

## LAUGHTER CLASS

‘Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.

Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho.

Hee, hee, hee, hee, hee.’

As the hullabaloo subsided, the tutor beamed her encouragement. ‘That was *great!*’ she exclaimed. ‘You’ve really got the hang of it. But this time open your mouths much wider, throw your heads back and rock from side to side, so that you’re using your whole body as you laugh. Is everyone OK with that?’

‘*No!*’ Anthea muttered under her breath. ‘The whole thing’s quite ridiculous.’

‘We’ll do some laughter solos next. I want you each to take one of the sounds we’ve been doing as a group, and give it all you’ve got – lots of pizzazz, lots of body movement. I’ll start you off, with “ha, ha, ha”.’

Anthea watched, aghast, as Joy broke into a peal of exuberant ‘ha, ha, ha’s.’ The woman’s eyes were shining; her mouth agape; her fluid, flexible body shaking with genuine mirth. How could she laugh with such conviction when there was nothing to laugh about?

‘Now, you take over, Caroline, with “ho, ho, ho, ho, ho”.’

Despite her age and girth, Caroline seemed equally uninhibited, ho-ho-ing with such natural ease and vigour, the class applauded spontaneously. And Barry, too, obliged without the slightest hesitation, turning his ‘hee-hee’s’ into an elaborate aria, tears of authentic laughter actually running down his face.

‘Right, Anthea, your turn.’

She fought a desperate urge to flee - to run full-pelt from the room and keep on running, until she was safely back in her flat. Laughter was a skill she had never mastered. It was difficult enough when someone told a joke – impossible in *this* situation, when you were expected to laugh to order, and in front of virtual strangers.

‘I’d like you to use a new sound - “oinck, oinck, oinck”. OK?’

Oinck certainly *wasn't* OK – an uncouth farmyard noise, and more idiotic even than the rest. Besides, she felt she needed a screwdriver to open her mouth at all; its hinges were stiff with embarrassment, and rusty from disuse. ‘Oinck, oinck, oinck,’ she faltered, aware that the strangulated whine emerging from her lips sounded more akin to agony than joy. It was like trying to sing when you were tone-deaf, or dance with two left feet – humiliating and purposeless.

The tutor came to her rescue. ‘Let’s *all* join in with this one,’ she suggested. ‘Come on, everybody, raise the roof with “oinck, oinck, oinck, oinck, oinck”.’

Every voice from soprano to bass-baritone took up the ludicrous cry – only Anthea self-conscious and on edge; in fact, feeling like a completely different species. While *they* were raucous chimpanzees, she was a shy and silent creature – a mole, perhaps, or water-vole, secretive and serious. She couldn’t even take refuge in her burrow, because she and all the rest of the class were standing in one big circle in the centre of the room, which made it impossible to hide.

As the horrendous din continued, voices from the past rose up to condemn her for daring to take part in this frivolity at all. ‘Anthea, wipe that smile off your face.’ ‘What have you got to laugh about, my girl?’

She couldn’t remember her mother laughing, not once in her entire eighty years. And the teachers at her school had also mistrusted laughter, regarding it as a sort of insubordination, and an infectious one at that, which had to be punished harshly and put

down. And, looking at this hapless crowd, she could sympathize with that viewpoint.

Laughter *could* be dangerous, turning normal rational people into uncontrolled buffoons.

‘Oinck, oinck, oinck,’ re-echoed through the shabby room. Would they never tire of making fools of themselves? Someone ought to remind them of all the suffering in the world – the millions dying in Africa of famine, drought and AIDS; the poverty in *this* country: children lacking decent clothes and food.

At last, Joy clapped her hands for silence, her face still wreathed in smiles. What could *she* know about suffering? – a young thing, barely out of her twenties, who had probably never had a low mood in her life. Even her clothes shouted jollity and confidence; the brilliant purple caftan a dramatic contrast to her frizzy, flame-red hair, and the glittering gold bangles on her wrists adding their jangling contribution to the class.

