

Learn
Love in a
Week



ANDREW CLOVER

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About the Book

Polly has been married to Arthur for ten years when she meets James Hammond. He's her Road Not Taken. The One That Got Away. He's also rich, and, in one week he's inviting her to his hotel in the country to give her the job she's always wanted. He also wants her.

Her best friend Em says, 'Go.' Em's spent two years with a man who resists commitment like a dog resists a bath. She understands how it feels to be stuck. But she has her own interest in Polly's husband.

Meanwhile, Arthur says: 'Stay. I can change.'

But can he? After ten years, can you learn to love? And if you can, would you still choose your partner?

About the Author

Andrew Clover is a Writer/Actor/Dad (a WAD). He's got a wife and three kids and his life changed five years ago when his 'Dad Rules' column in the *Sunday Times* became a big hit. But apart from that, he's absolutely nothing like the hero of this story. Got that? Good. Now read the book ...

Learn
Love in a
Week

ANDREW CLOVER



Century · London

Sunday

Polly

I first saw Arthur at college.

He swooped past the library on a bike, and he looked happy and so handsome that my heart skipped. 'Who's that?' I said. 'That's Arthur Midgley,' said Em.

I next saw him at a party in a field. It was dawn. I was by the bonfire, waiting on a lift home, when Arthur appeared and we talked. He was tall and he had a hat and a passionate look in his eye. 'You are without doubt,' he said suddenly, 'the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.' I was astonished. I felt like doors were being opened. Clothes were being ripped off. But my lift arrived, so I said: 'I'll ... see you soon!'

I didn't see him for four more years.

It was in London. I was twenty-four. I was sitting outside Bar Italia, and he just sat down beside me and we talked. I'd just started at JTS, he was at the RSC, everything felt fun and romantic and right. As he walked off I admired his big friendly frame and I thought: Arthur Midgley, I want to know *everything* about you.

And now, ten years on, we have three children, and ... *I do.*

He leaves earplugs by the bed. He leaves his big tent-sized boxer shorts on the radiator. He's moody. He has a friend called Malcolm. He doesn't earn much money. He seems to have a phobia about emptying bins. And he supports Arsenal.

Now ...

Obviously you can't *chuck* a man, just because he supports Arsenal. But recently I got the news that every wife dreads: my husband felt inspired, he announced, to write a novel. It's called *Looking For Lost Magic*. It's a teen novel about a sixteen year old who's the reincarnation of King Arthur. Em said: 'Sounds like the sort of thing teenage boys like to read.' 'Teenage boys don't like to read,' I said. 'They like to wank.' She said: 'Is that fair?'

The whole relationship isn't fair! That's the point!

OK. Give him his due ... He looks after the kids from 3.30, every day bar Friday. But I pay the mortgage. I pay the electricity, I pay the home insurance, I pay the car insurance, I arrange the holidays. What does he do? Erm ... He walks the dog, and it's he who, when necessary, showers her bottom. Anything pet-related he does (apart from vet's bills and pet insurance). That aside, he does nothing. OK, he's big and good-looking, though not actually as strong as he looks. He's the IKEA wardrobe of husbands. He looks good in the pictures, but if you ask him to hold anything, his back pops out.

He is still, however, the father of my three children, and obviously I love him very much. But then this happens ...

Em

It's a Sunday evening in late-May. We're at a party in the garden at Polly's mum's.

I'm probably drinking faster than I should. No one is paying any attention to me at this party, which is partly because I am next to Polly. (Polly thinks she's getting pear-shaped; she's still 5' 10" and almost supernaturally beautiful.) And I've had a nightmare of a weekend with Dan, which I'm *trying* not to think about.

But Polly says: 'How was the trip with Dan?'

Right away, I'm feeling panicky. 'I can't discuss anything that involves Dan,' I say. 'Or there is a very real chance I may lose it, and the next thing you know I'll be taking hostages at the bus stop.'

Polly smirks.

'Tell me,' she says. 'Do you love him?'

'Really,' I say, 'I cannot discuss it now.' I'm not trying to be dramatic. I'm the editor of *Lifestyle*, the features section of the *London Times*. I'm supposed to be at the office tomorrow morning, filled with ideas for five editions packed

with advice and features. It's Sunday night. I've got nothing. I need ideas. Quick.

'How's Arthur?' I ask Polly.

She rolls her eyes.

'His friend Malcolm,' she says, 'is trying to persuade him to do that online course - *Learn Love in a Week*.'

'I've not heard of that,' I say.

