



Straight Talking: A Novel *by Jane Green*

Excerpt

I was never supposed to be single at thirty years old. I was supposed to be like my mother, wasn't I? Married, a couple of kids, a nice home with Colefax and Fowler wallpaper and a husband with a sports car and a mistress or two.

Well, to be honest I would mind about the mistresses, but not as much as I mind being single. What I'd really, really love is a chance to walk down that aisle dressed in a cloud of white, and let's face it, I'm up there at the top, gathering dust.

It can't be that unusual, surely, to be thirty years old and to spend most of your spare time dreaming about the most important day of your life? I don't know, perhaps it's just me, perhaps other women redirect their energies into their careers. Perhaps I'm just a desperately sad example of womanhood. Oh God, I hope not.

It's not as if I haven't had relationships, although, admittedly, none of them have come close to proposing. I've come close to thinking they were my potential husband. A bit too close. Every time. But hey, if you're going to go into it you may as well go into it thinking this time he might be Mr. Right, as opposed to Mr. Right-for-three-weeks-before-he-does-his-usual-disappearing-act.

Sometimes I think it's me. I think I must be doing something wrong, giving out subliminal messages so they can smell the desperation, read the neon lights on my forehead . . . "keep away from this woman, she is looking for commitment," but most of the time I think it's them. Bastards. All of them.

But I never quite lose hope that my perfect man, my soul mate, is out there waiting for me, and every time my heart gets broken I think that next time it's going to be different.

And I'm a sucker for big, strong, handsome men. Exactly the type my mother always told me to avoid. "Go for the ugly ones," she always used to say, "then they'll be grateful." But she landed up with my handsome father, so she's never had the pleasure of that particular experience.

And the problem with small men is they make you feel like an Amazonian giant. At least they do if you're five feet, eight and a half inches, and a size twelve, or thereabouts, the product of constant dieting in public, and constant bingeing in private.

Big men are far better. They put their arms around you, their head resting on yours and you feel like a little girl; safe from the big bad world; as if nothing could ever go wrong again.

So here I am, and for your information I am neither fat, ugly, nor socially dysfunctional. Most people think I'm twenty-six, which secretly annoys the hell out of me, because I like to think of myself as mature and sophisticated, and I'm generally thought of as strikingly attractive.

I know this because the men -- when they're still in the stages of being kind to me -- say this, but unfortunately I've always longed to be strikingly pretty. I've tried being pretty, painting on big eyes and looking coyly out from under my fringe, but pretty can't be attained. Pretty, you either are or you aren't.

I'm successful, in a fashion. I earn enough money to go on shopping binges at Joseph every three months or so, and I own my own flat. OK, it's not in the smartest part of London, but if you closed your eyes between the car and the front door, you might -- only might, mind -- just think you were in Belgravia. Apart from the lingering smell of cat pee that is.

Of course I have cats. What self-respecting single career woman of thirty who's secretly desperately longing to give it all up for the tall, rich stranger of her dreams doesn't have cats? They're my babies. Harvey and Stanley.

They might be stupid names, but I quite like the idea of cats having human names, particularly ones you don't expect. The greatest name I ever heard was Dave the cat. A cat called Dave -- brilliant, isn't it? I can't stand Fluffys, or Squeaks, or Snowys. And then people wonder why their cats are arrogant. I'd be supercilious, too, if my mother had called me Fluffy.

Luckily she didn't. She called me Anastasia, Nasty to my enemies, Tasia, Tasha, to my friends, of which I have many.

Because just in case you're reading this and you happen to be happily married with other couples as friends, doing cozy couply things together, let me tell you that when you're a single girl, friends are vital.

I always thought the women's magazines were talking a load of crap when they told you to forget about men, crack open a bottle of wine, and sit around with your girlfriends cackling about sex, but it's true.

I still can't quite believe it's true because it's only recently -- well, within the last three years -- that I've discovered this group of female friends, but that's exactly what we do, once a week, and just in case you're thinking it's sad and lonely, it's not. It's great.

There's me, naturally; Andrea, commonly known as "Andy"; Mel; and Emma.

And I suppose, much as I hate the term ladettes, that's exactly what we are, except we all despise football. Actually Andy says she loves football, and she claims to support Liverpool, but she only says it for two reasons: She fancies Stan Collymore, and she thinks it impresses men.

They are impressed, but they don't fancy her because Andrea is everything I dread. She's more "blokeish" than most of the blokes I know. If a guy's drinking beer, Andrea will instantly challenge him to a drinking competition, and she usually wins. Attractive? I don't think so. They all think she's a great laugh but they wouldn't want to wake up next to her.

You think I'm bitter? If you'd been dumped from a great height by what feels like practically every single man in London, you'd be slightly bitter. But bear with me and you'll discover I'm not quite as bitter as I sound.

In case you're wondering how I earn my money, I'm a television producer. A bit of a joke, isn't it? I who leads such an exciting glamorous life, producing a daytime television show, I who rubs shoulders with the stars every day of her life, I who can't find a bloody man.

But I've had some fun on the show, I grant you. I remember one time an actor came on as a guest -- can't tell you who he is, much as I'd like to, because he's very famous, and very famously married to an equally famous wife. The night before the show I had to go to his hotel to brief him, you know, just to check my

researcher had got the right stuff, and there we were, drinking gin and tonics in the hotel bar, with him rubbing my leg under the table.

I can't deny I fancied him rotten and I followed him upstairs to make sure we "hadn't left anything out." Gave him the blow job to end all blow jobs. I'll admit it didn't do a lot for me, but then again, I've dined out on that story for nearly four years. I would tell you too, you understand, but we're not exactly close friends, and I haven't decided whether or not I can trust you.

