

Susan Midalia

Everyday Madness



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Bernard

‘Did I tell you the news?’ Gloria said. ‘Wendy has a brand new grandchild.’

Bernard stared at the toast on his plate. Another piece wouldn’t hurt, would it, if he sacrificed the jam?

‘You’ll never guess her name, Bernie. It’s something to do with the weather.’

He sighed. ‘Is it Heatwave?’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Cyclone, then. Or Hurricane.’

‘Of course not!’ Gloria shook her head. ‘Well, if you must know, it’s Raine, with an *e* at the end.’

‘Better than Hailstone, I suppose.’

Any sensible person would have given up by now, but Gloria was undeterred, carrying on about this miraculous grandchild’s hair and ears and those beautiful eyes that looked straight into yours as if the baby already knew you.

‘Do you remember that feeling, Bernie? When Karl was a baby?’

‘I remember him screaming round the clock.’

That didn’t stop her either, veering off like she always did, about someone else’s son now, taking his parents on a holiday to a country starting with M and how kind because he was always busy, wasn’t he a doctor, a doctor for kidneys or maybe the liver ... pausing for breath ... starting up again about some

woman's knees, arthritis, poor thing, trying a new kind of ointment or cream ...

Bernard looked through the window at yellowing lawns, wilting roses, a dog pissing on a letterbox. The footpath would be baking hot in the middle of the day, so that one, two, three barefoot steps would make you howl like a mad thing with the burn. He'd done that once, as a child, to see how much pain he could endure. But now he was a man who'd put childish things away, sitting at a table, trying not to watch his wife spooning gallons of creamy yoghurt into a bowl, spreading jam as thick as a brick on her toast. He used to love her hearty appetite, they called it, before the days of clogged arteries and late-onset diabetes. But now, sitting across the table, all he could see was her wobbling double chin, the meaty flesh of her arm as she reached across the table for the milk. Not that he could talk, with those sloppy rolls of fat around his middle. But at least he was making an effort, a month now at the gym, bristling with legions of muscular young men and bouncing young women with bud-like breasts and taut, silky legs. All the beautiful people working out on the machines, that glowing, heave-ho chorus of the modern, managerial self: I work out, therefore I am. All *he* could manage was trudging on the treadmill, an incline of seven on a really good day. Like a moaning Sisyphus he was, walking up, sliding back, over and over again.

'Bernie. Are you listening? I asked if you had any plans for your holiday? I thought we could go to the zoo, or maybe to Yanchep, they have those cute koalas and I haven't seen a koala in years and it's lovely there, remember the time we rowed on the lake ...'

What would he do on his holiday? He would read another book about a crafty detective; another magazine in which the same old *experts* frothed at the mouth about the appalling state of the nation. He would try not to picture being summonsed

to an office and told that his services were no longer required.

He might catch up on some sleep, he said.

He saw Gloria frown, then sigh, then start up again about a new puppy down the road, very cute but such a yapper, and what about Christmas, she said, was there enough white wine, Donna always loved her wine, and should they have turkey, a few years since they'd had turkey ...

It had been years since he'd taken her to bed. Years since he'd looked at her with love.

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For the sake of their guests at the table, Bernard smiled, nodded and made small talk, although Christmas, quite frankly, gave him the shits. Frenzied shoppers buying electronic gadgets at obscenely inflated prices, planting herds of plastic reindeer to light up their yuletide gardens. Reindeer, for crying out loud, in thirty-five degree heat. If there was any kind of god, he'd stop this heat right now, but the Maker didn't seem to be listening to anyone's prayers for relief. Or maybe he was the maker of Fujitsu air conditioners.

Bernard watched Gloria dishing out the turkey as she dished out the news of their son's second marriage. *Imposing*, she called it, when she'd clearly meant *impending*, although Bernard would bet his bottom dollar that the nuptials would be grand. Their son liked to boast about the money he made from conquering difficult teeth: filling, straightening and whitening, capping and implanting, while his patients paid through the nose, as it were.

'Is that a new hairstyle, Gloria? It's ever so flattering.'

