

# The Dating Detox

There's no sex in this city.

**By Gemma Burgess**

## PROLOGUE

*Nine months ago*

I knew the second I walked into this party that it wouldn't be any fun. Every person here looked around when we walked in. Then they welcomed Rick and ignored me. That was two hours ago and now here I am, in my stupid librarian costume, sitting in the kitchen alone, trying to enjoy myself and failing. Very. Badly.

My friends aren't here, which doesn't help. They're all having dinner together in a pub in Westbourne Grove. I wish I was with them. But I have to be here. My boyfriend Rick is here. He is friends with the guy who's throwing this party. Or he knows a guy who knows him. Something like that.

Where the hell is he, anyway? I haven't actually seen Rick in ages, but I don't want to be one of those socially-needy girlfriends. Especially after last night. Hell, people at this party are unfriendly. Perhaps they don't get that I'm dressed as an ironic geek.

The theme is 'Come As Your Childhood Ambition', and I'm surrounded by sexy nurses and Pink Ladies and ballerinas and air hostesses. (Aspiring to jobs that don't come with a revealing/girly costume doesn't seem to have occurred to these women as five-year-olds.) I should have come as Prime Minister or something. But I really did want to be a librarian. The men are dressed as Indiana Jones and Luke Skywalker and knights and things like that.

For God's sake, I'm 28 years old. I can handle an unfriendly party, can't I?

We're in a large flat just off Kensington Church Street, and it's packed. It's just the kind of party I usually love. Lots of people having loud conversations and being funny and silly. I don't know anyone, so I ought to just flick the insta-banter switch, go forth and jazz-hands myself around the party, conquering friends. I tried to do that earlier, but they just seemed to not hear me, or look through me. or something. So I don't want to try again. If only my friends were here.

I wonder how much longer I can sit in this stupid kitchen, pretending to read and send non-existent texts. This is so not me.

I wish I didn't look so dowdy. I'm wearing a tweed skirt and carrying a pince-nez and a stack of books. I felt terribly chic and witty when I was getting ready, now I just feel drab and lost. I could go home. But

that might upset Rick. Plus, they're his friends, and I would really like to get to know them better. I've never really met any of them before.

Seriously, where the sweet hell is Rick? He seems stressed tonight. I know his work is crazy at the moment. He was texting me about it the other night. Seeing him less is probably good for our relationship anyway. I just hang out with my best friends when he's busy. Or hang out by myself in the kitchen at parties where everyone's a bit weird and unfriendly. That's good fun too. (Sigh.)

'Are you a teacher?' says a guy who just walked into the kitchen. He's dressed as a cricketer. (How imaginative.)

'Librarian,' I say, and add, in my best librarian tone, 'Shhhh!'

He frowns slightly, gets a beer out of the fridge and says 'Freeeeek...' under his breath as he walks away.

See?

I repeat my mantra ('posture is confidence, silence is poise') to myself and smoke another cigarette.

That's it, I'm going to look for Rick. Kitchen, living room, dining room, balcony, second balcony... no, no, no, no, no. Just people who look around at me, see that I'm not interesting enough to bother with, and turn back to each other to keep talking. Fuck me, I hate this party... Sheesh, this place is packed. So many doors. He wouldn't have left without me, would he? Maybe he's near the front – oh, here—

*Oh my oh my oh my oh my God.*

Rick, on a bed, with nothing on but his judge's wig, straddled by a near-naked Pink Lady. It's Frenchy. I can tell because she's still wearing her Pink Lady jacket and it's got 'Frenchy' embroidered on the back.

They're having sex, holy shit, they're having sex. It takes a few seconds before they even notice I'm standing in the doorway. Then they both look around at once. (People look so odd when they're having sex. No wonder I've never understood the whole porn thing.)

'Fuck!' says Rick, and then lies back on the bed, pushing the girl off him. She giggles and nearly falls off the bed.

*I need to get out of here. I need to get out of here now.*

I back out of the doorway as quickly as I can, stack of books and pince-nez in my left hand and my dull little librarian's bag over my right shoulder, and dash for the front door.

