

DONATIONS

by John Boyne

People say that my mother is a fine looking woman for sixty-one. Her skin hasn't wrinkled, her hands aren't liver-spotted, her hair hasn't turned mysteriously blue overnight. Lucy says that men, older men that is, look at my mother when she walks down the street, sprightly, without limping, not a zimmer frame in sight. By rights this should make me proud, but it doesn't. It bothers me. This is my mother after all. Not someone to be leered at. Old men licking the chapped lips framing their dentures and remembering when they would have winked at her and held her in dancehalls and kissed her as they walked home, wondering what now, what move should they make next, what would she allow them to do. They've grown old, these men, but not my mother. She's stayed the same. For her, the only thing that's changed is the world itself.

'My girlfriends want me to go to Tenerife with them this summer,' she tells me, doubling up the last syllable into *reefee*. 'There's a special resort there. For the older client, you understand.'

I wince at her words. I never like hearing my mother talk about her girlfriends. It's a word that she's acquired from American soaps and talk shows, where humiliation after humiliation is poured upon trailer trash from Hicksville. Where big-haired women lash out and threaten to castrate the pot-bellied, bearded uglies who've left them for Ms Trailer Park 1996, only to forgive them forty minutes later and reveal their pregnancies to their hairy lotharios, promising to change. *Gimme another chance, honey*, they say, blubbing now, like New Men. *You know you're the only one for me, baby*.

'Don't go,' I say, shaking my head. 'You don't know the sort of thing that goes on in those resorts. They exploit people like you. Steal your money. Play you for a fool.'

'They'd have to get up early.'

'They work in shifts, Mother. These people are professionals. You wouldn't enjoy it. You should go down to the country for a few days. Visit your sister or something.'

My mother sniffs the air and thinks for a moment. 'You know,' she says. 'If you opened the windows in here when you cook, then that smell of spaghetti wouldn't linger so. Have you considered installing an Expelair at all?'

'And if I shot your puppies, then your house wouldn't stink of dogshit all the time.'

My mother won't look at me when I shoot lines like that at her. We sit at the table, silence reproducing silence, and I know she's thinking *that girl! If only he wouldn't stay with that girl! It's her that has him the way he is!* and all I'm thinking is my God, I'm turning thirty on Tuesday.

I'm a fucking grown-up. How'd that happen?

'Where is Lucy anyway?' she asks me, looking at her watch.

'At the clinic.'

'Again?' Her face betrays her feelings so badly they could bring her up on charges. 'Is she ever away from there these days?'

'Yes,' I say, taking a long drink from my beer, formulating the sentence in my head. 'It's a long drawn-out process. It's not at all easy. Especially not for Lucy.'

'And how about you?' she asks me. 'What are you doing here then? If she's over there, shouldn't you be with her? You're always telling me how much you –' She breaks off for a moment, unable to utter the word, which is a thrill, but finally manages to spit it out, along with a couple of others. 'How much you love her,' she says.

'I go on Wednesdays,' I tell her. 'Wednesdays and Saturday mornings. There's not that much work involved for me after all. I'm only actually needed on the Wednesday but I go on Saturday so I can be there for Lucy. She has to go in every couple of days though. Check-ups and what not.' I wave my hand in the air nonchalantly, as if these are women's problems and none of my concern, as if I am not lying awake every night crying silently while Lucy sleeps.

'But what do you *do* exactly, William?' she asks, repossessing me in a word. All my friends call me Billy. Lucy calls me Bill.

'What do you mean what do I do?' I ask her, prepared to blush if necessary. 'Surely I don't have to spell it out? To a woman of the world like you, I mean. A woman considering a spell in Tenerife.' To rhyme with *beef*.

'But you do,' she says. 'You do have to spell it out for me. I don't understand the *idea* behind it. I don't understand the *procedure*. And I want to, because I don't want to say the wrong thing at any time. To you or to Lucy. Something *inappropriate*, I mean.' My mother has an amazing ability to speak in italics. I can't help but smile as I try to think of an explanation.

'I go in,' I say nervously. 'And I... donate. They collect it and they do whatever they do with it. And then it's out of my hands. So to speak.'

'And where is Lucy when all this is going on?'

'In work usually,' I say. 'Or maybe in a cheap motel somewhere with some fat, sweaty guy, making a little extra money on the side. This stuff doesn't come cheap, you know.'

'You can be a very crude boy, William,' she tells me and she's right too. 'I don't know where you get that from.'

