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Opening Extract from...

## **THE NEIGHBOURS**

Written by **Nicola Gill**

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## Chapter One

Today. Has. Been. One. Of. Those. Days.

So, of course, there on the Northern line platform is Clare Hayes, aka Little Miss Perfect from school. I haven't seen her for over a decade but today here she is.

I rummage in my bag, let my hair fall over my face and pray she hasn't seen me.

'Ginny!'

Short of throwing myself on the track, there is no escape.

'Clare. Hi.'

She looks as if she has just stepped off the pages of *Vogue*. I, on the other hand, look like someone who put on the last clean(ish) items she could find regardless of the fact they in no way constituted an outfit. Someone who decided their hair could 'definitely do another day' when it definitely couldn't. Oh, and I have a spot the size of Africa on my nose.

A packed train pulls into the station and people surge towards the doors.

'I'll wait for the next one,' I say.

Clare shakes her head and pulls me on. I am squished against a large man with a bulging backpack.

Clare works as a film producer now. She lives half the year in LA. Nightmare! The backpack nudges me in the back of the head. She's doing a movie with Meryl right now.

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We stop at a station. Angry people on the platform tell people to 'move down, please'. Angry people on the train mutter 'move down where?' People squeeze on. I am shoved even closer to backpack man, who glares at me furiously.

Meryl is a *total* sweetheart!

The backpack hits me on the back of the head.

They are shooting the movie on location in Bali. Bloody hard work but such a fabulous place. Wonderful, welcoming people.

More stations, more people, more whacks in the face and more about Clare. What the hell did I do in a former life?

My mind drifts to the presentation I so spectacularly messed up this morning.

Clare, or Clare-Bear as her (many) friends used to call her, doesn't look like she messes up. Ever. She looks like the sort of person who makes herself hot water with lemon in the morning, puts her gym sessions in her diary and buys her Christmas presents in October.

'What about you, Ginny? What are you up to work-wise?'

I breathe a sigh of relief. For one God-awful minute I thought she was going to ask me if I was married. I have already spotted the diamond the size of a golf ball on her left hand. My job sounds okay. It's a dream job, in fact. Not my dream, but Clare's not to know that. She won't remember me gobbing off about how I was going to become a great novelist.

'I'm in PR.'

'PR? Great. You didn't become a writer then?'

Damn her perfect bloody memory! No wonder she got a string of A stars. 'Oh, I do a bit of writing on the side.' Why did I say that? I feel the sweat beading on my upper lip.

The backpack whacks me in the face.

'That's fabulous. Novels? Screenplays? Telly?'

Emails, the odd letter. ‘Err . . . This is my stop. Lovely to see you.’

When I get home Nancy is on her knees ironing a dress on the coffee table.

‘We’ve really got to get an ironing board,’ I say. ‘Functional adults own ironing boards!’ Nancy laughs. ‘How was your day?’ I groan.

‘That good?’ She unplugs the iron.

‘I bumped into Clare Hayes on the tube.’

‘Our esteemed Head Girl. Tell me she’s doing some deadend job she can’t stand.’

I shake my head. ‘She’s a Hollywood film producer.’ Nancy groans. ‘And – AND! – she asked me if we were *still* friends.’

‘The cow!’

‘I got off the tube two stops early just to get away from her!’

‘You walked further than you actually had to? That is bad! Lucky I got us wine.’

‘Aww, Nance, you really are the perfect flatmate. I can’t believe you’re moving out. I’m going to miss you so much.’

‘I’ll miss you too.’

‘No, you won’t. You’ll be too busy swanning around in your fancy pants new job in New York.’

She laughs. ‘Well, that is true.’ She pours two large glasses of wine. ‘Marielle seems lovely.’

I nod. Marielle does seem nice, although if I’m honest I had thought my days of sharing a bathroom with a complete stranger were over after uni. I just keep telling myself that she won’t be a stranger for long. And it’s not like we didn’t interview heaps of potential flatmates before settling on her. Nancy was particularly fussy on my behalf. One guy didn’t make the cut because she ‘could just tell’ he would be the

writer of passive aggressive notes. I take a sip of wine. ‘Hey, at least I’ve got the training course to cheer me up.’

She laughs. ‘It won’t be that bad, will it?’

