

Having a Lovely Time

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Published by Time Warner

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Guy Jamieson is on his way home from work. His wife, Alice, thinks he uses public transport, getting off at the bus stop round the corner on the main road. He doesn't. Guy can't stand rush-hour buses; they smell of poor people, of sweat and despair.

Five minutes ago he got a black cab to drop him at the local off-licence, where he bought a bottle of blood-red Shiraz from a man behind a metal grille. A grey-furred Alsatian lurked in the corner, one eye gone milky.

I live in a dump, thinks Guy. There are bones on my street. They could be Kentucky cast-offs but they look like babies' knees, gristle and sinew. I am thirty-nine years old, I am a married man, I am a father.

The blue plastic bag twists round his wrist. He bought a litre bottle; the normal-sized ones are never enough. On the corner stands a girl of fifteen or so, an inhaler in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She is pregnant, with skinny arms, skinny legs and a Humpty-Dumpty belly. She shouts up at an open window, 'Come outside, Bernice, you slag.'

'Fuck off,' comes the reply.

Oh the joys of south London, Guy thinks, sidestepping a shiny orb of fresh phlegm. Gob, dog shit and up-the-duff schoolgirls.

As he crosses the road, his pride and joy Timothy Little lace-ups (£130 per shoe) crunch on ruby shards of broken tail-light. Nearly home.

Guy casts a critical eye over Number 3 Derrington Road, as if he were a prospective buyer viewing the property for the first time. Victorian, single bay, end of terrace, three bedrooms – four if you went up into the loft. It's nothing special – there are millions of them. His just happens to have a navy-blue front door.

The paintwork needs doing and the clematis is dead. Boredom washes through his veins and his head feels granite heavy. 'I can't be bothered. I don't want to live here any more.'

The gate is rusty and he almost has to lift it off its hinges to open it. Ten years ago he and Alice first walked up this path – Max in a buggy, Alice fretting about being late, the tell-tale pink nerve rash creeping like poison ivy above her collar. 'The estate agent said eleven. It's ten past, Guy.'

She could have saved her breath. The estate agent wasn't there. What with this being a Saturday morning in 1994 he was under the duvet worrying about possible Ecstasy-induced brain damage.

We were so young, reflects Guy. I had optimism and Alice had fluffy golden curls and smooth freckled cheeks. These days, grey frizzes through her hair and her cheeks have become jowls. A reel of old memories plays pictures in his head: he and Alice standing on the threshold of their future. 'Well, go on then,' Alice had urged, 'ring the bell.'

A woman had answered the door in a towelling dressing gown. 'Oh,' she muttered, 'I suppose you've come to have a sniff around the place, have you? Come in, I'm not going to apologise about the mess because to be quite honest I couldn't give a flying fuck.'

Alice gave a small cough, scratched her neck and nodded her head at Max as if to say: Actually, we don't swear in front of our child.

The woman gave Max a cursory glance. 'Boy, is it? You poor cow. I've two of them and a girl, more fool me.'

The hall was full of packing cases; a guitar with its strings adrift poked out of one of them. The three of them did an awkward dance around the boxes.

'I'm Alice,' tittered Alice, as if her name was a really good punchline. 'This is Guy, my husband,' she added, her wedding band still shiny and new, 'and this little fellow is Max.'

'I'm Sonia.' The woman threw her name over her shoulder. 'Coffee?'

'That would be lovely, thank you,' replied Alice, and they followed the woman down a narrow corridor.

The entire kitchen seemed to be hanging off its hinges. All the cupboard doors were open and a packet of rice had erupted over the floor. They ground their way in. 'Kitchen, obviously,' sneered Sonia. 'French windows.'

There was a crack in the left-hand pane of glass; beyond the grimy windows, a garden drooped listlessly.

A baby sat in a high chair with what looked like a badly cut face. 'Bloody hell, Hugo,' the woman snapped, picking a filthy rag out of the sink and wiping the child's jam-smears. She chucked the rag back into the sink, opened the fridge and sniffed a pint of milk. 'Have to be black, unless I can tempt you to anything stronger.' She laughed but her eyes filled with tears. 'Sorry.'

A girl with matted hair sidled through the door. Alice guessed she might be about eight. She was still in her nightie. Pouring herself a bowl of cereal, she got a spoon out of a drawer and walked off.

'Verity's eight,' explained Sonia. 'I've a thirteen-year-old goes by the name of Harry, and this one, the mistake, is Hugo.'

