

TWO PLUMBERS

JEAN FLYNN

IT'S WEDNESDAY, AND I'm having trouble with my pipes. I'm still in my underwear, hair in a towel. My shoes are somewhere, definitely not where I put them yesterday, and every pair of tights I pull out of my drawer is laddered. I stub my toe on my way to the bathroom. 'Swearwords!' I yell, clutching the injured digit.

And then the toilet won't flush.

I pull on a fitted black dress, grab my phone and look up emergency plumbers. 'Evenflow Plumbing' comes up first, so I ring their number and talk to Doug, who says he'll send Justin over in the next hour. Then I ring work and tell them I'll be late. Clare doesn't care. She agrees that sewerage is definitely an emergency, and anyway, plumbers are hot, aren't they?

He's very hot. I mean, proper undies-catalogue-model hot. I almost text Clare, but have to follow Justin outside and try to pay attention to what he's saying.

'I'll have to find the blockage. Roots, probably. Usually is, with old houses. That massive oak, that'll be it I reckon.'

He's standing at my front gate with one hand resting on the fence post. I wasn't really expecting him to be so completely attractive, and now I feel nauseated and wonder if I have cereal stuck in my teeth.

‘So,’ I say, pushing my lips out slightly, ‘how long will it take?’

‘Couple of hours to find the spot, then if it’s straight-forward I might get it done today. If it’s under the footpath it’s trickier.’

‘Oh, right. Um, do you want a cup of tea before you start?’ I try to keep my eyes on Justin’s face and not his tanned forearms.

‘Nah, nah, better not.’ He smiles then takes a step towards me. ‘So, you’ll be right if I turn the water off? Want to fill up a few buckets first?’

I go inside, quickly put a coat of Lash Architect on then fill the kettle and the sink and the water jug. My hair’s a complete mess so I push some bobby pins in, then I flick my ballet flats off and step into black patent stilettos. When I go outside again Justin is on the phone.

‘Yeah, yeah . . . Geez . . . Okay, I’ll come right now . . . See you soon.’

He looks up as he puts the phone into his shirt pocket.

‘Look, I’ve got to go,’ he says. ‘It’s, ah, it’s urgent.’

And this isn’t?

‘I’ll be back.’

Before I can say ‘When?’ he gets into his ute and drives away. How rude, I think, to arrive for a pipe emergency, stand in my garden looking like a Hard Yakka advertisement, then disappear without a proper explanation. *Tradies!* My stiletto heels sink into the dirt.

I decide to ring another plumber. I choose Mick’s Plumbing, which ‘Specialises in Drain Unblocking’. Mick assures me that he’ll get to my place by noon and won’t leave until the job’s done.

I text Clare: *1st plumber v hot OMG but scared him off with enormous cleavage 2nd plumber on way. See you tomoz.*

Mick is maybe mid-fifties, beer gut, full head of hair but matching tufts emerging from his shirt collar. After a tour of the bathroom he gets to work, digging up my daffodils to locate The Root. I go inside, make a Moccona, grab *Marie Claire* and sit on the couch.

I’m halfway through ‘What’s Your Fantasy?’ when the doorbell rings. I leap up, pour coffee down my shirt and am still saying ‘Shit-shit-shit,’ as I run to answer the door. It’s Justin.

‘Hi,’ he says.

I’m holding my blouse out from my chest and attempting to blow cool air onto my burning bosoms.

‘Ah . . . are you okay?’ he says.

‘Yes, I . . . yes. But look, you’re too late. I’ve called someone else.’

‘I saw.’

‘Because, it was an emergency, you know, and you just—’

‘I know. Sorry about that. I had to—’

‘Can you hold on a minute?’

I dash into the bedroom and take off my wet blouse. I don’t care how hot he is, I think, he can’t just come back and expect me to be all, *whatevs*.

I pull on a T-shirt and go back to the door. Justin’s got one arm on the doorframe and the other in his pocket. I have some kind of hot flush, clearly from the coffee and not the sexy plumber staring at me. We share some awkward silence while I imagine him leaning forward and kissing my neck, then my phone rings and I step backwards and say, ‘I’ve got to go.’

