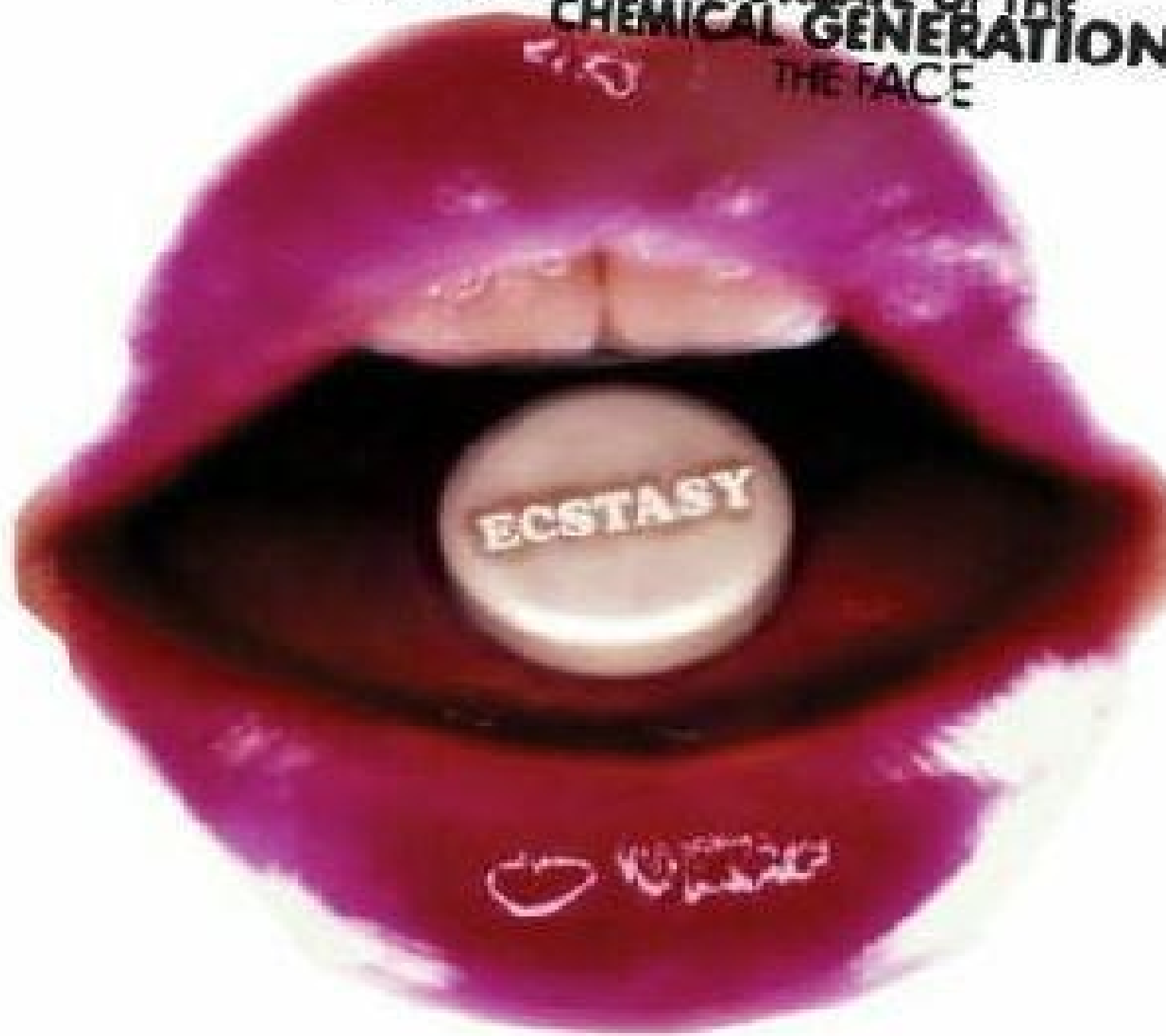


**THE POET LAUREATE OF THE
CHEMICAL GENERATION**
THE FACE



1

IRVINE WELSH

Irvine Welsh divides his time between Amsterdam, London and Scotland. His first book, *Trainspotting*, was published in 1993 and subsequently dramatised and filmed to enormous acclaim. It was recently voted No. 10 in Waterstone's Best Books of the Century. This was followed by the collection of stories, *The Acid House* (1994) - which is being adapted for television - a second novel, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995) and a trio of novellas, *Ecstasy* (1996), which was a No. 1 bestseller in the week of publication. He is currently working on a number of film and drama projects and a third novel.

Trainspotting
The Acid House
Marabou Stork Nightmares
Ecstasy

IRVINE WELSH

ECSTASY

Three Tales of Chemical Romance

V
VINTAGE

Published by Vintage 1997

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First published in Great Britain by Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1996

Vintage

Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited

20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney

New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited 18 Poland Road, Glenfield Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Limited Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa

Random House UK Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 09 977331 7

Papers used by Random House UK Ltd are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

To Sandy MacNair

*They say that death kills you, but death doesn't kill you.
Boredom and indifference kill you.*

Ecstatic love and more to Anne, my friends and family, and all the good people - you know who you are.

Thanks to Robin at the publishers for his diligence and support.

Thanks to Paolo for the Marv rarities, especially Piece of Clay; Toni for the eurotechno; Janet and Tracy for the happy house; and Dino and Frank for the gabber. Nice one to Antoinette for the stereo and Bernard for the gaff.

Love to all the posses in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Amsterdam, London, Manchester, Newcastle, New York, San Francisco and Munich.

Glory to the Hibeers. Take care.

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Lorraine Goes To Livingston

A Rave and Regency Romance

For Debbie Donovan and Gary Dunn

1 Rebecca's Chocolates

Rebecca Navarro sat in her spacious conservatory and looked out across the bright, fresh garden. Perky was down at the bottom end by the old stone wall, pruning the rose-bushes. She could just about make out the suggestion of that familiar pre-occupied frown on his brow, her view distorted by the sun shining strongly into her face through the glass. She felt floaty, drowsy and dislocated in the head. Succumbing to it, she allowed the heavy typescript to slip through her hands and fall onto the glass coffee table with a fat thump. The first page bore the heading:

UNTITLED - WORK IN PROGRESS (Miss May Regency Romance No. 14.)

A dark cloud hovered ominously in front of the sun, breaking its spell on Rebecca. She took the opportunity to steal a brief glance at her reflection in the now-darkened glass of the partition door. This triggered a brief spasm of self-loathing before she altered her position from profile to face-on and sucked in her cheeks. The new image obliterated the one of sagging-flesh-hanging-from-the-jawline to the extent that Rebecca felt justified in giving herself a little reward.

Perky was engrossed in his gardening, or pretending to be. The Navarros employed a man to do the gardening and he undertook his duties thoroughly and professionally, but Perky would always find a pretext to go out and do some pottering. He claimed it helped him to think. Rebecca could never, for the life of her, imagine what her husband had to think about.

Despite Perky's preoccupation however, Rebecca was still swift and furtive as her hand reached across to the box. She pulled up the

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top layer and quickly removed two rum truffles from the bottom section. She crammed them into her mouth, the sickly sensation almost making her faint, and started to chew violently. The trick was to consume as quickly as possible; in doing it this way there was a sense that the body could be cheated, conned into processing the calories as a block lot, letting them go through as two little items.

This self-delusion could not be sustained as the vile, sweet sickness hit her stomach. She could feel her body slowly and agonisingly breaking down those ugly poisons, conducting a meticulous inventory of calories and toxins present before distributing them to the parts of the body where they would do the most damage.

So at first Rebecca thought that she was experiencing one of her familiar anxiety attacks when it hit her: that slow, burning pain. It took a couple of seconds before the possibility, then the actuality, dawned on her, that it was more than that. She couldn't breathe as her ears began to ring and the world around her started to spin. Rebecca fell heavily from her chair to the floor of the conservatory, gripping her throat, her face twisting to one side, chocolate and saliva spilling from her mouth.

