

Week zero, day four

I am surrounded by idiots.

‘... it’s thirty quid but it’s seriously, like, the best foundation ever, swear to God ...’

‘... did you see her latest video? The eyelash tutorial is amazing ...’

‘... I need to figure out what I’m doing with my hair for Friday ...’

These are the dyed-hair, perfect-make-up girls, a brigade that get up an hour earlier in the morning to look beautiful even though no one can possibly look remotely attractive in the St Agnes’s school uniform. You can roll up that regulation-length maroon skirt at the waist to show off your legs but it doesn’t change the fact that it is a hideous monstrosity. And who are they trying to impress, anyway? It’s an all-girls school and I bet the closest any of them have come to queerness is one of those showing-off-for-the-boys kisses.

‘I can’t believe she gave me a B, it’s just because she hates me. It totally deserved an A.’

‘I know, she’s so harsh, it’s not fair.’

To the other side of me, the braniacs are bemoaning the

grades on a history project we just got back, which I'd have a little bit more sympathy with if this was an exam year and not Transition Year, dossiest of doss years. Also it just feels off, karmically, to ever admit out loud you think you were entitled to a better mark.

I am a groupless, friendless creature in a sea of chat. As soon as I push past the world's slowest walkers to get through the door of our assembly hall, I search for somewhere safe to sit. Front row, far left – a teacher's pet location but also means I don't need to watch everyone else drifting in. In pairs, in threes, in gaggles.

I don't need to avoid eye contact with Steph, is what I really mean.

Phrases float towards me as the hall fills up. What a vlogger posted this morning, who's going to get kicked off some reality show, what a teacher said yesterday.

My fingers itch for my phone, safely stowed in my schoolbag, to access something that matters. There's this case in the UK I'm following at the moment, this girl whose uncle raped her but the judge said she led him on and was very mature for her age. Sure, you know what thirteen year olds are like.

This is the world we live in and I'm sitting in a hall with a hundred girls who sort of . . . haven't even noticed?

And I know that whole thing of going 'I'm not like all the other girls' is super-problematic because, hey, what's wrong with being a girl, and can't we all move past gender stereotypes, and all that shit, but if you went to St Agnes's, you'd understand. Land of the girly-girls, trapped in the 1950s, like something out of Enid Blyton except less cuddly.

Actually, maybe not even like Enid Blyton, because Darrell Rivers kicked ass. (I may re-read the *Malory Towers* books every Christmas. Shut up.)

‘Ladies!’ Mrs O’Connor trills from the front of the stage. ‘Settle down, please!’

We settle down. Mostly. There are some girls at the back still yapping, who are treated to one of those sour-lemon frowns until they shut up.

‘We’re going to have a very important day today, so I hope you all take full advantage of it,’ she starts, and I tune out, because we have had many of these Very Important Days so far this year – and we’re only halfway through November. Basically everything else gets cancelled for the day and we go off to some local historical site or have someone come in to talk to us about mindfulness. Today has been billed as a ‘retreat’, which we all know from two years ago is code for sex ed.

‘. . . smaller groups, and then your facilitator will lead you through the activities . . . I’d ask you to make sure you give them your full attention . . .’

Mrs O’Connor likes speeches. Speeches and Catholicism. Her two favourite things.

‘Remember you’re representing the school today, ladies . . . spiritual ethos . . . meditation . . .’

I snap to attention. Spiritual what?

It’s an actual religious retreat. For fuck’s sake. I’ll be lucky if I don’t burst into flames.

We are sitting in a circle on the floor of a darkened classroom,

eyes closed. Allegedly closed. There's a lot of eye-communication happening. Across from me, new girl Felicity – a Blyton school-story name if ever there was one – is smirking at the other cool girls, while Steph engages in some surreptitious phone-checking.

'You're on a beautiful beach,' the lady at the top of the room intones. 'Just take a moment to see it. Feel the warmth of the sun on your face. Feel the sand beneath your toes. Listen to the waves gently lapping against the shore.'

Just when I think it couldn't get any worse she starts making wave sounds, her own eyes shut and her hands moving in time with the air hissing from between her teeth.

A muffled snort comes from somewhere else in the room. Ann-Marie, our saintly class prefect, purses her lips.

