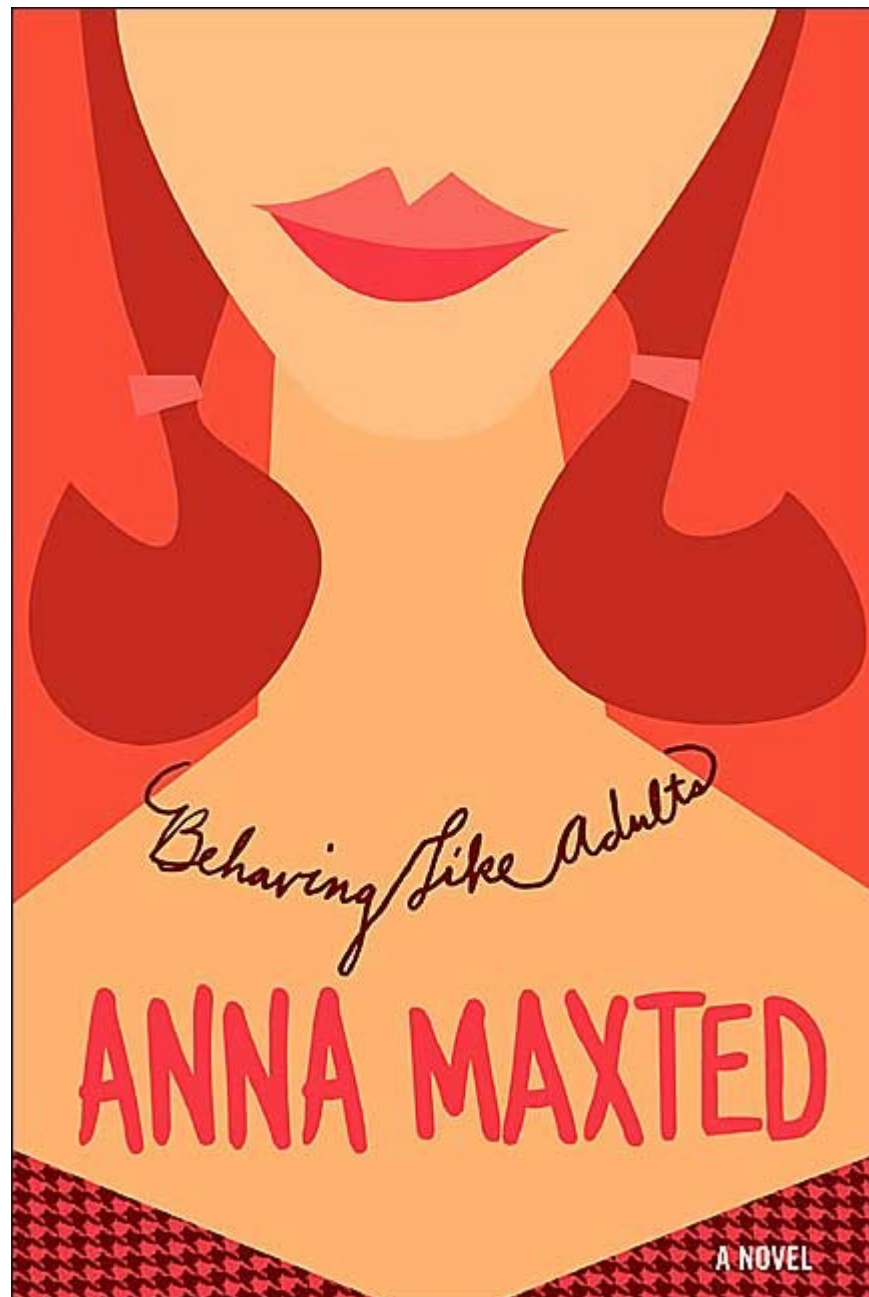


Behaving Like Adults:

A Novel

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CHAPTER 1

Modern women don't believe in love. Believing in love carries roughly the same stigma as halitosis. It's as old-fashioned as going on a diet (as opposed to a detox). It suggests you have no sense of irony, and you like Meg Ryan films. A modern woman cannot accept that Father Christmas is a fraud and persist in believing that one sunny day her dark handsome destiny will appear in a puff of Fahrenheit and haul her off to Happy Ever After.

I know all that and yet I do believe in love. I apologize. But I can't help it. I presume it's a genetic blip which might also account for my dress sense (too pink).

I just like stuff to be nice. That's even worse. If you wish to maintain even a shred of credibility, you have to be cynical and keep your mouth in a hard straight line even when you find something funny. I'm not stupid. I do know the world is cruel. But I always like to hope that it isn't. I test my awwww! count. You proceed through the day, listing every occasion you're prompted to think awwww!

You can't cheat and hire a puppy to peep out of a basket. Often, my total is horrific.

When I started the dating agency, Rachel crowed that now I'd see what people were really like. I wouldn't believe the lies they told to get laid! She said this as if I were either a nun or a social retard who believed—despite living in a densely populated part of the planet for twenty-nine years—that seduction was about honing in on the obvious and blurting it. Whereas I'm well aware that if that were the case, the human race would have fizzled out in the Iron Age when Wilma stared at Fred and said, "That's quite a small flint-stone you've got there." Sometimes I think my friends confuse optimism with idiocy.

Of course, unpleasant characters applied. When you launch a dating agency, even if you specify as we did that Girl Meets Boy was for the "young and funky" (which no doubt deterred everyone in both of those categories), you invite weirdos to your door. It's Open Day for Oddballs. It's the Marilyn Manson Fan Club Parents Evening. But overall—despite the nutters, nerds, squares, sociopaths, oafs, half-wits, dummies, brutes, airheads, and deviants gracing our files—the awwww! count was immense.

Partly to distinguish ourselves from the Christians with an interest in ornithology and partly to discern if anyone out there possessed a sense of humor (a Good Sense of Humor is a luxury), we asked silly questions on the application form. Even Nige—who'd only agreed to help out because he was between acting jobs and is nosy—agreed that the hoi polloi were far wittier than he'd given them credit for. I particularly warmed to the twenty-seven-year-old man who replied to "Do you have any talents?" with "Probably not."

