

A novel of coupledness,  
parenthood, being single,  
infidelity, betrayal and all  
the bits in between

# KATHRYN FLETT SEPARATE LIVES

'I loved this book . . .  
full of characters who  
behave like people  
you might actually  
know'

JoJo Moyes





For Shirley Nathan

First published in Great Britain in year of 2012 by Quercus  
The paperback edition published in 2012 by

Quercus  
55 Baker Street  
7th Floor, South Block  
London W1U 8EW

Copyright © 2012 by Kathryn Flett

The moral right of Kathryn Flett to be  
identified as the author of this work has been  
asserted in accordance with the Copyright,  
Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication  
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form  
or by any means, electronic or mechanical,  
including photocopy, recording, or any  
information storage and retrieval system,  
without permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78087 186 8

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,  
businesses, organizations, places and events are  
either the product of the author's imagination  
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to  
actual persons, living or dead, events or  
locales is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Typeset by Ellipsis Digital Limited, Glasgow

# SEPARATE LIVES

Kathryn Flett

Quercus

## PROLOGUE

*June 2009*

### Susie

I know it's a cliché, but it was the text on Alex's phone that did it. And yes, obviously I shouldn't have been reading his texts, but if you dared look me in the eye and tell me you had never done the same thing, frankly I wouldn't believe you. Because we all have.

The text simply said: *Start living a different kind of life ... P :-)* xxx

Several thoughts jostled for my undivided attention simultaneously.

Who the hell is P? And what's with the smiley? (And how come they forgot to *LOL*?). Three kisses. P's a She ...

Shit – Alex is getting out of the shower.

I tapped the phone in an attempt to return to the blank screen but only succeeded in opening the new *Up* iPhone App that Alex had got for the kids. It was tempting – though only for a moment – to see what level they were

‘up’ to. Instead, I shoved the phone back into Alex’s jeans and rearranged a simulacrum of the heap of clothes he’d left on the bedroom floor. By the time he appeared I was tidying my knicker-drawer. And humming. It occurred to me that tidying a drawers-drawer is pretty much at the bottom of the list of desperate displacement activities. And humming while doing so means you may as well have the words ‘GUILTY OF SOMETHING, M’LUD’ tattooed on your forehead. In this case, pants-placement-plus-humming was just the easiest plausible thing I could pretend to be doing under the guilt-inducing circumstances. It was just as well that Alex remained completely uninterested by my presence. As was, increasingly often, the case.

‘Nice shower?’

But before I’d even got past ‘nice’ to ‘shower’ I knew this was the most absurd non-question I could have asked. It sounded like something a guilty somebody might say in a soap. Alex, still dripping a little and clad only in a too-small towel that did nothing for his incipient paunch, frowned and looked at me as though I were a particularly stupid and annoying child to whom he wasn’t even related.

‘Yeah, you know – hot water, shower gel, that sort of thing.’

Alex leaned over to pick up his clothes. Relieved, I turned back to my drawers, unearthing a black Myla thong that

had been in my Christmas stocking three – maybe four? – years ago, in the days when Alex probably didn't get smiley-face xxx texts from 'P' and the prospect of hot, thongy sex with the missus wasn't the sexual equivalent of being forced to undertake a Bushtucker Trial on *I'm A Celebrity*. I pushed the thong to the back of the drawer. It would probably be another four years before I'd see it again.

'Right,' said Alex, 'I'm going to drag the kids away from the TV. Hurry up, would you?'

'Yes, give me five minutes.'

As Alex went downstairs, I walked into the bathroom and looked at myself in the big old Venetian looking glass, the only mirror I'd ever owned that always seemed to go out of its way to flatter me. I tried not to wear my 'mirror-face'; that pseudo-blank (yet ever-so-slightly Joan Rivers) make-up-application expression which, in the best light and with the right tools, means that reinvention isn't entirely beyond the realms of possibility. As I slowly began to apply my face-the-world mask to the blank canvas, the face peered back. I let it droop a little, stopping short of pulling the totally bonkers expression that might reveal the brutal, animated truth: that today I looked every minute of my thirty-nine years.

It was not a face that had ever been described as pretty – at least not since I'd hit puberty, shed the puppy fat, acquired cheekbones and suddenly appeared a lot closer



to a legal sixteen than a jailbaity twelve – but it was still a good sort of face and usually scrubbed up OK. I'm a blonde, but not naturally – half-head-highlighted and therefore what my sort-of sister-in-law once described, slightly cruelly but entirely accurately, as 'a school-run blonde'.

So: green eyes set slightly too far apart, pale Celtic skin, a neat nose and a serviceable sort of mouth currently distorted by being bitten at one side, my face arranged itself into a stillness that managed not to refer too obviously to the churning in my solar plexus. But there was definitely something in the eyes – a sort of panicky, adrenalized look, offset by exhaustion and the knowledge that this being Saturday morning, there were another forty-eight hours of varying degrees of domestic discomfort to be borne before Monday morning would allow me to reclaim my grown-up head and think properly about 'P's text and the emotional ramifications thereof.

## Pippa

Dear Mum,

It's been a while since I've done this, so where to start? Where to finish? Maybe it's just best to write until I run out of words. No idea where that will end up, but ... I should probably start with the text from Lisa, inviting me

to dinner with her and Guy. I nearly turned it down at the last minute because it was – a bit randomly – on a Wednesday and I’m often a bit done-in on Weds after the gym. And then there was Hal’s senior school interview, at College Hall, on the same day, which meant that he’d either be all wired and wanting to be on the Wii all night, or morbidly miserable because he’d screwed up ... and wanting to be on the Wii all night. So either way I didn’t feel as though I should be going out. And then the weather was starting to get me down – that last-gasp-of-spring sort of weather that always seems to turn up just when you think summer is finally under way and it starts raining and looks as though it will never ever stop.

So I wasn’t going to go but then it turned out that Hal was cool with the whole College Hall interview thing, and said, ‘Don’t stress, Mum, I’ve totally walked it’ (twelve-year-olds), then he actually said, ‘You should go out, Mum – you deserve it.’ (Er, hello?) And so I got Marta to babysit at the eleventh hour and just chucked on the first clean pair of skinny jeans I could find and didn’t even bother washing my hair and turned up at Lisa and Guy’s place in West Hampstead with a bottle of wine.

It was just six of us – Guy and lovely Lisa, obviously, and Guy’s mate Steve, who used to be the Harlequins’ physio but is now the go-to personal trainer for about six north/north-west London postcodes (luckily I’d seen him in *Grazia* just last week so I was up to speed), and Steve’s

sweet wife, whose name I've already forgotten – she's a senior stylist at John Frieda who has just got an OU degree in Eng Lit. And then there was Guy's twin, Alex, whom I'd heard about from Lisa but never actually met. I think he was there by accident, having stopped by to see Guy after work, before Lisa persuaded him to stay for the chilli.

So it was a good evening. Easy. No big deal – just a bunch of people chatting about this and that. No politics, or religion, or political religion (thank God!) and I really hardly spoke to him until dessert (Ben and Jerry's or cheese – it was totally Wednesday) and when we first started talking it was just the usual polite probing: 'So,' (me to Alex) 'what do you do?' 'Oh I work in magazines. I'm the publisher of *Excellent*, *Excellent Fitness* and *Max Men*. And you?' ... 'Oh that's cool. Well, I used to be a model agent – Lisa was one of my "girls" – but now I'm mostly a mum, and not so yum.' And Alex said, 'From where I'm sitting you look pretty yum,' and I laughed, and Lisa overheard this and raised an eyebrow across the table at me, as if to say 'woooooah!', but I'd had three glasses of a delicious Bordeaux (not mine, incidentally – mine was a so-so Sauvignon) and it was only 10 p.m. and I knew Marta was good till 1 a.m., and tomorrow wasn't exactly looking busy, so, whatever (as Hal would say. And now, apparently, do I).

