

~~Sexy~~
~~Fun~~
~~Honest~~
~~Cool~~

PRETENDING

HOLLY
BOURNE

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To Good Eggs

I hate men.

There, I've said it. I know you're not supposed to say it. We all pretend we don't hate them; we all tell ourselves we don't hate them. But I'm calling it. I'm standing here on this soapbox, and I'm saying it.

I. Hate. Men.

I mean, think about it. They're just *awful*. I hate how selfish they are. How they take up so much space, assuming it's always theirs to take. How they spread out their legs on public transport, like their balls need regular airing to stop them developing damp. I hate how they basically scent-mark anywhere they enter to make it work for them. Putting on the music *they* want to listen to the moment they arrive at any house party, and always taking the nicest chair. How they touch your stuff instead of just looking; even tweak the furniture arrangement to make it most comfortable for them. All without asking first – *never* asking first.

I hate how they think their interests are more important than yours – even though twice a week all most of them do is watch a bunch of strangers kick a circle around a piece of lawn and sulk if the circle doesn't go in the right place. And how bored they look if you ever try to introduce them to a film, a band, or even a freaking YouTube clip, before you've even pressed play.

I hate their *endless* arrogance. I hate how they interrupt you and then apologise for it but carry on talking anyway. How they ask you a question but then check your answer afterwards. I hate how they can never do one piece of housework without telling you about it. I hate how they literally cannot handle being driven in a car by a woman, even if they're terrible drivers themselves. I hate how they all think they're fucking incredible at grilling meat on barbecues. The sun comes out and man must light fire and not let woman anywhere near the meat. Dumping blackened bits of chicken onto our plates along with the whiff of a burp from their beer breath, acting all caveman, like we're supposed to find it *cute* that we may now get salmonella and that we're going to have to do all the washing-up.

I hate how I'm quite scared of them. I hate the collective noise of them when they're in a big group. The tribal *wahey*-ing, like they all swap their IQs for extra testosterone when they swarm together. How, if you're sitting alone on an empty train, they always come and deliberately sit next to you en masse, and talk extra loudly about macho nonsense, apparently to impress you. I hate the way they look at you when you walk past – automatically judging your screwability the moment they see you. Telling you to smile if you dare look anything other than delighted about living with stuff like this constantly fucking happening to you.

I hate how hard they are to love. How many of them actually, truly, think the way to your heart is sending you a selfie of them tugging themselves, hairy ball-sack very much still in shot. I hate how they have sex. How they shove their fingers into you, thinking it's going to achieve anything.

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Jabbing their unwashed hands into your dry vagina, prodding about like they're checking for prostate cancer, then wondering why you now have BV and you still haven't come. Have *none* of them read a sex manual? Seriously? None of them? And I hate how they hate you a little just after they've finished. How even the nice ones lie there with cold eyes, pretending to cuddle, but clearly desperate to get as far away from you as possible.

I hate how it's never equal. How they expect you to do all the emotional labour and then get upset when you're the more stressed out one. I hate how they never understand you, no matter how hard they try, although, let's be honest here, they never actually try that hard. And I hate how you're always exhausting yourself trying to explain even the most basic of your rational emotional responses to their bored face.

I hate how every single last one of them has issues with their father.

And do you know what I hate most of all?

That despite this, despite all this disdain, I still *fancy* men. And I still want them to fancy me, to want me, to *love* me. I hate myself for how much I want them. Why do I still fancy men so much? What's wrong with me? Why are they all so broken? Am I broken for still wanting to be with one, even after everything? I should be alone. That's the only healthy way to be. BUT I DON'T WANT TO BE ALONE. I hate men, that's the problem. GOD I HATE THEM SO MUCH – they're so entitled and broken and lazy and wrong and . . . and . . .

Hang on . . .

My phone.

HE MESSAGED BACK!!!
WITH A KISS ON THE END!
Never mind.
Forget I said anything. It's all good.

‘I think I’m going to fall in love with him,’ I tell Katy, as we stand by the dilapidated kettle, waiting for it to gurgle into a lacklustre boil.

‘Maybe a little bit soon for that, don’t you think?’

‘I know. But I also, like, *know*, you know?’

Katy closes her eyes for a little longer than necessary, which is fair enough. I can hear what I sound like with my very own ears. I am not this person. I am not this woman. Although I am, I am. ‘You’re getting carried away again, aren’t you?’ She’s washing out our mugs using the tiniest amount of Fairy Liquid, which has the note ‘please use sparingly’ on it, like the charity we work for can be saved from financial annihilation by more efficient washing-up.

‘It’s been five dates! *Five!* Do you have any idea what a milestone that is? I googled it, and it really, really is.’

