

# Going Home

Harriet Evans

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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HarperCollinsPublishers  
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,  
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

Published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2005  
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN 0 00 719843 4

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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## ONE

The bus ground its way slowly up the Edgware Road as I sat, like a mad old bag lady, gripping my last-minute Christmas shopping between my legs and on my lap, casting angry glances at those who tried to sit anywhere near me. It was Christmas Eve and I'd only just got round to buying my presents. With the depressing predictability of riots on May Day, rain at Wimbledon, and stories in August about hamsters who can play the kazoo, I promise myself every year that I will have bought and wrapped all my presents by 15 December, and every year I end up in Boots with an hour to go, buying my father a small, slanting glass toothpick-holder, my mother a furry hot-water-bottle cover endorsed by the Tweenies, and my sister Jess a gilt-edged notelet set that says, 'Happy Christmas!'

I jumped off at the lights, closed my eyes and ran across the road, praying that this would not be how I met my death. I had half an hour before Tom, my cousin, and Jess arrived to pick me up. We were going home, *home* home, in one of thousands of cars setting forth from London, after their occupants had put in a half-day at work, bags hastily packed, driving into the twilight. It was only three p.m., but dusk already seemed to be descending over the city.

My flat is just off the Edgware Road, behind an odd assortment of dilapidated shops that are a constant source of delight to me. There are the usual cut-price off-licences ('Bacardi Breezer's at 75p!') and poky newsagents, neither of which ever stock Twiglets but promise they'll have some next time I come in. There's also an undertaker, a computer shop selling ancient Amstrads, a joke shop called Cheap laffs – handy when you're in urgent need of a pair of fake comedy breasts – and Arthur's Bargains, which, incongruously, sells pianos and keyboards. I would not personally spend my hard-earned cash on a musical instrument from a place called Arthur's Bargains but *chacun à son gout*, as the French say. Off a tiny alley, so nondescript I have frequently noticed people not noticing it, away from the roar of the cars and lorries that thunder up and down the Edgware Road day and night, is a small cobbled street with tall, spindly houses, one of which is mine. Well, one of the shoebox flats on the top floor is mine.

The noise of traffic faded as I turned into my street. I could even hear the faint rumble of a tube beneath me, full of passengers escaping from work to enjoy the usual bout of indigestion, seasonal belligerence and disappointing new episodes of *Only Fools and Horses*. The flowers I'd bought for Mum, fiery red and orange ranunculas, crackled in their brown-paper wrapping as I grappled with the temperamental locks on the front door. I hauled myself up the stairs, struggled with my own front door, nudged it open with my bottom and lowered my bags on to the floor.

I headed into my tiny bedroom, which I love despite its size, sloping roof and lack of light. The view isn't uniformly picturesque, unless you call Wormwood Scrubs picturesque. But it's my flat, my view, so while other people look out of the window and say, 'Oh, my God – is that a dead body in

your street?’ I say, ‘You can see Little Venice from here, if you stand on that chair and use a periscope.’

The packing I’d been so smug about at one o’clock this morning was not at the advanced stage I’d imagined when I rushed out of the door, hung-over and dishevelled, a handful of hours later. I’d packed all my socks but no shoes, seven pairs of trousers and no jumpers, and had obviously been in a nostalgic mood because Lizzy the drunk had seen fit to pack three teddies (bears, not lingerie), a collection of *Just William* stories, and just one pair of knickers.

Expecting to hear the beep of Tom’s car horn at any minute, I rushed around the flat, plucking Sellotape and knickers out of drawers, contact-lens solution and moisturizers from the bathroom cupboard, shoving one plastic bag of presents inside another, watering plants picking up the papers and magazines that lay strewn across the floor and dumping them beside the sofa. The flat had a dusty, neglected air. Christmas cards had fallen over and not been picked up, videos and CDs lay out of cases, and there was a collection of unopened, unthought-of statements from BT, the bank, my mobile phone company. I loved my flat. I’d bought it two years ago from the old lady I used to rent it from. It had been painted by me, the pictures and photos were put up by me, and the hole in the plaster by the front door had been made by me kicking the wall when I was cross. It was my home. But it was at times like this, as I dashed around, longing to get away, that I knew it wasn’t really a home, not in the way Keeper House always had been, since long before I was born.

As I was cramming some old newspapers into the wastepaper basket, I heard a car horn and leaned out of the sitting-room window. Tom and Jess were waving up at me.

‘I’ve got fags!’ Tom shouted.

