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Comfort and Joy

Written by India Knight

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Comfort and Joy
by
India Knight

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So I'm walking down Oxford Street, sodden by the sheeting rain, like I walk down Oxford Street sodden by the sheeting rain every single bastarding Christmas. Well, I say Christmas – I mean 'festive period' (which always makes me think of menstruation, except while wearing a jaunty paper hat and blowing a tooter, for fun. Poot poot!). It's not actually Christmas Day – that would be tragic or, come to think of it, maybe quite refreshing: just me and the odd tramp and our cosy cider, rather than me and my sixteen or so, um, loved ones.

No, it's the 23rd and I'm picking up a few last-minute bits and bobs. Quite why I've left these bits and bobs so late is a mystery, but again, it's an annual ritual. If you didn't know any better you would think – fancy! – that there are people I subconsciously don't especially enjoy buying presents for, people who pop right out of my head until 23 December every year, when I remember not only that they exist but that they are coming to spend Christmas at my house, yay and wahoo.

I couldn't possibly comment, except to point out that the incredibly annoying and pointless thing about my approach – you'd think I'd have figured this out by now, since it happens every year – is that, in the last-minute panic, I end up spending far more money on the bits-and-bobby presents for the bits-and-bobby people than I do on presents for people I really love. Take this grotesque china cat with boogly eyes and improbable eyelashes, the one I am holding in my hand right now (I've come out of the rain and into John Lewis – as, apparently, has half of London). Perfect for my mother-in-law. £200, you say?

Well, my goodness. I stare at the sales assistant in disbelief. Has she looked at the china cat? It's eye-bleedingly hideous, it's not very big, and here she is, saying '£200' with a straight face. Also, 'collector's item'. Yeah, maybe, if you're mad. I'd rather collect those dried white dog turds you never see any more (why? Where have they gone?). No, not really. I wouldn't like to collect dog turds at all, obviously. I'm just becoming bad-tempered, which always makes me go a bit Internal Tourette's. It's just – it's so much money. Having glared, I smile penitently at the sales assistant and gingerly hand the cat back.

But then I go trawling off round to the bath salts and 'novelty gifts' bit of John Lewis, and there are so many people, and having been cold fifteen minutes ago in my parka, despite the fact that it is designed to withstand temperatures down to –20 degrees, I am now boiling hot, and I think I can't give her bath salts again, or soaps – it's got to the stage where it looks like I'm making a point about personal hygiene – and she doesn't read books and she doesn't listen to music and she has no hobbies except collecting cats, so . . . off I return to the china animal concession, sweating lightly, forcing a smile that probably looks more like a death rictus. £200. £200! The financial markets are falling apart, Sam keeps muttering darkly that our mortgage is about to do something terrible, I'm wearing frankly shabby underwear that I'd like to replace, and I've just spent £200 on a china cat that looks like it came via a full-page ad in a Sunday supplement: *Pretty Lady Pusscat needs a home. Look at her pleading eyes and feel your heart give way. Fashioned from the finest porcelain by skilled craftsmen, Lady Pusscat will be your cherished friend . . .*

It gives me a lurch in my stomach to think of the cost, on top of which I'm now paranoid about dropping Lady Pusscat. I'm going to tell Pat, my mother-in-law, that this is what it's called. I know exactly what she'll say: 'Oh, isn't that grand.

Lady Pusscat! What a beautiful name. Isn't that grand.' Pat likes to sandwich normal speech between two expressions. The thought of it makes me smile to myself with a mixture of love and irritation. This is more than I spend on my own mother, I note, as I hand over my credit card. Well, more than I *initially* spend on my own mother.

But at least Pat will be really pleased with the cat. She'll appreciate it and say thank you nicely, and put it on her special cat shelf, and possibly get a little piece of card and write LADY PUSSCAT on it in her best handwriting, and place it reverently underneath. The problem with Kate, my esteemed mama, isn't that she's on the list of people I can't be bothered to buy presents for until the last minute. And neither – ha! – is she a person that I forget exists. The problem with Kate is that she has all the stuff she could conceivably want. She's on a list of her own, called 'People Who Have Everything' (mind you, she doesn't have a Lady Pusscat. Now there's a thought. Maybe I could mix things up a bit and get her a Lord Puppy). There is nothing I can buy her, though obviously I'm going to have to buy her something.

The thing is – you wouldn't think it from this rant, even though it's true – I really love giving people presents. It gives me pleasure. I put a lot of thought into it. I start early, even if I do finish on the 23rd. And I've yet, in adult life, to give Kate something that provokes the kind of reaction I'm after: the gasp of delight, the genuine grin of pleasure that makes you think the whole flipping Christmas faff is worth it. She liked a clay ashtray I made at school when I was six. She still has it on her desk, all beaten up and manky and poignant in about ten different ways. It's nice that she's kept it, but I haven't been able to match that present in the intervening thirty-four years.

What happens with Kate is I throw money at the problem. I think, if it costs enough, she'll like it. This is a fatally stupid

approach – it doesn't work, and all that happens is that when she glances at her present, murmurs her thanks and then leaves it behind, I feel incensed and want to run after her telling her how much it cost. I did this once, to my shame. I'd bought her this amazing, hand-stitched sequined stole – beautiful, dull-gold proper sequins, not brash plasticky ones. It cost a fortune: I was still paying for it months later; in fact, if I remember correctly, there was an unpleasant episode with a red bill that I'd shoved in a drawer to make it magic itself away. She unwrapped the stole and said, 'How sweet,' and then she put it on the sofa next to her, never to be glanced at again. I couldn't help myself: I said, 'It's by this amazing new designer. I had it commissioned for you. It, um, it cost . . . ' and I told her what it had cost. Kate put down her glass of champagne, closed her eyes as though in an agony of pain, and said, 'Clara. I beg you. Please don't be vulgar.'

