

The Half-Pigs

Marco is in pain. Even loose pyjama bottoms make him cry out and he's been indoors for three days since his operation. If he knocks himself, mum comes running. His willy is a new blue colour with plimsoll stitches at the top. He tries to make me look but I start shouting and he gets into big trouble.

We have crept downstairs to watch TV. It's a film about the *Mafia*, Marco says. Mum's on the phone in the kitchen. I don't think she knows we're in the sitting room.

'He looks like dad,' Marco whispers.

'Who?' I ask.

'The soldier one.'

It's true. The man called Michael is short just like dad, has the same mouth, thick black hair and even the same wet angry eyes.

Marco holds up two of his fingers like a gun and points them at my head. He's been acting funny and it's not just because he stopped weeing properly. He screws his mouth up and squeezes his eyes together like the sun's hitting him in the face. Like he's got a tummy ache.

He's only nine but he went on a plane by himself for a skiing holiday with dad and the air hostess let him drink as much coca cola as he wanted. I'm a year younger so mum wouldn't let me go. Marco's got nice new clothes but he's become *paffuto* as dad said on the phone. He is scared of fat children. There was a quarrel about who had made Marco chubby; dad said it was fish-fingers and chips – mum said it was pizza and Coke. Sometimes he has trouble pushing out a poo which doesn't help.

In one of the photos he brought back, Marco's in a red ski suit, leaning on his sticks on the top of a snowy mountain.

'It was too tight,' he said. 'They bought it for me but it was too tight.'

When my mum looked at the photo her mouth twitched. Dad's not there but next to Marco is a young woman in sun-glasses, her cheekbones sharp under her skin. 'That's Marisa,' Marco said, 'she works with dad.'

Mum and dad are married but dad lives in Italy because that's where the shoe factories are. There aren't many wedding photos, just three or four small ones, but I flap back the sticky plastic to see more clearly. I like mum's wavy hair, her freckles and dad's handsome face. Their clothes are made from the same flowery stuff; dad in a shirt with big collars, grinning so you can see the gap between his teeth, mum in a dress holding a bunch of flowers across her chest. 'I was pregnant with your brother,' she told me. She'd taken off her glasses for the photo. They are laughing at each other, their mouths close as if about to kiss.

Dad flies all over the world. He's a shoe designer. America is '*favoloso*,' he tells us, the art galleries, the shops in New York, glass lifts that speak to you in Tokyo, gambling in Las Vegas, chauffeur drives in Singapore. He also tells us that in Italy people live 'properly,' they eat well and make sure things are tidy. But he says that

Leyton, where we live in London, is ‘dirty and people live like pigs.’

I look up and down our street, the small houses squashed together like different teeth, pebble-dashed, bricked or smeared in yellow cement. The grey pavements mirror the grey sky and the dog poo glistens with rain.

But dad doesn’t know that I can run to the corner shop to buy sweets and there’s a playground at the end of the road where we scream on the long-chained high swings. When the sun shines and the wind blows and the leaves scatter, it’s like the whole world’s humming. At Christmas a float comes round and Santa waves at us. There’s a donkey under the compost heap at the end of the garden who talks to us. He doesn’t know these things.

When he looks at me sometimes, I feel my Italian half shrivel away. Then I’m just left with the English part, my mum’s bit. That’s when I see all the mess; the kitchen floor covered in so much Lego you have to wade through it. Bits of toast crust and cereal slop under the table.

Once every few months mum shouts, *Your father’s coming! He’s on his way!* Pulling the Hoover from its coiled grey sleep under the stairs she jerks it round the floor where it sucks up sausages of fluff and hair. I’m on dusting and polishing. Even if the glass looks smeary mum keeps saying, *good girl, good girl* as if I’m in a race. I feel so good, I lead her to a small cupboard in the wall behind Marco’s bed. When she opens the door she sees all the pants dangling on the doll’s house with their yellow-brown stains. Mum screams at him. Then she calms down and asks him if he’s having trouble again.

‘Why d’you tell mum?’ he asks me after the pants are picked off with the end of a broom.

‘It’s my dolls house!’

‘You don’t even play with it anymore.’ He hates me now.

I’m sitting on the stairs, waiting for dad’s reflection to pour into the glass bubbles on the front door. I’m wearing sandals, soft as icing sugar, with blue stones sewn down the front. Dad made them for me. It feels good like his hands are cupping my feet. Sometimes I wait on the stairs so long, I need the toilet and the bell’s scream is like a squirt of wee. He never uses his keys.

When the bell goes I call out to the others. I’m scared of kissing him.

