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Opening extract from

The Meaning Of Life

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Monday 1

New Year's Day

10 a.m.

It is official. I am going out with Year Twelve sex god and part-time meat mincer Justin Statham. It is after our New Year's Eve midnight snog in Scarlet's wardrobe. I am utterly jubilant because I have spent two years trying to be his girlfriend and he is finally totally in love with me. And, most importantly, he is the ONE, despite him having small nipples (which is why Sophie Microwave Muffins Jacobs will not go out with him any more, she prefers Mr Vaughan's supersize ones, which would be fine except he is our French teacher and his nipples, fat or otherwise, should be out of bounds). For a minute, due to wardrobe blackout situation, I thought I might be snogging Jack. And was sort of hoping it was. But that was obviously just a mental lapse as Jack is Scarlet's brother. And we have far too much in common, i.e. our radical political convictions and love of tragic literature and Waitrose hummus etc. Whereas Justin and I have nothing in common and so it will be love across a divide, like Prince Harry and Chelsy Davy. Or Lembit Opik and the Cheeky Girl. We will argue about all sorts of things. If I went out with Jack we would end up on the sofa watching *Casualty* and eating HobNobs every Saturday like Mum and Dad. Although I do not think Mum and Dad will be doing any hobnobbing any time soon. They

are still not speaking after last night's hoo-ha with Mum's ex-driving instructor Mike Wandering Hands Majors and Tuesday's ex-alcoholic mum Edie who is seemingly in love with Dad. She is mental. He is called Colin and wears vests. Which is why he and Mum (Janet, also vest-wearing) are ideally suited. Anyway, cannot go out with Jack as he is not talking to me now after he opened wardrobe door to find Justin with his tongue in my mouth and his hand hovering dangerously close to my bra strap. Scarlet is not too happy either. It is because Justin is not a goth, wears Gap, and mops up meat blood on a Saturday, and she is a strict vegetarian. That is why she is going out with John Major High head-goth Trevor Pledger, who has rats and a floor-length leather coat. Although that might not last now she is giving up her hardline bat tendencies and going more EMO, so that she can wear skinny jeans. At least second-best friend Sad Ed understands me. It is because he is in a total love-across-the-divide relationship with Tuesday, i.e. her dad is gay and American and her mum is a drunkard, whereas his parents are in the Aled Jones Fan Club. Also Tuesday has tattoos and Sad Ed just has a birthmark shaped like Gary Lineker's head. It is on his left buttock. I have seen it.

10.30 a.m.

Why hasn't Justin rung? We have not seen each other for almost eight hours. Will check mobile phone again in case

it is on silent by mistake and have missed crucial message of love.

10.35 a.m.
Did miss message but was not from Justin, was from Scarlet saying when is someone coming to fetch Dad as Edna (the non-Filipina, Labour-friendly cleaner) wants to hoover up canapé crumbs and he is sprawled inconveniently on the Habitat rug. Will tell Mum.

10.45 a.m.
Mum is refusing to get Dad. James has gone instead with the dog. I feel sorry for Dad. James is more menacing than Mum when it comes to being thin-lipped and pedantic, which is impressive for a nine year old. I would go but am far too busy worrying about love life. Where, oh where, is Justin? Will check phone again. He might have called while was downstairs.

11.00 a.m.
No messages.

11.30 a.m.
No messages.

12 noon
Still no messages. Dad is home, but is exiled to Coventry (i.e. the bedroom). Mum says he is not allowed out until

he has thought about what he did last night and apologized. Dad says he cannot remember what he did last night due to uncharacteristic excessive intake of Suzy's life-threatening punch. Mum says that is the point. Mum is in no position to lecture Dad. She got a lift home with Mike Wandering Hands due to her uncharacteristic excessive intake (i.e two glasses) of sherry. James says he is thinking of calling Childline.

1 p.m.
No messages. Dad is still in the bedroom. Have taken him a cheese and pickle sandwich and some Alka Seltzer. James says he should say sorry for everything, including the time he tried to hoover up spilt tea and broke the Dyson, and offer to descale the iron every month as penance. He is unusually well-versed in the ways of women (or Mum, at least) for a nine year old.

2 p.m.
Dad has apologized using James's method. He and Mum are now on the sofa looking at the John Lewis sale catalogue. But there is still an air of frostiness lingering over the pictures of polycotton duvet sets. I predict the Mum, Dad, Edie, Mr Wandering Hands love square is not over yet.

3 p.m.
No messages. Maybe it is all over and Justin was just using

me in a bid to win back Sophie Microwave Muffins Jacobs from the clutches of possible pervert-in-school Mr Big Nipples Vaughan. I am just a pawn in his giant game of love chess. Oh God, will have to spend another entire year being single or snogging underage rat boy Kyle O'Grady.

