

Chapter 2

Thoughts from Tuscany By Emily Robertson

*F*riday night is pasta e fagioli night. In Italy, the custom of no meat on Fridays is still strong. The local pescivendolo does a roaring trade in gamberetti, scallops and little grey fish like sardines. Even some restaurants refuse to serve meat which, admittedly, is no sacrifice in a country so rich in other culinary delights. Italy really is paradise for the vegetarian. Even Daughter Number 2 who, in England, dined sullenly on congealed baked beans and beige toast, is suddenly devouring pizza napolitana and spaghetti con aglio.

Pasta e fagioli is a traditional Tuscan dish (the Tuscans are known in Italy as 'the bean eaters') which comes to us courtesy of Olimpia, our Treasure. Olimpia is an angel in a headscarf and pinny who came on our first day to 'help us out' and has become a member of the family. She cooks for us, cleans for us and scolds us constantly

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but we couldn't live without her. She has enriched our lives in so many ways but in no way more than in bequeathing us the recipe for pasta e fagioli, a heady fusion of borlotti beans, tomatoes, garlic and herbs. The recipe is actually meant to include bacon, which Olimpia devoutly omits on a Friday, but sometimes I surreptitiously add a dash of pancetta fat and don't tell Number 2.

So, on Friday night, the pasta e fagioli is simmering on the stove. An earthenware pitcher of the local Chianti stands on the scrubbed, wooden table. Crusty ciabatte (the Italian word, incidentally, for slippers), fresh out of the oven, sit steaming in their plaited basket. Spouse, who has been away for a week on business, stands in the doorway and sniffs appreciatively. 'Now I know I'm home,' he says.

To: Petra McAllister

From: Emily Robertson

Subject: None

Paul has left me. Bugger.

To: Petra McAllister

From: Emily Robertson

Subject: Thank you

Thank you so much for ringing last night. It meant so much just to hear another human voice. I mean, I know the kids are human but I can't really talk about it to them. I've just told them that Dad has been delayed at work and, God knows, they're

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used to that. I think Siena knows that something's up. She keeps asking questions, which is really unlike her. Usually she's totally absorbed in her own life: Giancarlo, school, clothes etc. But now she keeps asking when Dad will be back, why hasn't he rung, what's this important meeting he had to go to. On and on. It's driving me mad. Paris says nothing but then she never does.

You asked if this was a surprise and I said, yes, of course it was. I was even quite cross with you for asking. But actually I don't think it was really. I mean, I didn't think Paul would leave me like that, without any warning, but I've known for ages that something was up. Last night, I couldn't sleep so I just sat outside on the terrace all night thinking and thinking. Once I heard this howl quite near me (do you know they still have wolves in Italy?) and I thought, serve Paul right if I get eaten by a wolf and it's all his fault. But actually it wouldn't serve him right at all, only make it easier for him to start a new life with whoever she is. And yes, I am sure there is a whoever she is. I just know him so well. He might be fed up with me but he'd never go to all the trouble of leaving me if there wasn't something better on offer. I remember, when we first met, he always had something lined up for Saturday night. If something better came along, he'd cancel the first date but he'd never do that unless he had a better offer. So I'm sure he wouldn't walk out on one woman unless he had a

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better one lined up.

Oh God, Pete, what a long, depressing email. I'd press delete if I were you. Wish I could press delete on the whole of yesterday, on the whole of the last five years if that wouldn't mean losing my darling Charlie. Life's a bitch, as they say. Remember, Michael used to say 'Life's a beach and then you fry'? Sometimes nostalgia hurts more than anything.

Take care

Em

xxxx

On Monday morning, Emily sits on her terrace trying to ignore Olimpia who is inside muttering about the dirty habits of the English ('What is a bidet?' she mimics in a vicious falsetto). Emily is staring at her laptop. The file at the top of the screen reads 'Thoughts from Tuscany 50'. Her fiftieth column about the delights of Tuscan life. Dispiritedly she types in a title, 'Summer nights at the Villa Serena', then clicks on the icon to underline it. She sighs. She can't think of a single thing to say about summer nights at the Villa Serena. Olimpia's Hoover whines from inside the house. The Microsoft flag waves at her jauntily from the bottom of the screen.

Siena and Paris have gone to the local swimming pool (Paris making up a threesome with Giancarlo under protest). Charlie is

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having his siesta. Emily's copy is due tomorrow yet her mind seems vast and empty, filled just with one tiny scrabbling gerbil of a thought: Paul has left me, Paul has left me. Because she is so used to being without Paul, his absence doesn't impinge on her everyday routine, it is not as if she misses his shoes under the bed, his body in the shower, his whisper in the night. It is as if she needs this ridiculous gerbil thought, just to remind her of how serious things are. Paul has left me, he has left me.

