

Faking It

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Damn!

Erica's alarm has been beeping for half an hour before it wakes her. She still has to wash off last night's make-up, on top of everything else. She is going to be late for work.

The morning intrudes through her thin curtain – she had shut it before going out last night, knowing that she would probably be too tired to remember to do it when she got home. She forces herself out of bed and heads for the shower. A few minutes later she emerges, looking slightly more awake, dries herself and slips into her uniform, before giving her dirty-blonde hair a quick going over with the hair-dryer. Finally, she shrugs on her jacket and literally runs out the door, slams it to make sure it is properly shut, then locks it behind her. Her clock reads 6.30.

She is fifteen minutes late. This means the loss of half an hour's pay because they round up.

'Erica Marshall, if you're late again there'll be someone else cleaning them toilets this time next week,' says Rob, the squat supervisor with the BO problem. Somehow he makes it sound like a threat. Somehow she is able to take it as one.

She squirts Toilet Duck around the rim like she does at this time every morning (well, normally fifteen minutes earlier). Then she checks the sinks, hoping that no-one has vomited in them since they were last cleaned. This morning she's in luck. She squirts some multi-purpose cleaner onto a sponge and wipes the white ceramic. The label on the bottle promises that after use the surfaces will shine, a star of cleanliness burns brightly off the edge of a tap. Somehow her taps never shine like that. Finally, she cleans her first floor of the day, dragging her mop around in weird shapes to keep herself amused; circles, diagonals, wiggly lines. Inside these shapes are strips of light, as though discarded by the string head at the end of her stick.

Erica glances upwards at the real strip lights on the ceiling, then at one of the mirrors on the wall behind every sink. Opposite the wall with the mirrors is the row of toilet cubicles, and Erica wishes that she could bring all the doors to such a shine that they would reflect like the wet floor reflects the ceiling lights, and then do the same with every wall until she would be stood in the middle of a room of mirrors. Then the room would seem to stretch to infinity, as though this little room could encapsulate the entire universe.

She catches herself before drifting too far into her imagination, puts her mop back in her cleaning trolley and pushes it out the door. On to the next job.

Is this the most pointless job in the world? Erica wonders. No sooner has she mopped so much as an inch of the floor of the train station's entrance lobby, than it is dirtied again by the step of someone's shoe. She could easily spend the entire day just cleaning the same square foot over and over again and it would still never stay clean for more than a few seconds. She looks out through the clear-glass doors that slide across to allow passengers to enter, looks at the single-decker buses pulling up and pulling out, spilling or soaking up people on the pavement. All those people, going somewhere while she is stuck with her mop and bucket. She wonders where they are headed. A woman in a sleek black trouser suit walks past her, mobile phone to ear.

'I don't care what he says, *he's* not making this deal...'

Erica imagines her going to a high-powered business meeting, standing in front of a table surrounded by men, all of whom are intimidated by the authority this woman holds.

'Hey, Erica!'

She snaps back to reality, hoping that she hasn't been spotted day-dreaming by Rob again. But no, it's ok, it's Lucy.

'Hey there Erica. You going tonight?'

'Going where?'

'You know, to see *her*.'

‘Oh, that. I’m not sure.’ She glances away to avoid the probing eyes of her friend, and notices Gary standing by the entrance. Tall, dark and handsome; a cliché but a true one. Erica fancies him like mad in that security guard’s uniform, and his almost military-short hair helps give the impression of strength. Lucy follows her gaze.

‘Hey, snap out of it my girl. He might be nice to look at but he’s more trouble than he’s worth.’

‘What’d you know about it?’ Erica snaps back, harsher than she means.

‘I know he got that lass...what’s her name, used to work at Tesco’s? Mary, that’s it. I know he got that Mary pregnant then left her alone with the bairn, an’ he’s being a real sod over the child-support. He’s no good for no-one that lad.’

‘Yeah, I know, I know. Anyway, I don’t think I can come.’

‘Come on, you’ve got to! You always miss her. Why not?’

‘Mum wants me to baby-sit tonight.’

‘That kid sister of yours is sixteen now. She can be left for one night.’

‘Well...you don’t know what she’s like when she’s left by herself.’

‘Then she can stay at a friend’s house. Come on Erica, it’s not like these appearances happen every night.’

‘Look, I can’t promise, but I’ll try.’

