

THE MRS MARRIDGE PROJECT

Pauline Fisk is the much-loved author of eight children's novels, including *Sabrina Fludde* and *Midnight Blue*, which won the Smarties Prize and was shortlisted for the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award. Pauline has five children and lives in Shropshire. *The Mrs Marridge Project* is her first novel for Faber.

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'A multi-layered novel packed with big writing and even bigger ideas.' *Guardian*

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'A riveting read – "edge of your seat" stuff. Written with vast imaginative flair.' *SHE*

The Candle House:

'This is a marvel.' *Observer*

THE MRS MARRISON PROJECT

Pauline Fisk

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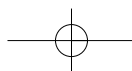
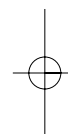
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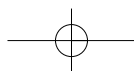
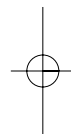
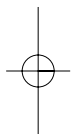
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To Nat and Virpi





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Prologue: The Epiphany

Halfway through my sister's best friend's funeral, I decided to get married. I knew I wasn't old enough, but life felt too short to hang about. You took a breath and it was over, and you'd never done a thing you wanted. Lucy Chan never got a single benefit from her years of studying for university. She was dead, run over by a car, before she'd even sat an A-level exam.

The church was packed. Half our town was there, and half our school as well. Everyone was crying, especially my sister Kate. I should have been crying too, because I'd known Lucy my whole life. But grief can do funny things to you, as I was discovering. Instead of shedding tears, I couldn't help thinking that Lucy's life would have been better spent having fun. Filling it with school work felt like a terrible mistake – and it was just the sort of mistake that I would make!

Lucy was a slogger, just like me. She was one of those hard-working, determined types who always put their grades ahead of everything else. The type who

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sets her mind to things, and has the drive to make them happen.

‘That Lucy Chan!’ people used to say. ‘She’s a real go-getter. There’s nothing she can’t do, if she sets her mind to it. Once she gets the bit between her teeth, there’s no stopping her.’

This was all very well, but being a go-getter hadn’t saved Lucy’s life when some drunk was in a hurry to get home and watch the rugby on the telly. And suddenly I worried that it wouldn’t save my life either. I could run along the sea wall, like little Johnny Williams, and a freak wave could sweep me out to sea. Or wake up one morning, like our old dog Tramp, and find I had a terrible disease. One day, he’d been a happy little terrier, chewing sticks, and the next he’d been down at the vet’s in the final stages of leukaemia. Nobody had known that anything was wrong until he went and died – and a thing like that could happen to anyone!

Lucy’s coffin started up the aisle, followed by her family staring straight ahead, trying to be brave but looking desperate. It was the same all over the church. The coffin glided between us, a white island, sweet with the scent of lilies, in a sea of black, bowed heads. Mum wept as if Lucy had been a member of our own family. Life without her would never be the same. Even Dad wept, his knack of seeing the funny side of

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things at unlikely times and in unlikely places temporarily suspended.

And as for Kate – well, what can I say? Her shoulders heaved and tears poured down her face as if they'd never stop. Kate had never been the crying type, and I was seriously worried. I wanted to comfort her – to be there for her like a sister should – but suddenly a chasm seemed to lie between us. I couldn't reach her or grieve with her. To be honest, I couldn't even reach myself. The chasm lay across my life, cutting off my feelings from everything else. I was ashamed to be dry-eyed while everybody else wept. But there was nothing I could do about it. For some strange reason, instead of grieving for Lucy, the only person I could grieve for was – *me*.

'If *I* was in that coffin,' I thought, 'my whole life would have been wasted. Everything I'd ever done would have been for nothing. None of it would matter. I'd have died without knowing who I really was, or getting what I wanted out of life. I wouldn't even *know* what I wanted out of life. I mean, I wouldn't have a clue.'

Lucy's coffin reached the chancel steps and came to rest before the altar. Her family filed into the front pews and sat down. The congregation sat down too, but I remained standing, lost in a tangle of thoughts. Only yesterday, my headmistress, Ms Lloyd-Roberts,

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had said that the path to true happiness lay in finding the right career. But if I died before I found that career, did that mean I'd never known true happiness?

Mum poked me to sit down, and Kate hissed at me to 'stop acting weird'. I sank onto the pew, mortally ashamed of having spent a single moment thinking of anybody other than Lucy and her family. The priest climbed into the pulpit and started delivering his address. Kate wrung her hands. Mum buried her face in a box of tissues that she'd brought especially. The boy on the other side of her wept so much that Mum leant across and shared her tissues with him.

