

Things



## Chapter 1

The little chapel hung in the mists between the worlds, coming and going, neither here nor there, like my soul and sword, nowhere to go but onwards. I shifted in the saddle, shouldered my shield, and set off in search of sin and salvation.

My horse shied at the shadows, and broken branches loomed over us in the gloom. Crooked rows of rotting teeth tombstones closed in on me like the jaws of judgement, ugly grasping granite gargoyles on big damp buttresses breasted out of the fog, barring my way, begging me to stay awhile with a come-sweetly sad smile and a siren song from the deep pit of their passion and pain saying, never again a simple refrain.

Stained glass figures of immaculate moral stature peered down from high vaulted windows and gasped and gossiped in their Gothic arches as I went by, the briar bramble bride snagging at my side and all the while her slimy sister mud trying to slip me up with dirty lips to suck me in – my soul for sex, beads for barter, bitches for the breeding dens of the devil-may-care wanderer.

The door to my flat is next to the garbage bins. Number seven. Not the door to heaven, but it's home.

The most important thing in the flat is, of course, the cupboard where I keep my tea bags and biscuits and things, to refresh my body and revive my spirits. There's a hot-plate for cooking and boiling water for tea, but it needs a bit of a clean. That's the trouble with a sunny day; it shows up every speck of dirt. Maybe it'll rain tomorrow and then everything will look much better. Ha, ha. You can tell I'm a lazy bugger.

In front of me is the window, but one of the panes is missing and has a piece of cardboard stuck over it with sticky tape. That's alright because I put my toothbrush and things behind it on the

windowsill, and then no-one can see them from the outside. There's also a pot-plant, but that died ages ago because I forgot to water it.

Underneath the window is the sink, which I don't use very often except to wee in because the loo doesn't work. I suppose you're pulling a face now. Well, you shouldn't judge me you know, you have no idea what it's like to 'sink' so low. Ha, ha. Oh, and I have to go into town on a number five to do a number two, in case you were wondering.

Next to the sink there's a car engine. Not the whole engine with spark-plugs and things, just the cylinder block I'm told. I thought I'd be able to get rid of it when I moved in but it's a lot heavier than it looks. The whole room seems to tilt down towards it. But never mind, as long as it doesn't fall through the floor. And it did come in handy after all, but that's a secret.

Behind me is my bed where I spend a lot of time staring at my stomach. It is a thing of wonder to me, my stomach. It's almost completely round, like a basket-ball, or the moon...with hairs on it, ha, ha. Can't say it's navel gazing because I can't see mine, but I can feel it. Anyway, if I had to add up all the hours I've spent contemplating my stomach, it would be millions.

So then, as you come in the door, there's a brand new wardrobe that I bought in a sale. I have to lock the doors though, otherwise they swing open and I keep walking into them. Inside there's a hanging rail for my coat, and a couple of drawers for T-shirts and things. Above that there's a shelf where I keep my letters. I don't know who they're from, but I used to receive one every week when I was in the orphanage. I like to pretend they're from my mother, but she doesn't say. There's no address or anything, and she just signs them 'from your very dear friend'. That doesn't really sound like a mother does it? But she does call me 'my darling' quite often, so it's a bit of a mystery. She doesn't say much else; mostly just the same things, how she misses me and is always thinking of

me. I read them if I'm feeling a bit low, or else I just sit and sniff them because they smell so nice. If I close my eyes I can see her all made up and ready to go out, smoothing down her dress and smiling at the mirror - but the perfume's not so strong anymore. I suppose it escapes every time I open the box, and soon they'll just smell like...me. Oh well. They're up there on the shelf, safe and sound. That's the wardrobe then.

Then there's the kitchen table where I'm sitting, and this chair seems to squeak rather a lot - I've never noticed that before. Squeak, squeak, squeak. Now it's going to worry me all day. Never mind. The table has a shiny plastic table-cloth, which is very nice to touch. It also has a handy cutlery drawer in the side where I keep the rest of my things. There's a tin opener, a spoon, some toothpicks, car keys (my pride and joy), birthday candles and a matchbox. In this corner here, I keep my toe-nail clippings. Ha, ha. No I don't. I'm just being silly now. I also keep an exercise book and a pencil in there to do my accounts. Not very exciting but it helps me to keep track of things. The money goes on food and rent mostly - and a few magazines. Well, quite a lot of magazines actually. I forgot to mention them didn't I? They're under the bed over there. It's one of those glossy type magazines for.....home-owners. You thought I was going to say something shocking, didn't you? No, it's alright, I'll protect you from the truth. It's got such a ring to it hasn't it? Home-owners. Ho! Moaners. Homo-ners.

Anyway, that's the drawer then. Oh, I forgot to mention the brooch. I found it behind the bins this morning. It took me ages to remember where I'd seen it before, but I think it belongs to the old lady down the road. She must've lost it. I should take it back to her I suppose, but...well, to tell you the truth, she caught me spying on her the other day. I wasn't spying really...it was so silly. I just happened to be looking out of the window as she walked by and she looked up and saw me and I got such a fright I ducked down like an idiot and I

had to hide on the floor until she'd gone away. I felt so stupid. I suppose I could put the brooch in her letterbox or something, but I'll think about that tomorrow. I'm going to go to bed now if you don't mind. I'm a bit tired, and talking about all that has depressed me.

The lure was strong, the smell of heat rising from her verdant loins set my body a trembling, but I turned my face from the fanciful fog and the fecund furies and struck out once more for that distant shore. I finally slid to a stop beside a sheltered oaken door, with the word inscribed above 'Forevermore'. I pulled on the bell and crossed the threshold into a bright new world. Pink cherubs, disturbed by the chimes, fluttered up in rainbow colours around the walls while streaks of gilded sunshine peeped in and out amongst the gaily painted clouds on the ceiling. As I walked cautiously down the aisle, hushed carpets underfoot sealed off all earthly sounds from below and ribbons of incense from the thuribles trailed through the room, simulating the sickly sweet scent of saintliness.

Suddenly a terrible noise made me nearly jump out of my boots. There, perched on a plinth of crimson crushed-velvet, in front of the altar-anvil - where so many souls, plucked red hot from the fires, have been hammered into the hardened steel of righteousness - a demonic little man with dirty hair was banging a nail into a coffin-lid with enough noise to wake the dead. My displeasure swirled down the aisle towards him and he swivelled round in return, hammer held high, his hunched-back black gown flapping like a raven's wing in a storm, his mouth, a suggestive smile of six-inch silver nails. Then the coffin behind him began to creak open of its own accord and from the massive pipe-organ came a sound like a slowly screaming spirit aspiring hopelessly heavenwards. The mad man whirled round, slammed the lid shut, and the sound ceased. With a conspiratorial wink over his shoulder, he took another nail from his mouth and began hammering like hell.

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Bang, bang, bang, rattle, bang.

You'd think the end of the world had come. Who is that? No one ever knocks here. They must have the wrong address. 'Go away, whoever you are. I'm still sleeping'.

Silence.

Bang, bang, bang.

It shouldn't be allowed you know, that anyone can come to your door and just knock like that. Well I'm not going to open up. You can bang away until kingdom come and...oh no, they're going to look in the window and there's no curtains. Up, up, ow, ow, ow...I must have slept funny.

Bang, bang, bang. Oh, bugger.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Jesus. Why am I so sore? And look at this bruise. I wonder where...oh, oh, this floor is soooooo cold. Shuffle on the sides of my feet over to the window. Shuffle along, shuffle along, shh, shh, shh, shit a policeman! Oh no. What does he want? He's come to arrest me, I'm sure of it. I don't want to go back to jail. I haven't told you about that, have I? But I haven't done anything since then, not really, so I don't know why he's here. Maybe he's selling tickets to his policeman's ball? Ha, ha. Oh god he's going to arrest me I know he is. I don't know why, but I just know it. Calm down. I have to calm down or else I'll look suspicious. Or else I'll have a heart attack more likely. Breathe deeply. In...out...in...out....relax...ok. There now.

I open the door and the sunshine's booming down. There's the policeman...and there's me, in my pyjama pants. I hope nothing's sticking out, but I resist the temptation to feel if my fly's closed. God, he must see some sights.

"Good morning sir," he says pleasantly. "How are you today?"

"Hmph," says the frog in my throat.

He has a friendly face, with a big prickly moustache that I can't stop staring at. How does he eat through that? It's a bush. It makes me want to stick my finger in there and see where it goes...and now I'm embarrassed because he probably thinks I'm staring at his lips, you know...like that. Why else do you look at somebody's lips? And now I don't know where to look. I can feel my eyes swivelling all over the place like a lunatic. Oh, I'm going to get into so much trouble here, I can just feel it.

"I'm sorry to bother you but I won't keep you long. We're making enquiries in the neighbourhood, and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?" He waits patiently while I gather my scattered wits. I pull my brows together and try to compose a look of serious concern. I must look a proper twot.

"It's about..." he looks down at his notebook, "the lady who lives at number thirteen." He gestures down the road.

That's where she lives, the lady I was telling you about. I know that because I sometimes pretend to take the rubbish out so I can watch her walking down the street. I have actually gone down there to get a closer look but she lives on the first floor. I know that sounds creepy, but it isn't really. Well, I suppose it is, but I don't mean anything.

"I...I've s...seen the lady..." I start to stammer, and then I realize what this is all about. Oh my god, she's gone and reported me to the police for being a Peeping Tom.

"I think she lives at number thirteen...but I don't know her...I...I've n...never met her," I rub my hand nervously against the side of my nose and thousands of skin flakes come floating down and settle all over his uniform. He is very kind and pretends not to notice. I have terrible eczema.

"I'm afraid there's been an incident. The lady's dead. Her husband found her on the floor yesterday morning when he came home from night duty."

It takes a few seconds before this information sinks in because I'm still worrying about the bits of dead skin on his jacket.

"Oh?" I say. Dead? And then I have a terrible thought. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I frightened her with my peeping and she got so scared she died. Well, I know that's not very likely, but it can happen. Some people are very sensitive, and she was quite old; not thin and shaky old, but old.

"It seems she was murdered."

And then one of those funny things happen where everything becomes very calm and still and peaceful, and all my troubles seem a million miles away. The sun feels lovely and warm on my tummy and the street has a wonderful golden glow. I feel like I'm drifting on a cloud.

I must have drifted off quite far because I jump a little when he speaks again.

"Did you happen to notice anything unusual in the neighbourhood, the night before last, say between about five thirty pm and eight am?"

I notice that a button on his uniform pocket is missing. There's a piece of thread hanging there where it used to be. It makes me want to pick at it and pull it off. 'Come on; pay attention,' I say to myself, 'this is serious. The old lady's been murdered'. But I can't seem to get it into my head, as if it's a story in a book and I can't see the words very well.

"Why?" I say the only thing that comes to mind.

"We don't know yet. That's why we're asking people if they saw or heard anything suspicious...any strangers been hanging about?"

"Mmm." I have the feeling he wants me to say something more but for the life of me I can't think what. He waits for a while, then nods his head.

"Always a bit shocking, isn't it? Something like that; so close to home." We both look down the road towards her flat, and for a while we stand there in the warm sunshine, thinking about her.

"Anyway," he shakes himself up and the wind whistles through his moustache as he takes a deep breath. "I'll be off now. You will get in touch if you remember anything won't you?"

I'm about to say "Hmph" when I remember the brooch in my kitchen-table drawer and suddenly everything's not so warm and wonderful anymore.

"Sir? Anything wrong?" he enquires, looking concerned.

"Oh, no. No, n...nothing." I squeak. "Just a cold," I cough to cover my tracks, and for good measure I start to shiver and wipe my nose on the back of my hand, and now I'm really not feeling very well at all because my ears are blocking up too, so I yawn to try and open them but they won't.

"Well, if you're sure" he says, looking at me a bit strangely, "I won't keep you any longer," but he's in a silent bubble and all I see is his hairy lips chomping like the chug-a-chug of a speeding train getting bigger and bigger and bounding down the line at me and hooting like the hounds of Hades howling for my blood.

"Thank you very much for your time, and I'm sorry to bother you with such bad news..." But the train is so loud now that I'm nearly blind from the noise and I know I've got to get away.

I somehow manage to stumble inside the flat and slam the door just in time.

## Chapter 2

Her lips were snow white and broken, dried blood in the cracks and bits of vomit on her chin. I'd never been so close to a woman before. I could smell the sick as I leaned forward and kissed her on her mouth. I must have made some sort of impression on her senses because for a moment she tried to focus on me, but the effort was too much and her eyes sank back into half-closed aimlessness again.

I couldn't believe my luck. I had found her leaning against the wall of the men's toilet on Second Street, one thin leg crooked up with her high heel hooked over the waste-bin rim behind her. I stood washing my hands for ages and watching her in the mirror as she swayed from side to side with a crooked little smile, singing some silly love song under her breath. She was very drunk, and I was very excited. Here was my chance. I dried my hands on some paper towels and went a bit closer.

"Are you alright?" I asked, trying to sound like a concerned citizen and not like the sex mad pervert rapist who was just about to pounce on her.

No response. This didn't necessarily mean anything. Girls often ignore me as if I'm not there. Because I'm not much of a threat really, just a nuisance.

"Hello?" I said, stepping a little bit closer. She must have looked very pretty this morning when she'd first done her make up because her eyelids were sort of smoky blue and exotic, but it was all smudged now, with a great smear of lipstick and snot up her cheek. She was beyond caring about her looks. She was beyond caring about anything really and the next thing I knew I was kissing her and

fumbling under her coat for her skin and bone breasts as we slipped and slid around on the sticky floor, nearly falling into the urinal on several occasions. It was sheer heaven on earth. I got to touch her nipple and she didn't seem to mind too much, except when I kissed her too long and she had to turn her head away to catch her breath. Otherwise she seemed to enjoy it, and actually hugged and kissed me back a little. She didn't get irritable or push me away or anything. It was very nice.

"Tired now..." she mumbled finally, and lay down carefully on the floor and went to sleep. I had to leave her there in case someone came in and thought I was molesting her or something.

I go back every day, but I never see her, or anyone like her. So I have to amuse myself mainly, and that's the long and the short of it. Ha, ha. Didn't intend the pun. Anyway I do 'do' things, which no one sees, in public...privately. This next bit's horrible, so close your ears if you don't want to hear. I often do it on the bus. If I'm lucky and it's crowded I can sometimes rub up against a woman accidentally, or else if she's sitting down I stand just behind so that I can look down her bra and rub myself in my pocket until I come. It doesn't always work. Sometimes I take too long and she gets off prematurely. Ha, ha. God I think I'm sick. Well, not sick...it's...I don't like being like this you know. It just takes me over, and there's nothing I can do about it, even though I know it's dangerous. Once a lady even turned round and asked me what I was doing. I could hardly get off the bus my legs were shaking so much from shock.

Anyhoo, I did it again today. I didn't want to, but that policeman made me so nervous I just had to do something. Wasn't so nice though. There were no pretty women about so I ended up sitting in the back seat just staring out of the window. Not much point really. Could've saved myself the bus fare and stayed at home. Which reminds me, I better do the laundry soon. These pants are beginning to smell. Feeling a bit down tonight, I suppose you can tell.

No point in lighting a candle...nothing to do really. Just tired.  
Suppose I'll just go to sleep. That way breakfast comes a bit sooner.  
That would be the ideal life. I would sleep all day. That would be nice...sleep and eat, sleep and eat, lovely feet, sleep...until it's dinner time...suppertime...rise and shine...stand in line...fine feathers make a friend fly away, floating up the stairs one finger at a time, fingers on the floor, the door...the door won't open, do not disturb...deep doing doo...dozing off here I can tell...what's that smell...don't disturb the daisies....dirty bugger dear, wait for the green light....wait for me, up the stairs, fingers on the bell, don't go away... ...shhh...shhh...close the door and go back to sleep my darling, my dear...my dream, girl of my dreams, my beautiful pink lady, standing with her arms outstretched and I'm running towards her but I can't move and she smiles across the pink miles between us. It's her. I'm sure it's her. I remember this room, the little pink bed with moonlight sheets and plumpy pillows, and the pretty pink hairbrush pouting on the little glass table with her hairpins. The pink armchair that looks so soothing and soft I feel myself sinking down into my toes twining in the carpet, cosy, and content. A womb of a room. A womb with a view of eternity. We stand like sleepwalkers on the shore of her foamy white rug lapping gently at our feet, our eyes caressing each other until all distinction disappears, and we are.....pink.

Then she climbs into bed and holds the blankets up for me and I walk towards her across the carpet growing like grass grabbing at my ankles and getting deeper and darker until I'm swimming through a jelly jungle lying on the floor all tangled up in my blanket and trying to climb back into bed while the pink lady fades away and no, no, no, no, no, no! Up, up into the bed and roll myself into a ball. Sleep Sleeeeeeep, softly sleep now...I've done it before, go back to sleep, go back into the dream again, sleeeeeeep. Concentrate and think of her...yes...yes, that's it, relax, there she is, let your eyes roll back,

pink, there, there's the bed. I'm back in her room again.....no I'm not.

"I'M JUST NOT SLEEPY NOW! I'm.....try to relax...sleep, try to sleep. I got too excited you see. Lie down. Don't think about it. Close your eyes, there, there. Look for the door. Relax. Hmmmmm. It's no good. I'm wide awake. Maybe if I masturbate again. Ok, relax.

Thumb in mouth and twirl it around in the soft fleshy bit under my tongue. That's nice, there we go. Suck it very slowly, in and out, in and out...well that isn't working! Dead as a dormouse. What if I look at some pictures? That'll help. Candle...where is the candle?

Up...cupboard...Ok. Ok Slow down, don't want to get too excited.

There, matches...there we go, that's nice and romantic.

Magazines...here on the table. Ok. Creak. Bloody chair, why does it DO that? Now, which one do I want...let's see...creak...this one? No, I've used her too many times. This one? Oh, I don't know, they all look so...ugly. No, not ugly. I'm sorry I said that. It's not true.

They're very pretty and I do love them all...my girls. Look, this one's nice....she's got such a nice happy smile...yes...hello my darling...oh I love it when you smile for me... oh and you have such beautiful breasts, such big beautiful breasts, oh yes, oh god I just want to suck on those nipples...oh boy... oh ye e es, yes, yee ee es I lo o o o ove youuuuu uu uu uu yes...yes that's right, that's nice...just there...creak,o o o o o o o o o yes that's VERY nice oo oo oo oo OH

you have the loveliest arse in the wo oo oo o orldd...creak, oh god...YES...NEXT PAGE NEXT PAGE.....OH GOD look at that juicy

CUNT OOOOOH YE E E E E ESSSS, WIDE O O O OPEN, CREAK, OH MY GOD I LOOOVE YOU UU UU UU UU UU UU UU UU UU UU OH YES CREAK YESSSSS S S S S S MYBABYYYYFUCKYOUUU UU UU UU UU UU UU UU UU UU CRE E E E E EE AK FF UU UU UU UU UUCK YOU U u U u U u U u U u U u U uUuUuUuUuUuUuUu CREEAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRGGGGGGGGHHHHH - - -HHHNNNnnn!

Oh. Oh that was good.

Sniff.

Creak.

I still don't feel sleepy though. Getting a chilly willy now. And I'm all sticky. Yuchh. Candle's gone out. Darkness shimmering over my hands, nibbling at the edges...nibble, nibble fingers going, going, nibble thumbs, eating up my arms...nibble, nibble, going, going...and there she is...as if she'd always been...standing by the sink, the pink lady. My worries slip away like sludge on the tide and she takes me sailing through the ceiling wide into the night-time sky. She winds me like a wisp of smoke and trails me through her starry cloak, with gleam and glitter blinds me to the brute beast crawling coarsely down below, her refined mind flowing like a silver river, cleansing me until I am glorious, a gold given god child, my mother, me, in ribbons of pink, see, how pretty she...she holds and folds me in her several sighs and contentedly we sink and lie, she and I, soothingly amidst the silken sheets of her soft love and downy bed. She pulls the covers over our heads and pours into me like a warm cloud, her breath brushing my skin with blossoms all bubbling up inside. I am so happy that I cry.

I put my head on her shoulder, and get a terrible shock as the air suddenly hisses out of her like a plastic doll with a leak, and she starts to shrink and shrivel, an autumn leaf sinking slowly back into the fading pink pillowslip, her mottled skin growing cold and clammy as the spring fever turns to mould and the damp air draws her vapours out until there's no mistaking who she is.

And there we lie, the old lady and I, skin to skin, eye to eye. Like lovers and strangers, about to die.

There's a hole in her chest, swelling soft and spongy pink, like marshmallow. I want to put my finger in it and as I think the thought I tumble down the hole and she enfolds me gently in her barely breathing bosom.

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The sunlight was shining on my nose when I woke up, and I had to peel my face off the plastic tablecloth. It was so hot you could see the heat haze coming off the table. I closed my eyes again and lazed in the warm orange glow. I was fantasizing about a nice cold ice-cream when the garbage truck pulled up like a black cloud outside the window, blocking out the sun. It always stops there when it empties the bins. Oh well, might as well have a wee. I got up and filled the kettle at the same time, listening to the shouting and the hydraulic hisses and creaks and crunks of the truck while I waited for the water to boil.

My flat feet stuck to the floor as I took my tea over to the table and sat down. The driver revved up the engine and the fumes rattled in through the gaps in the cardboard window like a gale. God, what a stink. I took a huge mouthful of tea and held my breath. Nothing to do but wait for them to go. My eyes were stinging from the smoke, so I closed them and tried to recall my beautiful lady in her pink bedroom, but I couldn't concentrate so I opened my eyes and there was the filthy face of the dust-man pressed up against the window, a ring of grime around his red rimmed mouth, his baggy bloodshot eyes staring at me as if I was the next piece of garbage to be taken out. I screamed and dropped my tea all over the table and had to scramble around like a mad thing trying to rescue my magazines. There's nothing more awful than a wrinkled pin-up girl.

When I looked up again he was gone. Horrible man. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one who murdered the old lady. Just the

type. Probably killed her for her brooch and then hid it behind the bins meaning to pick it up later and sell it, but now he can't find it and he suspects me because the bins are outside my door and he's going to come back at night and cut my throat. You can see I have a vivid imagination, can't you? Anyway, finally one of them shouted and banged on the side of the truck with his fist and the whole caboodle moved off down the road. The sunshine came back and made it all feel much better, except for the mess on the table, which I wiped up with my T-shirt. I felt a bit nauseous from the fumes, so I opened the window to let in some fresh air and lay down on the bed for a snooze.

When I woke, it was dark and cold. I wrapped a blanket around me and went to close the window. A feverish full-moon rose above the tree at the end of the block. The branches seemed to waver in the moonlight, coming and going in the dark, like fingers beckoning me. During the daytime it wasn't a tree you'd notice really. One of those dusty city trees that never seem quite alive and never get any taller. There's always litter lying next to it and a permanent white scuff mark on the trunk where the butcher boy leans his bicycle when he's making deliveries. Funny thing about that tree, the leaves usually turn yellow in autumn. I always wait for that, makes everything look bright and cheerful. But this year they just turned a soggy brown, like patches of dried blood. Even nature seems depressed. Maybe I should go out, try to take my mind off things. Go for a drive, a walk in the park...it's dark...men out there...lurking in the bushes and...oh my god there's someone standing behind the tree. I can see him...no, yes, I'm sure I can see someone. There! There, he moved. There's someone standing behind my tree. I'm sure. What if it's him? What if it's me?

I stared so hard that I started seeing all sorts of things moving out there; but nothing happened so I went to bed and counted to

keep the horrors at bay. One, two, three, four, who's outside the bedroom door?

I woke with my body spasming at a thousand beats a second, like a huge electric current was going through me and bending me backwards until I thought my spine would break. There was something frightening in the room; I could almost see it hovering over me...looking at me with invisible eyes. Then I saw a terrible green glowing energy radiating from the corner of the room where the engine was, as if some evil magnetic force had possessed it. A stain of suppurating oil began to seep out from underneath the engine and crawl across the floor towards me. It soon reached the bed and we began to slip and slide in the slimy substance, sucked inexorably towards the engine block. Sure of its prey now, the evil force began pumping out great globs of odorous oil into the room and we sank helplessly into the rising tide of sludge. I took a deep breath as it closed over my head and the world went away. Then somehow I was up on my feet and running. Demons, looking for a hero to kill, came crawling out of my forgotten wounds, opening their moist mouths on all sides. But I brushed them aside in my headlong rush. Nothing could stop me now. I was in full flight. I was in righteous power. I was looking for Death himself, the man behind the mask of flesh and bone - the real murderer. And as I ran, ranks of policemen rose from their graves, hungry for justice, and began to run panting by my side, thousands upon thousands cutting a bloody blue swathe through the steely moonlight.

A sabre jet screamed overhead, guided missile hanging from its fat underbelly and the rising crescendo of its red and over-heating engine howling to God and clawing its way up into the close and turbulent sky. It levelled off and leaped forward at an even more prodigious pace, hurling itself like a suicidal banshee at the black night. There came a tearing scream and a deep deafening thump as the plane struck and seemed to fracture the very fabric of the

hallowed heavens themselves. It turned, wounded, broken by its own madness, and the twisted plane plunged to earth. I waited for the shock wave to hit me, but it never did. I looked down, and there on the pavement lay the broken remains of a child's cot, a teddy bear still attached to one of the bars with a blue ribbon. I looked up and the light had changed. It was dawn. I floated quietly down the street.

I saw a man throw some meat to his dog, just a few scrag-ends, but the dog ate it up right there on the pavement. Then he put some tobacco in his pipe and struck a match on his shoe. With every puff, the smoke curled like a halo around his head and rose up into the early morning air.

"Tja!" he said to the dog and they sauntered off down the road. I tagged along behind them. After a while we stopped on a bridge over the railway line to look at the tracks tapering off into the distance. Soon the ground began to rumble and shake and I saw the smoke of the steam train coming round the bend. The man snapped his fingers, "Come on," and we strolled off again, the dog sniffing along the pavement, and finally stopped in front of a semi-detached house at the end of a cul-de-sac. I waited while he unlocked the door and then followed him in.

I got the fright of my life when I saw her, half hidden in the hallway, lips like menstrual blood, and a tattoo of a snake coiling up her arm and into her blouse. She was leaning drunkenly against the wall, holding half a bottle of gin by the neck and a cigarette by the lip, squinting at the man as he took off his coat and hung it up.

"Come boy," he called to his dog and headed for the kitchen, trying not to notice her. In one hand he carried the bag of bones, in the other a little bottle of red paint. As he passed her, she slapped the bag out of his hand and laughed as the bones and bits of meat scattered across the floor. As an afterthought, she tried to slap the paint bottle too but he jerked it away in time.

“Godda bone for the dog then?” She cocked her hips at him. “A nice big juicy bone for the doggie?” Without a change of expression on his face he got down on his knees and started picking them up.

“Here, doggie, doggie. Your master’s godda bone for you. How about a bone for me? How about a bone for this bitch hey? How about it, Mr Heart-throb big-knob. I love sucking the marrow from a good juicy bone. Woof, woof, come on baby, give us one.” She jabbed the crawling man in his ribs with her toes and they both nearly fell over.

“HmMMM. You got some nice bones there....nice big ones. Ha, ha, ha, ha. Bet you got a specially nice big one for that blonde bitch next door with the big titties don’t you, you bastard? I’ve seen you slobbering all over her, trying to get your little thing in there, sniffing up her dress. Sniff, sniff, sniff.”

She put her hand holding the gin bottle on her hip and posed for him. “Well how about taking a little sniff of me for a change. Come on.” She sauntered round in front of him, pulling up her slip and pushing her pelvis in his face. She had nothing on underneath. “Here you go, all for free. Come on then, have a sniff. Maybe that’ll get you stiff, ha, ha.” He calmly turned and carried on picking up the bones, keeping his eyes on the floor. “No? Not interested? Well your dog is always sticking his nose in my crotch, why don’t you?” She kicked him in the ribs with her painted toes again, harder and meaner this time. “Well, let me tell you something you bastard, you’re not fucking welcome in here anymore,” she said, pointing at her naked pudenda with the neck of the gin bottle. Then she lost her balance and swung the sloshing bottle around wildly to stop herself from falling over.

“But maybe that’s not the problem. You wanna know what I think is the problem here? I think you’re a queer. Tha’s wa’s the matter here. YOU’RE A FUCKING FAGGOT, YOU FUCKING BASTARD!”

He got up off his knees and put the bag of bones into the fridge.

"Why else don't you want to fuck me?" she said. The man sat down at the table and opened the little bottle of paint. She lit another cigarette and one-eyed him through the smoke.

"Here I thought it was my fault. That I wasn't pretty enough for you. Ha, ha, ha. What a joke. Look at you, fucking He-Man, painting little dollies."

"They're toy soldiers..."

"Dolls. You're a fucking girlie. You never do anything; just suck on your pipe...fucking penis substitute. Should've fucking known it was too good to be true." She stabbed her cigarette out in disgust and plonked the bottle on the table.

"I'm sick of the sight of you. I'm going out." she said, and as an afterthought she added, "And don't let that little bastard piss in our bed again tonight. He can sleep in his own fucking bed. He's four years old already, Christ." The man picked up a soldier and dabbed his paintbrush into the red paint.

I followed her down the hall and into her bedroom. I was scared of her but I was curious about the snake tattoo. I watched her as she sat down at her dressing table and crossed her legs. She lit a cigarette and left it to burn in the ashtray while she put on her lipstick. She did it quickly with two red swipes, and was just about to powder her nose when she stopped and squinted closely at the mirror as if she'd found a pimple on her face. Then she spun around and looked me straight in the eye.

