

My harsh lesson in love and life



Observer writer and interviewer Lynn Barber was an innocent 16-year-old schoolgirl when she met an older man and began a relationship that lasted two years. By day she was a diligent student; by night 'Simon' charmed her with dazzling stories, expensive restaurants and foreign films. And then came a rude awakening. In this exclusive extract from her memoir - now made into a film starring Carey Mulligan and Rosamund Pike - she describes her introduction to an adult world of sexuality and betrayal and how she was damaged by her suitor's lessons in life.



Lynn Barber at home as a teenager c1960. Photograph: Lynn Barber

I met Simon Goldman in 1960 when I was 16 and he was - he said - 27, but was probably in his late 30s. I was waiting for a bus home to Twickenham after a rehearsal at Richmond Little Theatre, when a sleek maroon car drew up and a man with a big cigar in his mouth leant over to the passenger window and said, "Want a lift?" Of course my parents had told me, my teachers had told me, everyone had told me, never to accept lifts from strange men, but at that stage he didn't seem strange, and I hopped in. I liked the smell of his cigar and the leather seats. He asked where I wanted to go and I said Clifden Road, and he said fine. I told him I had never seen a car like this before, and he said it was a Bristol, and very few were made. He told me lots of facts about Bristols as we cruised - Bristols always cruised - towards Twickenham. He had a funny accent - later, when I knew him better, I realised it was the accent he used for posh - but I asked if he was foreign. He said: "Only if you count Jews as foreign." Well of course I did. I had never consciously met a Jew; I didn't think we had them at my school. But I said politely: "Are you Jewish? I never would have guessed." (I meant he didn't have the hooked nose, the greasy ringlets, the straggly beard of Shylock in the school play.) He said he had lived in Israel when he was "your age". I wondered what he thought my age was: I hoped he thought 19. But then when he said, "Fancy a coffee?" I foolishly answered, "No - my father will kill me if I'm late." "School tomorrow?" he asked, and, speechless with mortification, I could only nod. So then he drove me to my house, and asked: "Can I take you out for coffee another evening?"

My life might have turned out differently if I had just said no. But I was not quite rude enough. Instead, I said I was very busy rehearsing a play which meant that, unfortunately, I had no free evenings. He asked what play, and I said *The Lady's Not for Burning* at Richmond Little Theatre. Arriving for the first night a couple of weeks later, I found an enormous bouquet in the dressing room addressed to me. The other actresses, all grown-ups, were mewing with envy and saying, "Those flowers must have cost a fortune." When I left the theatre, hours later, I saw the Bristol

parked outside and went over to say thank you. He said: "Can't we have our coffee now?" and I said no, because I was late again, but he could drive me home. I wasn't exactly rushing headlong into this relationship; he was far too old for me to think of as a boyfriend. On the other hand, I had always fantasised about having an older man, someone even more sophisticated than me, to impress the little squirts of Hampton Grammar. So I agreed to go out with him on Friday week, though I warned that he would have to undergo a grilling from my father.

My father's grillings were notorious among the Hampton Grammar boys. He wanted to know what marks they got at O-level, what A-levels they were taking, what universities they were applying to. He practically made them sit an IQ test before they could take me to the flicks. But this time, for once, my father made no fuss at all. He asked where Simon and I had met; I said at Richmond Little Theatre, and that was that. He seemed genuinely impressed by Simon, and even volunteered that we could stay out till midnight. So our meeting for coffee turned into dinner, and with my father's blessing.

Simon took me to an Italian place in Marylebone and of course I was dazzled. I had never been to a proper restaurant before, only to tea rooms with my parents. I didn't understand the menu, but I loved the big pepper grinders and the heavy cutlery, the crêpes suzettes and the champagne. I was also dazzled by Simon's conversation. Again, I understood very little of it, partly because his accent was so strange, but also because it ranged across places and activities I could hardly imagine. My knowledge of the world was based on Shakespeare, Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontes, and none of them had a word to say about living on a kibbutz or making Molotov cocktails. I felt I had nothing to bring to the conversational feast and blushed when Simon urged me to tell him about my schoolfriends, my teachers, my prize-winning essays. I didn't realise then that my being a schoolgirl was a large part of my attraction.

