

Infidelity for first-time fathers



mark
Barrowcliffe

Author of *Girlfriend 44*

'This book is a success:
honest, unpretentious...and extremely funny' *The Times*

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by Mark Barrowcliffe



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First published in 2001
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in paperback in 2002
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A REVIEW paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 0 7472 6815 0

Typeset in Palatino by Avon Dataset Ltd, Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.reviewbooks.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

To Wendy and Reg Bell –
for keeping me warm at night.

'It was one of the deadliest and heaviest feelings of my life to feel that I was no longer a boy – from that moment I began to grow old in my own esteem – and in my esteem age is not estimable'

Lord Byron, *Detached Thoughts*, 15 October 1821

'To find a friend one must close one eye. To keep him – two'

Norman Douglas, *Almanac*, 1941

In this novel I have referred to a number of historical facts. Following the time-honoured practice of all the best academics they are entirely made up.



Photo © Nigel Spalding

Girlfriend 44

MARK BARROWCLIFFE

Since he was ten years old, Harry has had one ambition – to find the girl for him. Forty-three women and twenty years later he is no nearer his goal. He doesn't ask for much; just a beautiful intellectual who doesn't mind his constant infidelity.

Harry's flatmate Gerrard did once find true love – but he didn't realise it until the day she left him. Only two women have met his exacting criteria, and he's not hopeful that he'll find another. Even if he does, he isn't sure he can trust her not to grow old eventually. Then they meet Alice.

Alice is the perfect girl. She's the only woman in the world Harry and Gerrard can agree on. Unfortunately, she seems to like both of them.

Gerrard wants Alice for himself, but Harry will stop at nothing to win her. Friendship is forgotten and even a little light poisoning is on the cards.

'A natural chronicler of the love-lorn male' *The Times*

'Sharp and funny' *Loaded*

'I howled with laughter . . . lively, witty and upbeat' *Mirror*

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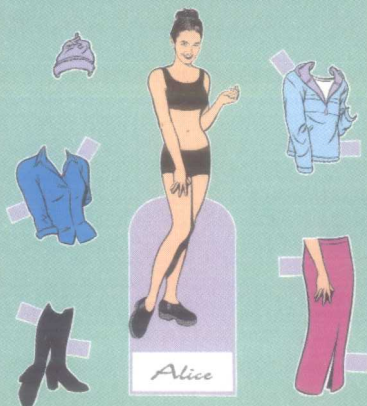
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Is she The One – or is she just
Girlfriend 44



**Mark
Barrowcliffe**

'Smart and funny' *Cosmopolitan*



Praise for *Girlfriend 44*:

'I howled with laughter... Lively, witty and upbeat... If you've got any sense of humour at all you'll be hard-pushed to get through *Girlfriend 44* without laughing out loud' *Mirror*

'Hilarious...[Barrowcliffe is] an assured stylist with a lively, wordy wit'
Independent on Sunday

'This is life, love and everything through the eyes of a thirtysomething bloke looking for love. Hilarious' *Company*

Mark Barrowcliffe was born in Coventry and graduated from the University of Sussex. He worked as a sub-editor, a conference-organiser and a stand-up comedian before giving it all up to become a full-time novelist.

Also by Mark Barrowcliffe

Girlfriend 44

1

Perfect Day

The day I learned I was to be a father was one of the happiest of my life.

It was mid-September, 82 degrees, and Londoners were wishing the summer dead. The sunlight and holidays were gone but a skulking heat remained, ignoring the darker nights, the pressing clouds and the first Hallowe'en lanterns in the shops, like a boyfriend refusing to register the 'I'll call you' look in his lover's eyes.

So the city sweltered unseasonably in traffic jam and tube bottleneck, sandwich shop queue and meeting room, everyone hot, everyone rushed, while I – floating like a sprig of coriander on this human stew – lay naked in the fan draught, immune to the bubbling calefaction of the streets, on Cat my girlfriend's bed.

I was old enough to welcome the news of my impending parenthood, God knows I was old enough. Thirty-five, the top of the loop, taking the long look at the horizon before the

inevitable tailspin towards three score and ten.

