FOOLISH HEROINES

June Wentland is an ordinary woman who believes that extraordinary things can happen if you keep your eyes peeled and your heart open to new possibilities. She grew up in Hull, moving to Manchester and Bristol before settling in Wiltshire. June has worked in community development and outreach for libraries as well as being a rather lacklustre waitress and on an assembly line sticking tassels onto lampshades.

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Foolish Heroines

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For all my family – to those who've gone before,
those who'll follow and those who are alive and kicking.

I hope Nick, Louise, James, Niamh, Jamie,
Daniel and Leo won't mind a special mention.

Chapter 1

When Janina Reston touched Owen Reston's arm and her hand passed straight through it, it only confirmed what she'd suspected for some time – her partner was simply a figment of her imagination. He wasn't really there at all. She wondered if he'd ever been real and, if so, whether he'd disappeared all in one go or whether it had happened gradually, bit by bit.

She had an acquaintance whose husband had vanished in the supermarket. One minute he was walking down the aisle between the cream crackers and the packs of lager, and the next he was gone. He'd undressed, leaving his clothes and shoes in a neat pile. Then he'd dived into the salty depths of a deep freezer amongst the battered cod and the new crabmeat fish cakes, never to be seen again, tossed about for infinity on the tides of consumer capitalism. Missing, presumed dead.

Owen had been looking increasingly transparent since the jumper incident. The question was, who'd put the jumper on to boil wash? Who'd committed the sin? *Wash with care in cool water*, the label said, delicate. A sure candidate for programme J: *suitable for hand wash items with a crease guard and a gentle spin*.

The jumper had hung from her hand like an unexpected blossom, an out of season bloom, defying horticulturalist theory. It emitted an aura of novelty, a self-conscious exclamation mark at its own existence. Perfectly circular drops of water clung to the surface, resisting its pull but inevitably absorbed by it.

"What the fuck's that?" Owen asked as he and Janina stood in the kitchen. "Is it my jumper?"

Janina leaned against the sink and weighed up the possibilities, the jumper still hanging from her hand like a question for which a solution must be found.

When objects, or people for that matter, went through such drastic change could they really still claim to be what they'd originally been? How many married individuals were still the same people they'd been on their wedding day? Did that annul the marriage? Janina and Owen stared at the offending piece of laundry, still steaming from the hot wash. Neither could quite draw their eyes away from it.

"Do you want it to be?" she asked. It was a philosophical question but he took it as an insensitive reply.

"What do you think?" he said.

"I think you put it in with the fast colours." she said. "Or it could have got put on with the boil wash."

The impasse couldn't go on forever in such a small kitchen, so Janina walked out into the garden. A few birds sang in the newly blossoming trees, pinprick specks of delicate colour, gently piercing the cool air; the trees' roots like wooden toes entwined affectionately or engaged in a hidden power struggle beneath the grass. Concealed beneath Janina and Owen's conversation had been the unsaid implication that, somewhere along the line, she was to blame for the jumper. As if, at some point, she'd been duped into signing a contract with unreadably small print that made her responsible for any shrinkages or mishaps that took place within the womb-like confines of the washing machine. Any mistake would be viewed as collusion between woman and technological hardware.

She draped the jumper over her shoulder while she

pegged out the other washing on the old rotary clothesline. Her daughters, Lidka and Eve, were playing a square-less game of hopscotch on the overgrown triangle of lawn at the side of the shed.

In each small city garden, clean washing flapped a circular journey to nowhere. Each garment hung, expertly positioned, to optimally exploit the breeze – pegged to perfection. The jumper struck an incongruous note of error, swinging and clinging in its carefree way.

How had she come to be standing here on such a sunny Sunday afternoon? Once she'd been a schoolgirl choosing positions carefully – attempting to work out the rules like a complicated knitting pattern. She tried to learn the abbreviations for what society said was right – pleasure through tact not tactile delight. There were a few men for whom she'd almost learnt the womanly crafts. She would have taken rich ripe fruits and stirred them to a syrup in heavy saucepans until, with her own magic, she altered the state of the fruits into a globulus, sticky, sticky, sweet, sweet jam. A domestic quickstep of fulfilled desire. She would have learnt the ancient skill of darning, divesting the passage of time with a perpetual state of newness, and smoothing the wrinkles out of hours with calm, competent hands. If they'd tired of her she would have taken the attributes of other women and painfully appliquéd them in neat suppliant stitches to her own skin.

She could have become the sort of woman who actually puts whites in the white wash instead of everything on programme D, who makes custard from eggs and milk instead of ready-made cartons, and drinks strictly herbal tea. She'd baulked at all this but, somewhere along the way, she felt she'd compromised; abdicated responsibility for her

own future. In a sense she'd given away her soul. Now, here she was in her thirties without a soul.