He was a gorgeous boy, black-haired and slim, with an elegance about him that not even swollen eyes and a dripping nose could disguise. I didn't know who he was but found myself fantasizing that he'd been Lucy's secret lover. At least, I hoped he had. I hoped she'd had a life before she died.

The priest started on about heaven, and I imagined Lucy stuck up there for ever, a legendary virgin like Ida Jones from Back Street, whose greatest claim to fame, at her old age, was that she'd never been kissed. Not that I knew, of course, that Lucy'd been a virgin. If she'd gone out with that boy, she must at least have done a bit of fooling around.

But if she hadn't, did it really matter? Would she be a lesser person for it? Was that all there was to life – a

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bit of fooling around, a few exams with straight A grades, the promise of university at the end of it all and a career if you were lucky?

Or was there more?

The priest finished his address and we started singing what the family said was Lucy's 'favourite hymn'. I looked at her coffin covered in white lilies. Sunlight danced on it, falling from a stained-glass window depicting the Holy Family. The colours in the window were a stunning contrast to the black-garbed congregation in the pews, and the serene faces of the Holy Family a stunning contrast to the tears around me. An angel looked down upon them, wearing an expression of serenity too. There were no tears for them. No fears of what the future might bring. No death hanging over them, full of cruel surprises.

They were frozen in a moment of perfect peace, and I envied them. I really did. My life had been thrown into turmoil by the events of the last couple of weeks. Until then, I'd never really grasped the fact that people like me died. It was always other people who did things like that. People somewhere else – old people, stupid kids who did things for a dare or people on the telly. Definitely not people whose lives touched mine.

I had thought I was immortal, and the world around me charmed, but not any more. Everything had changed for ever. I didn't know what the future would

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bring, or even if imagining I'd have a future was expecting too much. Didn't know where I was going in life. Didn't know what I wanted to get out of it. I felt as if I was standing on a precipice with nothing to hold on to. It was a terrifying prospect.

We finished the hymn and Lucy's father went to the lectern to read a eulogy. He got halfway through but couldn't carry on. For a moment it was as if he too was standing on a precipice, but then Lucy's mother went and stood beside him and read the words where he'd left off. They stood together, shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand. They were both crying, but they got through together, turn and turn about.

I watched them doing it, helping each other through, and suddenly – like that eureka moment in the bath, if you know the story of Archimedes – I *did* know what I wanted after all. It was very simple. *I wanted to be like them.* They were safe because, whatever came along, they had each other. They were strong because they stuck together. You could feel them reaching out, their voices answering each other as if they were one. For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, they were there for each other, and that closeness of theirs – that sense of belonging – was what I wanted for myself.

'It's people who make all the difference,' I thought, 'not school work and exams. My path to true happiness

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doesn't lie in straight "A" grades. If I could only have what they've got, then I could face anything. What I really want in life is to fall in love and marry. *To find my Mr Right and become his wife!*

I must have gasped, because people turned and looked at me. But who could blame me if I did? Marriage wasn't exactly a subject I'd ever given much thought to. Nobody in our family had ever gone in for it, apart from Grandad – and he wasn't exactly a role model! According to Mum, it was only brainless film stars who got married these days, because they were the only ones who could afford the maintenance. It certainly wasn't something to be considered before a woman hit her thirties, and even then it was a pretty risky idea.

'But why?' I asked myself. 'I don't get it. What's wrong with marriage?'

What indeed! Suddenly it wasn't good enough to have a string of lovers, every one as gorgeous as the boy next to Mum. Before I went and died like Lucy, I wanted somebody to fall in love with me, and fill me with serenity, like the Holy Mother in the stained-glass window. I wanted them to be there for me, always seeing the best in me. And, most of all, I wanted them to commit their lives to me, loving me enough to marry me.

Mum might call that sort of thing a fairy tale, but

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why couldn't fairy tales ever come true? I imagined the church full of pink fluffy roses instead of waxy, death-mask lilies, and everybody smiling instead of weeping, and me, glamorous in tight white silk, chucking my bouquet for one of my girlfriends to catch – preferably Jenna, but I wouldn't mind if it was Jody or Rebecca.

In school, weeks later, my English teacher, Mrs Arrol, explained about epiphanies. These were moments when your life was changed for ever because you got some sort of revelation. As literary devices went, epiphanies were dangerously over-used, according to Mrs Arrol. But, over-used or not, that moment in church was mine.

