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Adele Parks

Tell Me Something X

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Tell Me Something
by
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I

I fell in love with Roberto twice.

The first time was twelve years before I met him.

I was on holiday with my parents in Padova, north Italy. I was fourteen, sulky, brooding and romantic. The second time was twelve years later, in a pub, in south-west London. He was watching a football match on the large screen. I was pulling pints. By then I was more gregarious and thoughtless but still astonishingly romantic.

Before Padova, holidays with my parents (and there was no other kind) had been limited to the British Isles. I grew up accepting that foreign holidays were something that everyone else did but, for me, they were out of the question.

My parents were a traditional pair and they were careful with their money. Both facts can be quickly explained and possibly excused if I tell you that my mother and father were forty-four and forty-nine respectively when the stork dropped me on their doorstep. Today they would not be considered horribly geriatric parents but back then they were regarded as such. Some of my mum's friends were grandmothers. Besides, they'd previously had two stork visits, nineteen and seventeen years earlier. My father always joked that the bird assigned to our family had no sense of direction or urgency and it had been late by about fifteen years. He maintained that he and my mother had always wanted three children and a little girl was

especially welcome; which was very kind of him although unlikely to be strictly accurate.

No one in my family can have been particularly overjoyed by my tardy arrival. My brothers, Max and Thomas, must have felt vaguely uncomfortable with this obvious proof that their parents still indulged in sex. No doubt both of them were happy to rush off to university as soon as feasibly possible in order to put distance between themselves and the whole messy business. It would have been quite reasonable for my parents to have assumed that the broken night's sleep and soiled nappies part of their lives was well and truly behind them, at least until grandchildren arrived. My father had just made partner at his accountancy firm and he was the captain of the golf club that year; both time-consuming, demanding roles. My mother had her bridge and now she had me.

Still, they made the best of it. I was healthy and my mother found pleasure in dressing me up in party frocks, something that had not been available to her while parenting Max and Thomas, obviously.

But family legend suggests I was not so much a bundle of joy, rather a bundle of trouble; a poor sleeper, picky eater and angry while teething. It wasn't a picnic. I grew up believing resentment silently slept with us all. I believed that their ideas were out-dated and overly fussy in comparison to other parents. My father played the oboe and called boys chaps. He often corrected my friends' use of the auxiliary verbs 'can' and 'may'. My mother was more embarrassing still, just because her exposure to my classmates was more regular.

She was not as pretty as all the other mothers who

clustered at the school gate. Her clothes, shoes and complete ignorance about who Paul Young was set her a generation apart. Looking back I can see that she was a careful and concerned mother but at the time I gave her no credit for this, only grief. She regularly invited my friends around for tea but refused to serve fish fingers or Angel Delight, as the other mums would. Instead she made huge stews and persisted in serving sprouts or cabbage. She had no idea. She also insisted on collecting me from the school gate even when I was at senior school. Sometimes, if I thought I could get away with it, I pretended she was my batty grandmother (a batty grandmother being infinitely more acceptable than an interfering mother) and I would join the other children in laughing at her sensible shoes and practical mackintosh before I was in her hearing range.

I was always vaguely embarrassed by my parents and I was ashamed of myself for being so, which in turn made me even angrier at them for being the source of my ugly emotion in the first place. They weren't draconian; they were just wrong. While the pocket money they gave me was slightly below class average, they (theoretically at least) allowed me to spend it on whatever I chose. But their obvious disappointment if I chose a *Jackie* comic and a stack of sweets rather than an edifying classic novel always diminished the pleasure of those treats. Clothes were an issue. I was twelve before I was allowed to own a pair of jeans, fifteen before I was allowed mascara (although I secretly applied it at school long before that), seventeen before I was allowed to have my ears pierced. OK, I'm looking back at these grievances from a wiser

age (just thirty-two) and I admit that my parents didn't exactly commit war crimes but, at the time, in my view, they might as well have done.

The main focus of contention was holidays. Other parents took their kids to Costa del somewhere or other or even (the pinnacle of cool) Disney in America. My classmates tried sticky liqueurs on holiday and spent their money on stuffed toy donkeys and jars full of coloured sand. Their sunbathing was injudicious and they often returned home with sore sunburnt limbs but exciting stories about flirtations with foreign boys to make up for the pain.