Donna Stone and her *ever so: our new curtains are ever so elegant ... this turkey is ever so succulent ...* But no, Gloria said, *not a new hairstyle, left it too late ... a bit forgetful these days, what with my nerves and all.* But then she perked up again, rattled on

about singing in church last night ... only at Christmas ... lifted her spirits ...

‘But no grandchild this year,’ she said. ‘So sweet, young Ella, so clever ... but we hardly ever see her these days.’

She sighed heavily, as if to add weight to her lament, but it made no difference to Bernard whether the grandchild was there or not. What did he know about little girls? What did he know about his son, for that matter? He’d never been a *hands-on* father: isn’t that what they were called these days? His own father had been the fists-on kind, until Bernard grew too big to pummel into submission.

‘What about Ella’s mother?’ Donna said. ‘Is there a new man on the scene?’

‘Not as far as I know,’ Gloria said. ‘Not even a man *behind* the scenes. Waiting in the wings.’

Well. That was a surprise: a *bon mot* from his wife. But there was nothing surprising about Lionel Stone, with his lip-smacking taste for money, launching into the same lecture he’d given them last year: *huge drop in revenue ... rising taxes ... always happens under Labor, they’d tax the air if you didn’t watch out*. But Donna objected, trumpeting the virtues of the prime minister, *ever so articulate and smart, speaks fluent Mandarin as well*.

Bernard ground his teeth. Why had Gloria invited these people? Lionel with his money talk, a wife who thought life was a knees-up in a tavern. Because they were neighbours: people who lived in close proximity. Because they’d invited them for Christmas last year, along with some irritating woman whose only topic of conversation had been her ailing dog.

Lionel smiled across the table. ‘And how’s business, Bernie?’

Bernie. Why did people always reduce him to the chummy diminutive? Or *mate*. Or *old son*. He told Lionel that business was *just fine, encouraging figures*. He didn’t let on that the last

vacuum cleaner he'd sold was three weeks before Christmas, a robovac for a young couple living in a one-room apartment. One room was pretty much all those robovacs were good for, going for a song at one thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars.

'And how's the gym going, mate?' Lionel said.

The gym was also going fine, thanks.

'Good for you, old son. You'll get those kilos off in no time.'

Lionel had already announced his exercise regime: four mornings a week at the gym, jogging in the park after work. He was working on a woman as well, according to a story he'd offered Bernard on the sly, the two of them queueing at the ATM. Lionel's woman was *hot to trot*, apparently, *with an arse a man can really get his hands on*. Bernard had flinched at both the crudeness of the man and his presumption of matey approval.

Did Donna know about the other woman? Or did she look away? Because we can always choose not to see, Bernard thought, trying not to sink in his chair. We can always choose not to suffer.

'Are you watching the new series of that renovation show?' Donna said to no-one in particular.

Bernard had seen it just the once, dismayed by the six-bedroom extravaganzas with their sculleries and entertainment rooms, gardens with jungles of hanging baskets and meandering pathways, plashing waterfalls and statues of naked women. In renovation shows as in life, it seemed: a man could never have enough.

Donna leaned across the table, asked Gloria if she was finally getting some sleep.

Gloria frowned. 'It's not good, Donna,' she said. 'I lie awake at night for hours on end.'

Lionel laughed. 'The older you get, the less sleep you need,'

he said. 'Old people don't use as much—'

'Gloria's not old,' Donna snapped. 'And insomnia's the work of the devil.'

She made more sympathetic noises to Gloria, dispensed advice and offered her *ever so effective* pills.

Bernard always looked forward to sleep, that nightly drift into oblivion. Waking up was a problem, though: that moment when he stumbled out of bed and tried not to think about work and sex and love. Especially love. A man could go mad with thinking and you had to keep moving forward, *put one foot under the other*, according to his German mother. *You must be psycho*, she'd say, when she and her only child had the same thought at the same time. She'd made him smile, with her mangled English. He loved her, and she'd loved him, and then she died.

