

EMMA HART

Not Safe For Work



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For DAVID, without whom this would
not have been possible.

And for KARL, without whom it would
be meaningless.

What Sixteen Is



WHEN I WAS sixteen my boyfriend tried to kill me. Not very hard, but when I tell this story people tend to look at me like I'm crazy. That's usually a tipper that it might not be normal. It wouldn't be possible to tell this story without changing the names of the characters. Not wishing to misleadingly use other people's names, I've simply called everyone involved after inanimate objects.

We were doing school sport one day when someone pointed out that there were a couple of big leather-clad guys leaning on their motorbikes watching us. It turned out one of them was Table, a guy I'd gone out with briefly when I was in third form and he was in sixth, before leaving him for his best friend Pickles. Anyway, one thing led to another and next morning I'm in the Deputy Head's

office getting a bollocking for smoking and riding on the back of a bike while in school uniform. Lesson? Always carry a change a clothes.

Turns out Table has these three friends, and they're all very close. Table's friend Standard Lamp is tall, wiry, pony-tailed, covered in tattoos and one of the sweetest and most selfless people I've ever met. They're friends with two brothers, Crawdad and Catfish.

After I've been going out with Table about a month, Crawdad and Catfish's parents go on holiday, and the rest of us basically move into their house. My mum knows where I am, I'm still going to school, but I've basically become a sort of combination mum and girlfriend for this bunch of guys. A murlfriend, if you will.

Table loves me. He cooks me dinner, teaches me how to use a butterfly knife and play Strip Poleconomy (not at the same time). He may wear a lot of black leather and look like a brunette Billy Idol, and he might have a tendency to be overly aggressive and have flashes of violent rage, but I know him. He's fiercely loyal, devoted to his Mum, and he loves the theatre. Unlike the guy I went out with before him, he's never hit me. He's bright and frustrated. He's not coping very well with the death of his last girlfriend or getting kicked out of the army for getting caught with drugs. (He says he was framed. I say that'd be a hell of a coincidence.)

Me, I'm falling in love with Catfish. He sings and plays guitar—mostly he does Elvis covers down at the Bowling Club, but there's talk of a recording contract. He's got this little dimply smile like a human version of John Barrowman. He's got me listening to Randy Travis and liking it.

There comes a day we're briefly alone in the hallway, he reaches for a cupboard behind me, and suddenly we're playing Bobbing for Tonsils. Then he says something to me that I shan't repeat, as its awesome power as a flawless pick-up line makes it too dangerous to release on an unsuspecting public. An interruption prevents us setting a new land-speed record for trousers.

Things get very tense. Aware I'm slipping away from him, Table asks me to marry him. I tell him we have to break up. He presses me. Whatever's wrong he can fix it. I admit I'm in love with someone else. He says he'll share. I refuse. He asks who it is. I won't tell him, on the grounds that if I do, he'll kill Catfish. I leave.

A couple of weeks later I run into Catfish in the chippy. He tells me he took about an hour of listening to Table talk about me and this mysterious guy before he couldn't take it any more. He said to him, listen, we have to talk, but first you have to drink this rigger. Then he told him.

Table got up, walked out of the house and down the road. Catfish followed him, and sat with him

at the top of the Ben Venue cliffs in the freezing dark for four hours so he wouldn't jump.

I extract the salient fact from this story, which is that a guy who'll do that for a friend isn't going to have sex with me.

One night about a week later I get a call from Table asking me to go round to his place. He sounds weird. When he lets me in he's wearing cammo gear and sunnies and carrying a loaded crossbow. I figure I'm not leaving in a hurry.

So I sit down and he holds the crossbow to my head and talks to me. He's had a fight with the boys, and if they don't like him any more what's the point. They're his life, everything's wrong and nothing will make it right. Not once does he mention he knows about me and Catfish.

Gradually it dawns on me that he thinks this is the only way he can get anyone to listen to him. And I can do that, I can listen to him and let him let himself be talked down. I'm not scared. I'm annoyed, because I did the right thing and didn't have any Catfish and I'm still being punished for it anyway. I'm a little apprehensive that Table's going to make me have sex with him before he'll let me go.

But I do talk him down and the crossbow gets too heavy to keep holding to my head and he lets me go home. I run all the way, crawl into bed and bawl my eyes out. I tell absolutely no-one. That

was 1988. I spoke about this for the first time in 2004.

This is sixteen to me. When people talk about teenagers as if they're children this is what I think about. When they demonise hoodie-wearers I get myself all in a tangle. People used to judge Table as dangerous and stupid because of the way he dressed, and he was a sweet guy who was just a bit fucked up. I argue this, and my partner says, "Wait a minute, isn't that the guy who tried to kill you?" And all I can do is shrug and say, "Yeah, but not hard."

[PREVIEW ENDS...]