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Opening extract from

How to Get the Family You Want

by Peony Pinker

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Published by

A&C Black Publishers Ltd

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First published 2011 by
A & C Black Publishers Ltd
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

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ISBN 978-1-4081-3286-9

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

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Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

Chapter 1
Beans for Tea and World War Three

You know when your parents are being really annoying such as, for example, when your mum is starting up her own business called 'Garden Angels' and your dad's supposed to be doing more around the house, but isn't?

And they argue all the time until you can't stand another minute of it so you just have to get out of there and take a long walk on the beach with your sister's boyfriend's dog?

Well, that's what happened to me the day that Gran was coming to visit.

It was a Friday so Dad wasn't working. He takes Thursdays and Fridays off because he's a sports reporter on the Three Towns Gazette, which means he has to work weekends, going to cricket matches and stuff. Nice work if you can get it, Mum says.

Anyway, as he was at home all day and she was out mowing lawns and hacking hedges, Mum had left him a list of chores such as 'tidy house', 'buy food' and 'prepare evening meal'. Judging by the state of the kitchen when me and Primrose got home from school, he hadn't done any of them.

The kitchen takes up the whole of the ground floor of our house, so it's got both the front door and the back door going out of it. A third door leads to the stairs up to the sitting-room; then above that is my bedroom and Primrose's. Mum and Dad's bedroom and Dad's study are right at the top of the house. All the houses in Harbour Row are very tall and thin.

The back door was open and the sound of snoring was wafting in from the yard. We looked out and saw Dad snoozing on a sun-lounger with his newspaper spread across his belly like a blanket.

‘Dad!’ Primrose woke him up.

He shifted under his newspaper and a few pages slid onto the ground.

‘W-what time is it?’ he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

Instead of answering, she handed him Mum’s list. He groaned. Then, true to his motto, ‘If a job’s worth doing it’s worth getting someone else to do it,’ he said, ‘You’ll have to help me, girls.’

Primrose laughed. ‘Sorry, Dad. I’ve got revision to do!’

Once you get past Year 9 you can use exams as an excuse for getting out of anything you don’t want to do for the whole summer term. I learnt that from Primrose. You don’t actually have to do any revision – Dad and me both knew perfectly well that Primrose was going to spend the next half hour trying on every single thing in her wardrobe and doing her make-up before Matt came round.

She flounced off upstairs to get changed and Dad looked at me. I didn’t see why I should have to help if Primrose wasn’t going to, and anyway, as I pointed out to him, the list clearly said ‘Dave’ at the top, not ‘Dave, Primrose and Peony’.

‘You’ve got plenty of time,’ I said. ‘Mum won’t be home for ages.’

‘Fair enough,’ goes Dad in a you-can’t-blame-a-bloke-for-trying kind of way.

Mum had been working late every night for weeks. She and her friend Stella were trying to do as much lawn-mowing and weeding as possible so they could build a big list of customers. Then in the winter-time when everything stopped growing, those people might think of them for winter jobs like making ponds and digging vegetable patches.

Unfortunately for Dad, I was wrong about him having plenty of time because Mum decided to stop work early that day in honour of Gran’s visit. When she walked in, all covered in bits of grass and dust, he was just cramming the odds and ends that had been left lying around on the surfaces into the space at the front of the food cupboard – which should have been full of food if he had done the shopping.

‘This place looks like a pigsty!’ Mum said, stamping the dirt off her feet on the doormat. ‘What on earth have you been doing all day?’

‘I’ve been tidying,’ Dad said indignantly. He pointed to the list. ‘Item number one!’

‘Your mother will be here any minute and you haven’t even tidied up?’

‘Well, see, the thing is, Jan, my mum doesn’t mind a bit of mess.’

Mum stopped undoing her boot laces and stepped deliberately off the mat. She clomped across to the sink to get a glass of water, leaving a trail of grass cuttings and dirt all over the floor.

'All right, Dave, tell me this – what have you bought for supper tonight? Or does your mum not mind a bit of going hungry either?'

'No-one will be going hungry,' Dad assured her. 'I'm thinking, beans on toast!'

Dad's cooking skills didn't stretch much further than beans, pizza, pasta and take-away, and that was pretty much all we'd been living on since Mum started her gardening business. When she told him we weren't getting enough vegetables he invented 'beans 'n greens' by putting a lettuce leaf on top. When she said we needed fruit in our diet he sprinkled our spaghetti with sultanas.

