

Young Wives' Tales

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Extract

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I

Monday 4 September

Rose

I close the door with a little too much force; the slam reverberates throughout the house. In the instant that the bang disappears I notice the emptiness. A void. Silence. I consider shouting 'Hello' but I know there is no one to answer. The blankness shouldn't be a surprise. This is the third September I have returned to an empty home after a long summer break and noticed the all-consuming silence. The calm is partly a relief, partly heartbreaking. This year the hush is particularly distressing because I did not have to cajole, bribe, beg or threaten my boys to get them to surrender their vice-like grips at the school gate. This year, Sebastian ran into the playground without so much as a backward glance, let alone a kiss goodbye, and even Henry (normally the most openly affectionate twin) was only prepared to wave at me. From a distance.

Haven't I done a marvellous job? Excellent. Wonderful. I should be congratulated. I have produced confident, independent and secure boys. Well done me.

I think I'm going to cry.

I briefly consider pouring myself a glass of whisky. But dismiss the silly idea because in reality the only spirit in my cupboard is cooking sherry. I could have a glass of wine. I think there's half a bottle of Chablis in the fridge but I content myself with putting on the kettle. Strong coffee is the more sensible choice and I'm famed for my sensible nature.

The phone rings; its cheerful tring is a Red Cross parcel. I pick up hastily and gratefully.

'It's me.'

Me, in this case, is Connie, one of my best and oldest friends. She sounds tearful and I remember that it's her eldest daughter's first day at school.

'How was Fran's drop-off?'

'OK,' she mutters; she doesn't sound convinced. 'She looked amazing. The uniform is so cute. But . . .'

'But . . . ?' I prompt.

'Is it usual for them to cling to your leg and sob? I couldn't pry her off; she was like a tiny monkey. She kept begging to come home with Flora and me. She even offered to tidy up her Barbies – that's unprecedented.' Connie is trying to laugh but I'm not fooled.

'Very usual,' I assure her. 'Do you fancy a coffee?'

'I want vodka, but I'll settle for coffee. I'll be with you in five. I'm just around the corner.'

If I round up, Connie and I have known each other for nearly twenty years, which is phenomenal and unbelievable. To have known someone that long must mean I'm a fully fledged adult, and digesting that fact requires a mountain of sugar, not a teaspoon. We origin-

ally met through my sister, Daisy. Daisy and Connie went to university together; they were very tight. Connie and I have only become particularly friendly in the last five or six years. We both have kids and, sadly, Daisy doesn't. I've found that kids pull you towards women that you would never have considered being friends with if you didn't have children in common – it's one of the perks of the job. Besides, Connie was very kind to me when my husband left me for one of our mutual friends.

The situation was officially ugly.

Connie was a great pal of Lucy, *the mistress*, but despite that she's managed to walk a diplomatic line and remain friends with both of us. Sometimes, I think I should have demanded that Connie take a more moralistic stance. I should have asked her to spurn her old buddy and my deceiving ex but I couldn't risk it. Friends were thin on the ground at the time and so few people are prepared to see the world in black and white. Extremism isn't fashionable. Not even extremely nice. People who are extremely nice are mistrusted or taken advantage of. Believe me, I'm talking from experience. So, I make do with knowing that Connie is a great friend to me and I ignore the fact that she's a great friend to Lucy as well.

Since Peter left, I've battled with every instinct when talking to Connie and somehow I've trained myself to make only casual, polite enquiries about Peter and Lucy. I do not allow myself the indulgence of ridiculing or vilifying them, which would embarrass and compromise

her. I limit myself to the type of enquiry one makes after an old work colleague two people might have in common – civil, distant, even a little distracted – and I glean the occasional piece of choice information using this covert method.

Sometimes, in the early days, I couldn't help myself; little bits of pain or grief would eke out however tightly I tried to guard my feelings – and I'd mention Peter's name. I might have moaned about him or admitted I missed him. Yet I did this with the absolute certainty that I could trust Connie. She'd never, ever repeat to Lucy anything I say about him. This is a remarkable feat of self-restraint for anyone, but for Connie it's a breathtaking tribute to our friendship. Connie isn't discreet and it must kill her to keep mum. I've never allowed myself to reveal my true feelings about Lucy at all. The thing is I don't have the vocab – I don't like using expletives.

