

*So she married her handsome prince
and they lived happily ever after.*

Ever noticed how many fairytales end with that line? Sort of unsatisfactory, really. All the interesting things that happen to our heroines - evil stepmothers, being locked in towers, coaches made from pumpkins - and then nothing? Well, nothing but dull and happy domesticity they'd lead us to believe. Was I the only young girl who wondered what happened after that: when the curtains fell, when the credits rolled? Did the princess have her own palace? How many children did she have? Did the handsome prince ascend to the throne and, if so, did our heroine turn out to be a wise and fair queen? Were there anxious times when the prince had to fight a fire-breathing dragon, go to battle, or perhaps almost succumb to the charms of a comely lady-in-waiting? These were the questions that occupied my impressionable mind.

Lately I've had cause to think back to these fairytales - or at least all the girlie ones - and I've come to the conclusion that it's only really 'Cinderella' that does it for me.

The one I really couldn't get into was 'Snow White'. That thing about her living with the seven dwarfs was a bit weird, I think. I don't doubt the handsome prince was okay with this initially but what happened when they'd been married a few years

and the first heady glow of romance had dimmed a bit? Did he ever wonder what Snow White and the dwarfs got up to on those long, cold, winter nights? I imagine that might have provoked some awkward conversations...Oh, and I never liked her hair. It may well have been as black as ebony but in my opinion she could certainly have done with the services of a better stylist.

While we're on the topic of hair, what about poor old Rapunzel? Imagine the trouble she had to go through to keep hers shiny and bouncy and prince-snaringly good. 'No time for sex this week dear, I've got to wash my hair again.' Living under the sea, every day would have been a bad hair day for the Little Mermaid. Sleeping Beauty was better but even she had to wait a hundred years before her man came along. I'm all in favour of toy boys but I think that age difference may have told after a while. And let's not get started on 'The Princess and the Pea' - I can only wonder what Hans Christian Andersen was smoking the day he thought that one up.

No, Cinderella was the only girl who ever appealed to me. For a start, she's usually portrayed as a blonde, like myself. And she definitely gets to wear the best clothes - not unlike 'Pretty Woman' but without the tacky sex worker bit - designer ball gown and coordinated accessories all at the touch of a wand.

So okay, I'm being deliberately silly here. 'Flippant' is the word my mother would use: 'Eleanor, you're being flippant again'. She could present a convincing argument too. What follows is a serious story of love, loss and betrayal and I've chosen to introduce it with a series of tongue-in-cheek observations about the relative merits of our fairytale heroines.

Then again, I'm not sure that is so wrong. Isn't everyone's life like that: equal parts comedy and tragedy?

Anyway, there is a serious point to this. The difference between Cinderella and most of these other girls is that they were already princesses, so by marrying a handsome prince they

were just keeping it in the family, as it were. Cinderella, on the other hand, was an ordinary girl who, by dint of her good looks and charm and the odd fairy godmother, gets a free ticket into the palace and out of her life of drudgery. She's the girl we can all aspire to be.

And that was my story. I married my handsome prince too. However, that's also where my story and Cinderella's diverge - the place where fantasy and reality take their different paths and impressionable young girls who believe in fairytales find out they've been sold a dud.

The 'happily ever after' is the hardest part, you see.

New place, new life

I'm trying to create some atmosphere here so imagine, if you will, that you can hear the drone of aircraft engines as you read along. I'm sitting in the business class end of a Cathay Pacific Airbus, cruising several thousand metres above the dry outback of Australia as I write. If you really want to get into the mood you could even imagine a few bumps of turbulence, which would be an appropriate metaphor for my emotions at present, but in truth the flying conditions are really rather smooth today.

I'm a relaxed flier as I'm married to a pilot. I am in fact on my way to meet him, as he's just taken up a new position with Cathay as a Hong Kong-based first officer. It's the final stepping stone before becoming a captain: the guy calling the shots, or as they like to say in the aviation industry 'in command'. I once suggested to Tony that *that* particular expression had a few sexual overtones about it, but he said it just proved I had a dirty mind.

My husband's career has not been without its diversions to this point, but it appears he's finally got things back on track. As a teenager it was his ambition to become a 747 captain by his fortieth birthday and he might yet make it, give or take a year. However, it does beg the question: assuming you do achieve your

life's ambition by age forty, what happens after that? Will he be happy continuing along the same path *ad nauseam*? Or will a new restlessness set in? I suspect Tony has never really thought about it. He has many admirable qualities but I'm not sure self-reflection is one of them. I just hope it doesn't precipitate a mid-life crisis in a few years' time as we've had enough crises in our marriage to last us a life time.

We're currently in the process of selling our Sydney home and our little family - we also have a four year old daughter called Isabel - is moving to Hong Kong to live. We are to become expats. I know I should be excited about this grand new adventure but at present I'm more inclined to sadness about leaving my loved ones behind back home. It's going to take me quite some time to adjust, I fear.

