

two

How cool was Will Freeman? This cool: he had slept with a woman he didn't know very well in the last three months (five points). He had spent more than three hundred pounds on a jacket (five points). He had spent more than twenty pounds on a haircut (five points) (How was it possible to spend less than twenty pounds on a haircut in 1993?). He owned more than five hip-hop albums (five points). He had taken Ecstasy (five points), but in a club and not merely at home as a sociological exercise (five bonus points). He intended to vote Labour at the next general election (five points). He earned more than forty thousand pounds a year (five points), and he didn't have to work very hard for it (five points, and he awarded himself an extra five points for not having to work *at all* for it). He had eaten in a restaurant that served polenta and shaved parmesan (five points). He had never used a flavoured condom (five points), he had sold his Bruce Springsteen albums (five points), and he had both grown a goatee (five points) *and* shaved it off again (five points). The bad news was that he hadn't ever had sex with someone whose photo had appeared on the style page of a newspaper or magazine (minus two), and he did still think, if he was honest (and if Will had anything approaching an ethical belief, it was that lying about yourself in questionnaires was utterly wrong), that owning a fast car was likely to impress women (minus two). Even so, that gave him . . . sixty-six! He was, according to the questionnaire, sub-zero! He was dry ice! He was Frosty the Snowman! He would die of hypothermia!

Will didn't know how seriously you were supposed to take these questionnaire things, but he couldn't afford to think about it; being men's-magazine cool was as close as he had ever come to an achievement, and moments like this were to be treasured. Sub-zero! You couldn't get much cooler than sub-zero! He closed the magazine and put it on to a pile of similar magazines that he kept in the bathroom. He didn't save them all, because he bought too many for that, but he wouldn't be throwing this one out in a hurry.

Will wondered sometimes — not very often, because historical speculation wasn't something he indulged in very often — how people like him would have survived sixty years ago. ('People like him' was, he knew, something of a specialized grouping; in fact, there couldn't have been anyone like him sixty years ago, because sixty years ago no adult could have had a father who had made his money in quite the same way. So when he thought about people like him, he didn't mean people *exactly* like him, he just meant people who didn't really do anything all day, and didn't want to do anything much, either.) Sixty years ago, all the things Will relied on to get him through the day simply didn't exist: there was no daytime TV, there were no videos, there were no glossy magazines and therefore no questionnaires and, though there were probably record shops, the kind of music he listened to hadn't even been invented yet. (Right now he was listening to Nirvana and Snoop Doggy Dogg, and you couldn't have found too much that sounded like them in 1933.) Which would have left books. Books! He would have had to get a job, almost definitely, because he would have gone round the twist otherwise.

Now, though, it was easy. There was almost too much to do. You didn't have to have a life of your own any more; you could just peek over the fence at other people's lives, as lived in newspapers and *EastEnders* and films and exquisitely sad jazz or tough rap songs. The twenty-year-old Will would have been surprised and perhaps disappointed to learn that he

would reach the age of thirty-six without finding a life for himself, but the thirty-six-year-old Will wasn't particularly unhappy about it; there was less clutter this way.

Clutter! Will's friend John's house was full of it. John and Christine had two children — the second had been born the previous week, and Will had been summoned to look at it — and their place was, Will couldn't help thinking, a disgrace. Pieces of brightly coloured plastic were strewn all over the floor, videotapes lay out of their cases near the TV set, the white throw over the sofa looked as if it had been used as a piece of gigantic toilet paper, although Will preferred to think that the stains were chocolate . . . How could people live like this?

Christine came in holding the new baby while John was in the kitchen making him a cup of tea. 'This is Imogen,' she said.

'Oh,' said Will. 'Right.' What was he supposed to say next? He knew there was something, but he couldn't for the life of him remember what it was. 'She's . . .' No. It had gone. He concentrated his conversational efforts on Christine. 'How are you, anyway, Chris?'

'Oh, you know. A bit washed out.'

'Been burning the candle at both ends?'

'No. Just had a baby.'

'Oh. Right.' Everything came back to the sodding baby. 'That would make you pretty tired, I guess.' He'd deliberately waited a week so that he wouldn't have to talk about this sort of thing, but it hadn't done him any good. They were talking about it anyway.

John came in with a tray and three mugs of tea.

'Barney's gone to his grandma's today,' he said, for no reason at all that Will could see.

'How is Barney?' Barney was two, that was how Barney was, and therefore of no interest to anyone apart from his parents, but, again, for reasons he would never fathom, some comment seemed to be required of him.

'He's fine, thanks,' said John. 'He's a right little devil at the moment, mind you, and he's not too sure what to make of Imogen, but . . . he's lovely.'

Will had met Barney before, and knew for a fact he wasn't lovely, so he chose to ignore the *non sequitur*.

'What about you, anyway, Will?'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

'Any desire for a family of your own yet?'

I would rather eat one of Barney's dirty nappies, he thought. 'Not yet,' he said.

'You are a worry to us,' said Christine.

'I'm OK as I am, thanks.'

'Maybe,' said Christine smugly. These two were beginning to make him feel physically ill. It was bad enough that they had children in the first place; why did they wish to compound the original error by encouraging their friends to do the same? For some years now Will had been convinced that it was possible to get through life without having to make yourself unhappy in the way that John and Christine were making themselves unhappy (and he was sure they were unhappy, even if they had achieved some peculiar, brain-washed state that prevented them from recognizing their own unhappiness). You needed money, sure — the only reason for having children, as far as Will could see, was so they could look after you when you were old and useless and skint — but he had money, which meant that he could avoid the clutter and the toilet-paper throws and the pathetic need to convince friends that they should be as miserable as you are.

John and Christine used to be OK, really. When Will had been going out with Jessica, the four of them used to go clubbing a couple of times a week. Jessica and Will split up when Jessica wanted to exchange the froth and frivolity for something more solid; Will had missed her, temporarily, but he would have missed the clubbing more. (He still saw her, sometimes,

for a lunchtime pizza, and she would show him pictures of her children, and tell him he was wasting his life, and he didn't know what it was like, and he would tell her how lucky he was he didn't know what it was like, and she would tell him he couldn't handle it anyway, and he would tell her he had no intention of finding out one way or the other; then they would sit in silence and glare at each other.) Now John and Christine had taken the Jessica route to oblivion, he had no use for them whatsoever. He didn't want to meet Imogen, or know how Barney was, and he didn't want to hear about Christine's tiredness, and there wasn't anything else to them any more. He wouldn't be bothering with them again.

'We were wondering,' said John, 'whether you'd like to be Imogen's godfather?' The two of them sat there with an expectant smile on their faces, as if he were about to leap to his feet, burst into tears and wrestle them to the carpet in a euphoric embrace. Will laughed nervously.

'Godfather? Church and things? Birthday presents? Adoption if you're killed in an air crash?'

'Yeah.'

'You're kidding.'

'We've always thought you have hidden depths,' said John.

'Ah, but you see I haven't. I really am this shallow.'

They were still smiling. They weren't getting it.

'Listen. I'm touched that you asked. But I can't think of anything worse. Seriously. It's just not my sort of thing.'

He didn't stay much longer.

A couple of weeks later Will met Angie and became a temporary stepfather for the first time. Maybe if he had swallowed his pride and his hatred of children and the family and domesticity and monogamy and early nights, he could have saved himself an awful lot of trouble.