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Swallowing Grandma

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Extract

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Chapter One

Dogman turned up on our doorstep at nine o'clock sharp, wolfhound in tow.

'You'll love me,' he said. 'I've brought you a crevice tool.'

'Let him in!' yelled Poll from the kitchen.

He rustled past in his grubby mac and I pressed my back to the wall in case he brushed against me. The dog sniffed my crotch, then trotted on.

'Here you are,' he said, rooting in one of his plastic bags and pulling out the crevice tool for me to admire. It's true, I had been wanting one for about six months. Ours had disappeared; probably Poll threw it out by accident, we lose a lot of stuff that way.

Poll marched in and snatched it out of Dogman's hand. She felt it carefully all over, then took it over to the standard lamp to peer at it in the light. 'Well, aren't you lucky, Katherine Millar? She's always moaning about dog hairs. Winston sheds all summer and all winter, it's a wonder he in't bald. Say thank you. Where did you get it, Dickie? Car boot?'

Dogman grinned. 'I found it.'

Nicked it, more like.

Poll handed it over to me and I squinted at the maker's

mark. 'But it's the wrong brand,' I said. 'This is off a Dyson, we have a Lervia. It won't fit.'

'Get away,' said Dogman. 'Bit of duct tape on the end of your tube, it'll be fine.'

I could have inserted the tool into his mouth, Tom and Jerry style.

'Are you seriously expecting me to start mauling with duct tape every time I want to use the thing? Putting it on and taking it off? I'm not going through that performance.' I dropped the tool onto the settee. If Poll wanted to claim it, she could do the hoovering herself.

Poll tutted and Dogman shook his head sorrowfully.

'Young people today,' said Poll, 'they want life gift-wrapped, they do. Tek no notice of her, Dickie. She's on t' crest of a rebellion all t' time. I think it's hormones. At least, I hope that's all it is.' She raised her eyebrows at him.

Piss off, I nearly said.

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'One day I'll die,' Poll's always going, 'and then you'll be sorry, my girl.'

No I won't. I'll put the bloody flags out. I'll tie a red-satin bow round Winston's neck, dance stark naked up and down Mesnes Park, and put an ad in the 'Celebrations' column of the *Wigan Observer*.

She always had a lot to say
She had a tongue sharp as a knife
But now my grandma's passed away
I'm off to start a whole new life.
In remembrance of Pollyanna Millar,
evil-minded shrew and dog-botherer

That night, after Poll had groped her way along the landing from the bathroom, I wrote in my diary:

New Year's Resolutions

1. *Stop eating (lose 10 kg by Valentine's Day)*
2. *Get everyone at school to call me Kat, not Katherine, as sounds cooler*
3. *Try to make friends with Donna French X X X lush lush*
4. *Decide what to do about My Future*

Then I lay down on the bed, under Dad's old posters of Blondie, and tried to block out the bad thoughts that always gather about this time by doing A-level essay plans in my head. Finally I turned out the light and blew Dad a kiss, like I always do. It might be mad, but it helps.

I share my room with two dead people. As well as Dad, in his jar on the windowsill, there's Great-grandma Florence, who was Poll's mother, in the bottom of the wardrobe inside a black and gold tin. I never think about her, to be honest, except when I'm hunting for shoes.

The rest of Poll's family are buried in Bank Top cemetery, a sloping field down which the gravestones are moving imperceptibly, along with the wall that's supposed to keep them in. If you climb up on the war memorial in the middle you get a good view, a clear view anyway, of the dirty brick town of Harrop below, with its derelict paper mill and defunct loco works. Surely this can't be where the occupants of the cemetery are headed? I can't see the attraction myself.

My big dream is to be normal. I need to ditch the socks

and frocks and be more like other girls, but it's not easy with a grandma like mine.

'Make-up? What do you want to wear make-up for? You'll ruin your skin. You'll end up looking like a clown or a prostitute, one or t' other. Smear some Vaseline on your face, that's all you need at your age. I were a married woman before I owned a lipstick.'

We have this bollocks continually.

It's dawning on me, now I'm reaching my eighteenth birthday, that actually a lot of things Poll says are rubbish, e.g. that mending your socks while you're still wearing them brings on terrible bad luck. 'It's sewing sorrow to your heart,' she always moans. 'You'll rue.' She also reckons that washing your hair while you're having a period sends you mad, and that sleeping with a potato prevents cramp.

