

MAMA'S BABY (PAPA'S MAYBE)

Leonora Brito

Two summers ago, just after I'd turned fifteen, my mother got ill. One night in our flat on the twelfth floor, she held her face in both hands and said, 'Leisha, I'm sure I got cancer!'

'Just so long as you haven't got AIDS,' I said, and carried on munching my tacos and watching the telly. The tacos were chilli beef'n jalapeño. Hot. Very hot. With a glistening oily red sauce that ran down my chin as I spoke.

'AIDS?' I remember her voice sounded bewildered. 'What're you talking about, AIDS? How the hell could I have AIDS?' She grabbed at my shoulder. 'I'm an agoraphobic, I don't hardly go out...'

I took my eyes away from the television set and stared at her face. Then I just busted out laughing. I couldn't help myself. I was almost choking. Loretta looked at me as if she didn't know me. As if I belonged to somebody else. 'J-O-K-E,' I said, catching my breath and wiping my chin. '*Laugh, Muvver!*' But she couldn't do that, laugh. Even when I spelt it out for her. 'Like, AIDS'n agoraphobia – they're mutually exclusive, right? So you haven't got it Lol, have you?' She still didn't laugh. She couldn't laugh or be brave or anything like that, my mother Loretta.

All she could do was hit me with a slipper and call me

stupid. ‘Orr, Mama!’ I rubbed at my arm, pretending to be hurt. ‘You can’t take a joke, you can’t.’

‘No, it’s no jokin’ with you.’ Loretta got angry as she looked at me. ‘You’re gunna bring bad luck on people you are,’ she said. ‘With your laughin’ an jokin’!’

Bring bad luck by laughing? Such stupidity, I thought, in my own mother. Then I noticed how her body kept shivering as she sat there, squashed into the corner of our plush red settee. And how she couldn’t keep her hands still, even though they were clamped together tight. So tight, that the knuckle bones shone through. ‘Cancer’s a bad thing, Aleisha.’ My mother shook her head from side to side, and started to cry. ‘A bad thing!’

‘Orr Mama, you talks rubbish, you do.’ She looked at me through streaming eyes. ‘How do I?’ she said. ‘How do I talk rubbish?’

I shrugged. ‘You just do.’

I remembered what she’d said about tampons. Loretta said tampons travelled twice round the body at night, then lodged in your brain. Fact. Even the nuns in school laughed at that one. They said what my mother told me was unproven, unscientific and an old wives’ tale. Stupidness!

Now Loretta was sitting there, crying and talking about cancer. I wished she’d stop. The crying made her dark eyes shine like windows, when the rain falls on them at night. There was light there, but you couldn’t see in. Not really. It was like staring into the blackness of outer space. And it made me mad.

‘Look, why don’t you just stop crying,’ I said, adopting a stern voice, a mother’s voice. A sensible voice. ‘And get to the doctor’s first thing tomorrow morning and see about yourself?’

Loretta looked at me and hiccuped. Then she started crying again. Louder than before. ‘Just phone Joe,’ she said through her sobs. ‘Phone that boy for me, Leish. I want that boy with me.’

'Okey-dokey.' I took another big mouthful of taco and chewed callously. It was out of my hands now. Now Loretta had asked for Joe. Let Joe deal with it. I stood up. 'Where's your twenty pence pieces then?'

I went off to the call box with the taste of Mexican takeaway still in my mouth. Joe was out with the boys, so I left a message with Donna, who was full of concern. 'Is it serious?' she said.

'Nah.' I burped silently into the night as the tacos came back to haunt me. 'It's not serious,' I said. 'But you know Loretta.' My nostrils burned and my eyes filled up with water. 'You knows my mother, once she gets an idea into her head...'

Donna laughed brightly and said not to worry. She'd tell Joe as soon as he came in. 'Yeah, tell him,' I said. Raising my voice as the time ran out and the pips began to bleep. 'Though it's probably nothing. Something an' nothing. Knowin' her.'

I was wrong of course. I was wrong about everything under the sun and under the moon. But what did I know? I was fifteen years old that summer, and mostly, I thought like a child.

