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Husbands

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Published by Penguin

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1. Tomorrow is a Long Time

Sunday 9th May 2004

Bella

'OK? I'll call you tomorrow, Amelie. You're OK, aren't you?'

'Yes,' says Amelie with a sigh. Her tone isn't reassuring.

I press the red button on the handset and disconnect my lovely friend. I'm left with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and grief. Grief is so lonely. It stains everything it touches and builds huge divisive walls. I should know, my mother died of cancer when I was nine. I will never stop feeling cheated. I'd wanted to say something meaningful, calming, consoling and true to Amelie but I couldn't. I've tried to find those words for nearly ten months now but they don't exist. Sighing with frustration I push my fists into the sockets of my eyes and rub hard. When Amelie called, I'd just finished my night-time round of pelvic-floor exercises and I'd gritted my teeth through eight reps of stomach crunches. I was mid my cleanse, tone and moisturize routine but now I can't find the emotional energy to continue. All that vanity stuff seems so pointless in the face of Amelie's pain.

Loving is such a risk.

I look at my husband, Philip, who has fallen asleep

while I was on the phone. He's clasping a copy of *The Economist*. I turn on the bedside lamp and turn off the bright overhead light, ease the magazine out of his hand and kiss his forehead. I always love him even more after talking to my widowed friend; grief makes us selfish. I wish that every time I spoke to Amelie I didn't think, 'There but for the grace of God,' but I do. Which probably means I'm not as nice a person as I'd like to be.

I nip around to my side of the bed, climb in next to Phil and hold tight to his strong, bulky body. My breathing slows down and I can't feel my heart thud quite as furiously inside my chest. During my conversation with Amelie it raced so violently that I was convinced it was attempting an escape bid.

I often think my heart would like to escape.

Philip makes me feel safe. He's nine years older than me, which is undoubtedly part of it. He is kind, respectful and thoughtful, even after sex. The men that I dated before Philip had not often been these things, even before sex. We met not quite two and a half years ago – I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar, which makes me a tribute to a Human League song that I can barely remember but Philip enthuses about. An interesting dinner-party anecdote maybe, but working as a waitress in a cocktail bar is in fact a fairly grim existence. Philip is a highly successful City trader and while I'm not sure exactly what City traders do, I know that they get paid an awful lot of money to do it. So Philip charged into my life armed with the traditional gifts of dinners in fancy restaurants, flirty lingerie (wrapped in tissue paper and hidden in thick cardboard bags) and even the occasional

meaningful CD and book. He also brought with him a new array of courtship tools. He was a grown-up. Philip talked about ISAs, pension plans and stocks and shares with the same passion as other men talk about football league tables, PlayStation and bottled beer. He remembered stuff I found difficult to retain, like when the hunk of junk I called a car needed to be squeezed through its MOT, or if my household insurance needed renewing, and his DIY knowledge actively turned me on.

When I met Philip I was, I suppose, a bit of a mess. The most substantial thing about me was my overdraft and my most meaningful relationship was with my bank manager. In fact, thinking about it, I hadn't actually met my bank manager, so my most meaningful relationship was with the girl at the call centre (probably in Delhi) who I rang regularly to explain my latest embarrassment.

It wasn't as though I squandered money on designer labels and expensive lotions and potions. I didn't own much; not a flash car or a property. Not even a shoe collection; hard to believe, when you consider that most women who have been brought up on a diet of *Sex and the City* and *Friends* think that a to-die-for shoe collection and wardrobe is, well . . . to die for.

It wasn't as though I'd been idle. I'd worked pretty much every day of my life since I graduated with my middle-of-the-road degree. The problem was I hadn't been consistent in my career progression. I had been on the bottom rung of several career ladders but had never clambered to the top of any of them. The thing is, I don't know what I want to do or be. I try to view it positively that, after several years, I can confirm that I don't want

to be an accountant (too many exams), a banker (I don't like wearing suits), a calligrapher (anyway there isn't much calling), a dental hygienist (other people's mouths – yuk), something in PR or anything in the music industry. I still think being a chocolate buyer for Selfridges might be good but the opportunity has never arisen.

In fact fewer opportunities arise as the years pass. On leaving university starting and failing to complete one graduate trainee programme is acceptable but after several years of failing to finish any trainee programmes, potential employers became wary of what they (rightly) identify as my inability to commit.

I'd been seeing Phil for nineteen months when he popped the question. I like to round up and say two years; it sounds more . . . appropriate. Actually, he sort of blurted it rather than popped, in a very un-Philip moment. If I was a betting woman I'd have put money on Phil being the type of man to propose in a controlled environment, like a restaurant or in front of some significant building or beautiful sunset. I'd have guessed that he'd buy a ring in advance, go down on one knee and recite a rehearsed speech asking me to do him the honour etc etc. In fact he yelled over gushing water (he was wearing Marigold rubber gloves at the time). I think his exact words were, 'We'd better get married before you cause any more trouble.' How could a girl resist?

