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...

Today Will be Different

Written by Maria Semple

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

All text is copyright © of the author

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

TODAY WILL BE DIFFERENT

MARIA SEMPLE

W&N
WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON

First published in Great Britain in 2016
by Weidenfeld & Nicolson
an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Maria Semple 2016

The moral right of Maria Semple to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and
the above publisher of this book.

"Skunk Hour" from *Collected Poems* by Robert Lowell.
Copyright © 2003 by Harriet Lowell and Sheridan Lowell.
Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

"Morning Has Broken" from *The Children's Bells* by Eleanor Farjeon.
Copyright © 1957 by Eleanor Farjeon.
Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

"Meyer Mania" illustration on page 251 by Patrick Semple.
Copyright © 2016 by Patrick Semple.

"Mommy" and "Mad Mommy" illustrations on pages 247 and 248 by Poppy Meyer.
Copyright © 2016 by Poppy Meyer.

All other illustrations by Eric Chase Anderson.
Copyright © 2016 by Eric Chase Anderson.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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

ISBN (Hardback) 978 0 297 87145 3
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 0 297 87146 0
ISBN (eBook) 978 0 297 87147 7

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.orionbooks.co.uk

Today will be different. Today I will be present. Today, anyone I speak to, I will look them in the eye and listen deeply. Today I'll play a board game with Timby. I'll initiate sex with Joe. Today I will take pride in my appearance. I'll shower, get dressed in proper clothes, and change into yoga clothes only for yoga, which today I will actually attend. Today I won't swear. I won't talk about money. Today there will be an ease about me. My face will be relaxed, its resting place a smile. Today I will radiate calm. Kindness and self-control will abound. Today I will buy local. Today I will be my best self, the person I'm capable of being. Today will be different.

The Trick

Because the other way wasn't working. The waking up just to get the day over with until it was time for bed. The grinding it out was a disgrace, an affront to the honor and long shot of being alive at all. The ghost-walking, the short-tempered distraction, the hurried fog. (All of this I'm just assuming, because I have no idea how I come across, my consciousness is that underground, like a toad in winter.) The leaving the world a worse place just by being in it. The blindness to the destruction in my wake. The Mr. Magoo.

If I'm forced to be honest, here's an account of how I left the world last week: worse, worse, better, worse, same, worse, same. Not an inventory to make one swell with pride. I don't necessarily need to make the world a better place, mind you. Today, I will live by the Hippocratic oath: first do no harm.

How hard can it be? Dropping off Timby, having my poetry lesson (my favorite part of life!), taking a yoga class, eating lunch with Sydney Madsen, whom I can't stand but at least I can check her off the list (more on that later), picking up Timby, and giving back to Joe, the underwriter of all this mad abundance.

You're trying to figure out, why the *agita* surrounding one normal day of white-people problems? Because there's me and there's the beast in me. It would be kind of brilliant if the beast in me played out on a giant canvas, shocking and awe-ing, causing fabulous destruction, talked about forever. If I could swing that, I just might:

self-immolate gloriously for the performance-art spectacle. The sad truth? The beast in me plays out on a painfully small scale: regrettable micro-transactions usually involving Timby, my friends, or Joe. I'm irritable and consumed by anxiety when I'm with them; maudlin and shit-talking when I'm not. Ha! Aren't you glad you're at a safe distance, doors locked, windows rolled up? Aw, come on. I'm nice. I'm exaggerating for effect. It's not really like that.

And so the day began, the minute I whipped off my sheets. The *click-click-click* of Yo-Yo's nails across the hardwood, stopping outside the bedroom. Why, when Joe whips off his sheets, doesn't Yo-Yo *trot-trot-trot* and wait in abject hope? How can Yo-Yo, on the other side of a closed door, tell it's me and not Joe? It was once depressingly explained by a dog trainer: it's my smell Yo-Yo's caught whiff of. That his idea of nirvana is a dead seal washed up on the beach leaves me asking, Is it time for bed yet? Nope, I'm not doing that. Not today.

I didn't mean to be coy about Sydney Madsen.

When Joe and I arrived in Seattle from New York ten years ago, we were ready to start a family. I'd just wrapped five wearying years at *Looper Wash*. Everywhere you looked it was *Looper Wash* T-shirts, bumper stickers, mouse pads. *I'm a Vivian. I'm a Dot.* You remember. If not, check your nearest dollar store, the two-for-one bin, it's been a while.

Joe, a hand surgeon, had become a legend of sorts for reconstructing the hand of that quarterback whose thumb bent back and nobody thought he'd ever play again but the next year he went on to

win the Super Bowl. (I can't remember his name, but even if I did, I couldn't say, due to doctor/patient/nosy-wife confidentiality.)

