

## The Edge of Reason

(Viking). Author Helen Fielding's second diary-form novel featuring the popular character released in the U.S. last week. After its November release in Britain, the book spent 10 weeks on the bestseller list.

### From Chapter 1: Happily Ever After

Monday 27 January 129lbs. (total fat groove), boyfriends 1 (hurrah!), shags 3 (hurrah!), calories 2,100, calories used up by shags 600, so total calories 1,500 (exemplary).

7.15 a.m. Hurrah! The wilderness years are over. For four weeks and five days now have been in functional relationship with adult male thereby proving am not love pariah as previously feared. Feel marvelous, rather like Jemima Goldsmith or similar radiant newlywed opening cancer hospital in veil while everyone imagines her in bed with Imran Khan. Ooh. Mark Darcy just moved. Maybe he will wake up and talk to me about my opinions.

7.30 a.m. Mark Darcy has not woken up. I know, will get up and make him fantastic fried breakfast with sausages, scrambled eggs and mushrooms or maybe Eggs Benedict or Florentine.

7.31 a.m. Depending what Eggs Benedict or Florentine actually are.

7.32 a.m. Except do not have any mushrooms or sausages.

7.33 a.m. Or eggs.

7.34 a.m. Or - come to think of it - milk.

7.35 a.m. Still has not woken up. Mmmm. He is lovely. Love looking at Him asleep. V. sexy broad shoulders and hairy chest. Not that sex object or anything. Interested in brain. Mmmm.

7.37 a.m. Still has not woken up. Must not make noise, realize, but maybe could wake Him subtly by thought vibes.

7.40 a.m. Maybe will put . . . GAAAAAH!

7.50 a.m. Was Mark Darcy sitting bolt upright yelling, "Bridget, will you stop. Bloody. Staring at me when I am asleep. Go find something to do."

8.45 a.m. In Coins Cafe having cappuccino, chocolate croissant, and cigarette. Is relief to have fag in open and not to be on best behaviour. V. complicated actually having man in house as cannot freely spend requisite amount of time in bathroom or turn into gas chamber as conscious of other person late for work, desperate for pee etc.; also disturbed by Mark folding up underpants at night, rendering it strangely embarrassing now simply to keep all own clothes in pile on floor. Also he is coming round again tonight so have to go to supermarket either before or after work. Well, do not have to but horrifying truth is want to, in bizarre possibly genetic-throwback-style way such as could not admit to Sharon.

8.50 a.m. Mmm. Wonder what Mark Darcy would be like as father (father to own offspring, mean. Not self. That would indeed be sick in manner of Oedipus)?

8.55 a.m. Anyway, must not obsess or fantasize.

9 a.m. Wonder if Una and Geoffrey Alconbury would let us put marquee on their lawn for the receipt--Gaaah!

Was my mother, walking into my café bold as brass in a Country Casuals pleated skirt and apple-green blazer with shiny gold buttons, like a spaceman turning up in the House of Commons squirting slime and sitting itself down calmly on the front bench.

"Hello, darling," she trilled. "Just on my way to Debenhams and I know you always come in here for your breakfast. Thought I'd pop in and see when you want your colours done. Ooh I fancy a cup of coffee. Do you think they'll warm up the milk?"

"Mum, I've told you I don't want my colours done," I muttered, scarlet, as people stared and a sulky, rushed-off-her-feet waitress bustled up.

"Oh don't be such a stick-in-the-mud, darling. You need to make a statement about yourself! Not sitting on the fence all the time in all these fudges and slurries. Oh, hello, dear."

Mum went into her slow, kindly "Let's try to make best friends with the waiting staff and be the most special person in the café for no fathomable reason" voice.

"Now. Let. Me. See. D'you know? I think I'll have a coffee. I've had so many cups of tea this morning up in Grafton Underwood with my husband Colin that I'm sick to death of tea. But could you warm me up some milk? I can't drink cold milk in coffee. It gives me indigestion. And then my daughter Bridget will have . . ."

Grrr. Why do parents do this. Why? Is it desperate mature person's plea for attention and importance, or is it that our urban generation are too busy and suspicious of each other to be open and friendly? I remember when I first came to London I used to smile at everyone until a man on the tube escalator masturbated into the back of my coat.