I booked an early morning flight, which seemed like a good idea at the time, but when the alarm went off this morning and I had to drag my protesting body out of bed and stumble around in the dark, I cursed myself for not thinking things through. Unwisely, I stayed up late last night drinking and reminiscing with my mum, dad and younger sister. 'Let's open another bottle of wine,' I said. Yeah, great idea, Ellie - so now I'm going to arrive in my new home town lugging a hangover as well as jetlag in my carry-on baggage.

As you've probably worked out, my name is Eleanor, or more precisely, Eleanor Cooper (*née* Parkes). The younger sister I mentioned is called Emma, although pretty quickly after her birth Dad re-christened her the Divine Miss Em. I think Mum must have been channelling Jane Austen when she chose names for her daughters, but she claims otherwise. I'm a great fan of Jane's writing myself but I do feel that *Pride and Prejudice*, for all its charms, is just a witty and particularly well-written version of the Cinderella myth. It's no secret that Austen never married in real life. Also my admiration didn't extend to me liking my

name as a child and I always insisted that people called me Ellie. As a consequence I'm rarely called Eleanor these days, except of course by my mother when I've behaved in a way she's disapproved of. It is probably an interesting reflection on our relationship that she calls me Eleanor almost all of the time.

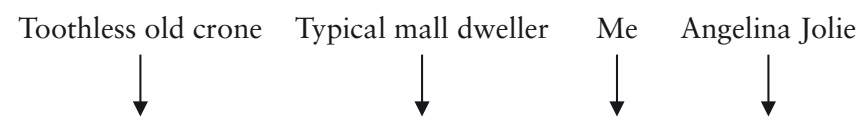
Having said that, there was a young man recently who called me Eleanor for completely different reasons and I found I quite liked it, so perhaps it is time to embrace my real name and the maturity that goes with it. We'll see.

I am, at the time of writing, thirty-five years old, the middle child of Dianne and Trevor's three. I also have an older brother, David, who's the family's brightest star. At the tender age of thirty-eight, he's a leading heart specialist in Adelaide, married to a GP, and the father of three bright little kids. As children we lived an ordinary middle-class existence, but David was always the one who seemed destined for bigger things. Dad spent most of his working life as an engineer with the Department of Main Roads, a solid, dependable guy. Mum worked as a combined teacher/librarian at the local primary school. They're both retired now. We didn't have a fancy lifestyle but things were okay. Mum and Dad still live in the same family home that we grew up in - a three-bedroom brick bungalow in a suburb so obscure that even most Sydneysiders ask, 'Where?' when I mention it.

I work in marketing: pharmaceutical marketing to be precise. I'm the girl that sells the pills that dear old granny and grandpa line up to pop every morning. Or rather, I was that girl until a few weeks ago. I had to resign from my job to move to Hong Kong so I suppose I am officially, at present, unemployed. Apart from the few months after Isabel was born, it's the first time in my married life I've ever been a stay-at-home mum. Ask me again in six months how I feel about that.

And how would I describe my looks? Well the nitty-gritty is: average height, average weight (although fluctuating), brown

eyes and blondy-brown hair (aided by six-weekly visits to the hairdressers). I have a small smattering of freckles across my nose and, by general repute, a nice smile, but that doesn't give a proper picture does it? It's a bit loaded, commenting on your own attractiveness. You don't want to sound too full of yourself, but then again it's also no place for false modesty. As I have a background in science I think I will describe myself graphically - on an attractiveness scale it would be something like this:



So definitely not bad, but remember that there are millions of girls between me and the genetically-blessed Ms Jolie and on a bad day I seem to see them everywhere. There have also been a couple of periods where I have moved down the scale: notably during that awkward stage commonly known as puberty and before and after the birth of Isabel, although there were extenuating circumstances there.

On that topic, why do parents always decide it's a good time to get professional family portraits done when you're at the absolute pinnacle of your hideousness? Emma is several years younger than my brother and me and when she was a baby Mum and Dad thought it would be a good idea to capture the family on film for posterity. They enlisted the services of a professional photographer and thus we were immortalised: Emma, the gorgeous blonde cherub; David, the gawky teen; and me, the unfortunate twelve year old with what looks suspiciously like a home-job fringe cut and a healthy layer of puppy fat laid down in preparation for a growth spurt that hasn't happened yet! Even worse, I have these tragically unsupported little breasts. Didn't

think to buy me a bra for the occasion, Mother? And because they spent so much money on those bloody photos my parents insisted on hanging them throughout the house, helping to scare off any potential suitors. They're hanging on the walls even now. When I think of those photos I marvel that Tony ever thought it would be a wise idea to marry me.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that a woman's attractiveness declines slowly from age twenty-five or thereabouts. Maybe for most people it is that way but for me it's been more up and down. I've recently lost a bit of weight and am currently enjoying an 'up' stage, attracting extra attention from the opposite sex, including, interestingly, my own husband. As a matter of fact, I've noticed a few business types on the plane checking me out, that is until they see the sleeping Isabel beside me. However, at thirty-five I can see the writing on the wall and I've got to make the most of the next decade or so before decrepitude truly kicks in.