5 p.m.

It is not over! Justin has called. He was not trying to win Sophie back. He was asleep. It is because he is in Sixth Form and it is compulsory to lie in a black-painted bedroom until at least 3p.m. at weekends and school holidays, preferably listening to gloomy music and reading Jack Kerouac. Although Justin only reads *What Guitar* and graphic novels (aka comics), which is why we are totally across a divide, as I am currently reading Nineteen Eighty-Four. It is excellent and all about Room 101 and Big Brother, which is odd as I did not think George Orwell got Channel 4. Anyway. I am totally in love. We are meeting tomorrow at his mock-Tudor mansion on Debden Road. I do not want him coming round here yet. Mum will ban him for sure. He has long hair and has done 'It' (allegedly). Oh God. What if he wants me to do 'It'? Know nothing about sex. Except dubious facts gleaned from *a*) PE teacher Miss Beadle (overweight, facial hair, bulgy eyes like Joey in *Friends* or rabbits with myxomatosis) and her plastic penis model and *b*) Thin Kylie and her unnecessary details about Mark Lambert and his very real and active penis. Am going to

have to get help from Scarlet's mum and dad Suzy (TV sex counsellor) and Bob (abortionist) fast. Or at least by sixteenth birthday.

New Year Resolutions:

1. Prove that Justin is the ONE by having excellent relationship on every level—brain as well as pant-covered parts.
2. Do not, under any circumstances, let brain or pant-covered parts start thinking about Jack.
3. Do 'It'. And in earth-shattering, meaningful manner. Not on a giant bag of potatoes round the back of the Co-op, like Fat Kylie. Because, as Sad Ed says, sex is not just sweaty thrusting, but is actual, in fact, MEANING OF LIFE.
4. Rekindle Mum and Dad's romance. Do not want to end up in care. It may be utterly tragic and could possibly write best-selling memoir about inevitable mental torture but they might send me somewhere in Harlow, which is at least an hour from Justin by public transport (people in care do not have convenient Passat-driving dads to ferry them to Barratt homes).
5. Get Saturday job so can buy vintage outfits suitable for girlfriend of rock god. And not in Woolworth's or will end up putting on two stone in pick-and-mix like Anita Nolan.
6. Take dog to training classes. Am sick of it devouring possessions and lounging hairily around on sofa

when it should be eating Pal and sitting neatly in kennel à la *Dog Borstal.*

Yes, that is definite recipe for year of utter LOVE. Hurrah.

10 p.m.
Have just remembered other essential resolution:

7. Pass GCSEs. Or will end up sweeping up hair with the Kylies at Curl Up and Dye. Or, worse, Mum will disown me and send me to live with inbred Cornish relatives and will have to eat Fray Bentos pies and say 'that it be' a lot.

. . . . . .

Tuesday 2

9 a.m.
Hurrah. Am going round Justin's this afternoon for breakfast. Have just six hours to plan wardrobe and hair, and revise essential snogging tips. Have texted for reinforcements i.e. Scarlet and Sad Ed.

10 a.m.
Scarlet has texted back to say she will be over at one for lunch and summit meeting and can Mum not try to conceal ham in her quiche again. Sad Ed has not texted back. Maybe he is getting in practice at lying in bed for hours for Sixth Form next year. Or more probably he is fiddling with

Tuesday under the covers. His mum is totally gullible. She thinks they are having a *Famous Five*-style sleepover when in fact they are doing very non-Enid Blyton things.

11 a.m.
James's frogs have escaped again. He is very excited as it means they have worked out how to act as one giant frog force to push up the lid of the aquarium. He thinks they may be magic frogs, like the Ninja Turtles. He has renamed them in honour. Mum is not so excited. She says they are going back to Petworld as soon as they are located.

11.15 a.m.
Mum has found Donatello. He was in the toilet (again), making a break for freedom (or trying to get back to sewer headquarters, according to James).

11.30 a.m.
Michaelangelo located in kitchen in half drunk cup of tea. Mum is livid—she says he could have given Marjory next door a heart attack if he had stuck his head out of the PG Tips during their tea and chat session (i.e. moaning about the Britchers' woeful lack of interest in their front garden, and whether or not the BBC should look to a remake of *To The Manor Born* to boost its ratings.)