A few yards away, Perky chopped at the rose-bushes. Buggers want spraying, he thought, as he stood back to assess his work. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something twitching on the conservatory floor ...

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2 Yasmin Goes To Yeovil

Yvonne Croft picked up the copy of the book *Yasmin Goes To Yeovil* by Rebecca Navarro. She had

scoffed at her mother's addiction to this series of pulp romantic fiction known as the *Miss May Regency Romances*, but she just couldn't leave this book alone. There seemed, times, she considered when its hold on her reached fearsome levels. Yvonne sat up in the lotus position in her large wicker basket chair, one of the few items of furniture alongside the single bed, the wooden wardrobe, the chest of drawers and the miniature sink in her small rectangular room in the nurses' home of Hubbin's Hospital in London.

She was greedily devouring the last two pages of the book, the climax to this particular romance. Yvonne Croft knew what would happen. She knew that the wily match-maker Miss May (who turned up in every Rebecca Navarro novel in various incarnations) would expose Sir Rodney de Mournay as an unspeakable cad and that the sensuous, tempestuous and untameable Yasmin Delacourt would be united with her true love, the dashing Tom Resnick, just as in Rebecca Navarro's previous work *Lulu Goes To Liverpool*, where the lovely heroine was saved from kidnap, the smuggler ship and a life of white slavery at the hands of the evil Milburn D'Arcy, by dashing East India Company official Quentin Hammond.

Yvonne nonetheless read with enthusiasm, and was transported into a world of romance, a world free from the reality of eight-hour backshifts on geriatric wards, looking after decaying, incontinent people who had degenerated into sagging, wheezing, brittle, twisted parodies of themselves as they prepared to die.

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Tom Resnick rode like the wind. He knew that his steadfast mare was in great pain and that he risked Midnight's lameness by pushing the loyal and noble beast with such savage determination. And for what? His heart heavy, Tom knew that he would never reach Brondy Hall before Yasmin was joined in marriage to the despicable Sir Rodney de Mournay, that trickster who, unbeknown to his beautiful angel, was preparing to swindle her out of her fortune and reduce that lovely creature to the role of an imprisoned concubine.

At the ball, Sir Rodney was relaxed and cheerful. Yasmin had never looked so beautiful. Her virtue would be his tonight, and how Sir Rodney would savour the final surrender of this headstrong filly! Lord Beaumont stood by his friend's side. - Your bride-to-be is indeed a treasure. To be frank with you, Rodney, my dear friend, I thought that you would never win her heart, convinced as I was that she had seen us both as frippery fellows indeed.

— Never underestimate a huntsman, my friend, Sir Rodney smiled. - I am far too experienced sportsman to pursue my quarry too closely. I simply held back and waited for the ideal opportunity to arise before administering the coup de grâce.

— Despatching the troublesome Resnick overseas, I'll wager.

Sir Rodney raised an eyebrow and lowered his voice. — Please be a little more discreet, my friend, he looked around shiftily and, convinced that nobody had heard them over the noise of the band that played the waltz, continued — yes, I arranged for Resnick's unexpected commission with the Sussex Rangers and his posting to Belgium. Hopefully Boney's marksmen have delivered the knave to hell even as we speak!

— A good thing too, Beaumont smiled, - for the lady Yasmin had sadly not conducted herself in the manner appropriate to a delicately nurtured female. She seemed to know little discomfort on the occasion when you and I visited her; finding her embroiled in the concerns of someone no more than an urchin— certainly far beneath the notice of any aspirant to social heights!

— Yes, Beaumont, the wanton streak, though, has appeal in a filly, though that streak must be

broken if the woman is to become a dutiful wife. It is this streak that I shall break tonight!

~~Sir Rodney was unaware that a tall spinster was standing behind the velvet curtain. Miss May had heard everything. She moved off, into the body of me party, leaving him with his thoughts of Yasmine.~~ Tonight would be Yvonne was distracted by a knock on the door. It was her friend Lorraine Gillespie. Ye on a late, Yvonne? Lorraine smiled at her. It was an unusual smile, Yvonne thought, one which always seemed to be directed at something beyond its recipient. Sometimes when she looked at you like that, it was as if it wasn't even Lorraine at all.

— Yeah, worst bleedin luck. That fucking Sister Bruce; proper old bag she is.

— Ye want tae see that Sister Patel... her fuckin patter, Lorraine winced. - You will go-oooh and change the bedclothes, and when you have done this, you will go-oooh and do the drug round, and when you have done this you will go-oh-oh and do the temperatures and then when you have done this go-oh-oh ...

— Yeah ... Sister Patel. She's damaged goods, that one.

— Yvonne, is it cool for me tae make a brew, aye? — Yeah, sorry ... you stick on the kettle, will ya, Lorraine? - I'm sorry to be such an anti-social cow, I just gotta finish this book.

Lorraine went over to the sink behind Yvonne and filled the kettle and put it on. On her way past her friend she bent over her chair and filled her nostrils with the fragrance of Yvonne's perfume and shampoo. She caught herself nibbling some of Yvonne's shining blonde hair between her thumb and forefinger. - God, Yvonne, your hair's gone really lovely. What shampoo is that you've been using?

— It's just that Schwartzkopf stuff, she said, — you like it?

— Yeah, said Lorraine, feeling a funny dryness in her throat, — I do. She went back over to the sink and unplugged the kettle.

— So you going clubbing tonight? Yvonne asked.

— Aw aye, I'm always up for dubbing, Lorraine smiled.

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3 Freddy's Bodies

There was nothing like the sight of a stiff to give Freddy Royle a stiffie.

- Bit bashed about this one, Glen, the path lab technician explained, as he wheeled the body into the hospital mortuary.

Freddy was finding it hard to maintain steady breathing. He examined the corpse. - She's bain roight pretty un n arl, he rasped in his Somerset drawl, - caar accident oi presumes?

- Yeah, poor cow. M2S. Lost too much blood by the time they cut her out of the pile-up, Glen mumbled uncomfortably. He was feeling a bit sick. Usually a stiff was just a stiff to him, and he had seen them in all conditions. Sometimes though, when it was someone young, or someone whose beauty could still be evidenced from the three-dimensional photograph of flesh they had left behind, the sense of the waste and futility of it all just fazed him. This was such an occasion.

One of the dead girl's legs was lacerated to the bone. Freddy ran his hand up the perfect one. It felt smooth. - Still a bit wahrm n arl, he observed, - bit too waarm for moi tastes if the truth be told.

- Eh, Freddy, Glen began.

- Oh zorry, me ol moite, Freddy smiled, reaching into his wallet and peeling off some notes which he handed over to Glen.

- Cheers, Glen said, pocketing the money and hastily exiting.

Glen fingered the notes in his pocket as he walked briskly down the hospital corridor and took the lift to the canteen. This part of the ritual, the exchange of cash, left him elated and debased at the same time. He could never tell which emotion was the strongest. Why though, he reasoned, should he der

were in on it? Those arseholes who had more than he ever would: the hospital trustees.

Yes, the trustees knew all about Freddy Royle, Glen reflected bitterly. They knew the real secrets of the chat-show host, the presenter of the lonely hearts television show, *From Fred With Love*, the author of several books, including *Howzat! — Freddy Royle On Cricket*, *Freddy Royle's Somerset*, *Somerset With a Z: The Wit Of The West Country*, *West Country Walks With Freddy Royle* and *Freddy Royle's 101 Magic Party Tricks*. Yes, those trustee bastards knew what this distinguished friend, the favourite caring, laconic uncle to the nation did with the stiffies they got in here. The thing was, Freddy brought millions of pounds into the place with his fund-raising activities. This brought kudos to the trustees, and made St Hubbin's Hospital a flagship for the arm's-length trusts from the NHS. All they had to do was keep *shtumm* and indulge Sir Freddy with the odd body.