Girl Meets Boy began as a business, but the people who used it fast melted my heart to a soft, sticky caramel. Also, toward the end of the great fiancé fiasco (not before in case you were wondering), it did occur to me that I might find someone. Don't mix business with pleasure? I thought it was a phrase made up by killjoys to stop you from smiling at work. I was trying to enjoy what I'd achieved. I'd achieved so much, everyone said, I should be so proud. Oh, absolutely. I'd made sacrifices, but not whole lambs, more the odd chop. I should be happy.

When I'm told I should be happy, I start trying to measure it with a ruler.

Everything is a test. Rachel rings to say that the cab dropped her outside her flat, whereupon she bade farewell to a loud luxurious fart. She then turned and saw her neighbor padding up the path behind her. We howl with laughter. Yes, but is that happy? The cat sits on my lap, her purr rumbles through me, and I sigh—that's happy, surely? I visit the art house cinema because I hate Warner Village (Village? It's not a village!), and I feel comforted by the fact that they sell whole-grain flapjacks—even though I wouldn't eat one for a bet. I watch myself do this, and I think, That woman, she's smiling. But is she happy?

Self-interrogation is dangerous. Your inner voice pronounces the obvious—"You don't realize you're happy till it's gone"—as if it's your fault for not keeping an eye out, thus making you feel worse than you do already. But you're not to blame. Mostly, happiness doesn't just drop from you like an apple from a tree. It trickles away silently, evaporating over the months and years, until one day you feel a strange hollowness inside. You glance around and it hits you—despite all you own, your great, glorious success, you have nothing.

The good and therefore unreported news is that you can find it again. It might be a bit of a trek. If you haven't the least idea of your destination, the journey takes a little longer. But I'm your fresh-breathed proof. Rachel was right. I did discover what people were really like. And yet, after everything that happened, I got happy again. I still believe in love. As I said, I can only apologize. And explain.

When Nige suggested a party to celebrate the success of Girl Meets Boy, I did wonder. I had done well, creating a company from scratch and making it pay. Although any old pinhead can create a company. They make it foolproof at Companies House. For around eighty pounds they hand you over a shrink-wrapped company. All you, the pinhead, have to do is provide the names of the

board of directors and their share allocation. I was the director with seventy shares, and in a selfless act my younger sister, Claudia, was secretary with thirty. (This was in lieu of pay for the first month. Nige, however, preferred to resist bribes. That way, he said, he didn't feel "obligated.")

Another twenty quid to Companies House and I could name my baby Girl Meets Boy. Then, the most important part of any business plan, I found a good accountant. And

that, give or take a bit of fuss, was it. My accountant did the bore's share of the paperwork, instructing me what I owed the taxman each month via apologetic E-mail. This allowed me to devote myself to my real interest: making Girl Meets Boy a hit.

My strategy was unscientific. I hoped that if I ensured that people had fun, and shelled out for advertising, financial success would follow. And after seven months it did.

So did I really want to tempt Fate and host a party? People might have fun, but it wasn't guaranteed. And you have to be pretty pleased with yourself to host a party. The subtext is, "I'm so interesting, I think you should all come to my home and bring wine." And parties are like cakes. They can fall flat for no apparent reason. Also, if you care the least bit about whether your guests are enjoying themselves, you are bound to have a stressed, hassled, fun-free time.

Nige, the arch manipulator, saw me hesitate and cried, "Oh go on! Everyone will have so much fun!"

I looked at his beseeching face and said, "Let's do it."

That's my weakness. I like other people. They interest me. There's hardly anyone you can't learn something from, even if it's "Check in the mirror, front and behind, before you go out." Nige wanted cool and exclusive, but I thought we should do the bash Elton John style: invite the world, every member of Girl Meets Boy included. I felt protective toward them, as if they were my kids. Most of them I was fond of. When people trust you, it's hard not to like them, even the annoying ones. This party would be a way of saying thanks.

My only problem was Nick. My ex-fiancé. Our relationship was over, except he hadn't moved out. He was still waiting for his friend

Manjit's girlfriend to clear out her spare room (an excuse so poor I wanted to huddle it in a blanket). The truth was, he wanted me back. I was past being flattered. Nick stayed fixed at that stage of emotional development where you yowl for whichever toy is removed from your grasp. I ended it too amicably for my own good. I feel sheepish about this. I think it's far worse for the "ender" than the "endee." Especially an endee as charming and wily as Nick. He'd guilt-trip me into inviting him to the Girl Meets Boy party, then worry me like a fox all night.

Because of this, I wasn't overjoyed about going on my own. Normally, I wouldn't fret about it. If there's one thing I don't need a man for, it's to attend a party. They're a hindrance every time. But this was different. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to be fighting off Nick the entire evening. I needed a safety barrier. Also, there was something about attending a party for Girl Meets Boy without a partner that

bothered me. It felt too puritan. If I saw me there alone, I'd be suspicious, like meeting a baker who isn't fat.

As party night loomed, Claudia—I gave her a job when it became obvious that no one else would—tried to encourage me to pick a man off the pile. “Come on, Holly,” she said, poking the morning's stack of letters with polished fingernails. “It'll be like Cinderella in reverse. Just ring one up and explain who you are. They'll be thrilled. A date with the boss of *Girl Meets Yob*. Plucked from obscurity to attend your grand ball. The token date. It's the kind of thing that gives blokes a kick. Or—or! or! or! How about this. You could ask Stuart again!”

I choked. Despite my devious plan of skimming off the single cream for myself, after time spent thinking about it I'd gone off the idea. I felt maternal toward these men. Even the thirty-eight-year-olds. Thus, it would not have been healthy to shag them. Plus, I'd had one bad experience, which I'm unwilling to share because it was such a disaster. However, as I've just let slip the disaster's name, I might as well tell you, if only so you see what I was dealing with.

A month before, the PA of a solicitor named Stuart Marshall had E-mailed us, asking for an application form on his behalf. I sent it to her but couldn't resist adding, “Does he make you forge his Christmas cards too?” She replied, “That's the least of it.”

Two days later Stuart's details were delivered—by courier—to our office. Stuart's rapacious misuse of company resources gave him an air of benign familiarity. Despite never having set eyes on the guy, I felt I knew him. Claudia was half in love with Stuart already. She fell on that envelope like it was a fifty-pound note.

