

Lisa Jewell

'A life-affirming tale studded with Jewell's trademark warmth and humour' *Red*

An illustration of a vibrant, colorful street scene. The street is paved in a light pinkish-red hue and leads into the distance between rows of multi-story houses. The houses have various colored roofs (grey, blue, red) and windows with colorful panes (yellow, blue, green, red). A man and a woman are walking away from the viewer down the center of the street. The sky is a deep blue with several small white stars.

31 Dream Street

'... another jewel from Lisa'
heat



31 Dream Street
by
Lisa Jewell

Copyright © Lisa Jewell, 2007

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from 31 Dream Street

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

Prologue

Leah peered through the gap between her curtains at the house across the road.

Detached from its neighbours by both its position and its appearance, 31 Silversmith Road was an eccentric building which stood alone. It rose three storeys and had been built a hundred and fifty years earlier by a pair of retired silversmiths who'd chosen the location for its sweeping views towards the Hertfordshire countryside. To fully enjoy the view they'd commissioned an ornate wrought-iron veranda which wrapped itself round the entire ground floor. Nowadays anyone sitting on the veranda would enjoy a view of nothing more inspiring than the terrace of characterless Victorian cottages opposite and beyond that the upper floors of three brutal tower blocks, sprouting from the wilds of Enfield.

The silversmiths, an unconventional pair, had chosen to decorate the exterior of their home with brightly coloured tiles picked up from their travels around the bazaars and flea markets of the world. On either side of the front door were richly coloured tiled panels depicting peacocks, which lent the house its unofficial local name of the Peacock House. In fact, when describing to people exactly where in East Finchley she lived,

Leah would often say – you know, just opposite the Peacock House.

It looked more intriguing at night when it was lit up from the inside. It reminded Leah of a ceramic lamp she'd had in her bedroom as a child which was shaped like a mushroom with windows and doors cut out and little ceramic people who lived inside. She'd often fantasized about living inside that little mushroom-shaped house, all snug and cosy and safe from the elements. The Peacock House made her feel the same way. It was so inviting with its stained glass and its ornate tiles, its hanging lanterns and gables and plaster-work lions with chipped noses.

As she watched, the front door opened, and the Girl with the Guitar emerged. She and Amitabh had nicknames for all the people in the Peacock House. As well as the Girl with the Guitar, there was Old Skinny Guy, Young Skinny Guy, the Teenager, the Air Hostess and Sybil (so-called because she changed her image so frequently and so dramatically that Leah and Amitabh were convinced she must have a multiple personality disorder). The Girl with the Guitar stopped at the bottom of the front steps and lit a cigarette. Then she pushed a shank of black hair behind her ear, slung her guitar case over her shoulder and headed left, towards the High Road, the tips of her stiletto-heeled boots issuing a sharp metallic clack as she went.

Young Skinny Guy watched her, as he did every night, from his window on the second floor. His face was illuminated, as ever, by the light from his computer

monitor and his expression, as ever, was one of quiet, lovelorn resignation. He was a strange-looking fellow, not unattractive, but seemingly intent on making the worst of himself. His hair was an unrestrained mass of curls, verging on an Afro, and he had equally exuberant muttonchop sideburns which sprouted from each side of his face like angel wings. He rarely left the company of his PC and Leah had seen him leave the house probably only five times since she'd moved to Silver-smith Road.

Leah had no idea who any of the people over the road were. She didn't know their names or their relationships. She had no idea who owned the house or what the set-up was. Was it divided into bed-sits? Was it a house share? Or some kind of strange interbred family? She'd lived opposite the Peacock House for nearly three years, yet she'd never had a conversation with anyone who lived there. Never even exchanged nods or smiles. Leah was a curious person by nature. She liked to know what was what, who was who, how everything worked and fitted together. But she was also a Londoner who played by the rules regarding personal space and keeping yourself to yourself. So she sat and she watched and she wondered and she waited because she knew that one day, somehow, she'd find a way to answer all her questions.

Fifteen Years Earlier

1 August 1990

Toby,

Jemma and I are leaving for Cape Town tomorrow morning. I'm sorry we'll miss your wedding next week, but I'm sure you understand.

