

book . . . will confirm Keyes's place as one of our finest writers' Jojo Moyes'Gut-bustingly funny' Independent on Sunday'When it comes to writing page-turners that put a smile on your face and make you think, Keyes is in a class of her own' Daily Express'Zips along with engaging characters, fabulous plotting and spot-on dialogue. Marian Keyes: what a genius' Daily MailExtraitI wouldnt mindI mean this is the sheer irony of the thingbut Im the only person I know who doesnt think it would be delicious to go in to someplace for a rest. Youd want to hear my sister Claire going on about it, as if waking up one morning and finding herself in a mental hospital would be the most delightful experience imaginable.Ive a great idea, she declared to her friend Judy. Lets have our nervous breakdowns at the same time.Brilliant! Judy said.Well get a double room. Itll be gorgeous.Paint me a picture.Weeeeeell. Kind people . . . soft, welcoming hands . . . whispering voices . . .white bed linen, white sofas, white orchids, everything white . . .Like in heaven, Judy said.Just like in heaven!Not just like in heaven! I opened my mouth to protest, but there was no stopping them. . . The sound of tinkling water The smell of jasmine A clock ticking in the near distance The plangent chime of a bell And us lying in bed off our heads on Xanax . . .dreamily gazing at dust motes Or reading Grazia Or buying Magnum Golds from the man who goes from ward to ward selling ice cream . . .But there would be no man selling Magnum Golds. Or any of the other nice things, either.A wise voice will sayJudy paused for effectLay down your burdens, Judy. And some lovely, floaty nurse will cancel all our appointments, Claire said. Shell tell everyone to leave us alone, shell tell all the ungrateful bastards that were having a nervous breakdown and it was their fault and theyll have to be a lot nicer to us if we ever come out again.Both Claire and Judy had savagely busy liveskids, dogs, husbands, jobs and an onerous, time-consuming dedication to looking ten years younger than their actual age. They were perpetually whizzing around in minivans, dropping sons off at rugby practice, picking daughters up from the dentist, racing across town to get to a meeting. Multitasking was an art form for themthey used the dead seconds stuck at traffic lights to rub their calves with fake-tan wipes, they answered emails from their seat at the cinema, and they baked red velvet cupcakes at midnight while simultaneously being mocked by their teenage daughters as, A pitiful fat old cow. Not a moment was wasted.Theyll give us Xanax. Claire was back in her reverie.Oh lovvvvvely.As much as we want. The second the bliss starts to wear off, well ring a bell and a nurse will come and give us a top-up.Well never have to get dressed. Every morning theyll bring us new cotton pajamas, brand new, out of the packet. And well sleep sixteen hours a day.Oh, sleep . . .Itll be like being wrapped up in a big marshmallow cocoon, well feel all floaty and happy and dreamy . . .It was time to point out the one big nasty flaw in their delicious vision. But youd be in a psychiatric hospital.Both Claire and Judy looked wildly startled.Eventually Claire said, Im not talking about a psychiatric hospital. Just a place youd go for . . . a rest.The place people go for a rest is a psychiatric hospital.They fell silent.

Judy chewed her bottom lip. They were obviously thinking about this.What did you think it was? I asked.Well . . . sort of like a spa, Claire said. With, you know . . . prescription drugs.They have mad people in there, I said. Proper mad people. Ill people.More silence followed, then Claire looked up at me, her face bright red. God, Helen! she exclaimed. Youre such a cow. Cant you ever let anyone have anything nice?ThursdayI was thinking about food. Stuck in traffic, its what I do. What any normal person does, of course, but now that I thought about it, I hadnt had anything to eat since seven oclock this morning, about ten hours ago. A Laddz song came on the radiothe second time that day, how about that for bad luck?and as the maudlin, syrupy harmonies filled the car, I had a brief but powerful urge to drive into a pole.There was a petrol station coming up on the left, the red sign of refreshment hanging invitingly in the sky. I could extricate myself from this gridlock and go in and buy a doughnut. But the doughnuts they sold in those places were as tasteless as the sponges you find at the bottom of the oceanId be better off just washing myself with one. Besides, a swarm of huge black vultures was circling over the petrol pumps and they were kind of putting me off. No, I decided, Id hang on andWait a minute! Vultures?In a city?At a petrol station?I took a second look and they werent vultures. Just seagulls. Ordinary Irish seagulls.Then I thought, Ah no, not again.Fifteen minutes later I pulled up outside my parents house, took a moment to gather myself, then started rummaging for a key to let myself in. Theyd tried to make me give it back when Id moved out three years ago butthinking strategicallyId hung on to it. Mum had made noises about changing the locks, but seeing as she and Dad took eight years to decide to buy a yellow bucket, what were the chances that theyd manage something as complicated as getting a new lock?I found them in the kitchen, sitting at the table drinking tea and eating cake. Old people. What a great life they had. Even those who dont do tai chi (which Ill get to).They looked up and stared at me with barely concealed resentment.Ive news, I said.Mum found her voice. What are you doing here?I live here.You dont. We got rid of you. We painted your room. Weve

