

Other People's Marriages

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Extract

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One

If a stranger had stumbled upon the Cunninghams' eighteenth anniversary party they would probably have assumed it was a celebration for Valerie Cunningham's birthday. Archie Cunningham was nowhere to be seen, and from a cursory glance round the drawing room, taking in the pale linen furnishings and the clusters of photographs – formal portraits of the children, and various posed shots of Valerie from her graduation day right up to her recent Himalayan trek – you could have been forgiven for thinking this was the home of an affluent widow or divorcee. Most likely divorcee, Anna thought to herself. There was something decisive about Valerie's deportment, something in the frisky tilt of her bobbed blonde head that knew no unpleasant surprises, no unscripted alteration to her plans. Anna watched her as she stood by the open French windows at the far end of the drawing room, a vantage point from where the hostess could survey the party taking shape in the garden and keep an eye on the front door at the same time. She was holding herself in that upright, self-conscious way that a too tight, strapless cocktail dress will dictate: her shoulders a little too square, her soft chin raised to counteract the slight welling above the

bodice. Every so often she glanced over to where Anna was sitting and beckoned her to join the throng, mouthing something indecipherable, before breaking off to brush cheeks with yet another guest whom Anna failed to recognize.

On the basis of previous Cunningham parties, Anna calculated that at this point Archie Cunningham would be downstairs in the kitchen easing the corks out of champagne bottles with an expression of intense concentration, despite the fact that an army of waiters had been hired for this purpose. Archie was notoriously party shy, particularly when the parties were organized by his wife. Earlier that evening he had returned upstairs to change his shoes, gone to repark the car and taken a call from his office, all just as the first guests were arriving.

'You see what I have to put up with?' Valerie had asked, motioning for one of the waitresses to answer the door. 'I hope *that's* going in your book, Anna, the way men always sabotage their wives' social plans. Without fail.'

She had bared her teeth for a moment in the hall mirror, smoothing her palms hastily over her wide, tightly packed hips, and twisting to check the effect from either side.

'I mean if Archie had his way, we'd see you and the Dickensons and Tony and Jean once a week for the rest of our lives and that would be that. They just have no idea, do they?'

Anna smiled to herself as she reached across the arm of the sofa and plucked a silver-framed photograph off the polished side table. The black and white image was

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three, perhaps four years old: a posed group portrait with Valerie seated to the left, and the children, Charlie and Charlotte, arranged in descending order of height, all spruced up, their hair brushed flat and gleaming against their heads. If you looked closely you could just make out, at the far right of the picture, the edge of Archie's trouser leg and the fuzzy white cracks where the photograph had been bent back on itself to fit the frame.

'What have you got there?'

Anna looked up at the sound of Ruth Dickenson's voice and registered a blur of mulberry-coloured print and the smell of musky scent as her friend snatched the frame and dropped onto the sofa beside her.

'Aaaah, look, aren't they adorable?' Ruth rested her head against Anna's shoulder as she held the picture up to the light. 'You wouldn't recognize them now, would you?' She grinned at the photograph, revealing the gap between her front teeth that made her look like a kid in a bubblegum commercial, even though her lips were painted a dark cherry red and her breasts barely contained by an empire-line dress.

Although they were roughly the same age, and although Ruth was married and the mother of a three-year-old child, lately Anna had begun to feel as though she was a different generation from her friend. She had reached the stage when she wanted an ordered, organized life. She planned, as did most of their contemporaries, so that everything ran as smoothly as possible and you knew where you were going from one year to the next. But Ruth's life didn't seem to have changed significantly from the days when they were at college. She still dyed her hair in the sink with an assortment of

tints that always came out more or less burgundy. She still ate takeaway kebabs, had her credit cards confiscated and drove a Volkswagen Camper, and she and Dave continued to suffer the kind of Sunday morning hangovers that made getting dressed out of the question. It was a way of life that Anna couldn't begin to explain to Richard, her boyfriend, who was a man who deliberately kept every Friday free for 'them', who, only last Sunday, had installed a low-level wardrobe especially for her shoes. She wouldn't have known where to begin.

Ruth leant across Anna to replace the photograph and then sat back, examining her from under lazy eyelids outlined with slightly too much kohl.