‘Three days locked in Premium Inn, Swindon. With Annabel. Assault courses for “fun”. Being forced to chant “YES WE CAN” every three minutes.’

She holds her hands up laughing. ‘Okay, okay. Let’s get drunk.’

We clink glasses.

She gestures towards the Xbox. ‘I see you’ve bought yourself something to fill the gap in your life once I’ve gone to New York.’

‘Very funny. It’s Jack’s. I reckon it’s a big step forward from just keeping a pair of socks and underpants here.’

‘Yay!’ Nancy says in a very un-yay voice. She recently bought me a book called *Stop Kissing Frogs*.

‘Nance! On Saturday, he said he cares about me lots.’

‘Here,’ she says, rummaging around in her handbag, ‘I got us some Twirl Bites.’

‘I really shouldn’t,’ I say, opening the packet and popping three into my mouth at once. ‘Did you hear what I just said?’

About Jack.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well it’s a good sign, isn’t it?’

‘A good sign of what? You’ve been going out with him for two years. Well, two years minus the periods of time he decided he couldn’t handle being in a relationship at all. And the best that he can manage is that he cares about you.’

‘Lots.’

‘Forgive me if I’m not exactly punching the air.’

‘I know you don’t like him.’

‘It’s not that I don’t like him, it’s that I don’t like the way he treats you.’

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I pick at my cuticles. ‘He’s had a very troubled past.’

‘Who hasn’t?’

‘Seriously. His parents’ divorce sounds really bloody. And his father was just never there for him. Too busy shagging around.’

‘Proving the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.’

‘Nance! Just give him a chance will you? For me?’

She pauses, and I realize I’m going to get the Best Friend speech. The one where she tells me I can do better. It will be peppered with Nancyisms like, ‘Give and take doesn’t mean he takes and you give.’ She has a glug of wine. ‘Shall we open another bottle?’

*List your biggest achievements to date.* I stare at the piece of paper in front of me, my mind going completely blank. I don’t think winning the Kindness Cup at Primary School is going to cut it here.

I look over at Charlotte, who is scribbling furiously. No doubt her achievements will require a supplementary sheet.

The woman running the training course is a groomed-to-within-an-inch-of-her-life American whose shoes I can’t stop staring at. I realize that if I spent less time focusing on such things, I might have more achievements to list, but they are extraordinary (the shoes, not the achievements). The heels are clear Perspex balls! They’d be even cooler – although probably a little dangerous – if they rolled around when she walked.

‘Don’t get too hung up on your answers, people,’ says Ms Perspex Heels. ‘This is just a starting point for discussion. And remember to think not just about what you want out of your career at Splash PR, but about what you want out of life.’

I have to stifle a snigger here as, for the majority of people in the room, life and Splash PR are one and the same. I’d

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rather fallen into working there. I left university and got a job waitressing to tide me over while I decided what I really wanted to do. And although there were bad bits – the stag nights and the mothers who lectured their kids in front of me about trying harder at school so as not to end up like me – there were also great bits: masses of fun, zero responsibility and great tips. And then I looked around, and all my friends had miraculously got themselves proper grown-up jobs. The thing with bumbling around is that it’s a lot like singing. Fine when there’s lots of you doing it, but deeply embarrassing when it’s suddenly just you. I answered the first job ad I saw which was for a receptionist at Splash.

My boss, Annabel, is staring at me. Annabel is the one who promoted me to PR Manager in the first place and now she is DISAPPOINTED in me. She doesn’t actually come right out and say this of course, but she goes around with it written all over her face (even though she’s had so much Botox, she finds it hard to make any sort of expression at all). Annabel likes to bounce around lots of ideas and doesn’t like people who never quite catch them.

We have been at the Premium Inn for three days, and I am longing to get home, even though it's weird to think Nancy won't be there when I get back. I am desperate to see Jack though, and hoping he's missed me. A couple of nights before I came here, we were supposed to be going for supper at Julia and Adam's. When I called Jack to remind him, he said he'd completely forgotten Jed's leaving drinks. And of course there were all sorts of things I wanted to say. But I didn't say any of them because I don't want to be Natalie. Natalie is Jack's ex and the ghost of nagging past. I didn't nag, and Jack didn't come. Which was fine. As long as I pretended not to notice that Julia hugged me a little too hard. And kept flashing Adam thank-God-I've-got-you looks.

