

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Loving Roger

Tim Parks

Contents

Cover

About the Author

Also by Tim Parks

Dedication

Title Page

Loving Roger

Copyright

About the Author

Born in Manchester in 1954, Tim Parks moved permanently to Italy in 1980. Author of novels, non-fiction and essays, he has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and Llewellyn Rhys awards, and has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His works include *Destiny*, *Europa*, *Dreams of Rivers and Seas*, *Italian Neighbours*, *An Italian Education* and *A Season with Verona*.

Also by Tim Parks

Tongues of Flame

Home Thoughts

Family Planning

Goodness

Cara Massimina

Mimi's Ghost

Shear

Europa

Destiny

Judge Savage

Rapids

Cleaver

Dreams of Rivers and Seas

Non-fiction

Italian Neighbours

An Italian Education

Adultery & Other Diversions

Translating Style

Hell and Back

A Season with Verona

The Fighter

For Rita

Loving Roger

Tim Parks



Mandarin

Roger lay on my new blue rug in the corner by the television and the lamp that seemed like it always had the funny orange bubbles rising in it that he hated. But I went to work just as usual. I made myself the regular cheese and ham sandwich and took the baby up to Mrs Duckworth for the day and she didn't notice anything odd about me, I don't think. The only thing I did different was to snap on the security lock in case Mrs D got it into her head Bobby needed a change of clothes or in case she picked too many flowers in the garden and decided to give the extras to me. Because Mrs D has a copy of the Yale key to my front door.

I washed my hands carefully, made my sandwich and went out, snapping on the security lock which is an Ingersoll with two great barrels that spring into two deep holes. Roger used to laugh at me for being scared. He used to say I had a mind full of terrors and that was why I dug my nails into other people and clung onto them. I took the baby upstairs, gave Mrs D her £20 for the week and went to catch the bus.

I went to work because I thought it would calm me down, compose me, and then in the evening, after the last letter was typed and sent and my desk was clear, after the typewriter was covered and all the little objects you have to use every day, paperclips and sellotape and the like, were all arranged perfectly square along the top edge the way Mr Buckley insisted when he did his rounds, like he always would, then, I thought, I would go and tell somebody (I didn't know who, the Samaritans maybe, or Mum's vicar who said he would never throw the first stone - but it would be the police in the end) - tell them how it had been between us, Roger and me, and why he was on the rug in the corner by the TV under that nice lamp he always sneered at and called working-class taste because of the wonky orange bubbles that floated up and down and were corny, he said. He said, 'You wet your pants for the obvious, don't you? And it's the same with relationships. You eat your little heart out to have one of those obvious relationships

you see on TV or read about in your saga books.’ Because while I was pregnant I’d read *The Thorn Birds* and *The Far Pavilions*.

And I said, ‘Oh Roger, I love you, you know I do.’

Anyway, I couldn’t not go to work on a Friday, not even in these circumstances. Because Friday was the busiest. There was a notice in our room, the girls’ room, and it said, ‘You can be ill any day but Friday,’ and when Mr Buckley showed new recruits round the building he used to point out the notice and smile and say, ‘Ill on Friday, crucified on Monday.’ Friday was the end. And with Roger not being there it would be worse than ever.

I was curious to see what the office would be like without Roger, and I needed a day to compose myself before I went to talk to people. Otherwise I would be confused before I started and they would confuse me even more with their questions and I would be all jitters and tears like I am sometimes and I wouldn’t have made sense out of it at all. Roger said it was bloody stupid this thing I had about making sense out of things; he said all I wanted was to find explanations that would fit into my small mind. But if you can’t make sense out of it when there’s someone you love and hate together so much that you did what I did, then what can you make sense out of in the end? Nothing.

I said ‘Nothing’ to myself out loud at the bus-stop and the little Indian inspector who’s always there with his pencil behind his ear said, ‘Doesn’t get any better, does it?’ I smiled at him. I never have any trouble smiling. Even when I’m in a panic.

‘Snarled,’ he said brightly. ‘Far as Uxbridge.’

There were about twenty of us jammed under this shelter watching water trickle from the edges.

‘And all the way in to Marble Arch.’

The inspector tapped the little transistor he had in his breast pocket with a grim smile, but nobody wanted to talk. They all had papers they were trying to keep from getting

sodden while they read about eight more pence on a gallon of petrol. I thought, if I'd ever learnt to drive like Roger was always telling me I should, I'd have been able to take his car and drive it in and put it in the space reserved for executives. I could have saved myself the bus fare.

He has a Passat, Roger. A Volkswagen Passat, diesel. Because he says he doesn't want to have a Ford like everyone else. It was a big thing for him that, not being like everyone else. Steering clear of the crowd, he said. Making sense of things, on the other hand, was not important.

Unless I hadn't understood somehow.

We crawled along on the bus through drizzle down the Uxbridge Road and then when the conductor came I found I hadn't brought any money with me. I was in such a state rummaging through my handbag with the young black next to me watching amused and the conductor whistling and opening and closing a big handful of tenpenny pieces - I was in such a state, I thought for a moment I was going to scream. I scrabbled in my bag. There was a pile of dirty tissues, my cross with the broken chain, tampons, make-up, used bus tickets and a gas bill, but no purse.

