This Is All Mostly True

Mum says lying is wrong; Dad says white lies are okay; Stacie says fiction is lies and fiction is the best thing in the world but your mum’s got a point.

Mum says to be polite and not have seconds unless I’m genuinelyhungry.

Dad says to have fun, always plan ahead and wear the sort of shoes that I could run in if I needed to suddenly. Dad and I watch zombie films whenever Mum’s out with the girls (it’s our thing). The girls are all older than Mum; they have a lot of fun but rarely plan ahead, and in the shoes they wear they’ll be the first to get their brains scooped out come the zombie apocalypse.

Mum’s out tonight with the girls – she’s just left. She said she’s going to the bingo and will be back before ten. This means she’ll be going out clubbing and will be back after one. Mum’s rubbish at planning ahead, and she tells lies of all colours.

She drinks too bloody much, is what Dad says.

I drink because your father’s a cheating bastard, is what Mum says.

They don’t say these things to each other. They say it to themselves, and to me if I happen to be there at the time.

I like to watch Mum getting dressed in the morning. I sit on her uncomfortable, white-silk kidney seat and watch as she stretches and wiggles into her tights. I don’t like to watch her get dressed when she’s been out with the girls the night before because she often puts her foot right through her tights and they rip and she swears and shouts and her jagged big toenail sticks right through the nylon and I get upset and have an episode.

I’ve only kept with him because of you, Mum says, Because I love you very much.

Mum feels *obliged,* because of me, to keep trying to love Dad. I’m an *obligation.* Stacie taught me that word and what it means. Stacie didn’t say that I am an obligation, because Stacie’s very careful with the truth. I like Stacie. She’s thirty-three and quite poor, and she’s got short blonde hair with pink ends and wears the most sensible shoes I’ve ever seen.

Dad calls Stacie ‘lass’.

Dad’s forty-four.

Thirty-three and forty-four are good numbers.

Mum’s fifty-three which means she can’t have any more babies. She had me fourteen years ago. I’m her first and last. Sometimes Mum sings *My first, my last, my everything*, to me and hugs me a lot. Sometimes she tells me to stop being weird and go away, especially when I’m watching her get dressed. She says stop it when we’re in the supermarket or a park or in town and I start having an episode.

Dad says okay then, over and over. Okay then, okay then, okay then… like that.

I don’t tend to have episodes when Stacie’s over, so I can’t remember what she says.

It’s raining. I should go downstairs because there’s washing on the line and Mum said not to forget to take it in if it rains. Dad always forgets. I forget too, but Mum tells us both so hopefully one of us will remember. She says for fuck’s sake when we both forget to take the washing in.

Remembering to get the washing in when it rains is a ‘basic thing’; I need to try to remember to be better at ‘basic things’.

At least you’ve an excuse, is what Mum says to me when she’s calmed down.

You’ve no excuse at all, she tells Dad.

I look out of my window.

The window’s got flecks of drizzly grey rain on it, making the garden beyond it look greyer than it really is. The flowers in their beds are mostly dead or dying, but there’s a crop of yellow roses which shine through the general greyness.

This is a good way of describing the window and the rain and the garden.

Stacie says I’m getting red hot at describing things and if she doesn’t watch it I’ll get a novel published before she does. This is a type of lie, but it’s the nice type that friends tell each other. Me and Stacie are friends; we only tell nice lies.

Through the window, I can see the washing is still on the line.

I go downstairs.

I call to Dad and he says What?

Dad’s having a fag out of the open front door. This is technically breaking a house rule, because he’s smoking and his feet are on the carpet. Even though the wind is whipping the smoke away as soon as it leaves his nose and mouth, it’s still breaking a house rule because his feet are on the carpet and that’s what counts. Dad smokes and Mum drinks. I don’t do anything. I wonder what it’d be like if Dad drank and Mum smoked. I think it’d be quieter.

I tell Dad the washing’s on the line.

He says Okay, well.

I say I’ll get it in.

He says Thanks Chuckyegg. This is one of his names for me.

I get the basket from beside the machine in the utility and unlock the back door and go out into the thrashing, wet cold. Stacie would like this description. If I remember, I’ll write it in my ideas book and tell her it later, so she can steal it for one of her stories if she wants to. Mum says stealing is wrong, like lying or smoking with your feet on the carpet, but Mum doesn’t understand about fiction. Stacie steals my ideas all the time but she asks me first and I always say OK. She sometimes steals the whole of me, to be a character in one of her stories. I don’t mind being stolen by Stacie. *Stolen by Stacie,* that’s alliteration. Alliteration is effective when used sparingly.

I begin taking the clothes off the line. This is a plot point. I could just say *I took the clothes off the line*, but Stacie says that by using ‘begin’ before an action or activity, it suggests that something will happen while the action or activity is being done by the protagonist.

A protagonist can be anyone interesting who you’d like to follow around.

Nobody ever follows me around, apart from the neighbour’s dog, Heinrich. And that’s only because I throw treats over the hedge for him and look after him when the neighbours are away.

Heinrich is a German name. The neighbours aren’t German. Heinrich’s name is *ironic.* I don’t know how Heinrich would feel if he knew he had an ironic name.