Like when I was six, nearly seven, I found a big blue ball hidden in the cupboard of the wall unit. I brought the ball out and placed it on the floor. Then I tried to step up and stand on it. I fell off, but I kept on trying. Again and again and again. All I wanted to do was to stand on the big blue ball that had misty swirls of white around it. Like the swirls I'd seen on satellite pictures of planet earth.

When I finally managed it – arms outstretched and my feet successfully planted, I felt like a conqueror. A six-year-old conqueror. 'Orr look at this!' I yelled at Joe. 'Look Joe, look!' I stayed upright for another dazzling moment. Then the ball rolled under me and I fell backwards, screaming as my head hit the floor. Loretta came out of the bathroom with a face pack on. She silenced me with a slap. Then she took the

comic Joe was reading and threw it in the bin. ‘Naw, Ma,’ said Joe. ‘That’s my *Desperate Dan* that is.’

‘Too bad,’ said Loretta. ‘Maybe it’ll teach you to look after this kid when I tell you!’

Joe laid his head down on the pine-top table, sulking, while I sat on the edge of our scrubby, rust-red carpet and hugged my knees. I wasn’t worried about Joe getting into trouble on account of me. All I was worried about was the ball. The beautiful blue ball. More than anything in the world I wanted it back.

But Loretta had snatched the ball away from me and was holding it up to the light. Palming it over and over in her hands. As if she was searching for something. But what? What magical thing could she be searching for? I watched the ball turn blue under the light bulb. Then not so blue, then *bluer* again. And it came to me in flash – that what my mother was doing was remembering.

But remembering what? Her creamy face was cracking into brown, spidery lines as she looked at the ball. And I got up on my knees, wanting to see more.

‘*Bug-eyes!*’ Joe leaned down from the corner of the table and hissed at me. ‘Fathead,’ he said. ‘You boogalooga bug-eyed fathead!’ Joe’s words put a picture inside my head that made me cry. I opened my mouth and bawled until Loretta turned round. Her face had stopped cracking, and she looked ordinary. ‘Joe!’ she said, ‘how old are you for god’s sake? Tormentin’ that kid. She’s younger than you.’

‘She’s a *alien*,’ said Joe.

‘Oh don’t be so bloody simple!’ Loretta looked across the room at me. ‘She’s your sister.’ Joe shook his head. ‘She’s *not* my sister.’ He kicked at the leg of the table with his big brown chukka boot. ‘She’s my *half*-sister,’ he said.

I remember the words were hardly out of Joe’s mouth before Loretta had reached him. ‘Half?’ she said. ‘Half?’ She started bouncing the big blue ball upside his head. ‘Who taught you half? I didn’t give birth to no halves!’

Loretta was mad at Joe. So mad she kept banging the ball against his head. As if she was determined to knock some sense in. Until Joe (who was twelve, and big for his age) lifted his big chubby arms in front of his face and yelled at her. 'Get off've me! Fuckin' get off've me. Right!'

I was scared then. I thought Joe was in for a hiding. The mother and father of a hiding. But something strange happened, Loretta suddenly upped and threw the ball away from her – just threw it, as if she was the one who was hurt. And as soon as she let the ball go, wonder of wonders, Joe burst into tears and pushed his head against her belly. Sobbing out loud like a baby, saying, 'It's not fair! It's not fair!' And asking her over and over again as she cwtched him, 'How come *my* father never brought *me* no presents, Ma? How come?'

Poor Joe! I sat in the middle of our scrubby red carpet happily hugging the big blue ball to myself. I realised now that I was luckier than Joe. My *half*-brother Joe. And quicker than Joe and cleverer than Joe – even though I looked like a *alien*. Joe was like Loretta. I looked across the room at them, across the scrubby, rust-red carpet, which suddenly stretched out vast and empty as the red planet Mars.