Glen thought about Sir Freddy, thrusting his way to a loveless paradise with a piece of dead meat. In the canteen, he joined the line and examined the food on display. Glen decided against a bacon roll and had processed cheese instead. He thought of Freddy and the old necrophiliac joke: someday some rotten cunt will split on him. It wouldn't be Glen though: Freddy paid too well for that. Thinking of the cash and what it could buy, Glen's thoughts turned to AWOL at the SWi Club tonight. She would be there - she often was on a Saturday - or at Garage City in Shaftesbury Avenue. Ray Harrow, one of the theatre technicians, had told him. Ray was into jungle; he had the same *modus operandi* as Lorraine. Ray was okay, he had lent Glen tapes. Glen couldn't get into jungle, but he'd try for Lorraine. Lorraine Gillespie. Beautiful Lorraine. Student Nurse Lorraine Gillespie. He knew she worked hard, conscientious, dedicated on the ward. He knew she raved hard: AWOL, The Gallery, Garage City. What he wanted to know was how she loved.

When he came to the end of the line with his tray and paid the cashier, he saw the blonde nurse sitting at one of the tables. He didn't know her name, all he knew of her was that she was Lorraine's friend. By the look of things she was just starting her shift. Glen thought

about sitting beside her, talking to her, perhaps even finding out about Lorraine through her. He moved over towards her, and then obeying a sudden nervous impulse, half-slipped and half-collapsed into a seat a couple of tables away. As he ate his roll he cursed his weakness. Lorraine. If he couldn't work up the bottle to talk to her friend, how was he ever going to work up the bottle to talk to *her*?

Then she rose and smiled over at him as she passed him. His spirits lifted. The next time he'd talk to her, then the time after that he'd talk to her when she was *with Lorraine*.

When Glen returned to the ante-room, he heard Freddy next door in the mortuary. He couldn't be seen to look, but he listened at the swing doors. He heard Freddy's gasps, - Wor, wor, wor, looks like a good one!

4 Admission

The ambulance arrived quickly, but it seemed a long time for Perky. He watched Rebecca gasp and groan on the conservatory floor. Self-consciously, he grabbed her hand. - Chin up, old girl, they're on their way, he said once or twice.

I - You'll be right as rain, he told her, as the ambulance men loaded her into a chair, placed an oxygen mask over her face, and wheeled her into the back of the van. It was as if he was watching a silent film in which his own sounds of encouragement seemed like a badly imposed voice-over. The Perky was aware of Wilma and Alan Fosley, watching the scene from over their hedge. - Everything's fine, he assured them, — just fine.

The ambulancemen, in turn, gave Perky a similar reassurance that this would indeed be the case, intimating that the stroke looked a mild one. This contention carried a conviction that he found unsettling and it served to lower his spirits. Perky found himself hoping fervently that they were wrong and that a doctor would come up with a more negative evaluation.

He started to perspire heavily as he turned the options over in his mind:

The best scenario: she dies and I am minted in the will.

Next best: she is okay and continues to write, and promptly completes the latest regency romance novel.

He shuddered as he realised that he was in fact flirting with the worse-case scenario: Rebecca incapacitated in some way, perhaps even reduced to a vegetable, incapable of writing but a drain on our resources.

— Aren't you coming with us, Mr Navarro? one of the ambulancemen asked, his tone quite accusatory.

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— You chaps go ahead, I'll follow in the car, Perky replied sharply. He was used, in social situations, to giving orders to people *from* such a class, and was therefore riled by their presumption that he should do as *they* think appropriate. He looked over at the rose-bushes. Yes, they could do with a spraying. At the hospital there would be all the fuss and palaver of checking the old girl in. Yes, time for a spraying, surely.

Perky's attention was arrested by the manuscript which lay on the coffee table. There was chocolatey vomit on the front page. With some distaste, he brushed the worst off with a handkerchief, exposing the bubbled, wet paper.

He opened its pages and started to read.

5 Untitled-Work In Progress (Miss May Regency Romance No. 14.)

Page 1

It only required the most modest of fires to heat the small, compact schoolroom in the old manse of Selkirk. This was considered a particularly advantageous state of affairs by the Minister of the parish, the Reverend Andrew Beattie, a man noted for his frugality.

Andrew's wife, Flora, matched this frugality with a lavish extravagance. She knew and accepted that she had married into reduced circumstances and that money was tight, but while she had learned to be what her husband constantly referred to as 'practical' in her day-to-day dealings, the essential extravagance of her spirit could not be broken by those circumstances. Far from disapproving, Andrew adored her all the more for it. To think that this wonderful and beautiful woman had given up fashionable society in London for the life he had to offer. It made him believe in the virtue of her calling and the purity of her love.

Their two daughters, huddled in front of the fire, had inherited Flora's extravagance of spirit. Agnes Beattie, a porcelain-skinned beauty, the elder at seventeen years, pushed back her raven hair to afford herself an unbroken view of the contents of Ladies Monthly Museum. - There is the most ravishing evening gown! Do look at it, Margaret, she exclaimed wildly, thrusting the page in front of her younger sister by one year, who was idly stoking the meagre coals in the fireplace, - a bodice of blue satin, fastened in front by diamonds!

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Margaret sprang up and attempted to wrestle the paper from her sister's grasp. Agnes tightened her grip, then her heart skipped a beat, from anxiety that the paper might tear, but she kept her tone admirably condescending as she laughed, — But dear sister, you are far too young to consider such

things!

~~— Do, pray, give it me! Margaret implored her sister even as her own hold was loosening. In the frivolity, the girls failed to notice the entrance of their new tutor. The slender, spinsterly English woman pursed her lips and tutted loudly. - So this is the behaviour I must expect from the daughters of my dear friend Flora Beattie! I must think twice before absenting myself in the future!~~

~~The girls looked embarrassed, but Agnes detected the note of playfulness in the tutor's reprimand. But madam, if I am to be introduced to society, in London too, then I must consider my attire!~~

~~The woman looked at her. — Training, education and etiquette are more important qualities for a young lady in her introduction to polite society than the detail of the finery she wears. Do you imagine that your dear mama, or your father, the good Reverend, for all his austerity, would see you embarrassed in that way at London's balls? Leave the consideration of your wardrobe in those capable hands, my girl, and turn your attention to more pressing matters!~~

~~— Yes, Miss May, Agnes said.~~

~~That girl has an untameable streak, thought Miss May, just like her dear mama, the tutor's dear old friend from many years ago — from the time, in fact, when Amanda May and Flora Kirkland were introduced to London society together.~~

Perky slung the manuscript back onto the coffee table. - What a load of utter nonsense, he said out loud, then, - Absolutely fucking brilliant! The bitch is on form. She'll make us another fucking fortune! He rubbed his hands together gleefully as he strode out into the garden towards the rose bushes. Suddenly, a tumult of anxiety rose in his breast as he ran back into the conservatory and picked up the manuscript. He thumbed through it, to the back pages. It stopped at page forty-two and had, by page twenty-six, degenerated into an unintelligible series of stark sentences and ramshackle spidery notes in the margins. It was nowhere near finished.

I hope the old girl's all right, Perky thought. He felt an uncontrollable urge to be with his wife.

6 Lorraine And Yvonne's Discovery

Lorraine and Yvonne were preparing to go onto the wards. After their shifts they were going out to buy some clothes, because tonight they were hitting a jungle club where Goldie was headlining. Lorraine was slightly perturbed to find Yvonne still engrossed in her book. It was all right for her; she didn't have Sister Patel on her ward. She was about to remonstrate with her friend and tell her to get the book and move on when the name of the author on the cover jumped out at her. She examined the book and the picture of a glamorous young woman adorning the back. It was a very old picture, and if it hadn't been for the name she would not have recognised Rebecca Navarro.

