

In memory of Luke, whose talent,
wit, drive and smile will be greatly
missed but always remembered by
everyone who met him.

Luke and Catherine met online via the BBC Writers Forum and decided to write this novel together as Luke wanted to see if he could write from a female perspective and Catherine from a male viewpoint. Heading South was completed in rapid time via email and telephone conversations, though as Luke tragically died in October 2006, aged just 34, the two authors never met in person.

Chapter 1

Cassie

Even in the snoozy Cotswold countryside, the mid-morning air isn't entirely filled with melodious bird song and the soporific mooing of cattle. Sometimes an impostor makes its presence felt.

“Caaaaassssiiiiiiiiieeeee!”

Oh bugger.

Just as my dream man is leaning in for our first electric kiss, something else needs my attention.

“What?!”

“I’m sorry, Richard. I’ll only be a second. Why don’t you pour us some more of Tesco’s finest and I’ll be back before you’ve burped up the first few bubbles?”

“Cassie!” The voice comes again.

Could that be another man after my attentions? Phew! What a morning!

I haul myself out of the flowerbed where, back in the real world, I’ve been planting a red rhododendron, and dust off my knees.

“There’s something on the girly wig!”

“Don’t worry!”

This had better be a full-on disaster, I think, as I hoick up my too-tight-therefore-unbuttoned trousers. My daydream was so real I was actually getting drunk on it.

“Why don’t you come and help me here, so I can see what

you're doing?" I call out.

Silence.

"Wiggy," I say a little more sharply, as the rhododendron collapses on its side. "Wiggy!" My call receives no reply. "Oh...f...iddle."

I round the corner of the cottage onto a semicircle of crazy paving. It should have been normal paving but D.I.Y was never my strong point. I call it D.D.I.Y. – don't do it yourself.

"Wiggy!"

Because of the dazzling sunlight, the scene that confronts me takes several seconds to become clear.

Underneath the whirly gig (or girly wig as Wiggy calls the clothes carousel) is a small bundle with something moving inside. The clothes still clinging on are thrashing about like spinnakers in high wind.

I approach with caution, crouching down like the tourists you see rushing from helicopters after a five-minute spin over The Grand Canyon or Rio de Janeiro, or the many other places I haven't been with my dream lover but would like to visit.

"Wiggy!"

"Here," says a small, frightened voice.

"Are you ok?"

I reach down into the heap and dig about for the reassuring warmth of a childish form. Finding it, I fumble for a hand and pull Wiggy free from what must have seemed an alarming avalanche of bed linen, teddies, nighties and a tablecloth (had a slight disaster with a glass of red wine on Saturday night).

I sit her on one of the whitewashed garden chairs and, giving her a rub on the head, turn my attention to the carousel. The sound it was emitting has greatly reduced but it still appears to be half-filled with crepe paper being rustled by a large kindergarten group.

I pull the washing apart, revealing the pheasant I adopted

after he suffered a broken wing.

“You stupid, stupid bird, Eeyore.”

I grab him roughly and place him on the ground. “How did you get in there?”

He gives me an indignant roll of his eyes as if to say, “How do you think?” Then, with a stropy flap of his wings, he scurries off into the hedge to brood.

Wiggy’s now smiling brightly and wagging her feet like paddles under the chair. “He’s a silly bird, isn’t he, Auntie Cassie?” she giggles.

My two cats, Piglet and Roo, are play-fighting under her, twisting and rolling like leaves in the wind. I stoop down, stroking both cats and, now at Wiggy’s eye level, ask her if she’d like some lunch. (I’ve bought alphabet spaghetti especially.)

“Can I have an avocado?” Wiggy chirrups.

“Sure,” I say, a little taken aback at her sophistication.

“With some French dressing and some chives?”

“If that’s what you want.”

I take her hand and lead her through the French windows into the kitchen, my mind already wandering back to my earlier daydream.

How perfect this quiet country living would be with just a tiny bit less babysitting and a smidgen more sex.

Nick

As I wake-up I experience two sensations in quick succession. The first is a pleasant vibration around my groin. The second is like the pain of being kicked in the bollocks, only transferred to my head. The rest of my body feels like it’s been in a road traffic accident.

I eventually persuade my hand to reach down and wrestle my buzzing mobile from the pocket of my jeans.

“Nick Ratcliffe,” I croak into the handset. The mouth isn’t so

good either: a dry, desiccated wasteland, vaguely tasting of stale lager.

“Nick, it’s Debbie.”

My sister’s voice twitters anxiously down the phone. What kind of girly crisis has she managed to get herself into this time?

“Nick...are you there, Nick?”

I groan to confirm I’m still alive.

“Nick, Scotty didn’t come home last night. I can’t get him on his mobile and I’ve no idea where he is and...”

Oh God! She’s sobbing, and sobbing means I’m going to do whatever it is she’s about to ask me. What is it about a crying woman that makes a bloke drop everything and go running?

“Ok. I’ll get dressed and come over.”

