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opening extract from

Rich and Mad

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A meeting in the camel shop

'I've decided to fall in love,' said Maddy Fisher.

Cath nodded to show she was listening, but did not look up

from her magazine.

'I'm seriously serious. I'm too young to get married but I'm

too old to be single. I need love.'

'And sex,' said Cath.

'Well, yes. But I'm not talking about a quick grope at a party.

I'm talking about can't-eat can't-sleep crazy in love.'

‘Any idea who?’ said Cath.

‘Not a single clue.’

Outside the old coaching inn, on the broad grass verge beside the main road, there stood a large wooden camel. The camel was painted gold, and wore a curious smirk on its face. The inn was now a shop; more than a shop, an emporium, crammed with furniture imported from India and the Far East. It was called Caravanserai. But all those who stopped to explore its warren of exotic rooms knew it as the camel shop.

Late one Wednesday afternoon in September, on the last day of the summer holidays, only three browsers remained as closing time approached: an elegant middle-aged woman and two very good-looking young men, her sons. The woman was intent on a display case of silver and coral necklaces. The older and more handsome of her two sons was sprawled in a teak planter’s chair, his long legs stretched out and his eyes closed. The younger son wandered off to explore on his own.

Up a flight of broad stairs hung with winking mirrors framed in fruitwood, through the high-windowed front room crammed with lacquered Ming Dynasty wedding cabinets, he made his aimless way at last to a back room that was given over to a display of cushions, textiles and rugs. He stood in the doorway

and gazed into the cave of colours. A central skylight made of stained glass streamed crimsons and purples and golds on to bolts of glittering fabric. Beds of Indonesian bangsat wood draped in rainbow weaves crowded against chaises longues inlaid with patterns of rosewood acacia, on which plump cushions were piled in bright profusion. The room was a nest for an oriental princess.

It was also Maddy Fisher's special place.

Unseen at first by the visitor, Maddy was curled up on the bed, screened by a curtain of mirror-fabric. She heard the approaching footsteps and frowned in irritation, quietly closing the laptop that lay on the bed beside her. She remained still, breathing softly.

Few browsing shoppers went beyond the doorway.

But now she heard the footsteps advance into the room.

Round the edge of the curtain a face appeared, and saw her, and smiled a quizzical smile. With the smile went a twist of the mouth, a drawing together of the eyebrows and a look of such amused surprise that it was as if he'd spoken aloud. *Here's a bit of fun.*

What he actually said was, 'Maddy Fisher!'

Maddy blushed, and at once hoped that the coloured light from the lantern covered her shame. She knew him. The surprise

was that he remembered her name.

He was Joe Finnigan, one year her senior, at the top of the school. Long and lanky, with his humorous face and wild hair he somehow managed to combine all the most attractive qualities in a boy without being male-model pretty. He wasn't the cleverest in his year, or the most athletic, but he was the most desired. You only had to look at Joe to feel that it would be an honour to attract his attention.

Maddy was honoured.

'What are you doing here?' he said.

'I live here,' replied Maddy.

'What, in this room?'

'In the house, at the back. This is my parents' business.'

'Oh, I see. What a great business.'

He never asked what she was doing hiding in a curtained bed with a laptop. Instead he fixed her with his eyes, allowing the lingering remains of his smile to tell her that he liked what he saw.

His elder brother now entered the room.

'Here you are,' he said with a yawn.

'Look at this, Leo.' Joe Finnigan waved one hand round the multi-coloured space. 'Isn't it fabulous?'

Leo Finnigan was a few years older than Joe, and looked like a more perfect version of him. He was strikingly good-looking, his dark eyes set in pale, perfect skin. He did not gaze round the room. He looked at Maddy.

'Hello!' he said. 'Is that for sale?'

'Behave yourself,' said Joe.

'I'd pay top dollar.'

Joe Finnigan grinned at Maddy.

'My bad brother Leo. Just ignore him.'

'Hi,' said Maddy.

Leo sat down on the bed close enough to brush against her feet.

'I suppose you're jailbait,' he said. 'I don't mind if you don't.'

'Leo,' said Joe. 'Control yourself.'

'I'm seventeen,' said Maddy. As soon as she said it she regretted it. She hated being treated like a child, but only children felt it necessary to announce their age.

'Maddy's family owns the place,' said Joe. 'It's a real Aladdin's cave, isn't it?'

