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Opening Extract from...

Monday to Friday Man

Written by Alice Peterson

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I

‘You slot the capsule into the machine like so,’ the shop assistant demonstrates, positioned in front of a deluxe coffee machine. Her red hair is pinned back into a tight ponytail that swishes from side to side. ‘Press the cappuccino button and there you go!’

‘Wonderful,’ I say, as the gleaming machine gurgles, churns and froths the milk. This Italian coffee-maker was one of the wedding presents I had to return reluctantly.

For the finishing touches she sprinkles chocolate powder into the mug and hands it to me. I take a sip.

‘Well, what do you think?’ she asks.

And that’s when I see him.

I stare into his face.

I knew that one of these days we would bump into one another.

After all we both live in Hammersmith.

I'm still not ready to face him.

My eye is drawn to the watch I gave him for his birthday two years ago. I remember putting it round his wrist, Ed leaning across to kiss me.

Now he can't even look me in the eye.

A fair-haired woman approaches with a piece of paper in her hand. 'Edward, darling, have we put the Le Creuset casserole dishes . . .' She stops, sensing the awkward atmosphere. 'On to our list?' she finishes, glancing at me and then back to him.

'We need to go,' is all he can say.

The glamorous woman whose groomed appearance gives the impression that she lives in a health spa waits to be introduced, but instead Ed takes her arm and firmly leads her out of the shop.

I exit the cookware department without my deluxe coffee machine and step numbly onto the escalator, clutching the handrail, tears stinging my eyes. I can't believe he's getting married! Six months and he's moved on. How could he?

I overhear hushed voices.

'Hang on . . . Gilly? Oh my God! *That was* Gilly?' Her powerful scent fills the air.

'Don't talk too loud,' he insists, before adding, 'we'll come back later.'

'You'd better not walk out on me,' she says, glancing over her shoulder.

I watch them leave the shop.

When it's safe to follow, I walk out of the double doors, catching a reflection of myself with froth decorating my top lip.

‘This is Dorset FM playing you your favourite *hot* summer tunes,’ the smooth-voiced radio presenter says, ‘and here’s another great track from a singer who needs no introduction.’ Next I am belting out, ‘Dancing on the Ceiling’ by Lionel Richie as I drive into the open countryside.

Ruskin, my dog, barks in protest on the back seat, before sticking his nose out of the window again, enjoying the wind against his face.

‘What’s wrong, Rusk?’ I call, glancing over my shoulder towards him. ‘I have the voice of an angel!’

He barks again, clearly saying I haven’t and that he’s not too keen on my musical taste either. He’s always been more of a Bach and Mozart man.

I pull over into the side of the road to let a tractor crawl past.

I think I needed to bump into Ed last weekend. I really do.

‘Nearly there, sweetheart,’ I promise Ruskin.

Following a friendly exchange between the tractor driver thanking me for waiting, and me thanking him for thanking me, I drive on.

I’m not going to dwell on it, I tell myself.

Ed looked handsome. Slim and tanned. I’d saved up for months to buy him that watch. I grip the steering wheel. ‘Look, Ruskin, isn’t it stunning? Look at the sheep and all this green space and blue sky! We are going to *love* it here!’

I’m convinced Ruskin and I should move out of London and make a new start in the country. I will miss London; I have so many happy memories. Dancing on Friday nights with my friends. Staying up until five in the morning and then enjoying lazy breakfasts as the sun rose. On Saturday nights Ed and I would usually go to a party or dinner and when we returned home, we’d carry on drinking cocktails and stick some music on and be silly. I loved those evenings. The museums are some of the best in the world . . . though it is true to say I don’t make the most of them. Spitalfields and Camden markets on a Sunday. Ed introduced me to opera. I was never sure I was going to like it, but I found myself falling in love with my evenings at Covent Garden. It’s where he proposed.

It is hard to imagine living somewhere else . . . except

recently . . . well, recently things have changed. For me London's lost its shine. Maybe that's because I'm single and many of my married friends have moved away. Only this morning did I receive yet another change-of-address card from an old school friend of mine, and on this card was a black-and-white illustration of a family waving goodbye as they ascended the sky in a hot air balloon, with the caption above, THE DIGBYS ARE TAKING OFF!

I drive past a thatched cottage, the front door open, letting in the sun. Now where in London would you be able to do this? Certainly not in Hammersmith, where I zigzag the pavements, avoiding one dodgy-looking person after another.

Late at night all I hear now are drunken voices outside my bedroom window and I wake the following morning to find shards of glass on the road. My car was broken into last week. Admittedly I was stupid enough to have left my gym kit on the back seat. The bastards took all of my CDs except for *The Best of Girls Aloud*.