‘Didn’t we talk about googling relationship stuff, April?’

‘I can’t help it. We work in an office with unrestricted Internet access and I’m not Gandhi. And even he, I am sure, would google “what to expect after five dates” if he was in my position.’

She laughs loudly enough that heads jerk up around the office. I *shh* her as I pour the coffee out of the cafetière into three mugs. She splashes in the milk equally and I giggle with her, but I can’t help but feel a twinge of hurt at her

amusement. Katy's been married for four years, to a man who completely and utterly adores her. She's all smug and I-wouldn't-be-like-that and chilled, which is so easy to be when you've been married for four years, to a man who completely and utterly adores you. I would be just as chill if I was married to a man like Jimmy. Bored as fuck, but chill.

We clatter back to our desks, through an office fizzing with Friday energy. The end of the week is tauntingly in sight. Shoulders relax as people tap at their keyboards, meetings are laced with jokes, and the radio's been cranked on. No one is working quite as hard as they should be and their Monday-selves will hate their now-selves for being so lax. But that is then and this is now and I have a sixth date and a whole weekend and the hope of the beginning.

I attack my phone the second I'm sitting down. The sweet agonising apprehension of waiting for a red blob containing a message alert – my future mood totally dependent on it. For a millisecond, as I wait for my screen to unlock, I imagine it all disintegrating. Maybe I'm overhyping the connection, maybe he won't have replied, maybe I'm delusional and mental and he's figured this out and will now ghost me without explanation. I'll have to start over again. Pick myself up and out of the dust again. Try to find the faith again. A dark chasm yawns open in my stomach . . . but wait!

There's a message!

He's replied!

I've been rewarded for leaving my phone at my desk while I made coffee. I successfully tricked the Love Gods with my trip to the kitchen to make a hot drink. They thought I was ambivalent about Simon's reply and therefore sent it to me,

but the joke is on them because I didn't even want this coffee. I just needed a reason to be away from my phone.

'Your phone buzzed,' Matt tells me unnecessarily as I stare at it in my hand. He's peering at me over his monitor, his eyes kind through the thick black rims of his glasses. 'Is it Simon?'

I nod. 'I think so. Can't open it to tell yet though, can I?'

'Why not? Of course you can.'

Katy plops his drink down in front of him and he nods a thank you. 'Google probably told her not to,' she says, taking her seat next to him. She pulls her keyboard towards her and starts clacking earnestly.

'It's not just that,' I protest. I open my top drawer and put my phone in there so I can't see it. It nestles in on top of some used-up notepads and promotional postcards we give out at student unions. 'I just don't want him to think I've spent my whole day checking my phone to see if he's messaged.'

'Even though you have . . . ' Matt puts forward.

'Yes, but I've done other interesting things and had other interesting thoughts too.'

'Like . . . ?'

'Well, we just had that meeting.'

'Which you brought your phone to . . . and spent the whole time looking at your lap.'

I shake my head and take a slurp of my unwanted tricking-the-Love-Gods coffee. 'OK, OK, so I'm a pathetic mess and Simon's going to find out how crazy I am and dump me and then I'll die alone in my flat, and my cat will eat my face because cats have no loyalty.'

'You don't have a cat,' Katy reminds me, still typing.

Matt points at me. 'Write all that out to him and send it back.'

'What? Say "please don't dump me when you find out I'm crazy. You're the one chance I have to not have a cat eat my decomposing face"?''

He points harder. 'Yeah. Go for it. Stress-test it. See what happens. If he's the guy, he'll get it.'

Katy and I shake our heads at one another. Katy has been with Jimmy so long she's completely out of the game, but even she knows that's wrong.

'You know that's not how it works.'

Here's the thing: I really don't understand why love has been so hard for me. I am pretty. I am smart. I have a goodish job. I have friends. I have hobbies. I am funny. I am self-actualized. I dress well. I don't have particularly high standards. I am not expecting to be rescued. I am realistic about what relationships are like. I know they take work. I know nobody is perfect, let alone myself. I know I have to 'put myself out there' and I have been doing that. I am a good conversationalist. I am happy on my own. I am.

But, like, I still want a relationship.

I *really* want a relationship.

Not because I think it will complete me or solve all my problems. Not because I want a big wedding and to look pretty in an expensive dress. Not even, really, because I want to have children because, if I had to, I could survive not having them.

I want a relationship because it's a really normal and natural thing to want. And yet, it's not been happening for me. It's so exhaustingly hard. I don't understand why it's so hard . . .

But maybe it won't be hard any more. Not with Simon.

God, I really, *really* like Simon.

