The Egg Race

Polly Williams

Published by Sphere

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

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

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Sphere

Copyright © Polly Williams 2007

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

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

ISBN 978-1-8474-4007-5

Typeset in Sabon by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

A Member of the Hachette Livre Group of Companies

www.littlebrown.co.uk

One

Stevie Jonson switched on her laptop. Wobbling on the shelf of her bent knee, its glow washed her round, pale face with green light, leaving the rest of the bedroom in shadow. It was one-twenty-three a.m. She knew what would happen if she shut her eyes. Her wedding – since midnight, only thirteen days, fourteen hours away – had assumed a voice of its own and it was a voice that grew louder as her head sank pillowwards, whispering questions about monogamy and seating plans or humming an unbearable rotation of late-eighties wedding disco classics. It hung above her head like a cloud made from thousands of tiny black question marks. And she hadn't slept properly for days. Unable to face another insomniac night, Stevie decided to push her tiredness to the limits and stay up as long as possible. This way she would, surely, eventually fall asleep, exhaustion the stones in her pockets that would plunge her into mercifully blank depths.

In the meantime, alcohol would help. She leaned over to the side of the bed, picked up the glass from the side table and took the last gulp of gritty red wine. It mixed not unpleasantly with the aftertaste of toothpaste in her mouth. Feeling fortified, she checked her emails; nothing interesting. She foraged

among eBay's handbags; nothing interesting. She mouse-clicked on an intriguing site she'd bookmarked earlier that week, Work Out Your Real Biological Age in Ten Minutes; possibly amusing. The health interrogation took forever. Finally, she ticked the last box. She stabbed the cursor key. The modem whirred. The website did its maths. Her biological age was . . . thirty-*seven*. Oh. Not so amusing. Stevie was thirty-four years old.

She slumped heavily on to the pillows, pushing them down into the dark, draughty gap between bed and wall. Blasted computer. She now felt older than thirty-seven. She felt forty-seven. No, eighty-seven. She was mortal. She was going to die – probably prematurely. She attempted to work out what she'd done so wrong. It was like trying to recall drunken antics at a party the morning after. OK, hands up, she'd been partial to a Marlboro Light in her twenties, but hadn't everyone? Skinny jeans weren't an option but she certainly wasn't obese, a size twelve or fourteen, depending on the shop and the season. She didn't bake – there was little incentive when the sun just dot-to-dotted her freckles – so why did she need a preservation order? Stevie sucked in her breath, locking it in her throat as she read. OK. Aunt Sue's breast cancer; Grandfather's mid-life stroke; caffeine and sugar intake; aversion to gyms; irregular flossing. Oh, and the fact that she hadn't breastfed a baby. Funny that.

Stevie slapped the laptop lid down hard. Biology was blunt, tactless. And it was beginning to seriously piss her off. Only last month her GP, forgetting his bedside manner during a routine contraceptive assessment, drily informed her that at 'her age' (antique, obviously) she should perhaps be more concerned about declining fertility than avoiding conception. As if childlessness was a 'lifestyle choice' as opposed to the way life turned out. In response she'd shrugged like a defiant

schoolgirl and, in her eagerness to leave the surgery's steely statistics, snatched her contraceptive prescription renewal out of the doctor's scrubbed-pink hands, their fingers touching fleetingly, somehow inappropriately, before leaping apart. With cruel synchronicity, that night she'd found her first grey hair, pale and curly as an alfalfa sprout.

She stared into the mothy darkness. If her 'real' age was thirty-seven, where the hell did that leave her ovaries? This question overrode the wedding chatter. Her brain faded like the laptop screen and she finally dropped out of one world into another.

Two

'Sleep well?' Poppy whooshed back the blue balding velvet curtain, disturbing a ballet of dust particles.

