

LOOK TO YOUR WIFE

'A zingy fast-moving novel - very readable,
elegantly written and crafted'
THE TIMES

PAULA BYRNE

Paula Byrne

Look to Your Wife

Аннотация

A debut novel by a bestselling non-fiction author, this is a witty, wholly entrancing story of the pleasures, pains and obsessions of contemporary life. Lisa Blaize – teacher, and would-be fashion writer, mother and second wife – feels out of place when her high-flying husband becomes the headmaster of a school in a country town. Isolated and far from her metropolitan upbringing, she turns to the one place where she learns she can be uninhibited. But ‘Twitter may be my undoing’, Lisa discovers as her one-time private life becomes all too public. Soon she is dealing with an online stalker and her husband’s reputation is put at risk, but will she be able to give up her addiction? From the gossip of the classroom to our obsession with instant communication, *Look To Your Wife* is witty and brilliantly observed, revealing the pleasures and pains of contemporary life.

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William Collins

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.WilliamCollinsBooks.com

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in 2018

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Cover design by Heike Schüssler

Cover photograph © plainpicture/Mihaela Ninic

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HarperCollins.

Source ISBN: 9780008270612

Ebook Edition © April 2018 ISBN: 9780008270599

Version: 2019-02-11

Dedication

For Matthew

Epigraph

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

William Shakespeare, Othello

Without the Tweets, I wouldn't be here.

Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States of America, interviewed in the Oval Office

Twitter is an online social networking service that enables users to send and read short 140-character messages called 'tweets.' Registered users can read and post tweets, but those who are unregistered can only read them. Users are identified by a 'handle,' indicated by an 'at' sign.

Lisa Blaize @Lisa_Blaize

Twitter may be my undoing!

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PRELUDE

The Letter

June 17th

Dear Headmaster,

Please, please, please do something about Lisa. When you first came to Blagsford School, we were all thrilled to have a man of your calibre and academic excellence. Edward Chamberlain is a name that inspires awe and reverence in the educational world. I, amongst many others, was full of admiration when you took on that academy 'sink' school in the north of England. How brave and clever of you. Everyone knew that you would turn it around. But you surpassed all expectations, raising it from 'Unsatisfactory' to 'Outstanding' in such a short time, before coming here.

Naturally, some whispered that you would use it to your advantage, only to gain the coveted knighthood for services to education. Congratulations, by the way. Well deserved (though we all know that you only got it because of your background). We know how lucky we are to have you. I have been one of your most loyal supporters since you came to the school a year ago. It pains me to have to write this: I can barely believe that I am doing so.

But please, Edward, silence your wife. She is a liability, and she is damaging your reputation. Blagsford is a small world. The community of public schools is even smaller. Social media is a

very useful tool, but Lisa's embarrassing and vulgar tweets are presenting a very bad image for the school. The woman is barely literate, for heaven's sake. She has no idea how to use French accents. Her grammar is appalling. I winced when she tweeted about meeting the opera singer 'Jesse Norman'.

To many of us, it beggars belief that Lisa Blaize has published a book. Still more that it got some very good reviews and was shortlisted for the Fashion History Book Prize. Did she flash her boobs at one of the judges? Many say you wrote it. At the very least, her copy-editor must be first rate. I'll wager the poor thing dreads the day when Lisa's next typescript comes in.

I was invited to your celebration party, but, like quite a few other people, couldn't face being subjected to another episode of The Lisa Show. Like many others, I was dreading what becoming Lady C would do to Lisa's already grossly inflated ego. I am pleased for you, Edward, and would have happily attended the party if all I had to do was talk to interesting, intelligent and perhaps even inspirational folk. But I simply don't have the time, let alone the inclination, to seek out 'glam' clothes to feed Lisa's attention-seeking fantasies.

It's clear from Lisa's Twitter account just how obsessed she is with designer clothes and shoes and skin potions, and how much time and money she devotes to her appearance, but it's naïve of her to expect the rest of us to do the same when we are extremely busy people, and, I might add, far less vain than Lisa.

I don't know how much attention you pay to Lisa's Twitter

account, but if you have a look at her tweets over the past five or six months you will get a sense of what people are concerned about and why Lisa has become an object of ridicule, not just at Blagsford, but across the public school network more widely. You will be able to see that she comes across as almost pathologically vain and egotistical ...

* * *

‘Lisa, I’ve had a poisonous letter. It’s unbelievably cruel. And very funny. It claims to be from a member of staff. It’s a vicious attack on you. Of course, I don’t believe a word of it. These idiots know nothing about you.’

‘Why do you say “about you”, and not “about us”? Is the letter aiming to hurt you or me? Is it about who you are and where you’ve come from?’

‘Probably me. First there was Airfaregate and now this. You’re my Achilles’ heel. They know that.’

‘Does it mention Sean?’

‘No. Would you like to see it?’

‘No, Edward, certainly not. I make it a rule not to read anonymous letters. People who write things like that are rarely “well” people. And I don’t want spiteful things sticking in my head. In fact, I’m surprised that you read it, knowing that it was unsigned. The person who did this wants to sow a seed of doubt in you. Please don’t read it again. Throw it away and forget about it. In fact, just give it to me.’

‘But they seem to know so much about you. I’m curious. It

reads to me like a bitchy gay, you know the type who hates women. Well, there are lots of them in the world of teaching, so no clue there. Critical of your tweets, your grammar, your body. Digs at your Liverpool background. It even implies that I wrote your book for you.'

'Ah, Sir Edward Chamberlain, that purveyor of feminist fashion history. The man I met a year after my book was published. But I hate to see you so upset. Don't let them get to you. It doesn't bother me one bit. Is it someone jealous of the knighthood? How petty and unkind. Anyway, I'm not ashamed of being a Scouser and not having had a posh education.'

'Darling, perhaps you had better stop tweeting for a bit. Just let the dust settle.'

PART ONE

Innocence

CHAPTER 1

Hamlet Cocks Up

Blagsford School for Boys was founded in 1552 under a law set out in the Charities Act of 1545, which had been passed by Henry VIII to put to use funds from the dissolution of the monasteries. For nearly four hundred years it stood opposite the Cornmarket in a quiet, pretty Midlands market town.

Between the wars, it moved to the edge of town. There was a need for more boarding houses, and an opportunity arose when death duties forced a local gentry family to sell their eighteenth-century mansion with its landscaped grounds – readily convertible to a sports field – and its small lake (or was it a large pond?). A few Old Blaggers objected, saying School wouldn't be School in a new location, but the move was a success.

Blagsford had twice made it to the top fifty of the *Sunday Times* Independent School Ratings. The *Good Schools Guide* described it as 'a comfortable mix of brains, brawn, and artistic flair, but demanding and challenging too'. Less good headlines were made after twenty-six pupils were taught the wrong Shakespeare play (*Hamlet* instead of *Much Ado about Nothing*) in preparation for an A level examination.

Every English teacher's worst nightmare, Edward had thought to himself, reading the story in the paper. As a Tudor historian with a particular interest in the cultural consequences of education policy, and a special fondness for *Hamlet*, he felt a real

sympathy for Mr Camps, the poor man who was forced into early retirement by the governors after the *Hamlet* cock-up. Though he was also quietly grateful. Camps happened to be the head, who liked to lead from the front by taking one A level set himself. It was probably because he was overwhelmed by administrative duties, and didn't have time to attend departmental meetings, that he had taught the wrong play. The resultant vacancy had been Edward's opportunity to apply for the position of Headmaster of Blagsford.

* * *

Edward had won a scholarship to a famous public school himself, got into Oxford, and taken a first-class degree in history.

He had stayed on to complete his doctorate, which was then published as an academic monograph entitled *Gilded Lilies: Grammar School Education and Social Mobility in Tudor England*. He was pleased with the pun in the title, though he had to explain it whenever someone at a cocktail party asked him what his book was about.

