

the  
Boy  
who Fell  
to  
Earth

The title is rendered in a large, black, serif font. The word 'the' is in a smaller font above 'Boy'. The word 'who' is positioned to the left of 'Fell'. The word 'to' is positioned between 'Fell' and 'Earth'. The word 'Earth' is the largest and most prominent. Various colorful icons and illustrations are integrated into the text: a yellow UFO with a beam of light above 'Boy'; a pair of pink headphones on the 'o' of 'Boy'; a pink heart above the 'l' of 'Fell'; a stack of books on the 'E' of 'Earth'; a silhouette of a person holding a stack of books; a silhouette of a person holding hands with another person; a pair of white pants hanging on a clothesline; a yellow t-shirt and a teal t-shirt hanging on a clothesline; a pink teardrop hanging from the end of the clothesline; and a dotted line with a teardrop above 'who'.

KATHY LETTE

## About the Book

**Meet Merlin. He's Lucy's bright, beautiful son - who just happens to be autistic.**

Since Merlin's father left them in the lurch shortly after his son's diagnosis, Lucy has made Merlin the centre of her world. Struggling with the joys and tribulations of raising her eccentrically adorable yet challenging child (if only Merlin came with operating instructions), Lucy doesn't have room for any other man in her life.

By the time Merlin turns ten, Lucy is seriously worried that the Pope might start ringing her up for tips on celibacy, so resolves to dip a poorly pedicured toe back into the world of dating. Thanks to Merlin's candour and quiriness, things don't go *quite* to plan . . . Then, just when Lucy's resigned to a life of singledom once more, Archie - the most imperfectly perfect man for her and her son - lands on her doorstep. But then, so does Merlin's father, begging for forgiveness and a second chance. Does Lucy need a real father for Merlin - or a real partner for herself?

**Funny yet heartbreaking, witty and wise, this unputdownable, bittersweet novel - about keeping your family together when your world is falling apart - is the wonderful Kathy Lette at her very, very best.**

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About the Author

Also by Kathy Lette

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# The Boy Who Fell to Earth

Kathy Lette

For my darling children

## Prologue

The car hits my sixteen-year-old son at 35 miles per hour. His body jack-knifes skywards then falls with a sickening thud on to its bonnet before bouncing down to the bitumen. The last words I've said to him just two minutes earlier are 'You've ruined my life. I wish I'd never had you. Why can't you be normal?!'

I'd tried to claw back these words as we faced each other in the kitchen but they rained down upon my child like blows. He'd stood, silent as a monument for a moment - then he was gone in a wild blur of limbs.

As I heard the door slam, I sat there aghast, helpless, horrified. I then gave chase, calling his name. I could see the pale denim of his legs scissoring towards the busy road. I heard the low rumble of a car cresting the hill. I spasmed with fear and then the world crumpled.

The windscreen winced at the impact, then shattered. The smashing glass tinkles like waves on shingle. The wheels throw up dirt and noisy gravel as the driver brakes in a belch of petrol. The earth moves slowly up towards my son's golden head. He collapses, like a crushed cigarette packet. I freeze in the tourniqueted silence. The pedestrians are so still they're like a concert audience hushed in anticipation ... Then terror detonates inside me. Each ragged breath feels as though I'm inhaling fire. I hear a primal, bloodcurdling scream and realize it's my own.

I fall to my knees beside him. A thickening, lacquered pool of blood is forming on the road. And then the air is

cleaved by my wailing. The world darkens and everything goes black.

I'm in the ambulance now. How much time has elapsed? I replay the impact, over and over. The smell of burning rubber. The full-throated roar of the crash. The terror exploding on to the screen of my eyelids. I feel again the shriek in my blood. The earth and sky merging, imploding, then finally coalescing into fact: my son has been hit by a car. My eyes start to burn and my body trembles. Grief shakes me between its jaws like a lion shakes a half-dead gazelle.

Intensive care. The doctor's voice seems to shout, as if from far away: 'Your son's in a coma.'

And then I'm vomiting in the toilet, dousing my face with water over the sink and shaking myself dry like a wet animal.

So the vigil begins. I watch over my darling. His skin is the colour of a cold roast. I strain my eyes until they sting but see no movement. I stroke a bruise which is erupting with the speed of a Polaroid on his soft cheek. Where is Superman when I need him, to reverse the earth's rotation so that I can go back in time and not utter those hateful words to my dear, dear boy? Where is Stephen Hawking's wormhole in space, his gateways linking different parts of the universe so I can quantum-leap backwards and bite my tongue? I whisper into Merlin's ear about how much I love him. Knowing how uncomfortable he is with emotion, I jokingly promise to eat my own foot so I won't put it in my mouth ever again. All the time my tears splosh on to the sheet, and a great stalactite of snot hangs from my nose.

