

This is the note I sent to the head teacher of Dunhill Comprehensive, because things needed sorting out.

Dear Mrs Cleaver,

This might not even help (I hope it does), but I thought someone else should try to explain too, just in case it makes a difference. You seem nice for a teacher, so maybe it will.

At the start of it, I would have completely agreed with you, so I wanted to tell you everything that happened to change my mind. And also let you know that neither of us planned this.

It's not a straight-forward kind of explanation. Sorry about that, but there's a lot you've got to understand, because it was all a bit 'domino effect'. I can't speak for Mike, but I know how I got here and it was a case of all these other unconnected things piling up.

I get rules. Both of us do. I understand they're there for our protection and everything, because sometimes all that stuff you said about people taking advantage is true, but this is different, so we'd really appreciate it if you read this through.

He said not to say this, but he never *had* to tell you anything; you seem to have forgotten that bit. It was both of us that did it (no one pressured me into anything) and it wasn't even in your school.

Anyway, this is it.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Jones.

The rest of it is why I needed to send a note in the first place.

## ***First Monday of Term***

Dougie Klein (my best mate) finished stuffing the crust of his ham sandwich back into the foil he'd brought it in and scrunched the lot up in one fist. The ball rolled across the table surface; my eyes tracked it, but Dougie's didn't.

He was giving me what he must have thought was a subtle once-over, which is what kicked everything else off like a tsunami-causing butterfly. If you want to blame anyone, it really should be him.

It wasn't a subtle once-over.

Dougie was about as subtle as an eighteen-wheeler truck heading my way and given that we don't get all that many juggernauts coming through our town, they tend to stick out. His lips had formed into this unbelievably contented smirk that any muppet could tell had nothing at all to do with his sandwich and he looked suspiciously post-coital. Given that it was lunchtime in the school cafeteria, making sense of that was more than a bit mind-bending.

"Y'alright Nick?" His crooked grin widened as he leant back, cricking his knuckles out in front of him with a dull pop-pop-pop. An exaggerated yawn hinged his mouth open and as he stretched, his biro-stained uniform shirt pulled taut across his skinny chest. My Adam's apple bobbed in my dry throat.

He was no one's idea of a heartthrob and this was the Danger Zone. I hope you can understand why I call it that.

"Yeah. I'm totally *ace*."

When you hit the Danger Zone, it was best to pretend to be completely ignorant of everything.

You want to talk about what's socially acceptable?

At a guess, he'd spent several hours the night before with his right hand clamped around his dick, which would have been all well and good, except I was practically positive he'd been moaning my name while he was at it. The look was one I recognised. Minus the intense creepy factor, I have the exact same glint in my eyes whenever I've had a particularly good jerk-off session. It comes with being nearly eighteen.

The big difference? I've never been delusional enough to think that an experience like that was a shared one, because, unlike Dougie Klein, I have a well-grounded sense of reality, and more importantly than that, a sense of what's actually ok between friends.

This wasn't it.

Ok, to put it in perspective, it wasn't as though I'd never let loose about someone I wasn't going out with. It wasn't even as though I was freaked out because he was gay; that would be irrational and highly hypocritical. I was freaked out because with the kind of fantasies he told me he had, the thought of him getting hard over me made me want to take a bath in hydrochloric acid and scrub my skin off just to make sure I was clean.

Doug smiled again and I grimaced, ducking down to my plate of cafeteria pasta. Head down, I planned to ride it out. The only way to tackle the Danger Zone was to ignore it, right up until you were forced to run away.

As he held my eye contact and his lips pursed around the banana he'd nicked from the sex-ed class the Year Elevens had before lunch in the lab that was our form room, adrenaline was stocking up in my muscles, ready for the sprint. The yellow skin of it was oily with spermicidal condom grease. I felt ill and a tiny bit violated. There are so many varieties of taking advantage.

From the face he was making, Doug didn't think all that much of my pasta either. "Is that even edible?"

I reckoned I had a more solid reason for disgust, but whatever. You risk being shot on the spot for saying there's nothing much wrong with school food. It breaks all the rules of being a teenager, just like what happened because of all of this does. You could say I was getting some practice in.

"It's alright," I managed to squeak out, voice wavering higher than I'd really have liked it to be able to go, but what could I do? At that moment, any distraction was good and talking was a grand one.

Doug grunted, his top lip curling up to show teeth in something of a snarl. "Whatever. Weirdo. PE after, new teacher and everything."

Mrs L had scoffed in the face of lesbian PE teacher traditions, got married and got herself pregnant so fast you'd never think she knew what a condom *was*, so we had a new teacher while she was on maternity leave. That's all I knew. First lessons were always painful, but first lessons with new teachers were always worse. Progressing through to the final year of our school careers had taught us that well enough.

"What's his name?"

He was JTR on the timetable. The small letters were just about visible on the colour-coded lesson plans we'd been handed for the new term. Deciphering the abbreviations was always annoying, especially when you thought you had an awesome teacher and then found out, when you walked into the class, that actually, they were PHM not HDM.

