



## Wednesday Night at the Beulah Tavern

Bernie slid the microphone on to its stand and took a bow, smiling as the small crowd in the Beulah Tavern whistled and cheered.

Roger leapt on to the stage and leant into the mike.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, a warm and wondrous thank you to our star turn tonight – the very beautiful lady with the very big *lungs!* The talented, the supreme, the incomparable Miss Bernie London. She’ll be here again next Wednesday to sing the old songs and to give us a bit more winter cheer. So don’t miss it!’

Bernie grinned again and headed straight for the bar, where Roger already had a gin and lemon waiting for her. She pulled her Silk Cut Ultras from her handbag and leant back against the bar, releasing a little of the tightness from the strappy sandals around her swollen feet. Bernie had been singing at the Tavern for nearly three years now, ever since Roger had taken over the licence, ripped out the twirly carpets, the tatty tapestry upholstery and reproduction Turners and turned the Tavern into ‘Crystal Palace’s Most Exciting Music Venue’. It was, Bernie was perfectly able to admit to herself, nothing of the sort – it was just a nice local pub

that happened to feature live music a few times a week, mainly Irish bands with names like The Ceilidhs or old rock-and-roll singers in threadbare drapes with wilting white quiffs. Bernie sang what she liked to call Lounge Songs: ‘Cry Me A River’, ‘The Way You Look Tonight’, ‘I Say A Little Prayer’, ‘Whatever Lola Wants’.

Roger, now back behind the bar, lit her cigarette, gave her a wink through large round spectacles and then moved away to serve someone else. Bernie settled herself on a bar stool. She loved this part of the evening – the fifteen minutes after her set when she sat alone with her gin and lemon and a fag and was just Bernie, a middle-aged woman in a black spangly dress and cubic-zirconium earrings who could sing well enough to get paid for it. A big-boned, bosomy woman with great legs, a little bit heavy around the waist now but with the thick, corn-coloured hair and sharp cheekbones of an older Geraldine James. She loved these fleeting moments of solitude when she wasn’t her husband’s wife or her sons’ mother. Bernie always had the feeling that if her life was ever going to change it would change now, during one of these brief windows of possibility in her otherwise structured existence. When she’d finished her drink and smoked another cigarette she’d call Gerry and he’d walk round to meet her, then they’d wander home hand in hand and her real life would begin again. Bernie loved her real life, but she’d miss these moments if they were ever denied her.

She bent down to rub at her tender, stockinged feet. She really wasn’t used to wearing heels any more, even

though she'd practically lived in them when she was younger. Now they were just for Wednesday nights and special occasions. As she straightened up, a figure at the far side of the pub caught her eye. A young man, all in black. A nice-looking man? Bernie couldn't tell from this distance. He was very pale and Bernie caught the glimmer of silver in his lobes. She was sure she'd seen him here last week, too, sitting at the same table.

He smiled at her, then, the self-conscious smile of someone unaccustomed to smiling. For some reason, Bernie found herself smiling back. Bernie didn't usually have much time for the sort of men who hit on her in pubs. But there was something about this guy, the set of his shoulders, the shape of his head, the way he moved. Something reassuring. He picked up his drink and wend his way around the tables to join her at the bar. Bernie's fingertips went immediately to her earlobe, twisting the little chunk of zirconium.

'Great voice,' he said, sliding his drink next to hers on to the bar.

Close up, the man revealed himself to be anywhere between twenty-five and forty. His mouth was thin, his eyes heavy-lidded, and his hair was a jet-black flat-top, the likes of which Bernie hadn't seen since the fifties. He was wearing a scuffed black leather jacket, tight black jeans and a thin grey T-shirt with some kind of wash-faded graphics on it. He had a faded cobweb tattoo across his neck, a skull-and-crossbones ring on his middle finger, a flashy buckle on his belt and a



missing tooth that Bernie didn't notice until he smiled at her and said, 'How long've you been singing, then?'

'Longer than you've been alive,' she said with a laugh, exhaling and stubbing out her cigarette. Bernie sensed that she should have felt uncomfortable, but she really didn't. There was something about this young lad – something familiar, compelling almost – that made him seem like the sort of person her fifteen-minute breathers were meant for.

