

Transients

by Helen Raven

Mrs French's shoulder-muscles were more tense than he'd ever known them, so it was a good five minutes before he could respond to the paging-light and call Reception.

"Lucy, it's Ray."

"Can you do a twelve o'clock today?"

"Not if I can avoid it. I want to get to the bank, and I'm solid all afternoon. Thursday would be better."

"OK. I'll call him back, then."

"Who is it?"

"He's new, I think. A Mister Bodie. Said something about an injury. I wondered if he was from the sports-centre."

Doyle paused. It wasn't a name he recognised. New clients did not appear every day, and you shouldn't put them off if you could help it. It wasn't as if he was the only massage therapist in the area.

"No, OK, book the twelve o'clock. And if anyone's going out could you ask them to get me a sandwich? Cheese salad, or something." He put the phone down and turned back to the table. "Sorry about that. How long d'you think it'll be until work calms down?"

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Neither Mr. Bodie nor the sandwich had arrived by ten past twelve. Doyle sat in his chair glowering and thinking about his overdraft. Another five minutes and he'd get Lucy to -

"No. I can *manage*. Thank you." Even through the closed door it was obviously "Thank you" as in "Get the fuck away from me". Doyle groaned and let his head drop to his chest. *Professionalism*, he thought. *Vocation*, he thought. *Twenty pounds for an hour's session*. He levered himself to his feet and went to open the door, preparing his new-client smile.

Mr. Bodie was leaning heavily on his stick as he reached across his body for the handle. He was obviously in some pain. Lucy was hovering anxiously at the end of the corridor.

"Mister Bodie? Come in." The left knee did not bend, and it looked as if all of the muscles in the body were locked in combat. Doyle quickly stepped back to pull the client's chair from out behind the screen, reducing the distance the man would have to walk, then hoisted himself up to sit on the edge of the massage table.

"If you'd like to sit down. We should talk about what you want before I start work." The chair had no arms, and Doyle found himself frowning in involuntary sympathy. *I should do something about that, I suppose*. Mr. Bodie was breathing audibly.

When the breathing had steadied, Doyle said, "It's not always this bad, is it?"

“Uhuh. Just the last couple of days.” A flick of the eyes towards Doyle, then away and down.

“You’ve seen a physiotherapist?”

“He’s on holiday. Looked in the phone book and this place was nearest.”

“And they didn’t arrange a replacement while he’s away?”

“She’s useless. Look, are you gonna get started, or is this some new technique? I’m not paying for an hour of mouth massage.” Fierce blue eyes, narrowed slightly in pain.

Doyle didn’t react. “I have to know what I’m dealing with. So what’s happened in the last couple of days?”

A brief quirk of the eyebrows. “Stairs. Seems like everyone I visit’s suddenly moved to the third floor.”

You’ve been overdoing it, you mean. He nodded. “Uh. You got tired and everything started to tense up.”

“I thought after a night’s sleep... But it kept spreading. Even been an effort to breathe today.”

“OK. I’ll start on your legs, and then do as much of the rest as I have time for. After that, you should have more luck relaxing on your own. If you can keep away from those stairs.” He levered himself easily off the table, then reached underneath it to pull out the broad wooden step. “Could you please get undressed completely and put on the towel that you’ll find on the rack behind the screen. Is there anything I can do to help?” The man’s head was lowered as he bore down on the stick and there was no reply. Doyle decided not to repeat the question.

He kept silent even through the gasping effort of the climb onto the table, simply holding out his hand for the stick. However, he took his time propping it against the wall by the screen, waiting until the breathing eased before he turned back to your table. “Can you lie on your front first, please.” Long seconds of further effort. “Now can you lift up a bit so I can loosen the towel. I’m going to use it to cover your back - stop you getting chilled.” With the ease of practice he lifted the large towel, turned it lengthwise, and lowered it carefully. Twisted lines of scars on the back of the knee stood out vividly against the white material.

The first exploratory touch found bunchings of aggressively knotted muscles, much as he’d expected though stronger and healthier. And they must be pulling at that knee from all directions - a very vicious circle. “This *is* going to hurt. I won’t pretend any different. But you must tell me if it’s too much.” No acknowledgement, exactly as he’d expected.

He earned his money with Mr. Bodie, more and more so as he moved up from calves to thighs. Acres of big, angry muscles, it seemed, fighting him for every millimetre of pliability.

The tone in the left leg was astonishingly good, after... well, it must be a year, at least. The firmly-closed eyes and the stifled grunts discouraged Doyle from asking the

question. *Must take his physio seriously.* Hoping to get better? Really better? *Poor bastard.*

What had he done for a living? Doyle had several body-builders as clients, and knew the patterns. The muscles under his hands were different. Working muscles. Not for show. Unusual.

“Could you turn over, please. I’ll deal with the towel.”

Doyle blinked when he got his first full view of the knee - or what was left of it - but otherwise thought he hid his reaction well. He’d seen worse, but not in a while, and not on this table. He went to get more oil, and when he turned back the watchful eyes were closed again.

Well, it made a change from stressed executives and wrenched squash-players. The quiet buzz from the paging system took him by surprise. One o’clock. Mr. Henderson. He realised he was hungry.

“I’d like another half-hour, really, but you should feel some benefit.” The breathing seemed easier now, as did movement as he sat up. Doyle placed the stick next to him on the table. “If you’ll be OK getting dressed, I’ll clean up.” He heard the towel fall to the ground before he’d taken four paces towards the sink, but he didn’t turn around.

The process of dressing was slow, and Doyle, watching the screen from the far side of the table, could hear that his hard work was being undone. But what could you do?

He was carrying a clean towel over when his client emerged. “How much do I...” A battered but plump wallet.

“It’s twenty for the hour. Lucy at Reception deals with all that.”

“Right. Thanks.” A brief nod and briefer smile, and he was out of the room and making his uneven way down the corridor. Doyle stood watching for a few paces, then shrugged, and reached for the phone to ask Lucy about his sandwich.

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“Didn’t think I’d be seeing you again.” It was five days later. “More problems with stairs?”

“Not so bad. But it helped, and Andy’s still away.” Mr. Bodie was already shrugging out of his jacket. Doyle wondered what he’d been like when fully mobile. Even more cocky, probably. He knew it was disgraceful, but he was briefly glad that he hadn’t got around to switching his chair - which had arms - with the client’s chair. However, the first impersonal sensation of flesh under his hands extinguished any remaining spark of malice.

“This is *much* better. I’ll have time to work on your feet today.”

Silence. Maybe he was falling asleep. Doyle got that several times a day.

Longer, smoother strokes today. Not so much kneading and coaxing. A few deep, sighing breaths, but none of those pained grunts. He must have been taking it easy. Learned his lesson. For a while.

Really, an impressive body. Such a shame. Angry scars. Angry man, most of the time. Patchouli should calm the scars. Or galbanum. Doyle made no claims to be an aromatherapist, but you pick these things up. *If I thought he was going to come back...*

“There’s nothing wrong with my feet.”

Doyle smiled. “I know. But it does more good than you’d expect. You’ll see. You’ll feel the effect all over your body.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Money back if you don’t. No - stay still.” *You prat, Doyle! Or is it charity?*

He did fall asleep while Doyle was working on his back. It looked like utter exhaustion. Maybe he was getting a lot of pain.

Well, he was certainly a light sleeper. Awake like the flick of a switch, and a hand hitting Doyle in the stomach as it seemed to search for something. Doyle stepped back out of range then returned almost immediately to take hold of the towel.

“It’s time to turn over.”

A much smoother process this time. You’d think he’d been practising.

Doyle started on the left thigh, continuing to adjust his techniques for a leg that did not bend. He was used to the knee now. It was ugly, but it was mostly the evidence of pain that was disturbing. Keeping his hands moving, he looked up. “How long ago was the accident?”

Mr. Bodie had been gazing at the ceiling. It was a few seconds before he met Doyle’s eyes, expressionless. “Year... thirteen months.”

“Uh. Not long. Really.”

A flickering grimace - or sneer. “‘t seemed long enough to me, mate.”

“The body’s quite sluggish about some things. Seems to have a sort of three-year cycle. I’ve heard...” The ceiling held greater interest. Doyle’s jaw-muscles bunched once, then he counted to ten, thinking carefully of nothing except the resilience of the flesh under his hands. Self-employment had forced him to control his temper - and sometimes he missed the old days fiercely.

At five minutes to the hour he stopped. “That’s it for today, Mister Bodie.”

“What about this amazing foot thing you promised me?”

Eyes as cold as his client’s, Doyle said, “That was ten minutes ago.”

“Well, it didn’t work.” Sitting up, and holding his hand out in the direction of the stick.

“Then you don’t pay.” Doyle placed the stick on the table without looking at his client, and was unusually brisk and noisy in washing his hands.

