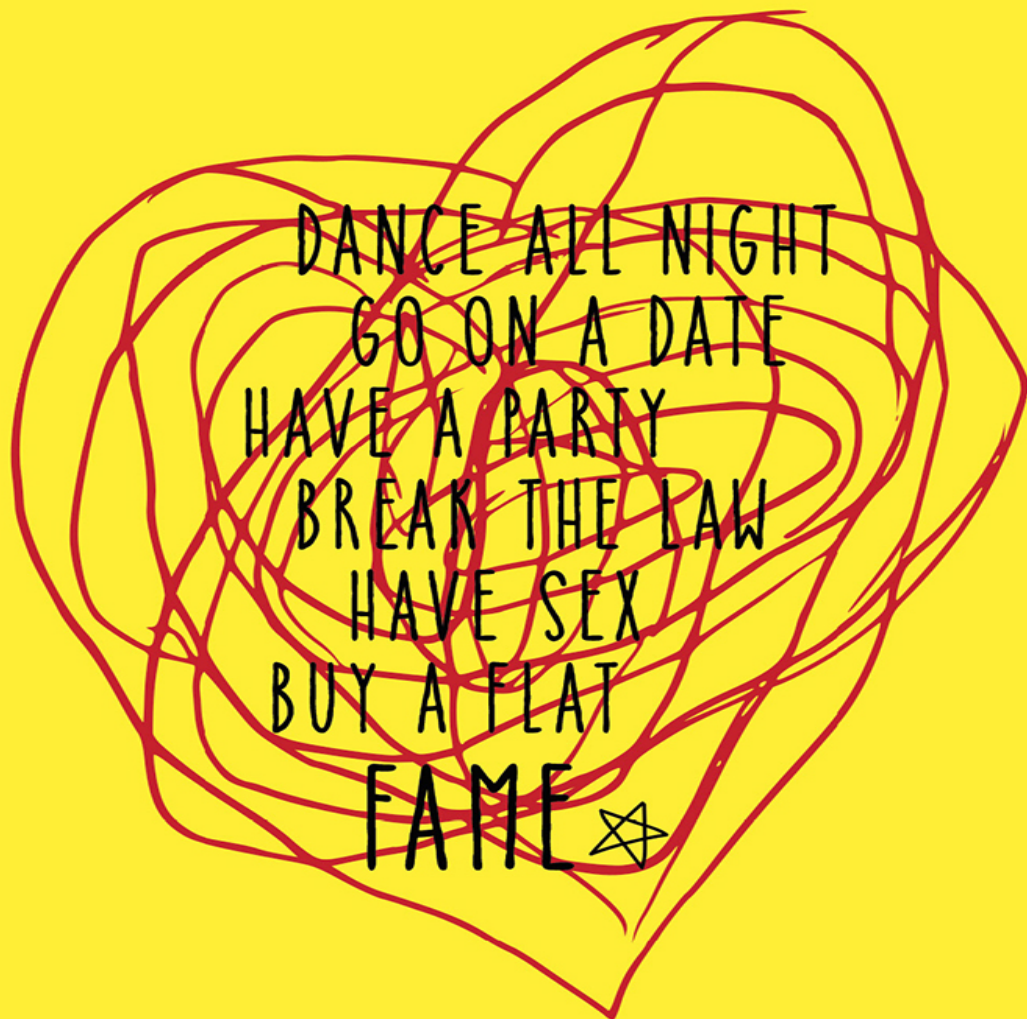


BEFORE I DIE

'EXTRAORDINARY'

SUNDAY TIMES



JENNY DOWNHAM

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About the Book

It's really going to happen. They said it would, but this is quicker than anyone thought.

Everyone has to die. We all know it.

With only a few months of life left, sixteen-year-old Tessa knows it better than most.

She's made a list though - ten things she wants to do before she dies. Number one is sex. Starting tonight.

But getting what you want isn't easy. And getting what you want doesn't always give you what you need. And sometimes the most unexpected things become important.

Uplifting, life-affirming, joyous - this extraordinary novel celebrates what it is to be alive by confronting what it's really like to die.

