

M IS FOR MUMMY

KATY COX



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Prologue

It started with a fart. Not any ordinary fart, but a fart with purpose. A fart that was to change our lives forever.

It was 6.30 a.m. and Ed had already left for work, as he had to be there early for hair and make-up. He was going to be playing live on *Good Morning Britain*, strumming his guitar behind Josh Groban, whilst I was stuck at home, cutting a banana into identical semicircles, hoping that they'd pass Stanley's thorough inspection. But then came the fart, and with it came a gush of fluid which exploded all over the floor with the force of a burst water main.

There was no time to process what had just happened because Stanley had already appeared in the doorway.

'Excuse me, but where is W?' he said as he walked in clutching a letter V in one hand and a Y in the other. 'I need it. I need it. Need it. Need it,' he chanted four times because he was four years old and, in his mind, every demand *had* to be made exactly four times.

'Stan, Mummy is having a bit of a problem here. Can you wait a second?'

But of course, he couldn't.

'Need! Need!' he continued, the hysteria in his voice rapidly escalating. 'Need! NEED!'

There was little choice but to ransack the flat looking for the letter W to complete his treasured alphabet puzzle. So,

whilst the floor became saturated with the birth waters of his unborn brother, I tore the living room apart and, eventually, I found it wedged between the sofa cushions. A crisis was thankfully averted.

With Stanley entertained lining up his letters in the lounge, I threw a towel down on the wet kitchen floor, stuffed a pad in my pants and grabbed my phone to call Ed. As usual, he didn't answer, so next on the 'in case of emergency' list was my best friend, Charlie.

'Charls. It's me. My waters have gone. Ed is at ITV and I'm alone here. Can you come?'

A simple but shrill 'Fuck' flew out of her mouth and, after pausing briefly to collect herself, she said, 'Okay. Let me just stick on a bra, cancel my gig and call in the cavalry. I'll be over in ten.'

'Haul ass!' I said. 'Promise you won't faff about?'

'I won't! I *won't*.'

But she would, and she did.

After checking that Stanley was still happily engrossed in his puzzle, I hurried to the bathroom to remove nine months' worth of body hair in preparation for my impending showcase of nakedness. I hadn't actually seen my fanny since conception and I was determined that, this time, she was going to look her best (unlike when I gave birth to Stanley and wound up in hospital with a seventies Disco Bush-ferno grooving out of my pants).

Climbing carefully into the bath tub, I set to work with Ed's razor in one hand and a magnifying mirror in the other, but it very quickly became too much. My back was on the verge of spasm, I had pins and needles in the most delicate of places and my contorted wrist felt like it was about to snap. So, after two minutes, I gave up.

Au naturel would have to do.

I heard the key in the lock at around 7 a.m. Charlie had arrived and was dashing down the hall calling out my name along with a mixture of colourful expletives. She threw open the bathroom door and found me totally naked, one leg up on the toilet seat, frantically spritzing every inch of my body with Marc Jacobs's Daisy.

'Luce!' she gasped. 'You okay? Sorry I took so lo—' She paused abruptly and the panic in her tone instantly dispersed when she clocked the bottle in my hand. 'Ooh, Marc Jacobs?'

'It sure is, my friend.' I winked. 'It may not look that pretty down there, but at least it smells divine.'

'Good call.' She nodded in approval. 'Hand it over, will you?' She snatched the bottle out of my hand and gave her cleavage a healthy spritz whilst I reached for a towel to cover myself up.

'Right, so, I've nailed it,' she said. 'Jen and Will are on their way. She'll stay here with Stan, and Will and I are driving you to hospital. And don't panic, I've already left several strongly worded messages on Ed's voicemail telling him to meet us there.'

'God, I love you, Charls,' I gushed and threw my arms around her.

'I know. I'm, like, fucking incredible.' She patted me gently on the back of my head, then withdrew from my arms. 'So, what now? Want me to rub your back or get you a shot of vodka or something?'

'Zero rubbing required, pal. Or vodka for that matter.'

She looked disappointed. 'But doesn't it hurt?'

'Hardly at all – I'd say it's only a two right now. But when it hits a ten and I'm begging to be put down, you've got to

promise me that you'll do whatever it takes to get me *all* of the drugs.'

She flexed her muscles and planted both hands firmly on her hips. 'That I can do, my friend.'

I sent her in to the lounge to hang out with Stanley, then threw on some comfy clothes and called the hospital. I was expecting to be told to take a paracetamol and wait at home for two days to writhe around in agony on a yoga ball. But no.

'Mrs Wright, if you're thirty-six weeks then you're not quite full term and must come in immediately to be examined,' said the midwife with a tone of urgency.

Anxiety levels were suddenly cranked up a few extra gears, but when I turned around and caught a glimpse of my hideous reflection in the bedroom mirror, all I could hear were my mother's words: 'You need a wee bit of lipstick there, love.' Since my early teens, I'd been trained to apply a 'wee bit of lipstick' at *all* times – family parties, weddings, trips to the dentist and for routine smear tests – and in my mum's mind, giving birth would certainly be an occasion that warranted a splash of colour across my lips. So, I dug out my make-up bag and got stuck in just to make her proud.

As I was smearing an extra thick layer of foundation across my cheeks, Stan wandered into the room wearing nothing but his Thomas the Tank Engine slippers.

'Excuse me. Excuse me.'

'Stan, where are your pyjamas?'

