

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Lovereading will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Greatest Love Story of All Time

Written by Lucy Robinson

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Lovereading.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Greatest Love Story of All Time

LUCY ROBINSON



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2012

1

Copyright © Lucy Robinson, 2012

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in Garamond MT Std 13/15.25 pt

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

ISBN: 978-0-241-95298-6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

Prologue

My friends broke into my flat.

They stood scrutinizing me for a few seconds: Stefania, a vision in purple dungarees; Leonie in a massive fur coat with an inexplicable gin and tonic in one hand. Dave, wearing a patchy deerstalker, rolled a cigarette while my cat Duke Ellington sat next to them on the floor, watching me with open contempt.

Stefania spoke first. 'Ve have decided to hold Gin Thursday here at your house.'

'I love you, Franny,' said Leonie, taking a sip of her gin. 'But this has got to stop, darling. You stink.'

Dave merely laughed, shook his head and murmured, 'Fuckin' hell, Fran. We left Gin Thursday for *this*?'

Duke Ellington looked up at them as if to say, 'See? See what I've been up against?' He stood up and stalked delicately out of the room with his tail twitching. 'Whatever, Duke Ellington,' I muttered in his wake. He ignored me.

I looked up at my friends again and tried to organize my features into a calm, spiritual sort of expression. Something that said, 'Dudes! Sorry I couldn't answer the door! I was just too blissed out to

hear you knocking!’ *Please make them go away*, I prayed. *I just want to live like a feral animal. Please.*

‘Get out of bed,’ Stefania commanded, striding over to the window and opening my curtains. ‘You look like someseeng zat Duke Ellington has secked up in ze flowerbed.’

Not having seen daylight in some time I shot back under the covers, swearing. Dave muttered something about me being a nasty little ferret.

I wriggled further down my bed and fumed. What the hell did Dave know about heartbreak anyway? He lived with the most beautiful woman in London. How dare he judge me? The injustice of it! I balled myself up into a foetal position and waited for them to leave, vowing to stay in the warm fug of my bed for ever.

But it was not to be. The duvet was swept from above me, the interior of my bed was exposed and all hell broke loose. Stefania shrieked, ‘YOU DISGUSTEENG ANIMAL!’ Leonie downed the gin and tonic and Dave, who was well known in war zones for dodging enemy fire without so much as a raised eyebrow, dropped his half-assembled roll-up and covered his face with his hands.

The sight that had greeted them wasn’t nice. Even I could see that. A half-eaten tub of ice-cream had welded itself to the sheet and was growing fur. My pillowcases were rigid and peaked where I had let snot dry on them, and photos of Michael lay under

an abandoned piece of rock-hard Cheddar. A small bottle of Morrison's brandy was resting against my feet. Scattered everywhere were crumbs, crisps and knickers.

Stefania stormed out to the kitchen, shrieking over her shoulder, 'Zis place needs to be decontaminated! Get OUT OF BED!'

I didn't move.

Dave sat down at my dressing-table and stared at me, while Leonie climbed over to my bedside table and took my phone. 'Give it back,' I mumbled feebly. She ignored me and started pressing buttons.

'Give it *back*,' I said again.

'Oh, bloody hell, Fran, what have you been doing?' she asked, taking off her fur coat. She passed the phone to Dave, who looked at it and shook his head with a mixture of pity and amusement.

'Fran, you can't send him messages like this,' he said, trying not to smile. 'That's just . . . it's just fucking madness, love.' He started chuckling. Leonie retrieved the phone and recommenced fiddling.

'I'd like to know what you're finding so funny, Dave,' I said, pulling my hood up to keep the draught out.

'Fran, where would I even start? Oh, love, you're a fuckin' basket case sometimes. Have you been sending him messages like this every day?'

'I never *sent* them,' I mumbled, tears of shame welling. Why was Dave laughing at me when my life

was falling apart? Did he really believe I needed to feel any more stupid than I already did? ‘Stop it,’ I whispered. Tears fell off the side of my nose and into my crusty sheets. Leonie was still fiddling with my phone and Dave sat back and roared with laughter, oblivious to my breakdown.

But when I started to sob he stopped laughing and jumped up from the dressing-table, arms outstretched. ‘Oh, no, Fannybaws, I was just joking . . .’ My sobs upgraded to roars in anticipation of one of his big hairy-bear hugs.