‘I was christened Brenda,’ she’d told them, when they had first assembled this morning. ‘But I changed my name to Joy because I’m a Joy-Enabler and Joy-Expander.’

Anthea had grimaced in distaste. Joy seemed so *extreme*. Basic contentment was enough of an assignment, without going overboard. Personally, she’d settle for something more modest – fewer fits of black depression, for example, and a cure for her ME. In fact, it was her doctor who had suggested the course, as an alternative to drugs or psychotherapy. But probably, like many in the medical profession, he didn’t even *believe* in ME, but simply wanted to get rid of her. She had a good mind to report him for wasting her time and money. This course had cost £100, which would have been better spent on a weekend in the country, rather than two pointless days in a dingy Adult Education College, in an insalubrious part of London.

Joy had turned her back to them and was scrabbling in a huge carrier bag. ‘I want to introduce you to some friends,’ she said, withdrawing half a dozen cuddly toys and setting them out on the table in a row. ‘First up is Chuckles the Chicken.’ She pointed to a large felt

bird that looked positively psychedelic – its acid-yellow feathers speckled with emerald, blue and red. ‘And this is Happy the Hippo and his good pal, Blissful the Bear. Next to them is Frolic the Frog, then Madcap the Monkey and, my favourite of all, Giggly-Piggly.’ She stroked the plush pink snout of an inanely grinning pig, the colour of candyfloss. ‘And why they’re important is they all know how to laugh.’ As she went along the row, pressing each one’s belly, they erupted suddenly in great guffaws and gurgles of laughter.

Anthea watched in horror, her gaze moving from the rollicking bear to the hysterical green frog. The pig, in particular, filled her with revulsion – an undignified, obese creature, with flaring scarlet nostrils and a protuberant stomach that vibrated as it laughed. And the monkey seemed completely manic, obsessively banging a tin drum as it giggled and sniggered in time with the honking hippo. Where on earth did one *buy* such monstrosities? Talking dolls she had heard of, and even dolls that wet their nappies, but never a giggling, vibrating zoo. When *she* was a child, toys sat stiff and silent, as if aware of the perils of the War - shortages and bombing raids and fathers who disappeared. This lot was so vulgar in comparison, literally falling about as they hooted, chortled, cackled. And of course, spurred on by their antics, all the class began laughing, too, so that once again the room resounded with meretricious mirth.

‘Remember to breathe!’ Joy shouted above the noise. ‘Breathe joy into your lungs. And if anyone’s still holding on to sadness, I want you to release it in a great long shuddering sigh.’

Anthea gave a brief, half-hearted splutter. She doubted that her sadness could be expelled in a single breath. Too much of it had accumulated over the last few years – the loss of her job, and subsequent move to a small and poky flat; the death of her only real friend, Daphne, from a relentless form of cancer; the death of her beloved dog, and now the constant

fatigue and joint pains of ME. (*‘Imaginary ME,’* she corrected herself, in Dr Tobin’s brusquely mocking voice.)

The toys had laughed themselves to a standstill, but unfortunately the respite was short-lived. Joy pressed all their furry stomachs again, setting off another round of trumpeting and braying, to the accompaniment of more laughter from the class. If laughter was infectious, how come she hadn’t caught it, she reflected with some bitterness? She’d had no trouble as a child, catching mumps and measles and chicken pox, nor any problem catching gloom and panic from her mother.

Joy picked up the large shaggy bear and gave it a friendly hug. ‘Laughter isn’t just a frivolous thing; it’s a very serious matter, and essential to our health, you know. It improves our lung capacity, massages our internal organs, tones our tummy muscles, oxygenates our blood, reduces stress hormones and increases the levels of antibodies, lymphocytes and endorphins. It can help a whole load of medical conditions from asthma and bronchitis to high blood pressure and strokes.’

As Joy reeled off this impressive list, Anthea longed to interrupt and demand scientific proof. Her mother had died of a stroke. Could she really have been saved by a few good belly-laughs?

‘Young children laugh about three hundred times a day,’ Joy continued, returning the bear to the table. ‘But once we grow up, we laugh on average only fifteen times a day.’

