

There was an old lady

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Lines from a nursery rhyme would randomly appear in Chloe's head. When she was making fish fingers for tea, pretending to do her job, or laying her tablets out in a line: two small white pills and three medium-sized ones which were mauve.

There was an old lady.

Except there wasn't. Not anymore. And she hadn't been that old. Sixty is no age really, a colleague had said. But when Chloe had put one candle for each year on the last ever cake she made for her mother, the ones she lit first burned right down before she could finish lighting the rest, the flames joining together so Chloe had to blow and blow to put them all out. The old lady would have needed help with the blowing anyway because her breath was wispy. Barely there.

Who swallowed a fly.

There was a chain that had led to the pills in Chloe's hand, the white and the mauve, but the links were slippery. She remembered the beginning, the words whisked away, the colleague who took her to the occupational health doctor who referred her to the counsellor who sent her to the GP (just so they know what's going on with you). These pills will increase the uptake of serotonin, said the GP. They were two-tone, green and white, and gleamed of the future. Chloe's words came back at a gallop, tumbling, magical. Every molecule of her began to spin. Astonishing brightness. The flowers. The stars. Faces in the curtains. Messages on the shopping channel. And on escalators and pavements, secret angels stood and watched.

Take this, said the duty GP. The pills were round and red, the colour of pillar boxes and blood.

A spider to catch the fly.

They modify the dopamine, he said. Chloe was coshed and slept for the first time in ten days.

The spider wove a cocoon. Chloe was spacey, untouchable, muffled.

The psychiatrist held his fingers tip-to-tip like a steeple and listened when Chloe told him about the old lady in her end-stage year. Her illness is a stressor, he said. Your problem is something more fundamental. He spoke of imbalances and gave her more of the blood-red pills. Chloe was submerged under the weight of a waveless ocean.

When she saw him again he said chasing your moods up and down like this is not the right approach. His solution was a large chalky pill, the one Nirvana wrote a song about.

She swallowed a bird to catch the spider.

It did not work and Chloe was driftwood.

And she somehow swelled. Eleven people – Chloe was counting – asked if she was pregnant. Her balloon fingers found a lump at the base of her neck. You need to take these small white pills, her psychiatrist said.

She swallowed a cat to catch the bird.

And he gave her some bullet-shaped pills to pull her out of the ocean. She shot up to the over-bright stars like before. So he added a peach-coloured pill to dampen the tiny fires sparking in her head.

A dog to catch the cat.

She woke on the floor, the bedroom all twisted, carpet burns on her shoulder and blood in her mouth. And so she saw a neurologist who replaced the peachy pills with diamond-shaped ones with rounded-off edges.

She swallowed a cow to catch the dog.

I don't know how she swallowed the cow.

Chloe was exhausted, treading water each day, always aware of the riptides below the surface of the choppy sea. You take the pills so diligently, said the psychiatrist, it is a shame they've given

you so much trouble and that we haven't yet found the right combination. Be patient, he said.

Prescribing is an art, not a science. Chloe was fond of this man who listened to her struggles and fed her pharmaceutical morsels.

The old lady did not like pills. In hospital she would hide hers under her tongue, collect them in the zip pocket of her handbag, and pass the bag to Chloe for her to flush the pills away. You told the nurses, didn't you, the old lady said. Chloe hadn't told them. She would not take away the only autonomy the old lady had left. And anyway, the pills could not save, could not delay, could only ease.

In the trudge of a traffic jam on the drive to work, Chloe fell asleep and woke with her car crunched into a bus.

The psychiatrist took away the chalky pills and the bullet ones too and swapped the diamond pill for some which were a beautiful mauve.

She swallowed a horse.

These pills were the exact same shade as the mohair jumper Chloe's mother wore when Chloe was little.

The years passed, mauve pill after mauve pill, and Chloe waited for the next bad reaction. It did not come. And one day she realised she was no longer treading water, but floating in a small boat, sometimes paddling this way and that, using her hands like oars in the ebbing sea.

It was so hard to think about the old lady, but every time she swallowed a mauve pill she remembered, somewhere deep inside, her mother's mohair jumper. How they would sit arm to arm in front of the telly and Chloe would pick tiny balls of fluff off the jumper and swallow them down. The jumper of her mother, the old lady who died.

Of course.