

## Sex Noises

One Saturday morning last January, Alice pointed out that I hadn't had sex in three years. I knew I'd been going through a dry patch — I'd been getting through vibrator batteries incredibly fast, and a few days previously I'd Googled "penis" just to remind myself what one looked like — but the full force of how much time I'd wasted not having sex hadn't hit me till then.

The last time I'd had sex was nothing to write home about either, let me tell you. He was a twenty-one-year-old editorial assistant from Alice's office with an unusually large forehead, and it happened after a terrible house party that left our flat stinking of pastis. I tried to take him to my room, but a couple were already in there, dry-humping on top of the duvet, so we did it on the fake leather sofa in the living room. I kept getting stuck to the sofa, sweat pooling in the gap beneath my lower back. I don't think he'd ever fucked anyone before, so it was a bit awkward and thrusty, and he cried and hugged me for too long afterwards. It comes back to me in flashes all the time — I could be boarding a bus, washing my hair, or sitting on a particularly squeaky sofa when suddenly I see his clenched red face or his sweaty pubic hair and flinch involuntarily. Enough to put anyone off sex for, say, three years.

To be honest, I'd always preferred the idea of sex to sex itself. In my imagination, I was experimental, confident, uninhibited, a biter of shoulders, a user of words like "pussy." I could think about sex in the filthiest terms and speak frankly about it to friends, but when it came to actually doing it, or talking to someone I might do it *with*, I clammed up. I struggled to think of myself as sexy when I was with another person. I struggled to say sexy things with a straight face. It all felt performative to me, ridiculous, too far

removed from the way I behaved in a non-sexy context, like I was playing a part in a porn film, and playing it badly. I couldn't even flirt convincingly, certainly not when I was sober. Which might go some way towards explaining why it had been so long since I'd fucked anyone.

Alice and Dave, on the other hand, did have sex. A surprising amount of it, actually, considering they'd been going out for five years. The Friday night before that Saturday morning, I was alone in the living room, trying to ignore the sex noises coming from their bedroom. Our flat had incredibly thin walls, so it was almost as if I were there with them. How can something that is so much fun when you're doing it (though not always — see previous note about sweaty sofa sex) be so repulsive when overheard? I didn't mind living with a couple; having three people in the flat brought the rent down. Also, Dave had several Ottolenghi cookbooks and some very tasteful mid-century furniture, so we were better fed and more stylish than we would have been without him. But sex-noise-wise, I'd had enough.

The next morning, I heard Alice walk Dave to the door. They whispered to each other revoltingly and kissed wetly. I sat on my bed, picking the dry skin on my fingers, practising my speech in my head.

Alice walked into my room without knocking; people tend to do that when there's no risk you'll be shagging. She sat on my bed, her hair rumpled, a post-coital smile on her face. "Do you fancy brunch?" she said. "I'm starving."

"I'm not surprised," I said, which wasn't how I'd intended to broach the subject.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Why aren't you surprised? What do you mean?"

"Well, you and Dave sounded like you had fun last night."

"You listened to us having sex?"

"I didn't listen. I *heard*. It wasn't an active choice."

"We weren't *that* loud," said Alice, as though asking for reassurance.

"You asked him to —"

"To what?"

I looked away. "You know what you asked him to do."

"How do I know if you won't say?"

"Fine. You asked him to stick a finger up your arse."

“Julia!”

“You’re the one that said it!”

“That’s private!”

“So keep your voices down!”

Alice’s cheeks were pink.

There was an unpleasant silence.

“Did you really hear us?”

“Yes! I always hear you!”

“You can’t always hear us. We don’t even have sex that often any more —”

“Three times a week isn’t often?”

“Not for us.”

“Well. I’m very happy for you.”

Another silence.

“You wouldn’t care so much if you had a boyfriend too.”

“I don’t want a boyfriend, thank you.”

“Sex, then.”

“I have sex.”

“No you don’t,” she said. And that’s when she pointed it out, about the three years.

I went back to bed after that, and stayed there for most of the day, eating cheese and trying to remember what sex was like. I’d never had really, really good sex, the kind that resulted in the sort of noises I heard Alice and Dave making. Oral always felt a bit like someone was wiping a wet flannel over my nether regions, and having a man on top of me made me feel quite claustrophobic.

