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Opening Extract from...

It Happened One Summer

Written by Polly Williams

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It Happened One Summer

Polly Williams

headline review

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Prologue

No one should have to get up at six a.m. on a Saturday morning. And it shouldn't be this stifling, even in August. It was like their skin was oiled, their legs slipping and sliding over each other as they concertinaed beneath the pristine white Egyptian linen that always made Nell feel like she was staying in a hotel. But Jeremy's smart duplex in London's Fitzrovia was better than a hotel and she wasn't checking out any time soon. In fact, she hadn't been back to her flat share in Hackney for days. Jeremy didn't do Hackney.

Nell tried to get out of bed – Cornwall was at least a five-hour drive away, they needed to get going – but Jeremy pulled her back, his fingers walking into the dip between her hip bones. Within twenty minutes he had made her come twice – he was gladiatorial even on five hours' sleep. They showered together in the wet room and Nell knew he was admiring her lean young body as she lifted her arms, slowly, one then the other, and shaved her armpits, ready for her party dress.

After the shower they were properly awake. So they

could now speak and reheat the row they'd had the night before. Despite the sex, Jeremy was still pissed off: she'd broken the news that she had a press trip next month, on his birthday weekend, unfortunately. She'd apologised, explained that if she didn't go, her editor would write her off as a non-ambitious homebody. And, come on, it was an all-expenses-paid trip to Miami! Jeremy said *he*'d take her to Miami. Nell said it wasn't about Miami – well, not exactly – it was about work. It was about proving a point, he retorted, throwing a napkin at her plate of Marmite toast. The toast hopped into her lap, leaving sticky brown skids on her petal-pink silk dressing gown.

Fourteen months into their love affair they were having lots of rows, and lots of fantastic make-up sex. Nell knew she'd started to rebel a bit. Jeremy's possessiveness, however tender and flattering, had begun to feel controlling. Worse, she suspected he resented her focus on her career – she'd done well in women's magazines but dreamed of breaking into newspapers – and that it rankled him that he, successful swinging-dick City lawyer, wanted to look after her but she didn't want to be looked after, not yet, anyway. (The babies could wait.) Yes, she loved him. Every bit of him. How could she not? Theirs was a big love, the kind of passionate, sparking Latin love that made you feel alive. It was just that sometimes she wondered if this was enough. Jeremy wanted worship.

Ten a.m. They still hadn't left the flat, making getting up so early completely pointless. Nell was all over the place. Whenever she went home to Cornwall – not often

enough, her mother complained – she got skittish, fidgety and forgetful. And it was a hundred times worse going home with Jeremy because she worried about a member of her family doing something off-puttingly dysfunctional. Which was why she couldn't find her make-up remover travel wipes. Or her gold gladiator flats. (She preferred heels but had to disguise that extra inch she had on Jeremy.) Nor could she find the right bra to go with her yellow halter-neck dress. Had she left the damn thing in Hackney?

Seven hours, much cursing, bickering and traffic jams later, the mercury was nudging thirty-one. With relief they finally slipped off the motorway and into the Perranortho Valley, weaving their way through leafy narrow lanes towards Tredower House where Valerie, Nell's mother, was hosting the hog roast. An annual event set in her lush semi-tropical garden, it was the one date in the year Nell couldn't easily flake out of, a rounding up of Valerie's closest friends and rivals for a parade of familial harmony. Jeremy's first. Not his last.

They piled out of his convertible and stood, hand in sweaty hand, on the gravel drive. The old stone rectory looked undeniably beautiful even to the most hardened metropolitan. Surrounded by swarms of cabbage whites, bees as big as birds and banks of blooming flowers, everything seemed to be fluttering and in motion, scented, sweating and moist. Suddenly it didn't matter quite so much that Nell didn't have the right bra or that she and Jeremy were irritating the hell out of each other. The day could still be rescued.

In the garden the party was in full swing. A roast suckling pig rotated on the spit with an orange in its mouth, its skin blackening and crisping like burnt toffee. Guests weaved drunkenly across the lawns. Valerie – yet to receive the diagnosis that would flip her world upside down – was animated and pretty in a sky-blue dress, trading gossip and gooseberry-growing tips and somehow working her way around the party without offending anyone. Only Nell noticed when she took five minutes out to sit alone in the summer house at the bottom of the garden, and wondered if she was thinking about Dad.