He accompanied Mr. Bodie to Reception. “Lucy, there’s no charge to Mister Bodie for this session. I’m off to the Post Office.” And he was gone. Mr. Bodie could open the door himself - would insist on it, even.

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At the end of that day, he spent a few minutes with Lucy updating his appointment book.

"Oh, he came back, you know. While you were with your three o'clock."

"What're you talking about?"

"That Bodie man. 'Smiler' I call him. Because he doesn't. He said... um... it *had* worked. But he hadn't realised till he was on his feet and moving around. And he paid."

"Oh." Doyle frowned. "He didn't make another appointment, did he?"

Lucy shook her head.

A broad smile. "Perfect."

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A week later, over the same task, and Doyle was even more puzzled. "But his physiotherapist *must* be back by now."

"Is he that rude?"

"Uncomfortable. To be around." A sigh. "I didn't think we'd see him again."

"Maybe he likes you."

"I don't think so."

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"Long holiday your physiotherapist's taking."

"No, he's back. Saw him on Tuesday."

"So what're you doing here?"

Doyle saw the back-muscles bunch in a shrug. "It helps. Andy thought it was a good idea."

Probably amazed you went for help. Unless he sees a different side of you.

Later, when Mr. Bodie had turned over and Doyle was working on the right thigh: "So, you'll be coming regularly, will you?"

"Yeah. Suppose so."

"Well, I think I can help with the scars a bit." The body rocked once under a strong twitch. "There are some oils that are good with injuries. I was thinking of starting with patchouli. You'd probably see the effects in about a month. Sooner if you use it yourself as well."

"Sounds like some sort of hippy crap to me."

"OK, forget it. Saves me getting the oil in."

Later still, while he was stroking between the tendons of the left foot: “Doesn’t Andy do any of this? ‘d’ave thought he’d be able to refer you to someone in the NHS, at least.”

“Didn’t rate her. Worth twenty quid to have a choice.”

A compliment. I suppose. And, at the end, a genuine smile. Doyle rearranged his list of “worst clients” and then - after Mr. Bodie had left the room - rearranged his furniture so the client got the chair with arms.

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“How’d you get into this, then?” A spontaneous question. A sign of interest. Doyle’s eyebrows rose, unseen.

“Strained something in my back about four years ago. Nothing too bad, but the pain hung around for days. Finally mentioned it to a friend, and she told me to get my shirt off and lie down on her living-room floor. And when I got up the pain was gone. Before that I’d always thought it was just a dirty joke. And I was casting around for something to do, so...”

“Oh. So you’ve not been at it for long.”

“Only a couple of years here. Before that I did home-visits. Put cards in hundreds of health-food shops. Adverts in ‘Time Out’. This is like a holiday.”

“And before that?”

“All sorts. Cook. Waiter - usually got fired after a couple of weeks. House-painting. Teaching.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Just evening classes. Karate. But they -”

“Yeah? I -” The first real animation Doyle had heard in his voice.

He waited. “You were saying?”

“Had a few bouts myself. A while back.” Dead. Talking about another lifetime. Doyle was surprised now that he’d even given that much of an answer. But how could you avoid stumbling across something like that...?

They were silent for the rest of the hour. But Mr. Bodie didn’t seem to be shutting him out, just thinking. Or feeling. They’d meet again in another week.

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“How much did you say that oil would be? That patch stuff.”

“Patchouli. Couple of quid, I should think. And, um... I think you should buy it yourself and bring it in. I should have said before that I’m not a qualified aromatherapist. I don’t claim to offer proper aromatherapy, and I’m really not supposed to charge anyone for it. But if you brought the oil in yourself...”

“Worried I’ll report you to the Therapists’ Police? God, they must be tough bastards.” The tone was bone-dry. Doyle grinned at the nape of his client’s neck, trying to think of a worthy response. “Where’d you buy that sort of stuff?”

“Oh, hippy shops, where else? The nearest one’s just around the corner from Rymans.”

A grunt. The topic was clearly closed.

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Doyle wasn’t surprised to be handed a small bottle at the beginning of the next session and he put it on the shelf by the sink without comment. By the time he came to pick it up again, though, his air of confidence required some input of effort. The back of the knee was no problem, but what about the front? How firmly could you rub when there were bits missing?

"You must tell me if I’m hurting you. I don’t have any direct experience of this sort of injury. As you’ve probably guessed."

“You’ll be OK. It’s just a knock sets it off these days.”

It was different, working with the sharply-scented oil. More direct and personal, somehow. His fingers started to memorise the ridges and the hollows.

“What happened?” It was a surprise to hear himself say it. He didn’t look up.

“I was knee-capped.” Even more of a surprise to get an immediate response.

And then he absorbed the information, and couldn’t hide his reaction. He stopped work. “As in...”

“Yer actual gangster movie, yeah.” Weary, but maybe relieved. “I was one of the lads with a badge. If you’re wondering.”

Immediately and urgently: “Which part of the force were you in?” Ah, so it was true - you never really left.

“Not me, Mister Doyle. I was CI5. Army before that. And yourself?”

“Never got beyond constable in South London. Had big plans, but -”

“Didn’t work out, yeah. Y’didn’t mention the force the other week.”

Doyle felt his caution-circuits disengage. “Might have got round to it. But you went all quiet around karate.”

He counted four inhalations while their gazes held.

“Well. I do that sometimes. Don’t let it bother you.”

Doyle smiled at him genuinely and openly for the first time. “I won’t. Now, I haven’t been hurting you so far, right?”

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The session was just over, and Mr. Bodie was sitting up and examining his knee. “It does look better. A month like you said. Still fucking ugly, though.”

"You get used to it," Doyle said mildly.

“*You* might. I keep dreaming that -” He swallowed.

“D’they catch the bastard who did it?”

“Dunno. There were four in the house and we shot one of them. Might’ve been him. Rest’re probably getting a good tan in Spain, or something. God, what a cock-up. Neighbour’s dog gets its stitches out at evening-surgery, spends its first night out in the garden in weeks. And barks its head off when these strange men start creeping around next door.” Mockingly: “They were *ever* so apologetic!” Then, on a sigh: “They were, actually. Kids sent me a hand-made get-well card. Wanted to come and see me.” He shuddered. “I wrote them a note with some... bouncy crap. ‘Oh, don’t worry about me’. Had to wait for one of my good days for that.”

“Why didn’t you evacuate the neighbours?”

“Good question, Mister Doyle. We didn’t think we had time... we thought they’d notice... we thought it’d all be over in a couple of minutes.”

“Was anyone else hurt?”

“Mate of mine died. Ben. We worked together a lot. Would have been difficult doing the job after that, so I suppose...”

“Mate of mine died in the force, too. Part of the reason I left.”

“Yeah?”

“Sid Parker. We were out on patrol. Stopped to check on something suspicious. Sid went into the house while I stayed in the car.” He shrugged.

“How long’d you been partners?”

“Doesn’t work like that. But he showed me the ropes. Gave me a lot of his time.”

“You must’ve been pretty cut-up. If you left.”

Doyle looked at him, down at the floor, and then back. “Not really. Look, you still think I’m a nice bloke. I’ll tell you more about Sid when that’s worn off.”

A start of surprise, then a snort of laughter. “I think you’re a two-faced, sulky toad. That’s why I keep coming back.”

Now why should that be so welcome? “You serious?”

“Course. I come out in a rash if I meet ‘nice’ people.”

“Well. I think you’re a bit of a shit, yourself.”

Nodding gravely: “Thank you, Mister Doyle.”

“Ray. It’s Ray.”

“Bodie. Without the Mister.”

Doyle felt a breath of disappointment, followed by curiosity. He smiled, and stepped forward for a ceremonial handshake. Bodie’s palm was rough and callused. *From the stick*, Doyle thought at first. But that was the wrong hand. A gun, then. And years of hard physical work.

The phone rang. Doyle glanced up at the clock and their hands fell apart. “God, it’s five past. And it’s Ballantyne in his precious lunch-hour.” Hurriedly, he fetched the stick.

"I know, Lucy. We're just finishing up. Two minutes." By the time he'd dried his hands, Bodie had only just disappeared behind the screen. Doyle hesitated for about ten seconds, then crossed the room. "Will you let me help? Please." He waited just around the edge of the screen.

The pause seemed to be about twenty seconds. "Yes. Alright." Bodie was sitting with his briefs hauled up to mid-thigh and with the right leg of his trousers half-on. "Deal with this. And my shoes and socks. I'll get my shirt on. Ballantyne trouble, is he?"

Doyle had never before dressed anyone else, beyond helping a girlfriend on with a coat. He was enjoying it more than he would have imagined - it felt like a hard-won privilege. "Ummm. I'm just not in the mood for him at the moment. Look, can you make evening appointments? Like six or six-thirty?"