JENNY DOWNHAM
Before I Die

RHCP DIGITAL

For Louis and Archie, with love

One

I WISH I had a boyfriend. I wish he lived in the wardrobe on a coat hanger. Whenever I wanted, I could get him out and he'd look at me the way boys do in films, as if I'm beautiful. He wouldn't speak much, but he'd be breathing hard as he took off his leather jacket and unbuckled his jeans. He'd wear white pants and he'd be so gorgeous I'd almost faint. He'd take my clothes off too. He'd whisper, 'Tessa, I love you. I really bloody love you. You're beautiful' - exactly those words - as he undressed me.

I sit up and switch on the bedside light. There's a pen, but no paper, so on the wall behind me I write, *I want to feel the weight of a boy on top of me*. Then I lie back down and look out at the sky. It's gone a funny colour - red and charcoal all at once, like the day is bleeding out.

I can smell sausages. Saturday night is always sausages. There'll be mash and cabbage and onion gravy too. Dad'll have the lottery ticket and Cal will have chosen the numbers and they'll sit in front of the TV and eat dinner from trays on their laps. They'll watch *The X Factor*, then they'll watch *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* After that, Cal will have a bath and go to bed and Dad'll drink beer and smoke until it's late enough for him to sleep.

He came up to see me earlier. He walked over to the window and opened the curtains. 'Look at that!' he said as light flooded the room. There was the afternoon, the tops of

the trees, the sky. He stood silhouetted against the window, his hands on his hips. He looked like a Power Ranger.

'If you won't talk about it, how can I help you?' he said, and he came over and sat on the edge of my bed. I held my breath. If you do it for long enough, white lights dance in front of your eyes. He reached over and stroked my head, his fingers gently massaging my scalp.

'Breathe, Tessa,' he whispered.

Instead, I grabbed my hat from the bedside table and yanked it on right over my eyes. He went away then.

Now he's downstairs frying sausages. I can hear the fat spitting, the slosh of gravy in the pan. I'm not sure I should be able to hear that from all the way upstairs, but nothing surprises me any more. I can hear Cal unzipping his coat now, back from buying mustard. Ten minutes ago he was given a pound and told, 'Don't talk to anyone weird.' While he was gone, Dad stood on the back step and smoked a fag. I could hear the whisper of leaves hitting the grass at his feet. Autumn invading.

'Hang your coat up and go and see if Tess wants anything,' Dad says. 'There's plenty of blackberries. Make them sound interesting.'

Cal has his trainers on; the air in the soles sighs as he leaps up the stairs and through my bedroom door. I pretend to be asleep, which doesn't stop him. He leans right over and whispers, 'I don't care even if you never speak to me again.' I open one eye and find two blue ones. 'Knew you were faking,' he says, and he grins wide and lovely. 'Dad says, do you want blackberries?'

'No.'

'What shall I tell him?'

'Tell him I want a baby elephant.'

He laughs. 'I'm gonna miss you,' he says, and he leaves me with an open door and the draught from the stairs.

Two

ZOEY DOESN'T EVEN knock, just comes in and plonks herself down on the end of the bed. She looks at me strangely, as if she hadn't expected to find me here.

'What're you doing?' she says.

'Why?'

'Don't you go downstairs any more?'

'Did my dad phone you up?'

'Are you in pain?'

'No.'

She gives me a suspicious look, then stands up and takes off her coat. She's wearing a very short red dress. It matches the handbag she's dumped on my floor.

'Are you going out?' I ask her. 'Have you got a date?'

She shrugs, goes over to the window and looks down at the garden. She circles a finger on the glass, then she says, 'Maybe you should try and believe in God.'

'Should I?'

'Yeah, maybe we all should. The whole human race.'

'I don't think so. I think he might be dead.'

She turns round to look at me. Her face is pale, like winter. Behind her shoulder, an aeroplane winks its way across the sky.

She says, 'What's that you've written on the wall?'