Up close, his flesh is spongy, his cheek hair is rough and his lips are too big and wet. But soon it’s over and we start looking for our presents. Lollipops in long plastic strips or sugar coal to gnaw on; skate-boards, clothes from Benetton or the new chocolate stuff, Nutella, in small plastic packs with mini spoons.

Dad has a headache, but after his coffee we take him from room to room so he can look at our work.

‘Look at my room dad!’ Marco says.

‘I worked harder!’ I say.

‘They all helped to tidy, even Luca!’ says mum, joggling him on her hip.

We are all smiling. He’s pleased. This time it’s going to be alright.

At dinner dad tells us a story. One night in Canada, he's unpacking his car outside a hotel when he feels something behind him. It's warm and heavy and clumps onto his shoulders. There's hot wet breath on his neck. Dropping the box, he steps away from the car but the thing comes with him. Now dad's really scared because he thinks it's a bear. *Vai via! vai via!* he shouts but his voice melts into the night. The thing stays, panting. He walks slowly to the hotel door. In the refectory he sees a big dog with its paws on his shoulders. A man behind the desk jumps up and shouts, 'Bruno get down, Bruno!' The dog drops down and lies down by the man's feet. The man explains Bruno is an Irish Wolfhound and says, 'He likes you, he doesn't do that to just anyone.'

We laugh and I look at dad's teeth. The gap's gone. He tells us that a dentist had to grind them down into spikes to fit new teeth on. I liked his teeth and he doesn't look the same. Every time he laughs I think of the stumps, black and sharp like a wild dog's under all the whiteness.

There are lots of things dad does all mixed up together, but not in all one visit. He does puppet shows with voices including Burt and Ernie from Sesame Street. He once saved Luca when he tried to climb out of the bedroom window, catching the toe of his babygro just in time.

He pushed the dresser over with all mum's china on it when we were having our tea.

He brings us brilliant presents.

He smashed a window with his fist when he was trying to fix it.

He threw my doll buggy across the room.

He's more handsome than any other dad I know.

He sings and dances like Elvis when we have a party.

He pulled my mum along the floor by her hair; it was like a man with a dog but it was a screaming woman, her hair the lead.

Mum says after he broke my doll buggy I stopped wanting to sit on his lap.

The problem is when dad tells us off in English we start laughing. It's funny.

I will kick your head off, he says.

I kick your fackin head off.

Dad sits brooding in the corner of the sitting room watching TV and smoking. It's the place where I listen to mum's Beatles and Leonard Cohen records. He holds his cigarette in a way that shows off his lovely fingers and his right ankle crosses the other knee. But he's cross. *Dio cane*, you hear from the corner, *Dio porco!* I watch the little men scampering round the green football pitch on *Grandstand*, their wet hair and funnels of breath. Dad's side never seems to win.

'I have to go to Le Marche again, the fackin factoree is breakin my balls,' he says. Worry streaks his face while mum stands at the cooker cooking steak and new potatoes. Dad stabs his fork into a bowl of salad. No one else is allowed to touch it. The big secret is dad designs shoes for Clarks. Nobody knows except us, mum, our grandparents and a few friends. The kids at school thinks Clarks is crap and they

point and scream at anyone who's wearing a pair. They just seem to know. Every summer before school starts, mum pulls me past the pretty patent shoes with bows in Ravel to get ones in Clarks. They're heavy and brown and ugly and I scuff them up as soon as I can. I want them to disappear.

We are in Italy for the summer holiday. Marco is healed now, the top of his willy just looks a bit angry like a hurt thumb. He doesn't show me much anymore, only when I ask.

We spend time with dad in his studio near Milan. The smell of leather hits my nostrils from all the shoes lined up on rails and shelves. I run my fingers along them, stroking the softness, (as soft as chocolate in my mouth), breathing in the sour smell of new suede, rough as a cat's tongue. In boxes behind the rails are piles of shoe moulds that look like caramel. I use scraps of leather to wrap them in. Or I flap thick samples of different coloured leather about like money.

Dad's finishing his new collection, designs falling from his pen again and again. He draws a high heeled boot in just a few seconds, hardly letting his hand leave the page. It's a good time to watch as long as you keep quiet.

The designs are taken away by the girl from the photograph. Marisa is taller than my dad with short black hair and a long narrow nose. She's a designer and hardly talks at all. She presses her fingers to her lips when I try and ask dad something. 'Be *quite*,' she says in a gruff voice. *Quite*, I repeat to Marco.

Later she takes us to buy some clothes. Dad says we need new ones. At the counter, Marisa takes a card out of her large wallet, tapping one of her long shoes against the floor. The woman smiles at me and Marco, then looks back at Marisa. She says something in Italian. Marisa shakes her head.

