

Why could she never find herself a public man? A man to walk down the street with, a man who would tend to the barbecue and flirt lightly with her friends. The fact that she was fat might have something to do with it (though she had no trouble scoring); the fact that she was fat and so felt herself to be odd; the fact that she was fat and so felt herself to be beyond the pale – free. Because every man she found was perfect at the time, perfect within her four walls or his, but, without exception, they all fell apart when she put them on display. Perhaps she was not sufficiently odd. Maybe there was an insubordinate streak of the ordinary in her, a thin woman trying to get out.

Successful women are supposed to be fat, she decided early on. If they are trim and look like mistresses then the board room is a minefield. She developed a motherly laugh. She developed a viciousness that made people mutter 'Fat bitch' and 'No wonder she's so neurotic – would you look at the size of her,' as their assignments came in on time.

She liked sleeping with men. It changed them. They were always surprised by her body – fat being a novelty

they would never have thought to pursue. They became nostalgic in her bed for first loves that had been reared on bread and dripping, for soft, Victorian thighs and garter belts that made a dent. They protested that sexuality was all to do with flesh – they were tired of being told to lust after skin and bone. Even so, their young wives were thin and expensive-looking. Bridget had noticed over the years that fat girls were expected to be cheaper and often went halves on dates. She didn't mind. She had plenty of money.

The men from work were not public men. They had nine-to-five faces and girlfriends who worked out. She could feel herself inflating when they walked into the room.

Nevertheless she confused them by her indifference and by the lack of conspiracy in her smile. Good-looking ones were the worst. They wanted Bridget to fall in love and bother them in the canteen with Significant and Resentful Looks. They avoided her ostentatiously and became helpful, formal and efficient.

One of the great sadnesses of Bridget's life was the fact that it all looked so sleek. Underneath the hard and friendly manner of a fatgirl who made it against the odds was the commonplace sickness of a woman who wanted a serious man. It was in public that the nausea hit – because there was a whole rake of oddities that Bridget did risk herself with. Men with sweaty eyes who liked to hold her hand walking down a street and were dying to meet her friends.

Her friends had a taste in wired, artistic-looking

types who liked to talk about themselves; men who could make an impression. Joan was addicted to the married variety and could not shake it, Maggie was interested in sex for its own sake, and Sunniva was pure class. Bridget adored and respected all three. She loved a good laugh and the privacy of their nights out. She was nearly jealous of their men, even though she knew that they were private disasters. These socially easy and uniformly handsome beasts used Maggie, Sunniva and Joan like bust-up sofas or wore them down with snideness and superficiality. There were tearful confessions of violence or infidelity. But when they all went out for the night no one had a bad time. Even their shirts were witty and they insisted on buying all the drinks.

Bridget divided her disasters into sections and phases. There were the fanatics, who had a tight, neurotic smell and undiluted eyes. They talked about death all the time or were severely political. There were the outright freaks: bizarre, hairy or double-jointed men who played the saw on the streets or trained to be anaesthetists; men who hated themselves so badly they might injure themselves if left on their own in a room. Some respite was provided by the silent brigade: patriarchal countrymen or foreigners, with rings of perspiration under the arms of their shirts and mothers who ascended bodily into heaven. There were the endearingly stupid. Men with beautiful smiles, who felt up Joan, or Maggie or even Sunniva under various tables and made obscene suggestions with cheerful tenacity and loping Woody Allen eyes.

Bridget made all the more usual and banal mistakes though they never lasted long: alcoholics, virgins, latent homosexuals, 'artists', whores, seminarian types, and one man who never spoke at all, who was mortified by the sound of female laughter.

The disaster was that Bridget loved them all. She loved them for wanting to hold her hand walking down a street, even though she was fat. She loved them because she knew that she was odd, despite the motherly laugh, the linen suits and the way she said 'Oh my aching feet!' to the person she sat down next to on the bus.

