

One day my best friend's hen choked to death on a sewing needle and when she told me what had happened, I laughed. And when she described to me the circumstances under which the choking had occurred, I laughed. I laughed convulsively, and when I failed to cover my mouth in time I saw my laughter spill all over her grief and remorse, spoiling the offering I ought to have made.

It is true that knowing her as I did, I could well imagine the fit of rage in which she would have thrown her sewing to the ground and stormed back to the house. But I could also imagine the hen pecking hopefully at the embroidery and – etcetera. It was not in the least bit funny to me that the hen whose name I do not recall should perish, nor that my unfortunate friend should have found her, far too late, with the needle jabbed awkwardly down her oesophagus and the moss-green thread dangling limply from her beak, but

I arrange my face before enquiring any further into my friend's state of mind. She has, after all, lost control of her hands.

*sound of laughter*

It is not in the least bit funny.

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The hands, at present, are nursing a finely filigreed box of Medjool dates. Any moment now the mouth will open and the tongue will muscle in and the voice will say, 'would you like a Medjool date?' and the face that is mine will contort as I begin on the loathsome spit-gloss jeering-split of the wretched fruits not to mention the fur and clag of them. Then she will throw back her head and laugh loudly, and I will laugh, too. And then, reacquainted with our little refrain – 'how is it that I always forget!', she will exclaim – we'll nestle back into our conversation without any concern for what might be hidden in the sweet smack and tang of the edibles (glass, for example: it would not do to find that in your mouth) because the edibles are Medjool dates and we know where we are with those.

Still chewing on the loathsome clag, my friend starts to be careful again and I decide I had better work the mouth that is hopefully still my mouth and address that word harm. I almost say, knowing her as I do, that I am quite certain that she is incapable of causing harm, only

*savage cackle, embroiling shriek*

I do not believe she can avoid it. We are none of us spared the hurt of colliding with decency.

Nic Chalmers, 2020