

Jayne Tremayne, Schoolgirl Conchologist

I know what you're going to say – everyone does. Am I *the* Jane Orsen? As if the mere mention ...

Yes I am, I always say; I suppose you've read all my nodules.

And they say Well, I've seen some of the videos.

I look down shyly. You see, I'm not like my heroine – pinky-and-perky and perfectly scripted. I'm brimming with hesitation. I know next to nothing about molluscs ... and not as much as that about boys. And I certainly haven't the legs.

It usually gets an ... uncomfortrouble smile. If I say it – but I don't usually.

I *intend* to say brash, witty, forthright, clever, ironical things always. But I've this habit of pausing undecidedly for so long, it goes dark or they cut to a commercial break.

Jane Norcross who played Jayne in the TV series never hesitated over a single line. She seemed to know plenty plus about boys; and she had the legs and everything else besides – as an astonkified world (and my dad) discovered in the noto-roarious episode three.

I wanted to be the discrumpled orphan, having-none-of-it at look-what-they've-done to my creation. I'd given em a lot of quiet headshaking and I-don't-knowinning, as a build-up. I'd even done the B—Bare Bare-But ... But this is children's television scene.

No Jane: this is *Australian* children's television, is the correct answer, apparently.

Finally when Sandy took me to the rushes, bursting to back me up (though it was her fault really), I couldn't – I couldn't get riled. Or rather, I didn't find anything to be having-none of.

The lights went on and I gazed at the blank screen, then down at my foot-rest. A few comments from April and the blokes, then the dread words What does Jane think?

Sandy handed me a rag – she'd noticed what Jane think. I wiped my eyes. It's fine, I said, when I could manage it. It ... It's actual ... alley ...

It was actu-ally the most beauty-tittiful thing I'd ever seen. My Jayne, my creation: my awkward, clever, freckled, unfashionable, intrepid little woman, brought to life to pure-fiction, legs and freckles and all.

Her moment of self-discovery, her megamorphosis, expressed with a sheer lyrication that superannuated anything I'd written, or *could* write.

And who needs dress-sense when you're clothed by the ocean?

I wrote that; but brave Jane Norcross and these people I'd come scarcely a scradget away from accusing of turning my books into sleaze had made it real. They'd phrased it a frillion times better.

It's her defining moment, April had said – in defence of the scene.

I know it's her ... defiling moment, I wrote the bare-bare bare-luddy thing, I nearly said. But instead in my usual way I bowed my head and grubbed around inside it, eventually coming up with a shortarsed version that sounded suspishilly like OK ... OK.

Funny now – to remember how the publisher had thought of binning the entire paracrap. I wasn't having *that*, but the naughty N-word was banished, and has never been allowed back.

I don't want it back, now – like the TV version, I that's-fined it knowing in my arse it was an improvement. Coy was right. Or rather, *not* that – the natural naturalness of it, the so-what and why-mention-it. Not mentioninning she was Nude.

I wish I'd thought of it. I wish I was a goody goody-nuff novelshit to hit that just-right balance between what I don't say and the reader's own imagination.

Then Sandy's illustrations – swallowed without a quimber by the softback fella. The bum-view, as she waded in, you couldn't be sure. But turning the page put you straight. Sandy's underwater full-frontal was leaving nothing to the magic-nation.

I reckon it squared sales triplicate, not to mention sextuplet – once word went round that this kiddies' paperback contained a picture of a nude girl.

He probly guessed it would – the limp editor – he's a lot cannier than the other bloke, for all his nicknames. It never crossed my noddly. If I'd have even dream-dreamed of seeing my name in the best-spellers list, it's not how I'd have thought of getting it there.

Just a line-drawing in Sandy's casual, sketchy style of course. But it wasn't amphiuous.

Nor nor was Jane Norcross as eyed by April's cheeky underwater camerawoman. My godfathers she wasn't. Plumbing uncensored – it was a freckled naked girl on children's telly.

Bare-naked, freckled, and nude.

Sandy's *picture* come to life, more than my prose, naturely nuff. And both of em, I shit you not, improving on me.

I wasn't too frothed by then. I'd not been all that comfy with the notoriety the illustration brought – though I banked the royalties. But by the time it came on the talking sideboard I'd got used to being mistaken for an articulated spokesperson for something-or-other.

World's worst. Imagine me a spokes-perkin for anything – even my friends go shop-shopping while I'm thinking what to say next. Or move house.