The life of an optimist is a lonely one. Bridget collected seashells and bits of blue glass in walks along the beach. Once a week she visited her elderly mother who had a medical pragmatism about sex. If Bridget did not find a husband soon then her insides would wither away and have to be removed. Of course when your daughter is thirty-five and a professional woman one doesn't enquire too deeply into her affairs, but in her mother's eyes Bridget was too fat for casual sex. She was, however, with her apartment, her job, and her motherly laugh, a Fine Catch. So there was a chance that some lonely and sensible man would save her womb from ossification in the grateful boredom of the marriage bed.

Bridget's mother believed in the marriage bed. When she was not talking about unmentionable diseases she was busy flirting with her dead husband. Bridget's dreams after these visits became infested with her father's eyes. She remembered the day that the

world fell apart and her mother's secret store of cosmetics was found. He made one of his only visits into the shops in town with the bag in his hand, went into the make-up counter in Switzers and demanded an estimate of prices from the assistant in her startling white coat. He fined the total from her mother's housekeeping money, with interest. At his funeral, Bridget's mother was plastered so thick with make-up that the mourners took her for some secret mistress, grinned with pride for the dead man and looked the other way.

Bridget was doing her best. She made a conscientious search for the lonely and sensible man. She sat in café windows and watched young and old pass by. She looked at their backs and asked 'Is that a sensible bottom? Can you tell by their taste in socks?' But she knew as she examined them in supermarkets or in traffic jams that she was a hopeless case. Any number of men with nine-to-five minds could provoke her into a faint stir of heat – but it was the ones that twitched who turned her inside out. These she would follow and catch with an audacity that made them feel needed. She would bring them back and empty them out all over her flat. She made them tea, folded them into her, wiped away their hurts and talked them dry – until they were so wet-eyed in love with her that her breasts began to swell. She held their taste in her mouth through the day and laughed all over the office. She started to speak their language.

All would be well until they grew suspicious of this interior life. They had to find out why she wanted

them and who she was. They stood outside her office at six o'clock and asked to meet her friends. They claimed her, laughed abnormally and let their jealousy show.

Even her friends were settling down, and their evenings out took on an alien air. Joan's latest married man was on the brink of leaving his wife and moving in, with his green eyes and excellent tailor. Maggie decided that sex was nothing without procreation and had a child by some Casanova who reformed on the spot and started to dote. Sunniva decided at last on a quiet civil servant who was a dedicated cook, read three books a week and adored her. Bridget, meanwhile, met a small travel agent with dog-brown eyes whom she thought might do.

She was initially attracted by a sign in his window which read 'Have a Boring Holiday Instead. Do Absolutely Nothing in Kinsale. Gourmet Food.'

She appeared to him in her most attractive persona, very slow and very witty and he appeared to her as light and hungry. The matter was soon resolved.

For some reason she did not despise the travel agent. There was something secret about his body, as though it were invisibly tattooed and wild beneath his suit. It made his business clothes seem like some kind of perversion – as though the tweed were a step more dangerous than latex, and she undressed him with care. He was perfectly presentable, willing, witty, he had a good singing voice, and the charming face of a sexual

child. Just when Bridget thought she had found it at last – the exciting, ordinary man – the travel agent showed her his collection of dolls.

The travel agent was a witch. He insisted that the word was 'warlock' but she couldn't see him in a sky-blue cloak scattered with stars. He believed in everything that was going, and a little bit more: astrology, herbs, zombie voodoo, Nietzsche, shamans, omens, some Buddhism and the fact that Bridget had been a water-buffalo and a Creole Madame in previous lives.

He talked to her about animal spirits and shape-changing with a ferocity that clashed with his lemon-yellow tie, and they followed discussions about telepathy and childhood with arguments about whether the bill should go on his expenses or hers. She gave him a key to her flat and he would turn up in the middle of the night with the strangest smells on his skin.

