I've never been one to dress up. I mean, I like looking nice, I really do, but not the whole kaboodle. Well, I wouldn’t mind but I’m not very good at it. I always seem to stop short at one thing.

Like tonight. I had on my top from Jigsaw, French linen, floral pattern, cap sleeves, tie around the waist. Very flattering, I thought. And my brand new cream cashmere cardigan by Deane & White. For years I’ve refused to wear real wool of any kind, too scratchy. But then the twins made me try cashmere. Now I’d happily wear knickers made of the stuff. Too, too soft.

And my Cavalli jeans. I only bought them because they were in a sale but one of the mums at Ben’s school noticed straightaway that they were Cavalli’s. I love your jeans she said when she saw me wearing them. Cavalli’s? How did she know? She wasn’t standing close enough to read the label. How do people do that, recognise a brand just by the way it’s cut? You have to be seriously committed to studying fashion to achieve that and, as I said, I nearly always fall short on one thing.

Tonight it was my shoes. You need to get yourself a nice pair of shoes, my husband has said to me on more than one occasion. It makes a real
difference to an outfit. What would he know? Mr Same Pair of Boring Black Lace-ups Since We Married. But he’s probably right. It’s all right when I’m at home and can go barefoot. Most things look okay like that but if you’re going out you need to have a sense of what goes with what and let’s face it, my trusty trainers are not actually the versatile universal I first took them for. Put them on with a nice pair of Cavalli jeans, a Deane and White creamy cashmere cardigan over a Jigsaw top and the look is, well… a bit disappointing.

But despite the old trainers the net effect wasn’t too bad considering how rotten I was feeling. It had been two weeks since I’d popped into the clinic for that little ‘minor’ op. Why do they call it that? Because you’re removing a minor perhaps. I don’t know why I’ve let it get to me this way. I mean we definitely didn’t want any more. The three we have are enough and with Sally and Florence about to turn fourteen and Ben finally out of the Infants I can’t see starting all over again now. But even so, the body gets itself ready, and the mind too, to some extent, completely beyond any rational control. That’s what it feels like anyway.

I’ve been crying, weeping actually, on and off fairly solidly since I had it done. My breasts, having jumped the gun and triumphantly claimed a new cup size before I sanctioned the go-ahead, are now refusing to return to the size C they once were. DD may be every Playgirl’s dream but I’m feeling a bit conspicuous myself not to mention sore and tender. My body still seems to think I’m gearing up for broken nights and clothes smelling permanently of sour milk despite the fact that I took it upon myself to halt the process. Damn hormones.

So I rang up Nick, my friend who’s a man, my male friend, because every girl needs one, even though Mike doesn’t understand how it isn’t something more than that. He even had the nerve the night I told him I was pregnant and was waving the stick I’d just peed on dangerously close to his face to show him the tell-tale blue line, to ask if the kit had also identified
the real father and didn’t I want to let my friend Nick know the good news. Bastard. I ranted and called him some names and told him what an asshole and a dick he was and he retaliated childishly by saying I must be right, I’d obviously known a few.

We were both upset that night. Pregnant was definitely not what we wanted to be and if I could have magicked it away as quickly as my peeing had magicked the blue line onto the stick I’d have happily done it but it takes weeks of appointments, tears and humiliation to jump through the NHS hoops necessary to get to the point where someone is willing to do the deed. And I have to say, what with constantly feeling sick and that unmistakable tinny taste taking up residence in my mouth, I have been unfairly foul to the kids and outrageously mean to Mike. So now, with all that finally behind me I have been taking steps to regain some sort of quiet control. Dressing nicely, or as nicely as one is able, is a good start. Going out with friends — not the sort who might fuss or go all gooey at the mention of babies — is another. So I rang up Nick.

Fancy a drink in town? I asked him.

Yes please he said. I’ve got loads to tell you. Had a hot date last night. Need to know if you’re going to approve.

Just the ticket. A night boozing and schmoozing with lovely Nick in a smoky bar while he tells me in lurid detail about all the girls he’s shagged over the past month. I won’t need to tell him a thing that’s going on with me but I know he’ll hold my hand, cuddle me, tell me I’m gorgeous and go on ad infinitum about his sorry love-life. Perfect. Mike was going to be out working late anyway.

I’d asked the twins to baby-sit and they said they would as long as they were allowed to order in a pizza and have two of their friends round to watch a DVD and sleep in the living-room. Okay, I said, but don’t totally ignore Ben. Make sure he has some pizza and brushes his teeth and couldn’t you maybe tell him a bedtime story or something before you start your film?
Mum, said Florence, what do you think we are? I wasn’t quite sure how to answer that or even what the question actually meant so I kept quiet and gave Ben a hug and zipped up my Top-Shop jacket (a hand-me-on from Florence) over my Deane & White.

