

Jeanette O'Shea

THE GIRL AT THE WINDOW

I'm worried about getting there late, and making a scene when I arrive, or there being no seats left, and lots of fuss being made to find me a chair, or having to sit on the piano stool, or the kid's table, and feeling really funny and conspicuous, so I'll leave in plenty of time. But what if I'm too early, and look obvious and desperate, like I'm the only one who doesn't have a life, and have to make small talk with Imogen while she's whipping cream and arranging pate on neat little serving trays, and I have to ask is there anything I can do, and she says yes set out napkins or put crackers on trays and when the others arrive I end up serving dip and chunks of carrot and celery because that's how they found me and I spend the evening like this instead of acting like a real guest.

But what if I get to the suburb in plenty of time and can't find the house and have to pull over to look at the refidex which might not be right because it's an old one, and then I drive round and round but just can't find the street and that pit starts to open in my stomach and I realise I have to get to a toilet quick and there are none around and even if I find one you know what public toilets are like and how just being in one makes my insides flip till I think my uterus will fall out, and by then even if I can find the street I'll be in no state to go in and I'll just have to turn around and go home and on Monday I'll have to make up some story for when everyone ask where I got to.

That's it, then. I can't go. I can't possibly take the risk. So I'll have to call them. They'll be getting ready by now. I should let them know. Send my apologies. That's what people do. Send their apologies. Grace sends her apologies. It puts me at the scene. A presence without having to go there.

So what do I tell them? Something came up? That sounds so obvious and fake. They'll know I just didn't want to go, and they'll think I'm antisocial and they'll start to look at me differently and imagine strange things in my personal life that have made me that way and stop inviting me to anything. Which isn't that bad. I hate going anyway. But what if I was the only one not invited and people had to dodge around and invite the others when I wasn't around, or I'd have to feign deafness when they ask in front of me, then I'd have to play invisible when they talk about the fun time they had afterwards and it made my palms sweat and my stomach heave and that thing start up in my chest and I'd have to work from home for another six months. Which is ok with me, but Imogen believes I need interaction. Imogen's fantasy. I interact

fine. I belong to seven different chat rooms. If I could telecommute again, I'd have a better social life.

My grandmother died? They'd all look sadly at one another and feel sorry for me and take me aside on Monday and tell me how sad they are and how they're thinking of me and maybe even have a whip-round for a card and flowers. I'd die of guilt. I'm sick? I ate some bad prawns and will be fine by Monday. Someone'd ask on Monday if I'm feeling better and I'll have forgotten and say what? And they'll realise I was lying. A crisis with Jessie? I could never use her like that. It's personal? Some emergency to do with my personal life occurred. No one will ask for more details. It could be my love life or my finances or my sex organs.

So I'll have to phone and let them know. I hate using the phone, though. It's like putting your hand down a hole in the ground. At the other end could be a treasure or a snake. The voice could be warm and friendly or hostile and flustered and I wouldn't know if they're really busy and I've called at a really bad time or interrupted a fiery domestic and they're about to separate or kill each other. They could be suicidal and just want to talk and I don't want to be the last person to talk to them alive. I can't handle responsibility. Or I could get the answering machine and that's worse than anything else, even worse than answering the door. I have twenty seconds to find the right words and try to make sense and then I forget to leave my name, or I just panic and hang up and people get a series of clicks when they check their machine. I feel bad about that but there's nothing I can do.

I'll email them. They may not get the message till after the party but the effort will be there. They'll see that the personal matter was so pressing that I didn't even have time to phone. I'm at home with email. I only answer when I want to and no one thinks it's weird. And how did I survive before online shopping? Starvation physically forced me into the street. And down to the supermarket. And I had to clench my teeth. And shove that trolley round and round. And it was torture. But I raced home with the bare essentials. Now I hear the delivery man at the door and I only sweat a little and barely have any palpitations at all as I hear him go back down the hall, then I open the door and drag it all inside.

