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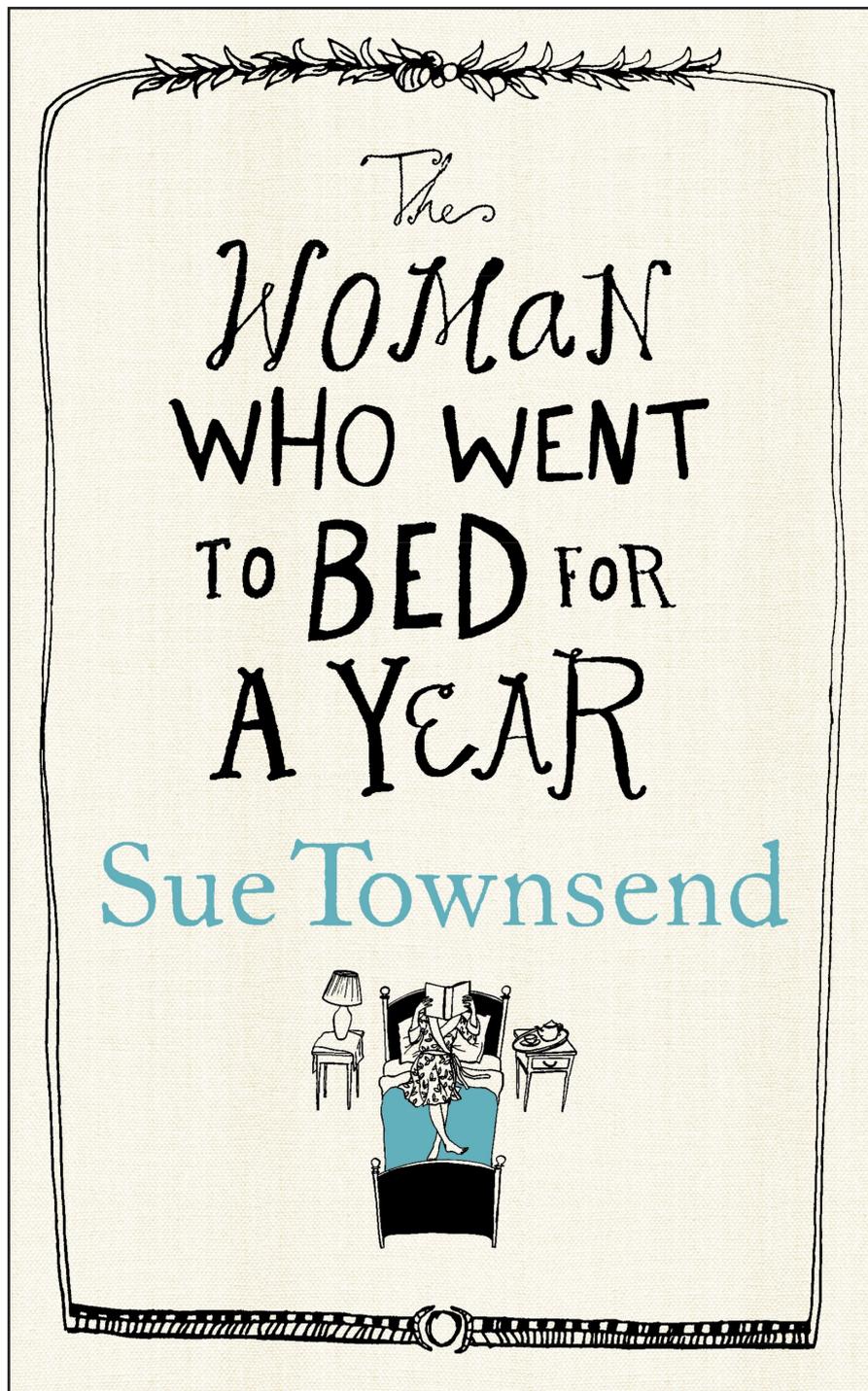
The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year

Written by Sue Townsend

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An extract from *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* by Sue Townsend
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The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year

by

Sue Townsend

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I

After they'd gone Eva slid the bolt across the door and disconnected the telephone. She liked having the house to herself. She went from room to room tidying, straightening and collecting the cups and plates that her husband and children had left on various surfaces. Somebody had left a soup spoon on the arm of her special chair – the one she had upholstered at night school. She immediately went to the kitchen and examined the contents of her Kleeneze cleaning products box.

