

Cambridge, England.

The World

Madeleine Tully turned fourteen yesterday, but today she did not turn anything.

Oh, wait. She turned a page.

She was sitting on the sloping roof of her attic flat and she was reading a book. Only, she was not concentrating on the book. She was listening to her mother, who was just inside.

Madeleine's mother was sewing and watching the quiz show. And she was answering every single question. Snap, snap, snap! She was shooting out the answers like a popcorn machine. She was answering before the host even finished asking.

"What is the capital of Ecuador?"

"Maputo!"

"From the French, what six-letter word —"

"Frisson!"

Each time Madeleine's mother answered, a contestant on the television also answered, but a moment later. The contestants' voices sounded calm and quiet.

An ad break came on. The sewing machine stopped. Madeleine's mother climbed out through the window and sat on the roof beside Madeleine. The spires of Cambridge University traced themselves against the sky behind them.

"Tonight," said Madeleine's mother, "we'll have supper out here on the roof."

Madeleine closed her book.

"We'll be cold," her mother continued. "I'll bring blankets."

Madeleine nodded.

"We'll eat your leftover birthday cake. It doesn't always have to be beans for supper, you know."

“No,” Madeleine agreed.

“And we’ll stay out here and watch the stars until we fall asleep amongst the blankets.”

Madeleine and her mother sat side by side, and sighed.

They were thinking the same thing.

They would not eat supper on the roof tonight.

Madeleine’s mother would keep sewing until midnight and would only stop to flex her aching fingers.

They sighed again.

They were remembering the same thing.

Supper tonight would be beans. They had eaten the whole birthday cake yesterday.

If only they had saved some.

“Right, then,” said Madeleine’s mother. She climbed back through the window. The sewing machine started up.

The sewing machine was a Harlsbury Deluxe Model 37B. Madeleine’s mother had won it in London many years before.

She had won it on the quiz show.

One day, soon, she planned to compete on that show again.

Only this time she would not just win the sewing machine. This time she would also win the plasma TV, the luxury towel set, the holiday, the barbecue, *and the car!!!* (That was how the quiz-show host — and Madeleine’s mother — referred to the car: italics and three exclamation marks.)

So, each morning, Madeleine’s mother phoned the TV station to “register her interest” in competing on the show.

Once a fortnight, she mailed in an application to compete.

Every month or so, she took a bus to London, walked to the TV station’s offices, and had a friendly chat with the receptionist. (You never knew who might be influential.)

And every night, she watched the show and answered every question.

Bang, bang, bang! She shouted out the answers like a fireworks display.

And every night, she got every single question wrong.

(The capital of Ecuador is Quito. *Frisson* doesn't even have six letters.)