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Spectacles

Written by Sue Perkins

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Spectacles

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Preface

I've always wanted to be a writer; since I first felt the precarious wobble of a book in my hand, since I first heard the phrase 'Once upon a time', since I first realized that fairies, wizards and seafarers could transport you from the endless grey of 1970s south London. I was a prolific child. By the age of seven, I had produced several anthologies of poems about God, death and aquatic birds. I was prolific right up to the point I received a B- for a haiku I'd written about a heron. The uninitiated can be so unkind.

As an adult I started writing articles, reviews and glib little pieces for glossy magazines. I'd hide away in my room on the days I wasn't on set and continue work on *Ra'anui and the Enchanted Otter*, the intense, magic-realist novel set in Tahiti I'd been working on for the best part of a decade. By the time it neared completion, it was clear that there was never going to be an appetite for it and that the book world had changed beyond recognition. Almost to prove that point, I had a meeting in the autumn of 2010 with a well-known publishing house to discuss the possibility of writing something. I'd been invited to a swanky restaurant in St Martin's Lane. I arrived late, as always, in full wet-weather gear to find a semicircle of unspeakably beautiful people sat at the table waiting for me.

'Hi, I'm Tamara,' said the immaculate blonde to my left, proffering a manicured hand. 'I'm head of talent acquisitions.'

I leant forward to greet her. Dried mud cascaded from my sleeve into the *amuse-bouche*. 'Sorry, I've been walking the dog on the heath.'

'I'm Sarah-Jane,' said the immaculate blonde to my right. 'I'm the publishing director.'

'Nice to meet you. Ooh, I wouldn't hug me – I'm a little damp around the edges.'

'Hi, I'm Dorcas,' said the immaculate blonde dead ahead of me. 'I'm the managing director.'

'Hello – oops!' I said, as a roll of poo bags unfurled from my coat pocket.

It wasn't the best first impression I'd ever made. I sat down and panic-nibbled on some artisanal micro-loaves.

'So, Sue . . .' said one of the immaculate blondes, staring at me as if I were a monkey smearing itself with excrement at the zoo. 'What would you like to write?'

It was the question I had been waiting all my life to answer. Twenty-five minutes later I finished speaking, having evoked, in minute detail, my proposed epic:

'. . . so Ra'anui finally tames the beast with his uncle's amulet and marries Puatea. It's essentially a meditation on climate change.'

There followed a long pause during which I awkwardly pushed some 'textures of artichoke' around my plate.

'Well . . .' said one immaculate blonde, breaking the silence, '. . . that's great!'

'Really, really great,' chimed the second.

'Great!' said the third.

This was going so well. All three had said 'great'. In a row! Then came the stinger.

Blonde 1: Now, you see, what *we'd* like you to write . . .

Me: Oh . . .

Blonde 2: No, hear us out . . .

Blonde 1: We've looked at what generates mass sales – you know,

what really works piled up at Tesco and Asda. And we've developed a formula . . .

Blonde 2: [*blurting*] Death is really hot right now . . .

Blonde 3: And pets . . .

Blonde 1: So either of those would make a great starting point.

By now I thought we were all having a laugh, that I was among friends. We'd ordered *sharing plates* for goodness' sake. I'd dug my fork into Blonde 1's sweet anchovies. Blonde 2 had tried my avocado tian. I mean, we were *mates*. In that spirit of fun I joined in.

Me: [*grinning*] Well, what about combining the two?

Blonde 1: [*intrigued*] What? Death *and* pets?

Me: Yes, why not? [*Carrying on*] A kind of *Lovely Bones* meets *Lassie*.

Blonde 3: [*squealing*] Amazing! Amazing!

Me: We could call it . . . *Angel Dog*.

Blonde 3: Oh my God – *Angel Dog*!

Me: The dog dies, doesn't go straight to heaven – ends up in some kind of canine purgatory, depending on how deeply Catholic you want to get – and ends up guarding his owners from the plane of the undead. *Angel Dog*.

Blonde 1: *Angel Dog* . . .

Blonde 2: Wow. *Angel Dog*.

Blonde 3: I love it. I love it!

I roared with laughter. Roared. It took me nearly a minute to realize no one else was roaring with me. The penny finally dropped – they were being serious.



Well, I'm sorry, but this book isn't *Angel Dog*. There is a dog in it, later on, although she was far from an angel, as you shall see. I doubt this book will ever disappear in huge numbers from supermarket shelves, or that shoppers will scuffle over the last discounted copy in a frenzied Black Friday riot. But neither is it the Polynesian pan-generational epic I pitched all those years ago. It's something in the middle. Mid-range. Comfy. The sort of book that turns up to a meeting covered in mud and shit having not changed into something more appropriate.

Something a little more me.



It's October 2014. My family are gathered together at my parents' house in west Cornwall. Rain relentlessly spanks the windows. There is the grumble of a distant tractor. My dad, brother and sister are bunched up together on the sofa watching a marginal American sport on a marginal subscription channel. Mum is perched on the armrest, jabbing at her iPad with a stiff finger, ET-style, muttering 'Well, I never!' in a loop.

It's at this moment I decide to tell them about the memoir. It's important to do so, I think, because memories are prismatic. I have my recollections, but they may well be totally different from those of my family. I want to see if I can integrate our perspectives so we can all be happy with the end result.