‘What would remove a Heinz tomato soup stain from embroidered silk damask?’

As she searched, she remonstrated with herself. ‘It’s your own fault. You should have kept the chair in your bedroom. It was pure vanity on your part to have it on display in the sitting room. You wanted visitors to notice the chair and to tell you how beautiful it was, so that you could tell them that it had taken two years to complete the embroidery, and that you had been inspired by Claude Monet’s “Water-Lily Pond and Weeping Willow”.’

The trees alone had taken a year.

There was a small pool of tomato soup on the kitchen floor that she hadn’t noticed until she stepped in it and left orange footprints. The little non-stick saucepan

containing half a can of tomato soup was still simmering on the hob. 'Too lazy to take a pan off the stove,' she thought. Then she remembered that the twins were Leeds University's problem now.

She caught her reflection in the smoky glass of the wall-mounted oven. She looked away quickly. If she had taken a while to look she would have seen a woman of fifty with a lovely, fine-boned face, pale inquisitive eyes and a Clara Bow mouth that always looked as though she were about to speak. Nobody – not even Brian, her husband – had seen her without lipstick. Eva thought that red lips complemented the black clothes she habitually wore. Sometimes she allowed herself a little grey.

Once, Brian had come home from work to find Eva in the garden, in her black wellingtons, having just pulled up a bunch of turnips. He'd said to her, 'For Christ's sake, Eva! You look like post-war Poland.'

Her face was currently fashionable. 'Vintage' according to the girl on the Chanel counter where she bought her lipstick (always remembering to throw the receipt away – her husband would not understand the outrageous expense).

She picked up the saucepan, walked from the kitchen into the sitting room and threw the soup all over her precious chair. She then went upstairs, into her bedroom and, without removing her clothes or her shoes, got into bed and stayed there for a year.

She didn't know it would be a year. She climbed into bed thinking she would leave it again after half an hour, but the comfort of the bed was exquisite, the white

sheets were fresh and smelled of new snow. She turned on her side towards the open window and watched the sycamore in the garden shed its blazing leaves.

She had always loved September.

She woke when it was getting dark, and she heard her husband shouting outside. Her mobile rang. The display showed that it was her daughter, Brianne. She ignored it. She pulled the duvet over her head and sang the words of Johnny Cash's 'I Walk The Line'.

When she next poked her head out from under the duvet, she heard her next-door neighbour Julie's excited voice saying, 'It's not right, Brian.'

They were in the front garden.

Her husband said, 'I mean, I've been to Leeds and back, I need a shower.'

'Of course you do.'

Eva thought about this exchange. Why would driving to Leeds and back necessitate having a shower? Was the northern air full of grit? Or had he been sweating on the M1? Cursing the lorries? Screaming at tailgaters? Angrily denouncing whatever the weather was doing?

She switched on the bedside lamp.

This provoked another episode of shouting outside, and demands that she, 'Stop playing silly buggers and unbolt the door!'

She realised that, although she wanted to go downstairs and let him in, she couldn't actually leave the bed. She felt as though she had fallen into a vat of warm quick-setting concrete, and that she was powerless to

move. She felt an exquisite languor spread throughout her body, and thought, 'I would have to be *mad* to leave this bed.'

There was the sound of breaking glass. Soon after, she heard Brian on the stairs.

He shouted her name.

She didn't answer.

He opened the bedroom door. 'There you are,' he said.

'Yes, here I am.'

'Are you ill?'

'No.'

'Why are you in bed in your clothes and shoes? What are you playing at?'

'I don't know.'

'It's empty-nest syndrome. I heard it on *Woman's Hour*?' When she didn't speak, he said, 'Well, are you going to get up?'

'No, I'm not.'

He asked, 'What about dinner?'

'No thanks, I'm not hungry.'

'I meant what about *my* dinner? Is there anything?'

She said, 'I don't know, look in the fridge.'

He stomped downstairs. She heard his footsteps on the laminate floor he'd laid so ineptly the year before. She knew by the squeak of the floorboards that he'd gone into the sitting room. Soon he was stomping back up the stairs.

'What the bloody hell has happened to your chair?' he asked.

