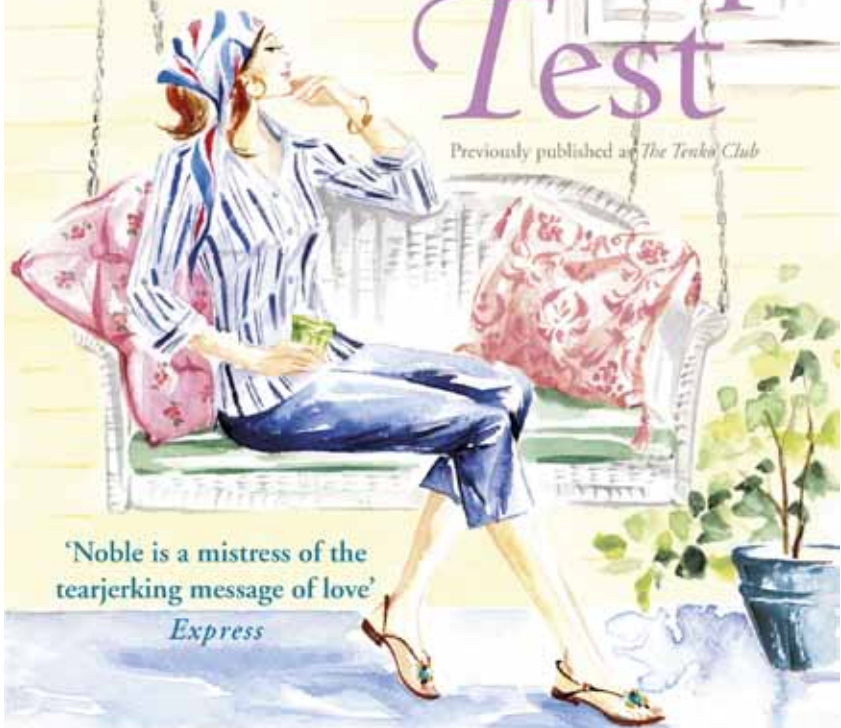




The Friendship Test

Previously published as *The Tenko Club*



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tearjerking message of love'

Express

Elizabeth Noble

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THINGS I WANT MY DAUGHTERS TO KNOW

The Friendship Test
by
Elizabeth Noble
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Prologue

October 1985, St Edmund Hall, Oxford

The rooms in the Kelly block were directly above the hall. One of the big plate-glass windows was slid all the way back. Freddie Valentine had one long leg in the room and the other over the sill, foot resting on the concrete balcony. She was smoking a Silk Cut, flicking the ash delicately into the night air. Tamsin wouldn't let her smoke in her room, but this one offered the best view of the top quad, where the rugby players were congregating before they went to the bop.

'Born in the USA' was blasting into the night air, Springsteen's every emphatic word crystal clear, even three floors up. God help anyone who was trying to work. Although if you were, three Friday nights into the Michaelmas term, it was the Devil's help you needed, not God's.

'Did you see him, last year, on tour?'

'Yeah. He was fantastic. Favourite Springsteen song?'

'Has to be "The River".' Freddie nodded approval. 'Yours?' Tamsin asked.

'"Drive All Night".' Tamsin didn't know it. 'It's on *The River*. It has the best lyrics.'

'Right.' Tamsin made a mental note to get the album, although she couldn't possibly imagine someone thinking

what Freddie was referring to. She'd never heard it. She was utterly in the thrall of her new friend Freddie.

They had met on the first day. After her mum and dad had gone, Tamsin had sat terrified on her narrow single bed three floors up among the dreaming spires, feeling bereft, and willed herself to go down for lunch. Everyone in the queue was chatting easily. Some people obviously knew each other already. Tamsin was the first kid from her sixth form ever to get into an Oxford college and she knew not one soul, unless you included that dopey-looking daughter of her mum's friend Muriel, and she wasn't at Oxford, she was at some secretarial college in the middle of the city. Although Tamsin had promised her mum and Muriel that they'd get together, she wasn't at all sure that they would. The girls in front were talking about hockey tryouts. Well, fat – pardon the pun – chance of making friends that way, unless there was a sumo team. Tamsin had always known she was overweight; and in the company of these slinky girls, all in their skinny-legged jeans, she felt positively elephantine. She hadn't cared before – at least, not enough to do anything about it – but now she was rather wishing she had.

