Love and Other Infidelities

Helen Townsend

Published by MIRA Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

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

CHAPTER 1
1975

Susan

I liked the early morning, lying in bed. There was the laughter of the kookaburras and then the calls of currawongs, with shafts of light coming through the venetians; thin, cool at first, then heavy with the heat of the coming day. I liked the peace, my feeling of contemplation as I lay there.

There was no family breakfast at our house. My father went to work early. My mother lay in bed after my father departed with a face pack that was supposed to keep her wrinkles at bay. She was not to be disturbed. My younger sister, Lisa, still at teachers' college, slept in and was always late for her first class. So when I got up, it was just me in the kitchen with a simple breakfast of toast and tea before I showered and dressed and set off for the station.

I liked to walk quickly. I liked that physical sense of myself, fast and precise. Every weekday morning I walked half an hour to the station to catch the train to work, not just for the exercise, but for the pleasure I took in the trees, the birds, the changes of season, the quiet of the early morning. The houses I passed, like my parents' house, were mostly hidden by their gardens—beds of azaleas and camellias, broad swathes of fine green grass shaded by old gum trees. I loved the reds of the camellias in flower in the winter, the pinks and purple of

the azaleas in spring. The gum trees housed possums and mopokes at night; currawongs, kookaburras and magpies during the day. When I was small my dad had taught me to imitate all the bird calls, and I thought I could still do a good kookaburra, and probably the mopoke. As I walked to the station I always thought of how he had taught me those calls and my mum's horrified, 'What on earth are you teaching her *that* for?'

As I walked, I also thought of the day ahead at work in the university library. It wasn't a bad job. I had taken it because I had an honours degree in English and library work seemed like a good fit. As soon as I'd taken the job it was obvious it was not a good fit at all. My work at the library consisted of stacking books on trolleys and then putting them back on the shelves or searching for requests, barely a glance in the direction of English literature. I didn't mind a great deal. In my spare time I read and read and read. I had never thought a job mattered very much. It was more something to do.

Searching for library requests led me to meeting Neil Andrews and then becoming engaged to him. He was a lecturer in the history department and ten years my senior. Once I realised he wasn't just looking for books, his attention was flattering. And from being flattered I drifted into the engagement, much as I'd drifted into the library job. It was my mother who had all the enthusiasm for Neil.

'He's aiming to become a professor,' she said. 'Just imagine being married to a professor.' In truth, I wasn't doing much imagining at all about getting married. I felt slightly sick every time my mother mentioned the flowers for the church or the drinks for the reception, which should have been a signal to me that my heart wasn't in it. I'd already had an argument with my mother about the flowers. I wanted red flowers for my bridal

bouquet but that interfered with her pastel colour scheme, traditional and tasteful.

That had been the way I had lived my life. I'd gone through childhood, ticking off the boxes—primary school, ballet class, netball, high school—always more my mother's agenda than my own. I wanted to make it my own, but at that time I didn't know how. My sister Lisa was more gregarious than me and had found her own life outside the house, even though she still lived at home. Friends, men, parties, drink were mentioned in passing, but not discussed. Somehow Lisa had escaped.

I had been passionate about my university studies and I still read voraciously. It annoyed me a little that my mother used this characteristic as a way of summarising me. 'Susan,' she'd say. 'Always got her head in a book. Just as well she's marrying a professor.'

'He's not a professor yet,' my dad said.

'At least he's thinking ahead,' said my mother archly, a reference to my father's failure to book the ski lodge in time for their annual ski holiday. Dad hated skiing.

My parents' marriage was like a tennis match. Serve, volley, hit, smash, but no love in the score.

My co-workers in the library were more sophisticated than I was and certainly more in touch with what was going on in the world. It was the era of enthusiastic and impassioned feminism and the university was alive with talk of feminism. En masse, women complained that the courses were sexist, demanded feminist perspectives be included, agitated against work practices which disadvantaged women and even demanded the toilets be made unisex. All this passionate debate fascinated me, but on a personal level it didn't seem very relevant to me.

I mentioned this mildly enough one morning tea-time. Someone pushed a copy of Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch* into my hands.

'This!' she said, 'is about you.'

I started reading it on the bus to the station that evening. The ideas jumped off the page. They were powerful, big and new. As the bus grew more crowded, it became harder and harder to read but I was drawn further and further into the book. I got off the bus and sat in a café to finish the first chapter and started the next one. It suddenly felt as if the rest of my life had possibilities I had never dreamed of. I could make choices. It was no longer inevitable that I'd follow the route my mother had so carefully plotted. I'd discussed the concept of free will in a philosophy course I'd taken, but it was a heady experience to imagine it in my own life.