It’s only a small lie but it seems to pacify her. I can’t get dressed because I’m already dressed.

“No, don’t worry, I’ll come to you.”

“See you in a bit then.” I hang up.

I must have just crawled straight into bed when I got in, whatever time that was. Perhaps a shower will help.

I roll off the bed into an undignified heap. I have to use the corner of my chest-of-drawers to haul myself up. At least I managed to take my trainers off before I passed out.

I shuffle down the hall and into the bathroom, trying to decide whether I need to be sick or whether...

“Eurchhhh!” My foot touches something warm and soft on the floor of the bathroom.

I turn my bleary eyes downwards and see what appears to be the decapitated body of a man wearing nothing but an England away shirt.

My head swims. I try to work out exactly who might have put it there and what happened to his head.

The answer slowly comes to me. I’d recognise that arse anywhere. Anyone who has ever driven behind a coach taking Owls supporters to an away game would recognise that arse.

I prod the body tentatively with my foot. I get a pained

grunting noise in response.

“Scotty, get your head out of my laundry basket and get some clothes on, will you? Deb’s looking for you.”

Cassie

I watch Wiggy squeeze out a large blob of gouache onto my pine kitchen table and then raise a mucky paw to her mouth.

“No, don’t eat it, sweetie.” Her multi-coloured fingers make their way to her lips. “Mummy will not be pleased if you go home with a tummy-ache.”

She’s already enjoyed two avocados, half a packet of (low fat, please) crisps and a satsuma.

As I scrub her hands for the second time in an hour, Jilly arrives to pick her up.

“Thanks so much again for looking after her.” She plonks herself down on a kitchen chair and gives an exhausted sigh. “What a morning!”

“So how are things at Corruptly & Dork?” I ask.

“I need lunchtime alcohol! This woman looking round the barn conversion wants her husband to come and view it later this afternoon. Can’t say no really but, if she doesn’t buy this one, I’m going to tell her to find another agent. You know the kind of thing.” Jilly puts on a superior voice, “‘The kitchen’s a bit pokey. How many acres does the house come with? Ghastly wallpaper, that’ll have to go. Carpet’s a bit frayed.’ She comments on everything, looks at the place three times and then says, ‘No, it simply won’t do. I’m not living in a hovel.’ I’ve nearly punched her several times.”

I tut sympathetically and pour her a glass of Rioja. She glugs it back in one and gasps, “Thanks Cass, you’re a saint.”

“Much to do this afternoon?” I sit myself down, putting my elbows on the table.

“Christ yes. I’m cooking for Jeff and a few of his clients

tonight. Suddenly got a terrible feeling I've left the beef in the deep freeze, so I'll have to buy another joint. Then I've got three more viewings to get through..."

"You're a miracle on legs."

"I'm a mess." She looks at her watch. "Oh Christ, Cass, I've really got to run. We'll catch up another time, ok?"

She gathers up Wiggy and bolts out the door. I wave as she backs out at action-movie speed and careers off down the lane, shouting at Wiggy to put her seatbelt on.

I wander back into my little garden and gather up the debris a lunchtime spent with a child has caused. Wiggy is so exhausting I really don't know how Jilly copes. Let alone working too. I do worry about her. It can't be healthy living life at her speed, though I do help out with Wiggy whenever I can. It relieves her of some of the pressure, but it leaves me drained. I've made a mental note that if I decide to have kids to adopt a little person aged eight, so they have at least basic independence. I bet Jilly wished she'd done that too.

As I gather up the wrappers and discarded morsels of food, I think about the work I must crack on with this afternoon. I have a portrait to present on Tuesday and it's nowhere near complete.

Dumping everything in the kitchen, I scamper up the stairs and cross the tiny landing to my second bedroom, converted by an easel and a rubbish tip of paint tubes into a 'studio'. The light is good up here. It comes slanting in through the dormer window and fills the room with an attractive glow, perfect for painting.

At school, art was the only subject I was any good at. I couldn't add or subtract, I couldn't speak French and I didn't see the point of English literature, although I've always read loads of romantic trash.

My latest commission is for Mrs Ponsonby, a landed gentry type from Lower Slaughter. I'm painting one of her prize stallions, a handsome fella called Mr Topsy. The day I went to photograph him was a nightmare. Not only would he not stand

still, but something unspeakable happened between his legs while I was doing a close-up of his hindquarters. I'm not sure I will ever fully recover from the shock, or the memory of Mrs Ponsonby shouting, "Oh Mr Topsy, I know she's a pretty little thing, but really!"

I squint critically at the painting. I'm relieved to conclude it's going ok. It is definitely a horse, not a hippo, or a wildebeest. No way do I want to go back for more photos.

"It's not bad, is it Tigger?"

My mallard is perched on the paint-splattered stool, blinking at the canvas.

"What do you think?"

He turns his brown, dappled head in my direction and quacks.

"Hmm. Me too," I agree. "You've got to budge now, honey. I need to get on."

