

ZOË HOWARD

Family Matters

I'D TELL YOU ABOUT MYSELF but I'd frighten you. I've been told I'm to have a "psychiatric assessment" on December first. Merry Christmas. Now that you know, "tell all your friends, tell a whole bunch." I just had an Anafranil for lunch. Suits me, don't you think?

So I will tell you about Hallowe'en, instead. And my family. It was my brother's twenty-first birthday and we were all to meet for dinner. It was a family dinner and I dressed cheaply for the occasion. As my mother and I arrived my dad and his wife were waiting in the lobby of Red Robins. Is that what it's called? Don't ask me. Chirp. Chirp. He had on a red sweatshirt with jeans and his hair looked kind of awkward as though it had just been cut. She had her long, stringy, grey hair that she unwillingly traded for red. The hostess had what looked like a bun on her head with rigid pieces of hair jutting out. I stared at it, eventually realizing it was a spider. Just an ornament, although exactly the same colour as her hair. Then I looked around for more spiders. There they were in the glass display case. I was right: just an ornament, in anticipation of Hallowe'en. My father commented on her hair.

I said, "It's not her real hair, you know."

He answered, "Yes, it took me a while to realize that." Bev, my dad's wife, was silently shocked.

I pointed to the display case, "See!" Her stare darted towards the case. I felt a tinge guilty for her not knowing.

My mother soon made it clear who was paying for dinner.

She put my father on the spot: "Are you paying for dinner?" It seemed to go against her "financially independent" stand. He said he would. I mentioned the \$3500 roof repairs we just had. He said, that was cheap, as far as roofs go. Well I tried, Mama.

My brother had called to say he'd be a half hour late.

The hostess must have called our last name. Either that or my father's first. Was this one of those restaurants where they pretended to know their customers? Did they have money in mind, too? "The more personal, the more tip money." Were there spiders behind their grins? "Creepy crawly. Creepy crawly." The four of us were led to a table. Me, my father, Bev, and lastly my mother.

I heard my father comment to Bev, "Do you notice all the guys look at Anna?" She said she didn't notice. I heard my father but pretended I didn't.

We were seated. My mother and I sat next to each other. My father directly across from me, with Bev at his left. We talked. Or they talked. Someone must have talked! I think I drifted. I know one thing that was discussed. We all wanted John, my brother's child, to be there. Nine months ago when John was born it was different. How funny time is.

Bill and Livi arrived. Bill's eyes didn't acknowledge my presence. I tried to be friendly. Let me explain. My brother, Garret, and his good friend, Bill, were roommates. There were three of them. Frederick was the third. They lived in Bill's mother's (Loraine, who was forty-three) house. Anyway, to be brief, my brother lost his briefs and now Loraine has my brother's child. His name is John. He is adorable although the situation wasn't. I won't explain the specifics; the little quirks that further complicate the matter. So Bill is now my family, I guess. Livi lives in Loraine's house and is like her younger sister, although she isn't. Bill had given me a sappy love letter about a week before. The more I read it the more nauseated I felt, so I stopped. Livi is twenty-five. She works overtime. She wears nice shoes. I drink her beer. Bill has chin-length jet-black hair with clothes to match. He has a droopy face like a basset hound. I chose to file him away in my filing cabinet. I couldn't file him under "Personal" because I didn't wish him to be. I filed him under "Bills." It is funny how there was such a perfect place for him in my filing cabinet. How well he fitted.

My brother arrived with his girlfriend, Chandra, who when they met had just broken up with her husband, who told my mother her mother might have been a prostitute, who may suit my brother very well. Bev made a fuss and was in a frenzy shuffling my dad and herself down one seat so that Garret and Chandra could sit next to each other. Garret sat beside me. My brother opened his presents, and I purposely left mine in the car. I didn't really like what I had bought him and wasn't in the mood for being judged. I quickly mentioned my present wasn't very good. He said something like he'd like it if it was from me. The time came when my brother ordered and I expected his voice to change into "work mode." He teaches how to fly

ultralights. The change in his voice wasn't as evident as I expected. He calls me by my middle name, "Liz."

Everyone ended up eating off of everyone else's plates. I had a glass of red wine. And when the waitress asked me if I wanted another I didn't decline. I was feeling a bit drunk and I was glad.

I mixed up my words and Chandra said "the wine must be affecting Anna." My mom said I hadn't drunk much. She must have thought I was still on my first glass. I didn't correct her.

Chatter was circling around the table and I was feeling trapped. I remember the lamp shades, red and blue, which muffled the lights. The room was congested with mirrors and TV's filling empty spaces. I went to the bathroom at least twice. More for escape than release. The music played louder in there, and I danced. All the time I had my ears cocked for the sound of the bathroom door creaking open. Ready to stop my dance in mid step and step into "normal bathroom behavior." I also reapplied my lipstick, drunk. Kinda like swallowing Coke upside down. I managed to smudge some on my cheap top. The water I used to try and wash it off only made it worse. I giggled.

When dessert was ordered Garret asked if I wanted to share. I thought that was a good idea although I wondered if he had asked his girlfriend the same question. As though I had taken her place. Garret and I couldn't eat it all and the waitress said my brother would receive a second birthday song if we emptied the plate. So I sent the dessert round the table, and it came back looking much the same. The waitress saw the lack of progress and said my brother could get a balloon if we finished. He asked if I could get one too. I put the big chunk of ice-cream in someone's cheesecake dish and covered it with a napkin. The waitress came and insisted on tying balloons on my brother's and my arms. My dad pointed out the cheesecake dish, but my brother said that *was* cheesecake. I wondered if she would ever discover she had been fooled. I asked my brother if helium was bad for you. He said it wasn't and I had known the answer because I had asked him this before. Scuba divers use it.

Garret and I both managed to, almost instantly, release the string from our wrists. We left. I was eager and they followed me. We took our turns sucking in the helium. Changing our voices. And laughing. My dad and his wife laughed too. Mine was the most false. Our voices went high, and we said goodbye. We left into the cold darkness. Into the parking lot. Into those structured white parallel lines. Into our four cars.

My mother—I'm not sure where she was—but later when she asked where my balloon was I said I think I left it in Garret's car. Sometimes I don't care to explain.

As I read this now, my father sits behind me in the cafeteria. I've decided this time I won't look back.