Nige tweaked Stuart's photograph from her grasp. He arched an eyebrow, drawled, “Whiff of the Channel Five Newsreader,” and spun it through the air to me. Well, possibly. Groomed like a racehorse. In blue Speedos. A lot of our clients do that—send us a snap that borders on intimate. Nige finds it “sad and grotesque,” but I tend to find it more awww! than aaaagh! It's only because they want to be accepted. They want to find someone. They're desperate to prove that they're good enough.

I understand that. It maddens me when I tell someone what I do and they sneer. We're biologically programmed to seek out nurturing relationships and yet, somehow, there are people who assume the attitude that this pursuit is trite. I tell them that those unable to empathize or forge rewarding bonds with others start by pulling the wings off bluebottles and end up breaking into people's homes and dismembering entire families. It usually shuts them up. So I was more sympathetic to Stuart than Nige was. Even when Claudia stuck her feet on the desk and started to dissect Stuart's vision of the perfect woman.

“Jesus Christ, listen to this.

“ ‘She should have a healthy zest for life’—as opposed to an unhealthy apathy—‘she should be secure in herself and her choices’—blimey, he sounds like you, Nige!” (Claudia once overheard Nige telling a fellow thespian that he “admired Brad Pitt’s choices.” Unbelievably, Nige wasn’t referring to Gwyneth or Jennifer, but to the genius decisions Brad made when acting. Quite rightly, she’s never let him forget it.)

“ ‘Not needy, but looking to share her passion and vitality’— what an arse! —‘ambitious, but probably already sorted careerwise, able to maintain a balance between work and play, prepared to make quality time for her partner and friends, interests of her own but would share a love of good food, wine, company, and exercise. She would enjoy long walks or runs along the beach’—sorry, but

who alive doesn’t enjoy a long sodding walk along the beach?— ‘and would enjoy riding high when I fly my plane.’ Good God, is he for real? What does that mean? Is it some sort of filthy pun? I bet it’s not his, I bet he hires it.”

“He probably means his toy plane,” suggested Nige. “He runs ’round the garden holding it above his head. He wants his perfect woman to watch from the upstairs window.”

Agreed, Stuart did sound a little—no a lot—much, but I was intrigued. That superlative sense of self-entitlement always starts me wondering about the mother. Not the father, you’ll note. Just the mother. I blame her. What a sexist. Shocking. “Go on, Claw.”

Claudia grinned. “ ‘She is ideally at least five foot seven but no taller than five foot nine, physically very active’—well, we all know what that means!—‘has blond hair’—no, surprise me!—‘and aged between twenty-four and twenty-nine. I would hope she has at least one relationship of respectable length behind her and has lived with a former partner. She should live in Zones One or Two’—un-bloody-believable —‘however, ideally she would not have any baggage (i.e., children or be divorced). She would be a female version of me.’ Wow. Holly, you’ve got to go out with him!”

I’d tipped back on my chair to listen, and I nearly fell off it. “What? I’m nothing like that woman! No one is. And you know what I’m like about flying. I panic if the pilot has a weak chin. Anyway, why me? What have I done?”

I looked beseechingly around our cramped little office—paper everywhere; it seemed to grow from the walls and breed on the floor—hoping for Nige’s support. When he pursed his lips, I knew I wasn’t going to get it.

“It’s what you haven’t done,” he said. “You need to take action, Holly. Show Nick that it’s over. I know you’re still fond of each other, but it’s not wise, him still lurking ’round the house. You need him to witness that you’ve moved on to better things. Claw is right. Stuart is just the pissing contest that Nick needs. You needn’t tell

Stuart who you are. I'll ring him, tell him Girl Meets Yob is giving him a free, er, trial. If we deem an applicant to be, ah, a VIP, we don't put them straight into a speed-dating session. We assign them what we call a 'free-range' date with an elite counterpart that's unsupervised and can last as long as they wish.

How's that sound?"

"Like bullshit," I said.

Claw started banging her fists on the desk, shouting, "Yes, yes, yes!"

While I am old enough not to be intimidated by two people disagreeing with me, I am also wise enough to know when to save my breath. "I'll think about it," I lied. Well, I thought I was lying, but my mind had other ideas. It danced around Stuart the whole day. I want to make this clear, I wasn't attracted to Stuart—I'm not an insane sadomasochist who doesn't know Hitler's CV when she sees it—but Nige was right.

I was still fond of Nick, dangerously fond. We'd gone out for five years, most of which were good, great even. And then we'd coasted. We were two parallel lines, always close but never together. Occasionally, we'd have a passionate quarrel during which many promises would be made. But not kept. Nick admitted that he didn't know how to make an effort in a relationship. I was his first, as he put it, Big One. Incidentally, when I say "effort" I don't mean he didn't send enough roses or stud the walls with little love notes (although he didn't). I mean he didn't talk much, wash enough, or seem to take particular pleasure in my company. Don't do me any favors.

But if I had to pinpoint the single factor that drove me to Stuart, it was the Febreze. As Claudia and Nige hummed about me, murmuring, "Go on, Holly. Oh please, it'll be fun," I thought of Nick, too lazy to shower, spraying his stinky feet with Febreze ("safely eliminates odors on fabrics and kills the bacteria that cause them"). And then a ripple of hard-done-by billowed airily through me and I thought, Ah, why not? What harm can it do?

How long have you got?

CHAPTER 2

I thought I was good at reading people. Is there anyone in the world who doesn't think they're good at reading people? I shouldn't have trusted myself. My judgment had already proved faulty with Nick. Why did I presume to know Stuart? The truth is, I'd painted my life into a corner. Instead of freeing me, every choice I'd made

hemmed me in. It's a pity to regret, but I did. I needed an escape. And if you're dying in a desert, you'll see hope in air and dust.

I refuse to begin with Stuart, though. He'd love that, if I began with him. The best way to gall people who wish you ill is not to give them space in your head. There's a great putdown in Casablanca, where Peter Lorre says to Humphrey Bogart, "You despise me, don't you?" He replies, "Well if I gave you any thought I probably would." I think that's funny. So I'll start with me and Nick.

