Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

When We Were Friends

Written by Tina Seskis

Published by Penguin Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

When We Were Friends

Tina Seskis



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



First published in Great Britain by Kirk Parolles as *A Serpentine Affair* 2013
Published in Penguin Books as *When We Were Friends* 2015
001

Text copyright © Tina Seskis, 2013

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 12.5/15.5 pt Bembo Book MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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

B FORMAT ISBN: 978–1–405–91795–7
TPB ISBN: 978–1–405–91796–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Alex, Annabelle, Brigette,
Jackie, Lisa and Rachel

Part One

1

Wandsworth, South London

The evening was set to be balmy, perfect for a picnic, even one destined to end in disaster. Light was dappling in the sloping back garden, enormous for London, and it had rarely looked so lovely. A glass of white wine stood gleaming on the window-ledge, chasing shadows across its surface. A squirrel hot-footed it across the lawn.

Juliette stood at her state-of-the-art white sink looking out of the window, fuming, ignoring the too-loud sounds of children misbehaving. Stephen had just called, and he would be home late again, although he'd *promised* he'd be back by six. He knew she was going out with her friends, and she really didn't want to be late for once. Her children were sat at the table behind her, throwing their food around like hand grenades, and she just didn't have the energy to stop them. She'd been effectively a single mother (apart from the nanny of course) all week, and she was tired of it now. She trusted Stephen, he was way too obsessed with his job to have time for affairs, but she was sick of taking second place to his career. He was only

editor of a newspaper, she always used to remind him when they still had that kind of relationship (you know, the one where people talk, really properly talk). No-one died, she'd joke, but then he would remind her that people did, that the stories he told could wreck or make a life, depending on his whim (or perhaps savagery, she'd thought) at the time. She often wondered how she could have married such a man – maybe it was because she'd met him when they were both students at university, before she'd had time to grow into who she wanted to be, instead of who *he* wanted her to be. He'd been behind her at the queue for the pay phones and they'd just got chatting, and she'd thought he was nice enough, but not like *that* at the time, he'd been wearing a rugby shirt for a start. And after that they'd said hello to each other around campus, in that polite way where you don't really know someone, until eventually one night he'd come and chatted to her in the student bar and, despite them both knowing he was doing well for himself, that had been that. And although he was keener than she was, before she knew it they were seeing each other *every* day, until somehow by the final year they were even living together in a shared house, and despite a brief split when he'd gone to America after they graduated, once he came back he'd pursued her until she'd succumbed again. And when they both moved to London, he'd thought they may as well get a place together, they could just about afford a studio if they both pitched in, he'd said, and somehow she found herself agreeing, and then she'd never quite got around to dumping him again. And so here they were now, over two decades later,

married with three children and happy, apparently. Juliette couldn't complain from a material point of view – the rented studio was long gone, their house was done up and beautiful, the kids were in private school, they had a place in Italy, and Stephen was making loads from his career, especially now he'd become a quasi-celebrity, appearing on late-night game shows and being asked to present televised awards events. It was odd how other people always found him funnier than she ever had.

Juliette kept her back to her children and thought about the evening ahead. She was meeting up with five of her oldest friends from university – every summer they got together, and although they had all been so close once, that was a long time ago now. Privately she thought that these occasions felt uncomfortably forced these days, there were far too many conversational no-go zones for a start, and she still found it hard to see Renée especially – but she wanted to go, for Sissy mainly, although she wasn't even sure if Sissy would be happy to see her, not after what had happened. This year they were having a picnic in Hyde Park, and it wouldn't be some half-hearted affair, but a traditional picnic, with old-fashioned dishes like coronation chicken and home-made potato salad served in handmade Italian bowls on real china plates with knives and forks, no plastic rubbish. It was all too heavy to carry really, but her friend Camilla was posh and liked to do these things properly, and so everyone indulged her, of course. Even when they'd been students a few bought pork pies and a family bag of Twiglets would never do in Camilla's book. It was all such a lot of

work, but Juliette had acquiesced as usual. And it wasn't cold or raining for a change, so hopefully they'd all enjoy it.

