

ANNABEL SMITH

The Trick with the Hat and the Dove

It began with babysitting. After a few months, Imogen asked Holly about house-sitting.

What do you think? Holly asked her mother.

Fancy taking a young child to India.

Imogen had told Holly that she and George needed to “find something they’d lost”.

Holly had no idea what she meant but somehow she knew better than to repeat it to her mother.

They’ll come back with parasites and the rest of it and us taxpayers will have to foot the bill.

I meant, what do you think about me house-sitting?

You’re too young.

I’m nearly eighteen, Mum.

Exactly.

What would you do for food?

I can cook.

Oh, you can, can you? Well, how come I do everything around here then?

It’s just down the road. I could come home for dinner, Holly suggested, though she had no intention of it.

You might as well be here then.

They’re going to pay me.

I can't for the life of me think why they'd pay you \$80 a week to sit around in their house. They've got more money than sense.

I'll be looking after the cat.

Well that takes all of ten minutes a day. A dollar a minute, I'd like a job that paid that.

Imogen says it's cheaper than a cattery.

Her mother sighed. I don't think your father would have approved.

There was no arguing with that. Holly's mother had the monopoly on what her father would have thought. But Holly wasn't quite ready to give up on three weeks of freedom. She asked Imogen to come and speak to her mother, hovering in the kitchen while they drank their tea in the living room.

We wouldn't ask just anyone, Imogen explained. But Holly's so mature for her age, we know we can trust her.

Mature? Her mother sounded surprised, then recovered herself. Well, I suppose she is a pretty sensible girl. Most of the time, she added.

It can't have been easy raising her on your own, Imogen said sympathetically.

Holly smiled to herself. Her mother loved an opportunity to play this card.

You can't imagine, she heard her say, sighing. Holly was only five when her father passed on. All these years I've had to do it all on my own. We've had our share of hard times. But we've muddled through.

I think you've done better than that, Mrs Field. She's an absolute credit to you.

When Imogen left, Holly's mother said she would think about it but Holly knew she'd already changed her mind.

The rules are, there are no rules! Imogen had said. You're welcome to have people round. Read the books, listen to the CDs, use the phone, make yourself at home basically.

There were four bedrooms, but with one for the baby, a study for George and the other still stacked with boxes from the move, Holly had to sleep in George and Imogen's bedroom. It was like a tiny private library. A floor-to-ceiling bookcase filled one entire wall. Books were stacked on the bedside tables and on a chest at the end of the bed. Holly knew that George taught history, that Imogen was writing a thesis, though she did not exactly know what that meant. It seemed impossible that between them, they could ever get through this many books. There were no bookcases in Holly's house. Books were things you bought at airports to read on holiday, then gave away when you got home. You forgot the people and their stories, even the titles.

Holly picked a book off the shelf at random. *Oscar and Lucinda*. She opened it to a page which was marked with a ticket from the New York subway. Her eye was drawn to an underlined section: *She came to feel herself inhabiting a cage constructed by her mother's opinions and habits, one she could not break free from.* Holly dropped the book on the floor. She sat on the bed and looked at it warily. Peter Carey. How did he know?

Holly had been uncertain about what to do with the diary. She was worried that if she moved it, Imogen would assume she had read it. She had decided that leaving it exactly where it was would be the best way to convey her respect for it. She could just dust around it.

She hadn't considered Lyndall.

A diary! What does it say? she asked, throwing herself across the bed, disturbing Minouche, who left the room, tail high.

I haven't read it.

Are you crazy, why not?

It's private.

If it's *private*, why did she leave it on the *bedside table*, in the room where you would be *staying*? Lyndall had a way of emphasizing certain words, when she wanted to make a point. She shoved her ideas front and centre, leaving Holly with only the space around the edges.

She obviously left it by accident, Holly said. She should have emphasised *by accident*, the way Lyndall would have done. But she didn't feel sure enough.

I think she *wanted* you to read it, Lyndall persisted.

Why would she want me to read it?

Maybe she's got a *dark* secret which she needs *desperately* to confess.

She probably just packed in a hurry. Holly knew how weak it sounded, compared with Lyndall's dramatic interpretation.

It's like a *written invitation*.

How would you like it if someone read your diary?

I would never leave *my* diary *lying* around.

But if you did.

I guess it would be too bad for me.

Holly tried to think of another argument but even as she scabbled for ideas she knew Lyndall would eventually beat down any objection she might raise. Lyndall was always sure, even when she was absolutely wrong.

Just make sure you put it back exactly where it was.

Don't panic, she's not going to find out. Do you want me to read it out loud?

No. I'm going to read something else. Uncertainly, she picked up *Oscar and Lucinda* and lay down next to Lyndall on the bed.

