

## Inner Balance

Kate Atkinson

June. If she'd been born in November would they have called her November? She asked her mother this once.

*Oh, June, you are funny.* June. It's a name for women in sitcoms and soaps, the name of women who knit with synthetic wool and follow recipes that use cornflakes. Nice people. June doesn't want to be nice people. June gets her nose pierced and wears a little ruby in the hole like a pinprick of blood. *At your age!* June's mother says.

The name doesn't belong to June, it belongs to her mother. *It's amazing, isn't it,* says June (the mother), *that we were born in the same month?* Not really, thinks June (the daughter), not given that there are only twelve months in the year and millions of people being born all the time. Thinks it betrays a serious lack of imagination not to be able to see further than your own name when christening another person. June.

June's parents - Ian and June senior. Old and stupid. And nervous - they're nervous about everything, from being mugged on the way home from the post office with their pensions to dying of carbon monoxide poisoning. Their lives are peppered with alarms - carbon monoxide alarms, smoke alarms, burglar alarms, car alarms - her mother even has a personal alarm ("in case I'm raped, dear") that she carries everywhere with her in her dreadful old handbag where it nestles amongst half-used Kleenex and packets of Rennie's. They're alarmed, June thinks to herself and laughs out loud. Their white hair and their nerves remind June of sheep. When she closes her eyes and thinks about them (which she tries not to do but often does) she sees sheep in brown anoraks and Gore-tex.

They were old when they had June. *Our one and only* says June the elder. June (forty-three) and Ian (forty-five) when they had June (nought). June doesn't know how they did it, she's only thirty-five but already she feels far too worn out to have another baby. She wouldn't want another baby - even if it was Mr McFarlane's. June's waiting for her parents to die so she can grow up and stop behaving badly. Whenever she goes near them she regresses twenty years. *You're a funny one* her mother says, but you can see she's not really laughing.

June - that's it, you can't do anything with it, can't lengthen it to Junie (sounds like chewing-gum) or shorten it to Ju. Unless you were Chinese perhaps. June is not Chinese, she's Scottish. From Perth.

"Pairrth," says Mr McFarlane in his lovely douce Aberdonian. "That's a bonny place." "Is it?" June says grumpily. They wait for their appointment with him in the E.N.T. waiting-room, which is really a corridor. "Ent," says Alistair, reading a sign, his little face pinched and adenoidal. "Not 'Ent'," June corrects him, "E-N-T - ear, nose and throat." Two years they've been coming here and this is the first time he's asked what it means. First time she's thought to tell him. What does he say to his teacher when he gives her a note - "I have to go to the ent clinic." Surely not. "What?" he says. "E-N-T," June spells out, her lips making exaggerated shapes. "Are you waiting for Mr McFarlane?" a neat chirpy nurse says to Alistair, but he's looking at the watch pinned to her chest and misses what she says. Half the world passes him by. June wishes something would pass her by, wishes everything would pass her by. She'd like to sleep for a long time and be woken up with a kiss from Mr McFarlane and feel his pale, soft fingers touching her cheek the way they touch Alistair's when he's peering through his auriscope.

June is waiting for Mr McFarlane. She's waiting to marry him. She's waiting for the first Mrs McFarlane to die or fall in love with someone else - preferably the latter

option, then June wouldn't have to bring up Mr McFarlane's children.

"Hello there, Alistair" Mr McFarlane says. "And how are you today?" One day, June thinks, she will open the door of their flat in Newington and Mr McFarlane will be standing there, slightly out of breath from the four flights, and he'll say - but what will he say? What is it that June wants him to say?

