

Your Sneak Preview •

TO LOVE, HONOUR AND BETRAY by Kathy Lette



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Fish Out of Water

Like all prisoners, I feel the presence of my captor like tentacles reaching down to where I'm cowering at the bottom of the stairs. The house is hushed. I take a deep breath, as if I'm a diver going under, and peek down the hallway. Empty. A rustle of leaves outside the window startles me. The nerves in my body contract as I move gingerly towards the door. I bump into something in the dark and jump as if bitten, but it's only the fronds of a pot plant I've forgotten. I wait an agonizing eternity to see if I've been detected. I shuffle forward, apprehension dogging each tentative step. Finally, I can see the outline of the front door, but the sensation that I am being watched intensifies. Goosebumps rise on my neck and arms. Adrenalin slams through me. I tell myself to breathe, then inch, one painfully slow tiptoe at a time, towards liberty. The door handle is almost within reach when a mutinous floorboard creaks. I hear the running thud of feet, and fright licks like flames all over me. Trapped, I wheel around to face the furious countenance of my captor. The hall light snaps blindingly on.

'What the hell do you think you are wearing? You are not going out dressed like that. Go back to your room and change immediately!'

I glance down in abject humiliation at the Wonderbra-ed cleavage semi-draped in one of her sequined tank-tops, and the vertiginous stilettos I've stolen from her wardrobe. The top is not quite long enough to hide the fact that I haven't been able to do up the zip on her denim mini.

'I don't know how to break it to you,' her voice is metallic with scorn, 'but your chances of becoming a famous cat-walk model have kinda faded, you know.' The next word she utters, dripping with contempt, is 'Mother'.

I sag into myself. 'Oh spare me the third-degree sarcasm, Tally, please.'

'I mean, look at yourself! You're forty-two. When are you going to start acting your age? You really are pitiful,' sneers my fifteen-year-old daughter, with a sucked-on-lemon expression. Her sun-kissed hair streams back from her face like a Viking warrior. 'If you think you are going to win Dad back by dressing like . . . like that,' she makes a moue of disgust, her lips as pursed as a cat's bum, 'then you're even more deluded than I thought.'

'But I can still wear short skirts, can't I? I mean, my legs are all I've got left.'

'It's not the legs. It's just that that skirt doesn't go with your face.'

I wilt like day-old salad. 'Oh.'

'You think you're funny, but the sad thing is, you're really not. If you'd been nicer to Dad, he never would have left.'

I've read articles about the psychological impact of marital breakdown on teenagers, and this isn't how it's supposed to pan out. My daughter, Natalia, should have been blaming herself – not her shell-shocked mother. When my husband walked out two weeks earlier, I'd told the kids that their dad was away working. But my endless sobbing – and the post-it notes stuck to my forehead asking passers-by to please apply alcohol intravenously – told them otherwise. Tally was adamant that I'd driven her father away with my endless niggling about where he was going and whom he was with. Even though it's pretty clear that

Jasper has officially forfeited his chance of winning Dad of the Year, I say little in my defence, not wanting to badmouth him. I just take it on the chin . . . OK, the double chin.

‘Gosh, Tally, if only I were young enough to know everything.’ But pain and anger bubble beneath the flippant surface of my words.

‘Oh my God. Is that my top?’ Tally regards me with slant eyed hostility. ‘How dare you borrow my clothes?’ She hisses, so as not to disturb her ten-year-old sister Ruby, already asleep upstairs. ‘If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a million times not to go through my stuff. It’s pathetic.’

Until Jasper walked out on me, I’d tended to wear the kind of baggy dresses you could use to slip-cover a small island. My wardrobe, mostly bought from catalogues, comprised vast shirts to cover up wobbly bits (I was planning, one day, to have my buttocks taken in), and pedal-pushers to hide leg stubble. But this was the third time in a week my teenage daughter had found me squished into her clothes, setting out to the city to win back my absentee husband.

‘I mean, just look at yourself.’ Tally is standing to attention, one foot turned out like a ballerina. Her hands move agitatedly at her sides, as though ruffling an invisible tutu. ‘It’s, like, beyond sad.’