'But I want my shapes puzzle.'

'It's on the big table in the living room. Go and ask Auntie Charlie to find your pyjamas, please.'

He stood totally still, staring at the floor, so I tried again in a way that I knew he would comprehend. 'Stan. I need you to do *four* things. Number one, go to the living room;

number two, ask Auntie Charlie to put on your pyjamas; number three, get your shapes puzzle off the big table; number four, play. Okay?’

He nodded stiffly then left the room in silence.

The buzzer sounded, marking the arrival of Jen and Will; the rest of the cavalry had arrived.

‘Whatever you do, Luce, do not give birth all over Will’s new car,’ Charlie called out from the other end of the flat. ‘He’s only had it a few days and Jen said he’s really precious about it.’

Before I could respond, Jen came bounding up the stairs and into the bedroom with her arms fixed wide open and tears streaming down her cheeks. She pounced on me, nearly knocking me clean off my feet.

‘I can’t believe it, Lucy!’ she sobbed into my earlobe. ‘We’re going to have another baby!’

In followed her boyfriend, Will, who hovered awkwardly in the doorway with his eyes glued to his phone.

‘All right, pull it together, Jen!’ said Charlie firmly as she pushed past him. ‘There’s no time for hysteria. And don’t you freak out either, Will. You *can* look – there are no heads hanging out just yet,’ she said reassuringly as she ushered him over to join in the group hug.

Then, BOOM! I was smacked in the guts by an invisible cricket bat and dropped to the floor in agony. Just as I began to clamber up, another hideous blow came to the uterus, then came another: thick and fast, like being repeatedly pounded in the guts by a sledgehammer.

‘Ten! Charls, I’m a ten!’

Sobbing followed, then the swearing: ugly words that I’d only ever heard spewing from the lips of Charlie when she’d overdone it on the Stella Artois.

Stanley wandered into the room. 'Excuse me,' he said, oblivious to the fact that my insides were rupturing directly in front of his eyes.

'Call me "Mummy", Stan, not "excuse me" – *Mummy*. What. Is. Iiiiiit?'

'Excuse me, *Mummy*. Excuse me, but did you know that a dodecahedron has twelve sides?'

'Yes, yes. Go and put on your pyjam—'

'A nonagon has nine sides ...' he continued as the tears rolled down my face and hit his slippers.

'Fuck! Get the car, Will! She's a ten!' yelled Charlie frantically as she pulled me off the floor.

Within minutes, I was mooing on the driveway on all fours like a heartbroken cow as Will screeched to a halt in his fourteen-year-old Fiat Panda. He emerged from a thick black cloud of exhaust fumes looking as proud as punch, then he promptly stuffed my suitcase in the boot. Using Charlie's arm as a crutch, I pulled myself up and leant down to kiss Stanley, who was standing on the drive, still wearing nothing but his slippers.

'Goodbye, my darling, I'll be back home soon with your baby brother.' I smiled. 'Auntie Jen will take good care of you and Daddy will be back later.'

'Excuse me,' he said, looking directly into my eyes for the first time in weeks.

'Yes, my darling?'

'But what does "fuck" mean?'

The Flabalanche

My day starts the way that every other day has for the last six months: at 5.01 a.m. with Stanley's foot wedged under my chin, Jack hysterical and demanding milk, and Ed snoring like a jackhammer smashing through tarmac. The man doesn't flinch, even when in a moment of rage I push Stan's foot away from my jugular, then lift Jack and press his screaming mouth up to Ed's ear to jolt him into action. It's *his* turn to feed him, after all.

Ed wasn't this useless when Stanley was born. I remember him being pretty crap to start with, but by the end of the first year, I'd transformed him into Mary Poppins with a penis – a Gary Poppins, if you will. Under my rigorous guidance, we tag-teamed the night feeds, passing Stanley back and forth through the night to each other like he was a baton in a relentless relay race. We shared the explosive nappy changes, spurred each other on through the milky vomit attacks and embraced the crippling exhaustion together.

But now that Jack has come along, the novelty has totally worn off. Ed has developed a 'been there, done that' attitude, and since becoming busier at work, his enthusiasm for burping a baby in the middle of the night has waned significantly. This time around, he doesn't hear Jack cry at all. A marching band of topless trombone-blowing models

could parade through our bedroom and he probably still wouldn't stir.

When I can take no more, I attack him repeatedly with a feather pillow until he falls out of the bed onto all fours like a startled cat.

'Okay. I'm up. I'm up!'

'It's *your* turn,' I say, seething. 'Take the baby. His bottle is there ready. I need to get Stan his breakfast.'

'Just give me a sec,' he says, before disappearing for one of his epic twenty-five-minute-long sessions on the toilet seat, as he does every single morning like clockwork.

I am perhaps less patient with him than usual because today isn't a regular day, but an important one: I am officially going back to work. Miguel, my agent, has been in touch with the offer of a gig and finally, for the first time since last July, I'll get to leave the flat with just a cello on my back.

A gig for Miguel is exactly the sort of gig that I need to gently ease me back in to playing the cello again. He exclusively books what we in the music industry call 'background gigs', which typically involve bashing out tunes to shitfaced business men at their fancy company dinners. Such gigs aren't exactly artistically satisfying, but they're an easy source of income for most musicians and they're essential if you want to keep the bailiffs from breaking down your door.

