To Love, Honour and Betray

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Extract

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To Love, Honour and Betray

He made love, and now it's war!

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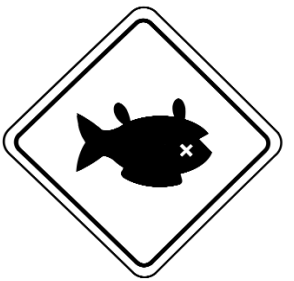
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1. Fish Out of Water

Like all prisoners, I feel the presence of my captor like tentacles reaching down to where I'm cowering at the bottom of the stairs. The house is hushed. I take a deep breath, as if I'm a diver going under, and peek down the hallway. Empty. A rustle of leaves outside the window startles me. The nerves in my body contract as I move gingerly towards the door. I bump into something in the dark and jump as if bitten, but it's only the fronds of a pot plant I've forgotten. I wait an agonizing eternity to see if I've been detected. I shuffle forward, apprehension dogging each tentative step. Finally, I can see the outline of the front door, but the sensation that I am being watched intensifies. Goosebumps rise on my neck and arms. Adrenalin slams through me. I tell myself to breathe,

then inch, one painfully slow tiptoe at a time, towards liberty. The door handle is almost within reach when a mutinous floorboard creaks. I hear the running thud of feet, and fright licks like flames all over me. Trapped, I wheel around to face the furious countenance of my captor. The hall light snaps blindingly on.

'What the *hell* do you think you are wearing? You are not going out dressed like that. Go back to your room and change immediately!'

I glance down in abject humiliation at the Wonderbra-ed cleavage semi-draped in one of her sequinned tank-tops, and the vertiginous stilettos I've stolen from her wardrobe. The top is not quite long enough to hide the fact that I haven't been able to do up the zip on her denim mini.

'I don't know how to break it to you,' her voice is metallic with scorn, 'but your chances of becoming a famous cat-walk model have kinda faded, you know.' The next word she utters, dripping with contempt, is '*Mother*'.

I sag into myself. 'Oh spare me the third-degree sarcasm, Tally, please.'

'I mean, look at yourself! You're forty-two. When are you going to start acting your age? You really are pitiful,' sneers my fifteen-year-old daughter, with a sucked-on-lemon expression. Her sun-kissed hair streams back from her face like a Viking warrioress.

'If you think you are going to win Dad back by dressing like . . . like *that*,' she makes a moue of disgust, her lips as pursed as a cat's bum, 'then you're even more deluded than I thought.'

'But I can still wear short skirts, can't I? I mean, my legs are all I've got left.'

'It's not the legs. It's just that that skirt doesn't go with your face.'

I wilt like day-old salad. 'Oh.'

'You think you're funny, but the sad thing is, you're really not. If you'd been nicer to Dad, he never would have left.'

I've read articles about the psychological impact of marital breakdown on teenagers, and this isn't how it's supposed to pan out. My daughter, Natalia, should have been blaming herself – not her shell-shocked mother. When my husband walked out two weeks earlier, I'd told the kids that their dad was away working. But my endless sobbing – and the post-it notes stuck to my forehead asking passers-by to please apply alcohol intravenously – told them otherwise. Tally was adamant that I'd driven her father away with my endless niggling about where he was going and whom he was with. Even though it's pretty clear that Jasper has officially forfeited his chance of winning Dad of the Year, I say little in my defence, not wanting to badmouth him. I just take it on the chin . . . OK, the double chin.

'Gosh, Tally, if only *I* were young enough to know everything.' But pain and anger bubble beneath the flippant surface of my words.

'OhmyGod. Is that my *top*?' Tally regards me with slant-eyed hostility. 'How *dare* you borrow my clothes?' She hisses, so as not to disturb her ten-year-old sister Ruby, already asleep upstairs. 'If I've told you once, I've told you a million times not to go through my stuff. It's pathetic.'

Until Jasper walked out on me, I'd tended to wear the kind of baggy dresses you could use to slip-cover a small island. My wardrobe, mostly bought from catalogues, comprised vast shirts to cover up wobbly bits (I was planning, one day, to have my buttocks taken in), and pedal-pushers to hide leg stubble. But this was the third time in a week my teenage daughter had found me squished into her clothes, setting out to the city to win back my absentee husband.