Five years ago, when I met Nick, he was helping a duck. I was driving through one of the quainter parts of London and I saw this duck waddling along the pavement. A thin young man with a cigarette hanging out his mouth sauntered behind at a respectful distance from madam's tail feathers, ushering her away from the road. Everyone was ignoring them. Londoners are good at this. We can ignore anything. That disappoints me. I get a kick when I say hello to the ticket guy at my tube stop and he says, "All right, darlin'," and gives me a high five. It turns my city into a village.

Anyhow, I got the urge to offer the man and the duck a lift. I decided there was no way this guy was a lunatic, as he was helping a duck. So I swerved across the traffic and buzzed down my window. "Excuse me," I said, launching into one of the silliest sentences I've

ever spoken, "do you and the duck need a lift anywhere?" Then it struck me that the duck might be his pet. He could be taking her for a walk, and I'd just busybodied in there. In the smarter parts of town you can act like a complete nut and get away with it, so long as you own the matching bag.

I was grateful when the man took the cigarette out of his mouth and smiled. "It's very kind of you," he said, "but I think being in a Golf might scare her. I wouldn't want her getting in, you know, a flap." He giggled at this bad joke, which made me smile. "But you could always leave the car and help me get her back to the pond." I parked on a double yellow and together we directed Jemima toward her pond. We got as far as the Chinese restaurant when, very sensibly, she decided to fly the rest of the way. We returned to a parking ticket.

"You might as well make the most of it," said Nick. "Do you want to get an ice cream?"

Our relationship was not about being adult. Some couples race to become less liberal clones of their parents. Nick's best pal, Manjit, chose Bo, a woman who clamps down on fun like it's illegal. When Nick showed Manjit a new purchase—a shirt with a design of a cat, a cockerel, a donkey, a bird, and a beaver on its back, plus the beautifully embroidered words "Pussy, Cock, Ass, Tit, Beaver"—Manjit said mournfully, "I wouldn't be allowed that." Same when he saw the two electric love hearts dangling from the Golf's rearview mirror. Tacky.

I felt sorry for Manjit, although privately I wondered what Bo could actually do to him if he bought a shirt like Nick's. Tear it off his back? Ignore him for a month? Refuse to leave the house with him? Stop hauling him to classical concerts and her school reunions? Manjit, buy the shirt. (He didn't, so I could only presume that in some way he enjoyed the childish relief of relinquishing free will, one of the few advantages of shacking up with a dictator.)

Maybe Nick and I weren't so different after all. We gave each other permission to behave like babies. On the face of it, that was good. In any romantic movie, universal code for "these people are meant to be together" is a shot of the guy sitting opposite the girl in a diner gazing at her adoringly as she stuffs down a burger and talks nonsense with her mouth open, mustard dribbling down her chin. The precise opposite of how a woman eats on a date. The point is: It's okay to act like you're five. You are officially in paradise.

With Nick I acted more like I was five than when I was five. I was quite a serious kid. It took me until I met Nick to realize I'd passed up on half my childhood. Nick would say, "Remember the episode of Fawlty Towers when Basil attacks the Mini?" I'd blush and say, "No." He'd recall the time he bet Manjit that he could eat three tins of golden syrup. He won the bet, but alas, puffed up and spent three days in the hospital. Or when he and Manjit went exploring on their bikes and found a dead bullet by the stream. High on good citizenship, they'd sped it to the local police station, where officers had to practically stuff their hands in their mouths to keep from laughing.

To me, this was idyllic, a marvelous adventure tale, Tom Sawyer meets The Secret Garden. My upbringing was fine, nothing wrong with it. Just a little more cautious, conservative. Our TV was black-and-white, toaster-sized, and kept in a cupboard. I was a bookworm. Whereas Nick lived the dream, I read about it. My parents are wonderful people, old-fashioned in their innocence, never expecting much. The first time we went on holiday to Portugal, I remember my father blinking in pleasure because the hotel had a pool. My mother looked cowed at her good fortune. It hurt me to see it in their eyes, What have we done to deserve this?

While they were keen to give us—me, Claudia, and our big sister, Isabella—whatever we wanted, it never occurred to them that we could want more than we were given. Which was books. Visits to stately homes. Museum trips. Two-thousand-piece jigsaws of English country gardens. Love. My parents never wanted more than they were given. My mother would have bitten off her tongue before she complained about anything. Her old friend Leila once gave her a cotton-tissue holder for Christmas. It must have cost 5 pence. A gas station wouldn't dare give it to you free with your petrol. Mum had bought Leila a painting by a local artist she admired.

It was painful to see my mother wriggle to excuse Leila. She didn't give a damn about the meanness, it was the lack of respect that got her. "Well," she said, "money's tight for Leila. And you know Leila, she's a batty old thing." Even though we both knew that "batty" didn't cut it. Unless you're clinically insane you know "tissue holder as gift" is unacceptable. But I kept quiet. It's easier to forgive than to confront. If you've been slapped in the face, you don't need people saying, "Gosh, you've been slapped in the face." "Why didn't she just give you a poo wrapped up in a hankerchief?" cried Nick.

Yea, behold the miracle. My parents adored Nick. He could say and do anything, cheeky as you like. They were in awe, treated him like a prince. That meant a lot. I'm uncool; parental approval matters to me. In fact, any parental approval matters to me, probably to the extent of weirdness. Once Nick and I saw a brilliant new band play their first big gig, and the frontman kept saying, in a croak of disbelief, "This is incredible for us, thank you so much for coming." All I could think was, His parents must be so proud. That's my first thought every time I see talented people onstage, Their parents must be so proud. (My second thought is, I wish I could do that.)

The mind-set, I suppose, of a woman resisting adulthood. I fell in love with Nick and his parents. I cherished the fact that he came from a glamorous family. His mother and father, Lavinia and Michael Mortimer, were a revelation. Rich, sparkly, magical, mysterious, like the parents in Peter Pan. They traveled endlessly, collecting art. They campaigned for their favorite charities. They owned a villa in Italy, which they'd renovated from ruin a decade before Umbria became fashionable. They both spoke fluent Italian. I was so bedazzled the first time I went there that when Nick's mother offered me a dish of olives, I went blind with fright. I reached for the brightest item on the plate, and she said kindly, "No, dear, that's a lemon."

