

PERHAPS?

(Jess)

The following week, I had to cancel our usual game of pool. 'No, Nikki, I can't play today,' I told her, for the third time. 'Come on! Please,' she wheedled.

'I've already explained to you that my arm is incredibly sore. It must have been the nurse's first day on the job at the blood bank yesterday.'

'Then what about a game later in the week?'

I have absolutely no idea why Nikki is always so desperate to play pool, when she loses every single time. However I do know how persistent she can be, so I agreed to a game on Friday while steering her towards the cafeteria in the meantime.

The place was jam-packed, with hundreds of students all talking at once and a very long queue for the food counter. As we took our place in the line, Nikki began to sing along to an old classic song that was blasting out of some even more antiquated speakers.

*'We don't need no education,
We don't need no thought control.'*

People started to stare but Nikki didn't care. She belted out the chorus, each time it came around.

*'All in all, it's just another brick in the wall,
All in all, you're just another brick in the wall.'*

Unfortunately Nikki happens to be tone-deaf and so I was relieved when she stopped singing and switched to playing air guitar. Eventually we arrived at the counter, bought our sandwiches and then managed to find a spare table.

'Oh yuk!' she cried. 'There's something incredibly sticky on this table. No wonder no-one was sitting here.'

'Looks like spilt cappuccino. With sugar.' I wiped my hands on my jeans.

Nikki failed to look impressed.

‘What are you two doing here? Isn’t this one of your pool days?’ asked a deep male voice and Daniel took a seat at our table.

When no reply was forthcoming from either of us, he wisely changed the subject. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘I’m glad to see you because I have to buy a car for my cousin. Any recommendations, Nik?’

The two of them launched straight into a debate about the merits and drawbacks of various types of cars, which I only half-followed. Not for the first time, I wondered why Nikki and Daniel hadn’t become a couple, given their mutual interest in cars and how well they get along together. However my friend always had her eye on some other guy.

I was just beginning to think about grabbing another coffee, when I became aware that Daniel was leaving.

‘I’ve got a meeting with my CAD teacher, so I’ll catch you both later. But thanks, Nik. Good advice about Ford Lasers.’

When we were alone again, Nikki began fiddling with one of her overall straps. I’ve known her for long enough to recognise this as a sign.

‘What’s up?’

There was silence.

‘I’m waiting.’

‘I didn’t want to tell you but . . . I’ve got some news.’

‘Good news?’

She nodded.

‘Go on.’

‘I might have a job. Maybe.’

‘Really?’

‘My auto teacher knows a motor mechanic who wants to put on an apprentice. He gave me his contact details and told me to apply.’

‘And you did?’

‘Yeah. I’ve got an interview this Thursday.’

‘Do they know you’re female?’

Nikki nodded, grinning nervously.

‘That’s fantastic!’ I shouted. I leapt up to hug her, and then hurriedly sat back down again. ‘Maybe we should wait till we hear that you’ve actually got the job before we get too excited. Remember the last time?’

Nikki’s face crumpled and instantly I regretted my words. A month ago, she’d been convinced that she had an apprenticeship, only to have a cousin of the garage owner appear at the very last moment and snatch the job away from her.

‘If this one doesn’t come through, I don’t know what I’ll do,’ Nikki now wailed.

‘Hey, when I said that it’s too early to celebrate, I didn’t mean that it’s time to consider euthanasia.’

‘I want the job so much, Jess.’ She rested her chin on her hands.

‘And hopefully this time, you’ll get it.’

She sighed.

‘Would you like a drink?’ I asked, to distract her.

‘I wouldn’t mind another can of Coke,’ she replied in a small, rather pathetic voice.

‘Do you think that you might have a bit of a problem with Coke? What number will this be for the day?’

‘So how many coffees have you already had?’ she snapped back. ‘And while we’re at it, how many cigarettes have you smoked today on your road to lung cancer?’

I smiled to myself. I can deal with Nikki much more easily when she’s annoyed, than when she’s feeling sorry for herself.

After getting our respective poisons, we were on our way back to our table when Nikki began tugging on my arm.

‘Don’t look now,’ she whispered, ‘but Gary is sitting over to your left, near the wall.’

I spun around and narrowly missed colliding with two mature-aged students.

‘The guy you like? Is he the one in the red shirt?’

‘Get serious! No, blue T-shirt. Curly dark hair.’

‘Where?’

‘Don’t stare, Jess!’

‘I’m not! I’m just trying to work out which one he is.’

‘Over there, near the pot plants.’

‘Oh yeah. Not bad. I’d give him a score of 75%. Maybe even 80%.’

‘Stop gawking! He’s going to see us,’ Nikki hissed, pulling so hard on my arm that I almost dropped my coffee.

‘Settle down,’ I said, ‘he’s not *that* gorgeous.’

She just raised her eyebrows at me.

Back at the table, I began to tell Nikki about an essay I was writing for my Community Development course. I assumed that she’d be interested, since it was about women’s participation in non-traditional trades during the Second World War.

‘What? You’re worried that your essay is too long?’ Nikki exclaimed, completely missing the point. ‘You’ve accidentally written too much? How is that possible?’

‘It’s an interesting topic and I guess that I overdid the research.’

‘Well, I prefer to learn through practical experience,’ she scoffed. ‘I don’t have to write essays to become a motor mech.’

Nikki finished the last mouthful of Coke and managed to land her empty can in a nearby rubbish bin. She can be such a cocky little brat sometimes.

‘Library, library, LIBRARY!’ I shouted at her.

Nikki snorted. ‘I’ve told you before not to use four-letter words in my presence!’

‘Seven letters, to be exact, which you would know if you spent more time inside one. Hey, you might even learn how to spell the word if you opened more than a car manual!’

‘Oh. So when am I fixing your rust-bucket of a car?’ Nikki asked. ‘Sunday week, isn’t it? Perhaps that might be a good day for you to start teaching me how to spell?’ She narrowed her eyes into two little slits. ‘That is, of course, if you honestly believe that the ability to spell is more important than any mere mechanical skill.’

'I've just remembered something,' I said quickly. 'Throughout history, there's been many truly brilliant people who couldn't spell. Albert Einstein, for example.'

'Really?'

'And nowadays it's even less important, because we have computer programmes that automatically correct bad spelling.'

'You little brown-nose!'

'If my nose needs to be brown in order to be mobile again, I can assure you that it's worth it.'

We both laughed.

As it was time for class, we made our way out of the cafeteria. Outside, I turned to face my friend.

'Good luck with the job interview,' I said. 'Here's hoping that this time you get it.'

Nikki grinned at me and waved a pair of crossed fingers in the air, before she marched off in the direction of the trades area.