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We Are All Made of Glue

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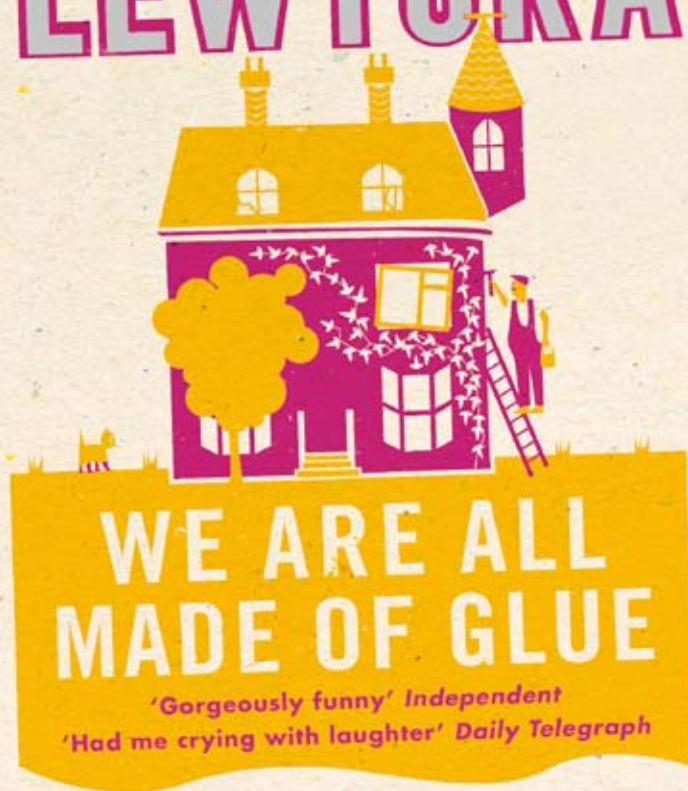
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MARINA LEWYCKA



WE ARE ALL MADE OF GLUE

'Gorgeously funny' *Independent*
'Had me crying with laughter' *Daily Telegraph*

We Are All Made of Glue
by
Marina Lewycka

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I

*Adhesives in the
Modern World*

The gluey smell

The first time I met Wonder Boy, he pissed on me. I suppose he was trying to warn me off, which was quite prescient when you consider how things turned out.

One afternoon in late October, somewhere between Stoke Newington and Highbury, I'd ventured into an unfamiliar street, and came upon the entrance of a cobbled lane that led in between two high garden walls. After about fifty metres the lane opened out into a grassy circle and I found myself standing in front of a big double-fronted house, half derelict and smothered in ivy, so completely tucked away behind the gardens of the neighbouring houses that you'd never have guessed it was there, crouching behind a straggly privet hedge amidst a thicket of self-seeded ash and maple saplings. I assumed it was uninhabited – who could live in a place like this? Something was carved on the gatepost. I pulled the ivy aside and read: Canaan House. Canaan – even the name exuded a musty whiff of holiness. A cloud shifted and a low shaft of sunshine made the windows light up momentarily like a magic show. Then the sun slipped away and the flat dusky light exposed the crumbling stucco, the bare wood where the paint had peeled away, rag-patched windows, sagging gutters, and a spiny monkey puzzle tree had been planted far too close to the house. Behind me, the gate closed with a clack.

Suddenly a long wailing sob, like the sound of a child

crying, uncoiled in the silence. It seemed to be coming from the thicket. I shivered and drew back towards the gate, expecting Christopher Lee to appear with blood on his fangs. But it was only a cat, a great white bruiser of a tomcat, with three black socks and an ugly face, who emerged from the bushes, tail held high, and came towards me with a purposeful glint in his eye.

‘Hello, cat. Do you live here?’