Ella

Her mum didn't want her to die! That was her lame excuse for saying *fuck* when some dude cut in front of them and she had to slam on the brakes. Then a bit later, another *fuck* when some old lady rode up their bum, tooting her horn like crazy. But now there was a lot less traffic and no more *idiots* and *morons* on the road, so her mum was starting to relax, humming along to Jason Mraz's dumb song about chilling out but melting cos he's madly in love. What a douchebag! Ella wished something loud and crashing would come on the radio instead, like the Black Eyed Peas, and she wished she could look like the lead singer with her curvy boobs and legs that went on forever.

She took a bite of her Cherry Ripe. Her mum always bought her a Cherry Ripe when they stopped at Settlers' Roadhouse on their way to Dunsborough, and every year the place was full of women checking out dumb women's magazines and fat guys pigging out on pies. This time some old guy had smiled at her and asked if she liked swimming. Duh! Why else would she be wearing a T-shirt that said *Vitamin Sea* on the front? And even worse, every single kid in the place was checking out their mobiles and it was so not fair that her mum wouldn't let her have one until she started high school. One whole year and three whole months to go! Her friends all had mobiles, they'd had them forever, and she must be the only person in the whole universe who didn't. It was majorly embarrassing,

and every time she argued with her mum, she'd get a lecture about *cyberbullying... distraction from schoolwork... destroying conversation*. Like, you couldn't have a conversation on the phone??? Then she'd say more stuff about boys wanting you to send pictures of yourself with no clothes on. Seriously! As if she'd do a dumb thing like that! And when Nana offered to buy Ella a phone for Christmas, her mum only said *Thank you, Gloria, but no*. Which was her nice way of saying *Thanks a million, now I won't hear the end of it*.

Ella looked through the window but all she could see was dry grass, sagging fences and sheep looking stupid in a sheepy kind of way.

She glanced across at her mum, who was concentrating on the road so that Ella didn't die. She didn't want her swimming out too far, either, once they got to Dunsborough, even though their usual spot had miniscule waves that weren't much fun at all. Why couldn't she go to a real beach with real waves, like Lola and Fern did? They could stay home by themselves as well, and they hadn't been abducted by aliens, had they, or kidnapped by some crazy bikie gang. And then just last week, when Ella went for a sleepover, her mum told her to *keep safe*. She was so OTT.

Her mum turned down the radio and cleared her throat.

'So how's your father these days?' she said.

'OK, I guess.'

'Well, you spent a long time on the phone last night. I was just wondering if—'

'I was telling him about school and going to Dunsborough and what I got for Christmas.'

Not a mobile phone. Still, she *did* like her mum's present: bookends in the shape of two cute flamingos. Their feathers were bright pink and their heads were tucked into their necks and both of them were standing on one leg. Her mum thought

the birds might encourage her to read, and Hanna had given her a book, though you could read books on a phone, couldn't you?

'So did he say anything about ...' Her mum stopped. 'What's her name? Imogen?'

'She comes from somewhere in England that sounds like snot.'

'Snot? Are you sure?'

'Upton Snottyville. Something like that.'

Her mum laughed, then turned up the radio to listen to the weather, which basically came down to ridiculously hot and hotter. Then she turned down the volume again.

'Did your father say when he's getting married?' she said.

'No.'

'And I guess the wedding will be in Sydney.'

'Sydney's dumb. Luna Park's just a bunch of stupid rides with kids screaming like they're going to die, and Bondi must be the dumpiest beach in the entire universe.'

She didn't tell her mum about her father at the beach. How he'd kept staring at all the girls in bikinis. It was gross. It made her feel sick.

'But you liked the zoo, didn't you?' her mum said. 'You love zoos.'

'It was just a whole heap of animals scratching themselves and looking bored out of their brains.'

'Ella! You've never told me this before.'

'Told you what?'

'That you didn't enjoy yourself.'

Ella heard that flutter in her mum's voice, meaning she was getting uptight. But why did she keep making her go to Sydney and have a *relationship* with her father, when there was nothing between them except a whole heap of desert. Still, she didn't want to make her mum more fluttery, especially while she was driving.

‘The zoo wasn’t all bad,’ she said. ‘There was this black hairy spider with pink toes that made it look kind of crazy.’

‘Pink toes?’

