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...

Best-Laid Plans

Written by Kathy Lette

Published by Bantam Press

All text is copyright © of the author

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

Best-Laid Plans

Kathy Lette



BANTAM PRESS

LONDON • NEW YORK • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
www.penguin.co.uk

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



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

Copyright © Kathy Lette 2017

Kathy Lette has asserted her right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact,
any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

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

ISBNs 9780593071359 (hb)
9780593071366 (tpb)

Typeset in 11.75/15.5 pt Palatino LT Std by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

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.



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

PART ONE

1
Kerb Your Enthusiasm

It was never my intention to take my son kerb-crawling to pick up a prostitute. Nope. Kerb-crawling was definitely not on my 'To Do' list after 'Buy hummus, sort sock drawer, do Pilates'.

A mother does many things for her son – running trays up to his bedroom for nothing more serious than a stubbed toe, detecting lost bits of sports kit, secretly completing overdue homework . . . But soliciting a prostitute shouldn't be one of them. 'So, how much to initiate my son sexually?' are just not the words a bookish, cake-baking, cryptic-crossword-ninja, law-abiding mum of one ever expects to say to a working girl in thigh-high boots and leather hot-pants in the dead of night in a seedy backstreet.

So how did this sick scenario come about? Well, earlier that night, over dinner, I'd casually mentioned the plans I

was making for my son's twenty-first birthday party. As soon as I mentioned the word 'party', Merlin's face shattered like breaking glass.

'No. No party! There's nobody to invite because I'm worthless. I'm nothing . . . The boys at school said I was a freak. And it's true . . . That time I came home with a sign sticky-taped to my back saying "Kick me, I'm a retard" . . . Well, they were right. I *am* a retard. No wonder no girl will ever go out with me. Those girls who laughed at me at school were correct – I'm shit on a shoe.'

I can't quite explain the fierce onrush of tenderness I felt then for my strange, beautiful boy. It overwhelmed me. I tried to hold his hand, but he recoiled as though being doused in boiling water.

'I can only apologize to you for not being the son you deserve. Why did you ever have me? I bet you wish you'd never had a child.' My son's tone was metallic with self-loathing. 'Why can't I be normal?' Each word he uttered was like a bullet to my heart. 'I'm so sorry I ruined your life, Mum. Without a girl to love, well, I just don't want to live any more.'

His annihilated voice filled me with desolation. A kind of sludge formed around my heart. Then this sob just wrenched out of him. And, well, it broke something open inside me. I was gripped by a protective, lioness-like love for my gentle, tortured boy for all the years of rejection, bullying and humiliation, for all the misery, isolation and lost dreams. I felt my claws come out . . . And the next thing I knew those claws were clutching my car keys and I was driving him towards the city to fulfil his inalienable right to the pursuit of life, liberty and human sexual contact.

I'd read in the papers that, since the gentrification of King's Cross, which was now all gastro-pubs and Pilates studios, the area close to Liverpool Street had become the new red-light district. As we drove closer and my mood cooled, I did register the fact that this was rating rather high on the Oprah-ometer. I mean, what kind of mother gives her son party tips championed by Donald Trump and Berlusconi: 'Take off pants. Mingle.' I'm an English teacher at a secondary school . . . And before you start picturing a boring, pedantic, predictably dull English-teacher stereotype, let me assure you: you are one hundred per cent correct. Was soliciting a prostitute for one's son a seriously abnormal thing to do? Well, yes, but mothering a child with autism tends to recalibrate one's view of normal.

When the twin spires of Liverpool Street Station loomed into view, I veered off the main road into a labyrinth of dark streets with low, dilapidated houses huddled together conspiratorially. I nosed my car into a lane-way that resembled a beach after the tide's gone out – plastic bags, broken bottles, rusting cans and crisp packets, and drunks lying by the wall like drowned sailors.

What the hell was I doing here? I was more likely to be found at a Quilting Bee than on a kerb-crawl. I felt I was going for an interview for a job I didn't want. This was such a foreign world to me, I might as well have been on Jupiter. It suddenly became an effort to keep hold of the steering wheel. The bitumen seemed to billow under my tyres like a mattress. I could think of a million things I'd rather be doing on this drizzly, grey May evening – a book club, a hot bath – Jesus, reordering my condiment cupboard while doing my tax return looked irresistibly attractive right now.

