

The Nearly-Weds

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Chapter 1

I'm trying my best to create the air of a sophisticated world traveller but am not entirely sure I'm pulling it off.

With hindsight, I probably gave the game away immediately by enthusiastically testing one too many fragrances at Duty Free, leaving me now exuding an aroma so pungent it could wake someone from a coma.

I've also been let down by my ethnic-style cotton top, the one I was convinced looked like an item I'd picked up somewhere fabulously exotic in the South Pacific – until I discovered the price tag poking out, revealing that I in fact paid £44.99 for it in Monsoon.

And maybe I didn't look quite as streetwise as I'd hoped by being the very first to camp out at Gate 65, beating a large group of Saga holidaymakers by at least half an hour.

Now I'm actually in the air, it's still happening: my status as a long-haul travel amateur is being ruthlessly exposed at every turn.

I'm currently attempting to balance all the empty packaging from my in-flight meal on top of a ludicrously

proportioned tray and an undrinkable cup of coffee without it tumbling on to my neighbour's lap and leaving his tackle with third-degree burns. It's like a real-life version of Kerplunk, with every item threatening to wobble off at the slightest hint of turbulence.

Unlike the American gentleman sitting next to me – he has cleverly tucked his lemon-scented freshening wipe into his empty teacup and neatly stacked the salt and pepper packets, plus the mini butter tub, in his tasty beef casserole container – I have ended up with an unruly compost heap of plastic and foil debris.

'Shall I take that for you, madam?' asks a stewardess, swiping it away before I can prevent a knife clattering on to my table.

'Whoopsadaisy!' I hoot, sounding not very like the cosmopolitan member of the jet-set I'm hoping to appear. I pick it up and attempt to hand it to her, but she's off already, steamrolling her trolley down the aisle and nearly taking the skin off several passengers' knuckles.

I glance to my side and realize my neighbour is eyeing my knife dubiously.

'Oh, well.' I shrug. 'Who knows when I might need a plastic knife complete with generous smothering of butter?'

He smiles.

It isn't a particularly conspiratorial smile, though, one that belies a flicker of amusement. It's sympathetic, revealing pity for the poor creature next to him who must surely be on day-release from a psychiatric ward.

I lean back in my seat, mentally humming a song that

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was always on the radio when I was little and Mum was cremating the Sunday dinner: 'I'm leaving on a jet plane . . . la la la . . . la la la la la la la . . .'

Oh, never mind. I'm sure the words will come back to me. And, anyway, it's the sentiment behind them that matters. The song, I assume, is about embracing new beginnings. About moving on. About discovering a whole new world.

Which is exactly what I'm doing right now.

As you may have guessed, however, flying halfway across the world by myself isn't something I've ever done before: easyJet to Barcelona for a two-night hen weekend, yes; two weeks in Turkey with boyfriend in tow, not a problem; a week with the girls in the South of France, bring it on.

But three and a half thousand miles across the Atlantic? *And possibly for good?*

No.

Except here I am. Actually doing it. Even if I wish it was with rather more panache.

Chapter 2

When I was at primary school, my best friend was called Elizabeth. She was of Jamaican origin but she was Scouse through and through – and had an accent so thick it could have unblocked a toilet.

Even at ten, Elizabeth knew what she wanted to do with her life: to see the world. She wanted to climb mountains, trek through rainforests and see as many different places and meet as many different people as she could. I found out last year that she'd graduated from Oxford, travelled for two years and now works for the Red Cross in Stockholm.

I mention this merely to illustrate a point: that if a scale existed to measure how adventurous your twenties were – according to conventional wisdom, at least – Elizabeth's life would be at one end and mine would probably be at the other.

For the past seven years, until last Friday, in fact, I've worked as a nursery nurse in Woolton, a suburb of Liverpool that fancies itself posh. Actually, I'm doing myself down a bit: by the time I left, I'd risen to deputy manager (the youngest they'd ever had, as my mother

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informs anyone she meets within the first thirty-two seconds of conversation).

This achievement doesn't so much reflect ruthless ambition, as the simple fact that I love my work. *Really* love it. Which is a constant relief, given that I embarked on this career after dropping out of my first year of a law degree (something my mother informs anyone she meets within the next thirty-two seconds of conversation).

