



VINTAGE

HEY YEAH RIGHT GET A LIFE

HELEN SIMPSON

Contents

Cover Page

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Helen Simpson

Praise

Title Page

Introduction

Lentils and Lilies

Café Society

Hey Yeah Right Get a Life

Millennium Blues

Burns and the Bankers

Opera

Cheers

Wurstigkeit

Hurrah for the Hols

Copyright Page

Helen Simpson
HEY YEAH RIGHT
GET A LIFE



About the Book

This collection, Helen Simpson's third and best yet, is a loosely linked set of stories about women – at work, at home and on holiday – that is poignant, perceptive, often sad and frequently funny.

About the Author

Helen Simpson is the author of *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*, *Dear George*, *Constitutional* and *In-Flight Entertainment*. 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

‘It’s a brilliant, painful, funny and courageous book’

Esther Freud, *Guardian*

‘Simply tremendous. . .She is a witch, with the surest hand
in contemporary fiction’

Philip Hensher, *Spectator*

‘Her limpid, chaste, lucious fiction describes real lives’

John Lanchester, *Daily Telegraph*

‘Her stories are – for those who, like me, recognise the
truth in every word – like a reprieve. . .Sharp, poetic and
marvellously witty’

Kate Kellaway, *Observer*

‘Motherhood has long been a subscription-only sort of
subject. Helen Simpson has found a way to tell it, and I
hope that people beyond the constituency margins are
listening’

Rachel Cusk, *Evening Standard*

‘There are short story writers who render the genre mere
snipped-up sections of prose, the poor relation of the novel;
and then there are those, like Simpson, who elevate it to an
art form all of its own, who make you see its point’

Maggie O’Farrell

‘A collection of ingeniously linked tales about women who
want something more out of life – the question is, do they
know how to get it? Funny, sharp and moving, Simpson is
one of the best short story writers around’

Cosmopolitan

‘A clutch of wonderful stories by a true artist who deserves
to sell by the squillion’

Harry Ritchie, *Financial Times*

‘It is the book’s truthfulness that makes it both intensely
tragic and intensely comic’

A. S. Byatt, *Mail on Sunday*

‘This is writing of complete integrity and honesty’

Paul Bailey, *Daily Telegraph*

‘She manages to travel both near to the bone and close to
the heart’

Clare Boylan, *Independent on Sunday*

‘Simply brilliant. She displays herself as a writer of unusual
power’

Robert McCrum

Introduction

No, I did not imagine I was the first person ever to have a baby. But life as I was seeing it in these new scenes was utterly different from the myths which had prepared the way. The writer in me was standing at the edge of a field of untrodden snow. As far as I was aware, there was hardly any fiction which treated this submerged territory with real interest or feeling or honesty. It was uncharted back then in the nineties, and it was somehow taboo to mention it in any but the most clichéd and upbeat way. Why was there this conspiracy of silence about what happens to women when they become mothers, I wondered. Why was it somehow not allowed, to talk or write openly about your days and nights with babies, about life and work with young children? Well, not unless you wanted to be thought a bore or unnatural or some other sort of social misfit.

I did not consciously think to myself, Ooh goody, here's my next book (and in fact it was not my next book). I just did what I'd always done, wrote about what I was finding fascinating at the time and trusted that that would give any resulting collection some sort of unity. I'm a slow digester; looking back at my work diaries for those years I see that I would often write a piece, leave it, pick it up again months later and rework it, then put it down again. After a while I realised I was tackling sensitive contentious subject matter, not least the wincingly tender areas of how women combine (or do not combine) paid work with motherhood, and how even the blindest of bats must eventually see it's

parenthood that gender-politicises relationships. And I could feel that these were painful areas where it is often hard to be truthful with one's self, let alone with other people. No wonder so many writers, women as well as men, had avoided such subject matter like the plague.

Another thing—you were in danger of losing caste here if you weren't careful. How could you be free and great as a writer if you started going on about such lowly matters? This had led to a ridiculous situation where describing domestic work and life (the daily reality of most women in the world) was seen as letting the side down.