She's here. I can feel her watching me...Oh lord just keep very still...quiet now. Sshhh.....shh.....try not to think of her...try not to think...things drifting away in the dark...come back...where's the bed...feel the bed...it's still there...she's still there...she knows...she saw me... in my dream, oh please lord don't make me go back

there...just this once...and...there...there...things moving again...I can't hold on...please help me...I'm getting very scared now. I can feel she's...oh, oh, oh. How do you know if...how do I know where I am? I'm here, I'm here....where is she?...breathe...breathe in...in – out - I wish it would hold still...bed...blanket...table...up, up, touch the table...yes, that's good...smooth table.....sink yes, steel sink, nice and cold...please stay still stainless steel sink she's still there I can feel her waiting oh god please help me and I'll never masturbate again....touch the window...no...no don't look outside, too many things out there...look at the wardrobe...look at your lovely new wardrobe....oh my god she's coming to get me... sing.....sing to God...KUMBAYA MA LORD, KUMBAYAAAAAA...oh please save me it's moving too...oh no please don't go away wardrobe....touch the wardrobe...touch the bed...the bed's here.....touch the floor....the floor...smell the floor....there, that's real...the floor's real...1234567, all the good boys go to heaven oh I'm so sorry.....what's that! What's that! oh no, oh no this is not good....she's coming...she's coming...

\* \*

She came into the kitchen and dropped her purse on the table with a clunk. Then she leant on the back of the chair with one hand so that she could lift her foot and take off her high-heel shoe. She didn't wear stockings...or panties. Most of her clients didn't have time for niceties like that.

"Had another fucking weirdo tonight. Wanted to talk. Didn't want to do anything, just talk." She poked at the blister on her heel and squeezed some water out of it.

"Well, I thought, what the hell. Probably wants to tell me about his wife. A lot of them do. What do I care?" She put her bare

foot on the floor and lifted the other one. "So I took him round the corner, next to the Chinese take-away....very romantic little alley. Anyway..." She stopped and looked up as if remembering. "He didn't want to talk about her," she said. "He wanted to know...." But then she thought better of it and waved the thought away. "Never mind." She took off the other shoe and let it clonk to the floor. She took a cigarette out of her purse and lit it.

"He was 'interested' in me, he says, as if I'm some kind of specimen." She took another drag and spat out a piece of something. "He wanted to know why I do it. Told him some crap. He still had to pay though." She reached into her bra and took out a wad of dirty notes.

"I told him..." she started saying. He paused resignedly in his painting and waited for her to finish.

"I told him that my husband was dead."

He looked at her and waited.

"I told him I had a boyfriend, but his penis was shot off in the war and now he sits around all day and paints little toy soldiers." She looked up to see if her bullets were hitting home. "And anyway, why don't you paint them properly. You're just painting them red. What's the point of that? Looks like blood. Who wants to look at bloody soldiers? Christ you're a sick fuck."

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to do except to keep his mouth closed, his hands busy, and his heart holding the things he loved steady as a rock. He was sorry for her story, but there was not much he could do about it. He did what little he could, even if it was only to be there for her to bite on when the pain got too bad. He didn't mind. He didn't know if he loved her. It didn't matter. He was as caring of her and her child as he was of the dog or any other animal in distress.

"You don't care, do you? Other men fucking me? You don't give a shit do you? What kind of a man are you?" He kept his head bowed

over his painting. She looked around for something to hurt him with. Then she noticed it. "And here," she took off her brooch and threw it at him. He flinched slightly as it bounced off his arm and onto the table. "You can take that piece of shit and shove it up your arse." She waved a red fingernail at it.

"Is that supposed to show how much you love me? Piece of fucking tin...crap. Fucking glass. That all I'm worth to you is it?" It was her most cherished possession. She liked it because he had bought it for her when they first met, to cheer her up. She was miserably pregnant at the time and needed something nice. She didn't often get that anymore because her brusque and abrasive manner only drove him to diminish his meagre efforts even further. The dog too would only half wag its tail at her, because she could coo over it as the cutest little thing and within the space of the same sentence kick it skidding across the room for getting under her feet.

"Dirty thing," she would say, hearing the echo of her father's voice, stern, holding her at arm's length with his frown and never with his hands, and as a result, the many, many men's hands she sought since that have left her looking like a well-fingered book. She could've been clean. She had tried so hard, little heart full of hope and helpfulness, until one day she found herself standing on the pavement outside their home, waiting for any old mongrel to come by and give her a friendly lick. That's how he found her fifteen years later, standing on the corner while he waited for his dog to finish pissing up against her lamppost. She had broken her shoe or something, and though he was too shy to offer any help, he hung around in case she needed to ask.

"Cheap rubbish."

It had become a talisman for her, the brooch, something that helped protect her from the awfulness of what she had to do, and reminded her that she wasn't just something that other men left their

semen in. It made her feel special, loved, and now she was throwing it away. She knew how to hurt herself all right. He carried on painting.

“And stop playing with those fucking toys!” She slapped at his hands in frustration, showering the kitchen with red paint and burning embers from her cigarette. She laughed spitefully at the mess while he dabbed out the smouldering sparks on the table with a cloth. “It’s okay,” he said. “No harm done.”

Then she hit him hard across the side of his face. The smack echoed sharply around the bare room.

\* \* \*

### Chapter 3

I'm feeling a bit better now, thank you. A bit cold, but it's getting light now. The sun will be up soon. I'll start the engine in a little while and warm up the car again. It's a real haven this car. I feel safe from her anyway, the snake lady, because it's too small for anyone else in here ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. Sorry, I'm still a bit hysterical. She's a witch that woman; even talking about her makes me nervous so I'll just stop. Could do with something to eat though. All the shops are still closed and I've eaten my entire secret store of snacks in here. Got some food at home but I daren't go back there yet. Anyway, the street sweepers are giving me the evil eye now because I'm parked in their way, so I better move on. Ok, here we go. Good car, starts every time. Wonder if the railway station kiosk

will be open. That's one of my usual haunts; plenty of food and pretty ladies standing around looking sleepy-eyed and sipping their coffee...God I'm getting horny again. That's what happens if I don't eat. Mind you, it's what happens when I do eat. I'm sorry for bringing up the subject again but there's nothing I can do about it. It just happens...all the time. I can't think of anything else. I want so badly to fuck someone I'll do anything. Usually something stupid and dangerous like...well...I dunno. At school, the boys used to pull my pants down in front of the girls and everyone would laugh. Don't know why I told you that. Oh yeah, showing my willy to girls. Well, I don't know how I've only been caught once. That's a miracle to me. Okay, here we go...there's the station. I'm sure the trains must be running by now...and there's a parking place. Dum dee dum dee dum oops, never mind. Place looks very empty though, and the ticket office is still closed. I'll just have to wait a while and warm up a bit first. Right, where was I. Oh yes, sex.

'Why don't I just go to a prostitute?' you may ask. Well, they don't like me very much either, always telling me to fuck off. They're a bit rough, those girls. I did try one of those fancy red light ladies once. Those ones who sit in the window with only stockings and stuff on. I planned it all very carefully, which one I was going to go to, but when I got there she was busy and her curtain was closed. I tried the next one but she was also busy, and the next, and finally I had to settle for this awful looking woman because I was practically coming in my pants by then. At first she pretended not to see me and stuck her nose up the other way but I kept knocking until she opened up.

"Go away," she hissed, and tried to close the door again.

"I'll scream." I had no idea why I said that. I would never have screamed, but she didn't know that I suppose.

"Alright then," she said and I stepped forward eagerly.

"Uh uh. Money first!" She said and jabbed her hand into my stomach. I wish people wouldn't do that to me. They don't jab

anyone else. And I'm very sensitive about my stomach. I also noticed she kept her eyes on the wall while I searched for my money...like she couldn't bear to look at me.

"Take off your pants," she said, putting the money in a drawer and locking it. Then she pointed to little hand basin by the bed. "Wash first."

Well, she didn't do it very nicely, you know, not sexy at all. It was more like she was washing a dog – scrubbing away at it with her elbows flying. My willy was actually a bit sore afterwards. Then she couldn't get the condom on because I was too soft and she started to get irritable with the whole business. Anyway to cut a long story short, I lay there like a lump while she sat next to me looking at the ceiling as bored as you please, plucking at my penis with her finger and thumb until I got a little bit hard and then took off her gown and sat on top of me smelling of baby powder and said 'oh, oh, oh' without even trying.

She wouldn't let me kiss her, or touch her breasts or anything. And I didn't come. I don't think I even got inside her. I couldn't feel very much at all. In the end she just told me to get dressed and bugger off.

"Move along now. You can't sleep here." God, for a moment I thought the witch had found me, but it was only a meter maid knocking on my window. I put the car in gear and moved off before I was even awake, my heart thumping away. It was broad daylight, with people bustling about, and I was so hungry I had an ache in my tummy.

"Could I please have two hot dogs with mustard, a large coke, a family pack of fries and a jumbo bucket of salty popcorn please. No, make it three hotdogs...with mustard AND ketchup please. Oh, and extra salt on the fries please. Thank you."

You see how nice I am. How nice and polite...but she pulled *such* a face, and got my order as slowly as possible and then practically threw it down in front of me. And she put hardly any mustard on the hotdogs, but I wasn't going to ask for more. I could see she was just waiting for me to complain...standing there all cocky, staring at me with her arms folded and chewing her gum with those open-mouthed smacking sounds trying to be as disgusting as possible. She's always like that to me. But it's the only cinema in town so I have to put up with it.

The seats were a bit of a squash, but the place was practically empty so I could put my elbows up on the armrests and spread out. That felt very good. Much more comfortable than my car. Didn't get much sleep last night in there I can tell you. But this was nice, the lights down low and they were even playing that hushed, harpy kind of music, so I settled down to enjoy my feast. Then the advertisements came on so I put my knees up on the seat in front and lay back and watched.

I liked the first one, the 'American Dream Pizza Parlour', with a sexy waitress in a mini-skirt holding up a thick crust pizza with all the toppings. Hmmm. Next was 'Pete's Luxury Car Emporium' with a pretty girl in a bikini lying seductively on the hood of a Cadillac. I've got a Mini actually, and she would never have fitted on the hood of my car. Ha, ha. Then came 'Bernie's Beds and Mattresses' with a girl in a very shortie nightie.....I'm sure it was all the same girl you know. Even the usherette at the door looked suspiciously like them, except she wasn't smiling and she was still chewing her gum. She was the same girl that served me in the foyer by the way. She also sells the tickets before the movie and she does the kiosk at interval as well, so there's just no escaping her. I watched her for a bit, flashing her torch willy nilly, making circles on the ceiling and then shining it in peoples eyes for a joke. She thought that was very funny. I always

have to sit in a different part of the cinema because if she sees me she'll spend the whole movie flashing her torch at me.

Then I noticed that the exit sign above her head was flickering and making that buzzy sort of sound. I hoped it wasn't a short circuit. Maybe it would catch fire...then you'll see her run, ha, ha. Be a bit ironic though, the fire-exit door catching fire. But it was getting a bit warm in here. Maybe the air-conditioning was broken too.

The lights went off and the movie started but I still couldn't take my eyes off the exit sign. It was flashing brighter now because it was dark. No one else seemed to have noticed. On, off, flash, flicker, off, and that stupid usherette was just standing there chewing the cud like a cow. Chew, chew, chew, chew. And then I saw it, wisps of smoke began to seep in under the door behind her like little silver serpents, crawling over the carpet and swirling about her shoes. Oh my God, the door really was on fire. What do I do? No one else has seen it. I have to do something. Look! Look! There's a fire...the door...no-one's looking. Stand up...I must stand up...get out of here. I pushed down on my armrests but nothing happened. I was paralyzed. I couldn't move.

It was all over. The firemen were rolling up their hoses and splashing through the red reflected pools of water in the road. People who had come out of their houses to watch the fire were crowding ever closer, eager to see more, emergency lights flashing on their spectacles.

"What are you looking at?" the snake lady snapped. "Fun's over so why don't you all fuck off home." The house was a charred, empty shell. The burst windows looking like the sockets of a giant death mask, smoke still steaming from the beams of its black and broken mouth.

"No one's dead you know. There's nothing more to see."

She threw away a half-smoked cigarette and closed her dirty dressing gown around her bare legs. Then she took another cigarette from a nearly empty packet. "Fucking ghouls," she said, patting her pockets for her lighter. "Nothing better to do than stick their noses up other people's arses." She sucked in a great lungful of smoke and blew it out slowly into the midnight air just as the crowd parted and the pipe man came pushing through.

"What happened?" His head swung between her and the house as if he didn't know which one to look at first. "Are you alright?" He put a worried hand on her arm and she shrugged him off. He looked anxiously at the burned out house.

"Where's the boy?" When he couldn't see him he turned around frantically, eyes searching the crowd; then his face relaxed and he ran over and picked me up. The world disappeared down below as I was whirled high up and held tightly in his arms.

"Look at him! Jesus, what happened? He's burnt...look at his feet. Why didn't you call the ambulance?"

She stared at him deadpan. He shrugged off his coat, one sleeve at a time, holding me in the other arm, and then wrapped it around me and hugged me tight to him. I could smell his tobacco smell. It was comforting.

"What about the dog?" he asked her. I felt his chest vibrate against me as he spoke. "Where's the dog?" I turned in his arms to look at her answer. After an interminable time, without moving her eyes from his face, she pointed a lazy cigarette at the burnt out house and flicked it with her thumb.

I followed the ash down into the pool as it sizzled out, and dissolved into the cool water.

I woke up soaking wet. I had spilled my Coke all over my leg and it had run down into my shoe. I had one warm foot and one cold one. The lights had come on and the audience were getting up and

pushing their arms into their coats. It looked like I had weed myself so I pretended to look for my popcorn under my seat and waited until they'd all gone, all except the usherette who stood staring daggers at me for not hurrying so I squelched and squirted my way up the aisle to the toilet, leaving a one-legged wet footprint trail behind me.

I rang my sock out in a toilet and dabbed myself dry with toilet paper but that only made things worse. Everything was wet and sticky, just a bloody mess. Why do I always end up in the toilet? Because I'm a fat useless turd that's why. Because this is where I belong. A pile of crap. Just look at me. Fat piggy face and tiny piggy eyes, and pimples and look he's going to start crying now. Oh god, not more snot. Shut up, shut up, shut up. Stop that. Stop that. Big baby. No one likes a sniveller. Look at you.

I never look nice you know. People just look at me and pull a face...who's ever going to want this...this thing? No one wants me. I don't even want me. Jesus, that's a horrible thing to say. It's just.....I'm always nice to people. I'm not a bad person. I'm never mean to anyone, but everyone's always mean to me. They treat me like a child. It's very hard you know.

It's actually quite nice...letting myself feel sorry for myself. Feels comforting...just crying...and the warm tears, and just letting go...letting it all out...oh so much...and then it feels so nice that I don't want to stop and soon everything's coming out all at the same time and it's so bad I have to sit down on the loo and I'm howling at the top of my voice now and I can't feel my legs or my arms anymore and sliding to the floor onto my knees; dear god this is where I always end up, on my knees, in the piss and the shit, always on my knees. My whole life I've been on my knees and I can't do it anymore and someone's screaming in my ears and my nose explodes with lights and pain and I can't see anything, flat on my face on the floor, flopping around like a fish, retching and choking and jerking so

hard in a fat fit that I can't breathe anymore and I know I'm going to die. And I don't care. I want to die. I don't want to live anymore.

\*

"Hello there. How are you feeling?" He put a blanket over me and tucked it in. "There, that'll warm you up. Don't be alarmed, but you're in an ambulance, and we're taking a look at you to see that everything's ok." He sounded nice but I couldn't see much of him. I was lying on my back and he was upside down and there were a lot of clicks and hisses and hums and things going on.

"Got yourself into a bit of a state there, didn't you? They found you unconscious in the toilet. Do you remember anything about it?" He was pasting some sticky pads to my ankles and wrists and carefully attaching little red wires to them. I shook my head. I didn't think I'd be able to talk. But it felt nice...being fussed over, and touched. Then a frantic beeping noise started and I nearly had a heart attack.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "Your pulse is a little bit high that's all. There's nothing to worry about," he said, patting my tummy reassuringly. "You lie back and take a few deep breaths on this." Well after that, I was willing to do anything for him. "It's oxygen and it'll probably dry your mouth out a little." He put the mask against my face and I breathed in the warm, strange tasting air. The beeping sound gradually slowed down and settled into a regular rhythm.

"There you go. Oxygen levels are up so your heart doesn't have to work so hard. Good boy." He picked up his clipboard. "Now I just need to take a few details and we'll be on our way."

The corridors of the emergency ward were lined choc-a-bloc with people. Some of them looked so old and lay so still, frail faces

with pale, thin lips, taking in the merest sips of air, you wondered if it would've been better to take them straight to the cemetery and wait for the angel there.

There were a lot of drunks as well. Some of them were singing and bleeding, some of them throwing up and moaning, groaning and shouting and calling for a nurse with the dong, dong, dong of the call button going all the time.

One man in particular was making a terrible noise, gurgling in his juices and grasping for life.

"Sounds bad, doesn't he?" said an old black man sitting in a wheelchair opposite me. He seemed to be all bones and big eyes, hugging his knees and rocking himself backwards and forwards.

"Why doesn't someone help him?" I asked.

He tilted his head and eyed me for a long time.

"He ain't going to die. Making too much noise for a start..." he giggled throatily like an old smoker. "It's the quiet ones you gotta watch out for."

He looked at me for a meaningful moment, but I didn't know what to say so I looked away.

"Like you," he said, and things started to creep up my spine.

"I know why you're here," he said. Oh god. My mind felt like it was trying to escape from my skull. 'Please don't talk,' I tried to say, but my lips were stapled together. 'Please don't say anymore'.

"You been playin' with dead people." he said.

I sat there for ages, listening to the nurses ever-cheerfully cajoling people into beds and out of clothes and constantly cleaning up after patients who had no control of their bowels or their manners. The nurses never got cross and were always kind and caring, no matter what the provocation, hour after hour after hour; patient after patient. Finally it was my turn and one of them ushered me into a small curtained cubicle and told me to take off my clothes

and put on a hospital gown, which was far too small for me. I felt a bit breezy about the buttocks, but it was quite nice in a naughty way.

"A doctor will be around to see you in a minute."

Hours later, a doctor walked in looking busily at his clipboard. "How are you feeling?" he asked. By this stage, I was feeling fine and ready to go home.

"Nothing wrong as far as we can see. Says you're not sleeping very well. Are you on any medication?"

"No."

"Any recent illnesses or operations?"

"No."

"Any allergies?"

"No."

"Fine. I'll give you some sleeping pills. Should set you right. Any stress at the moment?"

"A little." I lied.

"That's probably the cause. You need to relax, take a holiday."

\*

Well, here I am. Relaxing at the laundrette. Ha, ha, that's a joke. She watches me now...the laundrette lady. The first time I came here I jammed the machine, and now she makes me empty all my trouser pockets first, watching me as if I was a criminal. She also has these big wooden tongs that she uses to pick up the dirty washing and put it into the machine, and I'm sure she waves my washing around on purpose for everyone to see what a dirty bugger I am. Other people's washing looks clean before they put it into the machine. Mine isn't clean even after it comes out. Ha, ha. Anyway, she's gone off to her little cubicle now thank goodness, I was starting to get depressed again.

I opened my eyes and stared at a pair of stick thin shins attached to two splayed-out feet in threadbare slippers. The skin was a sort of mottled brown and blue colour with strange looking bumps and thick black hairs.

"Done," said the laundry lady, pointing to my plastic bag of clothes and holding out her hand for the money.

I must have fallen asleep, what with the whirr of the machines and the warm air from the tumble dryers and the wonderful smell of fabric softener, I had slid onto my side on the sunny window seat amongst the Women's Own magazines. I sat up, counted out five coins from my parking meter purse, and she did a jerky three-point turn on her cranky old bones and creaked off to the next machine. I picked up my bag feeling much refreshed, and went outside. The sun was warming up nicely and I was getting a bit peckish, so I headed for the snack bar.

It's a nice town really. Not very big, so everything's quite close by. A sign in the very next shop caught my eye. 'All plumbing jobs taken on, no matter how big or small.' Without thinking, I went in and walked up to the counter, feeling like a grown up. I looked around at the buckets and brooms and nails and pipes and screwdrivers and sandpaper while I waited for the shopkeeper to serve me.

"Can I help you, Sir?"

"My toilet's broken."

"I'm sure we can help you with that. Do you know what's wrong with it?"

"It won't flush."

"Ah. Is there any water in the cistern?"

"I don't know."

"Never mind. Shouldn't be a problem," he said, peering into a brown covered appointment book. "When would suit you Sir?"

Well that was easy. I walked along the pavement with a spring in my step. Well, not so much a spring, more like a little wobble of well-being really. Can't imagine why I'd been so afraid of getting the loo fixed before. He was such a nice man. My stomach was beginning to gurgle again as I bounced into the snack bar a few doors down and bought myself a couple of sausage rolls and a spice bun. I have to tell you that the sun doesn't shine here that often, so I made the most of it and strolled around town while I finished off my breakfast. I stopped in front of the Barbershop window to see if I had any crumbs on my face and the next thing I knew I was having a haircut too. I don't have them often because I hate the prickling hair in my collar afterwards. But anyway, it felt nice and cool around the ears as I stood outside once more.

"Out of the way fatty," said a voice behind me and tring-tringed his bell for good measure. I moved to one side just as the butcher boy skidded to a halt, jumped off his bicycle, and disappeared into the shop. Cheeky bugger.

I didn't know what to do next. Maybe go home and have a snooze. But the sunshine was so nice I lingered a bit longer. I looked around and noticed the shop behind me. I'd seen it before but never paid any attention. A sort of second hand junk shop... just rubbish really...old clothes and records and stuff. 'Pink Paradise'. Didn't look much of a paradise. Didn't look very pink either. The window was grimy and the wall underneath was filthy and stained with dog pee and had grass growing in the cracks. I was just about to move off when a glint of green from the window display caught my eye and I found myself staring at the brooch I had picked up behind the bins at home. The one that was supposed to be in my kitchen drawer at home. What was it doing here? My mind did a loop-the-loop and swooped this way and that as it tried to bend around the impossible fact before my eyes. I pressed my forehead against the cold window and peered closely at the brooch, my heart thumping with fright. It

couldn't be the same one, I thought. There must be hundreds just like it. Mass produced cheap jewellery. There's probably a whole drawer full of them behind the counter. Just forget about it. I didn't want to start all that funny business again. I turned away and tried to regain some of my former good feeling by closing my eyes and holding my face up to the warming sun.

"Out of the way, fatty" Tring, tring.

Cheeky little bugger.

For the next few days things went along fine and the toilet even got repaired. It needed a new ball-cock apparently. Whoever thought of that name was taking the piss. Ha, ha. Anyway, then my sleeping pills ran out.

So hush-a-bye baby, I now have a story to tell. I was woken at midnight by the rain hammering on the windows, and badly needing a wee I hopped over to the sink and joined in the noise of the downpour. Blissfully lost in thought, I happened to glance out the window and gave an involuntary squirt as I saw the old lady turn the corner by the tree. I blinked but there was no mistaking the pink umbrella walking through the rain towards me. It was her. I knew I wasn't dreaming because I could feel the steel sink under my willy as she went by. Then, with another kick at my heart that left me breathless, I remembered the brooch in the shop window and I knew something had gone wrong again. I lurched round the table and nearly ripped my fingernails off in my hurry to open the drawer. The brooch was gone.

\*

The relentless rattle of rain on the windowpane rakes at my nerves. Every time I nod off it seems to sense it and rush at the house, keeping me awake and pinned up against the problem, like

the brooch on her breast, never letting me rest. There's another rumble of thunder and the rain starts to beat like a stick on a drum as the storm picks up the pace. I can't see anything through the curtain of water so I go back to bed and lie down but it's impossible to sleep or to think with all the noise; like a million tiny bullets thrashing at the window in waves and the big gun thunder getting louder and stronger until it feels as if the room is going to collapse. Then the cardboard comes loose and the Devil slips in through the gap, howling and whistling a shrieking tune on the edge of the taut sticky tape that sets my teeth jangling. I rush across the room and try to push the cardboard closed but it's soggy and bends in the wind whipped watery frothing frenzy of foam and I rush back to the other side of the room, sliding on the slippery floor and grabbing onto the table as the room begins to creak and crack under the strain of the attack. The darkness thickens about me like blood and an awful thrill of anticipation creeps over my scalp as the room judders and bends and begins to beat like a bowstring. This is it. The noise is tremendous. The cardboard plucks loose and slaps against the wall and the storm pours in unopposed, filling up the room, a grand airborne waterspout dancing a devilish victory celebration, swirling and gyring around me, faster and faster, higher and higher, trying to suck me up off the face of the earth. I fall to my knees and hold on to the floor with all my might.

It seems to take hours for the whirlwind to recede and to be quiet again. I wait in the pitch darkness, drenched and clenched from teeth to toenails. I stretch out my hand and there's carpet under my fingers instead of linoleum. This isn't my room. Goosebumps begin crawling over my skin. I have no idea where I am but it isn't raining anymore and I can smell vomit. Suddenly an electric light goes on and I squeeze my eyelids shut against the painful brightness.

"What the hell have you been doing?" The voice makes me jump and I catch a glimpse of a huge man as he walks over and stands above me, blocking out the light. I cringe, not daring to move. All I can see are his big boots, standing in a puddle of puke.

"Jesus Christ! You've been sick again. What a mess." He steps back and I tense up, expecting a blow. "Well, you see that you bloody clean it up? Do you understand?" I look up as he bends over me.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" he shouts in my face. I close my eyes and nod my head and somewhere in my brain I hear the jangle of keys and the slamming of a door and I'm holding onto the floor as the room starts spinning again. Faster and sickeningly faster we go. Just hold on. Stay conscious. Breathe deep. In, out. Hold on. Focus on something nice, something beautiful. Think of the pink lady...her soft white feet in the moonlight on the white rug...on the cold floor...outside the door in the rain on my hands and knees beside the garbage bins gleaming wetly through my tears, watching myself from up here as my last hope gropes about in the muck and mire below the blubbering lips saying that it's going to be alright and crying because I know it's not, and feeling blindly for the brooch under the bins as if I'm reaching into my soul for a jewel beyond price...but there's nothing there, except despair. I watch myself and wait, feeling strangely distant from my troubles...as if it isn't me...just some fool I have to live with. And I know I'm mad, because I can see it in my eyes.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 4

The little boy in his arms jumped as the thunderclap exploded above them in the night. A blinding bolt of lightning had struck a building in the blackness somewhere ahead of them and the man had to stop and lean against a wall until he could see again. Then he bowed his head and pressed on. The storm struck all around them, seeming to follow the fleeing couple as if it were hunting them down, starkly exposing their progress at every bend in the road. The man twisted and turned, this way and that through the shortcuts and alleyways, child clutched to his chest, the driving rain whipping at his coat, trying to thrust him back at every step.

Eventually he stopped in a little alcove out of the wind and rain to catch his breath. He looked at the child in his arms. The boy was still and quiet, eyes closed, his mother's brooch clutched tightly in his blue and bloody fist.

\* \* \*

"How much is this?" His voice boomed out unnaturally loud in the quiet shop and startled her silly.

"Oh." She squeaked, swinging round and strewing bonnets and booties all over the counter. She put a fluttering hand on her pink-jacketed breast to still her wildly beating heart and leant the other on the counter to steady herself.

"Oh!" she gasped again, "I didn't hear you come in." She gave him a nervous little giggle and glanced down at her feet to get her bearings.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to shout like that." He pointed vaguely back there somewhere with his pipe

"No, that's alright." She tittered, "I'll get these out of the way," She gathered up the baby clothes, which she was wont to unpack from a shelf at least once a day, holding them up and looking at them with a loving tilt of her head, until finally folding the soft garments against her bosom and fondling them in a rapturous reverie.

She had been in one such pose the first time their eyes had met. His face had suddenly appeared at the window, and she had panicked and stuffed the guilty garments under the counter and then pretended to be busy with something else, her face aflame with embarrassment. When she finally sneaked a peek at the window, he had gone. A week later he was there again, staring through her window...and the next.

Not many men stopped in front of her shop. To most of them, it was a daunting demesne of dresses and blouses, petticoats and other more intimate apparel decorated with delicate laces and frills that frittered round the room in billows of pink and white, so she was a little concerned about him loitering outside her window. One day however, she happened to look up as he took a bone from a brown paper bag and threw it to his dog. And then the penny dropped. Of course. The butcher next door often gave away scraps and offal, and the stranger had merely been admiring her knick-knacks in the window display to fill in the moments while waiting for his doggy-bones. So relieved was she at discovering the cause of his dalliance that she surprised them both by nodding at him in an unaccustomed burst of bonhomie. He nodded back nicely and so began their acquaintanceship. She was now only a little bit embarrassed when by chance he would catch her all dreamy-eyed at the baby-clothes counter. She would give him a wry sort of smile and he would nod

back kindly and stroll off down the road, dog at his heels, pipe smoke trailing in the breeze.

They had continued this companionable custom for many months before she found him standing at the counter in front of her.

"Didn't mean to shout," he said again, taking a puff on his pipe.

She blushed at the closeness of him and his naked voice. The aroma from his pipe swirled about her, overpowering her senses and scattering the feminine fragrances that usually hung heavily in the air. She breathed him in and felt shocked by the warmth and thickness of his smell, how intimate it was, how it stirred things in her. She thankfully breathed him out, but he was there again with the next breath in, delving into ever-deeper desires and consequences. She spoke some words, any words, as beacons to guide her through the confusion that enveloped her.