There wasn't anything else that it could be. I sat there in astonishment, struggling with the fact that marriage could be the 'career for me'. The career that Ms Lloyd-Roberts had said I had a duty to work towards with single-minded dedication for the rest of my school life.

By the time the eulogy was over I could scarcely stop myself from smiling. Mum and Dad would go up the wall if they knew what I was thinking, but I didn't care. They'd had my life mapped out almost since I was born, enrolling me into an all-girls school in the hope that nothing – i.e. boys – would distract me from the higher calling of academic success. It had cost them a

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fortune to send me to Fishguard Girls' Academy, but I didn't care about that either. Not when the perfect man was out there somewhere, waiting to fall in love with me and marry me and make me happy for however many years I'd got left.

I sang the final hymn with a lustiness that was almost obscene. Dad glanced at me as if afraid that grief was tipping me over the brink. Mum hissed at me to sing more quietly. Kate scowled because Lucy had been her friend, not mine, and if anybody deserved people's glances it definitely wasn't me.

Finally the service drew to a close. The priest prayed for Lucy's soul and I prayed for my own, asking God to keep me going until the legal age of marriageability. It was all very well having some future husband out there waiting for me, but some future drink-driver could be out there too. Either that or some unknown medical condition, waiting to take hold of my body – Sudden Adult Death Syndrome, which I'd heard about on the telly, or something like leukaemia that humans got as well as dogs.

The coffin started on its final journey down the aisle and everybody stood. Slowly, it passed out of church and out of our lives. By the time we'd followed it outside, the immediate family party had moved on to the crematorium. We stood blinking in the golden light of an autumn morning. The whole thing was over, just

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like Lucy's life. I wanted to tell Kate how sorry I was that she'd lost her friend but, for once, I didn't know where to start.

Neither of us said a word as we walked together to the village hall, where a lunch of savoury snacks had been provided by the Chan family. We didn't feel like eating, but queued up like everybody else to put something on our plates. Then we walked to the end of the hall to look at a memorial display of photographs that had been set up on a low dais, with a black sash hanging over them.

Most of the photos portrayed Lucy as a baby, a toddler or a serious little girl with jet-black hair, rarely smiling and always looking deadly earnest. My three favourites, however, were of her with their family dog, laughing as they played together; with her friends, including Kate, sunbathing on the beach; and with her GCSE certificates, standing to attention in school uniform, her proud smile like sunlight on a cloudy day.

I had to walk away. Suddenly I found myself crying. *At last* I was crying! The relief was overwhelming, but Kate was furious with me for making an exhibition of myself. If I had to cry, she said, I should have done it in church like everybody else, not here in the village hall over a plateful of savoury snacks.

'Pull yourself together,' she hissed. 'Everybody's staring.'

This only served to make things worse. I cried and

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couldn't stop, and Mum said I should have known the funeral would be too much for me and never have come. 'Think of other people's feelings,' she said. 'Especially your poor sister's. Either get a grip or return to school.'

This was rich, coming from Mrs Kleenex herself! It was also a wonderful example of the cunning way Mum's mind works, never letting an opportunity pass her by. Half my teachers were in that village hall, and a good number of fellow pupils and their parents, but I couldn't see anyone else being cajoled into returning to school.

'Just because you blew your own education,' I hissed, 'that doesn't give you the right to interfere with mine!'

Mum didn't like that one bit. She pursed her lips together and said, 'Maybe you're right. Maybe I *did* blow my education. Maybe I had the brains but didn't use them, and ended up in some crummy job that bored me rigid. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let the same thing happen to you!'

I didn't answer. It wasn't worth the bother. This was a well-worn argument, used against both Kate and me any time Mum thought that we were slacking. The best thing to do was walk away from it. So that's what I did. I shut Mum up by doing what she wanted and going back to school.

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Here my new-found ambition to get married took something of a knocking. It was English after lunch, and maybe men were glorious in books like *Pride and Prejudice* but, in Physics afterwards, my teacher, Mr Pugh, was a total pain. He always looked so nice and kind and friendly, and that's probably what Mrs Pugh thought when she married him, but he spent his every spare minute making our lives a misery – either that or chasing women, and the whole school knew it, and probably half of Fishguard too.

Being married didn't stop him. It didn't stop my friend Rebecca's father either, who was just the same. And maybe my friend Jody's stepfather didn't chase women, but nobody would ever want him, apart from his wife. I mean, who'd fall for a small-town vet who looked and smelt like a ferret, and spent his whole life up to his elbows in animals' backsides?