The conductor said, if I gave him my name and address, London Transport would send me the bill in the post.

'But I'm just about to move house,' I said.

Then the post would forward the bill, he said. He stood over me, opening and closing his hand very quickly, so that the tenpenny pieces snapped together with a sharp click like the sound of my Ingersoll security lock. He was a big Irishman with red veins in his face and he was impatient because the bus was filling and emptying all the time and him with all those fares to take.

'Write down your address, love,' he said moving on. 'Think of it as free credit. Could be a century before you pay. No interest.'

I thought of that bill popping through the letter box a century later and the smell of Roger coming out, like the

smell when I worked in the hospital and the porters wheeled the trolleys down to the morgue. So then I got up and pushed past everybody off the bus and out into the drizzle and I walked the last half-mile to the office, because rain has never bothered me, and even if I caught a cold it wouldn't matter particularly at this point I didn't think.

I walked slowly because I couldn't find it in me to hurry and when I got to the car showroom, I don't know why, I stopped and looked at the Jaguar XJ they had there that Roger always used to stop and look at and once when he was in one of his good moods he had dragged me in and made me sit in the passenger seat with Bobby on my lap, while he played with the gears and made brum-brum sounds through his lips. On the showroom window it said, Best of British, Best Bargains, but the glass was wet with drizzle and the XJ was no more than a silver smear turning slowly from one side to the other on the big revolving podium they have. I wondered a moment if he and I would still have been friends at the point when he would finally have saved up enough money to buy the thing, or whatever new model there was on the market then, and whether he would have taken me for rides in it and even let me drive it, if I had learnt to drive like he kept persuading me to; or whether I would always have been restricted to the Mini he said he would help me buy if and when I got my licence: so that I would be more independent, he said, and could get out more and be happy, instead of moping so much at home like a wet rag and relying on him for transport. 'The trouble with you is you *want* to rely on me,' he said, and he said it was shameful for one person to actually want to rely on another. It was like hanging a lead weight round their necks.

* * *

I was late. More than half an hour.

Jackie said, 'Good evening, your highness.'

Wendy said, 'Late Monday to Thursday, venal; late Friday, mortal. Confess yourself, sinner.'

She has been to university, Wendy, and after another few months or so they will move her up to Design or Marketing and they'll find somebody new for typing. She is very thin and academic-looking with no more breasts than I had before I had the baby and when she speaks to Mr Buckley or Salvatore she holds her head high, keeps her lips stretched thin and tight and talks to them like equals, and you can see Mr Buckley likes that. You can see he thinks she's going to be the bee's knees in his department when he's got rid of Jonathan; if he manages it, that is, before Salvatore snaps her up in Marketing. She's never flustered like me and she's never jolly-jolly and flirty like Jackie, but she doesn't type half as well as us either. She makes five or six mistakes every page and her fingertips are always covered in white-out. She says her mind is too active to be a good copy-typist.

'You look like a drowned rat,' Jackie said brightly, puffing alight a cigarette.

My hair was soaking. I sat down behind my desk and took the cover off my typewriter.

'You didn't get out of bed the wrong side again?'

'And bang into the wall?'

They typed while they spoke with cigarettes in their mouths, so there was no need to reply. The smoke curled up and hung stale under fluorescent tubes. I found the first letter, which was from Mr Buckley, smoothed it out and read it. Then, when I laid my fingers on the keyboard, I saw there was something wrong. My nails were full of dry blood. I closed my eyes.

Nobody had said anything about Roger yet.

After about five minutes Salvatore came flying in, hands full of papers, all bounce and energy, which was supposed to make us feel more like working. He dropped the papers on my desk and rubbed his hands together so that you

could see his cufflinks flashing gold. 'My little lost soul!' he cried. 'Here at last! My favourite dattilographer.'

He's the company clown, Salvatore, and everybody hates him and loves him at the same time, excepting Mr Buckley who only hates him. Ever since the first day I set foot in this office he's always called me 'my little lost soul'.

'Roger doesn't seem to be here today, so I've to take all the typesetting calls as well. Busy, busy, busy now!'

'You won't catch me squeezing a tear for you,' Jackie said.

Then Salvatore said jokingly to Wendy, did she, by any particular chance, happen to know where the great Mr Cruikshank might be, because everybody knew Wendy had a bit of a crush on Roger and she said very primly, no, she had no idea. Salvatore started to laugh, still rubbing his brown hands together, and I thought, Roger's in my bedsit, stretched out on my new blue rug by the television; and I thought how, if it had happened in his own room instead, or pad as he used to call it when he came back from America, then I wouldn't have had to go and tell anybody about it.

Because nobody knew anything about me and Roger. Nobody was going to ask me if I knew where Roger was. Nobody knew anything at all.

The phone rang then in Salvatore's office, which was next door, and he threw up his arms saying God save us from Fridays, only you could see he liked it really.

