

The More You Ignore Me

Jo Brand

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JO BRAND



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Chapter 1

1966–9

As a child growing up in a tiny Herefordshire village, Alice had five personalities. These personalities were not buried in her subconscious, appearing randomly during explosions of emotional stress, they were fashioned and refined by her as a response to the circumstances in which she found herself. They functioned as an aid to her emotional survival in a family landscape which was harsh, absurd, histrionic, druggy and unpredictable.

That's not to say that Alice was growing up in an environment devoid of love and care. Love and care were the intention. They just weren't the result most of the time. This may have been because the eye of the frequent emotional storms, her mother Gina, was an

unconventional parent whose child-rearing methods were controlled not so much by her experience and instinct as by her mental state. So she might praise Alice for the sodden mess of paint-soaked tissue with which she had attempted to decorate the kitchen, or she might emit a fearful howling noise and cower in the corner as if she had been stabbed. Either of these was preferable to her wild temper which, when lost, was not found for what seemed like hours. China would be smashed, animals kicked, doors acquired gaping wounds and Alice and her father Keith had either to leave the area or barricade themselves in the bathroom.

When Alice was very small, her dad always tried to downplay the situation by turning it into a fantasy of sorts. Alice wasn't fooled by these games, though. For her, the big bad monster wasn't green and hiding under the bed, it wore tasteless floral prints, bright scarlet lipstick and sat in the kitchen smoking and saying 'bollocks' a lot.

Instinct encouraged Alice to attempt to fade into the surrounding domestic background on these occasions of temper or out-and-out madness and it was because of this that to her family she appeared secretive, apathetic and surly, even though, underneath, she was happy, loved fairies and kittens and wanted to be a vet when she grew up.

Had her mother realised quite what a normal little

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girl was flourishing underneath the miserable alabaster façade, she would have been extremely disappointed. Gina had always assumed that any child of hers would receive her idiosyncratic genes and translate them into something unearthly and unique. Alice's constitution seemed to have dealt with her mother's genes by suppressing and then ejecting them in favour of her father Keith's. So, despite the madness in which she existed, underneath lay a fairly well-balanced, unremarkable little girl who rarely showed her true colours at home for fear of Gina noticing and washing them away.

Gina was one of those anomalies occasionally thrown up by the gene pool. She came from a family of country labourers named, very appropriately, Wildgoose – they were as aggressive and uncontrolled as geese – and turned out to be extremely bright. By the age of eleven she began to suffer enormous embarrassment as she realised she was leaving her family behind on every conceivable level of social and intellectual achievement. Her father turning up to meet her from school in corduroys stained with cow's piss, her mother taking her shopping with the straps of her enormous bra flapping on her forearms, her two brothers fighting everyone they came into contact with under the age of fifteen who was not in a wheelchair – all of this heightened and basted Gina's feelings of embarrassment into an

angry shame. University was not an option for Gina, not because she wasn't bright enough but because, to her family, it was as alien a place as the moon. Eventually Gina came to the conclusion that the only way she would lift herself out of her gloomy future would be to find someone to marry who didn't have hands the size of shoeboxes and the social graces of a rutting boar. Gina's unconventional looks dictated that she could not pin down a potential husband simply by fluttering her stubby eyelashes or laughing as genuinely as she could at a wealthy man's jokes, so she began to stalk the farmyards and towns of Herefordshire. By her mid-teens this had become a full-time occupation, much to the disdain of her parents and her feral brothers nicknamed Wobbly and Bighead, but it was a pursuit made much easier by the advance of what came to be known as the swinging sixties.

Eventually Gina came across Keith, a rare bird in the Welsh Marches because he read books and loved nature. Anyone who has grown up in the country soon comes to realise that those who make their living from the land tend not to romanticise their brutal lives and so Keith, basking in the sun on a verge reading Wordsworth and appreciating the call of the curlew, was unlikely to be from around those parts. Gina liked the look of Keith's long hair, his humorous face and his long fingers capped with nails which were clean and trimmed, not

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cracked and gnarled like the talons of a troll. Keith liked Gina's breasts, the mad look in her eyes and her forwardness, which seemed to promise him disturbing sex in a hedge.

Their first encounter, noted by Gina in her diary, lasted thirteen minutes, during which time she found out that he came from a suburban estate in Wolverhampton, he was an only child and he had gone to agricultural college, much to the despair of his parents, Jennifer and Norman, who had wanted him to be a surveyor.

Gina knew her power lay in the rationing of her body for the pleasure of men, coupled with her sharp wit, and she had decided her strategy for capturing a partner would consist of these two weapons. It didn't occur to her that just because Keith was the only man she had met who seemed sensitive and educated, there weren't thousands more like him out there with bigger wallets she could have. No, he felt like her one opportunity to escape and therefore she knew she must cling on as tightly as she could, whilst appearing as nonchalant as an heiress, in order to buy her ticket out of purgatory. She was seized with a mixture of love, lust and pragmatic planning and her intelligence was put to work compiling a graded list of encounters which would drive Keith to distraction and assure his commitment to her.

