

Silence

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This book is dedicated to Alyson Henley-Einion

*Alys, for being there even when I wasn't.
For not giving up on me even when I did.
For telling me the book was worth it.
For allowing me this big romantic gesture.
And for so much else, I owe you.*

Penetration (*ˈp_nI|tr_I__n*) *n.* 1. the act or an instance of penetrating. 2. the ability or power to penetrate. 3. keen insight or perception. 4. Mil. an offensive manoeuvre that breaks through an enemy's defensive position.

Silence () *n.* 1. complete absence of sound. 2. the fact or state of abstaining from speech. *v.* 1. make silent. 2. (silenced) fitted with a silencer.

PRISON COUNSELLOR KILLS EX-CON

Jacqueline Harris, 35, prison counsellor at Newpark Women's Prison, has been arrested for the suspected murder of Francis Little, 37, who previously served time at Fenton. Jacqueline, who is known as 'Jack', claims that Francis was 'raping' her lesbian lover Jemima Albinelka, also 35.

Today, Ms Albinelka was unavailable for comment but a neighbour, who sees them regularly walking hand-in-hand to the car and once spotted them kissing on their doorstep, says this was inevitable. "They are always at it," said the neighbour, who does not wish to be named. "I hear them arguing all the time, they have parties till the early hours, and now this. It's disgusting."

A police spokesperson this morning confirmed, "A woman was arrested last night for the suspected murder of a homeless man and is currently being held at the South Valley Station while our officers conduct their enquiries."

Valley Gazette comment, see page 22.

Chapter One – 1988

JACK

O yez, o yez. Now hear this. Shout it from the rooftops, darling.

She is mixing – a mix here, a mix there – in her element. She is a mixture herself: a crazy mixed up kid. Looking out over the crowd to check they still like it. Not that she cares what anyone thinks of her art, but to be out of a job again would be difficult. To be a paid DJ is tough call enough, but for a dyke in Maddeston, North Warwickshire, there is really only one place to work. She doesn't fancy hauling her arse over to cardboard city Coventry and slumming it with the rest of the dregs. Though looking out over the crowd, she isn't sure this place is any better. She leans into the microphone.

“DJ Dance Jack comin’ at you with the b-b-*best* sounds of the eighties. Get yo’ dancin’ feet on the floor for some *Ride On Time*.” She eases the dial up for the first chords of the extended dance track and leans back to light a roll-up.

There has always been the possibility of passing for a boy and getting into warehouse work. She is tall and young enough to be beardless. Not yet grown into her skin, she is like a spring-born fawn – leggy and awkward with a potential for greatness. (Oh where are you now, you butch beauty?) Time will come for her to flesh out and slide in with the ranks of sad old bull-daggers at the bar, snarling over a piece of fresh meat.

As a gay club, its members at least keep the style that everywhere else lacks, between New Romantic and Acid Jazz, although there are still the sheep. Jackie sighs as she sees the

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regiments of miniature Jimmy Somervilles and Alison Moyets. Something catches her attention, flighty like a ruffle of feathers, and draws her eyes to a figure standing near the DJ box. Jack squints through the haze of stinging smoke and poppers to take a look and there she sees a straight woman quickly looking away. How does she know this girl is straight? Is it the long blonde look, the handbag and Silk Cut cigarette, the polished fingernails curled around a glass of white wine (*I didn't know they sold wine in this beer swinging club!*) or the tentative biting of lips as lustful eyes follow the butchest dykes on the floor?

No, what gives her away is the fact that she is unconsciously twisting her wedding ring, tugging it on and off her thin finger as if indecision were the worst thing in the world. Jackie feels a tightness in her boxers and with it feels every single moment of the last few months without a lover. The local girls have been warned off her, have learned to call her 'Jack-the-lad', and she is suffering for it.

The *Ride* over, she sets a long-playing twelve-inch of *Like A Virgin* on the spinner. Knocking the lit end of her roly against the side of the box, she leans over and nods to the woman. "New here, babe?" The straight woman laughs a reply, but her eyes dance with interest, flickering over the DJ's lithe body. As she comes closer Jackie can see beneath the makeup that she is older, at least in her thirties. This makes Jack feel good – like a young stud.

"See anythin' you like?" She smiles and then turns away to twist the dials before she hears an answer. Jack sets up another twelve-inch – Billy Joel's *Uptown Girl* – to play unattended for a while, and drops down out of the box to come close to the straight.

Jack wants to be sure the woman knows where she's coming from. She looks pointedly at the ring. "You going back to your husband tonight?"

“Not tonight...” Playful lips draw out the words like an expert, but the tremor in the woman’s hand and voice give her away as a newcomer. Far from putting her off, it only serves to spur Jackie on all the more. They draw closer together and as their bodies move in time to Billy’s agenda, Jackie risks leaning forwards to give a soft, teasing kiss on the woman’s cheek. She groans in Jack’s ear. “Do you know, the last time I slept with a woman I was eighteen.”

Jackie laughs, “Do you know, same here!” It’s a lie, of course, for she is only recently eighteen, but, hey, why pass up the chance of a good line?

“What’s your name?” she asks.

“Jackie Harris. Jack. What’s yours?”

The woman, whose name Jack learns and forgets again within a few seconds, buys herself another drink and waits for closing time at Jack’s insistence. They spend the next few hours eyeing each other and flirting with body language until finally the last dancer stumbles out of the club. Jackie then allows her into the DJ box while she packs up.

“So, have you always been a lesbian?” the woman asks carelessly. Jack stiffens. Is she taking the piss? But the knowledge that she hasn’t felt flesh against flesh for some time helps in shrugging off her belligerence. She doesn’t have to like the woman to shag her.

“Just about as long as I can remember,” she growls.

“Oh. I just wondered. You know, I’ve always wondered what it’s like to be a lesbian.”

She is turned away and the woman can’t see her face. Of the myriad terse replies she could have given, Jackie chooses a mild one. “Oh yeah?” She faces the flighty bird. “Well let’s just see if you can take it, babe.”

Leading her by the hand out of the deserted bar, she says, “I got a room just up from here.” Jack stumbles into the after-club crowd in the street. Each club has its own clientele who stick

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together in small groups around the communal courtyard created by the focal-point of a burger van. The van pumps out its fetid stink, enticing drug-hungry ravers to risk their lives for the sake of a food fix. The January freeze attracts even vegetarian hippies to hang around the back of the van. A group of skinheads appraise the couple, at first thinking Jackie to be one of them due to her haircut and dress; they then snap to attention as they notice the club from which she has emerged.

“Hey!” They hear the shout as she grabs the straight woman again and hurries past. “Hey, you two – off for some lezzie licks!” Jackie speeds up as she senses the fright escaping from her companion – it wouldn’t do to lose her now she’s so close.

“Run!” she whispers harshly, and as they run they hear laughter and thudding footsteps behind. Had she been alone she might have faced them down. Cowards mostly and she has enough bravado to pull it off – although she remembers the time she was mistaken for a gay man and set upon by a gang. When they had realised she was female they laughed at the mistake and kicked harder. She shudders at the memory of the cracked ribs and crushed pride as she throws herself down stone steps to her basement room, key at the ready.

Breathless, they lean against the door as it closes behind them.

Jackie thumbs the light switch and the bare bulb flicks on dimly to reveal damp walls and stained carpet. Wide-eyed, the straight woman turns shakily towards her. Jackie laughs unsympathetically. “You wanted to know what it’s like to be a lesbian. This is what it’s like.”

She pulls her close again, not caring how harshly she kisses, how hungry she is, whether she’s hurting. If this straight thinks another woman would be soft all night then she is about to have her preconceptions blown out along with her cobwebs.

