

# The Remarkable Everyday

‘To see the world in a grain of sand...  
And eternity in an hour.’  
*William Blake*

A collection of short stories

Legend  Press  
Independent Book Publisher

Legend Press Ltd  
Unit 11, 63 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5NP  
info@legendpress.co.uk  
www.legendpress.co.uk

Contents © Tom Chalmers, Nena Skrbic, Justin Elliott,  
E.C. Seaman, Brett Pransky, Sarah James, Lea Hurst, Miguel Ylareina,  
Joel Willans, Sophie Mackintosh 2005

First edition published October 2005.

This edition published August 2008

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978-1-9065580-4-8

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Set in Times  
Printed by J. H. Haynes and Co. Ltd., Sparkford.

Cover designed by Gudrun Jobst  
www.yellowoftheegg.co.uk

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## Foreword

If I ever had any doubts about the potential for the short story to rise again to prominence and to battle the novel for prime position on reader's bookshelves, these were dispelled during the composition of this publication. Since announcing its intention to make a mark with the short story and revealing the concept behind the collection, Legend Press has been deluged with interest, support and, most importantly, stories. To give an idea of how the publication was devised, there are two particular moments that stick in my memory.

Firstly, and this only came to prominence later, I was walking the familiar twenty yards to my local shop, absorbed in everyday thought, and I suddenly took a moment to look around. I was surrounded by people bustling along – parents with children, young and old couples, shoppers, kids on bikes, friends talking animatedly, a lone man walking his dog, and even a little old lady dragging a wardrobe.

The reality of the situation really struck home. Here I was, immersed in my own life, and everywhere I looked there were other lives going on at exactly the same time. Each one would be as complex and individual as my own, complete with their unique thoughts, hopes and worries. I remember thinking how fascinating it would be to have a little snapshot of each of their lives and minds.

The second moment occurred when I was travelling home one night – journeys seemingly a hotbed for inspiration. I was considering an appropriate project for Legend Press, a publisher with huge ambitions across the literary range. I wanted the publication to be something original, something with scope and something that really laid down a marker for the company as an innovative and successful publisher.

It was then that I saw the perfect vehicle – the short story.

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Overlooked for far too long, the short story can encapsulate everything literature has to offer into a concentrated nutshell. Not only that, but when placed side-by-side, as a collective force, the stories can offer a unique diversity and range simply not possible in the standard novel, for all the latter's great merits. Particularly in a society that is less inclined to wait and one that is in love with the quick and snappy, the short story seems designed to fit.

Then, in an instant, I saw that here was the chance to offer that snapshot of life within a single book. Having already staggered at just how much is going on at any given moment, with each day's immeasurable potential as a basis for storytelling, the title appeared naturally: *'The Remarkable Everyday'*. One character, one day and infinite scope for writer imagination and creativity.

It seems that writers from far and wide shared Legend Press' enthusiasm and passion for this idea. Submissions were received not only from throughout the UK but from the United States, Canada, Spain, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

We also benefited from an immense level of support from sources including art councils; literacy trusts; publishing and literary magazines; writing groups; and even organisations running literacy and writing courses. In addition, we set up a short story competition, though international writing website FanStory.com, offering cash prizes for the winners. In fact, the entries were of such a high standard that the top two have been included in the collection.

Then it came down to the difficult decision of selecting the best and most appropriate stories. As I previously mentioned, one of the fantastic benefits of the short story collection is that it can offer so much diversity without losing any of the narrative concentration. Therefore, one of the basic aims was

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to create a publication that every reader would be able to take something from.

Of course, one of main benefits of the short story collection written by different authors is the huge variety in tone, style and delivery. While a number of the stories are very hard-hitting in theme and content, this is obviously carried out in very different ways by each of the writers. Therefore, very much as a part of the depiction, a couple of stories do contain strong language and content. The others would be appropriate for readers of any age.

To further complement the collection, an introduction has been written by the leading short story scholar, Nena Skrbic. Her insightful and highly-regarded work has focused, in particular, on Virginia Woolf, one of the great short fiction writers and a major influence behind *'The Remarkable Everyday'*. Nena offers her interpretation of the stories as an exploration of contemporary life and society and considers how this raw depiction of modern reality strikes a chord with the reader through partial-identification. She further emphasises the short story as the perfect medium for focusing on the individual, in which 'the potency of the lived moment replaces history'.

So this mammoth project is finally complete, and I would like to personally thank the many writers who have submitted work for consideration. With a public rapidly turning again to the short story, it is reassuring to know that there is such a wealth of writing talent ready and waiting to satisfy this appetite. Most importantly of all, next time I am outside my local shop, I can look around and know that a little of the vibrancy of everyday life has been captured.

Tom Chalmers

Managing Director, Legend Press and Paperbooks

*Nena Skrbic completed her Ph.D. on the short fiction of Virginia Woolf at the University of Hull, UK. She is the author of 'Wild Outbursts of Freedom: Reading the Short Fiction of Virginia Woolf' (Greenwood Press: 2004). Other work includes 'A Foreign Country: Crossing Cultural Boundaries in the Short Fiction' in 'Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction' Eds. Kathryn N. Benzel and Ruth Hoberman (Palgrave Macmillan: 2004). Currently she is a tutor of English language and literature at Thomas Danby College of Further Education, Leeds, UK.*

## Introduction

*'With intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. And yet we have invented devices for filling up the crevices and disguising these fissures.'*

(Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*)

These eight stories about love, longing and infidelity; self-deception, self-doubt and self-loathing cover the sum of human unhappiness – the pretensions and neuroses, the confessions and concealments, the resentments and antagonisms at the heart of our everyday lives – while also exploring how we can draw consolation and spirit even when plagued with fear and doubt.

Highly influenced by the early twenty-first century context in which they are realised, yet illustrating the unchangeability of human nature, they demonstrate that there are plenty of discoveries to be made within the fissures and absences of day-to-day living – family secrets, adulterous relationships, the fear of growing old unhappy or in the wrong body. In each story, the zones of comfortable certainty – the ways in which we can delude ourselves that we exist happily (marriage, family, work, and even gender) – have become alien. In all, Prozac, cocaine, alcohol and sex offer alternative means of self-preservation and world-forgetfulness. Psychologically analogous, each of these stories home in on chronically tired and oppressively self-aware subjects (or anxious spirits) whose self-communion is punctuated by a series of vexing personal questions. All this happens in such a compressed way that it makes the claustrophobia within them all the more compelling.

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Justin Elliott's *Tuesday* is a mock-playful – yet deadly serious – insight into the post-op life of a thirty-three-year-old male sex-change patient (a new sociological type), who – with a measure of ennui and exhaustion – is about to embark upon the '[first] chapter of her romantic life'. Clichéd, pantomimic representations of femininity are the paradigm here as 'tottering on cruel heels' the modern day heroine begins her emotional journey: 'It was stupid, but she needed to feel the full range of what it meant to be a woman, even if that meant exposing herself to danger. She needed the full, unequivocal experience'. Clearly exposing the underlying insecurities of life lived 'from the other side of the genital divide', Elliott examines the partly consoling, partly threatening realm of female identity. His language is visceral and bold and his stark style of description desentimentalises the soft-focus allure of his heroine's romantic expectations with sharpness and clarity. Journeying back and forth between images of novelettish romance and the erotically-charged, Elliott gives us an unconventional entry into female consciousness:

'It had all been worth it. All the drugs, the vomiting, the pain, the self-disgust. Cutting her rectum with a knife so the blood would drip into the toilet bowl like a period. Staring at herself for hours in the mirror, crying at her gratuitous muscularity, and hideous, distended Adam's apple. All these had been steps on the parabolic curve of self-discovery.'

The backdrop of *Tuesday* is far from reassuring and there is a feeling of overwhelming, almost frightening immensity. The protagonist's perception of the world is relayed almost entirely through an economical language of images, which in a very modernist way, establish a psychological viewpoint rather than a narrative. These images have an exaggerated, stranger-than-fiction reality – the alienated and anonymous

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figure of the kite flyer and the dying seal, for example, communicate the strength of the protagonist's emotion directly:

‘She offered her hand, but he ignored it. They walked in silence, up the steps from the spit, up into the tufty grass on the top of the cliff, past the ice-cream van with its sad-looking one-armed attendant, past the balloon seller, who looked sadder still. The balloons were shrunken in the chill breeze, saggy and contracted like an old woman's breasts.’