Stevie squinted as daylight flooded the bedroom. 'No.' She smiled sleepily at her younger sister, pregnant and mother of two children under five. 'But I don't expect sympathy.' Yawning, she clambered out of bed, one bare foot, then the other, softly slapping the gnarled pine floorboards. At the basin, she splashed cold water on her face and inspected her reflection in the round toothpaste-speckled mirror: a pillow mark bisected her left cheek like a scar; tired pollen-brown eyes; hair fuzzy with the static of sleep and dreams. In fact she looked as though she had been on some kind of adventure during the night and had just managed to scramble back to bed before dawn. Which in a way she had, she thought, patting her face dry with a towel, wishing she could shake the remnants of last night's dream from her head like water.

It was a recurring, unsettling dream, which had woken her up with a start a few seconds before Poppy had pulled back the curtains and broken its spell. It hadn't involved the wedding, or even the website. It had involved Jez's lip. In particular, the way his upper lip got stuck to his front teeth

first thing in the morning. He'd smile and the lip would stretch and pale. It ignited a disproportionate reaction in her, making her flinch away as if assaulted by a particularly fetid blast of breath. And now the lip seemed to have penetrated her subconscious. When had she first started noticing the lip? The last four, or five months, possibly. Had the lip always stuck to the teeth? It seemed rather unlikely that this was a new phenomenon. Relationships are destroyed by details. Could the lip be the tipping point?

'A brew. Sorry, no other drinking vessels available.' Poppy placed a large steaming mug on the pile of yellowing paperbacks next to Stevie's childhood bed. The mug was one of their mother's old favourites, wrapped in a quote by Rebecca West: 'I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.' It was a mug that usually made the sisters roll their eyes – they had yet to encounter a woman less like a doormat than their mother – but Stevie was too tired for sisterly collusion today.

'Thanks, Poppy.' Stevie took the mug, aware that her sister was far more deserving of tea in bed. She sat down and sipped the tea, feeling the too-hot sip burn its way down her throat and tunnel deep inside to where anxieties churned. She rubbed her eyes. 'I feel like how I look, Pops.'

'Oh, don't worry. Weddings wreak havoc with one's beauty sleep,' said Poppy breezily, leaning into the radiator, pressing her bottom into its warm ridges. 'I was a right case before mine, remember?'

'Insufferable.' Stevie smiled, pushing the hedge of wavy brown hair away from her face. 'But at least you were organised.'

'Retentive, you mean? Oh, I accept that,' laughed Poppy, peering out of the sash window into her parents' garden, her

belly pressing against the cold glass, a ring of condensation misting its circumference.

Stevie gazed fondly at her sister, who looked more fecund than ever this morning, her cheeks rhubarb-pink, her pregnant belly high and round beneath her crisp white Boden nightie, like a large pudding bowl under the skin. She looked so happy, so light, almost air-filled despite her girth. Poppy was never happier than when she was pregnant. And it suited her. Stevie was certain that when she was eighty she'd be able to remember her sister exactly as she was now, would be able to flip the image up like a favourite old photo and immediately be transported back to this strange heady May morning at her parents' house, the air thick with pre-wedding tension and the smell of burning toast. By the age of eighty she'd know for certain whether, in her own lifetime, she'd managed to capture that same pregnant physicality, the secret galaxy pushing out the belly button, the genetic legacy assured. The thought made her panicky, prickling her mood further.

'Poppy, sorry if I sound a bit neurotic, but does my wedding have the air of disaster to you?' she appealed to her sister for reassurance. 'A fairground crash in slow motion?'

'*No!*' Poppy laughed, twisting her milkmaid-blonde hair over one shoulder. 'Don't worry about all the details. Mum's in control.'

'My point exactly.' But Stevie knew she had to take responsibility. She'd shirked too many of the preparatory nuptial duties and taken up her mother's offers of help fully aware of the risks. For the last six months she'd felt unexpectedly dislocated from the experience. Sometimes it felt like the whole bride thing was happening to someone else – her mother? – and she was watching it late at night on a fuzzy satellite channel.

'You know, what I didn't realise,' said Poppy thoughtfully, plaiting her hair loosely with slim tanned fingers, the pea-sized diamond on her engagement ring shattering rainbow rhomboids against the white bedroom wall, 'is that the interesting stuff happens *after* the wedding.' She looked up from her plait and grinned. 'Here's to you getting up the duff!'

