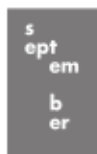


Good Husbands

C A T E R A Y



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Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!

Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 'The Rights of Woman', c. 1795

It starts out as curiosity – the temptation to peep behind the door. Just one look, and maybe that will be enough to satisfy it. But that's never going to happen because the door is always locked. They know what they're doing.

Before long, the desire has grown so sharp it's difficult to sleep through. Nothing dulls the pain. I carry it everywhere I go.

I begin to have the same dream, night after night ... Someone opens the door for me and I turn to thank them, but they're gone. A stranger who has done me an enormous kindness, perhaps without even knowing.

I don't have time to think about it because the clock's ticking. I'm taking in the palm-leaf wallpaper, inhaling the scent of lilies, knowing that at any moment they will spot me, eject me back onto the streets.

It happens all too soon. And I wake to a smell that isn't lilies, to walls that aren't palm leaves, and to bones that ache and creak. The longing becomes hostile in those moments; I hatch all kinds of plots, none of which will see the light of day.

And then, one night, in my dream, everything changes. The stranger reveals her face to me and suddenly the way forward is clear.

Maybe there's a way inside, a way of staying longer, after all.

PART ONE

The Letter

J E S S

I'm 100 per cent average – said no one, ever. Yet that's what most of us are, myself included. I know the sum of my parts and it equals ordinary and there's no shame in that. In fact, it's a strength. My parents were ordinary too and as their only child they raised me to respect being a leaf on a tree, a grain of sand on the beach. You get the picture. But it doesn't mean being insignificant, anonymous. It means being part of a community, a clan, a cause greater than yourself.

I realise this kind of thinking isn't very new. The idea of being average scares my girls to death. I wouldn't accuse them of it outright, yet it's probably in their DNA too, and at some point, they'll have to confront it. Mediocrity isn't something they can deal with and perhaps that's where we're going wrong because ordinary is what gets you through. Ordinary is noble, life-affirming. It's the heart of humanity and, somehow, we've forgotten that.

And then the letter arrives, and I know as soon as I read it that I'm going to have to rethink everything. Because I'm fairly sure that ordinary people don't get letters like this.

It's the first day of autumn and I don't know if it's actually colder or whether I'm imagining it, as though a door closed yesterday on summer and a chillier one opened, but I'm definitely feeling it today. The tip of my nose is icy and I would get a hot water bottle for my lap, only I'm leaving the house in twenty minutes.

I'm meeting Duane Dee, my favourite sculptor – the only sculptor – on my client list, and anything could happen. You never know what you're going to get with artists, which is why I like working with them. They're up and down but more than that, they're honest. I've never known a profession like it. My artists talk

about integrity and authenticity all the time and I lap it up. I love that the men don't shave for meetings, the women don't dye their greys, no one bothers ironing anything.

The investors are another sort altogether. People who buy and sell art are very different from those who create it. I know whose company I prefer, but I keep that to myself because even I know not to bite the hand that feeds me.

Max thinks it's funny that I work for Moon & Co – he calls them the Moonies – even though he was the one who got me the job. He knows everyone in Bath because he grew up here, whereas I'm originally from the East End, London. I've been living here for twenty years and it still makes me laugh that locals think it's urban, even though I can see cows from our bathroom window.

I've just got enough time for a quick look at Facebook. I don't know why I do it to myself, but sometimes I feel that if I don't keep up, I'll be left behind. Which is odd because it's not as if it's a race, is it, being human?

I'm forty-six years old and still on the lookout for new friends. I'm pretty sure I won't find them here in this endless scroll of happy images. People work so hard to make themselves appear perfect, it's hard not to try to find faults. I don't enjoy it. It makes me feel bitchy, but still I return and peek.

I glance at the time: ten minutes until I have to go. Outside, red leaves are hanging on the trees as though they've gone rusty and can't move. There's no wind today, the air completely still.

Duane Dee doesn't use social media. He thinks the tech companies are using us to get rich and that it's odd I'm willing to be a pawn in Silicon Valley, because I strike him as militant.

