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TROJAN HOGS

A novella

AND SUPPORTING EXEGESIS

JODIE DABER

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts by Research

September 2009

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Trojan Hogs

Jodie Daber

Birthday Cake

Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me, happy birthday dear Clovis, happy birthday to me. It's the big three-oh and it is going to be a delicious day. I breakfasted on hardboiled eggs all painted up like bees and seasoned with salt from the store in my trouser pockets, and little fish biting their own tails. Later I will go and see Poor Betty, get in my cups and look at her things and at her, but now I am at home about to start preparing for the feast. Around the sofa on which I sit, piquing my appetite with a mug of Advocaat, there is a moat of detritus, furry cups and clotted tissues, bottles both full and dead, eggshells and bones and a Pompeii of ash. Some fecund kind of mould pelts the walls and it is cold so I tend to sleep in my clothes and drink to excess. All the wallpaper is woodchip, and it looks to me like a million tiny people falling from the sky. I love my home. Houses are very important. People and houses are the same. Everybody is like a house inside, with cellars and secret passageways, noises in the eaves at night and infestations in the skirting. Everybody has somebody shackled to a radiator inside them.

To get to my house you go down a side street in between a takeaway and a travel agent, past the door of Soundz Niteclub, down an alley and there you are, in a dark, dark place where the sun doesn't shine and where revellers go to vomit. The club is open five nights. Its clientele often nip down here to get up to no good and when I'm in the big room I can hear them all under the door. Last night I heard a girl crying in the alley. I can't believe he's being such a twat, she sobbed, and her friend said I know and then they shared a cheeky

spliff before the queue. Later on another girl said get it in get it in and a boy said it is in and I laughed out loud.

It is like beach-combing out there. Sometimes you can find pounds that have fallen from the pockets of dropped trousers, or packs of ready-mades which I don't like but can use and almost every day I find a bit of kebab or burger to supplement my breakfast. Once I found a pair of tights, flesh-coloured, rolled down and kicked off as though a slut had shed her skin. Phones are my favourites, especially camera-phones, and purses with photos and love notes inside. Poor Betty was out there somewhere, in her fuck-me heels and vintage frock, staring backwards through her knees and showing all her gums.

I bet it was Poor Betty who stuck the envelope to my door. I went out earlier for milk and Gentleman's Relish and there it was, fastened to the door with a length of blue insulation tape. My name was written on the front, in black biro capitals. The envelope was empty. Poor Betty is playing a little birthday trick on me, disguising her handwriting just to freak me out, like the time at hers when she went downstairs to collect the takeaway and then came running back up saying there were two policemen at the door asking for me. I'm ashamed to say I completely blew my cool, running to the window and swearing, and Poor Betty laughed at me and said what have you got to hide, you naughty thing? It looks like she's really pressed down hard with the pen - the paper is slightly ripped in some places - and the envelope smells funny too, kind of gamey.

My house is like a peat bog. Things disappear under the strata of stuff and reappear ages later, preserved but blackened, like Vikings. There is glory in mess, in dirt, a stinking shambolic magic that gets under your fingernails and leaves your skin all sticky. I don't wash myself much and I haven't since I was small, since my mother would try and tempt me into the bath with rubber ducks and bubbles. The sound of bubbles popping in my ears

annoyed me like knuckles cracking, and I would only get wet in the rain. Poor Betty wears layers of perfume – scented baths, dusting powder, lotions, deodorants, body-sprays and dabs of the pure stuff behind her ears and knees and just above her pubic hair, but I can still smell her cunt, because I know it is there. I want people to smell me. I love the way I smell and I love my body's excretions, like the faithful love the tears of milk that fall from holy statues' eyes. I like to pick myself, and I cultivate crusts for the purpose, crispy frills of dried skin on my lips, little burrs of shit, froth at the pits, scabs and scratchings, snot and scum. When people smell me they are inhaling me, tiny particles of my body and what comes out of it, and then I am inside them. It is an invasion.

The smells of my house are handed to me like a bouquet every time I walk through my door. Abiding charcoal, historic fat, the dirty-sweet stink of bad meat, the cloy of old bin, the base-notes of cold must and the top-notes of me, and weaving it all together the smell of whatever I last cooked in my small but well-equipped kitchen. Melted fats have escaped from the bottom of the oven, dripped to the floor and hardened in layers like browning stalactites. Every surface is at the same time sticky, greasy, gritty and dusty. You could write your name in the deposits above the hob. The wall there is a kind of yellow that, were it a paint, would be called something like 'Tropical Sunset', but which because it is natural can only be called 'Cumulative Neglect'.

On the far wall, opposite the door, I have my sink, my cooker, a countertop with cupboards above and below and my fridge-freezer which is bigger than me. My table stands in the middle of the room with one chair at its head, and against the wall on the right sags my broken-backed sofa, so knackered that when you sit in it your knees are higher than your head. The lino is dark brown, almost black in places with grease and spills that have formed a tarry layer. Here and there are scorch marks as though a hot pan had been left on the floor, and holes cut or ripped through to the wood beneath, and everywhere there are cigarette butts

and their accompanying burns. The rubbish is epic. Empty tins, half full tins with caps of fluffy mould, food wrappers and boxes, peelings and leavings, skins and crusts, bones and feathers and many things that have no place in a kitchen at all, like a toilet brush, nail clippers, a trainer, some jigsaw pieces and a dog collar. Somehow there are always more dead bluebottles than I have ever seen live ones. I use them like cloves.

I take food very seriously. I am a gourmet, an epicurean. There's always something soaking or setting in my cupboards and my pantry is crammed. Every food means something different and what you eat can change you. If you eat enough rabbit you can see behind you without turning your head. Honey lasts forever and so to spread it on your toast is to eat the future. Bone soup is an aphrodisiac. You should never skimp on ingredients, you must use real toad in your toad-in-the-hole, real shepherds in your shepherd's pie. I would never dream of serving upside-down-cake unless my guests were hanging helpless from the ceiling by their manacled ankles.

As soon as I moved into this house I commandeered the large downstairs bathroom to use as my pantry, ripped out the fittings and started to fill it in earnest. A packed pantry is the key to happiness. Let the bombs fall. I have twenty tins of corned beef, I can deal with anything. My pantry is stocked floor to ceiling and sometimes I go in there and run my fingers over the tins of pease pudding, sild, ready fried onions and baked beans with mini-sausages, the jars of pickled eggs, pickled cockles, pickled walnuts and gherkins of all sizes, the ingenious squeeze bottles of treacle and salad crème, the boxes of suet and instant mash, the three dustbins that hold my salt, sugar and flour, the strings of smoked sausages and strips of my unparalleled home-made jerky hanging from the ceiling. Once in a while I sleep in there on a bed made from wrapped blocks of lard. In the night they soften with my body heat and mould to my shape. It really is the most comfortable thing, and so what if they leak a

little and I wake up greased – if someone broke in to kill me, they'd never get a purchase. Safety first.

Sleeping in different places gives you more interesting dreams. My childhood bed enveloped me like a woman and I shunned it, sleeping instead under it instead or in the shed or the attic or the wardrobe or on the kitchen table. My mother tried to scare me with talk of monsters that would catch me and eat me if I wasn't tucked up safe and sound in bed, but I just looked her in the eye and told her that the monsters were more afraid of me than I was of them. Now I divide my sleep between the sofa, the cellar and the floor. I have no bed and I don't go upstairs much.

Upstairs there are two bedrooms so full of mould and mildew that the air is powder. There is a bathroom, too, with a bath where I keep my rat-king of clothes, and a toilet like a black throat. I painted the seat lipstick red when I moved in, a small concession to interior decorating. I smashed the bathroom mirror. I do not need a mirror. I know what I look like. Most people cannot conjure up a clear picture of their own face. I can. I see myself clear as day. Next to the toilet I keep my library. Everything I need to know about the world I learned from the *New Illustrated Universal Reference Book*, published in 1933 and taken by me from a charity shop in town. Stealing is sweet, stealing from charity even sweeter. The other books I own are *How Fishes Live*, *Cooking With Gelatine*, *The Reader's Digest Book of Strange Stories and Amazing Facts* and a biography of Fanny Cradock.

I'm a big fan of Fanny. Those gowns! That migrating lipstick! Those imperious and yet utterly ludicrous eyebrows! All I need to do is close my eyes and I can see her, viciously plucking the skin away from a chicken so that she might stuff mushrooms beneath, saying that as one was doing the same at home, one should think about that woman whom one doesn't like but to whom one is too well bred to say anything. I doff my cap to anyone who

thinks it is acceptable to use 'harmless vegetable dye' to colour hardboiled eggs a lurid blue and then serve them topped with mayonnaise and a jaunty anchovy scarf. She had so much more elegance than these modern chefs and her eccentricities were not nearly so forced. Not like Austin Aspinall, that wanker.

Clovis is my family name, and I'm keeping it so that one day I might disgrace it. The house I grew up in was called Pleasant View and it was down a dirt track that grew a spine of grass and nettles down the middle where car tyres didn't go. Me and my best mate William would walk down it with our feet in the muddy gullies at either side, straddling a verdant, stinging serpent. The view that was so pleasant was the hill that sloped down to the valley bottom with its pubic tangle of trees and the river that ran through them, the river I told William held catfish as big as men and freshwater squid with armfuls of toothy holes. The river flowed into a sucking culvert that gripped all the local children in a morbid fascination. It was William's second greatest fear, that he would be dragged down into that abyssal hole, hauled through the underground passages and spat out at the other end, where the river emerged winking from the mouth of a tunnel in the Garlic Woods, amongst the foundations of the dead mills.

I always think of William on special occasions. He was my first and best friend. He was shorter than me, and bigger. His thighs rubbed together when he walked, and I used to spend wall-eyed hours dreaming of the redness, the rawness he must hide there, in between his chubby legs. I met him at Nursery School, and that first day we had rice pudding at dinner, topped with a blob of raspberry jam. William ate his pudding from the outside in, leaving the jam for last. I waited until he was nearly there, and then stole the last mouthful. He cried, and I opened my lips and let the jam squirt out of the gap in my teeth.

William was a doughy, girly boy, pink and white with nothing in his pockets. We went swimming every Saturday. You've got tits, Willy, I would shout, tits like an old dog's teats, and the other lads would cheer me on with hoots and grunts as I grabbed at his legs under the water. William always wore goggles because the chlorine hurt his eyes. Underneath the water I could hear voices like fish and the liquid trill of the Lifeguard's whistle. Underneath the water I saw William tied to the mast of a pirate ship, his podgy body bound with ropes, William walking the plank, falling down to the fishes. After our swim we always had chips, licking the salt off our fingers on the bus home.

Of course I didn't want to be like William, but I didn't want to be like the other boys either – I couldn't see myself charging round the playground pretending to be a jet and I never felt the slightest inclination to kick a ball about. I did not want to be like anything, although for a while I thought I might like to be a goblin. Goblins have sacks with things in them and they are clammy to the touch. I thought I would be good at goblin things, hanging around in caves being malevolent, tangling myself up in little girls' hair and leaving it befouled. I didn't know what they ate, but I assumed it was cattle or honeycomb or baby teeth, that it was goblins not fairies who insinuated themselves under your pillow, under your tender-gummed head, and the coin from your parents was compensation because they knew what the goblins did, they knew, but they didn't tell you. Goblins appealed to me – furtive and malformed, clumping about in big boots fucking things up for princesses. I wanted to wear a bellhop's uniform or a nappy made from sacking, to break into people's houses and unnerve them, to clamber naked onto the rooftops and cavort and be legend.

All over my house there are my things. Poor Betty collects her virgins, furs, pictures of women in various states of bondage and undress, novelty erasers and things patterned with cherries. I collect things I find on the floor and I nest amongst them like a maleficent magpie. The stuff is banked so high that you have to walk across its surface like a dirty Jesus. My

mother used to say that if you lost something you cared about it would be waiting for you in heaven. She was wrong. If you live in this town and you lose something, chances are it is in my house, as far away from heaven as you can get.

I have always found treasures, everywhere I go. I dug up a dolly once, in the Garlic Woods. A tiny pottery poppet, its hair a dull lacquered cap and no clothes on over its protruding belly and chubby little bottom. Its face was deformed by wart-like flaws in the glaze, one above each painted eye and one next to the rosebud mouth. It had no hands or feet, just angled stumps where they had broken off. I told William I could see through its warts and made him keep it with him so I could spy on him. The poppet smelled meaty and sour and William complained that it burned his palm. Another early treasure was in the bushes by the side of the road home from school, wavy with damp and colonised by small spiders and tiny red mites. It was instantly my best thing and I kept it secret and safe up my jumper all the way home. The bugs crawled off it and on to me and I was the same as it, I was an illicit find, a bushful of filth, something ugly and yet totemic, with the power to change the world. I didn't look inside until I had got home and set the scene, drawn the curtains and stolen a leftover chop from the fridge. I sucked cold meat and turned pages both powdery and damp with mould and there they were, my girls, all spread like butter, on their backs or propped on knees and shoulders or bent over things, like none of them had the strength to stand up straight. Each girl was an elaborate frame around the same red abstract. Each girl was an object, a morsel, posed. William hated the magazine, and the others I found later. He blushed so deeply when he read the few lewd words out loud that I think now that it's a wonder he wasn't permanently stained.

You can't embark on a feast of this magnitude with only hours to go. There are a few things that I had to make earlier secreted about the house. As any chef will tell you, the secret to preparing a large meal is organisation. You must start with a tidy kitchen, because a tidy kitchen is a tidy mind. Accordingly, the first thing I do is sweep everything off the table and onto the floor and then kick it towards the walls, the bowls and cups and pans all full of galloping mould, scraps of paper – some stuck so tight to the surface that they seemed to have been varnished over and have to be picked off individually, clotted forks and knives and spoons, empty cans slowly rusting, crusts of bread and potato peelings and other unidentifiable foodstuffs, cigarette butts and dead matches, three small bits of circuit board that I like to find because they look like tiny towns, a bridal doll that I found in a skip and brought home and left on the table when I discovered a family of earwigs living in her bloomers, a primed mousetrap and twelve empty bottles.

I inspect the surface of the table and pull a few hairs out of the grease. Hair is the only thing I won't eat. There are a couple of pennies stuck there as well, so I throw them into the sofa for safekeeping and then I set out my stall. Everybody has some little everyday ritual that calms them and this is mine. For Poor Betty it is her toilet, which I love to watch. She sits at her dressing table in her anachronistic slip and puts on her makeup like she's filling in a form. My mother had her ironing and *The Archers* and William had his secret bathroom weeps. I cook.

I liked to watch William eat. I liked to watch William eat the things I gave him. He had a sweet-tooth, of course, and I indulged it. The ultimate shame is shame of the body, the undeniable and ever-present. From an early age William would blush at his dimpled thighs, the spillage of his stomach over the waistband of his trousers. I loved the lines his clothes made, the angry bands of red, the indentations where the fabric held him in against his will. When he stripped they gouged out ghost clothes, described in chafed and glowing stripes the

outlines of his underwear, the day's discomfort pressed into his flesh. I was always lean and hard, but William you could lose things in, he could have smuggled diamonds in the folds of him, the folds I made and measured. Watching a fat person eat is both repulsive and compelling; even more so when they are weeping.

There are to be five courses. The starter is setting in the cupboard under the sink, so the first job is the soup. The stock is already in a large pan on the hob. I have boiled down the carcasses of a blackbird, a pigeon and two magpies for luck, with an onion, a pomegranate, twelve heads of garlic and a goodly dose of salt. Lesser chefs would have removed the bones, but I know they are where the goodness is. The stock has turned to pinky-grey jelly in the bottom of the pan, but it tastes delicious, and so I turn on the heat and poke at it with my wooden spoon as it thins, then take the end of a rolling pin to the big bits of skeleton, until a kind of lumpy, spiky paste is formed. I add a squeezey bottle of treacle from the pantry and a good slosh of Advocaat, as it is to hand and compliments almost all flavours, then turn down the heat and let it simmer. I won't add the liver until just before I serve.

The cake, of course, is paramount. It's the focal point of the whole party. A good birthday cake should be either witty or sophisticated, and should always reflect the personality of the birthday boy or girl. It should elicit gasps of wonder from the guests and, like a really beautiful girl, it should be almost a shame to cut into it. As this year is a milestone birthday I thought I would ceremonially put away childish things by creating what I have christened The Amazing Puerile Pudding. Into the mixing bowl go three bags of flour and two dozen eggs. A lot of people will tell you that you should always crush eggshells before you throw them away or witches will use them as flying machines. I just throw the whole egg in the bowl and have done with it. To the eggs and flour I add two pounds of winkles, the same of faggots and a punnet of Eat Me dates. This tickles me so much that I

have to stop and have a cigarette before I can go on. I make a mess getting it all into the cake tins, slopping the stuff all down my front, then whack the tins in the oven and turn it on full. There's nothing more comforting than the smell of home baking.

I set a tray with two glasses, a stub of candle in an eggcup and a bottle of Bollinger. No knives and forks because I prefer fingers. The starter itself – the foot-long Aspic Rabbit studded with baby octopuses and glistening beneath its jazzy crust of hundreds and thousands -balances precariously, overhanging the edge of the tray. With that final bout of activity, another slug of Advocaat and one last fag, it is time to party. I've got crusting smears of cake all down my jumper and around my mouth from where I've licked the spoon, there are bones in my turn-ups and bits of faggot in my hair. I have always believed in dressing for dinner. I throw my cigarette end into the soup, muscle the table out of the way, remove the requisite lino tiles and open the trapdoor.

I have an affinity with cellars. I had to be sure that this house had one before I moved in. My dream house would be an abandoned underground railway station, the silence of the tiles punctuated only by the tunnels clearing their throats. I would love to get into the sewers and reign over the rats. The cellar I have now is perfect for my requirements. It is one large room with flickering strip-lights and one whole wall of shelving. Here and there are little drifts of junk – planks and guttering and a couple of stolen street signs – and in the middle of the room there is a large table, the twin of the one upstairs, with two spindly chairs. There is even a convenient sink, and the chest freezer that is my pride and joy. The best thing, though, is the girl tied up in the far corner on a bare mattress mended so many times it is more gaffer tape than cloth.

Sausage Ends

Two years ago I was obsessed with stealing meat. I scatted in the bins outside butchers' shops, I sewed secret pockets inside my Parka so I could shoplift steaks and whole strings of sausages, like a carnivorous clown doing the handkerchief trick in reverse. To me, nothing tasted better than meat I shouldn't have. Once or twice I even mugged a student for his kebab. I would take my hoard home and eat it, naked and crowing. This meaty hobby is how I came to work at the cafe opposite the bus station, a place of unrelenting grimness staffed by disappointed women with hands full of sovereign rings and mouths like cats' bottoms. Pensioners and people-casings congregated there, queuing up with plastic trays for dehydrated sausage dinners or stew slopped from the crusted bain-maries. It was my job to collect the dirty plates and shove them, still on the tray, down a long, covered tunnel to the washer-uppers in the kitchen. I filled my pockets with the tough, wrinkly sausage ends that the old dears' false teeth wouldn't let them tackle. I ate the little nippy things in the toilet to keep me going until I could get home to the beef slices in my pants. The staff in the kitchen could not have been further from my mind until she came, the girl in my cellar. I was not so foolhardy as to approach her. She lasted only three weeks at the cafe and then she was gone. One of the other sink-monkeys told me she didn't like what the water was doing to her hands. I left soon after that. I grew disillusioned with sausages. I had seen a job advertised, waiting on in a posh restaurant, and I thought that this might lead me to a better class of meat.

I learned a lot in my time at that cafe. I learned that mushy peas are a powerful adhesive, that hair-nets suit no-one and that if you work around old people nobody notices how bad you smell. Most importantly, though, I learned that staff lockers are extremely easy to break into, and that girls carry in their handbags more personal information than is entirely sensible. From her handbag I found out her name, which was Gemma or Laura or something like that, her address, the university course she was on (textile design), her bank details, what

her boyfriend and friends looked like, that she had a three-year contraceptive implant and that she smoked Marlboro Lights. I waited a year, watching idly in between other projects, and then one night I bumped into her in town when she was drunker than she should be and separated from her friends, and it only took two minutes to convince her that she knew me.

When I first got her she would turn her face to the stone wall and rub and rub as if she were trying to rub it clean off and make a mooing noise that I could hear from upstairs where I sat in the nude with a plate of sandwiches watching her parents' snotty appeals on the telly that I bought specially, getting crumbs in my pubes and particularly relishing the tongue. According to the ham-faced copper on the box, she was last seen in the company of a slightly built man in a navy blue Parka who, of course, was me.

I set the tray down on the cellar table and look around with a deep, homecoming sigh at my favourite place in the world. I once asked Poor Betty where her favourite place was and, predictably, she said her bed. William's favourite place was the classroom, because it was the one place I couldn't get him. He volunteered for all sorts of extra-curricular activities; he stayed in at break to water plants and clean blackboards and he even learned the recorder, much to the amusement of our classmates, but I was always prepared to wait. He was a willing sheep in every nativity play except for one year when the teacher took pity on him and the Angel Gabriel broadcast the joyous news with a podgy, fidgeting companion. I did not participate in the plays. The teachers found it best not to press the point. When I asked the girl in my cellar to tell me her favourite place she just said anywhere, please, anywhere. But, to be fair, I didn't take her for the conversation.

On the shelves in the cellar I keep the tools of my trade. Some of them are the same as the ones in the kitchen – the spatula, the crab cracker, the meat mallet, lemon reamer and

basting syringe. The knives, of course. Then there are things that I only ever use in the cellar, like clothes-pegs, mousetraps and fly-paper. There's a box of tampons and some rolled up bandages piled up like snowballs, tubes of Deep Heat and pots of Vaseline. The plunger kept rolling off the shelf, so I keep it on the floor now. One shelf is dedicated to the things I need when I work away from home; copies of *The Watchtower*, a fake arm cast, a couple of wigs and bags of hair and dust from other people's houses.