Nick

I've never managed to work out how Scotty made the transition from being my best mate to being my brother-in-law. We were in the same class all the way through school. Pubs, football matches and holidays followed. Then suddenly, out of the blue, he started shagging my sister. I seem to remember he did very graciously ask my permission, but only after he'd already been doing it for a month. Next thing I know, she's got him down the aisle and he's a bloody relative.

I look across at him now as he sits on my sofa in the pair of boxers I've just lent him. Not an edifying sight. Either they've shrunk, or he's a lot fatter than I am.

"Sorry about puking in your washing, mate. I could have sworn it was the bog." He swigs from the mug of tea I've just made him and goes back to reading the paper.

"It's alright." I shoot an ironic smile at him. It isn't alright, but I don't feel well enough to argue about it yet. The

excruciating headache has started to ease off, but I still feel rough.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work or something?” he asks, not looking up from the paper. He seems incredibly chirpy for someone who drank half a brewery last night.

“No. Got sacked, didn’t I?”

“What?”

“The wedding on Saturday got out of control. The best man lunged in for a snog with one of the bridesmaids. She told him to piss off. The groom intervened, then another bloke. End result: me breaking up the scrap in the hotel car park and getting smacked onto the pavement. I got a grazed cheek out of it, so I hit the best man and he complained to my boss.”

“Oh. Bad luck, mate.”

The news doesn’t seem to have an impact on him. Perhaps I shouldn’t give a toss either. I never planned to work in conference and banqueting; it just happened. Organising other people’s weddings is the pits. Don’t ever let anyone tell you they’re happy occasions. They invariably end up in fights, arguments and customer complaints.

Scotty folds the newspaper. “We were bloody robbed!” He gestures at the picture of England’s players despondent after a late defeat.

Coming from an ardent Owls’ supporter that’s quite a statement. We should be used to watching our team lose.

I let my thoughts wander back to last night. Both of us sitting in the pub, fists clenched, waiting for that last free kick. The tension...

The memory is violently interrupted by the terrifying sound of screeching brakes followed by an almighty crash. An enormous set of ladders smash through the bay window onto the floor of my living room, spraying us with glass.

“What the fuck?”

We both race for the front door.

Outside there’s a white transit van parked where my front garden wall used to be. It has charged over the pavement,

obliterated the garden gnome and come to rest at an angle. There's a remaining ladder left clinging to the roof rack.

Debs' fast crumpling face is lowered over the wheel.

"What the hell have you done to my van?" Scotty screams, rushing over to comfort his vehicle. I half expect him to wrap his arms around it and stroke the huge dent in the bonnet, or scoop up the water that's flooding from the radiator and pour it back in.

"Oh, my God!" Deb cries, already opening the driver's door. She jumps down to the ground and rushes back to the road where I suddenly spot a small, lifeless body.

There are tears running down her cheeks now. "He just came out of nowhere. I tried not to hit him. Nick, what are we going to do?"

I wrap my arm around her shoulder to comfort her. I can feel her shaking.

"I've killed him, haven't I?" She buries her head in my chest, smearing snot and tears over my nice, clean t-shirt as she has done in times of distress ever since we were kids. I guess that's one of the many pleasures of being a big brother.

But Scotty isn't in the mood for cuddles and comforting. He seems oblivious to the medical emergency we have in front of us. He's just walking anxiously around his van, tutting. Still wearing nothing but my boxers.

Cassie

'Twitchy' in my home is called being 'Piglet's tail', which seems to have a life completely separate to its owner's. Many times I've watched Piglet's little face track his tail with a mixture of alarm and horror. It flicks about like a miniature black hose that's had the water pressure turned up too high. That's how I am sometimes if I'm getting behind with things: I feel a bit 'Piglet's tail'.

I'm feeling like that now as I squeeze an autumnal selection of colours onto my palette and mix up a dark bay to work on Mr Topsy's face. I've realised I'm going to have some difficulty here because the only shots I managed to get of his head make him look like a mad thing, with wall eyes and flared nostrils. I think Mrs Ponsonby is looking for something altogether more regal. I may have to nip down to the library to find a photo of a non-mad horse head to work from.

Once I start working I become so absorbed that time drifts away from me like a rapidly receding tide. It's mid-afternoon when the phone goes, jolting me out of my concentration with a sudden, shrill ring. I've been painting in a trance since Wiggy left.

In the hall I have one of those old phones with the 'brrring, brrring' bell and a dial for the numbers. It's not that I want to live in the past; it's simply that the phone was here when I moved in and I found no reason to change it.

I rush down the stairs and lift the black, chunky receiver.

"*Buenas dias!*" I say brightly. For some reason I think this is amusing. Don't ask me why. Perhaps I think it makes me look well travelled. Tee hee.

"Hello, mother," I continue, less brightly. A call when I'm this absorbed in my work is not good. My mother is a terrific talker. Anything less than half-an-hour 'to catch up' is unacceptable. The trouble is 'catching up' is at best pedestrian, at worst darn right funeral. My mother describes each day since we have last spoken in minute and exacting detail. A rip in the left-hand glove of the marigolds, their black Labrador's general state of health, problems with the Aga – they're all terrifically newsworthy.