‘Yeah, like it went to one of those nail salons, just for fun.’

‘You’ll have to show me a picture sometime.’

Well, I could do that right now, Ella thought, if I had my own mobile.

She took the last bite of her Cherry Ripe, let the chocolate melt in her mouth. She stretched her legs and looked out the window again, but it was just more dry grass and straggly trees, with a whole bunch of cows all facing the same way. Did they even know they were doing that?

‘Look, a Christmas tree,’ her mum said. ‘See the orange blossoms? I wish I could grow them but they don’t do well in the suburbs.’

‘It’s a bit of a dumb name,’ Ella said. ‘Like, the flowers come out at Christmas, so what shall we call this tree, guys? I know, I know: a Christmas tree.’

Her mum pulled back her shoulders, which meant she was trying not to be cross or was gearing up to give another lecture.

‘I’m really looking forward to a break,’ she said. ‘No assignments, no tests, just sleeping in and reading rubbish.’

Her *lying-down novels*, she called them, because they helped her to relax. Hanna was always telling her mum to relax, and she had a really cool name, Hanna Kiss, like the lead singer in a band. She did interior design and looked like a model and she didn’t have any kids, she said they were messy and rude and lied to you and then ended up marrying someone you hated and asking for a million dollars to buy a house and they never paid it back. Ella didn’t know if she wanted kids either. Lola’s little sister was a pain and Fern’s little brother was a bigger pain. He’d once pulled down his pants, waved his willy all around, and said that Fern was stupid because she didn’t have one. Fern

said he was stupid because he didn't have a brain.

'Let's have breakfast on the balcony,' her mum said. 'We can get croissants and listen to the birds. Remember last year? How that crow stole a piece of apple from your hand?'

Ella remembered the crow was black and bold, with beady eyes. But it wasn't being a thief, was it? It was just being a crow.

'We can go for a swim after breakfast,' her mum said. 'And maybe a bushwalk after that?'

'And Scrabble,' Ella said.

Hanging out in Dunsborough, even without her friends, was much better than going to Sydney or visiting Grandma and Grandpa in Melbourne. Grandma kept telling *Eleanor* not to put her elbows on the table and to say *napkin* instead of *serviette*. Plus she sniffed all the time, like everything was getting up her nose. Grandpa was always grouchy when he came home from work, telling *Eleanor* to get her fringe out of her eyes and work hard at school if she wanted to make something of her life blah blah blah. How come they were such pains and her mum wasn't? Well, most of the time she wasn't, and she still looked pretty when she wasn't all stressed out, with big green eyes and golden hair that didn't come out of a bottle. Not like Fern's mum, who dyed her hair a brassy yellow, and her eyebrows were dark tattoos that made her look surprised all the time. And maybe she'd had a boob job too because—it was the Black Eyed Peas on the radio!

'Turn it up, Mum. Please. It's my favourite song!'

Her mum turned it up and the music was pounding and the words were about to kick in. So it didn't really matter that her friends weren't here and she didn't have a phone and her father kept perving, when she could just bounce in her seat and open her mouth and sing at the top of her voice.

'We're on holidays!' she shouted, then cranked up the volume even more.



In the afternoon they drove into town to buy fruit and fresh fish, plus a big bag of Smarties and bottles of lemonade for Ella, and three bottles of wine for her mum. Because Dunsborough meant breaking the rules. The place was packed, not a parking spot anywhere, so her mum kept circling round while Ella tried not to watch three girls walking past in their super-short denim shorts. They looked like they owned the world, or lived in a big house, with their very own TV and computer in their bedroom. Her mum had given her *the talk* about using the internet, and she made Ella use her laptop in the kitchen or the living room where she could see what was going on. But it meant there wasn't much to do in her own room except listen to music and sleep. And do homework. Her mum wouldn't let her paint her room black, either, it was *much too grim*, she said. At least I have the stars, Ella thought, stuck on the ceiling and on one of the walls, but they weren't nearly as cool as Lola's purple beaded curtain and her feather boas scattered everywhere, which kind of made up for all the stuffed animals heaped on her bed. Fern had a cool hanging chair in *her* bedroom, and this new girl at school, Naomi from Canada, which might as well have been the moon, had movie posters stuck all over her bedroom walls: terrified people with blood spurting out of their mouths and *monsters with demonic eyes*. That's how she'd described it, anyway, because Ella had never been to her house and maybe she never would because Naomi was the coolest girl in the class, maybe even the whole school. She said *monsters* like *marn-sters* and *demonic* like *demar-nic*, and she was going to write a horror movie so she could walk the red carpet at the *Arse-cars*. And you must never call her American, she said, because Americans loved war and Canadians loved peace.