Then after five, maybe ten minutes, Jackie said very kindly, 'What's wrong with you, love? You look moonstruck this morning.'

So I told them I was pregnant again.

Wendy didn't say anything.

'Are you sure?'

I said yes.

'And who's the father this time?'

'Same bloke.'

Jackie was really outraged then. She asked me if he still wouldn't marry me and I said no, he wouldn't, he wouldn't

even live with me, but it wasn't his fault. He just wasn't that sort of bloke in the end. He wasn't cut out for being someone's husband. I tried to be really offhand about it and opened my top drawer for the chewing gum I keep there, but there wasn't any left.

'Bugger him and what kind of man he is!' Jackie said, leaning her heavy breasts at me over her typewriter. She has huge breasts, Jackie, too big even to envy. 'I'd bloodywell kill him if I were you!'

And I said, 'I have.'

* * *

To make sense of things, if you can, you start at the beginning, and that must have been the day Salvatore poked his head round our door and said would one of us girls go and show the new typesetting exec all round all the offices, and the other two made me go because they were too busy and they knew I was shy and probably thought it was a laugh to make me go. There was no Wendy in the office then, but another, older woman called Beatrice who had a posh voice and once, apparently, she used to read things out on the BBC, the radio, only she'd left to get married and now, ten years after, she was so bored she'd decided to go back to work for a bit. Her hours were different from everybody else's, ten in the morning to four, so I suppose her husband must have been a friend of Mr G's, and anyway she always said she only came to work because she got so bored at home in Surbiton.

How she got from Surbiton to Shepherd's Bush I don't know, but it must have taken yonks.

So I went down to reception to meet Roger. He was tall, Roger, and you could see that morning he was feeling very conscious of himself to be standing there so tall and blond and straight in a place he was new to and didn't know at all and where everybody else instead all knew each other and

exactly what they were doing. I even remember feeling relieved to see that this Mr Cruikshank was shy and not one of those cheeky cheery types who can never understand when you've had enough.

'Miss Eastwood,' I said, and I took him from reception upstairs to Sales and Marketing where Salvatore had his office door open to watch Sally and Yvonne. They were all three talking on the telephone, which was all they ever did, all day every day, and Salvatore was spelling out his name the long way like he always did - 'S for sunny boy, A for apple blossom, L for lover or lecher,' and so on. He was wearing a silver-blue suit and waved at Roger through the open door. A thumbs-up sign. I told Roger Yvonne and Sally's surnames and they lifted their eyes and nodded and he seemed embarrassed. Yvonne was wearing her black fishnet tights as per absolutely always, with one foot up on the windowsill where Salvatore couldn't see. 'PP can guarantee the fastest possible delivery times in the city,' she was saying, and she winked at us.

In Design, Mr Buckley wanted to make Mr Cruikshank his own man before Salvatore did, and he sat him the other side of his desk and started talking about efficiency and constant checking and this being the heart of the company where its bread and butter was made and everything else was all frills. Roger nodded and nodded and I stood by the window watching traffic grind along under the bridge on the Uxbridge Road. There was a woman crouched, wiping a baby boy's mouth at the entrance to the tube station and I thought how very nice it would be, despite all what the feminists say, to have a nice baby and be a housewife, because I was bored sick with the office and fluorescent lights and cigarette smoke. Bored right to my nerve ends. I turned round and Jonathan, who works with Mr Buckley, was peeling the back off an address sticker and smiling at me.

'Did you see *Saturday Night at the Mill?*'

I said why?

'You know that Natalie Bronsky, the American dancer?'

'Well?' I didn't.

'Well, you've got a bum just like hers.'

Jonathan is about 25, from Oxford University, awfully correct-looking and neat with a little moustache that seems almost pasted there, and he has this act of keeping a dead straight face while he says embarrassing personal things to you and that moustache never moves at all.

I took Roger down to Accounts and then Typesetting, which was to be his department. He just seemed a bit blank and nervous with everybody and I thought, he won't last more than two or three months here, I bet. I felt quite sorry for him. So that when we finished up in the telex room I bought him a coffee from the machine. Five pence a cup and expensive for what it was.

'What do you think?' I asked him, swinging on the telex stool. I was wondering if what Jonathan had told me was supposed to be a compliment or what. But then he said that kind of thing to everyone.

'It looks okay.'

'You don't sound very enthusiastic.'

He shrugged his shoulders and I laughed. If someone's shy then I get more bouncy and extrovert. I've noticed that. My dad says I'm terrified as a mouse, but it's not true really. Only with people like Salvatore or Mr Buckley. And not even then deep down.

'You don't sound like you really want the job at all.'

'I don't really,' he smiled. 'I never wanted to work in an office.'

He won't last even one month if he tells people what he thinks, I thought. Because everybody passes on everything in this office, and then Yvonne passes it on to Mr G.

'It's not your first job, is it?'

'No.' He paused and looked up at me. 'Well, actually, yes, it is. Though I said otherwise on the application.'