

Saturday Night

'This kinny go oan, Donnie. Look, a hunnar an' fifty-three quid this week fur diesel, no' countan' the wayar an' tayar aan' they high mileages at trade-in.'

Siobhan was well down on her second pint of Vodka-Coke and getting argumentative, as she often did on a Saturday night when had she decided to stay at home.

'I could try cycling it again, or get a moped, or get a motorbike or get a...'

'No! How minny times dae Ah huv tae tell ya? 'Member Alan Stewart? Deed! Kenny Brownlie, the paraplegic. Nae cycling, nae mopeds, nae motaarbikes, right?'

'But Siobhan...'

'Nae 'buats' Donnie! Naw, we'll huv tae think o' somethaan.'

'There's a website for a new Car Share Club, maybe I could try that? Melanie at the Centre said her brother gets a lift from a nice lady for a week, then he gives her a lift for a week, then she gives him a lift for a week, then he ...'

'Yeah, yeah, Ah get it! Nah shut it an' git oan wi' yar chores. An don't ya go near that f***ing laaptoap, goataat!'

'Or maybe we could move nearer to Inverness, or nearer to a bus route, or maybe to Muir of Ord where there are trains or maybe even...'

'SHUT AAP! Far f***'s sake Donnie, try tae control yarsel'. Noo git oan with yaar chores or ya know whit Ah'll be forced intae daein'.

'Sorry, Siobhan, sorry. I really mean it, I'm really, really sorry. Honest, I'm really, really sorry. I'm really, really sorry...'

'Ah f***** telt ya! Didn't Ah? That's it, git them aff, right noo.'

'Oh no, Siobhan, please. Honest, I'm really, really sorry....'

But it was too late. The birch switch that had been his mother's lashed at his bare buttocks twenty, thirty times. He knew to bend over, grab at his ankles and suffer, to take it without trying to evade her vicious blows. If he tried to escape that made Siobhan worse, then it would go on for longer.

ooOoo

Donnie was locked in his room. He could get out, easily, if he had somewhere he could go. But where would he go? He had his car now, she had bought it with his grant, but where would he go without money? Who else would want him, care for him, the way he was? Only Siobhan wanted him. She looked after everything, saw to all the bills, gave him his pocket money, wrote all the emails, and signed all the forms. If he ran away, Trevor might find him, and kill him for what he had done. He

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could try changing his name again, but he could not read or write, not properly, because of his condition. Except on the special computer, at the Centre, but that was his secret. If Siobhan found out about that, she might kill him.

ooOoo

The final strains of the EastEnders episode that she had recorded, saved up, blared down the hall. The TV was switched off and she played the mad K-Pop music she liked, loud and discordant. He closed his eyes and covered his ears, hoping she would pass out.

Soibhan staggered along the hallway and thudde into the bathroom. Now she was only inches away, through the thin wall from his bedroom. She was singing, or trying to sing. Tonight it sounded as if she was crying, something she often did when she was very drunk. He heard her flush the loo then run a bath. He knew what to expect. It was what she always wanted on a Saturday night, when she decided to stay at home.

Flight

It had started when Siobhan was sixteen and Donnie was seven.

At that time Siobhan had been called Daisy and Donnie had been Robert, or Robbie. That night Daisy had been responsible for Robbie. But Daisy had left Robbie at home alone, so that she could meet her latest boyfriend, secure in the knowledge that their Mum, Eva, would almost certainly stay overnight with her latest bit of totty, as she had boasted she would.

Eva's husband, Trevor, an ex-SAS soldier, was a man with a vicious and brutal streak in him. Trevor had a long history of wife and child abuse which the local police did nothing about, because of his reputation as a military hero.

Trevor was a man's man, very popular around the local pubs, ever willing to recount his exploits old and new to willing ears, in return for a freebie pint. In this way he would carry his listeners off into his clandestine world of high drama, telling and re-telling of his exploits, real or invented. Eventually, drunk beyond speech, Trevor would lapse into a sullen silence, and head for home, to mete out his 'punishments'. For weeks to come the lads in the pub would retail Trevor's tales of derring-do to their workmates.

At the time of the Eva's death, Trevor had long since drifted away from his family, disgusted by the obese teenage Daisy, a slut who was already following her mother's life trajectory. Trevor had never taken any fatherly interest in the troubled boy, Robbie, a boy he was unsure had issued from his loins.