She was just about to give up on lunch – start the diet now, then, shall I? – when she was trapped into the line by a new arrival. She was alone – that was good. But she was beautiful, and, if not exactly skinny, with a lovely shape, and Tamsin's heart sank again. But the girl was smiling at her. Then she held out her hand. When she spoke, it was with an American accent. 'Hi, I'm Freddie.'

'I'm Tamsin.' She couldn't think what else to say.

‘Look,’ Freddie was saying, ‘I’ve been in there and had a look at what they’re serving, and, frankly, I think we’d be better off at McDonald’s. There is one here, I hope?’

‘I think so – down the High Street, in the town centre.’
‘Wanna come?’

And that had been it. She was called Freddie Valentine, she was five foot ten tall, and what Tamsin’s mum would describe as statuesque – a proper woman. She had these big blonde curls and a widow’s peak and these sort of aquamarine eyes, and Tamsin thought she was beautiful. Beautiful and funny and irreverent and wonderful. She lived in Emden, the block opposite – so they could beckon each other over, waving a kettle and miming biscuits – and she’d covered every wall and surface in her room with these amazing Indian scarves and throws she’d bought from some place in the Covered Markets, so that it didn’t feel like you were in Emden but in Scheherezade’s tent in the middle of the desert. She burned joss sticks, drank weird teas, and when Tamsin came back in the next life, she wanted to be her.

She didn’t work out for a while that the feeling was completely mutual. The Winnie-the-Pooh duvet cover she had started to loathe on day two, the hinged photo frame with her parents’ pictures in it that she kept by her bed, the box of HobNob biscuits and sherbet fountains – Freddie loved it all. Tamsin’s shyness had quickly given way to the warmth and capacity for fun that made her irresistible to Freddie and to others. Freddie’s room had the exotic look, but Tamsin’s was where everybody wanted to be, drinking tea, raiding the stores and being mothered.

They were there tonight, ready for the bop, but anxious not to go too early. Anyway, they were waiting for Sarah.

She lived in the room two doors down from Freddie. They were separated by a geeky but kind third-year chemist, who had introduced them over an uncomfortable cup of tea in his room. They had bonded in a mutual protection society against further visits to Graeme's room, although they had felt bad when he went home the first weekend – for a Ramblers' Association 'get together' – and the other chemists had broken into his room to plant cress on his carpet. They had shared Freddie's room for a couple of nights while he slept in Sarah's and waited for the cress to be cleared up. Sarah had been at rowing tryouts all afternoon down at the river, but had promised to grab a shower and join them later.

Tamsin wasn't sure about the wisdom of entering any room with Sarah, who was so pretty that boys actually stopped talking mid-sentence when she passed them. Tamsin had thought women like her didn't exist – but they clearly did, and they came from the Mumbles. She wasn't shopping, though, Sarah had told them, the first chance she'd got. She was well and truly attached, she had told them. Practically engaged, they were. Only he hadn't got her a ring and asked her straight out because he thought her parents might worry about them being so young. Wasn't that considerate of him? He was certainly handsome and, yes, they had to concede he looked a bit like Sting. They'd seen one or two pictures of him – all right, hundreds – in Sarah's room. If Freddie's room was a homage to Marrakesh, Sarah's was a shrine to Owen. He was coming down soon, Sarah promised, and they'd all have the chance to meet him.

'Can we bear the suspense?' Tamsin had joked to Freddie, mimicking Sarah's Welsh accent.

Of course, it hadn't bothered Tamsin so much since she'd met Neil. Well, collided with him. She'd liked the idea of bicycling around Oxford, but she wasn't much good at it, and had ploughed into him one afternoon in week one, outside the Radcliffe Camera. Luckily he was studying physiological sciences – pre-med – and dressed his own flesh wound in his room. He hadn't held it against her, if that massive snogging session at last week's Queen's College bop was anything to go by. Neither had he seemed put off by her rolls. She'd mentioned tonight to him, ever so casually, when she'd seen him in the coffee-house. Something told her he'd be there. She couldn't wait.