The engagement didn't survive the *Female Eunuch* and the bottle of wine I drank on the next date with Neil.

'How could you, Susan?' my mother asked. 'Everything is booked.'

'Do you really think I should marry him because you've booked the church?'

'He's going to be a professor.'

'Mum!'

'What on earth will you do now?'

'Live my life as a woman, I don't know.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

My mother was deeply upset about the loss of her future professorial son-in-law but she also sensed that I was less amenable to ticking off her boxes. She and Dad took off to England to avoid the embarrassment of my cancelled wedding. And with that I felt freer still. My parents had a beach house and

I suggested to my sister Lisa that she and I go up there for the summer. I left my job, collected a swag of books and we took off.

At the beach house, Lisa and I had always felt conscripted into my mother's relentless timetable—beach in the morning, lunch at the club, board games in the afternoon, friends over for dinner. We were 'the girls', obedient, quiet and indistinguishable from each other. And somehow that relentless regime that meant we spent a lot of time together, also meant we didn't get to know each other very well. Now Lisa and I decided to do exactly what we wanted. At night we cooked extravagant meals and shared bottles of wine from Dad's cellar. We laughed and joked about that constrained and constricted childhood of ours, everything please and thank you, white socks and clean handkerchiefs.

'Bloody nightmare,' said Lisa. 'How did we turn out okay?'

'I don't feel okay,' I said. 'I feel socially retarded and full of primal terror.'

'Take my word for it, Suzie,' said Lisa. 'You're very okay.'

'But why was it a nightmare?' I asked. 'We weren't neglected. It wasn't as if every care wasn't taken of us. We were educated, looked after, had everything we needed.'

'Not everything.' As Lisa stirred the pasta sauce, she began singing 'All You Need is Love' by the Beatles.

'We were loved. They just couldn't show it.'

'Children shouldn't have to work that out. We shouldn't be wondering about it at our age,' she said. 'Did you feel loved?'

'I think Dad . . .'

'Every time he put his head up, she put her foot down.'

We started laughing. I don't know why, except that we were drunk and we felt free. We laughed and laughed and laughed. We weren't 'the girls' anymore. We were becoming sisters.

We walked on the beach the next day. We went to the pub at night and flirted with the yachties in the bar. Other nights we sat on the verandah, cooled by the sea breeze coming up and talked about our hopes, our puzzlement at life. I was the feminist with the ideology and the ideas; Lisa was the hippie who wanted to be young and free and alive. One night she stood out on the balcony without her clothes on. I watched her standing in the moonlight, enjoying the air on her skin, young and beautiful, soft and female. I still felt enough the older sister to want to tell her someone would see her, that she might get cold, that it wasn't quite proper, but I said nothing.

I changed too. I threw aside my tasteful, pastel-coloured clothes. At university I'd always felt out of place when everyone else was wearing duffel coats, black stocking with holes and big black jumpers. That didn't appeal to me at all. I started sewing my own clothes, using bold patterns, primary colours, outrageous combinations, sensual textures. I bought beads and scarves. It was not what other people were wearing but I felt bigger, stronger, that I made a mark in the world.

When my parents came back from England my mother closed down the beach house. 'It's the end of the season,' she said firmly. But now I had a taste of independence. Lisa was still at teachers' college and had money from a teaching scholarship. I got a job in the public service as a clerk, where I noted I got paid less than men with similar qualifications. I didn't like the work but I didn't expect a lot from a job, and it allowed Lisa and me to move out of home and get a flat together. I felt more myself, closer to my sister, more separate from my mother. Although it felt brave and daring, it was only a first step. Life still scared me a little. I felt ready for more risks, more passion, but I was cautious, waiting for things to come to me.

Martin

The sea. The good life. Love. They're the important things. Plus some serious boozing. I do like a beer. Or six.

I grew up in a fibro house in a scrubby suburb way out western Sydney. The local pool was the biggest body of water around so I never got into surfing until I was at uni in Sydney, before I went away on the Oxford scholarship. While I was away, surfing became the symbol of things I wanted in life—thrills, risk and sheer pleasure; waves transitory, the ocean endless. The essence of experience, a sense of the universal.

I was on scholarships all my educational life, except for the parish primary. Oxford was the biggie. 'Don't fall for them,' said my Nanna. 'Don't let those Poms turn you. Especially the girls. Mass every week remember.'

My Nanna was Irish Catholic. And proud of it, proud of herself, proud of her family.

'Best looking family at Mass, we are,' she'd say. 'Curly hair. You can tell God loves us. So long as yer dad keeps his gammy arm to hisself.'

Everyone at Mass knew my dad had had his arm crushed in an accident.

'Nanna likes to keep up appearances,' Dad used to say.

