

The Message

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The
MESSAGE

JULIE HIGHMORE


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ONE

London, February 2003

You have one new message.

Robert? Jen dropped her bags and pressed the key to listen.

‘Hi, John,’ said her husband. ‘I’m on my way. But, listen, don’t cook for me . . .’

Did he say Jen or John?

‘. . . Jen’s class has been cancelled and she’s doing one of her bloody Thai things. I promised I’d be home at eight, so we’ll only have an hour. Sorry. I might be a bit peckish, though. But, er, no doubt you’ll have something long and tasty for me.’ Robert groaned and signed off with, ‘Can’t wait.’

To listen to the message again, press one.

‘Hi, John, I’m on my way—’

She saved and switched off. She could hear it a hundred times and he wouldn’t say ‘Jen’.

In the kitchen, on a chair, she stared at her mobile, as though it might offer some sort of explanation. Then hated it, because

it had made her cold inside and sick, and had drained all strength from her limbs, and made her hands shake and her heart race and had ended her life, or so it felt. She should unpack the bags, put stuff in the freezer, but she couldn't move.

Had she misunderstood? Misconstrued? The idea that Robert might have a son he'd kept quiet about suddenly struck her, but then it was gone . . . *something long and tasty* . . . A sweet shop? Sticks of rock, lollipops . . . ? She was clutching at straws – very slippery, fragile ones. Robert didn't have a sweet tooth. He ate desserts out of politeness.

The ice cream, she remembered, managing to get up, legs shaky, everything shaky. After ramming the carton in the freezer, phone still in hand, like vital evidence she couldn't let go of, Jen unpacked the rest. Cereal, tea went in the cupboard; a raw pink free-range chicken, bought at the butcher's, in the fridge. Lemongrass, a carton of yogurt . . . she began to taste bile, swallowed hard and ran to the cloakroom.

Afterwards, she splashed cold water on her face and reached for the towel, then rubbed and rubbed at cheeks, forehead, eyes, as though trying to erase everything: images of Robert – her still-attractive husband – naked with a man; the way he'd talked about her. She stopped rubbing and looked in the mirror. Even in its current raw state, it wasn't a bad face. Her father's deep brown eyes and what someone had called an intelligent mouth. She still had no idea what he'd meant. There were one or two stray greys in her dark, shoulder-length hair, but for forty-eight she was doing OK. Not OK enough for Robert, though.

John couldn't be a woman's name, she wondered, lowering the loo seat and sitting down. Short for . . . or maybe he'd said Joanne? If it were a woman, at least he'd still be Robert, not someone she'd never known. She picked up the phone from the

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floor and listened again, and then again. John, he was saying. Definitely John. *Can't wait.*

She sat rigid, the tap dripping beside her. If only her French class hadn't been cancelled. Celia's daughter had phoned them all. Tonsillitis. Jen would have gone to the pub afterwards, got home around ten, ten thirty. Robert would have made them a nightcap, whisky for him, hot chocolate for her. They'd have read in bed and rolled over and gone to sleep, Robert first. And she'd never have known. Now, ridiculously, she felt she'd made this happen.

She was losing her mind, clearly. And not one part of her body felt the way it had twenty minutes ago, when she'd walked through the door with the shopping, wondering who'd been phoning her in the car, and looking forward to cooking. Now her mouth was dry, her knees ached. Everything ached. She was sweating. Her heart was abnormally loud and she wasn't breathing right. Oh God, she thought, AIDS. When did they last . . . ? Months and months ago . . . November, perhaps. After the boozy meal and the taxi ride home. His birthday treat. No, once since then. Christmas? Hard to remember something so unmemorable.

Jen clutched the towel and rocked back and forth. Then the phone rang in her hand. In shock, or revulsion, she let it fall on the floor. Robert realising his error? How horrible it would be to hear his voice. No, she didn't want to hear him. Not yet. Or see him. Was he outside the house, too nervous to come in? She reached to the cloakroom door and bolted it.