But just as he reached down to scoop me up, Stefania re-entered the room and yelled, ‘**STAND BACK, DAVE! DO NOT TOUCH HER! SHE IS RADIOACTIVE!**’

Through my tears I saw her standing in my doorway wearing long rubber gloves and one of my anti-dust face masks. She had even found the plastic goggles the plumber had left under the sink a couple of years ago. In one hand she held a bottle of antibacterial spray, in the other, a bin bag.

Leonie came and sat on my bed, ignoring Stefania. She took one of my grubby hands in hers. ‘Now listen here, Franny darling. We’ve come because we care about you. We want you to be happy, and that’s not going to happen if you’re drafting crazed messages to Michael and rotting in bed.’

I gulped and sniffed but the crying wouldn’t stop. *Happy?* Were they mad? My life was over. In thirty

years I had never felt more lonely and hopeless. How in the name of God was I going to achieve happiness without Michael? Dave sat down and stroked my greasy hair with one of his great big paws.

‘I just want my boy back,’ I cried.

Leonie squeezed my hand. ‘I know, darling. I know. And that might just happen!’

I howled.

‘Franny! Come on. It’s not like he’s said he never wants to see you again, he’s just asked for three months apart. It’s ninety days, Franny! You can get through ninety days, can’t you?’

I shook my head hard. I most certainly could not. Every part of me was in pain.

‘Well, from the sounds of it you don’t have any choice. But I can tell you right now, Franny, he’s not going to take you back if you die of malnutrition in your bed.’

More sobs, with snot this time.

Leonie sighed, then ploughed on: ‘So we’ve come up with a plan for you, Franny. A plan to help you get better. It’s a sort of dating rehab. And if at the end of it you still want to fight for Michael, you’ll be ready. We’ll even help you. OK?’

I made a snotty noise. Dave smiled and continued to stroke my hair. Stefania stood in the doorway, looking like a pest exterminator. Leonie gazed down at me in an uncharacteristically kindly fashion and squeezed my hand again.

I nodded. I'd do anything it took to stop feeling like this.

'Great. Good girl! We'll have you better in no time! Here's the plan . . .' Leonie began.

Chapter One

February 2008: two years earlier

I'd always wanted to be a journalist. In reception class at primary school, while all of the other children told Mrs Grattan that they wanted to be a fireman, a princess or a singer, I had announced coolly that I wanted to travel to war zones and do brave things on the telly. In retrospect I can see why Mrs Grattan told Mum and Dad at parents' evening that she found me a precocious arse.

It had been a little disappointing when the only job I'd been able to get after my broadcast journalism master's was a position as general gimp to the rugby union team at Sky News. For three years I spent every Saturday hunched in the corner of a broadcast truck parked up outside the nation's rugby stadiums, transmitting live scores while the boys talked about anal.

After a particularly sordid Saturday in 2005, during which I was asked to judge a Largest Bollock competition during the Wales v. Ireland decider, I resigned and managed, against all odds, to get a job as a general gimp on the six thirty p.m. news at ITN. (I strongly suspect that I got it because Stella Sanderson, the senior

specialist producer who was responsible for hiring me, had also begun her career judging testicles for the Sky rugby team. ‘Is there still quite a strong crotch theme in those broadcast trucks?’ she asked in my interview. I went red and talked about my overwhelming passion for current affairs. She nodded sympathetically and scribbled in the margin of my CV.)

I was twenty-five when I finally got my break; the age when my friends were beginning to settle down and do grown-up things like having relationships and getting pregnant. I started a wild and passionate affair with my career and moved into a strange little converted car mechanic’s garage in a backstreet off Camden Road. It was affordable only because the conversion – involving ceilings that sloped down to the floor – had been designed solely with dwarfs in mind. But it had an *actual* wet room and a big yard where Duke Ellington could terrorize the local mice and birds, so I took it on the spot and convinced myself that Big Things were coming my way.

My job was on the entertainment and culture desk, trailing around London in the wake of our correspondent; carrying his discarded Starbucks cups and broken tripods. Occasionally I’d look after studio guests, and Pierce Brosnan once complained that my hospitality had had a lot in common with sexual harassment.

It was pretty unglamorous stuff in spite of what Leonie and my mother believed: as often as not, I’d

spend shoots on bag-watch duty down a smelly alleyway with a coterie of crack addicts. But I loved my job and I gave it everything. It made me feel alive, challenged and useful. I entertained fantastical notions of one day being a foreign correspondent wearing linen trousers in a dusty land far away and in the meantime I plugged away merrily on cuts in arts budgets and the odd celebrity scandal.