Yet the reviews were kind – of the book – even in the highbrows, and only a few libraries burned it.

Marianne Monkhouse called it a brave and tasteful swipe on behalf of women's and children's self-esteem. Amazing. I haven't a clue what it means, but it sounded brilliphant.

I quoted it when I had to squeak on the radio. Australia's leading ... feminist educationalist *says* ..., I said.

Someone wrote in to say I had a sexy voice. Would I pose for him?

Turned out to be a soft-core fetishist videographer – named Barry.



Swimming really was like that for me. Like Jayne's magic moment in the first book I mean. Lubricating and transforficating.

Or going in the water anyway – I wasn't exactly swimminin. But it didn't matter. None of my dee-fishynesses mattered – in the water, I *wasn't* tichy and useless.

I wasn't an ugly, dwarfish, inarticulate, defective, useless lump any more. I wasn't a lump of any sort, I wasn't. In the water somehow I wasn't ridiculous, I was ... *ridiculous*. I was beautly and bigfish and ticklycute and ee-fective, and even moderately useful, for some porpoises.

So I gave her two special things, my Jayne, three empowering gifts – the moment in the water, and the legs.

I didn't mind her being ginger, in spite of all the usual jokes; and I didn't mind her being freckly, in spite of all the usual jokes. And she had to be a swot, to know so much about shells, even though she was adventurish too; and she had to be quiet and miss-underwood, or her

adventurish adventures wouldn't have been surprising. I had to let her keep some of *my* ... self-efface-itancy.

I don't mean she's me – though the name hint-hints at it a bit, so I'm told. Really that's just lack of insulation.

What I thought she'd be, deep-down deep, was the sort of secure, clever, sensible, confident, spunky girl who could cope with *being* like me, and shine in spite of it. Show-em-all – how freckles don't stop you being a hero, how studiousnessness don't stop you being a peach. Nor an apricot.

But on top of that I wanted to give her something spesh, something like I didn't have anything like. Something that would under-ping her triumph over life and over growing-up and over being name-called. So I gave her legs.

I gave her two of the beautiest, barest, longest, slimmest, smoothest matching legs you could imagine. Legs to dive off a cliff for. Legs the other girls would envy even as they branded her Ginger Loaf and Speckled Hen and Swotty Lotty; legs the boys would dream about even after they'd seen Sally Markham's.

And weren't they all flab-gobbified on that first-first field-trip, when she emerged from her tent in the shortest of short-short short-shorts. Ay-mazin.

None *more* amazified than Louise – the sextrovert curvy-girl who'd always been so peevish with her; and Robert – the nice-boy who'd been quietly liked by her but never given her a sniff.

Robert discovered Jayne and with her, slowly, a new passion – shell collecting I mean. Louise also felt the stirring ring-rings of a new passion ...

Jayne of course, in her fluffless way, was as incapable of gripping a grudge as Sandy's cat (who keeps straying into the pictures, though she isn't credited).

She forgave and befriended Louise and wasn't at all inverse to her suggestion of sharing a tent. Robert too – no not the tent, but they drifted into a ... tentative, supportatative friendship.

You'll remember how she helped him tremendously – practically and emotional-ally – when his step-mother destroyed his shell collection in book six. Like step-mothers do.

But – none of it affects her devotion to Denis, the orphaned critter with a stammer and an over-protectile granny. Jayne's never really tossed a

tinker's what they say about *her*, really – if you want to get her ginger up what you do is call Denis the names what kids like him get called.

Frog Boy adores Jayne, goes without saying. And Jayne does what she can to liberate Son of Davros from his granny's apron. Next up (nearly dry) she finally takes The Reptile to Mermaid Cove, and intro-duces him to the water. In-duces him ... Straight into, straight under.

Clothed by the ocean? You bet. It's become a regulation feature. Since book two seemed to disannoint the fans – never mind the bank manager – she drops her knitting and lets the ocean and Sandy's pencil tickle her tickly tickly-bits at least once in each tale.

Artistic integrititty be dangled – the customers are right. They *are*, I mean it. The stories are more ... tingly, more pomegranate.

So, another first coming up – doing it with a boy. Dunking the pink overall I mean. Yes, both of em. All-over bare-birthday wet-suit. We'll see what Marianne Monkhouse makes of that. Nor April's naughty camerawoman neither. Even if he *is* a Little Spaz. To me of course that's *more* ... eroti-tickle-ticklish, but I shan't say.

