

Samantha

I hate this dump, so I do. It's so *cold*. Sometimes you'd swear the walls were actually *radiating* cold, you know, the way a radiator radiates heat, only it's cold. And it's damp, so it is. No, I tell a lie. It's not damp. It's *wet*, it's sopping, it's dripping, that's the long and the short of it. Every surface you touch is clammy. Mind you, sometimes you touch something and, I swear to God, it's so cold you can't tell whether it really is damp or just so cold that it *feels* damp. The walls, well you can expect them to be cold, the doors, the windows, the floors, all the hard surfaces, but even your clothes feel cold when you touch them, as if they have been in the fridge, even the clothes you are wearing, the top layer anyway. You go to pick up a towel or a dishcloth, and I swear to God it's like handling a dead fish.

And everything smells. The kitchen is a health hazard, that's the long and the short of it. Your feet stick to the floor when you walk on it, and they go on sticking for a while after you come out of it. Whatever is on the floor there must get on your shoes and then you carry it around the house, I suppose.

There's a sink in the kitchen – which is how you know it's the kitchen. It's one of them old cracked cream ones, so it is, only it's all stained brown. It has taps, but there's no water. The house three doors up has a tap at the back, for watering the garden I suppose, and it works, so we get our water from there. We climb over the wall with buckets, after it gets dark, and fill them up, so we do. That's a bit of gas sometimes, clanking around with

buckets in the dark. Someone lives there, an old man, I think. He must know we do it, but fair play to him, he leaves us alone, doesn't want trouble, I suppose.

Of course no water means no jacks either. We pee out the back, when it's dark – though, mind you, the boys pee out there even when it's daytime, but that's blokes for you, no shame. I hate the way they do that. Girls have more self-respect, I think.

For the *other* we have to make what you might call alternative arrangements. There is a public toilet about a mile away, so there is, but it is a stinking hell-hole, and that's a fact. I was in it once and I swear to God I wouldn't go near it again – not if I had dysentery, I wouldn't.

What I usually do is I find a pub or a shop or a café or somewhere that has a 'Ladies', so I do. There's plenty of those, but of course they are supposed to be for customers only, so you have to sneak past the barman or whoever. And then again, you can't keep going back to the same places, because they'd get to recognise you, so they would.

You have to keep yourself looking presentable too, or you wouldn't be let in. I like to keep clean anyway. I swear to God, I'd hate to be one of them homeless-looking people with crusty heads and the soles flapping off their shoes. But then again, it's not easy, that, when you have no running water. It takes forever to boil up enough for a cup of tea on that camping-gas thing we have, so it does, not to mind trying to get enough to wash your hair in.

There is this sort of centre, for kids that haven't got a place. It's sort of like a huge garage or a warehouse, but then again it has these couches and pool tables and stuff in it, and it has these mad spray-paintings on the walls that are meant to make you feel at home, I think, and fair play to them, they let you have a shower and all, so they do. They want you to do art and stuff and they try to talk to you about FÁS courses – God, can you imagine *me* on a FÁS course? But then again, I just have the shower and a cup of tea if it's going, and I smile a lot at the fella that's in charge and take the leaflets. That's how I manage, anyway, I swear to God. I go there twice a week to get cleaned up and I get by on a quick lick with cold water and a lot of deodorant the rest of the time, so I do.

They even have a hairdryer. I never had a hairdryer. It's mad when you think about it, I mean, they only cost a few pounds, but then again, because it's electric, you sort of think it's like a telly or a microwave or something real dear that you could never afford, unless you nicked it, I suppose.

Hairdryers are great, so they are, because you're feeling all cold after your shower, and you can run the hot air all over yourself and warm up, before you dry your hair. When I get out of here and get a proper place to live, I swear to God I am going to have hairdryers in every room, and any time I am feeling a bit cold, I can just turn it on and stick it up my jumper for a minute, or even take off my shoes and spray lovely hot air on my toes. Warm feet is my idea of heaven, so it is. Then again, warm all *over* is my idea of heaven, but warm feet is definitely the

most important thing.

