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A Tiny Bit Marvellous

Written by Dawn French

Published by Michael Joseph

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A Tiny Bit Marvellous

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For the best mum. My mum. Roma.

Between yesterday and tomorrow
There is more, there is more than a day.
Between day and night, between black and white
There is more, there is more than grey.

Alan Bergman, Marilyn Bergman
and Michael Legrand

SIX

Oscar

Families are a frightful inconvenience, true, but nowadays we are too hasty to dismiss them.

The Battle family. My family. Hmmm.

I am utterly convinced that if only a little glitter could be sprinkled on their blandness, they might yet spring up, and dance the dance of life. This, at least, is my theory where my ancient (sixty-nine whole years for goodness' sake) grandmama is concerned. Nothing ages a woman so rapidly as a diet of relentless *Jeremy Kyle* and *Emmerdale*. Evidenced by Grandmama, who carries the horrific strains and scars of years of loyal service to both of these demanding mistresses.

I offered her the benefit of my company this New Year's Eve, but informed her that as of midnight I should much like to insist that she refer to me as Master Oscar at all times. For that is whom I am, and I can't stress enough the importance of being Oscar.

Thankfully Grandmama acquiesced to this simple request. She is dreadfully dowdy but a perfect saint. Her name is Pamela. I ask you, how was she ever supposed to make anything of herself with that ghastly moniker as her albatross? As a rule, I would *never* trust a woman who sports anything nylon but, in Grandmama's case, all is forgiven due to the incontrovertible fact that she is gleefully ignorant of the joys of fashion and

utterly unencumbered by a shred of style. I therefore choose not to taunt or goad her, it would only be cruelty, and poor wretch, she has no idea of the magnitude of her folly.

Bless her, she is famed in those parts of Pangbourne which are her closest environs, to be something of an expert when it comes to the preparation and serving of the finest of banoffee pies, and truly, in this respect, I am extremely fortunate, for banoffee pie in all its creamy bananaish toffeeish glory is quite easily one of my primary passions in life. To taste, to savour and to have culinary congress with it, is my pure rapturous delight and gives me, frankly, a reason to live. What else is there?

So, in pursuit of this pleasure, and at the set hour, I wended my way by means of two entirely separate and equitidious omnibus experiences to Grandmama's. I wore a high collar and one of Mater's faux fur hats against the biting wind. I fancy the ensemble was a mite enchanting, and suited me more than a little, and I detected not a few admiring comments en route.

Once at Grandmama's domicile I was horrified to realize that she had not reserved the evening exclusively for me, but had invited in, albeit briefly, her imbecile neighbour, the appalling Janice. A woman with the kind of face that once seen, is rarely remembered. Never was there a creature more appropriately placed to be the poster girl for euthanasia.

Why was Pamela born with such hideous contemporaries? I have no doubt that Janice was once the prettiest fool in England but now she is nothing more than a dull, agèd (sixty-two years) and ugly slattern, whose foremost crime is to assume she is

always worthy of the post of centre of attention. She is blissfully unaware that this position requires the skill of being even the slightest bit amusing or interesting, if that's not requesting too much? I am accustomed to dullards, Lord knows I am surrounded by them daily in my family, but the awful Janice takes the biscuit. And the cheese and, by Jove, the crackers.

It was the hour to suffer and suffer we did. News of her wearisome family in Wales, her bargains at the sales and her monstrous bunions were among the ripest of the topics. I wished I were rather ravaged by wild dogs and torn apart and greedily gulped down than have to sit in her atrocious company, but mercifully, she was soon stumbling off muttering something about her neglected dog.

This left Grandmama and I to our familiar New Year's traditional schedule of a hand of cribbage, followed by the notorious banoffee pie in front of Jools Holland's *Hootenanny* where we both agreed that Dizze Rascal was, frankly, dazzling. A satisfying evening with much to recommend it. I look forward to a decade of scandalous delights and I promise earnestly to remain forever Oscar.

SEVEN

Dora

Oh my complete and utter God. Mum is like a constant noise. She says the same things over and over again so much, that in the end, I can't even like hear her. She sounds like that noise you get when you're trying to tune the radio and you haven't got to a channel yet. The noise inbetween, that's her. Interference. I can usually pick up on a vague theme of whatever she's stressing about. Today it's something about revision and my UCAS personal statement. Duh. I know it's got to be done don't I? That's why I already finished like half of it already at school you dunce Mother. But if I let her see it, she'll just pick all holes in it and make me do it again, so why would I bother showing her?

Wish she could see what she looks like when she's in a major strop, she's hilarious. Her eyes bulge and her neck goes all red and she keeps slapping her head and the language is massive. She looks like an angry baboon. She's so over dramatic, she works herself into a psycho screaming fit. When she is swearing she doesn't even swear properly, and she always thinks of the worst possible thing that could ever happen. Today she banged on my door and said:

'Dora! Open this door immediately! I have been talking through it now for forty-five minutes! If you don't shitting wake up and realize that your cacking future is slipping away with every cocking second that you don't get that personal statement

finished, you should expect to spend your fucking useless life walking around in Oxford Street, with those massive boards on you telling everyone where the endless arseing golf sale is. Yes, that is your future!

