

CONTENTS

THE SIX WHO CAME TO DINNER

I

THE WEEKEND IN QUESTION

45

A LIFE MEASURED IN PUFFINS

113

BILL FLOOD

A grisly tale in three parts

127

EMPTY NEST

217

HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY THINK?

235



THE SIX WHO CAME TO DINNER

‘I heard the bone snap,’ said Theo.

‘I knew at once,’ said Vi. ‘I knew it was serious.’

They turned towards each other as they spoke, tossing the storyline back and forth, relaxed in the way they sat, side by side, on a two-seater sofa upholstered in gold velvet. There were eight people in the room, all of us full of good food, all of us sitting comfortably, in the spacious, dimly lit, well-furnished lounge of our hostess, Miranda Peabody. I had never met Theo and Vi before but they appeared to be a successful, lately young

couple, holding still to the illusion of youth. There was a chance I would know them better by the end of the evening, as it was set to be a long one.

Theo and Vi were in the middle of a story about their walking holiday in the Auvergne; more specifically, the occasion on their walking holiday in the Auvergne when Vi jumped off a wall and broke her ankle. It was a story, I could tell, that they had told many times before, as a couple. They were humorous in the parts that involved their own stupidity or discomfiture:

‘Of course,’ (Theo) ‘my mobile had run out of charge and Vi’s mobile was . . . remind me, darling?’

‘On the bedside table at the hotel. Of course!’ (Rueful smiles exchanged.)

They were sentimental in the parts that involved someone other than themselves.

‘He just dropped the spanner he was holding – I mean, literally just let go of it, not waiting to put it down – and ran to the quad bike, shouting to his wife to call the doctor. His wife said: “I don’t know any doctors because we are never ill, but I will find one.”’

It was a nicely framed story. The brightness of the cold day, the starkly beautiful landscape, the view from the peak where the incident occurred. Just enough detail for us to be able to picture the scene, sympathize with or admire the participants, all the way through to the happy ending: arrival back in the UK with a perfectly set ankle and no more than a few weeks’ worth of impaired

mobility ahead. It was almost possible to overlook the consuming banality of the little tale. All six of us, in the audience, listened attentively to the end. This, though, had more to do with the instructions our hostess had given us at the start of the evening than with the quality of the story and its telling.

‘I can’t bear it when people take it in turns to talk about something that has happened to them,’ she said, over the pre-dinner drinks. ‘For one thing, no one listens because they are busy working out what similar story of their own experience they can start to tell when whoever is talking shuts up. And for another, some people grab more turns in the speaker’s chair and others never get to share their own, just as interesting anecdote.’

There was general agreement. Theo told us the story of a party he had been to where the host spent the entire evening explaining how he had built the house, starting with the purchase of the land and progressing through design, planning permission, foundations, up to and including the fitting of the loo seat and the fixing of the knocker on the front door. Our hostess waited for him to finish then made a proposal, or, rather, dictated a plan for how she wanted the evening to run. Each of us, she said, could tell one story. It could be any story from the distant or recent past and could be as long or as short as we chose to make it. Whatever story anyone else told, we could – indeed should – discuss and comment on.

But we could not use it as a springboard for another. Or, if we did, that was our only turn, gone.

‘We’ll start after dinner,’ she said. ‘That will give you all time to plan in your mind what you’re going to say and leave you free to concentrate on those who go before you.’

As well as Theo and Vi, there was one other couple among the eight of us, Carl and Maeve. They could tell one story each, Miranda said to the couples, or one together.

Now I realize I have set off relating the events of that evening from the point when things began to be interesting: that is, from the first story told. When really I should have begun with the other guests or, more properly, with the hostess. She was a woman in her sixties, familiar to me as a neighbour, but not one of my familiars; someone I had known for some while as a member of the society I mixed with in the village, but she was a private person and, in truth, I knew almost nothing about her. I still don’t, but I do know her to be even more formidable than I had thought her before this dinner party. Of the other people in the room, I knew two of them at least as well as I knew Miranda, had a passing acquaintance with another two, and had never met Theo and Vi before.