‘That’s my girl. Now, I’ve got to get back to the toilets by platform 11 before BO Boy notices I’ve gone. Call me after we clock off and I’ll give you a lift to the gig. Ok?’

‘Ok. See you later.’

The clock reaches eleven and signals the beginning of her dinner break. Erica heads towards WH Smiths. Once inside she heads towards the newspapers and magazines, ignoring the glossy women’s life-style magazines, and the more austere broadsheet newspapers. Instead, she heads for the back corner to the Special Interest section, reaches out automatically

(knowing each title's place off by heart) and takes her selections to the till. Each bar code is scanned, Erica counts out exact change. She heads to the canteen with her purchases under her arm. This is her favourite part of her working day. Sitting down with a plate of chips (she did not have time to make any sandwiches this morning) and a cup of coffee, she spreads the magazines out on the table in front of her; *UFO*, *Paranormal Times*, *Conspiracy of Silence*. She takes a red felt-tip pen from her pocket and opens the first magazine, her eyes skimming each page as she flicks through them quickly. She holds the pen like a dagger, ready to thrust downwards at any moment, but she turns the last page without making a single mark on any of them. She tries not to be disappointed before moving on to *Paranormal Times*. No, no, no, maybe...no, no. Ah! A maybe-yes! The pen descends and circles like a vulture. *Killer Owl Attack! OAPs Menaced in Shopping Centre Sensation!* Yes, that's definitely a possibility. She glances at her watch. Her break is nearly over. She looks across the canteen and notices Gary sitting with a couple of other security guards, laughing, eating bacon and eggs. She wishes she could get him alone for a couple of minutes, maybe ask him out to the pictures or something. But not while he's with his mates.

Gary looks up and notices her gaze.

'You alright Erica?' he shouts over to her.

'Yeah...nothing...sorry,' she stutters, before picking up her magazines and hurrying out of the canteen. She has hardly touched her dinner.

Having walked up three flights of stairs (the lift, as usual, being out-of-order) she lets herself into her flat, picking the mail off the mat as she does so. She identifies them as bills without really looking. Pulling the curtains open allows the sun-light to continue its work of fading the print on the newspaper articles blue-tacked to the walls. In the corner of the room sits Erica's little secret – her computer. She had to smuggle it into the flat in the middle of the night so that no-one saw it. If she had been seen the flat would have been turned over by now. She switches it on and enjoys the hum as it boots. She sits down in her arm-chair and slips her shoes off. The flat feels stuffy, like there's been no new air allowed in for days. She opens her bag and takes the *Paranormal Times* out, flicking through it until she finds the story she circled in red before tearing it out. She stands up, wincing as she

increases the pressure on her aching feet, and reaches up to her bookcase, taking down two tatty note-books and a ring binder. On the cover of one note-book she has written 'Earth Chronology', and 'Iris Chronology' on the other, both in the same red felt-tip she circled the article with. She opens the former, flicks to the first empty page, and writes down the details of the news report on it. Then, she opens the other (which had half the pages torn out) and does the same on the first page. She tears the pages out that she has written on, and opens the ring binder. Now, this is difficult. Which incarnation was it (if it was her at all)? There's no details, no clues. No mention of a beautiful blonde seen fighting the beasts, or a pensioner in a Russian Doll of cardigans distracting them while some handsome young man sneaked up on them, on the sly. She is tempted to put it in the 'blonde Iris' section, because she is Erica's favourite, and she likes the idea of her having more adventures than the others, but decides she can't. After a moment she turns to the 'Parallel/Alternative universe/Unknown Iris' section, but then puts the book down goes over to the computer, unplugs the phone and inserts the computer's modem into the socket before double-clicking on the web browser icon and checking her e-mail. Among the usual spam there was one from 'rsc2004' headed 'Secret Info'. She opened it;

Dear Erica,

Thanks for the tip-off about the model of IW's bus, it'll really help me narrow my search down. There's so many red double-decker's in London, I feel like every one I don't get a good look at could be *hers!* Now I'll know which to ignore. You should come live down here, you don't get red buses up there, do you? Still, I suppose it means when you *do* see one it's almost certain to be her!

Now, keep this quiet, but there's an Unconvention happening down here in a month's time. Real fans only, we don't want loads of Casuals turning up. It would be so cool if you could come. You could stay with me! My place is pretty small, but it'd only be for a couple of nights. I'll let you know the date when it's confirmed.

