

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Woman Who Upped and Left

Written by Fiona Gibson

Published by AVON

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

FIONA GIBSON

the
WOMAN
who
UPPED *and*
LEFT



This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2016

1

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins*Publishers* 2016

Copyright © Fiona Gibson 2016

Fiona Gibson asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-367-5

Typeset in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC C007454

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Huge thanks as ever to my wonderful agent, Caroline Sheldon, and my fantastic editor, Helen Huthwaite, who is always such a joy to work with. Thanks to Jo Marino and Sabah Khan at LightBrigade PR for such great work in publicising my books.

For sixteen years I belonged to an incredibly inspiring and supportive writing group. Tania, Vicki, Amanda, Pauline, Sam and Hilary – you're such great friends, and even though I've moved away I shall still be bothering you from time to time. Thanks as ever to my amazing friends: Jen, Kath, Cathy, Liam, Michelle, Wendy R, Marie, Wendy V, Jane P, Ellie, Jan, John, Jennifer, Mickey and Carolann; to Chris and Sue at Atkinson Pryce Books, and to Kedi for insights on texting with teens.

Thanks too to my dad Keith (who is still sailing the salty seas at 80 years old), his partner Beatrice, and the wonderful staff at McClymont House who look after my mum, Margery, with such kindness (especially Sheila and Ruby).

Finally, to my dear family – Jimmy, Sam, Dexter and Erin, you're my darlings and I love you.

For Susan Walker, with love
and a hug on a chair.

Chapter One

Fried Chicken

Pants. There's a lot of them about. Tomato-red boxers are strewn on the sofa, while another specimen – turquoise, emblazoned with cartoon palm trees and pineapples – has come to rest under the coffee table like a snoozing pet. A third pair – in a murky mustard hue – are parked in front of the TV as if waiting for their favourite programme to come on. I'm conducting an experiment to see how long they'll all remain there if I refuse to round them all up. Perhaps, if left for long enough, they'll fossilise and I can donate them to a museum.

Yet more are to be found upstairs, in the bathroom, slung close to – but crucially not *in* – the linen basket. The act of lifting the wicker lid, and dropping them into it, is clearly too arduous a task for a perfectly able-bodied boy of eighteen years old. It's *infuriating*. I've mentioned it so many times, Morgan must have stopped hearing me – like the way you eventually become unaware of a ticking clock. Either that, or he simply doesn't give a stuff. Not for the first time I figure that boys of this age and their mothers are just not designed to live together. But I *won't*

pick them up, not this time. We can live in filth – crucially, he'll also run out of clean pants and have to start re-wearing dirty ones, turned inside out – and see if I care . . .

Beside the scattering of worn boxers lies a tiny scrap of pale lemon lace, which on closer inspection appears to be a thong. This would be Jenna's. Morgan's girlfriend is also prone to leaving a scattering of personal effects in her wake.

I stare down at the thong, trying to figure how such a minuscule item can possibly function as pants. I have never worn one myself, being unable to conquer the fear that they could work their way actually *into* your bottom, and require an embarrassing medical procedure to dig them back out. I know they're meant to be sexy – my own sturdy knickers come in multipacks, like loo roll – but all I can think is: *chafing risk*. And what am I supposed to do with it?

Although Morgan has been seeing Jenna for nearly a year, I'm still unsure of the etiquette where her underwear is concerned. Should I pick it up delicately – with eyebrow tweezers, perhaps – and seal it in a clear plastic bag, like evidence from a crime scene? Tentatively, as if it might snap at my ankle, I nudge it into the corner of the bathroom with the toe of my shoe.

Stifled giggles filter through Morgan's closed bedroom door as I march past. He locks it these days, i.e. with a proper bolt, which he nailed on without prior permission, irreparably damaging the original Victorian door in the process. We've just had a Chinese takeaway and now they're . . . well, obviously they're not playing Scrabble. Having known each other since primary school, they've been inseparable since a barbecue at Jenna's last summer. Favouring our house to hang out in, they are forever

draped all over each other in a languid heap, as if suffering from one of those olden-day illnesses: consumption or scarlet fever. They certainly look pretty flushed whenever I happen to walk into the room. ‘Yes, Mum?’ my son is prone to saying, as if I have no right to move from room to room in my own home.