Abandoned, tragic and down-at-heel, these ghostly images of isolation are the visual correlatives of an enigmatic mental landscape. It is on this visual storytelling, which forces the reader to rely on their visual sense rather than the words on the page, that the eloquence of the story finally depends.

‘*Wednesday*’ by E.C. Seaman is the tragedy of a woman who has died without ever having lived. An exploration of the vulnerable, submissive side to the female psyche, this story exposes the tragedy of women's impotence from the narrative viewpoint of a wife whose want of intimacy with her husband and desire ‘to end the charade’ of her married life has ended in suicide. With no ‘human’ content as such, this reflective tale of wifely unhingement – narrated by her ghost to her husband – exposes the dangerous psychological implications of leaving things unsaid and communicates the despair of mental depression, in all its pathological grief and lucidity: ‘I’ve always hoped to make that one bold gesture that will eventually crack your reserve, make you fling your arms around me and say you love me; that will finally force you to feel’. The uncanny is a handy metaphor for the ghostly vacancy that exists between the two seemingly incompatible and unconnected worlds on either side of the Mars/Venus divide:

‘...you and I speak the same language and after all these years, we still can't understand one another. Maybe your

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brain's wired differently to mine, or you learnt a different form of speech. Perhaps when I say 'love', you hear 'hate'. Or do you hear something even less relevant, a random word like 'lawnmower' or 'fruit'?

A raw exploration of feminine insecurity and suppressed individuality, '*Wednesday*' communicates the intolerance and fear of difference that colours other stories in the collection, such as '*Tuesday*': 'You want the free-spirited river nymph, but without all the darkness that drives my obsession. But extract that passion and what will be left of me?' This exploration of the estrangement, indifference and disengagement that can be at the heart of human relationships raises the possibility of never truly knowing another, even in marriage.

Silence and incommunicability become central themes in Brett Pransky's '*Friday*' – the story of an unhappily married university lecturer about to experience an unanticipated *éclaircissement*. The beginning of the story documents the mood switch from the dream-world to the tedium and predictability of the protagonist's married life. Strong on quotidian atmosphere, the story documents a lost state of perfection – the broken door handle, the rusted mailbox and the four-year-old sedan carry the burden of history and are pertinent in amplifying the story's complementary themes of memory and mortality, entrapment and freedom. For the story's ageing protagonist, sex is a way of turning back the clock, giving the illusion of mutability and transformation:

'He noticed a small coffee stain on the back of her robe, and couldn't help but form a nostalgic smile. In that moment, for just an instant, the poorly built, poorly furnished box apartment became a different place, a better place, and he became a different person, a younger person.'

Immersed in questions about the nature of human longing

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and escapism and drawing on the instabilities of ‘unfulfilled desire and undesired guilt’, *Friday* probes the undersurface of common everyday experiences. Pransky does present his protagonist in a sensitive and honest way, however, and part of the issue for the reader is that they can’t help feeling guilty that they empathise with him. The end of the tale – though hopeful – gives a realistic sense of moral discomfort.

A sense of discovery and journeying (inner and outer) is implicit in the metaphor of the train journey in *Monday* by Sarah James. James does not privilege any one voice, but divides the story into three separate sections that give an insight into the psychogeography of her characters – Catherine, a lonely woman seeking ‘a different, more exciting world’; Ben, a mobile phone salesman dealing with paranoia triggered by his struggle to balance work and family; and Phil, an ageing, lonely conductor, undergoing hypnotherapy to boost his self-confidence. With varying degrees of self-absorption and desperation, the characters contemplate the monotony of their lives and the routes they could have taken. This is quite literally storymaking on the move.

The question of how we communicate with and interpret others is important here. The gaps between the sections avoid each voice segueing into the next and demonstrate the characters’ absent relation to each other. It is the disjuncture between public and private identity that is fascinating in this story. The characters do not speak at all. Rather, they project subjective interpretations onto each other. In the case of Catherine and Ben, a whole relationship (complete with accusations, misunderstandings and jealousies) is played out paralinguistically, which precludes the necessity of interacting at all. The end of the story superbly illustrates this premise.

Lea Hurst’s *Thursday* is the story of a recently widowed woman whose instinct for survival seems to have taken a

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different form since the death of her husband. An abstracted storyline follows her trip to a supermarket where her subsequent visual encounter with a bunch of peaches triggers thoughts, memories and associations connected to her married life:

‘She could see again the sun slanting through the old lace curtains and hear the squeaky foreign traffic noises floating up from the square. They had called each other silly fools and slurped at the yellow flesh of the peaches’.

Hurst’s metaphorical use of the peaches epitomises the conceptual focus of the modern short story and its reliance on the suddenly seized, symbolically-charged detail. This sort of shorthand – which Allan Pasco describes as the short story’s affinity for ‘the essential truth or idea or image which rises above time and negates whatever chronological progression the work possesses’ – despite its simplicity makes the short story far more effective aesthetically. The abiding impression in this story is not of time passing but of a series of visual images that resist continuity and ‘connectedness’ and testify to the precarious qualities of life itself. We know better, the story seems to say, than to look for any sense of coherence.

Miguel Ylareina’s ‘*Saturday*’ continues the themes and motifs of the other stories in the collection, including the sense of the familiar infused with unease. A young black girl awakes and looks out of her bedroom window, only to find a picture of a noose painted on the door of her white neighbour’s shed. Set in the present day, it is an odd historical jolt. The parallel montage of violence and the beauty of the natural world (the fruit harvest signifies nature and its cycles in harmony with human life) implies a reassuring order that is about to be unsettled. This point is vividly made in the story’s opening metaphor that describes the element of treacherous uncertainty, which characterises life in a precarious world:

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‘Sometimes life changes slowly, like the tide wearing away a cliff. Sometimes life changes all at once, like a big section of cliff tumbling into the ocean, revealing something deeper within, something new.’

Felissa’s emotional journey to make sense of the tragedy, to analyse exactly what happened to her grandfather and to consider who was to blame for his death broaches interesting philosophical questions about history and racial identity. On the one hand, her determination to learn the truth sympathises with our eagerness to perceive a dramatic pattern and significance in experience; on the other, her confusion over the exact status of the story critiques our self-satisfied way of looking at the world by interrogating the presumptions and easy conclusions we make about the past. This is because how these presumptions and conclusions are arrived at may be influenced by stereotyped attitudes and paranoid belief engendered by upbringing, society and ideological beliefs. The story’s tension lies in the contrarious ways in which Felissa and her friend attempt to interpret and shape their discovery. Lorman is deemed incapable of conceptualising Felissa’s fear: ‘How could he ever really understand what it meant to be black? She could see he didn’t share her fright, her sick feeling, wondering what they’d find’. Her neighbour’s dream of memorialising the shed to ‘show what pathetic prejudice, misused power, and the miscarriage of justice does to people’ is an introduction to our contemporary political scene and is an equally relevant metaphor at the beginning of the twenty-first century in relation to the current battle against terrorism.

‘*Thursday*’ by Joel Willans is full of the quality of real life and looks cynically at commercialised modernity and the ties that bind us to the ‘rat race’. The central character, a successful, but disillusioned media salesman, cuts a lonely Kafka-esque figure. With his integrity virtually undone by

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the trappings of his 'comfortable lifestyle', he faces a difficult choice between morality and the path of least resistance: 'I like working in Soho and I like the cash I get, but is that really enough? I certainly don't want to be doing this forever. The problem is, there's nothing for me to do instead'. In the manner of a morality play, Duncan Parks' dilemma reflects a search for moral order in a world that seems in its senility. The images of a cruel and indifferent nature imply a no longer reassuring, immutable reality that can be relied upon:

'The sky is the colour of a battleship. It feels as if the sun can't be bothered. People march with their heads down past the terraced growth of houses that cramp the street. Cars squat in the road, spewing fumes and beeping like angry robots.'