- Fuckin hell! Lorraine's eyes widened. — See that book you're reading?

- Yeah? Yvonne looked at the glossy, embossed cover. A young woman in a bodice pouted in a dream-like trance.

- Ken her that wrote it? Her on the back?

- Rebecca Navarro? Yvonne asked, flipping it over.

- She was admitted to Dean, Ward Six, last night. She'd had a stroke!

- That's wild! What's she like?

- Dinnae ken ... well, she's fuck-all like that anyway! She seems a bit dotty tae me, but she'd just had a stroke though, eh?

- That would do it right enough, Yvonne smirked. - You gonna see if she's got any freebies?

- Aye, ah'll dae that, said Lorraine. - Aye, and she's really fat as well. That's how she had the stroke. She's a total pig now!

- Yeuch! Imagine looking like that and letting yourself go!

- Right but, Yvonne, Lorraine looked at her watch, - we'd better be makin a move, eh no?

— Yeah ... Yvonne conceded, earmarking a page and rising to get ready.

7 Perk's Dilemma

Rebecca was crying. Just as she had been every day that week he had gone in to visit her. The gravely concerned Perky. When Rebecca cried it was because she was depressed. When Rebecca was depressed she didn't write, couldn't write. When she didn't write ... well, Rebecca always left the business side of things to Perky, who in turn painted a far glossier picture of their financial situation than was actually the case. Perky had certain expenses unknown to Rebecca. He had needs; needs, he considered, that the self-centred and egotistical old bag could never comprehend.

Their whole relationship was about him indulging her ego, subsuming all his own needs in the service of her infinite vanity, or at least that's what it would have been had he not been able to lead his private life. He deserved, he reasoned, some recompense. He was, by nature, a man of expensive tastes, as extravagant as her blasted heroines.

He looked at her clinically, drinking in the extent of the damage. It had not been what the doctor would term a severe stroke. Rebecca had not lost the power of speech (bad, Perky considered) and he was assured that her critical faculties had not been impaired (good, he thought). But it certainly appeared nasty enough to him. One side of her face looked like a piece of plastic which had been left too close to a fire. He had tried to keep a mirror away from the self-obsessed bitch, but it proved impossible. She'd insisted, until someone had furnished her with one.

- Oh Perky, I'm so horrible! Rebecca whined, gazing at her collapsed face in the mirror.

- Nonsense, my darling. It'll all get better, you'll see!

Let's face it, old girl, you were never much in the looks stakes.

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Too gross, always stuffing fucking chocolates into your face, he thought to himself. The doctors had said as much. Obese was the word they had used. A woman of only forty-two years of age, nine years his junior, though you would never think it. Three stone overweight. It was a fantastic word: obese. The way the doctor had said it, clinically, medically, in its proper context. It hurt her. He noticed that. It cut her to the quick.

Despite this recognition of the change in her face, Perky was astonished that he couldn't really ascertain any real aesthetic decline in Rebecca's looks since the stroke. The truth was, he reckoned that she had repulsed him for a long time. Perhaps, indeed, she always had: her childishness, her self-obsession, her fussing, and above all, her obesity. She was pathetic.

— Oh darling Perks, do you really think so? Rebecca moaned to herself rather than Perky, then she turned to the approaching Nurse Lorraine Gillespie, - Will it get better, Nursey?

Lorraine smiled at her, — Aw, ah'm sure it will, Mrs Navarro.

— See? Listen to this lovely young lady, Perks smiled, raising a bushy eyebrow at Lorraine, and maintaining eye contact for a flirtatiously long time, before ending it with a wink.

A slow burner, this one, Perky thought. He regarded himself as a connoisseur of women. Sometimes he considered, beauty just bit you straight away. You went *wow!*, then you acclimatised yourself to it. The best ones, though, the ones like this little Scotch nurse, they just crept up on you slowly but resolutely, showing you something else every time, with every mood, every different expression. They allowed you to form a vague woolly neutral perception of them, then they looked at you a certain way and ruthlessly mugged it.

— Yes, Rebecca pouted, — my darling little Nursey. She's so kind and gentle, aren't you, Nursey?

Lorraine felt flattered and insulted at the same time. All she could think about was finishing up. Tonight was the night. Goldie!

— And I can tell that Perky likes you! Rebecca sang. — He's such a terrible flirt, aren't you, Perky? Perky forced a smile.

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- But he's such a darling, and so romantic, I don't know what I'd do without him.

His personal stock with Rebecca seemingly higher than ever, Perky instinctively placed a microphone cassette recorder on her locker, along with some blank tapes. Maybe a bit heavy-handed, he thought, but he was desperate. - Perhaps a bit of match-making with Miss May might take your mind off these things, my darling ...

- Oh Perks ... I couldn't possibly write romance now. Look at me. I'm horrendous. How could I possibly think of romance? Perky felt a sinking fear hang heavily in his chest.

- Nonsense. You're still the most beautiful woman in the world, he forced out through clenched teeth.

- Oh darling Perky ... she began, just before Lorraine stuck a thermometer in her mouth to silence her.

Perks looked coldly at what he saw as this ridiculous figure, his face still moulded in a relaxed smile. Duplicity came so easily to him. However, the nagging problem remained: without another Miss May Regency Romance manuscript, Giles at the publishers would not cough up that hundred-and-eighty-grand advance on the next book. Worse, he would sue for breach of contract and want back the ninety grand on the last one. That ninety grand; now the property of various London bookmakers, publicans, restaurateurs and prostitutes.

Rebecca was getting bigger and bigger, not just literally, but as a writer. The *Daily Mail* had described her as the 'world's greatest living romance writer', while the *Standard* referred to her as 'Britain's Princess Regent'. The next one would be the biggest yet. Perks needed that manuscript something to follow up *Yasmin Goes To Yeovil*, *Paula Goes To Portsmouth*, *Lucy Goes To Liverpool* and *Nora Goes To Norwich*.

- I'll really have to read your books, Mrs Navarro. My friend's a big fan of yours. She's just finished reading *Yasmin Goes To Yeovil*, Lorraine told Rebecca, taking the thermometer from her mouth.

- Then you shall! Perks, be a darling, do remember to bring in some books for Nursey ... oh and Nursey, please, please, please, please, please call me Rebecca. Of course I shall keep calling you

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Nursey because I'm used to it now, although Lorraine is a most lovely name. You look just like a young French countess ... in fact, you know, I think you look just like a portrait I once saw of Lady Caroline Lamb. It was a flattering portrait, as she was never as lovely as you, my darling, but she's my heroine: a wonderfully romantic figure not afraid to risk scandal for love, like all the best women throughout history. Would you risk scandal for love, Nursey darling?

God, the sow's ranting again, Perks thought.

— Dinnae ken, eh, Lorraine shrugged.

— Oh, I'm sure you would. You have that wild, ungovernable look about you. Don't you think so, Perks?

Perky felt his blood pressure rise and a layer of salt crystallise on his lips. That uniform ... those buttons... removed one by one ... he forced a cool smile.

— Yes, Nursey, Rebecca continued, — I see you as a consort of Lady Caroline Lamb, at one of those grand regency balls, pursued by suitors eager to waltz with you ... do you waltz, Nursey?

— Naw, ah'm intae house, especially jungle n that likes. Dinnae mind trancey n garage n techno that, bit ah like it tae kick but ken?

— Would you like to learn to waltz?

— No really bothered. Mair intae house, eh. Jungle likes. Goldie's ma man, eh.

— Oh, but you must, Nursey, you really must, Rebecca's swollen face pouted insistently.