The kiss leaves both of them wanting more and Jackie pushes her over towards the bed, tearing at straight clothes and straight

sensibilities. Far from putting the woman off, she is pulled down on top of her, gaining power all the way. They struggle on the bed, the woman wanting, wanting, and yet trusting that somehow this wild girl will manage as she seems so confident. The lie she'd told Jack about sleeping with a woman at eighteen had been a half-baked attempt to make the little dyke realise she was serious. And this might be the culmination of so many nights of fantasy in a cold bed, so many false starts and failed attempts. There is no way she is going to let go now. But Jack is holding back, not in a timid I-don't-know-what-to-do kind of way, but in a teasing, I'm-going-to-force-you-to-beg way, so that in the end she has to say. "Please..."

"Please, Jack..." she insists.

"Please, Jack, just do whatever you do. I need something, I need –"

Jackie sits up abruptly. "I know what you need: you're straight. I know what straight women want." She speaks with venom, almost hatred, and for a moment the woman is frightened. Jack turns away, suddenly cold. Although she knew this would happen it still feels like a rejection, an indication that she herself isn't good enough. And yet, why does she continue to pick up straights?

She sighs and opens the top drawer of a scuffed cabinet, the second of two pieces of furniture in the room, including the single bed. The drawer is stiff and opens only halfway; she reaches in and draws out the contents. Placing several items on the bed, Jack turns back to the woman who watches greedily like a child at a chocolate counter.

Now Jimmie, don't get coy on me. You may not want to face it, but I'm not pulling any punches with this one. Skip it if you need to, but you won't know 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth', will you? You'll only know your own sanitized version of the truth. And if you want to know the real me, as you say, then this involves a fair amount of

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penetrating thoughts.

Jackie's cynicism is abated and her sense of fun returns as she sees the look on the woman's face.

"Regular, medium or supersize?" she quips as she lays out the dildoes in a row. "Or I've got a vibrating one somewhere around here..." she ducks under the bed but the woman grabs her wrist to haul her back up.

"That's fine," she whispers excitedly, "that's ok. This one will do." The woman's hand hovers slightly over 'medium' – a blue-coloured solid latex model, also Jackie's favourite – as if she were afraid to touch it directly. "I hadn't realised I'd get a choice," she laughs.

"Of course you get a choice!" bursts out Jackie, sweeping the two rejects off the bed and dragging a leather harness from the back of the same drawer. "I'm not a single-size one-hit-wonder, you know," she continues conversationally as the fascinated woman watches her deftly strapping the dildo over her boxers and wiggling it into place. "I have a full set of unmutated chromosomes, size *and* stamina and can keep on going all night if required. How can anyone compete with that? There! What do you think?" She pulls her jeans back over her hips and shifts the bulge to display it at its best, strutting up and down in front of the amused older woman. In the arrogance of youth, she adds, "Once you've tasted the best, you'll never go back."

Jack nudges an ancient cassette player with her toe and turns the volume down as it springs to life with Meatloaf – it's now approximately 3am.

She is still swaggering around the small room while the woman shifts impatiently on the bed. "Stop posing and come here, you teasing little bitch." Despite the macho exterior, Jackie likes to be called a little bitch and likes being ordered around, so she obediently goes over to the bed and allows her jeans to be tugged down again. She lifts the woman's long denim skirt and expertly pulls off her pants. They kiss as before,

passionately pulling at each others' clothes. Only this time there is something hard between them, something sliding against Jackie's diamond and rubbing against the woman's open wanting until neither of them can bear it any more.

Jackie pulls back to watch it go in. She enjoys this: like a reversal of the rabbit-out-of-a-hat magic trick. She pauses for a moment to check it isn't hurting (having shagged a few young, tight girls) but the woman is groaning, pushing up to her. Jack grins and grabs the cheap headboard for the ride of her life.

Let's play a game of peekaboo. Now you see it, now you don't. A gasp, a flash of shiny latex, dark-nippled breasts bursting out of a tight teenage bra and spilling onto your face. Oh Jack, oh God Jack! There's more where that came from, so much more – always hard, always ready. What more could a woman ask for?

At some point they roll over so that the woman is on top sitting up and holding Jackie's shoulders, while Jackie lies on her back. She watches her hair flying wild and screams getting wilder. She is overwhelmed as wave upon wave of orgasm shake the woman's body. Then over again, Jackie on top, more gentle this time, slower and sweeter. Then hard again, taking her cue from the woman's movements; and again; and again.

This woman grabbing the leather belt of the harness-like reins and pulling Jackie down and into her, demanding more, demanding a constant hard, fast rhythm. *Oh God, when will she ask me to stop?* Jack makes it a personal policy not to stop until she is asked to do so. She tries to be as un-male as possible, given the circumstances.

Her concentration is beginning to lapse and she becomes aware again of the replaying Meatloaf tape.

She realises she is hungry, thinking, 'have I got any food in?' when, almost from outside herself, Jackie begins to feel something she wouldn't normally allow in company. She feels the wave of an orgasm beginning in her own body. Don't get me

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wrong – all this humping, pumping, rubbing action turns her on no end, but usually leaves her feeling frustrated and having to finish herself off when alone afterwards. But this insatiable straight woman has turned a corner in Jackie's sex life. She has shown that if you just keep on going for long enough and stop trying so hard then there are glories to come.

When the woman notices the surprised look on Jackie's face and realises that she is coming, she too begins a swift ascent into bliss. Gripping the headboard behind her, she pushes her hips up and out and calls out for Jackie to use her, to go as hard as she needs. In that brief achievement of immortality, in the throes of ecstasy it seems that their souls entwine somewhere a metre or so above their bodies, and Jackie knows then that she'll never be the same again. Their simultaneous yelling drowns out Meatloaf's voice and the complaining thuds of Jackie's neighbour. Then a crunch as the headboard finally gives way and a crack as it hits Jackie on the back of her head. She slumps on top of the stunned woman, a dead weight.

Dropping the broken headboard, the woman extricates herself from Jackie's body and in her panic almost flees the bedsit. But she turns back just to check the girl's pulse. Relieved to find her still alive, the woman sits on the bed at a loss for the next action. The *Karma Sutra* doesn't say what to do when your lover falls unconscious. She notices an old pop bottle filled with water next to the bed, takes a swig first to check that's all it is, and then splashes some into Jackie's face.

Jack sits bolt upright, blinking away the water from her eyes. "What you do that for?" she whines, then lies back down rubbing her face.

"You were out cold," the woman says. "Sorry, love. It looks like you're going to have a lump on your head. Maybe you'd better get to hospital?"

"No, I'll be all right. What happened, anyway?" Then she notices the broken stumps of bedposts and begins laughing.

“Don’t worry, this bed’s knackered already – it came with the room.” She reaches over to her jeans on the floor and pulls out a leather tobacco pouch. “Want me to roll you one?” The woman declines and fishes around in her own clothing pile for her packet of fags. What to do with post-coital embarrassment – light a fag. Jackie rolls a small, tight, fag quickly like she’s been practising all her life and lights up one-handed, while she pulls at the buckles on the leather strap around her hips.

“Here, let me help you.” The woman balances her newly-lit Silk Cut on the side of the cabinet and reaches over to prise the buckle open. Jack leans back to watch her peel the harness away, her unbuttoned shirt falling to the side to expose a creamy honey-coloured stomach. The boxers have ridden down and red wheals show where the buckle has been held tight against bare skin.

“Why do you pull it so tight?”

Jackie blows out smoke before replying. “It slips if it’s loose and I don’t get good control.”

The woman pulls it all the way off and exposes Jackie’s vulnerability, but Jack doesn’t move – just lies there watching her face.

“Well you certainly know how to use it, anyway.” The woman smiles up at her and as their eyes meet there passes a moment of intimacy, deeper and qualitatively different than all that has passed before. Jackie feels a stirring within her again but, unsure of her energy levels, she breaks eye contact and lets it dissipate. The woman goes back to her cigarette and Jackie pulls an ashtray out from under the bed, placing it on her bare stomach for both of their use.

