

The
Flat
SHARE

BETH O'LEARY

Quercus

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1

Tiffy

You've got to say this for desperation: it makes you much more open-minded.

I really can see some positives in this flat. The technicolour mould on the kitchen wall will scrub off, at least in the short term. The filthy mattress can be replaced fairly cheaply. And you could definitely make the argument that the mushrooms growing behind the toilet are introducing a fresh, outdoorsy feel to the place.

Gerty and Mo, however, are not desperate, and they are not trying to be positive. I would describe their expressions as 'aghast'.

'You can't live here.'

That's Gerty. She's standing with her heeled boots together and her elbows tucked in tightly, as though occupying as little space as possible in protest at being here at all. Her hair is pulled back in a low bun, already pinned so she can easily slip on the barrister's wig she wears for court. Her expression would be comical if it weren't my actual life we are discussing here.

'There must be somewhere else within budget, Tiff,' Mo says worriedly, bobbing up from where he was examining the boiler cupboard. He looks even more dishevelled than usual, helped by the cobweb now hanging from his beard. 'This is even worse than the one we viewed last night.'

I look around for the estate agent; he's thankfully well out of ear-shot, smoking on the 'balcony' (the sagging roof of the neighbour's garage, definitely not designed for walking on).

'I'm not looking around another one of these hellholes,' Gerty says, glancing at her watch. It's 8 a.m. – she'll need to be at Southwark Crown Court for nine. 'There must be another option.'

'Surely we can fit her in at ours?' Mo suggests, for about the fifth time since Saturday.

'Honestly, would you stop with that?' Gerty snaps. 'That is not a long-term solution. And she'd have to sleep standing up to even fit anywhere.' She gives me an exasperated look. 'Couldn't you have been shorter? We could have put you under the dining table if you were less than five nine.'

I make an apologetic face, but really I'd prefer to stay here than on the floor of the tiny, eye-wateringly expensive flat Mo and Gerty jointly invested in last month. They've never lived together before, even when we were at university. I'm concerned that it may well be the death of their friendship. Mo is messy, absent-minded and has this uncanny ability to take up an enormous amount of room despite being relatively small. Gerty, on the other hand, has spent the last three years living in a preternaturally clean flat, so perfect that it looked computer-generated. I'm not sure how the two lifestyles will overlay without West London imploding.

The main problem, though, is if I'm crashing on someone's floor I can just as easily go back to Justin's place. And, as of 11 p.m. Thursday, I have officially decided that I cannot be allowed that option any longer. I need to move forward, and I need to commit to somewhere so I can't go back.

Mo rubs his forehead, sinking down into the grimy leather sofa. 'Tiff, I could lend you some ...'

'I don't want you to lend me any money,' I say, more sharply than

I mean to. 'Look, I *really* need to get this sorted this week. It's this place or the flatshare.'

'The bedshare, you mean,' Gerty says. 'Can I ask why it has to be *now*? Not that I'm not delighted. Just that last I checked you were sitting tight in that flat waiting for the next time he-who-must-not-be-named deigned to drop by.'

I wince, surprised. Not at the sentiment – Mo and Gerty never liked Justin, and I know they hate that I'm still living at his place, even though he's hardly ever there. It's just unusual to hear Gerty bring him up directly. After the final peace-making dinner with the four of us ended in a furious row, I gave up on trying to make everyone get along and just stopped talking to Gerty and Mo about him altogether. Old habits die hard – even post break-up we've all dodged around discussing him.

'And why does it have to be *so* cheap?' Gerty goes on, ignoring the warning look from Mo. 'I know you're paid a pittance, but, really, Tiffy, four hundred a month is impossible in London. Have you actually thought about all this? Properly?'

I swallow. I can feel Mo watching me carefully. That's the trouble with having a counsellor as a friend: Mo is basically an accredited mind-reader, and he never seems to switch his superpowers off. 'Tiff?' he says gently.

Oh, bloody hell, I'll just have to show them. There's nothing else for it. Quickly and all at once, that's the best way – like pulling off a plaster, or getting into cold water, or telling my mother I broke something ornamental from the living-room dresser.

I reach for my phone and pull up the Facebook message.

Tiffy,

I'm really disappointed in how you acted last night. You were completely out of line. It's my flat, Tiffy – I can come by whenever I like, with whoever I like.

I would have expected you to be more grateful for me letting you stay. I know us breaking up has been hard on you – I know you're not ready to leave. But if you think that means you can start trying to 'lay down some rules' then it's time you paid me for the past three months of rent. And you're going to need to pay full rent going forwards too. Patricia says you're taking advantage of me, living in my place pretty much for free, and even though I've always stood up for you with her, after yesterday's performance I can't help thinking she might be right.

Justin xx

My stomach twists when I reread that line, *you're taking advantage of me*, because I never intended to do that. I just didn't know that when he left he really meant it this time.

Mo finishes reading first. 'He "popped in" again on Thursday? With Patricia?'

I look away. 'He has a point. He's been really good to let me stay there this long.'

'Funny,' Gerty says darkly, 'I've always had the distinct impression he likes keeping you there.'

She makes it sound weird, but I sort of feel the same way. When I'm still in Justin's flat, it isn't really over. I mean, all the other times, he's come back eventually. But . . . then I met Patricia on Thursday. The real-life, extremely attractive, actually quite lovely woman Justin has left me for. There's never been another woman before.

