



A short story by Kristina Bryson

## **Word of Explanation**

This short story is for every man and woman who, at some point in their life, have found themselves in THE worst relationship ever. If there were a book on how not to let someone treat you, then this could be it. In fact, my memoirs could make a great self-help guide to finding the perfect relationship. Basically, read what I did and then do the exact opposite. Oh, and by the way, if you have ever tried dieting I can also give you some 'do the opposite' tips.

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## Reflections

I could feel myself drifting into that dangerous position where only reinforced matchsticks would keep my eyelids from shutting. How is it even physically possible that something as featherweight as eyelashes and a little bit of skin can be a ton weight? This eyelid workout is fine if you're lying in bed watching the telly. Far from fine if you're behind the wheel of a car whizzing past Glasgow Airport on the M8. Why I hadn't left earlier to miss the rush hour traffic is anyone's guess. Flying up would've been even more sensible but hey ho. I was on the last leg of my four hundred mile journey from my home in Wiltshire to my parent's house in Bonnie Scotland.

"I know it's short notice Kristina but Ann and Herman are staying with us this weekend and we thought you might like to come and meet up with them. Do you remember them?"

"Is that the mother and son who you knew when we lived in Holland?"

"That's right. I think the last time you'd have seen them you'd have been about thirteen. Remember we went over for a visit and you had a crush on Herman? He used to take you out on the back of his moped." I could only pray that Herman would not also remember my teenage infatuation.

Less than forty-eight hours later I removed the matchsticks from my eyes as I pulled on to their drive. A sneaky look in the rearview mirror to check that I didn't look as tired and puffy-eyed as I felt. That wouldn't make the best first impression on Herman.

Just to be on the safe side, I also glanced down at my chest to double-check that my hammering heart was not visible through my blouse. Then adopting the most casual demeanour I could muster I opened the front door and was greeted by the warm embrace of my mum. Glancing over her shoulder I spied a tall, dark-haired, very slim man rise up out of his seat and head in my direction. It was 'him.'

"Hello, Kristina. It's great to see you," said Herman as he kissed me on both cheeks.

"It's lovely to see you too. I was trying to think back to when we last saw each other but have no idea. Can you remember how long it's been?" I knew exactly how long it had been, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I'd even thought about it.

The weekend flew by. The majority of it was spent in the company of our families, but on Saturday night we stayed up late, just the two of us, chatting away into the early hours.

“What is it you do for a job Kristina? I was asking your Dad last night before you arrived but he wasn’t giving much away.”

“I have my own freelance recruitment business. So, for example, my last assignment was working for AXA, the insurance company, recruiting their graduate intake for the year. I absolutely love it although, as you might have gathered from my Dad’s response, it’s not a business he approves of.”

“I didn’t like to say but yeah I certainly got that impression. I’ve also got my own computer retail business which I started just over five years ago.”

“Bet my Dad approves of that?”

“He was certainly asking me loads of questions about it. Changing the subject I haven’t heard you mention a partner. Are you in a relationship?”

I could feel myself blushing. “No, I’ve given relationships up as a bad idea. I’ve come to the conclusion that either I’m crap at them or there are no decent men out there.” I replied with a nervous laugh. “How about you? Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No, not at the moment.” Hindsight would teach me to question the exact definition of ‘moment’.

Although neither of us voiced it, that weekend a spark was ignited. What a romantic love story this would make; a girl and a boy who have known each other all their lives; who’d had a teenage crush before being parted for twenty years; fate bringing them back together.

When Herman returned to Holland, we continued chatting, first by email and then by phone. The chats became flirtier, each testing the water with the other.

“It’s your birthday next month. Would you let me treat you to a trip over to Amsterdam so I can spoil you for a few days?”

“Ooh, I think I could be persuaded” I replied, trying to play it cool but inside my tummy was doing somersaults.

If this love story has a happy ending Richard Curtis will be knocking at my door begging for the film rights, I thought to myself.