'Hello,' said Alice, who prided herself at being good with children now that she had one of her own. Hugo arched backwards in the chair. 'I think you've missed a bit of jam on his cheek,' ventured Alice. One side of the baby's face was still dark red.

'It's a birthmark,' snapped Sonia, sitting down. Guy suddenly realised she was naked under the robe. If she leant a little more to the left he might catch a glimpse of nipple. Suddenly the woman hauled herself up. 'Oh just help yourselves. I've a shitty headache, I'm going back to bed.' And with that she exited, leaving the baby with his mouth open and a battery in his hand. Quick as a flash Alice removed the Duracell AAA from Hugo's soggy fist.

'He could have swallowed it,' she gasped.

When Alice had been in the top class at primary school all the children had been given photocopied black-and-white pictures of a kitchen to colour in. Once they had done this (without going over the lines), they were meant to circle a number of health and safety hazards featured in the picture. A pan (with its handle turned out), a sharp knife (not put safely away in a drawer), a bottle of bleach (lid off), a toaster (with a frayed flex), a box of matches that should have been 'out of reach of children'. Eleven-year-old Alice had dutifully drawn big red rings around all the danger zones. She always was a sensible girl.

Once upon a time, Guy had needed this. Alice was his port in a storm, a metaphorical Rennie of a woman who had calmed his queasy heart. She could drive, assemble a flatpack of IKEA shelves, sort the bills, dress a wound, use a compass. Alice could do anything, apart from make pastry.

Rather than leave Max in ‘this death trap of a kitchen’, Alice lifted him from the buggy and, making sure that Sonia’s cigarettes and lighter were out of ‘poor little Hugo’s’ reach, the three of them tiptoed through the house.

‘It’s within our budget,’ murmured Guy. There was a half-eaten Chinese takeaway on the sitting-room floor alongside an empty bottle of wine and a full ashtray. ‘Hazarding a guess,’ he added, ‘I’d say divorce.’ Alice agreed. ‘Very sad,’ she tutted, hugging Max a bit more tightly.

Still, the rooms were a decent size and the original fireplaces were still in situ. They climbed the stairs. A couple of the banister rails were loose and there was scribble on the walls.

In the back bedroom Verity was playing with a pile of Barbies. They looked like they’d been in a motorway pile-up, naked and limbless. ‘Hello, darling,’ Alice said brightly. The girl ignored her. ‘Disturbed,’ whispered Alice. ‘Nice light room, mind,’ she added, a bit louder.

They peered into the bathroom next. ‘Lino needs replacing,’ said Guy, and Alice nodded: ‘So does the toilet roll.’

A quarter landing led up to another bedroom on the left. ‘Smells like teenager,’ ventured Guy. The curtains were shut and the walls were smothered in Heavy Metal posters sellotaped at odd angles right up to a purple ceiling.

‘Just a lick of paint, maybe a nice cheery yellow,’ Alice whispered, genuinely feeling sorry for this house, all scribbled on and smelly.

The master bedroom was at the front of the house. Sonia lay under limp sheets; on the table next to her lay another brimming ashtray, another packet of cigarettes, a jar of paracetamol and a bottle of Diet Coke. She pulled herself up on her elbows. The pillows behind her were grubby with make-up, smears of orange foundation, streaks of black mascara. ‘So what do you think?’

‘It’s really nice,’ replied Alice, a bit lamely.

‘Well, it’s got to go, now that the shit’s done a runner.’ Sonia lit a cigarette. ‘We were going to have an extension but his cuntiness has decided that he’d rather go and live with a twenty-seven-year-old Portuguese lap-dancer, arsehole! Seventeen years of marriage down the khashi. You never think it’s going to happen to you’ – Alice passed her the ashtray – ‘so here I am, forty, three kids and I’m going home to Mother. Fucking joke, that’s what it is.’

No one laughed. Alice noticed a dent in the wall. Sonia’s eyes followed hers: ‘Typewriter,’ she coughed. ‘Chucked it at his fucking head.’

Well really, thought Alice, there’s no need for ‘language’. She instinctively covered Max’s ears. He’d now heard more swearing in thirty minutes than he’d ever heard in his life. She backed out of the door. Guy followed her. A red lace bra got tangled on his shoe. ‘We’ll be in touch,’ he said. And they were.

