

# Meet, me.

BEX O’GORMAN

As I lie reading the *Jackie* magazine, I imagine the girl in the picture kissing me. It feels tingly in my pants. I put my fingers down the front of my knickers and rub the moist skin. It feels nice. Really nice.

I begin to get lost in the imagined kiss when something alien touches my hand. I jump and open my eyes. As sit up I feel a sharp pain from between my legs, like the time I jarred my thumb. I stand and lift the skirt that mother insists that I wear, to see what looks like a lump. As I am looking the lump is getting smaller but I can feel it going into me like it’s actually a part of me. I quickly pull down the knickers I have pulled the little ribbon bows off, but see nothing. There is a strange sensation and I can still feel it so I get out a mirror.

Being careful to lock the door in case my mother comes in, I pull the skirt that mother insists that I wear up to my waist. I sit on the floor and put the mirror between my legs. I realise how ridiculous it is that at the age of thirteen, I have never looked at what mother calls my ‘privates’. Biology is not open for discussion at our house and I have never seen my parents – or anybody else for that matter – naked. At school, biology lessons are about plants and animals. Never bodies. I don’t talk about what I have ‘down there’. I don’t really want to talk about my body; it’s embarrassing and I don’t feel the same about mine as Jess does about hers. All I know I have learned from Jess who talks constantly about what’s in her pants and what’s in ‘Tommy the Stud’s’ pants. Jess says she’d have sex with ‘Tommy the Stud’ if he asked her. I hate ‘Tommy the Stud’.

As I look at the peach and brown mass in the mirror, I know that I have no idea what I am looking for because I don't know what a normal vagina actually looks like. Jess never said anything about hers growing something out of it, and I know she'd have said. I always agree with her, like it's happening to me as well but it's only because I fancy her. I need to get to a library. I want to know what it is so when Jess tells me about hers, I'll sound like I already know and she might not see me as her naïve mate. She won't ever think about me like I do about her though.

*Her unconscious naked body lay motionless on the prepared sheet, the instruments delicately placed beside her on the floor.*

'Do you touch yourself, Laura?' Jess has a smile like cling film on leftovers.

'I do it all the time. It gets really wet and I rub it with my finger and it starts to feel really warm. Then I get a fluttery feeling and I can't touch it again for a while after that.'

She is looking at me and waiting for a response.

'Yeah, mine does that too.'

The reality is mine does far more than that, but I know I can't talk to her about it. I'm relieved when she spots her father's car.

'See ya tomorrow, babe,' she says as she hugs me and kisses me on the cheek.

I feel that now familiar tingle and my face feels as though it's on fire. I push her away and start to run.

'You alright, Laura?' she calls after me.

Without looking back, I tell her I'll see her tomorrow.

*I reach for the scalpel and assess the blade. I am rushing. Replacing the blade to its position among the surgical equipment, I stop.*

The books are spread in a semi-circle around me. With my legs apart, I am attempting to compare the labelled diagrams with what I am furiously manoeuvring before the mirror. Had my body been created on a Spirograph, I might see more of a resemblance to the sketches in the textbooks. The labels seem clear though and I have all of the bits listed. What it is not telling me is what is beyond

‘Opening of Vagina’. There’s something called the ‘Hymen’ but it doesn’t look like the disappearing lump that I saw and it says nothing about it growing and shrinking. I decide to explore further.

There’s something just inside the opening. Is that the hymen? On further reading, I realise it is not. I need the lump to come out again so I can see it, so I think about how it happened the first time.

I close my eyes and lie on my back in front of the mirror. Instead of thinking about the girl in the magazine, I think about Jess. She doesn’t kiss me on the cheek this time but holds my face and kisses me fully on my mouth. She tells me that she fancies me too and kisses my neck. The tingling feeling starts and as I touch myself, I imagine Jess’s hands touching my chest, but it’s a flat chest – like a boy’s. I begin to feel the lump stirring but do not want to open my eyes and spoil the fantasy that it is Jess touching me so I carry on. Just as she described, it starts to feel warm. Now that I know about the lump, I am aware that it is growing. I move my fingers and stroke what feels like a tube coming out of the ‘Opening of Vagina’ described in the book. I am surprised when this too feels good. I lift my head and open my eyes to see what looks like a well-used, flesh-coloured crayon, straight and moving when my fingers touch it. I stop and shuffle closer to the mirror. The crayon begins to retreat.

