

ROUNABOUTS

A coming of age.

BY SUSAN LANIGAN

“Christ,” Diana says. “I’ve never seen so many of them.” She means the roundabouts, 13 in all, designed to bypass Jake’s hometown. Twelve of them are named after the Twelve Chieftains of Macha; the thirteenth after a local councillor of dubious integrity.

Jake only laughs in reply. His profile in the seat beside her is like a blade, no soft forgiveness of chin, cheek or forehead. Watchful. They are all like that here.

Diana hadn’t told anyone where she was going, except Dr Anand, yesterday. His response was to shrug his shoulders and continue to fill the syringe with the chemical cocktail for Women’s Extender treatment. First the norethisterone, enough of it to extend Diana’s menstrual cycle to a two-month interval and slow down egg death, then the hydrogen peroxide mix, which would bind to her eggs and preserve them until they were released into the body, then a weak ammonium compound to keep the mixture stable.

Jake drives past a billboard of a woman in her forties wearing nothing but a padded bra, a spoon of diet yoghurt in her mouth. Diana sighs with relief. If they have sexy posters of women her age, it must be a friendly town. Some places haven’t been so welcoming. One village in Midwarthenshire successfully chased two Extender women out of town, ‘Trouts Out’ having been painted all over their houses.

Jake pulls up at a farmhouse. “We’re home!” he calls, leading Diana into a hall with striped fleur-de-lys wallpaper. His mother rushes up to welcome them. “Och, it’s lovely to meet you, Diana. Will ye not come in and have some tea and sandwiches?”

The tea is strong and scalding. “I hope the journey was all right, pet,” his mother smiles. “You know wee Jake, his generation always act as if cars are toys to play with.”

His generation. Diana immediately recognizes the deliberate jibe. Jake, oblivious, leaves for the bathroom. Mrs McCrea waits a moment before speaking again.

“I’m a churchgoing person, y’know. I have a lot of friends on the other side who feel the same way as I do about things.” Diana just nods her head, not mentioning how Jake’s fingers whiten when he drives through areas with the wrong colour flags flying. “Both the priest on the other side and I oppose those women freaks. It’s disgusting, you know.



Having babies when they’re ready for their pension.” She reaches out to pat Diana’s arm, but Diana recoils.

“It’s not disgusting. Society has changed. They test people regularly to make sure they’re fit for purpose.”

“Och yes,” Mrs McCrea says softly. “They keep telling lies about not getting defective wee babies any more. But you and I know those eggs are full of chemicals so they’ll keep and not go off. Full of poison, so they are.” Mrs McCrea leans close. “But it’s not about testing, or society, I’m talking about. Don’t ye think it would be better for Jake to be with a nice young gerrul?”

Before Diana can exclaim with anger, Mrs McCrea imperiously lifts her hand. “I knew the minute I saw you. Could smell the hormones a mile off. D’ye know, someone from this town tried that once? The puir auld lady, sure you know what is in them syringes? Hydrogen peroxide. Bleach. Well that’s what happened. They forgot to dilute it. Bleach all over, burning her flesh from inside. She died, you know. Died roaring —”

Diana gets up and walks out without another word. Behind her the witch is laughing. Laughing! Diana

puts her hands over her ears to block it out. “Bleach” — that is one of the many rumours about the Extender treatment. Infertility, endometriosis, unspeakable cancers. Even a recent High Court case. And now she can feel the poison coursing through her, just as Mrs McCrea threatened.

Jake is here now, talking at her through a fog: “It’s just Ma’s way. You know how sometimes we tell stories — it’s our way of saying things rather than directly.”

“Really Jake? Is that why you’ve got so many bloody roundabouts? Because you people can’t do anything straight?”

Jake starts shouting back. He is angry at her words. Her English pride, he calls it. But Diana cannot answer him. Her gut is heaving, her face pale, forehead covered in sweat. She runs away toward the barn and pukes a streaky brown mixture onto the ground. Like Mrs McCrea’s tea.

The following morning she is far away, back in London with Dr Anand. He is so solicitous, so gentle, that she breaks down in his arms. He has probably heard stories like this from many Extender women. But still he says no.

“What do you mean, no? I want to end it. Are you trying to kill me?”

And then he starts laughing, taking off his glasses and wiping the bridge of his nose, air hissing through his teeth.

“Ah Diana! No, no. *That’s* not why you are ill.”

Jake, when finally reached on his mobile, is incredulous. “You’re not, are you? You’re *not!*”

“Two months.”

“Two months! But — that’s fantastic, Di. I’ll come over.”

“Jake —”

“Love you, babe. Gotta go now.”

He rings off. Diana sips some ginger tea and swallows down another wave of nausea. She has just decided. It is not going to happen.

Dr Anand will be disappointed; she is a poster girl for Extender pregnancy. So will Jake. But she cannot go through with this. Night after night she dreams of Mrs McCrea and wakes screaming. Bleach. Poison. The smell of hormones.

She will just have to find some way, at some stage, of telling Jake the truth — without actually telling him. ■

Susan Lanigan is a programmer and writer. She lives on the east coast of Ireland, near Dublin city.