I'm never warm here, so I amn't. Curly, fair play to him, he gave me this stupid hot-water bottle. I do use it sometimes, but we only have a saucepan to boil water in, and it's hard to pour the hot water out of a saucepan into a hot-water bottle, so it is. I'm terrified I'm going to scald myself. All the same, I thought it was dead-on of him to think of the hot-water bottle. He is very sweet, Curly, fair play to him, even though he looks as if he would slice up his grandmother and have her on toast for breakfast. I swear to God it's all an act, the boots and the sleeveless jerkin and the tattoos and the pierced eyebrow and the shaved head and everything. He says he does it to look tough, because he knows he's not. If he dressed in jeans and a jumper, people would just walk on him, he says.

He wears combat trousers, and he is really pissed off that everyone wears combats now. It used to be just people like him that wore all the gear, but now you see *girls* wearing them, he says, and I swear to God, he says 'girls' as if was a dirty word. Kids who go to posh schools and get collected by their mummies in shiny little purple or lemon-coloured cars, you know, like Skittles on wheels, they wear them, so they do. That really depresses Curly and especially them black-and-white ones. Combats are supposed to be *khaki*, he says, or in that brown-and-khaki-leaves camouflage pattern. What's the point of a camouflage pattern in black and white? You might be camouflaged in a herd of pandas, but then again, what is the point of that if you live in the inner city?

I think it's kind of funny that he lets it get to him so much, I mean, when you think about the things we have to cope with, but then again I wouldn't dream of laughing at him, so I wouldn't. He's very sensitive, though you wouldn't think it to look at him – except for his ears. I think his ears give it away. I swear to God he has the smallest ears I have ever seen on a fella. Much smaller than mine. They look sort of apologetic, I swear to God, as if they think they shouldn't be there at all. That's really what Curly is like – sorry to be taking up oxygen, wishing he could breathe less so he wouldn't be using up the air on the rest of us. I like that about him, he's not a bit pushy, like a lot of fellas is.

Beano, now, is the exact opposite. He dresses dead smart, mostly in black, and he gels his hair and all and swoops it back off his face, which is sort of bony and pale and I suppose quite handsome. Curly is not handsome, it has to be said. His hair is the wrong shade of red, the shade that clashes with everything, and his face is kind of soft and squidgy-looking and his skin is piggy-pink – it's so pink you can't tell where his lips begin and end – and he's still a bit pimply, though mainly it's acne scars around his jawbones. Even his eyes are the wrong colour, I swear to God, too pale, but then again they are very far apart, which gives him a sort of surprised look that's kind of nice in a dreamy sort of way. I think so anyway. I think he has a nice expression, even if he's not good-looking.

I swear to God, that Beano looks like someone that works in the films, so he does, or maybe as a roadie with

a rock band or something dead cool anyway. He should wear shades really, they would suit the look, so they would. But then again, he gives me the creeps. I always think he's *leering* at me. I swear to God it makes me feel naked. I don't know how Caro puts up with him. I think she's scared of him, so I do.

I don't mind the robbing and that. You have to rob to live, so you do. It's not that. It's not even the gear either, though I don't like that. I mean, in fairness, I don't mind the odd joint, like Curly does, and I've done E a few times myself, though I know it's a bit risky because, when it comes down to it, you never know what's going to be in it, do you? But gear is different, so it is. Once you're into that, your soul is not your own any more, that's what I think anyway. I know there's people says it's all propaganda, that it's not that addictive *really*, but I swear to God, I look at what I see around me and I know what I know. You'll do anything for a hit, you will, once you're hooked, and I mean *anything*, you'd smother your mother for it, so you would. (I'd smother my mother anyway, if I got half a chance, fat lot of good as a mother she was, and that's the long and the short of it, but that's another story.)

Still, though, in fairness, it's not the gear that bothers me about Beano. That's his problem, is the way I look at it. It's just *him* I don't like, and that's a fact. There's something about him, and the way he treats Caroline that makes me mad, so there is. She's a lovely girl, is Caroline, and he just treats her like a piece of shit, so he does. I keep telling Curly, but Curly, poor oul' Curly, he's

such a big softie, he just says, yeah, Sam, he's a bad lot, you're right there, and he goes on doing absolutely nothing about getting us out of here. Sometimes, I swear to God, I could shake him.