'You all right, Bernie?' said Roger, suddenly appearing, owl-like, at her side.

'Yeah,' she said lightly, 'fine.'

'Let me buy you another drink,' said the man.

Bernie looked at her watch. Gerry would be expecting her phone call around now. But then again, knowing Gerry, he was probably so wrapped up in the candelabra he was polishing that he wouldn't have noticed the time. 'Yeah,' she said, 'why not. I'll have a gin and lemon, please.'

She eyed up the man's profile as he waited for Roger to serve him. His cheeks were slightly pock-marked and Bernie suddenly saw him as the spotty, awkward adolescent he'd once been. The black leather and the tattoo and the dyed hair were just a costume. He was no hard man, she thought, just a little boy, like her boys, like *all* boys. Bernie felt the familiar maternal throb in her chest.

'Saw you here last week,' she said, accepting her drink, 'all on your own then, too, you were. What's the matter with you – got no mates?'

The man laughed and offered Bernie a cigarette. 'Nah,' he said, 'not round here, anyway.'

‘Just moved to the area?’

‘Yup.’

‘Where from?’

‘Round and about.’ He stopped to light her cigarette and then looked her straight in the eye. ‘What about you? You a local?’

She nodded, wanting to tell him that she lived just around the corner on Beulah Hill, but stopping herself.

‘Alone?’

She laughed. ‘Not quite. With Gerry, my husband.’

‘Kids?’

‘Yeah. Three boys.’ She paused. ‘It’s funny. I never really wanted a girl. Always felt more comfortable around men.’

He nodded. ‘What sort of age are they, then, your boys?’

‘Well,’ she began, ‘Tony’s, the eldest. He’s thirty-four. Sean’s the middle. He’s just turned thirty. And then there’s Ned – the baby, he’s . . . what is he? Twenty-six, twenty-seven? What year is it?’

‘2001.’

She counted off on her fingers. ‘Twenty-seven next month.’ She smiled with relief. It didn’t feel right, not knowing how old your son was. But then it had been a long time since they’d celebrated his birthday together.

‘Proud of them all?’

Bernie thought of her boys – her beautiful boys. Of course she was proud of them. It was all she could do to stop herself exploding all over the place with pride.

Tony was a successful business man, ran his own

greeting-card company that he'd set up from scratch in a room in his flat when he was twenty-one. He employed twenty people now and had a lovely house in Anerley. Well, it was more of a flat, really – he hadn't been able to afford a house after the divorce – but it was very nice, overlooking a park with off-street parking and video cameras all over the place. She was a bit worried about him right now. He didn't seem to have got back on track after the divorce. Bernie couldn't put her finger on what was wrong; he just didn't seem quite himself.

And then there was little Ned – not so little any more, over six foot tall and as thin as a reed. He was the brains of the family, went to university, got a first in history of art, even worked at Sotheby's for a while. But then he and Carly split up – Bernie gulped at the thought; it still felt like a death – and he'd run off to Australia with some girl he'd met in a sports bar in Leicester Square and they hadn't seen him in nearly three years. *Three years*. He was working at an Internet café in Sydney, apparently, wasting his degree. But he'd be back one day, she was sure of that, back home where he belonged. And he'd make something of himself then. He had so much potential, that boy, it was just *oozing* out of him.

And then there was Sean. The jewel in her filial crown. Not that she'd ever admit it to anyone other than herself, of course; mothers aren't allowed to have favourites. He'd been a bit of a worry there for a while, her Sean, a bit wild, a bit troublesome. Middle children always are, she supposed. He hadn't really stuck at anything, had a different girlfriend every five minutes, each one better-

