

My Vintage Summer

Jane Elmor

Published by Pan 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.

1

Lizzie

For us it all began in the summer of '76, the year the sun scorched the grass the colour of sand and no one could sprinkle their lawns or take a bath, and the year I could no longer run around without my top on. According to my best friend Kimberley, my boobs were already as big as her sister Yvonne's, even though I was only eleven and she was nearly fifteen. It wasn't saying much. Kimberley called Vonnie's gnat bites, they were so small. If mine kept on growing I would have to ask my mum if she would buy me a bra and I couldn't think of anything more embarrassing. Getting boobs was even worse than starting your periods because they were harder to hide from boys. Before I'd ever met Vonnie I wanted to be like her, just because it didn't sound as though she'd ever need a bra. She'd got away with something and to me that made her seem free.

That summer was the first time I was allowed to go and stay with Kimberley for the weekend.

'You'll probably think Vonnie's pretty,' Kim had said. 'She certainly thinks so. But I don't. If you ask me, she's pretty ugly.'

Kimberley wasn't speaking to Vonnie when we became best friends. She couldn't remember what they had fallen out over in the first place, but whatever it was, their fight lasted for months. It made me scared to meet her; she seemed so mean. The first night I was there she was out, but we heard her let herself in way after we'd gone to bed. Her dad hadn't gone to pick her up or anything. I was on a zed bed, as close to Kim's as it could possibly be, and we were still awake, giggling in the dark at the thought of Miss Hodge and Miss Miller being lesbians.

Kim's house wasn't like other people's. She said it was because her dad was an architect and he'd designed it himself and had it built on a bit of land on the outskirts of a posh village. It was big and white and modern with huge windows and no wallpaper and instead of an upstairs it sprawled about, with arches and walkways through to other bits. Her mum and dad had their bedroom in an annexe with their own TV and en-suite bathroom with a shower. When they went to watch TV after dinner it was almost like being alone in the house with no grown-ups. From Kim's bedroom we could hear the front door open and close and someone banging around in the kitchen.

'She's probably drunk,' Kim said. 'And I bet she's been *snogging*.'

I went, 'Urgh.' We thought about snogging for a while.

'Has she got a boyfriend, then?' I asked.

'Oh lots,' said Kim. 'One of them gives her lovebites and Mum calls him the Vampire.'

I tried to imagine my mum joking about my boyfriend. Not even my only boyfriend, *one* of my boyfriends. She always invited my new friends round for tea to check they were suitable, but I didn't know if she'd do that if it was the kind of person who'd bitten my neck. I thought I'd rather die than sit up at the table at my house eating lettuce and Marmite sandwiches with my mum and Mr Grundy and my *boyfriend*. I really couldn't think of anything worse. And then I tried to imagine having a boy attached to my neck by his mouth. Was it something boys liked, or were you supposed to like it? And what were you supposed to be doing while he was stuck there? I didn't think I wanted a boyfriend.

After a while Kim leant over and whispered, 'Vonnie says she's Done It, but I don't believe her.' We thought about that for a while too.

Eventually I said, 'Did it hurt?'

'She said it was agony and she bled pints of blood all over the sheets. She had to wash them herself before Mum saw.' Of course I'd imagined Doing It before, but not where. I certainly couldn't imagine doing it in my mum's house.

I was thinking up the right questions to ask without looking too stupid when a shadow loomed into the light that was breaking through the crack in the bedroom door from the hallway. I looked up as the door was pushed wide and a silhouette leant against the door frame. An orange outline of wild, corkscrew hair flared out over a big, upturned collar.

A glow moved from hip height to mouth level, where it brightened for a moment before an exhalation of smoke drifted up towards the huge moon of a paper lantern behind.

'Wonders will never cease,' Vonnie slurred, taking another drag of her cigarette. 'Kimmie's actually found a friend.' She blew the smoke into the room at us and her breath smelt of something else strong and sharp and fiery. It made her seem like a dragon.

'Go away, you stupid old witch,' Kim spat.

Vonnie cackled and went, 'Ooooooh!'

'I mean it! Get out! Get out!' Kim was going crazy. 'I hate you!'

The shadow kicked the door wide and slunk towards us cackling, stretching out its spindly fingers towards our beds and grabbing at our feet. Even though I knew it was Kim's sister it spooked me and we both started screaming and scrabbling to the heads of our beds.

'Shut up. Mum and Dad'll hear you, you baby,' Vonnie suddenly snapped and stopped laughing. She took a final swipe at Kim before putting her thumb to her teeth and flicking it towards us as she turned to flounce away.

'That's an Italian rude word,' said Kim when she had gone. 'It's like doing a V-sign.'

But it was way cooler than doing a V-sign. I could imagine doing it to the boys when we went to the big school next year. They wouldn't know what it meant, but they'd have to pretend they did.