He sidled up, as though to rub himself against my legs, but just as I reached down to stroke him, his tail went up, his whole body quivered, and a strong squirt of eau-de-tomcat suffused the air. I aimed a kick, but he’d already melted into the shadows. As I picked my way back through the brambles I could smell it on my jeans – it had a pungent, faintly gluey smell.

Our second encounter was about a week later, and this time I met his owner, too. One evening at about eleven o’clock, I heard a noise in the street, a scraping and scuffling followed by a smash of glass. I looked out of the window. Someone was pulling stuff out of the skip in front of my house.

At first I thought it was just a boy, a slight sparrowy figure wearing a cap pulled down low over his face; then he moved into the light and I saw it was an old woman, scrawny as an alley cat, tugging at some burgundy velour curtains to get at the box of my husband’s old vinyls half buried under the other junk. I waved from the window. She waved back gaily and carried on tugging. Suddenly the box came free and she fell backwards on to the ground, scattering the records all over the road, smashing a few of them. I opened the door and rushed out to help her.

‘Are you okay?’

Scrambling to her feet, she shook herself like a cat. Her face

was half hidden under the peak of the cap – it was one of those big jaunty baker boy caps that Twiggy used to wear, with a diamanté brooch pinned on one side.

‘I don’t know what type of persons is throwing away such music. Great Russian composers.’ A rich brown voice, crumbly like fruitcake. I couldn’t place the accent. ‘Must be some barbarian types living around here, isn’t it?’

She stood chin out, feet apart, as if sizing me up for a fight.

‘Look! Tchaikovsky. Shostakovich. Prokofiev. And they throw all in a bin!’

‘Please take the records,’ I said apologetically. ‘I don’t have a record player.’

I didn’t want her to think I was a barbarian type.

‘Thank you. I adore especially the Prokofiev piano sonatas.’

Now I saw that behind the skip was an old-fashioned pram with big curly springs into which she’d already loaded some of my husband’s books.

‘You can have the books, too.’

‘You heff read them all?’ she asked, as though quizzing me for barbarian tendencies.

‘All of them.’

‘Good. Thank you.’

‘My name’s Georgie. Georgie Sinclair.’

She tipped her head in a stiff nod but said nothing.

‘I’ve not lived here long. We moved down from Leeds a year ago.’

She extended a gloved hand – the gloves were splitting apart on the thumbs – like a slightly dotty monarch acknowledging a subject.

‘Mrs Naomi Shapiro.’

I helped her gather the scattered records and stow them on top of the books. Poor old thing, I was thinking, one of life’s

casualties, carting her worldly possessions around in a pram. She pushed it off down the road, swaying a little on her high heels as she went. Even in the cold outside air I could smell her, pungent and tangy like ripe cheese. After she'd gone a few yards I spotted the white tomcat, the same shaggy bruiser with three black socks, leeching out of the undergrowth of next door's garden and trailing her down the pavement, ducking for cover from time to time. Then I saw there was a whole cohort of shadowy cats slipping off walls and out of bushes, slinking along behind her. I stood and watched her go until she turned a corner and disappeared from sight, the Queen of the Cats. And I forgot about her instantly. I had other things to worry about.

From the pavement I could see the light still on in Ben's bedroom window and the computer monitor winking away as he surfed the worldwide waves. Ben, my baby boy, now sixteen, a paid-up citizen of the web-wide world. 'I'm a cyber-child, Mum. I grew up with hypertext,' he'd once told me, when I complained about the time he was spending online. The square of light blinked from blue to red to green. What seas was he travelling tonight? What sights did he see? Up so late. On his own. My heart pinched – my gentle, slightly-too-serious Ben. How is it that children of the same parents turn out so differently? His sister Stella, at twenty, had already grabbed life by the horns, wrestled it to the ground, and was training it to eat out of the palm of her hand (along with a changing ménage of hopeful young men) in a shared rented house near York University which, whenever I phoned, seemed always to have a party going on or a rock band practising in the background.

