Motherland

Maria Beaumont

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Extract

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Thomas is moping, looking as if he's lost the will to live. He had football practice this morning, but two hours on, withdrawal is taking hold of his little body. It's a beautiful late-September day. I'll take him, his ball and Molly to the park.

I try Richard's mobile before we leave. I'd hoped he'd be back by now. Maybe he's stuck in traffic. Who knows? I get his voicemail. I don't bother to leave a message.

As we walk into the park, I look at the café ahead. It seems busy today. As we draw nearer, I spot Annabel, a mum from school. More precisely, the mum with the wart on the end of her nose. It's winking at me now in the low September sun. Obviously, she's with Cassie, who, despite not having a wart of her own, is Arlington's Head Witch. As we get nearer, I realise that I recognise every face at every table. It's like an Arlington mothers' convention. What are they all doing here?

'See you later,' Thomas yells as he hares off towards the football pitch without a backward glance. A game is already in progress, but I know it will stop the second he arrives. Then an argument will ensue over which side gets him. I have to agree with Richard that as ambitions go, football is hardly *feasible*. The chances of him making it are slim at best. But even so, I'm grateful for football on

a daily basis. Thomas is complicated and sensitive – deep to the point of being unfathomable. He might be a mystery to me, his teacher and possibly to himself, but in football he has found an answer. It's a simple game, he's brilliant at it, end of story.

As he melts into the throng on the pitch, I steer Molly towards the café. 'Come on,' I say, 'let's get an ice cream.'

Before I know it, Annabel is beside me. 'Fran, can I have a word?' Now we're face to face. Or rather, face to wart. *Look into the eyes, into the eyes, not around the eyes and definitely not at the wart.*

'Of course,' I say. 'But what's going on in there?' I ask. I nod towards the café. Its French windows have been thrown open and inside I can see what looks like every single one of Molly's classmates cavorting around a man with a painted face as he twists balloons into animal shapes.

'It's Fabian's birthday party,' Annabel tells me authoritatively.

The shrieking from the café continues. I look down at Molly's sweet face as she stares at her friends and my heart sinks.

'Ooh, look, Fabian's got Mr *Punch*!' she squeals. 'And Maisy's in there! Can I go in, Mummy?'

Annabel's daughter, Maisy, and Molly are inseparable at school.

But what can I say?

No, you haven't been invited?

No, you aren't wanted?

I feel a stab of guilt. Poor Molly doesn't get invited to many parties. It's not her fault – she's pretty and so sweet-natured. I'm to blame. The few friends I've made at Arlington are women I actually like – quite a sensible approach to friend-making, you might suppose. But experience has taught me that befriending people whose company you enjoy

is all wrong. If you want your kids to get on – that is, to get invited to the right parties – then you have to cosy up to their friends' mums because it is *they* who draw up the invitation lists. Witness Molly standing out *here*, party going on in *there*.

'*Please*, Mum,' she begs.

'Sorry, Molly,' I apologise. I try to fob her off. 'But we'll get an ice cream in a mo. I'm just going to have a quick word with Annabel.'

I turn to face her wart and quickly readjust my line of vision. She looks at me awkwardly, then gives me her most condescending smile. 'Look, this is a bit delicate, so I'll just get on with it,' she says. 'Maisy has been going on at me about the contents of Molly's lunchbox. Wine gums yesterday, Jammy Dodgers the day before . . . Freddie the Frog, I believe, the day before that.'

'Well, that's not all I put in there, but yes, go on.'

'I'm only trying to save your embarrassment, but were you aware that there's a movement to ban sweets and chocolates from the school? Including lunchboxes.'

No, I wasn't aware, but it doesn't surprise me. It would be madness to think that the mother-run police state of Arlington could ever condone sweets and chocolates as being part and parcel of the whole *being a child* thing. I picture Maisy's lunchbox filled with brown rice and tofu and her sad little face as she pines for a lump of chocolate moulded in the shape of a slimy amphibian.

'Mummy, the *party*.' Molly is tugging on my hand.

'Just a suggestion,' Annabel continues, 'but I've found yoghurts and little bits of fruit are ideal substitutes . . . and so much *better* for them.'