So imagine my surprise when my mother says, "Darling, this is just a quick call because I'm awfully tired, but I just wanted to warn you that you'll be getting a call tomorrow from Andrew... Hang on a sec."

I hang on listening to my mother shouting at my father, "What was the name of the chap you met today?"

In the background I can hear my father rustle his paper and mutter, “Andrew.”

“Yes, I know that, darling, but what’s his surname? Hughes was it, Hewitt? Something like that...”

“Hendry,” my father calls back. “Say hi to Cassie from me.”

My mother fiddles with the phone and relays the news.

“He’s down from London for a week to play polo and he’d like a portrait of this spaniel he’s bought for his parents. It’s their thirty-fifth anniversary.”

“When does he want it by?” I make a mental note to tell Jilly I have no need for a webpage with parents who are this good at networking. She’s been on at me to get one for ages.

My mother tells me a couple of weeks, which will just about be ok. I only have one other painting I’m working on (a much-loved cat) and that’s not due for a month. My mother signs off telling me Bumbles is in tolerably good health, though his cataracts are getting worse, and to let her know what happens with Andrew Hughes, no Hewitt; “No! Hendry,” my father calls out again.

“He’s knee-weakeningly good-looking, by the way,” my mother gasps before signing off, “and we think he’s single.”

Well, that’s preferable to being bum ugly and married, I think to myself, and skip off to the kitchen for a quick snack.

Nick

“Right, that should do the trick.” Scotty steps back to admire his handy work.

I give a half-hearted smile. I don’t see why I should be too grateful. It was he and Debbie who turned up and wrecked my flat between them. It’s been a stinking hot day – not the kind of weather where you want your windows boarded up.

“I’ll come round and put a proper one in when the van’s fixed,” Scotty tells me.

“And the front wall?”

“I’ll send one of the lads round from the site tomorrow if there’s any slack. If not, I’ll pop round next weekend myself, shouldn’t take long.”

I suppose having a builder for a brother-in-law does have its advantages. I wouldn’t have got the flat looking as good as it does without his assistance.

“Ahh! I think he’s wagging his little tail. Look!”

We both look over to Debs who is maternally stroking the little black bundle of fluff that she mowed down this morning; the bundle that is now wearing a plaster cast on his front-right leg and one of those plastic buckets around his head.

“Never mind sweetie. Uncle Nick will look after you,” she cooes in a nauseating tone as she stands up and grabs her handbag off the sofa. Suddenly, her words rearrange themselves inside my head and click into coherence.

“I think you’ll find Uncle Nick has already stumped up the money for a large vet’s bill and been conned into buying him a nice new bed on the way home, even though it wasn’t him that ran the poor little bugger down in the first place.”

“He can’t come home with us, Nick. I’ve just had all the carpets shampooed. Besides, he must be from around this area. It’ll be easier for you to track his owner down.”

I don’t know why I bother to argue with Deb. I can’t ever recall winning.

“What if I don’t track his owner down?”

“Course you will.” Scotty goes over and gives the fluff ball an affectionate tickle.

“They’ll not want to be without you for long, will they mate?”

“Alright.” I know I’m giving in. I always do and it’s probably best not to prolong the agony. “He can stay here for a week and then he’s off to the pound.” I sound decisive.

Debs’ mouth falls open and a distraught wail echoes around my living room. “You can’t send him to the pound, you evil sod! How can you be so awful?”

“You take him home if you’re so keen then.”

“I can’t, you know I can’t. What will we do with him while we’re both at work? At least now you’ll be in to look after him.”

The sound is suddenly sucked out of the room and an awkward silence is pumped in to fill the void.

“Thanks for reminding me.”

If being insensitive were an Olympic sport, my sister would be heading the Great British team.

“Come on love, time to head home.” Good old Scotty, always reliable. “See ya later Rooney, mate.” He gives the fur ball another tickle before ushering Debs out of the room and towards the front door.

I survey the day’s carnage. One big plywood monstrosity for a window, one dog with a broken leg, a coffee table with severe ladder impact damage and a dustpan full of broken glass left neatly at the corner of my new laminate floor.

Why do builders always do that? They make the effort to sweep up but they never get as far as tipping the sweepings into a dustbin, do they? I suppose I’d better do it myself.

I pick it up and plod out to the small backyard that plays host to the wheelie bins.

“You got it all fixed then?”

I turn to see Mrs Timmons’ head bobbing over the top of the fence. “I think we’re just about water tight.” I smile back. She’s a bit of a nosey old duck, but harmless enough. Just a lonely old lady.

“I was wondering, while you’re here.” She gives me the full show of grinning dentures. “I’m off to my sister’s next weekend. I wondered if you could just keep an eye on the place while I’m gone. That’s if you’ve got nothing planned.”

I can answer that question with certainty.