My parents were more interested in National Trust buildings than busy beaches. Their idea of a superb holiday was to hitch up the caravan to a site along the southern coast (preferably near a castle and a decent tea shop that sold a light sponge cake). I endured countless wet weeks watching my parents struggle with an Ordnance Survey map in an attempt to find the footpath that took us to yet another dull relic.

When I was fourteen it was my parents' thirty-fifth wedding anniversary, and Max and Thomas (who were already enjoying successful careers as a journalist and a doctor, respectively) thought that the anniversary was excuse enough to treat our parents to their first holiday abroad. My father had been to Germany to complete his National Service but my mother had only ever crossed the Channel to go to the Isle of Wight (terrific bird-watching, apparently).

My parents' reaction was guarded. Max spent hours drawing attention to the numerous places of historical and archaeological interest and Thomas calmed their fears

about drinking tap water or attacks from mosquitoes, and slowly my parents started to accept – and then finally enjoy – the idea. I was to be included in my parents' anniversary trip, as they would never have allowed me to stay at home under the supervision of my big brothers, let alone by myself. My reaction was one of unequivocal joy.

I got a paper round and began regularly baby-sitting for neighbours' kids, as I longed for a wardrobe boasting bikinis and shorts. I was thrilled at the idea of owning a passport. I pored over maps and guidebooks. I became silly with excitement when my father and I finally visited the bank to exchange our currency. I marvelled at the strange money and couldn't resist sniffing it. It felt warm and peppery; somehow promising and mysterious. Obviously, I had less interest in churches or art galleries than my parents and I was more focused on getting a tan, eating ice-cream and making eye contact with Italian boys. My targets were modest – I wasn't even expecting to speak to anyone other than the hotel receptionist – and still I was fizzing with the excitement of the adventure.

By some miracle our holiday managed to surpass even my lofty expectations. I delighted in everything strange, new and foreign. The duty-free shops at the airport seemed glamorous beyond compare and I coveted the enormous Toblerone bars that were not so freely available in UK supermarkets in those days. I was disproportionately pleased with the wet paper towels that the friendly air hostess doled out with free (*free!*) drinks of cola on the flight. From the moment the aeroplane doors swung open when we touched down and the sun slammed into the plane and cocooned me, I was in love.

I wasn't in love with the guy ushering us down the plane steps and towards the airport bus, or anything prosaic like that (although he was cute). I was in love with *Italy*. A wall of thick heat slapped on to my pale, gangly limbs and I wanted to sing because suddenly I felt at home.

I lived in a clean, functional house which groaned with healthy food, music practice and educational games. We were comfortably off. We had everything we could ever have needed but nothing that I wanted. We had fitted carpets, a microwave, hot water bottles, silver cutlery (that had been handed down to my parents from my mother's grandmother), but we did not have a TV in the sitting room (just a very tiny one tucked away in the spare bedroom, pulled out on special occasions); we had a piano, we had net curtains, for goodness sake; the very epitome of a middle-class British existence in all its insipid glory.

Suddenly I felt warm, colourful and impassioned. I'd never got excited about anything in my life until that point. Without a TV I had no idea who Duran Duran really were, and had faked a crush on 'the drummer' to blend in at school, but I couldn't have picked him out in a line-up of Thai lady boys. I did not excel at a particular sport or a subject. I was not the type of child to have found solace in books. My few friends were equally dull and ill-defined. We didn't even choose to be one another's

friends – we were sort of the left-over kids that no one really wanted to be pals with. I'd never had a boyfriend or even been kissed.

And suddenly there was Italy.

A country of warmth. A country that smelt of sweet, strong coffee. A country full of noise, chaos, chat and energetic and constant hand gestures. I was heartened by the abundance of flowers, festivals and flowing ribbons pinned to doors to announce the birth of a baby. It seemed to me that the Italians knew how to squeeze every ounce of juice out of life. And best yet – even better than the squeals of delight expelled from the kids chasing pigeons in the piazza – it seemed that every boy and man looked at me in a way that suggested I was interesting, appreciated and alive. In England my curly hair, fair skin and splattering of freckles were tragically unfashionable. But Italian men didn't seem to mind that I didn't sport a sleek, dark bob; quite the opposite.

