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What You Don't Know

Written by Lizzie Enfield

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WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

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Enfield


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Chapter One

SHE WONDERED what it would be like to sleep with him.

By imagining herself going to bed with Graham Parks, Helen had not singled him out for special attention. She considered briefly what it might be like to sleep with quite a few of the people she encountered, not always because she wanted to, in fact often quite the opposite.

Sometimes she'd be sitting facing someone on the tube, some great hulk of a man with his legs wide apart, using far more than his fair share of personal space and constantly wheezing or coughing, and she'd find herself wondering if he coughed and wheezed while having sex. She would picture him afterwards, spreading himself across the bed, with total disregard for whoever he shared it with, his arms and legs flung wide, forcing his poor partner to curl up near a pillow and try to sleep in only one eighth of the bed space.

She was particularly fascinated by the Polish builders who'd helped extend their kitchen. They'd often appeared to be arguing, raising their voices and spitting out guttural-

sounding words. But if she'd asked them what they were discussing, they would smile and say in their gentle, sing-song English voices things like 'I ask if he likes to go clubbing tonight.'

There was something in the accent that always made them sound cross. If she asked if they'd like a cup of tea, one would invariably shout to another, who'd reply with a guttural outburst that would then be translated to her as 'Yes please, thank you very much, that would be very nice.'

What, Helen wondered, did 'You are the most gorgeous, unbelievable woman and I want to cherish every inch of you' sound like when uttered in the heat of the moment between the sheets in a Polish bedsit?

In cases like these, she was never more than a detached observer, but every now and then someone would come under her radar who would make her wonder what it might actually be like to sleep with them. Graham Parks had, within moments of their first meeting, transformed himself from the unflattering image on his book's dust jacket to one such person.

Helen put her curiosity down to fifteen years of sleeping with the same person. It seemed only natural that if you went to bed with the same man night after night, you would wonder what different would be like.

'Have you read the book?' Graham Parks brought her back to the here and now, catching her unprepared.

'I haven't finished it.' Helen decided to be truthful. 'I was only assigned the job this morning, so I didn't have much time.'

'I'm not sure that any of the journalists I've met today

have actually read it.' The author didn't seem perturbed by this. 'You're the only one who has actually admitted it, though.'

'Sorry,' said Helen.

'It's okay.' He smiled. 'I've never read any of your articles.'

Helen laughed and put down her cup of tea, looking around to see if the publisher's PR, Claire, had witnessed this exchange. She seemed to have disappeared.

'But you don't have to write anything about me,' she said, adding, 'Do you mind if I move and sit next to you? Then I can get the recorder a bit nearer.'

'Shall I hold it?' Graham asked, in a way that suggested he was used to being interviewed, aware that his words would be picked up better if the microphone on the tiny digital recorder were directed towards his mouth.

'Yes please, as long as you don't rattle it,' Helen said, half rising from her perch, thinking that if he was holding the machine then she didn't actually need to be on the same couch.

Graham Parks had the sort of physique that when he was younger would have been described as 'being built like a brick shithouse'. Helen had never quite understood the terminology, which was usually deemed complimentary, though quite why someone should find satisfaction in being described like a toilet block she could not think. She would have said he was built like a gladiator, or a matador, constructed from an impenetrable mass of muscle, which as he got older and less active had gradually turned to flab. Or perhaps it hadn't. It was hard to tell beneath the shirt

and sweater that he was wearing. Perhaps the girth was still all muscle.

There was something powerful about him. He appeared physically strong. She imagined he could break up a fight simply by standing up. She hadn't encountered anyone with such physical presence for a long time. He was the opposite of her husband Alex, who'd been scrawny as a young man but had graduated to lean as he got older.

'Tell me about the book.' Helen sat up straight and tried to focus on the job in hand. 'It's been described as a Nick Hornbyesque *Bridget Jones* for men.'

'I know.' Graham Parks sighed, implying he didn't like the tag any more than he liked the photo of himself on the dust jacket. 'And I've been described as a literary James Blunt.'

'I hadn't heard that one.' Helen rather liked James Blunt. She knew it wasn't cool to admit to this, especially in the offices of the *Sunday Review*, where everyone professed their hatred for 'that posh singer with the wishy-washy sappy lyrics', but along with all the millions who had bought his album, she enjoyed his music. She also quite fancied him and had wondered what it would be like to sleep with him. 'I suppose that's because you used to be a soldier,' she said. 'Do you mind the comparisons?'

'I quite like being compared to Nick Hornby,' Graham confessed. 'I'm not so sure about James Blunt.'

