

'Clare Chambers' characters
are so vivid that by the end
of the book they feel like old
friends' *Daily Mail*

Back Trouble



Clare
Chambers

Author of *Small Pleasures*

Back Trouble

Clare Chambers' first job after leaving university was working with Diana Athill at André Deutsch. They published her first novel *Uncertain Terms* in 1992. Clare is also the author of *Back Trouble*, *Learning to Swim*, *A Dry Spell*, *In A Good Light*, *The Editor's Wife* and *Small Pleasures*. She lives with her husband in south-east London.

Praise for Clare Chambers:

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'The writing is beautiful' Jessie Burton on *Small Pleasures*

'A funny and moving story with a great deal of style' *Daily Express* on *Back Trouble*

Also by Clare Chambers

UNCERTAIN TERMS
LEARNING TO SWIM
A DRY SPELL
IN A GOOD LIGHT
THE EDITOR'S WIFE
SMALL PLEASURES

Back Trouble

**Clare
Chambers**



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To my parents

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PART ONE



Back Trouble



I felt so groggy when I woke up that I decided to leave the hearse at Tim's and walk home. I had been celebrating New Year's Eve there with my brother Raymond who was over from Canada.

I only get to see Raymond about once every five years – he emigrated when he was twenty-one and did not come back and see us for ten years, until he had a wife and four children to bring with him like hunting trophies. Ever since then he has only been able to afford to come alone: Julie is not that keen on London anyway, so she was happy to stay at home and have Christmas in Vancouver with the kids. We are both rather slack correspondents; every Christmas he sends me a photocopied circular beginning 'Dear Friends . . . It's been an eventful year for the Scriveners', which I scan in vain for any hint of a personal message before putting in the bin. Every year I send him a belated birthday card – his birthday is on March 2nd and I am always caught out by February being a short month. Because of the distance between us, and the fact that he left so young, we have very little in common except our childhood, and sometimes when I hear him reminiscing about it I wonder if we can have shared even that. Raymond's memory is like an oyster – throw in a piece of grit and he'll produce a pearl where I would just develop a running sore.

By the time I had reached Tim's that evening the others were already on their second drink and were passing round

Raymond's latest photos of his children in various stances of achievement: Megan's first day at high school; Peter holding the football shield; Ann, in a white leotard, poised on the beam at a gym display; Jenny as Peaseblossom in the same white leotard with a pair of chiffon wings tacked on; their new baby Fred – yes, they'd had a fifth – in his christening robe.

Tim is Julie's brother. He works for a fruit importers in Vauxhall, or as my father would say with his insistence on according any connection of his the highest position in any hierarchy, 'He's the top man at Covent Garden.' He came over to England about ten years ago and was immediately adopted by us as a surrogate Raymond: the swap seemed only fair. (Frankly, I think we have the better of the deal.) His flat is three times the size of mine and is therefore always commandeered for reunions of this kind. And his wife, Belinda, is an enthusiastic hostess, though even she, it must be said, finds my father hard work.

When I walked in I could hear Dad belabouring Tim.

'Do you know,' he was saying, wagging a finger ochre to the knuckle at him. 'Do you know how much they're paying men with my skills now? *Five hundred pounds* a week. They can't get them. They're begging me to go back.' He shuffled the pile of photos from one hand to the other giving every third or fourth one a perfunctory glance, before handing them back to Raymond with a 'Very nice'.

Mum, who only sees Dad when Raymond comes over, was glowering at him from the corner, raising her eyes to heaven every time he turned away. Dad, naturally, is oblivious to these nuances. In fact he seems hardly aware that they are no longer married, still treating Mum as his unpaid helpmeet: 'Pass me those glasses, Shirley'.

There was, of course, no question of Mum's 'de facto husband', Ken, accompanying her. (The first time she called him that I thought she said 'defective husband' – a slip which has proved somewhat prophetic.) Even if Ken were the sociable sort, it would be unthinkable to have him and

Dad under the same roof. Although my parents split up half my lifetime ago, Dad still has the air of a man newly divorced.

My entrance provided Tim with a welcome diversion, and he accepted my bottle of bargain bin champagne gratefully and retreated to the kitchen to chill it. I don't know why I bought it – I had never felt less fizzy in my life, and given the state of my finances it was highly imprudent. I had intended to buy the cheapest thing in the off-licence fridge, but when you are as broke as me economies on that scale seem rather futile. I had played down my predicament to the family, telling them only that we had decided to wind up the business because it was no longer profitable. I omitted any mention of bailiffs, repossession orders, threatening letters and my various personal debts.