Freddie had finished her cigarette and closed the window. She was wearing baggy denim dungarees – Tamsin knew they would make *her* look like a demented children's television presenter but on Freddie they just looked cool.

At least Reagan was here. She'd dragged her in from the corridor where she had allegedly been on the way to the law library, a poky room full of dusty books at the back of the general library, which was housed in an old church. Tamsin had never been there at night, partly from principle, but also because it was surrounded by a graveyard, which gave her the willies. Once she had established that Reagan was not going to the law library for some illicit tryst with a fellow lawyer, which Tamsin would have allowed on the grounds that it was romantic, but to actually engage with the tomes of tort, she forbade her rather dry and dreary neighbour to leave, and poured her a glass of cider. 'You're coming with us tonight. No arguments.'

Reagan was a bit strange, Tamsin thought. A tough nut to crack. She had one of those wipeable boards on her

door, and it often said ‘PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB! ESSAY CRISIS!’ (obviously an attempt to sound cool, which failed miserably). One morning, after a particularly drunken evening, some wag had rubbed out ‘ESSAY CRISIS’, leaving the exclamation mark, and written ‘I’M IN HERE WANKING’. Tamsin had rubbed it off as soon as she’d seen it, but she’d never discovered whether or not Reagan had already read it.

Now, Reagan was a skinny girl – and not in a good way. She had no chest, and not much bum. All her clothes were sort of brown – if those weren’t the individual colours, that was certainly the overall effect – and droopy. She definitely needed work. Tamsin thought of herself in terms of the theme tune of the *Six Million Dollar Man*: ‘Gentleman, we can rebuild this man. We can make him better than before.’ Tamsin liked a challenge. Great name, though: Reagan had told them her mum’s favourite Shakespeare play was *King Lear*, and that it could have been worse – one of Lear’s other daughters was called Goneril. An exotic name was a good start, Tamsin thought. Think how much duller Reagan might have been with a different name. Reagan had just ruefully pointed out that her mum had made a hash of the only interesting thing she’d ever done – by spelling the damn name wrong.

She looked at her now, talking to Freddie. Reagan was smiling, and she was one of those people on whom a smile made a world of difference: it lifted the corners of her eyes, made her nose crinkle, and she became almost nice-looking.

Tamsin filled all their glasses and looked anxiously at her watch. What if Neil was already downstairs, trawling around for her, and she was up here? He didn’t know which room

she was in. Which didn't stop her heart banging against her ribs when there was a knock at the door. Maybe he'd found her. Maybe he'd been in the porter's lodge, looking at her pigeonhole and pressing the porter for information . . . and maybe a friend of hers had overheard him . . . and . . .

It was Sarah, still wearing her black Lycra rowing shorts and a waterproof, her long dark hair in a ponytail. She had clearly been crying for quite a while: her face was all blotchy.

Tamsin put her arms around her and pulled her off the threshold. 'What's the matter? Sarah?'

This show of sympathy unleashed a new peal of fresh sobs, and they had to wait for them to stop.

Reagan wished she were somewhere else. She was intruding, but no one else seemed to think so – they were all concentrating on Sarah.

Sarah was holding a letter, one side of small writing in black ink. She held it out as explanation, but no one wanted to take it: a letter was private. Sarah let it fall to the ground. 'Owen's dumped me.'

'Oh, you poor thing.' This was Tamsin.

'Bastard,' said Freddie.

'I'm sorry,' added Reagan quietly, as though she thought she ought to say something.

Sarah looked at her, and smiled weakly in acknowledgement. 'That's not the worst part. He's gone off, hasn't he? With my best friend. With Cerys.'

Cerys had stayed behind in the Mumbles. She was going to be a hairdresser, Sarah had told them. She had designs on a salon on the high street. And, apparently, on Owen.

'We were going to get married.' More sobbing. 'Now he says they're thinking of moving in together.'

‘So much for his wanting to wait out of respect for your parents.’ Freddie smiled, but Tamsin shot her a stern glance, and stroked Sarah’s hair.

‘I mean, it’s only been three weeks – three weeks, for God’s sake.’