I don't worry that Lucy talks about me to Connie. I know that if she does Connie will be loyal and supportive of me, but I can't imagine the scenario ever arising. I don't think I've ever entered Lucy's consciousness, not even when she was eating Sunday roast at my house and giving my husband a quick blow-job in our cloakroom before I served up the pudding and coffee. She was always too busy giving literal meaning to the words 'Let's take an intercourse break' to think about me. I'm not glamorous enough to rank among her friends and I'm not rich enough to be her client. Therefore, I am beneath her notice.

True to her word, Connie arrives at my house within moments. I open the door and see that she's fighting tears.

'There *is* something worse than them clinging to your leg and begging you not to leave, you know,' I comment.

Connie plonks Flora, her youngest, on the kitchen floor and sits on a bar stool; she reaches for the biscuit tin.

'What's worse?'

'Sebastian and Henry literally skipped away from me this morning. Not so much as a casual endearment flung my way.'

As I'd hoped, Connie puts aside her own upset and grins sympathetically. 'I saw them in the playground, they did seem really settled. Running around like crazy. I think it was a good idea to stagger the drop-off on the first day so it wasn't too overwhelming for the new starters.'

'You mean new parents, don't you?'

'Yes.' She smiles, more relaxed now.

I turn away from Connie and busy myself with making the coffee so I can ask the next question with some dignity. 'Did you see Peter and Lucy drop Auriol off this morning?'

Because, here's the thing. In among the several million crimes against me that my bleep bleep ex-husband has committed, this one possibly takes the prize. He and his hussy mistress – oh, OK then, his wife – have decided to send their child to *my* school. My school! Well, of course, when I say *my* school,

I mean the boys' school. Hello? Isn't anything sacrosanct? Well, no, obviously not. With her form I can't imagine Lucy being squeamish about moving in on my school turf.

I thought I'd be safe. I never thought Lucy would choose the state school route for her daughter. Peter and Lucy both work in the City and earn shedloads. They could easily afford a posh little school with incredible alumni.

Sebastian and Henry's school is gorgeous. It does really well in the league tables and there's a marvellous playground; it's almost impossible to get a school with grass in London, yet this one has enormous trees with preservation orders. I'd carefully researched school catchment areas even before I conceived. I insisted Peter and I bought in a particular road to guarantee that we'd get our kids into Holland House. Then several years later, after Lucy had stolen my husband and destroyed my family, the woman had the cheek to announce that she thought it would be nice for Auriol to go to the same school as her big brothers.

Curse the cow.

This had to be a calculated move to hurt me. And it did hurt me, which is astounding because I'd thought that I was already dead to pain that she could inflict, slain by a thousand cuts. Their house in Holland Park isn't even in catchment, but Lucy visited the school and charmed the pants off Mr Walker, the headmaster (and I may mean literally, who knows with that conniving she-devil?). She spun the tale of how it was such a good

idea for Sebastian and Henry because they ought to be close to their sister. Cow, bitch, witch. How dare she? As if she cares about the boys' welfare. If she did, then she wouldn't have slept with my husband, while pretending to be my friend, would she? And Auriol is not their *sister*. She is a *half* sister, which is a very important distinction. They have a father in common and nothing more, and what does that mean really? All Peter had to do to earn the title of father was get me up the duff and that simply wasn't too taxing, whatever he might claim now.

It's not like he's had to mop their tiny bodies with cold flannels to bring down temperatures when they were babies, nor has he once applied calamine lotion to a single chicken-pox spot. He hasn't ever taken them to the dentist, the doctor or the optician. He hasn't yet cut nails or hair. He hasn't packed lunches. He does not do their homework with them. He does not have their friends to his house for tea. He does not sew labels into their uniforms. He does not answer their questions on death or bullies.