To be honest, Primrose and me preferred Dad's cooking. It was great. I mean, you could rely on him never to spring yucky things on you such as gooseberries, rhubarb, spinach or cauliflower. But it really annoyed Mum.

'I know you've raised laziness to a fine art, but surely you could make an effort when your mother's coming!' she thundered.

Dad pointed out that it was his day off, and as far as he was aware normal people regarded a day off as time to stop working and relax.

‘What’s that supposed to mean – normal people?’ goes Mum.

‘It means I liked you better before you went workaholic!’

‘Well pardon me for not being consistent like you. You’ve always been a waste of space!’

Primrose swept in looking for her eye-pencil. She would never have guessed where it was so I pointed to the food cupboard for her.

‘Thanks, Peony,’ she said, opening the door. A blue biro and a bunch of old bus tickets fell out. She shoved them back in again. ‘What’s with all the shouting? It’s like World War Three in here!’

That’s exactly what Mum and Dad say when me and Primrose are arguing but you could tell it wasn’t a good idea saying it to them. They straight away stopped shouting at each other and turned on Primrose.

‘If it’s like World War Three in here that’s because the place looks like a bomb hit it!’ Mum said. ‘We all know your father’s a lazy slob...’

Dad looked as if he might protest but then thought the better of it. He didn’t really have a leg to stand on.

‘...but that doesn’t mean you have to copy him! When was the last time you did anything around the house?’

‘Well, I’m sorry but I can’t help at the moment,’

Primrose said smugly. ‘I’ve got revision.’

‘Then you won’t be needing this,’ goes Mum, swiping the eye-pencil out of her hand.

It was like flicking a switch. Primrose is the only person I know who can go from smug to stroppy in two seconds flat.

‘That’s mine!’ she said. ‘Give it back!’

‘You’ll have it back when you’ve helped with the tidying-up,’ goes Mum.

Primrose glanced at the clock. Matt would be here any minute and she hadn’t finished her make-up. Mum said if she was feeling so stressed about her revision maybe she shouldn’t be seeing Matt every single day after school.

Right on cue, we heard him coming up the front steps. Primrose snatched her eye-pencil in panic but it was too late. Matt tapped on the open door and walked in. Old Sam, who usually trots in first, was dragging behind. Dogs can always sense danger. I ran and stroked him so he wouldn’t be scared. When Primrose is kicking off, wolves and lions would run for cover.

‘Everything OK?’ said Matt. He was probably wishing he had been able to sense danger too. Then he would have reached our house and gone right on walking.

‘You won’t believe this!’ blurted Primrose. ‘Mum wants us to stop seeing each other!’

‘She didn’t exactly say that,’ Dad pointed out. ‘She said maybe you could see a bit less of each other during the exam period because then you’d have more time for revising.’

‘And for pulling your weight around the house,’ added Mum.

‘That’s all you care about, the rotten house!’ cried Primrose. ‘You don’t care about me! When I fail everything and drop out of school and end up living in a cardboard box you’ll be happy because at least I did my share of the hoovering!’

She looked at Matt, expecting him to back her up, but he didn’t meet her eye. Sam gave a little whimper. I stroked his head again.

‘As if I haven’t got enough stress already!’ wailed Primrose.

‘Ahem...’ Matt cleared his throat. ‘Maybe your mum’s got a point?’ he ventured.

Was he mad? Primrose gave him a glare. Unbelievably, he carried on.

‘I’ve got exams this term too, and my parents have told me they think I should be staying home some evenings to revise.’

They would, when you came to think about it. I mean, they spent a fortune sending him to St Cuthbert’s College so they must be keen for him to do well. But none of us had seen this coming. Mum nodded approvingly. Dad glanced

nervously at Primrose. Sam stuck his nose under his paw.

Primrose said, in a voice that could make a polar bear shiver, ‘If that’s what you think...’

She was furious, but not fiery furious. She was frosty furious, which is even worse, though Matt didn’t know it yet because he’d only been going out with her for a few weeks. He had never seen her in a full-on strop.

‘Can I take Sam for a walk?’ I said.

I couldn’t hang around and watch. I had to get out of there quick-smart or else I might just snap and say, ‘Primrose, you’re an idiot. Matt’s the best boyfriend you’ve ever had and you’re going to drive him away!’