I force my mind back to the present and the piece of paper

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in front of me. *What do you think are your weaknesses?* How long have you got? I glance across at Kieron whose brow is furrowed. Kieron is about seven, but already a PR Executive.

He's the type to list strengths dressed up as weaknesses here. 'Sometimes I just care too much about a project', 'I have ridiculously high standards'. I suspect that he's not really a human being, but some sort of PR robot from another planet. I have become more convinced of this during the intensive 'down-time' we have 'enjoyed' over the last few days. For me this has been easily the most exhausting part of the trip. Kieron, however, is the Duracell bunny of Work Appropriate Fun. He gets drunk but not too drunk – on the lager whose PR account Splash handles – and chats in a way that seems casual but is actually one long advert for Kieron. All his conversations lead back to PR. It's in his blood, you see. Or it would be if robots had blood.

*List your goals.* I did have goals once. At the age of fifteen, when thirty-four seemed forever away, nothing seemed impossible. Hell, I could have been an astronaut or nuclear physicist by now. But somehow the years just got sucked into the vortex of day-to-day living. The truth is, I don't really know what I've done with the time. Get up, go to work, come home and do it all over again.

At lunchtime, as she is avoiding the evils of carbs by carefully peeling the bread off her turkey sandwich, Annabel beckons me over. She wants me to make a speech at Inspirational Women next month. It will be held at Grosvenor House.

The (bread included) cheese and pickle sandwich I am eating turns to stone in my mouth. 'I . . . I . . .' Why has she asked me to do this when we both know she finds me about as inspirational as a sweaty sock? Why isn't she doing it herself when she feeds on such things like a rattlesnake does on rodents? 'I . . .'

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She puts a sliver of turkey into her mouth. 'I'd do it myself but I'm in Milan.'

One thousand five hundred people. Watching me. I think of my first experience of public speaking, aged eleven. Mrs Gozney, my history teacher, was so pleased with my model of the Coliseum that she asked me to give a talk in assembly about how I'd made it. I wrote and re-wrote my speech, practised it in front of the bedroom mirror – 'I have some tips . . .' The day dawns and my legs shake as I walk up to the stage. I take a deep breath. 'I have some tits . . .' (Did I mention that I am the only girl in my class to already wear a bra, and it's a D cup at that?)

Annabel's head is cocked to the side and her black patent pump is drumming on the floor.

'I . . . I know Charlotte really wanted to do it . . .'

Annabel's eyes widen. She was expecting me to be kissing her feet in gratitude by now. 'Charlotte's in Milan with me. And Jess can't do it. Or Sarah. Or Hayley.'

I'm last choice. Well, unless you count the blokes on the team and you can't really send one of them to talk at Inspirational Women. Though I'm pretty sure Kieron would dress up in full drag if necessary.

Annabel pops a cherry tomato into her mouth. I watch her throat to see if she swallows it whole. I am thinking back to my friend Jenny's wedding. Jenny insisted that as chief bridesmaid, I simply had to make a toast. I spent the weeks beforehand having nightmares about standing up in front of everyone in the nude (in the event it was only marginally less embarrassing as I was wearing a Little Bo Peep style dress complete with a bonnet). It's only a toast, I tell myself on the day. I can do it. And I can. My voice is loud, clear and only slightly shaky as I ask everyone to raise their glasses 'to Jenny and Robert'. And that would have been fine if Jenny hadn't been marrying Brendan. And Robert hadn't been her ex.

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Annabel's foot is tapping so much now it's a wonder she hasn't rubbed a hole in the blue carpet. 'So?' 'I'd love to,' I say, my voice cracking.

I look out of the window and see that it's pouring with rain. This afternoon we are team-building. It's hard to see what twenty highly educated grown-ups can learn from clambering around on a series of elaborate bouncy castles, but perhaps I will have the scales lifted from my eyes.

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## Chapter Two

I know that the whole New Year, New Me shtick isn't traditionally something one tackles in November, but I sit on the tube deciding I can't possibly wait another two months. I must have faith that Jack and I will work out. All the wasted energy I spend worrying can be channelled constructively, so that I can be more impressive at work, make a great speech at Inspirational Women (another thing I must stop worrying about), and go to the gym for something other than the jacuzzi or sauna.