My mother is in a predicament and I'm enjoying every minute of it. On one hand she wants to slap me for apparently not supporting my wife, but at the same time she's glad that I'm here and not there because, let's face it, she hates Lucy with a vengeance and would surely do her in for the price of a new hat.

'And you're going to be thirty on Tuesday,' she adds, the Queen of the non-sequiturs, as if that has anything to do with anything; as if the fact of my horrific age change relates to Lucy, the clinic or I.

'Don't remind me,' I say.

'Your father was thirty when he died.'

'I know. Thank you.'

'Took a heart attack one morning, not two weeks after his thirtieth birthday. Collapsed on the bathroom floor and sliced his throat open with a razor blade.'

'I *know*,' I repeat. My father's death, hilariously macabre as it is, is an old story and one that I have heard many times before.

'You know the doctors said that the heart attack wasn't actually that severe and that he would have lived, had he not dug that razor blade into his throat as he went down. If only one of us had been there and found him in time.'

She disappears off into a galaxy far, far away and I have a moment or two for thought. My mother was alone that morning too, alone in a hospital, probably having the 1960s version of an amniocentesis which, for all I know, could have been an amniocentesis. Then, according to the legend, she went shopping for a new maternity dress and had a long lunch with her sister. Thirty is old. Thirty is so fucking old. I'm going to die, amn't I?

'Donate *what* exactly?' she says after a pause and I laugh.

'Blood,' I say. 'For heaven's sake, Mother, what do you think I donate? My services to a local charity?'

'You donate *blood*? What good does that do?'

'No, I don't donate blood,' I say quietly, a hand – my own – running across my eyes. 'That was a joke. I donate... Well, Jesus, think about it. I give of myself,' I say archly, a strange, handsome but wealthy man in a nineteenth century fiction.

'And then what do they do? Bring Lucy in another day?'

'Sometimes the same day. But we're usually in different rooms anyway.'

My mother looks so damn confused that I'm ready to throw her out. She's got to be kidding me, ploughing me for information like this, trying to get me all feathered up.

'Your father impregnated me -' she begins in a severe voice and I throw my arms in the air.

'I don't want to know!' I scream. 'Too much information! Too much information!'

'*Your father impregnated me*,' she repeats, shouting this time, 'on our wedding night and, I'm pleased to say, we did it the old-fashioned way.'

'The old-fashioned way,' I mock, amazed that I'm even having this conversation, shocked that this is the real world. 'What's that when it's at home?'

'Well we were in the same room for starters.'

'I don't want to know,' I say and head for the sink. My head is spinning and I need another beer. A keg or two.

'You need new socks,' says my mother, watching my feet for some reason as I cross the floor. 'There's holes in the heels of those ones.'

'You're a crazy old woman,' I say. 'Go to Tenerife, get robbed, do what you want. You're nuts. Jesus Christ,' I add, my hands on the counter, my head bowed. 'Thirty.'

A key in the door – it opens – sweet relief – Lucy is home.

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My mother is right about one thing and wrong about another. I *do* need new socks. There *are* holes in the heels.

But I don't love my wife and I never said I did and if I did say so, which I don't believe, it was surely meant to suggest that I wasn't a child anymore and was in fact capable of grown-up emotions, real life affairs, but like I say I don't believe I said it anyway.

'You know,' my mother says, an hour or so later, over coffee. 'When I had that problem last year with my feet, I went to Dr Barker. Your friend,' she adds, nodding at me. She calls Dr Barker "my friend" because he diagnosed an almost-ruptured and life-threatening appendicitis when I was twelve years old and she therefore thinks that we have had a long-running father-son thing going on, which we haven't. In fact he's a mad old bastard who probably touched me up on the operating table for kicks. He's been leering at me for eighteen solid years and I'm sick of it.

'Yes,' says Lucy thoughtfully as she thinks about this one. 'Not quite the same thing though, is it Mrs Lowe? Different parts of the body and so on.'

'But he may know something,' says my mother. 'Do you see? He may have some answers.'

Thirty, I think. When John F Kennedy was thirty, he was a congressman. When Bob Dylan was thirty he'd recorded *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. When Shakespeare was thirty, he'd probably already written *Hamlet*. For all I know. I'm thirty on Tuesday and I've got holes in my heels.

'Does it hurt though, Lucy?' she asks, feigning concern.

'It doesn't hurt Bill,' says my wife. 'In fact, I think he rather enjoys it.'

I smile a little. It's nice that she can see the funny side to it; interesting that there even is one.