They didn’t know how to comfort her. None of them had come anywhere close to the kind of relationship where you thought you might actually get married. Tamsin’s love-life until Neil had consisted of a few slow dances at the Young Farmers’ dances at home, and one very disappointing encounter last New Year’s Eve with a friend of her brother. She had thought she might let him go all the way, but frankly the first part of the journey had been such a let-down she’d changed her mind, straightened her skirt and gone back to the disco. Now that she’d met Neil she was glad she’d waited. She thought it might be more fun going all the way with him. That was, if they ever got to this bloody bop tonight.

Freddie had been all the way and back, as far as Tamsin could work out, with an impressive, or frightening, number of boys in America, but none seemed to have meant all that much to her. She certainly didn’t talk about them.

Freddie was actually thinking that it was the best thing that could have happened. She really liked Sarah – she was good fun, and she’d probably enjoy the next three years way more without some gormless boyfriend pulling her back to Wales all the time. Freddie couldn’t imagine getting married ever – but thinking about it when you were barely nineteen was crazy. There were so many boys. She’d just been casting her eye over a few on the top quad. It would be so much more fun trawling through them with Sarah.

Reagan felt something like envy, which confused her. Imagine feeling that strongly about someone. Of course, the heartbreak and the dumping bit were horrid, but to have had that feeling in the first place . . .

‘Men are pigs!’ Tamsin declared. She didn’t mean it, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

‘What about Cerys?’ Reagan couldn’t help blurting out. ‘He’s not doing this on his own, is he? Isn’t this Cerys supposed to be your best friend?’

Sarah’s face crumpled again.

‘Reagan’s right.’ Freddie took up her theme. ‘I mean, men, even the good ones, they’re just simple creatures, aren’t they? Ruled by their stomachs and their dicks, not necessarily in that order.’

Tamsin reflected that she probably wasn’t qualified to comment, not having known many men – and certainly not ‘known’ any. Freddie seemed quite angry. Perhaps there had been more to those ‘flings’ than she had let on about.

‘It’s women you’ve got to watch,’ Freddie was saying now. ‘Women have so many more layers – we’re so much more complicated. Look at this Cerys. Look what she’s done to Sarah.’

‘What? Behaved like a man, you mean? Thinking with her . . . well, you know.’

‘I bet it’s way more sinister than that. Sarah thinks it’s only been going on for three weeks, but we all know women a bit better than that, don’t we? Don’t you think she’s been planning this for ages – months, probably – maybe ever since she found out Sarah was going away to college?’

Tamsin wasn’t convinced that Freddie’s tack was particularly helpful, but Sarah was looking at her intently. Freddie

had that kind of voice: maybe it was the accent, but when she spoke you wanted to listen to her.

‘I mean, think back, Sarah,’ Freddie went on. ‘Think about how they were, those two, leading up to you coming away. Think about how Cerys was with you . . . with him.’

Sarah’s gaze went middle-distance for a minute. Then her eyes narrowed and she nodded. ‘I know what you mean . . . yes.’

‘See? Women.’

Freddie sat back, satisfied.

Reagan was impressed. ‘You should be reading law,’ she said.

Freddie’s eyes flashed. ‘No way! I hate lawyers. My dad’s a lawyer.’ Reagan wished she’d stayed quiet.

‘I don’t think that’s quite fair, Freddie,’ Tamsin objected. ‘We’re women, aren’t we? Are you saying none of us can ever trust each other? Because I’m not like that, and I don’t think anyone here is either.’

A damp Sarah shook her head emphatically.

‘Did any of you watch *Tenko?*’ Reagan asked.

Sarah and Tamsin nodded.

Freddie shook her head. ‘No.’

‘It was this drama on TV about five years ago, I think. It was about this bunch of women who were taken prisoner by the Japanese in somewhere like Singapore, English women, mostly. They were in a POW camp, no men, just women. It was brilliant. I think you can look at a woman, or talk to her, or listen to her, any woman, for five minutes and you’d know how she’d behave in that situation, in one of those camps, and once you’ve figured that out, you know pretty much what she’s going to be like in any situation.’

‘How’d you mean?’ They were all looking at Reagan now, fascinated: they’d never heard her say so many words in one go.

‘Well, take Sarah’s so-called best friend, Cerys. Now, I haven’t met her, but assuming that she’s like I think she is, she’d be the sort of person, in a Japanese POW camp, who’d sleep with the guards to get food, then not share it with the others. Selfish, self-obsessed. Amoral.’

