

Peeping Toms get a bad rap and in most cases that's probably the way it should be. But I wonder if that's because the alleged victims haven't signed a disclosure form rather than them being scared because they were being snooped on.

I'm going to ask you to bear with me before I even get started. I get the feeling I'll be asking you to do that quite a lot as I'm not much of a writer and much of what I have to say is going to sound like the ravings of a loon. I'm not a loon, by the way, but asking you to believe that without knowing me is a bit of an imposition so I think it's just my name you need to know at the moment - I'm Zep.

And yes, smart arse, it is my real name. And no, I am not 'a bit foreign'; and no I won't tell you what it's short for because right now my credibility is the only thing that I've— fuck it, it's short for Zeppelin. Go on, have a good laugh, get it all out so we can carry on. Here in England (in Lowe, to be precise) most people hear the name and ask if my dad fought in the Second World War.

Dicks.

I'm 23; how the hell is my Dad going to have been in World War 2? And following that logic, why the hell would an ENGLISH family name their son after a GERMAN airship? Or the designer? (In that case, wouldn't I have been called 'Ferdinand'? Yes I know my shit - *Ferdinand von Zeppelin* was his name.)

As you can see I have a few issues about my name. But when you walk into a Doctors surgery (for example) and the receptionist calls your name out wrong or pretends you're an alien (ha-ha-ha) and says - with a *who, me?*- look on her face 'Did I pronounce it right?', after the millionth time you really want to grab her by the neck and smack her stupid head onto her keyboard and shout 'It's three fucking letters, you moron!'

See? Issues.

So, yeah, my name is Zep.

Not Seb, not Jeff, and not Zip.

Zep.

So getting back to this Peeping Tom thing - or perhaps "voyeur" is a nicer way to put it - I remember asking my girlfriend one day, 'Why do you change your online profile picture so much?' We'd been together long enough to send sexts but short enough that a misunderstanding could break up our burgeoning love.

'Because I had new lip balm.' she said.

'So you wanted people to see your lips?' I was genuinely confused which is why I asked. Isn't lip balm see-through? I wear lip balm in the winter, or when it's windy, and no one knows. I mean, if she's wearing lip balm, would

people even realise? That's my point. And it confused me.

Mina (yeah, she does 'look a bit foreign') got defensive and diverted the conversation away, 'You have a problem with me posting new pictures of myself? I didn't know you were *that* kind of guy.'

The truth is the dumb bitch doesn't know *what* kind of guy I am. She was so wrapped up in taking the perfect pic, at the perfect angle, with the perfect pout that I could have the neighbourhood cats swinging by their necks from coat hangers in my wardrobe and she'd be none the wiser. And I really wanted to tell her she looked like Donald fucking Duck when she did that pout.

I never got the answer I was after and she never got that I was genuinely interested as to what her motivation was. So this unanswered question became a seed that stuck in my mind where it grew. Was it about her controlling her image; she wanted to make sure people saw her a certain way? And you know, Mina was a proper pretty girl. In fact, I'd go as far as to say she was bewitchingly beautiful. Shit, even her scowls had the power to.... well, let's not say what effect they had.

Funny that she's the one that's stiff now.

I'm a bit of an addict for those TV shows like *Big Brother* and *World's Strictest Parents*. I'm not into those *Help! I didn't know I was pregnant!* or *Help me put the goddamn fork down!* ones. Those are just ambulance-chasing crap. And you know, I may come across like a bit of a male chauvinist but I'm sure that if a woman is pregnant, she pretty much

knows it. Women know their shit, right? They know when they're due, and if they're late, and when they last shagged someone and bla bla bla. Let's face it, most of them are twice as intelligent as men, and have a hell of a lot more common sense; it's why their car insurance is so much cheaper than ours. So to tell me that you didn't know you had a life growing inside you is just bullshit. You're either lying because your parents'll kill you if they found out, you're in denial, or lying to your other half because you knocked boots outside of the relationship - most likely outside of your ethnicity, too, in which case there's no denying what you did. But then I suppose there are some girls who are so stupid they're - I don't know - like, the wheel's spinning but the hamster's dead. Thump - whirr - thump - whirr - thump.

