



**SPREAD
THE WORD**



Flamingo Land

Ruby Cowling

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Flamingo Land

The stained concrete of the big Procedure Unit building made it look as if it might, at least, once have been a real hospital. It was one of the okay ones, - ish – the waiting times weren't bad, and I knew the best place to park because it was right behind the FHO where we went for Assessment.

I scraped the dirty slush off my trainers, went in and gave Mum's name, and they sent me up to the third floor. I found her near the end of the ward, half-propped on a bottom bunk, looking at an old *Gourmet* magazine.

'How you feeling?'

'Oh, Tommy love. At last. Let's get gone before they bring that sandwich trolley.' She was obviously thinking straight, though she was slurring a bit. 'Have you had anything?'

It went without saying, I hadn't. Trying to avoid her dressings, I helped her into her clothes and into the wheelchair: she was so light. She gave a little wave to everyone as I wheeled her out.

Driving home, I glanced across to see she was snoozing, her head thrown back, mouth open wide like a hungry chick, and I put the radio on quiet. I'd been the family driver since I turned seventeen, Dad presenting me with the keys to our old Sharan as if he couldn't wait to get in the back with Beth and the twins. It'd been the same with the bills and stuff. One parents' evening the school mentioned me maybe doing Maths AS-level early, and that weekend Dad handed over all his piles of paper and a notebook on which

he'd written: PASSWORDS/PIN NUMBERS, and clapped me on the shoulder like I was finally becoming a man.

The kitchen was cold but felt freshly deserted, the tang of pickled onion Monster Munch staining the air. I knew it was hard for Beth to stop the twins: one would help the other onto the worktop to reach the cupboards, and I'd even come in once to find Kenny grilling cheese on toast like a little expert. It was all the cooking programmes they watched. I didn't like putting Beth in that adult role, especially as she benefited from me being around too – in terms of rules, keeping to them, and cupboards, keeping out of them.

I wheeled Mum through to the stair lift so she could go and have a lie down. We got a grant for the Stannah when she had the leg off – she'd filled in the forms in advance so all Dad had to do was send them in, and a couple of months later it was installed, helpful as anything.

Beth heard me put the kettle on and shouted from the telly room that she wanted two sugars. Two notes on the table: Dear Parent or Guardian, a pre-Easter-holidays trip next month, only £27.50 per child. I'd have to hide these quickly in my desk – the sideboard – otherwise they'd see them and start hoping, and I'd have another of those conversations to look forward to: Lily sniffing and wobbling, Kenny kicking the skirting board.

Dad's key turned in the door and he came in, smiling.

'Alright, Tom. Premium bonds come up, have they?'

'Yeah, right. Just school letters.'

'Your Mum alright?'

‘Oh, you know.’

Dad nodded, as if this was good. We’d been through four previous ops with Mum and this one wasn’t the worst, but he never seemed worried enough. Surely even he could see she must be running out of things – you only had to look at her, or lift her. After the first couple, once she admitted they’d been elective, she’d shown us all the stuff she’d read about the redundancy built into the human body – there’s a surprising amount you can survive without – and told us how glad she was to be doing something. ‘Make a bit of money, help someone in need – losing a few pounds is the icing on the cake!’ I realised she must like feeling aligned with You First: the element of sacrifice, doing the right thing, taking personal responsibility.

I never let myself ask Dad if, one day, he might volunteer.

‘Daddy!’ Lily hurled herself across the kitchen and into his arms.

‘Daddy, Daddy!’ Kenny shouted, ‘Flamingo Land!’

Oh *shit*.

‘What about Flamingo Land?’ he said, grabbing one in each arm and mashing their small faces against his chest.

‘There’s a school trip! Everyone in the whole world’s going.’

‘Well, isn’t everyone in the whole world lucky?’

I turned to deal with the boiling kettle, got everyone’s favourite mugs lined up.

‘Kenny, Lily,’ I said, calling them out from under Dad’s armpits, ‘what kind of twins are you again?’ They shrieked and piled over each other to get out and upstairs.

We had this thing: I’d say, or trick them into saying, *non-identical*, and they’d walk into it every time because they took it so seriously – who they were, how they came to be – and then I’d dive at them, fingers first, saying, *What? What? Noniden-TICKLE?!* I didn’t even have to say the full thing anymore. It killed me the way they squealed and squirmed.