looking than the last (he was her best-looking child, it had to be said). But then he'd written this book, a couple of years ago. He hadn't told anyone he was writing it – well, not his family, anyway – and all of a sudden some publisher had written him out a cheque for £50,000 and the next thing she knew he was in all the papers and everyone was talking about him, and it was *her boy*. Her little Seany! She still couldn't quite believe it. His book – *Half a Man*, it was called – was about a boy whose twin brother dies in a car crash and how he goes mad, after, and starts killing people. She didn't know where Sean got his ideas from, she really didn't. It wasn't from her, that was for sure – she had no imagination whatsoever – and as for Gerry . . . It was a good book, though. He'd biked her over an advance copy one Tuesday morning and she'd taken the day off work and read it in one sitting. A bit too much drug-taking for her liking, and an over-liberal use of the 'c' word, but a good book. The hardback had sold, what was it, something like 8,000 copies and the paperback had come out in the summer and was still in the top twenty now, thirty weeks later. Sean was something of a celebrity these days and oh God, was Bernie proud. She couldn't quite believe what she'd done. She'd produced a bestselling novelist! From within her own body. And she was prouder than any woman had a right to be.

Bernie never had any grand ambitions for her boys, never expected them to go to university, to make anything more out of life than she and Gerry had managed. A nice house, a happy family, a few quid in the bank. All she'd

ever wanted for her boys was that they be good boys. And, if she could blow her own trumpet for a moment, she'd done a bloody good job on them. They were fine, fine boys, her boys, each and every one of them. Of course every mother thinks her sons are perfect, but hers really were. She honestly couldn't fault them.

Bernie turned to the black-haired man and smiled. 'Proud as punch,' she said with a laugh and a wink, 'but what mother isn't?'

'So. Are you a *happy family*, then?'

'What sort of question is that?'

'A very interesting one.'

Bernie smiled. 'Yeah,' she said, 'we're a very happy family. We've been lucky. They're good boys, my boys – very good boys.'

They fell silent for a moment. 'And what about you?' she said. 'Have you got any kids?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Well, sort of. I've got a boy. He'd be about sixteen by now, I guess.'

'Lost contact?'

He scratched the back of his neck. 'Yeah. Long time ago. The mother didn't want to have anything to do with me.'

Bernie gulped and laid a hand on the man's arm. 'You poor thing.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Well, you end up paying for your mistakes in life one way or another, don't you?'

'What's his name?'

'Charlie.'

'Nice name.'

‘D’you think? I hate it. Sometimes wonder if I’d recognize him now. You know? If I saw him on the street or something. My own son.’

They fell silent again.

‘Look,’ he said, picking up his drink and draining it, ‘I don’t want to get in your face or anything. I just really wanted to tell you how great your voice is. You’re very talented.’

‘Bless you,’ said Bernie, ‘that’s very kind and I appreciate it. Will I see you next week?’

The man’s face suddenly softened. ‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘deffo. I’ll be here. My name’s Gervase, by the way.’

Bernie grinned at him. ‘You don’t look like a Gervase,’ she said.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t, do I? I sometimes think that I was never supposed to have been a Gervase. You know, in a parallel reality and all that. D’you know what I mean?’

Bernie smiled and nodded.

‘Thanks for the chat, Bernie. See you next week, yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ smiled Bernie, ‘see you next week.’

He nodded at her, and smiled his awkward smile, before forcing his hands into the tight pockets of his jeans and sauntering out of the pub and into the chill of the January night.

# Gerry Gets Technical

**From:** Gerald London [SMTP: grays@graysantiques.co.uk]  
**Sent:** Sat, 17 Mar 2001 14:01  
**To:** Ned London [SMTP: nedlondon@hotmail.com]  
**Subject:** Surprise for your mum

Hello Ned . . . How are you? I'm just using this computer at work. Deandra's showing me how so I hope I don't mess it up. I was going through some old stuff at home last week and found some letters me and your mum wrote to each other when we were dating. Turns out our first date was on 26th May 1961, forty years ago. I took her to the Ritz for a cocktail and then we went to the cinema at Piccadilly. It cost me a week's wages. Also turns out that 26th May lands on a Saturday this year so I was thinking that instead of just celebrating our wedding anniversary like we always do, maybe I'd do something a bit special that she won't be expecting. I'm going to have a party for her at the Ritz – and book us a few rooms so we can stay over. Once in a lifetime, you know. I've spoken to your brothers about it and they're both keen. Anyway – I know money's tight for you and I can help you out a bit, with a couple of hundred maybe. Tony and Sean said they'll cough up for the rest. Just bung it on your credit card and we'll sort it out at this end. Hopefully you'll stay

for a while, too – your mum would be the happiest woman in south London! And Monica's more than welcome if she can afford the fare. I've booked you a double room so it seems a shame to waste it! Anyway, I'd better get off. Write back soon (or call me at work) and let me know if you can make it or not – it wouldn't be the same without you, though – you know that?