'I like James Blunt.' Helen decided to confess herself. 'He seems quite happy with who he is.' She decided not to say out loud that it was a quality she found very attractive in a man, along with the newly discovered ones of baldness, bulk and grey-blue eyes.

‘Well, I’m not very like him then.’ A momentary look of sadness passed across Graham Parks’ face.

Helen felt a sudden rush of compassion for him. She wanted to reach out and put her hand over his and tell him that she liked him, as far as she could tell, but that would have been unprofessional. No, it would have been ridiculous. She was here to ask him about his book. Yet she felt strangely connected with him. She wanted to know about him, and not just so that she could write the piece.

‘Is that because you care what the critics say?’ She tried to phrase her next questions carefully. ‘Or because you’re not happy with yourself?’

‘A bit of both, I think.’ Graham considered what she’d asked. ‘I haven’t had any reviews yet, so I’m not sure how I’ll react when everyone says the book is terrible. I’m steeling myself for negative stuff – and stockpiling antidepressants. And I’m not particularly happy about myself,’ he continued. ‘When you read the book, if you read it, you’ll realise I’m a little disturbed.’

Helen leant back against the sofa again. She felt unusually comfortable with him. She could be at home on the sofa with Alex, in the comfortable silence that comes from knowing someone so well that you don’t have to talk to them. She felt like just sitting for a bit. Why did he make her feel like this? He was fat and bald, just like the photo on the dust jacket, but with a raw, understated appeal too.

‘Is the book autobiographical, then?’ she asked.

‘Not really.’ Graham leant back as well. His arm just touched hers, but he didn’t adjust his position and neither did she. ‘The Ed character is fictitious, but there’s quite a lot

of me in him. I suppose he's an amalgam of various friends, but his emotions are quite often mine.'

'So how is he like you?' Helen now wished she had had time to read the book.

'Sad, single, screwed up, trying to sort out his life at an age when it really should be sorted.' Graham was writing her piece for her. She wondered if he realised.

'There's my headline.' She sat up and drained the rest of her tea, aware that a door had opened somewhere behind them.

'Five more minutes,' said Claire in a stage whisper, making it seem as if she was not actually interrupting.

'Have you got enough?' asked Graham.

'Almost,' Helen replied, aware that she still did not have a clear picture of what he had been doing since leaving the army.

'If you need to know more, we could always continue the conversation somewhere else,' he said. 'I'm hungry and I wouldn't mind grabbing a bite to eat before going home.'

Claire looked alarmed at his suggestion. 'I'm sure we could have the room for another half an hour or so,' she suggested.

'To be honest, I could do with a change of scene.' Graham was not going to be swayed. 'As long as Helen doesn't mind?'

'I don't mind at all,' she said. Now they were presenting a united front.

'Will you call me when you're done?' Claire was addressing Graham now, unsure if her duties as his chaperone for the day were over or if she needed to hang around out of sight until they'd finished.

‘I’ll give you a call in the morning,’ Graham said, adding, ‘Thanks for organising everything today. Hopefully it will shift a few copies of the book.’

Chapter Two

AT THE RESTAURANT, Helen wondered if there was any significance in the fact that she was having a meal with another man on the day her husband had finally agreed to have a vasectomy. Having decided to put an end to the possibility of bearing any more of Alex's children, was she subconsciously seeking out someone who could successfully impregnate her?

Studying Graham's face again as he looked at the menu, she couldn't imagine for a moment that he had had the snip. He seemed too masculine. Did that mean that by having put pressure on Alex to end his fertility, she was somehow emasculating her own husband?

'What do you fancy?' Graham was looking over the top of his menu. His gaze was a bit too intense. Helen felt herself blushing. She wondered if he could tell she had not been concentrating on what to order but instead wondering if all his bits were still intact.

'Ummm . . .' She scanned the menu. 'I think I'll have the chicken with baby vegetables.'

Almost as soon as she'd said it, she regretted this. Not

because she didn't like chicken with baby vegetables; it was just that eating infantile carrots, peas and sweetcorn seemed somehow inappropriate, given the way her mind was preoccupied with the not having of any more babies.

'Or maybe . . .' She looked at the menu again.

'Something else?' Graham raised his eyebrows as he spoke, and she noticed for the first time that there was a small scar in the middle of one brow, which made it appear to split in two.

She wanted to know how he'd got the scar, but she didn't know him well enough to ask. After all, she'd only met this man half an hour ago. She had a husband and two children waiting for her at home. Yet here she was, sitting opposite him in a dimly lit restaurant, wanting to know all about him.