Mr McFarlane sits Alistair up on his desk and peers into his left ear. June wishes he would do something this intimate with her, look inside her brain with his little torch and see how lonely she is. On a table in the corner Mr McFarlane has a model of the inside of a giant's ear. The ear's almost as big as Alistair and coloured in shades of pink and blue. The ear comes to pieces and Mr McFarlane usually spends most of their appointment deconstructing and reconstructing it with Alistair. Sometimes June has a vision of the future, where the grown-up Alistair knows nothing about history or maths or geography or anything useful, but can take people's ears apart. You can tell just by looking at Mr McFarlane, peering through his spectacles and fiddling with the hammer and anvil bones of the giant's ear, that his boyhood was spent building working Meccano models and gluing Airfix kits together. June has a great fondness for the childhood she imagines for Mr McFarlane. She would like this childhood for Alistair. If she married Mr McFarlane then perhaps she would be able to give this childhood to him. Alistair spends his time lost in his own private world of the half-deaf. June imagines it's like being on the ocean floor listening to someone shouting down to you through the muffled boom and crash of waves and swells. "The organs of Corti," says Mr McFarlane mysteriously.

Mr McFarlane sits down in his chair and looks at the results of Alistair's latest hearing test. Mr McFarlane's lips move when he reads the same way that Alistair's do. June's heart reaches out to Mr McFarlane. He has dreadful shoes, always the same shoes - black slip-on moccasins that need polishing. That need throwing away really. June wonders what kind of a wife lets a man wear shoes like that. If June was Mrs McFarlane she would make him buy new shoes. Today he has on Argyle socks, patterned in blue and green, and old grey flannel trousers like a schoolboy's. Over everything he wears his creased white overcoat that makes him look like a lab assistant pretending to be a consultant. He has dark hair that's thinning and cheap wire-rimmed glasses that make his eyes look enormous. His eyes are the colour of the Water of Leith, grey and dirty, but full of compassion for everything from Alistair's scarred eardrums to the thread coming loose from the rainbow sleeve of June's jumper.

"That's nice," he says pointing at the band round her thin wrist and June blushes hot and rosy with pleasure and says, "It's a friendship bracelet, I make them." She wants to say, "I'll make one for you, if you'd like," she'd like to offer him the gift of her friendship (really she'd just like to offer herself), but she doesn't have the nerve and instead says, "I sell them, I've got a stall in the Grassmarket during the festival."

"Ah," he says, as if this somehow explains everything.

The huge cochlea on the model ear is whorled like a shell and coloured in pale blue, a delicate colour like the sky over the Forth in February. Like today. June thinks of Alistair's cochlea as being blue, a fragile piece of sky furled inside his skull. Mr McFarlane has said that sometimes problems with the inner ear can have emotional causes, but June doesn't want to think too much about that.

"Are you doing anything nice at the weekend, Alistair?" Mr McFarlane asks. Alistair experiences a kind of time delay while he unscrambles language. "Yes," he says, "we're going to Gran's."

Alistair trails behind June like a limp flag, all the way up the four flights of their

tenement. The cast-iron staircase turns like a stretched cochlea, like one of Alistair's shells unwound. June tells herself not to think like this all the time. It's like when she did the shorthand and typing course - all the time translating what people were saying into shorthand, little squiggly Pitman hieroglyphics running in front of her eyes like cartoon men. Now she's obsessed with ears. "Here we are," she says unnecessarily as she turns the key in the lock.

"I've got to stop smoking if I want to get up those stairs," she says sinking into an armchair and making a spindly roll-up - biting her lower lip intently like someone making a bomb. "What?" Alistair says, from the bottom of the ocean.

"Nothing."

Over tea, Alistair asks, "Are we going to Gran's tomorrow?" and June says, "Yes-for-the-hundredth-time." Alistair plays with his food, building a fort out of field beans, a moat full of white tofu. "I hate this food," he says. "It's good for you, it's macrobiotic," June says, fingering the coloured weaving on her friendship bracelet. After tea, Alistair plays with his shells, he calls it a collection, tracing the whorls and spirals with his finger and sorting them by size. It's not a collection really, just a few shells he picked up when they lived on the West Coast. "In a caravan?" Mr McFarlane asks doubtfully. "Yeah," June says, "why not?" but she says it nicely, not like she does to her mother. "But now you're living in Newington," he smiles, looking at the address on the top of Alistair's records. "Yes," June says. "It's got a nice view, you can see Arthur's Seat."