My infatuation grew deeper and more serious with every espresso I gulped. For ten days as I wandered around the narrow medieval streets of Padova I did not feel the ghosts of Giotto, Dante or Petrarch, as my parents did; I felt the weight of appreciative glances from the city's Giovannis, Davidos and Paulos. While my parents discussed the beatific smiles great artists had given the Virgin and Jesus, I wallowed in the much more salacious smiles secretly bestowed on me by waiters and boys lounging outside souvenir shops. I was too shy to actually talk to anyone else, tourist or local, so for hours I licked ice-creams or drank coke and stared.

I watched the girls who giggled in gaggles yet managed to attain a level of sophistication that even the sixth-

formers I knew could only long for. Was it their high heels? Or the tight belts? Their thin wrists or mascara? I did not know. All I knew was that I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to join an enormous, noisy family for the *passeggiata* parade at five o'clock; it was marvellous that even something as simple as an evening stroll seemed to be a celebration. I wanted to buy cakes as a Sunday morning gift for my friends; cakes that were presented in a cardboard box, wrapped with cheerful ribbons. I wanted to live among ancient history and serious style. I wanted their sociability to be mine. I wanted to eat their food and to bask in their civic pride and cultural interests. I wanted to live in Italy. I wanted to be Italian. It was obvious what I needed to do. I would marry an Italian.

I came back to England with bagfuls of *Oggi*, the Italian equivalent of *Hello* magazine. I vowed to teach myself Italian from those glossy pages; it would do – at least until I could find a formal tutor. But, as my tan wore off, so did my keenness to self-teach. While I continued to nurture my passion for all things Italian in terms of food, style and coffee, I'm afraid I did nothing about actually learning to speak the language. I pushed the *Oggi* under my bed and they stayed there gathering dust for several years.

I did intend to study Italian at university, but my grade C at French GCSE didn't convince the necessary academic authorities that I had a talent for languages. The university admissions tutors were not in the least impressed when I tried to explain my motivation; apparently 'desire to marry an Italian' is not a compelling enough reason to be accepted on to a degree course. I

considered moving to Italy to teach English. I'd heard about a course where the teacher doesn't even have to know the native tongue but instead can teach students through full immersion; but then I discovered that getting this TEFL qualification would cost thousands, so I decided that my best bet was to work for a year or so and save up. Mum and Dad were devastated when I told them I planned to move to London. My father said he feared I'd drift. He repeatedly pointed out that my brothers had always been terrifically motivated and decisive and had never presented him or Mum with a moment's worry. I was also motivated and decisive, but it was impossible to explain as much to my father. I was certain that he, like the university admissions tutors, would not accept my ambition to marry an Italian as a legitimate career plan. Luckily, that year Max's wife, Sophie, presented Mum and Dad with another grandchild and Thomas got married to a scary paediatrician, Eileen MacKinnan, who impressed and bossed my parents in equal measures. They had plenty to keep them occupied.

When I got off the National Express coach I immediately headed to Covent Garden, where I knew there were enough authentic Italian bars and restaurants to allow me to pretend I was in the country that flew the tricolour. I told myself that it would do until I'd saved up enough money to actually go there. I quickly found work waiting tables and pulling pints, yet somehow I never managed to gather together the money necessary for the teaching course. One year drifted into the next and then merged into another, almost without my noticing. My father got to say 'I told you so' on an indecent amount of occasions. If I ever gave any thought to my just-out-of-grasp TEFL

qualification I reasoned that there was no particular hurry; there would always be Italians needing to learn English. I was happy as long as I earned enough money to buy fashionable shoes and handbags and pay the rent on a scruffy bed-sit in Earls Court which I shared with my friend Alison, a girl I met through one of the waitressing jobs.

Despite the ordinary jobs and the tiny, scruffy flat I remember my early twenties as marvellous years; it's criminal to do anything other. I may not have been committed to earning a TEFL qualification but I was still resolute in my vow to marry an Italian, and I soon discovered that there were plenty of Italian guys to date here in the UK; I didn't really have to have the upheaval and inconvenience of going abroad alone. I dated a series of Giancarlos, Massimos and Angelos. They did not disappoint. They flattered and were attentive; they fed me pasta and enormous compliments and I had a ball. Admittedly, sooner or later, they inevitably returned to Italy or the intensity burned out after only a few short weeks. This wasn't much of a problem; while I had a tendency to instantly fall in love with every one of these guys, I fell out of love relatively quickly too. I never allowed myself to be heartbroken for anything longer than a week. Alison called me shallow but I liked to think of myself as adjusted. I was aware that my youth was to be enjoyed and I saw so many girls wasting night after night crying into their pillows because of some guy or other. Ridiculous! There were always plenty more *pesce* in the *mare*.