Lorraine felt faintly embarrassed as she was aware of Perky's eyes lingering on her. She felt strangely exposed in her uniform as if she was something exotic, something to be held up for inspection. She had to get on. Sister Patel was coming on soon and there would be trouble if she didn't get a move on.

— Where about in Bonnie Scotland are you from? Perks smiled.

— Livingston, Lorraine said quickly.

— Livingston, Rebecca said, - it sounds perfectly delightful. Are you going home to visit soon?

— Aye, see ma mother n that.

Yes, there was something about that Scotch nurse, thought Perks.

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She had an effect on more than his hormones; she was helping Rebecca. This girl seemed to ignite her, to bring her back to life. As Lorraine left, his wife drifted back into a litany of self-pitying whines. It was time he left as well.

8 Freddie's Indiscretion

Freddy Royle had had, by his standards, a tiring day prior to his late afternoon arrival at Hubbin's. He had been in the television studios all morning filming an episode of *From Fred With Love*. A young boy, whom Fred had sorted out to swim with the dolphins at Morecambe's Marineland while his grandparents were brought back to the scene of their honeymoon, was all excited in the studio and writhed around on his lap, getting Freddy so aroused and excited that they had to do several takes. - Oi loike em still, he said, - very, very still. Barry, the producer, was not at all amused. - In the name of God, Freddy, take the rest of the fucking afternoon off and go to the hospital and shag a stiff, he moaned. - Let's see if we can dampen that bloody libido of yours.

It seemed good advice. - Oi think oi moite just be doin that, me ol cocker, Freddy smiled, summoning a commissionaire to order him a cab from Shepherd's Bush down to St Hubbin's. On the ride through West London, frustrated at the grindingly slow pace of the cab in the traffic, he changed his mind and requested the driver to drop him off at a Soho bookshop he frequented.

Freddy winked at the man behind the counter of the busy establishment before sauntering through the back. There, another man, wearing strange, horn-rimmed glasses, and drinking tea from a Gillingham F.C. mug, smiled at Freddy. - All right, Freddy? How you going, mate?

- Not baad, Bertie, moi ol mucker. Yourzelf?

- Oh, musn't grumble. Here, I got something for you ... Bertie opened a locked cupboard and rummaged around through some brown-paper packages until he saw one marked FREDDY in black felt pen.

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Freddy didn't open it, but instead nodded over to a display bookcase on the wall. Bertie smiled, Quite a few been in today, and moved over to the wall. He grabbed a handle and pulled open a door. Behind it was a small, narrow room, with metal shelving stacked with magazines and videos. Two men were browsing, as Freddy walked in and pulled the bookcase door shut behind him. Freddy knew one of them.

- Alroight, Perks, me old sport?

Perky Navarro averted his gaze from the cover of *Long-Tongued Lesbo Love-Babes No. 2* and smiled at Freddy. - Freddy, old boy. How are you? He did a quick double-take to the rack, as he was convinced he saw a likeness of Nurse Lorraine Gillespie in *New Cunts 78*. He picked it up, studied

closely. No, just similar hair.

- I'm foine, me old mucker, Freddy began, then noting Perk's distraction, asked — Zeen zumthin interestin?

- I rather thought I had, but, alas, no, Perky sounded deflated.

- Oi dare zay you'll foind zumthin that takes your fancy. And what news of the Angel, ow's sh farin?

- Oh, she's doing a lot better.

- Well, she's in the roight place. I'm going to drop in and see her today, cause oime headin down t St Hubbin's for a fund-raisin meetin.

- Well, I can see a huge difference, Perky smiled, perking up again. - She's even talking about starting to do some writing soon.

- Crackin show.

- Yes, that young nurse that's been looking after her ... little Scotch girl ... she's been good for her. A stunning little bird as well. In fact I've been scouring the wares for a likeness ...

- Anything interesting in?

- There's some new stuff that Bertie tells me just came from Hamburg yesterday, but that's ov there, Perks ushered Freddy to one of the racks.

Freddy picked up a magazine and thumbed through its contents. -Not baad, not baad at all. Oi g moiself a noice little vist-vuckin magazine the other week there. Ow zum of them there girlz an boy can take one of them vists up their doo-daas oi don't know. Oi be

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bad enough trying to shoite if I've gone a vew days without spendin a penny!

- I think some of them must be full of those muscle-relaxant drugs, Perks told him.

This seemed to intrigue Freddy. - Muzzle-relaxint drugs... hmmm ... that open them up noicely now would it?

- Yes, that would do the trick. Read about it. You're not thinking of trying some, are you? Perks laughed.

Freddy turned a toothy grin his way and Perky found himself recoiling from the television star's pungent breath. — Oi rulz out nuttin at no toimes, Perky me boy, you knows me.

Slapping his friend on the back, the television star picked up his package and left the shop, hailing another taxi outside. He was off to see Rebecca Navarro, a woman he, like all her friends, indulged in shamelessly. He had playfully, and to her delight, nicknamed her 'The Angel'. But after seeing her, Freddy would spend more time with some other friends whom most people would describe as 'absent' but who, for his purposes, were very much present and correct.

9 In The Jungle

The night before his life changed, Glen had had to plead with his friend Martin, - Come on, mate, give it a try. I got good pills, those Amsterdam Playboys. The best ever.

- Exactly, Martin sneered, - and you're gonna waste them on this fuckin jungle shit. I don't go for that shit, Glen, I just can't fucking well dance to it.

- C'mon, mate, as a favour. Give it a go.

- A favour? Why you so desperate to check out this club? Keith and Carol and Eddie, they're all going down to Sabresonic and then on to the Ministry.

- Look, mate, house music's at the forefront of everything, and jungle's at the forefront of house. I got to have a capacity to surprise, innit, otherwise it just becomes affirmation, like country-and-western, or like rock'n'roll's become. Jungle's the music with the capacity to surprise. It's where the cutting edge is. We owe it to ourselves to check it out, Glen implored.

Martin looked at him searchingly. - There's someone you want to see at this club ... someone from the hospital goes there ... one of them nurses I'll bet!

Glen shrugged and smiled, — Well... yeah ... but...

- All right, that's cool. You want to chase the girls, we'll chase the girls. Ain't got no objections on that score. Just don't give me all this cutting-edge bollocks.

They got to the club, and Glen felt despondent when they saw the size of the queue. Martin strode up to the front and talked to one of the bouncers. He then turned and gesticulated violently at Glen to come up. There were some moans of frustrated envy from others in the crowd as Glen and Martin strode through. At first Glen had been

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terrified that they would not get in. After Martin had blagged it so effectively, he worried that Lorraine might have been stuck outside.

In the club, they went straight to the chill-out zone. Martin hit the bar and bought two fizzy mineral waters. It was dark and Glen pulled a plastic bag out of his Y-fronts. It contained four pills with a Playboy bunny logo stamped on them. They swallowed one each and washed them down with water.

After about ten minutes, the pill kept coming back on Glen, as it tended to do, and he had drunk hiccupy wretches. He and Martin were unconcerned; Glen was just bad at taking pills.

Three girls sat down close to them. Martin had been quick to start chatting to them. Glen was equally quick to leave him and hit the dance-floor. These Es were good, but unless you started dancing straight away you would sit around talking in the chill-out zone all night. Glen had come to dance.

He skirted the already-busy dance-floor and quickly came across Lorraine and her friend. Glen danced a discreet distance away. He recognised Murder Dem by Ninjaman sliding into Wayne Marshall's G Spot.