Attempts to express an identity apart from the collective are angry and territorial. The social space is hostile, the trip to work a Darwinian fight for survival. '*Thursday*' represents a sick culture with its life and colour drained away: 'I rush down the steps into the underground. It smells of piss and old beer. The harsh light bleaches faces, making everyone look ill. I glide down the escalator, past adverts for West End shows, makeup and mobile phones'. The adverts offer an ironic comment on consumerism and human happiness and underline the extent to which social identity is essentially fake – the surface-self a construct of others. As if to compensate, we create a synthetic, fake reality that is meant to offer us some naive hope. The images of 'harsh neon light' in Blue Peter-style offices allow a surrealist retreat and cocaine addiction provides a spurious means of attaining self-awareness.

'*Thursday*' demonstrates the unfashionableness of moral guilt in the early twenty-first century. Parable-like, the story's events are symbolic, with the incidents in it working

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as illustrations of the moral point. The characters, apart from the protagonist, offer a dichotomous view, symbolising a selfishness at the heart of society and the self-regarding, image-related basis of human interaction. In the manner of a moral story, *'Thursday'* is closed-ended, explanatory, satisfying. Duncan Parks emerges with his integrity intact, his faith in the world restored.

*'Sunday'* by Sophie Mackintosh is a heavily introspective story that describes a monumental day in the life of a mother after the death of her child. Monumental because over and above its tragedy, it asserts the value of living. Take, for instance, the sensuous opening paragraph, which describes the rush of happiness and the desire to epiphanise it:

‘For a moment when I wake up, I see the sun streaming through my window and I feel a flash of happiness. I feel its warmth on my skin and luxuriate in its feeling, for one golden second. And then I remember what day it is, and immediately the golden second is tarnished.’

Begetting a narrative that is ambiently reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s concept of ‘the moment’, the story resists chronology. Instead, a series of elliptically connected images reference the life of the narrator’s daughter – a swing in the park, for instance, is burdened with association and establishes connections to a lost historical context, giving the story large-scale coherence. Moreover, recurring images and memories of her daughter’s care-free childhood stand proxy for the tragedy of her own lost youth, of remembered sensations, impressions, experiences, of sad memories and ideals. It is at this paralysing juncture between passive nostalgia and the present moment – which carries on regardless of the narrator’s non-engagement – that the story operates.

*'Sunday'* highlights the psychological function that stories serve – how people tell (or re-tell) stories to make sense of

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their lives and the way we console ourselves by repetition. We get the sense that the narrator has re-visited her child's death countless times – working and re-working the story of the accident over and over. At the end, against all the evident odds, she attains a small triumph against chance and fate: 'As I start to drift off, I think to myself: today I have started to live again. It may only be small things that I have done, but now that I have done them I feel so much better'. In 'Sunday' it is the very 'dailiness' of our lives that – ironically – gives us direction and assures us of a stable pattern behind the violent and confused state of things.

It is in the intensely human and exceptionally honest reflection of life and human vulnerabilities that the contemporaneity and, indeed, endurance of this whole collection lies. In working out the story of the moment, the writers have produced a compellingly readable insight into contemporary urban experience. The choice of the short story as a medium emphasises the collection's tight focus on the individual. It is this inwardness and way of looking at the short story in terms of the epic-scale versus the human-sized that underlines a particularly modernist use of the short fiction form, one in which the potency of the lived moment replaces history. As Margaret Atwood observes: 'The fictional writer who writes to no one is rare' and it is safe to say that with their rawness and emotional content, these writers have captured the common reader. These are characters who we may – no, will – end up half-identifying with.

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**Tuesday**

**By**

**Justin Elliott**

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Mary O'Connor huddled before the fire, cursing her new found sensitivity, yet revelling in it at the same time. It was not even October, in a part of the country that was supposed to be sub-tropical, but still she felt the draft like an arctic breeze. It rippled the hem of her skirt, climbing up her legs with all the clumsy determination of an English explorer. She would never have noticed it before, when her body had been harder, stronger. But now, well, she might have to think about putting the central heating on. One fire was never enough.

Fraggle, the geriatric ginger tom, glanced up at her myopically. He was leaning against the chimney breast, grunting as he attempted to stick a cleansing tongue into a distant crevice. He wasn't as flexible as he once was, so this was easier said than done. His eyes were shot, too, and he was deaf in one ear, so that he always turned to his right to face danger, when danger invariably came from the left. He was largely helpless, a thing which ate, slept, and bumped into coffee tables.

In his dreams, though, he was still the scourge of all things rodent. He would leap about, sometimes, eyes tight shut, batting away at invisible beasts. Mary identified with his self-deception. She had long since been performing a similar trick upon herself.

She reached behind the curry-stained back of the old armchair, retrieving the precious sketch from its featherbed of dried poppadum shards. She had been fussing over the drawing for a few days now. It served as her cover, her reason to get even closer to her new friend. She twisted it this way and that, wondering if, by some accident, she had in fact any talent.

No, it was rubbish. Mary had a way with words (hoped, in fact, to make a living from them), but she had no skill with the brush at all. The sea was lifeless, the boats unrealistic. She

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had ideas, but there was something missing between her brain and her fingers. Something was lost in translation. She peered closer, the hunched form in the foreground nevertheless stirring something peculiar within. The woman, the artist Sylvia Carey, seen from the rear as she painted her own masterpiece. Her arms were spread, like some baby albatross facing into the wind for its first flight. A beautiful, delicate creature. With a cracking pair of breasts.

Sylvia Carey. It made her sound like some feminist professor. Or maybe a downtrodden northern housewife. The best names always inspired a sense of mystery. The Christian name was for Sylvia Plath. The surname was her ex-husband's, a lecturer at some undisclosed university. He'd divorced her, incredibly, as if such women were commonplace.

Mary prized these little snippets of information, which in time she hoped would develop into a full biography. Sylvia, she had decided, was very nearly the perfect woman. This made her an ideal case study.

She sighed, then chucked another log onto the fire. It spat as it hit, too green, too wet. Dirty smoke pulsed through the room, adding yet another layer of tar to the peeling, yellow-brown wallpaper. The cottage's previous owner, Uncle Frioc, had smoked fifty woodbines a day for sixty years, claiming that the nicotine stained walls were, in fact, a discontinued variety of Dulux magnolia. Poor old Frioc. He had developed a nasty cough in later years, which his neighbours had attributed to lung cancer. Finally, after months of badgering, he had agreed to visit the doctor, only to get run over on the way to the surgery by a trainee chemist. A post-mortem revealed that his cough had actually stemmed from an allergic reaction to ghee. Despite a lack of credible alternatives, the Star of Jaipur had refused to admit any liability.

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Mary scratched absently at her crotch, which still retained a vestigial itchiness. To balance this out, she ran a finger between the fulsome protrusion of her breasts, circling each nipple until it started to tingle. She had not yet started to take them for granted, which she supposed would be a sign in itself, when it finally happened. Proper ladies almost always took their chests for granted, or at least claimed to.

Time to go. Time to take a walk. Dr Alleyne had suggested she should keep moving to ensure that her parts were kept properly aired. So she shrugged herself into a nice Laura Ashley number, applying a subtle shade of lippy that complemented the soft pastels of her dress. She was a size fourteen, mostly – which was disappointing – but she took comfort in the fact that women generally were getting bigger. It wasn't a problem, not really. She had long since accepted that she would never be a supermodel. Womanly. That was the best adjective for her.

Outside, the streets were busy with those who had come for the annual music festival and the dregs of the season's holidaymakers. In a few weeks the town would go into its annual hibernation. Mary wondered what she would do then. She liked to sit by the window in her cottage, peering out at the countless passers-by, trying to work out what they were thinking. Eye-up the men, empathise with the women. Or vice-versa, depending on her mood.

She clumped down the steep zigzag of the Digey, tottering on cruel heels. She was a bit unstable, lacking as she did the necessary width of hips. She almost tripped in the gutter, slick with rain, only managing to right herself by grabbing hold of a passing midget. She thought she recognised him. Johnny, was it? Ronny? Something of a local celebrity. A jockey, maybe. Whatever, the pygmy cursed, looking up at her as if she were the freak. A B&B sign clacked about in the

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breeze, like something from a Western. A cat hissed, arching its back and looking at her with a degree of suspicion that was unusual, even for an animal that hunted rats for a living. A boy sniggered. She ignored him, wobbling out along Fore Street, then doubling back towards the lifeboat station.

She liked the lifeboat men. They looked very smart in their orange oilskins. Very brave. Very, oh, why not say it? Very hunky. She had a dream, sometimes, of being rescued.