'It's a massive trend, apparently,' she says. 'Loads of people are doing it.'

Obviously my ears prick up like a hare's, at the mention of a massive trend.

'What do you have to do?'

'Each day you read advice, then you have to do an exercise, then a challenge. Apparently it's changing people's lives.'

'Who runs the course?' I say.

'Nobody knows,' she says. 'I think it's someone in California. Apparently they're determined to stay anonymous.'

I like the idea of that even more.

'Why are you grinning?' asks Polly.

'If they want to stay anonymous,' I say, 'then they won't sue me if I nick the idea for *Lifestyle*.'

And I get straight into action.

Polly

I wish I hadn't mentioned it.

I've managed to keep Em off the subject of work for five minutes. She's now furiously typing into her phone. As usual she's showing off far too much cleavage, and the tops of her tits are wobbling.

'Are you signing up for the course?' I enquire.

'No!' she says, looking aghast. 'I'm getting someone to write about it. What do you think of Alain de Botton?'

'You could try Arthur,' I say.

She finishes her message, then looks up. 'Lovely Arthur,' she says, a bit mistily. Weirdly, Em rather fancies Arthur. She fancies anything that's mine. 'Would you say you love him at the moment?'

'We've been together ten years,' I say. 'My exact feelings are somewhat buried.'

'Why don't you dig down and find them?'

'That'll be like striking oil,' I say. 'I'll let loose a great spume of Resentment, then a few million gallons of sheer Rage, then a little jet of Lust for bad men.'

'So this is a good question,' says Em, turning up her irresistible journalist charm to full effect. She leans her breasts towards me and flashes her minxy eyes. 'What do you resent most about coming home to him?'

'He's grumpy,' I say. 'He's messy. He contributes nothing. Apart from that, he's a dream.'

Em smiles. 'I thought he was writing a book,' she says.

'He *is* writing a book,' I affirm. 'His last one earned him eight grand. He also does stand-up comedy, occasionally. He sometimes does cartoons. In fact, if there's a job that's erratic and poorly paid, he probably does it. He recently earned eighty pounds by walking round Battersea Park dressed as a Snapple bottle. Some kids threw him in a pond, where he was attacked by a swan. "Why didn't you get away?" I said. "It's not easy to get away," he said, "when you're in a big inflatable costume, and the swan's already pecked your lid!"'

Em

I laugh at this.

See ... this is why I like Arthur. He's very funny. OK, I can see he's not for everyone. He's very clever and, like a lot of bright people, he's completely without cunning. He blunders through life being honest, which obviously upsets people. But he gives excellent advice. I always call him when I need a male POV. He's also six foot three and gorgeous. I tried to

get off with him when we were students. Everyone did. At college, he was our Brad Pitt, he was our Hugh Grant: he was the one everyone wanted.

'I'd like to write a book,' says Polly. 'I'd really love to be designing gardens. But we have children and a gigantic overdraft so I have to work. Which means I subsidise Arthur, by working in a boring office where men in bad suits talk about "hitting the ground running".'

'Arthur is very talented,' I tell her. 'I'm sure his luck will change.'

'I can't take it!' she protests.

I give Polly a sympathetic look, while I reach for another drink. They're bloody good, these drinks. I think I've had six now.

'Come on, darling,' I say. 'You must see that Arthur is a sexy hunk of a man, that any woman would want.'

Polly's lip starts twitching. 'Well, right now,' she says, 'they can have him. But they'll need a truck to remove his big pants.'

We both laugh.

And it's *at this very moment* that her mum comes over with James Hammond.

Polly's mum is parading James round like he's a trophy. Fair enough. He looks like Dominic West. He's swarthy and masculine and just slightly simian. I have met him before actually. We did a big feature on him when he won Businessman of the Year. We had a cover of James and Tatyana Hammond. He was dressed up in normal businessman clothes - black leather lace-up shoes, blue pinstripe suit - but he looked naughty and unshaven, and he was leaning against a seaplane. The shout-line read: 'James Hammond - Why Business is the New Rock 'n' Roll'.

Polly

I see James and immediately I feel deeply uneasy. He is the last man I dated, before Arthur. He is my Road Not Taken.

I met him ten years ago, in a Bond Street gallery ...

It was lunchtime. (I was young. I did stuff like visit galleries at lunchtime.) I love how you can step in off the street and stand in front of a painting that's worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. I love how, for a moment, you're staring at the world through the eyes of a great artist. And I was there, enjoying that, when the man beside me stepped forward to examine the brushwork. Meanwhile I examined how his dark blue suit clung to his broad back. I examined his buttocks, which were unusually pert. The buttocks moved left. I moved left.

