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opening extract from

32c, That's Me

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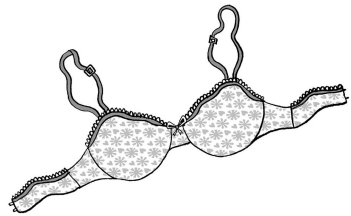
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Step on a crack, you'll break your back.
Step on a line, you'll break your spine.

Every day, on my way home from school, I do this weird thing. As I turn into my street I recite this chant in my head and try to avoid the cracks in the pavement.

Me, superstitious? Never!

Well, okay, a bit.

Because, when I reach the last lamppost before our house, I take a deep breath and fill my lungs with air. You see, if I can get into the house without taking another breath, Mum won't be there.

I turn my key in the lock, lungs bursting. Nothing. No Radio 4, no voice on the phone, no dishes clattering in the kitchen.

My breath explodes in a big rush of air. Yes! Mum's not home yet. I have the house to myself.

Don't get me wrong, I don't hate my mum or anything. It just means I have a bit of peace to go on the Internet, without Mum breathing down my neck about homework and 'the importance of Year 9 in laying the foundation for GCSEs'.

That's the problem with having two parents who are teachers. Double trouble. I've got no chance.

Actually they're not that bad. Quite cool really, though I'd never admit that to them or anyone else.

I dump my bag on the floor and help myself to a Coke from the fridge and a couple of rice cakes. I'm really into them. 'Gluten-free', it says on the packet. That's Mum's influence. I just like the taste.

The light's flashing on the answerphone. It's a message from Ali. Scatty Ali. My best mate. We're as different as chalk and cheese, but we've been friends since reception class. She was away today.

'Hi, Jess. How was school? I've been doubled up in agony but I'm okay now. Can I copy your maths? Ring me.'

Trust Ali. Ever since she started her periods she has a day off each month with stomach-ache which miraculously disappears at 3.30. She gets away with it because she gets her mum to write a note. Dumb mum.

I'm just jealous. You have to be on your deathbed in this house before anyone's allowed to take a sicky.

Though, don't tell anyone, but actually I like school and don't want to miss it. Especially now I'm going out with Muggs. I wouldn't mind the odd day in bed though.

Chance'd be a fine thing.

You see, my dad's in charge of absences at my school. He's the deputy head and teaches me science as well. I had to do sex education with him in Year 7. How embarrassing is that? At least Mum has the sense to work in a different school.

The next message is for him, all about money and pensions. Boring. Dad's forever trying to work out if he can afford to retire early, though Mum and I think this is just a hobby of his. Every so often he flips into stress mode and goes off on how he'll have to keep working till he's sixty-five to support my sister and me through uni. As he's only forty-eight now, that's hardly likely, especially as Carly is nearly nineteen and will be starting at Bristol in September.

Gran's voice comes on next. My gran's wicked. It's the usual. She's forgotten how to set the video and the over-60s have got a salsa class on tonight she doesn't want to miss. Can Dad ring her back?

The last one's for Mum. Message for Mrs Diane Bayliss from the Daybreak Centre asking her to attend tomorrow at 2pm. Wonder what that's about?

Mum teaches life skills and special needs in her school

so it's probably something to do with that. I must remember to tell her. She never checks for messages. She's not exactly technically illiterate, but not far from it. For her, checking her mail is exactly that. She comes in and looks to see if there's any post for her and there never is because she leaves the boring brown envelopes for Dad to open. She's got an e-mail address that Carly set up for her before she left so they could keep in touch, but she hardly ever uses it.

That reminds me. I go into the dining room to check my e-mails. Yes! There's one from Carly. It's from Byron Bay in New South Wales, Australia. Carly, the Byron Siren.

Carly's having a gap year before uni. I really miss her. She flew to Bangkok after her A-level results last year and spent a few months in Thailand. Mum and Dad couldn't say anything because she'd got the grades she needed and that was the bargain they'd made. Work hard for your A-levels and then do what you want for a year.