Anyway, Lisa was kind of locked into a conversation with ... um, I wish I could remember her name ... and

Guy and Steve were off on one about some great rugby match, which just left me and Alex to shoot the breeze. And after the breeze had been well and truly blown away, it got a bit personal.

I didn't really want to talk about David, but once I'd explained that I was a single mum of a twelve-year-old boy and Alex asked what had happened to Hal's dad, I ended up (and I blame the Bordeaux) telling him all about meeting David at one of those model-heavy parties (perhaps model-lite is a better description, given the amount of canapés they weren't consuming) I hadn't really wanted to go to, and how he'd pretty much swept me off my feet (not least by saying that models didn't do it for him ... anymore). How our first date had involved David chartering a private plane and taking me for Sunday lunch in Le Touquet, and how we'd walked along the dunes and he'd explained what a hedge fund was in language I could actually understand and then said that while he loved his work he wasn't ever going to be defined by how much he earned, that there was a big world out there and more than anything he was looking to meet the mother of his children because, without a family, what was the point of all that hard work – and money? And how I'd actually fallen for all of that.

Anyway, on I went and Alex was a really good listener. Such a good listener, in fact, that I made him listen when I would have been better off changing the subject. Instead I told him about the engagement ring in the soup six

months later at the Aman in Bali, the wedding six months after that at Luttrellstown Castle, falling pregnant with Hal on our honeymoon in the Maldives, moving into the house (that bloody house) in Hertfordshire ... I had practically got to the end of the marriage before I remembered to ask Alex about himself. Which is not like me, but he made it too easy. Though I did tell him other things too – all the family got brief name-checks, in case you're feeling sidelined, though I may not actually have covered all the pets. And no, I didn't tell him about the really important stuff, didn't fill in the biggest gaps. My tongue was a bit loose, but there are limits.

So Alex told me about magazine publishing (about which I pretended to know less than I do, because even you know model agent = models = magazines ) and he told me about his kids and his house and ... he didn't say much about his wife, which was, for a married man, a pretty glaring omission. But I tried not to notice the glare and we just chatted and eventually it was eleven thirty and people started making time-to-go noises and even though I didn't want to go I knew it was a school-night for everybody else, so, weirdly, I ended up being first out of the door, mostly so I wasn't the last. Alex gave me a peck on the cheek and said it had been lovely to meet me. And Lisa gave me a kiss and a bit of finger-wagging. Not that she needed to because that was that. Really nice guy. Married. End of. I don't do married. No woman who's had it done to her is

ever going to do married men, are they, Mum? Especially not a second-generation dumpee.

**Alex**

*Thursday 4 June 2009*

From: alex@foxmail.co.uk

To: guy@guysports.com

*Good to see you and Lisa last night. Didn't realize I was crashing a dinner party – sorry. Still wanna meet up for a beer tho. Stuff to talk about. Value your input. A*

From: guy@guysports.com

To: alex@foxmail.co.uk

*No worries, mate. You looked like you were having a good time anyway?! Thought you must have met Pip before at our place, but obv not! Anyway, can do quick beer after school 2moz, if that's OK?*

From: alex@foxmail.co.uk

To: guy@guysports.com

*Roger that! The usual, 6.30?*

SEPARATE LIVES

From: guy@guysports.com

To: alex@foxmail.co.uk

10-4.

*Friday 5 June 2009*

From: alex@foxmail.co.uk

To: guy@guysports.com

*Sorry bruv – have to blow you out tonight, big stuff going down at HQ with the Germans. Will prob be working late anyway and better get home. Don't know exactly why I'd better get home, but I feel I should. A*

From: guy@guysports.com

To: alex@foxmail.co.uk

*No probs. And you've got to get home because home is where the heart is, right? G*

From: alex@foxmail.co.uk

To: guy@guysports.com

*So they say! A*

*Thursday 11 June 2009*

From: alex@foxmail.co.uk

To: guy@guysports.com

*Just tried your phone but no joy. Listen, really need to talk. Things not quiet on the Western Front. Or the Eastern Front. Or indeed any fucking Fronts . . . Call me when you pick this up? A*

From: guy@guysports.com

To: alex@foxmail.co.uk

*Out of this twunting meeting by 5. Call you then . . . G*

From: guy@guysports.com

To: alex@foxmail.co.uk

*Just got to say, further to our chat? Holy shit. Hang in there. We're just talking about a hunch, nothing hard-and-fast. Don't let it eat you up. No need to steam in and say anything until you've got something to say, right? Thinking of you. Let's just get this party out of the way then we can all breathe easy. OK, easier . . . G*

From: alex@foxmail.co.uk

To: guy@guysports.com

*Thanks. It'll be fine. Grateful for input, as ever. Home now . . . A*





## CHAPTER 1

### Susie

‘Susie. HURRY UP.’

I glanced at my watch – the Cartier Tank that had been an eighteenth birthday present from my father and which was in permanent need of a service, having run six minutes slow since the late twentieth century. I’d been in the bathroom for four minutes.

‘Coming.’ I made it sound bright and efficient and I’m-on-top-of-all-this-Saturday-stuff. This was a lie.

I slicked on some tinted moisturizer, slightly cloggy mascara and the muted Mac Viva Glam gloss that I felt was appropriately ‘Saturday morning’; the kind of non-colour on which I had relied since motherhood had somehow mysteriously dictated I leave the hot pinks and vampy reds behind.

And while I’d assumed that having babies was responsible for the muted lips, here, now, in front of this mirror

a zingy lightbulb moment of clarity indicated that this might not in fact be the case. Perhaps it had been the moment I'd swapped my trademark bright red lips for tastefully grown-up gloss that indicated the passing of the Susie I had been and announced the arrival of the Susie I had become: a woman who asked her partner of ten years – her apparently straying, semi-stranger of a partner, the recipient of smiley-face texts from a red-lipsticked mystery woman (P almost certainly hadn't left vampy reds behind) if he'd had 'a nice shower?'. For fuck's sake.

A last glance in the mirror and a comb through the dirty-blonde bird's-nest. Noises were now coming up the stairs. Specifically the noises of a recalcitrant four-year-old male child – Charlie, aka Chuck – being reluctantly persuaded into a pair of shoes which, maternal multi-tasking brain effortlessly clicking into gear, I recognized were almost certainly the ones he had just outgrown.

'Alex. Those SHOES,' I shouted down the stairs. 'They don't fit him anymore. I meant to tell you.'

At the bottom of the stairs Alex was kneeling on the floor pushing a small foot into a smaller shoe, while Chuck was wearing an expression like a freshly smacked bottom – puffy, red, with a hint of grizzle. I sighed, pushed – almost elbowed, but not quite – Alex out of the way, removed the shoes and found an emergency replacement pair of *Bob the Builder* trainers that had been gifted by a friend with no taste and no children.

‘There,’ I said soothingly. ‘Lula, where are you?’

Lula is my – our – eight-year-old daughter. What with the postnatal hormones, she was very nearly Tallulah, after Jodie Foster in *Bugsy Malone*, but when I finally got around to registering her birth relative sanity had thankfully prevailed.

‘Your daughter,’ said Alex – she was always ‘my’ daughter when he couldn’t relate to her – ‘is watching *Hannah Montana*. As per.’