By the time I got home, I'd convinced myself that the funeral had worked me up into some weird mental state and marriage wasn't what I wanted after all. It was only for women whose careers were floundering, or who were panicking about being too old to have babies. It had nothing to do with love and serenity – and absolutely nothing to do with being fourteen.

Next day, however, buying chips after school, I caught sight of that boy again – the one I'd thought was Lucy's lover. He'd exchanged his smart black suit

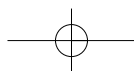
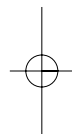
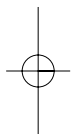
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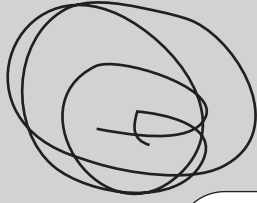
for an apron with ‘Charlie’s Takeaway’ written on it, and was serving behind the till. But he still looked terrific, and I broke out in a sweat and had to turn and walk away. Anybody else would have simply fancied him and been done with it, but I had to find my mind full of marriage again.

It was ridiculous, but I couldn’t help myself. I knew that boy couldn’t possibly be my Mr Right because he was too gorgeous to ever fancy me, and I was too young for him anyway. I mean, he had to be a good three years older than me.

But if I couldn’t marry him, then someone else had to be out there waiting instead. For suddenly – without a shadow of doubt – I knew that marriage was my destiny. There was no point telling myself that this could only be a fairy tale, or that the funeral had messed me up inside my head.

Some girls dreamt of being pop stars when they grew up, or scientists, or astronauts, or hairdressers, or nuns. They couldn’t explain why – it was just what they wanted. They had their vocations, and I mightn’t be able to explain either but, from that moment onwards, outside Charlie’s Takeaway, *I knew that this was mine.*





Cookery

Part I
Research

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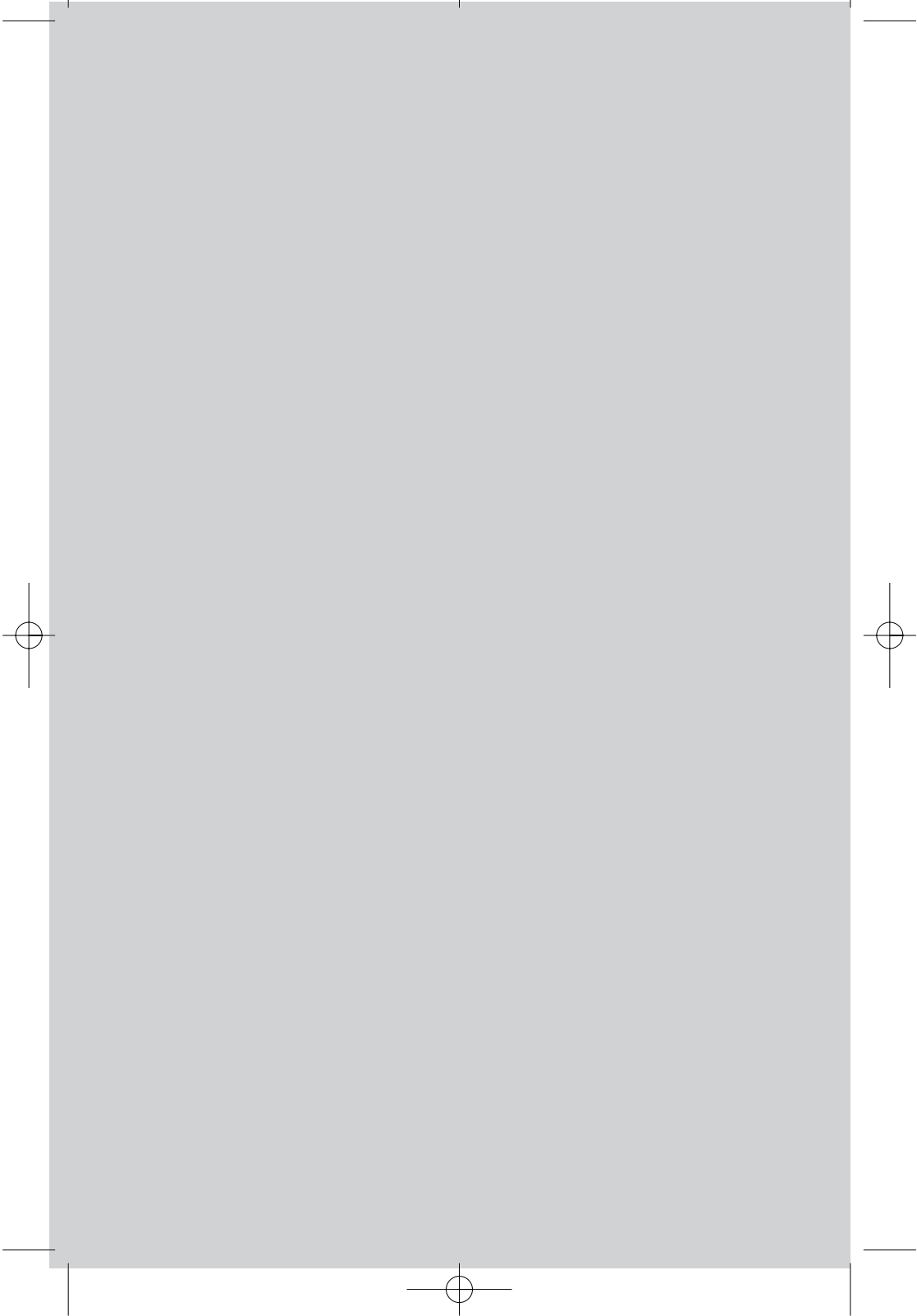
APPLICATION
IS THE
KEY

