life crisis – Derek maybe, sickly-looking, with liver spots and never-ending health issues. Or, to put it another, more honest way: the kick from the JD's worn off. Insult to injury, Derek's only gone and asked you to stay on for a bit – Kitten, the other brunette, is gonna be late. Cos, the club's got to provide someone for everyone, right, a flavour for every bloke's taste: a black girl, an Asian girl, a blonde, a brunette... Jez could shrink-wrap you and call you a variety pack.

Anyway. Don't know why he's worried. No customers in till later now, probably. The other girls bored and bitching, on the wind-up; Derek bashing the life out of a pocket calculator at one end of the bar, the bouncers huddled around a portable radio at the other. The boss has given them a free pass to listen to the pre-match build-up.

Bully for them.

Ivana sits opposite you at the middle of the bar, at a safe distance between Derek and the bouncers. You came up to keep her company a few minutes ago, cos the hussies were freezing her out: the old-timers in the club don't like her, see – too pretty for them, too natural – and the new girls, well, they don't like anyone, especially foreigners.

'But what do you think, darling?' Ivana's saying, putting her hand on your knee.

'What about?' you say.

‘Modelling,’ she says, ‘Weren’t you listening?’

No, you wasn’t. But you know the spiel. Cos, Ivana’s one of them thinks-she’s-your-mum kind of people, right? Always got a little pep talk for you.

You’re about to respond when at last the main doors open and a cold draught blows in around your ankles, bringing your skin out in goosebumps and making your nipples swell. Ivana’s expression changes from good-hearted soul to Baltic bombshell (as she calls herself) and she purrs, ‘Look, darling. Colin.’

‘Do what?’ you say, and your mood lifts for a second – like, only a split-second, you’re not that sad – and you swivel round on the bar stool to take in the familiar baseball cap, white T-shirt and black leather jacket.

Always smells of soap, does Colin, pays for endless sit-downs with you, wants to chat, nothing more. The management don’t give you grief so long as he keeps buying you drinks and that. And you don’t give Colin grief so long as he keeps chucking you twenties... God, look, can you just say something? You know he’s probably just as sad as the rest of the customers, but guys like Colin who only want a gossip and a drink, they’re basically harmless, ain’t they? Besides, he’s a regular, comes in for most of your shifts, checks with the girls on reception to see when you’re working. And sit-downs? Easy money. Right?

Wrong!

And you think back to one time when Colin lost it, got pissed and took advantage. Teasing you about your work name, he was, trying out one of the lines from the Clapton song... down on his knees, like he was about to propose... his breath boozy and fiery, his hands wandering... asking, again and again and again, *What’s your real name? Come on, we’re pals, you can tell me.* And you laughed it off, cos it’s one of his favourite subjects, trying to guess your real name,

when he's not banging on about his ex-wife, that is. Only then he went hardcore, grabbing hold of your wrist, till you ended up telling him 'Beverly' – Mum's name, as it goes – cos your wrist was sore, a swollen red welt appearing on it, what lasted for hours.

And all the while you're going over this in your mind Ivana's gone off to find her own victim, and Mr Easy Money has jumped up on the stool opposite, asking, 'Hi, how are ya?', his little legs dangling in the air – he must be a few inches shorter than you, and you ain't exactly leggy. *Rumpelstiltskin in the flesh*, you chuckle to yourself. But out loud you just say, 'Hiya,' putting on them must-have wide eyes and licking your lips, while he settles himself on the stool.

Jenny, one of the waitresses, is all over you as soon as his arse hits leather, pen in mouth, waiting to take his order.

'The usual?' he asks, avoiding eye contact, attempting a grin, though it comes out more like a sneer.

And even though you don't like champagne, don't like the bubbles going up your nose to tell the truth, you know what's what, so you say, 'Yes, please,' as brightly as you can.

'So, what's new, pussycat?'

You sneak a peek over at Ivana, who's now on stage, wishing you could sound off to her – she knows you hate Colin's stupid pet names for you. But you bite your tongue (them hormones ain't gone off on their holidays just yet) and smile your best toothpaste-advert smile. 'Um. Not a lot. Quiet.'

'Aw, poor Lay-lay,' he says, ruffling your hair, the mossy green graveyard of tattoos on his hands telling you he's much older than he lets on.

Then, silence. The grand sum of eff-all happening, apart from the usual comings and goings in the club, and at the same time you're aware of something uncomfortable, something dark hanging in the air between you and Colin.