The real point is that Bumblebees Nursery is precisely six minutes' walk from the house in which I grew up, twenty-one minutes' drive from the hospital in which I was born, and so close to my former secondary school that if you look out of the nursery's attic on tiptoe you can still see some graffiti referring to a snog I allegedly had with Christopher Timms in the lower sixth. (This, by the way, was someone's attempt at irony. At seventeen, Christopher Timms was renowned for lighting his own farts with such regularity he needed his own Fire Incident Support Unit.)

The pond-like existence I have somehow maintained for my entire twenty-eight years on this earth is – I am fully aware – slightly tragic, but, in my defence, I've got a good excuse. No, two good excuses: I found a job I adored and a man I adored.

So, why would I want to give them up?

I shift in my seat in another vain attempt to make myself comfortable. It's a space that would fail EU regulations for transporting poultry, never mind people. But it's no good. I lost all sensation in my bum cheeks a good two hours ago and I'm not likely to get it back any time soon.

I pick up my rucksack for want of something – anything – to do and take out my compact mirror to examine my reflection. It isn't a pleasant experience.

I'm not saying that under normal circumstances I'd threaten any of Eva Longoria's L'Oréal contracts but until recently I've been relatively okay with my looks. I inherited good bone structure from Dad's side of the family, good legs from Mum's and I've even – after many years of angst – learned to live with the washboard stomach I sadly didn't inherit from either.

At the moment, though, my most striking feature is not the dark eyes or full mouth I used to be complimented on, but my skin – which is so pale I look as if I need basting. I went for one of those spray tans a couple of weeks ago to see if its advertised 'natural, golden glow' would sort me out. Unfortunately, my knees and elbows ended up with such an alarmingly orange tinge that I'm convinced the beautician who applied it must have been sniffing glue.

To add insult to injury, in less than a month, my size ten–twelve frame – the one I took so utterly for granted that I even managed to complain about it at least twice a day – has somehow been replaced with one that is precisely sixteen and a half pounds heavier (and counting).

Yes, you read that right: sixteen and a half pounds. If you hadn't realized until now that it was physiologically possible to put on that much weight in such a short time, then I assure you, neither had I. But it is – and I have. Probably because I've spent the last couple of months comfort-eating for Britain.

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What has caused all this?

Oh, what do you think? A man. Obviously. My man. At least, he *used* to be my man.

I can now say categorically that Jason Redmond – high-flying accountant, pool champion, charmer of friends and parents alike, oh, and love of my life – no longer answers to that description.

No matter how many nights I spend weeping bitter tears into my pillow. No matter how many hours I spend with Leona Lewis crooning out of my iPod. No matter how many times I've accompanied well-meaning friends to karaoke bars and tried my best to look convincing while belting out 'I Will Survive'. (Okay, so, 'I Will Plummet Into The Depths Of Despair Until He Phones Me Again' hasn't quite got the same ring.)

I snap my compact closed and throw it back into my rucksack.

'Do you need an I-94W form, madam?' asks the stewardess, appearing at my shoulder.

'Um, why not?' I reply, taking it from her as casually as someone who fills in one of these every other weekend when they pop over to Buenos Aires for a spot of polo.

When she's gone, I peer at the lines on the form, wondering whether I'm meant to have one.

'You got a UK passport?' asks my American neighbour, repositioning his U-shaped cushion, an item I've been coveting for the last six hours.

'Um . . . yes,' I reply, suspiciously.

'Then if you're just going to the States on holiday you need to fill it in.' He smiles.

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‘Oh, um . . . yes, I know,’ I lie. ‘I mean, it’s a bit more than a holiday I’m going for but . . .’

‘You emigrating?’

‘I’ve got a year-long working visa,’ I explain, stuffing the form into the pocket of the chair in front, next to the butter knife and two plastic cups with Diet Pepsi dregs in the bottom. ‘So, I’ll be there for at least twelve months. Assuming they don’t throw me out first, that is!’

He smiles again, but this time it isn’t even the sympathetic one. It’s the sort of smile you’d give a shoe bomber to instil an air of calm while trying to work out where the emergency exits are.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking,’ announces a reassuringly plummy voice over a crackly speaker. ‘We will shortly be making our descent into JFK . . .’

I sit up in my seat and take a deep breath.

New life, here I come.

