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The Bad Mother's Handbook

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Published by Picador

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Chapter One

NAN DREAMS:

When I was twelve I fell and broke my elbow. It was election day 1929 and we were mucking about on top of the wall by the polling station. It was about six feet up and you were all right as long as you sat astride the coping stones, only I'd turned side-saddle so as to spot the people who'd voted Conservative, my dad said you could see it in their faces. Jimmy nudged me and we started singing:

'Vote! Vote! Vote for Alec Sharrock
He is sure to win the day
And we'll get a salmon tin
And we'll put the Tory in
And he'll never see his mother any more.'

I swung my legs to make the words come out better and the next thing I knew I was sprawled on the ground with my arm underneath me. Jimmy tried to make a sling out of the yellow muslin banners we'd been waving but I screamed and he started to cry in panic. It hurt so much I was afraid to get up in case I left my arm on the floor.

The following day, when we heard Labour'd got in, Dad got so drunk he couldn't open the back gate.

'I'll go and let him in,' Jimmy volunteered.

'Tha'll not!' said Mother. 'Leave him where he is.'

So I lay on the sofa with my arm all strapped up and watched him struggle. Finally he fell over and my mother drew the curtains on him.

It was funny, we'd never known him touch a drop before.

His vices lay in other directions.

JANUARY 1997

The day after it happened everything seemed normal. Even from behind my bedroom door I could hear Mum going on at Nan. She tries not to get cross but it's the only emotion my mother does these days.

'Come on, Nan, it's time for your bath.'

'I can't. My arm hurts.'

'No, it doesn't. You've been dreaming again. Come *on*.'

Ours is a house of lost things; keys, hearing aids, identities. There was a row about sausages this morning. My mum had cooked two sausages for Nan's dinner and left them on a plate to cool. Then the window cleaner came to the door, and when she got back they'd gone.

'What have you done with them?' she asked Nan (patient voice).

'I han't touched 'em.'

'Yes, you have, you must have.'

'It were t' dog.'

'We haven't got a dog, Nan. Where are they? I just want to know, you're not in trouble. Have you eaten them?'

'Aye, I might have done. Yesterday. I had 'em for my tea.'

'How can you have had them yesterday when I've only just cooked them? God Almighty, it's every little thing.' My mother ran her hand wearily over her face and sighed. It's something she does a lot.

'By the Crin! There's no need to shout. You're a nowty woman. You're like my daughter Karen, she gets her hair off at nothing.'

'I am your daughter Karen.'

'Hmph.'

It was me who found the sausages next day, wrapped in two plastic bags inside the bread bin.

Not that Nan has the monopoly on confusion.

I know my name is Charlotte and that I'm seventeen, but on a bad day that's as far as it goes. 'Be yourself' people, older people, are always telling me: yeah, right. That's *so* easy. Sometimes I do those quizzes in *Most!* and *Scene Nineteen*. Are you a Cool Cat or a Desperate Dog and What's Your Seduction-Style, how to tell your personality type by your favourite colour, your favourite doodle, the hour of your birth. Do I

a) believe this crap?
b) treat it with the contempt it deserves?

Depends on my mood, really.

Sometimes my nan thinks I am her own childhood

reincarnated. 'Bless her,' she says, rooting for a Mintoe, 'her father beat her till she were sick on t' floor and then he beat her again. He ran off and her mother had to tek in washin'. Poor lamb. Have a toffee.'

This drives my mum up the wall, round the bend and back again. She doesn't like to see good sympathy going to waste, particularly in my direction, because she thinks I Live the Life of Riley.

'You have chances I never had,' she tells me. 'Education's everything. How much homework have you got tonight?' She bought me a personal organizer for Christmas but I lost it – I haven't had the balls to tell her yet. 'You must make something of your life. Don't make the mistake I made.'

Since I am part of the Mistake ('I was a mother by the age of sixteen, divorced at twenty-one') this leaves me in an unusual position: I am also her redeemer, the reassurance that her life has not in fact been wasted. My future successes will be hers and people will say to me, 'Your mother was a clever woman. She gave up a lot for you.'

Or so she hopes.

Actually I'm in a bit of a mess.

When Nan walked in on me and Paul Bentham having sex yesterday afternoon she didn't say a word. She's surprisingly mobile, despite the bag. The colostomy was done donkey's years ago, pre-me, to get rid of galloping cancer.

'THE QUEEN MOTHER HAS ONE, YOU KNOW,' the consultant had shouted.

'Ooh. Swanky,' replied Nan, impressed. 'Well, Ivy

Seddon reckons Cliff Richard has one an' he dances about all ovver.'