When I was younger I believed her, so therefore all the other kids assumed I was mad too and wouldn't have anything to do with me. I couldn't catch a ball either, and I wore a hand-knitted school cardigan instead of a bought one from Littlewoods. I pretended I didn't care.

'Not everyone has a mother and a father,' I would recite when they cornered me on the rec. 'Me and my grandma are a family too.'

'Piss off, Fatso,' they'd say. 'You don't even call her grandma. How weird is that?'

'She doesn't like it.'

'She doesn't like you. You're mental. Your mum killed your dad and then ran off. Weirdy-weirdo.' Then they'd run away screaming and screwing their index fingers into their temples. Weirdy-weirdo would skulk by the bins for a bit and then go and stand by the teacher till the bell went.

The trouble with Bank Top is that everyone knows everyone else's history.

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Poll doesn't want people to feel sorry for her – which is lucky, because in general they don't. She's as blind as she wants to be: some days, you'd hardly know she had a problem; others, she's all but bed-ridden. 'It's like having a black spot pasted on the front of your eyeball,' she says. 'If I look at your head, now, all I can see is an empty space.' She's got peripheral vision, though, so you'd be unwise to try anything sneaky.

The Rehab Officer likes to stay upbeat. 'Here, we prefer the term *partially sighted*,' she says when Poll goes to be assessed for extras e.g. hand-rails, magnifiers, large-button phones. Not that she bothers with most of these aids; after all, it's what I'm there for. I'm just a two-legged guide dog.

When she first began to lose her sight she was given this handy booklet, *Coping With Age-Related Macular Degeneration*. It's full of top tips for someone with a reasonable take on life:

• *Use strong lighting throughout the house, particularly on stairs.*

Poll says, 'If you think I'm getting an electrician in you've another think coming. Pass us that flashlight.' Our sockets are loaded to buggery and we have nine table lamps in the living room alone.

• *Tell others clearly what you need.*

No problems with this one. It's all I get, all day and every day. I shop, cook, clean, wash, iron after a fashion, lay her

clothes out for her every night and put her eye drops in. She doesn't need the eye drops, she just likes the idea. She needs the ICaps dietary supplement pills, but she won't take them, of course.

• *Use your cane as a signal that you need help.*

Or a weapon. She may only have limited vision but she can always locate an ankle bone from a good height.

• *Don't dwell on your difficulties. Treat your visual impairment as a challenge to be overcome.*

To be fair, she isn't much into self-pity. Anger, petty-mindedness, pig-headedness; now those she does a treat.

• *Get to know your neighbours; build up a community around you.*

Don't know if Dickie the Dogman counts as community; he certainly hangs round our place enough. Poll thinks he's marvellous because he's always posting tat he's got off the market through our dog-flap; loaves with big holes all through them, unperforated toilet roll, bacon that's about 90% fat. And they have these long gossip sessions in the kitchen while Wolfie lolls about on the flags and tries to chew his own paws off.

'You know that woman up Nettle Fold who did Maggie's daughter's wedding dress?'

'Oh, aye?'

'She's a medium.'

'A medium what?'

'No, she talks to spirits.'

'Oh, right. What, part-time?'

'I suppose so. Maggie said she's snowed under with alterations for people.'

'So can she tell the future?'

'Maggie says she can.'

'It's a pity she didn't let on about the groom knocking off the chief bridesmaid, then, in't it?'

I never used to mind Dickie Dogman, in fact I thought he was quite funny when I first knew him. He came on the scene when I was about five, after he knocked on the door and offered us some sand he'd found. 'Mek a nice sandpit for t' littlun,' he'd said. 'Oh, go on, then,' Poll had said, unexpectedly. The pit was a disaster; it stained my arms orange and was a total cat-magnet. But somehow Dickie stayed on the scene. He knew a lot of jokes, and he could do tricks with matches. Sometimes I'd go with him over the fields while he walked Wolfie, or the other dogs he had then. In the spring he'd help me catch tadpoles which would go in a jar on the kitchen top for about two weeks, then Poll would knock them over, or pour melted fat on them, or swill them with bleach. In the autumn Dogman enjoyed identifying fungus, then smashing it up. 'That's fly agaric, that is. We'll have that bastard for a start.' I have a really clear memory of him sitting on a stile once and a red admiral butterfly landing on his coat sleeve. 'Look at that,' he said, watching it dip its wings and unfurl its tongue briefly. 'The miracle of Nature. Oh, it's fucked off.' But his favourite crop was dirty magazines, which grew all along the hedgerows near the lay-by. For a long time I thought he was just litter-picking.