I don't know why I let her read it. I guess I want something to happen. It's in black ink. With Zoey looking,

all the words writhe like spiders. She reads it over and over. I hate it how sorry she can be for me.

She speaks very softly. 'It's not exactly Disneyland, is it?'

'Did I say it was?'

'I thought that was the idea.'

'Not mine.'

'I think your dad's expecting you to ask for a pony, not a boyfriend.'

It's amazing, the sound of us laughing. Even though it hurts, I love it. Laughing with Zoey is absolutely one of my favourite things, because I know we've both got the same stupid pictures in our heads. She only has to say, 'Maybe a stud farm might be the answer,' and we're both in hysterics.

Zoey says, 'Are you crying?'

I'm not sure. I think I am. I sound like those women on the telly when their entire family gets wiped out. I sound like an animal gnawing its own foot off. Everything just floods in all at once - like how my fingers are just bones and my skin is practically see-through. Inside my left lung I can feel cells multiplying, stacking up, like ash slowly filling a vase. Soon I won't be able to breathe.

'It's OK if you're afraid,' Zoey says.

'It's not.'

'Of course it is. Whatever you feel is fine.'

'Imagine it, Zoey - being terrified all the time.'

'I can.'

But she can't. How can she possibly, when she has her whole life left? I hide under my hat again, just for a bit, because I'm going to miss breathing. And talking. And windows. I'm going to miss cake. And fish. I like fish. I like their little mouths going, open, shut, open.

And where I'm going, you can't take anything with you.

Zoey watches me wipe my eyes with the corner of the duvet.

'Do it with me,' I say.

She looks startled. 'Do what?'

'It's on bits of paper everywhere. I'll write it out properly and you can make me do it.'

'Make you do what? The thing you wrote on the wall?'

'Other stuff too, but the boy thing first. You've had sex loads of times, Zoey, and I've never even been kissed.'

I watch my words fall into her. They land somewhere very deep.

'Not loads of times,' she says eventually.

'Please, Zoey. Even if I beg you not to, even if I'm horrible to you, you must make me do it. I've got a whole long list of things I want to do.'

When she says, 'OK,' she makes it sound easy, as if I only asked her to visit me more often.

'You mean it?'

'I said so, didn't I?'

I wonder if she knows what she's letting herself in for.

I sit up in bed and watch her fiddle about in the back of my wardrobe. I think she's got a plan. That's what's good about Zoey. She'd better hurry up though, because I'm starting to think of things like carrots. And air. And ducks. And pear trees. Velvet and silk. Lakes. I'm going to miss ice. And the sofa. And the lounge. And the way Cal loves magic tricks. And white things - milk, snow, swans.

From the back of the wardrobe, Zoey pulls out the wrap-dress Dad bought me last month. It's still got the price on.

'I'll wear this,' she says. 'You can wear mine.' She starts to unbutton her dress.

'Are you taking me out?'

'It's Saturday night, Tess. Ever heard of it?'

Of course. Of course I have.

I haven't been vertical for hours. It makes me feel a bit strange, sort of empty and ethereal. Zoey stands in her underwear and helps me put on the red dress. It smells of her. The material is soft and clings to me.

'Why do you want me to wear this?'

'It's good to feel like you're somebody else sometimes.'

'Someone like you?'

She considers this. 'Maybe,' she says. 'Maybe someone like me.'

When I look at myself in the mirror, it's great how different I look - big-eyed and dangerous. It's exciting, as if anything is possible. Even my hair looks good, dramatically shaved rather than only just growing. We look at ourselves, side by side, then she steers me away from the mirror and makes me sit down on the bed. She brings my make-up basket from the dressing table and sits next to me. I concentrate on her face as she smears foundation onto her finger and dabs at my cheeks. She's very pale and very blonde and her acne makes her look kind of savage. I've never had a spot in my life. It's the luck of the draw.

She lines my lips and fills in the space with lipstick. She finds some mascara and tells me to look right at her. I try to imagine what it might be like to be her. I often do this, but I can never really get my head round it. When she makes me stand up in front of the mirror again, I glitter. A little like her.

'Where do you want to go?' she says.

