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The

Twenty-eighth

Day

by

Catherine

Barry



“Oh Betty, shame on you,” I sniffle out loud to myself, recognising the voice

It’s me. Betty. I’m back in my own body. I’ve survived intact but I’m none the wiser for the experience. The whole thing seems comical now. I am laughing and crying at the same time. I reach for the phone to call Michael but just before I do



I look to the calendar. I get the big back felt pen. I put a big X through the twenty-eighth day. Just in case I forget to remember, next month

There is a cup and a saucer and a spoon laid out.

I pour the water into the cup, swirling it around as I read the card. Inside the cup is a teabag, then see the small card that's lurching against the side of the salt cellar. I pour the water into the cup, swirling it around as I read the card.

"Happy Anniversary, Betty. Enjoy the cup of tea."



Happy Anniversary? Oh shit. It all comes back to me.

The memory part of my brain is working again. The twenty-eighth day was our tenth wedding anniversary.

I think of Michael leaving this morning and how horrible I was to him yesterday and all the time he was trying to tell me something else. I burst into tears I feel so overwhelmed with remorse and guilt. I am still swirling the teabag but it's making an awful racket. It sounds like there's something metal stuck in it.

I haul it out.

There is something in it.



A beautiful solid gold eternity ring.

I slip it on my finger and it fits perfectly.

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I am sitting at the breakfast table with my husband, Michael, the man I normally love, cherish and adore. Only I will not live and cherish and adore him for the next twenty-four hours. I will detest, despise and resent the very air he breathes because I have PMT. I am trying very hard to ignore the loud slurping noises emanating from his corner as he performs an archaeological dig on a bowl of cornflakes. He scrapes the bottom with a metal spoon. The noise is worse than two skeletons fighting to get out of a biscuit tin. I know I have PMT. I know what it is, I know why it happens. I know all about the hormonal imbalance. But all the knowledge in the world will not abate the terrific storm that looms in our normally happy abode. I know it passes and I know I can't help the way I feel. All the same, it doesn't stop me wanting to stick a knife in Michael's eye.



Ellie, my eight-year-old, wanders into the kitchen. Her blonde ponytails are matted in Sabrina's Secrets hair mascara. She has a ton of lipstick on, and none of it is on her lips. She stands at the table with her new violin.

She places the bow on the strings. The noise that comes out sounds like a bag of suffocating cats. She's only had three lessons and she's bloody awful. I try not to cover my ears.



"Hello, muchkin", Michael says to her. "Hello", he says, to her.

Not a good morning to me. He did that deliberately.

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The swine. He'll do everything in his power to tip me up; Well, he can sing. I'm not going to utter one profanity or make one mistake this time. It doesn't occur to me that I haven't exactly showered him with love and adoration and overt affection, nor does it occur to me that within five seconds I will have offended every breathing entity within my radius and not have a clue why.

"Ellie, have you been at my make-up bag again?" I snap at the little mite. She is waiting for me to tell her how good she is on the violin but my wincing has convinced her to put it away.

The narkiness is not directed towards her or even him, but I am powerless to shut my mouth. It will do exactly as it pleases and I will be completely at its mercy for the whole day. What I really need is one of those muzzles, you know, like Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*? I'm not fit to be let out, let alone speak. I contemplate taking a large dose of sleeping pills that will knock me unconscious for the waiting duration until the blessed period arrives. At best, Michael might hold off with the divorce papers, which is what he threatened me with the last time. He's always saying he will leave home when the next bout of madness comes round. With the daggers looks that are being exchanged at present genocide seems a more likely outcome. I know by Michael's face that he is aware it's that time of the month. I can't stand the sight of him. His very presence is annoying me. I hate the way he makes those little grunting noises. He looks fat and old and I can't remember one tiny ant-sized good thing about him. Actually, I can't even remember why I married him. Look at the state of him.

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I pad over to the side of her bed and kiss her lightly on the forehead. I remove the wedges of cucumber and she mutters something about "Hagrid". It's been a hard day for her. Tomorrow will be different. I can already feel the niggling first cramps of period pain in the base of my abdomen. It's on the way. I can sense it. I slip in beside Michael who is too deep in sleep to even notice he has company. I am relieved. I drift off myself and dream I am the Captain of the Quidditch team at Hogwarts School of Magic; well, come on now, at least it's innocent ...

