

Laura Solomon

## THE FAKER

I faked my death, just as I faked so much in my life; passports, degrees, orgasms. I was a fraud. My English Literature degree from Oxford I had bought online at [www.fakedegrees.com](http://www.fakedegrees.com) five years ago. My New Zealand passport, which would allow me to stay in that country indefinitely, had been purchased from a dodgy friend who had “connections.” Even the software on my PC (Microsoft Office, Dreamweaver, Photoshop) had not been bought legally, but acquired for free from other people who had burnt my CDs. I lived with the constant fear of being “discovered,” “rumbled,” found wanting, needy, substandard and inadequate. An impostor.

I left a note; *Dear Jake, I have had enough of this world and have decided to leave it all behind. Thanks for the time we had together.* I signed it with a lipstick kiss. I packed everything I would need into a hot pink suitcase I had bought from Argos the week before. Dressed casually in jeans, trainers, dark sunglasses, a blonde wig and a grey hoodie, I caught a cab from our flat in Peckham to Heathrow, checked in and sat waiting for my flight. I felt tense, furtive, as if somebody may have followed me and at any moment might put one hand on my shoulder, *Hey you, you're coming with us.* Nobody arrived to drag me back.

On the flight, after two gin and tonics, I relaxed slightly. There was a lightning storm as I was leaving; it lit up the early morning sky with its spidery electric fingers and made me feel that the heavens were complicit with me, cheering me on, putting on a sort of farewell-to-your-old-life and good-luck-to-your-new show in order to signal their approval of my decision, which had not been a snap decision at all, but rather had been meticulously thought out and planned and pondered over for many months prior to this morning's departure. I ate my meal of rice and stir fried chicken when it arrived on its plastic tray and drank a glass of red wine and buried myself in the Jackie Collins novel I had brought with me.

We refuelled at Hong Kong airport. I couldn't sit still, but wandered the airport restlessly, admiring the orchids. In my wallet was a picture of the shack (New Zealanders would say “bach”) in Te Anau that my Uncle Quentin had left me upon his death. Planks were missing; space for the wind to whistle through. The paint was chipped and falling off of the wood. It would be my space apart; I needed time out. I treated myself to some noodles which I ate quickly and then wandered around the airport in that stupefied limbo you enter on long haul flights. It seemed that there was nobody else around, just me, and yet at the

same time, the airport was packed with people, busy. Perhaps it was more that there seemed such a great distance between them and me, as if they stood on one side of an ice floe and I on the other with an ever-widening crack opening up between us. I felt as if I were a different species. Purposefully, I had left my mobile — my Blackberry and my laptop — at home, so there was nothing to tether me to my normal channels of communication. This was the moment I had dreamed of for months, and how many others, ordinary Londoners like me, also dreamt of slipping free of their chains; their jobs, their mortgages, their established relationships and setting out into nothingness? I was doing this for everybody, I thought, rather too grandly, to see if it could be done. Was it really possible, to set up a life and then vacate it, leaving the empty rooms of your old existence behind to gather cobwebs and dust?

In the ladies room, I took off my itchy wig and had a good scratch, feeling a little like one of Roald Dahl's witches. Was that a wart sprouting at the bottom of my nose? No, and no newts in my hand luggage either. I remained, beneath my costume, good old Harriet May, a less-than-notable journalist who had, during her four year career, written for a number of not-so-prestigious UK papers and who now wanted nothing more than to live in a shack and eat, what did they call them? Oh, yes, huhu grubs. Huhu grubs and supplejack. My uncle had sent me a brochure on the Wild Foods Festival a few years earlier and I had cast my eyes over the fine specimens that were available there. New Zealand — a green land, lush. There were mountains, proper ones, with snow on them and fjords and deep lakes and beaches both tame and wild. They had a summer there, not just two weeks of the year when the sun made a pitiful effort to shine. They had swimming pools in their backyards and quarter acre sections and you could still buy a halfway decent house for a hundred thousand pounds. Jake would be frantic by now. He would've called the cops. They would be looking for me.

Back on the plane, I felt lighter, freer as if I was shucking off the baggage of the years. There was ten thousand pounds in my bank account; my life savings. I had no commitments, not anymore. I had, to put it bluntly "buggered off." I did not intend to be easily traceable. I wanted to pull off a vanishing act, a disappearance, *whoosh*, up in a puff of smoke, into thin air like some third-rate magician performing a cheap trick. *Now you see her, now you don't*. Vamoose. An escape artist.