There are loads of places. The pub. A club. A party. I want a big dark room you can barely move in, with bodies grinding close together. I want to hear a thousand songs played incredibly loud. I want to dance so fast that my hair grows long enough to trample on. I want my voice to be thunderous above the throb of bass. I want to get so hot that I have to crunch ice in my mouth.

'Let's go dancing,' I say. 'Let's go and find some boys to have sex with.'

'All right.' Zoey picks up her handbag and leads me from the bedroom.

Dad comes out of the lounge and halfway up the stairs. He pretends he was going to the loo, and acts all surprised to see us.

'You're up!' he says. 'It's a miracle!' And he nods grudging respect at Zoey. 'How did you manage it?'

Zoey smiles at the floor. 'She just needed a little incentive.'

'Which is?'

I lean on one hip and look him right in the eye. 'Zoey's taking me pole dancing.'

'Funny,' he says.

'No, really.'

He shakes his head, runs a hand in circles over his belly. I feel sorry for him, because he doesn't know what to do.

'OK,' I say. 'We're going clubbing.'

He looks at his watch as if that'll tell him something new.

'I'll look after her,' Zoey says. She sounds so sweet and wholesome I almost believe her.

'No,' he says. 'She needs to rest. A club will be smoky and loud.'

'If she needs to rest, why did you phone me?'

'I wanted you to talk to her, not take her away!'

'Don't worry,' she laughs. 'I'll bring her back.'

I can feel all the happiness sliding out of me because I know Dad's right. I'd have to sleep for a week if I went clubbing. If I use up too much energy, I always pay for it later.

'It's OK,' I say. 'It doesn't matter.'

Zoey grabs my arm and pulls me behind her down the stairs. 'I've got my mum's car,' she says. 'I'll bring her home by three.'

My dad tells her no, it's too late; he tells her to bring me back by midnight. He says it several times as Zoey gets my coat from the closet in the hall. As we go through the front door, I call goodbye, but he doesn't answer. Zoey shuts the door behind us.

'Midnight's OK,' I tell her.

She turns to me on the step. 'Listen, girl, if you're going to do this properly, you're going to have to learn to break the rules.'

'I don't mind being back by midnight. He'll only worry.'

'Let him - it doesn't matter. There are no consequences for someone like you!'

I've never thought about it like that before.

Three

OF COURSE WE get into the club. There are never enough girls to go round on a Saturday night and Zoey's got a great body. The bouncers drool over her as they wave us to the front of the queue. She does a little shimmy for them as we go through the door and their eyes follow us across the lobby to the cloakroom. 'Have a lovely evening, ladies!' they call. We don't have to pay. We're absolutely in charge.

After checking in our coats, we go to the bar and get two Cokes. Zoey adds rum to hers from the hip flask she keeps in her bag. All the students at her college do this, she says, because it makes going out cheaper. Not drinking is one prohibition I'm going to stick to, because it reminds me of radiotherapy. I once got wasted between treatments on a mixture of stuff from Dad's drinks cabinet, and now the two are stuck together in my head. Alcohol and the taste of total body irradiation.

We lean on the bar to survey the place. It's packed already, the dance floor hot with bodies. Lights chase across breasts, arses, the ceiling.

Zoey says, 'I've got condoms, by the way. They're in my bag when you need them.' She touches my hand. 'You all right?'

'Yeah.'

'Not freaking out?'

'No.'

A whole room dizzy with Saturday night is exactly what I wanted. I've begun my list and Zoey's doing it with me. Tonight I'm going to cross off number one - sex. And I'm not going to die until all ten are done.

'Look,' Zoey says. 'What about him?' She's pointing to a boy. He's a good dancer, moving with his eyes shut, as if he's the only one here, as if he doesn't need anything other than the music. 'He comes every week. Don't know how he gets away with smoking dope in here. Cute, isn't he?'

'I don't want a druggie.'

Zoey frowns at me. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'If he's out of his head, he won't remember me. I don't want anyone pissed either.'

Zoey slaps her drink down on the bar. 'I hope you're not expecting to fall in love. Don't tell me that's on your list.'