“Hey, it’s the fuckin’ ladyboy!” a voice called out. “Oi, chick with a dick! Is it true you can fuck yourself up your own ass?”

Mary groaned, spinning round on her heels, and saw that Billy London, chief among her tormentors, was pointing at her. Billy it was who had plastered the posters across the town, offering niche-market, weirdo sex. He’d found her mobile number from somewhere and printed it out in bold, underlined, italicised text. Perverts from miles around still called her on a regular basis.

She prayed that, for once, he might find something else to keep him amused. He had been following her around for weeks now, on his own or in a group of his friends. The kid was evil, plain and simple.

She hurried along the harbour side, dropping down onto the sand in a billow of frock and manic, windmilling arms. Bad move. Her heels dug into the sand, sending her headfirst into a knickers-up sprawl.

She got to her feet, spitting out oily sand and seaweed. There were two of them this time. Billy and his queen bitch, spotty girlfriend Kaz.

“Please leave me alone,” Mary pleaded. “I’ve not done anything to you.”

“Not true,” Billy disagreed. “Ladyboy.”

“I’m not a ladyboy. How many times do I have to tell you?”

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“It’s disgustin’,” girlfriend opined.

Kaz glared at Mary, her knees flexing in an involuntary curtsy as if she were seeking to demonstrate her lack of encumberment down below. God, she was ugly. Her face was swollen, bruised here and there, the colour of a cow’s nose. Her cheeks resembled a couple of full udders, a mass of spotty teats leaking their own milky puss. She was like many teenagers – self-centred and obnoxious, come too early to the full ugliness of adulthood. It made her awkward, and malevolent, almost as bad as her boyfriend.

“Disgustin’,” Billy agreed.

“What?” Mary sputtered in exasperation. “What’s disgusting? I’m just a normal woman.”

Billy took a step closer. He was a head shorter than Mary, who was admittedly quite tall for a woman. But he was far more muscular than she, with a natural bulkiness that was as yet unencumbered by fat. In later life, he would doubtless develop an excessive number of chins and bellies, but for now poor genetics were being outweighed by a runaway metabolism. Fat was converted as fast as it was ingested. Brief, stupendous biological alchemy!

“Normal women,” he said, “do not have cocks.”

He looked at Kaz, who nodded her head, peering up at him with the kind of adoration normally reserved for dictators. It was hard to see how he might command such devotion, but then Hitler was hardly a looker. Mussolini was a fatty. There were precedents.

“I do not have a penis,” Mary said quietly.

Billy shifted his bulk. Such a transportation of dangerous materials would normally have required council approval. “Prove it.”

Mary crossed her arms, scowling her displeasure. She knew she was very alone, isolated and vulnerable to Billy’s

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cruelty. His fists were clenched, muscles were squaring off against each other as if jealous of each nerve impulse. Yet this had gone on far too long. She was sick of the little prick. And so what if he hit her? Deep down, in the part of her that experienced a sneaky thrill at the pain of injured boxers, she imagined how she might look with a bloody nose. Like a battered wife, maybe. It was a terrible, beautiful image. Mary snuffled at the potential tragedy, then grew irritated by the accompanying dribble of mucus. There was nothing clever or tragic about snot, it was merely icky. She stamped her foot, feeling further delight at the inconstancy of her mood.

“Why don’t you show me yours, first?” she suggested. “We could compare and find out who’s the real man.”

Billy said nothing, for a moment. His mouth hung open, letting a stream of tobacco-laced dribble settle in his stubble. He stared, unblinking, as if someone had cut out his eyelids.

But only for a moment. There was a globble, and a gloop. His features were suddenly infused with blood, making his head swell to dangerous proportions.

“You’re dead, you weird fucker,” he hissed.

He made a lunge, his fingers entwining with the lacy flounce of Mary’s cleavage. He flung her around in a rough circle, sending her crashing into the wall with a dull thud. Mary groaned, sliding roughly down to land in a dazed, tearful heap. She heard Kaz laughing, the girl’s nasal shriek at least two octaves higher than Billy’s deep chortle.

Ah, let him look. Let the little bastard look.

But Billy had a knife. It gleamed in the soft Cornish sunshine.

“I’m gonna prove this once and for all,” he said. “And then I’m gonna cut it off.”

He spat on the blade, then rubbed it against his thigh. Kaz sniggered. Billy glared at her. Torture was a serious business.

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“What are you doin’?”

Mary rolled onto her back. She looked up to see a small, skinny, ginger kid glaring at Billy with dead eyes.

Owen. She felt a curious flare of emotion when she saw him – guilt, sadness and lust. The three were inextricably linked.

They had met the night before, outside the youth centre. He had been looking a bit upset, she had been feeling a bit lonely. He had offered her a bite of his pastie. Afterwards, he had kissed her. There had surely been something in between, but Mary couldn’t remember anything other than the pastie and the snog. Teeth had clashed. He had mumbled an apology as if he had done something wrong. But Mary had loved his awkwardness, which had sat so comfortably with her own. If she had been braver, she might have asked to see him again.

“Just teaching the perv a lesson, sos,” Billy replied, rather carefully. “You can give us a hand, if you want.”

“Let her go,” Owen ordered.

Billy scowled. “It’s a him, not a her. Do you really think I’d hit a woman?”

“I dunno,” Owen murmured. “Does Kaz count?”

“Aw, come on,” Billy wheedled. “Let’s not fuck around, eh? All we gotta do is put this bitch straight, then we can be on our way. Honour will be satisfied and all that.”

“Honour, Bill?”

“Yeah. Gotta make a stand. Let this go and before you know it we’d have kiddy-fuckers and all sorts roamin’ round.”

“Feederpiles!” Kaz squealed.

“So,” Billy pressed, “you in?”

Owen stood still for a moment, head hanging loosely to one side, as if someone had sneaked up behind him and cut all the tendons in one side of his neck.

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“Nah,” he said finally. “Don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because you did my mum.”

Ah, the ghost town thing again. Crisp packets rolled across the sand, not quite tumbleweed, but close enough. Upturned dinghies, like cow carcasses, bleached by the sun. Even the seagulls were transformed, the adolescents as malevolent, as beaky as any vulture. Billy flinched. He looked guiltily at Kaz, whose face, with the exception of her spots, was suddenly drained of colour. The blackheads and the whiteheads remained, thrown into lurid, pussy relief by the pasty hue of the rest of her features. She shrieked, then started to cry like an Italian.

“But his mum’s a whore,” Kaz wailed. “An’ a cheap un, too! I’ve heard her only charges a fiver for a wank – that’d barely get you a snog in Penzance! What does that make me? You fuckin’ promised me, Billy! You promised me the first time I sucked you off you’d-”

“Look, it meant nothing,” Billy interjected. “I was just curious, all right? And actually, I did it for you as well. I thought that maybe her could teach me a few things that I could use on you. I’ll show you later, if you’ll let me.”

“Fuck off,” she hissed. And, after a brief, liquid pause, “Why, though? What’s her got that I haven’t?”

Billy held his hands out wide as if he had been nailed to a cross. Mary was struck by how well he could act the martyr. The kid was an actor all right, with an actor’s capacity for bullying, self-indulgence and deceit. He would probably tread the boards, in later life, if the Boards didn’t get him first.

“Nothing, babe,” he answered. “Her ain’t got any tits, for a start, and she’s looser than a wizard’s sleeve. It was like I’d been fuckin’ paralysed. But you, well, you got brilliant tits and everything else an’ all. I swear, now that I’ve tried it, I

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don't ever wanna do it again." He shivered, and hugged his arms about his chest. "I feel dirty," he concluded.

Mary was aware, even if Billy was not, that Owen had turned a rather pronounced shade of scarlet. She supposed that she should really take advantage of the situation, make her getaway while her tormentor's attention was elsewhere. Yet, for whatever reason, she could not. It was partly down to her fascination with the primal, timeless, immeasurably coarse nature of Kaz's pain. Mary was always on the look out for such conflagrations of female emotion, which she might, with practice, be able to weave into her own life. The majority of her emotions were, more's the pity, vicarious ones.

The hurt. Despair. Guilt. Guilt? That was odd.

Mostly, though, it was that she was touched by Owen's chivalry. She could not think of abandoning him. That he – poor, skinny and clearly wronged – should leap to her defence! In this light, he looked almost unbearably cute. Maybe she would let him have her, later.

