

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

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

Opening Extract from...

Life, Death and Vanilla Slices

Written by Jenny Eclair

Published by Sphere

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Lov**ereading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain as a paperback original in 2012 by Sphere

Copyright © Jenny Eclair 2012

The right of Jenny Eclair to be identified as author of this Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated 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.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-8474-4493-6

Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Sphere are from well-managed forests and other responsible sources.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C104740

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Anne

Busy, Busy, Busy

Anne has had a busy day. This morning she queued for thirty-five minutes outside the organic butcher's on Lordship Lane, only for them to be 'fresh out of partridge breasts. Would some nice fillets of pork do?'

The fillets sit glistening on Anne's black marble kitchen work surface, fleshy and pink in their white paper wrapping.

What on earth had she been thinking? No one likes pork, not really, but she'd chosen the fillets and now she must do something with the wretched things, and not just throw them at the wall.

Anne Armitage is forty-eight and peri-menopausal. This shouldn't be a big deal, it's nature. It's what happens to women: they are ruled by their hormones. Anne has been dealing with her ovaries ever since she started her periods during a compulsory Wednesday morning game of hockey when she was fourteen. 'Come on, Collins, run faster.' But she couldn't; blood was trickling down her thighs.

Since then there have been thirty-four years of cramps and bloating, tampons and pads. Some days she can almost feel the

wear and tear. Really, the whole rigmarole is getting to be quite unnecessary. After all, it isn't as if she is going to have any more babies.

Ah, babies. This morning in the butcher's shop the woman in front of her had been pushing twins, glorious matching blue-eyed babies in a buggy that could have been designed by NASA. The mother had been one of those yummy mummies, all cashmere, blond hair and beige suede boots, the sort of woman a butcher would keep partridge breasts under the counter for.

The babies smacked of IVF – there was a lot of it about these days. In *The World According to Anne Armitage*, smartly dressed, slightly over-anxious women in their late thirties pushing multiple-occupancy prams in newly gentrified areas of London scream 'Private Fertility Treatment'.

Obviously she'd done the cooing thing. When one is a woman approaching middle age society expects one to acknowledge cute babies. So you cluck and make goo-goo noises, even when there is a part of you that wants to scream into the mother's smug face, 'They will disappoint and upset you. You think this bit is hard? Just you wait until the school reports start making a mockery of the fees that you pay and there is a pool of dried sick on the glass roof of your kitchen-diner extension, courtesy of your eldest puking up through his bedroom window.'

She should have taken Mrs IVF to the park, sat her down and bought her a cup of coffee. She could have broken the news gently.

'Listen, I'm so sorry but you know those twins you've spent twenty-five grand conceiving? Well, how can I put this? There will be days when you will wish you'd put the money towards something else, a really nice convertible or a few decent holidays, because you know what? Kids don't come with a guarantee and, however faulty the goods, you don't get your money back.'

Anne looks up recipes for pork on the internet. She uses the PC in Paul's study and browses through ideas involving red cabbage and cider, or apricots and couscous.

Why on earth is she having this dinner party?

Because, she reminds herself, it's what she is meant to do, given her age, occupation, marital status and the cost of her recently installed Smallbone of Devizes kitchen.

You can't really justify spending over fifty grand on new handmade oak units and a powder blue Aga if you're not going to invite a constant stream of envious guests round. What would be the point?

Hmm, baked pork with pears, potatoes, onions and Roquefort butter, as demonstrated by Diana Henry on *Saturday Kitchen*. Anne likes *Saturday Kitchen*; she likes it best when Paul is playing golf and the boys are out, and she can curl up on the sofa in what she laughably calls her 'jogging' bottoms and thrill to James Martin and his cooking cronies.

Anne is a good cook but sometimes she gets anxious and makes silly mistakes. She is forever burning herself or slicing the tips of her fingers. She would like her family to notice these wounds and offer sympathy, but they don't.

There is too much testosterone in this house, thinks Anne. How nice it would be to have had a girl, a nice, sensible, dutiful girl, a girl a bit like herself, bookish and willing, keen to do her best, a girl who would leave the toilet seat down, sit at the kitchen table and just *chat*.

Instead she has two boys, Nathaniel Dominic and Julian William, Nat and Jools as their friends call them. Nathaniel and Julian don't chat to their parents, they grunt and huff.

Anne tenses at the computer. Should she open the file marked Family Photos and revisit her children as they used to be? Freckle-faced little chaps in cricket whites; toddlers in towelling robes all ready for cuddling and bedtime stories; pyjama-clad boys under glittering Christmas trees holding up *The Guinness Book of Records* or a new Playmobil pirate ship. She can envisage the once-upon-a-time summer-holiday snaps – her skinny sons in their baggy swimming trunks diving into shimmering blue water, ice-cream faces smiling.