It's probably because I still have a slight East End accent, which can sound blunt, tough, but I like to think of it more as plain-talking. My late dad used to say that the East Enders wore their hearts of gold on their sleeves. A firefighter all his life, he believed in helping people, especially along our street of identical terrace houses where no one could set themselves apart.

Enough of Facebook. I shut it down, telling it I won't be back, knowing I will. And then I gather my things, ready to take off.

In the hallway, I sit on the stairs to put on my trainers,

wondering when I started dressing like a teenager, and that's when the postman comes. There's only one small piece of mail, which slips in like a piece of confetti, drifting to the mat. I pick it up with interest because I can't think when I last received a handwritten letter.

But it's gone from my mind now because I'm locking up and putting on my puffa jacket as I walk to the car. And then I'm driving to town – the sun a pale wedge of lemon above me – running through what to say to Duane Dee.

Is he well? Is he pushing himself too hard? Is he sleeping enough? He always looks chronically tired.

I ask too many questions. 'Intrusive.' That's the little bit of feedback my boss always gives me. *Jess, here's some feedback you didn't ask for ...*

When people say you're intrusive, assertive or direct, they're basically telling you to be quiet. Are men given feedback like that? I don't know. But I'm thinking about this as I enter the Sicilian café, which is my personal preference for brunch and not Duane's. Whenever he chooses, we end up somewhere too dark to see our food, sitting on tasselled mats.

The service here is very good. Within seconds of my sitting down, the waitress hands me a menu even though I always have an Americano and an almond pastry.

Glancing in the wall mirror beside me, I note that my expression is severe. A semi-friend told me recently that I carry a lot of tension in my face. It wasn't that kind of her to say, but I know what she means. I have bony cheekbones and thin lips that can look mean if I'm not careful.

So, I've been making an effort lately to smile more, worry less and unclench my hands. I also tend to tap my teeth together and I'm doing that now in time to the café music as I wait for Duane.

And then I remember the letter.

It takes me several moments to find it, as well as my reading glasses. Since hitting my mid-forties, I misplace things all the time. I normally ask myself, *Where would I have put it?* And it's never there.

The letter is in the front compartment of my rucksack, which I

haven't used for so long there are still specks of food and foil from the school run years ago. Flicking the crumbs off the envelope, I examine the handwriting, feeling a pang of nostalgia at the idea of someone putting pen to paper just for me.

The writing is tiny and in capitals – internet code for shouting – but in this case is more like whispering. Something about it gives me the sense that it's trying its hardest not to offend or take up too much space. I have to prise the paper out of the envelope, where it's wedged, folded into eighths.

THURS 1st OCTOBER

DEAR JESSICA,

I HOPE YOU'RE SITTING DOWN TO READ THIS AND THAT YOU'RE ALONE.

THIS IS SO DIFFICULT. YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE HOW OFTEN I IMAGINED TALKING TO YOU, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO GO ABOUT IT. AND NOW IT'S TOO LATE.

For what? I check the postmark on the envelope: Monday, 5 October, 5 p.m. That was last night. Shifting uneasily in my seat, I turn over the letter to see who sent it: Holly Waite.

I'VE KNOWN FOR SOME TIME THAT I WON'T MAKE OLD BONES, BUT NOW IT'S URGENT AND I'VE ONLY GOT A FEW DAYS LEFT. SO, I'LL JUST COME OUT WITH IT.

ON 22 DECEMBER 1990, MY MUM NICOLA WAITE WAS RAPED BY 3 MEN IN THE MONTAGUE CLUB, BATH. THE MEN WERE ANDREW LAWLEY, DANIEL BROOKE AND MAXIMILIAN JACKSON.

MY MUM FELL PREGNANT WITH ME. SHE ASKED THE MEN FOR HELP, BUT THEY DIDN'T WANT TO BE INVOLVED. SHE NEVER RECOVERED FROM WHAT HAPPENED AND DIED 9 YEARS AGO OF AN ACCIDENTAL OVERDOSE.

EVERYTHING I OWN IS AT STONE'S STORAGE, UNIT 21, 156 CLEVEDON ROAD. IF YOU GO TO THEM, THEY'LL GIVE YOU THE KEY. YOU'RE WELCOME TO ANYTHING. I HAVE NO ONE ELSE TO LEAVE IT TO.