On the fateful evening, when Eva's totty had proved uncooperative, she had returned to home base to medicate herself with a bottle of supermarket home brand gin and a few poppers, before taking out her disappointment of Robbie with the birch cane. The child had defended himself by throwing a hot poker at her before running upstairs to his bedroom to hide under his bed.

As the full effect of the drugs kicked in, Eva had lost interest in Robbie, and collapsed in front of the open fire. The poker had landed on the sofa. The smouldering fumes filled the room with Carbon Monoxide, Carbon Dioxide and Isocyanic Acid gas fumes, a combination which both poisoned and suffocated her.

Siobhan had returned before the fire took hold. In fact it was when she opened the front door, which opened directly onto the living area, the fresh charge of oxygen caused a minor explosion followed by a full scale fire. Within an

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hour the small terrace house had burned out to dark shell, steaming in the floodlights as the many hoses played on the last of the flames.

Robbie had been saved by a fireman who broke in through his upstairs bedroom window to find the child huddled under his bed, a chair jammed under the door handle to block out the inferno below.

The Coroner returned a verdict of misadventure.

Before Trevor might return, Daisy had taken Robbie.

They fled from Gloucester, moving first to Glasgow where they remained for four years, moving from bedsit to bedsit. The boy was not 'seen' by the system. he did not go to school and he did not get assessed, did not get the treatment he needed. Siobhan worked on a casual basis, in corner shops and filling stations, usually for Asian businessmen, providing them with handjobs in the backshop at the end of the evening to earn a few extra pounds. She got caught dipping the till and she was blacklisted. It was then that she changed their names by Deed Poll to Siobhan and Donald Munro, and moved them to Edinburgh where they clung on precariously for a further five years, living as they had done in Glasgow, under the radar.

Two years after arriving in Edinburgh, Siobhan, the young woman suffered a miscarriage. The foetus was analysed, a routine requirement. The findings revealed: "damaged, fetal alcohol/drugs". Had the authorities analysed the genetic make-up of the foetus, they may have detected incest.

After her second miscarriage Daisy, now Siobhan, had arranged for Robbie, now Donnie, to be snipped, saving up for weeks to pay privately. She was now working as a masseuse in the "Leith Sauna and Sun Club". The young Serbian man to whom she had been 'referred' by the woman she worked for, was a back street abortionist who had recently been struck off for serial misdemeanors during his brief career as a gynecologist.

Eventually Siobhan gave up the struggle of trying to maintain a low profile by caring for Donnie alone. With the help of the kind lady Ellen at the Leith Citizens' Advice Bureau, she had arranged for Donnie to be 'assessed'. Then, with Ellen to help her, Siobhan had fought her way through the layers of paperwork to establish herself as Donnie's Registered Carer and Grant Holder.

With the extra income this provided, her gluttonous eating and excessive drinking increased, while her alopecia got worse. As she became even heavier, she lost her self-respect and with it her grasp on reality, and her bizarre behavior accelerated, fuelled by drink and drugs.

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Still in Edinburgh, Siobhan's current place of business was the "Pilton Purple Spa and Sauna". In the early hours of a Saturday morning, high on drugs, Siobhan started a fight with the woman who called herself Zenda Firtz, the nominal owner. In the melee, Siobhan stabbed Zenda with a pair of scissors, six times in her arm and once very close to carotid artery in her neck. The result was a great deal of blood and an even greater amount of very loud screaming.

Zenda, patched up by that same medic who had dealt with Robbie, was naturally reluctant to call the Police, but threatened Siobhan with a "visit" from her Romanian enforcer.

Siobhan and Donnie fled again, still heading north, casting up initially in Inverness, then moving to a down at heel residential caravan on a farm near Invergordon, and then finally, to the run-down cottage high above Beaully, where she had made a life of sorts for them during the ensuing decade.

Je t'aime

Donnie had the light out, and was hiding under his duvet, pretending to be asleep. It never worked, but he always tried. She unlocked his door.

'Robbie, baby, I'm sorry, but you made me. Come on baby, bath times and beddy-byes.'

She was back to using her nice voice, her Daisy voice, the one that sounded like his Mum, when his Mum had been sober. Now he must be Robbie, again.

Daisy was naked. Revolting; even without her clown face make-up. He tried not to look down there, tried not to stare at her fluorescent pink "toosh-toosh", as she called it, that she was so proud of. He closed his eyes against her.

Daisy helped him out of his blood-stained pajamas, without making any complaint. He stood in the bath under the shower while she sponged him down. The room was lit by three large scented candles, apple and lemon, her favourite. She dried him, gently patting the blood away from the lesions. When she applied the stingy stuff, he tried not to cry, but he always did. She fingered the pink ointment onto his buttocks, and rubbed it in gently.