The story I want to tell is really that of the last year of my life, but as we are all products of our pasts and our personalities it's essential I go back right to the beginning, as the conventions of fairytales dictate, to understand how the events of 2006 unfolded and why I happen to be sitting on a plane that is winging its way to Hong Kong as I write.

During my childhood I resided in the pink bedroom at the rear of the family home, which overlooked Dad's vegetable patch and the dog kennel: home to three successive generations of not-very-bright golden retrievers. If I can think of one word to describe me in those early days it would be 'dreamy'. Mum, by virtue of her position as school librarian, fed this tendency by bringing me home lots of story-books to read. I particularly loved all the unfashionable ones, like Enid Blyton's Famous Five series and *National Velvet* and, of course, the fairytales I critiqued earlier. I could never decide which of my favourite fantasies I

wanted most to come true: to get a pony for my birthday and win a jumping ribbon in a gymkhana or to be plucked from obscurity to play Cindy Brady in a re-make of *The Brady Bunch*.

I was pretty good at school work, but nothing like my gifted older brother. I attended the local primary school and, when the time came, transferred to the local girls' high school, where I received a patchy, state-sponsored education in science and the arts, of which I retain very little.

Once my hormones kicked in my daydreaming took on a different quality. I spent a large chunk of my teenage years lying on my bed listening to music and dreaming of my Prince Charming. For a long time I was certain it was to be John Taylor, bass player from Duran Duran. My bedroom, plastered with posters, became a shrine to my idol and I'd visualise elaborate scenarios of my life as the rock star's girlfriend. The fact that we lived on opposite sides of the globe was a minor obstacle in my adolescent eyes. What was 17,000 kilometres where love was concerned? If only I could just meet him, I reasoned, he would see through the unfortunate pimples and puppy fat, ditch his supermodel girlfriend, and sweep me off to London for a makeover, where I would emerge, swan-like, only to lord it over all the more popular girls at school (the last part probably being my favourite bit of the fantasy).

There was also an embarrassing, but mercifully brief, period when I forsook John for George Michael from Wham! (boy, was I barking up the wrong tree there), although I quickly saw the folly of my ways and returned to my first love. In my fantasies he was very forgiving. As far as I know, John is still kicking around with Duran Duran, and still looking pretty good if the photos are anything to go by. And you'd have to have been living on another planet to not know what George Michael has been getting up to in recent years. Fortunately I did eventually move on.

I occasionally went out with real boys during this period, but they always seemed so unsatisfactory compared with John and George - so spotty, so skinny, so *real*. And the boys I really liked were never the ones who liked me. It was always their less attractive, less cool friends who asked me out. Most of these relationships were short-lived - I think two months was the record. Occasionally I was the dumper but sadly more often the dumpee. I can't say I really blame those boys as I am sure I came across as being incredibly dull. Whilst devastatingly witty in my own mind I was so terrified of making a fool of myself that most of my clever remarks remained stuck in my throat, only to wither and die before being given the chance to dazzle. We'd go on these excruciatingly embarrassing dates, these boys and I, where he'd hold my hand and I'd hold his and we'd never actually look at each other. Going to the movies was a favoured activity as then you didn't even have to talk. A series of inept kisses and the occasional furtive grope was the sum total of my sexual experience during that time.

While I was having trouble getting it on, Mum and Dad were having more success. They'd only ever planned and budgeted on having two children, but that's not how things panned out. One quiet night when I was about eleven and on a sleepover (I never found out why my mother thought it necessary to reveal this particular detail - did they never have sex when I was in the house?), Mum had one too many Tia Marias and milk, Dad got amorous, and they found a few weeks later, to their equal surprise and dismay, that Mum was expecting. That was Emma of course, Mum and Dad's little 'afterthought'.

If my little sister has ever sensed she was a mistake she's never let on. If a baby could exit the womb twirling a cane and doing high kicks to music, that would have been Emma. She beamed at us all at age four weeks and that smile has rarely left her face since. From the moment she could walk, she danced and

sang and entertained and charmed her way through childhood. We all adored and indulged her from day one and I don't think any of us could imagine life without her. She's twenty-three now - a grey-eyed, dark-blond beauty managing her own thriving beauty therapy business - but she's not planning on relinquishing her baby of the family status anytime soon; on the contrary she continues to milk it for all it's worth.