I said I knew it was *quite* vulgar, but that I hoped she liked it because I'd had it made especially and . . .

'Don't, darling. And you shouldn't spend that sort of money on me. I'm a simple person. I'd have been just as happy with a candle.'

'A candle? What do you mean, a candle? Like, a scented candle?'

'A beeswax candle.'

'A beeswax candle?'

'Don't repeat everything I say, Clara, it makes you sound dim.'

'But I'm just checking. That's what you'd like for your present, ideally? One beeswax candle?'

'Yes. Beautiful and useful, as William Morris said.'

'Gosh. Well, I'll know for next time.'

'Quite. Pass me a blini, would you?'

What I should really do this year is go wild and buy her one lone stupid waxy candle and see what happens. 'Here you go,

Mother. Don't burn it all at once!' But I won't, because I want Kate to love my present. I want her to love me for buying it for her. I want the present to say everything that we don't say. That's the thing about presents, isn't it? Especially Christmas ones. The judiciously chosen present, the perfect gift, is offered up in the spirit of atonement and regeneration. It says, 'Look, I know I don't call as often as I should, and I know you think I'm grumpy and short-tempered' – insert your own personal failings here; I'm merely *précising* mine – 'but the thing is, I know you so well and I love you so much that I have bought you the perfect thing. And so now everything's okay, at least for today.' Which is all very lovely but a great deal easier said than done, and which is why I can feel the hair at the back of my neck curling with heat and stress. For a present to be eloquent, it's got to be just right, and everything I've seen so far is wrong to the point of mutedom.

I'm back on Oxford Street now, headed for Selfridges, sharing the pavement with one billion people and a mere million arsing pigeons. Can I just say, about pigeons? a) Why aren't they in their creepy old mank-nests, sheltering from the cold rather than festooning the streets with guano? Also, more urgently, b) Why do they walk along the pavement in straight lines, as though they were human? This has bothered me for years, and I find myself thinking about it once again as I slowly shuffle my way west, with one pigeon keeping pace on either side of me. We are walking three abreast, like a posse. The pigeons are my bitches: here come the girls. It is so, so wrong. But it always happens because, alone of all the birds, pigeons don't just alight, strut about for a few seconds and take off again. No, they walk for miles. They follow the invisible horizontal for a freakishly long amount of time, pretty much keeping up with us. *Pigeons think they're people*. It does my head in. It also explains why you see them on the Tube, pottering up and down the platform

before walking into the carriage, calm as you like. In London, pigeons mostly walk – they only fly if you run after them. It's bloody odd, is what it is. I don't like it. Birds should fly.

Here we are. Even my temporarily unseasonal heart gladdens a little bit at the sight of Selfridges' Christmas windows, a stunning exercise in glitter and luxe. They've done fairy tales this year, but subverted them a bit, so that bosomy Goldilocks is looking minxy in boned Vivienne Westwood and the three bears give the impression that never mind the porridge, come and sit on our laps (even the baby, disconcertingly. I'm not mad about the idea of Baby Bear with a boner). Little Red Riding Hood is wearing fuchsia silk underwear under her billowing cloak, which has fallen open for the wolf's delectation. So much sex, I think, as I watch an exhausted-looking couple and their two small children staring at the displays. Sex everywhere. The children practically have their noses pressed up against the glass, mouths open in amazement and delight. I suppose it goes above their heads, the fact that everyone looks like they're about to ravish everybody else. (I find myself wondering how they pick the fairy tales at the window-display meetings. Does someone clear their throat and point out that yes, you could technically put the Little Match Girl in sexy knickers but that it wouldn't necessarily add to the joyous Christmas vibe when she dies, broken and alone?)

They've done a nice thing with 'The Ugly Duckling', though: the Mother Duck is old-school glamorous; and the Ugly Duckling is new-school nerdy, with fabulous clothes that look like a beautiful mess and big black glasses. She looks good, the Ugly Duckling. She makes the Mother Duck look like she's trying a bit too hard. I expect the Mother Duck spent the Ugly Duckling's childhood trying to wean her out of vintage – then called second-hand – and into Laura Ashley. And I bet the Mother Duck didn't like the Ugly Duckling's boyfriends, because they

weren't called Rupert or Jeremy. The jewels glitter on the Mother Duck's hands; the Ugly Duckling is wearing a plastic necklace. I realize that I, too, practically have my nose pressed up against the glass, and that my mouth is slightly open.

God, Christmas. It makes my brain melt. Because – I've finished over-identifying with the Duckling and am now, appropriately enough, in the beauty hall – I love it so much, and I want it to be so lovely, so redemptive, so right. There's no point in doing it craply, is there? I know people who do do it craply, sitting there miserably with their substandard presents and their overcooked titchy bird, but that's not how I roll. The idea of that kind of Christmas makes me want to cry: I can't bear even to watch pretend people doing it on television. It's not that I want it to be perfect in the Martha Stewart sense – I don't even own any matching crockery. I just want it to be . . . nice. Warm. Loving. Joyous. All those things. Christmassy.