Hey Yeah Right Get a Life was published in 2000, a good ten years after I'd had my first baby. It hit a nerve. I didn't realise it would, and I was surprised. It was, I suppose, the first book of its kind. When I gave readings, I was amazed to find women coming up afterwards and using words like "reprieved" and "samizdat". Some laughed out loud during readings; others told me that such-and-such a story had made them cry. One I remember said she lent it to her friends but wouldn't dream of letting her partner see it (a new spin on the Lady Chatterly trial, when it was the wives and servants who needed protecting). What hostility there was appeared to issue from a feeling that the subject matter itself was out of bounds and that this whole area should remain seen and not heard.

I'm not a polemical writer and I had no axe to grind. I really did not know whether I sympathised more with Dorrie, self-sacrificing maternal doormat, or Nicola, high-flying mother-of-four with a nanny, or indeed with dynamic Max or teenage Jade or any of the other very different characters in my stories. During that child-rearing decade I'd kept my eyes and ears open, I'd read and thought and used my

imagination, I wasn't measuring this new life against my own pulse only.

And, writing this book, I was again struck by the huge imaginative advantages of the short story collection as a literary form. You are not forced to take a line then stick to it; your explorations can be genuine. You are not coerced into making judgments. Place this story against that and it throws a certain light; add a third, and the light shifts again. A multi-faceted story collection can show the true complexity of life without pandering to the simpleton's urge to prove this way Right and that way Wrong. The novel by comparison is too often a big bully.

Helen Simpson, 2006

Some of these stories have appeared in Granta, The New Yorker, the TLS, You Magazine, and on Radio 3 and Radio 4

She had grown stouter and broader, so that it was hard to recognise in the robust-looking young mother the slim, mobile Natasha of old days. Her features had become more defined, and wore an expression of calm softness and serenity. Her face had no longer that ever-glowing fire of eagerness that had once constituted her chief charm. Now, often her face and body were all that was to be seen, and the soul was not visible at all.

From *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, translated by
Constance Garnett

Lentils and Lilies

Jade Beaumont was technically up in her bedroom revising for the A levels which were now only weeks away. Her school gave them study days at home, after lectures on trust and idleness. She was supposed to be sorting out the differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge at the moment.

Down along the suburban pleasantness of Miniver Road the pavements were shaded by fruit trees, and the front gardens of the little Edwardian villas smiled back at her with early lilac, bushes of crimson flowering currant and the myopic blue dazzle of forget-me-nots. She felt light on her feet and clever, like a cat, snuffing the air, pinching a pungent currant leaf.

There was a belief held by Jade's set that the earlier you hardened yourself off and bared your skin, the more lasting the eventual tan; and so she had that morning pulled on a brief white skirt and T-shirt. She was on her way to an interview for a holiday job at the garden centre. Summer! She couldn't wait. The morning was fair but chilly and the white-gold hairs on her arms and legs stood up and curved to form an invisible reticulation, trapping a layer of warm air a good centimetre deep.

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

That was cool, but Coleridge was a minefield. Just when you thought he'd said something really brilliant, he went raving off full steam ahead into nothingness. He was a nightmare to write about. Anyway, she herself found outward forms utterly absorbing, the colour of clothes, the texture of skin, the smell of food and flowers. She couldn't see the point of extrapolation. Keats was obviously so much better than the others, but you didn't get the choice of questions with him.

She paused to inhale the sweet air around a philadelphus Belle Etoile, then noticed the host of tired daffodils at its feet.

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy.

She looked back down her years at school, the reined-in feeling, the stupors of boredom, the teachers in the classrooms like tired lion-tamers, and felt quite the opposite. She was about to be let out. And every day when she left the house, there was the excitement of being noticed, the warmth of eye-beams, the unfolding consciousness of her own attractive powers. She was the focus of every film she saw, every novel she read. She was about to start careering round like a lustrous loose cannon.

Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

She was never going to go dead inside or live somewhere boring like this, and she would make sure she was in charge at any work she did and not let it run her.

She would never be like her mother, making rotas and lists and endless arrangements, lost forever in a forest of twitching detail with her tense talk of juggling and her self-importance about her precious job and her joyless 'running the family'. No, life was not some sort of military campaign; or, at least, *hers* would not be.