I had started Backlist Books three years previously with Giles and Maggie, two college friends, after we had all been sacked from publishing jobs during a period of belt-tightening. Maggie had decided that initially our best chance of making money would be to forswear literature and confine ourselves to publishing those self-improvement books with titles like *Stop Feeling Guilty!* and *That's Not What I Meant! A Guide to Better Communication*. The beauty of these was that they didn't have to be very long – even the most dedicated self-improver begins to wilt after eighty pages or so.

Maggie was in charge of the accounts and everything to do with sales – which, as our only outlet was direct mail selling, involved everything from booking advertising space to stuffing books in jiffy bags. Giles dealt with the production side, haggling with printers, hounding typesetters, and it was my job to commission writers and freelancers, edit, copy-edit and proofread. We had secretarial and envelope-stuffing help in the shape of a school leaver who was frighteningly efficient and cost-conscious, and used to leave bossy yellow stickers everywhere reminding us to shut doors and switch lights off and put our scrap paper in the recycling box. And there was design expertise from a freelancer called Murph, whose

favourite trick was to turn up at five to six on Friday evening just as we were all going home.

We had invested all our redundancy money and savings in the lease on the office – a couple of basement rooms in Brixton, one of which was large enough to function as a makeshift warehouse. None of our suppliers would let us have anything on a long-term repayment arrangement unless it was personally guaranteed, so underwriting the furniture, computers, photocopier and fax machine was a rash of dotted lines, signed and countersigned.

The project's sleaziness was only intended to be short term. As soon as we started to make money, went the theory, we would be able to afford to move on to better, worthier books. But somehow these profits never materialized. Even when times were good we only made enough to stand still. Our collapse, once it started, took just four months.

One morning last August I was sitting in the office trying out the personality test in *101 Tips for Business and Social Success* and was feeling piqued at having come out as a poor team-player, when I became aware of a telephone conversation that was taking place in Maggie's office.

'Oh dear,' she was saying. 'How much? . . . That much? . . . Oh dear.'

A moment later she appeared in the doorway, cigarette in hand, fanning smoke through her nostrils like a dragon.

'Did you hear that?'

I nodded.

'It was the landlord. Apparently the people in the top flat are getting the roof mended, which means we'll have to pay our share.'

'How much?'

'Five thousand.'

It wouldn't have been an insurmountable problem if we weren't already having trouble paying our printers. And each new title seemed to do slightly worse than the last. As our advertisements grew larger and more expensive, our claims more extravagant – YOUR MONEY BACK IF THIS BOOK

DOES NOT CHANGE YOUR LIFE — so public demand dwindled.

I tried not to worry — after all there had been difficult patches before, and things had always improved. At one stage we had been selling several thousand of every title. They would barely have time to be wheeled from the van to the store room before Melanie would be packing them into envelopes and sending them out. It was then that we had bought our expensive equipment: the photocopier, the new desks, the computer, the car. When we had had the money to pay cash for these the suppliers had been falling over themselves to offer us credit and, delirious with excitement, we had accepted terms which involved negligible monthly payments over a period of five years, by the end of which we would still owe more than the items were originally worth. This they referred to as a balloon payment, perhaps because you could watch it inflate before your eyes. A tip: never buy office equipment new. Go along to an auction instead where some other poor bastard is having to sell off his stuff at a tenth of its value.

So I tried not to worry. But things stubbornly refused to improve. Overhearing Maggie saying 'How much? Oh dear' over the phone became the norm.

The roof was the final straw. Our modest estimate of two hundred and fifty pounds (Murph on a ladder with a tarpaulin and some second-hand slates) had been received with cries of derision from the upstairs tenants, who claimed that water was pouring through the gaps and making the children bronchitic.

We limped on for a few months more. First to go were Melanie and the freelancers. We increased our hours and reduced our salaries, and still the public weren't buying. The store room was stacked from floor to ceiling with unsold books.

One grim Monday we sat down with a calculator and our invoices and proved mathematically what we already knew: that without a miraculous windfall we were doomed. Rather

than settling any of the debts outright, we agreed to wait, and only pay a bill when it became physically perilous not to. By November bailiffs were making regular appearances at the office, and until we caught on and stopped answering the door, they had to be put off, bought off, and generally appeased. We knew it was only a matter of time before they started making home visits.

One afternoon just before Christmas I was alone in my flat watching Bing Crosby on TV, and cracking walnuts, when I saw a bailiff striding up the path. There is something about bailiffs which distinguishes them from other callers. Perhaps it was his immense bulk, or the way he knocked loudly and purposefully as if to say 'I'm coming in, like it or not', which alerted me that this was not someone selling dusters or collecting for Cancer Research. Fortunately I had seen him before he saw me, and I was able to dive down between the couch and the wall. At this point Hamlet, the great dane I had been looking after who was already barking and trying to force his nose through the letter-box, came bounding in, and finding me flat on the floor, decided I was dead and set up the most piteous howling. The bailiff was clearly not fooled and knocked again, this time on the window. Hamlet redoubled his cries, and seizing one of my shoe-laces between his teeth, seemed intent on dragging me out from behind the couch.