But what I have decided is to tell you about my life, and for all this hard, career-type stuff, I'm a real softie inside. The classic scratch-the-surface-and-you'll-find-marshmallow stuff. You've got to be hard in television -- I didn't make it this far just by dishing out the odd blow job -- but put me in a room with a man I could love, a man who could take care of me, and I'm jelly, bloody jelly.

That's my problem, you see. They meet me and think I spell danger, glamour, excitement, and then two weeks down the line, right about the time I'm trying to move my toothbrush into their bathroom cabinet and my silk nightdress under their pillow, they realize I'm not so different after all.

And after I've cooked them gourmet meals, because I'm an excellent cook, and added a few flowers and feminine touches to their bachelor pads, they know I could make a good wife. Actually I'd make a bloody superb wife; and they're off, like shit from a shovel.

I'd love to take you back over my whole life, but you probably wouldn't be that interested. Two parents, middle-class, comfortable, even wealthy I suppose, and not very interested in me.

I was the classic wild child, except I think I probably could have been a bit more wild, a bit more crazy, but underneath the good girl was always fighting to get out. Maybe that's why people think I'm a bitch now. I'd spent so many years trying to be good, being walked over by everyone, when I decided to stand up for my rights, and people started getting scared; and what do people do when they're scared of you? Exactly. They call you a bitch. But my close friends know that's not true, and I suppose they're the only ones that really matter.

Hang on, the doorbell's ringing. God, I hate people dropping in unexpectedly. This guy I used to fancy, Anthony, once came over when I was in a grubby old bathrobe with legs that were booked in for a leg wax the following week. I looked a state, and I had to sit there and talk to him, trying to hide my gorilla legs. We never got it together, unsurprisingly.

It's OK though, it's Andy. She probably wants to hear about the last one, the three-monther, bit of a record for me. For all her faults, Andy's great, always makes you feel better. Every time I get dumped I turn first to Mel to ease the pain, and then to Andy to cheer me up, and inevitably I leave feeling the world's a better place. Good job she joined us now, before I get seriously depressed.

You may as well join us, sit down, kick your shoes off, and don't worry, it's a smoker's flat. Beer or Chardonnay, which would you prefer?

The hosts of my show are the biggest pair of assholes I ever came across. I used to fancy him before I worked here, but as soon as I met him I realized he fancied himself more than anyone else ever could, and that was that, turned my stomach.

Whether it's fortunate or unfortunate, he likes blondes. Being blonde, albeit a Daniel Galvin special that costs me a small fortune and has to be redone every six weeks, he likes me. He doesn't actually flirt overtly, doesn't David, just gives me the odd wink when he thinks no one's looking.

And I play up to him, as long as she's not around; his on-screen partner, the woman who plays wife, mother, sister, daughter to the macho inanity he spouts every morning from 10:20 to twelve noon.

She's not crazy about me, but Annalise Richie, the female star of Breakfast Break, knows I'm good and she knows David likes me, not to mention the editor of the program, who, for what it's worth, I slept with on and off for about two years.

Oh, and by the way, don't get these two confused with the other hosts. They're not the sickly sweet pair on the BBC, who paw each other all morning like a pair of rampant lovebirds, nor are they the married couple on the other side who, granted, are as slick as they come.

David and Annalise, you know the ones. He's the one with the perfect looks, if you're into Ken dolls, and she's the dyed blonde who looks like she needs a bloody good scrub with carbolic soap.

Off camera of course; because on camera she's poured into a chic little number from wardrobe, and Jesus, wouldn't I love to tell her adoring public that underneath the silk Equipment shirt is a Marks & Spencer bra that's gone gray. Horrible.

And this morning I need her whining voice like a hole in my head, sitting in the gallery above the studio, trying to turn down the earpiece so her nasal tones sound halfway bearable.

"Tasha, I'm not sure I like these questions, I don't understand what point we're trying to make here."

"Annie," I say, gritting my teeth until I practically grind them down in one easy movement, and calling her by the nickname she prefers because it makes her feel like a friend to the crew, "Annie, we're back on air in three minutes, the woman's an expert on relationships, she's a good talker, just press Play and she's off."

From the monitors above me I see Annalise visibly relax. Stupid cow. Every time a guest comes on who's a pseudo-intellectual, Annalise gets in a panic, quite rightly, because she hasn't got the brains to cope.

The guest is Ruby Everest, larger-than-life stand-up comedienne who specializes in degrading men. My kind of gal. She also happens to have a degree from Cambridge in psychology, and dealing with hecklers is her forte. I met her earlier in the Green Room, and immediately warmed to her.

"Vain bastard, isn't he?" are her first words to me, gesturing at David, preening himself in a pane of glass that happened to have a shadow behind it at the time.

"Isn't that the bloody truth," I respond, suddenly blushing as I remember my vow not to swear in front of guests, or people I don't know well, which I suppose includes you so I'll try to mind my p's and q's. But Ruby just grins, so I grin back.

You can always recognize a fellow member of the sisterhood. Not all women belong, only those who have been prone to a little rough-and-tumble -- they've been treated roughly, and then they tumble. Once upon a time, in their twenties, the sisterhood were men's women. All their friends were men, they'd go out, get drunk, shag some bloke, and kick him out in the morning. It was fun in your twenties, you knew you'd settle down eventually, and you just wanted to do as much as possible while you still could.

But now in your thirties you've changed. You've become women's women. There's a weary air about you, you're resigned to the fact that the knights in shining armor disappeared with the round table, and if married men are as good as you're going to get, then that's as good as you're going to get.

Ruby's like me, I can see it immediately. She's a woman who's had enough, a woman who's forced herself to be happy with her cats and her girlfriends, with the odd one-night stand, with the men who treat her like shit and don't come back for more.

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