Mind you, I reckon they wouldn't have stopped her if she'd failed them altogether. There's still an element of the old hippies in Mum and Dad, under that veneer of middle-class respectability. That's how they met, in the late 70s, on the hippy trail. Dad had been hitch-hiking to Turkey and Mum had been on her way back from Kathmandu with a jerk called Jeremy, and they met in Istanbul in the Pudding Shop. Mum ditched Jeremy and

went off to live on a Greek island with Dad for a month, sleeping on beaches and on the roofs of houses. The rest is history, as they say.

Anyway, now Carly's having a whale of a time in sunny Australia. The e-mail says it all.

> Met a gorgeous surfer dude called Todd. Todd the Bod! He is seriously sexy! How does 6 foot 4, sunbleached hair and great pecs grab you? And, guess what! Have got a job! Bad news is, it's waitressing. Good news is, it's at a café on the beach. So I'm topping up my suntan as I'm earning money and get to chat up all these fit guys at the same time!

This is all seriously good news for me as it's what I intend to be doing in four years' time. I type out a reply to her, telling her all the gossip, though there's not a lot going on.

> Muggs and I are still together and it's getting better by the day. Kelly Harris hates me cos she's fancied him for ages. Think Ali's a bit jealous too. Guess what? Miss Taylor wants me to audition for the role of Lady Macbeth! Mum's worried I'll fall behind with my work. Ali's going for it as well but she's got no chance. Mum and Dad are boring as ever. I miss you.

Send.

I'm on the Internet looking up stuff about Lady Macbeth when Mum comes in. It's our Shakespeare text and Miss Taylor thinks we can make it come alive by putting it on ourselves. She's really cool like that, she's a great teacher. I'd so love to take the role of Lady Macbeth, she's such a nasty piece of work. I reckon I'm in with a chance as Miss usually picks me to read her in class because she says I make sense of the words.

That's down to Mum. She used to read aloud to Carly when she was breastfeeding me and she reckons I took it all in. I was reading properly before I started school. In reception Miss Barry put me with Ali to help her because she found reading hard. I've been doing Ali's work for her ever since.

Do you know something? Mum used to read Shakespeare to me in bed when I was little. I didn't know what she was on about but I loved being snuggled up next to her and listening to the sounds and patterns her voice made. Maybe that's why I love Shakespeare so much now.

Oh, and I forgot to mention, Muggs is going to try out for Macbeth. How romantic is that!

'Hiya, love. Had a good day? You're not in a chatroom are you?' Mum asks, all in one breath. Good old Mum, she doesn't even know what a chatroom is. She's just heard the phrase and thinks it's something mildly unsavoury.

'Yes, I'm just fixing a date with a fifty-year-old saddo

called Ronald who's pretending to be a fifteen-year-old called Dazza,' I answer.

'Well, don't stay on there all night, you've got your homework to do.' Mum's voice comes from the kitchen, where she's pulling out food from the freezer. She never listens when she gets home from school. It takes her till after tea to stop being a teacher and issuing orders.

'Spaghetti bolognese okay?'

'Fine,' I say, engrossed in the words on the screen. She has a really bad press, Lady Macbeth. According to this article, there's loads more to her than the scheming wife she's made out to be.

'Did your dad say if he was going to be late tonight?'

'Haven't a clue.' I'm intent on grabbing pages off the net about Lady Macbeth and her lack of power.

Mum starts pulling stuff out of the washing machine.

'Stick this on the line for me, Jess. It should dry before it's dark.'

'Mu-um! I'm doing my homework!'

It's a weird fact of life that Mum goes on all the time that I never do any homework but finds a million ways to stop me from actually doing any.

'Go on, Jess. It won't take you a minute. I want to get the tea on. I'm off to Stretch and Tone tonight.'

She's always doing something, Mum, she's never still for a minute. Dad's much more laid-back.

'You don't need to go anyway,' I grumble, picking up the basket of wet washing. Mum's got a great figure, something else I've inherited from her apparently. At least, that's what Carly says. She says I'm 'well-endowed' in the right places. She means I've got big boobs like Mum. Carly's a different shape all together. She's more like Dad – well, not really, because he's a bloke – but the same sort of lean body type without the paunch. I'm more curvy.

