

## The Skirt

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Wheelchairs are ageing. Or so my mother says. They add ten years, like sprouting grey roots. And anti-wrinkle creams won't help. Neither will painting your wheelchair red, but I got my brother to do it anyway. Rob drew Manga style<sup>1</sup> hamsters on the sides. If you're stared at, it should be for the hamsters.

5 Rob didn't want to come. He hadn't got over the wheelchair thing and he had his graffiti artist image to worry about. Neither did my mother, who couldn't cope with the city centre's crowds and car fumes. She insisted Aunt Joan and Jude from next door took me. They were glad to take turns pushing and have a day out, as long as I didn't mind popping into Ethel Austin's<sup>2</sup>. [...]

10 A black skirt and blue V-necked cardigan had been laid out on the bed. It was easier to dress me in a skirt than trousers. I closed my eyes till I could reach the chair with my hands. My arms were stronger. Four months ago, I couldn't lift myself at all. But Sue was still insisting on the hoist in the mornings.

Mum was rubbing my hair dry when Rob knocked and peered round the door. "Mum, I can't find any socks..."

15 "Rob! I'm getting dressed!"

"Robert. Give your sister some privacy." Mum's tone was exactly the tone she used when we were teenagers. Rob didn't mind, as long as he didn't have to pay rent so he could stay job-free and graffiti walls and shoes. "You'll just have to wash some," Mum said. She didn't believe in washing machines, but couldn't be bothered handwashing either.

20 Breakfast was pills with gluten-free muesli. My mother had lined up her pills in rainbow colours. She knew what she'd taken if she went by the rainbow. Mine were large and gritty in my mouth. I struggled to get them down.

"I can't take all these, every day, forever. It's a pill sentence."

25 "Bethany. We're all on pills nowadays. You'll just have to get used to it." She claimed that as a mother, it was her duty to say the truths others only thought. [...]

Saying that, my mother was an advert for alternative medicine. She'd had so many illnesses and the herbalist kept filling and fixing her with tisanes<sup>3</sup> and tinctures. She was hardly surprised when one day I couldn't get up. "We've all got something," she said. The specialist stared at me as if I was making it up. The herbalist said I needed to love myself more. The homeopath<sup>4</sup> said I needed exorcising. I screamed every time the reflexologist touched my toes, so he said my feet needed amputating.

It was simple. A metamorphosis. Or so I said.

35 I woke one morning and could not get up. I could not move. I shifted my arms in the sheets, heavy as if in a half-dream. An ache hummed down my back. Then hot, sharp pains pushed through the post-drunken fog. I tried to move one leg at a time. Wrenching back the covers, I saw my legs hadn't budged. Panicking, tugging at the sheets, I called and cried to my housemates. The room was freezing. The boiler had broken again and I could see that the patch of mould in the corner was spreading, grey-green and furry. The top of the poster from the comedy festival I'd performed at was unstuck; it curled over, baring its white side. I pushed away the stool leg and empty wine bottle.

40 I phoned Gemma, a housemate who rarely went out in daylight. She stumbled into my room, still in last night's clothes, orange lipstick smeared across a cheek. She panicked so much she couldn't dial her phone. I had to call the ambulance myself.

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<sup>1</sup> *Manga style*: style of drawing inspired by Japanese comics and graphic novels

<sup>2</sup> *Ethel Austin*: British clothes retailers offering elegant women's dresses

<sup>3</sup> herbal tea

<sup>4</sup> doctor who uses alternative kinds of medicine

The gluten-free muesli was awful. It was puffed rubber in rice milk. I pushed my bowl away. "You're not leaving all that," my mother said, mixing her tinctures. I shifted in my wheelchair. The pain was a warm ache today.

The bell rasped. It had always rasped. We never got round to fixing it, and neither had any of my mother's boyfriends. She went for men that didn't fix things unless they were political. The last one spent his Saturdays dressed as a grandma, disrupting Burger King outlets. Granny Action, he called it.

"That will be Joan."

Joan was all packed for our day out. She showed us a satchel with crisps, a flask and sandwiches.

"We're going to Market Street," I said. "Not Blackpool<sup>5</sup>."

"I know. But it will be a long day. And they charge the earth in those coffee shops." She lowered her voice and said in a confiding way, "Have you got your pads, you know?"

"Of course," I said and pushed myself back from the table. "You don't have to go on about it."

"Moody this morning, isn't she?" Joan said to my mother, who was dropping agnus castus<sup>6</sup> into a glass of water.

I spun round, clanged the table leg and pushed out of the kitchen.

The dining room had been converted into my dining-bedroom when I came out of hospital. I hung onto my room in the shared house, but eventually had to let it go, as I couldn't get up the stairs. My bed was where the old, scratched dining table used to be. I'd insisted on bringing my bookshelves, but most of my books ended up in the cellar. [...]

My mother's charity shop ornaments still cluttered the mantelpiece. [...] They seemed to match Mum's wallpaper. Green and yellow triangles stained with ancient 70's smoke [...]. I'd see myself floating from the bed and out of the pain and swimming through the triangles.

Aunt Joan had hidden four air fresheners amidst the figurines, as if my room was now particularly prone to odour. I threw the air fresheners in the bin, then took them out and placed them in a neat row on my bedside table, like four soldiers against smells.

My mother didn't clean [...]. As if to make up for it, Aunt Joan was a cleaning fundamentalist. She knew dusting made the world a shinier, glossier place. Yesterday, she'd hoovered my room thoroughly, in short, harsh movements, as if dust was my real problem and she could solve it. My mother called her a "dust-crazed bourgeois housewife." Joan called her a "dirty flea-bitten witch." Mostly, they argued over what to do with me.