Circulating at the top of the garden, Corona in hand, was Nell's older brother Ethan. Showing off his twin baby boys and new wife Janet to the rellies, he was chatty, sociable and charming. Nell suspected he'd just done a sneaky line of coke in the downstairs loo.

Heather, Nell's younger sister, was in a less gregarious mood. She sat quietly on a bench beneath a pear tree, sunlight threaded in her blond hair, looking vulnerable and exquisite in a floral maxi-dress. She'd recently split from Damian, the civil servant she'd secretly hoped to marry, and Nell knew she had been dreading the hog roast with all its 'Who's the lucky man?' single-girl agonies.

Nell had a theory. At summer parties and weddings single women split into two camps. One type of woman wears hot-pink or animal print, shows lots of leg and whoops across the dance floor worrying wives and advertising her availability. The other dresses as if she's

hitched, avoids dancing and slinks off without saying goodbye by midnight. Heather was the second type. All she'd ever wanted was a meat-and-two-veg love affair, then marriage, the dessert. But somehow the more she wanted it the more single she became.

She needs a gay best friend, thought Nell, as she and Jeremy walked across the lawn towards her. Shame that the only homosexual at the hog roast was Monty, the family Labrador. Then Nell had an idea. Jeremy was Just Gay Enough! He had looks, charm, wore an Ozwald Boateng suit – with pink silk lining – and was much more comfortable in the company of intelligent beautiful women than the lads. He would stop poor old Heather from being hit on by dairy farmers with yellow teeth and, in turn, Heather's company would ease the pressure on her, which meant she could hang out with her old friend Sophie. Genius.

The party zoomed by. The sun blazed. Nell whirled across the dance floor with a peacock feather in her hair, polkaing with the village oldies, smoking a sneaky spliff with Sophie and, because it was so damn hot, knocking back unladylike quantities of sticky table wine, local cider and Pimms. By one in the morning only a small hardcore group (the childless under forties) were still partying.

Nell's breasts ached from all the bouncing about – she'd gone braless in the end – and she worried that she might have ruined their pencil-test perkiness for ever. She called it a night. Jeremy, excelling in being a Just Gay Enough companion to a much cheerier Heather, said he was too awake to sleep. He'd join her shortly.

At five in the morning Nell woke in her old teenage bedroom with a tongue like dried biltong. She was alone in the bed. Feeling a whoosh of nausea, she leaned over and yanked up the bedroom's wobbly sash window to gulp some air. Outside the dawn sky was lava-lamp pink, the trees vivid green. Trippy, she thought, taking in a lungful of oxygen. And it was then she heard voices in the garden. A low indecipherable murmuring at first. Then laughter, Heather's laughter. Jeremy's voice? Yes, Jeremy's voice. She vaguely wondered if she should go and join them but her brain was fuzzy, and it was so early and she was so, so tired, and, probably, yes, probably she was imagining things.

By ten the next morning, Jeremy's limbs were wrapped around hers again. A smell of bacon wafted under the bedroom door. Forgoing hangover nookie, they stumbled down to breakfast, ravenous. Runny fried eggs. Hash browns. Oily sausages. Toast. Ethan, Janet and Heather were slumped around the battered oak dining table, bleary and smelling of booze; the twins were bouncing in their rockers; Mum, in her striped apron, was pouring a rope of dark brown tea. All as it should be … until the moment Heather passed Jeremy the wicker basket of toast. Jeremy reached for a piece, and then, as if in slow motion, Nell noticed their fingers touch – a tiny, fleeting touch, a split-second beat of butterfly wings – then part. Jeremy glanced away. Heather looked down at the table. Her neck flushed. A terrible heaviness began to balloon in Nell's stomach. And it was nothing to do with the fry-up.

One

Almost five years later

Ten a.m., Kensal Rise, north-west London. The postman, resentful at being lumbered with the unpopular Saturday morning shift, shoved the letter through Nell's dove-grey door. It landed on the Union Jack coir doormat with a dull thump.

'Love letter?' The man in Nell's bed – Pete? Peter? – grinned – as he dribbled his finger around her belly button.

'Er . . .' Almost certainly a bill or a letter inviting her to upgrade her mobile phone minutes, Nell thought, sucking in her tummy in the vain hope of keeping it flat.