The thing is, sex had never been particularly high on my list of priorities. In my teens, I was too obsessed with becoming a dancer to worry about having a relationship. I did manage to lose my virginity after my first year at ballet school, though. My friend Cat took me to Jamaica to stay with her grandparents, and I did it on the beach with a boy named Derrick, who had terrible acne and a bottle of cheap rum, which is what led to the sex. We didn’t use a condom; the sheer terror I’d felt afterwards at the prospect of being pregnant and the mechanics of trying to procure a morning-after pill without Cat’s grandparents finding out put me off sex for years after that. I still can’t drink daiquiris. But I was pleased to have got it over with. I felt more sophisticated than the other girls in my year, enjoyed muttering wisely, “Don’t do what I did. Wait until you’re ready,” whenever we talked about sex at sleepovers.

Then there was Leon. I met him during a Freshers' Week toga party at Warwick. He'd looked very fetching in his white sheet, and it was only later that I realized he wore corduroy trousers every day. Nevertheless, we stayed together, right up until he dumped me just after graduation because he wanted to "travel the world" and be "free of ties." He moved to Peckham three months later and started a graduate training scheme in management consultancy.

Leon and I had quite fun sex in the early days — we tried out the reverse cowgirl, did it standing up in the shower, things like that — but by the end of the relationship he could only get in the mood by listening to the "Late Night Love" playlist on Spotify, and I knew exactly where his hands would be at which point in each track, so it was a bit like an obscene, horizontal line dance. The boring sex was bad for both of us, self-esteem-wise, I think. After we broke up I decided to have a bit of a sex break, and the longer I left it, the scarier it seemed, like crossing a big, naked Rubicon. I had a couple of drunken one-night stands, including the sofa sex, but most of the time going home alone seemed like a much more sensible, less humiliating option, and far less likely to lead to stubble rash.

I masturbated, though — I had a couple of reliable vibrators, a Rampant Rabbit and a small, bullet-shaped one that I took on holiday with me. The only thing I didn't have was someone to grab my breasts. I tried to do it to myself sometimes, but it wasn't the same.

Dave made us roast beef that Wednesday night. As he was cooking, I sat on the sofa imagining myself fucking him — something I swear I'd never done before — and I found my heart speeding up a bit. Dave is objectively a very good-looking man, despite his massive beard. I found myself staring at the beard, wondering whether it got in the way during oral sex, and looking at his knuckles, imagining what they'd feel like inside me. I couldn't look him in the eye for a little while after that. I didn't really want Dave's fingers inside me, honestly. But I did want *something* inside me. Something live and warm and moving and not made of pink latex.

I was more awkward than usual during dinner that night, which isn't that surprising. Dave did most of the heavy lifting, conversation-wise, asking me lots of questions about work in his lovely northern accent and pretending to be interested in my answers, even though I was a civil servant at the Department of Health and Social Care, answering letters from members of the public about foster placements and NHS waiting times and other things I'd

rather not think about, and he was a graphic designer, which is both cooler and less depressing.

He passed me the horseradish and asked, "Get any good letters this week?"

People don't usually send letters to the government unless they are very angry and very old. But there are exceptions.

"Got another one from Eric," I said.

"The Bomber Command vet?"

I nodded. "He's upset about the cuts to social care."

"Didn't he write to you about that last month?" Alice asked through a mouthful of beef.

"Last month it was the standard of hospital meals."

"Getting old's a bastard, isn't it?" Dave said, but his eyes were fixed on Alice, and I could tell he was playing footsie with her under the table. I stared down and concentrated on the steam curling up from my potatoes, but the footsie continued.

There was a pause in the foot fondling while Alice cleared the table and served our dessert (Ben and Jerry's), but then it started up again, and it put me off my ice cream — no easy feat. So I ate it as quickly as I could, then pushed my chair back.

"Thanks for cooking, Dave," I said.

"No worries," he said, smiling at Alice.

Alice looked up at me. "Stay and hang out with us," she said. "There's that Benedict Cumberbatch thing on tonight."

"I'm not really into Cumberbatch," I said. "And I've got a bit of a headache."

I went to my room and switched on my TV. I tried to watch a cooking show, but Alice and Dave were soon snogging so loudly that I could hear them above the shouty presenter. So I opened my laptop and put my headphones on, and then I switched on private browsing and searched for "real couples" on Pornhub.