"Sure." Bodie hauled himself to his feet, keeping his trousers up with his right hand. "Hold me steady, will you?" He let the stick drop to free his left hand, and pulled his briefs and trousers up while Doyle helped support him. "Evening's are fine. 's not as if I'm working or anything."

"Well, why not book my last hour next time? Then I won't have to worry about over-running, and we can go to the pub, or something."

"OK. I'll do that." His jacket was on the back of the chair and he reached for it without looking. "C'n you get my stick? Thanks. See you next week, Ray."

Doyle was still smiling when Mr. Ballantyne walked in without knocking.

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Doyle had been looking forward to this all week. It had made him impatient with his other clients. Not openly, he hoped, but God it would be nice if they'd all just fall asleep on him.

"What pub d'you want to go to? The Drum's OK."

Bodie pulled a face. "Could do without the pub. What's wrong with this place?"

Doyle was surprised. "Thought you'd be sick of it."

"'s OK. Quiet. Or d'you have to be out by now?"

"No, I've got the keys. D'you want a beer, then? There's some in the kitchen from our Christmas party."

A shake of the head. "I'm off booze at the moment. You got any coffee? Or is it all herb tea?"

"Sure. How'd'you take it?"

"White, no sugar."

"OK. I won't be long."

When Doyle returned, he pulled the screen back so he'd be able to see the client's chair from the table, and hauled himself up to sit cross-legged, his coffee beside him on a piece of paper towel. "Are you an alcoholic?" he asked mildly.

Equally mildly: "No, but I really overdid it a while ago. When I was just out of hospital. After the third blackout I decided to leave it alone for a few months."

"Good for you." Doyle had a baffled admiration for that kind of self-control.

A shrug. "Pride. 's what gets me up every morning, too."

"Mmm. I can't imagine -"

"Neither could I. Never bothered trying. Always thought the bastards would make a clean job of it. Like they did with Ben. And Turner and Tony and Jackson and all the rest. Y'know, there's only five of us pensioned off like this at the moment."

"Good pension?"

"Great. No complaints. Leaves me with loads of time to wonder what the fuck I'm gonna do with the rest of my life."

"But there's - I mean you're not -"

"Not that badly crippled." A sigh. "I know, Ray. I served in Northern Ireland. I know what a real kneecapping looks like. I'm not in a wheelchair, so what am I moaning about?"

"That's not what I -"

"But you didn't know me before. There were files *this* thick on what this body could do. Now they just say what it can't."

"A year isn't a long time, you know. Not with something like this. Hasn't Andy talked to you? And moan as much as you like."

"He just tells me how well I'm doing. 'Star-pupil'. Doesn't feel like that."

Doyle just nodded, and then frowned down into his coffee, having run out of helpful remarks. *It's still a good body, you know. A pleasure to work on.* But that was probably against the rules of the profession. And he'd feel stupid saying it.

Bodie asked about the clinic and the other staff, and they talked for nearly an hour, until Maddy, Doyle's girlfriend, called to suggest a meal and the late film.

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"Maddy's booked us a holiday in Switzerland." It was patchouli-time for the back of the left knee.

"Just like that? Generous with your money, isn't she?"

"Well, we'd talked about it at Christmas. Some sort of mountain holiday. She's fed up with beaches." An action holiday, with hang-gliding and white-water rafting and glacier-trails, but he'd decided not to give Bodie those details. "But I'd forgotten about it until she called me on Monday and asked for the cheque."

“When you going?”

“May. For a couple of weeks.”

“Sounds good.”

“My mate Paul’s going to cover for me. We were in the same class. He’s good - you’ll like him.”

“Umm. I can wait a couple of weeks.”

“You’ll get all knotted up. Like the first time.”

“I’ll cope. Andy’s around.”

“Well. He’ll be here, anyway.”

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Bodie held out the packet of ginger nuts. “Why did you leave the force when Sid died? If you weren’t that bothered about it?”

“I was but not the way everyone thought. I liked Sid - you had to - but he was a bit of a bore. Hell of a bore. Born middle-aged. Born married. Slippers and cocoa. Looked a bit like Tony Hancock.”

“Yeah. Know the type.”

“He did the father thing with the new lads - not that he was that much older than us - and he’d always try and see the best in you. It was exhausting. He must have spent... hundreds of hours with me, and he never picked up on what I was really about.”

“The two-faced, sulky stuff?”

“For a start. But it was him being so boring and clueless that got to me when he was killed. Made me stop thinking it was all just a game for young hot-heads like me. I *mean*, I’d even been thinking of trying for CI5...”

“Can see it.”

“It wasn’t that I got scared. I’m sure it wasn’t. But I didn’t want people like Sid getting hurt in my game. Needed some time away to think things through. Always thought I’d go back after a year or so, but somehow...”

“And my girlfriend at the time threw a fit when Sid died. Worried sick for me. We were pretty serious - talking about thinking about getting married, sort of thing - and she went on and on at me to get out, so -” He shrugged.

“She wouldn’t have been keen on CI5.”

A grimace. “Never told her. Anyway, I was sure it’d all work out.”

“So what happened? You didn’t get married?”

“We split up. ‘bout six months later. Christ, it was messy. Does that make sense about Sid?”

“For you, yeah. Surprised you haven’t found another hot-head job, though.”

“I get some of it in my spare time. Race my bike. The karate. You.”

A pleased grin. “Yeah?”

“And I won’t be here forever. Something else’ll turn up that I *have* to try. It always does.”

“But all that training? Seems a waste.”

“It doesn’t just disappear down the plughole. It all helps.”

Bodie was still frowning, gazing towards the door.

Doyle waited.

“You’re thinking of that file an inch thick, aren’t you?”

Slowly, the eyes returned to him. “Something like that.”

“There’s stuff you can still use. Bound to be. Give me a few minutes and I’ll come up with... fifty ideas. Something’s got to click.”

“Yeah. But not now, OK.” Once in a while he’d get that subdued look. More and more, Doyle wanted to touch him at these times. Words were no good; it wasn’t as if Bodie was waiting for the perfect reason. The slow healing was of his body and spirit, not his intellect. A touch on the shoulder. A silent message that he wasn’t alone, wasn’t a prisoner. It would be the most natural thing to do.

But Doyle had never touched him outside of their hour’s session. And it seemed as if the session had walls around it. They never talked about it, about the fact that Doyle could have written his own file on the subject of Bodie’s body. Just what you’d expect from two British men.

Doyle had never got this close with a client before, never had any guidance. There was the professional side to worry about, and there was also Bodie’s. If he put holes through those walls, would Bodie get nervous, awkward? Doyle could imagine it very easily.

He sat and waited patiently for Bodie to raise his head and choose the next topic.

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Bodie had arrived looking tired and acting irritable. After a few minutes, Doyle had got him to admit that he’d knocked his bad leg over the weekend, and that the pain had been keeping him awake, and was still nagging at him. So it was a real compliment when he started to snore quietly.

He woke easily when Doyle wanted him to turn over, unlike the last time, and was soon snoring again. Doyle left the knee well alone, though he suspected Bodie would feel the neglect later.

It was while he was taking firm strokes along the length of the right foot that he heard the breathing change, becoming deeper and rougher, sighing. He looked up curiously, and saw an unmistakable erection lifting the towel. His hands stilled, and he blushed. Something else they didn’t teach you about. He shook his head sharply, and carried on. None of his business. The towel lifted higher. Doyle had a moment’s impression of startlingly black pubic hair before he stepped away from the table.

A few minutes later the erection had subsided, but Doyle didn't go back to work. Instead, he washed his hands and sat in his chair, and waited for Bodie to wake up in his own time.

Just a dream. That's all. Nothing to fuss about.

But what if he hadn't stopped? Doyle blushed again, fiercely, as he imagined the scene. *Should I tell him? So we can laugh it off?* After all, it was perfectly natural. Nothing to be ashamed of.

But so many people *were*. And Bodie might be one of them. You couldn't guess how someone *really* felt about sex until you were past the point of no return. It wasn't worth the risk.

Bodie was still now, breathing quietly and evenly, head turned slightly towards Doyle. A strong, handsome man. A body that was still worth documenting.

What if I'd been working on his thighs? What if the towel had been pushed right up? Doyle shook his head sharply, disowning the thought, banishing also month-old memories of dressing the man. But his heartbeat had quickened, and there was heat between his legs.

He was appalled at himself. *He's a friend, for Christ's sake! A client!* His cock didn't care. He looked away from the table, but the images were firmly in his mind.

Time for a coffee. Definitely. He shut the door very carefully.

The kitchen was just a cupboard with a sink, a fridge, a kettle, and a coffee-maker. He started a fresh pot, partly for something to do.