Stevie raised her mother's mug in a mock cheers. Not for the first time, part of her wished the roles were reversed, as if she'd upset the natural sibling order in some way by not being the first to pop out the first grandchild. It would be nice to be in the position of dispensing sage womanly advice to her younger sister occasionally.

'When are you coming off the pill?' pursued Poppy, circling her belly with a flat palm that didn't indent the flesh in any way, suggesting it was hard as a rock.

'After the vows. Jez is keen to populate the planet as soon as possible.' Fully awake now that the hot dark tea had kicked in, Stevie recalled the website's conclusion about her age. 'Hold off on the Brora cot blanket though. I'm sure it'll take decades to conceive,' she added drily.

'Oh rubbish! Piers barely had to touch me.'

'You were twenty-six.'

In hindsight, although it had seemed a rather dull choice at the time, Stevie mused, Poppy had done the sensible thing. She had eschewed the creative vanities of publishing and PR and gone to work in a male-dominated industry – a city accounting firm, much to her mother's incomprehension – where, at the age of twenty-three, she'd swiftly met the handsome, dependable corporate lawyer, Piers. They'd married two years later, in clouds of white-pleated chiffon, at Piers' small family church outside Winchester. The wedding breakfast, held at Piers' parents' large country house – geographically just outside her mother's influence, thus allowing Poppy to

organise *her* day without the intrusion of incense sticks or lentils – involved salmon and a chocolate fondue. Of the two hundred guests, Stevie hadn't managed to snog a single one, because even back then they were all – bar the odd, wet and boring individual – in couples. Poppy's first child, Sophie, darling in every way, was conceived on the Tuscan honeymoon four-poster. Finn came along exactly two years later, as planned. And now there was another Fitzpatrick kicking his heels in Poppy's womb, another perfectly timed sibling.

Stevie tried very hard not to be jealous. She was not always successful. But she consoled herself that fulfilment couldn't have happened to a nicer person. And with the fact that Poppy and Piers were exactly the kind of people – socially responsible, intelligent and solvent – who *should* reproduce. They deserved a government subsidy – their children were hardly destined for Asbos. Well behaved and charming, both had inherited Poppy's benign temperament, the same sane sky-blue eyes, unsullied by any disappointment, so unlike her own odd yellow-brown ones which her father always said were 'far too knowing', and used to get her into trouble at school for 'insolence'. In her dark period – aged thirty to thirty-two – after a particularly long romantic drought when she'd begun to seriously doubt she'd ever marry or have children or, indeed, ever have sex again, it had occurred to her that evolution had cunningly deselected her, satisfied that her sister was doing her bit in continuing the Jonson line.

'I'm afraid the mug of tea came with an ulterior motive, Steve. Would you do me a favour?' Poppy broke her prettiest smile. It made her look about fifteen years old. 'We're attempting a tantrum-free trip to the Natural History Museum. I'd kill for a shower first so I don't get mistaken for

a lump of prehistoric taxidermy. Would you mind shepherding Finn for a bit?'

'Seems like a fair exchange for a cup of tea.'

'Thanks, sis.'

Piers poked his head round the door. A tall and tubby thirtysomething in pale Gap jeans, he sported the kind of inoffensive English good looks advertisers used to sell bran-based breakfast cereals. 'Poppy, can we make a move, darling? Please.' He tapped his chunky diver's watch. 'I'll see you downstairs in ten?'

'Sure, sure.' Poppy scanned the room. 'Where the devil is he? *Finn!*' A toddler was on the loose.

'The artist in residence.' Stevie laughed and nodded towards the hall annex, which Finn was creatively redecorating with orange crayon.

'Christ.' Not seeing the funny side, Poppy lurched towards her two year old and scooped him up, Finn's stout fat legs – half baby-half boy – kicked, rigid with defiant energy. She arrested the crayon. 'Go sit with Aunt Stevie, darling.'

'Don't wanna.'

Stevie tried not to feel hurt. He was two, for God's sake. It didn't amount to rejection.

