



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

## **TAKING PICTURES**

by Anne Enright

Format: Trade Paperback

ISBN: 9780224085335

Imprint: Jonathan Cape

Released in May, 2008



### **PALE HANDS I LOVED, BESIDE THE SHALAMAR**

I had sex with this guy one Saturday night before Christmas and gave him my number and, something about him, I should have known he would be the type to call. For once, I was almost grateful that Fintan answered the phone. I could hear him through the sliding door.

‘Yes, she’s here. She’s in the kitchen, eating dead things.’

Then, ‘No, I’m not a vegetarian.’

Then, ‘I mean dead as in dead. I mean people like you.’

I said, ‘Just give me the phone, Fintan.’

After the call was finished, I threw out the rest of my dinner, came into the living room and sat down. Fintan was watching a documentary about airports, which turned out to be quite funny. When it was over, I got up to go to bed and he looked up at me and said, ‘Do not go gentle.’

And I said, ‘Goodnight, Fintan. Goodnight, darling. Goodnight.’

I nearly went out with Fintan, before he was diagnosed. Now, we live together and people say to me, Isn’t that a bit dangerous? But he is the gentlest man I know. The ashtrays were the biggest problem; the filth of them. I finally said it to him one day over the washing-up, and he disappeared for a week. Then one evening he was back, sitting on the sofa with a brass box in his hand. It had the most vicious spring lid. I said, ‘Where did you get that from, India?’ and he looked at me. You can hear him clacking and snapping all over the house now. It’s like someone smoking into a mousetrap, but it still makes me smile.

Otherwise I have no complaints. I would get him to wash his clothes more, but I think he is happier with the smell, and so am I. It reminds me of the time when I nearly loved him, back in college when it rained all the time, and no one had any heating, and the first thing you did with a man was stick your schnozz into his jumper and inhale.

These days, he is thinner and his hands tremble. He leaves his coat on around the house, and spends a lot of time looking at the air in the middle of the room - not at the ceiling or the walls, but at the air itself.

You can’t trust that sort of thing. I would be the last to trust it. Personally, I don’t think he would hurt a fly, but I still check his medication when he is not around. And yet, it was

**Extract from TAKING PICTURES by Anne Enright**

Available in bookshops May, 2008

ISBN: 9780224085335 | Imprint: Jonathan Cape | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

true what he said - when the phone rang that night, I was eating dead things. I was sitting in the kitchen with the condensation running down the black windowpane, forking through the carbonara as though it was all the men I had missed or messed up. All the men I had missed or messed up. If it was a song you could sing it. If it was a song you could Play it, Sam.

I went out and took the receiver and said, 'Hello?' and glared at Fintan until he left the hall. 'Sorry about that.'

'Is that you?' said the guy at the other end. 'Is that you?'

So, he introduced himself - which is odd if you have slept with someone already. Then, he asked me out for 'a date'. I didn't know what to say. There was none of that when I started out. You just bumped into people. You just stayed for one more drink and then by accident until closing time, and then by a miracle, by a fumble, by something slippery and inadvertent, for the night. (But it was a serious business, this accident, I'm telling you. It was as serious as an accident with a car.) This was partly what I had been thinking in the kitchen, as the pasta slithered through the egg and the cream - How do I do this now? How do I crash the goddamn car?

'So, what about Friday night?' he said.

'Sorry?'

'Or Wednesday?'

I checked an imaginary diary in the darkness of the hall, and listened for a while to the dialling tone, after he had put down the phone.

I wasn't sure that I liked him. That was all.

The dinner was hilarious. I should stop whining about my life, but I sat in a restaurant with red velvet curtains and white linen tablecloths and expensive, smirking waiters, and wondered, as I played with the fish knife, what all this was *for*. We went back to his place and I could feel the migraine coming through the sex. It should have been nice - I have no objection to sex - but with the migraine starting I felt as though he was a long way away from me, and every thrust set my brain flaring until I was very small and curled up, somehow, at the bottom of my own personal well.

Of course he was very solicitous and insisted on driving me home. Men say they want casual sex but, when you say thanks-very-much-goodnight they get quite insulted, I find. So he touched the side of my face and asked could he see me again, and when I said yes he undid the central locking system with a hiss and a clunk, and let me go.

In the kitchen I drank four cups of kick-ass black coffee, and went to bed. And waited.