I am enclosing a set of keys. I have bought you and Karen a house as a wedding gift. Peter got it at auction. I haven't seen it, but Peter assures me it was a good buy. In need of some TLC, but structurally sound. Which is just as well, as this house also represents your inheritance. I thought it best you have something now as I will be abroad for the foreseeable future and, once Jemma and I start our new family, things will get complicated in terms of who gets what. Much simpler this way.

Property is the thing, Toby. You're on the ladder now. I can see big things happening with the London property market. Make the most of it.

Peter says there's one snag. A sitting tenant. I'm sure he'll be able to advise you on how to get him out. I've enclosed Peter's card, if you need him.

I wish you and Karen all the best for Saturday. Jemma and I will raise a glass of champagne to you both as the sun sets over Camps Bay.

Nothing much else to say except good luck, I suppose.

Best,
Reggie/Dad

In August 1990, Reggie Dobbs came to the bitter conclusion that raising his only son had been a complete waste of his time, his money and his sperm. He still recoiled at the memory of what bearing this gigantic heffalump of a boy had done to his first wife's young, firm body and had never forgiven him for it. The enormous infant had continued to grow at a disgusting rate, six foot three at thirteen and thin as a streak of piss, useless at sports, covered in spots, not a pretty sight. Toby had inherited his model mother's height, but sadly not her looks. It was unnerving, craning your neck to look up into the ineffectual gaze of your gigantic son, looming over you like an overgrown bird of prey.

They'd sent him away to school at five years old and tried to make more babies, but none had come. And then Angela had died and Reggie had been stuck with this one son, a giant, a waste of space who claimed to be a 'poet'. Reggie said, 'Poet?! You look more like a teapot in that ridiculous hat!' But somehow, by some incredible stroke of luck, this strange boy of his had found himself a woman – a woman who was prepared to marry him. Not a beautiful girl, but then Toby should be grateful for what he could get.

He wanted to give them something, as he wasn't going to be a part of their lives, so he'd sat down with his accountant and concluded that his son was worth £75,000; £3,000 for every year of his life. He gave this money to his property broker and told him to get the best he could for it at auction.

And then he and his third wife slipped into the

first-class cabin of a 747 and flew to Cape Town, where another property broker was waiting for them with the keys to a penthouse apartment overlooking the Atlantic. Reggie didn't leave Toby a forwarding address or a telephone number. He just disappeared.

Reggie wondered about Toby from time to time, especially after the kids arrived. He wondered if Toby and Karen had had children, if he was a grandfather yet; he wondered if Toby was happy, if he'd managed to make a living out of writing his wretched poetry or if he'd grown up and taken responsibility for himself. He doubted it very much. But mostly he didn't think about Toby at all. Mostly Reggie just drank vodka, ate rich food, avoided his family and wondered when he was going to die.

2 September 1990

Dear Toby,

This isn't working. Marriage isn't what I thought it would be. I expected more, not just you and me and a smelly old man rattling around inside a big, damp old house without a penny between us. I think I've realized that I don't love you enough to live in penury with you. I thought I did, but I don't. I'm sorry that I didn't realize this earlier, but I think it took something dramatic like getting married to clear my head of my silly, over-romanticized view of you.

You're a good man, Toby, but you're not enough for me. Please don't hate me,

Karen xx

A ROOM OF YOUR OWN?

Finchley-based poet, unexpectedly alone in rambling Victorian mansion, has four big bedrooms to fill. Shared kitchen and bathrooms.

Rent negotiable, but reasonable.

Preference given to artists and performers.

Please write to tell me why you should live here.

November 1990

Dear Lonely Poet,

My name is Ruby Lewis, I am sixteen years old and I'm a singer. My mum threw me out last week because her ugly husband kept hitting me. Which was my fault, apparently. I'm staying with this man at the moment. He's thirty-two and he thinks I'm twenty. I don't really like him, but he lives in Camden which is really cool. Anyway – I'd really like to come and live in your house because it sounds really cool and because you sound really cool and because I can't afford to pay proper rent. One day I'm going to be the most famous singer in the world and then I'll buy you a Lamborghini to pay you back. Please let me live with you. You won't regret it.