I glance into the mirror above the hall table. What I see makes even my passport photo look good. My hair, dull blonde and centre-parted, curves around my jaw like a pair of parentheses – making me the unessential aside. My once pretty, pale-blue eyes are pink and red-rimmed, like a laboratory rabbit’s. Livid semicircles under both eyes give me the appearance of a neurotic possum. My hastily applied lipstick has bled into the tension lines around my mouth, and there’s a dismal dab of it on my eyetooth. Mirrors can’t lie – but they can be smashed to pieces once the kids are at school, I decide, flicking my gaze floor-ward.

My daughter sighs, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.’ Her voice is clear and adult and self-assured as she turns, disgusted, on her Ugg-booted heel.

Sheepishly, I trail Tally to the kitchen of our rented surfside accommodation in a south Sydney beachside suburb. It is vintage Brady Bunch, with breakfast bar and cheery tiles and kangaroo clock whose rotating tail points to 9 p.m. She’s been making biscuits. Since her dad’s unscheduled departure my oldest daughter has taken to obsessive baking at all hours of night and day. One morning in May, over breakfast in the leafy London suburb of Hampstead, Jasper had announced he’d been offered a job opportunity in Australia with the Football Federation, coordinating coaching for the international and youth teams. He would move to the Antipodes for a year while I stayed in England with the kids. But I insisted that we let out the house and travel with him. The experience would be enriching for the girls; we would be part of a trend. I told him how nearly two hundred thousand British citizens had packed their bags for Australia in the last year alone, the highest number to leave since the heavily subsidized mass emigration down under in the 1960s. Jasper tried to talk me out of it. But our marriage was curdling, like milk on a stove – and there was no way I was going to take my eyes off the pan.

And so we’d decamped in July, at the end of the English school year. Our oldest daughter, Tally, detested her posh North London private school and was happy to uproot. Our younger daughter, Ruby, was passionate about animals so Jasper rented a house on a Sydney beach, close to a national park, packed with cockatoos, wallabies and goannas. (I like animals too. Right there on the plate, next to the couscous and carrots.) The clincher for the girls was that their new school would be co-educational and the curriculum offered surfing lessons. The place sounded idyllic – even if our marriage was not. We left Heathrow forty pounds overweight – and that was just our emotional baggage.

A month into our Australian adventure, Jasper departed the family so fast he left skid-marks. He moved into a hotel overlooking the Harbour Bridge, to ‘find himself’ he said. But we were the ones who were lost. If only

there were a psychological satnav: 'You have taken a wrong turn. Go back to your wife. Cerebral cul-de-sac.'

'You should have been less critical.' Tally snaps me back to the present. 'And why didn't you diet? You were, like, a size ten when you married Dad. I've seen the photos. Now, you're, what? A fourteen? I don't know how many articles and ads I cut out for you all year about how to stop pigging out.'

Biting my lip, I try to remind myself that a child is for life, not just for Christmas. The best way to do this is to open the fridge and pour a hefty glass of wine. 'You have let yourself go, Mother.'

Her words hit home and I wince at the blow. Why would Jasper want to get into my pants, when even I can't? It had taken me half an hour to stuff myself into my daughter's most voluminous skirt – and even so the zipper is wedged half-way up my pudgy flank. No wonder for the last six months our sex life had been like trying to thread a darned needle with spaghetti. No doubt he worried that if he climbed aboard he'd burn his backside on the light bulb.

'You're right, Tally. Hell, if I left my body to science, science would contest the will.' I could hear my own voice, falsely cheery. 'I'm so out of shape that men in lap-dancing clubs would pay me to put my clothes back on.'

I wait for her to contradict me, to say something conciliatory, but her silence knifes me. When Jasper walked out, I had screamed at him: 'You brought me to a foreign country and then dumped me where I have no friends or family. How could you? I don't even know my way to the city.'

His reply still rattled around my cranium. 'Well, just make sure you leave a trail of crumbs so you can find your way back. Cake-crumbs, I expect. Have you noticed how much weight you've put on, Lucy?'