When did her sons stop smiling?

Stop wallowing, Anne tells herself, children grow up and that's that; but there is an insistent voice in her head: yes, children grow up and yours have turned nasty, they are selfish and they smirk at you as if to say, 'Are you just stupid or *really* stupid?'

Anne swallows hard and mutters, 'Well this won't buy the baby a new bonnet' under her breath. 'Diana Henry's cheesy pork bake it is.'

She presses print and closes her eyes. Anne is a technophobe and believes that computers and printers stand more chance of working if she's not watching them. The printer whirrs reassuringly and by the time she opens her eyes the recipe will be printed out, all nice and neat. Slowly she counts to ten for luck.

She opens her eyes. The paper that has emerged from the printer is bare. The printer has run out of ink, of course it has.

Anne strides into the kitchen, picks up the pork fillets and feeds them into the waste disposal unit. She feels like a murderer, like one of those serial killers that has chopped up a victim and then must dispose of the corpse.

'Fuck it, I shall order a takeaway.'

Twenty minutes later she is parking her car in the supermarket car park half a mile away. She can't justify a takeaway, not with the economy in the state that it's in, not with the vet's bills. Poor Galaxy, the chocolate-button-coloured Labrador, so riddled with tumours she looked like she was wearing a string of turnips around her throat. The vet had put her down – 'She won't feel a thing, Mrs Armitage' – and as he pressed the syringe into poor old Galaxy's jaw it was all Anne could do not to roll the dog off the slab and offer her own neck instead.

'I am tired and fat and old and sometimes I suffer from stress incontinence and my tights smell of wee when I put them in the laundry basket.' And, as if she needed to feel any worse, she adds, 'And nobody loves me.'

As she manoeuvres the car into a space that looked the right size but obviously isn't (a bit like the skirt she tried on in Hobbs

last week), she feels herself flush. It starts round the back of her neck and travels down her spine. Hormones or temper? She can never really tell.

Before she takes the paintwork off a rather smart people carrier, Anne reverses and finds a bigger space down at the far end of the car park, a nice roomy size-18 space. 'That's better.' Talking to herself has become an occupational hazard.

As she walks towards the supermarket she tries to pull her stomach in and swing her arms. She'd like people to think she is the type of woman for whom brisk walking and plenty of exercise is the norm. It's only once the glass doors have slid open that she remembers she has left her selection of Bags for Life in the car. Anne allows herself a whimper of frustration and pinches herself on the inside of her fleshy left forearm. This is what Anne does: she doesn't cut, that's for teenagers, she pinches. Occasionally, when she has the screaming ab-dabs, she has attempted to aim punches at her own face, but it's never terribly successful.

'Just a basket,' she instructs herself, keep it simple, some lovely salmon steaks with watercress and new potatoes, but habit makes her reach for a trolley. While she's here she might as well pick up a few bits and bobs.

Forty-five minutes later the bill has come to £126.42 and her Nectar card is not in her purse.

Anne drives home convinced that she can smell stale sweat from her armpits. 'Memo to self,' she murmurs, 'no more polo-neck jumpers.' Cardigans are the way forward, something she can easily take off should her temperature continue to yo-yo.

She parks her car in the gravel driveway. There's easily room for two other vehicles and if Nat had his way there would be three cars on the drive, but Anne has put her foot down. There is no way she is going to buy her eighteen-year-old son a car!

If he was that interested in learning to drive he'd have passed his theory test by now. She bought him a special DVD online, to help him revise the Highway Code, but it's still in its Amazon sleeve on the stairs.

Anyway, he keeps being silly, wanting this, wanting that, a Ford Mustang if you please. He sneers at her Honda Jazz, informing her that he wouldn't be seen dead learning to drive in that 'heap of crap'.

Anne puts her key in the lock. 'Nathaniel,' she bellows. It's four o'clock in the afternoon, surely he should be up by now?

'Nathaniel, I could do with some help with the shopping.'

He doesn't reply. He's in her en suite, hers and Paul's, she can hear the power shower. He will be using all of Paul's birthday Acqua di Parma. 'You utter shit,' she seethes through clenched teeth.

The Armitages live in a red-brick five-bedroomed thirties semi. The hallway is wide, the staircase solid oak, and the front door sports an original stained-glass panel featuring a tulip design.

Anne is proud to live in Dulwich Village. She may not inhabit one of the flashier Georgian properties, but hers is a fine example of the Arts and Crafts style and anyway, most Georgian houses tend to be all stairs and not much else.