In the upstairs window the coloured square winked and disappeared. Bedtime. I went in and wrote my husband a curt note asking him to come and remove his junk, and I put it

in an envelope with a second-class stamp. First thing next day, I telephoned the skip hire company.

So let me explain why I was putting my husband's stuff on a skip – then you can decide for yourself whose fault it was. We're in the kitchen one morning – the usual rush of Rip getting off to work and Ben getting off to school. Rip's fiddling with his BlackBerry. I'm making coffee and frothing milk and burning toast. The air is full of smoke and steam and early-morning bustle. The news is on the radio. Ben is thumping around upstairs.

Me: I've bought a new toothbrush holder for the bathroom. Do you think you might find a moment to fix it on the wall?

Him: (Silence.)

Me: It's really nice. White porcelain. Sort of Scandinavian style.

Him: What?

Me: The toothbrush holder.

Him: What the fuck are you talking about, Georgie?

Me: The toothbrush holder. It needs fixing on to the wall. In the bathroom. (A helpless little simper in my voice.) I think it's a rawplug job.

Him: (Deep manly sigh.) Some of us are trying to do something really worthwhile in the world, Georgie. You know, something that will contribute to human progress and shape the destiny of future generations. And you witter on about a toothbrush.

I can't explain what came over me next. My arm jerked and suddenly there were flecks of milky froth everywhere – on the walls, on him, all over his BlackBerry. A gob of froth had caught in the blond hairs of his left eyebrow and hung there, quivering goopily with his rage.

Him: (Furious.) What's got into you, Georgie?

Me: (A shriek.) You don't care, do you? All you care about is your bloody world-changing destiny-shaping bloody work!

Him: (Shaking his head in disbelief.) As it happens, I do care very much. I care about what happens in the world. Though I can't say I care deeply about a toothbrush.

Me: (Watching, fascinated, as the gob of froth works itself loose and starts to slide.) A toothbrush *holder*.

Him: What the fuck's a toothbrush *holder*?

Me: It's . . . ah! (There she goes . . . Splat!)

Him: (Self-righteously rubbing his eye.) I don't see why I should put up with this.

Me: (Flushed with achievement.) No one's asking you to put up with it. Why don't you just go? And take your bloody BlackBerry with you. (Not that there was the slightest chance that he'd have left *that* behind.)

Him: (Hoity-toity.) Your outbursts of hysteria are not very attractive, Georgie.

Me: (Lippy.) No, and you're not attractive either, you big self-inflated fart.

But he was attractive. That's the trouble – he was. And now I've well and truly blown it, I thought, as I watched Mrs Shapiro pootling away up the street with his precious collection of great Russian composers tucked away in her pram.

Pheromones

I was sitting at my desk, staring at the rain and trying to finish off the November edition of *Adhesives in the Modern World*, when the skip lorry arrived. Adhesives can sometimes, I admit, be quite boring, so it was nice to be distracted. I watched it reversing and clanking into position, lowering the chain loops to winch up the overflowing skip, dangling it in the air with the damp spare mattress, the dishevelled papers, limply flapping magazines, the bin bags of clothes and the boxes that contained all the soggy detritus of his Really Important Work, and crashing it down on the back of the truck with a satisfying thud. When it was ready I went out and paid the skip man, and I must confess I did feel a pang of extreme apprehension as it trundled out of view. I knew Rip would be furious.

When he'd got back from work that day – the day of the toothbrush holder – I'd calmed down but he was still in a rage. He started piling up his stuff in his car.

Me: (Nervous.) What are you doing?

Him: (Stony-faced.) I'm leaving. I'm going to stay with Pete.

Me: (Clinging. Pathetic. Despicable. Self-hating.) Don't go, Rip. I'm sorry. It's only a toothbrush holder. I'll put it up myself. Tell you what (little giggle), I'll learn to do rawplugs.

Him: (Clenched jaw.) But it's not just that, is it?

Me: What d'you mean? (A terrible truth dawns on me.) Are you . . . ?

