10 Reasons Not to Fall in Love

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Extract

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One

My hand reached out sleepily across the bed to touch the man who wasn't there. Who hadn't been there for a year now. Time, it turned out, was actually a lousy healer with fake qualifications and dodgy references.

On realising the date, my eyelids refused to open. I heard a canal boat chugging past outside my bedroom window. A car door slamming in the cobbled side street below. Nina's dog barking next door. Familiar sounds, reassuring me that although 25 November had indeed come around again, life was continuing as normal outside the four walls of our home.

I rolled over to the other side of the bed. To Alfie. Feeling his chest rising and falling next to mine. Instinctively, I pulled him closer. Buried my head in his hair and breathed him in. Any second now he would wake. And from that point on I would have a smile on my face. Do everything I could to make his special day a memorable one – for the right reasons this year. These were my last moments to myself. A time for quiet reflection and contemplation.

Bastard. Fucking bastard.

There is no such thing as a good time to be left but I had to hand it to Richard. Walking out on me and Alfie on the night of our son's first birthday had demonstrated exquisitely bad timing. It also suggested that he'd been waiting to do it for some time but had wanted to ease his conscience by saying at least he'd given it a year. So that if people ever asked how old his son had been when he'd left he could say 'one', rather than eleven months, which somehow sounded less brutal. And there was the present thing as well, of course. Richard's warped rationale being that the arrival of a Wheely-bug, a push-along truck and assorted things to bang, rattle and shake would somehow compensate for his disappearance.

Alfie stirred and snuggled closer to me. I'd brought him into our bed the night after Richard had left. Not, as my mother had later suggested, as a substitute for Richard, but to give him some sense of security. So that he could hear my breathing as he slept, feel the warmth of my body and see the second he woke that I was still there. That I had not deserted him in the night too.

Alfie hauled open his enormous blue eyes and smiled.

'Bob,' he said. 'Mummy' would have given my ego a much needed boost but I had become used to the fact that I appeared to rank just behind Bob the Builder in his affections, though mercifully slightly ahead of Wendy. Although if he was anything like his father he would be unable to resist the lure of a capable blonde with a girlish giggle for long.

'Watch Bob later,' I said. 'Happy Birthday, sweetheart. How old's Alfie today?'

'Two,' he replied, his head bobbing up from the warmth of my armpit, his grin threatening to outdo the sunshine which had just crept through the muslin curtains on to the floorboards in the corner of the room. The pilot light inside me roared into life. It was the one thing I hadn't expected. To love him this much. Alfie wasn't a planned, longed-for baby. He was an accident. A split condom. An 'oh fuck' moment swiftly followed by a 'don't worry, I'm sure it'll be OK' reassurance that had turned out to be untrue. My main concern during the resulting pregnancy, apart from wondering if I would ever stop feeling sick, was whether I'd love my baby enough. Whether I'd be one of those mums who didn't bond and would feel absolutely nothing. But no, the moment he arrived I was awash with love for him. And even later, after all those endorphins had drifted away and I was sore and exhausted, I still felt it. The strongest love I have ever felt for anyone in my entire life. Maybe Richard resented that. Maybe that was why our relationship careered downhill from that point onwards. Although the sleepless nights fuelled by colic and then teething clearly hadn't helped.

'Presents,' said Alfie, kneeling up in bed.

'Yes,' I laughed, ruffling his silky blond hair which had been pressed flat against his head by sleep. 'You've got presents.'

Just from me this year. Hard as I'd tried to resist the competitive parent thing, I'd spent far more than we had between us last year. The main present

was a wooden cooker, sink and washing machine in one. The sort of thing which had made me think they should do a grown-up version of it for people like me with a tiny kitchen. But the other present, the thing he'd really love, was a toy vacuum cleaner. Garishly coloured and the sort of plastic fantastic battery-operated monstrosity that Richard had once vowed we'd never have in our house, but Alfie would love it. And anyway, Richard wasn't here to complain.

Alfie started using my tummy as a bouncy castle. It was particularly suited to this purpose, given that my post-baby bulge had remained with me longer than the father. I sometimes wondered if that was why Richard had left. Though as much as I hated what he had done, I didn't want to believe he was that shallow.

'Come on, then,' I said, unzipping Alfie's sleeping bag to reveal his Bob the Builder pyjamas. At two you could get away with it. At thirty-four I had no such excuse, lying there as I was in an Eeyore nightshirt which doubled as a comfort blanket for Alfie. Richard had never seen it, of course. It wasn't as if I'd tried to drive him away. But now he'd gone, well, it really didn't matter if I had the sexual allure of an ageing Tweenie in bed. No one was going to complain.