'You takes after *my* family,' Loretta was telling Joe. 'You takes after *me*.' I felt a pang, but it didn't matter. I had the blue ball – which was big enough to stand on, like planet earth. A special ball, bought for me specially, by a strange and wonderful person called *my dad!*

Of course, *my dad* was always more of an idea than anything else. I never saw my real dad when I was a kid. But I clung to the idea of him. In the same way that I clung to an image of myself at six, triumphantly balancing on a blue, rolling ball. They were secret reminders of who I really was. I held on to those reminders even more when Loretta was diagnosed as having cancer. They helped me keep my distance. And I needed to keep my distance, because once the

hospital people dropped the big C on her for definite – cancer of the womb (Intermediary Stage) things got scary. And while Joe tried to pretend that nothing terrible was happening, or would happen, I knew better. And I made sure I kept my distance from the start.

Like when Loretta had to travel back and forth to the Cancer Clinic for treatment. Joe asked if I'd go with her. 'Sometimes,' he said, 'just to keep her company?'

'I can't,' I said. 'I've got tests coming up in school.'

'Tests?' Joe looked at me gone off. 'Tha' Mama's sick,' he said. 'She needs someone with her. I can't go myself cuz I'm in work.' His jaw tightened.

'I've got a biology test coming up, I said. And maths and history...'

'Oh leave it Joe,' said Loretta. 'I'm all right!' She laughed, 'I'll manage.' Joe umm'd and ah'd a bit, then he gave in.

'If you're sure, Ma,' he said. Hiding a little smile, I picked up my biology textbook, *The Language of the Genes*, and began taking seriously detailed notes.

I never did go with Loretta to the Cancer Clinic. Though I could have made time, if I'd wanted. Academic work was easy for me, I enjoyed reading books and doing essays. And tests were almost a doddle. But at home I began making a big thing of it. Hiding behind the high wall of 'my schoolwork' and 'my classes' and my sacrosanct GCSEs, which I wasn't due to sit until the following year anyway.

I also let it be known that I had to go out, nights. Most nights, otherwise I'd turn into a complete mental brainiac.

So when Loretta arrived home weak and vomiting from the radium treatment, I'd already be standing in front of the mirror, tonging my hair, or putting on eye make-up. No need to ask where I was going. I was off out, to enjoy myself. Even though enjoying myself meant drinking (alcopops) and smoking, and hanging with the crowd. All the stuff I used to describe as 'too boring and predictable' for anyone with half a brain. Now though, it was different. Now I became best

mates with a hard-faced, loud-mouthed girl called Cookie, who Loretta said was 'wild'.

The euphemism made me smile as I rushed around the kitchen filling the kettle and making the tea to go in the flask. I was happy and focused on what I had to do, knowing that the sooner Loretta was settled, the sooner I'd be out through the door.

Luckily, there was no need to bother with food. Loretta couldn't swallow any food. Only Complan. And Complan made her vomit. So she stuck to tea. Weak tea, and sometimes, a couple of mouthfuls of tinned soup. Which I did think was sad, because my mother was a big woman who'd always enjoyed her food.

Now, she hardly ever went in the kitchen, and it wasn't worth bothering to try and tempt her with anything. But I brought her a cup of tea, and handed it over. And I put the flask on the little table next to the couch.

Taking a couple of sips of tea seemed to exhaust her. And she laid her head back on the cushions, tired, but not too tired to speak. 'This girl Cookie...' she said.

'Yeah?' By now I'd gone back to the mirror and my mascara.

'I don't like the idea of you runnin' round with her.' Loretta pursed her lips. 'That girl's trouble,' she said. 'That girl's hot!' I was watching Loretta's face in the mirror. Her face and my face, side by side. It was eerie seeing us together. Like watching night turn into day or day turn into night. There was no resemblance between us. No real likeness that I could see. And it played on my mind. Who was she, I thought? This big woman lying on a plush red couch, with a green plaid blanket pulled up to her chin? I crossed over to the couch and looked at her, coldly. 'What're you talking about, hot?' I said. 'You're always going on about something.'

Loretta sighed. 'I just don't want you in no trouble,' she said. 'You nor Joe, come to that.'

'I'm not gunna be in any trouble!'

‘No?’ Loretta looked up at me and smiled. ‘Well, God be good,’ she said, ‘let’s hope it’ll stay like that.’