‘And I’ve got mags!’ Jess chorused.

‘I’m coming!’ I yelled down at them, and scooped up my suitcase and bags, pausing at the door as I spotted the answer-phone flashing. Like a cross between a *t’ai chi* instructor and a Russian weightlifter, I bent my knees slowly and elbowed the play button.

‘You have two messages,’ said the machine, as Tom leaned on his horn.

‘Well, come on, then,’ I said, in frustration to the machine.

‘Message One. Hi, Lizzy, it’s Ash here. I’m just ringing to say you left your chequebook at work. Anyway, happy Christmas and have a lovely time at home and I’ll speak to you when you get back. Oh, and I forgot to tell you this today and it will really annoy you but you know Sally? Press-department Sally? Well, she saw Jaden on Sunday and he told her you still haven’t told him whether you’ll go out with him or not and he thinks you don’t like him any more. He also thinks you’re not over your ex and you’re holding on to negativity in your life and all women have these flaws and essentially hate men, which is why their menstrual cycles club together when they live in the same house, to exclude men from the life of their women. But he also said he’d still like to sleep with you and that you have great boobs. I agree. Bye.’

‘Oh, God,’ I said.

‘Message Two. Lizzy, it’s Tom. I’ve got this week’s *heat*, so don’t buy it. Also, can you bring some CDs? I’ve got a new streaming system in the car and you can play about fourteen or something at the same time. Also, I just spoke to Jess and she spoke to your mum and last they heard Uncle Mike said he couldn’t come back. He’s been out of town and has to work in a couple of days. Bye then.’

I clenched my teeth at the first message and moaned at the second. Jaden. Oh, Jaden. He was a scriptwriter and I met

him at work. He lived in LA and was bloody gorgeous but totally insane, ringing me at seven on a Sunday morning to tell me that the wheat I ate was clinging to my lower intestine and poisoning my bowels, which was why my liver was wet and I felt drained all the time. When I later explained I felt drained because I kept going out and getting drunk by mistake, then waking up in the middle of the night lying on my sofa fully clothed, he simply shook his head. I'd reserve judgement about whether to see him again till the hell of New Year's Eve was over. And as for not being over my ex, well . . . ha.

And it was gutting about Uncle Mike. Even though we'd all known he probably wouldn't be able to get the time off, Christmas wouldn't be the same without him. Uncle Mike is one of those people who makes everything brilliant the moment he walks into a room.

The horn beeped long and loud, and I roared, 'Coming – flipping heck!' waved goodbye to my poor neglected flat and locked the door on my London life. My heels clattered on the cobbles as I slung my bags into the boot, kissed Tom and Jess, then flung myself into the back seat.

After a heated discussion about which radio station to listen to, and having plumped for Capital, we argued about what time we'd get home and whether or not we were late. Then, once we'd reached the motorway, we argued about Jess's request to go to the loo. I pointed out that, while she was my younger sister, she was twenty-five now and should have learned to control her bladder for the duration of a two-hour journey. Tom pointed out that it was his car and if she peed on the seat he would personally skin her alive, so we stopped at the first service station we came across.

By this time it was dark, nearing five o'clock, and a light drizzle was falling. Capital had long since gone out of range,

and we were listening to a CD of carols Jess had produced 'to get us in the mood'. Tom and I called her tragic for buying it, then sang along for the rest of the motorway, quarrelled again, then played Shoot Shag Marry, yelling rudely at each other's choices.

'OK, OK, OK!' Jess shouted, as we passed the last exit before ours. 'Tom, this is one for you. OK. Janet Street-Porter, Esther Rantzen, Lily Savage. Shoot, shag or marry?'

'Good one, Jess,' I said. 'Tom, that's easy, I know who I'd pick.'

'But you're weird,' said Tom. 'Right. I'd shoot Esther Rantzen. I'd shag Janet Street-Porter. And I'd marry Lily Savage.'

'Are you mad?' I shrieked. 'You'd marry Lily Savage over Janet Street-Porter? No way! She'd eat you for breakfast. And she'd be off with Dale Winton and Cilla Black all day long. You'd be a grass widow.'

'Hm,' said Tom. 'I'll take a chance. Better than Street-Porter jawing on all day.'

'No, I like her. She's into hill-walking and stuff. You'd be able to have great chats. And are you gay? Lily Savage is a man in drag.'

'Like you'd be able to tell. And since when have you been into hill-walking?' Tom sneered.

'That's not the point. You've picked the wrong one, that's all.'