'Now we're going to travel a little bit further down the beach,' the mad woman continues. 'And in the distance you see a small wooden hut . . .'

Guess who's in the hut. Go on. Guess.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, and all the genderqueer and non-binary humans out there, it is the one, the only . . . Jesus!

'What do you want to ask him? Think about that for a moment, and then when you're ready, ask. He's ready to listen.'

The only spiritual thing popping into my head right now is *The Book of Mormon* soundtrack, which I'm pretty sure is not what she has in mind.

It goes on in this vein. After break time, crayons – yes, crayons – are passed around and we are invited to draw our image of God.



‘There are no right answers. This is a chance for you to reflect on your own personal view of God . . .’

I blame Enid Blyton for this, really. I thought a girls’ secondary school would be all jolly japes and tricks on the teachers and passionate friendships and faintly queer overtones. When my parents gave me the choice between the two nearest schools to us – St Agnes’s on one side, the less-well-thought-of mixed-sex school on the other – I listened to my heart and not my head. I bet they don’t have to do God-art in Greenpark College.

Twenty minutes later we are invited to share and discuss our personal views of God, and by ‘invited’ I mean ‘forced’, which seems a bit dodgy if it’s supposed to be a personal thing. We get through five old-white-guys-with-beards and two clouds-with-smiley-faces before it’s my turn.

I hold up a blank page. ‘Um. I don’t really . . . have one.’

A head shakes in disappointment. ‘Would you like to tell us a bit . . .’

‘No,’ I say tightly. ‘Move on.’

A little bit of a gasp from someone – probably Ann-Marie – but no one says anything. More beards. A wise elephant from Felicity. The door swings open and Mrs O’Connor leans in the doorway, listening in. ‘How are you getting on, ladies?’

No response at first, then a muted chorus of ‘fine’.

She stays, waiting.

‘Who do we have next?’ our lunatic leader says.

Steph looks up. ‘Pass.’

I am conscious of Mrs O’Connor stepping closer, actually going around the desks to look at the pictures.

‘Let’s see what you have,’ the lady persists.



‘Pass.’ It comes off more insolent than I think is meant, but what the hell do I know any more?

‘Just show it to the group, Stephanie,’ Mrs O’Connor snaps.

Steph holds up the oversize sheet of paper. Even from a distance I can see it is not an image of God so much as a comic strip. I make out some of it and realise: it’s us. It’s today. And I am betting it is not a kind take on us.

Mrs O’Connor takes it. A moment of silence, and then everything is cold. ‘Stephanie. This is absolutely disgraceful. Please take this to the principal’s office.’

Yep. Typical St Agnes’s logic: bring in someone to tell us there are no right answers but punish people for not giving them anyway. I am mid eye-roll when Mrs O’Connor spots it, and stalks across to my desk. ‘And this is yours, Lauren? Nothing? Not even bothering?’

We are not each other’s favourite people. You’d never guess.

‘You can join your friend in the principal’s office,’ she barks, and then turns around to face the others. ‘I hope the rest of you are behaving yourselves and treating today with the respect it deserves.’

I’m sure there’s more to her speech but Steph and I are out of there, our offending artworks in hand. The principal’s office is only down the corridor, and I tell the secretary that Mrs O’Connor sent us.

‘Wait here,’ she says after some tut-tutting. ‘I’ll see if Mrs Carroll is available.’

Steph slides into the seat next to me. ‘Just like old times.’ Said lightly, but carrying more than it seems.

I know what I am supposed to do. Grin and agree, complain

about how ridiculous this all is. In another life I would have. That's how you behave around your best friend.

Instead I stare at the comic strip and go, in what I am aware is a snotty tone, 'Actually, I think that's really immature of you.'

It's the first overtly mean thing I've ever said to Steph and I know it is crossing a line. I can feel it in the air. But it means less than it would have before the summer. So. So I don't care. Not really. I don't.

The principal's door opens and we are beckoned in.

'Lauren,' Mum says, sighing. 'What is it now?'

Week zero, day six

'And she made us both apologise for, like, not having the right idea about God, and to that absolute *wagon* Mrs O'Connor because she's the one who organises these things, and . . . ugh. My own mother.'