Soon after starting I struck up a friendship with a cameraman called Dave Brennan. He was a big scruffy bear of a man who had been born with a camera in one hand and a roll-up in the other. He was renowned for his strange tastes: once I found him sitting in his van eating jellied eels and singing along loudly to soft rock; another time he turned up to a shoot at Buckingham Palace wearing a jumper that was covered with mating gnomes.

Dave was Glaswegian, tough as fuck, and had just transferred to domestic news after a long stint in Iraq. In spite of losing one of his fingers to a piece of flying shrapnel and being holed up in a besieged town for ten days without food, he hadn't wanted to come home; he'd only done so because his girlfriend had threatened to further dismember him if he didn't. I'd never quite worked out how old Dave was because of his sun-abused face and poor control of facial hair, but I suspected he was in the late-thirties bracket. Regardless, at ITN he was a legend, the best and bravest cameraman we had and generally believed to

be the wisest man in the world. Given the rather different nature of our news desks, I got to work with him only rarely but when I did I always sensed I was in the presence of a genius – a slightly hairy, unpredictable genius, but a genius all the same.

Dave and I bonded when he found me necking sausage and mash in a pub near work because I was too embarrassed to do so in front of my slim, tough, salad-eating colleagues. He had retreated to the same pub to down a pint of Stella after a particularly harrowing day at a murder scene. ‘Well, well, well. Another outcast. Welcome to my team of one,’ he said.

I blushed, mortified, while Dave got to work on his pint, drinking it like Ribena and finishing with a long, mellow belch. ‘Sorry. That came out wrong. It’s just nice to see someone round here who’s a little . . . a little less *corporate*,’ he said, and belched again. I smiled bashfully, feeling slightly less stupid.

Most weeks, unless he was in trouble with his girlfriend, Dave would join Leonie and me on Gin Thursdays, an institution the two of us had founded at the tender age of fifteen. The general rule for a Gin Thursday was to get drunk on gin on Thursday. We weren’t a complex organization. Ten years on, Gin Thursdays took place at the Three Kings in Clerkenwell, not too far from work. As per our remit, we would drink a lot of gin (Dave added it to his Guinness) and as a general rule Leonie would cop off with a hot lawyer while Dave tried to encourage me to do

the same. I always refused. 'I'm after something a little more special than a one-night stand with a man in a pin-stripe suit,' I had announced airily, a few months after we'd met.

'Rubbish,' Dave had replied. 'You're just shite at pulling, aren't you?'

'Yes,' I said meekly.

He smiled and ruffled my hair. 'Aye, I thought as much. Never mind. I'm sure some little scamp will whisk you off your feet soon,' he said kindly.

'Unbloody likely. Last time I tried to pull someone in here I pelvic-thrusted a Greek Cypriot and then asked him to take me home and feed me halloumi.' Dave roared with laughter. 'Oh, Fannybaws,' he said. 'You wee disaster!'

The only time I didn't really enjoy Dave's company was when his partner Freya turned up for a cheeky glass. This was not because she was anything other than nice; it was solely because she was so attractive that in her vicinity I felt like an animated rubbish dump. It was preposterous, a woman like her being let loose on an unsuspecting pub: all conversation shut down and everyone just *stared*. Freya was slim and horribly healthy; she possessed beautiful peaches-and-cream skin and gently waving hair. She wore things made of linen and always smelt amazing.

I had expected Freya and me to become excellent chums, but after a few months of stilted conversation I'd had to admit defeat. I wanted to blame this

on her but, deep down, I knew it was my fault: she was calm, spiritual and smooth; I was noisy, clumsy and foolish. I just wasn't her cup of tea. Nonetheless, she tolerated Leonie and me – and our bawdy, studenty drinking – with remarkable patience. Once when he thought no one was looking I saw Dave plant a gentle kiss on her summery shoulder. I was envious. I wanted to kiss it too.

After three years in my rather junior job, I was fantasizing daily about becoming a fearless correspondent with a bullet-proof vest and a string of exotic admirers. 'What do you think the chances are of me being able to apply for a job on the foreign affairs desk?' I asked Hugh, the assistant programme editor, one day.

He looked up briefly from his computer. 'Zero.'

