

The
Flat
SHARE

BETH O'LEARY

Quercus

FEBRUARY

1

Tiffy

You've got to say this for desperation: it makes you much more open-minded.

I really can see some positives in this flat. The technicolour mould on the kitchen wall will scrub off, at least in the short term. The filthy mattress can be replaced fairly cheaply. And you could definitely make the argument that the mushrooms growing behind the toilet are introducing a fresh, outdoorsy feel to the place.

Gerty and Mo, however, are not desperate, and they are not trying to be positive. I would describe their expressions as 'aghast'.

'You can't live here.'

That's Gerty. She's standing with her heeled boots together and her elbows tucked in tightly, as though occupying as little space as possible in protest at being here at all. Her hair is pulled back in a low bun, already pinned so she can easily slip on the barrister's wig she wears for court. Her expression would be comical if it weren't my actual life we are discussing here.

'There must be somewhere else within budget, Tiff,' Mo says worriedly, bobbing up from where he was examining the boiler cupboard. He looks even more dishevelled than usual, helped by the cobweb now hanging from his beard. 'This is even worse than the one we viewed last night.'

I look around for the estate agent; he's thankfully well out of earshot, smoking on the 'balcony' (the sagging roof of the neighbour's garage, definitely not designed for walking on).

'I'm not looking around another one of these hellholes,' Gerty says, glancing at her watch. It's 8 a.m. – she'll need to be at Southwark Crown Court for nine. 'There must be another option.'

'Surely we can fit her in at ours?' Mo suggests, for about the fifth time since Saturday.

'Honestly, would you stop with that?' Gerty snaps. 'That is not a long-term solution. And she'd have to sleep standing up to even fit anywhere.' She gives me an exasperated look. 'Couldn't you have been shorter? We could have put you under the dining table if you were less than five nine.'

I make an apologetic face, but really I'd prefer to stay here than on the floor of the tiny, eye-wateringly expensive flat Mo and Gerty jointly invested in last month. They've never lived together before, even when we were at university. I'm concerned that it may well be the death of their friendship. Mo is messy, absent-minded and has this uncanny ability to take up an enormous amount of room despite being relatively small. Gerty, on the other hand, has spent the last three years living in a preternaturally clean flat, so perfect that it looked computer-generated. I'm not sure how the two lifestyles will overlay without West London imploding.

The main problem, though, is if I'm crashing on someone's floor I can just as easily go back to Justin's place. And, as of 11 p.m. Thursday, I have officially decided that I cannot be allowed that option any longer. I need to move forward, and I need to commit to somewhere so I can't go back.

Mo rubs his forehead, sinking down into the grimy leather sofa. 'Tiff, I could lend you some . . .'

'I don't want you to lend me any money,' I say, more sharply than

I mean to. 'Look, I *really* need to get this sorted this week. It's this place or the flatshare.'

'The bedshare, you mean,' Gerty says. 'Can I ask why it has to be *now*? Not that I'm not delighted. Just that last I checked you were sitting tight in that flat waiting for the next time he-who-must-not-be-named deigned to drop by.'

I wince, surprised. Not at the sentiment – Mo and Gerty never liked Justin, and I know they hate that I'm still living at his place, even though he's hardly ever there. It's just unusual to hear Gerty bring him up directly. After the final peace-making dinner with the four of us ended in a furious row, I gave up on trying to make everyone get along and just stopped talking to Gerty and Mo about him altogether. Old habits die hard – even post break-up we've all dodged around discussing him.

'And why does it have to be *so* cheap?' Gerty goes on, ignoring the warning look from Mo. 'I know you're paid a pittance, but, really, Tiffy, four hundred a month is impossible in London. Have you actually thought about all this? Properly?'

I swallow. I can feel Mo watching me carefully. That's the trouble with having a counsellor as a friend: Mo is basically an accredited mind-reader, and he never seems to switch his superpowers off. 'Tiff?' he says gently.

Oh, bloody hell, I'll just have to show them. There's nothing else for it. Quickly and all at once, that's the best way – like pulling off a plaster, or getting into cold water, or telling my mother I broke something ornamental from the living-room dresser.

I reach for my phone and pull up the Facebook message.

Tiffy,

I'm really disappointed in how you acted last night. You were completely out of line. It's my flat, Tiffy – I can come by whenever I like, with whoever I like.

I would have expected you to be more grateful for me letting you stay. I know us breaking up has been hard on you – I know you're not ready to leave. But if you think that means you can start trying to 'lay down some rules' then it's time you paid me for the past three months of rent. And you're going to need to pay full rent going forwards too. Patricia says you're taking advantage of me, living in my place pretty much for free, and even though I've always stood up for you with her, after yesterday's performance I can't help thinking she might be right.