'Hey, when depressed, it's important not to skip a meal. You must eat something . . . even if it's only three or four courses an hour,' I'd retorted with mock-nonchalance. But what he said was true. Since our marriage had started to sour, I'd done nothing but eat. My only criteria for dinner was that there be a lot of it. I was considering putting speed-bumps in the kitchen to slow down my progress to the refrigerator. It wasn't my fault. As any woman can tell you, 'stressed' spelled backwards is 'desserts'.

'Well, why didn't you do something about it?' Tally demands, fractiously. She is eating raw cookie mixture off the wooden spoon, a childish gesture at odds with her severe demeanour.

A dull throb makes my temples ache. My oldest child is starting to give me a migraine. No wonder the Panadol bottle reads: 'Dangerous. Keep away from children.' I kick off Tally's high heels and glug back more wine.

'And you're drinking way too much.' Tally snatches the bottle. I notice for the first time that my daughter is taller than me, by at least an inch. When had that happened? She is so lithe and light, my darling girl, yet weighed down with worry. 'Every night since Dad left you just drink yourself legless. How many mornings have I found you passed out in the living room?'

'Hey, walk a mile in my stilettos and then you'll know why I need to lie down. Well, your stilettos.' I am trying to sound buoyant, but can feel the abyss of misery beneath me.

'And I just can't believe you're smoking again. You're so weak.'

'I am not smoking . . .'

'I found the packet in your bag. I wasn't born yesterday, you know, Mother. You must think I'm retarded if you believe you can get away with that.'

‘Smoking helps me think. And I need to collect my thought,’ I attempt a feeble joke.

Tally just rolls her eyes, declining to be cheered, and angrily shoves her tray of cookie dough into the oven.

‘And my thought is that I need a drink,’ I add, pinching the wine bottle from the draining board where she’s deposited it.

‘Well, my thought is that I’m, like, adopted. At least, I’m praying that is the case.’

In a rush of nostalgia, I think back to the time my daughter adored me. It was all hot hugs, fierce kisses, her face a warm smudge against my neck, her little fingers coiled tightly around my own, as I rocked her with lullabies in the enclosing dark. I can still feel her arms wound around my neck, dreams skitting across her flickering eyelids, her skin smelling of vanilla and sunlight. Handmade Mother’s Day presents, cups of luke-warm tea and cold toast in bed on Saturdays . . . Now it’s just disdain, contempt and sarcasm. But how can she respect me when she keeps catching me trying to grovel to my runaway husband in clothes half my size, made for a female half my age?

‘The truth is,’ I confess, hovering near her, ‘your father’s brought us to the other side of the world and just walked out. I don’t even have a bank account here. I need to see him about practical things, like, um, starvation. If he doesn’t give me some housekeeping money, Ruby will have to start wearing your hand-me-downs – while you’re still wearing them.’

Once more, she refuses to be amused. Tally has perfected a look of aloof insolence which implies that she is just too cool, too suave for mundane emotions like humour. And she is looking at me that way now.

‘Don’t you have your own money?’ she says, accusatorially. ‘I would never, like, give up my career for a guy. No woman in her right mind would do that.’

Another body blow. ‘Honey, I had a mind once. Now I just have offspring. But whatever your dad is going through, this midlife crisis of his, he will get over it and come to his senses. But in the meantime, he can’t leave us poor.’

‘Nobody calls people “poor” any more. You call them deprived, underprivileged or disadvantaged,’ she bristles.

‘Oh great.’ I take another slug of wine. ‘So, we’re still poor, but our vocabularies have been enriched. That’s helpful.’

I feel a wave of nausea wash over me, and sink down into the nearest chair. It’s fear. Jasper and I have – had – a very traditional set-up. I gave up work as a physiotherapist when Ruby was born ten years ago, and devoted myself to the cooking, cleaning and child-raising. My husband had always been the chequebook-balancer and smoke-alarm battery changer. He was the one who made sure the house insurance was up to date, the private health-care paid and the radiators bled. He was always on hand to fix things that leaked, fumed or boiled over. He knew where the fuse-box was situated and what to do when he got there. How would I live without him? What would I do about vehicle maintenance and shifting heavy objects and Allen keys? Who was going to open the honey jars? Who was going to take all the holiday snaps and never be in them? Who was going to shine flashlights around in a manly way, or drive to the all-night chemist at three in the morning?

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