The two I thought I knew quite well were Solomon Thorogood and Berenice, whose surname, being Polish, I have never learned to spell or even pronounce; she is

always addressed as Mrs B by the people who don't feel they want to attempt her full name. Solomon is a retired solicitor, a dry man who spends his life indoors and is an expert on Venetian glass. A widower, so I understand. Berenice is also a widow, or at least lives alone; she is very well dressed and fading into old age in an elegant way, retaining a restful beauty. What she says is in keeping with her appearance, sounding well put and meaningful. They are both perfect dinner party guests, if not very interesting ones. By the end of the evening, I would be able to make a much better judgement on both.

The couple I knew only slightly were unlike the rest of us in the room. Carl Turner and Maeve. I don't know Maeve's other name. It might even be Turner. Carl is a gardener and therefore known to almost everyone in this village, where the people who can afford to have other people labour on their behalf greatly outnumber those prepared to so labour. It is a large village; what Carl has to offer is hard to find, and his time is fiercely contested. Maeve is a care assistant at the local nursing home, a converted manor set in its own park. She has a particularly engaging face; round, freckled, wide mouth, fringe of red curls. I have always liked women who look like Maeve. I married one, once. Where is she now, I wonder? Carl is big and solid and has fingers thickened to sausages through years of manual labour in the wet and the cold. Though not so many years, in fact. Both he

and Maeve are younger than the rest of us; a decade younger than Theo and Vi, I imagine. Two decades younger than I am.

Strangely enough – and this must be a credit to Miranda Peabody’s skills as a hostess – it did not occur to me until towards the end of Theo and Vi’s broken-ankle story what a strange collection of guests this was. How odd, that Miranda should have invited two comfortably off, withered old people, a thrusting mid-life career couple, two young people in jobs regarded as low skilled (because the skills they had were useful rather than exploitable for large gains) and me. How shall I describe myself? Middle-aged, middle class, middle income? So I present myself; and the first of these at least is true. My name is Henry.

The funny-but-of-course-essentially-serious story of the trip to France drew to a close. The rest of us, who had been entirely silent throughout, followed Miranda’s lead in implying interest and attention when it ended.

‘I’ve always found the French to be helpful and friendly,’ she said.

‘I’ve never been to France,’ said Berenice, ‘but I would love to go.’

‘I expect you were wearing the wrong sort of shoes,’ said Solomon.

‘I don’t know what would happen to us if Carl broke his leg,’ said Maeve, and he took her hand and shook his head at her as if denying such a possibility existed.

‘That was a good start,’ I said. ‘I’m looking forward to the other stories.’

‘I’ll go next,’ said Solomon. ‘As a contrast.’

The story he told was indeed a contrast. No action, no detail, no weather or landscape. Instead, he chose a dilemma he had been faced with in the years when he was still working. Some years ago, he had been involved in a case of alleged child abuse, acting on behalf of the accused. Two couples – one without children, one with a daughter of eight years old or so – had become close friends. They lived near each other, went on holiday together, the one babysat for the other, they fed each other’s cats and watered each other’s tomato plants and wandered in and out of each other’s houses at will. Until the mother of the young girl accused the husband of the childless woman of abusing her child. The case never went to trial. The accused man was vehement in his denial, supported by his wife. They could only imagine, they said, that the allegations had been prompted by some jealousy on the part of the parents, who had less freedom to enjoy themselves and less money to do it with. Solomon’s client said, in private, that he was afraid the accusing wife was secretly in love with him and had chosen this way of making him notice her. It was possible, his wife said, sadly, that the father of the child might in fact be the abuser and the mother was in denial and seeking someone else to blame.

At length, the authorities concluded that there was

insufficient evidence, and convinced the mother and father to let it go, to avoid putting their child through the ordeal of a trial. When the police, in Solomon's presence, reported this outcome to the accused, they also told him that they had taken note of him; that they would know him again if anything similar occurred in the future. Solomon felt the same. He could not like the man and for all he wished to believe him, he did not. It was a relief to him (and significant, he could not help but feel) that it was the accused couple who moved away, and he heard no more of them.