Anyway, heard anything new? There's not been much news recently.

Let me know if you hear anything. TTFN,

Rachel.

Erica sighs. An Unconvention. She's always wanted to go to one, but they're always in London and it costs too much to get down there, even assuming she could get the time off. She doesn't reply to it now, she has got to check the newsgroups tonight and her internet time has to be rationed carefully to keep the bill down. She opens her newsgroups browser and clicks on 'rec.arts.iris'. There's a 36-message thread called 'Why the 4th Iris sucks', followed by a 28-message thread called 'Why the 4th Iris rules'. She scans down the list, looking for references to the article she found in *Paranormal Times*, some confirmation, negation or just speculation. 'Which Iris is sexiest?', 'Which is your favourite Iris companion?', 'Who else thinks that Iris is too good for the Doctor?'. Finally, 'Paranormal Times article', posted by 'the13thIris'. Erica opens it;

Saw an article in today's 'PT' that sounds like it might be about Iris

(p25). Anyone confirm or deny?

One reply from ‘redbusfanatic’;

I know the editor and he told me about this story ages ago.

Unfortunately I can’t reveal what he said because any more details might breach the magazine’s rule of anonymity for their sources.

Erica ‘Oh’s in frustration. She hates people like that – claiming to have all kinds of exclusive inside information and then refusing to pass it on, just to put themselves above the rest of fandom. Knowledge is power. The more enigmatic you are, the more people pay attention to you in case you really do know something. She closes her internet connection, re-connects her phone and dials Lucy’s number.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi Lucy. It’s Erica.’

‘Hi-ya. What time do you want me to pick you up tonight?’

‘Sorry Lucy, but I can’t come. I know I said I’d try, but my Mum say’s she’ll never speak to me again if I don’t baby-sit tonight.’

‘And that was supposed to be a threat to *stop* you going out? Well, I suppose if you can’t come you can’t come. Shame though. Dunno when she’ll be back round here again. It’s not exactly a glamorous venue is it?’

‘There’ll be other nights. Anyway, I’ve got to go. Have a good time.’

‘I will love, don’t you worry. See you at work tomorrow.’

‘Bye.’

‘Bye.’

Erica puts the phone down and glances at her watch. Four o’clock. That gives her four hours to get ready. She likes to be able to take her time and

enjoy the preparations whenever one of these nights comes along. Starting with a proper shower to wash away her personality with the dirt, allowing Erica to be slipped off like her uniform.

I'm a sensible, thirty...*something* woman, thinks Lucy. All glasses not totally full are in need of top-ups. Fit young men should be ogled but without any of those silly fantasies that they might notice you and fall head-over-heels. Ok, I pay my idiot tax on Saturdays even though I know my six numbers won't come up, but everyone does that. All in all, I'm level-headed as they come. So why, she wonders, do I feel like a school-girl on her first date? It's absurd.

She sits amid the kind of cacophony normally caused by the weekly Cub Scout meeting. Around her sits about one hundred and fifty people, including one or two familiar faces but mostly strangers, probably from out-of-town, here just for the night. From the animated way people are communicating – waving arms, raised voices, sub-conscious rocking motions – the rest of the crowd seems to share her level of anticipation.

There hasn't been a service in this church for a couple of years now, the pews have been sold so tonight's congregation sits on uncomfortable blue plastic chairs. Where the altar once stood is now two chairs, which although plastic-backed have cushions glued to the front, indicating the special significance of the people soon to be sat there.

It's not like this is the first time she's been to one of these events. But she's hardly eaten today, worried she'd bring it back up. She can't stop fidgeting, the wait is interminable. She is surrounded on all sides by all manner of people, from early twenties to late sixties. Indeed, such a combination is having a conversation next to her.

'Met her? Why, we're like *that*,' explains a grey-haired grandmother with a face wrinkled like a tree-trunk to a young man, twisting wrinkled fingers round each other. 'I'm always at these events you know, and she notices these things. "Evie," she says, "my second shadow." That's what she calls me – her second shadow.'

'I'd love to meet her,' say the young man, rather nervously, and his voice struggles to make it through the din. 'But I don't know what I'd say.' He is

wearing a tight black top, with black trousers that would have looked reasonably smart had he not sown on pink flames the length of the outside legs, and replaced the seat of the pants with tartan. On his top is a four-letter word spelt in glitter.