'I mean, just look at yourself.' Tally is standing to attention, one foot turned out like a ballerina. Her hands move agitatedly at her sides, as though ruffling an invisible tutu. 'It's, like, beyond sad.'

I glance into the mirror above the hall table. What I see makes even my passport photo look good. My hair, dull blonde and centre-parted, curves around my jaw like a pair of parentheses – making me the unessential aside. My once-pretty, pale-blue eyes are

pink and red-rimmed, like a laboratory rabbit's. Livid semicircles under both eyes give me the appearance of a neurotic possum. My hastily applied lipstick has bled into the tension lines around my mouth, and there's a dismal dab of it on my eyetooth. Mirrors can't lie – but they can be smashed to pieces once the kids are at school, I decide, flicking my gaze floor-ward.

My daughter sighs, 'I don't know what I'm going to do with you.' Her voice is clear and adult and self-assured as she turns, disgusted, on her Ugg-booted heel.

Sheepishly, I trail Tally to the kitchen of our rented surfside accommodation in a south Sydney beachside suburb. It is vintage *Brady Bunch*, with breakfast bar and cheery tiles and kangaroo clock whose rotating tail points to 9 p.m. She's been making biscuits. Since her dad's unscheduled departure my oldest daughter has taken to obsessive baking at all hours of night and day. One morning in May, over breakfast in the leafy London suburb of Hampstead, Jasper had announced he'd been offered a job opportunity in Australia with the Football Federation, coordinating coaching for the international and youth teams. He would move to the Antipodes for a year while I stayed in England with the kids. But I insisted that we let out the house and travel with him. The

experience would be enriching for the girls; we would be part of a trend. I told him how nearly two hundred thousand British citizens had packed their bags for Australia in the last year alone, the highest number to leave since the heavily subsidized mass emigration down under in the 1960s. Jasper tried to talk me out of it. But our marriage was curdling, like milk on a stove – and there was no way I was going to take my eyes off the pan.

And so we'd decamped in July, at the end of the English school year. Our oldest daughter, Tally, detested her posh North London private school and was happy to uproot. Our younger daughter, Ruby, was passionate about animals so Jasper rented a house on a Sydney beach, close to a national park, packed with cockatoos, wallabies and goannas. (I like animals too. Right there on the plate, next to the couscous and carrots.) The clincher for the girls was that their new school would be co-educational and the curriculum offered surfing lessons. The place sounded idyllic – even if our marriage was not. We left Heathrow forty pounds overweight – and that was just our emotional baggage.

A month into our Australian adventure, Jasper departed the family so fast he left skid-marks. He moved into a hotel overlooking the Harbour Bridge, to 'find himself' he said. But we were the ones who were lost. If only there were a psychological satnav:

'You have taken a wrong turn. Go back to your wife. Cerebral cul-de-sac.'

'You should have been less critical.' Tally snaps me back to the present. 'And why didn't you diet? You were, like, a size ten when you married Dad. I've seen the photos. Now, you're, what? A fourteen? I don't know how many articles and ads I cut out for you all year about how to stop pigging out.'

Biting my lip, I try to remind myself that a child is for life, not just for Christmas. The best way to do this is to open the fridge and pour a hefty glass of wine. 'You have let yourself go, Mother.'

Her words hit home and I wince at the blow. Why would Jasper want to get into my pants, when even *I* can't? It had taken me half an hour to stuff myself into my daughter's most voluminous skirt – and even so the zipper is wedged halfway up my pudgy flank. No wonder for the last six months our sex life had been like trying to thread a darning-needle with spaghetti. No doubt he worried that if he climbed aboard he'd burn his backside on the light bulb.

'You're right, Tally. Hell, if I left my body to science, science would contest the will.' I could hear my own voice, falsely cheery. 'I'm so out of shape that men in lap-dancing clubs would pay me to put my clothes back *on*.'

I wait for her to contradict me, to say something conciliatory, but her silence knifes me. When Jasper

walked out, I had screamed at him: 'You brought me to a foreign country and then dumped me where I have no friends or family. How could you? I don't even know my way to the city.'

