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It was the moment when milk came spurting out of my nose that I knew Mum was going to be a great comedian. Up until then, I'd had my doubts. Serious doubts.

With all the mothers in the world, I often wondered why I'd been landed with an odd one. I don't mean that in a nasty way. We all reckon Mum's a bit of an oddball, including Mum herself. But why is it, when all the other mothers do canteen duty or play tennis or hold down corporate jobs, my Mum sticks teapots on the roof, recycles absolutely everything – even tissues – and dances all night at our school's Blue Light discos?

And while she's out there dancing, the other parents – who are perched like parrots on their plastic chairs – gather into small flocks and flap about her. But it doesn't worry Mum, so it doesn't worry me. Well not much, anyway.

Sometimes I wish I had a normal family who ate normal food and who lived in a normal house in a normal suburb. But everything about our family is abnormal: a fire-eating father in the circus, a blood-sucking brother who dresses up like a vampire, and now a vegetarian mother who thinks she's a comedian!

But with all her weird ways, she's still a great Mum. She laughs a lot, even if something's not very funny, is really fair about things such as me staying up late, and stands up for what she believes in, like animal rights. Mum won't even kill an ant or wipe them off the bench with the dishcloth. And if she ever accidentally steps on an ant, she apologises, scrapes it up with her fingernail and then with a quick flick, buries it outside, chanting 'p-ay incy-way termitt-yay', which is 'sorry little ant' in Swahilian Pidgin. This means our backyard is a massive ant cemetery.

Mum's 'pet ants' even have their own food bowl, alongside my dog Tadpole's bowl. Mum always says: 'Don't forget to feed the dog and ants, Phoebe.'

‘Yeah, I’ll feed the doggone ants,’ I tell her, as I plop a dollop of marrow-bone jelly and dead horse meat into the two bowls. How any creature can eat that sloppy, stinky stuff is beyond me. Glad I’m not a dog. Or an ant. And even if I were an ant, I’d rather take the five-hundred-kilometre trek (ant-land measurements) for the sticky rim on the kitchen bench, than eat that stuff. And if I were a dog I’d be a vegetarian, like Mum.

So the night Mum told us she was going to be a comedian, I wasn’t all that surprised. After all, she’s done stranger things than that before. Last year she became a wind-sock darter for the local aerodrome. ‘There’s nothing more dangerous than a limp wind-sock,’ Mum would tell anybody who cared to listen.

And the year before that she became a moth activist with her ‘Save the Moth’ campaign, knocking on the door of every house in Beachcliff that had a porch light on, insisting they ‘Turn off to save a moth’. She even stopped buying mothballs. ‘Poor little moths,’ she said, emptying all our closets of the shrivelled-up, smelly little balls. I was glad to see them go, so I didn’t tell her that mothballs weren’t actually made from moths.

But Mum – a comedian? She’s joking, right?

‘I’m not joking, kids,’ she said, talking loudly over Jake’s favourite cartoon show, *Snotblocks*.

‘Well you should be,’ I said. ‘That’s what comedians do.’

She laughed.

‘Shoosh, please!’ Jake, my little squirt of a brother, said. He’s only seven and thinks he’s a vampire. He wears plastic, pointy teeth and a black cape – day in, day out. He even named his cat Dracula.

‘I’m going to make the whole town laugh!’ Mum said, a little more quietly, twirling around the room in her new second-hand Indian skirt.

‘I shaid “shoosh!”’ Jake said with such force, his vampire teeth flew across the room and landed behind the television where Dracula was sleeping. ‘Now look what you did!’ he yelled, as the cat leapt up in fright and bolted between our legs.

As I was laughing at Jake’s flying teeth, Mum’s words were still running around in my head: *I’m going to make the whole town laugh*. The trouble was, half the town were already laughing. *At her*.

People secretly called Mum ‘Mad Margie Wallace’. My best friend Ali told me. Ali’s been my best friend – my *only* friend – since my second day in high school: five months, two weeks and four days ago. All my friends from primary school have gone to River Valley Boarding School about two hundred kilometres away, so I knew no-one here except for a couple of boys, and they didn’t count.

On my second day at Beachcliff High, I was hanging out near the school gates during recess, hoping a miracle would happen and the school would blow up or burn down so I could go home. I was kicking the dusty gravel with my feet, acting like I didn’t care how I looked standing there by myself. I was staring down at the ants, thinking how upset Mum would be with me for creating a windstorm in an ant community, when a girl’s voice suddenly said very loudly, ‘Your mum’s the crackpot,

isn't she?' She was standing in my personal space, right up close like Mum says city people do. She was also standing on the ants. So much for *their* personal space.