“No, I’ve not got anything planned for this weekend, Mrs T.”

“You’re a good boy.” She returns my smile, waves and ducks back behind the fence.

I sigh and tip the broken glass into the bin, and then it all hits me again really hard.

Heading South

I was supposed to be getting married.

I close the dustbin lid with a slam and in a fit of anger give it a good kick. I throw the shovel onto the ground and then stomp off back into the flat.

Chapter 2

Cassie

Several days later, I'm happy to say I've delivered the portrait of Mr Topsy to Mrs P and she was delighted.

"You've captured his handsome face wonderfully," she said. "It couldn't be anyone else."

I neglected to mention, having given up with the rubbish photos I had of his proud visage, that I'd simply copied a similar looking horse's head from a library book entitled, *Four-Legged Front Runners*. The head she was admiring was that of Red Rum. Still, if the client is happy, I am too. And so it was with a lively spring in my step that I set out with Pooh to The Tunnel House pub in Tarlton to meet the extremely smooth-sounding Andrew Hendry.

Pooh is my bright Border Terrier. I called him Pooh to continue The Hundred Acre Wood theme and also because when I take him walking, I like saying it. I call it in a sing-song way so it has two syllables more like 'poowhoo' and for some reason it makes me smile. On these social occasions I'm very happy for him to chaperone me. Not only is he a good judge of character, he's also a good talking point. Should the conversation die a death he will lie down, turn in a circle and jump up, all on command. He's clever enough to know it's silly, but he does it anyway. And I love him for it.

I'm hoping my meeting with Andrew won't require Pooh's intervention. He sounded like a good talker on the phone, but

sometimes people clam up when they meet me in the flesh. Dazzled, no doubt, by my beauty!

I've resolved to keep the conversation friendly but businesslike. This way neither of us should get too nervous, even if the hint of chemistry I felt talking to him proves itself to be overwhelming.

Going up the gravel track to the pub, set next to the river on the Bathurst Estate, I find myself getting butterflies. I've been single for ages now and I'd love a bit of male company. I need space and tranquillity as an artist, but sex doesn't have to be completely factored out of the equation. A man who lives in London would be ideal. Space during the week. Sex at the weekend. Perfect.

I stop halfway up the gravel track in a bow-shaped lay-by and check my reflection in the rear-view mirror.

For someone who usually bums about at home in a state of total sartorial meltdown, I've made a big effort for this meeting. I've applied a spot of mascara to the lashes above my large greenish eyes (my best feature apparently) and a smear of lip-gloss. This dual action, I hope, will draw attention away from my rather blobby nose and freckly cheeks. I washed my hair this morning and dried it straight. (My brown locks are naturally a kinky mess. Usually I tie them back in a chaotic ponytail to keep them out of my eyes, which is as fantastically unglamorous as it is effective.)

I've chosen what I'm wearing with careful consideration, too. I'm in my white cotton summer dress, which comes down to just above my ankles and sympathetically hides my fat calves. It also plunges low at the neckline to reveal a cleavage Jilly envies, though she hasn't seen me with my bra off, where everything drops a good two inches and looks far less pert. The central panel of this dress also performs the miracle of holding my stomach in, which, like a square of boiling ravioli, sometimes bulges more than it should. (And does, of course, today.)

On my feet I'm wearing some tan clogs I bought in

Kensington Market. They're not what most girls would wear with a summer dress, but I am an artist so I should be allowed some concessions. My tan handbag matches them so at least I'm coordinated.

Satisfied with my appearance, I spray on a hint of Issey Myaki, drive up to the Fifteenth-Century pub, buy myself a white wine spritzer and take an outdoor table next to the river. Marvellous!

Sadly this turns out to be a mistake.

Though it is a glorious sunny day and a shame to be inside, the wind is charging through the trees like a hunt at full tilt. My beautiful, straightened hair is having great fun tangling itself round my face and generally behaving like the tail of a kite.

On the brink of collecting my drink and heading for the interior, a navy blue BMW pulls up and a tall, blond-haired man gets out. He is followed by a very springy spaniel.

Too late now. I haven't even got time to bolt to the ladies to check my hair.

"Hello there," I call out as Andrew heads towards the Cotswold stone porch, making his way to the bar.

He turns and looks at me, a smile spreading over his face. He approaches with a long, sporty walk.

"You must be Cassie."

I swoon as he gets nearer (but think I manage to cover it). His hair is cut short and is not so much blond as straw mixed with sand. His face is broad and honest. His upper lip is the shape of Cupid's bow. He has fine cheekbones and a lovely twinkle in his hazel eyes. And his body, well...dressed in a shirt with the sleeves rolled up and blue jeans, all I could think was Corrrrr!!! (Or perhaps cripes!)

When I come out of my reverie he's petting Pooh and introducing him to the spaniel in question, Digger. Thank God they seem to get along, and after the usual distasteful smelling rituals they lie down next to each other comparing tongues. I think dogs do this to cool off but it may be a blokey 'mine's

bigger than yours' moment. I feel good for Pooh, and proud, for even though he is the smaller dog, his seems the larger. Well done, Pooh. One up already!