Justin xx

My stomach twists when I reread that line, *you're taking advantage of me*, because I never intended to do that. I just didn't know that when he left he really meant it this time.

Mo finishes reading first. 'He "popped in" again on Thursday? With Patricia?'

I look away. 'He has a point. He's been really good to let me stay there this long.'

'Funny,' Gerty says darkly, 'I've always had the distinct impression he likes keeping you there.'

She makes it sound weird, but I sort of feel the same way. When I'm still in Justin's flat, it isn't really over. I mean, all the other times, he's come back eventually. But . . . then I met Patricia on Thursday. The real-life, extremely attractive, actually quite lovely woman Justin has left me for. There's never been another woman before.

Mo reaches for my hand; Gerty takes the other. We stay like this, ignoring the estate agent smoking outside the window, and I let myself cry for a moment, just one fat tear down each cheek.

'So, anyway,' I say brightly, withdrawing my hands to wipe my eyes, 'I need to move out. Now. Even if I wanted to stay and risk him bringing Patricia back again, I can't afford the rent, and I owe Justin a ton of money, and I really don't want to borrow from anyone, I'm

kind of sick of not paying for things myself, to be honest, so . . . yes. It's this or the flatshare.'

Mo and Gerty exchange a look. Gerty closes her eyes in pained resignation.

'Well, you clearly cannot live here.' She opens her eyes and holds out a hand. 'Show me that advert again.'

I hand her my phone, flicking from Justin's message to the Gumtree ad for the flatshare.

Double bedroom in sunny one-bed Stockwell flat, rent £350 per month including bills. Available immediately, for six months minimum.

Flat (and room/bed) is to share with twenty-seven-year-old palliative care nurse who works nights and is away weekends. Only ever in the flat 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday. All yours the rest of the time! Perfect for someone with 9 to 5 job.

To view, contact L. Twomey – details below.

It's not just sharing a flat, Tiff, it's sharing a bed. Sharing a bed is *odd*,' Mo says worriedly.

'What if this L. Twomey is a man?' Gerty asks.

I'm prepared for this one. 'It doesn't matter,' I say calmly. 'It's not like we'd ever be in the bed at the same time – or the flat, even.'

This is uncomfortably close to what I said when justifying staying at Justin's place last month, but never mind.

'You'd be sleeping with him, Tiffany!' Gerty says. 'Everyone knows the first rule of flatsharing is don't sleep with your flatmate.'

'I don't think this sort of arrangement is what people are referring to,' I tell her wryly. 'You see, Gerty, sometimes when people say "sleeping together", what they really mean is—'

Gerty gives me a long, level look. 'Yes, thank you, Tiffany.'

Mo's sniggering stops abruptly when Gerty turns her glare on him. 'I'd say the first rule of flatsharing is to make sure you get on with

the person before you move in,' he says, cannily redirecting the glare to me again. 'Especially in these circumstances.'

'Obviously I'll meet this L. Twomey person first. If we don't get on, I won't take it.'

After a moment Mo gives me a nod and squeezes my shoulder. We all descend into the kind of silence that comes after you've talked about something difficult – half grateful for it being over, half relieved to have managed it at all.

'Fine,' Gerty says. 'Fine. Do what you need to do. It's got to be better than living in this kind of squalor.' She marches out of the flat, turning at the last moment to address the estate agent as he steps through from the balcony. 'And you,' she tells him loudly, 'are a curse upon society.'

He blinks as she slams the front door. There is a long, awkward pause.

He stubs out his cigarette. 'You interested, then?' he asks me.

I get to work early and sink down in my chair. My desk is the closest thing to home at the moment. It's a haven of half-crafted objects, things that have proven too heavy to take back on the bus, and pot plants arranged in such a way that I can see people approaching before they can tell whether I'm at my desk. My pot-plant wall is widely regarded among the other junior staff as an inspiring example of interior design. (Really it's just about choosing plants the same colour as your hair – in my case, red – and ducking/running away when you catch sight of anyone moving purposefully.)

My first job of the day is to meet Katherin, one of my favourite authors. Katherin writes books about knitting and crochet. It's a niche audience that buys them, but that's the story of Butterfingers Press – we love a niche audience. We specialise in crafting and DIY books. Tie-dye bedsheets, design your own dresses, crochet yourself a lampshade, make all your furniture out of ladders . . . That sort of thing.

I love working here. This is the only possible explanation for the fact that I have been Assistant Editor for three and a half years, earning below the London living wage, and have made no attempt to rectify the situation by, say, applying for a job at a publishing house that actually makes money. Gerty likes to tell me that I lack ambition, but it really isn't that. I just love this stuff. As a child, I spent my days reading, or tinkering with my toys until they suited me better: dip-dyeing Barbie's hair, pimping up my JCB truck. And now I read and craft for a living.