I wait for Justin to say something, to be equally outraged by this, but he just kisses me.

Oh. Okay. Kissing is good. Kissing is nice. I am a girl with needs. Except.

'I just really wish she'd –' I don't know. I wish she'd stop being such a principled principal, maybe. She only took over this year but she's made this big deal of how she has to treat me the same as every other student, a speech delivered first back in August and then repeated at dinner time after our retreat. 'It's just –'

'Just what?' He waits. And then kisses me again. His hands go to my breasts, underneath my T-shirt.

(I feel like a body. Not Lauren. Just a girl-body to be touched.)

'Can you listen to me for two fucking seconds? I'm not a sex toy.' It comes out louder and angrier than I intended. There is something flaring inside me, hot and raw.

‘What the fuck? Come on, you came over here, we’ve, like, twenty minutes before my parents get home . . .’

(He’s right, he’s right, I’m a terrible person.)

(Wait, since when did going over to your boyfriend’s house constitute a binding contract about shenanigans?)

I stare at him. Spiky blond hair. Blue eyes. A boy who usually looks at me with admiration rather than irritation. A boy who is suddenly, unexpectedly, making me want to scream and cry.

‘I should go,’ I mumble.

‘Don’t be like that.’

‘I’m not – *you’re* being –’ I can’t finish the sentence. My throat is all blocked up.

I don’t start crying until I’m at the bus stop, which is just a tad mortifying.

I want humans. I want kindness. I want my hair stroked and I want to be told I’m okay, I’m right, I’m not a horrible monster.

I pull out my phone.

‘Oooh, you’re such a *girl*,’ Ellie mocks, passing me the open bottle of red wine. We are drinking from the bottle because we are epically classy, oh yeah.

‘I know! I know!’ My voice is more high pitched than usual, which is part upset and part alcohol. ‘All the feelings! All of them! But like, hi Justin, can you remember that I am an actual person and not just a vagina?’

She pats my head. A few of the girls across the room – the trio of Posh Pansexuals – look over at the mention of the word ‘vagina’ and then go back to their conversation.

‘And wanting to talk about something that’s bothering me

with my boyfriend – why does that make me a bad person? How am I the bad guy here? And he's like, oh, we're running out of sex time.'

More head-patting.

'But now I feel like the crazy one. Like, how is that fair? Why is the girl always the crazy bitch even if the guy's being a dick?'

'I know, I know,' Ellie soothes. 'It's nearly like we live in some kind of patriarchy.'

'Fucking patriarchy,' I mutter.

'Fucking patriarchy!' she yells, which prompts everyone else to join in.

Sometimes I love Q Club and our crazy rantings about how shit the world is. This is where to go for feminist rantings or getting to talk about the messed-up-ness of being presumed straight until proven otherwise. These are my people.

'I should break up with Justin,' I say. 'He's too normal.'

'He is a straight white dude,' Ellie agrees.

'Straight, white, cis, able-bodied dude,' I amend.

'Straight, white, cis, able-bodied, *middle-class* dude.'

'The most oppressed of us all,' I say.

We snort, and drink more wine.

Everything's okay here. Everything is okay at this party I was planning to skip in order to go have sex with my boyfriend, which on reflection makes me a terrible feminist and I should hang my head in shame. In shame. Q Club is where my friends are. My real friends.

Then Steph comes back inside after having a cigarette with Marc and I remember the bits of Q Club I am less crazy about.

Like Marc.

Marc with a c. If you're going to go to all the trouble of picking a new name after you come out as trans, at least pick Mark with a k. For fuck's sake. The world of manly, masculine, macho names open to you and you pick Marc with a c.

And, like, if you're deliberately going for something not super-macho then why the need to take testosterone and to talk about it all the time? Dude, we get it, T is The Best Thing Ever, let's move on.

I am pretty sure no one would be that enthusiastic about oestrogen. Like, Ellie doesn't go on about how much she wants to take lady-hormones. Pronouns and clothes a bit more feminine than you might expect (today, slinky purple T-shirt with skinny jeans) and that's it and it's not a big deal.

Who the hell would want lady-hormones, anyway?

I don't realise I've said this aloud until Ellie says, 'Time of the month, pet?'

'Fuck off,' I say. Not in a mean way.

