

Man of the Month Club

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Extract

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First Trimester

1

THERE IT WAS AGAIN.

‘Ak ak ak ak ak ak!’

Every morning this week the same grating, high-pitched staccato cackle from somewhere on the roof terrace just above Amy’s head, where she lay on this particular morning, the dawning of her 39th year to be exact, nursing a pre-birthday hangover.

‘Ak ak ak ak ak ak!’

Slowly pushing up her sequined ‘The Bitch is Sleeping’ eyemask (gratifying to remember she had at least one ‘witty’ ex) Amy squinted at the alarm clock.

‘Fuck. Fucking 6.14. Jesus.’

‘Just stick your head under the pillow and block it out,’ she reasoned to no-one in particular. ‘Mind over matter.’

A blissful twenty seconds passed.

‘Ak ak ak ak ak ak! Ak ak ak ak ak ak!’

Now it was in stereo.

Forget The Noise, forget your birthday. Birthday. God, what a nightmare, thought Amy. Surely it wasn't necessary to celebrate your birthday after the age of 21, was it? What was the point? Amy only ever got crap joke presents because she already had everything she needed and none of her close circle of friends could afford the sorts of things she liked to buy as treats. Who out of her requisite Five Good Friends (she'd read Marie Claire) could afford the vintage wine she'd just ordered, the limited edition Fendi handbag, the hard-top accessory cover for her convertible Mazda? Brendan? With his crap copywriting job for QVC's jewellery website? Gay Brendan who did his bit for homosexual equality by spending his days thinking up different ways of describing cheap baubles made of 'rolled gold'. Bleeding heart Soph, teaching her Adult Literacy evening classes for next to nothing while her husband Greg lounged about at home claiming to be a stand-up comedian? Angela, her oldest mate from convent days who'd banged out five kids and hadn't so much let herself go as emigrated? Or Jules, her work colleague and all-drinking, all-pulling mate who spent every last penny (and then some) on the latest plastic surgery fad? There wasn't an inch of Jules' perfectly average body that hadn't been tucked, lifted, botoxed or liposuctioned into submission already.

'Ak ak ak ak ak ak ak!'

What the bloody HELL was The Noise? It seemed to cut through her skull and pierce her nerve centre at exactly the right pitch to cause maximum irritation. The clattering, aggressive, insistent 'Aks' followed by the few seconds of sinister silence – just long enough for you to think it was over.

'Ak ak ak ak ak ak ak!'

Amy rolled over and imagined it was a haggard old witch who'd crash-landed on her Japanese roof garden, mistaking the bubbling ornamental water feature for a cauldron. No. It was only April 12th – far too early for Halloween. Maybe it was her mum, miraculously morphed into an airborne banshee, come to prick her single child-free conscience once again? No. Mum would wait until Amy was there over the weekend (to receive the mandatory, tragic, trying-too-hard-but-getting-it-oh-so-very-wrong gift; American Tan popsox 'Great under trousers for work!', an egg-poacher that could cook six eggs at a time – 'Well, I thought in case you had one of your dinners...'). It wasn't that Amy's mum was trying to rub it in regarding her grandchildless state – it was more of a constant drip drip drop of sad expressions and a subtle moistening of the eye walking past prams. A gently leaking tap.

'Ak ak ak ak ak ak ak!'

'Right, that's it, you bastard – I'm coming to get you, whatever you are!' yelled Amy, abandoning any hope of sleep.

Pulling on her dressing gown and stumbling down the mezzanine stairs from her platform bed, Amy scooted across the floor hotly pursued by Germaine Greer. It had been such an inspired choice of name for her scruffy, wiry grey-haired terrier with the bright, alert eyes and the faint air of jaded wisdom. Germaine had been a 30th birthday gift from another long-gone ex who erroneously thought buying a dog would cement their relationship. In reality Germaine had been the final fluffy nail in the coffin. Amy wrenched open the access door. Bugger. It was raining. She scooted back to the shoe rack and pulled out first a trainer, then a flip-flop. 'Sod it, no-one's looking'. As she struggled into her Nike she caught

a glimpse of herself in the mirror – eyemask askew, mascara circling her bloodshot eyes, the vestiges of last night’s red wine staining her lips a deeply un-this-season goth purple.

‘Well hey Miss Thing – happy birthday! You got it going on!’ she Marlboro-croaked at her reflection. She’d smoked so many fags last night her lips had virtually set in a cat’s anus wrinkly pout. She made a mental note to ask Jules about that Botox party. At one time it was Tupperware, then nylon lingerie, then ‘adult accessories’, but now women of Amy’s age gathered together in each other’s lounges for injections into their faces.