'Not really.'

'Good, because I hate to remind you, but time isn't on your side. Now let's get on with it!'

She pulls me with her towards the dance floor. We get close enough for Stoner Boy to notice us, and then we dance.

And it's all right. It's like being in a tribe, all of us moving and breathing at the same pace. People are looking, checking each other out. No one can take it away. To be here dancing on this Saturday night, dragging the eyes of a boy towards me in Zoey's red dress. Some girls never have this. Not even this much.

I know what'll happen next because I've had plenty of time for reading and I know all the plots. Stoner Boy will come closer to check us out. Zoey won't look at him, but I will. I'll gaze for a second too long and he'll lean towards me and ask me my name. 'Tessa,' I'll say, and he'll repeat it - the hard 'T', the sibilance of that double 's', the hopeful 'a'. I'll nod to let him know he got it right, that I'm pleased with how sweet and new it sounds on his tongue. Then he'll

hold out both arms, palms up, as if saying, *I give in, what can I do with all that beauty?* I'll smile coyly and look at the floor. This tells him he can make a move, that I won't bite, that I know the game. He'll wrap me in his arms then and we'll dance together, my head against his chest, listening to his heart - a stranger's heart.

But that's not what happens. I forgot three things. I forgot that books aren't real. I also forgot that I don't have time for flirting. Zoey remembers. She's the third thing I forgot. And she's moving in.

'This is my friend,' she shouts to Stoner Boy above the music. 'Her name's Tessa. I'm sure she'd like a drag on that joint of yours.'

He smiles, passes it over, takes us both in, his gaze lingering on the length of Zoey's hair.

'It's pure grass,' Zoey whispers. Whatever it is, it's thick and pungent at the back of my throat. It makes me cough, makes me dizzy. I pass it to Zoey, who inhales deeply, then passes it back to him.

The three of us are joined now, moving together as the bass pounds up through our feet and into our blood. Kaleidoscopic images flicker from the video screens on the walls. The joint goes round again.

I don't know how much time goes by. Hours maybe. Minutes. I know I mustn't stop and that's all I know. If I keep dancing, the dark corners of the room won't creep any nearer, and the silence between tracks won't get any louder. If I keep dancing, I'll see ships on the sea again, taste cockles and whelks and hear the creak snow makes when you're the first one to stand on it.

At some point Zoey passes over a fresh joint. 'Glad you came?' she mouths.

I pause to inhale, stupidly stand still a second too long, forgetting to move. And now the spell is broken. I try to claw back some enthusiasm, but I feel as if a vulture is perched on my chest. Zoey, Stoner and all the other

dancers are far away and unreal, like a TV programme. I don't expect to be included any more.

'Back in a minute,' I tell Zoey.

In the quiet of the toilet, I sit on the bowl and contemplate my knees. If I gather up this little red dress just a bit further, I can see my stomach. I still have red patches on my stomach. And on my thighs. My skin is as dry as a lizard's, however much cream I smooth in. On the inside of my arms are the ghosts of needle marks.

I finish peeing, wipe myself and pull the dress back down. When I leave the cubicle, Zoey's waiting by the hand dryer. I didn't hear her come in. Her eyes are darker than before. I wash my hands very slowly. I know she's watching me.

'He's got a friend,' she says. 'His friend's cuter, but you can have him, since it's your special night. They're called Scott and Jake and we're going back to their place.'

I hold onto the edge of the sink and look at my face in the mirror. My eyes seem unfamiliar.

'One of the Tweenies is called Jake,' I say.

'Look,' Zoey says, pissed off now, 'do you want to have sex or not?'

A girl at the sink next to mine shoots me a glance. I want to tell her that I'm not what she thinks. I'm very nice really, she'd probably like me. But there's not time.

Zoey drags me out of the toilet and back towards the bar. 'There they are. That one's yours.'

The boy she points to has his hands flat against his groin, his thumbs looped through his belt. He looks like a cowboy with faraway eyes. He doesn't see us coming, so I dig my heels in.

'I can't do it!'