Over the next few weeks, it became an accepted thing that Simon would turn up on Friday or Saturday nights to take me to the West End. Sometimes we went to the Chelsea Classic to see foreign films; sometimes he took me to concerts at the Wigmore or Royal Festival Hall, but mostly we went to restaurants. The choice of restaurants seemed to be dictated by mysterious visits Simon had to make on the way. He would say, "I've just got to pop into Prince's Gate", and would disappear into one of the white cliff-like houses while I would wait in the car. Sometimes the waiting was very long, and I learnt to take a book on all our dates. Once, I asked if I could come in with him, but he said, "No, this is business", and I never asked again.

Besides taking me out at weekends, Simon would sometimes drop in during the week when he said he was "just passing". (Why was he passing Twickenham? Where was he going? I never asked.) On these occasions, he would stay chatting to my parents, sometimes for an hour or more, about news or politics - subjects of no interest to me. Often the three of them were so busy talking they didn't even notice if I left the room. I found this extraordinary. It was quite unprecedented in our house for me not to be the centre of attention.

Perhaps I should explain about my parents. They were first-generation immigrants to the middle class and all their hopes were invested in me, their only child. They had no relatives in London, and no friends who ever came to the house - my father had his bridge club, my mother her amateur dramatics, but all they talked about at home was me, and specifically my schoolwork. My father often quoted Charles Kingsley's line "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever", but he said it sarcastically - he wanted me to be clever, and let who will be good. I had been reared from the cradle to pass every possible exam, gain every possible scholarship and go to the best possible university. By the time I met Simon, I was well on track. I had a scholarship to an independent school, Lady Eleanor Holles, a royal flush of O-levels, and my teachers predicted that I would easily

win a place at Oxford to read English. But still my parents fretted and worried. Their big fear was that my Latin would "let me down".

Simon in theory represented everything my parents most feared - he was not one of us, he was Jewish and cosmopolitan, practically a foreigner. He wore cashmere sweaters and suede shoes; he drove a pointlessly expensive car; he didn't work in an office; he was vague about where he went to school and, worst of all, boasted that he had been educated in "the university of life" - not a teaching establishment my parents recognised. And yet, inexplicably, they liked him. In fact, they liked him more than I ever liked him, perhaps because he took great pains to make them like him. He brought my mother flowers and my father wine; he taught them to play backgammon; he chatted to them endlessly and seemed genuinely interested in their views. I suppose it made a change for them from always talking about me.

Yet none of us ever really knew a thing about him. I think my parents once asked where he lived and he said "South Kensington", but that was it. I never had a phone number for him, still less an address. As for what he did, he was "a property developer" - a term I suspect meant as little to my parents as it did to me. I knew it was somehow connected with these visits he had to make, the great bunches of keys he carried, the piles of surveyors' reports and auction catalogues in the back of his car, and the occasional evenings when he had to "meet Perec" which meant cruising around Bayswater looking for Perec (Peter) Rachman's Roller parked outside one of his clubs. Rachman would later give his name to Rachmanism when the press exposed him as the worst of London's exploitative landlords, but at that time he was just one of Simon's many mysterious business colleagues.

Simon was adept at not answering questions, but actually he rarely needed to, because I never asked them. The extent to which I never asked him questions is astonishing in retrospect - I blame Albert Camus. My normal instinct was to bombard people with questions, to ask about every detail of their lives. But just around the time I met Simon I became an existentialist, and one of the rules of existentialism as practised by me and my disciples at Lady Eleanor Holles School was that you never asked questions. Asking questions showed that you were naïve and bourgeois; not asking questions showed that you were sophisticated and French. I badly wanted to be sophisticated. And, as it happened, this suited Simon fine. My role in the relationship was to be the schoolgirl ice maiden, implacable, ungrateful, unresponsive to everything he said or did. To ask questions would have shown that I was interested in him, even that I cared, and neither of us really wanted that.

Simon established early on that I was a virgin, and seemed quite happy about it. He asked when I intended to lose my virginity and I said: "17", and he agreed this was the ideal age. He said it was important not to lose my virginity in some inept fumble with a grubby schoolboy, but with a sophisticated older man. I heartily agreed - though, unlike him, I had no particular older man in mind. He certainly didn't seem like a groper. I was used to Hampton Grammar boys who turned into octopuses in the cinema dark, clamping damp tentacles to your breast. Simon never did that. Instead, he kissed me long and gently and said: "I love to look into your eyes." When he kissed me, he called me Minn and said I was to call him Bubl but I usually forgot. Eventually, one night, he said, "I'd love to see your breasts", so I grudgingly unbuttoned my blouse and allowed him to peep inside my bra. But this was still well within the Lady Eleanor Holles dating code - by rights, given the number of hot dinners he'd bought me, he could really have taken my bra right off.