Back at dad's flat she washes, dries and irons our old ones, then folds them into plastic bags with zips. When no one's looking later, I creep into dad's studio and find some old drawings from the bin. I put them into my pocket carefully. Then I say I'm missing mum. We are supposed to go for a pizza but we've been here all day.

We are staying with mum in my grandparents' farmhouse, a few miles from dad's flat. My nonna's kitchen is bright and smells of rich sugo and fried chicken. In this room my grandparents spend the day cooking and shouting at the telly.

My nonno's eyes are bright blue and his white moustache smiles as he slices peaches into my hands. He kills chickens and then hangs them over the back of a chair where they keep wobbling their stretched necks and making bad noises. My nonna walks with a rolling step, from when she was ill as a child. I wait for her laugh to come and her jaw to snap open like a puppet's. She's only got a few teeth.

Mum's on the phone a lot, her voice high, jabbering in fast Italian. She goes into my nonna when the call's over. Nonna keeps saying a word, '*managgia!*' and pointing her finger to the ceiling. Mum puts her head down table and cries.

We're going to the seaside. On the way to Folonica there's a heat wave. The window's open but there's no cool breeze, only hot hair-dryer fug. We pass a few cars that have crashed or lie smoking like black dead animals. Dad's going through a whole pack of cigarettes. I watch him pull the smoke in tight, after it wobbles round his lips for a second. His eyes squint on the road ahead. I remember the man in the film Michael, started out sweet and soft in his army uniform. But then his face went hard, he got the scar and he never smiled.

Marco's looking out of the window using his fingers as a gun. He points at dad's head. Then he turns to point his gun behind us to the small blue car. At the woman's head. It's Marisa. She's coming on holiday with us. *To help*, mum said. I turn to look back at her. Marisa's keeping as close as she can to us. As soon as she loses her position, she waves her arm out of the window until she's nosing up back behind us.

Marisa wears shorts and bikini tops and spends her time cooking, sweeping and mopping the tiles on the floor of our holiday flat. Marco and I call her 'the snake' as she's so thin. Mum spends her time in books, lying flat on her belly on the beach or on the bed in her room. She looks small next to Marisa. Her hair's dry from the sun and sea and crackles up as she walks. Everything she says to dad seems to make him cross but she doesn't seem scared. I feel sick every time she opens her mouth.

Dad's sharing with Marco, Mum's with Luca and I'm in with Marisa as there aren't enough rooms.

In the evening before she showers, Marisa pulls off her bikini which crinkles into a small pile on the bed. Her breasts are white against her darker skin and almost flat with brown nipples. Between her legs it's dark with tiny red bumps. Coming out from the slit is a white string, caught, like a mouse tail. She catches staring and snaps, 'Why arr you lookin?' Then she turns to the wall and wraps herself in a towel. I think about mum's body. She has big breasts, a soft white tummy I like to stroke. She bought a little statue when we went to visit some tombs in dark green stone. It's a short squatting woman with a line for a mouth, goggly eyes and a huge bottom.

'It looks like you,' I tell mum.

She doesn't say anything but turns to look in the mirror, pressing her stomach as though to push it in. Sighing, she pouts into the mirror.

After lunch, when we are supposed to have a siesta, Marco tries to get Marisa to repeat some of the things we say at school, *wicked*, and *yeah guy*, but also some other words like *spam-head*, *spazmo*, *dick-head* and *four-eyes*. She smiles at first but then gets angry after she says, *I'm a spam-head* and we laugh. She goes to dad who comes to find our heads to slap.

'Av'you finished?! Ma che stronzo!' he shouts at Marco. I wonder why dad has so much anger, he's always trying to find something to pour it into.

Marisa goes back to the cleaning. Cleaning is essential and the key to living well as a person. I make a mistake of walking over the kitchen floor and leaving sweaty prints on the tiles. Dad pulls me back to see the track I have left.

'Look,' he says, 'Look at your dirty feet. You dirty girl. Go get a cloth and wipe it up!' The marks are already vanishing like prints made by a ghost. But I wipe and wipe away until it's all gone while dad and Marisa watch.

We find her sleeping. Her buttocks rising gently in unison with her breathing. Creeping back into the kitchen I slide a fork out of the drawer and take Marco's hand. Quietly we pad into the room and it seems to me that even before the cold metal touches her flesh, Marisa's screaming.

Mum takes us for an ice-cream on the beach. She opens her book but this time faces us, sitting up with her toes digging in the hot sand. I ask her why Marisa doesn't have any fanny hair. She doesn't answer, just snorts and I see the gold of her filling, but then she stops smiling and goes back to the book.

