

## THE VANISHING POINT OF PUZZLES

When people ask me what I do, I answer: ' Nothing, really. Well, I haven't got a job, that is. I mean, a job outside the house. Of course, I *do* things.'

Why do I always qualify what I say? Is it because I'm always going to important functions with Luke, full of important people? I, of course, am nobody.

My thirteen-year-old daughter, Laura, is talking on her mobile to one of her numerous friends from her expensive private school; her accent dripping with educated vowels. Those vowels are costing us a small fortune and yet her elocution teacher, Miss Highbury-Smythe's language is so full of arcane metaphors that it's difficult to decode any of her sounds at all.

I glance at the Grandfather Clock in the hall. Oh, God – I'm going to be late again. My stomach contracts. I know exactly how Phil will look; a small, vulnerable boy, completely out of place, standing near the wrought iron gates of St. Jude's in his appalling brown uniform. Waiting for me. Always waiting.

'Going to pick Phil up,' I shout up the stairs.

I hear Laura yell into her mobile 'He didn't!' as I close the front door.

The traffic crawls along the congested High Street with its wide array of expensive shops and restaurants. Half past four. Phil will have been waiting half-an-hour by now. Guilt constricts my breathing. There's no excuse. I haven't got a job. Not a proper job like other people. Not like Luke. Head of Marketing at Brazier and Braithwaite. *The* Brazier and Braithwaite. Luke had been ecstatic when he'd landed the job; the night Philip had been conceived. We'd both got smashed on champagne and success.

‘We’re really going places this time, Fi,’ Luke had said as we lay post-coital in bed. And we had. Hampstead, London. Everyone says our house is *too* stylish for words. Luke got in a team of interior decorators, although I told him I wanted to decorate it myself. ‘No time for that, my darling. I want you sparkling at my side when we’re socializing.’ We’ve eaten together as a family a dozen times in five years.

‘Can you believe we were once penniless art students?’ Luke asks each time a limousine cradles us towards our next important engagement. And each time he reminds me to be *especially* nice to whichever man he wants money from. I often feel like a prostitute. But perhaps marriage is just legalized prostitution.

I turn the corner into Sedgebury Street and see Philip standing outside the gates of the school, looking exactly as I had imagined – lost. His short brown trousers reveal coltish legs, too thin for his body. Is it my fault he’s so vulnerable? I ask myself as I slide the BMW to a stop in front of him. He looks at me reproachfully.

‘You’re late again, Mummy.’

‘Sorry, darling. You know what I’m like with time.’ I lean over to kiss him.

‘Why don’t you wear a watch?’

‘We should count time by heart-beats.’

‘You know you can’t.... are you going out again tonight?’

I move out into the traffic, hating my answer. ‘Yes.’

‘You said we were going to draw pictures together.’

‘I know. I’m sorry, darling. How about tomorrow evening?’

‘You said that last night.’

‘Daddy just rang up and said we had to go to a launch party.’

'Full of important people?'

I turn to look at him, wondering at his tone. 'I expect so.'

'How can everyone you meet be important? What do they do? Build planes? Invent things? Save children from starvation? What?'

'They make a lot of money.'

I can feel Phil's eyes on my face: I know what he's thinking.

I am standing in a large, ornate reception room, full of immaculate personnel: men whose suits are hand-tailored at Gieves & Hawkes in Jermyn Street and power-dressed women who look as if their personal dress designer is waiting in the wings. I, of course, am wearing a slinky dress, playing the part of a sparkling wife by listening animatedly to Roland Anderson, the Managing Director of a company with whom Luke is doing business.

'Did Luke tell you he's directing the advertising campaign for the launch of our new tea, Fiona?'

'Luke always tells me about his work.' I smile at Roland Anderson as if I'm riveted by tea. Luke has warned me to be especially nice to this important American client.

He beams at me. 'Your husband's brewing up a storm in radical images, let me tell you. A storm in a teacup, eh!' Roland roars with laughter, then looks around to ensure his staff are celebrating his wit too. 'Luke's new advert is a sensation. Upbeat, life-affirming *and* sixty seconds long.'