‘Listen,’ I brought my face down close to hers and spoke slowly, deliberately. ‘Cookie’s ways, are not my ways, right?’ My voice grew colder. ‘Your ways, are not my ways...’ Loretta stared at my face, as if she couldn’t understand what I was saying. Then she took a gulp of tea and her eyes swam with tears.

‘You little bitch,’ she said. ‘Anybody’d think I was a bad mother to h’yer you speak!’ The sudden energy in her voice surprised me. And I tried to back away from what I’d started. But Loretta was on a roll. ‘Did I get rid of you?’ she said. ‘Did I? No, I kept you. You and Joe. Even though I had no man behind me. And what’s my thanks?’ Her voice was angry as she spoke to me. Loud and angry. ‘Shit is my thanks!’

I shrugged and tried to move away, but she started off again. ‘Course, it’d be different if I was posh, wouldn’t it?’

‘Pardon?’ I said.

‘They gets rid of their kids in a minute. Don’t they, posh women? When they wants to go to *college* or something.’ Loretta looked up at the ceiling and laughed. ‘An’ no buggar ever says a word,’ she said, disbelievingly. ‘Not a bloody word!’

For some reason I found myself laughing along with her. Enjoying the unfairness of it all. Then she closed her eyes again, tired. ‘Look, *get* if you’re going,’ she said. ‘And don’t be back yer late.’

When I reached the door, I turned to look at her. ‘D’you want this light left on?’

‘No, out it.’ So I flicked the switch and left her there, in the dark.

It was always a big relief to me when Loretta was taken into hospital.

I was happy then, escorting her down to the waiting ambulance and handing her in. It felt as though we were celebrities, touched by a black and tragic glamour, as the

neighbours rushed out of their flats and gave Loretta cards, and waved her off, like royalty.

Back inside, I always walked slowly past the lifts in the entrance hall. Then I'd whizz around the corner and start bounding up the stairs. Two at a time. All the way up to the twelfth floor.

The first few times Loretta went into hospital, I stayed with Joe and Donna in their little two-bedroomed house. But I didn't feel comfortable there. And when Loretta began to spend longer and longer as an inpatient, I told Joe I preferred to stay where I was, and keep an eye on the flat. Joe stuck out his jaw and said, 'If that's what you want, Aleisha. I'm not gunna argue.'

Which was just what I expected him to say. Though I hated him for saying it. After that, it wasn't difficult for me to ease my way out of things, bit by bit.

Whenever I made an appearance at the hospital, I was never on my own. I always came in with a crowd – usually Cookie and her sister, Cherry. Or Cookie and her new man friend, Wayne. I think they liked being with me, because I was fifteen years old and my mother was dying of cancer. It was like something off the telly that appealed to them.

Joe never came in on his own, either. He was always with Donna or one of his mates – usually Deggsie, or a caramel-coloured boy called Chip-chip, whose teeth were brown and white, like popcorn.

With so many young people around Loretta's bed, there was never any time for seriousness. All we could do was lark and joke about. Once, when they were fooling around, Joe and Chip-chip pressed down on the foot-pedals of the bed. Sending Loretta up in the air. And all she did was laugh and say, 'Put me down, boys! Put me down, people can see my old blue slippers under there.'

It was odd, standing under the bright hospital lights, watching Loretta laughing. And Joe laughing. All of us laughing, as if everything was right with the world. Loretta

was queen of the show. She sparkled in company, which was the way she used to be, I suppose, when she was young and working in pubs as a barmaid.

One night, Joe and Donna came in carrying a bouquet of flowers between them.

Loretta didn't care much for the white chrysanthemums, but she was chuffed with the card: '*Happy memories, luv from R. (The Rover).*' R. was Royston, Joe's father. And he'd been on friendly speaking terms ever since Joe had left school, and met up with him again.

'Now he sends me the white bouquet,' said Loretta. 'Maybe he wants to marry me...' While we were laughing, Donna said soppily, 'Why didn't you marry him, Lol?'

