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it's the truth. With big laughs'

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marian keyes

The  
Other Side  
of the  
Story



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marian Keyes is a phenomenon. The multimillion copy, internationally bestselling author of some of the most widely loved, genre-defying novels of the past thirty years – including *Rachel’s Holiday*, *Anybody Out There* and *Grown Ups* – has millions of devoted readers around the world.

In addition to her fifteen previous novels, Marian has also written three collections of journalism, upon which popular BBC Radio 4 show *Between Ourselves* was based. Marian co-hosts the hit podcast *Now You’re Asking* with actress Tara Flynn for BBC Radio 4, now on its fourth series. In 2022, she was named the British Book Awards Author of the Year.

Marian lives in Dublin. *My Favourite Mistake* is her sixteenth novel.

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# The Other Side of the Story

MARIAN KEYES



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PENGUIN BOOKS

# For Niall, Ljiljana, Ema and Luka Keyes

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# PART ONE

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*'Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents,  
and everyone is writing a book.'*

Marcus Tullius Cicero, statesman,  
orator and writer (106–43 BC)

*'There are three sides to every story.  
Your side, their side, and the truth.'*

Anon

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GEMMA

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# I

TO: Susan\_inseattle@yahoo.com  
FROM: Gemma 343@hotmail.com  
SUBJECT: runaway dad

Susan, you wanted news. Well, I've got news. Although you might be sorry you asked for it. It looks like my dad has left my mam. I'm not sure how serious it is. More as and when.

Gemma xxx

When I first got the call, I thought he'd died. Two reasons. One: I've been to a worrying number of funerals over the past while – friends of my parents and worse again, parents of my friends. Two: Mam had called me on my mobile; the first time she'd ever done that because she'd always persisted in the belief that you can only call a mobile *from* a mobile, like they're CB radios or something. So when I put my phone to my ear and heard her choke, 'He's gone,' who could blame me for thinking that Dad had kicked the bucket and that now it was only her and me.

'He just packed a bag and left.'

'He packed a . . . ?' It was then that I realized that Dad mightn't actually be dead.

'Come home,' she said.

'Right . . . ?' But I was at work. And not just in the office, but in a hotel ballroom overseeing the finishing touches to a medical conference (*Seeing the Back of Backache*). It was an enormous deal which had taken weeks to pull together; I'd been there until twelve-thirty the previous night, coordinating the arrival of

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hundreds of delegates and sorting out their problems. (Relocating those in non-smoking rooms who had slipped and gone back on the fags in between booking their room and showing up for it, that sort of thing.) Today was finally Day Zero and in less than an hour's time, two hundred chiropractors would be flooding in, each expecting

- a) a name-badge and chair
- b) coffee and two biscuits (one plain, one fancy) at 11 a.m.
- c) lunch, three courses (including vegetarian option) at 12.45 p.m.
- d) coffee and two biscuits (both plain) at 3.30 p.m.
- e) evening cocktails followed by a gala dinner, with party favours, dancing and snogging (optional).

In fact when I'd answered the mobile I thought it was the screen hire guy, reassuring me he was on his way. With – this is the important bit – the screens.

'Tell me what happened,' I asked Mam, torn as I was between conflicting duties. *I can't leave here . . .*

'I'll tell you when you get home. Hurry. I'm in an awful state, God only knows what I'll do.'

That did it. I snapped my phone closed and looked at Andrea, who'd obviously figured out something was up.

'Everything OK?' she murmured.

'It's my dad.'

I could see on her face that she too thought that my father had bucked the kickit (as he himself used to say). (There I am talking like he actually is dead.)

'Oh, my God . . . is it . . . is he . . . ?'

'Oh no,' I corrected, 'he's still alive.'

'Go, go, get going!' She pushed me towards the exit, clearly visualizing a deathbed farewell.

'I can't. What about all of this?' I indicated the ballroom.

'Me and Moses'll do it and I'll call the office and get Ruth

over to help. Look, you've done so much work on this, what can go wrong?'

The correct answer is, of course: Just About Anything. I've been Organizing Events for seven years and in that time I've seen everything from over-refreshed speakers toppling off the stage to professors fighting over the fancy biscuits.

'Yes, but . . .' I'd threatened Andrea and Moses that even if they were dead they were to show up this morning. And here I was proposing to abandon the scene – for *what* exactly?

What a day. It had barely started and so many things had already gone wrong. Beginning with my hair. I hadn't had time to get it cut in ages and, in a mad fit, I'd cut the front of it myself. I'd only meant to trim it, but once I started I couldn't stop, and ended up with a ridiculously short fringe.

People sometimes said I looked a little like Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* but when I arrived at the hotel this morning, Moses had greeted me with, 'Live long and prosper,' and given me the Vulcan split-fingered salute. Then, when I told him to ring the screen guy again he said solemnly, 'That would be illogical, Captain.' No longer Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* but Spock from *Star Trek*, it seemed. (Quick note: Moses is not a bearded biblical pensioner in a dusty dress and child-molester sandals but a hip, sharp-suited blade of Nigerian origin.)

'Go!' Andrea gave me another little push door-wards. 'Take care and let us know if we can do anything.'

Those are the kinds of words that people use when someone has died. And so I found myself out in the car park. The bone-cold January fog wound itself around me, serving as a reminder that I'd left my coat behind in the hotel. I didn't bother to go back for it, it didn't seem important.

When I got into my car a man whistled – at the car, not me. It's a Toyota MR2, a sporty little (very little, lucky I'm only five foot two) number. Not my choice – F&F Dignan had insisted. It would look good, they said, a woman in my position. Oh yes, and their son was selling it cheap. Ish

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Men have a very conflicted response to it. In the daytime they're all whistles and winks. But *at night time*, when they're coming home pissed from the pub, it's a different story; they take a penknife to my soft-top or hurl a brick through the window. They never actually try to steal the car, just to mortally wound it and it's spent more time at the dentist than on the road. In the hope of currying sympathy with these bitter mystery men, my back window sticker says, 'My other car's a banjaxed '89 Cortina.' (Anton made it specially for me; maybe I should have taken it down when he left, but now wasn't the time to think about that.)

The road to my parents' house was almost car-free; all the heavy traffic was going in the opposite direction, into the centre of Dublin. Moving through the fog that swirled like dry-ice, the empty road had me feeling like I was dreaming.

Five minutes ago it had been a normal Tuesday morning. I'd been in First Day of Conference mode. Anxious, naturally – there's always a last-minute hitch – but nothing had prepared me for this.

I'd no idea what to expect when I got to my parents' house. Obviously, something was wrong, even if it was just Mam going loola. I didn't think she was the type, but who can ever tell with these things? '*He just packed a bag . . .*' That in itself was as unlikely as pigs flying. Mam always packs Dad's bag for him, whether he's off to a sales conference or only on a golf outing. There and then I knew Mam was wrong. Which meant that either she *had* gone loola or Dad really *was* dead. A surge of panic had me pressing my foot even harder on the accelerator.

I parked, very badly, outside the house. (Modest sixties semi-d.) Dad's car was gone. Dead men don't drive cars.

But my rush of relief kept on going until it had circled back and become dread once more. Dad never drove to work, he always got the bus; the missing car gave me a very bad feeling.

Mam had opened the front door before I was even out of

the car. She was in a peach candlewick dressing-gown and wore an orange curler in her fringe.

‘He’s gone!’

I hurried in and made for the kitchen. I felt the need to sit down. Mad though it was, I was nursing a wish that Dad would be sitting there, saying in bemusement, ‘I keep telling her I haven’t left, but she won’t listen.’ But there was nothing but cold toast, buttery knives and other breakfast-style paraphernalia.

‘Did something happen? Did you have a fight?’

‘No, nothing. He ate his breakfast as normal. Porridge. That I made. See.’ She pointed to a bowl which displayed the remnants of porridge. Not much remained. He should have had the decency to have his gullet choked with shame.

‘Then he said he wanted to talk to me. I thought he was going to tell me I could have my conservatory. But he said he wasn’t happy, that things weren’t working out and that he was leaving.’

‘“That things weren’t working out”? But you’ve been married thirty-five years! Maybe . . . maybe he’s having a mid-life crisis.’

‘The man is nearly sixty, he’s too *old* for a mid-life crisis.’

She was right. Dad had had his chance for a mid-life crisis a good fifteen years ago, when no one would have minded, when we’d been quite looking forward to it, actually, but instead he’d just carried on losing his hair and being vague and kindly.

‘Then he got a suitcase and put stuff into it.’

‘I don’t believe you. Like, what did he pack? How did he know how to?’

Mam was starting to look a little uncertain, so to prove it to me – and probably to herself – we went upstairs and she pointed out the space in the spare room cupboard where a suitcase used to be. (One of a set they’d got with tokens from buying petrol.) Then she took me into their room and demonstrated the gaps in his wardrobe. He’d taken his top coat, his anorak and his good suit. And left behind a staggering

quantity of coloured, knitted jumpers and trousers that could only ever be described as 'slacks'. Fawn of colour and nasty of shape, cut and fabric. I'd have left them behind too.

'He'll have to come back for his clothes,' she said.

I wouldn't have counted on it.

'I thought he'd been a bit distracted for the last while,' Mam said. 'I said it to you.'

And between us we'd wondered if maybe he had the beginnings of Alzheimer's. All at once, I understood. He *did* have Alzheimer's. He wasn't in his right mind. He was driving around somewhere, stone mad, convinced he was Princess Anastasia of Russia. We had to alert the police.

'What's his car reg?'

Mam looked surprised. 'I don't know.'

'Why not?'

'Why should I? I only sit in the thing, I don't drive it.'

'We'll have to look it up, because I don't know it either.'

'Why do we need it?'

'We can't just tell the peelers to look for a blue Nissan Sunny bearing a fifty-nine-year-old man, who might think he's the last of the Romanovs. Where do you keep the documents and stuff?'

'On the shelves in the dining room.'

But after a quick scout in Dad's 'office' I couldn't find any car info and Mam was no help.

'It's a company car, isn't it?'

'Er, I think so.'

'I'll ring his work and someone there, his secretary or someone, should be able to help.'

Even as I rang Dad's direct line I knew he wouldn't answer, that wherever he was, it wasn't at work. Hand over the speaker, I instructed Mam to look up the number for the Kilmacud peelers. But before she'd even got off her chair, someone answered Dad's phone. Dad.

'Da-ad? Is that you?'

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‘Gemma?’ he said warily. This in itself was nothing unusual; he always answered the phone to me warily. With good reason – because I only ever rang him

- a) to say that my telly was broken and would he come with his toolbox
- b) to say that my grass needed cutting and could he come with his lawnmower
- c) to say that my front room needed painting and would he come with his dust sheets, rollers, brushes, masking tape and a large bag of assorted chocolate bars.

‘Dad, you’re at work.’ Indisputable.

‘Yes, I –’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Look, I was going to ring you later, but things went a bit mad here.’ He was breathing hard. ‘The prototype plans must’ve been leaked, the oppo are going to issue a press release – new product, nearly identical, industrial espio –’

‘Dad!’

