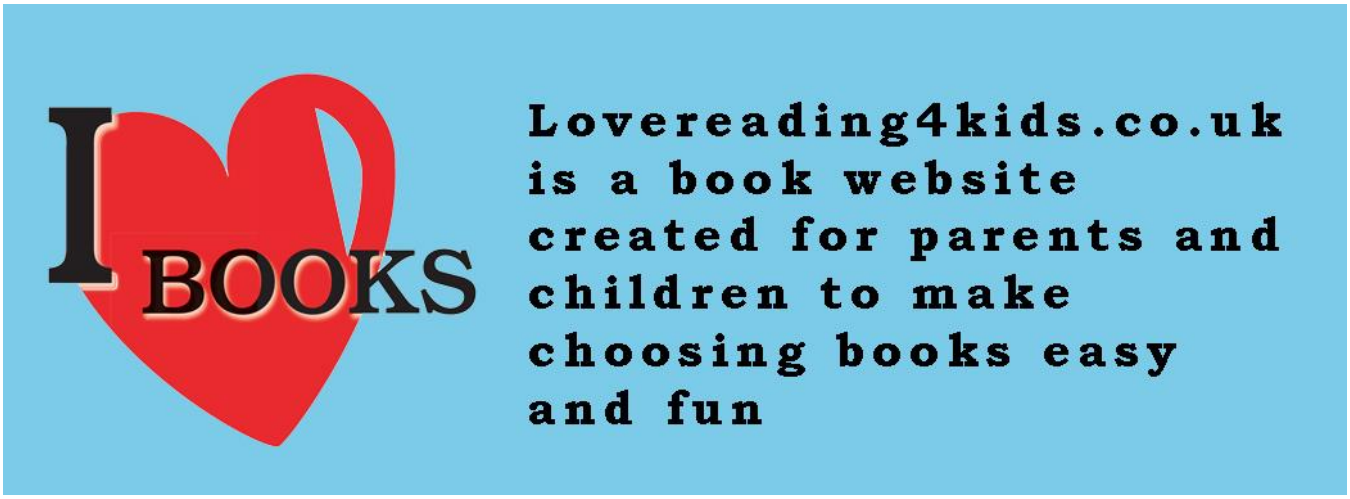


Opening extract from

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Clare Furniss

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I'm spinning, round and round, my arms held out, head thrown back towards the pale spring sun.

'Stop!' Mum calls out. 'Gloria, really! You're not a child. Seventeen is too old to be dancing in the middle of the Common.' Half laughing, but anxious, always anxious.

'I can't stop,' I call out to the blur that I know is her, the grey of her good Sunday coat and the fading blonde of her hair under her neat, blue hat, disappearing and reappearing, disappearing and reappearing, against the green of the Common as I turn.

'Please, Gloria. We'll be late. I've got to get the roast in the oven in time for Gwen and Vinnie. You know Vinnie is ever so particular about punctuality.'

'Vinnie,' I sneer. 'Who gives a damn about Vinnie and his punctuality?'

'Watch your language, Gloria, really.'

'Damn, damn, damn. Damn Vinnie. *Bloody* Vinnie.'

'Gloria!'

'I don't like him and I'm not going to pretend I do,' I say, laughing. 'Everyone's always telling me not to tell lies. You, Gwen, Sister Mary Francis. I'm telling the truth. I wish Gwen had never married him.'

'He just likes people to be punctual. It's because of him being a businessman, I expect.'

'It's because of him being an idiot.'

'Gloria!'

'He's rude. Even to Gwen. And he thinks he's better than everyone else. Just because he's rich. And anyway, who says he's a "businessman", apart from him? Everyone else says he's not much better than a crook.'

'Everyone who?'

'Just people.'

'Jealous, I expect.'

'Oh! Let's not talk about him,' I say. 'It's too beautiful a day to spoil with Vinnie. Let's just pretend he doesn't exist.'

'Gloria—'

'Go on! I'm pretending; are you? You see? Doesn't the sun seem to shine a bit brighter in a world with no Vinnie in it?'