I arrive in a sleepy market-town square and park right outside Hunters Estate Agents. As I unbuckle Ruskin from his seatbelt, I spot my A-Z squashed under the passenger seat, keeping company with an empty plastic water bottle, a heap of crumpled parking tickets and . . . what the hell's that? It's some old tangerine peel. I'll do a major tidy-up later.

Examining the parking sign, I discover with delight that I don't have to pay. In London I can barely utter my name without being charged, so that's another good reason to leave.

I open the door and walk into the middle of the room, Ruskin pulling me along at a pace towards a man sitting behind his desk.

'Gilly?' He stands up to shake my hand. 'Gilly with a G?' he adds cautiously with a wry smile.

I smile back, amazed by his memory. Dad used to say that I'd tell everyone I was different because my name was spelt with a 'G' and not a 'J'. I think the last time I met Richard was in Dad's kitchen. I must have been about ten; Richard would have been in his late teens. He had longish dark hair, was loud and confident. I remember thinking his cowboy boots were trendy. He'd come over for tea with his father.

I look at him now, guessing he must be in his mid-forties. I thought he'd be taller, but then everyone is big when you are still growing up. He's solid in build with a crushing handshake and . . . oh my God . . . such terrible dress sense now! Why is he wearing a glaring yellow tropical shirt with pineapples on it? He must be going through a midlife crisis.

'Good to see you again,' Richard says, 'it's been a long time. How's your dad?' Richard is my father's godson, and it was Dad who had suggested I see him if I really was keen on moving to the country. Richard's father,

Michael, and my dad met during their National Service and have kept in touch ever since. I remember Michael and my father reminiscing about getting up early in the morning to polish the toecaps of their boots until they shone like the sun, and constantly being shouted at by the sergeant. I had enjoyed listening to their stories.

‘Please, take a seat,’ he says, surveying me in my denim miniskirt, shades and pink Birkenstocks. I take off my sunglasses. Behind Richard’s desk, mounted on the wall, is a large black-and-white framed photograph of an aerial view of Dorset. ‘Cute dog,’ he comments.

‘Thanks.’ I glow with pride. Ruskin is my rescue dog, five years old and a terrier of some kind with a tail like a palm tree, thick sturdy legs and a handsome head too large for his body. Children laugh when they see him but always want to stroke him. To my mind, he’s the most loyal man in my life and I won’t hear a word said against him.

After briefly exchanging news about each other’s dads, Richard gets down to business. ‘So you’re looking to buy in this area?’

‘That’s right. I want an adventure,’ I say boldly. There’s no reason why I can’t take off like the Digbys, I think to myself.

‘I can’t remember . . . do you have family here?’

‘Yes, yes. My Aunt Pearl used to live in . . .’ I narrow my eyes, trying to remember. ‘Tolpuddle. That’s it. Tolpuddle.’ I remember, as a child, being sent off to Aunt Pearl’s during the summer holidays with my twin, Nick.

We enjoyed it. She'd take us to lots of different beaches, and Nick and I climbed rocks and played ducks and drakes in the sea.

Richard crosses his arms. He has a strong square face, curly dark-brown hair and thick eyebrows.

'Anyway, I drove through some lovely villages this morning.' I decide not to tell him that some of these villages seemed half-dead, 'and saw a cottage for sale in . . . Poddlehampton, or was it Puddletown . . . Puddle-something anyway.'

'Piddlehinton.' He's trying not to smile. 'Would you like a coffee or tea?'

'Oh. A cappuccino please.'

'You're not at Foxtons.'

I blush. 'Instant's great, thanks.'

He heaves himself out of his chair, walks up a couple of steps, and then he's out of sight.

I look around the office restlessly before reaching down to stroke Ruskin, who's lying under my chair.

I gaze out of the window, telling myself not to think about bumping into Ed and his new wife-to-be any more. When I'd stared into his face all I could think was I used to wake up to that face each morning. I know his every line, the shape of his mouth, the story behind his faded scar on the left-hand side of his forehead. I look down at my hands. She wouldn't wear chipped nail varnish, or bite her nails. I wonder if Ed has told her the story behind his scar?

I am jolted from my thoughts by noise and cursing coming from the kitchen, and Richard asking me if I want milk and sugar. It sounds as if he's having a fight with the mugs and the kettle is about to explode. As I watch a dodderly man shuffle past outside, pushing a trolley on wheels, a ripple of panic sets in. What am I going to do here? Would I find a job easily? I'd miss my father if I left London. He lives in our old run-down family home by Regent's Park. I don't think he wants me to move, but you can never quite tell with Dad. I know Anna doesn't want me to go. Like me she's single, and she and I are like sisters. I'd miss my twin, Nick, too. I'd especially miss his children. Still, they could all come and stay, couldn't they, in my idyllic country cottage with pale-pink climbing roses and a pretty front gate. I can see the girls now, running bare-foot around my lawn laughing and playing under the sprinkler. In the evenings we'd have fun picking raspberries from my garden.