I feel sick. I can't breathe. How could he? How could he do that to me? I've got to get out of here. As I open the front door, I hear people behind me whooping. They must have seen him with the Pink Lady too. They're all laughing. I hate those people. I hate them.

How could he do that? Is he even going to follow me? Is he even going to say anything? How could he do that? When I'm here, I'm at the *same fucking party*? How could Frenchy do that? She was always my favourite Pink Lady.

That's not a rational thing to think. Be rational, damn it. Pull yourself together.

How the hell do you get out of this mansion block shithole? I feel sick. I feel like throwing up. I am definitely going to throw up. Where can I... ah, a plant pot. Lovely.

I lean over the pot, bend the plant out of the way, and start dry-heaving. Up come my three vodkas and the peanut butter sandwich I ate before I left home. I can see my teeth marks in the bread. Gross. I must chew my food more.

I stand up and wipe my mouth. My hands are shaking and tears are running down my face. How could he, how could he? Why hasn't he followed me? Has he even called me? I'll check my phone... no, nothing. What happened between us arriving at the party together and him shagging someone else? Did I do something wrong? Who the hell shags at parties anyway? She must have seduced him. I hate her.

I'm going to call him. Maybe it's a huge mistake and he's hammered and thought she was me. That would be... no, that would not be good either. Please, please let this not be happening.

He doesn't answer the first time I call, so I try again. On the seventh ring, he answers.

'Yes?'

'It's me... I'm... How could you do that, Rick?'

'Pretty easily,' he says, and starts laughing. His voice is muffled. What is funny about this? What? Is he talking to someone else?

'Who is she?'

'No one you know.'

Is he even going to apologise? 'I'm so upset...' I say. He doesn't say anything. 'Did you plan this? Why did you even...' (I start crying, but try to hide it) '...ask me to the party?'

'I didn't ask you to the party. Don't give me that shit. You asked what I was doing and assumed you were coming too.'

I'm still crying silently, trying to quieten my shaky breathing. Typical lawyer, trying to point score even when completely in the wrong.

'I... I...' I can't talk. 'How could you d-d-do this to me? It's so h-horrible of you...'

I hear him sigh impatiently. I don't know what to say now and my stammering seems to have kicked in, so I don't say anything. Please, please let him apologise. I want to go back in time and stop this from happening. Dear God, if it is even the tiniest bit possible, please send me back in time right now to stop this from happening. Or just make him ask me to forgive him.

Or even say sorry. Once.

Instead he just says: 'I can't deal with this. I just... I don't love you and I don't want you anymore... I gotta go.'

You know when you jam your fingers in a drawer and you know a split second before the pain hits that it's going to hit, and your chest has that weird icy seizure? That's what I have right now. And then he hangs up, and the pain hits me, and I'm standing outside some mansion block on Kensington Church Street with a stack of books and my pince-nez and my handbag and I squat down – which isn't easy in heels, you know – and bury my face in my hands. I can't breathe. I want to vomit, but nothing is left in my tummy. I can't bear this. I can't bear to wake up tomorrow and have this as a memory.

Fucking, fucking, fucking bastardo. Never again. I will never let this happen again.

## CHAPTER 1

### *This morning*

Well, I thought I'd discovered the secret to never getting dumped again. And then Posh Mark came over to see me last night. And now I'm back in the bearpit of the singles.

Yet again.

The whole thing is just horrific. Not as horrific as the Rick/Pink Lady night all those months ago, I grant you, but horrific for the fact that it is now my sixth – SIXTH! – break-up in a row, with me as the breakee, and now I have to go and do it all over again. No, not today, I know, but eventually.

Oh God, the idea is so exhausting.

These are not particularly positive thoughts to have before you've even opened your eyes on a Wednesday morning. I sit up in bed and survey the detritus of last night: used tissues strewn around my pillow in a halo, chocolate wrappers all over the bed, a fag pack spent and crushed on the floor. Mon dieu, quel cliché. I flop back down on the bed and close my eyes again. I want to cry, but I actually can't be bothered.

