

The Best of Times

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Laura Gilliatt often said – while reaching for the nearest bit of wood, or tapping her own lovely head, for she was deeply superstitious – that her life was simply too good to be true. And the casual observer – or indeed quite a beady-eyed one – would have been hardpressed not to agree with her. Married to a husband she adored, Jonathan Gilliatt, the distinguished gynaecologist and obstetrician, and with three extremely attractive and charming children, with a career of her own as an interior designer, just demanding enough to save her from any possible boredom, but not so much that she could not set it aside when required, by any domestic crisis large or small, such as the necessity to attend an important dinner or conference with her husband or the sickbed or nativity play of one of her children.

The family owned two beautiful houses: one on the River Thames at Chiswick and a second in the Dordogne area of France; they also had a timeshare in a ski chalet in Méribel. Jonathan earned a great deal of money from his private practice at Princess Anne's, an extremely expensive hospital for women just off Harley Street, but he was also a highly respected NHS consultant, heading up the obstetric unit at St Andrew's, Bayswater. He was passionately opposed to the modern trend for elective caesarians, both in his private practice and the NHS; in his opinion they were a direct result of the compensation culture and therefore of the workings of the devil. Babies were meant to be pushed gently into the world by their mothers, he said, not yanked abruptly out in the more brutal environment of the operating theatre. This put him on the receiving line of a great deal of criticism from certain feminist branches of the media.

The beady-eyed observer would also have noted that he was deeply in love with his wife, while also enjoying the adoration of his patients; and that his son Charlie and his daughters Daisy and Lily – his two little flowers as he called them – all thought he was completely wonderful.

In his wife he had an absolute treasure, as he often told not only her but the world in general; for as well as being beautiful, Laura was sunny-natured and sweet-tempered, and indeed, this same observer studying her quite intently as she went through her days, raising her family, running her business, entertaining her friends, would have found it hard to catch her in any worse humour than mild irritation or even raising her voice. If this did happen, it was usually prompted by some bad behaviour on the part of her children, such as Charlie who was eleven, sneaking into the loo with his Nintendo when he had had his hour's ration for the day, or Lily and Daisy, who were nine and seven, persuading the au pair, Helga, that their mother had agreed that they could watch *High School Musical* for the umpteenth time until well after they were supposed to be in bed.

They were all too young to be committing any more heinous crimes; it would have seemed safe to conclude, given their hugely privileged upbringing, that it was fairly unlikely that they ever would.

The Gilliatts had been married for thirteen years: 'Lucky, lucky years,' Jonathan had said, presenting Laura with a Tiffany Eternity ring on the morning of their anniversary. 'I know it's not a special anniversary, darling, but you deserve it, and it comes with all my love.'

Laura was so overcome with emotion that she burst into tears and then smiled through them as she looked at the lovely thing on her finger; and after that, having consulted the clock on their bedroom fireplace, decided she should express her gratitude to Jonathan, not only for the ring but the thirteen happy years, in a rather practical way – with the result that she got seriously behind in her school-run schedule and all three children were clearly going to be late.

'And I don't have a very seemly excuse,' she wailed to Jonathan, leaning out of the window of the Range Rover to kiss him goodbye. 'Whatever can I say?'

‘Say your husband got held up.’
‘Don’t be filthy.’

Laura had been nineteen and still a virgin when she had met Jonathan – ‘probably the last in London,’ she said. This was not due to any particular moral rectitude, but because until him, she had honestly never fancied anyone enough to want to go to bed with them. She fancied Jonathan quite enough, however, and found the whole experience ‘absolutely lovely’, as she told him. They were married a year later.

‘I do hope I’m going to cope with being Mrs Gilliatt – quite an important career,’ she said just a little anxiously, a few days before the wedding, and: ‘Of course you will,’ he told her. ‘You fit the job description perfectly. And you’ll grow into it beautifully.’

As indeed she had, taking her duties very seriously. She loved cooking and entertaining, and had discovered a certain flair for interior design. When they had been married a year, and their own lovely house was finished to both their satisfaction, she asked Jonathan if he would mind if she took a course and perhaps dabbled in it professionally.

‘Of course not, darling – lovely idea. As long as you can do it from home and can cope with any problems on your own. I don’t want to come second to any difficult clients.’