Now we were both standing before David Inshaw's 'The Cricket Game.' There's not much to it, as a painting. There're cricketers of course, and also some trees, and some banks of soft green grass. But the whole scene is glowing with this heavenly yellow light. I've never seen a painting I so longed to be in. I actually sighed. And the man said: 'Why is that so pleasing?' And I said: 'It just looks so warm and magical, you can't imagine anything bad could happen there.' 'Yup,' said the man. 'I couldn't improve on that.' 'To be honest,' I said, 'I'd lose the cricketers. If I see a glorious scene, I don't instantly think: What this scene needs is a load of men standing round doing nothing. If I wanted that, I'd visit the House of Lords.' I thought that was rather funny, but the man didn't laugh. He just turned and looked at me, very directly. We shared a moment which was half uncomfortable, half electric. I noticed his square jaw, his expensive aftershave. 'Do you want to get a coffee?' said James Hammond.

We had one date.

He picked me up at my flat, and he took me to Nobu. I don't remember what we talked about. I do remember that, the next day, he invited me to a party that was going to happen that weekend, in Bologna.

I refused. Why did I refuse? (Why? *Why?!*)

I said no because I had a date with Arthur, which was not in Bologna. It was at the Battersea Arts Centre. (I've got vague memories of a squeezebox, and some mime.) And at the end of that evening, I went back to Arthur's flat. I was young: his flat seemed arty. It had books scattered everywhere (Kerouac, Coleridge, Neruda). It had a big bed with a lamp made from a bottle, and, on that bed, I kissed Arthur. I also lifted up his shirt. I saw his muscular stomach. I pulled down his jeans. He broke off. I said: 'What?' He said: 'I ... I ...' I've never felt so impatient. I said: '*What???*' He said: 'I have no ... condoms.' 'Just ... Just ... come here,' I said. And I pulled him towards me.

By next morning, I was pregnant.

Which is why, ever since then, I've been condemned to stay with a messy failed actor, while my Road Not Taken has slowly turned into James Hammond - entrepreneur, hotelier, *Lifestyle's* Businessman of the Year.

Em

James is staring at Polly. It's like he's trying to take in everything. He wants to Hoover up each detail. I'm feeling quite a strong desire to place myself between them. Hello! I want to say. I'm here too!

Polly

I admit it.

I've thought about him so much in the last few years, and I realise that the James Hammond in my mind is not quite the same as the one before me. He still looks like a boxer - the muscular torso, the thrilling sense of raw power. But he's got on a pink shirt and an orange tie. He looks more foppish than I remember. He also looks softer, kinder. I recall reading about the charities he's subsidised.

'It's amazing I should see you now,' says James. 'I've finally bought it.'

'What?' I say.

‘Remember the Inshaw?’

‘*You bought that painting?!*’ I say. I’m trying not to sound too impressed, but my voice does go squeaky.

‘No,’ he says. ‘I do have several Inshaws actually, but, no, not that one. I bought the place he painted – the fields and green hills. It’s in Wiltshire.’

‘Really?!’ I say. I’m now staring at Hammond with an almost cretinous sense of wonder. ‘And ...’ I say. ‘What’s it like?’

‘Spectacular,’ he says. ‘To be honest, I think Inshaw cocked up.’

‘Inshaw cocked up?!’

‘Yeah! If he’d only moved his easel back a bit, he could have got something really special into the picture.’

‘What?’

‘Bodsham Abbey. It’s a huge monastery constructed in the early thirteenth century. It’s probably the most beautiful place on the planet.’

‘Really?!’ I say. ‘You think so?’

‘I know so,’ says James. ‘That’s why I bought it.’

‘Really???!’ I say. ‘You bought a mediaeval monastery?’

‘Yeah,’ says James, and, for a moment, he smirks with pride like a boy who’s got a new bike.

‘But,’ I say, ‘where are the monks?’

‘They moved out five hundred years ago. The place was a ruin, which I’ve done up.’

‘Oh,’ I say. I’m marvelling at this man’s insouciance. He rebuilt a mediaeval manor. We spent four years pondering a loft extension. ‘What are you going to do with it?’

‘Turn it into a hotel,’ he says. ‘The guests will sleep in the Abbot’s House, unless they want their own cottage. The grounds contain almshouses and stables and about thirty acres enclosed within a high stone wall. And if you look over the wall, you see the green hills Inshaw painted.’

Em

While James is talking, Polly is staring at him dreamily.