'Everyone says that,' said Maddy.

'Have to do better than that, Joe,' said Leo.

Joe laughed an easy laugh and met Maddy's eyes with a smile.

‘Oh, I don’t claim to be more original than everyone else.

Come along, Leo. Mum’ll be waiting for us.’

‘I’ll catch you up.’

‘No way am I leaving you alone here.’

Leo groaned and rose to his feet. ‘Spoilsport.’

He turned and shambled towards the stairs.

‘Don’t mind him,’ Joe said to Maddy. ‘He’s still drunk from last night. You have a great place here.’

‘Have you bought anything?’

‘Not me. My mother’s downstairs ordering wagon-loads of junk for Leo’s flat. Sorry, not junk. Ethnic furniture.’

‘Call it what you like so long as you buy it.’

‘Leo’s not remotely interested. He’d just as soon live in empty rooms.’

He turned to go. In the doorway he paused and looked back.

‘So what’s the camel called?’

‘Cyril.’

‘Why?’

‘It just is.’

He left her alone.

As soon as he was gone Maddy began to chastise herself for the things she had said and not said. Joe Finnigan had never

spoken to her before in her life. Now he would go away with the impression that she was eccentric, rude and immature. The truth was she had been taken entirely by surprise. Joe had formed no part of her mental world before. He existed on another plane, altogether out of her reach.

In her mind she explored the picture he had left behind, still fresh and sharp: his quirky smile, his bright eyes. What had he been wearing? Some kind of greenish jacket, black T-shirt, jeans.

The way he laughed. It made everything feel easy.

The shop was closing. Maddy could hear the clicking of light switches as Ellen, the assistant manager, made her way from room to room. Maddy jumped off the bed, smoothed the cloths and cushions she had been lying on, and headed out with her laptop in her arms.

As she descended the stairs she tracked her reflection in the mirrors that lined the walls. The light on the stairs came from a single narrow window before her, which had the effect of making her reflection look flatteringly moody. She flicked back her long brownish hair, trying to catch a glimpse of herself as others saw her. Big brown eyes, oval face, a mouth that seemed to her to be too small. A few stubborn spots, mostly on her

forehead where her hair hid them. Tall figure, nothing much in the way of breasts. Good legs. Pretty enough, was the verdict she usually accorded herself. Not as pretty as her older sister, Imo, of course. Imo was the beauty of the family. But boys noticed Maddy. Joe Finnigan's brother Leo had virtually made a pass at her. What had Joe thought about that?

There was something scary about Leo, but on the whole Maddy was pleased by his attention. It helped her to believe something that she found hard to believe about herself: that she was sexy.

Just another loser bitch whore

Behind the coaching inn, across a yard, stood a deep-roofed building that had once been the inn's stables. The old brick walls were almost completely covered by Virginia creeper, its leaves just beginning to turn the burned red of autumn. This was Maddy's family home. The front door opened directly into a long low-ceilinged kitchen which filled most of the ground floor. At one end, steep stairs rose to attic bedrooms. At the other end, several sagging armchairs stood round a small television.

Maddy found the kitchen empty. This was good news and

bad news. She had taken a vow not to eat between meals, but when there was no one to see, it was as if she wasn't doing it. She put a slice of bread in to toast and got out the butter and the lemon curd. To distract herself from what she was doing she turned on the TV. It was the *Six O'Clock News*. Someone was forecasting that the economy was heading into recession. A businessman had shot his wife and daughter dead and burned his own house down. Scientists were warning that pre-packed salads give you food poisoning. A man had been murdered for asking some other men to stop smoking.

Why are they telling me this? What am I supposed to do about it? Feel bad?

The toast popped. Maddy laid on the butter and the lemon curd with generous knife strokes.

Am I allowed to be happy in this sick world of ours? Or here's a tougher one: am I allowed to be unhappy? I may not be starving to death in a brothel but I don't have a boyfriend. I've had my times crying in bed at night. Can't I be one of the world's suffering victims too?

The news rolled relentlessly on. Houses being repossessed. Families standing by stacks of sad old furniture in the street. Wagon-loads of junk.

The toast and lemon curd seemed to have gone. She had no memory of having eaten it. She put a second slice in the toaster.

No point in breaking a vow if you don't enjoy it.

