

Praise for Jessica Dettmann

‘Jessica Dettmann has an eye for the small details, irritations and inspirations of life which coupled with a truly original turn of phrase and great way with a gag makes for sparkling and heartwarming reading’ Ben Elton

‘Has a natural knack for humour’ Better Reading

This Has Been Absolutely Lovely

‘Brilliantly observed, Jessica Dettmann’s portrayal of messy, modern family life is packed with delicious humour and balanced with moments of real poignancy. Her knack for writing sharp, witty dialogue makes for a hugely entertaining read. I adored it’ Joanna Nell, author of *The Single Ladies of Jacaranda Retirement Village*

‘With humour and heart, Dettmann weaves an unforgettable tale about the lives we choose, and the lives that choose us. Dettmann nails the funny, sad and bizarre nuances of family life in this gripping novel that will appeal to fans of Liane Moriarty, Jojo Moyes and Marian Keyes. I expect to see this everywhere this summer’ Sally Hepworth, author of *The Mother-in-Law*

How to Be Second Best

‘Hilarious and heartwarming ... Part Marian Keyes page-turner, part Holly Wainwright local brilliance, this book is all too relatable for those who have found themselves at the supermarket or school drop-off wondering why they can’t quite get it together. Ultimate summer read’ *Herald Sun*

‘Full of funny moments, this debut takes a wry look at parenthood, divorce and the messy reality of blended families. ★★★★★’ *Who Weekly*

‘Sharp and witty. An absolutely delightful, funny and touching read’ Nicola Moriarty, author of *The Ex*

‘A warm and witty novel filled with deliciously cringy comedic moments’ Kathy Lette

‘Heartwarming yet biting’ *Sunday Telegraph*

‘A diverting comic novel that bubbles along, buoyed by the author’s dry, conspiratorial feminist wit’ *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Sharp and crisp and funny. I was dazzled’ Mia Freedman

‘Blends the family drama of Liane Moriarty with the humour of Sophie Kinsella ... Light-hearted and playful on the surface, this is a skilful novel about loss, resilience and the parental struggle to do the best for one’s children’ Newtown Review of Books

‘A great beach read. Dettmann has hilariously captured the craziness and competitiveness of modern suburban parenthood’ ScatterBooker

‘A refreshing and honest depiction of the delirium of modern family life, its challenges and triumphs. Whilst this novel is undeniably laugh-out-loud funny, it is also incredibly heartwarming and real’ Better Reading



Jessica Dettmann is a Sydney-based writer and performer. Her blog, *Life With Gusto*, turns a sharp but affectionate eye on modern parenthood. She has performed her work several times at Giant Dwarf's Story Club, and has appeared on their podcast.

After a decade working as an editor for Random House Australia and HarperCollins publishers she made the transition to writing after two small children rendered her housebound. She once appeared as the City of Sydney Christmas Angel and sat on top of the Town Hall in a frock that reached the street.

Also by Jessica Dettmann

How to Be Second Best

This Has Been Absolutely Lovely

JESSICA DETTMANN

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*For Drew, with all my love.
You see? Sometimes I can just say something nice.*

Home is where I leave you,
where you feed me, where I grieve you,
where you need me, where I don't need you.
Home is where the truth lies,
where your heart breaks, where our youth dies.
Home is where we'll never be again.

'Home Is Where Your Heart Is',
Great Britain's Eurovision entry, 1983

Chapter 1

The most successful song Annie Jones ever wrote had been stuck in her head for the best part of forty years, and it would only be a slight overstatement to say she hadn't had a moment's peace from it in that time.

So it had been too much to hope that her father's funeral that morning would have been enough to mute the self-inflicted soundtrack jangling inside her head. She wondered if this made her some sort of sociopath.

She'd managed to ignore it during her eulogy. She'd stood at the front of the blond wood crematorium chapel and paid tribute to the man who had always been in her corner — her most unwavering supporter, always ready to admire a lyric or fund a new instrument.

You'd have thought that grief would have dissolved or muffled the tune, but no. Not even the clanking old Anglican dirges her father had stipulated by turning down pages in his hymn book could drown it out. There the song remained. Sometimes the volume went down a bit, so she could, for example, hear people in the church singing along to 'Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise' and later, back at the house, telling her how proud he had been of her; that he'd had a good innings.

She couldn't understand why her dad had wanted 'Immortal, Invisible'. It sounded the way carrying too many bags of groceries

home from the shops felt. ‘Tell Out, My Soul’ was his other choice, which was slightly better — like something cut from a lesser Andrew Lloyd Webber musical because it didn’t move the plot forward.