Siobhan had good hands, everyone told her that. In Invergordon she worked at "Tanya's's Health and Beauty Spa", doing nails, eyebrows, false lashes, leg waxing. She also did personal massage, in the room at the back. For years Donnie had endured her repeated fantasies about the handsome men, the real men, not like him, the men that always wanted to 'do it' with her. Nowadays these men were rig workers, loaded with money. One day soon she would accept an offer and he would have to fend for himself.

Now fully Daisy, she led Robbie to her bed, pushed him gently in the chest. He knew what to do and lowered himself gingerly onto the bed, sitting until she was ready. She clicked off the bedside light, and took off her wig in the near dark.

The usual music was playing, on her CD palyer, on repeat: "*Je t'aime*" - the Jane Birkin version. There could be no escape now.

He swiveled round and lay back, putting his hands behind his head, as he had been tutored. It was part of the process. Daisy knelt on the floor beside the bed and worked at him with her hands bringing him to fullness.

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This is what excited her, her power over him, he could tell from her breathing.

When he was ready, she mounted him, all seventeen stones of her.

He moved his hands up to cradle and caress her enormous breasts, to tease her nipples, as she had taught him to do.

Years ago, when he had been fourteen, he had tried to resist but she had almost strangled him.

What was happening was a process, a routine, he understood that. Donnie was good at processes, good at routines. And this routine always worked.

He closed his eyes and thought of Terry at the Centre. Now Siobhan seemed beautiful and as she bounced down on him he began thrusting back.

It worked for both of them. It was lovely.

Then she spoiled it, as she always did, by slobbering into his mouth with her scummy cigarette-stained tongue. After a few minutes she collapsed onto the bed, always taking the outside, trapping him against the wall.

She grabbed his hair, roughly, and thrust his head into her breasts.

'Come to Mummy, baby. Come to Mummy.'

He began to suck and nibble.

Later he would have to do the other horrible, horrible thing.

Sunday Morning

In accordance with their fixed routine, at six o'clock he crept carefully over her bulk and made his way out of her bedroom, closing the door quietly. He shaved, showered, took his medication then dressed for the day ahead.

At 06.28 he sat at the kitchen table, in silence, waiting.

When the seven o'clock alarm on the oven pinged, he began the next phase.

He made her a full Scottish breakfast, three portions of everything, a one litre cafetiere of double-strength coffee with six slices of white bread toasted. He put butter and jam dishes to the side and her bottles of sauce - brown for the bacon, and red for the egg and beans.

At seven-thirty precisely, he carried her tray to her bedside.

While she ate and smoked he drove the round trip of thirty miles to Beaulieu for the three Sunday papers she liked.

He delivered her papers and removed the tray. The room was a fug of smoke and K-Pop.

At eleven o'clock he ran her bath and pulled the cord to start the fan heater. She bathed alone for almost fifty minutes, slightly longer than normal, and then he was called into the bathroom.

The process of the previous evening repeated itself, but now it was so much worse. It was happening in daylight. He could see everything. If he tried to close his eyes against her now she would punch him. Once she had broken his nose and he had to go to hospital and tell the lie that a mugger had attacked him.

He had his lines to say during these Sunday morning sessions.

"Oh Mummy, you are so, so beautiful. Thank you, Mummy, thank you for looking after baby Robbie. Oh Mummy, you are so, so ..."

Her hands worked on him, making him big and again he became her Robbie. Daisy crooned her familiar lament, mimicking his Mum, who had been well spoken, as he was. Siobhan was a great mimic. He did not ask but thought when spoke roughly, "like a local", it was so that she could fit in with them, at Tanya's, so that

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the Police would never find them, after what had happened.

"Robbie, baby, Daisy is your Mummy now. I'll always look after you. You must be nice to Mummy, you know that, don't you? That's a good baby, yes, yes, that's it. No! Look at Mummy! Open your eyes or... Yes, look at how nice Mummy is today. Tell me, my baby. Tell me, baby, tell Daisy. Tell me I'm nice."

"Oh Mummy, you are so, so beautiful. Thank you, Mummy, thank you for looking after baby Robbie. Oh Mummy, you are so, so"

Over and Over

At half-past one on Sunday afternoon Siobhan drove off in her car, an aging 1.7 Astra diesel, heading for Inverness, the only time of the week she had to herself, she whined.

Donnie was free to do as he wished, provided he made Lasagna and garlic bread for her return, and that everything was ready for seven-thirty, precisely.

