

'A' IS FOR ANOREXIA

by

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Sample chapters

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Remember me?

Of course you do. You've always been convinced that you're The Great Rememberer, that you can and do recall virtually everyone you've ever met. I remember you telling me how you'd often sit and think about your encounters, how you'd trawl through the past on a regular basis, ploughing up one-off meetings as readily as a month-long fling. And you were convinced these people wouldn't remember you - or at least, if they did, that they'd rarely spare a thought for you. Ten years on, I find myself wondering how much trawling you do now - now that anyone who's met you can't help but remember it, can't help but be reminded of you every time they pass a bookshop or open a tabloid or trashy magazine.

Thinking back to that sunny afternoon at the start of a long student summer, picturing us sitting beside Camden Lock with our bottle of rosé, I know you weren't fishing for compliments. You didn't work like that. I'm as sure of that now as I was then - even after all that happened in between. It's just not in your nature. You aren't, and never have been, the slightest bit devious. You couldn't be manipulative if you tried.

But that's just it, isn't it? You don't try. It's not a conscious thing with you. That's just the way it works out.

Take that innocuous revelation in Camden, for instance. It was just typical of the way you've always operated. There we sat, close but not quite touching, sipping one of the cheapest wines could buy in a bottle, and you served up the latest in a feast of lethal baits that would draw me further and further into the open. And you didn't even know you were doing it.

You simply didn't see those moments for what they were. To you, those tantalising glimpses of your soul were nothing more than conversation. You could have been telling me anything, your tone was that nonchalant. That whimsical manner of yours, the matter-of-fact-ness you managed whenever you leaked an insight - it was all part of the charm, the web of defenceless honesty in which so many of us have come unstrung.

It was the same a month later, when you told me you were sure you had guardian spirits. We were here in Bristol. I was back at my parents' and you'd come to visit for I forget quite how long, and we'd taken a picnic up to the Camera Obscura. It seemed so ridiculous: you - the Philosophy student - embracing an old superstition I can't imagine many people even considering. If it hadn't been for your blinding sincerity, I'd have laughed and called you an idiot.

As we lay on our backs in the freshly mown grass, gazing at the sunlit suspension bridge, you told me your life had always seemed blessed. You'd always landed on your feet, always felt guided, as if you were being nudged through life by unseen forces. Things simply happened to you, you insisted, and it invariably worked out for the best. Even apparent disasters proved a blessing once you'd seen them through.

You never called it *karma* and you never mentioned clouds with silver linings. I suppose, as a fledgling Philosophy student, you needed a more imaginative mythology, something sophisticated you'd created yourself - a realm in which God was well-and-truly dead but guardian angels were still going strong. Now that I'm more level-headed, I think your beliefs can all be written off as overzealous positive attitude.

Maybe those ‘apparent disasters’ would have stayed disasters if you hadn’t been so determined to see good in them.

I wonder how it’s doing, though – that mythology of yours. As far as I know, you’ve never mentioned it in interviews, and it certainly didn’t appear in your first book. Maybe you’ve decided it’s all a bit too crackpot to be published, that you don’t want to be tarred with the same brush you’ve used to tar a few of your characters. It wouldn’t really go with the down-to-earth image you’ve built for yourself, would it? It wouldn’t really do for the man whose done so much for Twenty-First Century masculinity, honesty and self-actualisation to go harping on about guardian angels.

So, perhaps you’ve sent them packing, thanked them for their influence, then squeezed their little harps into their little astral suitcases and sent them on their way. Or maybe you’re biding your time, polishing your pantheon for the great *coup d’état*, when you’ll turn the literary cult that’s risen around you into something that stirs not just the hearts and minds of your readers, but their naked souls as well. Who knows, maybe angels are due for a comeback.

Of course, there’s always a third option. You might have decided, like I have, that your own subconscious is the guardian angel – that it’s really you who’s pulling the strings. I’ve often wondered if that’s what’s behind the title of your first published novel, *The Reluctant Puppeteer*.

I reckon that title proves you’ve at least some insight into the effect you have on the people around you. Thinking back, you were probably well on the way to working it out when you and I were still together. One particular conversation springs to mind.

It was 1996, three years since that drunken afternoon in Camden, a year since you’d come to live with me in Bristol at the end of your degree. You’d grown bitter since University and, although I hoped otherwise at the time, things were set to get a hell of a lot worse. We were back in that same spot by the Camera Obscura, up on the hill by the bridge, sharing a picnic with two of my friends – friends you’d never accept as your own. I don’t remember the context, but at some point you declared that Truth was the ultimate weapon.

It wasn’t freedom of information you were talking about, or knowledge as power. You weren’t making some well-worn point about First World governments and rapacious multinationals. You were talking about Truth very specifically as a weapon, on all scales - from global to corporate, right down to personal relationships and deep into our own inner psyches.

“The truth hurts”, you reminded us, “Plus, you can never effectively deny what’s true. Not only that, but truth walks hand in hand with virtue, and there isn’t a thing in this world that we’re taught to respect more than virtue. As long as you stick to the truth, not only is it easier to remember what you’ve said, but no one can ever hold it against you.”

It was this attitude to truth that convinces me that, at some deeper level, you knew what you were doing. That you then went on to choose *The Reluctant Puppeteer* as the title of the book you were writing

at the time only makes it clearer. In some way, each time you tightened the noose on my heart by exposing a part of yourself, there was an inner you consciously manipulating everything.

And it wasn't just me you did it to. You'd done it before – and I doubt you've stopped doing it since. We'd begin our 'acquaintance' as friends but, before long, you'd be dropping us little titbits, flippant statements that filled our silly heads with romantic ideas. Opening up like most men never do, you'd tease us, drawing us in and convincing us that we could be trusted. And all in the guise of friendship. It would never occur to you that we, your confidants, were falling in love – just as it would never occur to us that you acted that way with everyone. Not that it would have made the slightest difference if we'd known we were nothing special. It didn't with me. All it did was convince me how different you were – so unlike other men, so wonderfully honest.

You could never understand why even the strongest of friendships quickly collapsed into more. In most cases, you assumed it was some weakness on our part. You'd never be so vain to think there was something unique about you, something none of us could hope to resist. And you were always so stunned when we fell in love with you without your permission, as if by never saying the words you could stop it from happening.

For a while, in the aftermath, I was sure that, far from being naive, you were actually being malicious. It all seemed so bloody convenient. By forbidding us to love you when you knew we couldn't resist, you could leech on our emotions, bleed us dry, then leave us and blame the whole messy ending on us.

I soon got over it, though, and until recently I've been giving you the benefit of the doubt. Like all of your other women, I've written it off as 'not meant to be'. I've blamed it on incompatibility, 'baggage' and Heaven knows what else. I've underplayed that power of yours – that ability to draw women in, to entangle them in your least private secrets and convince even the stoniest heart that it was falling in love. I've been convinced it was something you were never aware of, something wholly subconscious.

But now you're cashing in on it. You're milking that entangling instinct and, my God, you're milking it well. I'd love to know when you finally saw it for what it was. Did that now-famous therapist of yours turn you on to it? Maybe it was your editor – the 'driving force' behind your success. Or maybe you did know all along. Maybe you *were* teasing us with it, on that day in '96 when we picnicked by the Camera Obscura and you talked about truth as a weapon.

I don't begrudge your success. I'm not going to make a fuss about how I was there in its infancy, when you were based here in Bristol, tapping away on a crumbling laptop, piecing together the book that would one day make you famous. I'm not going to kick up a stink about how I supported you, and then demand a share of the royalties. It wasn't like that. You paid your way. You held down a job you hated, while you hammered away on that laptop. You wrestled with your conviction that you would never truly succeed. It was you who repeated the mantra that the odds were sorely against you. And it was you who barely batted an eyelid when the novel you'd written at Uni was met with a flood of rejections.

It was strange watching you then, witnessing the tug-of-war between your confidence in your own ability and your faith that you'd never succeed. But, whatever the odds, you had to keep going. You were far too terrified to stop. As long as you kept moving forward the job you hated would never become a career; the life you lived would never become a reality.

That you've succeeded is almost ironic, but even I would agree you deserve it. You're a good writer - note that I don't say stunning - and you've certainly put the hours in. It was *your* hard graft and *your* ever-present luck - your atheist's guardian angel - that got you published in the first place.

Am I jealous? Probably. After all, I was the one studying English. You were the Philosophy student, as full of self-importance as you were of ideas. You had barely touched the classics. You rarely read fiction at all. You certainly had no concept of literary devices or trends. That was my domain. You were supposed to be studying Plato, to be writing about Kuhn and Popper, and deciphering Hume and Kant. But instead, you were making the most of a handful of lectures a week. You paddled around, creating short stories, then submersed yourself in a novel.

I suppose I've written this partly to prove myself, or perhaps to prove that an English degree is at least as good a grounding for a writer of fiction as a degree in Philosophy. But it's more than that. I wanted to make up for the fact that I've always been the observer, that I spent all of my time in London *studying* literature. For three years, I took the field apart. I teased out the themes and wrote my critiques, but I never truly contributed. To twist the old maxim, 'those who can, do; while those who can't, criticise'.

So I'm *doing*. I'm proving I *can*. I'm writing a book of my own. I'm not looking to become a household name like you. I'm not hoping for prizes or my face on the cover of some tacky women's magazine. That's a step further. That's a lot about luck, and unlike you I've never believed in my own guardian angel.

But this book's not just about me. It's about the people I work with, the people I've taken under my wing. It's about the potency of words. And it's about you, about the mess you left behind and what became of it, about the lies you've spun since and the destructive power of Truth. You've chosen your weapon well and it's put you where you are today. But now it's time to have that weapon turned against you, in your own arena.

That's why I've done it this way, rather than bringing the truth to your doorstep. You've always wanted to live your life in the public eye, and that's how I'll deliver this message. The tabloids will love it, your doting fans will go wild, and your perfect trophy wife will see her perfect trophy marriage torn apart.