This apparently is my only option!

And she doesn't even know how to write the bloody statement anyway. The last time she had to write something like this was when SHE went to uni, which was in the last bloody century for God's sake, over seventy years ago or something. She probably just wrote 'I, Maureen' . . . something . . . Don't know what her name was before she married Dad . . . 'I Maureen Boring-Hair, do intend to attend this university of great learning so that I may learn all I need to know about being a crap shrink so I can tell everyone how to live, and boss them all about and convince them I'm cleverer than them, and charge them a bloody fortune and they can never tell me I'm wrong because it's not even a scientifically proven method, and there's no way of checking up on me whether I know how to like, even do this job properly at all. My hobbies are: talking, shouting, screaming, bossing, knowing best and getting really fat. I do hope this application finds a positive response because I really do want to boss people about for my job, and if I don't get in, I'll like, stomp about and shitting shout at everyone so please take me. I promise to be as fake as possible whenever I can, so my patients will always think I am a like calm and clever person who knows more about everything than they do.'

Yeah Mum, you're a *lot* of help, I really want your advice – not.

And she cracked off on a big one all about my Facebook site for bloody ages. She's got no idea what it is, or how it works, but she says I have put porno pictures of myself on there and apparently I send and receive messages with 'inappropriate language'. What would she know? She hasn't read them. And, actually those are the pictures me and Lottie took of each other and that is, like, a proper expensive bra thank you. Like, from Juicy Miss or something? So we're not sluts like she's making out.

She says any old perv could start talking to me on it but duh, hello old woman, you have to like invite people on to your page and like, why would I invite a perv? You div Mother, you honestly bloody embarrass me with your IT ignorance. Even her secretary at work has to type up her bloody patient notes stuff because she is so old and broken that she is too scared or something to learn how to like use a computer. Wake up you bloody doormouse! Everybody in the entire world has got a computer – except you. Even people in like mountain caves in Borneo or something? I learned how to use one when I was like, a baby for chrissakes!! If a baby can do it, can't a trained child psychologist use one?!

Dad says he is going to get her some stone and a chisel for her to write her next book on. I mean, who uses a pencil and paper to write a book? Even bloody Shakespeare must have had a better method than that. If the woman who writes *Twilight* had to do it with like a bloody pencil, it would take her like six years or something to write the first chapter, and I would like die of waiting. Get a life Mother, please! Wake up and smell the tea.

Anyway, I did do a bit more work on my personal statement,

just to keep Mum quiet. I think it's really good now. After I finished it, I read it again as if I was like not me, but like I was one of the examiner people type of thing, and I think I sound like a truthful, honest person who is interesting and like, full of charm or something. I have lied a bit about some stuff, like saying I am Head Girl and that I am an accomplished public speaker and that I have ten A stars at GCSE when I only have one and that's for Art. Like they're going to check!! Actually, I'm really pleased with it and if I was like choosing who to take at Manchester Metropolitan uni to study Food Technology I would def choose me. Def.

Oh my actual God, I'm going to uni this year! I can't believe it, freedom at last! Go uni – go uni! I'm still deciding about a gap year or not but prob not because Mum has said that if I take one now, I have to like get a job and earn towards my travelling before I'm allowed to go off? What is she talking about? What does she think learning to be a snowboard instructor is? Just fun or something? No, the reason you learn that skill, cretin of all cretinous mothers, is so that you can teach kids and like earn money for it you damn fool, that's the whole point!! And in the evenings I would be like cooking dinners for skiers and their families in the chalets. That's what Lottie's sister did, so I know how it works.

Oh my days, it's going to be so great because there are like so many fit guys out there? Yea, though I walk into the valley of hot guys, let me always carry my camera with me so I can like upload tons of pics of me getting lashed on to Facebook so Lot-

tie will die of jealousy. YAY! And maybe Sam Tyler might even visit my page and take a look at what he's missing, the idiot. Yeh Sam, here's me with loads of fit ski instructors, really like missing you – not!

Mum says that for def uni selection people are going on to Facebook sites to see what people are really like. Oh God Mum – you are one delusional mama, like I would invite them on as friends!

EIGHT

Mo

Dora is hell-bent on destroying her life. Her university application form is beyond awful. I tried, gently, to offer my help but of course she is rejecting all aid and encouragement presently. She has started the statement with a misguided attempt at a lonely hearts classified section-type joke which goes something like ‘Pretty blonde girl, 17, with GSOH and own scooter seeks buzzin’ uni with top class food tech department and fit boys for learning, fun and maybe more . . .’ Dear Lord.

She then follows this with the old chestnut, the dreaded definition, so it goes:

‘I ask What is a university? My trusty dictionary tells me it is a “high level educational institution in which students study for degrees and academic research is done”. Well, that’s handy then, because that’s exactly what I’m looking for – except for the research bit – I won’t be doing any of that at all. So hi Manchester Metropolitan University!, I’m Dora and it looks like we’re a match! . . .’ Oh God.