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My first trip over to Holland boded well. Herman, having booked and paid for my flight, was waiting in the Arrivals Lounge clutching a red rose. Taking me by the hand, he

guided me through the busy airport, out to the car park, where he proudly opened the door of his brand new BMW M3. I'd like to say that I wasn't in the least bit impressed by the expensive car but I'm shallow and I loved it! After speeding along the snelweg (motorway to you and I), Herman then took me on a mini-tour of the streets of Amsterdam. Wow, what a stunning city.

I sat in awe of the miles of canals running right through the heart of the city. It seemed like every building was different and steeped in history. Was that Anne Frank I could see peeking out of the window? The energy and buzz of the place were infectious. Most of all I was staggered that any cyclists, of which there were dozens, were still alive. Both cars, trams, and cyclists travelled at speed. How on earth they weren't colliding every two minutes seemed like an absolute miracle to me.

Pulling up at a set of red traffic lights Herman caught sight of the driver in the car next to us eyeing up his BMW. The guy gestured for Herman to wind down his window and started waxing lyrical about the motor.

"Hey man, is that the new M3?"

"Yeah, I just picked it up yesterday. It's the first one on the road in Holland."

The guy seemed suitably impressed. Not that we hung around long enough to catch his expression because as soon as the lights changed, we roared off into the distance.

"I've booked a table for dinner at a little Italian restaurant near where I live. Do you like Italian?" he asked.

"Yeah. I went out with an Italian for seven years and although he was a complete jerk, it didn't put me off the food" I joked.

That was how our first romantic weekend started and I left to come home on Monday with a big smile on my face.

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How I got into freelance recruitment a year earlier is a story in itself; heartache, pressures of work, failed relationships and much more. To cut a long story short I ended up having a nervous breakdown and, in time, made the decision to leave corporate life behind me. To this day I still maintain that my nervous breakdown was both the worst and best experience of my life. The constant run of adrenalin, the sleepless nights, the panic attacks, the isolation, etc. did not just appear overnight. These 'symptoms' were the worst part. The best part was it

offered me the opportunity, should I choose to accept it, to explore what was at the core of my feelings. What I discovered was a bit of a shocker but that's another story.

Working freelance was a precarious lifestyle. When I was working on an assignment I could earn more in one week than I'd previously earned in a month. The downside is that no work equalled no income. This shouldn't have been a problem except for the fact that I'm female and, as such, programmed to spend money, not save. It was a case of work hard, play hard. An assignment would last typically three to four months but I could then be doing nothing for the next month or so.

Wild horses would not drag me back to someone telling me when to turn up to work, when to have my lunch, when to go home, when to go on holiday and how much I could earn. I genuinely apologise to everyone who is employed because I appreciate that is a ridiculously stupid generalisation but it gives you an idea of my mindset at the time. Not everyone has the self-discipline, the drive and the tenacity to be self-employed. To be honest, at this stage I didn't know whether I had or not. Sometimes in life, we are more driven by what we don't want than knowing what we do want.

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My first assignment was helping a large pharmaceutical company recruit Medical Sales Reps. I was loving it (I can't say those words without singing the McDonalds theme tune). My role was really all about finding the right personality fit. It doesn't matter how knowledgeable a Rep is, if they can't get past the GP's Receptionist then they're doomed from the start. By that I don't mean they have to be like Ninja Warriors crashing their way into the building, ducking and diving their way past the Receptionist in a bid to get in front of a GP (although if you've ever tried to get an urgent appointment with your doctor you may know what I am talking about). In defence of the poor Receptionist, she probably has umpteen Medical Sales Reps vying for an appointment to tout their wares with the GP. A good Rep must know which buttons to push to get through that door and in front of the decision-maker.

There was one candidate in particular who still stands out in my mind.

"I've had a look at your CV Laura but I'd like you to walk me through your career to date in your own words. I see you started your career as a school secretary. Talk me through from there please."

What she went on to say absolutely floored me.

When she and her husband started a family, she went part-time and it fitted in nicely with her two young children. Her husband travelled a lot with his job and the school hours made it easier for Laura to look after the kids while he was away.

