

Head for the Edge, Keep Walking

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For Glasgow

And for
B, T, M and J

ONE

I step off the bus and stand there, planted; no part of me ready to go home. I watch the bus continue into the distance: start to pick up speed, stop to let someone off, start, stop. All that curbed potential.

A woman in joggy-bottoms walks by, supermarket bag on one arm and yoga mat rolled-up under the other. That's one way to spend your evening. But is it a life: a job, a hobby and dinner at nine o'clock at night?

My mind searches for things I could do at this time on a Tuesday. Sensing it might take a while, I move inside the bus-shelter to perch on the pole that passes for a bench. I scroll through my mobile looking for a companion; someone without children, or an early start, who could meet me for coffee. Names flow up the screen and the thought of holding another conversation wears me out. *That woman's voice says things... I don't know where she gets them from.* Since the split, I've been out in public as her, yakking, or home alone as I don't know who, silent. What I really miss is being quiet in the company of another. I need to be quiet. I don't need to be alone. Nor do I need to foist this on anyone else.

I put my phone away and stare up the street.

*

I get up. I go to work.

I spend the whole day there.

*

Emerging from the underpass something cold and sudden hits my legs. I look down and my thighs are wet; soaked through.

Brain whirring: *supposed to walk home like this? Is it water? Is it piss? Was it deliberate? Are they laughing? More to come?*

On the ground: tattered rubber.

Look left, right. Up.

A collection of boys at the wall, a camera-phone pointed at me. “Very funny you wee pricks! Is it not past your bedtime?”

I bring out my phone and raise it towards them. They scatter. One stays.

Look away. Look back.

He’s about thirteen, in his customised school uniform of shortened, fattened tie, un-tucked shirt and no blazer, no jumper.

“C’mere and say that tae ma face,” he goads. “C’mere and say it.”

*

I get up. I go to work. I spend the whole day waiting for the words on my screen to make sense.

In the commuter broth of the carriage home, tears run in hot lines to my jaw and for a minute or so, I let them.

*

I don’t even take off my coat. I beeline for the walk-in cupboard in the living room. Moving a portable heater to one side, I can access a large cardboard box to reach inside. Both blind hands are required to lift out a smaller box placed there in July; when I swore I’d never do this.

Cross-legged on the rug, my coat-seams cut into my armpits as I hold him.

My lungs remember air.

I slip-stop through the glossy stack: him alone, me and him, headshots, full-length, family groupings. Set against:

landmarks and landscapes and sun-loungers and celebrations.

Today has been a subway train rumbling towards this point, now arrived – I have to hear his voice. Just for a moment. The sound of it. I need to. I must.

I can't.

I don't have his new number.

I know I don't. But maybe I do. I reach for my bag and rummage to retrieve the phone. As soon as it's in my hand I feel a little better. Like I've fulfilled at least part of the craving that clawed at me all afternoon, from below the place where I know who I am or what drives me. I click the contacts icon: A... Angus. There he is. With his old number. The one he no longer uses because it's a UK mobile.

I hold the phone to my ear. I imagine it ringing and him answering. I feel sick and stupid for calling him. I haven't actually called him. I imagine we are talking, telling each other what happened today. Laughing before punch-lines are delivered because we can second-guess what they will be. The phone is him, in my hand.

I may never hear him again.

The phone drops on the rug and tears trail hot, again, to my jaw.

If I can't hear his voice I will drink. I'll sit here, forget dinner and drink till bedtime.

I can't. I know what that would lead to.

Opening the wine would end in me phoning his mum to ask for his new number and she would a) not give it, and b) phone him and tell him I asked for it.

My number is the same as it always was. My number used to be his number. And he hasn't phoned it since he left.

He is fine with this.

He has made a clean break.

*

I wake up. I am wearing my coat. I'm surrounded by photographs.

As I gather and neaten them into a pile I notice it's easier to look at them now. Why? Studying the uppermost image it's apparent that I am not the person I am looking at. Her static existence is not mine.

Angus, too, may not be the man I am holding onto.

Putting the photographs back in their box, I'm un-tempted by the items littering the bottom – birthday cards, Valentine's cards. Envelopes with my name, in his handwriting. Little packets of temporary truth.

I bury the box back inside the larger box in the cupboard, so there will be no evidence in the morning. The phone screen displays his name. I delete his redundant number and go to bed.

*

I get up. I go to work.

Passing an entire day there, I'm subjected to the ritual call-and-response of colleagues as they leave the office ('Cheerio' > 'See you tomorrow'). When I notice I'm the only person left I look at the clock and it's seven-forty-three. I won't cross the 8pm boundary so I turn off the computer, gather my stuff and decide to walk it. Perhaps I'll feel like being at home by the time I get there.

Not long into my stride, my phone rings. On the screen: Hilary calling. After a salutation she says, "It's the annual alumni dinner on Saturday. They sent me an email."

"Thanks, but it's a no."

"You don't know where it is yet."

"Who cares?" I am using the background traffic noise to my advantage.

"What?" she asks.

“I have plans already,” I tell her, semi-shouting. “An *alumnus* dinner at home. If you want to go husband-hunting, take Tania.”

“You just managed to get Tania and husband in the same sentence. Prize for the grumpy lady. Tania can’t go, she’s not a graduate. Just *come*. It’d be good for you, for us, to mingle.”

“New rule,” I say, loudly. “No parties till I stop yammering with the brittle zeal of the recently dumped. I see it in their eyes, ‘Who brought her?’”

Hilary peddles her usual angle. “You weren’t dumped.”

“As good as.”

I wait for the red man to turn green beside the twin exhausts of a motorbike.

“I can’t even hear what you’re saying,” she yells. “Phone me later.”

*

I get up. I speak to my cereal.

“Maybe it’s time. It has to be. I have to get used to doing things on my own.”

I go to work and manage small-talk at the kettle. At lunch time, I ping round the internet like a pin-ball finding out, ‘What’s on in Glasgow?’

