

## *Before the Party*

All at once it was the day of the kid's birthday party. Marian had certainly gone the full length for it: no-one was going to say her kid had less of a great time at his birthday than anyone else's. She'd rented a small corner of the common, and spent her day placing plastic cones for races and football games and the like. She'd even hired a clown! She wasn't particularly sure that the kid liked clowns, or that she liked the clown her parents got her for her own fourth birthday, but Ainsley had mentioned reading that children exposed to clowns in their toddlerhood had a higher chance of graduating college, and she really did know better where that sort of thing was concerned.

After checking for the seventh time with the people at the bouncy castle service that they would arrive no later than 10, she went in the ever-filthier kitchen to fix herself something to drink. She admonished her throat: no silly surprises this time! She still didn't think the Japanese clients had got over her expelling her complimentary tapas straight on their (extremely expensive looking) carpet... The fridge was perhaps the only place in the room that was at least partly clean; it was an enormous thing, that she had bought when they were renovating the house, and she couldn't think of having any less than four children. These days, it was starkly divided: the door, chock-full of juice bottles and children food and chocolate and peanut butter, was squeaky clean; the rest of it, which went on for what looked like yards, had turned to some dodgy peat which was probably developing sentience. She hesitated on getting a slice of bluish-coloured ham, contemplated taking some mouldy cheese – the kind that doesn't have mould originally, mind – and ended up deciding on a nice cup. Thank Christ the party wouldn't take place here; the look Lloyd's wife would give her if she even saw the table... Why had she invited that bore again? She could already picture her and Stephen's wife standing in a corner nibbling on some toast, warmly complimenting her to her face before turning on her as soon as she was gone. The only thing she couldn't quite decide on was whether they'd find the party gaudy and overdone, or lacking some detail essential for children that only they in their childless wisdom knew about.

Predictably, she couldn't find a single clean adult cup in the house, and so resorted to using the kid's sippy cup, vowing for yet again that she would clean the mess in the kitchen someday. She was about to make a start on it, digging beneath the sink to extract the cleaning liquid, when she thought back to her biology class; the mould eternally dividing and multiplying, making itself anew... Suddenly, she felt certain it couldn't be right to destroy this.

Walking from the flat to the common for one last time, Marian started to wonder whether she'd been right all those other people, and at the last minute too. Ainsley would certainly be alright, as well as Ainsley's girlfriend Jane, and their cute little daughter; anyway, the two kids were together so often people at the daycare assumed they were siblings, and when Marian had asked the child if he wanted anyone in particular, they were right at the top of the list. The others she wasn't so sure. Trevor and Fish would stick out like sore thumbs, being their academic selves who could probably not say a thing about children if they weren't in a 16th-century poem. Well, at least Trevor would get a thesis' worth of womb symbols and phallic imagery from the clown's plays...

The office wives were even more annoying, but Marian had found no way to invite their husbands separately from them, and at least she could park them with the daycare mums. Hopefully, they'd all get in a great spat about potty-training or something, and stay busy for the entire party. Marian did feel a bit awkward about those late additions, and after apologising to the caterers and the cleaners, she felt like asking the child:

- “Hey, mummy has invited some other people to the party, is that cool?”
- “Are they bringing presents?”
- “Of course they are, darling”

Marian realised that the child would never have said anything else, and felt a bit silly about all her misgivings and worries.

## DURING THE PARTY

The party was in full swing; there was no other way to put it. Lloyd, Stephen and the few daycare dads that had come were leading the boys in an enthusiastic game of mismatched football. As the swarm of kids buzzed this way and that behind the ball, they chatted about jobs and watches and cars – Marian didn't even know Lloyd had a car! On the other side of the common, the girls and the kid were watching enraptured as hankies appeared in their ears, knots undid themselves and strange-shaped balloons squeaked into existence. Somewhere in the middle, close enough to the catering to easily help themselves, but far enough not to seem greedy, was the main gaggle of women. One of the daycare mums was telling Stephen's wife about how she'd love to have a job, and the latter replied by saying how she'd love to have a child. As for Lloyd's wife, she had apparently settled on “garish” as the most choice description of the party, but Ainsley, bless that woman, was drawing on an armful of studies (most of which she'd probably invented on the spot) to prove that on the contrary, nothing less could be enough for a child's well-being. Trevor and Fish were predictably rather to a side. They were in front of the buffet, Trevor discussing the ins and outs of scallop preparation with the head caterer, while Fish stuffed himself and held forth to a mostly imaginary audience about the importance of the womb symbol in Bulgarian culture, occasionally fixing his gaze on a terror-stricken passing kitchen-hand. To Marian, this distribution seemed like an orderly garden, planted from above with a sense of symmetry and harmony. The only problem was that she couldn't quite see where her own plot was.

She must have been a weird sight, standing there on her own, because Joe came up to her for a chat. Of course she'd invited Clara and Joe. They were among her closest friends, and had been an invaluable help for the planning of the party. Of course, they had experience to sell; they'd married immediately after university and had started having children like it was going out of style. One of the things that had drawn Marian to Clara, back at uni, was that she was among the few who shared her dream of a large and happy family, and didn't think, like the others, that child-bearing was so *passé*.