There's something comforting about watching ordinary people having sex; I always think I'd probably do it better than them. Maybe that's not the point of porn, but I don't care — their incompetence turns me on. I clicked on a video and watched a thin, pale man adjust his shaky camera and walk over to the bed where an overweight woman was waiting for him. I pulled my trousers down to my ankles and started to wank as the pale man slapped himself arrhythmically into his partner. That'll show the patriarchy,

I thought. I'm going to give myself an amazing orgasm in about two minutes, because I know how to push my own buttons — don't need a man to do it for me.

But then it was over, and I felt hollow and desperate to come again. The video ended, and an ad for *Hot local sluts* popped up. I flinched and clicked on it to make it go away, but I accidentally clicked on the ad instead, and a woman with huge, spherical breasts filled my screen, panting and rubbing her nipples. I tried to shut it down, but hundreds of windows had popped up, each one filled with hot blondes, or dirty Russians, or naughty teens, like endless mirrors reflected in mirrors. Looking at them turned me on, and that made me feel sordid again, so I slapped down the lid of my laptop and hugged my pillow. It didn't hug me back.

I told Nicky about my unsatisfying wank. Bringing it up was a bit awkward; it was only my third session and I wasn't that comfortable with her yet. I wasn't that comfortable with the idea of being in therapy at all; I never thought I'd have a shrink at twenty-six, even a semi-amateur one. A therapist feels like the sort of thing only glamorous New Yorkers should have, the kind who can afford to buy olives from Dean & DeLuca and who say things like, "My ob-gyn told me to eat less wheat." This is how it happened: I'd been suffering from constant, low-level anxiety, the sort of feeling you get when you realize you've forgotten to turn the hob off, but all the time. Then one day I had a panic attack in the middle of a team meeting about letterheads at work, probably triggered by the fact that I have a job which involves team meetings about letterheads. Nobody noticed — it was a subtle panic attack — but that evening I burst into tears in the middle of the Sainsbury's frozen-food aisle, holding a packet of fishcakes. So I went to the GP.

"Would you say that you've been excessively worried, more days than not, for over six months?" the GP asked, looking down at a checklist.

"I don't know if I'd say *excessively* worried."

"What sort of things are you worried about?"

"Just — everything, really."

"Probably excessive then." She smiled at me. "Do you think the world is an innately good or evil place?"

"Definitely good," I said, pleased, because I knew that was the correct answer.

"And you haven't thought about hurting yourself? You don't have suicidal thoughts?"

“Never.”

“Do you feel like you can’t cope with everyday things?”

“No.”

“Do you have trouble making decisions?”

“Not really.”

“And do you often find yourself crying for no reason?”

“No. I mean — I cry quite a lot, but I usually have a reason.”

“OK,” said the GP. “It’s unlikely that you have clinical depression.”

“Hooray!” I said, giving myself a little cheer.

The GP smiled again — a patient smile, I now realize, looking back on it. “You appear to have what we call generalized anxiety disorder,” she told me.

I was very excited to have an actual disorder.

“I’ll refer you for talking therapy,” she said. “But it might be better to go private — the NHS waiting list is nine months long.”

“I know,” I said. “The Department of Health and Social Care gets a lot of letters complaining about that.”

I felt calmer than I had in ages. I went home and Googled “cheap counsellor North London anxiety,” and Nicky’s name came up. She was still training to be a therapist, which is why I could afford her, and she had an un-therapist-like way of voicing her very strong opinions on almost every topic. When I’d told her about the anxiety, and about feeling lost and directionless in life, she had said it was no wonder I was anxious, and that my job sounded so dull they should “prescribe it to insomniacs.”

Anyway, I told Nicky about the wank. I could feel myself sinking deeper and deeper into the armchair as I spoke, as though it was recoiling from me. She didn’t recoil, though. She wanted to know all about it.

“What did the couple look like?”

“Does that matter?”

“I don’t know until you tell me.”

“She was overweight and black. He was skinny and white.”

“Aha.” She nodded in a therapist-like way.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She scribbled something in her notebook and underlined it several times.

“Do you often masturbate thinking about Alice?” she continued.

“I wasn’t thinking about her!”

“But you said you were wanking out of resentment.”

“I was pissed off with them for having such loud sex, that’s all.”

"Because you're not getting any?" She gazed at me, unblinking.

"Look, I'm not repressed, all right? I'd have sex if anyone wanted to have sex with me, but no one has for ages."