The waitress in her teens has big sulky lips and slops to and fro in her beach shoes. Whatever dad says, it makes him chuckle. My mum says, *stop Alfredo!* but Marisa's silent at the end of the table, her long fingers pulling at the edge of the table cloth. Her lips start to tremble as dad follows the girl with his eyes.

The day continues with Marisa's tears and sulks. On the beach, mum and dad walk down the beach. I wonder if they're in the special place where the sea hisses round the big white boulders. Marisa's supposed to be watching us but it's me who makes sure Luca doesn't paddle too far into the water and stays under the umbrella so he doesn't burn. She just rubs oil into her legs and stomach and sniffs. 'The basket ball player's crying again,' Marco whispers. We both giggle.

When my parents return, mum's got that funny look on her face, her mouth twitching, not in anger but like she's trying not to smile. Dad has a funny look on his face too and dives into the water. Marisa gets up and stomps back to the flat. In a while dad disappears. Mum puts on her floppy hat and stares out at the sea.

Our boat, or 'gomene', looks like a rubber dingy with a motor. Dad seems excited but his smile fades as we pass other families in bigger ones or even shiny white speed boats with gold lettering on the side. They're called *Sapphire* or *Phoenix*. It's uncomfortable with the picnic, bottles and water skis, our six bodies crammed together. Marisa is busy making sure the boat keeps balanced and steady. Dad turns off the motor a few hundred yards from the beach.

'Get de hose,' he says to Marco. Marco looks worried and starts scrabbling in the bottom of the boat.

Dad shouts, 'C'mon, de hose, de hose!'

Finally he picks up one of the oars from the base of the boat.

'This the hose, the fackin hose, you shemo!' He whacks Marco over the head with it.

'It's oars, Alfredo, oars!' moans mum, holding my brother's head.

'Be quiet mum,' I plead. I don't want dad to turn on her.

People are watching from the beach. When we reach the shore we can't pull the boat together up the sand as dad commands. I fall over and so does Marco. Finally Marisa and dad do it together, sweating to get it right. We huddle round mum who's bent her glasses in the panic.

Topless women stand still at the edge of the water. One woman has slicked back hair, her bikini twisting up between her buttocks. Dad looks at her. He's panting in the heat, jolting slightly as Marisa smears sun-cream onto his back. Mum's hair is hanging down her back in tangles. Her costume is loose, the dip in her back is already red as well as the tops of her thighs. I look down at my own legs, short like mum's. I don't like what I see. I search for the next thing I don't like, my hands. I hold my fingers up to the sun to see their black fatness against the glare.

In the late afternoon mum and Marco go for a last swim. I follow for a bit but mum stops, treads water, then says, 'I want to talk to your brother *on his own*.' Whining I swim back and paddle, trying to listen from the beach.

They stop quite far out. The sun is setting, a red ball wobbling down towards the sea. I hear Marco cry out. After a while, mum swims back, staggering out of the water. He follows slowly, swallowing water and trying to keep his chin up as he cries. 'What?' I ask, 'what?'

Marco says dad loves Marisa more than mum. The hate flows up in my throat quickly like it was always meant to be there.

Marisa is helping dad prepare the boat. Her face is still, but alert as if she wants to hide how excited she is to be with him. Marco's shaking. Mum pulls his towel around him as he shivers. I stand watching his blue-tinged thighs jiggling against each other. Neither dad or Marisa seem to notice that we are upset. Finally dad says something in Italian to my mum who shakes her head.

Black, cold waves slap us as we wade out to get into the boat. Mum keeps trying to pull herself up the rubbery side. But she falls back into the water each time. Dad grabs the back of her swimming costume and pulls her in.

Dad's dream is to water ski with a single stick but he hasn't managed it once yet. He's angry with himself, furious at the other men on the beach who lean so far to the right and left on skis that they mime going to sleep to impress their girlfriends.

A few nights before we leave, he tries again. He grunts as we help pull the rubber footholds onto his feet. With Marisa at the steering wheel, Marco and I sit on either side of the boat to balance it out.

We look back as five, six, seven times dad crashes into the waves. His arms are shaking up and down as the rope drums and he tries to keep balanced. Somewhere inside I want to cry for him but Marco starts laughing and so do I. The loud motor means dad can't hear, but Marisa can.

Gripping the wheel she turns her head back to look at dad, biting her lip. 'Stop laffing...' she says. '...It's your father, voi papa!'

She slows down the motor to turn round. Dad's swearing in the water, his life jacket up around his head as the ski bobs away gently in the boat's ripples.