It’s Clare on the phone. She claims to be looking for some Excel file but is probably on Facebook.

‘So, what do you mean, he’s gone?’

‘He just is. No explanation. I even winked at him and bit my lip all sensually.’

‘Did you?’

‘No.’

‘Well, you should have. What about the second one? Any good?’

‘Maybe for a sugar daddy.’

Mick finds the root when I’m halfway through ‘Which Size is Sexiest?’ and am having my third Lindt ball.

‘I’ve dug the hole, but I’m gonna have to come back tomorrow to clear it all out and replace the pipe,’ he says.

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Shouldn’t take too long.’

I decide to stay at Mum and Dad's for the night as they have a functioning bathroom. Also, when I ring up, Dad mentions that he's making a chocolate pudding.

'And I doubled the sauce ingredients,' he says.

I do like a bit of extra sauce.

'But we've no cream. Could you get some on your way?'

The supermarket is almost empty. I go in and turn straight up the dairy aisle and bump right into someone. He drops a carton of milk and it breaks open, squirting all over the floor and my ballet flats. I gasp and he says 'Shit.' We look up at each other. It's Justin.

'Sorry,' he says.

'No,' I say, 'it was—'

'Christ.'

I don't really want to talk to him. I'm in a hurry to get to Mum and Dad's, and anyway, I wouldn't have had to move out of my house at all if he'd fixed my pipes in the first place.

'Your shoes,' he says.

'Don't worry about it. My fault,' I say.

Then I notice his eyes. They're all red around the edges and bloodshot in the middle. Either he's been to a highly-chlorinated swimming pool, or he's been crying.

'Are you okay?' I say, before I think that probably it's none of my business.

He looks at the floor, at all the milk. Then he bends over and picks up the carton.

'My mum is . . . she had a car accident this morning.'

Oh God. His mum's in hospital and I just assumed that he's a rude bastard.

'Is she . . . Will she be okay?' I say.

'Yeah. She's alright. Bloody lucky though.'

Milk is dripping out of the carton and onto his pants. He's still in his work clothes. We both stand there for a few seconds, until a supermarket boy appears with a mop and a bucket and a sign that says 'Slippery'. Justin moves out of the milk spillage at the same time as I do and our arms touch.

'How's the blockage?' he says, stepping away slightly.

'Getting fixed tomorrow. I'm staying at my mum and dad's tonight. Dad's making chocolate pudding.' I hold up the cream.

'Right, well. I'd better . . .'

'Hope your mum comes good.'

I turn and head over to the checkout. My toes are all wet.

The next day I go to work as usual and Mick calls at lunch time to tell me that everything's all clear and I'm right to use the toilet again.

When I get home I notice that the hole's been filled in and none of the daffodils survived. I also see a small esky sitting next to my letterbox. I look inside. There's a sandwich, an apple and two sausage rolls. Nothing has been eaten. Why would a plumber work all day without touching his lunch? Then I see an Evenflow sticker on the side and realise that it's not Mick's esky at all. It's Justin's. It's filthy, but I take it inside and put in on the kitchen bench, and think about the milk on the supermarket floor.

The next morning, I ring Evenflow before work and tell Doug about the esky.

'Right, right,' he says. 'I'll let him know. He's doing a job over your way first thing so leave it out the front, eh?'

Leave it out the front? I don't think so. I find my stilettos then put on moisturiser, concealer, foundation, blush, mascara and eye shadow. I pluck my eyebrows, colour the rest in with a pencil and tie my hair back in a loose pony. I'm pushing a bangle over my hand when the doorbell rings.

'G'day,' says Justin. He looks the same, only hotter.

'I didn't eat anything,' I say, holding the esky up.

He grabs the handle and part of my hand.

'In a bit of a hurry the other day,' he says.

'How's your mum?'

'Pretty stoic. Out of hospital already.'

'Back to unblocking pipes then?'

Justin grins.

JEAN FLYNN

‘Yeah. So, you know, if you need anything checking . . . ’

I turn slightly and glance up the hallway.

‘Kitchen tap’s a bit drippy, actually.’

‘I’d better come in then, have a look.’

Clare, v sick cant possibly come in today, feel hot flush coming on, could be serious.