Maybe he shouldn't be so surprised by this reaction. When he went for men - and it wasn't often - they tended to be dark and hard and difficult. Exciting, for an hour or a night. If he'd seen Bodie in the street two years ago, he'd have turned to look and lust, and maybe done something about it, if the signals had been right.

Oh, God, don't think about it! They wouldn't have been right - they weren't now. There were no signals. Get yourself under control. He's a friend.

A client.

And he's sleeping in there with the door unlocked. *Trusting me.*

Control.

Control. It must be within reach.

He leaned against the wall, eyes closed and head tilted back, breathing deliberately and with concentration. Slowly, his mind calmed and emptied.

The coffee-maker stopped hissing and gurgling. He washed a mug, then one for Bodie for when he woke. It was just an accident, a one-off. After all, he'd worked on him for four months without a flicker. It'd be OK. He needed a holiday. Some exercise. Time with Maddy. It'd be OK.

"Still here, Ray?" It was Christine, one of the doctors, car-keys in hand. "Oh, it's Tuesday. You have a late appointment, don't you?"

“Yeah. Just finishing. I’ll lock up.”

Better get back in case he’d woken up and was about to come searching the corridors in nothing but a precariously-fixed towel. Christine would not be amused. Neither would Bodie. Maybe two years ago, but not now.

Doyle felt the steadying weight of Bodie’s trust and his own responsibility. Bodie needed a friend - without complications. Someone to moan to. He wouldn’t let him down.

Bodie was still asleep, still in the same position. Doyle sat and gazed at the amateurish watercolour on the opposite wall, prepared to let him sleep for hours, if that was what he needed.

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Bodie was ten minutes late. This had never happened since the first time, when he’d over-estimated his reserves of energy and under-estimated the route to the clinic. Doyle was worried, and disappointed, and guilty. He wouldn’t have forgotten. No way. So why hadn’t he called? Probably something simple. Probably.

But he’d been so surprised that Doyle had let him sleep so long. Maybe a bit embarrassed. Had he done some thinking? Had Doyle let something slip? Doyle told himself he’d behaved perfectly, but... He had been wondering how he’d cope today. There’d been a few unwelcome thoughts during the past week. Nothing out of hand, no. Just when he saw a dark, hard man in the street, or on TV. Just for a second. He wasn’t worried. But he wanted to get it over with, get back to normal.

Twenty minutes late. He picked up the phone to call Lucy, then remembered she’d gone home.

Bodie’s card was in Doyle’s section of the filing-system, exactly where it should have been. The list of appointments covered the front, and half-filled the back. No address, but a phone number.

There was no reply. Twenty rings. Thirty. He gave up.

Maybe he was on his way. Got held up by... not traffic - he walked... boring neighbour... couldn’t find his keys.

Doyle waited the full hour, then went home. It was a long and restless evening.

* * * * *

Doyle got back to Lucy three minutes after the paging-light went on. “Mister Bodie called. He wanted to speak to you, but I told him to call back during your lunch break.”

“What? But I told you -” No, he hadn’t told her anything - in case this was strictly between Bodie and himself. “OK, Lucy. Put him straight through. You told him between one and two?”

In the break before his eleven o’clock, he called Bodie’s number, but there was no reply.

By 1.40, when Bodie finally rang, Doyle was so tense he was in need of his own services.

“Where did you get to? Where *are* you?”

“St. Hugh’s. Hope you haven’t been waiting. They’re stingy with the phone in here. Sorry.” St. Hugh’s was a local hospital.

“God, what’s happened? Are you OK?”

“Bit hazy right now. Took me most of this morning to remember your number.”

“But what’s *happened*?”

“Oh.” A pause. “Tripped in the street yesterday afternoon. Not sure how. Fell on my leg. Knocked myself out. They’re keeping me in till I can put some weight on it again.”

“How long?”

“Few days, Andy reckons.”

“When’s visiting hours?”

“Oh, don’t, Ray. Please. I hate being visited. Worse than seeing someone off at the station. Just wanted to say sorry about yesterday.”

“Then will you let me know how things are going? I’ll give you my home number.”

“Hang on.” A shout: “Anyone got a pen?”

“Why’re you hazy? Is it the knock on the head?”

“No, it’s the dope. The old joint’s a bit unhappy. Ex-joint. Thanks, love. No, I won’t be long. Go ahead, Ray.”

“*Ex-joint*”? *He must be high as a kite*. He gave his number, and asked Bodie to repeat it, just to be on the safe side. “You sure I can’t send you anything? Something to read?”

“No, I’m fine. There’s a Reader’s Digest I didn’t finish last time I was here.”

Doyle decided he wasn’t serious. “Well, give me a call if you change your mind.”

“Will do. Sorry again, Ray.”

“It’s alright. Glad to hear from you.”

“Have to go. Billy wants to call his bookmaker.” Was that a giggle? Must be the nurse. They said their goodbyes.

Doyle sat looking at the phone, bemused. Not what he would have expected from Bodie in hospital, especially not after falling over in the street. Must be good dope. And bad pain.

Probably best not to visit. Bodie was right. An open ward. Families with grapes and flowers and cards. Very different from his small, windowless and private room. Could be very awkward. Would be a long few days, though.

His worry about last week’s jolt of lust seemed very far away and irrelevant. Bodie was alright (sort of). Bodie had called.

* * * * *

"I bought us some sandwiches since it's your lunch hour. And I'm hungry." It was Monday. Bodie had called on Sunday night to say that he was home. "Prawn salad or cheese and pickle? I got some orange juice, too."

Bodie was in the chair, Doyle sitting on the table. Although Doyle had insisted on the phone that Bodie would be needing a massage, they were showing no signs of getting started.

"How are you feeling? You been walking much today?" Doyle pierced the carton with the straw and took a sip.

"Out to get a paper and some milk. Over here. I've felt worse. I know the ropes by now."

"How did it happen?"

"Still don't know. It all went with the concussion. Could've been a paving stone. I had a look at the road today, but there's nothing obvious."

"You seem quite cheerful about it."

"Suppose I do. People were OK - from what I can remember. No further damage done. Andy said he was expecting to see me back sometime. Everyone just treated it as normal. Oh, and they were very impressed with what you'd done with the scars, by the way. You might get some business out of it. Unless the Therapists' Police haul you away first, of course." He started to eat his sandwich as if it was his first food in a week, losing grated cheese down his shirt.

Doyle sat with his arms crossed, and watched, his own sandwich unopened. "Sounds to me like you're *too* cheerful. You still up to your eyes in painkillers? Or they do a personality transplant while you were in there?"

"Nice to see you again, too. It's spring. I can walk again and it's been less than a week. I got bored with self-pity, OK?"

"It won't last. It's too sudden. You still can't go back to karate."

"Jesus! You get a tax demand this morning? Or are you pissed off about missing your twenty quid last week?" He had his stick, and was getting to his feet. "No, I didn't cancel properly, did I? I'll pay Lucy on the way out."

Doyle scrambled off the table and blocked the way to the door. "Don't! I'm sorry. I don't know why I - I've been worried. Keyed up. I'm sorry. Don't go."

Bodie looked wary, but sat down after only a brief hesitation. "Thought you'd be relieved. God knows, you've heard enough of me moaning."

"I'd got used to it." *Thought I was the only one who got to hear it.* A tentative smile: "Bound to be a shock." *Thought I was the only one who was really helping.* "I'm sorry. I'm glad you're OK." He was, but it should have been different.

"Well. I'm sorry you were worried. Had a few moments there myself. Think it was a dog, you know. Some yappy little rat on a leash, ran out in front of me. Hope I squashed it."

Doyle smiled, reassured by the familiar dark tone, settled himself on the table and reached for the sandwich. "What was the ward like? Same one as before?"

At half past, Doyle said, "D'you want a quick half hour? I'd like to see what state you're in. Just for the sake of comparison."

"OK." He started to strip. "The usual hour tomorrow, though?"

"Course."

The left knee was slightly hotter than the right. Maybe it was more swollen than usual, but Doyle couldn't be sure by looking, and wasn't about to probe. He thought he could feel the effects of the week of physiotherapy - a slight difference in tone and proportions in the arms and right leg - and spent most of his time on the shoulders and back.

"I think you've lost some weight."

"Wouldn't be surprised. Andy had me working hard, and the food hadn't got any more exciting."

"I've been meaning to invite you to my place for a meal some time. It's on the third floor, though."

"I'll cope. Sounds great."

"We'll set something up when I get back from holiday."

"Oh yeah. You're off next week, aren't you?"

They overran again, and Lucy had to phone about his two o'clock. This time Doyle didn't hesitate before offering help with dressing, nor Bodie before accepting. It felt like a routine, as soothing as the massage itself.

* * * * *

"You sleeping OK? Is it keeping you awake?"

"They gave me some pills. Shouldn't pass out on you today." And he didn't. They talked when they felt like it, comfortable with the intervening silences.