They were all staring at her.

‘Go on, then, what about us?’

‘I hardly know you.’ She didn’t want to do this.

‘You said five minutes was enough. You’ve seen all of us for a hell of a lot more than that!’ Freddie goaded her.

‘Lay off, Freddie,’ Tamsin said. ‘She doesn’t have to if she doesn’t want to.’

‘See?’ Reagan couldn’t help herself now. ‘Tamsin’d be like the camp mother. She’d be the one who’d sort out the fights and look after the weak ones and worry about everyone. She’d be the lynchpin.’

Tamsin smiled. ‘I like that.’

‘Sarah would be the vulnerable one. She’d need protecting.’

‘From the guards – totally! They’d all fancy her!’

‘From everything. From bad news, and infection and the sun – and probably the guards as well,’ Reagan went on. Sarah looked a little pained. ‘But everyone would want to look after her – she wouldn’t be a burden or anything.’

‘What about me?’ Freddie’s bright eyes were challenging. Reagan knew she had to be brave now. This was some sort of friendship test Freddie was setting, and she found herself so wanting to pass.

‘You’d sleep with the guards, but you’d share what you got from them,’ Reagan told her.

Freddie laughed. ‘You’re not wrong. And what about you? I suppose you’d be the principled one, would you, the one who stood up to the guards and got shot the second day?’

Reagan smiled broadly. ‘I only said I could figure other women out. I never said I had myself sussed.’

They never made it to the bop. Tamsin gulped down the last of the cider so that she had an excuse to go downstairs and get some beer for them. Neil wasn’t anywhere in the hall, and she was on her way back upstairs when she saw him, shoulders low, walking towards the street. ‘Hiya,’ she called. He turned and beamed, then came towards her. ‘Listen, I can’t make it tonight,’ she said. He looked confused. ‘I can’t be a camp deserter.’ That didn’t exactly clear it up for him. ‘But can I see you tomorrow night? For a drink or something? My room’s up there. Kelly. Third floor, room five.’

‘Sure,’ he said, and she stretched up to kiss him square on the lips. Ooh, there was something about him . . .

They played the *Tenko* game, and Sarah cried some more, and they finished all of Tamsin’s biscuits and two of Reagan’s Pot Noodles, and they talked and talked, and smoked and got drunk. Several times each girl looked round the room and thought that this was the reason she had come, that this was how she had dreamed it might be. And by the time the three girls went back to their rooms, long after the music had stopped, they were the Tenko Club. Club rules were

simple: men, children, work, shopping and chocolates – important, but not *as* important. When they need you, you are there. No giving up. Yes, they were the Tenko Club and they swore, lurching down the corridor, that they always would be.

September 2004, England

There ought to have been a law against driving while you were in tears. It was probably infinitely more dangerous than negotiating the roads after a third glass of wine. It occurred to Freddie that she almost never drove up the A3 *without* crying. The whole landscape, from the hideous modern Guildford cathedral perched above the town to the exit signs for RHS Wisley, its slip road congested with elderly gardeners, driving with totally excessive care and attention, was always blurred for her. She was always leaving Harry behind.

She blew convincingly into a tissue, bit hard on her bottom lip, and switched the radio on. *Woman's Hour*. Listening to Jenni Murray's voice was like eating Galaxy chocolate while you were wearing cashmere socks on a suede sofa. If Freddie won the lottery, she was going to offer Jenni Murray a king's ransom to live with her and read out all the bills and letters, shopping lists and to-dos – think how much nicer life would be.

Jenni Murray was definitely a Tenko mother figure.

She tried to concentrate on the woman talking with passion about the banners of the suffragette movement, but she couldn't stop seeing Harry. He was much braver than her – he had to be – so she didn't cry in front of him. She knew her voice was brittle, unnatural, as she straightened his lapels, and smoothed down the rogue curl that

sprang from the widow's peak he had inherited from her. It had earned him the nickname Pugsley, which he had assured her, the first time she'd heard it, shouted across the car park, was no worse than Jugs, or Billy One Ball, or Timmy Tampon – better, probably. She knew he would pull his head away, just as she knew that at home the same gesture would bring him into her shoulder for a hug, their widow's peaks touching. He was tall for his age, but she was taller. She didn't tell him to take his hands out of his pockets, although a master surely would. She knew they were fists.