In the early sixteenth century, a man named William Lily wrote the standard Latin grammar textbook for use in schools. In the middle of the century, the Tudor monarchs founded numerous new grammar schools in order to train up a kind of civil service for the nascent modern state. This gave lower middle-class boys ample opportunities for social mobility. By the end of the century, Lily's grandson John had benefited from this – he had become the most famous and popular writer

in Elizabethan England, thanks to his clever (but admittedly unreadable) novel *Euphues*, and his court comedies that Queen Elizabeth absolutely adored. And, of course, this same process of education and social mobility was the key to the life and work of William Shakespeare, whose plays he adored. So you see, Edward would conclude, in best lecturer mode, it was the educational revolution that had made *Hamlet* possible.

Edward had wrestled with the idea of becoming an academic, but felt that he didn't quite have the killer touch. He knew from certain aspects of his postgraduate experience that he would never gain full institutional acceptance in the world of Oxbridge, and he saw too many fellow students exiled to junior lectureships in dreary, rainy places like Dundee and Belfast. He was more of a big fish in a small pond sort of guy, and felt that he would have more freedom (and certainly more money) as a teacher in a good public school. They were always on the lookout for bright young men who knew the tricks of the trade when it came to Oxbridge admissions, which was what the parents cared about. He soon had half a dozen offers to become a history teacher. He was relieved that the independent schools didn't bother with all the nonsense of having to do an additional teacher training degree, where all you learned was lesson planning and crowd control.

Well, he certainly had the money, thanks to the live-in accommodation arrangements when he became a housemaster. But not quite the freedom he might have expected to continue his writing career. In time, though, he was glad of that. He

discovered that he was good at organization, and liked running meetings. There was something satisfying about the art of letting everyone have their say, while still pushing the business along. Before long, he was promoted to deputy head in a minor public school just outside Guildford, in the south of England. It was a place that aspired to imitate his own famous *alma mater*.

Then he had a kind of epiphany. He wasn't really sure whether it was out of idealism or ambition, but he suddenly decided to leave the private sector and venture away from the south. Was it because he looked around the staffroom one day and saw old men with thinning hair who had never left the cocoon of public-school life? Or was it that he genuinely believed that, having made his case about education and social mobility in Tudor England, he could actually put it into practice in the real world? Was it his vocation to bring black kids out of the ghetto? Or maybe he knew that it would give him a certain edge, a fast track to greater things. So he had applied for the position of head teacher at St Joseph's Academy in Liverpool.

His friends had teased him mercilessly, saying he wouldn't last five minutes. 'Too posh, mate,' said Nick, his best friend from Oxford. He knew that there was an element of truth in this; he was Oxford through and through. Of course it was a risk applying for the Academy job, but, unlike most of the people he knew, he liked taking risks. St Joseph's was desperate for a turnaround, and in normal circumstances would not have even considered a man from the public-school sector.

At interview, the panel was impressed by Edward's CV, but more so by the man himself. He was told that he and another candidate were to be called back for a second interview. He had a hunch, from things he had overheard on the day of the first interview, that his rival was an internal candidate. I bet they'll go for the safe option, he said to himself. He had been impressed by the governors, and had liked the energy and grittiness of Liverpool. He really wanted the job.

He phoned Nick to talk it over.

'Ed, that's so weird that you called – I was about to email you. Did I ever tell you about my American cousin? Lives in Boston, filthy rich and on the board of a top school out there – I mean really top, Milton Academy. Just outside Boston, feeder for Harvard and Yale. Couple of the Kennedy boys went there. T. S. Eliot, James Taylor, you name it. They're looking for a new head of history, and he asked me for advice. You said you wanted a change: how about the New World?'

Edward was an Englishman to his core. He had no desire to move to America, not even to Anglophile New England. But he saw his opportunity. He emailed the secretary to the governors of St Joseph's Academy and asked about their timetable for a final decision, mentioning in passing that he was also having to make a decision about an offer from a top American private school. He stressed that he was really passionate about the St Joseph's job, but that if it wasn't going to work out, he'd want to take the American opportunity.

This swung the decision. One of the St Joseph's governors was in PR. He persuaded his colleagues that this would be a great story for the school. The decision was made before the second interview, and the PR man made sure that there was a big splash: 'Ed the Head turns down \$250k to come to Liverpool' screamed the headline in the *Echo*. It was the sort of story that Scousers loved, just like the rumours that long-lost son John Lennon was allegedly heading back to Liverpool – the day before he was brutally gunned down on a cold December day. No one had really believed it, but they all loved the story.

Ed was delighted, though he did wonder how the internal candidate had reacted at being brushed off before the second interview. Later, he learned that the newspaper story was the first that the internal candidate, Chuck Steadman – who, by a strange coincidence, was an American – had heard of the news. Black mark for the governors, Edward said to himself. Communication, communication, communication.

CHAPTER 2

Lisa

What Edward hadn't expected was to fall in love. Not just with that vibrant, exciting city, with its stunning architecture (built on slave money, he noted to himself, appreciating the irony) and its warm, friendly people, but with Lisa. She was a textiles teacher at the school. He noticed her at once, at his first assembly, because she was the only one not listening. She was whispering to a colleague. She was also the most beautiful woman in the room. Arguably the only beautiful one. She had shoulder-length dark hair, which flicked up at the bottom, huge grey eyes with sooty lashes, and a friendly dimpled smile. But it was her bone structure that mesmerized him most. She'd give Kate Moss a run for her money in that department, he thought. You could slice cheese with those cheekbones.

She annoyed him, though. He felt that he was being teased for something he hadn't yet done. Later, when they were formally introduced, she thrust out her hand and gave him a firm, confident shake. But he couldn't help noticing (with his devotion to Shakespeare) that her palm was slightly moist. So not *that* confident, he thought to himself. What did Iago have to say about sweaty palms and sexual desire? She could be trouble, he thought. Just as well he was happily married.

'You've always liked your Donnas and your Lisas,' his wife Moira joked.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ said Edward.

‘Well, you know. All those Felicities and Sophies in your previous school didn’t really do it for you. I mean from a teaching perspective, not a dating one. You love the idea of educating those working-class girls, but you’d never fancy them. I know I’m safe on that score. What did Oswald Mosley once say, “Vote Labour, sleep Tory”? That’s you through and through, Ed.’

‘Well, look what happened to Mosley. Are you trying to tell me that I married up?’ He laughed. ‘Well, I did. And I’m not ashamed to admit it. But I do agree that I love being around these feisty girls, rather than teaching dull, posh Lucindas, always flicking their long, glossy hair and cultivating a look of studied indifference. I’ve seen enough of them to last me a lifetime. Yes, I like the St Joseph’s girls, even though I only see them when they’re naughty. I miss the teaching sometimes. That’s the only downside of a leadership role. You don’t see enough of the children. And they make me laugh. They really do. And I miss you too, Moira. And the bloody cat. You’d love the city, if you gave it a chance.’

Moira had not come north. She worked in publishing in London, and didn’t want to give up her job. They had agreed to commute, meeting every other weekend in term time. Edward would return home during the school holidays.

‘Well, I’ll think about it, darling. Do you know what my mother had the cheek to say to me the other day? “You should live in Liverpool, Moira. Men have their needs.” What a

dinosaur! Well, I'm sorry that you raised a feminist, Mummy, I told her. Why should I pack up my great job, and leave our lovely little house in Surrey with its easy commute to London, when you probably won't stay five minutes in ghastly Toxteth. I tried to explain to her that this job was just a stepping stone. You could never live permanently there, and nor could I.'

'No, I think you're right, I don't think I could, much as I love the flat they found for me. But the commute is killing me. My hair is going grey. You've got to come north more often, Moira.'

Edward had gone straight in with a plan for St Joseph's, and it was working. On his first morning, an Inset day, he had walked slowly around the school grounds, taking in everything. He carried a small orange Post Office notebook. There were no markings in the playground for football or netball. The canteen stank of cabbage. The staffroom was painted corporation cream, with paper-thin brown carpet tiles, sticky underneath his handmade Italian shoes. The buildings were as tired as the staff. There was no sense of dignity or care, for either the teachers or the children.