At the time I was flat-sitting for a flamboyant and wealthy fashion designer friend of Amelie's, while she flittered around the globe to be inspired by spices in Morocco and sunsets in Cape Town, or similar. She had exactly the sort of job I could see myself being good at,

even though I wasn't sure what she did, it didn't even sound like work to me (undoubtedly part of the attraction). Real work, as far as I am concerned, is a series of dull temp jobs and late-night shifts serving cocktails to wanker bankers.

I found the fashion designer's Clerkenwell 'space' horribly intimidating. It was too trendy to be described as anything as mundane as a flat, which says it all. There were acres of glossy wooden floors and I thought the place would have benefited from a couple of cosy rugs. There were impressive skirting-board-to-ceiling windows which let in plenty of uplifting light but left me with as much privacy as a goldfish. And while stripping the palette to a single colour – white – apparently achieved 'monochrome drama on a grand scale', it was almost impossible to live with. Of course, I was grateful to be staying in such a stunning and stylized 'space' for a next-to-nothing rent but my gratitude was all about the rate not the stylized nature of the gaff. I'd never say so; it would be regarded as the epitome of crassness.

While my responsibilities were hardly tasking I did, disappointingly but somewhat predictably, manage to muck things up. I was charged with switching lights on and off, drawing blinds and setting alarms when I went out. I just had to live there, but all the same I found my position arduous. I was surrounded by white walls, white sheets, white settees, white crockery and white towels. All of them waiting for me to stain, spoil, scuff or spot. I lived in a state of perpetual nervousness for three months. Inevitably, the horror I imagined became a reality; I blocked the state-of-the-art waste disposal unit with the

remnants of a very average Chinese takeaway and I left a tap running as I rushed out to work. I returned to find a blocked sink and a flooded kitchen.

Philip arrived thirty minutes after I called him. He unblocked the sink, mopped up the spill and assured me that he'd source, buy and refit the water-damaged kick boards and tiles. I agreed to marry him that instant.

Besides, while Philip was being photographed by speed cameras as he dashed to East London to help me, I took a call from Amelie, who with an eerie calmness – that I later identified as shock – told me that Ben, her partner for eleven years, had been knocked over by a bus.

What are the chances of that? You hear people say, 'Go on then, I'll have a second piece of cake. Sod the cholesterol, I might walk out of here and get knocked over by a bus.' But no one expects to, do they? No more than we expect to be abducted by aliens or win the lottery. But he was. Dear, dear Ben. Exuberant, amusing, vibrant Ben was buying a copy of *Esquire* and a packet of chewing gum one moment and the next, he was dead.

It was the bus, not the blocked U-bend, that most encouraged me to accept Philip's proposal but I never, ever acknowledge as much. Sadness and fear seem inappropriate reasons to accept a marriage proposal.

2. One Broken Heart for Sale

Laura

Although it is 10.45 p.m. I consider this a perfectly acceptable time to call my bezzie mate, Bella. She knows it takes me until about now to find space in my day to talk. It's not that my friends are a low priority; it's just that Eddie, my son, is four years old and while he appears more than moderately intelligent, he seems to have a deaf spot where certain phrases are concerned. 'Can't you amuse yourself for a moment? Mummy has to make a telephone call,' and, 'Time for bed,' being the ones that spring most readily to mind.

I have tried to hold conversations while he's still up and about, but my friends (particularly the child-free ones) find it infuriating that I never finish a sentence without having to break off to yell, 'Don't touch that!' Or, 'No, you can't have a lollipop, eat an apple,' which I say for the benefit of the person on the other end of the phone while I feed Eddie kilos of sweets in an effort to buy time for adult chatter. Even when Eddie does fall asleep the next couple of hours are lost in a blur of household duties.

Not that I am a domestic goddess. I wouldn't like to mislead and give the impression that I am the sort of woman who pre-packs her kid's lunch for kindie the night

before it is actually needed. A lunch full of home-made goodies, organic whatsits and fruit and veggie thingies. I am (sadly) far more of a seat-of-my-pants type of girl. The chores that gobble up my time are scraping tomato sauce and leftover fish fingers from plastic plates into the bin, scraping yogurt from any and every surface that Eddie can reach in the flat, sticking a load of washing on, maybe doing a bit of ironing (if I can't smooth the crinkles out by hand) *and* drinking at least half a bottle of wine. By the time the washing is on the spin cycle the wine has usually taken effect and I feel sufficiently cleansed of the day's grime to call Bella.