Sometimes, Mary's only defence was flippancy.

Somewhere in the mêlée, the black knight had managed to butter up his fair maiden. Kaz was still trying to seem upset, but, deep down, she had probably always known that this was to be her lot in life. It had only been a matter of time before Billy fucked one of his friends' mothers.

"Surely it's better I get it out my system now, eh?" Billy cajoled. "Better now than when we're married?"

The tears stopped in an instant. God, were girls really that easy to manipulate? Mary suddenly felt ashamed of her own probable gullibility. Thrilled by it, too. What if some man should someday treat her in a similar fashion? It was terrible. Made her blood boil. Oh.

"You want to marry me?" Kaz breathed.

"Well, eventually."

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Owen snorted, which didn't go down too well. If Billy had been feeling a hint of remorse before, this evaporated in an instant. He lashed out, catching Owen a stunning blow on the point of the chin. Owen slid down the wall, his head lolling to a rest against Mary's shoulder.

"If you weren't my mate, I'd have fuckin' knifed ya," Billy hissed. He then scowled at Mary, who pressed herself hard against the slimy weeds. "And as for you-"

"Leave it, Bill," Kaz said. "Neither of 'em are worth it." She sniffed, and spat in Mary's direction.

Billy drew himself up to his full height, which was roughly knee-high to a baby tyrannosaur. His eyes burned red. Very Spielbergian.

"Later, ladyboy," he hissed.

Seizing Kaz by the hand, he strode out across the sand, casting a murderous glance at the group of seagulls that had settled down to watch proceedings. They followed him about wherever he went, much as their more honest cousins might follow a trawler. He walked though life with serrated toecaps, tearing up the rice paper, leaving carrion in his wake. Scavengers recognised this.

Mary turned her head to one side. Owen was looking at her.

"Thank you," she said. "Are you hurt?"

"A bit. You?"

"No, not really."

Owen took out a cigarette. He lit it between trembling fingers, taking a deep drag that began somewhere in front of his nose and ended near his toes. His whole body laid itself open to the smoke. He offered Mary a puff. She refused.

"Is what you said about him and your mum true, Owen?"

Owen nodded. He looked out across the sand. Billy and

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Kaz had stopped among the boats for a snog. Explicit body parts requisitioned blood from more reasoned, thinking regions in a series of sniggers and shivers. Kaz had stiff nips. Billy had a hard-on. Both of them got off on the making-up part of a relationship.

“Do you hate anything, ladyboy?” Owen asked distractedly.

“I am not a ladyboy,” Mary answered automatically. “Remember?”

“Sorry, Mary.”

“But anyway, yes, of course I do. Just because I’m a woman, it doesn’t automatically follow that I will love everything.”

“Hmnn.”

“So, I hate Zoë ffrench-Batistuta, of the Stripy Pony Literary Agency. She has rejected every manuscript I have ever sent her. Oh, and Billy London. And his father, too.”

“You know Jack?”

“I do. It was him who told Billy about me. And now the whole town knows. Billy saw to that. Have you seen the posters?”

“Yeah. He did them on his dad’s computer. I helped him with the colours.”

“Thanks.”

“Sorry. He kind of made me. He’s colour blind, you see. Red-green. He can’t tell the difference between blood and sick.” Owen took another drag on his cigarette. Mary saw that his fingers were trembling.

“Does he bully you?”

“He bullies everyone, apart from his old man.”

“I see.”

“So how did Jack find out, then?” Owen asked. “I mean, I don’t think anyone would know by looking at you. You’re stacked.”

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Mary felt herself go red. She could sense that he had hidden depths. She had sensed it the night before, the thrill of confirmation made her belly scrunch up. Beneath the pained, coarse exterior, there was a sweetie waiting to be set free. Hmmnn.

“Thanks,” she murmured. “But Jack used to work for the Health Authority. He had access to all sorts of stuff.”

“I’ll bet.”

Owen closed his eyes. Mary tapped a finger against a tooth, as she always did when she was nervous. She steeled herself, looking for a little more in the way of courage, while trying to seem light-hearted and not at all desperate. And she was desperate. For someone to talk to, if nothing else.

“I think that maybe I should repay your kindness, Owen,” she said in her most appropriate voice, the one she had used when first meeting with her plastic surgeon. “Maybe we could go for a walk, later? Perhaps I could buy you an ice-cream or something.”

Owen’s eyes opened, one at a time. He frowned. He looked up at the sky, then down at the sand, as if trying to find his bearings. Finally, he shrugged, and nodded. Mary clapped her hands. She couldn’t help it. He really was very cute indeed.

“I’ll meet you at the lighthouse at six, then.”

“All right,” he agreed.

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But it was not even lunchtime yet, and Mary had a few more things to take care of before embarking on this latest – or, to put it another way, first – chapter of her romantic life. She sat outside in the Sloop Jethro B’s beer garden, watching the kids zip about on their skateboards, buzzing the Festival visitors and hardier tourists. There were a few Americans in

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the throng, doubtless taking a day out to do 'the real England', before moving on to do 'the real France' on Wednesday, Germany on Thursday, and so on. What must they think of it all? The English were becoming a race of dull-witted, ugly, hopelessly rude simpletons.

She took a sip from her drink, a vodka, lime and lemonade. It was a fairly gay drink, but that was okay cause she was a girl, and girls, as she kept reminding herself when the world threatened to grow too complicated, were just gay men with tits and a fanny. People used to take the piss before, but now it was okay. Okay to have a low alcohol tolerance. Okay to have a weak bladder. It was all part of being a woman. With every major advantage, there came a fairly trivial disadvantage. It was okay.

She was shivering. It was understandable, of course. Finally, after several months of badgering, the literary agent Zoë ffrench-Batistuta had agreed to a meeting. Today's lunch might well mark the beginning of a bright future. It might.

Mary had already downed four drinks and a packet of nuts. She was feeling a little squiffy and hoped it didn't show too much. Writers, she imagined, were sober, serious types. It wouldn't do to make the wrong impression. This was a business, not a hobby after all. She would need to appear calm, collected, with maybe just a hint of creative eccentricity. Undiscovered genius she might be, but she would need to demonstrate that she could interact with the real world. It was a chore, a huge pressure, but hell – vicars and nuns could do it, so why not?

She was sweating. It was particularly irritating in the region of her crotch. Her new sex organs contained a number of inverted sweat glands, which helped generate a useful amount of lube, but were a bugger in the comfort stakes. She wanted to scratch herself, but whereas the process had once

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required little more than a quick pinch and a rub, it was now invasive and frankly obscene. Maybe she should go to the loo and insert a medicated tampon. She always enjoyed that, though she had to leave herself little notes as reminders to take them out again. Sometimes the string got lost. She'd heard tales of women dying from tampon infections. Men really didn't know how lucky they were, poor non-bleeding things.

Zoë appeared finally, only half-an-hour late. She was carrying a bundle of papers in one hand, a pint in the other. It was exciting, to see a professional clutching Mary's manuscript in such a business-like fashion.

Zoë French-Batistuta was a woman of profoundly limited talent. As a young girl she had felt most at home at the gymkhana. Schooling authors seemed a natural progression from keeping ponies. She took great delight in their cute mannerisms and wilful bouts of sulkiness. They were all like in-season mares, even the men. Especially the men, who were probably all gay.

She dreamed of spotting a great work, of being mentioned in glowing terms at an awards dinner. She dreamed of getting into film, of meeting 'A-list' celebs. In reality, she had more chance of shagging the Pope. She knew this, on a less superficial level. It made her a close friend of Prozac, and alcohol. She kept a bottle of vodka in the left-hand drawer of her desk, a bottle of port in the other. She also had a secret compartment, which she kept topped up with Special Brew. She liked to indulge her uncouth side sometimes, usually when she had her period. Nothing brought out the trucker-fucker in her like a parachuting egg.

It was all a little unfair, really. She worked twice as hard as her husband, the art historian Simon. She had changed her name to his not out of duty, but rather because she thought it

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might give her some advantage. Fat chance. Out of the two of them, he was the one who continued to attract all the plaudits. He had already popped up on the *South Bank Show*. He was on first name terms with Melvyn. He received an annual Christmas card from Damien. He knew people. Important people. He had a lazy eye, as if he had seen some terrible things at prep school, which had latterly caused his sense organs to lose interest. There was that about him which conveyed a sense of mystery. Bastard.