Again Anthea mistrusted the statistics. How could laughter be assessed unless you kept the adult population under twenty-four-hour surveillance? And as for her personally, she doubted if she’d laughed fifteen times in the whole of her *life*.

‘But, you see, if we laugh so rarely, we’re missing out on the chance of bonding with our fellow men and women. Laughter strengthens human connections, makes us feel more open and free, and thus more trusting of each other. In fact, you’ve proved that quite

magnificently today. When you first arrived, some of you were wary, or even quite suspicious, but look at you now – you’re one big happy family!’

And I’m the orphan, Anthea felt. Having never had a family, not even a single aunt or uncle, she didn’t find it easy to bond with such a disparate group. And, anyway, the others probably saw her as a miserable old bat who should have enrolled for crochet classes or Discovering Antiques, not for this anarchic course.

‘If anyone wants to play with these toys, please feel free to do so. Play is very healing. It releases the child inside us, and helps us to take life a bit less seriously.’ Joy broke off to consult her watch. ‘Time’s getting rather short, I’m afraid, but there’s one more important exercise I’d like us to do today. Then I’ll set you some homework ...’

‘Homework?’ Stefan groaned. ‘When on earth are we meant to *do* it, if we’re due back here tomorrow morning?’

‘You’ve got all evening,’ Joy retorted.

‘I’m going out.’

‘Me, too,’ Aziz piped up.

‘Well, my loves, you have to make *time* for happiness, if you want to increase it in your life.’

Fair enough, Anthea thought. Homework for her was simply part of life, either doing it as a child, or setting it and marking it in her adult role as teacher. However, Happiness Homework was a completely unknown concept and, if it involved more laughter practice, there would undoubtedly be trouble from her surly next-door-neighbours. The walls in the new building were embarrassingly thin, and the Atkinsons were bound to complain if they heard a chorus of ha-ha-ha’s erupting from her side.

‘The homework centres on forgiveness,’ Joy informed them, ‘which is absolutely crucial if we want to find true happiness. Holding on to anger and resentment is like taking

poison and hoping someone else will die. But I'll explain that a bit later on. What I want us to do now is stand in one long line – yes, that's right, spread yourselves out and use the whole of the room. You'll need some space to swing your arms. Suzy, you're too close to Luke – move over a bit, my love. And, Anthea, don't skulk there in the corner. Come forward into the line. Good! Great! Now, I want you to suggest some things you'd like to have in your life.'

'A nice cool beer,' shouted Barry, ever the joker.

'A million pounds!'

'More sex.'

Anthea flushed at the mention of sex, which, she suspected, would be harder even than laughing – though perhaps similar in certain ways. You would have to be able to let go, willing to make a fool of yourself, and not care how grotesque you might appear.

'Be serious, please,' Joy admonished, looking anything but serious herself. 'Let's start with joy, shall we, because the goal of this whole course is to bring more joy into our lives. Can you think of some symbols of joy?'

'A rainbow,' Suzy offered.

'Yes, good one.'

'A smiling Buddha.'

'Excellent!'

'Wine and roses.'

'Wine in moderation,' Joy laughed.

'Cloud nine.'

'Brilliant! Right, that's enough. Now imagine all those symbols of joy up there on the ceiling. Can everybody see them?'

Anthea craned her neck. All she could see was a dangerous-looking crack snaking its way across the grubby off-white paint.

‘Really visualize them. Admire the different colours of the rainbow, and the deep crimson of the roses. And use your other senses too. Feel the softness of the cloud. Smell the flowers. Taste the wine.’

Anthea could taste nothing but the chicken curry she had inadvisably eaten for lunch in the squalid college canteen. And could smell only the sweaty armpits of the fellow standing next to her. And as for clouds and rainbows, they reminded her of downpours – getting drenched, catching cold.

