Tales from a Hen Weekend

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Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

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ABOUT KATIE

'I can't believe it. I just can't believe you're finally getting married,' says Mum through a mouthful of pins.

'Watch you don't swallow one of those. And anyway – thanks a bundle! What do you mean, finally? Anyone would think I was a seventy-year-old confirmed spinster!'

I'm only thirty-one, for God's sake. Katie's my name – Katie Halliday – and I'm getting married in a couple of months to Matt Davenport. My mum, Margie, is in a terrible state already, fussing about dresses and flowers and menus. I'm beginning to think I'll be glad when it's all over.

'We didn't want all this fuss,' I say wearily, for the thousandth time; not that anyone's listening. 'We wanted a quiet wedding. Simple. Just close family and friends.'

'I know, I know, but you've got to have a *wedding dress*, dear, whatever you say.'

I'm wearing the wedding dress right now. I'm standing on a stool in the middle of my sister's living room, with the unfinished hem trailing over the carpet and the three of them, my mum, my sister Lisa and my Auntie Joyce, walking around me as if I was an exhibit in a museum, shaking their heads, tugging at seams here and darts there, sticking pins in random places and sighing about my waistline.

'If you could *just* lose a couple more pounds before the day,' says Lisa with a sigh, 'it would hang so much better over your hips.'

'Sorry to disappoint you, but this is me. What you see is what you get. If you can't make a dress that fits me as I am, Lise, then don't bother about it – I'll get married in my jeans and—'

‘Hey, hey, come on, calm down! No need for that’ Mum reprimands me. Honestly, standing here on this stool with my arms up, being prodded and poked and measured, I feel like I’m about six years old again, being kitted out for the new school year. ‘Lisa’s being very good to you, making you this lovely dress – you’re lucky you’ve got such a clever sister!’

Tell me about it. Lisa’s only two years older than me but there’s such a huge gulf between her life and mine, she might as well be from a different generation and a different family. She’s been married to Richard for six years, they have a perfect marriage and two perfect children, Molly and Charlie; she cooks like Jamie Oliver *every day*, works out at the gym twice a week while the kids are at their Yoga for Tots class, and is a professional wedding dress designer. Hence the dress. I suppose it was a bit unrealistic of me to expect to be allowed to get married in my jeans.

‘I know. I’m sorry. But I can’t think about dieting right now. I’ve got enough to worry about. Just make it hang however it wants – OK, Lise?’

Lisa sighs again and shakes her head as if she’s a doctor with an uncooperative patient.

‘I won’t sue you if I look rough in the wedding photos,’ I say, in an attempt at a joke.

She looks aghast.

‘You’re *not* going to look rough! You’re going to look *beautiful*!’

Blimey. Didn’t think we could stretch to plastic surgery.

‘At least you haven’t got to fork out for a proper wedding dress,’ says Matt at home later.

I might have joked about wearing my jeans, but I’m not thrilled by his choice of words. *Proper?!*

‘Lisa designs wedding dresses for a *living*! I couldn’t get much more *proper* . . .’

‘You know what I mean. Steve at work – his girlfriend wouldn’t settle for anything less than this bloody great frothy meringue thing from some posh shop in the West End, cost a fortune.’

‘*Most* girls spend a fortune on their wedding dress – or

hire one. I'm just lucky that Lisa's my sister,' I point out, realising I'm sounding exactly like my mum.

'Yeah, well: we haven't *got* a fortune to spend, have we, babe. So I guess I'm lucky I'm marrying someone who doesn't care about all that stuff!'

'Just don't you forget it,' I tell him lightly, trying to sound like someone who *doesn't care about all that stuff*. To be honest – and I know I'm being contrary here – it rankles slightly to be cast in the role of some kind of latter-day Cinderella who's happy to go to the ball in her rags.

'And I'm sure the dress will look lovely,' adds Matt, watching me carefully; as usual, he seems to guess what I'm thinking.

'Lisa thinks it'll hang better if I lose some weight.'

'I'll bin the last chocolate biscuit then, shall I?'

'No! Matt, give me that … I can't *believe* you've eaten the whole packet! You pig!'