The man next to me is looking at me out of the corner of his eye whilst pretending to read the *Metro*, and I realize that I am actually muttering some of my resolutions out loud.

Not stressing about my relationship with Jack is going to be easy-peasy after last night. We went to a party together. Normally when we go to parties, I hardly see him. But, last night, it was me he was flirting with, me he was making laugh. When we got home, he was solicitous: was I cold? Should he have let me go out when I wasn't quite over my chest infection? Oh, you of little faith, Nancy!

Now I need to be a whole new me at work. In this economic climate I'm lucky to have a job at all. It's time to stop dreaming of living on the beach writing novels and buckle down. My last performance appraisal was both lacklustre

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and completely fair. But, all that's set to change. I'm going to make a fabulous speech at Inspirational Women (I can see Shirley Williams and Judi Dench congratulating me now). I'm going to dream up stunts that get hundreds of thousands of YouTube hits within days, create product launches that make even the most jaded journalists sit up. I'll be a *PRWeek* 'one to watch'. Someone that every client insists they have on their account. Annabel will put her Blackberry down when she talks to me. In brainstorming, she'll underline my ideas with lots of red pen on her flip charts.

I'll be turning into the new me tomorrow. Or at least later today. I forgot all the concept boards for a presentation so am having to go back home to collect them, which will make me very late. By some miracle Annabel is out of the office this morning so I should be okay. Especially since I phoned my mate Jess and gave her a Code Red. (Code Red equals leave jacket on back of chair and place warm coffee on desk.)

I come out of Camden Town tube station and realize that I'm humming to myself. I cannot stop replaying a conversation I had with Jack last night. We talked about Rosie and Jake who were about to have a baby. And then Jack said that our babies would be terrible at bowling because we'd both completely sucked at it at when he came with me to the Splash Christmas party. And I struggled to stay nonchalant, whilst all the time my brain was screaming: OUR BABIES! OUR BABIES! He kissed me, and then pulled away, telling me I'd been poorly and ought to get some sleep. I undid his belt and he made love to me. Gently, as if I might break.

I'm nearly back at the flat now. A cat darts in front of me. Isn't a black cat crossing your path supposed to be good luck?

A little girl of about two is splashing in a puddle. She is wearing ladybird wellie boots and a green woolly hat under

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which peep bright red curls. Her face is full of wonder. She reminds me of Simon's little girl, Evie, who he bought into the office yesterday because her childminder was sick. Simon was up against a deadline, and somehow it was me who got to show Evie the photocopier and coo over her drawings. When they went home, Simon thanked me profusely and told me how great I am with kids, but none of that mattered in comparison to the fact that Evie gave me a sticky Ribena hug and insisted I keep her drawing of the Princess's castle (masquerading as a pink splodge).

I open the front door, thinking how I must pop in on Mr Holden in the basement flat later to see if he's managing to get out and do his shopping since his operation.

I tear up the stairs. The door to the flat isn't doublelocked. Jack mustn't have left yet. How odd! I hope he hasn't succumbed to my bug.

I walk into the living room. Sunlight is streaming through the window. There, in its spotlight, stands Jack, his jeans around his ankles, his head tipped back, his eyes closed and a low moaning escaping from his lips. Kneeling between his legs, with her back to the doorway, is a semi-clad woman, her blonde curls bouncing up and down.

Neither of them are aware of me, and I stand, rooted to the spot, my head spinning and vomit welling up in my throat. Finally, after what must only be a matter of seconds, but takes on the quality of slow-motion, I hear a strangled sort of cry escape from what I presume to be my own throat. Jack's eyes spring open and the woman spins around. It's Annabel.

My first thought is: Oh God, now she'll realize I'm not in the office. What can I say? The mind works strangely at certain moments.

I run out of the door, not bothering to close it behind me. I take the stairs two at a time and hurtle out of the front

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door and down the street. I hear voices behind me but carry on. I don't even know where I'm running, just that I have to run. I run until my heart feels as if it's going to burst through my chest and my breath is ragged. I slip and hear a sickening thud as I hit the pavement. A woman in a passing car stops to ask if I'm okay and I nod even though I feel slightly unsteady on my feet. My shoulder and knee hurt and I've taken the skin off my hands. A dustbin man stares at me. I start running again.