Then Finn spotted his aunt's laptop, wedged between bed and wall where she'd let it slump when she'd fallen asleep. It was blinking irresistibly, a call to mischief. He waddled towards the bed. 'Wanna.'

'Here, Finnballs sweetie.' Stevie pulled back the bed covers, the covers she'd had since she was twelve years old, the colour dragged out of the patchwork by her mother's accidental boil washes. Like a comfort blanket, she slept better under this ratty bit of faded cotton than any of her own crunchy White Company sheets back home at the Bayswater flat she shared with Jez. As the sun beamed dusty rays against

her face, she suddenly felt very glad she'd come back to her parents' for the weekend to finalise the wedding plans. It was nicely cyclical somehow. Finn dug under the duvet and reached up to the laptop prize, releasing a condensed-milk smell from the folds of his Power Ranger pyjamas.

'Step away from the technology.' Stevie swiped the computer out of his reach, ruffled his curls. Thwarted, Finn sulkily picked at the bedroom wall, digging his fingernails into buttons of Blu Tak, curly-edged old school photos, a starburst of peeling Wham stickers and a hard ancient pink Hubba Bubba globule that she'd stuck there during a teenage sulk sometime in the late eighties.

'Make sure he doesn't catapult that stair gate, won't you?' Poppy shouted behind her as she clattered downstairs. 'And watch the window that doesn't lock . . .'

Finn listened warily to his mother's retreating footsteps. He stamped a salivary finger on an old dappled school photograph. 'Aunty Stevie.'

'Yes, that's me! About a hundred years ago. Very well spotted.' She kissed his head, staring at the photo. Yes, she was an awkward-looking teenager, with not nearly enough confidence to inhabit that chunky 'big boned' body. Over the years she had pummelled her figure into better shape with gym classes, lifting her flat, rather square bottom half an inch and further cinching in her fifties-housewife waist. But the photo caught her stocky teenage silhouette, the one hard-wired into her self-esteem at the impressionable age of fifteen in chilly school gym changing rooms and verruca-infested municipal pools. In her own mind, no matter how slim she got, she'd always be the girl at school boys teasingly called 'pudding'. And pudding would have been grateful for her fiancé: strawberry blond (verging on ginger), warm-hearted, colourful and handsome, even if he had recently acquired a

tummy that shuddered on his middle like an underdone poached egg.

'Stevie. Jezzy. Wedding,' said Finn solemnly, as if assimilating the news for the first time.

The word 'wedding' was destabilising. Stevie felt herself tense.

Finn looked up, blue eyes wide and unblinking. 'Want wedding cake.'

She smiled. 'I would feed you creamed meringues for breakfast if I had any in the near vicinity. But I haven't. Cake, later.'

'Later,' parroted Finn, a little sadly, as if later was forever away. 'Wedding, later.'

Stevie bit off a branching split end of hair – recently missed by her hairdresser – and, in a disciplined fashion, tried to conjure up the gooey fondant feelings of the proposal, to compensate for the unsettling and wholly inappropriate feelings of negativity.

She closed her eyes. April. Friday night. Jez had spent the majority of that day with his father playing golf. When she'd met him, at about six p.m., beneath a spectacular gun-metal sky, he'd looked unusually flushed and insisted on taking her to supper at The Wolseley. By that point, she realised now, their relationship had needed good restaurants, theatre, cinema, external drama of some kind, because it had hit a plateau; the initial moving-in-together excitement had faded and the future remained unlabelled and uncertain.

In the restaurant, encased beneath the vaulted ceilings and black columns and shouting above the resulting bad acoustics, they'd discussed Jez's recent promotion at YR-Brand. Jez had told her off for not being more excited for him. He'd paid the bill, which was unusual since he was usually happy to split. After two years they'd got to that stage

too. Hand in hand, they'd walked through the West End and over Waterloo Bridge, London's lights splattered like fireworks in the oil-black Thames water, the city throbbing with noise and crowds. The usual vague whisper of violence carried on the wind with the fast-food litter. A gust skimmed across the water from the south, sticking hair to her glossed lips. She remembered cursing for not going to the toilet before they left the restaurant and wondering if she'd be able to endure a Tube journey home when Jez grabbed her suddenly, pincing her elbows tight, pulling her towards him, thrusting his tongue into her surprised mouth. 'Marry me!' he'd said, coming up for air. 'Marry me, pumpkin.' He'd looked as shocked as she, as if the proposal was entirely spontaneous, a bodily function he couldn't control.