‘Morgan, I’m off now, okay?’ I call out from the landing. Silence.

‘I’m meeting Stevie tonight. Remember me saying? I’m staying over, I’ll be back around lunchtime tomorrow. Remember to lock the front door and shut all the windows and *try* not to leave 700 lights blazing . . .’

More giggles. How amusingly *petty* it must seem, wishing to protect our home from thieves and avoid a £2000 electricity bill . . .

‘And can you start putting milk back in the fridge after you’ve used it? When I came back last week it had actually turned into cottage cheese . . .’

Muffled snorts.

‘Morgan! Are you listening? It blobbed out into my cup!’

‘*Rub,*’ comes the barely audible reply. With my teeth jammed together, I trot downstairs, pull on a black linen jacket over my red and black spotty dress, and pick up my overnight bag.

‘Bye, Mum,’ I call out, facetiously, adding, ‘Have a lovely time, won’t you?’ This is the stage I have reached: the point at which you start talking to yourself in the voice of your own child. Where you say things like, ‘Thanks for the takeaway, Mum, I really enjoyed it.’

The spectre of Jenna’s lemon thong shimmers in my mind as I climb into my scrappy old Kia and drive away.

*

My shabby, scrappy *life*. It's not very 'Audrey', I reflect as I chug through our small, nondescript town en route to the motorway. Although I don't obsess about her – the real Audrey, I mean – I can't help having these thoughts occasionally.

You see, my name is Audrey too. It *was* Audrey Hepburn; let's get that out of the way. It'll come as no surprise that I am named after Mum's favourite actress, which might sound sweet and romantic until I also explain that she and Dad had had an almighty row on the day she was going to register my birth. She'd threatened to go ahead with the Audrey thing. 'Don't you *dare*,' he'd yelled (Mum filled me in on all of this as soon as I was old enough to understand). And she'd stormed off to the registrar's and done it, just to get back at him over some silly slight. 'What did Dad want to call me?' I asked once.

'Gail,' she replied with a shudder, although it sounded perfectly acceptable to me. To be fair, though, I don't imagine Doreen Hepburn anticipated the sniggery comments I'd endure throughout childhood and adolescence. You can imagine: 'Ooh, you're so alike! I thought I was in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* for a minute!' In fact our name is the only thing we have in common. I'd bet my life that the real Audrey never picked up a single pair of pants, not even her own exquisite little scanties, and certainly not someone else's unsavoury boxers. Nor did she drive a crappy old car that whiffs of gravy (why *is* this? To my knowledge there has never been any gravy in it). The real Audrey was arguably the most gorgeous creature to ever walk on this earth. Me, I'm five-foot-two (if I stretch myself up a bit) with a well-padded bottom, boobs that require serious under-wired support and over-zealously highlighted hair. I am a shoveller of peas, a

disher-outer of sausages and mash. I am a 43-year-old dinner lady and my wedding ring didn't come from Tiffany's; it was on sale at Argos, £69.

While some women feel disgruntled about changing their name when they marry – or, quite reasonably, flatly refuse to do so – I was so eager to become Audrey Pepper that Vince, my ex, teased, 'It's the only reason you said yes.' I kept it, too, even when I reverted to a 'Miss' after our divorce, when our son turned seven. I never tell boyfriends my maiden name – not that there's been many. There was just the very occasional, casual date until I met Stevie nine months ago in a bustling pub in York.

I couldn't believe this charming, rakishly handsome younger man was interested. So intent was he on bestowing me with drinks and flattery, I suspected I'd been unwittingly lured into some kind of social experiment and that a reality TV crew was secretly filming the whole thing. I imagined people sitting at home watching and nudging each other: 'My God, she actually thinks he fancies her!' I even glanced around the pub for a bloke with one of those huge zoom lenses. In fact, Stevie turned out not to be an actor tasked with seeing how many middle-aged women he could chat up in one night. He runs a training company, specialising in 'mindful time management'. I don't fully understand it, and it still strikes me as odd, considering he seems to have virtually *no* time to spare for normal things like going out for drinks or dinner with me. Hence the venue for tonight's date being a two-hour drive from home.