I find myself in Regent's Park, where I collapse on a bench, my heart pounding. I wipe away the tears with the back of my hand, which is bleeding. Jack and Annabel! The image of the two of them is horribly vivid. Annabel's bright pink underwear (on anyone else, cheap; on her, fabulous), the expression on his face. My mind flashes back to our lovemaking the night before. What had seemed tender now seems vanilla. I cry great big hiccupy sobs.

A jogger goes past, looks at me, and then speeds up as if the unhappiness might be contagious. It starts to rain, lightly at first but then more insistently.

Why the hell were they in *my* flat? (Presumably because the post-coital commute was slightly more convenient than from his?) When had it started? Had it been going on when Annabel gave me that appraisal? How many times had they done it? How many lies had they told? Had they been laughing at me behind my back? Poor, stupid little Ginny. Could do better. At work and at home.

An old lady with a Scottie dog stops to ask if I'm okay. I am obviously very far from okay. Okay people don't sit sobbing on park benches in the teeming rain. Okay people attend to cuts on their hands, wipe the snot and tears from their faces. But I nod and the woman walks away, shaking her head. 'I daresay he's not worth it, love,' she mutters.

I am suddenly aware that my teeth are chattering. All I can

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think about is that image. The bright pink underwear, the look on his face.

Eventually I heave myself off the bench. My shoulder is sore. And I have a feeling the pain is only going to get worse.

## Chapter Three

*Bright pink underwear. The look on his face.*

It's three days since I walked in on Jack and Annabel. I sit on the kitchen floor shovelling Shredded Wheat Bitesize into my mouth straight from the box. They aren't very nice without milk. Jack's Coco Pops would have been better but they went in the bin on that first day along with his Yorkshire Tea and multi vitamins. What kind of a grown man eats Coco Pops anyway? I should have known then. I use the sleeve of my dressing gown to wipe away the tears that are rolling down my cheeks. The Shredded Wheat are sticking in my throat. There are no clean glasses left so I fill a mug with water. Jack's keys are sitting on the counter next to Nancy's.

My new flatmate Marielle was supposed to have moved in by now but she called me to say there's been a family emergency in France and she won't be able to move in for a week. It's a horrible thing to admit to but, although I felt sorry for her, I was also relieved for me. The thought of trying to act normal around someone right now isn't good.

I'm appalled by my appearance in the bathroom mirror. My hair seems to have gone into shock and is sticking up in little tufts. Red, swollen eyes stare back from a doughy white face, and my lips are cracked and bloody.

The phone rings. Perhaps it's Jack or Annabel (perhaps

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both of them together, phoning from bed)? They've each left countless messages. Because there's so much to say.

*Bright pink underwear. The look on his face.*

I turn the bath taps on full, steam swirling up in my face. I undress gingerly. My shoulder is still sore from the fall, but it's more than that; my whole body aches. It seems it's not just my heart that's broken.

I lie in the bath, letting the tears roll down my cheeks and into the bathwater. So much for bloody karma. I've been a 'good girl' all my life: sleeping through the night as a baby, handing in my homework on time at school, growing up to pay my bills on time and saying No to drugs. I've never dished out the kind of hurt I'm experiencing now. The kind of hurt that makes you feel as if your skin has been peeled off and you're just a gelatinous heap of raw nerves.

The worst part of the day is when I first wake up. For a nanosecond – just a nanosecond – I don't remember. And then it hits me; hits me like a two-tonne truck. I lie there, wanting to scream and trying to breathe.

I slump on the bed, exhausted. When I got back that first day, I ripped off the sheets and put them through a boil wash. If I could have done, I'd have thrown out the bed. Not that I knew if Jack and Annabel had ever had sex in it. In fact, the evidence of my own eyes suggested their sex was much too hot and exciting to even make it to a bed. How many times had they done it? Had Annabel been better than me? The sound he'd been making certainly suggested she might have been.

The phone rings again. Go away! I don't want to speak to either of you! But it's my mother's voice talking to the answering machine. I run into the sitting room, my hand hovering. I want to pick up. To tell her to come to get me.