'You can! Live fast, die young, have a good-looking corpse!'

'No, Zoey!'

My face feels hot. I wonder if there's a way of getting air in here. Where's the door we came in from?

She scowls at me. 'You asked me to make you do this! What am I supposed to do now?'

'Nothing. You don't have to do anything.'

'You're pathetic!' She shakes her head at me, stalks off across the dance floor and out to the foyer. I scurry after her and watch her hand in the ticket for my coat.

'What are you doing?'

'Getting your coat. I'll find you a cab, so you can piss off home.'

'You can't go back to their house on your own, Zoey!'

'Watch me.'

She pushes open the door and surveys the street. It's quiet out here now the queue has gone, and there aren't any cabs. Along the pavement some pigeons peck at a takeaway chicken box.

'Please, Zoey, I'm tired. Can't you drive me home?'

She shrugs. 'You're always tired.'

'Stop being so horrible!'

'Stop being so boring!'

'I don't want to go back to some strange boys' house. Anything could happen.'

'Good. I hope it does, because precisely zero is going to happen otherwise.'

I stand awkwardly, suddenly afraid. 'I want it to be perfect, Zoey. If I have sex with a boy I don't even know, what does that make me? A slag?'

She turns on me, her eyes glittering. 'No, it makes you alive. If you get in a cab and go home to Daddy, what does that make you?'

I imagine climbing into bed, breathing the dead air of my room all night, waking up to the morning and nothing being any different.

Her smile is back. 'Come on,' she says. 'You can tick the first thing off that bloody list of yours. I know you want to.'

Her smile's contagious. 'Say yes, Tessa. Come on, say yes!'

'Yes.'

'Hurrah!' She grabs my hand, steers me back to the door of the club. 'Now text your dad and say you're staying at mine, and let's get a move on.'

Four

'DON'T YOU LIKE beer?' Jake says.

He's leaning against the sink in his kitchen and I'm standing too close to him. I'm doing it on purpose.

'I just fancied some tea.'

He shrugs, chinks his beer bottle against my cup, and tips his head back to swig. I watch his throat as he swallows, notice a small pale scar under his chin, a thin ribbon from some long ago accident. He wipes his mouth with his sleeve, sees me staring.

'You OK?' he asks.

'Yeah. You?'

'Yeah.'

'Good.'

He smiles at me. He has a nice smile. I'm glad. It would be so much harder if he was ugly.

Half an hour ago Jake and his mate Stoner Boy grinned at each other as they led me and Zoey into their house. Those grins said they'd scored. Zoey told them not to make any assumptions, but still we walked into their lounge and she let Stoner take her coat. She laughed at his jokes, accepted the joints he made for her and got steadily wrecked.

I can see her through the door. They've put music on, some mellow jazz number. They've turned off the lights to dance, moving together in slow, stoned circles on the

carpet. Zoey has one hand in the air holding a joint, the other tucked into Stoner's belt at the back of his trousers. He has both arms wrapped around her so that they appear to be holding each other up.

I feel suddenly sensible, drinking tea in the kitchen, and realize I need to get on with my plan. This is about me, after all.

I gulp my tea down, put the cup on the draining board and move even closer to Jake. The tips of our shoes touch.

'Kiss me,' I say, which sounds ridiculous as soon as I say it, but Jake doesn't seem to mind. He puts down his beer and leans towards me.

We kiss quite gently, our lips just brushing, only a hint of breath from him to me. I've always known I'd be good at kissing. I've read all the magazines, the ones that tell you about nose bumping and excess saliva and where to put your hands. I didn't know it would feel like this though, the soft scour of his chin on mine, his hands gently searching my back, his tongue running along my lips and into my mouth.

We kiss for minutes, pressing our bodies closer, leaning in to each other. It's such a relief to be with someone who doesn't know me at all. My hands are brave, dipping into the curve where his spine ends and stroking him there. How healthy he feels, how solid.