‘Don’t!’ She says

‘What?’ says James.

I explain it to him. ‘Property,’ I say, ‘is the new porn.’

Polly

That’s nonsense actually. Property is *far* more exciting than *anything* involving men. If you had a mediaeval house beside a soft green hill dotted with oak trees, you could rely on that for ever. A man could never give that degree of comfort. Even if you got George Clooney, the day would come when he would ask you to pull his finger while he farted. But obviously that’s how I feel. I live in a three-bed suburban semi decorated with smears and princess stickers. While James is talking, it’s not *him* that I want, it’s his hotel. I want to go there. I want a glimpse into his life. I’ve followed his career the way teenagers follow pop stars. His life is a ball to which I could never dream of being invited.

But then he says: ‘We’re having a launch party on Friday to give the hotel its formal opening. Why don’t you come?’

I can’t believe it. He actually wants me to come. For a moment I’m not a thirty-five-year-old woman with fat knees and tattered dreams. I’m twenty-four again, and everything is possible.

‘Let me think about that,’ I say. ‘That’s all I ever say. Why can’t I be spontaneous, ever?’

He takes me in some more. I think that’s what makes him so sexy. He just seems so interested. ‘Polly Pankhurst,’ he says, ‘what are you doing in your life?’

I spend most of my days hunting behind the sofa for shoes. Shall I say that?

‘I’m rebranding Head and Shoulders,’ I say. ‘It’s not for dandruff. It’s for baldness. It’s a *thrilling* campaign, and it’s absorbed me for two years now.’

This isn’t good. I’m sounding sour as old milk.

‘What do you want to do?’ he says. I’ve noticed this about the super-rich. They’re always very in touch with what they *want*.

‘Well,’ I say. ‘I’d *like* to design gardens.’

‘Really?’ he says eagerly.

‘I’ve actually just done a Garden Design course. I *loved* it.’ (I read that, if you want to be attractive, talk about what you love. And it’s true – unless, like Arthur, you love Arsenal.)

‘I need a designer for Bodsham,’ says James. ‘There’s a ten-acre meadow, that we’ve done nothing with. Come to the launch, you can advise.’

‘Well, I’d *love* to do that!’ I say.

‘I’d pay your normal fee, of course,’ says James.

‘My fee?’

‘For consulting on the meadow.’

‘Oh, yes,’ I say, trying to sound professional. What is my fee? Five hundred? Three hundred? We owe that much for the campsite. They’ve asked me for it three times. ‘How much do people normally charge?’

‘Eight hundred?’ says Hammond. ‘Would that be enough?’

For that money you could have me too. I don’t say that. I just say: ‘Yes.’

‘Wonderful,’ he says. ‘So you can come?’

‘Erm,’ I say. Friday is supposed to be my childcare day. I’m about to say I’ll need to check if Arthur will be happy to look after the kids. (Obviously Arthur would never be happy; I need to check he’s doing it.)

And then Hammond says: ‘It’d be great if you could come. Tatyana’s just left. I’d love some good company.’

Oh. My. God.

As I look, slightly startled, into James’s manly face, I realise how ordinary my life has become. Normally when people talk to me, they propose playdates, they propose amendments to the text of the copy. I’m pretty sure he’s just proposed sex.

Albeit in front of my mum.

She has turned away discreetly and is examining the canapés. Although Mum has a craving for sexual attention which I find positively needy, she always pretends to be innocent.

'That's such a kind offer,' I say. 'Let me think what I'm doing.'

But then Em says: 'Oh, you've *got* to go. We'll go down together.'

'Are *you* going?!' I ask her.

'Of course I'm coming,' she says, giving James the full breast/eyelash treatment. 'I think Bodsham Abbey is about to become *Lifestyle's* favourite hotel.'

And then *my mum* says: 'Oh, you simply *must* go, Polly!' which really takes me by surprise. My mum was once an MP. She is an obsessive, relentless networker, but even I am surprised by the way she's prodding me towards the monkey man like a piece of meat. '*Why* don't you go?' she says.

'Well ...' I begin. What am I going to say? 'Cos I have a husband? 'Cos I have *kids*? I don't want to say anything. I want this rich, gorgeous man to fancy me, just a moment longer.

'I'll help you out,' says Mum, in her sweet fake voice.

This is more surprising still. During my childhood, Mum was a committed feminist. It was a matter of dogma for her that she should not devote all her attention to her children. Or really any of it. Has my mum *really* just offered to do childcare?

But I don't want to discuss childcare in front of James.