WE NEVER KNEW WHO MY FATHER WAS. SO, I'M ALSO WRITING TO:

PRIYANKA LAWLEY, 32 WALDEN WAY, HIGH LANE, BATH.

STEPHANIE BROOKE, 7 SOUTH AVENUE, BATH.

I'M SORRY TO DO THIS. I KNOW IT'LL BE A SHOCK, BUT I COULDN'T GO WITHOUT TELLING YOU. YOUR HUSBANDS WENT UNPUNISHED, WALKING AWAY COMPLETELY FREE. I ALWAYS HOPED THAT ONE DAY I'D SEE JUSTICE DONE, BUT I COULDN'T THINK OF A WAY TO DO THAT WITHOUT DESTROYING MORE LIVES.

NOW THAT I'M OUT OF TIME, I CAN SEE THAT IT WASN'T MY CHOICE TO MAKE. SO, I'M PASSING IT OVER TO YOU, TELLING YOU WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN FROM THE START. IT ALWAYS FELT SO PERSONAL, BUT IT WASN'T, NOT REALLY. YOU CAN'T DRAW A LINE WHERE ONE LIFE STARTS AND ANOTHER BEGINS.

ONCE AGAIN, I'M SORRY.

I HOPE YOU DO THE RIGHT THING.

YOURS TRULY,

HOLLY WAITE X

The kiss throws me the most. I stare at it. It's like she's trying to add a softener, after making the worst possible accusation.

I read the letter again, my eye lingering on *Maximilian Jackson*. No one ever calls Max that. It doesn't even sound like him.

'Jess?' I glance up to see Duane standing there, untying his Aztec scarf, clay stains on his jumper. 'All right, darlin?'

I can't pull out a smile for him. I'm not great at hiding my emotions. It's one of the things Max has always loved about me and I like it about myself too. Yet, suddenly, it feels like an impairment; a liability, even. Slipping the letter into my bag, I stand up robotically and we exchange kisses. He smells of autumn air and his cheek as it brushes mine is so cold it makes me shiver. 'Hi, Duane.'

We sit down and Duane scans a menu before tossing it aside. 'Who am I kidding? I'm gonna get the *calzoni*. I always get the *calzoni*.'

'So ... how are you?' I manage to ask. 'How's the new project

going?’ I sound uptight, formal. I clench my hands, trying to stop them from trembling.

The waitress takes our order. And then I sit rigidly in my chair, listening as Duane describes his latest creation – how it embodies technoculture, hyperreality, paranoia.

When the coffees arrive, I drink mine too quickly and burn my tongue.

‘You OK?’ He cocks his head at me.

No, I’m not. How could I be?

‘Actually, I just need to pop to the ladies. Could you excuse me a minute?’

In the solace of the toilets, I stand with my hands against the sink, trying to breathe, feeling dizzy. Closing my eyes, I see *Maximilian Jackson* again in that tiny handwriting.

It’s not Max. It’s some sort of mistake. Holly Waite ... whoever that is ... is wrong. And, perhaps, dead.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt happy before to hear of someone’s demise, but as I open my eyes it occurs to me that if this woman is deceased then there’s no one around to make any accusations.

I return to the table, where Duane is tucking into his *calzoni*, a thread of cheese hanging from his lip. Normally I wouldn’t hesitate to tell him, or anyone, so they could set themselves straight. But something strange happens and I just sit there, silent, watching the thread dangle as he chews and talks.

It seems to me that I don’t know who I am. Or, more to the point, who my husband is.

When I get home, Max is out. I pause in the hallway, noiselessly taking off my shoes because I don’t want Eva to know I’m back. At some point during the last year, I started tiptoeing around the house, stealing moments of peace. Sometimes I sit in the dark so no one knows I’m there. Tonight, though, I have more reason than usual to sneak.

‘Mum? Is that you?’

Damn. A door opens, followed by footsteps across the landing.

‘Hello, my lovely,’ I say.

‘Hi, Mum.’ Eva recently turned fifteen and was gifted very long

legs. From this angle, they're all I can see until she emerges fully at the top of the stairs. 'You're home early.'