*

The ‘musician’ wears baggy garb, topped off with a hard-hat. Not worn to deflect missiles sent towards the stage, it is an instrument. Tubing is glued to it which trails to her mouth (I conclude ‘she’ from something in the shape of her lips) and she blows through it to produce nothing like music.

Tightly surrounded by a set of objects found in any self-respecting back lane – bike wheels, bed frames, rusting white-

goods – she seems furious about this; hitting, scraping and banging them with the frenzy of someone on the wrong side of talented.

Metal strings connect some of the objects. She rubs the wires feverishly with flattened fingers and the audience is enthralled but I can't hear it. I just can't hear it.

Easing myself to the end of the row and then out, I wait for a bus while rain rushes at the vandal-proof glass in violent, percussive waves.

A short, shabby man teeters towards the bus-stop; hand resting on the open can nestled in his pocket. Not judging distance too well, he sits down next to me so our upper arms are touching through the bulk of our coats. I wait for his uninvited, incoherent ramble. The half-cut, half-arsed attempt at conversation he will make and I will be expected to invest myself in, in case he causes a scene or stabs me or something. Conversation that he will apologise for starting, “Sorry, hen, sorry to bother ye,” but will proceed with regardless. Conversation that will quickly move into the realms of the personal, “Yur a lovely lassie. So y’ur. Where’s yur husband the night, hen?” And I will have to shout my answers (because he is drunk and deaf) so passers by will hear me say, “I’M NOT MARRIED,” and he will reply, “Lovely lassie lik’ you? Courtin then, aye? Boyfriend, then.”

“I DON’T HAVE A BOYFRIEND.”

“Och. That’s no right. Come oot wi’ me, hen.” Does he honestly think? “See when ah wis younger? Quite a looker. So ah wis. Aye. Ah’ll take y’oot, hen. Up the dancin...” at which point he will get up and step from side-to-side, turn in methodical circles with his arms out, all the while smiling and carrying a pretty decent melody of a sixties song. And I will sneak off, leaving him to it.

But this is not what happens. Our upper bodies rest beside each other and I can smell his sour skin and breath but because

he doesn't say a word, doesn't even look at me, I don't feel the need to shuffle along. We sit in our silences. I contemplate what he might be contemplating and realise I have no idea. I start to like him for this; his courage to reject the coherent world and inhabit his own.

He sees a bus approaching and reels to his feet. Assuming that he wants to get on it, I face the rain to stick my arm out on his behalf. As the bus slows I hand him my day-pass to use for his fare, thinking, *I'll walk off some of the antsiness, then maybe I'll be able to go through my front door.*

*

Cradling a mug of tea, I scroll through a screen of 35 to 45-year-old males (who live within five miles of my postcode, have an 'about average' body type, work in an 'executive/management' occupation and 'no way' smoke). I pause at one. Continue scanning. Pause at another. My forefinger tendon twitches beneath the skin: if my laptop goes in for repair, will the shop-staff know which sites I've been on? I remind myself it's not porn – but being caught looking at porn would be slightly less humiliating.

Clicking the profile of LionRampant, I struggle to compute this realm of online romance. The last time I was in the market, occasional success depended on a blend of kismet, alcohol and making the effort (to get out the door, to look half decent). Now there's this strange internet shopping – with unwashed hair after a long day at work. No pheromones. No danger.

I read what he's written. Normal enough. Yet he hasn't met a woman at the pub, or a party. Do people not speak to each other anymore? I look at his photos again. *Would we hit it off, if we met?* I ask him. *Would I know how to function again, if I hooked up with you?*

I can't imagine knowing what to talk about with Lion-Rampant. I can only imagine knowing Angus so well that we didn't have to talk.

My eye-focus has drifted during the reverie and I'm aware of my face reflected on the darker areas of the screen. Drooping where it didn't used to, it is not a face to offer on a dating site.

The ramifications of the choice I made in July pitch up and bed-in for the night: I let him go at an age when no-one else will want me. I was reckless with my best years. I have nothing to show for them.

*

For several satisfying seconds, the blade hits a rhythm of back and forth. The adenoidal breaths of its serrated edge come in quick succession.

Then (due to the angle of my arm movement, or the grain of the wood) it catches. The sides of the cut hold fast around the slim metal but still I keep fighting with it, as though it's the teeth which have become embedded when I know it's something else entirely: some law of physics I have no patience for.

As always, it comes free again and obliges me: rasping back-forth-back-forth-back-forth.

It's only when I'm almost through the full diameter that I notice.

I am sawing the branch that I'm sitting on.

*

I get up, I go to work. I'm hit on the ear by scrunched-up paper.

The boss has left for her holiday ("Last chance of sun before another bloody Scottish winter") – and the others appear to be doing as little as possible.

A cheer goes up when I roll my seat over to join them.

One explains that I got in the way of the target. I look over to where I came in and there's a printed photo of the boss tacked to the door. "Ten points for her nose," he says.

A joy on Monday, by Wednesday, the inanity has back-fired to the point where I want to kill myself. At midday, I say that I'm taking a long lunch-hour, "...because I can, ha ha ha..." but actually because I need to do something, anything, with a point to it. What I have in mind is the shops: stocking up on toiletries and replacing the gloves I couldn't find when I looked for them. What occurs is a split-second decision to board a bus which comes to a halt as I'm passing its stop. *As long as I stay on it for less than half-an-hour, I can be back from wherever I am by one-thirty.* My luck is in; the traffic is light and after twenty-five minutes I disembark in a village that would have been quite isolated before the suburbs came out to greet it. There are a few shops up ahead. I wander towards them.

The woman behind the bakery counter is from the generation which considers it a female's duty to herself, and everyone else, to look as groomed as she is able before leaving the house (even if it's to serve sausage-rolls to pensioners and off-course office workers).