I open my eyes to see if he's enjoying it, but I'm drawn instead to the window behind him, to the trees surrounded by night out there. Little black twigs tap at the glass like fingers. I snap my eyes shut and grind myself closer to him. I can feel just how hard he wants me through my little red dress. He makes a small moaning noise at the back of his throat.

'Let's go upstairs,' he says.

He tries to move me towards the door, but I put my hand flat against his chest to keep him at bay while I think.

'Come on,' he says. 'You want to, don't you?'

I can feel his heart pulsing through my fingers. He smiles down at me, and I do want to, don't I? Isn't this why I'm here?

'OK.'

His hand is hot as he laces our fingers together and leads me through the lounge to the stairs. Zoey's kissing Stoner Boy. She has his back against the wall and her leg between his. When we walk past, they hear us and they both turn round. They look dishevelled and hot. Zoey wiggles her tongue at me. It glistens like a fish in a cave.

I let go of Jake to get Zoey's bag from the sofa. I rummage around in it, aware of everyone's eyes on me, the slow grin on Stoner's face. Jake's leaning against the doorframe, waiting. Is he giving the thumbs-up? I can't look. I can't find the condoms either, don't even know if it's a box or a packet, or really what they look like. In my embarrassment, I decide to take the entire bag upstairs. If Zoey needs a condom, she'll just have to come and get it.

'Let's go,' I say.

I follow Jake up the stairs, concentrate on the sway of his hips to keep myself cheerful. I feel a bit strange, dizzy and slightly nauseous. I didn't think that walking up the stairs behind a guy would remind me of hospital corridors. Maybe I'm just tired. I try to remember the rules about feeling sick - whenever possible get lots of fresh air, open a window or go outside if you can. Get good at distraction therapy - do something, anything, to keep your mind off it.

'In here,' he says.

His bedroom's nothing special - a small room with a desk, a computer, scattered books on the floor, a chair and a single bed. On the walls are a few black and white posters - jazz musicians mostly.

He looks at me looking at his room. 'You can put your bag down,' he says.

He picks up dirty laundry from the bed and chucks it on the floor, straightens the duvet, sits down and pats the

space next to him.

I don't move. Because if I sit down on that bed, then I need the lights off.

'Could you light that candle?' I say.

He opens a drawer, pulls out matches and gets up to light the candle on the desk. He turns off the main light and sits back down.

Here is a real breathing boy, looking up at me, waiting for me. This is my moment, but I can feel my chest ticking. Maybe the only way to get through this without him thinking I'm a complete idiot is to pretend to be someone else. I decide to be Zoey, and begin to undo the buttons on her dress.

He watches me do it, one button, two buttons. He runs his tongue across his lips. Three buttons.

He stands up. 'Let me do that.'

His fingers are quick. He's done this before. Another girl, a different night. I wonder where she is now. Four buttons, five, and the little red dress slides from shoulder to hip, falls to the floor and lands at my feet like a kiss. I step out of it and stand before him in just my bra and knickers.

'What's that?' He frowns at the puckered skin on my chest.

'I was ill.'

'What was wrong with you?'

I shut him up with kisses.

I smell different now I'm practically naked - musky and hot. He tastes different - of smoke and something sweet. Life maybe.

'Aren't you taking your clothes off?' I ask in my best Zoey voice.

He pulls up his T-shirt, over his face, his arms raised. For a second he can't see me, but he's exposed - his narrow chest, freckled and young, the dark shine of hair under his armpits. He chucks his T-shirt on the floor and kisses me

again. He tries to unbuckle his belt without looking, with only one hand, but can't do it. He pulls away, looking at me all the while as he fumbles at button and zip. He steps out of his trousers and stands before me in his underwear. There's a moment when maybe he's uncertain, and he hesitates, seems shy. I notice his feet, innocent as daisies in their white socks, and I want to give him something.

'I've never done this before,' I say. 'Not all the way with a guy.'

The candle gutters.

He doesn't say anything for a second, then shakes his head like he just can't believe it. 'Wow, that's amazing.'

I nod.

'Come here.'

I bury myself in his shoulder. It's comforting, as if things may be all right. He wraps one arm around me, the other creeping up my back to stroke my neck. His hand is warm. Two hours ago I didn't even know his name.