Laura promised him he wouldn’t, and he never had. And neither, as the babies arrived, in neat, two-yearly intervals, did they. For many years, until Daisy was at school, she simply devoted herself to them, and was perfectly happy. She did have to work quite hard at reassuring Jonathan that he still came first in her life, and was slightly surprised at his impatience and near-jealousy created by the demands of the children; she had imagined he was rather more mature than that. Clearly her mother had been right, she reflected, and all men were children at heart. For the first few years therefore, she employed a full-time nanny, for the demands of Jonathan’s professional life on her time were considerable, and he liked her to be totally available to him.

But when Daisy went to school, Laura began quite tentatively to work – small things, finding new curtains for one house, revamping a bathroom for another – and found she loved it ‘in spite of the

clients'. She had a particular flair for colour, for using the unexpected, and it was for that she was beginning to earn a small reputation. But it all remained little more than a hobby, very much what she did in her spare time: which was not actually in very large supply.

But that was how Jonathan liked it; and therefore she liked it too.

Spring that year had been especially lovely; it arrived early and stayed late, perfect green and gold days, so that as early as April, Laura was setting the outside table for lunch every Saturday and Sunday, and as May wore on, she and Jonathan would eat dinner outside as well, and watch the soft dusk settle over the garden, and listen to the sounds of the river in the background – the hooting of tugs, the partying pleasure boats, the occasional rush of water as a police launch sped along, the raw cries of the gulls.

'How lucky we are,' she said more than once, maybe more than a hundred times, smiling at Jonathan across the table: and he would raise his glass to her and reach for her hand and tell her he loved her.

But now it was midsummer and this being England, the rain had arrived: day after relentless day it fell from dark grey skies. Barbecues and summer parties were being cancelled, floaty summer dresses put away (and jeans and wellies pulled resentfully out of cupboards), the shops were holding what they called End of Season Sales and there was a stampede for flights to Majorca and Ibiza, for restorative weeks and even long weekends in the sun.

For the Gilliat's, there was no such stampede. Laura was packing, as she did every year, for their annual pilgrimage to the lovely golden-stoned farmhouse in the Dordogne, near Sarlat, where the sun would shine down unstintingly on them, heating the water in the pool, ripening the greengages in their garden and the grapes on the verandah-vine, and warming the stones on the terrace so that the lizards might siesta in the afternoons along with their landlords.

'And thank goodness for it,' she said. 'Poor Serena is so dreading the holidays, keeping the boys amused all those weeks – well, months really . . .'

Jonathan said just slightly shortly that he had thought the Edwardses were off to some five-star hotel in Nice, not to mention the ten days they would spend with the Gilliatts on the way down. Laura said well, that was true, but it still only added up to just over three weeks and that left six or even seven in London.

Jonathan said that most of his NHS patients would not regard that as too much of a hardship, given the three and a half weeks of luxury sunshine. He was less fond of Mark and Serena Edwards than Laura was. Mark was a Public Relations consultant for a big City firm, buffed over-smooth by years of networking and contacting and charming, and Serena was Laura's best friend and, in Jonathan's view, made Laura the repository of just too many confidences and secrets. But they were, officially at least, the Gilliatts' best friends, and Serena and Laura nurtured many a fantasy about (amongst other things) the weddings of Tim and Jack Edwards to Lily and Daisy Gilliatt.

Jonathan was not able, of course, to spend nine weeks in the Dordogne; he took as much of his annual leave as he could and for the rest of the time flew out each Friday afternoon to Toulouse and back each Monday, or if he could juggle sufficiently with his clinics, even Tuesday morning.

They all missed him, of course, but there was still so much to do, swimming, cycling, shopping in the endless markets, and meeting and visiting and entertaining all the countless other English families in the vicinity that they were almost surprised to find him joining them once more for supper in the thick, sweet-scented air.

And so, as she read reports of what appeared to be almost continuous rain in England, and indeed listened to friends in England complaining about it, and telling her how lucky she was not to be there, Laura savoured the long golden days even more than usual, and even more than usual counted her own multiple blessings.

Linda Di-Marcello was aware that she also was fairly fortunate; which meant that, given her line of work, she was doing very well indeed. Linda ran a theatrical agency, and as she often said, her own role was a complex one. She was, in almost equal parts, nanny, therapist and hustler. It was both exhausting and stressful, and she