I light the candle with my lighter and a flourish and turn to the girl in the corner. The way her arms are tied to the hook in the wall above her mattress reveals her armpits and the fact that she could do with a shave. When I open the champagne I can't resist aiming the cork at her, but it comes out cock-eyed and only catches her a glancing blow on the elbow. She starts to fret and low. I fill two glasses, drink one straight down and take the other to my friend. I untape her mouth briskly. If you do it slowly, it hurts a lot more, but I am eager to get on. I tip back her head and fill her full of fizz. I can see her teeth, once glacial and now burnt toast and old bones. She gulps and leaks and sneezes once, like a cat. I pet her head, smoothing the long blonde hair. Wisps come away on my fingers. She doesn't know that it is my birthday. I have been keeping that for a surprise. When I tell her she will be joining me at the table for a celebratory dinner, her eyes roll right back. The table is her least favourite place in the world.

Disgust and sexual arousal are very similar things; both involve an involuntary physical reaction prior to any physical contact with the object that inspires them, and both can be triggered by any of the senses. William had a very low disgust threshold and his disgust was indistinguishable from fear. Custard skin, raw fish, the sound of somebody clearing their sinuses, dog mess, flies; all of these things and more would cause first full body shudders and then flight, if he was in a position to fly. I learned early on in my career that disgust is a much more effective weapon than pain. You will still be gagging at a disgusting memory

long after you have forgotten the pain of a punch. Poor Betty – even though her ‘hobbies’ suggest that she has no sense of disgust whatsoever – will actually gag at the sight of me preparing my miracle hangover cure of gin and a raw egg. Eggs are very raw; they haven’t even become what they are supposed to be. Oysters, of course, are even rawer, they are still alive. People are selective about what they will eat raw. A nice, rare steak is great, sushi is fine, but not many people will risk raw chicken. People worry that if they eat certain things, they will get sick, but I will eat anything at all, and I’m OK. Better than OK – the eyes may be the windows to the soul, but the mouth is the gateway to the will, and if you can eat a slug, you can do pretty much anything.

The girl in my cellar is very susceptible to disgust as well. When I have manhandled her to the table and secured her to the chair she takes one look at the Aspic Rabbit and bursts into a fit of tears that completely ruins her rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’. She watched her figure before she came and then I watched it for her. She said she liked being hungry because it made her feel virtuous. Ironic really. I bet she wishes she was starving now. She has a good metabolism, though. She doesn’t put on weight, no matter how much she eats and how little exercise she gets. I don’t think that squirming about and arching your back and shuddering really count as exercise.

The girl in my cellar was, like all the women and girls I have ever met, involved in a constant battle against her body and all the bits of it that grew and oozed beyond her control. In a way, I suppose, her sojourn in my cellar must be quite a relief to her. She can just kick back and relax and let her hairy legs flourish. I love the things girls do to themselves, love it when they hurt themselves unnecessarily, tanning themselves to cancer, waxing their bits, plucking out their eyebrows until they cry. Poor Betty goes to the beauty parlour to have her cunt waxed, she has it all off and, Poor Betty being Poor Betty, she says it turns her on. I asked if I could go along and watch, but I think she thought that I was joking. I had a go with

the girl in my cellar and a roll of gaffer tape, but she must have had it done before because she only whimpered a little bit, although her nose ran.

I am a very understanding person. I understand the girl in my cellar very well indeed. I know that the thing she hates most, more than the picnics and banquets and midnight snacks, more than the slittings and the insertions, the gratings and the inflations and the crude tattoos I sometimes give her with a pin and Quink, more than the times when I just make her lie still in my arms so I can stroke her beautiful hair away, more than everything, she hates being made to wait for it. So I take her by the chin and tell her that I am going out, and if she is a good girl and eats up all the funny bunny, when I get home we will have the main course. Which, I say, as I thumb a lump of crust from the corner of her eye, will be you.

Poor Betty lives a bus ride away in her overstuffed flat at the top of a nice old building that might be Victorian if it were important. I like going on the bus, and I always take the scenic route. I sit on the top deck of the bus, at the front, so I can see in to people's upstairs windows. When you are on the bus it's another place, suspended animation, and all you can do is sit back and wait for your stop. People can't help but nod off, morning and night, against their will. Sleeping on the bus is like lapsing into a series of short comas. I like to watch them as their heads loll until the bus jolts and clunks their skulls against the window or they snort awake of their own accord and slyly wipe away their drool. Some winter nights when the heaters are working the natal throb of the engine lulls them all to sleep, the whole top deck enchanted in their scarves and rain-damp coats. The bus is best in the winter. In the summer it smells of corned beef and testicle sweat. Sometimes though there are girls behind me talking about ISAs and weddings and what they are going to have for their tea and I can't concentrate on my book for thinking about standing up and turning

round and exposing myself to them, pulling my trousers right down to my knees and showing them everything. Today I sit next to a schoolboy and I sit close enough for my thigh to nudge his and he moves away but I move closer and he turns his head right round to the window so I can see his red nape.

Her doorbell is on the fritz so I whistle at her open window. She comes down to let me in. Poor Betty's clothes are always full sentences. Kimono, mules, sleep-mask pushed into her catastrophic hair, mascara down to her cheekbones and a stained mouth. She sleeps in her makeup because she likes to look blasted and tragic in the mornings. She hugs me, wishes me happy birthday and tells me she has only had two hours sleep. I let her hug me and tell her she looks like a raped clown. She laughs and leads me upstairs.

Poor Betty has a wrought iron daybed in her living room and when I sit on it, nested in cushions of velvet and fur, I can see thirty-eight Virgins, twelve of them lewd. There are beautiful nudes on the wall and an ironic antimacassar on the back of the armchair, candles in wine bottles and a pair of knickers over a table lamp that I am sure she put there on purpose. There are clothes all over the floor, pools of silk and polyester, sequins and nylon and rubber. I can see through the door into her bedroom, to the queen-sized bed covered with a patchwork of furs that she made herself from flea-market finds. There are books everywhere, lots of them blue, de Sade and Sacher-Masoch, Miller and Nin, Nancy Friday and *The Story of O*. There are books about the occult, books of dubious photography and a hundred black-covered horror novels. She has several books about serial killers, thick volumes with photographs and raised red letters on the front. The air hums with incense and perfume and the underlying scent of Poor Betty herself, soft biscuits and sweat. She was born Elizabeth. She was Lizzy in pigtails, Beth in a blazer and when she was seventeen and started wearing dog collars and matching underwear she became Betty. Poor Betty had a Bad Daddy and a pissed-up mother and she was out boozing and bonking at thirteen years old. She was a

podgy, spotty child until she blossomed and took hold of her victimhood like it was a rattlesnake and she was dancing in a mountain chapel. She made her pain into her worship and her art. She likes me, but nobody knows why, and she likes that even more.

She gets dressed and puts her face on and makes me a bacon sandwich with a candle in it. She pours vodka from a teapot into porcelain cups and gives me a miniature Swiss Army knife to hang on my key ring and a card with a kitten on it, just to tease me. I hate cats. They have eyes like crocodiles and would kill you in your sleep as soon as look at you. William had a cat, a fat fur-ball with drool stains around its mouth and secret scars. It was called Kit, which I suppose was meant to be cute. Cats don't use their vocal chords to purr. So where does that lascivious throbbing come from? Are they rubbing their wing-casings together? If you are moving house and you are unlucky enough to have a cat going with you, you're supposed to rub butter on its paws to stop it doing a runner. This inspires a question. Cats always land on their feet. Buttered toast always lands butter side down. So if you were to spread butter on a cat's head and drop it out of a window.... Sometimes I fear they are like bees and can smell each others' deaths, and that if I killed one I would come home one day and find my house full of them, narrowing their lizard eyes on my bed, eels in their tails, little pink noses sniffing at my dirty plates, spraying their scent, limbering up in their velour tracksuits and tipping their claws with mercury.

She is beautiful, my Poor Betty, a stone fox with a parabolic body under her swaddling clothes and black hair like velvet ropes. She sits across from me today, her shellacked lips fellating a pastel pink cocktail cigarette, all bosoms and burlesque, and I smile, the vodka mixing with the whiskey I had before and making me feel pleasantly smudged. I pull the envelope I found on my door out of my pocket and wave it at her. She comes on all innocent and says what's that? Your little birthday surprise, I say, although I'm disappointed you didn't hire a stripper dressed as a policewoman to pretend to arrest me. She

takes it from me and asks me why on earth she would stick an empty envelope to my door. I say I don't know, because you're a strange, strange woman? She throws a cushion at me, covered with a cross-stitched 1950s pin-up girl. I've got better things to do than stick empty envelopes on your door, she says, and if you ever associate me with awful penmanship like this again, I'm going to kill you. She's so cute when she's trying to act all menacing.

From time to time it tickles me to work, to take tedious jobs away from people who would be grateful for them. Factories are my favourite. Once I worked for three months picking hairs and flies from open pots of face cream with a tiny plastic spoon. I met Poor Betty when I wangled a maintenance job in the place where she works as a PA. One day she was waiting for me as I went out for my dinner. She pushed herself off the wall she was leaning on and linked her arm with mine. You look interesting, she said, they all say you're weird but I think you're interesting. Let's go and have a cream bun. We talked solidly for the whole lunch hour and went out for a drink that night after work. I made her laugh with relentless assassinations of our colleagues' characters. I can be pretty charming when I want to be, and Poor Betty was fun to be around, dark enough to interest me and smart enough to know it. After a few drinks she said she had decided that we would be great friends and she told me I should wait for her down the road from work in the morning, so we could walk in together and she could see the look on the face of that miserable cow on reception. She asked me a lot of questions about myself that night, and because she was so enchanting I only lied about the important things.

I am definitely the kind of person who would read your diary if I found it. I am the kind of person who, left alone in your house, would rummage through your knicker drawer and heft your mattress until I found it. I am the kind of person who might even memorise

lines from it and drop them into seemingly unrelated conversation with you, just to unnerve you, to make you wonder, to worry you at night.

Poor Betty's diaries are beautiful things, hand-bound scented paper, lavender ink, the occasional illuminated letter like a medieval manuscript, their gorgeousness belying the filthy revelations inside. She keeps them in high poetic style, sometimes so thick with metaphors that it seems like code. I have some of the words copied out and pinned to the wall above my toilet. *Underground I was turned inside out as the troll clamped down and the wires sang and I was as full as Christmas. On the moors Cathy was keening like the wind and losing track of Heathcliffs. White dress defiled. She could use her feet like hands but I don't think she was really a doctor.*

I am no prude, but I have always found the idea of sex a bit ridiculous, especially the kind of sex that requires a costume. It's all so undignified, so *lowering*. I know that male squids transfer their ejaculate in special sacs on their arms to the female, who then deposits a mass of fertilised eggs under a rock or in a hole on the sea floor. It's all very interesting, but not really my cup of tea. There are better things than sex, more fulfilling, interesting, creative ways of satisfying yourself. I have never felt the need to find a partner, start a relationship. To do that, you have to find someone who you think is at least as good as you are, and that is impossible. As far as I am concerned, there is me and then there is meat.

William never kept a diary. For a while I kept one for him, writing all his secrets in his own handwriting in a pink-covered notebook I bought for the purpose, pretending it was for an imaginary sister to hide my embarrassment, but I grew bored and left it in the school library. When we were ten or so he had one of those lockable tin boxes that the other boys used to stash pilfered cigarettes and mucky pictures. I didn't even bother picking the lock. I

just applied judicious manipulation until it sprang open like thighs, and out of it fluttered nothing but a photograph of me.

Poor Betty asks me what I am going to do that evening and because I like to titillate her I tell her that what I am going to do will change the world forever. She gives me a strange look like a maternal jackal and pours us both another. I ask her what she will do, when I have gone, and she says that she is sure there is a rogue diazepam somewhere in the flat and that she is going to take it in the bath with Jackie Collins and then she is spending the evening with one of her many pervy lovers. I tell her that she should be careful, I tell her all the time. She thinks that she is always in control, but one day she might meet a *real* sadist, a Bad Man, and then she'll be sorry, but she just laughs and says it'll either be sex-crime or the fags that gets her.

When I stand to leave the vodka goes straight to my knees. I tell Poor Betty not to get up, take a last look at her in her snow-globe world and go to let myself out. As I go I see a bridle hanging on the hat-stand by the door, and I smile to myself all the way to the bus-stop. On the way home I sit at the back on the top and use my new penknife to scratch Poor Betty's name on the back of the seat in front. Then I look out of the window to see if I can spot a body, my favourite game to play on the bus, especially if we go past a wood, when I crane my neck to see if I can catch a glimpse of pale limbs in bin-bag gowns, maybe smouldering slightly under the trees, but I never have. Sometimes I see discarded suitcases, not very often but sometimes, dumped in lay-bys or in skips or in the woods again. Poor Betty notices them too. She says that whenever she sees a suitcase or a holdall left lying around like that she assumes it holds one of three things – money, drugs or body parts. This is an uneventful bus ride though, even though it is my birthday. All I see is a single magpie, and that's no luck at all, even for someone as contrary as me.

When I get home, the door is open. I know it wasn't me. I am not the kind of person who does things by accident. I take my knife out of my pocket and go inside. There's an air of activity halted, as though all the furniture has been playing musical statues and the music stopped just before I arrived. The trapdoor is open too. I descend the stairs quickly, no point in sneaking about, but my feet slip near the bottom when I see the table and I nearly fall. The girl in my cellar is indisputably dead. She is lying on the table, limbs akimbo, and most of her neck meat is gone. The blood from her throat and from between her legs drips off the table and splashes down on the broken plates, the shattered glasses and the splattered Aspic Rabbit. In her mouth, rolled up and lodged like a fat cigar, I find another envelope, addressed to me.

Cheeseburger

I KNOW YOU, it says on the note in the envelope, and my bowels drop like a coiled rope. For a long moment all I can do is stand and stare at her familiar face and see the end of my plans and the end of my peace reflected in her big, blue eyes. Then I race for the stairs, slipping on a baby octopus and almost falling on my arse. In the kitchen I grab my carving knife and hurl open the pantry door. There's nobody there and there's nobody upstairs either, just the fat spiders and the silverfish.

Poor Betty likes to read a certain kind of women's magazines, the ones that are all puzzles and incest with headlines like 'My Grandma Ate My Legs, But I Found Love', 'My Dog is Possessed by a Paedophile' and 'My Womb Exploded on my Wedding Day', and I once read in one of them a story about a woman who moved to Australia and discovered that her new next door neighbour was her long-lost sister. Strange things happen all the time in this world. I should know – I'm one of them. So it's not impossible that another baddie has found me out, but it is annoying. It's a challenge, a piss-take, a gauntlet thrown down. Who could it be? Poor Betty is the only person who knows where I live, but despite her haul of horror-books, she couldn't kill a fly. Well, she could, but I don't think she could kill a mammal.

Whoever it is has underestimated me. They don't know what I am. They want me to be scared, they want me to be intimidated. They want me to panic. They can get fucked. I've never done what people expected me to do and I'm not going to start now just because some dick breaks into my house and steals my birthday present. Yes I was looking forward to sitting down in a party hat, serving myself up a big plate of buttock and breast and toasting myself until dawn, but I'm not going to make a fuss about it like William weeping over a

dropped ice-cream cone. If this twat wants to play, I'll play. If he wants to send little notes then I'll send little notes back. I've always wanted a penpal.

I'm not scared, it's just that the bath looks so comfortable I can't help myself. I climb in and curl up on my collection of clothes, the lost scarves and misplaced gym kits and the donations left outside charity shops. Somewhere beneath me is the dress that the girl in my cellar was wearing on the night I took her, and even though I can't remember the last time I wept for real, the tears come now. But I only cry a little, and only for myself.

Soon I fall asleep and when I wake up with my eyes all crusty and my mouth full of gunge it's not my birthday any more, not my special day, and the dead girl is still in my cellar and the letter from her mouth is still clutched tight in my sticky fist. I put it in my pocket and pull out a crumpled cigarette. I light it and then I cough and hack until I spit over the side of the bath something the size, shape and texture of ravioli. Everything hurts.

I haven't taken medicine since I could outrun my mother, unless you count the cough syrup that goes into my famous *ragout*. William took medicine almost every day, Calpol, aspirin, whatever I could find in his neighbours' medicine cabinets. He was a sickly little thing, but my good health is rude. He always made a big fuss, especially over the spoonfuls, as though it tasted horrible. It turns out, though, that my own medicine tastes worst of all. For a long time my favourite thing to do was to break into people's houses and steal their remote controls. People get very attached to their belongings and if you steal the right thing, you can cause as much pain as you can with a knife. I have shoe boxes full of birth certificates, prescriptions, insurance papers and deeds, and others chock-a-block with contraception. I am a bad Santa, bringing frustration, inconvenience and worse, hiding little sister's knickers under big brother's pillow, taking the dirty magazines from under one bed

and putting them under another, shoving the cat into the hamster cage, sneaking sausages into the laundry basket. Now, to my utter disgust, I know how those people feel.

Downstairs the air feels like a dog that's been rubbed the wrong way. I close the trapdoor without looking down. I can't face the mess. It's like vomit – it's one thing cleaning up your own, quite another mopping up someone else's. I should rustle up some breakfast, something nourishing and sustaining, like Ritz crackers smeared with marmalade and lumps of Danish Blue, or cornflakes and Cointreau with a sprinkling of capers, or even just a humble bacon bap, but I'm really not that hungry. I make a cup of coffee instead – three heaped spoons of granules, three of powdered milk - but when I put it down on the table I miss and it spills, flooding the table and running to the floor. Some of it splashes onto my leg and soaks through my jeans and with a roar I pick the mug up and fling it against the wall. Then I pick up my cigarettes, put on my coat and leave as fast as I can, but not too fast to make sure there's no envelope on my door.

There are good things and bad things about leaving the house. This town has a lot of oddballs. A decent person might say that just because someone looks weird it doesn't mean they are, but I know the opposite to be true – I know that everyone is stranger than they look. There's the woman with her crown of rubbish who sings gospel in the bus station, the wild-eyed man who preaches to the pigeons, the woman with scabs on her face who screams she is naked, the dwarf whose hair is longer than she is and who trails behind her an empty dog-lead, various mutterers and mumblers and starers-at-the-sky. I like to watch them, to follow them to where they live, to touch their things and watch them sleep.

The bad things are usually the other people. I once spent a week with a man who had left a shop in the town centre and stopped stock still right outside the door to talk on his mobile phone. He was a big fella, and I had to squeeze past him, much too close for comfort.

It took me the whole week, but with the aid of plenty of oil and even more brute force, I managed to put a very large man through a very small hole. I felt better, but only until, on my way home from the derelict house where we had been playing, I was walking through town and was stopped in my tracks by four young women with pushchairs having a sodding mothers' meeting in the middle of the pavement. I hate people when they're not polite. That little lot took me over a month to deal with. I wonder what the collective noun is for ugly, arrogant brood-mares with no spatial awareness. An afterbirth, perhaps?

Today I can't appreciate any of the sights. I walk with my head down and my hands in my pockets and I end up in the supermarket for want of anywhere better to go. I expect to be soothed by the lights and the colours and the choices, but as I wander the aisles and fill my pockets with random items, my mind is with the girl who was snatched so roughly away from my open mouth and every man I pass smells of my cellar. If whoever it was had wanted to kill me I am sure they would have tried. Instead they *insulted* me, they invaded my home and destroyed my favourite thing. They took the piss.

Of course I can't call the police. I could lie in wait outside my door for whoever it is to deliver their next missive, then jump out and tear them apart. I could wait to see who it is and then follow them, break into their house and break something of theirs. I could move, leave town, maybe take Poor Betty with me. We could go and live by the seaside, I'd quite like that. Instead I am going to do nothing, apart from wait and see what happens. My stomach wriggles. I've never had an enemy before, the kind who sets out to thwart your plans. It might not be a pleasant feeling, but it is interesting, and I have always said it's better to be interesting than nice. As I queue up to pay for my decoy purchases I catch the eye of the till-boy and he wrinkles his nose as if he can smell a fart and then remembers his manners and looks away. It's my bad thoughts he can smell. When I hand over my money I touch his

fingers for a little longer than necessary and as I walk away with my change and my carrier bag I look back over my shoulder and see him wiping his hand on his trousers.

As I leave the supermarket I walk past the tobacco counter and the rack of newspapers and magazines and there on the front cover of *The Radio Times*, grinning out over the words King of the Kitchen, is the punchable mush of Austin Aspinall. Even though I know I should walk on I grab the magazine and rifle through with clammy hands to see what the bastard's up to now. It takes all my will not to drop to my knees and howl. *Austin Aspinall bursts back onto the screen with an amazing new series. The man who has been called the Willy Wonka of the kitchen travels the world in search of strange – and some might say disgusting – delicacies. Aspinall then works his magic and transforms these unusual foods into delicious dishes that would win over the most squeamish diner.*

Austin Fucking Aspinall, my bête noire. The so-called celebrity chef, the darling of the weekend supplements, the pretentious, headline-grubbing, over-charging, self-aggrandizing dinner-fiddler. Almost every week he's in the papers, photographed gazing moodily out from behind his ironic spectacles, usually with a big knife in his meaty paw. The articles all dribble on about his innovative use of unexpected ingredients, his experiments with textures and juxtapositions of flavours, the way he incorporates into his food not only his vast knowledge of culinary history but his understanding of psychology, how he plays with all the senses and with the gastronomic memories of childhood. Even Poor Betty loves him – she lapped up his first TV series, in which he recreated famous fictional food. One night round at hers she went on and on about the episode where he made a life-sized gingerbread house with all fixtures and fittings and working plumbing for so long that I had to bash her over the head with a pillow to shut her up.