'Get off, Hamlet,' I pleaded in a whisper, bracing my foot against the floor to stop him tugging it into view. I lay there hardly breathing for what felt like hours, before plucking up the courage to venture out. The bailiff had gone, but had left a card promising he would be back. I needed no further encouragement, but slipped out the back door and headed, at a nervous trot, for Giles and Maggie's.

They did not look well. Maggie had red rings around her eyes and appeared not to have slept for days and Giles's hair, which was already receding, seemed to have retreated even further down his head as if afraid that it too was about to be repossessed.

'I've just been speaking to a lawyer friend,' he said in a sepulchral tone, 'and I think the only thing to do is bail out now. I've found a remainder merchant who will take all our stock for £2,500, and altogether we owe about £26,000 which will have to be paid off gradually as and when.'

'It's definitely all over, then.'

'I'm afraid so.'

It wasn't as if I had been unprepared. 'Oh well. It's back to the Situations Vacant columns . . .'

They nodded glumly. I couldn't help reflecting that it was even worse for them, since they had a house and therefore something to lose should one of our creditors have felt sufficiently vindictive to bankrupt us.

Maggie wandered over to their bookcase in which our twenty titles were displayed and took one out. 'Here,' she said. It was called *Get That Job - A Guide to Interview Success*.

*

It was a piece of incredible bad fortune that this final collapse had to happen just days after Kate's return to New Zealand, when I was already feeling particularly miserable.

I had met her a year ago at one of Giles and Maggie's parties. Giles had got chatting to her when dropping someone off at the airport, and invited her along. And she, very gamely I thought, turned up. It wasn't a real party, like the ones you go to when you are eighteen which are all sweat and smoke and sexual possibilities. It was a sedate affair where people arrived and left in the same couplings, and ate more than they drank, and stood around in clusters talking about their jobs and their children. It was not, in short, the sort of party for which you prepare with a throb of anticipation. The guest list comprised the same thirty or so people who always come to Giles and Maggie's parties. I am now on nodding terms with many of them but, having failed to introduce ourselves properly on the first few occasions, we are all acutely aware that it is now too late, and out of mutual embarrassment nodding is as far as we go.

It is positively primitive this belief that it is somehow impertinent to address a stranger at a party without first having been introduced, but it holds me back every time, and if it hadn't been for a happy accident, Kate and I would probably never have exchanged a word.

I arrived a little later than I had planned because Mum had rung for a chat just as I was leaving, and as I walked in everyone swivelled round, fixing me with stares of uniform indifference, before turning back to their already well-established conversations. Through the crowd of half-remembered faces, Kate was instantly recognizable as a newcomer, and therefore an object of interest. She also stood out because of her tan, which made the rest of us with our mid-winter pallor look more sickly and under-nourished than ever. Her costume, too, marked her as an outsider. She was dressed as though about to go jogging, in tracksuit bottoms and a sweatshirt ('Giles said come casual – I asked him specifically,' she lamented later).

She had arrived in London that morning and was still in a state of bewildered excitement about everything – the narrowness of the streets, the traffic, the parked cars, chimney pots, *squirrels*.

Throughout the evening I discreetly orbited the various groups into which she had been absorbed but the later it grew the less likely it became that I would ever find the opportunity to talk to her. But I stayed nevertheless: I am always the last to leave at parties. It's a curse, this form of wilful optimism, the refusal to face up to the fact that however late you stay *nothing good is going to happen*. Kate made me aware of this only recently when she pointed out that when I am hungry late at night, and grazing round the kitchen in search of food, I will invariably open the fridge and, having checked that there is nothing edible inside, return five minutes later for a second look. As if between the two visits a whole chicken or a piece of cheddar may have materialized on the shelf.

At about a quarter to twelve people were starting to glance at their watches and murmur about the babysitter or the long drive home, and by midnight Maggie was wrapping the first

departees back into their coats and dispatching them into the night.

Kate stood up to leave, took one step towards the door and, as she did so, knocked over a glass which someone had left on the floor beside her seat. It was a spectacular kick which sent a purple ribbon of wine shooting across the carpet and up the spotless cream wall opposite and brought all conversation to a standstill.

'Oh my God,' said Kate, aghast, as Maggie and Giles appeared from the kitchen with dripping cloths.