Those trainers look naff, said Sally (charming, so like her father) just before I finally managed to make it out the door, but her only constructive suggestion was that I should paint my nails, decorate them with signs of the zodiac decals and wear open-toed sandals if I insisted on wearing ‘those kind of jeans’. Painted toe-nails are not my thing at all and it was practically freezing outside so sandals didn’t seem all that sensible and besides I was already in danger of being late meeting Nick by the NFT like we had arranged so I sneakered off in my Nikes.

It’d be alright if they were Converse, I heard Florence telling Sally as I closed the door behind me. Ah well, maybe the Cavallis will at least cover the shoes.

Nick loved the Cardigan, said I was sooooo cuddly in it especially with my new Pamela Anderson boobs. It felt good to have an uncomplicated hug. I leant my face into his neck and stayed there for a long time. He didn’t even notice my tears. Her name is Sophia, he said. She’s a trapeze artist. Great I said. You two should have a swinging time. I’ve ‘eard it, he said. Not funny. Well, try not to let go of this one, I said. Now that’s pretty good, he said. You’re on good form tonight. I hadn’t meant that last line to be a joke. I really did want Nick to manage to stay with someone. Then maybe I wouldn’t have to be so sneaky about seeing him. Maybe Nick could come round to us, have dinner even. If he was settled and happy with a long-term partner of his own maybe Mike wouldn’t feel so threatened and unnecessarily suspicious about the friendship I have with him.

Nick and I were both a bit tipsy. I’d had two pints of beer already and, oh yes there was the rather large glass of red I’d downed at home while I was still choosing what to wear.
Shall we eat something? he asked me as we wandered along, arm in arm by the river. Yeah, I said. I could eat. Nick took me to a Turkish place he knows, they greeted him like an old friend and me, like I was another bead on his long necklace of girls.

We both had Turkish pizzas, more beer and later, probably stupidly, brandies. You’re putting it away tonight, Nick said to me. I’d only managed half of my Lahmucan ve Pideler so I think he must have been talking about the booze not the food. I was in need of a binge I said. Thanks.

Outside it had started to drizzle. Shit, said Nick, we’re going to get soaked. I didn’t mind. What with the rain, the drink, all that water on the river around us, my tears had begun to dry up a little. After paying the bill — half and half — we walked out again into the wet London night. Let’s skim some stones I said, taking off my trainers and running down the steps that led onto the bankside of the Thames. The sharp pebbles hurt my feet and the ground was wet and cold but I was glad of the sensation.

Nick waited up by the wall. His shoes were new, and besides he said he didn’t want to be shown up by my amazing stone-skimming ability. I found four flat ones and cast them one by one across the water. The first one skipped eight times. That’s for Ben, I thought. The second two only skipped twice. One for each of the twins, I thought. The fourth one sunk immediately. Mike? The baby? I looked at the clock on my phone.

Oh Christ, I slurred, running barefoot back up to where Nick was waiting for me. I’m in trouble. It’s nearly midnight.

The bewitching hour? called Nick.

More like the bitching hour if I miss the last train home. God I’m a bad wife and a terrible... I couldn’t bring myself to say the other.

I carried my trainers, no point in putting them on, they were already wet and my feet were blocks of ice. Nick walked me to Waterloo and kissed me before sending me off with a friendly pat on the bottom through the barrier. Why don’t I mind this from him? His kisses are always so sweet. I
think he practices his best lover techniques out on me. A safe target.

I tip-toed to the escalator. It felt unholy and a little bit thrilling to be walking with no shoes in the underground, and trailed my hand over the edge of the moving handrail all the way down to the Northern line. Stupid. By the time I’d reached the platform my left hand and the bottoms of my feet were black.

Without thinking I wiped my hand on the seat of my jeans. I couldn’t see behind me to assess the damage but I can guess that it wasn’t a look Roberto Cavalli had in mind when designing his fashion label. In that gloriously unselfconscious way that you get when you’ve had a few too many, I spat on both my hands and rubbed them together and searched for a discarded newspaper or something to dry them on. There was nothing. The train pulled up. Northbound to High Barnet, Thank God they were still running.

It was a Wednesday night, 12:17, and the train wasn’t crowded. In fact, when I got on, stained jeans, no shoes, grimy spit-smeared hands, there were only two other people in the entire carriage. A London Transport official in a fluorescent orange jacket and a young woman wearing green.

I headed for a seat right at the other end of the carriage hoping to surreptitiously wipe my hands clean on the seat without anyone noticing. The woman in green was bent over, blond head covered by a pale green beret, on her lap. I thought she must be drunk, or sleeping, I couldn’t quite tell from where I was, but then I think I saw her shoulders heaving. Perhaps she was laughing?