Division of labour
Property prices
DIY

Weddings

* * * * *
* * * * *

Babies
Sex
Men



1 Finding the Key

The key to passing exams is application. I know this for a fact because Ms Lloyd-Roberts told us so in assembly the day after the funeral. We were embarking on the GCSE syllabus, she said, and we must be wondering what we were in for. But we weren't to worry because, however hard things got, we were bound to succeed if we only applied ourselves.

'And by succeed,' she said, 'I don't just mean top grades, but achieving all your other goals as well. Passing exams is a vital step in scaling slopes as high as any Everest. But in your lifetime of achievement, it's only the first step. Don't you ever forget that.'

I mightn't forget, but I didn't necessarily understand. I shuffled restlessly, and so did everybody else. When Ms Lloyd-Roberts started on like that, we knew there'd be no stopping her. Sure enough, she carried on, blithely unaware of the confusion she was causing, talking about good foundations and building on our skills, essay by essay and brick by brick. Her Everest example was

Research

only the start of it. Comparisons were made between coursework and plumbing, electrical circuitry and exam success. And the purpose of it all, we were assured, was that the House of Knowledge would be our very own.

‘If my dad knew I was being trained for the building trade, he’d want his school fees back,’ Rebecca Edwards whispered, rolling her eyes.

‘You think you’ve got something to moan about?’ I said. ‘I’ve heard it all before. This is just the way my mother talks. It drives me crazy.’

Finally we filed out of the school hall, Ms Lloyd-Roberts’s final words ringing in our ears that we should, ‘Go forth and multiply your knowledge and enjoyment of the world. And don’t forget, girls – *application’s the key*.’ She beamed down at us, confident in the belief that she’d demystified the GCSE process and passed on something of vital importance for the next two years, if not the rest of our lives.

As soon as I left the hall, however, I put the whole thing out of my mind. I had other matters to think about – more important ones as well, like getting married. When I want something, I always have a strategy; short- and long-term objectives, plans and endless lists. I’m not the sort of person who can ever let a thing ‘just happen’.

But how to start on something like this? It was

Finding the Key

hardly the sort of project that I could discuss with my form tutor and, if I told my friends, they'd think that I was mad. As for my family – I'd never hear the end of it. As far as Dad was concerned, marriage was a ball and chain, only there for losers who put their trust in bits of paper. Mum said the divorce rate spoke for itself. And her sister, Jane, who lives up the other end of Goat Street from us, said that there wasn't a man alive who any woman could sensibly spend a lifetime with.

Even Jane's on-off boyfriend, Carl, felt the same, saying that the only way he'd ever tie the knot was if they let you marry more than one wife at a time.

Well, *that* wasn't the sort of marriage I had in mind! It was the boy-meets-girl, loves-girl-and-she-loves-him type of marriage, celebrated with a great big wedding and a happily ever after ending. The sort of marriage that you read about in novels, or see in films starring people like Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant.

But how could I tell anyone that this was what I wanted for myself? And, more to the point, how could I find someone to marry me before cruel fate took over and I went and died? By night, I'd lie awake asking myself this question, and by day, I'd scour the newspapers, looking for advice. I'd had obsessions before, like my astronaut phase, when I'd written to NASA and the European Space Programme, asking if they'd take me for work experience, and my actress phase, when I sent

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a letter to Catherine Zeta Jones's mam, who lived up the road from my great-aunt Blanche, asking for help. But this was different. I'd never felt so passionate about anything as I now did about getting married.

