

‘A funny and poignant tale about first love.’ Nicky Pellegrino

tammy robinson

differently normal



If it doesn't break your heart, it isn't love.

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*This book is dedicated to the beautiful Rachel Tipene,
and all the other Differently Normal folk out there.*

Also to Mum and Dad, for everything.

Maddy

Photo of the week, we mutually agree, is the one that shows a life-size blow-up doll, one of those plastic ones that the manufacturers have tried really hard to make look like a real woman, propped up at a dining table. In front of her sits an untouched glass of red wine and a plate with what looks, on closer inspection, like a typical Sunday roast chicken dinner. There is even a little blue gravy jug, like the kind my nana used to keep in a cabinet.

Whoever cooked *that* is an amateur, Kyle said. The potatoes have no crisp and the chicken looks as dry as the skin on the end of Rory, our boss's, nose. We both shudder at the thought. We live in permanent fear of that skin – it has a tendency to flake off on to work surfaces and cups of coffee.

The doll's garish red mouth is wide open, like she is permanently surprised. When Kyle tells me why it's like that I make fake vomiting noises. I can't believe some people are actually

that desperate, I say. It's not just some people, Kyle says, it's a booming industry, the sex toy one. He quickly backtracks when he sees my eyebrows shoot up.

'Not that I'd know from personal experience,' he adds defensively. 'I read an article somewhere.'

'Sure.'

'It's true,' he protests.

'Do you think he's named her?' I ask, turning my attention back to the photo.

'How do you know it's a he?' He grins. 'Could be a lesbian doll.'

We both ponder this.

'Do you think they make lesbian dolls different to heterosexual ones then?' I ask.

He shrugs. 'No idea. But I can look it up if you like.'

'Better not. Rory's checking the internet search history now, remember? He doesn't trust us to make efficient use of our work time,' I remind him, while we both studiously ignore a lady standing at the counter.

'Excuse me,' she calls. 'Do you think one of you could actually bother to provide me with some service?'

Kyle and I exchange a look.

'Rock, paper, scissors?'

'Rock paper scissors.'

'One, two, three, dammit.'

'Every time,' I say smugly.

'One of these days I'm going to surprise you by *not* doing rock,' he grumbles as he walks off to serve the lady.

He won't, though. Kyle is nothing if not predictable.

While he's gone I study the photo for clues as to the photographer, but there's nothing. Thanks to new age technology and smartphone apps, the photo order was sent in via the internet, so we have yet to lay eyes on them. Whoever it is will have to pick the photos up in person, though. That's one thing technology hasn't figured out.

Kyle comes back to my side.

'I bet he'll be wearing a long black trench coat,' I say. 'With lots of pockets to hide all his deviant sex toys.'

'And dark sunglasses,' Kyle agrees. 'To hide his perversion from the world.'

We snigger.

That's one of the things I like about working the weekend shift with Kyle, our minds are on a similar wavelength. That and the fact he doesn't ask me about my home life, for which I'm grateful. Sometimes I just need to talk crap and forget about things for a while.

'And he'll have a fake moustache,' I add, warming up to our theory.

'Fake? Nah. He'll have a real porn star one that twirls up at the ends. In fact, I bet he waxes it with special stuff he orders in from Europe. Or maybe just K-Y Jelly if he's cheap.'

'Gross. That's really a thing?'

'What?'

'Moustache waxing.'

'Again, I have no real experience on the subject, but I read something somewhere.'

Kyle is always reading. He has a voracious appetite for knowledge, most of it useless.

As it turns out we couldn't be more wrong. 'Mr Smith' – fake name, we both agree – arrives at 4.49 p.m. Sunday afternoon to pick up his photos. The cynic in me thinks he has timed his arrival just before closing time to avoid the crowds. But he is neither furtive nor shady, which kind of blows that theory. If I had to compare him to someone for identification purposes, he puts me in mind of a certain big fat man in a red suit, the one who drives a sleigh and says 'ho, ho, ho' a lot.