Mo reaches for my hand; Gerty takes the other. We stay like this, ignoring the estate agent smoking outside the window, and I let myself cry for a moment, just one fat tear down each cheek.

'So, anyway,' I say brightly, withdrawing my hands to wipe my eyes, 'I need to move out. Now. Even if I wanted to stay and risk him bringing Patricia back again, I can't afford the rent, and I owe Justin a ton of money, and I really don't want to borrow from anyone, I'm

kind of sick of not paying for things myself, to be honest, so . . . yes. It's this or the flatshare.'

Mo and Gerty exchange a look. Gerty closes her eyes in pained resignation.

'Well, you clearly cannot live here.' She opens her eyes and holds out a hand. 'Show me that advert again.'

I hand her my phone, flicking from Justin's message to the Gumtree ad for the flatshare.

Double bedroom in sunny one-bed Stockwell flat, rent £350 per month including bills. Available immediately, for six months minimum.

Flat (and room/bed) is to share with twenty-seven-year-old palliative care nurse who works nights and is away weekends. Only ever in the flat 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday. All yours the rest of the time! Perfect for someone with 9 to 5 job.

To view, contact L. Twomey – details below.

It's not just sharing a flat, Tiff, it's sharing a bed. Sharing a bed is odd,' Mo says worriedly.

'What if this L. Twomey is a man?' Gerty asks.

I'm prepared for this one. 'It doesn't matter,' I say calmly. 'It's not like we'd ever be in the bed at the same time – or the flat, even.'

This is uncomfortably close to what I said when justifying staying at Justin's place last month, but never mind.

'You'd be sleeping with him, Tiffany!' Gerty says. 'Everyone knows the first rule of flatsharing is don't sleep with your flatmate.'

'I don't think this sort of arrangement is what people are referring to,' I tell her wryly. 'You see, Gerty, sometimes when people say "sleeping together", what they really mean is—'

Gerty gives me a long, level look. 'Yes, thank you, Tiffany.'

Mo's sniggering stops abruptly when Gerty turns her glare on him. 'I'd say the first rule of flatsharing is to make sure you get on with

the person before you move in,' he says, cannily redirecting the glare to me again. '*Especially* in these circumstances.'

'Obviously I'll meet this L. Twomey person first. If we don't get on, I won't take it.'

After a moment Mo gives me a nod and squeezes my shoulder. We all descend into the kind of silence that comes after you've talked about something difficult – half grateful for it being over, half relieved to have managed it at all.

'Fine,' Gerty says. 'Fine. Do what you need to do. It's got to be better than living in this kind of squalor.' She marches out of the flat, turning at the last moment to address the estate agent as he steps through from the balcony. 'And you,' she tells him loudly, 'are a curse upon society.'

He blinks as she slams the front door. There is a long, awkward pause.

He stubs out his cigarette. 'You interested, then?' he asks me.

I get to work early and sink down in my chair. My desk is the closest thing to home at the moment. It's a haven of half-crafted objects, things that have proven too heavy to take back on the bus, and pot plants arranged in such a way that I can see people approaching before they can tell whether I'm at my desk. My pot-plant wall is widely regarded among the other junior staff as an inspiring example of interior design. (Really it's just about choosing plants the same colour as your hair – in my case, red – and ducking/running away when you catch sight of anyone moving purposefully.)

My first job of the day is to meet Katherin, one of my favourite authors. Katherin writes books about knitting and crochet. It's a niche audience that buys them, but that's the story of Butterfingers Press – we love a niche audience. We specialise in crafting and DIY books. Tie-dye bedsheets, design your own dresses, crochet yourself a lampshade, make all your furniture out of ladders . . . That sort of thing.

I love working here. This is the only possible explanation for the fact that I have been Assistant Editor for three and a half years, earning below the London living wage, and have made no attempt to rectify the situation by, say, applying for a job at a publishing house that actually makes money. Gerty likes to tell me that I lack ambition, but it really isn't that. I just love this stuff. As a child, I spent my days reading, or tinkering with my toys until they suited me better: dip-dying Barbie's hair, pimping up my JCB truck. And now I read and craft for a living.

Well, not really a living, as such. But a bit of money. Just about enough to pay tax.

'I'm telling you, Tiffy, crochet is the next colouring books,' Katherin tells me, once she's settled herself down in our best meeting room and talked me through the plan for her next book. I examine the finger she's wagging in my direction. She has about fifty rings on each hand, but I've yet to discern whether any of them are wedding or engagement rings (I imagine that if Katherin has any, she'll have more than one).

Katherin is just on the acceptable side of eccentric: she has a straw-blond plait, one of those tans that somehow ages well, and endless stories of breaking into places in the 1960s and peeing on things. She was a real rebel once. She refuses to wear a bra even to this day, when bras have become quite comfortable and women have mostly given up on fighting the power because Beyoncé is doing it for us.

'That'd be good,' I say. 'Maybe we could add a strapline with the word "mindful" in it. It is quite mindful, isn't it? Or mindless?'

Katherin laughs, tipping her head back. 'Ah, Tiffy. Your job's ridiculous.' She pats my hand affectionately and then reaches for her handbag. 'You see that Martin boy,' she says, 'you tell him I'll only do that cruise day class if I have a glamorous young assistant.'