If we're going to get out of here, it has to be me that makes the move, no two ways about it. That's one thing about the way I grew up, you learn fast enough how to watch out for yourself. When you're one of a bunch of kids in a children's home, it's every man for himself, so it is. But the thing is, I have to think of Johnner, too. I can't just up and leave with Curly and abandon that kid, so I can't. Beano would eat him without salt and spit out his bones if there was no one around to protect him, the poor little scrap, and that's the long and the short of it.

You couldn't help but like him, Johnner, I mean, he's that daft and dreamy and trusting. I mean, look how he just came along with me, I mean, I could've been a spy for a paedophile ring or a child pornography racket or *anything*, you know, I mean, there's all sorts of sleazy types out there, so there is, worse than Beano even, picking up likely young fellas off the street. Mind you, I think now in fairness he must've been on something that day, Johnner, probably glue or something, because he was out of it, completely out of it he was. The roaring out of him! He was sitting on the street and roaring at the people passing, so he was. I was going past, and says I to myself, that young fella's going to get himself arrested, the stupid eejit, why doesn't he shut up, but then again I looked at him sitting there in the drizzly rain on the footpath, so I did, it was all wet and it was getting to be

night-time, and his trousers was all soaked, and I swear to God, it went to my heart to see him. Oh God, says I to myself, I can't leave him here, he should be at home with his mammy, so he should, he's only a kid.

So I get talking to him and says I to him, he could come back to our place for the night, but he had to stop shouting. His mouth was hanging open, and his eyes was glazed over, and I didn't think he was really listening to me, but fair play to him, the next thing he gives a little nod, and then he smiles at me. A sort of a crooked smile, and I swear to God it broke my heart the way he looked at me, all in bits he was, but he still smiled, so he did. He's too young for this sort of life, says I to myself, I can't leave him here on the street.

Well, see, I was remembering, thinking back to the day I met Caro and how *she* helped *me* out, so, anyway, I just put out my hand to him, so I did, and I pulled him up, and I half-carried him back to the squat.

One thing about him, young Johnner, he's good for a laugh, so he is. I mean, half of you would want to give him a good shake and tell him to get a grip, the other half of you would feel for sorry for the poor little shite, and another half again would just bust your ass laughing at him. That's three halves, but you know what I mean. Thirds, I suppose I should say.

Fair play to him, he bounced back pretty quick, when you think of the state he was in the night I met him. He's like a four-year-old now, all shiny-eyed about this oul' party he wants to have. I mean, I swear to God we're only half in it, the lot of us, it's as much as we can do to

get from one end of the week to the other – what am I saying? From one end of the *day* to the other more like – but there's oul' Johnner planning a feckin' *party*. But you know, there's something about him that would get around you, so there is, and before you know it, you find yourself offering to make fairy cakes.

No, of course I didn't offer to make fairy cakes, that was my idea of a little joke. I didn't offer to blow up balloons either, so I didn't. But I did find myself agreeing that a party was a great idea and asking him who he wanted to invite. That was when I felt sorry for him. He has these big soppy eyes, too big for his face nearly, they look, and they were all shining and excited-looking when he was talking about his party, so they were, but when I asked him who he wanted to invite, he looked away. He muttered something: 'Lorraino, I suppose.' I think that's the sister's name, it must be, I think. Then I realised that it's all in his head really, so it is, all this excitement. He hasn't got a big pile of friends bursting to let their hair down, so he hasn't. It's all just an *idea* he has. Poor little sod, he just wants to have a good time, but he hasn't a clue how to go about it, so he hasn't. So anyway, I ended up by saying I'd help him with the party, so now I've promised, I'll have to do something about it.

He showed me his little collection of treasures – a few scutty oul' candles, a bunch of half-battered, stale-looking smokes and two six-packs of Guinness. 'That's great, Johnner,' says I. 'You have the makings of a right party there.' And then I made my mistake. 'I'll see if I can get you a few cans,' I said.

So now I have to find some cans for this eejity party. But sure, I suppose I'll be able to manage something. I know he can't buy drink, because he's way under age. I am too, though not as young as him of course, but I look older, especially if I put on my lipstick and change out of my Tear-aways, which is what I usually wear, and put on a skirt. I have a skirt somewhere, I think, but I haven't got any tights, and it would freeze the bum off you going around in high heels with a short skirt and no tights, and that's a fact.