'Is there anyone you want to call?' a nurse asks, under the glare of naked electricity. 'His father?' she suggests, tentatively.

'His father?' After Merlin's diagnosis, Jeremy retreated into work. I used to joke that it was a wonder British



Airways hadn't embroidered his monogram on a business-class seat as he was in the sky more than he was on the ground. The smell of antiseptic cuts pungently through the air. Outside, the night is seeping away, dwindling into dawn. Below the hospital window, I see the cars parked diagonally, like sardines nosing up to a tin can - cars belonging to workers who will soon be going home to happy lives and unhurt children.

The nurse places her hand on my arm and guides me down into a chair. She sits beside me. Still holding my arm and stroking my skin, she repeats in a gentle voice, 'Is there anyone you'd like me to call, pet?'

'This is all my fault.' Raw with weeping, racked with guilt, my voice is seesawing with emotion.

'I'm sure that's not true. Why don't you tell me all about it, love. But first, there must be somebody you'd like me to call?'

'No. There's only ever been Merlin and me.'

She takes my hand. 'Tell me,' she says.

# Part One: Merlin

# 1

## I've Just Given Birth to a Baby but I Don't Think It's Mine

LIKE MANY ENGLISH teachers, I dreamt of being an author. All through my pregnancy I made cracks to Jeremy, my husband, about naming my firstborn 'Pulitzer' - 'just so I can say I have one'. But I was sure about one thing. I wanted our son to have a name which would make him stand out in a crowd, something out of the ordinary to mark him as different ... Well, not in my wildest imaginings could I have known how different my son would turn out to be.

My wunderkind started speaking early, then, at eight months, just stopped. No more cat, sat, hat, duck, truck ... Just a perplexing, deafening silence. By the time he was one year old, his behaviour was repetitive, his moods fractious, his sleep erratic, his only comfort being plugged into my raw breast. I was worried I'd be breastfeeding him until he went to university.

Until I began to wonder if he ever would ...

As Merlin was my first child, I wasn't sure if his behaviour was abnormal and made tentative enquiries to relatives. Since my father's fatal aneurism while in bed with a Polish masseuse (and part-time druid priestess), my mother had been mending her broken heart by spending his life insurance on a never-ending globetrot. Unable to reach her in the Guatemalan rainforest or halfway up Mount Kilimanjaro, I turned to my in-laws for advice.

Jeremy's family enjoyed a wealthy lifestyle on the land, just outside Cheltenham - and before you start picturing the kind of family that has a wealthy lifestyle outside Cheltenham, let me assure you that you're absolutely spot on. When I tried to broach the subject, my father-in-law's eyebrows took the moral high ground. Jeremy's father had achieved his life's ambition of becoming a Tory MP, for Wiltshire North. He had a broad, severe forehead like Beethoven but was completely tone deaf to life's lyricism. It's quite a Newton-defying feat, really, to rise by gravity. But that's what he'd done. The very earnest Derek Beaufort was the coldest, smoothest man I'd ever met. He was remote, chilly, self-absorbed; I'd often glimpse him on news programmes working hard at turning up the corners of his mouth into what could be mistaken for a smile. He didn't even attempt to simulate friendliness now.

'The only thing wrong with Merlin is his mother,' he proclaimed.

I waited for my husband or my mother-in-law to leap to my defence. Jeremy squeezed my hand under the heavy mahogany heirloom dining table but kept wearing his expression of bolted-on politeness. Mrs Beaufort's (think Barbara Cartland but with more make-up) smile thinned out between twin brackets of condemnation. She had always let me know that her son had married beneath himself. 'Which is true, as I'm only five foot three,' I'd joshed to Jeremy at our engagement party. 'Just think, darling, you can use me as a decoration on our wedding cake.'

Merlin was two when the doctor made his diagnosis. Jeremy and I were sitting side by side in the paediatric wing of the London University College Hospital. 'Lucy, Jeremy, do sit down.' The paediatrician's voice was light and falsely cheery - which was when I knew something was seriously wrong. The word 'autism' slid into me like the sharp, cold edge of a knife. Blood pulsed into my head.

'Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how a person relates to other people. It's a disorder of neural development chiefly characterized by an inability to communicate effectively, plus inappropriate or obsessive behaviour ...' The paediatrician, kind but robust, his white hair floating above him like a cumulus cloud, kept talking, but all I heard were exclamations of protest. Rebuttals clattered through my cranium.