Love to Monica. And love to you.

Your dad X



# Dear Mon

Sunday 8 April 2001

Dear Mon,

By the time you get this letter I will be on a plane and on my way back to England. I'm really sorry to bugger off like this without saying goodbye properly, but, as you know, the past few weeks have been quite stressful for me and the more stressful things got the more we seemed to be arguing. Losing my job was just the last straw and I can't see any reason to be here any more. I haven't made the life for myself over here I was hoping for. I've just got stuck in a rut doing crap jobs and hanging out with the same people and as time goes by I miss my life back at home more and more. I miss my mum and dad. I miss my brothers. I miss just sitting on the sofa with Sean watching *The Simpsons* and I miss all my old friends. So much has happened since I've been here with you – Sean's had a book published, Tony's got divorced, and now Mum and Dad are having a big anniversary party back home. I don't want to miss it and I don't want to be away from my family any more. I miss England, too. I miss the weather and the TV and the people. I know I should have waited till you got home, talked to you face to face, but I've tried that before and you know how things always turn out – you go into mental meltdown, I try to make you feel better, we end up staying together.

Things started off so great for you and me, Mon. Meeting you was one of the most exciting things that ever happened to me and coming to Oz with you was the greatest adventure of my life, but it's over now. Finished. I've never really managed to make you happy, Monica – you know that and I know that. I think you'll agree with me when I say that our relationship really ended ages ago. I don't know what's kept us together for so long. I think it might be a combination of fear and habit. You were such a strong person when I first met you, Monica, but you've let me make you weak. I can't hold you up any more. You've got so much going for you – you're so funny and cool and clever. It's only your own insecurities that are holding you back – and me. You can make a go of things in Oz, I know you can. You've just got to get out of your shell and into the world, become the person I met in Leicester Square all those years ago.

I love you, Mon, I really do. You're one of the most amazing people I've ever known, but it's time for me to go home and it's time for you to get on with your life without me. I wish you happiness and success. I'll think of you for ever, Mon. Good luck.

Ned XX

PS: Enc: \$250 for the next month's rent. I've also left you my football and my PlayStation, and the Fatboy Slim tickets are in my top left-hand drawer. There's some hash in the coffee jar next to the phone. I've sold my car to Spencer. And if you find my Titleist golfballs you can have them.

## Unbridled Parental Joy at Prodigal Homecoming

It was a perfectly miserable April morning when Ned finally came home. The city cowered glumly under a thick grey blanket of cloud and the air smelt of damp brickwork and diesel.

London, thought Ned, staring at the back end of a used-car depot through the misted-up window of a black cab. Look at it. Just look at it.

*It's so beautiful . . .*

The cab sped seamlessly through the empty streets of south London, stopping pointlessly at deserted traffic lights, gliding across roundabouts. Ned smiled as the Crystal Palace mast hove into view – a symbol of homecoming since the day he was born.

A few eerie, solitary figures moved through the mist that hung over Brockwell Park; early-morning dog-walkers and out-patients from the Marsden. A man in a red waterproof jacket practised t'ai chi under a just-budding horse-chestnut tree. Down Norwood Road, past West Norwood Cemetery and up on to Beulah Hill. And there it was: number 114. A two-storey Georgian villa, a bit like a child's drawing of a house. Steps up to a greying stone portico, large, stripped-oak front door,

sash windows on either side. It was looking tattier than ever. Flaps of cream stucco peeled from the walls, last year's autumnal fall was still heaped in mulchy piles up against the front wall and rivulets of green mould streaked the paintwork.