Doyle usually finished with the feet so they'd feel the full benefit when they were put on the ground again. Today he started with the right.

Halfway through, Bodie started to twitch. Doyle carried on, confident it couldn't be anything to do with him. The foot twisted to the side, sliding out of his grip.

"Uh... Ray..." Desperately embarrassed.

Doyle looked up. He saw another erection, not as advanced as the last time. Beyond it, Bodie's face was tinged with pink, which deepened when their eyes met.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why... I'm really sorry." He raised his knee, trying to cover himself, and fumbled with the towel.

Doyle was calm, as ever in an emergency. "Don't worry about it. There's lots of nerve-endings there. Some of the signals get routed through the groin. I obviously hit that bunch today. It's my fault."

"Does it happen often, then?" Relief.

“Well, not all that often.” Just twice, now. “This room doesn’t see that many virile young men with sensitive feet.”

A grin, and visible relaxation, though the knee was still raised. “Frustrated, you mean.”

“Yeah? Thought you’d be reeling them in.”

A grimace. “I don’t go for the Florence Nightingale types. And I can’t kneel.”

“They’re not all like that. Are they? And what’s it hurt for a one-night stand?”

“Oh.” He sighed and let the leg slide flat. The erection had subsided. “Haven’t felt like it, to be honest. It’s ugly, Ray. It’s fucking ugly. Dunno if I’d want any bird who’d put up with it. Or me.”

“Have you tried to find out?”

“Couple of times. Wasn’t good. Thought the last one was going to be sick over it. I’ve stayed away from them since that.”

Andy’s holiday-cover had been a woman. And the massage therapist they’d offered him. That first day he’d probably phoned round looking for a man. Doyle had never thought about that aspect of Bodie’s injury before; he himself had long got used to the knee, and he was well aware of the man’s physical virtues. “So what d’you do?”

“Wha’d’you *think*?”

“For nearly a year and a half?”

“Well, when the knee’s bad, I sort of lose interest. So it’s not really been that long.”

“It can’t be bad today, then. You *are* recovering quickly.”

“It helps if I’m feeling... well... cheerful. It’s been building for a few weeks. S’pose I shouldn’t be surprised. I’m still sorry, though. I’m not paying you enough to put up with that.”

Doyle waved a hand in dismissal. “I’ll take it as a compliment. My work must take some of the credit, I reckon. I won’t carry on today, though.”

Bodie got dressed while Doyle went to make the coffee. The clinic was already empty.

“How long’ve you been going out with Maddy?”

Doyle frowned at the ceiling. “Um... ten months, I think.”

“You living together?”

“When she’s in London. She’s got a house in Bristol. Goes back at the weekends.”

“Is it serious?”

“No! I don’t get serious. Not like that.”

“Determined bachelor, eh? That’s what I’d guessed.”

“No, not really. Wish I did get serious. Save a lot of hassle. I just... lose interest after a while. Someone else comes along and I -” He shrugged. “Just have to go for it. Can’t help myself.”

“That what happened with the bird who made you leave the force?”

“Yeah. That was the worst. Thought I’d changed. Grown up a bit, but - Started an art class. Met Suzy.” He clicked his fingers. “All over. Just like that. Lynne went bonkers. Shouting outside the flat in the middle of the night. Turning up at work - I had to leave in the end. Taught me a lesson.”

“I’ll bet. How’s Maddy going to take it? How long’s she got?”

A shrug. “Depends who turns up. It’s fine now. I’m looking forward to the holiday. But it *won’t* last.”

“You’re cold, Ray.” A simple statement.

“I’m realistic. I don’t lie. I suppose you’re a romantic.”

“Given the chance.”

“But you’ve never been married?”

“Never worked out. I’m probably not sorry now. Cut me up at the time, though.”

Doyle nodded, accepting the difference between them, and changed the subject.

As they were about to leave, Bodie said, “What’re we going to do about my feet?”

“I could leave them alone. Or we could work out what does it, and I could just avoid that. Or you could always have a good wank beforehand.”

“Um.” He’d gone pink again. “I’ll see how it goes while you’re away.”

“Yeah. Try it out with Paul. I’ll warn him.”

“You bloody will not! I’ll -” Doyle’s laughter escaped from confinement. “Bastard.”

* * * * *

Doyle sent Bodie a postcard from Switzerland. It said: “Having fun. Bit of a busman’s holiday, though. Everyone in the chalet knows I’m in massage (thanks a lot, Maddy), and I’m spending my evenings rubbing out the aches they’ve all got from the day’s walking. I’d think of setting up here permanently if I could persuade them to pay me in hard cash! See you on the 23rd.”

Bodie was the last person he wrote to, using all the others as practice for that breezy zone. Bodie must have no hint of the real state of Doyle’s mind.

It seemed by the end of the fortnight that there hadn’t been a moment when Bodie was completely absent from his thoughts. Bodie was always there - at some level and in some form. He’d close his eyes in bed at night and see the day’s mountain path still etched on his overloaded retina, and know that the presence just behind him on the path was Bodie - an unseen Bodie somehow walking easily and without a stick, and as content as he was with their companionable silence.

Not what you’d say on a postcard or even in person, but harmless enough. But then he’d start to drift asleep and somehow the path would take them to his room at the clinic, and Bodie would be on the table, all pliant muscle and half-covered cock, flushed excitement and surprised delight. He didn’t often remember exactly what happened

next, but he was certainly having a lot of wet dreams, and by the end of the first week Maddy had clearly decided that they were not connected with her.

And then during the day - and especially during the evening's massage-sessions - these heated images of Bodie would surface from his subconscious like bubbles, and his pulse always reacted whenever one burst into his conscious mind. He never let the images linger - not even after one of his near-arguments with Maddy - never let himself elaborate on them with movement and dialogue. He was refusing to play even the simplest game of erotic fantasy-building. The effort of this self-control was exhausting.

"Having fun." Anything but. He had longed for it to be over, except that he was frightened that coming home would not be the end.

* * * * *

Bodie had decided to do without the feet. "Thought you might," said Doyle. "You're obviously still feeling cheerful."

He was talking too much about the holiday. Chattering. He knew it. Bodie must surely be about to ask him what he was so nervous about. He'd shut up, then Bodie would ask him a question, and he'd be off again. Just half an hour ago he'd been thinking smugly about his powers of self-control, oblivious to the possibility that the reality of Bodie under his hands might be rather harder to resist than a phantom conjured at a distance of five hundred miles.

He couldn't understand how he could have been indifferent to this body for so long. Now its every inch and every action enthralled him. The complex, well-tended landscape of the powerful arm-muscles. The lift of his ribs as he breathed. The firm mounds of the buttocks: Doyle closed his eyes as he worked on them, not trusting himself with the sight of his tanned hands on those pale, inviting curves.

The cock was still today but made a distinct bulk under the thick white cloth. Doyle managed not to look at it while Bodie was watching him, but carried with him a vivid image of the line of black hairs leading downwards from the navel. The line seemed to him an unmistakable invitation to slide his hand just under the towel, push the towel down...

"No." He heard his own voice clearly in his head. No, he was not allowed to play that game: not in Switzerland, and definitely not here.

But just look at the way the hairs lie against the skin there. As if they know exactly what they look like. Incredible that in all these months he'd never assessed that wicked temptation.

Even without games his cock rose in jolts. When he leaned forward it pressed against the edge of the table with the rhythm of his work. However, the idea that the worst might truly happen - in this ordinary room, with this unsuspecting man - was too large and close for him to focus on, and he maintained a unexamined faith that *something* would intervene to save him.

He possibly had two minutes to spare when he finally faced the fact that "something" would have to be himself.

He staggered away from the table, then turned so that Bodie would not be able to see his groin. His breathing was ragged.

“I’m sorry, I -”

“Ray? What’s the matter?”

He took the few steps to the wall behind Bodie’s head, and leaned his forehead and a raised arm against its cool hardness. His eyes were closed, and he was concentrating fiercely on the tidal rush of his breath.

“Ray?”

He couldn’t reply. He knew he was still far from safe, but he couldn’t reply. He had no strategy at all.

There was the sound of Bodie clambering off the table, the sound of the towel falling to the floor, and then the sounds of Bodie’s unsteady journey to the wall. Doyle’s thoughts - such as they were - had reverted to the idea of the miraculous rescue.

“Ray? Are you ill? What’s wrong?” A hand on his shoulder. A warm pressure along his side. Apart from that ceremonial handshake, he was sure it was the first time Bodie had touched him. Pressed against the wall, his cock seemed to double in size. Sweat broke out on his face.

“I’m... uh... Some kind of bug.” He swallowed, still facing the wall, and felt the grip of Bodie’s hand tighten, gathering him, trying to turn him.

A few simple flexings of muscles would bring him around to face Bodie, would end it all one way or another. Behind him Bodie was standing naked.

