

Goodnight Miss Sam

My story is set in the future.

I don't mean it's science fiction. It's not a technological future, a future civilisation; it's not a future time in that sense at all. It simply hasn't happened yet. It's the ordinary future – my future. It's a story about what's *going* to happen, instead of about what's happened.

I shan't even bother with background. I'm not going to fill you in on who's who, not even who I am. Except as things occur to me in the story – in the future where the story will happen – I'm not going to tell you anything about myself. You might almost assume I don't know anything about myself myself.

We all start from there really don't we. I mean, we all wait where we are for what's going to happen to happen. Somehow picturing it ...

We lie thinking, daydreaming, rehearsing what's going to happen to us, what we're going to do or what we're going to say. Or what we're going to be.

That's where I am. I'm lying on my back in the dark, listening to the rain and going over my future. We all do it, we all think we can picture our futures. And this is mine.

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One morning Moyser will come in and tell me, in his usual smug way, that a little bird's told him Maunder's going to Panelco. You know what that means? he'll say, knowingly.

I'll nod my head and try to think of something witty; but I'll barely have started saying Panelco's lunches are better – when he'll say It's you or me darling.

I give him his gs free of charge – I don't think Moyser will ever say a final g in his life. It's you or me darling, he'll say again, lodging his thigh on my desk. What'll you give me to flunk it and let you in?

I'll be torn between righteous indignation at the idea that I can't get promoted on my own merits – which is part of his purpose of course, to ruffle me – and righteous indignation at knowing very well what it is he wants me to give him. Sod off, I ought probably to say; but knowing me I'll probably say I've a spare pencil-sharpener you can have.

There you are you see – one of those moments when little things about me occur to me. Even in the future, I’m assuming, I’ll not have grown out of using not-very-witty witticisms as a defence mechanism. Misguided, I know – when they pop out they’re never as funny as you thought they were going to be. As the actress said to the bishop.

I shouldn’t say pencil-sharpener anyway, it plays right into his hands. But it’s too late.

Sharpening my pencil’s pretty much spot-on tinkabell. He leans across the desk and sways over me, near enough for his spit to drizzle on my face as he speaks. But I shall want *you* to do it – he lowers his voice – with your own fairy hands. I shall want you to guide it into the tight little hole with your excited fingers, and when the lead’s in firm I shall want you—

I’ve had enough of it by now, obviously, and time enough to think of a witty escape. Good morning Mr Haddington, I say loud and chirpily across his shoulder.

He leaps to attention, quickly improvising something about That seems fine Sam, I’ll leave it to your—

Then he realises Mr Haddington isn’t there.

I might just amaze you and get it all by my tight little self, I say. Thanks for the offer. And I carry on with my e-mails.

I just want rid of your bony arse upstairs so they can put something worth looking at in this office, he says. Something with curves. And he skulks back to his own desk.

Funny how someone can love you and hate you, all in the space of a few sentences. Though I suppose love doesn’t enter into it with Moyser. I wouldn’t swap spit with the slimeball if it did, but at least I’d understand where he was coming from. For I’ve loved Maunder – by this future time I speak of, though I’m sure we haven’t met yet – ever since we met.

Not the formal meeting, the This is Maunder from Sales Division Frimley who’s stepping into Austin’s shoes at short notice, and we politely shake hands. And I look down at his shiny shoes.

I mean the meeting on the stairs when he’s taking off his bicycle clips as he bounds up, and bumps into me – quite gently really. And steadies me by briefly gripping my waist, as if I were a wobbly hat-stand. And then apologises so nicely. Late first day of new posting, he pants. And to make matters worse, I knock a secretary down the stairs.

No harm done, I say, of course. And then in a flash of inspiration: You can get a replacement secretary at two hours notice.

Not such a lovely one, I'm sure, he says, without time even to have thought of it.

Not such a lovely one, I'm sure. And bounds on his way.

Not such a lovely one ... I don't fall down the rest of the stairs – I glide. And before I reach the bottom I *have* fallen, helplessly.

Not such a lovely one. I sit on the toilet analysing it. Not such a lovely one, *I'm sure*. By the time my alarm goes off next morning he's said it a thousand times, in a thousand subtly different ways.

Of course he'll have been apologetic later, having learned I'm Senior Promotions Manager, his number two. You'll have me down as a chauvenist and I'm not, he says, after Mr Haddington has left us to chat. Don't hate and misjudge me at first sight, will you. It's just – at Frimley there aren't any girls at all, women rather, except secretaries. Oh and dinner-ladies, I mean canteen staff.

On reflection I'm not sure he knows the difference – between women and canteen staff I mean. He probably needs some friendly tuition, I think, naughtily. He probably needs a refresher course. And pudding.

He looks far too much like Patrick Mower to be replacing old Austin. But hate him at first sight is not what I'll have done – though I may possibly have misjudged him.

I don't believe it, actually. What Moyser says about him leaving, five months on. I tell myself all morning it's just a rumour, or one of Moyser's ploys. He *is* a salesman, after all; and it wouldn't be the first fib he's told about Maunder.

Arguably Not such a lovely one, I'm sure, may not have been a declaration of love at first collision – but I refuse to believe this smut he peddles about Maunder and Marsh. It's his last line of defence, Moyser's I mean, to shove him in Marsh's camp. So to speak.

But then in the afternoon meeting it's tabled: Sorry to hear we'll be losing you so soon Patrick, but of course I'm sure the whole committee joins me in wishing you well. We all nod stupidly.

That Panelco's had to head hunt from us for one of their top European posts is some consolation, Mr Haddington continues. We'll have to go hunting ourselves, now, to fill your shoes. It's meaningless jocular flattery of course; but it makes Moyser look cocky and me look down at my flipflops and feel ruled-out.