My feet lead me to the Chanel counter, for Kate. They have these fantastically expensive – of course – special scents, called things like Coromandel, which I start spraying on thick, heavy paper strips. Why am I not able to roll that way? Why can't I just go, 'Eh, Christmas, it's just another day – more food, more stuff, but it's just a day, a mere day, one lone day that in the great scheme of things doesn't matter very much'? I don't know. If I knew, I would fix myself. I just know that I want it to be right, absolutely exactly minutely right, and that people who bang on about the pressures of commercialism – she said, from the beauty department of a luxury store – are missing something. That's not what the day's about – well, not entirely. It's about love, and family, and, like I said, redemption. If I didn't want to run the risk of sounding like the king of the wankers, I'd say Christmas was about hope. Yeah. Hope. And optimism. It's like the fairy tales in the window: for families, every Christmas is a new opportunity for Happy Ever After.

No pressure, then.

So Kate now has the scent – it's called '31 rue Cambon' and they package it in a thick black box with a fabric magnolia inserted behind the grosgrain ribbon, and I feel temporarily reassured, because it really does smell delicious and will be perfect on her skin. But then, as I head towards Jewellery – crammed with men emergency-buying stuff for their wives without really looking at it properly – I think: I can't just give my mother one lone bottle of scent, even if it is super-scent. I'm veering dangerously into shout-out-the-price territory again ('I'd have been just as happy with a rose petal'). I need to get her a couple of other things. Small things. And pick up something for Jake. And I need to bump up Sam's present. Sam's present is too small, because I've been annoyed with him recently. And he with me. But it's Christmas. And while I'm at it, I could have a quick look for things to add to the children's stockings. Maisy's (I know: I did actually name my daughter after a cartoon mouse whose face is only ever seen in profile) is done, because she's five and it's easy, but my boys are teenagers and when you're a teenager and the only things you're into are bands and techy stuff, your stocking suffers. An iTunes card barely fills the toe; a DVD lies there all flat, making the stocking look tragic. And again, brain-melt: I am whooshed back through time to my own teenage years, at home with my own much younger sisters, Flo and Evie, clocking their fat, bursting-at-the-seams stockings and looking down at my own considerably thinner one.

Kate was married to Julian at the time – he is my sisters' dad. And my mini-stockings were always fabulous: earrings and lipsticks and thoughtful, hand-picked little books of poetry and suchlike. There was absolutely nothing, nada, zero, to complain about. But I felt – jealous isn't quite the right word. I didn't want more or better stuff. Envious, then. Envious of my

sisters' fat, teddy-stuffed stockings and everything they symbolized: their childhood, with two parents who were their parents, two parents who loved each other living under the same roof; the ordinariness of the teddies and little games; the absolute safe, cosy, family-ness of it.

And now, oddly – or not oddly at all, depending on your viewpoint – my own children are in the same situation, with a stepfather, and a much younger sibling (just the one) who lives, utterly secure, at home with a mummy and daddy under one roof; a sibling whose fat, teddy-stuffed stocking may present an emotional contrast that kind of harshes their Christmas morning mellow. Or not. They're happier than I was by miles, but still – I'm taking no chances. I hurtle down a floor, to the HMV concession, to stock up on Xbox games.

It all gets done, eventually. It always does – I don't know why I get myself in such a flap. Unless I've miscalculated, I've now got presents for everybody – enough presents, good presents, the gifts that will bring joy to the family home and would cause the Baby Jesus to kick His legs and coo with pleasure if His crib were in our kitchen. I take out my tattered list and double-check: yes, all done, though I'm not sure about the fluorescent underpants for Jake, which seemed a good – well, a comical – idea at the time. Still, too late now. I'll do a last-minute supermarket dash tomorrow – this might finally be the year that we don't run out of bay leaves – and try to get the bulk of the wrapping done tonight after dinner. I'm laughing, basically. All that fuss, and here I am, sorted, good to go, like some marvelous housewife in a magazine. Things are looking up.

The crowds have thinned out a bit – it's just before 6 p.m. – and even the pigeons no longer seem that keen to walk alongside me. Maisy's at home with her granny, Sam's mum – mine doesn't do babysitting – who said earlier she'd actively

like to look after her and put her to bed. 'Take as long as you like, love. It's what I'm here for,' she said, in her martyred but kind way. I have time – ample time – for a coffee and a sit-down.

It suddenly occurs to me that I can probably do better than that. I don't really want to donkey my parcels and bags around in the rain only to squeeze myself into an overcrowded, overheated coffee shop, and besides they start shutting at about this time. A light bulb goes on up above my head: I could go and have a drink somewhere really nice. Somewhere I could leave my parcels with a matronly guardian, and where someone would take my coat and bring me, I don't know, a giant Martini. And some olives. And some nuts. Maybe those little Parmesan biscuit things. Because actually I'm starving. Yes. Who does those things? Who cocoons you in that way? Why, a hotel. I've perked up massively by now: under the giant wet hood of my Arctic parka, I am smiling in the rain. I'm going to take myself to a glamorous hotel, for a pre-Christmas drink by myself. How festive is that? Just the one drink (don't want to spend a fortune), and then home within a couple of hours tops, in time to cook supper.

If I'm going to do this, I might as well do it properly. I don't want to sit in the bar of a sad hotel, with sad men from out of town who've come to London to see their children before heading off again to spend Christmas all by their lonely, divorced, broken selves. This leads me to quickly count my blessings, an old hobby that I've never quite managed to give up. Chief among them, tonight: I am not a sad man whose ex-wife only lets him see his children for a couple of hours on 23 December, while she sits silently in a corner, bristling with resentment and old woundage and he thinks, 'This used to be my home.' No. I may be divorced but I am not sad. Or a man. Also, I'm really good at being divorced. I'm a gold medallist.