Joe had job offers everywhere. Why pick Seattle? Joe, a nice Catholic boy from outside Buffalo, couldn't see raising kids in Manhattan, my first choice. We struck a deal. We'd move anywhere he wanted for ten years, and back to New York for ten; his city for ten, my city for ten, back and forth, unto death. (A deal he's conveniently forgotten his end of, I might add, seeing as we're coming up on year ten and not a peep on packing up.)

As everybody knows, being raised Catholic with half a brain means becoming an atheist. At one of our skeptics' conventions (yes, our early years were actually spent doing things like driving to Philadelphia to watch Penn Jillette debate a rabbi! Oh, to be childless again . . . or not), Joe heard that Seattle was the least religious city in America. Seattle it was.

A Doctors Without Borders board member threw Joe and me a welcome-to-town party. I swanned into her Lake Washington mansion filled with modern art and future friends, mine for the taking. My whole life, I've been liked. Okay, I'll say it: I've been adored. I don't understand why, on account of my disgraceful personality, but somehow it works. Joe says it's because I'm the most guy-like woman he's ever met, but sexy and with no emotional membrane. (A compliment!) I went from room to room, being introduced to a series of women, interchangeable in their decency and warmth. It was that thing where you meet somebody who tells you they like camping and you say, "Oh! I was just talking to someone who's going on a ten-day rafting trip down the Snake River, you should totally meet them," and the person says, "That was me."

What can I say? I'm terrible with faces. And names. And numbers. And times. And dates.

The whole party was a blur, with one woman eager to show me funky shops, another hidden hikes, another Mario Batali's father's Italian restaurant in Pioneer Square, another the best dentist in town who has a glitter painting on his ceiling of a parachuting tiger, yet another willing to share her housekeeper. One of them, Sydney Madsen, invited me to lunch the next day at the Tamarind Tree in the International District.

(Joe has a thing he calls the magazine test. It's the reaction you have when you open the mailbox and pull out a magazine. Instantly, you know if you're happy to see this magazine or bummed. Which is why I don't subscribe to *The New Yorker* and do subscribe to *Us Weekly*. Put to the magazine test, Sydney Madsen is the human equivalent of *Tinnitus Today*.)

That first lunch: She was so careful with her words, so sincere in her gaze, noticed a small spot on her fork and was overly solicitous toward the waiter when asking for a new one, brought her own tea bag and asked for hot water, said she wasn't very hungry so how about we split my green papaya salad, told me she'd never seen *Looper Wash* but would put a hold on the DVDs at the library.

Am I painting a clear enough picture of the tight-assed dreariness, the selfish cluelessness, the cheap creepiness? A water-stained fork never killed anybody! *Buy* the DVDs, how about? Eat the food at the restaurant, that's how they stay in business! Worst of all, Sydney Madsen was steady, earnest, without a speck of humor, and talked . . . very . . . slowly . . . as . . . if . . . her . . . platitudes . . . were . . . little . . . gold . . . coins.

I was in shock. Living too long in New York does that to a girl, gives her the false sense that the world is full of interesting people. Or at least people who are crazy in an interesting way.

At one point I writhed so violently in my chair that Sydney actu-

ally asked, "Do you need to use the powder room?" (Powder room? *Powder room?* Kill her!) The worst part? All those women with whom I'd gladly agreed to go hiking and shopping? They weren't a bunch of women. They were all Sydney Madsen! Damn that blur! It took everything I had to kink her fire hose of new invitations: a weekend at her beach house on Vashon Island, introducing me to the wife of someone for this, the playwright of something for that.

I ran home screaming to Joe.

Joe: You should have been suspicious of someone so eager to make friends, because it probably means she doesn't have any.

Me: This is why I love you, Joe. You just boil it all down. (Joe the boiler. Don't we just love him?)

Forgive me for long-hauling you on Sydney Madsen. My point is: for ten years I haven't been able to shake her. She's the friend I don't like, the friend I don't know what she does for a living because I was too stultified to ask the first time and it would be rude to ask now (because I'm not rude), the friend I can't be mean enough to so she gets the message (because I'm not mean), the friend to whom I keep saying no, no, no, yet she still chases me. She's like Parkinson's, you can't cure her, you can just manage the symptoms.

For today, the lunch bell tolls.

Please know I'm aware that lunch with a boring person *is* a boutique problem. When I say I have problems, I'm not talking about Sydney Madsen.

Yo-Yo trotting down the street, the prince of Belltown. Oh, Yo-Yo, you foolish creature with your pep and your blind devotion and

your busted ear flapping with every prance. How poignant it is, the pride you take in being walked by me, your immortal beloved. If only you knew.