When the meeting finishes I go straight to the toilet and sit there feeling ill and sobbing. I'm there so long Dorrington from accounts comes in looking for me. I pretend to be down with the monthlies. Not like you, she says in her cheery, matronly way. You must have caught it from my girls. They have it like clockwork, three days off a month, all of them in rotation. We laugh.

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So – I have a month, I'll tell myself. A month to win his attention. A month to transform myself from a lovely secretary to a beautiful executive. A month to turn his impeccable niceness into desperate attraction. A month to make him stop being so blinking polite and start wanting to tear my pants off. And marry me.

But that won't be the start of my stupidity – thinking these stupid things. You can guess how much headway I'll already have made, in the five months since falling down those stupid stairs. As much as not very, I expect, knowing me.

Like the time I'll have tried to sit with him in the canteen – a catalogue of stupid. Anyone sitting here? I'll probably have said as I put my tray down. I should just say Hi Patrick, but I'm always trying to be witty. And coming up with Anyone sitting here.

Time you learned how to masticate with the opposite sex (no, perhaps not that). Room for a skinny one? Probably. Gosh this place is crowded, 'fraid I'll have to squeeze on to your table. Yes, I like that one (the canteen's always nearly deserted). But I don't imagine I'll have thought of anything better than Anyone sitting here.

Peter Marsh will be joining me. We have to thrash out the Western Plumbing thing that Ostrich left in such a mess.

I'll have sat down by the time he's said it, of course, and won't be sure what to do. I'll look around. No sign of him yet, I'll say emptily.

He'll be along in a minute.

I'll have taken a mouth-full of my chilli by then. I'll move if you like, I'll say. Oh thanks Sam, that's good of you. We'll have a drink, sometime.

I look at him. He's not looking at me at all. I look down at my tray, so hurt I could throw it at him. It'll have been more a dot-dot-dot than a comma, between the drink and the sometime – as if he doesn't really mean it, or doesn't really want to, or doesn't remotely intend to. Or doesn't give a hamster's bum.

I put my fork down rather sharply, making a louder sound than I intend; and get up and move to the next table. I sit looking at my tray. Then I get up and move to the far side of the room.

The food's dreadful. I only have the chilli because it's hot enough not to notice how horrible it tastes. It tastes particularly unnoticeable that day, somehow.

Marsh never turns up. I sit it out. Tempted as I am to gobble and run, or leave it and run to the loo – and pretend I've got canteen belly when Dorrington from accounts comes looking. My girls have that, she might say. It's the one excuse I believe, food's so dreadful. We laugh.

But I don't, I sit it out. He never turns up.

Eventually there's me, playing with the last soggy pastry from the revoltingly runny custard tart; Maunder, seemingly absorbed in papers while finishing his second cup of coffee, two sugars; and that pale young chap Mandy fancies, I think he's in the drawing office.

I'm certain he knows I've been watching him out of the corner of my eye, Maunder I mean. He obviously knows I know Marsh didn't come. He obviously knows I know he knows I know. Finally he gets up. In fact they both get up at the same moment. I bow my head towards my worried piece of pastry, and tense up.

Sure enough, footsteps divide across the room, one set coming manfully towards me, right up to the table. The other chair is drawn out. He sits down. I finally deign to look up – it's the young chap from the drawing office.

I had the meringue, he says: it's indistinguishable from the custard. I force a brief laugh, no more than a nose laugh. Do you mind me saying hello? I ... I've been wanting to say hi. I've seen you around, obviously, and ... well I just ...

His resolve wilts slightly, so I smile. Strike me pink if it doesn't work.

I notice you're often with Mr Moyser. Do you mind me asking? Are you and he ... It's such a liberty, me asking I mean. But is he ...?

I'm probably already shaking my head, too surprised to do otherwise. I'm being chatted up by an apprentice.

He's Assistant Sales and I'm Senior Promotions. We share an office, I'm saddled with him. I shrug.

You're his boss then. He sounds surprised. He sounds impressed.

That's not the way we play it. We both work for Maunder. But I *am* senior to him, yes.

You're not ...

I stare at him, wagging my fork like fascinating older women probably do. He's at a loss again, poor kid. I wonder if it's a spur-of-the-moment chat-up, or if he's genuinely liked me and been planning and steeling himself and waiting for an opportunity. Like I have with Maunder. Then I sense he's going to give up if I don't encourage him.

Moyser's a jerk. I don't like him one little bit. I don't think he likes me either, actually, but he's one of these blokes who leads with his prick. He feels duty bound to offer it to anyone who hasn't got one. Beats me what makes arseholes like that think any woman would look twice. *And* he spits on you when he talks.

I've a chance then ..., the young chap says.

It takes me completely by surprise, in a very endearing way, its school-dance honesty and innocence. It really touches me. But this time my smile embarrasses him, or gives him the wrong message. I shouldn't have bothered you Miss Samuel. I only wanted to say hi. He gets up.

You haven't told me your name, I have the presence of mind to say.

Kevin.

I might have known, he's every inch a Kevin. I don't say so of course. I want to cuddle him to bits and buy a see-through nightie now he's backing off.

Anna, I say, but everyone calls me Sam.

Anna's a nice name, he says sweetly and rather ridiculously.

I've hooked him back anyway. He's hovering, he's going to ask me out. And I'm probably going to accept. Assuming Moyser's perpetual quickie-up-the-side-of-the-filing-cabinet propositions don't count, I haven't been asked out by a decent bloke in years. Assuming Kevin counts as a bloke – I imagine his Mum thinks he's a boy. I was probably at school with her.

I finally have mercy on the pastry and plonk my fork down. That was the foulest lunch I've ever tasted Kevin. I stand up. Tomorrow, take me to the pub.

He looks flabbergasted, in a pleased sort of way.

Is that a date?

You bet Miss ...

Sam, I say, and smile.

Miss Sam, he says, and smiles.