The man in LT uniform saw me looking and tried to wave me over. He was a big man, I thought at first he was a guard who would no doubt try to tell me it was against London Underground rules to travel without foot attire. But he did not seem to be bothering at that moment about my feet. He was leaning forward towards the woman, I could only really see her back.
She was wearing some kind of soft woollen trench coat, moss green, gorgeous. I would have said Marc Jacobs but then, what did I know? That mum at Ben’s school, she would have known, even from this distance. The coat really suited the woman. I spend my life searching for the right one but always seem to end up wearing the twins’ discarded jackets.

I bet she had green eyes too but I couldn’t see that close from where I was sitting and besides, her face was buried in her hands. She had on dark green leather gloves with tiny little round buttons on the side, like the kind you see women wearing in forties films. Really nice. The man kept looking at me in this kind of pleading way and at last — drink can definitely slow you down — I realised it was because he wanted me to come over and help. The woman in green was crying, weeping, I discovered when I finally went over. I guess he’d already been on for a few stops with her, trying to talk, asking what was the matter and not getting very far.

I suppose he was hoping that, being another woman, I might have more success. Somehow I doubted it, that this immaculately chic green clad woman was going to respond any better to my advances in my present state of disarray but I was filled with a sudden sense of purpose somehow. It is odd, isn’t it, no matter how out of it you feel, woken from a deep sleep in the middle of the night by Ben crying or roused from a half-conscious state in front of the telly, having drunk half a bottle of wine on your own, by one of the girls wanting to talk about boyfriend troubles, you shake yourself awake and go to them. It was like that now, I’d never felt so sober.

I went over and sat on the seat next to her. Her whole body was shuddering. She was making a kind of soft whine, a high pitched moan in the back of her throat. Her face, when I finally saw it, was raw with crying, cheeks drenched and eyes red. There was no point in asking her what was the matter. She was struggling enough for breath to get the cries out, let alone formulate any words. Besides I knew that when one of the children was that upset, it was pointless trying to get them to talk. Like Ben when his
bike was stolen. There was no way asking him questions was going to make it better.

I put my hand on her back. It was an exquisite coat. Probably some cashmere in it, like my cardigan still hugging me under Flo’s old jacket. She leant up into my hand, the touch of a stranger. The LT man, probably heading home after a long shift, looked across at me, relieved. She was in someone else’s hands now. Someone who would know what to do. A woman’s touch.

I left my hand there for a while, just pressing slightly against her upper back, steadying her sobs, letting her know I was close by. We’d already gone past the Embankment and the train now pulled into Charing Cross. The London Transport official got up to get off and asked me if I would be all right.

Fine, I said and moved my hand round to grip the outside of her arm and squeeze her to me for a second. We’ll be okay, won’t we? I think I saw her try to smile, but I’m not sure. She cried some more and put her head down in her lap but let my arm stay where it was behind her. The train stayed in the station for several minutes. A few other people got on but ignored us, the way people do when they think something intensely personal is going on. There was an announcement made somewhere but I struggled to hear what it was saying above the noise of the train’s engine — why do they rev it up like that just when it’s standing still?

Do you know what stop you need to get off at? I asked her softly. No response. She raised her head and stopped crying long enough to squint at the map overhead, her vision marred no doubt by swollen eyes and the graffiti that had been scrawled across the map’s surface. Then she leaned in to me slightly and rested there a moment, still crying quietly. The train’s engine revved up again and at the sound of it she lifted her head and looked up anxiously again at the map. The train wasn’t moving.

Do you think you might be on the wrong train? I asked her. Where do
you need to get to? She pointed, green finger quivering, to an indeterminate place on the map. Do you want to get off? Change trains? She nodded then through her tears and reached for her handbag (green leather, like the gloves) but couldn’t seem quite to coordinate her movements. Would you like me to help? I said. I didn’t wait for a response. Come on, I said, I’ll get you to the train you need. I’ll stay with you. She held my hand like a child as we got off. Her gloves were soft and warm, like skin. A baby’s skin. Outside the train on the platform was the big tube map. She pointed to Finsbury Park.

You want to go to Finsbury Park I asked her? That’s fine. I’m going to Turnpike Line. I’ll stay with you, don’t worry, I’ll get you there. It was 12:27. Please God, let the trains run for a while longer. Mike would be at home now sulking. Probably already under the duvet convinced that I’d gone off with Nick and left him. I haven’t let him touch me since I found out I was pregnant. I just didn’t want to be touched in that way. He thought I was snubbing him because of Nick. He’d be imagining the two of us together now, furious hurt and jealous. He’d never believe my story about the weeping woman in green.

I had one arm around her and was holding her other hand. We walked like that, side by side along the platform towards signs for Bakerloo line, northbound. We could go to Oxford Circus and change to the Victoria line, straight to Finsbury Park. It might be quicker than waiting for this train to go. The doors closed just as we neared the end of the platform and it was only then I realised I’d left my trainers on the train. It began pulling away from the station. I stifled a shout, which would have been useless in any case. Let them go, I told myself clutching the green lady’s hand. They’re gone now, let them go.