Maybe we don't have to have sex. Maybe we could just lie down and snuggle up, find sleep in each other's arms under the duvet. Maybe we'll fall in love. He'll hunt for a cure and I'll live for ever.

But no. 'Have you got condoms?' he whispers. 'I've run out.'

I reach for Zoey's bag and tip it upside down on the floor at our feet and he helps himself, puts the condom on the bedside table ready and starts to pull off his socks.

I take off my bra slowly. I've never been naked in front of a guy before. He looks at me as if he wants to eat me and is wondering where to start. I can hear my heart thumping. He has trouble with his pants, easing them over his hard-on. I pull off my knickers, find myself shivering. We're both naked. I think of Adam and Eve.

'It'll be OK,' he says, and he takes me by the hand and leads me to the bed, pulls down the duvet and we climb in. It's a boat. It's a den. It's somewhere to hide.

'You're gonna love it,' he says.

We start to kiss, slowly at first, his fingers lazily tracing the lines of my bones. I like it - how gentle we are with each other, our slowness under the candle's glow. But it doesn't last long. His kisses become deeper, his tongue thrusting quickly, like he can't get close enough. His hands are busy too now, squeezing and rubbing. Is he looking for something in particular? He keeps saying, 'Oh yeah, oh yeah,' but I don't think he's saying it to me. His eyes are closed, his mouth is full of my breast.

'Look at me,' I tell him. 'I need you to look at me.'

He leans up on one elbow. 'What?'

'I don't know what to do.'

'You're fine.' His eyes are so dark I don't recognize him. It's as if he's changed into someone else, is not even the half-stranger he was a few minutes ago. 'Everything's fine.'

And he goes back to kissing my neck, my breasts, my stomach until his face disappears from me again.

His hand works its way down too, and I don't know how to tell him not to. I move my hips away from him, but he doesn't stop. His fingers flicker between my legs, and I gasp with shock, because no one has ever done that to me before.

What's wrong with me that I don't know how to do this? I thought I'd know what to do, what would happen. But this is spiralling away from me, as if Jake's making me do it, when I'm supposed to be in charge.

I cling to him, wrap my hands round his back and pat him there, like he's a dog that I don't understand.

He eases himself up the bed and sits up.

'All right?'

I nod.

He reaches over to the table where he left the condom. I watch him put it on. He does it quickly. He's a condom expert.

'Ready?'

I nod again. It seems rude not to.

He lies down, moves my legs apart with his, presses himself closer, his weight on top of me. Soon I'll feel him inside me and I'll know what all the fuss is about. This was my idea.

I notice lots of things while the red neon numbers on his radio alarm move from 3:15 to 3:19. I notice that his shoes are on their side by the door. The door isn't shut properly. There's a strange shadow on the ceiling in the far corner that looks like a face. I think of a fat man I once saw sweating as he jogged down our street. I think of an apple. I think that a safe place to be would be under the bed, or with my head on my mother's lap.

He supports himself with his arms, moving slowly above me, his face turned to one side, his eyes tight shut. This is it. It's really happening. I'm living it now. Sex.

When it's finished, I lie under him feeling mostly silent and small. We stay like this for a bit, then he rolls off and peers at me through the dark.

'What is it?' he says. 'What's wrong?'

I can't look at him, so I move closer, bury myself deeper, hide in his arms. I know I'm making a complete fool of myself. I'm snuffling all over him like a baby, and I can't stop, it's horrible. He sweeps his hand in circles on my back, whispers 'Shush' into my ear, eventually eases me away so he can see me.

'What is it? You're not going to say you didn't want to, are you?'

I wipe my eyes with the duvet. I sit up, my feet dangling over the edge of the bed onto the carpet. I sit with my back to him, blinking at my clothes. They're unfamiliar shadows scattered on the floor.

When I was a kid, I used to ride on my dad's shoulders. I was so small he had to hold my back with both hands to stop me tipping, and yet I was so high I could splash my hands through leaves. I could never tell Jake this. It