We never run out of things to say. For quite some time we talked about my divorce and my bastard ex-husband, Oscar. Then we discussed Bella's wedding and now, as neither of us is facing any particular life-changing event, we talk about what colour I should paint my bathroom and what colour she should paint her toenails.

It really doesn't matter if I put a late call in, keep Bella up into the small hours of the morning, as she doesn't have to get up for work or a demanding child. I won't even try to pretend that I'm not jealous.

When I met Bella, over three years ago, things were very different. In those days she didn't visit beauticians, expensive hairdressers, food nutritionists or the gym to fill her day. Between approximately 8.30 a.m. and 7.45 p.m. she was a lackey in some PR company because she had a vague notion that she wanted to 'get into PR'. People kept telling her she'd be good at it. Not that she is a particularly good communicator but she is pretty and a disproportionate amount of pretty girls are advised that

PR is the career for them. As these girls often labour under the mistaken belief that a career in PR means attending lots of swanky parties, they try it out for a while, despite having little genuine interest in the industry. This is the category Bella fell into.

Some evenings she did a bit of waitressing in a seedy cocktail bar and other evenings she did an IT course because someone had told her she needed to improve her PC skills. Once she cleared up the misunderstanding that PC stood for 'personal computer' and not 'politically correct' she enrolled for evening classes. She used to joke that she might as well be an IT girl if not an 'it' girl. At weekends she worked as a waitress in a café, which is where I met her.

In those days she was overworked, underpaid and not glossy. Now, the opposite is true.

I was newly separated from my husband. Oscar left when Eddie was six months old. He said he needed to find himself, which is male-coward-speak for, 'I've met someone else.' This left me in what the British would call 'a tight spot' and we guys from down under would call 'up shit creek without a paddle'. My family were all thousands of miles and an expensive flight away. I'd packed in work just before Eddie was born, I didn't know anyone well enough to ask them to come over and dish out the Kleenex. Most of my other friends were halves of couples that had been *our* friends and while many tried to be helpful and sympathetic about Oscar's speedy exit, it was difficult. I felt I couldn't talk to them in case they repeated things to their husbands who might let stuff slip to Oscar. For 'talk' read monstrously slag off, bitterly condemn and

continually revile – obviously. Eddie was able to consume my hours with demands for food, nappy changes, cuddles and baths but he didn't offer much in the way of feedback beyond 'google ga, ma, ma, ma, ma, ma, ga ga'.

I was lonely.

Bella and I met just two months after the, frankly, gob-smacking catastrophic event. At that time the greatest distance I'd managed to wander from home was to the local child-friendly café in the high street. Its appeal was that I didn't really have to make any effort at all there. All the customers had squealing babies or unruly toddlers. Looking rat-shit, rolls of post natal fat and gaunt, sleep-deprived faces were de rigueur. I was sure that I merged into the noisy fray and that's what I wanted. Ideally, I'd have liked to fade away altogether; it's a common state of mind when your marriage is done for. However, it appeared my trust in my camouflage (elasticized daks, grey face, and scungy hair) was misplaced. I still stood out. I discovered as much when one day a waitress (Bella) said to me, 'You really are quite fucking miserable, aren't you?'

I intended to ignore the comment and just move to another table. However, instinct and curiosity took over and I couldn't resist a peek at the perpetrator of such an 'out-there' un-English comment. I looked up and was greeted by the broadest smile and biggest brown eyes; both assets were shimmering at me. For the first time in a couple of months I saw kindness.

'Totally,' I confessed.

Bella put a plate on to the table. There sat two large sticky buns, covered in icing sugar and cinnamon; they

glistened temptingly. I felt disproportionately grateful. I hadn't eaten much since Oscar had left. Or rather I'd eaten loads but nothing nice. I found going to the supermarket (chockers with happy housewives), an overwhelming task so I made do with whatever was in the house. At first I ate reasonably but as the freezer and cupboard resources depleted I found myself eating increasingly weird combinations, such as fillets of skinless, boneless fish (good) with cornflakes (slightly odd) or cold baked beans with spaghetti. That particular lunchtime I'd eaten a jar of anchovies and tinned rice pudding. My taste buds had been abused.

'These are my favourite. I thought you'd like them,' said the waitress, pointing to the buns.

'Thanks,' I muttered. Did I know this pretty woman with a dark, curly bob and a big grin? I didn't think so but she was behaving as though we were friends.

'Eat,' she demanded. Obediently I picked up a bun and bit into it. Tiny flakes of cinnamon and sugar stuck to my lips. Warm dough melted on my tongue and it felt like heaven.

'I'm Bella.'

I managed to mutter, 'Laura,' before I started to cry. Bella handed me a tissue. I think she'd used it but I didn't care.