Me: Hey, everybody, listen – I'm writing a book.
David: What?
Me: I'm writing a book.

Mum: What kind of a book?

Me: Well, sort of an autobiography.

All: Oh God . . .

Dad: Who's it about?

Mum: Bert!

Me: Hilarious, Dad.

Michelle: Do I have to be in it?

Me: Well, yes. You've been in my life for thirty-eight years, so you feature pretty heavily . . .

David: Don't you mention that incident with the honeydew. I was just a teenager . . .

Michelle: Can't you just say you've only got one sibling?

Me: Not really. It'd just be weird.

David: I'm serious – it was just experimental.

Dad: What kind of book is it?

Me: Dad, I've just told you. It's a memoir.

Dad: Who the bloody hell wants to read that?

Mum: Bert! [*To me*] Will there be swearing in it?

Me: I don't know. Maybe.

Mum: I don't think you should swear in it. People will realize you're not classy.

Michelle: Surely you could just not mention me?

Mum: Will we come across as mental?

Dad: You are mental!

Mum: BERT!

Me: I don't know. How do you want to come across?

Michelle: I don't want to be in it.

Dad: I'd like to be taller. Like, really, really tall. Can I be six foot five?

David: Can I be incredibly handsome and not a Lego nerd?

Me: All right . . .

David: I want every girl to fancy me. Can you do that?

Mum: Will there be swearing?

Me: I said I don't know!

Mum: Well, I'd like it to be clean. I don't mind what you say, but keep it clean.

Dad: [*to the telly*] Hit it, you little shit! Oh for Christ's sake.

Mum: Bert!

And so, with that in mind – taking into consideration their thoughts and wishes – I started writing the memoir my family and I had agreed upon.

ONE

Croydon

Chapter One

My first memory of Dad was him approaching my cot. I must have been around two years old at the most. I remember this towering figure coming towards me, blocking out the light as he bent forward to pick me up. We're not known for being especially tall in our family, but Dad was the exception. He stood at just over six foot five high – a magnificent oak of a man – born, as he was, from countless generations that never got beyond thin and weedy saplings.

'Hello, pumpkin,' he whispered, gathering me tightly to his chest, before standing back upright and knocking his head, hard, on the light fitting.

'Goodness gracious me, that was painful!' he said, and then carried me down the stairs for breakfast.

I was three when my brother, David, came along – and from the get-go we realized he was headed on a single-track road marked ADONIS. Wherever we went, pensioners, young mums and kids alike would peer into his pram and exclaim, 'What a stunning boy! I've never seen a child like it! He's an angel!'

He was born cool and grew up cooler. While children his age played with Scalextric and Lego, David would be programming computers and dabbling in abstract painting. Girls worshipped him, of course, but he'd only known what it was to be beautiful, so he took it in his stride. At the age of nine he was signed to a modelling agency, after being spotted at the local shopping centre, and by the time he hit puberty he had become the face of a well-known luxury goods brand.

By sixteen, David had queues of women following him – meaning, unlike his peers, he had no need whatsoever to masturbate into large round fruit while fantasizing about the opposite sex. Sexual opportunities afforded themselves at every turn. His popularity with women was so overwhelming that it even affected our family time. I have to admit it was hard growing up alongside him – alongside such perfection – and I would go through phases of resentment. Why does *he* get all the girls? Why did *he* get the beautiful genes and not me?

Mum had always wanted another baby, but she was so busy with her high-flying job as obergruppenadviser at Deutsche Bank that it never happened. Sometimes, when we'd get together as a four, and Dad and David were larking around, she'd wistfully remark in my ear, 'Wouldn't it be nice if I'd had another girl – you know, so we could outgun the boys . . .'

Sometimes I too longed for a sister, but it was never to be. What would she have been like? Would she have been as poor at relationships as I was? I doubt it. Would she have had the same issues with eye bags, anxiety and sugar addiction? Of course not. She would have been a younger, better and brighter version of me. And then, as I thought of her, I was glad she wasn't real. Because having a sister as amazing as that would have been *seriously* infuriating.

I remember clearly the day David introduced us to his first serious girlfriend after years of playing the field. It was Christmas Eve. Dad was tending to the logs on the fire as the doorbell rang.

'Mind your head, Bert!' shouted Mum.

Too late. Dad stood back, and there was a loud crack as his skull made contact with the ceiling.

'Gosh! That hurt!' he exclaimed. 'If only I wasn't so ruddy tall all the time!'

He went to the door. Standing there was David with wife-

to-be Lynne on his arm. They made the perfect couple. They had matching luggage and everything.

'Finally, another daughter!' cried Mum, one eye on dinner, the other on the progress of her global equity derivatives. 'Come on – give me a hand with these giblets!'

I watched as Dad and David sat down together. Each cast a shadow over the other. A marginal sport was playing on a marginal subscription channel.

'Gosh, I do wish this fellow would make a better job of scoring!' bellowed Dad, and we all laughed. The fire crackled and the room pulsed with warmth. I looked over at my family and . . . and . . .



. . . and I thought, *This is ridiculous*. Honestly. Let's just say it as it is. Dad, you're a little bit squat. David, you still like Lego and you're a forty-two-year-old father of two, and, Michelle, sorry, but you *do* exist and you're a part of this mental, mental family. Deal with it. Oh, and people swear, so – and I mean this in the nicest possible way, Mum – fuck you. I'm doing this book my way.