I'm an Olympian. Robert, the boys' father, remains my excellent friend, as evidenced by the fact that he *and* his parents are coming to Christmas, as they do every year. Pat on the head, Clara. (Everyone thinks I'm awfully clever to be good at divorce, and I smile and look positively crammed with the wisdom of the ancients, but actually there's nothing to it. Put it this way: if you've been the child of serially divorced parents yourself, you become very, very skilled at How Not To Do It.)

The Connaught, then. Ha! Why not? The Con-bloody-naught, so chic and refined. I haven't been in there for years. It's exactly the sort of place where a person might go and have a drink and be left in peace and feel like a lady in a hat in an old-fashioned novel, plus it's barely a ten-minute walk away. Worry: do I look smart enough under my polar-explorer coat? Why, yes, for once: I had coffee with my editor this morning and thought I'd better make an effort, so I am wearing an actual dress. A silk dress, since you ask, nicely cut to emphasize the good bits and minimize the bad (stomach, chiefly. We'll speak no more of it). And I have proper shoes on, and make-up in my handbag. No problemo: Connaught here I come. It is fated.

I'm walking through Grosvenor Square now, past the American Embassy, which it is impossible to get near because of all the anti-terrorist barricades. People huddle past, braced against the rain, which hasn't let up since eleven this morning; hundreds of outsize fairy lights glisten from the enormous trees lining the square. Two cars nearly splash me a little, but I don't care: I feel elated. I never do anything like this – take myself off to hotels, I mean. Once your default setting is switched to domestic, as mine has been for nearly two decades, you don't spend an awful lot of time on your own doing randomly fun, extravagant-seeming stuff. You only have minutes a day on your own doing non-homey, non-worky stuff, if you're lucky

and all your children are at school and it's not the holidays. Some people must really like it, I guess, and I like it too, the whole big bustling family thing, but I also really like my own company and sometimes I miss it. What's that awful expression that makes me gag? 'Me-time'. That's what I'm having. Perfect timing: me-time before the onslaught of Christmas Day.

Slight left, and here's Carlos Place, and here's the Connaught, shining in the dark with that yellowy light, like a house in a book, like a beacon of possibilities. A uniformed doorman outside is seeing someone into a Bentley: the scene is the definition of old-fashioned glamour. I wish I wasn't wearing the stupid parka, but anyway. In I go. Yes, madam would love to leave her parcels. Yes, do take madam's coat. No, I think I remember where the bar is, thanks, and anyway I'm just going to nip into the Ladies first to put on some make-up. Which is just as well, because when I look in the mirror I see the rain has washed all of mine away, leaving only two smudged black circles around my eyes: I look like I've been crying. New face, back out down the corridor, and yes – air-punch of a yes – here it is.

Here is my me-time bar. There's a fire, and dim lighting, and old-fashioned sofas and leathery club chairs and a polished walnut table just for me, with puffy, monogrammed paper coasters awaiting my drink. I sink into the chair, which seems to sigh with pleasure upon receiving my bottom, and I unfurl like a flag. Begone, stupidly expensive china animals! Shoo, pointless panic about presents! All is well with the world, and here's my waiter, and it's two days to Christmas and oh man, this is nice. This is *so nice*. A champagne cocktail, I think, rather than a Martini – I have a vague notion that it won't be as strong. I don't want to be drunk: my tolerance for alcohol has decreased tragically with age, and these days my hangovers can last up to

forty-eight hours. I wouldn't mind, but they're so seldom worth it.

The white-jacketed cocktail man catches my eye and smiles as he makes my drink, and I am filled with love for humanity. This is so . . . civilized, so old-fashioned, so *wonderful*, such a rare treat. The waiter brings an assortment of snacks, and having taken a sip of my drink, I peer round with interest at my fellow humans. It is as I thought: smart couples of a certain age, the odd patrician-looking, pinstriped businessman of the kind that has offices in St James's, two elderly ladies with stonking jewels and too much face powder, hooting with laughter. I imagine this is their annual ritual, that they are old friends who still meet for their Christmas drink, like they have done for decades. I hope me and Tamsin are like that, when we're really old. I can just see us.

Arse. Tamsin. My oldest and dearest friend. Tamsin is coming to Christmas and I haven't got her a flipping present. How did that happen? She always comes to Christmas and I've never forgotten before. I got her boyfriend a present and not her: how crap. I rack my brain, trying to picture the contents of my emergency present cupboard, which is where I store gifts that need to be recycled because they're not my bag, or stuff I get sent by PR people (advantage of working for a glossy magazine). But Tamsin likes the same stuff as me, so if it's in the cupboard it won't be her bag either. And she can always tell if I palm her off with some freebie. Crap. Crap. Crapadoodledo. Wasn't she on the list? I dig around in my handbag and find she wasn't. Terrible oversight, of the kind that makes me worry about getting Alzheimer's. I take another sip of my cocktail, surprised to note that it's nearly finished. The thing is, now Tam's finally hooked up with someone, the pressure to give her a fantastic present isn't as massive as it used to be during her (prolonged, eternal-seeming, much moaned-about) single

years, when I felt it was my duty as friend-in-chief to buy her the kind of thing that a) she could never afford (she's a school-teacher) and b) a boyfriend might give her. And now, hallelujah, she has a boyfriend, a proper one, Jake – they've been together nearly a year. He is incredibly old and sometimes they use Viagra (again, I worry fleetingly about having bought him pants: aside from anything else, does it make it obvious that Sam and I have discussed his aged loins?), but we needn't dwell on that – the point is that as far as I remember he usually buys her nice presents. He gives good gift. So it's not so bad. I'll just make a note to nip to the . . .