"How can I help you sir?" He also seemed to have forgotten his mission for a moment, and then he pointed to the widow display with his pipe. "The green brooch..."

"Oh yes," she said, grateful to focus on something else. "It's only five pounds. Beautiful isn't it?" She picked it up and ran her thumb over the glittering green jewel. "If that's too expensive I could let you have it for less..." she would have given it to him for nothing. Her heart lurched as she looked up at him and her limbs turned to rubber. She thrust her eyes down and bit painfully on her lower lip to steady herself.

"No, that's fine," he said, reaching into his coat-pocket for the money, dropping his gaze to gather *his* wits that had gone a-wandering amidst the perfumes and pomades of this pernicious paradise. He awkwardly held the note out to her and she took it with quivering fingers, eyes flitting this way and that not knowing where to land, eyelashes fluttering up and down like a hummingbird's wing. How dearly she longed for an old-fashioned ladies fan, to hide her upheavals and cool her glowing cheeks.

\*

They were both soaked to the skin and the man felt the boy shivering against his chest. He cuddled him closer and hurried his pace.

"We're nearly there now."

It was midnight before they stopped in front of the shop where he'd bought the brooch some years before. The rain had stopped and there was only the occasional plop into a puddle. The shop was locked up nice and tight and it would be hours before the lady arrived. They would have to wait. He was staking everything on the lady finding the boy and taking him in. Knowing her predisposition towards children and the kindly person she was, he felt quite sure she would. His eyes found a little alley down the side of her shop where the dustbins were kept. There was a sort of lean-to there with a wooden gate in front of it to keep the dogs out.

"There we go," he said, squeezing them in beside the bins and settling the boy on his lap. They snuggled down and soon began to merge into the sleepy surroundings.

\*

"There you go." She fussed over his hair, combing it with her fingers and sitting back to admire her handiwork. There he was, a real live, breathing boy who had fallen from heaven into her dustbin it seemed. A gift from God? Maybe someone threw him away. She felt quite nervous and fluttery and could hardly stop herself from stroking his hands and patting his palms and cheeks and uttering little mothering noises.

"You don't say much, do you? Poor thing," she said, forgoing all restraint and hugging his head to her breast. "I'm not surprised. Well, don't you worry. Everything's going to be alright now."

She could see that something awful had happened to him. He was scratched and bruised all over, and there was a feverish look to his eye.

The bus conductor dinged the bell chord twice, and the bus moved off. Tenderly she took up his clenched fist and a deep excitement stirred in her when she recognized the blood encrusted brooch clutched between his little fingers. She remembered the young man who had bought it. She still saw him occasionally, buying bones for his dog. He would still nod to her, but he never came into the shop again. Now the brooch had come back to her, bringing this child with it. His child? What it all meant she didn't know, but it twirled her heart with happiness, even though she knew it wouldn't last. Doesn't matter. She would live a lifetime on this wonderful moment.

"How old are you?" She said cheerfully, hoping to draw him out. He bumped up and down, his bare legs sticking to the leather seat. It was all he could do to hold on.

"Tickets!"

She dug in her purse.

"One and a half please," she said. The conductor took her money and ching-chinged the change, deftly whirring the handle and giving her the tickets with a flamboyant flourish.

"There you go luv. Tickets!" he boomed out, moving along down the aisle.

Despite the boy's silence she was in irrepressible spirits. She chattered away to cheer her little fellow up, pointing out things of interest along the way, rubbing his little hand and smiling at him, and sometimes laying her cheek tenderly on the top of his head.

"Next stop's ours," she said eventually, disappointed that the wonderful ride was over.

"What the hell ..." He brought his chair-legs down with a thump. A huge bunch of keys on his belt jangled in surprise. "Who the hell is this?" he demanded.

"I don't know," she said. "I found him hiding behind the bins next to the shop." She took a deep breath and quickly launched into her prepared story. "I asked him where his mummy was but he wouldn't answer me...he won't talk at all...and he looked so frightened. I think he's had some kind of shock. He likes holding my hand though, it seems to calm him down. If I let go of him he starts crying again. So I thought the best thing to do was bring him home with me until he's a bit more...you know..."

"No I don't fucking know. What?"

She looked at the child standing quietly at her side and ran a nervous loving hand over his hair. She'd always wanted a child, was ready for a child, a mother in waiting, fully prepared, her life geared for an event that never happened.

"You can't just take somebody else's child home you stupid bitch. You should have taken him to the police station.

"I phoned them," she said hurriedly. "And they said that no children had been reported missing and that I should phone the council, but they didn't have anyone to send so I said I would clean him up and feed him and they said it would be okay seeing as you were the prison warden, and they would contact me later." She looked up at him expectantly. "It'll only be for a while."

But she knew he knew she was lying. He knew the system. They didn't leave unauthorised children lying about without supervision and signed documentation.

"Are you listening to me?" he said, sticking his face in front of hers for emphasis.

"Sorry. What?"

"He can't stay here you dumb cow. What if he dies? What if he's got the pox...bloody TB or something, look at him, all these fucking tramps have got something or the other not to mention fucking lice and bedbugs and god knows what other kinds of dirty habits and diseases and look...he should be in a bloody hospital, probably got caught and beaten for stealing, bloody little thief, and you're going to bring him right into our house....." he went on and on and sank her heart like a stone.

She had found the boy fair and square. He was right for her, and she was right for him. They were gasping for each other. But the world would not let them breathe. It isn't made that way. The world is made by men who hunt down happiness and mount it on the wall next to mommy's face in the mausoleum of his memory to comfort his fearful mind in times of distress. What is he scared of? Gentleness. Emotions. Women. Life. Death. Mother. Child. Touching. It's all too close to the bone for a man. It makes him angry. And when he gets angry, he starts laying down the law. And when a man starts laying down the law, a woman had better shut up.

She was shocked when she tried to take his clothes off. His little underpants were caked with black blood and stuck to the wounds beneath. She had to soak them with a warm damp cloth until they were soft, and gently pry them off bit by painful bit as he jerked and whimpered and dug his nails into her shoulder. All the while, she hugged and kissed him and murmured in his ear.

"It's okay, nearly over." There were deep, ugly cuts and gashes in his groin and thighs, some of which had begun to bleed again. The bruising was also terrible, horrible yellow and purple flowers from his knees to his chest. She didn't even want to speculate on what had happened. She cleaned as much as he could stand, lathered him in antiseptic cream, and then carefully bandaged him up. She'd have to

keep a close watch on those wounds to see they didn't get infected. She was terrified she would have to take him to a doctor or the hospital.

That night she woke to his screams, and nearly fell down the stairs in her rush to get to him, grabbing him off the bed and hugging him to her warm body while he was still fending off some unseen horror.

"There, there. It's alright now, it's alright." she crooned and kissed him into consciousness, his little heart thumping against her chest. "No one's going to hurt you now. You're safe here." she said and sat them down on the little bed as he clung to her, shivering with need.

"There, there, my baby." She enveloped him like a soothing summer's day and soon he was calm again. She lay back and pulled a blanket over the two of them and they went to sleep in each other's arms.

When the first rays of light struck her face she snuck out of the bed and crept back to her own room.

"Got a new boyfriend then, I see?" said the Warden, wide-awake and smiling that sadistic smile of his. She didn't dare look at him. She put on her dressing gown and went into the kitchen to begin making breakfast. If she could feed him fast enough it would take the edge off his temper.

"I thought I told you to get rid of him? It's been three days now." he said, his voice getting louder as she went further away. He loved a good fight in the morning. She cracked an egg into the frying pan and nodded submissively. She could hardly wait for him to leave for work so that she could go down and tend to her poor patient.

She had made up the spare bed in her sunny little sewing-room and placed it so that he could look out of the window. There was a

tiny garden out there with pink petunias and a peach tree and white butterflies flitting from flower to flower. More often than not, a sparrow would chirrup on the picket fence, and if you looked carefully, you could see a little concrete statue of a bunny peeking out amongst the bushes. During the day, she would open the window a touch to let in the scents and sounds.

The Warden clonked down his cup and belched wetly. "Sign of good manners," he said.

'For a pig,' she thought and admonished herself immediately for thinking such a horrible thing. That's how other people drag you down into hell with them, she thought. It was unbearable to her that she should turn into a hateful, cynical shrew just because of him.

\* \*

A warm cloud of perfume cuts through my brain like a knife and I wake up gasping for life. I feel something warm, like hope, surge up inside me, but I can't move. I can feel that she's very close...somewhere...I can hear her saying things, softly, and then fading away and once again I'm on a highway curving through the dark night, the lights of the city signs long since gone and the soft sleek silent spinning wheel sounds on the smooth surface running mile upon bitumen black mile and getting darker and quieter and higher and higher. No white line or cat's eyes, no exits, no stopping, just this single shiny road going on forever, high in the darkness, canting over the clouds. I feel feverish at the wheel, but the highway is my home. My destination is a dream, a fond rendezvous with you.

\* \*

The sunny afternoon noises seep in through the closed curtains. The silent ringing in the quiet room and the warm drifting fever of the boy in the bed. She sits by his side, waiting as the day goes by, her sewing resting on her knee. Occasionally there's a click or creak of something expanding or contracting somewhere in the house, and then silence. Nothing moves. Fragments of a muffled voice outside, a bus going by afar, then the ringing silence returns.

He lay quietly for a long time listening to the soft rustling of fabric as she sewed away at his bedside.

"Hello my darling. How are you feeling?" She put her sewing aside and reached out to feel his forehead. Still hot, but his eyes seemed clearer.

"Did you have a good sleep?" She helped him sit up and plumped his pillows for him. "There you are. Looking much better too. Are you hungry? You must be I'm sure. Well I'm going to make you some soup and toast. Would you like that?" He nodded and she kissed him on the forehead. "Good boy."

He gazed out of the window for a long while, still dozy from his dream, then took his hand out from under the blankets and looked at the brooch for the millionth time. He couldn't let go of it, and yet he could feel the invisible infection rising from it in vivid green pus filled veins up his swollen arm and into his teeming brain. He put his hand back under the blanket just before the pink lady walked back in the room carrying a tray of food. She placed the soup and toast gently on the little bedside table and sat down beside him on the bed.

Clutching the brooch for dear life his fever raged and fell as he battled to defeat the demon infection. He wandered through strange landscapes, places, things reaching out for him through the walls, speaking to him, giant toy soldiers as tall as he was, throwing

furniture off a cliff, things locked up in faraway places, white faces hanging overhead, tumbling and turning with the heat, and then cool rain running down his body, washing him clean of the pain.

He woke up drenched in piss. He got out of bed and felt blindly for the door, making his way across the hall and up the stairs, looking for her, the carpet comforting his feet. Still half asleep, he stopped on the landing. There was a light on in the bedroom and he could hear the big fat man shouting. He came a bit closer and peeped in through the door.

“Leave that bloody boy alone. You’re at his beck and call day and night. In out, in out. This, that, and the other. If he’s sick, take him to the bloody hospital. You know sod all about nursing. Anyway, you should be tending to your bloody shop.” He grabbed her wrist and squeezed it so hard that she winced. “I’ll be bugged if I have to stand for this. Do you understand me?” He gritted his teeth at her. She felt as if her skin was coming off.

“Yes” she whispered.

It felt good...hurting her. Something warm and dark began to take hold of his insides like relief rising up his spine in a fog of ecstasy, and he felt himself getting strongly excited by her pain. It felt like...justice. He wanted to bend, break her...brittle...bits. He twisted her arm behind her back and pushed her face into the bed.

The boy turned around and went back to his room. He took off his wet pyjama pants and went to sleep.

She had a shiner the next morning. For once in her life, she didn’t feel like getting up, but because of the boy she made the effort.

“I suppose you’re going to wear that miserable bloody face all day?” he said. She made an attempt to smile, but it hurt so much she had to turn away from him and stood at the window, crying.

"Jesus Christ will you stop sulking." Not a man to swallow his pride he pushed his breakfast plate aside and, to get away from her accusing sighs, went downstairs into the boy's room.

"Get up you lazy shit. You're not going to lie around in bed all bloody day. Move your fat arse." He ripped the blankets off the bed and the startled naked boy dashed for the door.

The Warden felt much better after that. He was still in a good mood when he got to the prison later that morning and clocked in for work.

"Lock!" He called to the VTR. No need for the jangle of keys in here. All the doors were remote control. Someone out of sight punched a button and the bolt slid back with a clang that echoed through the empty hall, bare as bones, dead as God.

"Close!" He called out when he was through, and the door slammed shut. Metal to metal, man to man.

\*

She had chosen her bedspread from a catalogue. It was such a perfect shade of pink that she had launched a veritable assault upon the precincts of 'J Herbert and Son, Furnishings'. The armchair was her absolute pride and joy and no one ever sat in it, except finally the Warden did because she didn't know how to stop him. Since then she had never been able to take the same joy in it. The curtains and the headboard he mocked, and the carpet he poo-poo'd.

"Not very practical" he said strutting across it with his prison boots.

"But this is a bedroom dear."

"Looks like a whorehouse."

They had met at a church fete. She had baked a cake for the tombola sale, and he had eaten it. He was collecting for his Prison-

Warders Pension Fund. He liked cake. He left her the crumbs and the cleaning up and the taking down of the stall to do.

At first he would hang around her flat on weekends, sitting in her kitchen mostly, with his brown prison shirt tucked over his pot belly into his brown belted prison pants, telling her tasteless prison tales while she cooked endless meals for his big mouth. A small lady's kitchen it was, for such a cuckoo.

But the kitchen was as far as he dared go at first, until one day he appeared in her bedroom doorway while she was still in her slip, and stood watching her as she froze in his intense and silent focus. She supposed it was his way of wooing her. She watched him carefully, not moving a muscle in case he thought it was a come-on.

It seems he lost his nerve on that first foray into her borderlands and retreated shortly afterwards. Her tactics seemed to have worked. She tried not to get caught in her underwear again but she was dealing with a mastermind in understanding devious intent. He could read prisoners like other people read books. He did it again the next weekend, but again, he stood there as if unsure of what to do with her now that he had her cornered. If he were waiting for any sign of consent from her it would be a cold day in hell. He couldn't seem to breach her defences or his inhibitions, he didn't know which, but something had held him at bay as they stared at each other across the top of the fluffy pink armchair.

Then came the day she knew must come, for life is short, inevitable, and not always fun. He didn't hesitate in the doorway; he came right into the room and told her to take her nightie off. She knew then what it must feel like to face a firing squad, the kind of vulnerability involved. Not something one looks forward to, but life happens, because one lets it.

She let her gown drop to the floor. She was beautiful beyond belief.

And he thought it was all for him.

To plunder.

The angels wept as he walked across her beautiful carpet and doubled her over the bed like an inmate.

He had an all-encompassing nature, far beyond her means to resist. Once he had set his teeth into her, she just had to lie still and hope for the best.

He moved in immediately and claimed her side of the dinky pink bed leaving a black oily stain on the pretty pink pillow and her poppy pink headboard. Soon the little flat began to smell, faintly at first, of prison: stale cigarette smoke, urine, puke, and pain.

\*

"Hello dear." She put down the tray. "Feeling better then?" She took care not to smother him, to give him room to breathe and time to find his feet, but always within reach. She was the perfect mother. He was the perfect child. He loved her. He loved the sight and the smell of her. When she was near, it filled him to the brim. They drank each other in. They didn't need anything more.

She straightened his bedclothes and smoothed the sheet across his chest. "There you go, doesn't that feel better," she said. He looked up at her for a moment, and then took his hand out from under the blankets and offered her the brooch on his open palm.

"That's very sweet of you darling. Are you sure?" He nodded.

"Well," she said. "Just for a while then. And you can have it back anytime you want. Ok?" He nodded and she pinned it to her dress. He liked that.

"There." She patted it into place.

He never asked for it back, and she didn't make the offer. It was too precious. She knew the system would catch up with them sooner or later and she selfishly wanted something to remember him

by. She stood up and smiled at him. Tonight the Warden was on nightshift and soon they would be alone for the evening.

"I've cooked a very special dinner for tonight." His eyes lit up. "So you lie down for a bit and I'll wake you when it's time to eat." He nodded and put his thumb in his mouth, closing his eyes contentedly. Humming happily to herself, she went into the kitchen and began preparing her surprise.

The boy sat on the tall wooden chair with the humped-back leather seat that made him want to roll off the sides. Perched on the pinnacle, he held onto the mahogany table to get his balance. The lady came in with a pink placemat and put it in front of him.

"Here we go," she said, arranging a knife and fork on either side. She put a napkin rolled up in a pink napkin-holder by his left hand, and the salt and pepper cellars in a little silver salver in front of him.

"Nearly there now." The finishing touch was to light a little candle in the middle of the table. She watched it flicker into life and then went back into the kitchen while he gazed at the flame and how it reflected off the shiny tabletop.

"Here we are," she said, placing a big dinner plate ceremoniously in front of him.

"What do you think of that?" she said and watched his eyes widen with wonder. There was a big puddle of green peas, a sizzling lamb chop, and a neat pile of crispy fried chips. She took his napkin out of the holder for him, unfolded it, and placed it neatly on his lap.

"There you are my darling. Bon appetite." He picked up the knife and fork without taking his eyes off the plate, and she watched him eat with relish.

The next day the Warden phoned the authorities.

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The place reeked of booze from the broken bottle on the floor next to the dead woman. By the looks of it, she must've put up quite a fight; the place was a mess. The policeman was surprised and a little perturbed by his reaction to her body. He had seen many bodies before, in all stages of death and dying; but none had ever repulsed him as much, and none had ever excited him...as hers did. Notwithstanding the waxy skin colour and the spongy texture of her flesh, she was certainly the most perfectly beautiful woman he had ever seen. Breasts like apples and a body like Eve. Even the tattoo was perfect; a snake, curling up around her arm, with its head on her shoulder, whispering sweet nothing's in her ear. Well, maybe not so sweet. By the look on her face it hadn't been good news from fate's forked tongue, frozen forever by the moment of death, her mouth hinged open wide, protruding tongue trilling forever a silent scream of hatred while her eyes almost popped out at the extremity of emotion she had felt. He'd never seen someone so beautiful, look so ugly. A veritable modern Medusa.

He remembered his studies from university. How Medusa had once been a beautiful maiden, but that she had desecrated Athena's temple by laying her warm body on the floor beside Poseidon's in plain sight of the goddess's statue. In the marbled halls of her mind, Athena was beside herself with icy indignation and turned Medusa's golden locks into the snakes of fear behind the furious face that no man could look upon without turning to stone.

Eventually she was killed by Perseus who used his glittering shield as a mirror so he could cut off her head. In this case, he had thrust his knife between the eyes of the snake tattooed on her chest and deep into her gorgon heart. What the policeman had to do now was find Perseus. And that wasn't going to be easy because the

young lady had been a prostitute. So, it could've been half the town that did it. Could've been the boyfriend too, but no sign of him. She also had a kid apparently. Also missing. He sucked in his moustache as he gazed out of the window.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 5

"Get up." A woman's voice came to him through the heavy rain. A small spark of recognition ignited in his dim brain and he fought to fan it into flame. He held on to her voice for a second, and then lost it again in other worlds and warmer days.

"Get up," she said and pulled at his arm. "You must get up, otherwise you're going to die." Had he looked up and seen the lank black hair hanging down like seaweed across her gaunt face with its deep-set dark eyes in their sunken sockets and hooked nose thrusting out from in-between, he would indeed have thought some cadaverous crone or dark earth deity had come to collect him for his final journey.

She had found him scrabbling around on his hands and knees in the dirt beside the dustbins. At first she'd thought he'd lost his keys and was about to leave him to his own business and continue walking down the street, when she noticed that his door was standing wide open and the rain was pouring in. Strange.

Then she heard it...that peculiar type of singsong talking you hear from someone who is mad. The thunder crashed in her ears as

she moved closer to the fat young man. Senseless to his surroundings, he was babbling away to himself, crooning and encouraging, explaining and apologising, pleading and praying, and all the while his fingers were frantically feeling around in the mud. She relaxed a bit. She knew about mad people. They were quite harmless mostly, like children. But what was he doing out here on a night like this? All on his own? Surely someone should be looking after him? Well, she couldn't just leave him there that was plain. She took a deep breath and limped round in front of him. With both hands, she lifted her bad leg and thrust it out wide so she could bend down to his level, and shouted in his ear.

"Hello...do you need any help?" She didn't expect an answer, but she knew on some level he was hearing her.

"You shouldn't be out here you know," she said slowly and clearly. The rain splashed off his back, his T-shirt and pyjama pants long since soaked through. "Come on now. I think it would be much better if you come inside with me. It's much nicer inside. Can you hear me," she said loudly in his ear, but still he took no notice.

"You must stand up so that I can help you inside." She gave his arm a tentative tug as the wind drove little rivulets of rain across her face and down into the collar of her coat. He was far too big for her to manhandle and she was beginning to panic now. Her heart quailed at the alternative prospect of having to limp up and down the street, knocking on people's doors and asking them for help. Then she had an idea and unhooked her black plastic handbag from her shoulder. She dug around inside until she found a pill-bottle and opened it. Then she bent down in front of him and snapped one of her amyl nitrate heart capsules under his nose.

The effect was spectacular. In an instant he was standing upright, wide eyed and wonderful, swaying in the night above her like some ancient colossus, proclaiming nonsense to the world in a

voice like thunder as his blood raced with supercharged vigour through his body.

"Shhhhh," she said and shoved him towards the door of his flat, talking ten to the dozen as the sky tore open and the light poured in, illuminating him in all his oratorical glory.

"Inside," she said, steering his large bulk towards the door of his flat.

"There we go. Mind the steps. One, two..." She was so intent on guiding him that she missed her own footing and her ankle turned and twisted in the steel brace encasing her crippled leg. A terrible pain tore all the way up into her groin and she lurched forward, grabbing wildly at the banister rail, her mouth the shape of an 'O', her skin stretched tight in white agony across her face as she clung there breathlessly. The fat young man simply stopped and waited, wittering away to the world at large. After a few minutes, when the searing had subsided somewhat, she turned and touched him on the arm and he moved forward obediently.

She closed the door and sank thankfully against it, panting with pain and biting back the bile rising in her throat. She ran her hand up and down the wall to her left until she found the light switch and flicked it down. Her wiry black eyebrows shot up in surprise. The room was a mess. Water everywhere. An overturned plant-pot under the window sitting on its own little island of mud, a dirty old curtain blown into a soggy pile in the corner of the room, a wooden kitchen chair lying on its side and the wind and rain pouring in through a missing window-pane.

Supporting her leg-brace with one hand, she hopped gently over to the wardrobe in search of something to block up the hole. She found a pile of jigsaw-puzzle boxes in the bottom, grabbed the topmost one and wedged it against the empty window frame with the broom handle. That was better. The picture on the lid showed a sunny summer scene with a shepherd and his sheep sheltering under

a shady tree, but in her hurry, she had put it upside down so that the man was now hanging by his feet from a green heaven while his lambs floated around him like fleecy clouds. At least however, she had stopped the draught and the noise.

Next, she righted the chair and sat down on the damp raffia seat to catch her breath. The fat young man stood in the centre of the room dripping like a circus tent. But now his incessant talking was starting to get on her nerves. Unpleasant memories were nudging at her as he prattled on like a mindless magpie. He needed attention, but she wasn't ready for him yet. She would tidy up the room first. His handling required a bit more thought and imagination. The chair creaked as she leant forward to unbuckle the iron contraption around her leg and slide it off. She let the padded boot fall with a sigh and tentatively touched her toes to the floor and tested her injured foot. Then she limped across to the sink, found a saucepan and old tea towel in the cupboard underneath, and got down on her knees.

By the time she was finished her cheeks were flushed and the pain in her leg had eased. She could hear the storm outside had faded too, and the fat young man, as if animated solely by the elements, had subsided into a low murmur with only the occasional flurry of mutters. She sat down thankfully and surveyed the flat. It was much the same as hers. All these flats were. He didn't have many things. She liked the big kitchen table with the plastic tablecloth and automatically ran her fingers over the smooth shiny surface. The chair was a bit rickety, even for her. She wondered how it stood up under the huge bulk of the fat young man.

Everything desperately needed a thorough clean and a new coat of paint though. The car engine was a bit of a surprise, but she supposed there was a reason for it. The bed too had seen better days and sagged in the middle. She did get a bit of a shock at finding all those magazines underneath it though, but for all she knew, that's

what boys did. She found an electric heater there too, which worked, and was warming up her feet.

It felt nice, being in his room, with all his things. She rubbed her thigh thoughtfully and took a closer look at him. He had a sweet face, but his expression worried her. Empty as a sack. Something terrible had happened, some great shock or epiphany that had left him beyond the reach of mortal mouth or mime. Oh well. There was nothing she could do about that, but she was going to have to do something about his wet clothes...sooner or later she was going to have to take them off. Sooner or later she was going to have to touch him.

She looked down at her hands. They took her by surprise, as if she'd never seen them before. She lifted them up and turned them over slowly to examine them. Huge, horrible, horny things with knuckles like a man, nails broken and black, palms lined deep with dirt and grease. She resisted the urge to stick them in her pockets. Too late now. Thanks to her crippled leg, she had been left out of the running ages ago. At school, she hadn't been able to keep up with the others. By the time she finally arrived anywhere, they'd all left and locked up leaving her lonely and limping home to explain to her mother why no one cared about her. Always last in the queue, when her turn came everything was already gone or had been eaten. No one waited for her. No one kept a place for her. She got used to missing things...the bus, the bell, the ball bouncing past her ever hopeful, but ultimately empty outstretched hands. Ugly hands now. After she left school, she also got the last job in the line. The one no one else wanted. A washer-picker at a local foundry where a machine punched out steel washers into a tin bin which she had to scoop out and wire up in bunches of ten, eight hours a day, six days a week, for so many years that her hands had become hooks. They'd never been beautiful, but still, she'd had her dreams and in the beginning when the machine used to break down, while she waited for the boys

to fix it, she'd slip a sliver washer onto her ring finger to see what it felt like. She didn't do that anymore. She knew better now. Her face had also suffered. The grime from the machines had soaked into the creases and discoloured her skin like an ugly tattoo, punctuating her forehead and nose with crinkles and blackheads. At twenty-eight she looked like an old oil rag hag. She picked at a wart on the back of her thumb and a long forgotten memory popped into her mind.

The boy had come right into the house. It was probably the most wonderful and frightening thing that had ever happened to her. They stood breathless in the cool, dim kitchen, staring at each other, unsure of what to do next. He was twelve years old and needed to be near her. He didn't know why or what for, but her pale skin and fragile sadness had held him in a spell from the day he saw her limping up the stairs to her first period. It had taken him many months to come this far. But here he was, trembling with fright and daring. Now it was up to her.

Nobody had ever looked at her. Not more than once anyway, except to sneak another look at her gammy leg and snort behind their hands. Her mother worked all day since her father had died, so she had the afternoons all to herself in the big, dark, quiet house with its big, high beds and its big, high bath-tub and big, high chairs. The little boy was a complete surprise. He must have followed her home. She could see he was beginning to fidget and look around nervously, having second thoughts.

"Would you like to listen to some music?" she blurted out.

"Yes," he said, looking a little relieved. "Ok."

"It's in here," she said and led the way into the lounge, a quiet, dark room. The curtains were always kept closed to protect the furniture from the sunlight.

"This is my favourite," she said, taking the record from its sleeve and putting it on the turntable. "My father sent it to me from

overseas." She sat down on the carpet, pushing her leg-brace out in front of her. "Sit." She said. "It's alright." From the hi-fi speakers the sounds of surf and sea slowly began to fill the room from one end to the other, tripping over the couch, waves breaking gently over the two spellbound children, running round the lamp-stand, sizzling sand, shooshing as the water retreated from the shore. And from this circling sound sprang a melody, tiny at first, like a little sea horse in the foam, a flute darting out and in, growing ever bolder and beautiful, stronger and bigger until it rode like a silver dolphin gambolling on the crest of the orchestral wave.

"Ebb Tide, Ebb Tide, gets your washing white as new," sang the choir, and she sang along, her little body jerking and swaying to a tune she couldn't resist, the beautiful music playing with her soul.

"Ebb Tide, Ebb Tide, just the thing for you," she sang, and looked so happy and so lovely that he thought she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. The record stopped and time stood still as the dust motes danced between them. She could feel his gaze tingling on her skin, his gleaming eyes washing over her in waves of wonder, she closed her eyes and breathed him in towards that magic moment when his nose met hers and their eyes shot open in surprise and they giggled and bumped again and the door banged open, blinding daylight crashing into the room, leaving a stark black shadow on the floor and the silhouette of a large woman in the doorway.

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?"

They sat frozen with fright as her iron-girdled mother hoisted her skirts and steamed across the carpet, grabbing the little boy by his ear and dragging him unceremoniously through the house to the back door.

"And don't let me catch you sniffing around here again." She gave his ear a final painful twist and he darted off down the side of the house and jumped clear over the garden wall.

For many weeks after that they stared at each other in passing, but there was a gulf of shyness between them and the mountain of her mother to cross. With no hope of anything happening, the frequency of their encounters decreased and soon she could only catch a glimpse of him now and then, running across the playing field with his friends.

They were practically neighbours. Her flat was in the same road as the fat young man, just a bit further down. He, however, had seldom seen her because she had seen him first; watching the street like a hawk from his window, head bobbing up and down to get a better view. She was more self-conscious of her deformity now than when she had been young, and so would limp the long way round the block to avoid his scrutiny. Except tonight because of the storm. She squinted at him past the glare of the bare electric light bulb. He was quiet now. Everything was quiet except for the occasional gust of wind rattling at the window. She got up and switched off the light. The heater glowed redly round the room, but it was no match for the fat young man. He wasn't getting any dryer. She knew she couldn't avoid the moment any longer. She was going to have to take off his clothes and put him to bed.