Mum shakes her head. 'I don't know what gets into you sometimes.'

'It's Sundays,' I say, stopping spinning and trying to stand still but swaying a bit. My hair has come unpinned on one side and the wind blows strands of it across my face. 'Church. All that being quiet and looking like you're thinking holy thoughts. It's as if all the noise and unholiness builds up and builds up inside me and eventually I just have to let it out or I'd explode. You don't want me to explode do you, Mum? I'd make an awful mess.'

'You always make an awful mess.' She laughs her nervous laugh and shakes her head. 'You don't need to explode to do that. Now come on. Your father will be wondering where we are.'

She turns to walk on. But I can't follow. I can't bear the thought of lunch and Father drinking until he's all pink and sweaty and staring unfocused at nothing, half smiling, but angry in a secret way that you can only recognize if you know him. And Vinnie sitting there, his face as shiny as the Brylcreem in his hair, puffed

up and smirking, droning on about how well his business is doing and looking down his nose at us, making little comments to make Mum and Gwen feel stupid. And all the time knowing it's a beautiful day and I could be outside, I could be with Sam . . . Even thinking his name makes my heart skip a little.

I start spinning again, in the opposite direction and the feeling of it makes my stomach lurch gloriously and I can't help giggling.

'*Stop* that, Gloria,' Mum calls, sharp now.

'I can't,' I call out to her. 'I'd forgotten it could be sunny and warm. Isn't it funny how by the end of every winter we forget what it feels like to have the sun shining and not have to wear a coat? Doesn't it make your feet want to dance? Doesn't it make you feel light and free and as if you could just float off into the sky?'

I stop spinning and stagger, giggling, towards where Mum's waiting for me with her hands on her hips, grabbing hold of her so as not to fall over.

'No,' she says, her voice quiet. 'It doesn't make me feel like that.' I don't like to think of it, of how another spring might make her feel. She seems weighed down by it, the fresh pale sunshine and the thought of another year exhausting, not full of hope and promise. I feel a familiar flash of impatience with her, followed by the familiar pang of guilt that goes with it.

'That's because you're not dancing!' Holding both her hands I start to try and spin her round with me, like Louise and I used to do in the school playground. She smiles and for a moment I think she's going to let me. Then her face tightens and she forces her hands free of mine.

'What would Father think if he could see you?' she says. I look up at her and wonder if she was ever young and full of life like me, and I think how pretty she must have been once, before he broke her nose and her jawbone. He broke something else, too. Something I cannot name, that didn't crack or bleed or

bruise, but broke quietly and slowly over many years, and won't heal itself like bones can. She looks older than she is, faded. I feel as though one day I'll look at her and I'll be able to see right through her, as though she's slowly vanishing.

I let go of her arms.

'He'd think what he always thinks,' I say, turning away. 'That I'm going to hell and the sooner I get there the better.'

'That's not true, Gloria, you know it's not.' She tries to laugh, like she does when she's trying to placate him. It's a reflex, a defence; there's no humour in it, just a plea: *don't be angry*.

I turn back to her. 'I don't care what he thinks!' I shout, ignoring her plea, just as he does. 'And—' My voice fails, looking at her, thin and slightly hunched under her Sunday coat. It's as though she's always trying to make herself look smaller than she is. 'And nor should you.'

'Come on, love,' she says. 'You know he doesn't mean what he says when he's angry. He's not a bad man.'

'Really?' I mutter. 'Well, he's certainly not a good man.'

'He was a different person before the war.'

She always says this, as if it makes everything all right, as if it lets him off the hook for the drinking and the rages. I have no idea if it's true, or whether she believes it to be true even if it's not. When I was little, I thought perhaps she really meant it; that the person she married, the father I should have had, disappeared on a beach in France and never came back from the war. Maybe, in a way, that is what happened. I don't care. I know what he is now. It's all I've ever known.

Mum bends to pick up one of my gloves, which has fallen out of my pocket without me noticing. She hands it to me but I turn away. I can't bear her fear, her quiet desperation to prevent confrontation. It hurts to see it.