My career path has been an interesting one. It started in customary fashion with lust, specifically lust for Adam Donaldson, my Year 11 biology teacher. Imagine the frisson of excitement that spread throughout our all girls' school, when Mr Donaldson, the new science teacher, turned out to be not another fifty-something with dandruff and a tendency to wear long socks and polyester shorts but a tall, muscular, twenty-five year old with hazel eyes and honey-brown curls. Up until that time science had - apart from the occasional opportunity to make rotten egg gas and fill Emily Wilson's pencil case with copper sulphate solution - been no more interesting to me than any other subject, but Mr Donaldson's arrival sparked a fascination with all things *biological*.

Of course, I had competition. A couple of the more adventurous girls tried to get his attention by sitting in the front row and spreading their legs as wide as possible, perhaps offering him some more practical experience with the female human reproductive system. I was not that confident about the attractiveness of my inner thighs, and attempted to gain his notice by studying hard and becoming his best student. If ever you wanted to know anything about photosynthesis or the life cycle of the mosquito, I was your girl. This strategy did work to some extent. I'd flush with pride (or was it oestrogen?) when he'd single me out for praise in front of the other girls.

Unfortunately, just before I was about to sit my final exams and looking forward to the time when no pesky teacher-pupil

ethics would stand between me and my chosen one, I received the crushing news that he had become engaged to some horrible, undeserving cow. I sobbed for days. But by this time my study path was set and early next year I headed, broken-hearted, to university to study for a Bachelor of Science.

It's curious, reflecting back, but I never seriously considered whether science was what I really wanted to do. Proper scientific research requires patience and meticulous attention to detail, not qualities I have in abundance. I was probably too busy to think about these questions, what with commuting to and from university, attending lectures, working as a waitress at our local pizza restaurant to make ends meet, studying and occasional partying (or more accurately partying and occasional studying). I was a competent student, however, and did particularly well at pharmacology (the study of drugs), so when the chance came up to do an Honours year I took it, in lieu of thinking of anything more original to do.

I was near finishing up my Honours when, standing over a cage of rats I was planning to poison in the name of science, I had a terrifying vision of my future. I saw myself in twenty years' time, eking out an existence on my meagre salary, married to some fellow cardigan-wearing academic with a beard, and spending my rare holidays going on brisk hikes in the Tasmanian wilderness or at Australian Sceptics Society conferences. Not for me folks - for a start hiking boots make my legs look stumpy. I was seeking a life of glamour and excitement and Prince Charming was clearly not going to find me amongst the lab rats. This all coincided with my school friends graduating from their commerce and arts degrees and finding employment in the corporate world. Still living at home, they proceeded to spend all their salary on new clothes, so whilst I was still wearing old t-shirts and faded Levi's they'd arrive to meet me in their crisp new suits, swinging handbags that cost more than my entire

annual Austudy allowance.

Scientific ideals be damned - I was going after the money!

As luck would have it, I found the university careers advisory service was advertising a graduate position in clinical research at the local headquarters of a pharmaceutical company, commencing the next year. Thanks to my sterling results in pharmacology, I ended up being the successful applicant and immediately enrolled in an evening degree course in marketing.

When I arrived at my first lecture, I thought I had arrived on a different planet by mistake, rather than just at a different university campus. These leather briefcase carrying guys and gals were students? They looked a different species to the scruffy, thoughtful and - let's face it - slightly nerdy idealists I'd left behind in the science labs. Few of these new students were there to be educated. They had their hearts set on climbing the corporate ladder and thought a few extra letters after their name might fast track that process. Idealism was a commodity in very short supply. I was disgusted with myself for becoming one of them... briefly...until my first few pay cheques started arriving.

It was also about this time that Tony appeared on the scene.

One enchanted evening

When I think about it, it's more accurate to say Tony *re*-appeared on the scene because I'd actually known him for years. He was one of my brother's best school friends. At eleven, David won a scholarship to an expensive private school, the sort of school Mum and Dad could never have afforded to send him to ordinarily. Given this opportunity he provided excellent return on investment: becoming vice-captain, playing wing in the First XV and making the Honour roll in several academic subjects. Tony was also a star player, in the lock position, in David's rugby team. Mum and Dad would sometimes drag Emma and me along to watch the team play and memories of my future husband back then are all of sweat and clashing bodies and striped rugby jerseys. I didn't have a crush on him (remarkable in retrospect, as my infatuation net was cast fairly wide in those days) but I knew he was popular with the girls, impossibly cool and as remote from me as any member of a British glam rock band could be.

I can't imagine Tony ever gave David's dull and mildly chubby younger sister a second thought back then. He probably didn't even give me a first thought. But by the time we were reacquainted I'd shed some pudge, discovered blonde highlights and finally got enough money to buy a few decent clothes. If not

quite the swan I'd dreamed of, I was at least no longer an ugly duckling.