‘Now you’ve each got a big basket positioned just in front of you and, as the joy flows down from the sky, I want you to scoop it up and put it in your basket. Don’t be shy. Take as much as you want - there’s plenty to go round. Anthea, you need to actually reach out with your arms. That’s it - *hold* the joy, feel it sparkling and shining in your fingers. And now bend down and put it in your basket. Bend lower, relax your spine. This isn’t just a mind thing - make your body part of it. Better! Much better!’

Better for whom, Anthea wondered cynically? She felt a total idiot, reaching out for nothing, then placing nothing in a non-existent basket. But Joy still had her eye on her.

‘Don’t stop, my love. Why restrict the joy in your life? Grab all you can get – and then more! Fill your basket till it overflows.’

Anthea winced at the ‘my love,’ which Joy used indiscriminately. If they were *all* her loves, the phrase was basically meaningless. With ill-concealed reluctance, she stretched up again to the mythical cloud nine, the illusory rainbow, the fictitious smiling Buddha. Her arms were aching, her back hurt, and she was blushing with sheer embarrassment. Again she felt alien from the others, who were hauling down great bales of joy, and laughing as they did so, really entering into the spirit of the thing.

‘Right, now that your baskets are full, I’d like you to reach out for even more joy and throw it into your future - like this.’ Joy gave a demonstration, hurling invisible joy in front

of her with enviable strength and vigour. ‘We need to store up a huge supply of happiness, to last us through our twilight years. So don’t stint yourselves. Be greedy! Toby, do it with more conviction. Imagine the treasure-store that lies ahead.’

Yes, Anthea reflected, a treasure-store of pain, old age, and death. With no family or friends, who would visit her in the old folks’ home, or shed a tear at her funeral? Yet, aware of the tutor’s scrutiny, she threw a few small scraps of joy into her lonely, ailing future. The man beside her was wielding an imaginary spade and shovelling for all he was worth, stocking up on love, fame, wealth - whatever. And, all around her, other people were laying up huge stores of bounty with the same energy and verve. Only *she* had left it too late. Love, fame, wealth, whatever, were hardly likely to materialize at the age of sixty-seven.

‘Well *done!*’ Joy cried. ‘That’s absolutely brilliant! I predict dazzling futures for you all. Now turn round and face the other way, so that you’re looking into your past, instead of into the future.’

There was a general shuffling of feet as the participants changed position, some using the lull to exchange whispered comments or giggle with each other. No one spoke to *her*, Anthea noticed with a pang. She had hoped to make a new friend today, meet an empathetic female, who shared her outlook on life. But, apart from blowsy Caroline, there was no one else her age. And the younger women were rather a peculiar bunch – beatniks and Bohemians, a weird Polish girl with a crew-cut and a lisp, and a full-of-herself Australian miss, who laughed like a hyena on the slightest provocation. As for the men, well, she wasn’t very comfortable with the opposite sex – probably due to lack of practice. Her father had never returned from the War; she’d had no brothers (no siblings at all), and had attended an all-girls school, then taught in one herself until her recent forced retirement. Besides, the men on this course looked worryingly unwholesome – several with scruffy beards, or even stubble, and most dressed in baggy tee-shirts and old jeans.

‘I want you to throw joy into your past, which will *change* your past, transform it, fill it with all the things you lacked. If you were poor as a child, throw in sacks of gold and jewels. If you craved love and affection, give it to your child-self now. It’s not too late. Everything you needed then can actually be provided.’

‘What about my *father*?’ Anthea silently implored. ‘I never knew him at all. He was just bits of a dismembered corpse, scattered miles away in Normandy.’

‘Throw joy into your past,’ Joy urged, making exaggerated heaving motions to exemplify her words. ‘Throw peace and plenty into your past. Whatever you wanted, it’s there for you now.’

What she had wanted most was a happy, normal mother, not a grieving widow, constantly in tears. Long after the War, her mother had continued to live in metaphorical black, refusing to pull herself together, even for her daughter’s sake.