'No, chicken and baby vegetables it is.' She tried to sound decisive, businesslike, like the journalist who had just interviewed him and agreed to get a bite to eat in the hope of finding out a bit more about him. It was not unprofessional, this having a meal with an interviewee. She could even legitimise it by putting it on expenses.

'How about you?' she asked, vocalising her intent to make things appear entirely normal. 'I can put it all on expenses, so . . .'

She trailed off, which, she realised, made her sound not entirely convincing. But then she was not here because she needed to be here. She was here because she wanted to be here. It was only a meal, but it felt disloyal to Alex, especially today.

Helen had gradually, over the past eight years, been wearing Alex down into submitting to the knife. Initially, after Joe was born, although she didn't want any more children, she couldn't quite reconcile herself to the idea of not having any more either. So when the doctor asked what they were doing for contraception, she told him she didn't want to go back on the pill, muttered something about condoms and left it at that.

A lot of her friends had been more proactive, bringing vasectomy information leaflets home from the hospital with their babies, even though doctors advised them to wait a while, hedging around the fact that if their newborn for some reason did not survive the early years, they might want to reconsider their no-more-children position.

After Joe was born, Helen had had periods when she really wanted another child, but money had been tight, Alex, an actor, had been away and as their daughter Emma had got older and easier, the thought of returning to mountains of nappies and sleepless nights had grown less appealing.

Alex had initially come out with a thousand reasons why he should not have the operation, ranging from 'It might hurt' to the more fatalistic 'What if you are all killed in a car crash and I want to have more children with someone else?' Moreover, he reasoned, wrongly, Helen would be infertile in a few years' time anyway.

'Surely you won't be able to have children after you're forty?' he'd said, ignoring the fact that a lot of her friends had only started having them once they hit forty.

'Look at Cherie Blair,' she had countered. 'She had Leo at forty-six and then a miscarriage after that.'

'The Blairs are Catholics, though,' argued Alex, as if was Cherie's faith rather than her fertility that had caused her pregnancies.

'And being a Catholic probably prevented Tony from having the snip,' she'd retorted.

'I wonder,' mused Alex, enjoying this new line of thought. 'Don't you think world leaders need fully functioning tackle to maintain their global status? I wonder if George Bush has had his tubes tied? Or Fidel Castro, a man whose name suggests he may have undergone a more radical surgery?'

And so he had shied away from the issue, returning to it a few months later when Helen had reconsidered her position and was again not sure if 'no more children' meant 'no more children *ever*'.

'I've decided to have a vasectomy,' he had announced in the same breath as telling her he had decided to leave his theatrical agent and sign up with a woman who had been making overtures towards him for a while. She wondered if the two things were related.

Helen was rather frightened by all these new decisions. It was not in her nature to be decisive. If you asked her if she wanted tea or coffee, she found herself in a quandary, even though she didn't actually like coffee. She also hated her computer, which was forever questioning the small decisions she had managed to make on her own.

'Are you sure you want to shut down now?' it would ask her, implying she'd only been working for a couple of hours and would surely be shirking if she stopped so soon.

'Do you want to save this document?' it enquired when she tried to close her work, as if it thought it wasn't really

worth saving and causing her to question whether she actually wanted to keep it or not.

If she found decisions like that difficult, the question of whether to decide once and for all if you were never going to have any more children was almost impossible.

‘What made you decide that?’ she asked Alex, feeling and sounding suddenly panicky.

‘I thought you wanted me to,’ he countered, confused that his munificent gesture was not provoking the appropriate reaction.

‘I do,’ said Helen. ‘At least, I did. It’s just that it seems so final.’

‘That’s the general idea,’ said Alex. ‘Unless you have decided that you *do* want another child.’

‘I don’t,’ said Helen firmly.

‘Well then . . .’

There followed a conversation in which it emerged that the main driving force behind Alex’s decision was that he thought they would make love more often if he had the operation. Helen had told him once that there was always a slight nagging worry in the back of her mind that she might get pregnant and that this made her hold something back. So Alex, thinking it would lead to no-holds-barred, multi-faceted, every-day-of-the-week sex had decided the snip was a price worth paying.

This had made Helen weigh up her options again. Which was going to be the most tiring – another baby, or sex on demand? At that point in their married lives, she would probably have gone for another baby, reasoning that it might be the more tiring but probably the more rewarding option.