He called the governor who was in PR and arranged for painters and decorators to come in overnight. The Scousers loved a challenge, especially on double overtime. When the children arrived for the first day of term, a five-a-side AstroTurf football pitch had been laid down, and a basketball court was marked out on the playground. The staffroom was freshly painted with a Dulux imitation of Farrow and Ball Cornford White, and there

was even a new carpet. On the classroom walls there were large framed posters of aspirational heroes: Shakespeare, Einstein, Emmeline Pankhurst, Nelson Mandela (this was a detail he had arranged in advance). God knows how they had performed the makeover in one night or how much it had cost, thought Edward – but he had charmed the governor into picking up the bill.

He had been told that on the last day of term, the children smashed the fire alarm. It was a ritual. This interested him. He thought long and hard about why they did this. And then he got his answer. They wanted to make a mark. To end their schooldays with a statement and go out with a bang. So he came up with an idea. They would end their schooldays with a prom. There would be a survivors' breakfast. Suits for the boys, and prom gowns for the girls.

He instigated other rules too. Report cards. If you failed, you would be sent down a year. A strict dress code. The girls now wore below-the-knee checked kilts, with long socks. Black or brown shoes, or you were sent home. Boys' hair had to be no more than a number four cut. Ties were not to be tucked into shirts. Everyone must walk down the central aisle in silence into assembly. Students (no longer 'pupils') would stand when a teacher entered the room.

To create a sense of belonging, he instigated houses: Lennon, McCartney, Harrison, and Starr. The school was rebranded as SJA (St Joseph's Academy). The initials appeared everywhere.

'They deserve the same standards', was Edward's mantra. He

brook no dissent. 'You are free to enrol your child elsewhere,' he would tell the odd disaffected parent. But they never did. They all wanted their children to be part of a success story. He insisted that if ever he had children of his own, they would attend the school. He had no intention of having children, but this was a good way of putting pressure on the staff to set an example and do likewise with their own offspring.

One of Edward's best interventions was securing funding for a Literacy Support Dog called Waffles. The kids from Starr house were a bit dim, and he figured it would be a novel way of improving their reading skills. The students would take it in turns to read to Waffles, who lay patiently in his basket. When they had finished reading their two pages loudly and clearly to Waffles, he would raise his head in expectation of his doggy treat (his favourites were Arden Grange crunchy bites). It was another huge success of Edward's.

The GCSE results soared, as if by magic. When SJA won an award for Most Improved Academy in the North West, he organized cupcakes for the entire school and gave permission for lessons to be abandoned for the day. Again and again he emphasized that grades mattered.

The children, also, proved a doddle. From that first week when they returned to school after the summer holidays to find the playground marked out with football and basketball lines, they knew he was all right.

The staff were the problem. They were lazy, disaffected,

gossipy, complacent. They loathed Oxbridge, and they probably loathed him, even though they were nice to his face. Januses. Except for Lisa. It was not so much that she disliked him; she just didn't notice him. Towards the end of his first year, he decided to throw a party for the staff. He tried to pretend that it was to improve staff morale, to show that he was, after all, one of the guys: that he cared about his staff as much as he cared about his students. But he knew none of this was true. He wanted to see Lisa. He wanted to take her in his arms.

* * *

'Will you come to the party?'

'Yes, of course darling. May I bring Tabitha?'

'Well as long as she doesn't pee all over the flat. Or sleep on the bed.'

'Fantastic. I'll take the train. Tabitha prefers it that way. Can't wait to see you, Ed. Guildford feels cold without you.'

* * *

'Will you come to the party?'

'Is it OK to bring my husband?'

'Oh – do you know, I wasn't aware that you were married. You've kept that quiet! But yes, of course it is. I'd love to meet him.'

'Then I'll come.'

CHAPTER 3

After the Party

The invitation asked everyone not to wear stiletto heels. This puzzled Lisa. What a curious detail. What on earth did the headmaster and his wife have against high-heeled shoes? It was only when she arrived and saw the beautifully polished wooden floors that she understood. The pinprick of heels would not be a good look in such an immaculate flat, although, personally, she preferred a shabby chic look. She once shocked her husband when she took out a hammer and violently pummelled a brand-new butcher's block that had been delivered that morning from Ikea: 'It needs to look old,' Lisa explained, 'as if it's been around for centuries.' Later, she rubbed oil into the indentations. She liked to press her fingers into the holes that she had made. She loved the feel of wood.

The textures of natural materials; beauty. These were things that mattered to Lisa. She was a working-class girl from Bootle. But she had a love of beautiful clothes. It came from her father. He had been a postman, and he had a gambling habit. When he won on the 'gee-gees' he would bring her and her sisters posh clothes from George Henry Lee. The next day her mother would return them. Lisa never forgot the quality and cut of the garments. She bought her first beautiful dress with the first instalment of her student grant. It was black silk, cut on the bias, with embroidered dull-gold roses. It was the first time she truly

understood how beautiful clothes bestowed confidence.

Lisa had been educated at an all-girls' convent school, run by the Sacred Heart Sisters. Sister Agnes, unintentionally, used to crack them up: 'Girls, please remember, do not eat your sandwiches up St Anthony's back passage.'

Lisa loved the school chapel, with its smell of polished wood and incense. The other girls were a nightmare, though. The height of their ambition was to get pregnant, so they could bag a council flat. But she also knew that these girls wanted a baby to love. She was sure about that. Sadly, the men they went for were such losers. She knew, with absolute clarity, that once she left, she would never go back.

On leaving school, she applied for a foundation course in textiles at the London School of Fashion. The long-term plan was Textiles in Practice, BA (Hons), at the Manchester School of Art, but first she had to complete a foundation course, and London was the natural choice. She adored London. It was her city, and always would be. She still remembered how naïve she had been when she first arrived. She blushed at the memory of seeing posters around the city saying 'Bill Stickers will be prosecuted'. Who was this man Bill Stickers? Why hadn't anyone caught him. Her new sophisticated southern friends cried with laughter when she asked them.

But she made it to Manchester, and after the BA came an MA for which she wrote a dissertation called *Lipstick and Lies: Reassessing Feminism and Fashion*. It was about third-wave

feminism. How it was OK to embrace your femininity and still be a feminist. She traced the connection between fashion and female politics from 1781 to the present day. She began with the mother of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, arguing that her ideas about dress and women's liberation were paradoxically close to those of Marie Antoinette, a fashion icon from the other end of the political spectrum. She ended with Alexander McQueen by way of Coco Chanel. She had always worshipped McQueen. She appreciated the wit and style of his final act of defiance: hanging himself with his best belt in a closet full of beautiful clothes.

She was passionate about her work. It was her solace, her consolation and her joy. But jobs teaching the history of fashion were as rare as hen's teeth, and before she stood any chance of getting one she would have to spend three years working on a PhD thesis, earning no money. Things had also gone a bit pear-shaped in the boyfriend department, so she had returned home to Bootle. The next thing she knew, she had a job teaching textiles at St Joseph's Academy, and a husband from New Brighton – a man who was never going to set the world alight, but who was dependable, and, it had to be said, incredibly handsome: he could have got a job as a Tom Cruise lookalike.

Lisa was just twenty-three, straight out of her MA, when she got the job. She was taken aside by a wise old teacher, Will Butler, who told her to go in hard. 'Be firm, don't give an inch. Show them who's boss, and you will never have to discipline them again.'

Lisa took the advice to heart. She strode in, wearing a red jacket, and took no nonsense. Within hours, the gossip around the school was that Miss Blaize was ‘dead strict’. From then on, it was plain sailing. She had a laugh with the pupils, but with just one look she could command complete attention.

She learned another valuable lesson, early on, about schoolchildren and loyalty. It was towards the end of the school day, and she was tired. A boy called Michael Turner was giving her cheek. He was a redhead, and a clown, and he was trying to show off. ‘Miss, I can’t do it. Miss, I don’t understand. Miss, Tim’s kicking me under the table.’

Finally she snapped and slapped him across the face. Total silence. Utter horror. What had she done? Everyone looked at her. Then the bell rang.

‘Off you go. You’re dismissed.’

That night she told Pete, her husband, what she had done. He was shocked. ‘Lisa, you’ll lose your job. He’ll go straight home and tell his parents. You will have to resign. What on earth were you thinking?’

‘That was the problem. I wasn’t thinking. Well it’s too late now. There’s nothing I can do.’

