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Written by Nina Stibbe

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Man at the Helm

A Novel

NINA STIBBE

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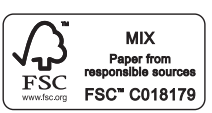
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To A. J. Allison

PART I

A Menace and a Drunk

I

My sister and I and our little brother were born (in that order) into a very good situation and apart from the odd new thing life was humdrum and comfortable until an evening in 1970 when our mother listened in to our father's phone call and ended up blowing her nose on a tea towel – a thing she'd only have done in an absolute emergency.

The following morning she took a pan of eggs from the lit stove and flung it over our father as he sat behind his paper at the breakfast table. He screamed like a girl – expecting it to be hot – and fell off his chair. It wasn't hot (she wasn't insane). He remained on the floor for a few moments until we all looked away, which we did out of decency. Then he went towards the coffee. Before he could lift the pot, our mother launched herself at him and, slipping on shards of wet *Daily Telegraph*, they both went down and began rolling around in the mess. It seemed mild enough to begin with, and quite playgroundy, until his great white hands circled her neck and one of her shoes came off as it might in a murder or fairy tale. I willed her to throw him off, judo-style, and tread on his throat with the remaining shoe, but in the end Mrs Lunt had to intervene and prise his fingers apart.

And then by coincidence it was 8.30 and our father's driver (Bernard, who lived in a chalet on the grounds) tooted outside in the Daimler and took him away to the office – furious, with scruffed-up hair and a wet shirt. Our mother smoothed herself down with her hands and poured a Scotch and ginger ale. She

didn't come to the breakfast table, she didn't smile or cry or exchange looks with us, but instead stood at the sideboard, thinking, in a world of her own and in the one shoe.

We had tea-biscuits for breakfast, everything else having been caught up in the riot (Mrs Lunt's words). In those days you didn't have endless supplies in the larder. You got it in daily. Mrs Lunt did.

As I say, our mother stood leaning on the sideboard thinking, and after swallowing down her drink she visibly had an idea and rushed into the hall. We heard her dialling the telephone and, because of everything that had gone on, we all listened intently, wondering whom she might suddenly want to speak to. Mrs Lunt didn't babble to shield us or protect our mother's privacy but froze with an ear to the doorway. She even put a finger to her lips.

I thought it might be the police or this man called Phil. But actually she just cancelled the coal.

'So, that's it, then,' she said, in a brave but broken voice. 'I'll settle up at the end of the week.'

And I was disappointed again. I think we all were.

Our parents had always liked a fire in the grate and only a heat wave prevented it. Our father particularly liked a coal fire and would gaze at the steady orange glow until his cheeks mottled and his eyes stopped blinking. Our mother preferred wood – tiny flames dancing along a collapsing log-type thing. She didn't like coal, its wet blackness twinkling in the gaping bucket. And hated the ash it produced – the kind that remained in the air after Mrs Lunt had cleaned the hearth – as opposed to more obedient wood-ash. We knew this because she'd written a poem containing all these images. Plus she'd taken against the coalman since seeing him pee onto a flowerbed. She wouldn't have minded except he'd targeted a clump of calendula with his forceful stream

and battered it down. She hadn't included that image in the poem but complained about it to our father, who'd said, 'The chap needed a pee – big deal!' and then he dragged Mrs Lunt into it for his own amusement. 'Have you ever had the good fortune to see the coalman relieving himself, Mrs L?' he'd said. And Mrs Lunt had gasped like a lady in a sitcom and rushed away muttering.

So, that was it. The coalman didn't come any more and we went over to logs from the milkman, who drove his whining float right up the drive and circled it like a fairground ride with everything sliding sideways. Better even than that, he whistled through his teeth and made a fuss of Debbie, our Labrador.

Mrs Lunt said it was all very well but logs required a certain amount of stacking and keeping dry (though not too dry) and that things liked to live amongst them and give you a heck of a fright. Whereas coal was simple and uninhabitable and you knew where you were with it. Our mother reminded her about the coalman peeing and stuck to her guns.

And I thought the switch to logs would be the long and the short of it. But my sister didn't think that. She worried about our father's continuing absence and pestered me from time to time to see if I had started to worry yet. As if I was bound to, sooner or later. She was very keen to drag me into it.

'Mother will go 100 per cent crazy on her own,' said my sister. 'Let's pray he comes home soon and they don't split up.'

'They won't split up,' I said.

