

# It's Not Personal

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*For my sisters*



## *Something My Girlfriend Said to Me*

Do you remember, when you were a boy,  
how the chimes of an ice-cream van  
could bring on a rush of excitement,  
how you struggled with the choice –  
a strawberry mivvi, a rocket lolly,  
or a 99 with hundreds and thousands –  
how different each felt  
in your mouth,  
on your tongue,  
how wonderful  
it was to know that  
if you chose a mivvi today,  
you could still have a 99 tomorrow?  
Well that's how it is with me and men.

## *First Times*

After the first time, she said to him  
‘The first time is always awful,  
isn’t it?’

It was his first first time, in his first year,  
in her shared room emptied of her room-mate  
used to being asked to work in the library.

After that, his first times came and went,  
in houses and halls, colleges and rooms,  
home and away, indoors and outside,

baroque, bizarre, boring, bloody, bad,  
but he would never say  
they were awful.



## *Crosswords*

She relished solving a crossword with her lovers,  
folding herself round the current man in her bed  
to measure his intellect against her own.

She gave each lover a cryptic crossword to himself:  
*Telegraph, Times, Guardian, Spectator, LRB*  
until there had been more paramours than puzzles.

Then she began to add rules of her own.  
With J they did the across clues first.  
K had to work up from the bottom right corner.

L must answer odd numbered clues before evens.  
M just the ones where they already had a letter.  
She switched to the General Knowledge Crossword

for N. Plumping the pillows and twining their legs,  
she said they should only try clues with seven words  
and with a transitive verb in the present tense.

‘Fuck that,’ he said, ‘that’s not what I came here to do.’

## *Visiting Sloane Square*

Slithering down her stairs, his heels  
slam, slat by slat by slat, slashing  
his slight chance of slinking  
silently away. He's left a slick

where he slathered and slobbered  
on the sleek silk of her pillow-slip  
then slumped into the slotted  
slab of her Peter Jones bed.

He's praying she's still asleep as he slips the latch,  
sliding into his Docs for the schlep up Sloane Street,  
where the sleet is slapping slantwise against the slates.

## *Differences*

In some parallel world,  
where Fermat's Last Theorem has yet to be proven  
and the rainbow has eleven colours,  
they still had lunch together in Olivo's,  
still laughed, flirted, drank too much wine,  
leant forward on their chairs, elbows resting on linen.

And in that world, where there is no salt in the sea or the soup  
and winter-flowering broccoli is orange,  
he didn't move his hand those last six inches  
to the freckled invitation of her forearm.

No, in that world where the alphabet runs from W to F  
and the sun sets in the north and rises in the south  
they drained their glasses, looked at their watches,  
said gosh that was fun we must do it again,  
and he is still married and has forgotten her name.

## *Bath*

You're lying in the long tub you bought  
when you first renovated the house,  
before the children, so you could both fit in,  
the water's hot and you've used the rose-scented bubble bath  
so you're half-covered in foam  
and through the squares of yellow and pink glass  
you put in the top frame of the window  
you can see the clouds pass looking just like the foam,  
and life is good  
because you're 35, there's Bach on the radio,  
and you're thinking about the au pair  
whose skirt rides up when she's driving  
and you're in the passenger seat.

When your wife comes in, she sits on the window-seat,  
her mouth smiles and she says,  
'You do know that I'm seeing someone else?'  
and when you say 'It's not Robert is it?'  
because that would be too close to home  
she says 'no it's Jack' and you say 'do you love him?'  
and then you get out of the bath and dress  
and you both go downstairs to the garden  
where the children are playing in the sand pit  
and you open a bottle of the good Chablis.

## *After the Dream*

Waking was hard, as if  
dragging himself up from the deep  
against the pull of where he'd been,  
and when at last his head broke clear  
it was not to brightness or new horizons  
or to thoughts of escape or relief  
but simply to the release of breath

breath that for too long had been held close  
was suddenly plentiful and free  
so free, he soon forgot that breathing  
was anything at all and before long  
all that was left of that dark time  
was the feeling that something,  
somewhere, was not quite right.