

We're in the canteen. It's fish, chips and peas day. Friday.
"Best day of the week." Says Betty, shovelling down a massive piece of fish and trying to talk with half her mouth so we don't notice. "Need to load up on the carbs. Don't want to be sick again!"

"It's that stupid diet of yours. I've told you millions of times not to follow these fads, but you never listen." Mandy is shaking her head. She's gone for soup.

Betty groans. "Oh, don't start that again, for god's sake! I've already lost a stone and I'm not giving up. Only today doesn't count because Adam's going to be there and I can't think of anything worse than him holding my hair back while I throw up."

Mandy laughs. "Throwing up in the middle of snogging would be worse, no? What do you reckon, Kate?"

I am watching how quickly they are all eating, how easy it is for them. Fork in food, fork up to mouth, fork in mouth.

Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat. Fork in food, fork up to mouth.

Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat.

"Kate?"

I do hear. I just don't make the connection it's me Mandy is speaking to.

"Kate, are you okay? You've not eaten a thing."

"I think there's a piece of glass in my peas." It comes out before I can control what I'm saying.

They stare at me, so I show them my mouth, my plate, and they all inspect everything, even holding my plate up to the light. Then they shake their heads.

"Nothing there as far as I can see." Says Mandy. She stops shovelling food in and looks at Betty, then at me again.

"You sure you're okay? It must be weird to be back." she says.

I've been off for two months. I'm so relieved to be back but I don't know how to tell them.

"It's good to see you guys." I manage a smile that isn't verging on tears, so they won't keep bothering me.

They both heartily tuck back into their dinners, and the air is suddenly lighter. It's a good lesson. Next time I will be more careful what I say.

Everyone soon goes back to their shift.

We're in the canteen. Quiche and salad day. It's Monday.

“I couldn’t believe he actually came over to talk to me,” Betty is saying as she sits down. Her plate is so full of salad I can’t see any quiche at all. She sees me looking and laughs, a little embarrassed. “Super hungry but back to my diet. Kind of went AWOL at the weekend.” She slaps her, not exactly small, stomach with relish. “Need to sort this out before he sees me naked!”

“Woah! Take it easy, tiger; some of us are already eating! Imagining you and Adam naked isn’t what I want to be doing on a Monday lunchtime!”

“When *do* you want to be doing it, Mandy?” laughs Betty, as she puts a giant forkful of salad into her mouth and swallows it effortlessly.

I look down at my plate. Honestly, I am trying, but it doesn’t look like I’ve touched a thing. I separate the salad with my fork. Cut up pieces of quiche and push them to the side of my plate, to hide the pieces of glass. Keep very quiet.

Mandy looks at me with concern. “Kate, are you not hungry again?”

“Hey, don’t worry,” I say, as lightly as I can. “I hate quiche. Always have. Anyone want mine?”

“I’ll have it!” This is from fat Matt, who’s sitting next to us and always goes up for seconds, no matter what day it is. “I’m starving,” he adds, looking at us sheepishly.

The girls laugh, and I plop my quiche on his plate, then try to attack the salad with some vigour.

“So, exactly how far did you two go?” This again from fat Matt. In my acquaintance with him of four years, he’s only ever become animated when someone mentions food or sex. Betty giggles. “Oh, I don’t think you want to hear the details!”

They are doing it again. All of them. Fork in food, fork up to mouth, fork in mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat. Fork in food, fork up to mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat.

Soon they will have finished their food and lunch will be over for another day. And I suppose they will do the same at dinner time too, at home, safely.

Betty tells the story of her and Adam, thankfully without too much graphic detail.

I shake my head, trying to listen, trying to put some lettuce in my mouth, trying to chew, trying not to think about dinner and home and families and being safe.

Everyone soon goes back to their shift.

We’re in the canteen. It’s spaghetti Bolognese day. Tuesday.

“Have you heard about Emma?” Mandy says in a low voice, before we’ve even had a chance to reach our table.

Betty nods her head and looks down. Emma's sitting at the table one away from our usual spot. They try not to look at her but I can see they're staring. I do too. She's lost the colour in her face and looks older somehow, though I can't put my finger on it.

"What's happened to her?" I ask. It's the first time I've said anything without being asked since returning to work.

Other people's sadness. It helps me to find a way back.

"She had a miscarriage. Only two weeks ago. And she's come back already."

"They won't give her any more time off, the bastards. That's how shit they are. She was five months!"

It's as though the girls' voices are getting louder as we approach Emma's table, although they're talking in low whispers.

As I sit down and put my food in front of me I look down at it. The spaghetti is swimming in glass. I try not to gag. I look at the others' plates. Surely they must have noticed?

As they sit down I expect them to carry on about Emma. I brace myself. But Betty suddenly giggles. "Adam called me last night! He left a voicemail. I'll call him back later – make him wait a bit first!"

I watch Emma's face in the background become a forgotten blur.