OK, I'd better tell you the background so you can get up to speed.

**Break-Up No.6:** Posh Mark. We met a few months ago in January, at a theme party ('80s Movies'). He was wearing a girlish flowery dress, a frizzy wig and carried a watermelon around all night. Wouldn't you have given him your number? Exactly. (I was wearing khaki shorts, a white-fringed jacket and little white cowboy boots like Sloane Peterson. If you're asking.)

So I made eye contact, he came over, I did my flirty thing, and then he asked me out.

Posh Mark was definitely not a bastardo. I realised that on our first date, at Eight Over Eight (sexy Far East vibe and delightful first date place, and my God do I know a lot of them). Posh Mark lived in Holland Park (expensive, leafy area of London, jam-packed with the sedate rich), was warm and affectionate (if a bit clingy with the hand-holding), liked to read (sports biographies, but whatever), didn't work in any of the 'arsehole' industries (law, banking, medicine) and greeted everything I said with an open-mouthed, utterly delighted smile (rather like a Labrador, and I do love an appreciative audience).

Crucially, he seemed to fit the criteria. Which was, basically, no bastardos. You see, after the Rick shagging-a-Pink-Lady fiasco (Break-Up No.5) – and the weeks of utter, utter misery interspersed with binge-drinking that followed, the criteria for men I'd even consider dating changed slightly: they had to be too nice to dump me. Which – if anyone is taking notes – is not a reason to go out with someone. Posh Mark was also the opposite of Rick in every way he could be. Polite, easy-going, tall and very, very nice.

We fell into a complacent co-dependency pretty fast. He called every night, texted every morning, discussed weekend plans by Wednesday, and was generally a Boy Scout of a boyfriend. My cup runneth over. No, I didn't want to be with him forever, but I decided not to think about that right now, thank you very much. And after the soul-destroying storm of Rick, he was a wonderful protective harbour.

Brutal honesty: he was (whisper it) a tiny bit dull and, um, thick. But he'd worn the Nobody-Puts-Baby-In-The-Corner costume. He obviously had a funny, clever side somewhere. And hot damn, he was nice. As mentioned.

And so we come to last night. He came over to see me unexpectedly. He said that he needed to talk. (Cue familiar stomach curl.) He said that when he met me, he was bowled over by how 'rahllly sahriously lovely, basically' I seemed. He said that I was 'so fun to be with, rahllly, rahllly so... yah, so fun' and his friends loved me, which was, obviously, gratifying to hear. Then he said 'I just feel like you're, ahhh, rather reserved.'

Huh?

'I just... After this much time one should know, you know, whether it's going to work or not and... I don't feel like we have rahllly gotten to know each other, Sass, and maybe, uh, it's because you were only recently, uh, single...'

Don't you mean permanently single, I wanted to say. And it wasn't that recent. The Rick thing ended almost six months before I met Posh Mark. Six ghastly months.

'Annabel thinks perhaps, uh, you're still in love with him. With your ex.'

Annabel can blow me, I thought. Slightly chubby Sloane-ista with a pashmina so permanently attached to her jowls that I've nicknamed her Pashmina Face to myself. She probably wears it at the beach. She's

also one of Posh Mark's best friends and, naturally, comes complete with a blatant agenda. And I'm not in love with fuckfeatures Rick.

'So perhaps we should just, you know, be mates.'

Mates? Oh God.

'What do you think?'

I didn't think anything very much, actually. And I'm not great at talking about feelings. Not lately. In fact, I never said anything to Posh Mark about how I feel (or don't feel). I thought he'd like it that way.

'I'm... I'm...' I'm not able to finish a sentence? I felt helpless. I didn't want Posh Mark to go, but I couldn't think of a reason why. Because I don't want to start again? I wondered if I could say that. Probably not.

Slumping down on the couch and burying my head in my hands seems a better option than speaking. Despite a tiny voice in my head saying 'you're not actually surprised, are you?', a much louder voice told me he was a lovely non-bastardo who had made me feel happy(ish) post-Rick, when I thought nothing would, ever again. And now I have to start all over. So I cried.