Observing her, I can only conclude that her generation is right. The care she has taken over setting her hair and tying her neckerchief extends to the way she has the Empire biscuits arranged; the way my sandwich is placed into its paper bag and the corners twisted with a dainty turn of manicured fingertips. She can touch nothing without nurturing it.

Handing over my money, I wish I'd made more of an effort this morning. "Is there somewhere nearby I can eat this?" I ask.

She thinks for a second. "There's a viewpoint behind the park," she replies. "Don't go into the park, mind. Go up the track at the back of the cottages. You'll see the signpost. It's a climb to the bench but the views go all the way to the

reservoir.” For the length of time she smiles at me, I forget to speak.

“Will you be warm enough?” she asks.

“Be fine,” I say, making a ‘tipping my cap’, ‘good day to you’ gesture with my sandwich bag. This excruciating display of masculinity bewilders me. I make myself leave though what I want to do is wait there till her shift is over, go home with her and live in her house.

At the bench I imagine how bakery-lady might sit and I do my best to emulate it. Gulls and crows are fussing in the distance, each group determined to claim a field as its own but neither getting to settle on the churned earth for more than a few seconds.

Watching the black-and-white rough-and-tumble, I stand to sweep crumbs from my coat then sit down again, wondering, *Does the bus go as far as that loch? Could I get off there another time?*

Edging in from around these musings comes the sense that something, somewhere, isn’t right. It accrues momentum. Things are not fine. But what isn’t fine? The feeling swells till it’s loosened my moorings. The sandwich is on the ground and I am bent forward in a gaping-mouthed, perfectly silent howl.

I can’t hold him. I don’t have him.

Spit trails from my lower lip.

All the things I’ve lost...

I don’t know how long I’m like that – seconds? Minutes? – before I manage a drink of water. Thank God no-one could see me. Thank God it happened here. It can happen anywhere; the acute, occasional human pain that stops your stride, robs your breath and sends you into the nearest alley, the nearest toilet, because you can’t cry in the street. Who in their right mind cries in the street?

*

At the base of the track sits the village war memorial, a chunky granite needle engraved with names. I quash the usual curiosity to see if my surname is among them; it's too high a risk that I'd see his and the heavily carved permanence of it is not an image I need to carry back.

Disco music builds inside my bag, signalling the life I have away from this place. The screen says, Tania. She's been in touch more regularly since I ceased to be a 'smug married' (her words).

When I open the phone there's scant chance to offer greeting.

"Thank God you answered. Where are you? Can you talk?"

Tania's grasp on the timetables of regular people is slight. She doesn't seem to need to work. It's assumed her parents or grandparents left a few bob; but none of us have been brazen enough to ask numbers. If someone at a party asks her what she does she answers "freelance" and excuses herself to the bar.

I tell her I'm on my lunch break and ask if she's okay.

"I need surgery."

"When, now? What?"

"It's shooting out my nose, Jill. Oh it's horrific."

"Put your head back."

"Not *blood*. God. If only. I found a hair. A bionic one. It's hanging right out my nose and I don—"

"And you think you need surgery?"

"To cut out the follicle or something, so it never grows back. And I'll need hormone pills too. I'm turning into a man. I must be."

She's turning into something... Let's see if I can coax her back.

"Tania, everyone gets a rebel hair now and again."

"I don't. I think I should get it checked."

"I wouldn't bother the doctor. *Really* wouldn't do that."

“What am I supposed to do?” she whines.

Get a job? Do a bit of voluntary work? “Set to it with nail scissors,” I suggest. Adding, “And don’t look at your big toes.”

Cruel, maybe, while she’s still in shock about her nostril but she’d have found out sooner or later.

*

On the journey back (me, three OAPs and a Chihuahua in a jacket) my conclusion is, *I am not taken seriously enough at work; they have lost respect for me.* Reflecting on when this might have happened, I can conjure no evidence that they ever had any. Not in two years of compiling their rotas, reconciling their wages, making good their customer service blips and not telling the boss when their call-times were out. If I stay any longer I’ll be in danger of a personal best.

My desk isn’t overlooked by anyone so I spend the afternoon updating my CV and surfing job websites because things can’t go on like this (> “It’s not fair on either of us.”).

*

I get up. I get to work at five to ten – within the bounds of flexi-time (just) but I’ve to get to the sixth floor, still, and put my computer on.

The lift doors close behind me and the guy who’s already inside says, “A’right?”

It’s a rhetorical question. An awkwardness-easer. He doesn’t need an answer. Doesn’t want an answer. Why do I feel compelled to answer?

If the lift hadn’t stopped on Level Three, if he hadn’t got out, I’d have told him.

“Yeah,” I’d have said, “all right. Though I woke up alone, again, to come to work, which has descended into a zoo this

week, with me as the performing seal. I know what you're going to say and, don't worry, I'm already looking. Where d'you work? Do they need a Section Manager? If I could just shake this pervasive malaise... everywhere I go, there it is. *Plus* I'm going to be logging-in late 'cause I was in my pyjamas for an hour googling a cervical procedure. My appointment card arrived. Colposcopy – heard of that? I'll spare you the details but I don't fancy it. At all. I didn't have time for breakfast in the end. I don't feel right without breakfast. So, yup, it's going all right, thanks for asking. You?"

*

Hilary and I laugh behind our hands like Japanese women, shielding each other from the food that may be lodged in our teeth. I'm telling her about the Facebook account the guys at work set up in the boss's name during her holiday – and the insulting (or plain insane) messages they sent to the old school buddies who 'friended' her.

"You should've seen the replies these people were sending back," I continue. "Outraged and full of personal stuff; what she's supposed to have done in the toilets in 1982."

"That's awful," says Hilary, frowning. "I wish I hadn't laughed. Is she married?"

"To a German Shepherd, in a humanist ceremony."

"Not her 'relationship status', Jill. Married in real life."

"...how can you marry a dog in a *humanist* ceremony?"

"Because I wouldn't like to be there when her bloke finds out."

"...unless they meant an actual German, who keeps sheep..."

Hilary claps her hands in front of my face.

