

Ordinary Miracles - Chapter 1

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'LL be forty next month.

Forty seems something you should be ready for – not something that lands smug and like-it-or not in your life – along with Gillian McKeith.

Bruce bought me one of her books to boost my morale. It's not the kind of publication I would have purchased myself. I tend towards books with embarrassing titles such as *No Need to Panic: Courageous Acts of Change in Women's Lives*. Still, it was a kind thought. One of the occasional small acts that show Bruce may still love me in his way, though there isn't much romance left in our relationship. 'You know what, Jasmine,' he announced happily on our nineteenth anniversary, 'one of the great pleasures of marriage is being with someone you can fart with.'

When he came he used to shout 'Oh God!' These days he just says 'Ah'. He scarcely glances at me when I'm in the shower. When we first got married he used to love the way I squeezed spermicide around the inside of my diaphragm. I did it with such fierce concentration, he said, that I looked like I was making an airfix model. Now he likes watching me watch television. He says I make funny faces without knowing it.

I like that he likes that. And I like that he thinks he can sing when he can't. But like doesn't make my heart leap. Like isn't what that woman felt when that photographer from the *National Geographic* landed on her doorstep in Madison County. Of course it's nice to day-dream that exactly the same thing might happen here in Glenageary but, frankly, there aren't enough bridges. There are lots of burned ones all right, but you can't photograph those.

Now that my daughter Katie's at college in Galway the mornings seem very quiet. I miss that moment when, having got her off to school, I made myself a cuppa and turned on the radio. Back then time to myself was something I snatched and savoured – now there's a lot of it about and I must work out what to do with it.

Of course I have my animal rights and adult literacy, and then there's the housekeeping and fantasising about the actor Mell Nichols. And there's missing people – missing myself even – that takes up a lot of time.

Sometimes, when I feel like this, I go upstairs and open the cupboard where I keep Katie's toys. I gave some away but I've kept the ones I liked. I wind up the little hen and watch her pecking her way along the carpet and falling over, and then I give Teddy a hug and tell him not to be lonely, that I still care.

You wouldn't think to look at me that all this stuff is going on in my head. Apparently I appear very settled and cheerful – not at all wistful. The thing is I don't think I can keep all this to myself much longer.

I think it may start leaking out.

It's time for my morning cuppa. I plug in the kettle and turn on the radio, where a woman is talking about how her husband urinates in the bath. Then the news comes on and I remember I'm supposed to be meeting Susan and Anne at eleven. I wonder if I should change out of my jeans, but I don't have time.

I haven't seen Susan in years. She's been a nurse in Africa. She's been leading the kind of adventurous, wandering life I said I was going to lead too. I really, really, don't want to see her.

'Hello Susan – great to see you!' I say as Susan opens the door of her Ballsbridge garden flat. She's looking wonderful. She's wearing jeans. She hasn't changed her hair,

but then she has no need to. It's dark and luxuriant. She puts it up in a chignon from which tendrils and curls escape to frame her pretty, thoughtful face.

'Great to see you too!' she exclaims, and gives me a hug. 'Anne's already here.' I wave a greeting to Anne who's sitting on a calico sofa surrounded by handwoven Persian-type cushions. She's perched there like a bewildered sparrow who's found its way into a tropical garden.

Susan, Anne and I went to school together. After she qualified as a nurse Susan went travelling but sent letters, and of course Anne and I attended each other's weddings. Then we went our separate ways.

And now Susan has organised a reunion, because that's the kind of person she is. And while I know it might be therapeutic and cheering to relive the day we all skived off school and went to see *Gone With the Wind* in seats so close to the screen we could almost feel Rhett Butler's breath – the first thing that comes to my mind as I sit down beside Anne on the calico sofa is the man who urinates in the bath.

'Were either of you listening to the radio this morning?' I say as I look around the sun-filled room which is uncluttered and spacious and painted a colour I didn't know existed let alone would work. A room full of African artefacts and unexpected little touches. 'Because this woman was on about her husband.'

