The next best thing

Sarah Long

Chapter 1

'Next Wednesday? I thought I had two more weeks!' Jane tried to keep the note of panic out of her voice. If she couldn't cope, they'd find someone who could. Freelance translators were two-a-penny, she couldn't afford to be difficult.

'Well yes,' she said, 'that should be OK, I'll just have to up the pace, that's all. Without compromising the quality, of course.' She laughed reassuringly. 'Nothing like a bit of adrenaline to kick the machine into action. Thanks Gus, I'll be in touch next week. Yup, you too, bye.'

Jane slumped back behind the kitchen table. It was a good thing Gus couldn't see her, still in her pyjamas, surrounded by last night's unwashed dishes. It wasn't exactly professional. The domestic squalor would have to wait, she thought, pushing aside a pile of papers to unearth her laptop. She was getting good money for this job, and no-one was going to pay her for cleaning the house.

She switched on the computer and listened to the opening chords of Windows ringing nobly round her kitchen-cum-office. Over to you, it said, now is the time to launch into your flawless translation of Bridges of France. It had seemed such a good idea at the time, working from home. It meant she could fit it round the rest of her life, leaving time for her daughter and her partner. Juggling on her own terms in a heroic bid to have it all, the way women were supposed to these days.

If she was going to meet this new deadline, she'd need to get at least three chapters done before she went to meet Liberty from school. She took a bite of her toast and watched the crumbs fall into the gaps between the letters on the keyboard. Disgusting really. There must be all kinds of detritus lurking down there, it could muck up the whole system. She picked up the laptop, turned it upside down and shook it gently. Bits of food and hair and dust showered onto the table. Even a couple of nail clippings – how vile. She brushed them onto the floor, then dabbed a tissue to her mouth and set about polishing the keys. You couldn't be expected to work when your fingers stuck to the plastic piano, made glutinous by a child's sticky hands.

She threw the tissue in the bin and ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the clean keyboard. That was better; she was now equipped for a full day's work. She pushed her hair back from her face and fastened it with a comb belonging to her daughter that had been discarded beside a plate of congealing gravy. It was no good, she'd have to load the dishwasher. Even for someone with her own low hygiene standards, there were limits. She didn't want social services coming round and seizing her daughter.

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She swiftly loaded the plates and wiped down the table. It would be nice to have a cleaner, but Will thought domestic staff smacked of bourgeois exploitation, and it was cheaper for her to do it herself.

Now, where was she . . . the Pont d'Avignon, rich source of a myriad of treasured folkloric history, not least the celebrated song beloved of generations of children . . . Too folksy. She mustn't slip into whimsy just because Gus had cruelly brought forward her deadline. Start again. The Pont d'Avignon, source of many legends as old as the noble stones themselves, and familiar to every French schoolchild. Better. She typed on, silently, swiftly, and was soon nearing the end of the chapter, which she would celebrate by taking a swift bath and getting dressed. It was one thing to do the morning school-run in your pyjamas, safely hidden in the car, but you couldn't stand outside the gates of Leinster Prep at four o'clock dressed like a tramp.

With just two pages to go, Jane became aware of an unpleasant sensation in her feet. She was wearing a pair of Will's old socks – he found slippers depressing – and when she looked down she saw that, for some reason, they were now sodden through. Not only that, the entire floor was covered with water. The dishwasher, of course. Not again: fourteen years old, what could you expect? Will had retrieved it as part of his spoils from the divorce, determined to take advantage of its extended guarantee. It always broke down when he was safely out of the way.

She paddled her way across the kitchen, soaking her knees as she bent down and reached under the sink in a well-practised routine to turn off the water supply. Once again she'd have to call the engineer and face his incredulity as he patched it up. You should get a new one, love, he'd say, and she'd agree, only Will wouldn't hear of it.

Cursing, she pulled out the mop and bucket and started slopping around. It wouldn't be like this if she worked in an office. The whole house could burn down for all she'd know about it, whereas being at home meant she was always on hand to take care of domestic crises.

The phone rang again. If that's someone trying to sell me car insurance, Jane told herself, they are in for a bumpy ride.

