

Now We Are Pink

Here are a few events in the life of Lauren Zoe 'Lorenzo' Clarke:

Grew up on the east side. Falls in love with a guy named Perry Wrack from the year above. Perry has a big vinyl collection, a 2002 Toyota and the keys to a Yorkshire Homes flat that sits empty while Perry's cousin dodges potshots in Helmand. At sixth form they wear their own clothes and hang out in the HA flat smoking dope and listening to guitar music and talking about The System and what really happened to Richey Manic and how to contact the dead. Sometimes they load up on cheap rose wine and Red Stripe and get buses into town for gigs. She leaves for university with the chorus of Kenickie's 'In Your Car' still breathing in her ears. *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!*

College is in South Manchester. Instead of guitars and vinyl, it's all electro and houseparties. It never occurs to either of them that they might not be able to keep it going. She begins to dread the weekends when he comes up and they end up bickering under the arches of Oxford Road. What's the point of this transpennine expense when he has the job at Wilko's Cross Gates and only has to pay seventy-five a month board at his parents' house? It's a relief when he finally stops coming.

Lorenzo goes clubbing and drinks and parties and sleeps around. In her second year she gets a flat on Princess Street with a man named Mick Vogan who DJs in the Northern Quarter. Then she's with a playwright who wrote a musical of H P Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu Mythos' that premiered at the Royal Exchange to generally favourable notice. There's so much going on she kind of forgets to go to lectures or read anything. Pills, thrills and bellyaches. She graduates with a two two. Her tutor says she was lucky to get that. She's working bar shifts and living in a place on the Slade Road with two strippers and a man who's addicted to Foxy Bingo. Something is happening to the city. Suddenly rents are up, work is hard to come by, and men sleep in tents under the Mancunian Way. The bright lights still shine but she feels like everywhere's running out of gas. She goes back to East Leeds that Christmas. She can't bring herself to tell her folks she can't afford to return to Manchester. Space is tight in the house you grew up in. She runs into Perry in their old local on Christmas Eve. They fall into bed. There's a sense that they've both changed and grown a little.

The east side has changed also. Shootings and stabbings and heroin dealing spills from the View into the respectable areas. She is crashing with Perry at his parents' house and working in the StuporStore on Cormorant Way. Staying with Perry's family is more fun than it sounds but when

they go out they have to go to the city centre because all the pubs on the east side have either closed down or been overrun with gangsters. Her old friends have moved to the west side. Perry gets a job in the card factory in Scholes. Lorenzo does twelve-hour shifts in the StuporStore. The work is intense. Targets for stacking bread, pedometers strapped to your waist, random spot checks. You stand at the terminal, shouts and the sounds of wheel on stone scrape away in the distance, and the day tips slowly into evening. On breaks she snatches glimpses of jobs offered on her phone. She can get up at half five and spent an hour on an electronic application before it's time to leave for work. She averages two or three applications a month. After six months she finds something.

The lettings agency is some way up the Otley Road. It's in an enormous detached stone building the agency shares with an Ocado, a post office and a company that delivers personalised cakes and calendars to the good people of the outer west suburbs. The agency is ground floor, open plan, with carpets and soft striplights and box counters separating walk-ins from full time staff. There are panels, built into the floor, that glow a dark, maroon colour. Later, on those lateweek afternoons when she's losing track of herself, these panels will seem to look like flesh and throb like badly healed wounds.

There's thirty staff and two toilets and a boiler that periodically breaks down and a kitchen the size of a henhouse with labelled milk and a water cooler and two fridges that periodically break down. There's a sense of frazzled urgency about the place. You have to cram as many people into as many properties as possible. These first months she tries to embed herself. She drives all over the west side, dozens of viewings, scribbles out paperwork at stoplights, deals with the tenants who walk in furious about recurrent or outstanding repairs issues, gets in when the doors open and goes home when the managers lock up. She has a flat on Headingley Mount and the rent is high and she needs this job. Perry is still looking for west side work and sometimes he can't get to interviews because Lorenzo's always bombing around doing viewings in their only car. Every so often a man named Matt Flixton – a man whose face is always flushed a ruddy, pinkish shade, who carries himself in this style of harried expectation that all the managers have – will bollock her for some trivial error, or bollock the staff en masse for more trivial errors. A deep, abiding dread falls upon Sunday evenings. You could cry in your car thinking about it.

Perry gets a training contract at a construction firm. He and a dozen others get the 6:29 train to Skipton and work on sites at apprenticeship rates. Lorenzo begins to feel more comfortable at the office. The work is as complex and relentless as ever, but there's a sense she's not alone. Janika the tall Persian-looking lone parent tells her *don't break yourself for this place*, Marion the bolshy five-two graduate with the posh voice takes her for lifts so Perry can have the car some days, and Perry himself gets more supportive, makes her pickups with silly notes and what he

calls 'chilli bombs' – delicious, innocuous looking sandwiches with very hot peppers secreted in the middle. She starts going drinking with the guys from the agency, and talking to them on social media, because they want to bitch and rant about work, but can't bore their partners or kids or non-letting agency friends, because who else would understand? When she falls asleep, her dreams are unreal.

When the next financial year comes a new manager starts at the agency. His name is Ian Flixton. The second name is probably not coincidence. He goes on walking holidays with one of the Directors. He is tall with sparse, bunched hair. His voice is squeaky and his face is a familiar busy pink.