The next morning I put on the clothes my mum had packed for me. She'd made me a dirndl skirt in a flowery print and

bought a new smocked top with puffed sleeves to go with it. I put them on with ankle socks and my brown Clarks sandals. I was about to put my pigtails in when I saw how Kim was dressed and then I changed my mind about the pigtails. Kim was wearing maroon cords with purple denim pockets and a purple V stitched at the knee above the bellbottom. And she had a matching stripy tank top. We'd only ever seen each other in school uniform before and now she suddenly looked like a trendy teenager and I was still a silly little kid.

'Is that what you're wearing?' she asked, which was a stupid question really.

I still replied, 'No,' though. I felt myself go red so I started brushing my hair. 'My mum forgot to pack my jeans and stuff. I don't know what she put these things in for.'

Kim said, 'Oh,' but I don't think she believed me.

We went out into the garden. It was enormous, with a lawn with a Swingball in the middle, and a fish pond and a tree house. Kim shinned up into it with the ease of a boy and I followed, making sure not to care about getting dirty. I forgot about my clothes until Yvonne emerged at midday. All she had on was a tiny string bikini, big round sunglasses and a straw cowboy hat. She sat on a lounge on the patio and smeared herself all over with suntan oil. Then she lay back and took her top off, just like that, without caring who was looking, and covered her face with her hat.

Her boobs were practically nothing. She didn't have any hips either, or a tummy, or any fat at the tops of her legs. They were straight and long and bony and shiny and I couldn't stop sneaking looks at her. Their mum and dad brought lunch out on a hostess trolley and sat on loungers

next to Vonnie, and she still didn't bother covering herself up. Kim's mum called us over. Vonnie sat up, pushing her hat back, and I knew she was looking me over behind her glasses. Why did my mum make me wear such stupid clothes?

Their mum and dad asked me lots of questions about where I lived and what my mum and dad did and stuff. I never knew what to say about my dad so I just told them my mum worked at a hospital and hoped people would think she was a nurse and stop asking about my dad. Vonnie just kept staring in my direction. She drank wine with her parents and lit up a cigarette after she'd finished eating. She stubbed it out again after a couple of puffs and took her sunglasses off, swinging them from her fingers while she looked me up and down. It was the first time I'd seen her eyes. They were huge and round and luminous green, like a cat's.

'You're quite pretty,' she finally declared. 'And you've got nice hair. We should plait it all over for you later and make it go frizzy.'

I went red and I didn't know what to say. They were all looking at me. Kim rolled her eyes at me with her back to Vonnie so she couldn't see. I giggled back to show I thought it was a stupid idea. But I didn't really. I'd never been allowed to have my hair curled or cut into a style or feathered or anything. I wasn't even allowed flicks at the side.

Kim said, 'Come on, let's go to the rec.' She didn't even ask her mum and dad if we could, and she got down from lunch without asking, too. Her parents didn't even say behave or be careful crossing the road or don't talk to any

strangers. So we went to the play park in the village and sang Abba songs as we swung on the swings standing up. I was the blonde one and Kim was the dark one.

‘Maybe we should crinkle my hair. Agnetha does do hers curly sometimes,’ I suggested. ‘Then we could dress up as them properly later.’ But Kim said she didn’t feel like doing Abba any more.

I didn’t know if she meant just then or ever, but I didn’t want to ask.

When we got back to Kim’s there was loud, crashy music coming from Vonnie’s room.

‘Let’s spy on her,’ said Kim, so I followed her out through the sliding glass doors in the dining room and round to Vonnie’s window, the other side of the house to Kim’s. She had a crooked bamboo blind that was still down even though it was daytime, and we crouched down to peer through the slit at the bottom. When our eyes got used to looking in I could see her room was a tip. She had a big Coca-Cola lampshade that gave the room a red light and there were records and clothes all over the floor. Yvonne had cleared a space and was exercising in a dancey sort of way in bare feet and a pair of silver hotpants and a boob tube. She had her hair tied up with bobbles in high, puffy bunches that stuck out at the sides of her head. She was bouncing up and down in a jerky motion with her arms swinging out, but she was a lot better than Pan’s People. She started singing along to the chorus of ‘Rebel Rebel’, pouting at herself in the mirror.

She twirled round with her arms above her head and then

danced over to her cigarettes on the bed, stopping for a moment to light one. She threw the packet down, shaking the match out and tossing it at her bin as she started to move again, sucking at the cigarette in her other hand. I'd stolen a cigarette once from Mr Grundy's packet and taken it to school in my pencil case, and Kim and I had smoked it at the bottom of the playing field, but we hadn't liked it. Vonnie made smoking look brilliant though, and I thought maybe I should have another go sometime. And then Vonnie turned and saw us and shouted, 'What the fuck do you think you're doing? Fuck off! You little perverts!'