Juliette turned wearily from the sink, exhausted suddenly by the thought of seeing everyone, fed up with her husband for letting her down again, and as she looked across to the table she felt her back stiffen.

'Noah, put that bowl down, darling.' Her tone was pleasant, cajoling. Her middle son pretended not to hear her.

'Noah, I said put it down, please.' He lifted the bowl further off the table and, ignoring her still, raised it to shoulder height.

'Please put it down, Noah.' Her tone was becoming strained. Noah smirked at her, took aim.

'NOAH! Will you put that bowl down NOW,' she yelled, as he was about to fling the yoghurt at his little brother, who was racing, screaming, out of the kitchen to avoid it.

Noah looked at Juliette and his expression was one of reciprocal hostility, a look she was becoming used to. He hesitated, went to put it down as requested, and then just as it touched the solid oak table, he changed his mind and flung it anyway.

Juliette stared into her wine glass as she counted to ten. Then she walked without speaking over to the spattered yoghurt, its garish patterns perversely making her think of the markings on some type of cow (*Friesian, she thought, or was it Piebald?*), and she picked the melamine bowl out of the pink bovine-shaped mess as if it were contaminated,

and took it to the sink and put it down, too calmly now. The two children still in the kitchen (Jack had escaped unmarked and hadn't reappeared) sat at the table motionless, watching their mother – the magenta violence of the incident had shocked them all, and none of them was sure which way this would go. Finally she turned to Noah and said wearily, 'Go to your room,' before she pushed her tumble of hair behind her delicate ears, went down on her delightful knees and got busy with the dish cloth – they'd run out of kitchen roll, and Mrs Redfern had left for the day.

2

Chelsea, West London

On a street tucked away off the King's Road, where long-dead artists and poets used to scrape a living, and a movie star had once fallen out of a window of the house diagonally opposite, and where the handsome flat-fronted terraced house had been bought for her for a tenth of its current value, Camilla was standing with her phone propped between her shoulder and chin, amidst a maelstrom of cooking. With the back of her free arm she pushed a stray strand of her Alice-banded hair out of her face as she ended the call with a forced, 'OK then, see you later, bye-bye,' and, bending over to drop her phone onto a cleanish part of the kitchen counter, frowned at it. Really, there was no need for Juliette to be so stroppy, she hardly recognised her friend these days. She used to have the sweetest nature, but over the years seemed to have transformed into the archetypal fiery red-head. Perhaps she'd just been married to Stephen for too long, or maybe she'd still not got over all that business with her mother – she seemed to get more bitter about her as the years passed

somehow, instead of letting it go like she should do. We all have our crosses to bear, thought Camilla as she finished skinning the salmon fillets, and although she wasn't prone to self-pity she thought that hers was probably greater than most, yet *she* didn't go round taking it out on everyone else.

Camilla tried so hard to keep the six friends together, but sometimes she wondered whether she was wasting her time, whether she should finally let them all drift off their separate ways – just because they'd, in effect, saved her life once, that was over twenty-five years ago now. Maybe the bonds simply weren't there any more, perhaps she was kidding herself that she could recreate what they'd had before.

Camilla also had another private concern about the evening ahead, aware that, what with the children's activities, all her charity work and now her new hobby, James seemed a little put out at how much she was going out lately, and she hated upsetting him. It seemed that, although he tried so hard to control it, he had an innate jealous streak that occasionally reared itself, and that over twenty years of happy marriage still hadn't quite fixed. She even wondered briefly whether she should call the evening off, it might be easier all round, and she could always freeze the torte. But then she remembered the hell that Sissy was going through, and she was still worried about Juliette, despite her occasional obnoxiousness, and poor Siobhan's life seemed to be as disastrous as ever; and she thought, no, they did all still need each other, and besides, it would be lovely to see everyone. She always had been an optimist.