Beth filled the doorway as they scrambled up the stairs. She was wearing those peach-coloured trousers she just wouldn’t give up on. She tugged the crotch away from herself when she saw me wince.

‘Mum texted to say she’ll just have it black.’ At Christmas we’d drawn lots to see who could have the phones, and the winners were Mum and Beth.

‘kay. Do you still want sugar?’

‘Yes. Why?’

I stirred it in for her, handed over the two mugs. ‘Let me know if she wants anything else.’

‘Obvs.’ She sloped back into the telly room. We used to call it the living room, and we used to mute the telly when the adverts came on, and we’d eat together at the table with Radio 4 on and talk about current affairs and get the dictionary out if somebody asked what something meant, but we kind of let all that go when Grandma finally died.

I put Dad's mug in front of him.

'Don't get them all excited. It's nearly sixty quid.'

'Ach—'

He has this habit of waving away complete impossibilities as if they're just bad smells.

'We can't...' I started.

'Tom, son, don't be so... We're going to have a good month this time. I can feel it. Look at me!'

He stood and pulled his shirt against his torso, sucking in air, and crabbed his arms like a bodybuilder. A curve of ribs, a hollow, the shock of his belt buckle.

'Dad.'

'I'm down a whole notch, you know. At work I have to sit on a cushion.' He winked. 'The future's bright, kiddo. Go on, do your sum thingies, just see what comes out. You can put me down for a straight sixty. Yes! I reckon, don't you? Then with your Mum, I mean, the swelling and that'll be gone by Monday, she can't come out more than, what, forty-five now, can she? And then there's, there's...'

He trailed off when his thoughts reached the four of us. He dropped his voice. 'How's Beth?'

Beth – well. The old Beth was under there somewhere, the one I used to bounce on the trampoline which now sat at 45 degrees in the tangle of our

back yard, but I hadn't heard that laugh of hers for months. These days she'd just sit, texting, with this furious air about her, jagged lines daggering around her head. And as she widened into her teens she was really becoming a problem, Formula-wise. I'd seen the tiny nuggets of Creme Egg foil in our bin; I'd come in to join her watching telly, glimpsed her stuffing something down the side of the settee. It was the secrecy that got to me; that feeling she wasn't, somehow, on our team. She should have worked out already that it's just better for everyone if you go by the rules. I admit it, I had my own habits: at work I'd pick the biggest jacket potato I could see, smush a load of butter into it and get beans *and* cheese if I got the right dinner lady. But I was so hungry all the time. Don't teenage boys need more food than, like, anyone? And I'm not being funny, but unlike the clothes straining to cover the surface of Beth, mine had leeway.

But I didn't want to get into it with Dad. 'Well, Assessment's this Monday coming, so...'

I took my tea through to the telly room. The screen flaunted a close-up of a fork dividing a golden sponge pudding to release a melting centre, a velvety voice-over saying how good it was. I saw Beth stiffen. She was plopped low in the cushions, chewing the rope of her hair, one hank of thigh slumped over the other. Someone would have to say something, but no one wanted to tell her directly; I definitely didn't, Dad would never shake himself into it, and Mum - well, Mum would rather have another thing removed. Still, if Dad was right and he was coming in under sixty kilos... maybe it wouldn't have to be this month, or next month – maybe we could hold out until April

and the planned Threshold Change, before the shit hit the fan. Before Special Measures.

Two nights after, Dad came in and shook my arm, whispering so he wouldn't wake the twins in their bunks. 'What's the number now for a doctor?'

I told him the new out-of-hours medical advice number. He rang it, eyes on me, but there was a message saying it had closed down, phone your GP. The GP's message gave us their opening hours and advised ringing the new medical advice number. Dad phoned back, hoping we'd misunderstood, and I sat in the bathroom holding Mum's hair as she leaned from her wheelchair over the loo. I could feel the heat coming off her. She retched and groaned; with her new stitches every gip must have been a knife stabbing.

'Should this be happening?' said Dad from the doorway.

She finishing throwing up and sat shivering. I turned away while Dad stripped off her soaking nightie and wrapped her twice round in a bath towel, then we lifted her into the aquability shower.