I didn't know what to do with me.

I wriggled my right toes. Movement was coming back on my right side. In the mirror I dabbed on lipstick and brushed my hair. It was straggly with split ends. I did look older. Especially in this skirt. I'd bought it from a vintage shop, thinking it looked retro. It looked catalogue, with the dark school material and voluminous pleats that reached to my calves. I didn't know why I'd let them dress me in this skirt. I hated it. I really hated it.

I found some jeans on my clothes rail. [...] I rolled to the bedside table and rooted for scissors in the drawer, then cut from the waistband to the hem and wrenched the skirt off.

The skirt sprawled on the floor, black and ripped.

I'd have to lie on the bed to get these jeans on. I'd practised lifting myself. That was the easy bit. The hard part was getting the jeans up over my thighs. I lay on the bed and pulled.

I was gasping, out of breath and doing up the zip when Joan rushed in. "What are you doing?" she cried.

"I'm fine. I'm fine!"

Her hands hovered over me. I pushed her roughly away. "I'm fine!"

"Well," she said. "Well..."

"I'll be ready in a few minutes."

I had some money in my purse. Twenty pounds. My mother had my cash card. Twenty would do.

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<sup>5</sup> town in North West England

<sup>6</sup> *agnus castus*: natural solution that works to balance your hormones, reducing your PMS symptoms

I could hear them in the kitchen. Joan was huffing as she put the dishes away. Mum was talking about global warming and Joan was saying she wouldn't mind, but her legs were still pasty white. Then Joan said, "She's moody this morning. You should have heard her snap."

95 "Why?" Mum asked. "Were you fussing again?"

"No! Perhaps she's heard from *him*."

I pushed myself out of the dining-bedroom and to the front door. I tried to hold the door open as I went out. It banged against my wheel. I listened. But they were busy arguing.

"It smells of mouldy cheese in here."

100 "Don't you dare spray any chemicals!" [...]

The warmth was brimming outside. It was too hot for Manchester, even for July. The social services' van drew up, large and cumbersome on this road of oak and beech trees and old rambling houses. I rushed past. Someone called my name. I ignored them with a smug feeling of rudeness as I clattered over the broken, uneven pavement and round the trees that seemed to burst from between the slabs.

105 There was a bus stop on Delaney Road North. My arms were already tired and the movement was catching my back, the ache reaching into sharper, harder pains. At the kerb I halted. It was really high. I turned and went backwards, feeling the wheel go over the edge. A car beeped. It was right behind me. It beeped again and screeched off.

110 I was shaking. What if I couldn't get on the bus? What if it didn't have disabled access? I crossed the road, but couldn't climb the other kerb. I'd have to stay on the road till I found a driveway. Another car blew its horn and I tried to steer close to the pavement, circling each car.

"Perhaps it was a freak occurrence," the specialist had announced when I last saw him, as if I was some kind of weather. "Not everything," he ruminated, "is known to man or science." I wondered if he'd been talking to my mother. "There is evidence of neurological damage on the lower spinal cord, perhaps sustained after trauma. Have you had some kind of accident?" he asked. "The notes mentioned there was extensive bruising on your lower back..."

115 "No," I said. Nothing. No one.

120 He folded his arms and waited for more. I looked away and wiped something invisible off my skirt.

I'd boxed up the fragments: the wooden stool beside me on the bed, its leg broken and bent; *Radiohead*<sup>7</sup> playing in another room; the flashes of pain through a drunken blur; the murmured sounds of him talking to a housemate on the stairs before he left.

125 On Delaney Road I joined the queue at the bus stop. They were fretting, glancing at watches and squinting at the timetable. My eye line caught belts and girls' bare midriffs. A little girl in a pushchair watched me, curious perhaps, at seeing an adult in a chair like her. Faces turned to look. I focused on my hands and knees, and scratched at the red paint on my chair.

130 The bus drew up. The queue crowded at the door and piled on. Someone lifted up the pushchair. I edged closer and waited. When he saw me, the driver sighed. "Full up, love," he said. "Already got the pushchair."

An old man next to me stepped up. "What do you mean?" There's room," he said. "Can you all move down? Can you make some room!"

I could feel myself blushing. The bus driver wiped his forehead. The bus lowered and creaked till it was just higher than the curb. The old man pushed me on. "There you go love."

135 "Thanks." I didn't look at the driver, just said, "Return to Piccadilly."

"It's free."

"It's okay. I'll pay."

"No love, the machine's broken. Just get on."

140 I turned to find the rows of people staring. It's a kind of stage, I said to myself. I parked in the wheelchair space, catching a woman's bag and ankle. "Sorry," I said. "I'm sorry."

I closed my eyes. They were burning and prickling. Squeezing the bridge of my nose, I gulped and

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<sup>7</sup> a British rock band

tried to focus on my breathing. I couldn't cry. Not on a bus. I needed some of my mother's flower remedies. I could picture her knocking back a whole bottle since they're distilled in brandy. "Herbal fix it," she'd say. "Never mind Jim'll fix it."

145       What I needed was to get back on stage. Perhaps I could be lifted or flown on, like in pantomimes. With pin-on wings. I thought of sketches I could do about today, about the skirt and the hoist; the rainbow pills and tinctures.

150       I opened my eyes and looked back at the crowded bus. I watched a man snoring with his mouth open; a woman in a red headscarf, whose little girl was wriggling out of her grasp; an old woman talking loudly; the newspapers trampled under the feet of passengers that swayed and shifted as the bus jerked and started. I thought at least my wheelchair was red. At least I wasn't wearing that skirt.

(2006)