On a background gig, our job is solely to create a sophisticated ambience – to be *seen*, not heard. Easy-fucking-peasy! There will be no TV cameras zooming up my nostrils, no picky audiences, no brutal critics or fiendishly difficult music to prepare. And what's more, I'll probably squeeze a free glass of champers out of one of the waiters if I play my cards right. This particular gig will be a goodie because

Charlie and Jen have been booked on violin. The 'A Team', as Miguel calls us, will be reunited at last and I simply cannot wait!

These past few months, I have been cooped up inside with two small kids, wading through an endless tunnel of soiled babygros, mucus showers and 2 a.m. wake-up calls. This has been taxing enough, but I've also had to cope with Stanley's explosions every time I serve him his dinner with my right hand and not my left. In short, I'm ready to get back out there and remind my fingers that they're not just skilled in smearing Sudocrem on a tiny bumhole, but they are also capable of playing some Mozart in the dark corner of a chandelier-filled ballroom.

The main concern that has kept me awake most of the night: I don't have anything to wear. Two kids later and my formerly upstanding boobs now hang down over my belly button like a pair of deflated balloons, and my nipples are the size of helicopter landing pads.

My gut is even more troubling. An avalanche of flab (a 'flabalanche', as I've christened it) has descended over the top of my high-waisted pants, the flimsy elastic straining under the force of it. After stuffing down a three-course Christmas dinner and an entire box of Celebrations last month, I ended up in tears when I caught sight of it smiling back at me in the bathroom mirror. All saggy and misshapen, my gut has developed a wicked grimace that strongly resembles the Grinch, only not green.

In Miguel's email, he stated in block capitals that we have to wear 'SHORT BLACK DRESSES' for this gig – a most unusual request, as full-length ballgowns are the norm for black-tie events. I'd banked on throwing on my trusty black maternity gown, but with that no longer being an option, I

spend most of the morning wading through my wardrobe in a blind panic trying to find something suitable.

‘Ed, what does this look like?’ I say, twirling around in a tight jewelled dress that has been gathering dust in the wardrobe for the best part of three years since I last wore it. He is engrossed in an episode of *Thunderbirds* and doesn’t look up.

‘Ed!’ I snap. ‘I said, what does this dress look like?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean my dress! What does it look like?’

‘It’s fine.’

‘But do I look fat in it? Be honest.’

‘Um,’ he pauses, ‘a bit.’

‘No need to be so honest. Damn, taking a bullet to the heart would be less painful!’

‘What? You said be honest.’

I sigh heavily, then squeeze my flabalanche into several more sparkly garments like some sort of amateur contortionist. Puffing, panting and fearing that I may have cracked a few ribs, I return to the lounge to seek his approval once again.

‘You looked the thinnest in that one,’ he says, pointing to an off-black beach dress that cost four pounds in Primark a few years earlier. It’s a casual cotton slip designed to go over a bikini and has clearly been tumble-dried over a hundred times, given that it’s greyish and has small fuzzy balls stuck all over it.

‘But that’s a beach dress. Is it posh enough?’

‘Yep.’

‘But do I look nice in it?’

‘Yep.’

All other options have been exhausted. I don’t have the patience to compete with Lady Penelope for his attention,

so I chuck it in a bag along with my stilettos and devote the rest of the day to preparing to leave the flat.

This solitary gig has caused me to lie awake several nights in a row in an anxious mess, thinking about everything that needs to be done before leaving the kids for just a few hours. I put Jack's nappies, wipes and bum cream in a neat pile on the changing table. I lay out clean pyjamas for both of them, then sterilise bottles and dummies and type out Stan's meticulous routine in bullet points so that it's easy to follow. Then, most importantly, I double check that all the pieces to Stan's new Russian alphabet puzzle are in place and put it safely on the kitchen counter so he can find it with ease. Only when all of this is done can I even consider setting foot out of the door.

What has fuelled my anxiety the most about working tonight is the thought of leaving the boys with Ed's mother, Judith, who is due at 5 p.m. From experience, I just know that I'll get home from work and have to spend the whole night rocking Jack back to sleep after the woman has ignored all of my instructions. It's a definite that she won't do what I've asked because she'll be too busy rummaging through our cupboards, searching for more evidence to justify why her beloved son should never have married me.

Last year, she stumbled upon my Rampant Rabbit in the drawer of my bedside table and couldn't look me in the eye for weeks after. Thankfully, when she snooped into Ed's drawer on her next visit and found the leopard-print thong and pink fluffy handcuffs that I'd bought him as a joke for his birthday, I felt an explosion of joy within.

I'd gone down, but I'd dragged him along with me, all the way to the gutter.

The Model Mother

Ed leaves for work at 4.30 p.m. He lifts his guitar, opens the door and walks out of it. Just like that.

Judith arrives a few minutes later and, against every natural instinct that I have for self-preservation, I buzz her up to the flat.

‘Hi, Judith. Thanks so much for this. You’re really saving me,’ I say with the most enthusiastic tone that I can muster.

‘Hello, Lucy.’ She strides into the hall and dumps a large box on the floor, which misses my toes by millimetres. ‘I’ve had a big clean-out of the garage.’

Stepping backwards, she slowly scans my body from top to bottom, then opens her skinny arms and leans in to give me a brief, stiff hug. ‘Lost a few pounds, I see.’ She smiles wryly.

As usual, I have no words. I simply shake my head and fake a slight smile.