But neither managed to properly dislodge ‘Home Is Where Your Heart Is’, which was, if not the best song she’d written, certainly the one with the greatest impact on how her life had turned out. That song was supposed to have been the beginning of something big, and it almost was.

Back when she wrote it, she’d imagined one day telling journalists what the song meant to her. They’d sit together at quiet tables in exclusive London or New York hotels, or in a cottage in Laurel Canyon, and the subsequent magazine profiles would celebrate her down-to-earth sensibility, her refreshing candour and her charm. They would describe her lack of makeup and her fresh-faced beauty, and mention that she ordered tea and not coffee. How could someone so brilliant and successful be so warm and unguarded? the journalists would write. The interviews would range over her young life growing up in a beachside Sydney suburb, to meeting Paul and Brian, forming the band, Love Triangle, with them, then their move to London, and the story of how they worked their way up, tiny gig by tiny gig. The journalist would obviously want to focus on Love Triangle’s big break, Eurovision 1983, which should have been the moment the world fell in love with ‘Home Is Where Your Heart Is’ and with Annie.

She hadn’t expected the song to take on this other life, as a personal form of permanent musical tinnitus. She had never dreamed no one would interview her.

There had been lots of moments in her life when she thought the ‘Home’ earworm might finally give up and fade away. The moment another singer performed it at Eurovision. The break-up

of her band. The births of her three children. Her divorce. Her mother's death. The moment the previous Friday morning when her father closed his eyes and became just a body on a bed. But none of them had done the trick.

Now at her father's wake, in the house where she had grown up, Annie opened the oven to check the cheese and spinach triangles and a burst of hot air rushed out and curled her eyelashes back. For just a second the song was shocked into silence, and she had her first inkling in thirty-five years that she might be free. It was mid-December in Sydney, in an already stifling kitchen, and the extra blast of heat was enough to singe off the last of her feelings of obligation.

When she stood back up — the triangles were still pale and needed three more minutes — everything had changed. It was a delayed reaction, of course. Her father had died five days earlier, and her mother four years before that. Her children had been adults for a while, in the eyes of the law at least. She let out an involuntary squeak of elation, and her daughter Naomi looked up with concern from washing a sink full of teacups.

'Did you burn yourself?'

'No, no. Nothing like that.'

Naomi rubbed a frosted lipstick mark from the rim of a cup. 'Are you sad?'

Annie shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'Surprisingly. I should be. But no.'

Naomi shrugged gently. 'There's no "should" with grief. We feel how we feel. No emotion or response is right or wrong. Don't fight the feelings, or judge them. I know you don't believe in auras, but yours is cloudy right now and bluer than it normally is too. That usually suggests some fear around the future, or a lack of self-trust.'

Annie pressed her lips together to stifle a smile. Her middle child was an actual mad hippie. So different from the other two. There was no explaining Naomi.

‘There’s a lot of power in the house at the moment,’ Naomi went on. ‘The more of us who gather, the stronger the energy becomes. The family will be whole when Dad and Brian get here. How are you feeling about them coming back? Combining energies — re-forming the triangle?’

What a way to put it. Annie was actually looking forward to seeing Paul and Brian. The other two members of Love Triangle were somewhere over the Middle East right about now, on their way from London for their first Christmas Day together in years, and, despite all that had happened between the three of them, they were her oldest friends. But they weren’t a triangle any more.

Annie could remember being five and drawing a picture of her family: Mummy, Daddy, Annie. Or maybe she only remembered the picture itself, because her father had kept it taped to the wall in his study for decades. It was in crayon, on a lined sheet of paper torn from a pad held together with gummy red glue. In the picture her dad was at the top, drawn with a brown crayon, his shirt and trousers the same colour. His shoes, though, were red, in a fit of childish exaggeration on Annie’s part, and he held a cake. Her father would no sooner have worn red shoes than made a cake and posed for a portrait holding it.

Below him to the right was her mother. Smaller, yellow-haired and wearing a blue dress. Her shoes were not coloured in. Annie had drawn herself the same size as her mother, in the opposite corner. She’d drawn lines connecting the three figures and realised they formed a triangle. Her father had been impressed by that. She could remember him, possibly then but certainly many more times over the years, reminding her that they were a triangle, and

that triangles were the strongest shape. She'd always been happy with their triangle, though quite frankly a sibling or two might have been a lot of help during her parents' last years.