A shudder, then, “Felt... weird all of a sudden. I’m sorry.”

“You’d better lie down. Come on, Ray. Lie down for a bit and then we’ll get you home.” A firmer grip, prising him away from the wall. Could he lie on his front? Keep it hidden?

No, it wouldn’t work. “I - I think I’ll sit.” Yes! He could escape round the head of the table to his chair. Without the stick, Bodie would take a while to catch up with him.

He pulled away, making a great show of needing the support of the wall, the table, and then the chair-back. Once seated, he let his head fall back and just panted with his eyes closed for a while. Then Bodie was moving towards him again. He rolled his head to the side and met Bodie’s worried eyes with a shaky smile, careful not to let his gaze drop lower. “Don’t worry. I’ll be OK in a while. Just giddy there. Thought I was over it. You might as well go home yourself.”

“I’m not letting you drive like that. I’ll get you a cab.”

Doyle knew the effort of balance it must be taking him to bend and get his stick. And then dragging his clothes on in half his normal time. Doyle’s erection retreated in shame, giving his brain a chance to do some work in the time before Bodie emerged with his socks stuffed in the pocket of his jacket.

“No. Don’t bother with a cab. I’ll call Maddy. She’ll come and pick me up.” He reached over for the phone and dialled his own number, knowing that Maddy wouldn’t be home for at least an hour. “Hi. I’m still at the clinic. Could you come and collect me? I’ve had

another bout of that bug.” Pause. “Yes, so did I. Anyway, I’m not safe to drive.” Pause. “Yeah, OK. Thanks. No, it’s not locked. See you.”

He replaced the receiver and looked up. “She’ll be over in about fifteen minutes. There’s no need to stick around - she’ll let herself in.”

Bodie was frowning, indignant. “I thought Switzerland was supposed to be really clean and healthy.”

Doyle smiled. “Must have got it off a tourist. Go on, go home. Don’t want you getting it too. I’ll be OK. Feeling better already.”

“Well... You’ll be OK for next week?”

“Bound to be. I’ll call you.”

Bodie went home, after a long look from the doorway.

As soon as the door was shut, Doyle let his head fall back, and gazed at the ceiling, wide-eyed and panting again. OK next week? Impossible. It was worse now than ever, now that Bodie had touched him, held him - he groaned as his entire body remembered how it had felt.

He would allow himself one game. Just one game. Easier to phrase it as a favour to himself that to admit total defeat. He parted his legs and opened his trousers, and imagined turning from the wall and finding Bodie as hard and desperate as himself.

He sat sprawled, eyes closed, hand heavy and damp between his legs. For a while, his mind was empty.

“What am I going to do?” Less than a whisper. Oh, but that was obvious. Lose his friend. Lose his job. Maddy would probably move out by the end of the week.

This ravenous desire was nothing new; for him, it was the traditional beginning. But for a friend... He felt it immediately or not at all - that was how it was supposed to be. And for a client... And a straight, straight man... *He’d break my jaw*. But it wasn’t an explosion of anger that he was really frightened of - it was the dawning of contempt in Bodie’s face.

Would the feeling fade? Suffocate in its own frustration?

Well, it might. But he didn’t know much about frustrated desire, about what happened to it. Maybe a couple of weeks would see it through. This was just an oddity, a mutant combination of physical contact and affection - it couldn’t possibly survive for long.

And if it didn’t disappear of its own accord, then it would be chased away when he met someone else. Someone normal and safe. That was the most likely ending. And of course he couldn’t say how long that might take, but his experience was that the supply of desirable women was, if anything, inconveniently large.

His sense of perspective had come back. He opened his eyes, sat up, and wasted no time in cleaning and rearranging himself.

It'd be OK. He wasn't worried any more. Except about how to tell Maddy it was over. She had loads of friends in London she could stay with. Tonight, even. Not his problem. He'd brush up his usual speech on the way home.

* * * * *

By the weekend, he knew he had to find some way of getting through Tuesday without coming in his pants. Maddy had moved out, but he felt distinctly crowded in the flat, and he was remembering his wet dreams now.

Well, he could call Bodie and cancel, blaming the bug yet again. But that lie was too-easily discovered. And what about the weeks after that?

On Monday morning he did call, putting back the appointment by half an hour. That would give him time to lock himself in the gents and calm his cock down. He felt some grim amusement at the idea of following the suggestion he'd given to Bodie. It just had to work.

* * * * *

It wasn't perfect, but it saved him from a repeat of the week before. He was still troubled by a succession of images from his dreams and his uncontrolled waking moments, which produced a low-level, simmering excitement.

He was not working well - too jerky and distracted, not paying proper attention to the messages from his kneading hands. There was so much more he wanted to do to this body. Part of his brain was convinced he had already fucked it. Right here. Towel slipping away smooth as silk. His fingers already oiled. Bodie surprised but so, so eager.

Not in a million years. He squeezed his eyes tight-closed, and ordered himself to think of nothing but the current muscle-group. And then the group after that. And after that. Until the hour was up.

While he was in the kitchen he slid a handful of ice-cubes over his face and chest until he was sure he could get by without a detour to the gents. *It'll get better. It has to. I've never been one for hopeless causes.*

"You thought any more about that meal? No, I can see you've forgotten. You remember before you went on holiday you said you'd -"

"I hadn't forgotten. Even figured out what I'll cook. But..." It was out of the question. He couldn't risk it or bear it. "... Maddy's sister's staying at the moment. I'd rather leave it till she's gone."

"What's she like?"

He described Maddy with a few additional irritating habits. He'd always lied easily, and had regarded it simply as a skill, until now. *He trusts me. And I've already betrayed him a hundred times over.* With every lie, and every pulse of blood that lifted his cock. *If it's no better next week, I'll finish it. Somehow.*

* * * * *

It was no better the next week. The week after that he greeted Bodie with: "Could you sit down? There's something I have to say." Bodie looked no more than curious.

Doyle sat on the edge of the table, near its foot. He was at least three feet from Bodie, but Bodie was closer to the door and he was far from confident of making a clean escape. "The thing is... you'll have to find another therapist. I can make some recommendations. Blokes I did the course with."

"Eh? You packing it in? Bit sudden." Concerned: "You're not in trouble here, are you?"

Doyle dropped his gaze to Bodie's hands. He couldn't bear to watch the change of expression, and they should give him sufficient warning of an attack. His voice was very quiet. "I could be if I carried on working with you. I've already let it go much too far."

"Oh, they don't like me hanging round here? Well, we could always -"

"No, Bodie. Listen. The problem's me. I find you... very, very attractive." The hands twitched, but were then still. Doyle breathed again, and swallowed jerkily. "It's out of control. I keep thinking - Well, obviously it can't go on. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You've every right to be disgusted. And to make a complaint."

"Ray."

"But it - It hasn't been all the time, honestly. Just in the last few sessions. I *know* I should have stopped things straight away, but I kept thinking it would get better. I'm so sorry, I -"

"Ray. Calm down. Look at me."

Doyle shook his head.

"I'm not disgusted. I'm not going to complain. Doesn't bother me at all."

Doyle jerked his head up. He felt strongly about lies when he was on the receiving end, and he also felt strangely let down after his weeks of heat and guilt. "It *has* to. You're just so straight you don't understand what it is I'm talking about. It's not just a matter of admiring your long eyelashes. I'm spending half the session fantasising about shoving my fingers up your arse!"

Bodie shrugged. "Well, I didn't think you'd get into this state over anything less. Look, I spent the peak of my adolescence in the African bush with the nearest woman a hundred miles away. You're not telling me anything new."

That was a complete surprise. They studied one another in silence.

"But you don't fancy me, do you?"

"I hadn't thought about it. At first you were just a pair of hands. And then you were a mate. It's years since I made a habit of eyeing men up."

"Think about it."

Bodie's mouth opened slightly, but he said nothing. He looked tense.

Savagely: "OK. Forget it." He hadn't really been hoping, anyway. Not really.

"I'm sorry. I can see... all the things about you that are... sexy. Wouldn't be any hardship at all. But it doesn't connect here." He cupped his groin briefly. "Not the way you want."

"Well, that's that, then." He wanted to go home. Never see Bodie again.

"I bet it will go away. Soon. You've just got in a state." He brightened. "Look. Why don't you just have a wank before the session? Like you -"

Doyle forgot there were other people in the building. "What d'you think I've been *doing*, for Christ's sake?" He remembered. "Ever since three weeks ago when I nearly *came* all over you."

Bodie's eyes widened. "So that's what... It wasn't a bug. You poor sod." He grinned in recognition, but suppressed it quickly.

"You see? It has to finish. You have to find another therapist. I've already... If anyone knew..." He shook his head.

