

BULLDOG

Middle-class and middle-aged, Helen believes she looks like the pet bulldog on which she dotes. The dog is clearly a substitute for her 12 year old son – a child who is academically gifted, but completely incapable of feeling, much less expressing, emotion.

Helen's husband, James, hates the dog with a passion (the feeling is entirely mutual), and never loses an opportunity to portray it as evidence of man's inefficient handling of nuclear waste.

When Helen attempts to defend the merits of her pet (she's awfully well bred, you know), her husband observes that it is merely in keeping with British tradition that something so well-bred can also be so physically revolting it's a miracle the male of the species can be induced to copulate with it.

When Helen discovers that James is having an affair, she sets into motion a plan to prevent him from leaving her. The result is mayhem.

“Helen,” said James, reprovably. “What’s *that* thing doing in the kitchen?”
I was tempted to reply that Dorothy had just as much right to be in the kitchen as he did, but for the sake of peace, I opened the door and shuffled her towards it.

Moments later, she was padding around the garden, and not for the first time, it struck me how alike we were. It was this as much as anything that made me wonder whether that was why James found both of us so grossly unattractive. Let's face it, Dorothy has always been something of an acquired taste. One would have to love *all* Bulldogs in order to love Dorothy. I, on the other hand, didn't always look like this.

Underneath this flab, I have the same bone structure I had as a girl, but over the years the skin around my eyes has grown puffy. My eyes are no longer almond shaped and bluish grey but mere slits fighting to see through the excess skin resting on my lashes. This is entirely in keeping with the fact that my cheeks have sagged so that there isn't a definite line where my jawline ends and my neck begins and the sides of my mouth droop all the way down to my chin.

James accuses me of looking miserable and discontented. He doesn't realise, you see, that the droop is there because my face is collapsing by degrees, or that this is what gives it the *hung* look that he finds so objectionable.

He isn't the only one who finds it objectionable. I know (and believe me, it hurts me to have to admit this) that I look exactly like Dorothy. That is to say, I look like a sandy-haired, patchy-skinned, bulldog bitch.

It's nothing to do with fat. I'm no more fat than Dorothy. What you see on the average middle-aged woman isn't fat. It's more an overall loss of elasticity. Our muscle tone has gone. We're still the same weight we were when the men who are trying to leave us married us in the first place; it's just that what we were born with appears to have spread. There's nothing I, or any of us can do to reverse the process. Even if I diet myself into non-existence I'm still going to look like a bulldog bitch, but underfed, instead of overweight.

Another thing Dorothy and I have in common is that James doesn't love us. Dorothy was born with that particular burden in that he has always thought her the most revolting object he ever set eyes on, but he didn't always feel that way about *me*.

Oddly, enough, we were married on the very day that one of Dorothy's ancestors took the championship at Crufts. She's awfully well-bred, but when I point this out to James, he merely remarks that in his opinion, it's entirely in keeping with British tradition that something so remarkably well-bred can also be so physically revolting it's a miracle the male of the species can be induced to copulate with it.

The truth is, women have a limited shelf life. When I look at my husband I see a man who, despite that he and I are much the same age, is just as attractive, if not more so, than he was when I married him. He still has the same dark-brown hair, the same square jaw, firm unlined flesh around his greeny-grey eyes and the same lithe frame.

Bloody unfair, don't you think?

"By the way," he said. "I had a call from Hilary today."

My stomach lurched as it always does when anyone mentions our son.

"What did he want?"

"It isn't what he *wants*. It's what he *doesn't* want."

"Okay, so what *doesn't* he want?"

"He doesn't want to come home for half term."

I tried not to look too ecstatic. "Did he mention why?"

"He said he'd rather stay at school and focus on his work."

I was neither surprised, nor disappointed, so I said, "Oh."

James flicked savagely at the newspaper. "Is that the best you can manage?"

I felt my temper rising. "Well what do you *want* me to say?"

There was no answer to that so James changed tac: "Doesn't it worry you that he never seems to want to come home?"

"Should it?"

"Of *course* it should. Any *normal* mother would be out of her mind.... Or perhaps it's just that you haven't yet noticed that we appear to have a bit of a problem with Hilary. It wouldn't surprise me mind you. You hardly seem to notice he exists."

That was unkind. One can hardly fail to notice he exists. I almost said as much but thought better of it, and he added:

"If you ask me, something needs to be *done*, and you don't seem to want to *do* anything."

"But what can I do? What are *you* doing?"

He didn't appear to hear that. "It isn't right," he said. "He ought to *want* to come home."

I suddenly felt exhausted, don't ask me why. I think it was just that I couldn't face arguing about Hilary. We'd had a similar argument prior to Christmas after Hilary dropped us a line asking us to ensure that any gift we might care to send was forwarded care of a box number.

I pointed out that he was growing up.

"He's twelve years old!" said James.

"Children grow up quickly these days."

"*He's never been a child!*"

I couldn't argue with that. I once drew a picture on the kitchen window. 'Look, Hilary... I've drawn in the steam from the kettle.'

He looked at me speculatively, his dank brown hair over-long; his horn-rimmed glasses cracked and held together by sticking plaster. 'It isn't steam,' he corrected. 'It's condensation.'

He was five years old at the time.

“What can I do?” I repeated, softly, and James seemed slightly shrivelled for a moment. “I don’t know. If he’d rather not come home there’s no point trying to force him. And anyway (I knew what was coming), what’s the point in him being here if there’s nobody around to look after him?”

“Don’t start that. You *know* I value my job. It may not be *much* of a job, but it gets me out of the house, and I enjoy it.”

“I don’t begrudge you that. I just begrudge the fact that you’re never here during the holidays. No wonder he doesn’t come home. There’s nothing to come home *for*...”

“That’s nothing to do with it—you seem to forget that even before I got a job, Hilary rarely came home if he could avoid it.”

“That isn’t true!”

“Then where was he all last summer?” (James had played hell when Hilary spent the entire summer writing computer programmes for a software company in Basingstoke). “Answer me that. Where was he?”

James skirted the issue and said, “It’s not as though it pays very much. I can’t think why you bother...” As if the thought had only just struck him, he added:

“Why *do* you bother?”

I thought it best not to tell him. If he knew I was saving up to buy the two acre field that adjoins our garden so that I can build kennels and breed top-class bulldogs, I’d never hear the last of it, though he admits that the breed fascinates him. According to James, their very existence is irrefutable evidence of man’s inefficient handling of nuclear waste.

“It’s not as though I keep you short of housekeeping.”

I couldn’t argue with that, either. Whatever else James might keep me short of, he didn’t keep me short of housekeeping, but I didn’t get the chance to say so. Probably just as well because this was turning into a monumental row. He looked at the clock and said, “I have to go—”

He drank his tea, grabbed his jacket, then left the house to drive into Bewley and catch a train that would take him to Waterloo.

Did I mention what his job is?

No?

That’s because, for the past twenty-six years, James has worked for the Civil Service and each time I inquire after the nature of his job, he gives me a different answer. Perhaps he keeps moving department. Or perhaps, like most civil servants, he hasn’t got a clue what he does?

I didn’t have to leave the house quite as early as he did, so I washed the things from breakfast, whizzed the dog round the block (insofar as anyone can whiz a bulldog anywhere), then went to the office.

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