He does play football with them on Sunday mornings, he bought them Game Boy Advance and introduced them to their first love – Sonic – and he does take them on holiday to Cornwall once a year. It's not that he's a terrible father, in fact he's quite a good father; I'm just saying being a father isn't that tricky, is it? Least not from where I'm standing.

It's not that I have anything against little Auriol, either. She's actually a fairly sweet child, especially

considering she's handicapped with the most evil mother known to the western world since Snow White's stepmother. But really . . . the school! Isn't it enough for the woman that she has my husband and I don't have a husband at all, mine or anyone else's? She has silky blonde hair, pert breasts, long legs, lots of cash and more shoes in her wardrobe than Russell & Bromley stock each season. While I have red frizzy hair, breasts that schoolboys would describe as bazookas and fat legs that have so many varicose veins popping and swelling that I look like I'm wearing the tube map. Lucy is a woman comfortable in her skin (although in my opinion she ought to be wearing sackcloth and ashes and beating herself soundly every day). I'm basically a nice enough person who lacks confidence, marked talents and sometimes even a sense of humour. I guess because I can give such a realistic account of us both I understand why my husband left me for her.

But I did have the school. That was my territory. I am class rep this year. A position I've done my time to earn. I always volunteer to take the kids on trips when the teachers need an extra pair of hands. I was solely responsible for the cake stall at the summer fair and for two years in a row I sold more raffle tickets than any other mother for the Christmas tombola. I'm known and liked at Holland House. The school gate is my social life, my haven in times of need and where I get a buzz. That's important. That's sacred. It should be untouchable.

I say none of this. I take a deep breath, turn to

Connie with two full cups of coffee and a wide grin and repeat my question. 'So did you happen to see Peter and Lucy at the gate this morning?'

'No. Eva, the latest nanny, dropped Auriol off.'

'I hope she settles,' I say with a smile.

I can't quite meet Connie's eye so I concentrate on blowing my coffee to cool it off. I do hope the little girl settles. I wouldn't want any kid to be unsettled. But, on the other hand, if she doesn't settle they might move her to another school. I wish her well but mostly I wish her well away.

Connie reaches to squeeze my arm. 'Are you OK with Auriol coming to Holland House, Rose? It's not an easy situation.'

'Oh, it's fine,' I lie.

'I feel a little bit to blame. I always think that Lucy was influenced to move to Holland Park after Luke and I moved to Notting Hill.'

Connie is a lovely girl but a bit self-centred, and she does hold a general belief that the whole world revolves around her and that everyone's actions are a result of, or a reaction to, her own. To be fair, she is aware of this trait in herself and, more often than not, fights it.

'Or maybe she just moved here to piss you off,' she adds with a grin.

'Maybe, but she hasn't. It's great that the boys are just around the corner from their dad if they ever need him.'

I lie convincingly now. I used to be hopeless at telling the littlest white fib but all skills can be developed with practice.

‘Yes. I guess he can drop in any time,’ adds Connie.

I nod and refrain from pointing out that he never has. Instead, I offer her another biscuit and ask if she managed to buy Fran a book bag. They’ve been hard to get hold of – the school outfitter miscalculated demand.

‘Yes, got it. Am I supposed to sew a label on to it or can I just write her name on the flap thing?’

‘You need to sew a label on the handle. It should be initial and then surname, in blue. Times New Roman font,’ I reply confidently. My feet well and truly on *terra firma*.

Connie stays for an hour but I can’t persuade her to stay for lunch. She even resists my offer of home-baked bread and soup.

‘Are you sure? It’s organic. Over six different vegetables in it. I made a huge batch for the boys, too huge as it turned out. We didn’t manage to eat it all.’

‘Rose, you put me to shame. Fran and Flora never get to eat like that. My idea of a healthy meal is a bowl of pasta and some frozen peas,’ she says. ‘Can we come round for our tea one day this week so that they get a few veggies and something organic inside them?’

I laugh and we agree to have tea together on Thursday. I assume and hope Connie is exaggerating her lack of skills in the kitchen. It’s true that historically cooking has not been one of her talents, but surely she knows that she has a responsibility to the children now. Hasn’t every mum converted to organic produce? I start to tell her how simple it is to make soup, but I don’t even get

as far as explaining the most efficient way to prepare and freeze stock when I see her eyes glaze over.