He has this poncy restaurant in London – of course it’s in London – called The Ripe Lamb, where they serve a £350 a head ‘taster menu’ full of such unabashed gimmickry as ‘Burger and Fries Bubblegum’, served from a round, penny-operated dispenser brought to your table by a bobby-soxed waitress on roller-skates, or his ‘Penny Sweet Paella’, made of Rainbow Drops with foam shrimp and mushrooms served in a pink-and-white bowl of hard candy. Some of the courses are no more than a mouthful and some of them just a smell inhaled from the facemasks that drop down from the ceiling, like the homage to his Scottish mother where the scents of fir and twelve year old malt whiskey are served with a pastille of tartan sorbet constructed from deer blood and thistle, real highland snow and the blooms of broom, with the aerated essence of neaps-and-tatties suspended in a cradle from a framework above the plate to represent the gathering clouds.

Making representative food out of the sum of something’s parts is nothing new – Aspinall should try my Sunday Broth, made from pulped Bibles and incomplete maths homework, the last of the summer wine and gravy with extra lumps. I have been doing this for years. I have eaten more snails than that cocky little parvenu has had hot dinners, and I eat them *raw*. I don’t need to condense twenty snails and pipe them into a shaped sausage and have them served in an edible shell on edible soil in a miniature edible flowerpot by waiters moving extremely slowly like Mr Aspinall does. I just eat the fucking snails.

The most annoying part is his signature dish, The Trojan Hog – or, in his case, the Trojan Piglet, a runty little beast about eight inches long, served on a gold platter with a persimmon in its mouth and its little trotters wrapped in edible gold leaf. The waiter then uses his or her theatrical skills to ‘notice’ that the piglet has not been properly prepared – the chef has left the innards in! The waiter draws a dagger from his belt and, in his or her poorly acted wrath, slits the piggy’s belly open. Out tumble gourmet sausages no bigger than finger-joints and miniscule pastries in the shape of dormice and larks. As the customers eat,

hundreds of rose petals flutter down around them from hidden vents in the ceiling. It goes down a bomb with the punters, even though there's not a single original component in the whole pretentious effort. It's all been done before. The sausages don't even *look* like guts, which is the whole point of the dish. I had my first Trojan Hog on my seventeenth birthday, and what I ate out of its belly were definitely not gourmet sausages.

What's the point of seeking out the strange and disgusting only to manipulate and disguise it so it becomes palatable? A real gourmet trains his palate to appreciate the disgusting for what it is, to savour the slimy and the rancid, to understand each flavour outside the narrow boundaries of what's *nice*. If Aspinall could see, could taste my experiments with the disgusting, he'd see that he's doing nothing new, and he's doing it with far less style than he thinks.

One day I will have Austin Aspinall for dinner, and then I will teach him all about the limits of gastronomy. Just the two of us at a long, long table in a soundproofed room, dining by candle-light off Princess Diana memorial china ordered especially from the *Sunday Express*. He would have to be bound, of course, because he couldn't be trusted not to play with his food, but I would feed him as gently as I could.

I have the menu perfected in my mind, from the salad of warm womb and roses to the rich chocolate cake with a stripper baked inside, from the Meat Garden to the potted dog. I would talk softly to my guest, help him to the prime morsels of each dish, lead him to the Vomitorium and gently rub his back. As I cut him a head-sized slice of Luxury Pie, the pearl-and fur pastry bursting with mud, I would tell him that despite his million-pound kitchen and his Michelin stars I could cook him into next week on my four-ring hob. I'd stand behind his seat and rub his throat to help him swallow and whisper in his ear that he was nothing more than a coward.

Over pig-bags stuffed with marshmallows and hooves I would calmly explain how he was held back by his pedestrian conviction that everything you cook, no matter how unusual the ingredients and how elaborate the technique, has to taste *nice*. His food has to taste nice so he can charge his extortionate prices and get his blowjobs from the press.

However, I would say, as we tackled bioluminescent squid served live and flashing in the gloom, if he were a *real* culinary adventurer, he would know that food shouldn't always be nice. Sometimes it should be unsettling, even frightening, it should be angry or sad, violent or narcotic, base or plain obscene. Sometimes food should make you cry. I would let him think about this over plumpious dormice, drowned in Baileys and eaten roasted and whole beneath a velvet hood. We would sit in the seamy dark and bear down upon the little bodies, lick away their breasts and crush them slowly until they yielded up their sweetest meats.

When we had eaten every scrap on the table I would pull my chair up to Austin's and lick away the meat-sweat from his brow. I'd make sure he understood, as I unbuttoned his chef's whites, that his fatal flaw was unoriginality, that I had done it all before, only better and in bigger portions. Then I would take out my knife and tuck into my final course, my Trojan Hog – Aspinall himself.

Blindly, I shove the magazine back on the shelf in the wrong place, obscuring the lacquered mooncalf pouting on the front of this month's *Cosmo*, and run out of the supermarket, bashing into a woman on my way and not even saying sorry. I've run past the market and the church and almost to the library before I realise I've left my carrier bag behind. Slamming into the closest phone box I paw in some coins and punch out Poor Betty's number. I try to keep my voice calm as I suggest we meet for a drink, but she says

she can hear me panting and asks is this a dirty phonecall? She normally spends Sundays recovering from Saturdays, but she says she'll meet me. She's a good girl.

Poor Betty prefers old man pubs. When I asked her why once, she smiled and said that all perverts drink real ale. The pub in which we meet is one of her favourites, only just opened up for the lunchtime shift. The barman is still polishing the pumps and the only other people here are two death-humping professional pissheads, dedicatedly pickling their regrets and shooting uneasy glances at me and Poor Betty. She walks straight up to the bar and orders for both of us. She has a double G&T and I have a pint of Best and two packets of pork scratchings. I might prefer Advocaat at home, but when I am out there are certain standards to maintain. We sit down and before Poor Betty has finished checking her makeup in her silver antique compact and reapplying her jammy lipgloss, I've necked three quarters of my pint and am making headway on the scratchings. They sell the good ones here, big lumps, some curled like pig-tails and tooth-breakingly crunchy, others with an underbelly of soft, creamy fat. Sometimes you even get a chunk with hairs still on it. I save those ones in my pockets. Poor Betty will not eat things straight out of packets. She prefers things served on pretty china. More for me.

Are you alright? Poor Betty asks me, and for a moment I think I'll just tell her, I'll just tell her everything and then I'll go away and never come back. She's wearing a high-collared blouse with a bow at the throat and her hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail. I think it's the first time I've seen her go out with casual hair. She isn't wearing any nail varnish either, and I feel a little bit guilty about dragging her out unprepared. I'm fine, I tell her as I get up to get myself another pint, I'm just having one of those days, you know. She sighs and says yeah, I had one of those nights. I get my pint and say let's go out for a fag and you can tell me all about it.

Outside in the 'smoking area' we stand in the incipient drizzle and curse the smoking ban and its instigators. It's funny, the people who you would most like to kill, you can't. Poor Betty tells me about her night, about the man she's been seeing. She says I don't know, he's just a bit *intense*. You don't want to hear all the gory details.....OK, I'll tell you one thing – last night, he wet my bed. And then he went mental. And it's just that I'm, well, I'm *bored*. I ask her what she's bored of and she laughs like a cracked bell and says everything, really, no offence. You know, she says, when I was a teenager I spent every Saturday hanging round town on my own, all dolled up with makeup I'd stolen from Boots and my best gothic outfits, just waiting to see someone *fascinating*. Sometimes I hung around with the only goth at school, this little fat girl who dyed her hair black but always had blonde roots, but she started cutting herself and all that bollocks and besides, she smelled of soup. What kind of soup, I ask, and she says pea and ham and wrinkles up her nose at the memory. I don't know, she continues, I just always thought that life would be a bit more glamorous than this. Never mind, though, I'm working on it. Maybe I'll move to Manchester or something, or even London.

For a second my heart seems to bulge and I say, in a smaller voice than usual, I'd miss you. She looks at me with a little frown and says ah, I'll never get round to it. Just got to be a bit more positive I suppose. You and me should go out more, go to some clubs, go crazy. I say you know me, Betty. I'm not the crazy type.

Then she puts out her cigarette, lights another and changes the subject. What about that weird envelope then? Have you got a secret admirer? Is that why you're in a funny mood? I say yeah, something like that and she says seriously, do you think you've got a stalker or something? Do you want to come and stay at mine? And I would, I would love to stay at her house and wrap myself in her patchwork furs and fall asleep in front of the telly. Instead I say ah, it's nothing I can't handle, and besides, I bet you've got a date. Well, he did

say he'd come back tonight, she says, raising her hand to the bow at her neck, but he might not turn up. Sometimes the real sadists do that, just to piss you off.

We sit and drink away the afternoon and I watch the pub fill up around us with Sunday drinkers, all a bit edgy until halfway down their first pint, the liquid sigh. I don't say much. At the bottom of every glass I see the girl in my cellar, and when I open my third bag of pork scratchings, Poor Betty says that cook you hate off the telly made pork scratchings once, only he made them into little clockwork pigs that walked across the table. For a second I want to glass her. I push the bag away and finish my drink. Being put off my scratchings is the last straw. I've got to go, I say, pulling on my Parka. I've got loads of cleaning up to do back at mine. We part ways outside the pub and I watch her totter away on her vertiginous shoes, her ponytail flapping and her arse wiggling, on her way home to be penetrated.

I can't bear the thought of going home to clean up someone else's handiwork, to face more taunting letters, and so I set off towards one of the houses I watch. 77 Moorhouse Road is a fifteen minute walk away from the town centre. All the lights are off, so I sit on a low wall over the road and smoke. It's a student house with a broken window catch in the downstairs bathroom. It's dangerous playing in student houses because they are almost always in during the day, but if you meet someone unexpectedly they usually just assume that one of their housemates has brought you home. In one student house I got made breakfast by an obliging young woman who assumed I was another of her housemate's one-night stands.

As I sit and smoke I see a young man approaching the house carrying a large and arty-looking portfolio. He's one of the housemates and he has a hairstyle, some sort of asymmetrical topiary that looks glued into place. I hate blokes with hairstyles. He goes in. I give him five minutes and then I walk over and knock on the door. He answers with a brew in his hand. I smile and say alright, sorry to bother you mate, I know this might sound daft

but I lived here about four years ago, and I put some of my sketchbooks in the loft and forgot about them, but now I'm working on this show and I really need them, wondered if it would be OK if I came and got them back? It sounds plausible - students, especially art students, do vague and stupid things all the time. He says sure man, sure, come right in.

Were you at the uni then? He asks. I say yeah, fine art for what it's worth, learned more when I was travelling though, and he says know what you mean. I ask him if he's at the uni too, as he leads me straight upstairs to the landing where I know from previous visits that the trapdoor to the loft is accessible by a rickety fold-down stepladder. He says yeah, fine art too, final year, think I might go travelling myself then, you know, see some of the world. Then he darts into the upstairs bathroom and grabs a broom. Students never keep things where you expect them to, that's something we have in common. He uses it to open the trapdoor and pull down the ladder. Whereabouts did you put them, he says, there's loads of shit up here. I say I'll come up with you, I can't remember exactly but I'll know them when I see them. He says cool, maybe we'll find like another world up there. I say yeah, maybe, and follow him up.

I kill him with the Stanley knife I keep in my coat pocket, jumping on his back as he stoops to fit in the loft and stabbing the blade into his neck, right through the juiciest vein. I repeat the process a few times for good measure, then after he has fallen, wriggled and gone quiet I wrap him up in a convenient bit of carpet and lick the knife clean. A quick, convenient kill. A cheeseburger.

As I leave, though, with forty nine pounds, an eighth of weed and a carrier-bag full of Super Noodles and Tesco own-label lager, I feel bloated and sick and yet still hungry, too. I take my time walking home. Some chicken nugget-faced children stop me and ask me to go into an off-license for them. I treat them to ten B&H alongside their vodka and one of them

calls me a paedo as they run off. I'm glad for the delay but I would have done it anyway – I like to assist children in illegality and lingering death.

I know it will be there before I see it. This time it's more like a packet, a fat brown A4 envelope with a smaller, white one taped to the top. It's propped up against the door and I look up and down the alley even though I know that there won't be anybody there. My door is still closed but before I unlock it I pull the white envelope off and tear it open. The note inside says 77 MOORHOUSE ROAD. A STUDENT WITH STUPID HAIR. THERE'S A PICTURE ON MY PHONE OF YOU LEAVING HIS HOUSE.

Penny Sweets

Blackmail, hate mail, home invasions and murder. These are a few of my favourite things, and they seem to be favourites of my new friend as well. When I get inside I open the big brown envelope with my teeth. It is stuffed with photocopies of newspaper articles. The first one I pull out is headlined *Body Found in Missing Secretary Case*. It reads – The body of a missing Leeds woman was discovered on Saturday evening in Roundhay Park. Police were called to the scene at 11.15pm and the body’s identity was confirmed this morning as Caroline Fitzgerald, who has been missing for five days. A police spokesman said that the wounds inflicted on the young woman were the most horrific he had seen in his fifteen years with the force. A quick shuffle through the other articles reveals a litany of similar headlines. *Body Found Believed to be Missing Woman. Human Remains Discovered in Woodland. Police Appeal for Information in Missing Becca Case. Mother Begg; Help Me Find My Daughter.* There are over fifty articles from all over the country. There are two articles in Spanish and one in French. All young women, some missing, some dead, some presumed to have run away, some presumed to have been killed by husbands, boyfriends, lovers. Most unexplained. All secretaries or personal assistants. The cases in which the bodies were found – raped and mutilated and dumped in parks and woodland - are the oldest. The more recent women disappeared without a trace.

Accompanying the clippings is a sheet of foolscap covered in laboured handwriting. I
TOOK OUT THEIR THROATS TO STOP THEIR PRATTLE. THEY DIDN’T KNOW
THEIR PLACE AND SO I TAUGHT THEM. I WILL TEACH YOU TOO BUT IT WILL
BE A HARDER LESSON. I WILL DESTROY YOU.

At the foot of the letter my new penpal has written READ IT AND WEEP, and weep
I almost do. If the articles speak the truth, this bloke had killed more than twice as many

people as me. I sift through the papers repeating *quality not quantity, quality not quantity*. There were bound to be other people like me – I would imagine there are more of us every year – but I am at a loss as to how this one found me and why he won't just leave me alone to get on with my business in peace. There are plenty of victims to go round.

I have killed twenty two people, and every single one of them was different. I have no pattern, no type, nothing to profile or link. Men who kill the same woman over and over again are killing because they need to. They are killing from a compulsion to destroy one particular woman. Usually their mothers. I am not like those men. I don't kill because I *need* to, because it's a compulsion that I can't control. I kill because I want to, because it amuses me, because I can. Some people say that murder is like lust, that you get an urge to do it like a hot stone fist that fills your belly and that the desire to cum and to kill are the same but one is worse than the other. For me murder has more in common with gluttony. For me it's not all a build-up to some mythic spurt, it's all about the journey, the relish. And it's not about power. Nobody prides themselves on having power over a cake. I am a big fat gourmand sitting down at a heaving table and with thick but dainty fingers helping myself to a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

Nothing bad has ever happened to me, and there were none of the signs. Nobody ever beat me or fiddled with me. They wouldn't have dared. I never fell on my head or wet the bed and my behaviour towards animals has been for the most part respectful. I have never been given messages by dogs, or the Virgin Mary – I have never heard a voice in my head other than my own. I am not interested in setting fires, because I cannot control them. I am sure that my mother would have given me all the love and support in the world, had I let her, and there was no way I could ever have gone hungry. I am not revenging myself on anyone, no love who rejected me, no whore who humiliated me, no wicked stepmother who got her kicks by administering of boiling hot enemas. I am a self-made monster.

I kneel on the surface of the mess around the sofa and hurl things behind me like a terrier digging in sand. I can find everything but a pen and paper – sardine tins and nutmeg graters, Babycham bottles and babies' booties, at least three dozen National Geographics and a large amount of unidentifiable matter. I kneel on a Lego brick and the pain comes out as a harsh scream of fuck. Now I throw things just to throw them, shattering plates and ashtrays and then a bottle of ink that explodes against the wall in a Rorschach of royal blue. Then I throw a child's shoe that bounces back off the wall and hits me in the face and I sit back on my heels and put my head in my hands. I count silently to ten and listen to my whistling breath. When I open my eyes the first thing I see is an exercise book poking out from underneath the sofa. Its brown cover is neatly inked with the words Jenny Matthews 9AG Social and Economic History Mr Robinson.

There's a biro in one of the kitchen drawers, a silver thing with a plume of pink marabou on the end that can only have come from Poor Betty's. I sit at the table with some sheets torn from the exercise book and pour myself a mug of Advocaat. I pop in a couple of olives and a good slug of brine, then light a cigarette and begin to write. I don't enumerate my body count and I'd never do anything as tacky as assemble a press pack. I just tell my penpal all about William.

I used to fall over a lot. At Junior School if you fell over in the playground and grazed your knees they sent you to the library to sit quietly for the rest of break time. I liked to read the fairytales and see William in my mind, dancing in red shoes, trapped in tall towers, drowning in magic porridge. Sometimes William would fall too, sometimes I would push him and he would spend the afternoons with me in the dead air of the old books. We would play and I would make him be the princess, the maid, the good little girl. I would be Rumpelstiltskin, jumping on the baize cushions with my fists clenched, and in the absence of straw I would pick his scabs. He would never guess right, because in our games I was

nameless, cheating, and his first born was mine. I was a monster in the Garlic Woods, gnashing my teeth and changing the rules so that whichever way William ran, I would catch him. There were no friendly little mice, no woodcutters, no princes. Just William and me.

I liked the Garlic Woods best when the heavy end of summer turned to autumn and the brambles grew up into the hawthorn and the elders twisted in between and William's mouth was crimson stained and his fingers sore from the thorns. William's mother slapped his legs if he messed his clothes, and then the only way you could tell which were bruises and which were berry blotches was to poke them and see if he squealed. I made him stay out late, until dusk fell and things got hazy, and then I told him stories. I told William about the demon dog that hunted up on the hills; Black Shuck, Gytrash, Sukir. I told him it had come over with the Vikings to help with the raping and that if he caught its single, burning eye he would be dead within the year. I told him there were kelpies in the river and if they caught him they would drown him under their mossy hooves and lick the flesh from his bones with their rasping tongues. He would sit on a protruding root and his eyes would dart around him, cat-like in the half-light, his little fists clenched in his lap, as I told him of monsters and tasted the inside of my mouth.

In the winter, the games I played with William changed. I have always liked the winter, when the trees are stripped and you can see everything they used to hide. Every year there would be a bonfire in the village, a huge pyre built of dead wood, old newspapers and discarded furniture. They would all stand around it, eating parkin stuck with tufts from their gloves or muffling their faces with breath-damp scarves. The bonfire was a wonder to them, they swayed before it, rapt. If I liked fires that much, I would set them all the time. The fire terrified William, the fireworks even more. He was a worried child, always certain that the worst was about to happen. He would have liked to hide in the wardrobe like an animal, but I liked to see the explosions reflected in his eyes. I sometimes got overexcited, in the dark

with all the noise, and I wasn't above chasing William about with a sparkler. Afterwards, when the fire had burned to nothing, I dug in the ashes with the toe of my boot. There were treasures there, charred springs and marbles from between the cushions of sacrificed sofas, nails and screws and intriguing scraps of magazines. The metal, exposed to such heat, sometimes took on a petrol sheen, and my hands were dirty for days.

I didn't mind Junior School. There was still some imagination in it, some hint that you could be anything you wanted to be, even if that was a fire engine or a puppy. There were stories and running around and make-believe. Secondary school was not really my cup of tea. They didn't teach me anything interesting, anything that might have been useful to me in later life, like butchery or lock-picking. There was no point at all in teaching me about four-course crop rotation, although I suppose that one day I might kill someone with a turnip. What work I did I did well with no effort. There were temporary balms, new games to play with William, the onset of his puberty, but overall the experience was boring and I set about working on a solution.

I suppose you could say I am a greedy person. I eat a lot, and often, and not just because I am hungry. I am greedy for the treasures I find on the floor, whipping them up and inside my coat before anyone sees and tries to share, like a fat child hiding his sweets. I am greedy for Poor Betty's secrets, for secrets in general, I could gorge myself 'til I split on them, and I was greedy for William. The older we grew the greedier I got. I was compulsive about him, craving any contact. I crushed myself against him on the bus, forcing him against the cold window, relishing tight corners where I would be tipped almost on top of him. I looked at William hot-eyed and white knuckled, I looked at him like you would look at a little puppy-dog who was just so sweet and cute and edible that you just wanted to grab it and squeeze it probably just a little bit harder than you should. I was an ogre and he was livestock to me and I would poke him and probe him, feeling for bones, but where I found

them I would pinch and slap. I did not want William to have bones because bones would be his and I wanted William to be all mine.

William was the only pet I ever had, apart from the time I thought I had fleas. A person's character is reflected in the pet they keep. People who like cats like to be treated like shit. They are emotional masochists, which is why most cat-enthusiasts are women. Cats are like bad boyfriends – they are all over you when the mood takes them, but the second they get bored they will sashay out of the door and stay out all night chasing birds. I remember the way that William would pet his pussy, the way he would cosset it and coo to it until with a swipe and a yowl it would disentangle itself from his chubby arms and leave the room with its tail held high and without so much as a glance over its shoulder. All the poor boy wanted was a bit of affection and all he got for his troubles was a clawed arm and a view of his beloved pet's anus. Dog owners, on the other hand, demand respect, loyalty and obedience. They are the alpha animal, the top dog in the relationship – dogs do not go out on their own, they do not hunt on their own and they will roll over and show you their belly at a single command. William was my well-trained, obedient little puppy. He never gave the slightest hint to anyone that we were anything other than best buddies, so there was no need for anyone to doubt my story that we had parted company in the Garlic Woods that day and gone our respective ways home.