'There's all these... videos,' I mutter to nobody in particular. 'It's amazing really. Such filth half the time. Wonderful stuff.'

'Bill looks forward to his little trips to the clinic,' says Lucy and she's not smiling anymore. 'I think it's been a blessing in disguise to him. My problems.'

'Our problems,' I say automatically.

'One of these days I'm going to go down there and hold your hand, William,' says my mother earnestly. 'Find out exactly what goes on in a place like that.'

'I really don't think that would be appropriate,' I say calmly, suppressing a hysterical laugh.

'But I'm your mother,' she says. 'I want to see what they do to you there. Make sure they're not hurting you in any way.'

'They don't lay a finger on me, old woman,' I roar. 'I'm left to my own devices.'

'But what if you need to -'

'Right! We're changing the subject,' I announce, meaning to slap my hand down on the table but missing and slapping down hard on Lucy's leg instead. The sound of it reverberates like two pieces of timber hitting together face on. She jumps and gasps.

'Jesus, Bill,' she says. 'What the...?'

'I'm sorry,' I say, suddenly shocked by how she has buckled up in the seat. 'I didn't mean it. I was going for the table.'

Lucy stands up and wraps her arms around herself. There is a bright pink mark on her leg, and one on each cheek too. 'I'm going inside,' she says. 'For a rest. The clinic's taken a lot out of me.' She promptly disappears and my mother watches after her, shaking her head.

'You got married too young,' she says.

'How can you say that a second after she walks away?'

'It's a fact. It's the truth. There, I've said it.'

'You're some piece of work.'

'You're not denying it.'

'What? Denying what?'

'That you got married too young.'

'There's nothing to deny! I got married. It happened. It's a matter of public record. What do you want me to do about it?'

'You said you were going to write.'

'What?' I look at her, amazed.

'To write,' she repeats. 'You said you were going to write. To write books. Novels. You know.'

I am flabbergasted and knocked for six by this distant, long-forgotten and torturous memory. I am winded by the associations it has for me. 'I was twenty then,' I splutter. 'Twenty-one maybe. I was just a kid. I was no writer.'

'You had that story.'

'Oh for Christ's sake,' I cry. 'Sperm!' I roar at her then, suddenly. 'Sperm! You hear me? I donate sperm! And I give it gladly! I give them as much of it as they want! And they shove it into Lucy! Sperm, Mother! Sperm!'

It feels bizarre to be shouting these last three words at my own mother but nevertheless, it gives me an enormous buzz.

'William, will you please calm down,' she says, looking around in horror. 'People will hear you.'

'Fuck 'em,' I say. 'Jesus Christ, I'm going to be thirty on Tuesday. Do you understand what that means? What happened to me anyway? I had a...' I can't even get the words out now. Grown-up emotions aren't something people will admire in me, they're something they'll expect from me. Because I am one. Because I'm a grown-up. 'I had a fucking tan once,' I tell her. 'Where's my fucking tan gone? I'm so damn pale.'

'You're losing your mind,' she says. 'You're going out of your mind. It's Lucy, isn't it? All this *donating*, as you put it. It's making you crazy. It does that.'

'Blind, Mother, blind. It makes you blind.'

'Well, whatever, it's the same thing.'

'Oh Jesus,' I say, laughing out loud now. 'Blind people are crazy. What's next? What's she going to say next?'

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Lucy puts her arms around my neck from behind and kisses me lightly on the cheek, breathing on my neck, rustling my hair, and I feel no desire for her, no desire at all. Just loneliness. I put down my book and stare into the fire. The wood is spitting a little, the flames are jumping up and down. A tiny red coal escapes, making a bid for freedom, and lands beside my toes, so close that I can feel its heat. It's late now. Near midnight. Lucy should be in bed.

'I need new socks,' I say. 'Or so it seems.'

'Turns out I'm pregnant,' says Lucy. 'Or so it seems.'

- And this is the moment the moment when I must say the right thing to her the moment when I must something honest something truthful and meaningful to us both for if I fuck up now how can I ever make forty let alone thirty -

'You'll be a great mother,' I say eventually, quietly. 'The baby will be lucky to have you. You have more love to give around than I do. The baby will be lucky to have you,' I repeat. And I mean it. I really mean it. She will be a wonderful mother. I turn around to face her and we look at each other and she softens and I touch her cheek and she smiles a little and tilts her head a little towards me.

I'm going to be thirty on Tuesday and I have no idea where the time is going. It speeds past me and I'm running alongside but getting nowhere, getting nowhere at all.