Now don’t be sad, ’cos two outta three ain’t bad.

“Turn the tape off, will you?” Jack nods towards the cassette player on the floor. “The neighbours’ll complain.”

The woman stands up and finds the ‘stop’ button, then returns to the bed and Jack. Turned on her side, she begins to

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run the fingers of her free hand along Jackie's legs and stomach while she uses the other to smoke. She strokes questioningly at Jack's hair – perhaps she's only just noticed the quality of it, being so short it's not obviously Black. Amazing how many people completely miss the significance of Jackie's large mahogany eyes and luscious lips. Light skin is everything, after all. But the race issue obviously doesn't bother this woman as she becomes all PC and dismisses it. Perturbed that she hasn't actually 'been a lesbian' after all, she cups her hand over Jackie's crotch. "Are you sure you don't want...?"

"What?" Jackie snaps, shrugging away under her touch.

"Me to... er..."

Jackie laughs cruelly. "And what exactly *would* you do? You're straight, what would you know?" She stubs out her roly petulantly, hands over the ashtray and turns her back. "Anyway, I need to get to sleep. Got college tomorrow."

The woman considers this, smoking quietly for a while, then, "What are you studying?"

"Doing my A-levels next year," Jackie mutters, half-asleep already. "And then university." She is pleased to feel the effect this has on the woman – a change in the quality of air around her. She knows that she's shocked her. Not only showing her age, but her intellect. The woman finishes her cigarette and lights another. Jack can almost sense what's going through her mind: she's afraid. Perhaps she has a son or daughter near Jackie's age, perhaps she is a teacher, policewoman or doctor, one of those professions that can be lost at a hint of illegal or immoral behaviour. Or a social worker – now that would be funny! Jack often thinks she'd like to rattle her own social worker's cage a bit.

Jack has lost count of how many women she'd invited to play a bit-part in the story of her life. Could it be that a higher percentage of these were blonde? Is it necessary to count?

Most people don't realise Jackie is as young as she is; she has

a job and her own place (albeit a dump) and carries herself with an air of arrogance not considered decent in a newly eighteen-year-old girl. Having already led a full life, she has the outward appearance of a youth of at least twenty.

However, her mind is that of a child and her social skills need a lot of work. What was that I said earlier? – what more could a woman ask for? Well, a more winning personality would be one thing, a modicum of tact and respect. But for now, while still physically attractive, she doesn't feel she needs these bonus attributes. As long as the girls are flocking, Jackie is fucking, and that's all the extra-curricular activity she's interested in. Not relationships. Not long-term lovers. Not anyone encroaching on her space for more than one night at a time. She has fought hard for this place and she is still fighting. Those who stay for more than one night do not stay for long. There is no argument as to her ability to satisfy in bed, but all who leave do so feeling strangely frustrated.

As she lingers on the brink of wakefulness, Jack feels a slight, birdlike, peck on her cheek and the other side of the bed lightens as the woman moves away. She wakes alone at eleven, sees £40 on the cabinet under the ashtray that still holds two Silk Cut stubs and half a roly, turns over and falls back to sleep. She is smiling to herself: another £40 towards the motorcycle fund. She dreams of a big fat purple one, throbbing viciously between her legs; a Harley or something classic like that will be an appropriate means of escape from this dire life she leads.

Are you going to say now that women don't pay for sex, Jim? They pay with a lifetime of drudgery; they hand over their self-respect with hardly a second thought. £40, then, is very little compared to forty years or more of housework. Talk to your mother about that one.

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The English class notice her absence but no-one comments. Jackie often skips Fridays. They know she is working her way through college but most of her classmates prefer not to mention it. Perhaps they feel guilty in their middle-class familial homes.

Perhaps they are jealous of her freedom. Perhaps they just can't make her out – she is an anomaly: the intelligent street urchin. Such a cliché that few people believe she can exist. Whatever it is, it blocks any possibility of intimacy while at college, though she often catches the posh girls looking. Jackie doesn't care because she isn't there to make friends. She is there for one thing only – to get an education. She isn't going to be a DJ for the rest of her life. She is going to get somewhere, be one of those professional, suited women – teacher, doctor, social worker, educational psychologist – that have so far dominated her life.

Meanwhile, why not be a gigolo? She gets her kicks; she gets the rent paid; she gets through college. Jack knows the looks won't last – beardless boys are only good for a few years; might as well use it while it's there.

She's not a gigolo anymore, though. A counsellor is a prostitute of a different kind, although she is not even this any longer. Let those without sin cast the first stone. She never asked for the money, she never stood on street corners and plied a trade. The money was the weight of the woman's conscience and it's surprising how heavy consciences can be.

Oh, Jim don't you judge me now. Don't tell me that you haven't prostituted yourself at some time in your life. Pretended to like someone for the sake of a job; gone against your better instincts and compromised for the sake of a quiet life.

What I'm trying to do here is to avoid making Jackie out as a victim. She may have been victimised, but she never considered herself a victim – of the care system, of abuse, of life; she never once sat down and sobbed 'oh poor little me'.

No, she got out there and survived. Like you. So why am I making her out to be such a bitch? Needless to say you've realised by now that I don't like myself very much.

Dearest Jim, you said you wanted to find out who 'I' am. But I must warn you that there is not just one story. The story of a life is a patchwork quilt: each oft-repeated scene a brightly shining piece of material, its edges clearly defined; those that are not so well remembered are the frayed pieces of indeterminate colour; and the thread that weaves between the patches is made of the stories we tell ourselves about what and who we are. On this thread the life-story depends because if it unravels, the patches fall apart, along with the life. Every day a new patch can be added, but as we get older the patches have to be forced to fit into the whole and the thread becomes thicker and stronger, filling in more gaps between patches.

It's all about choice. You might argue that choice is restricted by opportunity, but there are ways of forging your own opportunities. Look at Jackie now. At every point in her life she had the choice to deviate from the route. And had she not gone on, had she just said 'all I gotta do is stay Black and die' then she may still have ended up singing the jailhouse blues. *Aint that right, sister! You say it how it is.* Fate and free will are slippery customers. We are born; we become who we are; we try to be different; at some point in our lives we do something that makes people who knew us when we were younger say, 'ah, I always said she'd do that'; we become our parents. There's no point in hiding from your past as the faster you run from it, the more likely you are to trip and fall flat on your face.

I know you've read in the papers about Jackie. All sorts of distorted, exaggerated vignettes of her life have been on public view. Jackie Harris the sex fiend; Jackie Harris the murderer; Jackie the victim; Jackie the criminal; Jackie the Ripper (can you believe that one?); Jackie Harris True Crime Friday Night Special. All flash in the pan, of course. Sell a few papers; get a

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month or two's coverage; move on to the next sensational story. Slightly more than the allocated fifteen minutes, but by next year she'll be all but forgotten.

This is a story of a different kind. This isn't written by some hack-journalist simply regurgitating the same old tripe that's already been said, adding a few of their own salacious details to sell more copies. This is the truth (or as near to the truth as memory will allow). I have to write it well for my own sake, and yours. I don't have to sell it. If I manage to finish it before I die then maybe I'll see it published. I am a journal-ist, the opposite of the journalist. A hack has to sell but doesn't have to write well.

Unfortunately for Jackie (or perhaps fortunately, depending on how you look at it), she didn't know her origins. She never found out who her parents were or anything about their race, identity or circumstances. Her mother may as well have been the Queen of Sheba or the Wicked Witch of the White West. Or she might be shagging her own sister/aunt/mother. And if you're destined to become your mother but you don't know who your mother is, does that make you free or more constrained? So why not claim Maya Angelou, Alice Walker or Joni Mitchell for a mother; Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday or Gertrude Stein for a grandmother; Oprah Winfrey or Jodie Foster for a sister?