Often she came in later, drunk and/or drugged, sometimes amorous but more likely to be abusive, as a result of another disappointment trying to find a man who fancied her.

At nine o'clock Robbie locked himself down, barricaded himself inside his bedroom ready to turn his headphones to full and try to shut out her rantings and ravings.

One time, two years ago, when he had locked her out like this, she had thrown bricks at him from outside, through his window. He had hidden in his wardrobe. It had taken weeks to get the window repaired because the Owner wanted paid in advance. Then the man had put up their rent by nearly eighty pounds a month and she punished him repeatedly, and stopped his pocket money for ages, saying it was his fault.

Siobhan returned just before midnight. After an hour of K-Pop and burning toast on the grill, she fell into bed, fully clothed.

Once sure that she was asleep, he emerged from hiding, tidied up her mess and cleaned the house as best he could without making noise that would rouse her. Finally he set her tray for breakfast then crept past her open bedroom door to his own bedroom.

Release

At six o'clock on Monday morning Donnie rose to shower, shave and dress for the day ahead, rerunning his fixed routine. At seven o'clock the oven buzzer would signal his breakfast duties.

This is what he must do every weekday morning, including Saturday morning. Siobhan always worked on a Saturday, her busiest day in the back shop, mostly the granddads, she said. Only Sunday could be different.

At seven-thirty he served her in bed and asked permission to leave for the Centre. The Centre was open seven days a week, from nine each the morning to six each evening. If things got really bad he would always be safe there. At a push, he could sleep in his car, as he had done several times over the last few years as Siobhan's behavior had become more random.

Monday was a quite evening. Siobhan had taken three of her pills, her downers.

On Tuesday morning Donnie rose at six, shaved and showered quietly, emptied her ashtrays, cleaned away the crisp and peanut packets, switched off the buzzing TV monitor. He ejected the DVD: "Porn Star Sextravaganza", returned it to its case, then slotted it into its exact place, shoved them all along, and adjusted the bookend.

He served her breakfast on the dot of seven-thirty.

As he turned to go, she called him back.

'Donnie, go oan an ask thum a' the Centar if there is somebiddy in oor bit that is in that Car Share Club, will ya? But 'member, don't tell them anything about us, just git a name and address farst, an' Ah'll check them oot, OK? Right, Donnie, tell me whit ye've tae dae?'

'I've to ask them at the Centre if there is a nice lady who could do a car share with me, to take me to the Centre one week and then I would take her to the Centre the next week, and then she would take me...'

'STOAP! An whit huv ye tae say, about us?'

'I must not tell them anything about us.'

'And?'

'My name is Donnie Munro, and I live near Beaully, but on a farm, with my sister Siobhan. Siobhan looks after me. Please write everything down for Siobhan.'

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Siobhan will read it all to me. My name is Donnie Munro, and ...'

'Yeah, yeah, that's it. Good, noo scoot. Ah might be late back, Ah'm daein a hame visit jist efter work. Some auld guy wi' a gammy leg, phoned in an Ah took the call, cuz Tanya waas oot fur a smoke. Might be nuthin' but ye never can tell, it might be an earner. It's Tuesday, Donnie, so whit's for tea?'

'Today is Tuesday. You will leave out a steak pie for us, from the freezer. I have to do potatoes, carrots, peas, broccoli and sticky toffee pudding for afters. I have to be ready for you to eat at seven-thirty. I will make a pot of lentil soup when I get back from the Centre. It is Tuesday. You will leave out a stea...'

'Yeah, yeah, STOAP! Ye bettar git goin', ur ya'll be late.'

The Centre

Terry Devine was in her early forties, with two teenage children and a husband she adored. Terry was Donnie's 'Nominated Person' at the Centre and had a good way with him. Around her he seemed almost normal, most of the time. She had trained him to help her and her colleagues with some of their other Clients who were more erratic in their behavior. Terry had made Donnie into an 'asset', more independent than most of the others who shared his Autistic Spectrum Disability. Terry was very proud of Donnie Munro. Jokingly she called him her 'Assistant Manager'. Sadly, she knew nothing of his sufferings at the hands of his sister, or his mother before her. Donnie had kept all of that to himself.

'So, Donnie Munro, you want to car share. Now, before we can do that we need to enter all your details in their form, then we'll send it to their database. Will I help you?'

'No, Terry. If I can use the special terminal I can do it for myself.'

'OK, you make a start. I'll check up on you after I get Alan going on his woodworking project.'