'Aunt Flo come to visit?'

'Stop.'

'Vampire tea party?'

'Gross.'

She holds up the bottle of wine to the light. 'It's the right colour, anyway.'

I grab it off her. 'I'll text you the second it arrives. All the gory details. Number of tampons used . . .' I wait for this to be too much, then continue. 'Blood clots . . .'

Ellie puts her hands over her ears. 'Stop it.'

'I win!' I do a little victory dance from where we're sprawled on the couch, and catch Steph's eye. Not impressed.

Well, sorry for reminding you that you do actually have lady bits, Steph.

John, our host, brings in more popcorn from the kitchen. He's just gone eighteen, properly out and proud and mad camp, even at school (he's at the same school as Justin and even their year Know) but I still remember the first Q Club meeting he was at, all nervous and quiet and shy.

You get over that pretty quickly.

'How's it going, Lauren?' John asks, joining me and Ellie on the couch.

'Grand,' I say.

'Liar,' Ellie says.

'Stupid boyfriend,' I amend.

'Boys are stupid,' he agrees. 'Can't live with them, can't live without them.'

'Yeah,' I say sadly.

'Get more drink into this one,' John instructs Ellie. 'Oooh, how about shots?'

'Oooh, shots,' Ellie says.

'No. Shots are death,' I say. This is based on exactly one experience over the summer, after exams finished, at another Q Club party, but I will stand behind this decision for at least . . . until college, maybe.

'Shots are life!' John corrects. 'Live a little, darling.'

'So gay,' I say.

He smirks and kisses me on the cheek.

I sink into the couch, taking another swig from the wine bottle. It's going to be okay. Everything's going to be okay.

I watch Steph and Marc together, heads close, in intense

conversation that the rest of us aren't privy to.

Maybe shots.

Messages to Justin sent at some point after Ellie, John and I finished another bottle of wine but before I fell asleep in John's little sister's room:

I just wish you would try to understand what it's like when someone treats you like that and doesn't even listen to you or take your feelings seriously.

Oh of course you don't care why do I even bother?

Maybe a blow-up doll would be better for you?

YOU ARE THE PATRIARCHY.

SO DONE WITH YOU.

Week zero, day seven

'Shots are evil,' I groan in Ellie's general direction as I stumble into the sitting room.

'Unnnngh,' she responds, raising her head from the couch slightly.

My mouth tastes like dead things. And my phone scares the shit out of me. At least I didn't message Steph. But did I say anything? The end of the night is blurry.

'I am never drinking again,' I declare.

'Whatever you say,' she says sleepily. I tousle her hair – kept short, she's not out at school yet – and rummage around for my coat in the pile on the armchair.

John emerges from the kitchen as I'm about to open the front door. 'See ya, Lauren,' he says with far too much cheeriness for this hour of the morning. I make some kind of mumble in response, and he laughs.

As soon as I've left the house, out comes my phone. Justin doesn't answer the first three times I call, so I send a message – *Sorry, stupid & drunk last night! xxx* – and wait.

I will not be the crazy stalker who calls ten million times. It's not even noon yet. He's probably still asleep, or maybe he

lost his phone, or has it switched off, or something.

Except I *feel* like the crazy stalker on the bus heading back home, slipping my phone in and out of my bag every two seconds to check if there's a reply. And then just as I'm getting off, a beep. It's like the sun coming out.

We r goin in2 town 2 do sum shopping want 2 come?

Just Dad. Dad, who is still coming to terms with owning a smartphone and a data plan that doesn't necessitate using old-school text-speak.

My body is a toxic wasteground. No way am I hanging out with the parents looking at exciting saucepans or whatever it is they have planned.

No thanks, enjoy yourselves! x

I will crawl into bed and consider my life choices and then Justin will call. I contemplate sending him another message saying that the parents are out of the house for the next while, if he wants to come over, but then rethink it. I don't want it to feel like I'm bribing him with sex, making up for our missed opportunity yesterday. Plus I feel too disgusting to really be up to it right now.

I kick my shoes off and crawl into bed, my phone left charging on my bedside locker, my laptop on the pillow next to me. I get *Frozen* going, which, yes, is a kids' movie but is also amazing – Idina Menzel! Kristen Bell! Love and frozen hearts! – and half watch, half snooze.