Before we go any further, I have to tell you that my father works in the sales department of a big confectionery company. (I’m not going to say their name because under the circumstances I don’t want to give them any free publicity.) He’s worked for them my entire life and one of the perks of the job was that he could have as much of the produce as he wanted – free. Which meant that our house was always littered with bars of chocolate and I was more popular with the kids on the road than I might otherwise have been. Of course Mam and I were strictly forbidden from buying anything from the rival companies, so as not ‘to give them the edge’. Even though I resented his diktat (which wasn’t really a diktat at all, Dad was far too mild for diktats) I couldn’t find it in myself to go against it and although it’s ridiculous, the first time I ate a Ferrero Rocher, I actually felt guilty. (I know, they’re a joke, all that

‘ambassador, you are spoiling us’ stuff, but I was impressed, especially by their roundness. But when I casually put it to Dad that his crowd should start playing around with circular chocolates, he gazed at me sadly and said, ‘Is there something you’d like to tell me?’)

‘Dad, I’m here with Mam and she’s very upset. What’s going on, please?’ Instead of my father, I was treating him like a bold child, who was doing something idiotic but would knock it on the head as soon as I told him to.

‘I was going to ring to talk to you later.’

‘Well, you’re talking to me now.’

‘Now doesn’t suit me.’

‘Now had better suit you.’ But alarm was building in me. He wasn’t crumbling like something crumbly, as I’d expected he would the moment I spoke sternly.

‘Dad, me and Mam, we’re worried about you. We think you might be a little . . .’ How could I say this? ‘A little mentally ill.’

‘I’m not.’

‘You think you’re not. Mentally ill people often don’t know they’re mentally ill.’

‘Gemma, I know I’ve been a bit distant for the past while, I’m well aware of it. But it’s not from senility.’

This wasn’t going the way I’d expected *at all*. He didn’t sound bonkers. Or chastened. He sounded like he knew something that I didn’t.

‘What’s going on?’ My voice was little.

‘I can’t talk now, there’s a problem here needs dealing with.’

Snippily I said, ‘I think the state of your marriage is more important than a tiramisu-flavoured bar of –’

‘SSSSHHHH!’ he hissed down the phone. ‘Do you want the whole world to know about it? I’m sorry I ever told you now.’

Fright deprived me of speech. He’s never cross with me.

‘I will call you when I can talk.’ He sounded very firm. A little like . . . funnily enough, a little like a father.

‘Well?’ Mam asked avidly when I hung up.

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‘He’s going to call back.’

‘When?’

‘As soon as he can.’

Chewing my knuckles, I was uncertain of what to do next. He didn’t sound mad, but he wasn’t acting normal.

I simply couldn’t think what I should do. I’d never been in a situation like this before and there was no precedent or set of instructions. All we could do was wait, for news that I instinctively knew wouldn’t be good. And Mam kept saying, ‘What do you think? Gemma, what do you think?’ Like I was the adult and had the answers.

The only saving grace is that I didn’t get all cheerful and say, ‘How about a nice cup of tea?’ Or even worse, ‘Let’s get a brew on.’ I don’t think tea ever fixes anything and I vowed that, no matter what, this crisis would not turn me into a tea-drinker.

I considered driving over and confronting him at work, but if he was in the middle of a tiramisu-flavoured crisis, perhaps I wouldn’t even get to see him.

‘But where would he stay?’ Mam blurted plaintively. ‘None of our friends would let him move in with them.’

She wasn’t wrong. The way it worked with their circle of friends was that the men held the purse strings and the car keys but the women were the power-brokers in the home. They had the final say over who came and went, so that even if one of the men had promised Dad he could kip down in their spare room, his wife wouldn’t let him over the threshold, out of loyalty to Mam. But if not one of his friends’ houses, then where?

I couldn’t imagine him in a mildewed bedsit with a gas ring and a rusty kettle that didn’t click off automatically when it boiled.

But if he had taken some mad notion he’d last no length away from Mam and his home comforts. He’d spend three days playing with his golf ball machine and come home when he needed clean socks.

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‘When’s he going to ring back?’ Mam asked again.

‘I don’t know. Let’s watch telly.’

While Mam pretended to watch *Sunset Beach*, I wrote the first email to Susan. Susan – known as ‘my lovely Susan’ to distinguish her from any other Susans who mightn’t be quite as lovely as she was – had been one-third of the triumvirate, with me and Lily the other two, and after the great debacle she’d taken my side.

Only eight short days ago, on January the first, she’d moved to Seattle on a two-year contract as PR for some huge bank. While she was there she’d hoped to bag herself a Microserf but it had taken no time to discover that they all work twenty-seven hours a day, so they don’t have much time left over for a social life and romancing Susan. Drinking multiple-choice coffees can only fill the gap so far, so she was lonely and looking for news.

I kept the details brief, then pressed ‘send’ on my Communicator Plus, a huge brick of a thing with so many functions it could nearly read your thoughts. Work had given it to me, in the guise of a present. Yeah, right! In reality it just made me more of a slave than I already was – they could contact me in any way they wanted, whenever they wanted. *And* the weight of it tore the silky lining of my second-best handbag.

When *Sunset Beach* ended and Dad still hadn’t rung back, I said, ‘This isn’t right. I’m going to ring him again.’

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## 2

TO: Susan\_inseattle@yahoo.com  
FROM: Gemma 343@hotmail.com  
SUBJECT: runaway dad, still at large

OK, more news. You're going to need a Valium when you hear, so don't read any further until you've got it. Go on, go.

Back? Ready? Right. My father, Noel Hogan, has a girlfriend. It gets worse. She's thirty-six. *Only four years older than me.*

Where did he meet her? Where do you think? Work, of course. She's his – God, the tedious predictability of it – his PA. Colette's her name and she has two children, a girl of nine and a boy of seven, from another relationship. She wasn't married to the other man and when I told Mam she said, 'Small wonder. Why buy the cow when you're getting the milk for free?'

The story goes that they'd spent a lot of time working on the new tiramisu bar, and become very close.

Yes, I'd already told Susan about the tiramisu bar. I know it was a secret and I'd promised Dad I wouldn't tell anyone, but Susan had such enthusiasm for the topic that I couldn't keep my mouth shut. She'd love to do a thesis on the subject 'From Curly Wurly to Chunky KitKat – whither bars of chocolate in the twenty-first century'. 'Think of the research I'd have to do,' she says.

I had to leg it home from work (leaving two hundred frisky chiropractors in the hands of Andrea) and weasel the info out of Dad like it was a game of twenty questions. 'Do you owe money?'

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‘Are you sick?’ Then finally I hit bedrock with, ‘Are you having an affair?’

It’s only been going on three months – or so he says. What’s he doing walking out on a thirty-five-year-old marriage for a three-month fling? And when was he planning on telling us? Did he really think he could just pack a suitcase one Tuesday morning and leave for good without ever having to explain himself?

And the yellow-bellied cowardice of the man. He fesses up to me, on the phone, then leaves me to break the news to Mam. He-llo? I’m his daughter. She’s his wife. But when I reminded him of this he sez, ‘Ah no, you tell her, women are better at that sort of thing.’

He didn’t even have the kindness to let me go and tell Mam immediately; he had to Share The Joy about Colette, while Mam watched like a wounded animal.

‘She makes me feel young,’ he declared, like I should be happy for him. Then he said – and before he even said it, I knew he was going to – he said, ‘I feel like a teenager.’ So I said, ‘I’m sure we can find you one. Male or female?’ And he didn’t get it at all. Ridiculous old fool.

Telling Mam that her husband had left her for his secretary was literally the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my entire life. It would have been easier to tell her he’d died.

But she took it well – too well. She just said, ‘I see.’ Sounding very reasonable. ‘A girlfriend, you say? Stick on *Buffy* there.’

So, mad as it sounds, we sat in front of *Buffy*, not seeing a thing, well I didn’t anyway, then, without warning, she switched off the telly, and said, ‘You know, I think I’d like to speak to him.’

Back out to the phone and this time she rang him and got him at his desk, and they had what sounded like a calm conversation – very: ‘Yes, Gemma did tell me, but I thought she might have got it wrong. Uh-huh, she didn’t. Uh-huh, yes . . . Colette . . . you’re in love with her . . . I see . . . I see. Yes, of course you deserve to be happy . . . nice apartment . . . well that’s nice. A nice apartment

can be nice . . . solicitor's letter . . . I see, yes, I'll look out for it, well, bye for now.'

And when she hung up she said, 'He has a girlfriend.' Like it was news.

Back she went into the kitchen, me following. 'A girlfriend. Noel Hogan has a girlfriend. He's going to live with her in her nice apartment.'

Then she opens a press, takes out a plate, says, 'My husband of thirty-five years has a girlfriend,' and casually frisbeed the plate at the wall, where it smashed into smithereens. Then another, then one more. She was picking up speed, the plates were twirling faster and the gaps between me having to duck to avoid the explosion of splinters were getting shorter.

While she was just flinging the ordinary blue and white kitchen crockery, I wasn't too bothered. I thought she was only doing what was expected of her. But when she went into the sitting room, picked up one of her bone-china ballerinas – you know them, *awful*-looking yokes, but she loves them – and, after only the tiniest hesitation, fecked it at the window, *then* I was bothered.

'I'm going to drive over there and kill him,' she growled, sounding like she was possessed. And only that

- a) she can't drive,
- b) Dad had taken the car and
- c) she wouldn't be seen dead in my car because it's too 'showy'

I'm certain she'd have done it.

When she realized she couldn't go anywhere, she began pulling at her clothes – 'renting' them, perhaps? I kept trying to grab her hands and stop her, but she was much, much too strong for me. By then I was very scared. She was way out of control and I hadn't a clue what to do. Who could I ring? Ironically enough my first thought was of Dad especially as it was his fault. In the end I

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rang Cody. Naturally I didn't expect any sympathy, but I hoped for some practical advice. He answered in non-work mode, i.e. as camp as a row of cerise tents with marabou feather trimming. 'A shock? Do tell.'

'My dad's left her. What should I do?'

'Oh dear. Is that her I hear?'

'What? The shrieking? Yes.'

'Is she...? Is that the sound of Aynsley shepherdesses breaking?'

I took a quick look. 'Belleek creamers. Close enough. What should I do?'

'Hide the good china.' When it became clear that I wouldn't play ball, he said – kindly for him, 'Call the medics, dear.'

Round here it's harder to get a doctor to make a house call than it is to eat only one cashew nut. (Absolutely impossible, as we both well know.) I rang and got Mrs Foy, Dr Bailey's foul-tempered receptionist – did I ever tell you about her? She's worked for him since before the flood and always acts like a request for an appointment is a gross imposition on his time. But I managed to convince the old sourball that this was an emergency; the sounds of Mam in hysterics in the background may have helped, of course.

So half an hour later Dr Bailey shows up in his golf clothes and – get this – gives Mam a shot. I thought it was only people who lived in bodice-ripper-land who got given shots by doctors when they became a bit overwrought. Whatever they put in them must be good gear because before our eyes Mam stopped gasping and sagged feebly onto her bed.

'Any more of them?' I asked and the doc goes, 'Ahaha! So what happened?'