‘Somebody left a soup spoon on the arm.’

‘There’s soup all over the bloody thing.’

‘I know. I did it myself.’

‘What – threw the soup?’

Eva nodded.

‘You’re having a nervous breakdown, Eva. I’m ringing your mum.’

‘No!’

He flinched at the ferocity in her voice.

She saw from the stricken look in his eyes that after twenty-five years of marriage his familiar domestic world had come to an end. He went downstairs. She heard him cursing at the disconnected phone then, after a moment, stabbing at the keys. As she picked up the bedroom extension her mother was laboriously giving her phone number down the line, ‘0116 2 444 333, Mrs Ruby Brown-Bird speaking.’

Brian said, ‘Ruby, it’s Brian. I need you to come over straight away.’

‘No can do, Brian. I’m in the middle of having a perm. What’s up?’

‘It’s Eva –’ he lowered his voice ‘– I think she must be ill.’

‘Send for an ambulance then,’ said Ruby irritably.

‘There’s nothing wrong with her physically.’

‘Well, that’s all right then.’

‘I’ll come and pick you up and bring you back so you can see for yourself.’

‘Brian, I can’t. I’m hosting a perm party and I’ve got to have my own personal solution rinsed off in half an

hour. If I don't, I shall look like Harpo Marx. 'Ere, talk to Michelle.'

After a few muffled noises a young woman came on the line.

'Hello . . . Brian, is it? I'm Michelle. Can I talk you through what would happen if Mrs Bird abandoned the perm at this stage? I *am* insured, but it would be extremely inconvenient for me if I had to appear in court. I'm booked up until New Year's Eve.'

The phone was handed back to Ruby. 'Brian, are you still there?'

'Ruby, she's in bed wearing her clothes and shoes.'

'I *did* warn you, Brian. We were in the church porch about to go in, and I turned round and said to you, "Our Eva's a dark horse. She doesn't say much, and you'll never know what she's thinking . . ."' There was a long pause, then Ruby said, 'Phone your own mam.'

The phone was disconnected.

Eva was astounded that her mother had made a last-minute attempt to sabotage her wedding. She picked up her handbag from the side of the bed and rooted through the contents, looking for something to eat. She always kept food in her bag. It was a habit from when the twins were young and hungry, and would open their mouths like the beaks of fledgling birds. Eva found a squashed packet of crisps, a flattened Bounty bar and half a packet of Polos.

She heard Brian stabbing at the keys again.

Brian was always slightly apprehensive when he called his mother. His tongue couldn't form words properly.

She had a way of making him feel guilty, whatever the subject of the conversation.

His mother answered promptly with a snappy, 'Yes?'

Brian said, 'Is that you, Mummy?'

Eva picked up the extension again, being careful to muffle the mouthpiece with her hand.

'Who else would it be? Nobody else phones this house. I'm on my own seven days a week.'

Brian said, 'But . . . er . . . you . . . er . . . don't like visitors.'

'No, I don't like visitors but it would be nice to have to turn them away. Anyway, what is it? I'm halfway through *Emmerdale*.'

Brian said, 'Sorry, Mummy. Do you want to ring me back when the adverts come on?'

'No,' she said. 'Let's get it over with, whatever it is.'

'It's Eva.'

'Ha! Why am I not surprised? Has she left you? The first time I clapped eyes on that girl I knew she'd break your heart.'

Brian wondered if his heart had ever been broken. He had always had difficulty in recognising an emotion. When he had brought his First Class Bachelor of Science degree home to show his mother, her current boyfriend had said, 'You must be very happy, Brian.'

Brian had nodded his head and forced a smile, but the truth was that he didn't feel any happier than he had felt the day before, when nothing remarkable had happened.

His mother had taken the embossed certificate, examined it carefully and said, 'You'll struggle to find an

astronomy job. There are men with more superior qualifications than you've got who can't find work.'

Now Brian said, mournfully, 'Eva's gone to bed in her clothes and shoes.'

His mother said, 'I can't say I'm surprised, Brian. She's always brought attention to herself. Do you remember when we all went to the caravan that Easter in 1986? She took a suitcase full of her ridiculous beatnik clothes. You don't wear beatnik clothes at Wells-Next-The-Sea. Everybody was staring at her.'