His reply still rattled around my cranium. 'Well, just make sure you leave a trail of crumbs so you can find your way back. Cake-crumbs, I expect. Have you noticed how much weight you've put on, Lucy?'

'Hey, when depressed, it's important not to skip a meal. You must eat something . . . even if it's only three or four courses an hour,' I'd retorted with mock-nonchalance. But what he said was true. Since our marriage had started to sour, I'd done nothing but eat. My only criteria for dinner was that there be a lot of it. I was considering putting speed-bumps in the kitchen to slow down my progress to the refrigerator. It wasn't my fault. As any woman can tell you, 'stressed' spelled backwards is 'desserts'.

'Well, why didn't you *do* something about it?' Tally demands, fractiously. She is eating raw cookie mixture off the wooden spoon, a childish gesture at odds with her severe demeanour.

A dull throb makes my temples ache. My oldest child is starting to give me a migraine. No wonder the Panadol bottle reads: 'Dangerous. Keep away from children.' I kick off Tally's high heels and glug back more wine.

'And you're drinking way too much.' Tally

snatches the bottle. I notice for the first time that my daughter is taller than me, by at least an inch. When had that happened? She is so lithe and light, my darling girl, yet weighed down with worry. 'Every night since Dad left you just drink yourself legless. How many mornings have I found you passed out in the living room?'

'Hey, walk a mile in my stilettos and then you'll know why I need to lie down. Well, *your* stilettos.' I am trying to sound buoyant, but can feel the abyss of misery beneath me.

'And I just can't believe you're smoking again. You're so weak.'

'I am not smoking . . .'

'I found the packet in your bag. I wasn't born yesterday, you know, Mother. You must think I'm retarded if you believe you can get away with that.'

'Smoking helps me think. And I need to collect my thought,' I attempt a feeble joke.

Tally just rolls her eyes, declining to be cheered, and angrily shoves her tray of cookie dough into the oven.

'And my thought is that I need a drink,' I add, pinching the wine bottle from the draining board where she's deposited it.

'Well, *my* thought is that I'm, like, adopted. At least, I'm praying that is the case.'

In a rush of nostalgia, I think back to the time my

daughter adored me. It was all hot hugs, fierce kisses, her face a warm smudge against my neck, her little fingers coiled tightly around my own, as I rocked her with lullabies in the enclosing dark. I can still feel her arms wound around my neck, dreams skitting across her flickering eyelids, her skin smelling of vanilla and sunlight. Handmade Mother's Day presents, cups of lukewarm tea and cold toast in bed on Saturdays . . . Now it's just disdain, contempt and sarcasm. But how can she respect me when she keeps catching me trying to grovel to my runaway husband in clothes half my size, made for a female half my age?

'The truth is,' I confess, hovering near her, 'your father's brought us to the other side of the world and just walked out. I don't even have a bank account here. I need to see him about practical things, like, um, starvation. If he doesn't give me some housekeeping money, Ruby will have to start wearing your hand-me-downs – while you're still wearing them.'

Once more, she refuses to be amused. Tally has perfected a look of aloof insolence which implies that she is just too cool, too suave for mundane emotions like humour. And she is looking at me that way now.

'Don't you have your own money?' she says, accusatorially. 'I would never, like, give up my career for a *guy*. No woman in her right mind would do that.'

Another body blow. 'Honey, I had a mind once. Now I just have offspring. But whatever your dad is going through, this midlife crisis of his, he will get over it and come to his senses. But in the meantime, he can't leave us poor.'

'Nobody calls people "poor" any more. You call them deprived, underprivileged or disadvantaged,' she bridles.

'Oh great.' I take another slug of wine. 'So, we're still poor, but our vocabularies have been enriched. That's helpful.'

I feel a wave of nausea wash over me, and sink down into the nearest chair. It's fear. Jasper and I have – had – a very traditional set-up. I gave up work as a physiotherapist when Ruby was born ten years ago, and devoted myself to the cooking, cleaning and child-raising. My husband had always been the chequebook-balancer and smoke-alarm battery-changer. He was the one who made sure the house insurance was up to date, the private health-care paid and the radiators bled. He was always on hand to fix things that leaked, fumed or boiled over. He knew where the fuse-box was situated and what to do when he got there. How would I live without him? What would I do about vehicle maintenance and shifting heavy objects and Allen keys? Who was going to open the honey jars? Who was going to take all the holiday snaps and never be in them? Who was

going to shine flashlights around in a manly way, or drive to the all-night chemist at three in the morning?