*I look to my unsteady hands and clasp them together making the latex squeak. I take a long breath in through my nose.*

As my mother sprays the starch onto my father’s shirt collars, I am nervous as I say the words I have practised.

‘I need to go to the doctors, Mum.’

‘Why?’

‘I think there’s something wrong with me, down there.’

She holds the spray in position but doesn’t expel the aerosol. Her face drains of colour but she doesn’t look at me.

‘Down where, Laura?’

‘In my knickers. Something has been happening.’

She begins spraying the starch furiously and over working the shirts in a way that she has warned me against during what she calls ‘life lessons’.

‘We’ll go and make it stop. I told them that you didn’t need to keep it but they wouldn’t take it away. I knew I was right. A mother always knows best.’

I am not sure at first what she is talking about but it begins to dawn on me that she knows exactly what’s wrong with me.

‘Take what away, mum? What do you mean?’

She picks up the bundle of hanging shirts and leaves the room, closing the door behind her. This is my mother’s code for ‘do not follow me’. What hasn’t she told me about, well, me?

*The deep breath feels like water rushing to my lungs. I realise that I am only waiting for the inevitable drowning and I am irked at my own time wasting.*

Since that day, there have been no further discussions about it. We have spent the last couple of years resetting the understanding that this is my elephant and no matter how much it fills the room, we live edging around it and not giving it a name.

I retrieve the clothes that I bought with my sixteenth birthday money from behind the wardrobe. The underpants feel different to my usual knickers. I slide the jeans up my legs and fasten the buttons at the opposite side to the skirts I have always worn. The shirt feels stiff and the arms are too long. Nothing fits properly because I couldn’t try anything on before getting it home. Even here I have to be careful.

Mother took the lock from my bedroom door not long after my fifteenth birthday when I asked her to call me Jude. I understood more about my condition by then. I had asked the doctor how common hermaphroditism was and was told:

‘Figures are obscure.’

The word stuck with me, hence my chosen name.

Mother freaked. Now, at sixteen, I should be allowed some privacy, but she insists that these ‘ridiculous notions’ cannot be allowed to develop.

*She will start to regain consciousness in the next four minutes and, confident in my own ability during the dry runs, I know I haven’t factored in a moving body.*

I take the scissors and hack at my hair until there is barely anything left. I head to the bathroom and lather up what is left with my father's shaving foam.

As I am shaving the last remnants of Laura away, I hear my mother calling for the daughter that she desperately wants me to be. Nervous because she is climbing the stairs, I rush to finish and nick the skin on my head.

She opens the bathroom door and I drop the razor. Her mouth twists as she takes on-board the sight before her. The momentous meeting of Jude and my mother. Her voice cracks.

'I don't deserve this Laura. Why are you hurting me like this? I have only ever given you love. I have given you everything that a girl could possibly want or need.'

I tell her that I am not a girl; I am Jude. She walks toward me and slaps my face. It is my reminder that my existence is not about me, but her. I am not her child, I'm her possession and my purpose is to ensure all I do is about her being my mother rather than me being a person in my own right.

'Get those clothes off and cover your head, Laura.' She leaves the room. I have to get away from here. From her.

*Whilst her heart rate is down, the blood flow will remain manageable.*

I got my first taste of freedom from mother whilst in student digs, and since I had spent this precious time eliminating Laura, and there being no question of Jude returning home after graduation, I found a flat near the Uni. The flat is Jude's domain. Despite having lived here for the best part of fifteen years, mother has never been. When she wants to see Laura, she phones, always careful to open the conversation with '*It's mum*' so that Laura knows to speak. Then she has to put on those clothes and the 'real hair', go and be ushered into their house to be told how pretty she is and asked about any men in her life. Only once Laura mentioned me.