I thought she might let it slip that evening while we were watching *Coronation Street*. Suddenly she said: 'She were too young, she didn't know what she were doing. I towd her, tha maun fret, I'll tek care of it.' My mum, coming in with a cup of tea for her, banged the saucer down so that the tea spilt on the cloth, and gave me a look.

Christ, Nan, please don't say anything or I'm done for. ('A thirty-three-year-old woman was today formally accused of bludgeoning to death her teenage daughter with what police believe may have been a personal organizer. Neighbours reported hearing raised voices late into the night . . .')

It still hurts a bit. I didn't know it would hurt like that. I knew there'd be blood because I read somewhere about them hanging the bed sheets out of the window in olden days so that all and sundry could see the bride had been virgo intacta. I used an old T-shirt and rinsed it out afterwards; if she asks, I'll tell my mother it was a nosebleed.

I'm not a slag. It's just that there's not a lot to do round here. You can walk through Bank Top in fifteen minutes, a small dull village hunching along the ridge of a hill and sprawling down the sides in two big estates. From the highest point it affords panoramic views of industrial Lancashire; factories, warehouses and rows and rows of red-brick terraces, and on the horizon the faint grey-green line of millstone-grit moorland. To the south there's the television mast where a German plane is supposed to have come down fifty years ago; to the north there's Blackpool

Tower, just visible on the skyline. I used to spend hours squinting to see the illuminations, but they're too far away.

There are three types of housing in Bank Top. Victorian two-up two-downs line the main street, while on the fringes of the village it's all modern boxes with garages and uniform front lawns. None of the people in these Prestige Developments talk to each other but you can hear everything your neighbour's doing through the cardboard walls, apparently. Beneath these shiny new houses the foundations shift and grumble over defunct mine shafts – the last pit closed forty years ago – making Bank Top a sink village in every sense.

Then there's the council estate, thirties semis, where dogs roam free and shit on the pavement with impunity. This is where we live. We bought our house in the boom of '84 (also Divorce Year) and my mother celebrated by having a Georgian front door fitted and mock leaded lights on the windows. The front box room, which is mine and minute, looks out over the Working Men's Club car park; some rum things go on *there* of a Saturday night, I can tell you.

In the centre of the village is the church and the community centre and a rubbish row of shops, a newsagent, a launderette, a Spar. Two pubs, more or less opposite each other, battle it out but one is for old people and families off the new estates with quiz nites and chicken tikka pizza, and the other's rough as rats. I don't go in either. For kicks I get the bus to Wigan from a bus shelter smelling of pee. Fuck off, it says over the lintel, so I generally do.

I don't belong in this village at all. Actually, I don't know where I do belong. Another planet, maybe.

So there I was, on my back, entirely naked and rigid as a corpse, when Nan totters into my bedroom and says to Paul, 'A horse has just gone past the landing window.'

'Which way did it go?' asks Paul.

'*Which way did it go?*' I said later. 'What are you, mad as her?'

'I was only trying to make conversation.' He shrugged his bony shoulders under the sheets. 'What's up with her? Is she mental, like?'

'No more than a lot of people,' I said, a bit sharply. I get defensive about her, even though she is a bloody nuisance. 'Some days she's more with it than me. She's just old. You might be like that when you're old.'

'I'd shoot myself first.'

'No, you wouldn't. That's what everyone says, but they wouldn't.'

Part of the problem in this house is hormones. There are too many undiluted women for one small ex-council house. Huge clouds of supercharged oestrogen drift about and react sending showers of sparks into the atmosphere; the air prickles with it. Nan hasn't got any left, of course, although she hung onto hers longer than most (had my mum at forty-six! Didn't realize people even had sex at that age), but I've got more than I know what to do with. Certainly more than my mother knows what to do with. She suspects I have tart DNA (passed on from her, presumably). If she finds out I've been having sex she will kill me. Really.

This would be my worst nightmare:

BLOODY BLOODY bloody hell. Bloody Nan for making a mess on the bed. Again. Not her fault but I DON'T CARE, nobody cares about me. COME OFF, you bloody fitted sheet, bastard son of a sheet HELL. Trailing this armload off to the washing basket and HELL I've dropped a pair of tights HELL I've dropped a pair of knickers trying to pick up the tights, whole bloody lot's gone now all over the floor. Navy sock in with the whites, that was a close shave. Charlotte WILL NOT put her dirty clothes in the right baskets, what kind of a slut have I produced, you'd think she'd have more consideration. Dying for a cup of tea, cotton with pre-wash, heavily soiled, everything's heavily soiled in this house. Not Nan's fault, that bloody tape doesn't stick to her skin if she gets Nivea under it, what's this, what's this? What's just fallen out of the dirty pillowcase onto the floor?

Oh, Jesus, it's a condom. Charlotte's been having SEX.

