



## DIRTY TICKLE

Sara Crowley

It was light brown, which was somehow unexpected, and its legs kept moving even though it wasn't going anywhere.

She stared at it, bringing it as close as she could bear; there really was no mistaking it. After all these years of worrying if this speck or that smear could be one, there was no doubt after all.

... the loneliness of it all; the being surrounded by other mums, but they are all talking to each other, huddled in their twos and threes. They chat about fuck knows what, all very blah, and don't include her.

When she stands with Heath and Jay, adjusting the straps of their rucksacks, straightening hats and so on; the dutiful parent and her children, she feels fine, invisible, cloaked in normality. So the going to school bit is easy, it's the waiting at the end of the day, feeling like she is being watched and judged in the playground that she hates.

Heath is always last, or near to last, out. He hates going to school, but seems loathe to leave it. He emerges, a tangle of bag and lunch box, school letter, sweatshirt, coat. And always leaves something behind so that, oh no, he has to run back inside. He smells of school

when she kisses his head; musty and sweaty and rubbery, not hers.

It all feels like an artifice; a parental charade, the way she talks in a too bright voice asking how his day was in case someone should overhear them. He chats about stuff that doesn't interest her in the slightest, and she questions him.

'Oh, that's nice sweetheart,' she says, 'and what did Mr Booker say then?'

Occasionally she catches the eye of another mum, and she smiles as they pass, desperately polite. They make their way round to the year five classrooms and collect Jay, who is always standing scuffing the toes of his shoes as he wipes his foot over stones and shoots, scores, what a gooooooaaaal!

This was the life they had dreamt of; they had left the grime of London behind, the grey streets and chewing gum splats replaced by flowers and greenery, trees and sea air. She had never imagined that she would be so utterly alone. Wasn't it London that was meant to be anonymous and hostile? And yet she had always had people to chat with. Here, where she had imagined village life to be inclusive and warm, she had found that despite her eager friendliness, nobody wanted to know her at all.

At first she had stood in the playground, beaming around at the group of parents. She'd introduced herself to the ones that had acknowledged her;

'Hello, I'm Rose; Heath and Jay's mum, we've just moved here...' and they had smiled back and introduced themselves; Susan and Lorna and Francis and Tricia. They had remarked on what a nice bunch they were, how nice the school was, how nice the area, and then

had never spoken to her again.

Rose dreamt that her ex was holding her tightly from behind, his body pressed up against her, and she felt safe and happy before realising that he was actually restraining her. Ripped from the dream in the morning she scrambled to keep the drifting smoke of it because it was as close to him as she would ever get again. He occupied her thoughts through the breakfast fixing and lunchbox packing, all the way to school and back; the sex and alcohol and thrill of him, them, her past. At home looking in the mirror at the fat forty cliché of her with her caesarean apron stomach and blotchy lined face she knew that he wouldn't even give a sideways glance.

She plugs herself into the mp3 player. Dave Grohl screaming into her ears feels like armour as she stands at the school gates. She is better than them, than this. She has stopped surveying the groups of women wondering which of them will be her friends. Look at what that woman is wearing, she thinks, look at the cheap high lights on that one. Scuzzy.

But when one approaches she rips the plugs from her ears and launches into a rush of apology.

'Sorry, ha, just ...'

'That's ok, a quick word, you're Jay's mum aren't you?'

'Yes.' Rose smiles; look at me, I am just the sort of person you might want to know. My children have manners, as do I; we may well be the nicest family you'll ever meet. Are you going to be my friend?

'I'm Susan Carter's mum; I help out in class with reading and so on.'

The smile, even shinier 'Yes?'

'Jay's a bit upset, some of the kids have been teasing him, really he shouldn't be at school at all...'

The hot blood rush into her cheeks and the mumbled thanks when really she wants to yell fuck you all as loudly as she can. The classroom and Jay, dirt and tears staining his face. Soothing words and more apologies this time to the teacher, the air in the playground, the universe.

Rose lies that it is fine, happens all the time, nothing to be upset about and she will sort it all out, don't worry.

First she took the pillowcases off and put them on the floor, and then she wondered if that would contaminate the carpet so picked them up again. She carried them down to the washing machine and stuffed them firmly inside the metal drum and went back upstairs for the sheets. Immediately she knew that washing them wouldn't make her feel any better, so returned to the machine, yanked them out and dumped them in a black bin bag. The sheets followed, and shortly after she thought fuck it and lobbed the pillows in as well.

She Dysoned. She spritzed all the bathroom surfaces with Cif, glad for once of its chemical content that suddenly made her feel safe. All the while she restrained her scratchy urges, loathe to touch herself.

Heath and Jay were sitting in front of the TV, flicking through the music channels, and giggling. Their heads were piled high with the stinking noxious chemicals. Rose didn't know how she had managed to keep going as she had combed through over and over. When she had been at school it was a relatively rare thing. Rose's mum had insisted she never share a hairbrush with anyone else, never try on

another child's hat, never lean her head too close to anyone. She had obeyed without question; after all, what could be more disgusting than insects in your hair!