'Praise the lord,' her mum said. She ducked into a parking spot between two massive cars.

Ella saw a girl in a bikini top walk past. She had really big boobs. Ella wondered if she'd ever get any kind of boobs. She hadn't even started her periods. Lola and Fern had, they said it was a pain, and they hated the way boys kept staring at their boobs instead of their faces. Like people staring at my nose, Ella thought, only it was one lump instead of two, and when that awful Tyson Miller told her she looked like SquarePants Big Nose, her heart had plummeted to the ground. She made herself not think about it as she got out of the car. She made herself think about the pet shop in the mall, with all the crazy clothes for dogs in the window. Last year she'd seen plastic puppies dressed in tuxedos and tutus, and one in a Darth Vader outfit, and some kind of Scottish dog in a tartan coat and beret. Her mum called it *an obscene waste of money* but Ella thought they were cool, just a whole lot of fun to look at. *Look on the bright side*, that's what Nana liked to say, *Every cloud has a silver lining*, and a whole lot of other stuff as well, and after they'd left Nana's one time, Ella's mum had let out a ginormous sigh and said *Yak yak yak, it's enough to drive you crazy*, and then she'd gone all red and said *Don't ever tell anyone I said that*.

Ella shuffled into the mall behind her mum and: surprise! Hundreds of kids staring into their phones! If *she* had a mobile she could message her friends right now, or google to find out stuff, like the name of the first woman to go into outer space. She'd tried that on her mum when they were setting off down south, but her mum only said *Did you remember to pack your toothbrush?* It hadn't worked, either, when Ella showed her Fern's photos on her mobile: poetic ones of flowers and the ocean, and arty ones of people's ears and toes, but her mum only said that Fern was *very talented*. Lola was very talented too, she'd won heaps of medals for swimming. Naomi was top in maths and science and her mum was a lawyer who kept people out of prison and she'd even been on the news. Naomi

was thinking of being a lawyer, too, if she couldn't make it in the movies, she said, but she'd never once bragged about her mum. That's why Ella liked her, and why she liked Lola and Fern: they were impressive but they didn't show off. *She* didn't show off, either, at least she didn't think so, but she wouldn't have minded being more impressive.

Maybe they'd like her flamingos. They weren't obvious, like the stuffed toys on Lola's bed, or the messages on Fern's T-shirts, like *Keep Calm and Hug a Panda*. The flamingos were ... what were they? *Zany*. How did she know that word? Where had it come from? It was like putting a gleaming pebble in your pocket but forgetting it was there, until one day you reached in and felt something pebbly and took it out and there it was! A shiny kind of word for flamingos!

Gloria

She stared through the window at the flamingos, hoping to cheer herself up. All those bright pink birds across the street, so many you could hardly see the lawn. What a treat for Wendy's birthday, and how sweet of Max to surprise her like that. He'd always been one for flowers and chocolates, even when it wasn't Wendy's birthday, and last month they'd gone all around Australia in a caravan and had a wonderful time, judging by the photos and the smiles. Should I pop in for a visit? Gloria thought. But Max was home all the time now, ever since he retired from the police force. Not that she didn't like him, he was a big, burly man who always wrapped her up in a great big hug, but now she and Wendy had to go out for a coffee if they wanted some time alone. Not that they gossiped about Max, Wendy never gossiped about anyone, and anyway, she was happy. Not like poor Trudy, who'd never had a man in her life, and now her nasty sister had come to stay for a bit. Gloria wouldn't pop in there, either, because the sister was a pinched kind of woman who kept complaining about Trudy's cooking and the hard bed and the sagging pillow. Trudy was a saint not to scream in her sister's face, and she hardly ever mentioned her arthritis, even though she hobbled with the pain.