"No one's going to. But -" He shrugged. "I look forward to this a lot. Tuesdays. We can still be mates, can't we? It's bound to get easier if I stop stripping off for you every week."

"Right now..." A deep sigh. "... I can't face it. I'm sorry. That's why I put you off about the meal. You wouldn't've been safe." A digression: "It's finished with Maddy. She's been gone for over a fortnight. And she hasn't got a sister." Bodie looked alert, then frowned. "I wish to God none of this was happening. You're probably my best mate, and I don't - I'm sorry."

"Not your fault, is it? You must've thought I was gonna thump you when you told me."

"Something like that."

"The worst's over, Ray. It'll be fine."

"Yeah. Eventually. But you'd better go now."

"Can't we just have a coffee?"

"I'm a wreck. I want to go home. I can't face the effort of searching for safe subjects."

Bodie got to his feet. "OK. But you will be in touch, won't you? Let me know how you are? I'll be thinking about you."

Not like I'll be thinking about you, though. "Course I will."

Bodie paused in front of him, looking awkward, then reached out to give his upper arm a quick squeeze. "Take care, Ray." He didn't look back on his way to the door.

* * * * *

Ten days later, during his lunch-break, Doyle called Paul.

"Hi, it's Ray. How you doing?" Without waiting for a reply: "Can you do me a big favour?"

"Like what?"

"Can you cover for me again? I really need to take a break."

"You've just had one!"

"I lied about it on the postcard. Maddy moved out the week after we got back."

“Oh. No wonder you’re low. You do sound tired. When? And for how long?”

“As soon as you can. For a week. A fortnight if possible.”

“Well. Let’s see.” The sound of pages flicking. “I suppose I could make the week after next - give you about eighty percent cover - but the fortnight’s...” More flicking pages. “August at the earliest.”

“I’ll take the week, thanks. I’d go mad if I had to wait till August.”

“I thought it was sort of casual between you two. Though I s’pose it always takes you by surprise.”

Doyle hesitated. But Paul would understand (at least some of it). Might even be able to help. “That’s. Not. Really what it’s about.”

“No?”

“It’s hard to - I had the hots for a client.”

“Aaaah. I see. But you’re not still seeing her as a client? And you didn’t try anything...”

“I’m not and I didn’t. We had a talk and...” Deep sigh. “It’s hopeless. But I had it bad. Still have. And work’s not the same. I haven’t any sympathy left over for anyone else’s problems. They’re all *pissing* me off.” *And I can find something in nearly every one that reminds me of Bodie.*

His sex drive was still running at the same intolerable level, still fuelled by thoughts of Bodie. But with Bodie gone it had lost its sense of direction, and was now careering about aimlessly. Doyle was frightened, and thinking of leaving the clinic. The break seemed his only chance.

“Sounds like you dealt with it pretty well.”

“Maybe. Has it ever happened to you?”

“Well. Not that bad. Glimmerings. I managed to nip them in the bud.”

“How?”

“Just said to myself, ‘*I’m the therapist. I’m in control of what happens in this room. And I’m not letting this happen.*’ And it would go away.”

Doyle was no longer sure he was a therapist. “I’ll bear that in mind for next time.”

“And I used to imagine I was just a pair of hands.” “*You were just a pair of hands.*” Doyle winced, and felt cold in the pit of his stomach. “No personality connected to them, and especially no genitalia. Of course, you can’t work like that forever, but it’s useful in the short term. What’re you going to do in your week off?”

“Stay home. I can’t afford to go away.”

“You should keep busy. Give yourself something to concentrate on, something physical. I know it’s an effort when you’re low, but if you spend the week lying around the house you’ll be back where you started from. You mustn’t think about her. It won’t do any good.”

“Certainly hasn’t so far.”

“Park your head in a kennel for a week.”

Doyle blinked. “What did you say?”

“Your brain fucks you up at times like this. Send it off on its own holiday. Spend the week a couple of feet south of your neck. You remember those classes with Anita. What she -”

“The couple of feet south is the whole problem!”

“No, it isn’t. It’s just a symptom. A victim. Your brain’s been making up stories and sending them down to it. Put that big lump of jelly in its place.”

Doyle smiled despite himself. “I’ll look in the Yellow Pages under ‘Brain Kennels’.”

“You don’t get turned down often, do you?”

“Nope.”

“Well, all this advice has been tried and tested through my copious experience. Hope it helps.”

“I’ll send you a postcard from glamorous Benjamin Gardens letting you know.”

“Don’t let your brain write it - it’s a compulsive liar.”

“Yes, but my pancreas can’t spell for shit.”

“Have you told them you’re planning a break?”

“Not yet. I’ll see Neil straight away.”

“And I’ll call Lucy and let her know which slots I’ve already got booked. We’ll probably have to do some shuffling.”

Neil, the clinic’s manager, was in his office. Doyle invented an illness in the family as an excuse for the short notice. In his lower moments he wondered why he was bothering to maintain his image with these people - nothing was ever going to improve, and soon he’d be forced out of the job. It had helped to talk to Paul, though; he was reserving his judgement about the advice, but he felt less alone, less trapped.

* * * * *

That afternoon, after his pulse had been raised by the blackness of the hairs dusting Mr. Parry’s lower abdomen, he became just a pair of hands. It worked while he was allowed to be silent, but Mr. Parry expected comments on his third retelling of the complete history of his back-problem. Doyle knew he must be sounding distracted and disappointing his client, but at the moment treating “the whole person” was a low priority.

"Being open". He’d used to nod sagely and confidently at that like everyone else in the room. Didn’t seem the same now. Open like a sieve. Open like a gutted fish. That was how he felt after three years. Even when he got over this sex problem, it was going to be hard to recover from this realisation that every one of his clients was selfishly, greedily draining him dry.

* * * * *

The pair of hands had finished their work for the day. It had been better than the day before, even though it was a Friday, the day when the clients were most tense and talkative.

He'd had no plans for the weekend - beyond lying around the flat feeling painfully empty in his guts and painfully full between his legs.

A Brain Kennel. Well, Paul had been right about the hands. Physical activity. A run. Richmond Park would make a change. And then cook something complicated.

Yes. He could imagine the evening now. He could face going home.

* * * * *

During the working hours of the next two weeks, he was a pair of hands fascinated by the details of their own movements. During the other waking hours, he was a running, swimming body, with a head as clear of thoughts as a still mountain pool, and directed from some self-contained, pivotal point far down his torso. Or that was his aim, anyway, and he succeeded more and more each day.

During the nights... They got easier. It seemed that his detachment and his preoccupation with self-control gradually sank deeper and deeper in his mind. Bodie would still be stretched out on the table, cock huge and hard, and Doyle, leaning over him, would also be naked and erect. But the passion started to become irrelevant: Doyle found himself more interested in what his hands knew about the layers of muscle on the back, and he and Bodie were as relaxed with one another as if their erections had been casually-donned articles of clothing. There was one dream in which Maddy came into the room and asked about train-times: seconds after waking, Doyle had forgotten what happened next, but the next day he could still recall the feeling of naturalness, the complete absence of embarrassment or panic or guilt.

Yes, he was still having wet dreams, and yes, the cause could only be Bodie. But being strict with himself and his imagination gave him self-respect as well as this gradual recovery, and he knew it could have been a lot worse - one day he would be left simply with a sadness at knowing that there was something he wanted and could never have.

He did want to return to their earlier, simple days. He did want to see him again, even to be able to take him back as a client. But not yet. He might think himself recovered, in control, but faced with him in that small, bare room... Once was enough for that mistake. This was going to take time and hard work.

Of course, there would be someone else eventually. Maybe soon. He'd see what difference that made. He didn't think it would spare him the sadness.

* * * * *

It was his first Tuesday back, and the middle of his lunch-hour. The phone rang.

"Mr Bodie for you, Ray."

"Wait! Don't -" But the call was already through.

"Hi, Ray. Good holiday? Lucy said you'd gone up north."

Doyle said nothing, working hard, very hard, just to be sad.

“You there, Ray? Hello?”

“Yes, I - I’m not ready for this, Bodie. I’m sorry.”

“I just wanted to talk to you. That’s all. See how you were doing. It’s not been the same, you know.” A throat-clearing. “I’ve been missing... our Tuesday evenings and everything.”

“I know, but - *Please*. I *will* call you when it’s over, but I just don’t know how long it’s going to be.”

As soon as he’d put the phone down, he headed out for a brisk walk, inhabiting for that time only the joints of his feet. And in the afternoon, he was the pair of hands.

* * * * *

By the end of Thursday he felt more confident about keeping his job. Some of his clients had noticed his distraction and subdued responses, and commented, concerned. He’d said that there were problems in his family, and apologized because he hadn’t been feeling like talking for a while. To his surprise they were not offended - instead they were very understanding. “This must be such a difficult job when you’re not feeling one hundred percent. I’ll stop chattering, shall I?” They weren’t leeching monsters, after all. It was going to be alright.