The phone stopped but the tap continued to drip. Turning it off, Jen found herself staring at the soap dish Robert had excitedly bid for at an auction, insisting it would match the floor tiles perfectly, which it had. She picked it up and tipped out the

Pears, then rotated the pretty antique blue-and-white latticed dish just inches from her nose, examining it now in a whole new light. Had she spent their entire marriage missing all the signs? She tried to think of other clues, but everything had become a blur, all hazy and jumbled, along with her emotions.

Jen stayed in the cloakroom, her head racing through flashes of their life: holidays, watching TV with meals on their laps, walks on the heath, having people over. Normal married life, only it wasn't, hadn't been normal at all. Her husband was attracted to men, she thought, staring at her thin gold wedding ring, twisting it back and forth. In all their time together he'd never talked dirty with her, not like that. Romantic sometimes, but not dirty. His computer, she thought. If she had the strength . . . Another call came, and again she left it. All that life they'd had, such a waste. No children, even, and now no future. Their plan to sell the properties and move abroad, like everything else, was gone. She looked at the ring again, and twisted it up and off her finger.

She wondered about phoning Sarah, but dreaded an awkward silence, then, 'Actually, Jen . . .' and there'd be a story of him making a pass at some guy at a party; Sarah blurting out stuff she'd been wanting to say for months, years. Jen had told her about Robert's lack of interest in bed – hers too – and how dismal it was when they did get round to it. Dutiful, robotic. How she needed a toyboy, ha-ha. That was before Christmas some time. Sarah had looked uncomfortable and busied herself with a salad. And she hadn't commented, which was very un-Sarah like. Stupidly – well, now it seemed stupid – Jen had wondered about Sarah and Robert. Just fleetingly, though. The idea of Robert screwing around had been too ridiculous. He'd never been lecherous, or even flirtatious with other women.

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Of course he hadn't.

She slid the soap up and put it back in the fussy little dish she'd never seen the point of, then yanked tissue from the roll and blew her nose. 'Shit,' she said, 'I bet they all knew.' She got up, dropped her ring in the bowl of potpourri and unbolted the door.

A glass of wine might lead to another, then another, and her thoughts were muddled enough already. She'd have tea, she decided, and eat. Something simple. Bread went in the toaster and she filled a pan with water. When it was halfway to boiling, she lowered an egg in on a shaky spoon. After buttering the toast, she stood motionless, counting four minutes on the wall clock.

With her meal on the table in front of her, Jen continued to watch the time. Seven twenty-five, thirty. Thirty-five. No longer crying, she still shook, only now it was with dread as the minutes worked their way, too quickly, towards eight o'clock. She needed to calm down, think of something to say. Seven forty-one. She pictured him in his car, either aware of his blunder and chewing a thumbnail, or oblivious and singing along to something. Six minutes to, five to, four.

When the time finally came for Robert to walk through the door, drop his briefcase and kiss, or not kiss, her cheek, Jen stared and stared at the cold congealed egg she hadn't touched. Unable to move. Unable to make the tea she'd forgotten.

TWO

Germany, July 1969

‘This beats life in the UK,’ Kit’s mother said, the first time they met. ‘Like a Dubonnet, Jennifer?’

Mrs Avery was on the kitchen worktop, filing her nails, and beside her stood a glass of, presumably, Dubonnet. Her long legs were crossed and tanned and she wore strappy gold sandals. Her skirt was short and tight, her hair was shoulder-length, blond and backcombed. She wore thick mascara around her huge blue eyes, and her mouth was full and pouty and covered in apricot lipstick. She was glamorous, posh, tarty and a bit dated, all in one.

Paralysed with indecision, or just ignorance, Jen couldn’t answer the question. Did officers’ children drink alcohol with their parents? At four in the afternoon? She looked to Kit for help and saw he was pulling Tizer from the fridge. ‘No, thanks, Mrs Avery. Just some pop, if that’s all right.’

‘Oh, please. Do call me Eleanor.’ She smiled and revealed

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disappointingly crooked teeth, then lifted a glass clinking with ice to her pale orange lips. 'And where do you board, Jennifer?'

'I don't,' Jen said. 'I'm a day pupil in Hostert. The comprehensive.'