I went into the living room where she was indeed curled like an apostrophe on the sofa, sucking her thumb and staring at Miley Cyrus with a kind of crush-fostering girl-longing I entirely understood – I’d felt pretty much exactly the same way about Jodie in *Bugsy Malone*. Just for a moment I was disarmed by her loveliness. My straight light-brown hair had, when combined with Alex’s conker-coloured curls, given Lula a genetic leg-up. Those long thick honey-coloured strands (one of which was being chewed and which may or may not have been harbouring a nit), the delicately olive skin (Alex’s), Bambi legs (Alex’s) and green eyes (mine) made Lula the kind of child people first stared at and then smiled at in supermarkets, their days apparently brightened. Anyway, until recently Lula would have sneered at *Hannah Montana* as being ‘yuck! For girly-girls’ but something had shifted recently and a newly emerging Lula had started saying unnerving things like ‘when I

grow up I want to be Cheryl Cole'. So much for the vet-cum-part-time-firewoman.

'Lula, let's go. Like, now.'

The drive from north-west London to Suffolk was long and leavened only by Jonathan Ross on Radio 2, the occasional lingering shoe-related grizzle from Chuck before he decided to conk out and the bleep of Lula's Nintendogs. Alex seemed to be lost in his thoughts – red lipsticked, thong-wearing thoughts? – so I was left with mine. Which, with autistic-spectrum variety, ranged from the banal to the hyperventilatory.

'You're quiet,' said Alex at one point, just as we pulled into our preferred motorway services pit-stop for the traditional mid-morning caffeine-and-wee.

'I am. You're not wrong. I'm very quiet. On the outside.'  
Alex glanced at me quizzically.

'And what does that mean, precisely?'

'I think it means just that. Not talkative. On the inside, however, I'm practically Jonathan Ross.'

He left me to it.

My outlaws, Mr and Mrs Fox – to whom we were heading for a family gathering in honour of (brace yourself for the irony) their golden wedding anniversary – live in a rambling, low-slung house painted Suffolk Pink, which is about two shades the bearable side of Barbie but still very

much on the Disney Princess spectrum. It is the kind of house that looks unarguably attractive in estate agent's windows or on *Location, Location, Location* but which has always struck me as absurd for anybody less than 300 years old to actually live in.

I grew up in London, in an Edwardian mansion flat, and have always been about high ceilings and cornices and lots of light and never particularly charmed by a beam, which always makes me think I'm in the kind of hearty, engraved-tankards-behind-the-bar pubs I invariably want to leave immediately. The Foxes, on the other hand, are into their inglenookery and have spent their entire lives collectively banging their heads on lintels, which may explain a lot but, nonetheless, is all the more perverse because they are a family of giants – the shortest person in the family, Alex's mother, Joan, is five foot nine.

The Foxes habitually refer to the family homestead as The Pink House, though it is in fact called (gag-reflex alert) 'Whispers', after the sound of the East Anglian winds breezing through the fronds of the Weeping Willow by the stream. If I had been an American marrying into this family, I would probably have died of the joy of Englishness when I first heard this. However when Joan first told me about Whispers I had to suppress a snort and retreat to the loo. For ever after, if only by me, The Pink House was referred to as 'Careless Whispers'.

The most annoying thing about Careless is not the

low-slung ceilings (I'm five foot seven so it's navigable with minor stooping) but the fact that every room leads off every other room and none is quite big enough to contain everybody comfortably, especially if 'everybody' is more than six people, which it invariably is, what with Mr and Mrs Fox having four offspring and, thus far, seven grandchildren.

However, I do appreciate the gardens, even though, as a confirmed Londoner, I have never seen the point of having more garden than house. Houses are the bit that matter, gardens a luxury. And gardens with lawns that have to be mowed by small tractors (the Foxes have three acres) are a luxury from which I am pretty certain I shall forever be excluded. Owning a proper garden is, to me, a bit like waking up one day and suddenly finding oneself welded to a trug, yearning to vote Tory and knowing how to pronounce 'tsk-tsk'. But the kids, needless to say, adore Careless, and as we pulled into the gravel with just enough wheel-spin to announce ourselves, even I had to admit it scrubbed up pretty well for a 300-year-old, without recourse to lip-gloss, and on this warm mid-day June day, with its 'anyone-for-tennis' lawns and herbaceous border ablaze, Careless had never looked more like a double-page spread from *Country Living*. Or, indeed, a particularly pastel scene from *Fantasia*.

Nigel Fox – Alex's father – was already at the (wisteria-festooned, obviously) door, glass in hand.

'Aha. Alex. Susie. Offspring. You're last. Welcome.'

Nigel does actually talk like this, in short barked sentences. He was one of six children so presumably while growing up he rarely got a word in and it was a habit that stuck. When he joined the RAF it was probably considered an asset.

‘Dad,’ said Alex, with no particular inflection or warmth, and I noted, not for the first time, that Alex instantly deflates from his habitual Alpha-maleness as soon as he comes into contact with his father. I used to worry about it a bit, feel for him – but not these days. I’ve had more conversations with Alex about his ego-puncturing relationship with his father than I can count and I wasn’t particularly looking forward to the one we’d almost certainly be having on the drive home tomorrow. The contents of my empathy cup, far from running over, had all but evaporated.

‘Grown,’ barked Nigel, pointing at his grandchildren, ‘haven’t they.’ Statement not question.

‘They do tend to,’ I said. ‘I’ve tried pruning them but it’s no good.’

‘Ha. Susie. Funny.’

Inside Careless, a skulk (‘it’s the collective noun’, Nigel had told me, the first time we’d met) of Foxes ‘Hi’d and ‘How are you?’d and jostled for some kissing. A newly reinvigorated Charlie instantly disappeared with his five-year-old cousin, Jack, Isobel’s second ‘miracle’ IVF baby, and the one for whom that Mumsnetty term ‘Little Emperor’ could



have been coined. I have always failed to be charmed by Jack but Charlie worships at his (designer-shod) feet. Lula, meanwhile, had already paired off with her eight-year-old cousin, Isobel's daughter Chloe, a bright, devastatingly plain, tomboyish dogs-and-ponies girl of whom I was extremely fond, though I feared that now Lula was coming over all *Girls Aloud* she and Chloe were bound more by familial ties than by any shared interests. But still, vanishing children was one of the upsides of a Fox family gathering. It meant I could conceivably reclaim a portion of otherwise-occupied brain for myself.

So, apart from Nigel, who thinks kissing is common, in no particular order I kissed:

- \* Prickly, put-upon, wildly clever Isobel, Alex's older sister, successful human rights lawyer and single ('through choice! MY choice! And my choice of donors too!') mother to Chloe and Jack.
- \* Guy, Alex's older-by-five-minutes twin brother. Handsome, charming Guy, a professional rugby player turned sports agent who had not only retained his genetic share of Alpha-maleness but somehow kept on acquiring even more. One day I imagined the potentially flammable combination of success and testosterone might cause him to explode in a puff of machismo.

- \* Guy's brand-new, as of last weekend – though they had been together three years – fiancée, the no-longer-borderline-anorexic and therefore even more exhaustingly beautiful American ex-model turned hip boutique owner, Lisa, who predictably thought Whispers was 'like, *toadally* heaven'.
- \* Guy and Lisa's (runs in the family) twins, six-month-old Stanley and Poppy, who virtually at birth had been dubbed Pea and iPod by Isobel – nicknames that were in danger of sticking.
- \* The Fox firstborn, Will, an RAF officer and owner of an upper lip so stiff that on the rare occasions when he smiled, as now, it appeared to if not actually crack then certainly creak a bit. Will had suffered a horrible loss when his childhood sweetheart, Marianne, died of breast cancer when they were both thirty (he is forty-seven now, so I never knew her). Their son, Luke, meanwhile, was just nine months old when his mother died and Will has brought him up alone and, despite the demands of his job, quite brilliantly ever since. Still single, though stalked by squadrons of women bearing both sympathy and, no doubt, Myla thongs, Will is an acquired taste but one worth acquiring. Alex, interestingly, is not remotely close to his big brother.