'Is this seat taken?'

I glance up briefly. There's one of those interchangeable men in suits standing there, pointing at the club chair opposite mine.

'No, no – have it,' I say, looking down at my present list again. They had really nice stripy cashmere scarves at the shop down the road from home – I'll get her one of those in the morning. And some books. And maybe some pants, so Jake doesn't feel victimized. 'I'm not expecting anyone.'

'You don't mind?'

'Not at all,' I say, still looking at my lap and scribbling 'T – scarf + pants' on my list. 'I'm going in a minute, anyway.'

'I'm grateful. It's very busy in here,' the man says. 'May I get you another drink?'

'No, thank you. I think I'd better . . .' I look up properly for the first time. 'Oh.'

He is raising his eyebrows, and smiling.

It feels like about twenty minutes go by, in slow motion. I am looking at the man. He is looking at me. Nobody is speaking. I can hear the old ladies laughing, though they sound very far away.

'Another drink?' he repeats.

I realize that, for the second time today, my mouth is slightly open. I snap it shut, only to open it again. 'I, er. I. No. I have to go. I can't. I. Yes. NO!' is what comes out, humiliatingly. I can literally feel the blood rising to the surface of my skin. I am about to become puce.

'Have one more. For Christmas,' he laughs. 'Same again? I promise I'll leave you alone with your, ah, paperwork.'

I say 'Okay' in a weird squeaky voice.

To me, the man is the most attractive man I have ever seen. I don't know what else to say: it's a simple statement of fact. I, Clara Dunphy née Hutt, have literally, in my life, never seen anyone so handsome. It's subjective, of course. But . . . it's not just handsomeness. I know handsomeness, from interviewing the odd film star and so on for work: it takes you aback initially, but you adjust to it very quickly and just feel annoyed when you go back into the real world and find everyone walking about with their plain old faces. You don't, as I do now, feel like you've been winded, punched, jacked out of time. And that little stab in my stomach. I know what that is. That's not good. That's not supposed to happen to the old-lady wife and mother. I mean, it's been *years*. How weird.

'He's bringing them over,' the man says, coming back and sitting down. And then, gesturing to my ratty little list, 'Please. Don't let me put you off.'

'It's just my list, you know, for presents,' I say, pretending to write something important down on it. What I actually write is 'HELP', not in letters so large that he could see them from across the table, but as a useful aide-memoire to myself.

'Ah yes. I've been doing some of that too.'

'I was in Oxford Street,' I volunteer pointlessly, and then, as if that piece of banality wasn't enough, I add, 'I had two pigeons walking on either side of me. We were like a gang.'

He looks mildly surprised by this, as well he might. Surprised

doesn't even begin to cover how I'm feeling. A little voice in my head says, 'Leave. Go home. It was fun, the drink in the Connaught, but it's over now.'

'I went to New Bond Street,' he says. He has been smiling at me ever since he sat down. It's a knowing sort of smile, and I know what it means. If I were a different sort of person – one to whom these things happened, one who didn't find anything odd about being winded by strangers in hotel bars – I would smile back at him in exactly the same way. I'd be wearing stockings under my dress, instead of M&S tights and flesh-coloured Pants of Steel, and the whole stranger-in-a-hotel-bar scenario would be almost drearily familiar to me. But I am not a different sort of person, so I frown and blush and frown and stare, until it occurs to me that it might be an idea to compose my face, which is, as predicted, a fetching shade of scarlet.

'Bobond Street,' I say. 'I hope it was less crowded. Bond, I mean, not Bobo . . . Bobond.' I am sounding like a nutter. I have never stammered in my life. 'I'm sorry,' I say. 'Bond Street, you were saying.'

'It was hideous.'

'Yes. Will you excuse me?'

I have to leave the table. I wish I could explain it properly. To be succinct: if the man, whose name I don't know and whom I met maybe four minutes ago, said, 'Let's go round the back and do it against the bins,' I'd say yes. This disturbs me profoundly. I feel like someone's flicked a switch in my head; lobbed a bomb into my little world of domesticity and special Christmas-treat drinks. Actually, I feel like I've had a brain transplant. No – like zombies ate my brain. Because I can truthfully say that it has never happened to me before. I understand the concept of lust, obviously – I had entire relationships based on lust, when I was younger – hot monkey sex with someone who you knew was a bit pointless, if exceedingly hot.

But this isn't normal lust. This is . . . filmic. Surreal. Another thing altogether.

I go back to the loo. They have armchairs in there, and I plonk myself down on one. Am I drunk? Surely not from one cocktail and a quarter.

Other hand: maybe I've got completely the wrong end of the stick. Maybe this man is smiling and looking at me like that because he feels sorry for me, all alone in a bar two days before Christmas, clutching my scrappy little piece of paper and wittering on about pigeons, with a face so red it looks like it's been boiled. His heart goes out to my speech impediment. He's just being kind. Christ! He's probably waiting for someone. His former-supermodel wife and nine exquisite children, I expect. I need to get a grip. 'Get a grip, Clara,' I say to myself out loud. I am in a bar, someone has sat down at my table, they are incredibly, amazingly, inhumanly attractive, and that's that. So what? I am an adult, and quite a responsible one. I have self-control. I am also a biped, who can – and will – stand up and leave whenever I like, using my two stout feet to propel me homewards. The world is full of attractive people: there's no need to flip out like a weirdo because one talks to you. Deep breaths. Wash hands. Be normal. That stab in the stomach isn't necessarily desire: it could be hunger. Go back, eat the nuts, finish the drink, say thank you, go home. Not rocket science, by a long chalk.

