Secrets of a Family Album

Isla Dewar

Published by Review

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First published in 2004
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in paperback in 2005
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A REVIEW paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 0 7553 0082 3

Typeset in Cochin by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline Limited
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.reviewbooks.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

Beauty and Acceptance

'Some people are universally beautiful,' Mattie said. 'And some people are beautiful only to those that love them.'

A conversation five Christmases ago: sitting on the bus, going home after work, Lily remembered it well. The streets the bus rumbled through were lit, shops aglow with festive decorations. Faces looking in at her, people waiting for other buses, or moving through the pavement bustle, chilled, bored, impatient. It was a bitter London night, traffic crawled, horns blared, voices cut through the dark, 'Taxi!' Everyone was wanting to get home.

They'd been at Lily's other home, in Edinburgh, when Mattie had said that about beauty. She and Art, her husband, had come north, as they did every year, to spend the day with her family in the old house where she'd been brought up.

It was always a comfort, this house, the feel of it, its sounds – the shudder of the central heating pipes, the creaking board on the stair, five steps up, the hum of the fridge in the kitchen, the rattling window in the dining room. The radio was always on, usually tuned to a classical station. Lily could never hear Mozart without thinking about her childhood home, and its smells. Mattie's cooking, lavender room spray, and another smell, an indefinable mix that was always in the air: old wood, coal fires, the scents of lilies or roses in the vase on the dresser, the lingering wafts that trailed in the air after Mattie or John or Grandpa, Dior perfume, the chill from outdoors that hung on John's woollen jersey when he came in from the garden. All that and

more combined to make the smell that was the smell of Lily's childhood, soft, enfolding, familiar. She loved it.

It was an old house, rambling, draughty, spacious. It backed on to Edinburgh Zoo. Its garden was a haunt for magpies and occasional badgers and foxes. Something Mattie and John, Lily's mother and father, considered an asset, along the lines of a conservatory or a double garage, despite the damage they did to their compost heap. Inside was a huge hallway with a staircase leading to a large landing. Here there were five bedrooms and a bathroom with an old Victorian clawfooted bath with a shower attached. Downstairs was the kitchen, a big room, dominated by a pine table that was constantly cluttered with newspapers, bills, books, cups. On the other side of the hallway, a dining room, and off that the living room, bay windows looking out over the garden, a coal fire, and a long-lived denim-covered sofa, bought from Habitat in the seventies, where Lily had curled reading *Little Women* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and other books. On this sofa she had fallen in love with Jane Austen, and had, with her brother Rory and sister Marie, thrilled at the adventures of *The Bionic Man*, *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team*, and done some seriously heavy petting with Richard Hardcastle, her teenage sweetheart.

This house was filled with memories. There were secret haunts and hiding places here. The cupboard under the stairs where Lily had always gone when she needed solitude, an hour or so of peace away from her boisterous younger siblings. The sill at the window on the landing, wide enough to sit on, draw up your knees, gaze out at the world, and dream.

Everything was just as it had been when Lily left, over fifteen years ago. The door on the kitchen unit still needed fixing, the tiling in the bathroom still stopped three inches short of the door. John had been promising to finish it for years. Years and years, and hadn't got round to it. The front gate still squeaked.

The back door still needed a bang from the hip to make it open. Oh, the comfort of all this. The joy of returning to find the old quirks she'd been intimate with all her life, still in place. Lily felt safe here. It was home.

Lily, drifting and dreaming, her head on the window of the bus she was travelling on, looked round. An old man had, at some point, sat down next to her and was reading a paperback book. She wondered what it was and craned over to see if she could read the title. She couldn't, not without him noticing her curiosity, anyway. She always meant to read on buses, but somehow the movement around her, people getting on and off the bus, the unsteady stop, start, trundle of the vehicle, always disturbed the rhythm of her concentration. On buses and trains, Lily always moved into her own thoughts.

That year, the year of the conversation about beauty and acceptance, Lily and Mattie had lingered at the table after everyone else had gone out to walk off their meal. Mozart's third violin concerto was on the CD player. The cloth that spread before them was littered with festive debris, nut shells, empty bottles, pudding plates, some only half emptied because eaters had declared themselves too full, too bloated to manage another bite, remnants of pulled crackers, discarded paper hats, glasses, coffee cups, a bottle of vintage port. Mattie had poured herself a second glass, offered the bottle to Lily, who'd refused and filled her glass with the last of the champagne.

Yes, it would have been five Christmases ago, because Andy had been there, he hadn't left Marie yet. And Rory's hair was still long, he hadn't met Isabel, who would insist he had it cut. And it had also been the first time they took a bet on how long it would take Mattie to mention the sledge.