As I hit puberty, I began to see Dogman for what he was; a dirty old man. I kept catching him staring at my breasts and licking his lips. From the time I was fourteen, I never had a cold without him offering to rub Vicks on my chest.

Then, one day last year, something really horrible happened.

I came out of the library to find him sitting on the form outside, talking to someone on his mobile. He had his back to me and he didn't know I was there. Wolfie wagged his tail at me but still Dogman didn't notice. He was engrossed in conversation.

'Well, you know me,' he was saying, 'I like 'em big. Yeah, completely topless, nips and all.' His shoulders shook with laughter. 'She didn't know I were there, it were first thing in t' morning. Yeah, massive. Round the back, through t' kitchen window. Hey, hang on, it's not my fault if she parades round wi' no bra on. I was just standing innocently by the back door, me.'

As he was sniggering down the phone, I remembered Saturday and how I'd run down at half-eight to let Winston out for a wee in the garden. I'd not finished getting dressed, but you don't hang about with Winston because his Westie bladder's old and unreliable. Not ten minutes later, Dogman had appeared at the back door with the glad tidings that Lidl were selling off dirt-cheap TVs, and did we want him to get us one. I thought he seemed agitated at the time, but I put it down to the amazingly low price deal.

So ever since then, I've tried to avoid him, he gives me the krills. But it's not easy; he virtually lives here. He's Poll's number-one best friend.

Dogman's not the only pervert round here, either. I've seen a penis, and I was only about eight. This elderly gent stopped me in the street near Flaxton's Chemist and asked me to help him get his puppy out of a drainpipe. 'I know wheer 'e is. I can hear 'im whimpering. What's your name

love? Katherine? Well you've lickle 'ands, Katherine, you'll be able to reach in an' cotch 'im reahnd 'is collar.'

'I'll be late for school,' I'd said. Because I *thought* it sounded suspicious.

But he'd taken my arm and hustled me down the ginnel to the yard behind the shop, a scruffy walled area full of rubbish bags and cardboard boxes, and indeed there was a drainpipe sticking out of a mound of earth in the corner.

I stood there straining my ears for the sound of distressed dog and he told me to get down and put my face right up to the pipe. 'Call his name. Go on.' So there I am, down on my hands and knees, shouting, Beaver, Beaver, all the time peering into the dark anticipating the scrabble of tiny claws. When nothing happened I turned my head to ask what he thought we should do next and blow me, he had his tackle out. It looked exactly like he was yanking a plucked chicken head-first out of his flies. "Ave a shufti at this, Katherine,' he leered. I was out of that yard like a pinball off a spring. I still can't go into a butcher's round Christmas time.

I ran straight back home in tears, and Poll was the nicest she's ever been to me. She made hot chocolate and got the biscuit barrel down and we cleared the whole stack of Dogman's Kit-Kat misshapes between us. I didn't even have to go back to school that day, which was a major coup.

'I keep telling you it's a dangerous world out there,' said Poll through a mouthful of wafer. 'Let's get that packet of Jammy Dodgers open an' all.'

One time we had someone keep ringing up then putting the phone down. You'd go, Who is it? Who is it? And there'd be silence, it was dead eerie. Then a few weeks later the nasty

language started; I never heard it myself but Poll told me bits and pieces, stuff to do with underwear mainly. She's not one to bother normally, hard as nails our Poll, but it did shake her up. She used to tense when the phone rang. A few times she said, Don't answer it, so I didn't. But one time she picked up and went white, must have been more than knickers. She put the receiver to my mouth but with her fingers over the earpiece, and told me what to say: I had to shout, 'Leave us alone and get a life!' I enjoyed that. Most excitement I'd had in ages. And the best thing was, the calls stopped.

So Bank Top becomes the world in miniature, except it's even worse Outside with serial killers and exploding skylines and famine and anthrax-in-a-bottle.

'Yes, it's a sad world,' Maggie, Poll's bingo-friend, was saying last week over dinner. 'All our age are dropping like flies. I went to three funerals last month. And May Powell died last week, it was in t' paper.'