I groan. I know where this is going. Katherin likes to drag me along to these things – for any class she needs a live model to show how

to measure as you go when you're designing an outfit, apparently, and I once made the fatal error of offering myself up for the job when she couldn't find anyone. Now I am her go-to choice. PR is so desperate to get Katherin into these sorts of events that they've started begging me too.

'This is too far, Katherin. I'm not going on a cruise with you.'

'But it's free! People pay thousands for those, Tiffany!'

'You're only joining them for the Isle of Wight loop,' I remind her. Martin has already briefed me on this one. 'And it's on a weekend. I don't work weekends.'

'It's not work,' Katherin insists, gathering her notes and packing them into her handbag in an entirely random order. 'It's a lovely Saturday sailing trip with one of your friends.' She pauses. 'Me,' she clarifies. 'We're friends, aren't we?'

'I am your editor!' I say, bundling her out of the meeting room.

'Think about it, Tiffany!' she calls over her shoulder, unperturbed. She catches sight of Martin, who is already making a beeline for her from over by the printers. 'I'm not doing it unless she is, Martin, my boy! She's the one you need to talk to!'

And then she's gone, the grubby glass doors of our office swinging behind her.

Martin turns on me. 'I like your shoes,' he says, with a charming smile. I shudder. I can't stand Martin from PR. He says things like 'let's action that' in meetings, and clicks his fingers at Ruby, who is a Marketing Exec, but who Martin seems to think is his personal assistant. He's only twenty-three, but has decided it will further his merciless pursuit of seniority if he can seem older than he is, so he always puts on this awful jocular voice and tries to talk to our MD about golf.

The shoes *are* excellent, though. They're purple Doc Marten-style boots, with white lilies painted on them, and they took me most of

Saturday. My crafting and customising has really upped since Justin left me. 'Thanks, Martin,' I say, already attempting to sidle back to the security of my desk.

'Leela mentioned that you're looking for somewhere to live,' Martin says.

I hesitate. I'm not sure where this is going. I sense nowhere good.

'Me and Hana' – a woman in Marketing who always sneers at my fashion sense – 'have a spare room. You might have seen on Facebook, but I thought maybe I should bring it up, you know, IRL. It's a single bed, but, well, I guess that won't be a problem for you these days. As we're friends, Hana and I decided we could offer it for five hundred a month, plus bills.'

'That's so kind of you!' I say. 'But I've actually *just* found somewhere.' Well, I sort of have. Nearly. Oh, God, if L. Twomey won't have me, will I have to live with Martin and Hana? I mean, I already spend every working day with them, and frankly that is plenty of Martin-and-Hana time for me. I'm not sure my (already shaky) resolve to leave Justin's place can withstand the idea of Martin chasing me for rent payments and Hana seeing me in my porridge-stained *Adventure Time* pyjamas every morning.

'Oh. Right, well. We'll have to find someone else, then.' Martin's expression turns cunning. He has smelled guilt. 'You could make it up to me by going with Katherin to that—'

'No.'

He gives an exaggerated sigh. 'God, Tiffy. It's a free cruise! Don't you go on cruises all the time?'

I *used* to go on cruises all the time, when my wonderful and now ex-boyfriend used to take me on them. We'd sail from Caribbean island to Caribbean island in a sunny haze of romantic bliss. We'd explore European cities and then head back to the boat for incredible sex in our tiny little bunk. We'd stuff ourselves at the all-you-can-eat

buffet and then lie out on the deck watching the gulls circle above us as we talked idly of our future children.

‘Gone off them,’ I say, reaching for the phone. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to make a call.’

2

Leon

Phone rings as Doctor Patel is prescribing meds for Holly (little girl with leukaemia). Bad timing. Very bad timing. Doctor Patel not happy at interruption, and makes her feelings clear. Seems to have forgotten that I, too, as night nurse, should have gone home at 8 a.m., and yet am still here dealing with ill people and grouchy consultants like Doctor Patel.

Hang up when it rings, obviously. Make mental note to listen to voicemail and change ringtone to something less embarrassing (this one is called 'Jive' and is far too funky for hospice setting. Not that funk does not have role in place of sickness, just that is not *always* appropriate).

Holly: Why didn't you answer? Isn't that rude? What if it was your girlfriend with the short hair?

Dr Patel: What's rude is leaving your mobile on loud during a ward round. Though I'm surprised whoever-it-was even tried ringing him at this hour.

A glance at me, half irritable, half amused.

Dr Patel: You may have noticed that Leon is not a big talker, Holly.

Leans in, conspiratorial.

Dr Patel: One of the registrars has a theory. He says that Leon has a limited number of words to use each shift, and when it gets to this time of day, he's entirely run out.

Don't grace this with a response.

Speaking of girlfriend with short hair: haven't told Kay about the room thing yet. Not had time. Also, am avoiding inevitable conflict. But really must call her later this morning.

Tonight was good. Mr Prior's pain lessened enough that he could start telling me about the man he fell in love with in the trenches: a dark-haired charmer called Johnny White, with the chiselled jaw of a Hollywood star and a twinkle in his eye. They had one fraught, romantic, war-torn summer, then were split up. Johnny White was taken to hospital for shellshock. They never saw each other again. Mr Prior could've got in lots of trouble (homosexuality vexing to military sorts).