\* Finally, in the kitchen – the only part of the house that references the twenty-first century because, despite the Aga, it’s surprisingly un-farmhouse-y and, with its limestone work surfaces and handle-less drawers and cupboards, rather more Bulthaup-y – I found Joan doing her usual bossy matriarchal thing alongside four young cooks hired for the occasion: tonight’s sit-down dinner for a hundred in a marquee which, I could now see through the French doors, was being erected, distractingly, by numerous topless men.

‘Darling. Susie. Just the woman. Come and kiss me. But I’m very floury.’

If Will is a taste worth acquiring then Joan is a taste that may well be a lifetime’s work, like learning to appreciate hundred-year-old eggs. On the surface we get on very well – she’s clever and funny (if Will is Nigel Junior then Joan is Isobel Senior) and very much the flame around which her family gathers for warmth. However, if she didn’t actually give birth to you and you try to get a bit too close then you’re always in danger of meeting a moth-like fate.

After ten years of dealing with Joan and more than a few slammed doors and stamped feet (on both sides), not to mention a handful of ‘Alex, your fucking mother is driving me MAD!’s, we’ve now reached a kind of truce. If she can avoid competitively criticizing my parenting skills, or lack thereof, and stick to the stuff we both agree on,

i.e. food, which is Joan's great passion and happens to be my career, we're fine.

I'm a restaurant critic. Did I tell you that? Apologies – distracted. If push came to shove I could probably struggle by without sex, but I couldn't cope without having food at the centre of my life. If I couldn't have either, I would become a recluse and retreat to a darkened room where I'd grow twelve-inch fingernails and watch films like *Tampopo* (foodily erotic) and *Babette's Feast* (erotically foodie). And even though I think *Last Tango In Paris* is about as sexy as a cholesterol test, remaking it with *I Can't Believe It's Not Butter* would've been a disaster. Anyway.

'This looks very good, Joan. Anything I can do?'

'No, darling. I have these wonderful girls,' (at which point Joan waved an arm proprietorially around the kitchen), 'and they're doing marvellous things, but of course I always appreciate your expert eye!'

Of course. This is the form in Joan's kitchen. A proper control freak (and it takes one to know one, so, like, *respect*) she habitually both welcomes and excludes at the same time. Today my head is crammed full of so much other stuff that I really don't mind being let off the culinary hook, but it's very important to make all the right noises.

'Well, just shout if you need me. And those volleyballs are looking magnificent.'

'It's really all down to the girls. You'll have heard of them, I'm sure – "Hot Sausage and Mustard"?'

This information checked my social autopilot for a moment. ‘Hot Sausage and Mustard’ are the indubitably twee-ly named county caterers *du nos jours* – the last word in ‘our home cooking, cooked in your home’ comfort food for fans of ‘robust English fare’. And for avoiding adding a ‘y’ to ‘fare’, food writers remain very grateful. But more important even than this is the fact that HS&M is the brainchild of a woman called Harriet Harvey, who is the only person in the whole world I have ever actively hated. Momentarily stumped for an appropriate response and in the absence of worry-beads, I picked up a wodge of stray pastry and attempted squidgy origami.

‘You must know of them, Susie? They’re all over the press, aren’t you, girls?’ There is mumbled assent from the ‘girls’, the youngest of whom is probably mid-twenties. None of them, I’m relieved to see, is Harriet.

‘You’ll meet Harriet Harvey in a minute, I’m sure. Hot Sausage is her “baby”,’ (here Joan did air-quote fingers, which she considers groovy), ‘I think she’s outside with the van.’

‘Lovely,’ I said, dropping my pastry crane. ‘Long journey, Joan. Excuse me – loo.’

Since the time Joan told me about naming the house Whispers and I had had to retreat to quell my giggles, I have spent large chunks of the last decade in the Foxes’ downstairs loo. Usually I’ve been dealing with countless nappy-changing and toilet-training emergencies, though

there was the memorable – to me, anyway – incident when Alex had announced our engagement at a family gathering on New Year's Day and I'd overheard Joan's stage-whispered response: 'Alex, darling, are you really *sure* about this one?'

Now here I was again, staring blankly at the framed Klee print and selection of ancient yellowing *Punch* cartoons (the loo apparently having been time-capsuled in about 1976 – something which, as an only child without a lifetime's worth of 'home' to call my own, I found quite comforting) and contemplating the fact that I was within moments of meeting my teenage nemesis, 'Heinous' Harvey. A woman from whom I'd only recently received (and delightedly ignored) an emailed press release alerting me to the success of 'Hot Sausage', with an added personalized note: 'Long time, eh?! Anyway, thought you might be interested, Love HH.'

'Love?' I'd thought incredulously. How dare the woman who, with the assistance of her hapless weak-willed crony, Clare ('Hunchback') Hutch, once mugged me behind the sports hall, stealing not only an unread copy of *Smash Hits* and the Keith Haring Swatch I'd got for my fifteenth out of my backpack, but also my diary. An event about which I could still feel a surge of psychic pain if I dwelt on it for more than a moment. How dare 'Heinous' pretend to 'love' me, I'd thought before consigning her email to the desktop Trash with a flourish.

A knock on the door. 'Mummmmmeeeeee. Is that yoooooo?'  
Chuck.

'Yes, it's me. Are you OK?'

'What are you doing in there? I need a weeeeeeee. Are you hiding?'

'No, no of course I'm not hiding. I'm having a wee, too.'

'A wee and a number two?'

'No, sweetie. Not a number two.'

I sighed, unlocked the door. Charlie was hopping from foot to foot holding his father's hand and though Alex wore an expression of boredom coupled with indifference, Charlie was clearly about to cry. I watched helplessly as a dark wet patch spread across his crotch.

'Alex, surely one of the great things about both big and small boys who urgently need a pee is that if the loo is busy they can do it in the garden?'

Alex pulled a face. I interpreted this to mean that the idea of al-fresco peeing at Whispers was totally beyond the pale. He was always intractably up-his-own-arse about all things lavatorial. I blame Joan, but then I blame Joan for a lot of things.

'Whatever. I'm pretty sure I – no, in fact make that we. As in pee – forgot to bring a change of trousers,' I muttered, and Alex shrugged, immediately altering his expression to reflect the belief that remembering to bring a change of trousers for a four-year-old was pretty much 150 per cent not within his parenting remit. At which point (and

not for the first time) I felt the onset of a particular kind of resentment familiar to all mothers of small children whose partners not only *just don't fucking get it* but automatically assume women are genetically pre-programmed to remember this stuff. We haven't in fact been forced to delete numerous interesting files in our brains labelled 'Shakespeare's sonnets' or 'quantum mechanics' or 'Kerry Katona's private life' in order to download 'Always remember to take a spare pair of trousers to the outlaws' golden wedding anniversary party just in case the four-year-old wets himself'.

I removed Chuck's trousers and pants and figured that if I stuck them in the rockery they'd probably be dry in an hour. In the meantime Joan was bound to have an ancient (which predates 'vintage' by about twenty-five years) pair of children's velvet knickerbockers folded in tissue paper inside a drawer full of handmade lavender pouches.

