

The Polly Doll Factory

Monday. Your first day on the rota; your week to come to a conclusion. You have the casting vote.

Monday. Anna sits in her armchair in the sitting room, eyes closed, saying her prayers. You slip quietly out to the kitchen to cook the dinner, uninterrupted. But Anna is on red alert. The first sound of a lid on a pot and out she bullets. “Mother, its okay,” you say, “everything’s prepared, you can rest while I get it on with it”. To no avail. Anna positions herself at the sink, washing and re-washing plates, preparing Rufus’ nth meal for the day, tidying up. And there you are, trying to stretch around her for a colander, to wash a spoon, to get a dishcloth. The kitchen’s a warzone.

She *can* do things. Preparing vegetables she can certainly do. Or making pancakes. Take making pancakes. On Wednesday morning she’s inside recovering from a restless night and you decide to make pancakes for breakfast. You prepare the batter and leave it in the fridge to settle. Down for a shower, mouth salivating at the thought of freshly-made pancakes. You wash and dry the hair, nice and leisurely, then back up to the kitchen. The smell hits you as soon as you open the door. “Your pancakes are done,” says Anna, beaming. And there they are – the pancakes, stacked high in the oven, all rubbery, and hardening by the minute.

Then there’s Rufus, her little dog. Anna loves Rufus. And why wouldn’t she? He trails after her everywhere. Where she goes, he goes. A doll of a dog, champagne-coloured with two brown marbles for eyes. “He’s the cleanest dog,” Anna’ll say. Rufus pees regularly in the hall, the bathroom, the kitchen occasionally for a bit of variety. When Anna sees a mess,

she rushes to clean up. “Rufus never does this,” she’ll insist, scrubbing furiously. You keep your own counsel.

“He’s the cleanest little dog. I don’t know what got into him. Must be something he ate.”

So Rufus, guilty as sin, pees everywhere, just as the mood takes him. What’s not to like about this dog? Not to mention when you lie down on the only comfortable seat – aside from Anna’s armchair – both the dog and Anna get annoyed; for doesn’t Rufus always lie on the back of this sofa, exactly where you want to put your accursed head? Rufus growls and Anna consoles him. You hate dogs!

The microwave. There’s a ban on wet dog food, so Anna has taken to putting the dry dog food into the microwave: “The poor wee fellow, he hasn’t had a thing to eat today”, she’ll say. This will be his tenth meal of the day! Rufus is a smart dog: if he ate all he was given he wouldn’t fit through the door. She mixes in with the dog biscuits anything she can find in the fridge – yoghurt, cheese, plum pudding; the meat for the dinner, too, if you don’t watch.

So you hide things. Or throw them out. You get rid of all soft foods that might end up in the microwave; take to hiding the meat up on the very top shelf of the fridge away at the back, with a tub of vegetable spread towards the front as camouflage. But this woman is on a mission. And her mission field is the kitchen.

Thursday morning. Anna is in her chair in the front room, saying her prayers, by all appearances dead to the world so you nip out to do an errand. You’ve only gone as far as the car, when you realize you’ve forgotten your keys. You open the back door and there she is: going like the clappers – she doesn’t hear you on account of not having her hearing aid in – banging around the kitchen, fridge door open, saucepans out, vegetables, working flat out to get the dinner ready. At eleven o’clock in the morning! She was waiting for you to leave the

house. Now she stands, triumphant, with the vegetables prepared, *plus* the steak you'd so carefully hidden, out on the board chopped in half and ready to grill. Six whole hours of vigilance to ensure that the sirloin doesn't end up in the pesky mutt's dish!

She lifts things and puts them away.

"Mother," you say to her Thursday evening, having searched, "The cream for the pudding seems to have disappeared. I was certain we had the most of a carton left..."

Anna takes hold of your elbow, looks you straight in the eye and says *sotto voce*, "I don't like to say this, but that Maureen takes things on me, stuff for her own dog... that's likely where the cream went."

"Mother, I'm Maureen."

"Oh." Flustered, "I didn't mean *you*..."

"Plus, I've no dog." You close the fridge door firmly, loosening her elbow clinch. You have to have the last word on this one. You find the bowl of cream in the hot press later.

Friday. Five o'clock on the button, as soon as she hears the musical sound of a saucepan, out Anna charges and takes up position at the sink, elbows out, ready for battle.

"Mother," you say, "Why don't you go into the sitting room and have a rest, you've already prepared the vegetables?" You lift the lids one by one to show her.

"I want to help," she says

"You can do the dishes after," you say.

"Okay so. My back is killing me."

She wants to sit down? So why is she out in the kitchen annoying you? What is she trying to prove?

You heat the plates, serve the food and call Anna. She has just settled into her seat when she notices Rufus, looking at her with his two big brown marbles. Up she jumps. “I must get something for Rufus, the poor wee thing, he hasn’t eaten all day.” She hurries about, moving as fast as joints allow. She pours some nuts into the dog dish, then cuts up some of her own meat and potato to mix in with his food, swishes the whole mélange around with her hand. You do some deep breathing.

It’s not easy to have a conversation with Anna.

“How are the children?” she asks.

“They’re good. Rebecca is in Paris.”

‘Mnn?’ She can’t hear without the hearing aid. You have to say everything twice.

“Rebecca is in Paris,” you shout. Talking is a strain.