She then goes on to actively lie about many things including the bogus tally of her GCSEs and when I suggested she might elaborate on the sentence ‘I like badminton’ (she doesn’t) she begrudgingly wrote ‘I like badminton a lot’. She has sent it off now, so there is nothing I can do except scream internally. And I am screaming.

There was further annoyance when I returned to work today after the holiday period to find that George has agreed to take on two junior psychs to shadow us as part of some buddy scheme instigated by the Royal College. He mentioned this possibility to me before Christmas but at that stage, it was only supposed to be one, who would work with both of us alternately. That in itself was enough of an inconvenience – I always feel strangely self-conscious when there is an auditor of any kind. I find it hard to be natural when scrutinized; I'm distracted by their continual questions and judgements.

Fascinating that George has suddenly decided to take on two. Double fascinating that the one he has ascribed to himself is called Veronica and has unfeasibly huge tits and a constant pout and has already learned that George is putty in the presence of giggling girly flattery. How irritating that both of them would be so stupendously predictable and inappropriate. I do hope they both actually do some worthwhile work with the clients alongside their revolting public foreplay.

Oddly, it is Veronica that I find most disappointing. George is just behaving like the reactive Pavlov's dog with many cocks that he is. Has always been. It's a given with him, mandatory, if there's a pretty girl and she shows any interest at all in him, he is helpless. Ring the bell, the dog salivates. He's not even choosy, really anyone will do, and they do do. Often.

I will never forget his arse-wrenchingly awful opening gambit to our previous receptionist on her first day at work:

‘What the hell is the point of a heavenly creature like you

wasting your lovely bum sitting on an office chair behind reception, when you could be using it to sit on my lap being adored, eh? Eh?’

He thought it was ironic and flirty. It wasn't. He thought it was funny. It wasn't. What was funny though, were the rivulets of muddy-coloured Grecian 2000 hair dye running down the side of his overexcited sweaty face.

Veronica obviously believes she is the one who can finally fulfil George's aching chasm of emptiness left by his wife's neglect. His surprisingly saucy wife Jess, who he clearly adores and who he leans on and remains with. There's no neglect that I can see, quite the opposite it seems. Safe in the confines of her evident love, he has grown a kind of mighty hubris, a confidence which allows him to play-act his bachelor stallion fantasy. All acting and all harmless ultimately. Slightly pathetic yes, and nothing new, but he's only made of the same emotionally porous bricks and mortar as almost every other chap.

I'm not sure quite where this relationship leaves Veronica and George when it comes to the work? Perhaps engorged George enjoys feeling swollen with confidence and thus displays himself as an exemplary specimen of a clever psychiatrist in order to show off? He peacocks himself with both his stocky physicality and his muscular mind. He is clever *and* he's in charge. A winning combination. His power is the aphrodisiac for himself *and* the women, I suspect. Admittedly, he is never less than marvellous at work. Never. I have learned so much from him. Got to give him that.

But Veronica. Poor Veronica, who is just the next one in a never-ending, ever-willing queue. And what about her betrayal of another woman, Jess, who has done her no harm? Oh I don't know, am I just a judgemental, jealous fool? I grew up in a time when the fight to be recognized for one's intellect and personality ALONGSIDE, not instead of, one's fabulous tits was being fought. And it's still not entirely won, so I feel horribly let down by women prepared to present themselves as purely vessels for men's lust. God knows, being on the receiving end of a bit of lust IS gorgeous and I've certainly craved and luckily received my share of that, but that alone is a pretty miserable prospect.

Who am I to judge? Well, I'll tell you who – it is my job to persistently question why people define themselves in the way they do and why they relate to others in the way they do. Consequently, I cannot help but observe the behaviour of George and Veronica as a slice of social anthropology. However it may depress me, I still find it fascinating. On top of which, both of these particular people are of course prescribing techniques and asking others to monitor their own behaviours daily. That is their job. Do they ever self-analyse? I doubt it. They are interested mainly in each other's pants. And on we go . . .

I have yet to meet my intern. I'm told his name is Noel. He has apparently been abroad for Christmas and returns next week. Well, he will have to hit the ground running because the appointment book is fit to burst, always the case after the enforced jollity of family Christmases.

Talking of appointments, I must speak to George about Lisa.

She is a poppet and an excellent receptionist, but I sense by just how often she now quotes her survivalist training techniques to me that her mind is elsewhere, and I fear we may lose her soon to one of the jungles, deserts or islands she has been so studiously preparing herself for. This morning she furnished me, from behind her desk, in the presence of a full waiting room, with all I might need to know when Preparing the Kill in the Wild. I now know too many details about Bleeding, Skinning, Gutting and Jointing.

‘What’s vital, Mo, is never to waste blood – it is rich in vitamins and minerals including salt that could be missing otherwise from a survivor’s diet. Fact: When cannibals drank their enemies’ blood apparently their eyesight got much better. Deal with it.’

It follows, then, that I might be able to save on my next Spec-savers bill by drinking copious amounts of Lisa’s blood, maybe. Just a thought. Meantime we ought to be keeping our inferior pre-blood-drinking eyes open for a new receptionist, perhaps?