Nick's parents indulged him, like we all did. He entertained us. The first two years of our relationship I had a blast. I'd never been naughty—I was content, I hadn't felt the need. But it was liberating, to play. I thought it wild that I had a boyfriend whose job was to dress as Mr. Elephant at children's parties. It endeared me that his small Islington flat was a shrine to grime, and that when his mother visited she would sigh, in her silvery voice, "Oh, Nick." I didn't comment. If my man chose to live on hygiene's edge, I wouldn't interfere. I was proud of not trying to change him. So very modern of me. Nick and I spent a great many months in his king-size bed screwing, drinking vodka, or both. Only twice was I bitten by a flea.

We bought a cotton candy maker from the Shopping Channel and ate pink cotton candy for breakfast. We got drunk and ran along the road swapping people's doormats and then, because I felt bad about it, we ran along the road swapping them back. We bought twenty squirt bottles of chocolate sauce and had a food fight in the garden until we and the grass were brown. I was thinking to myself, This is what couples do in films. Then Nick stood up and said, "I don't like this. It's like we're covered in poo."

I thought I was a secure person until I met Nick. Then I saw what it was to be heart and soul at peace with yourself. I do believe that people treat you as you present yourself, and Nick presented as a gift from God. Luck followed him around like a puppy. Nick's parents owned a big white boat, and Nick blew it up.

He'd filled it with fuel after a day on the river, turned on the ignition, and Bang! The wooden deck splintered under his feet, flames shooting high. He grabbed my hand and we jumped into the Thames. The boat sank. Or as Nick told his father on the phone, "Was lying low in the water." A pipe had come loose and fuel had slopped into the engine. The firefighters said we could have had fifty-foot flames. We were lucky the whole thing didn't explode. Lucky Nick.

It was his idea to buy a house together. I was flattered. I don't mean that in a "Gee, li'l ol' me" kind of way. I mean that I loved Nick so fiercely I wanted to eat him up. If I could have crawled inside his skin I would have. I could almost understand the cannibalistic lust of Jeffrey Dahmer, my desire was so violent. Some nights I'd sob aloud because one day we'd die and then what would I do if we weren't together for eternity? He felt the same about me. "I worship you," he said. "Marry me."

We found a house and bought it with less thought than some people give to buying a newspaper. (Islington flats, even small dirty ones, scrub up well and sell for silly money. Even my non-Islington flat, bought four years earlier when property was affordable, had in those four years earned more than I had.)

It was a riot, flying by the seat of our pants, cheating death. When you live apart and meet for the good times, you can pretty much edit out the worst bits of yourself. The cold slap of joint property ownership put an end to that. Often Nick would lie in bed till midday. He ignored bills, claiming an allergy to paperwork. He left a trail of crap behind him like a snail. I'd considered myself easygoing. Now, to my embarrassment, I found I wasn't.

"Let Nick face the consequences of his actions," bossed my sister Isabella, a psychologist. "If he doesn't water the plants, let them die. He'll learn."

I didn't let the plants die. You don't nurture something, then let it die. Anyhow, I knew they'd die and he wouldn't notice. I consoled myself that Isabella counseled couples on how to argue effectively: be specific in your complaint, employ the pronoun "I," not "you," keep your voice calm and level. When I inquired how she argued effectively with her husband, Frank, she replied, "I scream at him."

I screamed at Nick. What next, cutting out recipes? Before I'd been proud that I didn't want to change him. Now that I did, I discovered that I couldn't.

It hit me with a shock that Nick wasn't playing hard before he embarked on forty years of working hard. This was it for him. He'd continue to live like a student till he

was sixty-five. There was no grand plan, no passion to make a success of his life. His idea of making a success of his life was to live in the moment, be happy. But, I thought, you need things to be happy. We didn't set a date for the wedding.

I was ambitious. I wasn't going to end up like my parents— meek, humble, grateful for crumbs. Nick, it struck me, was like them in that he accepted whatever happened to him. His fatality bordered on Australian. He had an end-of-the-rainbow approach to finances. He was pleased for me to earn the cash. My career became a sanctuary. At the office I could blank out the rage that pulsed through me when my metal hairpins jabbed my scalp because Nick had absentmindedly picked off their smooth plastic ends. Because he refused to behave even the teeniest bit like an adult, I was forced to grow up, and I resented it.

I was an imposter. Do adults think, This book I'm reading

matches my pajamas? Blush when a shop assistant calls them "madam"? Feel heartless when trading in their rusty old car for a shiny new one? Fold a black-and-white-checked dishcloth onto the cat's head and proclaim her Yasser Alleycat? Eat all the chocolate off a Kit Kat first? Lie on the floor and wish they lived on the ceiling? Stroke their childhood toy (not that Fluffy is real, but just in case)? Jab a knife into the toaster while it's still on? No? Well, then. I was an adult at work, taking care of others, but I refused to be that at home. Inside, I was still a little girl. Because you're not truly grown up until you're what, fifty?

Our relationship dropped sheer off a cliff. I kept more and more of me to myself. Nick didn't offer to make me coffee, why should I leave him any cherries? He never wrote down my phone messages, why should I tell him he was missing Larry Sanders? I was a hypocrite. I had endless goodwill for the world and none for Nick. I'd watch the RSPCA's TV appeal and phone them £500 to repent for the human race. Same for the NSPCC, guilt by association. But I'd spit and boil when Nick begged a fiver. So much for our eternal love. It couldn't survive a broken dishwasher.

Yet when I thought about ending our engagement, I felt panicked, sodden with dread, my insides heavier than I could carry. But then I didn't want to be fifty-eight, married, miserable, and marooned, looking back on a shadow of a life. Girl Meets Boy was a joy for me, but I needed something separate, outside of it. I didn't blame Nick wholesale. He hadn't changed, I had. He was the love of my life. But he was also, undeniably, the catalyst that turned me into a person I didn't much like.

I told him it was over on what must have been the prettiest night of the summer. A fat moon lay low, heavy and golden in the sky. Earlier, the setting sun had tinted the streets and houses pink. I chose to take all this as a cosmic sign: It's not the end of the world. But fuck, it felt like it.

