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Katie Fforde

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Dorothy Koomson

‘Warm and wonderful’ Milly Johnson

‘Inspiring and moving’ Kate Long

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‘Heartwarming and original . . . will leave you
full of hope’ Vanessa Greene

About the Author

Linda Green wrote her first novella at the age of nine. Unfortunately, the pony-based time travel thriller genre never took off. She did however go on to achieve her childhood ambition of becoming an author and has written six previous novels. Linda is also an award-winning journalist and has written for the *Guardian*, the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Big Issue*. She lives in West Yorkshire with her husband, eleven-year-old son, two rescue guinea pigs and a lot of mess.

Also by Linda Green

The Marriage Mender

The Mummyfesto

And Then It Happened

Things I Wish I'd Known

10 Reasons NOT to Fall in Love

I Did a Bad Thing

while
my eyes
were
closed
LINDA GREEN

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For Susan Stephenson, for holding my hand on
the journey into motherhood and for bringing
such love, light and joy to the world

‘I watch a bird as it brings food to its chicks. How it looks after them, how it protects them. And then I say to myself, “You’re a better mother than me”’

Hatidza Mehmedovic, mother of two sons
murdered at Srebrenica

Your body realises you have lost your child before your brain does. The invisible umbilical cord between you snaps. Everything inside you goes loose and limp. Only then does your brain register what is happening. It kicks into action, trying to prove to your body that it is wrong. You do what it tells you, of course. You scramble in every direction. Pulling and pulling on your end of that cord. Hoping that if you pull hard enough, if you shout and kick and scream, if you can only get to the other end, you might somehow find your child still there.

When they are not. When it is clear that they have gone. That is when the guilt kicks in. You are their mother. You have a duty to look after them. And you have failed in that duty of care, therefore you are a

failed mother. How can you be anything else when it happened on your watch? While your eyes were closed, for goodness' sake.

That is when you start to shut down inside. One by one, your vital organs cease to function. It is hard to know how you carry on breathing, how the blood pumps around your body, because you are certainly not doing it willingly.

You wish that somebody would be kind enough to put you out of your misery. Until you realise that this is the price you must pay - to suffer in the way that your child has. You deserve nothing less for letting them down so badly. And so you live your non-existent life. And every day when you wake up, if you have been lucky enough to get any sleep at all, the first word you say is sorry. They can't reply, of course. But you say it all the same. In the hope that somehow they will hear and forgive you. Even though you know you will never forgive yourself.

1

LISA

‘You haven’t seen me climb up to big slide yet, have you, Mummy?’ says Ella, who is lying on top of our bed in her grubby *Frozen* pyjamas.

I am not the sort of mum who beats herself up about missing ‘firsts’. I missed Chloe’s first steps (though Mum, bless her, described them to me afterwards with a commentary befitting the moon-landings), but I wasn’t particularly bothered about this because trying to earn enough money to get our own place was more important to me than being able to tick off a list of milestones in some crappy baby book that your mother-in-law gave you. (I didn’t have a mother-in-law at the time, on account of Chloe’s father not having hung around long enough after I told him I was pregnant for me to even meet his mother, let alone marry her son,

but if I had done, I reckon she would have given me one of those books.)

But today, for some reason, Ella's words sting a little. Perhaps it's the fact that since she first conquered the route up the rope climbing frame on Monday with Mum watching, Dad, Alex and even Otis have all seen her repeat the feat. Or maybe it's the fact that today is her last weekday of freedom. Ella starts school on Monday. And although she is excited about it now, I am well aware that when she realises she also has to go to school on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, not just the first week but every week from now on, she will be furious at being denied the chance of spending her afternoons in the park, as she has this week.

'No, how about I come and see you do it today then?' I say. Ella beams at me, her dimples showing and two rows of tiny teeth bared in one of those smiles which children stop doing when they become self-conscious.

'I thought you had clients this afternoon,' says Alex, rubbing his eyes as he comes round.

'My three o'clock's cancelled, and Suzie's already offered to do my last one if I want to get away early. It'll give Mum a break too. She'll be shattered after the party.'

'What party?' asks Alex, who has never been able to get his head around our children's packed social calendar.

'Charlie's party,' says Ella before I can answer,

jumping up and down on the bed. 'He's going to be four but he's still not as old as me.'

We both smile. Charlie Wilson lives next door to us. He and Ella are almost a year apart but will be starting school together next week. And she is so not ever going to let him forget who is older.

'Where is it?' asks Alex.

'Jumping Beans,' I reply.