'I'll miss you,' I croaked through my hands. And I will. He stroked the inside of my arms for hours when we watched DVDs and had perfectly muscley arms just built for spooning on a Sunday morning. (Does that sound shallow?)

'I'll miss you too, Sass. Rahlly. I feel ah-paw-leng doing this to you. I've had such a bloody good time with you, sahriously.'

I smiled into my hands. I love the way he pronounces appalling. So posh. And he pronounces my name with the longest-drawn out 'a' sound you've ever heard. Saaaaarrrrhs.

'Since the night we met. That hilarious pahty... Hugo made me take him out for a big night at Da Bouj, you know, in return for the outfit that you loved.'

Pause. The way he abbreviates Boujis to Da Bouj is irritating, but—

Outfit?

'The 80s costume, you know. With the watermelon. From *Girls Just Wanna Have Dancing*, or whatever it was, yah? It was all his idea. Well, he saw someone else wear it at a party up in St Andrews once, basicallah. And you were dressed as *The Breakfast Club*.'

Well, if I needed distracting from the idea that I'm being broken up with for the sixth time in a row, then voilà.

For the rest of the night, through him saying goodbye, and me calling Bloomie and Kate to announce that dating someone who isn't a bastardo won't prevent you from being dumped, falling asleep in a haze of nicotine and mild hysteria, and waking every two hours for a self-pitying-but-not-really-heartbroken little weep, I thought about that sentence.

Did I actually fall in love, no, sorry, in LIKE with someone because he wore a funny costume that his friend saw someone else wear at some rah party in fucking Scotland? What the hell is wrong with me? And he didn't even know that Sloane Peterson was in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

Enough thinking. I pull back the duvet, scattering tissues and wrappers across the bed, and shuffle to the mirror. I don't look that great, but I've certainly looked a lot worse.

I will try to look as ace as possible today, so that the world rewards me by doing something really ace for me. That's sartorial karma, you see. I'm a firm believer in it.

## CHAPTER 2

Shampoo, condition, scrub with exfoliating gloves and body wash, brush teeth, shave armpits, then shave legs (one razor in each hand so each leg is done in about seven seconds – that’s an as-yet unpatented time-saving move I invented when I was 14). Towel, hairdryer once-over, moisturiser, deodorant, perfume.

Throughout my morning routine, my brain is on a loop titled ‘disbelief’. Because I just cannot believe it’s happened again. I picked the nicest guy I could fucking well find and it fucking well happened again.

Let’s start at the beginning.

**Break-Up No.1:** Arty Jonathan. I was 22, and had been living in London about a year. (No one ever dates in their first six months of living here; they’re too busy avoiding psycho flatmates, drinking in bad chain bars and getting the wrong District line tube.) I met Arty Jonathan at a workmate’s party one night in Cafe Kick in Shoreditch, which was cutting-edge-indie cool at that time, rather than yuppie-indie cool as it is now. Arty Jonathan was gorgeous in a shaven-headed, mockney kind of way. He teased and flirted and flattered me, and I became helplessly giggly in his presence. He said he was an ‘avant garde’ artist – which meant he’d secure deadlines for shows at a ‘space’ and then throw something together last minute out of whatever rubbish he found on the way there. Avant garde, I now know, is French for pretentious, and any mention of the phrase makes me want to laugh hysterically. He’d had various jobs over the previous few years (producing indie films that never got greenlit, managing bands that never got signed) and had lots of stories that made me laugh.

You’re right, of course: he was a talentless cockmonkey. I’d like to blame inexperience, or perhaps I’m just a bit thick, but he seemed interesting... I think I was probably looking for someone unlike every good public school boy I’d known at university. And his self-belief was stupendous. I’m a sucker for a confident man.