Here's another un-Audrey thing: meeting your boyfriend at a motorway service station on the M6 on a drizzly Wednesday night. Charnock Richard services, to be precise. We are not merely meeting there before heading off to

somewhere more glamorous. I mean, that's *it*. We are spending the night at a motorway hotel. We do this a lot, snatching the odd night together when he's 'on the road', as he puts it, which happens to be most of the time. However, I suspect it's not just for convenience, and that service station hotels are just his *thing*. His mission seems to be to make passionate love to me at every Welcome Break and Moto in the north of England.

It's just gone 7.30 when I pull into the car park. I turn off the engine and take a moment to assess the situation I've found myself in. I'm parked next to a mud-splattered grey estate with a middle-aged couple inside it; they're chomping on fried chicken and tossing the bones out of the side windows. I watch, amazed that anyone could possibly think it's okay to do this.

A lanky young man with low-slung jeans and a small, wiry-haired dog ambles towards my car. Spotting the scattering of bones, the dog starts straining on its lead and yapping like crazy. Dragging him away, his owner fixes me with a furious glare. 'You're disgusting,' he snaps.

Before I know what I'm doing I'm out of my car, shouting, 'They're not *my* bones, okay? Maybe you should check before accusing people!'

'You're *mental*,' the man retorts, hurrying away. The chicken-munching couple laugh as they pull away, and it strikes me, as I stand in the fine rain in my skimpy dress – my jacket's still on the back seat of my car – that I probably *do* look unhinged, and this is all a bit weird. This service station thing, I mean. This thing of Stevie expecting me to jump in my car to meet him with barely any notice.

Yet I do, nearly every time. I picture his teasing greeny-blue eyes – eyes that suggest he's always up for fun – and

sense myself weakening. I imagine his hot, urgent kisses and am already mentally packing a bag. Never mind that I have another job, as a carer for elderly Mrs B, on top of pea-shovelling duties. At the prospect of a night with my boyfriend I quickly arrange for someone to cover my shift. Julie usually obliges. She's always keen for more hours.

So here I am, stepping through the flurry of pigeons pecking at the greasy chicken remains. Taking a deep breath, and inhaling a gust of exhaust from a carpet fitter's van, I make my way towards the hotel to meet the most beautiful man I've ever had the pleasure of sleeping with.

Chapter Two

Meat Feast Slice

Stevie springs up from the sofa in the soulless hotel bar and greets me with a lingering kiss. ‘Hi, gorgeous! You look lovely, Aud. I love that dress. You smell great too, and – wow – those shoes . . .’

‘Thanks.’ My irritation over the chicken bones melts away instantly. Despite the drive, I opted for vertiginous black patent heels – stockings too, middle-aged cliché that I am (Stevie is a whippersnapper of 34. He was born in the 80s, for God’s sake – okay, only just. But *still*).

‘G&T, is it?’

‘Love one,’ I say, unable to tear away my gaze as he makes his way to the bar. With his mop of dishevelled muddy blond hair and swaggery walk, he really is ridiculously sexy. He turns and smiles. He has the kind of angelic features – wide, clear eyes, a fine nose and pouty lips – that remind me of the centrefold pin-ups I used to rip out of my teen magazines: the kind you’d collect week by week, desperate for the face bit (which always came last). Whenever we’re together, I see women glancing at him in appreciation. Not that there are any other women here

now. Apart from us, the place is empty. The barman, who looks no older than Morgan, has already been smirking at us. I guess couples don't often greet each other like this here. The clientele are usually solo travellers – bored salesmen, besuited business types – or couples too tired to drive the whole way home. They're just breaking up the journey. They don't meet here for *dates*.

He returns with my G&T and a large glass of red for himself. 'Happy birthday, sweetheart,' he says, planting another kiss on my cheek.

I smile. 'Well, it's still two days away . . .'

'Yeah, I know. Wish I could see you then but I'm down in the West Country, can't get out of it . . .'

'It's okay, I know how it is. I'm having lunch with the girls – everyone's off on Friday – and I'm sure Morgan'll pull something out of the hat.'