'Merlin is not autistic,' I told the doctor emphatically. 'He's loving. He's bright. He's my perfect, beautiful, adored baby boy.'

For the rest of the consultation, I felt I was buckling with pressure, as if I were trying to close a submarine hatch against the weight of the ocean. I glanced through the glass panel at my son in the waiting-room playpen. His tangled blond curls, ruby-red mouth and aquamarine eyes were so familiar. But this doctor was reducing him to a label. Suddenly Merlin was little more than an envelope with no address.

An ache of love squeezed up from my bone marrow and coagulated around my heart. Dust motes danced in the heavy air. The walls, a bilious yellow, looked how I felt.

'He will have developmental delays,' the doctor added parenthetically. This was a diagnosis which pulled you into the riptide and dragged you down into the dark.

'You can't be sure it's autism,' I rallied. 'I mean, there could be some mistake. You don't know Merlin. He's more than that.' My darling son had become a plant in a gloomy room and it was my job to pull him into the light. 'Isn't he, Jeremy?'

I swivelled towards my husband, who sat, rigid, in the orange bucket chair next to me, gripping the armrests as though trying to squeeze blood from them. Jeremy's profile was so chiselled it belonged on a coin. He looked dignified but suffering, like a thoroughbred coming in last in a hacking event.

Falling in love with Jeremy Beaufort, I had scraped the top of the barrel. When I first saw him - tall, dark, turquoise-eyed and tousle-haired - if I'd been a dog I would have sat on my hindquarters and hung my tongue out. The first thing he told me when we met on the red-eye from New York - the flight had been a gift from my sister, an airline stewardess, for my twenty-second birthday - was that he loved my laugh. A few weeks later he was telling me on a daily basis how much he loved my 'succulent quim'.

But it wasn't just his 'Quite frankly, my dear', Rhett Butler good looks that attracted me. The man had a towering intellect to match. The real reason I fell for Jeremy Beaufort was because he'd graduated from the College of Really Erudite Personages. Besides his MBA, fluent Latin and French, and reputation as the Scrabble ninja, he just knew so much. Wagner's birthplace, the origins of the Westminster system, that the *Lampyrus noctiluca* and the *Phosphaenus hemipterus*, though commonly known as glowworms, are in fact beetles, that the Bunker Hill Monument is in Massachusetts ... Hell, he could even spell Massachusetts.

'Is that an unabridged dictionary in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?' I teased him on our first date.

My main claims to fame (apart from a Mastermind knowledge of Jane Austen's unfinished novel, *Sanditon*, T. S. Eliot's pornographic limericks and all the anal-sex references in the novels of Norman Mailer) were knowing how to gatecrash a backstage party at a rock gig, put a condom on a banana using my mouth, and sing all the words to 'American Pie'. Jeremy, on the other hand, only had Big Talk and no small. While my financial analyst boyfriend found it endearingly funny that the only bank I knew about was the sperm bank, I found it hilariously charming that when I mentioned the Marx brothers, he thought I was referring to Karl and his comrade Lenin.

Jeremy was so good-looking you wouldn't even consider him as date material unless you worked full-time as a swimwear model. I was a lowly English teacher with a moth-eaten one-piece Speedo and literary aspirations. So, why did I get to play Lizzie Bennet to his dashing Darcy? To be honest, I think it was mainly because my name wasn't Candida or Chlamydia; he'd come across too many upper-class females curiously named after a genital infection. These women not only owned horses but looked like them. They could probably count with one foot. If you asked for their hand in marriage, they'd answer 'Yeah' or 'Neigh!' After years of dating and mating with such mannequins, he told me that he found my spontaneity, mischief, irreverence, sexual appetites and loathing of field sports liberating. And then there was my family.

Jeremy, an only child, rattled around in an aloof-looking country mansion, while our Southwark garden flat was crammed with books and musical instruments and paintings waiting to be hung and delicious kitchen smells and too much furniture - a home which was comfortable with its lot in life. As were we. And Jeremy loved it.

Whereas meals at the Beaufort mansion were sober, 'Pass the mustard', 'Drop of sherry with that?' semi-silent affairs, dinner at my house was a riot of heady hilarity, with Dad arabesquing about the place in a tatty silk robe quoting from *The Tempest*, mother denouncing the Booker Prize shortlist whilst shouting out clues from the cryptic crossword and my sister and I teasing each other mercilessly. Not to forget the various blow-ins. No Sunday lunch was complete without a bevy of poets, writers, painters and actors, all regaling us with richly honed anecdotes. To Jeremy, my family was as exotic as a tribe from the deepest, darkest jungles of Borneo. I wasn't sure whether he wanted to join in or simply live among us taking anthropological notes and photographs. In his world of strained whispers, my family was a joyful shriek.