'Oh, shame you've got to work then. You'd have enjoyed that.' Alex turns to me with a wry smile, being well aware of my aversion to soft play centres in general and the one with the crappiest party food in town in particular.

'Yeah, never mind eh,' I reply. 'I'm sure there'll be plenty of others once she gets to school.'

Pretty much every other weekend, from what I can remember with Otis, who will thankfully soon be entering the more chilled-out going-bowling-with-a-few-mates party phase.

'Are you going to come and see me get my football medal then?' asks Otis, who has been lying quietly on the other side of Alex (we have got the four-to-a-bed thing off to a fine art).

'Yeah, as long as you behave and don't do a Luis Suarez on the last day.' I smile. Otis grins back. Having been blessed with his father's temperament, we all know this is highly unlikely.

'Are you coming too, Daddy?' he asks, climbing over onto Alex.

‘No. Sorry, mate,’ says Alex, ruffling Otis’s hair, which has grown longer than it probably should have over the holidays. ‘I’ll drop you off at footie camp, but then I’ve got to go to a meeting in Manchester. You can show me your medal when I get home though, can’t you?’

Otis nods. ‘And Grandad,’ he says. ‘I’ll take it to show Grandad too.’ My dad has a bet on Otis playing for Leeds United and England by the time he’s twenty-five. Otis is good but I’m not sure he’s that good. Not that it matters. The important thing is that he prefers to spend his time running around outside kicking a football, instead of hunched in front of an Xbox or a tablet. How long that will last I don’t know, but I’m going to make the most of it while it does.

‘Right,’ I say, stretching out under the duvet. ‘We’d better get up and get sorted then. Last one down to breakfast has to clear up afterwards.’

Ella and Otis scramble up in a blur of limbs and hair and disappear from our room. Alex rolls over to me. ‘When do you think that one will stop working?’

‘I don’t know. Hopefully not until they start having lie-ins.’

‘And remind me when that is again,’ he asks, tucking a strand of my hair back behind my ear. ‘It’s all a bit of a blur to me.’

I smile, remembering how Alex, having earned countless brownie points for being such a brilliant stepfather

to Chloe, then lost as many by being utterly hopeless with sleep deprivation when we had Otis and Ella.

‘I think Chloe was about twelve.’

‘Great, only another seven years to go until the end of the early mornings then.’

I dig him in the ribs before kissing him. His breath is warm. His lips taste of mornings. I pull him closer to me, wishing we could have a bit longer in bed. Sometimes I feel the need to introduce myself to him when we finally grab a few minutes together.

‘Hey, don’t start all that stuff,’ he says.

‘Why not? We are married, apparently.’

‘Are we? When the hell did that happen? Did I actually wake up in time for the ceremony?’

I kiss him again to shut him up. ‘Only just.’

‘Anyway, I need a shower,’ he continues. ‘Sticky night. I smell like a pig.’

‘No, you don’t,’ I reply (working in a gym qualifies me as something of an expert on this subject). ‘And anyway,’ I add, running my fingers down his back, ‘even if you did, I could put up with it.’

‘Shame someone will be barging in here in two minutes complaining that his sister has nicked the Coco Pops then, isn’t it?’

I smile and give him one last kiss.

‘They won’t like it next week, you know,’ I say. ‘When it goes back to being boring, healthy stuff for the school term.’

‘Well, if you set yourself up as the evil cereal dictator, you have to deal with dissent in the ranks.’

‘Thanks for your support.’

‘No problem. And just so you know when you have to referee the fallout, it was actually me who ate the Coco Pops.’ Alex leaps out of bed so quickly that my foot misses his backside.

‘I’ll get you for that later,’ I call out as he disappears into the en suite. I lie there for a second, breathing in the stillness, feeling the warmth of the early-morning sun, which is streaming through the new cream Ikea curtains just as Alex warned me it would. I can already hear the sound of bickering drifting up from downstairs. Ella’s voice, as usual, is the loudest.

I try to block it out as I wonder how Chloe is doing. Whether she’s actually allowing herself to have a good time in France or if that is still too big a leap for her. I’ve only had a couple of brief texts so far. There was a time not so long ago when she’d have been texting me all the time. That was before, though. When we were still best friends.

There is a shout of ‘Mummy’ and associated commotion from downstairs. I swing my legs out of bed. The laminate floor is warm already. It’s going to be another hot day. Though at least the gym is air-conditioned. I try to ignore the pile of laundry in the linen basket and the heap of clean clothes hanging over the balustrade on the landing still waiting to be ironed. I also try not to

think about what Mum would say if she could see the mess which greets me in the kitchen. She offered to come and do some cleaning after Ella was born. I had to say no, even though I knew the house needed it. Because I also knew that if I said yes, she would still be our cleaner when Ella was sixteen.