"Come on," she said, urging him towards the bed. "Sit here." He sat and the springs creaked ominously. "Arms up." Before she could think about what she was doing, she peeled his T-shirt up and over his head. She was pleasantly surprised by his complexion. His skin was a healthy pink with light orange freckles and soft ginger hair all over. He stared off into space.

"Up," She said. He rose on the sound of her voice and stood quietly while she undid his trousers and slipped them down. Now, try as she may, she couldn't help but look. She had never seen a naked man before, and probably never would again. The temptation was too much. She gazed at the soft ginger pubic hair covering his balls,

and the little plump penis nestling on top. It was like staring at the Holy Grail. All in all, he looked like some Greek god from the good old days with his curly ginger hair and beard and big cuddly baby-fat rolls. She smiled quietly to herself and herded all of him back into the bed, afraid to touch too much of his naked skin with her bare hands in case she started something. Besides, she remembered the magazines under his bed, so she knew he liked...girls and things.

"In we go," she said, pulling a reticent blanket over his bounteous beauty, and then sat down next to him and watched him as he fell asleep. She tried to think of other things, of what to do next. Perhaps she was being irresponsible by not calling an ambulance or the police but the nearest phone was on Third Street and the thought of putting on her brace and walking all that way made her feel sick. She rubbed her crippled leg and watched his stomach rise and fall. He looked alright. He wasn't in any distress. She on the other hand was hungry and tired. She'd been on her feet all day. She lit the candle on the table and made a recce of the cupboards. Not much. Soup. Beans. Biscuits. She rummaged through the table drawer. String, car keys, which was a surprise, and an old brooch, which, funnily enough, wasn't. She picked up a teaspoon and the tin opener, and closed the drawer.

When she had finished eating, she rinsed the dishes in the sink and stood looking out the window. He had a nice view down the road. All she could see from her flat was the neighbours back wall. She noticed the lamplight reflections in the puddles on the street, and the tree at the end of the block. She'd never noticed it before...the tree, black, naked branches fingering the sky round the side of the building. For a moment, she thought she saw someone standing behind it, but it must have been a trick of the shadows. She shivered and hugged herself. Still wet and cold, her leg was starting to twinge. She limped over to the bed and sat gently down beside him. Then

she lifted the blanket, slid her legs underneath, and lay down next to him. She put her hand under her head as a pillow and watched the slowly swaying shadow shapes that the candle flame threw on the wall. She felt at home, as if this was where she belonged. The nagging of her damp clothes made her grudgingly get up and take them off, panties too, and slide in beside him again. She became very aware of her body, so close to his, and how lovely it was to feel her bare skin against the coarse blanket. She stretched her legs luxuriously and then quickly drifted off to sleep.

\*

Skin to skin and suckling memories tripped over themselves in his brain as his body tried to explain what it was feeling.

He opened his eyes and the dormitory room sprang into view. An ugly off-white room with no curtains and bars in the windows to stop them from sneaking out at night. He didn't like waking up here. It was always a disappointment in the mornings. Nothing nice to look forward to either. Except for the porridge. And his aeroplane cards. He collected them. That was all he had, other than a toothbrush in a cup, and a few clothes on the shelf above his bed. He'd lost his comb a long time ago and they'd never given him another one.

"What you like?" she demanded. He looked blankly at her; his mind hadn't got into gear yet. She was his only friend in this place. She was also a bit mad. Everyone was very careful not to upset her. Among other things, she looked after the orphanage cats that lived in the boiler room, bustling to and from the kitchen on her various scavenging tours, getting them milk and titbits. They were as wild as she was and you couldn't pet them either, except on rare occasions when she was in a tender mood and feeling lonely, she would slide in beside him and curl up like a kitten against his stomach. But as usual

she was full of energy and ready for business before anyone else was even awake.

"What you like?" she held a comic in each hand.

"Archie or Little Lotta?" She looked at him shrewdly. "You like Little Lotta 'cause she's big like you." He looked at the Little Lotta comic that she was holding in his face.

"You like her?" Then, when he didn't answer, she put them down on the bed and moved onto her next point of interest.

"Look," she said, pulling at a zip on the side-pocket of her shorts. She pulled out two neatly folded and well-pressed cereal-box-top tokens.

"See, if I send these in I'm going to get this! I need three more coupons." She licked her lips as she ran her finger lovingly over the picture. It showed a ventriloquist's reed that you put in your mouth and it made your voice sound as if it were coming from the dummy. She was already practicing not moving her lips when she spoke. She folded the coupons carefully together and pushed them back into her pants. Zip, and she was up and away, off to fight another day.

She woke with his arms around her. She didn't move. She never wanted to move again. She shot up like a jack-in-the-box. She was late. She swung her good leg off the bed and hopped to the table. Leaning on the chair, she sorted out the which-way-round of her still damp dress, pulled it on in one movement, then sat down and strapped on her leg brace. He was still asleep, snoring at the ceiling. He'd be alright. She stood up and patted herself down, noticing how her blue serge dress was nearly worn through at the places where her hipbones stuck out in front. She was as thin as a pencil. Then, picking up her bag, she went out and closed the door behind her with a loving click.

When she got back from work that evening, there was a change in him. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, watching her.

"Hello," she said, putting her bags on the table. He seemed to have come back from his distant land. "How are you this morning?" He looked at her, but there was no other response from him. Never mind. It was an improvement of sorts, from coma to catatonia. His eyes followed her around as she unpacked the few things she had brought from her flat. He didn't know who she was. He didn't know who he was. He had nothing to say. He had no thoughts about anything. He had abrogated all responsibility to a higher power. He watched her as a baby would watch. He was...new.

When she had finished her chores, she heated up a tin of soup and sat down next to him.

"Alright?" she asked and smiled. He looked at her blankly.

"You want some soup?" she asked and nodded, trying to get him to nod too. "Soup?" she held the spoon out towards him and he opened his mouth.

"Good boy." She fed him, scraping the dribbles off his chin with the spoon. When he was done, she put him to bed and kissed him goodnight. "I'll look in on you in the morning."

The bath was old, with brown streaks running down from several places where the once-white enamel had chipped off revealing the rusty iron underneath. There was also a discoloured ring round the plughole and a deep stain where the cold tap had dripped for years. The pipes juddered as she turned off the hot tap and stepped into the steaming bath. She lowered herself bit by bit with baited breath, then blew it out as she relaxed back into the hot water. The bath salts smelled wonderful and she drifted quietly without much of a thought for near on twenty minutes before she surfaced again. Warmed through and through she reached for the soap and began to lather up the facecloth.

She seldom gave her body a treat, but for tonight, among other things, she had bought a special 'Deep Shine' shampoo, and for

the first time in her life...hair conditioner. 'Rub it in and leave for ten minutes' it said. After that she lay back and luxuriated in the warmth for a while longer, and then finally dunked her hair for a rinse and got out of the bath.

She dried herself, wrapped her hair up in a towel, and opened a fancy looking jar of skin cream which she had also bought from the chemist on her way home from work. Although it seemed a bit too Pompidou for her at first, she soon surrendered to the silky soft sensations and smells. It made her skin feel so smooth and sensuous that she massaged her entire body, twice, then stood in front of the mirror to see if she looked as good as she felt. She turned sideways and nodded good-naturedly at her profile, thin, but with attractive little bumps in the right places. She pulled up a little stool, sat down, and began brushing her hair. Soon she glowed gorgeously from top to toe. For the first time in her life, she felt like a real woman.

\*

Something was wrong. He lay very still. She couldn't see his chest moving at all. She dropped her bag of groceries on the table and hopped over to the bed in a panic. As she leant over to check his pulse, he popped open his eyes. She got a bit of a shock and jumped. He narrowed them to a sly slit and a slightly sardonic arch of his eyebrow sent a shiver down her spine, a cynical smile cracking at the corners of his mouth. She didn't know what to make of him. She couldn't bear his full frontal, foxy stare so she sat down there beside him on the bed and tried to act normally.

"How are you today?" she said, combing the hair away from his forehead with her fingers while he watched her with pinpoint interest. "I suppose you're hungry, aren't you?" She nodded at him and smiled, trying to get him to participate, but he was having none of that. His piercing gaze never wavered. She found it difficult to be

affectionate under those circumstances, so she got up to begin making supper.

"Whore."

Her chest thumped with horror as her dead mother's voice rang out behind her. For a moment she was back at home in the darkened dining room and her mother was fetching the wooden paddle from behind the door. "I'll teach you to play with boys." She pinched her eyes closed to shut out that horrible day.....

"Whore," he said again and cackled like an old woman. "Dirty little whore, ha, ha, ha." His words bit into her back like a strap. She turned a desperate deaf ear to him and began unpacking the groceries with as much noise as she could to drown out his voice, banging things down, slamming cupboard doors and crushing paper bags. How did he do that? How did he know?

Then the hair on her body stood outwards and the room went icy cold.

"Give us a cigarette, darling."

The tone of his voice was flinchingly accurate. She almost didn't dare turn round in case her mother was sitting there in the flesh, like she used to, at the gate of the care-home with her legs wide open offering any passing man a feel of her vagina in return for a cigarette. Her mother had changed from a prim and proper lady into a mad old woman in a matter of months. She had watched in bewilderment as her mother began to neglect her duties and her daughter. She stopped going to work, or cooking, or washing. She would stand unmoving for hours at a time, staring at the floor as if she'd forgotten something. At others she would walk out the house and wander off down the road, only to come home day's later. Soon the neighbours began reporting her to the police for roaming around the streets in the nude and eating their dog's food from their bowls.

She shivered, shook herself free from the memory, and launched into tidying up the flat with new found fervour and as much

hustle and bustle as would have drowned out an elephant charge. She gave the stove a scrub for good measure, and had practically forgotten about him when he spoke again.

"Wee." At first she didn't hear him, and then the word penetrated her brain.

"Wee." He said again with an agonized look on his face, standing with his pants down around his ankles and pinching his penis closed. She breathed a sigh of relief that he seemed normal again and happily rushed to get the saucepan for him. She didn't bother taking him to the toilet. It was too small in there for both of them, and he would just pee all over the floor if he went by himself.

He looked intently at the stream as it curved into the saucepan. She also kept a close watch in case his aim should waver too far towards the edge. She waited for him to shake it off and took the pot away from him before he could play in it.

"There we go." She emptied it in the toilet and put it back under the bed. Still shaken by the mother incident and not wanting to have a repeat performance of his terrifying impersonation, she tried to think of a way of keeping him occupied.

"Would you like to sit at the table?" He nodded. She looked around the room for an idea and happened to notice the jigsaw puzzle box she had jammed into the window.

"How about doing a jigsaw?" He licked his lips and his body jerked spasmodically in anticipation. "Okay, you stay there," she said, laying a calming hand on his shoulder, and then going to the wardrobe and rootling through the pile of boxes. She found one with a ship at sea and emptied the pieces onto the table. He didn't touch the jigsaw but he followed her avidly with his protruding tongue as she fitted it together. When it was complete he smiled and she was so relieved that he was back to normal she gave him a big hug.

"Good boy. You enjoyed that didn't you?" She felt a pang of guilt for not doing more about his condition, contacting someone or

something, but he was coming along so well, slowly, and surely getting better. Everyday he was coming more and more out of himself. She couldn't bear to think of him being locked away and given injections like her mother, who used to sit in the corner of the care-home sitting room like a cabbage. He was much better off here with her, even though he still wasn't all there. But wherever he was, she would look after him until he got back.

As the days went by, she watched the madness come and go, like different people in a show; she saw the battle for sanity rage behind his eyes. Sometimes he won, sometimes not.

"Feeling alright?" Blank.

"Would you like something to eat?" Blink like a bird of prey.

"How about doing another jigsaw puzz....." And then she got the most terrible shock of her life.

He was mimicking her, word for word, mouthing her utterances in perfect unison with her, as if he was her mirror.

"Oh my god," she said, and he mimed this too with a mock-shocked expression on his face. She clamped her hand over her mouth to stop herself saying any more and looked away. For the next few hours, she busied herself in downcast silence until it was time to put him to bed.

Later that night while she was soaping herself at the sink, singing softly amidst the steam, candlelight glowing on her naked skin, she felt him looking at her, and forgetting herself, she turned and smiled at him. He smiled back.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 6

From the day they had taken him away she began putting money aside for him every week in a savings account. When he grew up, and it came time for him to leave the orphanage, she posted him the savings book with a small fortune inside, together with the last of the many anonymous letters she had sent him over the years. She would have liked to have kept in touch, but she was too scared to give her address in case he should write, or look her up, and the warden would have....well, she had discovered that he could be a dangerous man. He had the power to do things to people, and she didn't want her boy anywhere near the monster. For his own sake, she had to forsake him.

Although no compensation for the loss of her letters, the fat young man found the money a godsend. He had no skills, no friends, and no inclination. Without that money, he would have been lost. On the other hand, it was so much money he didn't know what to do with it all. It made him nervous having to leave it all in the post office even though they had assured him it was quite safe. He had learnt a bitter lesson at the orphanage about letting other people look after his things. So he withdrew it, wrapped it in plastic bags, and hid it in the empty cylinder sleeves of the engine block in his room. He took the curtain down from the window above the sink and draped it neatly over the engine block. His only worry was whether the mice might gnaw their way through the plastic bags and make their nest in the crispy green banknotes, but he kept a close eye on it, checking every now and then.

He was very frugal and only spent what he felt he was worth, except for once, when in a moment of post-onanic euphoria, imagining himself driving around the bustling town, freed from the

restraints of his damp little flat and plunging himself into a wonderful world of social opportunities, he went and bought himself a second-hand mini.

He wanted a pink one. Why, he didn't know, but none were available so he settled for a red one from the local car lot. It was only after he had paid his money that he realized he didn't know how to drive. The sales-man quickly grasped this dilemma by its horns and set about equipping the fat young man with just enough confidence and skill to get him out of the forecourt and on his way down the high street. As a result, he only ever drove in first gear, the little car whining away happily under the strain of his bulk. He never reversed or indicated, and only found the hooter by accident when he rested his hamburger on the steering wheel. Soon he was having practically all his meals there, parked on the high street while he watched the people go by to his heart's content. Afterwards he would drive around for a bit to let the food settle and then park down a side road in a 'Pay and Display' and masturbate under his roadmap.

He tried to keep it down to four or five times a day, but it was a losing struggle. This urge, that makes the mind dissociate from the beast below at the drop of a hat, leaving the body to the mercy of fate. And fate has no mercy...she lets any undesirable passion drive us crazy when we're not behind the wheel.

And yet, on those rare moments when the mind is here with us, in the now, in the Now now, it seems sometimes too much here, as if it wants to take us too deeply into things and dispel even the little illusion we have of standing on something...firm. The mind is a delicate instrument, for all its rigid rules and fixed opinions, and easily unbalanced. Reality is a potent force from which mankind has withdrawn into the repetitive rituals of materialism and its religious, scientific, philosophical, historical, and psychological concomitant structures; places for the mind to live in while it works out how to land us here on earth, intact and sane. This world sometimes seems

too big and bright for human kind to comprehend, and for this ageing frame of skin and bone that somehow holds together in pain and pleasure, good times and bad, till death us do part.

So he masturbates as a way of keeping the balance. A way of staying in love when his dreams finally fail and all that's left is him, sans the safety net of social acceptability...an outcast, because he can't help himself, like all the other perverts, homosexuals, prostitutes, junkies, alcoholics, murderers, thieves and the like who reach the end of the line a lot sooner than most of us who have somehow managed to stay on the Wagon...Hay Wain...Gravy Train...choo-choo look at all the smoke and noise...and fanfares to the victorious, covering up the screaming of those who can't hold on any longer. Well what can you do? You can't help them. You're barely holding on by your pension fund. But even with tons of money, that's no cushion for the kind of place we're going to fall into when this body dies.

The money-machine keeps the mind preoccupied with calculations and percentages, predictions, permutations and possibilities, anything to stop it from dissolving into the absolute. And if you see someone clinging to a crumbling crag close by, you might give a hand, or a foot, depending on your mood and metre. But generally it's every man for himself and no one can agree on what's going on or what to do about it and all clinging together in isolation on a raft shorn of sails, charts, or goodwill. Better to stay under the blankets and have a good wank when it all gets too much and you have to give in to this body with a mind of its own...always needing...things.

Real bodies do real things despite the rules and regulations. These are no friend of the delicate heart beat pump blood pulse joy, you, me, everything, surrender to it all, and trust that grace will catch us when we fall. Let go...ahhhhh. We don't even know how to

anymore...except for a brief eternity....when we come...and go...and straighten our clothes before we re-enter the spotlight of perfection.

The Roman's had a cure for self-proclaimed deities like the modern man. A slave would walk by his side, carrying his crown and saying at every clap and cheer. "Remember, you are only a man." The mind is more than a man, and less than a god. But we depend on it for our very existence.

"I think, therefore I am." We couldn't make sense of the world without the mind now because we've grown so used to thinking that we've forgotten how to fly. Only God knows, and he's dead they say. So in the meantime the mind tries to keep us safe by jumping to the worst conclusions and then, by trying to avoid them, running slap bang into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not very clever. We have to bring the mind under human heart control because, when it predicts, it panics, and panic is no respecter of the body and its propensity to bleed. The mind doesn't 'know' empathy. It only knows self-preservation and paranoia. The mind doesn't feel...love. Its closest equivalent is sentimentality, preferably in the dark places down memory lane, cinemas and theatres being the closest facsimile of its home inside the dark bone dome skull auditorium where it replays the same old sad story with itself in the lead role of the virtuous victim and never the brutal bad guy.

The mind is an impostor of sorts, a relative newcomer to the race, punching well above its own weight unfortunately, but a necessary evil that helped us to survive at a time when man hung in the balance. Now it rules the roost, the body merely a slave to its next mad plan.

In reality the mind is a mother without any milk worth mentioning, because in the end, there is only you and me, and loving kindness and touching, and water and rocks and trees and the eternal splendour of the sun, which has moved all through this world and the next, our only home, this blithe spirit, wherever it is,

however it looks or manifests here on earth, whatever tools it uses to do and say...I love you. I love. That's all. So simple.

I Love.

\*

I lifted a cheek and farted.

"Whoa," she said. She was sitting on the stinky side and got the full blast of it. "Thank you very much."

I could tell she liked me; she didn't finish her sentences with "fat arse."

"Sorry."

"Easy on there, big boy."

"I'm a bit nervous."

"Well do it that way." She pointed away from herself.

We sat in the booking hall of the town jail. The room looked like a holding pen for cattle; dark, dirty and dilapidated, the bare brick walls worn and encrusted with grime, not to be leaned against. There were four rows of filthy grey plastic chairs bolted to the floor, most of them broken and drawn on. These were not to be sat on, except that after an hour of standing my legs gave in I didn't have much choice. Next to me was a barely conscious woman in a tattered fur coat swaying dangerously from side to side. I kept thinking she was going to fall off her chair.

It had been during one of my 'roadmap' moments that the public spotlight had finally fallen upon me. Always a possibility, but after a while one doesn't expect to get caught, so one gets careless, and by leaving the car window open for fresh air during the proceedings, the next thing one knows is that a uniformed arm is removing ones roadmap prematurely. I went all Bonnie and Clyde. Never mind the penis, I jammed my thumb on the starter and got the car into gear as he put his hand back in the window to unlock the

door. I hit the accelerator and nearly tore off the officer's arm as the car lurched forward and stalled.

Because it was my first offence, the judge suspended my sentence for 9 months and I only spent one night in jail. But, it was a night to remember.

"NEXT!"

My police lady got up and walked me over to the counter.

"NAME!"

"John."

"WHO?"

"John."

"JOHN WHO?"

"Smith."

"Put your hands on the counter and spread your legs." My policewoman patted me up and down and all around.

"Shoes on the counter." I took them off and put them in front of her.

"All your belongings will be returned when you leave."

"Thank you."

"NEXT!"

I farted again. Dear lord thank you for my abundance. We moved over to the fingerprinting table. The officer behind the desk shoved a piece of paper towards me together with an inkpad. "Put your fingerprints here in the little boxes. Left hand first." It was just like in the movies, so I knew what to do.

"This way," said the policewoman and led me off into a small cubicle with a curtain that only closed halfway. One notices things like that.

"Take all your clothes off and put them in the bag."

I was a bit shaky before this, with the arrest and all, but now I was beginning to understand where I was and what was probably going to happen to me. This was a bad place, full of bad people, and

I was getting scared. I did everything I was told at the double so that they could see I was co-operating.

I took off my pants and the devil walked into my cell. A terrible pressure welled up in my forehead and a pink mist pulsed before my eyes as the nightmare shape appeared in the doorway. Things began closing in and I threw my hands out to stop myself from falling.

"Well, well. What have we here?"

A grossly overweight old man in a dirty uniform jangled a big bunch of keys on his belt and unlocked all the doors of hell in my brain. I didn't know where I was or what was happening, I just knew I had to get away from him. My legs darted out from underneath me and I felt my bladder gave way.

"Oh Christ, he's pissed himself." He bent towards me, peering through little watery eyes, "I'm not going to have any trouble with you, am I Alice?" He put his hand on the back of my neck and I nearly got sick at the touch of him. I back-pedalled to try and get away but he held me firmly.

"It's alright. I got it," said my policewoman, kindly taking my arm, and trying to steer me away.

The Warden didn't move a muscle. He stared at me and spoke to her. "You got what...exactly?"

"Well, he's my prisoner..." she said without much conviction.

"Tell you what," he said, "...how would you like me to kick your fucking face in?" He was staring at me so hard I couldn't work out who he was talking to.

My policewoman looked at the back of his head for a moment, then sighed and turned away. I didn't blame her but please don't leave me alone with him...naked.

He smiled at me.

"Come on then fat arse." He tightened his grip on the back of my neck and pulled me closer. His breath smelled like shit. "I got a little treat in store for you. Been saving it up all week."

\* \* \*

She took off her high heels and climbed in through her bedroom window. It was late and the room was dark, but she smelt him immediately. The light clicked on and there he stood.

He was a small man. With large spectacles. She walked casually over to her bed and threw down her purse.

"Where have you been?" he said.

"Out," she said, casually inspecting her red fingernails.

He realized it was going to be another one of those pointless conversations. She could go on like this for hours.

"Out where?"

"Nowhere."

He was a great believer in Dettol. He gargled with it, diluted of course, and put a cap-full in his bath every night. He even soaked his glasses in it once a week and wiped his wristwatch in a strong solution. Not as strong as his mother had used mind you, when she used to wash certain sensitive areas of his anatomy to burn off any 'unhealthy humours' as she called them. Even his toys were disinfected daily causing him always to have the taste in his mouth.

His mother had kept him clean in every crevice and crenulation of his body and mind through sanitization and censorship respectively. No dirt, no pets, no bicycles, no T.V, and no friends. His movements were orchestrated from morning to beyond the veil of dreams. No passionate symphony or romantic sonata this – his life – more like a dirge for the dear departed. He was a good boy. Come to

that, he would have made a good girl. He continued to wipe his P's and Q's with fastidious care long after his mother had shrivelled away and was seamlessly replaced by a wife.

His wife was a slow-witted woman with largely ineffectual eyes, always peering in the wrong direction when someone called her name. She had an unexcitable nature and a delayed reaction-time that, as an adult, suited her for safe and simple servitude only.

They had met in the Human Diseases Faculty lavatory. He was a virologist and she cleaned the toilets. She had come in to clean the 'Men's' while he was trying to work out how to open the door without touching the handle with his thrice-washed hands. Shortly after that, they joined forces in their war against a common enemy. It turned out to be a satisfactory arrangement for both of them. She only cleaned at home now and he could rest assured on his immaculate throne. She understood his need for sterility and fulfilled it perfectly. She was also glad that he didn't expect too much from her in the bedroom, his passions being purely pestilential.

None-the-less there was a moment, in the dark, side by side and breathing softly, she, motivated by one of her monthly moments, rolled towards him as if by accident and he responding, slid on top of her like a sleepwalker and without any fuss or undue grunting, consummated her. She kept her eyes closed.

He didn't touch his daughter. He wasn't expected to. It was a custom that had been in the family for generations and served him well during moments of unavoidable intimacy and sudden spontaneous displays of affection. At such times he would merely keep his hands to his sides and his face slightly averted until her emotional hiatus was over and she retreated to a more comfortable distance. However, he was proud of her as an achievement, and at unguarded moments he would let slip a slight smile of satisfaction at the sight of her. He took the occasional pleasure of worrying about

her in emergencies, thrashing her with his concern and barking at her for being so careless. He would panic at the mere prick of a thorn and send his wife scuttling for the first aid box while he held the child's hand clear of any infecting surfaces. Once, in a moment of madness, mesmerized by the droplet of bright blood oozing from her tiny finger, he licked it off before he could stop himself. Despite himself, he liked the taste, and the shock of it all, afterwards. It fed his meagre soul for months. But one drop of desire was all he allowed himself. After that he kept things under tight control.

She was taught that daddy was a very busy man and not to bother him, so she sat silently under his desk and watched the shoes of his pupils traipsing in and out to recite and receive their daily lesson. Polished and neat, dirty and scuffed, laces loose or tied like a noose, big ones, small ones, wrinkled or smooth, twisting or still, thick or thin soles flapping open to reveal a smelly threadbare sock or toe. She had developed a whole relationship with each pair of shoes long before she set eyes on the corresponding faces. She knew the feet, farts, fidgets and foibles of each in such detail as would have embarrassed them to blushing. Unbeknownst, she grew very fond of these boys, and as she grew older she was drawn like a magnet to their jokes and high jinx and would contrive at every opportunity to bump into them in the little waiting room attached to her father's study.

"Hello. What you doing?"

"Homework."

"Oh." She stood with her hands behind her back, swinging left to right. "What homework?"

"Just homework," he shrugged.

"I got new shoes," she said. He looked at them briefly then back to his book. Her secret weapon had failed. She endured another minute of silent humiliation and then fled to her room. She was soon

back though, with more success this time, chatting and laughing with them once the ice had been broken and they became more accustomed to her. One little blonde boy in particular took quite a shine to her.

"Come over here." He said, moving them off to a little alcove in the waiting room where they couldn't be so easily seen. "Want to play a game?" he half whispered, casting a furtive eye at the door.

"What game?" She followed his gaze and moved closer to hear his answer.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"My what?" she asked, quite perplexed.

"Your thing," he said, pointing to her tummy. She was perfectly willing to oblige, but his demands were so obtuse that she was quite baffled by his meaning.

"What thing?" She said, looking down at her tummy to try and see what he meant. He was starting to lose patience because any minute now he would have to go in for his lessons and the opportunity would be lost.

"Look," he said, pushing his trousers down to his knees and holding up his shirt.

"Now you."

She liked the camaraderie of the collusion more than the intense disclosures it necessitated. She would have liked to continue this voyage of discovery if it hadn't been so fraught with heart stopping unknowns and unfamiliar zones, and as much as she wanted to see the boy again, whichever part of himself he proffered her, she couldn't bring herself to go back into the waiting room for the moment of truth. From her self-imposed exile she now became painfully aware of the boy's coming and going and had to satisfy herself with the merest glimpse of them as they went by her bedroom window.

After a month or so however she couldn't stand it any longer and in a pure reflex action tap-tapped on her windowpane as the bold blonde boy went by. He was a forward young fellow as we have seen, and before she could even get nervous he had climbed in through the open window and stood facing her in the silent room. She didn't even think. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and lifted up her dress.

It was an exciting feeling this, showing herself to him. She stood lost in a delightful delirium and let him look to his heart's content.

"No, you have to pull your panties down too."

Of course it was only a stone's throw from here to "can I touch it" and heaven on earth as she lay with her legs in the air while he poked about with a rather reverential finger.

He would come and play with her thing twice a week before lessons, for which she waited with such a hunger in her deprived heart that it was all she could do not to pounce on him before he was even through the window. She also began to notice, while still peeping at the other boys in between times, that they would all throw long searching looks towards her window now as they sauntered pseudo-nonchalantly by. Her reputation was spreading.

At first, she would jump back behind the curtains to avoid their glances and wait for them to pass. Then one day she stood her ground and caught a boy's eye full in the face without flinching. The electric current generated by the dare of her stare held him rigid for many a second. It was her moment of power, over all men. It thrilled her to the bone. She slid the sash window upwards, curtains billowing out in the breeze, and beckoned to the boy. Momentarily stunned, he shook himself free of his disbelief, looked left and right to see that no-one was watching, and leapt into the room like a rabbit.

When he was gone she turned in the mirror, touching her hair and tugging the ends of her pullover down tight over her non-existent breasts.

"Pretty as a picture," her mother had said. "The boys will love you," her mother had said. And they did. Soon she was entertaining the entire 5B in her bedroom. And then, just when she thought things couldn't get any better, they brought her a bag of boiled sweets. Her father's fear of tooth decay had set her up nicely for this one. The second of many illicit tastes she was to acquire that left her wide open to bribery on the boy's black market.

She began to sell her sex for sweets, sneaking out of her room to rendezvous with the bigger boys in a bunker belonging to the Scouts brigade. Sometimes she took them three or four or more at a time, the one waiting patiently until the other had come. As she slipped into her teens, her tastes became more sophisticated and she had to move the boys on to a more suitable method of payment. She didn't even bother to hide what she bought with the money because her father had no idea what those things cost and her mother was beyond the pale.

"Out where?" he asked again.

She lit a cigarette to give herself time to calm down and think. She exhaled a cloud of smoke that billowed round the room and he tried not to cough.