When I awake, the cramps are in full swing. I already have on a sanitary towel and can feel the first trickling of my period as it arrives at last. I'm in physical pain now but I would still welcome it any day in preference to the back cloud that sits over my head in the days leading up to it. I immediately feel better. I turn over to hug Michael but he's not there. I glance at the clock. It's late and I missed him. He must have taken Ellie to school. The pet. Suddenly, I am in love with him again and wonder how I could ever have harboured such ill will towards him yesterday. I miss him now and want to kiss him and hug him and tell him I love him. I feel guilty about it again, the mysterious illness that destroys my relationships once a month. I'll have to call him, or do something special for him today. Perhaps I'll make a nice meal this evening?

I get up and go downstairs to find the kitchen immaculate. The little darlings. They knew I would be tired and sore. Evidence of Ellie's help is everywhere. I can see she tried to fold some tea towels but gave up when they refused to become square-shaped.

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Fuck. The teabags. I hide my hand behind my back.

I was just about to have a bath," I try.

"Go ahead. I'll get them at the corner shop," he says quietly.



That's odd, I think. He's not fighting with me. He's not pouncing on me like he usually does about my interminable forgetfulness during PMT. I get in the nice hot bath and immediately my back feels the benefit. I am up to my chin in bath oil and bubbles and I am playing some soft dolphin music to try and calm my grating nerves. I can empathise with the dolphins and I'm sure they can identify with me. I look like one myself, that's probably why.

I take over an hour in the bath. I can hear Michael taking Ellie to bed. Thank God. I am not in the humour for reading *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* tonight. I am in my own chamber of secrets and feel like my body is a passenger on a coffin ship. I wade backwards and, forwards in the slippery bathtub and, when my skin begins to wrinkle, I reluctantly climb out. I set about doing my beauty regime with deliberately prolonged attention to detail. I even paint my toes and give myself a facial scrub before applying the spot cream. I take ages drying my hair.

When I finally tiptoe upstairs I can hear Michael snoring. Yippee! I've won! I creep past Ellie's door, which is slightly ajar. She is asleep on her back with two huge chunks of cucumber on her eyes. Another one of Sabrina's Secrets, I guess. It makes me laugh.

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Smiling away to himself. The great big eejit. Happy he is. The fucking nerve. He's no right to be happy when I feel like a bag of shit. He's doing that to annoy me as well. The "I'm a happy, normal, well-adjusted, balanced human being" thing. As opposed to "You're a crazed lunatic with a potentially lethal kitchen utensil and I'm pretending not to notice my life is at stake."

I play with the frying pan and conclude it would be better to use it for the purpose God intended. I fry some eggs, then realise nobody eats them in our house. I nonchalantly throw them in the bin and wonder what I'm supposed to be doing. The atmosphere is so tense you could stick a dinosaur's tooth in it.

"Ellie, check if your PE gear is in your bag and take that muck off your face immediately," I snap.

She grumbles.

"Now," I command.

One glare from the cave woman with the bulging eyes and mad hair sends her running. Ellie and I both know the PE gear is in her bag but it doesn't stop my mouth from stating the obvious. She checks what she already knows is there and wanders back in and gives *him* a hug. Michael kisses her and they have a little cuddle. They're conspiring. They're in it together. I'm on to them through, I'm not stupid!

"Ellie, what do you want for breakfast?" I ask wearily.

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“Honey nut Cheerios in the flower bowl with the pink spoon,” she answers.

I can't find the flower bowl or the pink spoon. I bash and bang around the kitchen looking for them, then it dawns on me he hid them deliberately. I may be completely off my trolley but I ain't dumb. I slam down a ginormous bowl I usually make sherry trifle in. I fill it with cornflakes and pour too much milk in it. It dribbles over the side and looks like it's alive. I plunge a tablespoon into it.

No one in their right mind is going to challenge me about it.

Michael gets up. Any minute now and he will be off to his nice job, sitting at his nice desk, talking to nice adults – nice blonde, buxom female adults – and having a fine dandy day. What have I got to look forward to? A trunkload of laundry and having my elbows immersed in Parazone for the next three hours. The highlight of the day



will be an over-the-wall chat with Mrs Bucket next door. The one with the house that looks so perfect I swear little elves are doing the cleaning during the night. It's always spic and span, the perfect display house for magazine articles like “Superior decors for inferior feckers” or “How to make you feel even more crap about your non-existent domestic skills”.

She amazes the hell out of me. The house is a palatial work of art but but *she* looks like something that just

I can't help it. She stares at me in bewilderment. I get up and try to tidy the house.