"Espresso? Filter? Latte? Cap: half fat or de-caf?" snapped the waitress, sweeping all the plates off the table next to her and looking at me accusingly as if Mum was my fault.

"Half fat de-caf cap and a latte," I whispered apologetically.

"What a surly girl, doesn't she speak English?" huffed Mum at her retreating back. "This is a funny place to live, isn't it? Don't they know what they want to put on in the morning?"

I followed her gaze to the fashionable Trustafarian girls at the next table. One was tapping at her laptop and wearing Timberlands, a petticoat, a Rastafarian bonnet and a fleece, while the other, in Prada stilettos, hiking socks, surfing shorts, a floor-length llamaskin coat and a Bhutanese herdsman's woolly hat with earflaps, was yelling into her mobile headset, "I mean, he said if he found me smoking skunk again he'd take away the flat. And I'm like, 'Fucking, Daddy'" - while her six-year-old child picked miserably at a plate of chips.

"Is that girl talking to herself with that language?" said Mum. "It's a funny world you live in, isn't it? Wouldn't you do better living near normal people?" "They are normal people," I said furiously, nodding in illustration out at the street where unfortunately a nun in a brown habit was pushing two babies along in a pram.

"You see this is why you get yourself all mixed up."

"I don't get myself mixed up."

"Yes you do," she said. "Anyway. How's it going with Mark?"

"Lovely," I said moonily, at which she gave me a hard stare.

"You're not going to you-know-what with him, are you? He won't marry you, you know."

Grrr. Grrrr. No sooner have I started going out with the man she'd been trying to force me onto for eighteen months ("Malcolm and Elaine's son, darling, divorced, terribly lonely and rich") than I feel like I'm running some kind of Territorial Army obstacle course, scrambling over walls and nets to bring her home a big silver cup with a bow on.

"You know what they say afterwards," she was going on. "Oh, she was easy meat." I mean when Merle Robertshaw started going out with Percival her mother said, "Make sure he keeps that thing just for weeing with."

"Mother--" I protested. I mean it was a bit rich coming from her. Not six months ago she was running around with a Portuguese tour operator with a gentleman's handbag.

"Oh, did I tell you," she interrupted, smoothly changing the subject, "Una and I are going to Kenya."

"What!" I yelled.

"We're going to Kenya! Imagine, darling! To darkest Africa!"

My mind started to whirl round and round searching through possible explanations like a fruit machine before it comes to a standstill: Mother turned missionary? Mother rented Out of Africa again on video? Mother suddenly remembered about Born Free and decided to keep lions?

"Yes, darling. We want to go on safari and meet the Masai tribesmen, then stay in a beach hotel!"

The slot machine clunked to a halt on a series of lurid images of elderly German ladies having sex on the beach with local youths. I stared levelly at Mum.

"You're not going to start messing around again, are you?" I said. "Dad's only just got over all that stuff with Julio."

"Honestly, darling! I don't know what all the fuss was about! Julio was just a friend - a penfriend! We all need friends, darling. I mean even in the best of marriages one person just isn't enough: friends of all ages, races, creeds and tribes. One has to expand one's consciousness at every . . ."

"When are you going?"

"Oh, I don't know, darling. It's just an idea. Anyway must whizz. Bye!" Bugger. It's 9.15. Am going to be late for morning meeting.

11 a.m. Sit Up Britain office. Was luckily only two minutes late for meeting, also managed to conceal coat by rolling it into ball to create pleasing sense of having been in for hours and merely detained on urgent trans-departmental business elsewhere in building. Made my way in composed manner through hideous open-plan office littered with the tell-tale remnants of bad daytime TV - here an inflatable sheep with a hole in its bottom, there a blow-up of Claudia Schiffer wearing Madeleine Albright's head, there a large cardboard sign saying: "LESBIANS! Out! Out! Out!" - towards where Richard Finch, sporting sideburns and black Jarvis Cocker spectacles, his portly frame squeezed hideously into a 70s retro safari suit was bellowing at the assembled twenty-something research team.

"Come on, Bridget Droopy-Drawers Late Again," he yelled, spotting my approach. "I'm not paying you to roll coats into a ball and try to look innocent, I'm paying you to turn up on time and come up with ideas."