Him: (Sigh of boredom.) There's no one else, if that's what you're thinking. Just . . .

Me: (Relief.) Just . . . me?

Him: (Looking at his watch.) I'd better get going. I told Pete I'd be there at seven.

Me: (Feeling like a despicable worm too low even to crawl out of its miserable hole, but putting on a show of non-chalance.) Fine. If that's what you feel. Fine by me. Give my regards to Pete.

Pete was Australian, Rip's squash partner, and a senior colleague on the Progress Project. We called him Pectoral Pete, because he always wore tight white T-shirts and big white trainers and made loud jokes about lesbians. In spite of that, I quite liked him. He and his wife Ottoline lived in a tall-windowed house overlooking a square in Islington, with a top-floor flat that they sometimes rented out. I went and stood outside one evening, looking up into the lighted windows. They couldn't see me standing down there in the dark with tears pouring down my face.

It lasted for a few weeks, the crying phase. Then rage took over.

'I'll come back for the rest of my things,' Rip had said as he left.

But he didn't. The shoes in the hall – I gave them a kick each time I went past – the old clothes in the wardrobe – they still carried a faint whiff of him – the back copies of the *Economist* and the *New Statesman* stacked up against the wall, the filing cabinets bulging with progress. Even his used underpants he'd left in the laundry basket. What was I supposed to do – take them out and wash them?

I didn't want him cluttering up my new independent life with his old discarded stuff. I'll be fine, I told myself. I'll get over it. I'll meet someone else. And just to convince myself that I really meant it, I hired a skip. Perhaps I should have taken it all to Oxfam, but I didn't have a car and it just seemed too complicated. And besides, if I had done, this story might never have been written, because it was the skip that brought Mrs Shapiro into my life.

About an hour after the skip had gone, the doorbell rang. So soon! I stood frozen, paralysed by the enormity of what I'd done. I listened as the bell rang again, a long, persistent, I-know-you're-in-there ring. No, best not to answer it. But what if he looked in through the window and saw me standing there? Maybe I should take my shoes off and silently sneak up to the bedroom. But what if he looked in through the letter box and saw me creeping up the stairs? What if he saw my silhouette in the window? I tiptoed into the corridor, lay down on the floor out of the sight line of any of the windows, and held my breath.

The doorbell rang again and again and again. Obviously he wasn't fooled. Then the letter box clattered. Then silence. As I lay stretched out on the floor watching the light fade from the windows, I could feel my heartbeat slowing down and my breathing getting calmer. After a while, a song drifted into my head.

'You thought I'd lay down and die. Oh no, not I! I will survive!' Gloria Gaynor. It was one of Mum's favourites. How did it go? *'At first I was afraid, I was petrified.'* I started to sing. *'I didn't know if I could something something without you by my side . . . something change the locks . . . I will survive!'* I'd forgotten most of the other words, but I still knew the chorus, *'I will survive! I will survive!'* I belted it out over and over again.

That's how Ben found me when he got back from school, lying flat on my back in the corridor, singing at the top of my voice. He must have let himself in so quietly that I didn't hear the door; then I looked up and saw his face looking down at me.

'Are you all right, Mum?' His eyes squinted with concern.

'Course I am, love. Just . . . enjoying a musical interlude.'

I clambered up from the floor and looked out of the window. The street was empty. It was raining again. There were no signs the skip had ever been there apart from a few shards of black vinyl on the road. Then I noticed a leaflet on the doormat. Ben picked it up curiously. *The Watchtower. Watch and pray for ye know not when the time is.*

'What's this about?'

'It's the Jehovah's Witness magazine. It's about the end of the world, when Jesus returns, and all the true believers get whisked up to heaven.'

'Hm.' He flicked through it, and to my surprise he stuck it in his pocket and clomped upstairs to his room.

What a shame. I could have done with a comforting heart-to-heart with some nice Jehovah's Witnesses.