I was tired, coffee buzz dying, but stayed with Mr Prior after hand-over. The man never gets visitors and loves to talk when he can. Failed to escape conversation without a scarf (my fourteenth from Mr Prior). Can only say no a certain number of times, and Mr Prior knits so fast I wonder why anyone bothered with the Industrial Revolution. Pretty sure he's faster than a machine.

Listen to voicemail after eating dangerously reheated chicken stir-fry in front of last week's *Masterchef*.

Voicemail: Hi, is that L. Twomey? Oh, shite, you can't answer – I always do this on voicemails. OK, I'm just going to proceed on the assumption that you're L. Twomey. My name's Tiffy Moore and I'm ringing about the Gumtree ad, about a room? Look, my friends think it's weird that we'd be sharing a bed, even though it'd be at different times, but it doesn't bother me if it doesn't bother you, and to be honest I'd do pretty much anything for a central London flat I can move into right away at that price. [Pause] Oh, God, not anything. There's *loads* of things I wouldn't do. I'm not like . . . No, Martin, not *now*, can't you see I'm on the phone?

Who is Martin? A child? Does this rambling woman with Essex accent want to bring a child into my flat?

Voicemail continues: Sorry, that's my colleague, he wants me to go on a cruise with a middle-aged lady to talk to pensioners about crochet.

Not the explanation I was expecting. Better, definitely, but begs many questions.

Voicemail continues: Look, just call me back or text me if the room's still available? I'm super tidy, I'll keep right out of your way and I'm still in the habit of cooking double quantities of my dinner so if you like home-cooked food I can leave leftovers.

She reads out her number. Just in time, I remember to jot it down.

Woman is annoying, definitely. And is female, which may vex Kay. But only two other people have called: one asked if I had a problem with pet hedgehogs (answer: not unless they are living in my flat) and other was definitely a drug dealer (not being judgemental – was offered drugs during call). I need £350 extra a month if I'm going to keep paying Sal without Kay's help. This is the only available plan. Plus, will never actually see annoying woman. Will only ever be in when annoying woman is out.

I text her.

Hi there, Tiffy. Thanks for your voicemail. Would be great to meet you and talk about the arrangement for my flat. How is Saturday morning? Cheers, Leon Twomey.

Nice, normal-person message. Resist all urges to ask about Martin's cruise-ship plan, though find myself curious.

She replies almost instantly.

Hi! Sounds great. 10 a.m. at the flat itself, then? x

Let's make it 9 a.m., or I'll fall asleep! See you then. Address is on the ad.
Cheers, Leon.

There. Done. Easy: £350 a month, almost in the bag already.
Now to tell Kay.

3

Tiffy

So, naturally I get curious and google him. Leon Twomey is a pretty unusual name, and I find him on Facebook without having to employ the creepy stalker techniques I reserve for new writers I'm trying to poach from other publishing houses.

It's a relief to see that he's not my type at all, which will definitely simplify things – if Justin did ever meet Leon, for instance, I don't think he'd see him as a threat. He's got light-brown skin and thick, curly hair long enough to be pushed back behind his ears, and he's way too gangly for me. All elbows and neck, you know the type. He looks like a nice guy, though – in every photo he's doing this sweet lopsided smile that doesn't seem at all creepy or murderous, though actually if you look at a picture with that idea in mind everyone starts to look like an axe-wielding killer, so I try to put the thought out of my head. He looks friendly and unthreatening. These are good things.

However, I do now know unequivocally that he is a man.

Am I actually willing to share a bed with a man? Even sharing a bed with Justin was a bit horrible sometimes, and we were in a relationship. His side of the mattress sagged in the middle and he didn't always shower in between getting home from the gym and going to bed, so there was a sort of . . . sweaty smell to his bit of the duvet. I always had to make extra sure it was the same way up so I didn't get the sweaty side.

But still. £350 per month. And he would never actually *be* there.

‘Tiffany!’

My head shoots up. Crap, that’s Rachel, and I know what she wants. She wants the manuscript for this bloody *Make a Stir Bake and Make* book that I’ve been ignoring all day.

‘Don’t try sneaking off to the kitchen or pretending to be on the phone,’ she says, from over my wall of pot plants. This is the trouble with having friends at work: you drunkenly tell them your tricks when the two of you go to the pub, and then you’re defenceless.

‘You’ve had your hair done!’ I say. It’s a desperate ploy to redirect the conversation early, but her hair is especially cool today. It’s in braids, as always, but this time the tiny plaits have bright turquoise ribbon laced between them like corset strings. ‘How do you braid it like that?’

‘Don’t try to distract me with my *Mastermind* specialist subject, Tiffany Moore,’ Rachel says, tapping her perfectly polka-dotted nails. ‘When am I getting that manuscript?’

‘I just need . . . a *little* longer . . .’ I put my hand over the papers in front of me so she can’t see the page numbers, which are in the single digits.

She narrows her eyes. ‘Thursday?’

I nod eagerly. Yeah, why not? I mean, that’s totally unachievable at this point, but Friday sounds a lot better when you’re saying it on Thursday, so I’ll just tell her then.

‘And go for a drink with me tomorrow night?’

I pause. I was meant to be good and not spend *any* money this week, on account of the looming debt, but nights out with Rachel are always brilliant, and frankly I could really do with having some fun. Besides, she won’t be able to argue with me about this manuscript on Thursday if she’s hungover.

‘Done.’