He had no idea where she went or what she did. His imagination ran only as far as the germs she might be picking up from the dirty glasses and toilet seats wherever young people gathered nowadays. He had no idea that she was earning more money from his students than he was, and that she could've provided him with enough venereal cultures for his research to keep him busy for the next fifty years. At the age of five, she had been

able to recite the entire list of known viruses, human and simian. At the age of fifteen, she had them all.

"Where 'nowhere'?" he asked.

"It's none of your fucking business." He felt his face flame up at the unaccustomed word and his little body bristled with automatic outrage.

"While you're living in my house it certainly is my 'fucking' business," he said. It sounded unnatural and contrived on his tongue, but in a strange way, he was surprised and almost proud of himself. To his wayward daughter, this sudden bonding by bad language caught her off guard and for a moment she felt an unaccustomed affection for him. They looked at each other and he almost faltered at the sight of her.

"Why do you do it?" He pleaded. She had been such a good little girl. "This terrible language you use?" The gentleness of his appeal struck at her heart.

She turned her back on him so his eyes couldn't get to her.

"Where were you?"

She ignored him.

"Answer me."

There was an intensity about him that she didn't like. Normally he would have petered out by now, and they could have gotten on with their lives. But he wasn't backing down and she wasn't in the mood for a serious confrontation. Not now. She was dead on her feet and desperately needed a bath.

"I was out," she said, scrounging in her purse for something she didn't need.

He hadn't petered out because he was a man at the end of the line. He was surprised to find, suddenly, that his journey was over. Tonight...here, the moment; and she, the last stop.

"Where?"

She sucked on her cigarette and then flicked it out the window in a spinning red arc. There was a slight sizzle, and the night was still again.

"You don't want to know," she said. They both looked out of the window and for a strange second the stars held them in a timeless grasp and a million years passed by their separate dreams and they floated somewhere deep unseen, the darkness dancing in between.

"I do," he said, and he meant it this time. "I want to know." He had nothing else.

"Fuck you," she shouted much too loudly and flapped her hand at him. "Why don't you fuck off and leave me alone." As she turned to arrange some fluffy toys rather roughly on her pillow he noticed a little chain around her wrist with a solitary silver heart dangling from it. 'That's new', he thought, and he should know; he spent a lot of time looking through her things. She was never there you see. It was all he ever saw of her, her things.

His life had grown grim, a wilderness of dry facts and figures and dreams dead in the dust. With each passing year and falling leaf his desolation grew, same old students always anew, the end creeping ever closer, the ticking clock, the waiting for when? When is it time? What am I waiting for? The next one? And then...what? Where is my reward? Is this all? Next....who's next....no-one there. Gone. All gone. Life. Wife – mad, daughter disappearing – going...going...

"I'm sorry," he managed to say, "I kept meaning to speak to you, you know. Things just...keep getting in the way."

An unexpected emotion roiled up like hot acid inside her and she looked away, keeping her brimming eyes wide open so that her tears wouldn't overflow. 'So now you want to talk?' she thought. 'There's no point in talking now. It's too fucking late...FATHER. Your daughter's a whore!'

"Leave me alone," she said softly and crossed her arms protectively over her chest. He saw the gesture and made the mistake of placing a sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

"Don't touch me you fucking creep!" she shouted and jerked away violently. Without thinking, he spun her around and backhanded her through the mouth. For a long, incomprehensible moment they stared at each other, and then the pain made him look down at the wound on his hand where it had caught her canine tooth, black blood welling up like some evil impulse finally freed from its restraint. He watched in a trance as she brought his hand up to her mouth and licked it lovingly.

"That's enough!" He shouted to dispel the unthinkable intimations gathering at the edges of his mind. "I'm going to put a stop to all this nonsense once and for all." He was vaguely aware that he was talking too much as he slid his leather belt from its loops and gripped the buckle in his bleeding hand. "Turn around!" His life had been buttoned up so tight that when things began to pop, there was no stopping him.

This was where everything came to an end. She knew it was all over. Might as well go out in style she thought. She raised a coquettish eyebrow at him and whirled around like a tease, touching her delicately bare shoulder with her bruised lips and blowing him a kiss. Then, with her back to him, she tucked her toes into her shoes and rested all her weight upon one thin high heel pinning his eyes to the floor with her slim ankle sliding up her naked calf and taut stretching thigh high straining back to breaking point, pert bottom peeping out beneath the mini skirted wasp waist wandering up the see-through shirt and sylphen spine, her bare shoulder blades stroked by wisps of hair blowing in the evening breeze.

"It's time I taught you a lesson," he said and felt the adrenaline surge through his body as he took a step forward and grabbed her arm.

What took him by surprise was the softness of her plump and yielding flesh, her overpowering scent and the fullness of her warm body as she turned into his arms and whispered in his ear "No more lies".

He heard a roar in his head and a speeding heartbeat thumping throb closed his throat in a choking kind of ecstasy. His speechless mouth dry, his mind and motives cloudy and unclear in the rising heat-haze of his passion, he dropped his belt and felt for her other arm, groping like a blind man in a desert, nearly losing consciousness amidst the ensuing sensations, sweet and hot and honey, her yielding body folding into his, flowing the length and breadth of him, bursting his bounds and bent her with kiss after bloody kiss until they melted one into the other and let slip the reins of reason and righteousness.

Shaken, sticky and spent, he stood up, pants flapping round his knees.

She had a slightly surprised look on her face, as if she didn't know whether to be cynically bemused, impressed, or sorry for him. In the end, he had been just another little boy in the queue. It had been nothing to her, but he was as a man already dead. His life was over. The light of truth and decency had gone from his eyes and she had been the cause. But she was glad. She was glad she had been there for him in the end, for herself, for once in their lives.

They both stared at her wide-open legs and the evidence of his need on her milky white thigh.

"More potatoes darling?" she smiled over the steaming pot at her husband and daughter, trying to be cheerful. He was deathly silent.

"I didn't have time to get the carrots in..." she prattled on as she went back and forth, trying to fill in the black hole in the

atmosphere. He would usually speak and put her at ease before she got herself into a state, but there was no response from him tonight. She began to get scared. She cast an eye at her daughter for a hint or a clue, but she too was more than usually sulky.

"But I do think..." she said, sitting down and taking a wild stab at the problem. "I don't think a tattoo is such a nice thing for a pretty young girl like you. Especially a snake. Why a snake? That's horrible. Look at your beautiful skin. Why would you want to go and spoil it? And with a thing like that?" Then her eyes lit up as if she'd found the perfect deterrent. "It's the mark of Satan you know?" She looked quickly at her husband, expecting him to flick her a warning glance for making this type of remark, but he wasn't even listening. Her simple good nature was starting to crumble under such ominous signs. Her lip started to tremble, but she crashed on regardless. There was nothing else she could do.

"You're still so young you know, only fifteen. That's not really...."

"...not old enough to have a tattoo? But I'm old enough for him to fuck me is that right?" She was sorry before the words were out of her mouth. It was like kicking a cripple. She knew her mother was retarded in some way and needed special treatment...but she was sick and tired of making excuses for her. SHE was the child around here. SHE was the one who needed special treatment....not her mother.

Her father didn't flinch or look up. For the millionth time in her life she was sorry for the things she couldn't help doing and saying that added to her pile of self-hatred every day. Her mother didn't actually understand what she had said but she had felt the intention, and that confused her. She had no frame of reference for something like this. It didn't engage in her brain.

"Oh," she said, and turned around and back again as if she had forgotten to do something and didn't know what it was. She smiled at

her daughter. "Yes dear?" she said, as if her daughter had asked her a question which she hadn't quite heard. Her eyes were smiling kindly, as ever.

"Jesus, Mom....." she was going to say she was sorry but it never came out. Her heart was breaking, but she couldn't let go of who she had become.

"Don't blaspheme dear."

\* \* \*

The bible felt sticky and slimy. It was torn and dirty, and black as hell. She pushed it aside with a shiver and sat down on the bunk. She had graduated from her father's college and the Boy Scout's bunker to walking the streets. Some of the students even followed her there, having graduated into perverts.

'Bloody cold without stockings.' She thought.

"And don't you worry about being lonely." The Warden bent over and cupped his hand behind her neck. "I got a special little treat for you. Been saving it up all week," he said, and clinked his handcuffs in her face. "You want to put them on me later when I come round to tuck you in?" He leered.

"In your dreams you fat fuck." Right there, she knew she was in trouble. She'd never been able to keep her big mouth shut.

"Oh yeah?" he said and she watched his dander rise to the occasion. 'Oh no. Oh please no,' she thought to herself. She was exhausted and sore and just couldn't handle another hard-on tonight. The rough ride through the town in the back of a police van and a four-hour wait in the holding cell had been bad enough. She wasn't in

the mood. And now he was swinging his stick like an angry cat's tail. She wanted to cry. Instead, she told him to fuck off.

"So you're a tough one then, are you?" he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet and whacking his stick against the palm of his hand. She groaned to herself. The night wasn't over yet.

She came up gasping for air, sexually aroused beyond the point of pain and more alive than she'd ever been. She tasted blood where she had bitten her tongue and sucked it down like nectar. Bloody mouth open, tooth missing, she grinned at him, inviting his pleasure.

The two of them hit it off from the start. It was love at first fight. He'd never known someone who excited him so much. She was vicious, foul-mouthed, fearless, and filthy - just what he liked. And she enjoyed having a man who could stand up to her and slap her down. It made her feel secure and cared for.

For the Warden it was the honeymoon he never had; lots of sex and violence. He set up a home-from-home in her cell during the time of her incarceration. He worked double shifts back to back so that he could be with her. It was true lust. When they were together they could let it all out. No holds barred. Blow for blow they were equals, the big white bull, and the bolshie black-haired bitch. They gave each other what they deserved. It was eminently sore and satisfying. They fucked each other black and blue. On the floor, up against the bars, through the bars, accessories from the deadly weapons department littering the floor. Neither of them had had such satisfyingly brutal sex in years. They couldn't get enough of each other, and afterwards they would nurse their bruises and swap stories like intimate friends, laughing and teasing and generally having a good time.

He saw to it that she was comfortable and well fed. Cigarettes, stockings, gin, all the necessities of life. She loved being looked after like this and was a bit surprised and sad when her sentence was over

and his loving ministrations came to an end. Once she was discharged, he had nothing more to do with her.

She didn't know why she didn't get an abortion immediately, but she was still basking in the halcyon hue of a fairy tale romance and not thinking very clearly. By the time the fog lifted from her brain, it was too late.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 7

He kept hearing sirens behind him and would scuttle off the road into a ditch, or some bushes nearby, only to wait in vain. His nerves were gnawed to the quick, and the longer he walked the more he feared that he had left the boy to some terrible fate. It had really been a bit of a harebrained scheme when it came down to it. But the lie got him through, and as long as he didn't know for sure, he could still believe everything was going to be alright.

After leaving the boy in the alley, the man had headed for the docks and hung around in the shadows until he spotted a Dutch Tjalk with a cargo of sorghum bound for Rotterdam. It was an old boat, but it was newly tarred and painted and gave the impression of solid sound seaworthiness, to his eye anyway.

"You hef trouble with the police?" the Skipper asked.

He didn't reply. The skipper took a slight second to register the fact, and nodded his head sagely.

“Ja well, no-one’s perfect. I hope you didn’t kill anyone that’s all,” he hoped he was joking. “What do you know about boats?” The pipe man shook his head. “I thought so. Can you cook?” He nodded. “Ja well that’s something,” he undid the stern rope and pulled it aboard. “I hate cooking...and you better jump if you want to come along.” The boat was adrift now with the engine idling in neutral and a burble of water and smoke coming out of the exhaust pipe just above the water line. The pipe man leapt frantically across the widening gap and barked his shins on the deck rail.

“Eina ja. There’s one thing you’ll learn. A boat is made of steel. Very hard corners and sharp edges. Right. Better tidy up those ropes. Coil them in a circle on the deck...like that one.” The Skipper swung effortlessly up into the steering hut, pushed the throttle forward and spun the wheel.

The thing about a boat is it’s always moving. And while the boat’s moving you have to constantly adjust your balance to the forward motion and the rolling pitch and yaw, walking always at a slight angle and ready to grab at any handhold to stop you from falling overboard. And there is always something to be attended to. A fully laden cargo boat is certainly not plain sailing or an easy ride.

There were a couple of water-locks on the river that allowed boats to drop down to sea level from the inland dockyards, many of them huge affairs with iron-bound wooden doors a hundred feet deep or more. The pipe man was learning the ropes on one such lock when he tied up the bow of the boat with a knot. If it hadn’t been for the skipper’s quick wit and sharp knife the boat would have been left hanging from a bollard while the water rushed out of the lock at an alarming rate.

“Klootsak!” The skipper swore at him as they lurched to an even keel again and he returned to the steering cabin. “Jus wrap it loose round the bollard a few times and let it slip when she goes down.”

There were six locks in all, demanding he pull, run, push, throw, drag, jump, and practically heave the boat all the way down to the ocean. In between times, the skipper had him washing down the decks with hose and broom and polishing the bell and brass. It was hard work for a sedentary person like himself and by the time they reached the open sea his legs were shaking from exertion. He sat down and watched the coast slowly slip away with the evening light, leaving only a twinkle in the darkness of his thoughts.

"Okay. If you've had enough from beauty sleep you can do some work." The skipper pointed to a door nearby. "There's a shovel in there and some plastic over-boots." He stood looking down into the hold of the boat. "I want you to shift as much of this forward as will bring the stern up to the waterline. Spread it out a bit to the sides also so that we don't roll so much."

The man fetched the spade and lowered himself in, up to his waist in the fluffy white powder. He began shovelling at the huge mountain of sorghum in front of him. It took nearly five hours before the skipper was satisfied and the man finally pulled the tarpaulin cover over the valuable cargo. He had the sickly sweet stuff in every crack and crevice of his body, caked around his eyes, in his ears, mouth, and nostrils, in his pockets and socks and turn-ups, his hair matted like a horsehair blanket. He looked like a ghost who had seen a ghost. He could also no longer even feel his arms and he had to sit down before he could straighten his back. When he had recovered somewhat, he washed himself down under a deck hose.

"You'll find a towel in the cupboard over there and you can go into the engine room to warm yourself up. Just don't touch anything, hear?"

The diesel engine was the size of a big car, roaring and clanking away, shining propeller shaft spinning smoothly behind. He sat down on an oil drum and looked around at the pipes and pulleys, and gauges and tanks. It was all strangely welcoming. Very neat and

tidy and well kept. The engine gleamed with a thin coat of new oil and everything was immaculately clean, and although the paint on the metal sheet flooring had worn through to the undercoat in places, it shone like a pin. He leant back against the hull and let the noise and vibration lull his tired and tender body into a doze. The last thing he saw were the two fire extinguishers bolted to the bulkheads, and his mind drew these in with him as he fell asleep.

\* \* \*

She came slopping down the stairs in her silver-sequined slippers and dirty dressing gown.

“You don’t know when to stop do you, fucking dog!” she said under her breath, belting up her gown with a vicious tug. The pipe man had gone to help a friend move something while she had to stay home with the dog. She had been asleep. Then she had lain in bed listening to it howling blue murder at the door for its master and looking up at the ceiling until she couldn’t stand it any longer.

The first thing that met her eyes when she entered the kitchen was a pile of excreta in the middle of the kitchen floor. She saw the dog, cringing up against the back door with its tail between its legs, shivering and whining now in an agony of guilt and anticipation. The vein in her temple pulsed and her nostrils flared, clenched jaw jutting out with the muscles of her face writhing rock hard as they fought to contain her fury.

“That’s the last fucking time you shit on my kitchen floor.” She picked up the cigarette lighter and flicked on the flame. Then she picked up a can of lighter fuel, pointed it at the dog, and squeezed

the tin. The dog squirted a few involuntary jets of piss as she applied the flame to the jet of highly flammable fluid.

Afterwards she calmly opened the front door and went and stood outside on the pavement. It seemed she was always standing on some pavement somewhere. She automatically reached into her sagging dressing-gown pocket for her cigarettes.

"Fucking dog," she murmured as she thumbed her lighter on and sucked the flame into her cigarette. The boy came staggering through the black billowing smoke into the hall, arm over his eyes, coughing and gasping, flickerings of flame already beginning to lick at the paint around his head. She'd forgotten about him. Behind him, the kitchen was burning like hell as he came into focus and fell on his knees just short of the threshold. She moved instantly towards him, but not out of concern, and stopped in the doorway, blocking his way and spreading her dressing gown wide to prevent any fresh air from reaching him. He looked up in fearsome wonder at what he thought were the white wings of an angel come to save him, and watched in awe the flames' fair reflection on her golden flesh. A wicked smile widened on the angel's face and she stabbed at the boy with her glowing cigarette, burning a fleshy hole in his chest. He screamed and jumped up. Recognizing her now, he tried to dart past but she was too quick for him, forcing him back into the house with her cigarette, bit by bit, deeper into the smoke until the fire siren's scream put an end to her fun.

"Ahoy down there, god verdomme!" He woke with a start, the engines hammering in his ear. He was on his feet and halfway up the ladder before his brain caught up with his body.

"Go up front and keep a sharp lookout for a flashing red beacon." He reached behind him. "Here, take this jacket with you." He threw it at him. "Wat 'n lul," he muttered half affectionately.

The night was dark and cold. He listened to the shush of white water against the bow. The salty breeze was thick and warm, and filled his lungs like nectar. He stared out at the choppy surface of a pitch-black sea stretching away endlessly, and he knew why a man would want to become a sailor.

Three weeks later, at 3 o' clock in the morning the lights of Rotterdam came into view. By daylight they were docked up against the wharf and beginning to unload the cargo.

For the next thirty odd years he crewed on barges going up to Amsterdam and back, loading and unloading, getting on and jumping off, tying up and letting loose, but sleeping always with the hum of the ship beneath. He went to Nijmegen and even further afield to France and Germany and down the Rhine. He learnt as many words in Dutch and German and French as he knew in English. He learnt to put mayonnaise on his chips and eat raw hamburgers. He became adept at driving his barges at full speed through the low narrow bridges of Antwerp and Amsterdam without touching a brick. He visited the ladies in the red light houseboats on special occasions, and was often seen drinking coffee in the many canal-side Cafés. But for all that, he was never happy. Waking or sleeping, the boy niggled in the background until one day he just couldn't bear it any longer. He turned his face to the west and went home. He had to know.

\* \* \*

He crouched on the bed and watched her, contradicting emotions boiling up from beneath as the battle to outwit himself

raged beneath the surface of his twitching brow. Things came and went. As the cripple girl moved around the kitchen, he could see the sounds she was making, how they built up into shapes that moved around him and took him away from the picture he was trying to hold steady in his mind. Things were getting too mixed up. She turned to him and moved her mouth and the meaning of her words welled up like a landscape that enfolded him in a story all of its own as he wandered along its byways and got lost in it. He didn't want her to do that. It confused him too much. If he followed her words, they would change into something else, another place, another colour, and it would take him such a long, long time to find his way back. He didn't like that. He hissed at her when she did this, but she paid him no mind. He hated that too. His irritation helped him to focus, and the glimmer of a plan began to form and unfold in the pit of his stomach. He pulled at the idea and shaped it with his hands, slowly massaging his penis up and down, eyes fixed on her back in suspense. She felt his stare and knew he was up to something, but he wasn't moving around so she ignored him and carried on preparing the supper.

Finally, with everything bubbling away nicely, she put her dishcloth down and turned around. She couldn't have timed it better. He was in full stroke and coming copiously as their eyes met. And in that instant she saw his triumph turn to ashes as some cruel god brought him to self-awareness at the climax of his act, and he caught himself red handed. He looked down at his penis. He had done something bad again. He looked up at her in agony and started scratching the skin on his arms.

"It's alright." She quickly sat down next to him and hugged him tight. "Everything's alright."

Later that night, after she had fed him, they sat on the bed and watched the lightning play around the room. The thunder made the pots and pans vibrate on the drying board and they cuddled closer

together for comfort, getting used to the feelings and smells, the touching skin and the warms and colds of each other.

The rain had long since stopped and it was the early hours of the morning when he found himself wide awake and clear as a bell. The cripple girl was tucked in his arms and he squeezed her gently. He was very fond of her. He wondered how long she had been there. It felt like a long time. He knew he had been sick, feverish, but it seemed to have blown over. He looked up and saw the old lady standing next to the bed, watching him. She smiled at him wistfully. Then she was gone.

\* \* \*

She stared out of the window, not thinking about anything much. The pink had faded from the shop and from her cheeks. She watched a young girl go by and not give either of them a second glance. Not many do anymore. They all go to the big shopping mall up the road now. They wanted the latest fashions, but the colours were so loud and garish that she just couldn't get excited about them. Her shop now was filled mostly with second-hand clothes and cheap bric-a-brac. She didn't care. The joy had gone out of her life a long time ago. She spent most of it standing at the window with a cup of tea in her hand and a faraway look in her eye. She wasn't interested in sales. She didn't need the money anymore. Things ticked over, like the clock, like her life. She looked at a dirty smudge on the window and resisted an urge to wipe it off.

Her rash had come back, under her arm and on her bra and panty line. Always worse in the winter. Never went away, just comes and goes. Put cream on is all one can do. Arthritis in her hands from all the sewing too.

'I used to be so pretty,' she thought. 'Well you can see it still. Skin still lovely and...it's the other things...the breath, I can smell it in the morning, awful, and the taste in my mouth, not young and fresh anymore. Body smells too. I used to be so proud of my smells, now I have to drown myself in scent. This shop smells a bit too. Too many old things in here.'

She'd been old for a long time now. From the day she met the Warden her young life had been over. She'd had dreams, dreams of a pink wedding, with pink champagne, at a pink reception with pink flowers and bridesmaids. She had planned for a little pink girl, or in the event of something going wrong, a little pink boy. She had wanted to watch the child grow up so they could grow old together. Now all she had was the Warden, and he only grew worse, and soon he would retire and be free to make her life a full-time misery.

There had been no church wedding because he said it was a waste of money so she spent the most wonderful day of her life in a dingy registry office with two musty old clerks as witnesses. Her honeymoon was a wet weekend in a bedsit-on-sea where he spent all his time in the bar. He had bullied her into marriage and then plonked his big boots and belly down in her delicate little love nest and proceeded to suck the life from her with his outsize demands. She never complained or protested. If this is what God gave her instead of what she wanted, well there must be a reason. Blessed are the persecuted, she would say. Blessed are they that suffer, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. She knew that God's choice of life for her was the right choice, even though she didn't like it. Happiness wasn't everything. She had a roof over her head, enough to eat, and she was healthy. The handsome husband she yearned for, the romance, the wedding, the cottage by the sea, the children running free, who knows...

Just then, a little ray of sunshine broke through the damp afternoon and sparkled on something in the window display. She

picked up the brooch and stared at it with a fond smile. It was what kept her going, her memory of the boy, her little glimpse into a paradise slowly fading with the years until she couldn't even really remember what he looked like. She closed her eyes and hugged it to her chest, then put it back in the window display, arranging it nicely on its red velvet bed. No one had ever bought it...again. Once someone had enquired the price but she had told them that it was already sold. The Warden had made her put it up for sale when he had been suspended from duty and they were short of money. It had been in the papers. Assaulting a prisoner. There was talk of a sexual assault, and that actually came as no surprise to her. She felt sorry for the prisoner. She understood how he felt.

Anyway, she did get a chance to wear the brooch at home sometimes, when he was on nightshift. Not that there was anyone to admire it, except for the young man at number seven who used to watch her from his kitchen window. Another lonely soul, like her. She understood him because she was also one of those watchers at the window. He was a nice boy, but he was very shy. She had been aware of him for a long time, and over the months felt as if they had struck up a silent rapport. One day, on a lonely whim, she had smiled at him. That was a mistake. He had leapt out of sight like a scalded cat and she never saw him again. She knew he was there, but he wouldn't show himself. Perhaps he'd come back in time, she thought, but she doubted it. She sighed, and with a last look at the brooch, turned away and began closing up for the night.

\* \* \*

He switched on the table lamp and the soft light reflected off the leather covered mahogany furniture in a warm glow around the

room. It was two o' clock in the morning. He liked being up at this time of the night. No phone calls. No interruptions. It gave him time to think and follow through on his thoughts. He walked over to the stereo cabinet and put on his favourite and only record, *Fuori dalla notte*, 'Out of the night,' by Ludovico Einaudi. A beautiful, haunting tune that kept him company in the dark hours and served as a soothing balm and antidote to all the horrors of human behaviour that were his daily bread. He sat down and contemplated the untidy heap of official documents on his desk. From the top he picked up a Polaroid picture and held it under the lamp. She was a beautiful woman, the Warden's wife, even in death. She was about the same age his wife would have been. His wife had died many years before. He still missed her. He still, at moments when he forgot himself, expected her to walk into the room, and each time he had to steel himself against the disappointment that followed. She had died of cancer. An awful time that, and one of the reasons he never married again. It hurt too much. He wondered what the Warden was feeling. He didn't like the man. He was a bully. But that didn't mean he didn't have feelings. He leaned back and put his finger to his lips as he studied the picture. Hardly a hair out of place. No sign of a struggle. It must have been quick, merciful. Not like his wife. Cancer is a cruel and torturous killer, and yet one can't say that cancer is evil. It's merely a cell that malfunctioned, due to a multitude of hereditary and environmental reasons. In the case of the Warden's wife's murder, it was a person that had malfunctioned for probably much the same reasons.

'Oh well, better get on with it.' He picked up a folder and opened it with a sigh. He read the witnesses' statements for the umpteenth time. A couple of spinsters who lived across the street said they had seen a fat young man running into the victim's apartment that evening. They saw no more because for fear of their own safety they had closed the curtains. When asked why they

hadn't called the police, they said they had done so, but because they had done so, so often, the desk sergeant told them not to do so anymore, unless they were dying.

So the fat young man had been in her flat. That much was established. There was also the fresh fingerprint on the blade of the knife, which matched with his prints taken at a previous conviction. The policeman had only met the man, boy really, briefly, but although he had seemed somewhat disturbed and eccentric in his behaviour (in his experience no one was normal), he didn't seem to be an aggressive or violent sort of person. He was an introvert, shy, more likely to commit suicide than murder.

He looked at the lady's photograph again as if it could give him some kind of clue to his dilemma. It seemed to him that she looked...well...he could hardly say it, blissful. There was a kind of fulfilment on her face, an angelic joy that reminded him of that statue by Bernini, and the expression on the delicately carved face of St Theresa who was about to be passionately pierced by cupid's arrow. Ecstasy, that was the look.

And what about the fat young man? Had he been her cupid, plunging his arrow into her happy heart? Had he been her redeemer, the instrument of her blessed release from this cursed coil? For a sensitive woman like her, living with the Warden must have been a wearying existence. To greet death with such joy, one must have been entirely without hope. A brute of a husband, no children, nothing to live for, no way out, just waiting to die of old age.

And yet, murder is murder they say. At least that's what the papers say. That's what the jury will say. But they also say it takes two to Tango, and that if you want to dance with death, you'll always find a partner.

But none of this was going to help him at all. Or the fat young man. And they were both running out of time.

\* \*

Her toes were nicely toasted, so she switched off the heater and climbed under the blankets with him. Pure paradise. She sighed and snuggled up against him, barely closing her eyes when...

"What's the matter?" she said, sitting up in alarm. Something...a dream, had woken him. He was trying to say something; he had remembered something...important. She waited, willing him on with her eyes. His mouth opened and closed as he tried to form the words of his revelation, to push out the sounds that would make sense to his ear, but there was nothing there, or something was blocked, and the effort was causing him to break out in a sweat. As he became more distressed, his body began to jerk and spasm and she knew he wasn't going to be able to say what he needed to say. His failing struggle for sanity was too much for her to bear and she gently put her hand on his cheek. At her touch he immediately ceased his struggles and the look of anxiety left his face.

Some things are too hard to live with she supposed. Perhaps that's why he couldn't come back, no matter how hard he tried. She sighed and stroked his cheek. He was also going to be taken away from her, like her father was. She knew it. She knew that every moment with him was precious. She looked at him. His eyes were clear and kind and for a long time they basked contentedly in each other's gaze.

Unexpectedly he bent forward and kissed her quickly on the lips, then sat back looking pleased with himself. She was surprised and delighted with his game, and returned the compliment, and lingered there for the longest while. She revelled in the naughtiness of touching him so intimately, so romantically, savouring the soft

skin and gentle breath and the delicate dancing butterfly kisses brushing like a wing the lips and cheek and chin.

Her Adonis glowed before her like a peach. With gleaming eyes he sneaked in for another kiss, but she side slipped his lips and pecked him on the cheek. Cheated, he laughed and turned to get his reward and their open mouths met. It took them by surprise. The wetness...and the warmth, closer than skin, within. She pulled away quite overcome, her hesitating heart hammering against her bony breast like a passionate lover demanding to be let in...or out. The fat young man meanwhile nudged her playfully, teasing her with tickles. He wanted some more, and when she tried to wriggle away he looped his huge arms around her and simply pinned her to his chest. There was nothing she could do but laugh and be happy with him so close...so close to...she closed her eyes and lifted her face up to his.

It was wonderful feeling his tongue gently trickling through the little hairs on her lip, tenderly tasting her skin until he came to the crevice at the corner of her mouth where it was sweeter, and licking more urgently there. She half tried to turn her head away but she was as weak as a baby in his arms and could only moan with delight as he probed and pushed and she finally opened her lips for him. She put her tongue tentatively out to greet his, and then, hungrily, she drank from his mouth.