And what makes it all the more perfect, you'll remember, is that truth walks hand in hand with virtue. And, as you once so facetiously pointed out, there isn't a thing in this world that we're taught to respect more than virtue. So, as long as I stick to the truth, no one - even you - can ever hold it against me.

The bare bones of this came together a couple of years ago. I wrote you a letter in response to *The Reluctant Puppeteer*. I never posted it, of course. By the time I might have got round to it, the anger had faded and I had the imminent release of my own *magnum opus* for comfort.

I managed to write most of my anger off as resentment. Understandable, really. After all, there I was, thinking I was over you. I'd reinvented myself, I'd found a career I actually enjoyed and I had a film coming out in the first week of May. And you just had to ruin it all. You just had to hit the shelves in March, less than two months before me, with *The Reluctant Puppeteer*. God, that pissed me off. I hadn't spoken to you in over three years, hadn't heard so much as a rumour in almost half that, and here you were reminding me - just when I thought I was doing okay - that you could still tighten that noose around my heart.

If it had been the other way round, if I'd hit the shelves first, I would definitely have sent the letter. That novel really hurt me, not just because it reminded me you were still there, or because your fame came sooner and bigger than mine, but because you'd clearly based so much of the story on us. Maybe it was cathartic for you, as you said in a short printed interview at the time, but it was far from cathartic for me. You twisted almost everything, adding and subtracting for the sake of excitement, making fun of me to keep your readers amused. You wrote me like some fairy tale villain, shallow and obvious, my few redeeming features paraded like curiosities in some literary freakshow. And where I wasn't a target for scorn, you made me an object of pity, the woman your hero loved in spite of her faults and largely in spite of himself.

I've still got the letter. It's not the most coherent piece I've ever written, but it's undoubtedly the most passionate. Until recently, it was stashed away in the cellar, with a load of old boxes I hadn't looked at since before I moved in here. But I live in an old Georgian house and it was only a matter of time before the pipes in the cellar gave way and my precious boxes had to be rescued and brought upstairs.

It was the last thing I needed at the time. It was Sunday morning and I'd been out with the girls until four. To make things worse, I was supposed to be spending the afternoon with Tim and Dom, running through the schedules for the next three weeks' filming. I hardly wanted to spend what little recovery time I had with an emergency plumber banging around in the cellar.

As it was, though, he was remarkably quiet. He helped me lift out my boxes and left me to deal with the contents while he and his cup of Tetley returned to the cellar. When he left I was still on my knees in the living room, wrapped in my dressing gown, rifling through a past I'd almost forgotten.

By the time Tim and Dom arrived, I'd started writing. I'd found my copy of *The Reluctant Puppeteer* and, with it, my venomous letter. There was a second book, too, a book Tim gave me when we both turned thirty a couple of years ago. I didn't pay it all that much attention, what with your novel and my letter to keep me amused. Over the coming days and weeks, though, what Tim had intended as a joke was to come hurtling back into his life and mine - with far greater consequences for all of us than your paperback debut.

I read the letter through and decided to reinvent it, to build it into something more, something equal to the novel that had first inspired it. I suppose, in a literary way, I wanted my day in court. Great writers have done it this way for centuries. Your once-beloved philosophers do it all the time. Even rappers do it, so why couldn't I?

Of course, at that time I was merely intending to state my case, telling our story the way I saw it, and to fill you in on the years in between. I'd mellowed a bit since I wrote that letter in April 2000 and I wasn't intending to punish you. No, that came later. I was in full swing, sharing every detail of my life with you, before I stumbled across a vicious nugget of truth – the truth that'll tear your life apart. And, until I delivered the news, I had no idea how much pleasure it would give me to share one last intimate moment with you - before I finally cut you loose, just as you abandoned me.

What follows is an abridged version of the first few pages of my diary, written the afternoon I found your book and my letter. As you might expect, it's less your typical diary entry than a rambling summary of the years since you left. Still, you need the background for the rest to make sense, and you'll find things soon slow down. In fact, it's not long before my style starts to swing between diary and story – I guess that's the scriptwriter in me...

May 4th, Sunday

I've got about an hour and a half to bring you up to speed before Dom and Tim arrive for our traditional pre-shoot run-through. These sessions were Dom's idea, not mine. Not that I'd do without them – not anymore, at least. I've learnt the hard way that, Dom's painfully systematic approach tends to save us a lot of frustration in the long run.

So, where to start? Well, I suppose I should explain who my imminent guests are, then take it from there. I guess that's as good an introduction to my little world as any.

Dominic's from the Wirral, the posher side of the Mersey, or so he claims. He's been in the business since he left school, but decided to leave active service in 1990 after six years of frustrating decline. Prevented from 'doing', he decided to teach. He actually made a very good tutor - I should know, it's largely down to him that I've made a success of myself. But meeting me was the beginning of the end for him.

Our paths crossed in autumn 1997, almost a year after that miserable Christmas when you and I went our separate ways. I joined his course in September, then left on his advice the following summer, convinced by his rampant ego-buffing that I was ready to go it alone.

At the end of the following year, he took what turned out to be a permanent sabbatical and joined me. And no, there's never been anything romantic between us. For a start, he's eight years older than me and - as I hope you remember - I've never had a taste for older men. On top of that, he's just not my type. We're just too different: he's as cautious and anal as I am impulsive and habitually disorganised.

It's this polarity that makes us the perfect combination at work. Over the years he has managed to temper my scattiness to a point where I can actually be consistently creative, and for that I owe him everything. But we'd drive each other mad in anything approaching a relationship. Besides, he's pretty average in the looks department. He's under six foot, which you may remember is a definite no-no, and he's blond which simply doesn't do it for me.

Tim, on the other hand, is gorgeous. He's talented, intelligent, sensitive and blissfully tall, dark and handsome. Plus he's got a lovely London accent and a deep, big-cat voice. He's even straight. Unfortunately, though, he's woefully out of bounds. Why? Because he's the best cameraman and video technician I know. He's also probably the best friend I have, especially within the industry, though Dom comes a close second.

Tim and I started working together in '99, at the same time as Dom came on board as my producer. Unlike us, Tim has higher ambitions. He has his heart set on the big screen. He wants to be filming in 35mm, strutting his stuff at the Hollywood premieres and picking up Tom Cruise's cast-offs. For him, my films are primarily a way to make money and get some on-set experience. When I met him he'd been doing some freelance work for the BBC. They all were back then. In a fit of stupidity, the Beeb had laid off its permanent cameramen, then suddenly realised it couldn't live without them. So the cameramen came back as contractors at a far higher rate. Tim himself had never worked for the BBC and was relatively inexperienced but, being Tim, he charmed his way in and was soon undercutting the hardened professionals, swanning around the region filming the local news. Then suddenly, towards the end of '98, the work dried up. Maybe the pros cottoned onto him, or maybe he messed something up. I don't know, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't either, but six months later he was working for me. I may not be as prestigious an employer as Auntie Beeb, but with me he's dealing with actors and sets, which is a lot closer to the big screen than standing in the Somerset drizzle doing long-shots of sheep.

We've had a few near misses over the past four years, Tim and I. Far too many lingering goodnights and pregnant pauses. I can't believe I still get excited by it, but I do. There's just something about him, something soft yet incredibly strong - God, I sound like I'm advertising toilet paper! Seriously, though, if I'd met him in anything but a professional capacity, I'd have jumped him in seconds - and no, the last few years haven't turned me into a slapper; I've still slept with far less men than my age.

I've just looked back over what I've written. Here I am, writing to you after all these years, and how do I start? I start with men. Pathetic really, isn't it? Straight away I'm on the defensive, trying to prove I've moved on. I'm telling you all about the men in my life before I say anything about the life itself. There couldn't be a more obvious buffer.

But maybe I need a buffer. Maybe, despite everything that's happened since Christmas '96, I'm still a bit tender when it comes to standing up to you. Who can blame me? After all, even your doting readers know

of your propensity for violence. They've read it from the inside, felt your urges channelled through Max, a tattered fictional off-shoot of the man you once were.

Still, I don't think it's fear that drove me to put Dom and Tim first. I've got nothing to fear from you now - nothing more than having my character dragged through the dirt in one of your best-selling novels. No, it's probably pride that got me rolling that way. I guess I need to show you I'm stable, that I have friends - male friends whom I can but don't need to rely on. And I need to show a certain strength of character before I take the next step and tell you what I do - for a job, I mean. After all, I'm starting from the gutter, thanks to your damning interpretation of my behaviour in the days when we were still together. I need all the positive press I can get.

You know I work in the film industry, and you know I make my own films. I'm a director. I'm also a writer - of scripts, which might make what I'm writing now a little confusing to read. There's a definite art to script-writing. It's quite different to writing straight prose. It has to be simple, it has to be quick, and it has to get straight to the point - which, of course, I'm not doing.

The chances are you won't have seen any of my films - not unless you've changed quite considerably in the past few years. It's not because they're crap - I've actually won a few awards since I started out in '97. It's because they're not exactly the kind of thing you're into - or at least you weren't, back then. They're porn. Real, hard, nitty-gritty porn. Nothing nasty, nothing overly weird, just sex. Straight sex, lesbian sex, solo sex, sex with toys and sex in every reasonable orifice.

Why? Because I love it.

Actually, it's a little more complicated than that. First off, the old adage is true: if I don't do it, someone else will. And they'd probably do it worse - especially if they were a man. Now, I'm not saying they're all bad - there are some excellent male directors out there - but the majority are absolutely appalling. In general, women do it better. Not only are we more imaginative, but we're more responsible. Yes, 'responsible'. It may be porn, but it's worth taking seriously - not least because the industry rakes in something like seven billion pounds a year.

I remember a discussion we had in the first few weeks of my film course. One of the other students argued that porn appeals to the lowest common denominator. It's easy to insist otherwise, especially if - like me - you think Schwarzenegger appeals to far lower denominators than any legal porn film. Nevertheless, her argument isn't a bad one. Porn *is* base. It *does* strike at the lowest common denominator because it taps into our primal instincts. We're built to have sex and our bodies have been designed so that we, unlike a lot of animals, can enjoy it any time we like. This is what porn appeals to. Dramas play on our fear, weepies tug at our sympathy and comedies tickle our sense of humour. Porn does the same thing with a different emotion. It grabs us by the short 'n' curlies in a way no Hollywood film ever will - at least not in my lifetime.