Thus far the day was not going particularly well; however, I was grateful that in the garden there was no sign of Heinous, just a lot of fit blokes with their tops off doing butch stuff with tarpaulin and ropes. I lingered awhile. And though I doubted if any of these men had ever remembered a change of trousers for a four-year-old either, I wasn't married to them, just ogling. Like a sad on-the-threshold-of-middle-age woman with a husband who was probably having an affair with a piece of work called 'P'.



Which reminded me. After I'd hung Charlie's clothes out to dry on a small palm, I walked around the end of the marquee in an attempt to spot the 'Hot Sausage' van, but without being seen. And lo – there was Heinous, sitting half in and half out of the passenger door, wearing a magnificent pair of boots and shouting into her mobile.

'You know what? I don't bloody care. I totally do not fucking care one iota what you think, OK? Actually, strike that "OK". If I didn't in fact totally not fucking care, I'd definitely hope it was not OK. OK?'

Which semi-articulate sentence of rage did rather impress me. It sounded good, sounded a lot like I was feeling. And then I thought about it a bit more and realized that it actually did make sense, so kudos to Heinous. Anyway, this was the point when I should have ducked out of her sightline, but when she hung up with a robustly delivered 'so just fuck off', almost inevitably she happened to glance my way. She squinted and grinned. Busted. This was it – twenty years of emotional baggage was about to be fly-tipped all over Whispers' freshly raked gravel drive.

'Susie Poo? Is that really you?'

See? One of the very best things about being proposed to by Alex had been the prospect of dumping my old surname and high-tailing it down to the post office to have my passport rebranded as Fox. As would the Righteous Post-Fem squad if their surname had been Poe and they were at school with Heinous.

‘Hein— er, hey.’ I scuttled – I don’t think I’ve ever scuttled before – out from behind the marquee. ‘How’s tricks?’ And no, I’ve no idea where ‘How’s tricks?’ came from because I’d never said it before; however, there always had been something about Heinous that made me turn into a character from her movie, not mine.

‘Tricks are fine. Tricks are good.’ Heinous glanced at her phone. ‘Good-ish. How are your “tricks”? And look, Susie, I’m sorry about the diary.’

For one disarming moment it looked as if she were about to lunge at me for a hug, before thinking better of it and thrusting out a hand, which I ignored. It was going to take more than a bloody handshake to eradicate the memory of Heinous removing pages from my diary and posting them on the common-room noticeboard.

‘It’s haunted me for years. You may be relieved to know that I am no longer that girl. Not anymore. I’m properly sorry.’

‘OK, thanks. But it was a shit thing to do. When Tara Maplethorpe . . .’ (aka Maple Syrup, because we were at an all-girls school and had read too much *St Clare’s* at an impressionable age) ‘. . . found out I’d got off with her boyfriend – what was his name? Mark Thingy? – while we were both waiting for the night bus after the St Benedict’s disco, she never spoke to me again. And I’d only got off with him to keep warm because Mark Thingy was wearing a puffa. And you also nicked my Swatch.’

It was amazing how much I sounded exactly like my sixteen-and-a-half-year-old self. Heinous must've thought I'd gone mental. Possibly as a direct result of her actions.

'Totally accept that. Totally out of order. But actually the Swatch was Clare. She's probably still wearing it. And not in a cool, retro, referencing-the-eighties way.'

Against all my instincts this made me laugh. Heinous too. It suddenly occurred to me that my day was already so shit there was no point in making it any worse.

'OK, Heinous Harriet Harvey. Whatever. Bygones. Shall we seek some closure?'

'You know, that would be a massive weight off my mind. Thanks.'

'I'm not saying I've forgiven and forgotten. Just that I'm probably grown-up enough to try.'

'Good enough for me. So, your bloke is somebody here?'

'Yes, though he's still my bloke only by the skin of my – his – teeth.'

This was slightly mad of me. It was clearly going to take a while to adjust to this new, quasi-likeable Heinous, one who suddenly felt like somebody I could talk to. Perhaps because her surname wasn't Fox? Or maybe because we were bonded by so much history. And Hockey. And Latin. Anyway.

'I'm sorry. And there's a man heading this way.' I liked that Heinous sort of hissed this, collusively. I turned.

'Alex. You won't believe it but . . . this is Heinous Harvey. You know . . .'

‘Yeah, I’ve heard all about Heinous Harriet Harvey, Scourge of the Sixth. And you’re actually speaking instead of sticking chewing gum into each other’s hair during Prep?’

‘We are. She’s apologized.’

‘Better late than.’ Alex thrust forward a hand. ‘Alex Fox. You still got the Swatch?’ He was suddenly all charm and smiles and twinkling eyes and really quite handsome. Like somebody else’s husband.

‘No, that was Hunchback. I was just saying to Poo – Susie – that she’s probably still wearing it.’

‘Very funny. So you’re the sausage woman?’

‘That’s one way of putting it.’

‘Well, good to meet you. You’re not half as hideous in real life.’

She had the grace to laugh. Probably because whatever she now was, ‘Hideous Heinous’ she definitely wasn’t. She was looking great. I knew she’d just turned thirty-nine, on the first of June. There are some bits of pointless information you really try to forget – or imagine will get lost inside a head filled with spare pairs of toddler’s trousers – but weirdly, Heinous’s birthday wasn’t one of those things.

The rest of the day was entirely bearable, the afternoon a sunny, ‘Whispery’ blur of family small-talk with a smattering of small-p politics and some gossip. I spent nearly an hour with Isobel, who was excessively interested in

some rumours about a Michelin-starred chef who was apparently putting it about a bit, to the predictable displeasure of his TV weathergirl wife. Turned out Isobel had met the chef at a mutual friend's dinner party. Apparently 'there were definite sparks'. And, Isobel eventually revealed, definite texts.

'In the interests of research,' I told Isobel, 'I went out with a chef, back in the 1990s when they were still just blokes who cooked for a living. He liked doing it *al fresco*, *al forno*, *al dente* – basically as often as possible, everywhere. And being a creative soul, in all sorts of ways, with lots of olive oil.'

'I am so listening.'

'OK, so the morning after one particularly memorable night before he made me a cooked breakfast in the nude – my own naked chef, back when Jamie Oliver was still burning water. He tried to get me to assist, but I said that if the nudity was compulsory I'd rather just lie around in bed rather than end up hauling my second-degree post-coital glow off to A&E.'

'Yeah, I can see that wouldn't be a very good look.'

'Anyway we split up shortly after that. He said it was because he was emigrating, but I've always wondered if it was because I refused to make bubble and squeak in the buff.'

'These days I'd be perfectly happy to make bubble and squeak in the buff,' said Isobel. 'Though it would be my

poor kids who'd probably end up emotionally scarred for life. Mind you, when they leave home I may feel a sudden compulsion to cook something complicated in my smalls. *Nostalgie de la bouillabaisse*. Bring it on.'

I tried to persuade Isobel that the chef, though undoubtedly good with his hands (and other extremities), was a tosser, but perhaps when you've been single for as long as Isobel then having breakfast cooked for you by a naked celebrity tosser is a prospect worth entertaining.

And so the day rolled into the evening, and because I'd drunk the Pimm's lake pretty dry, everything was very nearly sort of lovely when we finally sat down to dinner. Lula was entirely occupied by the presence of her cousin, while I fed sausages and mash to Charlie, who fell asleep on my lap before being spirited away to our sleeping quarters by one of the nannies Nigel and Joan had thoughtfully hired so that we grown-ups could fulfil our adult destiny, i.e. get even more spectacularly pissed, especially during the speeches, when Nigel referred to Joan as 'less Joan of Arc, more Joan of My Heart', which in turn made me snort snottily. Eventually (and surely it was Tuesday by now?) everybody hit the dance floor, commandeered for the purposes of total embarrassment by Ipswich's own DJ Jeff and his Spectacular Strobe, and threw their version of middle-class-white-people-can't-dance shapes to 'Brown Sugar', and thus the proverbial Good Time Was Had. Meanwhile, Alex and I barely exchanged a word.