Mr Smith *does* have a moustache, or maybe it's just considered an extension of his monstrous beard, like a loft conversion. Snowy white and immaculately groomed, I can't help but stare at the opening where his lips are, although there's no sign of them. He asks for his order in a jolly voice. I look suspiciously behind him for any signs of sleighs or reindeers or giant sacks of toys.

The coast is clear.

'Sorry, what was the name again?'

'Smith. I sent the order in via the internet a few days ago. The little box at the end said it would be ready in forty-eight hours.' He fishes into a back pocket and pulls out his wallet. From this he produces a printed receipt. 'Does this help?'

'Probably.' I tap away at the computer keys. It can't be right. The guy looks like someone's grandfather. Maybe there are two orders for Smith.

Nope.

‘Just a second, I’ll check with the technician if it’s ready,’ I say.

The technician, a.k.a. Kyle, looks startled when I appear out the back wide-eyed.

‘What? What happened? Did I miss something? Did Todd get fired again? Who did he hit on this time?’

‘He’s here.’

‘Who?’

‘Mr Smith.’

‘Ahh. And? Were we right? Is the moustache waxed?’

‘You’ll have to see for yourself.’

‘Intriguing,’ he says, grabbing the order from the counter and following me out. He stops short when he catches sight of our customer.

‘Holy shit,’ he says in a stage whisper.

‘I know.’

‘The guy looks like fuckin’ Santa Claus.’

‘I know.’

‘Are you sure it’s him?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Holy shit. Just goes to show, doesn’t it.’

‘What?’

‘You really *can’t* judge a book by its cover.’

I cringe. ‘Cliché.’

‘Yes, but, in this case, appropriate.’

I shrug. I dislike clichés as a general rule.

Mr Smith sees us standing there, staring at him. If he is at all embarrassed that we know his most innermost secret, he doesn’t show it.

‘Find it?’ he asks.

Kyle stands there, shaking his head. ‘It’s always the quiet ones,’ he says. ‘The ones you least suspect.’ More clichés. I take the photo wallet from his hand and complete the transaction. We watch Mr Smith leave.

‘Is it just me, or has the world become a little bit more jaded,’ Kyle says sadly.

‘You expect too much from people.’

‘I know.’

‘It’s not healthy.’

‘I know.’ He shakes himself from his melancholy. ‘I need a shower.’

‘Luckily for you—’ I check my watch ‘—it’s knock-off time.’

‘Are you coming for a drink?’

I imagine the luxury of sitting in a pub nursing a cold beer, no responsibilities. ‘Better not. My mother has book club tonight.’

‘You mean the one where they sit around drinking wine and discuss the meaning of life?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well then, my dear, I shall catch you on the next drift,’ he says. Kyle is on a mission to create new slang. So far it’s spectacularly failed to catch on.

Albert

The old bastard is on to me.

I know this because when I hear the front door slam and saunter out to the kitchen, confidently expecting the place to be empty, he is standing there, arms folded and face expressionless.

‘What time do you call this?’ he asks.

‘Hammer time?’

My wit, as so often happens with my father, goes unappreciated.

‘Are you planning on living at home for ever? Eating my food and watching TV I pay for?’

‘And using your Wi-Fi. Don’t forget using all your Wi-Fi.’

His lips roll in on each other, expressing his displeasure. I watch him limber up to deliver a sermon.

‘Your friends might think you’re funny, Albert—’

He’s wrong there.

‘—but in this house I expect you to show the appropriate amount of respect.’

Ah, it’s that speech. The respect speech. I lean back against the kitchen counter and cross my arms across my chest, settled in for the ride.

‘I work bloody hard,’ he continues.

I know this one off by heart. *To put a roof over your head and food on the table.*

‘To put a roof over your head and food on the table. When I was your age—’

I didn’t ask my parents to support me. Why, I was working in the quarry at the mere age of fourteen and I’d get as filthy as anything.