'What are you doing sitting in here all by yourself, anyway?' she asked, prodding Anna playfully in the ribs. 'Observing the rituals of the married classes by any chance? I'll bet you're wondering what it would be like to have eighteen years under your belt, aren't you? Me too.' Ruth rummaged in her bra cup and produced a skinny, bent roll up. 'I mean, that's more than four times as long as Dave and I have been married. Although I don't need to tell you that, of course. You've got it all down in your *notes*.'

She winked at Anna and Anna smiled back affectionately, discreetly checking the place where Ruth's fingers had grazed her pale cashmere top.

'Eighteen years though.' Ruth paused, lighter poised. 'Do you ever wonder, Anna, when you're working on your book, tip-tapping away . . . d'you ever stop and think, "What if?" You know . . . what if things had turned out differently and you'd got hitched, at some point?' The flame danced on top of the lighter and Ruth

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dipped her head to make contact, inhaling greedily. 'Because, I mean, you're bound to, aren't you? If you spend every day for three years analysing people's marriages. If you're writing a *book* about marriage. You're bound to wonder what it might have been like.'

For a fraction of a second Anna contemplated changing the subject but the slight, curious tilt of Ruth's eyebrow confirmed this was not a realistic option.

'All right. Yes,' Anna said, 'there've been times when I've thought, "Would that have been the answer?" But obviously it wasn't, for me.'

Ruth's chin jutted expectantly.

'Well, I wouldn't be with Richard, would I? You know his views on marriage. Our view.'

'Right.' Ruth blinked. 'Where is he, by the way?'

'Ashtanga. There's some specialist in town.'

They sat in silence for a moment, Ruth grinding the remains of her blue nail varnish against her bottom teeth.

'And the fact is,' Anna continued, 'if I was married, if I had a family, I wouldn't have had the time to write a book like this.' She smoothed out the sleeve of her cashmere top, running her hand down to the wrist and then straightening the hem across the back of her knuckles. 'I mean, of course it's made me think about the issues. That's my job. But not about *me* especially. I'm . . .'

she paused, an upturned palm floating in the air searching for the comfortable, at ease with herself aura that this particular speech required. 'I am completely . . . fine.'

Ruth nodded hesitantly. Her face was tensed as if she were preparing for an uncomfortably loud noise. 'So you don't ever think about Danny, then?' she asked.

'Hmm?'

'Danny. Fortune. You don't ever wonder how that might have turned out?'

'Danny?' Anna gave a little astonished laugh. 'Why are you bringing him up?'

'Well. You know.' Ruth shrugged. 'I've thought about it. So you must have. I'm just being nosey,' she added, reaching across to give Anna's knee a reassuring tweak.

It was a perfectly reasonable question, Anna knew. Not only that, but Ruth always told her everything as if it were the most natural process in the world; she'd spent the past three years sharing her innermost thoughts even though there must have been times when she hadn't much felt like it. Anna reached behind her neck and started to gather her hair slowly and methodically over one shoulder.

'I suppose I *have* thought about it,' she said airily, 'but that was another lifetime, wasn't it? It was years ago. I mean, do you spend a lot of time thinking about your boyfriends, before Dave?'

'A bit,' said Ruth. 'Yeah, actually I do.'

'All right, girls?' The sofa trembled behind them and they both looked up to see Dave Dickenson leaning against the back, a brimming glass of margarita lapping at his bottom lip.

'Having a bit of a sesh, are we?'

'Yes, thanks,' said Ruth. 'What do you want?'

'I came to look for you, my Muss,' said Dave, and then, catching his wife's distinctly unimpressed expression, 'Er . . . and our hostess sent me in to flush out the party-phobic husband. Anyone seen him?'

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Dave took a slug of margarita and cast his eyes around the room, his thick black eyebrows raised in anticipation.

'Have they decorated in here again? I don't remember that –' he thrust his glass in the direction of a lattice-fronted, silk-lined bookcase – and where's the telly gone?'

A look of panic crossed Dave's face as he spun around 180 degrees in both directions, scanning the walls and floor frantically.

'There's one in the study,' said Ruth flatly. 'They don't go in for the entertainment-centres-in-every-room-including-the-downstairs-bog policy.'

'Poor Archie,' Dave muttered. 'Eighteen years good behaviour, and the fella can't even watch the snooker in his own living room. Come to think of it, there's not much he could do in here.'

'Dave! Shoosh!' Ruth flapped a warning hand in his direction.