Then one day there was a knock at her door and her life changed forever. Standing at her door were two police officers who had the horrendous job of breaking the news to Laura that her husband had been killed in a car accident. As Laura was sat in the interview telling me this, I could not even begin to comprehend how that would feel. Where did she find the strength to then go to the back garden where the kids were playing and tell them they had lost their daddy? I was sat listening to this and to my shame could not think of a single appropriate response. I simply sat and listened to the rest of her amazing story.

Finances became tight and so Laura made the decision to retrain to become a Medical Sales Rep. Alongside doing her part-time job at the school and bringing up two young children she embarked on a degree course through the Open University. Four years later here she sat in front of me determined to get herself a better job to secure the future of her and the children. To this day Laura is still one of the most inspirational and determined people I've ever had the privilege to meet and if I ever moan about not having enough time, I try and remind myself of what she achieved in the same twenty-four hours a day. Needless to say, I didn't think she would have any problems getting GPs Receptionists 'on side' and she got the job.

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The first six months of my new romance were uneventful, which was a welcome relief after my turbulent relationship history. More often than not I'd fly over to Holland, but occasionally he would visit me in Swindon. Bristol airport was less than an hour away so an easy trip. To the best of Herman's, and my parent's knowledge, I was a non-smoker. I'd started the bad habit during my college years. Actually, that's not strictly true. As a seven-year-old, I used to steal my Mum's cigarettes but some facts are better forgotten. My mum had been a heavy smoker for much of her adult life but had successfully kicked the habit when I was in my late teens. Mr. Control Freak (aka my Dad) hated smoking with a passion. After years of him nagging me, I quit to get some peace. Or at least that was the story I told him. To



my shame not only did I lie but I also cheerfully accepted the £200 he gave me as a ‘reward’ for stopping. I probably spent it on more fags.

Smoking is a stinky habit. The smell clings to literally everything. About four times a year my parents would drive down from their home in Scotland to stay with me for a few days. If you care to look up the share value of Proctor and Gamble in 2002, you’ll probably see a huge increase. This would be solely down to the large volume of Febreze fabric freshener I was purchasing prior to every visit from either my parents or Herman. The furniture, curtains, carpets and even the car interior were all soaked to within an inch of their lives. At this rate, if the cost of the cigarettes didn’t bankrupt me then the cost to eradicate the smell would finish me off.

Let’s say, for example, that my parents were due to arrive at 8 pm. At 7.45 pm you’d find me standing outside on the patio, an old dressing gown ‘protecting’ my clothes and every last strand of hair tucked into a shower cap, inhaling as much nicotine as I possibly could before they arrived. The dressing gown was shoved in the back of my wardrobe, shower cap in the bin, copious amounts of mouthwash and they were none the wiser. It would be the same charade when Herman visited. I’m sure he must have thought I had a mint addiction.

This rigmarole was slightly easier when I went over to Holland. I suspect the flight was probably cheaper than the cleaning costs. Driving to the airport, I again wore my very fetching dressing gown over my clothes and of course the obligatory shower cap. I’m not sure how I would have explained that to the police had I been pulled over.

In between visits, Herman and I would regularly speak on the phone, and my weight was a frequent topic of conversation. It would be fair to say the honeymoon period of the relationship was waning. We’d be five minutes into a conversation when the inevitable question came.

“Hey Kristina, tell me what weight you are today?”

“This morning I was 10 stone 11.” I had been 11 stone 8 when he’d seen me that first time at my parents, so I was extremely proud of my weight loss. Not a pride he shared apparently.

“I think you’d look super sexy if you were about 10 and a half stone. You’re sexy now, but that would make you super sexy and hot.”

Well, who doesn’t want their boyfriend to think they’re super sexy? It’s amazing how much weight you can lose in a week if you starve yourself. Its lucky cigarettes don’t contain calories although I used to smoke the ‘Light’ version so would they have been low calorie too!