It happened in the summer holiday after the first year of secondary school. That day the heat had been like a living thing, something old and ill that had crawled on top of us to die. I thought about how the sweat must make William's thighs chafe even more. People get tetchy when it's that hot, the things that hold them back start to melt, like the summer is stirring. The tar started to soften and in places blew black bubbles. I put it on William and stuck things in it, but idly. The Garlic Woods offered some shadiness, and it was there on a whim that I demanded the poppet back and told him that I could talk to it, and wanted to find

out all his secrets and what he was afraid of most out of everything, and then I put it in my pocket, that strange little thing with its amputations and rosy cheeks, and forgot all about it until afterwards, when everything was done. There were never any birds in the Garlic Woods and the stillness was rippled only by the gibbering stream, into which William fell, when I broke his head just because I could.

With him lying face-down in the stream I could see all of his hair. It was long enough to touch his collar, slightly curly, damp at the nape. I wanted to touch it before it got all wet so I crouched down over my little friend and, bracing myself, pulled out a hank as a keepsake. I could see where the rock had split his scalp and the hairs I had taken had blood on the ends, so I thought better of it and dropped them into the water. The tuft stayed intact, glued together by the blood, and it wove in and out of the rocks in the stream like a thin, red eel.

When I killed him it was like waking up. I knew myself then, I knew what my purpose was, why I was here. In that moment I was Adam, the only one. If killing is sex, aren't you supposed to feel sad after, to experience your own little death? I just felt like Christmas, sated and snoozy and joy to the world. William was always going to be murdered. If I hadn't done it there would have been a stranger with a bag of sweeties and a camper van, a bad man in the bushes as he wandered slowly home, later a punch-happy drunk in a bar or a gang of chavs on a street corner late at night. There are different breeds of human like there are different types of dog, and William was one of the born victims, cheese on the mousetrap, a worm on a hook.

My performance was note-perfect. I cried, I shook, I even let my mother hug me. They sent policewomen to talk to me because I was so young. They asked me if I had seen anyone suspicious in the woods and I said only that weird man and that was all it took, piece

of piss and two weeks off school into the bargain. I was 'too upset' to attend William's funeral, but I did make a point of paying my respects. I left the house late one night specially to piss on his grave.

The letter covers twelve sides of paper and perfectly illustrates my point. I am and always have been interested in the long game. With a few exceptions I'm not a pounce-and-slash merchant like him. Killing girls in parks is such a cliché. Since William I have killed men, women and children, white and black, rich and poor, United Colours of Benetton. Each death has been unique. I have stabbed and strangled and killed by torture. I've killed with pliers, hand-whisks and nail-clippers. I pickled a girl once. I have killed in my home and the homes of others, in alleys and car-parks and up on the moors. As far as I am concerned, there is me, and then there is meat.

I finish with a P.S. that reads *Think of the girl in my cellar as a scrap from my table.* Then, for want of anything better to do with it, I put the letter in carrier bag and gaffer tape it to the door. I couldn't resist goading him. I won't be intimidated in my house, in my castle. I only go upstairs because the bath is really quite comfortable, but after an hour of lying there, chain-smoking and reading some old issues of the *Beano* that I unearthed during my tantrum earlier on, I can't wait any more and so I sneak downstairs like a child creeping up on Santa and open the door. The carrier bag is on the floor, the letter spilling out and soaking up the alley dirt. There's nothing on the door, and so I stick the carrier bag back up with even more tape and go back upstairs to the bath.

Leftovers

Monday mornings mean nothing to me apart from an opportunity to hang around the bus station lapping up the misery of the worker bees. Sometimes I take the early train to the nearest city just to occupy a seat. This Monday morning I wake up with a grunt, slumped against the door with a wide patch of drool on the front of my jumper. That fourth mug of sherry was a bad idea. I get to my feet and open the door. This envelope is smaller than the last, A5 and white, with no name on the front. It looks like it has been sealed and then opened again, the flap at the back just tucked in, no doubt so he could add some gloating postscript. I bring it in and put it on the table and stare at it while I knead my aching back. I can hear my stomach. It sounds like two men arguing very far away.

The soup I was preparing for the girl in my cellar is past its best, but it now has a pleasing pâté-like texture with an interesting crunch here and there. It's pungent, almost rank, with a faint tang of something filthily human, like bad gas. It's funny, when food goes off it smells like people, but when people go off, they don't smell like food. I've run out of instant coffee, so I wash down the handfuls of soup with a refreshing cocktail of gin and Benecol.

I hate being thirty. All I got for my birthday was a new series of that bastard Aspinall's television show and a psychopathic penfriend. The envelope contains a single sheet of good quality cream notebook paper, a bit like the stuff in some of Poor Betty's diaries only grubby and with a ring from a coffee mug in the middle. It says **THEY HAVE FOUND THE STUDENT. THEY ARE APPEALING FOR INFORMATION. DON'T WORRY THOUGH, I AM NOT GOING TO TURN YOU IN. I'M JUST GOING TO KILL YOU.**

I start my reply three times and each time I rip the page out of Jenny's history book, screw it up and throw it in the rough direction of the kitchen sink. I don't want to play any more. I put down my pen and go upstairs to the bathroom, where I root through the clothes in the bath until I find a denim jacket and a baseball cap. I put them on, transfer the contents of my Parka's pockets to the jacket and leave the house, sticking the empty, unmarked envelope that his letter came in on the door as I go.

I come out of the side street and cross the road. Opposite the takeaway and the travel agents there is a pub, a vast, stillborn Wetherspoons with stools at the large windows. Even this early in the day there's a fair few people inside, all men, the kind who wear tracksuit bottoms and suit jackets. I go to the bar and order a large coffee from the barman, then take up a seat by the window and wait. The side street is very quiet at this time of day. There's no real reason for anyone to go down there until the club opens. When he comes, I'll see him. Then I'll know him, then I'll destroy him. I take a chicken stock cube out of my trouser pocket, sprinkle it into my coffee and settle down to wait.

I'm good at waiting, biding my time, amusing myself. I've always been able to keep myself busy. When William died I was in need of a new hobby to entertain myself with, and I turned to my mother and cooking. She encouraged my early forays into the kitchen, and used to tell everyone that I would grow up to be a head chef. And in a very literal way, I did. After William died she was especially tender to me. I told her I wanted to take over cooking for the family and she let me, and she and my father would eat up every scrap I served them and make yum-yum noises even when it was cold or burnt or downright disgusting. I would sneak garlic into my spotted dick, pureed anchovies into scones, vinegar into the custard. I over-salted everything and undercooked the chicken.

Some people say that you are what you eat and, although I do not agree completely with that – I sometimes eat victims, and I am certainly not one of those – I think there is some truth in it. What you eat contributes to what you are. People use food to change themselves, to change their perception of themselves, to make themselves feel more like they want to feel, be more like they want to be. They eat health food in order that they might imbibe purity and virtue, to feel as clean and fresh as that lettuce leaf, that tall beaded glass of ice-cold mineral water, that crisp green apple. They eat big bowlfuls of cheesy pasta or creamy mash or rice pudding with a crunchy caramelised crust to comfort themselves, to transport themselves back to childhood when everything could be eaten with a spoon and nothing was asked of them. Women eat chocolate because it slathers them with sweet indulgence in a way that their men never do. Personally, I cannot abide chocolate. It tastes like weakness. In the Olden Days, people ate each other, they served up the hearts and brains and other vital bits of their enemies to absorb their strength, their power. Nowadays they snack on biscuity Christ to get the same effect. I was only young when I realised that I could eat food that would make me more monstrous.

To begin with it was just meat. I couldn't get enough of it. Perhaps my mother's roast dinners are to blame, but I could eat a whole joint of beef to myself by the time I was twelve. I progressed swiftly to offal. I would accompany my mother on trips to the market, she thinking I was learning how to be responsible with money, how to budget or some such, when all I was really interested in was the butcher's stall, with the hooked and dangling bodies, the glistening piles of flesh, the smell of blood. Eating meat is important social catharsis. It is one of the only times most people will get to feel real power over another being, to feel the strength that comes from being at the top of the food chain. If people weren't able to slaughter animals, they might start to prey on weaker members of their own species. Not a lot of people consider that. Nor do they consider that people might enjoy

eating meat because they feel deep down that what they are doing is wrong, that they are taking advantage of a helpless creature, that they are tearing its flesh and greasing their mouths with its fat and gnawing at its bones and that all this gets them off, in a secret kind of way. Or not so secret.

At first the more unusual of my recipes were concocted with the sole purpose of upsetting my parents, but then I found that they were very much to my taste. I grew to love combinations like fish and jam (smoked mackerel and a nice, runny, French raspberry is best), beef and treacle, pasta and lemon curd. I began to realise that my palate was far more sophisticated than that of everybody else. I indulged myself more and more. I sautéed slugs, stirred asafoetida into my tea, ate star anise like sweets and picked my teeth with fish bones. I became a gourmet, because I had no fear, no fear of disgust or unpleasantness or things other people say are bad.

I went back to school and kept my nose clean. I did well in all subjects and I made a few more friends. I didn't get in trouble. I kept myself to myself. Then I went home at night and tormented my mother. I had a chest of drawers in my bedroom that was almost as big as me that I was supposed to keep my clothes in, but I threw all my clothes on the floor and in the drawers and in the wardrobe as well and under my bed I piled up soil from the Garlic Woods and my mother's houseplants and there I grew my garden. I was a toadstool farmer, but not the toadstools that fairies sit on, round and red with perfect polka dots. Underneath my bed and in my underwear drawer seethed dead-white fungus, pale as the inside of a podgy whore's thighs, queasily phallic, reaching up on thick, blue-veined stalks. My mother loved handkerchiefs, she must have had fifty at least, lace-edged cotton, embroidered silk, all ironed and regimented in their own special drawer. One by one I stole them, burned them, wore the ashes as war paint. At first she thought it was a reaction to William, but then it went on, and on, and on.

Sometimes, with hindsight, I almost feel sorry for my mother. Nobody expects to give birth to their own worst enemy, do they? First came the knockings, as my mother sat on the sofa with her nightly Irish cocoa and my father tinkered in his shed. She blamed me at once, although I was in the room with her, draped upside down on the old armchair, the blood swelling my face, enjoying the pulsing. Then she checked the kitchen next door and her bedroom above. She found no one of course. I made the machine from a drum pedal I stole from the school band and a remote control car I stole from the boy who lived two doors down from William.

If you piss into plastic bags you can freeze it. Then you can remove the bag and place the frozen piss beneath the floorboards in an upstairs room. Then it thaws and drips through the ceiling of the room below. You can be creative with this basic idea. They say that the coming of the Devil is heralded by the smell of human excrement. All you need for a plague of flies is patience and a biscuit tin full of meat. It hurt my throat to do the voice but it hurt my mother more and so I kept it up. At night when I heard her soft slipper-shuffle in the hall I would stand on my bed, knees bent, back arched, fingers splayed like crone claws. I would crane my neck and roll my eyes and, grinning a rictus, leap into the air.

Of course my mother didn't really believe that the house was infested with poltergeists. She knew it was me all along, and that is what made it so frightening. My father gave me a few stern talkings-to, but he just didn't want to believe what was happening. He spent more and more time in the shed, and came out infrequently, reeking of Scotch. The atmosphere in the house changed completely. There was no longer the smell of baking and clean clothes. My mother took to watching television for twelve hours a day. The food got worse and worse. The first time my mother had to ring for a takeaway pizza, she cried.

My parents were terrible clichés, especially my Dad. When I wanted him to feel important and in control I called him Father, so he could feel for a moment like the wise, pipe-chomping Pater he would never really be. I went out of my way to get him onside. I always went to him for help with my homework, even though I knew the answers and he often got them wrong. I spent a long time swallowing yawns in his shed as he taught me the tedious intricacies of dove-tail joints and I always acted like it was a big treat for me to tidy up his collection of nails and screws. I memorised names and dates of battles and generals and once in a while I let him take me to some site of historic interest or other. When he was around I acted sensible and level-headed, and over the years I nurtured within him a feeling that my mother was more than just a little bit hysterical.

It came to a head one Christmas, when I had been amusing myself by making hoof-prints in the newly fallen snow. My parents had believed in Christmas. They had believed in the redemptive power of Brussels sprouts and tinsel, holly and ivy and a sixpence in the pudding. They kept Christmas in a dusty cardboard box in the attic, and no matter how carefully they put the decorations away, the following year they would come out hopelessly tangled, a snake nest of gaudy baubles, moulting tinsel and broken lights. I liked to absent myself for most of Christmas day, to go to other people's houses and stare through their windows as they were unwrapping their presents or gorging themselves at the table. It put them off something chronic, but I was always gone before they could catch me. Sometimes I would go to William's, demand to be let in, touch all his new things and taint them, taint the day for him completely, breach his cosy little family and leave him with a knot in his belly and my pockets full of nuts. Then I killed William, and Christmas died too. It got worse every year. At first they still bought me presents and my mother insisted on getting back into the kitchen to make the dinner. They drank more sherry every year and I sabotaged the

gravy, snuck in and stuffed the turkey with mud, re-decked the tree with stolen stockings and strings of rotting prawns. The only part of dinner I would eat was the Parson's Nose.

That last Christmas I was seventeen. I had found the presents my parents had bought and carefully wrapped for each other and I had replaced the watch with worms, the cardigan with nappies and the bath salts with green grave chippings from William's final resting place. I slept late that Boxing Day and when I woke up, my mother was gone, driven by my father to the nearest hotel, and he was sat at the table with his eyes closed. He had put the tree away.

He told me how concerned he was about my behaviour, how he was worried that I hadn't got over William's death. My mother thought there was 'something going on', he said, and although he was sure it was mostly just her nerves, he didn't think my little 'tricks' were helping. He was all for high spirits, he said, and he reminded me of all the scrapes he'd been in as a lad, but he thought it was time for me to be a bit more mature.

My father was as easy to play as a ukulele. We decided, or rather I decided and made him think it was his idea, that I would move a couple of towns away to get a job. He very kindly promised to pay my rent until I turned 21, and he suggested that it might be best if I kept my visits home to a minimum, just until Mother was feeling more herself. He never kept his promise. He died on my eighteenth birthday, a heart attack in his shed. My mother followed him six months later and the local paper said she'd died of a broken heart. I inherited everything.

After three coffees I am starting to need to pay a call. I could murder a fag as well. I decide to nip out front for a smoke and just as I get down off my stool a movement catches

my eye and I look up to see a man coming out of the side street and walking quickly away. He must have been up there all along, the bastard. He's wearing a Parka exactly like mine and I know it's him so I start running, bumping into a table and upsetting a pint and ignoring the shouted recriminations. I barrel out of the doors and down the street. I can still see him but he's right down by Lloyds bank and if he turns off towards the bus station I'll lose him. When I get to the road outside McDonalds the traffic lights are against me but I dance through the beeping cars and run on, the man only just visible on the wide, pedestrianised road ahead. As I sprint towards the stationers, someone steps right into my path and I only just avoid running smack into them. It is Poor Betty and, as I look over her shoulder I can see that the man is gone.

Flat Champagne

Poor Betty asks me what I'm doing three times, but I can't answer because I am so angry. I pretend to be more out of breath than I am until I trust myself to say something about having thought I saw an old friend. Why aren't you at work? I ask her, looking at her properly for the first time. And what are you wearing? Poor Betty has on baggy jeans, a fleece jumper and a pair of Converse trainers. She says I'm having a day off and I just didn't feel like getting all dolled up. I get fed up of doing it every day, you know. Look, I've got to go, but I'll see you soon, OK? and then she's gone.

I walk back home with my fists jammed into my pockets and my eyes inside out. I see nothing apart from his retreating back and my failure. I have to bite my lip to stop myself hollering obscenities. I'm beginning to think that I have handled this wrong right from the beginning. I should have camped out in the alley and caved in his skull, but instead I waited to see what would happen, let it go on because I was curious and amused and because I always have to do the worst thing. It was interesting to know that there was another monster in town, but this one is no fun at all. Nothing is right any more, it hasn't been right since he came into my house. That's like being inside me.

There's no envelope on my door. The need to piss is almost unbearable and I only just make it up the stairs to the bathroom in time. The red lacquered toilet seat reminds me of Poor Betty, and I'm glad that she's finally relaxed her dress code a little. All those buckles and straps and tight little sheaths, the perilous heels and the trowelled-on slap, they give a very pretty effect, but they don't exactly look comfortable. When all this is over, I think, I'll take Poor Betty out and buy her as much cream cake and gin as she can take.

Back downstairs I sit at the table and instead of reaching for the Advocaat or the sherry I drink some pineapple juice that was at the back of the fridge. I don't know how long

it's been in there but it tastes furry, so I've added some soy sauce to perk it up. I want to keep my mind clear so I can work out exactly what to do with my charming correspondent. As tempting as lying in wait in the alley and caving his head in may have seemed when I was on my way home, I think that's rather more his style than mine. I want to make more of a spectacle of it than that. I'm going to invite him round for dinner.

As I find the exercise book and start to compose the invitation, there is a scrabbling noise at the door and I pause for a second, pen poised. Then I leap to the door. I fling it open so hard that I feel my arm pull at the shoulder socket and the jiffy bag that is stuck to the door comes off and spills its contents at my feet. It contains a single finger. It's a middle one. I bend to pick it up. It's torn quite raggedly, but the messy bit serves to hold on a cheap looking silver-coloured ring with a single cubic zirconia blinking sleepily in the light. The finger has BOO written on it in green ink and when I look out of the door I curse myself for getting distracted because he is there, he just steps into the space between me and outside and punches me square in the mouth.

More than the letters, more than the house invasions, more than the dead girl in the cellar, the punch scares me. It's not right. He's not supposed to be the punching kind. He's supposed to be the stalking pretty girls and pulling them into bushes kind, the stabbing kind, the post-mortem mutilation kind. He must be angry. I must black out for a good few moments, because when I come to, he's no longer there, and the trapdoor is open.

In films, when someone is in your house who shouldn't be, you walk around very slowly in the dark until they jump out at you and then you run upstairs as fast as you can so they can stab you and push you out of a window. Or, you go down to the cellar. But I'm not doing anything until I have consumed all the alcohol that I can, which is the dregs of the Advocaat, a mouthful of gin and a few hearty swigs of sherry. Then I go to the trapdoor and

see that the cellar light is on. Instead of trying to peer down and see where he is I stop for a moment and light a cigarette. Let him wait. When I have finished I flick the butt in the general direction of the kitchen sink and then I walk straight down into the cellar.

He is sitting at the bloodstained table. He's tipped the dead girl onto the floor. He looks a lot like me. He is taller than me, but not by much, and he is broader than me, which makes me feel self conscious for a second. He has my dog-brown eyes and thatch of coarse dark hair. He has a beard, though, which is something I have never been able to manage, much to my disgust. We could be twins. It looks like his nose has been broken, which pleases me. I hope it was one of his victims. We are even dressed the same, in dirty blue jeans, black boots and baggy navy jumpers. He's wearing his coat, the one that's identical to mine. I suppose that if I did have a twin brother I didn't know about it would make sense for him to be going around in a Parka doing murders.

My jaw aches but I do not touch my face. He says sit down and, although I resent being told what to do in my own house, I do. When he speaks I see his teeth are awful, rotting in his mouth. His skin is bad too, pockmarked and spotty as though all he ever ate were sweets and burgers, cake and crisps. I don't say a thing, just wait for him to speak. He would appear to have had the same idea and we sit there for minutes in silence. In the end, he breaks first. I don't know who you think you are, he says in a quiet, low voice, as though someone once told him whispering was more scary than shouting. I ask him to repeat himself and he does. I don't know who you think you are, he says again, a bit louder and more strained, but I don't like you. I ask him if he would like a drink and when he says no I get up to see if there's any champagne left over from my birthday and he lunges across the table to punch me again. This time I move quickly enough to thwart him, but I fall back into my chair in doing so. He looks very angry. The muscles in his jaw bulge.

This time I speak. I don't know what your problem is. I am just minding my own business. I'm doing no worse than you, I'm just doing it in a much more stylish, interesting manner. He looks at me like I would imagine he looks at his women, and I notice a small scar on his forehead. I don't have any scars. I pull out my cigarettes and light one, and I can tell from his flickering nostrils that he doesn't approve. Good. Cigarettes always taste better when you smoke them in a non-smoker's face.

I have never been scared. I wasn't scared of my parents or my teachers or the dinner ladies. I slept with my feet out of the blankets. I went into the woods at night on my own and every broken branch and every shadow glimpsed was a joy, a challenge to rise to, a friend. Now I walk dark alleyways and haunt canal paths before dawn. I am the footsteps you hear behind you, the noises you hear at night when there's nobody else in the house, the face at the window that you dread. I am the thing that goes bump in the night and I have never been scared. Yet now the small of my back is pasted with sweat and my cigarette weaves in the air before my mouth.

When he speaks again his words are widely spaced and in between them I can hear him trying not to cough. You are my problem. I am going to teach you a lesson. He looks so very, very angry that I can't help it. I laugh. The guffaws erupt, and as the confusion crinkles his face I stand and reach for the champagne bottle again, this time to smash over his head. He's fast, though, and in less than a moment he is over the table and the chair is tumbling and I am shoved and falling backwards with both arms wheeling and then the mattress breaks my fall but he's on top of me and I can taste his breath.

He is stronger than me, that's the cruel truth of it. He holds my arms down with his knees and pats down his pockets. He makes a show of it, because he can. I won't give him the satisfaction of struggling. I expect him to pull out a knife, but what he eventually

produces is a leather case containing a fold-up pair of scissors. He starts to hack away at my jumper, talking from behind his teeth as he works the flimsy blades that seem at first to be just chewing the wool, until he is alternately hacking and tearing with his hands. He repeats his line about teaching me a lesson over and over again and then, with a final wrench of navy wool, he is through, and my world rolls over and my stomach lurches up. He is the first man on this earth to see my breasts, and with that, I vomit.