And then one day, on one of his drop-in visits, Simon said he was going to Wales next weekend to visit some friends and could I go with him? I confidently expected my parents to say no - to go away, overnight, with a man I barely knew? - but instead they said yes, though my father added jocularly, "Separate rooms, of course." "Of course," said Simon. So off we went for the first of many dirty

weekends. I hated Wales, hated the grim hotel, the sour looks when Simon signed us in. We shared a room, of course, and shared a bed, but Simon only kissed me and said: "Save it till you're 17." After that, there were many more weekends - Paris, Amsterdam, Bruges, and often Sark in the Channel Islands, because Simon liked the hotel there, and I liked stocking up on my exciting new discovery, Sobranie Black Russian cigarettes. They brought my sophistication on by leaps and bounds.

As my 17th birthday approached, I knew that my debt of dinners and weekends could only be erased by "giving" Simon my virginity. He talked for weeks beforehand about when, where, how it should be achieved. He thought Rome, or maybe Venice; I thought as near as possible to Twickenham, in case I bled. In the end, it was a new trendy circular hotel - the Ariel? - by Heathrow airport, where we spent the night before an early morning flight to somewhere or other, I forget. He wanted to do a practice run with a banana - he had brought a banana specially. I said, "Oh for heaven's sake!", and told him to do it properly. He talked a lot about how he hoped Minn would do Bubl the honour of welcoming him into her home. Somewhere in the middle of the talking, he was inside me, and it was over. I thought: "Oh well, that was easy. Perhaps now I can get a proper boyfriend." (I think the word that best describes my entire sex life with Simon is negligible. He was a far from ardent lover - he seemed to enjoy waffling about Minn and Bubl more than actually doing anything. And whereas my games mistress was always bellowing across the changing room, "But you said it was your period last week!", Simon always took my word for it when I said that Minn was "indisposed".)

The affair - if it was an affair - drifted on, partly because no proper boyfriends showed up, partly because I had become used to my strange double life of schoolgirl swot during the week, restaurant-going, foreign-travelling sophisticate at weekends. And this life had alienated me from my schoolfriends: if they said, "Are you coming to Eel Pie Jazz Club on Saturday?", I would say: "No, I'm going to Paris with Simon." Of course my friends all clamoured to meet Simon, but I never let them. I was afraid of something - afraid perhaps that they would see through him, see, not the James Bond figure I had depicted, but this rather short, rather ugly, long-faced, splay-footed man who talked in different accents and lied about his age, whose stories didn't add up.

Because by now - a year into the relationship - I realised that there was a lot I didn't know about Simon. I knew his cars (he had several Bristols), and the restaurants and clubs he frequented, but I still didn't know where he lived. He took me to a succession of flats which he said were his, but often they were full of gongs and women's clothes and he didn't know where the light switches were. So these were other people's flats, or sometimes empty flats, in Bayswater, South Kensington, Gloucester Road. He seemed to have a limitless supply of them.

But by now there was a compelling reason for staying with Simon: I was in love. Not with Simon, obviously, but with his business partner, Danny, and his girlfriend, Helen. I loved them both equally. I loved their beauty, I loved their airy flat in Bedford Square where there was a harpsichord in the corner and pre-Raphaelites on the walls. At that time, few people in Britain admired the pre-Raphaelites, but Danny was one of the first, and I eagerly followed. He lent me books on Rossetti and Burne-Jones and Millais, and sometimes flattered me by showing me illustrations in auction catalogues and saying "What do you think? Should I make a bid?" I found it easy to talk to Danny; I could chatter away to him whereas with Simon I only sulked.

Helen was a different matter. She drifted around silently, exquisitely, a soulful Burne-Jones damsel half hidden in her cloud of red-gold hair. At first, I was so much in awe of her beauty I could barely speak to her. But gradually I came to realise that her silence was often a cover for not knowing what to say and that actually - I hardly liked to use the word about my goddess - she was thick. I was terrified that one day Danny would find out. And there were sometimes hints from Simon that Danny's interest in Helen might be waning, that there could be other girlfriends. Knowing this,

keeping this secret, made me feel that it was crucial for me to go on seeing Helen, to protect her, because one day, when I was just a little older and more sophisticated, we could be best friends.