The following year had been full of news, the phone ringing, Mattie pouring her worries out to Lily. 'Andy's left Marie. He's just gone. What is she going to do? *And* she's pregnant.'

Only a few weeks later, another call, 'Rory's met some French woman. He brought her here last night. She's very chic. He's going to live with her in Paris. She's ages older than him, thirty-six, three years older than you. He's had his hair cut. It's a sign,' Mattie said. 'Actually . . .' Then she'd stopped. She had been going to say that actually Rory's Isabel had reminded her of Lily.

It had struck her as she spoke that Isabel looked a bit like Lily, wore similar clothes, had the same haircut. And there was something about the way she fussed over Rory, told him to put on his jersey when he was going out to buy milk when they'd run out.

'Is cold,' Isabel had said. 'You'll get a chill. Put on the sweater I bought you last week.' Remembering that, Mattie thought, My God, Lily used to fuss over him in exactly the same way.

'Actually what?' Lily had said.

Mattie, recovering from this revelation, said, 'Actually, I think she may rule his life.'

Lily had, at the time, thought her brother could do with someone who'd rule his life. Oh, the relief that he'd at last cut his hair.

Then, later that year, Lauren had been born. 'She's gorgeous,' Mattie crowed, weeping, 'just gorgeous.' John, Lily's father, had looked after Marie's two older children, Tod and Agnes, while Mattie attended the birth. The experience had rendered her sobbing and emotionally wrecked. 'I've never seen anything like it. I never knew it was like that. Well, I did know, I've had three myself. But when you are giving birth you are sort of out of it. I saw the little head appear, and I cried. I cried and cried. And there she was, a little person, a whole new human being. It's a miracle. I can tell you, I really bonded with that baby.'

And that was the first jarring pang of jealousy Lily had ever

felt. It sliced through her. Of course, she chastised herself for it. This new baby was her niece, she should love her. And anyone coming into the world in these times we are living through, she told herself, needs all the bonding it can get. But there it was, the envy. If her mother was going to really bond with somebody, really think someone to be gorgeous, Lily wanted it to be her.

So there they'd been, Lily and her mother, that Christmas five years ago, before Andy's mysterious departure, Rory's passion for an older French woman and Lauren's appearance in the world, discussing beauty and acceptance. Lily couldn't recall how the subject had come up.

'Love changes beauty,' Mattie'd said. 'When you love a truly beautiful person, they cease to be perfect and you love them more because you, and only you, know their flaws. That's what makes them yours, the secret of the flaws. And when you love, for want of a better word, an ugly person, they become beautiful to you. That's part of the love, the fact that you know they are beautiful.'

'People's features change when you love them. They become precious. And once you really know them, have held that face close and kissed every bit of it, you'll never recapture how it looked to you the first time you saw it,' Lily had said.

'Oh, absolutely.' Mattie had nodded furiously. 'But sometimes you see a face for the first time and know that is the face for you. And sometimes a face just grows on you, and there it is in your life, and your days would be empty without it.'

'I know,' said Lily. 'I didn't think Art was beautiful at all when I first met him. Now I wonder how I could have missed it.'

Lily smiled now, thinking of Art. And noticing a woman across the aisle of the bus noticing her, she stopped and looked out of the window. The streets were familiar; soon she'd get off and walk the rest of the way home.

'Art is beautiful,' Mattie had said. 'I thought that right away when you first brought him here. But I knew it was a slow beauty. One that sort of caught up with you the more you looked at him and spoke to him. That Mark Tilley you were with before him was a seriously handsome chap, but the more you let him into your life, chatted with him, heard what he had to say, the less handsome he became.' She'd been, on account of the vintage port, more than a little tipsy.

Lily had looked into her glass. She did not like to think about Mark Tilley. For three years their lives had been entwined, they'd been Mark and Lily. An item. At social gatherings one was rarely seen without the other. Then he'd asked her to marry him, and she, almost as much to her own surprise as his, said no.

'No?' he'd said. 'No?'

'I don't want to marry you, Mark. Ever,' Lily told him. She'd meant to say it gently, but it didn't come out that way. She'd sounded brusque.

'Well,' Mark had said. 'That's me told. That's that then.' They'd been at the door of her flat, and he'd turned and walked away.

'Wait,' she called. 'What do you mean, that's that? It's over? You're not going to see me again?'

He stopped, turned, looked back at her. 'Yes. It's over. What's it all about, Lily? I thought we'd marry. Have children. The full catastrophe, as they say. And it would be wonderful.'

Lily had said, 'Couldn't we just cut to the catastrophe without the ceremony first?'

Mark had smiled. 'No, Lily. I don't think so.'