A few minutes later Terry was diverted by a call to help with a Client called Melanie. Melanie was having a meltdown morning and had threatened to kill herself, again.

Terry was relaxed about Donnie on the special terminal, because nothing could actually escape from the Centre without a staff key-code. Or so she thought.

It was only much later, at home, that she remembered she had forgotten to check up on Donnie.

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Five hundred metres from the Centre, in the new Inverness Job Centre, Linda Aitchison checked her personal emails, an activity frowned upon by higher management and which she tried to discourage in her colleagues. There was an email contact, a Car Share Club possibility.

"Donnie Munro twenty-nine Assistant Manager The Allangrange Centre pick-up/drop-off from the town square in Beauly Mondays to Fridays 8.00 am. Pick-up/drop-off Inverness Flexible."

There was no telephone number but it seemed otherwise ideal. She pinged back a message.

"Right Donnie, will we start tomorrow morning? 8.00 am at the Town Square Beauly? See if we suit each other. What is your car? I have a white Fiat Panda 4*4. Linda Aitchison xxx."

As soon as it had flown Linda regretted the "xxx's". It was almost her trademark ending, almost a sub-conscious plea for romance, her hypnotherapist had advised. This after repeated sessions during which he had raked around in her memories.

She glanced around to make sure she was not being watched then logged off and headed for the Ladies. These were the new type with combined WC and Basin and a large vanity mirror.

The Look of Love

The nearest to a real romantic encounter Linda Aitcheson had ever experienced had been when she worked in Perth.

The stunning thirty-something super-fit Tracy from the Gym had pursued her. Flowers, texts, gifts, meals, bottles of wine shared in the new upmarket and intimate wine bar. Almost in surprise at being really wanted at long last, Linda had submitted, entering the world of woman on woman.

That first night, their first real date, Linda had gone to the wine bar fully ready, excited, tarted up like a teenager. In the near darkness, having reached the bottom of their bottle of chardonnay, Tracy slid around the table so that both girls were now side by side in their booth, in the darkest, quietest corner of the room, as if alone.

Seconds later Linda felt Tracy's hand on her thigh, caressing softly. Linda closed her eyes. The blood flushed up through her nipples, up through her neck and into her face.

That was the last moment she might have said no, no thank you, but no.

What she actually did was open her eyes to check that no one was watching, closed them again and smiled.

Tracy's hand moved slowly upwards as she cooed in Linda's ear. Tracy's hand caressed then tugged at Linda's too short, too tight skirt. Linda raised her bottom slightly to allow her skirt to ride up. Tracy's hand pushed aside Linda's newly purchased crimson thong. Tracy's hand teased at the entry to Linda's still closed door.

Tracy's voice whimpered, "Please, let me in, sweetie. Please let me in. It's so lonely out here."

Tracy's other hand slid up inside Linda's too tight blouse but found a way inside Linda's bra and tugged at her nipples, first one, then the other, back and forth, back and forth.

Tracy's spicy aftershave filled Linda's nostrils and Tracy's hot breathe lapped at Linda's ear as the girl again pleaded to be allowed entry to Linda's inner

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sanctum.

Tracy's tongue probed at Linda's ear, her teeth nibbled at Linda's lobe, sucking and tugging at her earring. Tracy's quiet voice whispered girly, naughty, naughty, enticing words. It was then that Dylan was mentioned for the first time.

The whispers described Dylan in vivid detail. Dylan was Tracy's giant black dildo and he slept to hand under the pillow back at Tracy's flat. Dylan was lonely too, Tracy confided.

"Please, oh please let me in, sweetie. Please, please let me in."

Linda spread her legs.

Tracy's fingers at once found Linda's slippy, throbbing mound, and pressed and rubbed with increasing tempo.

The rush of ecstasy spun Linda's mind away to sweet thoughts of a happy future: perhaps with dogs instead of children.

From the wine bar they had dashed to Tracy's place, all stark blacks and slivers, everything metallic and glitzy, with mirrors on the walls and ceiling, and the steady thump of reggae music from the music centre.

First they had danced around the pole, coming together to kiss, Tracy's tongue probing uncomfortably deeply into Linda's throat. While kissing they also stripped each other piece by piece until they were naked except for their thongs.

Then came the fluffy handcuffs, the soft straps around Linda's ankles.

First Tracy's probing tongue.

Then Dylan came to visit, big black Dylan, who vibrated at various speeds.

Linda learned quickly that only Tracy could hold Dylan, even when it was her turn to be pleased. Linda must only watch and caress Tracy's nipples.

