

Little Judas

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Dad used to have hair. I know because I saw it in the wedding photos. It was really black and shiny like his shoes and there was loads of it all combed back in this big point, like the Count's off *Sesame Street*. But for as long as I could remember he'd had no hair. Well, he had some but it went sideways across his head instead of all over. He wasn't ill, not like Bernadette Lehané's mum. Mum said that poor cow had to wear a headscarf because she was as bald as a coot on account of a medicine that made her hair fall out after she'd had her womb taken away. Dad was just bald.

Then one night he came home with new hair.

Me and Mum were watching *3-2-1*. I really wanted a Dusty Bin, but Mum said that bin was for losers not winners. She was up one end of the settee, her feet under my bum to keep them warm. The air was thick with smoke from a cigarette burning in the ashtray where she'd forgotten she'd lit it. I was eating Tea of the Week: cheese on toast with brown sauce.

'Fuck me, where'd you get that?' Mum said when Dad walked in the front room. He didn't answer. He didn't answer me either when I asked him why.

The new hair was weird. Dull black, not shiny. There was loads of it like in the wedding photos and it was high and round and swept back and up at the sides like when Mum did her hair with the tongs and it had a big swoopy flick at the front. It was like Dad was doing an impression of himself. And it made the house smell because Dad rubbed a cream on his head when he took the hair off at night. The cream smelt a bit like sick, but also sweet, like Anglo Bubbly. I used to love chewing

that stuff; you could blow massive bubbles with it that lasted ages, but I stopped after the new hair arrived. When Dad scratched his head, which he did a lot when he first got it, the hair moved backwards and forwards in one piece. I couldn't take my eyes off it then.

It was better before the new hair. Mum and Dad stopped talking after it arrived. I suppose they didn't talk much before really. When she first showed me her wedding photos, Mum told me I was in them but you couldn't see me because I was in her belly. I felt good about that because I didn't have any pictures of me, Mum and Dad together, so it made the photos extra special. And Mum looked really pretty in them even if she hadn't got married in a big white dress in St Patrick's because Father Jim said she'd committed a mortal sin and couldn't. Mum had loads of hair too, but it was bright like Narnia snow and in a shape called a beehive. Her teeth glowed and her eyes and nails were all sparkly. She looked magical.

But then she said the only reason she got married was because Granddad told her she had to. If she hadn't been in the family way, she would have been able to go to Barbados on a big ship and be a singer. I didn't believe that. For a start, I thought the point of being a grown-up was that you didn't have to do anything unless you wanted to: why have photos taken and smile in them if you *had* to get married? And she still sang, except it was in our front room not on a boat. And, when I thought about it, telling me she only got married because she was pregnant wasn't a kind thing to say. It wasn't as if I'd asked her a question she didn't want to answer, like I usually did. She'd told me for no reason when all I'd been saying was how pretty she looked.

It was Dad who stopped talking to Mum really because she kept laughing at his new hair. Not laughing happy, but like Nadine Brown did when she told me I smelt of cheese. I didn't laugh at Dad. I thought he was a bit brave because he acted just the same as when he was bald the first time Big Nan and Granddad saw his new hair, even though they kept talking to it instead of to him. I wondered what the men he worked with down the bus garage said about it.

I hated my hair because it was bright red and curly, but I also hated having it cut because Mum did it really badly and she always took loads off so she didn't have to do it very often. The worst thing ever was if she cut my hair on a Friday night because then I had to wait until Monday before the others saw it. That ruined the whole weekend. I knew that before I'd even got through the school gates Nadine

Brown and her lot would start and wouldn't shut up all day until they'd made me cry or hit one of them: 'Does your Mum close her eyes when she cuts your hair, Veronica Maloney? Does your ginger hair smell cos you wash it with lard, Veronica Maloney?' I wondered what they'd say if I did the opposite to Dad and went to school one day with no hair. That made me laugh out loud. I imagined walking past them with a big smile on my face and them staring at me with their mouths opening and closing with no words coming out for once, only air. I liked that.

Big Nan was round ours more after the new hair arrived, not just on weekends. When she was there Mum told me to go and play in my bedroom because they were 'talking'. There was no point listening at the top of the stairs or creeping back down them either because she always caught me. In my bedroom I traced my finger over the clowns' big red smiling mouths on the wallpaper. Mum said I was too old for it but I'd helped Dad put the paper up and I wanted to keep it. I wished I was in the circus with the clowns, having fun. Away from everything. Then I started picking my nose and wiping the bogeys on their orange wigs. It made me sad but I couldn't stop.