They broke apart breathless with excitement, beyond themselves with passion, becoming...man and woman. His unfolding penis was beginning to burgeon in his lap and she closed her eyes and breathed in its pungent aroma. He touched her cheek like a child and she turned and took his finger into her mouth, licking lovingly along its length and tracing a trail of saliva down her cheek and throat and hissed in the cool night air as his finger found her taut dark nipple. She revelled in the agony for as long as she could bear it then pulled away, taking deep breaths to try and calm her trembling

frame. The fat young man however had spotted his huge erection and was whimpering in distress, trying to push it down and hide it from sight, but she stilled him with a touch. She took his hand and put it on her crippled thigh, sliding it slowly up high until she felt his fingers slip inside. He watched with fascination as her other hand came towards him and touched him, and began with soft slow strokes to urge him up towards her, ever more intently caressing him and whispering sweetly and kneading and kissing him and putting her mouth around him until the fat young man was surging for breath, half out of his mind with pleasure.

Then she put her hands on the back of his neck and opened her legs wide.

She lay her head quietly on the pillow as the pain and sweetness rocked her back, and then forwards, coming and going, protesting at his withdrawal and welcoming the warmth of his re-entry, again and again, until she felt his weight on her speed up and bounce the bed and finally spasm, and thrust, and come, and crush her to the mattress. She was taken. Inside and out. She was his.

She was fast asleep and snoring when he got up and walked over to the sink. There was moonlight shining on the wet flagstones outside. Reflections on water always made him uneasy. Something stirred inside his brain for a moment, a memory, a premonition that flitted away, insubstantial as a ripple and he became calm and serene again, just looking, lost in the myriad puddles and lights fractured like the facets of his mind. All in his world was chaos, coming and going and tumbling over each other in a kaleidoscope of meaningless places and faces. The boy had permanently entered a world of dreams and shifting sands, a passive participant in the passing parade of his imagination.

A full moon hung in the dark heavens like the mad white orb of a lunatic's eye, some blind god straining in vain to see his misshapen creation. The fat young man stared back into the void until he was nearly frozen.

Perhaps sensing his plight or maybe he moaned out loud, she woke up and led him gently back to bed. She rubbed his feet with her bony fingers until they were pink again.

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It was eight o' clock in the morning when a police car pulled up behind the garbage truck outside the fat young man's flat. The dustmen stopped and stared expectantly, waiting for the policeman to make a move, but when nothing happened they disappointedly resumed their labours. The policeman switched off the engine, pulled on the handbrake and sank into his seat. He suddenly felt very tired and very old. This kind of thing didn't excite him anymore. For forty-five years, he had served justice faithfully, but in the end, he had found her to be much like her statue straddling the courthouse door. Cold stone, blind, bent scales and a bloody sword. It wasn't so bad in the old days, when criminals were bad people and everyone knew the difference. Nowadays it wasn't so cut and dried. Sometimes it was hard to tell who the victim was. No more so than with this case. To all intents and purposes, a harmless child of a man, still a boy, shy and self-effacing, wanted for murder. What tragic accident had befallen the poor fellow to get him entangled in this mess? He had thought about it so much it gave him a headache.

The garbage truck revved and roared off down the road with the men hanging on the sides, gawping at him. He picked his hat up off the dashboard. "Oh well. Better get it over with," he sighed.

This was where it all ended. She had seen the police car arrive, and knew that it was over. The day she had been trying not to think about was here. She had expected to rush for her palpitation pills, but instead she remained strangely calm. The policeman sat waiting in the car, giving her precious time to collect herself and say goodbye. She looked around at the flat and seemed to see for the first time how drab and dingy it actually was. How prettily her mind had painted it in her happiness. Even now, in the bleak, cold light of reality, how dear the dark corners, the dirty cracks in the linoleum and the draughty dirt-streaked windows. She turned her loving eyes on the serene and beautiful fat young man sitting on the bed smiling at her. Even here she expected tears and sadness, but there was only the emptiness of inevitability. A hollow knock clattered the door on its hinges and echoed round the room. She walked up to the fat young man and took his hand in hers.

“Goodbye my darling.” She kissed him fondly on the forehead and went to open the door.

“Good morning miss. I’m officer...” was all he said before her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell in a dead faint on the doorstep.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 8

Nobody liked him. He didn’t like himself. Nor anyone else. But man cannot live by hate alone. He needs to take pride in himself one

way or the other. He took pride in being an ogre. His mother, although she tried not to show it, was morally afraid of him. Since his father died, he had begun stalking her with surreptitious hints and innuendo's, mumbled propositions and indecencies, half said as a joke through leering lips. Then, when he was about 13 years old and already of monstrous proportions, the bathroom door key mysteriously went missing, and she would find him walking in on her ablutions quite regularly. He would arrogantly stand and stare at her while she cringed behind a towel or the shower curtain, then leave with a salacious smile on his mouth. She also knew he was going through her drawers and private things. He left her some...signs. She shuddered at the memory and tried to tell herself she was being silly and that he was just being a boy, but she couldn't help feeling scared. Her only acquaintance had stopped visiting them when the woman's child had developed an anal bleed after playing with him in the shed all afternoon.

In the shed was where it had all happened. Her husband used to take him there to punish him, usually after dinner. He was a miner with a short fuse and would come home from a hard day at the rock face in a bad mood and take it out on the boy.

"I thought I told you to get a haircut?" The boy looked sullenly at his plate.

"I'm talking to you." His father raised his voice and threw his fork spinning across the table, narrowly missing the boy's eye.

"John please...." began his wife.

"And you shut up. All you do is bloody molly coddle the boy. Look at him. Looks like a bloody girl with his long hair." Sometimes he wouldn't even finish his supper before he was dragging the boy out the back door. She would pile the dirty dishes into the sink and watch her husband steering him by his neck into the shed at the end of the garden. She'd wash and wait and keep her eyes on the

bubbles until she heard the back door slam and her husband would come in looking strangely relaxed.

"Going to have a bath." he'd say and whistle his way up the stairs. Her son emerged from the shed much later, walking very slowly, keeping his face averted from her. He never forgave her for witnessing his shame.

"Hurry up for Chrissakes. What's taking you so long? Don't make me come down there my boy." The boy mumbled sulkily under his breath and half-heartedly tugged at the pile of roof tiles stacked on the lawn.

"I told you to carry them up one at a time, you bloody idiot. You can't carry them all." The boy looked up at his father silhouetted against the skyline on the roof like some Jack-and-the-Beanstalk giant with his great bush of unruly red hair lit up by the setting sun, huge ham fists on hips, lips tight and twisted with bitter promise. For a moment, it was a stalemate as they stared at each other with mute malevolence.

"Are you going to hurry up or must I come down and fetch you?" The father said finally. The boy stood steadfast in deliberate disobedience.

"You little bastard," the father murmured in disbelief at his cheek. "I've just about had enough of you," he fumed, and with a matter-of-fact finality, backed up towards the edge of the roof to put his foot where the ladder should have been and turned a one-half somersault through the air before he hit the ground.

He was a big man. He hit the ground very hard. His upside down body sagged slowly sideways and then lay sickeningly still, neck twisted at an odd angle. The young Warden waited for some moments to go by and then carefully put the ladder back in position.

But men like his father are more than natural, and the force of their outraged spirit is not easily contained by mere death. More than once, it was to reach out in revenge and mar the blissful hereafter of the young Warden's life. One day he was at school, sitting in his usual place at the back of the class, drawing piles of steaming shit and pools of blood dripping from daggers on the cover of his school book, when his teacher, who was busy writing out a maths equation on the blackboard, was hit by a condom full of water on the back of the head. He was a slight, academic sort of man and the blow drove his head into the blackboard, smashing his glasses and giving him a severe nosebleed. The confusion was considerable. Some girls rushed to help and the rest milled around stupidly. In the end the teacher stemmed the flow of blood with his hanky, put someone in charge of the class, and took himself off to matron.

There were many whispered conversations and speculations going on once he left, but within five minutes, the Principal walked in with a purposeful stride and stood like a sentinel in front of the class. He looked neither right nor left but seemingly straight at every individual child at the same time. It was a full two minutes before he spoke, during which time they could practically hear the watch on his wrist ticking.

"Who did this?" His finger pointed at the pool of water and blood on the floor. His glance never wavered. He waited. Not a sound. One minute. Two minutes. Silence. The atmosphere was palpable. Everyone was figuratively squirming in their seats.

The principal was a man never seen, only heard about in tales and legend. The toughest of boys were seen to cry like babies upon leaving his office, white faced and stiff gaited, not to sit for many a day. The speculations ran wild as to the sort of cane he used, whether it was birch or carbon fibre. Whatever it was, seldom did he fail to draw blood. And now here he was. Unmistakably it was HIM, though no one in the class had ever seen him before.

“Did anyone see who did it?”

Silence. One breathless minute. Two breathless minutes. And then the impossible happened. A boy put up his hand and everyone’s eyes turned to him as he pointed straight at the young Warden. The Warden, intent on his gruesome art and vaguely hearing the silence deepen, glanced up to gaze down the barrel of a metaphorical gun. The boy with the pointing finger sat in front of one of the windows, the afternoon sun glittering in a wash of golden rays through his ginger hair, giving him the appearance of a biblical prophet prodigy in the form of his new risen father come to pass judgement and punish this patricide. The Warden’s mouth moved but no words came out. To the principal this was a sure sign of guilt. He waited a split second longer to see if any explanation were to be forthcoming and then turned and left the room. The silence was stupendous. No one moved. They were all waiting for the explosion.

The bell rang and everyone jumped, one or two actually peeing a bit in their pants from fright. The class didn’t quite know what to do now. Everyone was in shock. Hesitantly they packed up their books and dribbled off to their next class, where they were interrupted by a boy coming in and handing a note to the teacher. She called the Warden’s name and told him to report to the Principal’s office. He stood up as in a dream and walked out of the door.

He had never been in that part of the building before and it took him a while to find the office. At first knock, he got no reply. He waited for a decent amount of time and knocked again, louder.

“Come,” said a voice within. He went in and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The principal stood to one side of a big brown desk. He lifted his sleek silver tipped Birch cane and pointed at the centre of the carpet. The boy went and stood there. The principal rotated the cane tip to indicate he must turn around. He did so.

“Drop your trousers and your shorts.”

He did so after a fumble or two.

“Bend over and lift your shirt.”

He did so. How bad could it be? He waited.

He heard a step, a swish, and felt a blow. Caught unawares, his mind registered the event a split second later and was instantly filled with a white-hot hissing that sizzled behind his eyes. Waves of ice washed across his skin in a shower of stabbing splinters, the hairs on his body straining upwards as static electricity flared from every nerve and follicle. Then came the pain. A searing rush of lava poured out from a central core and consumed him, his body and being cooked and quivered, poised on a pinprick, his brain shrieking at the overload of stimulus. Pain was too small a word for the sensation that attacked him from the tip of his tail to his clenched teeth. He couldn't move. He couldn't see. He couldn't hear. All his senses had shut down in an attempt to deal with the disaster in his rear. His bones had turned to jelly and his major muscles began to twitch involuntarily. A flush of heat then spread across his face and flowed out over his body as his sweat glands went into overdrive and within seconds, he was soaked, shaking and shocked nearly shitless.

He tried to straighten up, despite the increase in pain that it caused in his buttocks.

“Stay,” said the voice behind him. “Down.”

He didn't understand what was going on now, but he blindly obeyed. Then came – unbelievably - another step, swish and thump. His mind rebelled at what was happening, but there was no way to deny the experience. His eyeballs started to boil and his mouth stretched open wide as he tried to suck in some solace, but there was none. He heard a distant moaning and wondered who that was.

Six times the cane descended. He lost count after three.

For the next few days, his awareness was acute. He noticed things. Tables, chairs, especially chairs. He noticed how far it was to walk from the woodwork class to the tuck shop. Colours were

brighter, sounds louder, and smells more poignant. His senses had come to life. He paid attention when the teachers spoke in class. He still didn't understand what they were talking about, but he listened avidly, noticing the tones and timbre of their voices as they echoed round the room. All these things served as a distraction from the throbbing ache and shooting pains in his bum. For the first time he noticed his classmates, what they looked like, what they wore, and who walked with whom between classes. He also noticed that some of them actually greeted him when he looked at them. No one had ever done that before. Some nodded, some nodded and slightly smiled. Some even mumbled a faint hello in passing.

Unbeknownst to him he had become a hero. The story had spread like wildfire that he had had a dozen of the best, and by going straight back to class and sitting down, he had enhanced his reputation to that end too. Slowly all this began to filter through to him and he basked in the unfamiliar warmth of popularity.

There was a little boy from one of the lower classes who started following him around like a puppy. At first, this was rather flattering, but then he began to get a little bit embarrassed by the boy's continual presence. He told him to go away, but this had little effect. In fact it only seemed to make the boy cling more closely. Soon he became obsessed with trying to shake him off. He would threaten and mock, and start to give him the unobtrusive clout or two whenever no one was watching, but he was a hero, and little boys love a hero.

One day though, he had just had enough. He grabbed the boy by the scruff of the neck and slung him across a crowded quadrangle, shouting at him to bugger off. The little boy went skidding across the sharp stones of the asphalt on his hands and arms and knees. Ironically, it was precisely then that the Warden realized how fond he had become of the little boy. Perhaps even the first person he had ever liked in his life. He had to curb an impulse to leap forward and

help the little fellow to his feet. Everyone watched as the little boy got slowly to his feet, tears in his eyes, skin hanging in strips, blood dripping from his hands and knees, and limped painfully away.

The young Warden watched him go with a pang in his heart and a smirk on his face. There was nothing he could do. He didn't know how to redeem the moment. He wasn't built for tenderness. His reign was over. Everything was back to normal.

\*

"Well well, if it isn't Mr John Smith," said the Warden. He loved the way his voice echoed round the room. It seemed to resonate in sympathy with the institution he had served loyally so many years, as if the soul of the building spoke through him, the very bricks of his being. He said the words again, rehearsing them in anticipation of the coming event. They had caught the killer. News of his arrest had reached the prison and the murderer was handcuffed and on his way. By law, the Warden shouldn't have been there, but no one dared debate the point because, although lowly in rank, his power on the prison floor was palpable. Anyway, no one objected because they all felt this murder rather personally.

He heard the big door slam and, after taking a cursory glance around his neat little office, went out into the narrow, old, red-bricked, high-arched prison hall with its round window over the iron clad entry doors.

"If it isn't Mr John Smith," he said, standing stiff-necked at-ease, hands clasped behind his back. The sun shining in his eyes made it hard for him to see clearly the men walking towards him. However, he wouldn't stoop to the indignity of squinting so he looked directly into the glare as if he wanted to stare down God himself, and as a consequence, when the two men stopped before him he was nearly blind and barely able to discern which one was the murderer.

But one shadowy silhouette towered over the other and threw off a shower of sparks and splinters of light from the shocking ginger haired halo of hell fire on a rooftop and the devil come home to roost in shape and sheen the spitting image of his father. And then he knew that it was his father who had killed his wife, struck back at him through the hand of this man, and was announcing it to him now with God's own light. He also knew he was being fanciful, but his fear of his father went deep into the bone, and was not easily undone by common sense. To cover up his considerable consternation and confusion, not to mention his trembling legs, he bounced like big stuff on the balls of his feet and jangled his keys loudly only to instantly discover the prisoner's fingers firmly round his throat, suffocating him. Paralysed and helpless as if he was a child again in his father's hands, the Warden floundered while the policemen tugged ineffectively at the fat young man, trying to divert his deadly intentions. The policeman shouted loudly for help and soon doors were banging open and feet came running from all directions. The fat young man was borne down and his wrists handcuffed behind his back this time. The old Warden stood up unsteadily and rubbed his throat, sucking in the air. The pain had somewhat dispelled the fearful spectre of his father and sanity came creeping back into his brain as he walked over to where the fat young man was pinned to the floor and raised his truncheon high.

My world burst open and pain became me. I gasped in the air but nothing happened. Nothing came in or out. I was held in a death spasm. I heard a rustle of clothes and a clink of keys as someone kicked me in the ribs and then everything came out at once.

"That's enough. Leave him alone." I heard someone say as waves of black nausea began to convulse my body and I felt all my muscles release.

"I'll break his fucking neck." Now there's a voice I didn't want to hear again. "Fucking cunt," he said. I opened my eyes a slit and saw a big pair of brown boots covered in puke, inches away from my face. There was no mistaking them. This was the man who was always waiting for me in my dreams.

"Jesus he stinks."

I was in trouble again. I could hear men hooting and hammering from the nearby cells. I knew where I was, but I didn't know how I'd got there. Or was it still the last time? It was very difficult to think. Slowly, I started to breathe in bits of air again.

"You can't do this. If you hit him again I'll file a complaint," said the other voice.

"File all you like," said the Warden. "I don't give a fuck."

"He's my prisoner," said the policeman. "And until he's properly processed his well-being is my responsibility."

There was a long standoff and then a shifting shoe.

"I can wait," he said. "Sooner or later his well-being is going to be my concern. Then I'm going to give him a little something extra. Just because of you. I'm sure he'll want to thank you for it later."

The white walls rushed by making me feel seasick so I closed my eyes and relaxed into the rhythm of the rock-a-bye ride with the rattling wheel on what I presumed was a hospital trolley hurtling along the hallway. Someone put a hand on top of my body to steady me as we went round a corner. The trolley slowed, bumped through a narrow doorway, and then stopped.

"Doctor will be round in a moment," said someone else, and then there was blessed silence and I could concentrate on my pain.

"Won't be long now. How you doing?" Asked the other voice. I was holding it all together by a hair. One word would slip the knot and my life would unravel there and then forever.

"You're in the Town Jail infirmary," said the other voice again. "But I don't suppose you care much about that at the moment," he mumbled under his breath. "Poor blighter. How did you get into such a pickle?" I didn't want to know what he meant. I didn't want to know what was happening.

"What's happening?" I asked.

His voice jumped in surprise. "You can talk?"

I opened my eyes and looked at him, and even though it was sideways on, I would've known that moustache anywhere.

"Hi," I said and tried to wave.

"Hello. I am sorry to see you here in this predicament, but that's the way things have turned out it seems. How are you feeling?" He asked. It was nice to have a friendly face nearby.

"Not so nice."

"I'm sorry about that too. The Warden wasn't supposed to be here," he said. I wasn't supposed to be here either, but I had a feeling things would get clearer all too soon.

"He's a bit of a swine." The policeman bit down on the last word, trying to cut it off halfway.

"I know. He raped me last time I was here." It was as if my mouth was speaking all by itself, telling me things I didn't want to remember. And here it was happening all over again.

"Why am I here?" I asked.

The policeman looked a long time at me, and then drew a noisy breath in through his moustache.

"It seems," he said, exhaling. "That you murdered his wife."

\* \* \*

"You do that? You do that a lot? You just let your dog piss on everyone? Look at this - all over my shoes. There's a thousand lampposts in this town and you gotta come here and piss on mine. Bloody Hell. Dunno if you noticed, but this isn't a walk-your-doggie type of street. Not that type of doggie anyway. What you doing down here with a dog anyway? Kinky sex? You want me to do something kinky with the dog? Tell you what I'll do with him next time he pisses on me, I'll put my stiletto heel right through his bloody skull. So you just.....now what? Now you gonna smoke? Right here? On my patch? Right here in front of me? Are you from out of town? Jesus, you're not from this planet, that's for sure. Get out of the way, you're blocking my customers view of me. They don't wanna see your arse. They wanna see my tits. Mind you, you can see these buggers from outer space at the moment. That's the trouble with being pregnant I suppose. Well, not trouble really, the men like it, that's for sure.

"Oh fuck. Now look what you made me do. Fucking broken my shoe now. Christ, that's all I need. Jesus, you're like a bad luck fairy. Why don't you just fuck off down the road there and let me get back to work? No, no. That's not far enough. More. More. Fucking creep. If you weren't so gormless I'd'a thought you were dangerous. What's the matter with you? You in love with me or something? No? Wanna fuck? Extra if you want the doggie to watch.

"Shit, look at that. Fucking straps broken. No, no. You just stay there. I've had enough help from you tonight, Mr Useless. But I must say it makes a change. A man who keeps his mouth shut. A breath of fresh air actually. Rather not know what kind of an arsehole you are. Watch him! Watch him! He's angling for another piss. I'm warning you. There, that's better. So, waddaya want? You're not the police. You certainly don't have the gift of the gab so you're not a pimp. We'd bloody starve if you were my manager, ha, ha. You married? No I shouldn't think so. Fucking zombie you are. So what is it? You

think I'm pretty? You think I'm pretty, is that why you keep looking at me? Well that's nice if it were true. You're not so bad yourself actually. Sure you don't want a quickie? I'll suck you off for 25. Look pretty funny, you sucking on your pipe while I'm blowing you off. Has an aristocratic ring to it. Got style. Hope you not foreign though. Not that it matters, just they got funny habits. Not that I can afford to be picky tonight. I suppose you've noticed that business isn't exactly booming. Tra, la, la, with boughs of Holly. The festive season's not very festive for us. Should be heaving now, but everyone's fucking at home. And I must say I'm getting pretty fed up standing around here talking to myself. What you say. Wanna go for a drink?"

Her bare feet made the softest padding sound on the still-warm slabs of paving as they walked down the road together, thick white plumes of pipe-smoke curling up into the languid night air, the dog following on behind.

"Come in," she said, letting them in and leading the way into the lounge. There were no carpets on the floor and no lampshade on the hall light, so it looked a bit bleak at first sight. But the wooden floors were clean and polished, and the walls not too faded. She had very little furniture. A hat-stand in the hall, a tallboy and some easy chairs in the lounge.

"There we go," she said and sat down on the couch with a weary plonk. Unladylike she hoiked her ankle up onto her knee and began rubbing her swollen foot.

"You wouldn't think it was my feet that suffered the most would you?" She gave him a rueful smile. "Wouldn't give us a rub would you?" She became aware of the double meaning in her words and felt a surge of warmth inside her. He quietly sat down next to her.

The next day he moved in. She continued to work the streets, but being heavily pregnant was proving to be something of a problem in the fact that she was finding it increasingly difficult to suffer fools and clients gladly as her hormones raged madly out of control. Business was starting to drop off because men didn't like too much piss and vinegar with their pussy.

She met her nemesis the night of the salesmen's convention in the lounge of the Royal Hotel. When things were slow, she'd often go and hang around the bar in the hopes of picking up a drunk or two. That evening there was a group of men in suits and ties, drinking beer and pissing themselves with laughter. There were a few other women like her at the bar, waiting tiredly to be invited over, but the men were having such a good time on their own that the ladies were obviously being left to the butt-end of the evening. She stirred some ice cubes around the plastic ashtray with her swizzle stick and unconsciously fingered the head of the snake tattoo under her blouse.

One of the men made a comment and the group turned around to look at the women. Someone else said something and they all laughed like hell. The girls turned sourly back to their tepid drinks.

The man who had made the comment was a cocky little runt with no hair and she knew he was going to pick her when the time came to come. He had been awarded the 'Top Salesman of the Year' trophy for the fifth time running. The secret of his success was his tongue. He was, to put it succinctly, a prizewinning arse-licker, and he would be the first to admit that his clients were all prize arseholes. In this respect, his lack of stature gave him a natural advantage over his colleagues. His lips were closer to the target area.

In some perverted way, he was actually vain about his achievement. He was proud of being the best brown-nosed bullshitter

in the business. He sold a product that didn't work, to people who didn't need it. One of God's more useless creatures it would be hard to find, a fact which he sometimes felt most keenly, this debasement of himself for the sake of profit and a fleeting glimpse of glory. Little wonder then that at his victory celebrations he would want someone else to do to him what he was constantly doing unto others.

"You're fucking joking." she said in answer to his request and picked up her bag. "Go get yourself a fag if that's what you want." She slid off her chair and headed for the revolving doors.

"OK. Wait." He had no option. He'd left it too late. There were no more girls to be had at this hour and he would just have to make do.

"Just a straight fuck then."

"Fifty bucks." She said.

"Now you're fucking joking." He looked around in disbelief, as if hoping for someone to agree with him.

She turned towards the door.

"Ok. Ok. Fifty bucks. Jesus, what is it? Gold plated?"

He was getting his money's worth tonight though. The alcohol had anaesthetised his nerves so much that he barely felt any sensation in his penis as he pumped away. Everything was numb. All he felt was a rather painful pressure in his balls after such a long time and no relief in sight. She was also feeling the strain.

"Jesus Christ why don't you come? I'm not a fucking donkey ride you know." She stared up at him from nose distance. "Your time is up. This ride is over." She heaved him off sideways. "Enough is enough."

And this is where he had had enough. Enough of being pushed around. Enough of being told what to do. Enough of being cheated out of his fair due. He was an award-winning salesman for fuck's sake. He was a man, not a mouse. He was furious.

"Listen you whore. It's only over when I say so." He rolled onto her and dug his forearm rather painfully into her windpipe. She started coughing and choking. "You do what I say, you bad mouthed bitch. Now open your fucking legs."

She let herself go limp so that he would ease the pressure on her throat slightly. Then he steered his penis back into her with his other hand and started his interminable in-out again. She waited until he was well away and his ear right up against her lips before she screamed so loudly that he leaped off the bed before he knew what was going on. He'd got such a fright he was actually shaking.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. He was sure the entire hotel had heard.

"You touch me again and I'll scream the house down. And I'm fucking pregnant too in case you hadn't noticed. What kind of a man are you? Raping a pregnant woman against her will?" She heaved herself up and sat on the end of the bed with her legs splayed out wide like a fat sow, rubbing her throat and looking for her shoes on the floor. He stood there, fingering his dwindling dick.

"Well I'm not paying for that," he said, trying to salvage some of his self-respect. "I didn't even come."

She turned around and looked him straight in the eye. "You pay me or I'll rip your fucking penis off, you cunt."

He hesitated and then decided that discretion was the better part of that kind of language. He wasn't a big fellow, and she was obviously in the mood, so he left it alone for now. But he wasn't going to let her get away with it. Like everyone else, he had issues, and this was as good a time as any to get a little payback for his missing balls.

He went to the police and told them she had stolen his platinum Rolex. She was arrested and convicted of soliciting, assault, and theft. A few weeks later she was screaming the jailhouse down.

\* \* \*

We looked at each other through the iron mesh. It felt strange. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to meet her at first. I don't like meeting people, but she looked very nice and seemed more nervous than me – poor thing, her face kept changing colour like a chameleon from one moment to the next. Apparently, she had been coming in everyday to ask how I was. The policeman told me she'd looked after me when I was...ill, but I couldn't remember her so it was all a bit embarrassing, her knowing things about me that I didn't know.

She winced when she saw my black eye. It had swelled completely closed by then.

"Are you alright?" she asked, pointing at it. "It looks very painful."

"Oh, it's alright, I can still see." I looked around the room with the other eye and back again. "It looks worse than it feels." She gave a nervous little smile. "They said that you were looking after me...you know..." I said. She pressed her lips together and nodded. We neither of us really wanted to talk about those things. It was a bit...personal; but I did want to get to know her. There was a long pause and then I said, "Hope I wasn't too much trouble?" I suddenly had a horrible vision of her having to wipe my bum. Oh, please God, no.

"Oh no trouble at all," she blurted out. "You were as good as gold." She blushed and smiled and didn't know what to do with herself. She was actually quite pretty. "I'm so glad I could help." She gushed and reflexively reached out towards me but then lost her nerve and pulled her hand back. "And I'm glad you're better now...I

mean...are you going to be alright? Your poor eye." She wrung her hands in sympathy. I wasn't used to people being that way with me. I nearly started crying.

"It's alright," I coughed and sniffed in a manly way. "Just a bit..." What could I say? "I don't really know what's going on. I don't remember much. It's all a bit jumbled up. They said I...I can't remember"

She jumped in quickly. "I'm sure it's all a mistake."

"That's what my lawyer says, and he should know, shouldn't he?"

She nodded with her eyes in her lap. There was nothing more to say for a while. She looked up at me, then away, and then back again. I liked her very much. When she looked up the next time, I gave her an encouraging smile and she brightened up a bit.

"I've tidied up your flat for you, you know, after the police had been there, gave it a bit of a clean, so when you come home..." She was trying to be positive but it was all so...horrible. I don't think either of us believed I was going home again. The tears started rolling down her face. I put my fingers up to the barrier to try and comfort her and my chains clattered over the counter. She saw my gesture and put her hand up against mine. At least we could touch...sort of. It felt good.

"I'm sorry. I promised myself to be cheerful, but it's so awful." She dabbed at her face with her hanky and sniffed. "I wish there was something I could do."

"I'm happy you're here." I said. She was a girl in a million. I was amazed at how easily we got on, how much we liked each other.

She smiled again. "I'm also glad." What a time to fall in love. That just tops off the story of my life. I could see we'd have been wonderful friends. Still might be. Who knows?

"I'll come again if you want me to," she said eagerly.

"I'd like that. Yes. Very much." And then she couldn't hold it in any longer and started crying again. I stroked her finger through the wire mesh.

"Please don't, or else I'll get scared," I said.

"Alright," she said, sniffing and smiling and hiccupping, and for the next few minutes we gazed tearfully into one another's eyes. It was much more relaxed now.

"Do you have any family that I can call?" she asked, unconsciously picking at a pimple on her cheek that was already raw and bleeding. I suppose she was nervous but she was making it hard for me to concentrate on her words. I wanted her to stop but I didn't know how to tell her.

"No."

"Any friends?"

I shook my head. "No." But she kept on picking at it until I could almost feel her pain pricking, picking, bleeding. I turned away so I didn't have to see it...and then I heard the bleep of a phone hanging off the hook, disconnected. I looked around but I couldn't see any phone. Bid-a-beep, there it goes again, no one there, empty air, try again, bid-a-beep. Nothing. Hello? Hello? Bid-a-beep.

