

HELLO! SHORT STORIES SPECIAL

Coffee break



There's a stunning twist to Frances Mensah Williams's tale of the woman who makes up an imaginary boyfriend to save face after being dumped

I will not cry! Dionne's heart was racing as she gripped the ceramic coffee mug and tried to will back the unshed tears burning her eyes. She bent her head, letting the heavy braids hide her face while she struggled to catch her breath and suppress the overwhelming urge to sob or – even worse – beg Josh to change his mind.

Yet again, she regretted agreeing to her boyfriend's – *Can I still call him that?* – demand to meet for a quick chat. The coffee shop around the corner from the office had been her idea, making it easier for her to sneak out between meetings. Inside, the comforting smell of roasted coffee beans filled the air and despite the clink of coffee cups and tinkle of teaspoons, with the tables crammed together, it was easy to hear the conversations swirling around them.

Josh sat facing her, his back to the queue of people waiting at the counter. The string of clichés he'd just trotted out – did anyone really say: 'It's not you, it's me'? – hung in the air between them. When she finally looked up, his brown eyes probed her face to gauge her reaction to his bombshell announcement and then narrowed in a clear warning not to embarrass him in public. Had he always been this selfish and – and *cruel? How did I not see it?* Even now, he was only worried about himself, Dionne thought resentfully. Well, she wasn't going to break down in front of everyone or humiliate herself by returning to the office with red-rimmed eyes, pretending her heart hadn't been shattered during her coffee break.

Having concluded his speech, it was blindingly obvious that Josh had no further desire to be there. Everything about him screamed impatience; the tapping of his fingers on the table top, the darting eyes, the jiggling denim-clad muscular leg sticking out from under the table. He ran a hand over his hair and

Dionne's gaze followed the rippling biceps under the short sleeves of his blue polo shirt. His muscular body with its impressive six-pack had been the first thing to catch her eye when she'd initially spotted Josh at the gym. The second thing was the cheeky grin that had his full lips curving so irresistibly that she'd found herself returning the smile and then sitting opposite him in the gym's coffee shop an hour later.

"Hey, Dee, are you alright?" His voice sounded strained from the effort of pretending to care.

"Why wouldn't I be?" She pushed back her braids, fixing what she hoped was a nonchalant expression on her face. "You're breaking up with me in the middle of my work day – of *course* I'm fine."

Her sarcasm sailed right over his head.

Their first date in the coffee shop had quickly progressed into weeks of cosy dinners followed by long chats walking hand in hand along the river, followed by even

longer nights spent in her flat. After several months, during which Dionne believed she had never been happier, the intervals between dinners had grown longer and the riverside walks shorter. While Josh still found his way to her apartment a couple of nights a week, his disappearing acts during the days in between eventually became the pattern. But, by then, having fallen for Josh like the proverbial ton of bricks and only too relieved when he did eventually show up, Dionne would let him kiss his way back into her good graces, while convincing herself that the pattern was just a blip.

Ignoring her best friend Leonie's exasperated: "You're wasting your time with this one, Dee," Dionne had told herself that things would change. Josh was gorgeous, funny, and amazing in bed. It just *had* to work out!

And yet, now, here she was. Unceremoniously dumped. The tears

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bubbled up again and Dionne bit her lip so hard she wouldn't have been surprised to taste blood. Taking a long swallow from the now tepid mug of latte, she tried to sound indifferent.

"Actually, you've done me a favour."

Josh frowned, his thick brows coming together and crinkling his smooth brown forehead. "What are you talking about?"

"What I mean is, if you didn't finish it, I was going to anyway." She lifted the mug to take another sip, praying he wouldn't notice the tremor in her hand. "Let's face it, it didn't take a genius to see that things between us weren't working. Yes, it was great, at first, but I don't want to be with someone who thinks it's okay to disappear for days at a time whenever it suits him."

"*You were going to finish with me?* Who are you kidding?" Josh scoffed.

Suddenly furious at his sceptical expression and dismissive tone, Dionne shrugged. "I've started seeing someone else." She could have kicked herself the moment the words emerged. *What did you say that for, you lying idiot!*

"Do me a favour!" Josh hooted with laughter.

Mortified by his blatant incredulity, instead of backing down, her voice rose. "Well, it's true! I wasn't going to just sit back and let you keep treating me like crap. Unlike you, *Troy*," – she pounced on the first name that came into her head – "treats me with affection and – and respect! We've been talking for a while, and we've had a few dates and..."



Her voice tailed off as her mind went blank.