'My father has left us for his secretary.'

I expected the good doctor to act shocked, but you know what? Something like guilt skipped across his face and I'm not joking, I could have sworn the word 'Viagra' crackled in the air, like a blue lightning flash. Dad's been to see him recently, I'd put money on it.

He couldn't get away fast enough. 'Put her to bed,' he sez.

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‘Don’t leave her on her own. If she wakes up . . .’ He shook two pills onto his hand and handed them over. ‘Give her the two. Emergency only.’ Then he scribbled a prescription for tranks and hot-footed it back to the thirteenth hole. His spiky shoes left little clumps of grass on the hall carpet.

I helped Mam into bed – she hadn’t got dressed, so there was no undressing to be done – pulled the curtains then lay beside her, on top of the eiderdown. I was in my Nicole Farhi suit and even though I hadn’t got it in the sale and even though I knew I was going to get feathers all over it, I didn’t care. That’s how freaked out I was.

It was all way too weird. You know what it’s like round here, *no* one leaves their wives. People get married and stay married for a hundred and seventy years. Even if they hate each other. Not that Mam and Dad ever seemed to hate each other, not at all. They were just . . . you know . . . married.

I paused and deleted that last paragraph. Susan’s mother had died when Susan was two and her dad got married again when Susan was twenty. The marriage had broken up about three years ago and even though Carol wasn’t her mother and Susan hadn’t been living at home when it all started to go wrong, she was still upset about it.

Anyway, so I’m thrun on the bed in my good suit and then the church bells start ringing the midday Angelus: I was lying in a darkened room with a sedated parent by my side and it wasn’t even lunchtime yet. This gave me a bad bout of the fear so I rang work, just to feel I wasn’t the only person in the world. Andrea let it slip that the screens had never turned up for the chiropractors’ conference, but insisted it was fine. Of course it wasn’t fine – how could the chiropractors look at their pictures of gammy spines without screens?

But who cares, I felt. In fairness, something always goes wrong at a conference, no matter how much preparation I do, and at

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least the flowers for the gala dinner centrepieces had arrived. (We were wrapping wire around hollyhocks and other lanky ones and kind of bending them to make them look like spines. Andrea's idea – she's really come on a lot.)

Poor Andrea was *dying* to know what was up with Dad, if he'd had a heart attack or a stroke or what but, you know yourself, etiquette dictates that you can't ask outright. I just said he was OK, but she wouldn't let it go.

'Stable?' she asks.

'Stable? He's certainly not acting it.'

I got off the phone fast, but I've a problem here. Everyone at work thinks Dad's at death's door, but how on earth can I tell them the truth – that all that was wrong was that he'd got himself a girlfriend?

Not only is it exceptionally embarrassing, but loads of them have met Dad, so they're just not going to believe me. In fact, even though Dad *himself* has told me that he has a girlfriend, I've stopped believing it too. He just isn't the type. Even his name is wrong, don't you think? Ladies and gentlemen, look into your hearts and ask yourselves, is Noel Hogan the name of a man who leaves his wife for a woman young enough to be his daughter? Should not his name be Johnny Chancer or Steve Gleam? Instead I give it to you, esteemed ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that Noel Hogan is the name of a man who reads John Grishams, who does up a family tree going back four generations, a man whose hero is not Arnie or Rambo, but Inspector Morse; in other words, ladies and gentlemen, a man who would never give his wife and daughter a moment's worry.

Anyway . . . After ages more of lying on the bed, I decided I'd better clean up the broken china and I swear to God, you'd want to have seen the kitchen; the smashed plates had gone everywhere – into the butter, floating in the milk jug. There was a four-inch long piece sticking out of a Busy Lizzie pot, it looked like modern arse.

And as for the sitting room where it was ornaments which'd

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bitten the dust . . . Obviously some of them were so horrible it was a good thing, but I felt really sorry for the poor little ballerina – her dancing days were over.

Then I went back and lay on the bed beside Mam who was doing these cute little whistly snores, but I stayed on top of the covers. There were some crappy magazines on the floor on her side, and I stayed there for the rest of the day, reading them.

Now, Susan, from here on in, I'm a bit worried about my behaviour – the heating clicked off at eleven and the room got cold but I wouldn't get under the covers. I think I felt that as long as I wasn't actually *in* bed, I was only keeping her company, but the minute I got in it meant that Dad wasn't coming home. Anyway I dozed off and when I woke up I was so cold I couldn't feel my skin; like when I poked my arm with my finger, I could see the indent but felt nothing. It was quite entertaining, actually, a bit like being dead. I did it a good few times then put on Mam's coat – no point getting hypothermia just cos Dad had gone a bit loola – but I still wouldn't get into the bed. The next time I awoke the bloody sun had come up and I was annoyed with myself. While it was still night-time, there was hope that Dad would come home, and if I'd stayed awake and on guard, morning would never have come. Mad, I know, but that's how I felt.

The first words Mam said were, 'He never came home.'

The second were, 'What are you doing in my good coat?'

So that's you up to date. More news as and when.

Love

Gemma xxx

PS I blame you for all of this. If you hadn't got the job in Seattle, where you know no one, you wouldn't have been lonely and in need of news from home and my life wouldn't have self-destructed just to oblige.

PPS I was only joking about that last bit.

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My mobile rang. It was Cody. Cody isn't his real name, of course. His real name is Aloysius, but when he started school none of his young chums could pronounce it. The best they could manage was, 'Wishy'.

'I need a nickname,' Cody told his parents. 'Something people can say.'

Mr Cooper (Aonghas) gave Mrs Cooper (Mary) a look. He'd been against calling the boy Aloysius right from the start. He knew all about the misery of being saddled with an unpronounceable name, but his more religious wife had insisted. Aloysius was a top-notch saint – at the age of nine he'd taken a vow of chastity, then died aged twenty-three while nursing plague victims and contracting the disease himself – it was an honour to be named after him.

'Right, pick a nickname. Anything you like, son,' Mr Cooper said magnanimously.

'The name I pick iiiiiisssss . . . Cody!'

A pause. 'Cody?'

'Cody.'

'Cody's a funny name, son. Would you not think of another? Paddy's a nice one. Or Butch, maybe.'

Cody/Aloysius shook his five-year-old head haughtily. 'Thrash me if you must, but my name is Cody.'

'Thrash you?' Mr Cooper said, aghast. He turned to Mrs Cooper. 'What stories have you been reading to the lad?'

Mrs Cooper coloured. *The Lives of the Saints* was good and educational. Was it her fault that they all met their ends being boiled in oil, or pierced with a quiverful of arrows or stoned to death?

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Cody is the only person I ever met who thought they had a 'vocation'. He spent two years in a seminary, learning the rudiments of priesthood (especially how to thrash people) before, as he puts it, 'coming to my senses and realizing that I wasn't holy, I was just gay'.

'OK, Gemma,' Cody says to me, 'You're going to have to be brave.'

'Oh God,' I said, because if Cody tells you you're going to have to be brave, it means the news he has for you is really horrible.

Cody is a funny one. He's very honest, almost gratuitously so. If you say to Cody, 'Now tell me, and be honest, be really honest, I can take it, does my cellulite show through this dress?' he will give you an answer.

Now, obviously, no one asks that question if they expect the answer to be yes. People only ask because they're smugly convinced that after a month of body brushing, thrice-daily use of some French 'minceur' gear, and the wearing of anti-cellulite tights and an expensive, industrial-strength lycra skirt, the answer will be a big, fat NO.

But Cody would be the one person to tell you that he can see a hint of orange peel skin. I don't think he does it out of cruelty; instead he plays Devil's Advocate to protect his nearest and dearest from ridicule. It's almost as if he disapproves of hope and feels that erring on the side of optimism makes fools of us and hands the rest of the world the advantage.

'It's Lily,' he said. 'Lily Wright,' he repeated, when I said nothing. 'Her book. It's out. It's called *Mimi's Remedies*. The *Irish Times* are reviewing it on Saturday.'

'How do you know?'

'Met someone last night.' Cody knows all sorts of people. Journalists, politicians, nightclub owners. He works in the Department of Foreign Affairs and has a kind of Clark Kent thing going on: serious, ambitious and 'straight' in the daytime, until quitting time rolls around, when he whips out his poppers

and minces for Ireland. He straddles many camps and he's privy to all kinds of advance info.

'Is it a nice review?' My lips weren't responding properly to my need to speak.

'I believe so.'

I'd heard ages ago that she'd bagged herself a publishing deal; I'd nearly gawked at the injustice. *I* was the one who was supposed to write a book; I'd talked about doing it often enough. And so what if my writing career thus far had consisted of me reading other people's books, firing them at the wall and declaring, 'Such shite! I could do better in my sleep.'

For a while, every time I passed a bookshop I went in and looked for Lily's book but I never saw it and so much time had elapsed – over a year – that I'd concluded it wasn't going to happen.

'Thanks for telling me.'

'Has Noel come home?'

'Not yet.'

Cody clicked. 'When God closes one door, he slams another in your face. Well . . . you know . . . call me if you need me.' As far as Cody went, this counted as deep concern and I was touched.

I closed my mobile and looked at Mam. Her eyes were bulging with anxiety. 'Was it your father?'

'No, Mam. Sorry, Mam.' We were halfway through Wednesday morning and the mood was very, very low. She'd been so pitiful when she'd woken up, then on our way down for breakfast as we passed the front door, she gave a huge gasp and said, 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the chain wasn't on.' She took a closer look. 'And neither was the mortice lock.'

She hurried into the kitchen and examined the back door. 'The back door wasn't double-locked, and the alarm wasn't on. And don't tell me the windows weren't secured!' Dad obviously had some sort of nocturnal routine when he sewed the house up tighter than Fort Knox.

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‘Why didn’t you do it?’ Mam asked. She wasn’t accusatory; more puzzled.

‘Because I didn’t know about it.’

This gave rise to more puzzlement and after a pause she said, ‘Well, you know now.’

I’d been all set to go to work but Mam was so lost and child-like that I rang Andrea to see how things were; she surprised me by saying that the gala dinner had been ‘great fun’, and the chiropractors had been wild crack, bending the hollyhock centrepieces in two and saying ‘slipped disc’ and suchlike. I think she got off with one of them.

She said I needn’t come in, which was very decent of her because the post-conference mop-up is a big job – ferrying the delegates to the airport, returning the chairs, the lighting and the screens to the hire companies – although as the screens had never arrived, that was one less job – arguing with the hotel over the bill, etc.

In return for her decency I told her, briefly, what had really happened with Dad. ‘Mid-life crisis,’ she promised me. ‘What car does he drive?’

‘Nissan Sunny.’

‘Right. Any minute now he’ll trade it in for a red Mazda MX5, then soon after he’ll come to his senses.’

I went back and relayed the good news to Mam but all she said was, ‘Insurance is higher on red cars, I read it somewhere. I want him to come home.’

She had her elbows on the table, which was still spread with the previous day’s breakfast debris: bowls, buttery knives, teacups (Aaaaagh!). I hadn’t bothered doing it when I’d been clearing up the broken crockery, probably because I thought it was Mam’s area. She’s very houseproud – at least under normal circumstances – but right now she didn’t even seem to see the mess. I made a start on it, clattering side-plates on top of each other, but when I picked up Dad’s porridge bowl, Mam cried, ‘No,’ took it from me and placed it on her lap.