Yet I can never quite make my mind up. Where she'd stand, I mean – if it came to it ...

How do you choose, after all, between the beauteous boy you've always had it for-granted you're supposed to yearn for (as all the other girls do, bar one), the Legless Dingle who adores you like you were Princess Di, and the bulgey blouseful of hormones that fills a tent with you on the field-trips?

Or do I know the answer really but not have the giblets to write it?



First time I submitted, the publisher got me in and said You ever *bin* to England Jane? I think he knew.

I bowed my head and shook it shyly-ly. I felt like a schoolgirl myself, made to feel silly-nelly and in-fradequate in that specialist way that teachers and publishers are trained to do.

It's really not like that anymore, he went on, if it ever was. You've read too many Jane Whatsit novels.

I was debating whether to say There can't *beee* too many, she only wrote six-and-a-half, when he got fed up of waiting and added She wrote about the world she was familiar with Jane. If she'd a' sat in Bath writing books about Australia they'd a' bin crap.

I never knew other famous nodulists wrote in the bath like me, I thought of saying.

I was wondering if I should tell him – not that I do it in the tub, I mean about growing up in Hampshire and my Danish grandad – when my contemflexions were uninterrupted by him saying We'd like to see this err novel set in the suburbs of Brisbane. Just as it is. Story's great, character's great, writing's ... well, the writing doesn't matter much does it? A vocab limited to the age-group's how we like it here at Wallaby.

But magically transmogrified from eighteenth-century Hampshire to the suburbs of Brisbane.

Oh it's not eightensss—sentry, I blurbled, it's mer-mer ... (I suddenly wished I'd not started, or better-still been run over on the way there.) It's m—meant to be mer-mer modern-day Hamp ...

He laughed rather too loud and a great deal too long. Then said You're ribbing me aren't you Jane.

I *did* exackerly what he'd advised. And as with everything else in life, my half-arsed vision improved, he was right – the story fitted in its new home like it was bred and buttered there. Which of course it was – Jayne Tremayne from Brisbayne.

Or Jane Smith with a y as she was then – in case you needed further evidence. It was Billie suggested giving her a more French-sounding name.

To spite the Wallaby wallah – less because he was right than because I was galled at him insulting my vocabula-babble – I didn't go back. I sent it to a different publisher.

You know the sort of bloke who always seems to have back-ache – he was in such dreadful pain and so down on it I was gobgasted when he said Sign this. I thought he was just giving me a two-cent lecture – how I should dice my fondness for five adjectives when three's more than plenty, ditch the paragraph that erotifies the skinny-dunk, and dip now and then into Roger's Free Saunas (I thought he said – I know what it is now but I'd honestly never heard of it).

It didn't do too too-bad, for a hardback. Enough for him to rub his lumbar and lecture me only briefly when I turned up with another. He wasn't shredding it. The lecture was about timing – and he was right.

How many letters have you had asking you when the next one's coming out?

I thought for a while ... None, I said.

Hold the sequel till your mailman's had to go to the osteopath. First, let's try putting her out in our illustrated softback series. You'll like our pulp editor, Robert – *he* thinks he's a pom as well.

By the way, d'you know any good illustrators?

His back-ache seemed a fair bit better by our next conflagration. The illustrious paperback had dived into the children's best-sellers list and dug in. It was there so long they thought of moving it to the adult list. With scrumlicious squiggles by my old college friend Sandy.

Actually we hadn't actually been friends. I liked her non-verbally from a quiet corner, in my usual way. But I knew what her friends *looked* like – there was an expedition of them in the student hall one time – affectionate little scratchings of pretty-titty gerbils, some with, some without.

Freckles I mean. They all had legs, obviously.

I always wished you'd wanted to doodle *mee*, I said, eventualleee, the evening we got back from grabbing the award. But of course ...

She lifted me on the bed and began undoing and arranging me, her shoulder-bag slipping sexy-lily off her ... shoulder. Me Tarzan, she said, and unzipped her pencil-case.

After that they didn't wait – the publishers I mean – they forgot all about time-timing and osteopaths. They were when-can-we-expecting me for the next one before I was off chapter four.