Alison suggested that I try to date men who were more likely to stay in the country but she was missing the point. I was spoilt for life and found it disappointing to date

anyone other than Italians. I didn't even want to. I did try, once or twice, but what came after was always *after*. English men simply didn't know about intense stares. They became tongue-tied when issuing compliments. By comparison, their dress sense was poor. Tailored shirts versus saggy football tops, reciting poetry or the words of some dated *Monty Python* sketch, drinking champagne out of my shoe or necking lager out of pint glasses; there was no competition.

So eight years passed, filled, but not punctuated, by a blur of intense but short-lived love affairs. Maybe I *was* shallow, or maybe I was perfectly average. I don't know. I just had a type.

Then Roberto walked into my bar and my life.

I watched him watching the football match on the TV screen. Even before he said a word it was instantly clear to me that he was Italian (his shoes shone and he was wearing a pink shirt with a confidence that eludes English blokes); besides, he had a unique energy and appetite that seemed to ricochet through the bar and then ping right into my being. I watched as he cheered his team when they made a decent pass, as he pulled at his hair when they let a goal slip through, as he hugged his friend with delightful, firm enthusiasm when his team equalized – and I was mesmerized.

The excitable and exciting stranger seemed to sense I was watching him. He turned and caught me undressing him with my eyes. I wondered whether he knew I was projecting way past the first carnal encounter, down the aisle and straight into the maternity hospital. I was defenceless; his deep, dark eyes stripped me of any ability I had to feign indifference. I fought my instinct to reach

out and stroke his glorious bronzed skin. I wanted to run my hands over his well-defined and athletic body. While not especially tall, everything about his presence seemed purposeful and powerful. His being in the bar made me feel strangely safe and excited all at once.

He pulled himself away from watching the football and came over to where I was standing behind the bar. Alison would probably have described him as swaggering, I saw a saunter. He leaned close enough for his citrus cologne to drift into my consciousness.

‘I take a beer and, you too, if you are available,’ he said. He held my eye, and despite my best intention of dragging my gaze away from his, I found I could not. Did he mean he wanted to buy me a beer? Did he mean he wanted to take me somewhere? Could he mean he wanted to take me sexually? Could he possibly be being so brazen? I hoped so.

‘Where would you take me?’ I asked choosing to understand his comment to mean more than an offer of a beer.

‘Wherever you want. To a restaurant. To a movie. To a new sort of ecstasy.’

He dropped the last suggestion with indecent aplomb and waited for my response with a cool confidence. I should have been offended or outraged. At the very least I should have *pretended* to be one of those things; instead I offered my phone number.

‘No. I won’t take your number,’ he said firmly.

‘You won’t?’ Suddenly I was embarrassed. Had I got it completely wrong? Had I misheard him? Had I imagined the chemistry which was zinging between the two of us? Had the lethal dart of attraction just struck me?

‘I wait here with you until your shift is finished.’

‘But that’s five more hours,’ I objected gently, grinning, not trying to hide my amusement.

‘I have forever. I know you are worth the wait. If you give me a number, I call, you might have met another man by that time. I can’t risk it. Rather I wait for you. I must not let this go. I sense it is important.’

I had heard similar before. Italians are prone to this sort of impassioned announcement – it’s one of the things I like about them. But I had never felt such chemistry before. Roberto’s presence made my throat dry. He’d detonated a bomb of unprecedented excitement. I felt sparkling shafts of exhilaration shoot and spread through my body. Lust lodged in my skull. Desire drenched my innards. Longing shuddered down every nerve in every limb.

The bar rapidly receded. I didn’t care if there were customers to serve or crisps to fetch from the storeroom. Suddenly there was only me and this Italian man; everything other was a dull, sludgy irrelevance.

We cleaved to one another for the following five hours. By turn we chatted, laughed and silently stared at one another. He told me of his love of fast cars and football. He introduced two or three of his pals but I could barely harness their names to my memory, as he was all-consuming and everything other was less. He told me that he’d only been living in England a week but already had an interview for a job in an advertising agency in Soho.

