

At eighteen she realised that she would never have the bone structure to be decadent...

Years of grimacing in the mirror and covering her face in a solution of bone meal had all been wasted. Her nose was snub, her jaw undistinguished, and she was short.

'It's your own fault, Gloria,' scolded her mother. 'You wouldn't take milk as a child.'

She had dreamed of martyrdom, her elegant profile jutting through the flames; she had dreamed of stardom, eager thousands trying to make their cheekbones just like hers. At the very least she might have been a recluse, casting aquiline shadows across her unswept floor. Now, all these things were closed to her, and what was left? She was moderately intelligent, but not very, she had a way with animals, and she wanted to fall in love. She sat down and accepted her fate. Either she could be a secretary or she could be a prostitute. If she chose the latter there would be the problem of what to wear for work and how to arrange her hair (her recent experiments with ash-blond tint had left her threadbare — she should probably have mixed the powder with water instead of bleach).

'I can wear a headscarf if I'm a secretary,' she told herself. Then, a little sadly, 'There's no such thing as a bald prostitute.'

She knew she would have to settle for less money, but she solaced that blow with thoughts of luncheon vouchers and regular hours. One of her mother's magazines was lying on the floor, and although she knew it would end in tears, Gloria picked it up and turned the pages. It was full of people whose jaws could have been used as scythes. They led rich fulfilling lives doing nothing at all and earning vast sums of money. They offered her their beauty tips, cut-price bath oil, and exclusive revealing interviews about their glittering lives. Quickly, Gloria turned to the problem page: acne, period pains, unwanted body hair, fat husbands, ugly wives. She felt a wave of relief. At least some people were still vile, obscure and blotchy. Not for them glamorous bed-hopping and expensive narcotics. Her mother called it sordid, but she still bought the magazines.

'For the recipes,' she said, whenever she caught Gloria's reproachful eye. Certainly the recipes were magnificent: sorbets smothered in cream, passion fruit dripping with Kirsch, breasts of melon spread with honey. Gloria dreamed the tastes while Mrs Munde carried on steaming fish. Her mother was nothing if not regular.

'Brain food,' she declared, and at other times: 'Fish, the Lord's first born.'

Mother and daughter laboured under a highly complex and entirely different understanding of the nature of their relationship. Often, Gloria would look at her mother and wonder who she was. She had been known to pass her in the street and not recognise her. Mrs Munde, on the other hand, fondly believed they shared a common ground other than the one they were sitting on. That night, as dusk fell, and her mother served up the fish, Gloria felt emotional enough to attempt a conversation. Usually she let her mother talk.

'Mother, have you ever been in love?'

'Of course I have: I was in love with your father. He had legs so fine it was a sin to walk on them. The first time I saw him I was lying face-down in the soil crying my eyes out because I'd lost my grass snake. I looked up and there were his legs going up like columns, and oh, at the very top, his head. I thought I was seeing a vision. He spent all day with me trying to find that snake, and at about half past three, I knew I had fallen in love.'

'Did he love you too?'

'No, I don't think he loved me until I made him my chocolate mousse.'

Gloria nodded slowly, stirring the fish pan with a bit of twig. If it could happen to her mother, surely it could happen to her? Perhaps she would marry her boss? Perhaps he would come in one day, and whisk the scarf from her head (her hair was bound to grow again), then murmur something about her being irresistible. She'd let him take her, right there, in front of the water dispenser and afterwards it would be a large house, babies, and endless barbecues on the lawn.

'Mother, I want to be a secretary,' she announced, suddenly and firmly. Her mother sat up from where she had been drawing dust pictures of her first husband (one of the reasons she enjoyed eating outside was the freedom it gave her to do other things).

'You can't be, it's dangerous, I won't let you, you don't know any shorthand, you'll have to drink instant coffee.'

'No I won't,' said Gloria as reasonably as she knew how. 'I'll take the grinder, and I can learn shorthand at school. I want to live in the city and meet interesting men.'

'Whore!' screamed her mother. 'Why don't you just become a prostitute?'

Gloria didn't want to go through all that again, so she just said, 'I'll come home and visit you, I promise.'

Mrs Munde was beside herself. 'I'm not letting you go and live in the city. It's full of gaming clubs and unmentionable practices; you'll get a disease.'

'I'll be careful. I'll share a flat with another girl.'

The mother burst into floods of tears and started to bang her head against the fish kettle. 'If only your father was alive,' she moaned. 'That I should be left to see my only daughter come to this.'

At that moment a low bellow upstaged the mother's din. Gloria got up.

'I've got to go and give Trebor his supper. It's not fair to keep him waiting.' She hurried over to the outhouse where her elephant was gently swinging his trunk. While she got his food ready Gloria talked over her plans, reassuring Trebor: 'Don't worry, I'll take you with me when I go. We'll find a landlady who doesn't mind pets.' The elephant grunted and together they sank into a daydream of what life would be like in the city...

*All this was happening a long time ago, before the flood. The Big Flood starring God and Noah and a cast of thousands who never survived to collect their royalty cheques. Of course you know the story because you've read*