She pats me on the arm. ‘Well, keep at it, Lucy. I’ve read that it’s harder to lose the weight the second time around, which is why I stuck to having just the one.’

I quickly steer the conversation towards something else before I give in to the temptation to headbutt her. ‘So, what’s in the box?’

'Books mainly. Most of Edward's schoolbooks, his drawings and his collection of *Spiderman* comics. Oh, and wait till you see this.' She delves into the box and pulls a painting out of a plastic wallet. 'He did that when he was Stan's age!'

'Wow,' I say, staring down at an immaculate picture of an aeroplane that was blatantly drawn by a teenage Ed ... perhaps even Leonardo da Vinci.

'It's such a shame that it's been in the garage for thirty-odd years. I thought you might like to hang it somewhere?' A squeaky giggle escapes her lips before she slips it back in to the box. 'Anyway, here. Take it all. It's for you to enjoy now. My new exercise bike is arriving next week and I need the extra space in the garage for it.'

'No problem, I'll find somewhere for it,' is all I say. I lift the box and dump it in the corner of the hall where it will no doubt stay for the next year.

'Anyway, Judith, thanks again for tonight. I really appreciate it. I just need to quickly run through the routine with you before I head off.' I hand her a list detailing exactly what she needs to do to ensure that her evening runs smoothly.

She nods. 'Yes, yes. I do know how to look after children, Lucy. I did raise your husband, don't forget.'

'But Stan is very particular. You have to stick to the list or else he will get upset and make your evening a misery.'

She rolls her eyes dramatically, then folds up my list and puts it in the back pocket of her burgundy cords before heading to the kitchen to survey the inside of the cupboards. 'So, what's for supper?'

'Jack is having one of his pouches and a yoghurt,' I say, 'and he'll need an 8-ounce bottle at around 7.30 p.m. before bed. Stan is having fish fingers and waffles, but make sure

you cut them into equal-sized rectangles or he won't touch them.'

'And what about vegetables?'

'Nope. I've tried everything, Judith, trust me. He won't go near them. He gags.'

'Gags? Lucy, you *really* should—' I stand back and brace myself for one of her lectures but something more distressing catches her eye. 'Whose is *this*?' She pulls a chicken and mushroom Pot Noodle out of the cupboard and holds it up in the air as if it's a dead rat.

I jump in first. 'It's Ed's.'

'It isn't!' She tuts and then pushes it to the back of the cupboard where she doesn't have to look at it.

I know now that my list will not leave her pocket. She is going to spend her evening researching the carcinogenic effects of Pot Noodle, and Stanley won't eat a morsel of his dinner because she will not serve it in the shape required.

Despite the bitterly cold January frost, I skid up to the venue in a sweaty mess after lugging my cello for the best part of a mile across the icy pavements from Old Street station. My recently straightened hair is now a ball of frizz. Sweat is running down my back and my foundation has melted into globules in the creases around my eyes – classic side effects from transporting such a large instrument during rush hour on the tube.

From the exterior, the venue in Hoxton looks like an abandoned warehouse, but when I've dragged all of my stuff through the graffitied wooden door, I discover that it's actually slick and impressively high-spec on the inside.

Standing behind the bar are beautiful shirtless men wearing tight tuxedos, the jackets of which are gaping open just enough to expose their waxed, muscular torsos. Several waiters are dotted around the place, carefully laying out plates of baby-pink cupcakes on tables draped in black velvet cloth. Down the centre of the full length of the room is what looks like a stage, with chairs laid out on either side of it, and directly in front of it stands a short woman, wearing a chunky headset.

‘You! I need more candles here. Stage left is too dark,’ she snaps, ‘and get Jules over here to sort the orchid display. It’s patchy! Patchy ... Jason, I said PATCHY! We’ve only got half an hour, people. Let’s pull it together. Come on, now!’

It’s only when I look to the back of the stage and notice a gathering of tall, flat-chested girls and muscular men in skin-tight leggings that I realise where I am.

It’s not a stage, but a runway.

I’ve brought my flabalanche, my frizzy ball of hair and my four-pound beach dress to play in a fucking fashion show!

Charlie strides over, all dolled up in her strapless black dress and her Jimmy Choo-esque stilettos (which are actually convincing copies from eBay). Her long, glossy dark hair hangs in thick ringlets down her bare back, her lips are a piercing red and her complexion radiant. As always, she looks stunning and exactly as pictured in our publicity photos on Miguel’s website. Our act – the Vixen Trio – is marketed on the site as ‘Three glamorous and highly talented ladies who play for some of the world’s most esteemed artists on TV and stage’. We’re supposed to be young and sexy – a ‘must have’ for your exclusive event – but now the Vixen Trio is missing a sultry fox and has acquired a hippo instead, which isn’t quite what the client booked.

‘Luce! You’re here. Fuck me, what’s with the ‘fro?’ Charlie teases. ‘Rough trip was it?’ She hugs me tightly.

‘Charls ... What. The. Fu—’

‘What the fuck, what?’ she interjects.

‘What kind of gig is this? I thought it was just background shizzle. Tell me it’s not a—’

‘Duh! It’s a fashion show, baby. Hot men wearing next to nothing ... and there’s loads of free gin. Cushdy one, eh?’

‘Well, it’s the first I’ve heard of it. If I’d known I would’ve turned it down. I’ve got a shit dress here and about eighteen extra kilos of flab under this coat. I’ll look like a whale.’