‘That’s what its always like when you meet someone you admire. Be bold, lad, be bold.’

‘I wonder which one it’ll be.’

‘Don’t know love. Bet you’re hoping for the blonde one, eh?’ Evie replies with a grin.

The young man smiles and does not answer.

Lucy is distracted by movement caught by the corner of her eye. A door at the back of the church has opened – the door to the vestry – and a figure emerges. All the conversations in the church stop. A man, maybe late twenties/early thirties, fairly tall and thin with short spiky hair, glasses and designer stubble. He is wearing blue denim jeans and a t-shirt (brave considering how cold it is) with a red, double-decker bus on it. He halts before the congregation, throws his arms out in a bad impression of a theatrical orator and announces;

‘Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great privilege tonight to welcome that famous adventurer, wicked wit, fearless femme fatale, the deliciously decadent, beautifully bohemian, awesomely angelic lady who you have all been waiting for. The most stylish heroine in this or any universe, Ms Iris Wildthyme!’

The audience’s silence is snapped unanimously as the crowd stands and chants;

Iris! Iris! Iris!

Behind him, the vestry door opens again, and a woman, with long blonde hair, slim build and wearing a blue cat-suit steps into the main body of the church.

The young man stands to one side and allows the woman to take centre stage. She blows theatrical kisses to the crowd and performs elaborate bows

to much applause. The chanting continues, a joyous sound that echoes off stone walls built to withstand this kind of adoration and worship. Lucy finds herself screaming, and others break the orderly chant by whooping and personal pleas for the attention of the woman before them. Lucy has never been a church-goer, but remembers a midnight mass she had attended as a child at the request of her grandma that the whole family go. She remembers the hymns sung that night by people with their best suits and behaviour. And if you had taken all the joy in all the hymns sung that night and added it together it still wouldn't amount to this cry. She wishes Erica had been able to come. If ever there's a girl who needs a little joy in her life, it's her.

After a couple of minutes the man indicates that the audience should sit and be quiet. After another couple of minutes, they do and are.

'Thank-you everyone, thank-you!' says Iris, when the second round of applause has dimmed enough for her to get a word in edge-ways. 'It's a pleasure to be here tonight. I've always said that you're nothing without your fans, and it's wonderful to see so many of you here tonight.'

'My name is Peter and I'm going to be conducting a basic question and answer session with Ms Wildthyme...'

'Iris, dearie.'

'...with *Iris*, in which I'll be asking some questions as well as taking questions from the audience. Just a couple of things before we start. I'm sure I don't need to remind you all that Miss...that Iris is a guest, and should be treated as such. Also, remembering what happened last time we held one of these events, if anyone is here simply to berate Iris for not arriving to save the life of a loved one, you will be asked to leave. While we sympathise with your loss, Iris can not be held responsible for the fall of every sparrow.'

'Well said, pet.'

'Finally, merchandise will be available at the end of tonight's event. You'll be able to buy t-shirts in assorted patterns and designs, including the one I'm wearing now. There will also be Iris key-rings, book-marks, belt-buckles, as well as fanzines and fan novelisations of Iris's adventures, based on the reports in the underground para-media. Now,' he says, turning to his

guest, 'Iris, why not begin by telling us about your latest exciting adventure. Just how far have you travelled to be here tonight?'

'Oh, Peter, you mustn't think that I spend my left flying from one thrilling and dangerous escapade to the next! Nononono. Even space sirens such as myself need some time off, some 'r & r'.'

'Oh, of course.'

'I mean, I often go for long periods without toppling any evil empires, or fighting off marauding monsters or anything like that. Although, as it happens I *have* just staged a daring escape from a dungeon but you don't want to hear about little things like that.'

'Go on, tell us!' shouts a voice from the crowd.

'Oh, no,' says Iris, 'honestly there's no real story there. All I had to do was evade a squad of an alien emperor's most highly trained troops using only my wits and beauty. I mean, I freed all the slaves as well of course but that was too simple to be worth telling. All it took was the re-wiring of the palace's central security computer inside the three minutes it takes for the anti-tamper bomb to go off, with only the metal wire from a bra, a lipstick and one of my high-heeled shoes. Anyone could have done it, really.'