Honestly. The lack of respect day after day is beyond human endurance.

"Right, Bridget!" he roared. "I'm thinking New Labour Women. I'm thinking image and roles. I want Barbara Follett in the studio. Get her to give Margaret Beckett a make-over. Highlights. Little black dress. Stockings. I want to see Margaret looking like sex on legs."

Sometimes there seems no limit to the absurdity of what Richard Finch will ask me to do. One day, I will find myself persuading Harriet Harman and Tessa Jowell to stand in a supermarket while I ask passing shoppers if they can tell which one is which, or trying to persuade a Master of the Hunt to be chased naked through the countryside by a pack of vicious foxes. Must find more worthwhile fulfilling job of some kind. Nurse, perhaps?

11.03 a.m. At desk. Right, had better ring Labour press office. Mmmm. Keep getting shag flashbacks. Hope Mark Darcy was not really annoyed this morning. Wonder if it is too early to ring him at work?

11.05 a.m. Yes. As it says in *How to Get the Love You Want* - or maybe it was *Keeping the Love You Find?* - the blending together of man and woman is a delicate thing. Man must pursue. Will wait for him to ring me. Maybe had better read papers to brief self about New Labour policy in case actually get Margaret Beckett on end of . . . Gaaah!

11.15 a.m. Was Richard Finch yelling again. Have been put on the fox-hunting item instead of Labour Women and have got to do live insert from Leicestershire. Must not panic. Am assured, receptive, responsive woman of substance. My sense of self comes not from my worldly achievements but from within. Am assured, receptive . . . Oh God. Is pissing it down. Do not want to go out in fridge-crossed-with-swimming pool-like world.

11.17 a.m. Actually is v.g. to get interview to do. Big responsibility - relatively speaking, obviously, not like having to decide whether to send cruise missiles to Iraq, or holding clamp on main arterial valve during surgery - but chance to grill Fox-Murderer on camera and actually make a point rather like Jeremy Paxman with Iranian - or Iraqi - Ambassador.

11.20 a.m. Might even be asked to do trial item for Newsnight.

11.21 a.m. Or series of short specialized reports. Hurrah! Right, better get out cuts . . . Oh. Telephone.

11.30 a.m. Was going to ignore it but thought it might be interviewee: Sir Hugo Rt Hon. Boynton-Fox-Murderer with directions about silos, pig-huts on the left etc. so picked up: was Magda.

"Bridget, hi! I was just ringing to say in the potty! In the potty! Do it in the potty!"

There was a loud crashing noise followed by the sound of running water and screaming in manner of Muslims being massacred by Serbs with "Mummy will smack! She will smack!" as if on a loop in the background.

"Magda!" I yelled. "Come back!"

"Sorry, hon," she said, eventually returning. "I was just ringing to say . . . tuck your willy inside the potty! If you let it hang out it'll go on the floor!" "I'm in the middle of work," I said pleadingly. "I've got to set off to Leicestershire in two minutes . . ."

"Great, fine, rub it in, you're all very glamorous and important and I'm stuck at home with two people who haven't learned to speak the English language yet. Anyway, I was just ringing to say

that I've fixed for my builder to come round and do your shelves tomorrow. Sorry to have bothered you with my boring domesticity. He's called Gary Wilshaw. Bye." Phone rang again before had time to call back. Was Jude, sobbing in a sheep's voice.

"It's OK, Jude, It's OK," I said, tucking the phone under my chin and trying to shove the cuttings into my handbag.

"It's Vile Richard heggggggggg."

Oh dear. After Christmas Shaz and I convinced Jude that if she had just one more mad conversation with Vile Richard about the shifting sands of his Commitment Problem she would have to be put into a mental hospital; and therefore they would not be able to have any mini-breaks, relationship counseling, or future together anyway for years and years until she was released into Care in the Community.

In a magnificent feat of self-love she ditched him, cut her hair and started turning up to her staid job in the City wearing leather jackets and hipster jeans. Every striped-shirted Hugo, Johnny or Jerrers who had ever idly wondered what was under Jude's suit was catapulted into a state of priapic frenzy and she seems to have a different one on the phone every night. But somehow, the whole subject of Vile Richard still makes her sad.

"I was just going through all the stuff he left, ready to chuck it out, and I found this self-help book . . . book called . . . called . . ."