I carried on plugging away with my ideas and late nights, and eventually Hugh came good. In February 2008 he summoned me to his glass fortress at the top end of the newsroom floor. He told me that I was 'a lucky little fucker' and that I was being given a chance to audition for Foreign Affairs by going out to help them cover the aftermath of Kosovo's Declaration of Independence. I'd 'better be fucking outstanding' or 'you'll be working in the fucking canteen for the rest of your fucking life'.

Hugh Gormley was an enormously intelligent man with a swearing habit even worse than mine and a reputation for being a monster. Normally I was terrified of him, but the day he sent me to Kosovo I loved

him madly. It was all I could do to stop myself jumping into his lap and kissing him passionately.

As I left, gasping promises of outstanding journalistic vigour, Hugh softened a little bit and smiled. ‘You’re fucking good news, Fran,’ he said. ‘You’re doing really well. Now fuck off to the Balkans. And be careful. Spend the next two days in hostile-environment training, please.’

I punched the air discreetly and ran off to buy a celebratory can of Vimto, as I often did when life felt good. At last! Fran the Balkans correspondent had been born! I knew nothing about the Balkans, but who cared?

‘Don’t get any big ideas,’ said Stella Sanderson, as she strode past me at the vending machine with a huge folder marked ‘Kosovo’ under her arm. ‘You’re at the bottom of the pile. We’re going only because the main team out there need a break. It goes them, then me, then our correspondent, then Dave, then the entirety of Kosovo, then you. OK?’

‘OK,’ I said, nodding enthusiastically. I’d wipe Stella’s bottom if I needed to.

After two days’ training in hostile-environment filming I began to read about Kosovo. A few moments later, I gave up and called Dave. ‘Who’d have thought it, eh? ITN’s promising new talent learning her stuff from the cameraman.’ He chortled.

I could hear Freya’s pots and pans in the background.

‘You’re not a cameraman, you’re a legend,’ I said, feeling a bit silly. ‘Of course I’m trying to learn from you.’

After a pause, Dave started talking. I listened intently. By the end I was feeling pretty scared.

‘You’ll be fine, kid, I’ll keep an eye on you,’ he said at the end, stopping to puff on his fag.

I sighed. ‘Dave, I *wish* you wouldn’t smoke.’

‘Cut the wee princess act, Fran.’ He snorted. ‘I’m off for my tea now anyway. Pork chops. What are you having?’

I looked in my empty fridge. ‘Um, probably some dry Weetabix.’

‘You’re the fuckin’ pits, Fannybaws.’ He laughed, hanging up.

I made my nightly call to Mum, who was drunk and complaining about something to do with the gardeners, then packed my bag, wondering how she would cope over the weekend without me coming over to do her shopping and clean her house. Well, she’d have to. If this foreign-affairs thing took off, I’d be going away a lot more. I filed my prickly sense of guilt into a remote drawer in my head and wrote a Post-it note for when I got back: *sort out Mum*.

In spite of having spent his life either attacking me or pretending to hate me, Duke Ellington always got into a panic when I went away. Tonight was no exception. Every time I turned round to put something in

my bag he was sitting in it, refusing to meet my eye. ‘Duke Ellington, if I ever love a man the way I love you, he will be very lucky,’ I told him. He ignored me and moved over to sit down on my clean pants, purring loudly to indicate that he knew this was a bad thing to do. Cursing him, I braved a hand underneath him to fish them out but was unable to escape without toothmarks. ‘Why are you such a little bastard?’ I yelled, as I washed my hand. I kept a box of plasters by the sink for Duke Ellington attacks.

‘You’d better behave yourself when Stefania comes round to feed you,’ I told him, just as she arrived at my back door. His purring got louder. For the purpose of driving me mad, he *always* behaved himself with Stefania. I watched in frustration as he trotted flirtily over to her and sat, purring, while she stroked his head and crooned to him in an unidentifiable language.

After talking to him for a good thirty seconds, she glanced up. ‘Oh, Frances. Greetings. Have you been drinking ze barley grass like I said?’

‘No. It tasted of shit,’ I replied.

My neighbour Stefania was simultaneously the best and most ridiculous human being I’d ever met. Since she had barged into my kitchen the day I moved in, bearing a ‘dish for health’ in an earthenware pot – ‘It vill grow ze hairs on your chest’ she hissed – she had become my friend, cat-feeder and source of inspiration.

The converted garage in which I rented my flat had retained the inspection shed that was used to assess cars on their arrival, and this shed, just inside the lop-sided wooden gates, was where Stefania lived. By anyone's standards it looked from the outside like a shack in a Comic Relief appeal, but inside it was delightful – a childhood fantasy den full of exotic silks and mad plants and just about enough floor space for her to contort herself into strange yogic shapes.