'Such smart kids too,' Nanna would say.

'Modest like you,' Mum said but Nanna didn't miss a beat.

'From County Wexford,' Nanna said, nevermind that it was two generations ago. 'Full of fight, the six of them.'

That was the brash front we presented to the world. But it hid considerable sadness, bitterness and gloom. We were loyal to a fault but we could be harsh with each other to the point of cruelty. We wanted to be better than we were but we didn't

Aussie law firm. They were *so* impressed I began to see why the Oxford lot thought the colonials were brown nosers. I began to understand about Anglophile Australians my Nanna had always railed against. The law firms were full of them. Snobbery, born-to-rule mentality, God Save the Queen and no idea of how hard the average punter has to work to earn his crust. Silk ties, crisp, ironed shirts and expensive suits. The buggers weren't even trying, it wasn't an act. They bred that way, true to type. But the Oxford degree meant they made me offers which were hard to refuse.

I consulted the family. I went to see my Nanna in the nursing home. I hated that place. It smelt of death and piss. I hated it even more that she had expected to end up there. I wished I had the money to get her out. She had her teeth floating in a cup of iridescent green and her cardie on inside out. She had cancer eating away her insides, but she still had her poor Irish dignity and her sense of humour.

'Be one of those fancy lawyers,' she wheezed. 'Queen's Counsel, then put it right up the Queen.'

'All right,' my father said, 'practice for a while then go into politics. Get a house with a driveway, trees on either side.' That was his definition of success.

But a politician needs a cause and I had never been a true believer, right from first communion. The seventies were full of causes, good causes—Vietnam, Gough Whitlam and the Governor General, rights for the aborigines, the Springboks and rugby. I was partisan, on the side of the oppressed and repressed, but I wasn't a joiner, and most of those causes were full of middle class do-gooders. It was just another place I wouldn't fit in. Political action wasn't my thing, which wasn't a view that got you into bed in the seventies.

'Your dad has hated his work all his life,' said Mum. 'It's soured him. Find something you like, love. Don't worry about the money. It isn't that important.' She said it with a sort of softness. She was soft, my mum, but it didn't make any sense because she and Dad fought about money on a daily basis.

So it was buckets of money that seduced me into joining the firm of Thomas Thomas and Rodgers, up in Macquarie Street. Top firm, all pretty private school boys, golf club membership and the rest. The buggers working there just couldn't conceive what life might be like if you weren't a lawyer. Their imagination could stretch to their clientele who were company directors or rich, old codgers wanting to change the will. But they had no sympathy for the smart bugger who could fence a truckload of suits but had the misfortune to get caught, or some poor bastard stoned out of his mind while committing some fuck-witted larceny.

My imagination stretched further. My life stretched further, at least I hoped it did. Praise the Lord and pass the dope. Thank God for Bondi on a summer morning! Soggy old Oxford hadn't done me too much damage. And I liked that law firm salary.

Thomas Thomas slotted me into criminal law.

Criminal cases had an interesting sense of threat that if you lost your case you might also lose your teeth. There were the lovable rogues and the truly bad bastards. Generally the clientele in crime were a good deal more human than your average company director. But I had no illusions. I was getting them off doing whatever they were accused of, although it was pretty clear most had done something approximating what they had been accused of, with different names and places. It was fun for a while being on first name terms with hit men, standover men, madams and thieves. It pleased old Thomas because it was

want to admit to our aspirations. We wore our Irish Catholic origins with pride, while at the same time chafing to escape from everything they represented. Underneath it all, I felt a degree of confusion that covered a love-hate attachment to my origins.

Being Irish Australian didn't go down too well at Oxford. The Poms had their noses permanently in the air so they could look down on the colonials. They hated the Irish on principle but they'd been hating them so long they had no idea what the principle was. The dons didn't like my in-your-face attitude. There were good things about the place. Ideas were thick in the air and there were people who were brilliant and inventive. But I didn't exactly feel the warm cosy glow of welcome, except in the pubs. Pubs are an environment where I slot into remarkably well, whatever the country.

When I got back after three years in Oxford, I kicked around as a taxi driver, barman and surfer for a while. I was restless and lost at the same time, I didn't seem to fit anywhere apart from surfing and drinking and drinking and surfing. But I'd got to the stage where I wanted possessions. My parents had always been a scratch above poor. They owned their fibro house and they were forever paying off the car, but if they disappeared off the face of the earth their worldly goods would be up for grabs in a garage sale. Or more likely, straight off to the tip.