After the apparently endless Stones medley, which featured a bit too much air guitar for me (any air guitar being too much air guitar, frankly) and a mass outbreak of non-ironic lighter waving during Boston's 'More Than a Feeling' (who knew so many people still had lighters?), it was time for a head-clearing perambulation around the garden. I was pissed enough to feel not-unhappy, but then the memory of this morning resurfaced and my heart sank, assisted by heavy sausages.

And then, sitting beside a willow smoking a surreptitious fag, I found Heinous.

'Hey,' she said. 'I don't really smoke. I'm just a bit ...'

'Stressed? I heard your rant into the phone earlier. Domestic?'

'More of a post-domestic, really. My ex, Jonathan – father of my daughter. Did I tell you I had a daughter?'

'No, what with getting stuck in the 1980s you neglected to. Also, I'm properly pissed. And sausaged. Very good sausages by the way.' I sat down, landing heavily on my (by now) Hussein Chalayan-clad arse.

'Thanks, we give good sausage. Yeah, my daughter, Edie. Same age as yours, give or take.'

'Really? Well, maybe ...' (and I surprised myself with this one) 'we should get them together? Let them nick each other's Lelli Kelly shoes, or something. It would be a shame to break the cycle.'

Heinous laughed. 'I think that would be great. If you ever a fancy a daytrip down to Random-on-Sea ...'

‘You don’t live in London?’ I was slightly surprised. I assumed she did, but then I’m so London-centric I assume everybody does. ‘Where’s Random-on-Sea?’

‘South coast. Not Brighton. From London, it’s down and left a bit, just before East Sussex peters out and Kent kicks in. Arse-end-of-nowhere and a bastard for travel links but we’ve been there five years now, since I left Jonathan, and it suits us. You get a lot of house for the price of a two-bed flat in “Media Vale”.’

‘Sounds lovely. Really.’ I meant it. ‘Look, I’d better go and do the family thing. It’s been . . .’ I scrambled to my feet and sort of hovered with my arms outstretched. ‘It’s been good. It’s been real.’

And this was the point in the evening when Heinous Harvey and I actually hugged, right there under a willow at Careless while The Moody Blues’ Justin Hayward sang ‘Just what the truth is, I can’t say anymore’.

‘It pains me to admit it,’ I said, ‘but you’re OK. And I love your boots. And I’ll stop now because I’m pissed and I don’t actually have lesbian tendencies. Not that there’s anything wrong with lesbian tendencies. They’re great, possibly even enviable. I just don’t have them. Sorry if that’s a terrible disappointment.’

‘I’m devastated, obviously,’ Heinous deadpanned. ‘But the boots are by Georgina Goodman and I happen to know they’re now on sale, reduced from a slightly challenging £595 to a not-entirely-unaffordable £245.’



And even as we both convulsed into hiccupy sixth-form giggles I wasn't so pissed that I didn't make a mental note to check out the boots online first thing Monday morning. Or possibly second thing. Just after a nice big row. It was something to look forward to.

Inside the marquee, people were now slow-dancing in couples. I sat back down at our table and attempted to make eye-contact with Alex, who was deep – extremely and obviously deep – in conversation with Guy. A wave of misery rolled over me as I sat next to my partner, yet entirely alone, when Jeff spun the slow-dance-from-hell, the song that could make even big girls cry – 10cc's 'I'm Not In Love'. After what felt like an eternity of aeons but was probably only as long as it took to get to the end of the first verse, Alex turned to me.

'I'm going to sit this one out with Guy. We're talking. That's OK, isn't it.' It wasn't a question but a statement.

'Yeah.' I couldn't bear the fact that my eyes were watering. And I just hoped nobody could see. Or if they did that they were so drunk they'd mistake my duct-excretions for tears of 10cc-related joy.

A tap on my shoulder.

'Susie. The father of your children is clearly pressingly engaged. Dance?'

It was Will, whom, it occurred to me, I had never actually seen dance. Maybe it had been a Careless Whisper-style

'I'm never going to dance again' situation after Marianne had died? Either way I nearly fell off my chair.

'Whoops. I hope you're better on the dance floor.' Will grinned as Alex nodded in assent, as though it had ever been sought.

'Yeah you go for it, bro. Just keep your hands off the missus's arse.' Alex was weirdly faux-cheery-to-the-power-of, but clearly distracted and instantly back in earnest sotto-voce conversation with Guy. I'd learned never to gate-crash the twin-thing.

Slow-dancing in public with Will meant I was forced to adopt a kind of close-but-not-too-close technique I'd never previously attempted. The way to pull it off seemed to be to do all the usual slow-dance moves with extra crotch-avoidance, while making small-talk straight out of Austen. And then there was the fact that Will smelt of Creed's Green Irish Tweed, which was lovely but also confusing, because not only was it my favourite men's aftershave but also, rather wrongly, my father's favourite too.

'So, Will, I meant to ask you – where's Luke? I appreciate that Careless is the last place a cool eighteen-year-old male would want to be hanging on a Saturday night but I assumed there was a three-line whip?'

'There would have been, but he's up to his eyeballs in revision for his A-levels.'

'Of course, I'd forgotten, yeah. Poor Luke.' I wished I

could be a bit more articulate but the situation was too distracting. Rather needily, I always wanted to impress Will with my wit and intelligence, though this was probably neither the time nor the place to do it.

‘He already has a place at Oxford in theory, so after his exams he’s off to Costa Rica with Operation Raleigh, during which he’ll turn himself from a smart boy into a well-rounded young man.’ Will paused, rolled his eyes. ‘With all that that entails.’

‘South America? It’s all red hot chilli chicks and Class A’s, surely?’

‘Yeah, pretty much the perfect training for three years of PPE.’

*Big boys don’t cry* breathed the 10cc girl as ‘I’m Not In Love’ shifted a musical gear from merely soppy to properly clinchy. My embarrassment was palpable.

‘I get the feeling that us dancing to “I’m Not In Love” in front of the father of your children is possibly too big an ask? I can hardly blame you.’ We pulled apart, relieving ourselves of the enforced intimacy – and relieved by our relief.

‘That was nice. If wrong-feeling.’

‘Well, maybe. But you looked like you wanted to dance. Come on, let’s get you some air.’

“I can feel it coming in the air tonight” ...’

I was singing Phil Collins. To Will. Shit. Nonetheless, I allowed myself to be gently steered out of the marquee

and back down to the willows – fast becoming a place where surprising things could happen.

‘Look, Susie. I asked you to dance because I wanted the chance for a quick word. And though I hadn’t anticipated you’d be quite as pissed as you clearly are, I’m going to seize the moment anyway. So help me God. And the only reason I’m doing this is because you’re you, and I care. You know I do.’

‘I do know that. Yes.’

‘And I don’t want you to get hurt – or indeed to do any hurting because you’ve been hurt. And I’m almost certainly talking out of turn because I have had one, possibly even two glasses of wine, never mind the Pimm’s. And I want you to know that whatever’s going on with Alex – and it’s pretty obvious something’s going on – I think you shouldn’t attempt to sweep it under the carpet but address it. As soon as possible. And that’s about all I’ve got to say. At least that’s all I’m able to say, here, now.’

‘But?’

There were many questions jostling for my undivided attention simultaneously. Again.

‘No “buts”. Not now. Just sort things out with Alex before it’s—’ He stopped short.

‘Too late?’