Chocolate

I almost drop the mixing bowl, smoke getting in my eyes as I take it out of the cupboard. He has probably been in my pantry, which feels like the biggest violation of them all, but I am suddenly so very hungry that I couldn't care less. I fill my arms with food, with tins of treacle and bags of brown sugar, condensed milk and spray-can cream, strawberries in syrup, peaches in syrup, syrup on its own, custard powder and pink wafer biscuits, two bottles of Baileys, my beloved Hundreds and Thousands and three full boxes of cocoa. It all goes in the mixing bowl. Know your place, he said. You are prey. All women are prey. He said that and then he spat on my breasts and then he left. He said that next time he comes round he will kill me. For a long time I sit cross-legged on the kitchen table with the bowl between my legs and in between cigarettes I eat the sweetness with a wooden spoon, just like William.

When I have pulled myself together and eaten enough to make me feel sick, I pull on my Parka and I walk very slowly to the biggest supermarket in town. The problem with my penpal is that he cannot stand seeing a woman doing his job and doing it better than him. There is such a glass ceiling in this business. I know my precedent, all those baby-killers and smotherers of the elderly, the pissant little poisoners. Even when the crimes get juicy, it's always the boyfriend's idea. Nobody is afraid of ladies. Everybody assumes that the bogey man is a man. Which is a mistake that I am only too happy to exploit. The supermarket is very large and bright and full of people, men who would not cross the road to avoid me, mothers who, in a tight spot, would rather leave their kids with me than with a man, any man, young girls who would not worry if they found me walking behind them on the way home from the nightclub. Here we are, us girls, bursting through the glass ceilings in our trouser-suits, assembling flat-pack furniture all by ourselves and drinking ten pints on a Saturday night, and we're missing out on the one sphere where we have never been even remotely

equal, where we really need to do some work to redress the balance. Men have always done more and bloodier murders, and they have also written more poems and symphonies, invented more machines, solved more philosophical questions. Of *course* men and women aren't equal. Men aren't scared of us. They don't expect us to beat them and rape them and jump out of the bushes at night to tear them apart.

I always knew I was going to be special. Killing seemed like a logical career choice for me. I was drawn to death like some girls are drawn to ponies. If you can be born with a talent for dancing or drawing or playing football then it stands to reason that you can be born with a talent for killing. My mother wanted me to be a nice girl, and so I was obviously going to be the opposite. It starts out with being told to be good and nice, which sounds like such a simple thing – be good, don't hurt anyone else, be kind and respectful to other people. But from being nice and good a whole raft of utterly illogical prohibitions spring up, especially for those of us with fannies. Be good and nice and don't pick up worms or burp in company or think dark thoughts or grow mushrooms in your knicker drawer. For my mother, nice and good meant clean and quiet and well-ironed. For William it meant milksop and pliable, for the teachers at school it meant writing neatly and showing all your working out. Somehow, being nice and good turns into doing what is expected of you, what other people say you should do, and I will have no truck with that. I reject both the supplemental restrictions and the fundamental premise. I will be neither nice nor good. Basically, it all boils down to not wanting to do what I'm told.

I think a lot of people would be like me if they dared. Everybody has a few people that they would secretly kill quite cheerfully; they just don't, because of what would happen if they did. Other people would not be happy; the police, the courts, parents, wives, nobody would be happy. Except the murderer. It's like picking your nose on the bus – you don't do it because you are afraid of what people might think. If you stop caring what they think then

you can do anything. You can pick your nose with gay abandon and you can hunt and kill anyone who questions your right to do so.

Don't you remember being a child, committing some mischievous, destructive act just because the opportunity presented itself, just to see what would happen? But then you stop, you stop doing anything you feel like doing just because you feel like doing it, because you learn about consequences, you learn to be good, to be nice. You still think about it, though. You think *God I'd love to press that Do Not Press button, or I'd like to teach that po-faced bint in the paper shop some manners or I want to smell her hair or It would feel so good to break my boss' nose*. Of course, murder is an extreme example. Most people will never try it, and so they'll never know if they like it. I was lucky – I was born without a fig to give. I pity those that were. A conscience, a sense of *guilt* – that's a cross-eyed bear indeed. I cannot understand how anyone could feel guilty for doing something that they wanted to do. What else were we put here to do, if not satisfy ourselves?

I don't dawdle in the supermarket. All I need is bleach. Of course I already own rubber gloves, bin-bags and a spade. It takes me less than an hour to shovel the contents of the kitchen slash living room into bin-bags and put the bin-bags in the bigger of the upstairs rooms. Then I move on to the bathroom and find, to my amusement, one hundred and eight toilet roll tubes. A long time ago I stole a bottle of Poor Betty's perfume so that I could make things smell like her, but now I am willing to sacrifice it and I tip some of it down the toilet after the bleach and some of it on the floor. I cannot have my bathroom smelling like slurry anymore. Back in the kitchen I open the trapdoor to the cellar and using the spade, scrape all the remaining bits from the floor of the kitchen down it. Then I scrub everything that I can with hot, soapy water.

As I clean I put into a special box all the things I have stolen from Poor Betty. The perfume bottle, the marabou pen, a laminated picture of the Virgin Mary, a page from her diary that reads in almost italic script *I am Victim staked out splayed legs spread for the Godhead*, a novelty eraser shaped like a cup-cake with a tiny cherry on top that I have someone managed to resist picking off. Poor Betty has nearly seventy novelty erasers from when she collected them as a little girl, shaped like food and animals and vehicles, patterned with stripes and dots and the black stamped names of tourist attractions I am sure she visited just to buy an eraser. You can't call them rubbers anymore, people giggle. I have seven pairs of Poor Betty's knickers. The last pair I find underneath the sofa and they stink, an itchy, feral smell. I remember the time I took them: a drinking session at Poor Betty's, a pill in her drink, her slow passing out. When she was out cold I went out and killed a girl in a council flat, made it look like a burglary, knowing that if the worst came to the worst, as far as Poor Betty knew, I had been in her house all night. When I got back Poor Betty was where I left her, slumped so far down in the sofa that her skirt had ridden up around her waist. Her hair was different then, it was a sleek black bob held back by a bow and she looked like nothing more than a debauched Snow White after a dwarf orgy. I pulled down my jeans, straddled her, and pissed all over her nylon-clad crotch. It worked like a dream. In the morning she came to me with her pink-cheeked confession, all groggy and ashamed. I ran her a bath and she threw the knickers in the bin. I rescue them and now, putting them in a box with all my other memories of Poor Betty, I feel a twinge of something that makes me reach for the Advocaat.

The girl in the cellar has stiffened and what was fluid has thickened. I don't have time to parcel her up, so I take everything out of the chest freezer, pile it up on the floor and half-carry, half-drag her over and in. With a bit of bending and shoving I can close the lid. It seems a shame to waste the contents of my freezer, all those Tupperware tubs of leftovers, the

pre-prepared pastry and the chicken nuggets that are my guilty pleasure, the things I binge on in the middle of the night. I find they taste better when you are squatting. I take a handful of nuggets to eat frozen like fowl ice-lollies and head back upstairs for the final push.

There is nothing at all that can be done with the sofa, and so I heft it out into the alley, but not before having a good rummage under the cushions and coming up with just short of six pounds in greasy, small denomination coins. When I have finished all the tidying I sit outside on the sofa and smoke a cigarette and I feel better; lighter, more energetic. A tidy house is a tidy mind, after all. As I finish smoking I hear a scrabbling noise behind me. I turn and look and see a little starveling cat. Fuck it, I think. That puss is mine, consequences be damned. Let its brethren come. I sit very, very still until it comes close enough and then I grab it. It yowls and starts to flail its legs but I tuck it under my arm like bagpipes and twist its head almost all the way round and it shits all over me and goes limp. The gods giveth, but the gods also taketh the piss. The shit is warm and so acrid that I can taste it. I hold the cat by the head at arm's length and go back inside. Now I have no choice. For the first time in countless months, I am going to have a bath. The cat goes in the fridge for later, when I will be very hungry, and I go upstairs with some trepidation.

The pipes clank and groan and shudder and as the bath fills, the water mixing with the badly-rinsed bleach and making the place smell like a swimming pool. I add half a bottle of washing-up liquid, and the smell is replaced by that of artificial lemons. The water is tepid, but it will do. I take off my shitty clothes and put them in the last of the bin-bags, and then I stand for a moment and look down at myself. No spare fat, muscles tight from corpse-dragging, my too big hands that hang like crabs on lines, reddened and knuckly from the scrubbing. The hairs on my legs and under my arms are as long and dark and thick as a man's and the ones between my legs grow straight, like an animal's pelt. I have never been that interested in my body. It's just the bag I use to carry around my malice and my glee.

When I am as clean as I will ever be I rub myself down with my sleeping bag and clamber into the nicest clothes I can find in the bin-bags– the green, smock-like dress that the girl in my cellar was wearing when I took her, teamed with the tights I found in the alley, to hide my hairy legs. None of the shoes I have fit my big feet, but I think the boots add a certain charm to the outfit. With the last few spritzes of perfume from Poor Betty’s bottle, I am ready.

Poor Betty has only been to my house once, when we were first getting to know each other. I didn’t want her to come, I didn’t want anybody at all to know where I lived, but she insisted in that charming way of hers and I gave in. She took one look through the front door and refused to go any further. She said it looked contagious.

When I get to her house she is dressed elaborately in a dress that looks like it is made of bandages. She screams at me and says look at you, anyone would think you were a girl! I tell her that I have turned over a new leaf, cleaned my house and my sorry self and that I am here now to cordially invite her round for a bit of a knees-up. She says she doesn’t believe me but I know she will come, because she is curious, and Poor Betty will do anything when she’s curious. She goes into her bedroom to pack a bag and I look around at her beautiful, chaotic nest and feel something I can only assume is sadness. We walk back to my house arm in arm, passing her hip-flask back and forth between us.

Although my house stills smells quite a lot of me, albeit with strong overtones of bleach, Poor Betty compliments me on a job well done. Then she takes an aerosol out of her bag and sprays a few squirts of something lilac-scented into the air, lights a cigarette and offers me one. She is on menthol today. She sits at the table on the only chair and I sit on the short, wonky barstool I found behind a pub in town. I pour us both a mug of sherry. She

keeps looking at the door, as though she would like to open it and let a bit of fresh air in, but she doesn't say anything, just smokes and drinks.

Why are you here? I ask her, and she looks at my eyes then at the door then back at my eyes. Why do you associate with me? I am odd, and I smell, I've told you nothing about my past or what I do when I am not with you. She lights a second cigarette from the butt of the first and says that she never knew I was so insecure. I tell her that I am not insecure, only curious, and she seems to think for a long time before she says I like you for lots of reasons. You're like a beetle in a matchbox, a strange secret that I have that nobody understands. And you get drunk with me and make me laugh. You don't get freaked out by the stuff I do and you don't make any demands on me. Besides, I'm not that easy to get on with myself. Everybody gets the friends they deserve. I look at her, smoking at my kitchen table, her perfect black eyeliner flicked out at the corners of her eyes, her painted lips, and I say Betty, I am a monster.

She giggles at first but stops when I repeat myself, quieter this time. I am a monster, and I am proud of it. I have killed twenty-two people, and soon it will be more. I have no remorse, I do it for fun and because it makes me feel like the god I think I am. It is art to me, like you make art from being a victim. All these years I've been watching you, and it has galled me to see you going to waste. I always told you that one day you would meet a really bad man and then you would be sorry. Then, in a moment that makes my stomach lurch up like a bucket hauled from a well, Poor Betty puts out her cigarette on the lino and says I know. I know all about you.

The Trojan Hog

When he arrives I have put the table back in place and toed the shards of my broken mug into the corners of the room. My suitcases are by the door. I have smoked three of Poor Betty's grim minty fags and finished most of the sherry, but I still feel strange, nervous I suppose. He hasn't made an effort, he is wearing exactly what he was wearing the last time I saw him. He has on his Parka and is carrying a stuffed-looking holdall. He wrinkles his nose as he steps inside. I offer him a drink and he puts down his bag. I give him Poor Betty's mug with the lipstick stains and drink mine straight from the bottle. Some people would probably think that he and I would make quite a charming couple. After all, it is traditional that female murderers should have a male partner-in-crime to do all the raping and the heavy lifting.

So you're going then, are you, he says, nodding at the suitcases. I say yes, I think it's time for a change, I seem to have exhausted all the fun in this town. Besides, I have always wanted to live by the sea. This is true. I would like to walk beneath the waves, see the whales hang, heads down in the lambent blue like bombs falling in aspic, the squid sliding with their petticoats rippling and their beaks bared for a kiss, the sea-sponges like sweetbreads, the umbilical eels. He looks at the lipstick on his mug, then at me, and says you do know that if it hadn't been for her, I'd never have found out about you. I don't say anything and he continues, tells me he has been fucking Poor Betty for over a year, and one day not long after they first met he was sitting in her flat while she was tied up in the bedroom and he started to read her diaries.

He throws me a notebook, one that I have never seen before and that is nothing like any of Poor Betty's other diaries. I flick through it. He has underlined some passages. *My best friend is a serial killer, and nobody knows it but me. I have followed her, and she is*

always in places where later they find a corpse. I have been to the library. There have been many deaths and disappearances since she came here that I think are hers. I have been in her house when she was out. I could hear noises coming from under the kitchen floor. I think she has a girl down there.. You interested me straight away, he says, even from her half-baked witterings. I staked out her flat and next time you came to visit, I followed you, and I've been following you ever since. Well, I say, it takes one to know one, I suppose.

Poor Betty is the kind of girl who makes up stories about the people she sees on the bus, imagines their home-lives, their love-lives and their secrets. She decided that the Payroll Manager in her office was practicing black magic, that the I.T. technician was a paedophile, that the man who runs the meat auction van on the market was secretly selling human meat. I always thought that this was pretty cute, and it amused me to think that, no matter what she fantasised about me, she would never guess the half of it. What I didn't imagine was that my penpal would read her secret musings and take them seriously.

Right then, he says, and puts his mug down on the table with a decisive bang. Where is she? And don't try any funny business, because whatever you might think you are, you are only a bitch, right, and if you put a step out of line I will beat you to death and fuck your corpse. Some of the thick smear of damson coloured grease has rubbed off the mug onto his bottom lip. I don't say a thing. I just pull the table out of the way with a great grinding squeak, pluck out the relevant tiles and pull up the trapdoor. He makes me go down first, and he follows close behind, one hand gripping the back of my neck in a way that tickles and makes me raise my shoulders to my ears.

In the cellar on the table, Poor Betty lies naked, bruised, still looking like an Empress, her hands and feet tied with ropes attached to the table legs. She is gagged, and when she sees us all she can do is emit little whinnying noises and wriggle about. He smiles at Poor

Betty and tells me to go and sit on the mattress. I hesitate for a second and he punches me again and I let out an involuntary squawk and stagger to the corner. The mattress stinks of piss and fear and worse, and in some places the stains are as thick and crusty as scabs. He comes over and kneels down beside me, pulls a length of thick cord from his pocket and ties my hands behind my back. He strokes Poor Betty's forehead and says, like he thinks he's funny or something, two for the price of one. Then he clambers onto the table in between Poor Betty's legs and drops his trousers as far as they will go. He's already hard and he pushes himself into her straight away. He starts to huff and grunt like a truffle pig and he looks over to me and says I bet you wish you could do this, and then he puts both hands around Poor Betty's throat and starts to squeeze. I can't believe my eyes. I think he is actually going to kill her straight away, just strangle her right there on the table within five minutes of entering the room. No detail, no finesse, no little artistic touches. This is the trouble with male violence, it's so *obvious*. He starts to buck and Poor Betty's face turns purple. It is nearly over. He shudders and comes and almost at the same instant, Poor Betty pulls her hands from the fake bonds and in one swift movement, no messing at all, she plunges both manicured thumbs deep into his eyes.

He screams and jerks and bats at her arms but she holds his head tight, her free fingers buried in his hair and her legs wrapped rib-crushingly tight around him. He slumps forward as though he has passed out and Poor Betty pulls her thumbs out with a wet smacking sound. He falls sideways off the table and she looks at me. She is panting, filthy, covered in blood and sperm and eyeball goo. I have a split lip. We smile at each other and she slips off the table and unties me.

In the end we finish him off with a carving knife. I let Poor Betty wield it but she's a bit wobbly and in the end I have to do it myself. I open him up from the bottom of his ribs to just above his pubes, gutting him like a Trojan Hog. We leave his body on the cellar floor

and climb back up into the kitchen. Later I will cook. Poor Betty pulls on my Parka but she's still shaking all over and makes straight for her cigarettes. We don't say anything for a long time and then she says chemist, I must go to the chemist when I've got cleaned up, I'm not on the pill. Then when I get back I want you to teach me everything you know. She is pink-cheeked and grinning, prettier than I have ever seen her. I say let's have a drink first, I'll mix you something special. Before I do we go outside and drag the sofa in. Poor Betty looks at it askance, but after what has just happened, she can hardly be squeamish about a sofa.

When Poor Betty said those words before, when she said I know all about you, I thought for the worst moment of my life that there was about to be a bashing at the door and hoards of filthy police crawling everywhere. She laughed at me and said look at your face, you cocky little bitch! You never look over your shoulder, do you? You were so wrapped up in the idea of yourself as an invincible monster that you thought you had a monopoly on monstrosity, and that's what got you into this mess in the first place. She poured herself some more sherry and explained everything.

It was all too much, she told me. That bastard had started being really rough with me, and sometimes he just left me tied up for hours and I could hear him in my flat, going through my stuff and it really creeped me out but I didn't know what to do because by this point I was really fucking scared of him. When he pissed my bed it scared me even more. He was so angry that he throttled me and he only just let go before I...then that night after I met you in the pub he came round again and he was OK, he wasn't so rough and he said he was sorry, but right in the middle of it he called me your name. For a while I actually thought you'd been fucking him, but then when he'd gone I thought about it and when I looked, some of my

diaries were missing. So I got my trainers on and I ran to your house as fast as I could, to warn you that this weirdo knew who you were, but when I got to your house there was this carrier bag full of paper hanging on your door and I thought it was from him so I read it and then I knew. And then I started to make my plans.

Now she gets herself settled with her cigarettes and an ashtray and I go into the kitchen to make the drinks. I mix her a gin and lemonade and add some harmless vegetable dye to turn it a lurid pink. I have to rummage round the cupboards until I find the special ingredient. I tap the powder into her drink. She talks non-stop. Poor Betty wants to go on a crusade. She has had enough of her submissive games, she has had one too many run-ins with people like the corpse in the cellar. She wants to be like me. She is making lists of all the men she wants to kill. She is going to hunt down men who hurt women, she's going to lure them back to her flat and kill them. I pass her the drink. I have put a pink straw in it. She drinks it quickly as if she was parched and then lies down on the sofa with her head in my lap and outlines her plans.

I let her talk. She is beautiful when she is excited, all fired up and barely pausing to breathe. I never thought I would have a disciple, a little follower to mould in my own image and unleash upon the world, but the more I think about it, the more the idea appeals to me. I have made mistakes, I have been arrogant and complacent, but I can learn from those mistakes, and I can pass those lessons on. I could be not just a monster, but a maker of monsters.

As Poor Betty talks I let her words lead me off down dreamy paths where I am teacher, master, god. I stroke her hair, trace my fingers down the side of her cheek, then move them further down to rest on her stomach. She just smiles and smiles. She is still

smiling when the drugs kick in, her eyes close and her head lolls to the side. She is out cold. I slide out from under her head and set about moving her as gently as I can towards the trapdoor. I am very careful. I don't want to hurt her. Not for nine months, at least.

Exegesis

Jodie Daber

Introduction

When you are walking home alone in the dark, a man is walking the other way, and your paths must cross, most people, male and female, might feel a little pang of anxiety. When you are walking home alone at night and a woman is walking the other way, is there the same shiver of unease? I have walked in the dark and had other women approach me, walk with me, confessing that they found safety in numbers. A lone woman is not perceived as a threat, a lone man is. Why is this the case?

In 1970 the criminologist Freda Adler published a book called *Sisters in Crime* in which she posited that as female liberation allowed women to behave in any way they wished, they would begin to resort to more and more ‘masculine’ expressions of aggression, and would eventually equal men in the perpetration of crime (1970 cited Pearson, P. *When She Was Bad*, 1997, 227). Rates of violent crime amongst women are rising, and women are committing more of the kind of acts that in the past have mainly been seen as the province of men – women are now reported as routinely participating in violent robberies, assaults and sexual crimes. Joanna Bourke writes in *The Guardian*:

Recent figures suggest that levels of female belligerence are rising. In America, the number of young women arrested for committing violent offences is rising at twice the rate as among young men. If membership of gun clubs is anything to go on, Annie is getting her gun. According to the British Crime Survey, women and girls are responsible for 13% of all violent attacks. (Joanna Bourke, “Women beware women”, *Guardian*, 30 May 2009)

An article in *The Daily Mail* (Matthew Hickley, “Rise of the Thugettes”, *Daily Mail*, 26 May 2009) quotes statistics from a Home Office report that illustrate the growing number of violent women. Hickley writes that, “A quarter of all violent assaults in England and

Wales are now being carried out by women.” and that, “Violence is now the most common reason for women in England and Wales to be arrested, recently overtaking theft and handling stolen goods.”

Women commit all kinds of crimes, as a few examples from the recent news demonstrate. In Tracy, California, a woman called Melissa Huckaby is about to stand trial for the alleged rape and murder of a little girl whose body was found dumped by a pond in Huckaby’s suitcase (Mike Harvey, “Disbelief as teacher Melissa Huckaby is charged with child rape and murder, *Times Online*, 24 April 2009). Amanda Knox, another American, is on trial in Italy accused of the sexual assault and murder of her roommate (Richard Owen, “Meredith Kercher ‘killed after refusing orgy’”, *Times Online*, 7 November 2008). In England, Vanessa George is charged with sexually assaulting the children she looked after in the nursery where she worked (Steven Morris, “Angry scenes as nursery worker appears in court on sexual assault charges”, *Guardian*, 11 June 2009). A mother in Maine has been arrested after sexually abusing her own children live on a webcam (Anton Antonowcz, “Mum held over live child sex abuse on internet”, *Daily Mirror*, 16 June 2009). In London two teenage girl gang members have been imprisoned after they stripped their victim naked on the streets, in broad daylight, and whipped her with their belts (Adrian Shaw, “Whipped naked by girl gang”, *Daily Mirror*, 16 June 2009).