I turn and look Andrew straight in the eye. "So, what size do you want me to do?" And then realising how foolish this sounds, add, "The portrait, I mean."

Andrew's eyes twinkle a little more brightly as he sits on the bench next to me.

"What size do you prefer?" He winks.

We both understand he's not being serious and burst out laughing.

"Let me just get us both a drink and we'll chat it over," he says.

It seems like it's going to be a fun afternoon...

Nick

Welcome to the wacky world of the unemployed. I've just spent the last few millennia searching for jobs on the internet. And what is there available for the 28-year-old male with no references and a third-class degree in leisure and tourism? Answer: sod all.

I've been doing this longer than is good for my mental health. And what's worse, every time I log off the internet the phone rings. Debbie told Scotty he's got to take me out to stop me brooding.

I should be grateful someone remembered that tonight should have been the last night before my wedding. But I really don't feel like going out. I just want to be left alone.

I throw the squeaky lamb chop across the room again for Rooney to fetch. He's looking livelier now and has adapted well to his plaster cast and bucket. He also likes pork scratchings. Can't be a bad bloke.

I pour another large JD and resign myself to getting slowly and miserably pissed. Alone.

I've searched all the jobs fifty-billion times now and there's nothing but bar work and call centre 'career opportunities'. Perhaps I should get a paper round.

I'm feeling melancholy now. Just the right frame of mind for melting my brain with whisky and descending into a bottomless pit of despair. And then for some stupid reason I click on Friends Reunited. That just sends me over the edge.

I don't need to read the entries. All the girls I went to school with have written something like, 'I'm married to a lovely bloke now and we have hundreds of little children'. So, no use to me then. And the blokes? Well, they're all living in London with flashy jobs, having escaped this dump years ago.

Yep. It's working. I'm really start to feel the misery take hold now. It's rising up my chest and making me feel like I could go out and bite the heads off small animals.

I scrawl up and down the page aimlessly. I can't even be bothered to click on the picture that someone has posted of me and Scotty dressed as big foam vegetables for the school fun run.

Hang on. They've changed the format. There's something called an inbox at the top and I've got a message in mine. I click on it, feeling a surge of excitement.

Pete Towser! The third musketeer. (The teachers didn't have much imagination at our school when it came to ascribing nicknames to slightly notorious groups of lads.) I wonder if he's contacted Scotty as well.

Ha! As I suspected: living in London, cushy job, married (well cohabiting), kids...he wonders if I want to go and stay with him for a weekend to catch up.

I don't think so. The last thing I need right now is to be surrounded by people playing happy families.

I push the button and turn off the computer. I know it'll take ages to load up next time, telling me I didn't shut it down properly but I don't care. I don't care if the bloody thing never loads up again. I don't give a shit about anything anymore.

I walk over and unplug the phone from the wall, pick up the

attractive-looking bottle of JD and head for the bedroom. There's something wholesomely tragic about drinking whisky in an empty bed straight from the bottle, don't you think?

I sit down on the bed and kick off my trainers. I can see my scabby face in the mirror – the mirror Danielle and I chose together in Ikea. The one I used to catch glimpses of her naked body in when we were shagging.

Perhaps it's just as well I'm not getting married tomorrow. Even if we'd done all the photos in profile I don't think I could have got through the day without picking at my grazed face. It itches like hell.

I take the packet of Bensons that I bought earlier out of my top pocket, feeling the cellophane crinkle as I peel it off. I haven't had a fag for two years. Danielle and I gave up together.

I lie back on the bed, sucking in the taste of moist tobacco before I light it.

Suddenly I feel a presence beside me on the bed.

"Hello mate." I ruffle Rooney's fur as he nuzzles his bucket against my leg. "We make a sorry old pair, don't we?"

I take a good swig from my bottle. I'm feeling good and miserable now. I try and imagine that I can beam it out. That I can transmit my misery to her, wherever she is now. I feel it surging through my body and fighting its way out into the world like some fledgling bird I'm going to send on a mission. I want her to know just how bad I feel.

If only I thought she'd care.

Cassie

The following morning I find myself in a state of high tension. Gouache is going everywhere, the portrait of Digger looks more like a JCB than Digger the dog and either Piglet or Roo has scratched my picture of the cat (right through the canvas), thereby forcing me to restart the whole project.

There's only one person in the world who can rescue me

from this sort of mental torture...my wonderful sister, Daisy. I phone her and we arrange lunch.

“Sorry!” I coo loudly as I arrive at The New Inn twenty-minutes after the allotted time.

Daisy is already sitting at one of the round outdoor tables on a raised stone dais, looking like she doesn’t have a care in the world.

I trot up the steps and sit down.

I left home at one to meet Daisy. There was no need for makeup or posh clothes this time. Any old kit would do.

We’d arranged to meet at one, but I knew she’d be late. Besides, the New Inn is only a fifteen-minute drive away so how late could I be?

