

Words for Things

WE WERE TALKING ABOUT MONICA LEWINSKY.

My friend had googled her, some late-night internet rabbit hole, and had realised that, when it all happened, she'd been just twenty-two.

Fuck, I said.

I know, right? Twenty-two.

Neither of us said anything more for a bit. We rocked our buggies absent-mindedly back and forth. Sometimes I rocked the buggy when the baby wasn't in it. Sometimes I rocked shopping trolleys.

We'd just come from our baby swimming class, thirty minutes of trailing wet bundles in thermoprene suits, who ranged from bemused indifference to howling impotence, around a hotel's basement pool, singing made-up extra verses to old nursery rhymes. *If you see a crocodile, don't forget to scream!*

We were standing outside the hotel's back entrance, preparing to push our buggies their separate ways. The babies were uncharacteristically silent, glazed and stupefied in the way I remembered being after swimming as a child, although

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they hadn't exactly done much of the work. It was spring, but cold. My friend tucked a stray hair under her yolk-yellow hat. Our babies, born within a month of each other, were just old enough now that our hair was starting to grow back: soft, stubborn wisps, and the relief of no more frantic hairballs choking the plughole.

Well, my friend said. I want to get home for his nap. So I should get going.

Twenty-two, I said. Do you remember what you thought at the time?

How stupid she was, I think.

Yeah, me too.

We'd been sixteen, seventeen, and certain it was Monica Lewinsky's fault. I remembered discussing it with school friends in the sixth-form common room. The stupid wee bitch, we'd called her. The silly wee slag. And the dress, like! The president had come to Belfast a couple of years earlier. He'd ousted the Power Rangers to turn on the Christmas lights; there'd been cheering crowds in Donegall Place, and fireworks. The Leader of the Free World. What did Monica Lewinsky think she was at? His daughter was more or less our age: frizzy hair and braces. We felt scundered for her, and disgusted.

I remember my mum saying how charismatic he was, I said.

That's one word for it.

Ha.

And do you know that The Dress was only from Gap? It was just this . . . shirt-dress thing. Bog-standard blue.

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I had imagined some chi-chi cocktail dress. Marabou feathers, a plunging neckline.

Yeah, my friend said. She never got it cleaned to wear it again cause her friend said she looked fat in it.

We both had a fit of giggles and the babies regarded us with their disapproving stares.

I'll walk with you a bit, I said. I turned the buggy and we fell into step. We were both wearing trainers, hers trendier than mine. It had been a joke between us for years, my impractical footwear. I thought of how substantial my first hi-tops had felt, after years of flimsy ballet pumps, the cheap ones made out of cardboard and fake leather. When we'd discovered how well made men's brogues were we'd laughed and laughed.

Her bus was pulling in to the stop, and we ran for it.

Come back to mine, she suddenly said, for baby rice and Ella's.

But there was already a buggy on board, and the maximum allowed was two. We hugged a quick goodbye, chlorine and cold cheeks, and see-you-next-weeks.

It wasn't for the babies we did baby swimming, of course.

A minute or so later, my phone buzzed: a stream of emojis telling the story of two splashing whales and two fishes abruptly and tragically separated. Then another message, tactfully upgrading the whales to dolphins, with the crying-laughing face.

I didn't know when we'd started to communicate in emojis, but I was pretty sure it had coincided with parenthood. A way of acknowledging how forthright, earnest,

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certain we used to be about everything. Or maybe it was just sleep deprivation.

I sent the same face back, then searched for the bowl-of-rice and the strawberry and wrote: Enjoy your pre-digested feast.

She sent me the Edvard Munch face, and some x's.

There was no way I'd make it home before my baby fell asleep. But if I started walking now, I could sit in a cafe and google Monica Lewinsky for five minutes before he realised the buggy was no longer moving and woke to express his outrage.