At the flat, I am checking the views on my profile and seeing if there are any messages.

*Hi. My name is Ruth. I am 36, divorced and have two great kids. Blah blah blah.*

Delete.

*I'm Karen. I love partying and having a great time. Blah blah blah.*

Delete.

*Hello Jude. My name is Jenny. I have looked at your profile a few times and have plucked up the courage to contact you. If you fancy a drink sometime, send me a reply. Everything you might want to know about me is on my profile. J x*

I go to her profile so I can see her picture more clearly and find out a bit about her. As I click it open, a larger, clearer picture surprises me. She is pretty. There is something familiar about her. I read the page.

*Name: Jenny Aster.*

*Age: 33.*

*Occupation: Veterinary assistant.*

I continue to read through the profile and decide to email her, leaving her my number.

*I glance towards the ketamine bottle and decide to refill the syringe.*

I strap my breasts down for the date. They have remained in a pubescent state so this isn't a massive job. I select a shirt and trousers, then add my waistcoat. Aftershave on, hair parted, shoes on, wallet and keys in my pocket, I head to the restaurant.

When I walk in, she is already there. She stands to greet me as I approach the table. As she smiles, I realise why she looks familiar; her eyes and smile remind me of my mother. I am instantly revolted but do not show it, masking it as I have on many occasions with the woman herself. When I awkwardly kiss her cheek, I notice that her perfume is not the same as mother's and decide that I won't make my excuses just yet.

Conversation is flowing and I find myself laughing easily and enjoying Jenny's company. We discuss work and I talk about accountancy. I mention my early aspirations of becoming a mechanic and my mother's refusal to hear of it. She picks up one of my soft hands. Inspecting it and smiling, she tells me that she's glad because she doesn't like rough hands. My stomach churns.

'I think you and mother would get along famously.'

*After doing so, I pull her breast across her chest and check the tautness of the*

*skin. I pick up the marker and begin to draw the dashed lines that my blade will soon follow.*

Things are going well with Jenny. There have been times during the couple of dates when I have felt genuinely at ease with her. I feel bad for keeping my condition from her. She is really open about herself. I know where she lives, works, who her friends are, how often they see one another. I know about her happy, normal childhood and where she grew up. I know that her boss leaves an array of animal medication in his unlocked car in case he is called out of hours. She knows nothing about the real me.

*As I finish the last line, I know that my last chance to allow her to remain a complete woman has passed and I find the scalpel between my fingers again.*

During our fourth date, Jenny asks if I would like to go back to her house after the performance. I have been expecting the question since the second date due to the hints she has been dropping. I have managed to avoid it so far with clichés such as ‘I don’t want to rush things,’ but it seems my platitude well has run dry. She looks at me as though I am the wine she has looked forward to all week, then turns her head back towards the stage, revealing her profile and I almost double-take. Her make-up is different. She is wearing colours which compliment her outfit. The eye shadow is almost exactly the shade mother wears. When I do not give her an answer, she looks back to me and the hue of her eyelid makes me feel queasy. Panic registers on her face and I know that I must either walk away or commit to the next move.

*The polished blade glints in the stark bathroom lighting.*

I am putting my things in the overnight bag, checking each item against the list. The plan is to meet at Jenny’s house and have lunch before we head to the hotel and spend our first night together.

I have driven past her house so know the area quite well. We have decided to take her car so I phone a taxi which drops me in the next street. She is preparing lunch so I enter through the open

back door into the kitchen. She smiles *that* smile as I walk in and offers me a drink. She asks if I want to put my bag straight into the car but it has my phone in it and I tell her I want to let mother know when we are about to leave.

I ask to use the bathroom and she explains where it is.

'I'll put my bag by the front door on the way.'

As I reach the door, I think about walking straight out of it. Jenny calls something from the kitchen but it's muffled by the pan sizzling so I don't hear. I walk upstairs with my bag.