"They've taken it down," I tell her.

She studies me for a second before reaching into her bag.

Bringing out her diary, she clicks a pen into 'ready' mode and hovers it over an open page. "Note to self," she dictates. "Email Jill's boss with details of Facebook prank. Suggest Jill is sacked."

"Me!"

"I can't believe you joined in with that," she says, laying the pen down (but not un-cocking it).

"I didn't know they'd done it! Until the replies started coming in and the hilarity went up a notch. You don't understand what it was like in there. I was tuning it out most of the week, trying to concentrate."

Hilary shakes her head in slow-motion. "Never lose your authority," she says. "If I taught you anything I thought it was that."

I raise my glass. "A toast to October half-term and Miss Marshall being out on a weeknight."

"And to you, Ms. Beech, for being single and free to come out anytime."

"Every cloud..."

*

I get up.

At work, I remember to block off a morning on my calendar for the colposcopy clinic. Try saying that when you're drunk. Whispering it to myself over and over as a tongue-twister, a text interrupts. Hilary's message says she wants to make the most of having no homework to mark and do I want to see a film this evening?

Top hole, I text. Shall we meet somewhere first?

At six o'clock, there she is, in a hangar-like bar close to the cinema. As I approach, she gets up from her seat and turns in a circle, drawing my attention to her shorter hair.

"Classy," I tell her. "Suits you."

“Spur of the moment,” she says. “I phoned up and there was a three o’clock cancellation. This new do is *destiny*.”

I pick up her empty glass. Buying two large wines at the bar, I remember what she said last night and sitting back down I ask, “Did I never come out midweek, when I had a bloke?”

“Made no difference to me,” she says. “I don’t go anywhere on school-nights.”

“Tania must have commented on it, then.”

Hilary’s expression doesn’t change.

“If I went straight home during the week,” I tell her, “it wasn’t to snuggle up with Angus.”

“Tania doesn’t understand six o’clock exhaustion,” Hilary says, which suggests she may have defended my corner when Tania was moaning.

“I looked forward to getting home,” I say, re-experiencing that congruent sensation between where the body wants to be and where the body is. “Now I take as long as I can to get there. And I can’t even cook a meal because serving it onto one plate makes me cry.”

“Still? After how many months?”

Two (and-three-quarters) but to say this would be evidence of counting. I’m supposed to be beyond the counting stage.

“If I can’t get used to being alone, maybe I’m not meant to be by myself,” I say, to appear solution-focused; less of a wallow-er. “I should meet someone else and then I’ll feel normal again.” I don’t mention that I got this idea from browsing a dating website.

“Do whatever you think you need to.” She’s not looking at me; she’s primping her hair in a metallic wall-panel by the table.

“But?” I offer, because there is one.

“But...” she concedes, “why would a man take you on, in such a fragile state? That wouldn’t be fair on someone who’s ready.”

“What does that mean, *ready*? I hate being alone therefore

I'm ready for a boyfriend."

Hilary draws away from her reflection. "It's because you hate being alone that you're *not* ready for a relationship."

"I hope you don't teach this to impressionable children."

"I think it makes perfect sense."

"What? That if I'm a couple-y person, who feels happiest with a boyfriend, I've got to transform into the kind of person who is happier with my own company and that's how I become ready for pairing-up again? Plus, if I went to all the trouble of becoming an ecstatic loner, why would I bother getting into a relationship at all?"

"It's the conundrum at the heart of romantic love."

"Or you're drunk."

"On a Wednesday! Praaaaise Jeeesus."

"The conundrum at the heart of love," I say, "is that losing it is harder than grieving a dead person." She can scoff at this, too, if she wants but I will say it. "When someone dies, there's no ambiguity. You can't talk to them ever again and you have to accept that they're gone. The person I want to speak to is still alive, but I'm not allowed to make contact. I have to *act* like he's dead when he's not. The pain of that, at times, is indescribable."

"You only think you want to speak to him," Hilary says.

"Ease off, teach'."

"Jill, if I'd realised you were still at the ugly-mess stage I'd have intervened sooner. The pain you're playing with is heady stuff. As addictive as love, in fact. You have to nip it in the bud." Her Rioja-fuelled fist presses on the table, annihilating the 'bud'. "You want to speak to Angus again. Explain to me – what purpose would that serve?"

"We might get back together and I could stay at home on weeknights, not be out getting abuse from a drunk school-ma'am."

She emits a whoop-screech, leans across in a fumbled hug

and carries on. “You got into the *habit* of existing as a couple; of having him around. But that twosome habit will fade.”

“How long are we talking?”

“There’s no set length of time. You haven’t been single for what, a decade? It’ll take as long as it takes.”

“I need figures.”

“Welcome to my world. Sometimes you exist as a solo operator, sometimes as an ‘other half’. You need to learn to move between the two, to survive.”

“If you’re suggesting I could be single for years, Hilary, I don’t have years. I’m already past the beeps; I’m on the long continuous tone before the burglar alarm goes off. I need to shut the front door.” This bamboozles her. I will clarify. It’s worth saying. “You know what I realised this week – and I can’t believe I never thought of it *before* waving Angus off to Canada – I realised that any guy my age wanting a family has no interest in starting to date me, at 34, then trying for a family at 36 or 37. And what’s more, an older guy would go for a proper ‘younger woman’. A pert one. I am already surplus to requirements and you’re suggesting I wait however long it takes to be *ready*?”

Hilary doesn’t have a response to this. I thought it was quite revelatory, myself. After a substantial sip of her drink, she speaks. “Tactful as ever. We’re the same age.”

And both single.

“That’s true,” I say, “that *is* true. But *you’re* ready. That’s the difference. If you meet a nice guy tomorrow, you can get on with it. Plus you’ve been eating dinner every night since July. You’re more fertile than I am. You, Hilary, have the eggs of a 22 year-old. You’d get pregnant from a blow-job.”