Looking back, I cringe at how green I was to be impressed by a dude like that. I was an art groupie for an artist who hadn’t really created anything. I’d sit quietly in the Bricklayer’s Arms in Hoxton, buying way more than my fair share of rounds, listening to Arty Jonathan and his friends gossip about Young British Artists that I’d never heard of and they didn’t actually know. We’d snog. He’d draw doodles for me. They made jokes about the establishment, some of which were very funny, even though I didn’t know what the establishment was yet. Then, after about two or three months of this, and just as I was starting to

wonder why Arty Jonathan never did any of the things he talked about doing and notice that he recycled all his best lines and jokes, he ended it. He looked at his watch when we were walking towards the Barley Mow one Saturday lunchtime and said: 'I have to go to King's Cross. My girlfriend is arriving from Leeds in an hour. We're going to Paris for the night.'

I was sledgehammer-stunned by this, rather than heartbroken. There is a difference. What hurt more was that he was a bit of a freeloader, and in fact, two days before he dumped me, he'd 'borrowed' £200 off me. He said his bankcard was broken. But clearly, he wanted the money to take his girlfriend to Paris. And I was too timid/stupid/polite to ask for it back. I just nodded and walked away as quickly as I could and never contacted him again. (I've never liked confrontation.) My friends from university started to move to London soon afterwards, so life improved immeasurably, and I tried to chalk it up to experience. At least it knocked some of the naivety out of me.

God, Arty Jonathan was a long time ago. And yet here I am.. Single. Again.

What shall I wear today?

Unsurprisingly, given my newly single status, mild heartache and general blues, I feel like being an Urban Warrior today. I throw on blacker-than-black opaque tights, black boots, a black dress and a black motorcycle jacket with studs. Hair in a ballet bun, some scary black undereyeliner and a few careful minutes with my eyebrow pencil. (I'm obsessed with my eyebrows. They are my *bête noire*.)

Outer Self is thus prepared for the day. Check with Inner Self. Inner Self is not as prepared. Inner Self would like to curl up at home and watch *Gossip Girl* on the internet all day, despite fact that Outer Self is old enough to play a mother on *Gossip Girl*.

I eat a banana, standing up in the kitchen(ette), noting happily that my never-home flatmate/landlord Anna has left the dingy little 60s-era front room as pristine as ever. I've rented a room here for years. The shower is dreadful, the carpets are worn and the furniture hasn't been changed since Anna's parents lived here in the early 70s. But Pimlico is a good area: no real personality (it can't decide if it's posh/scuzzy/boring) but it's about 15 minutes from Oxford Circus, home of practically every flagship high street fashion brand and tourist hell. My room is very quiet and light, Anna and I enjoy a good flatmate relationship (friendly without being in each other's pockets), and it's *très, très* cheap. She could actually get more for it, even given the shittiness of the place, but she doesn't seem to care. Most of

Anna's time, when she's not away for work, is spent with her boyfriend, who I've never met. I get the feeling she's hoping to move out soon and in with him.

I give the kitchen a quick once-over with a dishcloth, ignore the huge pile of my unopened bank statements on the breadbin, grab my lucky yellow clutch and head out the door to the tube. I would try a skippy-bunny-hop on my way out the door, but I don't think I can manage it today. Sigh.

I swing into the newsagents to buy *Grazia* for a little pick-me-up. As I'm waiting in line, a twenty-something guy walks in. He's wearing rugby shorts and a T-shirt with 'I taught that girlfriend that thing you like' written across the front. I lower my gaze behind my sunglasses and check him out. Big strong thighs, good chunky knees like huge walnuts. Mmm, the rugby-playing man. Shame it comes with a predilection for obnoxious T-shirts and 'boys-only' nights out that end with pissing in the street.