Anthony John Cooper is the elder of Douglas and Pamela Cooper's two sons. Douglas was for a long period one of Sydney's most successful stockbrokers and the Cooper boys grew up in a Federation-era trophy home with a pool and harbour views. Those who didn't know Tony well assumed he would follow his father's footsteps into a business career. Those who did, knew he'd had only one ambition since childhood, to become a Qantas pilot, and in his last years of school had spent all his spare time out at Bankstown airport clocking up his flying hours.

Finally I had suitor who lived up to my girlish fantasies - he didn't quite arrive on a prancing white steed but a Boeing 737 is not a bad substitute.

He was only my second serious boyfriend. As you've heard, my teenage years were not very successful in that regard. In fact the only satisfactory relationships I had during that time were those where the entire drama - from star-crossed meeting, to impassioned declarations of love, right through to poignant parting - was played out exclusively in my head. Fortunately, I had my books to sustain me and during this time found a whole new form of literature to keep me occupied. I was rummaging around in an old cardboard box of Mum's books one day when I discovered *How to Save Your Own Life* by Erica Jong, the author of the notorious *Fear of Flying*. What's this about? I thought, as I glanced idly inside. Well, well, well...I can't remember when I next came up for air. There was one particular scene that sticks in the memory where the heroine gives another woman an orgasm using the neck of an empty bottle of Moët and Chandon. This was an eye-opening experience for the young Eleanor and, I can only imagine, an eye-watering one for the recipient of that orgasm. Then I discovered more books of this type in Mum's collection, including some wonderfully trashy novels by Judith

Krantz, which included numerous romps in the hay - oral sex, lesbians, you name it - depicted in glorious anatomical detail. This was a very different sort of sex to the tame procreation I'd been taught about at school.

It was then I discovered that my mum - far from being the quiet suburban teacher/librarian I'd assumed - was in fact a raving sexpot. This probably explained the unplanned conception of Emma.

I resolved to put this new found book knowledge to use, deciding that I was going to need a few notches on my belt if I was ever going to convincingly seduce my Year 11 biology teacher. My unspoken New Year's resolution that year was to lose my virginity. Unfortunately the actual act was not quite the romantic Sunday afternoon deflowering by a tender young lover I'd envisioned. It ended up being a drunken shag in the back seat of a car with a boy from the neighbouring school.

The two of us were sitting out the front of a party at the home of Susie, one of my school friends, when the cops arrived. Susie's parents had gone away for the weekend so as a matter of course she'd organised an impromptu party, but it turned into a much bigger event than anyone anticipated. In addition to the under-age drinking we knew there was a bit of minor league drug taking happening inside, so at Justin's suggestion as the cops filed past us we beat a retreat to his car. Then he drove to a deserted park and put the hard word on me, which was probably his plan all along. The ridiculous thing was he kept apologising to me about not being 'very big'. If only he'd known I had no idea, he could have saved himself an awful lot of embarrassment that evening. It's possible he was just seeking reassurance but if so he picked the wrong girl. I am now much at ease in the world of the phallus (more on that later) but at this early stage of my sexual development I was too bashful to even look! Anyway, the way I saw it, this revelation was actually a positive development.

Given the choice between losing her virginity to a guy hung like a horse versus one tending towards the under endowed side of the equation, I think any sensible girl would choose the latter.

To cut a long story short, I did manage to achieve my objective that evening but the whole experience was awkward and clumsy and completely unerotic. I comforted myself that, starting from such a low base, things could only improve.

My love life spluttered along in fits and lots of false starts until I met John in one of the university bars. He was two years my senior: a tall, thin vegetarian, with dark eyes and shoulder-length brown hair, which he often tied back in a pony tail. I thought him terribly exotic and fell completely in love at first sight. He was officially studying for an economics degree but much more interested in student politics and working to overthrow the oppressive capitalist state. In fact in all the time I knew him I hardly saw him attend a lecture, although remarkably he still passed all his exams. He lived with several other students in a horrible grotty terrace house in Newtown. There was never any food in that bloody house but a lot of cheap alcohol was consumed. I used to stay over frequently, sleeping with him on a double bed mattress on the floor. John taught me the ways of love on that old Sealy Posturepedic although he'd be disappointed to know that I've had better since. Anyway, we hung together for most of my science degree, but in the end I got weary of his earnestness and gave him the flick. I don't know what happened to him and must remember to Google him one day. Maybe he'll turn up as a Greens' candidate in a forthcoming election, although if he's followed the typical path of most old socialists it's more likely I'll find that he's now a tobacco company executive or something of that ilk.