Anyway, now those years were over, and her three children — another triangle, though one in which each corner was outward-looking, only sneaking glances over their shoulders to make sure the others weren't receiving preferential treatment — were leading their own lives. Maybe she was actually, finally, wonderfully, alone in the world.

She needed to examine the situation properly. Surely it couldn't be that she was no longer beholden to anyone. There had to be something to tether her. 'Home Is Where Your Heart Is' started up again in her head, but it was quieter and less obtrusive than usual, like an iPhone playing accidentally in a handbag.

'Mum?'

Annie realised she hadn't answered Naomi. 'Sorry, darling, what was the question?'

Naomi smiled. 'Nothing. I'll watch the oven. You go get some air.'

Annie kissed Naomi's cheek as she passed by to open the back door and step out onto the patio. At once, from around the corner in the driveway, came the soundtrack of the past twenty-something years: her eldest and youngest children, bickering. The voices grew louder as Simon and Molly approached the patio.

'I don't see why I have to go. I got exactly as much beer and wine as Mum said, and it isn't my fault those old boozehounds want whisky.' He tossed a set of car keys at Molly, who caught them without thinking.

'Simon, you have to go because Mum said you have to go. You're unbelievably selfish — this is her father's funeral. It really shouldn't be that big an ask to drive one kilometre to the shops.'

She threw the keys back at him, but he kept his hands clamped by his sides like one of the queen's guards and they clattered to the ground.

'You go,' he told her. 'You're not even drinking. I'm halfway through my second beer. Possibly my third. I might be over the limit.'

'I'm a thousand weeks pregnant and my back is killing me. You're not over the limit. You're just lazy. Mum, tell him he has to go to the bottle shop.' Molly crouched awkwardly down, her bump preventing a bend, picked up the keys and shoved them down the back of Simon's shirt.

'Oh shit, Molly. You're so fucking immature — pardon my French, Mum.'

Annie frowned at them. It was half an hour since she'd asked Molly to source a bottle of whisky for the aged great-aunts. 'Have you two been arguing about this since I asked? For goodness' sake, I'll do it myself.'

Molly glared at her brother. 'You're making Mum leave her dad's wake? Really?'

'Mum,' whined Simon. 'Why can't Molly go? You never make her do anything.'

Annie sighed deeply and looked past them to the garden. Her two grandchildren were out there somewhere, swallowed up by the rambling garden on the oversized suburban block. You could usually hear kids out there but you couldn't see them, which were the ideal conditions for children between the ages of two and twenty — or maybe fifty, she thought now. It was after four but the sun was still high and hot above the patio.

She couldn't be bothered with Simon and Molly any more. She saw them look uncertainly at her. They didn't know how to end arguments without maternal intervention: they never had.

She waved a hand dismissively. ‘Do whatever you want. Get the whisky, don’t get the whisky.’ She dragged a heavy iron-lace chair off the paving and onto the grass, which was rudely green and lush thanks to her diligent dawn and dusk watering regimen.

Simon untucked his shirt, pulled the keys from the waistband of his trousers and stalked off in the direction of the car. Molly lingered for a moment, the winner of quite a hollow victory, before muttering something about low blood sugar and heading inside.

Annie sank onto the chair. The evergreen wildness of the garden pleased her. That had been her father’s work. It took a lot of effort to make a garden look untamed, without it actually being overtaken by weeds. He had encouraged the tangled greenery, the creepers and vines, but he’d never let them encroach on the lawn. Her mother had been a different sort of gardener, preferring to cultivate a few roses, happy to wait through the long periods of the year when they were just bare sticks to be rewarded with the unfurling of tiny bright green leaves in the spring, followed by a few months of blooms. Most of the rose bushes back here were barely visible now, overcome by the bolshy spread of geraniums and the great drooping buddleias.

Sitting out in the garden was one of Annie’s habits now. For the past two years, almost every afternoon, while her weakening father’s dinner was cooking and before she would bathe him and help him to bed, she had come out to the lawn, just to be in the air and breathe the smell of medicine and disinfectant out of her lungs. She’d played songs she loved on the little Bluetooth speaker perched on the kitchen window, facing out. The songs were good for drowning out her earworm.

She rested her hands in her lap. Now. This was when the grief would come. Her friends had warned her. She’d be all right until the funeral was done, they’d said. They’d all turned into versions

of Naomi on this subject, to varying degrees. Apparently she had to allow her loss to flow through her.