As I walked, I thought of our early twenties. We'd spent them putting the world to rights over cocktails of Żubrówka and apple juice at bars that used to be handbag factories, or in bedsits over mugs of herbal tea, the same freewheeling conversation that continued for years, it seemed, lightly spanning the places we and our other friends variously sojourned, internships, relationships, the occasional Alpha course. Brussels, Paris, London, New York: big cities with bright lights, flatshares and failed love affairs and flea markets on Sundays. We'd thought we were living the dream, and if we were unhappy, well, it was our fault, our failure to live up to it all.

Once, at a bonfire party, we'd talked late into the night, long after the others had gone, moving our chairs now and then towards the warmth. At one point we'd looked down to realise the embers were smouldering around us. It had

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seemed, at the time, a metaphor for something.

I took my phone from my pocket and swiped it. Do you remember the bonfire? I texted, still walking.

Her message flashed back before I'd even suffixed some flames.

There'll soon be less distance, it said, between our babies and us-then, than us-then and us-now.

It took me a moment to get my head around it.

I sent back the smiling-crying face and the Edvard Munch.

On a whim, in the aisles of the Costcutter, I bundled the necessary packets and tins into my basket, and when I got home I made Fifteens.

They were called Fifteens because you needed fifteen of everything. Fifteen digestive biscuits, fifteen marshmallows, fifteen glacé cherries – the stickiest, most artificial, reddest sort. You bashed the digestives with a rolling pin, halved the cherries and marshmallows, mixed up the whole lot with a tin of condensed milk, then rolled it into a sausage and shook over desiccated coconut. You didn't even need to cook it, just chill it for a bit. It was a ridiculous recipe, and one that could only come from a place where grown men and women would, with a perfectly straight face, order a square of Lumpy Bumpy to have alongside their pot of tea. A place whose facade was allowed, or needed, to slip just that much, no more.

We had made Fifteens in primary school – everyone made them in primary school – and I still remembered the

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stout headmistress sliding her finger around the inside of the tin of Carnation condensed milk and shivering, rolling her eyes with pleasure.

She'd taught us penmanship, and stepped into the classroom unannounced to drill us on times tables. Her hair was tight with perfect curls and she walked with a rubber-tipped stick which she sometimes thumped on the floor. Once, in Supermac, at her wits' end with our bad behaviour, my mum had threatened my sisters and me with the idea that our headmistress could be right around the corner. We'd turned into the next aisle, and there she was. I'd been in awe of her for years after that, as if, rather than the force of my mother's summons, the power to appear had been hers alone.

I hadn't thought of the headmistress for years. I tried to work out how old she might be. I realised that, by my friend's logic, I was nearer to her age then than she would be now. If she was still alive. She had retired when we left primary school. I tried searching for an online obituary, though I didn't know her first name, didn't know, in fact, if she'd taught and lived under entirely different surnames. No, I realised; that couldn't have been the case. Teachers back when she started out had to resign upon getting married. I googled some more. I came across a young Nell McCafferty, in the mid-seventies, leading a charge of thirty women into a pub. They ordered thirty brandies and one pint of Guinness. When the barman refused to pull a pint for a woman, they each drank a brandy then refused to pay, on the grounds that their order had not been fulfilled. I

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could still hear my headmistress's voice. I decided she would have approved entirely of the enterprise.

I closed the little window on my phone. It was time to wake the baby, still out for the count in the hallway, or he'd never sleep tonight. Before I woke him, I cut a corner off the roll of Fifteens. It was too sweet, of course: far too sweet. I thought once more of the headmistress and her theatrical pleasure. Then I ate two or three more slices.

The baby woke beaming, as if seeing my face was the most wondrous thing ever, and I ached with love for him. We spent the afternoon in bed, feeding, cuddling, practising tummy-time. I amused us both, or at least myself, by making up more alternative verses for songs. *Three little people in a flying saucer flew round the world one day, they looked left and right and they really liked the sight so they came for a holiday.* The baby was in a playful mood, gurgling and babbling, so I took a video of him squealing with pleasure as I kissed his toes and sent it to my family group. We'd communicated more, in the few months since the baby was born, than we ever had before, and it was almost entirely through the medium of him.

awwwwwwwwwww

my youngest sister said, almost immediately

sooooo cute

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give him a kiss from his aunty

My youngest sister messaged like the Millennial she supposedly was and I definitely wasn't, despite the barely-four years between us: one line at a time, rarely any punctuation, and all lower-case. If she and her boyfriend were annoyed with each other, they would zap back and forth gales of messages one word at a time.

seriously

you

are

such

a

complete

and

utter

dickweed

sometimes

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My middle sister, from whatever time zone she was in, sent hearts-for-eyes.