Some time later, a divorcee with a young daughter, for whom he had acted in the divorce and in the subsequent selling of one house and buying of another, came in to consult him. She was in a relationship, she told him, and her partner was about to move in with her. Marriage was possible. She wanted to know what his advice was in relation to the making of a new will, the ownership of the house. This was a woman he liked. He applauded her good sense in seeking such advice and they talked through the possible advantages and disadvantages of letting the new man in her life be a partner in all her financial affairs. Speaking hypothetically, Solomon laid out the problems that could arise if the man turned out to be unreliable, untrustworthy, fickle. He did not think it likely his client would have chosen unwisely. Until, almost on parting, she mentioned the name of the man who had been the subject of their conversation. It was

the husband accused, some years before, of the abuse of a child of a similar age to his client's daughter. What, he asked, should he have done?

This story was interrupted frequently with requests for clarification, but, with a few detours back over territory already covered, the tale was told and the question understood. There were two or three lamps lit in the drawing room where we sat, and the polished wood and heavy fabrics of the furnishings were so many pools of darkness around the edge. The expressions on the guests' faces were hard to identify, unless they leaned into the light or showed extreme emotion. I looked at Miranda, waiting for her to speak first, and I sensed the others, too, were waiting for her lead, but I could not tell from her face what she thought.

'An interesting dilemma,' she said, finally. 'Professional and compassionate obligations would compel you to say nothing. But if harm came to the mother and her child as a result, you would have made yourself complicit.'

'I think you should have told her,' said Berenice. 'Poor woman, all alone. You can't imagine how hard it is, to be a woman, living alone.'

'Hang on,' said Theo. 'This is someone who has never been found guilty of anything. What would you say? He was once accused of something he probably didn't do? What a way to destroy someone's life.'

'Two people's lives,' Vi said. 'Even if she didn't believe

it, the woman would never feel as safe and happy with the man again.'

'I would say it was none of your business,' I said. 'Who are you to make judgements?'

'You could have kept an eye on her,' said Carl. 'You know, watched out for her, not spying as such, just noticing, if you know what I mean.'

Miranda leaned forward into the light and the expression on her face was puzzling: pleased, but suspicious.

'Well done,' she said to Carl, 'well done.'

'I'll go next,' said Berenice.

'Hold on a minute,' said Miranda. 'What did you do, Solomon? We need this story to have an ending, as well as a beginning and a middle.'

'I said nothing, of course,' said Solomon, smoothing the material of his mustard-coloured cord trousers over his knees as if checking they had been correctly made, with the nap going downwards. 'I'm not quite sure how my young friend here thinks I could have, as he put it, "kept an eye on her", but obviously I made sure she knew she could consult me about anything in the future.'

'Did she?' asked Vi.

'No, actually. Really, I don't know what you're all expecting. This isn't a story in a book where the ends are neatly tied up. This is life. It was the dilemma that interested me; the ethical question. If you must know, the

couple moved away, so I have no idea whether they lived happily ever after or if it ended in tragedy.’

‘What were the names?’ asked Theo, getting his phone out. ‘I could google them and find out if they’ve featured in the news.’

‘I think Solomon would prefer us not to know,’ said Miranda. ‘Over to you, Berenice.’

Berenice’s story was short and yet full of irrelevant detail, most of which I will eliminate. One evening, she said, when it was nearly dark, the wind blowing strongly in the conifers round her isolated cottage, far from the nearest street lamp, there was a knock at the door. She opened it, as far as the chain would allow, and peered through the gap. A man stood outside, unknown to her, dressed in jeans and a waterproof jacket with a knitted beanie on his head and a dog on the end of a lead.

‘I’m sorry to bother you,’ he said, ‘but there is a cat in your gateway and it seems to have been injured in some way.’

He stood back and moved his arm to indicate the gate, lost in the darkness behind him.

‘A cat,’ said Berenice.

‘Yes. I’ll show you.’