Some time the next day, Fintan came in and closed the curtains where there was a little burn of light coming through. I was so happy the light was gone, I started to cry. There is something unbelievable about a migraine. You lie there and can't believe it. You lie there, rigid with unbelief, like an atheist in hell.

**Extract from TAKING PICTURES by Anne Enright**

Available in bookshops May, 2008

ISBN: 9780224085335 | Imprint: Jonathan Cape | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

Fintan settled himself on a chair beside the bed and started to read to me. I didn't mind. I could hear everything and understand everything, but the words slid by. He was holding my childhood copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and I wondered were the colours that intense when I was young; Alice's hair a shouting yellow, the flamingo scalded pink in her arms.

He got to the bit about the three sisters who lived in the treacle well - Elsie, Lacie and Tillie. And what did they live on? Treacle.

'They couldn't have done that, you know,' Alice said, 'they'd have been ill.'

'So they were,' said the Dormouse. 'VERY ill.'

I smiled, swamped by self-pity. And suddenly I got it - clear as clear - the smell of treacle, like a joke. The room was full of it. Sweet and burnt. It was a dilation of the air: it was a pebble dropped into the pool of my mind, so that, by the time the last ripple had faded, the pain was gone or thinking of going. The pain was possible once again.

'Oh,' I said.

'What?' said Fintan.

He looked at me in the half-dark. Downstairs, the phone began to ring. I went to get out of bed but Fintan stopped me, just by the way he sat there, in a chair by my side.

A couple of weeks later I was arguing with him, banging his dirty dishes in the kitchen. It is possible Fintan has a problem with water. It is possible all men have a problem with water. Some day they will find the gene for it, but in the meantime, I want a better life.

But of course Fintan never answers back, so the argument is always about something else - something you can't quite put your finger on. The argument is about everything.

Yes, I wanted to say, he is married. But he is separated - well and legally separated - from a wife who is always sick; a daughter who is bright but will not eat; another daughter who is his pride and joy. I liked him; he made the effort. Every time we met, there was some present; usually not to my taste, but 'tasteful' all the same; small and expensive, like some moment from a fifties film. And there was an astonishing darkness in bed. That had to be said. I felt, as he reared away from me, that he was thinking about nothing, that there were no words in his head. He rolled his eyes back into it, and the widening dark was bliss to him. It was like watching a man die. It was like having sex with an animal.

None of which I said as I banged the saucepan from Fintan's scrambled eggs on to the draining board. I didn't mention the too-bright daughters either, or the crumbling ex-wife. What I did say was that Fintan had to find somewhere for the Christmas holidays, because I didn't want to be worried about him in the house by himself.

'Christmas doesn't matter,' he said.

'Right.'

Of course not. Christmas, I went down home. What mattered was the New Year, because when midnight struck I would be in a hotel, drinking good champagne beside bad swagged curtains. I would be in bed with my new squeeze, my big old, hairy old, Mister Daddy-O.

**Extract from TAKING PICTURES by Anne Enright**

Available in bookshops May, 2008

ISBN: 9780224085335 | Imprint: Jonathan Cape | Publisher: Random House Australia



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

And. And. And.

'And I don't mind your dishes, Fintan, but I really can't take scrambled egg.'

There was a silence.

'Fried?'

'Fried is fine.'

He was right. Fintan didn't care about the champagne, or even about the curtains. I suspect he wasn't even bothered by the sex. He cared about something else. A small flame that he put his hands around, but could not touch. He is the gentlest man I know.

But it was a gentle feeling I had, too. I wanted to say that, somehow - that this man had too much money and no taste, but he wanted me very hard. I wanted to say how helpless this made him; how violent and grateful I felt him to be. I wanted to say that he had flat, self-important eyes but the back of his neck smelt like a baby's hair.

That evening, as I opened the front gate, I heard the sound of the piano starting up in the house behind me. It was dusk. Across the road, the alcoholic teacher had put up his Christmas lights; a different shape in each of the windows. There was a square and a circle downstairs, upstairs a triangle and what we used to call a rhomboid, all in running, flashing, gold and white. Over by the postbox, an object flew out from among a cluster of boys and landed in the roadway. It was a skateboard. I stood there with my hand on the cold, low handle of the gate and listened to the first bars of *Pathétique*.

You only play when I'm not looking, I thought. Every time I look, you stop.