'I'm not afraid of him,' I say. 'I'm not scared of anything.'

I say it as clearly and firmly as I can, because if I say it often enough, perhaps I can make it true.

Chapter one

From: hattiedlockwood@starmail.com
To: wilde_one666@starmail.com
Subject: On The Road

So, Reuben, I'm assuming you're still alive despite the fact that I haven't heard a SINGLE BLOODY THING from you since you got off the Eurostar THREE WEEKS AGO!?! I guess you're just too busy leading the life of an international playboy to worry about your oldest and dearest friends. By which I mean ME, despite the fact that I am NOT old and dear at all, but young and relatively cheap considering.

How is St Tropez? (Assuming you got to your dad's as planned and aren't still under a table somewhere in St Germain in an absinthe-fuelled coma like on the school Paris trip?) UNBEARABLE, I expect. Far too hot. All those beautiful people with their tans and their toned abs. The clear blue sea and sandy beaches. The endless sunshine and cocktails. I bet you find your thoughts often turn mournfully to the drizzly London suburbs and all you've left behind . . . Your dear co-workers in the Men's

Casualwear department at Debenhams who I feel certain are still lamenting the loss of your unique approach to customer service. Warm snakebite at The Lion. Chips with curry sauce and fights and vomit-dodging on the night bus. Didn't think about the gaping hole all of THAT would leave in your soul when you decided to go off travelling and Finding Yourself and all that, did you, Jack bloody Kerouac?

So anyway, things can TOTALLY be exciting here too because GUESS WHAT???? I passed my driving test!!!! I KNOW!!!! As miracles go, this is right up there with Lazarus and water into wine and you not failing GCSE Maths. Who'd've thought I'd ever be legally sanctioned to be in control of a moving vehicle? It's madness, I tell you. Celebrated by reversing mum's car into a pillar in the multi-storey. Oops. Haven't told her yet.

Anyway, motoring-related marvels aside, the summer holidays are turning out to be a Disaster Of Epic Proportions. Carl's being such a pain in the arse about the wedding I almost hope mum calls it off. He's booked a castle for the reception. Seriously. And he wants me to be a bridesmaid. In a PEACH DRESS. I'M NOT EVEN JOKING, REUBEN. Meanwhile the twins are madder than ever. Mum's working all hours, so when I'm not at the Happy Diner in my brown nylon air-stewardess-from-the-1970s uniform, my days are spent being tortured by Alice in the name of 'Science' (she's SO going to grow up to be a serial killer) or reading Watership Down to Ollie AGAIN. I know it off by heart, Reuben. Literally, I could go on Mastermind and answer EVERY BLOODY QUESTION ANYONE COULD EVER THINK OF about Fiver and Hazel and flipping Bigwig. And the worst thing is

that no matter how many times we read it, it always makes both of us cry. Not saying I don't like a good cry but seriously, my life is depressing enough at the moment without any help from **SPOILER ALERT** dying bunnies.

And the Happy Diner is pushing me beyond the edge of sanity. I actually DREAM about the All-Day Breakfast of Champions. My hair smells of hash browns. It really does. I fantasize about ways of murdering Melanie the Manager. It's the only thing that gets me through the shifts. I can't work out whether her cleavage is constantly expanding like the universe or her tops are shrinking, but either way it's verging on pornography. She's always calling the boys into her office for a coffee and a Little Chat. Mack had to spend a good five minutes in the walk-in freezer after the last one. Needless to say she never calls me in for a Little Chat. She just gives me evils and makes me clean the toilets. She told me yesterday I'd actually look quite pretty if I did something with my hair. She suggested a perm. A PERM!!! Said it would help with the lankness, although it might be prone to frizz. I tell you she's evil. EVIL I tell you.