To tell the truth, I'm still getting used to my boobs. They've crept up on me in the last couple of years. I like them, but I'm getting to the stage where I hope they won't grow any more. Ali thinks I'm nuts. She says they're my best asset. She's saving up for a boob job because she says hers are like two fried eggs.

'Don't forget these.'

Mum chucks some underwear that's got stuck in the back of the machine into the basket.

'Those bras are no good for you, you know.'

Here she goes. I can feel my hackles rising.

'Don't look at me like that, Jess. You need some support or your breasts will sag. You should come with me to Marks and Sparks and be measured. These skimpy little things do nothing for you.'

'No way,' I protest. 'I'm not wearing a boulder-holder for anyone!'

No one can infuriate me like my mother. She's got it off to a fine art. And she's oblivious to it. She can bring me to boiling point in 1.5 seconds and leave me simmering there without even noticing.

Dad's late and Mum's clucking that she'll never get to exercise class if he doesn't hurry up because she needs the car. At last he comes in, plonking his briefcase down by my bag and loosening his tie. Mum's about to tell us to move them but changes her mind when she sees how tired he looks.

'Busy day?'

'Mmm.' He puts the kettle on and runs his fingers through his hair. It's going a bit thin on top. 'You?'

'You're not kidding, I'm exhausted,' she says and launches into a lengthy and complicated description of her talk to Year 7 boys on personal hygiene. Gross. The strange thing is that she seems full of energy after her day whereas Dad really does look tired and crumpled.

It's not till we're halfway through our spag bog that I remember the messages on the phone.

'Oops. Gran wanted you to explain to her how to set the video, Dad.'

'Again,' said Mum, darkly.

'It's too late now. She'll have gone out. And there's someone about pensions on the answerphone.'

Dad grunts.

'Oh, and Mum, the Daybreak Centre rang. You've got an appointment there tomorrow at two.'

'What?' Mum looks startled.

'There's a message on the answer machine,' I mumble, my mouth full of pasta.

'I wish you wouldn't do that!' Mum snaps, getting up from the table and stacking dishes even though Dad and I haven't finished.

'What?' I ask in surprise.

'Listen to my messages. They could be private, you know.'

Dad and I look at each other in amazement. Mum's logic never ceases to surprise. She's throwing plates into the sink as if she's a guest at a Greek wedding.

'It's an answerphone. For all of us,' I explain patiently.

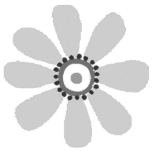
'Oh you know what I mean,' mutters Mum. 'Anyway, you two can wash up. I've got things to do.'

'I thought you were going to Stretch and Tone,' I say.

'It's too late now. And I'm too busy. I've got a load of stuff to do for school.'

'Ofsted,' mouths Dad as she sweeps out of the kitchen and goes upstairs.

'PMT,' I reply, chucking him the tea towel. 'I'll wash, you wipe.'



The next morning Mum's back to normal, though she hadn't come back downstairs the night before. I guess she was marking books in her room, then she called down to say she was having a bath and an early night. She gives me a hug as I go out of the door.

'Good luck for the audition today.'

I hug her back and say goodbye. Ali's at the end of the road, period pains forgotten for another month. I run to catch her up. She's stuffing a Mars bar down her throat for breakfast. It's not fair. She lives on a diet of chocolate and chips but she's skinny as a rake and never gets spots.

'Got your maths?' She gives me a chocolatey grin as I hand over my book. 'You're a star,' she says and copies down my answers as she walks along. Mum would go ballistic if she saw her, but it's no skin off my nose.

Dad's left an hour ago. He has to be at school early to

sort out the registers. There's no way I'd go with him anyway, even if he left at a civilised time. It's embarrassing enough having him in the same school as me without advertising the fact by arriving with him.

Ali thinks I'm nuts. She reckons it's great having my dad as deputy head and plays up to him like mad. He's got a soft spot for her too. He's known her since she was a little kid and he used to tease her to bits and she loved it. I used to feel a bit jealous sometimes, but Mum said it was because she didn't have a dad of her own so I stopped minding. Mum's more critical of her. She worries that she'll lead me astray. No chance.