I knew we hadn't used up all of February's Internet credit so, with Dad keeping an eye on Mum, I dug out the Procedure Unit's scribbled discharge papers so I could look up exactly what she'd had done. They were a mess; their big thing was patient choice, and they were great at helping customers with self-directed healthcare, but they weren't so brilliant at the admin side. I went down to the kitchen, to my sideboard, and Googled *problems post-hysterectomy, partial hepatectomy, cholecystectomy*. Antibiotics seemed like

the first option. I'd pop down to Anwar's before work and order them. I had an old prescription I'd managed not to use.

If she was still like this in a couple of days, though, we wouldn't make it to Assessment. Not the end of the world – you could miss one a year, enter your own provisional data – but it meant I'd have to calculate the official Formula myself.

Even unofficially doing the Formula gave me a headache. Mid-month, I'd get out the Guide and the calculator and plug in our info, see where we were. I'd chivvy the twins to get on the scales – worst of three I'd take – and get a written note from Beth, after asking about a million times. She only gave in because she knew Assessment would reveal everything anyway, and we'd had enough bad scenes after a surprise result, all of us sniping blame, storming through the waiting area past other anxious, dehydrated families. We'd drive back in silence, staring out at the golden arches, the Wild Bean Cafes, the ten-metre hoardings sighing *eat, eat* – but not stopping, because we didn't have the spare calories, and now we wouldn't have the spare cash.

The online timer told me I had a while still and, I admit it, I thought about looking at some of the sites I used to go on a lot last year. The videos. But I heard Mum retching again which was kind of a mood killer, so instead I went to the tax office website to check for Formula updates. You never knew: an early Threshold Change, maybe. But no. I logged in to college to see how far behind I was. Then email, but no surprise pay rise announcement from work, ha ha, and no secret admirer messages from fit local girls, ha even

more ha. Finally I went to look at the news, because Mum never let us have it on the telly. Dad appeared behind me as I read.

‘Oh dear,’ he said in that sad way, like it was people he knew, people down the road. ‘There’s always someone worse off, eh?’ And he gave my shoulder a squeeze. I turned, so he’d stop.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘Your mum’s settled down. Better get to sleep myself if I’m to be up and at ’em tomorrow, eh?’

Something flared up in me as he ambled out. His relentless happy-man good humour. He never seemed to stop and question his life, our tiny terrace, the state of Mum, his embarrassing job. He used to teach art history at the uni. All his family had been teachers or doctors or whatever but something had happened, and it was like he couldn’t get back to where he was before. Grandma used to call it *a little local difficulty* and change the subject.

I’d only ever heard Dad say, *There’s a lot of competition out there; a man can’t expect to be on top all his life; I’m lucky to even have a job; blah blah. It means I can focus on my book.* His ‘book’, as he calls it, sits on the shelf above my sideboard in a lever arch file. I’d never seen him touch it, though I remember him a few years ago shut in the bedroom during the day, Mum saying he was trying to write. I suppose we were living on his redundancy then – I was only eleven, I didn’t think about it – and then Mum got her little surprise, then the bigger surprise that there were two of them, and it all coincided with the rollout of You First, which I remember because of all the announcements at school about the changes, and then the Formula came in. So he had to find something; he couldn’t really keep waiting to go

back. But then he seemed to forget things had been any other way. We struggled month after month and Dad just said *Ah well. We do our best. No fault of our own.* Maybe not, but he never thought about whose fault it was, or what we might do about it.

I was starving. I went back to bed.

After dropping Beth and the twins at their schools I headed to Anwar's, but although it was going on for nine, his shutters were still down. We'd been using Drugworld for a while because it was next to the big Asda, but I'd stopped at Anwar's for paracetamol a few weeks ago and he was open then. I got a lucky parking space and sat looking at the dead shop. Anwar was never exactly joyful, especially since they'd lost a granddaughter to a family of vegans in Colne, but last time I saw him he looked really grim, told me Drugworld had put in some official query about his dispensing licence. *Troublemakers*, he said. *Bullshit merchants.* It sounded funny in his accent, funny coming from that kind face.

I drove off to the retail park. Drugworld, so brightly lit, had the biggest range of everything you can imagine. A relief: Mum would get what she needed today. The price, though. After I paid I had to sit down for a minute on the old people's plastic waiting chairs. I must have had my head in my hands or whatever, because I didn't see Erin until she was standing right in front of me saying my name in this concerned way.