‘I didn’t sit around the house, expecting my parents to support me. I was only fourteen when I got my first job. Ball-busting physical work it was too, in the quarry. I’d come home covered in grime but proud, and—’

I earned my father’s respect by paying my own way. You could do well to learn from that.

‘—my father respected me because I paid my own way. I certainly wasn’t a burden.’

Wait, what? That’s new.

‘I’m a burden?’

‘I owned my own car by the age of – what?’ He blinks, disturbed from the script.

‘You think I’m a burden?’

‘Of course not. Wrong choice of word. You know what I mean.’ He looks shiftily though, like he knew full well what he

was saying. He checks his watch. 'Right, I'm off. Shift starts at oh-eight-hundred-hours. Tell your mother I've gone but I'll be home in time for dinner.'

He leaves, banging the front door shut behind him. My mother emerges from the laundry carrying an empty washing basket.

'Oh, he's gone already, has he?' she says, pretending she's disappointed. I don't know why she's bothering because her audience is me, and I couldn't care less if she's avoiding him or not. Plus, the laundry sits off one side of the kitchen – there's no way she couldn't hear us from in there.

I must look rattled because she puts the basket down on the counter and sighs.

'You know he didn't mean it like that, love,' she says.

'Yes he did.'

'He didn't. He's just old school, your father. You know that. It's a generational thing.'

'No, it's an asshole thing.'

'Hey, don't call your father an asshole.' She says it half-heartedly though.

'Sorry.'

'He loves you, really he does.'

'He's got a funny way of showing it.'

'You don't need to tell me,' she mutters. 'Aren't you working today? You better get your skates on or you'll be late.'

Shit, I check my watch. I was so busy trying to avoid my father I let time get away on me. Being late wasn't exactly a good look, especially not with what I had planned today.

‘Yeah, I better get going.’ I grab a piece of bread from the cupboard and slap some Marmite on it. As I leave I call back through the door, ‘Dad says he’ll be home for tea.’

‘Great, I’ll lay out the best china and shave my legs.’

I’m fairly sure she’s being sarcastic.

After fetching my bike from the shed, I jam the piece of bread in my mouth and take off down the street. I love my bike, now. But as far as learning to ride a bike goes I was a late starter. I don’t know what it was but there was something about the whole look of the thing that scared the hell out of me, much to my father’s disgust. His method of teaching involved plonking a helmet on my head and taping my feet to the pedals with black insulation tape. Then he’d push me off and stand there yelling, ‘Pedal your feet, pedal your feet, PEDAL YOUR GODDAMN FEET, YOU IDIOT!’ I would just sit there, terrified, eventually wobbling to a stop and falling sideways to the ground. He would sigh and remove the tape, then dust off my knees and spit on the grazes to clean away the blood.

‘Let’s not tell your mother about this, eh?’ he’d say on the way home.

It was the fear of being left out that got me on a bike in the end. All my friends would boast of the freedom to go wherever they wanted, usually the local swimming pool to ogle girls, and I didn’t want to miss out. Of course most of my friends have cars now. And as much as I’d love a car of my own so I could take off to the beach whenever I feel like it instead of having to beg to borrow my parents’ car, I’m saving my

money for something I deem far more important: getting out of here. My plan is to get enough money to head back to the coast where I spent the majority of my childhood, and where I learned to surf. I still know a few people there and I'm sure someone will hook me up with a job. From there, with breathing space away from my father, I'll save even more, eventually heading to Bali where I've heard they're always looking for surf instructors.

The bike I'm riding was a gift from my mother last year for my eighteenth birthday. She was worried that my old one was more rust than metal and had nightmare visions of it disintegrating and toppling me in front of the wheels of a car. As crappy as it was, I'd still been sad to see it go. That bike had been my ticket to freedom for over seven years.