**Break-Up No.2:** Rugger Robbie. He played rugby – obviously – with some of the guys in my newly-arrived uni crowd, and after three months of random snogging, we started going out. Rugger Robbie was a classic Fulham rugby boy: easy-going and actually very sweet. You know the type: intelligent but not introspective, good humoured but not humorous. (Yep, the antithesis to Arty Jonathan.) We mostly hung out in our large group of friends; we were all earning money for the first time in our lives, and life was one long party. (Which was fortunate, as Robbie and I would quickly have run out of conversation at one-to-one dinners.) He shared a horrifically messy flat off Dawes Road with three other rugby guys, and got so shit-faced with the rugby boys every Saturday night that once I met up with him at the Sloaney Pony or Crazy Larry's, I'd have to carry him home practically straightaway and take off his shoes and jeans for him. One time, I woke up to find him pissing on the curtains. 'At least I got out of bed,' he said apologetically the next day. For some reason, this didn't bother me at the time.

I liked Rugger Robbie, despite his habit of getting apoplectically drunk, because he just seemed so straightforward and familiar after the strange, intimidating pretensions of the East London crowd. And he had a really, really good body. (Ahem.) So I settled into it and decided he was an excellent boyfriend, and was quite content with life. Until, after about three months of properly being together, he said, 'I'm going to Thailand for Christmas. I'll call you when I get back.' And then texted me in mid-January:

*I met someone else in Thailand I'm sorry I'll see you around*

Dumped via text. With a misspelling. Or typo, to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Sure, it was no great love affair – Rugged Robbie never really made me laugh and frequently responded to things I said with ‘you’re bonkers’. (I’m so not, but since he had no imagination, I blew his fucking mind.) But I’d grown quite fond of him, so it hurt. That’s the thing about being dumped. Even if you don’t care about him that much, it still hurts. Because if you don’t care much about the dude and you’re still dating him, he must not care about you far, far more to actually go to the trouble of dumping you.

I did have boyfriends at university, since you ask, but they hardly count. It was so much easier then. You’d see them in lectures or at parties and get a crush, and know them via their friends so you could weed out freaks, and flirt for ages and then finally snog, and once you snogged three times, boom! You were going out. Then you’d both agree it was over and move on to someone else. It was easy. Not any more.

Oh fuck me, again. I can’t believe it’s happened again.

As I walk up towards Victoria station, Grazia tucked underneath my arm, I decide to call Bloomie. She gets to work by 7 am every day, because she has a high-flying job. In a bank. (Note: despite high-flying job in aforementioned arsehole industry, Bloomie is not an arsehole.)

‘Mushi mushi?’

‘You know, Bloomerang, you’re not Japanese.’

‘You better now, Sassafras, my little drama queen?’

‘Dude, I give up. If you pick someone interesting, they’re a bastardo and they’ll dump you. If you pick someone kind, they’ll be boring and, apparently, they’ll still dump you. What. The. Fuck.’

‘So you are better, darling?’

‘Yes. I’m *fine*. I’m just fucking over... this... shit.’

Sometimes when I’m upset I get dramatic. It makes me laugh. And that kind of makes me feel better. Even when I’m lost in Break-Up Memory Lane.

‘Sass, darling,’ Bloomie whispers. I don’t think talking on the phone is really approved of in her office. ‘I thought we agreed last night that it was better you stopped toying with Posh Mark? You would have thrown him back into the sea sooner or later.’

Bloomie is one of my best friends, and manages to say 'dah-ling' at least four or five times a minute. It's not pretentious from her, for some reason. She grew up in Chicago, as her dad's American, but her parents moved to London when she was about sixteen, so her accent is a bit of a mongrel between East Coast USA and posh London. She's been exactly the same since the first time we met, on the first day of university.

Bloomie is also a total alpha: always leading the way, immensely more self-assured, together and tougher than I am, and sometimes – and she knows this too – rather spiky. But she's utterly lovely and funny, of course. Why else would I be friends with her? And since I'm the kind of person who's quite happy standing on the sidelines smoking fags and making quips rather than leading the pack, we fit together very well. Together with Kate, who I'll tell you more about later, we've seen each other through about 19 boyfriends, 16 holidays together, probably over 250 coffee-and-fags-and-shopping Saturday afternoons, and truly countless hangovers, yet we still don't run out of things to talk about.

'I must be doing something wrong. I've been dumped six times in a row, Bloomie!'