I spent two days taking in downtown Auckland (I bought a second blonde wig to match my first) and exploring the beaches of the North Shore. Wanting to see the city, I had allowed myself this time before flying down to Queenstown, from there to take the bus to Te Anau. I was missing my laptop a little; my fingers were in the habit of rapid typing and with no keyboard to drum upon

I found myself tapping away at the top of the little wooden dresser in the Sky Hotel. I had checked the top drawer upon arrival: no Bible, Gideon's or otherwise, though the liquor cabinet, I had gratefully noted, was stacked high with miniature bottles of spirits of which I made short work, reprimanding myself as I did so. *Easy on the liquor*, I told myself. *You don't want to make a habit of drinking. You will need will power and discipline to make this new life work.*

Queenstown was hideous. It was the ski season, so the place was packed with tourists — Japanese, German, American. They were there in droves, swarming over the city like ants. The whole place was geared up to cater to them, with its expensive boutique shops and over-priced restaurants. I hid in the YHA and cooked a simple dinner of steak, beans and spuds washed down with a couple of Steinlagers. I didn't want to think of myself as a tourist; I wanted to be local, a Kiwi girl, at home. I didn't want to be camera to the eye, click, click, clicking. I wanted to blend in to the landscape.

The one electrical appliance I *had* bought was my iPod. Sigur Ros, which Jake had given me last Christmas, provided good company on that winding bus trip, through the spectacular scenery that greeted my eye as we wove our way towards Te Anau. Closer and closer, closer to the dream. Further and further away from the life I had come to despise and in which I had felt so trapped. I was shedding neuroses like a tree sheds dead leaves, springing back to life like a Jack released from its box. I applied a fresh coat of lipstick and wiggled my toes. The lipstick was called Fuschia Shimmer — it was a shade of pink that Jake always like me to wear. Jake worked at Reading University, in the Cybernetics Department there. He was part of a team that was developing a robot that had, or at least could simulate, emotions. It was a long commute for him; he worked from home two days a week and occasionally stayed over in Reading. According to him, his research was of global importance.

“Imagine it,” he used to say. “A robot that can feel. They'd make great companions for old people, or could be used to help raise kids. A sentient machine. Something that would fly through the Turing test.”

He was very engrossed in his work. It wasn't work so much as a grand passion and he found it difficult to disconnect, to switch off. I would be talking to him about something, what to have for dinner, say or what I had accomplished during the day and I would get no response and realise that he wasn't with me at all, but off, somewhere else, lost far in his mind, “on another planet” as they say — not the planet of our marriage but “planet AI” where he was a sort of God who had the power to create life. The robot he was developing was his real wife and he gave more time and attention to it than he did to me. Lovelace was the team's name for the robot they were creating, named after Ada, rather than

Linda. I had only met Lovelace once. We had a most pleasant conversation. She was very congenial. I liked her. She seemed to have a personality all of her own and I was most disappointed when Jake switched her off. I found myself wondering if he didn't sometimes wish that *I* had a switch so that he could shut *me* down when I became tiresome. All that was behind me now. My tiny world was about to expand. I walked the three miles from the bus stop to the shack.

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The shack was unlocked. Three large bugs with enormous feelers, which I recognised as wetas from the Wild Foods brochure I had been given, consolidated in one corner. I swept them out with a broom that Quentin, or whoever had been here last, had thoughtfully left behind. The place was musty and stank, so I threw open the creaking windows and let in the cold winter air. It was freezing, below zero, but I was rugged up, prepared, with my hot pink beanie with its matching scarf and my polar fleece and my thick wool trousers and socks. The shack was simple but it would do. There were four rooms; a bedroom which contained two bunks, with the plastic casings around the mattress worn and split, a kitchen which contained a jug (thank God!) and a small electric hob with a grill beneath it. The cupboards were completely bare but for an ancient tin containing five teabags, a few chipped plates and cups and half a packet of rice. I would have to walk back to the supermarket tomorrow. Stupid old me, I should've thought about food before coming all the way out here. There was a bathroom, which contained only a bath and a sink, no shower. A mouldy-looking sofa sat in the living area, a number of springs poking up through its cushioned surface. A fireplace was in the living area; there were ashes in the grate and I wondered how recently there had been a fire. There were no mirrors anywhere so I could not check my reflection. The bookshelf in the living area held a few musty old volumes of Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Gideon's Bible I had looked for earlier in the Sky City Hotel and an old map of the area, which began to fall apart at the creases when I opened it. The toilet was outside, an outhouse; I would have to buy a torch then. There was no garden to speak of, though you could see that there had been one once, for stones had been used to divide the yard up into sections. Behind the house was a large patch of native bush and to the front was the pebbly shore of the lake and the jetty which I had seen in the photograph. Best of all, parked up outside the shack (I knew I had to start calling it a bach) was a rickety old pushbike that would serve me well. I didn't want a car. A bike was just the ticket. I wouldn't have to walk to Te Anau tomorrow, after all.