Lots of love,

Ruby xxxx

April 2002

Dear Sir,

My name is Joanne Fish and I am an actress. I am thirty-one years old, single and currently living in New Cross. I do not have much experience of sharing houses, but I was attracted to your advert because I am currently at an interesting and unexpected juncture in my life – a crossroads. Your advert struck me like a neon sign on a long and circuitous journey. I realize you will have received a thousand responses to your advert and that the onus is on me to make myself appear more interesting and needful than the other nine hundred and ninety-nine, so I will try my best.

I have had an interesting life. I have lived abroad and in various corners of this country, including Luton (!) and the Isle of Man. I have had many jobs, from the sublime to the ridiculous. I once spent a summer sticking eyes on balls of fluff in a factory that produced promotional 'bugs'. I also once spent a summer helping a famous actress rehearse for a role whilst she was suffering from a mild case of amnesia. I am not what I would call a particularly gregarious person, but I do like the company of other people and that is why your home appeals to me so much. My flat is very well insulated and living alone I sometimes miss the noise of existence.

I am currently researching a role for a film that is due to begin filming at the end of the year. It is a small role but pivotal and the director is very well known. Unfortunately the project is top secret so I can't divulge any more information than that. It does mean that I will not be earning a regular salary until filming commences (although I will take on occasional temporary work) so the possibility

of being able to pay rent on an ad hoc, flexible basis could not have come at a more opportune moment.

I am also clean, tidy, reliable, polite and non-smoking.

I look forward to hearing from you.

*Yours, in good faith,
Joanne Elizabeth Fish*

February 2004

Dear Sir/Madam,

I have to admit I don't usually read the Private Eye but someone left it in the toilets at work so I thought I'd have a flick through and your advert caught my eye. Not for myself, you see, I'm a married man with three kids and a house in Hainault, but for my friend, Con.

Con works with me at Condé Nast. He's an assistant in the post room here, been working here for about a year now. He's a nice lad, a bit of a loner, but reliable to a fault. He's never had a day off. He's young, eighteen I think, and what's happened is that his mum's done a runner, bugged off to Turkey and left him alone. His grandmother raised him and then after she died the mum came back and promised him the world, rented some luxury flat for the pair of them and then two months later she bugged off again. Poor kid couldn't afford the rent on his own so he moved out, about a week ago. He was staying with a girlfriend for a while, I think, but then she kicked him out too. I don't know where he's living now but I can't help noticing he's not looking as sharp as he usually does. And he's getting that smell, you know, that sort of grime smell. I reckon he's sleeping rough. He gets the papers, looks at the ads for rooms but he can't afford anything decent, not on what he earns here. I've tried to persuade him to come home with me but he's too proud, and, if I'm honest, we haven't really got the room for him anyway.

I know your advert says you want creative people and Con's

not exactly that, but he is young and just starting out and this could be the moment in his life which makes or breaks him. When I was his age I got in with a bad crowd, lots of popping pills, taking speed, fighting, that kind of thing. Lucky for me I met Chrissie and fell in love. She showed me a better way to be, you know? She saved me.

Maybe you could save Con.

Hoping for your kindest and fullest consideration.

Yours faithfully,
Nigel Cadwallader

September 2004

Dear Toby,

It was lovely to meet you the other night. I just wanted to say thank you again, for what you've done for my Con. It fears me to think what might have happened to him if you hadn't taken him in and given him a room. You are a very good man.

The reason why I'm writing is that I'm in a bit of a bind. I won't go into too much detail, but suffice it to say that I'm going to be homeless too, not to mention unemployed, unless I find somewhere to live. Con said that he's happy for me to share his room, but he said I should write to you, officially, as you like to do things properly, which I totally respect. So, would it be OK if I shared with Con for a while? I'll pay you rent and it will only be for a few weeks, just until I get myself settled back in the country and get myself a job.

I really need to be near Con now, after what happened to him when I left the country. I feel so guilty and I've got so much to make up for. If you would allow me to spend some time with him in your beautiful house, I'd be forever in your debt.

Yours faithfully,
Melinda McNulty

I

Early mornings were the only time that Toby felt that his house belonged to him. Everyone was still sleeping. There was no imminent possibility of a key in the door, of footsteps down the stairs, of voices carrying through walls. It was just him, in his pyjamas, sieving flour into a bowl, tap, tap, tap, against the palm of his hand.

