

Boy Next Door

By HOLLY DIXON

I am an old woman. Zachary is a young boy. That is why it is wrong. That is what I tell myself. I watched him in the playground yesterday, acting like the big man he isn't. He had on trousers three sizes too big for him, crotch hanging down to the knees, Calvin Klein's big black stamp stretching around his waist and leaving him branded. His shirt loosely hanging over a chest that waited patiently to fill out and dark hair falling in an intentionally messy mop on top of his head, shadowing brown eyes and enhancing the air of mystique that always surrounds him. A basketball spun patiently on the end of a finger, never stopping, never falling. Two blonde girls giggled as they danced around him, trying to put him off and knock the ball from its platform.

Nigel is about to have sex with me. Nigel is my husband. Crept into bed with me and has started to talk about his day as he strokes his hand up and down my thigh, up and down, up and down, tickling my skin with dirty fingernails.

'Jeff and Simon were given a pat on the back for an idea that I gave 'em!'

I don't care.

'Sheila's really bin takin' tha mick lately – ever since she started up with this bloody loser from marketing she's really dropped 'er game an Monica 'as to run round fixing 'er mistakes! Mark says she's started drinkin' again, too'.

Good for her. I want a drink. If this is his idea of dirty talk it's no wonder I have closed my eyes and replaced the blurred mumblings of life at Tesco's head office with the much more attractive vision of a naked school boy. His music blares from next door, pounding on the wall and trying to reach me. I can hear him laugh in the silent gaps between songs and I can almost hear him breathe.

The hand slides higher up my thigh and for a brief moment I almost believe it is Zachary, until my husband mechanically transports his heavy bulk to its suffocating position on top of me. Pushing down on me, I feel my ribs bend under the pressure and my heart sink lower, hiding from the inevitable as he plunges into my body and my mind goes blank.

I forgot to set my alarm last night and now mum's screaming up the stairs that I got five minutes or I get no lift. Fucken woman could've given me a bit more warning, she just does it to piss me off, I swear. She's probably shagging the boss and doesn't want me in the car unless I clock the half bottle of perfume she's got on, or the 'secret' stash of jonnies wedged in the glove box. Gonna have to take the bus. Hate the bastard bus, full of knobs who think they own it.

His mother's called Anna-Mae and she's just left the house. She usually gives him a lift on Thursdays, but today there's no sign of him. He will catch the bus then, and from the bathroom window, I can see when it's on its way, so I plant myself between toilet and window and stand guard, waiting until I see the big red vehicle roll towards me. Nigel wanders in while I am on watch – I forgot to lock the door.

'What you doin' all tarted up like Pedigree Chum?' Nigel thinks that through adapting the phrase 'dogs dinner', he is showing wit and intellect. 'And why ya peering out that window like a lighthouse watchman?' Nigel also has a love of inventing his own similes. He calls them metaphors though, as it 'sounds better'.

'Can't a wife look nice for her husband?'

Nigel pulls himself free of his pyjama bottoms and begins to urinate, without lifting the seat. Some of it misses target and splashes its way down onto my shoe. I ignore it.

'And I'm just checking the weather.'

'You're forty bloody two years of age, don't you have better things to be doin' with ya time than slapping on tha lippy like a twenty bloody two year old slapper when the most important person you're gonna see today is the postman?'

The bus is coming. I leave Nigel pissing on the floor and talking similes to no one while I head outside with the bin bag from the kitchen to throw it in the wheelie bin, ensuring the 'chance' encounter I every now and again allow myself. He's not at the stop. Fuck. I linger a while, pulling imaginary weeds from the front garden and preening flowers that I don't like. The bus goes by and it doesn't stop. He isn't going in. He is ill, or hung over, or perhaps he had a girl stay and they're in bed right now. Anger and frustration floods my veins as I slowly walk back to the house, made up like Pedigree Chum for a husband that makes my skin crawl, when the slam of a door and the stomping of feet turn me around. There he stands, wet hair falling flat, black trousers, not yet as long as they will fall by the end of the day, the same Calvin Klein pasted around his waist, but this time

in a slightly off-white colour. He watches the red bus sail into the distance and yells at the top of his voice, 'FUCK!'

And then he sees me, nods an uncomfortable acknowledgement in my direction and, head slumped, sidles back towards the house.

'I can...' He can't hear me. Louder. 'I can... I can give you a lift... if you want, if you like.'

His head seems to raise itself in slow motion and he struggles to make eye contact, probably figuring out a way of letting me down easily.

The woman from next door is giving me a lift. I'm waiting by her car while she looks in the house for the keys. She's taking a while. Maybe she was joking, maybe she's not gonna take me. I'll be standing here like some muppet, staring into the windows of a banged up old Merc with cream leather seats and then her grimy ole bloke'll come and knock me out for hanging round his wife.

He's standing by my car, shifting his weight from one foot to the next like he needs the toilet. At first I couldn't find the keys. I don't like to drive. I change my top, a white shirt with frills where the buttons meet (as I think it may be too dressy), to a plain black T-shirt, then change it back in case he notices I've changed and questions why.