I spread out my sleeping bag and placed my belongings on one of the lower bunks in the bedroom and was boiling the jug in order to enjoy a mug of tea when I heard heavy steps, a man's steps, crossing the front porch. A brief knock.

“Hello, anyone home?”

I quickly applied some face powder then moved towards the door to answer him.

“Hello there,” I said. “You must be a neighbour of some sort.”

“Indeed I am. Name’s Dave. Pleased ta meetcha.”

He was enormous, well over six feet tall; if I had to estimate I would say six foot four or five and built like the proverbial. His hands were what I really noticed; great callouses bloomed on them and the knuckles were red and swollen up to half again the normal size.

“Come in,” I said. “I’ve just boiled the jug.”

“Oh na na, I can’t stay. I was just on my way to mend a fence that borders your land. I’ve got the land behind yours but I live in town. You might see me out here from time to time, so I just thought I’d introduce meself to the new girl so as you didn’t get a fright if you see my around and about.”

“But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,” I quoted, but it was lost on him of course, he simply said “Eh?” and squinted down at me from his gigantic height as if he was hard of hearing.

“Do you need me to contribute anything? For the fence, I mean. If it borders both of our properties, is it my responsibility or yours?”

“Well, nobody’s been out here for years, see, so I’ve always taken care of it but I suppose that technically it’s half your responsibility.”

“Oh, I’m happy to pay.”

“Oh the money’s nothing. It’s more the effort, if you see what I mean. Checking that the fence posts haven’t rotted and that the wire hasn’t been damaged where some animal’s tried to get through.”

“I see.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t throw you in at the deep end. But if you’d be happy to help out from time to time...”

“Yes, of course.”

“What do you do for a living then?”

“I write romance novels.”

It was only half a lie. I hadn't yet written one, but that was what I intended to do out here, in the middle of nowhere; lose myself in a doctor/nurse fantasy, or the tale of a ski instructor seducing a pupil or a man gradually helping an amnesiac woman to regain her memory, or a story of love across the class divide — the son of an earl falling for a shop assistant.

Dave looked amused.

“Righto then. I'll be seeing ya round, I guess. Nice to meetcha. What did you say your name was again?”

“Oh, I didn't say. Lola. Lola Sullivan.”

“Lola! Gosh that's unusual. Met her in a bar down in old Soho eh? You're not a tranny are ya?”

“No, no, I can assure you that I am one hundred percent female. Last time I checked anyway.”

“Yea, good on ya. I'll see ya later.”

Stomp, stomp, stomp and he was gone. What was he doing out fencing at dusk? I made my cup of tea; sat out on the porch sipping it slowly, smelling the fresh native forest which smelt like heaven.

Dinner was a plate of congealed rice, with nothing to decorate it.

*I would have to be more sharp, I thought. I really should've remembered to bring groceries with me.*

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Early morning frost coated the grass at the side of the road. The bike creaked and groaned and felt like it hadn't been ridden in many years, which undoubtedly, it hadn't. The chain needed oiling. I pushed my way back into town and parked my new vehicle outside the local store. My requirements were simple; meat, vegetables, bread, perhaps some pasta, matches for the fire, that torch of course and light bulbs in case the ones in the bach blew. And seeds.

“Do you have any seeds?” I asked the gentleman behind the counter and he pointed me towards a small rack, a scanty collection; my choices were spinach, radishes or carrots. I bought two packets of each and because he didn’t sell potting mix and informed me that nowhere else in the town did either (*You’d have to go to Queenstown for that, love*). I prayed that the soil on my patch of land would be rich enough in nutrients for the seeds to sprout and thrive.