The sharp intake of breath from Roland's acolytes tells me that this is unusual.

'Yeah. Rad-i-cal!' he continues, 'but Luke can pull it off – that's why we've allocated a budget of 16 million bucks to this one.'

The enormity of the sum staggers me. I remember what Phil said about starving children, but I continue smiling at him as if advertising is the most important thing in the world. I glance at Luke: tell-tale blotches have spread across his face; he's been knocking back whisky all night to celebrate his success.

'In a month's time, Rollo,' Luke's voice reverberates round the room.

'Everyone in the world will be raising their cups to celebrate the health benefits of Titanic Tea.'

'*Titanic Tea!*' Laughter explodes from my lips before I can stop it and Luke's face darkens. 'My husband's great at lateral thinking, Mr. Anderson. He's way beyond me.'

'Isn't he, though? And it's Rollo, to you, Fiona. Yeah, I was stunned by the name too at first, but then Luke said to me - think *real* Titanic, Rollo. What does it suggest? Strength! Vitality! Vigour! Pure genius, Fiona. And listen to this slogan. *As Titanic Tea sinks, you get the lift of your life.* This time next week that slogan is going to be pasted on billboards all over the world, let me tell you.'

Everyone claps, looking at Luke with admiration. He knocks back another glass of whisky and tries unsuccessfully to look modest. I wonder how long I can stand this performance.

Three hours later we are driving through shadowy streets full of rubbish and Luke

is slumped against the headrest of the limo. I stare at the shadowed angle of his slack jaw and remember the day when Tom Campbell, my Tutor in Art School, told everyone in the class that I had an eye for perspective. 'You either have it or you don't,' he'd said, that wet autumnal day in 1988. 'And effortless perspective is one of the artist's most important tools.'

Luke had made a great effort to be rebellious in those days. 'What about Jackson Pollock and all the other innovative artists?' He'd shouted out. 'They don't care a fuck about perspective!'

Jackson Pollock always brought the blood surging into Tom Campbell's face. 'I'm talking about *Art*, Luke – not daubs of paint thrown at a canvas. I'm talking about perspective and beauty of line. Fiona has that gift.' He'd looked at me and smiled. Luke had stormed out of the Studio.

Fourteen years later, my perspective is clouded by drink and another vacuous evening where I am considered, at best, an attractive appendage, and at worst, not at all. I study Luke in the sodium-studded night: the vacant mouth; the lolling head; the stale breath, wafting out so much whisky I wonder if I'm getting passively drunk. The limo turns into the gravelled driveway of our detached eight-bedroomed house and I suddenly realize ... I'm wasting my life.

It's a week before I have time for Phil. I find him sitting at the kitchen table, swinging match-stick legs, trying to draw an overflowing bowl of fruit. I study the nape of his neck, too exposed by his regulation school hair cut, even in the diffused lighting. I can almost touch his vulnerability as he turns to me.

'It's no good, is it, Mum?'

I am just about to lie when I see what his problem is – perspective.

I sit down beside him and ruffle his hair. 'That depends on what you're trying to do.'

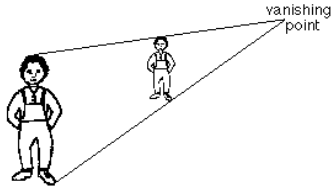
'Make my picture look real.'

'Okay.'

I get a piece of A4 paper, a pencil and ruler and place them in front of me, sideways.

'What are you doing?'

'Watch.' I draw two boys at different positions on the paper and draw two lines to a vanishing point.



'The vanishing point is where the lines join together.'

'I *can* see, Mum.'

We smile at each other.

'Artists have used vanishing points for centuries. You try.'

The tip of his tongue emerges between his lips as he concentrates on drawing more lines.

'Now what?'

'Draw someone inside the lines.'

'All right.'

He draws a small woman with long, dark hair and bow legs. I suddenly realize, he's drawing me. He gives her cross eyes.