‘Calm down. Let’s get some GHDs on that head, pronto, and maybe stick a pair of suck-in pants on you and you’ll be back to your beautiful self,’ she says. Then, after lifting my cello, she takes me by the elbow and drags me backstage to hair and make-up.

In truth, I’d rather have been dragged off for a smear test.

‘Babe, what’s going on with your eyebrows?’

There’s nothing more demoralising in life than having to sit next to a bunch of supermodels and explain why I look like I’ve been yanked out of a ditch. Zoe, the freelance make-up artist, is taking no prisoners. She doesn’t have time for pleasantries, having made it clear that she has to be at the O2 arena within the hour.

‘Um, I don’t know,’ I reply sheepishly. ‘I haven’t really thought much about them lately.’

‘Well, trust me, you *need* to, babe,’ she says, her face a mixture of horror and pity. She leans in so close to my face that I clock a whiff of her fruity chewing gum. Running her

manicured fingers slowly over my eyebrows, she yanks out a few errant hairs then sighs heavily, blasting me in the face with a hot burst of Hubba Bubba air. 'Look, I haven't got time to really get stuck in. I've got to do Ronan at eight forty-five. He's on at nine thirty, so time's tight.'

'What, Ronan Keating? Wow!' I say, my eyes still watering from the brief assault. 'My sister would go nuts to meet him. Is he a nice guy?'

'Gawd!' she interjects, pulling back abruptly. 'Your bags are so dark! Tell me, babe, what product do you normally put on them?'

A hot rush of blood hits my cheeks when the entire row of models sitting next to me turns to have a gander at my baggage. I briefly consider diving under the table for cover, but instead squeeze out an 'Um' and follow it with an awkward chuckle.

'Right,' continues Zoe, 'well, I haven't got my full kit here to sort it, so I'll have a go with the Touche Éclat, babe. It's good stuff but there's only so much it can do, if you know what I mean.'

The woman tries her best but she's right: all the luxurious concealer in the world isn't going to cover my dark circles, which look like they've been scrawled on with a black Sharpie. She slathers all sorts of lotions and potions across my face, tutting at regular intervals as she interrogates me about my skincare regime. Telling her that I moisturise with E45 and use Jack's Sudocrem on my zits isn't going to go down well with this woman, so I keep schtum and let her get on with it.

'These roots!' she exclaims loudly when she moves on to my hair. 'When did you last get these done, babe?'

Before I have a chance to invent an elaborate excuse as to why I have totally let myself go, Charlie pops her head around the door with a much-welcome treat in hand.

‘Gin, Luce?’ she chirps. ‘Got you a double.’

I’m not breastfeeding, and even if I was, Jack is on the other side of London and my useless boobs are here, flatpacked in a cheap beach dress that is at least two sizes too small.

‘Hand it over and grab me a straw, will you?’ I say, just as Zoe scrapes a brush through my fringe, pulls it back off my forehead and twists it up to form a towering bubble.

Jen arrives shortly after and is sat at the end of the dressing table wincing in pain as Zoe’s assistant drags a comb through her tight blonde curls. An entire can of hairspray is being offloaded onto her lumpy bubble when I glance behind her and clock a massive unopened multipack of crisps sitting on the table. The only benefit of working with supermodels that I’ve seen so far is that they survive solely on a diet of electric cigarettes and sparkling water, so the crisps are up for grabs.

Three packets of crisps each and two double gins later, the Vixen Trio are ready for showtime. Reeking of vinegar and gin and caked in thick, dramatic black eyeliner, we clamber past the queue of svelte supermodels with our instruments and take our seats at the top of the runway.

Miming expressions of sophistication, we serenade lines of beautiful people with Mozart trios as they glide up and down the stage like swans draped in chiffon. Photographers flash their cameras and the audience claps gently in that upper-class we-are-so-rich kind of way as they sip elegantly on their complimentary gins. When the show is over, we immediately dismount from our stilettos, stick on our trainers

and head straight to the bar to sedate ourselves from the pain of blistered feet with as many free gins as possible. Not surprisingly, the trays of cupcakes, like the crisps, are totally untouched, so we stuff down a few of those too.

Once Charlie has eaten her fill, she disappears to the loo and returns with a full bottle of Molton Brown soap and a bog roll stuffed in her tiny bag.

‘Charls! You can’t take those.’

‘Nah, Luce. They shouldn’t leave this stuff lying around if they don’t want us to take it,’ she garbles as she shoves another cupcake into her mouth. ‘There’s another one in there if you want me to get it for you?’

‘No way. I’m *not* going to prison for a bottle of pretentious soap. I’ve got kids to raise now. A slab of soap from the pound shop will do me just fine, thanks.’

‘Your loss,’ she says, then wraps up another two cakes in a serviette and squashes them into her already bulging handbag.

Pert, scantily clad models stand around networking with agents; beautiful and flawless, they look as though they’ve been airbrushed, and the hot barmen flock around them like dogs on heat. It doesn’t take long for one to come sniffing around Charlie and Jen.

‘Move on, mate. It’s a girls-only table tonight,’ Charlie says playfully, ‘but we’ll get some more drinks if you’re pouring?’

And off the man scampers to the bar, returning moments later with a tray full of drinks and his phone number scribbled on a pink napkin for Charlie.

