

GIRL, TRAVELLING

...discovers that fleecism is the last refuge of scoundrelly mums

A proponent of long-term singlehood and low-maintenance dating, **Helen Croydon** shares her monthly exploits; this month she visits Fleeceland and finds the temperature distinctly chilly – in more ways than one...

If I could type lying on my back, I would most definitely be horizontal right now. Not that I usually take my laptop to bed – there are much better electrical devices for that – it's just that I'm back from a weekend in the Cotswolds and cannot walk.

Last time I said I couldn't walk after a weekend away, I meant it as a good thing. This time, not so. This time my trip away involved a visit to my two-year-old nephew and an afternoon entertaining his under-five-year-old friends and a gaggle of their country mums.

I had been prewarned by my sister to dress 'appropriate for the country' and get there in time for lunch. So I arrived just before 3pm, prudently attired in skinny denim, strappy tunic, gold sandals (with the subtlest of heels) and – in case it gets cold – a prudent pashmina. I was internally triumphing in my personal achievement to get: Up, graciously rid of the male from my bedroom, dressed, freshly caffeinated and into a different county before what I consider to be lunchtime on a Saturday.

It soon transpired, however, my inner praise was not shared. Despite it still being April, I arrived to find that a crazed bunch of country bumpkins in three layers of khaki green fleeces had dragged a garden table onto a damp lawn and were sitting at it, along with dirty plates, plastic spoons, soiled bibs, wet wipes, three plastic tractors, two politically-correct mixed-race dolls and a teddy bear.

They were making a good dent into a neat triple-

decker pile of cupcakes layered up in the largest Tupperware box I have ever seen. It looked suspiciously like I had missed main course. And, I clocked, they are well into their fourth bottle of sparkling Highland Spring. Water at 3 in the afternoon! I thought. Whatever next? Peppermint tea as a digestif?

"I thought you were getting here for lunch!" greeted my harassed-looking sister with two different two-year-olds wedged under each arm, neither of which I don't *think* were my nephew.

"I am here for lunch." I replied.

No sooner had the words left my lips than I was greeted with that kind of dagger stare that only new mothers can inflict upon a well-meaning but blunderingly naive childless singleton. They did not need to say anything for it all came flooding back from the last time I was late for a mother's lunch. Feeding schedules are – how could I forget – *incredibly* important. Lunch invariably means lunch whatever the day of the week. It, under no circumstances, merges into a late, long, loud afternoon giggle about sex over Chardonnay.

Thankfully I spot my nephew, who is about to be beaten up by a pair of mean-looking ginger four-year-old twins. I run and scoop him up. For a minute I am overwhelmed by love for this being of my own family blood. I'm captivated by this bundle of the purest possible human innocence. I'm melted by his little smile that shows perhaps, just perhaps, he remembers who Auntie Helen is. Then he is sick. All down my *décolletage*.

"He's been sick." I call out. I am ignored. "Does anyone have a tissue? He's been sick." I try again, louder. I can now feel the thick milky compound of part-digested Birdseye fish fingers and baby snot trickle into my cleavage. All I can think is that I'm wearing a cream Gossard and it may never be the same again.

"Oh it's only baby sick," mocks a mother in a fleece

struggling to stable a wobbly leg of a wooden high chair whilst at the same time sticking a plaster onto the bloody knee of a screaming three-year old. "Just rub it in."

Rub. It. In. I think she said. Looking at her - and I don't mean to be disrespectful to anyone helping to provide the country's future work force, and hence my pension - but she is not the sort of person one would want to take skin care advice from. "Just put a different top on," adds my sister. I point out that I don't have a different top with me. Well I do, but that's for dinner later. Surely we'll be going for dinner later, won't we?

"You must have a fleece with you," says another cup-cake munching mother in a fleece. Erm actually I don't have a fleece because, as with all my mini-breaks and holidays, I have arrived in clothes kitted out for whatever temperature my flat happened to be cranked up to when I packed my case. Within the hour I find myself in an oversized fleece borrowed from my brother-in-law and my 'sensible wedges' swapped for a pair of 'spare' trainers dug out from underneath a go-kart amongst a mesh of cobwebs in my sister's garage.