Lorraine and her friend Yvonne were up there, going for it in a big way. Glen watched them dancing with each other, Lorraine blocking out all the world, focusing on Yvonne, giving her friend everything. God, for just a bit of that attention, he thought. Yvonne, though, was more disengaged, further away, taking in the whole scene. That was how it seemed to Glen. His pill was kicking in, and the music, which he had had a resistance to, was getting into him from all sides, surging through his body in waves, defining his emotions. Before it had seemed jerky and disjointed, it was pushing and pulling at him, irritating him. Now he was going with it, his body bubbling and flowing in all ways to the roaring bass-lines and the tearing dub plates. All the joy of love for everything good was in him, though he could see all the bad things in Britain; in fact this twentieth-century urban blues music defined and illustrated them more sharply than ever. Yet he wasn't scared and he wasn't down about it; he could see what needed to be done to get away from them. It was the party: he felt that you had to party, you had to party

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harder than ever. It was the only way. It was your duty to show that you were still alive. Political sloganeering and posturing meant nothing; you had to celebrate the joy of life in the face of all those grey forces and dead spirits who controlled everything, who fucked with your head and livelihood anyway, if you weren't one of them. You had to let them know that in spite of their best efforts to make you like them, to make you dead, you were still alive. Glen knew that this wasn't the complete answer, because it would all still be there when you stopped, but it was the best show in town right now. It was certainly the only one he wanted to be at.

He had looked back over at Lorraine and her friend. He couldn't tell at first, but he was dancing like a maniac, and when he glanced over at them, he realised. There were no poseurs here, they were all going crazy. This wasn't dance, that wasn't the word for what this was. And there they were: Lorraine

and her friend Yvonne. Lorraine, the goddess. But the goddess had multiplied. There wasn't just one of them now, like when he came in, there was just Lorraine and her friend. Now it was Lorraine and Yvonne, in a dance of crazy, rapturous emotion which, while conducted at ninety miles an hour, slowed down to almost nothing under the onslaught of the throbbing strobes and jerky break-beats. Lorraine and Yvonne. Yvonne and Lorraine.

A mass scream went up from the crowd as the music left one crescendo and changed its tempo to build up to the next one. The two women, danced out, collapsed into each other's arms. At that point Glen knew that there was something wrong in their body language. Lorraine and Yvonne were kissing, but Yvonne, after a while, started to resist and was pulling away. So slowly, under the strobes. It was as if she had snapped: as if she had gone beyond the range of her emotional elasticity/She jerked free from what at first seemed a symbiotic hug with a violence the strobes couldn't disguise, and stood with a cripplingly uncomfortable rigidity as Lorraine appeared to look at her with a brief, odd contempt, then to ignore her.

Yvonne headed from the dance-floor, making her way towards the bar. Glen looked at her departing, then looked at Lorraine. Lorraine. Yvonne. He went after Yvonne. She was standing at the

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bar drinking a mineral water. On the night his life changed he tapped her on the shoulder.

- Yvonne, innit?

- Yeah ... she said slowly, then, -you're Glen, aintcha? From the hospital.

- Yeah, Glen smiled. She was beautiful. It was Yvonne. Yvonne was the one. Yvonne, Yvonne, Yvonne.

- Didn't know you was into this, she smiled. It was as if her big white teeth burrowed through his chest bone and ate a hole into his heart. She is so fucking beautiful, Glen decided. This is a woman I'd die for.

- Oh yeah, said Glen, - Most definitely.

- Having a good one? she asked. He was gorgeous, Yvonne thought. He was a fucking hunk. He was fucking well noticed me big time.

- I'm having the best ever, and what about you?

- It's getting better, she smiled.

This was also the night Yvonne's life changed.

10 Rebecca's Recovery

Lorraine was taking Rebecca's temperature when her illustrious patient's distinguished visitor arrived. — Angel! announced Freddy, — How goes it! Oi was supposed to be down ere to zee you yesterday, but this vund-raisin meetin dragged on and on. Ow be you?

- Mmmm, Rebecca began, and Lorraine withdrew her thermometer, her hand trembling and unsteady. — Freddy! Darling! Rebecca outstretched her arms and gave Freddy a theatrical hug.

- That's you, Rebecca, Lorraine forced a smile. She was on a bad comedown and Yvonne had the hump with her. She'd let things get silly, out of hand. No, *she* had got out of hand. She consciously stopped the psychic self-mutilation before it gathered momentum. Now was not the time.

- Thank you, Lorraine darling ... have you met darling Freddy?

- Naw ... said Lorraine. She went to shake his hand. Freddy gave her a lusty shake followed by a kiss on the cheek. Lorraine winced at the cold, wet feel of the greasy saliva that Freddy's lips left on her face.

- Oi've been hearin all about you, that you've been doin a great job lookin after the Angel here, Freddy smiled. Lorraine shrugged.

- Oh Freddy, Lorraine's been perfectly darling, haven't you, sweetheart?

- No really, it's jist ma joab, eh.

- ~~But you do it with such style, such *savoir faire*. I absolutely insist, Freddy darling, that you bring~~ all your considerable influence to bear on advancing Lorraine's career within this health authority.

- Oi think you're overstatin the influence of a zimple Zomerzet varmer's boy ere, Angel, but ah obviously be puttin the roight wurdz in the roight lugs, zo to speak.

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- Oh, but you must. It's due to my Nursey Lorraine that I'm going home next week. And I've lo over a stone. Oh Freddy darling, I *had* let myself go in recent years. You must promise to tell me wh I'm overweight and simply not indulge me. Please, darling, do say you will!

- Anythin you say, Angel. Great newz about you gettin out though, Freddy smiled.

- Yes, and Lorraine's going to come and see me, to visit, aren't you, darling?

- Eh, well ... Lorraine mumbled. This was the last thing she wanted at the moment. Her legs ache they would ache more before the end of the shift. Her eyes were tired. She saw the beds she had change and wanted to lie down on one so badly.

- Oh, do say you will, Rebecca pouted.

Rebecca made Lorraine feel strange. Part of her detested her patronising and moronic behaviour. Part of her had an urge to shake this stupid, bloated, naive and pampered woman, to tell her that she been a fool, to try and get herself together, to come out off her childlike fantasyland. However, part of her pitied Rebecca, felt protective of her.

Lorraine realised that, for all her irritating ways and pitiful inadequacies, Rebecca was essentially good, warm and honest person, - Aye, right, she told her patient.

- Wonderful! You see, Freddy, Lorraine has inspired me to write again. I'm going to base th heroine on her. I'm even going to call her Lorraine. She was going to be called Agnes, but I think could get away with a French-sounding name. I'm thinking that Flora may have had a French lov before she met the Minister. The auld alliance, you see. God, I'm bursting with ideas again. I definitely dedicate this book to you, my dear dear Nursey darling Lorraine!

Lorraine cringed inwardly.

- That's great, said Freddy, impatiently wanting to get down to the path lab, - but oi must be o now. Tell me though, Angel, that woman in the next room, what's up with her?

- Oh she's very ill. I think it's only a matter of days, Rebecca sighed.

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- Terrible, Freddy said, trying to stop his features shifting into a smile of gleeful anticipation. Sh was a hefty one. The kind of body Freddy could happily get lost in. All that meat to conquer. - It'd b loike climbin Evirizt, he said happily, thoughtfully, under his breath.

11 Untitled - Work In Progress

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It was, in the event, not until the end of March that Lorraine and Miss May set out to accomplish the long trek to London. To a young girl from the Scottish borders, who had only once been as far as Edinburgh, every new sighting on the road was viewed with eager interest. At the start of the journey Lorraine was still in a fit of intense excitement, which was as much to do with the small fortune of sixty pounds that her father, the stoical Reverend, had surprised her with prior to her departure.

They travelled by an old coach pulled by two sturdy beasts and driven by Tam Greig, a Selkirk man who had undertaken the journey many times in the past. To those accustomed to the speed which the post-chaises were able to attain, a journey in a rather ponderous, creaking carriage drawn by only two horses often seemed so painfully slow. So while for Lorraine this was a great adventure, for her

travelling companion, Miss May, it was an untold grind -the only benefit being the superior comfort.