Suddenly she was aware of tears pricking at her eyes. Panicking, she blinked them back. It would be unthinkable to cry in public, spoil the joyous mood. This was a Laughter Class, for heaven’s sake, not a Weeping Class. Yet treacherous tears were overflowing and trickling down her face. Appalled, she dashed for the door, slammed it behind her and stood outside, trembling with mixed horror and relief. She should never have come on such a course. It was extremely unwise to stir up these emotions, when she had managed to control them the whole of her life to date. She must go straight home and distract herself with some practical task. An hour of vacuuming or window cleaning would drive this nonsense out of her mind.

‘Anthea?’

She froze. Joy had come in search of her. ‘I, er, just needed a bit of air,’ she explained, forcing a casual smile.

‘Don’t worry. I understand. That exercise can stir up grief, or loss, or very painful memories. But it’s best to face such emotions, in order to let them go.’

‘No, honestly, I’m fine. I’ve, er, got to leave now anyway. And I’m afraid,’ she rattled on, desperation lending her fluency, ‘I won’t be able to come tomorrow. I forgot to tell you. I’m busy – tied up at work.’

‘Work on a Sunday?’

She flushed. Lies, she’d been taught, were sinful, and she still experienced the deepest shame when departing from the truth. ‘It’s not that I didn’t enjoy it (another shocking lie), but my free time’s rather limited at present (again, patently untrue), so I won’t be here. I’m sorry.’ She tried to make the ‘sorry’ sound forceful and emphatic, so she could make a hasty getaway, but Joy took her hand and clasped it in her own.

‘We’ll miss you if you don’t come back.’

That she *didn’t* believe. Who would even notice – let alone care a fig - if she was there or not tomorrow?

‘You’ve contributed such a lot to the class. I love your sensitivity and your sense of dignity, and the gentleness you show to other people.’

Anthea stared at her open-mouthed. The woman must be joking.

‘Is there any chance you could change your mind and complete the course?’

‘No,’ she said tersely. ‘None whatsoever. And now I simply must go.’

‘OK, my love, that’s your choice. But hold on just one second. There’s something I want to give you. Promise not to move?’

‘I promise,’ Anthea mumbled, praying she’d be quick.

Fortunately she was back in less than a minute, holding something behind her back. An imaginary rainbow, no doubt, with an imaginary crock of gold. Well, the latter would be useful, if only to cover the cost of the course.

‘I want you to have this,’ Joy said, thrusting the pink-plush pig into Anthea’s hands.  
‘Keep him. Take him home.’

Anthea all but exploded in a plethora of ‘no’s’. ‘No, really, I wouldn’t dream of it. No, I couldn’t, honestly. No, *you* must keep him - he’s one of your props ...’

‘He’s not a prop, Anthea. He’s a reminder that we can all choose joy, if we want. Remember what I told you earlier on – pain is part of life, but suffering is optional. The Dalai Lama said that, and he’s an extremely wise man.’

Anthea had no intention of arguing with the Dalai Lama. It would only prolong the encounter, and she was desperate to get home. Firmly she returned the pig to Joy. ‘It’s kind of you, but -’

‘No “buts”, my love. I’m giving you Giggly-Piggly to show that you deserve the occasional treat, and to help you value yourself a wee bit more. And, after all, he knows the secret of happiness, so perhaps he’ll pass it on to you! And now I must get back to the class. Goodbye. Best of luck!’

Anthea was left standing with the pig. She was tempted to put the creature in the bin, but she had an uneasy feeling that, like her mother, Joy had eyes in the back of her head. As a child, she’d assumed that her mother’s second pair of eyes was hidden by her thick brown hair. And Joy, too, had a great cloud of hair that could easily conceal several pairs of all-seeing eyes.

Defeated, she stumped downstairs, trying to hide the pig beneath her coat before heading for the underground. In fact, the tube was so crowded, no one really noticed her and, once she reached her flat, she dumped the toy in the airing-cupboard. On Monday morning she’d take it to a charity shop, and perhaps some child would buy it – drive its mother demented with the noise.