'Marry Royston? Prrrrf!' Loretta's voice was derisive. 'He was no good, him, Royston.' She looked at us. 'I put his bags outside the door, didn't I? Comin' his little ways. I said goodbye, tara, I'm sorry – I needs my space!'

'Orr, my poor father! I bet you gave that man a hard time,' said Joe, laughing. I was in agonies in case anyone mentioned *my* father. But luckily the nurse came round, ringing the handbell so we had to go. Good job too, because I would have hated to hear Loretta start in on my dad.

As we were leaving, Joe leant over the bed and asked Loretta in a low voice, about her blood count. When she told him it was up a couple of points, Joe looked relieved. 'Good work Ma,' he said. And went off happily with Donna.

Joe never asked the doctors anything. He clung to his ignorance like a baby clinging to a bottle, and I despised him for it.

My own behaviour was more rational. Gradually, I dropped off going to the hospital on a regular basis. Telling everyone I was studying hard for my 'mocks'. Where we lived, no one understood about 'mocks' and when they were due. Instead, relatives and friends of my mother admired my determination in carrying on with my schooling. You keep it up girl, they said. You're makin' your mother proud!

No one, not even Joe seemed to realise what I was up to. Though I saw my mother less and less, I always made sure I phoned the hospital regularly. 'How is she?' I'd ask dutifully. And I'd end by saying, 'Please give her my love.'

But instead of studying, I spent my time lying on the old red couch where Loretta used to lay, dreaming about my life in the future. 'My dad' was somewhere out there, in the future. I knew his name (from my birth certificate) and that he'd cared enough about me to leave me a gift – the beautiful blue ball. These days, the blue ball looked like a sunken moon, stuck on top of the wall unit. But I treasured its memory, knowing that one day in the starry future, I'd meet my dad, and we'd talk about this gift he'd given me. Of course, we'd recognise each other instantly – my dad and I, because it was obvious to me, that his genes were the dominant genes in my make-up. They were there, encoded in the double helix of my DNA. How else could I account for me?

It was strange how pleasantly the time passed when I was thinking like this. Even when I did put in an appearance at school, I didn't let go of the daydreams. And when scary night times came around, I'd turn up the mattress on Loretta's bed, and fish out some notes. Then I'd go off with Cookie and the gang, drinking.

Not that I did much drinking, except for a couple of cans of *Hooch*. Three cans of *Hooch* and I was away. Floating. Doing stupid things. Once, I tried to walk around the side of a mirror in the pub toilets. I couldn't see that the toilet door was a reflection – and I kept banging my head on the faecal-coloured wall tiles, as I tried to go round it. The side of my head was swollen and smarting when I stopped.

'Leisha man you makes me piss!' said Cookie, laughing. 'You really do!' It crossed my mind to ask her why I was so funny. And why was she Cookie, and her sister Cherry, so cool? Both of them wore shiny auburn wigs, like supermodels. And they had the clothes. But Cherry was

humungous in size. And Cookie wasn't much smaller. So how come they were cool?

I opened my mouth to ask – but I couldn't fit the words inside the moment. The moment just went by me. Pass. So I opened my mouth a bit wider, and started to laugh.

Coming home from a night out, I'd crash down on the old red couch and fall asleep, happy and floating. But in the morning, even before I was awake, I'd feel the weight of something miserable pressing down on me. My eyes would focus slowly, and I'd remember what it was.

Then one day, I woke up and saw a piece of blue sky through the window. I realised it was spring, and for some reason, that made me feel better. So I went and phoned Joe's house, to check up on hospital visiting times; and to see who was going in that night.

The minute she picked up the phone and heard my voice, Donna broke down in tears. 'Wassamarrer?' I said, suddenly fearful. There was a long snuffly silence. Then Donna managed to tell me what had happened. She said the consultant had called Joe up to the hospital and explained there was nothing more they could do. Treatment-wise, that was it. 'Oh, Leisha! I'm so sorry,' said Donna sobbing all over again. 'But there's no hope for her. There's no hope for Loretta!'