never been happier. I said I've news. That's my news. I live here. The fear was starting to creep into her face now. You have your own place. She was blustering but she was losing conviction. After all, she must have been expecting this. I don't, I said. Not as of this morning. I've nowhere to live. The mortgage people? She was ashen (beneath her regulation-issue Irish-mummy orange foundation). What's going on? Dad was deaf. Also frequently confused. It was hard to know which disability was in the driving seat at any particular time. She didn't pay her MORTGAGE, Mum yelled, into his good ear. Her flats been RECLAIMED. I couldn't afford to pay the mortgage. You're making it sound like it's my fault. Anyway, it's more complicated than that. You have a boyfriend, Mum said hopefully. Can't you live with him? You've changed your tune, you rampant Catholic. We have to keep up with the times. I shook my head. I can't move in with Artie. His kids won't let me. Not exactly. Only Bruno. He absolutely hated me but Iona was pleasant enough and Bella positively adored me. You're my parents. Unconditional love, might I remind you. My stuff is in the car. What! All of it? No. I'd spent the day with two cash-in-hand blokes. The last few sticks of furniture I owned were now stashed in a massive self-storage place out past the airport, waiting for the good times to come again. Just my clothes and work stuff. Quite a lot of work stuff, actually, seeing as I'd had to let my office go over a year ago. And quite a lot of clothes too, even though I'd thrown out tons and tons while I'd been packing. But when will it end? Mum said querulously. When do we get our golden years? Never. Dad spoke with sudden confidence. She's part of a syndrome. Generation Boomerang. Adult children coming back to live in the family home. I read about it in Grazia. There was no disagreeing with Grazia. You can stay for a few days, Mum conceded. But be warned. We might want to sell this house and go on a Caribbean cruise. Property prices being as low as they were, the sale of this house probably wouldn't fetch enough money to send them on a cruise of the Aran Islands. But, as I made my way out to the car to start lugging in my boxes of stuff, I decided not to rub it in. After all, they were giving me a roof over my head. What time is dinner? I wasn't hungry but I wanted to know the drill. Dinner? There was no dinner. We don't really bother anymore, Mum confessed. Not now as it's just the two of us. This was distressing news. I was feeling bad enough, without my parents suddenly behaving like they were in death's waiting room. But what do you eat? They looked at each other in surprise, then at the cake on the table. Well, cake, I suppose. Back in the day this arrangement couldn't have suited me better all through my childhood my four sisters and I considered it a high-risk activity to eat anything that Mum had cooked but I wasn't myself. So what time is cake? Whatever time you like, Mum said. That wouldn't do. I need a time. Seven, then. Okay. Listen . . . I saw a swarm of vultures over the petrol station. Mum tightened her lips. There are no vultures in Ireland, Dad said. Saint Patrick drove them out. He's right, Mum said forcefully. You didn't see any vultures. But I stopped. What was the point? I opened my mouth to suck in some air. What are you doing? Mum sounded alarmed. I'm . . . What was I doing? I'm trying to breathe. My chest is stuck. There isn't enough room to let the air in. Of course there's room. Breathing is the most natural thing in the world. I think my ribs have shrunk. You know the way your bones shrink when you get old. You're only thirty-three. Wait till you get to my age and then you'll know all about shrunken bones, Mum said. Even though I didn't know what age Mum was she lied about it constantly and elaborately, sometimes making reference to the vital part she played in the 1916 Rising (I helped type up The Declaration of Independence for young Pdraig to read on the steps of the GPO), other times waxing lyrical on the teenage years she spent jiving to The Hucklebuck the time Elvis came to Ireland (Elvis never came to Ireland and never sang The Hucklebuck but if you try telling her that, she just gets worse, insisting that Elvis made a secret visit on his way to Germany and that he sang The Hucklebuck specifically because she asked him to) she seemed bigger and more robust than ever. Catch your breath there, come on, come on, anyone can do it, she urged. A small child can do it. So what are you doing this evening? After your . . . cake? Will we watch telly? We've got twenty-nine episodes of Come Dine with Me recorded. Ah . . . I didn't want to watch Come Dine with Me. Usually I watched at least two shows a day, but suddenly I was sick of it. I had an open invitation to Artie's. His kids would be there tonight and I wasn't sure I had the strength for talking to them; also, their presence interfered with my full and free sexual access to him. But he'd been working in Belfast all week and I'd . . . yes, spit it out, might as well admit it . . . I'd missed him. I'll probably go to Artie's, I said. Mum lit up. Can I come? Of course you can't! I've warned you! Mum had a thing for Artie's house you've probably seen the type, if you read interior-decorating magazines. From the outside it looks like a salt-of-the-earth working-class cottage, crouched right on the pavement, doffing its cap and knowing its place. The slate roof is crooked and the front door is so low that the only person who could sail through with full confidence that they won't crack their skull would be a certified midget. But when you actually get into the house, you find that someone has knocked off the entire back wall and replaced it with a glassy futuristic wonderland of

floating staircases and suspended birds-nest bedrooms and faraway skylights. Mum had been there only once an accident, I had warned her not to get out of the car but she had blatantly disobeyed and it had made such a big impression on her that she had caused me considerable embarrassment. I would not permit it to happen again. All right, I won't come, she said. But I've a favor to ask. What? Would you come to the Laddz reunion concert with me? Are you out of your mind? Out of my mind? You're a fine one to talk, you and your vultures. *Revue de presse* When it comes to writing page-turners that put a smile on your face and make you think, Keyes is in a class of her own (Daily Express) Zips along with engaging characters, fabulous plotting and spot-on dialogue. Marian Keyes: what a genius (Daily Mail)