Weird, but still ecstasy.

Night after night after night the dopamines flushed through Linda's body.

As they lay side by side in the afterglow, waiting for their bodies to make ready for their next excursion into paradise, Linda had whispered her innermost hopes for their future life together.

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That had been the fly in the ointment, Linda had realised much later. Tracy could never have become a homebird. Tracy's was the world of the chase, the pursuit through the dim caverns of wine bars and cocktail lounges, flushing out the prey, the excitement of hunt, the conquest, the control.

After a only few weeks, Tracy, a serial pursuer, moved on, abruptly, leaving Linda confused and hurt. Tracy was after younger, firmer flesh, she had announced, brutally, and by text.

Therapy

After wallowing in self-pity and white wine for almost three years, Linda had ballooned to a size 16. One day she read an article on how to find your way back to your old self.

She searched Yellow Pages, but not for someone in Perth. In nearby Dundee she visited Henry T. McCann, a Registered Hypnotherapist, a man in his early seventies, a man who reminded her of her long dead grandfather.

Over six weeks, three times a week, at £75 per forty minute session, Linda re-found herself. At their final session Henry T. McCann had handed Linda a little personalised message to carry around with in her handbag.

"Linda, you have to always be realistic. You are not stunningly beautiful. Few women are. But if you get yourself back to the person you showed me in those old photographs, the ones taken with your friend Tracy, you will be again presentable. Very presentable. Do that first. Get back to your old you. Then be brave and keep lifting stones, keep looking for your Frog-Prince. Persistence pays. That is how it works."

Linda re-joined a different Gym, and fought off the pounds, getting back down to her trim old self, back into her size 12 wardrobe. Even though her body was back to its old shape, her her mind had still been raw, fragile. At every turn she feared she would meet Tracy or see her with her latest victim.

When Linda saw the opening on the Staff notice board, "Deputy Manager, Inverness", she had applied immediately, one of only two candidates. Being well experienced Linda had been welcomed warmly by the newly promoted Manager, Ingrid. This twenty-eight year old, newly graduated with a Degree in English Literature from the Open University, was bright but without life experience. Her only previous employment had been as an Administrative Assistant in a failing care home in Arbroath. Ingrid at once fixed on Linda as a mother figure.

Even now, after nearly nine months, Ingrid was still struggling and, *de facto*, Linda was running the Job Centre, commanding respect from both Ingrid and the other members of staff. It had been a good move for Linda. She soon decided to sell up in Perth and make her move permanent.

It took her a few months in digs before she found the derelict cottage in the

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hills. The almost derelict three-bedroomed cottage was old and full of character, she had insisted to herself. Sitting high above Beauly, looking over the Firth towards Inverness, it had once been small farmhouse, with several sheds and a crumbling barn.

Inspired by various TV shows, Linda had thrown herself into a refurbishment project. With every new tradesman there had been an initial surge of hope, followed by a bit of too obvious hinting on her part, followed by sniggers and not too *sotto voce* jokes, made not quite behind her back, making her tearful.

Bringing the cottage back to life had had a parallel cathartic effect on Linda's mind. By the time it was finished, she had been ready to start again, ready once more to look for true romance.

Her only three sexual encounters had been with unlikely men that she had bent the rules for at the Job Centre. These Wine Bar or Pub Quiz evenings had been followed by frantic fumbblings in the back of her small car, in dark windswept car parks.

These were not the enduring romantic relationships that Henry T. McCann had explained she was programmed to seek out. But reading his message reassured her. She must keep hoping. And looking. That is how it worked.

A Prince at Last

Standing locked in the WC cubicle, staring at the mirror, Linda's latest fantasy took hold as it always did. No thought that this man might already be taken crossed her mind. Suddenly she felt all gooey.

"Donnie Munro 29 Assistant Manager."

She was hyper-ventilating, something she was prone to since Tracy. Although this emotional upwelling had not occurred for many months, she knew this syndrome well: it was an old 'friend'. She was tumbling forward into her old pattern of romance and love and family and happily ever after.

Staring in the mirror, her breathing gradually returned to normal.

Back at her desk she too another illicit look at his email.

"Donnie Munro, twenty-nine, Assistant Manager."

She smiled back at herself as she touched up her make-up again. No, not too bad, Linda. At least you are not fat and ugly, just not beautiful. Five-foot-eight, ten stone three pounds, good skin, nice sandy blonde hair (enhanced) and great little tits, as Tracy had said, over and over.

Her inbox pinged.