Mum is typing . . . my phone said.

Mum is typing . . .

There wouldn't be any response to the video from my dad. He caught up on all his messages once or twice a week, texting like the digital immigrant he was: long, single texts riddled with elisions and compressions (cu l8r), muscle memory from when you – or rather he – paid per message for all phones on the family account, and characters were limited.

Mum is typing . . .

Mum is typing . . .

I thought about my first-ever Nokia, and how miraculous it had seemed back then: the little envelope that showed a new message had come in; the string of flashing letters slowly scrolling across the small grey-green screen.

Mum is typing . . .

My mother, true to form, eventually sent a gif. She had recently discovered gifs and communicated almost exclusively, if often erroneously, through them. This one was a key moment from *Flashdance*. Despite having three daughters, I doubted she'd ever seen the film. On the spur of the moment, I rang her.

Hello? she said, sounding surprised.

Hi, I said. I just thought I'd ring.

Oh, lovely, she said. I'm in the Tesco's car park.

Oh, sorry.

No, no, it's nice to talk. Hang on.

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There was a pause while she did whatever she did. My mum never phoned me, in case she disturbed me, she said, or woke up the baby. But I called her almost every other day now.

You saw the video? I said, when she came back.

Yes, did I not reply? she said. I thought I'd replied.

No, no, you did. Have you ever seen *Flashdance*?

What's *Flashdance*?

Never mind.

Well, my mum said brightly, so how are you?

Good, I said. He's very sweet, isn't he?

Oh, he really is. I remember you at that age, when you suddenly started crawling. Just suddenly, out of nowhere. It was Christmas Day. You couldn't even sit up properly, but there you were, hauling yourself across the floor to get to some shiny wrapping paper.

She laughed. Then she said:

You'll never be loved so much again.

Sorry? I said.

It goes so fast, she said. Then she said, brisk now, Well, I'm at the car, and it's starting to rain, and I've got to get the dinner on.

Mum? I said.

Sorry? she said. Hello?

No, nothing, I said.

Keep sending the photos and videos. We love seeing him.

I will, I said.

My mum, in the Tesco's car park. Starting the engine so

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the heat would come on, then sitting there for a minute, before edging out of the parking space and joining the traffic on the slip road to the Sydenham bypass. The clouds over the Holywood hills would be thick and lowering in a waterlogged sky. The Stena Line ferry chugging in over the lough; the Irish Sea.

You'll never be loved so much again. It was no more than I'd been thinking myself, since my son had woken. But I felt the ache all over again, the inevitable and necessary complication of that love. Something my friend and I discussed almost every time we met: was it harder, these days, raising sons or daughters? And how were we not to fuck it up?

What do you think of, I said to my husband that evening, when you think of Monica Lewinsky?

It was Friday night so we were having a glass of wine while we looked at our phones.

My husband didn't miss a beat.

I did not, he said in a hick voice, while continuing to swipe at his screen, have sexual relations with that woman.

But he did, though.

My husband looked up at me.

Course he did. Did anyone ever doubt it?

Well – yeah. Or at least – they wanted to.

Plausible deniability.

The baby monitor squatting in between us crackled ominously. We waited to see if it was something or nothing. It was something.

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I'll go, my husband said, even though he'd gone the time before.

Thank you, I said. If parenthood was seventy per cent trying to get a baby to sleep, twenty per cent trying to keep it awake, and ten per cent texting each other lists, then maybe this was true love.