The woman had on green shoes, pistachio green, kitten heels and tiny little heart cut-outs in the leather by the toes. Next to the soft click click click of her heels the pad of my bare feet seemed ridiculous. I marvelled at the
beauty of her shoes and thought how Mike would look at the two of us, side by side like that and shake his head in despair wondering why I found it so impossible to look nice like she did. I talked to her as we walked. Her crying had not stopped but had softened into something like music, that steady insistent beat that sits behind the melody of some club tunes. Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay.

Water lapping at a river’s edge, an owl hooting at night.

Is there someone waiting for you at Finsbury Park? I said. Will you have someone to be with when you get there? She didn’t answer. Has anyone hurt you? I tried, thinking perhaps now she might let me know. She shook her head. No one’s hurt you? I asked again, to make sure.

When we got to the Bakerloo line platform we sat together on the bench. She nestled into my shoulder, still sobbing softly. Have you been with friends tonight, I asked her? She smiled a little but didn’t reveal more either way. That’s nice, I said, not knowing whether it had been or not. We sat in silence for a while longer and the train came. Thank you thank you thank you Ken Livingstone. The trains never used to run this late on a weekday. I wiggled my toes to warm them up. They were thick with London Underground soot. The few other people who got on did not seem to notice what an odd pair we made. It was as though we were wrapped in our own little bubble, a translucent bubble of shiny green. Finally I asked her. What’s happened, what’s making you cry?

She began to fumble in her handbag fingering the objects she had in there, lifting them out as though she was only seeing them for the first time. A packet of tissues, a mobile phone with a lime green cover, a glasses case and reading glasses, both green. She took the glasses out of the case, put them on and took them off again. She pulled out a book, a paperback, the kind you might buy in a hurry at Heathrow. Closed Circle by Robert Goddard. I’ve never read anything by Robert Goddard. She opened the book to the page marked by a marker. Sniffling, she smiled, pulled out the marker and gave the book to me. Do you want me to read it? I asked. She nodded.
Now? I asked. She shook her head. You want me to keep the book and read it later? She nodded again, her chest still heaving in tiny little rhythmic sobs. I took the book in two hands clasping it to me. Then I will, I said, I'll take it and read it. Will it explain the reason you’re crying? She shook her head.

Oxford Circus. Trains were still running to Finsbury Park. If I was lucky I could get a Piccadilly Line train from there to Turnpike Lane. If not, I could walk, or take a taxi. Would my weeping green woman be all right when I left her? I was already feeling the pangs of letting go. It was 12:48. Mike would be fuming. He’d be in bed but not asleep. Waiting for me and fuming.

Two minutes. We got on the Victoria line, still going north, three stops to Finsbury Park. I want my mother, she said when we sat down. They were the first words I’d heard her speak. And she’s not here? I said gently, as though I had known that was the reason all along. You want your mother, but she’s not here for you. She nodded, tears spilling out of her red eyes again, clinging with her green-gloved hands to my Top Shop jacket, Flo’s jacket.

And you miss her, I said. Yes, yes, she was nodding and I was nodding too. I know, I know I said. Warren Street. And I did. I knew exactly what it was like to miss someone that should be a part of you and isn’t anymore. No matter how recently or long ago the separation. I know, I’m sorry I said. I’m sure she loves you, your mother, wherever she is. She nodded, both of us, tears flooding. Euston. People got on and off, oblivious of we two wrapped together in our green bubble, a closed circle. Joined.

The train arrived at Finsbury Park. We both got off, she in her kitten heels and me with my blackened feet. Will you be all right? I asked her. She nodded and smiled, the crying almost stopped, her breathing almost stilled. I kissed the top of her head. A stranger’s kiss. She smiled again. She put one hand on my shoulder and leant down lifting her foot to take off a shoe. She
put it down on the ground and touched my feet. She stood down on her stockinged foot and eased the shoe off her other. She touched the top of my feet again leaving the shoes standing there ready to step into.

You want me to put them on? I said. The Victoria line, southbound, pulled in to the platform on the opposite side. She didn’t wait to answer me but ran, stocking footed to get on the train going back in the direction we had come from. This is the last train to Central London, the announcement sounded, and the train doors bleeped and closed.

Let her go, I said to myself, clutching at my stomach and feeling the emptiness there. Had it been so long since Nick and I had the pizzas, or was I aching for something else? Let her go, I told myself again, and slipped my cold dirty feet into the beautiful green shoes. They fit perfectly. I felt like her, the green woman. Gorgeous. Mike will like these, I thought. And Florence, and Sally, and Ben. They’ll all approve.