Look at him. The bastard, he's holding the packet above his head, laughing at me jumping up and down trying to reach it.

'Go, girl! That's it! Work up a sweat! Work off those pounds!'

'*Not* funny. So *you* think I need to lose weight too?'

He sighs and drops the biscuit packet into my hand. It's not the last one: there are three left.

'It was a joke, Kate.'

But I don't want the frigging biscuits any more. I put them down on the worktop, crossly, and start rummaging in the fridge for something to cook for dinner.

'A *joke*, Kate, for fuck's sake!'

'All right, all right! Enough! Chicken or fish?'

'Whatever. Pasta or rice?' He gets a saucepan out of the cupboard and fills it with water.

'Whatever.'

And we're preparing the dinner in silence. Very mature! Does planning a wedding do this to everybody?

'I'm sure it's normal,' says Emily in the pub later. 'I'm sure Sean and I would be the same. It's just the tension, with all the preparations and everyone getting on your case, telling

you what you should be doing, what you should wear, who you should invite . . .'

She's right, of course. Everyone says how stressful it is, don't they. You only have to read the problem pages of *Wedding* magazine to see how true that is. Brides have nervous breakdowns. Mums and daughters fall out over the guest list. Whole families split up and never speak to each other again. Marriages break up before they've even happened. Why do we bother?

'Why are we bothering, Em? We've been perfectly happy living together . . .'

'Don't be silly. You *are* perfectly happy. You and Matt are fantastic together. You can laugh off a bit of stressy bickering. It's going to be a lovely wedding. You'll both have a great day.'

'So why aren't *you* bothering? Eh? If it's such a great idea what's stopping you and Sean doing it?'

They've been together nearly as long as Matt and me. Emily and I were at university together so we've known each other nearly half our lives, and we see each other at least once a week. If I didn't have Em to talk to, I'd explode – all the worries and mess inside my head wouldn't have anywhere to go. You can't talk to men about half the stuff that goes on in your head – it would scare the shit out of them.

'Maybe we will, one day,' she says casually. 'Maybe. We'll see how you two get on, first!'

'You can have my dress when I've finished with it. It'll hang better on you,' I say gloomily.

'I bet it looks gorgeous. Come on, finish your drink. The boys are getting another round in.'

The boys are laughing together at the bar, punching each other the way men do when they're being friendly. It's hard to imagine what they laugh about together when we're not listening. Em thinks it's something sexual and disgusting, but my money's on football. Some obscure joke about a rubbish goal, or a bit of teasing about the rubbish team one or the other of them supports. Matt's an Arsenal supporter and Sean's West Ham. To hear them insulting each other at times, you wouldn't guess they're actually good mates.

'Yeah, right – and what about that goal kick in the second half?' Sean plonks my glass down on the table in front of me without noticing it slopping over the side. 'The referee was a *total* fucking idiot. That decision was fucking criminal!'

'Bollocks!' says Matt. See? I was right. Bloody football. Anyone would think it was important. 'Face it, we were the better team. We played a fantastic game.' *We*? Since when did Matt play for the Arsenal?

'I didn't realise you were playing,' I say without looking up.

'What?'

They're both staring at me as if I've spoken in tongues. Emily giggles.

'Lighten up, you two,' she says. 'Can't you talk about anything other than football?'

Look at their faces! They're completely stumped now. They blink at each other over the tops of their beer glasses. *Other than football?* Jesus! What else is there?

'Um . . . so how's work then, Matt?' says Sean.

Em raises her eyebrows at me.

'Let them get on with it. Bless them, they've got simple needs. Work, sport, beer, sex . . .'

'And who cares about work, sport or beer?' I laugh.

Emily's right. I know that really. Matt and I are great together. We like the same things (apart from football): Italian food, forests, mountains, rock music, cheese and pickle sandwiches, cats, autumn, hot chocolate. We like the same sexual positions. Well, sorry, I know that's too much information, but it's important in a relationship. I've heard of couples breaking up because one loves doing it standing up and the other one would rather never have sex at all if it means getting out of bed for it. We're compatible. We pass all those psychological tests with flying colours – you know, the ones in women's magazines that give you situations and ask you to tick *Sometimes, Never, Always* or *Don't know,* and then you add up your scores and they tell you whether you should stay together forever or call it a day immediately. We always do brilliantly on those, and I try not to cheat. We know each other really well. We share everything; we're not

like those couples who have separate bank accounts and charge interest if they borrow money from each other. We've been together for nearly four years, lived together for three and a half, and we do everything together. Tell me one good reason why we shouldn't get married?

