

LEIGH K CUNNINGHAM

BEING ANTI-SOCIAL

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Vivante Publishing
inquiries@vivante-publishing.com

Leigh K Cunningham
<http://www.leighkcunningham.com>

Cover design by Elizabeth Botté
<http://www.illos.net/>

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To mum, dad and my brother, Mark

Chapter One

IN MY THIRTY-EIGHT years, many names have followed me; most lack a generosity of spirit, but most are also probably true. My much unloved older sister, Shannon, has added another—I am anti-social she announced as she swaggered past me with her silver platter, not bothering to stop so I could partake of her home-made satay sticks and curry puffs. I put down *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets Nest* and glared after her. I took offence—not so much at the words, but by the malice that accompanied them. I looked around the Evans family gathering expecting to find others aghast by such antagonism, but conversations and laughter continued unabated.

I reclined deeper into dad's armchair to contemplate my new label, and while I was thankful my siblings and in-laws never attempted to draw me into their pointless chit-chat, it seemed to validate Shannon's tirade. Not fearful of further retribution, I slithered down the hallway in search of a computer and solitary environment.

My affliction, according to one source, is a "hostility toward or disruption of the established social order marked by engaging in behavior that violates accepted mores, like gangs". This is definitely not me—I could never fall in with a gang; that would require networking for a common purpose with other like-minded individuals. I am also not one for violating accepted mores—I don't buck systems, which is how I came to be at yet another family shindig without will or purpose, and certainly under duress. I do what is expected, especially when mother is involved, to avoid the ugly consequences.

I continued with my research, buoyed by the initial results that proved Shannon wrong. I anticipated bursting her balloon in front of everyone should they wish to listen. The next source defined 'antisocial' as "an unwillingness or inability to associate in a normal or friendly way with

other people; not merely shyness, but an antagonism toward or disrespect for others, rudeness". I read the words several times looking for some aspect that did not fit my particular condition then one of Shannon's spawn jumped through the doorway and fired his plastic arrow at me. I chased him away with a scowl and a growl and returned to the brutal definition before me. Perhaps there was something in it, and just maybe they were written with me in mind.

I stared at the anti-glare screen that sheltered each word under a green hue and a sense of relief and acceptance flowed, like the patient who had languished undiagnosed for years until a medical breakthrough finally identified the disease, but offered no cure.

More googling generated a list of suppliers for custom printed t-shirts. It would be useful, I figured, to warn others in advance of my disposition, but then I worried it might inspire a complete stranger to ask about the t-shirt and its sentiment—a chatty, bubbly stranger worse still. My time on dad's antiquated PC did however resolve one annual dilemma—what to buy Shannon for her birthday. I placed an order for a t-shirt that read, "Everyone is entitled to my opinion".

Satisfied with my efforts, I attempted to spin around in the fossil of an office chair and was flung to the floor by a rusted swivel—and an ideal place for further contemplation. Where and when did the *anti* begin? Was I born this way, or was it the by-product of a series of unfortunate encounters with other humans and dogs?

My birth and subsequent naming may well have been the beginning. They called me Mace—that's 'ace' with an M in front of it. It's a boy's name for starters and I am not. A mace is a medieval weapon used by knights to break armour, or a liquid used in riot control that causes tears and nausea, and in Latin, Mace is a spice made from the nutmeg seed. My parents have not been asked to explain themselves, out of fear mostly, because knowing mother as I do, I am not likely to understand her explanation, and no good could ever come from such a discussion. So it remains a mystery that they will take to their graves still feeling quite good about it I expect.

My siblings, all four of them, have normal two-syllable, sex-appropriate names: David, Jason, Lauren (good sister) and Shannon (bad sister). It seems I was singled-out for special attention the minute I arrived in this world, and not a lot has changed since.

There is a very good reason why gestation takes a good nine months—to give the parents ample time to get the naming part right. It is not too much to ask therefore that adequate time be set aside for such an important assignment. It could have been worse I suppose—they might have called me Pringle, Apple, Sage Moonblood, Pilot, Rocket or Blanket.

That is it, our family unit—five children and two parents, plus three offspring from Shannon and two from Jason.

Given what you so far know of me, you will probably be surprised to learn that I have friends, who are all friends of each other: Kimberley aka Kimba, Sophie, Amber and Erin. We have been friends forever, a habit that began at school and has perpetuated for decades since. If I stopped for a moment to think about it, I might not actually like any of them any more, except Kimba, and not just because she is like her nick-namesake: a cute, white lion who believes that true peace requires communication and mutual understanding. Kimba is the voice of reason, which is often drowned out by the irrational musings from Erin, pessimism and woe from Sophie, and the shallow preoccupations and obsessions of Amber that spew forth like Vesuvius.

It might also surprise you to learn that my life has not been completely devoid of relationships (although I am currently single) and I have been able to live with another human being, in harmony too. There was a man I loved and another I did not. I sacrificed the former for a meaningless fling with the latter for reasons that remain unclear to me and anyone who knows me and them. I had it all with Benjamin, Ben, my Benny then he left me because of Joshua, or rather, because he found out about Joshua.