Women and girls today live in a world of unprecedented representations of violence. Expressing their anger and frustration in a physical manner has never been more acceptable, and still there seems to be a cultural belief that violence is male, that it is innate to the masculine temperament and that violent women are an aberration and a man-like one at that, as Pearson writes in *When She Was Bad* (1997),

Violence, we believe, is implicit in the construction of the male: the chest-beating ape evolved into the soldier, the rapist. Men are propelled into conquest by a surge of

testosterone, and build their blocks of power in the strength of their physique. (Pearson, 1997, 7/8)

When it comes to female aggression, the stereotype is one of subtle, social, manipulative behaviour. Girls in the playground are less likely to resolve their differences with a swift punch-up behind the bike-sheds than with a campaign of rumours and social exclusion. In his book *See Jane Hit* (2006), James Garbarino writes, “Traditionally, when girls want to hurt people, they do so by manipulating relationships, which researchers have come to call relational aggression” (Garbarino, 2006, 115), and goes on to state that “Powerful nasty words abound in contemporary girl culture, and they hurt.” (Garbarino, 2006, 117)

Women are violent because they have reached the end of their tether, because they have had enough of their abusers, because society is so oppressive, because they have lost their minds. As Peter Vronsky writes in his book *Female Serial Killers: How and Why Women Become Monsters* (2007),

Women have been generally perceived to be capable of committing only “expressive” violence – an uncontrollable release of bottled-up rage or fear, often as a result of long-term abuse at the hands of males: Battered Woman Syndrome or Battered Spouse Syndrome. It has been generally believed that women usually murder unwillingly without premeditation. (Vronsky, 2007, 6)

However, women are clearly capable of horrendous crimes, as the following research will demonstrate. When we know that there is a killer prowling, or a rapist on the loose, we look nervously at the men on the bus, on the streets, the men we know. Maybe we should look at the women, too.

The Female Killer in Literature

Here I will consider several texts, all of which have as their protagonist a woman or girl who commits murder. The texts are *The Wasp Factory* (Banks, 1984) *Dirty Weekend* (Zahavi, 1991), *A Clockwork Apple* (Webb, 2008), *Heart Sick* (Cain, 2007), and *The Bad Seed* (March, 1954).

The Wasp Factory (1984) by Iain Banks, raises questions about ‘nature vs nurture’ within the debate on violence and gender. At the end of the text, we discover that Frank, the murderous narrator, was actually Frances all along, having been tricked by his/her father, Angus, into believing that she was a boy, castrated as a baby in an attack by the family dog. Angus doses Frank/Frances with male hormones and even constructs a wax replica of the severed penis.

Frank, although castrated, believes ‘himself’ to be wholly male, saying that he can “feel it in my bones, in my uncastrated genes” (Banks, 1984, 154). He is disappointed with his body, which is soft and feminine and not at all like the idealised masculine form he desires:

I want to look dark and menacing; the way I ought to look, the way I should look, the way I might have looked if I hadn't had my little accident. Looking at me, you'd never guess I'd killed three people. It isn't fair. (Banks, 1984, 20)

The violent, war-like rituals he uses to define his territory on the isolated island on which he lives also allow him to construct his own masculinity. Frank is playing at being a man, adopting the stereotypically aggressive, acquisitive, war-mongering characteristics that allow him to compensate for the weaknesses he feels accompany his castration. He is a toy soldier playing with toy soldiers. For him, violence is essentially, gloriously male, and masculinity is violence. He believes that violence is “what men are really for. Both sexes can

do one thing especially well: women can give birth and men can kill.” (Banks, 1984, 155). This biological essentialism is turned on its head by the revelation that Frank is female, and is herself capable of giving birth.

Angus, Frank’s father and the author of all his trouble, can be seen as representative of an omnipotent, controlling patriarchy. Frank’s birth was never registered; he exists not only outside gender definitions but outside of society as a whole – as far as the establishment goes, Frank does not exist. Not only does Angus control his son/daughter’s physical understanding of him/herself, he also controls Frank’s understanding of the wider world by misinforming him, controlling and perverting his education. Frank says:

For *years* I believed Pathos was one of the Three Musketeers, Fellatio was a character in *Hamlet*, Vitreous a town in China, and that the Irish peasants had to tread the peat to make Guinness (Banks, 1984, 14).

Angus slips Frank doses of bromide to temper his sexual impulses. Frank is allowed to be ‘a man’ only as far as his father will allow him. Frank is raised in an atmosphere of scientific knowledge, of quantifying everything around him, an utterly male-dominated world in which women are not only absent, but abhorred. Angus rids the island of women and ‘creates’ a son for himself.

The Wasp Factory raises questions about the social construction of gender, the ‘masculine’ aggression that Frank has learned through his father and through television, but also the physiological construction; we can never be sure if Frank’s murderous spree was caused by his father’s over-administering of testosterone or if it was innate to Frank’s real, female self. Frank is a created being, and his name itself could be a nod to Frankenstein’s monster – another being created by an omnipotent ‘father’ figure, and another creature whose identity problems lead to murder.

It is interesting that Frances only begins to question her crimes when she discovers her true gender – before that, there was a sense of entitlement, a sense that the slaughter of animals and other children was somehow acceptable, that the acts of destruction committed were a natural behaviour for a boy, that the killings were a natural response to the ultimate injury of male pride. There is a sense of ‘boys will be boys’, and that boys being boys involves aggression, violence and even murder as a matter of course. When Frances realises her true sex, for the first time she displays unrestrained emotion: “I stood and I cried, letting the tears trickle down my cheeks.” (Banks, 1983, 228). The dam inside her has broken, reflecting the real river that she spent her ‘boyhood’ trying to dam. She looks at her motives for killing and seems to find reasons but no excuses;

Perhaps it was because I thought I had had all that really mattered in the world, the whole reason – and means – for our continuance as a species, stolen from me before I even knew its value. Perhaps I murdered for revenge in each case, jealously exacting – through the only potency at my command – a toll from those who passed within my range; my peers who each would otherwise have grown into the one thing I could never become: an adult. (Banks, 1984, 183)

The Wasp Factory is included in this study not only because of the questions it raises about the construction of gender and the innate violence of the masculine stereotype, but also because of the shock to the reader caused by the revelation of Frances’ true gender and the way in which this forces a rethinking of Frank’s acts of violence. In *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: from Leavis to Levinas* (1999), Andrew Gibson writes,

Murder and obscene violence are the centre of the world of *The Wasp Factory*, and Banks’s novel appears ultimately to prise masculinity and violence apart, to transfer responsibility for murder and mayhem to the feminine; except, of course, that it also seems to suggest that the violence has resulted from the absence or repression of the very female element which finally intrudes into the novel. (Gibson, 1999, 42)

Frank/Frances stands in between definitions and constructions of gender and is damaged by his/her inability to fit into established categories. As Frances herself says at the end of the text, when her sex has been revealed, “Talk about penis envy”. (Banks, 1984, 183)

The wars that Frank/Frances wages against the wildlife of the island, the small children of his/her acquaintance and the world in general are very different to the war waged by the heroine of the next text, *Dirty Weekend* (Zahavi, 1991). *Dirty Weekend* is a fictional example of women’s violence as self-defence against violent, predatory men.

Bella, the heroine of *Dirty Weekend*, is a woman who ‘woke up one morning and realised she’d had enough” (Zahavi, 1998, 1). Living alone in a Brighton bedsit, she is subject to obscene phonecalls made to her by a neighbour. When the man confronts and threatens her in the street, Bella decides to take matters into her own hands. She breaks into her neighbour’s house and kills him with a hammer as he sleeps; she then arms herself with a gun and sets out to find and murder a variety of abusive men.

Bella is an every-woman, she represents all women and girls who have been victims of or felt themselves vulnerable to male violence, especially male sexual violence. Bella’s violence is inspired by and confined to the destruction of violent men. The female violence that she enacts is not innate to her but is created by oppression, a reflection of the violence perpetrated against her. Her actions could be seen as wish-fulfilment or a call-to-arms; “God bless you, Bella. God bless you for reclaiming the night.” (Zahavi, 1998, 48). Some feminists have espoused a ‘physical feminism’, training the body in order to meet men head on in the battle of the sexes.

While most feminists did not advocate murder, the emerging women’s movement countered women’s internalization of passive femininity by promoting what Martha McCaughey (1997) calls “physical feminism”, including training in self-defense. (Caputi, 2004, 157)

Bella goes to see a clairvoyant, an Iranian man called Nimrod, because, she tells him, “I want to change”. Nimrod asks her if she wants to be a better person and she says no, “Cut out my heart and put a stone in its place. I want vengeance.” (Zahavi, 1998, 24). This echoes Lady Macbeth’s speech in which she says “Come, you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here/And fill me from the crown to the top top-full/Of direst cruelty” (Shakespeare, 1967, 1.5. 39-41). Both Bella and Lady Macbeth feel they need to have something removed in order to commit their crimes, and for Lady Macbeth especially it seems to be something inherently female, suggesting that men who commit murder are lacking something inherently female, that violence is *male*.

Bella’s fight against violent males culminates with her stabbing to death a serial killer who she meets on the beach. The serial killer is called Jack, perhaps a reference to Jack the Ripper that paints Jack as the god of all sex-crime and Bella as his vanquishing foe.

Since sexual violence against women is viewed, by most feminists, as a political phenomenon, serial killers have come to be seen as engines of misogynistic oppression. Feminist Jane Caputi writes that serial killers act on behalf of all men as “henchmen” in the subordination of women. (Pearson, 1997, 162)

Men are not afraid of women, Zahavi seems to be saying, because they do not expect a woman to turn round and stab them, shoot them, or run them over with their own luxury car. Violence is the exclusive province of the male, and perhaps men will not stop abusing their position until they are afraid that women might start fighting back. Bella is a warning.

If you see a woman walking, if she’s stepping quietly home, if you see her flowing past you on the pavement. If you’d like to break her brittle bones, and you want to hear the hopeless pleading, and you want to feel the pink flesh bruising, and you want to taste the taut skin bleeding. If, in fact, you see her and you want her. Think on. Don’t touch her. Just let her pass you by. Don’t place your palm across her mouth and drag her to the ground. For unknowingly, unthinkingly, unwittingly, you might have laid your heavy hand on Bella. And she’s woken up this morning with the knowledge that she’s finally had enough. (Zahavi, 1991, 185)

Bella's violence is directed exclusively towards men and the oppressive, ever-present threat of sexual violence. The protagonist of *A Clockwork Apple* (Webb, 2008) is also railing against oppression, in her case the oppression of an unfair class structure that prevents those like her who were raised in deprived areas from achieving anything in their lives.

A Clockwork Apple takes the familiar tropes of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and transforms them by means of gender inversion. Webb's Alex is a young woman running riot through a dystopian Manchester with her gang of 'Grrrlz', robbing, vandalising and drinking speed-enhanced wheatgrass shots. Alex is an autodidact deeply enamoured of literature, devoted to the feeding of her 'phrontistery' or 'mind', and resentful of the middle-class 'Blytons' she sees around her attending the city's universities.

Alex commits her violent acts, including murder, out of a seeming desire to rail against the injustices of a classist society. Unlike Burgess' Alex, Webb's does not seem to take a sadistic pleasure in her violence – she does not rape, and two of her victims are heavy-handed prison guards who the reader is perhaps encouraged to see as somehow 'deserving it', as they are representatives of the system that so oppresses Alex.

Do I care that I have murdered a dum dum doing her job? Yes. I would. But she wasn't doing her job. D'ya get me? (Webb, 2008, 130).

Perhaps Webb felt that it was impossible to have her female lead take joy in violence, impossible to have her commit her own versions of the original Alex's sexual assaults. The novel seems to suggest that women are not violent unless provoked by a masculine system. Although in Alex's miserable Moss Side existence there are few men – only rampaging girl gangs or their gin-addled 'Muvvas' drinking their lives away in the local pub. The doctors she encounters after her arrest and placement in the Bill 'n' Bob recovery programme are all

male. Alex's violence is the violence of revenge, she sees her anger and aggression as justified and important;

And yet, the fire in me belly, oh loyal Etna of wronged goddesses that has ever existed, both in myth and other worlds, doesn't let me down [...] It has taken a long time for me to be able to see through the bullshit and rechristen my belligerency borne from longing as a good thing. (Webb, 2008, 76-7)

Alex's doctor tells her at one point that she is "nothing but a scared, lost little girl, a scared alcoholic/addict/whatever." (Webb, 2008, 208), and also says "Little good can come of an alcoholic/addict/whatever UNLESS!...she has first accepted her devastating weakness and ALL its consequences." (Webb, 2008, 194). This denial of responsibility is what Alex rebels against during her treatment. She is trying to retain, if not her violence, then her volition.

Alex finds it relatively easy to convince her doctor that she has been 'broken' and recovered from her addictions. She just cries and they believe her. She says, as she is putting on this performance "They can now be secure in their power. And my seeming lack of it. I is conforming to my sex. Hee haw hee haw." (Webb, 2008, 220).

While Bella and Alex commit their crimes as acts of violent rebellion against male sexual aggression and the oppression of a classist society respectively, the protagonist of *The Bad Seed* (March, 1958), a young girl called Rhoda Penmark, commits murder for entirely personal and selfish reasons. *The Bad Seed* explores the idea of a female who is *born* to be a killer, rather than being made into one by social, familial or political pressure. March essentially takes a blue-print definition of a sociopath, although he doesn't use the term, and uses it to shocking effect by making his villain a little girl. Rhoda kills to get what she wants and to avoid getting into trouble. She kills a young boy for the penmanship medal she craves,

a woman for an opal pendant, and the janitor who suspects her. She is cold, highly manipulative and views human life as expendable if that expenditure furthers her own ends.

Rhoda was a cold, self-sufficient, difficult child who lived by rules of her own, and not by the rules of others. She was a fluent and a most convincing liar, as they'd soon discovered. In some ways, she was far more mature than average; in others, she was hardly developed at all. (March, 1954, 36)

Rhoda has suffered none of the abuse that some of the other violent women studied here. She endured no incest, beatings or rapes. Her mother is at a loss to understand how a childhood as idyllic as Rhoda's could produce a child who was so devoid of all compassion:

Rhoda has been given love and security from the beginning. She was never neglected, and she was never spoiled. She was never unjustly treated. Kenneth and I always made it a point to see that she felt important to us, and wanted. I don't understand her mind or her character. I do not understand it. [...]I don't believe environment had much to do with it. It must be something deeper than that. [...]It was something dark. Something dark and unexplainable. (March, 1954, 85)

Rhoda does not get her come-uppance. She seems destined to become the kind of serial killer who murders for money and other personal gain, but not for pleasure. Her mother commits suicide at the end of the text and even then Rhoda appears to feel no remorse. At the funeral she insists that her father humour her in her games, despite his grief:

But the little girl was not to be diverted from her game. She did a little pirouette, curtsied, and said, "What will you give me, Father? What will you give me if I give you a basket of kisses?" There was a moment's silence before Kenneth said, "I'll give you a basket of hugs." And then, as though the last vestige of his reserve were broken, he covered his face and wept with a harsh, tearing sound. (March, 1954, 217)

Rhoda's mother eventually works out that she herself is adopted, and that Rhoda is therefore the granddaughter of 'The Incomparable Bessie Denker', a 'Black Widow' type serial killer who appears to be loosely based on Belle Guinness, who killed up to forty-eight people, mainly for her own personal gain, between 1900-1905 (Vronsky, 2007, 180). *The*

Bad Seed raises questions of nature vs nurture; whilst the violence of Bella and Alex is a reaction to abuse and oppression and Rhoda's violence is innate and possibly hereditary.

In contrast, the villain in the next text also feels no remorse for her crimes, but commits them entirely for her own pleasure and amusement. *Heart Sick* (Cain, 2007) involves a reversal of the traditional tropes of a certain kind of crime thriller in which a brilliant but flawed detective hunts down a sadistic, male, serial killer. Gretchen Lowell is the unrepentant killer of two hundred men, women and children. She is happy with her murderous nature, she gloats over it and, despite her teasing Detective Archie Sheridan with tales of an abusive childhood, she reveals in the sequel, *Sweet Heart* (Cain, 2008) that she made these stories up. She is a female Hannibal Lecter. In *The Silence of the Lambs* (Harris, 1988), Lecter says to Clarice Starling, the FBI trainee who is interviewing him,

Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up good and evil for behaviourism, Officer Starling. You've got everybody in moral dignity pants – nothing is ever anybody's fault. (Harris, 1988, 15)

Until Thomas Harris goes back on this in the later book *Hannibal Rising* (Harris, 2006) and gives Lecter a traumatic childhood of his own, the inexplicability of the man was perhaps the most chilling thing about him, and in this study I was looking for a female equivalent, a woman who could not be reduced to influences, to abusive parents, boyfriends, society, a woman who was 'born evil'. Gretchen Lowell is an exaggerated character, the monster at the heart of a pulpy thriller, but the fact that she stands almost alone in that particular genre and in the wider literature I have read for this research, as an unrepentant, unprovoked female serial killer is notable. In one particularly gruesome scene, Cain plays with conventional notions of femininity and their juxtaposition with Lowell's violent nature by having Lowell remove one of her victim's intestines with a crochet hook.

Gretchen Lowell is a psychopath. She's not like us. She doesn't do things for reasons. She liked killing people. She's said as much in prison. She kidnapped Archie Sheridan, drugged him, tortured him for ten days, and would have murdered him if he hadn't talked her out of it. (Cain, 2007, 56)

Gretchen Lowell gets away with her crimes for so long because the police simply do not think of looking for a woman. The FBI agent charged with profiling her says "I was convinced the killer was a man. That he was working alone. I didn't even consider the possibility of a female" (Cain, 2007, 135). As Pearson writes, "Prejudice about female nature is the gift of misogyny to women who want to get away with crime." (Pearson, 1997, 43). However, Gretchen Lowell does not kill entirely alone – she occasionally uses men to help her where her own physical strength lets her down,

Poor fucks. They think she found them mostly through newspaper personal ads or, later, on Internet dating sites. She'd use false information to register on the sites and then trawl, looking for her targets. Apparently she had a knack for picking out men she could manipulate. She'd isolate them from their friends. Find their weaknesses. And push them until they cracked. (Cain, 2007, 52-3)

Gretchen Lowell is using men as tools, for her own convenience, and thereby gaining power over two people – her victim and the man she has brainwashed into helping her kill. Unlike the other fictional women considered here, Lowell kills purely for her own pleasure. She says,

What astounds me is that people get up and go to work and come home and they don't ever kill anyone. I feel sorry for them because they aren't alive. They will never really know what it's like to be human." (Cain, 2007, 321)

These fictional women and girls commit murder for many and varied reasons. Frank/Frances kills from both a sense of masculine entitlement to violence and from a grief at the penis he believes himself to have lost. Alex kills at first by mistake in the course of her

rebellion against the society she feels wrongs and marginalises her, and then as a reaction to the heavy-handed prison guards who are trying to hurt and contain her. Bella kills because she has ‘had enough’ of the day-to-day abuses perpetrated on women by men, she kills for revenge, she kills to ‘take back the night’. Rhoda kills for personal gain and to try and get herself out of trouble. Gretchen Lowell, in her pulpy thriller world, kills for her own personal amusement. In real life too, women kill for many reasons.

When female serial killers appear in real life, they are often partnered with a man, a husband or boyfriend. If they are not, they more often kill within one location – a hospital, a rest home, their own family. Female killers do not prowl, they do not stalk and kill random victims in back-alleys, and as a result they are not as feared as male predators, they do not haunt the imagination in the same way. As Vronsky writes,

Yet somehow the notion of a female serial killer has not entered our popular consciousness of fear or into our alarmed imaginations in the same menacing way that the figure of the male serial killer has. (Vronsky, 2007, 3)

A serial killer is defined by the FBI as “a murderer who is involved in three or more separate events, with an emotional cooling-off period between each homicide” (Wilson & Seaman, 1992, 101). Serial killers hold an unusual place within public imagination. We are revolted by them and at the same time fascinated. In *Goddesses and Monsters* (2004), Jane Caputi quotes a review of a film about Ted Bundy:

Dave Kehr (2002) reviewing the film for the *New York Times*, finds that once again the killer is celebrated as someone free to “act out the impulses...that the rest of are too cowardly and conventional to own up to. He’s pure id, running loose in a society that is all repressive superego. And we’re supposed to have a sneaky admiration for him. (Caputi, 2004, 187)

Ted Bundy himself provides a stereotypical picture of the male serial killer. Bundy was a white, middle class, intelligent man, a law student who confessed to the murder of 23

women but who is suspected of being responsible for many more deaths. Most serial killers are similar to Bundy in that they are young, white, men (Wilson and Seaman, 1990, 48), but there are more women in their ranks than most people might imagine. As Candice Skrapec writes in her essay “The female serial killer: An evolving criminality” (1993),

Serial murder is typically presented as a male phenomenon, but the reality does not support this. Women do kill. Moreover, American society’s experience with female serial killers is consistent with its experience with female murderers in general. If we look at rates of homicides committed by each gender in the United States over time, females account for roughly 12 to 15 per cent of all murderers. Intriguingly, women represent the same proportion of serial murderers. In criminologist Eric Hickey’s research on serial murderers and their victims, 17 per cent of the 203 offenders he studied were female. (Skrapec, 1993, 243)

In her book *Women Who Kill: Profiles of Female Serial Killers* (2001), Carol Ann Davis records the lives and crimes of fourteen women, all of whom perpetrated or were directly involved in serial murders. Of the fourteen, seven killed with their husband or boyfriend, and two – Gwen Graham and Catherine Wood – killed together. Even the most cursory reading of these profiles reveals stark similarities between the women, particularly in their upbringings. All but two of the women had very unhappy childhoods. Seven were physically or sexually abused by their parents or guardians. Four were brought up by their emotionally distant or violent grandparents. Ten were either married or pregnant in their teens as a result of sexual promiscuity from an early age. Four worked as prostitutes. Only Charlene Gallego and Karla Homolka were from relatively stable backgrounds.