'Hallo, you sexy beast.' It was Will calling from work. He'd already written his column and was sitting feet up on his desk, swigging from an Evian bottle.

'Will, great timing,' said Jane. 'Your nasty old dishwasher has just blown up again. It's got to go, otherwise I will.'

'That's a very Wildean threat,' he said. 'Just ring Zanussi, it's under guarantee.'

'I'm always ringing Zanussi, they hate me.'

'Don't dramatise, darling, it's only an appliance.'

'An appliance that's begging to be put out of its misery.'

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'You know our views on needless waste,' he said, crumpling the plastic bottle with one hand and chucking it across the room towards the bin. 'Landfill sites are clogged up with perfectly serviceable white goods, we don't want to make any further contribution to the death of the planet.'

'Sod the planet, I've got work to do. Gus has brought forward my deadline and the kitchen's flooded.'

Will observed a brief silence.

'On a brighter note,' he went on, 'I've invited Chas over tonight. I thought you might like to do your mushroom risotto. You could stop off at Fresh and Wild on your way to school.'

'Or you could stop off on your way home.'

'I'd love to,' he said regretfully, as if nothing would have given him more pleasure, 'only they'll be closed by then. We're not all part-timers.'

'Part-time cleaner, chief cook and bottle-washer.'

'And talented translator. You are an extraordinary woman, I realise that.'

She softened at the flattery. 'All right then. What time will you be here?'

'Dinner time. Have you got proper stock? You can't make risotto without it.'

'In the freezer.'

'Good girl. Love you.'

'Mmm.'

He was right, she thought as she put the phone down. It was only an appliance, there was no point getting hysterical about it. Will was good at putting things in perspective, he never lost his cool and often made her feel like a petulant child. Though, in truth, it was easy to be cool when you weren't the one who had to deal with things.

She threw some towels down on the floor and shuffled them round with her feet to dry it, then sat down at her computer. She'd call Zanussi later, better not to interrupt her concentration. So Chas was coming to dinner. Chas was Will's agent, and therefore worth courting. He also liked his food, and was always complimentary about Jane's cooking. She'd need to get in some more parmesan, too, for tonight. Will would be pleased with her for making the effort, and she did like it when he was pleased with her.

Sighing, she forced her mind back from the evening ahead and concentrated on her work. Double speed now, no time to waste. The phone rang again. Damn, she'd

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forgotten to plug in the answer phone. Maybe she should just let it ring? But what if it was Liberty's school to say she'd had an accident?

'Hallo darling.'

Lydia. Her old friend. Or to be more accurate, the daughter of her mother's friend.

'Lydia! What a surprise!'

Which it was, in one way, since Jane had no idea why Lydia still bothered to keep in touch with her. On the other hand, Lydia called her so often at this time in the morning that it was hardly surprising at all. They had been at school together, then on to Oxford, followed by parallel lowly jobs that involved a lot of photocopying. But whereas Lydia's career had gathered momentum and was steaming along a high-speed track, Jane's had ended up shunted into a cul-de-sac right here in her kitchen.

'How are things, Jane?' asked Lydia. 'What have you been up to?'

'Coping with an enormous flood. The dishwasher broke, my deadline's been cut short and Will's just rung to say he's invited his agent to dinner . . .'

But Lydia wasn't listening. It was always like this, she popped the question, ignored the answer, then roared in with a full account of her own glamorous life. 'God, I can't tell you how busy I've been, it's been wall-to-wall hectic here.'

So if she was that busy, thought Jane, why waste time – especially my time – making unnecessary phone calls?

'Really?'

'Yes, really. I had to go down to Highgrove last weekend, we're doing a thing on Charles's organic stuff. He's fantastic, by the way, couldn't have been more welcoming.'

'Did you curtsey?'

'Did I curtsey! This was a professional meeting, I wasn't there presenting him with a bunch of flowers!'

'Were his hands softened by luxury or calloused by honest toil?'

But Lydia was already off on a full account of what he said and what she wore and calf lactation cycles. It was disingenuous of Jane to kid herself that she didn't know why Lydia bothered with her. Beneath that high-gloss exterior, she was constantly seeking validation for her achievements and Jane's drab life at home was the perfect foil to her own giddy existence. Busy, busy me and dear old steady you.