I had a number of tried and tested methods for rapid weight loss that I could pick and choose from prior to each visit. There was the ‘starve yourself skinny’ diet which I’d start on a Monday (because anyone who diets knows that they can only really start on a Monday after pigging out on takeaways all weekend) before flying out on Friday.

“I’ll have porridge and a banana for breakfast, nothing for lunch and a lettuce leaf (I’m being slightly dramatic) for tea” I promised myself. All was going well up until lunchtime when my tummy started shouting “hello, have you forgotten something?” I then remembered why the ‘starve yourself skinny’ diet hadn’t worked the previous month, abandoned it and made a deal with myself that tomorrow I would try the ‘little and often’ diet.

The key to success with the ‘little and often’ diet is your definition of what is little and what is often. Whoever came up with the idea of mini Mars bars, mini Baby Bell cheese and mini bags of cereal has a lot to answer for. They really didn’t think it through. All they did was make my ‘little’ diet more convenient for me. In my defence, I was pretty damn good at the ‘often’ bit!

Now I’m on Wednesday and instead of having four pounds to lose to get to Herman’s desired 10 and a half stone I now have five pounds to lose. My last-ditch attempt is to jog to the chemist, buy some dieting pills (reading the promises on the label I really don’t know why I didn’t opt for this miracle, zero effort approach in the first place) and jog home again, popping pills as I go.

Friday morning and the day of reckoning has arrived. I delay weighing myself until I’ve been to the toilet. I then completely strip off, including any jewellery and place the scales on exactly the right spot in the bathroom. I take a deep breath and then slowly exhale every last air pocket from my lungs before slowly stepping on and looking down. Damn. That’s not the number I was expecting. I’ve obviously not found exactly the right spot to place the scales. Everyone knows that scales can read very differently depending on the surface. I try three more times but just can’t seem to find that right spot and admit defeat. 10 stone 10 it is then. Well, a pound is better than nothing.

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Long-distance relationships can be challenging, and Herman and I only saw each other once a month. With hindsight, that was once a month too often. I can’t honestly say there was

anything dramatically wrong with our relationship (apart from the fact I let him treat me like dirt) but equally, there was nothing dramatically right with it either. Relationships usually progress in one direction or another, good or bad. Ours did neither. It just existed. With hindsight, I can see that, yet again, I'd made a rubbish choice in boyfriend. There is a well-known saying that the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing, but expect a different outcome. Some girls are attracted to 'bad' boys; some go for the 'pretty' boys. I was attracted to the suited and booted, highly successful control freaks. Basically mirror images of my father. Now if that's not insanity, I don't know what is. Double insanity; we can all make a mistake in choosing the wrong guy once, maybe twice. However, more than that is just plain stupid. Please tell me that I am not the only idiot out there.

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For someone who had a history of being attracted to the suited and booted, my choice of a hobby was perhaps odd; horses. Ponies had seen me through some extremely difficult times during my childhood but, for various reasons, I'd been four-legged free for over ten years. However, I'd rekindled my love of horses a couple of years earlier and had bought myself the most beautiful mare called Impala. She was only just five when I got her and for the first year challenged and scared me in equal measures, but I loved her to bits. A couple of years down the line and we'd reached an understanding and my confidence levels soared. So much so that I decided to have a go at eventing.

For anyone not familiar with eventing it's basically made up of a number of phases. Dressage (or donkey dancing), show jumping (where the jumps fall down in you hit them) and cross-country (where you fall down if you hit them). The pinnacle of our eventing career was taking part in a two-day event down in sunny Somerset.

It wasn't just sunny. It was roasting and I am absolutely rubbish in the heat. At best it gives me a headache. Worst case scenario it makes me throw up. Puke and horsehair are probably not a great combination, so I tried to keep hydrated and out of the sun as much as possible. Accompanying me were my best friend Linda and her daughter Kate who did an amazing job keeping Impala and me in fighting fit condition.