As for her, she felt so fatigued, she couldn't even contemplate Hoovering one room, let alone cleaning all the windows in the flat. The course had taken its toll of her, both physically and mentally. She boiled herself an egg and ate it with a small slice of toast, then retired to bed. Sleep, however, proved even more elusive than usual. Her mind was like a roller-coaster - various members of the course plunging up and down on it, shrieking in hilarity: Luke and Suzy clinging wildly to each other as they made yet another precipitous descent; Caroline showing her underclothes as she rolled around in hysterics; Toby and Aziz clutching the rail as they hurtled up a dizzying incline, only to plummet down again with more boisterous guffaws.

Exhausted, she turned over on to her front. She had never been keen on fairgrounds, least of all in the middle of the night. But the disturbances weren't over yet. Joy herself suddenly burst into the room, flung the blankets back and climbed into bed beside her, reeling off the same advice she had given at the class. 'Don't wait to laugh till you feel happy. Laugh anyway and the laughter will boost your mood.'

All very well for *her*. She probably had a lovely husband and a couple of gorgeous children, and literally hundreds of devoted friends. Not quite so easy to roar with laughter when you lived alone in a new and strange locality, with a landlord who forbade all pets, and had lost not only your job but all contact with your colleagues. She ate her meals alone these days, often switching on the radio just to hear a human voice. In fact, it had probably been extremely foolish to leave today before the end of the course. Some of the class might have gone on to a pub, or out to supper together, which meant she had lost the chance of a companionable evening – rare indeed for her. But would she have fitted in? They would have all got merry (*tiddly*) and giggled with the greatest ease, while she sat po-faced with her mineral water – the duffer on the course, the only one who couldn't laugh.

Still wide-awake at 2 a.m., she decided to take a sleeping pill. The doctor had warned her off them, but she couldn't face the prospect of tossing and turning all night, dwelling on her deficiencies. As she crept out to the bathroom, she heard the sound of muffled giggles coming from the airing-cupboard and, opening the door, she saw the pig spread-eagled on the floor. It had fallen from the shelf and landed on its stomach, which had activated its laughter-button. On impulse, she picked the creature up and took it back to bed with her. She had never slept with a cuddly toy, even as a child, and somehow, in her miserable state, the idea of it appealed. It always felt so lonely, lying on her own each night, imagining married couples lovingly entwined, or affectionate little sisters, happily sharing a bed. A pig was hardly the ideal sleeping-companion but, as her mother had always said, beggars couldn't be choosers.

She pulled the covers over her, ensuring that the pig was tucked up warm and snug. Self-consciously she held the creature close, trying to transform it into an ardent husband, but the imaginative leap was too great. Her mind went into shock at the thought of naked male genitals, or of a scratchy chin pressed against her cheek, or – worse – hot, hairy legs sweating into hers. Safer to make the pig a sister – a younger sister, born after the War, in a time of peace and plenty.

But that was every bit as difficult. She had always been an only child – it was part of her identity, part of how she saw herself, and the sister she was conjuring up was simply a mirror image of herself.

She turned the pig back into a toy again as she tried a third scenario. Her father had just returned from the War and had brought the toy as a gift for her. In fact, she had never had a present from him, since he had died before she was born. But now he was *there*, as large as life, sitting on her bed and handing her a parcel, wrapped in magical paper – blue with silver stars. Thrilled, she tore the wrappings off, to reveal a fantastic sight: a pig that actually laughed! Gently, he took it from her and pressed its tummy-button with his big, brown,

capable hands. And immediately a delirious laugh resounded through the room - her *father's* laugh: a laugh of overwhelming relief because the War was over and he was back, and in one piece.

Smiling with pleasure at the scene, she kept pressing the pig's button, to perpetuate her father's laugh. And then *she* was laughing, the excited little girl - laughing with unalloyed delight because both her parents adored her and both were now alive.

The picture was so beguiling, she dared to laugh in reality, quickly pressing the pig's stomach once more, to drown the unaccustomed sound. The pig obliged with deep satisfying chuckles - her *mother's* laugh, this time, the stiff death-mask of her face cracking into an exuberant grin. And once again, *she* laughed, too, thrilled to see her mother so transformed.