While the Beauforts were meat and three veg, Yorkshire pudding people, the only thing my family didn't eat were our words. Garlic, hummus, Turkish delight, artichokes, truffles, tabbouleh ... Jeremy devoured it all, along with Miles Davis, Charlie Mingus and other jazz musicians, and foreign films, and performances by banned theatrical groups fleeing from dictatorships like that in Belarus, whom my father was always bringing home to crash on the overcrowded couch.

And, to be honest, an allergy to my father's excesses is partly why I fell in love with Jeremy. Jeremy was all the things my feckless father wasn't. Employed, trustworthy, stable, capable, hard-working, as dependable as his expensive Swiss watch. Nor was he the type to come home with a nipple piercing or purple pubic hair, as my pater had been known to do. Whereas my dissolute dad ran up debts like others ran marathons, Jeremy was as reliable as the mathematical formulas he pored over at his investment bank. The man put two and two together to make a living.

My father, a character actor from the Isle of Dogs, had a lemon-squeezer-diamond-geezer accent. My mother, an alabaster-skinned, willowy woman from Taunton, Somerset, boasts a sing-song accent, as though everything she says has been curled by tongs. Her lilt makes other accents, including my own South London twang, sound flat to my ear. Except for my beloved's. His voice has more timbre than Ikea. Just one word in that dark-chocolate baritone of his could calm all chaos.

But not now ... Now, in the doctor's consultation room, he sat mute as sadness flowed down his face from brow to chin.

'Lucy, it's clear something is wrong with the boy. Face facts,' Jeremy finally said, all staccato stoicism. 'Our son is mentally handicapped.'

I felt the sting of tears in my sinuses. 'He's not!'



‘Pull yourself together, Lucy.’ With his emotions now held in check, my husband’s voice was as clipped and precise as that of a wing commander from a Second World War film.

We drove home from the hospital in numbed silence. Jeremy dropped us off and careened straight back to his City office, leaving me alone with Merlin and Merlin’s Diagnosis.

Our tall, anorexic Georgian house in Lambeth, which we’d bought cheaply as a ‘renovator’s delight’ – sales spiel for ‘completely dilapidated’ – leans tipsily into the square. It’s just like all the other houses in the street, identical in style, paintwork, latticing, flower boxes – except for the little boy inside. My son was sitting on the floor rolling a plastic bottle back and forth, rocking slightly, oblivious to the world. I scooped him up and crushed him to me, a hot smudge against my neck. And then I began the agony of self-doubt.

Was it something I ate whilst pregnant? Soft cheese? Sushi? Or wait! Was it something I *didn’t* eat? Organic tofu, perhaps? Or maybe I ate too much? I hadn’t just been eating for two, I had been eating for Pavarotti and his extended family ... Was it the glass of wine I shouldn’t have drunk in the final trimester? Was it that one martini at my sister’s wedding-anniversary party? Was it something I *should* have drunk – like puréed beetroot? Was it the hair dye I’d used to brighten up my bouffant when pregnancy made it lanky and dull? But, oh my God! Wait. Maybe it wasn’t me at all? Did a teenage babysitter drop him on his head? Did the nursery heater leak carbon monoxide? Did we fly with him too early on that holiday to Spain and burst his Eustachian tubes, leading to a seizure and brain damage?

No. It must have been the negativity I’d exuded while carrying him. Merlin wasn’t planned. He’d come along two years into our marriage. Even though we were excited at

the prospect of parenthood, I had slightly resented the unexpected intrusion into our extended honeymoon. The only time in my life I wanted to be a year older was when I was pregnant. It's putting it mildly to say that I didn't embrace the moment. In fact, I shunned it. I didn't feng shui my aura in yogalates classes chanting to whale music like Gwyneth Paltrow and Organic Co. Instead, I moaned and complained and railed against the dying of the waist. Especially as I'd recently spent a whole week's wages on lacy lingerie to celebrate our anniversary. I said to anyone who would listen that 'Pregnant women don't need doctors, they need exorcists.' Birth seemed Sigourney Weaveresque to me. 'Get this alien out of my abdomen!' ... Could too many caustically black-humoured jokes have affected his genes?

But stop. What if it was the difficult birth? Why do they call it a delivery? Letters, you deliver. Pizzas. Good news. This was more like *Deliverance*. Forceps, suction, the episiotomy ... Was it telling the doctor that I now knew why so many women die in childbirth - because it's less painful than going on living?