‘And your family?’ I probed.

‘My family have a business in the wine trade,’ he said simply; then he sipped his beer in a manner which suggested he found the turn in the conversation difficult.

‘A vineyard, how amazing.’ I imagined rows of green vine things, like soldiers in the sunshine.

He shrugged. ‘Not really. Quite normal.’

I could not comprehend how he could describe running a vineyard as normal. It must be the most romantic thing in the world. I assumed he was attempting to be modest. I wondered if they still crushed grapes by stamping in them. Probably not, some European regulation doubtless prevents it, but maybe they still celebrated festivals by producing wine through the traditional methods. The Italians are big on festivals. Not that I was sure that I’d actually want to feel grapes oozing through my toes. I’m not really that earthy. Worse yet, someone else’s toes. Yuk. It’s enough to send you teetotal.

He sighed. ‘Actually, I have come to England after terrible argues with my family. I need to prove myself. Make career here.’ I admired his independent spirit and didn’t need to ask for any detail on the nature of the arguments as he added, ‘Sometimes families are stifling. I need to be away from my family for a time. You understand?’ I nodded enthusiastically. Yes, yes, I understood. I understood everything about this man. ‘I think you really do,’ he said with a gravelly voice that shook with sincerity.

A sincerity that transcended all that had gone before.

I was a smug bride. We married within six months of meeting one another. My parents thought that was a little hurried but I pointed out that *they'd* only known each other for three months before they got engaged. Mum tutted and said things were different 'in her day', plus they'd had a two-year engagement. Privately I believed that Mum must have had time to waste or perhaps tiny doubts about my father which needed relieving; I had neither time nor doubts so didn't see a need for a lengthy engagement. Alison hinted that we might be in lust rather than love but I dismissed her cynical insinuations with a giggly laugh; secretly I pitied Alison for not having experienced such a glorious free-fall. By default my father was the most encouraging of our speedy nuptials; his only comment being that maybe if I married I'd finally start thinking about a *real* job. He never missed an opportunity to let me know that he didn't think working behind a bar was a particularly admirable way to fill the day.

My father was right, I was thinking about a real job: a series of *bambini* – one popped out straight after the next. I did not want to be an old mum, like mine had been, and while I had two siblings the age gap was such that I might as well have been an only child. I wanted a bursting, boisterous house full of kids. I didn't bother telling my folks that, they'd only have worried about whether Roberto's relatively junior job in advertising would bring

in an adequate salary to support a family. Since everyone seemed intent on worrying and finding fault with our union I didn't want to add fuel to the fire. I abhorred the lack of romance in my nearest and dearest. That's why Roberto was so perfect for me. We were both very romantic and impetuous. We recognized and admired each other's daring souls.

To me, it was delightfully simple. We were desperately, totally, firmly in love. He, like all Italians, adored my curly blonde hair and freckles. He couldn't keep his hands off me and his constant physical attention seemed to have a material effect on my body. My tits seemed fuller and more responsive; Roberto only had to walk into the room and my nips seemed to spring to attention like rookie soldiers in the presence of an officer. My waist appeared tighter, my stomach flatter. I existed in a constant state of heightened sexuality. He was charmed at the way I pronounced 'mobile' and 'potato', he liked it that I could explain English humour to him and he loved the way I smiled all the time. He didn't mind that I didn't have an impressive degree or job. He found my obsession with all things Italian charming, flattering. He agreed that I'd make a great mum. Everything about me delighted him, nothing about me irritated him. And it was so lovely to be so thoroughly approved of.

And for my part, I simply adored Roberto. He was the embodiment of everything I'd long dreamed of. I was mad about his voice (sort of huskily heartfelt but not cheesy). I worshipped his eyes, which always focused on me, and I loved his shoulders and back, which seemed strong and perfectly in proportion to his waist. His feet were neat. His cheekbones just the right side of angular.

His clothes were immaculate and his hair was glossy to the point where I found it a trial not to stretch out and touch some part of him every time we were in the same room. He was everything I'd ever fantasized about. Loving him was easy.