Gloria looked back at the flamingos. Why were they all standing on one leg? No one knew why they did that, not even the people on that nature program. Bernie didn't know either,

when she'd asked him, but even if he had he wouldn't have bothered telling her. Clipping off his words, or pouring sticky words all over her, wishing she'd go away. Wishing she was dead, probably. He thought she didn't notice. He thought she was too dumb to feel hurt. Just because he'd been to university and she'd left school at fifteen. She'd had a decent job at the Morley Post Office, sorting out parcels and stamps, handling money and all the grumpy customers. Couldn't he remember how good she'd been at all that? But she had to stop thinking all the bad things, she mustn't even start, because then she'd toss and turn all night and she just couldn't stand feeling stretched out and empty in the dark, forever and ever, staring at the ceiling, then dragging herself to the kitchen for a glass of water. Donna's pills hadn't helped, but Donna was always kind and why couldn't Bernie be kind? She'd tried to make him happy, she'd really truly tried, but— she snapped herself out of it. She needed to get a move on and clean the oven, but she was feeling so tired and weighed down, like she was lugging a huge bag of washing on her back. If only she could sleep. She would feel so much better if she could just drift off to sleep.

She made herself turn from the window, walk towards the kitchen and the dishes. A clean house for a new year, that's what her mum used to say. Not that it made any difference, one year the same as the next, Bernie snoring away at night and sleeping in the daytime now because he was on holidays. Holidays. Holy days. Gloria didn't believe in God anymore, even though singing the hymns had been lovely, good for the soul, they called it. Did she have a soul? Did anyone? Did it live inside us somewhere, or was it something that floated around us over our heads and why was she even thinking those things when her body was making her so heavy? Fat Gloria. Fat old Gloria, that's what she'd become. She'd see it on Bernie's face. Not that he was an oil painting, either, and wasn't she the one who kept their

life going, when all was said and done? She did the shopping and cleaning and washing and cooking, she even paid the bills, while he just sat around reading things that made him mutter and go red in the face. She thought there'd be Christmas to look forward to, but Meg had taken Ella down south again, saying no to an offer of a mobile phone, her voice like a stone in your shoe. Sounding more and more stony since the divorce. Not that she came round much anymore, or brought Ella round. It used to be fun when Ella was little and she and her Nana made pancakes and cupcakes and Ella would make up stories and read them out loud and once she'd said *Listen Nana, I can skip along the lines*. So clever, she was, only not the rude clever of her father.

But what if she turned out to be like Karl? What if she grew so full of herself there was no room for other people?

Was that why he and Meg split up? And what did it take to leave?

Gloria rubbed her eyes and the tiredness hit her in the head like an axe. She'd told Dr Marr about not sleeping and feeling all knotted up and he'd asked her what she did with her time, drumming his fingers on the desk, not looking her in the eye. So she'd told him she did the housework and shopping and watched TV and sometimes she got to see her grandchild, the sweetest girl, although not very often, not nearly as much as she'd like. And yes, she had friends, so kind and caring, she was very lucky. And how are things in your marriage, he'd said, still drumming his fingers on the desk, but how could she say she was lonely and sad when she had a lot more than other women did, with a man to provide for her, a roof over her head, and he hadn't ever laid a hand on her. Well, he hadn't touched her in years in any kind of way. But how could she say that to the doctor? To anyone? And how could she tell him about her son getting married to a woman she'd never even met, someone

called Imogen from somewhere in England like a lady with long white gloves. Karl hadn't sent a photo or said much about her at all, except that she was beautiful and worked with reflexes or something like that. He hadn't invited them to the wedding either, he said Sydney was too far away, *You'll find it too much, Mum*. Too much of *her*, that's what he meant. He didn't need to say it. So in the end she hadn't told the doctor what was really on her mind or in her heart, she just said she'd go mad if she didn't get some sleep, her friend's sleeping pills hadn't done a thing. Then he'd folded his hands and looked her in the eye at last and told her not to take other people's pills and he thought she was depressed. Then he'd written a prescription, torn off the page like a snap, told her not to worry because so many people these days took pills for depression, then he'd more or less shooed her out the door. He always called her Gloria and she always called him Dr Marr because he'd never said to call him Patrick. The name was written on his door, but he'd never once said.