The subject had been dropped for a couple of years, until Helen brought it up again, unsettled by the news that a friend of hers in her mid-forties was expecting another, unplanned child. The word 'expecting' when applied to babies seemed to her an oxymoron. Getting pregnant was often the last thing anyone expected, especially when, like Beth, they had had a coil fitted in order to prevent it. Unluckily for her, she was the one per cent left over from the ninety-nine per cent effective statistic. Helen and Alex's own roulette of reliance on withdrawal, Helen not being fertile at certain times of the month and using condoms when Alex could be bothered to go to the bathroom and get one seemed increasingly risky.

'You certainly pick your moment,' Alex had said when she broached the subject as he lay in the bath one morning.

'Would you rather I'd called you to discuss it while you were on set?' Helen replied, wondering if there was ever a right time to suggest your reluctant partner render himself voluntarily infertile.

'Is it really necessary?' Alex asked, sitting up in the bath and hiding his expression behind a mountain of shaving foam.

'I thought we went through this last time,' she retorted. 'You thinking that I ought to be infertile by now and me having to disappoint you by saying I could be conceiving children until I'm fifty, for all we know.'

But this time, Alex had another line of defence ready.

'No, I meant, do we actually have sex often enough to make it necessary?'

'What do you mean?' said Helen, wondering how the discussion had moved so quickly from the minor operation

to what for Alex was always the more major matter of her libido. 'How often is often enough?'

'I don't know,' said Alex. 'More than seven times a year.'

'We shag more than seven times a year!' protested Helen. Honestly, what was the point of making a conscious effort to ensure they had regular sex if Alex didn't even notice? That was the trouble with being with the same person for so long. While sometimes they did still have what Alex insisted on referring to as 'nights of torrid passion', more often it was simply a case of going through a well-rehearsed routine. Not that the well-rehearsed routine wasn't good, but possibly (obviously in Alex's case) it wasn't that memorable.

'I know we do,' he replied, scraping the shaving foam from one side of his face. 'I'm just saying that enough would have to be more than seven times a year.'

'Then we have sex enough!' Helen was winning ground again.

'I'm not saying that a few more than seven times is enough, just that less than seven would definitely not be. Sixty sounds like a good figure to me. At least once a week and then a few more for birthdays and Christmas and coming home really drunk.'

He was laughing now, but was probably still serious. She didn't know. It had been an issue when the children were young. Her libido had more or less disappeared beneath a wave of tiredness and the fact that she was already having an extremely satisfying physical relationship with another man, even if that other man was her nine-month-old son.

Alex's figure of seven was probably plucked from that

time. It hadn't been enough for him, and his frustration had manifested itself in his obsessive-compulsive behaviour (repetitively checking the sell-by dates of the unused condoms in the bathroom cabinet) and resulted in him spending longer periods at work. Helen wondered, when she had the energy to think, if he was getting it elsewhere. There were a number of women on the set who, apparently, constantly told him he had a nice arse or looked much younger than his actual age, and there were plenty of opportunities on tour and on overnight shoots. But if he did take advantage elsewhere, he never let on and he always came back to her.

Helen reckoned that, on average, these days they did it around twice a month, which, if any of her friends were telling the truth about their own sex lives, was pretty good going. She imagined Graham Parks would be horrified to hear this. He had never been married. That much she knew.

'I think you'd have to take away a few potential shags for you being away, or cross with me for failing to unload the dishwasher, or because you were distracted by the attentions of the make-up artist,' said Helen.

It was like justifying the cost of a new dress by dividing it by the number of times you were likely to wear it. If the dress cost two hundred pounds and you only wore it once, then it had cost two hundred quid, but if you wore it four times, it had only really cost fifty, and twenty times made it a bargain at a tenner.

So, Alex reasoned, if you had sex fewer than seven times a year, a vasectomy was an emotionally costly procedure; around twenty-four times it would probably be worth it in the long term; but over fifty-two and it was (literally) a snip.

Saying ‘Do you fancy boosting the annual statistics?’ had been his idea of foreplay since they’d had this conversation, and his methodical mind had obviously been logging the bedroom activity in a mental register, because on the phone that morning, as she’d been about to leave for work, he’d announced that he’d decided to go ahead and have the snip and would see the doctor later in the week and put himself on the waiting list for the operation.

It was a milestone in their relationship; the end of an era but perhaps the start of something new. Helen should have said something to show him she appreciated the sacrifice he was making. She could have offered to find a babysitter and take him out to dinner, something they would be able to do more often as Emma and Joe got older. Instead she’d phoned him, told him she’d be late home and directed him to the freezer for sustenance.

‘Do you think you’ll have any more children?’ Graham asked as Helen shovelled the last of the miniature sweetcorn into her mouth.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Helen replied, considering for the first time that one unforeseen consequence of Alex’s operation would be to make it far more risky for her to sleep with anyone else.