She breathes deeply and carries her Sainsbury's bags through into the kitchen-diner. The extension, despite being three years old, still gives her a thrill, especially now that the rain has worn away the halo of puke Nat deposited on the glass roof back in the summer. There is so much space, such a wonderful family room.

Of course the family spend very little time in it these days. The boys have their own bedrooms and a games room in the attic.

Years ago the attic room was awash with toys, and with each passing phase nothing seemed to get thrown away: toy cars and wooden Brio trains, Meccano and bits of broken-up Scalextric track, tiny Warhammer figurines and desiccated pots of enamel paint.

A couple of years ago they'd had a big clear out, the boys dry-eyed as their childhood was boxed up and distributed around various charity shops.

'Don't you even want to keep an Action Man each?' Anne

had pleaded. In the end she'd kept a small box of favourite toys, some Lego and a few books, including *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, *The Jolly Postman* and *Where the Wild Things Are*.

'What the fuck for? In case either of us gets brain-damaged and ends up in nappies with a mental age of three?' Jools had sniggered.

Now the games room smells of dope, the floor is a viper's nest of computer and Xbox cables and the walls are plastered with cheap-looking girls with no tops on, perma-tanned blondes with ridiculous breasts.

Who would pay to have big bosoms, wonders Anne. Hers have been the bane of her life, costing her a fortune in scaffolding disguised as lingerie. They're forever getting in the way, she's sick of leaning over the table to pick up her glasses only for her bosoms to brush the butter dish. Lurpak on her cashmere sweater, what a palaver.

She unpacks the food into the honey-coloured oak cupboards and American-style fridge. One of the boys has broken the ice dispenser and neither of them will own up. Each would rather blame the other than tell the truth. Anne tuts unconsciously.

Julian should be home soon, although he probably won't. He likes to go to the park and 'cotch' with like-minded boys and unsuitable girls, girls whose parents don't ask them what they've been up to and why aren't they at home doing their geography homework?

Julian is in Year 12 or, as Anne prefers to call it, the Lower Sixth, and he's coasting.

Anne realises she is talking to herself out loud, itemising the contents of her Sainsbury's bags in a dull monotone she finds comforting. 'Avocados, spinach, pine nuts, cereal, cereal, cereal.'

Three boxes. The men in her life have different breakfast requirements: Paul wants oats, Nat likes Dorset Cereal with berries and cherries – 'the purple box Mum, you mong' – and Julian, despite being almost six foot and therefore taller than both his brother and his father, likes Sugar Puffs.

What about me? thinks Anne and her conscience replies, 'And for you, Special K because you are getting very fat.'

At this point Nat wanders into the kitchen. He is wearing a towel around his hips and although Anne has seen it before she is still shocked by the tunnel of dark hair that reaches his navel. Casually he rips open a packet of pitta bread and slots four into the family-sized Dualit toaster.

'Lunch?' asks Anne, trying to keep things light. Sometimes talking to her sons is the verbal equivalent of lighting the blue touch-paper. She never knows if they are going to explode in her face.

'Snack,' he yawns back.

She watches him heap hummus and tzatziki on to a plate, but as he reaches for the marinated olives she slaps his hand.

'They're for tonight. The Robinsons are coming.'

Nat rolls his eyes and gives a theatrical shudder. 'Ergh the Robinsons, Jesus fuck.'

The pittas leap like salmon from the toaster. He catches two of them in mid-air (Nat could have been sporty) and saunters back upstairs.

He won't bring the plate back down. Anne or Loretta, the cleaner, will eventually unearth it.

I have brought my children up to expect women to do everything. I pity their future wives, thinks Anne. Most mothers think their sons' future brides are not worthy. Anne has reached the stage where she is thinking the poor bitches, whoever they might be, are welcome to these two.

Julian rings the doorbell at ten to six. He has forgotten his keys and 'some cunt' has stolen his iPod Nano.

'The Robinsons are coming for supper,' Anne repeats.

'For fuck's sake,' responds her youngest as he bounds up the stairs two at a time, as if fleeing from the impending guests.

'They won't be here till eightish,' yells Anne. 'I'll do you and Nat a pizza in an hour.'

They used to like the Robinsons, so much so they went on

holiday together. The Robinson children are shuffled in with her children in the Family Photos file. Anne met Melanie Robinson when they shared antenatal classes in Herne Hill almost nineteen years ago. Nathaniel and Piggy attended the same nursery school; they were both in the yellow class, as were Julian and then Hannah a few years later.