I had a poor man's materialism which surfing and cab driving wasn't going to help. On the strength of my degree I got a senior clerkship in the public service. It wasn't work and it wasn't leisure, and it felt greyer and greyer every day. I didn't last long but there was the pressing problem of rent money and beer money, to say nothing of the clothes and the more illustrious possessions I hoped to acquire. I asked around a few law firms.

The Oxford degree impressed the hell out of your average

a good income stream, and that put the wind up those silk ties with posh voices.

I liked Thomas Thomas, who was the founder of the firm. I thought his name was a hoot and we got on well. He was fair dinkum. His dad had been a plumber. Thomas had polish and education but he liked a rough diamond like me. Thomas didn't believe the law was a sacred calling. 'There's no spirit of the law, son, just the letter, and you better get that right.' Thomas didn't bullshit with a lot of legalese. He wanted me to build up a Family Law division to deal with the no fault divorce under the brand new *Family Law Act*.

'We'll see a big rise in business there,' he said. 'Lots of people want to get out of a marriage. Now that they can do it without being publicly humiliated, they will.' I could see his point. I could see it a whole lot better when we went to his club and had a few beers. Evidently it wasn't exactly marital bliss with Mrs Thomas Thomas, although he wasn't contemplating divorce. But Thomas Thomas understood human pain and misery and had considerable sympathy for the average punter.

The new law was an important advance. You didn't have to prove adultery. You didn't have to prove cruelty. You didn't have to engage private detectives to spy in the bedroom or have your marital misery reported in lurid detail in the papers. You just had to say it was over. It seemed that the pain and nastiness of divorce would be lessened and human dignity respected—not a bad way to make a crust. And I still did a bit of criminal law.

I joined a touch-footy team, I surfed, I drank with a bunch of blokes, and surfed some more. I saw my parents, my sisters and my little brother. I bought a grotty unit in Bondi Junction, mortgaged myself to the hilt and got a car on the never-never. I nosed

round the art world. I'd always been scared of high art but I got up my courage and started looking round the galleries. I fell in love with a fluid Brett Whitely drawing and had to buy it. I bought a gorgeous painting by Grace Cossington Smith and a 1930s ceramic kookaburra. I loved that kookaburra best of all. Evidently blokes used to make these pieces in the pottery after work, just for fun. That appealed to me, and my kooka had a mean blue streak down his back and a cross look in his eye. So the possessions were coming on.

I had a girlfriend, Yvette. I'd never thought marriage was quite me, having been a juvenile witness to the most painful and destructive argument in the history of the world, otherwise known as my parents' marriage. But now, here it was in my head; the idea of love, companionship, kids. I couldn't quite define it. Where I came from blokes got hooked, they didn't make choices.

Yvette was smart and sassy, hot and dirty, bright and good looking, totally wild.

I talked to my eldest sister Kathleen and explained that while I liked Yvette very much indeed, I wasn't quite sure it was love.

'You can't expect to feel infatuation at your age,' she said. I was only twenty-six and I reckoned, unlike her, I hadn't had my passion sucked dry. She'd just married a clerk in the public service. Found him in the filing cabinet under 'D' for 'dreary'.

I asked my sister Mary, my closest and dearest sibling about love. Mary was just a year older than me and we'd always done things together. We were at the pub and Mary was seriously drunk. 'You've got to be crazy in love,' she said. 'You've got to be mad for her, can't be without her. You don't want to end up like Mum and Dad. You know they're sleeping in separate rooms since Lachlan left home.'

I was crazy for Yvette and I decided I'd marry her and let the love question sort itself out.

'Yvette, you know I like you, don't you?'

She looked at me, puzzled. I reckoned that was because she still had a hangover.

'Yvette, it's been very intense between us . . .'

She now had a really puzzled look on her face. I wasn't exactly articulate. I had a hangover too.

'So why don't we get married?'

She started giggling, then rolled off the bed laughing, and rolled around the floor.

'Darling no one gets married now, it's the bloody seventies. Oh sweetheart, don't look so bloody hurt. I love you too, but it's like I love that labrador dog of mine—I like going for walks with you, I like having you around, I like to be with you, I like to scratch you behind the ears, but for Chrissakes, no one but no one gets married these days. We haven't lived together. This is your inner altar boy speaking.'

My pride was battered. The moment she started, I knew I *didn't* want to marry her.

'Thank God,' she said.

Sex is a wonderful balm but that relationship was over.

'See you 'round,' I said as I got up to get dressed. I felt more emotionally bruised than I would have thought. Her rejection had hurt my ego, especially that stuff about the bloody dog.

'Corrupting charm,' she said as she watched me getting dressed. 'That's what you've got. I almost said "yes".'

'I'm thinking it'll be a good story for you to spread round my drinking holes.'

'You bet,' she said without a trace of shame.

I leaned over and kissed her.