'Yeah?' Stevie laughs. 'You reckon?'

'Well, I'm not expecting a three-tier birthday cake but he might get it together to bring me a lukewarm coffee in bed.' I chuckle as Stevie winds an arm around my shoulders.

'I'd love to be with you.' He pauses and sips his wine. 'I'm actually thinking of selling the company. Sick of all this travelling, babe.'

'Really?' I am genuinely shocked. Stevie has built up his business from scratch and, from what I can gather, has done pretty well for himself. I can only assume he's a workaholic, as he lives in an immaculate one-bedroomed flat above his office in York. Despite it only being a twenty-minute drive away, I've only had the pleasure of going there . . . *once*. He's hardly ever home, he explained. It's just a base, not somewhere he's especially attached to.

'I just want to see more of you,' he adds.

‘Well, I’d like that too.’ I sense a flurry of desire as he rests a hand on my thigh.

‘The thing is,’ I add, ‘we *could* see each other more. I mean, we don’t have to stay in hotels so often, do we? Morgan doesn’t have a problem with you staying at our place, you know.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I realise that. He’s a good kid.’ Stevie crooks a brow as his fingers detect the bump of suspenders beneath the flimsy fabric of my dress. ‘But it’s nice to, you know . . . have *privacy*.’

The barman squirts a table with disinfectant and gives it a vigorous rub with a yellow cloth. I know what he’s thinking: *They’re having an affair*. I’ve already been blamed for the chicken bones and now I’m being labelled as the kind of woman who sleeps with other women’s husbands. And I’m *not*. Stevie has never been married, and has no children. Apart from living with a hairdresser in his early twenties – he refers to her as ‘the lunatic’ – he’s breezed through life pretty much doing his own thing. ‘Well,’ I continue, ‘there’s nothing to stop me coming over to your flat more often.’

‘That miserable little place?’ He shakes his head. ‘That’s another thing, darling. I need to get myself a proper place – a *home* – somewhere that’s not just a crash pad . . .’

‘I like your flat,’ I remark.

He looks amazed. ‘You like it? What on earth is there to like?’

I sip my G&T. ‘Well . . . it’s so pared down and uncluttered. You don’t have stuff strewn everywhere. It feels sparse and simple, like a holiday flat.’

Stevie smiles. ‘It’s not very homely, babe . . .’

‘I don’t mind, honestly. I have enough homeliness at home.’

He laughs and squeezes my hand. It *is* weird, though, this motorway fixation. I mean, I can understand the motel thing in the movies, in the States. They are tawdry and thrilling and slightly dangerous. Exciting things happen in those places. But this is an ordinary service station in Lancashire, with rain trickling steadily down the windows and a Hoover droning away in the foyer. Stevie drains his glass. ‘Fancy another? Or shall we just head up to the room?’

‘It’s only just gone eight,’ I say, laughing.

‘Yeah, well . . .’ He leans closer and whispers, ‘Got chilled champagne in my case . . .’

I grin. ‘Very tempting.’

‘And proper champagne glasses . . .’

‘So you brought your special seduction kit,’ I tease him, brushing away the tiniest thought that this doesn’t feel quite right either – this kit thing – or the fact that we never bother with dinner on our overnighters. But, hell, he is an incredibly sexy man. So I knock back my G&T and grab his hand as he takes my small overnight bag. I’ve already brushed aside my doubts as we hurry upstairs – there’s no lift – and tumble into our room.

We kiss fervently, like teenagers who’ve just discovered this thrilling act. As we pull apart, I register Stevie’s small black leather wheeled case parked beside the bed. I glance around the room, which is pretty standard for a motorway hotel: decorative turquoise cushions arranged diagonally on the bed; coffee- and tea-making facilities crammed onto a small plastic tray on the flimsy desk; a hairdryer on a stand; a notice about fire evacuation procedures and a guide to Interesting Things to See and Do in Lancashire. And that’s about it. They’re all like this: the four we’ve stayed at on the M62, and the others we’ve ‘enjoyed’ –

and yes, I have enjoyed them in a bizarre kind of way – on the M6 and M1.