For the rest of the afternoon I work like a dervish. I'm don't know what's come over me but I have to clean everything. Cookers get pulled out, skirting get washed, the Hoover is going constantly and the can of polish is almost empty. The house is spick and span but I'm still finding stupid things to do. It's like I'm preparing for the Pope's visit. I remember my mum used to do this when she was due a period. “Homing”, they call it. Getting ready. Getting ready for a baby. Only there's no baby. I made certain of that. Ellie is enough for us both at the moment. I think about Michael and glance at the clock. He'll be in for dinner soon. We have to get through the whole evening together. How are we going to manage it? I'll do the usual, I suppose. I'll have a long, hot bath, shave my legs, moisturise my whole body, paint my nails, (and the bathroom if necessary) and hope that, when I'm through, he's snoring his head off. Any better suggestions? The mouth will have its way no matter what and all I can think of is locking myself in the bathroom for a couple of hours. It's completely insane. I manage to string together a rather meek-looking dinner of chops, potatoes and vegetable.

Michael strolls in, looking tired and hot. He nods at me and sits down at the table. As soon as he starts to eat, I go to exit.

“I'd kill for a cup of tea,” he signs.

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I amble back up to the school to collect Ellie at two o'clock. I have a bit of a scuffle with a particularly nasty Jeep that tries to ambush me out of a parking space but I win hands down because I'm faster and driving a smaller car. Hah!

The Jeep is forced to park on the kerb and cause an obstruction. I'm delighted with myself and shout something about the "outback" as I pass the driver up on her stilts. It's the only thing I have enjoyed to day so far but Ellie clearly mortified and dubious about this strange woman who is supposed to be her guardian and mother. After all, she is in the passenger seat and there's a fruit and nut driving the car.



I is

She clunks her seat belt and gives me a sideways glance. Am I really that bad I wonder?

When we get home, I try to help her with her homework. I watch her concentrate hard on doing her joined writing. I just watch. I think about her growing up and wish there was some way I could fix it for that she sidesteps it all. It won't be long before she becomes a woman herself and starts getting breasts and periods and boys will be ogling her. I don't want her to have to go through any of this.

I can't bear the thought of letting her go. I push the stray blonde strands of hair that fall on her face behind her ears so she can see better. She smiles at me and melts me.

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crawled out of a wheelie bin.

She has no dress sense or personal hygiene standards. There's no need for any woman to be sporting designer stubble and going around smelling of Jeyes fluid and hamster droppings. And that kid of hers! That snotty little four-year-old torment drives me insane. Why can't she wipe his nose instead of the kitchen table, just occasionally? Why doesn't she do something about the two streams of green slime that permanently ooze from his nostrils? I don't know why he gets these delusions every time he sees me coming. His face lights up and his hands go out expectantly. For some strange reason, he seems to think I might have a surprise for him. Oh, I would love to give him a surprise now. Yeah, a good kick up the ..



"Betty, we've no teabags again." Michael's voice brings me back.

He is standing beside me and hasn't brushed his teeth yet. He smells like a Kellogg factory and it makes me sick. If he goes to kiss me, I will spew. No need to worry. He



leaves the sentence unfinished and we both glance at the calendar hanging on the wall. Michael has ringed the twenty-eighth day in a big fat black felt pen. I don't think it's a particularly funny gesture. He doesn't have to go through this hell every month. He doesn't know what it's like to be a woman. PMT, periods, pregnancy, labour pain, hysterectomy and finally the long-suffering menopause,

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after which we hurtle onwards to certain death. At least there's something we look forward to. It's a relief to know that really.

"You forgot, didn't you?" he barely whispers.

Michael nods at the calendar again. Does he really think I'm sane enough to handle a comment like that? Does he value his life at all? Does he not realise we are in the kitchen and the carving knife is within arm's reach?

"How could I forget?" I roar at him, tearing the calendar off the wall. How insensitive can he get? I think to myself: *I know I have PMT. I know I'm away with the fairies. Does he want me to put a sign on my back or something? Away with the birds. Back tomorrow.* Huh?" he stares at me, utterly confused.

He's pretending to play dumb. He's noticed the carving knife and my itching fingers dangerously drumming nearby.

"I'm talking about the" he fades off.

I give him the deranged look. The one that should permit any husband that right to commit me to the home for the bewildered. He steps back in abject terror. All he is short of doing is thrusting a crucifix in my face and screaming: "Come out! Come out, whoever you are! I command you to leave this woman's body immediately!"

I can't say I blame him. I feel as if the devil and all his distant cousins possess me. I am being tortured by some

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I suggest calling in back-up. All SWAT terms on red alert. Over."