Of the five women profiled in Davis’ book who killed alone and not as part of a ‘killer couple’ - Anna Maria Zwanziger, Jeanne Weber, Martha Ann Johnson, Genene Jones and Aileen Wuornos, - three were exclusively killers of children. Johnson suffocated her own children by sitting on them (she weighed 250lb) as a way of getting back at her bisexual husband who had left her for a man. Jones, a paediatric nurse eventually charged with the deaths of two children in her care but suspected of killing as many as fifty, used medical

poisons such as the anti-coagulant Herparin. Weber strangled the children for whom she babysat. Zwanziger was a poisoner who referred to arsenic as her “truest friend” (Davis, 2001, 21). She started poisoning to rid herself of love rivals and when this did not work, she poisoned for revenge. Although they killed together, the lovers Graham and Wood, who worked in a nursing home and suffocated their elderly patients, did not kill with a man, and so they are included here. All of these women, with the exception of Zwanziger, preyed on the most vulnerable members of society, young children and the elderly. None of the murders were what I would term ‘bloody murders’; the victims were poisoned, suffocated or strangled, no blood was shed. This does not in any way diminish the horror of these crimes, but it does contrast interestingly with the crimes women commit in partnership with men, and the crimes men commit alone.

Another trait that these women share is the fact that they all killed within one location – their homes, hospitals, nursing homes, places where their status as protector, nurturer or carer allows them to operate more freely and with less suspicion. Pearson writes;

Women have historically felt most comfortable and masterful in their homes, and that is where they have tended to kill. The next most frequent sites are hospitals, boardinghouses, or private residences they visit as nurses or baby-sitters: all zones that women can move through without being scrutinized.[...] Serial killers need to build up a certain confidence before they attack, and part of that psychological process involves feeling secure in their surroundings. (Pearson, 1997, 159)

However, when women kill with a male partner, their victims are often strangers picked up on the street; in several of the cases recorded by Davis, the women in the partnership were used to pick up the victims, as people are more likely to trust a woman. Vronsky writes,

The presence of another female, even a stranger, still disarms many women’s primal fears of finding themselves alone with a male stranger. Our belief in an intrinsic non-threatening nature of the feminine is deceiving both genders. (Vronsky, 2007, 2-3)

It is as though women kill outside of their comfortable, domestic environment only when they have a chaperone.

The exception to this is Aileen Wuornos, the prostitute who shot seven men in America in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Wuornos is often described as the first female serial killer, and sometimes as the only female serial killer. However, Davis cites several that had gone before:

Other US female serial killers who pre-date Aileen Wuornos are profiled in this book, namely Genene Jones, Martha Ann Johnson and Judith Neelly. And Carol Bundy (with Doug Clark) and Gwen Graham/Catherine Woods also qualify if you include female serial killers acting as part of a team. (Davis, 2001, 305)

There are also the female serial killers *not* mentioned in Davis' book, for example Belle Guinness, Jane Toppan, Dorothea Puente, Nannie Doss, Delfina and Maria de Jesus Gonzales and Erzebet Bathory.

However, Wuornos may be unique in that she was a lone female killer who preyed exclusively upon men. Her troubled background – she was raised by her grandparents and her grandfather was abusive, she was pregnant at 14 and a prostitute from 16 and she claimed to have been raped multiple times – led to many people claiming that she herself was the victim. Davis writes:

At least one feminist writer suggested that Aileen was in jail for daring to be openly homosexual and said that she had only shot the seven men to defend herself. And an Aileen Wuornos Defence Group was formed, also claiming that she had been wrongly convicted, that each death she'd caused was indeed self-defence. Websites told surfers how they could write to her and support her." (Davis, 2001, 306)

The crimes of the women who kill with a man are very different from the crimes of the women who kill alone. Davis' book profiles six women who killed with their husbands or boyfriends: Myra Hindley, Charlene Gallego, Judith Ann Neelley, Catherine Margaret Birnie, Rosemary West, Carol Mary Bundy and Karla Leanne Homolka. Gallego did not personally kill any of the victims – all ten were murdered by her husband Gerald – and nor did Myra Hindley, but both women participated in the kidnap and sexual abuse of children and young women. All of the above women's crimes involved rape and sexual assault, and all the women were active participants in this abuse.

Of the women who killed with their husbands, both Bundy and Homolka received lesser sentences than the men, and Judith Neelley's death sentence was commuted, on her conversion to Fundamental Christianity, into the same life sentence that Alvin Neelley received, despite the fact that she had murdered all their victims (Davis, 2001, 136). What the women who killed alone share is the fact that, although their actions were highly suspicious, they were allowed to go on killing. The deaths of Johnson's children were put down to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (Davis, 2001, 81). Jeanne Weber continued to be asked to babysit despite the number of deaths amongst her charges (Davis, 2001, 31). Genevieve Jones was not only given a good reference from one hospital, but when a fellow nurse raised suspicions about her behaviour, she was "...told to stop picking on Jones..." (Davis, 2001, 120). Many of the women who killed with their partners claimed that they were helplessly in thrall to them and were believed by the courts, despite their active participation in the kidnap, sexual abuse and murder of their victims. Patricia Pearson writes:

In essence, what is lost in the way we view female aggression is its moral and rational content. Women are not responsible actors imposing their will upon the world. They are passive and rather deranged little robots who imperil themselves on cue. (Pearson, 1997, 23)

The discrepancy in sentencing mentioned above, and the fact that several of the women studied here were allowed to continue killing without suspicion, suggests that both society and the criminal justice system are uneasy with the idea of women being capable of extreme violence. Skrapec writes,

Our collective sense of security is particularly threatened by the notion of female serial murderers. In the matter of women who kill, we have become fatally complacent. We seem to need to look at the women who are agents of multiple murder as aberrations rather than as symptoms of a phenomenon. I believe that many homicide cases remain unsolved, without viable suspects, because the offender was falsely assumed to be male. (Skrapec, 2003, 265)

There is evidence, however, that these women enjoyed their crimes. Karla Homolka was filmed telling her partner Paul Bernardo how much she had enjoyed the drugging and sexual assault of her own sister, which resulted in her death (Davis, 2001, 332). Carol Bundy killed and decapitated a man entirely on her own (Davis, 2001, 276). Judith Neelley watched as the drain cleaner she had injected into her raped and beaten victim took effect (Davis 2001, 147). These were arguably brutal, sadistic women:

This, above all, is what we must understand about extremely violent women, as we have always understood it about violent men. They were once needy girls, yes. Their lives were exploited, indeed. Patriarchal oppression incited them to desperate responses, perhaps. But none of that can be relevant to our social response. They are human first and gendered second. They will destroy you in an instant, no slower than the men. (Pearson, 1997, 175)

Women kill. They do not kill as often as men, but they do kill, for many and varied reasons. The main difference between male and female perpetrated serial murders appears to be the *modus operandi*, the idea that women kill *quietly*, in their homes and in the places where they have power over those who rely on them for care. The popular notion of a ‘serial killer’ is perhaps an amalgamation of real life and fictional ‘monsters’; Peter Sutcliffe, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Michael Myers, *American Psycho* – a stalking, ripping, raping, *male* nightmare. In *Sexual Personae* (1990), Camille Paglia writes,

“Serial or sex murder, like fetishism, is a perversion of male intelligence. It is a criminal abstraction, masculine in its deranged egotism and orderliness. It is the asocial equivalent of philosophy, mathematics, and music. There is no female Mozart because there is no female Jack the Ripper. (Paglia, 1990, 247)

However, society is changing and women are changing with it. Female aggression is becoming more familiar. Film and television portray more and more violent women as role models to girls and young women; from Ripley in the *Alien* films to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Lara Croft to the Powerpuff Girls. As it becomes more acceptable for women to express their anger and frustration in a physical way, and as women shed the social constraints which have in the past kept them in their homes, perhaps it is not surprising that, as discussed, women are becoming increasingly involved in criminal activities that have previously been committed mainly by men – paedophilia, gang violence, murder itself. With these thoughts in mind, it is interesting to consider the future of female violence. Will we see more serial murders committed by women? Will those crimes be more like those traditionally committed by their male counterparts – predatory, bloody and sexually abusive? As Dr Deborah Schurman-Kauflin writes in her book *The New Predator: Women Who Kill* (2000),

It is all a matter of perception, and until the public realises what a danger female predators present, essentially, a free pass for killing is offered to those females who choose to engage in this behaviour. If nothing is done, more and more females will take advantage of that. (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, 14)

This conjecture inspired my creative piece, *Trojan Hogs*. I wanted to invent a female serial killer who was as terrifying as her male counterparts, who had none of the ‘mitigating circumstances’ of the female killers mentioned here, who appeared to have been ‘born bad’ as opposed to being moulded by circumstance. I wanted to create a woman whose violence was as inexplicable as Hannibal Lecter’s originally was, who killed like a man – on her own

and for her own personal pleasure. I wanted to create a frightening woman. My protagonist considers herself to be alone amongst killers. To her, murder is art and she is a virtuoso.

Craft and Technique

Clovis is the scourge of an unnamed Northern town. She is an amateur chef, an artist of disgust, a faker of poltergeists and a serial killer. She sits in her filthy house and remembers a childhood spent torturing her best friend and her mother, and how she found her calling. Clovis is the happiest girl in the world, until she receives a letter from another of her kind, a fellow monster with designs on her friend Poor Betty and a firm belief that murder is man's work.

The above serves as an introduction to my novella, *Trojan Hogs*. One of the controlling ideas of the piece was the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that serial killing is one of the last bastions of gender inequality, that murder is a field in which women are seriously underrepresented and that Clovis believes an attempt should be made to redress the balance;

Here we are, us girls, bursting through the glass ceilings in our trouser-suits, assembling flat-pack furniture all by ourselves and drinking ten pints on a Saturday night, and we're missing out on the one sphere where we have never been even remotely equal, where we really need to do some work to redress the balance. (59)

Clovis believes that the imbalance between the sexes is predicated on fear – the fear women have of men but men do not have of women. She believes that men and women will not be equal until men are as afraid to go out on their own at night as women are;

Of *course* men and women aren't equal. Men aren't scared of us. They don't expect us to beat them and rape them and jump out of the bushes at night to tear them apart. (60)

My purpose in examining the profiles of female serial killers was to establish a stereotype of that particular type of criminal that I could subvert in my creative piece. I wanted to create a fictional serial killer who had none, or very few, of the distinguishing traits of her real-life counterparts. The 'typical' female serial killer I established from the cases I studied was a young woman from a poor background, who was abused as a child, had a

violent or absent father, low self-esteem, a tendency to attention-seeking or histrionic behaviour, was sexually promiscuous and attracted to dangerous men but also had strong lesbian tendencies, and who killed babies, children, girls, the elderly and the infirm, either through non-bloody methods such as poison or suffocation, or in partnership with a man.

Accordingly, I set about making sure that Clovis displayed none of these characteristics. In the first draft, Clovis lived alone with her mother, an unusually weak, timid, quiet and religious woman who lived in fear of her cocky, maleficent daughter. Clovis had a happy childhood, although her mother did not enjoy it at all. This made it easier for Clovis to be in a position where she could take over the house and cause the death of her mother, thus freeing herself to move to the town and begin her career as a serial killer. However, it was important that Clovis' childhood was as normal and outwardly happy as possible in order to make her actions even more inexplicable, and so in the second draft I had to rewrite most of the passages in which Clovis reminisced about her mother and introduce a father for her. Clovis needed a 'normal' mother and father to avoid her sharing a characteristic with the 'typical' female serial killers listed above, most of whom had absent or abusive fathers and unhappy home lives.

Clovis' parents are quiet, 'normal' people – her mother cooks and keeps the house and her father spends his spare time pottering about in his shed. They are supportive of and kind towards Clovis – she talks about how her mother “encouraged my early forays into the kitchen, and used to tell everyone that I would grow up to be a head chef.” (47), and they put a lot of Clovis' bad behaviour down to her grief at the death of William, her best friend, little knowing that Clovis herself was responsible for his murder.

While Clovis torments her mother by engineering ghostly phenomena – knockings on the walls and plagues of flies – she manipulates her father, saying he is “as easy to play as a

ukulele” (52). She spends a good deal of time with her father, humouring him with a faked interest in his hobbies of carpentry and military history,

My parents were terrible clichés, especially my Dad. When I wanted him to feel important and in control I called him Father, so he could feel for a moment like the wise, pipe-chomping Pater he would never really be. I went out of my way to get him inside... I spent a long time swallowing yawns in his shed as he taught me the tedious intricacies of dove-tail joints and I always acted like it was a big treat for me to tidy up his collection of nails and screws. (51)

Clovis makes her father feel as though he is in control and her mother feel like she is losing her mind. To her father she appears honest and straightforward, to her mother strange and malicious and by these means she makes her father think that her mother is “more than just a little bit hysterical” (51). When her father confronts her over the tricks she is playing, Clovis suggests that she go away for a while and her father, thinking it to be his idea, agrees to support her in this.

Clovis makes it clear that there is no real reason for her persecution of her mother other than plain and simple malice when she says, “Sometimes, with hindsight, I almost feel sorry for my mother. Nobody expects to give birth to their own worst enemy, do they?” (50). Her behaviour towards her mother is a precursor to her later activities, the horrible food she uses to torture the girl she has imprisoned in her cellar and the many methods she has for upsetting and disturbing strangers in their own homes;

I am a bad Santa, bringing frustration, inconvenience and worse, hiding little sister’s knickers under big brother’s pillow, taking the dirty magazines from under one bed and putting them under another, shoving the cat into the hamster cage, sneaking sausages into the laundry basket. (27)

I decided that Clovis’ parents would have to die, in order for her to inherit enough money to buy her house and maintain her lifestyle. In the first draft of the piece, Clovis killed her mother and made it appear a suicide, but I decided this would have too many

repercussions that would slow the pace of the story, and so in the final draft they both die of natural causes within a year and a half of her leaving home, leaving Clovis their house.

It was important for me to understand Clovis' motivations; her wants, needs, fears and what was at stake for her in the course of the piece. This question was closely linked to another vital question, the question of why Clovis kills. It was imperative to me that Clovis did not kill for any of the conventional stereotype reasons ascribed to many serial killers; she was not killing for revenge, or money, she did not hear voices or see visions of the Virgin Mary, she was not killing for attention, or to destroy versions of herself, she had no vendetta against a certain section of society, she did not kill to impress a man or get back at one. If she were to fit into any of the categories that Davis uses to define the killers in her book, Clovis would be a "Thrill Killer", a woman who "killed partly for kicks, to enliven their otherwise dull world and bolster their flagging relationships" (Davis, 2001, 369). Clovis does not fit entirely into this category, because her world is never dull to her. Killing for Clovis is less of a thrill and more a protracted creative endeavour.

To Clovis, killing represents doing as she pleases, and doing as she pleases is her main motivation. She believes that most people feel the desire to hurt, to steal and to kill, and she pities them for being too weak and oppressed to act on their desires. Clovis was born without a conscience, and she sees this as a great liberation;

I was lucky – I was born without a fig to give. I pity those that were. A conscience, a sense of *guilt* – that's a cross-eyed bear indeed. I cannot understand how anyone could feel guilty for doing something that they wanted to do. What else were we put here to do, if not satisfy ourselves? (61)

All Clovis wants from her life is to be left to go about her business. All killing is about control, and Clovis wants to control her world. Edward, the male serial killer who stalks Clovis and murders the girl in her cellar, not only represents a threat to her physical

safety, he threatens to *distract* her, to impose his world on hers, and she considers this a terrible pollution.

One of the main things I wanted to achieve was to avoid all mention of Clovis' sex. Although I set out to write about a female serial killer, I wanted to confuse the reader, to sometimes make him or her think that Clovis was a woman and at other times to think that she couldn't possibly be. To this end, I placed some 'red herrings' in the text to try and cloud the issue of her sex. For example, she refers on more than one occasion to the 'other boys' at school, although she means the boys other than William, not other than herself,

Of course I didn't want to be like William, but I didn't want to be like the other boys either – I couldn't see myself charging round the playground pretending to be a jet and I never felt the slightest inclination to kick a ball about. (9)

What I wanted to express was that Clovis identifies herself as neither a woman nor a man, but simply as *Clovis*.

In the original draft of the story, Clovis killed her best friend Minna, her mother, the girl in the cellar and the student whose house she visits, and mentions killing a woman who stopped in front of her on the street to answer her mobile phone and a number of women who committed the same crime but with pushchairs. This was an unbalanced body-count; if Clovis killed too many women it would start to look as though she had patterns and preferences, which is something I wanted to avoid as it would make Clovis too similar to other serial killers. I therefore changed the sex of some of her victims and wrote a paragraph in which she claims to kill all sorts of people,

Since William I have killed men, women and children, white and black, rich and poor, United Colours of Benetton. (45)

Aside from her murders, the most important thing in Clovis' life is food. Food is often associated with women, with the mother in the kitchen baking and roasting nourishing delights for her family. Clovis' love of food subverts this – her cooking is not about comfort and nourishment, it is about pushing the boundaries of taste and toying with disgust and taboos. Clovis is closer to the gourmet and the master chef, both traditionally male figures.

In *Consuming Passions: A History of English Food and Appetite*, Phillippa Pullar describes Roman cooking, writing of food that was “overspiced with unspeakable zests and extracts, putrid with abominable sauces” (Pullar, 1970, 2). I found some research into the history of food and cooking very useful in compiling Clovis' menus, and research into Roman cuisine particularly so for its unusual combinations of flavours and textures. Wealthy Romans would often have entertainment between courses of their long and elaborate meals, and some of the more debauched examples of this included both sexual and murderous acts. Pullar writes,

It is significant that violent sensation, particularly anything to do with killing and blood, seems to have been termed especially gay and beneficial to the appetite. (Pullar, 1970, 21)

I felt that Clovis combined these passions for outlandish meals and acts of cruelty. She intends to torture the girl she has imprisoned in her cellar with a huge and, to most tastes, deeply unpleasant meal, before murdering her and consuming her body, although not necessarily in that order.

The Romans farmed and ate both dormice and snails, and these appear on the imaginary menu that Clovis has concocted for her dream dinner party.

...plumptious dormice, drowned in Baileys and eaten roasted and whole beneath a velvet hood. We would sit in the seamy dark and bear down upon the little bodies, lick away their breasts and crush them slowly until they yielded up their sweetest meats. (32)

The way that the dormice are served relates to the now illegal practice of eating ortolans, tiny songbirds that were eaten roasted and whole beneath a hood, the hood supposedly serving to hide the sin of the consumer from the gods. Shortly before his death, President Mitterand was alleged to have consumed two of these birds, instead of the customary limit of one per diner, as Stewart Lee Allen describes in his book *In the Devil's Garden: A Sinful History of Forbidden Food* (2002);

...the last flavour Mitterand wished to savour belonged to the flesh of the endangered *ortolan*, a songbird the size of a human toe that is a crime to buy or hunt, and is certainly illegal to eat. Mitterand devoured it in the traditional manner, first covering his head with an embroidered cloth, then inserting the entire bird into his mouth. (Lee Allen, 2002, 73)

A mistake I made in the first draft was to describe Clovis' mother's cooking in a manner that made it sound unappetising – she was a vegetarian who served large bowls of watery, overcooked pasta, tinned soups with gobs of soggy white bread, bland and glutinous puddings. Most people would find this food unpleasant and so it did not provide enough of a contrast to the food that Clovis liked to eat. In later drafts, Clovis takes over the family's cooking, serving up large and horrible meals that her parents force down so as not to upset her, as they believe she is in mourning for William;

After William died she was especially tender to me. I told her I wanted to take over cooking for the family and she let me, and she and my father would eat up every scrap I served them and make yum-yum noises even when it was cold or burnt or downright disgusting. I would sneak garlic into my spotted dick, pureed anchovies into scones, vinegar into the custard. I over-salted everything and undercooked the chicken. (47)

This is a precursor to Clovis' later experiments with food, disgust and the girl in her cellar. Clovis believes that disgust is what prevents people from doing a lot of things that they might otherwise enjoy. She believes that, just as people say the eyes are the windows to the soul, the mouth is the gateway to the will, and if you can eat a slug, you can do anything. She discovers and develops this theory through her culinary torture of her parents, saying,

At first the more unusual of my recipes were concocted with the sole purpose of upsetting my parents, but then I found that they were very much to my taste... I began to realise that my palate was far more sophisticated than that of everybody else. I indulged myself more and more. I sautéed slugs, stirred asafoetida into my tea, ate star anise like sweets and picked my teeth with fish bones. I became a gourmet, because I had no fear, no fear of disgust or unpleasantness or things other people say are bad. (49)

On several occasions in *Trojan Hogs*, food serves to represent or emphasise what Clovis is feeling, for example, the morning after she discovers that Edward has killed the girl in her cellar, even though she claims not to be too upset by it, she cannot eat breakfast, which for someone with as big an appetite as Clovis is telling. Clovis eats sweet food only in conjunction with clashing savoury foods – for example when she adds brine to her Advocaat – but she does not have a taste for sweet foods on their own. She especially dislikes chocolate, which she says “tastes of weakness” (48), but when Edward assaults her, she mixes together a bowl of all the sweet things she can find in her pantry, including a large amount of cocoa. Clovis is not only feeling weak and vulnerable, but now that her sex has been revealed she is eating a food she associates only with women.