‘Yeah, OK. Too late.’

It was a bit too much, prompting an uninvited tear – a hot, fat, saline tear, the precursor, presumably, to many

more, hotter, fatter, infinitely wetter and saltier tears. Will put an arm round my shoulder in an appropriately ‘chin-up, sis’ kind of way while I sobbed a bit into his armpit. Then I pulled back, reached up on tiptoes and kissed him quickly – very quickly – on his stiff upper lip. Which was not very stiff at all.

‘Thanks, Will. I hear you. Which also means I know that I need – no, not need, want – a drink.’

Back inside the marquee, I did have a drink. Possibly two. And then I stumbled the fifty yards to ‘our’ quarters – the studio room over the stable-block-turned-garage, where Lula was already curled up on a sofa-bed alongside Charlie – and I slept right through the departing ‘Carriages at One’ (minicabs by any other name) and then for another eight heavily dream-laden and unrefreshing hours.

Sunday morning arrived looking blurry. Thankfully the kids slept late (for kids) and Alex, who I presumed had come to bed at some point if only because there was a dent on his pillow, had already left the building. I was slightly surprised – and heartened – by the fact that on the bedside table there was a glass of water and a sachet of Resolve. Thoughtful. Suspiciously so? Or was I now just programmed to be suspicious? It could just have been kindness laced with a dash of self-interest. After all, a Susie with a sore head was always going to be less of an attractive proposition on a Sunday morning than, say,

a Susie with a sore head that was becoming marginally less sore.

When I emerged from the shower with last night's mascara panda-ing my eyes, the kids were awake.

'Hi. Big night, eh? Fun?' I could just about do chirpy, though preferably monosyllabically.

'Where's Chloe, Mum?' said Lula, yawning and stretching; a Pixar lion cub. 'And what happened to your eyes?'

'OK, my eyes demonstrate the fact that when you are a grown-up and have been to a party and had a whole glass of wine, you must always remember to remove your make-up. It's an important life lesson for all females.' Lula looked suitably bemused. 'I expect Isobel, Chloe and Jack were sleeping in Isobel's old room, so why don't you go and look for them? I'm sure those posh pyjamas from Grandma Joan are acceptable attire before noon.'

In a streak of candy-striped cotton, Lula disappeared, though a thumb-sucking Chuck was less easily persuaded out of bed.

'Come on, Small. Bet there's bacon butties.'

I carried him down the stairs, negotiated the gravel in my bare feet and entered the kitchen through the back door, to be confronted by a sitcom's-worth of Foxes and the aroma of upscale frying. Inside the 'Careless Cafe' Joan was in charge of bacon, Guy was toasting, Alex was on coffee duty, Isobel was arranging condiments, Will

was washing up and Nigel was wearing a novelty apron that said 'How can you help? GET OUT OF MY KITCHEN!' and beaming the smile of a man who had been married for fifty years and was miraculously still both compos and mentis.

'Ah, Susie. Charlie. You're here. Butties?'

And I felt a kind of sharp stab somewhere in my chest, albeit more of a metaphorical stab than an actual physical pain, and I knew it was because I was both moved by the familial warmth and sheer cosiness of the domestic scene unfolding in front of me and yet also somehow disconnected from it. In that moment I felt quite clearly that one of the reasons – perhaps even, in retrospect, the most compelling reason – I had wanted to accept Alex's proposal nine years ago was that marriage would give me instant all-areas access to a proper family, one that seemed, to all intents, and at least from the outside, to be convincingly functional. It was at times like this that I felt both very privileged to belong and, weirdly, almost entirely alienated. Half in, half out. Story of my life.

All through my only-childhood I'd been obsessed by notions of family and had gravitated to books in which siblings interacted in slightly baffling yet thrilling ways, sucking up stories of brothers and sisters who did stuff together, who fought and fell out and then found each other again. Using children's fiction as a template I probably grew up with a pretty warped perspective on what

constituted A Family (fifty per cent *The Chronicles of Narnia*, fifty per cent *Little Women*) but it was also a very potent one. My parents had both emigrated from Australia in the early 1960s, as groovy middle-class Australians of the era were wont to do, and their eyes had met over a tray of Lamingtons in the flat of another Earl's Court émigré, so being a three-person family with no close relatives nearby we were a tight little unit, forever on the outside of other people's parties, looking in.

When I was seven my parents split up. And that my advertising copywriter father, Derek, ran off with his secretary is a source of eternal disappointment, if only because – and this is nothing to do with the secretary, Cathy, of whom I was, and remain, properly fond – it was the single unimaginative act of a man whose imagination had made his fortune. Anyway this was the point when the family triangle – our impenetrable little pyramid – was irreparably broken. After that we were no longer A Family, just three individuals trying to find our way and bumping into each other occasionally en route.

After the split I lived with Pauline, my mum, seeing Dad every other weekend. By the time I was eleven Mum had met my soon-to-be-stepfather, another divorced Aussie (not to mention the first Australian I'd met who was actually called Bruce) and the two of them started planning a return 'home'. I was invited, of course, but it was a no-brainer: Pauline and Bruce were planning to live in a country 'town'



(one pub and a petrol station, apparently) while I had spent my entire life a ten-minute drive from Selfridges.

When Mum and Bruce finally left for Australia the week after my fourteenth birthday, I moved in to Dad and Cathy's St John's Wood townhouse. Dad had worked hard to turn a spare bedroom into a cool 1980s girl-den, installing an entirely impractical but massively desirable white wool carpet and painting the walls egg-yolk yellow. Gone were the 1970s brown-on-brown-with-accent-of-beige Laura Ashley print curtains of my old bedroom, replaced by 'funky' blinds decorated with big red poppies. On one wall I had a long set of shelves already loaded with books, a pine dressing table-cum-chest of drawers next to the bed and a free-standing pine wardrobe. This sophisto-teen universe was set off by a yellow corduroy modular sofa beneath the shelves and, within minutes, my walls were Blu-tacked with pictures culled from the pages of *The Face* and *Smash Hits*. On the day I moved in, there, waiting for me on my sofa, was a pair of red and white Converse-style high top roller skates with orange Kryptonite wheels, from Slick Willies in Kensington High Street. Obviously I didn't have the heart to say that I was already over roller skating, an obsession of the previous two years, and was infinitely more excited by the girl-heaven that was my own en-suite bathroom, in which I could (and did) fail to remove eye make-up at my leisure.

Cathy worked hard at being sweetness itself. As she was

also a sublime amateur cook, we bonded in the kitchen. (Years later she'd watch *Masterchef* with a permanently wistful look, but, being hopelessly self-effacing, always refused to apply). Mum, on the other hand, wasn't much cop as a cook, though she was useful in other ways – it was she, for example, who had instructed me always to remove my make-up after parties. Anyway, the point is that this new fractured family reconfiguration may have turned out to be a triangle – and a pretty good triangle – but because it was more isosceles than equilateral it was just not my triangle of choice.

So I stood in Joan Fox's kitchen, bacon buttie in hand, surfing an invisible wave of wistfulness and feeling something dangerously close to sorry for myself. And not even for the obvious reason – a potentially vanishing partner – but because *if I lost him, I'd also lose all of this*. At that precise moment I wasn't sure which was worse; all I knew was that if I lost this I had also lost my shot at belonging to a family. And I don't think I'd ever realized quite how much that meant to me, far less ever articulated it.