Zoë had recently relocated the office away from darkest Yorkshire, setting up camp in Atlantic Cornwall. This was partly due to Simon getting a position at the local branch of the Tate, partly because she thought the South-West might prove a more fertile hunting ground. All the great, undiscovered writers hung out in Cornwall. Everyone knew that. True, the St Ives postcode was a little embarrassing, from a professional point-of-view, but not everyone could afford to live in London. Maybe she would set a trend. She had website (which had already received seven hits) and liked to think she was fostering a reputation as an innovator.

So far she'd secured deals for two books. A small number in three years, admittedly, but she could take comfort in the fact that she was dealing in quality, not tat. One was entitled '*Drinking from the Furry Fountain: a Lesbian's Guide to Wine*', the other dealt with the sensitive issue of homosexual pets. The latter was doing big numbers in the American Bible Belt, where gay pooches were a real problem.

Mary waved. Zoë nodded, then made her way across the terrace. She looked like a woman who knew everyone worth knowing, who slept with heads of major publishing houses, who had real, undeniable influence. This was the true art of the agent, giving head in return for a nice fat contract. Well worth 15 per cent of anyone's money. Mary would gladly

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have paid three times that figure if only she might get a book deal.

Zoë sat down at the table and instantly turned into a midget. Mary stared. “All my height’s in my legs,” Zoë apologised. “I have a very short torso, you see. Would probably look pretty crappy in a wheelchair, ha ha.”

“Oh,” Mary murmured. “Paraplegia is terrible, isn’t it? I hope it never happens to me.”

Mary hated herself for a moment.

“Yes,” Zoë agreed anyway. “I know what you mean. I try to avoid sitting down wherever possible. It puts me at a disadvantage.”

“I think they are very brave,” Mary suggested. “Paraplegics, I mean.”

Shut up, shut up!

Zoë gave the matter the attention it clearly didn’t deserve. “Oh, I’m not sure they have much option, do they? Anyway, back in a mo. Need a wee.”

Mary watched her leave, not quite sure what to think.

“Mary, hello,” a beautiful voice said from behind her.

Mary span to see she was being watched by Sylvia Carey. The beautiful, naturally buxom, thin-armed, narrow-wasted, flared-hipped, perfect role-model Sylvia Carey. Oh, and she was clever and talented, of course. She was an artist.

“Hi,” Mary acknowledged, her shock at being thus accosted conveying a wholly false sense of nonchalance.

“Can I join you?” Sylvia asked.

“Well, not really,” Mary answered, though it caused her a good deal of pain to say it. “I’m meeting someone, you see. My agent.”

“Oh good,” Sylvia enthused, warmly. “Is that it? Is that your book?” She reached out, her fingers caressing the stack of papers. “Can I have a read?”

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“No!”

“Bit saucy, is it?”

“It’s not that,” Mary replied. “It’s just, well, you know-”

“Sooner or later everyone’s going to read it, Mary. So where’s the harm?”

“I’d rather you didn’t, Sylvia. Not just yet. It’s not finished.”

“These things never are, in my experience. If I ever stumble across one of my old paintings, there are always things I’d change. But you have to draw the line somewhere.”

“Oh, that’s very clever!” Mary gushed, then immediately wished she hadn’t.

Sylvia blinked. “Is it? Well, the thing is, you have to move on.” She took a pointed breath. Things gathered deep in her chest. “You know, I was thinking. How your, ah, situation must put you at an advantage.”

“Oh?”

“We women are always criticising male authors for their inability to create believable female characters, aren’t we? Well, I’m assured the opposite also holds true. A woman can no more understand the mind of a man than a man can understand, well, anything really. The two states are quite alien. But you know how it feels to be a man. You also know how it feels to be a woman.”

“I’m not sure I fully understand either condition,” Mary admitted.

“Well, then at least your writing will have balance!”

Zoë appeared, just in time. She gawped as she saw Sylvia, who was obviously something of a star in the local arts world.

“Ms. Carey!”

“Mrs. Carey,” Sylvia corrected with atypical vehemence. “Do I look like a lesbian?”

“Mrs. Carey!”

“Hello,” Sylvia purred. “You must be the agent.”

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“Yes,” Zoë confirmed. “Yes, yes! Zoë French-Batistuta. Mrs. I believe you know my husband?”

“Simon? Indeed I do. Terrible man. Very pompous. Always winking.”

“He has a lazy eye,” Zoë murmured. And then, with a conspiratorial dip of her head, “He went to Harrow, you see.”

Sylvia shrugged. “He’s still an idiot.”

“Oh yes,” Zoë agreed readily. “Very much so. Anyway, as you say, I’m a literary agent. I represent people. I, well, you know-”

Sylvia smiled gently and the hard edge left her. “Have you any experience of working in film?” she asked, for no reason that was immediately apparent.

Zoe’s eyes went so wide they looked momentarily piscine. “Film?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Sylvia expanded. “I have a little project and I might need some expert advice. Could you spare a few minutes?”

“Now?”

Sylvia turned her head a fraction. “You don’t mind, do you Mary?”

“Oh, no,” Mary answered. “Why would I, in fact?”

She watched as the two conspirators retreated to the opposite side of the terrace. She cast her eyes inwards, into the pot of bile that lurked in the centre of her stomach. It was on the boil. Nicely on the boil.

Mary considered herself a remarkably placid person, usually – but there were times when she found herself thinking dark thoughts. Right now, she had a vision of a medieval torture chamber. Owen was there, acting as chief torturer. Mary would supply him with suitable candidates and he would oblige her as best he could. Rats, damp, mildew, blood, agony. She put her fingers to her ears, the sounds of protracted screaming almost splitting her head in two.

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Later that afternoon, she caught the train to Penzance where she had an appointment with her plastic surgeon, Dr Alleyne. Part of her was excited at the thought of meeting her saviour again; the other part wished that he could just leave her be. He insisted on regular post-operative consultations, taking a number of measurements and wot-not for his database. He had a dream, of constructing the perfect vagina, a study in ergonomic excellence, a sort of BMW Five-Series of the fanny world. Mary's procedure, stunning as it was, was merely a step towards that goal. She understood this, but did not mind. It was quite an uplifting thought, to consider that her occasional agonies might bring hope to men (and women) the world over.

The secretary brought her coffee and biscuits, which she sipped and nibbled demurely. Estelle was a lovely girl, really, very kind and supportive. Much nicer than Sylvia or Zoë, surely. The heroine in Mary's novel was constructed along similar lines. Estelle doubtless had a boyfriend who played cricket. Mary liked men who played cricket. Said a lot about a man's character that he should have the patience to chase a little ball of leather around a field for hours at a time. She imagined Owen dressed in whites. Hmmnn.

Mary daydreamed a little harder. Owen. Her first potential suitor! She was feeling a little nervous about their forthcoming rendezvous. She knew how men's minds worked. They were only after one thing. Or two, perhaps, if the Premiership title were taken into account.

Ah, but this was Cornwall, and they didn't have football down here. They had cliffs and gazing out at the sea. Mary congratulated herself on her choice of rendezvous point. It would be very romantic.

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As a proper woman, Mary liked to gloss her carnal desires with a lippy of romance. It was all a lie, of course. All she really wanted was to touch his cock.

In that respect, she was looking forward to seeing things from the other side of the genital divide. Her own todger had been possessed of a wilful, somewhat malevolent sense of independence. It had been like a vampire, sucking blood from her body to feed its peculiar hunger for things she did not understand. A parasite.

As a woman, Mary felt compelled to subscribe to the standard female view of all things phallic – they were clearly ridiculously shaped and ugly as only inflatable flesh can be. To be fair, though, a flower shaped – for instance – object would never have worked, in a penetrative sense. Maybe – gasp! – it was all the fault of the vagina.

Speaking of which, she was finally shown into Dr Alleyne's office. The doctor looked up as she entered, smiling his familiar greeting. Mary smiled back. It was all right. No emotional baggage. Just two old friends meeting after a few weeks apart. Perfectly normal. They would have a perfectly normal conversation, perhaps share the odd anecdote-

“Right, let's have a look at your vagina,” Dr Alleyne said.