From his case Stevie lifts out a small leather box, in which two cut-glass champagne flutes nestle in an inky blue velvet nest. Not that I need champagne. That sole G&T would have done nicely. Then he's lifting a tissue-wrapped bottle of Krug from the case – it's properly chilled, he must have only just bought it – and popping it expertly open and filling our glasses.

We kick off our shoes and recline side by side on the bed, holding hands, legs stretched out. The bubbles whoosh to my head, and only momentarily do I wonder if Morgan will remember to lock the back door as well as the front.

Stevie kisses me, softly and slowly, and it's so lovely I'm barely aware of the distant hum of traffic outside. Another noise starts up – a fan, or an air conditioning unit – then fades from my consciousness as Stevie peels off my dress, followed by the only decent underwear I possess: a black push-up bra and matching lacy knickers. I can't quite fathom why sex with this man is so thrilling; perhaps because we only see each other around once a week? Or is it his relative youth, his taut, toned body? Or that we mainly do it in hotels? If you add it all up – the weird hotel meet-ups, the fact that I can hardly ever reach him on his mobile – you'd probably say, run a mile, woman, are you a raving idiot? You might even say, would the real Audrey drop everything to rush off and meet her date at a Day's Inn Motel on the M6?

No, of course she wouldn't. But I should also add that, before I met Stevie, I had actually given up on being in any kind of relationship at all. I'd started to wonder if I was emitting distinct dinner lady vibes, even when I was all dressed up for a night out. Perhaps, I'd begun to think,

the whiff of school canteen macaroni cheese was emanating from my pores, and *that* was putting men off. For a while, I took to giving my freshly washed outfit a thorough sniff before any night out. Still no luck, until I met Stevie. I know I'm sounding pathetically grateful, finding myself a boyfriend with such obvious lady-pleasing qualities. But we *do* have fun, and it's thrilling to think that, instead of making cups of tea for Mrs B tonight and then coming home to channel-hop on my own, I have hours of pleasure ahead. Okay, I'll have to be up at the crack of dawn to make it home in time for work – pity, as checkout isn't until eleven (I'm familiar with such details) – but at least we'll grab some buffet breakfast. While Stevie's sniffy about the dinner menu, he does enjoy piling his plate high with hash browns and cumberland sausages. Then we'll be off: me back to my small, sleepy town just outside York, and Stevie to his next appointment somewhere in the Manchester area.

'That was amazing,' he murmurs, pulling me close. I glance at my phone, which is sitting beside my empty champagne glass: 10.17 p.m.

'It really was.' My stomach growls as I kiss his delicious-smelling neck.

'You hungry, babe?'

'Yes, I am a bit.'

He smiles, and plants a tender kiss on my forehead before swivelling out of bed. 'No problem, I'll nip out and get us something . . .' I glance at his lean, taut body as he pulls on his jeans and shirt, wondering – as I always do – how I managed to get so lucky.

In his absence I stretch out in bed, enjoying the coolness of the sheets against my skin. From a laminated card on

the bedside cabinet, I learn that the all-you-can-eat breakfast is just £5. I doze a little, then check my phone, to reassure myself that my darling son hasn't plunged his finger into an electrical socket or exploded the TV. No texts, which could signify that he's lying in a fried heap, although I know I'm being ridiculous. No contact from Morgan is completely normal – he tends to message me only when he needs to know where he might find money for late-night chips. And I can't bring myself to text Jenna to ask if he's okay; he'd be *mortified*.

My worries fade as the door opens, signifying that my hunter-gatherer has returned from the service station shop – open 24 hours, another benefit of conducting our sex life on the motorway – with a carrier bag of treats. 'Hey,' he chuckles, undressing swiftly and clambering back into bed, 'imagine finding *you* here.' I laugh as he tips out our provisions, which, I happen to notice, contains one of those Fuzzy Brush toothbrushes that come in a little plastic ball from a dispenser in the loos. 'Forgot my toothbrush,' he says with a grin.

'Another great thing about service stations,' I snigger, which he chooses to ignore. We kiss, and we eat, and then, fuelled by a couple of Ginsters Meat Feast Slices and a tub of Pringles, we fall back into each other's arms.

It's lovely, as always. But I still can't shake off the feeling that this isn't quite right.