It is in this sad and sober state in which I begin to be grilled by The Fleecees: "Where's your boyfriend this weekend Helen?"

I point out that he is nowhere because no such person exists. They look shocked. I point out that there hasn't been such a person for many years. The look of shock subsides to one of puzzlement. I feel their eyes drop to my feet and up again, checking that I have four limbs.

"But what about what's-his-name?" butts in my sister. I scan my mind to remember which what's-his-name I had told her about last. Would it have been the what's-his-name who I sent off this morning without so much as a cappuccino? No he's too fresh. Would it have been the what's-his-name from New York who has taken so much of a liking for my company when he stays at the Dorchester once a month that he feeds me Veuve and keeps me up until five each time? Or maybe it was the what's-his-name who I quite shamefully seduced at a friend's work function.

"Didn't you go out with a friend's colleague?" I do wish she wouldn't use such terminology. There was

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never, and will never be, any question of ever 'going out'.

"Oh he was just a date," I dismiss. At the mere mention of the word, The Fleecees nudge each other excitedly, sending cupcake crumbs asunder. They start hooting about how long since they have done anything so adventurous as 'go on a date.' None of them apparently 'could imagine doing that now.' I notice they find all this hypothetical fantasising hilariously funny. One of The Fleecees roars that she 'can't remember the last time she wore matching underwear.' Another

cackles that 'she can't remember how to snog.'

Suddenly one of The Fleecees clasps her hands and gasps: "Oh my god, I've just thought." I brace myself

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desperate to be the one with the nugget that can save me from what must be a wretched lonely life. I simply have to meet Terry, 'the gorgeous single friend of my husband.' No, make that David 'the most decent bloke you'll ever meet.' Another Fleece puts forward her husband's cousin, who no one 'can understand *why* he is still single.'

for a fresh vision on how to smash atoms. "You should meet Mark. Oh don't you think she would be *perrrrfect* for Mark?"

The others pause, blink, and all at once their faces also fill with looks of mind-blowing revelation. The Fleeces start firing their solutions at me,

I sit back and picture the Davids, Terries, Marks and the other Fleeces' husbands' friends. My mind's eye makes them very handsome and I imagine having them all at once. "Sure, I'm open to being introduced," I say, wondering if I can get away with adding: "Especially if you get them all together at once?" The Fleeces clap their hands in delight and start enthusing that the next time I'm in the Cotswolds they'll definitely 'get the two of us together'. I pour myself more Highland Spring and start picturing my next trip to the Cotswolds. Funnily enough, that country visit also ends with me lying on my back.



PETE CLARK

It was the summer of 1974 and I was in search of an adventure. Money was tight in those days and so the best possible use of my cash resources was a one-way ticket to Istanbul – aka Constantinople, also aka Byzantium – on what was laughingly called the Orient Express, a shabby train of no distinction and less romance. I will spare you the details of the journey – an Australian traveller who puked his false teeth out of the window after sharing my whisky, a Turkish migrant worker who gave me a chilli sandwich as a joke – and concentrate on the distilled eroticism of my stay in that wonderful city.

The atmosphere on arrival was charged. It was only after several hours had elapsed that the reason became apparent: it was not my arrival, sad to say, but the fact that Turkey and Greece were at war on the island of Cyprus. I realised this on the first evening

ISTANBUL NIGHTS

on a trip to the huge Taksim Square, where hundreds of thousands of people were watching war films on giant screens. Except that they were purportedly real footage of Greek atrocities committed on Cyprus and the crowd were baying for blood. Each and every one of them. It was round about then that I thought of finding a woman.

Istanbul in the height of summer is devilishly hot and it was suggested by a Turkish acquaintance (male) newly acquired that a visit to the hammam was in order. A hammam is the original Turkish bath and, like the soldiers on Cyprus, no prisoners are taken therein. It seemed at first a strange idea: why should a person, sweating like bastard, enter an establishment which was even hotter and more humid? After ten minutes of sitting around on a stone bench wondering why all Turkish men had such pendulous testicles, I was wrestled on to a stone table and mightily pummelled by a man wearing a giant glove made of brillo pads. After the initial shock, I said goodbye to the epidermis and trusted to St. Christopher.

The remarkable fact of this treatment is that it works.