The old bubble car that Tony had bought with his first pay-cheque when he was seventeen sat half-shrouded under a sun-bleached tarpaulin on the front lawn. In front of the bubble car sat Sean's Vespa, once the apple of his eye and the centre of his universe, now a mildewed and pitiful-looking creature, slouched defeatedly against an old set of Formica-topped drawers. Edwardian, Victorian and Georgian chimney stacks sat in a kind of Stonehenge arrangement on the other side, and between the detritus all manner of robust-looking weeds had taken root.

Ned had once brought a friend home from university who lived in the area too. He'd looked rather uncertain as Ned ascended the front steps, jangling his door keys. 'You live here?' he'd said. 'Uh-huh,' Ned had said. 'Shit – I always thought this place was a squat.' Which was, Ned could see with his newfound objectivity, exactly what it looked like.

He slung his rucksack over his shoulder and crept quietly up the path, kicking a sheet of old newspaper out of the way as he walked. His key in the lock sounded familiar, like it had been just hours since he'd last heard the sound. Even after all this time he still had the knack, turning the key at just the right angle and with just enough of a flick of the wrist, and then the front door swung slowly open.

Mayhem. Total and utter mayhem. He smiled wryly to himself and sidestepped a large stuffed rabbit, approximately the size of a Rottweiler, which for some strange reason was wearing Tony's Jim'll Fix It badge and had a packet of rolling tobacco on its lap. Walking into the Londons' house from the grey street outside was like leaping from monochrome to vivid Technicolor. The bleak exterior of the house masked an interior that made the word 'eclectic' seem a little puny in its powers of description.

Bernie and Gerry had a very *laissez-faire* attitude to interiors and made no effort whatsoever to exert any kind of control over their possessions. It wasn't that they had no taste. There were flashes of class, style and downright *Elle Decoration* in places. Gerry was an antique-silver dealer with a long-established stand at Grays in South Molton Street, and Bernie was a jewellery buyer for Alders in Clapham Junction. They knew nice stuff when they saw it. The problem was that they also managed to turn a blind eye to some truly grim stuff. Like the cut-crystal vase with a small ceramic cat sitting on the rim, a Christmas gift from Tony's ex-parents-in-law. It had pride of place on the mantelpiece, even though Bernie had hated it on sight and even though there was zero possibility of said ex-parents-in-law ever setting foot in their home again. Bernie had simply forgotten that she hated it. Ditto the carpet, which had been in the house when they'd bought it, thirty years ago, and was of the classic British 'swirl and square' design in violent hues of mustard and baby poo. The

fireplace was still surrounded by the ‘Brick-alike’ false brickwork they’d put in when it was ‘modern’, in the seventies, and above it hung a rather nice late-Edwardian mirror that had fallen from its hook years earlier causing the glass to snap clean in two. Other people would have wailed about seven years’ bad luck and rushed it to the mirror emergency ward to be fixed. Bernie and Gerry had simply tutted, sighed and re-hung it, and the fractured reflection it gave of the living room became yet another aspect of their home that you just got used to.

But what really set Ned’s parents’ house apart from other ill-furnished residences was the junk. Not just family detritus that had been hanging around waiting for a trip to Oxfam. Real, actual junk. Old chests of drawers, broken chairs, shop mannequins, boxes of rusting kitchen utensils, old Christmas cards, disembodied doll-parts, unidentifiable bits of oily machinery, mildewed curtains. And there were things that were just *in the wrong place*. A plastic swing-bin in the hallway. A pushchair in the living room. A shower curtain separating the downstairs toilet from the kitchen. A proper front door, replete with letterbox, knob and the number 15, hanging between the front and back rooms. A manky old hobby-horse with matted hair and a drawn-on moustache stood sentinel at the foot of the stairs.

Gerry was a skip-hound. He could not pass a skip without having a little rummage and coming away with at least one small trophy, be that an old telephone or a piece of skirting board. And Bernie was just as bad, bringing home whimsical odds and ends from the

display storeroom at Alders, things that were going to get thrown away otherwise. She felt sad, she said, thinking that for a few weeks these bits of sculpted polystyrene and plywood had been spotlit and dazzling, enticing customers into the store, and were then discarded like pubescent child stars.