"You're *pathetic*, Dee. I say we're finished, and you give me some rubbish about seeing someone else. We both know you wouldn't give *Troy* or any other bloke the time of day."

Josh's scornful laugh cut her to the quick and, as fast as it had come, her bravado fled like a thief in the night. She stared into the coffee mug, her cheeks burning with humiliation. She could feel a sob rising in her chest and this time she knew she wouldn't be able to hold it back.

"Dee?" The deep voice came from behind Josh's chair and Dionne's head whipped up to see a tall man in a dark suit staring intently at her.

Before she could say a word, the stranger nudged past Josh's chair and bent low to kiss her cheek.

"Just go with it, okay?" he murmured, his lips close to her ear. He looked deep into her eyes and, too stunned by the unexpected gesture to protest, she gave a slight nod.

"Who the hell are you?" Josh glared up at the man. "We're having a private conversation here."

Yes, *who are you?* Dionne wondered, staring in fascination at the new arrival. He was at least a head taller than Josh and the suit he wore looked expensive. His

caramel eyes, light brown skin, low-cut beard, and entire demeanour brimmed with confidence.

"I'm Troy. Good to meet you."

Dionne gasped, and then quickly turned it into a cough, watching in shock as Josh, looking as dazed as she felt, reluctantly shook the hand the new arrival had extended.

Troy turned back to Dionne with an apologetic smile. "Sorry I'm a bit early, sweetheart, but you did say *this*" – he waved a dismissive hand in Josh's

direction – "wouldn't take long, and I was desperate to see your beautiful face and snatch a kiss before I go back to my meeting."

Far too gobsmacked to string together a coherent sentence,

Dionne simply nodded. Then, the sound of Josh's chair scraping on the tiled floor jolted her back to her senses and she tore her gaze away from Troy to focus on Josh's furious expression.

"So, you've been playing me for a fool, girl. Is that right?" he snarled, snatching his jacket from the back of his chair.

About to protest her innocence, Dionne glanced at Troy and caught the almost imperceptible shake of his head. Taking a deep breath, she turned back to Josh and lifted her chin defiantly.

The stranger nudged past Josh's chair and bent low to kiss her cheek. 'Just go with it, okay?' he murmured, his lips close to her ear

"I gave you enough chances, Josh. You're the one who screwed things up."

Clearly thrown off balance, he glared at her furiously. "You'll regret this!"

Dionne looked at Troy again and, buoyed by the admiration she suddenly saw in his eyes, she smiled at her newly ex-boyfriend and waggled her fingers. "I seriously doubt it. Bye, Josh. Have a nice life."

But then, as she watched Josh stride out of the shop without a backward glance, Dionne's smile faded, and her eyes welled up.

"Hey, you were *incredible*! Don't go soft on me now!" Troy sat in Josh's empty chair and rested his arms on the table, leaning forward with a look of concern.

"Who *are* you?" Dionne ran trembling fingers through her braids, her voice husky with tears.

"I was standing in the queue for coffee and I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. That guy was acting like a complete scumbag and I couldn't let him get away with it."

Dionne sighed deeply, torn between the humiliation of knowing this attractive stranger had heard Josh call her pathetic and gratitude that he'd helped her escape her ex with her dignity intact.

"I feel like such an idiot, and I can't thank you enough for helping me out. I only made up that stupid lie because I felt so hurt and angry with Josh, and I almost passed out when you introduced yourself as Troy! I'm Dionne, by the way."

"My name's Finn – and it's a pleasure to meet you." He hesitated, and then said gently: "Listen, don't be too hard on yourself, Dionne. We've all picked wrong 'uns at one time or another. You just need to keep going to find Mr Right."

"I really don't think I believe in Mr Right," said Dionne bleakly. She pushed her chair back and stood up. "Thanks again for rescuing me, Finn."

"Wait..."

She turned back to find Finn staring at her quizzically.

"What?"

"Dionne, if you don't believe in Mr Right... what about Mr Right Now?"

Before she could answer, Finn stood and walked up to her with a wry smile. For the first time since she'd laid eyes on him, he looked unsure of himself.

"I strongly believe in fate and, honestly, what are the chances of us running into each other like this today? No pressure, but what do you say to meeting up after work?"

Dionne searched Finn's eyes for a long moment and then she smiled. "Okay – just so long as it's not for a coffee."

She was still smiling as she left the shop and walked back to the office.



The Second Time We Met by Frances Mensah Williams is out now, from Lake Union Publishing.