He was clearing up when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in.”

Bodie stepped into the room, which suddenly seemed very small indeed.

“No! I said I’d *call* you. It’s only been two days, for God’s sake.”

Bodie shut the door. “I know. I know how long it’s been. That’s why I -”

“Please go.”

“Just five minutes, Ray. I want to say something.”

“Stay over there and say it. And then go.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I do fancy you. I want you to come home with me. To bed.”

A bark of unamused laughter. “What are you playing at, Bodie? ‘I’ve changed my mind.’ Sounds like someone choosing a shirt. What the hell do you think you’re *doing* here?” Doyle had retreated behind the table: for the increased separation and for concealment.

“I’ve missed you. Something rotten. It’s been a lousy month.” Quickly: “Not as bad as yours, but -” He took two steps away from the door. “We don’t have to be this miserable, Ray. I think we could make a go of it. I think it would be good.”

“How could it be when you don’t fancy me? And you don’t, do you? You explained it very well the last time. You were very convincing.”

“You’re ten times more attractive than any of the men I ended up having sex with. A hundred times.”

“When you were fifteen and desperate. I remember what that’s like. Anything that’s warm and has a grip. It doesn’t count.”

“It wasn’t always like that. With some of them... We had some good times.” His voice was quiet, and deep with nostalgia - more intimate than Doyle had ever heard or imagined it. Doyle closed his eyes briefly, then clasped his hands on the table, concentrating on the hardness of the interlocking knuckles. It helped, but not enough. “OK, it might take me a while to warm up. But I can still make it good for you. Right from the start. It’ll work, Ray. And it has to be better than this, doesn’t it?”

Doyle closed his eyes again, and bowed his head. “You *must* go away. Please.” But he heard the uneven, dragging sound as Bodie came closer, then felt the padding on the table shift under his hands.

“Let me show you. Let me touch you. I want to. I’ve been thinking about it for days. I want to undress you. I want to find out what makes you come. What’s the point in putting yourself through this? What’s the point when you can have what you want right now?”

Doyle looked up. Bodie was two feet away at the foot of the table, and leaning on it for support. Doyle’s cock pushed urgently against his clothes, as if being drawn by a magnet.

“Because this is nothing compared to what I went through in the first weeks. That was - I couldn’t think. At all. I was getting over it, but it’s taken all my time. All my energy. I can’t face... letting myself think about you that way again.”

“But thinking about me won’t be a problem, will it? Not when you’ll be fucking me. Or whatever you want.” Doyle’s mouth had gone painfully dry, and his head was buzzing. “That’ll make all the difference, Ray. You know it will. I’m sorry it’s been so difficult for you. I wish I’d thought it through like this straight away. So I could have said yes right then and there. But - I admit it was a surprise, and I thought... Well, you’d told me yourself how it works for you. Seeing someone new. Losing interest. And so on. Well, you know it’s not like that with me, and when I realised I was the latest -”

For an instant, Doyle met his eyes. “I don’t blame you. I’m not proud of it, but -”

“No! No. It’s perfect. We both know what to expect. And this way you *know* you’ll get it out of your system easily. And when it’s over we can go back to being mates, same as before. And maybe by that time I’ll feel up to dealing with birds again. It’s perfect.”

Doyle studied the smiling, confident face, his panic fading. “You *have* been thinking, haven’t you?”

“What’ve we got to lose, eh?”

After a few seconds, Doyle said, “My reputation as an irresistible stud, for one thing. I’d feel... I wish it wasn’t so cold-blooded for you. I wish -” The stick clattered to the ground, and Bodie’s left hand closed around his arm and drew him close.

“How cold-blooded is this, Ray?” Despite himself, his mouth was opening even as Bodie’s right hand curved around the base of his skull. Bodie’s mouth was hot and salty, crammed with textures and edges. It was like nothing Doyle had let himself imagine. But then his fantasies had been devised by himself alone, and this was the reality of

Bodie: a separate person. The idea of Bodie's independent existence hit him like a revelation, seeming at that instant an utterly original and shocking thought. Separate. Unknowable. Mysterious. But here and pressed close and thirsty for the taste of Raymond Doyle's mouth.

Doyle sighed when Bodie's left hand moved down to his waist, feeling the heat and shape so vividly it was as if he was already naked. He wrapped his arms more tightly around his lover's back.

It was Bodie who finally broke the kiss. He was breathless as he murmured against Doyle's lips, "You need more than this. You know you do. I want to suck you off." Doyle made a high, pained sound as a wave of heat passed through his entire body, just under the skin, leaving his hips thrusting and rubbing of their own accord. He seized Bodie's head between both hands and pulled him into a ravenous kiss.

More breathless still, and with lips glistening and bruised: "Please, Ray. Just calm down enough so we can - I can't kneel, remember. And I can't lift you onto the table."

"Ohhh." Doyle's head dropped forward and he stood with his cheek resting against Bodie's, concentrating on keeping his hips still. "I don't want to move. You feel so good."

"I can feel even better if you give me the chance. Lie down on the table." Hands on Doyle's arms, pushing their bodies apart. "Please."

Doyle glanced at the table, considering, then suddenly remembered where they were. "Not here. This is mad. We can't -"

"I locked the door. And there's no one around. You know there isn't."

A quick look at Bodie, then Doyle nodded - to himself, really - and clambered onto the table, his jeans kneading him wickedly in the process so that it took him long, panting seconds to recover. When he opened his eyes, it was to find that Bodie was still near the foot of the table, moving slowly backwards by leaning on the edge of the table with his left hand. Of course - the stick was on the floor. This time there was no sensible help he could offer.

He started undoing his flies, and Bodie's head twisted round at the sound. "Don't. Please, Ray. Be patient."

Doyle reached down to place his hand lightly on top of Bodie's. "I'm just easing the pressure. You'll be surprised how patient I can be."

By the time Bodie reached Doyle's groin and had turned to face the table, Doyle had freed his cock from his Y-fronts and undone the bottom three buttons of his shirt. They gazed at one another, expressions identically flushed and intent, and were still gazing when Bodie's hand, scalding hot, closed around Doyle's balls.

When Doyle was still and eye-contact regained: "Open your shirt. Properly. I want to see more of you." A lop-sided smile. "Start catching up."

Doyle undid the remaining buttons by feel. "Oh, you've just caught up and more, I reckon. I was very good. I never even looked under the towel when you were asleep."

“No?” The weight of a hot hand on his stomach. “Not even once?” A quick, sure pinch of his right nipple, then the pad of a thumb circling. “A man might think you weren’t really interested.”

Doyle started laughing with relief and delight and sheer amusement, and carried on laughing - though with a marked change of tone and pace - for some time after Bodie’s mouth had taken him in. He locked his fingers in the short, feathery hair - *The first time I’ve done this. The first time I’ve touched his hair.* - and tugged and stroked in rhythm with the rise and fall of his hips.

As soon as he could afterwards, and with as much coordination as he could muster, he got to his knees in the middle of the table and pulled Bodie into an exhausted, sweaty kiss.

“Oh, God. You’ve convinced me. Christ, you’ve convinced me. Now what can I...?”

“Oh.” Bodie closed his eyes for a few seconds - he seemed to be thinking. A rueful smile: “Get me to a bed first, I think. My knee’s just over-ruled my cock.”

Doyle drew back. “Oh, God. I forgot. How bad is it?”

“Come on. You were supposed to.”

“Can you make it to my chair?”

A quick assessment of the distance. “Not worth it.” He started buttoning Doyle’s shirt. “Let’s hurry up and get home to that bed. God, you smell wonderful.”

Doyle couldn’t remember if he’d ever felt this happy before. “Whose home?”

“Yours if you’ve got any food in. I’m halfway to working up a hell of an appetite.”

Bodie in his home. In his bed. Lying next to him when he woke the next morning. Head whirling at the way his life had just changed, at all the possibilities now before him, Doyle shuffled to his knees so he could deal with his jeans. “Well, the stairs will help with that. You haven’t forgotten I’m on the third floor?” As soon as he was off the table, he knelt to retrieve Bodie’s stick.

“Forgotten? That’s what I was thinking of. You’ve got a one-track mind, Ray.”

They grinned at one another, then Doyle reached under the chair for his case and led the way to the door. He paused with his hand on the bolt, waiting for Bodie to catch up. They stood inches apart, looking at one another, serious now.

Doyle said, “This *is* going to be good. Very good.”

“While it lasts. How long d’you give us?” Simple curiosity.

A shrug. “Could be three months. My record’s two years.” He slid the bolt across and opened the door.

“Hmm. Could look at it as a challenge, I suppose. Or we could take bets.”

Slowly, side by side, they walked out of the building, and across the car-park to Doyle’s car.

The End