I pay up and get out fast before the men in the white coats come and straitjacket me. I arrive home for a cup of tea and the sugar cravings, which have been bugging me since early morning, have reached fever pitch. I put one the kettle and get out a nice clean mug. Then I realise. I forgot the bloody teabags!



What's new?

I settle for coffee again and curl up in front of the telly. Sally Jessy is on. Great. Just what I need. The show is about reunions. There are women sitting in a row on the stage claiming undying love for men they haven't seen in twenty years and have not been able to contact. Hey presto! The men appear from backstage and they run into each other's arms. I'm not able to cope with the emotion of it! I'm in bits. I can't stop crying. It's like a waterfall. I try to get hold of myself but it's no use. I am crying for Ireland. I switch channels. I start watching a programme about the Eskimo fishing industry. A guy has his head in a pool of water. It's no use. I'm still sobbing my eyes out. I ravage the last of the jam doughnuts and feel full of wind. I take some Remegel to deal with the fallout. I'm miserable and lonely and depressed.

Only six more hours and the whole thing will be over. Only six more hours and I will once again be human and it will be safe for others to approach me without putting their lives in danger.

“Serenity”. I choose that one instead because there are more letters in the title and “serenity” sounds a damn sight better than calm. I’m not either. Who am I kidding? I wander up and down the other aisles, grabbing unwanted items and throwing them in the trolley. I stand at the



shampoo counter for ten minutes, trying to figure out why I am there. I know there is something. Oh yes. Sanitary towels for the onslaught.

I pick up a packet of Always. With wings. With wings? What next? Boeing 747s with chilled Champagne, free newspaper and window seat? I wish ...



I notice the security man sidle up beside me. He is watching me like a hawk and I know he has me down for a thief or a drug addict; not surprisingly, as I arrive at the checkout with a trolley load of drugs and a huge bag of doughnuts. (There’s also a padlock in there I’ve no idea why I am buying a padlock, so I don’t ask...). I look like a strung-out junkie who has just won the full house on *Telly Bingo*.

I start to hum to myself.

Telly Bingo Friday night, Telly Bingo Friday night ...”

The security man is right beside me. He discreetly covers his mouth with his hand. He is whispering into one of those walkie-talkie things. I imagine his alarmed plea for assistance: “Guys, we’ve got a real live one here. A member of the tutti-frutti club, if ever I laid eyes on one. The lift doesn’t go all the top, if you get my gist.

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unknown force I cannot touch or feel.

It’s like somebody else has taken over my body, mind and soul. There is a demon spirit inside me, telling me to do inappropriate things, prompting me to say hurtful, offensive words, urging me to be the meanest bitch that ever walked the earth. I wish they would all fuck off and find someone else to haunt. I’m a zoo of multiple personalities and there’s no room at the inn.

If it gets worse, there may be murder committed and I start praying Michael gets the hint and leaves. He does. He turns away, looking sad and offended. What has he got to be hurt over? The great big sack of self-centred self-pity! I hear the door shut quietly but the noise echoes through my brain like an orchestra of crashing cymbals. My sense of sound is heightened and I already have that familiar throbbing, tense headache. It feels as if someone had tied a band around my head and is squeezing it tighter and tighter. I need some Anadin Extra but can’t remember where they are.

Ellie is at my side, tugging at my dressing gown. I hate it when she does that.

“What?” I ask, irritation spilling out.

“Mam, I’m late and you’re not even dressed,” she pleads

“Right,” I remember now.

I have to get dressed. I climb that stairs wearily and walk

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into my bedroom. There is a dirty cup and a magazine lying on the floor. But I do not see that. My eyes are affected as well as everything else It looks like the Dunsink Dumping ground. I don't know where to start. I feel overwhelmed. I'm so confused. I try to think about how I will cope with all the things I have to do, even though I know I don't really have anything more to do than I did yesterday. I cannot bear the dirty room that isn't dirty.

I go looking for clothes. Confusion. Oh, please don't give me choice today! I cannot decide what to wear. My pyjama top is stuck to me from sweat always a sign that I am in the war zone. I can't be bothered taking it off. I dream of climbing into bed as soon as I have left Ellie at school and want to aspire to minimal effort as my goal for the day. I pull on a pair of jeans but the zip won't go up. I normally look about three months pregnant anyway but this morning I look like I am three weeks over the estimated date of delivery. My stomach is bloated and full of wind. I pull the jeans off and pull on a dirty pair of black tracksuit bottoms. I look in the mirror and die with the shame. My face has erupted. I am covered in spots and pimples and they are really sore to the touch. My hair is greasy and limp despite having been washed only yesterday. I look like a turned-out bread and butter pudding with a few raisins thrown on top. I look fat, dumpy and ugly. I *feel* fat, dumpy and ugly.