It was at a party for David a couple of years later that Tony and I hooked up. I can remember the details clearly even though it was twelve years ago now. By this time Tony had been

newly elevated to a first officer position with Qantas. David was heading to the UK for a couple of years of physician's training so his friends had organised a *bon voyage* party, held in a private function room at a pub. I toddled along with my good friend, Mimi, which would not usually be regarded as an effective strategy if you were out to meet guys. Mimi is small and dainty with glossy dark hair, a delicate pointed chin, huge brown eyes, and a little girl voice and tinkling laugh which drive men to distraction. She also has the most beautiful skin you've ever seen; I expect she's the only girl in recorded history to go through adolescence without a single blemish. Her presence seems to trigger some caveman-protector gene buried deep on the Y chromosome but the guys aren't privy to the joke that she doesn't need protecting at all. She's smart and witty and fun to be around and possesses just the right amount of cynicism to be interesting. That's why I chose to hang around with her. If only it wasn't so dispiriting to turn into the invisible woman in her company.

However, as it turned out, Tony was one of the small percentage of men (I'd estimate around 0.5 percent) who found me the more attractive.

This particular evening Mimi and I were standing together, sipping bad house wine and viewing the passing parade with a detached eye, when I noticed Tony heading in our direction. He'd be hard to miss, a golden boy in every sense of the word. There was none of that apologetic sidling up I associated with less attractive men. He approached us confidently - clearly a young man expecting a positive reception.

I sighed. There was my evening gone.

'Hi, Ellie isn't it? David's sister? I almost didn't recognise you at first.' Well at least he's polite, I thought, taking time to acknowledge my existence before he moves in on Mimi.

'Yes, and this is my friend Mimi,' I explained. May as well

get on with it.

‘Hi, Mimi. And what are you up to these days, Ellie? I haven’t seen you for ages. Have you been overseas?’

‘No, just at uni all the time. I’m studying for a marketing degree. But I did go on holiday to Italy recently with two girlfriends. We had the best time. I know everyone is meant to prefer Florence but I especially loved Rome. Have you been?... Oh, my God, I just realised how stupid that must sound, what with you jetting about the world for your job.’

‘No, not really - I’m just flying domestically at the moment. A holiday in Italy sounds pretty good to me, too.’

And so the conversation ensued. I asked him more about his job and told him about mine, and we discussed David and his already brilliant career and after about twenty minutes it dawned on me that Tony was directing almost all of his conversation towards me. He wasn’t interested in Mimi it seemed - very strange.

I also started noticing how good looking he was. I’d never thought of myself as a girl who was interested in blondes. Surfers have certainly never done it for me. I began to reassess; he was pretty damn cute. He was wearing jeans and an immaculately-ironed white cotton shirt, which he had folded up to his elbows to reveal tanned hands and muscular forearms covered in fine golden hairs. When he folded his arms his biceps pressed tightly against the shirt fabric in a most alluring way. His closeness and in-your-face masculinity started arousing some curious sensations within me, so much so that when he started telling me about his job and what a big rush it was to get those magnificent machines to rise up in the air, I couldn’t help speculating on other large objects that may also get a rise. I was glad the lighting was dim so he couldn’t witness my blushes.

By the way, you needn’t waste your time feeling sorry for Mimi about all this. Predictably by this time she was surrounded

by a circle of worshipful admirers, although I could tell by her demeanour that she wasn’t interested. Her time would come later.

Eventually Tony asked me to dance and took my hand as he escorted me to the dance floor, past the raised eyebrows of my brother. I was having a fine old time when Mimi came up to me saying she had a headache and wanted to leave. Damn, that was my lift home gone.

‘Don’t worry, I can drop you home,’ said Tony. ‘If that’s okay of course.’

Oh yes, that was okay.

My first impression of Tony was that he seemed extremely grown up. He owned a nice car - a late-model Mazda 323 - unlike most of the other guys I’d dated who, if they possessed any sort of vehicle, invariably got around in rusty old jalopies that were never guaranteed to start when you turned the ignition key. Of course he knew the way to my place as he’d been there before; it was a comfort that he already knew that my family wasn’t wealthy. He asked if he could see me again and I gave him one of my new business cards, feeling very sophisticated. Then he kissed me, just the once, but it was splendid - a tantalising hint of what I hoped was to come. He’s always been a great kisser.

For the next few days I was on tenterhooks. I’d had enough of those ‘I’ll call you’ experiences to know the success rate wasn’t great. Every time the phone rang at work my heart would skip a beat. I’d eagerly grab the phone, only to say ‘Oh’ when it turned out to be Joe from the accounts department, or someone else equally as boring. Then, after almost four days, when I’d convinced myself he was just another arrogant prick who didn’t deserve me, Tony called.

‘Sorry I didn’t call earlier. I’ve been away with work and I forgot to take your number with me.’

‘Oh that’s fine,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t expecting you to call any

sooner.' Liar!