Lily had thought, he knows. He knows. He'd been testing her, and she'd failed. Will you marry me, Lily? Do you love me enough to take my name? Though hardly anybody she knew took their husband's name; he'd just wanted to see if she would. She'd have been Lily Tilley, and she couldn't bear the thought of it.

Thing was, she had, all her life, wanted to change her last name. At university her friends had said she could easily change it by deed poll. Indeed, they had all spent gigglish evenings thinking of names Lily could choose. Pasternak, they'd thought. Steinbeck. 'Austen,' Lily had said, dreamily. 'That's lovely. Or Woolf. Lillian Woolf. I'd sound important, intellectual.' But somehow she couldn't do it. She was sure John and Mattie would be hurt, and she didn't want to offend them.

She'd been Lily White, daughter of John and Mattie White. Lily White, how she'd been taunted at school. *Lily White is a shite. Oh, Lily White got a fright, in the middle of the night*. If she'd been naughty, teachers would peer at her imperiously. 'Not as pure as your name suggests, Lily.' She'd longed for years to dispense with that last name, and had thought she'd do what none of her friends were prepared to do, take her husband's name when she married. But Lily Tilley? She didn't think so.

She'd said no to him. That had indeed been that. She hadn't seen or heard from Mark again.

For some time she'd felt dreadful about it. The way the no had come out. Strong and loud, no denying it was a refusal. She thought she was shallow. She could have said yes, and kept on being Lily White. What was wrong with that?

In the end she'd confided in Marie, her sister. She couldn't tell her mother about the name shame.

'You said no because it was what you really felt. Nothing to do with your name. For the first time in your life you truly expressed your emotions. No, you said. Because you knew marriage to Mark wouldn't work. He was a pompous arse. Never liked him.'

Some months later Lily met Art. Arthur Raphael. She'd married him, taken his name. Now they'd been together for almost nine years. No children, which was an issue. But more of an issue with him than it was with her.

Lily still squirmed whenever Mark Tilley was mentioned. As Mattie had mentioned him then.

'People want to be beautiful,' Mattie was saying. 'And they want to be rich. But I'm past all that. I want acceptance.'

'Acceptance?' asked Lily. 'What do you mean?'

'I want to be accepted for who I am, what I am wherever I go. Just that. In the supermarket, in the park, in the street, in my music class, my book group, I want people to think there goes Mattie White and she's just fine.'

'I'm sure people do that already,' Lily had said.

But Mattie had shaken her head. 'No. There's always criticism, nasty thoughts, rumours, speculations and hints. I know, I know, it's the same for everyone. But I've had enough of it. I want to live in a world where we all just accept one another. I've come to think beauty is over-rated.'

'Over-rated,' Lily said, now. 'I don't think so.' The man she was sitting next to stopped reading, raised his head, turned and looked at her. Lily looked down into her lap, embarrassed. It would soon be time to get off, thank goodness. Art would already be home, in their flat. He'd have showered, and changed into fresh clothes, which would be the same as the clothes he'd have shoved into the laundry basket in the bathroom – jeans and a T-shirt. He'd be in the kitchen now, preparing supper. His hair would still be wet. The radio would be playing. He'd be chopping onions. He was a better cook than she was, more flamboyant, adventurous. Lily needed proper measuring spoons, a recipe to consult at regular intervals. Sometimes songs on the radio interfered with her thoughts and she had to switch it off lest she made a mistake and her dish turned out wrong. Art's food never turned out badly, he always seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

On the subject of beauty and acceptance Lily had said to Mattie, 'Hmm.' She knew this to be true. But still, to be utterly

beautiful would be wonderful. It would make up for being shallow and foolish, which was what she secretly thought she was. Mattie had been about to ask what hmm meant, but hadn't because the room filled up with sound and bustle and people with the stark scent of winter still clinging to their coats.

The walk hadn't lasted long, it was cold outside. Lily's brother Rory, her sister Marie and her two children, and Art were back, stamping their feet, rubbing their hands and casting glances at the table. They could eat something; after the walk there was room for a little tasty mouthful or three.

Art took a slice of pudding and poured himself some wine. He was off to watch the film on television. 'That's what you need on Christmas Day, a good rubbishy film with a good rubbishy happy ending.' And Lily agreed, and went to curl on the sofa next to him.

In fact, Lily was clever, an academic, Doctor Raphael (Doc Lil, Art called her). But it was the cleverness of someone who knew how to read, how to distil facts, form opinions and critiques and write them exquisitely and accessibly. She lectured part time in English at London University, something she didn't think she did very well. She often stopped mid-sentence and stared at her students, who lolled this way and that, took occasional notes, gazed out of the window. She'd say, 'Is anyone listening? Has anyone grasped what I'm talking about?' And she contributed to a series of educational books, *Writers Unravelled: Understanding Authors*.