I stroke Ruskin, thinking how much I'd also miss my Ravenscourt Park dog-walking friends. We've become an institution that meets every morning at eight o'clock, under the oak tree, come rain or shine.

God, I'd miss Susie too. Her daughter, Rose, is my goddaughter.

Then I think of Ed, again. 'Oh, my God, *that was* Gilly,' she'd said. I can't bump into her again.

'Gilly?' Richard hands me my coffee.

‘I’m sorry.’ I take the mug, thanking him. ‘I was a world away.’

‘Remind me, have you sold your London place yet?’

‘No. It’s all early days but . . .’

‘What do you do, Gilly?’

‘Good question.’ I smile as I clear my throat. ‘I work in my friend’s antiques shop.’

‘Right.’

‘It’s only temporary,’ I rush to tell him. ‘I used to work for this company that hired out locations for photo shoots, adverts, conferences, that kind of thing, but it went bust under new management. She was terrible, the boss . . .’ I rub my hands together, realizing Richard doesn’t need to hear all the details. ‘Anyway, I’m just helping this friend out over the summer, until I move. Now, you said over the phone that you had a few houses within my budget?’

He shuffles some sheets together and a few fly onto the floor, which he doesn’t bother to pick up. ‘OK, let’s start with this one.’

It’s a thatched cottage. The kitchen has a black-and-white chequered floor and an ancient-looking cooker. ‘It’s on the main road to Dorchester,’ Richard says.

Scanning the details, I search to say something positive, but . . . ‘It looks *a little bit* pokey.’

‘Too right! Awful place,’ he agrees.

I watch him curiously as he produces another sheet, this one revealing a white cottage with a front garden and shutters over the windows.

‘The thing is,’ Richard begins, sensing I like it, ‘it’s down a steep hill and come the winter you’ll be trapped if there’s snow.’

‘Is it a lively place?’

‘Um, now what do you mean by lively?’

‘Well, it would be nice to meet some people my age.’ How about an attractive country gentleman who owns two golden Labradors, and who enjoys coastal walks and romantic meals by the fire? And dancing. Got anyone like that hiding in your filing cabinet?

Richard taps his fingers against the desk. ‘I forget who lives there apart from the vicar and his wife. She, poor thing, has been laid up for months, fell into her wheelie bin and skidded down the hill.’

I can’t help smiling at that.

He shows me another tiny cottage in a village that seems to consist solely of three houses and a postbox. The windows are the size of matchboxes and the curtains are drawn. I know I have a small budget, but come on!

‘Right.’ He pauses, looks tentative, but continues, ‘Listen, are you sure you want to move?’

‘Sorry?’ I say, just as my mobile rings and Ruskin barks. Flustered, I reach for my handbag and rummage around in it, aware that Richard is watching me. All manner of things come out: diary, bronzing powder, Oyster card, lipstick, even Ruskin’s poop-scoop bags. I’m sure mobiles conspire to hide the moment they call.

At last, you little devil. ‘Sorry, what was that?’ I switch it off.

He surveys my long dark-brown hair pinned back with a navy spotted scarf, my bangles and turquoise suede handbag; next he casts an eye down to my bare wedding finger. ‘I’m not sure the countryside is a place for . . .’

‘Single women?’

He strokes his chin, nods.

‘I have thought about this,’ I admit, ‘but . . .’

‘People will be suspicious of your motives in moving here.’

I look at him, puzzled.

‘You won’t get invited out much if that’s what you think. No invitations winging their way through your door I’m afraid.’

I smile nervously. ‘Why not?’

He leans in close towards me. ‘Women will feel threatened.’

‘No they won’t. What do you mean?’ I add.

‘Believe me, it happens. They’ll be scared you’ll run off with their husbands. You’re a good-looking girl,’ he says, with a sparkle now in his eye.

‘Running off with women’s husbands is not my style, believe me. And if they wear pineapple shirts like yours, there’s no chance,’ I add, beginning to relax. ‘I just need a change.’

‘These villages are idyllic right now, but come winter no one will darken your doorstep,’ he claims.

‘Of course they will! I’ll make sure friends visit me all the time.’

‘What are you doing to do stuck down here? Play bridge?’

‘I’ll get a job. It’ll be fun!’

‘You haven’t thought this through, have you?’

‘I have! I want to be somewhere different. I want a garden for Ruskin and I want . . . I want a healthier life. Clean fresh air.’

‘It smells of silage round here,’ he laughs.

‘Oh, don’t be so stupid. I’ll have a lovely garden where I can grow my own vegetables and fruit,’ I insist. ‘Raspberries, potatoes and . . . and . . . purple sprouting broccoli!’