2 p.m.
Oh God. There has been a terrible accident. Scarlet has

trod on a frog, possibly Leonardo. He is clearly not magic. He is just very squashy and dead. She says it was like stamping on slightly crunchy jelly. Am going to definitely wear slippers from now on. A bit of him got stuck between her toes. We flushed rest down toilet. Will tell James he must have made it back to sewer HQ (not a total lie). He will be devastated if he knows he is a victim of our haste to find hair mousse. Scarlet is lying down on my bed with the curtains drawn. She says it is the most traumatic thing to happen to her since Gordon and Tony (cats, not Labour party supremos) ate her gerbils. She says she cannot possibly dispense snogging or wardrobe advice under such circumstances. Have only got one hour to go before I have to meet Justin. Am going to go for a very innocent and covered-up look in the hope he will delay any sexual interest until I have managed to glean advice from Scarlet. Will wear one-armed fluffy jumper (it's a look, sort of) and denim mini, with Oxfam fleece-lined boots. (Which are almost like Sienna Miller-style Uggs, except for the Clarks label inside. So will not be taking them off, obviously.) Hair is successfully less Leo Sayer, due to use of entire can of mousse.

3 p.m.

Raphaelo still missing. Plus Mum has demanded to know provenance of frog-like stain on stair carpet. I said it is an utter mystery but probably something to do with the dog. (I

know this is unfair, but the dog is an easy target. He is nearly always the cause of any hoo-ha so one more incident won't affect his record.) James is demanding that we take the dog to the vet's for an autopsy to find the missing frogs. I said I could not get involved in the discussion as I had to go out, and that Scarlet was meditating upstairs and not to disturb her. James demanded to know where I was going and what time I would be back. I said it was a band rehearsal (not a complete lie, he might do some guitar-playing to woo me) and I would be back by *Eggheads*. (James's favourite TV quiz. He has written in twice offering to take them on single-handedly but the BBC have been strangely quiet in their response.)

3.05 p.m.
Oh God. Cannot believe have used word 'woo'. Sexual education cannot come fast enough. Or maybe it makes me like Elizabeth Bennet. Yes. That is it. I am repressed rural beauty who will be awakened magnificently by cosmopolitan and sexually experienced (two times, allegedly) Mr Darcy, i.e. Justin Statham. Hurrah.

6 p.m.
Was not totally *Pride and Prejudice*-style awakening thing. We watched his Led Zeppelin DVDs for three hours. Admittedly it was in his bedroom (not black, actually pale blue with racing car border), and we did do some excellent snogging when they played the *Top of the Pops* theme tune

(no groping due to vastness of jumper and inability to find entry point). But it is early days. I predict he will be flinging me manfully against his Angus Young posters by the end of the week.

Scarlet was still meditating when I got back. She asked how it was and what he had touched. I said it was seminal and that he had touched only my heart. She will not understand our love. It is too poetic.

James is still two frogs down. The dog definitely got one after all so I feel no guilt. On the plus side, Mum has agreed to let Michaelangelo and Donatello stay, on the grounds that they no longer have the power to lift the lid up. James is happy. He thinks they will devise a new and Ninja-like way of escaping, so they can fulfil their destiny of fighting Shredder.

Wednesday 3

Am going to fulfil New Year Resolution number 5 and get a Saturday job. Will present myself at shops in Saffron Walden and offer my services. Am going to forsake vintage clothing for a day and wear more business-like outfit, i.e. school uniform, and target Waitrose, as they pay more than minimum wage and also you get a discount in John Lewis, which will please Mum, and free past-their-sell-by cakes, which will please James. Sad Ed is coming with me. He is also looking for work to fund his Mars bar and condom requirements. I do not think he will get a job. He

is notoriously lazy and dishevelled. Mum is not entirely backing my job search. She says it could cost me my GCSEs. I said the only cost involved was the increasing one of vintage clothing due to Oxfam getting wise to trend-setting celebrities and raising the price of their Sixties rail to £20, and if she wanted to up my pocket money then she could do so. She said no. Then James took the opportunity to ask if he could get a job as the frogs were costing a lot in meat (they are strictly non-vegetarian). Mum said he could earn himself 50p by cleaning the dog's teeth. He accepted; it is her highest offer yet. He has been ripped off though. The dog has bad breath.

5 p.m.

Have found job. It is not at Waitrose. They only had one vacancy and it was herding trolleys so they gave it to Sad Ed. I said that was sexist but they said it was more weightist, as he had the hefty upper arm requirement. Yes, and slightly distant expression. My job is at lentil-smelling health food outlet Nuts In May, run by hunchback Mr Goldstein and his ailment-ridden assistant Rosamund. I am going to be stacking carob bars and tofu. On the plus side, they have a pro-vintage clothing policy (Rosamund wears only hessian skirts and hemp blouses) and the shop is opposite Goddard's Butcher's, so I will be able to catch a glimpse of Justin hacking chops through the Linda McCartney display. They are paying me £2.70 an hour. Which is barely legal. But is better than Mum.