'Am I?' I pretend to be surprised. 'I've got some work to do. Are you OK carrying on with your homework?'

She nods. 'That's fine. I've got Spanish revision.'

'Good.' I feel guilty. Eva normally likes a chat as soon as I get home. 'Can I get you anything?'

'No, thanks. Call me when you're done. I want to tell you what Charlotte said.'

Charlotte only reaches Eva's shoulder in height yet somehow manages to bring her down every day. They've been friends since primary school, despite my efforts to break them up. Just hearing her name makes me waver, assessing Eva's face. But then I think of the letter, my body tensing with resolve. 'See you in half an hour,' I say, making for the kitchen.

'OK, Mum.'

I make a cup of tea whilst waiting for the laptop to wake up. It's slow and old, but it's the only one that doesn't talk to the others and doesn't have child safety blocks on it.

With the letter hidden on my lap, I enter Holly's name into a search engine.

Holly Waite, Bath, UK, is an osteopath and a make-up artist. She could be either of them, or neither. I look up Stone's Storage instead. It exists, seems innocuous enough, but then storage is storage.

I bend my neck to read the first of the men's names. Andrew Lawley. I've never heard of him, which is odd because I thought I knew all of Max's friends. He's a very sociable, open sort of person. His mantra is to treat people the way you'd want to be treated yourself. I don't know whether I've mentioned that I adore him but it probably should have been the first thing I told you about me.

I type *Andrew Lawley, Bath, UK* and tap my teeth together as an image appears. His eyes are deep-set, his hair bushy – set away from his head as though you could lift it off. I don't hate or love his face; it leaves me neutral.

He runs his own IT company, based in an attractive Georgian square in the city, several streets away from the Montague Club.

I sip my tea, thinking of the club's unwelcoming, unmarked door. I've never really given it much thought before. I know it opened in the mid-nineteenth century, a lavish gentlemen's club for the landed gentry. Gradually, it evolved into a private members' club, attracting businessmen and professionals, allowing women to join in the eighties.

Max doesn't go there very often; maybe once a month, if that. I don't need to know everything about him, not on the business side of things. We've reached a point where I smile and nod when he talks about fixed-rate mortgages, just like he does when I tell him about the Moonies.

I've never even set foot inside the place. I'm not into private clubs. I don't like private schools, either, or anything exclusive. It irritates me that some people can't cope unless they're on the top tier, looking down on the rest of us. But these days, the Montague is full of entrepreneurs, according to Max: excellent for networking. He arranges most of the members' mortgages, so I can't argue with that.

He started going there during his teens with his dad. So he could easily have been there in – I look at the letter on my lap – December 1990.

Upstairs, a door closes and then the pipes whisper as Eva comes out of the bathroom. I wait for her to return to her room and for everything to go quiet again.

I take a closer look at Andrew Lawley's picture. How old is he? I guess at fifty. Max is fifty, but a lot better looking. Maybe this guy is slightly older. Either way, they'd have been about twenty in 1990.

So, I'm doing this? I'm taking a stranger's word for it? Why don't I just show Max the letter – confide in him like I do with everything else, and ask him outright?

I don't answer myself – not yet, anyway. Instead, I look up the next man. Daniel Brooke. The moment I type it, a light goes on in my head.

Brooke Prestige Cars is a large dealership in the city centre. Everyone knows it. You can't sit in traffic in Bath without having to look at one of those window stickers.

I'm surprised, though. I had no idea Max knew him.

I find Daniel Brooke's photo on the company website page and again, he looks about fifty. Unlike Andrew Lawley, I have an immediate reaction to this man. His hair is spiky, cropped short like an army cadet, and there's the hint of a smile on his lips as though he thinks he's smarter than you.

The front door rattles and I jump. I've completely lost track of the time. Quickly, I grab the letter and stuff it into my bag and I'm just deleting the history on the laptop and slamming down the lid when Poppy enters the kitchen.

I can smell the chlorine from here. 'Hey, Mamma Mia,' she says, going to the fridge, the back of her sweater wet where her hair has dripped onto it. 'What the—?' She spins round, her face like a screwed-up newspaper. 'Who drank all the juice?'