"It's OK. It's OK. You can tell me."

"Called How to Date Young Women: A Guide For Men Over Thirty-Five."

Jesus.

"I just feel terrible, terrible . . ." she was saying ". . . I can't stand being out in dating hell again . . . It's an impenetrable sea . . . I'm going to be on my own forever . . ."

Working towards balance between importance of friendship and impossibility of getting to Leicestershire in negative amount of time, gave merely preliminary first-aid advice in manner of holding on to sense of self: probably left it there on purpose; no you're not; etc.

"Oh, thanks, Bridge," said Jude, after a while seeming a bit calmer. "Can I see you tonight?"

"Um, well, Mark's coming round."

There was a silence.

"Fine," she said coolly. "Fine. No, you have a good time."

Oh God, feel guilty with Jude and Sharon now I have boyfriend, almost like traitorous double-crossing side-switching guerrilla. Have arranged to see Jude tomorrow night instead, with Shaz, and merely talk through everything again on phone tonight, which seemed to go down OK.

Now, had better quickly ring Magda and make sure she doesn't feel boring and realizes how opposite-of-glamorous job is.

"Thanks, Bridge," said Magda after we'd talked for a bit. "I'm just feeling really low and lonely since the baby. Jeremy's working again tomorrow night. Don't suppose you'd like to come round?"

"Um, well, I'm supposed to be seeing Jude in 192."

There was a loaded pause.

"And I suppose I'm too much of a dull Smug Married to come along?"

"No, no, come. Come, that would be great!!" I overcompensated. Knew Jude would be cross as would take focus away from Vile Richard but resolved to sort out later. So now am really late and have got to go to Leicestershire without actually having read fox-hunting cuts. Maybe could read in car when at traffic lights. Wonder if should quickly ring Mark Darcy to tell him where am going?

Hmmm. No. Bad move. But then what if I'm late? Had better ring.

11.35 a.m. Humph. Conversation went like this: Mark: Yes? Darcy here. Me: It's Bridget. Mark: (pause) Right. Er. Everything OK? Me: Yes. It was nice last night, wasn't it? I mean - you know, when we . . . Mark: I do know, yes. Exquisite. (Pause) I'm actually with the Indonesian Ambassador, the Head of Amnesty International and the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry just at the moment. Me: Oh. Sorry. I'm just going to Leicestershire. I thought I'd let you know in case anything happens to me. Mark: In case anything . . . ? What? Me: I mean in case I'm . . . late. (I finished lamely.) Mark: Right. Well, why not ring with an ETA when you're through? Jolly good. Bye now. Hmmm. Don't think I should have done that. It says specifically

in Loving Your Separated Man Without Losing Your Mind that the one thing they really do not like is being called up for no real reason when they are busy.

7 p.m. Back in flat. Nightmare rest of day. After challenging traffic and rain-blocked journey, found self in rain-swept Leicestershire, knocking on the door of a big square house surrounded by horseboxes, with only thirty minutes to go till transmission. Suddenly the door burst open, and a tall man was standing in corduroy trousers and a quite sexy baggy jumper.

"Humph," he said, eyeing me up and down. "Better bloody well come in. Your chaps are out the back. Where have you bloody well been?"

"I have been suddenly diverted from a top political story," I said hoity-toitily, as he led me into a big kitchen full of dogs and bits of saddle. Suddenly he turned and stared at me furiously, then biffed the table.

"It's supposed to be a free country. Once they start telling us we can't even bloody hunt on a Sunday where will it end? Baaaah!"

"Well, you could say that about people keeping slaves, couldn't you?" I muttered. "Or cutting the ears off cats. It just doesn't seem very gentlemanly to me, a crowd of people and dogs careering after one frightened little creature for fun."

"Have you ever bloody seen what a fox does to a chicken?" Sir Hugo bellowed, turning red in the face. "If we don't hunt 'em the countryside will be overrun."

"Shoot them then," I said, staring at him murderously. "Humanely. And chase something else on Sundays, like in greyhound racing. Fasten a little fluffy animal impregnated with fox smell on to a wire."

"Shoot them? Have you ever tried to shoot a bloody fox? There'll be your little frightened foxes left wounded in agony all over the bloody shop. Fluffy animal. Grrrrr!"