She watched it happen; in the blink of an eye he was gone. Her little happiness turned to terror. She had thought it was going to be okay, that he was going to be alright now, but they were back where they started. She knew there was nothing she could do. In desperation she tried to soothe him with calming words and cooing sounds, and crooned and cried and tried to cajole him into coming back through the sheer force of her love for him.

"Don't go away my darling, please stay here with me. Please don't leave me now...." But he was beyond her reach...and he was on a roll. She saw in horror and embarrassment that he was drooling

with rapt concentration and his hand was jerking up and down in his lap. He had his penis out and was masturbating it furiously.

She knew the warders were going to spot him any minute now and there was going to be terrible trouble. His warbling moan was getting louder and louder as he got closer and closer to his climax. She stuffed her hanky into her mouth to stop herself from crying out loud.

\* \* \*

It was freezing in the cell. She shivered and sniffed in the stink of shit from the broken toilet in the corner. The baby at her breast had its wide eyes fixed on the head of the snake tattoo that heaved and surged towards him as he pushed and pummelled at her bosom, weaving and swaying ever before him like some toxic warning sign as he drank from the nipple.

"Ouch, that's enough," she said as she pulled his greedy mouth from her bruised breast. "Jesus Christ it fucking hurts." She touched her cracked and bleeding nipple while the hungry child howled at his rough treatment.

"Shut the fuck up. You've had more than bloody enough." She dumped it on the bed, buttoned her blouse gingerly, and walked to the cell door to put some distance between them. "Hey. Is anyone listening to me? I don't want him. Fucking thing's chewing my tits to bits. Can you hear me, you arseholes? Jesus," she clung hopelessly on the bare bars, "Somebody help me please." No answer. She put her hands over her ears and tried to block out the baby's cries. There are sounds you can shut out, and there are others that drive you to the edge of your nerves.

“And where’s that fucking Warden then? It’s his fucking baby too you know, why doesn’t he come and get it? I’ll tell you why. BECAUSE HE’S HAD HIS ALREADY! WADDAYA KNOW! JUST LIKE A FUCKING MAN. Arseholes, the lot of you. Had his bit of fun and I get stuck with the leftovers. I didn’t even want the fucking bastard.” She turned around and slapped the baby on the bed who sucked in the air and began howling afresh. “Here we go again! Someone better come and take this fucking child away from me before I do something. I’m telling you I’m going to KILL HIM>>>>” she shouted down the hall. “You want to fucking ignore me, well I’m going to SMASH HIS FUCKING BRAINS OUT ON THE FLOOR and then you can come in and clean it up. Can you HEAR MEEEEEEEEEEEE?”

They didn’t look at her as they came in to collect the child. There’s something horrible about a woman with nothing left to lose. But within half an hour she was screaming through the bars for them to bring her baby back to her, although she didn’t for the life of her know why except that sometimes she wanted it and sometimes she didn’t. When she was released, the pipe man was there to take them home. Only the dog was happy.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 9

She used to have a friend called Amy, and they would play for endless hours on her bedroom floor under the window where her toy box was. They were very good friends. They even went on holiday

together, usually to the Beach Hotel on the Esplanade, except for one time when Amy was in hospital (nothing serious). One such holiday was coming up soon and they were already planning and rehearsing and packing and unpacking their suitcases until they were nearly worn out.

Amy lived with her parents in a six-roomed mansion with white gables and a red brick front. There was a kitchen on the ground floor and a little pantry for the pots and vegetables. There were copper runners on the stair carpet that gleamed in the lamplight and a beautiful mahogany banister curving up to the bedrooms on the first floor. Amy's room was right in the middle at the front of the house; she had a bay window that overlooked the garden and driveway.

"I think we should take the yellow sandals," she said through a mouth full of silver hairpins as she combed Amy's hair.

"But I don't want to wear sandals," said Amy.

"I know, but other people have been walking barefoot through the sand with their veruka's, and they're very contagious you know. You'll just have to wear them I'm afraid."

There was a knock at the door and a small shadow paused over their happy afternoon. She placed Amy very carefully on her little bed in the tiny bedroom, and carefully closed the front of the doll's house. There was another knock at the door.

"Can we come in dear?" It was her mother. "Your cousin Junior is here." She'd forgotten about that. Cousin Junior.

"Yes," she said, her diminutive voice only just carrying as far as the door. She didn't like him. He was an ignorant lout, as her father would say of his pupils. The door clicked and creaked and her mother's white pointy face appeared and ushered in a sullen jowled Junior through a crack in the door.

"There you go. Now play nicely." She urged him further into the room with a pat on the back and slipped the door closed behind him. She and Junior stared at each other for a long moment. She

was trying to will him away with her mind and he was trying to do the same. He would have loved to have been outside in the garden or the street, with a stick in his hand. But then they'd have to watch him. So they stuck him in here, hoping that a girl's influence would dampen the devil down for a while. But he didn't like it. He didn't like her. He didn't like her room. It smelt funny and made him sneeze.

"What you doing?" he said eventually.

"Nothing. Reading."

"I hate reading. Reading's for girls." He looked around the room for any articles of interest.

"Oh wow!" his eyes lit lasciviously at the doll's house with its built in garage and painted driveway in front.

"It's just a dolls house," she said as he brushed past her and plonked himself down in front of it. He took a toy car out of his pocket and began pushing it around the garden.

"I've got a nice picture book of birds," she said, trying to lure him away from her precious mansion with its little cardboard cut-out bushes and delicately carved trellises on the front lawn.

"Vroom." He roared up the driveway and skidded his car into the little painted pond. "Oh no, I'm stuck," he play-played. "Vroom, Vroom," he revved up the engine and the wheels of his chunky Land Rover tore at the fake grass and finally reversed out of the pond at full speed and his fist smashed into the house, bits of wood and furniture flying everywhere. The devastation was beyond mortal bearing. She turned around, blinded by her tears, and ran with outstretched arms towards the living room and into her mother's arms.

"Oh dear, oh dear?" she said, looking at her husband for help.

"They must have had a fight or something," he said.

"Shall I come and see, there, there you mustn't cry. Big girls don't cry," said her mother standing up. "Come along then."

"I'd better come too. See what Junior's been up to now," said Junior's father.

Junior was standing in the middle of the room with his hands behind his back.

"He drove his car into it," she sobbed, pointing a tearful finger at him. That was a big mistake, and if she hadn't been crying, she'd have seen Junior's eyes harden into two atomic beams of hate pointed directly at her.

"Give it to me," said his father holding out his hand. Junior didn't move a muscle.

"Give me the car or I'll give you a hiding right here and now."

Junior handed it over and looked down at his feet.

"Now I don't want to hear a squeak out of you for the rest of the day. Do you hear me?"

"Yes dad," he mumbled, himself in tears now.

She felt a tiny bit of satisfaction at that, but the house was broken. Her life was over.

"Come along with me," said her mother. "Let's go and wash your face. I'm sure daddy can fix it. Come on now, it's not so bad."

The little boy waited alone, in ignominy, red-hot hate and humiliation streaming from every pore of his being. He was furious at the injustice of it. It had been an accident. He hadn't meant to do that, but no one would ever believe him. His heart smouldered blackly as he looked around for something to kill. He looked again at the wreckage he had caused, the splinters of wood and cardboard, and a terrible plan blossomed in his mind.

When the little girl came back into the room, the doll's house was crackling with fire. Smoke billowed from the little windows and flames licked at the red tiled roof. The bedrooms were already an inferno.

"Amy!" She screamed and fainted.

\* \*

The alarm bells and sirens went off like World War Two. Doors banged open and boots thumped like thunder as prison warders and orderlies poured into the hall like storm troopers and headed straight for the fat young man who had increased his hand-stroke to a blur and was hooting “wooo wooooo” like the whistle of a steam train trying to get to the tunnel before the posse cut him off. Their collective impetus drove him from his chair as if he was a rag doll. The cripple girl screamed and clung to the metal grating as they rolled around on the floor and struggled him into a straightjacket.

“Please don’t do that. He’s not dangerous,” she called out but her voice was drowned in the crowd of shouting shuffling men. A couple of female warders came in to clear out the visitor’s room, but when they tried to remove her she wouldn’t let go and her steel-like grip on the partition had to be prised loose, finger by finger.

On the other side of the divide, the fat young man was ignominiously carted out, straining at his bonds and bellowing like a demented bull.

This was music to his ears. This was the news he had been waiting for. Mr Smith was misbehaving. A visceral thrill shivered up his spine and exploded like sherbet tingles in his brain. This was where he came into his own. Punishment. This was his domain, his Forté. This was where he had the makings of an artist. He knew all the methods: ancient and modern; oriental or homespun; tailor-made punishments to fit the personality; the duration; quick or slow; suddenly by surprise, or the measured approach. With or without bruises, accessories, the importance of suspense, the alternation of

pleasure and pain, sympathy and censure, all designed to make the experience exquisitely unbearable for the recipient.

The Warden crammed the sandwich into his mouth and knocked his chair over en route to the door. He was aware that he was being overly keen to get to work on Mr Smith, but this was going to be his masterpiece, he knew it in his bones. In the back of his mind however, his unseemly haste was also due in part to a covert desire to discredit his fanciful imagination and lay his father's ghost to rest, once and for all.

He reached the isolation cell just as they were locking up the now silent and straight-jacketed fat young man inside.

"Okay," he said, still chewing his sandwich. "I'll take over from here." They stood back as one and waited, half hoping to get a glimpse of him in action. It was a long awaited and not to be missed encounter in the Jail's social calendar but the Warden was having none of it. Under his insistent gaze they slowly turned away and sloped off disappointedly down the hall. It wasn't that he was shy to perform in front of others, he simply didn't want any witnesses.

He waited until the coast was clear before turning to the old dented steel door, green being the last of many layers of peeling paint peeping through the rust at him. It had an ill-fitting observation hatch of the same colour and decrepitude through which they fed the prisoner and checked where he was before entering. The old Warden never bothered with the hatch.

The fat young man hit him running head down in the midriff like the wallop of a whale and the Warden was hurled out the door and smack onto his back. He lay stunned and winded as the swaddled Smith straddled his fallen foe and roared a full-throated victory to the gods. The Warden quickly recovered enough of his wits and breath to drive his boot up into the fat young man's groin, cutting him off mid bellow and launching him in a parabola across the room. The landing shook the building to its foundations. A deep hush

settled over the prison as the Warden got to his feet with deliberate slowness and pulled out his baton.

\*

I knew I wasn't dead. I couldn't see anything, I couldn't feel anything, but I wasn't dead. I was awake in emptiness, bodiless. I tried to move and poison poured into my brain, green pain scouring over me and I went away again. Dark. Nothing. Nowhere. Waiting. Then a ripple in the dark, and the bristling blackness boiled with birthing brisance. Out of nowhere, a primeval being began to form and flow like quicksilver, filling the void and rearing up against the icy wastes of space like a cosmic colossus, a glittering giant straddling the universe, skin sizzling with radiating energy, an overwhelming force of pure intent.

Half formed babies began dropping from its seething womb, and as fast as they fell the giant would scoop them up into his hungry mouth and eat them. The falling children, trying to avoid this awful fate, began to turn into silent silvery flowers floating gently down from an hibiscus tree onto a shady verge of green grass, and settle in the strange streetlamp-hue like stars upon the lawn.

A man and a boy came strolling along, at one with the still night air, a little dog sniffing at their heels. Drawn by the sight, they sat down on the grass amongst the falling blossoms. They idly picked up a few to sniff and admire, and then the man began fitting one in the other to create a chain. The boy followed his example and soon they were engrossed in their endeavours. The dog lay between them with his jaw on his paws. The sweet smelling, silent night was soon filled with garlands of flowers everywhere, and now and then, a gently falling blossom would land upon their bowed heads.

Then the scene changed and I dreamed the silver singing ring of a railway line hum, heralding the approaching train driver flashing

by, floating to a stop gliding in through sliding doors and chrome shiny surface seats sitting soft sigh escaping cushioned closing doors and the tug and the pull of the faster and faster we go.

I saw his plan. Simple and clear. I looked down at the hands upon my knees, gnarled and stained and dear. I patted the jacket pocket and took out his pipe and lit it. Someone pointed to a 'no smoking' sign and I sank through seat and floor onto the rails and the clickety clack creak and sway of the steel wheels rolling onwards through the early morning mist to the end of the line.

The pipe man and destiny got off the train. The moment he put foot on home ground he became a fugitive again. The proximity of place seemed to erase the years between, leaving his memories as fresh as yesterday's bruises. The full reality of the situation flooded in on him and he became cautious and watchful. It might be thirty years later but for all he knew he was still a wanted man. A woman murdered mysteriously was not easily forgotten in a small town like this. Old fears reawakened with his first step onto the bloodstained soil. So acutely did he feel his guilt, that his tread was experienced by some sensitive souls as a tangible tremor radiating out into the town. An ancient gentle woman felt a faint foreboding in her bowels and turned a weathered eye to the heavens in search of a storm. To a fat young man parked in a side-road nearby, the effect was more direct. He felt a looming rush of doom dart down his spine, which interrupted the business in hand. He looked up wildly, like a gazelle startled from its grazing, and grated his gears in a frantic get-away. The car lurched like a leaping buck, windscreen wipers whipping back and forth like antlers, bounding over curb and concrete, bouncing off the bollards and denting a bin here and there before he finally skidded to a confused halt on the high street. With shaking hands he zipped himself up and cast anxious glances all around. The feeling was even worse now and he had the awful suspicion that he had

been driven into a trap like an animal. He sat dumbfounded...not knowing what to do next. It was out there somewhere...something. He drummed with nervous fingers on the steering wheel and stared through the wet windscreen for signs of his stalker, the evil that lurked just beneath all this normality.

Then he saw it. At first it was only a white wisp in the rain, then soon a thick coil of smoke curled out from around a brick column just ahead, like a slithering snake sniffing out its prey. Someone was standing in the pillared portico of the railway station entrance, hidden from his view.

The pipe man stood under the archway at the entrance and looked out into the rain. It had been raining when he left, so it seemed like only yesterday he had run away. A few things had changed though. Fresh paint here and there, a new car park and a fountain in the square that did nothing to dismiss the dismal, damp, drenching spirit of the town. Not even Progress with its Better things and Brighter future had been able to lift its sodden soul, and as every new generation raised its head, it was all too soon cowed into dull destiny by the sheer dreariness of it all: surly son replacing unhappy father in the on-going line of time and duty and dust; difficult daughter inheriting her mother's lipstick and lace, same old face, place, race. If you didn't look at the hairstyles too closely, you wouldn't know that any time had gone by.

He looked down the high street towards the Pink Paradise where he had left the boy all those years ago. It was still there, and the butcher shop next door with its bicycle parked against the 'Special Offer' sign on the pavement. He wondered if she was still there too, and would she still recognize him? He didn't know what he was going to say to her. He hadn't got that far in his thoughts. Would she remember him? Had she found the boy he had left in the alley next to her shop? Would she know where the boy was now? He

absentmindedly thumbed some more tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. All these unknowns were only fleetingly felt by him. He was a different sort of man. There was no use getting ahead of himself. He lit his pipe and watched the smoke drift off into the rain.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 10

The Judge sat up on high above an oak panelled wall, out of reach of the general brawl. There was no way up to him and no way down. He entered from a door behind his bench and disappeared the same way, never setting foot on common ground. The scuff marks and scratches on the panelling below him attested to the wisdom of this lofty retreat where he and his twelve apostles could watch the two sides slug it out: one good, one evil, and no one knew which until the jury decided, swayed by the tide of words and innuendo, objections and invectives, directives, overrulings and suppositions. In short, a circus of shrewd sharp words showering down on a pair of ears poised above two hovering hands recording every phrase in phonemes pricked out on a roll of paper.

The stenographer was the first to enter the silent, stuffy courtroom that early Wednesday morning. She heard the air conditioners switch on and begin their daily task of sucking out so much hot air as she unpacked her stenotype machine from its black leather case and carefully placed her floral covered cushion on her chair. She came early because she didn't like to rush. She needed to

be calm and relaxed when the trial began, with no distracting thoughts or feelings. When all was set up to her satisfaction, she sat and waited patiently with her hands folded in her lap. She watched the dribs and drabs begin to dawdle in and drift to their places, discussing desperate deeds and D.N.A., and hoping that today would offer up some startling new revelations about the same old degradation. She watched the council for the defence and the prosecuting attorney chatting in the doorway, looking forward to honing their wits on each other, playing their part as heads and tails of the same coin of chance jingling in the pockets down at the pub afterwards celebrating the winners all round and the losers underground and the same again barman, and time, gentlemen please, will catch up with all of you sooner or later.

But the whos, whats, whys and wherefores of the case were of no concern to her. She had a job to do and seldom listened to what was going on. As a result, she remained in the courtroom while everyone else was off in some imaginary dark and bloodstained bedroom, knife on the floor, fingerprints galore, and all the gory details captured by her flying fingers.

However, now she watched with mazing eyes as a stream of people began pouring in through the door like droves of sheep driven into a pen, bleating and shoving and climbing up onto the seats. The ladies gallery was nearly full already, women dragging along their young in need of a cautionary tale. Indeed, it was starting to look a bit like a circus where everyone had come to see the fatman freak of nature that had murdered a woman in her sleep and a lot more besides as rumour had it, being led into court in chains.

A momentary hush fell upon the crowd as he clinked his way up the aisle, a gross, grovelling creature, inspiring shivers and shouts of outrage along the way, growing in volume and ferocity and hounding him to his seat and settling down into a hateful hum around about his ears. He was almost crying with anxiety.

"It's an open and shut case," his lawyer had told him. "Don't you worry about a thing." He had looked down at his watch again and said. "I'll come and see you again before we have to go into court, and talk you through what's going to happen so you'll know what to expect."

But nothing could have prepared the fat young Mr Smith for the sea of spiteful faces spitting and hissing at him through the windows of the prison van as he rode through the streets of the town to the courtroom, where still more crowds awaited him like the hungry ghosts of the dead, reaching out, welcoming another victim to their doom. A few actually managed to lay a hand on him and rip at his T-shirt or slap his ear and the police were hard pressed to see him safely through. On top of that he was only just beginning to recover from the Warden's beating, and although it had cleared the fog from his mind and brought him somewhat to his senses, he was so sore he could hardly sit still.

"It is your duty to follow the law, determine the facts, assess the credibility of the witnesses, and apply these facts to the law," announced the judge to the jury. "In a moment the public prosecutor will present to you his...ARE YOU CHEWING IN MY COURT?" The unfortunate clerk of the court ceased momentarily all mandibular movement and waited for the axe to fall. "No, your honour," he said, manoeuvring the gum surreptitiously to the back of his mouth and swallowing it. The judge looked at him for a long, unbelieving moment, and then, having forgotten what he was saying, waved at the prosecutor to carry on.

"May it please you, my lord, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. You have heard the charge against the defendant Mr John Smith, who is no stranger to a court of law, which is that on the night in question he did break into a house and viciously attack and murder an innocent woman in her own dining room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, in the course of this trial you will hear how the accused, in a passion of unnatural lust, followed Mrs Jones down the street in broad daylight and forced his way into her flat. You will hear how this event was witnessed by two ladies of impeccable reputation and long standing respect in the community. You will hear forensic evidence on how the accused’s fingerprints were found all over the knife that was used to brutally butcher this frail and helpless old lady.” He paused, looking at the floor and shaking his head in bewilderment at the depth of human depravity, while everyone else swivelled as one head and looked at the monster in the dock.

“Why? We don’t know. Perhaps it was robbery. Perhaps it was attempted rape. We might never know. But we don’t need to know. The law requires no motive. We have witnesses. We have the murder weapon. We have the facts. We need no more. The charge is murder in the first degree, and it is up to you, members of the jury, to see that justice is done and that this man pays the ultimate price for his terrible crime.”

“...gossiping old biddies that had a grudge against my client because he once hooted them off a pedestrian crossing and scattered them like clucking chickens all over the road. They never forgave him for the indignity, even though he explained that his brakes...”

“I don’t see the relevance your honour and I object to my learned colleague calling the witnesses chickens...”

“Like. I said ‘like’ chickens. I didn’t call them chickens.”

Madness is when moments go missing and the mind loses the thread of things and just walks off into a different story. Chickens were good. He liked chickens, especially when dressed in their Kentucky Fried best. He remembered a story from the ‘Bumper Barnyard Book for Boys’ that had him mentally lurking in the bushes,

round about page nine, his fine furry foxy face following the chickens in the courtroom coop, kicking up the dirt, clucking at this and pecking at that...quite safe behind their fence...for the moment. He simply waited for the story to unfold, the old sly-socks, licking his chops in anticipation of the feast on page ten. But his excitement didn't go unnoticed. A ripple of scandalized whispering spread through the crowd as all eyes turned to him and the saucy smirk on his leering lubbery lips, drooling, and making gestures with his tongue at a particularly fine specimen in the jury box with feathers in her hat. The judge had to bang his gavel a good many times before order was restored.

"Mr Public Defender, your client is disrupting the proceedings. Please do something about it." The public defender, sitting next to his client, had not witnessed his strange behaviour and, to give him his due, knew absolutely nothing about his frequent forays into the twilight zone and the fact that a very important document had been removed from his clients file, to wit, the arresting police officer's recommendation for a psychological evaluation, and was languishing in a garbage bin not far from the Wardens home.

"I wasn't aware your honour." He turned to his client who was looking quite normal. "You ok?" he asked. The fat young man nodded. The defence attorney was at loss as to what the problem was, and looked quizzically back at the judge. The judge was more than a little annoyed.

"Listen to me young man," he said to the fat young man. "If you do that again I'll have you removed from this court and returned to your cell and the trial will go on without you. Do you understand?"

The fat young man fastened onto the voice speaking to him from above and slowly brought the face into focus. A picture fell into place of a sheep with woolly ears bleating on the roof of the hen house. Well, the first question was, how did it get up there. The

second question was how to get it down. Well, he didn't know. Silly sheep. Why didn't it jump off?

"Jump. Jump," he said to the sheep in his own language. Of course, he didn't get the accent quite right, being a foreigner, but his 'Baaa Baaa' was quite clear and understandable.

"What is the matter with him?" asked the judge. "Is he playing the fool or what?"

Who is to say who is the fool? The man with the curly powdered wig upon his pompous pate, wearing a dressing gown in public like some primed up ponce in a period play from the throne-age, where a fool plays the fool to a fool for his edification, and every fool knows that reality is merely a matter of the mind.

"Counsel, I want to see you in my chambers. NOW! The court is adjourned."

"Do you want to change your plea?" asked the judge. "Your client is obviously deeply disturbed."

"No your honour. My client still wishes to plead not-guilty."

"Is he aware that if he pleads not-guilty he'll probably get the death sentence? And if he pleads guilty, he'll merely be put in an institution?"

"Yes your honour."

"And he refuses to change?"

"He says he's not guilty."

"Then he's mad."

"I know."

"Well I'm not having him behaving that way in my courtroom. We'll try him in absentia"

"...and do you recognize exhibit A? The knife?"

"Yes," said the policeman.

"...and was this the knife used to kill the old lady?"

“Yes it was. It had traces of her blood on it and the wound on her body was consistent with.....”

The policeman paused in his testimony and thought about the thirty-year-old murder of the prostitute with the snake tattoo. It still gave him a shiver when he thought about her naked body, also stabbed in the chest by a table-knife, a wobbly weapon at best. The only two murders in this town and they're almost identical, except for the fact that one was a young woman, the other was old.

They never found their Perseus, killer of the gorgeous green-eyed Gorgon, but it was pretty much accepted that the boyfriend had done it. Did he also kill the old lady years later? And why?

And what had happened to the boy, her child? At the time of her death, he would only have been about four or five years old. That would make him about the same age as Mr Smith. Could Mr Smith have been that little boy? And if so, where had he been when his mother had been killed. Did he see it? The murder? Was it this that drove him to dancing in the deep? And what if Mr Smith had in fact been the one who killed the old lady, why had he done it? Was it his mother's murder he was re-enacting in his madness, perhaps trying to lay old ghosts to rest, or bring them back to life...with a sacrifice? Blood for blood? Meanings of mythical proportion welled up in his brain, too vast for consciousness to explain, and certainly nothing one could offer in a court of law.

“.....the shape and form of the knife.”

“And did it have any fingerprints on it?”

“It had a partial print. Yes”

“And was this enough to identify the murderer?”

“Yes,” replied the policeman.

The stenographer dutifully recorded his reply.

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"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," said the judge, "have you come to a true and just verdict?"

"We have, your honour," answered the foreperson.

Guilty or not, a person's destiny is intimately tied up with their own beginnings in body and mind - and what happens to these two organs is mostly not of a person's own making, especially when young and formative, when all the shaping is done and the impressions are pressed home and the young are girdled and guided, curbed, corrected and imposed upon at every turn and tumble of the table manners needed to exist in 'superbia.' They are bottled up and labelled, muzzled and constrained from any form of independent expression if they wish to remain desirable.

Things are done to children! Things are said and done to children by parents and peers, uncles and dears, careless and cruel, kind and refined, deep, deep things that form and find their future fantasies and fears floating in arrears of the deeds they've done under the sun and in the depths of night beyond sight and sanity to redeem. To condemn a person, one would have to condemn all who played a part in the shape of their machine, the art and nature of it, simply by being a part of the society that touched them in that particular fit or fashion.

The foreperson was a bony little woman with a mouth like a mollusc muscle. Tight, white, calloused skin around her puckered lips wrinkling into hard fleshy furrows radiating outwards from her orifice of oracle, so to speak, from whence the verdict would issue. She had a pug-nose for sniffing out sneaks, and sly slitty eyes that slid hither and thither and pursued your guilty hide where no crimes necessarily abide, beside the ones in her mind. Everyone on the jury was scared of her. From the very beginning it was clear that she wasn't

concerned with innocence or guilt; she was only interested in punishing someone for her unhappiness. If one of the men on the jury showed the slightest sympathy for the male accused, she would hint at misogyny and latent homosexuality. If the offender were a woman, she would allude to an unconscious desire to be brutalized and raped and killed. She would impart these drops of venom with a stillborn smile that didn't linger long; a mere fleeting grimace like a sphincter spasm that fled her face so fast it made you feel a fool for smiling back. She was democratic in her disdain, but men held a special place in her spleen. She realized, almost with a tear in her eye, that this was the moment she'd been waiting for all her life. Her quills quivered in her cap as she stood facing the judge.

"Ladies and gentleman of the Jury, what is your verdict? Do you find the accused innocent or guilty?" he asked.

"Guilty," she said. There was an audible sigh and the court turned as one to look at the fat young man. The Judge coughed loudly to clear his throat.

"In light of the barbaric nature of your heinous crime, and your refusal to show any respect for this court or remorse for what you have done, it is my duty to impose upon you the heaviest penalty that the law allows." He removed his glasses and stared blindly into the courtroom. He felt a bit like God Almighty looking down through the mists of heaven as his voice boomed out above the clouds.

"You are hereby sentenced to death."

\*

She screamed.

"I've got you now you little bastard," she breathed smoke and alcohol-fumes into the blurry face of the little boy in front of her, groping for his nipples with her pinching, painted fingernails. He

could have been any one of the thousands of little boys who had left her lying on her back with a bad reputation. This one writhed and tried to fend her off but she had drunk herself into such a frenzy that her vision was beginning to blur and pulse with her heart-beat rate hate and the throat surging bile smile on Junior's face flickering in the flames as her dearest friend burned to death. She hated little boys.

She screamed again.

"You fucking little piece of shit.....do you know that God hates you? Do you know what he does to naughty little bastards like you, you fucking turd? He's going to make your pee-pee go all rotten and stinky and fall off." She lunged forward and grabbed him in the crotch and he screamed and slapped at her half-heartedly so as not to jog her arm too much. She squeezed her nails into his flesh and watched him with long awaited glee as his face turned to pain, white as a ghost, dancing on tippy toes to try and lessen the strain.

"I'm going to pull it right off you dirty little bugger." He was whining and whimpering all the time now, begging her to stop, sobbing as the pain cut up into his bum and he felt something wet run down his legs and she started laughing.

"Did the little baby wet his pants? Did the little sissy pee-pee in his panties again? Did you do a poo-poo too, little baby?" She laughed and pulled him towards her face, "Do you want me to change your nappy you stinking pile of shit." He breathed in her fumes and wretched.

"Oh now you're going to puke all over me as well....hey? Well, we'll see to that." He called out in despair as she lifted him off the floor by his balls. The pain took his breath away and he felt himself passing out.

"Well?" She gave a quick, vicious twist with her wrist but there was nothing more to come out. He knew he was going to die.

“How does that feel you little sod? You’ll never know what I’ve had to go through with you, you little shit? Look at me when I’m talking to you!” She shook his eyes open. “YOU RUINED MY LIFE. Every day and every fucking night, hour after fucking hour, crying and pissing and shitting up the place until you made me want to vomit. And you never stopped crying....well now I'm going to give you a reason to cry.” She jerked hysterically at his crotch, the muscles in her face working with violence. She ripped off her slip and slapped at her naked tits.

“LOOK AT ME! LOOK WHAT YOU DID TO ME!!!! YOU STOLE MY BODY YOU FUCKING BASTARD.”

Of her body he saw nothing. All he saw were the glinting green eyes of the snake on her breast, smiling at him in victory as its uncovered hood rose up, riding on the crest of her passion and his pain, readying itself to strike.

He understood then that it wasn’t her. He understood that it was the snake that was making her do it. He began to black out, and fell, flailing arms flung out wide, grabbing at the table for support but everything gave way, and then, as if by God’s will, the knife fell into his hand and instinctively he stabbed the snake with all his might between its emerald eyes.