All night she agonized over the slap. What *had* she been thinking? She planned on going to the head first thing in the morning and fessing up. Hold up your hand, *mea culpa* ...

As it happened, she bumped into Turner in the playground. ‘Aright miss, see you later!’ He gave her a wide grin.

He never said a word. Nor did the other children. Loyalty. Children always have the ability to surprise teachers. He never gave her cheek again. But she still had nightmares about the slap.

Then there was Jordan. He was fourteen and the most handsome boy she had ever seen. He had huge hands, like Michelangelo's statute of the boy/man David. She would catch Jordan's eye in the classroom and he would respond with an intense stare. God, the boy was so bloody sexy. He disconcerted her. Made her feel that he was undressing her with his eyes. Then she would feel wracked with shame for having such thoughts about a schoolboy. Now I know how Humbert Humbert felt when he confessed that it was Lolita who seduced *him*, she said to herself. These were thoughts that she could never have voiced to anyone. Especially not to Pete, for whom the phrase 'jealous guy' might have been coined.

One day, Jordan stayed late in the textile room to help her tidy. She was stacking scissors into metal containers. Jordan was picking up tiny dressmaking pins with his oversized fingers. They were working in silence, but he suddenly broke down and told her that his parents were divorcing. She hugged him and kissed his forehead softly. And that was it. Just a chaste, butterfly-wing kiss. But she felt worse about that kiss than she had about slapping Turner. God, if anyone found out. Perhaps she wasn't cut out for teaching.

She wanted to keep her options open. She was already thinking that she might not be cut out for marriage either. Pete

had the most gorgeous body, but never said anything interesting. She was a grafter, and always had been. At fourteen, she'd sold records in Woolworth's. During her foundation year in London, she had worked nights as a hospital cleaner. While an undergraduate in Manchester, she had been a barmaid. So when she came home in the evenings, tired as she was from the noise of the school and the strain of being a new teacher, she sat at her computer and worked *Lipstick and Lies* up into a book. A small publisher took it on, and there were a few enthusiastic reviews in some little-known magazines and periodicals. It was even shortlisted for a prize so obscure that there couldn't have been many competitors. She began thinking about a subject for a second book; one that might get her out of teaching.

* * *

She had to admit that she was rather attracted to the new head, and just a little excited about the party. She had pretended not to listen to his address in that first assembly back in the autumn; in reality, she had been mesmerized by his quiet but charismatic basso profundo voice, and the way that he spoke in perfectly formed sentences. His words had been like silk, his soft phrases a drug, a charm, a conjuration.

The day before the party, she found herself alone in the staffroom with Chuck Steadman, who had also applied for the headship. He had quickly overcome his disappointment and was making himself indispensable to the new man.

'What do you really think of him?' Lisa asked, fixing Chuck

with her blue-grey eyes and twisting her hair around her index finger. Men always listened when she did that.

‘Edward is an only child,’ Chuck replied, ‘that says a lot about him. He told me he was once destined for the church. Don’t you think he would have made a good bishop?’

‘Oh, I see what you mean: Scott Fitzgerald’s “spoiled priest”. Yes, I see exactly what you mean. He speaks in a very reverential way. He’s shy underneath all that intellect and brilliance. But he’s certainly tough. He’s made a great start in turning this place around. Not an easy feat.’

‘Aha, you gotta hand it to him. He’s Mr God round here. Did you ever meet Mrs God?’

‘Not yet. She doesn’t come here very often, does she? I’m hoping she’ll be at the party tomorrow. I’ve heard she’s very posh, what do they say, very Edinburgh. She’s Scottish, isn’t she? I overheard one of my indiscreet sixth-formers saying that one Sunday night he’d been passing that old block of flats where the head lives, and he’d seen him stuffing a busty blonde holding a cat basket into a car. That must have been her. Not what I’d imagined he’d go for.’

‘Well, as a red-blooded Southerner, I approve of the *Baywatch* type. Why, look at my Milly!’

‘Very funny. Your wife’s the most gamine, chic Audrey Hepburn doppelgänger I’ve ever seen.’

‘Moirá’s more of a Marilyn.’

‘Whatever. God knows how you persuaded Milly to marry a

deadbeat like you!’

‘My American charm and charisma, no doubt. English women love American guys because they’re forthright and honest. Not like your English gentlemen, still in love with Nanny.’

‘Chuck, we are not living in *Brideshead Revisited*. You do make me laugh. Anyway, you seem to hero worship Edward. You’re never away from him. You still after his job?’

‘Of course I am! First I can be his wing man and then I can take his place. Seriously, though. I’m fed up teaching. I fancy a bit of admin responsibility. That’s why I had a shot at the headship myself, even though I knew I didn’t stand a chance. Look, I like him. He’s a nice guy. A good leader. He makes you want to be part of his winning team. That’s your trouble, Lisa. You don’t want to be part of any club that might accept you.’

* * *

Pete had refused to come to the staff party, though Lisa hardly pressed the issue. She was too selfish to look after him at a party. So she was alone and slightly nervous. To be honest, a little out of her depth. She didn’t usually mingle with the other staff, preferring to teach her classes, get into her Mini, and head home to work on ideas for her second book.

She looked around the room and saw a fascinating scenario unfolding. There were two beautiful, long-haired young women deep in conversation. One was a teacher at the school, the other a sixth-former. The teacher, Maia Riddell, filled the wine glass of the student. The student didn’t thank her. Lisa saw with instant

clarity that they were lovers. It was simply impossible that a student would not thank her teacher. Now the evening was getting interesting.

Edward was watching her. She could feel it. But his wife was in the room, so he was being careful. He was biding his time. During a lull in the music, he approached and asked her to dance. She felt for his wife. But she wanted to dance: Lisa loved to dance. She had an odd feeling that Edward had orchestrated the evening so that it would end like this. They danced to k. d. lang's 'Constant Craving'. His wife's eyes were boring into them, though she was pretending not to notice. Lisa told Edward about the lesbians.

'Please be careful, Edward. I think this could blow up.'

'No, no,' he protested, 'you've got this wrong. Maia Riddell is an exemplary teacher. She would never, ever hit on a student. But, Lisa, I thank you for your concern.'

'Well, don't say I didn't warn you,' she laughed.

* * *

There is always a green-light moment in every relationship, especially in a clandestine one. The moment when a couple can make a decision, stop what they're doing, or just go ahead anyway. Lisa was no strict moralist when it came to relationships; she'd always had a loose notion of fidelity, but she wouldn't go any further if there were children involved.

Edward and Lisa met for a drink in the local pub after work one day. He asked if she had children. 'No,' she said, 'had my bellyful looking after my siblings thank you, to ever romanticize

the idea of raising a family. I'd rather concentrate on my career. How about you?'

'No. We've been married for seven years, and we have never wanted children. In fact, we left out the prayer for children in our marriage ceremony. We're happy with our cat, Tabitha. I think my mother is disappointed. I don't see Moira as the maternal type. And she's quite paranoid about needles and childbirth.'

'Well, who can blame her? My mother had six, and it was no picnic.'

'Six? Are you serious? Such a large family. Where are you in the pecking order?'

'Third daughter. Says a lot about my character. My parents were desperate for a boy. He came after me. Spoilt rotten, as you can imagine. But don't get me wrong, I love being part of a big family. You learn from a very early age that life is basically unfair. You also learn not to take yourself too seriously. How about you?'

'I'm an only child.'

'Ah.'

'And by the way, Lisa, you were right about the lesbian lovers. The school is facing a law suit.'

He paused, and then said, 'By the way, I've been sent a couple of free tickets for a play over in Manchester. You know my wife lives down south. Would you fancy coming? Sounds a bit experimental, but that might be your kind of thing.'

'Why not?' she replied.

It was only when they were halfway to Manchester, Edward driving his black BMW very distractedly, that he mentioned that the show in question was a production of *Richard III*. She knew that he loved Shakespeare, and so did she, so this was no surprise. ‘Apparently it’s got wolf and boar masks, and dancing, movement, physical theatre stuff – probably more your vibe than mine,’ he said, then he paused. ‘And it’s in Romanian.’