‘If you think you’re lonely now . . .’

‘Lonely! I’m not lonely.’ I bend down to stroke Ruskin, curled up with his face resting on my feet.

‘Why are you really moving?’

‘What?’ I daren’t look up. His question takes my breath away.

‘Gilly, someone once told me I should leave London only when I hated it, when I’d squeezed all the juice out of it. Stupidly I didn’t take their advice and I miss it like mad. I’m not sure you’ve reached that stage yet.’

I picture Ed again and at last some courage fires up in my belly.

‘Want to bet?’

He nods.

‘I’m tired of the same old scenery. I’ve become immune to the wailing sirens and accidents that happen right under my nose. I hate paying the fucking congestion charge, Ruskin has no garden, just paving stones, hardly any of my friends still live in London and . . . and . . . the ones that do only invite me round for tea where I have to listen to their screaming children demanding ice cream in a cone not a bowl!’

I breathe again. My God, that felt good.

‘I don’t have a job, well, not a proper job right now,’ I continue, like a pressure cooker letting off steam. ‘I’m free and single so I have nothing to lose, right? So what if I’m single? What if I never meet anyone, Richard? If I just live my whole life in London and then get buried in Hammersmith too? I’m scared, I’m . . .’

He sits up. ‘You’re scared?’

‘I’m so angry with myself.’

‘Why?’

And then the strangest thing happens. I start to cry and Richard is handing me tissues and telling me to let it all out, his voice now soft, as though he’s my therapist.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say eventually, wiping my eyes. ‘I’m really all right . . .’ I falter. ‘Oh God, Richard,’ I exclaim, knowing I can’t fool him now, ‘I’m so embarrassed! I haven’t seen you in such a long time, and here I am breaking down in front of you.’

What must he think of me?

‘You don’t need to be sorry.’ Richard smiles. ‘Happens all the time.’ I find myself smiling back at him. ‘But tell me,’ he asks gently, ‘what is it?’

I sigh. ‘I still love him,’ I say.

Richard listens patiently as I fill him in on my four-year relationship with Ed and how it ended abruptly, only two weeks before our Christmas wedding. There was no explanation from him except for a scribbled note on the hall table that read, ‘I can’t do it. I can’t marry you.’

‘Do you sometimes feel like you’re sitting on the sidelines, that you’re watching everybody’s life move on except your own?’ I ask him.

‘Often.’

I tell him that I’d bumped into Ed and his future wife in Selfridges.

‘God, Richard, I’m stuck in a rut.’ I wait for him to say something comforting. ‘Tell me what I should do.’

‘You need to stop feeling so sorry for yourself and get on with it.’

‘What?’ I say, taken aback by the sudden change of tone.

‘I feel for you, Gilly, I really do. What this Ed did was unforgivable, but it’s been six months. You need to move on.’

‘I know,’ I say, bottom lip quivering.

‘Moving here isn’t right. You’re running away.’

I fiddle with the strap of my handbag. 'You're married aren't you, Richard?'

'Divorced. It's a lonely business. Believe me, I've felt like running away too.'

I glance at him, surprised by this sudden confession.

'If I were you, Gilly, I'd go back to London with my lovely dog and start having some fun again. What are you smiling about?' he asks me now.

'Going back home. London's dirty, so expensive and everyone's rude,' I add. 'You wouldn't believe it, but the other day I was told to fuck off by a drunk on my own doorstep who then proceeded to chuck his beer can at me.'

Richard smiles.

I tell him how Gloria, my neighbour, had asked me if I had a new lodger who'd forgotten his key.

'Oh my God!' he exclaims as he rolls up his glossy property magazine and thumps it against the table in triumph. 'I've got it,' he says, sounding like Professor Higgins. 'Get a lodger.'

'A lodger?'

He crosses his arms with satisfaction. 'Yes! I was only reading about it in the paper the other day and how everyone's renting out their spare room. Hang on, you've got a spare room, right?'

I nod. 'A very small one.'

'There you go then.'

'Oh, I don't know.' I need time to warm up to ideas.

‘It’s an easy way to make some money,’ he tempts me.

I think about this. Since being made redundant from my last job my salary has plummeted. Mari, my dog-walking friend who owns the antiques business, can’t afford to pay me much more than the going rate for working in a shop. Recently I’ve been making my own packed lunch to save some cash.

‘I’m too old for a flatmate, I’ve done all that. I’m too set in my ways now.’

‘Well, unset.’

Next thing I know he’s ushering Ruskin and me out of the door. ‘What are you doing?’ I say in protest as he propels me out into the fresh air.

‘Taking you out for lunch.’

‘Hang on . . .’

‘There’s a good pub across the road. Clearly you need convincing,’ he finishes.