And it's because it's so powerful that it needs to be done right. Who watches porn? 'Sad little men,' is the usual answer, men who're too ugly or too dysfunctional to get their kicks first hand.

Rubbish. Could a fistful of 'sad little men' spend all of that seven billion? Of course not. Porn's far more main-stream than many people believe. You might not watch it, but a hell of a lot of people do. Normal people. Men, women, couples... And not only do they watch it but, if I'm doing my job properly, they enjoy it. And anything they enjoy has an effect on them. Even if they don't enjoy it, it's tapping into their most powerful emotions. It's influencing them, possibly giving them a few new ideas.

This is where the responsibility comes in. If I'm influencing these people, I have to be careful what I say. It's like advertising. Like any film maker who gets their audience's attention, I'm working on people's perceptions of, and attitudes towards, a certain issue. The effect is almost always subtle, but it's there. It's undeniable. It's nowhere near as powerful as is claimed by those who kept porn firmly in the closet during the Eighties and most of the Nineties. Watching movies doesn't turn ordinary decent people into rapists or murderers. But it does have a certain effect on them, which is why I'm so keen on responsible film-making.

When I say 'responsible', I mean using it to do good, to teach people. Where sex is concerned, people are easily conditioned - especially men. Take a guy to see an action movie and he emerges filled with bravado and dreaming of being the hero. Show him a porn film, and the effect is much the same. They're so easily manipulated. You just have to know how and when to tug on their strings.

With porn, they're especially sensitive. They pick things up and adapt them into their usual routine. Sometimes they barely notice. Other times they make a conscious effort to copy. It doesn't even have to be something overt. It can be as simple as a slight shift in attitude, which is another reason to be careful of what you put in your films. Show something nasty enough times and eventually it won't seem so bad. Show something good and eventually the viewer'll catch on.

I remember reading a letter in *The Guardian* three or four years back. It was from a woman - it had to be, no man could have been so perceptive. She was comparing porn with the sex scenes offered by Hollywood. In Hollywood, the clitoris doesn't exist, she maintained, while in porn it's seen as essential.

I'm not so sure. Of course, the clit gets a look in. Of course, women are seen to masturbate. But our little pink button is very much second fiddle. Whenever there's a guy in the room, it's his cock that holds the stage. More often than not, the girl gets her token rubbing and - if she's lucky - he'll lick her like a dog lapping water. But then it's down to business, and that business is pleasing the man. In the words of Roy Castle: 'Penetration... that's what you need'. She might play with herself while he's in there, but the focus of all her pleasure is almost always her lover's huge dick. It's hard to imagine, watching mainstream porn, that there are a hell of a lot of women out there for whom penetration just isn't enough.

In a way, I suppose I'm a bit of a feminist. Old style porn and most modern man-made films put men very much in control. Even if the woman's in charge, the focus is on the man. All she needs is a dick or two up her and she'll explode into a fabulous multiple orgasm. Foreplay's virtually non-existent, apart from the obligatory blow-job, and it's all over as soon as the man's popped his top. Like most other female directors, I'm trying to redress the balance. I'm trying to teach our male viewers that real life just doesn't work like that. You can't just stick it in, slam her like a jack-hammer for a couple of minutes, then spurt and leave her

to clear up the mess. In my films, the women tend to get what *they* want. The men almost always do - simply because they're so easy to please - but if a girl goes unsatisfied, then it's part of the plot. Not that the women are always in charge. If you're a woman whose boyfriend or husband is watching my films, the last thing you want is for me to build a stereotype that the girl always takes the lead.

So, I'm educating my audience. I'm steering their attitudes away from the stereotypical porn view of sex and guiding them towards a more fulfilling sexual existence. Dom tends to put my militant outlook down to the time I spent in the little-censored world of adult-education while the new Labour government was hammering true porn into oblivion. But I prefer to think of it as an extension of my natural mothering instinct.

Yes, it might surprise you to hear it, but I've become something of a mother figure since I took to the world of porn. I've always been a shoulder to cry on, and I've always been the one people turn to when things go sour. But the people I mix with now are all the more vulnerable. They've all got their reasons for being here and they've all got their weaknesses, just like anyone else, but their backgrounds and present environment are harsher than most. All I've done is treat my cast and crew like I'd want to be treated myself, but it's been enough to earn me the moniker 'the philanthropist of porn'. Don't ask me who came up with it, but it certainly smacks of Dominic's often-sarcastic way of delivering praise.

Naturally, the label has its benefits. For a start, I rarely have trouble getting actors - even male ones, who are usually thin on the ground. I wish I could say they're drawn to my artistic integrity, but I reckon they think I'm a pushover. They're wrong, of course: I run a pretty tight ship. But I'm not going to bite a guy's head off for a few extra seconds of limpness or a delay in the grand finale.

At this point, I should probably throw in a disclaimer. From what I remember of your novel, you're still as keen on the old 'behind closed doors' attitude to sex as you were when you first started writing. True, it's a little old fashioned, but I actually happen to like it. Obviously it's not appropriate when I'm making a film. No one's going to watch a porn film that fades out on a passionate embrace and back in on the following morning. But, as a student of literature, I've always preferred literary sex at a distance. So, I'm intending to stick with the formula.

Still, to have a hope of understanding the industry, you're going to have to suffer some lapses. I'll be describing the basic mechanics and I'll be using some of our terms of reference, including a few choice words you'd rather not use in front of your mother - especially *your* mother. Nothing too nasty, I'm sure, but if it bothers you... well, tough - I doubt you'll be as offended as I was by what you wrote about me. And if the mechanics aren't detailed enough, then go out and buy the video. I'm sure it'll give the tabloids a thrill to catch you on film buying porn. Just think of the publicity.

Okay, so you've got a vague idea of *why* I'm doing what I do, but how did I get here? It might give you a sense of morbid self-satisfaction to discover that you actually had something to do with it. I'd hardly call you responsible, but you certainly gave me an early helping hand.

It was you who made me kinky. I suppose the tendencies must have always been in there somewhere, but you brought it all to the fore. Back before our sex life went stale - or perhaps because it was starting to do so - it was you who introduced the art of sordid imagination. We dressed up, we role-played, we bought a few toys and started discussing our fantasies. From where I am now, it all seems so touchingly innocent, but I'll never forget the first time we came home from Ann Summers with a bagful of goodies and the stupidest, wickedest smiles.

I should have guessed you'd done it before, but I suppose I just didn't want to. I wanted to think we were both on our maiden voyage, that the wonderful openness was as new to you as it was to me. And I'd have still thought that now if hadn't got closer to Lucy.

You know, of course, that I met up with Lucy just after you dumped me that Christmas. What you probably don't know is that, over the following months, the two of us grew to be friends, despite the fact that she was still living in London. It's bizarre, I know, and it would never have happened if you and I had still been together. I'd always had a problem with my boyfriends' ex-girlfriends and she would have been no exception. In fact, she was probably the worst case scenario. She's beautiful, funny and unashamedly sexual - everything a boyfriend's ex shouldn't be.

But it was Lucy who took me that all-important step further. When I rebounded off you into one of the worst mistakes possible, it was her alone who stood by me. While the rest of my friends took a big step backwards, Lucy came into her own. I've never had a girlfriend quite like her - which, if I'd thought about it, would only have made me more miserable. Add sensitive, caring and strong to her other sickening attributes and you have exactly the type of woman that no self-respecting female would want as her predecessor. "No wonder Michael dumped me," I might have told myself. "I could never have matched up to her."

But at the time it never occurred to me. Unbelievably, I wasn't thinking of you. I was still very much your ex-girlfriend, but I had far more immediate things to deal with. I'm still not sure whether Adam was the antithesis of you or some kind of super-you - not that there was anything particularly 'super' about him in the 'super duper' sense. It was just that he was more extreme, a kind of amplified version of you. When I met him, of course, I was convinced he was utterly different. It was only when it started to go terribly wrong that the similarities started to dawn on me. By then it was already too late. I'd embraced a fatalistic attitude to relationships. As far as I was concerned, I had picked him because he was all I deserved. I'd been such an irrational, nightmarish girlfriend to you that I needed the boyfriend equivalent of a medieval ducking stool. I'd dip myself into the murkiest pond I could find and wait for the verdict. If I drowned then maybe I wasn't so bad after all, but if I lived then I was clearly a witch and a public roasting was long overdue.

But Lucy saved me from judgement. There I was, staring up at the surface of the pond that was Adam, wondering whether I'd drown or be burnt at the stake, when Lucy dived in to save me.

She did it in her own unconventional way, of course, and she did quite literally dive in. She got *him* to dump *me* - in favour of her. Naturally, it was all perfectly orchestrated, and naturally she didn't stick with him, but almost as naturally it didn't do much for our friendship. Sure, I was being particularly hard on myself at the time, but it doesn't do much for your confidence when your ex-boyfriend's ex-girlfriend - whom you're convinced was an impossibly hard act to follow - steps in and sweeps your next bloke away from you. It didn't matter that I was far better off without him - and you. It didn't help that she only did it for me. It was the fact that she could do it at all, and so easily, that cut me so deeply.

What was pivotal as far as my career was concerned was that she did it through porn. Adam loved it, all of it - magazines, videos, web sites, clubs. I'd say it was more than a habit. More often than not, we'd watch a video as a prelude to intimacy. I suppose it was the natural step forward from the games I was playing with you. At the time, I was certain it had to be, but to be honest I didn't enjoy it. I said as much to Lucy on a night out in London, and a couple of glasses later she made her confession.

She'd started in porn within months of splitting with you. That's how she paid her way through Uni - not by waitressing and getting in debt like the rest of us. By the time she graduated she was making far too much money to do anything more mundane, so she stuck with it. She knew her shelf-life was short and that she only really had six years left in her, but the wages were good, the hours weren't bad and she'd few taboos left to conquer.