It was okay for her – she was minutes away from being in the car, where she could cry, and no one would see. Harry had to face a dormitory, a hall, four hundred boys. For the next seven weeks, he wouldn't be anywhere where no one would see. Then she would come to take him home for the oh-so-precious half-term holiday.

Adrian had no idea how much she hated this. By the time he came home this evening she would have cried all her tears. She'd gone to pieces in front of him the first time, and his parents had been there. She'd resented their presence, their need to be fed and entertained, when Harry, who should have been there, wasn't. She'd cried over the dinner she'd cooked.

Clarissa, Adrian's mother, (who would alienate two-thirds of the women in camp and, with a bit of luck, get shot for condescension and insubordination *really* early on) had looked at her with something between disdain and confusion. 'Of course it's hard,' she had said, sounding as though it wasn't, in the least, 'but it's absolutely for the best.' This brooked no disagreement.

‘Absolutely,’ Charles, Adrian’s pompous father, had echoed. They both said ‘absolutely’ a lot. It made them feel even more right about everything. What the pair of them lacked in intelligence, they more than made up for in dogmatic vehemence. Absolutely insane-making.

‘It was the making of me, Freddie, and it will be of him.’ Adrian had been nodding too. They looked like a line of those velveteen dogs people put in the back of their cars.

Freddie had wanted to smack them one after the other. She wanted to scream, ‘He doesn’t need “making”, you stupid bastards. I made him already. And he’s perfect. And he’s eight years old.’ But even she recognised the futility of it. It was decided. It had been decided since the midwife had held him up and Adrian had spotted the swollen purple testicles he had never doubted that the baby would possess. Adrian had been to the same school as his father and grandfather before him, and Harold Thomas Adrian Noah, seven pounds eight ounces, was to be no exception.

She couldn’t fight them all. Maybe she would have done, but Harry didn’t want her to. He wanted to make his father proud, and his grandfather. ‘It’ll be okay,’ he had told her. ‘I’ll be okay.’ And he was. After three years, she and he were used to the agonising parting. On eighteen hideous days they had said goodbye to each other in that hateful car park. It broke her heart that Adrian didn’t know what it cost his son. She no longer worried that he didn’t know what it cost her.

‘Frederica’s American.’ That was what Clarissa always said, when she was introducing her at some ghastly drinks party or golf club social. Like Sybil Fawley pointed out that Manuel was from Barcelona. Like ‘Frederica’s got raging

impetigo.’ Except that, as far as her mother-in-law was concerned, that complaint was treatable. There was no known cure for being American – unless it was relentless indoctrination and regular use of the word ‘absolutely’. Surely she would understand the necessity of public-school education for male children if she were ‘one of us’. Clarissa had never understood why Adrian had married a foreigner when it was bound to present so many cultural problems, this inappropriate display being only one. The poor child was called Noah, for heaven’s sake. Thank God for the three proper Christian names that preceded it – most entry forms (Oxbridge, Coutts, In and Out Club) would never have enough room for him to include it. She’d insisted on placing the birth announcement in the *Telegraph* herself, with the express purpose of leaving it out, and had been gracious enough to excuse Frederica’s unpleasant outburst on reading it as the direct result of a long, tiring labour.

Freddie had always thought, or hoped, it was because she was different from the other girls Adrian knew that he had fallen in love with her. They’d met in the Alps, where Freddie was working for a ski company in Méribel. It was the fifth job she’d had since she graduated from university, and easily the most fun. She shared a flat with four other girls, averaged no more than three hours’ sleep a night, and survived on a diet of Rice Krispies and schnapps (which she consumed in legendary quantities with her flatmates in the resort nightclubs each evening), and was having that mythical ‘time of her life’. Adrian had come in with a few army buddies, and had seen her before she spotted him. He told her that his friend Stuart had pointed at her and said, ‘Now, that’s the kind of woman I want to marry.’ She’d

been standing on a chunky wooden table, singing ‘Unbelievable’. Unbelievably badly, he had always laughed. He always used to laugh. He hadn’t thought about it for years, as far as she knew. She sometimes wondered if he had only married her because of what Stuart had said.