Camilla washed her hands in the enormous butler sink, checked the timer and went over to the oven – she pulled out the wire rack and admired the way the frangipani had risen around each individual raspberry, cushioning each one like a precious jewel. She pushed her finger gently into the torte, and the sponge sank under the pressure. Never mind, she thought – five more minutes, and it should rise again, the dent would hardly notice. She closed the oven door and picked up her phone once more, tried to call Natasha to confirm that she was definitely making a tabbouleh as well as a potato salad, but Natasha didn't pick up, so instead she sent a group text to everyone, saying how much she was looking forward to the evening and reminding them all to bring chairs; oh, and perhaps an umbrella too, just in case.

3

Soho, Central London

Siobhan stared at the long brown smear down the left thigh of her coral-pink skinny jeans, the broken cake stand, the torn carrier bag on the ground, and felt like wailing. At least the wine bottle hadn't broken, instead was rolling drunkenly towards the gutter, and she managed to catch it just before it dropped off the pavement into Marshall Street. A young man in indigo jeans and a dark shirt, thin white tie arranged just so, black glossy hair swept asymmetrically across one eye, sidestepped the Tupperware as he walked by, his gait almost as graceful as the sweep of the eight Georgian arches that rather improbably made up the facade of the leisure centre she was outside. He studiously ignored the catastrophe that had befallen her, focused instead on the trendy boutiques on the opposite side of the narrow street, as if stopping to help or interact with this dishevelled, slightly deranged-looking woman would be bad for his image.

Shit! Why was it always when she was meeting her

university friends that disaster befell her? She was a successful career woman these days: a million miles from the girl at college they'd known, the one who was always losing her keys, scoffing her flatmates' food, forgetting her library card, going to the wrong lectures, mangling her washing. She'd wanted to turn up in Hyde Park looking cool, happy, confident, successful – a shining example of how you don't need marriage and kids to be a complete, fulfilled person. She'd made a special effort with her hair this morning, had blow-dried it into languid honey-coloured waves (the hideous perm she'd sported at college long gone), and she'd thought her outfit made her look willowy, California-glamorous. She'd even been fine with Camilla's somewhat long-winded picnic instructions, pleased with her profiteroles – they'd risen really well for a change – but now they were strewn halfway across the pavement as well as down her trousers. She wished Matt were here to help her, but he was miles away, and anyway when she'd tried to ring him earlier his phone had gone straight to voicemail. Again. She remembered the last time she'd spoken to him, four days before, how although she'd tried not to be, she'd been silent and sulky, and she wondered with a pang whether he'd deliberately turned his phone off, was maybe even about to dump her. She wouldn't blame him if he did – she'd been such a nightmare lately, her fixation on their future, or otherwise, utterly joy-sapping. What was wrong with her? Why did she always manage to push men away, especially the nicest ones, the ones she liked the most?

Siobhan felt even more miserable now, and wondered whether she should just ring Sissy and cancel – Sissy wouldn't give her a hard time, out of all of her friends she'd be the one to understand. She felt so inadequate turning up like this, plus she didn't really know where she was going, and it would take ages to get there on the Tube. She wanted to go home, get into her pyjamas and watch something slushy on the telly that she could have a good cry to, that always helped. Work had been so stressful today – although she was pleased she'd been promoted again she wondered whether she could cope with her new job, and she found the high-octane aggressiveness of her boss exhausting sometimes. Advertising sales was a tough business, no matter that everyone else said it was just talking.

In the end Siobhan bent down and rescued what profiteroles she could, relieved she'd made so many. The rest she kicked into the gutter. She picked up the broken pieces of the cake stand and grimaced as she threw them in the bin. She put the lid back onto the Tupperware, retrieved the wine and rammed it into the depths of her handbag, placed the box of profiteroles back in the carrier bag, and slung the fold-up stool over her shoulder. It was such lovely weather, and it *would* be great to see everyone – hopefully they'd not tease her too much for a change, she wasn't in the mood for it today. She was also a little worried about how Juliette and Renée would be with each other – normally one or other of them managed to make some last-minute excuse, but according to Camilla they

were both definitely coming this year. Siobhan checked her phone one last time – just in case Matt had called after all – and then she tottered in her cream-smeared heels in the direction of the Tube station, positioning the carrier bag carefully in front of the stain on her jeans, hoping no-one would notice.