As soon as we got back to her place she put on one of her films. I was stunned. It was one thing watching random mainland Europeans taking it every which way they could, but seeing my closest friend with a cock in each hand was something I could never have imagined.

How can she do this? I was thinking at first. *How can she let herself be filmed being treated like meat?*

Except she wasn't being treated like meat. She was enjoying it. And, while she'd never discussed it before, I could see she was proud of her work. This wasn't the typical mainland jack-hammering I'd seen in Adam's films. This was almost artistic. It was sensual, attentive - in its own porno way. And while Adam's videos had often made me uncomfortable, Lucy's was turning me on. I was mesmerised, utterly fascinated, but I still couldn't believe it was her.

When it was finished I just sat there in silence. What could I say to her?

"Your hair looks good like that."

"Do you ever get stage-fright?"

"Is anything ever *too* big?"

"Have your parents seen this?"

It was Lucy who broke the ice. "You can come and watch us filming if you want," she offered.

Well, what could I say?

It was a couple of weeks later that she sent me the video. It wasn't for me, it was for Adam. It was part of her devious plan to pluck me off my ducking stool and deliver me back into the land of the living.

But I did watch it.

I sat there, alone in the living room one evening when Adam was out with his friends, watching Lucy doing her stuff, knowing how much she enjoyed it. And that night, when Adam came home and 'made love' to me, I imagined myself in her place – ironic, really, seeing as she would soon be in mine.

Getting Adam to watch it was easy. He'd lent some films to a friend and when they came back, I swapped Lucy's tape for one of his favourites. Then I gave him plenty of time on his own to discover the 'mistake' and watch it. It can't have taken him long to recognise her. He'd met her twice in the time we'd been together and, as you know, she's not the kind of girl a guy forgets in a hurry. She wasn't even wearing a wig. I left it a fortnight before I told him she was coming to visit. You should have seen his face. Any girl with an ounce of self-respect would have dumped him for the look in his eyes.

She came down to Bristol a week or so later, all cleavage and pasted-on makeup - like she'd just stepped off of the soundstage. Adam lapped it up. Half an hour later, his Saturday night on the town had been mysteriously cancelled, and he was getting us drunk in The Lansdown. Lucy could barely keep from grinning, he was so painfully obvious. He couldn't keep his eyes off her. In retrospect I can hardly blame him. She's quite a performer, and I haven't met a fan yet who could treat a girl normally when he's watched her with three young men.

But of course I *did* blame him. He was my boyfriend. He may have been widely regarded as one of the worst of his kind, and I might have been trying to get rid of him, but surely he could have been a little less eager? He could have at least made Lucy flirt before he forgot I existed and devoted all his attention to her.

By the time she was leaving on Sunday, he'd made up some excuse for an imminent visit to London and suggested they meet for a drink. Yes, he was scum. Even by your standards, he was extremely insensitive. Or maybe he just didn't care. Maybe he was as keen to dump me as I was keen to be dumped. Either way, he slept with her on the very first visit. He'd been up to London four or five times in a month before he finally plucked up the courage and told me he wanted some space. I resented her for that. When we'd originally come up with the plan, I'd thought it would just take the once. I'd thought it would be one quick meaningless roll in the proverbial hay, then he'd dump me and I'd be blissfully happy. As it was, I was dunked even deeper in misery.

When my witch's seat bobbed to the surface, there was nobody there to greet me. In retrospect, it was largely my fault. I'd lost most of my friends over you, and those who were left were still too bruised to cope with another emotional crisis. The only one who might have helped me was Lucy, and she was the one shagging my ex.

It was June by the time I met up with her - I'd split up with Adam in April, five months after splitting with you. We'd spoken twice on the phone, Lucy and I, and I couldn't believe she was so thick-skinned that she'd

failed to realise I didn't want anything to do with her. I'm wiser now. Now I know how thick her skin is, and that it's been thickened by years in the business. Without it she'd have quit a long time ago, she wouldn't have made it through Uni, and she'd never have got the degree she's never come close to using.

But it wasn't just thick skin that kept her leaving messages and brought her back to Bristol that weekend in June '97. It was friendship. I had trouble seeing it at the time. I couldn't quite get past that feeling that she was so much better than me, and that she'd stolen Adam just as easily as she'd left her mark on you.

She met me for a drink at Bar Ha Ha, having already dropped her things off at a grubby B & B a stone's throw from Templemeads. The first thing she told me was that she'd given Adam the flick as soon as she was sure he had dumped me. The news just rolled off me, didn't even touch me. I was only there to show her how much I resented her, to glean just a little satisfaction from the knowledge that she'd taken the train to Bristol and paid for a night's bed and breakfast only to fail at whatever she was hoping to achieve. *Bitter as always*, you're probably thinking, and you'd be right. It was less than six months after you'd trashed me for what I was convinced was the last time, and bitterness was what I was best at.

But Lucy talked me round. She started appallingly, telling me she'd thought I was exaggerating when I'd told her just how awful Adam was. But her meandering, scatter-gun diplomacy soon took a turn for the better. By closing time, we were in a taxi headed back to my place with two uncorked bottles of wine. It was just like the night that January, when I'd first tracked her down for a booze-fuelled bitching session about our first mutual ex-boyfriend - you.

Three weeks later I was down in London, watching Lucy at work. It was certainly not for the squeamish but, by the end of the day, Adam was all but forgotten and a whole new world was wrapping itself around me. There I was, a twenty five year old English Lit graduate with five past lovers (all male) to her name, who had seen her first porn film four months previously and felt her first dildo less than a year ago... There I was, standing at the edge of a soundstage while my best friend knelt on all fours with her face in another girl's crotch and a guy with no pubes stuffing her backside with a cock like a prize-winning marrow.

It was fantastic. All of a sudden, my life as a PA in Bristol seemed duller than ever. I wanted to get into porn. Yes, I know, I've always been rather impulsive, but this was different. Over the next few weeks, porn became an obsession. I'd lie awake at night, playing the sexual architect, fitting as many people as possible into huge, humping jigsaws in which no one was wanting for pleasure.

The fact that I was always the builder, and never one of the blocks, should have told me I was a budding director, but once again it was Lucy who gave me that all-important nudge. We sat down one evening in London and talked it all through. By three in the morning, we'd decided I was not only too old but too prudish to act, and that my place - if I had one - was on the opposite side of the camera. I was keen, I was full of ideas, and I'd already decided that I was destined to make porn more femme-friendly.

I guess I owe Lucy my sanity. If she hadn't pulled me together, there would have been nothing for Dom to get organised. If she got me back on the rails and refuelled my engine, then it was Dom who helped me decide on a route and then drew up the timetables and taught me how to sell tickets.

They're fantastic, both of them. You missed out with Lucy - not that you'd be as keen on her celebrity status as you are on the fame you've actually married, of course, but she could have taught you a thing or two. And that's not all you missed out on, either. She told me what you were up to, back in '96 when things were coming unstuck and you and I were busily experimenting in the hope of saving our sex life. To think that, less than a year later, she and I had become such close friends and I'd watched - even filmed her - acting out the very same fantasies you had for the three of us. Maybe if you'd just stuck in there, those dreams of yours might have come true...

But with you I would always have been sexually reticent. You were far too domineering for me, far too self-absorbed. Still, it's rather amusing that you drove us both together *and* helped us broaden our minds, and yet you never got to reap the rewards.

My directing debut came less than a month later. Lucy borrowed a camcorder and the two of us spent a couple of days filming her on her own. I've never felt anything like it. It was the first time I'd ever been able to admit to myself that was enjoying watching another woman. The finished product was terrible, but the experience itself was one I will never forget. She was so perfect and her performance so overwhelmingly natural. Not once did I think she was faking it, and not once did it seem contrived. Even now, six years on, I consider those two days my glimpse of the Holy Grail. The intimacy and realism of that first tape are what I've been aiming for in every film I've made since. In spite of the awards I mentioned before, I've yet to come close.

Six weeks later it was autumn and I was starting a film course full-time. I'd re-mortgaged the flat then traded my intolerable job for three shifts a week at one of the city's seedier night-clubs.

And that was when I met Dominic. I was almost twenty six then, young enough to pass for an undergrad club-chick, but old enough to play the conscientious mature student when I wanted to. Not that conscientiousness was a problem, of course. After all, while the rest of the youngsters were first-time students drinking their grants and Mum and Dad's top-ups, I had to pay for myself.

I didn't actually get to know Dominic at first. He was my tutor, I was one of his fifty-odd students and that was all there was to it. It wasn't until the following Easter that I got him all to myself.

It was my first real film that brought us together. Throughout the first term, I'd been working with Lucy and some of her friends, putting together an hour-long video that I was convinced would break the mould of UK porn. As far as I was concerned, the cast and crew had as much faith as I did. If they did, then they must have been just as disappointed. If they didn't, then I've no idea what strings Lucy pulled to get them to work for me. Either way, there were no profits. The film didn't even hit the shelves. Nevertheless, I've since paid them twice the going rate for the work they did, and some of them have even worked for me

again. They're good people, and I owe them a lot. Doubling their wages was the least I could have done for them.

So what went wrong? Why did my attempt to break the UK mould amount to nothing? Because of the BBFC - or I suppose, more correctly, because of good old Jack Straw.

You see, when Lucy and I were filming our first 'girl solo' video, the industry seemed on the verge of a renaissance. The all-powerful British Board of Film Classification had relaxed the stranglehold it had held since the birth of the Video Recordings Act in 1984. All of a sudden, little snippets of hardcore were allowed into R18s. Content was still laughably weak compared to the stuff flooding in from mainland Europe. Jism was out, long and obscured shots were in, and the average sixty minute film was packed with repeats and slow motion just to fill out the time. Any genuine hardcore came in short bursts, interspersed with banality, which still seems ludicrous given the moral minority's objections to any hardcore at all. But, nevertheless, to everyone on the inside, this was the dawn of a new age.

But like most teetering toddlers, this new-found liberalism stumbled and fell. We should have known squeaky-clean New Labour would be far less forgiving than their scandal-ridden predecessors, but we were caught up in a fervour with the rest of the Great British Public and we geared up for the arrival of mainland ideals.