'Hey – less of that.'

He laughs and I suddenly feel ridiculously happy. He starts drawing another small woman as Laura saunters in with her mobile stuck to her ear.

'What did you say?' She gives a small squeal and shouts. 'You *didn't!*' She glances at me briefly. 'Where're the Bath Olivers?'

'Go somewhere else to talk, Laura. We're busy.'

'With what?' She looks at our drawings and shouts into the mobile.

'You won't believe this one. I'm in the kitchen and I'm like looking at my mother trying to teach my baby brother to draw stick women with cross eyes and legs like cellos.' She hoots with laughter into the phone. Phil scrunches up the paper and walks out of the room.

If only there was a vanishing point for people, I think, following him. I am dreading the week-end at the cottage.

We bought the cottage in Kent two years ago to celebrate a well paid project Luke had completed. At first, I'd been reluctant to buy it, not wanting the hassle of driving to the country almost every weekend, but of course, Luke convinced me how important it was to have a weekend retreat to consolidate that high-profile-corporate-image. But when I saw the cottage, trailing history and clematis, I fell in love with its small nuggets of rooms and slanting light. It was surrounded by hop fields and water-washed flowers and myriads of birds. It was wonderful to escape from the fumes of London to breathe clean country air; to watch the garden fill with yellow archangels, jacob's ladders and brilliant pink shamrock which blossomed into a kaleidoscope of colours when the sun shone... It took Luke four months to transform our rural idyll into a geometric designer gallery. He enjoyed taking the *before* and *after* pictures, knowing they would impress future clients.

'A man who can reinvent a property shows the talent and tenacity to make any project work,' he told Laura as he supervised the extensive renovations. She shadowed her father, and soon knew almost as much as he about corporate images. Phil and I were told to go for walks and not interfere while Luke and his team of men plundered history: hammering and reconstructing the 16<sup>th</sup> century until it was propelled into the 21<sup>st</sup> with open planning; minimalist furniture and Luke's advertising images and slogans despoiling the walls. Phil and I consoled ourselves by walking around the ruins of Scotney Castle. All that remained of this once imposing 14th century building was a massive round tower and a crumpling gatehouse. But it was beautiful, surrounded by Japanese maple trees. Each day we sat by the water-lilled moat and studied the refracted reeds in the water; the cobwebbed light on old medieval stones; the oblique angles in the tower. And as I taught Phil how to develop an eye for perspective, I learned to see what he might become.

Luke has just rung to say he's been detained at work on an important project, but not to worry as one of his colleagues, Jonathan, will bring him down to the cottage later. I've spent two hours packing everything we need for a relaxing weekend: mountains of food, walking boots, Gorek jackets, light-bulbs, easels, paints and enough clothes for Laura to wear in a month. Laura, of course, is moaning about being incarcerated in the countryside where nothing happens.

'It's like being part of the walking dead,' she shouts at me. 'Why can't we stay in London like everyone else? Why can't I go clubbing with my friends?' This tirade continues all the way down the congested A21 as I stop-start through single lane traffic for nearly three hours. By the time I stop the BMW outside the cottage door, I'm totally exhausted. I open the cottage door to a blast of cold, damp air to find the boiler has burst. 'That's all I need!' Laura wails. 'A freezing cottage in the middle of Pittsville!' I want to strangle her.

An hour later, after trying to resurrect the boiler, I hear Luke talking to Jonathan outside the cottage, then Jonathan's Jaq speeds off, peppering gravel against the kitchen door. Phil and I stand in the kitchen, tense with expectation, knowing Luke will be expecting dinner to be ready. The kitchen door opens and he walks in, whistling.

'The boiler's broken and I can't get the cooker to work properly so there's only cold food.' My stomach contracts as I wait for his face to darken, but he smiles at us disarmingly.

'No problem. I'll fix everything tomorrow. Just hooked the biggest deal of my life, Fi.' He gives a whoop of delight. 'Let's go to *The Peasant*. Food's not bad for a pub. Anyway - who cares about food when I'm with my family? Where's Laura? Laura!' He shouts up the stairs and suddenly she's rushing down the stairs to throw herself into his arms.