I’m invisible: *totally* invisible in a crowd of stunning people. My gut, my big forehead, my tired baggy eyes, the mono-boob: I have nothing worth looking at, nothing to say, nothing to contribute at all and, honestly, I just want

to go home. So, I make a lame excuse and leave my friends behind to drink the free bar dry.

One hour and three tube journeys later, I drag my cello down the full length of Windsor Road, my cheeks sore and my teeth chattering percussively from the vicious sting of the icy wind. Within arm's reach of my front door and mere seconds away from collapsing onto my cosy bed, I'm suddenly accosted by my annoying neighbour Alan, who – clothed in a tartan dressing-gown and matching slippers – is standing on his driveway organising his recycling bins. Naturally, I have to stand and listen to the man rant about the 'ghastly hooligans' that have been speeding down our street, then to shut him up, I agree to sign a petition to persuade the council to lay speed bumps before one of us gets 'mowed down in our prime'.

After aging the best part of ten years, I eventually escape and head upstairs to discover, to my utter delight, that Judith has left. Stanley is fast asleep in our bed clutching his Russian puzzle, which suggests that he's had another bout of nocturnal anxiety. I gently kiss his forehead and lay his puzzle down on the bedside table, then wander through to the lounge to find Ed snoozing in the recliner with Jack in his arms, his tiny hand resting on his daddy's hairy chest.

It's beautiful.

Not supermodel beautiful, but a beauty that far transcends anything one would ever see on a runway.

Starfucks

My body confidence is low, and working alongside models with waists barely wider than the circumference of a toilet roll has done nothing to help it.

The flabalanche is officially out of control, and if I'm ever going to get out of my maternity jeans and back into regular ones, then drastic action needs to be taken! No more sneaking packets of crisps at 4 a.m. as I feed Jack. No more double dinners where I scoff Stan's leftovers and then make my and Ed's proper dinner two hours later. I *have* to control myself, and must stop giving in to the squeaky voices of the double-stuff Oreos that call out to me all day long from the cupboard. *Pick me! And me! Screw it, pick us ALL!*

Although I don't want a ribcage that can grate cheddar, it would be nice to shave my bikini line without having to lift my gut up with one hand to reach it first. I've done the maths and I estimate that my current body mass is composed of 40% Stan's leftovers, 20% Big Macs, 20% cake and 20% crisps, and if my blood was ever analysed, the lab would probably report the results as being 10% plasma, 50% instant coffee and 40% Pinot Grigio. These figures are shameful and need *addressing* if I want a figure that's worth *undressing*.

Therefore, the day after my encounter with London's most-emaciated, I put myself on a strict diet and I have been slowly starving to death ever since.

At the start of the week, I did pretty well.

Monday

Breakfast: Fat-free natural yoghurt with granola and berries

Lunch: Chicken and beetroot salad

Dinner: Steamed salmon and fresh vegetables

Dessert: A bottle of wine, two packets of Cheetos, a Snickers bar and four rounds of toast with *real* butter

Tuesday

Breakfast: Fat-free natural yoghurt with just the berries

Lunch: A remorseful salad

Dinner: Overcooked chicken seasoned with an abundance of misery

Dessert: Two packets of Cheetos, three double gins (but with slimline tonic) and only two rounds of toast with real butter (progress?)

Wednesday

Breakfast: Three cups of coffee and a bowl of air

Lunch: A McDonald's salad, Diet Coke, six fries and a lingering sniff of Stanley's hamburger

Dinner: A boiled egg and dry toast ... followed by the remainder of Stan's fish fingers, three 'BURNT!' Smiley Faces, seven double-stuff Oreos and a long hard look in the mirror

Dessert: An early night where I dreamt of Hugh Jackman force-feeding me jam doughnuts – he was wearing nothing but a leather thong

I carried on in pretty much the same pathetic way until Friday when I summoned the courage to weigh myself. Before breakfast and just after my morning poo, I stripped naked, removed all jewellery and hair accessories then climbed on to the scales with hope in my heart. The crushingly disappointing result? I hadn't lost a gram; not a single one. So ...

Friday

Breakfast: Yoghurt – not with berries or granola,
but with salty tears

Lunch: Tuna salad with water (whilst watching
some guy icing a three-tiered cake on the *Great
British Bake Off*)

Dinner: Vegetable chilli and a pot of Jack's pureed
cauliflower that he threw at me.

By the end of the day, I was starving but genuinely felt thinner, more energetic and positively vibrant. I even contemplated trying on my pre-baby jeans but decided to hold off until Monday when they would undoubtedly fit.

But it all went to shit when Ed came home with a box of beer and a twenty-pound note in his wallet. 'It's Friday' was all he had to say. So ...

Dinner number 2: Chinese! Half a duck with hoisin
sauce and pancakes. Fried noodles – *large*!
Chips – *extra large*! Some unidentifiable fried
meat slathered in a chemically enhanced spicy
sauce that will probably give me cancer. All of
this was washed down with beer: bottles upon
bottles of delicious, icy-cold, thirst-quenching

beer. Then out came the imitation Baileys from Lidl that had been gathering dust in the cupboard since Christmas and we drank the lot between us.

Come Sunday, I've gained two pounds and am forced to switch from wearing maternity jeans to maternity leggings to give myself a little extra breathing room.

I call Charlie and whinge about my week of shameful behaviour.

'Don't be ridiculous. You're not fat, you're fucking beautiful!' she says emphatically.