'Let's go and open some presents.' The smile was on my face. Nothing was going to spoil his day this time.

Rachel arrived early for the party to help. Seriously help. Not just offer to put some serviettes out and tell me the sandwiches would have looked better

with the crusts cut off, which was the sort of help my mother always gave.

'Hi, Jo. How are you?' she said as she squeezed through the kitchen door with Poppy in her arms and her floral changing bag slung over one shoulder.

'We're fine, thanks,' I said, hugging the bag and Poppy and a little bit of Rachel's left arm.

'No,' said Rachel, bending down to deposit Poppy on the floor before fixing me with one of her concerned looks, 'I asked how you are.'

'Oh, you know,' I said with a shrug. 'Hanging on in there.'

Rachel gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze as Alfie ran into the kitchen.

'Hey, Happy Birthday,' said Rachel, giving him a hug. 'Why don't you show Poppy your presents while I help Mummy with your birthday tea?' Alfie took Poppy's hand and they disappeared into the living room together. Rachel and I had already decided that they should marry. It would make a fantastic story for the wedding speeches, the fact that they had met while still in the womb when their mothers had sat next to each other at a National Childbirth Trust ante-natal class.

'I'll put the kettle on and you can tell me what needs doing,' said Rachel, donning an apron. If Rachel was ever sawn in half by a magician, I swear she would have the word 'capable' running right through her middle. On several occasions during the past year when she'd seen I was close to breaking point she had calmly taken Alfie home to play with Poppy and brought him back a couple of hours

later changed, fed and watered and with his changing bag restocked with everything that was missing out of it. Rachel had motherhood licked. I was still taking notes.

'Er, you'd better have a look at the cake,' I said. 'It's not exactly a Jane Asher.'

It was my third attempt at creating something which would pass as a train. The first had ended up in the bin, the second had at least graduated to being edible duck food, the third had emerged from the cake tin in one piece but appeared to bear little resemblance to a train. I deposited it on the kitchen table where Rachel examined it from a distance, as if it was road kill and she was a bit squeamish.

'You don't know what it's supposed to be, do you?' I said.

Rachel poured us two mugs of tea before turning to me.

'Some kind of construction vehicle?' she suggested hopefully.

'A train,' I said. 'It's supposed to be a steam engine. I haven't decorated it because I haven't got an icing bag and, besides, I'd only mess it up even more. Oh God, what am I going to do?'

Rachel stared at the cake for a moment. 'Fruit,' she said. 'Have you got any fruit?'

Five minutes later I was the proud owner of a steam engine cake with kiwi wheels, puffing banana slice steam from a pineapple chunk funnel. I gazed at it in utter admiration.

'Why didn't I think of that?'

'Because you're a frazzled single mum with more important things to do than read cake decorating

articles in patronising parenting magazines,' said Rachel.

She was being kind, I knew that.

'So, any word from Richard?'

When Richard had left, it was Rachel who'd been the human blotting paper for my tears, who'd finally drawn back the curtains after I'd sobbed for a week and told me I had to face the outside world, who'd sat through more of my rants about what a bastard he was for abandoning his son than I cared to remember, yet she was still good enough to risk another. Knowing that sometimes I was desperate for a chance to unload.

'He sent a card for Alfie.'

'And is he still seeing him tomorrow?' Richard was supposed to be taking Alfie out somewhere as a birthday treat. I had no idea where though I suspected it would be the local soft play centre where he took Alfie for their monthly contact meetings. I'd gone along with them the first few times. And even on Saturday mornings when the place was full of estranged dads, Richard had been conspicuous by the self-conscious expression on his face as he'd jumped into the ball pool with Alfie. Richard didn't actually like children. Certainly not other people's. Maybe not even his own, it was hard to tell. He'd told me not long after Alfie was born that he was looking forward to him being old enough to play squash with.

'Apparently so,' I said. 'Though as you know, Richard's word counts for very little.' Richard was notorious for cancelling at the last minute. Alfie seemed to rank somewhere behind work, girlfriend,

Manchester United and squash fixtures in Richard's order of priority. And that hurt me. Because it hurt Alfie.

Rachel nodded sympathetically as she spread cream cheese on a pile of rice cakes and made smiley faces on them with raisins. She'd never really warmed to Richard though she'd been far too nice to tell me so. It was just the way she'd looked at him at the ante-natal classes when he'd said that he thought two weeks' paternity leave was a bit excessive.