Here Berenice’s story moved from the what to the why, from action to analysis; that is, the man’s possible motives for wanting to lure her, a lone, defenceless woman, out of the house. Stepping across the threshold would have put her in his power. Any attack hidden by

darkness, any cries inaudible above the wind, even if – and this was unlikely – anyone was close enough to have heard them. What, she speculated, was he doing, out after dark; was the dog a prop to give him a feasible motive for being there or part of the plot, ready to hold her at bay while he ransacked the house?

‘I thought you said it was a Labrador,’ Maeve said. ‘I’ve never known a vicious Labrador.’

Berenice looked from Maeve, who is quite a solid young person, to Carl, who is positively well built, and nodded, investing the nod and the direction of her gaze with meaning.

‘Ah, but you’ve never been in my position,’ she said, ‘alone, and vulnerable,’ dropping her voice on the last word.

Maeve looked puzzled, as well she might, but Berenice was back on her doorstep, enjoying herself. She was an animal lover, she said, and would be prepared to risk limb or indeed life if the situation arose where either of these could be effectively sacrificed for the removal of pain from one of God’s little creatures. But in this case, she was quite clear that God would not have expected her to offer herself up for a possibly mythical cat which might or might not be injured. So she said to the man with the Labrador and the knitted hat:

‘I don’t have a cat,’ and shut the door.

There was a pause during which Berenice looked

smug and no one spoke. It was not clear whether the story was over or, if so, what had made it worth telling. It turned out it was not over and the pause was for dramatic effect.

‘The next morning,’ said Berenice, ‘I went down to the gate, and what do you think I found?’ No one offered to speculate, so she told us, with a note of triumph in her voice. ‘A dead cat!’

It crossed my mind to say the story was a dead end, but it was not a flippant gathering, so I kept quiet. No one else could think of anything to say, either, or nothing they wished to say out loud, except for Maeve who murmured: ‘What a shame!’ which was ambiguous enough to suit all of us.

‘Thank you, Berenice,’ said Miranda. ‘Now, Henry’ – turning to me – ‘would you mind topping up everyone’s glass, then I think we might have your story.’

I have a few stories I tell, carefully selected, edited and embellished, for just this sort of occasion. It means I can join in a conversation when I feel it is appropriate without finding I am revealing too much about myself by carelessly launching into an anecdote I have not reflected upon and thought through. I selected one of the humorous stories, as the dark night, the menacing figure at the door and the dead cat had left a gloomy taste on the palate. So I set off through a little tale involving a lift in an apartment block in Rio de Janeiro stuck for four

hours between two floors. I described the people with me in the lift: the grandmother and her granddaughter who had been shopping for a party and took up, with their bags and boxes and not insubstantial bodies, the space of four people. The British boy on a gap year, wearing flip-flops and showcasing a bad attack of fungal nail infection on his right big toe. The American evangelist who was wearing too many clothes and whose bald head had started to drip even before the lift stopped moving. The two workmen who had been going up to paint the penthouse, one of them with a speech impediment, who had entered last, just squeezing themselves and their pots and tool-bags into the space available. And me. I described the way the conversation started, quite hesitantly and in at least two languages, then became general, ultimately jovial as the grandmother and the teenage girl concluded that the party might as well start early, and the bottles of red wine and the salty snacks were circulated. By the time the lift moved and the doors opened, the younger of the two painters and the granddaughter were writing each other's phone numbers on each other's bare arms; the grandmother was teaching the American the Portuguese word for everything within her eye-line, which, as she was now sitting on the floor, consisted mainly of parts of the body; the gap year student and I were seeing how many opening chess gambits we could remember and articulate clearly; and the painter with the speech impediment

had nearly completed a painting of a mermaid on the inside of the door. The last of the bottles of red wine was empty and the authority figures gathered in the lobby, pressing forward to see if we had sustained any injury, were pushed aside by a group of people conscious only of their bladders, and were left contemplating a craggy landscape of empty snack packets.

At the end of this story, which had bemused Berenice ('But what were they going to give the guests at the party?') and irritated Solomon ('I don't know why anyone would waste their time travelling to places where you might know the lifts won't work') but amused the others, Miranda said:

'I wonder how much of that is actually true, Henry, dear.'