I didn't know what perverts were, but it didn't sound good. I ran away quickly, but Kim was shouting back, 'You can't stop me. And anyway, you're the pervert!'

I could hear Vonnie's sarcastic laugh. 'How can I be the pervert, you dummy? You're the one spying on people like a peeping Tom.'

'Well, you think you look great, but you don't: you look stupid,' Kim said back. 'Doesn't she, Liz?'

I didn't want to say anything so I shrugged and said, 'Come on,' and backed away.

My mum didn't like me being called Liz. She didn't mind Beth, if I had to be shortened to anything at all, but she preferred me to be my whole proper name, Elizabeth.

But I didn't like Elizabeth. It was old-fashioned and boring, and I didn't stop people calling me Liz or Lizzie any more.

I hoped Vonnie wouldn't tell on us. My mum had said if I was any trouble she wouldn't let me stay again. And I really wanted to. Being at their house was like being on holiday the whole time. Mum had told me to be helpful to Kim's mum, but it was difficult to find anything to help

with. They had a dishwasher instead of washing up and Kim's mum never seemed to be in the kitchen or doing the housework.

We went into the sitting room, only they called it the lounge, and Kim put the telly on, which was a really big one, and colour. They didn't have flowery armchairs and a matching sofa or a fireplace. They had an orange leather chair that you could spin round on and a huge brown velvet couch that was more like a bed, with shaggy cream cushions that matched the carpet. They didn't even have curtains, just some macramé thing hanging in the window with beads on. There was a coffee table with chrome legs and a smoky brown glass top and a pile of *Vogues* and other fashion magazines on it.

'Can I look at them?' I asked Kim.

'Course,' she said. 'Why do you even ask?'

'Are you allowed to? My mum doesn't let me,' I said.

'Your mum's a weirdo,' she laughed.

'No, she isn't, she's normal,' I said. 'Your mum's the one who's weird.'

'No, she's not. She keeps up with the fashions 'cos she was a model in the olden days when she was young,' Kim replied.

'No, she never,' I said, but Kim said that yes she was and she could prove it, and she went and got some photo albums off a shelf in the alcove.

I've seen pictures of my mum when she was young, and she was pretty and slim, in those dresses with a little waist and a big full skirt. But she still looked like my mum. Kim's mum didn't look like anyone's mum in photos. She was thin as a stick, in tight skirts and high stilettos, and she didn't

smile but stood posed like a statue. She was very glamorous. I didn't know whether to believe it really was Kim's mum or not, but there were also pictures of her getting married to Kim's dad, and with Vonnie and then Kim when they were little. They were often in nice places, like hot countries with beaches and palm trees.

They didn't seem to have their tea at a certain time at night. It was late, though. We were allowed to help ourselves and eat where we liked. I'd never eaten Italian food before, not counting Alphabetti Spaghetti. Kim's mum and dad and Vonnie had theirs in the dining room, which had a really long table and chairs with high backs like thrones, and they drank wine in big purple glasses like goblets. We had fizzy grape juice in goblets too, so it looked like wine. Vonnie sat at one end in a floaty turquoise top that was see-through. Her hair was newly washed and curled into ringlets that cascaded over one shoulder. She sat with her back straight and her legs crossed to the side, and ate really small mouthfuls only using her fork. She was like a real-life princess.

We were allowed to eat in front of the TV and watch anything we wanted; they didn't even check. We saw *Starsky and Hutch*. We both liked Starsky best. I liked Hutch too really, but I never said. There was a horror film on afterwards which Vonnie came and watched with us, about teenagers being chased by devil people who could move objects with the power of their evil thoughts. It was really scary and I thought I'd have nightmares, but Vonnie just laughed at it.

Kim was sitting in the swivel chair and after the film finished Vonnie winked at me and did a shush sign and slid

silently across the couch. She suddenly grabbed Kim's ankle, like one of the devil people did to a girl in the film. You've never heard anyone scream so loud. Vonnie and I laughed together. Kim joined in in the end. Their dad came in to see what all the racket was about and I thought we were going to get into trouble, but Vonnie told him what she'd done to Kim and he grinned too, a fuzzy sort of grin with out-of-focus eyes. He didn't even seem to realize we were up past bedtime or watching things we shouldn't.

There was jazz music coming from the dining room and Vonnie went back with him to have more wine. Kim and I tried to move objects with our minds for a while, but neither of us could. Kim tried to cheat by sneakily raising the table with her knee to make her glass slide across, but I caught her. We got sleepy and lay end to end on the couch. We thought the boy who saved the girl in the film was quite nice and wondered if any of the boys at the big school would look like that. We made a pact we wouldn't have a boyfriend unless the other one got one at the same time.

We must have fallen asleep because next thing I knew was Kim's mum throwing quilts over us and turning out the light, and the sound of her Scholls slapping as she walked back down the corridor.