And you know what? I've had enough of being condescended and dictated to. I've had it up to here with her winking wart too. I'm going to say something.

'Molly's glucose intolerant,' I announce. Not exactly openly rebellious, but I'm standing my ground. Sort of.

'What am I, Mummy?' Molly asks, still staring at the party.

'Don't you mean lactose intolerant?' Annabel frowns.

Obviously, I'm not actually sure what I mean. 'Yes, that too, so it's really hard to find suitable things, to be honest with you, Annabel.' I feel my face burn red and turn away, pretending to be fascinated by the cavorting clown.

'Don't worry. There are plenty of alternatives these days. I'll give you a list and you can hit the health-food shops next week,' Annabel tells me.

I want to be anywhere but here, for Molly's sake and for mine. I can ignore Annabel's condescension but not Molly's desperation at missing the party. I'd love to tell her that Fabian's a stupid name, anyway. Stupid boy, stupid party, stupid—

'Oh, hi, Fran.'

I turn to see Natasha standing beside me. Fabian's mum.

'In you go, Molly.' She smiles. 'You're a bit late, but never mind. Here's your badge.' She peels off a white sticker bearing her name in fat orange felt-tip.

Oh God, I'm such a horrible person. There I was, thinking vicious thoughts about Fabian's mum for blacklisting Molly, and here she is, *expecting* her. Molly had been invited all along – the pre-prepared sticker proves it. Seeing the unrestrained joy on her face as she skips off makes everything better for a moment.

But only for a moment because I realise that – *shit!* – we have no present. And it's a well-known fact that the child who turns up to a party without a present faces eternal social oblivion.

'Would you like a drink?' Natasha asks as my head searches for a solution. 'I've brought wine for the mums. The café's

prepared to turn a blind eye as long as we drink out of plastic cups. If anyone from the council turns up, it's apple juice, OK?'

She has a twinkle in her eye. God, I really *am* a horrible person, tarring everyone with the same brush, always thinking the worst of them. I barely know Natasha, but anyone who's prepared to defy the licensing laws by turning the park café into an illicit drinking den is all right by me.

'I'd love a glass,' I say, 'but I've stupidly left Fabian's present at home.'

Annabel narrows her eyes. She probably realises I've made a huge gaff here. 'We bought him the Twenty Questions game,' she says. 'They love educational stuff at this age, don't they?'

I want to tell her – preferably while punching her – that, *no*, at this age they'd much rather stuff marbles up their noses, but I don't.

'Thanks, Annabel, but you shouldn't have gone to any trouble,' Natasha says. 'He still prefers playing with the empty boxes. I thought that stopped at eighteen months.' She laughs and bends down to scoop up her toddler. 'Fabian's still got more in common with little Trist than he has with Quinn, hasn't he, Trist?'

I'd forgotten she has three boys. And look at her: slim, made-up, together.

I shuffle my feet and look at my dirty trainers and ripped jeans. I try to console myself with the fact that, OK, so she looks great, but her children still have stupid names. Strangely, the thought doesn't make me feel any better. Worse, in fact. Why am I always thinking such spiteful things about people?

'Don't worry about the present. Just sit down and relax,' Natasha tells me. 'I'll go and get you a drink.'

As she walks off, Annabel too rejoins her cronies, taking her wart with her. Head Witch Cassie half smiles at me, then looks quickly away. What's she looking so shifty about? Who cares? Molly's happy. And Natasha has just brought me a glass of wine. What more could I ask?

I settle myself on a bench away from the café and watch Thomas do his thing. I take a sip of wine and feel alcohol-tinged relief seep through me. I might still be wound up after Annabel's ridiculous lunchbox conversation, but a few more sips and relaxation will arrive.

I glance at the café and see Cassie, Annabel and the other witches, huddled together, heads down. Who knows what they are talking about? Maybe they're exchanging recipes.

'*Eye of newt, ear of bat, tail of frog, claw of cat. But let's not forget a spoonful of couscous and a handful of bean sprouts. After all, ladies, a healthy balance is so important.*'

But Natasha was a pleasant surprise with her warmth and her wine. Maybe I've been too blinkered. I'm resolving to search harder for like-minded mums when my mobile rings.