The apprenticeship thing falls through. Perry hangs around the flat for two days playing Fifa and then goes out and gets a job at an arts café in Headingley. It's minimum wage but the place is fun and they make new friends. They start having sex again, and inventive new barmen and wraps turn up in Lorenzo's pickups. Lorenzo doesn't dread work so much now. She enjoys the laughs and the banter and the impressions people do of the Flixton managers. Issues that revolved cruelly like a Rubik's cube in her mind now resolve themselves and fall away. She begins to get things done. Tenants send cards to the agency, even flowers. She begins to realise how badly the Flixtons are running things, and makes suggestions that are ignored. She finds things out, about the scary towers they sublet in Armley and Wortley, the drug runs and the caretaker who makes his rounds twice a week with a gun in the trunk of his car.

In her dream she gets into the office to find the cleaner – a cheery Eritrean fellow – mopping the lobby tiles. The cleaner is not so cheery today. He's trying to clear a pool of pink sludge that has got stuck and won't shift. The mess is disgusting, the fluid near covers the whole lobby and smells like internal bleeding. Lorenzo can feel the pink, sucking at her shoes.

He tells Lorenzo that he's been there all night trying to clean it up. 'They leak,' he tells Lorenzo. 'They have these orgies and they get overexcited and they leak. I have to clean it up. I can't stand it anymore. I just can't.'

She's on top of it now and she's bored. When she's tasked to minute the frequent long meetings she writes it up as *Fast Show* Channel 9, or *Crimer Show* from Twitter. A different kind of edge settles over her. She's not the new starter who potentially isn't up to it, she's the kid who knows it all and they can't get rid of her. She is bored and reckless and careless. She runs her time so well she can flirt and play with her phone at work. It's a matter of time before she comes back in from the smoking alley round back and is pulled in by Matt Flixton.

It's not just you.

I wasn't listening at the door.

I heard a team leader discussed in a way that was inappropriate.

You need to be respectful to your team leader at all times.

You are a representative of this firm.

He says all this and it's like the longer he talks, the pinker his face gets. At first it's funny, then disturbing. She's sitting in his corner office and gets a flashback to her dream. Andy's head will burst and cover her in pink.

'I'll let this go, as you're still relatively new,' Andy says. 'But I need a written apology.'

'I'll think about it,' says Lorenzo.

Everyone in the smoking alley is pulled in one by one. Everyone present is asked to give a written apology, and one by one they give it. Lorenzo just doesn't know. She starts to get worried looks. Then people start taking her to one side. They are okay with laughing and joking but now they are scared.

'You've got a decent future here,' Janika says. 'Just eat the shit and say nothing. No shame in that.' They're drunk in the Social in Hyde Park.

'Correct, Lorenzo,' says Carlo – Carlo, whose Flixton hand puppet show creases her every time. 'This isn't the place for heroes.'

A mad unknown thought – *the pink people got to you, now you're pink too* – flits through her head. 'We've got a smackhead tower in Armley that's subcontracted to a guy who drives over from Manchester twice a week with a gun in the trunk of his car. And I'm at fault for refusing this apology?'

Friday afternoon there's an email from Andy Flixton. *Apology by the end of the month* it says in the subject line. The length is the same time as her notice period. The message has been sent to her personal account.

Her mother and brother come over. They go to the farmer's market and the afternoon movie at the Cottage and then an Ecco pizza and it's a fantastic day until her mother, for fuck's sake, brings up work. She ends up telling them about the apology deadline. She never talks about work but she ends up telling them. Everyone has had a little too much to drink.

'I can't believe it,' her brother says. Her brother is older, still on the east side, working full time for the Provi. While some men went to college he stayed home and ran car boot sales and read interesting things on the internet. 'This is your first serious job, the first thing you've done that might actually lead to something, and you're going to throw it away over some stupid teenage eppi fit.'

She knows she can't rely on her parents to validate her as they always have, all that goes when you're up against the pink world, but even Perry is nodding. 'If you get aimed now it could be months until you find something else. You know this. And we can't live on my sandwich millions alone.'

Her mother is looking at her with the expression you'd look at a child who is about to walk out onto a busy road.

Face it, we all want money and status and comfort. But when she dreams of the pink world it's because of its absences rather than its virtues. No more agency work or bounced direct debits or crap HMOs or peasant wagons or arguments about money. No more selling on EBay or Amazon or bank charges or food banks or split bills or feeding change and points into the self service machine. No more price comparison exercises at the Headingley charity shop row. No more practical fear and practical disappointment.

You'll be pink, says Andy Flixton in her dream. Apologise and you can be pink.

She walks into the room.

Eight months goes by.

She's working in the student pub across the road from Perry's sandwich place. It's busy and rough and minimum wage but loads of tips and loose change. She and Perry fell out and broke up for a while, but he came back once he became jealous of the beautiful younger men she was sleeping with, and Lorenzo loved him enough to take him back. They're getting by. She's not getting as much as she was on the lettings agency, but there's no mileage to consider and slinging drinks feels like more human work.

Lorenzo still sees her friends from the agency. They are polishing CVs and looking for other work. Carlo tells her that the Flixtons are now going through complex liquidation proceedings after the police arrested their cousin at the Armley tower with a vacuum-packed kilo of heroin in his shoulderbag.

Life is never secure, but it slips down easily, with plenty of light moments. Her mother came over recently. They had lunch in the Clock, Lorenzo knows the people who run it and got her Americano on the house. When she turns down the money her mother offered, the old girl tells her that *in the real world, you have to take things when they're given*. Something about this makes Lorenzo giggle. It really tickles her. She can't stop.

Max Dunbar