Suddenly he grabbed the phone and dialed. "Finch, you total arse!" he bellowed. "What have you sent me . . . some bloody little pinko? If you think you're coming out with the Quorn next Sunday . . ." At which moment the cameraman put his head round the door and said huffily, "Oh you're here, are you?" Then looked at his watch. "Don't feel you have to let us know or anything."

"Finch wants to talk to you," said Sir Hugo.

Twenty minutes later, under pain of sacking, I was on a horse preparing to trot into shot and interview the Rt Hon. Bossybottom, also on a horse.

"OK, Bridget, we're coming to you in fifteen, go, go, go," yelled Richard Finch in my earpiece from London, at which I squeezed my knees into the horse, as instructed. Unfortunately, however, the horse would not set off.

"Go, go, go, go, go!" yelled Richard. "I thought you said you could bloody ride."

"I said I had a natural seat," I hissed, digging frantically with my knees.

"OK, Leicester, tighter on Sir Hugo till fucking Bridget gets it together five, four, three, two . . . go."

At this the Hon. Purpleface launched into a bellowing pro-hunting advertisement as I dug frantically with my heels until the horse reared up neurotically, cantering sideways into the shot as I clung to its neck.

"Oh my fuck, wind it up, wind it up!" yelled Richard.

"Well, that's all we've got time for. Now back to the studio!" I trilled as the horse wheeled round again and started reversing at the cameraman.

After the sniggering crew had gone I went - mortified - into the house for my things, only to practically bump into the Rt Hon. Biffing Giant.

"Hah!" he growled. "Thought that stallion might teach you what's what. Fancy a bloody one?"

"What?" I said.

"Bloody Mary?"

Fighting instinctive urge to glug at the vodka I drew myself up to my full height. "Are you saying you sabotaged my report on purpose?"

"Maybe." He smirked.

"That's absolutely disgraceful," I said. "And not worthy of a member of the aristocracy."

"Hah! Spirit. I like that in a woman," he said throatily, then lunged towards me.

"Get off!" I said, dodging out of his way. I mean honestly. What was he thinking of? Am professional woman, not there to be made passes at. In any sense. Though, actually, just goes to prove how much men like it if they think you are not after them. Must remember for more useful occasion.

Now have just got in, having trailed round Tesco Metro and staggered up stairs with eight carrier bags. Am really tired. Humph. How come is always me who goes to supermarket? Is like having to be career woman and wife at same time. Is like living in seventeenth . . . Oooh.

Answerphone light is flashing.

"Bridget," - Richard Finch - "I want to see you in my office at 9 o'clock tomorrow. Before the meeting. That's 9 a.m. not 9 p.m. Morning. Daylight. I don't know how else to put it, really. Just bloody well make sure you're there." He sounded really pissed off. Hope am not about to discover impossibility of having a nice flat, a nice job and a nice boyfriend. Anyway, am going to give Richard Finch what for about journalistic integrity. Right. Better start getting everything ready. Am so tired.

8.30 p.m. Have managed to get energy back using Chardonnay, shoved all mess away, lit fire and candles, had bath, washed hair and put on make-up and v. sexy black jeans and spaghetti-strap top. Not exactly comfortable, in fact crotch of trousers and spaghetti straps really digging into self, but look nice, which is important. For as Jerry Hall said, a woman must be a cook in the kitchen and a whore in the sitting room. Or some room anyway.

8.35 p.m. Hurrah! Will be lovely cozy, sexy evening with delicious pasta - light yet nourishing - and firelight. Am marvelous career woman/girlfriend hybrid.

8.40 p.m. Where the bloody hell is he?

8.45 p.m. Grrr. What is point of self rushing round like scalded flea if he is just going to swan in whenever he feels like it?

8.50 p.m. Bloody Mark Darcy, am really . . . Doorbell. Hurrah! He looked gorgeous in his work suit with the top buttons of his shirt undone. As soon as he came in he dropped his briefcase, took me in his arms and turned me round in a little sexy dance. "So good to see you," he murmured into my hair. "I really enjoyed your report, fantastic horsewomanship."

"Don't," I said, pulling away. "It was awful."