I was so proud of my arse when I was slim and beautiful. Now it just blobs away behind me and follows me around like a lost puppy. Too much sitting down and not enough sex. I'm getting too old for this.

Chapter Two

JACK

The clang of metal prison doors reverberated around the yard, setting my teeth on edge. Keys rattled in the lock as I pulled my coat collar closer to my neck and shoved the annoying wiry ponytail inside, scant protection against the late afternoon drizzle. Head bowed, I trudged to the outer gate. I blinked into the rain as I glanced up to see who was on gate duty. Old George wasn't too bad, but Tommy could be a real smarmy bastard.

"Just my luck," I muttered to myself as I recognised the massive frame moving inside the portacabin gatehouse.

"Hello darling," Tommy growled, leaning out of the half-open window as I passed. I felt the heat escaping from the cabin and saw the steam of his coffee but did not linger on the way through the gate.

"Oooh, ignore me then, see if I care," he guffawed. And, frustrated at still getting no response, he ventured to stick his prematurely balding head out into the rain to bark after my retreating back, "See you next week, my love!"

I restrained myself from retorting or even looking back as I knew it would incite him to further attempts at intimacy. He probably said that to everyone leaving the prison, inmates and staff. Given the weather, I estimated just one second of him staring at my backside (I was glad to be wearing the long coat) before he ducked back inside his kennel.

I headed towards the waiting Skoda that I would recognise

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anywhere. Not because of its distinctive pattern of rust, nor the nodding Scooby-doo on the dashboard, nor even the *'I'd rather be riding a bike'* bumper sticker on which I'd cleverly altered the 'b' to a 'd'. It's the angel sitting in the driver's seat that does it. Reaching out a numbed hand to open the passenger door, I flung my briefcase onto the back seat and slid into the relative warmth and comfort of the car I shared with my partner, Jimmie.

Despite her butch-sounding name, Jimmie is a picture of lesbian chic. Short-but-not-too-short, wispy blonde hair, pale blue eyes and a fresh-faced, mildly freckled complexion; I wondered several times a day at the fortune of landing such a good-looking lover. As Jimmie revved the engine and turned the rattling heater up a notch, she could well have been an angel sent from heaven.

"Oh God," I groaned, "what a day! I'm so glad it's Friday."

"Tough week?" Jimmie enquired vaguely, her attention elsewhere as she revved and reversed the car. "This thing's like a tank," she muttered, wrenching the gearstick.

"Tough day, tough week, tough *life*," I intoned, looking back at the imposing building we arced in front of. "That place gives me the creeps." I dug around in my briefcase for my E45 cream and rubbed some on my hands. The cold weather always brought out my eczema.

"Why work there then?"

I ignored the question, as it was one I so often asked myself and for which I could find no answer except that I was compelled to continue. "Still," drawing myself up as the Skoda lurched forwards into the rain, "thank God I've got the weekend off. Home, James, and don't spare the horses."

"You always say that," complained Jimmie.

"Ok then: lead on McFluff if you prefer." I snickered at Jim's annoyed expression. "Well you should change your name then, to something more feminine. Like *Jemima* for instance..."

“Shut up, *Jacqueline!*” The car swerved as Jimmie leaned over to poke me in the ribs. Both of us object to the use of our given names, even in jest.

No doubt Tommy chuckled to himself, “Women drivers!” wishing that he could be the one to show us how a real man motored.

Okay, he’s a stereotype. So what? There will always be some people who live up to the image or it wouldn’t have arisen in the first place. Possibly Tommy had a sensitive side, maybe he cried at Bette Davis movies before cycling off to his macramé and quilting night classes. But somehow I don’t think so. And anyway, this story isn’t about him.

Jimmie’s driving settled down once we were on the main road and the Skoda was behaving itself. “Are you sure you’re ok to drive?” I asked, always aware of her bad leg. She shrugged; she knows how much I hate driving. It’s her car after all, technically; her mobility allowance. I would drive if we were going a long way, like the impending visit to parents for the weekend, but I’ll always be a biker at heart. And my knees will never allow me to forget that fact. By the time we were halfway home, the conversation had turned to the evening ahead.

“Do you want to stop off for some grub? Before we go to The Claires?” asked Jimmie, always aware of her lover’s need of sustenance in times of trial.

“Hmm, have we got enough cash for a pizza?”

“Have a look. My purse’s in my bag.” Jimmie flicked her eyes away from the road for a brief moment to nod at her hippy patchwork handbag on the back seat. I strained against my seatbelt to reach the strap of the bag, nearly dropping it as a high-pitched rendition of *The William Tell Overture* blared from within.

“You’ve changed the ringtone *again?*” I protested, fishing in the bag for her mobile.

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“I’ve set a different tune for specific numbers,” she explained, as she searched for a spot to pull over from the busy road. “I know who that is.”

I looked at the display on Jimmie’s phone and groaned. “Do you want me to answer it?”

“Here,” she said impatiently as she swung the bulky car into a mini-sized space, grabbing the phone and thumbing the green button as the nearside wheel mounted the pavement.

“Hello?” she chirped brightly, frowning at me and dragging on the handbrake. “Yes, tonight? Hang on...” Jim put her hand over the end of her Nokia and turned to see me pouting like a child. “Jack... we need the money.”

I threw up my hands, “Ok, fine.”

“I won’t be starting till eight. We can go to The Claires early. I can –”

“Ok,” I said. “Fine. Do the shift if you want.”

“Jack...” Jimmie pleaded and I sighed, softening my tone. “Sorry love, I just think it’d be nice to have a night together for once.”

“We’ll have tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night we’ll be at your parents’,” I muttered and then looked up to meet my lover’s eyes. “You do still want me, don’t you?”

Jim always melted when I displayed rare signs of insecurity. “Look. If you really don’t want me to...?”

“No, it’s ok,” I said, looking out of the window at an irate pedestrian trying to manoeuvre a pushchair through the gap between the Skoda and a shop front. “I just needed to know you’d turn it down if I asked you to. Take it – we could use the money, like you said.”

Jimmie released a breath, trying and not succeeding to hide her annoyance, and returned to the phone conversation. “Yes, I’ll do it. Sorry to keep you waiting. Yeah. See you at eight then.” She pressed the red button and handed the mobile back

to me. “Full steam ahead to Pizza Land?” She looked over her shoulder and began gradually reversing into the stream of traffic. “Oh shit. Now I’ve got to get out of this tight hole.”

“I thought tight holes were your speciality, darling.” Jimmie glared at me before her face cracked and she laughed. I laughed too, even as I gripped the edges of the seat as the Skoda swerved away from oncoming traffic. I’ll never get used to her driving, any more than she’ll get used to my sense of humour.

We still had to go home to our two-bedroom terraced shit-hole so I could get changed, but buying the pizza cut down the amount of time before we would be ready and out again. Jimmie slopped two slices onto plates while I went upstairs to throw off my professional suit and drag on jeans and white t-shirt. Just another kind of uniform. The jeans were tight and I considered digging around for some jogging bottoms but thought maybe I should make an effort to look reasonably smart for a social occasion.

Jimmie didn’t need to change; she wore the same embroidered jeans and frilly tops whether she was working at the night shelter, hanging out at home or visiting friends. I sometimes envied her for this simplicity although I never envied her femmie clothes.

She was already munching in front of the TV, stripping the pizza topping away and nibbling at it, when I arrived back downstairs for my slice of action. It was congealing on a plate next to my mug, both of which were balanced precariously on top of a full A4 envelope on the corner of the computer desk. “Oh thanks,” I said, picking up the mug and taking a sip.

Jimmie glanced up. “I presumed you’d want tea,” she said as she chewed.

I nodded, non-committal. I could have really done with a

Silence

decent coffee but we couldn't afford such luxuries. Still standing I took another sip and looked at the TV. She was watching some crap as usual and I hovered over the computer. "Mind if I do some writing while we eat?"

