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Not Married, Not Bothered

Carol Clewlow

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Extract

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A is for . . . Attitude

If you ask me how all this got started, I'd say it was with Magda deciding to marry herself.

You may wish to read that line again.

She was packing up one of her *Spells for Beginners* for a customer when she caught me.

'RILEY! IMAGINE! JUST THE PERSON!'

Magda used to be in television, which is why she speaks in one of those loud overenthusiastic TV researcher's voices. Then one day she found her hair was too high and her fingernails too long. Now she runs Hocus Pocus at the bottom of the High Street.

Deciding to get married was a big thing for Magda.

'After all, I've been single all my lives.' (She was previously a vestal virgin and after that a witch. Obviously this was before she went into television.)

Magda got the idea of marrying herself from some Weirdo of the Day paragraph in her morning paper. Except, of course, being Magda, she didn't think it was weird at all.

'I THINK IT'S WONDERFUL. TOTALLY *EMPOWERING*.'

Apparently the woman who married herself said she'd lived with herself for forty years. She felt she *knew* herself. She felt *ready* for the commitment.

'Um . . . where did this happen exactly?'

'California.'

Only in California.

Only in the loony tune town of my birth.

Over cappuccinos in her coffee shop, I said, 'So how will it work, Magda? Will you promise to obey? Will you have a joint account? You're a woman of substance. I hope you'll insist on a prenup.'

She said, 'I'm sorry you feel the need to mock, Riley. I'm surprised you don't see it. I'm making a statement. For all of us.'

'Us?'

'Single women.'

And then she said it: '*Spinsters*, Riley.'

And that was where it started. Because it was like I was hearing it for the first time. That much-maligned, charming, noble, splendid old word.

Courtesy of Magda MacBride. *Spinster* of this parish.

Magda said, 'It's time for a new attitude, Riley.'

'Damn it, she's right,' I said later to Danny.

This after I found the spinster sites on the Net: *Be at peace with your singleness. Do not apologise for your chosen life-style . . .*

'For God's sake. It's all so goddamn craven.'

It was after that I started noticing things. What things? Well, this for instance, from one of those 'Things I Wish I'd Known' columns by some doyenne of the women's movement.

I wish I'd known that breaking off my engagement didn't mean resigning myself to eternal spinsterhood . . .

'*Resigning* herself?' I said. '*Excuse* me.'

And this too, from a celebrity journalist (female, to her shame) interviewing a hot-shot female film producer.

Despite, perhaps because of, what they are, a certain air of loss, of sadness will always cling to such women . . .

'A *certain* air of loss and sadness . . .' My Ss spat out on to the table. 'Ssssimply because she can't *produce* a husband and children.'

So that all of a sudden I'm beginning to get that old Jonathan Aitken feeling, that whole *If it falls to me* thing. I want to swish that old Sword of Truth in the air. And why? Because the more I think about it, the madder I am, and this because as far as I can see, it's spinsters that have kept this damn country going. Teachers, civil servants, nurses, secretaries, plus a hundred other occupations, years of faithful service from the single woman and not just after World War One either. And for what? To go on being patronised and condescended to, to have her life considered so much of less worth than that of her married sister. Worse – and this in the new millennium – to continue being the subject of grubby jokes and prurient conjecture, to be caricatured as fey, grey and miserable on stage and screen and in all those fey, grey miserable novels.

'We're the last minority group,' I said to Danny. 'We suffer from prejudice. We need a campaign. T-shirts. Car stickers.'

Look. Once upon a time, spinsters were just that – women who spun for a living.

'See . . .' I said, jabbing a finger down on the dictionary, open like a Bible. 'Once spinsters were just ordinary working girls.'

'Still are,' Danny said, diving a hand into his pocket. 'Here's your gas bill, Spinning Jenny. They stuck it through my door by mistake.'

From all this you will deduce that Danny is my neighbour. He's also my workmate, both of us being employed – me as reporter, he as a photographer – on our weekly newspaper. More importantly, however, he's my Obligatory Gay Male Friend and I am his . . .