Auntie Pat stopped coming round though. She was Big Nan's daughter like Mum was. She looked like Mum except her face was more creased. And she wore a massive long white fur coat in the winter and smoked her cigarettes in a holder like Cruella De Vil off *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. She wasn't evil like Cruella though. I liked Auntie Pat because she always threw her big coat around me and hugged me into her, tight, like she meant it. She smelt like the best sweet ever and I never wanted to let her go. And she'd always had a good eye for a meal ticket, according to Mum. I wondered if that was why Auntie Pat worked down the Wimpy bar.

There were no more parties either. For as long as I could remember, Granddad, Big Nan and Auntie Pat used to come round ours on weekends. Uncle Terry never came with her on account of him being self-conscious about his withered hand in company, Auntie Pat said. We had a bar under the stairs, in the shape of a half moon and made of squishy black pretend leather with white plastic twirly stools. I liked to sit on a stool in my nightie and watch Dad do the drinks for everyone. Port and lemon for Big Nan, stout for Granddad, Cinzano and lemonade for Mum and Auntie Pat, pale ale for Dad and cream soda and a bag of Salt 'n' Shake for me. I'd have my drink, eat my crisps and spin round for a bit until I felt sick and had to stop.

It felt good on the stool though.

After a while Mum always told me I should be in bed but I just went to the top of the stairs and sat there until I fell asleep. I knew that once she put the record player on and started singing she wouldn't notice I was still up. Mum forgot to be angry when she sang. I liked that. 'You'd think Karen Carpenter herself was in the room,' Big Nan said. Then Dad would be Neil Diamond and Auntie Pat'd be Barbra Streisand. Then Granddad would sing a song to Big Nan called *I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen*, even though her name was Mo, and Big Nan would tell him he was making a holy show of himself even though you could tell she liked it really.

But one party night after the new hair arrived, I woke up on the stairs to arguing not singing. Granddad and Big Nan were sort of pushing Auntie Pat out of the front door and Mum was shouting after her: 'Don't you ever show your face round here again. You're no fucking good; I should know that by now.' Then Auntie Pat laughed in this snorty way and said: 'That's rich, coming from you.' Then Mum said: 'Coming from me? You fuc--.' Then Dad slammed the door and Mum started screaming at him. Then it went quiet.

Next day I asked Mum why Auntie Pat was no good and she shut me in the coal bunker for a bit, but not before she'd wet-slapped me hard on the legs and said: 'Little girls should be seen and not heard.' That was really stupid because she couldn't see me in there could she, but she could hear me shouting to be let out.

After the parties stopped Mum went to bed early, Dad went out and I watched *Play Your Cards Right*. I missed the parties.

There were some good things about the new hair. Dad took me out more, especially at weekends. On the ferry over the Thames to see Nanny Maloney in Silvertown. When the boat set off loads of gulls flew after it, squawking. Dad said it was because all the water was stirred up and they were looking for food. I used to imagine one of those birds swooping down, getting hold of the new hair in its yellow beak and flying off with it to use for a nest and my Dad looking like his bald self again. But it never happened.

Mum called Nanny Maloney a spiteful old cow because she'd asked Dad if he was sure I was his when Mum got pregnant. That's why she wasn't in the wedding photos. But I thought Nanny Maloney couldn't have meant it because she was always kind to me. I liked going to her flat. And I liked her. She was as short as me for a

start, which no other grown-up I knew was. And she had loads of curly hair too but hers was the colour of candyfloss. And she never laughed at Dad's new hair. But best of all she had a massive Alsatian called Martha that she got as a guard dog after Granpa Maloney got put in the nuthouse and never came out. She let me take Martha for a walk all on my own while she stayed indoors talking with Dad.

I loved Martha very much. She always wagged her tail when she saw me and gave me a big, sloppy lick and let me cuddle her. I didn't feel scared when I was with her. I wished Nadine Brown lived in Silvertown because I bet she wouldn't call me little fatty or laugh at my hair and pink glasses if she saw me with Martha. She wouldn't say anything. She'd just know what it felt like to be frightened for a change.

Nanny Maloney always gave me 20p for sweets when we were going home. She gave Dad money too, but loads more than 20p. Once after we'd been to see her, Dad said he was going to buy some new shoes from Cuffs, a proper shop, not the market where we usually bought them. I held his hand when we walked through the doors. It was big and the floors were all shiny and made of wood.

Dad spent ages trying on different shoes. Twisting his foot this way and that way in the mirror and asking me what I thought without waiting for an answer, just like Mum did. He chose these ones made of pretend pythons. They're massive snakes. I know because I saw one up London Zoo once. It stared at me for ages without moving and kept sticking its tongue out. I was glad the shoes weren't made of real pythons because even though the thought of snakes made me hold my breath until I felt dizzy, it wasn't nice thinking of them ending up on someone's feet. The pretend python shoes were brown and black with goldy bits in them, and a big heel and no laces. I asked Dad if he was going to wear them to work. He laughed but he didn't answer.