'It sounds fascinating Iris' says Peter eagerly. 'Why not tell us from the beginning?'

'Well...ok. If you're sure. But you will stop me if you find it dull won't you? I materialised the bus in the court of Emperor Illias the Magnificent. I stepped out of the doors and saw all around me the nobles of the planet Patrices. They were in the middle of their holiest festival, and to interrupt it was punishable by death. So, there I was expecting to be gobbled up whole – the Patrices are huge, crocodile-like creatures with razor-sharp teeth and stomach acid so dangerous their guts are lined with lead – and suddenly everybody starts applauding. Turns out the Emperor was a huge fan of mine, and the festival was actually in my honour!

'I had such a hard time getting away in the end. The poor creature was besotted with me. Absolutely refused to let me go. Said I had to marry him. Well, as you can imagine I wasn't having any of that nonsense and I told him straight. So, then he had me chained up in a filthy dungeon without any

company except the guard who brought me my food. He wouldn't let them talk to me. The only time I was allowed out of the cell was to visit the little girl's room, and even then I had the guard stood outside the door. Can you *imagine*? And I wasn't allowed to wash or sort my make-up out until I agreed to marry him.'

'How did you escape, Iris?' shouts an impatient male voice from the crowd.

'Well, aren't we the premature one?' Iris replies. 'Hasn't anyone ever told you it's better if you can wait a while before you splutter forth like that?'

The crowd laughs appreciatively, and Lucy feels an odd flutter of pride that her hero has such poise and wit.

'Since some of us can't control ourselves,' she continues, 'I'll cut to the chase. Literally. Well, what happened was that the guard who brought me my food every day had made a bad career decision. Vero his name was. You see, he didn't like to see people chained up, especially someone who was so obviously made to *exude* style. He was a sensitive boy. Anyway, eventually I convinced him to free me, and we ended up being chased through the palace catacombs by the Emperor's personal guards. So, I thought that we should release all the slaves from their little cells to create a diversion. Vero kept watch while I re-wired the entire system to open all the cell doors it was keeping shut. Obviously I stayed on until the slaves had taken over and established democracy, with Vero as their elected leader. I love a happy ending, don't you?'

'Iris,' came another shout from the crowd, 'where's your bus?' There was a collective groan over the dusting off of that particular 'classic', and Lucy shakes her head sadly. Some Iris fans are real saddo's, she thinks. Give the rest of us a bad name.

'It's just fine honey, blocking up a...' There was a pause and Lucy thought she saw a look of uncertainty on Iris' face, before she continued 'temporal leak thingy. But it's ok because it's using the energy to top up on fuel. Now then loves, any questions for me that are actually worth asking? Don't be shy now.'

There is about two seconds of silence. Then everyone tries to ask their questions at once.

A couple of hours later, and the side-door to the church opens, and out steps a lone figure. Some of the noise from inside, as the Iris fans talk, compare clothes and queue up for commemorative key-rings, flows out with her until she staunches the flow by closing the door. The contrast between the church packed with human warmth and the bitter outside world makes her shiver uncontrollably, despite her winter coat, until her body gets used to the temperature. At this hour it is so cold that the air seems to have frozen, and breathing is like swallowing sharp ice. Her breath acting like a personal smoke-screen, she sets off towards the gate, hands in pockets, fingers wrapped around £10 notes.

The door to the church opens behind her as someone else leaves. She increases her speed.

‘Iris! Wait!’

The voice is soft, male, rushed.

She turns back to face him. He is shaking so much that the pink flames on his trousers appear to be burning. It is dark in the church-yard (much to her relief), but he looks quite nice in a plain kind of way.

‘I saw you sneaking out. I used to come to this church you see, when I was a kid. So I knew there wasn’t another way out and you’d have to come back through the church. So I kept an eye out for you. Not that I’m a God-botherer or anything. I don’t blame you for sneaking out – they’d never have let you go otherwise.’ He speaks as though trying to cram every second that it’s his turn to talk with as much information as he can.

‘What is it you want, darling?’ she asks.