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Then, once again, she dialled Dad's work number. She'd been ringing him approximately every five minutes since eight-thirty, and it kept going to his voicemail. It was now ten-thirty.

'Can we go over to his work, Gemma? Please. I have to see him.'

Her naked desperation was *unbearable*. 'Let's wait until we can talk to him.' Because what if we turned up at his office and we were turned away? I couldn't risk that.

'Mam, would you mind if I popped out for ten minutes?'

'Where are you going?' Her voice thickened with tears. 'Don't leave me.'

'Just down to the shops. I promise I'll come right back. Can I get you anything? A pint of milk?'

'Why would we need milk? Doesn't the milkman bring the milk?'

A milkman. Another world.

I was looking for my coat until I remembered I'd left it with the chiropractors. I had to go as I was – yesterday's suit creased and covered in little sticky feathers.

'You'll come right back?' Mam called after me.

'Right back.'

I burned to the local shopping centre and was nearly out of the car before I'd finished parking. My heart was pounding. For the time being the drama with Dad had been relegated to second place. Lily's book was the cause of my dry mouth. I ran across the concourse, hoping that I wouldn't bump into anyone from work, and entered the bookshop on full alert, adrenalined to the max, feeling like an SAS man breaking into an enemy embassy. I flicked my eyes from left to right, expecting to be ambushed by big displays of Lily's book, then twirled around very fast to see if there was anything behind me. Nothing, so far. With my Super-Anxious Vision, I spotted the New Titles wall and in under a second I'd scanned every cover – the Six Million Dollar Man couldn't have done it faster – but there were none by Lily.

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What if they didn't stock the book here? After all, this was just a small, local store. Already I knew I would have to go into town to a bigger bookshop and keep searching. I couldn't give up until I had a copy of Lily's book in my hand.

Next, the alphabetical listing. The Ws were on the lower shelves, near the floor. Down I sprang. Waters, Werther, Wogan . . . oh Christ, there it was. There was her name. Lily Wright. Done kind of curly and wacky. Like this: *Lily Wright*. And the title was the same: *Mimi's Remedies*.

My heart was banging and my hands were so sweaty they left a smear on the cover. I turned pages but my fingers would only fumble. I was looking for the little bit that tells about the author. And then I found it.

*Lily Wright lives in London with her partner Anton and their baby girl Ema.*

Sweet Jesus. Seeing it in this book made it more true than it had ever been before. It was *in print*.

Everyone – her publishers, her readers, the bookshop staff and the people who worked in the printworks – they all thought it was true. Anton was Lily's partner and they had a little girl. I felt out in the cold and excluded from the loop because I was the only person in the whole world who still thought Anton was rightfully mine. Everyone else *everywhere* thought Lily's claim to him was legitimate. The bitter injustice. She'd stolen him, but instead of treating her like the common criminal she was, everyone was slapping her on the back congratulating her, 'Well done, that's a lovely partner you've got there. Good girl yourself.' No mention of the fact that she was thinning on top, of course. Not even a hint that she'd look a damn sight better if she got herself a Burt Reynolds-style hair-follicle transplant – and that's not just me being bitchy, she often said it herself. But no, projecting only a positive spin, everything was lovely and hirsute. On the back cover there was a small black and

white photo. I gazed at it, my mouth in a bitter-sweet twist. Look at her, all delicate and wide-eyed and blondey and tenderly, like a long-limbed, slender angel. And they say the camera never lies . . .

I almost felt that I shouldn't have to pay for the book – not only had the author stolen the man I'd loved the most, but she'd written a book about me. I got one of those well-nigh irresistible urges to croak at the assistant, 'This is all about me, you know,' but I managed not to.

Somehow I'd paid and I was outside the shop where I stood in the cold, skimming the pages for my name. At first glance I couldn't see it. I kept looking, then understood that she'd have had to change my name, in case I sued or something. I was probably 'Mimi'. I got as far as page seven before I came out of the trance I was in and saw that I could just as well be in Mam's in the warm, as standing here reading it.

As soon as I let myself back into the house, Mam stood framed in the kitchen doorway and choked, 'He has a girlfriend.'

While I'd been out, she'd finally managed to track Dad down and she was experiencing the news afresh.

'This has never happened to anyone I know. What did I do wrong?'

She walked into my arms, sagged against me and something hard banged off my hipbone – the porridge bowl, she had it in her dressing-gown pocket. She cried like a child, proper wa-wa-waaaaas, with gulping, coughing and hiccups; my heart nearly broke. She was in such a terrible state I gave her the two emergency tablets and put her back to bed again. As soon as she was breathing peacefully I closed my fist around the tranquillizer prescription Dr Bailey had left – the first chance I got, I'd go to the chemist.

Then, in a riptide of fury, I rang Dad, who sounded surprised – *surprised*, no less – to hear from me.

'You come home tonight and explain yourself,' I said angrily.

‘There’s nothing to explain,’ he tried. ‘Colette says –’

‘Fuck Colette, I don’t give a fuck WHAT Colette says. You get over here and have some respect.’

‘Language,’ he said sulkily. ‘All right. I’ll be round at seven.’

I hung up the phone and the ground actually rocked beneath my feet. My father was having an affair. *My father had left my mother.*

I settled myself on the bed beside Mam and began to read the book that was all about me.

Mid-afternoon, Mam opened one eye. ‘What are you reading?’ she mumbled.

‘A book.’

‘Ah.’

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# 4

TO: Susan\_inseattle@yahoo.com

FROM: Gemma 343@hotmail.com

SUBJECT: What kind of woman steals the love of her life from her best friend, then writes a book and doesn't mention it?

Another day, another *douleur*.

More shocking news just in. Lily's book is out. Yes, Lily 'Every man for myself' Wright. Lily 'Bald Patch' Wright. It's the maddest thing I've ever read, sort of like a children's book, except there's no pictures and the words are too big. It's about a witch called Mimi (yes, you heard me, a witch) who comes to a village, which might be in Ireland or might be in England or might be on the planet Mars, and she starts interfering in everyone's lives. Making up spells with instructions like, 'Include a handful of compassion, a sprinkling of intelligence and a generous helping of love.' Gag-making. And I'm not in it, you're not in it, even Anton doesn't seem to be in it. The only person I recognize is a spiteful girl with ringlets, who has got to be Cody.

It took me only four hours to read but I suppose millions of people will buy it and she'll be a millionaire and a big celebrity. Life is such a bastard.

As soon as I'd finished, I had to get Mam up because Dad was coming. She refused to get dressed – she's getting way too fond of that dressing-gown. And as for Dad's porridge bowl, she's holding on to it like she's waiting for the Forensics people to bag and label it as Exhibit A.

Then in comes Dad – using his own key which I thought was well out of order – and I got a real fright. Less than two days and already he looks different. Sharper, more defined around the

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edges, less blurry, and it struck me how very serious this whole business is when I saw that he was wearing new clothes. Well, I'd certainly never seen them before. A brown suede jacket – Christ in the marketplace! Rudimentary sideburns, much comb-over action going on with his hair, and, worst of all, trainers. Oh, mother of God, the trainers. Blinding white, and so chunky that it looked like they were wearing him, rather than the other way round.

'So what's going on?' I asked.

And without even sitting down, he announces that he's very sorry, but he's in love with Colette and she's in love with him.

It was the weirdest, most awful thing. What's wrong with this picture? Absolutely fecking everything.

'But what about us?' I said. 'What about Mam?' I thought I had him there because all my life he's been devoted to us. But do you know what he said? He said, 'I'm sorry.'

Which of course meant he wasn't. He just didn't care, which I didn't understand, because he'd always been so gentle and kind. It took a while to get what was happening, because this was my DAD, you know? Then – with another terrible fright – I saw that he was in that loved-up cocoon where all you can feel is your own happiness and you can't imagine that everyone else doesn't feel it too. I never knew it happened to old people, to *parents*.

Then Mam says in this tiny voice, 'Will you stay for dinner?' I *mean!* I am so sure. So I go, all narky, 'He can't, there aren't enough plates.' Then I tell him, all accusing, 'She broke most of them yesterday because she was so upset.'

But not a bother on him. He just said, 'I can't stay anyway.' Then he gives the front door a furtive look and something clicked into place and I yelled, 'She's outside! You've brought her with you.'

'Gemma,' he shouts, but I was already at the front door and yes, there was a woman sitting outside in the Nissan Sunny. I thought I was going to gawk. There really was another woman and Dad *wasn't* in an overworked state of delusion.

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You know how in books they always say that women who steal other people's men look 'hard', just so we'll have no sympathy with them. Well, Colette did, she really did look hard. She spotted me and gave a kind of don't-mess-with-me stare. Like a complete looper I ran over, pressed my face against the window on her side, pulled my bottom lip over my top one and bulged my eyes at her, then I called her the C word and, all credit to her, she didn't retreat even an inch, she just gazed coolly at me with roundy blue eyes.

Dad shows up behind me and goes, 'Gemma, let her alone, it's not her fault.' Then he murmurs, 'Sorry, love,' and it wasn't me he was talking to. Deflated to fuck, I went back inside, and Susan, do you know what I was thinking? I was thinking, She has highlights, her hair is nicer than mine.

Dad stayed only about five more minutes, then just as he was leaving, he produced four of the prototype tiramisu bars from the pocket of his (I can hardly type this) brown suede jacket. For a minute I was almost touched – at least he was planning to keep us in chocolate – then he says, 'Let me know your impressions, especially if you think the coffee flavour is too strong.'

I threw a bar at him, which caught him on the sideburn and said, 'Do your own fucking market research,' but Mam held on to hers with a death-grip.

And next thing you know it's just me and Mam again, sitting in silence, our mouths agape.

It was then that shock really got a grip of me; none of it seemed real. I couldn't get anything hardwired into my system.

How had it all happened? But do you know what? In amongst all the other feelings I've still enough room to feel embarrassed. That's bad, isn't it? But, Christ, the thought of my father *cavorting*, *cavorting* with a woman my age. It's bad enough to think of your parents having sex with each other. But with different people . . .

Remember when your dad married Carol? And how the thought of them 'doing it' was too horrific so we decided they were just together for the companionship? If only I could convince myself that this is the case here!

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And what's in it for hard-faced, highlighted Colette? My dad wears a vest. A *vest*, for God's sake.

Aaargh! Just had an image there of them 'at it'.

'After all I did for him,' Mam said. 'And to leave me in my twilight years. What did I do wrong?'

You know what, I've always worried about having children because I felt I couldn't watch them endure their teenage heart-breaks. Not in my worst nightmares did I think I'd have to do it for my *mother*.

You know what she's like – the perfect wife, always cooking wonderful meals, keeping the house perfect, never braining Dad when he was narky about bars of chocolate not selling as well as they should have. She kept her figure right into the menopause. Even her menopause was carried off with aplomb; not once was she stopped leaving a supermarket with an unpaid-for can of sardines in her handbag. (Why is it always cans of sardines?)