One arse-clenching minute later and he breaks the silence.

‘Noo shoes?’ he asks in that annoying fake American accent of his.

‘Er, yeah,’ you say, following his gaze down to the glittery pink stilettos. ‘Wow, you’ve got a beady eye, intya?’ You’re torn between appreciation that he noticed and freaking out that he did.

Little does he know why the new shoes. It was part of the row with Jeremy earlier in the week, right? That your other ones weren’t ‘glamorous’ enough. You’d been trying to get away with three-inch heels, can’t understand why other girls stick them agonising six-inch ones – might as well nail on horseshoes and be done with it. Of course that was only one part of the argument, but you’re not in the mood to think about that now...

Instead you let your mind wander, and even though your head’s filled with the racket from the hustle on the main floor, with the too-loud ‘listen to me’ voices of the other customers and the *thump, thump, thump* of the music, you feel the silence closing in. And a grim, grey loneliness, a loneliness what catches you off guard at moments like this – a loneliness you can’t understand, being as you’re surrounded by people – takes a hold of you, starts leading you into stony, shadowy thoughts. *Damn it!* If you wasn’t so hormonal, and (let’s be honest) so bored, you’d get the conversation going, buttering Colin up, massaging his ego and that. But your head’s splitting, and you could do with a drink – a non-alcoholic one, you mean. God, are you getting a hangover already, at seven pm?

You gee yourself up to say something. Anything! ‘So, what’s new with you?’ is all you can think of after a while. Dull as, you admit, but maybe it’ll get Colin chatting. Or maybe he might even tell a funny story, like one from his

lorry-driving days, when him and his mates used to neck speed and E to stay awake while they was transporting goods across Europe.

But no, worse luck.

All it takes is a small bone and he's off on one (Easy Money, like you said), starting up his usual moan about how his ex-wife's a 'stupid old cow'; and, sucking up his pint like a right old fart, he launches into it: how it was his daughter's eighteenth last week 'and I never even sin her'; how he misses his kids; how it's all that 'pardon my language – cunt of an ex-wife's fault... stealing my house, so I had to move up Tottenham, taking my kids away... ain't my fault, got picked up for speeding... lost my licence... lost my job...'

How the hell can he afford to come in here, then? you wonder, not for the first time, only to soon drift off...

You're out celeb-spotting at the Ivy. Colin Farrell passes your table and drops a napkin by your ankle, an excuse to get you talking. His brooding Irish eyes meet yours and you know something's going to happen between you. 'Claridge's or the Savoy?' he asks with a wink...

'... so I says to her, Sheila, you're just a gold-digging – pardon my language – cunt.'

'Yeah, that told her,' you chip in.

And then the hand's on your knee and he's going, 'You're such a good listener, pet. So nice to have someone who cares.'

'Mmm, yeah, lovely,' you murmur as Colin throws you over his shoulder and steps over the threshold into the penthouse suite.

Then Colin, the real one, lands a punch in the guts, asking, 'What about your dad? Did he come and visit in the end, then?'

'What? Never want to see that old git again,' you say, sucking your breath in, all thoughts of sunken baths

and room service swallowed back with a you-probably-shouldn't-but-you're-going-to-anyway gulp of champagne.

'But I thought you told me how much you was missing him, how you'd hoped he'd come up and visit.'

Dur!

Dad's in a wheelchair after an accident a few years back, lives in a specially built bungalow with his new missus. He worked in a warehouse, Dad did, always playing the joker, then one day it went Bad and Wrong for him: a truck driver didn't see him messing about in front of the forklift. It pitched towards him and that was that. Both legs had to be amputated in the end, poor sod. Cos warehouses can be badly lit, yeah, and quiet...

But then, that ain't really what it's about, is it? Why you and Dad don't see each other no more, why your contact has boiled down to stupid knock-knock jokes by text, what with him saying nothing to Mum over –

And suddenly it seems stark raving mad: you sitting there in a spangly evening gown, Colin in his everyday clothes, talking about stuff you've packed away in a box at the back of your mind labelled *Do Not Open*.

You do that now. Take an imaginary box. Shove those thoughts in. Lock it. Change the subject. 'So, how come you're not watching the match then?' you ask, and that's an end to that.