'Sorry, sweetheart. I love Val, you know I do. I just feel sorry for Archie, that's all. We blokes need to stick together, you know, or homo erectus' – Dave waggled his eyebrows – 'will be extinct by the year two thousand and fifty. We men were not made to live in scented cages.'

'No,' said Ruth, 'apparently you were made to live sandwiched between a couple of speakers within arm's length of a fridge.'

'I am perfectly serious, Muss. There was a thing on the telly about it – the feminizing of Western culture and how it's actually having a physical impact on the male *form*.' The eyebrows hopped up and down

independently before settling in a quizzical double arch. 'Anna, do you know about this? Because if you don't, I think you should look into it. Seriously. Could be vee-ry significant for your book. This may mean the end of union between the sexes *as we know it*.' Dave craned his neck and lowered his voice to a whisper. 'Smaller willies. It's a fact. Possibly no willies at all eventually, by the time the newspapers are all given over to "Get the Look" and "Heal Yourself with Yoga". Ah . . . now I don't mean anything by that, Anna. I know Richard is . . . I respect . . . yogists. Honestly I do. It's the, you know, bigger picture I'm worried about.'

'Well, look on the bright side. If everyone else's are shrinking . . .' Ruth tried not to smile, she sucked her lips over her teeth but her throaty laugh escaped regardless making her beaded earrings jangle.

'Yeah, very funny.' Dave squinted at his wife affectionately, mouth puckered, dimples dimpling in his trademark blend of wry smile and schoolboy smirk. Anna noticed a green dry-cleaning ticket still safety-pinned to the inside hem of his jacket and the words BOOK MOT scrawled in biro on the back of his hand. 'Anyway, some of us are luckier than others,' Dave continued, 'some of us have wives who are not hell bent on turning us into house pets. And I thank my lucky stars that I married my Muss and not some . . . *woman*.'

Dave drained the margarita, placed the glass on the mantelpiece, dragged his fingers through the front peak of his woolly black hair and then, with a smart clap of his hands, announced that he was off to look for their host.

'By the way, Muss,' he hissed when he reached the

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door into the hall, 'you're driving. I think I'm over the limit.' He steadied himself with an elbow on the door frame. 'And girls, keep it clean, will you? I don't want anything ending up in that book that I wouldn't be happy for my mother-in-law to read.' And with that, Dave turned and disappeared down the corridor.

Ruth rolled her eyes and fished in her bra for another roll up.

'How you can get that sloshed in a couple of hours beats me. He never used to . . .' Her eyes met Anna's and she paused for a moment, fingers wedged in her geranium-pink D cup.

'All right, maybe he did. Perhaps the difference is I was always half cut too. But you can't carry on like that for ever, can you?'

'I don't know. Maybe not.' Anna's tone was expressionless, non-judgemental. These days she lapsed into it automatically whenever the talk turned to other people's relationships, whatever the context. She'd been gathering information about her friends' marriages for so long now that there was no distinction in any of their minds between on and off the record; book time and real time.

'Anyway -' Ruth extracted the cigarette and smoothed it out between her fingers '- better not start now. I'm seeing you for our update tomorrow, so you'll get it all then. How's it going by the way? Nearly there?'

'Sort of. Nearly there with you and Dave, and Archie and Valerie, and most of the case studies are coming together. I've just got a few gaps to sort out. The recent second marriage, that couple I thought I had fixed up? They fell through yesterday.'

'Oh?'

'He decided it was going to be too intrusive.'

'Well -' Ruth dusted some stray ash off her knee '- there is a bit of that, isn't there? I mean, you need to be prepared to find out a few home truths in the process.' The ash was all gone but still she carried on, rhythmically brushing. 'I suppose at the start I thought it was going to be more basic, you know: who does the cooking? Who gets to choose the holidays? How often d'you have sex? A, B or C? But then . . . it's like anything, isn't it? The more you delve into something, the more you start questioning what it's all about.' Ruth glanced up from her lap and must have seen the anxiety in Anna's face. 'I'm not saying it's a problem,' she added hastily. 'It's just . . . revealing, that's all. And that was the whole point, wasn't it?'

'But you don't regret it, Ruth, do you?' Anna leant towards her on the sofa. 'I'd feel terrible if you regretted it.'

'Noo, no regrets! I just feel a bit different now, that's all. We're all different. Look how much you've changed!'