Simon always refused to talk about business to me ("Oh you don't want to know about that, Minn") but Danny had no such inhibitions. He loved telling me funny stories about the seething world of dodgy property dealers - the scams, the auction rings, the way the auctioneers sometimes tried to keep out the "Stamford Hill cowboys" by holding auctions on Yom Kippur or other Jewish holy days, and then the sight of all these Hasidic Jews in mufflers and dark glasses trying to bid without being seen. Or the great scam whereby they sold Judah Binstock a quarter acre of Ealing Common, without him realising that the quarter acre was only two yards wide. Through Danny, I learnt how Peter Rachman had seemingly solved the problem of "stats" - statutory or sitting tenants - who were the bane of 1960s property developers. The law gave them the right to stay in their flats at a fixed rent for life if they wanted - and they had a habit of living an awfully long time. But Rachman had certain robust methods, such as carrying out building works all round them, or taking the roof off, or "putting in the schwartzers" (West Indians) or filling the rest of the house with prostitutes, that made stats eager to move.

So I gathered from Danny that the property business in which Simon was involved was not entirely honest. But my first hint of other forms of dishonesty came about 15 months into the relationship when I went to a bookshop on Richmond Green. Simon had taken me there several times to buy me books of Jewish history and the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer - I was glad to have them, though I never read them. But on this occasion, I went alone and the bookdealer, who was normally so friendly, asked: "Where's your friend?"

"What friend?"

"Simon Prewalski."

"I don't know anyone of that name," I said truthfully.

"Well, whatever he calls himself. Tell him I'm fed up with his bouncing cheques - I've reported him to the police."

That evening I said to Simon "Do you know anyone called Prewalski?"

"Yes - my mother, my grandparents, why?"

I told him what the book dealer had said.

Simon said: "Well don't go in there again. Or if you do, don't tell him you've seen me. Say we've broken up."

"But what did he mean about the bouncing cheques?"

"How should I know? Don't worry about it."

So that was a hint, or more than a hint. But soon there was unmistakable proof. Simon and Danny were buying up a street in Cambridge called Bateman Street, so we often stayed there. One weekend I was moaning - I was always moaning - "I'm bored with Bateman Street", so we drove out towards Newmarket. At a place called Six Mile Bottom, I saw a thatched cottage with a For Sale sign outside. "Look, how pretty," I said. "Why can't you buy nice places like that, instead of horrible old

slums?" "Perhaps we can," said Simon, so we bounced up to the cottage and an old lady showed us round. I was bored within minutes, but Simon seemed unconscionably interested in the bedroom corridor which he kept revisiting. Then I saw him going out to the car, carrying something. Eventually we left and went for lunch at a hotel in Newmarket. We were having a rather lugubrious meal when two men came into the dining room and one pointed the other towards our table. The man introduced himself as a detective. He said: "We've had a complaint from a Mrs so and so of Six Mile Bottom. She says a couple visited her cottage this morning and afterwards she noticed that a valuable antique map by Speed was missing from one of the bedrooms." "Oh, Simon!" I said. He shot me a look. "Perhaps we could have this conversation outside," he suggested. He went outside with the policeman. I waited a few minutes and then went to the Ladies, and out the back door and away down the street. I had just enough money for a train back to London. I hoped Simon would go to prison.

He didn't of course; he bounced round to Clifden Road a few days later and took me out to dinner. "How could you steal from an old lady?"

"I didn't steal. She asked me to have the map valued."

"No she didn't - I was with you."

"All right, she didn't ask me. But I recognised that the map was by Speed and I thought if I got it valued for her, it would be a nice surprise."

I knew he was lying, but I let it go. I said: "If you ever really stole something, I would leave you."

He said: "I know you would, Minn."

But actually I knew he had stolen something and I didn't leave him, so we were both lying.

When I did try to leave him a few weeks later, it was not out of moral outrage but because I was bored. I was bored with Minn and Bubl, I was bored with the endless driving round, the waiting while he ran his mysterious errands, the long heavy meals in restaurants, the tussles in strange bedrooms, the fact that we never met anyone except Danny and Helen. I told Simon: "We're finished - I've got to concentrate on my A-levels." He said: "We're not finished. I'll come for you when you've done your A-levels."