She was aware that he was staring more intently now, as if the possibility of competition had sharpened his appreciation. She felt a corresponding quiver of self-consciousness and rearranged her naked body on to its side.

Uppermost boob dropping down like triangular

bunting. Not a good look. Out of practice. She quickly flipped on to her front – better, less exposed – and as she did so, noticed that the arrow of dark hair around her bedmate's belly button had crusted up like the edges of an omelette.

'Hey, just relax, babes.'

Relax! How much more relaxed could she be? Lying horizontal, naked but for the sheet she was gripping to hide the stretch marks on her boobs. Maybe waking up next to a naked stranger was something this guy did every weekend? Maybe this was what all people under thirty did. Like Skins! Yikes. She gripped the sheet tighter.

'So you've got to work later? On a Saturday?'

'I have, I'm afraid.'

'You bloody journalists.'

'Boring, I know.' She winced apologetically. Work. Even the word made her tense. She wanted to forget about the newspaper, just for a few hours at least. But the office had taken up residence in her brain like a kind of warped doll's house complete with mini-photocopier and carpet tiles and the matchstick figure of her spiky boss in a black McQueen suit.

Friday had been manic, as always, the hours slipping like minutes, leaving a pile of unedited features that needed to be filed by Monday morning glaring back at her on the desk. There were no longer any keen underlings to palm the surplus work off on. The *London Comet*, like all newspapers, was suffering from crashing advertising revenues. There had been three waves of

redundancies, each spreading through the office like a particularly nasty flu, taking a few out each time, and the workloads on the survivors – none of whom suffered survivor's guilt – had dramatically increased.

'Oh, man. Are you sure I can't tempt you to skive off and drink bloody Marys?' He spanked her bottom lightly.

Nell imagined the spank rippling out across her cellulite. She hadn't had sex in over a year. Why couldn't she enjoy it more? What was wrong with her? Yes, she really should be less British and uptight about the whole thing. Channel Catherine Deneuve! Channel *Belle de Jour*! You are a goddess. You *are*. But somewhere inside her a little voice was laughing and whispering, yeah right . . .

'Come on, where do lifestyle journalists hang out on a Saturday morning?'

'Well . . .' she began. The kitchen. Hand in a box of Cheerios. Pore strip on the nose.

'Hey, isn't Portobello market down the road?'

'Not far.' She hadn't been to Portobello for months, possibly years.

'Sold! See if you can convert a Hoxton boy to West London.' He nuzzled her neck. 'I warn you. You'll have to use *all* your powers of persuasion.'

'I'm afraid I really do have a deadline.' Thank goodness. He seemed lovely. *This* was lovely. Sexy. Pretty bloody revolutionary, in fact. But . . . well, she wouldn't mind savouring the more delicious sensual details in private without him breaking the spell. Sophie would be

waiting for her juicy morning-after phone call. And it was surprisingly stressful all this being-naked-with-someone-you-didn't-know business. It wasn't stressful last night, of course. But now it was morning. The daylight was unforgiving. And she was sober.

It was the last thing she'd been expecting, which was why she'd set off to the party last night in a blue Reiss dress and shocking underwear – Jurassic cheese-wire pale-green thong, Primark T-shirt bra – and a 1970s bikini line. It was a well-connected, fashionable party where everyone had jobs worth broadcasting and even the men passed on the carby canapés. She'd been invited as a Friend of Sophie. (Sophie knew everyone and everyone wanted her at their party. She *was* the party.) Nell had been in a good mood, having had one of those rare successful trips to the hairdresser's in her lunch hour, and having secured, for the first time since she was nine, a fringe. The fringe – heavy, glossy, a bit Daisy Lowe – covered up all her frown lines, did something clever to her cheekbones and made the office swoon with fringe envy. The four pounds she'd shed with the help of the Norovirus two weeks before also helped. Although she was tired – she was always bloody bone tired – she knew she looked OK, plus, there was this distractingly charming twenty-something looking at her mouth when she talked and this had improved her mood immensely.

When he suggested they finish the evening with a drink at a nearby bar she'd dithered – a bar? there was drink at the party – but Sophie had pushed her out of the door, 'The fringe pulled already! Go, Nell, go!'