Instead we got Tony's smiling, softly-spoken moral Gestapo.

Back in the days when we were ready to oust the Tories and their public school mentality, there was a quiet reformation going on in the porn industry. After European border controls were relaxed in 1992, the British police finally admitted that they could do little to stem the tide of mainland pornography flooding onto the UK market. Unlicensed sex shops were springing up faster than the boys in blue could shut them down, and sales of black market foreign hardcore were rocketing while the UK film industry churned out less than a couple of dozen legitimate R18 titles a year.

By 1996, shortly before Blair came to power, the Home Office itself was telling the BBFC that its current policies were untenable, that relaxation of censorship would be preferable to a total lack of control over harder, under-the-counter products. The Video Consultative Committee, an advisory group made up of representatives from local authorities and the video industry, as well as members of the general public, had been telling them this for years.

But in late '97, both the police and Customs pulled a sudden about-face. They apparently had a word with old Jack and he was only too happy to oblige. He immediately did away with Lord Birkett, the acting head of the BBFC - rather than approving his permanent appointment as was expected - and replaced him with former editor of *The Independent* Andreas Whittam-Smith.

We should all have pity for poor Whittam-Smith. Here was a man who firmly believed that nothing with more than a PG certificate should be available to be watched at home. How he must have squirmed when faced, day-in day-out, with uncut pornographic videos.

The Straw/Whittam-Smith backlash sent us reeling into the Nineteenth Century. It was in the first few months of this new regime that my supposedly ground-breaking film hit the wall. The BBFC's helpful cut-list would have left me with a film that would have raised few eyebrows on Channel Five. The difference between the 18 and R18 versions was negligible, and releasing either would have been pointless. To drop to an 18 certificate would be admitting defeat; to stick with the R would prevent it being distributed. There were so few sex shops licensed to sell R18s anyway, and with so little difference in content the returns would never be worth it.

So, instead, I had a mild emotional crisis. I looked at my mortgage, which was cheap for London but enormous for a West Country singleton; then I compared the benefits of being a PA with the life of a struggling artist. After a week or so in the depths of depression, I decided to jack it all in and went to my tutor to tell him.

How I ended up telling him I'd been directing a porn film I have no idea. I was delirious, embarrassingly resolute and - by all accounts - incredibly unconvincing. I'd fallen at the first hurdle, given up at the first sign of trouble. I was weak and I was being impulsive - yes, 'impulsive', what you and I as literary people would refer to as a recurrent theme.

I must have told him the truth when I was busy having a go at him. I was like a spoilt child - which is just how you described me in *The Reluctant Puppeteer*. I was determined to quit and he wouldn't let me without a tenable reason. So I told him. I told him I had absolutely no interest in continuing the course because the content was no longer relevant. I had no aspirations towards directing a BBC play or a Hollywood movie, I simply wanted to make porn films. But I couldn't, not unless I relocated to Germany and rewrote my scripts to incorporate fisting, scatting and animals.

And he laughed. I couldn't believe it. There I was, trying so desperately to offend him, hoping to shock him into letting me go, and he was just sitting there laughing at me.

"There's always adult education," he told me, once he'd recovered. "They won't let you put shit, fists or donkeys in there, but they're a hell of a lot more lax than they are with mainstream porn."

I remember it so clearly. My lips were far enough apart to make me look stupid, and they twitched inanely as I stood there, staring at a man I'd written off entirely from the moment I'd first set eyes on him.

"It's part of the Obscene Publications Act," he continued. "As long as it's 'in the interests of science, literature, art or learning', you can get away with quite a few things that would never be allowed in a straightforward skin flick. And they'll be out on the high street, rather than tucked away in some seedy little backstreet sex shop."

And so it began. With Dominic's approval and guidance, I left the course and slipped into the world of adult sex education. Dominic used his contacts to negotiate my first commission and, in what seemed like the blink of an eye, I went from student to genuine, paid-up director.

A couple of months later, swords were drawn for what was to be the penultimate battle between the industry and its draconian regulators. A company called Sheptonhurst, who distributed overseas films onto the UK market, had done what I - as an independent student-director - could never have afforded to do. They'd hired a well-known QC to challenge the BBFC over one of its rulings - a ruling that was a symptom of the same drastic reversal of policy that had hobbled my own film in March.

The ruling concerned an American-made film called *Makin' Whoopee!* Sheptonhurst had submitted it to the BBFC in late '97, when Lord Birkett was still acting head and the censors were softening up. Pending the full certificate, the Board gave Sheptonhurst an interim clearance form stating that the film would pass as an R18. Based on this assurance, the company manufactured the necessary packaging and publicity material and bought up a range of comparable videos for subsequent UK release.

While they were doing so, along came the Home Secretary and his friend Whittam-Smith. All of a sudden, *Makin' Whoopee!* was up for the chop. So the distributors grabbed their QC and lodged a complaint with the Video Appeals Committee. The case was heard by five of the ten committee members, one of whom was the almighty Biddie Baxter of the good ship Blue Peter. Also on the committee, though perhaps not present at the time, were agony aunt Claire Rayner, Sarah Morrison - a former director of Channel Four - and Nina Bowden, author of children's books *Carrie's War* and *The Peppermint Pig*. Now these are hardly pillars of the porn community, but they have pretty much the same views as me. As long as it's consensual, non-violent, non-exploitative and doesn't involve children or animals, they can't see a problem with it. Neither can I - and neither, it seems, could their colleagues on the committee.

So the five decided unanimously that *Makin' Whoopee!* should be given its original R18 certificate. 'It may offend or disgust,' they said, 'But it is unlikely to deprave and corrupt that proportion of the public who are likely to view it. The whole purpose of the R18 certificate is to cater for those whose tastes are for works which may be said to be filthy and lewd.' Even so, the BBFC had to be threatened with High Court action before they actually complied with Biddie's ruling.

In the jubilation that followed, I almost dropped my first commission and waded back to the heart of the industry. I was determined to get in early and make my mark, but Dominic stopped me. Always the voice of reason, my mentor told me to wait. He was right, of course: I had my commission and I needed to expand my portfolio. The adult-ed market was everything he was - stable, dependable, liberal and totally under control. Meanwhile, the porn industry proper, with all its U-turns and to-ing and fro-ing, was a faultless reflection of me.

Sure enough, a whole flurry of films that were no different to the great *Makin' Whoopee!* never made it to video. Biddie's ruling was for *Makin' Whoopee!* alone and, if anything, it sealed the gates even tighter.

A guy I now know, once in charge of Load Video - an outfit that makes R18 gay films for our glorious UK market - was hurt more than most. Back in the Summer of Love between porn and the BBFC, he'd had four films passed featuring - shock! horror! - close-ups of erections, as well as masturbation and oral sex. A few months later, he submitted another three films. He got interim clearance for one, but heard nothing more

from the Board for months. And then, when he finally got hold of someone who'd admit what was happening, he was told that Whittam-Smith & Co had decided to delay giving any further certificates until they'd clarified their position with the Police, HM Customs and their daddy at the Home Office.

Eventually, Load got its snip list. The suggested cuts for one film amounted to over half of the 49 minute run-time. The strongest material the BBFC would pass were a selection of brief long-shots of guys' erections - a huge leap backwards that more than compensated for the porn-friendly hiccup of late '97.

But by the end of '98, when I was in the middle of my fourth commission, the censors had hiccuped again. Oral sex and vaginal penetration were suddenly back on the menu and I was itching to make some real porn. This time, Dominic couldn't contain me. It might have been paying the bills, but adult-ed wasn't for me. It was too sterile, too nice and too dull. And so, ignoring Dom's calls for caution, I dropped my commission and started assembling a crew.

By the time I'd got them together the banquet was over. The Home Office had seen what was happening and had jumped on its lackeys once more. A fistful of harder core films had slipped through, but in January the old cut-lists returned.

And so began the final battle. That loveable famous QC was back on the case, and the summer of '99 saw him back in front of the Video Appeals Committee. Biddie wasn't there this time, but Nina Bowden was there in her place with the authoress Fay Weldon at her side. On trial were seven films the BBFC had rejected, one of which was a trailer for a video that already had a certificate.

The BBFC's case was a joke. They'd given up arguing that the films were obscene, and had instead chosen kids as their weapon. With their boss Whittam-Smith looking on, the floundering champions of censorship were insisting that the videos could be harmful to children - despite the fact that they were available only in licensed sex shops, which children are legally forbidden to enter.

Even Dominic could see that the end of the battle was imminent. I'd never seen him quite so excited. He was talking of quitting his job, and was begging to be my producer. He insisted I dig out the video the BBFC had rejected in March '97 - filmed with Lucy and her generous friends - so we could be out there the moment the Board lost their case.

But I wouldn't. For once, our roles were reversed. I was the sensible one while Dominic was being impetuous. The footage was almost three years old and it showed. With four top-selling titles behind me, I was ready to do something far better. So I tightened up the script I'd written the previous winter, then gathered my crew and sought out my cast, and prepared to break into porn.

I was out with Dom and Tim when the BBFC lost its case. It was August and we'd just started filming. Dom had turned in his notice and announced he was returning to porn. I wish I'd seen the face of his head of department, but Dominic's sudden enthusiasm was more than enough at the time. He seemed almost as young as me that night as we sat in Bar Ha Ha, awash with excitement and a fair few glasses of wine.

Tim was another ex-student of Dom's, although he'd been committed enough to stay the full length of the course. He was the same age as me and, as I've already mentioned, thoroughly gorgeous. We'd been out for a drink twice before - first when Dom introduced us, then again after the second day's filming. I was determined to drag him to bed, but not while he was my primary cameraman. Yes, I know hesitation sounds wildly out of character for me, but Dominic's scruples are extremely contagious and I was determined to make that film work. And so I held off - even though, in the drunken euphoria of that warm August evening, I'd have happily taken him home.

