

## The Itch

Debbie wished she could wipe away the frustration she felt as easily as the Fiesta's windshield wipers brushed away the misty drizzle that cried down from the dull March sky. She bit her lip and suppressed another of the small tears that had been welling since she left Bristol. This was stupid. The news came on the radio and she turned it up for the traffic report at the end.

Traffic on the M4 was light. She'd missed the morning rush hour, and it looked as though she'd make it to Heathrow in plenty of time. Passengers complain that they have to check in two hours before take-off for an international flight. They should try being a flight attendant and have to get there five hours early. The only mention of hold-ups west of London was the stretch of the M25 between the M40 and M4, so Debbie pressed the pre-set on the radio for Classical-FM and settled into a lilting waltz. The rhythm of the wipers kept time metronomically for a while, but soon drifted off beat.

What was Brian's problem, anyway? Strauss's violins couldn't distract Debbie for long, and her thoughts turned inexorably back to the argument she'd had with her... her what? What do you call the man you've been seeing for five and half years and who still can't offer the commitment of the dreaded M-word? Not "boyfriend". Surely women of 26 don't have them. Live-in lover? S.O.? Life partner, as an American passenger had once described the man with her? Not fiancé, that was for sure.

Ahead brake lights illuminated in the distance and the traffic came to one of the mysterious slow-downs that have no apparent cause. Seconds later the cars ahead started to move again, equally inexplicably.

The row had started over a trivial thing, just as the previous one had, and the one before that. Why were they becoming so frequent? Debbie was in the bathroom and had discovered too late there was no toilet paper left, as one does.

"Throw me in some loo paper, Bri!" she hollered.

Brian poked his head round the door, sheepishly.

"Erm, we're all out."

"What? I thought you were going to pick some up last night."

"Yeah, I forgot. That meeting went on a bit and I forgot to stop at the all-night."

"Great. So much for sharing the shopping. Kitchen towel will do."

He disappeared and a few second later a disembodied hand flicked a bulky roll of triple-thickness kitchen towel through the gap in the door.

"Catch."

It was a small thing but Debbie was slightly miffed. She liked her flight days to go a smoothly as possible. It was only once a week, but the three-hour car journey from their small terraced house in the Clifton suburb of Bristol could be gruelling enough without hassles like this.

In the bedroom, Brian had got back into bed. He wouldn't have to get up for a couple of hours yet, but usually woke up to chat to Debbie when she had an early morning start.

"Sorry." He looked so contrite, his ruffled fair hair flopping around his sleepy eyes, striped pajama-top making him look younger than his 25 years. It was impossible to stay annoyed for long.

“It’s OK. It’s just, you know, these early starts.”

“Yeah, I know. Oh, before I forget, that San Antonio thing might be happening.”

Debbie didn’t know what San Antonio thing at first, but then remembered Brian mentioning that he might be sent to Texas to do some consultancy for a drugs company that was setting up a new pill production line. The firm he worked for in Bristol did manufacturing consultancy and Brian had a lot of experience on the laser-etching device their American client was going to use.

“Oh,” Debbie said, cautiously. “How long for this time?”

“Oh, probably a month at most. But it could possibly stretch to three. Six at the outside.”

“Six months!”

“Not necessarily. I’ll know when I get there.”

“What, and in the meantime I’m supposed to just sit here and wait. Oh, Brian!”

Why now? Why did he have to wait until now to tell her, when she didn’t have time to fight it, to tell him she didn’t want him disappearing yet again to some far-off place? She suspected it he chose his moment carefully to avoid yet another repeat of the same old discussion/fight (depending on how tired she was). He would argue that his infrequent (two or three times a year) trips of a month or two were no worse than her being away three days a week. She countered that it was much worse: at least they got to see each other regularly, and it wasn’t even every week seeing that he sometimes went with her if things were quiet in his office. These months-long separations were totally different. Where was the continuity? How could she feel settled if he was away for half the year? What would happen when they got married? She only asked this last one if she was really angry. Brian’s usual response was “Well, we’d sort something out in that case.” And then it was quietly dropped.

Debbie did a first pass over her make-up in the bathroom, gathered her flight bag and stood at the bottom of the bed.

“See you when you get back,” Brian said.

“Assuming you’re not in Houston.”

“San Antonio. It won’t be for a couple of weeks, at least. We’ll talk about it on Thursday. Sorry, Deb. Do I get a kiss?”

She kissed her hand and blew in to him.

“That’ll have to do for now. See you Thursday. Oh, and Bri?”

“Yeah?”

“Get some loo paper.”