*

I get up. At work an email arrives mid-morning thanking me for my application and inviting me to interview, ‘details attached’.

A dragging feeling accompanies it, *What did I go and do that for?*

I remember the energy it takes to change jobs: write handover lists of what I do and how I do it; say goodbye; say hello; learn where the stationery is kept and the procedure for ‘non-standard item’ requests; sit through the induction training, equalities training, health and safety training, IT training; learn what your predecessor called his/her file names and how far along he/she was with certain projects; and have no clue, for the first few months, how the photocopier works or who you are talking to.

I search for my saved application form, to remind myself what I would be interviewing for. This one... is... an Office-and-Projects Manager with... a small firm of business-stroke-management consultants, which has... opened a second office, in Edinburgh. My role would be in the Glasgow office, to relieve the Director of HR tasks and other day-to-day stuff plus oversee the scheduling of concurrent projects. And... it’s a new post.

No predecessor, no pre-existing files and no spreadsheets with illogical column headings. For this reason alone, I block off my calendar under the heading ‘flexi-time take-back’ and accept the invitation.

TWO

The woman behind the desk extracts my file from the day's stack. She opens it and scans a finger down the first page. "Is your GP still Doctor Gillespie?"

"Yes."

"Address still Heron Crescent?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. Take a seat till the nurse calls you through."

I'd been looking into her eyes, to gauge the gravity of the situation, but she could have been behind a supermarket checkout. Is this serious or not?

The L-shaped waiting area of the colposcopy clinic is as close to a B&B patrons' lounge as an NHS budget will allow. Why the special treatment; because they're softening us for bad news or because women need 'nice' waiting areas? I'm glad of the broad, padded seats. My legs are wound round each other.

In my world, routine smear tests had routinely clear results, until the letter which said I was being referred to the colposcopy clinic (the *what?*) to assess the degree of cell abnormality on my cervix and, in the meantime, I was to read the enclosed pink leaflet (is men's bad news explained in a blue leaflet?).

The appointment letter suggested that I wear a skirt and I bring someone with me. Almost a wedding invitation.

Who would I share this morning-off with? Besides, I'm only here for a biopsy: a pin-head cell sample. Not for treatment: there might be nothing worth treating. I did read the leaflet. By definition, I suppose 'pre-cancerous' cells could *become* cancerous, but it's a misleading term, implying an inevitable connection and according to the internet, there isn't one. Cervical abnormality progressing to cancer is rare. One dodgy smear result is exactly that.

The stresses of the past few months aren't the norm. Nor have I been eating proper dinners. Now my body has responded to the hiccup, which confirms what Hilary was saying – it's time to get a grip of the grief. Time to take better care of myself.

A nurse appears from behind a pastel-patterned curtain. "Jillian Beech?" she smiles to the room. I pick up my bag and follow her through to what looks like a second waiting room. Mother of *God*, the interminable suspense. She guides me to a cubicle and says, "If you'd like to take off your underwear in here. Not the skirt. When you're all sorted, have a seat. I'll come back for you." The metallic curtain rings slice cleanly across the rail.

To take off my underwear, I first want to remove my winter boots but she didn't say anything about taking off footwear. Where's the wall-chart showing the correct way to disrobe for a vaginal probing? Can I have my feet in the stirrups in a pair of knee-high, leather boots? Reeks of porn. The boots come off.

I take a seat, again. Cellulite assaults me from a tatty magazine cover with an invitation to guess which celebrity it belongs to. My lower leg mimics a pneumatic drill. I tell it to stop. I glance sideways at the other women. There's a respectful two-seat distance between each of us. How can they read that crap? How can they read full stop? I try to work out why they've ended up here; *Do you smoke? Because I don't. Had more than a dozen sexual partners? Because I haven't. Eat nothing but junk food? Not me, love.*

The nurse returns. I walk behind her over the linoleum floor in my socks: no pants on under my skirt. Like I'm five and I've wet myself in the classroom.

*

We enter a small room cluttered with a treatment table, a storage bench, a consulting table and a consultant. Doctor Carr stands to introduce herself. ‘Former hockey captain’ is suggested by her sensible hair; her breeze-block boobs and bottom. She’s dressed in green walking trousers and a pink polo shirt with its collar raised at the rear. A feminine touch? Or the public-school affectation? This is her golfing outfit, I surmise, during our seated conversation where she asks what I am doing later and reciprocates by saying she is playing golf; that she only works mornings. *Well isn’t that nice*, I think. The advantages of earning seventy grand a year, pro-rata. The advantages of making good choices at the age of 16. Burning, cutting and scraping cervixes before lunch; striding fairways in the afternoon.

“A routine visit today,” she says, readying herself to stand. “As you know already, your smear test showed signs of atypical cells which has resulted in us needing to take a closer look. Thousands of biopsies are performed every year, so, not something you need to worry about.”

Nor you, I imagine. Cervical abnormalities only arise in women who’ve had sex.

“A simple procedure,” – she is standing now; should I stand? – “to obtain a sample of tissue about the size of a sesame seed from the cervical surface. Most people don’t feel a thing.”

The nurse takes over. As instructed, I leave my things on the chair and walk between the stirrups of the treatment table. I turn and lie against its half-upright back. With my legs parted on the elevated rests, she tells me to wheech my bum down to the edge of the table. This pushes my skirt up around my hips, where it needs to be. She places a sheet of rough paper across my pelvis. A thin attempt to protect my modesty, my bits are now visible to anyone in the room except me. Do some women find the sight of themselves offensive? Maybe

it's seeing someone else fiddling around down there that's traumatic.

The nurse is standing by the table in silence. I know she would smile at me if I looked at her. I look up at the line where the wall joins the ceiling.

Dr. Carr starts asking about my job. This is not the hairdresser's. I need to concentrate; to follow what she is doing; to be ready for when it will hurt.

A speculum with curved blades slathered in lubricant disappears under the paper and finds its greasy way in. Its mechanism is adjusted and my vaginal canal is held wide.

