



Lionel Shriver is a novelist whose previous books include Orange Prize-winner *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *The Post-Birthday World*, *A Perfectly Good Family*, *Game Control*, *Double Fault*, *The Female of the Species*, *Checker and the Derailleurs*, and *Ordinary Decent Criminals*. She is widely published as a journalist, writing features, columns, op-eds, and book reviews for the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, *Marie Claire*, and many other publications. She is frequently interviewed on television, radio, and in print media. She lives in London and Brooklyn, NY.



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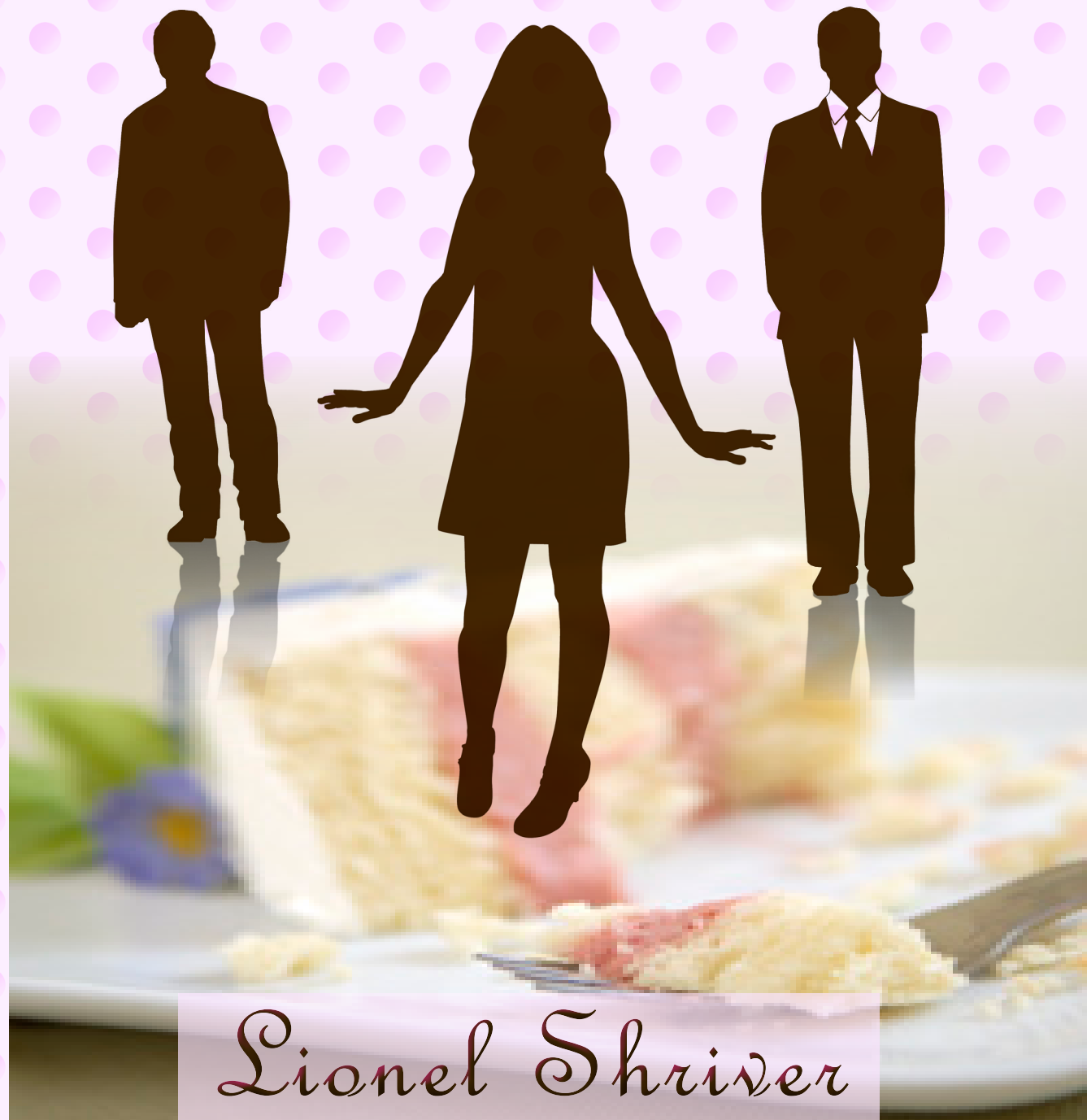
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# THE POST-BIRTHDAY WORLD

Lionel Shriver

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## Chapter One

**What began as coincidence** had crystallized into tradition: on the sixth of July, they would have dinner with Ramsey Acton on his birthday.

Five years earlier, Irina had been collaborating with Ramsey's thenwife, Jude Hartford, on a children's book. Jude had made social overtures. Abjuring the airy we-really-must-get-together-sometime feints common to London, which can carry on indefinitely without threatening to clutter your diary with a real time and place, Jude had seemed driven to nail down a foursome so that her illustrator could meet her husband, Ramsey. Or, no—she'd said, "My husband, Ramsey Acton." The locution had stood out. Irina assumed that Jude was prideful in that wearing feminist way about the fact that she'd not taken her husband's surname.

But then, it is always difficult to impress the ignorant. When negotiating with Lawrence over the prospective dinner back in 1992, Irina didn't know enough to mention, "Believe it or not, Jude's married to Ramsey Acton." For once Lawrence might have bolted for his Economist day-planner, instead of grumbling that if she had to schmooze for professional reasons, could she at least schedule an early dinner so that he could get back in time for NYPD Blue. Not realizing that she had been bequeathed two magic words that would vanquish Lawrence's broad hostility to social engagements, Irina had said instead, "Jude wants me to meet her husband, Raymond or something."

Yet when the date she proposed turned out to be “Raymond or something’s” birthday, Jude insisted that more would be merrier. Once returned to bachelorhood, Ramsey let slip enough details about his marriage for Irina to reconstruct: after a couple of years, they could not carry a conversation for longer than five minutes. Jude had leapt at the chance to avoid a sullen, silent dinner just the two of them.

Which Irina found baffling. Ramsey always seemed pleasant enough company, and the strange unease he always engendered in Irina herself would surely abate if you were married to the man. Maybe Jude had loved dragging Ramsey out to impress colleagues but was not sufficiently impressed on her own behalf. One-on-one he had bored her silly.

Besides, Jude’s exhausting gaiety had a funny edge of hysteria about it, and simply wouldn’t fly—would slide inevitably to the despair that lay beneath it—without that quorum of four. When you cocked only half an ear to her uproarious discourse, it was hard to tell if she was laughing or crying. Though she did laugh a great deal, including through most of her sentences, her voice rising in pitch as she drove herself into ever accelerating hilarity when nothing she had said was funny. It was a compulsive, deflective laughter, born of nerves more than humor, a masking device and therefore a little dishonest. Yet her impulse to put a brave, bearable face on what must have been a profound unhappiness was sympathetic. Her breathless mirth pushed Irina in the opposite direction—to speak soberly, to keep her voice deep and quiet, if only to demonstrate that it was acceptable to be serious. Thus if Irina was sometimes put off by Jude’s manner, in the woman’s presence she at least liked herself.

Irina hadn’t been familiar with the name of Jude’s husband, consciously. Nevertheless, that first birthday, when Jude had bounced into the Savoy Grill with Ramsey gliding beside her—it was already late enough in a marriage that was really just a big, well-meaning mistake that her clasp of his hand could only have been for show—Irina met the tall