Meeting her family lay at the end of this project

because she realised, quite correctly, that however much someone loved her, her cartoon family would inevitably weaken that love, possibly to the point of extinction. So, as the months of their relationship passed, she held herself aloof sexually, meting out just enough physical contact to keep Keith going, fuelling the flames of his fantasies, and denying access to the rest of the Wildgoose family, despite repeated requests.

Keith had no such qualms about introducing Gina to his parents, although he should have had, and within a year of their relationship beginning, an invitation to tea was reluctantly extended by Jennifer, whose reaction to her son's description of his new love was a lot of shuddering and shaking of her head.

Keith and Gina's relationship had become one of snatched meetings in strange places to ensure her family did not get to know about him. She never took him home and they could not go into the local pubs because she would have been recognised and either thrown out or asked to elucidate on her relationship with this stick-thin, pleasant-looking hippy. So instead, Keith in his battered Ford van with the customary sacking in the back and Gina on her bicycle would make their separate ways to the high points of Shropshire and Herefordshire. At Bury Ditches they would sit holding hands, windblown and cold as they surveyed the countryside from the Black Mountains to the Long Mynd; or they would race round

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the battlements of Clun Castle, laughing and falling over in the long grass; or stand by Hopton Castle, oppressed by the atmosphere, both temporarily transported back to the Civil War and the shocking history of the slaughter that took place there. Keith rather uncharacteristically hoped Gina would get so upset he could have sex with her. In fact, each time they met, Keith thought they were going to have sex and each time they didn't, it had the required effect: a growing desperation which was not eased by beer or masturbation. Gina had him exactly where she wanted him.

Then they went to tea with Jennifer and Norman.

For Jennifer, a big week was one in which she bought a Mr Kipling's Battenberg cake and served it on a silvered cake plate with a cake slice. She constantly attempted to refine her husband's utterances and behaviour on these occasions as Norman was prone to farting loudly and saying things like, 'Better out than in,' oblivious of the presence of guests.

But when Gina Wildgoose turned up for tea, Jennifer realised that Norman was a veritable aristocrat in comparison to this country bumpkin, however bright she may have been.

Jennifer's *raison d'être* immediately became the prevention of her son's marriage into the Wildgoose clan, which only served to increase Gina, Keith and Norman's determination that it should happen.

The teatime debacle that took place in Jennifer's pristine home with its beige Dralon furniture and the routinely twitched net curtains was something akin to a badly performed West End farce in which people forgot their lines, began to laugh or fell over.

When Keith and Gina arrived, Jennifer was sitting in the front room toying with her freshly laid and polished hostess trolley, hoping against hope that the front door would open to reveal, attached to Keith's arm, a smartly dressed fresh-faced graduate with a talent for modesty and deference, and child-bearing hips.

The child-bearing hips arrived satisfactorily, but above them sat a wild-haired temptress who appeared slightly grubby and out of the pages of one of those dreadful magazines Jennifer occasionally found in Keith's toolbox or bedside cabinet, which revealed a series of catalogue model types dressed in very little, breasts primed and pointing straight at the camera, and on the odd, truly shocking occasion – for Jennifer at least – legs wide open and what she called their 'foo-foos' on show to all. To Jennifer, Gina looked like a porn queen.

Norman, who had been instructed to turn off *Grandstand*, his favourite sports programme and sanctuary from Jennifer's constant monologue on his shortcomings, felt an unmistakable stirring in his loins and a wave of pure jealousy at his son's good fortune.

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The hostess trolley groaned with a traditional suburban tea of egg and cress sandwiches, a salad consisting of the truly banal trio of lettuce, cucumber and tomato, and of course the Battenberg cake.

Despite Gina's appearance, she had made what she considered to be a gargantuan effort for Keith, who had begged her to bury her cleavage and watch her language. She was clad in a green nylon cardigan, tweed skirt and some shoes she had bought at the local jumble sale for a pound, which were too high for her and caused her gait to become a totter, resulting in her moving into the lounge like a cutprice geisha with Parkinson's disease. As she swayed forward to shake Norman and Jennifer by the hand, a fixed, determined gurn on her face, the heel of one of her shoes gave way, propelling her forward at quite some speed and depositing her on top of the hostess trolley which collapsed under her weight and sent her sprawling to the ground on top of it, her skirt flying up to reveal stocking tops and no knickers, a state which she had planned to employ in the van later to make Keith implode. The final nail in the coffin of Jennifer's support for Keith's union was Gina's response to this accident. She turned and said, 'Oh fuck, oh shit, sorry, Keith, oh bollocks, sorry Mr and Mrs Wilson.'

'They think it's all over . . . it is now,' said Norman to himself quietly.

As most adults of a certain class and age would in this situation, Jennifer and Norman tried to pretend nothing had happened, but it had destroyed their suburban idyll and the visit was curtailed almost immediately.