Nine years and eleven adventures of the intrepid two-leggy schoolgirl conchologist in hardback and ill-assorted paperback with reprints and Danish and Japanese translations and a telly series and some joker called Spielberg phoning me at all hours (OK, it's called nudging the credibilititty threshold) and talkie-speaks and interfeuds and a tremmemifying anything-can-happen phone-in *live* (nothing much happened) and three awards and meeting Amy Taylor, and a disastriate writer-in-residence shit at the Queensland Versammeltude Center, and those videos I mentioned, and here I am doing another ...

Alonza, the Portuguese fabric adviser who's into sexual feng-shui, has to be finished by twelve in order to fetch her uncle from the aquarium.

She arranges me on the bed. Unzips her wet-suit. Can she put some of these shells *on* you? says Barry.

I think for too long about saying I'm surrounded by em, isn't that ee-bloody-nuff?

She makes me a stringless necklace of cowries – Like in the story, she says – puts other shells here and there, on my belly and chest, priming the spots with a moist lip-hickey. They're my dragon points, she says. She's right, they are ...

The cowries rattle together and slide between my breasts, when she gets to my dragon's cave and makes me squimble. Shiver the shellfish.

But I'm not like my heroine – I'm not a shell collector. I know, the flat's full of the flipping things – I *know*. I can't help it, people send em because of the books. Schoolgirls write to me for advice about their dalai-lamas – are they lesbians? should they show boys their quim?

Shells are symbolic, apparently – well I didn't know. I was never the sort of girl who knew stuff like that. I'm nothing like Jayne Tremayne, nor Jane Norcross – my legs aren't nearly long enough for a start.

I don't say it; I don't usually say any of it, usually. What's the point in saying things?

Unt, do you haff zese ffantasies offten?

Pardon.

Pozing ffor ffetishist ffideos. Do you haff ze ffantasy offten?

Oh it's not a faffantasy doctor. I just don't know why I'm doing it.

Vhy do you zink you are doing it?

I don't b—burble-uddy know, I just told you, that's why I'm paying you for you quack.

No, I didn't say it. I thought silently for far too long and then bowed my head, feeling ashamed and word-shy and un ... adderquaint, as usual. *And*tichy and useless.

Though I do know the answer, actual-alley – I'm just not telling *him*. I do it piss-icely because the one one aspect of me I don't have an inferiosity contest about is my body – now there's some tichy-useless psycho-shit for you. Ever since I was nine I've *known* I was perspex.

I shouldn't have gone really – to the shrink I mean. I only went because Robert made me.



Like I said, I grew up in Hampshire (I may have drifted on occasion into Somersex, or Somothersex-shire). A Hampshire of my

imagination – or lack of it. The imaginary nation provided for me by my grandad's passion for Jane and her World.

I knew Sense and Sensibilititty before I had either, and Pride and Prejudice before I knew what preddajuce *tasted* like. That's the phrase that got a giggle at the acceptance screech for the Polly. I was glad of some reaction – *any* reaction.

I thought people awarding an award for fiction for teenage girls (I didn't bother pointing out the difference between for and about – I just grabbed the gong and banked the cheque) I thought they'd be a chattering gaggle of frizzle-haired hippies who'd never grown up and said gosh. It was the most starchy fidgety po-faced why-am-I-here our-father-were-chart-in-heaven audience I've ever had to thank my agent and thank my publisher and thank my postman in front of.

And a tickly arse-felt thankyou to my loveliful dee-liquorice nude-girl illustrator Sandy, without whom I certainly wouldn't be here ... as I can't drive. (Barely a titter.)

I think that's why they'd come for really – they all had someone they hoped was going to thank em, *or* else.

Next award – much posher doo, very letraset – entirely diffulent, everyone relaxed and uninformal, and probba-bubbly *on* something. I think they'd have loved a couple of titters.

It was right though, making it a tribute to my hero, or rather, my grandad's heroine. A tribute to him too, my Danish grandad. I'm pretty sure he'd never been to Hampshire either.

But in Dinmork when ar were a neepper, he said, there were nurthing to doo but reeed and milk the cooos; and nurthing any gurd to reeed but the inglish burks. That's what meed me want to curme to Østreeelia. (That got a laugh – or else my ridicuphone attempt at the accent.)

That's why ar meeed them give you the nurme. He said it to me a thundred-thousand times. Ar noo one deee mar heart would be proood. He said that only once, when I gave him the first transgression into Danish.