Jimmie shrugged and I leant down to switch the computer on. I had a bite of pizza while the computer was warming up, then wandered off through the galley kitchen into the toilet at the back of the house.

The computer was still not loaded when I got back and I sifted through the pile of books, letters and paraphernalia on the desk to find my puzzle book. Jimmie noticed me ferreting for a pencil and smiled. "I'm glad you like the puzzles," she said. It was her that got me hooked on them, her and her *Logic Problems* magazine. "Remember your pizza though," she chided.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, already colouring in a couple of squares on the Tsunami grid. I put the book down again and took a bite of pizza, looking up at the now completed screen. I double-clicked the Word icon and opened the most recent document. I stared morosely at my title page.

Breaking Down

Jacqueline Harris

I had to change that title or people will think it's about a car mechanic. I double-clicked the word 'Down' and changed it to 'Out'. I then sat back and looked at it again.

Breaking Out

Jacqueline Harris

Not much better but it would do for now.

I skipped to chapter five which I knew needed work and began to read the opening line: 'She was mixing – a mix here, a mix there – in her element...'

Jimmie finished what she wanted of her pizza and got up to throw the rest away. She paused on her way to the kitchen. "Are you going to eat yours? Before it gets cold?"

I minimised the screen self-consciously before I answered.

“You can talk,” I said, but I picked up the plate and looked at the envelope that it had been resting on. “Is this new?”

I looked at Jimmie, who frowned for a moment before answering. “Oh yeah. It arrived this morning. Sorry I forgot to tell you. The postman woke me up. And I put it on the end of the desk and then went back to sleep again. Sorry.” She drifted off into the kitchen and I heard the toilet door close.

I sighed. I couldn’t be annoyed with her when she was so knackered all the time. And that was a long speech for Jimmie, who usually speaks in such a halting way that most people interrupt before she’s finished her point. The only time I hear her being really articulate is when she’s passionate about politics. I wonder if this is why she writes: she needs it more than I do as a mode of expression.

I turned the envelope over and recognised my own handwriting, not unexpected but disappointing nevertheless. I took another bite of pizza and chewed distractedly, looking for somewhere else on the desk to rest the plate. In the end I balanced it on my lap and rubbed my hands on my jeans to rid them of grease before attacking the envelope. I peered inside and read what I had anticipated.

Breaking Down

Jacqueline Harris

I pulled out the covering letter, which was a standard rejection without even the pretence at interest in the novel. After reading the letter I was about to toss it aside in disgust when I noticed that it had two pages. My heart leapt despite itself and I flipped the first page over only to find a blank sheet of headed notepaper. Maybe someone had carelessly taken two sheets from the printer instead of one. An idea occurred to me and I slipped the blank sheet into my own printer. Opening up a new document, I began to type.

Esteemed Jacqueline,

We are eternally grateful that you chose us as a publisher to

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receive your novel. Your style is beyond comparison to any unsolicited manuscript previously received. Our editors were moved to tears on reading it and found themselves unable to return to work for several weeks.

However, it is with great regret that we find ourselves unable to publish your masterpiece. We are a publisher of trashy junk read by illiterate morons. Your work has inspired us to upgrade our list and perhaps include literary works in the future. But for the moment we feel that, were we to publish your novel, we would fail to sell any of our other titles.

Being unable to find another work equal to yours would halt our production and inevitably put us out of business. It is therefore with deep regret that we find we must return your manuscript to you. We hope that you will find a publisher more worthy of your intellect.

We will be forever in your debt for giving us the opportunity to review such a work of genius.

Yours regretfully,

With satisfaction at a job well done, I took a sip of cooling tea while my printer whirred and shook, and the new rejection letter appeared. I clipped the two sheets together, mine at the top. Impaling the letter on my Stephen King style rejection spike that hangs on the wall behind the computer, I smiled as it stabbed through the heart of yet another company of ungrateful bastards. That spike was very useful for taking out frustration. Of course, I haven't got anything like that here; they barely let us use cutlery let alone murderously sharp spears.

A visit to The Two Claires was our standard Friday night entertainment. This is so for a whole sector of the Valley lesbian scene, who prefer domesticity to clubland. Although living in a

private house of usual size, The Two Claires have the benefit of a huge knocked-through lounge that can host numbers of standing guests and several prized places on the sofa. This lesbian haven has achieved such notoriety on the scene that ingénues have been known to think that 'The Two Claires' is the name of a public house. The Claires had, in fact, considered running a pub but neither had any business sense, as Claire Tilley's failed hairdressing shop demonstrated.

We didn't have parties ourselves since, during our housewarming barbeque, our new neighbour had called the police with complaints about noise and lewd behaviour. The music hadn't been particularly loud and the 'lewdness' had been a couple of women openly holding hands as they arrived on the doorstep. The police arrived and told us to turn it down which we did, but it kind of put a damper on the day. The neighbour then stood in his back garden and watched us and our guests with a smug expression.

We haven't had many visitors since and we haven't played music very often. Jim only practises her trumpet when she knows he's out, but that doesn't stop him complaining. The Claires don't have this problem as their neighbour on one side is deaf and on the other side the house is vacant.

The Two Claires have two cats, Dart and Sheba, both rescue cats from abused backgrounds but otherwise have nothing in common – as unlike as the Two Claires themselves. However, much to the couple's dismay, Dart appears to be heterosexual. If she detected a male presence, she would pounce onto the unsuspecting bloke and proceed to tart herself all over him. Considering the fact that Dart would normally have nothing to do with other cats, including Sheba, I argued that she indulged in what should properly be described as bestiality.

I generally object to labelling people, especially in terms of sexuality, which I see as a fluid state. This makes me unpopular among certain quarters of the lesbian community, and I have on

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more than one occasion been accused of not being a ‘real’ lesbian – especially when I admit to having had a relationship with a man in the past (however unmanly he was). The objection is not so much that I’d had sex with a man, but that I refuse to say that I hadn’t enjoyed it.

As far as Jimmie (and the rest of the Valley lesbian scene) were concerned, I’d had a relatively amicable split with my ex, although we hadn’t stayed in contact. Only Claire-O knew the truth, and I didn’t know until recently whether she told her partner what had really happened to my ‘husband’. I would not pretend to having wasted five years of my life in a so-called heterosexual relationship. I could have explained, of course, that my wife was a transsexual and our sex could hardly be referred to as hetero. Going on past experience, though, I found that this usually opened a whole new can of worms. I left their narrow minds to make assumptions on who penetrated whom in our marital bed and who wore the tux at the wedding.

The ‘lesbian fascists’ (as I call them, sometimes to their faces) not only dictate correct modes of sexual behaviour, but proscribe on areas such as dress code, hair length and general demeanour. They do not accuse Jimmie of unreality, however, and I often wondered about this. My lover’s cheeky grin and engaging disposition gave her that ‘boyish’ air (and of course the fact that half the scene – including the men – will admit to fancying her, and the other half are lying), and therefore she gets away with being so feminine.

“What is a ‘real’ lesbian anyway?” I asked into the air that night, during yet another discussion on whether a local MP was gay. “At the end of the day, if you’re a woman and you fuck women – then you’re a lesbian.”

“Ah, but what is fucking?” Jimmie countered with a smile, “but a patriarchal construct. Designed to keep women in their place under men. Penetrating them with the ideals of a heterosexist society.”

To which I replied, “Oh fuck off, Germaine fucking Greer.” The conversation then veered again to the MP.

I know what you’re thinking but let me assure you that this exclamation came from an ironic stance, not an ignorant one, as Ms Greer is all for penetration from what I can gather.