Kit's mother looked at her blankly, as though she'd never met a child who didn't board. Jen and her friends got bussed to the huge secondary, ten miles from them and even further from other camps. 'Really,' said Mrs Avery. It didn't sound like a question, so Jen didn't answer.

Mrs Avery went back to her nails and Jen turned to Kit, filling two tumblers. Behind them, his mum started singing a Dionne Warwick song: 'I Say a Little Prayer'. She had a nice voice; soft and a bit gravelly, like Dionne's. Jen thought she'd love to be just like Mrs Avery at thirty-eight, or whatever she was.

When a big woman in an apron came and asked Kit's mum to move so she could do 'ze cleaning', Mrs Avery slid from the worktop, swayed slightly on landing, and stood taller than Jen, and almost as tall as her son. Now they were side by side, the resemblance was amazing. Same deep blue eyes, same small nose and face shape. Kit's hair was blond too, but wavier. Like Kit, his mother had a big full-lipped smile, which she now aimed at the cleaner.

'Elke,' she said, 'my treasure of a batwoman.' She swung round to Jen and quickly lost the smile. 'Perhaps we should vacate. Do you play tennis? Kit's got a shocking backhand and I'm desperate to find an equal.'

'Jen played for her county when she was thirteen,' said Kit. 'I bet she'd thrash you, Mummy.'

Jen laughed, more at the 'Mummy' than the idea of beating this perfect, apart from the teeth, woman in front of her. 'Two summers ago,' she told them. 'I haven't played much since.'

That wasn't exactly true, although there'd been no more tournaments.

'Super!' said Mrs Avery, who didn't seem to be listening. 'I'll book us a court.' She wandered off with her glass, like a tall, graceful model at a cocktail party.

Jen wondered if Mrs Avery knew she was a sergeant's daughter, and if she'd still want to play tennis if she did. What a whole other world it was in the officers' patch. Dubonnet in the afternoon, a batwoman.

'Want to listen to records?' Kit asked quietly. 'In my room?'

'Oh,' Jen said, not expecting that. 'OK.'

Because his dad was a wing commander their house was huge. They passed a dining room, a lounge with French windows, a cloakroom, then went up a wide staircase and along a landing. Paintings and sketches and family photos hung everywhere, and Jen wanted to stop and look closely, especially at the old photos. But Kit was in a hurry. She counted four bedrooms, wondering if his brother was in one, before being led up another staircase to an attic room.

It was nothing like the lofts Jen had peered into with her dad; dark and dusty, and somewhere you shoved old stuff. Here, there were windows and carpet. The walls were covered in posters – something she wasn't allowed because Sellotape pulled the paint off and you had to pay for damage when you moved. Maybe officers didn't get fined, or didn't mind paying.

'Welcome to my humble pad,' Kit said. 'What shall we listen to?'

'I don't mind.'

'Hendrix?' He slipped a record out of its sleeve and held it between palms, then blew dust off, put it on the turntable, lined

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up the needle and lifted a lever. When the music struck up, he played an invisible guitar for a while, before coming and putting his arms around her. 'Did you see him at the Monterey Pop Festival?'

'No, I've been in Germ—'

'It's a film, silly. Jimi was mind-blowing.'

'Oh.' How stupid she must seem, but he kissed her anyway, all through 'Foxy Lady'. Then he lowered her to the carpet, where they continued through song after song until side one finished.

'More Tizer?' he asked in the silence.

'If you're having some.'

While he was gone, Jen inspected herself in an orangey-wood air-force mirror, the only thing their bedrooms had in common. Her mouth was swollen and she prayed it would go down before she got home. Lifting her long brown hair, she saw the first signs of a love bite. Toothpaste would help, according to Christine. The expert.

All the while, she heard distant voices. Kit and his mother? Was she telling him off for taking a girl to his room? But Mrs Avery – Eleanor – seemed such an easy-going parent. Offering her alcohol. Maybe Kit would come back with a bottle of something, get her tiddy and try and take advantage. Hopefully not.