Back to the matter in hand, Amy scooted over to the door, clambered up the fire escape stairs – thud flip flop, thud flip flop – and arrived soaked and breathless in her ornamental rooftop paradise. Not that she’d had much to do with it – an old flame had constructed it in happier times, and had stolen the onyx Buddha as he left. Now was that good Karma?

Silence. No piercing cackles, no unidentifiable hawking, no strange clattery disturbance. Just the cold, raw, seeping damp of an early spring morning in London, Canary Wharf winking away conspiratorially at the Docklands developments it overlooked. It was still pretty dark, and by the look of the sky today was going to be one of those London days with a grey ceiling, when you swore you could feel invisible hands from the heavens pushing you downwards into the cracked pavement and pot-holed roads. Flicking on the security floodlight, Amy flip flop thudded her way round to the skylight directly above her bed. Nothing.

‘Ak ak ak ak ak!’

Amy wheeled round just in time to spot two, no, three enormous hopping magpies descending into a monster nest they had obviously spent the past week thieving for.

‘Go on – shoo! SCRAM!’

Clearly out of shock more than indignation, the three magpies scattered into the thick sky as Amy odd-shoe shuffled her bird-scaring dance.

Did I really just say ‘scram’? Nobody says ‘scram’ apart from the villain at the end of Scooby Doo, she thought.

It was at this point that the glint of metal caught her eye. Just a flash at first, but something pulled her over to the nest. Niftily woven in amongst the twigs, leaves and bits of moss, was a 39 year-old silver locket, blackening in the dew, the catch slightly ajar, revealing Amy aged two weeks, sausage-wrapped in swaddling clothes. Amy had turned the flat upside down for three days cursing and crying, thinking she’d lost for good the one thing she had left that her dad had actually bought for her. It wasn’t worth a lot, but it was her one link with the useless dead old bastard. At forty he’d drunk himself to an early grave, pawning anything worth the price of a pint along the way. Amy had been just fourteen when the saggy armchair by the radiator had become permanently and eerily vacant one Saturday afternoon. He’d gone out to the pub at a quarter to twelve – the landlord of the depressing prefab sixties bar he propped up could set his watch by her dad – and had simply never come home. It wasn’t until the Monday that Amy found out he’d died. That obstacle course of diplomacy and sensitivity had been given to Sister Kathleen to navigate – ‘Amy Stokes, you’ll not be joining us for the Fun Day because you’ll be burying your drunken father, God rest his soul’. For years she had worn the locket despite the dictates of fashion (albeit often hidden beneath her Gucci and Nicole Farhi casuals).

‘You thieving little shits!’ she shouted, as hot tears of relief sprang to her eyes. She’d heard that magpies liked to steal

shiny things but had always assumed it was an old wives tale. But apparently the much-maligned Old Wives were bang on the money. The magpies – or one of them at least – had flown in four days ago, nicked her necklace and used it for a nest makeover. She wouldn't have minded so much if it had been any other piece of jewellery she owned – the black pearl earrings, the Tiffany solitaire engagement ring she'd guiltily wangled out of a no-hoper would-be fiancé, the platinum charm bracelet she'd added to for seven years. But the locket, the locket was a no-go area. Nobody touched the locket.

It was hard to say why it held such potency for her – it wasn't as if her dad had ever even really noticed she was around. Only when she had any money – the odd fiver from relatives on a birthday or Christmas – would he turn his watery sad eyes on her and pay her any attention. She'd always relented and handed over whatever she had, if only to see that alcoholic mask of self-pity disappear momentarily from his face. But the one thing she would not budge on, the one thing she had taken great pains to hide under floorboards, down the back of sofas, in the cistern of the toilet at one point, was the locket. Not that he would have forced it out of her hand and into the pawnshop – she'd hidden it more from herself as much as anything. She got so good at it that she would almost forget herself where she had hidden it. Almost.

In some ways, Amy supposed, as she teased the locket from the thickly thatched nest, it had become a symbol of her triumph over poverty. If you've got something, if you hang on to something of value, however small, you've always got something to build on. And look at her now, on the roof of her Docklands Penthouse, mistress of her own business, able to buy whatever (and whoever) she wanted.