When he paid Dad licked his finger and counted each note slowly into the shop man's hand like he wanted everyone to see. I'd never seen so much money. 'Is Nanny Maloney rich, Dad?' I asked. He pretended to laugh and didn't answer again. Instead he said: 'Remember this when you're a grown-up Ronnie: always buy a good pair of shoes and a good bed, because if you're not in one you're in the other. Ain't that right?' He winked at the shop man. I didn't like him because he kept having quick looks at Dad's hair like he thought I couldn't see, with this sort of twisty smile on his face.

For a while Dad took me to the cinema too on Saturday mornings. He always fell asleep, even though he said he was just resting his eyes. I didn't like that in case he never opened them again. So we stopped going.

But best of all Dad took me down the Wimpy loads. I only ever went there on my birthday usually, but Dad started taking me for no reason and he said I could have whatever I wanted, even a Big Bender and chips with loads of salt and vinegar and red sauce from the plastic tomato and a Brown Derby for afters. Once he even took me after school when Marcella Warrington was there for her birthday. I wanted to tell her she could keep her smelly old party, even if Mr Wimpy was at it, because my Dad took me out for my tea even when it wasn't a special day. All I had to do was promise not to tell Mum. That made me feel funny at first but, when I thought about it, if she asked me where I'd been I could just say 'nowhere' or 'that's for me to know and you to find out' like she did. She'd slap me but she wouldn't know my secret.

Auntie Pat always served us if she was working. I felt shy when I saw her again after the fight, but she acted just the same as before it happened. Sometimes her daughter Hazel was there too and Dad and Auntie Pat said we could sit at our own table like grown-ups. I'd rather have sat with Dad. Hazel was two years older than me but she acted younger. She lived across the estate and was my only girl cousin but we didn't play together. She told me once she'd only invited me to one of her birthday parties because she knew I'd buy her a Scooby-Doo Shaker Maker.

'Stop doing that,' I said to Hazel one day after she'd been kicking me hard under the table.

'Doin' what?'

'You know what. Kicking me.'

'I ain't. Your legs are in the way. It's cos they're so fat.'

'They're not in the way; you're doing it on purpose.'

She stuck her tongue out then opened her mouth to show me what she was eating. After a while she started to sing in a baby voice. 'I know somethin' you don't, I know somethin' you don't.'

I tried to ignore her and looked out of the window. There was a lady at the bus stop over the road. Her carrier bag had split open and tins were rolling into the gutter. She was bending down really slowly to pick them up. No one was helping her.

'Oi, Veronica, I'm talkin' to you,' Hazel said.

‘What?’ I looked at her. There were bubbles of spit at the corners of her mouth.

‘I said I know somethin’ you don’t.’

‘No you don’t.’

‘I do. It’s really bad and I know what it is and you don’t.’

‘Shut up, Hazel, you don’t know anything.’ I got up and went to tell Dad about the lady.

Even though I didn’t like seeing Hazel I liked the Wimpy because Dad smiled and laughed there, which he didn’t do indoors after the new hair arrived. His smile reminded me a bit of Martha’s when she growled at other dogs because they both had massive pointy teeth at each side of their mouth, but at least he was happy.

And Auntie Pat never laughed at the new hair like Mum did. And she wasn’t scared of it like I was. I know because I saw her touch it once when I was coming back to the table after having a wee. She was sort of smoothing it down with her hand and then she stroked Dad’s cheek and he held her hand. That made my tummy go funny. I turned around and went back to the toilet before they saw me.

* * *

Then it was all over. I was on my way home from school one day. Loud music was coming from our maisonette. A pounding feeling started in my ears. Mum only put Shirley Bassey on when she was really angry.

I rang the bell. No answer. I tried again, holding my finger on it for ages, but still no one came. I looked through the front room window. Mum was sitting on the settee, one leg crossed over the other, jiggling her slipper and sucking on a cigarette. I knocked on the glass.

She opened the door but didn’t say anything, just went straight back into the front room and sat down. I followed her.

‘I was ringing for ages, Mum. Why didn’t you let me in?’

She ignored me and started blowing slow smoke-rings.

‘Mum?’

I went over to the record player to turn it down but she jumped up and grabbed my arm.

‘Oh no you don’t you little Judas. Leave it alone.’

Judas? He was really bad.

‘What have I told you about emptying your pockets before you put your clothes in the wash?’ She started to open this scrunched up bit of red-and-white paper, but I already knew what it was. A Wimpy serviette. Then she nodded, slowly. My tummy felt sick.

She turned up the volume on the record player even louder, so you couldn’t hear the words properly.