I'll tell you something, this has made me very bitter about men. What's the point? You give them your life, cook yourself blue in the face, starve yourself into osteoporosis and for what? For them to leave you just when you're commencing your final descent into old age, for a vest-loving woman who has highlights.

'He didn't deserve you,' I said.

But she looked annoyed and said, 'That's your *father* you're talking about.'

But what was I meant to say? Plenty more fish in the sea? You'll meet someone else? Like, Mam is sixty-two; she's soft and comfy and looks like someone's granny.

If you get a chance, call me at Mam's. She's terrified of being on her own, so I'm going to stay here for a little while, just until he comes to his senses and returns home.

Love

Gemma

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PS No, I don't mind about you not having a Valium and yes, a rum and Coke was a good substitute. You did the right thing.

Mam let me out to collect clean clothes from my flat, a fifteen-minute drive away. 'If you're not back in forty minutes, I'll be afraid,' she promised.

At times like this I hate being an only child. Mam had had two miscarriages – one before having me and one after – and no amount of rocking horses and pink tricycles made up for not having brothers or sisters.

As I drove my mind was on Colette and her highlights. The greatest shock was that she was almost the same age as me; did this mean Dad had been eyeing up my friends? He had no history of affairs or flirtations – until yesterday the thought would have been thigh-slappingly funny – but all of a sudden I was looking with fresh eyes. Thinking back, he'd always been nice to my friends, giving them chocolate whenever they called round, but that was almost the same as inviting them to partake of the fresh air in the house. And when I was in my late teens and early twenties he was the dad who used to come out at two in the morning with his coat on over his PJs to collect me and nine or ten others from a club in town. We were usually a bit the worse for wear and the highwater mark was the time Susan opened her window and gawked half a bottle of peach Schnapps down the outside of the car door. Dad didn't notice until the next morning when, jingling his car keys, he was leaving for golf only to find one of his doors caked in gunge. But instead of going on a mad rant like Mr Byers did the time Susan gawked into his flower bed ('You tell that little brat to get round here and clear it up! She shouldn't be drinking, she's under age and she can't hold it!' etc., etc.), all Dad said was, 'Ah, sugar! That Susan,' and tramped back inside to get a basin of water and a J-cloth. At the time I thought Dad was simply being kind but now I was wondering if it implied something far more lecherous.

A revolting thought.

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I got caught on several red lights, which ate into my time, but at least the code on the electronic gate was working. My flat is in a complex which aspires to be swinging and ‘modrin’ and among its many facilities are a (laughably poor) gym and an electronic gate which is meant to provide ‘security’. Except that, on a regular basis, the code on the gate doesn’t work and people either can’t get out for work, or can’t get back in for their dinner, depending on what time of the day it happens.

I flicked through my post – six or seven leaflets advertising power yoga, a flyer for colonic irrigation – and checked my answering machine: nothing urgent; everyone finished their messages by saying, ‘I’ll try you on the mobile.’ (Mobile indeed. My life would be easier if they just put wheels on it.) Then I flung toiletries, underwear and my mobile charger into a bag and tried to track down clean clothes for work. I found one crisply ironed shirt hanging on the wardrobe door, but I needed two. A rummage through the hangers produced another, then I saw that the reason it was unworn was because it had funny yellow stains under the arms that washing couldn’t shift, so I never wore it any more. Well, it would have to do; I just wouldn’t take my jacket off. Finally, I packed my pinstriped suit and four-inch heels. (I *never* wear flats. My shoes are so high that sometimes when I step out of them, people look around in confusion and ask, ‘Where’d she go?’ and I have to say, ‘I’m down here.’)

Before I left I gave my bed a wistful look; I’d be sleeping in my parents’ spare room tonight and it just wouldn’t be the same. I love my bed. Let me tell you about it . . .

A few of my favourite things

Favourite thing No. 1

My Bed: A love story

My bed is a lovely bed. It is not just any old bed. It is a bed I assembled myself and by that I don’t mean it came in a flat pack from Ikea. I

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bought an expensive mattress, in other words, not the cheapest one in the shop. I think it was only the third cheapest. Extravagance indeed!

Then the bedding. I have not one, but two duvets. One to cover me – obviously. But – you’re going to like this – the second one goes *under* my sheet, so I lie on top of it. It’s a trick my mother taught me and it’s hard to convey the bliss of climbing in and being received by the fluffy, feathery envelope. The duvets seem to stroke me, murmuring, *You’re OK now, we’ve got you, we’ve got you, let it go, it’s all OK, you’re safe now* – like the hero does to the girl at the end of the movie, after she’s been on the run from rogue elements of the FBI, and she’s finally managed to expose them without getting shot.

Sheets, duvet covers and pillow cases: cotton, of course, and they are white, white, white (apart from the coffee stains).

Unique feature: the headboard. Aka: the best bit. Cody’s friend Claud made it for me (I paid him for it, it wasn’t a present) and it’s a headboard fit for a fifties movie star: big, padded and all curves and curlicues, upholstered in faded bronze silk with a scattering of tea-roses, it’s a bit fairy tale, a bit Art Nouveau, in other words, a bit fabulous. People always remark on it. Indeed the first time Anton saw it he exclaimed, ‘Look at your girlie bed!’ then roared laughing, before rolling me onto it. Ah, happy days . . .

I gave my bed a final regretful look, wishing I didn’t have to leave it. I consulted my ghost sisters. ‘You go on over to Mam,’ I said to the first one. ‘You’re the eldest.’ But nothing doing, so I went myself.

When I got out of the car and came into the house, carrying my clean suit and shirts, Mam said, ‘What do you need them for?’

‘Work.’

‘*Work?*’ Like she’d never heard of such a thing.

‘Yes, Mam, work.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow’ **Copyrighted Material**

‘Don’t go.’

‘Mam, I have to go. I’ll lose my job if I don’t.’

‘Take compassionate leave.’

‘They only give it when someone dies.’

‘I wish he had died.’

‘Mam!’

‘But I do. We’d get a ton of sympathy. And respect. And the neighbours would bring food.’

‘Quiches,’ I said. (Because they do.)

‘And apple tarts. Marguerite Kelly makes a lovely funeral apple tart.’ (Said with a certain amount of bitterness, you’ll see why in a minute.) ‘But instead of having the decency to die he’s got a girlfriend and left me. And now you’re talking about going to work. Take some of your holidays.’

‘I’ve none left.’

‘Sick leave, then. Dr Bailey will give you a note. I’ll pay.’

‘Mam, I *can’t*.’ I was starting to panic.

‘What could be so important?’

‘Davinia Westport’s wedding next Thursday.’

‘Big deal,’ she said.

One of the society weddings of the year, to be precise. The most important, complex, costly, terrifying job I’d ever worked on and the logistics had occupied me for months, both in my waking hours and in my dreams.

The flowers alone involved five thousand refrigerated tulips arriving from Holland and a flower specialist and his six assistants flying in from New York. The cake was to be a twelve-foot-high replica of the Statue of Liberty, but was to be made of ice cream so couldn’t be prepared until the last minute. A marquee, big enough to hold five hundred guests, was to be set up in a field in Kildare on Monday night and transformed into an Arabian Nights Wonderland by Thursday morning. Because Davinia – in every other respect an obliging, sensible girl – had elected to get married in a tent in January, I was still trying to track down enough heaters to ensure we didn’t freeze.

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Among other things . . . Many, *many* other things. It was a real stamp of approval that Davinia had picked me to pull together her dream wedding. But the *stress*, I can't *tell* you – chefs could get food poisoning, florists could develop sudden pollen allergy, hairdressers could break their wrists, the marquee could be vandalized and, at the end of the day, the problem was mine.

But I couldn't tell Mam any of the details because they were strictly confidential and she was even worse than me at keeping secrets – half the locality already knew about the tiramisu bar.

'But if you go to work, what about me?'

'Maybe we could get one of the neighbours in to sit with you.'

Silence.

'Is that OK? Because, you see, it's my job, they pay me to be there, and I've been away for two days already.'

'What neighbours?'

'Ehhmm . . .'

A recent shake-down had seen a change in the fabric of the local community. One minute it seemed that all the neighbours were women of Mam's age and older, and were called Mary, Maura, May, Maria, Moira, Mary, Maree, Mary, Mary and Mary. Except for Mrs Prior who was called Lotte but that was only because she was Dutch. They always seemed to be dropping in, distributing envelopes for a church collection or looking to borrow a jumper de-baller or . . . or . . . you know, that sort of thing.

But recently three or four of the Marys had moved; Mary and Mr Webb had sold up and moved to a retirement apartment by the sea 'now that the children have grown'; Mr Sparrow had died and Mary Sparrow, a great friend of Mam's, had gone to live with her sister in Wales. And the other two Marys? I can't remember because I must admit I didn't always pay as much attention as I should have to Mam's recounting of local events. Oh yeah, Mary and Mr Griffin had gone to Spain because of Mary Griffin's arthritis. And the other Mary? It'll come to me.

‘Mrs Parsons,’ I suggested, ‘she’s nice. Or Mrs Kelly.’

Not a great idea, I realized. Relations had been strained – polite, of course, but strained – since Mrs Parsons had asked Mrs Kelly to make the cake for Celia Parsons’s twenty-first, instead of asking Mam, who the whole cul-de-sac knew made the cakes for everyone’s twenty-firsts; she did them in the shape of a key. (This took place a good eight years ago. Grudge-holding is one of the hobbies around here.)

‘Mrs Kelly,’ I repeated. ‘It wasn’t her fault Mrs Parsons asked her to make the cake.’

‘But she didn’t have to make it, she could have said no.’

I sighed. We’d been through this a thousand times. ‘Celia Parsons didn’t want a key, she wanted a champagne bottle.’

‘Dodie Parsons could at least have asked me if I could do it.’

‘Yes, but she knew that Mrs Kelly had the decoration book.’

‘I don’t need a book. I can just make up designs out of my head.’

‘Exactly! You’re the better one.’

‘And everyone said that the sponge was as dry as sand.’

‘They did.’

‘She should just stick to what she’s good at – apple tarts for funerals.’

‘Exactly and really, Mam, it wasn’t Mrs Kelly’s fault.’

It was important to broker closer links with Mrs Kelly because I couldn’t take any more time off. Francis and Frances – yes, *the* F&F of F&F Dignan – had been pleased when I’d won the Davinia account and said if I got it right I might get to do all of her weddings. But if I messed it up, well . . . The thing was, I was terrified of Frances and Francis – we all were. Frances had an iron-grey bob, all the better to highlight her boxer’s jaw. Although she didn’t actually smoke cigars, wear men’s trousers and sit with her legs apart, that’s what I saw whenever I closed my eyes and thought of her – something that didn’t happen often, at least not voluntarily. Francis, her

partner in evil, was like an egg on legs: all his weight was piled on his stomach, but his pins were Kate Moss-skinny. He had a roundy face and was bald except for two tufts of hair which stuck out over his ears, so he looked like Yoda. People who didn't know him well thought he was a hoot. They said of Frances, 'She wears the trousers.' But they were wrong, they both wore the trousers. They each had a pair.