Mandy actually takes Betty by the hand and shakes it.

"Congratulations! That's ace news!"

"Oh, come on; it's just a phone call." This is from fat Matt. "It doesn't mean he wants to marry her or anything!"

"Shut up, Matt." Mandy hisses at him.

I've loaded up my fork with food but there's just glass, just fucking glass sitting on the end of it, waiting to cut my mouth. I blink a few times, praying the image will go away. It doesn't.

And they are all eating. Again. Same as always. Fork in food, fork up to mouth, fork in mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat. Fork in food, fork up to mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat. I push my plate away from me, get up quickly, half stumbling in my hurry to leave the table.

"I think I'm going to be sick." I mumble and run out, past Emma and her dead baby, before anyone has a chance to say anything.

We're in the canteen. It's pizza and chips day. Wednesday.

I ask for a small slice and plenty of chips. I love chips. The girls glance at my plate as I'm asking for more.

Betty sighs. "You're lucky. You don't have to think about your

figure. You can eat like a horse.”

I laugh, uneasily.

I walk past Emma’s table taking care not to look at her face. I hope Betty has some news for us, or Matt says something stupid, or there is some more unpleasant gossip. Anything to keep the talk away from my plate.

But I’m not so lucky.

“She never eats what’s on her plate! I don’t think people should take food if they’re not going to eat it!” This is fat Matt’s sensitive contribution.

Mandy throws a warning glance his way and says, “It’s her first week back in this hell hole. Can’t be easy, can it, Kate?”

“It’s fine. Honestly.”

Betty chips in. “Probably the warm weather. Always puts me right off my food, too. It’s just a shame I make up for it so much in Winter!” She squeezes the fat on her thighs and everyone laughs. It’s enough for me to try to start eating without worrying they’ll focus on me again.

And they are all eating. Again. Same as always. Fork in food, fork up to mouth, fork in mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat.

Fork in food, fork up to mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat.

“He only called to say he thinks he left his scarf at mine.”

Says Betty, interrupting the small talk, suddenly going red.

“He hasn’t actually asked me out or anything.”

No one says anything for what feels like a long time.

Then I hear comfort and solace in Mandy’s response, though I’m not exactly sure what she’s saying. Something about all men being bastards.

I don’t hear any more, because somehow my chips aren’t chips any longer, but pieces of glass. Long, fat, chunky pieces of glass, piled high on my plate.

I’m so hungry. But I push the pieces to the side and sit very still in my chair. Perhaps if I sit still long enough I will become invisible.

Mandy is in the middle of saying, “They’re not worth it, anyway. All bad news.”

Betty bursts into tears.

Mandy comforts her. “You’ll find someone else, Betty. Don’t fret, sweetie.”

Betty’s distress means I have become an aside to the conversation, and I can hurry to my feet and take my plate to the clearing area before anyone can comment.

I can even go back to my shift without anyone saying a word to me.

We’re in the canteen. It’s fish and chips and peas. Friday

again.

I couldn't help it; I had to take Thursday off. I couldn't get out of bed.

I want to pile up the peas high on my plate, and hide behind them, gather myself some peace in the canteen, where no one will find me or talk to me or worry about me.

But it's too late. I can't sit here another day, another lunchtime, expecting them to leave me be. I know it's been a whole week, a whole week of hunger and silence and absence, and I know they know.

And they are all eating. Again. Same as always. Fork in food, fork up to mouth, fork in mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat. Fork in food, fork up to mouth. Chew. Swallow. Pause. Chat. I just stare at my plate.

"Are you feeling better today?" This, surprisingly, is from Betty.

I nod, making sure I don't use my voice. I put a huge mouthful of peas on my fork and try to make it travel to my mouth. Half way there, it falters and drops, and I watch as the peas scatter back over the plate, making a quick getaway, scampering off the table and diving headfirst onto the floor. I can feel myself going red, but no one takes the piss like they should. Like they would if it was anyone else. Or me how I used to be.

I look up at them and they've all got their eyes on me, even fat Matt, who's normally stuffing his face.

"It's just the glass in the food." I say, again, before I can stop it from coming out. "I can't bear it anymore. I don't know what to do."

We're supposed to go back to our shift, but Mandy takes me by the hand. It is the most gentle, intimate contact I have had for so long it brings me to tears.

'You need to talk to someone.' is all she says, as she takes me out of the canteen.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, as I follow her through the corridors towards the main office.

"Look, we've all seen how things are. You've lost masses of weight. You're not eating. You're barely speaking. You're not yourself. You need to go to HR. You need to talk to someone." I stop dead. Shake my head. "I'm not talking to some stranger who's employed by this company! No way."

"That's okay." Mandy says, and she pushes the staff toilets door open, holding it for me. "I was hoping you'd say that. So now you've got no choice. You have to talk to me."