"So you're just waiting for someone to offer it to you on a plate."

"Well, no —"

"That's what it sounds like to me. It's like your career. You've just decided to sit back and stay in this dead-end temp job —"

"I'm a contractor, actually, not a temp. And I might apply for the Fast Stream this year."

"Why didn't you apply last year?"

I hadn't applied because that would mean saying "I'm a civil servant" when people at parties asked "What do you do?," and then having to answer a lot of questions about NHS funding and whether I approve of the government. I hate it when people ask "What do you do?" I assume everyone does, even if the answer is "I'm a novelist" or "I'm a surgeon specializing in babies' hands," because even then you know someone will say, "Will you show my book to your agent?" or "Can you look at this lump on my finger?" I missed being able to say, "I'm a dancer."

I looked at the floor. There was some sort of stain in the carpet — ketchup, possibly.

"You need to make an effort with your career," Nicky said. "It's the same as your love life. You're not prepared to put yourself out there."

"I'm not going to go looking for a relationship. I don't need one to make me complete. I'm independent."

She put down her notebook. "*Are* you independent?" she asked. "Or are you really, really sad?"

I maintained a dignified silence.

"It's OK to cry," she said.

"I'm not *that* sad," I said.

"Just let it out."

"I'm not crying," I said, which wasn't strictly true.

She handed me the tissue box triumphantly.

I called Cat on my way home from Nicky's. I didn't want to be alone with my thoughts, and I could always rely on Cat to tell me an anecdote about her terrible career to put my problems in perspective.

"Do you fancy a drink?" I asked when she picked up the phone.

"I wish," she said. "I'm in Birmingham. Doing the life cycle of the frog



again.” She sounded a little out of breath. She’d probably been having energetic sex too.

“When are you back?” I asked, sidestepping a puddle.

“Not for ages,” she said. “It’s a UK tour.”

“Ooh!”

“Of primary schools.”

“Oh.”

“I’m probably going to get nits again. Or impetigo.”

Cat couldn’t get work as a dancer after leaving ballet school — every company she auditioned for said, “You have the wrong body type,” which is the legal way of saying, “You’re black.” But instead of doing what I did when my dance career ended — moving back in with my parents and swearing never to perform again, except to sing my signature version of “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” at karaoke nights — she retrained as an actor. Now she earned most of her money performing in Theatre in Education shows, playing roles like “frog” and “plastic bottle that won’t disintegrate” and “uncomfortably warm polar bear.” I think we probably stayed close over the years because neither of us could stand our other friends from dance school, with their *OMG I just got cast in Birmingham Royal Ballet’s Swan Lake! #Blessed* Instagram posts. But I did feel envious of Cat sometimes. She still got to experience the thrill of applause, even though the people applauding sometimes pulled each other’s hair and had to be sent to the naughty corner.

“Lacey’s playing the frogspawn,” Cat continued, “and she won’t stop going on about the musical she’s writing about periods.”

“I bet that’s going to be really successful,” I said.

“It is, isn’t it? Oh God . . .”

I heard a muffled sort of stretching sound on the other end of the line.

“Are you taking your tadpole costume off?” I asked her. “Go on, sing me the tadpole song again.”

“I’m the frog this time. Fucking green leotard is a size too small.”

“You’ve been promoted!”

“Very funny,” said Cat. “One of the kids came up to me today and said, ‘You’re not a real frog. You’re too big.’ I swear, six-year-olds are getting stupider.” More stretching and shuffling, and then a grunt of effort. “Got it off.”

“So now you’re naked.”

“Yep. This is basically phone sex,” she said.

"This is the closest I've come to a shag in three years." I gave myself a mental pat on the back. At least I could joke about it.

"I thought I had it bad," Cat said. "Lacey's been shagging Steve, the new tadpole, all tour, and I've been feeling like a total third wheel."

"You're best off out of that," I said. "Tadpoles shagging frogspawn is all wrong. Sort of like incest." I tucked my phone under my chin and unlocked the front door.

"How are you, anyway? How's work?" asked Cat.

"Too boring to talk about."

"You need a creative outlet outside work."

"No thanks," I said. All I wanted to do was watch TV without listening to people have sex. I sat on the sofa, coat still on, and felt around between the cushions for the remote. *Come Dine with Me* was on, and Alice and Dave were out. This was shaping up to be a good evening.