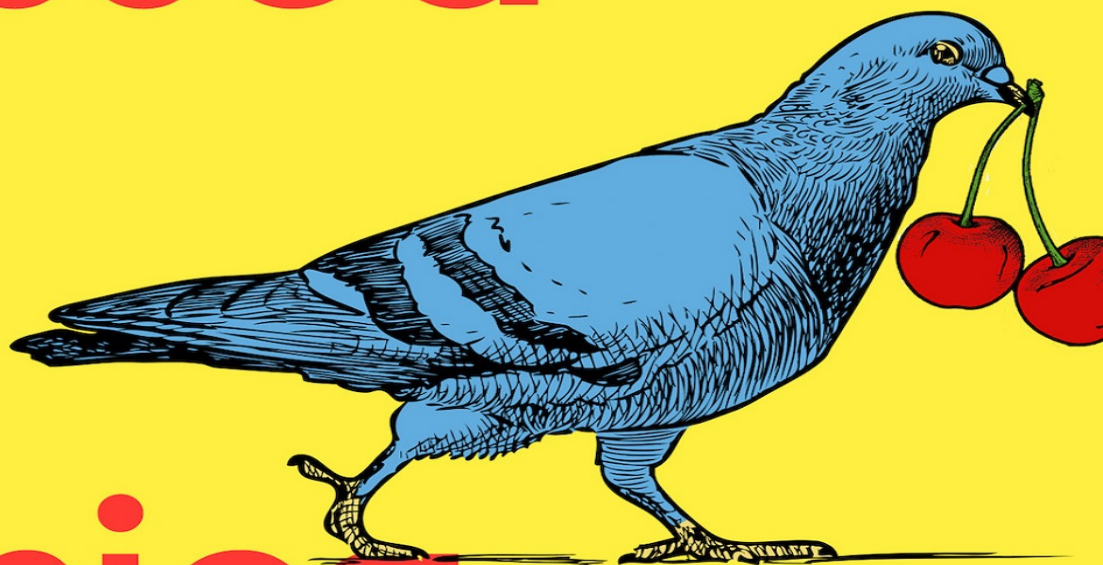




Consider Yourself Kissed

'A love story like no
other: charming, warm,
heartfelt and funny.
I didn't want it to end!'
LIANE MORIARTY

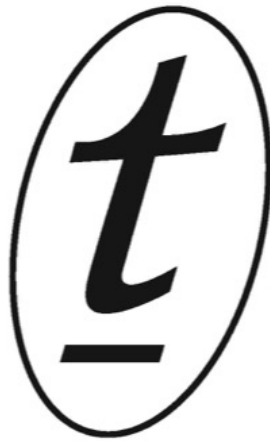


Jessica

'Ringingly original and
just absurdly good.'
CATHERINE NEWMAN

'Deeply appealing.'
MEG WOLITZER

Stanley



TEXTPUBLISHING.COM.AU

About the Book

Mother, writer, worker, sister, friend, citizen, daughter, wife. If she could be one, perhaps she could manage. Trying to be all, she found she was none.

Coralie has grown up in Australia but needs to escape some ghosts there. At twenty-nine, adrift in London, she meets witty, sexy, generous Adam—and his charming four-year-old daughter. Falling in love is fun, romantic and reassuring. And then?

Coralie yearns for children of her own, and to become a writer. Gradually, with Adam, who has a blossoming career as a political commentator, she builds the home and family she's longed for.

But her trips back to Australia change her perspective. Ten years on, she realises something important is missing: herself. When she reaches breaking point, the results surprise everyone.

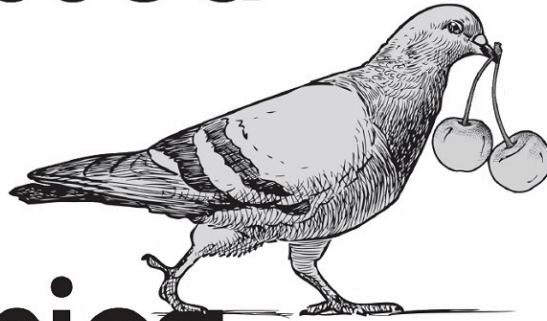
In this unforgettable story about what 'happily ever after' might truly mean, Jessica Stanley writes about life as we live it. Against the backdrop of a

turbulent decade in politics, she reveals how our intimate dramas can get tangled up with the public events of our times.

An honest, entertaining and intelligent portrait of a woman in love, *Consider Yourself Kissed* will capture your heart.



Consider Yourself Kissed



Jessica
Stanley



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

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For Kitten, Boppy and Nonny, with love.

2022

Laundry she could do. Tidying wasn't a problem. She made up her daughter's bed with the summer duvet, and the handmade quilt that said FLORENCE. She arranged Catty with his long legs crossed, his plush black arms open in a hug. Maxi's special toy was a sheep; she laid him on his side in the cot. The colourful magnets went in one basket, the Duplo in another. Upstairs, she made Zora's bed with sheets she'd brought in from the clothesline. They were warm and smelled of the sun. Her tired mind surveyed her luck—a home, the children, Adam. In so many ways, her dream.