'Darling... it's just really, really, really, really fucking bad luck.'

Suddenly the reality of both statements hit me. I really have been dumped six times in a row. And it can't just be bad luck. I must be an absolute loser and no one will ever love me again. (Why would Bloomie say I am a drama queen? I mean really.) So I start to cry, ish. Mostly I snuffle into the phone. Bloomie makes soothing noises for a while, and then she clears her throat and says abruptly:

'Darling, seriously, I have to work. Let's have a drink tonight. We can talk about this properly... I'm not being, you know, negative, but I don't want to see you get into a post-Rick spiral...'

How could she remind me of that? 'Sheesh, of course I won't. You're on for drinks, though.'

'Good, darling, that's the spirit. I'll ask Katie too, and email with detes later. Sayonara.'

This perks me up, naturally, and I stride, like the Urban Warrior my outfit makes me, to the tube station, with a cheeriness I don't really feel. Despite my heartbreak/ache/mild graze, I can't help but notice a few good-looking men as I walk through and down to the Victoria line. They're all heading towards the District line. I wonder where they go.

Where was I? Ah yes. Now, on Break-Up Memory Lane, we come to a large speedbump.

**Break-Up 3:** Clapham Brodie. I met him in the Bread and Roses pub in Clapham just after I turned 25, following a long dry spell during which I had an excellent time and met no one I really fancied. At all. I had lots of flirtations, of course, and still went on a few dates – just to keep my tools sharp. When none of the guys tried particularly hard to keep seeing me after one or two (or three or four) dates, however, it was actually more depressing than if I'd actually liked them, if that makes sense. But I really liked Brodie. Damn it, he was cute, with perfect teeth, like an American. And he really made me laugh.

Clapham Brodie was a product manager, whatever the hell that is, and lived in Clapham.. (Clapham is an area in South London that is popular with young people because it's quite affordable, quite safe and quite nice... oh God it's boring.) All his friends lived in Clapham, and every restaurant or bar he ever went to was in Clapham. 'I will never leave Clapham,' he said on our first date. 'It is the centre of the universe.' He was full of quips that tickled me, though looking back, I'm not sure he was joking about that.

So. Clapham Brodie. Very funny guy. He kept up a running patter of playful silliness that I adored. We had long, giggly dinners at Metro and the Pepper Tree, where he made up food voices ('don't eat meeeeeeee!' squeaked pasta, 'who are you callin' chicken?' barked stirfry – I know what you're thinking, but it was funny at the time). We danced to 80s music in Cafe Sol on Fridays and bad dance music in Infernos on Saturdays (if we were drunk enough to consider it), and spent Sundays in the Sun pub, people-watching and making up voice-over conversations for strangers. I found him hilarious, if a tiny bit deluded about his own intelligence (he once corrected my pronunciation of hyperbole, incorrectly). And we never talked about anything serious, ever. I'm not a particularly serious person, so that was fine by me.

After a few months of what I considered to be a rather nice relationship, I heard him refer to me as 'a friend... with benefits' when he was talking to his mates in a bar. A cold chill ran over me, but I was too chicken to bring it up that night. (The ol' fear of confrontation strikes again.)

'How do you... uh, feel about, us, what's going on with us?' I asked his teddy bear Ivan the next night, as we watched DVDs in his bedroom. (Clapham Brodie liked to chat via the medium of the teddy.) 'I am bear. I feel grrrrrrrrrrreat!' growled the toy. (Ivan was Eastern European.) I glanced at Clapham Brodie. He kept his eyes on the TV. I decided to try again, in a silly way he might respond to. 'Do you think... are we... you know, officially going steady? Like, swinging hands?' I asked in an American accent that I hoped belied my hopeful tone. Clapham Brodie put the toy down and looked at me. 'I was wondering when this

would come up...’ he said, and promptly dumped me. If I hadn’t asked him, he would have let us keep wandering on for months. Friends with benefits infuckingdeed. Bastardo. I was quite upset about Clapham Brodie, I must admit. The ability to be silly is so attractive and rarer than you might think.