'You're a fine one to talk,' Tom snapped.

There was an awkward silence.

'I meant in the game, not in real life,' he said, after a moment.

'I know you did,' I said.

Jess cleared her throat. 'Lizzy, your turn. OK, this is good. Right – Jonny Wilkinson, David Beckham, Mike Atherton.'

'Easy,' I said. 'I'd shoot David Beckham, because I think



he's a bit of a wally. I'd shag Mike Atherton, because he seems nice. And I'd definitely marry Jonny Wilkinson – I'd live on a rugby field if he asked me.'

Tom slapped his forehead. 'God, oh, my God,' he moaned. 'Are you two serious? For a start, *Mike Atherton*? Why include him?'

'He's the cricket captain,' said Jess, looking surprised. 'You know, for England.'

'No, he's not, you mallet! He hasn't been for ages! Jesus . . . And, Lizzy, even if he was, are you saying you'd shoot David Beckham and shag Atherton instead? I mean, seriously?'

'Yes,' I said firmly, knowing I'd made a bit of an error. I mean, David Beckham may speak like a six-year-old girl but look at him! However, I couldn't let Tom know I agreed with him. 'I'm telling the truth,' I said.

'You're lying,' Tom said crossly.

'So are you,' I said automatically.

Tom frowned. 'What do you mean?' he said.

'You always do this! You always pick them to annoy me, then lie about who you like best. You never tell the truth about it.'

'I didn't pick them,' Tom said. 'It's only a game.'

'But I'm taking it seriously and you're not,' I said.

'Well, I don't know what to say. You're a terrible picker. And I won't say what's on the tip of my tongue because you'll get upset.'

'What?' I asked, then realised he was going to say something mean about David. My David, not David Beckham. My ex-David. 'Oh, right. Forget it.'

Even though Jess, Tom and I all lived in London, we saw each other less frequently than we would have liked. Jess is doing an art foundation course and living in a crummy flat in South Clapham with three schoolfriends. I love my sister,

but she can't even draw a circle, let alone a 3D object, so I'm not quite sure what she does all day.

Tom is a high-powered lawyer. He works terribly hard and lives in trendy Clerkenwell where, in his infrequent leisure time, he surrounds himself with gossip magazines and indulges his obsession for high-tech gadgets. Aside from my parents and sister, Tom is my favourite person in the world. We speak often, usually when he's still in the office at eleven p.m. and I'm in a pub, drooling into my phone and slurring, 'Comehere! Youneedadrink!' Tom is terribly nice-looking. His hair does lovely floppy things without seeming outrageously Huge Grunt-ish, he's always tanned, and he's very smiley, which masks the fact that he is the most sardonic, annoying person in the world.

The only person Tom really loves, I'm sure, is his mother Kate, who lives near my parents. When we were both three his father, Tony, had a heart-attack and died. He was only twenty-eight, the next in age to my dad. Tom can hardly remember him now, although he can picture lying beside him in the long grass of the meadow opposite Keeper House one summer and being tickled so much he was sick. I always think that's a rather unfortunate last memory to have of your dad, but Tom always says no, because it's complete; he can remember what he was wearing, how he felt, what his dad looked like, and how hot it was. Tom doesn't talk much about Tony, in fact none of us does. But our house is full of reminders of him, from a little cricket trophy he won when he was twelve to his huge collection of opera programmes, and I think Tom likes looking at them secretly when he goes there. And being in the house where his father grew up.

As we headed deeper into the countryside, the roads became thinner and darker, the trees arching over us. The car wove

its way through the old familiar places, the scenes of our childhood that I always forgot about until I came back. We were getting closer and closer to home.

Past the meadow we used to own when my aunt Kate still rode and kept a pony there, and where as children we used to play Funerals for Pets, a rather ghoulish game involving the re-enactment of the various ceremonies we'd held for recently deceased dogs, cats, hamsters, gerbils and guinea-pigs. Along by the river that had an island at its centre, then skirting the edge of a small wood, where Tom once got lost, gave up on civilian life and determined to be a child of the forest until our other aunt, Chin, found him there. The road sloped gently down the side of the valley and now I could just make out Wareham village, a mile away – it was the same view as the one from my bedroom. Now we were driving past the house where sweet Mrs Favell lived: she had made a pet of me when I was small and rewarded me with old copies of the *Radio Times*, a glamorous luxury to Jess and me because it was banned in our house as a waste of money. Last time I was home I found an old copy and was disappointed to see that its most exciting feature was on the new series of *Ever Decreasing Circles*.