Muggs is waiting for me at the school gate with his nose in *Macbeth*, reading over Act 1, Scene 3 for today's audition. I still can't believe I'm going out with him. Muggs, christened David Morgan. He's tall with long dark hair that he wears tied back in a ponytail for school, and when he smiles his eyes crinkle and his mouth goes lopsided and he looks soooo sexy. Everyone fancies him. And the bonus is, he's in Year 10 so I get to use the Upper School common room as his invited guest. We got to know each other during last year's production of *Little Shop of Horrors*, and by Christmas we were a couple. He's my first (and hopefully my last) boyfriend.

'Hiya,' I say, and give him a peck on the cheek. 'How's it going?'

He strikes a pose and looks Ali and me up and down and says:

'What are these,
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o'th'earth,
And yet are on't?'

'Ha, ha, very funny,' I say, impressed despite myself. Ali looks at him as if he's mad. This is typical Muggs; he's probably stayed up half the night learning all of Act 1 so he'll be word-perfect for the audition.

I just don't get him. His home life's chaotic, with loads of little step and half-brothers and sisters, and parents who wouldn't notice in a month of Sundays whether he's done his homework or not, and he just gets on with it. He's good at everything – rugby, football, schoolwork, drama, the lot – and he's dead popular as well. I know my Dad rates him, which makes life a lot easier for us.

'What's he on about?' asks Ali. Shakespeare is not her strong point even though she's desperate for a leading role in the play.

'Speak if you can: what are you?' Muggs continues, putting his arms around me. I nestle close to him. I can feel his heart through his sweatshirt.

'Hail,' I say.

'Hail,' he answers.

'Lesser than Macbeth, and greater,' I continue.

'Not so happy, yet much happier,' he caps me, nuzzling my neck.

'You two are weird,' says Ali.

We both laugh and he gives me a kiss on the lips. My heart pounds. Next to me, Ali is giving Sean Wheeler from Muggs's class a full-on snog. She pulled him on Saturday night, not because she likes him but because he's an entrance ticket into the common room. Boys are always buzzing round her like bees round the proverbial honeypot. She's such a flirt. There's no way I'd snog Muggs in front of everyone even though I fancy him to death.

'Teachers,' warns Muggs, and Ali and Sean spring apart. He's spotted my dad on duty in the playground but it's okay, he's crouching down, talking to Miss Taylor through the window of her car. When he stands up he opens the door for her and pretends to bow. Cheesy! She spots us and calls over.

'Ready for the audition today, you two?'

'You bet,' I say with enthusiasm. 'Can't wait.'

'Good,' she says. 'Should be a strong line-up, but I'm sure there'll be a part for you both.'

She smiles at Muggs. I can feel him grinning at her. All the boys fancy her rotten, and half the staff, probably. It's

funny, because she's not conventionally gorgeous, but she's got this waterfall of long curly red hair cascading down her back and she's little and bubbly with freckles on her face and arms and amazing green eyes. She's got a pair of boots exactly the same shade. She has a way of making you feel really special, like you could do anything you wanted. No wonder loads of people want a part in the play.

Trouble is, being Shakespeare, there are lots of parts for the boys and not so many for the girls – six to be precise, if Miss decides to include the Hecate scene. And there's no way I intend to be a witch or the one-scene, no-hoper, Lady Macduff. No, there's only one part I want and that's the lead; it's Lady Macbeth for me or nothing.

'I'd better warn you, *Macbeth* is known as "The Unlucky Play", you know,' Miss Taylor says.

'Why?' asks Muggs.

'Apparently it has a curse on it. It's supposed to bring bad luck to people who act in it.'

'No way,' scoffs Muggs.

'Is that true?' I ask, fascinated.

'Well, it's theatrical legend,' Miss Taylor replies. 'Why, you're not superstitious, are you?'

'I don't know,' I lie. 'I've never really thought about it.'

'Don't worry, your dad will be around to look after

you. I've persuaded him to be stage manager,' Miss Taylor says to me.