I don't know what to say. I resolve it by pulling a card out of my breast pocket. 'James,' I say, 'could you ask one of your helpers to call me tomorrow? I'll have my diary.'

At this point James and I look at each other a beat too long. It feels like an admission.

He says: 'I will.'

Throughout this whole exchange no less than four women have been circling behind him like wasps after jam, but Hammond has concentrated on me. It's been almost steely, the way he's given me his total attention. But now the youngest buzzes forward. She's an offensively beautiful waif, who looks about sixteen.

'Dad!' she says. 'We've *really* got to go!'

James gives an apologetic smile. 'I'll call you,' he says, and he goes.

And as he does, the fun of the party seems to go too. The champagne is now flat. The pastries are now soggy. And I'm once again a suburban mum, who really should be home for bathtimes.

Em

As soon as Polly's gone, I take a drink to the bottom of the garden, and I start reading ...

Learn Love in a Week - the online course that will change your life

Day One: I like to ask couples: 'What is the secret to staying in love?' The most common answer is: 'Well ... it does take a lot of work!' This is not inspiring to the middle-aged romantic. 'That's what I need, we think, more work! Nobody says what the work involves, but the dark hint is that it may involve Couples Therapy - a prospect which strikes fear into the heart of the modern man. The man knows that, if he goes to Couples Therapy, he will be like Muhammad Ali being beaten round the face by George Foreman. And he knows that after a few hours of that, there's a danger he will start to talk. And then his lady will *never* forgive him.

Most couples don't need more work, I say. They need more play.

Today's exercise: write for ten minutes, as fast as you can, beginning with the words 'I love ...' Be specific, be *playful*. Thus you will unearth your buried desires, and you'll start to make them happen.

Today's challenge: do something for fun.

Actually I do rather like that. I definitely want to do pieces on this. Alain de Botton's not got back to me. So I call Arthur.

It takes him bloody ages to pick up.

'Arthur darling,' I say.

'Hello, Em!' he says.

'I've got a work thing I'd love to ask you about. You know *Learn Love in a Week?*'

'Yup,' he says. 'My friend Malcolm wants me to do it. You've got to do exercises apparently.'

'Have you done today's?'

'I've done exercise,' he declares. 'We danced to "Chiquitita" eight times.'

'Chiquitita?'

'Our favourite ABBA song. It's got an oompah bit in the middle, where we all go mental. Malory ...'

At this point I cut him off. People with children are always under the illusion that their lives are interesting. I find that must be contested at all times.

'Instead of writing,' I suggest, 'why don't you do the exercise on the phone? It's basically all about love.'

'Right.'

'Do you love Polly?'

'Yes,' he says, straight away.

'And ...' I say. 'Could you expatiate? *What* do you love about her?'

'I love her arms,' he says. 'I love her smirky top lip. I love the little cigar box where she keeps her stamps. I love the leather armchair she found in a junk shop. I love her

enthusiasms – the way she loves bean pods, and soups. I love her voice. I love the smell of her neck. I love her.'

'And,' I say, 'do you tell her you love her?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'She'd take advantage. "I love you," I'd say. "Great," she'd say. "So can you mow the lawn? And then can you go to the upstairs cupboard? Could you please throw out the box of Arsenal programmes, half of your stinky suits, and every garment bought by your mum? Then ... for the next month, could you please take care of everything? I shall be away, drinking wine."'

'And does Polly say she loves you?'

'If she's leaving on a big business trip, she might text from the airport. Otherwise no.'

I feel a bit sorry for Arthur suddenly. I asked Polly if she loved him, and she said her feelings were buried like oil. I asked Arthur what he loved, and he gave me a list.

'Sounds a bit sad, doesn't it?' he says. 'What am I supposed to do about it?'

'You're supposed to play something.'

He sighs. 'I've spent the whole day playing.'

'What have you played?'

'I've played with Barbies, as per usual. Sarah (that's the blonde one with the chewed hand) got married to Aladdin (the Disney doll with one leg). There was a lengthy service (conducted by Gruffalo). Then there was a ball, in which we all danced, in a succession of costumes. 'That's where "Chiquitita" came in.'

'Sounds like you need to play something you like playing.'

'Sounds like I need to drink a large quantity of beer,' he says. 'But I can't do that till I've got them in the bath.'

Arthur

It takes me bloody ages to get them in the bath. Then it takes ages more to get them out. They sit there like infant

trades unionists, refusing to budge. I finally get them out, after bringing them milk, Cheerios, and Marmite soldiers. And that was after lengthy negotiation. At one point Ivy said she wasn't moving unless she got a puppy.