In desperation, Emily types a string of key words about Tuscany: light, heat, olive oil, sun-dried, wine, terracotta, hills, vines, piazza, antipasti, rustic, unspoilt, cappuccino. Then she tries to form these into elegant, elegiac sentences: 'We ate antipasti under the vines in the rustic piazza', 'Sun-dried tomatoes, sprinkled with a little virgin oil make the perfect antipasti', 'Cappuccino drunk in the heat of the morning in the beautiful local piazza'. She groans and presses delete, delete, delete. Then she types another list of words: shit, fuck, bugger, bastard, wanker.

The sun is hot on the back of her neck so she shifts round until she is in the shade of the beautiful, rustic, etc., etc., vine. Bunches of grapes dangle in front of her like some illustration of plenty (though she knows that, in fact, they are not yet good to eat, being sour and hard). Two hunting dogs with bells round their necks crash through the undergrowth and disappear around the side of the house, intent on business of their own. A lizard suns itself on the baking stones, shutting its eyes with prehistoric calm. Emily,

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too, shuts her eyes and thinks about her husband. He's left me, he's left me.

'I'm not leaving the kids,' Paul explained kindly when she finally reached him on the phone late on Friday night. 'I'm leaving you.'

'But why?' Emily asked for the hundredth time.

'Our marriage is over,' pronounced Paul as if this was an indisputable fact, one which Emily had been wilfully denying for some time.

'How can you say that? We've never even talked ...'

'Emily,' said Paul, with awful heaviness, 'I don't want to discuss this any more.'

'Don't you? Well I do! After all, you've just told me that our seventeen-year marriage is over. Don't you think I deserve an explanation?'

'Don't get hysterical, Emily.'

'I'm not hysterical,' said Emily. 'I'm fucking furious.'

Then she had slammed down the phone and spent the next two hours trying to ring him back. His phone was switched off. Panicking, she phoned his parents in Portsmouth, 'Neither Derek nor Anthea is able to take your call right now,' then his brother in Gravesend.

'But it's the middle of the night, Emily,' Anthony kept saying.

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'I know. Your brother's just left me. I need to talk to him. Do you know where he is?'

'But it's the middle of the—'

She had hung up on him and sat in the dark sitting room of the Villa Serena (all exposed beams and giant fireplace), trying to breathe calmly. Then she texted Paul ('bstrd!') and wrote him an email. Then she deleted the email and sent one to Petra instead. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a large glass of wine. Drinking was difficult because her throat seemed to have closed up but she persevered, sip by sip. Why had Paul left her? They had been happy, hadn't they? Of course it had been a strain coming to live in a new country but, she told herself, that was only to be expected. OK, Italy was her idea but Paul owed her that much surely, after the Affair? And Paul had seemed happy enough; it had fitted in with his idea of his own lifestyle (villa in Tuscany, skiing in Klosters, Christmas shopping in New York). He had even set up his own company, selling Italian property to starry-eyed English families. And she had got a job writing about how wonderful it all was. Paul was lucky to have her. She had looked after the children, made the house look lovely, she was the one stuck here all the bloody time. Self-pity was dangerous. She took another deep breath. What was going to happen to her now?

The phone had rung and she raced across the hallway to answer it. In those few seconds she lived through the entire reconciliation: Paul's tearful apologies, her own gracious

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understanding, their ecstatic reunion. A second (or third) honeymoon, somewhere exotic (not Italy), away from the children. A new start. Perhaps even a fourth baby.

But it wasn't Paul, it was Petra.

Now she sits frozen in the sun and thinks, I might never see Paul again.

She will, of course. Paul finally rang back on Saturday night and proposed flying to Italy the next weekend so they could 'discuss things more sensibly'.

'Discuss what?'

'Well, access, solicitors, that sort of thing.'

Emily had been dumbstruck. 'Access' had such a worn, legalistic ring. How could Paul, who had once, in a Siena hotel room, compared her to Botticelli's Venus, be talking to her about access?

'Emily? Are you there?'

'Yes. Don't you think you're moving rather fast? Yesterday I had no idea that anything was wrong and now you're talking to me about access and solicitors.'

'Emily.' Deep sigh. 'You must have known for years that something was wrong.'

'Well, I didn't.'