Or perhaps it was the flippant remarks I made in the delivery room to my mother as we peered at the scrunched-up little blue ball I'd just brought into the world? 'I've just given birth to a baby, but I don't think it's mine.'

On and on I fretted. I would stop worrying occasionally to change a nappy - usually the baby's. But for days after *The Diagnosis*, a San Andreas of fault lines ran through my psyche, coupled with an overwhelmingly protective lioness-type love, waiting, watchful, my claws curled inside me. I kissed my baby boy's soft, downy head all over. He coiled into the circle of my arms. I held him close and cooed. I looked into his beautiful blue eyes and refused to believe that they led inwards to nothingness. The doctor had reduced him to a black and white term - 'autism'. But the

prism of my love bathed him in bright and captivating colours.

I had to save him. It was Merlin and me against the world.

## Planet Merlin

I'M A GREAT believer in ignoring things until they go away. When Facebook and Twitter came along, I turned a blind, technical eye. Just like I ignored the 'Protein Only' diet, doing the Macarena, those weird Masai running shoes, bubble skirts and Esperanto. If you wait long enough, these fads fade. But the same logic just wouldn't apply to Merlin's diagnosis. It was not something he was going to grow out of.

There was no choice but to begin the disorientating journey through the labyrinth of social workers, speech and occupational therapists, top paediatric psychologists ... For the next year I trekked here, there and everywhere, in the endless search for experts. They ranged from National Health doctors locked away in sooty Victorian mausoleums flannelled with dust, linoleum floors overlaid with reeking antiseptic, to the private clinics of Harley Street with their low, plexiglass coffee tables laden with copies of *Country Life*. I hate to think how many specialists' kids I've now put through law school. (When visiting a private doctor, be sure to note carefully where you leave your car, because you will probably have to sell it to pay off their astronomical bills.)

My son had so many tests, he must have thought he was being drafted into the elite moon mission astronaut programme. I had to hold him as he was measured, weighed, blinded with torches, probed, prodded, pinched,

stethoscoped and syringed, despite the fact that his body would twist into a spasm of despair as he wept inconsolably.

And, oh, the constant battle to keep my gaze neutral and unperturbed though I was dying inside as various labels were hurled his way - dyspraxia, dyslexia, dysphasia, aphasia, attention deficit disorder, sensory defensiveness, Fragile X, chromosomal abnormalities ... Apparently autism was only the tip of Merlin's diagnostic iceberg. How it made me burn with love for my strange little son.

Meeting after meeting, in government buildings full of grimacing cracks, social workers told me that being the mother of a child with autism would be a challenge but an exciting one ... This is as accurate as the captain of the *Titanic* telling his passengers that they were in for a diverting little dip in the briny. Mothering a child on the autism spectrum is as easy as skewering banana custard to a mid-air boomerang.

Denial was my first response, hence the years of alternative medical rounds. I tried everything from cranial massage to karma maintenance and other areas of scientific expertise based on medical ideology that's been rigorously and methodically proven by Goldie Hawn and other well-known academics.

Anger came next, mostly towards the farcically solemn, flat-shoed educational psychologists with their expressionless expressions. The way to recognize an expert is by the clipboard. A parent needs United Nations headphones to decode what these clipboard-wielders are saying. 'What a fascinating child' decodes as 'He's retarded.' 'A true original' means 'I've never met a child quite so retarded.' 'Your son is differently interesting' translates as 'Your life is screwed for ever. You might as well put yourself up for adoption immediately.'

I found myself snapping at all clipboard-wielding, euphemistic people. 'So, let's stop beating around a dead

horse and cut right to the conversational mustard, shall we? Will my son ever lead a normal life?’

‘What do you define as “normal”?’ asked a social worker with ferrety alertness. As her eye twitched and she chewed on her half-gnawed nails, I got the feeling there might be a very fine line between social worker and sociopath.

While I ricocheted from psychologists to bio-feedback practitioners and other nouveau-vooodoo nut-jobs until my own inner child wanted to throw up, Jeremy retreated into work. When Merlin was born, Jeremy had been so besotted. He’d spend all day planting kisses on our baby’s soft, plump belly, warm as freshly baked bread, before wriggling and giggling him in and out of his little pyjamas. Jeremy, an only child, had happily professed he wanted three, four – no, five – more children. He took every second day off, left for work late and came home early, his face alight with joy.