"Roberts or something. Sounds like a wanker to me."

The urge to run let off as I scraped up the last of the cheese sauce on my plate. The threat had passed for then at least, if not permanently.

"Yeah, well, it's PE, en't it? It's in the job description."

Doug's actually an alright guy, when he's not trying to get off with anything in trousers. The problematic, Danger Zone, bits only came about because my classmates did a very simple sum that went along the lines of '*gay guy in class, plus gay guy in class, equals couple*' and repeatedly shoved us together on report projects, forced us to sit together and left us alone at mysteriously empty rooms at parties. This had been going on since a particularly memorable gym class at the pool left me thoroughly out-ed (Speedos were always going to be my downfall; we don't need to get into that) and Doug had jumped on the logic of the equation our genius classmates had constructed.

Unfortunately, for them as well as for Doug, while he fancied me, I didn't reciprocate. The thought of us together made me more convinced there was something to my Nan's idea that my sexuality was actually just a phase, and that really, I was straight. I would have gladly performed cunnilingus on all of the girls in the building, including Mrs Waterman, the seventy three year old librarian, over getting down and dirty with Dougie Klein. When he wasn't in the Danger Zone, he knew that.

Slouched on the lunch bench, he lay the slick banana skin down next to the ball of foil before propping his chin up on his knuckles, hand fisted, the point of his elbow on the table top as he let his gaze slip past me to the side. With a jerked nod, he kicked my shin to get me to look as well.

"Head up. Target's landed."

Angel Boy aka James Carmichael - the one sitting over on the art kids table - was who Doug meant. The boy was a walking wet dream and Doug was not his type, which was pretty lucky for him really, because I would have come over all 'psychopathic caveman' and torn his nuts off if he actually managed to get somewhere.

Angel Boy was off limits to both of us. We had an unspoken pact, but if it was to my advantage, I wouldn't have minded breaking it.

James looked at me once, caught me drooling and actually laughed, before he met my eyes and mouthed, '*No chance, Nick,*' like the overly arrogant, godly being that he is. He did slam my head into the lockers when he went past, but he always did that and it was really beside the point; he actually knew my name, which meant I was way more in-there than Doug.

Thankfully, Doug proved no threat at all, because he had no sense of what was *right*. He designed characters on this combat game he had, purely for wanking over, while Angel Boy got let out of heaven to come to school. They scooped him up in a feather-filled handful at the end of every day and locked his pouting lips back amongst the clouds, while Doug tried to convince me to play *Tekken* using his custom-made characters. He never understood why I had a problem with that. Incompatible really doesn't quite describe Doug and Angel Boy in relation to each other well enough. He was the anti-James.

To add to it, Doug's a pervert.

As one of his reluctant friends, I feel entitled to make that judgement.

We'd had those sex talks that started off when one of your respective other halves, or whoever, had done something totally sick, and you'd split up, and the next thing you

knew, you were getting drunk off stolen cider with your mates, going, "And then he licked my teeth. Who licks teeth?"

With Doug, after the teeth, it always got into more detail than you really wanted to hear. "So, he's on the bed, right? Looking at me like some complete submissive and his eyes were begging me to fuck him raw. He was shaking, but his eyes - which are the important things to pay attention to, I think - were going '*come on, Doug, fuck me. Hold me down and fuck me.*' But he's such a closet case, he punched me. It was kind of hot. You know?"

Our other mate Lucy reckoned he had a bad case of Virgin Brain Kink Obsession (ViBKOb). Like she was way more experienced than either of us with her long string of non-existent boyfriends. I thought if he didn't get a shag soon, he was going to get done for assault, or I was going to snap and stab him to death with my biro during a free in the library. I also thought he'd been playing *Vice City* a bit too much, because all the violent stuff was mental. It's not like we live in down town Chicago. We're in the bloody suburbs.

This is the kind of pressure I was under.

When he was in the Danger Zone, I felt stalked. I felt sexually bloody harassed. We had talked about it; he'd sworn on his mortal soul that he didn't fancy me at all, which meant I had to come up with a better reason if I planned on ditching him. His soul was a crap prize, given the amount of sleep I was losing over this.

Sleep wasn't the only thing I was missing out on, either, which brings me back to how this is all his fault. He did a really good job sticking to me most of the time and nearly always managed to make out I was going out with him any time we were anywhere near anyone I found remotely attractive. That was so bloody frustrating because it wasn't like Stanley Grammar was a thrumming social hub of an awesomely huge gay community.

Most of the guys I could have had, thought I was already taken. Escaping Dougie's clutches was about as difficult as getting away from the curse of the Mummy once you'd gone and done something as stupid as take the lid off the tomb. Friendship and Doug was a very dangerous thing indeed; all I was ever trying to do was back away from him a bit.

Staring at his banana skin, I took a deep breath and made a life-altering decision. There was really only one way forward. I had to find Dougie Klein a boyfriend so that I could get my life back and stop worrying that he had pictures of me on his phone.

That was my only plan for the term; everything else just sort of happened, but nobody took advantage, I swear.