

## **The East Reiham Quartet**

### **ONE**

My friend James is a novelist. He's married to my friend Eleanor, who's also a novelist. Eleanor's best friend Stella – also one of my best friends – is a novelist too, and married to Larry, who's a very good friend of mine and... a novelist. They are, in sum, my four closest friends. I introduced James to Eleanor at university, and Stella to Larry while in my first publishing job. I was best man to James and job-share best man, with James, to Larry. James and Eleanor's son Daniel is named after me, and I'm atheist-godfather to their daughter Juniper and proper C-of-E godfather to Stella and Larry's daughter Annabel.

These four were the companions of my young adulthood, those friends you're supposed to get drunk and take drugs with, and have late-night discussions with, and find your way through the world with, celebrate and commiserate rites of passage with, and even perhaps have the odd fling with – though not in my case. We all shared a similar background: the educationally-aspirational upper-working or lower-lower-mid. We shared, too, that pre-loans, pre-fees, pre-results-obsessive university experience, an extraordinary gift we didn't appreciate, alongside an idealism that was already in the late Eighties under threat. And we had the books thing in common. When we were younger, we – I'm pretty sure I can speak for all of us here – we all thought books were magical windows. We marvelled at the wonderful

things they could do, how they could change your heart and maybe the world. Then in time books became, in one way or another, the way we all earned a living, and the magic started to have a price-tag. Nowadays James runs a second-hand bookshop which survives mainly through internet orders; Stella is a librarian, one of the new hi-tech kind who understand databases and search engines; Larry is Head of English at an East London school – or, I should say, academy; Eleanor teaches Creative Writing (and the more lucrative ‘Writing for Business’) at City East Uni; and I’m an editor at Durrant & Lowe. Over the years, I’ve been there in the background while they had their courtships and house-buying and children, their parental ill-health and their promotions. And while they published their first novels, like their subsidiary lives, all within a couple of years of each other, and which all had the briefest flare and a long tail down to a line on the CV.

The other thing I ought to mention, given everything that follows, is that since I knew each of them separately, often for a good while, before I knew them together as couples, those pre-couple relationships, while they lost their primary importance, didn’t fade entirely. They routed themselves into certain defined activities. I still spent time at the cinema with Stella. Larry remained my tennis partner; in the winter we used to play squash, which latterly had become badminton. I would go with James down The Lime Tree and drink Old Fox or Alamein and sometimes play pool. Eleanor worked not far from me, and we’d have coffee or lunch in a bare-brick coffee shop.

All this made me the recipient of separate, individual confidences. I heard about the first novels, and then about the attempts on the second novels, which were slow coming, because of children and finance and all the other reasons that put real people before imaginary ones. I heard about the houses and jobs and holidays and kids and relatives. And I heard about the others. The little friendship foibles and disagreements. What annoyed Larry

about James – “much as I love the bloke,” said Larry. What little thing Stella had said, while they were shopping, that had made Eleanor smile. The limits of the cross-foursome friendships (Eleanor: “Larry is a such a show-off. I know you’ll never agree with me, Dan, but he is.”). My job was to listen, and to say things like, “He's always been like that, he doesn't mean it,” and “I've known her since we were eighteen, and she's never thought that.” And, “Oh, I really don't think that's true.”

And over time, the marital foibles too – the dull complaints of socks and toilet seats and make-up and time-keeping, and OCD and slatternliness and downright sexism and “Sometimes I really don't understand her, Dan,” and “I love him but he sometimes drives me up the wall,” and “We've not been getting on that well lately, to be honest,” and “Sometimes I feel I'm missing something,” and “Sometimes I envy you single people,” and then one day, “Dan,” said Stella, “I need to tell you something. About me and Larry.”

Unlike Eleanor, Stella was not one for being dramatic, and her whole lengthy overture about how I was such a good friend and how trustworthy, and how discreet (it's true, I used to be) began alarming me. Money, relatives or sex? I thought. The unholy trinity of marital firestarters. Not money, probably. Not relatives, surely. It must be, oh God, sex.

I still remember it clearly. We were in the Odeon, in that red-lit limbo before the adverts. Stella's lovely light-brown hair bobbed and curled about her head. It's the facing-forwardness of cinema seats. Car-seats are the same. Sit next to each other, facing a screen, and you can say the hard things more easily.

“I'm going out with James,” she said. Not proudly, not miserably, not bravely, not sheepishly, in fact quite matter-of-factly, as though the words themselves would do all the work without the aid of any expression on her part. Spoken like a novelist, in fact.