'And how are you feeling about Monday?' asked Rachel. I'd been so busy dreading the anniversary of Richard's departure I hadn't had time to dread anything else. But Monday was going to be as bad, if not worse. Because the complicated bit, the incredibly annoying, embarrassingly complicated bit was that I was finally returning to work on Monday. And my new boss was one Richard Billington. The same one who'd walked out on us. That's what could happen to you if you were stupid enough to sleep with someone you worked with. Richard hadn't been my boss at the time. That would have been seriously stupid. He'd been promoted while I was on maternity leave. We'd laughed about it at the time, how weird it would be when I went back to work for him. But that was before he'd left me.

'You think I'm mad going back there, don't you?' I said.

'I think you're making things unnecessarily hard for yourself.'

'I love my job,' I said with a shrug. 'And I don't see why I should leave because of him. He's done enough damage to our lives. He's not taking my

career away as well.' Even as I said it I wasn't sure that I actually had a career any more. Two years on maternity leave was a long time. I'd been planning to go back after a year but Richard going AWOL had put paid to that. As desperate as I'd been to return to the newsroom, I couldn't desert Alfie when his dad had just left him.

'But there must be other TV reporter jobs going,' said Rachel.

'Not for part-timers like me. Anyway, I don't want to move, you know that. You and Pops have kept us going this past year. We couldn't do without you.'

Rachel smiled and gave me a hug. Although I could tell from the expression on her face that she still didn't get it. But then her life seemed decidedly straightforward by comparison. She'd been with her husband Matt since they were teenagers and they were still blissfully happy. She worked two days a week at the Willow Garden florists while Matt, who was a reflexologist, looked after Poppy. They were a living, breathing example of a perfect life/work balance. And very Hebden Bridge with it, as I often pointed out. That was another thing Rachel didn't get. To her, Hebden Bridge wasn't the alternative capital of the north or the second funkiest town in Europe, or the little town for great little shops or any of the other accolades bestowed on it. It was simply home. The place where she had grown up. To me, an outsider who had moved here from deepest darkest Rochdale, only a few miles down the road but half a world away in terms of character, it still seemed like something out of a Little Britain sketch.

I loved it but Richard hadn't been so keen. He used to joke that he was the only heterosexual, meat-eating, suit-wearing, car-owning person in the village. He'd found the unwritten politically correct constitution a bit of a minefield and had never really taken to the place or its eclectic inhabitants. I'd tried to sell it to him as the Didsbury of West Yorkshire but the truth was you didn't get people dressed in Alpaca wool ponchos asking for goat's milk in their tea and gluten-free hemp and poppy seed muffins in Didsbury, or anywhere else in Manchester for that matter. Sometimes I'd tried to kid myself that it was Hebden Bridge Richard had walked out on, not me and Alfie. But that was unfair to Hebden Bridge.

'Anything else I can do?' said Rachel, looking up from the plate of edible spiders with tomato bodies and carrot stick legs she'd just created.

'Er, just Postman Pat's van made out of spaghetti hoops, please,' I said.

Rachel looked perplexed for a second before she realised and grinned at me, her freckles catching the afternoon sunshine in the kitchen.

'Thank you,' I said, giving her a hug. 'You are a complete star and have saved my life.'

Rachel took off the apron and brushed a strand of her long reddish-brown hair from her face. We had been mistaken for sisters on more than one occasion due to us having such similar hair. Mine tended to flop in front of my face if it was not tucked back safely behind my ears. Rachel's was tied back loosely behind her neck. We were both on the tall side as well but Rachel's face was much softer than mine, her features more delicate. Richard had once

said that my face demanded attention. I think it was his way of saying that my mouth and nose were on the large side.

We were on our way into the living room when there was a knock at the door, one of those rat-a-tat-tat knocks that people only do in sitcoms like *Terry and June*.

'Cooeee, anyone in?'

'Come in,' I called.

Mum entered the kitchen in a cloud of Yardley, dressed in grey nylon slacks, a padded cerise jacket and matching handbag, the type which only she and the Queen still carried. Following a few steps behind, in true Duke of Edinburgh style, was my stepfather Derek, who was wearing his trademark checked jacket and clutching a huge present.

'Where's the birthday boy, then?' Mum said, acknowledging my existence with only the faintest peck on the cheek. She still held me responsible for sullying the family's name by getting pregnant out of wedlock and ending up as a single mum, although at least she didn't hold it against Alfie.

'He's in the living room, playing with Poppy,' I said. 'You remember Rachel, don't you?'

Mum flashed her a toothy smile. Rachel said Mum looked like me when she smiled, which was true but not something I liked to be reminded of.