Actually when you come right down to it what does it matter if I'm happy or unhappy? It's not as if my life has any meaning. I mean, I want it to go on. You can't help that, you just do. But from the point of view of the rest of the world I might as well not exist. I'm just one more pointless creature taking up space and resources on an overcrowded planet.

Just another loser bitch whore, as Cath would say.

The toast popped.

Her sister, Imo, came into the kitchen as Maddy was once more lathering on the lemon curd.

'Jesus, Maddy. How can you eat that stuff ?'

'I like it,' said Maddy.

'Have you any idea how many calories there are in every bite?'

'I don't care.'

All Maddy's life Imo had been thin as a pole. She looked stunning whatever she wore. Imo was three years older, and ever since Maddy could remember she had wanted to be like her, but she had given up long ago trying to be that thin. Her body simply refused to go there.

'Imo,' said Maddy, 'doesn't it ever strike you that your life has no useful purpose and you're pretty much a waste of space in the universe?'

'No.' Imo picked up Maddy's knife and ran one finger along the blade. Then she licked the lemon curd off her finger. 'Oh my God!' she said. 'That is so disgusting.'

'Not just you,' said Maddy. 'Everyone. I mean, maybe the things we do just don't matter. Maybe our life is just pointless.'

'Not to me it isn't.' She licked more lemon curd off the knife. 'Really, Maddy, it's not fair of you. You know I've got no powers of resistance.'

'Pointless to everyone else, then.'

'My life isn't pointless to everyone else. Alex minds about what I do. I wish he wouldn't mind quite so much, actually.'

Alex was Imo's boyfriend.

'Is that enough to give your life a point? Alex minding?'

'Not really. Not Alex. But the right guy'll come along one day. You know what, Mad?' Imo pointed one finger glistening with lick. 'You need a boyfriend.'

'So you keep saying.'

Imo pulled her phone out of her jeans pocket and tilted her head towards it as if into a private space.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Talking about you.’

She moved slowly backwards, retreating to her own room, no longer fully present in her body. Phones did that to you. Maddy didn’t mind. She was no different.

Of course she needed a boyfriend. But it wasn’t that simple. Maddy wasn’t gorgeous like Imo, or like her friend Grace; but nor was she desperate. In her own way she was quite proud. She didn’t want just any boyfriend, for the sake of appearances, the way you might want a designer top. She wanted a boy to love.

The difficulty was the boys she had grown up with, the boys in her year at school, were simply not up to the job. Undersized, badly dressed, noisy and stupid, there wasn’t a single one about whom she could summon up the smallest tremor of excitement. And falling in love, if nothing else, had to be exciting.

Maddy and Cath and Grace often puzzled over this conundrum. How was it that at sixteen and seventeen some of the girls were truly stylish, while the boys still thought it was funny to make fart noises?

‘Girls grow up faster than boys,’ said Grace. ‘It’s well known.’

‘But why?’

‘Because girls have to get ready to be mothers.’

‘So? Boys have to get ready to be fathers.’

‘Being a father isn’t such a big deal as being a mother.’

‘Says who?’

‘Well, you may or may not have noticed, Maddy, but in all the one-parent families, the one parent is the mother.’

Grace had always had this way of making pronouncements as though what she said was divine law. She’d been the same since they first met, at the age of five: Grace so perfectly formed that Maddy had idolised her from the start. It wasn’t just her adorable appearance – it was her precocious composure. Grace was never flustered, never in a hurry, never had a hair out of place. In more recent years Maddy had grown apart from Grace in many ways, but neither of them had ever admitted it to the other. They had a history together. They were best friends by default.

‘I don’t really know Grace any more,’ Maddy said to Cath. ‘She’s so secretive.’

‘Maybe it’s all a front,’ said Cath. ‘Maybe her life’s just empty and sad.’

Maddy didn’t believe this. She saw the way boys acted round Grace. But if Grace did have a boyfriend, no one knew his name.

The change had begun when they all moved up to their

senior school at the age of eleven. Grace's family had taken her away for two years. When she came back she was older, more sophisticated, more remote.

'What you need,' said Grace to Maddy as they talked about the curious immaturity of boys, 'is an older boyfriend.'

'How much older?'

'Five years minimum.'

'Five years! I don't know anyone that old.'

'They exist,' said Grace. 'And they like us young.'

'You, maybe,' said Cath.