I chuck him under the elbow as I breeze off, like the confident older woman he probably wants to think I am might do if I was. Probably. Or does he think I'm a trollop? Now I've been bold and done the asking. Oops.

Though in fact I mosey back into the office completely ignoring the toilets, as if being snubbed and humiliated by the man I love didn't devastate me one bit.

It soon comes back to me though. And I forget, of course – the date with Kevin I mean. I never give it another thought.

Maunder e-mails – I see surprisingly little of him: articulate and good at bounding up stairs as he is, it turns out he leads a largely electronic existence. He bounds upstairs and stays there.

Sam. Marsh let me down – my loss – not having your company – no rudeness intended. Let me make up for it in the Maison Etienne – I'll consult diary and get back to you. Patrick.

You can imagine what I'm like after that. Ruins my afternoon. I can't concentrate on anything: the blurb for Margate, the Basildon sewage tender, Kevin, all recede behind a dazzling vision of candles and Charles Aznavour songs, and a real man looking at me with let's-make-a-baby eyes. The Maison Etienne is ever so romantic. So Mandy says. I actually go to the toilet and have a little cry – silly, shows what a daft toss-bag I am when it comes to this sort of stuff.

Or anyway, I'm assuming I will be – I'm assuming I'll not change.

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I assume he forgets. Or doesn't really want to. Or finds Diary full for ever. Or never meant it in the first place. Or, he just forgets. I slip his mind, unimportantly, like Kevin slips mine. Shit.

Anyway, nothing happens, he never gets back to me Re: Maison Etienne. So back to the future.

I'll be thinking hard about this month I have, now, to capture him before he goes to Panelco. To wean him off knobs and dials; to convert him, to convince him there's more to life than control panels. Pipes and valves are much sexier. And Woking's – well it's probably OK for true

love, but it's out of my area socialising-wise; so I shall never see him again. Unless I've made some impression on his heart or his other thing; unless I've made him want to throw me over his handle-bars and take me with him.

I wonder if Panelco will ever come head-hunting *me*.

Patrick, weren't we going to have dinner sometime? More casual, the thought's just crossed your mind – Oh by the way, weren't we going to have dinner sometime? *More* casual, it's crossed your mind and you don't give a monkey's – Oh just remembered, weren't we going to have dinner sometime? and a little laugh. Very past tense, couldn't care less, what a silly idea. No, that gives him a wriggle-out.

Shame if your diary's so full we never ... Did we ever have that ...? Wasn't there something ...? I know.

I know it won't work. The trouble is you work yourself into such a dither about it, it's a full warranty it won't come out right. And if that's the only plan I have ... It's not me who should be saying it anyway – but it's got me nowhere, fantasising him saying it to me. Or e-mailing. It's true, my heart flutters every time I see there's an e-mail from him now. I'm turning into Bridget Effing Jones.

Sam. Jeffcott Crawley Milson – contract renewal – please send usual brochures. Patrick.

Jeffcott Crawley Milson. Must be scope for something there. I take it to the toilet and come up with Can yw ffeell it too Sam, and some left over. Well he *might* be part Welsh.

Sam. Remind me what we tell people wanting venturi tubes instead of diaphragms. Patrick.

Mmm. As the actress said. I know everything there is to know about why our diaphragms are better than Fisher's venturis – I wish I didn't. After a visit to the toilet fails to convince me it's code, I tell him.

Sam. Margate blurb – up to scratch? Patrick.

Blurb I like. I expect I'll have got into marketing because I'm creative and literate, supposedly. I like preparing promotional texts and writing brochures. Blurb I'm good at, I'm up to scratch on blurb. It's getting gorgeous decent men to notice I need feeding and that other thing, that's what I'm rubbish at.

Patrick. Margate blurb attached, comments welcome. I've included the final gs even though Moyser won't use them. I've also made him up a nice dossier of photos. Sam.

Efficiency, creativity, initiative, and a gentle, ironical sense of humour. That's what I want him to notice. As well as how beautiful I am.

I know I'm pale, but some people like that; and on the willowy side, but some people like that too. All right Moyser – skinny and boyish. Don't some people like that? I don't think I'm bad-looking, really. My hair's beautiful, Antoine always says: black and straight and (at the moment) quite long. Antoine thinks it goes perfectly with my porcelain flesh, but ought to be shorter.

It keeps getting to me though. I'm back on the loo sobbing. He called me lovely the very first time we met, Maunder I mean (well actually, Antoine did as well). And measured my waist with his hands. You'd think he'd have spotted I'm beautiful by now. Above the waist *or* below it. Or at least witty and professional, and quite a reasonably nice person really, if you take the slightest effort to get to know me. And head-over-sodding-heels in love with him.

Sam!

Oops, it's Mandy come looking for me. I wipe my bottom and begin making the usual excuse. She says, Maunder's looking for you, he's in the office.

I hop out and head straight for the mirror. What's he want Mand?

Directions back to his own office would be a good answer. I suppose that's more me than Mandy. Though I'll be too nervous to think of jokes – she has to adlib.

Either his e-mail's not working, she says, or he's twigged what a massive mistake he's making going to Ghent without the industry's most eligible publicity manager.

Going to where?

Panelco Europe. He's Head of Sales for Europe.

I know but ...

The job's in Ghent Sam.

Mandy's shocked that I'm shocked. Nobody's told me. Or rather, it must have passed over me, somehow. Somehow, I've been so preoccupied I've leapt to the assumption he'll be working at Woking. On calm reflection it makes no difference: *not* being dragged off to be ravished in Ghent is as boring a way to spend a Thursday afternoon as not being dragged off to be ravished in Woking. But the idea that he's going abroad, permanently, without dragging me, seems gutting at first.

Come on love he's waiting. I told him you were checking proofs with Kevin.

Kevin?

You know, from the drawing office: the dishy guy who goes through the proofs with me for you. Come on love, you look fine.