I cut out articles on film stars' marriages, royal marriages – including morganatic marriages – gay marriages, so-called immigration marriages, arranged marriages, serial marriages and teenage marriages, trying to understand what my obsession was all about. I read news items on fathers' rights, gypsy marriages and child slave brides, trawled through the letters pages in my sister's magazines and my parents' weekend newspapers, and drooled over photographs in *Vogue* of brides in state-of-the-art wedding frocks. But, despite my mounting box of cuttings, I still felt none the wiser.

What made the state of marriage so different to flat-sharing, for example, or joining a commune or living together like Mum and Dad? And as for getting married itself – how was I meant to make it happen? I didn't have a clue.

But then, one night my headmistress's words came back to me. I was lying in bed, staring blankly at the ceiling as usual, and suddenly it occurred to me that if application was the key to passing my exams, it could also be the key to getting married. The two weren't all that different. Both were gateways into adult life. Both required careful planning. Both had the power to

Finding the Key

change lives. And both – I suddenly realized – could be achieved in exactly the same way.

‘Of course,’ I thought. ‘It’s obvious! Maybe I don’t have all the answers, but *I know where to start!*’

I leapt out of bed and started rummaging through my schoolbooks, looking for my GCSE timetable for the next two years. I had class tests after Christmas, end-of-year exams next summer, mocks the following winter, study leave the following spring and what my teachers called ‘the real thing’ after that – a string of GCSE exams that would take place in May and June the summer after next.

Within that outer framework, however, there was another tighter structure – an intricate pattern of research, case studies, field trips, coursework and revision, giving shape and substance to every minute of the next two years. But could it also give shape to my new ambition?

I knew it could. ‘If I get this right,’ I thought, ‘I can actually be married the summer after next! It might sound crazy, but I know that I can pull it off. Mum and Dad will hate it, but I’ve got two years to work on that one. All I have to do is *apply myself!*’

I wrote the words ‘APPLICATION IS THE KEY’ in my diary. Then, as if I thought I might forget them, I tore out the page and stuck it over my desk. My mobile started bleeping, Jenna texting me to say

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goodnight, but I didn't text back as usual. I was too busy listing all the stages I'd have to go through in order to succeed in becoming a grade-A wife. My hands were shaking as I wrote everything down. It was as if I'd cracked a code and could read my future like a secret message. I wrote 'Research', 'Case Studies', 'Field Trip', 'Coursework', 'Revision', 'Mocks', 'Study Leave' and 'The Real Thing'.

By the time I'd finished, Jenna was on the phone, wanting to know why I hadn't replied. We chattered about nothing in particular until she fell asleep. But I lay wide awake, wishing I could sleep too but nursing a thumping headache. It was hardly surprising after so much excitement, but I made a note of it in the back of my diary, where I kept a detailed record of my personal health.

'Nothing to worry about, I'm sure,' I wrote, but put an asterisk in the margin so that it would show if a pattern was emerging.

At long last I fell asleep, but no sooner had I closed my eyes, or so it seemed to me, than it was morning. The sun came pouring through the curtains, shining on my desk and the message hanging over it. Application was every bit as much the key in the bright light of day as it had been last night, and I leapt out of bed and dashed to my desk, where I started drawing up a list of research subjects.

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'Babies' went onto that list, along with 'love', 'sex', 'weddings', 'men', 'religion', 'cookery', 'divisions of labour', 'property prices' and 'DIY'. I could have carried on as well – so totally absorbed that I forgot to wash and dress and was nearly late for school.

Finally, however, realizing how late I was, I hid the list in a desk drawer and rushed off without breakfast. Usually I met Jenna outside, and Jody and Rebecca down at the crossroads, but all three of them had gone by the time I appeared – and so had the school bus.

Not that I cared. It was nice to be alone and to have time to think. I sat in the bus shelter, waiting for the scheduled service to come along, watching sleepy little Newport coming to life. Our town's not like Fishguard, which is full of cars and shoppers, and has a business park, supermarkets, a railway station and a ferry terminal to Ireland. There are just a few rows of fishermen's cottages, a handful of shops, a couple of pubs, the rugby club and the primary school. Oh, and the yacht club, of course.