*

Drunk Man No. 1 is the expressive kind. The sort of drunk who likes to throw his arms out wide regardless of what might be directly to his left or right (so far, that's included one large fake palm tree, one tray of sambuca shots, and one relatively famous Ukrainian model). Every movement is exaggerated, even the basic walking steps – you know, left foot out in front, right foot out, repeat. Drunk Man No. 1 makes walking look like the hokey-cokey.

Drunk Man No. 2 is the deceitful sort. He keeps his face very still when he's listening to you, as though the absence of expression will make it clear how very sober he is. He nods occasionally, and fairly convincingly, but doesn't quite blink enough. His attempts to stare at your boobs are much less subtle than he thinks they are.

I wonder what they think of me and Rachel. They headed straight for us, but that's not conclusively positive. Back when I was with Justin, if I was going out clubbing with Rachel he would always remind me that lots of men see 'quirky girl' and think 'desperate and easy'. He's right, as per usual. I actually wonder if it's easier to get laid as a quirky girl than a perky cheerleader type: you're more approachable, and nobody assumes you've already got a boyfriend. Which is probably another reason Justin wasn't a fan of my nights out with Rachel, on reflection.

'So, like, books about how to make cakes?' says Drunk Man No. 2, thus proving his listening skills and aforementioned sobriety. (Honestly. What's the point in having sambuca shots if you're just going to pretend you haven't been drinking all night?)

'Yeah!' Rachel says. 'Or build shelves or make clothes or . . . or . . . what do *you* like to do?'

She is drunk enough to find Drunk Man No. 2 attractive, but I suspect she's just trying to keep him busy to open the floor for me to jump Drunk Man No. 1. Of the two, Drunk Man No. 1 is clearly preferable – he is tall enough, for starters. This is the first challenge. I'm six foot, and though I have no problem with dating shorter men,

it often seems to bother guys if I'm more than an inch or two taller than them. That's fine by me – I've no interest in the ones who care about that sort of thing. It's a useful filter.

'What do I like to do?' repeats Drunk Man No. 2. 'I like to dance with beautiful women at bars with bad names and overpriced drinks.' He flashes a sudden grin, which, though a little more sluggish and wonky than it's probably intended to be, is actually quite attractive.

I can see Rachel is thinking the same. She shoots me a calculating look – not so drunk as all that, then – and I can see her evaluating the situation between me and Drunk Man No. 1.

I look at Drunk Man No. 1 too, and do some evaluating of my own. He's tall, with nice broad shoulders and hair that's greying at the temples in a way that's actually quite sexy. He's probably mid-thirties – he could be a little 1990s Clooney-ish if you squinted a bit or dimmed the lights.

Do I fancy him? If I do, I could sleep with him. You can do that when you're single.

Weird.

I've not thought about sleeping with anyone since Justin. You get tons of time back when you're single and not having sex – not just the actual time doing it, but the time shaving legs, buying nice underwear, wondering whether all other women get bikini waxes, etc. It's a real plus. Of course, there's the overwhelming absence of one of the greatest aspects of your adult life, but you do get much more admin done.

Obviously I know that we broke up three months ago. I know that in theory I can have sex with other people. But . . . I can't help thinking about what Justin would say. How angry he'd be. I may be technically allowed, but I'm not . . . you know. *Allowed* allowed. Not in my head, not yet.

Rachel gets it. 'Sorry, mate,' she says, patting Drunk Man No. 2 on the arm. 'I like to dance with my friend.' She scribbles her number

on a napkin – God knows where she got that pen from, the woman's a magician – and then my hand is in hers and we're winding our way into the centre of the dance floor where the music hits my skull from both sides, sending my eardrums shivering.

'What kind of drunk are you?' Rachel asks, as we grind inappropriately to classic Destiny's Child.

'I'm a bit . . . *thoughtful*,' I shout at her. 'Too analytical to sleep with that nice man.'

She reaches for a drink from the tray of one of those shot ladies who wanders around asking you to overpay for things, and hands the woman some cash.

'“Not enough” sort of drunk, then,' she says, giving me the drink. 'You may be an editor, but no drunk girl trots out the word “analytical”.'

'Assistant editor,' I remind her, and knock back the drink. Jäger-bomb. It's strange how something so fundamentally disgusting, whose very aftertaste makes you want to vomit the next day, can taste delicious on a dance floor.

Rachel plies me with drink all night and flirts with every wingman in sight, chucking all attractive men in my direction. Whatever she says, I am plenty tipsy enough, so I don't think much of it – she's just being an excellent friend. The night spins by in a mass of dancers and brightly coloured drinks.

It is only when Mo and Gerty arrive that I start to wonder what this night out is all about.

Mo has the look of a man who was summoned on short notice. His beard is a little skewwhiff, like he slept on it funny, and he's in a worn-out T-shirt I think I remember from uni – though it's a little tighter on him now. Gerty looks haughtily beautiful, as usual, with no make-up on, and her hair yanked up in a ballerina topknot; it's hard to tell if she was planning to come because she never wears make-up, and dresses impeccably all the time anyway. She could

well have just pulled on a slightly higher pair of heels to go with her skinny jeans last minute.

They're making their way across the dance floor. My suspicion that Mo was not planning to be here is confirmed – he's not dancing. Take Mo to a club and there will always be dancing. So why have they turned up on my random Wednesday night out with Rachel? They don't even know her that well – only through the odd birthday drinks or housewarming parties. In fact, Gerty and Rachel have a low-level alpha-wolf feud going on, and when we do all get together they usually end up bickering.