She’d gone back with him that night to the chalet where he and his mates were staying. They had both been too drunk to do anything, of course. But the next morning, after a cup of coffee, a hot shower and a toothbrush had revived them, my God, they had done it then. Missed a whole day’s skiing doing it.

He’d been fantastic-looking then. Taller than her – if only by a couple of inches – and broad. Freddie was big herself – ‘statuesque’, as Tamsin’s mum had once told her to refer to herself, but for years she had just felt huge – and wasn’t used to feeling, as little women did, protected and precious in a man’s arms. She thought there was a pretty good chance she could have beaten most of the men she had been out with in an arm wrestle, but not Adrian. When she’d come down off the table, and he’d bought her a drink, and they were swaying and watching and getting the feel of each other, he’d put his arms round her waist from behind and his hands had overlapped comfortably. He’d rested his chin on the side of her head, and she had felt suddenly tiny and safe. It was a new and nice sensation. The mates he’d been with that night had called him Red, but that wasn’t fair: his hair was coppery, and there were copper flecks to match in his hazel eyes. Tanned from skiing, he looked all sort of burnished and shiny and healthy and big, and Freddie had thought he was delicious.

When he’d taken her home to meet his family, a few

months later, she remembered thinking it was no wonder he'd come looking for her that night. They were so stuffy. So false. So cold. She'd been there a whole day, and no one had said anything with any depth or feeling. Weather, golf, food, golf, people from the golf club, golf. His mother had dwelt briefly on some of the more palatable things Adrian had told her about Freddie: that her father had been a serious lawyer in the States and now, retired, lived out on Cape Cod; that Freddie herself had been educated at Oxford, no less (which was impressive without being threatening, since she showed no inclination to use her BA). And she was beautiful. Long and lean and all blonde curls, with that remarkable widow's peak and those extraordinary white teeth that Americans tended to have. Clarissa was particularly vocal about the teeth – Freddie felt like a horse. Charles, having established that Freddie's father was a keen golfer who played several times a week at his club on the Cape, patted her distractedly, then largely ignored her; he was keen to show Adrian the new lob wedge he had won in the spring dinner-dance raffle.

If she hadn't been what she assumed was so completely in love with Adrian, she might have run a mile after that first visit. But she was, and she believed it was him and her against the world, including his parents. They'd giggled hysterically afterwards. He'd parked his vintage Austin Healey next to a lake near his parents' home and taken her face in his huge hands. 'Let's have a closer look at these teeth, shall we?' He pushed his tongue into her mouth and ran it across them, then slid a hand down her thigh and slapped it gently. 'Hmm. Fine flanks. Let's see how she goes, shall we?' They'd had to get out, of course. The interior of the Healey wasn't big enough. He'd made love to her standing up, against the car,

one of her feet on the bonnet, whispering horsy terms she'd never heard before, making her giggle even as she concentrated. They'd done it anywhere and everywhere in those days. Freddie thought bed was her least favourite place.

When had he changed sides? When had it become them and him against her?

By the time she got to the M25 *Woman's Hour* had finished. The traffic was heavy as, inexplicably, it always was. She joined the motorway, and sat in the middle lane doing no more than twenty miles an hour. She wasn't in any hurry. She pressed the button and switched from Radio Four to Radio One. She recognised the song – Harry had the album, and he'd been playing it all summer. She turned it up. It felt good to be listening to something he loved. It was hot for September, and she opened the car window to let the breeze in. She felt calmer now.

She didn't hear her mobile phone ring – the music was too loud – but she saw its persistent green flash in the hands-free holder next to the stereo controls. Adrian's office number. Grudgingly, she turned Harry's song down. She hated mobiles. You could never be 'unavailable' any more.

'Hello?'

'Hello, it's me.'

'I know. Caller ID.'

'Of course. How did it go?' He never rang to ask her that.

'Fine.' So she wasn't about to tell him.

'Can you talk?'

She'd thought they already were. 'Yes. Traffic's crummy. I'm going about two miles an hour. What's up?'

She heard him take a deep breath – actually heard him. 'Perhaps it'd better wait until we're home.'