CHAPTER 3

I felt that my resolve might snap like a bread-stick. I was always a breath away from begging him to stay. I had to chant in my head, over and over, He doesn't love you enough, you don't love him enough, or I'd weaken. Our families were aghast and distraught, which made it even harder. And when Nick wept, I wanted to wail my remorse at his feet. It would have been easy to be nice to him now. So I focused on his flaws; I magnified them ten times over. He didn't want me, he just objected to rejection on principle. I made myself despise him for not having the honesty to walk away.

Scratch what I said earlier about the Febreze leading me to Stuart. I could pretend Nick and his smelly feet drove me to it, to that stupid juvenile plan to humiliate him via some stranger plucked from a pile. I could maintain that Claudia and Nige were so persuasive that I had no choice, but no. Even if my colleague made the call, I made the decision. I'll stand up and say it. It was my fault.

When, two months after I'd told him it was over, Nick discovered I had a date with some guy from Girl Meets Boy, he went bananas. As he slammed the kitchen door again, it occurred to me that our grand plan wasn't foolproof. My date with Stuart Marshall—who'd swallowed the bait, as Nige said, "like a carp biting on a maggot"—was as likely to make Nick want me more as less. I told myself this had nothing to do with me as a person. Nick would battle Stuart over a cardboard box. Which made it easier to tell him just what I thought of his behavior. When you're angry at yourself, there's always the option of taking it out on a loved one.

"Nick," I said, "this doesn't endear you to me. Stop acting like a three-year-old. As of two months ago, it's none of your business who I see. I'm going out with this guy tomorrow, and if you can't deal with that it's your problem. And stop banging doors. You're frightening Emily. Look. Her ears are flattened to the back of her head. And her tail's gone like a toilet brush."

I heard myself make this righteous little speech and knew I'd made the right decision. See? This man turned me into someone I disliked even when we were no longer a couple.

Nick swiveled around from the side, where he was making himself a cheese sandwich, and glanced guiltily at the cat. To be divorcee about it, Emily is technically his. He was passing the vet surgery and saw a notice in the window about "the most affectionate" ten-year-old cat who was to be "PTS" (put to sleep) unless she was found a new home, because she had diabetes and her owner "couldn't cope emotionally." Nick yup-yup-yupped the vet's warning about commitment and returned to the flat a hero, with a handful of syringes and a small black fur ball. A month later I was giving Emily her insulin injections.

What a bastard, no?

To my surprise, Nick looked meek. “Sorry, darling,” he said, sweetly contrite.

I realized he was speaking to the cat. Emily forgave him and arched her back to be stroked. Much as I love her, she sets a terrible example. Nick grinned and glanced at me. “You’re right,” he said. “I’m being a jerk. I’m sorry. Let me make it up to you. You’re seeing this guy, when?”

“Tomorrow. Saturday. Daytime.” I hoped I didn’t sound defensive.

“Right. Okay. Cool. What you doing?”

“No idea.”

I’ll say here that office politics bore me to tears, and I think that one of the meanest methods of mental warfare is to cut an employee out of the informational loop. The dawning sense of isolation nibbles away at their confidence, feeds their paranoia, confirms it, until they’re reduced to a miserable twitching wreck, their

superiors’ lack of faith becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and they resign for fear of being sacked, thus saving the bullies a wad in severance pay. In any hierarchy, it’s a practice perpetuated by cowards, and I despise it—like cruelty to animals and waiters—but when the power balance is theoretically equal, I waive my morals.

In other words, I did have a vague idea of what Stuart had planned for our date (a surprise that involved the motorway and glamorous dress, which to me suggested a champagne picnic—how quaint), but I thought if I willfully froze out Nick it would send the right message. I looked him straight in the eye, and he gazed back. He’s gaunt, but with a slight puffiness under his brown eyes, which are so dark they’re almost black. Once I told him that he reminded me of Johnny Depp’s dress sense. It did his ego no good at all. Now I wished I hadn’t.

“All right,” he said. “How about I make you dinner tonight? You know, to say sorry.”

I couldn’t think of an excuse fast enough. “Well. Yes. If you want to. You don’t have to. Rachel’s coming around at some point to lend me a dress.” I meant this to sound how it sounded. Threatening. Don’t take another step. Back away from your ex-fiancée with your hands up, etcetera. I didn’t trust him and he knew it. He chose his reaction with care. “You’re taking a risk, aren’t you? You don’t know where that dress has been. Or worse, you do know where it’s been. On Rachel. Urrgh.”

I didn’t want to think about it. Rachel is a dear friend, and I’d say this to her face: She’s a foul slob, the finest that Cheltenham Ladies’ College has produced. Even Nick (forever shoving his hands down his boxers on the grounds that “it’s relaxing, like having a pouch”) finds her disregard for hygiene a bit grim. She prefers to wait for the public rest room, as she appreciates a warm toilet seat.

I was about to rub it in by saying, “I don’t have anything smart, and Stuart said smart,” then recalled my vow of silence. So instead I settled for, “What time’s dinner?”

I would have been a fool to pass up the offer. Nick is a fabulous chef, when he can be bothered. It was going to be tedious, cooking for myself again. Following a recipe doesn’t excite me. It’s math with food. (I’d cooked for Nick once during our five-year relationship. Chicken stir-fry. I hadn’t cut the chicken up small enough. Nick, choking down a poultry boulder, had said, “I feel like an Alsatian.”) At eight-thirtyish, Nick called me to the dining room table. This in itself was hilarious, since for the past four years we’d eaten supper either sitting in silence on the sofa or standing in single file in front of the fridge.

“Smells gorgeous,” I said. (No harm in being civil.) “What is it?”

Nick beamed. “It’s a Mediterranean peasant soup, soupe au pistou, if we’re being fancy.”

“Mm,” I said, like a lamb to the slaughter. “What’s in it?”

“Everything. Vermicelli, tomatoes, carrots, you name it.” Except he didn’t. (The beans, the leeks, the sprouts, the raw garlic, all of which, in my innocence, I found delicious.) The main course was sublime. A colorful plate of roasted vegetables—Jerusalem artichokes, parsnips, asparagus—and a delicious beef curry, crafted from scratch by Nick’s “loving hand” with fresh ginger, cloves, cardamon, garlic, chili, cumin, coriander, and turmeric. Dessert was stewed pears with hot chocolate sauce. Nick’s behavior was immaculate. He made no snide references to Stuart and when, keen to show that greed couldn’t sway my resolve, I asked on the progress of Manjit and Bo’s spare room, he gave me a serious answer. Maybe the Stuart plan would work. I was impressed.