Ben was the perfect husband. It pains me therefore to say that I knew he was perfect for me then and now, so why, how then, did the ruffian Joshua Steele find a way in? This question remains unanswered despite obsessive analysis and study for the past six years since our divorce, and neurotically so since Ben died four years ago depriving me of any chance for redemption. I did try to win him back, but he could not overcome the betrayal even though he said he would love me until the day he died and from beyond his grave. He said this before he knew he was going to die and again before he died, so I know it was true, and the pain in his eyes had said so too.

I was with him the night leukemia stole his life at the age of thirty-four. There was not enough time to make everything right between us because I was only informed of his imminent passing after the battle had been waged and lost, and only then with reluctance did his sister call to let me know Ben's time was up. I guess the moment was a sweet one for her and the final retaliation for what I did to her brother.

The night of the Joshua revelation still haunts me. I relive it whenever any of the reminder flags pop up, for example, when switching on a light in the darkness. It was well after midnight that night when I arrived home. I had been pulling an all-nighter at work in pursuit of an immovable deadline, but try telling that to a husband who had just learned of an affair. The hallway lamp that usually

revealed the path to our living room was unlit. I was annoyed as I shuffled my way past all known obstacles, cursing Ben for being so inconsiderate while I was collapsible with exhaustion. In our living room, I saw a seated silhouette illuminated from behind by a full moon streaming through our uncovered French doors. I screamed and fumbled with the light switch.

“What are you doing?” I yelled. “You scared me.” Then I saw the suitcase, and his swollen eyes.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I never imagined my life without you—,” he started to say and tears rolled over new lines etched into his once ageless skin. A taxi had pulled up out front and before I had found words to say, Ben was gone. In a mental haze, I wandered through to the kitchen where I found a note that simply read, *Joshua Steele*. I went to bed with a pounding heart, but with a belief I could make things right.

I tried to call Ben the next day as soon as I had finished the apology script. I wrote it out in longhand and was truthful and complete to the extent possible, leaving out details that would cause angst for a male psyche, for example genitalia and performance-related issues. I also modified the when, where, and how often, for similar reasons. In the end, it was not that truthful, if I were to be truthful now. The why was not explainable anyway, and remains so even after years of counseling, hypnotherapy and past life regression. I had my own unanswered questions like, how did Ben find out about Joshua, and what exactly did he know.

I tried non-stop for three days to contact Ben. I tried everything and everyone, but none of his friends or family would help. “He doesn’t want to see you,” they said. “How could you do this to him?” “He loved you more than life itself.” “What kind of a woman are you?” “Leave him alone.” “Move on. He has.” There were other less constrained suggestions I will not go into. Ben filed for divorce, we sold the house we loved, and communicated solely through lawyers, and that was that.

I later learned from badgering his friends, Adam in particular, that Ben was working in the Arabian Gulf on an oilrig. He had always wanted to work on an oilrig so I was happy for him in a way, but disconsolate also that I had driven him to such isolation and this was his only means for coping with the end of us and what I had done.

I did not cope either, but no one wanted to hear that from me—it was a price that only I could pay. Mother’s words were true enough, “As you make your bed, so must you lie in it.” As a child, I used to think this meant that my untidy bed making would result in a sleepless night, but of course, I know now that she meant to teach me about consequences. The lesson is so learned.

It is a wonder that we became us, Ben and me, given our first date. He had bored me senseless rambling on about separating water and gas and removing the hydrogen to make oil. The night was

only made bearable because I was able to stuff myself stupid with wood-fired pizza while he talked through his nervousness. When the bottle of merlot was empty, Ben had barely taken a sip from his glass, and in that respect, he was a good date, but marrying an engineer was not an option.

However there was something magical about Ben, when he was not talking about chemicals. ‘It’ was not definable, but everybody felt it, could see it, and love it absolutely.

For the little time we had left together before he died, I did not want to waste any of it going down that path, but I had to know—how had he found out about Joshua. “Joshua” was the answer. Joshua had contacted Ben and told him everything, well, almost everything—he failed to mention that I had ended the affair. I asked Ben if this would have made a difference if he had known this back then, but he said no, he didn’t care about when it ended, only that it had begun. Not that it mattered anymore—my love was dying and six years had been lost, apart with separate sufferings, and all that was left was this moment in time with no salvation.

The hatred I felt for Joshua was crushing and remains so to this day despite hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars in every known form of therapy. I would undergo a frontal lobotomy if it would help and if they could remove specifically every cell that had his name in it. I have to let my anger go, I’m told, to dissipate the loathing as if it is a thick fog that lifts to reveal a beautiful, warm, sunshiny day that appears inevitably when a fog does lift. I can visualize it, as I am supposed to, and I can even breathe better as the metaphoric fog rises above my head, but that is as far as it goes because I want to hate Joshua, and I want to feel the power and pain of cold and icy. My mentor and life coach, Oscar Wilde, says we should always forgive our enemies because nothing annoys them more, but then he also said that good advice should always be passed on as it is never of any use to oneself.

It has been pointed out to me that Joshua only owns half of the blame, and if I hear again that it takes two to tango or any other bothersome cliché, I might end up in a mental institution after a rampage with similarly tortured souls. Statements of the obvious do not help anyone, and I already suffer of my own accord. But I can rationalize Joshua’s greater responsibility by saying that it was the *way* Ben found out that was the crux of it all, and that was Joshua’s doing, solely, one hundred percent. I had planned to tell Ben in time to free myself from the guilt, and because I was certain of his forgiveness. He would have forgiven me. He did, in the end, before he died. Not that it helps now.