Silence. ‘I’m not sure whether there are surtitles.’

* * *

She loved the show. And she loved that he loved it. On the surface, he was so English, so Oxford, potentially a right stuffed shirt, but underneath, he was mischievous, a bit radical, full of surprises. Ever so slightly dangerous. Afterwards he offered her a drink in his flat.

She had parked her precious Mini at the school, and she didn’t want to leave it there overnight – the radio would be sure to be nicked. ‘Can we swing by the school, and I’ll follow you in my car?’

Later, and for many years later, he would tell her how he had looked into his rear mirror only to glimpse her terrified eyes.

She *was* terrified, because she knew that she was going to kiss him. He put on *Tristan und Isolde* (corny, but effective, she thought). He lit a fire, and they talked. As she was leaving, he took her in his arms. She felt less guilty for that long, passionate kiss than she had for tenderly kissing Jordan.

CHAPTER 4

The Truth Will Set You Free

Lisa knew that she would bear Edward's children. And she knew that he knew it too. Parting with Pete was painful but necessary. Once she had slept with Edward, she knew that she could never sleep with her husband again. Strangely, she felt that to sleep with her husband would be a betrayal of Edward.

Moira was furious, chilly, vengeful. She threatened to ruin Ed's reputation in and around his old school in the south. It was she who had raised him from the gutter, supported him whilst he rose in his career, put her own career on hold. She stormed over to Liverpool to have it out with him, taking her beloved cat and some empty suitcases. Edward was on the phone when she arrived. He hastily hung up.

'Hello Tabitha, and where's your mistress?'

'She's here, and don't let me prevent you from chatting to yours.'

Ouch. She could be cutting, Moira, but she was also terribly witty. When she realized that he had made up his mind to leave, she told him that she would destroy him and take every penny. She told him that he and Lisa wouldn't last five minutes, that he was making a big mistake. Then she proposed an open marriage. Half-ironically, half-seriously, Edward put the proposition to Lisa: 'Gosh, that's too sophisticated for me,' she replied. 'I'm a simple, northern, working-class girl, we're all or nothing up here,

I'm afraid.'

Moira begged him to go into marriage therapy. Then she tugged at his heartstrings, saying that she now wanted children.

He would give her the therapy. But he was cruel when he told her that even if he only lasted three months with Lisa, he would still want those months. The marriage was over. He loved Liverpool. He wanted to stay. He didn't want to return to that tiny house in boring Guildford.

Lisa was angry when she heard that he was going into marriage therapy. She felt it was a mistake, and cruel to Moira, when Edward had no intention of saving the marriage. But he was adamant. He owed it to Moira and the seven happy years they had spent together.

Then one night Edward phoned from Guildford. 'Darling, you will never believe what I have to tell you. Moira's admitted in our therapy session that she's been having an affair with one of my colleagues from the history department at my old school. I feel fantastic. Liberated. I no longer have to feel so guilty.'

'Why did she tell you, Edward? Did she want you to know that she was desirable and sexy in the eyes of other men? Was it a last-ditch gamble to save the marriage, to show another, dangerous, side that you didn't know existed? What's her agenda?'

'She said something rather noble. She said, "The truth will set you free".'

* * *

Lisa married Edward. He'd first proposed in the Puck

Building in Manhattan on New Year's Eve at midnight, where he'd flown her for an old Oxford friend's wedding to some hedge fund manager. They were dancing together to the sounds of an all-girls jazz band. She turned down his first proposal. 'Edward, we're both still married to other people. It's too soon to think about another engagement.'

He tried again, this time in Paris, after they had both got the decree absolute. He gave her a box containing a beautiful gold lamé Vivienne Westwood dress, wrapped more exquisitely than any present she had ever received. Then he told her that he was taking her to a train station café for supper. When she got there, she saw that it was the fabulous art deco restaurant at the Gare de Lyon, Le Train Bleu.

Edward told her that this was the restaurant where Coco Chanel would have dined, and Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, and then they would have caught the famous Blue Train to the French Riviera, and that was the kind of life he wanted with her. When he took out a small blue box, she grinned. It was a beautiful ring, in a style called *Moi et Toi*, which he had bought from Cartier. Two stones, a diamond and a sapphire, twisted around one another.

'So is this a Yes, this time?'

'OK then, Edward. Let's do it. But it must be a small and intimate wedding. No family. No fuss.'

So they married. Edward in a cream linen suit, Lisa wearing a simple, elegant second-hand Chanel dress, made of cream tweed

and bought at a bargain price from a student friend who had started an online store buying and selling vintage couture. It was cut on the bias, and fell to just below her knees, nipped in at the waist. It showed her figure to perfection. Her measurements were exactly the same as Marilyn Monroe's (as she often reminded Edward, and anyone else who would listen). 36, 24, 34. The dress hugged her perfect breasts, and accentuated her tiny waist. She carried a handmade posy of white roses. She looked sensational. They told nobody that they were getting married, other than Chuck and Milly, who were the witnesses.

Edward and Lisa had their honeymoon in Venice. They stayed in a hotel on the Grand Canal opposite the Ca' d'Oro. Lisa loved the 'Golden House', which she could see from their bedroom window, so-called because of the gilt that adorned its façade. They woke in the morning to the cries of the gondolieri, and the splash of boats carrying their wares in the early morning sunshine. At that time of day, the sun was not yet shining on the Ca' d'Oro, so it was more putty-coloured than golden, but that would change with the afternoon sun, and then it would glow and shimmer, casting its gorgeous reflection on the glassy green waters below. Narcissus in love with its own dazzling, dizzying beauty.

Venice was the city that ignited Lisa's passion for food. After Edward, it was her most enduring love affair. It was early September, just before the start of term, and the restaurants were not so crowded. She made friends with the *cameriere* at

Al Mascaron in Santa Maria Formosa. He recommended the stuffed pumpkin, then *risotto ai funghi* with rocket and warm bread. They drank chilled Prosecco and then Refosco from the demijohns that lined the wooden bar. The *cameriere* brought figs and pears in a bowl of iced water. When she asked him to point out the locals, he told her that Venetians mainly eat at home, but buy bread at the *panificio* and pudding at the *pasticceria*, where, he said, you can also buy biscotti *al vino*, tiny plum tarts, and almond *cornetti*.

The next morning, whilst Edward slept late, Lisa wandered to the Rialto, home to the famous food market. She failed to find Shylock, but she saw wreaths of onions, bunches of aromatic herbs, late-ripening *San Marzano* tomatoes and bulbous glossy purple *melanzane*. Then, next to the fresh market was the *pescheria*, fish pulled straight from the Adriatic, squid, soft-shelled crabs, writhing eels, swordfish and tuna. The *macellerie*, where rabbits hung from hooks, and steaks and chops lined the tables.

Lisa did not speak Italian, unlike Edward who was fluent and spoke the language like an ambassador, but she understood when the market farmers proffered shards of melon, and warm figs, ‘*Tasta, tasta bea mora.*’ She stopped off at a bar and ordered a cappuccino. Even in the morning, the local people swigged glasses of Prosecco and gulped down espresso in one go; the Italian way.

The next morning she headed to the market on the Lido, not

to buy, but to look at the rolls of damask, cappuccino-coloured, bolts of creamy silk, embossed linen napkins.

When she got back, Edward was showered and ready to explore. He wanted to show Lisa the Carpaccios at the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni.

‘Main course, or starter?’ she teased.

Edward laughed.

‘Well, coming from the girl who’s currently reading the high-brow, literary thriller *Gondola Girl*, nothing surprises me.’

‘I’m also reading *The Wings of the Dove*,’ Lisa protested.

Edward never read trash. He only read improving books.

‘Shall we take the *vaporetto*, or walk?’

‘Let’s walk.’

Edward was happy showing Lisa his beloved Carpaccio painting of St George and the Dragon. Lisa was surprised by his choice. St George astride his stallion; his long, silky blond hair streaming behind him, his lance poised to strike. She didn’t like the picture; it reeked of violence and destruction. He saw the patron saint of England valiantly fighting the dragon, she saw toads and snakes, vipers, lizards. Then the dead bodies, a woman’s torso, still clad in a half-devoured dress, severed arms and legs. Why did he love this so much? She wondered about this side of Edward; a side she didn’t really know.