We passed the track that led down to the ivy-covered tunnel of the long-neglected railway, along which the steam trains had ferried my father and his brothers to school, and my grandparents to town. It had been closed down long before I was born, and replaced with belching, unreliable buses, crowded and sticky, especially in summer, and thoroughly unsatisfactory.

'Nearly there,' said Tom, as he swung off the main road, the sound of wet leaves mulching beneath the car. 'Can't believe it. I thought I'd die of alcohol poisoning before I made it to Christmas Eve.'

I knew what he meant. I find the lead-up to Christmas so

exhausting that it's sometimes a struggle to preserve some energy for the holiday. Some of the stores on Oxford Street put their Christmas lights up two weeks before Hallowe'en. It's ridiculous. I remembered the slanting glass toothpick-holder and shuddered, resolving that next year I really would do my shopping before Bonfire Night.

'So, who's going to be there when we arrive?' Jess asked.

'Mum will, because we're staying at yours,' Tom said. Kate lived in a cottage down the road from my parents.

'And Mike's definitely not coming?' I asked.

'Mum spoke to him a week ago. He's obviously knackered, and he has to be back in the office on, like, the twenty-seventh to finish some deal.'

'What if he's just lying, doing an Uncle Mike joke?' Jess said hopefully.

'Don't get your hopes up,' Tom said. 'He's not coming, and that's that.'

Mike was Dad's eldest brother and everyone's favourite. He's the funniest man I've ever met. He did a lot of the work necessary to earn that title when I was about five years old and fairly easy to impress, but he somehow knows exactly what will please you most, or cheer you up when you need it. Who else would forget his godson Tom's tenth birthday, then arrange, a week later, for a pair of remote-controlled toy cars, complete with flashing lights, proper gears and red enamelled bonnets to be delivered from Hamleys by a man in full livery? Who, for my thirteenth birthday, took charge of the party when Mum was ill with flu and escorted me, with ten of my friends, to the cinema, where we saw a '15' film (*A Fish Called Wanda*) then went to Pizza Express where he let us all have a glass of wine and tipped the waiter to go and buy me a proper birthday cake from the patisserie next door? Mike.

Actually, more often than not he's useless. He never turns

up, he has no idea how old you are or what you're doing, he's late, he's disorganized, and when he's there he often has no idea what's going on, but I suppose that's part of what makes him so fab – you never know what he's going to do next.

Mike is a high-powered lawyer, like Tom, and lives in New York where he works even harder than Tom does and has an infrequent succession of girlfriends. 'The law is my mistress, Suzy,' he'd say, in answer to Mum's hopeful enquiries about his love life.

'I don't care who your mistress is, you stupid man,' Mum would reply crossly. 'Have you got a girlfriend?'

Tom negotiated the crossroads through the village. A Christmas tree covered with twinkling lights shone through a cottage window, and in another I could see the glow of a television. The rain had stopped, and the temperature had dropped sharply.

'Mum told me yesterday that Chin's bringing her new man,' Jess said.

'I didn't know she was seeing someone.' Tom was obviously nettled by this information.

'Wait! It's not that Australian guy . . . Gibbo? She's bringing *him*?'

'Apparently,' said Jess. 'It must be more serious than we thought.'

'Must be, if she's willing to expose him to Christmas at home,' I said.

Chin was Dad's youngest sibling by a mile, and more like a cousin to us than an aunt. She was a designer: some of her scarves had been sold in Liberty and she also made necklaces and little bags. She lived in London too, but I hadn't seen her for a while, although she had a flat not too far from me, in Portobello Road. Even now she seemed the epitome of

chic Bohemian glamour, without even trying; the kind of woman who could walk into a junk shop and say, 'Wow, what a delightful eighteen-century French armoire for fifty p! I'll take it please,' while if I'd been in there three seconds earlier I'd only have spotted a rusty old baked bean tin for four hundred pounds.

She'd been seeing Gibbo for a few months now and all I knew about him was that he had long hair and wore flip-flops in November. Jess had bumped into them in Soho one evening, and Chin – who normally goes out with worldly Frenchmen or devastatingly handsome record executives who break her heart, rather than dishevelled young Australians who punch her jovially in the arm and say 'Let's get going, mate!' – couldn't get away fast enough.

'That's it, then,' Jess said. 'That's everyone.'

'You've forgotten your parents,' said Tom. 'Perhaps they don't count, though. I mean, it's their house. They're always there.'