That Friday, Jimmie stayed for long enough at The Claires to have a cup of strong tea, and for her tiny share of the pizza, so speedily devoured, to settle down. Then she headed off for her shift at the night shelter, leaving me to the wolves. At that time, Jimmie worked twelve-hour shifts, contracted for three per week but more often working four or five, at a direct access night shelter for homeless people. She’d been doing this for a few months, before that clerical work following factory work and, before that, her own unique concoction of benefits only understood by the higher echelons of the Department of Social Security.

Jimmie is a musician by vocation, playing the trumpet beautifully in an all-female blues band called ‘Girls In Blue’. They gig weddings, women’s parties and various social functions. The Girls organised a couple of festivals and had recently cut a CD with funding from the Arts Council. They always seemed to be on the point of breaking through into the big time. As I said, Jimmie rarely practised the trumpet at home as the neighbour objected. Banging on the walls, banging on the doors, shouting abuse through the letterbox was the general level of complaint. Maybe now I’m gone, Jimmie will finally decide to move out. The Girls mainly practise together at Liv’s house. Liv is the drummer and Jimmie’s ex-girlfriend. I loved to watch Jimmie play but rarely got the chance. Don’t know now if I ever will again.

Jimmie was right about us needing the money. Debts from my marriage and Jimmie’s years on benefits after university meant that we were still living in a scrappy terraced rented house with shitty neighbours and little chance yet of a mortgage. And, although well-paid by the hour, counsellors

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rarely find full-time work, so my job at the prison barely paid the bills. We hadn't had a holiday in the five years we'd been together and scraped around for treats like pizza on a Friday night. In my darkest hours, I wondered how much better off I'd have been had I stayed a DJ and not bothered with university at all. I was the professional suited woman that I had set out to be, but somewhere along the way I'd forgotten to ask destiny to ensure that my finances were in order.

I drifted through the conversations, overhearing but not joining in, waiting for a spot on the sofa.

"...decided to have an *L-Word* night, ordered the box-set DVD of the new series from America. But like a thick tart didn't think to check the DVDs were compatible and everyone was sitting there when she found out they weren't."

"So what did you do?"

"Changed it to a *Xena* night instead."

"...think we might have the ceremony but I doubt if her family will come. Good excuse for a party though."

"If you've been together for twenty years, what's the point in getting married?"

"Legal stuff, she says, but I think she just wants a new dinner service."

"It's not really *marriage* though, is it?"

"...they're going to have a wake-up call when the kids start growing up. We've been under the radar for so long, now all these lesbians are having children and soon it'll be in their faces, in their play-schemes and their schools, in their comfortable homes."

"You make it sound like a terrorist network."

"That's how the papers'll see it, you wait. Few years' time and it'll all be the scandal of thousands of lesbian parents. They're quite happy if we stay in our boxes and they can label us as weird but as soon as we start acting normal like them, setting up a family, using the same facilities, then they'll complain."

“...I said to him, if you’re my alternative darling I’m glad I’m a dyke.”

I sat in the corner of the sofa nursing an empty glass and watching the party unfold around me. No-one spoke more than a few words to me and I wondered not for the first time if these people only put up with me because I was Jimmie’s lover. What I didn’t realise was that they were mostly repelled by my glowering bulldog impression and preferred to leave me alone.

Claire-O, who was my friend from long ago, came and sat next to me on the sofa handing me a glass of gin and a concerned look. “You in the dumps, girl?”

I took the gin and sipped, smiling gratefully. “Not now you’re here.”

“Jimmie’s job getting you down?” I sighed and picked at the corded fabric on the sofa arm, not meeting Claire’s eye. “You’re not getting it much, are you?”

I laughed. “You know me so well!” I swallowed a larger gulp of gin and flashed my eyes at Claire, waiting for the inevitable.

“Well, you know I’d do what I could but...” Claire shrugged, grinned and nodded over to her lover who was holding court in the other corner of the lounge. A large group of young women surrounded her as she talked animatedly, “...so there I am in the back room of the newsagents and still haven’t found the magazine I wanted. I came out again and asked the girl at the counter – she said, ‘look up’. ‘Aaaah,’ I says, and went back in. Well – they’re all on the top shelf of course, aren’t they? I’d forgotten about that. So I’m stretching up and jumping and still can’t reach. It’s a patriarchal conspiracy, isn’t it! Only men and tall people are allowed to read them. So what did I do? I asked for a stepladder of course. Then this guy comes in just when I’m climbing up the ladder and you should have seen the look on his face...”

“Does Tilley really read porno mags?” I looked at Claire-T with a new level of respect.

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“No!” Claire-O laughed, and then amended her comment. “Well, I don’t think so anyway – who knows what she gets up to when I’m at work? No, she’s probably only saying that to wind up those two dinosaurs in the corner. Look at them pulling a face. Honestly, anyone would think that to be a lesbian you have to renounce sex!”

I looked and saw that Claire was right, there were two women in the corner scowling dangerously as Claire-T’s story slipped from the bizarre to the ridiculous. I kept my tone low as I said, “They’re gopping, man. Who’d want to shag them anyway? They’re just jealous because their own nude pics were turned down by the ugly sisters.”

As if they’d heard my words, the two women in question abruptly stood and marched out of the house. Claire-T wound up her story and laughed fit to wet herself. I laughed too, momentarily feeling that I might belong here after all. I fervently hoped that I didn’t belong with the ugly sisters.

The look on Claire-O’s face as she watched her lover said it all: adoration, admiration. I couldn’t remember the last time Jimmie had looked at me like that. I was happy that my friend was still in love after – what, thirteen years? – but seeing Claire like this somehow made my own situation sadder. I covered up by flirting.

“I know you’re happy on a ball and chain. But hey, if ever you’re interested in some *real* action, sister, you know where to find me. Meanwhile, you’ll have to settle for the soft-focus-touchy-feely-sisters-in-the-woodlands.”

This is our favourite game: one of us will quote from a lesbian film and the other one has to guess which. But Claire wasn’t playing tonight. She saw through the facade. She did indeed know me so well and was worried. “Listen, you look after yourself, ok? How’re you getting home tonight?”

“The bus I suppose.” I looked at my watch and stood up. “I’ll catch the ten o’clock.” I sighed, gulping down the weak gin and handing back an empty glass. It may as well have been water, the

effect it had on me.

Claire stopped me, frowning again. “I mean it, you know. I got a premonition something bad’s going to happen. I wish you weren’t going home on your own. How about staying and asking one of the girls to give you a lift?”

I didn’t need to consider this option for long before discarding it. “I’m fine, honestly. Have a good night.” I leaned forward to kiss Claire softly on her cheek, smelling the familiar hair oil and feeling the brush of her breasts.

It didn’t hurt so much anymore to settle for this, but I was reminded of the long years of yearning for Claire’s touch as I stumbled through the crowd. As I swept past Claire-T, I couldn’t resist a quiet dig. “How non-PC of you, Tilley.”

She turned to me and sneered. “I could hardly compete with the larger half of *Little and Large*, could I? The most politically correct couple in the Valley: a disabled lesbian and a lesbian of non-white origin. Tell me – did you settle on Jimmie deliberately because she makes you look good? ’Cos someone should tell you it ain’t working.”

“You know nothing of my origins!” I answered hotly. She really knows how to wind me up.

“No, and neither do you from what I’ve heard.”

I think I actually raised my fist but whether I would have used it or not we’ll never know because at that point Claire-O appeared at my elbow and steered me out into the cold night. I immediately regretted not staying for another gin and almost turned back but, as I left, a burst of laughter came from the crowd within and my paranoia went into overdrive. I couldn’t go back in there in case it was me they were laughing at.

Claire knew that I had been in love with her when we were kids, and I knew that Claire knew. Tilley knows too, and this really gets her goat. But none of us spoke about it. Claire and I preferred to flirt lightly and skirt around each other nonchalantly while Tilley glowered silently. I walked to the bus shelter, not far

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from The Claires' house, thinking about tomorrow.