The problem is, I wasn't always a person of the flesh-coloured pants variety. There was a time, many centuries ago, when triceratopses frolicked playfully across the plains with diplodocuses, when I was acquainted with the woman in the stockings. Well, not the actual stockings – they're so ooh-saucy, someone's-feeling-lucky – but the general 'Here we are: anything could happen' thing. But it was a very, very long time ago. Happily for me, I don't find that many people attractive,

plus my propensity for bad behaviour has been napalmed into extinction by years and years of marriage, children, supermarkets, laundry, bills, school, work, all of that stuff. And, I tell myself again, I have probably got the absolutely wrong end of the stick.

But I know, when I sit down again. The air is heavy, like syrup. Even the molecules in the air seem charged. And I smile back at him and lean forward in my chair.

No, we didn't do it against the bins. But, all the same, there exists, it turns out, an accelerated and dizzying kind of intimacy that is so intense and overwhelming, it feels not a million – or even a hundred – miles from infidelity: while you could certainly state that 'nothing happened', this would only be true if you were an emotional imbecile and your heart was dead. What I learned tonight is that it is possible for nothing and everything to happen in the same breath. I push the thought – confusing, exciting, disabling, impossible – out of my head and try to calm myself, and in the taxi home I make myself think about Sam. Sam, Sam, only Sam.

To be perfectly honest with you, and if I'm to be *completely realistic*, Sam and I are no longer at the passionately romantic stage. Not by any means. It pains me to say this. It actually makes me feel prickly in my armpits, that sort of shame-guilt prickle you get. And it makes me feel sad. Because, why? Some people go on for ever, happy as two happy clams at the bottom of the happy sea, for decades and decades until death do them part, and even then they probably fly around heaven chastely kissing each other and having joint hobbies. I see them in Sainsbury's sometimes, ancient old couples holding hands. They make me want to cry. I'm not just saying that: they literally make my eyes fill with tears. Sometimes I follow them around for a couple of aisles, until I can't bear it any more.

What's so wrong with me and Sam, with us – well, with me mostly – that I know we won't be buying cheap ham together holding hands when we're eighty-two? And why do I assume the fading of romance – the perfectly normal fading of romance – is somehow fatal, against ham? I bet most of these old couples went through some rough patches. Like, you know, loved ones dying in wars, like the Blitz, not just some low-level pissed-offness. So actually there is no reason why we shouldn't buy cheap ham in our time of decrepitude. I want to buy cheap ham with Sam. Sam's my man, for ham.

But anyway: it's true. The passionate, easy tiger, grr-grr bit is petering out. There's a bit of tiger and a bit of grr, but – how can this be? – I don't get that ache of longing any more. I just think, 'Oh look, there's Sam.' Occasionally I think, 'Oh look, there's Sam, who is quite easy on the eye.' Or, 'There's Sam, who makes me laugh, which I find attractive.' Or, 'Sam has said an intelligent thing, and that appeals to me.' And then I carry on with whatever I'm doing. This seems really pretty incredible, considering the longing I used to feel for him. I used to watch him when he didn't know I was there – coming up the stairs at a party, once – and feel dizzy. I used to think, 'Oh my God, that's my boyfriend. That man – that clever, funny, charming, talented man, whom I fancy to the point of giddiness – has chosen me. Me! Out of all the gazillions of women in the whole gigantic universe. Me!' And then I'd want to laugh wildly, hahahahaha, to roll around the floor kicking my legs in the air and whooping with incredulous, delighted joy. I didn't, obviously. But I wanted to. Inside, I whooped. I whooped on our wedding day; and when Maisy was born, I cried with happiness and whooped some more.

And then, slowly, the petering. Oh, it kills me. On so many levels, really. But mostly because it's so sad. I'm like Kate: I believe in romance. But I don't want to be like Kate and show

the strength of my belief by marrying four different men – at the last count, though I think she’s pretty settled with Max. Two should suffice, which means I’ve run out of options: it’s the end of the line. (My friend Amber sang that at our wedding – ‘The Trolley Song’ from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, which ends, ‘And it was grand just to stand with his hand holding mine / To the end of the line.’ Everyone thought it was a sweet, camp choice, but I knew.)

I also know perfectly well – I’ve read the books, and as I keep saying, I am an adult – that the kind of romance I believe in is silly, unrealistic, schoolgirl, Emma Bovary-ish. Penny novella, cheapo stuff, with *coups de foudre* and manly chests and sweepings into arms and elopements and never any boredom or nappy-changing or sleepless nights or wee on the loo seat. I *know*. I know I’m silly. But it slays me. It pierces me that the early bits are always the best bits, that you go from falling into bed every hour on the hour to being lucky if you feel like it once a fortnight. I don’t mean just sex – I mean that feeling of being transported, of your stomach plummeting three storeys when he gives you a call. The first time I found Sam’s wee on the loo seat, I stared at it reverentially. I thought, ‘That is His wee, on my lowly loo seat,’ and I felt privileged.