I'm now downstairs.

I can't be bothered to clear up quite yet. I generally prepare for Polly's arrival by cleaning as if I'm one of Cleopatra's slaves who's cleaning to save his life. I think that's what she wants. But today she's at a party. And Em told me I'm supposed to play something.

I sit down at the kitchen table, which is still covered with paper and pens. (There was a lengthy art session, in which we all drew the dolls' wedding gifts.) I figure I could draw something for my own amusement. But what? What amuses me?

Ooh. I know ...

I'm rereading the biography of Alma Mahler - wife of Gustav, the great composer. The Mahlers live in Vienna, in 1900, a fantastic time. Freud is inventing psychoanalysis. Schopenhauer is inventing a new kind of radical music which will be atonal, and shit. And, one night, on a thronging staircase at a party, Alma meets the other great Gustav - Gustav Klimt, the painter. Klimt presses Alma against a wall. He stares into her eyes. 'There is only one thing for it,' he says. 'Complete physical union.'

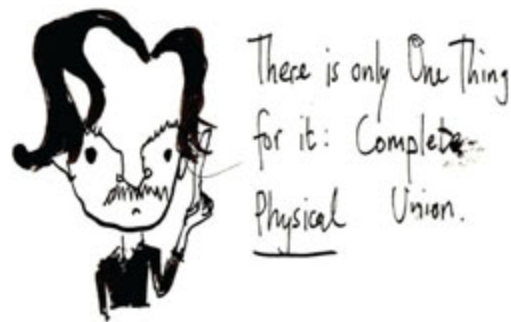
I love that.

And I'm going to do a cartoon of Klimt, uttering his immortal line. I've tried to draw him before, but I've never quite captured it. Drawing him again - that would qualify as play. I'll do it now.

I open a Hoegaarden beer. I draw the basic Klimt ...



I'm quite pleased with him, but this Klimt looks rather mild. He looks like a sex pest, as depicted in a Mr Man book. Mr Clammy. So then I do another one, making him much more impressive and artistic ...



Again ... I'm quite pleased. Actually, I could do a Klimt t-shirt. But this Klimt looks fierce, I decide, rather than passionate. So then I try to do another one who's more sensitive and creative, but he just comes out a bit gay ...



That looks like an out-of-work actor auditioning as Klimt. This Klimt would smell of hair dye and frustrated ambition. If

he's an actor, he must be a great one. I try to imagine Klimt as played by Johnny Depp. But he just comes out a bit small ...



Perhaps I'm being too tentative. Klimt lived in a different age. He produced mighty passionate work: he wouldn't have to feel guilty he'd left a cloth in the sink. I draw another Klimt, making him magnificent and powerful.



But this Klimt just looks like Hitler.

It's not surprising, I suddenly realise, that Polly doesn't say she loves me. I can't even imagine a man who a woman would find attractive.

By now it's nearly 10. I've drunk a heroic amount of Hoegaarden beer, and the table is covered with tiny Gustav Klimts who are all urgently shouting the same message at me. It's a cacophony of Germanic voices. Some are intense and breathy, some are loud and hysterical. They all give the

same instruction: *'There is only one thing for it: complete physical union.'*

At this point Polly arrives.

She stands in the kitchen doorway looking gorgeous and slightly drunk. She's in that state of inebriation when you feel quietly pleased with yourself, like you've just won ten arguments and you'd be just *delighted* to have another. I smile. I approach her. I put my hands around her waist. Then I try the line: 'There is only one thing for it,' I say, 'complete physical union.'

'No way,' she says archly. 'You stink of beer, and we need to talk about Friday.'

I flinch at that.

I'd love to discuss Klimt, or what makes men attractive. But as far as Polly's concerned, the subject of men can wait. But scheduling - that can't. The schedule waits for no man. What I can't take about marriage is all the bloody admin.

I take a deep breath and start clearing up my pens.

Polly

I've just come home. Already he's huffing and puffing. *Already* he's slightly grumpy.

I know what it is I hate most about coming home ...

There is a fruit bowl by the fridge in which he piles all the things he wants me to deal with. It has bills, buttons, bike lights, dental floss, phone chargers, letters from the school, Barbie dolls that are missing half their limbs, and some mouldy pears. That fruit bowl is an image of my life. It is buried under a confusion of admin. It contains things it should not. And I have asked Arthur to deal with it about twelve times. He hasn't.

I notice there's something new on top of it. It's a letter from France. 'That'll be the campsite, asking again for their deposit.'