She's scrappy, like me. You shouldn't typecast your kids. We all know they're their own people, but still, we look for ourselves in them and I always see myself in Poppy.

'Oh, for God's sake!' She stamps her foot.

I should say something. She's always shouting and I'm sure our elderly neighbours can hear her. Yet I'm too busy watching Max, who's just come in with an armful of swimming bags and coats, as though he's taken five twelve-year-olds swimming and not just one.

'What's all that lot?' I'm glad of the distraction. I wasn't sure how I'd be with him.

'Sasha left her things,' he says, dropping the bundle onto the table. 'I've texted Marie to say we've got it. It's no biggy.'

He's so easy with it all ... Sasha ... Marie ... I couldn't pick these people out in a line up, but then he's been taking our girls swimming since they were toddlers. I'm happy not to be involved. There are parts of my daughters' lives that are nothing to do with me because they fall under his jurisdiction. It's the way we've always done it: fifty-fifty, right down the middle. That's how partnerships are supposed to work.

'Everything OK?' he asks, catching sight of my expression.

I'm still sitting at the table, chewing a thumbnail. 'Yeah, I was just doing some work.'

'Think I'll take a quick shower then. It's always so bloody hot

in that pool.’ He loosens his tie, unbuttoning his tight shirt, arms bulging.

I try to imagine what the swim mums think when they look at him, maybe mistaking his friendliness for something else ... subtly checking out his frame, his heavy eyelids and long eyelashes, weighing up whether the lack of height would be a problem.

He works out most days. And in all honestly, I like it. I like having a man who others find attractive; a man who is strong and capable.

Capable of what?

As he draws close to me, pressing a kiss onto my lips with a flutter of his cartoon eyes, I feel mistrust for the first time.

‘What’s wrong?’ He frowns.

‘Nothing. Just tired.’ One of the benefits of being middle-aged is that you can use this line to cover pretty much anything and no one ever questions it.

He kisses me again. And then he’s off, upstairs, whistling an empty tune.

Just before lights out, I tap on Eva’s door. She’s in bed, duvet drawn to chin.

‘Hey, lovely.’ I sit down on the edge of her bed. ‘Sorry we didn’t get to talk. It’s been one of those days. Do you want to tell me about Charlotte now?’ But she’s already sleepy, the nightlight casting a peach glow over her face. ‘OK, then. You get some rest.’ I nudge her hair from her eyes, kiss her cheek. ‘Night, night. Love you, sweetheart.’

In the doorway, I turn back to gaze at her. She looks just like she did as a baby and I regret the time that’s passed so quickly. Closing the door softly, I think for the thousandth time how my mum would have loved watching her grow, turning into a woman; Poppy, too. Yet life has a way of taking your beautifully drawn-up plans and red-inking them.

In our bedroom, Max is undressing. He takes off his T-shirt, swapping it for a pyjama top which fits snugly over his chest. I feel

a familiar swirl of pride and lust, followed by that nasty mistrust again. I hate this. I've never hidden anything from him before.

Just ask him. Give him a chance to explain that it's a huge mistake. A terrible lie.

I practise it.

Max, hon. Do you know someone called Nicola Waite? Did you rape her in 1990?

I can't do it. If he lies, I'll know. He gets a look, a tension around his mouth when he fibs. I have a strong radar for these things and have called him out on it before, on little lies like whether it was him who tracked mud through the house.

On something this big, he wouldn't be able to hide it. We'd both know the truth and it would hang between us. Maybe I don't know him as well as I thought I did, but I know me. This letter, this accusation – if endorsed – would destroy our marriage in an instant.

My life. Our girls. Our home. Everything ruined.

Switching off the bedside light, he spoons me and I breathe heavily, pretending to have fallen asleep in record time. Within minutes, he loosens up, his limbs slipping away, softening.

I can't confront him about the letter yet. I need more time, more information.

Drawing up my knees, I curl into a ball, my body tight. Sometimes, before you do something really big, it helps to make yourself small. That way, if it all goes wrong, you're not an easy target. That's what I'm thinking as I fall asleep.