



VINTAGE

CONSTITUTIONAL

HELEN SIMPSON

About the Book

Charting tantrums, funerals, pregnancy, war and love affairs, these stories unroll with piercing wit and sympathy. One woman finds grief for her lost lover is assuaged by involvement in some carpentry repair work. Another grows increasingly angry as the grim reaper scythes through her circle, with farcical and tragic results.

Elsewhere, a foreign correspondent receives an unwanted ultimatum, a south London builder avenges the duping of his adored mother, and a chlorinated changing-room encounter brings about a much-needed break with the past. And in the title story, a circular walk on Hampstead Heath leads to revelations involving feats of memory, a Shakespearian heroine, crossword clues, nonagenarians, and new life.

About the Author

Helen Simpson is the author of *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*, *Dear George*, *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*, *In-Flight Entertainment* and *A Bunch of Fives*. In 1991 she was chosen as the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year and won the Somerset Maugham Award. In 1993 she was chosen as one of Granta's twenty Best of Young British Novelists. She has also received the Hawthornden prize, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters' E.M. Forster Award. She lives in London.

ALSO BY HELEN SIMPSON

Four Bare Legs in a Bed
Dear George
Hey Yeah Right Get a Life

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VINTAGE BOOKS
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The Door

Organising a new back door after the break-in was more complicated than you might imagine. Even sourcing a ready-made door to fit the existing frame took some doing. After following a couple of false trails I drove to a little DIY shop five miles away, in a draughty row of shops just off the A3 after the Tolworth Tower turning.

Bleak from outside, this charmless parade supplied all sorts of seductive and useful items when you looked more closely. Under the dustbin lid of a sky were: a travel agent offering cut-price controlled escapes; a newsagent with a bank of magazine smiles on entry and a surprisingly choice collection of sweets (real Turkish Delight, macadamia praline, Alpine milk chocolate); an art shop with dusty sleeping cat at the foot of a good wooden easel; a café with Formica tables, a constant frying pan and a big steel teapot. If you looked closely and in the right way, all the pleasures and comforts were accessible here in this dog-leg just off the Tolworth turning, as well as all the nuts and bolts. It was the first time for months that I'd been able to entertain such a thought. In the iron light of February I entered the hardware shop and inside was a little community of goodwill and respect.

The woman on the other side of the counter listened to me attentively, looked at me with kind eyes from behind her

glasses, and explained the sizes, finishes, charges and extras for the various models of ready-made doors they could supply. While she did this she also dealt with a couple of phone calls, politely and efficiently, and paused for a few seconds to admire the baby asleep in the arms of the café owner from next door who had come round with some query about his ceiling, promising herself aloud a cuddle once my order had been taken. Since the seventeenth of August I had grown unimaginative about others, selfishly incurious and sometimes downright hostile. Now, here, some sort of thaw was taking place. A tall man in overalls was talking to the shop's manager, telling him about the progress of a job out in West Molesey, and it seemed it was going well.

There was an atmosphere of good temper which was rare and warming, none of the usual sighs or in-staff carping or reined-in impatience when you wanted to know how much it would be with extra safety bolts or with three coats of paint rather than two. I was charmed. I wanted to stay in this dim toasty light amid the general friendliness and walls festooned with hosepipes, tubes of grouting and sealant, boxes of thumbtacks, lightbulbs, my mind soothed by the industrious but not frantic atmosphere.

Everything here had to do with maintenance and soundness. Grief kept indoors grows noxious, I thought, like a room that can't be aired; mould grows, plants die. I wanted to open the windows but it wasn't allowed.

The order was complicated – did I want full or partial beading; what about a weatherboard; the door furniture, would I prefer a silver or gold finish, or perhaps this brushed aluminium – and it took quite a while. Even so, I was sorry when it was finished and Sally – the young woman's name – had handed me my carbon copy and swiped a hundred pounds from my Barclaycard as the deposit. Because even a very ordinary ready-made back

door was going to cost £400 in total to supply, fit, hang and paint.

‘They’re not cheap, are they, doors,’ I said, as I signed the slip.

‘They’re not,’ she sighed in agreement, not taking my comment in any way personally. ‘But they’re well-made, these doors. Nice and strong.’

‘Good,’ I said, tucking the Visa slip into my wallet. For a moment I toyed with the idea of telling her how they’d kicked the last one in, but I couldn’t face the effort. Even so I felt she was like a sister to me.

‘So Matthew will be along on the twenty-second to hang the door and paint it,’ she said.

‘You’ve got my number in case he needs to change the date.’

‘Yes, that’s right, but expect him on the twenty-second at about nine thirty,’ she said. ‘Matthew is very dependable.’

At nine thirty-five on the twenty-second I had a phone call, and I relaxed at the sound of Sally’s calm voice, even though I was expecting her to cancel the door-fitting appointment with all the irritation that would involve. I had with difficulty arranged a day at home to deal with a couple of files from the office, without having to take it off my annual holiday allowance. But she was not ringing to cancel, no, she was only ringing to let me know that the traffic was terrible that morning and Matthew had rung her to say he was stuck out in a jam near Esher but should be with me before ten.

He arrived at two minutes to, the tall man in overalls I had seen earlier in the shop; he had a frank open face and unforced smile. As he walked into the kitchen at the back my shoulders dropped and I gave a sigh as thorough as a baby’s yawn. It was going to be all right.

‘Would you like tea or coffee?’ I asked, raising the kettle to show this was no idle offer.

‘Not just now, thank you,’ he said. ‘Later would be good, but I’d better get cracking on straight away.’