'Daddy - where've you been? It's so awful here.'

He starts singing the UB hit *It's a Wonderful World* and soon they're dancing round the kitchen, laughing.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century pub is full of people celebrating the fact that it's Friday night and they've survived another week. Loud laughter makes it difficult to talk, but Phil and I are glad about that. During a sudden lull in the laughter, Laura puts down her knife and fork and smiles at Luke. 'Let's have a puzzle, Daddy.'

I watch Phil's fingers tighten on the cutlery and say: 'Not tonight, Luke – we're all tired.'

He stares at me before turning to Laura. 'Rubbish. Look at Laura. Does she look tired?'

Of course she doesn't. She's with her father. She's radiant. Luke takes one of the paper napkins from the holder and starts drawing a puzzle on it; the tip of his tongue poking out between his teeth as he concentrates. I've watched the same study in concentration for fourteen years. He passes the puzzle to Laura, confident she'll solve it. Phil's face is very pale in the lamplight of the old pub. Should I take him back to the cottage, I think? I watch the agitation develop in Phil's breathing, knowing I'm a coward. Laura's forehead creases as she studies the puzzle. She suddenly beams at Luke.

'The answer's 210, Daddy. That was *so* easy!'

Luke smiles at her. 'Who's my clever girl?' Laura smiles triumphantly at Phil as her father leans over to kiss her. 'Now here's one for Phil – in letters. I know he's no good with numbers.'

Phil sits very still, but I can see small muscles moving in his jaw. He doesn't look at Luke, but stares intently at a picture of a Sussex Hunt on the wall above his head. Why does Luke do this every time we come to the country? Why does he need to negate his son?

'It's getting late, Luke. It's been a long day, let's get back to the cottage.'

Laura's head rests on her father's shoulder as he continues to draw letters on a piece of paper.

'Luke?'

'There we are.' Luke pushes the paper in front of Phil who shrinks back into his chair. Luke's face tightens. 'Well for God's sake, at least look at it!'

Phil's eyes dart to the paper and away again. 'I can't read properly in this light.'

'I'm taking him to the optician's next week,' I say quickly.

'Optician's? You've never told me there's anything wrong with his eyes.'

Luke looks at me as if I've given him a genetically inferior son.

'He's started having headaches – that's a definite sign of eye problems.'

'How can he read so much if he can't see?' Laura stares at me confrontationally, knowing I'm lying.

'It's *because* he reads so much that the problem started, Laura!' I want to shake my daughter very hard.

'Well, I read more than him,' she argues, before turning to Phil. 'You can't do it, can you? It's much easier than mine.' She points to the letters and reads:

'What are the letters in place of the stars? A D g J M \* S \* y?'

Phil blinks rapidly. I hear people shouting good night to the landlord and look at the pub clock. It's 10.30.

'Luke, the children should be in bed. It's long past their bedtime.'

'Come on, Philip. Make an effort!' Luke starts tapping on the table with his pen. A bad sign. Phil's body tightens like a bow.

'It's in twos, isn't it, Phil?'

Luke glares at me. 'He'll do this by himself!'

'It's *so* easy, Philip,' Laura elongates her words in a patronizing drawl.

'P.' Phil whispers.

'Lower or Upper case?' Luke snaps.

'What?'

'Lower or Upper case? Don't they teach you to listen in school?'

I look at the anger on Luke's face; the fear on Phil's. I actually loved this man once. How is it possible?

'It's lower case, Dumbo.' Laura shakes her head at Luke. 'He's a lost cause, Daddy. I'd give up on him if I were you.'

I watch Phil moving his mouth, desperately trying not to cry and suddenly push my chair back and grab his hand. 'We're going back now. Luke. I'm tired.'

'Sit down - unless you want a row.' We lock eyes. 'And you hate rows, don't you?... even in private.'

Phil's hand tightens in mine and I want to scream, but the savage look in Luke's

eyes forces me back into my seat. Phil takes his hand away from mine. What sort of mother am I?