Ned walked from room to room for a while, absorbing the smells – French polish, tired carpeting, dog hair – and taking in the scenery – the junk, the cardboard boxes, the piles of magazines and abandoned embroidery – and thought to himself, This is me, all this clashing and clutter, this hoarding and piling. This is what made me and this is where I belong. And this was why he hadn't phoned ahead, why he hadn't told anyone he was coming home. Because he'd wanted to find home exactly as he'd left it three years ago and not as some fussed-over, tidied-up, bunting-festooned facsimile stuffed with aunts and uncles and neighbours and chicken-paste sandwiches and pork pies cut into quarters. Because he'd wanted to smell bed on his dad and see last night's dinner plates piled up in the kitchen.

He heard a scuffling, scrabbling noise coming from the other end of the hallway.

'Goldie!'

An ancient, threadbare golden retriever put his nose to the air, turned and made his way slowly but enthusiastically towards Ned, who dropped to his knees to greet him. Goldie was fifteen years old and looked like he too might have been found on a skip. He was wearing a scuffed Elizabethan collar; and just above his left eye

was a shaved patch, zipped together with black plastic stitches, indicating yet another mishap. His eyes were thick and half-blind with cataracts. And he was opening and closing his mouth in an approximation of the bark he would never again be able to emit since a laryngectomy had left him mute four years ago. To compensate for his lack of vocal communication, he was wagging his tail so hard that he was almost back to front and his lips were stretched back into something that Ned had always sworn was a smile.

‘Ooh yes, ooooh yes. Goldie boy, I’m home – I’m home!’ Ned grabbed the ruff of fur that poked out from under the collar and scratched him good and hard, trying politely to ignore the fact that dear old Goldie hummed to high heaven.

He took off his boots and tiptoed quietly up the stairs, his socked feet instinctively missing the creaky bits and the ever-dangerous ‘seventh step’, which had remained unfixed since Gerry fell through it years ago when chasing Tony upstairs to give him a hiding.

He stopped at the top of the stairs to look at all the old framed photographs on the landing walls, yellowed and pinkish with age and sun. Ned, Tony and Sean on the beach at Margate, Bernie in a straw hat, Sean on a carousel at the local fair, Tony and Ned sitting on a step in nylon shorts with sunburnt noses, the three of them in their first Holy Communion outfits – snugly fitting white shorts, starchy white shirts and bow-ties. The family likeness was uncanny. All three of them with the same bog-standard brown hair, triangular noses,



determined chins, blue eyes and sticky-outy ears. Ned, skinny like his dad; Tony and Sean, slightly sturdier like their mum. Ned smiled at the images, so much a part of him, and made his way to the end of the landing, to his parents' bedroom.

His parents' bedroom was, in some ways, the hub of the house. The bed was where they all used to congregate on weekend mornings, watching children's television and eating their cereal while Mum and Dad went through the papers and drank leaf tea that brewed in a pot on the bedside table.

The door was open – there was no such thing as a closed door in the Londons' house – and the sound of Bernie's snoring was now almost deafening. He pushed the door slowly and peeked around it to have a look at them. Their bed was a huge lace-festooned extravaganza of a thing that Bernie had bought from Biba in the seventies. It was four-poster and canopied with bits of twirly wrought iron all over the place. Bernie had attached things to the lace over the years – silk flowers, feathers, rosettes, tiny wire birds. Underneath this ornate marquee of a bed lay his parents. Ned felt a lump in his throat when he looked at them. His father was curled up on his side with his hands tucked under his cheek, like a small child. His head was the same shape as a rugby ball, covered from chin to crown in snowy-white, close-cropped hair with a couple of ruddy bare patches where his cheekbones were. His glasses and a Patrick O'Brian novel sat on his bedside table.

Ned's mother lay flat on her back, her ropey, honey-

coloured hair spread out around her, her green polyester nightie rising and falling with each voluminous snore, a Virgin Atlantic eye-mask attached to her head with black elastic and her unlined cheeks gleaming with night-cream. Her glasses and a Maya Angelou book sat on her bedside table.

‘Mum, Dad,’ he whispered, loudly.

Dad twitched but remained firmly asleep.