The rest of the morning was spent mucking in, tidying up, debriefing and re-running scenes from the previous night. I seemed to have missed a lot. Apparently Nigel's golfing buddy and near-neighbour Adam Purves had turned up to the party with somebody called Jennifer who had implausible Mrs Slocombe hair, while Mrs Purves was apparently sitting at home weeping into a Campari and

soda. Adam and Jennifer had met while tackling a tricky bunker a month ago and had been inseparable ever since. However, everybody whose surname was Fox, or nearly-Fox, was united in their agreement that introducing your amusingly coiffed mistress to the world at your best friend's golden wedding party pretty much ensured golf-club-related social suicide.

Then, to a roomful of laughter, Alex shared the story of my history (and subsequent reconciliation) with 'the sausage woman, aka – wait for it! – “Heinous” Harriet Harvey, Scourge of the Sixth.'

'But Susie, dear, you really should have said!' exclaimed Joan with slightly more glee – a hit TV series-worth of *Glee*, in hindsight – than she might have done. Or perhaps I was just being a bit thin-skinned.

'You know how it is, Joan. Lot on my mind – didn't want to burden you on the big day.'

And I don't think I imagined the triangle of quick glances and furrowed brows that followed this unremarkable statement. A blink-and-you'd-miss-it from Guy – firstly to me and then to Alex. And then from Alex back to Guy, and swiftly on to me. It was almost imperceptible, but not quite imperceptible enough.

'Oh, it wouldn't have been a burden, it would have amused us all!' said Joan, oblivious to all the glancing, which, not knowing whom to trust, felt like the start of a potentially messy game of 'wink murder'.

And on it rolled, until we eventually departed after a lunch of leftovers and some overly complicated send-offs, plus kissing.

- \* From Isobel: urgent whispered demands not to ‘breathe a word to Alex about you-know-who. Promise? Strictly *entre nous*, yeah?’
- \* From Guy: ‘Remember, please don’t tell Lisa what I told you about the, y’know, thing!’ Which only confused ‘things’ because I couldn’t actually recall having had a conversation with Guy at all last night, so I was now entirely up Willow creek without a paddle – or indeed a ‘Thing’. But I nodded and assured him I wouldn’t breathe a word.
- \* From Lisa: ‘Hey, hon, Guy doesn’t know I know but actually I do know, so it’s toadally fine. But isn’t that like hilarious?’ *Toadally*. If I’d known what she was on about. However, I grinned and winked. ‘Everybody’s secrets are safe with me.’
- \* From Will: a briskly whispered ‘Hang in there, Susie. You’ll be fine.’
- \* From Joan: ‘So lovely to see you and the children. I must say you’re looking a little pale and peaky but perhaps

that's to be expected. Though you're not skinny at all.' What the hell did that mean?

\* From Nigel: 'Susie. Lovely. Safe home. Bye.' Dear Nigel, the definition of uncomplicated. Such a relief.

Having burnt out on the combination of extreme excitement, excess sugar and lack of sleep, Lula and Charlie had both drifted off even before we hit the A12.

'You're quiet,' said Alex after a mile or two.

'It's been a pretty noisy weekend, so ...' I tailed off. 'I hardly saw you. Have a good time?'

'I guess. It was all about the folks, really, and they definitely had a good time. I haven't seen Dad looking quite so chuffed since ... maybe since Will got his starred first, or Isobel was called to the Bar, or Guy scored his first try for Harlequins.'

It was Alex's turn to tail off and I felt, despite myself – despite everything – an unexpected surge of warmth.

'I seem to recall he was completely delighted when you became Publishing Director.' (Did I tell you that Alex is the publisher of three men's style magazines? Apologies, distracted.)

'Maybe.' Alex sighed. 'You want music?'

Sunday afternoon, Radio 2, Johnnie Walker's *Sounds of the Seventies*.

*I'm not in love, so don't forget it. It's just a silly phase I'm*

*going through. And just because I call you up, don't get me wrong, don't think you've got it made . . .*

Alex punched the retune button. 'I hate that song. Always have.' He stared straight ahead while navigating a roundabout. His expression . . . expressionless, unfathomable.

'I like it.'

'Yeah, you would.'

I didn't know what he meant by that but I did know it wasn't the best time to ask, so we drove the rest of the way home accompanied by Radio 4 while, inside my head, I started practising the beginning of an entirely different conversation. After numerous versions – the traffic was bad – I eventually hit on one that seemed to strike the right sort of tone: potentially quite light but with hidden depths. It went like this:

'So, anyway, Alex, um, I was just wondering . . . who is this person whose name begins with P who wants you to live . . .' (at which point I would do air-quotes with my fingers, so help me Joan) "... a different sort of life?" A life which apparently includes smiley emoticons and three kisses?

Now all I had to do was pick my moment. Fingers crossed.



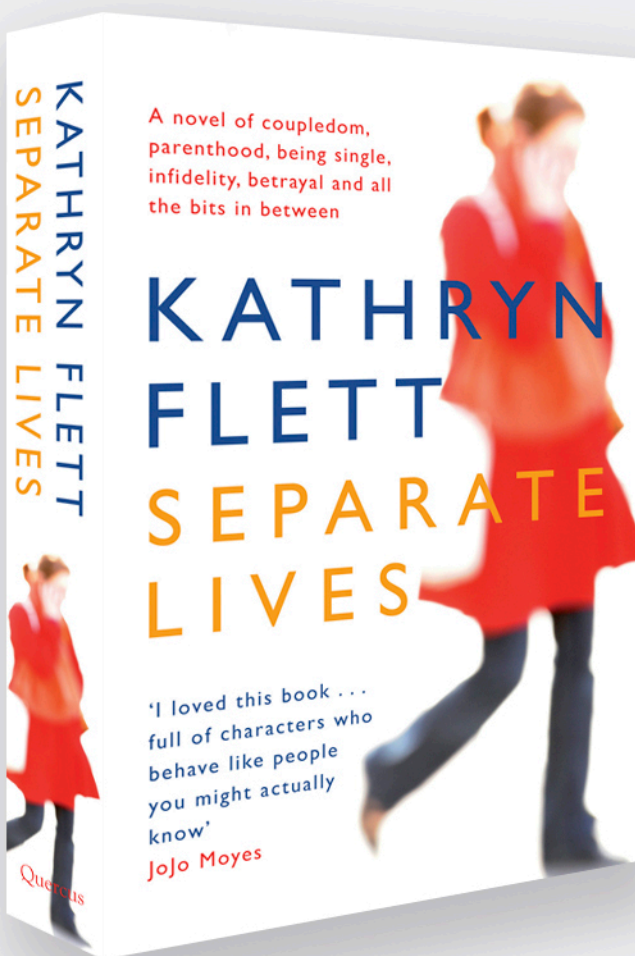
## About the Author

Kathryn Flett is a journalist, has written for numerous international publications and makes regular TV and radio appearances as a critic and pundit.

Kathryn is one of the stars of the BBC's 'Grumpy Old Women' series and was the TV critic for the Observer for ten years. *Separate Lives* is her first novel.

She is the mother of two sons and lives in Random-on-Sea.





Amazon



Book  
Depository



Waterstones



WH Smith

'Seriously gripping book . . .  
funny, sad and always sharp'  
Daisy Goodwin

Your partner of ten years, and the  
father of your children, receives a  
text. You happen to see it.

It says:

'Start living a different kind  
of life . . . P :- ) xxx'

You don't know a P. But you  
know this spells trouble.

'A book to devour in one greedy session.  
Seriously hard to put down'  
Jenny Eclair

'Funny, clever and aching honest . . . a wonderful  
insight into contemporary relationships'  
Sally Brampton

Quercus Fiction  
UK £7.99

ISBN 978-1-78087-186-8



Cover image © plainpicture/Alain Caste

[www.quercusbooks.co.uk](http://www.quercusbooks.co.uk)