Is it my birthday? I drunkenly wonder. Do I have exciting surprise news?

I turn to Rachel. 'Wha—?'

'Table,' she says, pointing at the booths at the back of the club.

Gerty does a relatively good job of hiding her irritation at being redirected just when she's battled her way through to the centre of the dance floor.

I'm getting bad vibes. I'm just at the happiest point of drunk, though, so I'm willing to suspend worried thoughts in the hope that they're coming to tell me that I've won a four-week holiday to New Zealand or something.

But no.

'Tiffany, I didn't know how to tell you this,' Rachel is saying, 'so this was the best plan I could come up with. Get you happy drunk, remind you what flirting feels like, then call your support team.' She reaches to take both my hands. 'Tiffany. Justin is engaged.'

4

Leon

Conversation re flat not at all as predicted. Kay was unusually angry. Seemed upset at idea of someone else sleeping in my bed besides her? But she never comes round. Hates the dark-green walls and elderly neighbours – is part of her ‘you spend too much time with old people’ thing. We’re always at hers (light-grey walls, cool young neighbours).

Argument ends at weary impasse. She wants me to pull down ad and cancel Essex woman; I’m not changing my mind. It’s the best idea for getting easy cash every month that I’ve thought of, bar lottery winning, which cannot be factored in to financial planning. Do not want to go back to borrowing that £350. Kay was the one who said it: it wasn’t good for our relationship.

She’s come that far, so. She’ll come around.

Slow night. Holly couldn’t sleep; we played checkers. She lifts her fingers and dances them over the board like she’s weaving a magic spell before she touches a counter. Apparently it’s a mind game – makes the other player watch where you’re going instead of planning their next move. Where did a seven-year-old learn mind games?

Ask the question.

Holly: You’re quite naïve, Leon, aren’t you?

Pronounces it 'knave'. Probably never said it out loud before, just read it in one of her books.

Me: I'm very worldly wise, thank you, Holly!

Gives me patronising look.

Holly: It's OK, Leon. You're just too nice. I bet people walk all over you like a doormat.

She picked that up from somewhere, definitely. Probably her father, who visits every other week in a sharp grey suit, bringing poorly chosen sweets and the sour smell of cigarette smoke.

Me: Being nice is a good thing. You can be strong and nice. You don't have to be one or the other.

The patronising look again.

Holly: Look. It's like how . . . Kay's strong, you're nice.

She spreads her hands, like, *it's the way of the world*. Am startled. Didn't know she knew Kay's name.

Richie rings just as I get in. Have to sprint to get to the landline – I know it'll be him, it only ever is – and hit head on low-hanging pendant light in kitchen. Least favourite thing about excellent flat.

Rub head. Close eyes. Listen closely to Richie's voice for tremors and clues to how he really is, and just for hearing a real, living, breathing, still-OK Richie.

Richie: Tell me a good story.

Close eyes tighter. It's not been a good weekend for him, then. Weekends are bad – they're banged up for longer. I can tell he's down from that accent, so peculiar to the two of us. Always part London, part County Cork, it's more Irish when he's sad.

I tell him about Holly. Her checkers skills. Her accusations of knavery. Richie listens, and then:

Richie: Is she going to die?

It's difficult. People struggle to see it's not about whether she's going to die – palliative care isn't just a place you go to slowly slip

away. More people live and leave than die on our wards. Is about being comfortable for the duration of something necessary and painful. Making bad times easier.

Holly, though . . . she might die. She is very sick. Lovely, precocious, and very sick.

Me: Leukaemia statistics are pretty good for kids her age.

Richie: I don't want statistics, man. I want a good story.

I smile, reminded of when we were kids, acting out the plot of *Neighbours* in the month when the TV broke. Richie's always liked a good story.

Me: She'll be fine. She'll grow up to be a . . . coder. Professional coder. Using all her checkers skills to develop new digitally generated food that'll stop anyone going hungry and put Bono out of work around Christmas times.

Richie laughs. Not much of one, but enough to ease the worried knot in my stomach.

Silence for a while. Companionable, maybe, or just an absence of suitably expressive words.

Richie: It's hell in here, man.

The words hit like a punch in the gut. Too often this last year I've felt that connection in my stomach like a bunched fist. Always at times like this, when reality hits afresh after days of blocking it out.

Me: Appeal's not far off. We're getting there. Sal says—

Richie: Ey, Sal says he wants paying. I know the score, Lee. It can't be done.

Voice heavy, slow, almost slurred.

Me: What is this? What, have you lost faith in your big brother? You used to tell me I'd be a billionaire!

I hear a reluctant smile.

Richie: You've given enough.

Never. That's impossible. I will *never* give enough, not for this,

though I've wished enough times that I could have swapped places to save him from it.

Me: I've got a scheme. A money-making scheme. You're going to love it.

Scuffle.

Richie: Hey, man, ah, give me one sec—

Muffled voices. My heart beats faster. When on the phone to him it's easy to think he is somewhere safe and quiet, with only his voice and mine. But there he is, in the yard, with a queue behind him, having made the choice between using this half hour out of his prison cell to make a phone call or to have his only shot at a shower.

Richie: Got to go, Lee. Love you.

Dial tone.