2

UNLOCKING THE DOOR TO Precious Little Darlings and punching in the alarm code, Amy reflected glumly on just how she'd come to be one of the leading designers in baby kitsch this side of the pond.

At school the smell of the art room had always been the most heady aroma to her nostrils; that mixture of paint, new paper, stale water and dusty frustration. So different from the resigned and defeatist atmosphere of her home life. She spent most of her time there, encouraged by an incredulous Scottish art teacher named Alan who drew saucy nudes and erotic scenarios alongside her before dragging her off to the pub for lunchtime discussions about Cubism. She didn't really bother with any other subject, instead devoting her time to maudlin self-portraits and developing a unique new screen-printing process which she sold to a local design firm. Alan had pushed her to apply for the Chelsea Art School, and had sprayed her with cheap sparkling wine when, miraculously, she got in – the only pupil he'd ever had who'd gone on to

college. Chucking her keys on the counter she wedged the door open with a Peter Rabbit draft excluder and lit up a cigarette. It still seemed like only yesterday that she had left home for college.

At Chelsea, despite fitting in as well as a one-legged woman at an arse-kicking party, her star continued to rise. She'd felt at once intimidated by and superior to the trust-fund babies who populated the corridors, their pie-crust collars and velvet headbands a daily assault on her good taste. She'd felt similarly irritated by the tortured souls in black; their hollow eyes and artistic temperaments merely seemed affected and unproductive compared to Amy's pragmatic approach. She felt lucky to be there, and couldn't understand the casual laziness, the studied disinterest shown by many of her classmates. She worked hard, and quickly became the unlikely star of her class.

After her finals show she had been offered various prestigious positions in several small but well-established design partnerships, but, ever the maverick, had opted instead to set up her own company, hand printing t-shirts with political slogans and selling them at her own stall on the Portobello market. One of her most successful lines had been a set of BabyGros with hand-painted Enid Blyton fairies and Magic Roundabout characters on the front.

She had meant the designs to be witty, post-modern nostalgia. She had meant them to wink a knowing too-cool-for-school retro irony, a sort of 'God, weren't our childhoods sad' kind of vibe. Instead they were snapped up each Saturday by well-heeled trendies who thought them 'sweet' and 'adorable'. Within weeks she was selling whole bundles to foreign buyers, and taking orders on all sorts of soft furnishing requests from nursery curtains to cot frills. It

became impossible to spend any time on her other lines – the anti-Thatcher outsize t-shirts, the cutting feminist slogan aprons or the nuclear disarmament bed linen. Her business had snowballed so fast she'd had to employ seven staff by the end of the first year just to meet demand. Just how she wound up owning three shops and a successful mail-order business, specializing in clothes, fabrics, wallpapers, painted murals and furniture for over-privileged infants was beyond her comprehension.

Despite her initial resistance, her insistence that she was better than the soft market of children's design, it had seemed increasingly churlish to turn down the lucrative commissions and large overseas orders. Against her better judgment Amy had become the darling of the chattering breeding classes, opening her first shop at the height of the consumerist eighties in a fashionable Chelsea back street. Not that she was complaining. The money was great – more than she knew what to do with most years – and she still kept some hands-on links with her team of designers. She was even known to personally paint the fairy grotto frescos she had become famous for on the nursery walls of her rich and famous clients. She'd done a Spice Girl brat's room, for god's sake.

But sometimes she regretted the lure of the success and the easy money. Sometimes she yearned to be in the adult world of chic minimalist urban cool design. She could have done it – she could have gone into any field. She had the business head and the technical skill. To think that by now she could be entering the glittering premises of Conran's emporium, or swanning about in senior creative management at the Designer's Guild. It was galling beyond measure. But somehow she'd got the biggest buzz from her first roll of

children's fabric, had wanted to stroke it and wrap herself up in the long, luxurious roll of brushed cotton with its clean promise and unsullied possibilities, and her hands had unilaterally decided they wanted to paint beautiful fluffy chicks on stripped pine chests of drawers, or flower-capped pixies dancing around the bottom of old oak trees in *trompe l'oeil* extravaganzas.

Amy stubbed her ciggy out and picked up the stub. It wouldn't do to make the Chelsea ladies step over her detritus. It didn't seem fair that her own hands had cornered her into this cutesy world of unrealistic utopian childhood, especially as it was so at odds with her own rather gnarled world view. It was a cruel joke, she thought sometimes, that someone as unmaternal, as disinterested in babies and children and fluffy things and faux olde worlde sentiment as her should have made such a success of marketing such ridiculousness. Coming in to one of her own shops, however, she was filled with that same sense of excitement she had always experienced at the start of a working day. She couldn't help but be thrilled by the prospect of customers with their ready cash and their easy dreams of the perfect child in the perfect nursery receiving the perfect childhood from Precious Little Darlings – Amy's firm, Amy's ideas, Amy's designs. Even though she knew deep down that these people were sad and it was a crock of shit.