The doorbell rang again as Ben and I were about to sit down for tea. Ben answered it.

'Hi, Dad.'

'Hi, Ben. Is your mother in?'

Nowhere to hide this time. I had to face him across the table. Pectoral Pete was with him. They were both wearing their jogging gear. They must have run all the way over from Islington. I could smell the sweat on them. The whole kitchen reeked of pheromones, and I felt a mortifying stab of lust – my traitor hormones letting me down just when I thought I was beginning to get things under control.

Him: (Pulling back his chair and stretching his legs out as if he owned the place.) Hi, Georgie. I got your message. I've come to rescue my stuff.

Me: (Oh, help! What have I done?) It's too late. They took the skip away this morning.

Him: (Eyes round and blinky. Mouth open in a little round O that makes him look like a hooked trout.) You're kidding. (Yes, definitely more trouty than destiny-shaping. Ha ha!)

Me: Why would I be kidding? (His hair seems to have receded a bit, too. Good. He's not as gorgeous as he thinks he is.)

Him: (Disbelieving.) They took the records? My great Russian composers?

Me: (A sly smirk.) Mmhm.

Him: (Even more disbelieving.) My first-fifteen rugby boots?

Me: All the junk. (How can a man who discards his loyal and devoted wife without a frisson of sentiment get all dewy-eyed about a pair of mouldy old football boots?)

Him: (World-weary sigh.) Why are you being so childish, Georgie?

Childish? Me? I picked up a plate of pasta. I could feel that twitching in my arm again. Pete was grinning with embarrassment, trying to bury his face in the *Guardian*. Then I caught the frightened look in Ben's eyes – poor Ben, he didn't need to see his parents behaving like this. I put the pasta down, bolted out of the room and ran up the stairs; I threw myself on to my bed, blinking the tears out of my eyes. I will survive. I will grow strong. I will change the locks. Look at Gloria Gaynor – she turned her heartbreak into a song that sold millions. As I sat there listening to the voices down below, and wishing

I'd kept my cool, an appealing thought floated into my head. I can't sing, but I can write.

In fact I was already halfway there. I had a working title and a terrific nom-de-plume. My mind lingered on a seductive image of myself as a published author, trendy in crumpled linen and a stylish leather bag full of proofs slung casually over my shoulder, jetting around the world with an entourage of poet toy boys. Rip would be revealed to the world as a self-obsessed workaholic, pitifully underendowed, with an insatiable Viagra habit and dandruff. His wife would be beautiful and long-suffering, with a fabulous bum.

'Forget! Survive!' Gloria Gaynor's voice seemed to chide in my head. 'You'll waste too many nights thinking how he did you wrong. Change the locks! Grow strong!'

And to be fair, she had a point. My previous attempts at fiction, twelve and a half full exercise books, were stowed away in a drawer, along with a file of hoity-toity rejection slips.

Dear Ms Firestorm,

Thank you for sending *The Splattered Heart* for our consideration. Your book has some colourful characters and displays an impressive array of adjectives, but I regret to say I was unable to summon sufficient enthusiasm . . .

That sort of thing is bad for morale, and my morale was already low. But it was no use – a seed of optimism had lodged itself in my heart, and the opening lines were already sprouting in my head. There was one empty exercise book left.

The Splattered Heart

Chapter I

It was past midnight when Rick rolled exhaustedly on to his broad, ~~muscular~~ slightly podgy back and casually ran his ~~powerful~~ fingers with their chewed-down fingernails through his thick curly, ~~naturally-blond~~ discreetly highlighted hair.

Okay, I know it's not your Jane Austen. Maybe Ms Insufficient Enthusiasm had a point about the adjectives. I sat staring at the page. Had I developed writer's block already? Downstairs I heard voices in the hall and the click of the latch. Then my bedroom door opened a crack.

‘Are you all right, Mum? Aren’t you having any dinner?’