If I got this wedding wrong, they'd take me into the RWNW (the Room With No Windows, their version of room 101) and say that I'd disappointed them. And then, almost as an afterthought, sack me. Because they're a married couple they often boast that their company is more like a family. Certainly they know how to make me feel like a guilty schoolgirl and they encourage account managers (I'm one) to compete with their colleagues in an echo of – I'm told by those who know – sibling rivalry.

Anyway.

'So will I ask Mrs Kelly to come in?'

Mam had relapsed into silence.

She opened her mouth. For a while nothing emerged, but I knew something was on its way. Then from somewhere far inside her came a long, thin keen of pain. Almost like white noise but with a slight, ragged human undertone. It was chilling. Give me plate-breaking over it any day of the week.

She stopped, gathered breath and began again. I shook her arm and said, 'Ma-am. Please, Mam!'

'Noel's gone. Noel's gone.' At that, the white noise stopped and she was yelping uncontrollably, the way she had that morning, when I'd had to calm her down with Dr Bailey's emergency tablets. But we were out of pills; I should have gone to the chemist when I'd had a chance. Perhaps there was a late-night one somewhere?

'Mam, I'm just going to get someone to stay with you while I go out and get the tablets.'

She paid me no attention and I peered up the road to Mrs

Kelly and when she saw the state of me at the door, it was clear she thought it was time to start making pastry and peeling cooking apples.

I explained my plight and she knew of a chemist. 'They close at ten.'

It was now ten to ten. Time to break the law.

I drove like the clappers and got to the chemist at a minute past. But there was still someone inside. I pounded on the glass door and a man calmly walked over and opened it for me.

'Thank you. Oh, thank God.' I fell in.

'It's nice to be wanted,' he said.

I thrust the crumpled prescription at him. 'Please tell me you have them. It's an emergency.'

He smoothed it out and said, 'Don't worry, we have them. Take a seat there.'

He disappeared behind the white partition bit to where they keep the drugs and I sank onto the chair, trying to catch my breath.

'That's right,' his disembodied voice came from behind the melamine divider. 'Nice deep breaths. In, hold, out.'

He reappeared with the trunks and said kindly, 'Mind yourself now. And remember, no driving or operating machinery when you've taken them.'

'Fine. Thanks. Thanks very much.' It wasn't until I was back behind the wheel that I realized he thought they were for me.

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Normally, I never read book reviews so it took me a while to find them in Saturday's paper. As I skimmed critiques of biographies of obscure English generals and a book about the Boer war, I began to suspect that Cody might have been wrong for once. But then, my heart gave one big bang that hurt my chest. Bloody Cody was right. There *was* a review. He knows everything.

### CHARMING DEBUT

*Mimi's Remedies* by Lily Wright. Dalkin Emery. £6.99

This debut from Lily Wright is less of a novel and more of an extended fable – and none the worse for that. A white witch, the eponymous Mimi, mysteriously arrives in a small village – location unspecified – and sets about working her own particular brand of sorcery. Rocky marriages are cemented and sundered lovers are reunited. Sounds too sweet to be wholesome? Suspend your cynicism and go with the flow. Shot through with magic, *Mimi's Remedies* manages to be a charming comedy of manners and a wry social commentary. As comforting as hot buttered toast on a cold evening, and just as addictive.

Shaking, I put the paper down. I think they liked it. Deep breath in, hold, deep breath out, deep breath in, hold, deep breath out. Oh God, I was jealous. I was so jealous, it was hot and green in my veins.

I could see it all now: Lily Wright was going to turn into a major celebrity. She'd be in all the papers and everyone would love her. Despite her bald patch she'd be in the pages of *Hello!*. She'd get on *Parkinson*. Even on *David Letterman* or *Oprah*. She'd

be loaded and finally able to afford a Burt Reynolds-style hairweave and everyone would love her even more. She'd do charity work and get an award. She'd have a limo. And a huge big house. And a stalker. Every bloody thing!

I picked up the paper and read the review again, looking for something – anything – negative. There had to be *something*. But no matter how I read it, I really couldn't see that this review was anything but a rave.

I threw the paper from me with a sharp rustle. Why is life such a bastard? Why do some people get every fucking thing? Lily Wright has a gorgeous man – mine, a lovely little girl – half mine, and now a glorious career. It wasn't fair.

My mobile rang and I grabbed it. Cody. 'Have you seen it?' he asked.

'I have. You?'

'Yes.' Pause. 'Fair play to her.'

Cody walks a very narrow line between Lily and me. He refused to take sides when the great falling out occurred and he won't bitch with me about her, even though under normal circumstances he could bitch for Ireland. (If only it was an Olympic sport.) One time he even had the cheek to suggest that Lily stealing Anton from me might have caused her as much pain as it did me. I mean! In theory I can understand his position – Lily had done nothing to him – but sometimes, like today, it gives me a right pain in the arse.

It was Saturday morning, five days since Dad had gone – *five days* – and he still hadn't returned. I'd been certain he would have by now. It was what had kept me going, thinking that the situation was very, very temporary; that he'd had a rush of blood to the head, coupled with the stress of the tiramisu situation, but that he'd come to his senses in no time.

I'd been waiting, waiting, waiting. Waiting to hear his key in the lock, waiting for him to rush into the hall, yelping about what a dreadful mistake he'd made, waiting for this hell to be over.

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On Thursday I rang four times to ask him to come home and each time he said the same thing – that he was sorry but he wouldn't be returning. Then I thought that I'd rung him enough and perhaps a few days' silence from me and Mam might jolt him to his senses.

A week. I'd give it a week. He'd be back by then. He'd have to be because the alternative was unthinkable.

I didn't go to work on Thursday and Friday. I couldn't – I was too worried about Mam. But I worked from Mam's, spending Thursday making calls, sending faxes and emails, as I chased up Davinia's arrangements. I even managed to zip off a couple of emails to Seattle where I vented big time and agreed with Susan that yes, Dad's jacket could have been worse, it could have had fringes.

On Friday morning Andrea came to Mam's with the files and we worked our way through the lists. Davinia Westport's wedding arrangements consisted of list after list after list; lists of the guests' arrival times; lists of the drivers who'd be collecting them; lists of where everyone was staying and lists of their specific requirements.

(I love lists and sometimes at the start of a job, I'll put things on the list that I've already done, just so I can draw a nice 'done' line through them.)

Then there were the timetables. Hour by hour breakdowns of when the marquee was being erected, when the acres of satin would arrive, when the floor would be laid and the lighting and heating should be set up. We were making good progress until Davinia rang on Friday afternoon to say that her friends Blue and Sienna had broken up and could no longer be seated at the same table as each other. All other work had to be shelved for the next two hours as we constructed a new seating plan – this one tiny sundering had set off shock waves which rippled through the entire wedding party, because they all seemed to have slept with each other. Every proposed move impacted negatively. Sienna couldn't sit at Table 4 because

Blue's new girl, August, was there. She couldn't sit at Table 5 because her ex, Charlie, was there. Table 6, Blue's ex, Lia, whom he'd dumped for Sienna. Table 7 . . . etc. And if we tried moving the obstacles – August to a new table, for example – *she'd* end up face-to-face with someone she'd shafted or slept with. It was like trying to solve a Rubik's cube.

What made things worse was that I didn't have Andrea's full attention. She kept eyeing the bars of chocolate thrown casually along the window sill, in the bread bin, and on top of the fridge. 'It's like,' she exclaimed, 'being let loose in a sweet shop.'

Because chocolate had been so freely available to me all my life, I could pretty much take it or leave it, but it had come in very handy since Tuesday: more alarming even than Mam losing the will to live, she'd lost the will to cook. And as I had no clue how to, it was just as easy when mealtimes rolled around to have biscuits and chocolate.

I loaded Andrea up with a selection of stuff in the hope that she might concentrate on the job in hand.

'Focus,' I entreated. 'Do it for Davinia if you won't do it for me.'

You see, Davinia Westport was a bit of a rarity. Even though she was posh, rich and good-looking, she was nice. (Apart from, like I said, insisting on getting married in a tent in the coldest month of the year.) More often than not the client is the worst thing about my job – worse than hotel ballrooms burning down two days before the event or the guests at a fund-raiser being fed salmonella chicken and having to be ferried off, puking their guts up, during the raffle. But Davinia was different. She didn't ring me at home in the middle of the night shrieking that her polo neck was the wrong shade of black or that she'd got a cold sore, and that I'd better fix it.

Andrea and I finished up at about eight o'clock on Friday night. No sooner was she gone, gratefully clutching an armful of confectionery, than Mam presented me with a list and dispatched me to the supermarket for the weekly shop. She

didn't come with me because whenever I suggested she get dressed, she hugged her (increasingly grubby) peach dressing-gown tighter around her and whimpered, 'Don't make me.' But as I unpacked the groceries when I got back, Mam complained that I'd got all the wrong things. 'What did you get this butter for?' she asked, puzzled the way she'd been puzzled when I hadn't locked up the house the first night. 'This isn't the bread we get. And we don't get proper cornflakes, we get the own-brand stuff. Throwing money away . . .' she muttered.

Before I went to bed, the locking up had to commence; checking the windows, shooting bolts and putting chains on all the doors as I secured the house to Mam's high standards. I was exhausted by the time I trudged up to bed – and I couldn't help feeling a little sorry for myself. It was Friday night, I should have been out on the razz instead of babysitting my mam. How I wished that Dad would come home.

I was too upset to sleep so I took refuge in a fantasy. Conjuring up imaginary story-lines where runaway boyfriends return and enemies are vanquished is my party trick. I've gained quite a reputation, especially among Cody's gang and sometimes people I've just been introduced to ask me to do it for them.

How it works is, they give me a thumbnail sketch of the disaster: for example, their boyfriend had been spotted in Brown Thomas getting a Burberry bag giftwrapped. Naturally the aggrieved party thought it was for her and did what any sensible woman would do – went directly out and bought matching sandals. But the next time they meet, the fella breaks it off . . . without cushioning the blow with the bag. Obviously he's met someone else!

I take a bit more information, like length of relationship, cost of the bag etc., give it a little think and come back with something like, 'OK, picture the scene. It's three months from now and you bump into him and as luck would have it, you're looking great . . .'. Pause to plan the hair and wardrobe – yes,

they could have the candy-striped trews they saw in *Vogue* and yes, they would go with those scoop-necked tops. OK, high-necked if they preferred. And the new season's boots, well, *obviously* – then I continue. 'The Burberry bags have been marked down and you've bought yourself *two*. No, no wait, you haven't bought yourself *any* because who wants a bag that no one else wants? No, you got a bonus at work and you bought yourself an Orla Kiely that there was a waiting list for and you're just back from a sun holiday where you caught jaundice so not only are you rake-skinny, but you've a lovely colour. His car has just been clamped, it's pelting rain and one of his shoes has been stolen by a vicious inner-city fox.' Etc., etc. It's my attention to detail which people rate me for, I'm told, and when Anton ran off with Lily, it was a case of fantasist heal thyself.