Were souls circular too – like the drops of water on the jumper? A friend once told her about the increasing size of her cervical cap. She'd started with a small one at the age of eighteen and then, with progressive pregnancies expanding her cervical circumference, she'd ended up with one the size of a bowler hat. Did souls shrink in direct proportion to the expansion of cervical circumference? The circle of the cervix rubbing against the circle of the soul? The healthy red corpuscles pulsing round the rim and hollowness through the centre?

Oh, how aerodynamic some women would be if only they realised. What low air resistance they'd have. To what heights they'd be able to soar like self-powered frisbees – cutting sharply, economically, through the soft bloodless substance of other people's dreams.

A sudden gust of wind swept through the garden, grabbing at the newly formed blossoms and whipping at Janina's skirt. It almost pulled her off her feet as the jumper flapped joyously between a pair of grey socks and an off-white sheet.

Chapter 2

"My wife doesn't understand me," Owen said, when he visited the doctor a few weeks later. Owen wasn't sure what made him come out with such a statement when he'd really come about a sore throat. And especially when he knew, full well, that Dr Jelf was a personal friend of Janina's.

Ever since the jumper incident, Janina had been acting very strangely. She hardly engaged with him at all.

"If I'd had a dose of penicillin for each time one of my male patients told me that their wife didn't understand them," said Dr Jelf. "I'd be in big trouble if I contracted a rare tropical infection."

This remark was lost on Owen. Lots of Dr Jelf's remarks were lost on people, partly because of her obstinate fluency in Latin. She used it liberally in general conversation, otherwise the years she spent learning a dead language at school would have been wasted.

"She says I don't exist," said Owen.

"When did the symptoms start?" asked Dr Jelf.

"Since she shrank my jumper," said Owen. "Although when I think about it, she's always been a bit unusual."

"Not your wife," said Dr Jelf. "I mean you. Let me have a look at your tongue."

Owen was about to ask what his tongue had got to do with his wife's rather individual character traits but decided to comply instead. Celia Jelf peered at it in what Owen considered to be a censorial manner before dismissing it without thanking it for putting in an appearance or giving

a verdict on its condition.

"Take these tablets three times a day," she said, scribbling a prescription and giving Owen a smile that was as inscrutable as her handwriting. "Maybe they'll make you a bit less blurry round the edges."

"Outrageous," said Owen as he headed for the door. He didn't have the energy to explain whether he was referring to Dr Jelf's comment or her appalling handwriting or both.

"It was a joke," said Celia Jelf.

"Illness is not a joking matter," said Owen.

"Tell me about it," said Celia.

Owen half closed the surgery door and then, a health and safety officer by profession and by inclination, he felt obliged to turn back into the room. He was staring at a pile of medical journals on a shelf above head height. It was an avalanche of cutting-edge medical theory ready to slice into a patient's head. He nodded towards it.

"An accident waiting to happen," was all he said.

Owen called in at the paper shop on his way home. He took a copy of *Mountaineering Today* from the tidily stocked shelf, which he noticed was well secured to the wall. In Owen's mind there wasn't anything incongruous about being a health and safety officer by day and a mountaineer in his spare time. Safety consciousness limited and contained the possibilities of danger in climbing whilst climbing pushed the limits of safety measures to their extremes.

When Owen reached home, a tidy end terrace house on the edge of the inner city, he carefully ascended a step ladder and checked the batteries in each of the four smoke alarms while he waited for the kettle to boil. Then he sat down with a cup of tea to look at pictures of unassailable peaks and to read about journeys through inhospitable terrain. The cats,

Gus and Carlotta, locked out and waiting for food, sat on the windowsill observing Owen through narrow eyes – blue as risk assessment forms, cold as mountain glaciers.



"How's that husband of yours?" Celia Jelf asked her old friend Janina, when she went to see her a few weeks later.

Dr Jelf had slightly reorganised her surgery. The medical journals were still in exactly the same position but she'd moved her consulting desk to the other side of the room to keep herself, and her patients, out of harm's way in case the predicted avalanche should occur.

"He doesn't exist," said Janina.

"He disagrees," said Dr Jelf.

"He's a product of my sub-conscious," said Janina. "He's someone I dreamt up."

"Janina," said Dr Jelf, a bit snappily – she'd had a hard day. "Your sub-conscious might have created a man who doesn't exist but Owen does. He has a heartbeat. I'm his GP; I can vouch for that."

"Objects, and people, can exist in some situations but cease to exist in others," said Janina. She was thinking of the undelivered parcel she'd waited at home for all day and which the courier insisted had been delivered. It may well have been deposited somewhere but it had never inhabited the space outside Janina's front door and therefore had no reality within the immediate vicinity of her home. It had been totally vexing. Now, here was Celia Jelf making the same sort of oversimplified assertion. It was all too much.

"You're a doctor of medicine not a doctor of philosophy," said Janina. "Everything is much more complicated than that. If you're going to take Owen's side in this, I'll take my germs elsewhere."