Tomorrow morning Jimmie would be home around eight, she'd need some sleep before we set off north to her parents for their anniversary party. I would drive and we'd arrive late-afternoon, change clothes, stand around being polite, sleep and come home again. The usual kind of family thing, but at least Jimmie's parents aren't offensive and even allowed us to sleep together, unlike some partners' parents I've known.

In fact, I think that Jimmie's mother quite likes the kudos of having a lesbian daughter. She's a Women's Studies lecturer at a northern university and an incredibly intelligent woman. I can see where Jimmie gets her political sense from, if not her looks. I can't remember what Jimmie's dad does because he rarely gets a chance to speak, but he's ok by me if he loves Jimmie.

The bus pulled in just as I meandered up to the shelter. A group of hoodies jostled me as they got off and I hurried to a seat, glad when the doors swished closed and the bus pulled forward. I glanced back out of the window and saw them looking over their shoulders at me. One of them made a lewd gesture and another mouthed what looked like 'fucking dyke'. I turned back and rubbed my eyes; I could have been imagining it. Then I felt eyes on me again and became aware of hostility from the other passengers. Another set of young people sat sullenly staring at me and didn't look away when they saw I'd noticed. I pulled my coat tightly over my chest, and folded my arms in an unconscious defensive stance.

I was reminded of Claire-O's premonition and reached for my mobile phone. An older model to Jimmie's, it was nevertheless functional and I was glad to hear my lover's voice through the static.

"Hi Jack. You ok?"

"Yeah, fine. Just on my way home now – on the bus."

"Oh, right. Wanted a bit of company."

"Yeah, how's it going down there?"

“Quiet. Not many in tonight. And most of them are in bed already.”

“Good for you, you’ll get some studying done then. Won’t be long before I’m in bed myself.”

“Yeah. You’d better get some sleep. You’ll be driving tomorrow.”

“I know. So who’s on with you?”

“Babs.”

“Oh, lucky you! I wouldn’t fancy spending the night with my manager. Couldn’t she find anyone else to cover?”

“No. Friday night, you know...”

“Can you talk? Is she there?”

“Yeah, but...” I heard a door close. “I’m in the laundry room now.” The laundry room, which doubled as an office and place to store workers’ belongings, was compact and warmer than the rest of the shelter. It also had the benefit of a very noisy dryer so that one could have private conversations from inside, if the conversant on the line didn’t mind the feeling that there were aeroplanes taking off in the background. And there was a window overlooking the main hall so that workers could keep an eye on the residents while in there.

I’ve never actually been to the shelter but Jimmie’s very good at detail. She can’t talk about any of the clients due to confidentiality, but she’s gone into the whole layout of that place so I could draw a map or walk around it myself with my eyes closed. “God. It’s a nightmare you know! I’ve only done one shift with her before. When I was new. She’s had me sorting through the cupboards, reading all the files... I don’t know if I’ll get any rest at all tonight.”

“Oh poor you.” I tried not to sound amused as I generally felt that she was onto a cushy number with this job at the shelter, which from what I could tell only involved a few hours’ work in the whole night. “Hey, here’s my stop – hang on a sec.” I jumped off as the bus slowed at the end of our street and I began walking

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up the steep incline to our darkened home. “You still there, Jim?” I asked, already breathless from the climb.

“Yes. I’ll walk you to the door, shall I?”

“Thanks. Ok, so tell me a fantasy.”

“What?”

“Go on, tell me something I can think about tonight while I’m missing you.”

“Do you ever give up?”

“No, and I hope you’ll shoot me if I ever do.”

“I can’t... Christ! I’m blushing already. Babs is just out there.”

“You’re in the laundry room?”

“Yes, but –”

“Are you leaning against the washer while it’s on a spin cycle?”

“You dirty little –” but Jimmie didn’t finish her sentence as she was interrupted by my raucous laughter. “Aren’t you home yet?”

“Yeah,” I sighed, “just putting the key in the lock now.” As I sneaked the door open, I heard the familiar scuffling at the adjacent door – the neighbour’s house – and took the phone from my ear just long enough to swing the door fully open, rush inside and slam it before the neighbour appeared outside to shout whatever abuse was on the menu tonight. I double-locked and bolted the door and then returned to Jim. “Right, all set now. Goodnight then, sweetiepie. Try and get some rest.”

“Yeah. G’night then... Jack?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Ending the call, I walked through to the middle room. We barely used the front room as it was on the colder side of the house. The middle room wasn’t much warmer but had a friendly, ‘lived-in’ atmosphere and a more comfortable sofa. The old settee in the front was the one that came with the house and was mainly used as a filing system rather than a place to sit.

Every now and then I tried to tidy the front room to make it look like a ‘best’ room and create a good impression on the unusual occasion of visitors. I’d polish the old double-headed axe that I’d found at a car boot sale and hung over the fireplace, reclaiming it as a labrys – the quintessential lesbian symbol. I’d clear out the boxes of junk that just seemed to accumulate in every corner, but inevitably the clutter amasses and multiplies so that on entering the house I would be confronted with disorder. I can’t blame Jimmie for not throwing things out as I know that it’s me: I have problems letting go.

I like to have a big old clear-out once in a while but it hadn’t happened for some time. When I was younger I didn’t live anywhere for long enough to gather that many possessions or that much fluff behind them. The clear-outs would happen every time I moved.

This isn’t the first time I’ve walked away with a single bag and left most of my belongings behind. It probably won’t be the last. As one of my old foster mothers used to say: you can’t take it with you when you die.

I plugged the phone into the charger that sat next to the PC on the cluttered desk we shared. My hand hovered over the keyboard. Now that I was home, I didn’t feel ready for bed at all. I felt alert and restless. Perhaps the encounter on the bus, the unsatisfactory ending of the phone call or the suspended thought of Claire’s ‘bad thing’. Whatever it was, it wouldn’t leave me alone and I knew that if I forced myself to lie in bed then I’d be awake all night.

I set the CD player running, turned down as low as it could go so the noise of the disc spinning was louder than the strains of Bessie’s voice.

I’ve got the blues, I feel so lonely

I’ll give the world if I could only

Make you understand

I crept into the galley kitchen tacked onto the end of the long,

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thin house, reached into the back of the undersink cupboard and felt through various bottles of cleaning fluid. My hand brushed and then gripped the cold neck of a glass bottle. I drew it out and poured myself half a tumbler of strong vodka. Sipping at this thoughtfully, I walked back into the middle room.

Baby won't you please come home

The computer screen flashed momentarily and then commenced a low hum to indicate that it was ready. As I straightened up, I noticed a coaster was in a skewed position and I moved it to line up with the corner of the desk. I was reminded of how amused Jimmie used to be to see me do something like this; amid a pile of dusty clutter, which I will make no attempt to rectify, I will be irritated by some small straight-edged item that doesn't align with the edge of the desk. It's my own distinctive form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. My world can be falling down around me but I will be satisfied to control the immediate minutiae. Containment is important to me.

However, while funny to her the first year or so together, I know from experience that it's the little idiosyncrasies that begin to aggravate a lover to the point of contemplating homicide. Like the way she doodles on my work when she's on the phone, or taps her pen against her teeth when she's thinking. Sometimes the way she talks really gets to me. And don't ask me about those bloody jangly bangles. We all have our foibles.

As the ancient machine whirred, I rubbed some more E45 cream onto my sore hands and ruminated on Claire's premonitions. She'd always said that she could see things coming and I had believed her because some things were just too much for coincidence.