\* \* \*

“For those of you who are nigh-on Zion, who are about to be delivered from the fleshly bonds of your captivity,” he looked at the small group of prisoners sitting in the front row, heads bowed like wheat waiting for the harvest, the death row.

"Freedom!" he said. "Freedom from the woes and wonders of this body our Babylon. Freedom to bathe unfettered in the eternal waters once more," he held up his thin black robed wrist and pointed to himself, "when this will no longer be our home."

He was a tall, hook nosed, hawk eyed man, at first glance more like an emissary of hell than of heaven; gaunt and sunless, a man accustomed to frequenting the darker and more dangerous alleyways of the mind in search of truth and God. A serious man. No pedlar of panaceas this.

"Death...is whom you now confront," he said. There was an uncomfortable shuffling on seats.

"Are you ready?" He looked up at his congregation. "That is the question." He paused to let his words sink in.

"No, is the answer."

He lifted his hand and let it hover over the closed leather-bound Bible on the dais.

"In here it say's many things.

"It speaks of hell as a place of wailing and a gnashing of teeth." He shrugged. "You could say as much for a traffic jam." He lowered his head and waited.

"Death," he said, "will empty your bowels with fright." His sunken eyes gleamed in their sockets.

"Too late comes the understanding when you see HIS awful angel approaching...sickle severing your earthly schemes and setting you adrift upon the dark waters...a ship without a sail, a prey to every passing shade.

"Hell." He raised a piercing glance at these mottled sheep and herded their startled thoughts into a sheltered corner of the field.

"Or Heaven, where there is eternal, joyous celebration in song and laughter, dancing and feasting," he said, with a faraway fondness in his eye.

"Happy people."

He squared up the Bible on the rostrum and paused.

"There are no happy people in hell." He looked down straight into the beaming face of the fat young man in the front row.

"You had your chance to be happy, when you first came here, when you first knew you were going to die and you repented of your crime. Do you remember how it felt, on your knees, crying, begging forgiveness, your hearts humbled and glorious, washed clean, buoyant with love for all mankind, your simple souls weighing less than a feather." He looked up.

"But it's a lonely road, and the long nights spent lurking in the shadows of temptation, selling your soul for a nickel and a dime, one sin at a time, until it's business as usual, Lucifer and Son, two for the price of one, cut-throat competition, grab the money and run, the thing you hate you've become. And you're always waiting for the payback, because of what you've done.

"The wages of sin is death. And everyone is working overtime for Father Lucre. Rising at the crack of dawn and going at it 'til late, when the gates of gangsterdom are finally shut and sleep or stupor releases you from your hell on earth and the self-inflicted slavery of a soul reaved of suckle and sustenance, wracked by ambition and insecurity, a bad tempered beast at best, rushing roughshod over the lilies and love songs that are your true nature." He pointed up to paradise.

"And not satisfied with the damage done by daylight, at bedtimes you bestow your belligerent bleatings on your blessed friends and family heirs, leaving a lethal legacy of discontent for the next horde of hooting, tooting schemers spinning their snares for the unwary and the not so bright.

"You were a baby once; now you're the big mouth on the block, faster than the speed of sound, running everybody else down, you battle to belittle and out-boast the other big boys with your second hand opinions and your second hand stories and your self-

aggrandising pride and preening pomposity as inflated as a balloon and just as thin-skinned until some pin prick comes along and then it's fartsville."

There was a quickly stifled snort from one of the prisoners, and the ancient cleaning lady, who wouldn't miss one of these sermons for the world, actually farted a small one.

"You are going to die. And yet you complain that..." The preacher's bony jaw clenched slightly, "...there's not enough salt in the porridge?" He raised his eyes.

"It's not the porridge that wants for salt." He twisted his lips sourly. "Tasteless people that you are.

"Thin and insipid in your souls," he pinched his fingertips tightly together, "meagre and grubbing in spirit, disgruntled swine slopping at the trough, tusks tossing through the empty husks, heaving with discontent and sensitive to the slightest insult. So the porridge cook told you to lump it, and now he's a dead man you say? Are you any more alive? You, who are scared to go to sleep without a knife under your pillow, not because the world is dangerous, but because YOU are."

At the mention of a knife the fat young man began to squirm uncomfortably, rocking back and forth in his seat and making anxious noises in his throat. The man in the black robe took him in with a glance and held out his hand over the troubled waters. The fat young man lapsed into placid silence again.

"You are going to die," he said quietly, head bowed over the book, hands grasping the pulpit on either side, neck sunk between his shoulder blades like a bird of prey. He turned a desultory eye on them.

"Stiff necked and brittle with pride, you can hardly wait to be offended by someone so you can work yourself up into a lather of righteous rage, howling like a mad monkey in a cage that they have to put down because you bit somebody."

His beaked nose bobbed up and down as his emotions took hold. He lunged forward over the pulpit and strained towards them.

"Someone took your toothpaste? Well, knock his teeth out. An eye for an eye? No, mister high-and-mighty hard-done-by 'I'." He drew himself up, cloak roiling about him like a storm cloud.

"YOU'RE GOING TO DIE!" the words thundered over their heads, scorching the air in between. "But go on." He stuck his neck out as far as it would go, staring eyes lurching out of their sockets. "Hunt thy neighbour down and teach him a lesson he'll never forgive." His body writhed, arms jerking at the pulpit like a pinball machine. "Carry on...cursing man and God and heaping hell and damnation on your souls."

"Go on!" he said, grabbing them by the ears. "Keep stoking the fires." He threw an arm up to the heavens.

"You're the ones that are going to burn in them." He shimmered like a spectre above them.

"And don't think," he hammered on relentlessly, "that a little bit of holy water is going to quench those flames.

"Never!" He boomed. "You never let up on others; God will never let up on you." His hand swooped down in a flash of flesh and opened the huge black Bible with a thump. The ancient dust swirled around him as if in the throes of a new creation.

He stabbed at the innards of the book with a long bony finger, his eyes nailing the congregation to their seats. The shadow of death loomed over them.

"You didn't bother to read the rules, did you?" He arched a lazy eyebrow at them, scanning the row of faces from left to right. It was so quiet you could hear an angel fall.

"Well," he said, straightening up and closing the book, "you're not going to make it." He tugged the sleeves of his gown straight and brushed a piece of lint off his shoulder.

"But you can take cold comfort in the fact that no-one else is either.....not unless they're a new born babe." He looked down into the bright eyes of the fat young man upraised towards him, smiling with affection and rapture, mouth drooling and gurgling with happiness, eyes and ears empty of comprehension. Mere pools of endlessness.

The man in black closed his eyes, and after a pause, he started to pray.

"Our father who art in heaven, have mercy on these men, the ones on whose backs rest the sins of our fathers and our mothers.

"Amen."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 11

Today is the day. D-day, some say...in the month of May hay pray stay, a wily dog sniffs the streets and sweeps his tail up the moon soon June tune loon.....looooooooon. I'm a looooooon. I'm a tuuuuune in the bow-wow, what a naughty little doggy dooooo you understand .....me? See tea key free three pee in his pants the little baby cry lullaby try sigh die.....FRY!

\*

"Here you go. The condemned man's last meal, just like you ordered." The Warden dropped a tin plate on the bunk. No peas, no

chips, just a tiny lamb chop crucified to a charcoal crisp and covered in congealed fat. An unsettling reminder of what was to come. It smelled...black. But I didn't mind. Things smell so much better when you know you're going to die. Even shit smells warm and friendly. Musty smells and pocket smells. Floor polish and farts. I breathe them in and hold them dear to my heart. Even brick smells and blanket smells. Everything smells.

I've also been looking at myself. My hands mostly, because they're the easiest to see. They move. I know it sounds obvious, but it's amazing when you think about it, moving through space, there, waving about like a robot on remote control, up down, up down, over the hill, flap, flap, flap. I can feel the wind I am making on my face. It feels nice.

I can feel my feet in my shoes, and my socks. Socks aren't as soft as air. They're a bit sweaty between the toes, and sticky. I can understand why mad people take off their clothes and walk in the breeze. It feels much nicer, soft like silk, nice and cool and free. I don't have much to enjoy in here, so it's nice to have a body, if you know what I mean.

\*

"Tell me if I'm hurting you," he says with that facetious smile of his. He's got such thin, mean lips. Must say he looks very smart though, all dressed up for the occasion. Uniform nicely pressed and clean. I certainly am getting the V.I.P. treatment.

"There we go. Nappy fitting snug and tight?" He tugs at my pants and waits for my nod. "Good. Don't want you shitting all over the place when I pull the switch," he says. Not much chance of that after last night's meal. I don't mind. I wasn't really looking forward to a last supper. Didn't think I'd be hungry. But he feels better after being nasty to me so he's in a good mood now, bustling about like a

fussy housewife, checking everything twenty times over. Just look at him, smiling that stupid smile of his. You can tell he's in his element, carefully wiring me up for the final fuck with James Watt. You didn't know I knew that did you? Well, he's been telling me ALL about the electric chair, in all it's gory details. 'Old friends' he calls them, him and the chair; him and his victims. The only friends he has are those about to die.

I sat staring through the windscreen, my eyes glued to the station entrance portico where the mysterious man lurked. In my fancy I saw him as one of those cigar smoking hit-men with a gun bulging under his raincoat and a black briefcase, the kind of man who knew how to wait for the right moment. He was waiting for me to break cover. That's what they do. Play on your nerves until you snap and make a run for it, then shoot you in the back. I watched as a fresh cloud of smoke snaked round the pillar and began slithering down the high street towards me, sniffing me out. That was it. I couldn't stand any more. I banged open the car door and ran for my life.

I could practically feel him breathing down my neck but I didn't dare turn around to look. Even the ground was conspiring against me because every time I touched the pavement I felt an electric shock shoot up my legs and galvanize me on. I was just about to put on an extra spurt of high-stepping speed when I heard the tinkle of a shop's doorbell chime crisp and clear and stop me in midair like a magic spell from a fairy tale. It was nothing special really, just an old lady I knew coming out of the butcher shop with a brown paper bag, but everything became still and calm, as if I was standing safe in the eye of a storm. I turned around to see if the hit man had been following me but I knew there would be no one there. Even the noise in my head had stopped. I felt like I was in a peaceful picture like in one of my jigsaw puzzles.

But then I noticed a cloud of flies buzzing around the old lady. I thought that was strange because there are no flies in a butcher shop nowadays. I blinked and turned my head away to refresh my eyes, but when I looked again there were even more of them, a shadowy, sheeny, shifting shape brewing about her head, constantly undulating as she walked along, coagulating and re-forming into dark, diaphanous, vulturine shapes that swirled and swooped down upon her, and with ripping beak and snatching claw tore unbeknownst the soft substance of her soul, puncturing the flimsy fabric of her spirit and feeding on her life force bleeding out into the ether.

I watched in horror as she stepped off the pavement into the road, fly-shapes folding themselves about her head and trailing out behind like some black and deathly bridal veil. Did this mean she was going to die? Oh God please don't let her have an accident; please don't let her get hit by a car. I don't want to see that. I closed my eyes and waited for the crash...two...three...four...nothing, just the swish of tyres on the wet road. I opened my eyes and they were gone. The flies. Just the rain swirling around her as she crossed the road and everything became calm and quiet again. The old lady went and stood under the bus shelter and I veered off to the left and loitered in front of the hairdressing salon where I could keep an eye on her.

I look through the window to where the visitors will soon sit and watch my final performance. I see my reflection for the first time in days and I nearly don't recognize myself. Trussed up like a turkey in a barber's chair, shiny shaven head bald as a convict. That's for the electricity to have good contact with my skin, and also so my hair won't catch fire. They must use a lot of electricity if it can set your hair on fire. I wonder if my skin will turn black too...or red...or maybe my head will just pop open like an overripe tomato.

The bus roared by behind me like a juggernaut, whipping up a storm of wind and rain and filling the barbershop window with rushing red reflections. As it began squealing to a halt I saw a man on the other side of the road begin running towards the bus, waving his arm and calling to the conductor to wait for him. It was him! Without a second thought my legs were already running me in the same direction. I don't know how I knew it, but I knew it was him...and I also realized it wasn't me he was after. The old lady stepped onto the bus as the man was crossing the road. Just as he was getting ready to leap aboard, I changed course and charged straight into him. He bounced off me like a bag of balloons and the bus began pulling away. I didn't look to see what happened to him, I still had enough momentum to catch up with the bus and jump on board. Clutching the rail to aid my rubbery legs, I headed for a seat and saw him out the corner of my eye, still sprawled on the pavement and people rushing to his aid. I watched till he had disappeared into the rain

"And what'll it be, young sir?" The bus conductor ching-chinged and whirred away three times and I bounced up and down with the skin of my thighs sticking to the hot leather seat and heard her sigh and stroke my hair and kiss my head as the puzzle came together for a brief moment in the warm sunshine and then fell to pieces on the wet floor as the present day cold and rainy people pushed in on me, dripping and shoving and steaming and scattering the pieces of my past, jostling and shoving their wet coats in my face as I craned forward to see if she was still there but the Warden pushes me back and straps my other wrist to the arm of the chair.

"Sit still. Don't want any trouble now."

It's starting to get very warm in here. I can feel beads of icy sweat breaking out on my bald head. Apparently, perspiration aids

the passage of electricity very nicely thank you, according to the expert here.

I stood up and hung onto one of the leather loops as the bus began slowing down for our stop. I didn't want the old lady to see me, so I jumped off and hid behind the bus shelter till she'd gone.

"Not long now, don't you worry," says the Warden. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and whispers in my ear. "You'll soon be dead."

\*

Well, the old lady got home alright, and no sign of that man. I've been standing here at the window watching for half an hour now so I don't think he's coming. I'm sure he was after the old lady...otherwise why were all those flies swarming around her, like she was a dead carcass? I'm sure it was an omen or a warning. I could be imagining things I suppose. Why would he want to kill a harmless old lady? She seems a nice person. Not that we're friends or anything, but...well, at the moment I'm actually trying to avoid her. There was a...a misunderstanding. Nothing serious, just a silly thing really, but it was a bit embarrassing and I...oh my god there he is...standing under the tree. It's him!

He heaves the strap across my chest and buckles it up tight. Snap! I can't move. I can hardly breathe but he isn't satisfied and cinches it up another notch, just to make sure.

"Alright then?" he asks with a smile. My thighs are sliding together in pools of sweat. I can also feel the skin under my armpits slipping about if I wriggle. Water, water everywhere, but my mouth is so dry I can hardly talk. "Wa'ar." I say.

"In a minute."

I could feel sweat prickles breaking out all over me. I was so scared I could hardly stand and had to hold onto the sink for dear life. How had he found us? Perhaps he hadn't. Perhaps he was just getting off at every stop hoping to find her by accident, standing round in case she comes out. With a sigh of relief I watched him turn to go. But just then the butcher boy flew into view and stopped under the tree to park his bicycle. The man said something to the boy and the boy answered and turned and pointed straight at the old lady's flat.

\*

The fat young man was running as fast as his legs could carry him. His chest shrieked at the mighty strain of his forward thrusting brain and the huge counter surge of his different body-parts in their various orbits around his wildly beating heart. He wasn't going to make it. He knew he was going to die. But he couldn't stop now. He barrelled through the door at number thirteen and ran up the stairs to the old lady's flat.

That was a mistake for a fat young man who never ran. His body had nearly torn itself apart. His heart slammed him once and stopped him like a freight train. A black hole opened up and began to suck him in and as he fell away he watched himself receding and felt sorry for the one he was leaving behind. Somehow, this feeling of empathy seemed to hold the connection between them for that little while longer.

"Stop that now," says the Warden with an edge to his voice as he squats down and grabs my swinging feet. "No use making a fuss." He straps my legs to the chair, at the last moment being quite gentle about it.

"There you go." He pats my calf. I can't move anymore. Only my tongue.

"I love you." I say, but all that comes out of my mouth is a hoarse hiss like a corpse expiring.

And then I hear it. The tick of the clock counting down the seconds.

\*

Three minutes to go. She looked up from her watch and thought of him. In the chair, waiting to die. She couldn't even cry anymore. She couldn't bear to think of what he must be feeling...and did he think of her...did he remember her? It didn't matter, she told herself, it had happened and that's what was important. Him and her. It had been a rare and wonderful chance, but now it was over.

Time's up. She held her breath and looked at the indicator. It was twinkling Blue. She was pregnant.

She limped over to the window and looked out at the stars in wonder and cried, happy tears now running down her cheeks. A new moon shone in the heavens, curved like a cradle, a gentle hook to hang her dreams on. She was going to have his baby. She hugged her newborn joy and sang a soft song to the moon. "Ebb Tide, Ebb Tide, gets your washing white as new. Ebb Tide, Ebb Tide, just the thing for you."

\*

Blood thumping blows buffet his body as he clings to the shadows on the wall, the pipe man's footfalls in the hall below, tobacco smoke wafting up the stairs and a thickening pall of flies swarming all over him and shrouding the door as he fumbles frantically for the handle.

A gleam of light began in the centre of his soul and radiated out into the room from a tiny candle on the dining-room table.

"There you go my darling," said the old lady to an empty chair with an old lumpy leather seat. "How does that look?" She put a steaming plate of chips and peas and a beautifully cooked chop carefully down on a pink crocheted place mat in front of it. She took the napkin out of its holder and with a deft flick, fluttered it onto the leather seat. Then with a ceremonious little scoop, she moved the salt and pepper salver a little closer to the plate.

"You tuck in now," she said and stood back, hands folded in front of her, surveying the scene with satisfaction. When she had gazed her fill she turned to go to her own seat and nearly collided with the fat young man.

She stopped. Then she half looked behind her at the empty chair, as if a paradigm had shifted and the little boy would be sitting there, but he wasn't and she got confused between her instincts and her eyes, not quite knowing how to reconcile that warm familiar old feeling with the young man standing in front of her.

She'd seen him before of course, from a distance. He was that nice boy from number seven who used to watch her from his window. Close up like this he was...he was...she noticed his ginger hair above a slightly familiar frown, those cheeks, could it be...that beloved snub nose, and those dear baby blue eyes, those pools of paradise where she used to bathe.

Surely not! Dare she believe, so often deceived by her need? The recognition hit her like a rock and sank her to her knees. He was her little boy. Huge beyond belief, but it was him. She put her hand to her mouth to stifle an up-surgng cry of joy. She could hardly speak; she could only look at him, her heart bubbling with happiness.

He too, through intermittent waves of wakefulness that washed over his waning consciousness, began to recognize....things, and the doors opened wide and his pink lady paraded for him in all her

gorgeous guises, in all the perfect places they'd ever been, in memory and dream, whirling one after another like a magical merry-go-round until the fantasy finally slowed down and she came to stand before him, breathing, beautiful, hands outstretched with love and adoration in her fingertips.

He looked on in blurry wonder. He tried to move, to hold her, but he was barely able to stand, so taxed was he to his utter limit by his recent exertions. Like Moses on his last legs, he could only look upon the Promised Land.

And then, from the corner of his eye, he spied the emerald brooch twinkling upon her breast, and a suspicious thought, like the chill shadow of a hawk on a sunny field flashed across this happy scene. He heard a high wind begin to howl and a wall of darkness rushed towards him across the meadow, tearing up the buttercups and ripping apart the beautiful face of his beloved like a flimsy veil of air and there...the flaccid flesh he couldn't bear, the leering lips and drunken stare, the coiling locks of gorgon hair, the heaving breast and bosom bared in sweet surrender to the vipers kiss.

\*

Darkness.

\*

"Nighty night. Lights out," he says, pulling the cloth over my eyes.

"I don't want it," I say.

"You don't have a choice. I don't want to get splashed when your eyeballs boil and pop."

In truth he was glad because the boy's eyes disturbed him, the way he looked at him, like the boy at school. He didn't have time for that nonsense now; he had a job to do. Life had to go on.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 12

They lay side by side, almost hand in hand. On the carpet between them lay the brooch. The pipe man knelt down on his haunches and picked it up. He stared at it mindlessly while the reflected patterns of rain running down the windowpane played over his hands and covered the couple on the floor in a sylvan shroud.

The woman was dead, pink table knife protruding from her chest.

The fat young man was unconscious, but breathing normally. He recognized him immediately as the boy he'd abandoned those years ago, despite his changed appearance.

He remembered when he had found him as a child, sitting next to another dead body...his mother's. Lying in a sea of drunken debris, it looked as if she had been killed by some crazy client with a quirk, unhinged by the elements of a moon mad thunderstorm.

"Mommy's dead." The boy startled him by stabbing towards his mother, his little fist jab-jerking and twitching over her body in an effort to explain himself.

"Mommy's dead," he said, and struck her in the chest.

"The snake's dead," he said, "I killed the snake." He looked at the man and pointed to the knife.

It took a full moment for him to react and scoop the boy up to his chest. He stood frozen in shock while her ghastly face glared up at them with unseeing eyes. His mind kept circling around the central core of horror, unable to penetrate the deed with his imagination. There was black blood everywhere, all over the boy, fresh, running down his legs. He pulled the child's pants down and saw that his crotch was a swollen bloody blob of bruises and cuts.

"Mommy hurt me," said the boy and put his thumb in his mouth.

At the public toilets on the high street he lifted the boy up onto the hand basin and tried to wipe him clean with a wet hanky. But the boy cried out and jumped at his every touch and the most he achieved was to start the wounds bleeding again.

"Alright, alright, no more," he said. "Easy now, we're done." He straightened out the boy's clothes and picked him up, eager to be off. It was then he noticed the brooch clenched in the boy's fist.

"Let's have a look." The child pulled his hand away, hiding it behind his back. "Okay, okay. I'm not going to take it away," but a plan had begun to take shape in his mind. He buttoned his coat around the boy and sidled them out into the rain and the dark.

\*

Can't see anything now. I can smell though. Not that that's any good. Smells like Jeyes fluid. Like a toilet. Everything in here smells like that. They should call it Jail's fluid. Shh...shuffle, shuffle. Someone's moving about. Someone's doing something. Sweat burning my eyes ow, ow, ow...squeeze, squeeze blink. Oh no, that was a mistake. Ow...ow, ow, owwww.

The door opens and there's a blessed breeze. Oh, that is so nice. Door close and it's gone. Hot, sweaty again...quiet. Too quiet. Can't hear anyone. I think they've all gone. All gone to lunch. Ha, ha, ha. That would be funny.

"Comfortable?" I nearly jumped out of my skin. I'm sure I weed a little bit too but I can't tell I'm so wet already.

"Just you and me now." I could just imagine him bouncing on the balls of his feet like he does. I don't speak because I want to punish him for giving me a fright. I sit very still.

"Yes sir, just you and me now." He whistles a little air. "Not long to go."

I know he wants me to ask him how long but I refuse. I want to know, but I don't. I would rather it was sudden, but if I tell him that he'll do a countdown like at Cape Canaveral. Ten...nine...eight...

"Enjoy your chop then?" He asks. "Cooked it special." I still don't answer. He whistles some more air, like he doesn't care. The door opens and another heavenly breeze brushes by. I suck in as much as I can get.

"Are we all ready?" says someone else. "Good."

The closing door echoed damply through the midnight drizzle and they shuffled silently down the street past the sleeping houses until they came to the fat young man's flat. The pipe man stopped and propped him up against the wall with one hand while the other searched for the brooch in his pocket. He then wiped it carefully on his sleeve and tossed it into the garbage bin. He meant to retrieve it later on and get rid of it properly, but for now that would do, he didn't want to get caught with it on him. He manhandled the fat young man over the threshold through the open door and steered him towards the bed. He didn't look too good, but he'd be alright. He hoped so anyway, because there wasn't much he could do about it.

He is trying to paste some sticky pads to my wrists and ankles but I'm so wet they keep slipping off, ha, ha. There, that's better. I'm getting a bit of a wipe here. That's nice. You know I think I have been touched more in here than in the rest of my life. Just ordinary touching. And it feels so nice. Now he's attaching the wires, holding my wrists. This is not for my electrocution by the way. No, for that they put a steel hat on my head with MUCH bigger wires bolted on top. This is for my heartbeat. They did it to me once in an ambulance. Now he's fiddling with the pads again, hmmm. Click...beep, and there we go. Beep...beep...bid-a-beep...beep.

"Now we'll know when you're properly done." he said suddenly into my ear. My heartbeat sped up with fright. "Don't want you going off half-baked now do we? Ha, ha, ha."

Beep, beep, beep.

Today was the day he was going die. The dew dribbled down the quietly parked car's windows as the pipe man lit up and sucked in a mouthful of bitter smoke. Water dripped down his neck from a No-Parking sign and he flared up in uncharacteristic irritation. He wanted the smash the stupid sign with his fist. He looked across the street at the jail with its commemorative brass plaque and hanging baskets on either side of the door. The back door of civilization, where one comes to make one's final futile gesture to the universe. The pipe man finished his smoke, knocked out his pipe on his shoe and crossed the road.

It was deathly quiet inside. He walked echoingly up to the counter and waited for the officer on duty to notice him. After ten minutes, he gave a discreet cough. Not a flicker. And by the look on her face it was going to be a long silent battle. Oh well. He let a lifetime go by while she stooped to her task and the sun transgressed the brick bound grounds and entered the holding hall through the round window above the door, shining brightly off the floor.

"Excuse me." He said respectfully. "I wonder if you could help me?" The officer yawned and carried on writing. He paused for a polite eternity then tried again.

"It's rather urgent...I was wondering if I could speak to somebody about..." He faltered, daunted by her disregard and the fact that he didn't actually know what he was going to say. He hadn't thought that far ahead. What could he say? Nothing that would let the boy go free. Not after they'd found his fingerprint on the knife. He thought he'd wiped them all off.

In the beginning he had attended the trial, hidden in the crowd, half hoping for a miracle, until he couldn't watch anymore and went to wait it out on the edge of his bed in a hotel room nearby. For once, his pipe remained unlit between his teeth as he sat with the curtains drawn and his head in his hands, staring at the headline of a newspaper on the floor in front of him. It was all over. He was shocked. He had somehow believed that it couldn't go that far. Surely they could see the boy had lost his mind? Surely someone should have stopped the trial?

"I know you're busy..." he said, but she clucked him into silence. She was in a bad mood this morning. On her way to work, she had misjudged her timing at a T-Junction and pulled out in front of a car going well over the speed limit. The big off-roader had screeched to a halt within inches of her life, the driver grinding on his horn in a frenzied dance of indignation. He had hooted at her with all the fury that his fright-shrivelled penis could muster, his face swollen purple with passion. He had hooted continuously until she somehow managed to back out of his way, fumbling at the controls with shaky hands, humiliated in front of all the other drivers waiting for her. Then the man had driven past her, slowly, so that he could subject her for the longest possible time to the glare of his righteous indignation and the blare of his righteous horn. That it had been his

fault for driving too fast and not allowing enough time for others to see him, had not crossed his mind. One of God's many gifts to the motoring world was one such as he. She was still shaking when she got to work.

She looked up at the man in front of her.

"Stand back behind the line please."

The pipe man looked around him. The floor was gleaming with the mid morning reflections on its highly polished surface, worn to a glass-like smoothness by thousands of shuffling feet. He was only too willing to comply, but the line was invisible to his eye, it being worn away in all but the memory of the officers who still saw it as bright as day.

"I can't see any line, but I'll step back if you want me to. Is this far enough?" It wasn't. Something inside her unlatched and she leaned forward on her desk, all shaky with power and anticipation. She was about to speak but he saw her face and stepped back again, shrugging his shoulders. He was behind the line. She was disappointed at that. She was just in the mood for a man. Anyway, now he could wait.

"Look, I need to speak to some..."

"WAIT!"

"...body."

"When I'm finished." She pointed pedantically with her pen at the pile of papers in front of her.

"But it's going..."

"Guards!"

\*

Eventually she started to shake with cold and weariness and turned away from the window. She sat down with a sigh on the old steel engine block, pushing out her bad leg in front of her.

It would soon be over. She just couldn't think about it anymore. She had reached the limit of her sorrow and her happiness. She was numb inside. One of her loves was to die and the other to be born. The many days of suffering the two conflicting emotions had exhausted her, and she could feel her inconstant heart flutter with every surging thought she had. She must calm down now and be quiet, for the baby's sake. She would rather not have to use her medication; she didn't know what it would do to its little heart. She rested her hand lovingly on her pregnant belly while the other played absentmindedly with the curtain covering the engine she was sitting on.

'I'll take this old thing off and wash it tomorrow.' She thought, poking her fingers idly into the holes of the engine block. 'Give me something to do to take my mind off things'.

\*

"The brooch was found in the accused's kitchen-table drawer."

"And are you sure it belonged to the deceased?"

"Yes. Her husband identified it as hers."

"Thank you."

\*

\*

\*

She's happy tonight. I like watching her when she's doing her make-up.

"Why aren't you in bed yet? And don't put that fucking thing in your mouth." She reaches out and the Warden places the helmet on

my head and ties it in a playful bow at the side of my face. "There," she says facetiously. "Who looks like a little girly now?"

She opens her jewellery box and takes out her brooch. She always puts it on when a man is coming.

"Not long now," says the Warden, resting his hand lightly on the switch.

There's a knock at the door.

"Oh shit, that's him," she says, putting the brooch down and frantically waving her fingernails around to dry quicker. She gets up and goes towards the bathroom.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Just a minute!" She shouts at the door. "And you bugger off to your room." She glares at me as she rushes into the toilet.

The brooch is still on the dressing table. I reach across the table and pick it up it.

The second-hand reaches the twelve and the Warden throws the switch.

I feel a sharp slap across my face.

"God man, you make me so fucking cross. How many times must I tell you not to touch my things?"

The End