But not any more. Now he left for the office pre-dawn, getting home at ten or eleven. Saturdays he indulged himself with a little sleep-in till, say, 6 a.m. His only son was damaged goods. Humiliated, he implored me not to tell anybody. My instinct was to blurt it out, to scream it from rooftops, a howl of indignation and terror. But, under Jeremy’s strict instructions, when people asked about Merlin, I produced a mechanical smile and placed a platitude or two on my lips. Which brought on stage three – a bad case of the ‘Why me?’s

I’d been teaching English at the local state school for a year. I now downgraded to part-time but didn’t give up altogether, reasoning that it might prove therapeutic. After all, mono-syllabic teens whine ‘Why me?’ constantly, so perhaps no one would notice my own self-absorption. When my sister, in whom I’d confided, asked me why I didn’t quit work completely as I was clearly going gaga, I glibly replied that London mothers had to be able to afford to buy their kids the latest iPhone or their offspring would put themselves on the ‘at risk’ register. But in truth, now that

Jeremy had abandoned me emotionally, single-parenting every night and weekend had quickly made me realize that the only good thing about being a domestic goddess is that you can't commit suicide by putting your head in the oven as there's bound to be a casserole in there already. If I gave up work it wouldn't be long before I'd be licking the cake beaters ... while they were still whirring.

Still, I felt so guilty about the relief I experienced when I dropped my son off at the childminder in the mornings ... (What kind of heartless mother was I?) ... only to feel even more guilty when I picked him up in the afternoons. After all, I was obviously on parental 'L' plates. Surely he'd be better off with professionals? Worry became my Mastermind specialist subject. Even though four hours a day teaching a group of truculent teens better armed than your average Colombian drugs cartel was a lot like hosting a hurricane, I found it a respite from mothering Merlin.

Day's end, though, seeing my pupils spurt out of the school gates like toothpaste from a tube, only reminded me that my own son would never know those normal, exhilarating pleasures. Merlin was like a rubber glove turned inside out. Everything I took for granted - smiling, laughing, loving - all as natural as breathing, were alien to him. My son was exiled on to a planet beyond my understanding, beyond logic. Looking up at me, his eyes as bare and round as light bulbs, I knew he was not in the same space-time continuum as the rest of us. The kid was all currents and impulses. Merlin's moods were so erratic it was as though he were responding to some invisible conductor's baton. I'd often find him smiling at something secret, as if being tickled from the inside with a feather ... only for this to be followed by a sudden darkening of his mood, as the poison of anxiety branched through his little being.

I was also going through childminders like tissues. Even though I only left him with carers who assured me that they

were trained in 'special needs', a frazzled Tracey or Leanne or Kylie would invariably hand my son over as though he were some rare feral creature recently netted in the Amazon and still adjusting to captivity. Merlin would go rigid with horror when I tried to wrestle him into his car seat, flapping his arms and legs like a trapped bird which was panicking and frantic and crashing into walls. My son's muteness meant that all I could do was peer into the disturbed, empty reaches of his eyes while pleading with him to be calm. 'Earth to Merlin, come in. Are you reading me? Over. Ground Control to Major Mum.'

I then drove home, white-knuckled with stress. Eventually Merlin's crying would subside into a brooding, sullen, twitching silence. Unless I deviated from the usual route, that is. Then he would thunk his head against the car seat, screaming with terror. Once home, he would shudder with exhaustion, clinging to me desperately as he sobbed into my chest. My heart quivered with pity and I would have to blink away tears. And then I would look into his eyes and realize that they weren't empty but brimming with fear. It seemed there was a place in him which I could not reach, where he dwelt in solitude. Beneath the surface of his daily existence was a life he lived as if underwater.

My son was like something that had appeared in a magician's hat. I had no idea where he'd come from and he was unlike anybody I'd ever met. Merlin seemed to broadcast signals all day but nobody was on the same wavelength. He would raise his face up to the heavens, as though listening intently to cosmic harmonies beyond the constraints of my earthbound senses. Merlin and I could look out of the same window but never see the same thing. Still, one thing was clear. It was my job to stay alert. To pick up bleeps on my Merlin radar. And to stop him from tumbling through a hole in the world, like Alice.

After my last class one Friday, I was dashing to my car so that I could relieve yet another rattled and overwrought



childminder when I saw a mother silently sobbing by the gates of the private primary school next door. My heart lurched. I instinctively felt that she too must have a boy who didn't fit in. Perhaps the 'A' word had been bandied about? My emotions swelled with the recognition of her pain and angst and I found myself dashing to her side, arms open. 'What is it?' I said, brimming with fellow feeling.

'It's my son ... He's five.'

'Yes?' I soothed, a hand on her arm, urging her to unburden herself to one who would understand.

'He's not taking to his French.'