So what's happening in yours? Lyndall said after a while.

Holly hesitated. She wanted to protect the book from Lyndall's sarcasm. It's about a guy who fights with his dad a lot.

He sounds like me, Lyndall said. And then, coyly, So don't you want to know what's happening in mine.

Not really, Holly said, knowing that Lyndall would tell her anyway.

She's got a crush on a guy that works at this bookshop, Alexandria.

But she's married.

Lyndall shrugged. Just because you're on a diet, doesn't mean you can't read the menu. His name's Harvey, she went on, and he's younger, like, heaps younger, and she's obsessed with whether or not he could ever be attracted to her. She talks about her wrinkles and stuff.

Holly thought about Imogen's face. She doesn't even have any wrinkles.

Well, she thinks she has millions. How old's her husband?

Holly pondered. A lot older, I think. Why?

Listen to this. Lyndall read: *I wasted my youthful beauty on George.*

She was his student, Holly said, and then immediately regretted it.

At school? That's wrong!

Not at school, at uni.

I bet he was married, and they had an affair, Lyndall speculated. What a *scandal!* Now *that's* the diary I should be reading.

She didn't keep a diary before, Holly said quickly.

How would *you* know?

She told me once, when she walked me home. She said she'd just started. Holly had never lied to Lyndall before. She felt uneasy.

Why would she tell *you* that?

We talk about all sorts of things. That part was true. Imogen seemed to forget that Holly was still a teenager. She spoke to her as if they were equals, friends. Sometimes, Holly did not know how to respond to the things Imogen confided. On occasion, Holly had thought about sharing them with Lyndall, to try and make sense of them. Now she was glad she had not.

Let's go to the movies, Holly suggested, when Lyndall came round the following evening.

I want to read the diary.

You're not going to read the whole thing, are you?

That's usually the point. Are you just going to stop reading your book halfway through?

Holly had no intention of giving up her book. She had stayed up until 2am reading it.

Mine is a *novel*. Yours is someone's *private business*. She felt proud of her emphasis.

So what? I still want to find out what's going to happen. Unless you've already got the scoop, seeing as you know so much about her and everything.

Holly had thought Lyndall would quickly tire of the diary. She regretted not putting it away when she first saw it. The worst part was Lyndall's insistence on keeping her updated.

She's *totally gaga* over this guy, Lyndall said. She writes down, like, every conversation they have. And their conversations are so boring.

What do they talk about? Holly asked, in spite of herself.

Books.

Holly wished she could talk to Imogen about books.

What does he look like? Holly couldn't explain it, but she felt jealous of him.

She doesn't even describe him. Except for his *hands*. I couldn't care less about his hands. I wish she would describe his *body*.

What does she like about him then?

God knows. Listen to this:

He knows so much about contemporary fiction. He's read everything. I've never been able to talk to George about books, the way I do with Harvey. George is so proud of never reading fiction, as though it's beneath him somehow.

She's weird, Lyndall concluded.

She's not weird. You don't even know her.

I know her better than you do.

You've never even met her.

Just because you're neighbours and you babysit, doesn't make you, like, her best friend. I'm the one who's read a year of her boring diary. I know her better than anyone!

Why do you keep reading it if you think it's boring?

I'm waiting for something juicy to happen.

Holly went back to *Oscar and Lucinda*. She was lost in the glassworks when Lyndall clapped the diary shut with a huge exasperated sigh.

They finally kissed, she said, when Holly did not look up.

Holly couldn't help herself. They *kissed*?

Lyndall nodded, waited.

What happened?

Now that she had Holly's attention, Lyndall lost interest. She drove him home because it was raining, he kissed her on the cheek, she wanted more, she felt guilty, she decided to stop going to the shop, end of story, she said, in a bored voice.

Well, what did you want? Holly said defensively.

I wanted them to rip each other's clothes off and have wild sex in the back of the car. All that build-up for one measly peck. That was, *hands down*, the *worst* book I've ever read.

Holly didn't know what to say. She was angry with Lyndall, or maybe she was just angry with herself. Why had she even let Lyndall argue with her about it? Right at the start she should have just taken the diary out of her hand and said no. She wanted Lyndall to go home.

Let's go down there! Lyndall said suddenly.

Where?

To Alexandra.

Alexandria, Holly corrected.

You think you know everything, don't you, now you've read, like, one whole book?

Why do you want to go there? Holly asked, already knowing the answer.

It can't have been just the book thing that made her so crazy about him. He must be really hot. I might ask him on a date.

Lyndall!

It's not like they were in a *relationship*. I mean she's about twenty years older.

Didn't she say he was in third year uni? That's only about fourteen years.