I creaked and groaned homewards, with my bounty on my back, then changed into my swimming costume, intending a dip in the lake. That would wake me up, bring me to my senses, keep me “with it.” Then I could tackle cleaning the bach and getting everything organised. Organisation and structure would be key, or else I would just drift through my days without getting anything done and I *did* want to get things done, I had plenty to do. I wanted to get on with those romance novels.

There was a speedboat on the lake. It bounced across the surface of the water, its roaring engine cutting the silence. I dipped one toe into the water. A mistake; the lake was freezing. Better to simply leap straight in. I took a breath and dived; the shock of the cold left me gasping. I did four brief lengths of the jetty before hauling myself out of the water and drying myself with a towel. The trick had worked; I felt awake, alive, my senses shocked. A fish leapt, breaking the surface of the water with a splash before diving back under. The boat was out of sight now, but you could still hear the distant drone of its motor.

When I returned to the bach, Dave was sitting on the front steps.

“I was just in the area,” he said. “So, I thought I’d come see how you were settling in.”

“Oh, fine, fine.”

It was vaguely creepy having him there; he was after all, still a stranger, an unknown quantity.

“Won’t you come in?” I said politely, opening the door.

He rose to his feet, stomped into the bach.

“Oh, you’ve done wonders with the place,” he said jokingly, looking around.

“Yes, it’s not much to write home about, is it? Still, it’s mine. Home for now.”

“What part of the UK you from?”

“London.”

“Ah, the big smoke. I’ve been to Blighty meself a couple of times. Didn’t think much of the place. Better over here.”

“Yes, I dare say.”

“It’s a bit odd though.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s odd you being out here. A woman alone and all that. Come all the way from London just to live in a tumbling down old bach.”

I didn’t say anything.

“How’s about that cuppa then?”

He plonked himself down on the old sofa, his legs, with their muddy brown boots on the end of them, stretched out in front of him. Christ, he was enormous, like somebody had stuck a straw in a normal man and inflated him. Enormous and nosey.

“You got a husband then? Kids.”

“A husband. No kids.”

“He gonna be coming out here too then?”

I murmured something that sounded like “no.”

“You’re a brave one.”

“Brave or stupid. Milk? Sugar?”

“Milk and two thanks. I like it sweet.”

I took him the cup of tea.

“Any biscuits? I love a good piece of shortbread, me.”

“No, sorry.”

“Ah.”

He blew on his tea, then slurped at it noisily, while I merely sipped at mine.

“I used to have a wife,” he said suddenly.

“Oh. Used to? I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don’t be, she isn’t dead. She ran off with a chef from Queenstown who was down here having a holiday. Bitch. She had everything a woman could want down here and what does she do but run off with the first ponce who comes her way spouting talk of ‘fine dining.’ Fickle, like all women, no offence intended.”

I sipped my tea.

“She’d never have the guts to do what you’re doing, just rough it in a shack on your own. That’s admirable in a woman. Independent-minded.”

I checked my watch.

“Well, I can see you’re keen to be getting rid of me. Listen, I’ll need some help on that fence early next week. I’ll come by and get you. You got sturdy shoes?”

“Running shoes.”

“Oh na, you’ll need some decent boots. I’ll bring you a pair of Trisha’s old ones. She left a lot of stuff behind. You can have some of her old clothes too if you like.”

“Oh no, that’s quite alright.”

“Yea, I’ll bring them anyway. Somebody might as well get some bloody use out of them.”

Stomp, stomp, stomp and he was gone.

I had bought five exercise books with me from Britain, hopeful of filling them up. I should’ve bought the laptop after all, I’d probably have to buy one now, that’d be a trip to Queenstown. I wrote three romantic beginnings, but none of them held much promise so I tidied up the shack a little and then went outside to chop firewood, using an axe that I had found by the back door.

In the night, I awoke to the sound of heavy breathing outside my window. Terrified, faking bravery, I grabbed the torch that was on the floor beside me and headed outside, shining the light directly into a face which contained two

small gleaming eyes. A black shape scurried off into the bush. Heart thudding I returned inside. Sleep did not return until I took a Seconal.

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“Possums,” pronounced Dave, having been told of the incident when he arrived the following morning, with a truck full of fencing posts and wire.

The chemical taste of the Seconal was still in my mouth though I had cleaned my teeth twice to be rid of it. He handed me a rubbish bag full of old clothes.

“Get changed into something old,” he said. “Those poncey clothes you wear aren’t good for working on the farm.”

I did as I was told.