Deep breath and some toilet paper dabbed round the eyes. Thanks Mand. And try to stop shaking.

We march back upstairs. Past the spot where he mistakenly thought I was lovely. And where I mistakenly fell in it.

He shuts the door manfully, shuts Mandy out. Sam I've been feeling guilty about never getting back to you for that dinner.

I shrug and sit down and cross my legs with a kind of tense casualness. It's accidental, the way my skirt lies, neatly above the knee. He can't not like my legs, surely. Or are they too pale? I should have worn tights.

You know what I'm like, he says, and you've probably an idea what the diary's like these days. Especially with all the preparations, and Panelco expecting me to be up to scratch. It's like I'm doing two jobs—

There's no need to explain Patrick, I quite understand. It slipped my mind too.

I hate myself when I catch myself lying – I think I will anyway. Even after years as a sales blurb writer I'll not like lying, I'm sure I won't. Though I got the tone right. Truth and tension three out of ten; but unconcerned, understanding tone-of-voice, ten.

And legs eleven – he's looking at them.

Look I've taken a darned liberty. I've booked a table for tomorrow night. Are you free? Or more to the point, *if* you're free would you? It'll be ghastly tedious without you (he does a little laugh) ... please come.

I think hard, quite unnecessarily, though I suspect my expression is giving him his answer. And then I say Well, yes, I think so, I mean, I think I'm free, I mean no, I'm sure I am, really, yes, I'd love to. Yes. Thankyou. Patrick. (Perhaps when it comes to it I ought to put it more concisely; but that's what I think I'll say.)

There's something I want us to discuss, before I depart, he says. I've a meeting in Woking in the p.m., so although it's ungentlemanly can we meet *there*, I mean at the Beefeater? About seven?

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There's something I want us to discuss, before I depart. It'll be ghastly tedious without you. I've taken a darned liberty. Jeffcott Crawley Milson. Not such a lovely one, I'm sure.

You can imagine what I'll be like the following day. I'll spend a third of it in the toilet. From peeing with excitement all morning to being sick with rice crispies in the afternoon. To wriggling into my tight sparkly dress and sprucing myself up a bit in the evening. I haven't been out with a bloke in years.

I'll stay on at work to do some catching up, as well as the wriggling and sprucing. It's easier than from home, it's only ten minutes walk. I know, it's not exactly the Maison Etienne. But it's on the way there.

Moyser has to get in his fourpence-worth of course. Once he gets back after lunch. Instead of telling me how it's gone and thanking me for all my support, and how useful the pics were and here's a stick of rock – he thought it was a handy shape even if I don't like the taste – instead he says something about a lawnmower, which I pretend not to understand.

I say been to the unisex? he says.

I don't think it is actually, I say. There certainly weren't any men there, unless you count Antoine. I shouldn't do that joke, it's stooping a bit to Moyser's level. But it's too late.

Mistook you for one of his prettyboys toots. Did you from behind (he makes haircutting gestures accompanied by pelvic thrusts) and didn't even notice you weren't. And don't tell me – you didn't feel a thing.

I think even for a salesman that's an impressively zipped compendium of stock insults. My boyish figure, my flat chest (the idea that someone having sex with me wouldn't know which way I'm facing is one of his standards, you wouldn't believe how many forms he can give it), the notion of shagging me from behind (which somehow fascinates him), rounded off with the frigidity swipe (I didn't feel a thing), all compressed into an ostensible insult to my new hair-do.

The man's brilliant – he should definitely get the promotion.

Funny how someone can hate so many things about you and still let no opportunity pass without verbally stripping and shagging you. It's the pillage and rape creed I suppose – sex as an act of subjugation, a

means of degrading someone. Neither love nor lust, just the joy of conquest, the perverse thrill of dishing out humiliation to the vanquished. I hope most men aren't like that.

I hope and pray if ever I find a man to love me he *will* be loving me, and not just getting a rise out of sitting on me. And shoving things up me.

I pray the son I should so like to have, if I ever get lucky, will grow up to *love* women, truly, and be nice to them.

I'm not much bothered by the physical taunts really. And as for frigidity ... if only he knew how deeply I can love, how deeply I ache. I don't know why I put up with it. I ought to come down on him like a ton of bricks, in this day and age. He wouldn't get away with it in most places.

But as usual, all I do is try and think of an ironical witticism to brush him off with. Try and fail, on this occasion.

... easily pass for a boy now *Shaun*, he's still ranting when my attention drifts back. I say topless in Y-fronts, I dare you – Christmas party stunt. You'll look peachy in Y-fronts popsy, I'll lend you mine. Y-fronts and a sausage. What with the choirboy hairdo, what's the betting they'll think you're a lad? Maunder'll be in like—

That's enough Cliff! I'm not in the mood ...

I storm off to the toilets for my afternoon break. I'm certainly not *that* flat-chested. My tight sparkly dress presents me nicely in that department, thankyou. I'm neither that nor frigid. It's not fair, a salivating wanker like Moyser judging and dismissing me like this.

Mandy's tougher with him. I can hear her shouting at him as I run for the loo. I spew up all my breakfast. Can't blame it on the lunch because I haven't had any: spent lunchtime at Antoine's and anyway, a decent meal coming up later. Forgive the expression.

I feel ghastly just now though. I shall have to borrow Mandy's mouthwash. I sit on the loo crying and wiping my lips with toilet paper.

Coming out, who should be hovering rather deliberately a little way down the loo corridor but Kevin. I've not seen him in a while; I've been avoiding him to be honest. I should like to have had lunch with him that day. I should like to be nice to him, if he really likes me. But I don't know – I don't know what he must think of me.

It genuinely slipped my mind, as you know. But for some reason you always feel you should lie. As the actress ...

Kevin: that day, I wasn't – I start saying.

Are you all right? You look poorly, he says. You know how it unlocks you when people say things like that. My face screws up and I sob.