Two hours, five Bellinis later, to Nell's astonishment, they were entangled in a full-on pash-fest back at her flat. She remembered being prudishly surprised that he'd had condoms with him. And, no, she hadn't come. But she hadn't come with anyone since splitting with Jeremy, so it wasn't his fault.

Nell had felt a bit of a hussy. For all of two seconds. Apart from the fact that her hymen was practically growing back, it was a bit late in the day for the coy act now. All that Rules business was for single women who wanted to get married, didn't want to scare off The One and still had to pretend they'd only ever slept with four people. (One of those being another bi-curious heterosexual woman.) Nell didn't want to get married. She wasn't hunting down The One. Indeed, she feared she'd already met him and ballsed up the relationship spectacularly.

'You're lovely, Nell Stockwell.'

'Not the South London tube station,' she said, flattered that he'd got so close. 'Stockdale.'

He kissed her left shoulder flinchingly close to the large mole shaped like Ireland.

'Thanks for inviting Pete back to your lair.'

Pete! She knew it! Must not forget his name again. She took a closer look at him. Full head of hair. Slanted hazel eyes. Yes, Pete was definitely handsome – not just Bellini goggles – even if it was in a bit of a predictable blokey Ted Baker-shirt-wearing kind of way, like he might be the kind of man who bought gadget magazines.

‘Nice place you’ve got here,’ he said, putting his arms beneath his head. His biceps bulged like potatoes.

‘We like it.’

Pete’s brow furrowed. ‘We?’

‘Me and my daughter.’

He sat bolt upright and his eyes bugged out.

Oops. No, clearly didn’t remember at all. OK, she hadn’t gone into huge amounts of detail but she hadn’t hidden the fact. Well, not exactly. She was proud of Cass, proud of everything she’d achieved on her own, but stupid as it sounded now, last night she hadn’t wanted to draw attention to the fact she was a mum. She just wanted to be Nell, for once.

‘Daughter?’ Pete pulled the sheet up over his knees. ‘Shit. Is she, like, here? In the flat?’

‘No. At Dean’s.’ She twisted on to her side, feeling awkward all of a sudden.

‘Dean?’

‘Sorry, that’s her dad.’

‘Right.’ Pete scanned the room. ‘Right.’

Nell smiled. ‘We’re not together.’

He frowned. ‘You were married?’

‘We slept together once.’ This wasn’t the first time Nell had had to explain this. Better to get it out of the way early on. ‘And conceived my daughter.’

‘Wow. O-kay.’ He groped his balls, as if checking they were still intact and hadn’t been snipped off and utilised for fertility purposes. There was a moment’s awkward silence. ‘God, so you’re a *mum*,’ he marvelled. ‘Sorry. I suppose I wasn’t paying full attention last

night.' A slow grin spread across his face. 'Mind on other things.' He squeezed her nipple. It reminded her of breastfeeding a baby with teeth. 'Would you mind if I had a quick shower?'

'On your left. Pink fairy wings on the door.'

Pete walked with his legs bowed, big strides like John Wayne. He had high-worked buttocks. A great body, well, a wonderfully male body, which was all that mattered. Hearing the hiss of the shower, knowing he was safely confined to the bathroom, Nell finally started to relax. She wondered if she'd look back and see this morning as a turning point. Not only in terms of her underwear. (Must go knicker shopping immediately.) And, hopefully, her sex life. But maybe, just maybe, after all the years of hard work and the turbulent rollercoaster of single motherhood, she was arriving at a better place? Why, she might even be entering her prime.

Apart from the fact that she had beautiful Cass, the world's most wonderful four year old, she had a fantastic career that was going places, a flat she loved, and she was still nine stone three on a good day. She could spend her money on Colefax and Fowler wallpaper if she so wished – she had expensive plans for the hall – rather than a family estate car. And, yes, Pete was a reminder that she did have a certain freedom, more freedom than married people, anyway. Hell, she could bed men who looked like they'd been born in the *eighties*! Indulge in a no-frills sexual liaison knowing it was never going to end in Chinese takeaways in front of the telly. The married mothers at Cass's nursery couldn't do

that, could they? And nor could her sister.

'Hey.' Pete sauntered back into the room, pink towel tightly knotted round his waist. He flung a letter on to the bed's crumpled white waffle throw and winked. 'Your post, Foxy.'