

HYPERLOCAL COMMISSION

COMFORT STOP by Lucy Bell

My name is Serena. I am here today for both your safety and entertainment.

Welcome aboard this air-conditioned two bed flat above Jane's Accessories, Exeter, which I have not left for a *fourteen days*. Please note this is a non-smoking environment, in line with UK law and my stress-related asthma.

If you care to look out the window to your left, you will see the edifice of Exeter's 14th century cathedral, and to your right, site of worship, Mecca Bingo. Today, before the advent of a global pandemic, we were due to visit moorland village, Widecombe-on-the-Moor.

This grazing ground of wild ponies is a favourite with our more senior clientele, and is located 10 miles east of notorious prison, HMP Dartmoor -as ever in Devon, the beautiful and the psychotic go hand in hand - but as our fleet of coaches are now grounded, we will soon be approaching my sofa, complete with warm dent created by Wilf, my ex. His things were mostly boxed up, before Boris instructed us to lock down together. Indefinitely. That's Wilf, 20th century edifice and in no way a site of worship.

I will now spend 12 weeks indoors for my safety but no one's entertainment, taking all the bloody comfort stops I like. I will be wholly dependent on Wilf to get my Ventolin refills – or this virus may take me on a tour with no return leg – and the items on my shopping lists, something he finds mysteriously complicated to achieve.

How does a person confuse spam with prosciutto? A bottle of Rose Petillant I asked for. Four quid Prosecco's what I got. I suppose Wilf did always say to me, "I don't know what you want," and expect me to tell him, when I wanted him to figure it out himself.

Wilf will be taking his bike out at precisely 4 o'clock every afternoon. That's where he is now: making love to the sunlit highways and byways of Devon. He asked this morning, had I hidden his bib shorts, knee warmers and overshoes? Why? Can't bear to look at or smell them, least of all touch them.

Why did he get these? I said to try The Range for humane mouse traps, not these horrible snap traps. The mice will be having a feast on the handbag leather downstairs, since Jane locked her doors.

They keep saying on the radio about nature taking over, since the roads emptied and the planes left the sky. Families of deer are sighted bounding across the A38. Re-wilding is quite something if you live in a meadow, but a different prospect in a rodent-infested flat in a small to medium sized regional capital. The only stags we're familiar with wear penis dee-dee boppers. At least *they're* all hibernating now.

At kicking out time, it's eerily quiet, apart from the Ambulances. I listen to scratching in the skirting boards, Wilf snoring next door, and picture sizeable groups of mice doing tours through my tin cupboards, led by a mouse with a large umbrella.

"We will shortly be enjoying a comfort stop at the couscous packet behind the chick pea towers. I direct your attention to the following archeological gem: a chipped mug emblazoned with "World's Best Auntie" and a photo of Serena's baby niece. Serena tucked it here when she couldn't bear to see it anymore," but felt too guilty to bin it.

To your left, note the thrilling modern architecture of the dented kidney bean can, thrown by Serena at the wall behind Wilf's head, when her period came for the 25th time.

Please feel free to gnaw the sticky label of the Lemoncello bottle, bought back from their honeymoon in Florence, and nearly finished by Serena one frosty night on the roof,” when she looked at Wilf and quietly marveled that she could love someone so much.

Perhaps their nocturnal itinerary then proceeds under the floor boards to the back of my bathroom cabinet. They stop to nibble on a Lush banana and oatmeal soap before taking in the zone of special scientific interest: my old inhalers, and anti-wrinkle creams, and the mountain of ovulation sticks. A monument to my total and utter failure.

I can’t say I miss all the drivers at Westward Horizons, but I find myself worrying about our regulars. The residents of Green Laurels were always game for a laugh. One of them – Rajani was it? – used to get the giggles and have to suck on her oxygen canister. They must be terrified. Such generous tippers.

Wilf should be back now. He gets home and showered in time for the One Show at 7, because he finds the keyworker stories touching. He’s soppy really, for a great big hulk of a man.

He brought a bunch of tulips in with the shopping today - not on my list - and looked terrified, in case I took it the wrong way. He blurted out that he just thought to bring something from the outside in, till I could get out there myself.

Why is he so bloody relaxed about crying in front of Patrick Kielty? But *never* in front of me? When we ditched the IVF, all I wanted, was for him to say, just once, that *his* heart was breaking, as well as mine.

I’ll set the traps now. Don’t need a man for the dirty jobs. Not. Any. More.

I’ll put one under the bed: saw one shoot out from there yesterday. Christ, look at the dust under here.

Behold the unbroken vista of Kleenex tissues and sweet wrappers, the rolling tumbleweeds of hair. Oh my God – so that’s where it fell. The bike bolt Wilf put on my finger when he proposed. It still fits.

Is that what I think it is? Kim Cattrall’s “Satisfaction” sex manual. I hope the younger mice avert their gaze from its curling pages as they pass. I bought that in desperation, when months of timetabled procreation killed all spontaneity in the bedroom.

Look at page 27. We never tried *that one*. Might be more feasible, now Wilf’s got fit from his cycling...

That’s tomorrow planned: a clear out. I think you can safely say, if you haven’t eaten a tin of kidney beans from 2018, you’re never going to. I remember how it happened now, Wilf was telling me they were rich in folic acid...

I suppose I could sit with him, when he watches The One Show on catch-up? It’s a pain, us using the lounge in shifts. I’m sure I read in Marie Claire, you can mix Prosecco with Lemoncello. I could get a couple of glasses down.

Where is he?

Out of nowhere, I feel my breath getting raspy. I sit quiet on the bed and look out down the street. It’s nearly dark. He’ll break his neck one day, taking the corners too fast, hitting one of these ruddy dis-inhibited deer.

I am totally still, thinking of the landmarks of our life, and whether I really want to chuck them.

And that’s when I hear it: the trap under the bed goes snap.