I've known Paul Bentham since primary school. Funny to think of all the small events that lead up to a big one. Once, when I was about ten, we were down on the rec, watching the lads play five-a-side. Paul went for an extra big kick, got it wrong and smacked me really hard in the face with the football. The girls all marched off to tell on him and he thought he was in big trouble. Even his ears went red. But I didn't cry, even though I thought my nose had changed shape. I think he appreciated that.

Then there was the Valentine's Day before we moved schools. I knew he'd made a card for me, his friends had all been teasing me about it, and I waited; morning playtime, dinnertime, afternoon playtime. It wasn't till four o'clock he thrust it into my hand, and even then he'd changed the words on it:

Roses are red	*Vilots are blue*
Vilots are blue	*Roses are red*
If you go with me	*If I went with you*
I'll go with you	*I'd be off my head*

I wasn't that fussed, though. I knew it was Martin Hedges who'd made him do it.

I was more upset when he didn't dance with me at the leavers' disco. We knew we were off to different schools, him to the comp and me to the grammar, so I thought he might be up for a kiss, but he never came near me, just raced around hitting his mates with balloons and stuffing streamers down their backs. I told my mum about it afterwards (we got on in those days). She said, 'Well, what can you expect, he's a little boy.' It made me wonder when he'd be grown up.

Luckily it's impossible to avoid anyone on a place as small as Bank Top. We'd meet at the bus stop, blank each other out and sit as far apart as possible on the red leatherette seats, so I knew there was a chance he was interested. When he was with his friends he'd spread himself out over the back of the 214 to Wigan and talk loudly and swear a lot, writing on the windows and converting the sign EMERGENCY EXIT to VIRGIN EXIT by scratching off bits of the lettering. Then the boys

would say to each other, 'That's *your* door, that is. That's the door *you* should use.' Such a stigma.

Now neither of us would be able to use it.

I thought it would make me feel different, not being a virgin, but mainly it's made me feel scared.

'Have you done this before?' he asked as he unzipped his jeans.

We knew what was going to happen. It was my New Year's resolution and I'd told him. I don't think he could believe his luck.

'No. Have you?'

'Does it matter?'

I didn't trust myself to answer so I took my skirt off. Like we were changing for PE; hand your valuables over. I was sure we should be undressing each other, or at least kissing, but that seemed too intimate. I started to shiver with nerves and the cold. 'Can you stick the heater on? You're nearest.'

CLICK went the thermostat and we got into bed.

Then time seemed to hang for a moment and I was back at last August's carnival, sitting on our front wall watching the streamered floats go past and waving at toddlers dressed as bees, when he came sauntering over with his bucket of coins. He was wearing a pirate costume and he'd drawn a black curly moustache over his soft top lip, but the skin only looked more smooth and bright, almost girlish. 'It wrecks, this eyepatch,' he said, peeling it off and rubbing at the red mark on his cheek. 'I'm sure I'm doing myself damage. And these boots are killing me, an' all.'

So he sat down and we chatted shyly, then we walked

to the field together to hear the judging and watch the endless teams of high-stepping knee-socked majorettes waving giant pompoms about. The megaphone squawked the names of princesses and queens. 'Why is there always a fat one in every troupe?' he'd said, and the brass band played 'Oh When the Saints' while the air glittered around us. Little children ran about screaming, teenage girls lay on the grass and exposed their midriffs to the sun. Before he went home he said, 'You'll have to come round some time and we'll listen to some CDs or summat.' The sun flashed on his dagger. 'Yeah,' I said. 'All right.'

CLICK.

He was fumbling between my legs and pushing a finger inside me then, Christ, two, stabbing and rotating clumsily. (Wasn't that what the boys boasted about, the girls at school said, how many *fingers* they'd managed?) No. I'd changed my mind. This was a bad idea. Stop. I looked for his gaze to tell him to slow down, to abandon the whole thing and go downstairs and watch *The Simpsons*. But the fierce desire in his eyes paralysed me. I'd heard of people's eyes burning, but I'd never seen it in real life. It was like all his maleness concentrated there, shocking.

Suddenly he paused and half turned away. My heart lurched, then I realized he was rolling on a condom. His vertebrae were clear through his skin and I followed their curve down to the shadow at the base of his spine. Were all men so angular?

CLICK.

Then he turned back to me, grasped his cock like he

meant business and forced his way in. Ow ow OW it stung so much it was all I could do not to cry out. A football in the face was nothing compared to this. I held myself rigid and clung on to his back, wondering why something so universally billed as brilliant could be so awful. Why didn't they warn us at school? I'm sure if some teacher had said, 'Oh and by the way, it feels like someone sandpapering your cervix,' they needn't have bothered with all the Aids warnings and morality stuff. I'd certainly have thought twice. He came quickly with a series of great shudders and then collapsed into me, hiding his face against my neck.