'May Powell? May Powell as we were at school with?' Poll looked up from her soup.

'That's the one. Th' undertaker's daughter. She was right snooty at school, do you remember? Not that I'd wish her dead. Does anyone want that last crumpet?'

Poll shoved the plate across the cloth towards her. 'She used say her father put her in one of his coffins if she'd been nowty, and closed the lid on top of her.'

Dogman snorted his tea, as if this was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

'Eeh, and they'd go complaining to Social Services these days for summat like that.' Poll shook her head despairingly. 'You're not allowed to punish your child at all without

somebody poking their nose in. Then they wonder why the kids are running wild. In them days, a parent had some authority. And really, it didn't do the children any lasting harm, did it?'

'No, said Maggie. 'Of course it didn't.'

'So how did May die?'

'Committed suicide.'

'My life's been full of tragedy too,' Dogman piped up. 'Hang about.' He pulled out a hanky and blew his nose hard to clear out all the tea, deliberately making a trumpet noise.

'Has it, love?'

'Oh, aye.' He wiped his eyes. 'I lost my father really young, in an accident.'

Maggie looked at Poll in surprise. 'What happened, Dickie?'

'It was terrible. You know he used to work at the brewery?'

'I didn't, no.'

'Well, he did. He were in charge of one of t' vats. Anyroad, the big paddle they use for stirring got stuck, so he climbed up to see if he could free it. And he fell in.'

Poll put her hand to her mouth. 'Oh, Dickie. I never knew that.'

Dogman nodded glumly. 'My mother was distraught. She said to t' foreman, "Were it at least a quick death?" And the foreman said, "Well it would have been, but he got out three times to go to t' toilet." '

'Ooh, Dickie,' chuckled Poll. 'You're a caution.'

I tell you, we have some hilarious times in this house.

Life seems to be particularly dangerous for our family

around the time of our coming of age. We get the key of the door and the hammer of doom at the same time.

The week after his twenty-first birthday, Poll's father lost his arm up to the elbow in a nasty bleach-works accident. We have the photographic evidence; a mild-looking man with sunken eyes and one flat sleeve stuffed into his pocket. The hand he still has is resting on a little table and there's a roll of paper poking out of his fist. 'His Certificate in Textile Technology,' Poll pronounces as if it were a Nobel Prize.

Then of course there was Roger, my dad, eighteen and smashed to pieces in the car that was his very special birthday present, a scarlet Mini Metro Vanden Plas. We all know whose fault that was. (Well, actually we don't, because although it was mostly my mad evil mother having a fit and grabbing the wheel just as a juggernaut was coming in the opposite direction, there's also the school of thought that if he hadn't been bought the car in the first place – which was Vince's bright idea – then the accident could never have happened.) So cars are deadly too and that's why I can never, ever have driving lessons because I will either kill myself or some other bugger, in fact best to stay off the roads altogether if possible (Poll once saw a schoolboy run over by a Selnec bus).

Poll's Aunty Cissie lost her fiancé in the war a fortnight before she came of age; she and her sister were actually cutting up old sheets to make streamers when they got the telegram. She's in her eighties now and she never had another sweetheart, so that was her life over with.

Poll herself got through her twenty-second year unscathed but only, she reckons, because she had a premonition that she'd drown, a recurring dream from childhood

that she was stranded on a bare rock with a towering wave about to engulf her. She went to a clairvoyant in Blackpool who confirmed it, so she's made sure she's always stayed well away from water, and thus has cheated Fate.

And therefore because I'm almost eighteen now, and I've had no helpful dreams about avoiding accidents, I ought to be particularly nervous. I could leave Bank Top if I wanted to, I have somewhere to go. But is it a trick? Maybe Destiny has got something unpleasant lined up for me. Sometimes I lie awake at nights gripped with a fear I can't put a name to.

I don't know which is worse; fear or boredom.

Funnily enough Poll thinks she's going to die this year as well. 'Threescore and ten I am. Living on Borrowed Time.'

Yes, well, I think. Play your cards right. It could be arranged.

*

There are nights I wake up having dreamed about her and wonder then if maybe in those same hours she dreamed about me too. But the detail is never very positive. I'm always crying. Sometimes I'm covered in blood. Once I had her father's head in a holdall that I couldn't put down.

The need to let her know is a physical pull. It's a constant battle. But I have no substance in her life. I'm useless, as useless as a ghost.