Something was wrong with Coralie, something that set her apart—she couldn't be *in* love, but she couldn't be out of it either. If she didn't love, she was half a person. But if she did love, she'd never be whole. Her hands shook as she packed her bag. Mother, writer, worker, sister, friend, citizen, daughter, (sort of) wife. If she could be one, perhaps she could manage. Trying to be all, she found that she was none. A high-summer night, still light outside—the seagulls soared and screamed. She loved him so much, more than anything. But when Adam came home, she'd be gone.

1

2013

It was a Sunday morning in March, one of the coldest London winters in modern memory, and—although she was totally alone—Coralie Bower, aged twenty-nine and a half, was certainly *not* unhappy!

Which superpower would you prefer: to be invisible or able to fly? Her first and only *Guardian* Soulmates date had asked her that question at Nando's. (An agronomist from Walthamstow, he identified as a 'contrarian', had worn a full Tour de France-style cycling kit, and had asked if Australia had 'any universities'. Never again.) The answer was invisibility, and she had that power right now. All it had taken was moving to the other side of the world.

She marched down the canal, dodging bikes and strolling couples. As she reached Victoria Park, she realised she hadn't spoken a word all morning. She cleared her throat a few times to loosen up. In her mind, she rehearsed her order: 'One latte, please...' She said it out loud: 'One latte.' Was that weird? It was weird! She'd spent the whole weekend writing, books and papers spread out across the flat, and she'd forgotten how to exist in public.

It was so incredibly cold—whippets on their walks shivered in double jackets. Only the thought of coffee kept her going.

The night before, the pub on the corner had held a ‘private event’ in the function space next to her bedroom. ‘Private events’ were not subject, apparently, to the opening hours she’d carefully reviewed before signing her one-year lease. A few weeks after she moved in, she’d emailed the landlord about the noise. The pub was clearly visible to the naked eye, he’d replied. Besides, it had been ‘factored in to the rent’. The rent was 43 per cent of her take-home pay. She still had six months to go.

It was far from ideal. (It was terrible.) But she’d learned her lesson during the Christmas-party season: better to stay up and keep busy than to lie in bed, failing to sleep, questioning every life choice. By midnight, she’d hung her hand-washing out near the radiator to dry. Her work emails were up-to-date, replies in Drafts for Monday. She’d dealt at last with her brother’s scrupulously non-judgemental update from what she supposed she should call home. *Don’t worry, it’s fine, keep your distance*, his polite email seemed to imply. *You’re totally not wanted or needed*. Coralie managed other people’s emotions for a living! She didn’t welcome having the tables turned on her by Daniel! She’d drafted and deleted several hurt responses before accessing a higher plane. *You’re doing an amazing job with Mum*, she’d replied. *I bet she’s so glad you’re there. Please keep me updated on it all*. The truth was, she could hardly bear to know.

Inside the Pavilion Café, every seat was taken, and the warm breath of laughing friends and families had fogged up the windows and even the high glass dome. (‘One latte, please’—it had gone well, though she’d been forced to freestyle some small talk when the barista had been nice.) She took her coffee outside and stood by the lake to drink it. Soon the wind changed, and the fountain’s spray changed direction too. The sun came out for a brief moment; the mist glowed with a streak of rainbow. She slipped her hand in

her overcoat pocket for her phone. Images like that killed on her nascent Instagram, and performed an important function by reassuring friends in Australia she was alive.

‘A rainbow,’ a man said. ‘Zora, look, a rainbow.’

The lake, at least the part next to the cafe, was bordered by a low fence of interlocking cast-iron semicircles. A small girl raced right up and bumped it with her scooter. ‘A rainbow!’

She was so sweet, with bobbed hair, a little fringe, and serious dark eyes and brows—Coralie glanced up to take in the man, enviably warm-looking in his woollen jumper, scarf and coat. To her surprise, he was already studying her, turning on her the full force of his gaze. Did they know each other? But the whole point of Coralie Bower was that, apart from her colleagues at the office, she knew no one in London at all.

‘Dada, see the baby ducks?’

‘I can see them.’ He sounded amused, and from the direction of his voice it seemed he was still looking at Coralie, even though she’d turned away and drifted off, staring down at, although not seeing, her phone.

‘Can you get me one? A baby duck?’

‘I could get you a croissant. Or a pain au raisin—would that do?’

‘I don’t want the duck-ning to *eat*,’ the girl said.

The man laughed and picked up her scooter. ‘Why do you want it then?’

‘To love it and take care of it!’

They were walking off—the man carrying the scooter in one hand, the other hand holding the girl's.

When Coralie was five or six, her neighbour's cat had kittens. The cat received visitors like a queen in a pile of towels in the laundry, her babies fanned around her, their eyes closed. If Coralie could've got away with it, she would have stolen one—she'd wanted one of those kittens so badly. She knew exactly where the little girl with the fringe was coming from. Now she studied the ducks, very fluffy and newly hatched—hatched too soon, surely, in this cold. A sudden yearning filled her, too; although the ducks must have been swimming near her for five minutes without her even noticing.