At this time of the morning there is hardly any traffic about so I make good time. The sky is grey but it doesn't feel like it's going to rain. More like it will burn off and we'll be left with a nice sunny day. I feel the familiar sense of pleasure I get whenever I am outdoors. I feel more at home outside than I ever do inside four walls. At the stables only Deborah is about. I wave hello. She ignores me as usual because I am clearly below her social circle. I park my bike behind the barn and say hello to Freckles, my favourite pony. She nuzzles my hand affectionately.

'How ya going, old girl?' I ask her, rubbing her on the soft spot between her eyes, which I know she loves so much.

Before I started at the stables my experience with all animals equine had been limited to a ride on an aged donkey at a fair

when I was four years old. According to my mother I held on to its ears and cried the whole way around the ring. She has a photo that backs up her story and likes to wheel it out on occasion when she's feeling nostalgic for my childhood, especially after a few wines.

In our last year of high school, we seniors were encouraged to volunteer our weekends for a whole term as part of an internal awards system they set up to encourage us to Strive for Excellence, and to become Well Rounded Members of Society instead of the selfish misfits they feared some of us were destined to become. While most ended up nursing kittens at the local RSPCA or playing card games with lonely elderly people, my friend Connor and I were lucky enough to get spots here at the stables. In a classic case of 'it's not what you know it's *who* you know', his mum knew the lady, Francine, who runs the place. I don't think she was particularly pleased to be lumbered with a pair of teenage boys who barely knew one end of a horse from the other, but she owed Connor's mum a favour and Connor's mum called it in.

After the term finished and we could legitimately leave, Connor did, without a backward glance, but I stayed on. To everyone's surprise, I turned out to have a natural affinity with the horses. I often knew what they needed before they did, or sensed if one was a little under the weather or out of sorts. And I liked working with them. They didn't expect too much from me, and they never judged. After graduation Francine offered me a paid job, not many hours working for a pittance really, but I jumped at the chance to earn some regular money. My

savings aren't growing as quickly as I'd like though, so I've decided to ask Francine for more hours.

'Wish me luck, girl,' I say to Freckles. She whinnies and stomps one foot, then turns her attention back to her food.

Taking a deep breath, I knock on Francine's office door.

'Come in,' she calls. Some of the staff call her Fat Francine because she's almost as wide as her desk. She's been pretty good to me though so I don't. Todd and Matt the stable boys give me shit over beers, saying she has a crush on me, but I doubt that.

When I enter she is looking pretty chuffed with herself. The bouquet of cheerfully coloured flowers with a yellow bobbing balloon gives me a clue.

'Birthday?'

She nods.

'Aw lovely,' I say.

'Guess how old I am,' she asks coyly.

I freeze, instantly on alert. I'm wary of this game. It seldom ends well, yet for some reason women still initiate it.

'No idea,' I say.

'Guess, go on,' she prompts.

I pull a few faces while I scramble to think. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say somewhere between forty and sixty.

'Happy fortieth!' I say, erring on the cautious side.

Her face falls. 'I'm thirty-eight.'

Aw shit. Which is exactly why I don't guess stuff like that.

'I was joking.' I grin manically. 'Haha. I thought you were only, like, thirty or so. Haha. Haha.'

Neither of us believes me.

‘Did you want something?’ She has turned her attention to her phone and I think maybe I should come back later. But no, I’m here. I grab my confidence by the metaphoric balls.

‘I was wondering if there was any chance of picking up a few more hours?’

It’s her turn to pull a face.

‘Please?’

She sighs. ‘I don’t know, funding is pretty tight.’

This would normally be the point where I’d apologise for breathing and back out of the room. But I need this.

‘Pretty please?’ I give her the most charming smile I can muster.

She sighs. Her chins wobble. ‘Leave it with me. I’ll crunch a few numbers and see what I can do.’

‘Thank you!’

‘I can’t promise full time,’ she warns.

‘That’s fine. I’ll take anything.’

‘All right. Come and see me on your way out at the end of the day and I’ll have a new contract for you to look over.’

‘Ah, you’re brilliant. Thanks, Francine, you won’t regret it,’ I say, beaming as I back out of the room. Her face looks unconvinced.