Half eight on Saturday. Even leaving now, I'll be late. And am not leaving now, evidently. Am changing dirty sheets on Dorsal Ward, according to Doctor Patel; according to the ward nurse on Coral Ward, I am taking blood from Mr Prior; according to Socha the junior doctor, I am helping her with the patient dying on Kelp Ward.

Socha wins. Call Kay as I run.

Kay, on picking up: You're stuck at work, aren't you?

Too out of breath for proper explanation. Wards too far apart for emergency situations. Hospice board of trustees should invest in shorter corridors.

Kay: It's OK. I'll meet that girl for you.

Stumble. Surprised. I'd planned to ask, obviously – that's why I called Kay and not Essex woman herself, to cancel. But . . . was very *easy*.

Kay: Look, I don't like this flatsharing plan, but I know you need the money, and I get it. However. If I'm going to feel OK about this, I think everything should go through me. I'll meet this Tiffany person, I'll handle the arrangements, and that way the random woman sleeping

in your bed isn't someone that you actually interact with. Then I don't feel *quite* as weird about it, and you don't have to deal with it, which, let's be honest, you do not have time to do.

Pang of love. Could be stitch, of course, hard to be sure at this stage of relationship, but still.

Me: You . . . you sure?

Kay, firmly: Yes. This is the plan. And no working weekends. OK? Weekends are for me.

Seems fair.

Me: Thanks. Thank you. And – would you mind – tell her . . .

Kay: Yep, yep, tell her about the weird guy in Flat 5 and warn her about the foxes.

Definite love-pang.

Kay: I know you think I don't listen, but I actually do.

Still a good minute's running before I reach Kelp Ward. Have not paced self adequately. Rookie mistake. I'm thrown by the horrible *nowness* of this shift, with all its dying people and bed sores and tricky dementia patients, and am forgetting basic rules of surviving in hospice setting. Jog, don't run. Always know the time. Never lose your pen.

Kay: Leon?

Forgot about talking out loud. Was just heavy breathing. Probably quite sinister.

Me: Thanks. Love you.

5

Tiffy

I consider wearing sunglasses, but decide that would make me look like a bit of a diva, given that it's February. Nobody wants a diva as a flatmate.

The question, of course, is whether they want a diva more or less than they want an emotional wreck of a woman who has clearly spent the last two days weeping.

I remind myself that this is not a flatmate situation. Leon and I don't need to get on – we're not going to be living together, not really, we're just going to be occupying the same space at different times. It's no bother to him if I happen to spend all my free time weeping, is it?

'Jacket,' Rachel commands, handing it over.

I have not yet reached the depths of needing someone else to dress me, but Rachel stayed over last night, and if Rachel's here she's probably going to take charge of the situation. Even if 'the situation' is me getting my clothes on in the morning.

Too broken to protest, I take the jacket and slip it on. I do love this jacket. I made it out of a giant ball dress I found in a charity shop – I just picked the whole thing apart and used the fabric from scratch, but left the beading wherever it fell, so now there's purple sequins and embroidery across the right shoulder, down the back and under my boobs. It looks a bit like a circus master's jacket, but

fits perfectly, and oddly the under-boob beading is really flattering to the waistline.

'Didn't I give this to you?' I say, frowning. 'Last year sometime?'

'You, part with that jacket?' Rachel makes a face. 'I know you love me, but I'm pretty sure you don't love *anyone* that much.'

Right, of course. I'm such a mess I can hardly think straight. At least I actually care about what I'm wearing this morning, though. You know things are bad when I'll throw on whatever's top in the drawer. And it's not like other people won't notice it – my wardrobe is such that an insufficiently planned outfit will really show. Thursday's mustard yellow cords, cream frilled blouse and long green cardigan caused a bit of a stir at work – Hana in Marketing had a full-blown coughing fit when I walked into the kitchen as she was mid gulp of coffee. On top of that, nobody gets why I'm suddenly so upset. I can see them all thinking, *What's she crying about now? Didn't Justin leave months ago?*

They're right. I have no idea why this particular stage of Justin's new relationship bothers me so much. I'd already decided I was going to move out properly this time. And it's not like I wanted him to marry me or anything. I just thought . . . he'd come back. That's what's always happened before – he goes off, doors slam, he freezes me out, ignores my calls, but then he realises his mistake, and just when I think I'm ready to start getting over him, there he is again, holding out his hand and telling me to come with him on some kind of amazing adventure.

But this is it, isn't it? He's getting married. This is . . . This is . . .

Rachel wordlessly passes me the tissues.

'I'll have to redo my make-up again,' I say, once the worst of it is over.

'Reaaaally not got time,' Rachel says, flashing me her phone screen.

Shit. Half past eight. I need to leave now or I'm going to be late, and that *will* look bad – if we're going to observe strict

who's-in-the-flat-when rules, Leon's going to want me to be able to tell the time.

'Sunglasses?' I ask.

'Sunglasses.' Rachel hands them over.

I grab my bag and head for the door.

As the train rattles its way through the tunnels of the Northern Line I catch sight of my reflection in the window and straighten up a little. I look good. The blurry, scratched glass helps – sort of like an Instagram filter. But this is one of my favourite outfits, my hair is newly washed and coppery red, and though I may have cried away all my eyeliner, my lipstick is still intact.

Here I am. I can do this. I can manage just fine on my own.