The problem with saying there is a 'bad thing' about to happen is verification. A bad thing for whom: for me? For her? For someone we know? For the world? The environment? There is always something bad going on. At any point in time there is a war, a rape, a murder, a death, a deceit, a lie. So to say she had a

premonition of a 'bad thing' is really leaving the options quite open. She could just as easily said that a good thing will happen. Because at any point in time there is a peace, a love, a life, a birth, a virtue, a truth. The bad thing could already have been prevented in that I didn't knock Tilley's block off on the way out of their house. So if you think about it, what I was about to do may not have been the 'bad thing' at all.

JIM

"Was that Jackie?" Babs asked as I emerged from the laundry room. I returned my mobile to the pouch habitually attached to my jeans.

"Yeah. She's just off to bed. Saying goodnight." I had always been open about my lesbianism in the job. It was a voluntary agency and the housing charity had an extensive Equal Opportunities Policy. Most of the staff made an effort to be politically correct.

"Was she ok with you taking on the shift?"

"Think so. Want a coffee?" Babs nodded. I strolled into the large church kitchen. The shelter was a church hall during the day, the campbeds and bedding folded away and deposited behind a curtain. I spooned out two coffees and sugared Babs' excessively. I looked up to find that the shelter manager had followed me into the kitchen. She was now leaning on the worktop. Looking at me. My sleeve rode up as I reached to drop the spoon into the sink. Deep stainless silver sink. My wristband clinked on the side of it. I pulled the sleeve down self-consciously and covered my wrist.

Babs was still looking at me. She could be quite talkative and obviously wanted to talk now.

"I envy you, Jemmy."

"Please call me Jimmie. Or Jim."

"I did, Jem. You seem to have a really solid relationship. You know, most husbands would complain about being left at

home all night.”

You don't know the half of it, I thought. But I kept my irritation to myself. Why do so many hetty women assume that? Is a lesbian relationship more communicative, more intimate than a heterosexual one? Simply by dint of being two women? Sometimes it is easier to put up with the nasty comments than the patronising ones: at least you know where you stand when you're being spat at. People who refuse to call me by my chosen name? Who insist on reworking it into a format with which they are more comfortable? Don't get me started. Babs can get irritatingly patronising about disability issues as well. Thank God she's never actually met Jack because then we'd have race to contend with as well.

“You never told me how you two met.” Babs took her coffee and looked at me expectantly. It was going to be a long night.

“Well. We first met at the agency. Where Jack worked before she got the job at the prison.”

“Oh, were you a counsellor there too? I thought you were only just doing your certificate now.”

“No, I was...” I realised that I'd dug myself into a hole. “Actually I was a client.” I watched Babs' expression change, recover, then change again. Amused, I perceived her conflict: her realisation that I had had counselling, yet she was not permitted to judge me on this openly. Jack had worked in a sexual violence survivors' agency. I had already told Babs this. But from each of these realisations she recovered. Then another shocked look appeared, along with the inevitable question.

“You mean she was your counsellor?”

I laughed. “No. No, nothing like that. Jack would never do that. It's breaking all the rules. No. I was seeing one of the other counsellors. I didn't go there for long anyway. Just a few sessions.” I was tempted to add, “I wasn't abused”. I decided not to. Let the woman make her own assumptions.

“We chatted a couple of times in the reception area. She

encouraged me to become a counsellor myself. Didn't do anything about it until this year though. Anyway. Then a few weeks later I was doing a gig. You know I play in a band?" Babs nodded and made an encouraging sound. I continued, "And Jack was in the crowd. She came up to me afterwards. Said she liked my piece. We got chatting. She invited me out the next day. We had a few drinks. Then we were together."

"Just like that?"

"You know the joke? About where do lesbians go on their second date?"

"No, what do you mean?"

I sighed. "Women traditionally want commitment. Yes? And men are traditionally commitment-phobic. So in a heterosexual couple, there is a lot of skirting around before a commitment is made." I could see that Babs was getting lost here. Probably not someone who contemplates sexual politics on a daily basis, however PC she tries to be. "So anyway. A lesbian's second date is a visit to the estate agents. That's the joke. It fails miserably when you have to explain."

"Oh I see," said Babs. Light dawned. "You mean you moved in together."

"Something like that." I took my coffee and moved over to the work desk in the corner of the shelter hall. It had taken a bit longer than the second date to persuade Jack that moving in together would be a good idea, though I was too tired to go through the ins and outs for the sake of Babs' nosiness. I picked up my textbook recommended by the course tutor. I hoped that the manager would take this as a cue to end the conversation.

I leaned back in my chair and looked up at the windows under the high ceiling. From where I sat, I could see the waning moon surrounded by a brightly illuminated cloud mass. I had a sudden yearning to play my trumpet. Slowly. Painfully. Pointing at the moon. The snoring of one of the old men dragged me back down to earth. Reminded me that I was here to do a job. The large hall

Silence

was cool and all the residents were snuggled into blankets. I went into the office/laundry room again and warmed my hands on the dryer as it spun residents' clothes. I often grinned at the irony of how years of feminism had led me to a job where I was washing men's clothes, cooking for them, cleaning and tidying up after them. I reached for an old jumper from my bag. It fell, dislodging my book. It was going to be a long, long night.

JACK

Impatient while the computer still whirred and rumbled, I wandered through the cold kitchen and into the even colder toilet/shower-room. Condensation settled on the walls, window and porcelain, and showers were excruciatingly miserable in the winter. I peed and splashed my face with cold water. Wiping mist from the mirror, I stared into my reflection.

“When did I get so old, fat and ugly?” I asked myself out-loud as I poked at my jowls. “The only recourse is vodka.”

I'd taken to talking out loud to myself when Jimmie wasn't around. Perhaps a sign of age or possibly impending madness. If we'd had a dog then at least I'd have an excuse to talk out-loud. But I can't have pets; I've told Jimmie it's an allergy and let's leave it at that for now.

I poured another large one and checked the remains in the bottle. Surprising myself at how little was left, I returned it to the undersink cupboard. Why I kept it there was a mystery, as I wasn't hiding it from Jimmie or anyone else. But then, maybe I was hiding it from myself.

Setting the full glass on the windowsill next to the computer desk, I bent down to switch phonelines so that I could use the internet. My knee banged against the solidity of Jimmie's trumpet case, which she stored there along with boxes of unsorted clutter. I brought out the case onto my lap and paused before opening it. It felt strangely like invading my lover's privacy – like reading a diary or sniffing underwear. Would Jim be angry or embarrassed

at the knowledge that I sometimes took out the trumpet and caressed it on the long, lonely nights?

I opened the case and there it sat, brassily beautiful. What else would embarrass or anger Jimmie, I wondered: the collection of erotic books and magazines, my sordid past, the anonymous conversations I had begun holding over the internet with people I had never met? The fact that I'd prefer a single cup of good strong coffee to the endless gallons of wish-wash tea that got foisted on me?

I remembered the first time I had seen Jimmie play the trumpet. The half-closed eyes, pursed lips, swaying hips. Claire-O had commented that she could have sworn Jimmie had Black blood as no White girl could play like that. I had turned to my friend and muttered, "Black or White, she can blow my trumpet anytime." Claire had replied that Jimmie had recently split with her lover, the drummer in the band, and that I should go for it.

So lust had brought us together, but what had kept us going? Was it just pure habit? Surely not the puzzles?

No really, we have lots in common: counselling, writing, music. Sometimes I know she can be irritating and she tends to speak like a robot, but she's very kind and she's one hell of a looker. Don't get me wrong, I'm not someone who goes just by appearances. But I'm telling you anyone would be hard-pressed not to admit she's fucking gorgeous. What worries me sometimes is why on earth she stays with me.

I sighed again and put the trumpet case back under the desk. I took a swig of vodka and started up the internet, dear Bessie still giving it some in the background. I tapped into the sex chatline live sites, finally noticing the effect of the alcohol firing through my veins, and further thoughts of Jimmie's admonition ceased to trouble my mind.

If I should take a notion

To jump into the ocean

'T ain't nobody's bizness if I do, do, do do