'Maybe this wasn't such a good idea . . .' I admitted to my son, who was slumped despondently in the passenger seat beside me. 'I'm sure someone lovely will come into your life soon, darling.' My second-favourite mothering experience is lying to my son about his chances of ever having a girlfriend – my favourite being beating my head on his locked bedroom door until drawing blood.

'It's so much easier for animals, Mum, isn't it? Animals are always in pairs. I can't even go to the zoo any more, because it just reminds me how lonely I am.'

Since puberty kicked in, Merlin has attempted *every*thing to attract girls . . . Well, everything bar smothering himself in cupcake icing and sauntering through town holding a placard saying, 'Free Designer Shoes!' . . . And still nothing. To girls his own age, he's just too exotic . . . The poor boy might as well be a sherbet-winged flamingo flying down the high street.

'I can't fathom why no girl wants to date me' has become his sad mantra. 'Do you know why, Mum?'

Of course I knew why. Because saying you're autistic and socially isolated is like saying that you're on a diet *and* hungry.

With Merlin's birthday only a month or so away, his hormones had gone into overheated, obsessive overdrive. When he wasn't asking me if dogs do it 'people-style' or why his penis kept making him touch it, dark moods began to dominate his quick-silvered wit.

'I'm failing to add up as a person, Mum,' he'd said a few days before. 'The constant rejection, it's breaking me down. I compliment women all the time. I talk to every female I

meet . . . "Are you a woman of experience?" "Do you moisturize?" "How's the modelling going?" And they just laugh at me. A woman's sweet smile says nothing about her heart. I struggle, Mum.' He'd looked at me, his pale-blue eyes wide with confusion. 'The signals I broadcast make me hum like an amplifier but I'm just not on the same wavelength as women. What can I do, Mum? What can I do?'

What *could* he do? I'd racked my brains. Mail-order bride? Thai wife? Auction him online? I'd seriously considered this, and was discouraged only by the fact that it's illegal to sell live things on eBay.

Basically, if I didn't want his only hobby to be earning Boy Scout badges in Trouser Tenting and his passport to read, under 'Occupation', 'Crazed Loner', then I had to help him . . . Which is why I was now kerb-crawling behind Liverpool Street Station.

'The male kingfisher courts the female by bringing her small fish. They mate even before she's had time to swallow her wedding present,' Merlin elaborated.

'Uh-huh,' I said, wondering where I could park. The irony of worrying about getting a ticket for parking on a double-yellow line while illegally picking up a prostitute was momentarily lost on me.

'The male wolf spider presents the females with morsels of food gift-wrapped in silk. Although copulation for spiders must be difficult. How does a male spider let a female arachnid know that he wishes to be her mate and not her meal?'

'Uh-huh,' I said again, preoccupied about how I would negotiate the transaction and where the escort would take

him. I glanced up at the sooty Victorian buildings crumbling away behind their grey façades. Would she have a room in some seedy B&B, the static electricity from the cheap acrylic carpet providing an impromptu perm? Or – oh God – maybe they'd do it in the car and I'd have to go for a walk? And surely if I walked around here I'd be brutally mugged and my battered corpse tossed into a filthy canal.

Women were skulking out of the shadows now. My heart drilled against my bra. All I could think about were the night-hunting snakes Merlin had shown me on YouTube, and how their infrared sensors allow them to strike at anything warm in the dark.

This was a bad, bad idea. I waved my hand back and forth like a windshield wiper to shoo the women away. White-knuckled, I'd just decided to turn the wheel for home when a statuesque blonde in the clichéd uniform of thigh-high boots and leather hot-pants emerged from a murky whirlpool of pimps and prostitutes.

'Botticelli's Venus rises,' Merlin sighed wistfully, as the woman homed in on us with the nocturnal accuracy of a bat.

I braked abruptly so as not to hit her. By the time I'd established that I hadn't wet my pants with nervousness, Venus had put one high-heeled foot on my bumper bar like a conquistador. Her beautiful, ice-blue eyes were clear and cold and as hard as mint candies. They were framed by eyebrows plucked into two sceptical arches. Her luscious pink lips were enhanced with the most emphatic lip-liner but I couldn't quite decipher the exact tone of her smile. It seemed to be held stiffly in place as if for an invisible photographer.