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'But that's enough about me,' said Lydia, 'let's talk about you. What do you think about me?'

'Ha ha,' Jane replied.

'No, really, how are you?' said Lydia. 'Still busy with the old translation?'

Jane ran her finger across her computer screen and examined the line of dust which it had accumulated. Dust was supposed to be made up largely of skin cells, so why did it look so grey and fluffy?

'Frantic, can I call you back? I've got to get on before school finishes . . .'

'Ah yes, that child. You're a saint, Jane, you know that?'

'Mmm.'

'But good for you, you've managed to keep some kind of career going.'

'Nice of you to say so. Must go . . .'

'No honestly, Jane, I take my hat off to you. It can't be easy working all by yourself, with no-one to bounce ideas off. It would drive me mad, I know that.' Lydia fell silent in a moment of true, shuddering pity. 'Anyway, the reason I called,' she went on, 'was to ask if you were going to Miss Lancaster's memorial service.'

'Who?'

'Miss Lancaster, you know, our old tutor.'

Jane cast her mind back to a woman with Margaret Drabble hair and large flat feet, pouring out three glasses of Stones ginger wine before their midday tutorial. 'Of course, I remember, she was nice enough but I think I'll give it a miss. No point in wallowing in the past.'

Lydia's motives were neither sentimental nor nostalgic. 'It's a great networking opportunity. All those people you haven't seen for ages, some of them really worth knowing. I've made some great contacts at memorial services.'

Jane was not convinced. The last thing she wanted was to run the gauntlet of polite enquiries from her peers. Holding up the unremarkable achievements of her life for general inspection, while Lydia glittered and whirled around her.

'No, I think I'm busy that day,' she said, 'I don't think Miss Lancaster will miss me.'

'Obviously she won't. I'm just thinking of you. It would do you good to get out more. Finger on the pulse and all that. Hang on, there's my other line, I'll call you back.'

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And with a dismissive click Jane was dropped back into her fusty old life. Self-chosen, and therefore not pitiful. The life of the home worker. Independent, flexible, the mistress of her destiny. Or underpaid, lonely and unrewarded? Discuss.

Goodness me, it was nearly lunchtime and the place was still a pigsty. She'd better just take ten minutes out to tidy up, they couldn't have Chas sitting down to dinner surrounded by mountains of trash. She took a stray plastic bag and started to fill it with bits of Barbie outfits that were strewn across the counter: a tiny boucle jacket, a handbag the size of a thumbnail and minuscule stilettoes for deformedly small feet.

The best thing about working at home was being able to move around freely since you weren't stuck behind the same desk all day, though the benefits were debatable when you were constantly reminded of your household chores and other family commitments. She sighed, picked up the rest of the toys littering the floor and decided to relocate to the bedroom to escape the demands of her kitchen. Picking up the laptop, she stepped over the piles of clean sheets sitting on the stairs. Her sister-in-law had noticed her laundry-pile habit and last Christmas had given her a rectangular basket specially designed to fit on a bottom stair. The idea being that on your way up you would gaily seize it by the handle and swing it behind you, tra la la, all the way to the linen closet, that well-ordered place so loved by women with its crisply pressed Egyptian-cotton sheets interleaved with lavender nosegays.

Upstairs, she slipped under the bedcovers, placing the computer on her knees. It was cold up here – Will didn't believe in heating too many unnecessary rooms – and the computer generated a reassuring surge of warmth through the goose down. This is the life, she thought, tapping happily at the keys. Tucked up in bed in her pyjamas and the womb-like security of her very own sleep/workplace. You couldn't really ask for more. Lydia was welcome to her hectic schedule of royal encounters, jumping into cars in a flurry of pashminas and spiky heels. It made Jane feel exhausted just thinking about it. Though sometimes she wouldn't mind slamming the front door and clipping off to the office in a pair of noisy look-at-me shoes. But Will was right, it made more sense for her to be at home. As he pointed out, it was one thing going out to work if you were a top dog with a fat salary to pay for nannies and cleaners. But when you were a middle-ranking nobody, you were lucky to break even once you'd paid for a childminder, and tube fares and lunch and decent clothes.

