

Career Girl

Jenny appeared to have it all – the looks, flash job and villa in France. But Miriam started to realise she had something Jenny didn't...

Words by Emma Burstall

“Hey, look at this!” David thrust the magazine under Miriam’s nose. She stopped ironing and stared.

“At home with... Jenny James, architect to the stars,” she read.

And there she was, sunning herself by her pool in the south of France, all big blonde hair, white teeth, itchy-bitsy bikini.

Miriam swallowed. It was nearly 20 years since they’d seen each other. She herself was going grey now of course. She’d put on a few pounds, too. But Jenny looked, if anything, prettier, younger.

Botox, obviously.

David whistled. “She hasn’t changed an inch.”

Miriam snatched the magazine and tossed it on the floor beside the mountain of ironing.

Not surprising, she thought bitterly. Jenny didn’t have three kids and a husband to look after.

She reached for the tin of shortbread fingers. Her beige skirt felt tight and sweaty round the waist. She’d bet Jenny didn’t eat shortbread fingers.

“Tea?” David asked. Hah! Did he think he could get round her that easily?

She scowled. The image of Jenny in that wretched bikini was dancing in front of her eyes.

Weird to think they’d once been so close, she reflected, lugging the basket of ironed clothes upstairs. They’d gone to the same school, parties, both talked of travel and a career. Like twins, everyone said.

But Jenny was the leader, of course, the one with the drive and ambition. Miriam just did as she was told.

Jenny always said she couldn’t be bothered with children, she’d rather throw herself into a career.

Well, she’d done that all right – and reaped the benefits.

Miriam put the clothes away and

trudged back downstairs. She could hear Lucy and Sam squabbling in the front room.

David was doing the crossword at the breakfast table. She didn’t mind usually, but couldn’t he be less predictable, just for one day?

Dear old David. It was Jenny, of course, who’d set them up on that date.

“He’s far too serious,” she’d giggled. “Make him fall in love with you, Miri, please. Then he’ll go off me.”

Who’d have thought the plan would work so well? One thing led to another and before she knew it, Miriam was staring at a blue line on the pregnancy stick.

“You’d be a fool,” Jenny said. “You’d be giving up everything you’ve ever dreamed of.”

But Miriam couldn’t get rid of this little person growing inside her, could she? Besides, she liked David. He was a good catch, her mother said. And he was over the moon. He bought her an engagement ring and that was that.

Jenny made her own little discovery soon after the miscarriage. By then it was too late to do anything about it.

“The timing’s perfect,” she insisted. She was always insistent. “We three are the only ones who’ll ever know.”

Soon they had Flora, beautiful Flora, so grown up now. Then a big gap. Then the other two. Miriam was so busy she forgot about a career and seeing the world.

She filled the sink with cold water, plunged her hands in and started to peel the potatoes for Sunday lunch. What would Jenny be having? Champagne and oysters, probably. She felt a lump in her throat. Stupid potatoes, stupid lunch, stupid Jenny, for that matter.

She could at least have dropped a line now and again, just to find out how they were all doing.



loved Flora. The door creaked and

David came in from the garden. He looked at his wife tentatively. “Bill next door said there’s flash flooding in the south of France.”

She smiled. She couldn’t help it. She’d really been in a foul mood today.

He took a couple of steps across the room and pulled her to him, squeezing her against his chest. He was still in his muddy wellies but she didn’t care.

She glanced around at the white kitchen units he’d assembled himself, the black, granite-effect worktops they’d picked out together from the MFI catalogue, the stainless steel kettle, the photos of their children on the fridge, the neat little garden beyond: her world.

It was just a silly old article anyway. She must be lonely as hell in that big villa. Miriam felt sorry for her.

“Thank you Jenny – for everything,” she whispered, listening to her husband’s slow, steady heartbeat.

And she meant it. ☺

Emma Burstall’s first novel, Gym and Slimline, is published by Preface, price £6.99. See Bookshop, page 98.