I stare at the alphabetized spice rack, consumed by my own bleak thoughts. How will I cope, Jasper-less? I call every gadget a 'thingy'. My only DIY procedure is the highly technical art of whacking the crap out of any electronic device to make it work again. Thank God wine bottles now have twist tops, because even a corkscrew is probably beyond me.

Cold panic curls around my gut. Not only do I not know how to live without Jasper, I don't want to. I have loved him since we lay naked on a beach in Greece in our early twenties, and I traced the constellations of freckles on his broad shoulder blades. I knew them all by heart. I still do. Even during the last year, when he'd been callous and neglectful, paying me no attention except to put me down. Even when I found a love bite on his ass, which he dismissed as a tennis injury but I hoped was leprosy or the Black Death. My best friend, Renée, had told me to kick him out. 'Why are you allowing him to corrode your confidence?' She told me to be a 'glass is half-full type'. She told me to look on his betrayal as the catalyst for fashioning a new life. I could refurbish my personality and redecorate my dreams. It sounded no more difficult than one of her interior decoration jobs. I'd first met Renée when she'd saved me from the renovation from hell. Our bed was in the

hall, the dishwasher was in the bathroom, the fridge was in the garden . . . and the builders were on holiday in Ibiza. Renée knows about integral showerheads, dual-action flushes and the swan-necked versatility of taps – which is all Sanskrit to me.

Although I'd come to depend on Renée for much more than tiles, taps and terracotta – taking advice from a childless woman on marriage seemed like taking tap-dancing lessons from an Ayatollah. Although Renée pushed and pushed for me to see a divorce lawyer, I stayed right on loving my husband. 'Jasper and I are entwined, Renée. We've been married so long our wedding certificate should be in hieroglyphics,' I'd remonstrated.

But what I meant was that Jasper was the first man I'd ever loved. The first man who'd found my G-spot without a map, a compass and a list of edible berries. Tanned and sinewy after a lifetime of football, he has deep-set eyes slightly slanted, the colour of dark honey, close-cropped hair and a handsome, chiselled face which wouldn't look out of place in a shaving ad. He'd been there when our babies were born. He'd been there when they took their first steps. We were just woven together; knitted by domesticity, daily little kindnesses, in-jokes, in-laws . . . OK, he isn't perfect. He doesn't walk like a puma, regard a woman's body as a revered classical instrument, or wash-up naked having cooked a gourmet extravaganza. But he ticked so many other

romantic boxes – intelligent, capable, handsome, athletic. And above all, *mine*.

Slurping back more Riesling I determine to see him, no matter what Tally says. I am the adult here, I remind myself. Why am I taking the advice of a teenager? What would a fifteen-year-old know about the complexities of love? Do you know what comes out of the mouths of babes? Weetabix.

'Tally, if you ever fall in love, try to wipe it off your shoe before you walk it all over the carpet, OK? It's a messy business.'

Tally confiscates the wine bottle once more. 'Don't you think you've had enough, Mother?'

'Of sobriety? Yes.'

I rummage in my handbag for the cigarettes I am not allowed to smoke.

'What are you looking for?' she tersely interrogates.

A loophole in your birth certificate, is what I want to say when I realize she's hidden my fags, but I reply instead, 'Car keys. Watch Ruby for me, will you? Once I explain to your father the chaos he's caused and how much we need him, he'll come back.'

Tally bars my exit. 'Have you, like, *no* self-respect?'

Self-respect? I muse silently. I don't know if you'd categorize my condition as chronic low self-esteem, but I definitely have an inflated idea of my own irrelevance.

'I thought the good thing about being an adult is that you get smart enough not to, like, do dumb stuff,' she admonishes, making a grab for my keys.

'I thought the good thing about kids is that you keep your parents too busy to break up,' I hit back, wrenching the keys from her hot little hand.