Phase one – dressage. Imagine having to learn a dance routine where you have to perform a particular movement at a particular point. You also have to learn the routine off by

heart. Well, that's dressage. I mounted Impala and made my way down to the dressage arena and was quietly warming up outside the ring. Ten minutes to go and she was feeling great. Five minutes to go and I gave her one last canter. Two minutes to go and I brought her back to walk and started mentally running through the test in my head. The test that I had run through my head literally dozens of times before in the lead up to this event. Enter at A in trot, down the centre line and track???

Despite the soaring temperature, my blood ran cold. Try as I might I just couldn't remember whether I was meant to turn left or right. In fact, the harder I tried to visualise the test sheet the more blank my brain went. Not to worry. I always carry a copy of the test in my jacket pocket for just such an eventuality. Reaching into my pocket my cold blood then started to drain from my body. I'd only gone and left the test sheet in my lorry.

"Kate, any chance you could run to the lorry and grab the test sheet, please? I'm on in less than two minutes and my mind's gone completely blank."

"I'll give it my best shot" she called over her shoulder as she hot-footed it in the direction of the lorry park.

In fairness even Usain Bolt couldn't have made it in the time required. The judge rang the bell and I dutifully entered at A and trotted down the centre line not having a clue which way I was going to turn at the end. Eeny meeny miny moe. I'd got a 50:50 chance of getting it right. Let's try turning right. I knew if I'd gone wrong I would hear the sound of the judge ringing the bell. No jingle so must be right. Unbelievably I managed to ride the whole test applying this method. If only I was as good at guessing the winning lottery numbers.

Phase two was the showjumping. We had just one fence down and I was pleased with that. The ground was as hard as concrete and I'd ridden the round cautiously but safely.

Phase three was the roads and tracks. This was essentially a huge test on the fitness of both horse and rider. We had trained for weeks to get this fit, and my horse looked amazing. In the increasing heat, we set out on the marked route keeping a steady but speedy pace. I think the horse must have been fitter than me because I was puffing and sweating buckets by the time we got back.

Phase four was the cross country. Our least favourite phase. We had a ten-minute break between finishing the roads and tracks and setting out to face the solid, won't fall down, scary jumps. This is where my super grooms Linda and Kate excelled themselves. In the waiting area, they had armed themselves with a number of buckets of cold water, sponges and towels. Before they set about washing and cooling down Impala Kate sat me down on an upturned bucket, flung a cold, wet towel over my sweaty head and handed me a Mars bar and

a cigarette. Now if that's not attention to detail, I don't know what is. They knew how to look after a top athlete such as myself!

The ten minutes flew by and, with stomach-churning, I launched Impala out of the starting box at a gallop. The first jump was a log pile. Clear. Jumps two and three were made up of hedges and tyres. Clear. Jump four was the water jump. We'd practiced water jumps many, many times and so I rode at it with gusto. Impala had other ideas. At the very last stride, she slammed on the brakes and stopped dead with the water just lapping the tips of her hooves. And there she stood, not moving for love nor money. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the jump judge signalling to me to leave the course. I then had to take the long walk of shame back to the lorry course swearing and cursing under my breath the whole way. That's horses for you.

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By this stage in my relationship with Herman, I was pretty familiar with Schiphol airport. It's like a mini-city, and it would take me about half an hour to make my way to the Arrivals gate. In the beginning, my slim tummy would be doing somersaults of excitement and anticipation. Herman was tall and easy to pick out from the crowd. It would have been even nicer if he had been easily spotted because of his close resemblance to Brad Pitt but sadly not. In fact, not even close.

After not seeing me for a month there are many subjects he could have picked to chat about. Such as how was your flight? Or I've missed you, or even what's the weather been like back home?

Instead, he opted for the next obvious question every guy likes to ask his girlfriend. Sat in his sporty BMW, he would look across and croon "Hey sweetie. You look great but would you like me to pay for surgery to get rid of this?" as he ran his finger under my non-existent double chin.

What I should have replied was "Perhaps they would give us a discount and you could get a personality transplant" but like an idiot I just sat there, wanting to cry.