Musicals are soothing. So I'm all zen, or at least something approaching it, but then the phone rings and it's Justin and there's a boa constrictor crushing the life out of me. 'Hi,' I say warily.

‘Hi,’ he says. Similar tone.

‘Sorry sorry sorry,’ I say in a rush. ‘I just went to this party and we were talking bullshit and drinking and . . .’

He waits.

It’s not quite like a dagger straight to my heart but it’s not far off it.

‘Honey, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it, I was just – annoyed. And sad.’

‘*You* decided to walk out,’ he reminds me.

‘I know.’

‘And you made me feel terrible for just wanting to be with my girlfriend.’

‘*I know.*’

‘It just came out of nowhere. Like, I’m not psychic.’ His voice gets louder on that last word. I can hear the pain and it kills me.

‘I’m sorry,’ I repeat, tears springing up again. I am a one-woman sobbing machine. I know if I could see him right now it’d be different. Doing this over the phone, without physical contact and context, is too sad.

‘If you don’t want to be with me –’ he begins, and white noise takes over.

Buzzing. And fear. My heart. My pounding, terrified heart.

‘I do. Honey. Justin. I do. I’m crazy about you.’

Please don’t break up with me, please, please, please.

‘But, come on, Laur, you made it sound like I’m a monster or something.’

‘I’m *sorry*, okay? I was with some friends and kinda worked up and we were drinking . . .’ I swallow. I can’t say anything

else without hysterical sobbing, and I hate how I feel right now, and I just want this to be over.

Silence on the other end.

I wait. I wait. And then I hang up.

I have *Frozen* on repeat. Every single bit of it hurts, even the funny bits. Even the fucking dancing snowman is ripping at my heart. The sounds coming out of me are howls, like something inhuman.

My phone is off. Dealing with people seems too hard. I've deleted my Facebook account – no big deal, I can always reactivate it, but the thought of logging in and seeing that Justin Maguire is no longer 'in a relationship' is horrendous. (Do they really need to have that picture of a broken heart turn up when someone changes their status? Isn't it a bit too on-the-nose?)

I don't even know what I want. I'm angry with him and want him and I just want him to get it, to get that I was stupid and drunk but also that I was really upset, and doesn't that count for anything?

It's like feeling anything too much makes you crazy. Crazy girl! Which is extra shit because Justin once said that the thing that impressed him about me, first off, was that I was passionate and opinionated. That I was strong. (I'd never thought of myself as strong before.)

We met over the summer. At summer camp, actually. Not the American kind you read about that are set in the woods and have cabins and pranks and sailing and lanyard-making. Not even overnight, unlike this mad nerdy thing that Ellie

does every year where you get to live on a college campus and take classes and apparently it's – her words – 'gloriously fucking weird'. This was a two-week programme at an arts centre near where Mum used to work, before she decided that her absolute calling was St Agnes's.

It was this songwriting thing. Steph was maybe going to go, before everything changed, and I said it to a couple of people from Q Club who were all 'maybe, maybe' and never got around to signing up. But my parents are big believers in Keeping Me Occupied for the summer and anyway, I wanted to be there. But as soon as I got there, the fear kicked in.

The particular kind of fear and inadequacy that hits you in certain situations. Like, I played violin for a couple of years in primary school and gave it up because it was too hard, but also because there was this other girl in my class who was just a proper genius at it. She'd been playing since she was three or something ridiculous like that, and there's nothing more depressing than being ten years old and already feeling like you've missed your shot at being a prodigy.

Same thing again here, surrounded by all these cool people – I was suddenly so terrified they were all going to say they'd already produced loads of material and recorded it for YouTube and it'd got ten million hits and they were going on TV the following week, actually.

And then I saw this guy. And our eyes met across a crowded room.

And he looked so incredibly too-cool-for-school that immediately the anxiety gave way to rage. I wanted to say, 'Why are you even here?' I mean, language classes or extra maths or

whatever is one thing – exam-related, totally the kind of thing your parents would force you into. But songwriting? Who the hell ends up there and then makes a point of looking bored?