Toby made bread every morning. It was a ritual, something that Karen had done every day when they were together. The first morning after she left he'd come downstairs and immediately started pounding dough, desperate to re-create the scent of his failed marriage. He didn't even eat it any more, just left it on a cooling tray every day for his tenants to enjoy.

Toby had slept badly and his usual sense of melancholy was now overlaid by a thick blanket of tiredness. It was three days into the New Year and life had already fallen flaccidly back into place. He was still trapped in this mausoleum of a house, still surrounded by people he didn't know and didn't want to know. He was still married to a woman whom he hadn't seen since he was twenty-five. He was still an unpublished poet and he was still penniless.

A pile of bills sat on his desk upstairs, unopened and unpaid. Next to the pile of bills was a pile of rejection

letters from publishers and literary agents. And next to that was a letter from a local estate agent informing him that there were people queuing down the street, apparently, to buy a house like his and enclosing examples of houses the agent had sold recently for unseemly amounts of money. While Toby was grateful to them for alerting him to this fact, it was really of no possible use to him. Toby's house was full of people who had no intention of leaving and he had no intention of making them.

Toby finished making his dough and pressed it into a loaf tin, which he then slid into the Aga. He could hear the tinny drone of someone's radio alarm switching itself on upstairs and he headed quickly back towards his room, before he inadvertently crossed paths with anyone. He glanced at things as he passed through the house. A pair of Con's trainers sat under the coffee table in the TV room, with his socks curled up inside them like sleeping dogs. There was a copy of *Now* magazine on the arm of the sofa and a mug half full of blotchy tea on the floor. Ruby's black lacy cardigan was hanging from the back of the armchair and Joanne's Clarins face powder sat in a little plastic pot on the coffee table next to Ruby's cereal bowl. A small plastic Christmas tree with multicoloured fibre-optic tips twinkled forlornly in the early morning gloom. A pair of Ruby's pointy boots lay by the door, one upright, the other on its side, as if it had fallen over drunk. Toby picked up one of the boots and stared at it longingly.

This was his world, had been for years. A world of

other people's possessions, rhythms, dramas, smells and habits. His presence left no imprint on the dynamics of his home. It was as if he didn't exist. What would it be like to live alone, he wondered, to come home and find everything as he'd left it? To never have to take someone else's unwashed saucepan out of the kitchen sink to pour himself a glass of water, never to be woken up by the sound of someone else's snoring or someone else's lovemaking? To know people only as they presented themselves to the world, not to see the ragged, domestic underbelly of strangers any more. Would he feel more substantial? Would he feel more alive?

He climbed the two flights of stairs to his room, three at a time, and closed the door silently behind him.

Ruby watched Con leaving for work from her bedroom window. He moved with the slightly lolloping gait of a teenage boy in trainers. His dark hair was slick with product and his jeans hung somewhere short of his waist but not quite below his buttocks. He was a lovely-looking boy, clear-skinned, well proportioned with startling indigo eyes. But Ruby didn't find him attractive. She didn't appreciate younger men. She liked older men. Not *old* men, just men who were slightly used, a little creased, like second-hand books. In the same way that you might look at a small child and try to envisage their adult face, she liked to look at a mature man and imagine the young man who'd once inhabited his features.

'What are you staring at out there?'

Ruby turned and smiled at the man in her bed. Paul Fox. Her slightly creased forty-five-year-old lover.

'Nothing,' she teased.

She sat on the edge of her bed. One of Paul's feet was poking from the bottom of the duvet. She picked up his big toe between her thumb and forefinger, put it between her front teeth and bit down on it, hard.

'Ow.' He pulled his leg back under the duvet. 'What was that for?'

‘That,’ she said, ‘was for ignoring me last night.’

‘What?’ His brow furrowed.

‘You *know* what. Eliza walked in and suddenly it was as if you didn’t know me any more.’

‘Oh, Christ. Ruby – she’s my *girlfriend*.’