But what do you think happened this morning? I woke up early as usual, about nine o'clock, which is plenty early enough if you've nowhere to go for the day, so it is. I was doing my usual thing of staying in the sleeping bag for as long as possible, because it's the only place I'm warm. At least, I'm warm in it in the morning when I wake up, apart from my feet, which are *permanently* cold, I swear to God, since we came to this feckin' place, so I hardly count those any more when I'm thinking about warm and cold.

So where was I? Oh yes, well, as I say, it's funny how you're warm when you wake up, isn't it, so even if your nose is cold, which mine usually is, because you can't keep your nose inside the sleeping bag, so you can't, not if you want to survive the night, and even if your feet are cold, which mine always are, because I think they've sort of become permanently deep-frozen like two Christmas turkeys from Dunnes stuck on the end of your legs, so when you wake up, the last thing you want to do is get up, because then you lose that lovely warmy feeling that

lasts about half an hour after you wake. (God, I can't stop thinking about the cold. It's the thing that gets to me most about living here, so it is.)

So anyway, this morning, there I was enjoying my morning warm-in, which I try to spin out as long as possible, but I always end up overdoing it, so I do, and then I start to get chilled to the bone lying there and then I just have to get up to get the circulation going again or I will die of exposure, no two ways about it, when suddenly something comes flying through the air at me and lands on my face, I swear to God, real soft, nearly like someone touching you. I put out my hand from inside the sleeping bag, so I did, and I felt whatever it was. It was all soft and silky to touch, but it was cold – so what's new? – like everything else around here, I swear to God. I brought out my other hand so I could hold whatever it was up in front of my face and take a proper look at it. And wasn't it a tiny little micro-mini-skirt, and it was made of some sort of velvety material, very slinky, though, slinkier than you'd expect velvet to be, and pure black like the night.

Then comes Caroline's voice: 'Keep it if you want it,' she says.

'Hey Caro, that's your best skirt, the one you wear for going out in,' says I. 'You can't give it away.'

'I can't wear it,' Caro said, but she wouldn't explain any more, and the next thing, I swear to God, a pair of tights came flying through the air as well, a black pair, dead sheer, and with only a little rip at the toe, no actual ladders or nothing – I know because I checked later, so I did.

'You might as well have them too,' says she, and – I know this sounds soft but I can't explain it any other way – her voice sounded sort of *empty*. 'They go with the skirt,' says she.

'What about you, Caroline?' I asked her then. 'Do you not want to wear this any more? Is it after going out of style or what?' I couldn't believe she was giving stuff away, you know.

I thought she might have got mad at me then for saying that, so I did, but she only shrugged and she turned over in her own sleeping bag, and then she says in a real muffled voice, 'Take them or leave them, Sam, but stop going *on* about them, okay?'

Well, anyway, I took them, so I did, sure what else would I do? I got up and I tried on the skirt. It looked a bit stupid over my tracksuit bottoms, I have to say, but I was too cold to take them off, so I was. Later, says I to myself, when I get a bit of heat into me. So then I put on my runners and I went into the kitchen to boil up some water to make tea and warm my feet.

Not the *same* water, of course. I make the tea *first*, and while it's drawing I put on a second saucepan and when that's warmed up a bit I throw it into a basin and stick my feet in it to thaw them out. That's my favourite moment of the whole day, I swear to God, putting my feet in warm water in the morning, soaking up the warmth. I swear, I'm like an owl the way I do be going on about the cold, but it gets right into you, you know, so that you can't think of anything else, not even the hunger, and that's a fact.

So anyway, once the feet were nice and pinky from the hot water (wiggle, wiggle, howya toes, nice and warm, huh?) and when I had them dried on an old T-shirt I keep for a towel, and after I had a good hot cup of tea inside me and another one poured, mainly for keeping my hands warm, I thought I might chance trying on my new outfit, so I stripped off the tracksuit and slipped into the tights. I threw my tracksuit bottoms on the floor, so I did, and I stood on them, like a mat, so I wouldn't have to touch the manky oul' cold floor with my nice warm barely-black feet and I did a little twirl, twisting to admire myself all around. God, I was gorgeous, I could see that even without a mirror. I thought you had to have legs that go on forever, so I did, to look as good as Caroline in a dead short skirt, but really, as long as they're not *awful* dumpy or fat or hairy or anything, *anyone's* legs can look good in the right tights, and that's a fact.