Bridget lived in an apartment block with a failing popular singer upstairs, two widows on either side, and someone who worked in TV below. She changed lightbulbs for the widows and they watered her potted plants. She met the failing popular singer in the hall with glitter on her cheeks, and listened to her sobbing through the ceiling all night. The TV person was rarely there and she did her crying in the mornings. Bridget and the widows never cried. As her affaire with the travel agent progressed, a flicker came into the widows' eyes and they started to borrow more cups of sugar. Slowly the apartment filled up with feathers, beads, small sweaty pieces of paper with mysterious

and banal phrases leaking in the creases and the occasional mask. Bridget believed. Why shouldn't she? She believed because the travel agent said that it didn't matter whether she believed or not. All these facts were indifferent to her, as the animals are, and they spoke a different language. As the travel agent said, when you are talking about Power the word 'true' had about the same weight as the word 'orange'. She started worrying about flights of crows, and wrote small hexes to put under his pillow.

The travel agent spent late nights grinding out his philosophies, trying to make her afraid of the dark. He started at hawk shadows on the walls and said that her body was a landscape of mist with a creature in it he could not meet. He begged her to howl and grunt, and the widows' hands started to tremble with admiration as she filled their cups with borrowed flour.

In point of fact, Bridget did feel herself to be under a spell. He flipped her body on the bed like a cake in a pan, he sang messages onto her answering machine. At inappropriate moments she would see him smile at the door, and when she looked, he wasn't there.

There must have been one particular morning when Bridget first neglected to take her shower. It was probably a morning in spring, which was always her most anxious time. Spring made her think of summer and her inability to wear shorts. The crocuses and the daffodils started pushing their way into her mind, like the sound of a party to which she had not been invited.

The thin light made her pant going up the stairs and left a turbid scum on all her windows. It was the time when she forgot to like her fat. It was the time when she most distrusted the fact that she was odd.

She asked the travel agent to marry her and he rolled over onto his back in the bed, stared into the dark and said yes. This was shortly before he noticed that dust was gathering in the shower head and her potted plants were all starting to die. As for the smell, he didn't seem to mind.

There were other creaks and groans on her way to a final halt. Bridget was bright as a button at work in the same dress all week, although she changed hats from day to day. The hats were needed to hide the beehive of tangles she got from writhing on her back underneath the travel agent, which she somehow wasn't interested in combing away. There were wrinkled noses and whispered complaints, but her bosses were all men, so none of them took her aside for a few words. Besides, Bridget had started to lose weight.

Maggie, Joan and Sunniva knew a crisis when they saw one, although it was three weeks before they invaded, cut Bridget's hair short, made her a meal and ran the bath. They all got splendidly pissed and made plans for the wedding, which for Bridget's sake, and the state she was in, would have to be fast or not at all. Joan said not at all, but Bridget said Yes at all costs. Sunniva agreed and made a pact with Bridget to 'pull herself together'. Maggie demanded that she get pregnant to

make the union meaningful and all of them asked 'My God Bridget, what IS he like?' 'He's a bit odd,' she answered. 'He's magic,' and they laughed until four o'clock in the morning.

Bridget realised the need for secrecy. Both her lapses and her man must be kept secret from the rest of the world. Her smell without water settled down and she chose a musky perfume to compliment it and make it more modern. She made the effort to dress and moved without complaint to the backwaters of the firm. Her short hair explained the new smallness of her face.

The travel agent seemed to be avoiding her except in the hours of darkness. He said that he loved her. He slit his finger and left a small bowl of blood beside her bed. There was a feather in the bowl.

One day she caught sight of him on the street and the ease with which he walked and talked was a minor miracle. He was wearing a shirt with thick blue-and-white stripes and an all-white collar. He had a blue paisley tie. His blue-grey jacket was slung over his shoulder by the maker's tag. (Unfortunately he was wearing brown shoes, but she took that as an exterior sign.) There were two men walking beside him in similar suits, one in navy blue, one in grey. They were bigger than him, but their bodies were sloppy. All their attention was devoted to what he was saying and they laughed a lot. She was hopelessly in love with that man.

Maggie, Sunniva and Joan took care of arrangements while she took to her bed with the shadow of a hawk

now real on the wall and wolf howls in the middle of the night. When things were very bad she went back to her fat laugh and her slow, witty talk. She pretended to listen a lot. Her days were spent in prescribed sets of movements, and when she erred – if, for example, she put her shoes on before her blouse – then she was made to suffer badly. She got cramps and side-stitches, shadows flitted and tormented her. Sometimes when she sat still there was music in the room that made her want to cry.