I decided I wasn't going to bother with him, which goes to show that sometimes the whole you-can't-trust-first-impressions, *Pride-and-Prejudice* thing is right, after all.

Mum and Dad insist on parading their purchases: new cushions for the living room, and a pair of shoes each, half price! I try to look interested and vaguely cheerful, and then we sit down and watch some TV before the weekly Skype call to Brian and Liz in Australia. Brian's my brother – twenty-eight, does something with computers, don't ask me what. Liz, the wife – also Irish, even though he met her out there. They both do this thing where they act more Irish than anyone here actually does, now that they've living abroad. Case in point:

'Say hello to Granny and Granddad, Caoilfhionn!' Liz says, holding their eighteen-month-old on her lap and making her wave. Oh yes, they're spelling it that way. Any sensible person living – well, anywhere – would opt for Keelin so that the poor child doesn't spend the rest of her life having to pronounce it for everyone, but hey, national pride. Or something.

Mum and Dad dissolve into doting-grandparent mode. 'Helloooooo, helloooooo,' they coo at the screen. 'Who's a pretty girl? Who's a pretty girl?'

This goes on for a few minutes. I smile and wave at the screen too – I mean, she is cute, but there's only so much of this a rational human can take.

Brian comes on. 'Heya,' he says, looking tanned and healthy.

It's breakfast time there, we can see what I'm pretty sure is freshly squeezed orange juice behind them.

'How's it going, pet?' Mum asks, and we listen to stories about work and surfing and what Caoilfhionn's been up to lately. I start to zone out. It's all so adult, so otherworldly, and I keep thinking of my phone upstairs and whether if I turn it back on there'll be a message from Justin, and if there is, what I'd do with it.

'How's school, Laur?' he asks finally, and I offer up a smile.

'It's fine.' Well, what else am I supposed to say with the principal sitting next to me on the couch? The woman whose office I was sent to this week?

'Anything exciting coming up?'

'School play, a couple of trips . . . you know yourself.' Standard Transition Year fare, no matter what school you're in. Brian's school did *Oklahoma!* with the girls' school down the road, and had at least three trips to the local park when the teachers couldn't think of anything else to keep them busy during their non-exam year.

'D'you know what play yet?'

I shrug. 'No idea.' I turn to Mum, half kidding. 'Mum won't tell me.'

'I can't tell you,' she snaps. 'Stop pestering me.'

My mouth opens and closes. I stare at the floor, at the hole in one of my socks, right at the big toe.

'How's the new school?' Brian asks, even though he's asked her this in previous weeks.

I wasn't *pestering*. I asked once, maybe a month ago, if she knew. That was it. And it's okay if she doesn't want to tell me,

or feels she can't, or whatever. It just feels like I'm in trouble, in a way that I didn't know I could be. Like I am somehow a bad daughter.

I can't look at the screen again until Caoilfhionn comes back on, Liz making her wave bye-bye at us, and then I hide in my room for the rest of the night.

Week one, day one

Sunday morning. Stabbing pains of doom. Wetness between my thighs. Sheets . . . I lift up and check – yep. Blood, blood, blood.

How can something that happens once a month still be such a fucking disaster every time it attacks?

In the shower, letting hot water pound over my belly and then at the lower part of my back, it hits me: oh, fuck, Ellie was right. Time of the month. Stupid lady-hormones.

How do I even know what I'm really angry about when everything hurts? Is it always going to be like this – never being quite sure whether it's okay to be annoyed or whether you really are just, well, a crazy girl?

Before

'This is so shit,' you say.

'So shit,' I agree.

'So incredibly shit. I want to rip my womb out with a –'

'Spatula,' I suggest.

You burst out laughing. 'Do you even know what a spatula is?'

'No,' I say, laughing as well.

'You'd need a knife or – ooh, one of those cake slicey things!'

Your face lights up in that way it does when you have a plan.

'Okay, I'll go get one. Get ready!'

You lie down on the couch, arms at your side, eyes closed.

For a second I forget the twisting agony, the fact that I'm rushing to the bathroom every few minutes to make sure I'm not bleeding through onto my jeans. For a second all I can see is you.

And then it passes, and I return brandishing a cake knife, intoning solemnly, 'Just relax, this won't hurt a bit . . . it'll hurt a lot, though.'