Closing her eyes, Annie tried to observe her feelings. Grief can take many forms, she told herself. What am I feeling? Hot. And pretty itchy in the only black dress she owned. Were hot and itchy common manifestations of grief?

A sudden urge to laugh overcame her. Hysteria, she thought at first, but as she sat and let it bubble up through her chest, she remembered when she had felt it before: long ago, on another turning-point day. It was the feeling that had swept through her as she walked out of the assembly hall after handing in her final exam of the HSC, an Ancient History paper on the Peloponnesian Wars. It was the feeling of having a future.

‘Fuck,’ she said to the garden. A flood of euphoria swept over her and she let out a loud ‘Ha!’ A magpie pecking around at pastry crumbs on the patio paused and cocked its head at her. In the absence of anyone else to tell, she leaned down and, laughing, said to the bird, ‘Little mate, I think I’ve done it. I think I’ve escaped.’

Still smiling, she sat back and mentally turned to the checklist that had existed in her head for thirty-five years, since the birth of Simon: the list of Who Needs Looking After And What Precisely They Require And When.

Simon’s had been the first name on the list. He shouldn’t have still needed looking after but, although he did, he was now in the capable hands of his German wife, Diana. She was a logistics co-ordinator for Ikea, unflappable and slightly severe. One of those women who seemed effortlessly fit, she had smooth olive skin and wore her dark hair in a spiky crop that Annie hadn’t seen on anyone else in real life since the Berlin Wall came down. Their life ran smoothly, and Simon was well fed on a combination of grain-heavy breads and plum-based cakes. He could stand to

take more exercise, but he'd figure that out when he turned forty. For the past decade he'd been gainfully employed in a managerial role by a construction company in Berlin, they had enough money to visit Sydney every two years, and their only child, Felix, at six years old was a delight. Annie had no cause to worry about Simon.

Next was Naomi. On paper, Naomi should have been a worry. She was thirty-three, the single mother of a daughter, Sunny, also aged six, and she lived what Annie could only describe as a hand-to-mouth existence as a freelance masseuse in Byron Bay. Annie was only mostly sure that wasn't a euphemism for sex work. Recently she'd started selling paintings of people's auras, too, after years of telling everyone she could see colours around them. Naomi's life seemed to involve a lot of swapping vegetables, and while Sunny apparently possessed a pair of shoes, she was rarely seen wearing them. Annie might worry about her daughter's myriad piercings getting infected, but Naomi was a sensible-level hippy — though she did believe apple cider vinegar to be the panacea for all ills, Sunny was nonetheless fully vaccinated.

Annie turned her mind to her youngest, Molly, and felt a growl of anxiety. It seemed uncharitable to use the expression 'a fly in the ointment' to describe her own offspring, but she couldn't help thinking it. Molly was twenty-seven and pregnant. She was married to Jack, happily enough, it seemed. Jack was pretty nice. Neither short nor tall, fat nor thin, he had blondish brownish hair and the sort of face that was difficult to remember — usually it was easier to describe him by his bushy beard — but, once reminded, people usually recalled him fondly. He was much more sensible than Molly: he had two jobs, neither of which was really a career as Annie understood it, though the definition of careers had changed since she was young. He mixed cocktails in a city bar that sold one hundred and six kinds of gin and tended to present

them under a smoky cloche, and he was a sales rep for a type of dried cat food that cost more per week than Annie had had in her budget to feed three kids.

Annie had once said she thought their pairing was like a draughthorse had taken up with a poorly trained racehorse, but Paul, Molly's father, had said that in such an equine metaphor he saw Molly less as a racehorse and more as two enemies trapped in a pantomime horse suit. Annie was pleased she and Paul could still talk like that, because there was only one person who you should laugh at your children with, and that was their other parent.

Paul was right about Molly: she was a mass of contradictions, which made her a lot of fun, but certainly slowed her progress through life. She was forever changing her mind about what she wanted to do, which everyone said was just the millennial way, but Annie thought Molly would have been a dilettante no matter when she'd been born.

Half of Molly's problem was her beauty. She got that from her father. They were both blessed — if that was how you chose to see it — with fine features, large eyes, thick, wavy golden hair that did whatever was fashionable, high cheekbones and generous, naturally pouting mouths that made them look like they spoke French. People had always turned to stare at their willowy frames and their dazzling smiles. After watching people fall at Paul's feet for forty years, Annie wasn't sure it was necessarily to Molly's benefit that she moved through the world like that too, but there wasn't anything she could do about it.