In that instant, I was transported back to that little girl growing up not feeling good enough in the eyes of my dad. If I had been good enough, he would have loved me more and would never even have contemplated leaving his family for another woman (although that plan

went pear-shaped for him). In that instant I was transported back to my twenties, forging a successful career but where each promotion would be instantly met with “That’s great Kristina. Now, what’s next?” from my Dad. Here I was, now in my thirties, and still with that little voice in my head whispering “you’re still not good enough.”

Herman ran his own business and had his mobile phone surgically attached to his ear. I am not exaggerating when I say the only time that the phone was switched off was when we were in bed. Looking back, that’s all I was to him – another sexual conquest. However, as you’ve probably gathered by now, I’m a slow learner, and it took me four years to accept that’s where his interest in me started and finished. My self-esteem plummeted to an all-time low. The relationship pushed all those insecure buttons – if I was thinner, if I was prettier, if, if, if – then he would love me.

Why is it so much easier to believe the bad than the good? Is it easier to say “poor me” than it is to say “actually I’m a good person and I don’t deserve to be treated this way”? For me the ‘poor me’ was like a well-worn comfort blanket I wrapped around myself for protection. The major flaw in this plan is that the blanket was now years old and holes were starting to appear. Its protective powers were waning.

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Thankfully, all was not bad during my visits to Holland. It’s a beautiful country and my place of birth will always be dear to my heart. If you’ve ever wondered if Holland is really flat, the answer is yes. (If you’ve ever actually wondered this then you probably need to get out more and find yourself a hobby!). It’s flat and crisscrossed with miles and miles of canals. The numerous old fashioned, but still operational, windmills dot the landscape. Driving through the countryside, it’s almost like going back in time. Amsterdam is the complete opposite. I was not a city girl but could still appreciate its beauty and historic appeal. However, it’s the atmosphere and vibe of the place which appealed most to me.

On the subject of beauty; if you ever get the chance to visit the Red Light district over there then go. Not for the reasons that are perhaps springing to mind though. On one of my visits, Herman took me out to a gorgeous Chinese restaurant. Afterward, we romantically strolled, hand in hand, through the city streets. Turning down a smaller, busy side street, I glanced at the shop window on my left. My split-second thought was I was looking at the most

stunningly beautiful manikin. That was until I quickly realised that the ‘manikin’ had very few clothes on and was dancing erotically! Jeez, Herman might have told me where we were going! To this day I cannot understand how such drop-dead gorgeous girls end up working as a prostitute in a shop window. A lesson for me to never judge a book by its cover and that we all have a story to tell.

Sticking with the prostitution theme please, please don’t judge me for what I am about to share with you. The arrangement we had was that I booked and paid for my flights and Herman would reimburse me when I was over. This I thought was a very generous arrangement. After one enjoyable weekend, Herman brought up the subject of the cash. Out of his wallet, he pulled a wad of notes. Have you ever watched the film *Pretty Woman* with Julia Roberts and Richard Gere? If so do you remember the scene in the hotel room where he leaves a pile of cash on the bed in return for her ‘services’? Well, we could have been rehearsing for that scene. Note after note was counted and slowly laid out. The charmer even made a sleazy comment as he handed over the cash.

The lesson here is that if you let yourself be treated like trash, then that’s how people will treat you. Yes, he was a complete bastard for doing this, but the blame lies firmly at my feet for letting myself be treated in this manner. There is a part of me that admires folk who can so cleverly control and manipulate others with such ease. It takes great skill and years of practice and boy did Herman have it down to a fine art. I was like a lamb to the slaughter. That was how low my self-esteem was in my early thirties.

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Does anyone else have a Psyche Protector? My PP was doing its best to teach me another valuable lesson. A nervous breakdown in my twenties had started to teach me to understand that it is OK not to be perfect in life and relationships. However, when I was learning this lesson back in the Mad Days, I had only applied this understanding to my relationship with my Dad. Your PP is very wise and will only try and teach you as much as you are able to deal with at that point in your life. It then lulls you into a false sense of security by keeping a low profile for a while. Then, when it thinks you’re strong enough to take another hammering, up it pops. It takes you by the hand and stands you in front of that damn mirror again. You don’t have to be Einstein to work out the message here.