'What do you want?' Richard asks. 'The good news or the bad?'

'The good, I guess.'

'I've got you a pair of limited edition GHDs. The new pink ones.'

He pauses, waiting for me to squeal my undying gratitude. Given that I let him down so badly last Monday, I know I should. But I don't.

Instead, I say, 'Lovely. Thanks. And the bad?' Like Richard's hero, Don Corleone, I'm a person who prefers to hear bad news immediately.

'It's been a total disaster. We've got to stay on and do extra groups today and then go back to the office tomorrow morning for a strategy meeting.'

'On a *Sunday*?'

But why am I surprised? It's not as if this is a first.

'I know, I'm so pissed off. And I'm knackered. Couldn't sleep at all last night.'

'Poor you,' I say, trying really hard not to sound sarcastic. I'm wound up now, because if he's working tomorrow, that means I have to go to *his* family gathering without him. In an effort to suppress my growing angst, I tune out of Richard's moan about work and watch Thomas score a goal – an athletic scissor kick that has his teammates burying him beneath a writhing pile of bodies. That's my boy.

'What's happening?' Richard asks, sensing he has lost me.

'Thomas just scored. We're in the park. And Molly's at Fabian's party.'

'Oh, yes, I saw the invitation in her lunchbox last week,' he says absent-mindedly.

'Well, why didn't you show it to me, then?' I snap involuntarily.

'I did!' he protests. 'I put it on top of your pile of papers on the counter.'

'That pile of papers, you idiot, was for the recycling bin.' My voice is raised now.

'What's the big deal?' he shouts back. 'She's at the party, isn't she?'

'Yes, but she very nearly wasn't. It was very nearly a complete disaster.'

'I was only trying to help.'

'Well, in future, you stick to your job and let me do the kids.'

'Fine, I'll remember that next time you're moaning about being bored because all you've got is the kids.'

'*Fine*.'

'Good.'

'*Good.*'

'*Jesus* . . . I'm going,' he says.

And he goes.

'Fuck you,' I say to nobody, draining the plastic cup in celebration of having the final word, even if he didn't hear it . . . and even though he's probably mouthing, 'Fuck you too,' to the air up in Bristol. No, not *fuck you*. He doesn't approve of swearing – apparently, it demonstrates a sad lack of vocabulary. Though he doesn't seem to mind that every other word Tony Soprano says starts with F.

Richard the gangster freak. He has a party trick: name any scene in *Goodfellas* and he'll quote you a line, possibly the entire scene. Although his accent is crap (but I would say that), he's word perfect. Having listened to him over the years, I've become something of an expert by default.

There's a scene in *Goodfellas*: Henry is walking with Jimmy when Jimmy asks, 'Do you think Maurie tells his wife everything?' And in the space of that throwaway remark, Henry *knows* that Maurie is going to get whacked. That's how easily, how quickly, life-changing (life-*ending*) decisions are taken.

It's as quick as that for me too.

No, no, no, I'm not going to whack Richard . . . Not yet, anyway. (*Joking!*)

But I am going to do something. I *know* that I have to sort things out. Now! Not next week, next month, next year, the way I usually tell myself. It's no longer just my sanity that's at stake, but my marriage too.

Look at us: we live in the same house, but we exist on different planets. And when we do come together, it's only to bicker. If I try really hard, I *can* remember when it wasn't like this . . .

Our first date: three hours in some crummy spaghetti

house *laughing*. To be honest, I used to find making people laugh a doddle – all I had to do was read out a menu in a Joan Rivers voice and they were *mine*. But Richard listened beyond the comedy voices. And he looked beyond my plain-Jane ordinariness – five foot nothing, thin lips, flat chest – and fell in love with *me*. And I fell in love with him right back. With his dry wit and perfect timing, he made me laugh until my eyes streamed. And I can remember it like yesterday. All that happiness and laughter . . .

But you know, right now, sitting on this park bench, I can't remember a single funny thing he's ever said.

