

# **The Juggler**

**by**

**Lindsey Mackie.**

“The thing I like best about Lola is that she doesn’t want children” announced Doreen as she wiped clean the vanilla bottom of her seventh grandchild Amber.

“Good teeth” shouted Ron from the lounge where he stroked Hitler the Parrot’s crest.

Amber toddled through, resplendent in a lemon ball-gown.

“I don’t know why Janine has to dress them up like fairy stories.” Doreen sighed.

“Off you go” screamed Hitler.

“Why does he say that?”

“You know what you like my pretty” cooed Ron. “Any tea?”

Doreen trudged to the kitchen. In seconds there was a cry.

“The child’s tripped on her train”, he yelled from his armchair.

“Why marry again?” asked Doreen, hanging Amber over the sink to let the nose bleed flow freely.

At the last and most lavish of all his weddings, it had been dimly noted by her son Paul and his fourth wife, that Doreen had worn the same hat as for his first marriage to Delilah. There were two swans sculpted in ice, many guests she didn’t know and the children all looked wonderful in grey satin – except that Dylan and Thomas the twins, would glower in the photos. Since the ‘Ex’s were making a point of being ‘away’, they all stayed at Grandmas as usual. Three of them had diarrhoea – she couldn’t remember which.

“I had a postcard from Gwyneth today. The Army have given her and Petra a house so the boys can finally go live with their Mam. I’m surprised...I didn’t think they approved of lesbians.”

“Nothing surprises me anymore. They’ll have to start putting those boys first – like we always have” said Ron waving a finger.

The doorbell rang. How many times had she walked down this hall, wondering whose silhouette she saw through the frosted glass?

“Vanessa. Why aren’t you at school? You did have your eyebrow pierced then?”

“I’ve had a row with Mum. Can I stay?”

The suitcase was unceremoniously bumped up to the attic room and from under her arm trailed the flex of the hair tongs

“I’ll feel better after a bath, Grandma...is there a towel?”

Doreen flicked on the immersion heater, realising that the ways of the female adolescent were becoming less of a mystery to her.

The doorbell rang.

“Mummeeee” called Amber.

Yes, Janine’s elaborate coiffure was already talking as she walked in.

“God, the salon’s steaming with clients – one of the sun-bed’s broke down and the rep from Nailshine spilled his samples over the new granite – you look tired, Dor’ – is that blood on your dress Amber? What on earth’s happened?”

“Just a nosebleed. She fell over her frock on the hearth. Can you send some dungarees next time?”

Janine’s nose twitched, her eyes darted in confusion.

“What d’ you mean?”

“Play clothes” interpreted Doreen.

Vanessa trailed downstairs and drew level. A look of unveiled mutual hostility passed between them.

“Got here just in time. Thanks Dor’. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You mean Thursday.” Doreen was firm.

Wednesdays were hers – she was never available.

First, the hairdressers where she relaxed into a cocoon of pampering and overheard conversation. Then she visited a park to feed birds or an expensive clutch of boutiques where she bought nothing but thrilled at the luxury. In all, she was a willing spectator, conserving her energy for later – for girls night. Everyone tolerated this sprig of independence and assumed that she hugged a predictable scampi basket in some pub corner with a posse of cackling similars– but no one ever asked and Ron was always asleep in front of the out-sized screen when she got home.

This Wednesday however, the house seemed floodlit on her return. Muddied boots strewn across the hallway warned of the two black mop-heads staring fixedly at a colliding digital nightmare, their forefingers manically over-stimulated with cola. Ron watched them fondly and spoke without turning, “Paul dropped them off. Business meeting. Sitter let them down. I’ve said we’ll take them to school in the morning. Good meal?”

Vanessa lay on the sofa, her toes twitching to unheard sounds.

“It’s like the un-dead” Doreen thought.

The following morning as she drove up the school lane, she asked. “Are you looking forward to spending more time with your Mam, then?”

“Yeh, barracks are good fun.” Dylan said gravely

“Anything’s better than LO-LA” joined Thomas.

“She’s not unkind is she?” Doreen was concerned.

“No...it’s just too quiet with Dad and her standing around on one leg and chanting all the time....”

“Ti –CHI, Feng SHUI, PI – La TES” they squeaked in accurate mocking unison.

Her mouth twitched although she could not imagine Paul chanting. Actually, she saw him so little he was like a shadow to her – a snake slithering along the skirting seeking the nearest exit. As she turned into the drive, Ron was making rare use of his state-of-the- art electric saw.

“I’m converting the garage to a games-room for the boys. Ooh, I shall miss them.” He said tearfully. “They’ll leave such a hole”

“They’ll only be five miles away, Ron.”

She stared at the breakfast debris littering every surface and thought of holes.

Later, before she collected Amber from playgroup and Paris from nursery, she stopped off at the printers. Each in the group had a job – hers was stationary.

She had promised to have the children to sleep on Friday as Janine had a hair and nail extension fair on. Her shopping list was as strange as ever.

Organic Sausages. Chocolate Muffins. Soya milk as Amber gets eczema. Her second granddaughter Bridget had also asked to stay as her science field trip was at the local dairy farm – so it was fish and chips for the rest of them.

“So unusual to meet a girl called Paris,” the new teacher smiled at Doreen, “perhaps Bo Peep could leave her crook at home next time.”

There wasn’t enough time to explain the idiosyncrasies of this family...and she had stopped minding what people thought long ago.

Ron had his foot raised on a stool.

“Dropped a drill on it...just have to take it easy. Vanessa’s having a lie down. Stomach ache.”

She had not shut the door properly so Bridget walked in without knocking.