~~However, they were happy to be offered excellent refreshments at most of the halts, and the beds in the posting houses were generally of an acceptable standard. Lorraine found a three-day break at York most agreeable. It was extended on the advice of Tam Greig, who had noted bad fatigue in one of the horses. So enthralled with the town was Lorraine that she begged that they stay just one more day, but the dour Scotch coachman reported the horses to be quite fresh and Miss May, as ever, had the last word. - I have a duty to get you to Lady Huntingdon's, my girl. While no time was given for your arrival, I would be less than prudent in my responsibilities were I to sanction long holidays at every interesting point we pass through! There is little gain in lingering!~~

With that, they set off.

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The rest of the journey was uneventful until Grantham. It had been raining heavily for most of the day as they approached the Gonerby Moor, and the Lincolnshire landscape was sodden. Seemingly from nowhere, a post-chaise and four dashed by at such pace that the more docile horses drawing the carriage were thus highly vexed, and ran the vehicle off the road. The carriage tilted and Miss May banged her head. — What...

— Miss May, Lorraine held her hand, — are you all right?

— Yes, yes, yes, girl ... I thought the carriage was going to tilt over ... what, pray tell, happened?

Lorraine looked out of the window to see Tam Greig shaking his fist and cursing in a guttural Scotch, the likes of which she never heard before. - Ye devils, ye! Ah'll cut oot yer feckless English herts!

— Mister Greig! Miss May barked.

— Begging your pardon, ma'am, I was fair scunnered by the recklessness of the men in yon coach. Officers they were too. Officers, but no gentlemen, I'll wager ye.

— Perhaps they were in a hurry to get to some posting, Miss May said. — We too should be in a hurry.

— I'm sorry, ma'am, but yon horse has gone lame. He'll have to be replaced in Grantham, and I say it'll take some time to make yon arrangements.

— Very well, Miss May sighed. — Oh, Lorraine, I am so vexed by this journey!

It took longer to get to Grantham than expected, due to the lameness of the second horse. There was no room at the Blue Inn, so they were forced to billet in a much less genteel lodging. As they disembarked, Tam the coachman cursed as he saw four officers, the occupants of the post-chaise which had caused them their grief, pass them en route to a tavern.

One of the soldiers, a dark, handsome chap with an arrogant twist to his mouth, raised an eyebrow in Lorraine's direction which caused her to look down and blush. Miss May noted the officer's gesture and nodded approvingly to herself at Lorraine's response.

The stop-off in Grantham held them up for another two days, but the final part of the journey to London was uneventful and they reached Earl Denby and Lady Huntingdon's grand town home at Radcombe House in Kensington in fine spirits.

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Lorraine was overwhelmed by London; its size and scale were beyond anything she could have conceived of. Lady Huntingdon, a strikingly handsome woman, and much younger-looking than her thirty-six years (for Lorraine's mother Flora was the same age as her friend), proved to be a most amenable hostess. Lorraine also had Miss May, whom only Lady Huntingdon addressed by her

Christian name of Amanda, keeping a watchful eye on her during her induction to society. Earl Denby was a dashing, handsome man, and he and his wife together seemed so full of vitality and gaiety.

The dinners at Radcombe House were grand affairs, even on the occasions where few guests were present. - Isn't this wonderful? Lorraine said to Miss May, ever present by the young Scotch beauty's side.

- This is rather modest. Wait until you see New Thorndyke Hall, my girl, she smiled. That was the family's country seat in Wiltshire, and Lorraine eagerly anticipated going there.

At a smaller Radcombe House dinner one evening, where only a few guests were present, Lorraine's attention was caught by the flirtatious eye of a handsome young man. He seemed strangely familiar and she fancied that she might have seen him before at one of the earlier dinners. This man, an erratic young sprig of fashion, faced his friend and host, Earl Denby, with a mocking eye and demanded in theatrical, rallying tones: - Well, Denby, you old rogue, you promise me a champion time down in Wiltshire with the hounds this weekend, but what, pray tell, do you offer me for my entertainment this evening? The young blood smiled over at Lorraine, and she instantly recalled where she had seen him before: he was one of the officers from the post-chaise which had so disrupted their progress to London, the one who had gestured at her.

- My cook, said Denby, rather nervously, - is generally thought of as an artist in her own line ...
- But, interrupted the young man, smugly, as he cast another flirtatious glance over toward Lorraine, who felt herself blush, as she had done before, - I am not to be put off with a cook! I came here in the fond expectation of finding all manner of shocking orgies! he boomed. Lord Harcourt sitting nearby, spluttered on his wine and shook his head testily.

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- Darling Marcus! You are so scandalous! Lady Huntingdon smiled benignly.
- My dear lady, said Lord Harcourt, - you are as bad as that despicable young blade himself, giving his puerile and amoral blabberings such indulgence!

- The lamentable influence of Lord Byron and his cohorts upon society! Denby said, with a slight contemptuous smile.

- Yes, that damn poet fellow has set up such a dust! Harcourt exclaimed.
- But the point I seek to make, continued the young man, - is how can I seek to encounter old Bonny at the end of the month without the sustenance of more vigorous recreation?

- The sort of recreation you seem to be suggesting shall not be forthcoming under my roof, Marcus. Denby growled.

- Marcus, do be a darling and dampen that fiery ardour for a moment while we eat, as your talk verging on the scandalous! Entertain us with your army tales, Lady Huntingdon sweetly implored her bullish young guest.

- As you wish, my good lady, the young man smiled, soothed and seduced by the soft tones and calming classical beauty of his hostess. And that was exactly what he did for the remainder of the evening: enthralled the table with tales of great wit and humour concerning his military service.

— Who was that man? Lorraine was moved to ask Lady Huntingdon, after the guests had taken their departure.

- That was Marcus Cox. A perfect darling, and one of London's most eligible bachelors, but a complete unspeakable cad. There are many bloods in this town who are not what they seem, my angel, and you must tread warily with them. But no doubt my friends your dear mama and darling Amanda will have already told you that. Alas, many bloods will do and say almost anything to capture a maiden's virtue. When a man, even one of Marcus Cox's breeding, faces posting at the front, a certain recklessness enters his tone and bearing. For the sad truth is that many do not return, a fact of which they are only too aware.

too well aware.

- *You are so wise in the ways of the world ... Lorraine said.*

- *And it is therefore my duty to impart to you some of the wisdom I have had the good fortune have acquired, my darling Lorraine. But now, there is work to be done. We must, with reluctance undertake that most pressing and*

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arduous of tasks and finally decide what you and I are to wear to tomorrow evening's ball.

The following night, Lorraine was prepared for the ball, supervised by Lady Huntington. Lorraine could tell the operation had been a success before she studied herself in the mirror. In the eyes of her hostess she saw such a look of glowing approval that, indeed, a mirror was superfluous. She looked heavenly and striking in a red dress made from imported Indian silk. — How wonderful you look, my darling, how simply divine! Lady Huntingdon cooed.

Lorraine went over to the minor and studied her reflection, - It cannot be I, surely not!

- *Oh but it is, my darling, it most surely is. How like your darling mama you are ...*

At the ball, one handsome officer after another danced with Lorraine, all keen to make her acquaintance. The waltz was the most wonderful dance, and Lorraine was intoxicated by the music and the movement.

Lady Huntington and Lord Denby took her aside after one dance with a particularly tall officer. - My darling Lorraine, we are so proud of you! How I wish your dear mama was with us to witness this! the mistress of the house said appreciatively in her ear.

Lorraine thought with fondness and love of her beloved parents back up in the Scottish border manse, and the sacrifices they had made so that this dream might be realised.