We married in the UK, which was not in fact my dream. I wanted to get married in Italy. I saw myself click-clacking through a piazza in a flowing white gown and high heels. I'd be holding Roberto's hand and giggling as we led the wedding party to a stupendous *trattoria* for the enormous wedding breakfast. Onlookers would cheer and clap, wish us well and throw rice. We'd drink fine wines and eat for hours. Then we'd dance in the street, the evening would be warm long after the sun had gone down. Except Roberto pointed out that I'm not Catholic and in those days there were requirements that had to be met in terms of instruction classes, etc. if I wanted to marry in a Catholic church. It wasn't practical for us both to leave our jobs for months before the wedding just to attend instruction classes. Besides, I couldn't speak the language (I kept meaning to take lessons but never found the time) and the service would be in Italian or even Latin.

The matter was settled when my father started to suffer from seizures thanks to his dicky heart. The seizures were mild and he was probably well enough to travel, but somehow I couldn't see him dancing in the streets and struggling to communicate in Italian with his new in-laws at seventy-five years old. I figured (or actually Roberto reasoned) a more sedate Church of England wedding in my parents' local village church was the most realistic option. I knew Roberto was being the perfect son-in-law by putting Dad's health first and so I could

hardly stubbornly hang on to my dream. I comforted myself with the thought that we could have the children baptized in Italy and we could parade through a *piazza* then.

I was surprised so few of Roberto's family could make it to the wedding. His father had died when Roberto was fourteen, but his mother was still living with her very elderly father and Roberto's sister, Paolina. Apparently the row that had caused Roberto to come to England and pursue a career independent of his family's business could not to be forgotten in just six months. Around the time of our engagement Roberto made a number of calls to his mother. Even without a degree in the Italian language I understood from his tones that Roberto begged and cajoled his mother to come to our wedding. To no avail.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and tried to comfort him.

'Maybe we should wait until you and your mother sort this thing out before we get married,' I offered, although secretly dying at the idea of delaying the wedding for a single moment.

'Pointless,' said Roberto. He didn't elaborate and I didn't pursue.

Still, I had expected a host of aunts and uncles, cousins and godparents to attend. Italians *do* family, don't they? None came. They pleaded the lack of notice as an excuse, but I suspected Roberto's row with his mother had sent shockwaves through the family. I pretended to accept their excuses at face value rather than force Roberto into another tricky confrontation. For all the hours we'd spent talking about just about every subject under the sun in the previous six months, I'd never found the right time

to probe into the exact nature of the 'stifling' family or the need to be away from them. Roberto had assumed I understood. An urgency for gory detail would somehow taint that assumption of connection. I chose to leave well alone. It would all come out in the wash, eventually. I didn't have to concern myself. Thank goodness, four or five of Roberto's Italian friends did come to the wedding; most brought wives and multiples of children, so his side of the church didn't look too stark in the end.

Some brides say that their wedding day did not meet their expectations. Perhaps the stress and hype just proves too much. Not me; my day was blissful. I loved every moment from dawn to dusk and beyond. My hair gleamed, my husband was handsome, my dress flattering. The flowers were fragrant, friends delighted, relatives sober. It was perfect. As I stepped down the church steps I took a deep breath. Perhaps it's just because the air in the Midlands is cleaner than in London, but I swear that I breathed in a pungent smell of possibility and I whispered to myself, 'Bring it on. Happily ever after, here I come.'

4

When I close my eyes and think of the happily ever after shebang, there are at least a dozen plump *bambini* in the picture but our happily ever after has not produced offspring with thick dark curls and velvet eyes. Nor any other type, come to that.

I'd be a good mother. I know I would. I love babies, *all* babies. I've never come across one that I didn't think was just one hundred per cent adorable. I don't even mind if they are screaming, smelly or ugly. In fact I don't accept that there are ugly ones (although Alison swears there isn't any other kind) – I think there are just some that haven't grown into their looks yet. *And* I adore kids. Lots of women like babies but not kids – or the other way round – but I don't mind. I like them when they are tottering or tearing about. When they are lisping their first few words or when they are incessantly repeating the latest catch phrase from some awful cartoon. I even like teenagers. I just want a family. A noisy, messy, demanding, *big* family. It's what I've wanted. Isn't the *passeggiata* parade at five o'clock with said noisy, messy, demanding, *big* family part of the Italian deal?

And Roberto is an ideal dad candidate, too. He also likes kids – Italians do, don't they? And as he is patient, kind and fun – all my friends' kids *love* him.