'What am I to you, Danny?'

'My help in ages past, my hope for years to come . . .'

Danny comes from good Methodist stock and sometimes the past comes back to haunt him.

Over the years of our friendship (ten), and over many bottles of wine and/or the odd joint, Danny and I have debated all the major questions – whether there's a God, if Keanu Reeves can act, if Google really is the only search engine.*

Gay men and spinsters will always be natural allies, according to Danny.

'Gay men look at spinsters and know that's pretty much where they're going to be.' He lays a hand on his heart. 'Take me, for instance. Without you, I would never have known how truly rich and fulfilling life could be for the single person in their twilight years.'

Yes. Thank you, Danny.

Still, you can pretty much bet that any single woman of uncertain years these days will have a friend like Danny. Not that my years are remotely uncertain.

I was born at the turn of the decade, the year of Korea, the year they gave the Nobel Prize to Bertrand Russell, principally for his book on marriage (with three of his own

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* Answers in reverse order: Yes, No and How could we know?

he'd been able to research it closely), the year George Bernard Shaw died, who wrote, among other things, 'All great truths begin as blasphemies' (something to bear in mind, dear Reader). Also the year in which Peggy Ashcroft played Beatrice and to much acclaim at Stratford. Beatrice, that great spinster heroine, a woman with *serious* attitude, not curst like Kate, who also I love, but not half as much as Beatrice, who was just so much more damn *merry* about the whole thing.

Born in a merry hour, surely?

No, sure, my lord, my mother cried . . .

'Damn right. What a time I had of it with you . . . You were bloody hours coming.'

Oh, why not? She's like Banquo's ghost, after all. Don't invite her to the feast and she'll show up anyway.

Might as well start where all spinsters start.

Folks . . .

My mother.

Once in the back garden my brother-in-law, Fergie, put his arm comfortingly around his wife's shoulder. He cast his eyes up into the soft sweet Somerset night.

'Ah yes . . .' he said. 'Somewhere up there the mother ship is circling and it's looking for Babs Gordon.'

Because our mother is barmy Our mother is bonkers. Our mother is barking, dippy, daft as a brush. Our mother is Madame Defarge at the foot of the guillotine, but in the words of the late great Freddie Mercury, only knitting on that one solitary needle.

Not that the comparison with the revolutionary Ms Defarge would at all suit our mother, she being one of those old-fashioned, unreconstructed Thatcherites doing

such a stirling job holding back the party. (Oh thank you, thank you, *thank you* mother.)

And yet, and yet . . . if only this was the end of it.

If only the gods in their wisdom, in their compassion, had given Cassie and me a straightforwardly mad hang-em-and-flog-em Fascist for a mother. For instead Babs Gordon *oscillates*. Babs Gordon is a human fan, swinging eternally left to right, and for no discernible reason, blowing out the first vacuous, entirely illogical and idiosyncratic opinion that drops into her lovable Carmen-curled head. And while you, in your folly, might think it adds a certain piquancy, a certain *frisson* to life to walk up your mother's front path of a morning never knowing, when the door opens, whether you'll be confronted by Mother Theresa or the winner of the Genghis Khan Most Promising Newcomer Award, trust me, it doesn't.

Shall we, for instance, be sympathetic to single mothers this fine morning?

'Well, of course, I am. I've been one myself haven't I?'*

Or shall we, by contrast, be taking a stronger line?

'It's all taxpayers' money. You and me, we're paying for them. You know that, don't you?'

Or – I know – asylum seekers. An oldie but goldie. Shall we be extending the hand of friendship today?

'I mean, I feel *so* sorry for them. Imagine having to shop with *vouchers*.'

Or shall we be in favour of putting them up against the wall and shooting them?

'Don't be ridiculous, Adeline, I really resent the way you do that.'

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* Author's note: Cass was 29 and I was 26 by the time our father passed peacefully and gratefully away from our mother.

