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The Party

It was a day she would later remember by the clouds she could see through the kitchen window, clouds restless and drifting across the sky in all directions as if uncertain which winds to obey.

The party had been a success. Just a little more effort, a few more smiles, and now the cake would soon be cut and the pieces wrapped into napkins, added inside the party bags already full of sweets and toys.

'Dentist', Emilia thought to herself. 'We'll need a dentist after this.'

She couldn't say that it was a bad life - a bad marriage, a bad husband, or that her children were bad in any way other than the occasional wilfulness one might expect in five-year olds. It was not that. It was something else. There was something in the air of her neighbourhood, in the summer barbeques and those family weekends filled with cutting the lawns and renovating the bathrooms and taking the

children to ballet. It was in the water, in the food, in the free-range eggs and the imported hummus and the organic grapes with their non-GM seeds still inside. The grapes which other mothers said you must always cut lengthways so that your five-year old twins wouldn't choke on them; those same twins who ran around the garden barefooted and climbed the lone apple tree in one breath and who had chewed on Lego since the day they were born. But she cut the grapes anyway, grateful for the advice, and told the children to put their shoes on and play quietly on the patio.

The party had been a success. Standing hunched over the granite kitchen counter, in her cashmere roll neck and burgundy leggings, she tried to distract herself from the painful awareness of every imperfection exposed to her guests' inquisitive eyes; every unsightly bulge on her body, every undusted surface in the room, every paper plate as yet not cleared away. She could see over her shoulder – see or, perhaps, sense – the polite smiles and stern eyes of the other mothers. It had been a good party; all the party games were a success, the musical statues and pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey and pass-the-parcel, where every layer of wrapping paper contained a bag of sweets so that no child would go empty handed. There must be a consolation prize in every layer, at every turn. You didn't win; but don't cry – here's a bag of sweets for you.

She slid the knife into the cake, her thoughts drifting back to the dentist. The knife split apart the red and blue icing of the Wondergirl's costume. Emilia wondered what the cake tasted like inside, was it almost at its use by date, were the first cracks beginning to show in the vanilla sponge and was the cream starting to dry out? She licked her finger and looked through the window for a moment, her thoughts following the clouds to a different place.

Her husband had chosen the cake. It was not a habit of theirs - for him to choose cakes - any more than it was for her to choose life insurance or stock bonds. But he revelled in today's role: the father of twins, the new man, the one-who-takes-the-recycling-out and buys cakes when emergency strikes. And the emergency had come out of nowhere. She had followed the recipe closely. It'd been given to her by one of the other mothers and it seemed simple enough; and yet half way through the mixing and the sieving and the stirring she had started to cry. The cake wouldn't submit. The taste, the texture, the colour, it was a jungle of mistakes and poor judgements on her side. A sink full of dirty dishes and a kitchen floor covered in a light dusting of flour brought her no closer to having a birthday cake to show the following day. But her husband – you could always count on him. He went out and came back, triumphantly, with the Wondergirl cake, pointing out her super-hero costume: what a great influence it would be on the girls, they agreed. What a great cake. He'd spent the rest of the day calling her my Wondergirl and squeezing her hips every time he walked past, until she'd abandoned the cake disaster into the bin, cleaned the entire kitchen and finally thrown herself down on the living room sofa, away from the Wondergirl and her husband's roving hands.

The dentist had not shown his feelings for her at first. It was her – the thought was shameful, but true – it was Emilia who'd made the first move. God knows where she found the courage to do it, the man had only seen her prostrate on the dental chair, her mouth stretched wide open into an unattractive grimace, her knuckles always white where she was gripping the seat in sheer terror. 'Don't be scared', he used to say to her, as you would to a child. Later, he told her it was her eyes; her eyes had drawn him to her.

For a party to be a success, every ingredient has to be just right. The guests, the decorations, the food, the programme. The entertainer called himself a magician but in reality he didn't do any tricks; he played very loud music and made the children run in circles a lot. He was fat and sweated under the shiny disco ball he'd attached to the ceiling, his big contribution to the party atmosphere. But the children liked him and the other mothers nodded approvingly. When she took a plate of party food over to him, he looked at her gratefully and ate it quickly during an unscheduled break.

It was the day she would later remember by the mess everywhere, in every room and every crevice of her life; and she would remember standing in the kitchen, wrapping cake slices for the children to take home; around her the mothers stood and nodded and in the other room her husband's laughter could be heard in bursts over the music; and the only thing in her mind was an image of herself, naked, with her wrists pinned above her head while the dentist smiled at her and the world felt so precise, so right.

And the knife continued cutting through the cake, while the clouds drifted on.

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