I attempt to lose myself in my work. My important work in my important job in my independent life. I try to be better than this. Less needy than this. Less obsessed than this. It's my shift answering the inbox this afternoon and that's always a traumatic ball-ache, so I need to be efficient and get through my emails and be all the things I know I'm capable of being. I type up the notes from the meeting about safeguarding procedure. I plan next month's buddy timetable and send it out to the volunteers. I go to another meeting about budget cuts, how to make it work on much less than we have and how we will probably get even less next year but we are positive that actually it will be OK. I'm hyper-aware of my phone in my top drawer, however. The unread message thumps through the oak like it's the still-beating heart of a murdered body I've tried to bury, like the Poe story. I stare into nothingness for many a moment to obsess about the contents of the message. He won't be cancelling tonight, will he? He seemed really up for it last night. He explicitly used the words 'looking forward to seeing you'. He put a kiss on the end. But what if he's changed his mind? What if his ex rang him randomly last night and told him she still loves him and they've been up all night rampantly shagging and he's only just remembered he's got a date tonight?

'Whoops, I should probably let her know,' I imagine Simon saying, laughing with carefree abandon as she wraps her arms

around his neck. Her name is Gretel, I've decided. For some reason, whenever I fantasise about perfect women who behave perfectly in relationships, I always call them Gretel. Gretel kisses his face and says, '*Well you can't go now, can you? Not when we are about to elope to Gretna Green,*' and— OH MY GOD, WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME? Why is this weird image of him and his ex in my head? I don't know him, it's only been five dates, and why am I doing this to myself? I have to open the message. He's going to be cancelling. I know it, I know it. I should get over the disappointment now, rip off the plaster, give the wound oxygen to heal and . . .

The drawer is open. Phone retrieved, alongside a scattering of postcards that rain onto the grey carpet like shrapnel. I jab my finger on the scanner to unlock it, already wondering if my housemate Megan will be free tonight to commiserate-drink with me. I open the message.

Simon: Hey, are you having a nice Friday? Shall we meet at 7pm in Gordon's Wine Bar? X

The usual knee-jerk of emotions scurry in. Euphoria! He messaged! He likes me! I like him! I've not imagined the attraction! Human beings can meet and like each other and make it into a thing and I can be one of those humans! I can do relationships! I can totally do them! There's nothing wrong with me after all! Yes! Oh I like him so much! Gordon's! What an idea! I love that place! I hate it normally but it's so perfect now! Yes! Oh, he really is perfect! I think I'm going to fall in love with him and it will always be perfect! Silly me! Whoopsie! Silly, silly me for doubting this.

Hang on . . .

I just full-on *hallucinated* him having amazing make-up-sex with his ex-girlfriend. I even christened her ‘Gretel’.

That’s not normal, is it?

Bloody hell, that is *so* un-normal.

What is wrong with me?

HE CAN NEVER FIND OUT HOW UN-NORMAL I AM!

Matt glances over and sees my shaking hands clutching my phone. He takes his headphones off and gestures towards it. ‘All OK? You look like he’s sent you a death threat?’

I look up, flustered. ‘He wants to go to Gordon’s Wine Bar.’

‘Woah, even worse than a death threat.’ He ducks just before I jokingly thwack the top of his head. ‘It’s good that he wants to see you again though, isn’t it?’

‘I guess.’

‘Are you going to reply?’ He talks slowly, like a teacher would say to a child, ‘that’s a lovely painting, are you going to add a sun to the sky?’

‘I mean, that’s the obvious thing to do, isn’t it?’

‘Tends to be the pattern. They message. You message. So on and so forth.’ He goes to put his headphones back on, before pausing, holding them out either side of his ears.

‘Oh God, what is it?’ I ask. ‘You’re not about to give me some brilliant dating advice, are you? Like “if it’s right there’s nothing you can do to fuck it up, and if it’s wrong there’s nothing you can do to make it work” – because I did not have you down as the inspirational quote kind of guy.’

‘No, actually, I was going to talk to you about your shift.’

My heart stiffens. Vision smears. I know where this is going.

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‘I had a look at the inbox and there’s a heavy one in there. I’m your buddy so I just thought I’d give you a heads-up and—’

I cut him off. ‘I know what you’re trying to say, but I’m OK.’
‘You sure?’

I smile through it, though I can recognise all the familiar triggers *zing-zinging* throughout my nervous system, setting everything off again. Turning all the switches on across my body. I’m in the dark dark dark of the worst that life can be. The white wallpaper dissolves behind my eyelids. The embossed pattern swirling. I’m here in the room and things have got out of hand and I’m not sure how because it all happened so very quickly you see, but the wallpaper and . . . *No*. I’m not there. I’m here, in an office. On a Friday. I’m totally safe.

‘I’m sure,’ I tell him.