- "I've been worrying a bit about Clara, especially since she had to quit her job" Joe said after a few pleasantries.
- "I didn't even know she had! What happened?"
- "Well, we do have four children now, and bringing them up doesn't get any easier with time. We had a round of chickenpox for everyone a few months ago, and that was it. I think we realised someone had to become a full-time parent. And her boss had already been giving her the side-eye for a while; four children means eight whole months of maternity leave..."
- "But isn't her boss a woman? I think I met her once. A tall, thin redhead, on the older side, no?"
- "Exactly, but she did things the proper way: waited till her thirties to have kids, dropped out to take care of them for precisely ten years, then went back on the corporate ladder"
- "And how's Clara taking it? She's always been so passionate about her work"
- "Well, I told you I was a bit worried. I mean, she's putting a brave face on it, but I can see it's bothering her. As you mentioned, her work's always been a big part of her life, and since she's quit, she's a bit different, less active. I mean, I could put on my professor outfit and analyse her to say that she's caught in an opposition between the role she's expected to put on as a woman and the one she used to fulfill in her work, but more and more these days I'm thinking it's not so simple. After all, she decided she'd be the one to quit, and she's genuinely devoted to the kids – she's never as happy as when they are. But I can still see that part of her is missing"
- "Would it be possible for you to quit your job instead? And she'd go back? After all, there's no lack of openings for a woman with her resume"
- "Well, as I told you, she was the one who decided to quit. Even though we both looked after the kids as they grew up – I might even have spent more time with them since I had more time off – she always had more of a bond with them. Really, me quitting never came up. But ..."

He trailed off. Marian could see they were now both deep in their thoughts, him about what she'd said concerning his and Clara's jobs, and her about the fact that if Clara had lost, she probably didn't stand a chance. She didn't want to destroy the atmosphere completely, though: "I think there are a few bagels that Fish didn't get to yet..." she said, and that was the end of the conversation.

Ainsley was still talking when Marian got back to the main group of women. The others didn't seem to mind, though. Ainsley had this way of talking for ages and still making you think it was a conversation. But then, Ainsley always awed you a bit; she and Jane were so interesting and beautiful and successful, and it only felt natural that their daughter read quicker and better than anyone else. Ainsley was telling the assembly about how she quit her job after reading that children achieved the most when looked after by a parent at home. They'd had a long conversation with Jane, and had ended up deciding that Ainsley would be the designated care-giver. Ainsley's life thus satisfied both the office wives and the daycare mums: the former being convinced they would follow her lead, the latter happy to see their choice vindicated. After the hundredth expression of approval, Marian couldn't take it any more. She wanted to go play football with the men, but she couldn't possibly do it in heels, and she'd look ridiculous barefoot. She wanted to go watch the clown, but he seemed to have left. Above all she wanted for the party to be over, to have the child to herself and hug him tightly, and to finally have some time to think about Monday's board meeting. She looked around at the office wives, the daycare mums, the men and the boys racing about, the other kids on the bouncy castle, the caterers, Trevor and Fish, and the park beyond, and suddenly she decided. She took the kid by the arm and ran with him outside the hired corner, towards the play area and the swings.

## AFTER THE PARTY

I finally cleaned the kitchen yesterday. It was a terrible loss to science, since there must've been three dozen undiscovered life forms in there, but so it goes. I heard Freddie wake up in his room, but thankfully he's got enough presents to keep him busy until I've finished the entire flat. I was starting on the living room table (enough dust for a medium-sized beach) when I heard the doorbell ring. It was Duncan.

- "You know you're the last person on this Earth to still show up unannounced? We have phones you know"
- "Not me... I lost mine. Anyway, sorry I couldn't make it to your son's party, but I really didn't care. What happened?"
- "Well, I don't know. I had this sudden flash of clarity, and felt like I needed something else, but I'm still trying to figure out what. In the meantime, I clean"
- "You're hardly the only one to have made life decisions that day, you know? Trevor apparently wants to found a family now. Anyway, what's that on the table? Mind if I take some, I'm famished"
- "Oh! It's just the kid's birthday cake, there are a few leftovers apparently. Seems like Fish left enough of the

buffet to fill everyone else up”

- “Weird look though isn't it?”
- “Yeah, it's some bakery I found. They do all the birthday cakes you can imagine, including my favourite: they make the cake look like the birthday kid if you send you a picture. It costs an arm and a leg of course, but it's just so unique”
- “Well, you don't mind me finishing it do you? It's just the head anyway.”

I sat watching the cake disappear, the smiling pink mouth first, then the nose and then one eye. For a moment there was nothing left of the face but the last green eye; then it too vanished, like a wink. Duncan started devouring the hair. He scraped the last chocolate curl up with his fork and pushed away the plate. “Thank you”, he said, licking his lips. “It was delicious.”