And now it was Daphne's turn. Her friend had died in hospital, with a grim Staff-Nurse in attendance - a curmudgeon more concerned with tidying beds than easing patients' pain. Cancer of the liver wasn't exactly a joyful thing, so she pressed the pig's stomach ten times in succession, to prolong the delightful experience of her and Daphne laughing – simply laughing at the joy of being healthy, and good friends. They had never laughed in actuality. Daphne was a serious type and, even before the cancer, her life had been a trial, but now they were making up for it, rollicking and gasping in transports of genuine glee.

And what about her dog? Didn't poor, faithful, anxious Dudley deserve a little merriment? He'd been very highly strung, terrified of thunderstorms, a quivering wreck in traffic, and totally unable to sleep if she moved his basket half an inch or laundered his security blanket. But, by activating the laughter-button, she could listen to his joyful bark as all his terrors vanished. Indeed, he had cast off his starchy pedigree and become a cheerful common mutt, sniffing ecstatically round lampposts, and frolicking in the park. She reached out to stroke the pig's pink ears, as she had often stroked his long brown droopy ones. In fact, Piggly's ears and Dudley's felt very much the same – velvet-soft and smooth. Nice to have a

pet. A cat or dog (and, yes, a pig) made you feel less lonesome. Perhaps she would sleep with Giggly-Piggly every night. The creature no longer seemed grotesque – instead a faithful friend. ‘My love,’ she whispered to it, aghast at her own temerity. Yet it wasn’t so impossible to say – not once she had got the words out: extravagant, unstinting words that broke the frugal habits of a lifetime.

One last thing to change – icy Miss Sylvester, who had given her her marching orders in the summer term last year. The laughter on her own lips died as she recalled the stern-lipped Head telling her she was too old and out of touch to continue teaching at the school.

‘Too *old*,’ she repeated falteringly, feeling again the appalling sense of powerlessness and shame. ‘And out of touch.’

The pig, however, laughed the words to scorn; laughed Miss Sylvester herself to scorn, mocking her in peals of derision.

‘No!’ Anthea rebuked him, suddenly remembering Joy’s words. ‘I need to forgive her, not resent her.’

‘Easy!’ beamed the pig, hooting with forgiving laughter. ‘Just look at it in a different way. She did you a favour, really. If you were still teaching at that school, you wouldn’t have time for laughter. It’s a skill, you see, which needs a lot of practice. I’m so good at it myself because I practise more or less non-stop.’ And, as if to demonstrate, the pig convulsed itself in giggles.

Again Anthea joined in. It was definitely getting easier. She no longer cared how stupid she might sound; she no longer cared about being wide-awake in the middle of the night; she no longer even cared about tedious Miss Sylvester. She *could* forgive her now. *And* forgive her mother for the years of grief and bitterness. Forgive her father for getting killed; forgive herself for being ill, and inhibited, and, yes, old and out of touch. The relief was so colossal, it produced a protracted burst of laughter, which amazed her in its turn. Her mouth

was opening wider, her shoulders shaking convincingly, and authentic, naturally happy sounds were emerging from her throat. At any moment, the next-door-neighbours would start knocking on the wall in fury, yet it didn't even bother her. She'd *laugh* at the knock when it came; laugh at her landlord's antipathy to pets; laugh at Dr Tobin when he refused to give her drugs. She no longer needed drugs – laughter was her medicine. She could actually feel the t-cells and the lymphocytes racing through her bloodstream, the endorphins falling over themselves to heal and energize her body.

And she certainly wouldn't take a sleeping pill – not at this late stage. She must be wide-awake for tomorrow, with all her senses sharp. She would get up early and go for a nice healthy walk, before rejoining the Laughter Class on the dot of ten o'clock. Of *course* she couldn't miss the second half. She owed it to the pig to be back there in the morning and bond with her new family; show all her brothers and sisters, all her loving uncles and aunts, how well she'd learned to - ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ho-ho-ho-ho, hee-hee-hee-hee – LAUGH.