

## **“Family Matters”. Belinda McCain (2019)**

Monday evening, 10:30. Jack is sitting on the sofa with his laptop, reading for work. Cathy has been talking to a friend on Skype.

If he is going to work all night, I may as well go to bed, Cathy decides, and goes upstairs without a word. Jack joins her at midnight, when she is sound asleep, face to the wall.

- 5 Tuesday evening, 10:45. Cathy decides that their dog, Charlie, needs a late walk. Jack, who has been watching a Champions League game in the old playroom, wanders back to the sitting room to find it empty. If she is out with the dog, I may as well go to bed, he decides. Cathy joins him at midnight, when he is sound asleep, face to the wall.

- 10 Wednesday evening, 11:00. Jack is still out playing billiards with his friend Alan. Cathy concludes that she may as well turn in and leads her dog, Charlie, up the stairs to his basket by her side of the bed. “Go to sleep now,” she tells him when he puts his cold nose between the sheets. “Bed, Charlie! Bed!” Jack joins her at 1:30, when she is sound asleep, face to the wall.

- 15 Thursday evening, 9:30. Jack and Cathy are in the sitting room reading, he on the sofa, she at her place at the table. He is reading a novel by Haruki Murakami, she a book about training cocker spaniels. Unusually, their son, Simon, comes downstairs. “It’s warmer here,” he says, and proceeds to open his computer to watch a film, with headphones. The boy is fourteen. Jack looks up and says that he’d like to watch the film, too, if that’s O.K. Simon tells him that he won’t like the film, but Jack says he’ll give it half an hour, if that’s all right. Simon says, “Fine,” and unplugs the headphones. Jack asks Cathy if she would like to watch the film, too. Cathy says that there isn’t  
20 really room for three to watch a film on their son’s laptop. Simon says that they could go and watch the film on the TV in the playroom. Cathy says that it’s too cold in the playroom to sit through a film and decides to take Charlie for a walk. Jack finds the film dull, stupid, and disturbingly violent. It’s nice to sit beside his son, but, at 10:30, he bails out and goes to bed. Cathy joins him at 11:30, when he is not asleep, but pretends he is, face to the wall.

- 25 Friday evening, 7:30. Cathy has arranged an evening out with her friends from the dog park. She invites Jack to come. He would enjoy meeting them, she says, and they are eager to meet him. Jack is not convinced. He doesn’t want to meet her friends from the dog park; it is not his scene. He will take Charlie out, he says, while she is at the pub. Cathy says their son can take the dog out, leaving Jack free to come to the pub and meet her friends. He repeats that it really isn’t his scene. He has  
30 some work to do. In the event, he has a long conversation on Skype with an old friend. So as not to have to pretend to be asleep again, which he finds painful, he goes to bed early. Cathy joins him at 11:30 and hardly cares whether he is asleep or not, since she has nothing to say to a man who she believes is having an affair.

35 Saturday evening. Cathy says there is a good film on at the local cinema, about ten minutes away by car. She asks their daughter, Emily, who is home from university for the weekend, if she would like to go, but she wouldn't. So she asks Jack if he would like to go. Jack asks for some more details about the film, which she provides, and he decides that, yes, he would like to see this film, so Jack and Cathy go to the cinema and watch the film, which is called "We Need to Talk About Kevin,"  
40 and both of them enjoy it, up to a point, and afterward they go to a bar and have a drink and talk for quite a long time about the film and about their children and their relationship with their children, since the film is largely about parents and the terrible mistakes you can make with your children, and both of them feel how pleasant it has been to chat together and what a good decision it was to come out together and see a film.

45 Back home, Cathy asks Simon if he took the dog out and Simon says that he did, about two hours ago, and Cathy says that, since they are back much later than she expected, she feels the dog should be taken out again for another quick walk and she keeps her coat on. She asks Jack if he would like to come with her to walk the dog for a few minutes, perhaps just around the block, but he says he'd better check his e-mail since there's an issue with one of his company's clients in the U.S.A. and  
50 this is prime time for people e-mailing from the U.S.A. before the end of their workday, and so she goes out alone. As it happens, there is no e-mail from the U.S.A. It's Saturday, after all. Jack sends a few private e-mails and text messages and waits, expecting Cathy to come back, but after forty minutes she is still out. Jack feels conflicted but he decides that he may as well go to bed and is, in fact, fast asleep when his wife follows him, half an hour later. "Jack?" she asks, checking to see if  
55 he would perhaps like to talk, but he doesn't respond, face to the wall, snoring lightly.

Sunday evenings, Jack has always taken one or both of his children out for a burger or even to a restaurant, depending on their choice, and since his daughter is home today he takes the two of them to a burger bar. He and the children ask Cathy whether she would like to come, but she says no, she doesn't really want to go and have a burger—they are so fattening. The children suggest that, in that  
60 case, she could have a salad—why not? And she says that there is no point in going out to pay for a salad that she could perfectly well have at home, so they say, "Let's go to a restaurant, then, maybe Indian or Japanese," but she says, "No, you go." She doesn't want to go out to eat, and so Jack takes his son and daughter to the burger bar, where they chat and joke very merrily, eating burgers and drinking Coke, and afterward Jack persuades them to go to a pub as well, so that he can have a beer,  
65 and the children discuss music and boyfriends and girlfriends and how not to get fat, despite eating burgers and drinking Coke, and Simon, who is four years younger than his sister, worries about school, and Emily worries about university, and they all have a good time laughing at some of the other people in the pub, one of whom, in particular, has an offensively loud voice, and in the end they return home around 10:30. Given the early hour, Jack is surprised to find that Cathy has  
70 already retired to bed. He sits at his computer to look at some e-mail, while his children go to the playroom to sit in the cold with a sleeping bag on their laps and watch a horror film. He smiles on hearing them giggling in there and decides to go to bed, where he finds that his wife is not sleeping with her face to the wall but reading a book.

75 Jack is taken aback. “Coinciding bedtimes,” she says, laughing, and there is something of a challenge in her voice. “A miracle,” Jack agrees and he undresses to his underwear and T-shirt and lies down beside her. Propped up on a pillow, she continues to read by the light of the bedside lamp. Jack lies on his side, face toward her, watching. The air between them is tense. Jack feels that his wife is a good-looking woman. She is aware of the pressure of his eyes on her. “How can you keep reading so many books about dogs?” he finally asks. “They’re fascinating,” she replies at once.  
80 “Absolutely fascinating. Aren’t you, Charlie?” she addresses the dog, who is dozing in his basket and raises a silky ear. “Speaking of which,” she suddenly says, “he probably needs a last pee. Poor thing.” And she climbs out of bed and pulls on her jeans. Jack watches. He feels he should protest, but doesn’t. Perhaps she is waiting for him to protest, but, if she is, she doesn’t make it clear. “Do you really think he needs to go out again?” Jack eventually asks, but it’s too late, the dog is now  
85 racing around and around the room in inane canine excitement, and she is saying, “Come on. Come on, darling!” And she disappears through the door and downstairs.

Jack lies on his back. He had a nice evening with his children, but now he feels drained and lost. He wonders, Should he wait up for his wife and confront her? But in the end it is only a passing thought. Surely it’s she who should confront him. These thoughts are discouraging, and eventually  
90 he rolls over toward the wall and falls asleep. Finding him in that position forty minutes later, Cathy sheds a tear or two before falling asleep herself. Another week has gone by. In the playroom, the two children are wondering whether there’s anything they can do about their parents.

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