On the evening after my last A-level, Simon took me out to dinner and proposed. I had wanted him to propose, as proof of my power, but I had absolutely no intention of accepting because of course I was going to Oxford. Eighteen years of my life had been dedicated to this end, so it was quite impertinent of him to suggest my giving it up. I relayed the news to my parents the next morning as a great joke - "Guess what? Simon proposed! He wants me to marry him this summer!" To my complete disbelief, my father said, "Why not?" Why not? Had he suddenly gone demented? "Because then I couldn't go to Oxford." My father said: "Well - is that the end of the world? Look," he went on, "you've been going out with him for two years; he's obviously serious, he's a good man; don't mess him around." I turned to my mother incredulously but she shook her head. "You don't need to go to university if you've got a good husband."

This was 1962, well before the advent of feminism. But even so, I felt a sense of utter betrayal, as if I'd spent 18 years in a convent and then the Mother Superior had said: "Of course, you know, God doesn't exist." I couldn't believe my parents could abandon the idea of Oxford. But apparently they could and over the next few days they argued it every mealtime - good husbands don't grow on

trees, you're lucky to get this one ("And you not even in the family way!"), why go to university if you don't need to? Simon meanwhile was taking me to see houses, asking where I wanted to live when we were married. I couldn't resist telling my schoolfriends: "I'm engaged!" And they were all wildly excited and thrilled for me, and said "You'll never have to do Latin again!" Even so, I was queasy - I'd always liked the sound of Oxford, I even liked writing essays, I wasn't so keen to give up the idea.

Events overtook me in the last few days of term. Miss R Garwood Scott the headmistress somehow got wind of my engagement and summoned me to see her. Was it true I was engaged? Yes, I said, but I would still like to take the Oxford exams. She was ruthless. I could not return to school (in those days you had to stay for an extra term to do Oxbridge entrance) if I was getting married. When was the wedding and which church would it be in? Not in church, I said, because my fiancé was Jewish. Jewish! She looked aghast - "Don't you realise that the Jews killed Our Lord?" I stared at her. "So I won't take the Oxford exams," I said. My little gang was waiting for me outside her study. "I told her I was leaving," I announced. "She tried to persuade me to stay but I refused." They all congratulated me and begged to be bridesmaids. Then I went to the bogs and cried my eyes out.

I told my parents: "I'm not going to Oxford, I'm marrying Simon." "Oh good!" they said. "Wonderful." When Simon came that evening, they made lots of happy jokes about not losing a daughter but gaining a son. Simon chuckled and waved his hands about, poured drinks and proposed toasts - but I caught the flash of panic in his eyes. A few days later, probably no more than a week later, we were in the Bristol on our way to dinner when he said he just needed to pop into one of his flats. Fine, I said, I'll wait in the car. As soon as he went inside the house, I opened the glove compartment and started going through the letters and bills he kept in there. It was something I could have done on any one of a hundred occasions before - I knew he kept correspondence in the glove compartment, I knew the glove compartment was unlocked, I was often waiting in the car alone and had no scruples about reading other people's letters. So why had I never done it before? And why did it seem the most obvious thing in the world to do now? Anyway the result was instantaneous. There were a dozen or more letters addressed to Simon Goldman, with a Twickenham address. And two addressed to Mr and Mrs Simon Goldman with the same address.

I behaved quite normally that evening though at the end, when he asked if Minn would welcome a visit from Bubl, I replied smoothly that she was indisposed. By that stage, I was at least as good a liar as Simon. As soon as I got home, I looked in the phone book - and why had I never thought of doing that before? - and sure enough found an S Goldman with a Popesgrove (Twickenham) number, and the address I'd seen on the letters. It was only about half a mile from my house, I actually passed it every day on the bus to school. I spent the night plotting and rehearsing what I would say, working out scripts for all eventualities. When I finally rang the number the next morning, it was all over in seconds. A woman answered. "Mrs Goldman?" I said. "Yes." "I'm ringing about the Bristol your husband advertised for sale." "Oh," she said, "is he selling it? He's not here now but he's usually back about six." That was enough or more than enough - I could hear a child crying in the background.