Of course as usual it wasn't my idea (making it about Jane and grandad). Billie took me to this one. She worked *so* hard, convincing me not to make it personal, not to mention the N-thing, not-to-mention not to mention the L-word – Legs. In the end I did it for her. And of course as usual she was right – or wrong.

It was the most personal shit I'd ever done in front of a herd of people dressed as penguins. It's called the pairasox of disengagement.

Chatting about Jane and grandad and imaginary Hampsters, and not about my *self*, came out more autobiogamous and autobiophulous and autobiographic, and autobio-jellylike and autobio-bottom-baring, than if I'd confessed everything and showed em my flippers – or my videos. I blubbered a quipple of times.

I'd thought it would be un-modest to be comparing myself to the thrice-greatest orsen that's ever scribbled. Billie countered, in her broadest Ipswich, You go start chucking off at yourself again and I'll chuck you off in the flickering Arbour (I think she said flickering – the presentation was in Sydney).

Then you can wiggle back to Moreton Bay like a little sperm, and know what it's *really* like to be tichy and useless.

No guessing which of us oughtra been the nozzle-wright. Billie can trade insults like John Cleese.

She's the sprog (in Billie-speak) of a coal miner turned gold prospector turned rich dead-bloke. She's better uneducated than me; she can do perfect pommy, like you'd think she was Emma Woodhouse. But she snorts in its face and adopts the persona of a lesbian factory-moron.

Except she's a car mechanic. She's only a dyke on her days off. At work she gets more spanner than a wonky wheel. (Yes, that's one of hers as well.) Parrently, men like having their nuts tightened by butch greasy girls with big bazoomers and dirty dungarees.

Where did Jayne Tremayne go wrong?



A dozen's enough-and-a-half though, *shirley*. I'm looking to dash-off something differnt, more immature, after this next one's scared the shrimps.

Damn right – smear the frockless bitch, Billie says. Revenge of the killer scallops. Sucked to death by an octopus (I think she said sucked).

Or by Louise, I said. I actually thought of it in time to say it.

Billie doesn't really want me to kill her though, really. She wants me to stop sidling away from the L-word – the *other* L-word – Louise. She wants Jayne Tremayne to come out.

I shake my head.

Bisextile, obviously, she says, all frogwomen should be swingers. Then we get to slobber and spurt over both – yer slurpy sixty-nine in the sleeping bag, and that first-ever-in-a-kids'-novel long-awaited sub-

aquatic docking-procedure with Robert. Sandy can draw knobs can't she?

I shake my head again, then change my mind and nod it. Denis, I say twinklyly.

What I should like to do is something more true to my Hampshire up-beginning, something more Summersexy.

My dad was well ashamed of how twenty-three years of saturation in the-english-novel-of-the-nineteenth-century could spawn nothing better than a schoolgirl adventure yarn set in the suburbs of Brisbane. Why ever didn't you set it in England sweetarse? he said.

So I'm thinking of going back, back to the land of lost incontinence, revisitating my abandoned infantile efforts. Which usually went something like this, usually – see what you think.

Proud and sensible Miss Jane Prendergooly, daughter of posh but impoverished Mrs Prendergooly and big-sister of the flighty Anastasia, finds the cold superiosity of the thinks-he's-handsome Mr FitzDayley (Lady Marcey's nephew) less than contemptible. Until he saves Nasty from the bounder Captain Billaricky, with whom she's eloped to Middlesex after losing her pimples to a cow-spanker, proving himself (Mr FitzDayley, that is) cruelly underestimated by the *now*secretly panting-for-it Jane. In spite of her poorishness and being so tichy, and of Lady Marcey's dee-termination to marry him to the squeaky socialite Honourable Marguerrina Cardigan (Duke Cardigan's granddaughter), the tallest girl in all Hampshire, Mr FitzDayley risks everything (fame, fortune, the family banana plantation near Wiltsex-excester, pronounced Wiltster) by declaring his arse irrevoltingly entailed to Miss Prendergooly, who may be as harsh and as haughty a custodian of it as she pleases or flush it down the flipping dunny, he says, it will not alter its bestowal upon her gratuitis in perpetuitum. She melts of course. But only when she hears he's had his legs amputated after rescuing a koala from a burning lighthouse.

That final scene was my masterpeach, my coup-de ... something-or-other. Seventeen and I'd reached my littery apple-tree – slowly going pear-shaped since.