'Do what?'

'You know.'

'What?'

'Make me out to be some sort of . . . oh, I don't know . . .'

'Burbling, featherbrained, six-short-of-a-box reactionary old swinger?'

I lied.

Regrettably this is not something I've ever managed to say to my mother.

Meanwhile please note the reference to shopping in her sympathetic response to asylum seekers. To say that shopping plays a big part in Babs Gordon's life is to indulge in the deplorable British habit of understatement. Shopping is Babs Gordon's faith, her hope, the nearest, viz. the voucher argument, she'll ever come to charity. Brought up as a wishy-washy Baptist, Babs Gordon thereafter converted to shopping. A card-carrying member of the Royal Society of Shoppers (Visa, Mastercard, Debenhams, John Lewis, but in particular M & S), at least once a month she drives the thirty miles to our nearest out-of-town Marks, a massive thing the size of the British Museum, there to walk the aisles in the same spirit, a dutiful tourist looking at all the exhibits and making her way through women's wear, footwear, underwear, handbags and shoes, home furnishings and, of course, menswear, the last for which she heads expressly just so she can flutter her eyelashes like some sixteen-year-old virgin, and say with that deceptively careless, entirely self-satisfied and proprietorial air: 'I'll just slip in. See if I can get anything for Tommy.'

A word now about Tommy.

What is Tommy to my mother?

In other circumstances you might call Tommy my

mother's lover. But I don't believe it. Not for one minute. And if you think this is the response of an anally retentive spinster daughter, well, frankly I don't give a toss. Suffice it to say on the matter of sex, I wish my mother was having it, I wish I was having it, I wish you were having it, I wish we were all having it, I'm that generous. Still I'd lay a pound to a penny that my mother is not and never has been *en flagrante* with Tommy. Or with anyone else. Including our father. For while I recognise that the existence of Cass and myself would indicate some form of interchange between our mother and our father (I think we can safely rule out any of that early test tube stuff with the sperm of actors and vicars), I have every confidence that, at least on my mother's part, we represent entirely token copulations.

Not that Babs does not like men. No, no. Our Babs *adores* men, a fact she is given to asserting frequently in her cups at parties.

'I've always got on so much better with men.' That's one of her particular favourites, accompanied by those eternally fluttering lashes and that familiar hand laid deprecatingly upon bosom.

In short, there's a word for what my mother is but I don't intend to use it. Let's just settle for flirt, a quaint old-fashioned term that would thrill my mother to her skinny marrow should she overhear it being used to describe her. For were you to venture, machete in hand, through the impenetrable jungle that is my mother's mind, you would find there a scary image, the one she bears of herself, a Mata Hari figure, a *femme fatale*, condemned (hand fluttering upon bosom again) to wreak havoc and confusion in the hearts of men. As for Tommy, well, I guess the best thing to call him is her consort, the man she goes bowling

with, on chaste single-room coach-tour holidays to the Swiss Alps, the Scottish Highlands and the Dutch Bulb Fields, as well as to all and every event at the Conservative Club, where Tommy is bar steward and chairman of the entertainments committee. And the fact that this entirely sexless relationship unquestionably suits Tommy down to his last buffed-up blazer button is not something my mother feels a need to take on board. And strange as it may seem, neither do I. It is one of only a handful of things for which I feel a need to defend my mother, and this because I am, at heart, a sixties person and therefore a fully paid-up member of the Whatever Is Your Bag/Whatever Turns You On Party. Furthermore, if it is the case that in an age and a world different from the one into which he was born, Tommy might otherwise be more merrily engaged flicking a towel at the firm buttocks of a handsome young pool boy . . . well . . . that's his business. And long may the pair of them, my mother and he, ignore it.

This is a small town and with a small-town mentality. Despite, or possibly because of, this, as far as their friends and neighbours are concerned, Babs and Tommy are respectably *à deux*, occupying their own remarkably similar, chintzy, cushiony, squeaky-clean homes, each with matching pine block freshner down the toilet, pink seat cover and frilly Kleenex holder.