Emily traces her name in the dust on the terrace wall and

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thinks: did she really know all along? All right, they had had what they always referred to as their 'rough patch'. Siena had been twelve and Paris ten and Emily was just resigning herself to the fact that she wouldn't have any more children. Paul was working all hours starting a new company and Emily felt lonely and neglected. Siena was at secondary school, Paris would follow next year. She remembers how much she dreaded losing the comforting routine of the school gates. But then it turned out that Paul would miss it even more as he was having an affair with one of the teachers, a woman he had actually met during a parent/teacher consultation. Emily had left him, gone to Brighton, asked for a divorce. But then they had got back together. It had been Paul who wanted the reconciliation, she thinks sourly; he had come racing after her, begged her to go back to him. She remembers, at the time, feeling quite strong and determined about the whole thing. She was going to divorce Paul and start a new life with the girls.

But Paul had arrived, begging her for a second chance, and she had relented. This time it must work, she had told herself. And, for a while, it had. Paul had been lovely to her, wooing her all over again, and eventually she had begun to love him again. She suddenly became consumed with desire for a third child and Paul had agreed, with hardly any persuasion. They had had darling Charlie and they were both besotted with him. Then Emily had her big idea. They should go to Italy, start a new life, just the five of them. A perfect new life in the sun. She remembers how the vision of this perfect new life, the children playing under the olive

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trees, tranquil evenings in the cool of the terrace, the view of the hills at sunrise, had sustained her for months, had carried her through all the actual horrors of moving, the children's hysterics, Paul's boredom, her own, suppressed feelings of panic and inadequacy. It is only now that she wonders if this vision was ever really shared by her husband.

He had loved the house, though. They had fallen in love with it together, during that magical holiday in Siena. Leaving the children with Emily's parents, they had embarked on a second honeymoon: visiting crumbling properties by day, eating in the famous piazza in the evening, making love all night to the sounds of Tuscany (church bells, scooters whizzing past, the cries of Italian youth at play). One evening they had seen the Villa Serena, dusky pink in the evening sun, and they knew they had come home. But then they actually moved to Tuscany and their idyllic tourist days were over. Emily had thrown herself into the renovations but she knew that Paul was bored and irritated by the mess and chaos involved making the Villa Serena a Tuscan paradise. He spent more and more time away, returning only to complain about the workmen and, increasingly, about Tuscany itself. Too late Emily realised that Paul, the urban wheeler-dealer, was never at his best in the country.

Yes, of course she knew.

Emily sighs again and turns her laptop away from the sun. She opens 'Thoughts from Tuscany 50' once more and types:

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'Summer evenings in Tuscany, drinking cold white wine and watching the stars appear over the distant hills ...'

Paris sits by the side of the swimming pool, in the only available shade (half an umbrella). She adjusts her peaked cap and pulls her T-shirt down over her knees. She is not going to get skin cancer, thank you very much, not like that idiot Siena, sitting on the baked concrete in the full glare of the sun, pulling her bikini straps down over her shoulders. Just asking for melanomas, thinks Paris sourly; she is sure that mole wasn't there last week. A beauty spot, Siena calls it. The Lake District is a beauty spot, mocks the running commentary in Paris's head, that is the grim reaper, my sweet. The Lake District sounds so wonderfully cold and English that she has to close her eyes for a moment to stop herself feeling dizzy with homesickness.

Siena saunters over, her blue bikini now just clinging to the bottom half of her breasts. Paris had never realised before just how fat Siena was getting. Her boobs are huge, all sweaty and glistening with suntan oil, and there is a definite roll above her bikini bottoms. Not a roll, almost a tyre. Paris shuts her eyes.

'Paris! Do you want an ice cream?'

'No thanks,' says Paris, eyes shut.

'A drink then. You ought to, it's so hot.'

'No thanks.'

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'You ought to,' Siena persists.

'OK,' says Paris, to get rid of her. 'Water.'

'Con gas?' asks Siena with an affected Italian accent.

'Still,' says Paris, through gritted teeth.

Siena wanders over to the café where she is joined by Giancarlo and his friends. Then they start that whole loud, horseplay thing that Italians seem to do at the drop of a hat: throaty cries ('Aiee! Hai!'), extravagant hand gestures, lots of pushing and shoving and laughter. What in God's name, thinks Paris, have they got to laugh at? Giancarlo, the pastry chef's son, doomed to a lifetime of cooking biscotti in ninety-degree heat. Massimo, the farmer's son, whose parents have never travelled outside Tuscany. Pretty Francesca, already engaged to sullen Mauro, the mechanic. Clever Andrea, who will probably never get to Pisa University to study medicine. Why the hell do they look so pleased with themselves, wrestling with each other at the pool's edge, drops of water like jewels shining on their brown legs and arms? OK, they're good looking, if you like that smug, well-fed look, which Paris doesn't. But is that everything? Is that enough?