It was an ideal time for me to welcome children into my life, particularly since, in Cat, I had a woman I wanted in a way I hadn't really known before.

We already had several children, in my mind. Sad – or as we used to call it, romantic – as it is after so brief a relationship, I had pictured us lounging by a river bank looking into each other's eyes while the kids, the products of our perfect passion, gambolled nearby.

The children would be expensively dressed in old-fashioned clothes, the way that posh children are, like something out of *The Sound of Music* (not the Hitler Youth, clearly). We'd tear our gaze away from each other, watching while they played with a hoop and stick, or maybe a model sailing yacht. Obviously that's the fantasy, in reality it would be a Gameboy or something, but I try to resist yielding to marketing in my dreams.

And when the wine was poured, and as the children slept, weary from their games, we would discuss art and books, and amaze each other with our insights.

'Hmm,' she would say, 'I'd never thought of that . . .' Well, you can always dream.

Then I would lean back, with Cat hanging over me, her hair tickling my face as I noticed how age was making her even more beautiful and wondered how I could want her more with every second.

'Look,' she'd say, hand bending fine as a willow to the river, which would be free from punts and the class of university student that rhymes with them, 'swans – they pair once and forever.'

'Like us,' I'd say, 'like us,' and I'd surrender myself to sunlight and kisses.

By coincidence this fantasy was playing in my mind as she rose in glory like the dawn to go to the lavatory. At that stage of our relationship every parting bore a pain. I had a physical need for her, an animal ache. Like the rain-frozen walker wants a warm bed, like the child-blasted parent wants sleep, I wanted her – body, mind and soul.

Tell her, I thought. Tell her how you feel. Lay yourself open to love. Before you go thinking me soft, I should record that I don't often think this sort of stuff and have all sorts of normal fantasies about scoring winning goals, lottery bonanzas, cars, the lot. Also, I've been arrested twice (OK, once it was mistaken identity and once it was for disturbing the peace with a banjo, but nevertheless I *was* arrested), and I used to box for the Southern Counties. I'm also man enough to admit that last point was a lie. So I'm not soft, all right?

There were things holding me back from expressing my inner feelings about Cat. We'd only been seeing each other for a few months and it seemed dreadfully premature to whip out the 'L' word. I'm not like Lee Henderson, my oldest friend and new business partner, who says expressions of love should enter at about six months – which in his book of sexual manners neatly coincides with his first request for sex up the wrong 'un. 'Love and buggery must enter together,' he'd said, like a home economics mistress explaining that many a mickle makes a muckle, 'you can't have one without the other.'

'You can,' I'd said. 'I have.'

'Yes, but it isn't so much fun,' he'd said, examining the back of his hand for the tell-tale wrinkles he'd just read about in a paranoia-inducing magazine he'd found at a supermarket

checkout. 'It's the ideal combination of the pornographic and the romantic – the whole range of human needs.'

A wistful, faraway look had come over him, like a seventy-year-old footballer examining the shirt he'd worn when he'd lifted the cup.

I'm not like Henderson, though. It's not a cynical thing for me. I can't trot out words in return for bizarre sexual favours. I wanted to say I loved her because I loved her and I was ready for the next stage – nights by the fire, the school run in the morning, taking the kids to Cubs and asking them if the bloke who runs it ever makes them do anything 'funny'. Really, I'd wanted this for years. The fact that I loved her so soon, so ridiculously soon, and that I knew it was ridiculous to say so but was going to say so anyway, would show the depth of my feeling.

Not that the sexual thing wasn't part of what I felt for her. That day we'd been shagging on and off since we'd woken at 11, and the night before that we'd been shagging until we went to sleep at dawn. What Henderson terms my 'pork sword' was vaguely stirring to life again, like a sleepy child forcing itself awake at the party because it's convinced it's going to miss something.

If we did it again I feared that Social Services might place a care order on my knob. But I still really wanted to try. She had a sexual magnetism strong enough to rip the rivets out of your door.

Other than the extreme youth of our relationship making me feel reticent about declarations of love, there was also the extreme youth of Cat to consider. She was only twenty-four and, though she acted older, she looked younger. While it was a mild concern, and slightly embarrassing, to get those