Exactly. There isn't one, is there?

So just remind me, if I keep panicking about these little bickering sessions we've started having: it's just the stress of this build-up to the wedding, that's all.

I did plan to keep it simple. I was only having two bridesmaids. Well – one bridesmaid, and one matron-of-honour, if you want to use the proper old-fashioned correct terms – Emily, and my sister. It was stressful enough getting my own dress made, without all that old malarkey about bridesmaids, until I remembered The Pledge.

The Pledge took place in the summer of 1989, on the back seat of the bus home from St Peter's Comprehensive School in Romford. Jude and I were fifteen at the time, and we'd been best friends since we started infants' school ten years earlier. We went everywhere together; people called us the Terrible Twins, but actually we were like negative images of each other. She was blonde, I was dark; she was tiny, I was big; she was quiet, I was noisy; she was sweet-natured, I was your typical stroppy teenager. I should perhaps warn you at this point that neither of us has changed one bit since we've grown up.

Jude's family were about to move to Ireland, and we were considering a suicide pact. We'd been considering it ever since Jude broke the news about her dad's new job in Cork, but we couldn't agree on the means to our ends. Jude wanted to get the train to Southend, go to the end of the pier and jump off, holding hands – but I was terrified of water so I didn't fancy it. I was all for putting our heads in the oven, but Jude's house was all-electric and I wasn't sure my mum's oven was big enough for both our heads at the same time. We spent so much time debating the methods, we never actually got round to it, and here we were on our last day together. Jude was off to Ireland the next morning, and we were both still alive. Tragic!

‘Let’s run away,’ she said.

‘Where to?’

‘I don’t know. Somewhere in Ireland. It’s a big place. They’d never find us.’

‘Why Ireland? That’s not fair. Just because your family are going …’

‘All right, then. Where?’

‘London. Everyone goes to London to run away.’

‘Bor*ing*. Twenty minutes on the train. That’s not running away, it’s commuting.’

‘But we can disappear there. And eat in the soup kitchens.’

‘What type of soup? I can’t eat tomato, it brings up my mouth ulcers.’

‘Jude, we’re talking life or death here, and all you can worry about is your mouth ulcers.’

‘I don’t want to disappear in London. I want us to stay together, but …’

‘But what? How can we? I’ve begged and *begged* my mum to let me come and live with you in Ireland, but she’s just completely cruel.’

‘Mine too. How do you think *I* feel, being taken away from St Peter’s, and everyone? At least you’ll still have all the *others*.’

We brooded in silence, staring out of the windows, both probably thinking the same thoughts about who would want to be my friend after Jude had gone. And who would be *her* friend in some strange school in her new, strange country.

‘I suppose we’d better not, then,’ I said at length, with a sigh. ‘If we run away, they’ll just get the police after us.’

‘My mum and dad say you can come and stay as soon as we’re settled.’

‘Yeah. Mum says you can come back and stay with me whenever you want, too.’

I can’t remember whether we hugged each other at that point, or whether we cried. Probably not. A load of the other fifteen-year olds from St Peter’s were on the same bus and we wouldn’t have wanted to look uncool. But I remember The Pledge as clearly as if it was yesterday.

‘When I get married,’ said Jude, still staring out of the window as the bus trundled along the suburban roads back to

our estate, 'you can come over to Ireland to be my bridesmaid.'

'What if I get married first?' I pointed out.

'Then I'll be *your* bridesmaid, of course!' She turned and flashed me a grin. 'You'll probably be first, anyway. Loads of boys always fancy you. They never look at me.'

'Don't be stupid—'

'Anyway …' she cut me short. 'Let's make it a pledge. We'll be each other's bridesmaids, yeah? No matter what? Even if you get a new best friend?'

'Definitely! And I won't! *You're* my best friend,' I said stoutly. 'And you always will be.'