I took the train to Waterloo, and walked all the way to Bedford Square. Helen was in, and guessed as soon as she saw me - "You've found out?"

Yes, I said - "It's not just that he's married - he lives with her. And there's a child."

"Two, actually."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry. I wanted to. The other night when you said you were engaged, I told Danny we must tell you, but he said Simon would never forgive us."

This was - what? - my third, fourth, fifth betrayal by adults? And I had really thought Helen was my friend.

"What was Simon planning to do?" I asked her. "Commit bigamy?"

"Yes," she said soberly. "That's exactly what he intended to do. He felt he'd lose you if he didn't. He loves you very much you know."

I went home and raged at my parents - "You did this. You made me go out with him, you made me get engaged." My parents were white with shock - unlike me, they had no inkling before that Simon was dishonest. My mother cried. When Simon came that evening, my father went to the door and tried to punch him. I heard him shouting, "You've ruined her life!" From my bedroom window, I saw Simon sitting in the Bristol outside with his shoulders shaking. Then my father strode down the front path and kicked the car as hard as he could, and Simon drove away. I found the sight of my father kicking the car hilarious and wanted to shout out of the window, "Scratch it, Dad! Scratch the bodywork - that'll really upset him!"

It was a strange summer. My parents were grieving and still in deep shock. I, the less deceived, was faking far more sorrow than I felt. After all, I never loved Simon whereas I think perhaps they did. I stayed in my room playing Cesar Franck's Symphony in D Minor very loudly day after day. My main emotion was rage, followed by puzzlement about what to do next. I had no plans for the summer or - now - for the rest of my life. When my A-level results came, I not only got the top marks I fully expected in English and French, but also - *mirabile dictu* - top marks in Latin. I slapped the letter on the breakfast table and said, "You see? I could have gone to Oxford."

My father took the day off work, probably for the first time in his life, and went to see Miss R Garwood Scott. God knows what humble pie he had to eat - and he hated humble pie - but he came back with a grim face and a huge concession. She had agreed I could be entered for the Oxford exams as a Lady Eleanor Holles pupil, and I could sit the exams at school. But she was adamant that I could not attend the school - it was up to him to arrange private tutorials. Mum and Dad talked far into the night about how they would find a tutor, and how they would pay. A day or two later - presumably at Miss R Garwood Scott's instigation - one of my English teachers rang and volunteered to be my tutor. So I spent that autumn writing essays and going to tutorials, working hard and feeling lonely. My parents were in such deep grief that mealtimes were silent. Once or twice I saw the Bristol parked at the end of the street, but I was never remotely tempted to go to it.

I sat the Oxford exams, I went for interviews, I was accepted at St Anne's. In my second term at Oxford, one of the nuns at the convent where I boarded handed me a note which she said a man had brought. It said "Bubl respectfully requests the pleasure of the company of Minn for dinner at the Randolph Hotel tonight at 8." I tore it up in front of the nun. "Don't ever let that man in," I told her. "He's a con-man." I went round to Merton to tell my boyfriend, Dick, and he said, "Well, I'd like to meet him - let's go to the Randolph." So we did. Simon was sitting in the lobby - on time, for once in his life - looking older, tired, seedier than I remembered. His face lit up when he saw me and fell when I said, "This is my boyfriend, Dick." Simon said politely, "Won't you please both stay to dinner as my guests?" "How are you going to pay for it?" I snapped and Dick looked at me with horror - he had never heard me use that tone before. Simon silently withdrew a large roll of banknotes from his pocket and I nodded, OK.

Dick was enchanted by Simon. He loved his Israeli kibbutz stories, his fishing with dynamite stories, his Molotov cocktail stories. I had heard them all before and sulked throughout the meal. As Dick walked me back to my convent, he said, "I see why you were taken in by him - he is quite a charmer, isn't he?" "No," I said furiously, "he's a disgusting criminal con-man and don't you dare say you like him!"

Was Simon a con-man? Well, he was a liar and a thief who used charm as his jemmy to break into my parents' house and steal their most treasured possession, which was me. Of course Oxford, and time, would have stolen me away eventually, but Simon made it happen almost overnight. Until our "engagement", I'd thought my parents were ignorant about many things (fashion, for instance, and existentialism, and why Jane Austen was better than Georgette Heyer) but I accepted their moral authority unquestioningly. So when they casually dropped the educational evangelism they'd sold me for 18 years and told me I should skip Oxford to marry Simon, I thought, "I'm never going to take your advice about anything ever again." And when he turned out to be married, it was as if, tacitly, they concurred. From then on, whenever I told them my plans, their only response was a penitent "You know best".