We organised to go to the movies (we saw *Speed* as I recall), which proceeded to dinner, which proceeded to dinner and parties with his friends and before I knew it I had assumed girlfriend status. Almost all of Tony's friends had, rather unimaginatively, paired up with girls they'd all known since their school days, so I did for a period feel somewhat an outsider. Luckily most of these girls were friendly enough, except for one or two whom I suspect had been planning to line Tony up with a friend or a sister, or maybe even themselves. He was certainly much cuter than their boyfriends, I thought with satisfaction. I was glad that my brother was living overseas by this time, because I think this might have been more awkward if it had been happening under his nose. I think Tony was relieved too, as it's always a bit loaded seeing a friend's sister, especially when there is sex involved - which there was before too long - and David was nothing if not the protective big brother.

After we'd been seeing each other about a month or so Tony suggested we head back to his place after dinner. Things had been getting pretty hot and heavy in the kissing department so I'd suspected this might be on the cards and had even bought new lingerie in anticipation. I had been just about to hand over my credit card to purchase them in vixen black when I had a rethink and opted for virginal white. Even by this early stage I was having furtive fantasies about marriage and thought it prudent to appear more bride than seductress. I was touched to observe he'd tidied his bedroom in my honour but later discovered that that was just Tony and his bedroom always looked neat. He was so strong he could have taken 'command' of me and I would have been powerless to resist (I'll admit I sometimes fantasised that he did) but he was surprisingly gentle and deferential. It was all that I had dreamed of and more, and I knew that I had fallen in deep.

His job meant he was away a lot but that mostly suited me fine; it gave me more time to study for my degree and made his homecomings all the sweeter. I also loved telling people my boyfriend was a pilot. It spoke to me of a spirit of rugged adventurism, my brave and gallant explorer of the skies. Okay, so I was romanticising a wee bit, but that was my tendency in those days. Besides, Tony looked extremely hot in his uniform.

All that first year I expected Tony to wake up and realise he was going out with little ol' me. It is pathetic to say this now but back then I even thought he could have done better. My husband is a strong, silent type (Mr Darcy come on down) - not a great one for unnecessary talk at the best of times and certainly not someone who is comfortable talking about personal issues. Knowing what I know now, I'd say the romance writers have got it wrong and this is an overrated stereotype. Nature abhors a vacuum, as they say, and it seems I have wasted years of my life filling in the void created by *his* silences with *my* fruitless thoughts and pointless speculations. So in those days whenever he was a bit quiet, or a bit cranky, or a bit distracted, I'd think, okay this is it, he's met someone else and he's going to dump me, but of course he never did.

The fact he never did became all the more remarkable to me when I got to know his mother, Pamela, well. And she definitely is a 'Pamela' (pronounced in short, breathy syllables), not a 'Pam' - no-one ever makes *that* mistake twice. Pamela is tall, blonde and elegant and both boys have inherited her good looks. Unfortunately she also holds copyright on the 'mother-in-law from hell' title.

I'm certainly no angel (a fact that will become obvious the further you read) but I do at least give each person I meet the benefit of the doubt and am inclined to like them until given good reason to do otherwise. However, the very first time I met Pamela she was hostile to me and nothing's changed since. It's

not as if I ever gave her cause to be in those early days: I was too intimidated to say anything to Tony's parents, let alone anything offensive (although she probably interpreted this as surliness on my part). I'm not sure she would have thought any woman truly worthy of her beloved eldest, but she made no attempt to disguise the fact she would have preferred a girl from their social circle, not some middle-class upstart with ideas above her station. No doubt she tried her damndest to break us up back then.

I brought this up with David around this time, when he came back to Australia for his wedding to Amrita, but he claimed that Pamela had always been fine with him.

'She probably thinks it's okay to mix with the lower classes, just as long as we don't interbreed,' I grumbled.

'Oh come on she can't be that bad.'

'I tell you she is.'

'Well if it's really that bad you may want to think about whether it's worth it. Don't get me wrong. Tony's a good guy. But I'm not sure he's the right guy for you.'

I was pretty annoyed with David about that. Never seek advice unless you want to hear the answer. Although it turned out he was right about at least one thing - and I'm embarrassed to admit it took me a long time to realise this - it was less about snobbery with Pamela than jealousy and this has made her a much more powerful adversary.

Fortunately at this time Tony was sharing a flat in Neutral Bay with another pilot and didn't spend much time at the family home. Thus I was spared too much exposure to the formidable Pamela Cooper. Tony's flat mate, Mark, was an older guy, who had been an air force pilot before joining Qantas. He was an inveterate womaniser, too. Tony and I started calling his girlfriends 'Miss January', 'Miss February', 'Miss March' and so on as few of them lasted more than a few weeks. Living with Mark meant you'd never know who you were going to bump

into leaving the bathroom the next day. Some of these girls were lovely but there was no point getting to know any of them because as soon as you'd developed an attachment for one she'd be shown the revolving door. Of course Mark was often away, too, so we did have many glorious periods where we had the flat all to ourselves.