“Hiya. How are you Grandma?”

Doreen softened. “All the better for seeing you. Thanks for asking.”

“Mum’s here to get Vanessa.” They exchanged glances as Delilah lurched strangely into view.

“Dor’...pulled a muscle lifting Mrs Grey out of the commode.” With her brown and ash streaked curls tumbling over an oddly contorted face and breasts swelling out of her tight uniform, Doreen struggled to find the young girl her son had married.

“Where’s madam?”

On the landing something bolted to the bathroom and they heard the unmistakable sound of vomit hitting basin.

Paris drove Amber into the hall. “She’s my sheep” and stopped in her tracks as she saw Delilah, who purred,

“It’s the little girls.”

Doreen winced, realising they were meeting a myth made real.

“Girls, this is Bridget, Vanessa and Penny’s mummy.”

“Wife One” nodded Paris solemnly.

Vanessa tottered downstairs, drawling, “I’m not well but I’ve cleared up.”

“Come into the Crock room” shouted Ron.

“Shall I bath the girls for you Grandma?” Bridget leaped in. Doreen nodded gratefully. The room seemed to be shrinking.

The phone rang.

“Grandma, it’s Penny. Can I pop round?”

“Uhm....”

“Please it’s important.”

“Bring fish and chips....loads...I’ll pay you back.” Her head was spinning with troubled dynamics rumbling towards her like a herd of stampeding bison. In slow motion she saw Vanessa project a vivid green spew across the kitchen table. As she mopped and soothed and wondered where everyone else was, the doorbell rang.

No one moved.

“Can you get that” Doreen asked.

No one moved again.

Seething, she raced to open to ....Janine.

“Dor’, I’ve brought some soya and Amber’s ‘blankie’ round...” she broke off as Delilah shuffled from one stair to the next, carrying Amber snugly wrapped in a towel.

Penny stepped onto the porch behind them and scornfully looked up at her mother who returned an extraordinary look of stereo dislike. It was then that Doreen recalled that Delilah must never touch the girls and hadn’t spoken to her own daughter for two years.

“How could you let that devil- witch near my babies?” screamed Janine.

“You should have said she was here!” spat all three women in unison.

“Anyway, I’m keeping the baby” blubbered Vanessa to Ron who looked round the room in alarm, thinking it lay hidden in a corner.

Delilah handed her cargo over. “Oh stay in your pram. I was only helping out. I’d never hurt them.”

“You’ve no right!” spluttered Janine.

The door opened.

Paul, Dylan and Thomas stepped into the hall carrying a case occupied by two jabbering chinchillas. All mouths stopped moving. Paul’s honeymoon tan drained.

“Aah,” he said faintly. “Present for the boys. Should’ve checked. Lola’s allergic. Can you keep them here and ...since things are a bit rocky at the moment, could the lads stay over....Just for tonight.?”

Like an engine running out of steam, his speech grew more halting, as he realised how appalling the situation was.

“I’m keeping my baby too” said Penny valiantly, to no one.

Ron had limped to the lounge door and witnessed the last scene.

“Hello boys. Welcome to the billet. Good job we’ve got bedding.”

There was no room for anyone to manoeuvre, so one by one they sidled round each other. Bridget held aloft an empty bottle of Doreen’s Christmas chartreuse. “She’s drunk the whole lot!”

“Om Rheem Namaha” hummed Paul atonally

Doreen could hear the house pulsing, straining, over-wound.

Closing her eyes, she searched for a joyful moment. It was too hard. She found herself floating over all the bodies through to the kitchen and shutting the door. Fountains of fish and chips cascaded onto the lino. After a while, she felt better. This was a good night to remember how to drink. The family fell silent as she returned. It may have been the sight of rodents invading his territory that caused Hitler to screech a parting, “Off you go!” and fall from his perch.

For the first time, Doreen smiled at him.

“Absolutely. I’d like you all to leave now.”

Such chuntering belligerence as the animals left the ark.

Elliot, a neighbour’s child joined the queue carrying a sleeping bag – she didn’t ask. Ron breathed a sigh, “I think you were a bit...”

She raised her hand “Goodnight Ron.”

The bright yellow and red invitations asked them to gather by the tent on the common. It was the second time in a month they had been together.

Inside a single row had been reserved for them. Every other space was taken.

Suddenly the drums rolled and a disembodied voice told them to prepare for an unbelievable evening.

Was it Betty spinning and curling on her trapeze; or Irene looming above them on her stilts; or Rene whizzing, possessed on her unicycle; Joan whirling her plates and diabolos; Margaret eating her long poles of fire; or the general crackling, sparkling chaos of ribbons and ropes, feathers and hoops, bunting and flags; Or perhaps it was the spangly vision of a juggler emerging from the epicentre, encased in a lilac leotard and sending her glittering bottles in a continuously turning arc, which caused their jaws to drop. Finally, delight replaced suspicion in their transfixed, lit faces and when the ring-mistress ordered Paul into the ring and lassoed him, the cheers were deafening.

It was a glorious finale. Human cannonballs flew and acrobats dangled while simultaneously eating daggers of fire and as Doreen stepped over the tight-wire and juggled with glowing spheres, both father and son were moved to

ask themselves what they had missed. The bows were taken and their spines tingled with bewilderment, admiration and the faint possibility of ....loss. Afterwards, she came to them arm in arm with her ring of dazzling cohorts. "Hello everyone. This is our agent Lance Driver. He'll be managing our European tour."

2004 Words

"The Juggler" by Lindsey Mackie.

"Redforde", 8 Windsor Road, Gerrards Cross, Bucks, SL9 7NA.

01753 882720