

The dream house

Susie fantasises about a rural idyll but Susie's head is in the clouds. The bump back to reality is bruising in this month's short story by **Pippa Kelly**



With each page came the promise of a better life in a different place. There was nothing Susie liked more than to make a cup of Earl Grey and settle down to a good read.

Even the names of the minor characters – the gatekeepers of that other, printed world – were exotic. She tried to imagine what Charlie de Mason Marquis or Jonathan de Beret looked like. Her mind conjured up signet rings, dark suits and double-cuffed shirts in pastel shades.

She wondered what sorts of homes they lived in. Turning the pages, she saw Cotswold manor houses, idyllic estates and fine Georgian homes. These were backdrops against which human dramas had been played out over centuries. They were grand settings for all-consuming passions. By contrast, the four walls of her Victorian house, itself hemmed in by scores of identical terraced buildings, stifled emotion.

She sometimes felt that she was turning into her neighbours. Rows and rows of middle-class families, each expressing their perceived differences through the same soft furnishings and choice of kitchen sinks.

But the homes in those pages were *real* homes. Substantial

homes of character. Interesting period houses in rolling countryside. Victorian farmhouses with paddocks, cottages and outbuildings.

And everywhere, there was space.

In this magical land, where gardens came in hectares, not metres, each of the children could have their own room, with their own bathroom, probably in their own wing. They could quite possibly have their own lake. And all for the price of a London box.

Her dreams came free; Annie, her hairdresser, passed on the previous week's salon copy of the magazine. Susie devoured every picture, every cliché-ridden phrase. She couldn't get enough of *Country Life*.

Everyone she knew – well, all the mothers she knew – were planning their escape.

It was a no-brainer. The ultimate swap. A front step frequently swamped under tides of litter washed up from the pavement, exchanged for an enchanting wisteria-covered porch. A cramped hall without room for so much as a shelf, traded for a spacious area with black and white chequered tiles and a staircase

sweeping upwards to seven or eight bedrooms. Plastic Ikea storage boxes, for a fully-equipped playroom. A postage-stamp garden for a heated pool and an old orchard.

She discovered a website called Virtual Viewing and spent hours surfing mansions and Grade II-listed farmhouses when Richard and the children were asleep. It was often 2am before she rolled into bed dreaming of sculleries, game larders and walk-in wardrobes.

Soon, virtual viewing was not enough. She called Pearson-Jeeves & Johns and asked to speak to Charlie de Mason Marquis. "Charlie's qualified and moved to our commercial division in London," said a plummy voice. "May I help?"

Before she knew it, Susie was regularly asking other mothers if they could possibly pick up the children and look after them for a few hours. She covered hundreds of miles driving out to Hampshire, Suffolk and Sussex. One day, in an act which even she acknowledged was madness, she drove to Bangor to look at a 16th century timber-framed farmhouse with seven bedrooms, four bathrooms, a minstrel's gallery, two kitchens and a chapel, priced £50,000 lower than their terraced box. She hated it. But she'd had to see it. After all, it *could* have been hers . . . with change.

She tried to forget the fabulous-looking barn conversion in Sussex which she could have been viewing, and half-heartedly went shopping in Bellevue Road

When Richard began asking about the number of miles she was driving, she started travelling by train. But delays and cancellations forced her back onto the road. So she invented a hospitalised friend in Suffolk. Lying, she fast discovered, was easier than she'd thought. Dear old Richard was too busy to notice the changes of routine. He lived for his work – and there was the rub. She rationalised endless lies to her husband by arguing that the biggest lie was to herself.

Richard's consultancy business, set up five years ago, was taking off. It had expanded so much in the past year that, by a cruel irony, he was in the process of moving to larger, smarter premises in Mayfair. His success fuelled Susie's imagination, and she increased her price limit by several hundred thousand. She simply blocked out the one immutable fact: Richard would *never* leave London.

As if to compensate for the impossibility of turning her dream into reality, she began living a virtual life. She found herself straying into the pet food aisle in Sainsbury's. The day after viewing a spectacular 14th century house with three reception rooms, seven bedrooms and a kitchen garden, she bought four tins of Winalot for the retriever that would live there.

When not cruising down motorways listening to *The Archers*, Susie haunted her favourite shops in Webbs Road, noting the measurements of distressed French wardrobes and antique shutters. She smuggled home three irresistible candelabra, heaved them into the loft and covered them with bin liners.

Her parallel world seemed normal because all the other mothers she knew were talking about moving to the country, looking at houses and schools, and buying furniture. Their husbands could, and would, commute. Richard couldn't, and wouldn't. And they'd always agreed that they would never live in separate homes during the week. "It's a recipe for disaster," they told each other

(continued overleaf)