'So...what's the other missing letter?' Luke's pen taps a staccato rhythm on the table as we wait.

I can hear Phil's rapid, shallow breathing at the side of me, but do nothing.

There are no one other customers left in the pub now. From behind the bar, I see the landlord staring at us curiously. I smile at him, playing the game I'm so good at. Laura leans over and whispers something to Luke.

They laugh. I get a biro and a small note-pad out of my bag and write a large V on it and slide it under the table across to Phil. Laura's eyes follows my movements. I glare at her, willing her silence.

'Well?' Luke stares into Philip's pale face.

'It's V. Upper case.'

Luke looks surprised. 'Good.' Perhaps there's hope for you after all.'

'Daddy – Mum's just -'

I jump up and clutch Laura's arm tightly. 'Right – that's enough. We're going home. It's late. Come on, Laura. Philip. You stay and have another drink if you want, Luke.'

Luke looks at me with surprise. 'All right. I think I will. See you later. Night, kids.'

Laura rushes to hug her father.

I drag her back. 'Come on, Laura. You know you hate walking in the dark by yourself.'

I push her in front of me out of the pub.

The sky is studded with stars as we walk home. I'm always amazed by the night sky in the country-side. No street lights to block out the brilliant constellations. I lag behind the children, feeling utterly drained by the evening.

'I'll tell Daddy, Mum gave you the answer.' I hear Laura taunting Philip. Suddenly I find myself running towards her, holding her in a vice-like grip.

'Mum - that hurts!' Laura is shocked. I never get angry.

'If you tell your father, I'll make sure that you don't go on that expensive school skiing trip you've been on about for weeks.'

'Daddy wouldn't listen to you. He gives me everything I want.'

'He won't if he finds out you've been going out with a boy from that tough council estate.'

Laura gasps. 'What boy?'

'The boy with the stud in his nose. I drove past you last week. You were walking home together.'

'We were only talking!'

'I saw you kissing him, Laura. One word and no skiing.' I am blackmailing my daughter and really enjoying it. She pulls away from me in surprise and stomps off towards the cottage.

Phil puts his hand in mine and suddenly the last drop of energy seeps from my body: I cannot continue living like this.

An hour later, Luke and I are lying together in the same bed; separated by hundreds of adverts. He rubs his hand down my leg and my body rebels.

'Not tonight, Luke. I'm too tired.' It's true, but the real reason lies much deeper: I no longer want this man to touch any part of my life.

He rolls away from me in disgust. 'You're always too bloody tired these days. I'm the one with the job, remember. The one who gets up early every day to provide for this family. Jesus - what have *you* got to be tired about?'

I could pretend to go to sleep as I usually do; I could pretend to play this part for the rest of my life. I could, but I've lived too long with puzzles. I get up from the bed. I can't discuss the rest of my life, lying down. I switch on the light, wrap myself up in a dressing gown and suddenly feel amazingly strong. He sits up and stares at me in surprise.

'What are you -?'

'Listen to me carefully, Luke – for once. I want a divorce and I want custody of Phil. I want to paint professionally and I want to live in this cottage. What I don't want - an argument because you'll never, never change my mind. You and Laura live in London. It's where you both belong. Phil and I belong here. Now I'm going to sleep in the spare room and tomorrow I'm going to see a solicitor to arrange everything. Good night.' Then I walk out of the room and he doesn't say a word.

That autumn, Phil and I start to change the contours and colours in the cottage so they reflect the burnished browns and blues of our personalities. I open up the inglenook fire-place in the lounge that Luke had buried behind

bricks and in the kitchen, Phil and I discover a beautiful rich brown quarry floor hidden beneath garish modern tiles. In the winter, Phil and I are going to sit in the inglenook fire place beside a blazing log-fire and here we'll design our art studio. It's going to take a long time to bring back the past, but at last, I'm regaining my perspective and slowly Phil is discovering his.

But do you know what we love most of all about living here? The puzzles have all vanished.