'I am, Charls. Be honest. None of my clothes fit, my tits are swinging under my pits and I haven't seen my fanny in months. I am totally un-shaggable! Ed hasn't gone near me in ages and, let's face it, who can blame him?'

'Well, I'd do you – but that's not really what you want to hear, is it?'

'Not really. You're not exactly my type.'

'Fair enough. I'm not to everyone's taste, I admit.' She laughs. 'Okay. I've got a plan. I'm free tomorrow and so is Jen. Let's hit the shops and kit you out in a new sexy bra and pants. Lift the tits, lift the spirits, I say!'

'Sounds good. Although, right now, I'd prefer to lift the tits and *drink* the spirits.'

I'm forty-five minutes late to meet my friends for our sexy-underwear shopping trip. Leaving a house with a baby comes with plenty of stress as standard, but trying to get Stanley

out of the front door on time causes heart palpitations resembling a Beethoven-esque timpani roll.

First, I have to change his socks twice before I find a pair that feels 'right'. Then, he kicks off when I put the 'wrong' T-shirt on him. It's the same brand and colour of polo shirt as the one he wears *every* single day, but he can tell that this particular one isn't the exact original. The child has some super sixth sense for this kind of thing, and it is only when I pull the original shirt out of the dirty laundry basket and put it on him that he agrees to leave. I must make my peace with the fact that he is going to wander the streets with a large orange juice stain all down his front. But some battles, I've learnt, just aren't worth having.

It's early February, it's icy cold and the heavens are emptying with the sort of harsh, spiky rain that threatens to slice straight through my skin. Standing on the driveway, I wrestle for ages with the cover on the pram, trying my best to keep my language clean. Soaked to the bone, I then grab Stan by the hand and try to make a run for it down Windsor Road, but he stops dead every few steps to tell me the make of every car on the street. Staying dry is not a priority for him, but pointing out every single Saab and Alfa Romeo is. Once he has positioned himself ankle deep in a muddy puddle, he starts telling me the number plates of the cars parked further up the road.

'Excuse me, but we will be getting to BT20 NXZ soon,' he says, and once we've skidded around the corner on to Oxford Road, there it is, just like he said.

'That's incredible, Stan! How do you know that? Who taught you about cars?'

'Daddy teached me,' he replies.

I recall a day a few weeks back when I caught Ed and Stan lining up dozens of Matchbox cars across the kitchen floor just as I was about to start cooking dinner. I snapped at them and told them to move, then poor Ed ended up flat on his arse after he was taken down by a rogue Honda that had slipped out from under the dishwasher. Come to think of it, he still has a yellow bruise there, even now.

Twelve number plates later, we arrive at Starbucks to find Charlie and Jen outside, huddled under a tiny umbrella. The pile of cigarette butts on the floor next to Charlie's foot indicates that she is on edge.

'It's rammed inside: batshit crazy toddlers, stressed mums and the usual laptop loners. I say we ditch it and go somewhere else,' she says. 'I don't know why you even suggested Starfucks in the first place, Jen.'

A steamed-up coffee shop filled with 'batshit crazy toddlers' doesn't sound remotely appealing. Not only had I fed Jack four times in the night, but I'd also been up for ages trying to calm Stanley down after he had a nightmare in which he was being chased by a 'giant kicking K'.

'Sod this. We're going to the pub,' Charlie declares, taking the reins.

I am weak – physically worn down, emotionally drained and totally soaked – so I don't even try to object.

En route to the nearest pub, The Grove, we bump into Marsha and her well-adjusted son, Hugo, because sometimes life can be *that* cruel.

'Lucy! Hi, Lucy!' She waves from across the road. She glides over the zebra crossing in her Cath Kidston floral raincoat and matching umbrella, with Hugo trotting alongside her like the Cruft's Best in Show winner. 'How are you all, ladies?' She leans in and kisses me on both cheeks and I play along,

inhaling the thick fumes of her sickly perfume as I try to avoid getting clocked over the head with her umbrella. 'Awful weather isn't it?'

'Yep,' I say as a thick raindrop drips off the edge of my nose onto the pavement.

'Hello, Stanley,' says Hugo sweetly.

Stanley looks straight down at the floor and doesn't say a word.

'Stanley is going to Ealing Primary in September too, Hugo,' chirps Marsha. 'You might even be in the same class.'

Hugo proudly thrusts a Spiderman figure up to Stanley's face to show it off, but it sparks no reaction. Stan doesn't even look up, but shuffles in behind me and buries his head under my coat. Rejected, Hugo backs away and reaches for his mother's hand and I see her lips shrivel up tightly in disapproval.

'What is it that you have there, Stanley? The alphabet?' she says as her tinted eyebrows disappear into her hairline.

Stan is still lurking under my coat, feigning mutism, so I am forced to answer for him as usual. 'Yes,' I say, 'it's his favourite puzzle that he takes everywhere.'

'Oh. How *unusual*! Well, we like Lego in our house and Spiderman ... as you can see.' She reaches down and ruffles Hugo's hair. 'Speaking of which, did I tell you that Richard renewed our annual passes for Legoland, Lucy? The new season is starting next month.'

'No, I don't think so,' I say, even though she had on several tedious occasions just like this. I stand back and wait for the 'P' word, which I know is coming next.

'Well, he bought us the *premium* ones as an impromptu gift, so we can just pop down whenever we like. It's so fab!'