Chapter 3

Having fallen out with Celia Jelf, Janina had to turn to other friends to mull over her problems. Since the jumper incident, Janina had acquired a friend called Gladys. Gladys was a spider. She lived in a web in the corner of the downstairs toilet, hidden in the shadow of the cistern. She was a large black spider and Janina often chatted to her.

Slowly as their one-sided conversations progressed, Janina decided that the spider was a reincarnation of her grandmother. She decided she was wise and sympathetic and that she belonged to the species of spider that eats their partner after mating with them. Eventually, one day soon, after recovering memories from her past life she would speak in human tongue. For some unexplained reason hidden deep in Janina's own psyche, she believed her spider grandmother would speak with a pronounced Italian accent. Unfortunately, Gladys never got the chance to speak as, in a moment of misguided trust, Janina told Owen about her. And one day, in the middle of an argument, Owen flushed Gladys down the toilet.

Janina and Owen faced each other over the toilet bowl. Janina seized hold of the toilet brush, though neither of them was quite sure what she was planning to do with it.

"That was my grandmother you just drowned," said Janina.

"You took more notice of what that spider said than anything I say," said Owen.

"Really?" said Janina. "She hadn't said anything yet. Are you telling me you felt insecure because of a spider?"

"Don't be stupid," said Owen.

"You didn't have to drown her. You could have found something to talk to yourself," said Janina, before adding helpfully. "There're some maggots at the bottom of the dustbin."

"You're a sick woman," said Owen, noticing one of Janina's grandmother's legs – it must have fallen off in the scuffle – still trailing on the toilet seat. He used a bit of toilet paper to plop it into the water below.



The next day Owen felt guilty. He came home with flowers. They were a budget bouquet from *Fatima's Blossom Tree*, the florist's at the other end of the street. He left them lying on the kitchen table, which strongly displeased Janina. How could he just leave them there? She would not accept the flowers without being properly presented with them. After Owen went to bed, she carefully put the blooms in water. She was downstairs before him the following morning to take them back out again. She placed them exactly where they'd been. When Owen went to work, she put them in water again. She couldn't bear to see them die. But still, she carefully took them out of the water before he arrived home in the evening. She did this every day.

Four days passed. The sun rose and waned and the moon sent down its delicate magnetic light, dictating the patterns of the tides around the globe. Leaves fell silently in the garden of Janina's home. The ivy on the walls continued its microscopic advance, slowly sucking the lifeblood from the bricks.

Inside the house, the children and the cats played in the trenches of domestic warfare – avoiding a sniper here, jumping across mined areas in psychological no man's land there – like resigned villagers who have devised cunning techniques of survival on land appropriated long ago by alien super powers.

"If you can't be bothered to put those flowers in water you may as well throw them away," said Owen on the fourth day.

"I hope no one was expecting them," Janina said as she dropped them into the dustbin. But Owen had already gone.

The Earth continued its slow inevitable rotation. The clock ticked on. One of the cats meowed for more food. The exchange rate of the pound sterling fell in relation to the euro by one Polish złoty. The petals added droplets of colour to the potato peelings in the bin.

That night Janina had a dream that Gladys came back as a ghost. In the dream, Janina was trying to flush a very obstinate tampon down the toilet. Every time she pushed the button the tampon just got bigger and bobbed about in the water in an even less surreptitious way.

There was a queue of men outside the toilet. The men were getting very impatient and started banging noisily on the door. They were grey suited with ties and Janina felt sure they were from the City. She felt equally sure that if they came in and actually caught sight of the tampon, they would all become instantly ill. This would result in the pound becoming extremely unstable and the complete collapse of the Nikkei index.

It was a huge responsibility. How was she to save the whole of the twenty-first century capitalist economic system? And did she want to? She tried tearing a long strand of toilet

paper off the roll and draping it over the tampon but it just pushed its way through, surfacing with apparent glee.

Just as the banging on the door got even louder, Gladys appeared. She was bigger than she'd been when she was alive. She had one leg missing and a look of revenge on her face. She promptly came to Janina's rescue by turning all the men into spiders, mating with them and then eating them. She paused only to ponder whether to mate with and then eat each one individually, or to mate with them one after the other and then end with a large banquet. It hadn't taken her long to decide on the latter.

Janina woke the following morning feeling decidedly happier; having a ghostly Gladys seemed an excellent idea and she started up her conversations with her again immediately. Miraculously, now that Gladys was a ghost, she could speak, or rather communicate, by sending telepathic messages. The trauma of dying a second time had obviously done the trick in restoring her grandmotherly memories.

That evening, after getting the girls off to bed, Janina managed a quick visit to the toilet for a chat with her invisible kinswoman. Her grandmother had never been keen on Owen in real life. She'd noticed that when he and Janina came to visit her on Sundays, Owen wiped his knife and fork on the tablecloth before eating, as if he thought she didn't clean her cutlery properly. As a result, she'd always made sure that he got the fatty bits of meat off the joint. Being drowned by him had done little to change her opinion.

"Letta zat bastard try anda getta me now," was Gladys' first telepathic contribution to the conversation.