‘That spear’s rather phallic,’ she joked.

‘The whole thing is beautiful, astonishing.’

Lisa was glad of the cool, a respite against the burning heat

of the day. She lingered to buy a postcard. It was time to tell her parents that she had quietly remarried.

‘Let’s find a *bacari*. I’m desperate for a drink. Edward, it’s my honeymoon.’

Edward disapproved of lunchtime drinking. He could be such a Puritan. He liked breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, supper. Sometimes, when she offered him an early aperitif, he would say that he’d prefer a cup of tea. He would drink two glasses of wine over supper. He never liked to feel out of control.

As they walked along the Salizada Sant’Antonin, Lisa spotted a dress shop called Banco Lotto n. 10. In the tiny window was a beautifully cut cashmere coat. There was a notice pasted on the door saying that the clothes sold inside were made by the female prisoners of the Casa di Reclusione Femminile. Lisa pushed the door open and walked in. The woman behind the counter spoke English, and she explained that the Guidecca’s Women’s Prison was situated behind the walls of a former thirteenth-century convent. There were about eighty inmates who ran a tailor’s workshop and then sold their goods in the little shop. Even Edward was intrigued.

There were rails of organza dresses and coats, hats and scarves. Lisa bought a couple of silk scarves and the cashmere coat. She vowed to herself that she would try to discover more about the prison workshop and the women who made these beautiful clothes. Maybe she could write an article about it for *Textiles* magazine.

That evening, Edward and Lisa went to the Teatro la Fenice. Chuck had made them promise to go to the theatre, as it was one of his favourite opera houses in Europe. They had smiled when they heard that Verdi's *Otello* was being performed. They decided to dress up for the occasion. Edward wore black tie, and Lisa a backless Helmut Lang maxi dress of black, draped jersey. As Chuck had predicted, the theatre was indeed fabulous, if baroque was your thing. The gilded private boxes and crimson velvet seats, and the painted ceiling were opulent, though it was not Lisa's aesthetic. Edward looked happy; he was glowing, and looked so handsome in his dinner jacket and bow tie.

The opening was spectacular. The Cypriot crowd anxiously waiting for *Otello's* ship to come in, singing the storm in a swell of percussion and brass. There was Desdemona, wearing a fish-net veil over her bright blonde hair, peering out looking for her husband, and then, there he is, the crowd are giving thanks and rejoicing. But something is wrong. Lisa sensed her husband stiffening beside her. His mouth was set in a hard line, his eyes angry.

'We're leaving,' he whispered.

Thank heavens they were sitting in the end seats. It was bad enough enduring the black looks of the audience as they left, without having to squash past a line of angry Venetians.

Once outside in the balmy air, Lisa learned what had upset Edward. He spoke quietly, calmly.

'He was blacked up. Can you believe it? I thought they'd put a

stop to all that. It's fine for a white man to play Otello, but why cover his face in soot? We're supposed to be colour-blind.'

'Edward, I barely had time to notice before you dragged me out. I understand why you're upset, but shouldn't the best singers have the best roles?'

'Yes, of course, but, for God's sake, it looked like shoe polish on his face. He looked absurd. And Verdi's *Otello* is not particularly interested in race. Otello is the archetypal jealous Italian husband.'

At that very moment, a gorgeous black man in a sharp suit walked past them, looking every inch as if he'd just walked out of Shakespeare's imagination. He gave a barely perceptible nod in Edward's direction, and an appreciative glance at Lisa. She was mesmerized.

'Crikey, look at him, why didn't they drag him off the streets and into the theatre!'

They both burst out laughing, and the tension dissipated. Edward smiled and enveloped her in his arms. He gently kissed the top of her head. They walked home to bed.

CHAPTER 5

'I'm Going to Rescind that Ticket, Sir'

The postcard of St Augustine in his study with his little dog, sent from Venice, was signed Mr and Mrs Chamberlain. Lisa waited for the storm to break. Her mother wanted the details. She tried not to feel disappointed that her daughter had married in a register office. Lisa told her that she didn't want a fuss. She told her mother that after the ceremony, they ate thin slices of veal, sipped champagne, and gorged on confectionary from a corner shop. It was exactly how she wanted it. Her mother forgave her, even though she knew that the Pope wouldn't. She had always worried that there weren't going to be grandchildren with Pete, and she had a mother's instinct that it would be different this time around.

Lisa was pregnant when they returned from the honeymoon. They called their daughter Emma.

Lisa loved her with a visceral passion and ferocity. She herself was born in August, a Leo, and although she didn't hold much faith in astrology, she was a lioness through and through. She had flaws aplenty, but she also had loyalty and courage in spades. Her revered Coco Chanel was a Leo too, and collected lions, and used them again and again in her work. Lions embroidered onto bags, costume jewellery, even jackets.

It had been a tricky start to motherhood, however. Emma was premature and tiny. Her lungs were not developed, so she

was whipped away into intensive care before Lisa could bond with her. There was a terrible moment when she experienced a fleeting desire to grab the baby and smash its tender skull on the hard hospital floor. The feeling went as quickly as it came, but it horrified Lisa. Is this how an animal feels when confronted with the runt of the litter? It was a Lady Macbeth moment. She dared not tell a soul, not even Edward, who understood her so well, and would never judge. She felt a deep sense of shame.

The love for baby Emma came later, but, when it did, it was all-encompassing. It was the truest, purest, love of her life. Emma was her Achilles' Heel. She would die for her. The difficult first few months – Emma in an incubator, with the only possible contact through a tiny finger-hole in the Perspex casing – brought her close to Chuck, who had by now been promoted to deputy head. He had become Edward's trusted confidant.

Chuck had lost a baby. A boy. The baby had been three weeks old when he and Milly found him lifeless in his cot. Cold as any stone. Chuck – smart-talking Chuck, the coolest dude to come out of South Carolina – still cried when the boy was mentioned. His marriage to Milly had foundered under the strain, though they would always remain the best of friends. Milly ran a small local charity for battered wives. Edward arranged for it to be the school charity, supported by cake-sale days, and sponsored walks along the banks of the Mersey.

Some of Lisa's colleagues disliked Chuck: he was too American, too forthright, too clever. But she knew what he had

suffered. She sympathized, and he in turn revealed a tender side as baby Emma struggled to pull through those first weeks.

Despite this, Lisa was never entirely sure that Chuck could be trusted. Soon after arriving at St Joseph's, she had been warned by a colleague to be wary of him.

'Do you know what he said about you?'

'No, Jan, and I'm not sure I want to. I'm insecure enough as it is.'

'Well, I'm going to tell you because he's no friend to you. He doesn't like women, Lisa.'

'What do you mean? He's not gay. No one has a better gaydar than me. Go on then, what did he say?'

'Well, it was at your book launch party. Someone asked for you and he piped up, "You can't mistake her. She'll be the one with her tits hanging out of her designer dress".'

Lisa chuckled. 'Oh come on, Jan. That's the way he speaks. He means no harm. He's just joking. You know he's got a thing about breasts, because his wife is so flat-chested.'

'Well, look at the way he dressed for your party, in all that combat gear and muddy boots. Why would anyone turn up to a party celebrating a book about *fashion* looking like that? It was a deliberate slap in the face. He doesn't like you, Lisa. I see the way he watches you all the time.'

* * *

Emma wasn't very lucky with her health. The under-developed lungs had consequences. Apnoea episodes in the night.

Parental panic. More than one 999 call. The hospital became a familiar place.

Clinics, scans, tests. And then, during what was supposed to be a merely precautionary ultrasound, the radiographer said, ‘Something’s not quite as it should be here. Can you wait a minute while I consult a colleague?’

A more senior-looking figure came in, holding the printout of the ultrasound. ‘Nothing to worry about, but just to make sure, we’re going to admit Emma to hospital down in Birmingham where they specialize in this area.’ They refused to say exactly what was wrong, only that when a young child’s lungs struggle, it was important to keep an eye on the heart. ‘Let’s leave it to the experts in Birmingham.’