Shall I just tell you about Break-Up No.4 quickly? Go on, then. We’re nearly done in my Tour O’ Heartbreak.

**Break-Up No.4:** Smart Henry. A bit less than a year after Clapham Brodie, I met Smart Henry at a BBQ in Putney. (People who live in Putney have to bribe you to come and visit them by offering you food.) I was there with Bloomie, who was dating the BBQ host, a man now known as The Hairy Back. Smart Henry was The Hairy Back’s cousin. Smart Henry lived in Putney too, in a grubby little terrace. He was very tall and thin and scruffy, and always wore a battered tweed jacket that had belonged to his father, which made him look like a genteel English professor-in-the-making. Smart Henry seemed to have the perfect combination of indie cred (he freelanced for the *NME* and reviewed films and bands for the *Guardian*), genuine braininess (he had a degree from Cambridge) and politeness (he stood up when I approached the table, and always made sure I had a drink), with just enough silliness to surprise and satisfy (he’d frown at me when I teased him and say funny, mock-patronising things like ‘you’re smarter than you look’, or ‘that’s a spanking for you’). He always called me by my real name – Sarah – rather than Sass, which everyone has always called me, ever since I can remember.

Smart Henry was also older than me – 32 to my 26 – which was refreshing. Enough of these boys, I thought, I want a man. He was nonchalant about everything, and suggested cool, grown-up things to do – like see arthouse films, or go to new restaurants no one else knew about yet, or art fairs where we’d drink brandy out of his hipflask and make up faux-expert reviews. He was a bit serious and detached, but I put that down to age. I was happy.

Then just less than six months after we met (a record long relationship for me), Smart Henry announced he was moving to the States to go to Harvard for an MBA as he was ‘fed up with earning fuck all’ and wanted to ‘make some serious coin’. So he broke up with me, and I went home and cried.

Was I really devastated? I don’t know. Yes. I think I was. But I was tired. I felt like I’d been dating for decades. It seemed like they always really liked me until they got to know me. And each time I met someone new, I tried to be as positive and open and hopeful as I could be. Each time I got so damn fond of them and I’d wonder if I was falling in love. I thought they were having fun. I certainly was. (Though

then again, I find it pretty easy to have a good time. It's one of my better qualities.) But each time it went wrong.

Of course, over the years I also met a lot of guys who were almost great, with one fatal flaw. I don't think I'm being too picky, either. Would you date someone who had a horrible snake-tongued kissing technique, or who ate with his mouth open, or talked about money all night, or admitted to an extensive Crocs collection, or who said stupid things like 'Global warming, I'm not sure I believe in it'? ( 'It's not the tooth fairy,' I replied. 'Believing' makes no difference.) Well, I wouldn't. One date was enough. Sometimes I ignored them afterwards, sometimes they ignored me, whatever: a disappointing mistake is a disappointing mistake.

Oh, Smart Henry. I hope you're making some serious coin now. You cockmonkey. If I'd only known what was ahead of me. The next guy was Rick.

I can't bear to think about him right now. I just can't. Anyway, I'm almost at work.

I get out of the tube at Piccadilly Circus and start walking up past Burger King to my little corner of Soho. I love it at 9.30 am. The streets are scuzzy, and fresh air mingles with the smell of last night's sin, but the sun is shining in its absent-minded London way, and Soho looks all small and personal. Not big famous naughty Soho. My nice little Soho, with my favourite little hidden coffee shop, where they know what I like without me having to go through the whole 'latte but with a bit less milk slash macchiato but with a bit more milk' thing.

I work in a tiny advertising agency on a little road just near Golden Square, just around the corner from Piccadilly Circus. My first ever boss, Cooper, left the (big, glossy, soulless) ad agency we worked at to start it, and after a few months of witnessing the Machiavellian politics at the big agency, I scurried off to join him. It's a fun job, not a real job like being a doctor or a teacher. But I like it. Anyway that's all I'll say about work for the moment. The only thing more boring than hearing about other people's jobs is hearing about other people's dreams.