Well, plenty late was the answer.

Daisy has ordered a bottle of white wine and is pouring me a glass. I grab it from her and take a long gulp.

“Sorry,” I say again when I’ve got my breath back. “Got stuck behind a combine harvester, would you believe? You wouldn’t think it was possible in this day and age, would you? Even I can’t understand it.”

“I got stuck behind one the other day actually.” Daisy leans in and scrunches her nose. “Happens all the time.”

“You haven’t been here long, have you?” I ask her.

Daisy looks at her watch, a rubbishy Timex she’s had since she was about eight, and says, “Two minutes. No. Three.”

I sigh with relief.

“Thank God. I thought this would be the one day you’d turn up early and I’d have kept you waiting for hours.”

“That’s never likely to happen,” Daisy shrugs. “You know I’m far too disorganised to get anywhere on time.”

I nod, loving my sister for her laidback approach to life.

Daisy is quite a lot older than me at thirty-five, but she looks about the same age. I guess our features are similar, but her looks have had a little extra fairy dust sprinkled over them. Her nose is cuter, her skin is smoother, her legs a little longer. The only thing she doesn’t usually beat me on is her hair, which

normally looks as if it's attached to a girl who's recently been involved in a four-hour shagathon. Wonderfully, she doesn't care, and simply ties it back and still looks stunning. I imagine how proud her boyfriend must be of her.

"How are things with Guy?"

Daisy gives a mischievous little smile.

"I know it sounds awful. But better than ever."

I clap my hands quickly to show my approval. I like Guy. He doesn't take himself too seriously.

"And no trouble from the dastardly ex-husband then?"

"No more than you'd expect."

Peter was all about making money. Oh, and having affairs.

"So what's this lunch all about?" Daisy asks as the smart, very young waiter gives us the menus and puts up the parasol to protect us from the unusually harsh sun.

Good ole sis. She knows this isn't a crisis-free moment.

I gaze momentarily at the creeper on the pub wall and admire the large Georgian windows. Then I lean in and say, "I've met someone I really fancy."

"I thought so," Daisy smiles. "And?"

"Well, I've only met him once, but he's completely gorgeous. I'm painting a spaniel for him--"

"So you have the excuse to see him a few more times."

"Yes, the trouble is, the painting's not going great."

"Hmm."

"It doesn't look like a dog."

"What does it look like?"

"Hard to say. A woolly mammoth perhaps, or a sabre tooth tiger. Something never seen in our recent history anyway."

Daisy laughs and takes another sip of her wine.

"But you're a great painter. Can't you fix it?"

I tell her I've tried three times, starting from scratch to get it right, and it simply is not taking shape.

"I think it's the pressure, Doodle." (Nickname from childhood. I couldn't say Daisy.) "Every time I pick up a brush I think of him and how good I want this portrait to be and I just

start to quiver and it all goes wrong.”

“Hmm. You have got it badly.”

“What should I do?”

Daisy suggests convincing him that animal portraits have gone right out of style and that he should settle for a nice, tastefully framed photo. Possibly in black-and-white.

I disagree, order the chilli prawns from the attentive waiter, and think about sulking for a bit.

Doodle winks at me.

“Cheer up. Let’s forget about the painting. Tell me all about him. That’ll be more fun.”

So as we eat I relay what I know of Andrew’s life. It doesn’t take long.

“Brilliant. He’s at an age where he’s not shy to commit. He’s fit. He’s financially secure. Go for it!” Now it’s Daisy’s turn to clap her hands. “Can I have another prawn? I’ll pay the bill.”

I push the plate over to her with a smile.

“Thanks, Doodle. If it all goes wrong now I can blame you.”

When we’ve thanked the waiter, we kiss goodbye and I drive my little Renault home, feeling reassured and much less panicky.

Nick

Something wet smears itself against my face. The scraping sound of plastic against pillow, and the heavy, foul breath that is accompanying the wet sensation, leads me to think it might be Rooney’s breakfast time.

I’m trying to pluck up the courage to open my eyes but I know it’s going to hurt. There’s a distinct feeling of déjà vu around: two monster hangovers in a week.

Is that a good or a bad thing?

It’s got to be bad. I seem to be turning into a lonely, alcoholic saddo, not a sociable party animal.

That’ll be my lack of ambition again. That nasty, vile,

horrible lack of ambition that drove away the most beautiful woman I've ever touched.

It's funny, isn't it? You watch all these TV programmes and chick-flicks brimming with girls trying to find a bloke who they can cajole into marriage. The media would have us believe there's a world out there packed with ticking body clocks desperate for us to fertilise their eggs.

So what do I do? I throw myself in feet first. I'm up for it all: mortgage, marriage, kids.

"You're not serious!"

I can hear her words screeching through my head again.

"Why not? That's what married couples do, isn't it? Have kids?"

"For God's sake, Nick! Where did that come from? You've never mentioned it before."