Jen settled on the carpet again, head propped on one hand. She'd only known Kit six days and wanted to look her best and capture his heart before he met the camp's sexpot, Sonia Durrell, currently on holiday. Kit and his friend Lawrence had wandered into the youth club last week, making all the girls stop what they'd been doing and stare like idiots. Jen and Christine, anyway. The new boys were tall, skinny and equally gorgeous: one quite blond, the other much darker. The blond was in velvety flares

and a faded collarless shirt, while the dark one wore beads and, on his feet, beneath the frayed jeans, Jesus sandals. For a while they leaned against a wall and looked around, their hands squeezed into the pockets of their tight, tight trousers.

‘Quick, let’s dance,’ Christine had said, and when the next record started, the boys strolled over and joined them without saying anything, the fair-haired one opposite Jen. Christine’s couldn’t dance, but Jen’s did amazing intricate arm weaving and seemed to go into a trance. She couldn’t take her eyes off him, and neither could the boys playing billiards, all smirking like the yobs they were. By the end of the song, she was in love.

‘Perhaps I should introduce myself,’ her partner said, while they stood there, Jen not sure what to do. ‘Kit Avery.’

‘Jen,’ she said. He was gazing into her eyes and she liked it and didn’t like it at the same time.

‘Would you do me the honour of another?’

She laughed and wondered why he was talking like Mr Knightley from *Emma*, which they’d done last term. She expected him to bow and kiss her hand, but then The Doors came on and he turned back into a hippie.

Kit was taking so long that her arm began to ache, so she sat up, reached for an LP and read about Buffalo Springfield. When he finally returned, he didn’t sit down beside her, but on a nearby chair, and he didn’t put another record on.

‘The Tizer’s all gone,’ he said, his voice quiet and flat. ‘Sorry.’ Kit checked his watch, as though he’d been given so long to get her out of the house.

‘Is your mum cross that you brought a girl to your room?’

He shook his head. ‘No, it’s . . . not that.’

‘Oh,’ Jen said, guessing what had happened but not daring

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to ask. She suddenly felt quite terrible, and also silly, sitting on the floor, while he was on a chair. 'I should go, or I'll be late for tea,' she said, standing and realising her error. She should have said 'dinner' or 'supper'.

'I'll walk you home.'

Jen told him not to bother but he insisted. At the bottom of the stairs, he steered her through the front door.

On the way, she was miserable and quiet, while Kit rattled on about his school friends, Magnus and Rick – more people who'd disapprove of her – and about his younger brother, Pip, who got 'tremendously homesick' boarding. When they'd gone through the officers' married quarters, along the road that divided the officers' and airmen's patches, then across the playing field, and were as close to her house as she'd allow, Kit asked when he'd see her again.

'But I thought—'

'Look . . .'

He stepped forward and pulled her towards him. 'I really like you, and I don't think we should let this ridiculous, antiquated hierarchy force us apart. I'm a Marxist myself. Did I tell you?'

'I don't think so.' She had no idea what he was talking about.

'I love my ma, but she does rather speak her mind, especially when she's blotto. She had Susie, the CO's daughter, lined up for me, you see. Anyway, Daddy's not like her. He's egalitarian and I know he'll adore you.'

'Oh?' Jen felt warm and unsettled at the same time. She'd never seen or heard of Susie, but she hated her. There was only one commanding officer, or group captain or station commander, as he was also known. The boss of the camp. Up one rank from Kit's father and a million miles from Jen's.

'Tomorrow?' asked Kit. 'Outside the youth club at two? We could go for a walk, exploring.'

Jen wondered what there was to find, apart from acres and acres of airfield. Unless he meant exploring off camp. 'All right,' she said, and then he leaned them both against a lamppost and gave her a long last kiss.

They were watching telly, boiled eggs on laps. The two blonds – her mum and little Paul – were on the settee. Her much darker and much fatter father was in his chair, wearing a string vest and smoking while he ate. How small the room looked after Kit's house.

'Yours is in the pan, love,' said her mum. 'You'll need to cut your soldiers.'

'Thanks.'