A white metal head off to the side cranes its hinged neck and the black circle of its single eye is aligned with my fanny. Dr. Carr looks down binocular-style eyepieces on the rear of the box.

Because I haven't answered her question (I didn't even realise), she starts telling me about *her* job. Not in general, but moment-to-moment. "You won't feel this, but you might smell it." I can't see what her hands are doing below the shelf of paper.

"Recognise the smell?" she asks. "That's right, vinegar. Sometimes you don't need anything more hi-tech than what's in the larder. Though here we call it acetic acid," she says this by spelling out each syllable. Well, why wouldn't she? People who didn't get five As in their Highers have limited mental capacity.

What's going on inside me? I can't feel it properly. I don't want to be here. I want to ask her to stop. I want a healthy cervix. I want Angus holding my hand. I want an easy life. I want my old life. I get the message. I messed up. I lost sight of things that matter. If we could make this stop now, I will pay attention. I will be grateful for everything I have and not squander it ever again. I should have nipped it in the bud. Instead I let it get to this.

My incapacity, my inability to bolt, my ignorance relative to the two women running the show, are about to send me into meltdown. I can't cry here. Keep. It. Together. Keep. It. Together.

“The properties of the vinegar react with any abnormal cells and make them more visible,” she is saying. “Cough,” she instructs.

I'm expected to participate?

After the cough, she places the sliver of cells in a sterile container and the speculum is unclipped and retracted with a light suction sound. She drops her rubber gloves into a bucket, saying, “There can be a little spotting, from the biopsy site, so I popped in a tampon.”

I look at her through my spread legs. I have a tampon inside? That you put there, without asking? You didn't check with *me*? You presumptuous, Thatcher-ish, doctor-knows-best, once-a-head-girl-always-a-head-girl, bossy-boots. I may be less qualified but I know my body better and I decide, me, I do, if it receives a tampon or it doesn't. I happen to hate tampons. The dry-boak sensation when the lumpen stodge of it slugs its way out with blind tugs on a blue string. Ugh. Don't exert that all-girls-together crap with me.

“The tissue sample will go to the lab,” she says, diligent about eye-contact, “and the results will be posted to you, in about two weeks.”

When she finally moves the colposcope out the way, and moves her brick-stack body towards the door, there is room for me to repossess my legs and stand up.

The nurse invites me to get ‘sorted out’ but I will not struggle in a corner to pull on pants, socks and boots. I go straight to the toilet, in the waiting area, sit down, catch the blue string and drag the fibrous bullet along my vaginal walls.

Wretch.

With my sleeve pulled down over my thumb, I wipe a tear

which trickled into the crevice of my ear. I let my hand linger longer than it needs to because I can't access the part of me that really needs comforting.

*

Tania doesn't answer her phone when I call it from my sofa at seven o'clock. She does answer it when I call her again at seven-thirty. I tell her I need a pick-me-up. I suggest the pub at eight.

"Can't. Sorry."

I wait a second in case there's any more in that sentence. "Plans already?" I ask.

"Mm, sorry."

A personal life she doesn't need or want to talk about – the joy of being Tania.

*

I get up. I get on a bus. I try not to let a single particle of my coat touch the damp-day-plus-bus-heater sweat on the window. The traffic is light; I remember it's still the October half-term.

I text Hilary: You are still sleeping, lucky lady.

I text Tania: Who are you sleeping with, lucky lady?

Then, to use up journey time, I delete messages from my 'sent' box. The phone beeps in my hand.

Hilary: No I am not. I went to bed early cos was still hung-over at 9pm.

I reply: Ah, sensai. So wise... yet so mortal...

Hilary: I could hardly swallow my dinner last night, thinking of you crying into your single serving. Fancy a decent meal after work?

- No thanks. Am now wildly happy with own company. Don't need relationships.

- How about meaningless sex?
- Thought u'd never ask...
- Tart. It's Friday – wanna go dancing? The men of Glasgow await.
- Who could resist those specimens?
- Woo! That's the spirit! Call me when you finish work 😊

I put my phone away to prepare for my stop. There's a gash in the window condensation. I feel violated.

*

Four of us sit round the table of a staff kitchen (“Sorry, the shared meeting room was already booked.”).

I was welcomed, my hand was shaken and so far, only one person is doing any talking. “Many, many people, Jill, told me to change it *but* you don't get anywhere in this life doing what people tell you to. Otis kept sittin' on the dock of the bay and I kept the name. You need to stand out in business – maximise every asset. It's what I tell my clients. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't take my own advice. And you can't be a hypocrite, in business. Integrity is paramount.” My application form has crumpled in his tightened fist.

“You clearly have enduring interest in commerce,” he continues. “A degree in Business Studies from Strathclyde. Not an honours degree, I notice, but experience counts for more in this game, eh? Theory is all very well for, for, a *physics* guy, but business-people operate on instinct and street smarts. Am I right?”

I remember to eyeball all three of them during my reply. “When I was at university, an honours year wasn't considered essential.” *Especially by those who had no interest left in their subject.* “It was more for those who wanted to specialise and, as you say, I was ready to put what I'd learned into practice.” *And take a year-out before it was too late.*

“Yes,” he says, gesturing towards my form. “I see you volunteered in South America. Canny. Business is international. We ignore other economies to our detriment. Muffin Management may be Glasgow-based but we’re outward-looking. If someone from Bolivia phoned looking for business advice we’d offer it, same as if they were in Blantyre, eh guys?”

“Si,” says the other bloke, under his breath. The woman forces a deep inhale through her nostrils. “Can you tell us about your time there?” she manages to ask.

“Yes, it was a sustainability initiative. Creating capacity within the local community for a viable enterprise trading cocoa with Western companies. I’d spent the previous six months in Ibiza... learning Spanish, so I was able to offer basic translation and research skills. The project is still going. The people involved are training other communities to do the same. It’s amazing what they’ve achieved.”