Ruth spread both hands in Anna's direction and for a moment both of them contemplated her pristine, mostly cashmere outfit; the dainty silver wristwatch; the French-manicured fingernails; the single diamond on a chain at her throat.

'When you started on the book you were living at ours, remember?' Ruth said, her eyes expanding in mock disbelief. 'No Richard. No money. No job. D'you remember? You had that funny Rod Stewart haircut and that tweed coat.'

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They both laughed, Anna quickly lowering her eyes in case Ruth should be encouraged to reminisce any further.

'Still. We're OK, aren't we?' Anna asked.

'Oh yes,' said Ruth. 'You've got a book contract, a gorgeous partner, a fabulous flat . . . not to mention a great new haircut. And I'm married to my best friend. I'd say that's officially OK.'

'Ruth?'

'Hmm?'

'I've always wanted to ask, what's Muss short for exactly?'

Ruth took a drag of her cigarette, one dark eyebrow gliding upwards towards her ruby-tinted fringe.

'It's short for moustache,' she said, when the eyebrow had reached its limit. 'Touching, isn't it? Yeah, well, we can't all have Richards I suppose.'

When Anna and Ruth decided it was time to go in search of Dave and Archie, they found them both downstairs, sitting at the kitchen table, and Tony Alcroft pacing the floor, apparently enlightening his friends as to the lot of the divorced man.

'I mean, you call it a day precisely so you don't have to keep on bending over backwards just to keep them in a half civil mood,' he was saying, 'and then you discover . . . Hi there girls! Come on in and join the party!'

Tony raised an arm over his head and beckoned them enthusiastically before returning to his theme

'And then you discover that marriage was only a bloody dress rehearsal for the serious jumping through

hoops that starts the moment you separate. Take tonight –’ Tony ran a hand swiftly through his lustrous blond hair, the substantial signet ring on his little finger leaving a slight furrow in its wake. ‘My oldest friends’ eighteenth wedding anniversary party. I mean, I was only Archie’s best man. My night, right?’ He paused for effect, one hand resting on his hip. ‘And Jean . . . Jean wants to bring Herman.’

‘Herve,’ Archie said.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘He’s called Herve, apparently.’ Archie removed his spectacles and started to polish them briskly on his shirt tail. ‘Herve with an H.’

‘Okaaay, Herve . . . Since you insist. Anyway, that is the kind of selfishness you come up against all the time. My friends, their anniversary, she wants to bring some . . .’

‘Bloke,’ interjected Dave, nodding vigorously.

‘No, not *bloke*. Hardly. Boy. Some . . . youth. I mean you see to *me* that shows a lack of sensitivity, a basic lack of awareness of other people’s feelings, and frankly’ – Tony was pointing his finger now, wagging it in Archie’s direction – ‘that is what makes the difference between thirteen years and eighteen. Am I right? Anna, come on.’

Tony was shimmying across the floor now, tucking his pink shirt firmly into his straining white moleskin trousers as he went. He grabbed Anna by the shoulders and ushered her back towards the Aga, propping her against the rail and then stepping away with a flourish of his hand to indicate that the floor was now hers.

‘You tell us, Anna,’ Tony said. ‘It’s all there in your

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little notebooks, all those . . . case studies, whatever they're called. You've got the whole thing sorted out – the dos and don'ts, the clinchers and the deal breakers. Everything it takes to make a marriage.'

Tony folded his arms and settled himself solidly against the edge of the kitchen table.

'And I'm betting,' he continued, puffing out his chest, 'that if you look at Archie and Valerie's marriage, or Dave and Ruth's for that matter –' he gave a little courtesy nod in Ruth's direction '– I'll bet you that nothing more complicated than good old-fashioned sensitivity is the secret of their success.'

This sort of proposition was put to Anna with increasing regularity these days, particularly in the kitchen at parties. So she knew from experience that she was not actually expected to give her considered opinion, but rather to reinforce whatever line the questioner was taking. She took a long breath and gave a little leap of her eyebrows, a gesture which she found generally covered it.

'What did I tell you?' crowed Tony, slapping his palms against his thighs. 'What did I tell you?' and he made for the fridge to get another round of beers.

'Sensitivity?' Ruth murmured. 'That's really your final answer?'

Anna shook her head. 'But don't worry,' she said. 'I'm working on it.'