I dare say the middle bits weren't as sharp, but they could be twittled. Toings and frooings in dinky little horse-drawn carriages between Hampshire and 'Town' via Stonehenge; and digressive descriptions of the bright-green sheep-spotted Anglo-Australian downland that stretches for eleven-hundred-and-fifty-two miles between the Prendergoolys' cottage in Barleywick-cum-Dumbleford (or was it Barleyford-cum-Dumblewick) and Mr FitzDayley's palatial bungalow amid the eucalyptus trees of Carmondlecestersley Park (pronounced Cumsexy).

You mean you'd ditch Ginger-muff to resuscitate this twaddle? You cunt.

Well I know – I bowed my head – but I've got to move on Bill. And I want to pay tribute to my little-hairy roots. And to my grandad, who loved the English twaddle so much, even in Denmark.

Jane the best tribute to all these fart-retaining politeness-fetishists you grew up stifled with is what you've done with Jayne. Jayne the freckled conchologist – spunky, sexy, and smart as an onion. Free to be who she is. You've created something new and fresh and meaningful for your own age dammit.

I know, you're right, I said sulkily. Tough criticism's just what I need right now.

⌘

She's been fourteen for nine years – how old does that make her?

I thought for a while ... Thirty-seven?

Well there you are then. Legs Tremayne at thirty-seven. Ph.D. from Brisbane Uni – *Doctor* Tremayne. Fellow of Bananaland Academy of Sciences. Director of marine zoology and tourism at Mermaid Cove Aquatic Themepark and Marina. Well I'm sorry Tadpole, development's imperative, lonely beauty-spots can't last for ever.

Drives a four-by-four; friend of Kim Beazley; freshly divorced from Robert ...

Steady as a fish on stilts – but maybe a kind of mid-life moment? Can't help wondering where Louise is now, hasn't stuck her digit in the dyke in decades. And whatever happened to that whatsisface, hasn't seen The Gimp in years. Hasn't gone for a skinny in yonks. Hasn't had a wank in the water in a while ... Returns to the ocean to rediscover herself, come to terms with maturity, the onset of middle age, the drooping of the boobs.

Thanks very much Robert.

Fantastic make-over role for a fortyish actress everyone thinks is washed-up. Or Kylie. Off with the togs and she's back on the cover of Maxim, all wet.

I thought silently – not about the cover of Maxim. About the divorce idea, I said, sheepily.

Yes. He said it in his brisk businessy way, as if okaying a new nudie-doodle.

Was it Sandy?

He shook his head. I haven't *been* unfaithful to you Tadpole. I'm just sick of answering your phone. I'm sick of being Mister Orsen, or Mister Tremayne. I'm sorry, I just am. We'll stay friends. (He did a little laugh.) And you won't have to pay me *much* alimony.

No, I said, I didn't mean that Robert. I meant, was it my affair with Sandy? Because honest—

You mean you've had an affair with her as *well*? He sounded genuinely stone-the-lizards, though I thought he knew.

As well as who? I didn't need to say it. He suddenly looked as guilty as Willoughby and Wickham rolled into one, never mind Captain Billaricky. Then he made me jump by expluttering with laughter and spit.

I didn't laugh. I bowed my head as usual, and my eyes filled up – I think he was too wrapped up in irony to notice. Then I nodded, and kept on noddying. OK, I said, when I could manage it ... OK.

I'd refused each time you see, before, each time he'd asked me, about splitting up.

Funny – I loved him more just then than I think I had, I think. I hadn't really, I'd just forsumed you're supposed to do it with a bloke. We'd drifted together. It was to do with him being English, with a capital I – though he said he was from Perth. He'd always been everso nice to me, everso. And not limp, in spite of his floppy nicknames – definitely more Rutland than Wiltshire. It was my fault it went dog-eared, as usual.

Like Billie said, At least he didn't bin your arse and bugger off with your records; at least he was Hampshire enough to ask – the fart-brained rat's-turd.

He ruffled my furry orange with his big strong hand. A tear or twelve dripped on to my foot-rest. I don't think he noticed.

He was right, I *should*-oughter go swim-swimming again. The people who help you in-and-out, they're very nice. They always make kindly jokes that aren't funny. I used to go regulously, before I was famous.

Of course you can't go nude-nude, at the lido I mean. But it was the most beautifying, liberalising, empowdering experience in my life, going in the water. If you'll pardon the shortage of adjectives.