"It was brilliant," he said. "For centuries people have been riding horses forwards and then, with one seminal report, a lone woman changes the face - or arse - of British horsemanship for ever. It was ground-breaking, a triumph." He sat down on the sofa wearily. "I'm wrecked. Bloody Indonesians. Their idea of a breakthrough in human rights is to tell a person he's under arrest while they're shooting the back of his head off."

I poured him a glass of Chardonnay and brought it to him in manner of James Bond-style hostess saying, with a calming smile, "Supper won't be long."

"Oh my God," he said, looking around terrified as if there might be Far Eastern militia hiding in the microwave. "Have you cooked?"

"Yes," I said indignantly. I mean you would have thought he would have been pleased! Also he had not so much as mentioned the whore outfit.

"Come here," he said, patting the sofa, "I'm only teasing you. I've always wanted to go out with Martha Stewart."

Was nice having cuddle but, thing was, pasta had already been on for six minutes and was going to go floury.

"I'll just do the pasta," I said, extracting myself. Just then, the phone rang and I lunged at it out of pure habit, thinking it might be him.

"Hi. It's Sharon. How's it going with Mark?"

"He's here," I whispered keeping my teeth and mouth clenched in the same position so Mark would not lip-read.

"What?"

"E's 'ere," I hissed clenched-teethedly.

"It's all right," said Mark, nodding reassuringly. "I realize I'm here. I don't think It's the sort of thing we should be keeping from each other."

"OK. Listen to this," said Shaz excitedly. "'We are not saying that all men cheat. But all men do think about it. Men have these desires eating at them all the time. We try to contain our sexual urges . . .'"

"Actually, Shaz, I'm just cooking pasta."

"Oooh, "just cooking pasta", are we? I hope you're not turning into a Smug Going-Out-With-Someone. Just listen to this and you'll want to put it on his head."

"Hang on," I said, glancing nervously at Mark. I took the pasta off the heat and went back to the phone.

"OK," said Shaz excitedly. "Sometimes instincts override higher-level thinking. A man will stare at, approach or bed a woman with small breasts if he is involved with a woman with large breasts. You may not think variety is the spice of life, but believe us, your boyfriend thinks so." Mark was starting to drum his fingers on the arm of the sofa.

"Shaz . . ."

"Wait . . . wait. It's this book called What Men Want. Right . . . "If you have a beautiful sister, or friend, rest assured that your boyfriend is **HAVING THOUGHTS ABOUT SEX WITH HER.**" There was an expectant pause. Mark had started miming throat slitting and toilet chain flushing motions.

"I mean isn't that revolting? Aren't they just . . . ?"

"Shaz, can I call you back later?"

Next thing Shaz was accusing me of being obsessed with men when I was supposed to be a feminist. So I said, if she was supposed to be so uninterested in them, why was she reading a book called What Men Want? It was all turning into a hideously unfeminist man-based row when we realized it was ridiculous and said we'd see each other tomorrow.

"So!" I said brightly, sitting down next to Mark on the sofa. Unfortunately had to get up again as had sat on something that turned out to be an empty Müller Lite yogurt carton.

"Yeees?" he said, brushing the yogurt off my bottom. Sure there cannot have been that much on or needing quite such hard brushing but was very nice. Mmm.

"Shall we have supper?" I said, trying to keep my mind on the task in hand. Had just put pasta in bowl and poured jar of sauce on it when the phone rang again. Decided to leave it till had eaten but answerphone clicked on and Jude sheep-voiced out, "Bridge, are you there? Pick up, pick up. Come on, Bridge, pleeeeeease."

I picked up the phone, as Mark hit himself hard on the forehead. The thing is, Jude and Shaz have been kind to me for years before I even met Mark so obviously it would not be right to leave the answerphone on now.

"Hi, Jude."

Jude had been to the gym where she ended up reading some article calling single girls over thirty "re-treads".

"The guy was arguing that the sort of girls who wouldn't go out with him in their twenties would go out with him now but he didn't want them any more," she said sadly. "He said they were all obsessed with settling down and babies and his rule with girls now was "Nothing over twenty-five"."

"Oh honestly!" I laughed gaily trying to fight a lurch of insecurity in my own stomach. "That's just complete bollocks. No one thinks you're a re-tread. Think of all those merchant bankers who've been ringing you up. What about Stacey and Johnny?"