‘How do we get there?’ asked Lisa. ‘On the train?’

‘No, we’ll take her in an ambulance – just to be on the safe side. Maybe call your husband and get him to drive down and meet you? Nothing will happen before he gets there. It’ll probably be a day or two before they complete the necessary tests.’

‘You’re one of the Heart Kids now,’ one nurse joked, as little Emma was admitted onto the ward. A Heart Kid, thought Lisa, as if that were a good thing. You had to laugh or you’d go mad. Soon, Emma was hooked up to an array of machines, and a whole team of doctors was standing over the bed. And then Lisa heard words that no parent should ever hear: ‘Your daughter is in serious danger of heart failure. We are going to have to perform

bypass surgery. Immediately.' A 'nil by mouth' sign was hung up in preparation for surgery.

Broken hearts, Lisa thought. Men and women whine on about broken hearts. Narcissists. Know what it's like to have a consultant tell you that your child needs bypass surgery. The kind of thing you associate with old men whose arteries are clogged. A child in intensive care. That's a broken heart.

Edward fell apart when she telephoned him. He cried and he cried. No time for tears, thought Lisa. Get this girl through the operation. She sat at Emma's side, holding her hand, as she waited and waited for her to be taken into theatre, willing her to survive. I can be the mother of a sick child, she thought, but God please spare her. She was reassured when the surgeon came to speak to them. He told her that heart bypass surgery, even for children, was a routine procedure these days. 'No different from having your tonsils out in the old days when you were young,' he grinned, slightly flirtatiously. She didn't believe him, but she liked his style. He looked alarmingly young to be performing heart surgery. He had blond, floppy hair, and was wearing DM boots. He's OK, Lisa thought. A surgeon in DM boots is going to save my child. And he did. She never doubted him.

On coming round from the anaesthetic Emma cried silent tears and tried to mouth the word 'Mummy'. From that moment on, Lisa knew she was going to be all right. She was strong, like her mother. No one likes a child who screams and throws a tantrum, but a child who is trying not to cry, when she has had

major heart surgery ... well, that was courage.

Edward had only just made it down from Liverpool to Birmingham in time for the operation. When Lisa had called him, he had been in a tricky meeting, and he'd seen it through to the finish before setting off. He was always the professional. When he arrived, Lisa shouted at him, accusing him of caring more about the bloody school than his own daughter. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'I'm here now.' Though he'd only made it in time by virtue of driving the wrong way down the one-way street outside the hospital and parking in a direction that revealed his transgression.

When he emerged into daylight, after the long night waiting in the parents' room while the surgery was taking place, then the relief of stroking Emma's hair in the recovery room, he found a yellow ticket on the windscreen of the BMW. His head throbbing with fury, he stalked into the police station that happened to be opposite the children's hospital. He had a thing about the police. He had been incandescent on the occasion that he had been pulled over in Toxteth, just because he was driving a black BMW. He demanded to see Officer 354, who had issued the ticket, explaining through gritted teeth that his young daughter had just gone through open-heart surgery.

The constable looked visibly taken aback, and said, 'I'm so sorry to hear that, and in the circumstances I'm going to *rescind* that ticket, sir. And I do hope your daughter makes a full recovery.' She did, and somehow his faith in human nature, even

in God, was restored by the policeman's evident delight in the opportunity to use the word *rescind*.

Having come close to it, Lisa knew that there could be no pain in the world like losing a child. Once it was clear that Emma had got through the operation without infection or complication, she was moved from isolation to a ward. One evening, Lisa saw a tiny premature baby boy in a side room. The door was ajar, and she overheard family members saying platitudes to the mother like 'he's a little fighter', 'he looks stronger today', 'you'll be home before you know it'. But when Lisa looked at the father's pale, pitiful face, she knew that he knew the truth. At least her daughter was still alive. She thought of Chuck that day, and the hell that he had endured.

In the months following Emma's recovery, Lisa became desperate for another baby. Edward had always insisted that he only wanted one child. That was his own experience. 'Have two and it will soon be three,' he said. 'And then you lose your man-to-man marking capability.' And again, 'If there are three, one child will always feel left out – and then you'd have to buy a people carrier, get an extra bedroom on holidays.' His other worry was Emma's health. What would happen if she needed another heart operation, if there were a new baby in the family?

'I'm not talking about six children, like in my family, darling. Not even about three. Just one more.' Lisa was not to be deterred, and Edward believed her when she said that she could cope just fine. Her strongest argument was her concern that their home

life would be dominated by Emma's poor health. What could be more distracting, more lovely, than a baby in the house? The milky, yeasty smell of a new baby. Then, as Emma began at school, a toddler making them all laugh.

Edward never really had a choice. When a woman wants a baby, nothing or no one will stand in her way. Emma told her colleague Jan about her plan to become pregnant. She had conceived easily the first time. She had no worries on that score. 'Tonight's the night,' she said. 'The champagne's in the fridge, and I'm going to seduce my husband.' Three months later, she told Jan that she was having a baby, a boy. They both giggled conspiratorially. 'I always knew you were a determined woman,' said Jan, admiringly.

Emma was delighted to know that her mother was having a boy baby. Lisa told her, 'He's yours. I had him for you.' She wanted something good to come out of the sadness of Emma's health problems. She had secretly longed for another daughter, but little Emma much preferred the idea of a brother.

Emma was special. One day when Lisa was heavily pregnant and climbing the stairs, she felt two little hands underneath her belly, lifting up the weight. The support felt fantastic. During the early part of the labour, Emma came into the hospital ward and encouraged Lisa to walk around and work through the pain. Much to Lisa's amusement, Emma found a large pink plastic ball in the maternity suite and rolled it towards her.

'Em, how on earth do you think that exercise ball is going to

help?’

‘Sit on it, Mummy. Then your back won’t hurt.’

It worked like magic.

Because Emma had been premature, Lisa had been told to have an epidural. There had then followed a messy forceps delivery. This time, she wanted a natural birth. She wanted to know whether physical pain could be as bad as her mental anguish over Emma’s heart condition. Nothing could be worse than almost losing her daughter. Physical pain is physical pain and could be endured. Perhaps she was punishing herself. She wasn’t entirely sure about her motives, and the pain was excruciating. It was Edward who got her through it.

‘You can do it. You can do it. I know you can.’

That was all she needed to hear. Afterwards, she was too exhausted to take the baby in her arms. She told the nurse to give the baby straight to Emma. Job done, she told herself, as she saw Emma’s happy, excited face. Lisa fell asleep.

Emma was only five when he was born, but she carried George around the house as if he were a doll. Lisa’s girlfriends were amazed that she let Emma carry the baby in her arms over the flagstone floors of their farmhouse – having married, recovered from the financial clean-out of their respective divorces, and had a family, they had moved out of the city to a village in Cheshire. After the trauma of Emma’s first few months of life, Lisa had decided that she would only go back to her textiles GCSE class part-time. With the arrival of George, she decided to give up

teaching altogether. She might finally have some time for that second book.

‘Aren’t you scared that she’ll drop him? She’s only a child herself.’

‘She won’t drop him. There’s more chance that I would drop him than that Emma would. He’s too precious.’ And she never did.

* * *

Over the years, Chuck always offered support through the difficult times. Once, when Edward and Lisa had returned home after several days and nights in hospital with Emma, who had come down with a serious infection, they had found, waiting on the kitchen table, a Fortnum and Mason hamper of goodies and a huge vase of blue cornflowers. A stew in a brand new Le Creuset casserole dish was warming in the Aga, and the lawn was freshly mown in neater stripes than Edward had ever achieved. Chuck had arranged it all, liaising with one of their neighbours, who had a spare key to their house.

Touched by such gestures, Lisa and Edward asked him to be George’s godfather. Lisa also hoped that it would help him to have a child in his life. Chuck took his godparenting duties seriously. He gave generous and thoughtful Christmas presents, and said that he would lay down a bottle of the best Californian red wine every year so that George would have his very own cellar when he was eighteen.

CHAPTER 6

Missy

Lisa kept saying that she had had enough of teaching. Apart from Jan, she didn't get on with the other women in the staff room. Especially not with Ms Robinson. There was history between them.