- *Yes, my pretty one, your introduction to society has been more of a success than I had bargained for! I have had every young officer in my own regiment asking after you! Lord Denby noted cheerfully.*

- *Alas, I am always in the radiant shadow of your beautiful wife, m'Lord, Lorraine smiled at Denby. The company all knew that the pretty debutante's comment was an honest statement of the truth, rather than a sycophantic act of deference or display of gratitude to her hostess.*

- *Ha! You flatter me so! The eyes are on you, my little darling. Look, watch and wait, my angel, and curb any tendency towards impetuosity. The ideal one will come along and you will know, Lady Huntington smiled at her husband who touchingly squeezed her hand.*

Lorraine was moved by this. She felt that she should dance with the most

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handsome man in the hall. - Come and dance with me, m'Lord, she pleaded to Denby.

- *That would never do! Denby burst into a laugh of mock outrage.*

- *You will not get him to waltz, my child; his Lordship is a strict opponent of the importation of such music into this country.*

— *And I must agree with his Lordship's principles on this, Lord Harcourt, who had now come over to join them, sharply opined, — for it is but an underhand tactic of our foreign foes to import this decadent music and dance to our shores.*

Lorraine was horrified that the wise lord could feel this way about such beautiful music. — Why do you say that, m'Lord? she asked.

Harcourt took a step backwards and Lorraine watched his chin recede into his neck. — Wliy, he began with bluster, unused to being challenged in such a way by a young woman, — this unsettling proximity of gentleman to lady is a most scandalous and improper thing, and can only be a strategy by our overseas enemies of the realm to weaken the resolve of the British officer, by facilitating the erosion of his moral fibre and lubricating his fall to debauchery! This filth is spreading like an unchecked

virus through polite society, and I shudder to think of the ramifications for the enlisted men adopting these devilish practices!

— Oh hush, Harcourt, Lady Huntington smiled, brushing the good lord aside as she swept majestically down the marble stairs, to the approving eye of her husband, who noted the admiring looks his handsome wife elicited.

Lorraine saw Lord Denby's expression, and was moved to address him. — My Lord, I pray that one day I will command a presence similar to that of this divine beauty, your good wife, the Lady Huntington. What poise and grace that most radiant and noble woman possesses, what ...

Lorraine's words were cut short as Lady Huntington tripped on the skirts of her gown and toppled down the marble stairs. The guests watched in shocked and horrified silence, none of them being close enough to catch her, with the lady herself seemingly unable to break her fall as she tumbled on and down the steps for what seemed like an eternity, gathering a frightening momentum, until she came to rest in a broken heap at the bottom of the staircase.

The Earl of Denby was first at her side. He lifted his wife's golden, tousled head to him, tears filling his eyes as he felt the blood run through his hands and drip onto the marble floor. Denby looked up towards the heavens, beyond and

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through the ornate roof of the banqueting hall He knew that by the most random and arbitrary of cruel accidents, everything he had and held dear had gone from him. - There is no God, he said quietly, then, even more softly, he repeated, — no God.

12 Rebecca's Relapse

Rebecca thought she was having another stroke. Her heart burned as she flicked through the contents of the magazine. There were two young women inside, in various poses. One of them - as she considered one might expect from the title: *Feisty Feminist Fist-Fuckers* - appeared to have her clenched fist in the other's vagina.

Her mind raced back to last Friday, when her world had blown apart. This was worse than the stroke, it seemed even more casual, vicious and sickening. It carried a humiliation that the illness, for all its disfigurement and incapacity, had never conferred. Last Friday, following her hospital discharge, she had gone shopping. She was coming out of Harrod's with a new, morale-boosting outfit one size down from what had become her usual. Then, from the window of the taxi on the way home she saw Perky, right there in a busy Kensington street. She had the taxi slow down and she got out to pursue him, deciding that it might be jolly good fun to follow her beloved Perks.

It started to seem less good fun as she saw him vanish into a small flat. Rebecca's heart sank, as she immediately suspected another woman. She went home under the darkest of clouds and fought the desperate urge to cram her face with food until her stomach was at bursting point. Then, the urge passed and she couldn't have eaten had she been force-fed. All she wanted to do was to know.

After this, she followed Perky many times, but he always went to the flat alone. Rebecca spent ages watching to see if anyone else was coming and going. It seemed to be unoccupied. Eventually, she went to the door and rang the bell. Nobody answered. Every subsequent time she tried it, nobody went home. She confided in Lorraine, who came over to tea at her request. It was Lorraine who

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suggested she look through his pockets to see if there was a key. There was, and Rebecca had copied. Going there alone, she found a small studio flat. Inside, the place was a library of pornography: magazines, video tapes and, most ominously, a video camera on a tripod positioned over a bed that — along with the television set and the racks of books, magazines and tapes — dominated

the room.

~~She was now sitting there alone, glancing at this one, *Feisty Feminist Fist-Fuckers*. She couldn't bring herself to look at the video tapes, especially the home-made ones. They each had the name of a different woman, written on a label on the spine. They were whores' names, she thought bitterly. Candy, Jade, Cindy, and the like. She felt the side of her face again. It didn't burn but it was wet. She dropped Perky's copy of *Feisty Feminist Fist-Fuckers* on the floor.~~

Something told her to do her breathing exercises. She started with forced, laboured, deep breaths, punctuated by sobs, but eventually found a rhythm. Then she coldly said out loud: - The *bastard*.

A strange, frozen calm came over her as she continued to compulsively explore the flat. Then she discovered something which proved to be the worst find of all. It was a large box-folder which contained various financial statements, cash receipts and invoices. Rebecca found herself shaking. She needed to be with someone. The only person she could think of was Lorraine. She dialled the number and her young former nurse, and now friend, answered, — Please come, Rebecca said softly to her, - please come.

Lorraine had just come off a shift and was going to bed. It had been a good one at the club last night and she was suffering, but when she heard Rebecca's voice on the other end of the line she threw on some casual clothes and jumped in a taxi to Kensington. She had never heard such pain and desperation in a human voice before.

Lorraine met Rebecca in a wine bar which was by the tube station and round the corner from the flat. She could see that something terrible had happened.

- I've been betrayed, deeply betrayed, she said in a cold, trembling voice. - I've been paying for him to ... it's all been a lie, Lorraine ... it's all been a fucking *lie*! she sobbed.

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It fazed Lorraine to see Rebecca like this. It wasn't when she was no longer the eccentric, by turns engaging and irritating woman she knew in the hospital. She seemed vulnerable and real. This woman was a troubled sister, not a dotty aunt.

— What am I going to do ... she cried to Lorraine.

Lorraine looked her in the eye. - It's no what you're gaunny dae. It's what that fuckin creep, the fuckin parasite's gaunny dae. You're the one wi the money. Ye cannae rely on everybody else. Rebecca, especially some fuckin creepy man. Look around you. He's got away with it cause you've had your heid stuck up your fanny for too long in that never-never land of yours. That's how he's been able to exploit ye, tae fleece ye like that!

Rebecca was jolted by Lorraine's outburst. But she sensed that there was something behind it. Through her own pain, she was able to empathise with something coming from Lorraine.

— Lorraine, what's wrong? What is it? Rebecca couldn't believe that she was talking like this. Not Lorraine. Not Nursesey ...

— What's wrong is that I see people who come into the hospital who've got nothing. Then I get home, back up the road tae Livi and they've got nothing. And you, well, you've got everything. And what dae ye dae wi it? Ye let some pig fuckin waste it aw away!

— I know ... I know I go on about romance all the time ... I know I live in that dreamworld you say. Maybe I've been writing that crap for so long I've come to believe it... I don't know. All I know is that he was always there for me, Lorraine, Perky was always there.

— Always there, watching you get fatter and more ridiculous, jist encouraging ye tae sit about and be a fucking fat stupid vegetable. Making a fool ay yersel for other people's amusement... ye know what we used tae say about ye oan the ward? We said: she's so fuckin stupid. Then ma pal Yvonne goes: she's no that daft, she's the one that's makin aw that money while we're working these back

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