In the meeting with my supervisors in which we discussed the first draft, it was suggested that Clovis have an obsession with a celebrity chef, someone along the lines of Heston Blumenthal, a man who expounds similar ideas about culinary experimentation. Having this interaction, albeit one-sided, with another person might serve to make Clovis’ world more realistic.

I had wanted Clovis to idolise Fanny Cradock, who always said that “food should feed the eye as much as the palate” and who, when viciously plucking the skin away from the body of a chicken so that she might thrust mushrooms beneath it, told her audience that when they did the same at home, they should imagine ‘that woman’ who they had never liked, but were too well bred to say anything about. Clovis, on the other hand, would treat ‘that woman’ exactly how Cradock treated that chicken.

However, Cradock was not contemporary enough a reference, and so I set about creating a character who would act as Clovis' culinary nemesis, an obsession and a constant source of irritation. Austin Aspinall is a chef famous for his elaborate taster menus, consisting of unusual ingredients cooked and served in elaborate ways, for example,

...the homage to his Scottish mother where the scents of fir and twelve year old malt whiskey are served with a pastille of tartan sorbet constructed from deer blood and thistle, real highland snow and the blooms of broom, with the aerated essence of neaps-and-tatties suspended in a cradle from a framework above the plate, to represent the gathering clouds. (30)

Clovis feels that Aspinall's experiments with peculiar food are nothing when compared to her own, and that his much-publicised originality is merely hype. She feels that anything he can do, she can do and has done better, that Aspinall is merely a "cocky little parvenu" (30),

Making representative food out of the sum of something's parts is nothing new – Aspinall should try my Sunday Broth, made from pulped Bibles and incomplete maths homework, the last of the summer wine and gravy with extra lumps. (30)

When Clovis flees her house after discovering that the girl in her cellar has been murdered, she goes to the supermarket to try and calm her nerves only to see in a copy of *The Radio Times* an article about Aspinall's new television series, in which he seeks out delicacies that many people would consider to be disgusting and inedible, and then transforms them into delicious versions of their original selves. This upsets Clovis greatly,

What's the point of seeking out the strange and disgusting only to manipulate and disguise it so it becomes palatable? A real gourmet trains his palate to appreciate the disgusting for what it is, to savour the slimy and the rancid, to understand each flavour outside the narrow boundaries of what's *nice*. (31)

Clovis' hatred of Aspinall was intended to display some parallels with her relationship with Edward. Like Edward, Aspinall is working in the same field as Clovis – his experiments with food are similar to hers, although she feels that he shows far less originality and

creativity than her. Also, just as Edward makes Clovis feel slightly inadequate by the size of his body count, there is an element of jealousy in her reactions to Aspinall's fame and money and the scale on which these things allow him to work.

Another thing I felt was central to the character of Clovis is the filthy state of her house and body. I think that the 'will to cleanliness' is especially strong in women, and this is something that Clovis is rebelling against. She also rejects the societal pressure on women to keep their bodies clean, hairless and sweet-smelling, and she finds women's insecurities about these issues positively funny. Clovis rejoices in the state of her house because she knows that it would disgust so many people. One of the character's dominant traits is that she is contrary, perverse, and takes great delight in doing anything she shouldn't do, and the condition of her house and person reflect that. Clovis' uncleanliness also serves as another red herring to misdirect the reader away from her true sex – a messy house and an aversion to taking baths are traits more commonly associated with men, especially young men living on their own.

Clovis collects things she finds. She particularly likes to 'find' important things that other people have lost, either in the street or in the houses that she breaks into. I wanted to show that Clovis understands that there are more subtle ways to hurt people than physical pain and that she thinks of herself as having a sophisticated palate when it comes to other people's misery.

For a long time my favourite thing to do was to break into people's houses and steal their remote controls. People get very attached to their belongings and if you steal the right thing, you can cause as much pain as you can with a knife. (26)

I appreciated that many readers might find it difficult to engage with a protagonist who was so deeply unpleasant and who committed such atrocious acts. It was important for Clovis, as a narrator, to have some redeeming features, otherwise the reader might not care

what happened to her in the course of the story. In order to make the character more appealing, I used touches of humour and social commentary to which the reader might relate. For example, as previously mentioned, Clovis kills a person who stops just outside a shop door to talk on their phone – an annoying lapse in personal spatial awareness that many people may have encountered and found deeply annoying;

I was walking through town and was stopped in my tracks by four young women with pushchairs having a sodding mothers' meeting in the middle of the pavement. I hate people when they're not polite. That little lot took me over a month to deal with. I wonder what the collective noun is for ugly, arrogant brood-mares with no spatial awareness. An afterbirth, perhaps? (28)

Clovis also dreams, when standing shivering in a beer garden, about killing the person or persons responsible for the banning of smoking in pubs,

Outside in the 'smoking area' we stand in the incipient drizzle and curse the smoking ban and its instigators. It's funny, the people who you would most like to kill, you can't. (34)

This is something I think a lot of smokers might secretly sympathise with. I wanted there to be an element of comedy to Clovis and to some of her crimes that would hopefully amuse the reader and at the same time emphasise by contrast the more unpleasant and frightening aspects of her character.

Edward

I will refer to the man who stalks and torments Clovis as Edward, as this was his name in earlier drafts. In the final draft of the piece, he remains nameless, as I believe this makes him more sinister.

As Clovis was intended to contradict traditionally held notions about the female serial killer, I wanted the man who writes to her to conform to the stereotype of a male killer. As

discussed, the majority of male serial murderers are white men in their late twenties and early thirties with relatively high IQs. They, like their female counterparts, on the whole come from broken, violent and abusive homes. As children, a large proportion of male serial killers exhibit the same kinds of behaviour, as described by Wilson and Seaman;

In the context of serial murder, the triad of youthful behaviour most frequently seen as indicative of violence ahead is: *enuresis* (bed wetting) beyond the age of twelve (although analysts also recognise that there may be several different reasons for this). Next is *arson* – sometimes committed by children as young as five or six. [...] The ultimate stage of the behaviour triad is *cruelty*, to animals and other people. (Wilson & Seaman, 1992, 41)

Heterosexual serial killers kill women, homosexual killers kill men, and there is usually a sexual element to the crimes; the victims are raped or sexually assaulted before or after their deaths. Serial killers kill almost exclusively within their own racial group. Male serial killers often kill a particular ‘type’ of victim - Peter Sutcliffe killed women who were, or who he believed to be, prostitutes (Wilson & Seaman, 1992, 26), Dennis Nilsen frequented bars looking for homeless young men (Wilson & Seaman, 1992, 39), Ed Kemper killed the pretty, educated women he believed he could never date (Wilson & Seaman, 1992, 63) – and they also tend to stalk their victims, seeking out locations where they might find their prey, as Wilson and Seaman write;

This trait, of first choosing a *type* of victim to murder and then staking out a likely locale in which to trawl for them, can be identified time and again in the behaviour of modern serial killers. (Wilson & Seaman, 1992, 39)

Male killers often kill in the same way, an almost ritualistic pattern of stalking and killing, the predictability of which often leads to their profiling and ultimate capture. Edward conforms to all these characteristics. He stalks, rapes and kills young, blonde secretaries, in a variety of locations but always with the same *modus operandi*. It was important not only that Edward conformed to the stereotype of the male serial killer, but also that his crimes were a

contrast to Clovis'. While I did not want Clovis to be a typical female serial killer, I also did not want her to fit the male stereotype. Edward kills all his victims in the same way; Clovis, in contrast, considers it a matter of personal pride to kill all of *her* victims differently.

One of the main problems with the first draft of the piece was that Edward was not enough of a threat. I had spent too much time focussing on the character of Clovis, and had not paid enough attention to developing Edward to the point where he would be convincingly frightening. My supervisor suggested that I write a separate, detailed character profile for Edward, and I found this very helpful. Edward, in order to be a successful, plausible nemesis, needed to be of more or less equal status to Clovis and to reflect similar qualities. They both kill for their own pleasure, they both consider themselves to be at the top of their game and they both want to continue with their lives without having their style cramped by the other.

With the character of Edward I wanted to find a balance between creating a frightening character who the reader could believe would pose a genuine threat to Clovis, and satirising the stereotypical male serial killer. I tried to achieve this through Clovis' opinion of Edward. Despite the fact that he has killed many more people than she has, she is disappointed in him. She sees him as unimaginative, boorish and clichéd. She despairs of a killer who would be so stupid as to adhere to a victim type, to a pattern and a repetitive *modus operandi*. Clovis feels that Edward is a base creature, driven by impulse, testosterone and the need for power as a balm for his low self-esteem. She thinks that he is an animal, whereas she considers herself to be an artist.

Poor Betty

In contrast to Clovis, I wanted to make the character of Poor Betty a stereotypical embryonic female serial killer, and to these ends I gave her an unhappy and abusive childhood and made her highly promiscuous and attracted to dangerous, controlling partners, both male and female.

Poor Betty had a Bad Daddy and a pissed-up mother and she was out boozing and bonking at thirteen years old. She was a podgy, spotty child until she blossomed and took hold of her victimhood like it was a rattlesnake and she was dancing in a mountain chapel. (34)

Ironically, the characteristics that mark her out as a typical female serial killer also make her a typical victim, the kind of woman Edward thinks he can control and dominate. However, because Poor Betty had to turn out to be a worthy opponent for both Clovis and Edward, as she would ultimately help Clovis to kill Edward in order that she might become a serial killer herself. She needed to be strong and self-aware enough to play with her role of perfect victim and intelligent enough not only to suspect Clovis, but to put her plan to kill Edward into action.

This play between dominant and submissive roles is reflected in Betty's sexual relationships, in her habit of connecting with strangers on the internet in order to indulge in sadomasochistic scenarios, in which she takes the submissive role. However, Betty is very much in control, dominating her partners from her submissive position. As Hendin writes;

Ironic and in control, a woman may script sadomasochistic sexual play so as to use the prospect of her masochism as an instrument of control over her sexual partner who might delude himself that he is actually the sadist in charge. Once the bait is taken, he might discover he is not. (Hendin, 2004, 54)

Betty is obsessed with serial killers and owns many books on the subject. Her suspicions about Clovis are at first largely fantasies detailed extensively in the diaries read by Edward and eventually by Clovis.

My best friend is a serial killer, and nobody knows it but me. I have followed her, and she is always in places where later they find a corpse. I have been to the library. There have been many deaths and disappearances since she came here that I think are hers. I have been in her house when she was out. I could hear noises coming from under the kitchen floor. I think she has a girl down there. (67)

In early drafts, it was revealed at the end that Poor Betty herself had set up the contact between Clovis and Edward in order to draw out Clovis' secret. I decided, however, that it was implausible that Poor Betty should be able to track down Edward when the police have so clearly failed to do so, and that instead the realisation of who and what both he and Clovis are should come slowly, a change from daydreams to shocking (but for her also titillating) reality. Edward intends to kill Poor Betty. He searches for his victims on the internet, on social networking and dating sites, and as Poor Betty is a PA she is his type. He goes to her house at first with the intention of killing her there and then, but cannot resist reading the diaries that lie open on her desk while she is otherwise engaged. When he reads what she has written about Clovis, he decides to keep Poor Betty alive in order to find out more. He spies on Poor Betty until he sees her meet Clovis, and then he follows Clovis to find out where she lives.

Poor Betty can tell that Edward is bad because she is attracted to him. This attraction fades, however, as their liaisons become increasingly violent and she realises that he has been reading her diaries. When she intercepts one of the letters that Clovis leaves on her door for Edward, a letter in which Clovis describes how she killed William, her suspicions about them both are confirmed and she begins to formulate her plan.

In the early drafts of the piece, the character of Poor Betty was underdeveloped and mainly revealed through Clovis' descriptions of her. If the reversal at the end of the piece, where it is revealed that Poor Betty wants to become a serial killer just like Clovis, was to work, Poor Betty needed to be a more believable, well-rounded character, and accordingly I

wrote some more scenes where she and Clovis interact and where her character can be more clearly understood, for example the scene set in the pub, in which Poor Betty tells Clovis that she's bored;

And it's just that I'm, well, I'm *bored*. I ask her what she's bored of and she laughs like a cracked bell and says everything, really, no offence. (34)

It is a mixture of boredom and curiosity that motivates all of Poor Betty's actions, from her relationship with Clovis to her dalliance with Edward. She tells Clovis that she had always thought her life would be more exciting than it has turned out to be, and this is why, when she discovers the truth about Clovis and Edward, she decides to get involved as opposed to going to the police.

The reader needed to see a change in her that could mark out the moment when she discovers for certain that both Edward and Clovis are serial killers. This moment comes when Clovis literally bumps into Poor Betty when she is chasing Edward through town. Poor Betty, who is usually dressed up to the nines and in full makeup, is wearing jeans and trainers and says to Clovis,

I'm having a day off and I just didn't feel like getting all dolled up. I get fed up of doing it every day, you know. Look, I've got to go, but I'll see you soon, OK? (54)

Clovis does not wonder why Poor Betty has changed so suddenly, and nor does she realise the significance of the tampered-with appearance of two of the letters. She returns to the letter in which she describes William's fate to find that "The carrier bag is on the floor, the letter spilling out and soaking up the alley dirt" (45), and when Edward responds, his letter "looks like it has been sealed and then opened again, the flap at the back just tucked in, no doubt so he could add some gloating postscript". These are the letters that Poor Betty has read and they are the catalysts for the change in both her appearance and her plans.

Plot and Structure

The piece was originally written in the form of a diary kept by Clovis, but I found this problematic in that it seemed implausible that after some of the events in the piece she would find either the time or the inclination to write a long diary entry. I changed the piece to first person present tense, so that there would be a sense of both intimacy, as though the reader were privy to Clovis' private thoughts, and immediacy, so the reader discovered things at the same time as Clovis.

One of the main problems with the early drafts of my creative piece was that the inciting incident, the occurrence that sets in motion the action of a story and which, in this case was the moment when Clovis discovers that the girl in the cellar had been killed by someone else, occurred much too late, giving the piece an extended first act and a truncated second. I had concentrated too much on establishing and developing the character of Clovis and her world, and as a result, the pace of the story was disrupted. In order to move the inciting incident forward, I decided to begin the piece at a later point in the story. Originally, the story had opened on the morning of Clovis' birthday, before she went to Poor Betty and came back to begin the preparations for the birthday meal she intends to share with the girl in the cellar. In later drafts, I began with the scene in which Clovis cooks the birthday meal, in order to have the girl in the cellar revealed at the end of the first chapter, and killed by Edward at the end of the second.

In early drafts, Clovis found the first letter from Edward – an empty envelope – stuck to her door when she went out to see Poor Betty. In later drafts I had Clovis find the letter before the action of the story started, in order to introduce an element of mystery right at the very beginning. Clovis suspects Poor Betty of planting the letter as a practical joke and mentions a previous prank that Poor Betty had played – pretending that the police were at her

door looking for Clovis. This was intended to not only demonstrate a more playful aspect of Poor Betty's character, but also to suggest that Poor Betty suspected Clovis of having secrets to hide – a person with nothing on their conscience would not react to mention of the police in the way that Clovis did.

I found it difficult to combine the pace necessary to move the plot along with the studies of Clovis' character and the descriptions of her childhood and past crimes. I found there were long passages where these reminiscences resulted in loss of focus and pace. In order to overcome this, I tried to cut these long sections up, and to make sure that each memory or story told by Clovis had a specific connection with the plot developments that were occurring at that point in the story, for example, the long passage in which Clovis reveals how she killed William became one of the letters she writes to Edward.

In the first two drafts of the piece, the character of William was a young girl called Minna. When I came to write the third draft, I decided to change the character in order to better misdirect the reader in the matter of Clovis' sex. I felt that, reading an anonymous account of an intense childhood 'friendship' with a little girl, a lot of people would assume that the narrator was also a little girl, just because most children have a 'best friend' of the same sex. I know that this is far from always true, but I do think it is the first assumption. If Minna were male I could refer to what the 'other boys' thought and did, and portraying William as a plump, girly boy served to emphasise Clovis' masculine traits by contrast;

William was a doughy, girly boy, pink and white with nothing in his pockets. We went swimming every Saturday. You've got tits, Willy, I would shout, tits like an old dog's teats, and the other lads would cheer me on with hoots and grunts as I grabbed at his legs under the water. (9)

The original title of the piece was *Forcemeat*, another word for stuffing, which I had chosen because I felt it had not only culinary associations but also murderous ones, in the

combination of ‘force’ and ‘meat’. However, my supervisors felt that this title was too abstract and not intriguing enough, although they agreed that the title should have culinary connotations. During my research into the history of food and cooking I had read about a Roman dish called the Trojan Hog, or Trojan pork, often mentioned when describing the dinner eaten by Trimalchio in the Roman novel *The Satyricon* by Petronius. One of the best descriptions of this dish comes from Stewart Lee Allen’s *In the Devil’s Garden*;

During one course, a whole roast pig is carried triumphantly into the dining room, only to have Trimalchio go berserk when he “realizes” that his chef has neglected to gut the beast. The cook is about to be strangled in front of the guests for his incompetence, but Trimalchio decides that his last act on Earth should be to gut the animal with everyone watching. When the chef, weeping, begging for his life, plunges a knife into the carcass, a sea of sausages gushes out. Ha! Ha! It was all a joke...This kind of dish was called *porcus Troianu*, or Trojan pork, because like its namesake, the Trojan horse, it was stuffed with piquant surprises.” (Lee Allen, 2002, 53-4)

As the piece I had written ended with a surprise of its own, the revelation that Poor Betty knows Clovis’ secret and wants to become a serial killer as well, I decided that *Trojan Hogs* would be the new title of the piece. Accordingly, I made the Trojan Hog, or in this case a Trojan Piglet, one of the dishes that Austin Aspinall serves in his London restaurant,

...a runty little beast about eight inches long with a persimmon in its mouth and its little trotters wrapped in edible gold leaf. The waiter then uses his or her theatrical skills to notice that the piglet has not been properly prepared – the chef has left the innards in! The waiter draws a dagger from his belt and, in his or her poorly acted wrath, slits the piggy’s belly open. Out tumble gourmet sausages no bigger than finger-joints and miniscule pastries in the shape of dormice and larks. (30)

Clovis does not approve of Aspinall’s version of this dish, criticising its lack of originality. She has eaten Trojan Hog before, on her seventeenth birthday, but as she says, “what I ate out of its belly were definitely not gourmet sausages” (31), insinuating that she had eaten the actual guts of the pig and further emphasising her belief that food should not always be nice.

Clovis daydreams about the lavish banquet at which Aspinall would be her guest of honour and which would culminate in his death – she would cut him open and eat his innards as she ate those of the pig mentioned above,

When we had eaten every scrap on the table I would pull my chair up to Austin's and lick away the meat-sweat from his brow. I'd make sure he understood, as I unbuttoned his chef's whites, that his fatal flaw was unoriginality, that I had done it all before, only better and in bigger portions. Then I would take out my knife and tuck into my final course, my Trojan Hog – Aspinall himself. (32)

Although she does not get to fulfil this fantasy, when she and Poor Betty finally dispatch Edward, they do so by gutting him, and there is a hint that Clovis will return to eat that which spills forth.

Trojan Hogs was limited to a word count of 25,000, but if I were to expand it into a longer, novel-length piece, I would focus more on the character of Poor Betty, perhaps splitting the narration between her and Clovis or separating each chapter with a longer extract from Poor Betty's diaries, allowing the reader to see her suspicions about Clovis growing and her reaction to intercepting the letters exchanged between Clovis and Edward. A longer piece would also give me the opportunity to describe the meetings between Poor Betty and Edward and go into more detail about both of these characters' lives and backgrounds. Another possibility would be a three-way narration with chapters told from Edward's point of view, allowing me to show the crimes he commits and to further explore his motivations for stalking and tormenting Clovis.

I would also like to develop the culinary elements of the piece, to pay more attention to the meals Clovis cooks and to her hatred of Austin Aspinall. One possibility, were I to extend the piece, would be to have Clovis travel to London in order to eat at Aspinall's restaurant, with a view to an attempted kidnap of the celebrity chef. Alternatively, in order to draw further parallels with Edward's invasion of Clovis' world, Aspinall could open a branch

of his restaurant either in the town where Clovis lived or in the nearest city. The proximity of her *bête noire* would perhaps inspire Clovis to infiltrate his restaurant in the guise of a kitchen hand with a faked C.V., so that she might not only get closer to her nemesis, but also tamper with the food prepared by him.

Conclusion

Trojan Hogs was intended to examine the life and crimes of an original female serial killer who had none of the hallmarks of the other female serial killers I had studied in both literature and real life. It was my intention to create a character who was both frightening and entertaining, who operated outside all social norms and laws and who was ultimately triumphant over all the obstacles put in her way.

As discussed in the literature review section of this exegesis, women can and do commit extreme acts of violence, and more and more examples of this are being reported in the press. In some ways, Clovis represents what could be seen as a natural progression – a female criminal who, rather than committing the acts normally associated with her sex – the killing of children, family, the elderly and infirm – is predatory and commits the kind of bloody, ‘motiveless’ crimes that have traditionally been the province of men.

Edward represents the reluctance to accept that women have the potential to commit serious, long-term violent crime. He believes that serial killing is man’s work and that Clovis should know her place. In this way he is a stereotype of misogynistic arguments that women should remain at home, but here this stereotype supports Clovis’ unsettling notion that women should be as liberated in crime as they are in society in general.

Poor Betty reflects the stereotypical notion that when women do commit violent acts, it is most often as a reaction to abuse and to *male* violence. She has suffered abuse at the hands of men and wishes to take revenge by joining Clovis in her crimes, by becoming a murderer’s apprentice. Clovis likes this idea, but she would never let herself become involved in something as clichéd as killing men for revenge. Poor Betty has told her that she is not on the pill, and there is a chance that she might be pregnant with Edward’s child, and Clovis decides the child will be her apprentice. With Poor Betty’s help, Clovis has defeated

the threat posed to her world by Edward. The story ends the way it began, with Clovis keeping a girl in her cellar and everything right with her world.

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