If they were English, she would think they were drunk, the way Dad and his friends sometimes got on a Sunday afternoon after watching the rugby. But Italians didn't seem to drink, alcohol that is. She'd heard Mum saying that it was impossible for a woman to get a second glass of wine in Italy. Well, that was OK. She hated Mum to drink wine. It made her face softer and vaguer than ever.

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When Mum and Dad both drank wine it was unbearable. They'd either argue or get all kissy and stupid. But Giancarlo and his friends were all kissy and stupid on two cans of lemon soda and an aqua minerale. Weird.

Siena hands her a bottle of mineral water, still sweating from the freezer. Paris opens it and takes a tiny sip. She is experimenting with taking smaller and smaller amounts of food and liquid. She can almost feel the water trickling slowly past her larynx and sliding gently down her throat, drop by drop.

'Hey, Parigi!' This is Giancarlo, using a version of her name that she hates. She ignores him.

'You want to swim?'

He stands in front of her, all skinny brown body, baggy swimming trunks and beaded necklace. How can Siena find him attractive?

'No thanks,' she says.

Giancarlo lifts both hands in an operatic gesture of acceptance. He turns back to Siena and Paris hears him say, 'Your sister. She hates me.'

She cannot hear Siena's reply but there is a lot of giggling and head-tossing. Paris lies down in the shade of the umbrella and closes her eyes.

At the Villa Serena, Emily makes scrambled eggs and attempts to

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arrange her thoughts. Paul has left me, she begins briskly. Things to do:

1. Sell house
2. Move back to England
3. Get a proper job
4. Organise childcare
5. Get a divorce.

She stops because she is crying. Charlie, sitting stolidly at the table waiting for his eggs, says, 'Mummy's face is wet.'

'It's the cooking,' says Emily. Charlie stares at her as if this answer is beneath his contempt. Emily stirs the eggs with a wooden spoon and adds salt and pepper.

'No black bits,' says Charlie sharply.

Emily starts to pick out the pieces of pepper. Paul has left me, she begins again. I have three children without a father. No great change there, she thinks. Paul was away most weeks, travelling to London or Frankfurt on business. She is used to living without him, she tells herself, she'll hardly miss him at all.

But then she stops herself, staring at the congealing egg, pale yellow against the heavy iron frying pan. There is a big difference between your husband being away on business and your husband

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leaving you. A vast, yawning gulf of a difference. Paul may not have been with her physically during those long, hot afternoons when the washing machine broke down and Paris broke her arm jumping from the terrace, but he had been there somewhere, in the background, a phone call away. Someone to moan to about the kids, safe because he was the only other person in the world who loved them as much as she did.

Dispiritedly, Emily spoons the scrambled egg onto a Postman Pat plate. It looks disgusting, she thinks, but Charlie, watching her through narrowed eyes, consents to eat a spoonful. She does not feel like eating. In fact, she feels as if she will never eat again. At least then she will lose some weight. She just knows, somewhere deep in her heart, that Paul has left her for someone slimmer.

She is sure that he has another woman, just as she is sure, even deeper in her heart, that the Affair with the teacher was not the only one. Paul is attractive to women, with his mesmeric blue eyes and his habit of sitting just a little bit too close. She has seen it so often, with strangers, colleagues, even with friends, women who criticised Paul behind his back ('He doesn't deserve you, Emily') but became curiously skittish and playful in his presence.

Slowly, deliberately, Charlie tips his drink over. Bending down to clear it up, Emily says brightly, 'What shall we do this afternoon, Charlie Bear? Shall we play with your train track?'

'No train track.'

'What about a lovely walk? We could go and look at Anna-

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Luisa's hens.'

'No walk. Horrible hens.'

Afternoons in Italy, with no parks, no soft play areas and no children's television have begun to assume monstrous proportions in Emily's mind. Hour after hour of hot walks to see the hens or endless games running wooden cars along stone floors. All the thousands of times she has looked at her watch to find that only ten minutes has passed. All the tears, tantrums and capitulations. Emily sighs.

'What about a video?'

Ten minutes later they are sitting in the cool, high-ceilinged sitting room watching *The Jungle Book*. Charlie looks up from the screen as Mowgli is adopted by the wolf family. The Father Wolf is standing on a rock laying down the law about something, the Mother Wolf is looking at him apprehensively.

'When's Daddy coming home?' asks Charlie.