What did I get from Simon? An education - the thing my parents always wanted me to have. I learned a lot in my two years with Simon. I learned about expensive restaurants and luxury hotels and foreign travel, I learned about antiques and Bergman films and classical music. All this was useful when I went to Oxford - I could read a menu, I could recognise a fingerbowl, I could follow an opera, I was not a complete hick. But actually there was a much bigger bonus than that. My experience with Simon entirely cured my craving for sophistication. By the time I got to Oxford, I wanted nothing more than to meet kind, decent, straightforward boys my own age, no matter if they were gauche or virgins. I would marry one eventually and stay married all my life and for that, I suppose, I have Simon to thank.

But there were other lessons Simon taught me that I regret learning. I learned not to trust people; I learned not to believe what they say but to watch what they do; I learned to suspect that anyone and everyone is capable of "living a lie". I came to believe that other people - even when you think you know them well - are ultimately unknowable. Learning all this was a good basis for my subsequent career as an interviewer, but not, I think, for life. It made me too wary, too cautious, too ungenerous. I was damaged by my education.

About the author

Born 22 May 1944 in Bagshot, Berkshire.

Educated at Lady Eleanor Holles School, Hampton and St Anne's College, Oxford.

Career Her first job in journalism was at Penthouse. She went on to work for the Sunday Express, Independent on Sunday, Vanity Fair, Sunday Times and Daily Telegraph magazine. She has worked at the Observer since 1996.

Awards Five UK Press awards and a What the Papers Say award (1990).

Books How to Improve Your Man in Bed, The Heyday of Natural History, Mostly Men, and Demon Barber

Turning point In 1986, when interviewing her ex-employers Bob Guccione and Kathy Keeton, she decided to write for the first time in the first person: "I felt I'd finally found my voice. I never

believed in 'objective' interviews anyway - if there are two people in the room, you can't pretend the interviewee is talking into space."

Personal life Married David in 1971, with whom she had two children, Rosie and Theo.

Hobbies Gossip, lunch, birdwatching, contemporary art.

How my young love story was turned into a film

When a version of this story first appeared in *Granta*, a young woman called Amanda Posey said she'd like to buy the film rights and said she had a screenwriter in mind. I thought she was mad, but the screenwriter turned out to be her then boyfriend, now husband, Nick Hornby and they spent literally years honing the script and finding backers till it finally went into production last year. Amanda asked if I'd like to watch some of the filming, and said I should come to the Japanese School, Acton, to watch one of the classroom scenes.

Only as I was driving there did I think: why on earth would they film my story in a Japanese school and why is there a Japanese school in Acton anyway? And at that point I registered the date - 1 April - and decided I must have been the victim of an April Fool.

But no - the Japanese school was there and in fact turned out to be the old Haberdashers' Aske's girls' school which we used to play at lacrosse. It was so eerily like my old school, Lady Eleanor Holles, that I kept looking at the school photos in the corridors to see if I could see myself in them. And entering the classroom was a real madeleine moment because it even smelt like my old classroom.

I met the Danish director, Lone Scherfig, and Carey Mulligan who plays me in the film, and was knocked out by the brilliance of the acting and the incredible care and authenticity that had gone into getting the period detail right.

I saw an early rough cut of the film last summer and the finished version at Christmas. It comes out at the end of October and I firmly believe it will be a hit. Carey Mulligan is amazing - when the film was shown at Sundance earlier this year (and won the audience prize) all the critics hailed her as a star. But the other actors are great too - Peter Sarsgaard as my dodgy boyfriend, Rosamund Pike and Dominic Cooper as Helen and Danny, Alfred Molina and Cara Seymour as my parents, Emma Thompson as my hated headmistress, Olivia Williams as the good teacher who saved me.

Of course I now routinely refer to it as "my" film and have almost convinced myself that I not only wrote it but produced and directed it - but anyway huge thanks to Nick Hornby, Amanda Posey, Finola Dwyer, and Lone Scherfig for making such a good job of it. And if anyone wants to believe that I was as pretty as Carey Mulligan when I was 16, by all means go ahead.