Cath was the opposite of Grace in every way. Cath wasn't at all pretty. Quite why she wasn't pretty was hard to say. There was nothing obviously wrong with her face.

'I've got eyes in the same place as you,' Cath would say, 'and my nose is the same length, and my mouth's the same.' They had actually measured each other's features with a ruler. 'I don't see where I've gone wrong. It doesn't seem fair. Just a few millimetres here and there and you end up looking like a witch.'

'You do not look like a witch.'

'And no one loves you and you die alone.'

'The man who loves you will love you for your true qualities.'

'Like I'll love him for his dog and his white stick.'

‘Come on, Cath.’

‘What true qualities? Deep down I’m bitter and twisted.’

‘Okay,’ said Maddy. ‘You’ll just have to be amazing in bed.’

‘Now you’re talking. Once the lights are out they won’t know the difference.’

They returned to Grace’s theory of natural selection.

‘Since when have you been out with anyone five years older?’

‘I didn’t say I had,’ replied Grace.

‘So you’re just making it all up as you go along.’

‘Sure,’ said Grace. ‘I’ve no experience at all. I don’t know anything. I just say the first thing that comes into my pretty little head.’

After that they believed her, of course. They’d never seen Grace with an older man. But then, they’d never seen Grace with any kind of boyfriend. Her love life happened somewhere else.

The low grade of available boys wasn’t Maddy’s only problem when it came to love. She was dissatisfied with her own character. It seemed to her that she was essentially passive. Her natural instinct was always to please others. She rarely made demands of her own, and hated taking risks.

Cath agreed.

‘You’re just too nice, Maddy. You should hate more people.’

‘I don’t want to hate people. I just want to do things for myself.’

‘It comes to the same thing. The minute you put yourself first, they stop liking you. Then you either cave in and go back to being nice, or you say fuck ’em all.’

‘I want to be somewhere in the middle. Friendly but decisive.’

‘There’s no middle, sweetie. It’s rule or be ruled out there. You have to come out fighting.’

She punched imaginary enemies with her fists.

‘I’ve never hit anyone in my life.’

‘There’s your problem. You need more aggression.’

Maddy half agreed with this diagnosis. She lacked aggression. But it wasn’t the power to biff people she sought: she wanted to take control of her life.

She wanted to fall in love.

*

So as the new school year was about to begin, she told Cath, ‘I’ve decided to fall in love.’

Announcing her decision to Cath didn’t amount to an action in itself, but it was a start. It shifted her expectations. Instead of sitting around waiting for something to happen, she would make

things happen herself.

If she was to fall in love it would have to be with someone she admired; someone older and more experienced. Grace was partly right. Older, but not five years older. Maybe one year older.

Someone like Joe Finnigan.

As soon as she formed the idea in her head she knew it was a no-hoper. Joe already had a girlfriend, Gemma Page, one of the prettiest girls in the school. But Gemma was dull and stupid, and school relationships never lasted long; and Joe had smiled at Maddy and looked at her in a way that implied he was interested in her. Or was she just imagining that?

Joe was attractive in just the kind of way that Maddy liked. He was clever enough, and sophisticated without being showy. If she was attracted to him maybe that meant that he was attracted to her.

Or maybe she was away in fantasy land.

She could hear Cath's voice in her head, the voice of reality.

Yes, of course it was a fantasy. But Maddy hadn't had a real fantasy for a long time. And no one need ever know. It was like a secret game she could play with herself: *adoring Joe Finnigan*. It could be quite exciting in its way.

This is the first boy I've ever felt excited about.

That thought alone was exciting. Maddy wanted to be loved, just like everyone else, but there was something else she wanted almost as much. She wanted to love. She wanted to yearn and pine and feel a prickly feeling all over her skin when her loved one was near. She was tired of laughing at the boys, even though they were ridiculous. She wanted a boy to treasure.

It can be practice, she thought. Practice in falling in love. It's just a matter of taking control of my life.

That night, alone in her room, she opened her laptop and logged on to MSN. Cath was online.

Guess what? she tapped out to Cath. *I decided who to fall in love with.*

Cath messaged back: *So who's the lucky boy?*

No names. I'm superstitious.

So why tell me, bitch?

Can't help it.

Call yourself a friend. I'll never have a love life of my own. You owe me yours.

If anything happens I swear I'll tell you.

Go get him, girl.