'Enough,' I said, having too much respect for Miranda to pretend it had all happened just as I described it.

Carl and Maeve had a story each. Before they began there was a flurry of movement, further topping up of glasses, trips to the loo. Theo and Vi, I noticed, were showing a tendency to have conversations with each other at a level just above a whisper but below audible. I was interested to see if, having had their ten minutes in the spotlight so early in the evening, they attempted to leave before the rest of the group had had their turn. Miranda must have made the same observations, and took Vi off into the kitchen on some pretext. When they came back, Vi murmured something to Theo and they

settled back down as if the idea of abandoning the party had never crossed their minds.

Maeve went first and was brief.

‘I don’t really have a story,’ she said. ‘Nothing interesting or exciting has ever happened to me. At least’ – she looked sideways at Carl – ‘nothing I’d want to talk about in this company.’

Her eyes were beautiful, hazel, oval and thickly lashed.

‘Nothing that didn’t involve alcohol,’ Carl said.

All of us except Solomon and Berenice smiled politely.

‘So I’m going to tell you about something that really pleased me, in the home where I work,’ said Maeve.

‘Something that pleased you is perfect,’ said Miranda. ‘And it will be a story, I’m sure.’

‘Well, it is, in a way.’

She told us about a woman with dementia who had moved into the home, because her husband could no longer manage. At first, she was unhappy and restless. She would not participate in any of the activities organized by the home for the residents; in fact, she did her best to disrupt them, throwing pieces of jigsaw on the floor, attempting to puncture the giant inflatable skittles, tearing up the pictures laid out to be the basis of memory boxes. Her husband, who visited every day, was told all this by the staff and he said, quietly, for he was a quiet man:

‘She wants to be useful.’

The next day he brought in a laundry basket full of

socks. Individual socks, in different colours and patterns. Putting his hand on his wife's arm, he said: 'Help us with these,' and she did. For the first time she sat quietly for more than an hour, carefully selecting a sock, searching through the basket for another sock to match it, putting them together. When she had finished, her husband kissed her.

'Thank you,' he said.

The next morning, while the other residents sat in a circle singing or trying to sing or pretending to sing or just sitting while others sang, Maeve emptied the cutlery out of the drawer and muddled it up.

'Can you help me with this?' she said to the woman who had sorted the socks. 'I seem to be in a mess.'

The woman put the forks, the knives and the spoons back, in order, in the drawer. The husband brought something in every day for his wife to help him with – putting the right lids with the right empty jars, putting the photographs of their children growing up in the right order, sorting out the seed packets. Whenever she became angry, the staff found something for her to do that they could claim was helping them: tidying a cupboard, separating the pieces of two different jigsaws.

Maeve became slightly pink as she spoke. I could see it was not going to be easy for her to bring this little tale to a close. There could be no happy-ever-after for the man and his wife, yet most of her audience was watching her, maybe more fixedly than she had expected, as if

hoping for something to come out of it that was more than a moment or two of peace for a damaged brain. She had not understood, I think, that her story would not be heard from her point of view, from the perspective of a carer admiring the ingenuity of the husband and the compassion of the staff. Though Theo and Vi may have seen it as she did, the rest of us were closer in age to the old woman and her husband than to Maeve, and we could not help but project ourselves forward into this ghastly future where sorting socks was the greatest pleasure we could expect from life.

‘I think it shows,’ said Maeve, reaching for a climax, ‘that we have to remember the person that the person with dementia still is, when we try and help them.’

It was a good call. All of us could agree wholeheartedly with it, and relax.

Carl was equally brisk with a case of mistaken identity. One of his employers had a garden full, for reasons Carl could never understand, of mislabelled plants. A lilac with purple flowers was labelled ‘Madame Lemoine’, when Madame Lemoine has white flowers, and a clematis labelled ‘*viticella* Polish Spirit’, a late-flowering cultivar, bloomed early and had pale-mauve bells in place of the flat, dark-purple heads the name would lead anyone in the know to expect. The garden’s owner was proud of his plants and had become committed to the names he believed belonged to them. He reacted badly when Carl took out his phone and offered to call