'Laur,' you say, but in a way that lets me know it's really a compliment, 'you're actually deranged.'

Week one, day five

Teen magazines lie. They lie about many things, but especially how much blood you lose in an average period, because there is no way this is just 'a couple of tablespoons'. Unless they actually mean giant spoons the size of proper tables.

They also lie about the benefits of 'gentle exercise'. Case in point: PE this week, which made me throw up afterwards. (In the bathroom. Not on the actual basketball court, which would have been extra gross, and also prompted the super-competitive sportsy types to make sneery faces at me.)

Now I am staring at my phone trying to find the appropriate words to explain how cramps so bad they make you want to puke can mean you're not quite up for apologising to your poor misunderstood boyfriend, and just how exhausting the whole damn thing is.

Hey honey, I'm really sorry about the crazy. Bleedy time of doom & pain & much insanity. I miss you. L xxx

I amend 'bleedy' to 'hormonal' to minimise the grossness, and then get annoyed with myself and change it back. So what if Justin goes 'ew' a little bit? He's not the one with a mother who believes in going into school unless someone (preferably

yourself) has actually died or if a limb is missing. He's not the one who's spent the last five days in agony, with at least a day more of this to eagerly anticipate. Fuck him.

No, self. Stop listening to your crazy-lady hormones. This is how you got in trouble in the first place, and one of us has to break the stalemate. Suck it up. Play nice. I swap it back to 'hormonal' and add another 'really' before the 'sorry'.

Okay. Send.

Ten minutes later the phone is ringing. 'Hey, you,' I say, hoping it is good news.

'Hey,' he says, and I can almost see him from the way it sounds, all slouchy and sexy.

'Hey,' I echo.

'Hey.'

We crack up.

The relief, the relief, the relief. It races through my veins. Or maybe that's just the heavy-duty painkillers talking.

'So,' he says, 'my parents are going out on Sunday . . .'

'Sunday, you say.'

'Sunday.'

'Okay.'

Can't sleep. Online. (I should get that printed on a T-shirt.) Ellie's really good at finding the weirdest stuff online and sharing it, so I watch a video of something that starts off as a boy-band parody and ends up turning into a superhero story, and read a blog about how to decorate your wheelchair before I get back to what other friends have posted.

John is moaning about exams – this is his last year of school

so the pressure is on – and one of the Posh Pansexuals is name-dropping Z-list celebrities that her parents know. I keep scrolling.

Literally had a panic attack yesterday before PE. Changing rooms = no. CANNOT FUCKING DO THIS.

Oh, Steph. My heart twitches in my chest, even though a tiny bubble of annoyance is manifesting at the same time. Like getting changed for PE is fun for anyone. It has always been its own special kind of torture. But. But.

Message: *Heya, sorry about being snarky at you after Retreatgate. Hope you're okay. x*

It's the first message I've sent since the 'thanks for letting me know' over the summer. I deliberately don't scroll back up.

Week two, day one

There is a frantic bird flapping against my ribcage as I wait outside Justin's house. What if he's still annoyed with me a bit? What if I've misread this and we're going to have a serious talk about the state of our relationship because he thinks that's what I want the whole time? (I would like sex today, please. I deliberately refrained from self-pleasuring in the shower this morning. So there.)

He opens the door. My eyes meet his.

When he kisses me, fireworks go off.

The first time we had sex: awkward, clumsy, non-orgasmic (for either of us, so at least that's fair). My house, over the summer, right before school started again, loud music on even though we were alone there and also because just-sex noises seemed like they might get a bit ridiculous.

This time: he's a little bit more impatient than usual. Not forceful, just – you can see in his eyes how much he wants this. Those blue eyes. His hand between my legs and then he's thrusting in sooner than I'd like, and it's not like I'm not wet or anything, it doesn't *hurt*, but I know that after he comes this

way we're going to watch stuff on his laptop or something, not worry about getting me off.

Before Justin I always thought that you'd have to demand equal-orgasm-opportunity, like it was all being added up on a balance sheet, but in real life it doesn't work that way.

I can get myself off but this – Justin's hair matted with sweat, his eyes wide and adoring, the closeness of him – is something beyond. A safety, a happiness.

We manage another round before his parents get home.