‘Well, it’s just that I’m a huge fan of yours – and you were great tonight, by the way – and, I just wanted to tell you. I had a bit of trouble a couple of years ago, you don’t want to hear about it, but I was a bit down, you know. Things weren’t working out, I was a bit lonely...anyway, like I said, you don’t want to hear about that. But then I heard about you, you see. About this woman who travelled around the universe, having all kinds of wild adventures and whose life was full of excitement and colour. And it really helped, you know? I started reading the novelisations of your adventures,

and following the fanzines, and looking for reports of you in the alternative news-sheets. And it pulled me through, it really did, just knowing there was someone out there, someone like you. And everyone else feels the same. I know they do. Like tonight, I never felt an atmosphere like that when it was still being used as a church, never. So, I just kinda wanted to say...thank-you.' He pauses, and looks embarrassment at the ground. 'You wouldn't have thought I'd rehearsed that, would you?'

She looks at him, this shy young man with his real-life problems and his belief in her. 'You did just fine,' she says, not sounding quite like she did in the church earlier. 'Anyway, I've got to get back to the bus. Good-night honey, hope to see you next time I make a stop.' She walks away, dematerialising into the night.

Erica day-dreams her way through work, barely even wishing the boss would discover deodorant. She dreams of being Iris, with Gary as her companion and lover, travelling the galaxies in the bus. She isn't unblocking a loo – she is defusing a bomb. She isn't mopping the floor, she is wrestling with an alien that can control any object made of wood. She time travels the only way she can – forwards, one second at a time – towards clocking off time, and barely notices when she arrives.

She does not have a booking tonight – the next one is an out-of-town gig in a couple of days - so she has to fill her evening. She smiles to herself; she knows what she will do. Under her pillow is a book of writing paper. Some of the pages are covered in Erica's scratchy hand-writing. It had started just as a place for her to note down some stories she could tell on stage. Nothing flashy. She found that when she was on-stage she could improvise. It was weird, like she really wasn't herself from the moment she stepped in front of the audience. She always wonders about the audiences. Surely, some part of them knows that she can't possibly be the real Iris, but then, sometimes when she's in full-flow on stage, *she* almost believes that she is. Perhaps it's just easier to believe a lie sometimes, if it makes life feel better. If it's useful.

‘I don’t know how you can live in that Hole-in-the-skirting-Board,’ her Mum would say, normally as Erica was about to leave her house. ‘You’re quiet as a mouse, but you don’t have to live like one.’

But, in the costume with the lights on her, she feels so different. She prefers being Iris to being Erica. Erica never has adventures. And one day, she had realised that what she was doing on stage was making up stories, like writers do. And then she started writing more of them, longer, more complicated to the point where she would never be able to remember it all. And then she realised what she was doing and her secret was born; she was writing an Iris Wildthyme novel. A big, colourful book where the bus travelled around magical worlds, and whatever she wanted could come true, where any strange character she thought of could come along for the ride. She doesn’t do much reading, but she has a library card and once tried to read a book every month. But they were all so dull. She doesn’t want to read about the ordinary world. She lives in that all the time; why would she want to read about it as well? No, she wants adventures. She wants thrills. She wants handsome heroes with brooding faces and long hair. She wants monsters; proper monsters who want to take over worlds. She wants magic. And slowly, she realised that she was writing the book she always wanted to find in the library, but never did.

She starts a new chapter. She has been thinking about it for ages. There is a vicious ruler who wants Iris dead, because Iris always beat tyrants, and there was...*him* of course. Erica often wonders about him. She can’t understand how he can turn Iris down like he always does (or so the rumours say). She’s wild, vibrant, exciting. They could join forces, be a team. But he doesn’t work like that. He prefers to surround himself (mostly) with ordinary people. Just people he picks off the streets. He could travel with anyone, anyone in the whole universe. Yet he nearly always picks humans, from roughly the same time period just because they happen to get involved in his latest adventure and are eager for more. But that’s so silly! If he wants company he could offer the chance to princesses, or exotic aliens with super-powers. What if she were to bump into him on the street one day, would he offer her the chance to travel around with him? *Her?* Surely not, the idea is too ridiculous.

But that is the great thing about her story. Erica could make *anything* happen. So, she is going to write a happy ending. He will be trapped in a dungeon, and Iris (blonde Iris, the seriously *fit* Iris) will rescue him and he will realise that they belong together, and he’ll give up his silly little blue

box and whoever he is travelling with and he'll start a new life with Iris, and Erica will write adventures for them. She picks up her pen, turns to the first blank page, and starts to write.