The only mirror in my flat is in the bathroom. It's attached to the wall, so I couldn't remove it, like the others. I covered it with a towel, but curiosity got the better of me, like a view through a stranger's window. So as I step out of the shower, my naked self mocks me. Look at that fat, those legs have no shape, look at those drooping breasts, where do you get off being naked? I prove her

wrong on one count. If I lift my arms above my head, those breasts could be a centrefold. And I've seen plenty. I used to sneak Ray's while he was at work. I could tell the ones he liked best. The pages were dog-eared. If I lay on the bed like that, I could be the way he wanted me. Sometimes I do it still. I forget that Ray's gone, and discover the hand gently smoothing lotion over my curves and bumps, in and out of the hollow of my breasts, is my own.

The bathroom mirror tyrannizes me. I can't start the day without enduring the ridicule of myself. I might just race in to brush my teeth on the way out the door. While leaning over the basin, I catch a glimpse of my cleavage, and find me sneering at myself. You're not wearing that, are you? I take the hint, and change into something looser. I'll remember the Mars bar I had for dinner last night so I can do without breakfast. Myself will comfort me that when I'm smaller, I can wear that top, I'll get around looking like a knockout and somehow Ray will get to hear about it and come back. The authorities will find out I'm stable again and I'll get Jessie back. The bathroom mirror tyrannizes me, but it's for my own good.

My friend Stacey doesn't believe Myself, or the mirror. *How much smaller than size 8 do you want to be?* Stacey's a good friend, but some people just don't get it. I can still pinch up a roll of fat on my thigh. The jeans I wore in high school are still tight. When I walk down the street I can tell people are looking at me, and when I'm slim and pretty I can toss my head and enjoy being watched, instead of shrinking and sweating and apologizing for not doing my share to decorate the world. I'll have the nerve to shine at work, and take credit for what I do, instead of craving camouflage, and get a promotion. I'll be so able and assured and well paid, I'll get Jessie back, and I won't even need Ray.

I'll have that little blonde head to pat at night. A sweet companion to tuck in and read to, take care of and need me. Take for walks and buy ice creams. Once I'm small enough, I can afford the odd snack, and I can always get rid of it later. Like how I cope with the rich food at office parties. I'll be able to wear that top that's waiting in the wardrobe for me. I'll take Jessie to daycare and the other dads will wish their wives were like me, or the single ones will hit on me.

But they won't get anywhere, because I'm not losing Jessie again. They exaggerated it, anyway. *An endless string of men.* Endless months of managing on my own. Jessie's my life, always has been, but a girl gets lonely. A gentle touch, lips on my neck, he whispers he wants me. Soft touch. Someone who wants me. Gentle hands on my body. I can't say no. Then he's gone. I find another to take his place. Because it feels so good. Like water when you're

thirsty. And I don't believe them. I asked Jessie myself, and she told me flat *No, mummy, he never did that. I never said.* They put the words in her mouth. I'd never let that happen. Jessie knows that.

So anyway, things will be different, and with every hunger pang I can just feel the fat falling off me.

Stacey emailed me a picture she took of my building. Now the view of my block from across the street is my wallpaper. Every day, without leaving my flat, I see the people walking their dogs, a couple snogging at the bus stop, the garbos emptying the bins, and one other thing. At a window. Three floors up. The only one with open curtains. A figure looks out on it all. That's me! I sit and stare at this picture for hours. The footpath, the bins, joggers, dog walkers, lovers, old redbrick sixpack, window gardens, patio barbecues ... and me.

The bins look orderly and neat, lined up in their little corral, awaiting collection. The picture doesn't project the stench of rotting food, sitting for a week in the Western sun. You can't see the pieces of heirloom china, smashed to pieces by ground-floor Jim (sounded like he used a hammer) when intoxication made war against his life partner seem a good idea. Nor the conciliatory flowers, effective in their aim and now withered. It doesn't show the litter of drowned kittens. Gaze at it all day, and you won't hear the sobs of distraught children, begging Daddy not to carry out the inevitable.

Another look at my wallpaper. I'm right there! I was never a part of anything in my life, but I'm a part of this. If I weren't where I am right now, the streetscape would be damaged. I belong there and I'm staying where I belong.

If we all stayed where we belong, we'd live a lot longer.