Another glass or two of champagne, another forty-five minutes of boring chit-chat, one attempt, two, to stifle yawns... and at last a stag party turns up, six young lads up for a crack, and it's like the club's been plugged back in – *fizz, crack, pop* – to the National Grid. The girls' dresses seem silkier, brighter, the chatter livelier, sexier; the air is sparky, electric. You turn away, the green-eyed monster surging. Rather have fun with that lot than sit chatting with pea-brain here.

‘Oy-oy, check that lot out,’ Colin breaks into your thoughts, and you turn back round in slow motion, not that interested to tell the truth, only to cop an eyeful of the new girls, Sapphire and Bella. And you don’t quite believe what you’re seeing... cos they’re dancing together, right, at the table of the rowdy lads who just come in? But not just dancing. Fondling, groping. Rubbing their plastic tits up against one another. You pull a face at Colin, but of course he doesn’t notice cos he’s all agog at...

lips tangling... tongues poking in each other’s mouths, lapping at each other’s boobs. OK, you’ve all done lesbian shows – guys, and the lesbian customers, love a bit of that – but on the main floor? In front of everyone? You frown, twist your neck around for a better view. Where’s Derek? Jez? It seems to be one rule for the new girls these days, another for the old-timers. Anger snaps at you, a small dog at your heels, yappy and shrill.

So not fair!

And then, just as you’re telling yourself to chill the hell out, it ain’t that bad, Sapphire wraps her arm around Bella’s waist. With the other arm, lifts Bella’s dress. Thrusts her hand underneath the shiny pink fabric. You look at the lads, drooling, transfixed; you look at Sapphire, smirking, eyes glazed. And it’s like someone’s pressed *Pause* on the evening, the air overloaded and tense till she:

pulls out her hand from under the dress

puts her middle finger in her mouth

tosses a coy look at the lads and takes a long, exaggerated suck.

She never, did she?

Did she? Did Sapphire just – you feel yourself flush – finger Bella? Dirty dancing? And the rest!

You flick your hair, just for something to do. Pull at the hem of your skirt. Look around the room. Pray for the fire

alarm to ring out. Then, after an hour-long minute, you lift your eyes to meet Colin's and he blushes, actually blushes!

'Well, that was, um, nice,' you say, trying to break the ice.

'Bloody slappers,' he mutters, rubbing his jeans with his hands.

Too right, you think – the tone of the club, it's gone right down! And, like, if these are the new rules, what hope is there for girls like you and Ivana? Girls who don't play dirty, who don't cross the line into – you gulp – damn near prostitution? You tip the rest of the bubbly down your throat. Excuse yourself from Colin for a quick word with Ivana, whose cage has also been rattled. Then, bottling up this aggravation, these worries, you paint a picture of whatchamacallit? – nonchalance on your face and sidle back over to him, managing a bit more chit-chat till at last – it's a minor miracle – Kitten shows up and Derek nods that, yes, you can push off. And so, with the mask of cool and calm slipping, you say your goodbyes to Colin, ignoring the puppydog eyes what trail after you as you peg it upstairs to the changing room.

A quick change of clothes (trainers, more like it!) and you light up a fag, sucking up a gluttonous lungful of smoke, and, though you're breathless and pale with exhaustion, you crack out the last simper of the day for the bouncers as you come out of the main doors of the club onto Dean Street.

Freedom at last!

And there you find Soho bombed out with the usual human debris of a Friday evening, all braying voices, the latest fashions and ears grafted to mobile phones. Ten months of pacing these streets and you're no closer to understanding what the hell it is about the place. Why do they come here, them trendies? you wonder, catching the smell of sweaty meat from a kebab shop, neighbour to the freshly painted black door and stuck-up brass plate of a private members'

club. Two worlds side-by-side. And do you fit into either? Do you hell. Or into the next buildings on the block: an expensive café rubbing up next to the seedy doorway of a rent-a-room-by-the-hour joint, a grubby flyer Blu-Tacked to its wall promising a ‘stairway to heaven’.

The words *sweaty meat* repeat on you like the garlic sauce on a kebab.

Christ’s sake, what now? A worse-for-wear lad spilling out of a trendy new bar bumps your arm. He lurches, blurts, ‘Sorry,’ and you dodge out of the way just in time before he spews a Technicolor puke on the pavement, a loud ‘ooh’ of disappointment erupting from the bar what seems to echo across the whole of West London.

England missed a chance?

What. Ever.