Annie wondered if Molly's baby would look like its mother and grandfather, or if it might have Jack's broader, slightly doughier features. She felt pretty sure it would be one or the other, as it was with her own children. The beautiful genes didn't seem to mix. Annie's first two children looked like her: attractive by

ordinary standards — regular features, one chin each — but not when compared to the dazzling perfection of Molly and Paul.

Regardless of what the child looked like, the idea of Molly as a mother didn't sit easily with Annie. Molly had a tendency to get bored with things.

She'd been very enthusiastic about the three different university degrees she had begun. Her podcast was clever and well liked — for the four episodes she released before she moved on to a volunteer position with a refugee aid organisation. Her interior design phase had followed that, and the small inner-city flat Molly and Jack had bought with a gigantic mortgage had almost been beautifully decorated, until Molly fell in love with stand-up comedy for six weeks. She could play the piano pretty well, and sing, like both her parents, but she'd never liked doing either for an audience.

Her latest passion was home organising, and she had been putting sticky labels on people's jars of dried kidney beans and consolidating all their open packets of Nurofen for a year, which was almost record-breaking for a Molly job. Annie wondered how close they were to the end of that phase.

Annie chided herself: that was a silly way to think. Molly wouldn't treat her baby like one of her jobs or hobbies, something to tire of like she had of her sewing machine, stand-up paddleboard and sourdough starter. Motherhood was different. It taught you to sustain interest. Just because Molly hadn't chosen a solid career path didn't mean she wouldn't be a terrific mum.

Honestly, Annie was a little surprised that Molly was happy to be pregnant at all, given that she had seemed almost violently unmaternal since the unfortunate afternoon when, at the age of six, she accidentally witnessed a classmate's mother giving birth on the laundry floor. Annie remembered that like it was

yesterday and she hadn't even been there. Poor little Molly and her friend Catherine had watched in terror as Catherine's baby brother entered the world as if shot out of a cannon onto a pile of freshly washed soccer shirts in a plastic clothes basket. The girls had called an ambulance, but it was all over well before the paramedics came.

It had been a surprise, then, when, in winter, Jack and Molly had announced they were going to be parents. They were too young, by today's middle-class standards. They'd only got married a year back, and none of their friends had even got that far. Annie supposed Jack had talked Molly into it. Or it wasn't planned. Molly's fear of missing out, her love of new adventures, would have overridden her fears of carrying on with the pregnancy.

As always, Molly had been unsustainably enthusiastic to begin with. Blessed with a nausea-free first trimester, for the first twenty weeks she had taken daily photographs of her profile and stitched them together into a time lapse. She'd downloaded three baby growth apps on her phone and could and did tell you at any moment how many weeks and days pregnant she was.

But nine months was a long time, and by the end of the second trimester the shine was off the pregnancy and Molly was just annoyed by all the things she wasn't allowed to eat. Or do. Only the week before, she'd raged to Annie that tuna and tooth-whitening were forbidden.

'Your teeth are white already,' Annie had said, bemused. 'And you hate tuna. You used to call it trick chicken when I gave it to you on sandwiches.'

'You're missing the point,' Molly told her, but Annie wasn't sure Molly knew what her point was. 'It's like no one even remembers mothers are people too. Suddenly I'm just a vessel for a child. It's obscene. What if I decided I did like tuna? Then what?'

Annie hadn't been able to summon a satisfactory answer. There was no point trying, really — when Molly got her knickers in a twist like this the best thing to do was nod and stand well back.

She'd always been like that. Well, not always, Annie admitted to herself. Only since her dad left. Annie had heard once, or read, that sometimes when a young person has something monumental and catastrophic happen in their life, they remain emotionally the same age forever after. It sounded like nonsense, and obviously it was, but there was no denying that there was a touch of the eight year old, even now, about her daughter. Molly thought she had her whole life ahead of her, that the world owed her a happy ending, and that she could spend as much time and energy as she wanted making her own story just right. Becoming a parent would come as quite a shock.

Annie shook her head and told herself Molly would be fine. She was bound to figure out motherhood. People did. Babies changed you, mostly for the better. They gave you a sense of your place in the world, in the circle of life and all that.

In the warm evening air Annie breathed slowly and calmly. Her children were no longer her responsibility, her marriage had been over for nearly twenty years and now her parents were both gone. There really was a decent chance she was free.

She let out a delighted whoop, and the magpie flapped off in alarm.