So you see – Jude has to be a bridesmaid too. There's no way I can renege on The Pledge. Without me even trying, this wedding looks like it could go from a small, quiet, private do, to being the social event of the century.

The three lilac bridesmaid dresses have been finished for months and hanging up in Lisa's wardrobe. Jude sent over her measurements, and when the dress was at the tacked-together stage, she came over for a weekend and had a fitting. Since then Lisa's been on at me about fifteen times a week:

'Tell Jude she'd better not put on any weight. Not even an *ounce*, tell her! When she comes over for the wedding there won't be time to let out any seams.'

'Jude's as skinny as a twig,' I tell her wearily. 'She's not like me. She doesn't have to go on a diet every time she nibbles a biscuit.'

'Yes, well, she'd better stay skinny, otherwise it's going to be a *complete* disaster.'

'She'll have to wear her jeans,' I say, grinning. Lisa's just too easy to wind up.

She closes her eyes and shakes her head.

'Don't even *joke* about it, Kate. I can't bear it.'

See what I mean about weddings? They make people lose all sense of proportion. Someone getting too fat for their bridesmaid's dress is *not* an international incident. At the minute I think it might actually lighten things up a little.

'You're not putting on any weight, are you?' I ask Jude on the phone. Again.

'Jesus, God, can you ever give it a rest about me putting on weight?' Over the years, along with the Irish accent, Jude's developed this weird habit of blasphemy that sometimes even extends to the theatrical *Jesus, Mary and Joseph*! To my English ears it sounds so fake, I'm never quite sure whether she's kind of taking the piss out of herself. 'I'd be thrilled with meself if I even put on so much as an ounce, but it just never happens, no matter what I eat.'

'Well, *don't*. Not even an ounce. Lisa's doing my head in about letting out seams at the eleventh hour.'

'Not a chance, Kate. Tell your sister she can sleep easy in her bed. She's no need to worry on that score – I'm as bony as ever. I wish I *could* put on a little weight in some areas. Like me boobs for instance. It'd be nice to be recognised as a woman from one angle at least.'

'After the wedding you can have a boob job. Just don't go sprouting any till after the twenty-first of May.'

'Katie, I've gone all through puberty, my teens and twenties without sprouting any, as you put it, so why in the name of God you think I'm suddenly going to become Madonna herself just to ruin your wedding . . .'

'It's not me. It's Lisa, going on and on about the dress . . .'

'And I *don't* want a boob job, thank you very much for the thought, even if I could ever afford one in a million years!'

'So think yourself lucky, then, you skinny thing!' I'm a size 14 on a good day (don't ask me about the bad days) and when I talk to people like Jude I become so conscious of my size I can practically feel my bum, stomach and legs flopping and flabbing about like giant jellies. 'And big boobs are overrated. They get in the way. I can't buy nice pretty little bras with delicate shoestring straps, you know. I have to go for industrial harnesses.'

'Overrated? Not to men, they're not!'

'Come on, Jude – we're not going out with fifteen-year-old schoolboys now! Men do grow out of the breast-fixation stage. Fergus loves you the way you are, doesn't he.'

'Yeah. I suppose.'

There's a silence I can't quite work out. Is she upset? Have I offended her? It's so hard not seeing someone's face. It's hard being best friends, oldest friends, but only getting together a couple of times a year.

'I can't wait to see you, Judy.'

'Me too. Only a couple of weeks now!'

'Yeah. God, I'm looking forward to the hen weekend so much! I think I'm looking forward to it more than the bloody wedding at the moment.'

She laughs.

'I don't think Matt would be too flattered to hear that.'

'No.' Suddenly this topic isn't funny any more. 'No, he wouldn't.'

'But he'd know you were only joking, Katie, so he would.'

Maybe. But I'm not so sure.

The hen weekend is a bit of a sore point, actually. Rather, the stag weekend is. Or to be more accurate, the stag *week and a half*. You know I told you about how compatible we are? Well, the hen and the stag are the first things we've really disagreed about. I'm trying to keep off the subject, to be quite honest. But how do you keep off the subject of something that's going to happen in only two weeks' time?