'No,' I said, 'you must have the wrong mother. My mum's Margie Wallace.'

The city ant-killer thought that was hilarious. 'You crack me up!' she said, pushing me on the shoulder in a friendly kind of way. 'Like mother, like daughter. Mad Margie Wallace strikes again, eh?'

I pretended to laugh along with her, and gave her a *kind of* friendly shoulder push back.

'Anyway, my name's Ali,' she said, smiling.

'Anyway, my name's Phoebe,' I said, 'and you're standing on an ants' nest.'

She freaked out then, slapping her legs and jiggling up and down. Some major slapping and minor pushing later, and we were friends. A good day for me; a bad day for the ants.

Mum was still twirling around the room. I grabbed her skirt and it wrapped around her like fairy floss on a stick. 'Okay, so you're not joking about being a comedian,' I said, letting her go.

'You're such a worry-wart, Feebs!' she said, swishing past. I followed her into the kitchen, hoping her mind had switched from funny to food. She grabbed some eggs out of the fridge, but instead of cracking them into a bowl, threw them into the air and began juggling. Two eggs, then three, then four. Then three. Egg everywhere.

'Egg-cellent!' she said, applauding herself.

'Cool. Scrambled eggs!' said Jake, coming into the kitchen, holding out in front of him his plastic vampire teeth that were covered in cat hair. 'He shoots!' Jake hurled his teeth into the sink. 'He scores!'

'Bullseye!' Mum said.

I couldn't believe he was going to wash those things and then put them back into his mouth. 'You're as bad as each other,' I said, almost slipping on slimy egg as I walked past the two crackpots, formerly known as my family, and headed to my room. 'I'm giving myself time out!'

Mum used to work in the circus with Dad, so juggling and throwing stuff around the kitchen is nothing out of the ordinary in our house. 'The Wild Walloping Wallace Circus' has been in our family for generations. Great, great, *really great*, Grandpa Wally started the circus a gazillion years ago. Dad told us, 'He was great, your great, great Grandpa. He lived to be 108. They called him "Wally the Great 108".'

My dad's great, too. Except he keeps leaving. He says he doesn't leave because he *wants* to, he only leaves because he *has* to. He's been in charge of the circus since his dad, Grandpa Willy, died just after I was born, twelve years ago. This means we only see Dad for about three months of every year, so I've never known what it's like to have a full-time father. But just because I'm used to it, doesn't mean I like it. None of us do. Especially Mum.

For the last three years, every time Dad leaves, Mum comes up with some strange occupation to keep her mind off Dad and on something else.

Aunty Lizzie, who's not our real aunty but Mum's best friend, told me Mum misses Dad more since Jake started school.

'With both of you at school now, your Mum is less distracted, that's all. It makes the hole bigger in her heart.'

'Mum's got a hole in her heart?' I asked, frightened.

'Not a real hole, Feebs. It's a kind of gap that opens up when your dad goes, and now she's got more time on her hands with you both at school, it feels bigger, that's all.' She got a far-away look in her eyes and stared outside at the little ant graves. 'She's lucky, really.'

'Lucky?' I asked. Having a hole didn't sound like a *lucky* thing.

'Lucky she's only got one hole, that's all,' replied Aunty Lizzie.

'Do *you* have a hole?' I asked.

'I have lots of little holes,' she said, giving me a quick hug.

Uncle Reg and Aunty Lizzie have lived in Beachcliff for twenty years, ever since they were first married. They own a wheat farm and lots of farm dogs, but no children. I think Aunty Lizzie's holes are all the children she couldn't have.

Since she told me that about Mum, I understand better now why Mum does all these strange things when Dad leaves. I just wish she'd take up cross-stitch or knit trauma teddies like normal people do. Or Feng Shui, like Aunty Lizzie. Aunty Lizzie reckons it's because of Feng Shui that Uncle Reg had a bumper wheat crop last year. She says it's because of the water feature near the front of the house. Uncle Reg keeps reminding her: 'But the dam's *always* been there, love.' Sometimes Aunty Lizzie makes Mum seem normal.

'Mind your mother for me while I'm away, won't you, Chicken?' Dad always whispers to me before he leaves. It's the last thing he says as he's getting into his beaten-up Ute to drive away.

So I mind Mum while she puts her mind to something else to keep her mind off Dad. Sometimes it feels like my mind is going to burst with all the minding I have to do. If it's not Mum, it's Jake. If it's not Jake, it's Mum. And if it's not Tadpole, it's the stupid ants.

And now Mum says she's going to become a comedian? This is her dumbest idea yet. Much worse than her 'edible jewellery' idea that luckily never got off the ground. Jake, the ants and I had made sure of that.