We've been trying for years, in fact we've always tried, right back from our very first carnal encounter, which

might have been a tad irresponsible but at the time responsibility was not on my mind. The physical attraction between the two of us was so absolute that we got naked within about six hours of first clapping eyes on one another and pretty much stayed that way until I had to get up to put my wedding dress on. But still no babies.

Everyone knows someone who can't get pregnant. It's the latest epidemic, but its common or garden nature does not make the situation any less heartbreaking; I think it makes it more so. Sympathy is exhausted. Hearing that a couple are struggling to conceive (I'm very careful with the use of the word infertile) is a bit like hearing that a kid has food allergies. You're sympathetic but also slightly sceptical. I mean, there were no food allergies when we were kids, were there? Isn't it possible that food allergies are a modern paranoia? And childlessness the same.

I've read every article that has ever been written on the subject. I know that the decrease in childbearing is because women are now taking responsibility for contraception (already explained that this is not my case) or that they have selfishly put their careers before their family life (what career?) or that they have delayed too long because they were constantly at the hairdresser's or the beautician's or some other hopelessly indulgent pursuit (not true, not true!). The only conclusion I can reach is that I really ought to buy a different newspaper; something less misogynist would be nice. Other articles suggest that it might be the filthy Thames water lowering the sperm count, but Roberto drinks mineral water. Or the eight hours a day that he spends in front of a laptop might be to blame. Apparently something nasty is emitted and is gnawing at his manhood, but the guy at the desk next to

his has four kids, including twins. It might be additives in convenience food (bad wife, lazy wife) or it might be our stressful lifestyles, but we are not a stressy couple, at least, we weren't.

Or it could just be bad luck.

It turns out it's just bad luck.

We've had all the tests. After two years of not conceiving we started the battery of examinations that many couples endure in order to discover why they aren't being blessed with a bundle. Poor Roberto – neither of us particularly enjoyed the experience but I always think men find medical intrusion much harder to bear. I'm not saying I enjoyed peeing into pots, giving blood and handing over all sorts of bodily samples but at least I'd had years of smear tests to erode my dignity by way of preparation. Before our fertility tests the most intrusive thing a doctor had ever done to Roberto was tap his knee to test his reflexes.

There's no need for me to go into exactly what we had to tolerate; as I said, everyone knows someone who has endured this modern torture. Everyone knows it's embarrassing, heartbreaking, painful, soulless and ultimately – for us at least – inconclusive. It turns out there's nothing wrong with either of us. When I first heard this I was delighted. If there was nothing wrong then we must be all right. We were told to take a holiday and have more sex. Naturally, we were happy to follow doc's orders. But after another year of going at it like rabbits and still no baby it dawned on me that being told there was nothing wrong with either of us was disastrous. If there was nothing wrong, how could we be fixed? And we did need fixing.

We returned to the doctors and asked for more tests. We wanted to know what our choices were; we wanted more options. We were given an explanation that under other circumstances would have been almost funny. Ultimately, after prolonged consultations with a large number of experts, the diagnosis they settled on was ‘unexplained infertility’.

‘What exactly does that mean?’ asked Roberto. He didn’t bother to hide his irritation and frustration. I took his hand in mine and gently squeezed. I wanted him to remain polite with the doctor. I wanted the doctor to know we were good and nice people who *deserved* a baby. I thought that showing any irritation might jinx us.

The doctor sighed and said, ‘Unexplained is exactly that. It’s self-explanatory.’ He shrugged apologetically. ‘Physically there’s nothing stopping either one of you conceiving a child. Elizabeth is ovulating on time. Your sperm count is fine. There’s no sign of tube damage or endometriosis. Everything is in order. You’re a healthy young couple.’ He pushed his glasses further up his nose and looked doubtful. ‘Thirty per cent of infertility is unexplained.’

‘That is ridiculous,’ snapped Roberto. ‘There must be more you can do.’

The doctor shrugged. He looked as tired and worn as we did. I wanted him to reassure and encourage, like some sort of sports coach, but I got the feeling that he knew we were dropping down the fertility league tables and he couldn’t brook our relegation. He sighed.

‘We could run a test and see if Elizabeth’s vaginal fluids repel your sperm, that’s often the answer in cases such as this.’