She comes out the house, nods coolly and heads to the passenger door, unlocks and opens it, and seats herself inside. I stand there, motionless – like what she wants me to drive? Or is her bloke taking me? Fucken shoulda just said no. Then, suddenly her eyes seem to register, her face glows red and she springs up and jumps outside, laughing nervously as she excuses herself and shuffles round the car to the driver's side. I nod and tell her I completely understand – that I've done the same thing. This bird must've had a few last night.

So I've already made a fool of myself. I did not think this through. As I drive along the street I become extremely conscious of my face. Its expression. Should I smile? Frown? Look casual and comfortable? Formal? I pull my lips between my teeth and bite hard, encouraging the pain to enliven my senses. Have you ever driven while shaking? When your foot rattles around the accelerator independent of your body and it just won't keep still. The car moves along shakily and I have to fill the silence.

'I've seen you playing basketball, you're really good.' Why did I say that? He's going to realise I've been watching him.

'Thanks, I enjoy it.'

'Do you play for a team?' Why do I keep talking about this?

'Yeh, but only the school team. I'm lookin' to join another team outta school but it's hard to get anywhere when you got no transport.'

'Won't your mum take you?' Why am I getting so personal? Stop talking now.

'Nah, she don't like giving me lifts unless she's goin' out anyway an' she don't go out that much'.

'Well I'm...'

His gaze burns a hole in my face and the car swerves slightly to the left. I don't really know what I am about to say. 'I'm...,' he's still watching me, 'I have a lot, lot of free time if you ever need a ride.'

Silence. Long silence. Then, 'hey, thanks, I might just take you up on that.'

He has agreed and I can hardly contain my excitement. But why would he want to be with me? I can see my reflection in the rear view mirror. Wrinkles protrude through the thick mass of make up on my forehead and skin collects crumpled around the corners of my eyes. Thick black balls of mascara cling to short and stumpy lashes that blink too frequently under their weight.

I move to change gear and my hand brushes past his leg. A rush floods through me. Every part of me is alert to this feeling. I move to change gear once more and when I touch him, I pause to take in the moment – the chance may not come again.

And I am at school and I am late and Mr Townsend is shouting but I am happy. I counted the cash and chucked her wallet in the skip they've been meaning to remove from outside school since last term. There was thirty quid in there and I'm halfway to that new pair of Stan Smiths.

After he left me, I placed my hand on his seat and absorbed its warmth. When I was sure no one was looking, I leant down and pushed my face into the dip he had made in the seat and rested it there until the leather became cool. I floated home on the clichéd cloud nine and passed the day in the nourishing memory of my morning's journey. Now my husband has returned home from work and he explodes with anger.

'Where in God's name did you get to this morning? Not even a bloody word! You just disappeared like an ugly whore in a brothel!'

I cannot see him. All I can see is Zachary and I pounce on my husband and reach for the buttons of his shirt and pull them apart and force his bulk to the floor, pushing my lips hard against his, to his neck, to his chest. He seems scared of this new predatory nature of mine, but gives in to the pressure and I take my husband for the very first time.

I'm kinda nervous, 'cos her bloke is a beast, but this is real important so there's no harm in trying. The bell rings a tune, like the ding ding dong you hear before an announcement over the speaker system at the airport. I hear a man's voice yell from inside, and soon after, heavy footsteps rush, bang bang bang down the stairs.

It is happening again! He has asked me to drive him to a party in town. 'Very important,' so he says. Very important. I don't repeat my foolish mistake of planting myself in the wrong side of the car. I head confidently to the driver's side and start the engine, revving the gas a few times to exert my power over the vehicle. He hurls a sports bag into the back and lumps himself down with ease. He has become so comfortable in fact that he pulls one leg up onto the dash board, while the other spreads out towards me, so that I have no option but to graze his knee with my hand at each change of gear. Every time I touch him, his knee pushes against me and something connects between us.

She begins to make small talk and she watches my knee as I push it against her and she doesn't complain. She likes it I know that now. She ain't even mentioned the purse – probably not even noticed. I'm taking liberties to see how far I can push it and I get the feeling there are no boundaries. I change the radio station to Radio 1 and Tim Westwood's show. She shuffles in her seat but as I turn the music up she just continues with her small talk, watching my knee each time I move towards her.

He shows me how relaxed he feels in my company and I try to connect with him, talking about the music he is playing.

'So... who is this?'

'Kanye West.'

'Ok, do you like him?'

'He's alright.'

'Maybe you can bring some CDs to put in the car if you need a lift another time?'

'Yeh I will, cool thanks.'

There's a gap in the song and I am sure he can hear my heart pounding through my chest.

I shoot her my best smile, give the old dog a look like I want her, grab my bag from the back and I'm out.

He looks at me and the connection grows. I drive a little down the road, pull over and once more my head sinks into its place in the warmth, while I stroke the muddy mark left behind by his shoe on the dash board.

On my return home my excitement has been built up to the point of overflow, and I excitedly announce, 'Honey, you're in trouble!' I let out a giggle that sounds like it's come from a fifteen year old and race up the stairs to take advantage of my husband.