It sounded like the title of a book, the way she said it: '*No Hope for Loretta.*' That was my first thought. Then I began to feel empty, as though a stone had dropped inside me. And I needed to sit down, but I couldn't because I was in a call box.

'How're we gunna tell her?' I said, helplessly.

'Oh don't you do anything,' said Donna, quickly. 'Leave it to Joe, Leish. Joe said he'll deal with it.' So feeling especially childish and helpless, I rang off.

I didn't do any of the things I might have done, like phone the hospital. Or actually go in and see my mother. Instead, on a sudden whim, I lifted the telephone book out of the

cubbyhole and began flicking through its pages, idly at first, then with more attention. It was gone ten when I arrived in school. Calmly, I sat through classes until lunchtime. Then I picked up my bag and my jacket, and left.

Once out of the school gates I turned right, and onto the high road that ran past the school. I walked slowly, admiring the big solid houses, with their spacious lawns and double-garages. In this area where my school was, all the houses had names instead of numbers. And I said them to myself as I walked along: '*Hawthorns, Erw Lon, Primrose View, Ty Cerrig, Sovereign Chase...*' names that were as anonymous as numbers, really. But I didn't mind. It was a lovely day, warm and sunny, and I kept looking up at the blue sky, marvelling at how beautiful a day it was.

When I came to a black and white gabled house, with a big front lawn and a wrought-iron gate marked *Evergreen*, I stopped. This was the place where the man who could be my dad lived. Blyden, D. H. I'd got the name out of the telephone directory that morning. It was almost the same as the one written on my birth certificate under father: 'David H. Blyden, O/S Student.' It could be him, I reasoned. It could be my dad, living here in a mock-Tudor house with mullioned windows. Loretta had never had much to say about him, except that he was quiet. But he had his little ways, she said, like they all do. Joe had whispered to me once, that my dad was from Africa. But would an African be living around here? Maybe, I thought, if he had money.

The detached house, like all the surrounding houses, was set well back from the road. And on one side there were no neighbours. Only a red-brick observatory and a fenced-in tennis court. It was all in keeping, I decided approvingly. Everything was so quiet, and cultivated and tasteful. Then, afraid someone might be watching from the window, I walked up onto the grassy bank, nearer the observatory, and sat down.

Now I could see the house from the side, facing the sun,

with the dark pine tree towering over it. The pine tree was striking. Its dark green branches seemed to flip out like arrows, right up into the blue sky. As though, I thought admiringly, they were aiming straight into the heart of heaven.

I wondered about my dad, living here. I wondered if he visited the observatory at night, to study the billions of stars in the universe? If he did, he'd understand just how little our lives were, compared to the vast infinity of outer space. Surely he would? He was the man who had given me the blue ball.

I don't know how long I sat there, dreaming and wondering in the sun.

I imagined my African dad, climbing the steps of the observatory, and looking out over the mysteriously empty ball court. Like a priest in ancient Mexico – except that we were in Wales. Our history class that morning had been about lost civilisations – which was a theory connecting Africa to ancient America and to ancient, Celtic Britain. *We were all connected!* I suppose that fed into my mind, and kept my thoughts turning over, magically.

It was late in the afternoon when I heard the sound of car wheels crunching over gravel. Someone was parking a car in front of the house. I got to my feet in a sudden panic. What if it was him, my dad, arriving home? My heart began to pound, and I felt sick. This could be him, I thought with wonder. This could be my dad! Involuntarily, I looked towards the house, and my courage began to waver. Could it be my dad, back there? It was possible, I knew it was possible, but was it probable?

No, I decided, suddenly. No! The sun had disappeared behind the clouds, making everything seem different. Devoid of magic, colder. I glanced up at the observatory, and was amazed to see its structure in a new cold light. Now it was revealed as squat and ugly. Shaped like a red-brick kiln against the sky. I looked again, and saw that its narrow

windows or apertures were shuttered over with grey metal grilles. There was a padlock on the entrance door; and weeds were sprouting from the brickwork. The place was derelict!