‘Mum, Dad, it’s me. Wake up,’ he whispered a bit louder, and approached the bed on tiptoe.

Mum grunted and turned on to her side and Dad twitched again.

Ned prodded his father, who woke up, dramatically and suddenly, opened his eyes, stared straight at Ned, muttered something incomprehensible and then turned over on to his other side and farted.

Ned sighed and decided to try again later. He headed towards his bedroom.

His was the only one of the boys’ rooms that hadn’t been overrun by general junk overflow. Because he’d never moved out. Even when he’d left three years ago, he hadn’t actually been *leaving home*. He’d had every intention of being back within six months. He was aware that some might find it strange that at his age he would willingly choose to live in his parental home. But why shouldn’t he? It was a great house, in a great location just twenty minutes on the 68 Express to the centre of town, his parents were the coolest parents in existence and he loved it here. Why fork out rent for some shitty flatshare or be lumbered with a ball-breaking mortgage?

No – he was giving himself until he was thirty before he even began to think about moving out.

He pushed open his bedroom door, his heart full of anticipation and warmth. He turned slightly to locate the light switch, flicked it downwards and then yelled out at the top of his voice when a man suddenly sat bolt upright in his bed. A very pale man with dyed black hair cut into an improbably geometric flat-top, wearing a selection of earrings and with a tattoo of a cobweb across his neck.

‘Jesus Fucking *Christ*,’ said Ned, claspng his heart with his hand.

‘Urgh?’ said the man in the bed.

‘Jesus Fucking *Christ* – who the fuck are you?’

The man squinted at Ned for a moment, one hand reaching across to an ashtray on the bedside table for a half-smoked fag butt. He put it to his lips, lit it with a Zippo, inhaled and then clicked his fingers and smiled. ‘Ned?’ he said. His voice was deep and gravelly.

‘Uh-huh,’ said Ned, still stretched back against the bedroom door, his eyebrows somewhere near his hair-line.

The man in the bed exhaled and then broke into a painful, hacking smoker’s cough. He rested the fag back in the ashtray and pulled himself from the bed, still coughing. He was wearing black underpants and was very pale and unbelievably lean – solid muscle with just a hint of flesh stretched over the top, comparable, Ned thought, to the physique of a greyhound. There were more tattoos. A Confederate flag on his forearm, a line

drawing of Marilyn on his upper arm and the words 'Live Fast Die Young' across his hairless chest.

'I've heard a lot about you.' He took Ned's limp hand and shook it. 'I'm Gervase,' he said and then wandered back to the bed and his smouldering cigarette. He started hacking even harder, then, producing all sorts of vivid sound-effects through his nostrils and throat.

'Yeah, but – who *are* you?'

'Didn't Bernie tell you?'

Ned didn't like the way he said 'Bernie' with so much familiarity. He shook his head numbly.

'I'm the lodger.'

'Lodger?'

'Yeah – you know – me pay money, me get room.'

'Yeah, but – this is *my* room.'

'That, Ned,' said Gervase, stubbing out his cigarette and pulling a fresh one from a packet of Chesterfields, 'is debatable.' And then he wandered towards the wash-basin in the corner of the bedroom, leant down over it and in one practised action hawked up the contents of his lungs.

## Lose Weight Now – Ask Me How

It was the usual scenario: Millie, strong thighs clamped around a white stallion, thick chestnut hair flowing, never-ending beach, foamy waves crashing against the shore. Tony, slim, in white linen, lying in a hammock, watching her. There might have been a bird of some kind, a blue bird. He wasn't sure.

She dismounted her horse and approached, a half-smile playing on her lips, one eyebrow slightly cocked. There was sand dusted across her cheek. It glittered like ground diamonds. He reached out to brush it away and as he reached, she grabbed his wrist and slapped him, hard, across the face. And then, with the same hand she'd used to hit him, she delved into his trousers and held him. And it felt like he was being held by her throat, her warm, red throat. He couldn't explain it any other way. Her breath was on his cheek, her eyes were roaming his face, her hot hand throat-like on him, up and down. She leant in to his ear and as she moved him up and down she whispered, 'You are a god, Anthony. You are a *god*.'