Of course Stevie had said, 'Er, yes.' It was the affirmative answer she'd rehearsed as a little girl. Jez had caught her unawares – she had no idea he was close to proposing – and at a vulnerable moment with Perrier Jouet coursing through her veins, the wind rolling over the Thames and tossing her hair from her face like a romantic heroine from a BBC drama. And in that one-syllable puff of air, scented with goat's cheese crostini, both their destinies changed for ever.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, she could now see that there was a subtext to her 'Er, yes'. At that point in her life, as she'd crossed that particular bridge into her mid-thirties, Stevie had begun to suspect that she just wasn't marriage material. She'd voiced her concerns to her father. 'I wouldn't worry too much. Marriage is an overrated institution anyway. It suits girls like Poppy,' he'd said distractedly, hole-punching a wad of lecture notes. 'I'm not sure it would suit you.' Her spirits had plummeted. She'd always feared that in love's game of musical chairs she'd be the one left standing. She'd had boyfriends, of course. Not loads of them,

just enough to make a regular bikini wax worthwhile. But the relationships hadn't *gone* anywhere. It was hard. But she'd accepted the consoling drinks with girlfriends (which always made her feel more like a victim somehow) and put herself in the ex's Dunlop Green Flash trainers and realised that things were slightly different if you were male, heterosexual, over thirty and living in London.

And then there were the Tube bombs, she reminded herself. The worst could have happened, would have happened, had Jez not lost his striped Paul Smith socks that morning and had his mother not phoned to complain that they weren't visiting his father on his birthday that weekend, had he not been running so late. Had Jez's coordinates matched the bomber's, then all the possibilities of her life would have blown apart too. And that made her love Jez more, need him more, in a visceral sniff-his-neck kind of way. They'd surely been given a second chance, for a reason, she'd rationalised. At that time, that hot, dirty London July, everything felt fragile, vulnerable. The bombs made both of them cling together. It made them want to commit. It had been hard to tell what was love, what was insecurity. Now nearly a year had passed without incident and things felt rather less fragile. Armageddon had been postponed. The future could last for another fifty years quite easily, Stevie thought, burying her nose in the dandelion clock of Finn's hair, a swell of sadness rising in her throat.

Still, facts were facts. She was thirty-four, going on thirty-seven. She was not suited to single life in the twenty-first century, loathing the idea of speed dating, internet dating, plotting her social life around the likelihood of meeting single guys as if she were a dog on heat that needed studding, hanging out in bars, being overlooked by men for her prettier friend, when she'd rather be at home reading or

watching her *Lost* box-set. And as for the endless, painful, waiting by the phone, well, she wouldn't do it. She hated that prescribed passivity. So she'd made a habit of phoning men to ask why they hadn't phoned her. Disastrous move, always. So, yes, as her grandmother had declared over a tea-dunked custard cream at the announcement of her engagement, Stevie was lucky. She had managed to get under the wire, *just* in time.

'Cuggle,' demanded Finn, sensing her attention wavering. 'Want cuggle.'

A what? Stevie looked down. A cuddle? How lovely. Of course. Her body ricocheted with endorphins as she pulled her nephew towards her, kissing him behind his ear and inhaling deeply. Only like this, she realised, buried in her nephew's infant deliciousness, could she exist solely in the moment. Only like this did she feel quiet inside, as if suspended in a kind of happy hormone soup. Only like this did she feel that there was a *point* in anything. It was all very weird. But this was not an urge that could be rationalised. Nor was the urge particularly convenient. It felt like some kind of surrender. But there was no getting away from it. Shit. She was broody.