I race down the stairs, putting Ellie behind me and telling her to hurry up when it is me that is delaying everything and she has been ready for over half an hour.

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make a quick cup of watery coffee, remembering Michael didn't bring me any in bed this morning. How selfish and inconsiderate! Typical. He ought to know I need to be pampered. He definitely doesn't love me. *No one loves me*

I look around the kitchen and the breakfast things are still sitting on the table. All of a sudden the skirting boards look manky dirty and the curtains need a washing too. Those carpets are awful-looking and the walls need a lick of paint. The whole house is a filthy dirty mess and I'm a failure. I can't stand it. I can't stand the house. The four walls are closing in on me. I have to get out of it, now.

I sniffle my way to the supermarket, determined not to leave it without what I came in for, but I am sidetracked almost instantly and decide to visit my favourite Boots store. I am immediately drawn to the "pick and mix smartie counter" (the medicinal aisle for those of you more emotionally balanced individuals). Mmm, yummy tablets. Some nice little red ones, oh and some blue ones; hey, they look cute. Yes. Now, Starflower Oil, Vitamin B6, Evening Primrose Oil, Waterfall tablets for the bloated tummy, strawberry-flavoured Remegel for the excessive flatulence that is sure to arrive after I binge on a shopping bag full of high-calorie, fat-saturated, sugar-loaded goodies. Feminax for the agony of period pain and Anadin Extra for the headache. Not forgetting some cream for the facial explosions. Oh, and St John's Wort and some "calm" drops. No, wait. I see something more interesting. I put back the calm drops and pick up another bottle called

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“Yeah, yeah!” I shout after her. She probably has it too. The PMT, that is. Imagine, if all the women in the world had PMT at the same time. Nothing to imagine really. No need for red button or any of that rubbish. And you can certainly shelve your retirement plans for that cottage in Connemara. There won’t be a Connemara.

Let them all out at 8 a.m. and the human race, as we know it, would be extinct by 8.15 a.m. (give or take a moment or two).

As soon as I have dropped Ellie off at school and battled through the intimidating ‘tanks’ overtaking me on the ramps, I collapse into my bed. My back is aching. A slow, dull ache that will nag all day. If I bend down at all, I feel like I have been weight-training. I lie in bed feeling sorry for myself and start to feel guilty. I could have been nicer to Ellie. I never even kissed her goodbye. Michael never kissed me goodbye either but then again, he doesn’t love me and he doesn’t care about me. If he did, he wouldn’t have put me through the cornflakes thing. I bet he’s having an affair with someone. They’re probably swapping cornflake particles behind the water dispenser as I speak. I pine in grief-stricken silence.

I get up and decide to go to the shops. There are no teabags as per usual and I am determined Michael won’t get the better of me. I write “teabags” on the back of my hand just to be on the safe side. My back is really killing me. I need to get some Anadin for it. Besides, I had better pick up his suit or there will be another out-burst of unwanted temper. I



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“Right. Get a move on, Ellie,” I nudge her out the door.

“Mam?” she says, bringing her eyes down to my feet

What now?” I ask, exasperated, and it’s not even 9 a.m. I look down myself and see the problem.

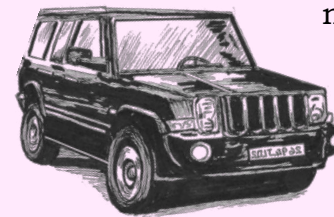
“You’re wearing your slippers,” she sighs.



“I knew that. Get in the car,” I snap.

Actually I didn’t know that but I’m not giving in, no sirree, not by a long shot.

I open the gates and the boot of the car and throw her stuff in haphazardly. We get it, I reverse out onto the road and only then does it become apparent that I left my bag on the roof of the car so I jam on the brakes and the contents spill out onto the road. An irate woman in a Jeep swerves to avoid me and beeps several times in succession. Those stupid-looking military



monsters. What are they doing buying Jeeps, for God’s sake, when the road has a ramp every ten yards? They gaze down at you from their miles high position of presumed power and bully their residential streets and block the whole road outside the schools. I mean, it’s not exactly fucking *Out of Africa* in Donaghmade, is it?

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