While my husband was gone, I texted a new name to my friend: Anna Nicole Smith. We'd spent the afternoon sending names back and forth. Tonya Harding, Amy Winehouse, Shannen Doherty, Britney Spears. Because the thing was, it wasn't just Monica Lewinsky. It was all the other women too, who used to be sort-of laughing stocks, and who – you suddenly realised – turned out to be something else entirely. Once you started googling, it was hard to stop. Anna Nicole Smith's son, Daniel, I now newly knew, died suddenly in her room in hospital, while visiting her and her new baby, his half-sister. The toxicology report suggested he'd ingested some of her methadone prescription, along with other medication. At his funeral, she made them open the coffin and tried to climb inside: she begged them to bury her with him. He was twenty, and she was only thirty-eight. She died of an overdose herself a few months later.

Good one! my friend messaged back. A moment later, she texted: Jade Goody.

Jade Goody! I replied.

My friend sent the hand-painting-its-nails.

How could we not have known? I wanted to text, but I couldn't think of the right emoji to make it funny.

You knew, and didn't know. Sometimes it seemed that all of my life had been knowing and not-knowing. As if it was a technique rather than a state; a safety mode, a way of coping. There were words for things now that we hadn't even realised were things, because there were no words for them.

Do you remember, I said when my husband came back, Sinéad O'Connor ripping up the picture of the Pope?

Vaguely, he said. Not really.

Here, look, I said, and I found it on my phone.

She'd been performing on the American programme *Saturday Night Live*. In rehearsal, she'd held up a picture of orphaned children. *We have confidence in the victory of good over evil*. But when she did it live, the picture was of Pope John Paul II and she ripped it up, once, twice, three times, and scattered the pieces. *Fight the real enemy*, she said, looking straight at the camera. The clip ended with her taking off her headset and blowing out the church pillar candles on the table beside her.

We watched the twenty-nine seconds again, and then again. Every time, you felt something creeping up and down your spine.

Bloody hell, my husband said.

I can't believe you don't remember that, I said. Maybe it wasn't such a big deal in England.

I took my phone back and leaned against his shoulder.

We would have been eleven at the time, I said.

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I remembered the shockwaves. One cardinal, in an interview on TV, said she was using voodoo or ‘sympathetic magic’ in an attempt to injure the Pope.

The cigar, my husband said, after a bit.

The what?

That’s the other thing you think of. Or at least that you try not to.

A moment later, he said, I’m completely knackered. Shall we just go to bed?

It was nine thirty-five, which was at least five minutes past our bedtime. We’d been going to try to watch something.

Yeah, I said.

He set off the dishwasher while I plugged in the monitor to recharge.

There are times in my life, I said. It was a phrase that had recently entered our private lexicon, a shorthand of sorts.

I know, he said. It’s nine thirty-seven now. Come on.

I couldn’t sleep. It was too cruel, the nights this happened. Your exhausted body, flush with adrenalin, primed to jump at every cough and whimper, eventually refused to settle at all. I googled Monica Lewinsky again, and found the photo of the dress. It was on a cached eBay link, where someone was offering it, *not the actual dress itself lol*, for sale for a hundred dollars. Wouldn’t some other museum want it? someone had asked in the questions. Like I think the Smithsonian has the original?

I looked at the dress, at pictures of Monica now, at pictures

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of Monica then. You didn't even need to type *Lewinsky*, the internet knew you wanted her. I found a fuzzy picture that someone had scanned in from a college yearbook.

I thought – of course, again – of myself back then. Of myself at twenty-four, twenty-two, nineteen.

We had done the Starr Report in my first week in college. It might, in fact, have been my first-ever lecture. The lecture theatre was packed to the rafters with not just freshers, but second- and even third-year students. The young lecturer was something of a celebrity on campus: I had picked that much up already, along with the slang for the dining hall and the porters' lodge and the woman who, to my shame, made my bed and emptied my wastepaper basket every day. They were all words that I couldn't bring myself yet to use, out of conviction they'd sound ridiculous coming in my accent, coming from my mouth.