And anyway, there are things you can do. I can’t guarantee that Sam and I will be buying ham when we are tiny, withered old people, but I do know how to maximize our chances. I know – I have observed – that the secret to a happy marriage, apart from the obvious stuff like saintly patience and award-winning acting skills, the ability to cope with disappointment, and a dramatic lowering of expectations, is to put out regularly. Oh yes. You may frown, and I’ll grant you the concept doesn’t exactly thrill my good feminist heart, but it’s true. Put out regularly, seem extraordinarily eager for the mighty husbandly front bottom, and you’re improving the chances of your

marriage succeeding – whatever that means – by about 300 per cent. Do the whiny thing about being tired and how you were up half the night with X or Y child, and you're doomed. The whiny thing, which starts off as a temporary measure based on the simple fact that you are, actually, broken with child-exhaustion and cracked-nipple agony, segues seamlessly, over the months and years, into 'We are lovely friends'. It's insidious. When you are lovely friends – and it's lovely to be lovely friends, I'm not knocking it – sex slips down the list of stuff to do. And there is no man alive who wouldn't like more sex. Ergo, there is no man alive who would like less. So. Put out. I know it sounds simplistic, but I'm not making this stuff up: I learned it from my first marriage and from all of my girlfriends. It's very crude and very effective.

The thing is, even if you give a good impression of being permanently up for it – if you came top of the class at RADA, say – the petering usually comes along anyway. It does for me, at any rate. I don't see how it can't. Perhaps it's different if you don't have children. But I have children: three of the blighters. I love them to pieces, but children do stuff to relationships, or maybe just to mine – there's no point in pretending that once they sleep through the night or start getting their own breakfasts, or going to school, you slip magically back to where you were to start off with: madly in love and dizzy with longing. You don't. You reinvent the relationship to incorporate Mr Muscle and cooking and nits and arguments and in-laws, and all the claustrophobia that brings with it. And because you're an adult, you crash through it. You say to yourself, 'It's like this for pretty much every married couple in the world. You get through it. I love him. He loves me. It's fine.'

And it is fine. It's more than fine, and besides there are compensations. Many, many compensations, which it behoves me to remember. You may no longer live with Mr Take Me Now,

but you've acquired a new best friend, someone who knows you intimately in the way that your girlfriends never could, someone who truly loves you, warts and all, though hopefully not literally. You never have to do anything on your own again. You have a permanent ally, someone who's always going to be on your side, someone who winks at you at parties and whisks you home, lying about babysitters, because he knows you're not enjoying yourself. Someone to cook for (I love cooking) and save up your jokes for, someone to communicate with in shorthand, someone to laugh with and hug and sleep with – that lovely comforting sleep, like two peas in a pod, all cosy. Someone, more to the point, who loves the children you have together as insanely much as you do. That's no small thing, is it? That's maybe the most important thing of all. There are literally hundreds of compensations for the death of passion. Thousands. Millions, I expect. It's just a question of persuading yourself, as other people seem to have no difficulty doing, that this bit – companionship – is in fact *better* than what came before it. And I'm a horrible person, because I want both. I want companionship – obviously, who doesn't? – and passion. And I don't think it's possible for them to co-exist. I'm forty: I don't want just passion, like some sort of super-slag, hopping about for the hot rumpo for all eternity. On balance, I'd rather have companionship. And I do, plus the hottish rumpo as often as I like. So. I don't really know what I'm moaning about. Except, you know a really beautiful, huge roaring fire? I wouldn't trade the beautiful roaring fire for cosy central heating in every room. I'd rather be cold, and then go and sit in front of the amazing, blazing fire in all its glory. That is my problem. I don't want my children to die of hypothermia, so I'm grateful for the central heating. But.

Sam was a dancer when I met him, though now he's a much-esteemed, manageably famous choreographer. He's fit, in both

senses. He is extremely attractive. But you see, even with that – I lie in bed and watch him getting dressed and I think, ‘He’s extremely attractive,’ but I think it like one might think, ‘What a sweet dog,’ or, ‘I really like what the Browns have done to their spare room.’ It’s become objective. I would prefer it if I had the thought and then felt compelled to remove his pants with my teeth.

Do I sound sex-obsessed? It’s to do with my age. Eleven years ago, when my older children were small, it was pretty far removed from my mind. Everything was removed from my mind, really, and not only because when you have young children you basically lose a decade – a large part of the nineties, in my case. I existed in them, obviously, but I’d have a hard time telling you much about them beyond the basics – Britpop, Blair, opaque tights, my discovery that avocado houmous existed. And then my marriage to Robert was breaking up, though Sam and I got together pretty quickly afterwards. And then Maisy came along, and the children grew up, and I hit forty and realized that my prime was pretty much behind me. I mean, I’m okay, I’m in good nick, I look all right, but I’m never going to see twenty-one again, obviously. And what I really don’t fancy very much at all is spending the next twenty or thirty – or forty – years pootling about all filled with *companionship*, like an old lady, like a bloody *nan*. To tell you the absolute truth, the idea of it kind of freaks me out. I repeat: what’s wrong with me?

Anyway. Sam’s annoyed because I said we couldn’t have his entire family to stay for Christmas. There are so many of them: he has four brothers, who all have wives and children. We have one spare room, which Pat, his mother, is in this week. He said that his family didn’t mind, that they could all bunk down on the floor (kids) and sofas (adults), but the idea filled me with distress. I don’t want to be stepping over bodies on Christmas

morning, you know? I don't want my painstakingly decorated tree to be surrounded by teenagers' worn socks and the debris of their lives – crisp packets, cans of fizzy drinks, general crap. I just don't. Not at any time, really, unless someone wants to buy me a twelve-bedroomed mansion, but especially not at Christmas. I suggested we put them up in a nice B&B I know locally, but that was like suggesting we round them up and slaughter them like pigs. I'm still not quite sure why it was like that, but it was. Something to do with the Celtic concept of families, I'm guessing – Sam's Irish. I said they could come to our house from breakfast to bedtime, but sleep elsewhere. No go. Apparently they have to do their actual snoring under our roof, otherwise it doesn't count as hospitality. I used to think this kind of thing was charming – amusing cultural differences and all that. Now I'm not so sure: it just seems stupid, and a stupid thing to be arguing over. But it's okay. I'm going to fix it. It's Christmas.