Kat's spent the whole summer so far off with all her art college friends pretending to be a tree as part of some kind of guerrilla eco pop-up something or other. I've only seen her once, at the pub with the other trees. She's irritatingly happy, although to be honest the trees seem like pretentious tossers to me, and I spent the whole evening trying not to notice that their faces were streaked with some kind of indelible green. She's still going out with Zoe-from-Kettering (remember Kat brought her to the pub that time – the condescending one with the nose) and totally loved

up. They've gone off to Edinburgh now because Zoe-from-Kettering's ex is in a fringe show up there or something. I can't keep up.

I stop typing and look out of the bedroom window for a while, wishing I'd had a chance to talk properly to Kat before she went. I watch the wind gently wafting the leaves of the trees that line the road. Actual ones, I mean, not just students painted green. The movement of the leaves is slow and soothing. Then I type:

Oh and by the way, you know how we accidentally had sex a month ago? Turns out I'm pregnant.

I stare at the screen. It makes my stomach flip, seeing it there in black and white. Worse even than the line on the pregnancy test somehow. I delete the words quickly. Once they're gone I feel a bit better. In their place I type:

So ALL my friends have abandoned me!! (Can you hear that violin playing in the background?) Mum and Carl and the twins are off to Mallorca soon and instead of the 'shenanigans' Carl thinks I'll be getting up to, I'll be here on my own with a ready-meal for one and a mug of cocoa. No danger of even a single shenanigan.

Meanwhile, no doubt, you're bathing in champagne with beautiful French heiresses or doing obscene things with cocktail waitresses. Again.

I feel tears pricking my eyes and I rub them away before they can fall and carry on typing.

Anyway, if you have 5 minutes to spare between your many assignations, send me an email, will you? Vicarious hedonism is better than none at all. And I miss you.

Yours a teeny bit resentfully if I'm honest,
Hattie xxx

I read it through a billion times, trying to see it as he will, editing it, hoping it sounds clever and funny and like I just wrote it in five seconds without even thinking about it, and not at all needy or desperate or like someone who might be pregnant.

I click Send and then I hug my arms round my middle and lean forward until my forehead is flat against the desk. The wood is cool and hard and I press my head against it until it hurts a bit. And I find that I'm crying, horrible, big, silent crying that feels like it's coming from a space inside me that's bigger than I am, bigger than the room, than the house, bigger than the whole city. I haven't cried like this in years. Not since Mum threw out all of Dad's old clothes. It must have been a few months after he died. She stuffed them in a bin bag and took them to the charity shop along with a load of baby clothes the twins had grown out of. When she'd gone, I went and looked at the empty wardrobe, the bare hangers swaying a little as I opened the door, and I cried more than I'd ever cried before. I don't know why. It wasn't like I missed Dad really.

I try not to think about that, or about Reuben, or what's going on inside me and what's going to happen next. I switch it all off and just let myself cry.

When the crying stops I look in the mirror. My face is puffy and sad and streaked with grey. I sort out my mascara

and dab a bit of concealer under my eyes to make them look less red and blotchy. Bit of lippy. I smile at myself. Almost convincing.

All the time I'm doing it, I realize I'm half waiting for a reply from Reuben, waiting for my laptop to ping or my phone to buzz. As if. I should know him by now.

When I finally get a a reply, several days of denial and fried food and *Watership Down* later, it says this:

From: wilde_one666@starmail.com
To: hattiedlockwood@starmail.com
Subject: Re: On The Road

your hair smells of hashbrowns you say? thats actually quite alluring to a certain kind of man. so i've heard.

i'll write more soon. phenomenally hungover.

oh and i am never ever ever getting in a car with you. ever. can only assume you bribed the instructor. was it money drugs or sexual favours? all three? i'm guessing all three.

and who the hell is Jack keroauk>? dcos he play for Chelsea?

xR

PS can you think what I might have done with my left shoe? and er trousers? they don't seem to be where I am. was quite a night! least i think itwas

PPS also you have an over-punctuation disorder. all those CAPITALS and exclamation marks make me dizzy!!!!!!!!!!! or that could be the hangover

A whole week and that's it? I've been sitting here, pregnant and miserable, waiting for hungover abuse and a lame football gag?

I type a reply saying:

FUCK OFF REUBEN AND NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN.

But of course I don't send it.