The other man on the panel lists the ‘range of industries’ I’ve worked in, including recruitment, local government, telecommunications – *all right, all right* – and asks why I’ve never focused on one sector.

“That’s my priority now,” I tell him. “In this position, I could return to the fundamentals of business-practice in a company which combines expertise with good old-fashioned nous.” I look at Donald Muffin. “Helping other businesses in their times of need – I know how good that feels.”

“What is it about your current role that you’re not happy with?” asks the woman. At last, a question I can answer truthfully.

“As a smallish firm, specialising in teleconferencing, the company has, in my view, a top-heavy management structure. So in practice, the Section Manager role lacks challenge. I have re-organised the shift system, streamlined procedures for international conference calls and resolved some tricky demands from the pharmaceuticals, our bread-and-butter, but

I see a role in your business consultancy as more suited to my ability.”

The boss responds, “I don’t think ‘top-heavy’ is a criticism that could be levelled at Muffin. There’s me, as Director, two business consultants in Glasgow, two in Edinburgh plus one senior consultant. The Office-and-Projects Manager is a new position, Jill, at a time of expansion. The role is there to be defined. It might not be client-facing but doing the job well would mean we could do ours better. And that shows.”

“Have you got any questions at this point?” asks the other guy.

“No, you’ve given me a lot of helpful information already.”

“Well, there’s one last thing,” says Donald. “Go with me on this...”

Oh not one of *those* questions. What’s my favourite animal and why? I haven’t prepared anything. What’s the last film I saw?

“If you were shipwrecked, Jill, who would you rather be stranded with; the chairman of the CBI or George Clooney?”

Does it matter, seeing as I can’t populate an island with either of them? My equipment is too old for George and too similar to the CBI president’s – she was pictured in the Metro today.

“I’m nothing if not a pragmatist, Donald – may I call you Donald? I’ll have to say George Clooney, as he’s the one most likely to trigger an international rescue effort.”

This elicits the charmed guffaw I hoped it would.

*

We’ve eaten two courses each in a jumping pub.

“I hope I wasn’t too harsh with you the other night,” Hilary is saying. “It’s difficult being alone. Nine years is a long time. But I meant what I said about not overdoing the doldrums.

You were the one who gave him up, remember?”

“That’s debatable, *remember?*”

“I think,” she continues, “your boyfriend leaving the country has been such a shock because there’s nothing sustaining you in his absence. If you had more going on in your life, that meant something. If you liked your job—”

“I had an interview today actually, so—”

“Your usual, is it? Jill’s bi-annual job change.”

“Leave me alone! You sound like my brother.”

She is glancing at the Italian biscuit on the edge of my saucer. If she wants it she should just ask. Keen to change the subject, I say, “I’m worried about the vagina.”

“Excuse me? What’s wrong with your vagina?”

I don’t know yet, I’ll find out in a week or so.

“Nothing,” I say, “except maybe under-use. I’m worried about *the* vagina.”

“I’m worried about you,” says Hilary.

I continue, “It occurred to me yesterday that even in this day and age there is a campaign against the vagina and women are colluding in it.”

“What happened yesterday?”

What *did* happen? I still can’t revisit the clinic memory.

“Erin’s sister had her baby,” I tell her, “by Ce—”

“Oh lovely! What did she have?”

“A boy. Girl. I don’t know, anyway, she had it by Caesarean. What is the obsession with Caesarean deliveries if not a mass by-pass of the vagina?” I am slouched over with sadness for all the undervalued, forsaken birth canals.

Hilary is systematically gathering the crumbs of her Italian biscuit onto the pad of her finger. Licking her fingertip, she says, “Erin’s sister met her husband online. Maybe I should try that.”

“Which site?” I sit up. But then I remember we’re off-topic. “Women’s anatomy is not superfluous to the birthing

process,” I say, leaning on my elbows.

“You actually look depressed about this,” she says, her forearms outstretched, fingers resting beside my biscuit.

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

“I never thought about it. In fact, if anything, I thought Caesareans were a means to preserve the vag.. do we have to keep saying that word? You know, preserve the pelvic floor muscles, tautness, pleasure.”

“Yeah, men’s pleasure.”

“Oh here you go. Getting into one of your moods.”

Why is her cleavage on display? Why has she come to meet *me* for dinner showing full cleavage? “I get upset about something I have a right to be upset about and it’s ‘one of my moods’! You sound like a man!”

“No, *you* sound like a man, after one pint too many with a bit between his teeth over something that he won’t care about in the morning.”

She’s right. “I do, don’t I? It’s still true though.”

“Okay then, let’s do something about it. I know,” she says, drawing up to full height and raising a fist in the air, “Vagina Day! There must be a day in the year that’s free – between Hug-an-eejit Day and Try-tripe Day. We could have t-shirts printed. I could hand them out to my Primary Fives.”

I’m laughing but at the same time I’m thinking Vagina Day is not a bad idea. I keep talking to distract myself from this. “Everything is still skewed in favour of men.”

“May I?” Hilary asks, as her fingers sweep the biscuit from my saucer to her waiting mouth. Crunching, she continues, “But look at us. Two women – in a pub, no less – eaten our dinner with no chaperone. What more do you want?”

If she’d started this conversation, I’d have done the same as her. This is what we do; take it in turns to be the riled and the flippant.

“Look at magazines, look at advertising,” I add. I have to

shake the contents from this piggybank, now that I've begun, or it'll be the next person I meet who gets it. "And don't even get me started on TV dramas – there's only one storyline: woman gets raped, woman gets murdered, or woman gets raped *then* murdered."

"Isn't that three storylines?"

"We're pitted against each other on the basis of how good we look, how desirable we are to men, and while we're distracted by this, they run away with the pay packets, the promotions and the political agenda."

"I'm not giving you the response you want, am I?" she says. "Get yourself along to Glasgow Women's Library."

I can't think of anything less appealing. "Just 'cause I can spot the problems, do I have to be the one to fix them all?"