We don't see them very much these days, thinks Anne as she runs herself a bath. Nat has left three Peter Jones towels twisted and wet in the corner of the bathroom, and as she bends down to pick them up Anne finds herself stuffing one of them into her mouth. Her mouth is full of navy blue towelling and she bites down hard. She's not sure why she does this. Maybe it's to stop herself screaming.

Jean

Touch and Go

Jean Collins lies flat on her back. This isn't my bed, she thinks. She opens her eyes but she can't see anything, she can't hear anything either. It's quite nice, peaceful and quiet. Now where was she?

She was outside and it was raining, she hasn't got her umbrella and her tights are soggy. Someone's taken those off. Maybe she's been drugged and raped?

Oh well, she'll check for bruises later.

Maybe she should spend a penny? When you get to her age it's sensible to go even if you don't really need to, just in case.

Jean attempts to move her legs but she's not quite sure what she's done with them. It's like she left them on the bus.

They worked perfectly well this morning, carrying her around as normal, bedroom to bathroom, stairs down to the kitchen. Her feet had hurt but then they always do, she needs to see the chiropodist. Strange what's happened to her feet, they used to be so lovely, but that was before the bunions.

What a funny dream this is. Perhaps she's fainted, it's happened before – now when was that? Maybe when she comes round she should have a biscuit and a glass of milk, but she's not

hungry or thirsty, not cold or hot, she's not anything, she doesn't need anything! It's quite relaxing being like this. She hasn't even got heartburn, there's nothing she has to do, nothing she can do. It's a bit like being a baby, only babies don't have memories and Jean's head is full of memories, which is good, at least that's something she can do. She might not feel like knitting for a while and she's no idea when she'll be up to posting her LoveFilm DVDs back, but until then, at least she can remember.

It's a bit like having a television in her head: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, it's *The Jean Collins Show*.' At the moment she's watching herself leave the house, almost forgetting she still has her slippers on, checking in her handbag for her keys and her purse. Jean watches herself go back into the sitting room, kick off her slippers and change into her slip-on leather shoes. Then she buttons her coat and shuts the front door. Should she bother to double lock it? No, she'll be home in an hour. She pops the keys back her bag and the picture on the keyring makes her smile, the little devils!

Now where on earth is her handbag?

Jean's handbag lay in the road with Jean on top of it. For a second everyone stopped like musical statues on the street then, just like a DVD that had been paused for a moment, the action starts up again, people shouting, pulling mobile phones out of bags and pockets. 'STOP,' someone yells but the motorbike roars into the distance.

Mothers turn their children's faces away: 'Don't look, it's rude to stare,' but at least one of them adds, 'See that's what happens if you're not careful. What do I tell you?'

Around Jean's head is a big red stain as sticky as jam. 'Fucking hell,' someone breathes.

A woman in a pink tabard runs out of the cake shop and kneels in the road. She holds the old lady's hand and puts her ear close to her mouth. She can't be dead if she's still talking.

The ambulance wails around the corner, just like in *Casualty*. Gently, gently they carry her away. Poor old thing.

'I could see her pants,' a small boy crows.

Jean's handbag has fallen open, her Rimmel Peach Sundae lipstick rolls into the gutter.

Jean can't remember any of this. All she can remember is leaving the house – was she going to the post office or to the fishmonger's? If only she knew what day it was, that would give her a clue. Friday would be fish. It's frustrating not being able to see what happened next.

Oh well, if she can't look forward at least she can look back. There are seventy-two years of memory tape looped around Jean's brain, reams of the stuff. Some of it has got jumbled up, all higgledy-piggledy. She can see herself watching *This Morning* last week, the picture is so clear she can see the patterns on Phillip Schofield's tie and now she can see herself feeding a rabbit when she was nine. Benji the rabbit who turned out to be a girl.

Her head is like a big airing cupboard, all these bits need sorting out. It's time to have a good tidy, put things into drawers. It's a bit like filing: memories should slot into neatly labelled compartments, Births, Marriages, Deaths, Happy, Sad.

When the important milestones are sorted perhaps she could fill a box marked Too Boring to Remember. Which, when she gets her legs back, she can take down to the charity shop to sell to people who haven't had enough experiences of their own.

But for now she's not going to do anything. Jean turns off the television in her head and floats back into blackness. Maybe when she switches it back on she'll get *Coronation Street*.

'D'you think she'll come round?'

'Dunno. Have you ever tried anal sex?'

'Yeah. Doesn't really work, does it?'

'Nah. You've got to give it a go, though.'

'Why?'

'I dunno.'

Karen and Mai-Lin are the nurses on duty. Coma patients are