It's been this way since our father died the best part of thirty years ago when the funeral baked meats, metaphorically at least, began to coldly furnish forth the marriage table.

'Don't go there,' has been Cass's advice from the first, counsel I followed reluctantly at first but, as time passed, increasingly easily.

To all intents and purposes, Tommy is now part of the

family, not least thanks to thirty years of Christmas Days spent together. In essence, he still looks the way he looked at our father's funeral, like some old-fashioned stiff-upper-lipped colonel with a stick beneath his armpit. His back is still ramrod straight, or at least it would be was it not for the shaking that has begun to afflict him and that may or may not be the onset of Parkinson's. This shaking gives him the air of a man trying to control his anger but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact he's an astonishingly peaceable man, miraculously so bearing in mind he spends so much time with my flighty, wildly irritating mother.

All of this would be fine was it not for the fact that, in clear contradiction of her own eminently comfortable life-style, she still feels the need occasionally to harass her spinsterdaughter

'Hey, I've not noticed you're in that much of a hurry to get hitched again, Mother.'

'I'm not talking about getting married, Addy. No one has to get married these days.' (Babs likes to think of herself as *excessively* modern.) 'There just never seems to be anyone in your life, that's all.'

'Well, thank you for mentioning it. I don't believe I'd noticed that, Mother.'

A strict diet of booze and fags plus the odd lettuce leaf pushed in a desultory way around her plate at what passes for meal times ensures that my mother's size 8 figure never gets any bigger. Despite this unhealthy life-style she gets a clean bill of health every time she goes to the doctor (and while we're on the subject, why do you go to the doctor, Mother; is it because he's young and good-looking, you shameless hussy?). Given half a chance, she'd still do that Cleopatra thing of hopping forty paces through a public

street. Robbed of the opportunity, she contents herself putting in a full day's shopping at Marks & Spencer on a pair of heels that would provide training for a stilt walker.

Like Cleopatra, my mother believes with passion and spirit that age cannot wither her, an opinion most often expressed when she stands before her hall mirror patting her washboard stomach and uttering the now familiar words: 'Haven't put on a pound since I was sixteen,' this always followed by a critical stare in the direction of whichever daughter has the misfortune to be caught in the mirror next to her, and the rider, 'Darling . . . do I dream it . . . or are you a size 14?' (Or 16 in Cassie's case.)

I have learnt over the years that all my mother's snips and snides are prefaced by the word 'darling'. As in:

'Darling . . . do you *have* to buy such clumpy shoes?'

'Darling . . . is that a *motorbike* jacket you're wearing?'

And now, of course: 'Darling, all I'm saying is, do you *really* think your hair suits you that short?' (The italics in all cases, I promise you, are my mother's.)

As regards my hair, I've always worn it long. I've had every style known to man or beast (perms, pleats, plaits, highlights, low-lights, etc., etc.) but still it's never risen much above my shoulders. Thus the day I came in with it ice white and shorn, my mother fell back against the sink like she was having a heart attack.

'Oh, what have you done . . . what have you done?' she moaned, clutching her chest.

'I've had an arm amputated. I've shot the Prime Minister. Oh no. I've just remembered. I've only had my hair cut, Mother.'

She continued keening for a while. 'Oh, your hair . . . your beautiful hair.' But in the way of these things, grief soon turned to anger.

'It was your saving grace, Adeline, you know that, don't you?'

'Oh, and I thought it was my crowning glory.'

Please note here my mother's use of the name Adeline to address me, she being the only person on the planet to do so, and this on account of it being the one she gave me – a fancy French name, according to my dictionary of first names, although not in this instance, since I was named after an Adeline from Bromsgrove whose bridesmaid I later became and who had the bed next to my mother's in the barracks in Cairo.*

The name was and is entirely unsuitable, one I would have had to wear like a bolt through my neck was it not for my father, God bless him. In a move that my mother would forever regret, she deputed him to register my birth, something that allowed him to pull one of only two known flankers over her in the history of their time together (the other was when he died to get away from her).