Chapter 3

We are so bombarded by American culture in the UK that it's sometimes impossible to think of the United States as a foreign country. Yet the second I step off the plane, JFK couldn't feel more foreign if it were situated on the far side of Jupiter. I wander round the airport lounge, trying not to spend too long scrutinizing the flight information boards with a hopeless look on my face in case I give anybody the impression I don't know what I'm doing, and am enveloped in unfamiliar sights and sounds: accents that make my own vowels sound so British I feel like someone auditioning to read the BBC news in 1953; language I recognize – *diapers*, *cell phones*, *mommies*, *zip codes* – but have never used. And there's a bustling, gaudy, fast-food whirlwind of an atmosphere that makes half of me giddy with excitement and the other half long for somewhere that sells a nice sausage roll, and tea that's been brewed to the correct strength for several days.

I had an inkling of this sensation when I spoke to my new employers on the phone last week. I'm on my way to be a nanny for Summer (three and a half) and Katie

(two), daughters of Josh and Karen Ockerbloom. The Ockerblooms run their own real-estate company just outside Kalamazoo, Michigan – my ultimate destination – and they sound lovely. Really lovely. And unbelievably, well, *American*.

Karen was at pains to stress how excited she and Josh were about welcoming me – ‘a bona-fide British nanny’ – into their home.

On top of that, I get my own car (an SUV – which, thanks to Google, I now know does not refer to the filters in a sun-tan lotion), I won’t be expected to do any chores (they have staff) and they’d like me to go on holiday with them to Bermuda next month, *all expenses paid*.

I feel my mobile vibrate. There’s a new message from the agency I’ve registered with, British Supernannies. They’re apparently very good – the fastest-growing UK agency in America – although, judging by their choice of name, understatement isn’t a speciality.

‘This is a message for Zoe Moore,’ begins the voice of Margaret, the slightly dodderly secretary I’ve been dealing with for the past few weeks. ‘I’m terribly sorry about this, Zoe, but there’s been a change of plan. Please do give me a ring when you have a chance – and, most importantly, before you get on your connecting flight.’

A long conversation ensues, during which it emerges – as I try not to get too exasperated – that I’m no longer going to Kalamazoo. I’m now going to Hope Falls, which is near Boston. Which means I’m no longer going to live with Karen and Josh. Or to drive their SUV. Or to go to Bermuda. Hope Falls? You can say that again.

I’m now going to Mrs R. Miller, a single mother, to

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look after her two children, Ruby, who is nearly six, and Samuel, who's just turned three. There was a last-minute change of plan, apparently. Karen and Josh have a nanny, a girl from Surrey who was with them last year and suddenly became available again after they came to an agreement about a pay rise.

I grip my rucksack and force myself to come over all Thelma and Louise-like. To remind myself that I'm a strong, confident, independent woman who is more than happy to live life on the edge and change her plans when required – even when it means Bermuda's out.

I head towards a shop to buy a bottle of water, and when I get to the till to pay for it, the generously proportioned African-American assistant flashes me a smile.

No, no. That's not right. To call it a smile doesn't cover it. This is the sort of grin you'd expect from a woman who'd just lost a stone in weight, won the lottery and found the most glorious pair of shoes she's ever set eyes on . . . in a sale.

'Going anywhere nice, ma'am?' She beams.

'Oh, Boston. For work,' I reply, keeping it vague enough for the others in the queue to imagine me an off-duty human-rights lawyer on her way to reverse a miscarriage of justice or two.

'Boston, huh? Well, you be sure to have a good time.'

'I will. Thank you.'

I take the bottle from her and attempt to put it into my rucksack before I move away. But the cord at the top isn't budging. I free my hands by shoving my purse into my mouth, then try stuffing the bottle into the front pocket. But it just isn't happening. Not easily, anyway.

Pushing, pulling and scrambling, I'm no nearer to getting the bottle into my bag, and painfully conscious now of the growing queue.

With the woman behind me tutting and rolling her eyes, I rip open the back pocket, stuff in the bottle and straighten my back indignantly.

It is at this point that the clasp on my purse, still squashed between my teeth, takes on a life of its own. It bursts open, coins projecting out as if I'm vomiting two-pence pieces. The woman behind looks as if she has lost the will to live. Others rush forward offering help as I scramble around, clumsily trying to pick up my money. My cheeks redden violently.

'Um, thanks, ooh, sorry, I, em, thanks a lot, sorry, um . . .' I babble. Wanting to escape, I shove my empty purse between my knees and hobble out, my arms full of coins, plastic bank cards and my rucksack, forcing myself to ignore the suppressed giggles.

'Have a nice day, ma'am!' the assistant calls after me, as I disappear round a corner, hoping she'll understand why I don't reply.