I only began to be less impressed when Rachel arrived with the dress. I leaned to kiss her and—oh, the irony—she jumped back, crying, “Bloody hell, babes, you smell like Mummy’s old Lab! Deal with that breath, it’s wilting my hair!” I tested it with cupped hands and nearly passed out. I sped to the bathroom but the damage was done. The reek proved immune to brushing, flossing, and gargling with the sort of evil mouthwash that brings tears to your eyes.

Rachel passed me the dress from a safe, offensive distance (“Ring when you’re better, babes”), then left. I checked it over like a guard dog inspecting a poisoned doughnut. It was either breathtakingly postmodern, the essence of cool, or eighties froufrou verging on frumpy. I wasn’t hip enough to tell. Dark green sheeny material, sleeveless, bodiced, wide skirt with puffy netting underneath. And a matching bolero jacket. “You are going nowhere,” I said to the jacket. “I’ll tell you that for nothing.”

I decided to wear the dress with a bright pink V-neck sweater and Adidas trainers. I had the feeling Stuart would be horrified, which didn't unduly alarm me. Life is not about being reviewed. I was congratulating myself on my inner steel and thanking the Lord for inventing mints when I felt a strange stirring in my gut. My torso seemed to inflate as I stood there. Suddenly, I was uncomfortable, my skin tight and stretched. My abdomen felt like bubble wrap being squeezed but unable to pop. It emitted a bad-tempered growl. I gasped as the breath jolted out of me. The pain was fierce and exact, a lightning strike, as surely as if someone had drawn a line across my stomach and written, Cramp here.

The next seven hours were like a bad chemistry experiment. My breath revolted even Emily, a feline not exactly minty-fresh herself. I farted like a bog of corpses—endlessly; I could have powered a hot-air balloon from London to Colorado—and (the piss de résistance) even my urine reeked. Nick had trumped every Bond villain yet by fouling my bladder. You forget asparagus does that to you. It's nasty. Particularly when you look and feel as though you've swallowed a beach ball. As I sat on the throne, groaning at three A.M., Nick called through the door, between gusts of laughter, "Gorgeous, are you getting set for your date?"

His inquiries got the response they deserved.

I awoke at 5:37 A.M. slumped on the toilet. It was not an exhilarating moment. Everyone has an ideal self-image. This was a long way from mine. Clutching the towel rack like a bewildered old woman, I tried to lurch to my feet, but my behind was stuck to the seat. I felt like stone, as if I'd fossilized overnight. Slowly, wincing, I peeled myself upright and hobbled to my bed. Lucky for Nick that he now slept in our study. If I'd laid eyes on his snoring form at that moment I'd have surrendered to primeval rage and bitten him.

Time skipped to midmorning, and I drove through the rain in my sleep, still farting. I was aware of a horseshoe-shaped bruise blooming on my buttocks, and I was chewing spearmint gum with ferocity. Stuart had wanted to pick me up from home in his Mercedes Kompressor, but while this would have out-penised Nick good and proper, I'd declined. This was our first encounter—I couldn't call it a date—and I wanted my own transportation (Nige,

our intermediary, had reported back that Stuart seemed hurt by this. So I'd compromised. We'd meet in the tube parking lot and he could chauffeur us from there. If it meant that much to him.)

I was so intrigued to see what a fascist looked like in real life, I briefly forgot that I was also under inspection. Then I caught him staring. I wondered how I looked to him. I'm quite a big girl. Rachel says I have a "seventies body." Nick says I have the aura of "I'm Woman, outta my way!" Whatever. I prefer a bit of heft. I feel it's the natural order of things. It pains me to see anyone—kids, teenage girls, old people, greyhounds—that I consider too thin. Peculiar, I know, but I can't help but worry that

there's unhappiness behind it. When Nick first got Emily she was a wisp. I'd feed her canned tuna, then pinch her softly like the witch in Hansel and Gretel to see if she'd gained weight.

"It does your heart good to see a cat eat," I'd tell Nick, who'd shake his head, laughing. What I meant was, I love to eat, I love to watch any creature eat, to me it's like a celebration of life. But suddenly, crunching on gravel in a ball gown in front of this Viking in yellow shades, I felt odd. My instinct told me that Stuart was the sort who saw it as his duty to inform normal-sized women they were fat and needed to diet. You know, make less of themselves.

"Holly?" he said, a half-smile forming on his geometrically exact face.

"Stuart?" I replied.

His smile went all the way. "You're not at all what I ...expected. But very lovely. I, ah"—he whipped off the shades, revealing blond eyebrows and blue eyes—"goodness, I don't know what to say. I haven't done this before. This is my first time. I'm a blind-date virgin. How about you?"

I didn't want to fib more than I had (which was already quite a lot). As blind dates went, I was an old slapper. All in the name of research, of course. Before I launched *Girl Meets Boy* I'd tested the services of two established agencies. Both, I'm delighted to report, were ghastly. Stuart needed to know none of this.

"My hymen is intact," I said. Well sorry, but I like a good chauvinist. They're so much fun to bait. To my disappointment and his credit, Stuart resisted the opportunity for fatuous comment ("A little

more information than I need, mah-hah-hah!"). Instead, he giggled, raised a yellow eyebrow, and gestured to his silver car. "Shall we?"

He held open the door—"Please! Allow me!"—sweetly formal, like an old-fashioned gentleman. I spotted the hamper squeezed into the joke of a backseat. (Give me a truck over a sports car, any day. It's not my favorite, zooming along horizontal.) "A picnic in the rain," I murmured. "I knew it!"

Stuart laughed. "Good guess. But not quite."

"Oh?"

Stuart glanced side-on at me. "I've arranged something a little more special for us. Let us say"—he looked at me again—"a little more high flying."

Jesusgodno.

"What do you mean?"

I soon found out. To maintain his pilot's license (oh, get a life) Stuart had to fly a certain number of hours per year. He'd had this morning's flight at Northolt booked for ages, so it was no problem to take a guest. His treat. He said this like I might argue. You bet it was his treat. I wasn't about to pay this man to kill me. I tried to be noble and resign myself to the end. This was my due for trying to bait Nick. At the airport we marched from desk to desk. There was a reassuring amount of paperwork. I knew Stuart was aching for me to quiz him about being insane, I mean, a pilot.