Mary found herself slipping into the old apparatus, a shiny mass of pulleys, levers and stirrups, which might have sent a medieval torturer into an ecstasy of professional delight. Despite the relative warmth of the day, every surface was freezing cold.

“Any problems?” Alleyne enquired from somewhere between her legs. His words were curiously reverberative, as if he were speaking into the mouth of a large cave. Mary did not know whether to feel embarrassed at the implication of volume or rather listen out for the echo.

“Well, not really,” she answered.

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“Not really?”

“It’s still a bit itchy,” she admitted. “Actually, it’s quite a lot itchy. Seems to be getting a bit worse, in fact. I’ve been taking the pills, but-”

“Hmm.”

“Can you see anything doctor? Is everything all right?”

Dr Alleyne’s head reappeared over the parapet of Mary’s knees. He scratched thoughtfully at his chin. “Bit inflamed, in places,” he replied. “Doesn’t look like a STD, or anything like that. Now I don’t want to alarm you unduly, Mary, but we might have to face up to the possibility of rejection.”

“Rejection? You mean my body is rejecting my vagina? How can that be?”

“Well, there’s always a risk.”

“But only if you take grafts from someone else, surely.”

“Well, funny you should mention that.”

Mary sat upright, struggling to free herself from the restraints. “You didn’t,” she whispered. “You said you weren’t going to.”

“I had a problem with the labia minora,” Alleyne said with a shrug. “I happened to have some material lying around, so-”

“Material? You weren’t making curtains, doctor!”

“Mary, Mary, you misunderstand. This was a state-of-the-art procedure. I was very thorough. The risk of rejection fell within acceptable limits.”

“Shit. What am I going to do? I mean, I’m sure I could get by without an arm, or a leg, but – excuse me – a vagina? Isn’t it kind of imperative?”

“Not really,” Alleyne answered smoothly. “One hole’s as good as the next, if you want to be brutal about it. All the twirly bits are more decorative than functional. We’ll give you a rebore, if necessary.”

“I am not an engine, either!” And then she bit her lip

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because a proper woman should not know anything about internal combustion and the repair of damaged cylinder liners.

“Well, it’s not that bad yet. I’m going to prescribe you a few goodies that might help. All being well, things will settle down again fairly soon.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then we have another go, I suppose.”

“Oh, Lord,” Mary groaned as she pulled up her knickers. “Why is nothing ever simple? Do they have any side-effects, these new pills?”

“Well, you might notice the odd mood swing. The odd flash of violent psychosis. Quite normal for a female, I should say.”

“Tell me. Whose labia am I carrying around inside me?”

“Oh, I don’t recall exactly. A Chinese girl, I think. A student, perhaps. I do remember that she was run over outside B&Q, if that’s of any use to you.”

“I’ve got a mixed race vagina,” was all Mary could think to say. “My mother is probably turning in her grave.”

Mary stomped out of the surgery, thumping along the street towards the station. By the time she arrived home, she was still furious. Why was the world such a nasty, complicated place? The odds on it existing at all were as near as dammit one in infinity, so adding a little measure of contentment would hardly have been placing an unnecessary strain on the laws of probability.

She looked around for something to break. Aha! She seized hold of her sketch and in a fit of further temper proceeded to obliterate Sylvia’s image from the canvass. Traitress!

Afterwards, she located Fraggie and gave him a vigorous stroking. The old moggy seemed oblivious to her mood; he yawned, farted, then settled down for a snooze. A lap was a lap to his way of thinking, however it was presented.

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Mary took a deep breath and rather irresponsibly focused all of her hope on Owen. She did not know what she would do if the date did not go well.

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The seal was in a sorry state. It looked up as they approached, flapping a flipper dejectedly. Some gunky substance oozed out from one eye, the other was shut tight. It made a peculiar honking sound, as if calling to its more fortunate fellows out at sea. One or two of these, their whiskered noses silhouetted against the dark splotch of Godrevy Island, looked on as the scene unfolded, their soft faces a study in melancholy. They were relatively common around the coast – but not so common that a death or injury went unnoticed among their own kind.

And nothing is as sad in life as a grieving seal, except maybe a lonely whale. It's in the eyes.

“Well I never,” Mary murmured. “Who'd have thought-”

“Happens all the time,” Owen said as he dropped down by the injured creature. “Daft buggers are always crashin' into the rocks. There's some bastard currents out there, mind.”

“What's wrong with him?”

“It's a her,” Owen replied. “Can't you tell the difference?”

“Oh, of course,” Mary answered blandly.

Owen stroked his hand along the seal's back. She had all but dried out and felt surprisingly furry.

“Shush,” he said as the seal attempted to flop away. “We'll get you some help, yeah? You gotta mobile, Mary?”

Mary handed Owen her phone. She watched as he tapped in the number, his slender fingers a blur over the keypad. He looked almost beautiful, what with his long, reddy-gold hair wrapping itself around his delicate features. Quite like a girl.

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Did that make her a lesbian? Whatever, he made her feel awkward, boyish.

“Fag?” Owen offered as he handed the phone back.

“No, thanks. Who did you call?”

“RSPCA. They’ll be here in a quarter-of-an-hour.”

“You know the number off by heart?”

“I’ve got some nasty friends.”

Mary sat down next to him. She patted the seal, feeling a bit awkward about it. It was helpless, like a baby. Babies made her feel nervous. She was afraid of anything that seemed less in control of its circumstances than she was of her own.

That had been formed in a womb. Mary had no womb. In her lighter moments, she fantasised that she’d had a hysterectomy.

Childbirth. Everything about it scared her. Made her a little envious, too, because the things that still made her different from other women, those anatomical hotspots, were rooted in procreation. Her hips, particularly, were a source of disappointment, designed as they were to expedite the basic process of running after a wild boar, or playing football, and nothing more. The female pelvis, of course, has a dual function. It also has nowhere to go, in evolutionary terms. Any more flared and a woman wouldn’t be able to walk. So human children are all born several months premature, even those that are carried the full term. If the gestation period were any longer, our huge-brained progeny wouldn’t fit through the birth canal. This is why human babies are so helpless when compared to, say, a newborn deer.

This was perhaps Mary’s favourite fact. It always amazed her that other women didn’t find it equally interesting.

Out at sea, a single shaft of yellow light was leaking through the clouds as if God, or some other drunken deity, were taking a piss. It was a beautiful, if slightly chilly, place

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to spend an evening. She shivered, crossing her legs to shut out the breeze that whistled up her skirt.

Owen wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She still felt a little uncomfortable, to be touched in such a provocative fashion by a teenager, but not so uncomfortable that she could bring herself to push him away. She had waited twenty years to feel this, ever since puberty had set her off into an emotional and physical cul-de-sac. She had to lean into him a little, to make the angles more comfortable. Owen was barely five-four. Mary herself was five-eight. He was seventeen, she was thirty-three.

He had been born male, so had she.

There. They had something in common. Mary closed her eyes and tried to think calming thoughts. She was as new to all this as he was. It wasn't as if she was taking advantage of him, after all.

No, look at him. See the mischievous look in his eye as he spots a chance to satisfy an urge. He wants this. How typically male he is. His curiosity, his artless manoeuvring, so transparent, is a powerful aphrodisiac.

She edged a little closer. He had a peculiar smell about him, which again was stimulating. She rested her hand on his thigh. His hand sunk a little lower, an inch at a time, until he had her breast. She let out a little sigh, like a woman was supposed to. It felt nice, to have someone else doing the caressing for a change. Owen didn't seem to care much about her unconventional route to sexual maturity, so why should she? And so what if her breasts were a little firmer than they should have been? Plenty of real women chose to give nature a helping hand.

She stooped her head, until her lips brushed his. It was easier this time. His fingers trembled against the faint scar, where they had broken and reset her jaw into a softer shape.

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She could feel his strength, out of proportion with his refugee skinniness. She felt a gratifying sense of danger, as if at any moment he could pin her down and ravage her. They were miles away from anywhere, with only an injured seal to act as a chaperone.

The reality was that she still retained the remnants of her old male strength. She despised it, longed for the day she would have to ask a man to open a bottle of sauce for her. She was getting a little weaker, a little bit more vulnerable each day. But it wasn't happening quickly enough. It was stupid, but she needed to feel the full range of what it meant to be a woman, even if that meant exposing herself to danger. She needed the full, unequivocal experience.