What a disheartening spectacle it's been, a new month, a new condo higher than the last, each packed with blue-badged Amazon squids, every morning squirting by the thousands from their studio apartments onto my block, heads in devices, never looking up. (They work for Amazon, so you know they're soulless. The only question, how soulless?) It makes me pine for the days when Third Ave. was just me, empty storefronts and the one tweaker yelling, "*That's* how you spell America!"

Outside our building, Dennis stood by his wheelie trash can and refilled the poop-bag dispenser. "Good morning, you two."

"Good morning, Dennis!" Instead of my usual breezing past, I stopped and looked him in the eye. "How's your day so far?"

"Oh, can't complain," he said. "You?"

"Can complain, but won't."

Dennis chuckled.

Today, already a net gain.

I opened the front door of our apartment. At the end of the hallway: Joe face down at the table, his forehead flat on the newspaper, arms splayed with bent elbows as if under arrest.

It was a jarring image, one of pure defeat, the last thing I'd ever associate with Joe—

Thunk.

The door shut. I unclipped Yo-Yo's harness. By the time I straightened, my stricken husband had gotten up and disappeared into his office. Whatever it was, he didn't want to talk about it.

My attitude? Works for me!

Yo-Yo raced to his food, greyhound-style, back legs vaulting past his front. Realizing it was the same dry food that had been there before his walk, he became overwhelmed with confusion and betrayal. He took one step and stared at a spot on the floor.

Timby's light clicked on. God bless him, up before the alarm. I went into his bathroom and found him on the step stool in his PJs.

"Morning, darling. Look at you, up and awake."

He stopped what he was doing. "Can we have bacon?"

Timby, in the mirror, waited for me to leave. I lowered my eyes. The little Quick Draw McGraw beat my glance. He pushed something into the sink before I could see it. The unmistakable clang of lightweight plastic. The Sephora 200!

It was nobody's fault but my own, Santa putting a makeup kit in Timby's stocking. It's how I'd buy myself extra time at Nordstrom, telling Timby to roam cosmetics. The girls there loved his gentle nature, his sugar-sack body, his squeaky voice. Soon enough, they were making him up. I don't know if he liked the makeup as much as being doted on by a gaggle of blondes. On a lark, I picked up a kit the size of a paperback that unfolded and fanned out to reveal six different makeup trays (!) holding two hundred (!) shadows, glosses, blushes, and whatever-they-weres. The person who'd found a way to cram so much into so little should seriously be working for NASA. If they still have that.

"You do realize you're not wearing makeup to school," I told him.

"I know, Mom." The sigh and shoulder heave right out of the Disney Channel. Again, my bad for letting it take root. After school, a jigsaw puzzle!

I emerged from Timby's room. Yo-Yo, standing anxiously,

shivered with relief upon seeing that I still existed. Knowing I'd be heading to the kitchen to make breakfast, he raced me to his food bowl. This time he deigned to eat some, one eye on me.

Joe was back and making himself tea.

"How's things?" I asked.

"Don't you look nice," he said.

True to my grand scheme for the day, I'd showered and put on a dress and oxfords. If you beheld my closet, you'd see a woman of specific style. Dresses from France and Belgium, price tags ripped off before I got home because Joe would have an aneurysm, and every iteration of flat black shoe . . . again, no need to discuss price. Buy them? Yes. Put them on? On most days, too much energy.

"Olivia's coming tonight," I said with a wink, already tasting the wine flight and rigatoni at Tavolàta.

"How about she takes Timby out so we can have a little alone time?" Joe grabbed me by the waist and pulled me in as if we weren't a couple of fifty-year-olds.

Here's who I envy: lesbians. Why? Lesbian bed death. Apparently, after a lesbian couple's initial flush of hot sex, they stop having it altogether. It makes perfect sense. Left to their own devices, women would stop having sex after they have children. There's no evolutionary need for it. Our brains know it, our body knows it. Who feels sexy during the slog of motherhood, the middle-aged fat roll and the flattening butt? What woman wants anyone to see her naked, let alone fondle her breasts, squishy now like bags of cake batter, or touch her stomach, spongy like breadfruit? Who wants to pretend they're all sexed up when the honeypot is dry?

Me, that's who, if I don't want to get switched out for a younger model.

"Alone time it is," I said to Joe.

"Mom, this broke." Timby came in with his ukulele and plonked it down on the counter. Suspiciously near the trash. "The sound's all messed up."

"What do you propose we do?" I asked, daring him to say, *Buy a new one.*

Joe picked up the ukulele and strummed. "It's a little out of tune, that's all." He began to adjust the strings.

"Hey," I said. "Since when can you tune a ukulele?"

"I'm a man of many mysteries," Joe said and gave the instrument a final dulcet strum.