‘You know, I always just buy the cubes,’ she comments, as she hugs me goodbye and makes for the door.

I remember the day when there was nothing easier on this earth than persuading Connie to waste time. She was the undisputed queen of sloth. Of course, that was when she was pretending to be a management consultant. Now she is a photographer and runs her own business. As yet her photography business isn’t making her millions but it’s clear that the job satisfaction she gets from her work is priceless. At least she no longer resents her husband for enjoying his work as an architect.

After Connie leaves I wash the breakfast pots and then clean the house from top to bottom. I congratulate myself as I manage to dust on top of wardrobes and vacuum under the beds. I spend over two hours tidying the boys’ bedroom. It is extraordinary how time flies when you’re sorting Lego bricks into different colours and sizes. I do a basket of ironing and put on two loads of washing. One is drying at the moment. I’ll iron that tonight while I’m watching TV. I make a ham quiche and peel the vegetables for tea.

At 3.15 p.m. I put on a dab of lipgloss and set off to school. I feel a bit guilty. I should have made more of an effort with my appearance. Some of the mums always arrive at the school gate with full make-up and the latest high-street must-haves. But, then again, they have men over four feet tall to make an effort for.

I can't imagine Sebastian or Henry noticing whether I'm wearing the latest fashion statement or an old favourite peach M & S T-shirt; one that's been comfortable in my wardrobe for a decade. I'm more of a slummy mummy than a yummy mummy.

That said, although it is only a short walk to the school (literally two minutes) and it's a sunny afternoon, I don't leave the house without finding a cardigan. The sight of my wobbly, flabby arms is not something I want to share. I'm a size sixteen, or eighteen in the less generous brands. I've been this size since I got pregnant and this doesn't bother me at all. Or at least it doesn't bother me enough to make me want to do anything about it. I hate diets, and the only exercise I enjoy is walking the dog, which I do regularly. I do this more for the good of my heart than my figure, though. I've never been skinny. My wedding dress was a size fourteen and had to be let out a little around the bust. I suppose the difference is in those days my bust made men trip over their tongues, while now my boobs hang so low the only person that's likely to trip on them is me.

It's a very pleasant afternoon; rather more summer than autumn because the seasons no longer know when to change. When I was a girl you were guaranteed golden leaves underfoot almost the moment you pulled your school tie out of the wardrobe but it's not the same now. Everything is topsy-turvy. I saw crocuses sprouting in Hyde Park this August. I sometimes think the whole world is going mad. I hurry along the path

worrying whether the boys are likely to have lost their blazers if they've taken them off.

As I approach the school gate I see two or three mums already clustering and my pulse quickens. I like this time of day. In the mornings, at drop-off, none of us have time to chat; we're all a little too harassed. In the afternoons I get my dose of adult company. I notice that all the other mums have younger siblings with them. Some in arms and strollers, others pulling on skirt hems. My arms feel empty and for a moment I don't know what to do with them.

We swap pleasantries; catching up on news about where people have been on their hols, comparing which after-school clubs we've enrolled our children in this term and suggesting dates for tea visits.

'Did you get away this summer, Rose?' asks Lauren Taylor. A mum of three, her eldest daughter is in the twins' year. Her middle one's in reception and the youngest is in the stroller.

'Yes. We hired a *gîte* in the South of France with my sister and her husband.'

'Oh, I'm so pleased. I was thinking of you and wondering how you manage over the hols. Six weeks can be a long time on your own.'

People often assume I am lonely. Even relative strangers feel compelled to say, 'It must be very hard on your own,' cue sympathetic look. Pity is something I've become accustomed to. Accustomed to but not anaesthetized. It's meant to make me feel better. It doesn't. The exact words may vary marginally; there

might be a seasonal twist – ‘It must be hard to be on your own during the holidays/Christmas/your birthday’ – but the sense that they feel sorry for me is the same. I’m always stunned by comments such as these. How can I be considered to be on my own when I have twin seven-year-old boys, a dog, a rabbit, two goldfish, a full complement of parents, out-laws (the fond name I give my ex in-laws), friends, a younger sister, a brother-in-law, a large rambling garden and a small crumbling house? All of whom/which depend upon me for sustenance, maintenance, guidance, a ready supply of opinions (if only to reject them), walking, weeding, painting, cleaning, etc.

