

♥ my FUNNY ♥ Valentine

Omigod . . . under the lamppost nearest Jude's house. . .

[My stomach's just lurched in the weirdest way.]

It's a boy . . . maybe about seventeen . . . he's stopped . . . he's gazing up at the sky. . .

[*What's he looking at?* I wonder, raising my eyes to the clear, velvety sky and its sprinkling of stars. Nice . . . but not as interesting as this boy, who I'm staring at again now.]

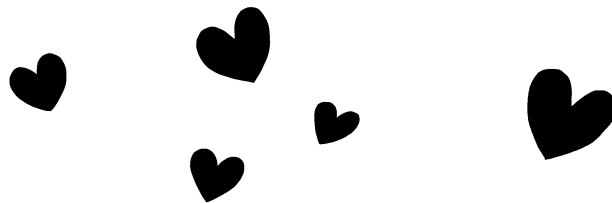
His face is bathed in light from the lamp. . .

[My heart's beating so fast I'm getting *breathless*.]

He is. . .

[I never believed in lust at first sight before.]

He is absolutely *beautiful*. . .



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Font

my FUNNY
Valentine

KAREN M'COMBIE

*For Wendy, for all her help with my research
(ie an excuse for tea, biscuits and gossiping).*

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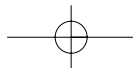
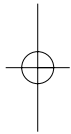


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Boring Brian is blushing and smiling and trying not to crumple under my dad's over-enthusiastic patting.

Ah, but I've got something wrong here – Boring Brian is *not* Ruth's boyfriend. As of now, he is officially her *fiancé*. This is what they've just announced, and this is what all the screaming and back-thumping is about.

"Isn't that lovely, Shaunna? Your sister's *engaged!*"

Mum turns a little too quickly and catches me looking blank-faced. (Lucky she didn't catch me half-a-second earlier when I was wincing from the pain of her and Ruth's high-pitched howling.)

In a panic, I stick on a smile and nod back, hoping I'm coming across enthusiastic enough.

"Mmm!" I manage to mumble non-committally.

It's not that I'm cynical or hard-hearted or anything – *honestly* I'm not. I'm really pleased for Ruth, if that's what she wants. It's just that it's all so . . . *predictable*.

"Oh, Ruth, on Valentine's Day too!" Mum gushes at my sister, letting me relax my fake smile slightly. "It's *such* a surprise! And *so* romantic!"

Now there's my point – that last bit of what my mum's said? It's *so* not true. It is *so* not a surprise that Ruth and Boring Brian are engaged. I mean, they've been going out together since . . . well, practically since the dawn of time, and they've always made it totally clear that their life plan was to get engaged/married/have 2.4 children/an estate car and a Tesco Club Card, and anything else would be a big let-down. I'd have been more surprised if they'd announced that they weren't *ever* going to get engaged, or that they were splitting up. But this? This is about as surprising as the Ten o'clock News having depressing bits

in it, or being told that cats go miaow and dogs go woof.

And as for romantic? They got engaged on *Valentine's Day*. I'm sorry, but that's not romantic – that's just *corny*.

“Oh, Mum, it was so fantastic!” Ruth is saying, clutching Mum's hands. “Brian took me to Franco's tonight –”

Now you see; that proves my point again. Franco's is this glorified takeaway pizza place that's been running ads all week in the local paper saying, “*Hey fellas – why not treat that special lady to a two-for-the-price-of-one pizza deal for Valentine's Day?*” Why not? I'll tell you why not – because it's naff, *that's* why not. Specially when the ad goes on to promise “*a candle on every table!*”, like that's some big wow. It's just that if Boring Brian *had* to propose on Valentine's Day (pass me the sick-bucket, please), why couldn't he do something like . . . I dunno, like . . . ask Ruth to marry him down at the beach at midnight, under the moon and stars, with the dark sea crashing spectacularly in the background. . . Not in sodding two-for-the-price-of-one Franco's, along with every other sucker who thinks a candle rammed in a bottle and some cheesy taped Italian music playing in the background is the height of romance.

“– and then this man came round the tables selling flowers,” Ruth is gushing, “and Brian bought me a single red rose –”

Arrgghhhh! Not a single red rose, Brian! You could have surprised her with a bunch of beautiful tulips; an armful of arum lilies; a fistful of freesias; a bundle of buttercups. . . Ten-out-of-ten for choosing the *least* original flower in the world!

thing, and if I don't escape in two seconds flat I won't have any eardrums left.

"Listen! I'm going to nip across to Jude's and tell her the news!" I say, coming out with the perfect response to get me out of there and still look like I'm impressed by the whole not-very-surprising surprise announcement.

"OK, love," Mum nods distractedly in my direction, too excited to look at her watch and comment that it's nearly ten o'clock and a bit late on a school night to go disturbing the Conrads.

Ruth gives me the sweetest, wibbly-wobbly little smile and wiggles her fingers at me. She's lovely, my sister, even if she does settle for ordinary.

"And remember, Shaunna!" Ruth blinks at me, all dewy-eyed. "There's only *one* person I want as my bridesmaid!"

I'm kind of hoping she's talking about Justine or Penny or one of her other mates when she says that, but I have this funny feeling (called dread) that it's *me* she wants to see in a flouncy frock. . .

As it happens, Mum is wrong: "the Conrads" are only too glad to be disturbed. At least the one who's at home is. Jude flings open the door to me and says, "Thank God! A human!" and ushers me in.

See, my mum doesn't *get* that other people don't live exactly the same as us. You know; two, smiley parents who stay home in the evenings watching *Casualty* and *The Weakest Link*, two nice daughters who work hard (me at school doing GSCes; Ruth at college studying Hotel Management), in our nice, cosy house. Jude's set-up is slightly different – maybe she lives in a practically

identical house across the street, but, in *her* living room, there's no mum tut-tutting at Anne Robinson's rudeness. After being dumped by Jude's dad a few years back, her mum spent six months in a pit of gloom, then rose phoenix-like to take on the world – which involved ditching the “Mrs” tag and getting everyone (including Jude) to call her by her first name (Helen); studying for a degree; getting a whole new bunch of (much younger) friends from university; and basically managing somehow – in the midst of all the hard studying and hard partying – to forget the fact that she's got a fifteen-year-old daughter she's meant to be looking after.

“Where's Helen tonight?” I ask, following Jude through the hall.

“Who knows?” shrugs Jude, reaching for a big cardie that's draped over the end of the banister. “She's on this planning committee for some rally or something about student loans. They're supposed to be organizing it tonight, which probably means they're all in a *pub* somewhere.”

Ooh, that came out a bit bitter. That's the trouble; *I* think Jude's mum is pretty inspirational (Helen's been planning a rally this evening while *my* mum's been planning tomorrow night's *tea*), but I know it's tough on Jude. It's hard to get your head around the fact that your mum is having a better social life than you.

“Um, where are we going?” I ask, as Jude hauls on the duvet-sized cardie and heads for the back door.

“Got to have a smoke,” she replies, waving a cigarette at me. “I'm having a crisis.”

Me and Molly hate the fact that Jude smokes. So does