Eva screamed from upstairs, 'You shouldn't have thrown my lovely black clothes into the sea!'

Brian hadn't heard his wife scream before.

Yvonne Beaver asked, 'What's that screaming?'

Brian lied. 'It's the television. Somebody's just won a lot of money on *Eggheads*.'

His mother said, 'She looked very presentable in the holiday wear I bought her.'

As Eva listened, she remembered taking the hideous clothes out of the carrier bag. They had smelled as if they had been in a damp warehouse in the Far East for years, and the colours were lurid mauves, pinks and yellows. There had been a pair of what Eva thought looked like men's sandals and a beige, pensioner-style anorak. When she tried them on, she looked twenty years older.

Brian said to his mother, 'I don't know what to do, Mummy.'

Yvonne said, 'She's probably drunk. Leave her to sleep it off.'

Eva threw the phone across the room and screamed,

‘They were men’s sandals she bought me in Wells-Next-The-Sea! I saw *men* wearing them with white socks! You should have protected me from her, Brian! You should have said, “My wife would not be seen dead in these hideous sandals!”’

She had screamed so loudly that her throat hurt. She shouted downstairs and asked Brian to bring her a glass of water.

Brian said, ‘Hang on, Mummy. Eva wants a glass of water.’

His mother hissed down the phone, ‘Don’t you dare fetch her that water, Brian! You’ll be making a rod for your own back if you do. Tell her to get her own water!’

Brian didn’t know what to do. While he dithered in the hallway his mother said, ‘I could do without this trouble. My knee has been playing me up. I was on the verge of ringing my consultant and asking him to chop my leg off.’

He took the phone into the kitchen with him and ran the cold tap.

His mother asked, ‘Is that water I can hear running?’

Brian lied again. ‘Just topping up a vase of flowers.’

‘Flowers! You’re lucky you can afford flowers.’

‘They’re out of the garden, Mummy. Eva grew them from seed.’

‘You’re lucky to have the space for a garden.’

The phone went dead. His mother never said goodbye.

He went upstairs with the glass of cold water. When he handed it to Eva, she took a small sip, then put it on

the crowded bedside table. Brian hovered at the end of the bed. There was nobody to tell him what to do.

She almost felt sorry for him, but not enough to get out of bed. Instead, she said, 'Why don't you go downstairs and watch your programmes?'

Brian was a devotee of property programmes. His heroes were Kirstie and Phil. Unbeknown to Eva he had written to Kirstie, saying that she always looked nice, and was she married to Phil or was their partnership purely a business arrangement? He had received a reply three months later, saying 'Thank you for your interest' and signed 'Yours, Kirstie'. Enclosed was a photograph of Kirstie. She was wearing a red dress and showing an alarming amount of bosom. Brian kept the photograph inside an old Bible. He knew it would be safe there. Nobody ever opened it.

Later that night, a full bladder forced Eva out of bed. She changed from her day clothes into a pair of pyjamas that she had been keeping for emergency hospital admittance. This was on her mother's advice. Her mother believed that if your dressing gown, pyjamas and sponge bag were good quality, the nurses and doctors treated you better than the scruffs who came into hospital with their shoddy things in a Tesco's carrier bag.

Eva got back into bed and wondered what her children were doing on their first night at university. She imagined them sitting in a room together, weeping and homesick, as they had done when they first went to nursery school.

Brianne was in the communal kitchen and lounge of the accommodation block. So far she had met a boy dressed like a girl, and a woman dressed like a man. They were both talking about clubs and musicians she'd never heard of.

Brianne had a short attention span and soon stopped listening, but she nodded her head and said 'Cool' when it seemed appropriate. She was a tall girl with broad shoulders, long legs and big feet. Her face was mostly hidden behind a long straggly black fringe which she pushed out of her eyes only when she actually wanted to see something.

A waiflike girl in a leopard-print maxi dress and tan Ugg boots came in with a bulging bag from Holland & Barrett which she stuffed into the fridge. Half her head had been shaved and a broken heart tattooed on to her scalp. The other half was a badly dyed lopsided green curtain.

Brianne said, 'Amazing hair. Did you do it yourself?'

'I got my brother to help me,' the girl said. 'He's a poofter.'

The girl's sentences had a rising inflection as though she were permanently questioning the validity of her own statements.