And then he woke up. Just as he was about to come. Every night. Every fucking night. He wasn't sure

whether it was frustrating or pleasurable, hell or bliss, but at least he didn't make a mess on his sheets.

He pulled himself heavily from his bed and gave his body the customary mirror appraisal. A couple of years ago he'd look in the mirror and see a slightly stocky man with a burgeoning belly and ever so slightly budding breasts, a thirtysomething man who looked like he'd had a few curries in his time, the odd pint of lager, balanced out by sessions at the gym and the occasional game of football. What looked back at him now was a spherical, snowy-white blob with a belly large enough to house a five-year-old child and sad, slightly pendulous breasts that were bigger than Ness's (yes – she'd measured them).

He'd given up smoking a year ago and all he'd done since was eat. Going out with Ness didn't help. Ness was a *bon viveur*, a gourmand, a complete fucking pig. He'd never met a woman who ate as much as she managed to pack away. The bugger of it was that she had a fast metabolism and managed to stay rake thin, while Tony had the metabolism of a chronically depressed slug and now he was fat. Tony sighed, turned his back on the awful truth that was his thirty-four-year-old body and started getting ready for work.

He thought of Millie again as he showered. He thought of Millie pretty much all the time at the moment. But stranger than just thinking about her was that he imagined her *watching* him. Everything he did, everything he said, he envisaged Millie floating in a corner of the room, judging him, evaluating him, *rating* him. At home,

in the office, in the car, she was there. If he did something clumsy, he'd blush. If he did something cool, he would puff up with pride. He held his stomach in when he was naked, he only sang songs he knew the words to in the shower, he didn't pick his nose, he didn't even fart when he was on his own these days. Well, certainly not loudly, anyway.

He'd only met her once, a week ago, in a bar on Charlotte Street. She'd arrived just as he and Ness were leaving. They'd met for less than five minutes. She was with her boyfriend. A nice bloke, but not good enough for her – she was way out of his league. He was a boy. She was a *woman*.

Tony had never really been a detail person when it came to women. He could never remember things like eye colour (Millie's were olive green, with gold bits in), or noticed wedding rings (Millie wore silver rings on three fingers of her right hand, none on her left). And he could never find words to describe things like hair (Millie had brown hair that was made up of about a hundred different shades of honey, mahogany, chestnut and red. It was thick and blunt and she grabbed it in her fist while she talked, as if she was showing it who was boss), or clothing (Millie wore a tight red sleeveless vest with low-slung jeans, half a centimetre of tanned belly showing). Her voice was throaty and coarse, she had laughter lines, her fingernails were cut short and square. Her skin was the sort of colour that suggested some kind of watered-down exotic ancestry; Latin American, perhaps, or Middle Eastern.

She held a Marlboro Light in the same hand as a bottle of Stella and she laughed like he'd never seen a woman laugh before. Big white teeth, three fillings, the back of her throat visible, pink and glossy in the overhead light.

Camilla, that was her actual name. 'Nobody calls me *Camilla*,' she'd said when her boyfriend introduced her. 'Makes me sound like I own a poncey handbag shop in Chelsea, or something. Call me Millie.'

Millie. Millie Millie Millie. *Millie*.

Tony's hand had subconsciously found its way to his crotch. He snatched it away impatiently. He didn't have time for a wank. He was going to be late. He got out of the shower, dried off and headed for his wardrobe, leafing sadly through all the clothes he was now unable to wear. Shirts that Tony had bought for their capaciousness years earlier, shirts he used to wear untucked and casual, now strained across his belly. And as his expanding girth forced his clothes to expand horizontally, so they diminished vertically so now all his trousers exposed at least a centimetre of sock.

Call me Millie. Millie Millie Millie.

She'd smiled at him as they left. It wasn't like a 'Thank God they're leaving now we can get back to our cosy evening' smile. It was a 'See you again soon, I hope' smile. It was a 'You interest me' smile. It was a smile that promised something, something substantial.

He'd had the foresight to make a plan. At the last minute, just as they were backing out of the door, he invited Millie and her boyfriend to his birthday dinner