She kissed him again. His fingers found a way inside her dress, and into her bra. She was a C-cup, which seemed a nice size to be. Not as spectacularly proportioned as Sylvia, right enough, but still nice. Very normal. Not gratuitous, yet still a good handful. Enough to draw admiring glances from men, not so much as to arouse the scorn of other women. They were surprisingly heavy, surprisingly unwieldy, but she loved them all the same. She would run her fingers between them for hours at a time, over and around them, her mind racing away on romantic visions of plunging necklines, and heaving bosoms. It was a joyous feeling, to find herself in such a condition, like a gospel choir had taken up residence inside her head.

And then his hand went down below. She held her breath, fearing that he might be disgusted.

But no, think positively! For all the slight possibility of rejection, the doctors had done a wonderful job; they had assured her that she was, cosmetically speaking, as convincing as any other woman. And it certainly felt wonderful, all the old nerve endings firing in response to his touch. And to

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think it was basically a penis turned inside out. Remarkable. She groaned again, spreading her legs a little wider as his finger snagged accidentally against her clitoris. Her clit was best of all – a work of art. Dr Alleyne said it was his greatest achievement. He had even taken pictures of it that he might use in a new brochure. Just think of that – her clit on posters in sex clinics all over the country, and beyond. Dr Alleyne had a growing reputation in the States, too.

Perhaps he might even ask Mary to accompany him to a conference. Mary O'Connor, international clitoral superstar!

It had all been worth it. All the drugs, the vomiting, the pain, the self-disgust. Cutting her rectum with a knife so the blood would drip into the toilet bowl like a period. Staring at herself for hours in the mirror, crying at her gratuitous muscularity and hideous, distended Adam's apple. All these had been steps on the parabolic curve of self-discovery.

Yes, she thought in curves now, rather than straight lines. Perfect, sweeping, grand-romantic curves.

Things were interrupted by the arrival of the RSPCA man. He raised one eyebrow at the sight of the unlikely couple, so obviously mused, but did not pass comment. Mary looked at him defiantly, daring him to say anything. She could feel her surgically enhanced nipples stand out stiff through her dress and half-hoped the man didn't notice. Only half, mind you.

Owen stared at his feet, cheeks flaming, which Mary found surprisingly hurtful. Ashamed of being with her, was he? Maybe it was just the bashfulness of youth. Yes, that was undoubtedly it. Owen would have blushed whoever he was caught with.

They helped the uniformed man load the seal onto a stretcher. The poor creature honked, its gammy eye emitting a stream of liquid.

"It's not crying, is it?" Mary asked, girl-like.

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The RSPCA man sniffed and climbed back into his van. Like many of his type, the love and kindness had long since left him. If you've seen one tortured animal, Mary supposed, you've seen a thousand. It was even worse with doctors, though not, strangely, plastic surgeons.

He trundled off, his expression clearly visible in the rear-view mirror. It was not disgust, as Mary would have anticipated, rather it was something that contained an element of lust. She could not make up her mind how this made her feel. As ever, everything was rather ambiguous.

But this was good. Very natural. It was her duty to feel offended if men did stare at her, and offended if they did not. Perhaps she should get one of those t-shirts with writing in the breast area, 'what are you looking at?' or something like that. She giggled to herself as she considered all the possibilities for making mischief.

She took station behind Owen. He really was rather adorable. She reached around his waist, her fingers trembling over his groin. It was beautiful, with the sea crashing around them, as if it were applauding their kind deed. It made her feel good about herself. A perfect day to consider whether she might wish to give up her virginity. Dr. Alleyne had even created an artificial hymen for her. She could feel it now, vibrating like a timpani inside her. Sometimes she had nightmares, that it wouldn't break when required, that it would exist as a permanent barrier to further pleasure. But right now those fears seemed a long way behind her. She was confident, relaxed.

"Let's move on," Owen muttered, his strange tone breaking the mood in an instant.

"Oh. Okay, then."

She offered her hand, but he ignored it. They walked in silence, up the steps from the spit, up into the tufty grass on

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the top of the cliff, past the ice-cream van with its sad-looking one-armed attendant, past the balloon seller, who looked sadder still. The balloons were shrunken in the chill breeze, saggy and contracted like an old woman's breasts. Mary's would never sag. Even when old and battered, when every other part of her had given way, her baps would remain, firm and proud, a reminder of what she had been.

Owen didn't seem much aware of his surroundings. He rather deliberately walked a yard to the left of her, his face a study in neutrality. He still had the erection, though. Mary watched it out of the corner of her eye, covetous.

They passed a couple of teenage girls, maybe Owen's age. One, a pretty young thing with pigtails, grinned as she saw Owen's hard-on. Mary wanted to shout, "it's mine!" but somehow managed to restrain herself. The girls passed by, giggling and whispering. Owen didn't seem to notice them at all. Why would he, though? He was with her, no one else.

They came finally to the edge of the world. Out at sea, cargo ships glistened. Closer in, fishing boats took station over secret hordes of fish. Nearer still, a middle-aged man was flying a kite. It flashed in the weak sun, diving like a falcon into the abyss, before reappearing in a billowing flutter of plastic. The man watched it, sadly, his melancholy clinging like mist to his anorak. No happy, stable person would ever choose such a hobby, where every flight ends in death. No good ever comes of it.

"See them rocks down there?" Owen said.

"What, those big ones just beneath the water?"

"That's them. Do you know how they got there?"

"No."

"A giant threw 'em there."

"Why would he do that?"

"He was aiming at passing ships. He was called Ralph and

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he lived in a cupboard. That's what his cave was called. The Cupboard. Anyway, he would sink the ships and take them back to his cave to eat the sailors."

"How dreadful! I-"

Her mobile rang, the shock of the artificial, monophonic noise making her start. She fiddled with it, forgetting, as ever, which key accepted the call. "Hello? Hello? Oh, nuts. Ah. Hello?"

"I've seen your advert in the phone box," a husky voice said down the line. "Is it true? Can you fuck yourself up your own fanny?"

"Oh, piss off," Mary replied. She switched the phone off, carefully stowing it away in her handbag. "Fucking Billy London," she cursed. "I thought I'd found all those bloody posters."

When she looked up, Owen was staring at her.

"Why did you come to St Ives?" he asked.

"Oh. To write my novel, mainly."

"Why here, though? Why not Penzance, or Zennor?"

"My uncle left me his cottage." She looked out to sea.

"Which was rather fortuitous. If ever I'm going to find inspiration, then it'll be here."

Owen lapsed into a contemplative silence. "What's it like?" he asked eventually. "Bein' a woman, I mean."

"Difficult," Mary answered. "But probably less difficult than being a man. I didn't realise, before, how easy we – women, I mean – get it. Did you know that the male suicide rate is ten times higher than the female one? I used to think about it all the time, you know. But not any more. Yes, it's very hard being a man. I don't think women think about that, sometimes. We're closeted really. Or do I mean cosseted?"

"Whatever. And you like that, being protected?"

"I do," Mary answered. "I like it when a man gives up his

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seat for me on the bus. I like it when he holds a door open for me. It makes me feel valued.”

“I held a door open for a lady once,” Owen mused. “She looked at me like I was a right asshole. Said she was quite capable of doin’ it fur erself. I’ve not much bothered with all that stuff since.”

“Well, that’s a shame. Don’t let it put you off.”

“Why’d ya do it, though? Not sure cutting me cock off would make me happy.”

“It wasn’t like that. It felt wrong, before.”

“And now?”

“And now it feels better.”

“Well, yur lookin’ good, anyway.”

Mary bowed her head in acknowledgment of the compliment, then sat down on the grass. Owen joined her, albeit a bit hesitantly. The kite flying man turned to look at them, one eyebrow raised quizzically, before turning back to his lonely pursuit. Owen sighed, his fingers tearing strips from the mossy grass.

“Does my past make you feel uncomfortable?” Mary asked stiffly.

She held her breath, dreading the response. He frowned, his expressive face revealing a whole host of complex emotions.

“All girls make me feel uncomfortable,” he said.

Somehow, this was the nicest thing he could possibly have said to her. She reached out to take his hand and this time he didn’t push it away.

# **Wednesday**

**By  
E.C.Seaman**