As she leant into the window, I opened my wallet,

preparing to launch into the brute vocabulary of the sordid transaction. 'So, yes . . . um . . . so what are your rates?' I asked, feigning insouciance.

Venus levelled a searing glare at me that only just fell short of igniting my hair.

'Fifty for a headie. A hundred for the full service. Five hundred for the night . . . For a thousand, you can have dwarves and a donkey, as far as I'm concerned.'

'Um . . . The full service, I guess.'

I extended a fan of twenty-pound notes in her direction. Her hand shot out like a tentacle and wrapped around my wrist. With the contemptuous suavity of a diplomat, she then stated: 'You're nicked.'

I dropped the money, the notes scattering over the car floor, and drew back from her as if she were a live socket. '*Nooooo!*' My volume rivalled the voice of Moses parting the Red Sea. Panic punched my chest. If I were a nuclear reactor, I'd have been going into meltdown. What to do? Pleading seemed the best option. Either that or abandoning the car and sprinting off down an alleyway . . . an option Merlin now took, leaving the passenger-side door swinging wildly on its hinges.

'Merlin!' I called out after him. As he disappeared from view at the far end of the dingy street, I made a noise like a tyre going flat. Couldn't the undercover officer see that I was more deranged than St Deranged, the Patron Saint of Single Mothers of Special Needs Boys?

'Please, I must find my son!' I pushed out of the door to run after him, but Venus blocked my way. The pimps and prostitutes had instantly evaporated back into the shadows, leaving an eerily empty silence.

'Your son? Jeez, Louise! Tell it to the custody sergeant. He's gonna love this one.' The click of the handcuff snapping on my wrist had a dull and final sound to it, like a lead door shutting.

I shouted Merlin's name again. I tugged the officer in his direction. I flailed about to no avail. 'Let me go, you idiot!'

'Do you want me to add resisting arrest to the charges?'

'You don't understand! My son is out there alone!'

Venus flashed me her identification badge and began reciting my rights, as a back-up police van pulled up.

As she spoke, I stared at her in shocked silence for what I estimated to be about a million years, then interrupted, 'But . . . you can't arrest me. I have thirty-two English essays on Moral Education Through Literature to mark before morning.'

I'd hoped this would make me appear a sensible, sane, supremely competent career woman and decent member of society rather than a kerb-crawling crazy. But there was no more talk. Despite my squirming protestations and writhing anger, I was told to 'secure my car' and was then bundled into the caged back of the police van and dragged off to the local cop shop for questioning.

'But my son!' I cried out, beating on the sides of the van. 'We're going the wrong way! We should be looking for Merlin!'

When I thought of Merlin alone in the city, a burning sensation skittered through my stomach and my toes curled. How could this have happened? God had clearly taken a sabbatical and left some hopelessly unqualified intern in

charge. I felt the wild terror of losing my moorings. Even worse, I'd lost my child. I was a bad, bad, hopeless mother. Kerb-crawling – I mean, what had I been thinking? Clearly, from now on, when it came to parenting I would have to wear a paper hat reading 'Trainee'.

2

Best-Laid Plans

As I bounced about in the back of the police van, my nerves were shrieking like unoiled hinges. As we swerved through a quarrel of traffic, I pondered the best way to explain the build-up to tonight to the police. How could I adequately express the frustrations my boy had endured in his effort to make female friends for so long.

By his sixteenth birthday, despair had already started creeping in. 'Mum,' Merlin had said to me, 'I think I have an enthralling and charismatic demeanour, don't you? I'm also at the pulchritudinous pinnacle of my career . . . It would make me feel amazing inside if a girl loved me. It would just be so majestic . . . Do you think any woman will ever throw me a lifeline of love?'

I said, 'Yes, of course,' but I was thinking, *Yeah, the day kangaroos start playing croquet.*

After another year of rejections, his voice became even

more plaintive. 'Mum, will I ever feel the lick of love's tiger-ish tongue?'

Then, on his eighteenth birthday, he'd beseeched me, 'Mum, will all women forever find me geekish and freakish?'

I told my son to think of all the wonderful, inspirational people who have been misunderstood – Galileo, Luther, Jesus, Pythagoras, Socrates, Copernicus, Newton, Van Gogh . . .