The next few days on set were rich with that same euphoria. The films had been passed with a 4-1 majority and the Committee had chastised the BBFC for its failure to be clear with its policies. Even Ann Widdecombe, the bulldog Shadow Home Secretary, couldn't get us down. She had the temerity to insist that the Committee were putting children at risk by passing the films, and demanded that its members step down. In a stunning act of stupidity, she even implied a link between porn and the death of James Bulger, when it's a well-known fact that his killers had been watching a horror film.

Claire Rayner stood up for the nation, wielding the tried and tested 'double standards' approach. With all of us cheering her on, she accused Widdecombe and her ilk of attempting to "mollycoddle" society as far as sex was concerned, while kids were free to watch Arnie, Bond and friends glorifying violence and spoon-feeding them nationalist stereotypes.

And so ends our history of porn and the story of how I got into it. The Committee and its rulings prevailed, and the BBFC established a clear and more generous policy. It was the dawn of a new and glorious era, an era of freedom and happiness, an era of close-ups and come-shots and an abundance of full penetration.

Dom and I had our film out by the following Easter. Since then, we've made four films a year, all with Tim as the principal cameraman. They've all been a resounding success and the content just keeps getting better. But I still haven't recaptured the intimacy and loin-wrenching realism of those magical two days with Lucy. My heart's still set on that Grail.

May 5th, Monday

It's 5am and I'm annoyingly wide awake. I often get like this on the first day of filming. No doubt, subconsciously, I'm worried that I've left something out - that the sets aren't quite ready or the script needs a drastic redraft.

But that's what yesterday evening was for. The three of us talked it all over 'til ten. We waded through Dominic's lists and went to our all-purpose warehouse to be sure all the sets were complete. The warehouse is perfect. It's down by the river but we've made it entirely soundproof. We own it outright and

we've had four multipurpose soundstages built in it, which gives us plenty of scope for scene changes. It's hardly Pinewood, but it's certainly enough for a porn film.

Like most of the films we make, this latest one uses all four soundstages. There are seven sets in total - two main sets and five we'll use for a scene or two. Obviously, there'll be some rebuilding while we're going along, hence our dependence on Dominic's painstaking schedules.

When Dom and I first started out, it was all a hell of a lot simpler but the product was a great deal less interesting and things more often went wrong. I suppose that's what happens when you start your career with commissions in adult-ed. You get used to being given direction, to being fed with the script and largely supplied with the actors. You come to expect the luxuries and the leeway in budget. In short, you get sloppy - which is why it took us a while to get that first film in front of the censors. It wasn't that Dom wasn't there with his lists. It wasn't that we didn't have schedules. It was simply that I wouldn't stick to them. I was finally out on my own and I was insisting on total control. Dominic's lists, though a symbol of his greater experience, were an affront to my artistic integrity. The tighter his grip, the more I wriggled and argued, until eventually he stormed off the set and told me to call when I needed him. By the end of the week, he was back. I was keeping my head down and he was running the show. Even so, we ran over time, wound up with dozens of re-shoots and spent a hell of a lot more than we'd ever intended.

Now we're a lot more efficient. I write the script, we source the actors and Dom does the budget and paperwork. It's perfect. I don't get bogged down in the details and we both know they're under control. Since that first flirtation with failure, we've never had run over budget or time. Not only that, but we rarely work weekends or evenings. While many directors'll do seventeen hours in a day, we do our best to stick to a standard forty-five hour week, including a brief buffet lunch. It keeps us all fresh and it helps keep mistakes to a minimum. The actors love it - especially the guys, as a seventeen hour erection is extremely hard to maintain - but Dom and I do it for us. Neither of us sees the logic in working longer than we'd ever have worked for anyone else. Being self-employed is all about freedom. It's about doing overtime only when you need to or desperately want to. Sure, we start a bit later than your average office worker, but we're rarely still filming at seven and, in Bristol, no one commutes.

The upshot, of course, is that our films take a little bit longer to make. Nevertheless, filming lasts less than a month and we only make four films a year. So, in total, with editing, submission and the rest of it, Dom and I work an average of seven months a year - a month less than you, if what I've read of your habits is true.

But back to our current project. The schedule is set for a three week shoot, with a subsequent week out in Austria, filming exteriors with a skeleton crew to put the rest of the film into context. The story's set in Vienna at the turn of the Eighteenth Century and, while we can't afford to do it all on location, we're keen to make it as authentic as possible. So we've a beautiful castle in the heart of the Austrian countryside to make up for what the warehouse is missing.

I've always had a thing for this era. There's something intrinsically sensual about it. All that intrigue and backstabbing; those ludicrous costumes, all cleavage and hips and long voluminous skirts. I've plundered the genre before, but then it's hardly surprising when I've got such a taste for the classics.

And the classics are always my influence. In my pursuit of that elusive porn Grail, I've drawn on a wide range of sources from erotic art and literature. Pierre Lancombière's *The Book of Lust*, for example, is a wonderful celebration of women enjoying themselves with or without the assistance of men. Other Thirties favourites I was hard pressed to find are *Dressage*, *The Four Thursdays*, and *A Piquant Brunette*. Like so much porn seventy years later, these four books tapped into one of the core contradictions of manhood, that primal confusion between fear and blind adoration of women in power. That said, the bondage can be somewhat extreme.

Bondage is something I've rarely had that much to do with, at least in my films. As much as the 'victims' seem to enjoy it, to me it just looks ridiculous. It's hard to take it seriously after Carlo, Mac Clyde and Lapaz hammed it up in the Thirties with ludicrous comics like *Triumphant Leather* and *L'Inquisiteur Moderne*, and John Willie put the last lampooning nail in the coffin at the end of the Second World War. Call me a purist, but the sight of a woman trussed up like a cart horse and running along on her fingertips does little to stir my excitement. Not only that, but John Willie's obsession with Barbie doll figures and impossibly pert oversized breasts was an insidious prelude to the world's current addiction to silicon.

So we don't do bondage - at least nothing strong - and we don't use girls with augmented breasts. It's not just a moral crusade for me, it's about keeping the viewer's attention. Fake boobs are as distracting as gimp masks. To your average purveyor of porn, especially in Britain, they both look incredibly stupid, and any man or woman who's touched a pumped-up breast will know they feel even less real than they look. Which is why we stick to reality. As far as their bodies are concerned, anything that hasn't come naturally to our actors has been earned fair and square at the gym.

You might think I'm being pretentious, that by referring to porn from sixty-odd years ago and insisting on organic actors, I'm revealing delusions of grandeur. I hope not. Rest assured, while there are some people out there using Hollywood pyrotechnicians in an attempt to shake up the genre, my feet are firmly rooted. As I've already told you, I have no aspirations towards directing a box-office blockbuster. While Tim's saving up for his plane ticket and some of the actors are desperate for a call-back to *Emmerdale*, Dom and I are sworn to our industry. There's nothing I'd like better than to die of old-age in the middle of making a porn film.

Okay, so perhaps I'm exaggerating, but this is my industry - and, no, I'm not even here for the money. If it was cash I was after, I'd have moved on already. Distribution rights for porn films are notoriously cheap. Even a low-budget horror flick is worth fifty times more. So it's truly a labour of love. Porn is where we excel, and I couldn't imagine anything better.

What you might consider pretension is merely a reflection of my professional commitment. I may love what I do for a living, but I take it no less seriously than any trader, banker or doctor - perhaps even more so than one or two best-selling authors. It's for this reason, as well as out of sheer fascination, that I've devoted as much time and attention to classic erotica as I did to my studies at Uni. Back then, you respected the breadth of my literary knowledge. I wonder if you can do the same now.

May 5th, Monday (still), 8pm

The first day is out of the way and at last we're actually moving rather than being stuck in the preamble. Things went reasonably well. You'd expect them to, really. After all we were only filming dialogue scenes. Dominic was as impatient as ever, picking me up on the details and quoting his schedules. He'd been insisting for over a week that we could easily fit a third scene in. And, of course, he was right. He invariably is. If I wasn't convinced he was long overdue to be wrong, I'd probably give in and start listening.

But we've done our two scenes and they're as near as we'll get to perfect, not that Tim would have noticed. Something's wrong, I can tell. He's just not his usual good-humoured self. He was the same yesterday, painfully vague and frustratingly non-committal.

Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm being too neutral. Until yesterday, we'd barely spoken in weeks. I'd assumed he'd snared himself another woman. He has a tendency to take a step back from me when he's contemplating another relationship - 'on the cusp' I call it, as he rarely finishes with one before he embarks on another.

He's an incredibly cyclical creature, and for such a free spirit his adherence to form is both stunning and deeply ironic. Every couple of months, he finds himself wrapped in the limbs of yet another attractive young woman. They're rarely girls from the industry, but they're always so striking they should be. For the first week or two he's madly in lust with them - just long enough to get rid of the last one - but as soon as they make it official he starts to get bored. And that's when he comes to see me.

Every time he does it, he's acting as though it's the first. It's not that he suffers from some strange form of sexual amnesia. He hasn't forgotten that only a couple of months ago he was tiring of somebody else. No, he honestly thinks his latest foetal relationship is the closest he's come to finding the woman he wants. So, of course, I mother him through it. He might well be my junior by less than a fortnight and you might well think I'm hardly cut out for it, but as I've already said, I've grown up a lot since my twenty fifth birthday, when you took me out for dinner and we wound up so drunk that I woke up in hospital after a 'fall' from the top of the stairs.

So I'd been assuming that Tim was back in the cycle, that he'd found someone new and perhaps even shaken off Lisa - one of his most persistent and tedious barnacles. And, when he turned up on Sunday with

a face like a weekend in Weston, I concluded that the excitement was fading and acted accordingly. In other words, I had a quick go at him, then asked him whose heart he was about to break this time.

He looked at me blankly.

“Oh, come on, Tim,” I chuckled, slapping his bicep like an honourable bloke. “I’ve never seen you this miserable when you’re not about to fall out of love.”

Dominic laid his briefcase on the table and slipped off into the kitchen, mumbling about making a coffee. He may have known Tim a lot longer but, like most men, Dominic’s incredibly reluctant to probe. Not that he’s unsympathetic, he just prefers to let his friends come to him. I, on the other hand, am a proud and diligent burrower.