All my life I'd loved flying. The thrill of hearing the roar of the engines sending you hurtling down the runway, off to some new magical place. Don't even get me started on in-flight meals. They're the best thing ever (apart from Service Station food). So why was it that towards the end of my relationship with Herman, the minute I stepped on board my KLM flight, and the doors closed, every part of my mind and body was screaming "Get off, get off, open the doors, I've changed my mind?" It took every ounce of strength I had, and my eyes squeezed shut to keep me in my seat.

If you've never had a panic attack, then you're very lucky. I'll do my best to describe how one feels to me.

**P** is for petrified. When you have a panic attack, your body releases a huge surge of adrenalin. It goes back to the caveman era when we needed all that adrenalin to give us the strength to either fight or flight (more commonly known as run like hell). So in the 'normal' world when you feel this power surge, your instinct is to go on high alert for danger. Another way to try and describe the feeling is to compare it to when you're driving your car, some idiot pulls out in front of you, causing you to slam on the brakes and skid to a halt. Once you know you are in fact safe your body can be left trembling, from head to toe.

**A** is for anxiety.

"Hi, Kristina. Just phoning to see how you are?"

"Hi, Mum. Yeah, I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You don't sound fine. Is something worrying you pet?" Years of suffering from her own mental health had made my mum very intuitive at spotting the signs.

"Well, now you say it, I'm not sleeping very well. Mum, do you ever have that feeling when you are anxious and worried about something but you've no idea what?"

"Oh, you poor love. I know that feeling only too well. It's horrible. You really should go to the doctor and talk to him about it. He might be able to prescribe you a little tablet to calm you down." My mum had been on various anti-depressants literally all her life, so this suggestion came as no surprise.

"I'm loathed to do that mum, but if this doesn't get any better, then I'll need to. Anyway, what have you and Dad been up to?" and with that, I would brush the topic to one side.

**N** is for nodding off. It's flipping exhausting being on high alert all the time. I don't know about other peoples' bodies, but mine was certainly not built for stamina. Immediately after each panic attack, I'd feel like I'd just completed a marathon (the only marathon I would ever complete would be the nutty chocolate variety now known as a Snicker). I would literally



want to just put my head on my arms and sleep. No matter where I was at the time. Not a problem if I was at home but a serious risk if it happened when I was driving. I became very familiar with the local laybys and service stations.

**I** is for I. I don't know why this is happening. I don't like it. I want it to stop. I don't know how to make it stop. I am the only person in the world to feel like this. I don't want to leave the safety of my house in case I have a panic attack. I don't want to fly to Holland in case I have a panic attack on the plane. I'm terrified I have a panic attack in front of Herman, and he thinks I'm stupid. And so the list could go on.

**C** is for chocolate, or cake, or cookies. Whatever comfort food floats your boat. In my case, this was virtually all I could eat. If I added proper, nutritious meals to my calorie intake then I would not be super sexy! Now, who in their right mind would run a marathon (I could just finish that sentence there) on comforting junk food? This demonstrates that I was not in my right mind.

If you need more proof that I was off my rocker then here you go. I can hardly bear to read the words I'm writing as I'm that ashamed. About four years into our relationship I was on the phone with my mum, and the subject got around to Herman.

"Have you split up with Herman?" my mum asked me.

"No. In fact, I'm seeing him in a couple of weeks. It was meant to be last weekend, but he had a business trip to go on. Why do you ask?" This was followed by a moment's awkward silence.

"Oh God Kristina. I really don't know how to say this or even whether I should tell you."

"You're getting me worried now Mum. Just tell me. Please."

"Anne, Herman's mum, phoned me last night, and we were chatting away. She was telling me that Herman was away on a touring holiday with a girl called Monica. Apparently, he went out with her for a few years before he started seeing you. I'm guessing you don't know anything about this?"

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Humour me and create this image in your mind. A lone (slim) figure stood at a crossroads in the middle of a dusty outback desert. On one shoulder sits an ugly little gremlin

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