The day the estate agent told them their offer had been accepted, Alice was so thrilled she bought a bottle of sparkling white wine and allowed Guy to have sex with her on the sofa during *Have I Got News for You*. Some months later they worked out that was the night Alice got pregnant again.

Hoorah, a new house and a new baby on the way! What’s more, the surveyor found a damp patch and managed to knock another £6,000 off the asking price! ‘How lucky we are,’ gloated Alice, rubbing her belly in glee. Poor old Sonia. Alice felt a good deal of pity for her. But surely she must have been partly to blame?

Ten years ago – a different decade, a different millennium, when Alice was still the right side of fat and bothered to wear her contact lenses. She has let herself go, thinks Guy sourly, and I haven’t. I am trim and well dressed; on a good day I look like Clark Kent. I have a good head of dark auburn hair and all my own teeth.

Guy feels oddly disconnected. He can feel his keys in his pocket: a Chubb and a Yale hang from a chunky silver ring (Conran), but rather than reach for them, he rings the bell. The words ‘Hi, honey, I’m home’

dance silently at the back of his brain. If he were to verbalise them, he has a horrible feeling he'd sound like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

Alice opens the door. She is carrying a bin-liner of old clothes. 'Oh, it's you. I thought you were from Cancer Relief. Have you lost your keys?'

'No.'

Guy follows his wife down the hall. She drops the bin-liner at the foot of the newel post; the hessian stair runner is frayed at the edges. Everything is worn out, thinks Guy, everything has come to the end of its life. He brushes past various anoraks and school blazers, sidesteps a rollerblade.

'Cup of tea?' puffs Alice. 'Di and I are just having a lemon and ginger.'

Guy has an almost uncontrollable urge to hide in the cupboard under the stairs. He swallows a groan. Di Clements – chief witch of the coven with her bulging, overactive thyroid eyes and her gruel-coloured clothes. He can see her over Alice's milkmaid-fat shoulder, thin as string. As Alice parks herself on to a chair, Guy realises that his wife and her friend look like Laurel and Hardy in drag.

'Hello, Guy.'

Di Clements is Welsh. So is Catherine Zeta Jones – it is the only thing they have in common. Catherine Zeta Jones has breasts that heave in red satin gowns; Di Clements has tits that droop down her chicken-bone ribcage. Guy knows this for a fact: he has seen them. She is forever flipping them out. Di Clements is still breastfeeding her three-year-old.

Guy surveys the kitchen. Subconsciously he is searching for the bottle opener. It could be anywhere – under today's *Guardian*, behind the bread-making machine. 'Jesus, Alice, it's a pigsty in here.'

Di bristles; she is of the feminist old-school brigade. Her husband Michael is very supportive. He teaches children with learning difficulties, plays the acoustic guitar and practises tai chi in the local park. He has a thick beard, obviously, and Guy loathes his guts. 'How's Michael?'

Alice shoots him a look. He did say 'Michael' and not 'that moronic arsehole', didn't he?

'His sinuses are playing up but apart from that he's fine,' sings Di. 'Anyway, Alice, must be off. Silas has got his cranial massage at the crack of dawn, so I need to wash his hair.' Silas Clements has behavioural problems. Di thinks this is because he had a tricky passage into the world; Guy thinks it's because Di and Michael are the poor little sod's parents.

Di exits looking like she's on her way to a dress-like-your-favourite-cereal party. She is half woman, half Weetabix. Alice sees her out.

Guy finds the bottle opener – it's in the drawer with the takeaway menus. Everything is in the wrong place, everything is spilling out. The washing machine gapes open, twisted laundry hanging from its mouth, Alice's vast knickers clinging to Guy's pyjama legs, the boys' T-shirts a strangled heap of navy and grey. What a mess, thinks Guy, what a fucking mess. It never used to be this bad.

Once upon a time he was proud of this house, determined to make something of it – a house, not a flat, with a garden and stairs, these bricks and mortar, his blood and sweat, a place to put down roots, grow plants, dig a pond, light a bonfire. Sometimes it seems to Guy that the house conspires against them: bright yellow paint turns to a dingy ochre, water refuses to go down plugholes, there is always a funny smell on the landing and, on top of everything, it seems to be shrinking.

When did it get so small? It's Alice's fault: she cannot throw anything away. Crap vies for space on every surface, the fridge is grubby with magnets, the corkboard thick with yellowing invites from people they never see any more. Alice marks her territory with avocado stones growing in margarine tubs, hideous clay pots made by nursery-school fingers, jars of home-made chutney gone grey with mould in the cupboard.