'What are you doing on Friday?' I ask.

'Writing,' he says.

'The thing is,' I say, 'I've just met James Hammond.'

'James Hammond?' he says. 'That City boy who wanted to shag you?'

'He's not a City boy!' I say. 'He's a businessman. He owns about sixty high-end hotels.'

'Right,' says Arthur, and tips an empty beer bottle to his mouth.

'And he's launching one this Friday,' I say. 'He said I should come.'

'So he can shag you?'

'So I can advise him on the garden.'

Now Arthur looks astonished.

'Is that ... a commission?' he says.

'Well, I don't think he's promising to do my design. But he'd pay me to go and advise.'

'How much would he pay?'

'Eight hundred quid!'

'Eight hundred?!!' says Arthur. He's grinning delightedly. We're both smiling.

'I wanted to say ... for that money, you could have me as well!'

'For that money, he could have *me* as well! He could clamber on and he could thrust for victory.'

'I don't think he'd pay for that,' I say happily. 'But I would.' Arthur smiles. I look into his eyes. Suddenly I feel something I've not felt for a while: I feel light and happy and just slightly horny.

'So,' I say. 'Are you happy to look after the kids?'

'Of course!'

I feel so overjoyed that, for once, he has made this easy. And I press my lips to his, and I snog him.

Arthur

I'm so not into that.

We've been together ten years now. I have the libido of the Giant Panda. I know what sex leads to. It leads to a small

person who likes to post toast in the DVD player. Plus, she's blocking my one good nostril, so I can't breathe. I'm not *against* French kissing, but I'm not prepared to drown.

I pull away.

'Are you OK?' she says.

'I've done these Klimt cartoons,' I say. I've covered the entire table with them. Why won't she even look at them? It bugs me. Why must we always discuss projects and plans, and not jokes?

She glances. 'Great!' she says quickly. This is worse. Now I've had to plead like a puppy for her attention, and I've still not got it. She kisses me again.

This time she takes it more slowly. She places her hands on the sensitive skin at the back of my ears, and she presses her soft lips to mine.

This time the kiss has a different effect.

This time I'm getting that bzzzz feeling in my rude area. I'm feeling a stirring in my loins. I feel the unfamiliar sensation of Excalibur preparing itself for combat.

Oh my goodness!

And now we're doing something we haven't done in months. We're snogging like teenagers at a party! I'm tasting the wine in her mouth. I shut my eyes, and in my mind I'm kissing the beautiful girl I first saw by a bonfire. I love her. I want her. I want her naked now.

'Darling,' I say. 'Let's go to bed.'

'OK,' she says. 'But first let's tidy!'

'OK!' I say.

'And I'll quickly check my e-mails!'

'OK!' I say.

She goes. I canter to the sink. And as I arrive, I think ...

How the heck did that happen?! A moment ago, I was about to have sex. Now I'm cleaning!

I take stock.

The mess is bad. It's very bad. There are plates piled by the sink. At the bottom of the stairs, there's a pile of laundry

which has been sitting there for a month. Is it going up? Is it going down? Who knows? It's like a sort of refugee camp for socks.

I think: This could take bloody hours!

Then I think: Tonight Excalibur will return to the Lady of the Lake! Feeling lusty, I thrust toys in the toy box. I scrape egg from saucepans. I even remove the wet onion that's clinging to the kitchen plughole.

By 10.48, I've finished the cleaning. I'm coming up the stairs, and once again I'm feeling good. I'm thinking about Polly's bottom. She thinks it's fat. It is. But I don't care. Some of the happiest times of my life have been spent pressing against it. And I'm going to do that any moment now. She's probably in the bath. She's probably soaping that bottom right now.

I come into the bedroom.

She's sitting up in bed with her laptop. As I go over, she shuts it guiltily.

Obviously, that gets my attention. I open the screen and look.

She wasn't looking at porn. She was looking at Primelocation.

I should have guessed that. In the last year, Polly has got *obsessed* with moving to the countryside. Finding the right place: that is her great quest. Initially her search was just online. She sized up the different counties like they were lovers. First it was Lincolnshire. Lincolnshire was plain, but cheap. Lincolnshire, she thought, I could *have* you. Then it was Kent she wanted. Kent was curvy. Kent was fertile. She wanted Whitstable, but she'd settle for Ashford. She made Kent hers. She explored Canterbury. She explored every damp corner of her Kent. She threw away weekend after weekend on the quest. Then she had a bad moment in Maidstone. She hated Kent. Kent was stuck up. Now it's Suffolk she wants. She yearns for fields and open skies. She doesn't care about Ipswich.