I used to think he was a bit rock 'n' roll. He did coke, he smoked and drank; a real *fuck-you* spirit, which I loved. Then he caught someone's eye at work and got his promotion. Out went the cool T-shirts that showed off his tattoo and in came the suits and ties that showed off his professionalism. I told him I liked the new him, which I suppose I did. All that winning new business meant he had to put in the hours but that was OK. Back then, he still had excess energy and he'd bring it home and inject it into *us*. And the pay rises and share options got us the big house and the wonderful life.

Ten years ago, when I was pregnant with Thomas, Richard – like Sureya, like *everyone* seemed to be doing – quit smoking. I told him I'd give up too and I did – for eighteen months in total. I endured two smoke-free pregnancies. Yet, while my friend and my husband have remained resolute, here I sit, on a park bench with a cup of wine in one hand, a cigarette in the other. But at least, I tell myself, I did the right thing by my babies. Two gorgeous, chubby eight-pounders, they thrived and grew just as they were supposed to.

Unlike Richard's and my relationship.

What happens to couples when they have kids? How is it that children come between their happy, loving parents, forcing them apart like tiny human wedges? Honestly, Molly and Thomas are everything to me. I wouldn't want to be in a world without them. But where does that leave Richard? Stuck in Bristol, that's where. But what can I say? He may not be where he's supposed to be on this sunny Saturday afternoon, but neither was I last Monday morning.

Pots, kettles, black.

I force myself to smile as his gorgeous daughter bounds towards me. She's waving her party bag in triumph, as if she's just cracked the Da Vinci Code. 'Look, Mummy, look!' she yells, waving a giant yellow cellophane-wrapped monstrosity.

Whooping with joy seems the required response, so that's what I do.

Maisy joins her and they flop on to the grass and dip their fingers into the little sachets of white sherbet they find inside. I look on and wonder what the Sweet Nazis will make of that.

'I've given a box of that stuff to Annabel. Gift-wrapped, of course.'

It's Natasha, and I add mind-reading to her growing list of qualities.

I'm slightly embarrassed that she overheard our conversation earlier, but I bat it away. Instead, I laugh and say, 'They've had a great time. Thank you.'

'They enjoyed themselves all right. Here, have this.' She hands me another filled-to-the-brim plastic cup and adds, 'I need this one myself.'

She drinks hers back thirstily.

'Well, it's over now. Until next year,' I say brightly.

'These bloody children's entertainers are the vilest people

on earth. They hate us mums and they hate our kids even more. They're patronising, dictatorial . . . Mr Punch? Mister Bloody Wanker more like.'

This woman is OK. She's relaxed, she possesses an actual sense of humour, and, ooh, say it really quietly, she swears too!

'I can't believe I waited until the end to have a drink,' she says. 'I'm going back for another. I'll get you another too. Won't be long.'

I'm not going to get the next cup, as it goes. As she walks off, Thomas's game finishes and he trots towards me. 'Come on, let's go,' he urges sullenly – you'd never guess he's just scored six or seven goals. He isn't one to hang around, Thomas.

And I've learnt that there isn't much point in arguing with him, so off we go. I wave goodbye to Natasha, but she doesn't wave back. She looks as if she's about to head-butt Mr Punch, who seems to be taking her to task over the correct way to play musical statues. Best leave her to it.

I avoid eye contact with the witches, still at their table, their heads together. Good luck to them. They can't get to me now. The afternoon hasn't been such a wash-out after all. I've been wanting to make new friends and look what happened. I clicked effortlessly with Natasha, who until a couple of hours ago I'd glibly written off as One of Them. Sometimes it's a wonderful thing to be proved wrong.

For once, I feel as happy as all the other mums look. I decide that when we get home, the kids and I will bake cakes or do some painting. Or maybe we'll just play *Duke Nukem*. Who cares? We're going to have fun, even if it isn't of the PC variety.

Even the argument with Richard doesn't bother me now.

No, that was a positive thing. It sparked my resolve to change. And I'm going to stick with it: bake cakes, paint pictures, sort out my life. In that order, obviously.