He'd interrupted my rattling roll call with the words, '*I'm* not a genius, Mum . . . If I were a genius, I'd know how to pretend to be normal.'

I said something platitudinous about how there was no such thing as normal and abnormal, just ordinary and extraordinary . . . And how exciting, tangential, intriguing, creative and unique I found his mind to be . . . But it was to no avail, because on and on they came – the normal everyday knockbacks, the endless everyday put-downs.

On his nineteenth birthday, Merlin had asked, 'Why don't any love goddesses want to chat to me?' He was gangling in the door, all legs and elbows. 'Why do girls always say no to a date? Why do they reject me as a retard and a spaz?'

Merlin's luminous eyes had fleetingly held mine. The green bowler hat he'd chosen to wear that night (he often dressed eccentrically, for 'good luck') was tilted at an awkward but absurdly touching angle that tore at my heart.

On his twentieth birthday – just Merlin and me and a chocolate cake – he'd confided, his voice heavy with weary exasperation, 'My personality is a dazzlement of surprise. I feel I'm at the zenith of my charismatic beguilement. It really hurts when you compliment a girl and tell her how

exquisite and delectable she is and she just shoots you down. Or laughs at you. It happens a lot and, most importantly, I don't know why. Without love, existence is futile. If I don't lose my virginity before I turn twenty-one, I won't be able to go on.' He wrung his hands. 'Rejection is like a repugnant odour you feel instead of smell. I torture myself, remembering hurtful things women have said to me . . . If the body is designed to vomit up what is contaminated, why not the brain? Why can't my brain throw up, Mum? Why?'

How I'd ached with love for my eccentric son. I had to help him. And so began the mission to *Get Merlin Laid*.

At first I'd tried dating websites. But Merlin's profile – 'Adore space–time continuums and tennis scores, plus have encyclopaedic knowledge of Amazonian moths, mathematical equations and black holes' – tended to put girls off. As did his accompanying declaration suggesting that women 'Come and join me in my magic world where relationships are at their very zany best.'

His profile picture didn't help either. The shy, delicate glance he gave to the camera was just right. His tender blue eyes, the flawless lapis of an Italian summer sky, peeking out through his mane of golden hair, coupled with his other-worldly, ethereal aura, gave him the look of a mischievous cherub. If it weren't for his suit-of-armour-plated six-pack, the result of his obsessional sit-ups (six hundred a day), the kid would have looked under-dressed without angel wings . . . Except that he was wearing a Sherlock Holmes deerstalker hat and a monocle. 'My most lucky look,' he'd explained.

After running the usual online gauntlet of paedophiles, predators and money launderers who prowl the Web, the

only woman who responded was an eighty-eight-year-old great-grandmother whose byline read 'Time wasters need not apply.'

My sister then proposed that I just 'Think French.' It was wine o'clock and we were sitting at her kitchen table mulling over Merlin's options. My younger, prettier sister, who's as glossy and flighty as a racehorse – I'm like a plodding Clydesdale beside her – assured me that, if we lived in France, my husband would simply take Merlin to a brothel. Phoebe is very worldly. Literally. She's a flight attendant. Although right now, I was the one who had done something stratospheric – stratospherically stupid. I was the Sensible Sister. It was so out of character for me to be caught with my synapses down.

Anyway, I'd reminded Phoebe that not only was I neither French nor married, but as a feminist, the exploitation of women wasn't high on my agenda. But Phoebe had already clicked open her iPad and found a list of twenty-five women within a five-mile radius offering everything from fetish work to adult mothering – whatever the hell that is. She then proceeded to read out the reviews, like TripAdvisor – only this was a walk on the wild side with the sexually dysfunctional, or, rather, the 'differently pleasured'.

' "The worker enjoyed the sex," ' my sister read out to me.

'Yeah, right. Academy Award-winning orgasms all round . . .'

' " . . . and offered FWE – the Full Wife Experience." '

'What's that, I wonder? Leaving hubby sulking on the couch eating crisps while *she* goes off to bonk the pool boy?'

We both snorted out a laugh then, the big, hearty kookaburra cackle we'd inherited from our bohemian Antipodean

mother, who was away on another of her SKI – Spend Kids' Inheritance – trips, somewhere in the big, wide world.