'Do you mean the one who's having an affair with his chiropodist?' asks Anne.

'No, the one who urinates in the bath when he's drunk.'

'Oh yes – because it's easier to aim at.' Anne laughs in a hollow sort of way.

And before you know it we're not talking about all the exciting things Susan has done in Africa, or how I got involved with adult literacy and animal rights, or how Anne became a Montessori teacher. No, we're talking about men – their selfishness and emotional tourism. The way they so seldom know where to find the clothes pegs or the clitoris. How they fumble around all right – but you have to tell them in the end.

Anne and I talk about men while Susan, who is single, listens respectfully.

'He keeps saying, "What do you want me to do about it?"' Anne is talking about her husband.

'Typical,' I reply.

'I just want him to listen. To try to understand.'

'Absolutely.'

'I mean emotions aren't like cars are they?'

'No. No.'

'You can't just open up the bonnet and pump in a bit more oil.'

'Exactly.'

Suddenly Susan jumps up from her crushed velvet cushion and says 'Sorry to interrupt but what's it to be – tea or coffee?'

'Tea please,' I say.

'Me too,' says Anne.

I know Susan's been bored from the eager way she heads for the kitchen. And then a funny thing happens. I suddenly realise I've been bored too. Extraordinarily bored in fact. I've been having these conversations about men with women like Anne for years now and they never seem to get anywhere. If I have to say one more thing about men this morning my head's going to grow terribly heavy and land, thud, on the coffee table.

I get up and start to wander round the room. 'As I was saying,' says Anne who's really getting into her stride, 'he never seems to listen.'

I go over to the mantelpiece and pick up an African carving of a woman with huge breasts. 'Ballsbridge is a funny name isn't it?' I say. 'Balls-bridge – I wonder where that came from.'

Then Susan comes back with the tea and we talk about Africa until I blurt, 'I'll be forty next month.' It's been building up inside like alcoholism at an AA meeting.

'My goodness of course! I'm glad you reminded me,' Susan exclaims.

I'd forgotten we'd met when we kept birthday books. When we knew the ages and birthdays of everyone, including hamsters and dogs.

'I must get you a present,' Susan continues.

'Oh, there's no need really.' I'm embarrassed and grateful.

'Of course there is,' says Anne, adding, 'you know something Jasmine, you haven't changed a bit.'

This being the kind of stupid thing friends sometimes say to each other I smile and finger my Turkish puzzle ring. Then Susan says casually, 'Oh, by the way, I read that Mell Nichols is doing a film here.'

'Mell Nichols is here – here in Ireland?' I almost spill my tea.

'Yes – he's filming in County Wicklow, only it's supposed to be Yorkshire.' Susan has always been a stickler for detail. 'He's playing a farmer who falls in love with the local postmistress – that's Meryl Streep – only she disappears in mysterious circumstances. You've always had a soft spot for Mell, haven't you Jasmine?'

'Well – yes – I do think he's rather attractive,' I mumble, wondering if this is the moment to reveal that my soft spot has somehow turned into hard, burning passion. That in recent years Mell and I have spent sweat-soaked nights feverishly exchanging bodily juices and soul-filled intimacies. That the only small stumbling block to our perfect relationship is that Mell doesn't know anything about it.

'I never really got over Clark Gable' – Anne is twisting her wedding ring dreamily. 'I'll never forget that day we all went to see *Gone With the Wind*. Never.'

And then, because it's sunny, we all go into the garden which is gratifyingly messy but bears the first traces of care. There are small clumps of begonias and climbing nasturtiums. 'I probably won't stay here long but it's nice to brighten it up a bit,' says Susan.

And I know wherever Susan goes she'll brighten things up a bit because that's her way. And maybe she could brighten me up a bit too, if I could stop myself wondering where I went wrong and she went right. If I could face the mess and mystery of my own life – see that even weeds can bear small flowers as they sprout through crazy paving.