By the time Alex arrives downstairs the cereal fight has been broken up and Otis has just finished counting out the last of the Coco Pops so he and Ella have exactly the same amount in their bowls.

‘Mummy says you owe us a box of Coco Pops,’ Otis says, clearly still riled by the perceived injustice.

‘Grass,’ Alex mouths to me before turning back to Otis. ‘And you owe me about sixty quid for replacing the glass in Mrs Hunter’s greenhouse, which you mistook for a football net, remember?’

‘Oh yeah,’ says Otis.

‘Quits?’ asks Alex.

‘Quits.’ Otis smiles, getting back to his Coco Pops.

I swear under my breath as I knock over the open pack of ground coffee at the exact moment I realise I’ve forgotten to get the bread out of the freezer for Otis’s packed lunch.

Alex comes over, puts his hands on my hips and whispers, ‘Chill out. Sit down and have your breakfast; I’ll sort it.’ I smile at him and for once don’t argue. He knows I’m uptight about Chloe. He was the one who suggested the holiday, said it would do her good to get

away. He was right of course, though it pains me to admit it. But he doesn't worry about her as much as I do. Nobody worries about her as much as I do.

I pour myself a bowl of muesli, take two slices of bread from the freezer and put them in the still-warm toaster on my way past, and sit down at the kitchen table.

'How many sleeps now, Mummy?' asks Ella.

'Three,' I reply. She gives a little squeal. I have never known any child be quite this excited about starting school. Chloe was nervous about it, Otis was entirely nonplussed, but for Ella it appears to be on a par with Christmas.

'We ought to be videoing this,' says Alex, 'so we can play it back to you in ten years' time when you're saying "I hate school" and refusing to get up in the mornings.'

'Why would I hate school?' asks Ella.

'You won't,' I say in between mouthfuls of muesli. 'It's just that some teenagers can be a bit grumpy.'

'Like Chloe, you mean?' she says.

I glance up at Alex. Chloe has made an effort to be her old self in front of Ella and Otis. She made me promise not to tell them what had happened. She didn't even want Alex to know, although I couldn't agree to that. There are some things which can't be passed off as teenage moods. Anyway, I wasn't prepared to lie to him. It was the one thing I insisted on before I finally gave in and agreed to his marriage proposal. Always being honest with each other. Which was why he said he didn't

think it was a good idea for me to be his personal trainer any more. Not unless I wanted to know what he really ate when he was on the road every day.

‘Chloe’s not grumpy,’ says Alex, crouching down next to Ella, ‘not compared to Daddy Bear when he discovers Goldilocks has eaten all his Coco Pops.’ He goes to grab Ella’s bowl. She squeals and collapses in fits of giggles as Alex tickles her. I smile, finish my muesli and wonder for the umpteenth time what I ever did to deserve him.

MURIEL

The house reeks of emptiness. It does so all the time but I notice it particularly in the mornings. Not that it was ever a noisy house. Not like some of those chaotic places you see in documentaries about people on benefits on the television. But there was always some low-level noise in the mornings. A workman-like hum as Malcolm and Matthew went about their morning ablutions and got ready for the day ahead.

I didn't really notice it at the time. It is one of those things you only miss when it has gone. There are rather a lot of those. Malcolm was generally considerate with the toilet seat, Matthew perhaps not so much. It is strange to think how it used to bother me. And now I am bothered by something I do not have to do. Do not have to remind someone of.

And socks. I am disturbed by the lack of socks in the house. It hardly seems right, does it? I mean most women are forever complaining about having to wash them (my mother even used to iron my father's socks) and find lost ones. But now, living in a house without socks doesn't seem right somehow. It is yin without yang. Everything is out of balance. There are plenty of houses with only female occupants of course. It is simply that this house was never meant to be one of them.

I reach over and turn on the radio. I am not particularly fond of Classic FM. I rather like John Suchet – although I could never understand what he was doing on ITV instead of the BBC – but I would prefer not to have to listen to the adverts. Still, it was one of the things I discovered after Malcolm left – that *not* having Classic FM on in the mornings reminded me more of his absence than having it on.

I think Matthew preferred it on too. Although maybe for the same reasons I did. I don't know because he never spoke about his father after he left. Matthew knew better than to bring such things up at the dinner table. Or anywhere else for that matter. And I, of course, know better than to discuss Matthew's departure too.