‘Yeah, I know. But it’s still not very nice, is it?’ Ruby and Paul’s relationship had always been an informal mix of occasional business and no-strings pleasure. He got her the odd support slot for one of his acts, they got together once or twice a week for sex or drinking or both, and he paid her what he jokingly referred to as a ‘salary’, a small monthly cheque, just to keep her ticking over, just to keep her in tampons and vodka, because he could afford to and because he wanted to. It was easy-come, easy-go, a bit of reciprocal fun that had worked for both of them for the past five years. Ruby didn’t expect anything more from Paul. But at the same time she couldn’t help feeling a bit gutted that Paul had failed to fall in love with her throughout their five-year relationship. And she couldn’t help feeling a bit cheated that six months ago Paul had fallen in love with a forty-two-year-old earth mother from Ladbroke Grove with two kids, her own business and a vineyard in Tuscany.

‘Look,’ sighed Paul, sitting up in bed, ‘I had no idea she was going to show up last night. She said she couldn’t get a babysitter –’

‘Sorry?’

‘She’d originally said she was coming to see the band and then her babysitter let her down and –’

‘And you invited me instead.’

‘Well, yes.’

‘Fucking charming.’

‘Jesus, Ruby –’

‘Jesus-Ruby-what? I’m sick of this. This whole thing is fucked.’

‘Ruby. Come on.’

‘No. I will not come on. You and I. We used to be equals. We used to be the same. But ever since you met Eliza it’s like I’m just some bit of crap who follows you around plugging the gaps in your life.’

‘That is *so* not true.’

‘And don’t talk like that. Like some American teenager. You’re forty-five years old. You sound *ridiculous*.’ Ruby winced inwardly as the words left her mouth. She was being a bitch, but she couldn’t help it.

She glanced at herself in the mirror. Ruby had an image of herself that she carried around in her head. It was an image of a smoky brunette with black eyes and creamy skin and a look about her as if she’d just had sex or was thinking about having sex. Generally speaking the mirror reflected back exactly what she expected to see. Every now and then it didn’t. This was one of those moments. Her make-up was smudged under her eyes. Sometimes when her make-up was smudged under her eyes it made her look sexy and dangerous. Right now it made her look tired and vaguely deranged. Her hair was dull and dirty – she should have washed it yesterday, but just couldn’t be bothered – and she had a big spot on her chin. She wondered what Eliza looked

like first thing in the morning and then realized that it didn't matter what Eliza looked like first thing in the morning because Paul was in love with her and to him she would look beautiful no matter what.

There was a knock at the door. Ruby breathed a sigh of relief and pulled her dressing gown together.

'Ruby. It's me, Toby.'

She sighed and opened the door.

'Hi. Sorry, I was just, er – oh, hi, Paul.' He peered over her shoulder and threw Paul a stiff smile.

Paul put up a hand and cracked an equally stiff smile. He looked silly, arranged between Ruby's marabou-trimmed cushions and fake leopard-skin throws with his big hairy chest and his mop of greying hair. Silly and like he didn't belong here. He looked, Ruby suddenly and overwhelmingly realized, like a silly handsome man having a silly adulterous affair. She gulped silently.

'Yes, I was just wondering about the rent. Just wondering if maybe you could give me a cheque today. It's just, there are some bills, and if I don't send a cheque by the end of the week, then, er, well, there'll be no hot water. Or heating. That's all.'

'Fine,' sighed Ruby, 'fine. I'll give you a cheque tonight.'

'Yes, well, you did say that last week, and you didn't. I haven't had any rent off you since the end of November, and even then it wasn't the full amount and –'

'Toby. I'll give you a cheque. Tonight. OK?'

'Right. OK. Do you promise?'

'I promise.'

‘Good. Right, then. See you. *See you, Paul.*’

‘See you, Toby.’

Ruby closed the door, and turned and smiled at Paul. He peeled back the cover and smiled at her invitingly.

‘Sorry, mate.’ She flipped the duvet back over his naked body and picked up an elastic band from her dressing table. She pulled her hair back into a topknot with it. ‘I’m not in the mood.’

Paul threw her an injured look. ‘Not even a quickie?’ he said.

‘No. Not even a quickie.’ She winked at him, softening the bluntness of her rejection. She wasn’t in the mood for another scene. She knew there was a Big Conversation waiting to happen, but she didn’t want to have it now. Right now she just wanted to have a shower. Right now she just wanted to feel clean.