‘How’d you like that, you bald bastard?’ she screamed at the ceiling.

I ran upstairs and into their bedroom. Dad was sitting at the dressing table looking in the mirror and rubbing the cream on his head. The hair was hanging on Mum’s statue of Mary and Baby Jesus in the middle of the table. I wished I had the guts to grab it and burn it on the compost heap like Dad said he’d done with my afterbirth when the midwife told him to get rid of it, but I couldn’t touch it.

‘Dad?’

Silence.

‘Dad?’

Nothing.

‘Dad, Mum knows. About the Wimpy.’

‘Go to your room, Ronnie.’

I didn’t go to my room. I couldn’t stand the thought of sitting in there with the bogey clowns and my Dad next door and that music playing and Mum thinking I was Judas. I went downstairs and out again, to the playground at the centre of the estate. There were only a few kids about so I sat on a swing.

‘Oi,’ said a voice behind me.

Hazel. She must have been sitting behind the bins. Her mouth and chin were covered in ice cream.

‘What you doing?’ she said, sweeping her tongue around her lips.

I ignored her and scraped the toe of my school shoe on the ground. Mum would kill me for scuffing them, but I didn’t care anymore.

‘Oi, Veronica, you deaf as well as fat?’ She kicked my leg then wiped her shoe down my sock.

I looked at her. ‘That day in the Wimpy when you said you knew something I

didn't. What was it?'

'I ain't tellin'.'

'Please.'

'Nah.' She shook her head and put her hands on her hips.

'Please, Hazel, you said it was really bad and you knew what it was.'

'It is and I do.'

'Please tell me.'

'All right. But you gotta pay me first. Enough for a screwball.'

I only had 10p. She still took it.

'I can't remember.'

'Yes you can.' Hot snot tears.

'I can't.' She flipped the coin and put it in her pocket. 'Ain't my fault if I can't remember everythin', is it? I've got special educational needs. Wot you cryin' for, you baby?'

She circled her arms to take in the flats around us. 'Look everyone, there's a big baby cryin' on the swings. Ha ha ha ha ha ha.' She started clapping, fast. '*Cry baby buntin', Daddy's gone a-huntin', Gone to get a rabbit skin, To wrap the baby bun-*'

'Hazel!' Auntie Pat was at the gate to the playground. 'In. Now.'

'*Run, run as fast as you can, You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man!*'

Hazel laughed, climbed over the fence and ran off, still singing.

Auntie Pat walked over to the swings. My heart was beating so fast I thought it would explode out of me and all over her face.

'What's she done to upset you, love? Don't cry, it's all right,' she said. She stroked my cheek then went to hug me.

My tummy turned inside out and back again, like it did on the Scenic Railway at Dreamland, except this time it wasn't because I was excited.

'I'm sorry Auntie Pat, I've got to go.' I jumped off the swing and walked out of the playground. I held my breath until I saw black dots in front of my eyes and the sound went all swooshy-swirly, like when you held a big shell against your ear, but more faraway.

The music had stopped but clothes were falling from the sky when I turned the corner to ours: Dad's shirts, trousers, Y-fronts and socks. Mum was throwing them

out of the bedroom window and shouting.

‘Go on, you can have all the knickerfuckinbocker glories you like now, you dirty bastard. And take this with you n’all.’

Dad’s hair came out. It seemed to take ages to fall, like a black parachute. I felt a bit sorry for it when it landed, all flat and with no head to go on. It didn’t look scary anymore.

‘Stop it, Mum. Stop it, please,’ I said standing under the window.

A few of the neighbours were watching and mumbling, with their arms folded. Kids were turning circles on bikes.

Someone laughed and shouted, ‘Go on girl, you tell ’im.’

‘Mum!’

She stopped what she was doing and stared at me, her shoulders moving up and down as she breathed. She had this funny sort of blank look on her face, like she’d forgotten who I was. It gave me goosebumps. Then she shook herself like she’d just woken up and disappeared from the window but came back holding the Mary statue. The neighbours sucked in air like they’d had a shock but I knew what was coming and I didn’t move.

The statue missed me and broke all over the pavement. Half of Baby Jesus’s face landed next to my scuffed shoes.

Our front door was open and the big suitcase was at the bottom of the stairs. Dad was kneeling over it with the fake snake shoes in his hands. He didn’t look up.

I stepped over the case and went straight up to my room and shut the door. I sat on the bed for a while with my hands over my ears. Then I stood up and got a corner of the bogey paper, sharp, under my nail. I started to pull it away from the wall in long strips with both hands. I didn’t stop until it was all off. I put my nightie and dressing gown in the Snoopy nightdress case Nanny Maloney had given me for Christmas and zipped it up. Then I opened the door.

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