When she thought of her mother, she saw tendons and hawsers, a taut figure at the front door screaming at them all to do their music practice. She was always off out; she made them do what she said by remote control. Her trouble was, she'd forgotten how to relax. It was no wonder Dad was like he was.

And everybody said she was so amazing, what she managed to pack into twenty-four hours. Dad worked hard, they said, but she worked hard too *and* did the home shift, whatever that was. Not really so very amazing though; she'd forgotten to get petrol a couple of weeks ago, and the school run had ground to a halt. In fact some people might say downright inefficient.

On the opposite side of the road, a tall girl trailed past with a double buggy of grizzling babies, a Walkman's shrunk tinkling at her ears. Au pair, remarked Jade expertly to herself, scrutinising the girl's shoes, cerise plastic jellies set with glitter. She wanted some just like that, but without the purple edging.

She herself had been dragged up by a string of au pairs. Her mother hated it when she said that. After all, she *was* supposed to take delight in us! thought Jade viciously, standing stock-still, outraged; like, *be* there with us. For us. Fair seed-time had my soul I *don't* think.

Above her the cherry trees were fleecy and packed with a foam of white petals. Light warm rays of the sun reached her upturned face like kisses, refracted as a fizzy dazzle through the fringing of her eyelashes. She turned to the

garden beside her and stared straight into a magnolia tree, the skin of its flowers' stiff curves streaked with a sexual crimson. She was transported by the light and the trees, and just as her child self had once played the miniature warrior heroine down green alleys, so she saw her self now floating in this soft sunshine, moving like a panther into the long jewelled narrative which was her future.

Choice landscapes and triumphs and adventures quivered, quaintly framed there in the zigzag light like pendant crystals on a chandelier. There was the asterisk trail of a shooting star, on and on for years until it petered out at about thirty-three or thirty-four, leaving her at some point of self-apotheosis, high and nobly invulnerable, one of Tiepolo's ceiling princesses looking down in beautiful amusement from a movie-star cloud. This was about as far as any of the novels and films took her too.

A pleasurable sigh escaped her as the vision faded, and she started walking again, on past the tranquil houses, the coloured glass in a hall window staining the domestic light, a child's bicycle propped against the trunk of a standard rose. She sensed babies breathing in cots in upstairs rooms, and solitary women becalmed somewhere downstairs, chopping fruit or on the telephone organising some toddler tea. It really was suburban purdah round here. They were like battery hens, weren't they, rows of identical hutches, so neat and tidy and narrow-minded. Imagine staying in all day, stewing in your own juices. Weren't they bored out of their skulls? It was beyond her comprehension.

And so materialistic, she scoffed, observing the pelmetted strawberry-thief curtains framing a front room window; so bourgeois. Whereas her gap-year cousin had just been all over India for under £200.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Although after a good patch of freedom she fully intended to pursue a successful career, the way ahead paved by her future degrees in Business Studies and Marketing. But she would never end up anywhere like here. No! It would be a converted warehouse with semi-astral views and no furniture. Except perhaps for the ultimate sofa.

Jade rounded the corner into the next road, and suddenly there on the pavement ahead of her was trouble. A child was lying flat down on its back screaming while a man in a boilersuit crouched over it, his anti-dust mask lifted to his forehead like a frogman. Above them both stood a broad fair woman, urgently advising the child to calm down.

‘You’ll be better with a child than I am,’ said the workman gratefully as Jade approached, and before she could agree – or disagree – he had shot off back to his sand-blasting.

‘She’s stuck a lentil up her nose,’ said the woman crossly, worriedly. ‘She’s done it before. More than once. I’ve got to get it out.’

She waved a pair of eyebrow tweezers in the air. Jade glanced down at the chubby blubbering child, her small squat nose and mess of tears and mucus, and moved away uneasily.

‘We’re always down at Casualty,’ said the mother, as rapidly desperate as a talentless stand-up comedian. ‘Last week she swallowed a penny. Casualty said, a penny’s OK, wait for it to come out the other end. Which it did. But they’d have had to open her up if it had been a five-pence