To take me back to my parents' slightly too warm house where she'll tuck me up in the single bed I used to lie in looking at my Take That posters. My mum will bring me a tray with a bowl of Heinz tomato soup on it and white bread cut into triangles. She'll make me eat it. But I don't want to hear that my mother had never liked Jack. And I don't want to be asked what I'm going to do about work.

I replay Mum's voicemail. 'Hello, darling. Haven't heard from you in a couple of days. Expect you're very busy. Talk soon.'

*Bright pink underwear. The look on his face.*

Maybe relationships are going to be like backwards somersaults; something I will never get the hang of despite trying over and over again and making myself sick and giddy in the process. I've always been bad at them, right from when Jamie Robb stuck his tongue down my thirteen-year-old throat and I started wondering if he was The One.

I keep the curtains closed night and day. I remember once going to see a friend who'd just had a baby. She said the boundaries between day and night had become blurred, that it no longer seemed to matter if it was three in the morning or three in the afternoon. I'm like that now. I sleep when I'm overcome with exhaustion, eat when I remember (from a diet that would appal Annabel, who always eats her five a day). I am a feral cat.

I start to cry again. Can you run out of tears? I'll never have a baby of my own now. I'll die alone. Annabel will have Jack's baby shortly after their fairy-tale wedding. Mr Can't Commit and Miss Work Is Everything live happily ever after.

My romantic history consists of a series of Jacks. A Jack called Mike. A Jack called Ed. A Jack called Raif (stupid name!).

Nancy always says it's 'them not me', but surely there must

come a point when there are too many 'thems' for it not to be me? What a fool I've been! But that's all going to change from now on. I am going to be a cold, hard bitch.

Yesterday, Jack's tickets for Manchester United/Tottenham arrived in the post. At least I can stop trying to make myself like football now. Ditto R&B. (Could have been worse. The Jack called Ed was a *Star Wars* nut. I actually spent a day of my life at a convention where every other woman there had Princess Leia Danish Pastry hair.) I looked at the tickets, which said 'North Lower BLK 5', and ripped them to teeny tiny shreds. I felt a euphoric high before coming crashing back to earth. Cold, hard bitch is one thing, but I don't want to edge into bunny-boiler territory.

I rub my pounding head. The birds singing in the trees outside the window are driving me insane! I snort. This is the sort of dried-up, miserable old cow they've turned me into. Someone who is irritated by one of nature's most beautiful sounds.

I pick up my phone and start scrolling through Facebook.

**Lulu Jordan**

*I said yes!* 🍷

*Isn't my fiancé just the cutest? Last night the love of my life asked me to marry me and I said yes!*

*#engaged*

*#Ilovehim #fiance*

Great! Great, great, great. Congrats, I write. Oh God, have I become *that* person? I add an exclamation mark and a few emojis before casting my phone aside.

Next time I meet someone – assuming there is a next time – I am going to have a list. Apparently, this is what normal people do. I only discovered this by accident fairly recently when I was chatting to Julia and she told me that she couldn't really mind that Adam didn't like camping and outdoorsy

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things because he ticked most of the boxes on her list. Apparently, it's just like when you're buying a flat – you can't expect to tick all the boxes. (I am just thinking: who can actually afford to buy a flat nowadays? Especially on their own. And I am probably going to be on my own forever.)

I haven't told Julia what's happened yet. It's hard not to notice that since we first met waitressing thirteen years ago, Julia has become a Global Head of Marketing and managed to find herself in a relationship that looks like the last few scenes of a rom-com without any of the 'will they, won't they' lead-up. I, by (stark) contrast, seem to have endlessly cried on her shoulder about my failing career and relationships. So is it any wonder that I'm slightly embarrassed about rocking a Britney 'oops, I did it again'?

I haven't told Nancy either. This job is a huge promotion for her – she's editing the American *Elle* – and I don't want her to have the distraction of worrying about me. She sends me messages about people keeping shoes in their ovens because their flats are so tiny and they eat out all the time anyway, and I reply trying to sound chirpy and normal. I keep pretending to be in meetings when she tries to FaceTime me. I know as soon as she sees me the jig is up.

The couple upstairs are shouting at each other. They're always shouting at each other. I don't know why they stay together. Why anyone bothers to stay together. It's all going to go wrong at some point, so why not just cut to the chase?