'I bet they will. They have nothing in common – they're chalk and cheese,' said my sister. I didn't agree. I thought they were just different types of cheese (or chalk).

They seemed to me to have plenty in common. They looked alike, both adored toast, they had the same walk (heel down first), loved Iris Murdoch and had a habitual little cough as if

they were saying 'Come in' very quickly. Truly the list went on and on but I didn't mention those things because it didn't seem to add up to much – listing it like that.

I did say, 'They both love sitting by a blazing fire.' And then we were back to the coalman.

Our mother tried to break the news of their separation as painlessly as possible.

'I want this to be as painless as possible,' she said, soothingly. 'Your father and I have decided to split up and get a divorce – Daddy has gone to live in the flat.'

But the mood changed when my sister accidentally said, 'Oh no! Poor Daddy.'

And our mother erupted, 'Poor Daddy? Poor Daddy is over the fucking moon.' And she sobbed – great comical sobs – and I didn't dare look at my sister for fear of laughing. The way you do at times like that.

I couldn't understand how my sister, with all her apparent worrying about our mother, had managed to blurt out, 'Poor Daddy.' I honestly couldn't.

My sister immediately wrote to our father on her special peach-blossom writing paper with matching envelope and implored him to rethink the separation. It was a brief note, to the point, and included the line 'Lizzie and I have some concerns about the future', and although he didn't write back he telephoned and spoke to her about the situation and warned her that his chauffeur, Bernard, was going to call in and collect his small belongings. Upon hearing this, our mother told us to be vigilant re Debbie – as she wouldn't put it past the chauffeur to snatch her.

Bernard arrived the next day and took a few things, such as a painting of a gun dog with a dead bird held softly in its mouth, a gentleman's case containing assorted hairbrushes, and the toaster.

My sister had made a pile of other things ready – including a cushion he apparently liked – but Bernard wouldn't stray from the list, except for a blanket to wrap the painting in.

I kept Debbie on the lead for the duration and felt relieved when the Daimler drove away dogless.

You might think our mother would have been glad to be rid of our father (and all his awful hairbrushes). Not just because he was now in love with Phil from the factory but also because, even before that, he hardly ever came out of his den except to have dinners (though never teas or lunches). And when he did show himself he seemed to be nothing but a tall irritant. For instance, we'd be halfway through our dinner, deep in conversation about whether or not we agreed with the modern tendency to cover everything with breadcrumbs, when he'd appear with his hair combed and ask our mother to put her cigarette out. And then, turning on us, say we weren't holding our knives and forks correctly. And though our mother would undermine him with her expression, I always felt I should obey. And I'd struggle to eat using the pronging method with the fork in my left hand when I much preferred the Scandinavian way of scooping with the fork in the right hand. And he'd finish his food and say, 'Right, I've work to do.' And leave us alone again and we'd go back to scooping and discussing the breadcrumbs.

Often our mother would murmur 'idiot' or similar and Little Jack, my brother, would defend him, run after him and then come back, sad and in no-man's-land.

And to begin with, after the split, I thought I was quite glad to be rid of him. But actually, I missed him – his dinnertime appearances being better than nothing and his mild disapproval suddenly seeming quite important. And hearing about his love affair – which we did via the short play-act our mother wrote recalling her discovery of it – my opinion of him changed. It was

exciting and unexpected. He was flesh and blood all of a sudden, whereas before he'd seemed like a dusty old statue, to be driven around and avoided.

Even my sister – who was furious about the split and very worried about the future – was thrilled by the affair. 'I just can't imagine Daddy like that, you know, kissing etc. with another man,' she said. 'It's amazing.' And we agreed. It was.

Maybe that's why our mother was so upset. Perhaps, like us, she began to see him in a new, romantic light. Let's face it: she'd actually heard the loving whispers on the phone. And now he was gone.

(*Adele holds telephone receiver to ear. Hand over mouthpiece.*)

Roderick: (*quietly*) I want you.

(*Adele grimaces silently.*)

Man's voice on phone: When?

Roderick: Meet me in half an hour at the flat.

Man's voice: Bring the toaster.

'You won't be lonely, Mum,' I said. 'You've still got Mrs Lunt.'

'I don't need Mrs Lunt. Mrs Lunt is a cunt,' she said, and seemed pleased with the rhyme.

'Well, you've got us three anyway,' I chirruped, but she recited a line from a poem called 'Lonely in a Crowd', which illustrated that strange problem with the image of a plastic parsley garnish on a hungry person's plate.