Misan Robinson was formidable. Most people at SJA were terrified of her. She was so right-on, with her dreadlocks and her Adidas trainers. The students respected Missy. There was no messing about in her classes. She taught religious studies (even though she was an atheist). Her special interest was in feminist theology. She worshipped Rosemary Radford Ruether. Her dream in life was to teach at Howard University, and, to that end, she had enrolled on an MA programme at the Open University. Missy had a dream.

Lisa could not stand Ms Robinson. She was so pretentious, so achingly cool. What a phoney. Edward, of course, loved Missy. This was one of the rare instances when he and Lisa did not agree.

'She's exactly what this school needs. Know your privilege, Lisa.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You know exactly what I mean.'

'Do you fancy her?'

'Don't be absurd. She's a first-class teacher, and a team player. You don't make any effort to win her over.'

'I don't intend to. She patronizes me about our relationship. She's a cow. And I'm not going to be nice to her because she's black. Because that's racist.'

'Lisa!'

'What?'

Edward shook his head as he unlaced his shoes. Sometimes, Lisa was utterly impossible.

'She likes you, Edward. A bit too much, in my view. I've seen her, with her velvet doe-eyes giving you the look.'

'Lisa, she's gay. I've met her partner.'

'Don't believe that for a minute. She told me she's gender fluid. As if! I could float a canoe in her gender stream. You mark my words; she'll be married by Michaelmas.'

Edward burst out laughing. God, Lisa was funny, even when she was being ridiculous.

Missy was sexy, though. He wondered if she did swing both ways. It was true, she loathed Lisa, and she did give him the eye. He quite liked those feminist types. At least she had an opinion about something. Maybe he should promote her to deputy head. Let's face it, she deserved a break. What was it they said about religious studies teachers? 'Can't do: teach.' 'Can't teach: Teach RS.' Besides, Chuck was starting to drive him mad. He was getting a bit too big for his boots. It would teach him a lesson to announce that the duties had to be shared and a second deputy head would be appointed.

Edward decided to sound Missy out. No matter how tough

they all behaved in staff meetings, the mob usually crumpled when he called them individually to come to his office for a little chat. He kept her waiting outside his door for a good ten minutes, pretending he was making a phone call. It helped to exacerbate their anxiety. They always thought that they'd done something wrong; that they were in trouble. It gave him the psychological edge.

The meeting did not go well. Edward asked Missy what she thought about extra-curricular activities. It was his belief that SJA was not doing enough. It was that sort of thing that created a sense of belonging and camaraderie. He went on a bit too much about improving standards. Missy was looking bored. When she finally spoke, she was bolshy. She was a prominent member of the Union, and this was exactly the sort of thing that the Union feared and loathed. The teachers were under great strain, too much red tape, and time spent on the phone speaking to stropky parents. Edward insisted that books should always be marked promptly and handed back – no excuses. The staff were at breaking point. No, Missy certainly did not support the idea of extra-curricular work.

Later, he spoke to Lisa, when they were in the black BMW heading back to towards the Birkenhead tunnel.

‘She was a nightmare. I forgot that she was a powerful voice in the Union.’

‘So what will you do? Did you mention the deputy post?’

‘Well, I dropped the hint. I told her that her CV would benefit

from a leadership role, that she was highly respected by the students and staff, blah blah blah, but then she blew it by banging on about the Union. I need her to be onside. I'm not sure that I trust her.'

'But if you don't promote her now, she'll be really pissed off. You've dangled the carrot.'

'No, it's fine. I'll find a way to give her something. Keep her quiet.'

'Well you know my feelings about her, and I never change my mind: *about clothes or men.*'

'That's a quote from Jane Austen, isn't it?'

'Wow, Edward, you're really learning. But it's true. I don't trust her one bit. Do you know what she said to me today? I saw her chatting with the girls in the loo, and as I walked in she said, "Oh don't come in, we're having a good gossip about you." She's a spiteful cow.'

'Ignore her. She's trying to rattle you. She's jealous. I think she's OK, deep down. What she needs is a good seeing-to by a real man.'

It was Lisa's turn to be shocked.

'You can't say things like that. You'd be sacked, if anyone heard you.'

Edward chuckled; that wonderful, throaty laughter (as infectious as herpes, as Chuck once described it).

'Don't worry, sweetheart, it won't be me; she's not my type.'

A police car's siren wailed as they drove past the docks, and a

slight look of anxiety flickered across Edward's face. He watched as the car passed, and then he descended into silence. Lisa put her hand over his as he switched gear. Her man, her love.

* * *

Missy waited to see what would happen about the promotion. She guessed that Edward was sounding her out for the deputy headship. She knew she had it all; she was mixed-race, gay, female, clever, and young. God, if she only had a disability she'd be running the world! Missy was all for positive discrimination. Diversity was one of her things. She loved playing that game with all her white friends: 'How many black friends do you have?' That usually shut them up.

Missy's mother was Liverpool–African. Her father was white, and from a working-class Catholic family. He was a boxer, and the gentlest man she had ever met. Her mother had died of cancer when she was thirteen, so it was always just Missy and her dad, Tony. Tony's father was a racist, so they had very little to do with his extended family. Her father was insistent that she should be proud of her roots and in touch with her African heritage. He took her to the Maritime Museum at the Albert Dock, where she read about the eighteenth-century slave trade that had made her city rich on the blood and tears of African slaves. Tarleton Street, Tony explained, was named after one of the richest slave merchants. They owned plantations in the West Indies. They got rich on sugar and slaves.

Her father told her the story of the Zong massacre, where

healthy slaves, including women and children, were thrown overboard, for an insurance claim, when the ship ran out of water. He told her about Lord Mansfield and Wilberforce, and Thomas Clarkson, the man who wrote the first history of the slave trade. Tony had inspired in Missy a love of history, but she had read religion and ethics at university. Tony was so proud of Missy. Time and time again, he told her to live her own life, get a boyfriend, and a flat, but she would never leave her dad. She hadn't told him, either, that she was attracted to women. That could wait.

To begin with, Missy had quite liked the new head. He was a great appointment and he was really turning the place around. He set a very good example, but she didn't like it when Lisa became his girlfriend. It was a bit of a scandal when the news broke that they were an item, and that he was leaving Moira. It was the talk of the staffroom. No one thought it would last. They were so unsuited, so different. She felt he was letting the side down, again. Though she had to admit, that working-class Lisa wasn't quite such a sell-out as posh, blonde Moira. No matter, he would come to his senses once the sex wore off. He was too ambitious to be stuck with someone as gobby as Lisa.

Missy was annoyed when Lisa started getting into feminism. Far too close for comfort for Missy. Lisa was writing some tripe about fashion and feminism. Disguising her frivolity and shallow nature and obsession with clothes and lingerie by transforming it into something political. Well, she, Missy Robinson, wasn't

having any of it. She despised clothes and fashion. Gay men designing expensive clothes for stick-thin women starving themselves to death. She was waiting for Lisa to bring up the subject in the staffroom, so she could confront her. But she would do it cleverly: attack her with words, with considered argument. Missy did not buy into third-wave feminism.

She had been secretly flattered by the head's attention. Promotion would be a great opportunity. She was glad that she had mentioned her interest in the Union. He was impressed by that, she could tell. He was right-on, Edward. She had a feeling that he wanted to get rid of Chuck. The power had gone to his head, and he was becoming insufferable. Since Edward had married Lisa and they had had the baby and moved to the country, the Head had become rather less visible around the school. Chuck, picking up the slack, was strutting around and giving orders as if he were the top man. When Edward was around, everyone mocked Chuck for running around him like a bitch on heat. Chuck was all right with Missy, but he kept his distance, too. He knew a rival when he saw one.

But then the weeks passed and no word was forthcoming. Edward was avoiding her, and then an announcement was made that Chuck would be carrying on as sole deputy head for another year. Bastard. Leading her on like that and then discarding her like orange peel. I bet that Lisa had something to do with it. She'd always been so thick with Chuck. She needed male adoration, that one. Well, you just wait. I'll have my day with you. You'll

make a slip and I'll be there to see it. To bear witness.

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