But I still manage to lie. Canteen tummy, I say. That's why I let you down the other week, I'm everso sorry love. Let's do it another time.

He nods. But as I pass him, he places his arm lightly round my shoulder and leans forward and kisses me on the cheek, nervously and tenderly. Beautifully nervously and tenderly. It stops me in my tracks, the sheer niceness of it. I melt inside.

I hope you'll feel better soon Sam, he says, everso sweetly.

I'm looking directly into his face, a beautiful, blue-eyed face. I wish I had such lovely blue eyes, I think; I wish I had a son who was pretty and sweet like this ... And as there's only four inches to travel anyway, I touch my lips lightly on to his.

You smell of sick, he says.

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Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam will be the last thing I remember when I regain consciousness.

Slowly as feeling comes back I'll feel wet. Then a slight ache around my thighs. When I try to move there's a sharp pain and I go cold—

The pain wakes me; or is it that the pain put me to sleep?

Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam is the first thing I remember. What I can feel of my body's soaking wet, but most of it's numb. Except an ache below the hips. Except a terrible, icy pain if I try to move—

I open my eyes and everything's black; a fine drizzle's falling on my face.

Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam is the only thing I remember.

I seem to be lying on my back in the dark, in the rain, in a swamp ...

Silly really – stupid of me. I get up and continue on my way, drenched and bedraggled, my hair ruined, mud under my clothes. I meet with a beautiful boy and he doesn't care: he doesn't care how wet or smelly or muddy I am. He kisses me and I absolutely dissolve – you know how sometimes you just melt, you don't think about it, you become a runny pudding, a trifle.

He pulls up my tight wet frock, pulls down my soaking wet pants. He makes love to me. His passion surprises me. He gets so deeply into me it hurts, it hurts beautifully, it hurts so ever so exquisitely, excruciatingly. I feel like I'm giving birth to him.

Trying to scream wakes me.

Everywhere's black. A fine drizzle's falling on my face. My body's wet, but my legs and feet are numb. Except for the remains of an ache, indistinct really, down in the mud below my belly. I want to go to the toilet ... I try to move—

I try again when I next awake, to move I mean. The ache sharpens into a terrible pain and I go cold. Everytime I move, even slightly. So I stop trying, I try not even to think of it. I try not to think of wanting to pee. I close my eyes. I listen to the rain.

When I next open them it's coming daylight. Or perhaps it's been daylight for ages, how would I know?

It crosses my mind how little I know – less than when I normally wake up, probably. About who I am I mean: whether I've got to get up and go to work, whether I always sleep in a ditch, whether I'm a virgin – I assume such things usually dawn on me, sooner or later. But somehow I can't think.

I'm lying in a ditch, a muddy ditch. I'm wet through. I want to go to the toilet. But I daren't move in case of the pain. Sometimes it's raining, or drizzling; just at the moment it seems to have stopped. All I can see looking up is a tall hedge and the sky.

I'm desperate for a pee. One of my arms is asleep, and both my legs. There's an ache around the top of my thighs. I try to raise up. The sharp pain makes me gasp—

Bursting to pee wakes me up. I let it go, I pee where I lie, I wet myself. I feel so ashamed. I close my eyes and try to forget everything.

Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam is all I remember.

And a beautiful boy kissing me, like love's first kiss. I think I dreamt him. Kissing me and then ... I don't remember really how it was. Only an impression, of how he seems to love me, of how very much I love him – I ache when I think of him. It must have been for him I ...

It's raining again, I can hear it. I can feel it on my face.

I went to a lot of trouble making myself nice. I don't do makeup much, I don't bother with it. But somehow I know for this lovely young man – how tenderly he kisses me, how deep in my belly I feel him – it must

have been for him I squeezed into my tight sparkly frock, and did my face. Just to bring out the eyes and lips a little, nothing heavy. I'm too pale for anything heavy, I've always been pale.

I'm not sure if I've dozed or if I've just been lost in thoughts – about what's name and my frock and my makeup and ...

I try to think of his name, the beautiful boy I mean, the boy I was seeing. But I suppose he hasn't a name, I suppose it was all a dream. There's no boy. Life's just this, lying on my back in the muddy ditch, being rained on, peeing myself, unable to move. Feeling pain when I try, feeling icy cold when I try to move. And waiting ...

Waiting for what's going to happen to happen, waiting for the future.

As if I'm a baby. It is, it's as if I'm a baby, born in the ditch, or flung into the ditch unwanted, my thoughts about this frock and being kissed and Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam a kind of mistaken identity, a different life, somebody else's.

Lying in a ditch is most of life I remember.

When I hear the sirens I start crying. It suddenly floods into my mind that something's happened to me. I've been taken ill, or mugged. Or raped probably. I've been raped and thrown in a ditch.

A young woman dressed in green and with ropes puts a very tight collar round my neck and chats about the rain and how she doesn't think things are ever as bad as they seem. She keeps wanting to know my name. She nags me about my name, but I don't ... I'm not even sure I've got one.

She goes down and spends a while around my belly and thighs, and comes back up with muddy hands, chatting about being glad the rain's stopped.

You left your umbrella in the road, she says. As if it were a joke.

= ♡ =

The first visitor I'll get in hospital will be Mandy, my secretary, my friend really, I think. She'll be ever so upset – somehow I won't be sure why. Her tears will fall on my face as she kisses me. She'll kiss my mouth, moistly, then lick me all over the chest, tickly and tingly; then she'll crawl into bed with me and go down to my belly and ...

Moyser always calls her a dyke but I never had evidence of it before. She's a very good one. Whatever she's got it's in me so deeply it hurts, it hurts beautifully. I open wide—

I hold my breath and try not to cry out. She plunges her arm into me, up to the elbow, pulls out my womb and some other useless bits, leaving me wet and hungry. The girl in green I mean. When she comes back up I notice her gloves are all muddy.