'Yes, of course. Lovely to see you again, dear.' She liked Rachel because she was one of my few friends who was married and had a nice job. Derek smiled and nodded a greeting to both me and Rachel. He'd only kissed me once, on the day he'd married Mum six years ago, when I'd been an embarrassed over-

age bridesmaid in a ridiculously girlish dress. He was one of those men of a certain generation and upbringing who felt awkward socialising with younger women. I liked him, though. He'd made Mum happy. Or as close to happy as she'd allow herself to be.

We went through to the living room where Alfie was busy trying to dismantle the vacuum cleaner.

'Nanna,' said Alfie, swiftly followed by, 'Present,' as his gaze settled on the large parcel Derek was holding.

'Let's have a kiss from the birthday boy, then,' Mum said, bending down to allow Alfie to stretch up and plant a sloppy kiss on her chin. She wasn't one of those hands-on grandmas, crawling around on the floor playing rough and tumble. She preferred not to get her trousers creased. 'Here you are,' she said, taking the present from Derek and handing it to Alfie. I braced myself for what was inside as he started ripping the paper. I'd tried to offer some present suggestions but Mum had insisted she knew just the thing to get. Alfie pulled out the box and stared at the picture. He had no idea what it was. 'Radio-controlled combat battle tank,' it said in bold camouflage letters.

Rachel let out an audible gasp before clapping her hand over her mouth.

'I know, it's fantastic, isn't it?' said Mum. 'Open the box for him, Derek. Show him how it works.'

While I was still rooted to the spot in shock, Derek pulled the tank from the box, picked up the remote control and began military manoeuvres across the floorboards.

'It's even got real smoke and sound,' he said, pulling a lever which unleashed a plume of smoke from the gun to a deafening crescendo of artillery. Alfie clung to my legs and stared in awe as Poppy ran screaming from the room, pursued by Rachel.

'Can you turn it off, please?' I shouted over the din. Derek put the controls down and looked up at me.

'What's the matter?' he said. 'Did she want to have a go herself?'

'No,' I said, trying hard to sound diplomatic. 'I think the noise and smoke just came as a bit of a shock.'

'Sensitive little soul, isn't she?' said Mum. 'At least Alfie likes it.' I looked down at Alfie who was still clinging to my trousers, his face pale and his eyes wide and staring. Shell-shocked would perhaps have been a more accurate description of his current state. I tried to phrase my objections without re-opening hostilities.

'Thank you. Perhaps next time you could check with me first? It's just he's a little young for it.'

'Your brother had a tank to play with when he was Alfie's age,' said Mum. 'It never did him any harm.'

That was a matter of contention. My older brother Adam was a computer programmer who went paint-balling at the weekends, had married a real life Barbie doll and was a hands-off father to his two children.

Derek stared out of the window, obviously keen to keep out of it. Rachel and Poppy were still cowering in the safe enclave of the kitchen. I bent

down and picked up the box the tank had come in.

'Look,' I said, pointing at the corner of the box. 'It says not suitable for children under six.'

'Oh, it says that on all the toys these days, it's those silly European directives.'

If she was in danger of losing an argument my mother often resorted to quoting from the *Daily Mail*.

'Well, I'll probably put it away for a few years, just to be on the safe side, if that's all right with you.'

'Please yourself,' said Mum, pulling a disapproving face. 'But I think he'd rather play with a tank than something like this,' she said, pointing to Alfie's all-in-one kitchen. 'I mean it's hardly suitable for a boy, is it? You'll be dressing him in pink next.'

I walked out of the room before I said something I might regret.

Rachel was watching Poppy pull the carrot-stick legs off one of the tomato spiders. I hoped she wasn't suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

'Sorry about that,' I said to Rachel. 'Is she OK?'

'Yes, she's calming down now. What about you?'

I shook my head and lowered my voice.

'I can't believe I'm leaving Alfie with them on Monday. I'll probably come back to find him re-enacting the Gulf War.' My mother's offer of childcare for the two days a week I was working had been gratefully received at the time. But as the moment when I had to hand Alfie over drew nearer, I couldn't help worrying I'd made a big mistake.

'I'm sure Matt wouldn't mind looking after Alfie as well, you know,' said Rachel. As much as the idea appealed to me I couldn't possibly accept; it was too

much to ask and I knew I'd start a huge family row if I told Mum her services were no longer needed.

'No, honestly. It'll be fine, I'm probably over-reacting,' I said. 'You know how she winds me up.'

'A cup of tea would be nice, dear,' Mum called from the living room. I flicked the switch on the kettle up, opened the fridge and sighed.

'Great,' I said. 'We're out of milk.'

'Haven't you got any longlife stuff in a cupboard somewhere?' asked Rachel.