If he was intending to be more specific about exactly what this test would entail or whether he could offer us a treatment depending on the results of the test, he wasn't given the chance. Roberto leapt from the chair as though someone had put thousands of volts through it, grabbed my arm and dragged me from the surgery.

Out on the street it suddenly seemed miserably cold. An autumn wind scratched my skin and I watched leaves and litter skittering across the road. The doctor's ugly words stood on the pavement with us, more real than the longed-for pram with a chubby baby inside. Roberto swore, repeatedly and in Italian. He kicked a discarded, crushed can and then a wall. For a split second I wondered if he wanted to kick me or at least my hideous repelling juices.

'*Va fanculo stupido* doctor,' he muttered time and time again. 'He know nothing. *Nothing.*' Roberto finally dragged his eyes to mine. He stopped cursing and pulled me to his lips. The swearing and blaspheming was swallowed as he kissed me passionately. He flagged a cab, bundled me into it and gave our home address. I didn't realize I was crying until the tears splashed on to my hands, which were folded on my lap. I guess I was practising self-restraint. If my hands were free to flay I might have caused myself harm. What good was I? What was the point of me? Roberto resumed the muttering and vicious swearing and maintained it at a ferocious level for the entire journey. We were, most likely, terrifying. We must have been, because even the cabbie (normally an irrepressible breed) did not dare to pass bigotries or pleasantries.

We were barely through the door before Roberto started loosening his belt and pulling up my skirt. He

yanked down my knickers and entered me almost immediately. We had sex on the stairs; urgently and angrily he rode me hard and fast. The sweat ran down his back and slipped between his buttocks. I clasped him tightly and tried to ignore the friction burns that were developing on my shoulders and elbows. He thrust over and over again, as though he was chasing something. Perhaps he wanted to go deeper than ever before. Perhaps he sought to be nearer than ever before. It was clear he thought that he was battling my murderous juices. His needy rutting was not exciting or fulfilling, it was desperate. It put me in mind of Alice chasing the crazy White Rabbit. *I'm late. I'm late.* I heard him repeatedly mutter the names of saints. He sometimes did this to delay orgasm, which I'd always thought sweet and amusing. I liked the fact that he found me so desirable he had to employ particular techniques to prolong our pleasure. That day I listened carefully and soon realized that this time he wasn't trying to counter the carnal by thinking holy thoughts; he was praying.

'This time, please God,' he whispered. Roberto and I locked eyes. His face was swimming through my tears. He kissed the wetness from my cheeks. 'This time please God. *We need* this baby.'

After he came he collapsed on to me. His body, a dead weight, desperate to make a new life. He lay still for some moments before he summoned the energy to struggle to stand. Still in his socks, with his trousers around his ankles, he impatiently kicked his clothes away and then carried me, like a new bride, to our bedroom.

There, we made love slowly and carefully for the entire afternoon. He kissed and caressed me, as though he was trying to wipe away the doctor's filthy words. With each

stroke he tried to ease the misery of our uncooperative bodies and ward off the desolate thought of a childless future. His touch patched me and comforted me for brief seconds at a time and – when I let my self-hate recede – his touch excited me.

He expertly eased me from one position to the next, leaving me feeling delicate and ladylike (not true – I'm reasonably sturdy and solid); he appeared powerful and controlling. It was brilliant of him to know that I needed to feel feminine and he needed to feel masculine. The months of tests had eroded those roles and the doctor's words had desexed us in a final fatal blow.

He slowly took off the remainder of my clothes and his. He made a long, lingering trail of kisses up and down my body. He'd always been a conscientious and careful lover but that day he took us to a new level. He cupped my breasts as though he'd never held them before. He trailed his fingers along my spine and over my buttocks. He seemed to anticipate where I needed to be touched next and the pressure I required him to apply. Moaning softly, roving leisurely, so gently, as though he had all the time in the world to spend on me, his long fingertips finally provoked, and tugged, and spun me into overdrive. He made me feel wanted, needed. Thrilled and thrilling. I came and then came again. With each wave of orgasm we hoped, wished and prayed that we were creating. We wanted to believe that the doctor's hateful analysis could be willed away, that if we loved long enough, deep enough and hard enough we'd make a life. It was the best sex we'd ever had or certainly had since. It felt clean, purposeful and important. I felt passionate, consumed and joyful.

But there was still no baby.