It's Friday. She gets the weekend off – some poor lass struggling for money to pay for her degree comes in instead. It's an odd day – everyone knows how close they are to their days off, but they still have eight hours to scrub through before they reach them. But freedom is alluring, and no-one manages to keep their minds on their jobs. There are nights out to organise, people need to be reminded that they've got to get the first round in. Erica let her mind wander and imagines the real Iris walking on stage in the middle of a show. In this, one of her very favourite fantasies, Iris puts her arm round her and pretends that Erica is another of her incarnations as opposed to an impersonator. They swap anecdotes before the audience, both adlibbing furiously but faultlessly, ending with a song, a duet of 'The Winner Takes It All', which brings the house down.

'In a good mood are we?' asks Lucy from behind her as she mops. Suddenly she realises that she must have been singing her part of the duet out loud. Erica and Lucy hadn't been able to talk yesterday, so Lucy starts to fill Erica in on what she thinks she missed at the 'event'.

'It was wonderful! All those people together, and then *she* walked in. I screamed! *Me!* And to think, whenever there's some boy band on the news surrounded by screaming girls I look down on 'em!'

Erica tries not to look too pleased as Lucy proceeds to unwittingly compliment her performance. 'Oh, she was gorgeous as ever. The blonde in the cat-suit, you know. So glamorous. You should have been there. Really. Next time, tell your Mum where to stuff her baby-sitting. You can't be ruled by her all your life. Take a leaf out of Iris' book and stand up to her.'

Erica glances over Lucy's shoulder and sees Gary joking with a couple of the other security guards. He glances up, and their eyes meet for a moment. He smiles, and she looks away quickly. *Oh my God*, she thinks, *he's coming over!*

Lucy looks round and spots Gary on his way.

'Don't worry,' she says, 'I'll not play gooseberry.' She picks up her mop and bucket and walks away.

Gary walks across to her accompanied by his mates. She smiles shyly.

‘You look happy,’ Gary says.

‘Er...yes...I’m o-ok,’ she stammers.

‘Good,’ says Gary. ‘Listen, Erica, I’ve been thinking. Do you like going to the pictures?’

‘Yeah, yeah I do,’ she replies eagerly.

‘Do you wanna see the new Bond film?’

He surely isn’t asking...is he? ‘I’d love to,’ she answers.

‘Cool,’ Gary says, ‘cos Roy wants to go and he hasn’t got a date!’ His mates, who have been waiting for the punch line, almost choke on their laughter. Roy joins in, the lights reflecting off his bald head, his second chin wobbling in amusement.

‘Go on Erica,’ spits Gary through the laughter, ‘it’s his birthday. Its not everyday you’re 57.’

Erica’s cheeks stain bright red, and she runs into the ladies’ changing rooms, goes into a toilet cubicle and locks the door, before sitting on the closed loo-top and only then does she allow herself to cry. How could she fallen for it, hoped he was being serious? How stupid could someone be? And how is it that she can hold an audience several times the size of that group entranced any night of the week, but she stumbles over her words so much in front of a few lads?

She kicks her bag across the floor in frustration, and finds it heavier than her foot expected. Then she remembers; her Iris costume is in there, so she can take it to the dry-cleaners straight after work, to have it ready for tonight’s show. Perhaps...perhaps if she put it on she could find some of that...*presence* she was missing now, and she could face down the lads as Iris. She thinks about it for a moment, before giving up on the idea. If they knew about her...hobby she’d never hear the last of it. But she doesn’t wear the costume while she writes her novel, and she has written Iris dialogue in it. So, leave the clothes. She dries her eyes with a tissue, and re-does her make-up in the mirror next to the sinks. Standing up as straight as she can,

she walks back out of the changing room. She'll show them. She'll be sharp and witty. She'll make everyone laugh at *them* for once. She'll...

They have gone, all she can see are un-red buses and unglamorous passengers. Her resolve vanishes. She won't see them again until first break, and the canteen always seems to suck the volume from her words. Plus she will have to face them down in front of everybody – what if it went wrong? She'd never live it down – it would be every day. She knows that her moment has passed, she will not have the guts to stand up to them again.

But that's ok, that's fine. Because she has the show tonight (and other nights), she has her novel and her fantasies. She will cope. She has Iris.

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