'Oh,' I said, sitting up.

'Alright?'

'...Yeah.'

'I'm just getting...' She lifted her basket – four different flavours of Slimfast, which no way did Erin need.

'Right. I had to get some stuff for my Mum.'

'She have another op?'

'Yeah.'

'Huh, wow.' She fiddled with the stuff in her basket. 'How's Beth?'

'Alright. You know.'

She nodded. We said nothing for a minute.

'So how's college? Top of the class?' She said, jaunting out one hip.

'Ha, yeah. Well, actually not really.'

'Come on.'

'No, I haven't gone for ages, had extra shifts and that.'

'I bet you'll get all As anyway, with your big maths brain. You love all that stuff, don't you?'

Some old woman with a crutch came up, aiming herself at my seat.

'Well, I'd better...'

'Yeah.'

‘See you.’

I watched her walk off toward the self-checkouts. Erin hardly looked at me usually, even after last June, when it was boiling and I helped her revise for her exams, lying on the grass outside her flat, and her boyfriend had turned up on his bike and she told him she was going to be busy all day and he zoomed off and she nudged me in the side and I’d not said anything. Especially after last June, actually.

Mum started to get better after a week or so, but we’d missed Assessment. So after work on the last day of February, instead of going to college, I sat at the sideboard and did the Formula.

One evening when the Formula first came in I found Dad hunched over the You First Family Guide, close to tears. Amongst other stuff the Guide helps you make your own Action Plan to pass Assessment, and it includes the actual Formula they use. I sat down and had a look, tried to explain it. Each family member gets a number of points, depending how they compare against the national average, given on tables in the back of the Guide. You add them all together and you get a number, W , which you plug in to the Formula:

$$\frac{W}{(N+A)} * \left(1 - \frac{((N - 3) * INT(\frac{1.1}{(1 + 2^{-N})}))}{N}\right) + 25 * (A - 2)$$

Where N is the number of children, A the number of adults and so on-obvious. There’s a penalty for one-parent families, and - hard cheese for us, a

penalty for having more than three children. Dad rang up to double-check about the twins, because he couldn't believe they really counted as two, but they did. I could see the logic both ways.

If you achieve your ideal weights, you get your full amount, but if you fail it's cut, really cut. Then if you keep on failing, Special Measures. Maybe it was seeing how close we were getting that had made Dad cry.

I finished, and sat for a minute with my eyes closed. I'd have to go online to enter the final figures, but first I got myself a filling glass of water and joined the others in the telly room. The usual repeats were on: a young Jamie Oliver was pounding a massive steak through some cling film with a rolling pin. When he'd finished, beaming, the ads came: stuffed crusts oozing mozzarella, buckets of crispy chicken. Then came one of those low-quality montage adverts, showing stills of local Easter attractions: the model railway, the mining museum, the petting zoo.

'So,' said Dad. 'Flamingo Land.'

'Dad...'

I couldn't believe him. A fortnight ago I'd said no – Lily had cried for two hours – but they'd moved on, the twins, and accepted it. Now they sat up and looked at each other as if they'd heard Santa's sleigh bells.

'Oh Tom,' he waved me away. 'Let them tell me about it.'

Kenny panted down his mouthful of 5 Alive. 'It's the whole of Year Three, it's like a whole day and we have to go in a coach at six o'clock in the morning!'

‘It’s half past six it sets off, Kenny,’ said serious Lily. ‘But Tom said we couldn’t go.’

‘Well,’ said Mum from the corner, looking at me. ‘Let’s see. It’s a whole day? Won’t you need a packed lunch? And a bit of spending money?’

Kenny was already shaking his head, his eyes wide. ‘Nope, there’s this place there where the children go, to eat, they have crocodile soup and pelican pie and like, armadillo something, I can’t remember, but you get this like voucher for the shop too, and Miss said to tell our mums and dads it was all inclu - included.’

Mum and Dad glanced at each other. The twins jumped to the edge of their seats.

‘Tommy?’ said Dad, ‘How’s it looking?’

I drank some water, tried to steady myself. ‘Well, I put all the numbers in-’

‘Did you put me in at sixty?’