I try to say something about being wet. I try to apologise, I couldn't help it, wetting myself, I couldn't hold it in any longer. I cry with shame. The bed is soaking wet.

The nurse pulls the covers off me and presses a high-pitched buzzer. Several people run up to me—

When I awake I try again, to apologise, to explain.

You were in theatre a long time, you won't remember a thing.

Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam ...

Harold? Who's that?

I ... I don't know.

You've a gentleman to see you, with flowers, she says. Let me cut your clothes off for him.

Moyser ... I was about to say he'd raped me. But it doesn't seem nice, I stop myself.

She has a large pair of scissors, the nurse. She cuts my tight wet frock, from between my knees up to between my breasts.

Why, you're just like a boy dear, she says. Let's show your gentleman friend here. She peels the frock to both sides, displaying my front to him, sparkly and wet, a bit muddy. I'm just like a boy.

It's Moyser of course, this so-called gentleman. I knew it would be.

He rests his thigh on the bed, leans over me till everything turns black, splatters my face with spit and smacks the wet flowers on to my chest. Then he goes down, his big busy hands all about my belly and between my legs, tears off my soaking wet pants, yanks me open like a ruck-sack, thrusts his fist into me. The pain is awful.

He clasps my hips with his hands – he's inside me, under my flesh, gripping the bone. And he pulls my entire pelvis down like pulling off pants. The pain is awful. I wake up. The pain is awful.

It's dark and wet. It's raining on me again.

= ♥ =

You've a young gentleman to see you, with flowers. See if you can sit up a little – she'll pile pillows behind me, the surse, and move my left arm (I think about it, but can't seem to make it move) – would you like me to comb your hair for you dear?

I'll shake my head. The idea will seem ridiculous. I just ... I had it done, I'll say.

She'll briefly tidy it anyway. You want to look nice for a young gentleman with flowers, now don't you dear?

A beautiful boy with a small bunch of flowers stands before me. I can't remember his name. I try and try but I can't remember. Yet I know him ... I think I remember him kissing me, very gently; I remember loving him, I feel as though I loved him with every fibre of my being. I ache with love for him ...

He stands by the bed rather awkwardly. He looks sad but kind, very kind, and ever so pretty. Sweet and pretty. I hold out my hand to him, my good hand. He puts his hands lightly on my arms and kisses me on the cheek. Nervously and tenderly. I pull him tightly to me, as best I can with one arm, and melt all over his face and neck.

I ... I don't remember ..., I say. I'm sorry sweetheart, I've lost ... I've not quite got all my memory back, I ... I can't remember your name. I love you ever so but I can't remember your name.

It's Errol Mum, he says.

I stop love-biting his neck. Then I do a slight laugh. Why ever did we call you that?

I always wondered, he says. I think you were a bit screwy; but I forgive you. At least you didn't call me Sam. He releases himself from my stranglehold and sits by the bed. He's obviously inherited some of my dubious skill for not very humorous ripostes.

I don't ... I don't think I remember your ... dad, I say, rather cautiously.

That's not changed then, he replies. I shake my head. You never did, you never knew who he was. It's just you and me Mum.

That's not the sort of person I thought I was. I think it, I'm almost sure I don't say it, though he looks offended even so.

I hold his hand. How old are you?

Seventeen.

You remind me of Kevin.

Everyone says, he says, and laughs shyly. He says it instantly, without having to think, without wondering who Kevin is.

You know Kevin then? I say.

I notice you remember *his* name, he says, in mock offendedness. I hope it's mock anyway.

It's only just come back to me sweetheart. I've been trying ever so hard to remember ... I've been trying to remember you all.

All the men in your life?

You mean there are more ...

Probably, he says smiling. But generally it's just Kev and me, and that plonker who pesters you at work.

Moyser. Moyser's ... I was about to say he's the one who raped me, but I think better of it. The police can easily identify rapists these days, I don't want to bother Errol with it.

He is a plonker, you're right, I say instead. He's a prick.

The beautiful boy laughs. I've never heard you say that word before.

I have a sudden awful thought. Kevin's ... your brother?

He *is not*, he says with emphasis. He's your toy boy.

D'you resent him sweetheart?

I wish you wouldn't call me sweetheart, he says.

What do I normally call you?

You call me sweetheart, all the time; but if you've got amnesia, that's something you can forget.

Witty and clever too, my beautiful boy. I feel so proud. I might not be able to help it sweee ... eety-pie, I say. I'll try though. What would you like instead?

Not pie neither. Cut down on the sweeties – go on a diet.

You have, you've got a sense of humour like your Mum's.

You really have lost your memory then.

You didn't say, I say, what you feel about Kevin, honestly. I shan't mind. You get your priorities sorted, spending the night in a ditch.

I'm sorry you ..., he snuffles. Mentioning the ditch has upset him. I didn't mean it to, I wish I hadn't mentioned it. We came looking, but we couldn't find you Mum. To think of you lying there all that time ...

My beautiful seventeen year old boy's crying. He's wiping beautiful tears from beneath his beautiful blue eyes. I think what a nice boy he is, I'm so ever so proud of him. He's just the son I hope I'll have, he's just perfect. I don't actually remember him, or anything about him, at all. Except for an aching deep sense of loving him.

It's OK sweet ... potato, I say, and stroke his lovely gingery hair with my good hand.

Kevin helped, he says, he looked for you as well. Kev's great Mum, we're mates, I like him fine. I was at school with his kid brother – you remember Garry. I shake my head. I think you should marry him and have a baby.

Boy or girl?

Girl of course; but don't give her a stupid name. I have to go now Mum, there's a policewoman waiting. She let me come in first, to soften you up.

I've wondered where the police were. He kisses me on the cheek again. A short policewoman with a pony-tail and brownish skin and huge brown eyes comes and sits in his place. Do you remember anything about what happened? she says.