'Opening up the classics to new generations of readers,' Lily said.

'Kafka for beginners,' Art said.

The books sold to schools and colleges across the world, and made Lily a fair amount from royalties.

'A good source of income, that I'm quite proud of,' Lily said.

'Nice little earner,' Art said.

It was what Lily wished she could say. It had a certain indiscreet charm. And people who spoke that way were all the things Lily wanted to be. Street-wise, they had natural savvy, nous. Writing books about dead writers for schoolchildren who, Lily suspected, wanted to read neither the dead writers nor books about them, was a dreamy thing to do, made her feel unworldly. Words were no challenge, she swam through them effortlessly. But life bothered her. She could not cope with car dealers, plumbers, window cleaners, she got short-changed in bars. She was easily taken in.

Until Art had come along she'd driven dud cars, had dripping taps and dirty windows, and had stood rapping her knuckles on bar counters saying, 'Excuse me, I think there has been a mistake.' Her unworldliness infuriated her. And it showed. She yelled, she demanded. 'I absolutely *demand* you look at this heap of a car you sold me,' she'd said to the man at the garage where she'd bought a Fiat that had turned out to have a dodgy gear box. The salesman had shrugged and told her the three months' guarantee period was up, and really she should depress the clutch every time she changed gear. She'd huffed, puffed, ranted and raged. And threatened to report the garage to whoever it was you reported garages that sold dud cars to. But in the end she had left feeling outraged and more than a little foolish.

She knew, she just *knew*, that if she was beautiful none of these things would happen to her. Beautiful people were exempt from being duped, they did not have to be street-wise, or smart. Despite being old enough to know better, Lily believed this. She wanted to be beautiful. Though, because it was Christmas, and she was feeling champagne-mellow, she'd agreed with Mattie on the matter of acceptance over beauty. 'Being accepted wherever you went would be lovely,' she'd said. But reluctantly. She wanted more than acceptance; adoration would suit her nicely.

Her husband, Art, was adored. Everybody loved Art. He ran a post-production company in Soho. A small outfit, ten people working mostly on pop videos and occasional adverts. He was handsome, but in a roguish way. Not stunning, just, as Lily put it, his face had been assembled almost perfectly.

In fact, his nose was slightly squint, though you had to stare to notice it. But as faces go, Art had been blessed. His was open, swift to smile, dark eyes, and eyelashes that were the envy of all the females who saw them. 'Not fair,' they'd say. 'What does a man need with lashes like that?' He was tall, long legs usually encased in jeans. Above them, a T-shirt. Always plain, black or white. He only wore suits for business meetings. He had three, and in one of the pockets of every jacket was a rolled-up tie. For as soon as he hit the street after spending time with potential clients, he'd whip off his tie, roll it up and shove it in his pocket, before opening the top button of his shirt. 'Bloody ties,' he'd say. 'Hate them.'

He was easy to like. He liked people, so people tended to like him back. They called him a lovely bloke. Which pleased Lily – for Art was hers – and filled her with envy. It was what she wanted to be – a lovely bloke. Except the bloke bit annoyed her.

'There is no female equivalent to bloke,' she complained to Art. 'Men get to be, well, men, chaps, gentlemen, lads, boys and blokes. We don't have a blokey word for us. A bloke's not a boy, a man, but affable and, well, male, terribly male. Women are women, ladies or girls . . .'

'But they ain't blokes,' said Art. 'Thank goodness.' And he smiled.

Which made Lily smile, and forget the rest of her tirade, which had been going to be lengthy. Art could always do that.

At last the bus reached her stop. Lily got off and walked the rest of the way home. She made her way through the thick

bustle of Islington, to the quiet, expensive, tree-lined street where she lived. She wondered what Art had prepared for supper. She thought that he would never have to choose between beauty and acceptance, for he had both already. She wondered what that might be like, as she considered how she had neither. Then she wondered what Rita Boothe would choose.

Her heels clicked along the empty pavement. She walked past houses, wide bay windows, curtains open. Inside living rooms were lit, televisions on; she could see plants, bookcases, large sofas. Lifestyles being lived.

Rita Boothe, she thought. Terrifying. The woman was known to be brusque, abrupt, a curmudgeon. And tomorrow Lily was going north to St Andrews, about an hour's drive from Edinburgh, to interview her for a chapter she had been invited to write in a book about lost icons. People who had in the past failed to make their mark and had, instead, become victims of their times. Rita Boothe, writer, photographer, journalist and cook, fitted the bill perfectly. Lily was nervous about meeting her. She didn't think Rita Boothe would give a fig about either being beautiful, or being accepted. There was a freedom in that. Lily knew she would never achieve it.