'I've found a great place near Colchester,' she says.

I stare at her. I do love her, very much. But if she says a single word about the great place near Colchester, I may do something untoward.

I sit beside her.

I take the computer from her lap. I kiss her.

But then the dog starts barking.

Polly

There's someone at the front door.

'Who could that be?' says Arthur, pulling away.

'It's got to be Malcolm,' I say.

Let's be honest. Who else could it be?

Malcolm is a forty-two-year-old Irish builder. He is the only person in London who still calls in uninvited. He once turned up, uninvited, with his mum, who is eighty and has Alzheimer's. That was a long hour.

'Why don't you go down and ask him to return tomorrow?'

I say. 'He can fix the dishwasher.'

Arthur

I run down. I open the front door.

Malcolm has ginger hair, paint-spattered clothing, and the soft friendly grin of Stan Laurel.

'Big Man!' he says cheerfully. 'Is this a good time?'

'Erm,' I say. 'It's nearly eleven on a Sunday night.' Malcolm keeps smiling. 'So ... is that a good time?'

I want to say: Malcolm, there's no one in Modern Britain who welcomes a random visitor, unless they're mad, or they're very old, or they're awaiting a victim.

I say nothing.

'What's up?' I say.

'The Springfield Park Community Festival is this Saturday,' announces Malcolm. 'And I, my friend, am in charge of the waterborne procession.'

I don't know what to make of that. 'Congratulations,' I say.

'Thank you,' says Malcolm proudly.

He turns to his old red van which is parked on the street behind him. It has two metal canoes on the roof, plus some kind of huge papier-mache heads.

'I've got two animal heads that are going to be in the procession,' he says. 'Would your kids like to paint them?'

'They'd love to.'

'Will I bring them into the house?'

'NO!' I say, a little too loudly. Malcolm keeps smiling though. 'Tell you what,' I say, 'why don't you come back at three-twenty-five tomorrow? We'll pick up the kids from school. We'll do the painting. And maybe you could look at the dishwasher?'

'It's a perfect plan!' says Malcolm. He hugs me. I get a whiff of white spirit mixed with skunk. 'I'll see you tomorrow. Good night, Big Man, sleep well!'

'Good night!' I say. And I beam happily at Malcolm till the door is shut. Then I double lock it.

Then I *sprint* upstairs.

I'm terrified Polly will now be going to sleep. She comes from an extraordinarily driven family. All the Pankhursts are religious about sleep. They like to get to bed early. They like to wake up early. They like to get busy busy busy, doing jobs they hate.

When I reach the bedroom, the lights are out.

Oh, shit.

This looks bad.

But maybe she's just lying in the darkness waiting for me. I strip. I get into bed. I shuffle over the little hump in the mattress that marks my territory from hers.

I hug her. She takes my hand.

Oh, no. Oh, no. I understand what that means ...

I have now gone off sex, she's saying. Do *not* attempt it. And in case I don't get the message, she holds my hand captive.

Oh, bollocks.

I hug her. This is *love* I'm trying to show her, not just lust. I reckon two minutes should do it.

One hippopotamus. Two hippopotamus. Three hip ... OK. 'That's two minutes. Let's prepare for combat.

But for that I'm going to need my right hand. Can I free it?
Ha-ha, I can!

My hand wriggles from her grip, and it creeps away like it's escaping from a witch. Then it tickles the back, and then it sneaks, with silent intent, towards the right breast. That right breast is the base camp. I know that, if I can just get there, I can wear her down.

She shrugs. She turns. She moves her arm.

The way to the breast is blocked!

Now I'm stumped. And suddenly I am also starting to feel a bit cross. (*She started this!*) I'm also feeling a bit sad. My seduction technique hasn't really changed since I've been a teenager. Basically I'm still just hanging around, hoping to get lucky.

She just snored. Oh, God in heaven!

I roll away from her, and I'm hit by the fetid stench of disappointment.

The trouble is though ... Excalibur is still there. He's standing eagerly to attention like a little cub scout. For a moment I do think I could ... rub his toggle a little. I don't of course. I'm a gentleman. But I do shut my eyes, and suddenly my head floods with luscious images. I think of Polly looking beautiful by the bonfire. I think of the night I spent kissing Greta Kay in her hotel room.

I feel sickened suddenly.

I can't think about Greta Kay. It rouses too many feelings of What If, and If Only.

As I shuffle back to my side of the bed, I don't feel like Klimt. I feel like a dog returning to his basket.