Sarah would be in soon – all smiles and offers of lunchtime spritzers. Amy suspected she would do what she usually did on a Friday lunchtime; slope off and go drinking at The Wheelbarrow with her unlikely advertising exec mates from down the road. After an oestrogen-infested morning on the shop floor she always welcomed their testosterone joshing and no-nonsense chat. Plus they didn't know that it was

her birthday, so she could avoid any of the dreadful tepid celebrations her staff were so fond of. It wasn't that she didn't like her employees – they were all perfectly nice hard working and decent people. But she had absolutely nothing in common with them. Their very niceness alienated her so much that at times she wanted to run screaming around the shop slashing at fabric and spray-painting the walls. It was as if the twee décor and the sugar and spice platitudes of the baby books they'd sold had entered their very souls by a process of osmosis. They made the Stepford Wives look like a bunch of rabid valkyries.

This was perfect for the business. Most of Amy's clients responded so well to the cooing and sighing of her staff that her company was constantly exceeding its annual profit predictions. It seemed most people wanted this kind of insipid service when it came to buying things for babies. Sarah was an absolute mistress of the honeyed smile and the whimsical reverie when it came to steering new parents on what to buy for their young. She knew exactly when to push, what to match things with and how to maximize a spending spree without ever appearing as if it was for any other motive than to make the newborn as welcome and stylish as possible. Indeed, she had mastered the art of making each new parent-to-be feel that she would be entirely justified in placing their unborn child in foster care if they refused to buy a complete matching nursery set. It was all in the soft suggestiveness of a manicured stroking of a fleece blanket.

Amy and Jules – her mail-order chief and fellow cynic – survived by rolling their eyes in unison and giggling uncontrollably in storerooms. If it wasn't for Jules – hired over the first of many champagne cocktails at the top of the Oxo Tower – Amy felt sure she would have hanged herself

with one of her own tinkly musical cot mobiles by now. On too many occasions she'd had to stuff her sleeve in her mouth and run spluttering to the loo as Jules expertly patronized yet another moronic customer.

And soon they would be in – the customers. Friday was always a good day for the Chelsea shop. The Ladies Who Lunch (who, it seemed to Amy, were getting younger every year – careers were so last millennium) seemed to favour Fridays for their shopping expeditions. They came in and fingered swatches dreamily, then ordered cribs and matching bed linen on a whim after feasting on pregnancy-friendly salads and spring water. So many of them substituted their spending sprees for cocktail habits.

From the front of the shop Amy heard the unmistakably naff rendition of 'Teddy Bears' Picnic' which Sarah had insisted should indicate the arrival of a new customer in the shop. In another life it had been the soundtrack to a horror movie in which axe-wielding Teddies marched grinning into close-up. But Sarah loved it, and so did the many snotty toddlers who tripped through the door only to insist on going out and coming in again several times to re-trigger the cacophony.

'Hiya!' chirruped Sarah, neatly folding her mac and placing it on the back of her chair. Everything she did was neat, efficient, preppy. Amy casually wondered when (or if) she ever orgasmed it would come out as a polite, brief 'Aah' of ecstasy followed by perfectly served tea and crumpets.

'Happy birthday! God, you look awful! Coffee?'

Without waiting for a reply she was off into the staff room to boil a kettle and deposit whatever spongy monstrosity she was concealing in that baker's bag at the back of the fridge.

No doubt it would be covered in some gooey pink icing, and would carry the wobbly inscription ‘Happy Birthday Amy.’ The lady who iced the cakes was eighty four and had once iced what looked like ‘Happy Binday’, which was pretty apt really as her cakes were so inedible they usually ended up in the bin. Amy would smile and eat anyway, pretending to enjoy the fuss of her employees.

‘Isn’t it good that you’re here today? Hasn’t it worked out well? You could have been at the store in Islington or even Bath! And we all know that we’re your absolute favourite team!’