The nit nurse had appeared suddenly on random occasions, and Rose and her friend would grab each others elbows in the line to see her and squeal at the very thought of there ever being anything in their long, tangled locks. There was always a frisson of panic just in case, and then a phew of relief when it was over.

And no matter how many times it was said that the lice preferred clean hair nobody believed that for a moment; it was dirty kids that got them. In fact she only ever knew of one boy who did; he had a dark pudding bowl hairdo and lived a few doors away from her. They called him nit boy even now in reminiscences.

In Home Economics Mrs Olsen had showed them a film about hygiene. There had been a close up of a fly landing on shit and feeding, after that, on food, and then on a persons arm. It puked something on to the skin, and rubbed it in with its front legs. Rose's phobia had begun; the very idea of something eating pooh and then vomiting it up on to her was disturbing, and it seeped into her brain as her idea of hell. There wouldn't be flames, just her and a million flies buzzing and landing with their dirty tickle and she would scream with her mouth closed and writhe and twist away from them as best she could for all eternity.

She searched online for information, disgusted to find out that lice feed on blood from your scalp and can be for there for weeks without you knowing — it's only if your head is irritated by their secretions

that it begins to itch. She wondered how many times she had cuddled the boys or bent her head to them whilst they were infested. Rose vowed to be more cautious in the future. She dragged the comb through her own hair, glad that huge clumps of it were being tugged from her scalp. She checked obsessively but found none. She put the nit shampoo on anyway. She had phoned Daniel at work, demanding that he come home and help her immediately. He told her that was impossible, head lice don't count as a family emergency. She felt entirely unsupported. By the time he did get back she had stopped shaking.

The playground was even worse now as she felt shame blush her face. Her sons' closely shaved heads seemed like an announcement of 'Unclean, unclean'.

As other people's children rushed from the school doors she watched them. All so innocent and nit free, although Jay had to have caught nits from one of them. The boys didn't seem bothered but Rose noticed that even unfriendly people can make it obvious that they are pissed off. The lack of camaraderie even more pronounced.

'A party,' she said with enforced gaiety. 'Let's have a party. You can invite all the children from your classes.'

'What's brought this on?' asked Daniel.

'Well, we've been here a while now, and I thought it would be nice.'

Heath and Jay cheered and jumped up and down, punching the air and shouting 'Get in there.' They then ran outside to do excited laps of honour.

‘So what’s this really about?’

‘About giving our children a chance, make people forget that they’re the nit boys.’

She sat in front of the television trying to restrain her scratchy impulses. It was hard to concentrate when so aware of every sensation on her scalp. I am imagining things, the mind is very powerful, ignore it, she told herself. Her long hair was twisted up into a bun, it made her look like shit but she jumped if a strand brushed her skin lest it were a bug.

Daniel appeared unbothered. He was bemused by all the fuss.

Cupcakes are very fashionable; there are even specialist bakeries in the U.S. It seemed retro chic, very now. She bought a gorgeously photographed book with 200 pages of differing varieties. The party would serve a dual purpose; she would invite the parents to stay as well as the children. They were bound to be impressed by the house and then fresh coffee. Home baking would be the icing on the cake, she joked with herself.

Their home was full of hollering children. Things are never as filmic as she hopes. There are a few girls in party frocks, but mainly the sweaty, runny nosed, pushing boys grab her attention. She worries about the new leather couch, her grandma’s vase, the laminated floor. The back door is open and they swoosh in and out trailing mud and grass and scabs. Rose remembers that she doesn’t actually like other people’s kids. Heath and Jay seem happy, which is what it’s all about, she thinks. Then immediately knows that’s not true. She has worked so

hard for this, cleaning and cooking and shopping and tidying. Schmoozing parents and offspring, putting her all into the hope that it would be another fresh start.

She smiles and it aches. She fake laughs and forces her chatter into the lounge, where the same clusters of women have formed as in the playground. Even here in her home they don't include her, and she blinks self pitying tears away and excuses herself.

Satisfyingly they do all exclaim when she returns with a tray loaded with a higgledy piggledy tower of cupcakes. For one moment Rose feels Nigella-ry; very Domestic Goddess.

The cakes, adorned with a variety of toppings and colours, look amazing together. There are tiny silver balls on some, multi-coloured confetti on others. She has used chocolate strands and chocolate buttons, food colouring and candy coated coloured beans. There are marble effect cakes and plain white cakes, sprinkles of hundreds and thousands, sugar flowers and sugar paste.

She sets the cakes on the table, and fetches more.

'You're so clever,' says one woman.

'Where do you get the time?' says another, and it sounds like a reprimand, as if Rose spends her life icing stupidly instead of earning money and working.

She smiles whilst children rush to the table, grabbing at the cakes, strewing crumbs and mashing pieces of sponge into the floor.

First published by [Pulp Net](http://www.pulp.net)

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