I'd established by this time that Tony's sculpted body wasn't completely a work of nature: he liked to exercise, a lot. I signed up to his gym and started joining him on the bikes and treadmills. We'd get all hot and sweaty on the gym equipment, have a shower, and then go home to get all hot and sweaty again whilst performing a work out of a completely different kind. He was not the wildly adventurous lover I dreamed of, but I was completely in love with the idea of being in love and with the intimacy that only comes with that. I think there is a place for the good old, no-strings-attached fling; one highlight from my trip to Italy I omitted to tell Tony about was the twenty-four hours I spent holed up in a pensione with Roberto, a lawyer I met at a restaurant near the Spanish Steps. It was with Tony, however, that I finally discovered the difference between having sex and making love.

I never tired of the fact that he was so big and strong and masculine - it made me feel, if not exactly petite, at least very feminine. Once I'd worked up the courage to suggest it, we'd sometimes pretend I was a damsel in distress and he my rakish lover come to take advantage of me.

One afternoon, after about a year of togetherness, we were lying in his bed. I plucked up the courage to ask him a question that had been niggling at me for some time.

'You know the night we got together, at David's farewell party.'

'Yeah.'

'Was it me or Mimi you were interested in?'

His head jerked up from the pillow a little and he gave me a puzzled look. 'You - I thought that would have been obvious.'

'Well, she is very beautiful. Most men flock to her. I thought you might have been going to hit on her but when you got talking to me changed your mind, or something.'

'No, never...Mimi is very attractive, but it was always you.'

'Why?'

'*I don't know...*it's not something I can really put into words. You just looked nice. Although,' he said, giving me a wicked look, 'I did notice that you had very nice breasts.'

Then he went quiet for a while, his usual state. I thought our conversation had reached a typical dead-end but he surprised me this time by continuing. 'You know, I don't really know Mimi that well, and she seems nice and all, but in my opinion really beautiful girls are generally more trouble than they are worth. You know about Sarah, I suppose?'

'Yes,' I said. I knew of Sarah, Tony's last serious girlfriend, well. Alice and Cathy, the catty girls in Tony's crowd, delighted in telling me about this apparent paragon of beauty and virtue whenever they could. Sarah was travelling in Europe by this stage, so we'd never actually met.

'She was absolutely, stunningly gorgeous [I could have done without hearing that] and when we started going out I thought that all my Christmases had come at once, but in the end she just drove me nuts and I got sick of her.'

Ah, that was much better. 'Why?' I asked, trying - and failing - not to sound too eager.

'She is a daughter of one of my dad's friends and my mum and dad were really keen on us getting together. I think they thought we'd eventually get married, you know. [That explained a lot.] But Sarah is an only child and absolutely spoilt. When she got her driver's licence her dad bought her a brand new MX5 as a present. My dad has always stressed that we should earn

things, not have them handed to us on a plate. After a while she started bitching and moaning about my job - you know, when I'd have to be away when a good party was on and all. Anyway, one day she actually suggested I might want to give up flying and go into dealing or something. Can you believe it? I have never wanted to do *anything* but be a pilot since I was four years old. Flying is my life - you know that. So, I went home that night and thought about it and the next day I called her up and dumped her. That didn't go down well, I can tell you,' he said, wearing the smile of a small boy taking pleasure in being caught doing the wrong thing. 'I decided there and then that I was through with these princess-types and I was going to find myself a nice normal girl who didn't think the world revolved around her.'

'So you decided to seek out a homely girl who would be so grateful to have your affection bestowed upon her that she would never complain about anything?' I said this in a slightly mocking tone but it was closer to the truth than I cared to admit. There had been times when I had wanted to complain about Tony's many absences but had checked this inclination because I had a feeling he would not like it. Seems I was correct.

'Now you're being silly. As if I would have gone after a homely girl. I always thought you were pretty. And now I have got to know the whole package - the fact you are so easy to be around - I truly think you are the loveliest girl I know...and as I said before you do have the most magnificent breasts.'

'Are you in love with me?'

'God I hate this sort of talk. Isn't it obvious?'

'You know sometimes girls need to be told these things.'

He went silent for a while.

'Well?'

'Okay...I love you.'

'And I love you. See that wasn't so hard was it?'

'No...but I'm never going to be good at this sort of stuff.'

You'll have to get used to that. [I liked this reference to getting used to it. It suggested a healthy permanence.] Talk is cheap and I'd rather you judge me by my actions not my words.'

And then, embarrassed by all this personal talk, he made a move to kiss the aforementioned breasts and with that all sensible conversation ceased.

So that's when I found out that Tony did genuinely love me and why he stuck by me against the wishes of his mother. And more importantly I now knew the secret of *keeping* him happy. I resolved that very day that nothing I said or did would ever stand in the way of me marrying him.