I asked him about the safety checks.

"There's one hundred and ten points," he told me. "It takes around an hour. But I once had a plane turned 'round in eighteen minutes. You're just looking at tire pressure, that sort of thing. It'd just come in. But that was at a bigger airport."

Rushing the safety check. Excellent.

I followed him numbly onto the runway. At least, I thought, commercial pilots fly full-time. This guy was on work experience. It wasn't even his plane. He was renting it. When I rent a car, it takes me a day to master the clutch. I spend the first hour leaping about like a kangaroo. And stalling. But that's not such a problem when you're on the ground.

"It's pouring," I said hopefully.

"Shit," replied Stuart, frowning skyward.

"What?"

"Water melts the engine."

"Wha—"

"Joke," replied Stuart. "There's my girl."

Our plane had obviously been trundled out of the hangar like a Ford Mondeo out of a shed. I peered at the engineer and tried to assess whether or not he looked alert. I attempted to keep my breathing slow and deep, but I couldn't and panted like a dog. I prayed the cockpit had sick-bag facilities. A large fried breakfast this morning — scrambled egg, sausages, mushrooms, tomatoes, no beans—to settle my stomach already threatened to announce itself as an error.

"It's a Cessna," said Stuart, "twin propeller."

"Right."

"Twin engine, see? Greater stability. In the event of engine failure we've got some power capability. The backup engine gives us some balance control. It enables the

plane to still maintain thrust. You're free-falling but, quite simply, you glide the plane down. You have the ability to land it—presuming you've got landing facilities, that is."

"Stuart," I said, keeping my tone jolly. "Please don't say 'freefalling' again."

He laughed, and his eyes crinkled. "I'll keep you safe, Holly. And"—lifting the hamper—"I hate to let a roast chicken go to waste. Hop in, then."

There weren't even steps. I clambered in the little door, and Stuart leaped in behind me. And there we were in Legoland.

"This is . . . cramped."

"Cozy," replied Stuart. I sat dumb in my seat and goggled at the mass of controls. I must have put on my headphones—"the cans" I think Stuart called them—done up my seat belt, watched Stuart flick switches, heard him check in with air traffic control, run through what I should do "in the event of an emergency," but I don't remember much of it. I presume I blanked it out. That safety procedure is just patronizing waffle, anyhow. In the event of an emergency, we all know that it's good-bye world in a big red fireball.

Then Stuart said, "Let's hit it."

What with keeping in the screams and the farts, I had my work

cut out. A few of both escaped. Only now do I understand the true meaning of "taking off." Imagine stepping in a lift and jumping up twenty floors. In a jumbo, you feel the power behind you. This was like being pinged from a slingshot. Noise (mostly me, screaming) but no vroom. No push. A sick, vertical ascent in a cigar tube. I gripped my seat and focused on not vomiting. I knew if I opened my mouth to scream again, my stomach and its contents would fall out. Nick, I thought, my eyes blind with fear, you can stay forever. Just let me survive.

"Still alive, Holly?" said Stuart eventually.

"Just."

I noticed the plane had windshield wipers. How primitive can you get? I was already exhausted with the continuous tension of waiting to die. We were now horizontal but every other second a jolt knocked a gasp out of me. I can only compare it to hurtling a car over the brow of a hill at great speed and feeling your stomach fly. My innards were way behind. All of me trembled so hard I felt that my bones were in danger of rattling out of their sockets. I would have felt safer on a broomstick.

"Stuart. Will it be this turbulent all the time?"

“Chill, Holly. It’s just weather. Look at the view. Enjoy it. Relax. The sky is ours—unless that is, we choose to blunder into commercial airspace and knock down a Boeing. Joke. Joke, okay? Bet you didn’t expect Girl Meets Boy to set you up on a date like this, hey?”

I’m not that keen on the word hey as a question. “You’re absolutely right. No, I didn’t,” I replied. I felt bad. Stuart genuinely thought he was giving me a thrill. He was a lot sweeter than his application form. As far as he was concerned, this horror death ride was a laugh. It wasn’t his fault I was a nervous flier. Shame on me. This poor man had applied to my agency in good faith, and here I was using him for my own petty purposes—to edge my former fiancé out of the house. If I live, I told myself, I will stop being a coward. I will march up to Nick and say, “Go.”

“It’s wonderful,” I said, glancing out of the window to check the propeller. “But”—it was only fair to tell him as soon as I could—“I feel queasy. I’m not going to be able to eat any roast chicken.” Even the idea made me shudder.

Stuart grinned at me. “No problem, Holly. There are other things we can do.”

I realized I was ice-cold and my teeth chattered. I like to think the best of people, I really do, but this oily innuendo could only mean one thing. His next sentence was bound to contain the word joystick. I can’t think of one good reason why, but I laughed.

“Stuart,” I said. Shake, rattle, hum, mechanical fault. “If that was a veiled reference to the Mile High Club, you have got to be kidding me. I mean that.” I stopped. I wasn’t going to reel out a list of reasons why not (I don’t know you, I don’t fancy you, I need you to fly the plane, etcetera). No was it. That, in my view, is enough. But curiosity overcame pride. “I can’t believe sex is possible, in this. I bet you haven’t. Ever.”

Stuart laughed. “There are ways and means,” he said. “You set the controls, let her ride.” He nodded at his lap, a wicked look on his face. “But for a pretty girl you’ve got a dirty mind, Holly. I wasn’t talking about that. I was talking about this.”

I shrieked shrill and loud as our tin coffin jerked harsh left and tipped in a rush of noise, till the plane lay dead on its side and I could see its flimsy wing sharp above us. “What are you doing,” I screamed. “Stop, stop, stop, you’re going to kill us!” Normally I’d never speak to anyone like that, not even Nick. “Oh my God, help meeeee!”

We were plummeting, spiraling, a heinous lunatic roller-coaster, toward Earth. My hair stood on end, every follicle prickled, and I had to swallow and swallow to gulp down the saliva, the nausea, the fear. I couldn’t even grab the controls. I screeched and Stuart smiled. He cried, “Weeeeeeeee!” I just cried.