'I'm hardly the sensible cupboard type, am I? The only thing I stock up on is Alfie's formula.' An idea floated into my head. I walked over to the cupboard and took out a bottle of ready-made vanilla-flavoured growing-up milk.

'You can't use that,' said Rachel, giggling.

'The recommended age is for ten months and over, there's nothing about an upper age limit,' I said, reading the label before pouring a little into two teacups. 'Let's pray that she doesn't notice.'

There was a knock on the door. One of Alfie's other party guests had arrived early.

'You go and let them in,' said Rachel. 'I'll take the teas in and make sure the army has retreated.'

'Thanks,' I said, taking a deep breath before I opened the door.

It wasn't one of Alfie's guests, though. It was Richard. Standing there with his jacket zipped up high around his neck, his eyes still unable to decide whether to be an appealing blue or a steely grey.

'What are you doing here?' I said.

'I can't make tomorrow. Something's come up.'

'But I've told Alfie you're taking him out.'

'Well, I'm afraid you'll have to tell him there's been a change of plan.'

'But what's more important than your son's birthday?' I said.

'It's a work thing. Something I can't get out of.'

'On a Sunday?' I stared at him hard, trying to work out whether he was lying to me. Daring him to blink first. He didn't.

'Anyway, I just popped round to give him this.' Richard lifted up the Old Treehouse bag he was holding, which I hadn't noticed until then. It was Richard all over. Screw things up then try to make amends with presents when what Alfie really wanted was time with his father.

'We're in the middle of a party,' I said. 'I'm afraid it's not convenient.'

Richard looked hurt, stung. He had a great knack of making me feel like the baddie in this. I hesitated, hovering on the doorstep, while I tried to decide what would be least upsetting for Alfie. The hesitation proved fatal.

'Daddy.' Alfie came running out of the living room at full pelt. He must have heard his voice. Richard bent to greet him.

'Hey, Happy Birthday.' Alfie hugged his legs before his attention switched to the bag.

'Present,' said Alfie, whose materialistic tendencies were becoming rather concerning. I looked at Richard, waiting for him to apologise to Alfie about tomorrow. He said nothing.

'Alfie,' I said, crouching down to his height. 'Daddy's sorry but he won't be able to take you out tomorrow. He's got to work. So he's just popped

round to give you your present.' Alfie nodded solemnly. I had no idea if he'd understood any of the words apart from 'present'. Richard looked at me.

'Can I come in?' he said. 'Just for a minute to see him open it. I won't interrupt the party.'

I sighed and held the door open.

'Stay in the kitchen, then. Mum and Derek are in the lounge.' I knew full well he would want to avoid a confrontation as much as I did. Richard handed the present to Alfie who appeared a little reluctant to open it, perhaps fearing another round of artillery.

'You might need to give him a hand,' I said.

Richard crouched down on the quarry tiles and peeled off the Sellotape. I'd forgotten what a tidy present opener he was. Alfie's face lit up.

'Train,' he said. It was a wooden train set. A really good one with a station and turntable. I couldn't say anything. Not even about the fact that I'd been saving up to get him one for Christmas. Alfie was happy. That was all that mattered.

'Thanks,' I said. Richard shrugged and stood up. An awkward silence descended on the kitchen. A kitchen we used to cook meals in together. Where my pregnancy scan was still stuck on the front of the fridge. Exactly where Richard had put it.

'Anyway, I'd better be off,' he said, shuffling towards the door.

'Daddy's going now, Alfie,' I said. 'Say bye-bye.'

Alfie burst into tears, mumbling something incomprehensible to anyone but me. Richard looked at me for a translation.

'He wants you to stay for his party,' I said.

Richard appeared suitably uncomfortable. I picked Alfie up, each fresh sob pricking at my conscience.

'Look, if you want to stay . . .' I started.

'I can't actually,' said Richard. 'I've made arrangements.'

I nodded, hackles rising. I had a good idea who the arrangements involved.

'Right, well, you'd better go quickly, then. No point in upsetting him any further.'

'Fine,' said Richard. 'Bye, Alfie.' He turned and left, slamming the kitchen door behind him. I looked down at Alfie, his eyes red and puffy. He'd only had two birthdays and Richard had now accomplished the considerable feat of spoiling both of them. 'If You're Happy and You Know It' was blaring out from the living room where Rachel was doing her best to get a party going.

'Hey, listen, your favourite song. Let's go and join in.'

Alfie obligingly clapped his hands as we went back into the room where Richard's card was jostling for position with mine on the mantelpiece. Reminding everyone that it shouldn't be like this. 'Happy Birthday, Son' cards were not supposed to come in pairs.