I had an overwhelming desire to get into my car and back over her body repeatedly. And do you know what? A jury of mothers of special needs children would acquit me. For most mothers, their biggest worry is that their offspring won't eat anything which hasn't danced on television. I have seen mothers tearing their hair out over this. When my pupils' more aspirational parents tearfully complained about their wayward progeny not grasping *Beowulf*, I felt a grinding hollowness. The only remedy was to take a quick sniff of the classroom glue pot. I was tempted to commandeer Merlin's Postman Pat flask and start carrying something stronger in it than orangeade. Valium, say, with a heroin chaser - Mummy's 'little helper'.

I would have turned to my husband for comfort, but he had taken to imitating the Loch Ness monster: rumours of his existence abounded but there were no actual sightings. I understood that the shock of Merlin's diagnosis had sent Jeremy retreating into the world of high finance, where he could take solace from the solid predictability of percentages and equations, and at first I'd been patient. Jeremy's world has always been so certain. The only hard knocks he'd ever taken had been whilst playing polo. He'd perfected his French on frequent skiing trips to Verbier or Chamonix. Entertaining his parents' friends at dinner parties meant that he had learnt osmotically, from the

cradle on, how to charm and disarm. Although professing members' clubs to be horribly outdated and unnecessary, he attends all the same and secretly relishes them. Having an autistic child was not on his life's shopping list. Consequently, my darling husband had become like a hostile witness, grunting and only answering in monosyllables.

He'd had a year to acclimatize and yet still refused to discuss Merlin's condition. The loud, contentious quality of Jeremy's muteness bounced off the walls of our ramshackle little terrace. The whole house seemed to be holding its breath. The plastic Philippe Starck garden gnomes he'd given me as a comedic housewarming gift stood back to back on our pocket-handkerchief lawn as though in a huff with each other. Yes, we'd bought our house cheaply as a 'fixer-upper', but it was us who needed fixing. We were falling to pieces. I felt I'd woken in my own home to find all the furniture rearranged. Disorientated, I had to reevaluate my surroundings.

I tried to make light of it. Against Jeremy's wishes I'd confided in family and a few close friends, but when other acquaintances, still oblivious to Merlin's condition, asked why Jeremy was never with us, I explained that he'd enjoyed trying to get me pregnant - 'He liked trying for that three times a day but contracted morning sickness - the *morning after the baby was born.*' After they laughed, I'd add, with a practised smile, 'He's just taking time to adjust. He'll get more involved when Merlin is older.'

When my husband missed appointments with our son's speech and occupational therapists, I told myself I wasn't stressed. I told myself that it was normal to add chocolate chips to a cheese omelette. When Jeremy didn't turn up to the interview for the special needs nursery I'd spent months lobbying, I joked with the headmistress that he'd muddled up the dates. 'The greatest mystery is how men,

who are so universally stupid, got to rule the world. Dan Brown should write a thriller about *that!*'

When I had to forgo staff meetings because Jeremy was too busy to pick up Merlin from the latest childminder, I commiserated with the other wives by delivering a stagey eye-roll. 'Ah, how wonderful marriage would be without husbands.' I jokingly took to wearing my wedding ring on the wrong finger so that I could quip at opportune moments that I'd 'obviously married the wrong bloke'.

When Jeremy didn't make it to Merlin's third birthday party, I philosophized, glibly, to the small gathering of family members, 'Do you know the one way to keep a husband at home?'

'Baking?' suggested my mother.

'Gymnastic sex?' volunteered Phoebe.

'Let the air out of his tyres,' I advised caustically.

My mother and sister exchanged concerned glances. My older sister is just like me, except she has a gentle disposition, an attentive, devoted husband, two normal children, a job she adores and a genuine love of humankind.

Our mother, although never the type to cut sandwiches into triangles and knit organic muesli, is also very loving. When she found out I was having a baby, Mum crocheted herself into a coma. Packages arrived from all over the world containing baby booties, mittens, beanies, cardigans, bed-spreads, doilies and matinee jackets (one for the mornings and one for the evenings and one for any unaccounted matinee moments in between). Within weeks, my house was covered in crocheted things, as if a lumpy, multicoloured sauce had dripped over every surface.