Okay, this is *not* why I'm writing this - to rant about pregnant girls - but I think you see now that I'm kind of into the human condition. Although probably in a pessimistic way; the bitternesses of life interest me far more than the sweetnesses. My glass isn't half-empty, it's smashed on the kitchen floor and your neighbour's six year old just walked barefoot over it, got tetanus and is now fighting for its life. Then dies. (But your neighbour still talks to you, and you both do that dance where you avoid the soul-breaking fact that you killed her kid.)

Yeah, the human condition; what we see and what we don't. Or choose not to. I'm not like that. I like to get the nails of all my fingers under that scab, and have a good pick, and peel it off to see what's underneath. But at least I don't wave it in front of the person whose body I picked it off.

However, this time I wasn't prepared for what I saw.

What I *caused*. It's like that old phrase *curiosity killed the cat*. Except I'm more reminded of something my grandmother used to say which was along the lines of *when you catch the butt-end of conversations, don't be surprised when you get your fingers burnt, dear*.

My dad is a bit of a maverick, I think. No, I don't mean because of my name which *was* his idea (but there's a thin line between maverick and egocentric-ass-who-sees-kids-as-status-symbols-and-names-them-accordingly and my dad's not like that; to be honest there are plenty of Led Zeppelin records in his collection, and I wonder if that was what inspired my name.) but in terms of his entrepreneurial skills. He's had all sorts of business ventures and most of them have been successful, but none of them have been as successful as the one that has become the family business.

The Exchange is a dating bar at the top end of Lowe town centre. The rent is cheap because it's away from the beach, at the crest of the hill, and although it's not seedy, it's in a discreet place.

From outside it looks like a normal bar; stucco walls with circular porthole windows (only bigger), and a subtle door with not-so-subtle bouncers and velvet rope. Actually on the inside it looks pretty regular too, except that the layout suggests it may have been fashioned on those 1950s American diners. There are small booths and snugs with high dividers but it doesn't have the PVC seats and aluminium details; it's far more English. There're dark-stained wood tables and black crossbeams that look like they came from a Tudor country house, and pools of almost indigo shadows where the venn diagrams of

spotlights never reach.

But the most peculiar thing about *The Exchange* is that on every table (and three on the bar) there are old Bakelite telephones. And next to those telephones are plan diagrams of the bar; every table is depicted with a number.

So, say Johnny Lovesick and his mate come in and on their way to the bar Johnny sees a pretty girl in a little black dress he likes the look of. She clocks him walking past, likes the look of him, too, and has a little giggle with her friends. After stealing some not-so-sneaky glances at each other, he orders drinks from one of the barmen (that'd be me) and he goes to an empty booth with his mate. Now, he's had a couple rum and cokes in a bar down the road before he got here and he's feeling a bit lively, so he looks at the plan of the bar and sees the table she's sitting at is, let's say, number 8.

Johnny picks up the phone and dials 8, and a little way off he hears a phone ring, just barely audible over the slow jams the DJ (yep, that'd be me) is playing. Some girl answers the phone but she has a voice like worn car brakes, and when she laughs Johnny thinks of a donkey he saw earlier on the beach by the pier with a straw hat and so he hangs up. Johnny doesn't want to date a girl with a voice like that so he— oh fuck it, you get the idea. The point is it's a novelty pick-up joint for Lowe's twenty- and thirty-something club crowd. In reality, these days the nightbreed have enough balls to go up to whoever they like the look of and trade their chat-up lines face to face, but it's the novelty of the thing that appeals to folk, and it's that novelty that gets them coming through the door.

So, now you know; that's what my dad pioneered. I've

been to places like Bristol and Manchester and Newcastle and I've seen the same kind of set up (although the phones in Newcastle were brown plastic office ones with grimy push buttons and the smell of the handset's mouthpiece was enough to put anyone off romance) and I swear they got the idea from my dad's bar. Lowe has a big reputation as a club town and every summer it's populated with sexy brides-to-be on their hen weekends, and every halloween, it's full of sexy devils or sexy kittens from the same migrant Northern cities. I figure some of those northerners took the idea back home. And that's fine. It's not like it's relevant competition for our customers, and even if it was, our phones don't smell of dried vomit so I'm confident the family business will always prosper.