'But seriously, Phoebe, I can't take my son to a brothel. What am I going to do? Sit outside the bedroom, knitting? Like some pervy Madame Defarge?'

'Well, clearly, *you* can't take him,' my sister had said, disappearing in a haze of cigarette smoke – the cigarettes she'd supposedly given up years earlier. 'Put the hard word on one of your male friends.'

And so, desperate and demoralized, the next day I asked some of my male colleagues if they'd take my son to a brothel.

Invisible tumbleweed blew around the staff room for a while before Philip, the Head of Maths, replied facetiously, 'Great idea. I'll just run it by my wife, shall I? *Sweetie, do you mind if I just pop off tonight for a few hours? I'm helping out Lucy's son, Merlin. No, not with algebra, football practice or driving lessons. I'm taking him to a whorehouse to get laid*. Seriously, Lucy, does the word "manslaughter" not mean anything to you?'

Undeterred, I next propositioned my lesbian journo pal from Yogalates, peering at her across our perineums while we did the upside-down lotus position.

'Jesus, Lucy! We're members of the Women's Equality Party!' Her Lycra-clad legs were suddenly as taut as an archer's bow. 'How can you condone prostitution?'

'I wasn't really seeing her as a prostitute but as a "sex care provider" who is presenting herself as a commodity allotment within a business doctrine,' I rationalized.

But the only result was that another friend bit the buddy dust.

Next stop, the gay boys, starting with Arron, my urbane and unshockable hairdresser. Well, he reacted as though I'd suggested he support Lance Armstrong's return to professional cycling. He positively convulsed at the notion. 'What? And start an ugly rumour that I'm straight?'

Finally, an actor friend *did* agree to take Merlin to a local brothel for me. He maintained that it would be good research. Off they drove, with high hopes (and low morals), to some suburban house in Kilburn . . . but he was on the car phone to me half an hour later saying he'd chickened out because someone had recognized him.

'You're an actor, for God's sake,' I chided him. 'Why don't you just pretend to be someone else, you old ham?'

My son's voice had then piped up over the car speaker. 'Mum, is ham sick? Is that why it's got to be cured? Can loneliness be cured the same way? We just passed a dead fox on the road . . . How do you know if animals are roadkill or suicides? Maybe they were just depressed?'

Most parents' biggest worry is that their child might get a nose piercing or a tattoo or dye their hair purple. Mine is keeping my son from hurling himself under a moving vehicle. This is the kind of worry that keeps me awake at night.

When Merlin's twenty-first was only a month or so away, my sister had another idea. 'With Merlin's lean, lithe physique and angelic looks, you should get him work as a male escort . . . Apparently, professional women seeking sexual encounters have fuelled a three-fold increase in the male-escort business . . . You could make money out of this libido of his. Merlin would make an excellent escort. He's so amusing.'

'Are you crazy? I am *not* pimping my son! Besides, he

might just want to sit around and talk about tennis, or comets, or meteors, or something totally boring. Then *she'll* charge *him*.'

As the police van shuddered to a halt, an idea came to me – a bit late, admittedly. As all my fifty-something, divorced women friends are chewing holes in the furniture with sexual frustration and all the young autistic boys I know are priapic, perhaps I could matchmake them on an app called – maybe – 'Square Pegs for Round Holes'? Or 'Tinder-ism'? Or 'Au-Tinder'? . . . But before I had time to write my app pitch to Mark Zuckerberg, the police had me clambering out of the van. As my sleeve caught on the wire mesh and tore, I looked up at the grey, grimy walls of the cop shop with foreboding. The whole place had the ambience of a Dickensian debtors' prison. Clearly this is why I became a mother – I couldn't resist the glamour of it all.

As I was frog-marched inside, I concluded that a seedy, inner-city police station is definitely not my natural habitat. My natural habitat is the classics section of the local library. Or the cheese counter at a French deli. How had it come to this? Even worse, my son, my vulnerable boy, was now out there, lost, in the big, bad world**.** It was then that I threw up. Right there on the linoleum floor. When I stopped retching, the 'prostitute'-turned-arresting-officer tore off her blonde wig and said brusquely, 'Are you okay? How do you feel?'

I felt like a fish left gasping at the bottom of a bucket.