‘Yeah, sixty dead on, and Mum at forty-five –’

‘Oh, I don’t even know if I’m that, now,’ said Mum, and she went into this coughing fit. Beth got up and rubbed her back for her.

‘But, you know how complicated it is, and I mean, we’re all still growing, even me...’

I was trying so hard not to look at Beth.

‘So,’ Dad said, ‘what did you come up with? We’ll get our full lot this month, won’t we?’

‘I can’t - I don’t know exactly.’

Then Lily turned her small face up to me. ‘Is it... So are we still not going?’

Seal pup eyes.

It felt so nice to log in to the account and see a positive figure. It felt amazing to be able to tell the twins they could go on their trip, to send them off to school with the money and the signed tear-off slips in their little backpacks. And it felt completely new to have two purple twenties in my wallet, to actually plan for real how I was going to ask Erin if she fancied a drink sometime, maybe even a Pizza Express.

And then somehow it just ebbed away. Dad a bit freer with his debit card; Mum’s internet bits and bobs she’d been waiting to get; cash for store-cupboard stuff; petrol at Asda; shoes for Kenny and Lily; the standing orders; bit by bit each day it dwindled, and then it was all gone.

In the Family Health Office there was a big green poster headed *You First presents the Fantastic FORMULA for Family Fitness!* Clip-art party hats and streamers either side of the header, and a graph. I stood up to have a proper

look. Then I felt my face go red before I realised why - there was this scent I recognised, and I turned round and it was Erin with her sisters and her mum.

'Wow – hi.'

'Don't normally see you,' she said.

'They changed our day. Because of Mum, the other week?'

'How's she doing?'

'Better. Thanks. You going in?'

'Yep, when they call us.'

'What do you think?' I nodded toward the Assessment room.

'Oh yeah, we're well under. What about you? Did you have to do it yourself?'

'Should be good, should be fine, it worked out okay, it looked – yeah.'

Nodding and nodding, toeing the nylon carpet.

'Pain, innit? It does work, though.' She nodded toward the graph and its downslope. 'Says the average has gone way down.'

It was like a silver bell in my brain. But there was another thing biting at me: *now or never Tom or you are an utter waste of space*. 'Look, I wanted to ask you something, are you, would you – '

'Taylor-Peel?'

We were being called in. It was the Assessor with the ankles and the shiny hair down the back of her white coat, and I admit it, I didn't want to keep her waiting.

Someone had left one of those tipping trolleys full of plastic crates on the wheelchair ramp, so me and Dad carried Mum down the steps. It was snowing again, settling on the slope of daffodils behind the rank of cars. Kenny and Lily bundled each other through the revolving door like they had when we'd come in, but quiet. With a jerk of my head I got them to follow us. Beth was already at the car, jabbing at her phone. I admit I looked at her phone once when she was in the loo. The texts she sent to about twenty different friends were long and witty, full of smileys. They'd shocked me more than what I'd been expecting.

I wasn't going to be the first one to speak. Whatever I said, Beth would say I was having a go at her. And, well, it sort of was her fault. She was the one who cost us so much in food, the one who just kept getting heavier like she didn't care. Someone was going to have to say something.

I said nothing. We set off on the ring road, first drop-off the twins' school.

The fit Assessor had handed me an updated Family Guide. It was true: average weights were down; the points tables had been adjusted. Erin was still in the waiting room as we left, and I wanted to stop and say, hang on, think about it, if there's been a drop in average weights wouldn't everyone

who was doing just about okay suddenly be above average? And then fail Assessment? But of course it couldn't work that way, surely, that would be stupid. And I'd remembered her mouth twisting when she said about my big maths brain. And then the Assessor had gone to unbolt the double doors for Mum's chair and she'd bent over and I couldn't not look.

Of all people, it was Dad, sitting in the middle seat, who spoke. 'I s'pose we have to, then.'

I still didn't say anything.

'Can we, Tom? Can we pay it back?'

We couldn't really, no.

Dad was quiet for a while.

He shook his head. 'It doesn't make sense. Not at all.'

Beth in the far back seat pulled out her earbuds. 'Well, it's not just me.'

'Course not, lovey,' he said. 'No-one said it was your fault.'