My sister did finally get me worrying – as big sisters do – about our mother's loneliness by going on and on about the possible outcomes. She was eleven and I was nine, she knew better than I did, and I was forced to admit loneliness probably was one of the top-ten worst things imaginable and might easily turn into unhappiness and play-writing and that was definitely

to be avoided. But I still wasn't as bothered as she was and could only spend so much time on it – a position my sister felt was unkind.

Defending myself, I listed the many other people our mother might count on to help ward it off (the loneliness). And it was a long list. There was her family for starters – she had some older brothers (though not sisters, which would have been a million times better – especially in those days). I didn't count her mother, her being an unloving woman who liked to rub salt into wounds. But there were some nice aunts and a few cousins dotted around.

I had to admit that our mother's lack of a proper best friend (or any friend really) put her at a disadvantage (the result of being sent away to boarding school in a far-away place and then marrying at nineteen before she'd got going properly on adulthood). But on the plus side there was an assortment of family friends she'd known all her life – well-mannered posh people who had little cocktail parties and so forth that would be perfect to ward off feelings of loneliness.

More immediately, there were our neighbours. Such as the blousy Mrs Vanderbus and her driver, Mr Mason, whose big old house shared our D-shaped drive and who had daytime naps and would shout at us from an upstairs window ('Myself and Mr Mason are goink for our siesta, so shut up your noises') and we would tiptoe about dramatically and stay as quiet as possible until she reappeared at the window and shouted, 'Wakey, wakey,' meaning they'd got up again.

We loved Mrs Vanderbus – I'm writing an extra line about her because of it. She often brought us home-made Dutch sugar cakes in pretty tins, which she always wanted back (the tins). And who, when she found a grass snake in the crocosmia, called us to see it and lifted it like a true expert even though she'd only

ever seen one on the telly before and suffered a delayed panic attack approximately one week later and had to see Dr Hillward for a pill.

Other nice neighbours included Dr Hillward and Mrs Hillward (who was named Marjorie before margarine had become the norm, she said, and wished either she hadn't or it hadn't). The Hillwards were charmed by us and brought their sweet puppy, Bimbo, to meet our sweet puppy, Debbie, when they were still puppies and after. And they helped us with our fireworks one year when our mother was afraid of the danger aspect and our father was tied up at the factory.

There was Mrs Lunt, who, whatever our mother called her, was always helpfully around and though definitely not in the nanny role (for she hated children and said they gave her the horrors) was a comforting presence and made wonderful little jam tarts, with different-coloured jams, which we called pot-dots. 'There's nothing quite like a jam tart to cheer a person,' she used to say, and although that was the only nice thing she ever said, it was nice and she said it often.

I didn't count the nannies as possible warders-off of loneliness (apart from one very nice one called Joan, but she was in the past by then). The rest never stayed long and never seemed quite to be on our wavelength (unlike the cunt Mrs Lunt who'd been with us for years and knew us inside out). Our mother would begin by trying to befriend the nannies and behave informally until they showed signs of not wanting to be friends and then she'd go chilly on them like a schoolgirl. The whole performance seemed, even to me, uncomfortable. They just wanted to be left alone with a small cash float. After the third one left, our mother hardly had the heart to contact the agency for a fourth – the agent being a judgemental cow and a friend of my grandmother's. But she did and we got Moira who had amber eyes

– like a wolf – and it was hard to look at her. Our mother knew not to try to befriend Moira. For one thing she had ointment jars on show on the bathroom ledge and for another she went to bed early to read and these things irritated our mother no end.

Ignoring amber-eyed Moira, I pointed out to my worried sister, there was a marvellous group of people on hand and I didn't see how our mother could be lonely for a moment. My sister disagreed and quoted that poem ('Lonely in a Crowd') so that I knew she'd been speaking to our mother on the subject.

'Look,' I said, 'I know about the plastic parsley – but, in real life, she's got plenty of friends and acquaintances and so forth who will all rally round and do their utmost.'

'No, they won't, that's not what happens,' said my sister, sounding horribly grown-up at only eleven years old. 'That only happens when someone dies and, even then, not for long. If a lone female is left, especially if divorced, without a man at the helm, all the friends and family and acquaintances run away.'

'Do they?' I asked.

'Yes, until there's another man at the helm,' she said.

'And then what?' I asked.

'Then, when a new man at the helm is in place, the woman is accepted once again.'