Jen went straight to the sideboard and rummaged through the compendiums of games and Spirograph and Operation for the dictionary. Things were never allowed to be left lying around, not even books. Not that there were many of those. Her mum ordered the *People's Friend* from the Naafi and her dad didn't read.

In Kit's house there were packed bookshelves everywhere, even on the landing. In fact, there'd been loads of stuff just left here and there: racquets and balls, golf clubs, shoes, bags, clothes. Maybe the batwoman dealt with it all. Jen would never find out, not now she'd been barred.

It took a while to find 'hierarchy' because of the spelling. Yes, that was what she thought it meant. Best to be sure, and not start using words wrongly when she was with Kit. 'Here, Kitty, Kitty,' kept running through her head and Jen wondered why the Averys had given him a cat's name. Strangely, though, it suited him. Lovely Kit. She remembered their kissing and got butterflies, then saw Mrs Avery with her crooked teeth and her stomach lurched in a different way.

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Jen flicked through to M, but didn't find 'marksist', and she couldn't remember the other word he'd used about his dad. Elegant? Gallant? She sighed and put the book back. The worst thing about going out with Kit would be feeling dim.

'Fetch your egg,' said her mum, 'or it'll be like concrete.'

In the kitchen, Jen tried to imagine Kit's mother boiling an egg or making toast soldiers for him and his brother. But all she could see was Mrs Avery pouring them cheap Dubonnet. Cheap, because all alcohol was cheap on camp. Cigarettes were cheap too, which might be why her dad was a walking chimney. Not that he walked much.

Jen carried her tea through and told Paul to budge up, then squeezed in between him and her mother. The toast was cold and hard, and yes, the egg, when she sliced the top off, was like concrete. But she didn't care, didn't think she could eat anyway. Love did that to you.

Another mad Dutch game show was on, fuzzy and flickering because the aerial wasn't right. RAF Weisfelt was near the border, so they picked up both Dutch and German stations. In Holland they showed English-speaking programmes, like *Coronation Street*, with Dutch subtitles. They also went in for slapstick, which Paul, being eight, loved.

Jen wondered if they were allowed to watch telly at Kit's school, or if they had to do Latin and stuff instead. Kit detested Latin. She told him she hated domestic science, and he said he'd swap any time. She leaned back and closed her eyes and thought about the kissing again. Real kissing, not like when she'd gone out with Dean, and he hadn't moved, so she hadn't either.

'What's that on your neck?' her dad was asking, and Jen jolted

forwards. He dropped the stub in his ashtray on a stand, pushed the knob that made it disappear and leaned across Paul for a better look.

Jen let her hair fall forward and gave her neck a scratch. 'Just a gnat bite.'

'You want a dab of Germolene on it,' said her mum, reaching for the knitting she always had on the go.

'Gnat bite, eh?' said her father. He always sounded more Scottish when he was cross. 'More like a toffee-nosed, public-schoolboy, Winco's son bite, if you ask me.' He broke into his horrible cough, then stopped and took in some air, his tummy stretching the string when he breathed out again. 'Don't think you haven't been seen, young lady. Of all the officers, you had to pick the one commanding Supply Squadron. In other words, ma bleedin' boss.'

'Do you *mind*?' Paul was moaning. 'I'm trying to watch this.'

'Less of your lip,' said her dad, rearing back and slapping his bare leg.

Poor Paul. You never knew, with their father, whether he'd laugh or fly off the handle. All eyes turned to the telly, where a blindfolded man balanced a bucket on his head. A woman was shouting in Dutch and the audience was hysterical. Beside Jen, the needles began clicking a little too furiously, and her brother was quietly sniffing, a hand on his red thigh. Her dad took another Senior Service from the packet and tapped it on his wooden armrest.

'What's for pud, then?' he asked.

'Bird's Angel Delight,' said her mum, her voice with that wobble. 'Jen'll fetch it when she's finished. Won't you, love?'

'Yeah,' she said, staring miserably at the bucket man. She

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and Kit were doomed. She wasn't good enough for his house and he was too good for hers. She looked down at her lumpy egg and felt both sick and in love. But maybe they always went together.