The scenario I'd comforted myself with involved escaping to some remote rural Mills & Boon community. Beside the sea, naturally; some fantastically wild sea with big waves and surf and spray and the whole lot. I'd go for long, mad walks along the sea or the cliffs and while I was out tramping along gloomily, some hunky farmer would spot me and, even though I hadn't had my roots done for ages, he'd take a shine to me. Of course, he wasn't just a farmer, he was also a film director or a former entrepreneur who'd sold his innovative company for millions. I'd have an ethereal fragile quality about me, but because I was so wounded I'd be rude to him in the village shop when he tried to be nice to me. However, instead of calling me a stupid bitch, like he would in real life, and recommencing his fling with the village floozie, he'd take to leaving two fresh eggs on my doorstep in the morning. I'd get back from my four-mile stomp along the cliff to find the eggs – still warm from the hens, of course – waiting for my breakfast. (And never mind that my breakfast would normally consist of a mini-Magnum and three bowls of sugarpuffs.) I'd make a delicious omelette, with some wild parsley snipped from the garden that came with the house. Or else he'd leave a freshly picked, hand-gathered

bouquet of wild flowers, and the next time I met him I wouldn't sneer, 'Do Interflora not deliver out here, then?' Instead, I'd thank him and say that buttercups were my favourite flowers. (As if.) At some stage I'd end up in his kitchen where I'd see him tenderly feeding a tiny lamb from a baby's bottle and my heart would begin its long overdue thaw. Until one morning, when I was out on my hike, a piece of the cliff would dislodge itself, taking me with it. There had been warnings about the unstable cliff edges, but in my death-wish state I'd discounted them. Somehow the hunky farmer would have seen me toppling over into the briny and he'd come with his tractor and ropes and rescue me from the little ledge I'd fortuitously landed on. Bosh. Happy Ever After land.

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# 6

TO: Susan\_inseattle@yahoo.com  
FROM: Gemma 343@hotmail.com  
SUBJECT: non-stop drama

Wait till you hear. Last night I was in bed, comforting myself with the film director-farmer fantasy when I heard a noise coming from Mam's room. Some sort of bump, then she was calling piteously, 'Gemma, Gemma.' Like this – Ddgemmmaaaah ... ddgemmmaaaah ... so I pelted into her and she was turned on her side, writhing like a dying haddock and said, 'My heart!' (So people really *do* say that in the real world.) 'I'm having a heart attack.'

I believed her – she was grey, her chest was heaving and her eyes bulged. I grabbed the bedside phone so hard it fell on the floor.

It's the weirdest thing, making a 999 call – I'd only ever done it once before: Anton had had badly bad hiccups and I'd been very drunk. (Actually, so had he, it was the reason for his hiccups.) We'd tried everything to stop them: cold key down his back; drinking from the wrong side of the glass; looking at his bank statement to see just how overdrawn he was. It had seemed like an emergency at the time, but the 999 operator had given me short shrift.

This was a different story. I was taken very seriously, told to put Mam in the recovery position (whatever that is) and promised that an ambulance was on its way. While we waited, I held Mam's hand and begged her not to die.

'I've a good mind to,' she gasped. 'That'd teach your father.'

The awful thing was I didn't even have a phone number for Dad.

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I should have insisted on getting hard-faced Colette's number, in case of emergency, but I'd been too proud to ask.

Mam was wheezing and fighting for breath – it was absolutely terrifying, I can't tell you – and I couldn't get over my bad luck. Imagine! Losing two parents in one week. It had never said that in last Sunday's horoscope.

This was the time that I wished that the autumnal evening classes you and I used to sign up for (but never go to after week three) had been in first aid, instead of yoga or Spanish conversation. I might have learned something that made the difference between my mother living and dying.

I half-remembered something about aspirin – weren't you meant to do something with that for heart-attack victims? Either you were definitely supposed to give it to them, or you were definitely *not* supposed to . . .

In the distance came the sound of sirens, getting closer, then through the bedroom curtains the blue light flashed. I ran down to open the front door and ten minutes later when I'd undone all the chains and locks, two fine hefty young men (you'd have liked them) burst in, pounded up the stairs with a stretcher, strapped Mam on, then pounded back down again, me scampering to keep up. They slid her into the ambulance, I hopped in after her, then they were attaching Mam to all kinds of monitors.

We wee-wah'ed through the streets as the men checked Mam's readings and I can't say how I knew but very shortly the atmosphere changed from efficiency to something less pleasant. The two men were giving each other funny looks and the knot in my stomach got worse.

'Will she die?' I asked.

'Nope.'

'Um . . . ?'

Then one of the lads said, 'There's nothing wrong with her. No heart attack. No stroke. All her vital signs are fine.'

'But she was gasping,' I said. 'And she'd gone grey.'

'Probably a panic attack. See your GP about it, get some Valium.'

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Can you imagine! The siren switched off. The ambulance was doing a u-turn and, at a much slower speed, Mam and I were returned home and deposited outside our front gate. Mortified. The lads were quite nice about it. When I clambered out I apologized for wasting their time and they just said, 'No bother.'

I went back to bed and I swear to God I was burning with shame, in *flames* from it. Every time I was just drifting off I'd remember again and go Aaaagh! and have to sit up. It took hours to get to sleep and when I woke up it was Saturday morning and time to read the rave review of Lily's book in the *Irish Times*. (Copy attached from the *Irish Times* website.)

I hate my life.

Although I'm glad it's cheering you up – but soon you'll make friends and you won't be lonely any more.

I have to go now because Dr Bailey is here (again). Please write and tell me nice things about Seattle.

Love

Gemma

PS I shouldn't even humour you on this, but if you really need to know, I thought the coffee flavour was too concentrated and I'd much prefer it with milk chocolate instead of dark.

I was allowed out to collect Mam's prescription from the chemist. Dr Bailey had prescribed stronger tranquillizers. Then he'd scribbled on his pad and said, 'Perhaps some anti-depressants too.'

Mam said, 'The only anti-depressant I want is for my husband to come home.'

'That's not on the market yet,' Dr Bailey said, already edging down the stairs and back to the golf course.

I went to the same chemist I'd gone to the other night. Not only had they been nice to me, but it was the nearest.

The door pinged and someone said, 'Hello again.'

It was the same man who'd saved my life on Wednesday night.

'Hello.' I handed over the prescription. He scanned it and clucked sympathetically. 'Take a seat.'

While he ducked behind the melamine divider to get Mam's happy pills I noticed they'd all kinds of nice things that I'd missed on my mercy dash on Wednesday night.

Not just the usual chemist paraphernalia of painkillers and cough mixtures but mid-range face creams and, most distracting of all, nail polishes. This is how I feel about nail polish . . .

A few of my favourite things

Favourite thing No. 2

My nails: A testimonial

All my life I've hated my hands. I'm prone to short limbs anyway and nowhere is it more pronounced than my fingers. But about six months ago, at the behest of Susan, I started getting my nails 'done'. Which means getting them lengthened and strengthened with all sorts of fake jiggery-pokery. But the best bit of all is they don't look fake. They just look like nice nails, a nice length, painted a nice colour. (No horrible witchy femme fatale red talons for me.)

I am different when my nails are done. I am more dynamic, I gesticulate more, I am better at scaring my staff. I can indicate impatience by drumming on table tops and I can wrap up a meeting with a few choice clatters.

I am now utterly dependent on my long nails. Without them I'm like Samson without his hair, I feel naked and devoid of power. And I no longer laugh when people make fun of girls who regard breaking a nail as a disaster, because a broken nail has the same effect on me as kryptonite on Superman.

For the first time in my life I've started buying nail varnishes. I'd always felt sort of left out in that department but I've made up for lost

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time and now I have lots of them. Opaques and clears and metallics and glitterys and opaescents.

The only problem is what to do when things go wrong at work, now that I can't bite my nails any more. I might have to get false ones to bite, the way people get fake fags once they've given up smoking. Or indeed, I could take up smoking.

When the man re-emerged with the happy tabs, I'd selected a nail polish: a milky beige colour, the same colour as the January sky, which is absolutely horrible on the January sky but, interestingly enough, quite chic as a nail varnish.

'That's a nice cheerful shade,' he said.

I thought that was a funny remark for a man to make. Especially because it wasn't true.

But then when he started reeling off instructions – 'Take the anti-depressants once a day, if you miss a day, don't double up the dose the next day, just carry on as normal. Only take the tranquillizers as an emergency, they're highly addictive' – I remembered that on Wednesday night he'd thought the tranquillizers were mine. Evidently, he also thought these pills were for me and I wasn't sure quite how to go about telling him they were for my mother.

'Um, thanks.'

'Take care,' he called after me.

Back at Mam's, anxiety began growing inside me. I needed to go home.

I had to

- a) do my laundry
- b) put out my wheely bin
- c) pay bills
- d) set the video to record *I love 1988*.

Also, in the outside world, I had to

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- e) get a birthday present for Cody
- f) get fancy tights for Davinia's wedding (I had to masquerade as a guest even though I'd be working at it.) (I really should get a clothing allowance because I have to buy so many gussy clothes for work. Hats and cocktail dresses and whatnot.)
- g) get my nails done.

The second I stood up, I must have conveyed my purposeful air to Mam because she said anxiously, 'Where are you going?' 'I have to get home, Mam. I've my laundry to do and –' 'How long will that take you?' 'A few hours, so –' 'So you'll be back here by three. Or why don't you bring your laundry here and I'll do it for you?' 'There's no need.' 'I do it much nicer.' 'Yes, but I've other things to do too.' 'What about me? Are you going to leave me here on my own?'

I drove away, fear sitting in my stomach like a bag of stones. There *had* to be other people who could help, but I scrolled through the options and found thin pickings.

- 1) Siblings of mine? None.
- 2) Caring and supportive spouse of mine? None.
- 3) Siblings of Mam's? Also none. Like me, Mam was an only child – obviously it runs in the family.
- 4) Siblings of Dad's? Check! Two sisters – but one lived in Rhode Island and the other in Inverness – and one brother, Uncle Leo, who had died nearly seven months ago of a massive heart attack while buying a new bit for his drill in Woodys. The shock was appalling, and made far worse when his wife, Margot, who was one of Mam's best friends, died only five weeks later. Of a

broken heart, you're probably thinking. Of taking a corner too fast on a wet night and coming into collision with a pebbledashed wall, actually. It was horrific, especially so soon after Uncle Leo – Margot was a hoot and although I'd only seen her at weddings, Christmas and other family beanos, even I missed her.

- 5) Neighbours? The best I'd come up with was poor maligned Mrs Kelly. This I struggled to comprehend because when I was growing up the cul-de-sac felt like a community; all the families seemed to be roughly the same age. Now, without me having noticed, it had switched over to much younger families. When did it all change? When did everyone start dying or settling in those easy-to-manage apartments which are the final port of call before the great three-bed, semi-d in the sky?
- 6) Friends? Mam and Dad weren't exactly part of a large, glittering set and any of Mam's friends were also Dad's friends – they were a 'couple', they went out with other 'couples', they talked about people being 'a lovely couple'. There were 'the Bakers' – Dad played golf with Mr Baker. And 'the Tyndals'.
- 7) Mam's spiritual adviser? Father something or other – worth a try.