Brianne asked, 'Are you Australian?'

The girl shouted, 'God! No!'

Brianne said, 'I'm Brianne.'

The girl said, 'I'm Poppy. Brianne? I haven't heard that before.'

'My dad's called Brian,' said Brianne tonelessly. 'Is it hard to walk in a maxi?'

'No', said Poppy. 'Try it on if you like. It might stretch to fit you.'

She pulled the maxi dress over her head and stood revealed in a wispy bra and knickers. They both looked as though they had been made from scarlet cobwebs. She seemed to have no inhibitions whatsoever. Brianne had many inhibitions. She hated everything about herself: face, neck, hair, shoulders, arms, hands, fingernails, belly, breasts, nipples, waist, hips, thighs, knees, calves, ankles, feet, toenails and voice.

She said, 'I'll try it on in my room.'

'Your eyes are amazing,' said Poppy.

'Are they?'

'Are you wearing green contacts?' asked Poppy. She stared into Brianne's face and pushed the fringe away.

'No.'

'They're an amazing green.'

'Are they?'

'Awesome.'

'I need to lose some weight.'

'Yeah, you do. I'm a weight loss expert. I'll teach you how to be sick after every meal.'

'I don't want to be bulimic.'

‘It was good enough for Lily Allen.’

‘I hate being sick.’

‘Isn’t it worth it to be thin? Remember the saying: “You can’t be too rich or too thin.”’

‘Who said that?’

‘I think it was Winnie Mandela.’

Poppy followed Brianne to her room, still in her underwear. They met Brian Junior in the corridor as he was locking the door to his room. He stared at Poppy and she stared back. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She threw her arms above her head and affected a glamour girl pose, hoping that Brian Junior would admire her C cup breasts.

He said under his breath, but loud enough to be heard, ‘Gross.’

Poppy said, ‘Gross? It would be really useful to me if you would elaborate. I need to know which bits of me are particularly repellent.’

Brian Junior shifted uncomfortably.

Poppy walked up and down past him, did a twirl and rested one hand on a bony hip. She then looked at him expectantly but he did not speak. Instead, he unlocked the door to his room and went back inside.

Poppy said, ‘He’s a baby. A rude, mindblowingly awesome-looking baby.’

Brianne said, ‘We’re both seventeen. We took our A levels early.’

‘I would have taken mine early but I had a personal tragedy . . .’ Poppy paused, waiting for Brianne to ask about the nature of the tragedy. When Brianne remained

silent, she said, 'I can't talk about it. I still managed to get four A*s. Oxbridge wanted me. I went for an interview, but quite honestly I couldn't live and study somewhere so old-fashioned.'

Brianne asked, 'Where was your interview – Oxford or Cambridge?'

Poppy said, 'Do you have auditory defects? I told you, I was interviewed in *Oxbridge*.'

'And you were offered a place to study at *Oxbridge* University?' Brianne checked, 'Remind me, where *is* Oxbridge?'

Poppy mumbled, 'It's in the middle of the country,' and went out.

Brianne and Brian Junior had been interviewed at Cambridge University, and both of them had been offered a place. The Beaver twins' small fame had gone before them. At Trinity College they were given what looked like an impossibly difficult maths problem to solve. Brian Junior went to a separate room with an invigilator. When they each put down their pencil after fifty-five minutes of frenzied workings-out on the A4 paper supplied, the chair of the interviewing panel read their workings as if they were a chapter of a racy novel. Brianne had meticulously, if unimaginatively, worked her way straight to the solution. Brian Junior had reached it by a more mysterious path. The panel declined to ask the twins about hobbies or pastimes. It was easy to tell that they did nothing outside of their chosen field.

After the twins had turned the offer down, Brianne explained that she and her brother would follow the

famous professor of mathematics Lenya Nikitanova to Leeds.

‘Ah, Leeds,’ said the chairperson. ‘It has a remarkable mathematical faculty, world class. We tried to tempt the lovely Nikitanova here by offering her disgracefully extravagant inducements, but she emailed that she preferred to teach the children of the workers – an expression I have not heard since Brezhnev was in office – and was taking up the post of lecturer at Leeds University! Typically quixotic of her!’

Now, in Sentinel Towers student residence, Brianne said, ‘I’d sooner try the dress on in private. I’m shy about my body.’