And there was no mysterious ball court. Just an ordinary tennis court marked out with yellow lines, behind the trampled wire netting. Enough was enough. I swung my bag up over my shoulder, and started walking, fast. I didn't look behind me, not even for a last glimpse of *Evergreen*, with its lonesome pine tree standing dark and arrow like against the sky.

Of course, running away like that allowed me to keep on dreaming. And even before I was halfway home, I'd begun to reassemble my defences. After all, nothing had happened. I could always go there again, I reasoned. Not straightaway, but one day. When I was ready. The choice was mine...

By the time I stepped out of the lift on the twelfth floor, I was actually smiling. It was fun trying to picture myself living with my dad, in a big gabled house, a wrought iron gate and a plaque on the front, marked *Evergreen*.

I was still smiling as I put the key in the lock and gave the door a push. When it swung open, I almost collapsed. Loretta was framed in the doorway, wrapped in a red velvet dressing gown, staring at me. 'Ullo stranger,' she said, in a croaky voice. 'Wassamarrer with you, seen a ghost?'

Inside the living room I was surprised to see how everything had been changed round. The old red couch had been pushed to one side and Loretta's bed had been brought in and placed against the wall. I didn't see Joe at first, hunkered down by the little table, fixing a plug on the lamp. When I did see him, I gave a sigh of relief. 'Oh Joe!' I said, 'you're here!' Joe nodded over his shoulder at me, and carried on with what he was doing.

I watched Loretta move slowly across the room. Twice she had to stop and retie the belt on her dressing gown, as it came undone. Then very gingerly and carefully, she lowered

herself onto the edge of the bed, and looked at me. I was terrified. ‘What’re you doing home?’ I said, in a rush. ‘I didn’t know you were coming home...’ Loretta began to laugh. ‘She wants to know what I’m doing home, Joe,’ she said, looking over her shoulder at him. ‘Shall we tell her?’

‘Uh, Ma?’ said Joe. Too busy screwing a light bulb into the lamp it seemed, to pay much attention. But Loretta didn’t need his support. Instead, turning back to me with her dark eyes shining, she leaned forward and whispered, ‘I’m home because I’m cured! Ain’ I Joe?’ she sang out loudly. ‘Ain’ I cured, almost?’

At that moment, Joe clicked the switch on the table lamp. Throwing a soft, glowing light over everything. Including our faces. ‘There!’ he said, turning round at last. ‘Sixty watts so it won’t burn.’ He grinned. ‘That’s better, ain’ it?’

A week later I ran away from home, and two days after that, my mother died. I suppose there was something inevitable about the way those two events were linked. But it didn’t seem like that at the time.

That last week, I played along with Joe and Loretta as far as I could. What did I care? And on the Thursday night, when I’d had enough, I went out clubbing with Cookie and Cherry. It wasn’t really clubbing. We ended up sitting in the Community Centre, because I was broke and Cookie announced, suddenly, that she was saving up for a white wedding.

I asked how much it would cost, a white wedding? ‘Thousand pounds,’ said Cookie, proudly. ‘The dress alone’ll set me back a couple a hundred.’

‘Wow.’

‘That’s because she wants one that flows,’ said Cherry.

‘Yeah, that dress just gorra to be fl-o-w-i-n’!, man,’ said Cookie, snapping her fingers and laughing.

I was troubled in mind, but I laughed along with them. Just to show willing. I even asked about the car. What sort of car would they be having? And Cookie said, ‘One with

wheels, preferably!' And while we were laughing at that, a man came over and asked if he could buy me a drink.

When I said no thanks, he walked away. All nice and polite and everything, but Cookie said I was simple.

'He had a fuckin' big gold ring on his finger!'

'Yeah,' said Cherry. 'And that twenny pound note he was flashing came off've a roll!'

'So?'

'So,' said Cookie, 'anybody'd think you won the lottery!'