Again he smiled that nice natural smile. He was not going to be chatty, how wonderful; I would be able to trust him and leave him to it and get on with my work. He did not need respectful hovering attendance, as the man who had recently mended the boiler had done; nor me running around for stepladders and spare bits and pieces that he might have forgotten, like the electrician before Christmas just after I’d moved in. That had been three months after the funeral I wasn’t at. First I’d chucked things out in a sort of frenzy, bin bags to Oxfam, but then I’d realised that wouldn’t be enough, I’d have to move. Which I’d done, somehow.

I waited around a bit while he brought in his toolboxes. Then, staggering only slightly and with a shallow stertorousness of breathing and blossom of sweat on his forehead, he carried in the door itself, a raw glazed slab of timber that looked too narrow for the destined frame.

‘I didn’t quite realise . . .’ I said. ‘I thought it was going to be ready-painted, ready to hang today.’

‘It is ready to hang,’ he said. ‘But first I must see how it fits; I must shave anywhere it’s a bit tight. I must see wherever it needs adjusting to the frame.’

‘Oh, so it’s not just standard; I see,’ I said.

‘The frame is a standard size from the measurements you took, but they’re always a few millimetres out here and there,’ he explained. He wasn’t irritated or bored by my questions, but at the same time he continued to prepare for work, spreading a groundsheet, setting out his tools.

‘We want a perfect fit,’ he said, looking up, looking me in the eye. ‘But don’t worry, it’ll all be done by the end of

today.'

I hardly ever believe a man when he says that sort of thing, but this one I did. I went into the front room and sat down to work. The disabling sluggishness which had dogged me ever since I'd moved here, stagnant as my reflection in the mirror, seemed to have beaten a temporary retreat. It was over two hours before I looked up again, though I had been distantly aware of the sounds of drilling and tapping, finding them reassuring rather than distracting. There was satisfaction in two people working separately but companionably in the flat. It was dignified.

I went through to the kitchen.

'Are you ready for a coffee now?' I asked. 'It's nearly twelve thirty. I'll be making myself a sandwich, shall I do one for you too? Just cheese and tomato.'

I hadn't cooked anything in this kitchen. Nuts and raisins, toast, that was about it. I really couldn't be bothered.

'I'll say yes to the coffee and no to the sandwich,' he said, looking briefly in my direction, his concentration needed for the door, which he appeared to have in a wrestling hold halfway into the frame. 'Thank you.'

'Can I help?' I said feebly, despising myself immediately for putting him under the necessity of making a polite refusal while struggling with a seven-foot door. The wood was still in its patchy undercoat. Outside, the air was the opposite of crisp, and chill with it.

'Not brilliant painting weather,' I commented as I sawed away at the loaf.

'I don't think it'll rain quite yet,' he said. 'Not till the evening. And the paint should have gone off by then. You'll know when it's gone off, when you're safe, by licking your finger and then just touching the surface of the gloss. If it's

smooth, you're safe. If it's still tacky you'll have to wait a bit longer.'

Safe - that word - I thought I'd never hear it again. And of course there *is* no safety but it's nice to hear it spoken of.

'Will you really have time to give it two coats?' I said. 'What happens after you've applied the first one?'

'Then I have to be a bit patient but it doesn't take as long as you'd think,' he said, at work now on lining up the hinges with the places marked for them on the frame.

'Watching paint dry,' I suggested, and smiled. I felt better than I had for weeks; I'd worked hard and happily this morning and would continue to do so after my sandwich, with him round the corner. I saw what a ghost I'd become in these rooms, invisible, restless, talking to myself and leaving half-finished sentences in the air.

He had a row of little brass screws held by the line of his lips, like a seamstress with her mouthful of pins, and frowned as he prepared the path for the first of them with the tip of a bradawl. I put his coffee on the draining board beside him, then perched on a kitchen stool over by the breadbin while I ate my sandwich. The hinges went on well and without trouble. He stood up at last and straightened his back.

'That's more like it,' he said, and picked up the mug of coffee.

'It looks lovely,' I said truthfully. 'The last one was too old, I think, the wood was rotten in the corner and really it wouldn't have kept a squirrel out if it was determined. Let alone a burglar.'

'You had a break-in then,' he said, shaking his head.

'"Opportunistic" the police said when they came round,' I replied, remembering the two young boys with their

notebooks and curt chivalry. One of them had had a large fading bruise on his cheekbone.

‘I’ve got a couple of good sliding bolts to fit on this door,’ he said. ‘That and the Chubb lock mean that things should be as secure as they can be.’

‘Excellent,’ I said. I wanted to tell him, that meant nothing. Out of the blue your heart can stop beating and you’re dead. All finished in twenty minutes. No warning. I’d finished my sandwich. I should have gone back to the front-room table then and made a start on the next file, but somehow I felt like loitering in the kitchen.

‘Funny how things come all at the same time,’ I continued. The business of trying to utter natural words from the heart, frank and clear, struck me with dismal force, the inevitable difficulty involved in discovering ourselves to others; the clichés and blindness and inadvertent misrepresentations; but I thought I would have a go anyway.

‘Yes, all sorts of things,’ I said, but I suddenly couldn’t be bothered to mention personal details. One step at a time. One day at a time. Yeah, yeah. ‘You just have to put your head down and keep walking, sometimes,’ I blurted. ‘Keep on keeping on. Never mind the weather.’

He nodded and sipped his coffee. He didn’t think I was mad. I *wasn’t* mad, but I was very shaken, very shuddery inside when I remembered things. My mind had been behaving like a bonfire, feed it a dry and crackling little worry and it would leap into flame.

‘I know what you mean,’ he said. ‘When something happens. Takes over. I’ve had a few weeks when it’s been hard to think of anything else. Well, me and my wife both, really.’

He paused, took another sip of coffee.