In the summer the holidaymakers come down with their cars and yachts and windsurf boards, and every house in town is full. But in the winter Newport's really quiet, apart from first thing in the morning, when people go to work or school, and teatime, when they come home again.

I watched mums with pushchairs making their way

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down the street, and cars jostling for position as they got caught up in the traffic at the bottom of the road between the school gate and the estuary. Jody's mum went by with a carload of toddlers for the nursery school, and came back with it empty. She offered me a lift into Fishguard, and I thanked her and got in. I wouldn't have minded staying at the bus stop all day, thinking my thoughts and watching the world passing by, but I knew it would only get me into trouble.

Jody's mum talked all the way to Fishguard, but I didn't hear a word. Normally I'm pretty chatty myself, so perhaps that's why, when she dropped me off, she said, 'Are you all right, Elin? You don't seem to be yourself today.'

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Really. Thanks for the ride.'

Jody's mum wasn't the only person who asked if I was all right that day. So many people asked that I ended up with a headache from repeating, 'Honestly, I'm fine.' It was a relief to get home, close the door on the lot of them, and get on with the only thing that really mattered in my life – *marriage plans*.

I opened up my diary, drew a line under everything I'd written so far, recorded the exact time, as if it was a significant moment in world history, and wrote END OF OLD LIFE, START OF NEW. Then I took the research list I'd hidden in my drawer and started work in earnest.

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On a fresh page, I wrote my aim – to be married on my sixteenth birthday, 31 August, in two years' time, which was the first day when I'd be old enough, in law, to become a wife. Then I started brainstorming. I went down that list, scribbling every thought-association that came into my head, and became so carried away with it all that I started recording ridiculous things, like what hair colour I preferred in my ideal husband, and the names I'd give our children.

Welsh names were out. Names like Jez and Baz and Zak were in. And my husband would be called Sebastian, or Seb for short, or Oliver or James. His eyes would be brown, and they'd be kind eyes and utterly trustworthy, but there'd be a hint of wickedness in them as well – something exciting that would set him apart.

I didn't mind how old he was, but he had to be smart. He had to be crazy about me too, head over heels in love. It would help if he had money – enough to get me a big, flashy diamond ring, not to say anything of a wedding dress out of *Vogue* – and I wouldn't exactly object if he drove around in something really cool, like a Porsche. That would definitely be one up on Mum and Dad, who drove a clapped-out Mazda known universally as the 'Millennium Falcon', and Rebecca's family with their boring BMWs.

Page after page, I wrote this down until I finally

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realized what a load of rubbish it was, and tore it up and threw it in the bin. Apart from the bit about love, there was scarcely a word on any of those pages that had anything to do with the real me, or what I wanted out of life, or how I intended to make my marriage work when I'd found my Mr Right.

It was as if I was running away from the real project ahead of me, sensing how difficult and challenging it was going to be. For the first time, it dawned on me exactly what I'd taken on. Marriage was a tricky business – not just the getting married either, but staying that way. You only had to read the newspapers to see that. I thought of all those rich and famous people whose marriages had failed. It made you think. It really did. The wonder was that people still wanted to go through with it.

And yet they did. Year by year, all around the planet, in every race and culture, people still got married.

'It speaks for itself,' I thought. 'There has to be a way of making a success of it, otherwise people wouldn't bother.'

But figuring out what that way might be, and then getting it down on paper, were proving far more difficult than I'd expected. I sat for ages, writing things like 'It's important to communicate,' and, 'You need a bit of give and take.' But I knew I was only scraping the surface. There was so much more to it all than that.

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And, besides, I wasn't answering the question of how to find a husband in the first place.

When Mum called me down for supper, it came as a relief. It was a special family supper too. Grandad had come round, and Dad was home early from work. Even Kate came down and ate with us instead of eating in her bedroom, over her homework.

The cause of our celebration was Jane, who'd just come out of hospital with her brand-new baby daughter, Imogen Louise. She was a beautiful-looking baby with flawless skin and ginger hair, but she cried most of the time, not even stopping when we drank her health in sparkling wine. Not that Jane seemed to mind. After seven long days in hospital, fighting doctors, nurses and midwives, she was happy to be back again in the bosom of the family.

We're a funny lot, our family – as thick as thieves, but continually fighting. But then, an old grump like Grandad – Dad's words, not mine – couldn't possibly have had daughters who didn't enjoy an argument from time to time. Even Kate can be an old grump, and Dad's not much better sometimes.