The bacon and French toast were being wolfed, the smoothies being drunk. Timby was deep into an *Archie Double Digest*. My smile was on lockdown.

Two years ago when I was getting all martyr-y about having to make breakfast every morning, Joe said, "I pay for this circus. Can you please climb down off your cross and make breakfast without the constant sighing?"

I know what you're going to say: *What a jerk! What a sexist thug!* But Joe had a point. Lots of women would gladly do worse for a closet full of Antwerp. From that moment on, it was service with a smile. It's called knowing when you've got a weak hand.

Joe showed Timby the newspaper. "The Pinball Expo is coming back to town. Wanna go?"

"Do you think the Evel Knievel machine will still be broken?"

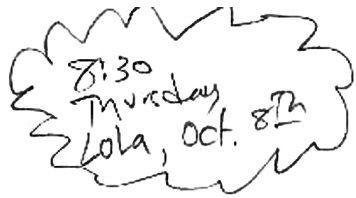
"Almost certainly," Joe said.

I handed over the poem I'd printed out and heavily annotated.

"Okay, who's going to help me?" I asked.

Timby didn't look up from his *Archie.*

Joe took it. "Ooh, Robert Lowell."



Skunk Hour

By Robert Lowell

(For Elizabeth Bishop)

Nautilus Island's hermit
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
her sheep still graze above the sea.
Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
is first selectman in our village;
she's in her dotage.

Thirsting for
the hierarchic privacy
of Queen Victoria's century,
she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall.

The season's ill—
we've lost our summer millionaire,
who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean
catalogue. His nine-knot yawl
was auctioned off to lobstermen.
A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.

And now our fairy
decorator brightens his shop for fall;
his fishnet's filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;
there is no money in his work,
he'd rather marry.

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,
"Love, O careless Love. . . ." I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
I myself am hell;
nobody's here—

* only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare.

I began from memory: " 'Nautical Island's hermit heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage; her sheep still graze above the sea. Her son's a bishop. Her farmer's first selectman' —"

" 'Her farmer *is* first selectman,' " Joe said.

"Shoot. 'Her farmer *is* first selectman.' "

"Mom!"

I shushed Timby and continued with eyes closed. " '. . . in our village; she's in her dotage. Thirsting for the hierarchic privacy of Queen Victoria's century, she buys up all the eyesores facing her shore, and lets them fall. The season's ill — we've lost our summer millionaire, who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean catalogue' —"

"Mommy, look at Yo-Yo. See how his chin is sitting on his paws?"

Yo-Yo was positioned on his pink lozenge so he could watch for dropped food, his little white paws delicately crossed.

"Aww," I said.

"Can I have your phone?" Timby asked.

"Just enjoy your pet," I said. "This doesn't have to turn into electronics."

"It's very cool what Mom is doing," Joe said to Timby. "Always learning."

"Learning and forgetting," I said. "But thank you."

He shot me an air kiss.

I pressed onward. " 'His nine-knot yawl was auctioned off to lobstermen' —"

"Don't we love Yo-Yo?" Timby asked.

"We do." The simple truth. Yo-Yo is the world's cutest dog, part Boston terrier, part pug, part something else . . . brindle-and-white with a black patch on one eye, bat ears, smooshed face, and curlicue tail. Before the Amazon invasion, when it was just me and hookers on the street, one remarked, "It's like if Barbie had a pit bull."

"Daddy," Timby said. "Don't you love Yo-Yo?"

Joe looked at Yo-Yo and considered the question. (More evidence of Joe's superiority: he thinks before he speaks.)

"He's a little weird," Joe said and returned to the poem.

Timby dropped his fork. I dropped my jaw.

"*Weird?*" Timby cried.

Joe looked up. "Yeah. What?"

"Oh, Daddy! How can you say that?"

"He just sits there all day looking depressed," Joe said. "When we come home, he doesn't greet us at the door. When we are here, he just sleeps, waits for food to drop, or stares at the front door like he has a migraine."

For Timby and me, there were simply no words.

"I know what he's getting out of *us*," Joe said. "I just don't know what we're getting out of *him*."

Timby jumped out of his chair and lay across Yo-Yo, his version of a hug. "Oh, Yo-Yo! *I* love you."

"Keep going." Joe flicked the poem. "You're doing great. 'The season's ill'…"

"'The season's ill,'" I said. "'We've lost our summer millionaire, who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean catalogue'—" To Timby: "You. Get ready."

"Are we driving through or are you walking me in?"

"Driving. I have Alonzo at eight thirty."

Our breakfast over, Yo-Yo got up from his pillow. Joe and I watched as he walked to the front door and stared at it.

"I didn't realize I was being controversial," Joe said. "'The season's ill.'"