That wasn't where it started though. I have to give him his due – it was my dad first induced me, first enticed me in. And straight under too – no half-measures. It was my dad, of all people, who magicuted me into something ... magicute.

He tried to give it all the thrill of a sexpedition, that day – like Jayne in the books. But I was never an easy child.

It'll be great, he said. I know this quiet little beach, all hidden away. We used to go as lads, finding big ugly shells. The water's warm when you get in. You'll love it sweetpee.

I haven't g— ... I haven't g—got a s—sss—wizmut, I said.

You don't need a swimsuit out there Jane – you've got the ocean to clothe you.

I suppose I looked less than unimpressed.

Come along for my sake then sugarbum, he said, keep me company while I get you a shell. You needn't go in if you don't want to – you can sit on the sand and watch.

It was the most idyllic, lonely little cove. Your arse leapt just to see it. The blue water contained a handful of fluffy clouds. Gentle ripples of wave slopped sloppily on to the sand and disappooed.

He carried *me* in one arm and the pickernic basket in the other.

He stripped to his hairy-bear birthday-suit and stuck the snorkel in his mouth, like a peace-pipe. The other one he chucked down beside me.

It'd mean a lot to me if you'd come in with me, but I'll say no more than that. I shan't go further than that rock – he pointed – you'll see me, I'll give you a wave.

He waded in, and when the water was up to his willy he leaned forward into it and glided under, down into the blue blue sky. A minute or four later he bobbed up not far from the rock and waved.

I waved back and smiled. Under he went. I was happy nuff.

I thought about it though – I was always good at that, at thought-thinking, at feeling feelings, at hesitate-itate-itating. And what I was feely-feeling was ... inevitroubly, guilty, as well as tichy and useless, for not going along with his attempt to seduce me in.

I don't think I was scared of it; though I did expect I'd just flump to the bottom like the sort of lump I knew I was.

I was very reluctipants, you see – all my childhood till that day – to concede anything to being anything but a downright useless lump: ugly, gormless, defective, tichy and, I think I may have mentioned it, useless.

On the other hand, how was I a more useful sort of lump just sitting on the sand like a jellyfish? how much flipping gorm did that take?

Would he really be trying to tempt me in if there wasn't something spelicious about it? It looked invitin-tintingle, as he surfaced and waved again, held something up triumphously, and swam back across the splashy sky.

He sat by me, all wet, and put a handful of tiny little shells down. Enough there to make you a pretty necklace, when we get back, he said. Then he opened his other hand. A smallish, reddish-coloured conch – it was weird, I think I gasped at its uglitude, or else at the improbahood of his having found anything so extra-horny.

It's yours sugarplumbing. Thanks for coming with me.

I held it in my hand. It was obscene. It had spikey bits.

No one will know you didn't dive for it and find it yourself.

I looked into his eyes. He meant it kindlyly – or did he? Yes they b—bare-luddy will. I didn't say it of course, at that age, I couldn't have got past the bee.

Instead I handed it back to him and gathered my little frock in my two little hands and pulled it off over my little head in one defiant woosh – defiant of my own little stubbiness, that is. My little vest came with it. Then I held my little arms towards him.

He looked everso pleased. Picked me up, as he always did, as if I was nothing in a bag, kissed me on my furry orange (as he used to call it), shoved the snorkel in my gob and trotted with me straight into and straight under the water. Straight under.

It wasn't like I'd expecteded at all. I thought I wouldn't be able to see; I thought he'd have to grip me consternately, keep me from sinking, push me around like a stupid toy boat.

He supported me at first, of course he did, dads are like that – they've got this dread of you drifting off to Chile.

But soon he relaxed his hold, balancing me like a beach-ball. He showed me a movement of the arms, with the hand in a particular perzish. I imitated it. He took his hand clean away ...

The water *was* warm, just like he said. And you could see so clear underneath it. It wasn't deep. All sorts of interesty things lay on the bottom – seaweeds and ferny things and big pebbles, and fish pretending to be big pebbles.

I didn't sink. I was flotsam – I wasn't a useless lump at all. I was a puffin. I could move, all by myself. I could actually actually make myself move, by leaning, and wiggling, and paddling my hands.

Light as a leaf I was, svelte as Sally Markham, athletic as Annette Kellerman – and brave like her too. Buoyish as a jellyfish, bare-arsed as Aphro-dy-titty.