‘What?’

‘No . . . it’s okay.’

Freddie was instantly irritated. ‘For goodness sake, Adrian, what’s wrong? You’ve obviously rung about something . . .’

When he spoke next, his voice was louder, and stronger. ‘I think you should know that I’m seeing someone. It’s become rather serious, actually. I love her, and we want to be together. I wanted to wait until Harry had gone back. I know it’s going to be rather complicated . . .’ His voice trailed off.

He’d started so well, she thought. You’d think once you’d told your wife you were in love with your lover it wouldn’t be that much harder to tell her you wanted a divorce and one or other of you out of the home you shared. But apparently it was.

Silence. She very nearly felt sorry for him. Pandora’s box: lid off. Can of worms: opened. Cat: no longer in bag.

‘Freddie? Are you there? Freddie?’

More silence.

‘Freddie, come on. We have to talk about this –’

‘No, Adrian. Apparently *you* have to talk about it. Right now I think you’ll find that I *absolutely* don’t have to.’ And she pushed the red button that cut him off. Her hand was shaking.

She turned the radio on again. The inexplicable jam had cleared, just as inexplicably, and soon she could go at fifty, sixty, then seventy miles per hour. She moved into the fast lane and drove.

It would have been even more unforgivable if she’d been surprised. She’d known about it, of course. Did a wife ever

really not know? She doubted it. It was more a question of whether or not you wanted to know. Because if you did you had to deal with it. And dealing with it was going to be more than ‘rather complicated’, she feared.

She felt almost bad about hanging up on him. Lousy timing. It had probably been like lancing a boil. Or throwing up after a dodgy prawn. He had probably waited until he couldn’t bear any longer not to get it out. She had left Harry maybe an hour ago.

Antonia Melhuish. If she was honest with herself, Freddie had seen the spark flash between them the first time they had met. Antonia had been married to Jonathan, a friend of Adrian’s from the army. She was pretty, rather than beautiful. Neat – that’s how Freddie always thought of her. Not being able to wash in hot water in camp would have completely freaked her out. She was the kind of woman who never went out without makeup or a belt in her trousers, and whose toenails changed colour in summer to match her outfits. The kind of woman who, years ago, would have made Freddie feel inadequate, unfeminine. Not now. Freddie was more or less happy in her own skin, and that kind of attention to detail seemed vaguely absurd to her. Antonia and Jonathan had never had children, and Freddie had always assumed that was because children would interfere with the neatness: of her figure, her home, her life. But they’d never been close enough for her to ask. Jonathan had moved on to someone messier about three years ago, and now they had a baby. Drunk and miserable at some party, he’d once told her that Antonia always got up out of bed after they had made love and washed herself. He said it made him feel dirty, the idea that she couldn’t sleep with something of him on her.

She didn't know how long it had been going on. Probably longer than she imagined. What was that statistic Jenni Murray had told her a few months back? The average extra-marital affair lasted seven years. Maybe theirs had too. There'd been nothing sit-com or *Trisha* show about Freddie finding out – she hadn't pulled a pair of Antonia's knickers out of the washing-machine after she'd washed the sheets, or found receipts for romantic dinners she hadn't eaten when she went through Adrian's suits before she took them to the dry cleaner. In fact, she wasn't domestic enough for either of those, and Adrian was a careful man – he wouldn't have been caught out by something so elementary. She hadn't walked in on them banging away in her bed, or seen their hands clasped, or their ankles entwined under the table at some dinner party. It had been much more subtle. The way he had stopped confiding in her and asking for advice about things at work. He didn't ask how he looked, or whether she loved him. He had stopped leaning on her. The way he made love to her had changed too. Not that he had refused to do it with the lights on, or anything like that. . . . Freddie wondered if Antonia Melhuish knew that she and Adrian still had sex as frequently as ever. Perhaps not. And that he was more giving in bed, less interested in himself. He'd always been a great lover – but now he was fantastic. A best-behaviour lover. One day it had all made sense. He didn't need anything from her any more: he was getting it from someone else.

Antonia Melhuish.

And now he wanted to be with her all the time. He wanted to leave Freddie and Harry, and the end-of-terrace house in Shepherd's Bush where they had lived for ten years. He wanted to do it now.