“The weather is dry, that’s a good thing.” Anna wants a conversation. “And how are the family?”

“They’re good. Rebecca is in Paris”. You make the effort. “She’s teaching English.”

Afterwards Anna spoons out the pudding, giving you the larger portion. She insists on doing the wash-up by herself, tells you to go in and sit down.

You ring Blathnaid.

“So how’s mother?”

“Oh, you know...the kitchen! Plus, she won’t wear her hearing aid. So hard to have a conversation.” You keep your voice low. “She asked me yesterday if I was related to her.”

You’ve visited the new home in Carrick. Very clean. Lovely staff. You have to make a decision soon.

Anna is suddenly in the room with a hot water bottle. Could she have been listening?

“She’s just brought me in a water bottle for my knees?” you tell Blathnaid.

“She won’t wear the long Johns I bought her, says they’re for old people.”

Without warning, the sitting room door snaps open again and Anna is back in the room.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

You say, ‘no thanks’, but Anna doesn’t move.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Blathnaid... she’s coming back tomorrow.”

“What are ye talking about?”

Is she aware of the Damocles sword over her head?

That evening you both settle into the sitting room, you with your book, head resting on Rufus’s favourite spot; Anna with her beads. You reflect on your life back in London, longing to be back: to your ballroom dancing, meeting up with friends. You’re here less than a week, and already you’re suffering from cabin fever. You have to come to a conclusion soon; you have the casting vote.

You glance at Anna. She’s sitting there, newspaper on her lap; looking into the middle distance. She drums her fingers on the arm of the chair as if deep in thought, as if planning tomorrow’s trip to town or a visit to a friend, or some problem she must solve, some plant she must buy. But she’ll do none of those things.

You turn on the telly.

“Can you turn it up,” Anna asks. You turn it up.

At the ad break, she says: “Where is that happening?”

“India and Thailand.”

“Isn’t it sad for those people?”

“Very sad.” And then you both talk about the tsunami – or rather you talk and Anna sits engrossed, delighted to be having a conversation; to be connected.

Anna spreads the sheepskin cloth over her knees, lifts Rufus up onto her lap and strokes him. You bring up the old days: how Anna met your father; how, when he was at college, Anna went to work at the Polly doll factory, the money was needed.

“I hated working there.”

You know that. The other girls there – town girls – were coarse, foul mouthed.

“It’s not that I was a snob. Just that the other girls, well, they were very rough.”

You say nothing.

“There was one nice girl there, I made friends with.”

Maria was her name.

“I liked Maria but I hated being there.”

Yes, you think, because the other girls were the wrong sort.

“The manager used to call us his Polly dollies. Maria said he had a thing for me.”

Wait a minute! This was new. You’ve not heard this before.

“He paid me a lot of attention. Always showing me how to do things.”

Your heart skips a beat: a middle-aged manager showing a pretty country girl extra attention?

“Then, one day he asked me to come into his office. To help with filing, he said. There’d be extra money.”

You’re holding your breath.

“He tried to kiss me, the dirty blackguard.”

A married manager sets his sights on one of his workers, a teenager. Oh, my God!

“He was stroking my hair, hands all over me. He kept on trying to kiss me but I wouldn’t let him. The rascal.”

All the while she's talking, Anna's face is flushed. It's as if she's back there, defying this manager who had his eyes fixed on one of his Polly dolls.

"I hated the place. In the end I just said I was leaving. And I left."

For the first time in your life, you consider the possibility that your mother's life could have taken a different path; that you might never have been born.

Saturday morning – one day left.

Anna is in fine form, having slept well.

"Look at the daffodils," she says, looking out at the miniatures in the window box, "aren't they lovely."

You feel good. "I love spring," you say.

"Isn't it wonderful too, how they come up every year. You know, they die down and then the next thing up they pop again a year later. Year after year."

"Yes, it is amazing," you say.

"How is it that they come up again every year? How does it happen?"

Anna has her hearing aid in. You talk to her about first beginnings, the big bang, the evolution of life; and suddenly you're back talking to your own children when they were little.

"Some say that all there was at the beginning was a tiny point, that built up so much energy it exploded. It exploded and everything that is in this world was shot out from that tiny point of singularity. This planet was made up of fragments from that explosion. At this stage there was no life. Only water. Gradually the water subsided. And during one particularly bad storm life emerged. At first only fish."

Anna looks at you with the openness of a child, as you unfold the heretical tale of the evolution of plants, animals and man; listening to the words; feeling the excitement in your voice; overjoyed to be part of a conversation, to be engaged, involved.

“Then came lizards, dinosaurs and primates. Then us. And along the way, all along the way, plants.”

“It’s amazing the way they come up every year the same as before,” Anna says.

Here’s a woman who can’t remember what she did five minutes ago and yet she’s full of wonder about life on earth.

“Plants like us need light and food. They grow from a tiny seed and like us they die. The plant that comes up this year is related to, but not the same as, the one last year.”

“I’m nearly ninety,” says Anna, “I can’t believe I’ve lasted this long.”

“You’re a great age,” you say.

“My memory isn’t good but apart from that I have a good life.

“You have.”

“I’m not ready to throw in the towel yet,” she says.

“And why would you?” you say.

As you drive through the lush Tipperary countryside en route to the airport and home, the sun is beaming; everything appears fresh and bright and brimful of life. The moment has been rescued. No need to make a decision yet.