I look at Mandy. She's a decent girl. I've sat with her in the canteen for as long as I can remember. She always says the right things in the right places. She makes other people laugh. She's warm, approachable, with her forbidden dangly earrings, matching the t-shirts she wears under her uniform. I follow her in and sit by her on the large sofa, under the mirror. "I'm not sure I know where to start." I say, my voice surprising me with its clarity.

"So, don't start." Says Mandy. "Just talk."

"I was managing to handle it, until that bloody glass started appearing. Out of nowhere."

"Out of nowhere?"

Mandy's question reminds me I haven't spoken to anyone truthfully about anything for a long time, and if I want her to understand then I have to try to be clear.

"No. Not out of nowhere. The glass has only started to appear since he started smashing bottles."

Mandy sits a little more upright. "He? I assume you mean your husband?"

I laugh. It's a laugh I've learned to live with recently, one devoid of any happiness. It's a slightly high-pitched sort of laugh which could easily be replaced by a sob.

"Yes. He's my husband, isn't he?" I start to tremble, my legs and hands suddenly out of control.

Mandy just moves closer to me and grabs my shoulders, gives me a little shake. "Hey, nothing is ever as hopeless as it seems."

I take a deep breath. "He was drinking already before, but stupidly, god – I was so stupid – I thought he might change once we were married."

Mandy shakes her head. "It's not stupid. Or if it is, thousands of women make the same mistake."

I nod. "But I could always bear it, see? Because he always would come out of it, and say sorry, and be ten times more attentive and loving than before."

"Until the next time he drank?"

"Until the next time he drank."

I don't know why telling Mandy about it makes it feel as though it is all my fault, but it does. I married him, didn't I? I already knew.

Mandy is watching my face carefully.

"None of this is your fault." she says, as though reading my thoughts.

I burst into tears. She takes my hand and waits for me stop. The sobs come in huge waves; I think I will drown in them, but then they subside and dwindle into gulps of air so I can

breathe again.

Mandy doesn't look at me; she just keeps stroking my hand.

"I don't know where I'm going with this. Where have we got to?"

"The glass." Mandy reminds me. "Where does it come from?"

"Oh. Fuck. Yeah. The glass." I take a deep breath. I know it's going to sound ridiculous. "When getting married didn't seem to help cure his drinking, I had another bright idea. How about a baby? I thought. After all, his disgusting behaviour was totally the right environment to bring one up in – Oh, I'm sorry. Sarcasm isn't exactly going to help, is it?"

"Don't be sorry. You tell it how you need to tell it. I don't care what you say about him."

I'd never taken him out with me on a works' do. They'd started a rumour as a joke that I was ashamed of him. But was I more ashamed of myself?

"So, we decided to try for a baby. Only, for some reason, I just can't get pregnant -"

" – Thank god! - "

" - and he's started, when he's drunk, to blame me for it." I pause for a moment, suddenly realising the implications of Mandy's exclamation. "Now he's become violent."

"He's hitting you?"

"Oh no, God no; well, only twice, but both times were by accident and –"

" – By accident? Kate! How can you hit someone by accident? - "

" - Listen, I don't want to talk about it; that's not the point. The point is he started taking out his frustration on things that were lying around the house. And mostly what's lying round the house after he's been there for a few days are bottles."

"Why doesn't he throw them away?"

I laugh again, again nicely high pitched and joyless. It's such a naïve but obvious question.

"Because he denies that he's drinking. And so he hides the bottles. Until he decides, when he's drunk, to unhide them for the beautiful purpose of smashing them instead."

God, if only Mandy knew. I think. The number of bottles I keep finding everywhere in the house. Who'd have thought you could find so many places to hide them? The airing cupboard, behind the microwave, in his socks' drawer, behind the sofa, in pillow-cases, under duvets, behind wardrobes, in wardrobes...

"He's been smashing bottles around the house?" Mandy now looks horrified.

I guess it is horrific. Only, that's not really what I've actually

found to be horrific.

I nod. "But it's the glass." I say. "You've no idea. It gets everywhere. However much I use the dustpan and brush, collect it with my hands, Hoover and sweep, it just doesn't go away. It's on my toothbrush when I brush my teeth, it's on the pillow when I want to sleep, in my handbag when I get out my purse - I mean it really was once, because I cut myself and was bleeding all over a five-pound note."

"So you do recognise the glass isn't always there?" Mandy reads between my lines with ease.

I nod my head slowly. "No and yes. I mean, I can see it. It's there for me. And obviously I can't eat if it's in my food. For some reason this week that's where it's always been appearing. But I know you can't see it there."

"None of us can, Kate, except for you." Mandy says this tenderly.

There's silence. For quite some time. It's not uncomfortable. I just don't know how to carry on.

"You see, what I really need to do is just get rid of the glass."

I finally say to Mandy.

"No." she says to me, uncrossing her legs, moving over to me, giving me a hug. "You just need to get rid of him."

I stare at her.

The answer, of course, is clear as glass.