'Salt's what you need', 'White wine', 'Carpet shampoo', people were suggesting, standing over Kate and Maggie as they scrubbed hopelessly at the stain, turning it from mauve to dirty grey. Giles was trying to wash the splash marks off the wall.

'I'm so sorry,' Kate was saying faintly.

'Oh, don't worry,' said Maggie bravely. 'At least it missed the new rug,' and she pointed to the cream and blue Chinese carpet on which I was standing, absent-mindedly stroking the stem of my wine glass as I watched the proceedings.

The words had hardly left her lips when there was a crack, the stem snapped in my hand and the bowl of the wine glass plummeted to the floor, depositing a lake of burgundy in the middle of the palest, creamiest, most vulnerable part of the rug.

Maggie was incandescent with rage. 'You stupid oaf, Philip,' she ranted, as I fled to the kitchen for a cloth. 'I don't believe it!' As an old friend, I suppose I was a legitimate target for this sort of reaction in the way that Kate, as a stranger, could not be.

On my third visit to the kitchen to rinse out the cloth I bumped into Kate on a similar mission. We exchanged guilty looks, confederates and fellow carpet-wreckers, and then began to snigger. 'I'm so glad you did that,' she said. 'Your stain looks so much worse than mine.'

With that bizarre introduction, our relationship began. I ended up giving her a lift back to her hostel in Holloway.

She was slightly taken aback by the sight of the hearse until I explained that, unable to afford a van, I had bought it cheaply from a local undertaker's (the second-hand hearse market being somewhat sluggish), thinking it would be useful for transporting books.

She didn't have any friends or relatives in London, it emerged, so as we pulled up at her door, after scribbling my address and phone number down on a piece of paper, I mumbled something about hoping she would call round sometime, and then drove home to an empty flat and dreamt that Maggie was chasing me round the kitchen with a broken bottle.

The next day was cold and drizzly. I mooched around the house, bored and restless. My hatred of Sundays has a clear childhood precedent: the unfailing walk to Clapham Common without so much as a dog or a kite to give the journey any pleasure or purpose; roast beef followed by fruit crumble – rhubarb usually, or the pitiless gooseberry. Fruit has changed. It is sweet and soft now; strawberries, peaches, mangoes, even exotic things with spikes on can be had all year round it seems. But the fruit of my childhood was always sour. Then after lunch and washing up, the afternoon nap; Dad in his chair, hogging the fire; the click-click of Mum's knitting needles; and Raymond and I with nothing to do but squabble over our toys or whose turn it was to refill the coal bucket.

After reading the Sunday newspapers I decided to chuck everything out of the fridge that was either past its sell-by date, or self-evidently putrid, and then realized that that left me nothing to eat but a couple of eggs and a gnarled carrot. Glumly I surveyed the possibilities. Carrot omelette? Poached eggs with carrot julienne? Disgusted, I gave up and read all the bits of the paper that I had skipped over first time because they looked too dull. When that was done, I checked out the small advertisements. Finally, driven to distraction by my own company, I reached for the phone. Giles and Maggie. No reply. Murph. No reply. My old schoolfriend

Eddie. Engaged, and then when I finally got through – no reply! He must have put the phone down and bolted out of the door. I was seized with paranoia. Everyone was obviously out at the same event, from which I, alone in all London, had been excluded. One thing at least was clear. They were all having a more interesting Sunday than I was. I cast around in search of entertainment.

I had just finished an experiment to check the reliability of an idea I had read somewhere that an egg is strong enough, if correctly positioned, to bear the weight of a grown man standing feet astride on a breadboard, and was mopping the floor, when the doorbell rang. Through the stained glass I could see the wobbly outline of a short-haired woman. I flung open the door.

It was Kate. ‘God, I hate Sundays!’ she said. And from that moment I knew she was the woman for me.

How did I lose her? It was easy. It happens all the time.

*

So understandably that New Year’s Eve I wasn’t feeling my usual festive self, and when at midnight we all staggered to our feet, wagged our arms up and down and sang ‘Auld Lang Syne’, I will admit it, my mother was not the only one to shed a tear. She has cried every New Year that I can remember. I don’t know why. Maybe because we’re all getting older, maybe at the thought that another year has passed by like the Royal Mail van, delivering to everyone in the street except her. I suspect that every New Year she thinks, ‘By this time next year my life will have changed and I’ll be happy’, and every year it hasn’t and she isn’t and she cries.

And then – and this is how it started – Raymond wandered over to the bookshelves and picked out a copy of *Take Control: A Guide to Running Your Own Life*, which I had given to Tim a few months earlier, and started reading aloud from the more absurd bits.

“Three years ago I lost my job, my home and my wife. I came to London with nothing but the clothes I stood up in.