"That's lovely," Mr McFarlane smiles. It's a lie, they can see the back of an old warehouse. But if you climbed up on the roof you could see Arthur's Seat.

Alistair starts reading his shell book, his lips moving silently. It's an old book they found on a second-hand stall - *The Encyclopaedia of Conchology* - and Alistair likes to recite the names of shells in his head like some kind of spell, *Abida, Abra, Absia*. June gets ready to go out. She's going to classes in polarity therapy at the Salisbury Centre. She's done T'ai chi and hatha yoga and meditation. She's working towards being a real person, balanced and healthy. Wholesome. June imagines Mr McFarlane leads a wholesome life - not a smoker, definitely not. And not a drinker - maybe a glass of wine with a meal now and then. Imagines him driving out to Musselburgh at the weekends and walking his dog along the banks of the Esk. For his dog, June imagines a Labrador - chocolate-coloured and friendly and very obedient.

June used to do a lot of drugs, nothing hard, nothing you would have to inject. June hates injections. When she was thirteen and had a TB jab at school she got so hysterical that they had to call for her mother. June the first hovering in the sick-room of Perth Academy looking small and indefinite (*Oh June, you are a one*) making June the second even more hysterical. June hasn't done any drugs for a long time, except for the odd joint now and then, not since she left Alistair in his buggy alongside the disposable nappy aisle in Boots' in Princes Street and was on the bus going over the South Bridge when she remembered him. Now she's cleaning away all the bad stuff. Imagines filling her head with sky. "Come on," she says to Alistair, handing him his rainbow scarf (June knits everything the same - in thin stripes of any-colour-going), "you have to stay with Lianne."

"I don't want to go to Lianne's," Alistair grumbles, snailing behind her on pavements slick with rain, and June feels a guilty little clutch at her heart for his powerlessness. She's not got rid of all the bad stuff inside her head yet though. Sometimes she gets a rage, not one that's hot and red with passion, but cold and blue with meanness, and Alistair disappears into his bedroom and fingers his shells like talismans and recites his mantras, *Nicania, Neverita, Nisso*. Then June gets even madder and meaner and

tells him to stop or he'll end up in the loony bin. Then she feels guilty and June doesn't like feeling guilty so she gets even meaner, spiralling down the mean, blue labyrinth until she feels so bad that she thinks they would be better off if they were dead - if she smothered Alistair with a pillow in the night and then dived off the windowsill - but she couldn't do that. Not really. But it's an idea.

When she's got rid of this nastiness, June thinks, when she's balanced and her head's full of sky, she's going to invite Mr McFarlane up to the flat. Cook him a nice meal - stir-fry and brown rice - and show him all the best things about herself. Then he'll never go back to his wife, he'll stay with June and she'll knit him jumpers and buy him shoes and get him a chocolate-coloured Labrador. "We are going to Gran's, aren't we?" Alistair asks again, his voice muffled in rainbow scarf.

"Sit down, sit down," June's mother fusses round the tea-table nervously. Brought up in the meat-and-two-veg school of cuisine, June senior never knows what to feed them when they come to visit. Usually she just trawls the shelves of Marks and Spencer's food hall for something with a big green "V" on it. Alistair picks up his knife and fork before there's anything on the table. "Come on, father," June's mother says and June's father smiles and says, "All right, mother," and shambles to the table. June glares at them both. "Cheers," June's father says, raising a glass of lemonade. June feels about fourteen years old. Why don't they just die? They won't though, will they? They'll go on getting older and older. They'll probably outlive June. And if not, then it won't be long before things start going wrong with them, they already complain about arthritis, rheumatism, stiffness, bunions. Their eyes, ears, teeth and toenails. Soon it'll be the big stuff, their bladders, their brains. "Aye," June's mother says, "old age disnae come by itsel." A real old wifie. June will never grow like her mother. Never, ever, ever.