You picked a fine time to leave us, Noel Hogan, you prick. Didn't scan but I liked it all the same. I couldn't help thinking, What if he never comes home? What if it's always like this? How will I cope if Mam starts to hyperventilate every time I leave her house? How will I hold down my job? How will I have a life?

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I *had* to go to work on Monday morning. I really, *really* had to. Davinia had requested a face-to-facer, plus I needed to go to Kildare to check on the site and ensure that the marquee was being erected in the correct field. I know this seems like a total no-brainer, but it had actually happened to Wayne Diffney, from the boyband Laddz (you know him, he's the 'wacky' one with the extra-stupid hair). His wedding marquee was put up in the wrong field and there wasn't time to take it down and reassemble it, so an extortionate sum had to be paid to the farmer who owned the land. It wasn't our agency, thank God, but nevertheless it shook the foundations of Irish Event Organizing.

So on Sunday night, feeling guilty and defensive, I pressed 'mute' on the telly and said, 'Now, Mam, I absolutely *must* go to work tomorrow.'

She didn't answer, just sat staring at the silent images, like she hadn't heard me.

It had been a terrible day – Mam hadn't gone to Mass, and it's impossible to convey how serious this is to someone unfamiliar with the Irish Catholic Mammy. The ICM won't miss Sunday Mass even if she's got rabies and is foaming at the mouth – she'll simply bring a box of tissues and brazen it out. If her leg falls off, she'll hop. If her other leg falls off, she'll walk on her hands while still managing to wave graciously at neighbours passing by in cars.

At ten o'clock on Sunday morning, I interrupted Mam who was sitting passively in front of the telly watching a weekly round-up of the stock market. 'Mam, shouldn't you be getting ready for Mass?' **Copyrighted Material**

(At that point I suddenly remembered who the fourth Mary who'd moved was. It wasn't a Mary at all. It was Mrs Prior – *Lotte*. No wonder I hadn't been able to remember. The incipient Mass must have prompted it because Mam had once said, 'I'm very fond of Lotte, even if she is a Lutheran.' But the previous summer Lotte had gone to that great clog-dancing competition in the sky and Mr Prior had sold the house and gone into sheltered housing.)

Mam didn't seem to hear me so I said, 'Mam! It's time to get ready for Mass. I'll drive you.'

'I'm not going.'

My stomach plunged. 'OK, I'll come with you.'

'Didn't I just say I'm not going? They'll all be looking at me.'

I employed the line that she'd fed me throughout my life every time I'd been self-conscious. 'Don't be silly,' I said. 'They're far more interested in themselves. Who'd be bothered looking at you?'

'All of them,' she said woefully, and actually, she was right.

Under regular conditions, eleven o'clock Mass counted as a 'promenade'. For Mam and her cronies it counted as 'going out'. If someone in the cul-de-sac got a new winter coat, the first time it was unveiled to the public was at eleven o'clock Mass.

But now that Mam was a deserted wife, she'd knock any new winter coats off today's agenda – and there was bound to be one or two, it was January, it was Sales time. All mutterings and sly glances would be directed at Mam and her abandonedness, completely bypassing, say, the maroon wool/polyester mix topcoat that Mrs Parsons might have bought at a whopping seventy-five per cent off.

So Mam didn't go to Mass, she spent yet another day in her dressing-gown and now she was refusing to hear me.

'Mam, please look at me. I've really *got* to go to work tomorrow.'

I turned the telly off altogether and she turned to me, wounded, 'I was watching that.'

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‘You weren’t.’

‘Take tomorrow off.’

‘Mam, I have to go to work in the morning because over the next four days every second counts.’

‘That’s just bad planning, leaving everything until the last minute.’

‘It’s not. The marquee costs twenty thousand euros a day to rent so we have to cram everything into the few days we have it for.’

‘Can’t Andrea do it?’

‘No, it’s my responsibility.’

‘So what time will you be home at?’

Panic rose in me. Normally I’d live on site for a job like this, so that every moment that wasn’t spent working was devoted to catching up on precious sleep. But it looked like I’d be doing the hour-and-twenty-minute drive from Dublin to Kildare and back, every day. Two hours and forty minutes of lost sleep. A day. Aaagh!

On Monday morning when the clock went off at 6 a.m., I was crying. Not just because it was 6 a.m. on a Monday morning but because I missed my dad.

It had been the strangest week of my life – I’d been so shocked and trying so hard to mind Mam. Now all the other stuff had gone and sad was all I felt.

Tears spilled onto my pillow. With child-like unreasonableness, I wanted Dad to never have left and for everything to be the way it had always been.

He was my dad and home was where he should be. He was a quiet man who’d left most of the talking to my mother but still, his absence in the house was almost tangible.

This had to be my fault. I’d neglected him. I’d neglected the pair of them. All because I had thought they were very happy together. In fact, I *hadn’t* thought about it, that’s how happy they seemed. They’d never given me a moment’s worry, just jogged

along nicely, seeming extremely fond of each other. OK, Dad worked and played golf and Mam was at home all day but they had plenty of shared hobbies – crosswords, drives to Wicklow to look at the scenery and they were very keen on gentle murder-in-the-community programmes, *Morse*, *Midsomer Murders* etc. Once they even went away for a Murder Mystery weekend although I don't think it was quite what they'd hoped for: they'd been looking forward to a serious murder investigation-style thing, with a 'crime', and a series of clues which would lead them to the villain. Instead they were plied with drink, bundled into wardrobes and groped by giggling co-sleuths.

Had Dad been unhappy for a long time? He'd always been such a nice mild-mannered person but had this been a cloak for something darker, like depression? Had he spent years secretly yearning for another life? Until now I'd never thought of him as a *person*, just as a husband, father and golf-lover. But there was much, much more to him and the extent of the unknown territory confused and shamed me.

I dragged myself from the bed and dressed for work.

By 10 a.m. the site in Kildare looked like a film set – lorries and people everywhere.

I was wearing a microphone headset so I looked like Madonna on the *Blonde Ambition* tour, except my bra wasn't as pointy.

The marquee had arrived from England and seventeen of the twenty staff contracted for had shown up to erect it. I had signed for four portaloos, a team of carpenters were hard at work laying a temporary walkway, and over the phone I had convinced a custom's officer to let the refrigerated lorry full of tulips into the country.

When the ovens for the catering tent were delivered – two days early, but at least they'd come – I sat in my car, turned the heater on and rang Dad at work to ask him, once again, to come home.

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Gently but firmly he said no, then I had to voice a concern which had grown over the weekend. ‘Dad, how will Mam manage for money?’

‘Didn’t you get the letter?’

‘What letter?’

‘There’s a letter, it’ll explain everything.’

Straight away I rang Mam and she answered by gasping, ‘Noel?’

My heart hit bottom. ‘No, Mam, it’s me. Did we get a letter from Dad? Could you go and look?’

She went off and came back. ‘Yes, there’s an official-looking thing addressed to me.’

‘Where was it?’

‘On the window sill, with all the other letters.’

‘But . . . why didn’t you open it?’

‘Oh, I always leave those official things for your father to deal with.’

‘But this is *from* Dad. From Dad to you. Could you open it?’

‘No. I’ll wait till you come home. Oh, and Dr Bailey came, he gave me a prescription for sleeping tablets. How will I get them?’

‘Pop down to the chemist,’ I cajoled.

‘No,’ her voice shook. ‘I couldn’t leave the house. Will you go? The chemist stays open until ten, surely you’ll be home by then.’

‘I’ll do what I can.’ I hung up and mashed my face into my hands. (Hitting the redial button and hearing my mother gasp, ‘Noel?’ again, with *Groundhog Day* repetition.)

Leaving the wedding site at 8.30 p.m. was almost like taking a half day. I drove as fast as I could without getting stopped by the peelers, got to Mam’s, grabbed the prescription and gunned to the chemist. The nice man wasn’t there, thank God. I handed the piece of paper over to a bored-looking girl, but then the nice man popped out from behind the drugs bit and gave me

a jaunty, 'Hello there.' Did he actually live in the chemist shop, I found myself wondering. Surviving on barley sugar sticks and cough sweets and resting his head at night on a bundle of springy corn plasters?

He took the prescription and murmured sympathetically, 'Not sleeping?' He surveyed my face and what he saw there had him shaking his head regretfully. 'Yes, the anti-depressants can often have that effect in the beginning.'

His sympathy – though entirely misplaced – was comforting. With a small smile of gratitude, I went home to Mam, where we sat down and opened the scary letter from Dad.

It was from his solicitor. Jesus, how serious was this? Although tiredness was making the letters dance before my eyes, I gleaned the gist.

Dad was proposing what he called 'an interim financial settlement'. This had an ominous ring because it promised a more permanent financial settlement to come. The letter said he would give Mam a certain sum a month, out of which she'd have to pay all housekeeping bills including the mortgage.

'OK, we have to take stock. How much is the mortgage?'

Mam stared as if I'd asked her to explain the theory of relativity.

'Well, how about utilities? Roughly how much is the electricity bill?'

'I . . . I don't know. Your dad writes all the cheques. I'm sorry,' she said, so humbly I felt I couldn't go on.

With anything.

Hard to believe that Mam had once had a job – she'd worked in a typing pool, which is where she'd met Dad. But she gave up work when she got pregnant with me; after the previous miscarriage she wasn't taking any chances. Maybe she would have given up her job anyway, after I'd been born, because that was what Irish women did in those days. But when other mothers returned to work when all their children were at school, Mam didn't. I was too precious, she said. More prosaically we

didn't need the money; even though Dad never got promoted to fat-cat, Merc-driving, executive status, we always had enough.

'I think we've taken enough stock,' I sighed. 'Let's go to bed.'

'There's just one thing,' she said. 'I've a rash.' She extended a leg and parted her dressing-gown. Sure enough, her thigh was covered in raised red bumps.

'You'll have to go to the doctor.' My mouth twitched. Hysteria.

She actually laughed too. 'I can't ring Dr Bailey and ask him to make another house call.'

*And I can't go to the chemist again. The nice man must think I'm a total nutter.*

Tuesday morning saw ructions in Kildare. The interior designer and his eight-strong team swanned in to effect the transformation of a tent smelling of damp grass to a glittering Arabian Nights Wonderland. But the marquee wasn't fully hoisted, so both crews were trying to work around each other, and from the moment one of the marquee men marched along a length of gold satin in his muddy boots, battle lines were drawn.

The interior designer, a bouffed Muscle Mary, called the marquee man 'a cack-handed brute'.

However the marquee man thought being called 'a cack-handed brute' was the funniest thing he'd ever heard and kept saying it. 'Listen, lads, I'm a cack-handed brute. *A brute!*'

Then he called Mary 'a big fat ponce', which was nothing but the truth, but not exactly conducive to a harmonious working environment and I had to use my considerable negotiating skills to prevent the interiors team from flouncing (what other way?) out.

Once calm was restored, I stood in the freezing field, hoping for privacy and rang Auntie Gwen in Inverness.

With a mini-shriek, she began marvelling at how lovely it was to hear from me and what age was I now, which I