'Great,' I say, 'we'll have to check it out.'

More P's fly out of her mouth like a shower of bullets. 'I mean, it is *pricey* – especially if you haven't got the *perks* included with the *premium* passes,' she continues, 'but if you bring a packed lunch then you won't get stung too badly.'

Silence falls on the group. We are all drenched, Stanley is pulling on the back of my jeans and Charlie is executing her 'let's go before I stab someone' glare.

Marsha finally breaks the silence. 'Anyway, we'd better go. We're off to meet the new school mums and their kiddies at Starbucks, then we're heading into town together to see the new dinosaur exhibition in Kensington.'

Her dagger strikes me straight through the chest.

'Well, we are going to the pub,' Charlie says pointedly. She links her arm through mine and pulls me towards her.

'The pub? Gosh! I haven't stepped foot in a pub in years,' says Marsha, her mouth shrivelling once again.

'Excuse me, but I want to go!' Stanley says bluntly. 'I want to go, I want to go, I want to go, I want to go!' he yells four times, as standard. His volume knob is turning itself up rapidly and it won't be long until he reaches maximum decibels.

'You'd better get him into that pub quickly, Lucy!' Marsha chuckles before bidding us farewell and gliding off up the high street with Hugo cantering along beside her.

'God, that woman is a dick,' says Charlie when Marsha is still within earshot.

'The biggest dick,' agrees Jen.

'The *ultimate* dick!' I conclude.

We arrive at The Grove, and as I force the bulky pram through the tiny door, I immediately clap eyes on a group of mums breastfeeding in the far corner. I smile and give them my best wave of admiration – a sort of Jennifer Lawrence-

esque, *Hunger Games*-style salute to acknowledge my fellow pub-going warriors of motherhood.

‘What are you *doing*?’ says Charlie, glaring in confusion at my dramatically extended arm.

‘What?’ I shrug my shoulders. ‘I’m doing a Katniss Everdeen, obviously.’

‘No, Luce – it’s more like a Hitler.’

I elbow her sharply in the arm. ‘What are you trying to say? That I need to bleach my moustache?’

‘Yep,’ she sniggers, ‘and maybe refrain from doing any elaborate arm extensions until you do.’

Noticing that these mums are drinking coffee, I ask Charlie to order a Diet Coke for me and a smooth orange juice for Stan whilst I look for a suitable table.

‘Diet Coke?’ Charlie is disgusted. Taking a bullet would be less painful to her than hearing these two ugly words said out loud in a respectable beer-serving establishment. ‘What’s happened to you? First this, next you’ll be asking for a tap water with a slice of fresh lemon.’

‘Leave her alone, Charlie,’ says Jen, jumping in to defend me.

‘I will not!’ she retorts. ‘This is *our* day of fun. This woman needs a beer. Look at her – she is positively miserable and only a delicious pint can fix her.’

‘Okay, okay, Charls. I give up. Get me a half, but we’ve got to sit out of the way, maybe down the back where no one can see. And don’t forget an orange juice for Stan. No bits.’

The unfortunate run-in with Marsha has chinked my armour, so bottle-feeding Jack with a beer in hand, in full view of the breast-feeders, is the last thing I need. I’ve already experienced glares of disapproval every time I pull a bottle out amongst the ‘breast is best’ brigade down at

the baby clinic, and I don't particularly want to be on the receiving end of any judgemental daggers from this pack of women. This day is about rebuilding self-esteem, not shredding what is left of it. And so, tucked away at the back of the pub, with a half of lager on the table and a bottle of formula in hand, our afternoon of blissful girly fun begins.

Whilst I pace back and forth trying to burp Jack, who bursts into tears every time I try to sit down, Jen and I discover the ground-breaking news that Charlie, the eternal singleton, is seeing someone. She is sketchy on the details, claiming that she doesn't want to jinx it, so we're only told that his name is Tom, he is thirty-six and a doctor, and that she met him at a gig. 'All I can say is that he's smoking hot, *highly* energetic and has unlimited access to an abundance of free lube ... not that we need it. And that's all I'm saying for now.'

Jen is stunned, as am I.

A hot doctor? Free lube?!

Even Jack is shocked into silence, so much so that he allows me to sit down for nearly a whole minute to digest the news. Of course, the bliss of being in a seated position comes to an abrupt end ten seconds later when Stanley takes a sip of his orange juice.

'Bits. Bits. Bits. BITS!' he screams as he spits it out, darts to the centre of the pub then throws himself down on the floor and convulses like a paralytic starfish. Hysterical tears ensue, and even after Jen dashes to the bar and returns with a smooth orange juice, I just cannot calm him down. His Oscar-worthy display of emotion captures the undivided attention of every person in the pub, in particular the pack of mums in the corner. I can actively feel them marking my child-calming techniques out of ten like the panel from

Strictly Come Dancing, and I'm expecting them to hold up their score cards to reveal a pitiful result.

One out of ten.

It's minus two from me.

Zero – poor performance. Poor!

When I can take no more, I lift Stanley and put him into Jack's pram, taking several vicious kicks to the chest in the process. I then secure Jack into the harness that I've packed for emergencies such as this and scramble to the door, leaving my friends and a room full of aurally traumatised punters behind me.

My blissful afternoon of girly fun lasted a measly twenty-five minutes. Bra shopping is officially on hold, and my boobs, for the time being, are going to remain deflated.

Much like my spirits.