Soon, June knows, they're going to try hauling her in by the umbilical cord, she'll have to deal with their incontinence and their amnesia, she'll have to listen to endless tales about malfunctioning bowels and intimate female parts that she can't believe her mother really has. This is their fault, she thinks, stabbing a slice of potato. "Leek and Potato Bake," June's mother says like an advert (although not one that would encourage you to buy anything). This is their fault for only having one child. Only child, June thinks, that's the worst thing in the world to be. An only, lonely child. It's wicked to do that to someone, not to give them brothers and sisters. June catches the eye of her own only, lonely child and winces. June's mother gets up from the table and comes back in with a transparent plastic mould. "Trifle," she beams at Alistair. June reaches across and takes the lid off and reads the ingredients written on it. June's mother has already dolloped out a big red, yellow and white quivering spoonful into Alistair's bowl. He smiles happily. "Gelatine," June announces sternly. "It's got gelatine in it."

"Is that bad, dear?" June's mother asks tremulously, the spoon hovering over the remaining trifle. "Of course it's bad," June snaps, "it's made from boiled-down cows' bones and hoofs and other bits too disgusting to think about. Things swept up off abattoir floors probably."

"June," June's father remonstrates gently.

"He can't have it," June says. "Give me the bowl, Alistair." Alistair pushes his bowl across to June and stares at the space left on the tablecloth. His lips move, trembling slightly as he recites to himself - *Turbinella spirilis*, *Ensatella*, *Lucidella*, *Purpurifera* - like exotic girls' names.

"Banana then, dear?" June's mother says to him, sounding as if she's about to burst

into tears. Then, June thinks, they'll go into a nursing-home and the DSS will sell their house from under them to pay the fees and June will have put in thirty-five years as their daughter and have nothing to show for it, not even this solid pink sandstone house. She would like to live here. Without them, of course. A real home, with a garden, a view of the hills, the Tay. If they died now, she'd get it all, the house, the insurance policies, their "little nest-egg". Why don't they die? Alistair eats his banana miserably. June imagines killing her parents. Spicing their bedtime Horlicks with aconite, splicing their smokies with cyanide. Maybe she could get a gun and just shoot them. That would be satisfying. June sees herself blowing their wobbly grey heads off, splattering blood over the Sanderson wallpaper. "Cuppie, dear?" June's mother says, lifting the teapot for June's inspection. "No milk," June says sullenly. "That's what makes veal calves."

"Oh dear" June's mother says. "I've never had veal."

June sleeps in her old bedroom, Alistair in the "guest room". June doesn't know why it's called that, they never have guests staying over. They have hardly any friends. Just each other. That's what June's father says, "We've got each other, that's all we need." And June, of course, they've got June. June's bedroom has been preserved as if she was dead. A shrine to her dead childhood. It's pink, everything's pink, the sprigged curtains, the bedspread, even the carpet blooms with pink roses. On a kist in the corner her Sindy doll sits pertly in a pink ballgown, her teddy-bear lolls his old head on a blue rabbit's shoulder. June huddles under her pink bedspread and pink cellular blankets and tries to switch her brain off. The worst thing is that she feels so safe here, under the pink covers, inside the pink sandstone. This is where she feels at home. It's horrible. She thinks about Mr McFarlane, imagines the kind of house they would live in if they got married. Solid and square, rooms with high ceilings and picture-rails. Imagines Mr McFarlane climbing into their big double bed with an expensive orthopaedic mattress. Mr McFarlane will wear pyjamas. He'll put his arms round June and say, what will he say? He'll say, *Don't worry, June, I'll look after you.* Yes, that's what June wants him to say. June wants somebody to look after her.

June falls asleep in the shelter of the pink house, in her safe childhood bed. She dreams she's standing at the living-room window in Newington. There's a line of bright blue snails crawling along the window-sill and from the window you can see Arthur's Seat, in fact, the window is full of Arthur's Seat, like a blind that's been pulled down on the outside. And the green grass is covered with little pink flowers and in the dream June thinks, *Oh good, now I can show Mr McFarlane.*