"My name is Donnie Munro twenty-nine Assistant Manager The Allangrange Centre Donnie Munro twenty-nine Assistant Manager My car is a silver Corsa My car is a silver Corsa I will meet you at the town square at Beaully at 8.00 am tomorrow Tomorrow is Wednesday My car is a silver Corsa I will meet you at 8.00 am My name is Donnie Munro twenty-nine Assistant Manager xxx xxx"

Linda stared at the email.

All she really took in was the end tag: 'xxx xxx'.

Her heart thumped and her mind swirled away to imagine what might be.

"Donnie Munro twenty-nine Assistant Manager. xxx xxx."

Head On

That evening, Tuesday, returning home from her seventy-two year-old her punter with his gammy leg and a very tired old penis that had failed to respond to everything she tried, Siobhan was running late. Unaware that her lights were off, Siobhan was driving with her foot hard down and K-Pop blasting her mind.

She hit the supermarket container lorry head.

The closing speed was in excess of 140 M.P.H., as the accident expert would later confirm to the Coroner's Inquest.

The lorry driver, Bertie Boland, 53, walked away unscathed physically. His collision with Siobhan was his third night-time "head on", and all of his assailants, as he thought of them, had died. Siobhan made his total seven. At least this huge unattractive woman had been alone.

Bertie knew that, as had happened with the the others, this woman's death would be blamed on him: by her family, by the system and the public at large, as had happened after his second hit with the four young partygoers, all drunk and high, just like this one.

Bertie also knew he would be obliged to defend himself at the inevitable FAI one more time. He knew that the media would pull up his record and imagined the headline: "Death Road Driver Strikes Again".

The day after the accident Bertie vowed to his family that he would never allow himself to risk such a trauma again. He resigned from his job and took up a position as a door-to-door Home Insulation Consultant, working fifteen hours a day.

Over the next year, as he was no longer free to play two rounds each day, his handicap rose steadily. When it reached twelve, he gave up golf and took up trout fishing.

Love Match

The next morning, Wednesday, Donnie responded to the Kitchen buzzer, made Siobhan her usual full breakfast. He left it on the bedside table, cleared away the untouched food from the previous evening, washed up her dishes and left for Beaulieu, on time for his Care Share Club meeting.

Donnie had slept well, as he almost always did when he had not been abused. He was dressed in his best jeans, his AC/DC tee-shirt, and wearing his best trainers. Siobhan would have not allowed him to wear this outfit, but she was not there to object. He checked that he had a strip of pills in his back pocket, just in case he had a panic attack.

Donnie was indeed twenty-nine. At five foot eleven, slim, good-looking with dark curly hair and hazel eyes, he had flipped many a girl's heart in the passing. He did not drink or smoke and, apart from his medication, he did not use drugs.

Donnie saw the white Fiat Panda zoom into the car park. It parked alongside him. A nice smiling lady wearing a lime green trouser suit bounced out of the car, pulled his passenger door open and leaned in.

'Hi, Donnie? I'm Linda, your lift. My car or yours?'

'I'm Donnie Munro. You are Linda Aitchison. My sister is Siobhan. Siobhan is not a nice person. Are you a nice person?'

'Yes, I think of myself as a nice person, yes. Yes! I am definitely a nice person.'

'My name is Donnie Munro. You are a nice person. Do you want to come into my car?'

'Yes, Donnie, I do.'

'Linda, where do you want to go today?'

'Don't you have to go to work?'

'I don't know. Siobhan didn't say I have to go. I am Donnie, you are Linda. You have nice hair. You have nice eyes. You smell very nice. Where do you want to go, Linda?'

'Tell you what Donnie, I need to go back to my house. I forgot something. What if we go in my car? I'll drive. What do you say, Donnie? Would you like to come to my house?'

'You are Linda with nice hair and nice eyes. You are a nice person. You smell nice. You have nice eyes. You have nice hair. I want to go to your house. My sister Siobhan is not a nice person.'

Car Share Club

ooOoo

On that first morning, sitting in her Kitchen drinking coffee, Donnie suddenly stood up and asked if he could have a shower, asking her to help him.

She saw his beautiful but wounded body, and wept for him.

As she leaned round him to pat him dry, his hand reached down to touch her cheek. Then he reached across to his jeans and took out the Jane Birkin CD. Linda looked at it and smiled. He put it into her CD player and set it to repeat. She took him to her heart and, later, after she had applied antiseptic to his wounds, to her bed. She was so excited she forgot to make him wear a condom.