Well, not really a living, as such. But a bit of money. Just about enough to pay tax.

'I'm telling you, Tiffy, crochet is the next colouring books,' Katherin tells me, once she's settled herself down in our best meeting room and talked me through the plan for her next book. I examine the finger she's wagging in my direction. She has about fifty rings on each hand, but I've yet to discern whether any of them are wedding or engagement rings (I imagine that if Katherin has any, she'll have more than one).

Katherin is just on the acceptable side of eccentric: she has a straw-blonde plait, one of those tans that somehow ages well, and endless stories of breaking into places in the 1960s and peeing on things. She was a real rebel once. She refuses to wear a bra even to this day, when bras have become quite comfortable and women have mostly given up on fighting the power because Beyoncé is doing it for us.

'That'd be good,' I say. 'Maybe we could add a strapline with the word "mindful" in it. It *is* quite mindful, isn't it? Or mindless?'

Katherin laughs, tipping her head back. 'Ah, Tiffy. Your job's ridiculous.' She pats my hand affectionately and then reaches for her handbag. 'You see that Martin boy,' she says, 'you tell him I'll only do that cruise day class if I have a glamorous young assistant.'

I groan. I know where this is going. Katherin likes to drag me along to these things – for any class she needs a live model to show how

to measure as you go when you're designing an outfit, apparently, and I once made the fatal error of offering myself up for the job when she couldn't find anyone. Now I am her go-to choice. PR is so desperate to get Katherin into these sorts of events that they've started begging me too.

'This is too far, Katherin. I'm not going on a cruise with you.'

'But it's free! People pay thousands for those, Tiffany!'

'You're only joining them for the Isle of Wight loop,' I remind her. Martin has already briefed me on this one. 'And it's on a weekend. I don't work weekends.'

'It's not work,' Katherin insists, gathering her notes and packing them into her handbag in an entirely random order. 'It's a lovely Saturday sailing trip with one of your friends.' She pauses. 'Me,' she clarifies. 'We're friends, aren't we?'

'I am your editor!' I say, bundling her out of the meeting room.

'Think about it, Tiffany!' she calls over her shoulder, unperturbed. She catches sight of Martin, who is already making a beeline for her from over by the printers. 'I'm not doing it unless she is, Martin, my boy! She's the one you need to talk to!'

And then she's gone, the grubby glass doors of our office swinging behind her.

Martin turns on me. 'I like your shoes,' he says, with a charming smile. I shudder. I can't stand Martin from PR. He says things like 'let's action that' in meetings, and clicks his fingers at Ruby, who is a Marketing Exec, but who Martin seems to think is his personal assistant. He's only twenty-three, but has decided it will further his merciless pursuit of seniority if he can seem older than he is, so he always puts on this awful jocular voice and tries to talk to our MD about golf.

The shoes *are* excellent, though. They're purple Doc Marten-style boots, with white lilies painted on them, and they took me most of

Saturday. My crafting and customising has really upped since Justin left me. 'Thanks, Martin,' I say, already attempting to sidle back to the security of my desk.

'Leela mentioned that you're looking for somewhere to live,' Martin says.

I hesitate. I'm not sure where this is going. I sense nowhere good.

'Me and Hana' – a woman in Marketing who always sneers at my fashion sense – 'have a spare room. You might have seen on Facebook, but I thought maybe I should bring it up, you know, IRL. It's a single bed, but, well, I guess that won't be a problem for you these days. As we're friends, Hana and I decided we could offer it for five hundred a month, plus bills.'

'That's so kind of you!' I say. 'But I've actually *just* found somewhere.' Well, I sort of have. Nearly. Oh, God, if L. Twomey won't have me, will I have to live with Martin and Hana? I mean, I already spend every working day with them, and frankly that is plenty of Martin-and-Hana time for me. I'm not sure my (already shaky) resolve to leave Justin's place can withstand the idea of Martin chasing me for rent payments and Hana seeing me in my porridge-stained *Adventure Time* pyjamas every morning.

'Oh. Right, well. We'll have to find someone else, then.' Martin's expression turns cunning. He has smelled guilt. 'You could make it up to me by going with Katherin to that—'

'No.'

He gives an exaggerated sigh. 'God, Tiffany. It's a free cruise! Don't you go on cruises all the time?'

I *used* to go on cruises all the time, when my wonderful and now ex-boyfriend used to take me on them. We'd sail from Caribbean island to Caribbean island in a sunny haze of romantic bliss. We'd explore European cities and then head back to the boat for incredible sex in our tiny little bunk. We'd stuff ourselves at the all-you-can-eat

buffet and then lie out on the deck watching the gulls circle above us as we talked idly of our future children.

‘Gone off them,’ I say, reaching for the phone. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to make a call.’