I hear Melody miaowing outside the door. She has never been allowed in the bedrooms. It troubles me that so many people do permit such things. Certainly she has been a huge comfort to me, and I understand the human soul's need for comfort, I truly do. But we should

not accept another species into our most private room. That is how the lines start to become blurred. People have this ridiculous notion that we and animals are somehow on the same level. I blame Disney films. I blame them for a lot of things. All of this over-sentimentality and the vulgar Americanisms which have crept into our language. I saw the P. L. Travers film at the cinema. They had it on for elevenes at the Picture House in Hebden Bridge. *Saving Mr Banks*, I think they called it. Though personally I think it was Mr Disney who needed saving. Poor Miss Travers was rather lazily portrayed, I thought. I mean it's all too easy, isn't it? The middle-aged, middle-class Englishwoman as an odd and emotionally cold spinster, out of step with the modern world. Maybe if we'd listened more to the likes of her then the world would be in a rather better state today.

I prop myself up with the pillows. I've never believed in jumping straight out of bed. You need a little time to acclimatise, to see the world from a vertical position before you actually set foot in it. I listen to the news, or rather I am aware that the news is on. The words themselves wash over me. You get to an age where you have heard it all before. Each item only a variation on well-worn themes, and it doesn't really matter that the names are different, or even some of the details. Because nothing changes. Whatever sort of fuss is kicked up about these things, the old order will be maintained.

And one day these young people, young people like Matthew, will accept it as I do, rather than thinking they can somehow change the way things are.

I tune back in for the weather. It is going to be another hot day. Too hot by far for what is the tail end of summer. I miss the seasons we used to have. Four distinct ones with clear demarcations between them. Not two. Summer and winter. Both of them being far too long. One shouldn't complain. That is what people always say. The lady in the baker's does, at least. Not that I subscribe to that view. These over-long over-hot summers are not good for people. They become suffocating. People find it difficult to breathe. At least one of the benefits of living in a Victorian house is that the high ceilings give the air more room to circulate. And the thickness of the walls keeps the temperature down to a bearable level. It is one of the reasons I never liked staying in Jennifer's house. It was like a pressure cooker in weather like this. I don't know how she and Peter could stand it. Why she went for a newbuild I'll never know. There again I'll never know why she went for Peter either. Odd to think that a sister of mine should have such questionable taste. I suppose that's the one good thing to have come out of all of this. They've given up asking me to stay. You can only ask someone so many times, you see. And at least now I don't have to feel embarrassed about declining. Everyone deals with these things in their own way. That is what Jennifer says.

Melody miaows again. I let Matthew name her. Even when he was young I could trust him to do things like that. He was always such a sensible child. He chose it because she used to walk along the keys when he was practising the piano. I suppose the name overstates Melody's musical capabilities somewhat but it does have such a lovely, lyrical tone. It would have been a nice name for a girl. I often used to think that. Melody or Meredith. You don't hear those names nowadays. They say that all names come round again in time but I have not heard those two. I have several Olivias who come to me for piano lessons, which is nice as it was my mother's name. And at least two Graces – though I have noticed that those who are called Grace rarely possess the quality themselves. No Melodies or Merediths though. Or Muriels, come to that. I think my name is one which has been consigned to history, never to be brought out again. There was a film about a girl of the same name some years ago. Awful thing it was. Australian. A rather uncouth young woman playing the supposed bride-to-be. I remember sitting through the whole thing and not laughing once while those around me appeared to find it hilarious. I do not go the cinema very often. Perhaps that is why.

Melody miaows for a third time. That is my cue to get up. I put on my slippers, pull my dressing gown over my nightdress and walk over to the sash window. I draw back the curtains and twist the blinds just enough so

that I can see the world but it can't see me. I look beyond the rows of terraced houses to the line of trees in the distance. Matthew used to love living so close to the park. It made up for not having a proper garden. Only a paved yard at the back and a small, neat front rose garden, not the sort a child could play out in.

The park provided open space for him to let off steam. Not that he used to charge around it like so many children do nowadays. But he could play on the grass. We would sit and make daisy chains. Little boys would sit still and do such things in those days. He would wear the crown of daisies on his head for the rest of the day, telling anyone who asked that he was the prince of the fairies. Never the king. Always the prince.

I sigh and turn away. Sometimes it is too painful to remember him like that. When these empty-nesters complain about missing their offspring once they have gone to university, I don't think it is the eighteen-year-olds they miss. It is the children they once were.