It was the best sex she had ever had, slow and gentle, she on top, as he wanted, putting her in control, he thudding back up into her as she reached her climax. Ecstasy.

Throughout their actual coupling he had kept up his mantra.

"Oh Mummy, you are so, so beautiful. Thank you, Mummy, thank you for looking after baby Robbie. Oh Mummy, you are so, so"

Afterwards, as they lay together, under the duvet, Jane Birkin seranding them, she held him in the crook of her arm, stroked his cheek, ran her fingers through his dark curly hair, and kissed away his tears. He snuggled into her, gently sucking and nibbling at her breasts. He was much better at love-making than Tracy. He was the best looking, most gentle man she had ever slept with. Her mind whirled away to thoughts of a life together. Was she too old to have children?

Later that morning, while he slept, she rose and called in to the Job Centre, feigning a severe migraine.

They made love many times during that day, always starting with a shower together, then she patting him dry, then applying the antiseptic cream, then Jane Birken, then....

It was a process. It worked for both of them. Ecstasy.

As they lay quietly together through that first day and the night to follow, she questioned him, very gently. His story tumble out in an almost incoherent jumble, making him tearful at times.

The next morning, early, while it was still dark, they drove back to Beaulieu and returned to Linda's cottage with both cars. Again she called to the Job Centre,

Car Share Club

this time booking herself off for a long overdue holiday. She had already decided she could not let this beautiful fragile man return to the clutches of his vicious sister.

Linda did not figure out the long flight of Daisy and Robbie and Siobhan and Donnie immediately. It took her three months to extract the whole story, to understand what had happened. But Linda was patient, good at leading conversations, good at listening and very good at hearing between the lines.

Ever After

At the very moment that Linda and Donnie were coupling for their first time, thirty-five miles away, in Invergordon, the owner of "Tanya's Health and Beauty" was well down into her first pint glass of Vodka and Blackcurrant. On good days Benta Zorovitz would drink only two bottles of Vodka; on bad days, more than three. Her customers could not tell that "Tanya" was alcoholic, they saw only the bottles of blackcurrant juice.

Benta was from Ukraine. She had bought her way through the UK refugee system with money stolen from her previous employer, a Turkish brothel owner in Berlin. That had been in 1991, when Benta had been nearly good looking.

For months Benta had been on the point of sacking Siobhan: for lateness, unscheduled absence and because she suspected the girl was skimming the till. With Siobhan's non-appearance Benta made her decision. The Chinese-looking girl who had been in several times looking for work had left her mobile number. Benta dialed it. Lianne promised to arrive within the hour. Siobhan was history.

ooOoo

Six weeks later there was a short funeral service for Siobhan in the undertaker's parlour, immediately prior to her cremation. It was attended by Donnie, Terry, Linda and an off-duty policewoman called Mirabelle McAlister. Mirabelle had been called in to direct traffic in the aftermath of the accident. Mirabelle was an Evangelical Christian who believed that such funerals were God-given opportunities for witness and proselytization.

ooOoo

Terry at the Allangrange Centre had been wary at first, then fully supportive when she saw how much happier and open Donnie had become. Since he had moved to stay with Linda he had not had a single panic attack. Working together Linda and Terry trained Donnie to give appropriate answers, and he responded willingly to their promptings.

It took two years of wrangling and all of Linda's bureaucratic skills and steady persistence to persuade the System to accept her as Donald Munro's replacement Registered Carer and Grant Holder.

Car Share Club

Linda and Donnie's personal life was never revealed or referred to at any of the meetings. If Terry suspects, she wisely says nothing. To the System, Robbie will always be Donnie Munro, whose sister Siobhan had died tragically in a road accident, leaving them with a problem. To the world at large, by assumption, Donnie is Linda's autistic son or brother.

ooOoo

It is a few years on from their first Car Share Club meeting in the car park at Beauly.

Linda and Donnie continue to live in the cottage high above Beauly.

Linda has adjusted to her new reality and they live their lives in a hierarchy of fixed routines that meet Donnie's needs.

Behind closed doors they are kind and gentle to each other, sharing housework, cooking, doing DIY projects, gardening, watching television together, and sharing a double bed.

Nowadays they have two Border Collies, and so they do a lot of walking.

On holiday, Robbie becomes Donnie Aitchison. Linda insists on a twin-bedded room, explaining her brother's care needs.

If you are travelling in the greater Inverness area, watch out for a white Fiat Panda 4*4, with its back seats down flat and two enquiring doggy faces peering through the gap between two happy humans.