I’m half-way through removing the washing from the line when a very good-looking boy comes into the garden through the side gate and right up to me and says You’re ever so pretty, would you like to be my date for my friend’s party. I drop a sock.

This is called action.

It hasn’t really happened, so it’s a kind of lie, but it could have done, which means it’s credible. Credible lies are just fine in fiction.

If the boy was ugly, the author – that’s me – would have to work harder at giving him a three-dimensional personality so that the reader can *invest* in him.

He could be someone I know or a stranger.

He could *even* be a zombie.

If I wanted to introduce some emotional complexity, he could be the zombie of someone I know. That way, I’d be scared for my life but also sad about killing him.

Maybe Dad would hear a commotion from where he’s having a fag at the front of the house and run around the back to save me.

The zombie could kill Dad or… for even more emotional complexity, it could bite Dad and then Dad could kill it but later *I’d* have to kill Dad. That would be a major plot point *and* emotionally complex. If I didn’t notice Dad’s bite but the reader did, that’d be called dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is different to regular irony.

But then, if Dad was still having a cigarette out of the front door at the time the zombie came into the back garden via the side gate, Dad would’ve seen it and a whole lot of action would have been avoided.

Fiction is complicated. But Stacie says it’s easier than real life.

I’ve finished taking the washing down. I haven’t folded anything because it’s not yet dry. I’m using my initiative.

As I go inside, I linger for a moment at the back door. One foot on the concrete step, one on the lino inside. The rain has stopped already; I needn’t have bothered getting the washing in at all. I hear Heinrich’s bark from behind the neighbour’s hedge. Everything smells of petrichor.

This is excellent writing.

The scene takes place in the fictive present (me on the step) while also alluding to an alternative future in which I hadn’t brought in the washing, and Mum never noticed. The bit about Heinrich barking is good because we’ve heard about him earlier, and the bark suggests the passage of time.

Also, it’s a moment of introspection.

Readers love introspection because it’s like listening to a friend, and a lot of readers are lonely.

The use of *petrichor* is a gamble, because most people won’t know what it means. But one difficult word shouldn’t put off most readers.

Writing stories is like *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, Stacie told me before I wrote anything at all. She said Nobody wants to admit their ignorance. I wish everyone explained things like Stacie does, I’d never be confused again.

Stacie left three hours ago, before Mum. It still smells of Stacie in the hall. Her perfume is called patchouli. Mum says drug addicts wear patchouli to hide the smell of marijuana. Mum says mean things sometimes but she can’t help it because she’s sad. Nobody told me this so it could be wrong. It might be wrong but it’s not a lie.

What’s the movie, I ask Dad who’s finished smoking and is in the kitchen making malted milk.

Malted milk is our favourite drink. And it’s alliteration.

Lady’s choice, says Dad.

*Dawn of the Dead,* I say.

Not again, says Dad.

*Evil Dead,* I say.

Hmm, says Dad.

*Evil Dead 2,* I say.

Sold to the little lady in the camouflage onesie, says Dad.

I’m the little lady in the camouflage onesie, so I go into the living room and find the film, pop it into the DVD player and read the back as I wait for Dad and the malted milk.

I’ve seen *Dawn of the Dead* twelve times and *Evil Dead* seven times. I’ve only seen *Evil Dead 2* three times, so I don’t know it verbatim yet. Verbatim is a great word; It’s Latin and most people know what it means.

My favourite movie is *Shawn of the Dead,* but Dad won’t watch it with me anymore because we’ve seen it nineteen times and he’s sick to the back teeth. Mum thinks it’s strange that all our favourite movies have ‘dead’ in the title.

Is there extra sugar in it, I ask when Dad comes in and hands me my mug.

Nooo, he says in a silly voice and winks. This means there is.

People lie all the time and it’s not always bad. Lies can be funny, like Dad lying about the sugar. Lies are only really bad when the stakes are high.

You can kill a vampire with a stake, but not a zombie. You have to cut a zombie’s head off, or shoot them through the brain with a large calibre bullet, or blow them up.

I’m about to press play on the remote control, but change my mind.

What is it, says Dad.

Don’t know, I say.

This is a lie.

Go on, I want to see this flick. I’m dying to know what happens, says Dad.

This is a joke.

I told Stacie she’s my best friend today, I say.

Oh, says Dad.

Yes, I say.

Dad puts his malted milk on the coffee table between us. The mug says: BEST DAD IN THE WORLD.

This is a lie.

That was a nice thing to say, he says.

Yes, I say.

What did she say, he says.

She said, you too, I say.

That’s great, he says.

It’s a lie, I say.

Elsie, your leg, he says.

I know, I say.

Have you taken your meds, he says.

Yes, I say.

This is a lie.

She’s only my friend because I can’t go to school and you and Mum pay her to come here, I say.

My foot is banging against the leg of the coffee table and it’s hurting but it won’t stop however much I tell it to.

Dad moves his malted milk from the table to the floor. A safe distance. He tries to prise mine from my hands but my fingers have gone stiff and won’t move an inch. This is a cliché. Clichés are a sign of bad writing.

Okay then, says Dad. Okay then, okay then, okay then…

2,198 words