Although it is worth noting that I haven’t had sex for over half a decade. This does niggle me from time to time. I comfort myself that there’s no point in lamenting the lack of sex. Even if opportunity knocked, I’m not sure I was ever any good at it and I’m pretty convinced that if I was, I wouldn’t be now. I’ve forgotten what goes where.

Lauren continues. ‘I was tearing my hair out towards the end of the summer and counting the minutes Mark was at the office. The moment he walked through the door I’d yell at him, “Your turn, I’ve had them all day.”’ Lauren says this without any intention to be rude or malicious. She’s simply stating what every happily married mother thinks. ‘I can’t wait until Chrissie starts nursery school next year. Last one off my hands. The new nirvana is an empty house.’

‘You shouldn’t wish it away,’ I tell her, sourly.

She looks mildly chastised and I'm pathetic enough to feel chuffed by this; it evens the score after her comment about the certainty of my being lonely. I know motherhood shouldn't be a competition but it often feels as though it is. I do like Lauren a lot, however, so I resist adding that *my* best days are the ones when the boys are around me; days when they are drowning me in their noise and mess, because I know she'll be floored with guilt.

I feel down as I suddenly realize that today has been the strain, not the holidays.

'Maybe you could come over for Sunday lunch one weekend. It's no fun having a Sunday alone,' offers Lauren. And maybe I would have accepted except that she adds, 'Not this Sunday though, we have Phil and Gail Carpenter and their kids coming over. They have a girl in year one and the boy is in year four. Do you know them? Anyway it might be better if you come one weekend when it's not all couples. I think you'll be more comfortable. Maybe when my Mark is working away? What do you think?'

I think I want to punch her but I smile and lie, 'I'm sorry Lauren. I'm booked up every weekend from now till Christmas.'

Luckily, at that moment I catch sight of the boys snaking their way out of the classroom and across the playground, so I make my excuses and move forward to collect them.

The boys are mortified that I've picked them up and point out that they can walk home in minutes and I can

practically see them from my bedroom window if I choose. I incense them further because I waste (their words) precious minutes that could have been spent watching TV (not if I get my way) by chatting to Mr Walker, the head. He's always visible at dropping-off and picking-up times so that the parents can grab him for a moment's gripe or grovelling. He also asks about our holiday but without the pity Lauren interjected into the conversation. The boys kick the pavement throughout the brief interlude and I whisper threats about confiscating favourite toys unless they are civil. When we do walk home they insist I trail behind them, keeping a distance of at least ten paces so their friends don't think they are babies. But they *are* my babies.

As I mosey behind them I consider my lie to Lauren. I know it was motivated by pique. My one bugbear about being single is that married couples never invite you anywhere. They don't want to draw attention to the fact that you are a spare part, not because it embarrasses the single person but because it embarrasses the cosy couples, who on the whole don't know what to do with unwanted wives. Where, oh where to put them?

Still, I know Lauren well enough to trust that she wasn't trying to be offensive in any way, she's just tactless. I sometimes think I live with shackles of tactlessness. Great iron chains that I lug around with me. These chains grow more hefty, awkward and burdensome as friends, relatives and strangers make unintentionally offensive comments and then I have to live with the emotional weight of their remarks.

But then again maybe I'm just touchy. Maybe I should ring Lauren and tell her that a date has freed up in November. It would be nice to go somewhere different for Sunday lunch. Daisy and Simon come to me about once a fortnight and Connie and Luke invite me to theirs reasonably frequently. Luckily, Luke is a far superior cook to Connie. But they have busy lives of their own and I can't impose myself on them all the time. The boys are often with Peter on a Sunday and those Sundays are the worst. Relentless. Evil.

Yes, I'll call Lauren.