"Well...I just assumed-"

"Well, you assumed wrong. I've just got my career off the ground and you want me to stop just so you can clutter up the place with snivelling little mini-mes?"

That hurt. You think you've finally found the one: the woman you'd kiss Neil Warnock's backside for (probably) and she turns round and looks at you like you've just admitted to battering a seal to death, just because you offer to father her children.

I use the corner of the duvet to wipe my eyes. I promised myself I wouldn't do this again. I swore I'd wasted my last tear on that bitch. But I keep seeing her face in front of me, smiling and saying she loves me. Lying cow!

I was supposed to be getting my suit on now. I'd rehearsed it all in my head so many times. Scotty would be here, pretending he'd lost the rings and winding me up about the stories he was going to put into his speech. And in just a couple of hours' time I would be there in that church, looking into her eyes and promising that I'd love her forever.

And do you know what the really shitty thing is? I think I will.

Cassie

Why am I hopping about in my back garden like a mad bunny on heat?

I'm collecting up the teeny bits of Digger's photo from various disparate locations. I discovered it had blown out the window of my studio a minute after composing myself to continue the portrait.

I find a segment in Tigger's beak. A chunk on the lawn. A little balled-up section being skittered about by the overjoyed Piglet and Roo.

I kneel down and survey the carnage. Eeyore walks unsteadily up to me and gives me a solemn look.

"I know Eeyore," I wail. "I'm in the poo."

And up bobs my little terrier all ready to play.

I laugh, but with more bitterness than mirth until Pooh licks my face and starts sniffing round my nose. Then I can't help giggling and letting all the tension out of me.

"Oh get off me!" I cry out. "Get off!"

The neighbours must think I have a highly-sexed boyfriend with all the rough and tumble going on. Chance would be a fine thing!

I confess I have to take a very deep breath before phoning Andrew Hendry later that night. Just the thought of his voice makes my heart flit, so it is with a quivering hand that I laboriously dial his number on the old, black telephone. The ring-tone seems to continue uninterrupted for an eternity and I am about to hang up when a breathless, panicky voice comes on the line.

"Hello." He sounds far less charming than at our meeting.

Oh cripes, I think. He's expecting the bailiffs round. He's not the dream man. He's in all kinds of debt and in all sorts of bother with the law.

"Andrew...Hendry..." I'm unsure if I can call him by only his Christian name. Is this too informal?

"Yes, speaking." He's more composed now. His breath has

levelled off from Olympic sprinter to gentle jogger.

Disappointed he hasn't recognised my voice, I plough on.

"It's Cassie Oldham." I adopt the most casual voice I can but I think it comes out sounding lofty.

"Ah, Cassie. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

He sounds like he's never met me, or is putting me at a great distance.

"It's about the portrait of Digger."

"Ah yes, how's it coming along?"

"Great, great. I'm really, really, really, really, REALLY pleased with it."

"Brilliant."

"Although, I'd like to take a few more photos of him, if I may."

"Why's that?"

"Well, I'm a perfectionist, I suppose. I haven't quite got his tail yet and I don't have any decent photos of it." I cringe. Why did I blurt that out? He must think I'm mad.

Andrew laughs, or splutters.

"Well, yes. Why not? I'm back in London but you're welcome to come here. I'm free tomorrow night, in fact. Digger's still with me and he'd love to see you. Yes," he continues, seeming to warm to his theme, "yes, come on up. After you've taken the photos, we could go for dinner."

"Really?" I speak with incredulity and then immediately regret it. "I mean, really?" I say much less incredulously and perhaps a little patronisingly. "Yes, that would suit me."

When the conversation is over I pop the phone back on its holder and scream into the kitchen shouting, "Yes!" at the top of my voice.

Piglet and Roo, who'd been quietly dozing in their basket by the oven, both wake with a jolt, as does Pooh who's by the fire in the little drawing room. Tigger quacks in the garden and I may have imagined it but I'm convinced Christopher Robin neighs in the back-field.

I gather Pooh up in my arms, who is now barking excitedly,

and give him a kiss on the top of his coarse hairy head.

“He’s invited me for dinner Poowhooo. He wouldn’t do that if he didn’t like me, would he?”

Suddenly the world is again a joy to inhabit and I dance Pooh out into the star-lit garden and roll around on the lawn with him while he yaps excitedly. It’s all good, clean fun until Eeyore bustles up and nips him on the bum with his sharp beak and a low-grade fight ensues between dog and bird with bird losing more feathers than dog loses fur.

As a light goes on in a neighbouring cottage I hustle Pooh inside and flick Eeyore back into the hedge with a deft touch of my toe hooked between his wiry legs. The cats are shocked by my return into the cottage and give me a kind of ‘do be quiet or we’ll scratch another painting’ look and, having soaked it up, I turn out the kitchen light with a whispered and apologetic, “Night all,” and head for bed. Happy but somewhat chastened by my pets’ social and moral rectitude.

If only I could be like them, I think as I snuggle in my duvet. Content, well looked after, cute and, on the whole, terrifically well-behaved.