The next thing there came a wolf-whistle, whi-whi-eeew. I swear to God, I hate that kind of a whistle, so I do. It makes me jump, and anyway I always think it sounds sort of sarky, as if the person doing it is really sending you up instead of admiring you, which is what he's pretending to be doing. It was Beano, so it was, and he was slouching against the door jamb.

'Jay, you're lookin' great this mornin', Samantha,' he said, all smarmy-like. 'You have a great pair of legs on you.'

I suppose it was meant to come across as a compliment, but it I swear to God, it sounded like something

you'd say about a racehorse or a greyhound or something. It made me want to tuck my gorgeous legs away somewhere, so it did, but there was nowhere I could put them, and there was no point in pulling the little skirt down towards my knees, it would only draw attention to how short it was. So instead of hiding my legs, I lifted one knee up and gave my ankle a sort of a sexy little twist and I said, 'You like, Mister?' but it was really because I was embarrassed, and that's the long and the short of it, I didn't know what else to say to him. Then I did this sort of a silly pirouette, holding my hands out stiffly, you know, with the fingers all pointing outwards, like a little girl in one of them puffy party dresses.

'I liiiiiike,' says he, and he was looking at me with his eyes half-closed, and raising one eyebrow high above his eye, in a sort of a pointy arc. (I don't know how he does that. I've practised and practised, but all I've ever managed is to wiggle my ears like a stupid bunny rabbit, and that's a fact.)

I threw my head back and I gave one of them little silvery laughs, so I did, God, I blush even thinking about it, the sort girls do in the films when they toss their hair back at fellas. I was just playing a part really, and that's a fact, pretending to be somebody I'm not – and I don't even *want* to be – but for some reason it was the only way I could think of to act with him, so it was. He gave this real low laugh, a sort of a chuckle I suppose you would call it, just like a movie star, I don't think, all cool and smooth and distant.

And then, very suddenly, I swear to God, his smile

turned to a snarl and he snapped out: 'Hey, is that Caro's skirt you're wearing? The one I bought for her?' (Bought? I don't think Beano ever bought anything in his life, everything he ever owned since he got too big for his toy trainset he robbed, and that's a fact.)

'Ye-eh,' says I, feeling like I was getting the third degree. I didn't want a row with Beano over a stupid skirt, but I didn't want to start a row between him and Caro either, so I didn't. 'She ga- lent it to me.'

'Lent it to you? What'd she do that for? That's her working skirt, I mean, her best skirt for going out in.'

I thought that was a funny thing to say, about her working skirt. But anyway, I said, 'Yeah, well I know that, Beano, but she just lent it to me, okay? Maybe she thought it would suit me?'

'Suit you?' God he's really roaring now, I swear to God. 'What's that got to do with it? Wait till I get my ...'

'I tell you what, Beano,' says I suddenly, thinking real quick - that's me all over. 'Would you like a cup of tea? It's fresh in the pot. It'll take the chill out of you, isn't it terrible cold this morning?'

I was jabbering on, so I was, changing the subject, and he knew it, but all of a sudden, just the way he got suddenly nasty, now he turned on the charm again and says he in his cool voice, 'Yeah, well, maybe I will so, darlin'.'

God, I hate anyone calling me darlin'. It makes me feel about a hundred, so it does. So anyway, I poured him a cup of tea without another word, and he took it from me and went off someplace with it.

Now that I had the skirt on, I thought I might as well

go and get the booze I promised Johnner, so I finished my tea, rinsed up after myself, splashed cold water on my face, and ran a comb through my hair. I had to clean my teeth with my finger, so I had, and put a stick of chewing gum in my mouth, because I haven't got toothpaste or a toothbrush. So then I picked up my tracksuit trousers, and I tiptoed quickly back into the bedroom to get a pair of decent shoes, I changed my tracksuit top and I put on the least smelly tank-top I could find. Then I slung my CAT bag over my shoulder and ... I sashayed off, so I did, out into the world. Dha-dha!