When she finally reached the end of the chapter, Jane leaped out of bed and ran a bath. While waiting for it to fill, she walked across to the window and looked out at the rainy street where two men in hooded sweatshirts were shouting at each other. It was funny how she'd ended up in this dodgy bit of London where, bizarrely, houses were twice as expensive as in the leafy suburbs of her upbringing. Her dream had always been to move to the country, but she knew it wouldn't ever happen. Will didn't do the country. Or at least he might do the country for a weekend provided he was staying in a stonking great house with no ribbon developments to spoil the view. His fantasy, as he liked to reiterate in his newspaper column, was to live in London for the rest of his life. Dear old dirty London: her clothes may be ragged but beneath them beats a heart of gold. Or words to that effect.

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She quickly bathed and changed then went downstairs to call Zanussi. Two more chapters, then she'd have to rush off to Ikea to get those shelves for Liberty's bedroom. Will had been chasing her to get them for weeks now and she didn't want to tell him yet again that she hadn't had time, it sounded so feeble. She finished her work in silence, then picked up her coat and the Ikea catalogue, marked up in Will's neat handwriting. On the North Circular she stopped for petrol and bought a family-sized box of Maltesers, which she ate from her lap as the traffic stopped and started its way through the drizzling rain.

In the downstairs bar of the French House, Will caught sight of himself in the mirror. With the benefit of low lighting and three gin and tonics, he had to admit he liked what he saw. He turned his head to get the best angle of his cheekbones, and found it incredible to think that he was pushing fifty. That was no age, though, these days. Fifty was the new forty, or more like thirty-five in his case. He smoothed some rogue hairs back into his ponytail and turned to his companion.

'Another one before you go, Chas?'

He wasn't usually so profligate in buying rounds, but it was worth keeping his agent sweet. Chas had sounded pretty bullish about what he might get for Will's next book. Anyway, he could probably push the drinks through on expenses.

Chas looked at his watch. 'Better not, I'm late already. I'm sorry about tonight, do apologise to Jane for me.'

'Don't worry about it, she's cool. One thing about Jane, she doesn't get uptight about a change in plan. Not like Carol, she wouldn't have spoken to me for a week.'

'How is the ex?'

'I hardly know, all right I think. Best thing I ever did was walk out of that marriage. Tough at the time, but she's grateful to me now. Freed her up to start a new life with that dismal travel agent.'

'And left you free to set up home with the lovely Jane. You're a lucky man.'

'I know.'

'Clever, good-looking woman who knows how to cook. And she earns her own money.' Chas sighed as he thought of his own high-maintenance ex-wife. Lounging around at home between trips to the beauty salon. He had asked her once whether she ever thought about going back to work. Perfectly innocent question, you'd have thought, but her reaction had been savage. 'What am I supposed to do?' she'd snapped back at him. 'Get a job in a shoe shop?' That was the problem with well-educated women. A few child-rearing years out of the market and they became unemployable.

'That's the advantage of cohabitation over marriage,' said Will. 'Women understand it's not a meal ticket for life.'

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'Rod Stewart said he wasn't going to marry again,' said Chas. 'He'd just find a woman he didn't like and give her a house instead.'

'Exactly.'

They sat in silence for a moment to consider this monumental statement.

'I'll be off then,' said Chas.

They left the pub and said their goodbyes on the pavement. Chas had been offered a ticket for the Donmar, and Will insisted he take it. If there was one thing life had taught him it was always to drop an engagement if something better came along. He wandered up Dean Street towards the tube, but then thought better of it. A man in his position shouldn't have to slum it on the underground, even if he was financially crippled by years of alimony. He hailed a cab.

'Shepherds Bush please.'

Shepherds Bush, that was bad enough. It had been Notting Hill before the divorce, and for the purposes of his newspaper column, it still was. The Portobello Road was his beat, and every week he wrote of its delights to lighten the journey of his poor readers as they headed off to their god-awful suburban homes.

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