For some reason, I lost my temper and started shouting. I told Cookie if I won the lottery, I'd buy *her* a friggin' ticket to Mars. 'And Joe,' I said loudly, 'I'd buy Joe a ticket to Mars, straight off!' Just then a hand tapped me on the shoulder, and I froze. Cookie and Cherry burst out laughing. They knew I thought it was Joe. But it wasn't Joe, when I turned round. Only his best mate, Chip-chip, wanting to say hello. Naturally he asked how my mother was, and I said fine. She's fine. Then Cookie and Cherry went off to the toilets, and Chip-chip pulled up a stool and sat down. He told me he was working part-time, now. In McDonald's, Mickey D's? 'But really,' he said, 'I'm a *player*.'

'A player?'

'Didn't Joe ever tell you?' he said. 'I plays basketball.'

'Oh, yeah,' I said, unenthusiastically, 'basketball!'

'Hey, don't say it like that,' said Chip-chip. He pulled a face at the way I said it, making me laugh. '*Barsketbawl!*'

'I didn't say it like that!'

'Yes you did,' said Chip-chip. 'Still, it's good to see you smiling, I like to see you smiling,' he said. And he went off and bought us both a soft drink, to celebrate.

'Well kiss to that!' said Cookie, coming back to the table half an hour later. 'Lemonade and no major money? An' having to listen to all that stuff about sport is fuckin' boring!' she said. I agreed. But I still thought it was nice for him. Having an interest like basketball. 'His little life is rounded by an O,' I said, half seriously. Then I laughed and got up to

dance, when the man with the gold ring on his finger came over and asked me.

While I was dancing, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked round with a smile on my face, thinking it was Chip-chip.

But it was Joe. I shied away from him. But he raised his arm and brought his fist crashing down on my back, again and again. ‘Where’s your mother?’ he said, as he punched me. ‘I’ll tell you where,’ he said, punching me. ‘She’s in the hospital dying,’ he said, punching me. ‘And where are you? Out!’ he said, punching me. ‘Enjoyin’ yourself!’

Joe only allowed Donna to grab hold of his arm when he’d finished. Then the two of them walked out of the Centre, arm in arm.

Most of the sympathy was on my side. People said Joe was taking everything out on me when I wasn’t to blame. Neither of us was to blame, they said; and I knew it was true.

But still, I felt guilty. Before going out that night, I’d brought Loretta her cup of tea and her tablets, and watched her swallow them. Eyeing my outfit, she’d asked if I was going out? ‘Yes, I’m going out,’ I said, coldly. ‘I can go out, can’t I? *Now you’re on the road to recovery...*’

Loretta didn’t say anything after that. And I waited until the tablets knocked her out ‘dead’ as she always said, then I put on my coat and switched off the light; and left her. An hour or two later, Joe had called at the flat, and found her on the floor, haemorrhaging. I suppose our behaviour that night – mine and Joe’s, was totally predictable.

A couple of days later, I left Cookie’s house where I was staying, and went with her and Cherry to the hospital. Joe was sitting in the waiting room, munching french fries and KFC out of a carton. Neither of us spoke. Then Joe pushed the carton of chicken across the table, and told me to take some. I did. Then we both went in and sat with Loretta until she died.

Inside the cemetery most of the stones are black marble, with fine gold lettering. I like the homemade efforts best. The rough wooden crosses that you see here and there, with 'Mam' or 'Dad' painted on them in thick white letters.

Loretta has a cross like that, though we are saving up for a stone. Right now her grave has a blanket covering of long brown pine needles over it. Fallen from the pine tree overhead. There's a row of tall pines all along this side of the cemetery – and I see them differently now, depending on the season.

It's late spring and the sky is blue and the sun is shining. Looking up at the patch of blue, through the pines, I notice the little wooden pine cones, tucked beneath the brush of feathery green branches. 'Like little brown eggs,' I say to Chip-chip as we walk away. Chip-chip says it takes two years for these pine cones to mature and fall, as they're doing now, all around us as we walk. Two years! I think to myself, well, that must be about right.

'Hey! Frank Sinatra's dead,' says Chip-chip, as we reach the exit gate. 'Is he?' I say without thinking. 'Then his arse must be cold.' At first, Chip-chip is shocked, then he starts to laugh. 'That's your mother talkin' that is,' he says. 'That's Loretta!'

'Yeah,' I say looking at him and smiling. 'I think it is!'