What does she do all day? It's not like she's off down the gym or shopping for new clothes – Alice is a domestic Buddha, fat and content, smelling of biscuits, happy to be at home.

The wine glass is smeared. Guy fills it with red liquid to the brim. Once upon a time he found his wife's presence comforting. Having a wife had been a bit like having a really good dog. But things have changed. Alice is still faithful; she's just not so eager to roll over and beg any more.

Alice reappears. She looks like a mother, thinks Guy. She looks like being a mother is her fulltime job.

The evidence speaks for itself. Alice's legs are unshaven, her skirt is merely some fabric attached round her waist, her shoes are brownish and she is wearing one of his old Aertex shirts – it used to be white but it went in with the coloureds.

Hello fat wife I no longer want to fuck, says the voice in Guy's head.

'Drinking already?' tuts Alice, sounding even more like a Sunday-school teacher than she intended, and as she clears the table she absent-mindedly picks up a piece of left-over breakfast toast, glazed scarlet with jam, and eats it. 'Damn.' She was only meant to nibble fruit between meals; a brown-spotted banana lies forlornly next to a mouldy plum in the wicker bowl on the table.

'Where are the boys?' Guy's mind is drifting. Alice says something but he's not listening, he's looking into the back garden at the plants he never bought and the pond he never dug. 'Someone could get drowned,' Alice had said, and somehow the years went by.

Everything is closing down around my ears – there's got to be more to life than this. And Guy thinks for the seventy-sixth time about the girl. The girl is called Peanut. Stupid name for a girl who looks neither dry roasted nor salty. Peony, yes, Petunia, hmmm, Persephone? 'Just call me Peanut,' she'd said. How old? Twenty-five, maybe younger. This makes Guy gulp. It is conceivable that there might be a bigger age gap between himself and Peanut than Peanut and his eldest son.

His glass is empty. He turns round. Alice has put the cork firmly back in the bottle, quite possibly the only bit of tidying she's done all day. As Guy pulls the cork out of the bottle's skinny green neck, a joke hiccups into his memory – how does it go? Something about a husband and wife sitting at the breakfast table. The husband says to his wife: 'I hate you, you've ruined my life.'

'Pardon?' says the wife.

'Sorry,' says the husband, 'I meant pass the sugar.'

Guy burps. Alice looks disappointed.

We're in a play, thinks Guy, some godawful play. Any moment now the phone will ring.

The phone rings.

Alice answers it. 'It's for you-hoo.' (She always says this.)

The receiver is greasy. 'Hi, Guy, it's Peanut, remember me?'

Remember her! He's already had a wank on her behalf!

'Ah yes, um, this afternoon – if I didn't remember you I'd have Alzheimer's,' jokes Guy. Oh God, maybe he shouldn't have said that, maybe her mother is in the grip of dementia . . . No, of course she won't be. Her mother is probably only in her forties and quite possibly a very attractive woman. 'How can I help?'

'I've got your diary – it's the same as mine. I must have put it in my bag by accident.'

Somebody once said 'there is no such thing as an accident'. Was it that Nietzsche bloke? While Guy ponders the source of the quote, Peanut says, 'Sorry,' in the silence.

'No worries, I'll pop by and pick it up tomorrow. You will be at work, won't you?'

'Sure, see you then.'

'Oh, listen, maybe I should take your mobile number just in case?'

Good thinking, Batman! Guy congratulates himself on his cunning.

The girl reels off a string of numbers and Guy shouts 'Pen, pen' at Alice's backside, as she picks the washing up off the floor. Suddenly Guy remembers he has a Mont Blanc in his pocket precisely for these occasions. He whips the lid off with his teeth and scribbles the number on the back of a gas bill, resisting

the temptation to draw a heart around the digits. I'm thirty-nine, I'm a married father of two, he reminds himself.

'See you.'

'Thanks, bye.'

Alice holds the washing in her arms. A pair of Sam's Harry Potter underpants escapes her grasp.

'Who was that?'

'A girl called Peanut,' replies Guy, blushing for the first time in years.

'What a stupid name.'

'I think I'll have a shower,' Guy mumbles, wishing not for the first time that Alice would agree to having a lock put on the bathroom door.

Alice picks her youngest son's knickers up off the grubby lino.

On reflection, it's already too late to put the clock back. Let's face it, it always is.