Tally's eye-roll is full of contempt. Our fight is about to escalate, when Ruby suddenly appears in the doorway. 'I wet the bed,' she mutters. The face my ten-year-old turns up to me is a blur of despair. The look of her tear-stained visage tears at my heart. Her big, blue eyes are now nothing more than crescents, from a week of crying. For a minute, I feel paralysed by love, and then I curl her into the circle of my arms.

'That's OK, honey. It's no big deal, darling.'

'Has Daddy come home yet?'

A question like that should be stepped around as carefully as a dozing crocodile. So I did . . . For the first week of Jasper's absence at least. But when I eventually tried to explain that Daddy was very tired and needed some time on his own, Ruby had started crying and hadn't stopped. 'Doesn't Daddy love me any more? Was it because I lost the hamster?' As well as crying herself to sleep every night, she'd also started wetting the bed. Jasper walking out on us was a cataclysm on the scale of an emotional tsunami. My daughters had responded in different ways. While

Tally remained closed-off, her eyes slits, mouth zipped, feelings tourniqueted, Ruby had gone into meltdown. But either way, the tectonic plates of their infant world have shifted, opening up a bloody great fissure of uncertainty and angst. I feel a sudden stab of love for them both. The pain of it takes my breath away. How can I have let this happen to my family? Tally's right. It *is* my fault. I gulp oxygen to try to hide the harrowing sob which is about to burst from behind my tonsils.

'Why don't you just ring Grandma?' Tally asserts.

I recoil from the idea. The glacial condemnation of my twinset-and-pearls mother from her heritage listed terrace house in Wimbledon; the 'I told you so's' raining down on my head like hailstones. No, thank you. My mother had always said that Jasper was a man of straw. And my dad? Well, he knows all sorts of fascinating and useful info, like the correct tyre-pressure for long-haul trucks in Alaska and how to fix a fan belt with your pantyhose. But not what to do when your heart has broken. I cringe from the public humiliation, just as I would from a communal mirror in a bikini changing-room. I can't even ring Renée as she's gone on a diving-trip to some remote part of Madagascar. 'There's no point worrying Grandma because I am going to patch things up with your dad. We just need to hold the fort,' I say, rocking Ruby in my arms. 'I don't want everyone from home

calling Daddy and demanding explanations. He's obviously in a fragile state. We just need to hang in there, kids. Carry on as normal.'

'Normal!' Tally seethes, shaking her head emphatically as she looks me up and down with disgust. 'Yeah, right. *You* being normal.'

'Why *can't* we just be normal, Mum?' Ruby asks, sleepily. They both crave the dutiful domesticity and matrimonial longevity of my mother's generation, something I am starting to view with a nostalgic awe, just as I find myself amazed by the valour of the Spartans or the ingenuity of the ancient Greeks.

'And I don't want you girls emailing anyone at home in England about this, either. Not after all those farewell parties and going-away gifts. It's just too embarrassing. Besides, it's only a momentary blip.' I try to smile, but it makes my mouth hurt.

Tally opens the oven and removes the biscuit tray. The smell is homey and warm – the only thing in this rented, modern brick house which is. She slams the tray down on the slate bench-top. 'A *normal* mother would know what to do. A *normal* mother would never have let this happen. A *normal* mother wouldn't have told her husband to go to hell.'

'Hey, living in Cronulla, hell would be a step up,' I retort. Now that Jasper has left us, I'm starting to have suspicions about why he'd rented a house as far from the city as possible. Cronulla is the last stop on

the rail line. Mind you, as I'm now suicidal, at least the segue from Cronulla to death will be pretty effortless.

'As your sister has grounded me and I'm not allowed to go to the city tonight,' I rally for Ruby's sake, 'what say we all have warm biscuits and hot chocolate? Are you going to dock my pocket money too, Tally? Ah!' With glee I find a hidden packet of cigarettes in the back of the pantry and light one up with desperate relish.

'I can't believe you think this is funny. Why do you have to make jokes about everything? Dad's, like, *left us*. How can you make a joke at a time like this?'

'How can you *not*?' I respond dismally.

'This is all your fault. I hate you!' Tally spits at me. 'I wish you'd just die!'

I take another swig of wine, draw back on one of the cigarettes I stopped smoking ten years ago, and reply, 'I'm doing my best, darling.'