Nevertheless, when Tim looked me straight in the eye, both my pride and my diligence faltered. The film maker in me is longing to say that the wonderful blue of his eyes had faded to grey, but I didn’t see anything quite that dramatic. What I did see was a staggering reflection of hopelessness, an all-encompassing sadness worse than anything I’d seen there before. My mind filled with possibilities, each more extreme than the last, but for the first time in years I was stuck for something to say.

“I’m just not feeling all that great, that’s all,” he told me, blinking slowly to cover his eyes. “I think I might be coming down with something.”

He was lying, I was sure of it, but I wasn’t about to start badgering him with Dominic next door in the kitchen. Still, I didn’t appreciate being blocked out, which is probably why I said what I did.

“You’re not going to go spreading flu on set, are you?”

He shook his head, ignoring or missing my blatant insensitivity. “I don’t think it’s flu,” he assured me. “I’m probably just over-tired.”

And that was it. He turned away from me and went to join Dom in the kitchen. I was furious. I still am. Four years I’ve known him and I’ve been there at the demise of every fling and half-serious relationship he’s had since we met. We turned thirty together, for God’s sake. How can he do this to me?

He came in today wearing that same lifeless expression under a transparent, fixed-smile veneer. But he still wouldn’t tell me what’s wrong. I offered him dinner at my place, cooked by very own hands - which are no more the hands of a chef than they were when I last cooked for you - and he turned me down. He told me he was meeting a friend for a drink which, seeing as that friend remained nameless, was clearly a lie. So, I’m sitting here with my third glass of wine in an hour, wondering first why he’s so bloody miserable, and second why he’s pissed off with me.

Maybe he’s just had enough. Maybe he’s suddenly decided that he’s no closer to Hollywood now than he was when we did our first film together. Or perhaps it’s just me. At the risk of sounding conceited, perhaps I *have* been overly neutral. It’s been difficult, juggling three sets of emotions at once. It’s hard enough with Dom at times, balancing friendship with a working relationship. With the added complication of enduring sexual attraction it’s almost impossible. All those drinks after work when we’ve sat in The

Lansdown, discussing his failing relationships while I wished I was next in the queue. All those mornings when I woke up with him on the sofa bed, thanking God I still had my clothes on.

There are plenty more sharks in the sea, I've told myself so many times, so why do I have to keep baiting one I know will be bored of me just as soon as he's taken a bite? As much as I love him - and I mean that in the most acceptable way - I can't see it working. I can't see why, with a mass of beautiful women ready to knock down his door and a sexual attention span as short as his, Tim's interest in me could last any longer than his interest in any of the others. And then what? We'd get back to being great friends? He'd walk back onto the set and we'd continue our professional relationship? No. I'd lose one of my closest friends and the best cameraman I've ever worked with, and all for a fortnight of unbridled hedonism - assuming I lasted that long.

So I've struck a balance. I've taken a small step back while remaining both a friend and an objective employer. I've edged us away from that third dangerous point on the triangle and into a nice safe place between the other two. But, clearly, I've done it all wrong.

All great things come in threes. Father, Son and Holy Ghost; Virgin, Mother and Crone; three wise men and three blind mice; 'to love, honour and obey'; and, of course, the old Triple 'X' of porn.

Now that I look back on my own recent story, the abundance of trinities is painfully obvious. Most striking of all, though, is that it all revolves around three books - the diary you're reading now, the novel you wrote while we were living together in Bristol, and the book Tim gave me as a darkly humorous gift on the eve of my 30th birthday. I mention this particular trinity now because that third book is about to make its appearance. It was on this fateful Tuesday, our second day of filming, that Tim's flippant present first began to turn. And it didn't just turn on us, it turned on the people we worked with, leaving all of us scarred by its passing.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Back to that Tuesday...

Tuesday, 6th

It's early and I'm sitting on the bed, staring across at the chapel. In a few hours' time, a girl I would almost consider a friend will be sitting where I am, being deliciously licked by one of my favourite male actors. Does it give me a thrill? Of course it does.

For now, though, the warehouse is wonderfully empty. The sets have a strange peace about them, the chapel especially. It's bizarre, sitting in one set and looking out into the others. It's like peering into three

different worlds. No, it's like being a character on television when the cameras are no longer on you, and suddenly seeing three other TVs, each tuned to some other channel.

Yes, I *do* have a hangover.

It occurred to me when I got in here this morning that I still haven't told you all that much about this particular project. I wrote that we'd spent yesterday doing some dialogue scenes, but I didn't even touch on the dialogue. I told you the story was set in Vienna, but I didn't even hint at the plot.

I'm not going to tell you exactly what happens, at least not all in one go. If you're after the simpler, linear plot then pop out and purchase the video or skip to the end of this diary for a quick synopsis. I'm going to let the story unfold as the filming progresses. That way you'll get the reality in context and there'll be a story to go along with it. But I'm not just being facetious. I'm hoping you'll prove yourself as a writer and guess it - and I'm not being clever because the story isn't my own. I've borrowed it, though I've tweaked it a bit for the sake of my audience.

I won't tell you the name of it, either. Not yet. It's a pun, like all the best titles, and would almost definitely give it away. To be honest, the location itself should be enough to tell you the author, but we'll see.

One of the scenes we filmed yesterday was the opener. The other was Scene 24. We did them together because, although they're on different sets, they use the same actors. Not only that, but I prefer to kick off with some dialogue. Maybe it's me, but I think it sets the tone for the rest of the project. Yes, I'm serious - and as idiosyncratic as ever.

The chapel's for Scene 24, and we'll be using it again on Wednesday. After that it becomes a convent, and in a fortnight it'll be used as a crypt. And as for the bedroom I'm sitting in now... well, on Wednesday night it will be transformed from a glorious Austrian boudoir into a dingy, straw-scattered jail cell. Nothing overly dodgy, I assure you.

So, the opening scene. As with any respectable porn film we start with a few minutes of plot. It gives the audience time to get comfortable and gives us directors and script writers a chance to be seen as creative. In this case, I've devoted two complete scenes to building the story before the audience reach for their tissues.

In Scene 1 we meet the Duke of Vienna, played by Alex, a twenty three year old Bristolian lad who's not only hung like a donkey but is actually dripping with talent. I tend to give him the meatier roles, the ones with plenty of dialogue, so both he and I can make the most of his acting ability. He'll go far that boy. He's already had a bit-part in *Casualty* and it's only a matter of time before he's snapped up by a respectable drama or soap opera.

The Duke, we learn from this scene, is a kind and lenient man whose subjects are taking advantage. A long-standing law states that no man may live or consort with a woman who isn't his wife, and that any man doing so should be punished by being beheaded. Being somewhat progressive and none-too-keen on

capital punishment, the Duke has let the law slide and during his reign there hasn't been a single decapitation. Unfortunately, this lackadaisical attitude has led to a lot of sex-before-marriage - and a perfect setting for porn films.

The Duke is besieged by formal complaints from parents whose daughters have been seduced and stolen away by young, dishonourable men. On the morning we meet him, he has decided he can take it no longer. He calls in his trusty chief counsellor, Escalus - played by Bill, a poorly paid thespian who often fills non-meat-wielding roles for me.

The Duke confesses to Escalus that he's been far too lax and that he is to blame for his subjects' moral decline. He is convinced the populace needs to be disciplined, but he's afraid they will no longer love him if he takes the steps he deems necessary.

The two of them consider the options and Escalus suggests they delegate. Enter Angelo, played by Ben - a chatty and humorous Brummie whose head is so tightly screwed on that virtually nothing would faze him. The character Angelo is a well-known ascetic and puritan, only a miracle short of a sainthood - the perfect man for the job. The Duke has him deputised, puts him in charge of the crack-down, and promptly skips town.

As I said last night, filming went pretty smoothly - aside from Tim's distinct and unusual lack of good humour. Where he would normally have been full of snappy one-liners and playing his trademark practical jokes, yesterday he was worryingly subdued. I was hoping Ben would take over, that the young, vibrant Brummie would stand in for our man from the capital. But he didn't. He took Tim's lack of overt enthusiasm as a cue to keep his head down and get on with his job.

I'm hoping today will be better. We're getting down to the nitty-gritty now, and for that we need everyone upbeat. It can be a long and arduous process. A simple guy-on-girl scene, which both of these will be, can take four and a half hours to film. This makes a good mood on-set an essential part of the process. For a guy to stay hard for four and a half hours is quite an achievement. Add cameras and a roomful of people and, for most men, it would be almost impossible. Wrap that difficult package in an atmosphere of nervous tension and even professionals flounder.

Which is why I'm glad I've got Chris. At the ripe old age of 24, Chris has been in the industry longer than I have. He's a veteran, and his ability to keep 'wood', as we call it, is verging on legendary - hence his involvement in both of the scenes we'll be filming today. He's every inch a star, and rightly so. He's blessed with what most women would call a perfect body - very well toned but not stupidly muscly; like a shorter, less plastic-looking version of Brad Pitt in *Fight Club* or *Snatch*. And every time he's on set, his body seems that little bit tighter. If he wasn't a porn star and he wasn't so short, I'd probably have been as keen to bed him as anyone else. To be brutally honest, I might have been tempted anyway. *Might have been*. As it is, out of all of the boys I've worked with over the years, he's not only one of the best, but he's one of the few with a place in my heart.

He was already a popular actor when he first came to work for me. Dom had pulled a few strings and I'd cast Chris in a guest slot. He was a joy to direct - the perfect mix of laughter and no-nonsense professionalism. By the time we'd wrapped his first scene I was desperate to use him again. Half an hour later I found him snorting coke in the bathroom.

Now, drugs are a common occurrence in a business like this. Most of the time it's wise to turn a blind eye. If you insisted your actors were clean, you'd have a hard time finding any to work for you. But actually taking drugs in the middle of filming just isn't acceptable. You might think I over-reacted. I lectured him like a primary school headmistress and insisted he turn out his pockets. It was lucky for him that I did, because coke was the least of his problems. In his jacket were three single gram wraps of heroin.