Poppy said, ‘No, I’m coming in with you. I can help you.’

Brianne felt suffocated by Poppy. She did not want to let her inside her room. She did not want her as a friend but, despite her feelings, she unlocked the door and let Poppy inside.

Brianne’s suitcase was open on the narrow bed. Poppy immediately began to unpack and put Brianne’s clothes and shoes away in the wardrobe. Brianne sat helplessly on the end of the bed, saying, ‘No, Poppy. I can do it.’ She thought that when Poppy had gone, she would arrange her clothes to her own satisfaction.

Poppy opened a jewellery box decorated in tiny pearlised shells and began to try on various pieces. She pulled out the silver bracelet with the three charms: a moon, a sun and a star.

The bracelet had been bought by Eva in late August

to celebrate Brianne's five A*s at A level. Brian Junior had already lost the cufflinks his mother had given him to commemorate his six A*s.

'I'll borrow this,' Poppy said.

'No!' Brianne shouted. 'Not that! It's precious to me.' She took it from Poppy and slipped it on to her own wrist.

Poppy said, 'Omigod, you're such a materialist. Chill out.'

Meanwhile, Brian Junior paced up and down in his shockingly tiny room. It took only three steps to move from the door to the window. He wondered why his mother had not rung as she had promised.

He had unpacked earlier and everything had been neatly put away. His pens and pencils were lined up in colour order, starting with yellow and finishing with black. It was important to Brian Junior that a red pen came exactly at the centre of the line.

Earlier that day, once the twins' belongings had been brought up from the car, their laptops were being charged, and the new Ikea kettles, toasters and lamps had been plugged in, Brian, Brianne and Brian Junior had sat in a line on Brianne's bed with nothing to say to each other.

Brian had said, 'So,' several times.

The twins were expecting him to go on to speak, but he had relapsed into silence.

Eventually, he cleared his throat and said, 'So, the day has come, eh? Daunting for me and Mum, and even

more so for you two – standing on your own two feet, meeting new people.’

He stood up and faced them. ‘Kids, make a bit of an effort to be friendly to the other students. Brianne, introduce yourself, try to smile. They won’t be as clever as you and Brian Junior, but being clever isn’t everything.’

Brian Junior said, in a flat tone, ‘We’re here to work, Dad. If we needed “friends” we’d be on Facebook.’

Brianne took her brother’s hand and said, ‘It might be good to have a friend, Bri. Y’know, like, somebody I could talk to about . . .’ She hesitated.

Brian supplied, ‘Clothes and boys and hairdos.’

Brianne thought, ‘Ugh! Hairdos? No, I’d want to talk about the wonders of the world, the mysteries of the universe.’

Brian Junior said, ‘We can make friends once we’ve obtained our doctorates.’

Brian laughed, ‘Loosen up, BJ. Get drunk, get laid, hand an essay in late, for once. You’re a student, steal a traffic cone!’

Brianne looked at her brother. She could no more imagine him roaring drunk with a traffic cone on his head than she could see him on that stupid programme *Strictly Come Dancing*, clad in lime-green Lycra, dancing the rumba.

Before Brian left, there were some badly executed hugs and backslaps. Noses were kissed instead of lips and cheeks. They trod on each other’s toes in their haste to leave the cramped room and get to the lift. Once

there, they waited an interminable time for the lift to travel up six floors. They could hear it wheezing and grinding its way towards them.

When the doors opened, Brian almost ran inside. He waved goodbye to the twins and they waved back. After a few seconds, Brian stabbed at the Ground Floor button, the doors closed and the twins did a high five.

Then the lift returned with Brian its captive.

The twins were horrified to see that their father was crying. They were about to step in when the doors crushed shut, and the lift jerked and groaned itself downstairs.

‘Why is Dad *crying?*’ asked Brian Junior.

Brianne said, ‘I think it’s because he’s sad we’ve left home.’

Brian Junior was amazed. ‘And is that a normal response?’

‘I think so.’

‘Mum didn’t cry when we said goodbye.’

‘No, Mum thinks tears should be reserved for nothing less than tragedy.’

They had waited by the lift for a few moments to see if it would return their father again. When it did not, they went to their rooms and tried, but failed, to contact their mother.



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