Afterwards he would claim that the middle name he gave me was that of a close friend killed in the war. He'd even take the trouble to look suitably mournful when he said it. Once, though, bending beneath a bonnet in his ramshackle old tin-roofed garage on one of our long evenings together, me standing beside him handing him his spanners, he told me he'd named me after his favourite car, a Riley Sprite he'd owned in the halcyon days of his youth, which translated means those days before he met my mother.

'Lovely thing, she was. Four cylinder push-rod-operated overhead-valve engine.'

I assume he was talking about the Riley.

Thus I am Adeline Riley Gordon, but to all and sundry

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* Among many others. See B for Bridesmaids.

ever since (except, natch, my mother), *Riley*, not least because my father, keen to compound his crime and irritate my mother whenever possible – the revenge, *raison d'être* and principal calling of his married life – referred to me as that from Day One, firmly instructing my sister Cassie, three at the time, to follow his example.

In all this I count myself lucky. Not just because Riley suits me infinitely better than Adeline ever could (or, the horror . . . the horror . . . the appalling 'Addy'), but because if I'd had the misfortune to be born a generation later, God knows, I might have had to put Golf or Mondeo or Fiesta at the top of my O level paper.

Anyway, I like Riley. It suits me. It has a jaunty, freedom-loving air that I like to think entirely encapsulates what I am. I think, I hope that, like Beatrice, a star danced when I was born.

'Not from where I was looking it didn't.'

Yes, thank you, Mother.

Anyway, I'm more than happy, just like Beatrice, to pay for my state by leading apes in hell when I die, this being the mythological punishment for spinsters, but one that holds no fears for me, coming of age as I did at a time and in a place where men were still getting used to the upright position. Confronted by the word 'clitoris', there's still a few would guess at one of the lesser known Greek islands.

All in all I'd say the only downside, if downside there be to my name, is the jokes it provokes. Or rather, The Joke. Because there is only one. I've heard it a thousand times but, trust me, that's not something that ever spoils the enjoyment of the joker.

'Ri-l-ey . . .' he'll say, and I'll watch as that geeky smile dawns and behind the skin of his face those old wheels and cogs start turning. 'I suppose you live the life of Riley, then?'

And if you want know what all this Spinster's Alphabet stuff is about I'd say it's just that.

Because as a matter of fact, I think I do.*

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* As will be clear by now, the aim of this book is ever to inform. Thus you may be interested to know whence comes the term Life of Riley. It first appeared in a popular song performed by one Pat Rooney in 1880s America, 'Are You the O'Reilly', which describes all the things said O'Reilly would do if he was rich. Another song, 'The Best in the House is None Too Good For Reilly', shortened the name to the one we know and introduced the notion of R(e)iley as a carefree soul. The actual words the 'Life of Riley' appear in a third and later song, 'My Name is Kelly'.

> Faith and my name is Kelly Michael Kelly,
> But I'm living the life of Reilly just the same.

With 'My Name is Kelly' the metamorphosis was complete. Reilly had become the idle, ne'er do well of popular fiction, and in particular of my mother's morning newspaper for whom the phrase is indispensable, especially when applied to that vast amorphous body of people whose sole unifying feature is that they're all somehow not just getting something for nothing but something due, by rights, to readers of said paper. This body includes but is by no means confined to:

- single mothers
- students
- gays
- lesbians
- blacks
- any teacher, vicar, lawyer, film or theatre director deemed by her morning newspaper to be 'trendy'
- anyone with a good word to say for the sixties
- criminals (unless they're actually members of the Tory Party)
- and last, but definitely not least, anyone receiving Unemployment Benefit.

'Scroungers,' is my mother's rallying cry as she waves her paper in the air. 'On the dole. Lying in bed all day. Leading the Life of Riley.'