He must believe me because he puts his headphones back on. Matt can’t handle the office’s choice in radio station. Essentially, if a song isn’t written by some sad bloke tormented by low self-worth and memories of all the exes who got away, Matt doesn’t want to listen to it.

I return my phone to the top drawer without even thinking about it, Simon’s message temporarily forgotten. I plug in my own pair of noise-cancelling headphones. I know it’s Friday, and it’s fine that everyone wants to listen to Magic FM, but I can’t read about sexual violence to Wham!. I put on *Piano and Rain*, log in to the charity’s inbox, and wait to see what horrible thing a man has done to a woman today.

It's bad, my shift. I mean, it's always bad, but I'm almost gasping as I read through this message in the charity's inbox:

Message received: 15:34

Was it rape? He is my boyfriend. I don't understand. Did he mean it?

Matt's checking on me more than he's letting on. I sense every one of his head twitches, feel his eyes dart towards my face.

I stand up suddenly. 'My round for tea. Anyone?' I announce in an overly-chirpy voice.

He pulls his headphones around his neck. 'No tea for me. You OK? Honestly April, I'm happy to do this shift if you'd rather not.'

'I'm *fine!*' I collect my mug and make a thumbs-up/thumbs-down motion to Katy to see if she wants in. She shakes her head. I act like the day hasn't shifted entirely, like my life doesn't feel like a shaken snow globe. 'Tea coming right up,' I mutter to myself.

I stand in the grotty kitchen, gulping down the tea without tasting it. I'm in the office. I am safe in the office. I am in the present moment. God, this office is a shithole. When I was little, I imagined an office with men in dry-cleaned suits

and silken ties and women in power heels with perfect manicures. People would shoot up floors in a sleek, glass lift and have meetings overlooking the London skyline. That is not what a charity office looks like, especially a charity office in a never-ending financial crisis. Since the cuts, we've had to relocate again. We're now uncomfortably snuggled above a high-street estate agent. Twenty of us share a unisex loo where everyone can hear everything and there's no window to let the smell out. There are no freshly cut flowers at reception or state of the art touchscreen thingamajigs – just an office rota for who's answering the phones this week and some old lumpy computers we got cheap from an office sale. Oh, and too many desperate young people needing help and not enough of us to help them effectively.

I make myself go back to my chair, then I reach into my clogged handbag and rummage for my lavender oil. I dab it onto my wrists and inhale deeply to further ground myself in.

'Honestly,' Matt interrupts again. 'April, I can take over.'

I look up and smile at his concerned face. Matthew is one of the few things about this job that doesn't totally destroy my faith in men. 'You are lovely,' I tell him, because he is.

'Ice cream afterwards?'

'More than lovely.' I take another deep sniff of my scented pulse points and read through the email message again. I start taking notes, making sure I've caught everything, all the fragments of her story and her pain. Then I minimise the window and double-click on my 'template answers' folder, pulling up the Word document entitled 'Raped By My Boyfriend'. Because being raped by your boyfriend is so commonplace the charity has a template answer for it. I tweak the template

that contains all the important phrases about it not being her fault, and there being no right or wrong way of dealing with this, and ask her if there's someone she trusts whom she can talk to. I signpost her towards specialist organisations that can help her further. I offer hope that, in time, she will be able to make sense of this and not let it define her, or her life. I slurp from my cup and check my reply for typos. Then I put the cup down, have one final read-through, and press send. My breathing's not quite right. It stays lodged in my diaphragm like a lump of wet clay. My computer beeps sharply to inform me my reply's been received. I picture it arriving in this faceless girl's inbox – wherever she is in the country. I imagine her refreshing her screen, waiting for this reply, and now it is here. I hope it helps. I picture her feeling soothed by it, less alone. Her crying, but a good sort of crying, a cry that leads you to the start of a hard, but right, path.

I'm helping I'm helping I'm helping, I say over and over to myself, and let the thought seep in, spread out, and calm me down again.

Matt again. Looking over my monitor. 'Just read through your answer,' he says. 'You got the tone spot on.'

I sigh and hang my head back, staring up at a loose ceiling-tile. 'Cheers buddy.'

'Just say when, re the ice cream. The rest of the inbox is pretty standard. You've got a 23-year-old virgin to look forward to, and someone who wants to know if you can get pregnant from a toilet seat.'

I smile up at him. 'I can't talk about my job on my date tonight, can I?' I ask. Simon is back in my thoughts now that I've pushed through the trigger. Hope blossoms through my

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bloodstream. 'Not sure if sperm on toilet seats is appropriate date-conversation fodder, is it?'

'Google it,' Matt smiles back.

I start to type.

'Oh God,' he says. 'You're actually googling it, aren't you?'