“Jump in the ute,” Dave said, when I emerged from the bedroom. “You are good for it aren’t ya?”

“Oh yes,” I said. “Yes I’m ‘good for it’ as you say.”

In the ute, Dave pushed a pair of boots much like his own towards me and said, “Here, put these on. You need decent shoes out there, not those little city things you ponce around in. You need what real women wear.”

His world, I suppose, was divided into “ponces” and “real people”; a dichotomy, black and white with not much room for shades of grey.

The ute jerked and shook along the gravel road. Window down, with the breeze in my face, it felt good. Wasn’t this what I had dreamed of, back in Britain — wide open roads? Dave stank; old sweat and unwashed clothes — his odour assaulted my nostrils.

“My land stretches for miles,” he said, when we arrived at the fence that needed repairing. “As far as the eye can see.”

He gestured to the open fields where cattle and sheep grazed.

“I think I’ll get you pulling out staples,” he added and handed me a pair of fencing pliers.

It was tedious work, but not difficult. Dave was busy digging out old fence posts that had rotted. I wanted to keep up a conversation, but had no idea what I could talk to him about. What did we have in common, this rugged man and

I? What could we talk about? Sheep and rugby? Dave said nothing, just gave the odd grunt and the occasional nod in my direction to indicate that he was happy with my work. At eleven, he boiled the billy and handed me a cup of tea and one of his beloved shortbread.

“Gotta keep the tucker box stacked,” he said, patting his stomach.

When we returned to the bach, Jake was at the door. I froze. God, how he had tracked me down to this remote corner of the earth? He stared at me, scowling, as Dave and I approached.

“I found your itinerary on your laptop,” he said. “I guessed your password. Your sister’s name. You’re lucky I haven’t called the cops. *Yet.*”

I nodded slowly, feeling like an animal caught in a trap. He stood to one side of the doorway.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“Do come in,” I said icily and pushed open the door.

Both he and Dave followed me inside. Jake turned to Dave.

“And who, may I ask, are you?”

“I’m Dave. Lola’s mate.”

“*Lola?* Who the hell is Lola?”

Dave pointed at me. Jake sneered.

“Oh, had a name change have we. Listen, *Harriet*, this whole escapade is completely juvenile. I don’t know what you think you’re trying to prove.”

“I’m not trying to prove anything.”

Jake held out his wedding finger.

“We’re *married*, Harriet. Doesn’t that even mean anything to you?”

“Who’s Harriet?” interjected Dave.

“My wife!” snapped Jake.

I sighed heavily and lowered myself down onto the sofa.

“Listen, Jake. It’s over between us. I’m a new person now. I won’t say all of it was bad, but I grew to hate my old life, the life I had in London. I need a fresh start. It happens. People get tired of their old shackles and they want to start again somewhere new. Just let me go. Set me free.”

He looked like I’d slapped him in the face.

“But what about *us*? What about the seven years we spent together? Don’t they mean anything?”

“You heard the lady,” said Dave. “It’s over.”

“You keep out of it buddy. This has nothing whatsoever to do with you.”

“Forget me Jake. Just go back to London and find a new woman. Work hard on Ada. Get famous. Dazzle the world.”

“But I’ve flown all this way. I’m not returning without you.”

“You’re not returning with me.”

His shoulders slumped, defeated.

“Fine.”

He yanked off his wedding ring and threw it into my lap.

“You can have that hunk of metal back. I assume you don’t want any of the possessions you left behind, either?”

“No, you can sell it all on eBay.”

“Good. I’ll do that. See ya later. Good fucking riddance.”

He strode out of the shack, slamming the door behind him.

“Moody bugger, ain’t he?” commented Dave. “You okay? Fancy a cuppa?”

I nodded.

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David and I sit out on the front porch, drinking cups of tea. I am no longer Harriet May. I am the beginnings of Lola.



*Hazel Menehira*

## BEGUILED

Plump as a pumpkin mouse meandering waist deep  
in slender china bluebells, the wild common  
was my princess kingdom.

Florabelles handmaids paid homage, ensconced  
me in an azure bower where spring winds waltzed  
upon my face and dimpled knees.

While bombs and cities fell, I lay beguiled in  
sibling bells believing primrose sun shafts charmed  
bird flutes would last forever.

Then I grew up you see. But even now, world wise, age weary  
my heart will give a sudden rush when an expanse of bluebells  
floats into my mind.