"What you need," Hilary says, winking, "is a good night out." She lifts her chunky scarf off the back of the chair and gives me a look that says, "Ready?"

*

Hilary's gone to the loo. I sit facing the dance floor, stabbing my straw through the stack of ice in my glass with semi-hypnotic determination. I look around at people I don't know and make assumptions about them. What else is there to do?

There's the square kid at school who turned trendy late in life. Looking like a Topman mannequin come alive, the clothes have borrowed his body for the evening. But with his jeans one half inch above the trainer tops, he's clearly good-husband-material masquerading as bad-boy. What I would give for some good-husband-material; many contented years with a man who pulls his fair share of the weight. Once I got to know the guy better I'd have to say something though, or maybe drop a hint. Like the wife who brings home a beautiful negligee for her closet transvestite (showing him that she knows and she's

okay with it), I'd buy my awkwardly trendy good-husband a golfing v-neck and slacks and let him relax into the person he was born to be. Maybe I'd make the M&S conversion myself: aging while pretending not to look like a load of hard work.

Ooooh! Ooooh! This song! My song! Where's Hilary? She's just coming back through the archway. I trot towards her, moving my arms like I'm already dancing to indicate that's what we'll be doing now. She smiles, walking and wiggling her arms around too. Yay! She wants to dance! It takes my body parts a minute or so to find their rhythmical assemblance but we get there, turning, arms above the head, feet planted hips moving, feet moving mouth shaping the lyrics. Smiles! And now we are three. A short, Mediterranean-looking man has joined us, stepping from side-to-side, smiling, nodding, "Yes yes?" says his facial expression. "No no," we respond, silently; turning slightly, trying to mask our enjoyment, tone it down, attract less attention, pretend we are lost in the music, interested in nothing else, especially not him. The transaction takes mere seconds and he's woven himself back into the general mass.

You always hope for two good songs in a row and that's what we get. Hilary and I make eye contact to check we both want to keep dancing. We do! The music has jumped two decades but not my dancing. Hands slightly elevated and out to the sides, mouth open, face to the ceiling, torso pulsing. Smiles. Oh hello. The return of the little interloper. Bless you for not being northern. Bless you for showing what you want and believing you can have it. But look at me – I'm so carried away by the music that my eyes are closing and my legs are turning me round, away, away. I'd happily chat some other time, somewhere else. Tonight is not about effortful small-talk in an onslaught of music. Tonight is unfettered.

"Drink?" I mime to Hilary, and we go together to the bar. I feel we should get priority service over this row of nineteen-

year-olds. “Move aside, sonny,” I say, to an insouciant youth who fails to make room, “might be the last night out we ever have...” It’s not that funny but Hilary and I laugh like bastards. Clubbing at this age – best time for it. Okay, gone is the turbo charged anticipation for the night ahead, and self-defining significance of the night as it’s happening, but also gone is the deep doubt about the wrong outfit or whether the guy you snogged last time will acknowledge you.

We take our drinks and stand at the railings of the two-tiered club.

“What about him?” Hilary says, pointing to a crowd of about two hundred dancers. “Left side, three pillars down. See the red t-shirt? Yellow logo, skinny jeans.”

I can barely be bothered to follow her directions but I pick him out. “He’s a mere boy,” I say.

“He’s lovely though. Look at the hair falling over one eye thing. It’s gorgeous.”

“Okay, he’s gorgeous. But does he have anything new to say? Can he spend more than a fiver on a bottle of wine?” What’s making me crotchety? “Yeah, not bad,” I contribute, “but what about him?”

As I extend my arm sideways to point, I strike a young woman approaching the railing. She’s heavy on the make-up and hair streaks. I start apologising as soon as I get my mouth in gear. “Sorry, sorry,” I say, crinkling my face to show how unintentional the blow was. Then we hang there between my apology and her response. She grips the hand-rail and barks through her teeth, “Fucksake, wantin’ to start somethin’?” Of course not. It was an accident. But she’s being such an arse I think maybe she deserved it. Sensing I might continue a dialogue with this bacchante, Hilary steps in. “Sorry. She didn’t see you coming. Really, really sorry.”

It seems all the woman wanted was more pandering to her pride because she turns and moves away with her posse,

albeit slowly: the eight-inch stilettos have them shunting along like zombies.

After downing my vodka, I ask, “Were we nearly in a fight?”

“Well, you were.”

“We can’t go to the toilets again, she might jump us.”

“Fine by me, we can use the men’s.”

Diffusion with humour. I’m starting to relax when a large figure in a black, puffy jacket emerges from the throng, walkie-talkie in hand. “Had a report of harassment. Know anything about it?” he asks us.

“Yes, we were just harassed by a woman and her pals,” I answer, helpfully.

“The way she tells it, you punched her. Unprovoked attack.”

“Punched? It was an accident. I stuck my arm out and didn’t see her. I said sor—” Trying to hear and be heard over the music is wearing me out. I turn to Hilary to let her know she’s welcome to take over. It’s not like her to be so quiet. She looks self-conscious. Guilty even. What have we got to feel guilty about? Why is she blushing?

*

I get up. I leave for work. I meet the postie in the stairwell.

“One today,” he says, holding out a brown envelope with a window.

I see part of an NHS insignia sitting above my Sunday name. In the subway station, I take myself to the quieter end of the platform to open it.

[...] the recent biopsy taken from your cervix has shown an area of abnormal cells, also called cervical dysplasia, graded as CIN 2. A full explanation of this and the treatments which could be used, are given in the enclosed leaflet. Please telephone the

clinic to confirm the following appointment [...]

I enter a state of contained panic – an anxious hum rising to a buzz; bluebottle in jar.

The pink leaflet is the same as last time. Except last time it didn't apply to me. They weren't going to find anything. It feels as though each treatment it describes is occurring as I read about it.

If it's a case of having the lady golfer cut me with an electrified metal loop, burn me with a below-freezing probe, or doing my own research; I'll do my own research, thanks.