‘Yes, isn’t it fortunate,’ said Amy, absent-mindedly picking over a few letters she’d picked up from the mat. Two bills, a birthday card from a favoured customer and a reminder that her pap smear was three months overdue. Happy birthday. Just what you wanted to be reminded of on your birthday – imminent invasion by a brutal metal duck with an ice-cold bill and a nasty habit of cranking you up like a car in a pit-stop. She’d told her doctor’s receptionist a million times to send all mail to her home address, but the fact that the surgery was just around the corner (near Harrods, so convenient for that post-appointment picnic lunch) had foxed the poor girl into thinking Amy lived at the shop in Chelsea. God forbid. I mean, did she *look* like she lived in Chelsea? Despite the business being rooted there, despite her college days in the area, Amy felt much more at home in the sleek new urbanism of Docklands. It was an antidote to all the old money casual wealth which cloyed away at her every time she visited the shop.

‘Teddy Bears’ Picnic’ juddered into life and Amy swung round to welcome the first customer of the day. It was only five past ten. Must be someone keen to buy. It was.

‘Hello Mrs Cummings! How’s things?’

Amy couldn’t stop her eyes from darting downwards to the smart woman’s belly. Nope. Still no sign of an impending infant.

‘Yes, well you know the fertility treatment’s getting me down a bit but onwards and upwards, that’s the way!’

‘Sorry to hear that. How many times have you...’

‘Oh, this is the seventh. One of the embryos is bound to take sooner or later. Never say die. And we’ve got the money so why not?’ said Mrs Cummings, sweet and brittle as an overcooked meringue. Amy felt that if she were to tap the surface lightly the whole lot would shatter in to a powdery mess.

‘Well yes, these things can be quite mysterious, can’t they? Nothing for ages then – whoosh! Three at once! Like buses I suppose...’ said Amy lamely. These conversations always made her uncomfortable.

‘Yes...’ said Mrs Cummings unsurely, who had never so much as been on a bus, let alone waited for three.

Amy left Mrs C to get on with her weekly ritual. She couldn’t help but feel sorry for the poor woman. For five years now she’d been in nearly every week, pawing at fabrics and measuring high chairs. She’d notate each decision carefully in a beautiful pink leather-bound notebook. She’d stay for perhaps an hour then leave, throwing a shy smile backwards as the Teddy Bears announced her departure. But this was nothing compared to the yearly ritual.

Over the past five years Mrs Cummings had redecorated an entire empty nursery six times, from top to bottom. She’d started with the London theme Amy had designed seven years ago (big red buses, busby-wearing guards outside Buckingham Palace, Big Ben with a smiley face). With no

baby in sight, she'd decided to feng shui the room by totally stripping it back and opting for the more minimalist Panda Bears Chinoiserie style (long-lashed pandas chewing amiably on beautiful bamboo stalks, hand-painted on Chinese silk). Still no baby joy.

Next it had been the turn of the Circus to drum up the much-wanted baby's enthusiasm for arrival. Curtains, wall coverings and cot had been festooned with clowns, lions, seals balancing colourful stripy balls on their shiny noses. Amy had run riot with that one, designing an optional Big Top cot surround which fell in luxurious red and gold folds around the cot. Despite the comical Ringmaster's captioned invitation, nothing had 'rolled up' for Mrs Cummings.

Next she'd gone for the *Magic Faraway Tree* nostalgic design – Enid Blyton's Moonface and spinning tree tops leading to fantastical lands painted in vivid frescos. Nope. A brief excursion into the contemporary children's TV market had seen Amy slumming it with the Teletubbies. Mrs Cummings had even gone for that, perhaps thinking her exclusive tastes were prejudicing her chances of conception.

At present, as far as Amy was aware, the ghostly nursery in Beauchamp Mews was covered in the ever-popular fairy design which still took up an entire wall of the shop. Each time the redecoration was ordered, the staff kept their eyes lowered, their voices kindly and their respect to the fore, despite the sighing and shaking of heads which went on behind their most regular customer's back.

No-one could quite understand the level of this woman's pathological addiction to all things baby-related, least of all Amy. Still, if she was desperate enough to count her chickens before they were even conceived, then more fool her. At

least she kept the business rolling in; more and more of Mrs Cummings' IVF support group – In Vitro Veritas – were coming to Precious Little Darlings determined that the best, and only the best, was suitable for their hard-won bundles of puking joy. Mrs Cummings had sat by and endured dozens of success stories while she remained resolutely childless. And here she was today, a flesh and blood reminder to Amy that at least she had made it to her thirty-ninth birthday without succumbing to the hideous shackle of baby-and-chain.

So far.