The lecture was on *prac. crit.*, 'practical criticism', the newest of the skills – or concepts – I had to master. How to close-read and analyse a text. I tried not to think of our teacher at GCSE, fresh out of teacher training and earnest, pressing us to explain why Wilfred Owen had selected a particular word. My friends and I sniggering, passing notes.

Because it rhymes? I'd said when she finally called on me, just sarcastically enough that my friends would definitely know it and she might not.

It's utter shite, all of it, the girl beside me had whispered. Sure he's there in the trenches, being shelled to fuck. He

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wants to get his poem on the page, he doesn't care what word he uses and why.

The lecturer, who was slim and angular, allegedly quick-tempered and also reputedly brilliant, stalked up to the lectern and immediately began reading aloud, while we fumbled for a copy of the handout being passed along the rows.

At one point, Ms. Lewinsky and the President talked alone in the Chief of Staff's office. In the course of flirting with him, she raised her jacket in the back and showed him the straps of her thong underwear, which extended above her pants.

He was reading from the Starr Report. He looked up, made a joke about the American versus the British word for undergarments and paused for laughter. Everyone, myself included, obliged. Carry on, he said suddenly, pointing at a blushing boy with steel-rimmed glasses near the front.

Ms. Lewinsky testified, the boy recited, 'I believe he took a phone call . . . and so we moved from the hallway into the back office . . . He put his hand down my pants and stimulated me manually in the genital area.'

Straight out of the Haynes Manual on Sexual Intercourse, he said, and we all laughed again, though I didn't know what the Haynes Manual was.

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Let's hear that passage again, he said, and picked on someone else.

I believe he took a phone call . . . and so we moved from the hallway into the back office He put his hand down my pants and stimulated me manually in the genital area.

I'm still not getting it, he said. Again.

In the third or second row, I was desperate not to catch his attention. If he called on me to read aloud, or give an opinion, I'd freeze, I knew I would, and make a mockery of myself.

After the fourth time, he took pity on us, or maybe just got bored.

The *ellipses*, he said. Why am I not hearing the ellipses? The ellipses are the most important part of it.

He read aloud himself, then, in a falsetto voice.

I believe he took a phone call – dot, dot, dot – and so we moved from the hallway to the back office – dot, dot, dot, DOT. Poor prim, flustered, trying-to-be-dignified Monica, he said. I mean, look at those ellipses AGAIN – dot, dot, dot – dot, dot, dot, *dot*. Think about what they're saying, or trying not to.

While I tried to make myself invisible, while the president continued talking on the phone, while the lecturer strutted and joked, she dropped to her knees and performed ('performed', the lecturer said, how much of all this is a performance, and for whom?), she *performed* oral sex.

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He finished his call, and, a moment later, told Ms. Lewinsky to stop. In her recollection: 'I told him that I wanted dot, dot, dot to complete that. And he said dot, dot, dot that he needed to wait until he trusted me more. And then I think he made a joke dot, dot, dot that he hadn't had that in a long time.'

Randy Bill hasn't come to completion, the lecturer said, but like him we're done with Monica for now, although she may yet come back to haunt us.

And we laughed and laughed: at Monica, with relief, at the trope (a new word on me) of the dissatisfied husband, and moved on to Wordsworth.

At the end of the hour, everyone, myself included, gave a round of applause. It had been inconceivable to me that you could put a verbatim account of giving a blow job alongside the poems of Wordsworth, and read them with equal attention and care.

I still remembered it, after all these years. Dot, dot, dot. Dot, dot, dot, *dot*. What was said, and wasn't, and why.

He was meant to be very charismatic, my mum had said. That's one word for it (my friend).

The beginning of the Starr Report, which I found now on my phone: *When she introduced herself to him, he said he already knew who she was.*

At least we –

I began to text my friend, my phone jumping to anticipate each word. It was 2 a.m., but her baby was teething

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too, and even at this time of night, or morning, the little ticks often went instantly blue to show she'd read it.

At least we—

Then I stopped. I held my phone in my hand for a while, and concentrated on breathing, until I could feel my lungs release and fill, then deleted the characters, one by one.