Well I was once my pants dropped off and set sail down the coast. Dad laughed. I didn't give a kookaburra. It seemed perfectly OK. It seemed right.

We surfaced near the rock. Now, sugarplops, he said, I found the little conch round here. How about seeing if you can spot another? Under we went.

I'd forgotten about shells till then. For I was discovering something a heap more fizzly – I was discovering not that the ocean clothed me, but that it liberated me.

I was Flipper released into the wild – I didn't have to be picked up or plonked or pushed any more, I moved by myself. I glided, I did, I rolled over, and over, I stretched my arms.

I felt absa-flippin-lute ... I was going to say divine. I know it's all clichés. But I'd never felt so pretty, so perfect, so complete, so feminine, so free. Nor never so loved. Every inch of me felt and was felt. The very element I was *in* found me irresistibly beauty-cutie.

Clothed by the ocean my bum! I was stripped bare, licked barer, and ravished shameless by the big wet nympho.

I don't know how long we swam and swom and dived and dove and floated and flouted and flitted, and weren't useless. It belongs with the eternal, it wasn't bounded by time. We're probly still there – printed on the water for ever, showing up as ghosts in the moonlight. Suspension of mortalititty, it's called, the fallacy of timelessnessness.

I didn't want to come out. But every dream lands you on the beach. The water becomes shallow, your lumpitude reclaims you, you crawl back into your earthly curse.

It wasn't though – not any more. I wasn't cursed any more. For now I knew ...

We emptied the tucker-basket granny had sent along with us. I sat on the sand, dried by the sunlight, dazzled by the ocean, utterly elated, utterly nude, utterly ... utterly-utterly. And I gazed from my dad's smiling eyes to *my* conch-shell – my very own. The *bigger*, and *better*, and *uglier*, and *spikier*, and *sexier* one I'd found myself, I'd swam and dived for myself.

Eee-bloody-mazing. A ruby-dazzler.

It was, it was astonnifying, I was so proud of it. It was the greatest achievement of my life – to have dove to the bottom of the ocean and found something so fantabulously grotastic.

But shells are symbolic, I'm told. Naughty-nautical symbolical. And so it was. It was symbolic of a deal-and-a-half more.

I'd gone to the bottom of the ocean and found something fantabuful indeed – I'd found my ... my *self*.

I'd found Jayne Tremayne, if you like to see it that way. I'd undiscovered a better person within me.

What did I tell you sugarbum, he said after a while. You've found your element there Jane. Like you were born in the ocean.

He leaned over and ruffled my furry orange with his big strong hand.

You've made me so proud sweetarse. How many dads can say they've swam with a beautiful mermaid?

I looked down at my flippers. They *were* – they were suddenly beautickle and cuticle and you-tickle – those ridiculump addenda dangling from my bum where other kids have legs.

I *wasn't* a tichy useless lump or a gimp or a spaz, or Sally the Snail or Freda the Frog at all – like everybody thought. I was a mermaid.

Dad was right. I was a beautifrocked mermaid. I really really was. I was a bare-bare bare-luddy amphibian! My entire self-image transmorphed in that moment. I'd been bare-born anew – and bare-bare baptised – and this time I came out right.

My dad and the water healed me that day, cured my negatichy body-image for good, cast me from the cursed world into my true elephant, a creature of the ocean.

I can honestly say, from that afternoon – pratt-tickly inconvenient though it is, being a wheelie, of course it is, it's shit, and quiet-lily self-deprecating as I am, by nature, I can't help who I am – but I can honestly say that from that magiful afternoon I never for another instant, ever in my life, have felt physic-alley image-disadvantaged, ugly or unfeminine-in, for not having legs.

I didn't need legs – I was a mermaid.

I gave Jayne legs *not* to make her complete, or normal, or pretty-pretty. I gave em to her to allow her to be that better *person* I'd found inside me – a tool to unlock her little padlocks, to weigh her anchors, to launch her on her adventuresome life. With legs, I knew someone like Jayne Tremayne, dis-enshacked from being me, would not only be able to swim – she would soar.

And I gave Jayne Tremayne, Schoolgirl Conchologist, to freckled or swotty or insecure or tichy or useless girls everywhere, human and mermaid.

It's all down to what my dad gave me that day. Thanks dad – I wouldn't *bee* here without you. Oh and, stick around, I need a lift back as well ...

And thanks again to the A.double-W.G. for humouring me with your award.