'Are you?' I stare at him. I didn't know Dad was interested in drama.

'Well, yes, I thought I might, that is if you don't mind,' Dad says, looking a bit sheepish.

'Cool,' I say, turning away as the bell goes. This could work to my advantage. If Dad wants to help, he'll have to persuade Mum it's okay for me to be in the play. I'm surprised, though.

'What's all that about?' I say to Muggs as we walk into school.

'He's smitten,' he says and laughs. I look at him, puzzled, and he says, 'He probably fancies her, idiot,' and then I laugh too. My dad? I don't think so somehow.

The morning flies by and there's only one thing on my mind. The auditions are at lunchtime and Miss Taylor has promised to put us out of our misery by the end of the day. The cast list will go up in the drama room after school.

I eat my lunch at break time and Ali and I go over our speeches together. Ali's watched the Polanski film on video and wants to play the scene where the beautiful Lady Macbeth captivates poor old, unsuspecting Duncan. She doesn't have a clue what's going on and reads Shakespeare as if it's a foreign language, but she certainly knows how to give Duncan the come-on.

I've chosen the really sexy speech where she's alone and she calls on evil spirits to fill her up with direst cruelty.

'How can you say this in front of other people?' squeaks Ali.

'Come to my woman's breasts
and take my milk for gall.'

'I'd die of embarrassment!'

'Oh grow up!' I mutter. To tell the truth, I am a bit nervous as to whether I can handle this speech, especially in front of Muggs and the others who'll be trying out. It's too late to worry now though, I've just got to give it my best shot.

And everything goes swimmingly. I'd studied it carefully last night and that article on the net has given me a new dimension into Lady M's character. I just think about Muggs playing my husband and about how I would do absolutely anything for him and go for it. At the end, everyone claps wildly and Miss Taylor looks really pleased. I knew I'd got it.

I didn't see Muggs doing his part but he's far and away better at acting than any other boy in the school. He's also totally dependable and if he says he's going to do something he'll make sure he does it, which Miss Taylor says is far more important than any talent he has. So I

spend the whole afternoon in a dream of Muggs and me wrapped in each other's arms as we plan how to murder Duncan and, at last, four o'clock arrives.

Muggs and I go up to the drama room together, holding hands. I'm more confident than he is, I can tell, because he's so quiet, but I still feel sick. There's already a crowd of hopefuls at the board. Miss Taylor comes along with a piece of paper. She winks at me. It's going to be all right.

It is! There it is in black and white.

Macbeth . . . . . David Morgan
Lady Macbeth . . . . . Jessica Bayliss

Muggs picks me up and swings me round. I scream till he shuts me up with a kiss. Everyone congratulates us, even Ali who's green with envy.

Miss Taylor beams and says, 'Well done, you two. Rehearsals start tomorrow, four o'clock. Don't be late.'

I look again at the list.

'Oh wow, Ali, you've got a part! You're one of the witches!'

'Witch! Me! Puh-lease,' splutters Ali. Everyone laughs. Ali looks mortified. Miss Taylor jumps in to the rescue.

'Seriously, Ali. I want you to be the Third Witch. It's a most important part. The witches have to entice

Macbeth into doing what they want. Your powers of seduction came over well in the audition. I think you, Kelly and Jade will make a great team.'

Ali looks brighter. Kelly and Jade are two girls in Year 10. They also tried out for Lady Macbeth. I see where Miss is coming from: Girl Power. Those three will definitely give Macbeth a run for his money. Sounds like typecasting to me.

Dad comes up and gives me a hug.

'Congratulations,' he says, looking dead proud. 'I look forward to working with you.'

I find myself grinning from ear to ear. I am *so* lucky. I've got the best life in the world. Great parents, a fab boyfriend and the most amazing part in a play that anyone has ever had. Life couldn't be better.

Dad and I drive home together. I can't wait to tell Mum. I know she'll be over the moon, though she's bound to say, 'Don't neglect your work.'

I push open the door and yell, 'Mum!'

She's in the kitchen and she's crying her eyes out.