I shake my head. I don't remember anything after Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam.

Harold?

He's the security man at the works. I was on my way ... But it can't have been ... I know I dreamt ... but it can't have been.

What can't?

I mean who did it, who you're looking for. (I wonder if I should mention Moyser, but for some reason I can't bring myself.) You mustn't suspect Kevin, he's a sweet – I mean he's ... he's my ... You can't think it's him?

Not unless he drives an articulated lorry love, she says.

I suppose I look at her blankly.

Unfortunately we've no witnesses. But the tyre-marks show an eight-wheel-cab artic; and paint from your ... paint from the impact shows it was brown, at least at the front. It doesn't ring any bells?

I look at her blankly. I don't know what she's talking about.

I suppose you didn't see it at all.

I thought I'd been raped, I say, after a while, feeling stupid.

She shakes her head. Unfortunately – though it's terrible to have to say it love – there'd be more of you left if you'd only been raped.

I follow her eyes down the bed. Down towards the gentle perpetual ache, where I think my legs are.

= ♡ =

It's raining again, I can hear it. I can feel it, a fine drizzle on my face. What I can feel of my body's soaking wet, but most of it's numb. Except the usual ache, somewhere down in the mud.

While the young woman in green puts ropes and belts around me, ropes that dangle from a big red crane, I close my eyes and drift back, try to remember, to relive what happened.

I don't know if I'm remembering remembering, or remembering a dream. Or dreaming remembering.

He punches my bottom and keeps his hand there, his big fist, pushing me with great strength, taking me completely by surprise. I didn't even know he was following me.

I can remember it slowly, I can slow it down. I've been in the ditch so long I can relive it as if it went on for hours. Moyser raping me I mean. But in fact it only takes seconds.

He flattens me down. Kicks me, I think, or stamps on me. Pushes my frock up, yanks my pants to one side and he's in me, from behind. Like a plank thrust with tremendous force as far up me as it'll go. The pain is terrible. I have a falling sensation. Then—

It's raining on me. I'm lying in the ditch. I left my umbrella in the road.

I don't understand how he could do such a thing to me. Even an insensitive misogynist like Moyser. It's just so intrusive and brutal, it's so disrespectful. And throw me in a ditch ...

It wasn't him Anna.

I never did anything to him. I never even reported him for ... that time ... I don't understand how ... how he could ...

It wasn't this chap you're speaking of Anna. You weren't raped.

I look through my tears at the diagram.

You weren't raped Anna. You were hit by a lorry. It impacted in your buttocks – which is one reason you're here for me to tell you the tale (he's showing me a diagram of how he reckons it happened, as he speaks, he's pointing to the diagram, though it's a bit blurry). And having knocked you down it ran over your legs while—

No.

Ran over your legs while swerving, throwing your body – your torso, the legs were—

No.

The legs were largely crushed and detached at this point—

No.

Throwing your torso into the ditch.

No, no ...

(The diagram shows the stages and trajectories and angles. He leaves it with me so I'll look at it again later, when I feel braver, when it's less blurry. It's quite interesting, but it's all nonsense of course.)

He drove away Anna, the bastard drove away. Parts of you adhering to his tyres. Fragments were found along the road, but it was all very muddy; all that passers-by saw was an umbrella lying there.

I sniff and shake my head. It's nonsense, he's come to the wrong room.

An incredible combination of circumstances Anna – like him hitting you in the most padded part of a person's—

Why do you keep calling me Anna? I'm not Anna.

A series of chances kept you alive. If he'd damaged your spine, if you'd landed in the ditch face-down ...

I'm not Anna, I'm not this person.

If the ditch hadn't have been muddy, if the water hadn't have been so cold – both inhibited haemorrhaging. The mud in the ditch acted like a poltice on your wounds, as best we can work out. Think of it as a little miracle, Miz Samuel.

I look at him as if he's mad.

You've got a boy haven't you?

I ... I don't know, I can't remember.

Perhaps you were spared for his sake – to spare his grief. Think of it that way Miz Samuel. By all that's holy you should be dead. Even with the bleeding staunched by the mud, you should have died of shock. Or hypothermia. You realise you lay in the ditch nearly thirteen hours ... The paramedics and firemen were two hours lifting you out. That girl Mandy, who talked you through it's up for a medal. She had to stabilise you and hook you up all by herself, with the limited space.

She was very nice.

Lifting you out could have killed you. By then she'd put you out, you won't remember: believe me, she deserves the VC. She worked out a way of bringing sufficient mud with you to avoid exacerbating trauma; she held your bottom end together with her bare hands till you arrived in theatre.

I look at the blurry diagram and shake my head, and sniff.

Do you know what happened to my frock?

= ♡ =

I don't think I'll be the sort of person who wishes anyone ill, I hope I won't. I want to be a nice person.

Yet I confess I'll be pleased – later, much later – when I hear what happened to Moyser. He's not getting the promotion even with me out of the running. To add insult to injury, a woman will get it: a perfumed Lumley sound-alike from head office – Mandy says she's a lesbian!

While my job will go to someone even less susceptible to Moyser's charms, and with as few curves – a man. A newcomer, very ambitious, but Mandy finds him OK. She's *his* secretary now of course.

Though she visits me regularly. I don't know if we were friends much, before. I mean, we worked well together, she was a fantastic PA. But ... I don't remember. You socialise at work, the girls, in a male world of pumps and valves, you have to – Dorrington from accounts makes

you. It's just that I don't know whether I thought of Mandy as a friend. Yet she's been an angel since the accident. She comes more often than whatsisname, the boy.

She's got beautiful blue eyes. And a lovely figure, tall and willowy yet curvy with it. I love it when she leans over me and kisses me. I go all limp and tingly, gazing into her cleavage. I stroke her lovely gingery hair with my good hand.