'You don't have to say it though.' She was rattling the seats in front of her, almost standing. 'I can see the way you all look at me, like I'm the problem. Like you want me to die.'

Kenny's voice was high. 'Don't die!'

'Don't die, Beth!'

'Beth's not going to die, Lily, Kenny, it's all right.'

‘But you all want me to. Admit it. It’d all work out if it wasn’t for me and my big fat disgusting body.’

‘Beth, please, sweetheart.’

‘If anyone’s going to die anytime soon, I think you’ll find it’ll be me.’

Mum’s voice was so small these days, but it cut through us all. I turned so fast to look at her that I screwed the wheel round too, nearly drove onto the pavement. I stamped the brake, and the sudden shock of the stop made Lily cry.

I had thought it’d be all right. I had thought we’d do it, really, we’d been so close.

‘Beth, it’s not you. It’s never you.’ And I meant it. Beth was so bright, so pretty. Full of all that rebel energy. It killed me that she had so many friends, attracted all that love, when at home we saw her as the problem.

We were more or less in a lay-by so I turned off the engine. ‘I must have done the sums wrong. I don’t know. There’ll be some way... I’ll sort it. I’ll get another job. Dad, maybe if you, you could...’ and a big lump came up like I was about to be sick, so I had to stop and swallow before I carried on. ‘Oh I dunno. And Mum, you’ve got to stop doing this. That so-called Procedure Unit, I’m not going to take you again. I mean they shouldn’t be allowed, all that stuff done for money, and they’re not even real doctors are they, some of them?’

Mum got hold of my fist that was beating the dashboard. We sat like that for a minute. Kenny reached over the back of my seat and stroked my

neck with a little finger. I glanced at him in the mirror. Lily had crawled onto Dad's knee, sniffing into his chest.

I reached round, clawed my fingers. 'What kind of twins are you again?' And I got the instant sunlit squirm from them both.

Behind us all, Beth unsnapped her seatbelt and opened the door into the road.

Shit. I scrambled out and dashed after her. Cars honked and swerved. It was the ring road, for god's sake, slippery already from the new snow. She skipped the crash barrier and stopped as if to check the traffic but she looked down at herself, not at the road. A bus slowed right in front of me and I was faced with a giant Lindt ball being filled with molten caramel, blocking my path.

I got this sort of surge.

I saw exactly what the driver shouted as I ran round. I skidded to the barrier. Beth stepped out into the roadway but I did it, I got her, I grabbed her arm, then I pulled her to me and just hugged and hugged her soft self. We were there a full minute, ten minutes, a lifetime, in the slackening snow, between the oblivious streams of cars. Eventually I felt the buzz of her speaking into my chest. I let her go. Her nose was running. I glanced back at the car, the pale faces of our family.

'Where you going, you big idiot?' I said.

A probationary little smile. '...Burger King?'

‘ _ ’

‘Joking, duh.’ She semi-punched me.

So on Saturday as the streetlights blinked out we were all back in the car, sitting in the same seats but going the other way round the ring road, heading for the A1, everyone jigging about to Jessie J. And I thought about February’s money that we’d have to give back and March’s money that we wouldn’t get, and Special Measures and the twins, how would we, how could we? Unless that other party got in and changed things back, stopped the Formula and re-thought You First, maybe gave everyone a bit of breathing space, I mean there were elections coming, my first time voting, so... And I thought about how I’d put our petrol on the credit card again, and that we’d have to pay full admission price which was like forty quid each, no schools’ discount, and then there’d be hot dogs and milkshakes and soft toys and branded pencils from the shop, and I thought about how we’d have to sneak Mum onto the Octopus because there was a height minimum. And then I pictured Lily and Kenny screaming happy in the whirly teacups, and Dad reaching for Mum’s hand in the café, and me and Beth the spitting image of each other in the gormless photo they take of you at the scariest bit of the Doomacoaster, and us all pointing out the flamingos as if they were a surprise, clue in the name and everything, and so I thought, you know what? I don’t care, because no one can force things to be exactly the way they want them to be, not always, maybe not ever.

About the author

Ruby Cowling won the London Short Story Prize 2014. She was born in West Yorkshire and now lives in London. In 2014 she was also awarded *The White Review* Short Story Prize. Her work has appeared in various anthologies and magazines

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