Stefania's country of origin was nebulous: when I'd first met her she'd told me she was a Yugoslavian princess; another time she'd claimed to be related to the Polish prime minister, and recently I'd heard her introducing herself to another neighbour as a descendant of the oldest family in St Petersburg. Whatever the grandeur of her past, however, the reality of her present was not so impressive. Apart from making enormous pots of stew for the local homeless shelter, she appeared to have no job and even less desire to discuss the matter. I knew that I was probably paying her gas and electricity bills but I couldn't give an arse. I loved her and her barmy ways: I wasn't prepared to lose her over a detail as minor as money. I *wanted* her there. Apart from anything else, Duke Ellington worshipped her.

'How are you anyway, Stefania?' I asked, as she removed my house key from the bunch of spares.

'I am blessed,' she replied, putting the keys down and placing her hands flat on the work surface. Just to emphasise the fact, she closed her eyes.

I smiled. This was textbook Stefania. ‘Oh, good. Are you in love?’

‘Do not be silly.’ She kept her eyes closed.

‘Well, then, what is going on?’

‘Today I make the perfect seaveed lasagne. It is touched by ze hand of God, I tell you, Frances.’

‘That’s amazing. Congratulations.’

Stefania nodded. ‘Sank you. It is truly amazing. As I tell you, I am blessed.’ She scooped up Duke Ellington, who put up no fight whatsoever, and left my house, shouting, ‘Take peace viz you to Kosovo, Frances!’

On the train to Gatwick, Dave was unlike his usual self. He was quiet and serious, even rougher round the edges than usual. ‘You OK, Dave?’ I asked, fishing a fag out of his mouth before he got us thrown off the train.

‘Yep,’ he said briefly. ‘Yep, all good. Just up late with the missus. Tired.’

This was obviously Serious Dave, the Dave who’d lost one of his fingers in a war zone. I resolved to be Serious Fran during the trip, although I was less keen on losing part of my hand. As if he’d read my mind, Dave picked up my bandaged thumb and raised an eyebrow. ‘Duke Ellington?’ I nodded. ‘He’s a little fuckwit, that one.’ Dave grinned, and returned to his paper.

I’d been sitting at the MAC counter in Duty Free for about fifteen minutes when Dave strode in looking

agitated. ‘What’s up?’ I asked him as a pearlescent black eye shadow was brushed into my eye sockets.

‘Stella,’ he replied, staring at my glam-rock aesthetic with confusion. ‘Get out of here, Franny, we’re in trouble.’

I shrugged guiltily at the makeup girl as Dave strode off. She gazed at me stonily. Not only was I leaving in the middle of her story about having it off with a minor league football player but I was scarpering without buying any makeup. ‘Sorry,’ I tried. ‘We’re journalists. There’s an emergency in progress.’

‘You – you are *journalist?*’ she asked, with a raised eyebrow.

Damn her! ‘Yes,’ I said, drawing myself up to my full height of five foot four. ‘Actually, I’m a foreign correspondent.’

The girl looked me up and down and smiled. ‘No. I think you lie,’ she said, handing me a face wipe.

When I met up with Stella in the Ladies, I saw why we were in trouble. She was crouched around the toilet bowl with a grey face and shaking hands. ‘Crayfish,’ she muttered in anguish.

‘Oh dear, I, erm . . .’ I said, dabbing ineffectually at her brow. It was cold and clammy. I withdrew my hand swiftly and ran as she heaved.

I left the loos to find Dave outside, his phone in his hand. ‘She’s not flying, is she?’ he said. I shook my head. ‘No. Let’s get on to the office urgently. If some-

one leaves now they'll get here in time.' He peered at the departures board. Our flight was to leave in under two hours. 'No, they won't. I think we should go alone, Fran,' he said.

'*What?*' I froze. 'Dave, I'm a gimp. I'm just a junior producer! I'm the lowest of the low – I wouldn't have the first idea how to do Stella's job! I . . . can't. It'd be like asking Stephen Fry to stand in for one of *Girls Aloud* just because he's an entertainer. No way.'

Dave smiled briefly. 'You *can* do this and you will,' he said. 'There's only one direct flight each day. By the time anyone else gets out there we'll be going home again. Come on, Franny. Stop being a fanny.'

I gulped. Dave grinned more encouragingly. 'Are we good to go, Producer Fran?'