What did you do, take notes? I thought you weren't interested. Anyway, she's still way too old for him. And he kissed her *cheek*, remember? Her lips were right next door, in the middle of her face, and he went for the cheek.

I'm not coming, Holly said, in what she thought was an emphatic manner. But in the end Lyndall wore her down, as they both knew she would.

Holly had passed the bookshop many times, but this was the first time she had ever been inside. People were browsing, taking things off shelves. She wondered how they knew what to look for.

Are you Harvey? Lyndall asked a guy in a military jacket.

Holly cringed.

He's down there, in the Jack Kerouac t-shirt.

Lyndall followed where the guy was pointing. Holly went down a different aisle, but within earshot. She dreaded what Lyndall might say to Harvey, but she couldn't drag herself away. Finally he finished with the customer, and she heard Lyndall's voice.

Do you have that book *Oscar and Lucinda*? It's, like, glued to my friend's hands, I wanted to see what all the hoo-ha is about.

He laughed. It's a favourite of mine too. I'll grab it for you. You can see for yourself.

Holly heard them move away, saw Lyndall appear a few moments later, book in hand. Let's get out of here, she said, shoving it on a nearby shelf.

Holly picked it up and took it over to the counter.

Why're you buying it? Lyndall said, following her. You've nearly finished it.

Harvey scanned it.

I want my own copy, Holly said quietly, handing him the money.

What for? It's not like you're going to read it again!

Holly felt hot. It would not have been accurate to say that she wanted the earth to swallow her up. She wanted it to swallow Lyndall up.

Course she's going to read it again, Harvey said. It's a classic, isn't it? He smiled conspiratorially at Holly.

Holly nodded, her anger evaporating.

What a let down! Lyndall said, when they got back into the car. He is so not cute. And those sideburns. Hello, it's not the seventies.

Holly didn't answer. *Isn't it?* he had said. He was asking her. She had entered a world where Lyndall could not follow.

Oh well, there goes nothing, Lyndall said, moving on in the abrupt way she had. What shall we do?

Holly had the book in a paper bag on her lap. I'm pretty tired, she said. I think I might just go home.

It's, like, nine o'clock!

I can catch a bus if you want to stay out.

A person could *die* of boredom with you as a friend.

I'll get a bus then.

No, no, don't be stupid. I'll drive you, Lyndall said, sulking. Call me tomorrow? she said, when Holly got out of the car.

Sure.

Holly had the letter of offer for two days before she told her mother.

Arts? I thought you were going to business college. You can't even draw.

It's not that kind of art, Holly explained patiently. It's English and History, things like that.

How's that going to help you get a job? What about Lyndall? Don't tell me she's part of this hare-brained scheme.

Holly shook her head. They hadn't spoken since the last day of school.

Well, at least she's got her head screwed on, Holly's mother said. Your father would be turning in his grave. Anyway, what makes you think you'll even get into uni?

I got in, Mum, Holly said. That's what this letter is.

Her mother sniffed. Still, an Arts degree! Not worth the paper it's printed on.

Holly wished she could walk down and tell Imogen. But after they returned from India, Imogen had taken Milla to stay with her mother in the country, and eventually it became apparent that they weren't coming back. There was no one who knew what the letter meant to Holly.

Holly downloaded the English booklist as soon as it was posted on the university website. The list terrified her. She feared that Lyndall and her mother were right, that the books were beyond her in some way. She needed someone to believe that she could really read them, that they would open their covers and let her in.

She hadn't been to Alexandria since that night with Lyndall almost six months earlier and all the way there she tried to prepare herself for the fact that Harvey might not be there, that he might not even work there anymore. But when she walked up to the counter he looked at her and said, *Oscar and Lucinda*, right?

She nodded and reddened, flattered that he remembered her.

So what did you think? Did you cry? he pressed. Because I nearly did.

Holly smiled. The boys she knew did not talk about crying. I didn't like the ending, she admitted, afraid it was the wrong thing to say.

I didn't like it either, Harvey said. But a happy ending would ruin that book.

Why? she wanted to ask. But she felt exposed, like a child at a magic show who has been asked to hold the magician's hat. She did not know what was expected of her. She might spoil the trick.

Are you looking for something particular? he asked.

I need some books for uni.

She handed him the list. She was ashamed by the length of it, as if it were a measurement of her ignorance. There were authors she had never heard of, names she did not know how to pronounce. Vladimir Nabokov, Milan Kundera, Kurt Vonnegut, Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

You haven't read *any* of these? she imagined him saying. You think you can just start now? Would he take the hat away from her, give it to a more worthy child to hold? But he read the names like he was saying the words of a spell and Holly held her breath.

This is a fantastic reading list, he said. You're going to have an amazing year. He smiled at her, and the white dove emerged blinking, as surprised as she was.