It was at this point that Nan walked in, so all credit to him really that he managed anything coherent at all.

Afterwards it was embarrassing. Even though I ran over and locked the door I still felt the horror of Nan's blank stare and half-smile. Neither of us knew what to say and there was blood and we were still naked. Down the landing we could hear Nan singing:

'You know last night, well you know the night before
Three little tom-cats come knockin' at the door
One had a fiddle, another had a drum
And the third had a pancake stuck to its bum.'

'Don't put that in the bin!' I shouted as he scooped up the condom and neatly tied a knot in it. 'Hell's bells, if my mother finds that in with the tissues . . .'

'So what am I supposed to do with it? Do you not want to keep it forever?'

He dangled it from his finger then made as if to throw it at me. I screamed and flinched. He lunged and we rolled

about on the bed, then somehow it became a pillow fight. I bet that never happens in my mother's Aga Sagas. His ribs moved under his pale skin and his blue eyes shone, and I thought, He's still just a boy really. He was panting and smiling, and I knew then I'd done the right thing.

At last we rolled into the bedhead. He banged his chin and I knocked a picture off the wall which fell down the back.

'Aw, shit, sorry. I'll get it.'

He dived under the bed, all sharp shoulder bone, and brought out the photograph; two hand-tinted ginger kittens in a basket above the legend *Happy Hours!*.

Hoping always for a meeting
With a friend I love so true
Dear I send this simple greeting
May the world deal well with you

'The frame's a bit jiggered.'

He handed it over. The thin black wood was split at the corner and the glass was cracked.

'I can get a new one. Best not let my mother see, though.' I opened the bedside cupboard and slid the picture in under some magazines. 'I know it's naff but it's got sentimental value. It's one of Nan's birthday cards from when she was little, she used to have it in her room and I always wanted it. I nabbed it when her mind began to go. Sort of a way of preserving a piece of my childhood, do you know what I mean? Against all the change . . . She's never noticed.'

'Very nice. Do you want to come round on Saturday?

Everyone's out so, only I've got to get back to let Daniel in now. Sooner he gets his own key the better.'

He was pulling on his sweater as he spoke.

'Can you not stay just a bit longer?'

'Sorry. Little brothers and all that. Have you seen my sock?'

I scrambled to put something on, we found the sock and then he went home. I lay on the bed wishing he'd kissed me goodbye instead of ruffling my hair. Should've asked. Or maybe that's not cool. What are the rules, anyway? Perhaps some men just aren't all that demonstrative; it doesn't necessarily mean anything, it's the way they are.

So there it is, the great seduction. I suppose I've made the whole thing sound pretty gross. Some of it was. But the point is, the point is, I'm a woman now, an adult. Perhaps people will be able to tell just by looking at me (God, I hope not! The girls at school used to say you walked funny afterwards). But the point is I have a life that is not my mother's and it is the beginning of some big changes round here.

I know things are going to be different from now on.

*

I'D MET Billy when he ran across the street to help me carry a basket of washing. It was blowing about, a great white sheet on the top, and I knew if it hit the ground and got dirty my mother would chow. It happened once before when I was little and Jimmy had hold of one handle and I had the other. We were staggering down the street to Dr Liptrot's with his week's wash when a big gust of wind took two or

three shirts right off and they fell in t' road. We were two-double laughing as we picked 'em up, but when we got home and showed my mother she laid her head on the table and wept.

Billy had been courting a girl he'd met in the TB sanatorium, a bonny woman but it made no difference. We had ten for the wedding tea, then caught the train to Blackpool. At Chorley some lads got in and saw all t' confetti in my hair so they started singing, 'We have been married today, We are on our honeymoon all the way.' When we got to the bed and breakfast I gave a fish to the landlady so she could cook it for our supper. The next evening she said, 'Mrs Hesketh, are you ready for your fish now?' And I never took her on because I wasn't used to the name.

When I got back to the mill I had such a colour all the girls said I must be pregnant.

*

WHERE'S CHARLOTTE? Gone to Wigan for the afternoon, no doubt to spend money she hasn't got on crap she doesn't need. Nan? Asleep in the chair, legs apart, mouth slightly open. God, if I ever get like that. And why are there never any pens in this house? You put them down and they walk. Useful Drawer; what a flamin' mess, I don't know why we keep half this rubbish. Sandpaper, candles, napkin rings – like we're ever going to use *those* – Stain Devil's leaked all over the clothes brush now. Had a big row with the hoover and a table leg today; broke one of the attachments, so that'll be something else to sort out. Bingo! Black biro, bit fluffy round the nib, still, be all right. Here goes nothing.