She was back, suddenly—the girl, leaning on the fence by the lake. Coralie glanced through the windows into the cafe, and thought perhaps she saw the man, his head thrown back in a laugh. The wind changed again, and a wall of frigid spray advanced on them from the fountain. She raised her hand to shield her face. When she lowered it, the girl was in the water, face-down. Fuck!

Was it an emergency? It was an emergency. As in a nightmare, her throat ached with panic, but she couldn't scream for help. Seconds passed in a horrible flash. Why was the girl so still, her coat puffed around her like a life-jacket? Coralie climbed over the fence, steadied herself, and jumped in. The water was up to her waist. She scooped the girl up and lay her over the crook of her arm. She gave the top of her back, right between the shoulder blades, one tremendous thump with her fist. The girl coughed, spluttered, and gave a quick, outraged shout. 'Ahh!'

Coralie looked up towards the cafe. People had begun to spill out—silent, open-mouthed. She waded the few steps to the edge, reached up, and tipped the girl over the fence. Now she had no visible reason to be in waist-deep freezing water, and she could feel new people arriving at the scene and

staring at her as if she was mad. She realised with horror that her phone was in her pocket, submerged. Oh well. She climbed up to the ledge, balanced herself, and stepped awkwardly onto dry land.

The girl's face was white with shock. Coralie crouched and rubbed her back. 'Did you want to see the ducks?'

The girl nodded. There was a graze under her fringe where she'd bumped her head on the way in. Tears filled her eyes. She began to cry.

People were surrounding them. A woman took off her coat and put it around the girl. There was an accusatory element to the crowd's murmured remarks, as if someone, probably Coralie, had been remiss and, now that the danger had passed, it was time to apportion blame.

'I'll just get her dad,' Coralie said to no one, but as she struggled towards the cafe in her sodden jeans and boots, the man emerged with a big cup in one hand and a small one in the other. When he saw the crowd at the water's edge, he dumped the cups on a bench and ran.

'Zora!' He crouched and heaved her up into his arms. In his embrace, water squeezed from her coat and dripped to the ground. He talked closely into her ear. Her cheek rested against his. For a moment, he locked eyes again with Coralie—the circle of onlookers drew closer, offering jumpers, scarves, lifts home. The man and his daughter were cut off from view. Walking as normally as possible, so no one would notice her leave, Coralie trudged home, shaking with cold and inwardly freaking about lake-borne parasites. But something had changed. She was no longer invisible. The man had really seen her, and she had definitely seen him.

'If you can't write, you can work.' That had been the advice of an author she'd heard on an otherwise-forgotten podcast. A week after the lake

incident, she spent all weekend organising the notes she'd taken for her project, in emails to herself, on receipts and scrap paper, and in notebooks. What actually *was* she writing? (Her childhood friend Elspeth asked delicately in her email.) It wasn't that clear, even to herself. Something about the distance between Coralie and home, her past so far away, decisively 'the past'—her future here so blank and unknown—no one around to see her try, and probably fail, to get words on the page and keep them there. There weren't actual events from her life in her notes, or real people—it wasn't memoir. It was more like: feelings she'd had that she couldn't explain. Or: things she'd done that she couldn't understand. In the absence of fresh intel, she found herself starting to invent. That was something new—that felt like proper writing. By early afternoon on Sunday, it was so cold and so dark she couldn't face going far for coffee. She pulled the door of her flat shut and crossed the street to Climpsons, a small cafe with rough wooden bench seating and good coffee.

'Is that her?' she heard as she ordered. 'That's her!'

It was the man from the park. He stood up from his seat at the window. 'It's you!'

Coralie waved at the girl next to him. 'It's you!'

The girl waved back, her legs swinging.

The man came towards her. She wondered for a moment if he'd embrace her, shake her hand, or even, for a crazy second, kiss her—he seemed to be contemplating all three. He stood with his arms open wide. He was her height (not tall). They gazed at each other. 'I can't believe you ran away,' he finally said.

'I didn't *run*!' Coralie said. 'I sort of squelched.'

‘Zora said it was you.’ He called over to her. ‘Didn’t you?’

Zora, busy eating raw sugar from the bowl, didn’t reply.

‘Mmm,’ the man said. ‘Healthy!’

They both laughed, and then smiled, and then were silent for a second. ‘She’s okay then?’

‘She’s perfectly okay! I thought she’d be traumatised for life, have a fear of ducks and water, but she’s living a normal life, taking baths willy-nilly, quacking—she’s fine! Thanks to you,’ he said, suddenly serious.

She waved her hand. ‘God, no, not really. It was fine.’

‘It must have been fucking freezing.’

It *had* been freezing, she’d had to buy a new phone, and her good overcoat was ruined, the wool all rough and misshapen. ‘No, I really elegantly... *plunged* in, loving it, like Mr Darcy taking a dip in his lake.’

‘People often say *I* look like a young Colin Firth.’ He angled his face to help her see it—which she could, immediately, but what was she supposed to do? Agree?

‘Colin Firth is a hundred and eighty-seven centimetres tall.’ (Unlike you, she didn’t add.)

He laughed, unoffended. ‘Did you write his Wikipedia?’

‘I might have.’