She flopped down on the kitchen chair and fanned her face with the hem of her dress. The air con was on but she was still feeling hot and maybe it was the anger that made her feel like that, with Bernie not talking to her, not wanting her, not wanting her for years. Oh he'd wanted her the first time he'd laid eyes on her, it was all over his face, blushing and stammering when he asked her on a date. A play at the university, where he was studying, he wanted to be an architect and plan houses in his head. She'd never been to a play before and she thought there'd be marble stairs and a red velvet curtain and people dressed up to the nines. She'd worn her best dress, a blue Empire line, but when Bernie met her at the theatre he was wearing old jeans, like he was taking her to the Rosemount Bowls. And then that play: there was nothing on the stage except a chair and a bucket and three men walking in and out of a room without any walls.

In and out, ganging up, with lots of places where they didn't speak for ages, then suddenly a really horrible fight at the end. But everyone kept laughing, even though the men were nasty and cruel, and it bothered her, the laughing. She knew there was something that she didn't understand, about the play and the people in the audience, their jumpers hanging down to their knees. It made her feel small, even though she was tall, and she'd grown into a beauty like her mum always said she would. Bernie used to tell her she was beautiful. He'd buried his face in her hair and said he was sorry, he'd never been with a girl before, and she'd stroked him and said it was fine, just fine, because she didn't want to hurt his feelings. And then it got better, she showed him how to please her, and he'd even said he loved her, lying in one another's arms. Did she love him back? Well, he was shy and sweet and when they had sex he'd always ask if she was OK and no boy had ever asked her that before. Not once. And when she got pregnant he didn't get angry or tell her to get rid of the baby. He never said she'd tricked him into getting married, either. She would rather have died than do a thing like that. That's when she knew he was decent, that he'd stand by her through thick and thin and that's what mattered most in the world. That's what she'd thought, at the time.

But why was she going backwards like this, all the time backwards, when it didn't change a thing and there was washing to be done. Bernie's shirts, his socks and undies. Her summer dresses, the ones she could still squeeze into. She made her way to the laundry, one heavy foot after another. She lifted a shirt from the basket, saw a stain on the collar. She needed to spray it, then wait for the liquid to sink in. One minute, it said on the label, but she always waited longer just to be sure, standing by the sink and wondering what to do after that and after that.

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‘You’re not hungry, Gloria?’

What did he care? What did he care if she shoved meat into her mouth or not?

‘I can’t eat,’ she said.

‘What do you mean? *Can’t?*’

He used to say that to Karl when Karl was a tiny boy. What do you mean, *You can’t eat your peas, you can’t eat your carrots? What’s the matter with you?*

‘I can’t swallow,’ she said. ‘The food gets stuck in my throat.’

‘Maybe you should see the doctor,’ Bernie said. Offhand, like saying she should open the curtains.

But she didn’t want to see the doctor again. She just wanted to drift away, fall into the longest sleep. And now she couldn’t eat, either, when she’d always loved food, all the time, to fill up the emptiness inside her. She found herself standing and walking to Karl’s old room, lying on the bed again, staring at the ceiling again. She tried to make her mind go blank, let go of the tightness and let sleep come in and—what was that? It was flitting past the window in a black pointy hat, someone with a sharp ugly face. Who was it? Was it outside or inside? Where had it gone? She hauled herself up to look, her heart beginning to thump, thump, but it was gone. The face. She slumped down on the bed and kept really still, her heart still thumping with the pointy hat, the ugly face. She looked across at the window again but there was only the fence and a dried-up shrub, so it must have been a dream, that *thing* flitting past the window. A dream when she was wide awake, already knowing that she wouldn’t sleep, already dreading the blank white ceiling and the dark all around her and inside her too, the darkness she’d never felt before and how could she make it stop? How?