All of this works, I must tell you. My marriage works. There is nothing the matter with it. I just wish that marriage wasn't predicated on everything being perfectly balanced, positioned just so. It's like a stack of tins in a supermarket: it only works if every tin is in the right place. And we both, consciously or not, work very hard at moving the tins back into place when they start to slip out of position and threaten the structure of the whole edifice: it's become second nature. It's just what you do, when you're in a long-term relationship – keep shoving the tins back into place, like a couple moonlighting as shelf-stackers in their sleep. Of course, all of that presupposes that a wrecking ball doesn't swing in out of nowhere and demolish the pyramid in three nanoseconds.

Home, to the known universe, and where my love does not lie waiting silently for me. Maisy's in bed already and Pat is kindly tidying the kitchen, Jack and Charlie having made themselves

and a couple of their mates supper – spaghetti with butter and cheese, by the looks of things: to think there was a time when I imagined them whipping me up little snacks for treats; I even taught them how to cook.

‘You shouldn’t tidy up after them, Pat,’ I say, bending to kiss her hello. ‘They’re perfectly capable of using the dishwasher.’ This is a lie: the dishwasher exists, their dirty plates exist, and never the twain shall meet, unless you make dire threats involving either gating or pocket money – and even then, they don’t rinse them first and the filter gets clogged up with disgusting bits of old mince. ‘It’s no trouble,’ Pat says sweetly. ‘And Maisy was good as gold.’

We’ve known each other for six years, Pat and I, and she’s never been anything but lovely to me. Well, you know. ‘Lovely’ in the mother-in-law sense, where the word is elastic enough to encompass a high degree of competitiveness, some jealousy, plenty of resentment, and more childrearing advice than the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe would know what to do with. This latter is especially bold considering her own – how shall we put it? – complicated relationship with her children. Pat, like so many former matriarchs, now sees herself as a martyr, a sort of Mater Dolorosa who has been abandoned by her ingrate offspring; it seems never to have occurred to her that her children demonstrably love her but are a) a bit busy, what with work and families and children of their own, and b) wary (justifiably, frankly) of giving up a weekend to go and stay with her and be told, tearfully, what complete disappointments they are to their mammy. Happily, Pat doesn’t find me disappointing – just perplexing, as though I were a different species, which I suppose I am. Pat is originally from County Tyrone and has worked hard all her life, first in factories and then as a shop assistant in a bakery; I am from west London, privileged and spoiled. The difference used to thrill us in the beginning: I was,

in those early months and years, fantastically excited by her modest origins, her salt-of-the-earthness, her council flat with its china cats and artificial flowers. Here, I would think, sipping vodka on her unfeasibly plump, immaculate sofa, was proof that we were all the same. We weren't: I was just pissed and filled with hippie-love for all of mankind. But I know she liked my accent, and the way I knew how to order in restaurants – the way I took her to restaurants in the first place, or to shops, and was, unlike her, never made to feel small by a maître d' or snooty sales assistant. I have my uses. Also, I make her laugh, and she me.

'Tamsin called to say she was on her way over,' Pat says. 'She's bringing Jake. Is he the oul' fella you told me about?'

I am torn between loyalty to my friend and wanting to know what Pat, who is despite everything quite wise about stuff other than her family, makes of the age discrepancy.

'He's a bit older than her, yes,' I say, with princely understatement.

'Ah, it's a shame,' says Pat, looking fantastically – disproportionately, really – downcast and wiping down the table for the third time. 'A dirty oul' fella like that, with a young girl.'

'She's hardly a young girl, Pat,' I say, wanting to laugh hysterically at her description. 'We're practically the same age. We're middle-aged women.'

'All the same,' she sniffs. 'It's not right, fellas like that playing the goat. And she should know better. A beautiful girl like that!'

'But she loves him, Pat.'

'Love!' Pat says, quite forcefully.

'Pat. Did I tell you about my friend Fay?'

'Does she have an oul' fella as well?' Pat says, quite waspishly.

'No, she has a very young fella. Er, man. Boyfriend. Husband.' And therein lies a tale, which I am about to share with Pat, except that Sam and the boys burst into the kitchen.

'Is dinner ready? I'm starving,' says Jack.

'You've just had spaghetti!'

'Yeah, but that was only a snack,' says Charlie, who is, incredibly considering the amount he eats, not clinically obese.

'I thought you'd eaten,' I say. 'Lay two more places then. It'll be ready in about half an hour.'

'Oh man,' says Charlie, clutching his flat stomach. 'I'm so fucking hungry.'

'Charlie! For God's sake. Please don't swear.'

'Mum?' says Jack. 'I think Charlie has worms. Seriously. He eats like a freak. He never stops.'

'I don't have worms, you twat,' says Charlie. 'You have worms in your brain. And if I did have worms, I'd get them all together and put them in your bed.'

'Whatever,' says Jack. 'And if you did that, I'd crap on your head while you were asleep.'

'Please don't be revolting,' I say, pointlessly. Such are the joys of boys, especially twelve- and fourteen-year-old ones. 'And do your friends want to stay and eat? And could you do me a favour and go back upstairs and stay there until supper's ready?'

'They're going home in a minute. Don't you love us?' says Charlie, making a comedy sad-face.

'Sometimes,' I say.

'Cool. See ya,' they say, blurring into one, and galumphing back upstairs.

'Hello, babe,' says Sam.