After my father had died, naked in the arms of what my mum called 'a shady lady', my bookish mother had become a party girl. If there's a party on across town, she rings to ask if she can speak to herself as she can't believe she's not there. She would crochet her own party if she could. To

complement her good-time girl image, she traded in her neatly knotted scarves for a feather boa which writhed about her throat like something tropical, exotic and most definitely alive. Mum had been a librarian by trade, which meant that the only excursions she'd experienced were flights of fancy. But then she discovered that my father had over-insured himself, which was amusingly typical of his inflated sense of self-worth and caused us to laugh through our tears at the funeral. Now Mum was always making up for lost time and was either off abseiling an Alp or doing a degree on volcanology somewhere unpronounceable or spending a small fortune saving lemurs. (Individually, I presume, at the price.) Most of my mother's conversations began with 'I'm just back from ...', or 'I'm just off to ...' It might be St Petersburg, or Bhutan or Belize. She was always either shark-diving or Turin-shroud authenticating, nude tap-dancing or off on a little trot around the Hermitage. 'Sorry, darling, but I don't have a weekend free till early October,' she'd say, gulping in the good life, every last drop, living the daylights out of every second. My own life just telescoped away to a blip of mundanity. 'Got a good deal on mincemeat at the supermarket,' I'd mumble in reply.

She communicated by postcard only. One arrived from Kathmandu with a yak on it and the scrawled message 'Madly in love with Sherpa.' Another arrived two months later from Brazil. 'Sherpa-ectomy. Now on dig for fossils - *not* the archaeologist, although he is fetching.' Merlin's diagnosis had brought her home immediately. Needless to say, my vibrant mother and Pollyanna-esque sister found my glib pessimism alarmingly distasteful.

But beneath my Teflon-coated veneer of repartee, my husband's indifference was cooling my ardour to arctic levels. Jeremy accused me of 'alienation of affection' - a legal term for losing the hots for someone. He said that attempting to make love to me was reminiscent of trying to

shop in a small country town on the Sabbath. Nothing was open. When he complained that I never initiated sex with him any more, I wanted to tell him to go to hell but realized that, of course, by this point, single-parenting a child with autism, hell would be a major improvement on my own life.

My optimistic sister felt sure that Jeremy was suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome. 'He'll come round. Basically, Jeremy is a decent, compassionate man.'

I laughed out loud. 'Calling Jeremy compassionate is like calling me a Peruvian pole-vault champion.' Bitterness had started to creep into my voice and lines of resentment were etching themselves on to my countenance. What had happened to the man I adored?

Jeremy began staying out later and later and then not coming home at all. And then when he did finally come home a week before Merlin's fourth Christmas, it was in a psychological suicide vest, judging by the grenade he threw into my world.

'I'm leaving you.' His voice was heavy with weary exasperation, his face flushed with drink. 'I need to find some peace of mind.'

What he found was a piece of a televisual domestic goddess called Audrey.

With Stevie Wonder's eye for detail, I hadn't noticed he was drifting into the arms and freshly lasered legs of a pulchritudinous daytime-TV chef. Finding a false fingernail in our bed should have been a clue, but no, I chose to put it down to an over-beautified babysitter. I trailed him and his suitcase out into the street, past the little Christmas tree I'd spent all day decorating. My face was a rictus of incredulity. 'Why?' We'd only been married for five years.

'Well, if you hadn't rejected me all the time ... if you'd shown me the slightest bit of affection ... but you've been so preoccupied.' The thin smoke of his breath was steaming away in the icy air, like a 1950s cigarette ad. 'All you can

think about is Merlin. You've given up cooking. The house is a tip. You're so frosty in bed I feel compelled to keep checking your vital signs every half-hour.'

'Oh, forgive me, Jeremy. I'd love to screw your brains out but Audrey obviously beat me to it ... judging by how much you've lowered your IQ to shack up with a woman who cooks cupcakes for a living. So, the way to a man's heart really is through his stomach? I always thought that was aiming too high.'

My sister Phoebe googled the TV temptress. Apart from a regular cooking spot on a daytime television chat show, where she pouted provocatively as though in a porn film, her only other claim to fame was a tabloid exposé of the time she sat in a plate of cocaine at a rock-and-roll party, giving new meaning to the phrase 'powdering your cheeks'. Photos revealed a scrupulously diet-conscious honey-blonde from the home counties with melonesque breasts, a minuscule waist and a cat-like languor. Her make-up was so consistently perfect it seemed she was permanently poised to receive an award on some imaginary stage for services to lip-liner.

Despite her prime-time habit of practically fellating the more phallic-looking vegetables before she baked them, the woman was so thin Yves Saint Laurent could use her as a straw. Her only large body parts were her breasts, which could easily be mistaken for a breakaway republic. The posh trollop wore cashmere trousers - obviously to keep her ankles warm when my husband took her roughly by the hardy perennials in her herbaceous border. I suppressed a swift shudder of revulsion at the thought of my erudite Jeremy naked with a woman whose tan was the same colour as a carrot. One kiss and you'd have consumed half of your five a day.

When I broke the news to my mother by showing her Jeremy and Audrey's photograph in *Hello!* magazine (they'd been papped, ironically at some charity ball for disabled