Keith sat, mortified, in the van, running the incident over and over again in his head. The closing scene of the horrified face of his mother and the slightly horrified (combined with more than slightly aroused) face of his father refused to subside, and he wondered to himself why a serially unremarkable person such as himself should have fallen in love with an uncontrolled, mobile wrecking machine such as Gina.

But Keith was remarkable. He was intelligent, humorous, kind, altruistic, warm and very funny and these qualities together, unsullied by any negative accompaniments, were rare in most men as they often came with the initially hidden price of moodiness, drunkenness and laziness to puncture the woman's joy at having found the man of her dreams.

Within a few days, however, Keith found that the image of Gina's disgrace in his parents' front room, which had initially gnawed at his entrails ceaselessly, had faded completely and he and Gina continued their courtship, with Gina safe in the knowledge that the blip that had occurred in Wolverhampton had not ruined her chances of snaring Keith. Paradoxically, it had the

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opposite effect and it gave Keith more impetus in his journey away from his parents towards independence and Gina.

Gina realised a proposal was close. If it was possible, Keith was more attentive, more dreamy-eyed and more sexually charged than ever. And so it happened that one day, as they lay squinting at the late-afternoon sun in a field very close to the Welsh border, looking up at a hill where King Caractacus was rumoured to have fought his final battle, the much-awaited moment arrived. Despite appearances, Keith was uncomfortable. Gina's head lay on his arm, which had gone to sleep; she looked so peaceful, he couldn't bear to disturb her but he had to do something to shift his paralysed arm from under her big, heavy head.

'Do you want to get married?' he said almost inaudibly, so that Gina, with her eyes closed, listening to the breeze, thought it was an auditory hallucination.

'What did you say?' she said.

'Nothing,' said Keith.

Gina quickly became agitated. She was sure she had heard a proposal but didn't know if it was bad form to ask him to repeat it. Would he be offended that she'd missed the proposal? Even worse, what if he hadn't proposed and she started to badger him, insisting he had? She heard a low chuckling and looked across at Keith who seemed highly entertained by her pain.

'You fucking bastard,' she said. 'You did propose.'

'I'm afraid you're too late,' said Keith. 'You should have answered straight away.'

'So what does that mean?' said Gina.

'Well, you'll have to wait and see if I ask again,' said Keith, 'and pay attention next time.'

Gina felt tears pricking at her eyes.

'Keith . . .' she said falteringly.

Keith was smiling broadly. 'You silly bag,' he said. 'What's your answer?'

And that was probably the last time Keith had the upper hand in their relationship.

Their wedding took place in a small chapel in a neighbouring village, although the minister took some persuading before he let the Wildgoose family across the threshold of his territory; long hours spent asking God if it was all right to hate an entire family produced little encouragement.

There had been a serious threat to Keith and Gina's relationship arising from Keith's introduction to the Wildgoose family. But this mountain had been climbed and everyone had safely coasted down the other side. An uneasy camaraderie existed between Keith and Gina's brothers Wobbly and Bighead but Jennifer and Norman kept their distance during and after the wedding for fear of some breach in social etiquette that

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would force them to cut the lines of communication completely. Keith was terrified of his mother-in-law-to-be and found himself taking seriously the idea that one's wife's mother is what one's wife will become eventually. This horrifying reverie overtook him during the ceremony and when the kindly elderly minister asked Keith if he took 'this woman', his mouth formed the word, 'No.'

Something akin to snarling emanated from the back of the chapel and Keith, waking from his strange de-personalised state, realised what he had said and quickly converted the 'no' into a 'yes'.

The reception in the village hall was a rather subdued affair because the legendary stag night the previous evening in Hereford had left the major players in the drama virtually blinded by hangovers. Keith, knowing that vast amounts of alcohol would be poured down his throat before some kind of rustic humiliation was visited upon him, had attempted to water down or spit out his drinks during the evening, thus ensuring that when he was finally dragged into a fight and then tied naked and protesting to the back of a milk float, the suffering was doubled by his relative sobriety.

Still, he and Gina were happy at last and, with what many of the older relatives considered to be slightly bad-mannered haste, headed off for their honeymoon in Aberystwyth. The elderly relatives had little idea

just how unseemly the haste was; had they processed behind the couple in Keith's old van, decorated with a few old cans and some badly spelled obscenities, they would have seen the van swerve into the first field it encountered and within a very short time begin to rock to the accompanying sounds of Gina's shrieks and Keith's low, mournful whoops.

'And that was 'ow you came to be, littl'un,' Nan Wildgoose would often say to Alice as she sat her on her bony knee and talked her through the post-nuptial encounter.

'Mum, for Chrissakes,' Gina would say, even she baulking at the idea of a three-year-old being regaled with her parents' first sexual encounter in place of a bedtime story.

'Shall I tell 'er 'bout the stag night instead then?' asked Nan Wildgoose.

'Jesus,' said Gina, her eyes swivelling towards the ceiling.