That was how Bella became my bezzie mate.

Bella and I recognized in one another certain similarities. Not that she had been abandoned by her husband and left holding the baby, far from it. Bella had never been married and from what I could gather, back then, she wasn't capable of staying interested in a relationship

with a guy much longer than the initial three-month oh-la-la stage. But we were both travellers, both searching for something.

I was born in Wollongong, Australia. It has everything a girl could ask for; a big port and a smelting and steel plant. Wollongong is the Oz aesthetic equivalent of Slough. Or so I'm told; I haven't been to Slough so I might be doing one or the other of the two places a disservice. I'm the youngest of four children. My older brothers and sister all grew up gracefully, sat and passed exams, went away to uni, moved back home, married the neighbours and settled down to live the same lives as my parents had lived.

For as long as I can remember I have wanted more. Not more money. When I was growing up we always had enough money but not too much, and as a consequence I've never given money much thought. I wanted more experiences. I wanted to see more, do more, feel, taste and touch more. I didn't go to uni: instead of getting a degree I got several part-time jobs and started to save up for a ticket that would take me around the world. I wanted to see the Taj Mahal, the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower and all those other monuments that end up inside plastic domes that scatter snow.

I wanted to meet different people from the ones in my neighbourhood; who were very lovely but scarily similar, in a Stepford wives sort of way. I left Oz in 1993, aged twenty-one, and set off on my big adventure. In truth, most twenty-one-year-olds embark on an adventure; it's called life. But my adventure seemed to be more significant, more vital because it was *mine*.

I worked my way across Europe. And it was every bit pure gold, just as I'd imagined, and sometimes it was as terrible as my poor mum feared. The highlights included working in a circus – not that I was doing anything exotic like a trapeze artist or a flame thrower – I sold tickets and mucked out elephants. Another highlight was meeting a French lesbian who became a great mate. Briefly I wondered if we should become lovers, just for the experience, but she introduced me to her brother who was just like her but with a dick so I had a thing with him instead. I saw the Eiffel Tower, the Vatican and the tulip fields in Holland. The low lights included being employed as a dunny cleaner in public loos in Spain and sleeping on a floor for three nights in Florence train station because I couldn't get a job and I'd run out of money. Best not dwell.

I met myriad people; some fascinating, some so dull they brought on rigor mortis, some astute – I'll always remember their soundbites of wisdom. Some were totally nong yet their nonsensical chatter pops into my head at inconvenient moments. In 1998, aged twenty-six, I met Oscar. I'd never believed I was looking for 'the one', that my search and wanderlust were born from something as prosaic as that. But when I met him I thought I heard the pieces of my life drop into place.

Oscar was twenty-eight, just two years older than me but he seemed the epitome of grown-up sophistication. He owned his own flat, a small one-bedroom thing, above a dry-cleaner's in Fulham. He had a car. He threw dinner parties. It was only a few short months before he suggested that it was time for me to hang up my travelling

boots and hinted that maybe he could swing a job for me as a receptionist at the media buying company he worked for. I never saw the Empire State Building or the Taj Mahal.

Not that I had a problem with that at the time because I felt a seismic shift. Something like relief washed over me and I hastily agreed. I believed that meeting the love of my life had answered all my questions and needs. And he *had* to be the love of my life, didn't he? He was clever enough, good looking enough and even though he hadn't travelled (because you can't class two-week package holidays to Crete or Ibiza as travel) he seemed happy enough to listen to my boisterous recounting of adventures *and* I fancied him so much I practically fizzed when he walked into the room. It seemed like love to me.

Three years, a white wedding, a baby boy and a decree absolute later I realized I was still on life's journey. Far from Oscar answering all my questions, his existence just forced me to ask new, harder ones.

Bella hadn't actually worn out her passport and crossed continents like I had but she was always seeking out new experiences too; she was a stone that gathered no moss. Bella looked Latin although born in Scotland and had moved to London in her early twenties. I'm not sure how she passed her time before that, she doesn't yak about her family much. My guess is that she has a perfectly respectable middle-class background and a respectable 2:2 degree to boot. This hardly fits in with the bohemian lifestyle that she likes to pursue and portray so she is tight-lipped about her teen years.

We bonded because we were broke and knew well

the tedium of temping. We bonded because we soon discovered that we love a decent paperback, our Boots loyalty cards, window shopping and white wine. We bonded because we believe you have to laugh or else you'd cry and we believe that there's something in horoscopes. We bonded because Bella said nice things about my son (even while he was in his buggy and asleep she noticed his above-average intelligence and creative temperament). We bonded because, in short, she is kind.

Bella's line rings. She picks up the handset quickly. Philip is probably asleep and she won't want to wake him.

'Hiya.' I don't need to introduce myself.