At night she dreamt of all the men she had loved, who queued by her bedside, and laid red, dark bunches of grapes in her lap.

Bridget got married in an ivory satin dress with a bouquet of freesias and the wedding march thundering down the aisle. Maggie, Joan and Sunniva cried their eyes out while her mother concentrated on the invisible knitting in her lap. Joe (for that was the travel agent's name) unveiled fifty-three relatives of impeccable respectability. Several nuns were in evidence, their hair unveiled and neatly styled. The women wore huge and expensive dresses in various sheens of acrylic, with splattered prints and enormous shoulder pads. They rustled and sagged in the church benches, sighing for their youth and the Day They Had Done It. The men were all backslappers, continually checked in their talk by the echoes from the vaulted roof, and they turned around in their seats, mouthing vigorous reminders of stag nights and holes of golf to each other, with jovial incomprehensibility.

Bridget trembled violently as she entered the church, after being held for ten minutes for photographs in the freezing cold of the porch. Her arms were purple and poked out of her dress like chicken legs. She clutched at the uncle delegated to give her away, as his chin went double with the formal effort of the long walk. Her progress was met with the traditional indulgence and good humour, and there was a great sigh from the bride's side when they saw how thin, how marvellous she looked. Joe waited for her in front of a Victorian Gothic altar, dapper in his morning suit, hands folded neatly, fingernails manicured and buffed to a slight shine.

She had a violent sexual tic when she felt the wool of his sleeve. What was under his suit? A bleeding sign slashed into his belly? A word on his breast? Or nothing at all? He smiled and so did she.

The priest was a malaria victim back from the missions who got her name wrong twice, though not at the vital moments. His sermon drifted back to the savannah as he lifted his eyes to the ceiling and talked to the simple black souls he saw there. He advised Joe against taking two wives.

When it came to the exchange of rings, Bridget was solid again. She could feel the ground under her feet and she didn't get his name wrong. Her hands, she noticed, as he placed the ring, were thin and expensive-looking.

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At the reception Joe was the life and soul. Maggie, Sunniva and Joan could hardly contain their enthusiasm as they flirted with him beyond the call of duty. They were shy of expressing their surprise to Bridget, who was shrouded with the new privacy of a married woman, even to her friends. Of course she had married a normal man. How could they have expected a disaster?

Maggie got maudlin and cried as she said over and over 'I always knew you were beautiful. I always knew.'

Bridget wasn't used to looking so well. She danced with all of Joe's uncles and three of them made a fumble as they let her go. She got too much attention.

Her sixteen-year-old cousin tried to seduce Sunniva's civil servant and there was a tight little scene in the ladies' toilet. In the corner, the mother of the bride had three brandies, gave a polite rendition of 'Goodnight Irene' and told anyone who would listen about the horrors of a life spent with a mean man.

Through it all, Joe kept his eye on her, smiled and lusted sedately. They met amongst the dancers and he said 'How are you? Alright?' and squeezed her hand like a brave girl.

'Wait until he gets you home Oho ye Boya!' said one of the uncles and Joe's teeth glittered as he smiled.

The D.J. hustled them into a ring to sing 'Congratulations'. He said 'Only virgins leave at nine o'clock, but a little birdie told me that they wanted to go.' Joe sang him with a look.

The bouquet was thrown and it landed in the chandelier, which would not stop swinging.

Joan whispered 'Don't forget the garter.' and Bridget felt a burning sensation on her thigh.

They were forced to run the gauntlet and Bridget was bruised by her mother as she attempted and missed a first and last kiss. Outside, the street was on fire with reflected neon that lit her dress in red, then blue. 'Jesus Christ, this is it,' said Bridget as she ripped off her veil and pinned it to the car aerial. The toilet paper flapped and everybody cheered as Bridget was driven into the thin, wet night by her public man.

What are
Cicadas?