I stood at the bus stop, but as soon as the bus appeared I pulled my coat around me and walked back to the house. Because, if he was playing again, then the shake was gone from his hands. And if the shake was gone then he was off his pills and all hell was about to be let loose - airport police, Fintan running naked through Dublin or, if he was lucky, Paris; Fintan balanced on the parapets of buildings or bridges, with his pockets full of rocks.

I had never seen him in full flower. I was away when it started, the summer after our finals - in which, of course, he had done indecently well. His notes, they discovered later, were written all in different colours, and some were in code. There was a dried-out pool of blue ink draining out of the bath, staining the enamel. It was still there when I got back to the house - hugely sad. The blue of his thoughts, the blood of his mind, I thought, as I tried to scrub it away and failed, or sat in the bathwater and looked at it.

So when he came out of hospital six months later his room was still there - of course it was. No one was going to let Fintan down. Our other housemate (and my ex), Pat, was setting something up in Germany and was always there and gone again. I had a job. Over the years, the area started to come up. And then it was just Fintan and me.

Now it was just me, crying on the way back from the bus stop, pulled by the sound of his playing along a terrace of pebbledash, painted blue and grey and dark green. The woman we called Bubbles was listening at her front door in a peach-coloured housecoat-negligeé. She saw me blowing my nose and I gave her a laugh and waved her away. I didn't know

**Extract from TAKING PICTURES by Anne Enright**

Available in bookshops May, 2008

ISBN: 9780224085335 | Imprint: Jonathan Cape | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

what I was crying for. For the music. For the guy I used to know at college, maybe, with his boy's body and his jumper of royal blue. And the fact, I think, that his were the first hands I ever loved, the whiteness of them.

The playing stopped as I put my key in the door. When I got into the living room he was sitting on the sofa, as though he had never left it. I pulled him into an awkward, easy embrace and we sat like that; Fintan twisted into me, his face pressed against my chest until my T-shirt was wet from the looseness of his mouth. We sat for a long time. We made that picture of ourselves. That pietà. When I closed my eyes, I could see us sitting there - though I could not, for some reason, feel him in my arms.

In the kitchen, drinking tea - the phone started to ring and I went out to answer it. Then I came back and sat down.

'I used to be clever, Fintan,' I said. 'But it is no use to me any more.'

'I know,' he said.

I should have given him his pills then. I should have forced one into his hand, into his mouth, or down his throat - but we were always too delicate with each other, even for words, so we just said goodnight and went to bed.

On Christmas Day, my mother announced that plum pudding was too much trouble any more, and produced one of those shop-bought ice-cream desserts. My brother had brought a few good bottles of wine, and I supplied the paper hats. After the pudding declaration, we had a huge fight about brandy butter and I burst into tears. My mother just looked at me.

On New Year's Eve, I rang the house, but there was no answer. And when I got home on the third of January, Fintan was gone.

On the fourteenth of February I got my Valentine's card and twelve fat, dark roses delivered to my desk at work. I also got a phone call from Fintan's occasional brother in Castleknock to say that they had found him, finally, that they knew where he was.

I took the afternoon off and bought a Discman and some CDs, then took a taxi out to Grangegorm. I had never been there before: it was a joke of an asylum, looming and Victorian, people muttering and whining in the bare wards, and a smell everywhere of bleach and sperm that was like your own madness, not theirs. When I found him, Fintan was lying so still in the bed that you could see every bump and crevice, from the knuckles of his fingers to the high, tender line of his penis, under the thin white counterpane. He opened his eyes and closed them again. Then he opened them and looked at me for a while and turned his head away. Drugged up to the eyeballs.

I clipped the headphones into his ears and put some music into the Discman. He twitched, and I turned the volume down. Then he turned to look at me, as the music played. He took my hand and placed it against his face, over his mouth and nose, and he kissed my palm. He looked at me with great love. I don't know what his eyes said as they gazed at me, over my lightly gagging hand. I don't know what they saw. They saw something lovely, something truly lovely. But I am not sure that they saw me.

**Extract from TAKING PICTURES by Anne Enright**

Available in bookshops May, 2008

ISBN: 9780224085335 | Imprint: Jonathan Cape | Publisher: Random House Australia



**RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA**

Copyright © Anne Enright, 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

**Extract from TAKING PICTURES by Anne Enright**

Available in bookshops May, 2008

ISBN: 9780224085335 | Imprint: Jonathan Cape | Publisher: Random House Australia