That night he stayed at my flat under threat of me calling the Police. Lucy came over and, between us, we sat with him all through the night. The next day I told Tim and Dom what had happened and, for the following three weeks, Chris spent barely a moment alone. He's clean now. He won't even stoop to a drink and he's replaced his addiction with exercise.

In spite of the drugs, he was still doing incredibly well for himself. Gorgeous or not, it's quite an achievement for a guy to rise to the top in a world where fame is primarily reserved for the women. In porn, the boys are little more than props for the girls. And, in a total reversal of traditional employment practices, the guys earn considerably less. Even Chris is no exception.

Part of me would like to stand up for equality. In most people's eyes, the boys work far harder. If a girl's not aroused, she scoops up a handful of lubricant. If a guy can't get wood, he goes home and he doesn't get paid. Not only that, but unless he has an impressive track record, it's doubtful he'll be asked to come back. That's why, in this industry, the women outnumber the men. It's also why a good man will rarely be wanting for work.

So perhaps I should be out there defending them, waving my banner and championing the cause of the underpaid male. I could start by paying my workers equally, hoping to trigger a change, to spearhead a great reformation of porn. But why would I want to do that? As much as the men have my sympathies, at the end of the day I'm a woman. And, as a woman, I'm glad there's at least one labour market where we're worth more than men. When we're paid like men everywhere else, then maybe we'll start looking at wages in porn. Until then, things will stay as they are. And besides, men have a far longer shelf-life. As long they don't lose their wood they can go on for years. Even with face-lifts and silicon, women don't have that luxury.

Ten minutes before the crew start arriving for work and I'd better finish off and get ready. Just quickly, I'll run over the two scenes we're filming.

The scenes are numbers 9 and 3. As I said before, Chris appears in both. The first will be filmed on the set we've made up as a kitchen. Chris plays a character called Claudio, on the face of it one of those 'young, dishonourable men' who have been seducing the young girls of Vienna. The scene in the kitchen is a kind of

dream sequence for later in the film, when he starts reminiscing over his affair with Juliet, with whom he is deeply in love.

Juliet is played by Helen, a strawberry-blonde Bristolian with a chequered history that I'm sure I'll get back to at some point. It's her I was referring to earlier when I mentioned a girl 'I'd almost consider a friend' who was soon to be 'deliciously licked'. That licking occurs in Scene 3, set here in the bedroom, and is part of my mission to educate the audience. Claudio and Juliet are lovers, so the focus here is on love. It's something so few male directors even try to pull off. They forget about passion and cut straight to the rutting. Maybe it's my time in adult-ed talking here, but foreplay is far too often ignored. In your typical porn film, the guys simply show up, exchange a few choice words with the girls, then flip out their dicks out and the girls get down to business. It could hardly pass for romantic, now could it?

So Helen and Chris will be doing it properly. There'll be lots of kissing and teasing. He'll pay attention to less obvious parts of her body and, most importantly, he'll take his time. The hardcore misogynists can always fast-forward to fucking.

But back to the plot. In Scene 3, Claudio and Juliet are *making love* in their bedroom. It's beautifully intimate and the scene ends with Claudio coming and Juliet drifting off to sleep - a sign of happiness, comfort and trust. Ultimately this scene will be mixed with footage and dialogue from Scene 2, which we're filming next Friday and which focuses on Angelo's first day as deputy. The Duke has barely left the city when Angelo receives a visit from none other than Juliet's parents. Clearly jealous of the fun their daughter is having, they've come to complain that she, like so many other young Viennese women, has been seduced by an unscrupulous scoundrel and has left the family home to live in sin.

Rousing stuff, I'm sure you'll agree. Now, if you'll excuse me, someone's just shown up for work.

4.30pm

I'd be overdoing it if I said today was a total disaster. Nevertheless, we've had sixteen people on set for most of the day and we've got nothing to show for it but Julian's stills and some behind-the-scenes footage that, one day, I'm sure we'll all laugh at.

Surprisingly enough, Tim had nothing to do with it. He arrived nice and early and I took him aside to talk about yesterday. I put all the cards on the table and told him I was speaking as his boss not his friend. His friend, I said, was both concerned for his well-being and offended that he hadn't confided in her. His boss, however, really couldn't care less about him, but she was worried his mood would disrupt the day's filming and was demanding he snap himself out of it.

"Maybe my boss should take lessons in empathy," he responded, looking me straight in the eye. But then he relaxed. "I've a friend who could give her a few tips," he added as a smile slowly spread through his face.

And he wore it for most of the morning. He even kept it up when things began to go wrong.

No, it wasn't Tim we had a problem with, it was Chris.

I once heard one of my American counterparts describing one of her actors as 'an excellent woodsman'. I love that phrase. Only a woman would have come up with such an innocuous term for something so beautifully wicked, and it has changed the way I look at erections forever. I'm stuck with this image of a guy dressed in pale green tights and a green, felt hat. He's standing in Sherwood Forest, with his legs apart, his hands on his hips, and his dick like a tent-pole in front of him.

Chris almost ruined that image.

I wanted Claudio to take his time with his lover, but I hadn't expected the foreplay to go on forever. Even Helen began to lose patience, and she's been begging for a role with Chris since the first time I made a film with him. He simply couldn't keep wood. By eleven o'clock, we'd had so many false starts and deflations that I opted for a change of scenery, just to shake things up a bit. We switched from kitchen to bedroom and tried our luck with Scene 3, but in spite of the loin-stirring build-up Chris remained stubbornly flaccid and I was forced to concede that we might as well break for some lunch.

"Chris, you're not doing drugs again, are you?" I whispered in his ear as we filled our paper plates from the buffet.

He shook his head.

"Then what's wrong?" I pressed him. "Is it Helen?"

He looked across the room at his co-star, then his gaze dropped to the floor and he grunted a 'No'.

"It's not Toby is it?" Toby is Helen's boyfriend, and also appears in this film. He's usually on-set whenever she is. "I can ask him to leave if you want - but, believe me, it doesn't bother him."

"It's not him," Chris insisted. "It's not either of them. I just can't get into it."

"What were you doing last night?" I asked him suspiciously.

His expression was one of disappointment and betrayal. "I told you, I'm not back on the drugs."

"That wasn't why I was asking," I assured him. "I was wondering if you'd been doing a spot of moonlighting."

"What?"

"Were you wasting your wood on another?" I explained.

"No." Far too abrupt.

"Is that 'No, you can trust me, I'm committed to you a hundred per cent' or 'No, and it's been a while since I did'?"

"Surely 'No' is enough, Sarah," he said bitterly, which I assumed meant the latter.

And that's what I can't understand. If he's not getting any, why wasn't he ready, willing and able as soon as he was given the chance?

I left him to his salad and water and took my plate over to Tim and the rest of the crew. Dominic was out in his car, babbling into his mobile while he lunched from a packet of Bensons.

“What do you reckon is wrong with him?” Tim asked, careful not to look over my shoulder in Chris’ direction.

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “But he’s ready to bite someone’s head off.”

“Perhaps it’s stress,” offered Steve, who does lighting and doubles as electrician and gaffer. Steve’s another Bristolian, but I’m not going to write out his dialogue phonetically. I’ll leave that kind of cleverness to you. “You know,” he elaborated, “All that stardom. It’s a lot to live up to.”

“He seemed fine when he came in this morning,” Tim pointed out.

“Maybe Tim put him off,” countered Paul, our Somerset soundman. “You’ve hardly been a barrel of laughs lately, have you Tim? Maybe your misery’s wilted his knob.”

“Fuck off, Paul,” Tim retaliated.

“Aah... Did I hurt little Timmy’s feelings?” Paul chided him.

“Stop it, Paul,” I cut in. “The last thing we need now is you two acting like a couple of schoolgirls.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Steve piped up. “We could always film them and flog it to Load.”

The four of us laughed at the thought of it, bringing an end to Tim and Paul’s bickering and an end to our discussion of Chris. We polished off our lunch and moved back to the set, where Helen was already doing her damndest to solve Chris’ problem.

An hour and a half later, I was signalling Tim not to bother. The crew were losing their patience and I was losing my temper.

“Anyone else want a go?” I barked across the set, as angry at them as I was at Chris and his woodlessness. “Paul? You seem to think you’ve a gallon more spunk than the rest of them. Julian? I’m sure someone else can take a few stills while you get on with the easy job. Or what about you, Adrian? Sasha wouldn’t mind stepping in as Head Tissue Wielder for a couple of scenes - would you, Sasha?”

When I finally ran out of steam, I found them all standing there, staring at me - or, rather, at someone behind me. I turned on my heel to find Dominic less than a yard away. I felt like I’d been caught in the act by the teacher - and I suppose, technically, I had. My anger wilted to acute embarrassment, but almost returned when I realised just how stupid he was making me look in front of the others.

“I take it things haven’t improved since this morning,” he said flatly, his breath impossibly minty.

Even with my back to the set, I could tell everyone’s eyes were on Chris.

“Woodworm,” I told Dominic quietly.

He looked at his watch and shook his head. “We’ll have to reschedule,” he called out. “We’ll do this next week, assuming Chris and Helen are available.”

And that was it: the end of the day’s filming. Our second day and already two of the scenes have been pushed back a week. And tomorrow we’re back on the dialogue. I don’t know whether to be annoyed or relieved.

But what’s wrong with Chris? I know it’s nothing to do with Tim, regardless of Paul and his shit-stirring. And I’m sure it’s not Helen. I cast Helen as Juliet *because* she’s so irresistible. Even an actor like Chris should

be more than happy to work with her. Could it be Toby? I'm not sure, but I doubt it. Sure, he's rarely off-set when Helen's filming, but he's always careful to keep out of the way.

It can hardly be nerves, though. Chris has worked on far bigger projects and with far bigger crews than ours. At any given moment, there are no more than twelve of us inside the warehouse - excluding the actors. That's nothing. Some other directors will have over twenty people on-set at one time. Plenty use two or more cameras, while I - being Britannically minimalist - stick to just one, with Julian on the edge with a camcorder.

Shit. I think I've just realised what's wrong.