*I look at her face and see it; the face that made me do this. The shape of her nose. The same colour eye shadow. Even unconscious the resemblance to my mother is uncanny.*

I close the bathroom door behind me with my elbow, put on the latex gloves that are in my trouser pocket, and open the bag to reveal the plastic sheet. I lay it out in the cramped space. Kneeling on it I find a suitable place within arm's reach to lay the contents of the wash bag. From it, I take a sealed bag containing a syringe barrel and a packet with a single needle. After placing them together I take out the small bottle of clear liquid and fill the syringe with its contents. After checking for air bubbles, I place it on the edge of the bath.

I glance at my watch and lean to flush the unused toilet. I turn on the hot tap and take the overall from my bag. Once I have it on, I pick up the syringe, turn off the tap and wait.

*I feel a familiar tingle within me but I am not aroused. I don't want to fuck her. I want to rob her of the body that she thinks should be hers, like she did to me.*

She calls my name as she climbs the stairs. The right name this time. 'Jude. Lunch is ready. Are you OK in there?' I purposefully do not answer. She says my name again as she reaches the top of the stairs. I stand behind the door and hold my breath. She knocks gently. 'Jude, are you OK?'

My knuckles are white around the barrel of the syringe and the swishing of blood in my ears begins to make me feel dizzy. I



can't hold it any longer and an explosion of breath escapes from my mouth.

The door handle begins to turn.

I've changed my mind. I am about to push the door to prevent her from entering, tell her I'm fine and head out of the front door as soon as I can when Jenny throws open the door. She sees the sheet, the instruments, and then me. She begins to scream. I know that a neighbour is home as I saw the car as I came in the back door and I panic.

As she turns to run from the bathroom, I leap forward and grab her. She is struggling and we stumble. Her screams are becoming louder and I panic. Feeling the syringe in my hand, I fall onto her and inject the ketamine where my hand lands, on her thigh.

I know that the ketamine will take four to five minutes to kick in and I need to keep her quiet until then. The injection has understandably alarmed her and the screaming continues. I quietly but firmly say her name and tell her that if she continues to scream, I will be forced to slit her throat. The threat doesn't quieten her racket. The scalpel is within my reach and while still on top of her, I grab it and pull it towards us. Getting a proper grip of it, I slide it to her throat. Breathy sobbing replaces the screams and when I am satisfied that she has stopped the screaming, I let her sit up against the bath. She looks at me, her eyes darting between me and the instruments laid out on the floor.

'What is this? What did you just inject me with?'

'I wanted to tell you the truth about me. I gave you a mild dose of tranquiliser because I was frightened that you would walk away without letting me explain everything.'

'What the fuck is everything?'

I unzip the overall and unbutton my shirt revealing my strapped torso.

Crying and visibly afraid, she stares at me as I begin to unstrap my chest. There is an audible intake of breath as my immature breasts are revealed. I unfasten my belt and unbutton the jeans, allowing them to drop.

'Before I show you, I need to explain.'

'What are you going to do to me?'

Her impatience irritates me. This is not about her. I am trying to

explain and offer her a way out of this but she isn't listening. I was right to think that she is like mother.

'Please, Jenny, just listen to me. I have a condition.'

Her eyes widen.

'What condition makes you inject a woman who was falling for you with a tranquiliser, dress up like a freak and, what? What's the sheet for? Are you going to rape me? Oh God! You have breasts! Are you even a man?'

'Shut up and listen! Of course I'm a man! I have a penis!'

Her eyes drop to my underpants. She looks puzzled and rubs her eyes. At first I think she is mocking me but I soon realise that the ketamine is starting to take effect. Her speech is starting to slur. 'What is this *condition*?'

'I am a hermaphrodite. I have both male and female organs.'

I start to tell her about how my mother – the woman she represents so well, chose to bring me up as a girl. As I speak, she is fighting the effects of the tranquiliser, desperately trying to stay awake. I have only ever tried to be this honest with my mother but she always shut me down. I look to Jenny for reassurance, but the look of disgust as she succumbs to the tranquiliser tells me all I need to know. I put my clothes back on and zip up the overall, then pull Jenny onto the sheet and begin to undress her.

*Goodnight, god bless, mother. Don't let the bed bugs bite.*