All the way through supper, they argued about everything that you could think of. Even Imogen Louise couldn't shut them up. God, politics, the pros and cons of breast-feeding – they argued about it all. I sat back and watched. There was Kate, who'd been so

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quiet since Lucy's funeral, getting animated and chipping in; Dad big and brawny, rolling up his sleeves as the argument got heavy; Mum small and tight in a sweater that had shrunk because she'd washed it on the wrong setting, insisting that only she was right; Jane trying to have the last word over the din of Imogen Louise; and Grandad, who couldn't hear most of the argument but reckoned he didn't need to anyway, because he knew better than anybody else.

What bound us all together, I wondered? Was it simply blood relationships, or was there more to it than that? We thought we knew each other through and through, but did we really? Did *I* know them? Did *they* know me? Was I just that little girl, to them, who appeared in all the family photographs, her hair tied up in bunches and braces on her teeth? Or had they noticed I'd grown up, and was old enough to plan a marriage?

As soon as the meal was over I tore back upstairs, saying I had mountains of work to do. Somehow I had to turn my messy brainstorming into a proper structure with dates on it so that, when the Big Day came, I'd be as ready for it as any GCSE.

Before I could do that, however – in fact, before I could do anything else – I had some important questions to ask. I'd been thinking about them all through supper, and now I got out my diary and started writing

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them down. After 'Research' and somewhere between 'Case Studies', 'Field Trip' and 'Revision', I promised myself I'd produce an essay on each question and store it under the heading 'Coursework'.

'*What is Marriage?*' I wrote, followed by '*How to Recognize Mr Right*', '*How to Keep Him When You've Found Him*', '*What's Wrong with Marrying at Sixteen?*', '*The Pros and Cons of Babies*', '*How to Stop Them Screaming*' and '*What is Love?*'

Once I'd started, there was no stopping me. I lay awake for hours that night, thinking in the darkness. '*Why Get Married?*' I thought, and '*What's It Going to be Like?*', and I was still coming up with questions in the morning. In fact, I was so busy getting them down that I was late again for the school bus.

This time it was Dad who, finding me sitting in the shelter, drove me to Fishguard. He was late for work himself, but scolded me all the way to school for what he called my bad time-keeping. This was totally unjust, but later that very same day I had reason to dwell upon the fact that men *were* sometimes unjust, and there was nothing you could do to change them.

It was Mr Pugh, our Physics teacher, who got me thinking that way, shouting at us for not finishing a piece of Physics homework that he hadn't even given us. We tried to point this out to him, but he shouted even more and refused to listen to a word we said.

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Afterwards, everybody grumbled about him. 'Men are stupid,' Jody said, and Rebecca quoted her mother saying that all there was to know about them started and ended between their legs.

Everybody thought this was hysterical, except for me, who laughed along with all the rest but didn't quite get the joke. When I got home, I promised myself, I'd start my research on the thorny subject of 'Men'. Obviously I'd got a lot to learn.

To this end, I made another of my lists – a short but tricky affair listing the general areas I might want to investigate, though not knowing quite where to start. I cursed the fact that I didn't have a brother and that most of my school life had been spent with girls. There was no one I could ask to help me. Jenna had a brother, but he was away at university, and Jane's boyfriend, Carl, was out of favour at the minute, and the only other boys I knew were the ones who hung around outside school at the end of the day – and they'd never as much as looked my way.

But then that evening – as if designed especially to get my research going – Mum and Dad had an argument. I didn't know what had set it off because I was in my room at the time, but when I got downstairs it had blown out of all proportion. Mum was accusing Dad of doing nothing with his life except slumming in front of the telly watching kung-fu DVDs and

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boring reality TV shows about people like us having arguments about watching the telly. He refused to switch it off and she tried to make him by snatching the remote. They ended up screaming at each other. Mum accused Dad of being fat and he called her a nag.

‘*A nag?*’ she yelled, turning bright red. ‘You think I *nag*? You think that *I* – who spend my whole life biting my tongue – nag *you*?! Why, if you ever listened, it’d be a different story. You try the patience of a saint, you really do. Any other woman would have dumped you years ago. I mean, look at you! Whatever happened to your get-up-and-go? You’re like a lump of soggy bread. You’re like a bowl of porridge. You’re like . . .’

She ran out of words. Dad laughed as if he’d won, but in the end she succeeded in getting him off the sofa.

‘Typical woman!’ he grumbled as he stomped out of the room. ‘You never know when to leave a chap alone. Thank God I never made the mistake of marrying you!’

‘Typical man,’ Mum shouted back, ‘to think I’d ever *want* to!’