She's not a dyke though. She's dating a boy from the drawing office. He wants to get married. I'll tell her about my dream, eventually – her licking my chest and getting in bed with me. We'll laugh about it.

The ambulance girl's also named Mandy, a plump little thing with curly yellow hair. When she visits me I shan't know what to say. Except to tell her I've remembered my name. I haven't really, I simply remember Harold saying Goodnight Miss Sam.

I hold her hand with my good hand. She says she'd only just qualified, she got to come in the ditch because she was little. She shows me her award; I should share it really, she says, for being so brave. I do a dismissive little laugh – the idea of *me* being brave. I wonder whether I ought to apologise to her again, for peeing myself.

Mandy – my Mandy – brings a bunch of e-mails, printed out, for me to read now I'm out of intensive. Get-well messages mostly, from people I don't remember. First one's from someone called Patrick on the day of the accident.

Sam. Absolute catastrophe this meeting in Woking – no way I'll be able to make it back – awfully sorry. Go anyway – table's booked – it's all on my tab. Peter Marsh and Cliff Moyser will be there. I know you and Cliff get on famously – you can do some of your usual teasing of each other – then compare notes about what a bastard I am. But I do apologise. Patrick.

Another's from Moyser, the next morning.

Ha ha. Very funny. You cunt.

Perhaps he's not a rapist – I shan't press it – but I forgot to say he'll have been disciplined for using a company e-mail account to verbally abuse a colleague. They've got software that picks up naughty words. That's why he didn't get the promotion.

There's also a grovelling letter of apology from him. It's meaningless – it's a condition of his reprimand. I'll reply though, now I'm out of intensive. Just to make him feel worse.

I can't write, being left-handed, so I dictate my reply to Mandy. She's right – it should be Ha ha. Very funny. You prick. Yet prick doesn't do it – one letter too many for a start. I don't actually know of an equivalently hurtful word that you can use to demolish a man's self-esteem with ...

Anyway, typical of me, I think Dear Cliff, Thanks for the very nice letter, and the flowers. I wasn't offended. Sorry it's taken me eight months to reply, I've not been very well. All the best, Sam will be more humiliating somehow. With Sam signed in my best awful scrawl.

Mandy says they made an issue of how much worse it was under the circumstances – sending abuse to someone critically ill. I suppose they think e-mails get to you wherever, in intensive care or in a ditch. Quick, bring her round, nasty e-mail coming through.

Ha ha. Very funny ... To be honest we're not entirely sure what it means. I assumed at first it was for standing them up at the Beefeater – because they didn't know I was already legless in a ditch (the boy won't like my new line in ditch jokes).

But in fact it's more subtle: I think he thought me and this Patrick chap had eloped to Woking, or to Etienne's, setting *him* up with a date with Marshmallow. Ha ha. Now that *would* be very funny – and doubtless was.

Mandy doesn't even read it that way. She thinks that Moyser thinks I was using the one thing I have that he doesn't, in order to get the promotion – my tight sparkly frock I mean ... my boyish charm.

I hope it's not so. I mean, I hope I'm not going to be the sort of person who'd do that.

I don't bother asking who Patrick is. She's been very patient, but you feel so stupid. And it's not relevant any more.

= ♡ =

None of it's relevant any more. I wait for my new life. I lie in the dark, listening to the rain, thinking of my future. Like sleeping beauty, I wait for my beautiful boy to kiss me. Kiss me awake ...

I'm out of intensive now by the way – perhaps I told you. They said if I stayed much longer I'd have security of tenure. I thought need a mortgage would have been funnier, but I didn't say. They've been so kind to me.

Mandy visited me a few times, which was nice of her. But of course she has her own life to lead. I think she's getting married.

I'm getting used to it, or anyway, it doesn't give me nightmares any more. Being in the ditch I mean. And I've plenty to think about as I lie here on my back. As the actress said to the bishop. No I have, I've my whole future to think of now. That's what I should be doing, the doctor says, thinking of the future and getting my mind accustomed to how it will be, when I go home. So I lie in the dark and think of that.

I don't remember home of course, but I picture it as best I can. A nice bungalow with window boxes, a huge bed, a nice clean bathroom ...

It'll be fine. They'll lift me gently on to the toilet – I know, you don't want to hear about it. Lower me gently into a warm bath, sponge the mud off me, sponge me all over. Lay me gently on the bed, what's left of me, a bundle like a baby. I won't mind, I won't mind them seeing me. And they won't mind that I've been in a ditch, they won't mind my chest being flat, they won't mind if I'm muddy or if I've wet myself ...

But I don't want to bother you with it: how I'll go to the toilet and have baths and make love, and what's going to happen when the little girl comes along. I know ...

I know I can't have her normally because of my pelvis. It's held together with rods – I think they gave me a diagram, it's here somewhere. But they'll cut her out of me when it's time. It hardly matters, another cut, another scar. It'll be fine. They know what they're doing. She'll only be tiny, she won't be any trouble ...

I'm looking everso forward to her. All my life I've longed to have a child. A boy I wanted really, a son. I woke up in hospital and there he was, seventeen. I don't remember him at all – but I don't say, you feel so stupid, and I don't want to hurt his feelings. If he visits again.

It'll come to me in a minute, his name ...

Anyway that's what I'm thinking about. I've plenty of time for thinking, lying here in the dark. About my beautiful boy and my baby Mandy. About my future, and all that's going to happen in my life. I like thinking of it, I like going over it, picturing it. I'm looking forward to life. It's going to be everso nice, I'm sure it is. I'm—

It's raining again, I can hear it. I can feel it on my face. A fine drizzle, it's not heavy, I don't mind it much. It runs off my cheeks.

I close my eyes. And a pretty blue-eyed boy kisses me. Kisses me to sleep.

Goodnight Miss Sam.

= ♡ ♥ ♡ =

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