Con pulled the glossy brochure out of the envelope and flicked through it impatiently, his eyes taking in the images a second at a time. Blue skies, palm trees, creamy beaches. But this wasn't a travel brochure. This was a brochure for the Right Path Flight School in Durban, South Africa. Con gazed at crop-haired men in icy white shirts and epaulettes, sitting in tiny cockpits lined with a thousand buttons and lights, knobs and levers, and felt a thrill of excitement. Then, before anyone could ask him what he was looking at, he slid the brochure back into the envelope and headed for the eighth floor.

The *Vogue* fashion department looked like a normal office. It had desks and computers and printers and wastepaper bins. It had a suspended ceiling and fluorescent lighting and phones ringing and fax machines chirruping. It looked like a normal office, but it absolutely wasn't.

Con partly relished the point in the day when he was called upon to push his trolley through the *Vogue* fashion department and partly dreaded it. He liked looking at the girls, rail-thin, delicate as wisps of smoke with their serious clothes and their perfect skin. He liked the

way they sat behind their desks, slender legs knitted together like vines, tap-tapping at their keyboards with lean fingers. He liked their flat, pointy shoes and their strange accessories, the scarves and rings and tiny cardigans, so different to the girls he knew from home. And he liked the way they talked, their husky Marlboro Light voices and the peculiar shapes they made out of ordinary words. They appeared to him like people from dreams – half-formed, semi-opaque, not quite human. They fascinated him. And they repulsed him. It annoyed him that they existed so separately to him. It wound him up that he could move through them with his trolley, invisible, even to the ugly ones. They passed him their packages and parcels; they asked him stupid questions about costs and timings; they addressed him only via pieces of paper.

In his world, outside the gilded gates of the Condé Nast building, Con was a player. He met his friends in the pub on a Friday night and girls, *good-looking* girls, shimmied around him, glanced against him, willed him to pay them attention. Here he was just the post boy.

One of these wraith-like girls approached him now, her hand clutching a large white Jiffy bag. She had fine blonde hair, the colour of rice paper, and pale waxy skin. She was wearing a biscuit-coloured suede waistcoat with a shaggy trim over a grey lace top. Her eyes were icy blue. Con had never seen her before.

‘Erm,’ she started, handing him the envelope, ‘this has to go recorded. Will it get there by Friday?’

Con took the package from her hand and examined

it. It was addressed to someone in South London. 'Yeah,' he said, 'should be OK.'

'Excellent,' she said. And then, miraculously, she smiled. Not one of the smiles that these well-brought-up girls usually served him with, not the practised co-ordination of facial muscles to force the mouth into an upturned crescent, but a proper burst of sunshine. 'Thank you,' she said, still smiling. 'Sorry . . . what's your name?'

Con felt a flush of surprise rise from his midriff towards his temples. He hesitated for a second, not entirely sure of the answer to that question. 'Connor,' he said eventually. 'Con.'

'Con,' she repeated, cocking her head slightly to one side. 'I'm Daisy.'

Daisy, he thought. Perfect. That's what she looked like. A colourless, uncomplicated flower, tiny and well formed. 'That's nice,' he said, feeling the heat of his embarrassment starting to fade.

'Thank you,' she smiled again. Her teeth were slightly crooked, but very white. 'My sisters are called Mimosa and Camellia. I must have been a very plain baby.'

Con laughed. He noticed a girl sitting at the desk nearest to him look up at the sound of his laughter. Her face registered a situation she didn't quite comprehend. She looked away again.

Daisy said, 'It's my first day today. I'm in charge of letters and things so you'll probably find me bugging you about stuff.'

Con shook his head. 'That's OK,' he said.

‘Good,’ she said. And then she went back to her desk.

Con dropped the white Jiffy bag onto his trolley and pushed it towards the doors at the far end. As he passed Daisy’s desk she looked up at him and grinned. She mouthed the word ‘Bye’ and waved at him. He waved back, his heart leaping around in his chest like a wild salmon.

As the door closed behind him and he found himself in the corridor outside, he breathed out and leaned against the wall. He tried to decipher what had just happened from the mixed messages his head and his heart were sending each other, but none of it made any sense. He had a curious feeling that something significant had just happened, that his life had reached a mini-roundabout, that suddenly he had options. And all because a beautiful girl called Daisy had smiled at him.

He pulled himself upright at the sound of the lift pinging and wheeled his trolley quickly towards the features department.