"Huh," said Jude, though she was starting to sound more cheerful. "I went out with Johnny and his friends from Credit Suisse last night. Someone told a joke about this guy who drank too much in an Indian restaurant and passed out in a korma and Johnny is so literal that he went, 'Christ! How bloody awful. I knew a bloke who ate a lot of Indian food once, and he ended up with a stomach ulcer!'"

She was laughing. The crisis had clearly passed. You see there is nothing seriously wrong, she just gets a bit paranoid sometimes. Chatted a bit more and, once her confidence seemed firmly back in residence, I rejoined Mark at the table only to discover the pasta was not quite as had planned: slopping about wetly in white-coloured water.

"I like it," said Mark supportively, "I like string, I like milk. Mmmm."

"Do you think we'd better call out for a pizza?" I said, feeling a failure and a re-tread.

We ordered pizzas and ate them in front of the fire. Mark told me all about the Indonesians. I listened carefully and gave him my opinions and advice, which he said were very interesting and very "fresh", and I told him about horrid sacking meeting with Richard Finch. He gave me very good advice about working out what I wanted from the meeting and giving Richard plenty of places to go other than sacking me. As I explained to him, it was rather like the win-win mentality as advocated in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* when the phone rang again.

"Leave it," said Mark.

"Bridget. Jude. Pick up. I think I've done the wrong thing. I just called Stacey and he hasn't called back."

I picked up. "Well, maybe he's out."

"Of his mind just like you," said Mark.

"Shut up," I hissed, while Jude ran through the scenario. "Look, I'm sure he'll ring tomorrow. But if he doesn't, just move back one of the Mars and Venus Stages of Dating. He's pulling away like a Martian rubber band and you have to let him feel his attraction and spring back." When I got off the phone, Mark was watching the football.

"Rubber bands and win-win Martians," he said, smirking at me. "It's like war command in the land of gibberish here."

"Don't you talk to your friends about emotional matters?"

"Nope," he said, flicking the remote control from one football match to the other. I stared at him in fascination.

"Do you want to have sex with Shazzer?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you want to have sex with Shazzer and Jude?"

"I'd be delighted! Did you mean individually? Or both at the same time?" Trying to ignore his superficial tone, I pressed on. "When you met Shazzer after Christmas did you want to sleep with her?"

"Well. The thing is, you see, I was sleeping with you."

"But has it crossed your mind ever?"

"Well, of course It's crossed my mind."

"What?" I exploded.

"She's a very attractive girl. It would have been odd, surely, if it hadn't?" He grinned wickedly.

"And Jude," I said indignantly. "Sleeping with Jude. Has that ever "crossed your mind"?"

"Well, from time to time, fleetingly, I suppose it has. It's just human nature, isn't it?"

"Human nature? I've never imagined sleeping with Giles or Nigel from your office."

"No," he murmured. "I'm not sure that anyone else has either. Tragically. Except possibly Jose in the post room."

Just as we'd cleared away the plates and started snogging on the rug, the phone rang again.

"Leave it," said Mark. "Please - in the name of God and all his cherubim, seraphim, saints, archangels, cloud attendants and beard trimmers - leave it."

The answerphone was already clicking on. Mark crashed his head down on to the floor as a man's voice boomed out.

"Ah, hi. Giles Benwick here, friend of Mark's. Don't suppose he's there, is he? It's just . . ."

Suddenly his voice cracked. "It's just my wife just told me she wants a separation and . . ."

"Good God," said Mark and grabbed the phone. An expression of pure panic spread across his face. "Giles. Christ. Steady on . . . um . . . ah . . . um, Giles, I think I'd better give you to Bridget."

Mmm. Did not know Giles but think advice was quite good. Managed to calm him down and point him in direction of one or two useful volumes. Had lovely shag with Mark afterwards and felt v. safe and cozy lying on his chest, made all the worrying theories seem irrelevant. "Am I a re-tread?" I said sleepily as he leaned over to blow out the candle.

"A retard? No, darling," he said, patting my bottom reassuringly. "A little strange, perhaps, but not a retard." --Reprinted from *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* by Helen Fielding by permission of Viking Penguin, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright (c) 2000 by Helen

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