It sticks for about as long as it takes to get to the entrance to Stockwell station. Then a guy in a car screams 'get your fanny out!' at me, and the shock is enough to set me spiralling back into shit-at-life post-break-up Tiffany again. I'm too upset even to point out the anatomical issues I'd have if I tried to comply with his request.

I reach the right block of flats in five minutes or so – it's a good distance to the station. At the prospect of actually finding my future home, I wipe my cheeks dry and take a proper look at the place. It's one of those squat, brick blocks, and out the front there's a small courtyard with a bit of sad-looking London-style grass that's more like well-mown hay. There are parking spaces for each flat's tenants, one of whom seems to be using their space to store a bewildering number of empty banana crates.

As I buzz for Flat 3, a movement catches my eye – it's a fox, strolling out from around where the bins seem to live. It gives me an insolent stare, pausing with one paw in the air. I've never actually been this close to a fox before – it's a lot mangier than they look in picture books. Foxes are nice, though, aren't they? They're so nice you're not allowed to shoot them for fun any more, even if you're an aristocrat with a horse.

The door buzzes and clicks out of the lock; I make my way inside.

It's very . . . brown. Brown carpet, biscuit-coloured walls. But that doesn't really matter – it's inside the flat that matters.

When I knock on the door of Flat 3 I find myself feeling genuinely nervous. No – borderline panicked. I'm really doing this, aren't I? Considering sleeping in some random stranger's bed? *Actually* leaving Justin's flat?

Oh, God. Maybe Gerty was right and this is all just a bit too much. For a vertiginous moment I imagine going back to Justin's, back to the comfort of that chrome-and-white flat, to the possibility of having him back. But the thought doesn't feel quite as good as I imagined it would. Somehow – perhaps around 11 p.m. the Thursday before last – that flat started to look a little different, and so did I.

I know, in a vague, don't-look-straight-at-it sort of way, that this is a good thing. I've got this far – I can't let myself go back now.

I need to like this place. It's my only option. So when someone answers the door who clearly isn't Leon, I'm so in the mood to be accommodating that I just go with it. I don't even act surprised.

'Hi!'

'Hello,' says the woman at the door. She's petite, with olive skin and one of those pixie haircuts that makes you look French if you've got a small enough head. I immediately feel enormous.

She does nothing to dispel this feeling. As I step into the flat, I can feel her looking me up and down. I try to take in the décor – ooh, dark-green wallpaper, looks genuine 1970s – but after a while the feel of her eyes on me starts to nag. I turn to meet her gaze head-on.

Oh. It's the girlfriend. And her expression could not be more obvious: it says, *I was worried you might be hot and try to steal my boyfriend from me while you make yourself at home in his bed, but now I've seen you and he'd never be attracted to you so yes! Come in!*

She's all smiles now. Fine, whatever – if this is what it takes to get this flat, no problem. She's not going to belittle me out of this one. She has no idea how desperate I am.

'I'm Kay,' she says, holding out a hand. Her grip is firm. 'Leon's girlfriend.'

'I figured.' I smile to take the edge off it. 'So nice to meet you. Is Leon in the ...'

I lean my head into the bedroom. It's that or the living room, which has the kitchen in the corner – there's not really much more to the flat than this.

'... bathroom?' I try, on seeing the empty bedroom.

'Leon's stuck at work,' says Kay, ushering me through to the living area.

It's pretty minimalist and a little worn around the edges, but it's clean, and I do love that 1970s wallpaper everywhere. I bet someone would pay £80 a roll for that if Farrow & Ball started selling it. There's a low-hanging pendant light in the kitchen area that doesn't quite match the décor but is sort of fabulous; the sofa is battered leather, the TV isn't actually plugged in but looks relatively decent, and the carpet has been recently hoovered. This all looks promising.

Maybe this is going to be good. Maybe it's going to be *great*. I flip through a quick montage of myself here, lazing about on the sofa, rustling something up in the kitchen, and suddenly the idea of having all this space to myself makes me want to bounce on the spot. I rein myself in just in time. Kay does not strike me as the spontaneous dancing sort.

'So will I not ... meet Leon?' I ask, remembering Mo's first rule of flatsharing with a wince.

'Well, I suppose you might do eventually,' Kay says. 'But it'll be me you speak to. I'm handling renting the place out for him. You'll never be in at the same time – the flat will be yours from six in the evening until eight in the morning in the week, and over the whole weekend. It's a six-month agreement for now. Is that OK with you?'

'Yeah, that's just what I need.' I pause. 'And ... Leon won't ever pop in unexpectedly? Out of his hours, or anything?'

'Absolutely not,' Kay says, with the air of a woman who plans to make sure of it. 'From six p.m. until eight a.m., the flat is yours and yours alone.'

'Great.' I breathe out slowly, quieting the flutter of excitement in my stomach, and check the bathroom – you can always tell a place by its bathroom. All the appliances are a clean, bright white; there's a dark-blue shower curtain, a few tidy bottles of mysterious manly-looking creams and liquids, and a scuffed but serviceable mirror. Excellent. 'I'll take it. If you'll have me.'

I feel certain that she'll say yes, if it really is her decision to make. I knew it as soon as she gave me that look in the hallway: whatever Leon's criteria for a flatmate, Kay just has the one, and I've clearly ticked the 'suitably unattractive' box.

'Wonderful,' says Kay. 'I'll call Leon and let him know.'