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*Wednesday 26 July 1989*

*Got the tickets for Venice today. Phoned Lisa first and made sure she was free at the weekend. Didn’t tell her what for but had to tell her she’d need a passport. Luckily she’s got one. Quite fancied the girl in the travel agents, which isn’t a good sign perhaps. Not as much as Lisa though, so maybe it’s not so bad. Feel optimistic about cracking it with L this time, but don’t want to write that in case it jinxes me. Too late! Driving to Lisa’s tomorrow night, then early flight from Gatwick on Friday. Probably no more entries till after I get back, so there’ll be lots to write. All quite exciting, really.*

By the time Debbie pulled up into one of the reserve spaces in Terminal Four's car park, she'd composed herself a little. Part of the flight attendant's training was staying calm in an emergency. Although in her four years of flying on BAC 1-11s, 737s and 747s the worst emergency she'd had to confront was a child throwing up over the passenger in the seat in front, the relaxation techniques still came in handy during life's own little crises.

In the cavernous terminal, she was immediately enveloped by the bustle of the place. It never ceased to give her a buzz. The moment she was amongst the baggage-laden passengers forming ragged lines in front of the check-in desks, she entered flight mode. One or two of the small army of BA staff that serviced Terminal Four gave her friendly smiles, which she returned. Her blonde hair was cut in a short bob and contrasted dramatically with the navy blue of her uniform. Although the airlines claim not to use attractiveness as a factor in selecting cabin crew (citing "presentability" as the criterion instead), Debbie's brilliant white smile and friendly blue eyes certainly hadn't harmed her career prospects. She'd been used in several flight magazine shoots and only just missed being chosen for the coveted poster-campaign photos.

Preparation for the flight in the cabin crew room was minimal. Debbie was working in Club Class, which was fairly straightforward, as long as there were no drunken, lecherous businessmen to fend off. Once a respectable-looking man had blatantly spilled his drink over her as she bent to clear his dinner tray away, and proceeded to brush her breast with his hand, mumbling mock apologies as he did so. Debbie would have been slightly less outraged if the drink had even landed there, but it actually spilled on her skirt. She got her own back by pouring hot coffee into his lap during a well-timed bout of turbulence, but it was a Pyrrhic victory.

The Captain asked the cabin crew to take their positions for take-off as the metal bird swung round ninety degrees to line up with runway 28-right. They would take off heading almost due west, then bank right to join the northbound airway that passes over Manchester and Glasgow on the early stages of the great circle route to the west coast of the United States.

Strapping herself into the minimal seat attached to the rear-facing bulkhead at the front of the World Traveller cabin, Debbie immediately recognised the passenger seated opposite her.

"Hello, again," he said, with a gentle smile.

"Hello. What a coincidence! This is my first run to San Francisco for three weeks. Since you flew over, in fact."

"Really?" Again, the smile.

There was a hiatus as the plane stopped momentarily on the threshold of the runway, and then the Captain throttled back the four Pratt & Whitneys to their maximum take-off thrust. The sound of exploding gasses was muffled but still loud enough to interfere with conversation, and outside the portholes on her right, Debbie could see the silvery grey wings of the jumbo vibrate up and down, as though the great bird intended to take off by flapping them.

As soon as the plane was airborne and the passengers, experienced and novice

alike, breathed the secret sigh of relief that we all do when a lumbering giant parts company with terra firma and doesn't come crashing down again, Debbie unstrapped herself and prepared to perform her duties for one of the busier parts of the flight. Before she disappeared into the curtained-off luxury of Club Class, she turned again to the passenger in seat 26B and said "See you later."

Debbie was nonplussed. The man had been on her previous flight from San Francisco to London. They'd chatted during take-off. His name was Jeff and he owned a small recording studio in Foster City, about twenty miles south of the city. He was British but had lived in the States for three years. The trip to England was business; he was attending a trade fair and trying to drum up some trade with a couple of the independent record labels. He didn't know exactly how long the trip would take, but it appeared that it had taken three weeks.

Debbie thought about that previous flight to London. About a third of the way through the flight, as the 747 passed at 37,000 feet through the polar darkness above the Hudson, Debbie had taken a snack to the flight crew. The Captain pointed out a spectacular display of the aurora borealis - the Northern Lights - ahead. The lights hung like great, white curtains before them, flickering slightly as though swaying in a gentle breeze. Debbie imagined them shrouding a secret, mystical ice palace, hidden from earthly view. She had the feeling that the passenger in 26B would like to see this display, and asked the Captain if she could bring him up. It wasn't a busy part of the flight for the crew, and he said "Of course."

Debbie wasn't sure if Jeff was more taken by the ghostly aurora or the multitude of dials, knobs, levers and displays of the cockpit's instrument panel.

"Looks like a 24-track console!" was his comment.

The Captain dimmed the cockpit light to give a better view out of the front window. Jeff ducked down to look between the shoulders of the pilot and co-pilot.

"Wow!"

Debbie knelt beside him and looked. It was still in the cockpit and for a moment the three-man flight crew seemed to fade away. She was only aware of the glow of the aurora ahead and, in the periphery of her vision, Jeff's shoulder-length hair. There was a charge between them that crackled like the electrical particles that streamed towards the earth from the sun and glowed in northern heavens before her. The navigator's voice discharged the tension.

"Time to call Gander."

Debbie and Jeff stood simultaneously. He touched her the back of her hand with a gentle finger and said "Thank you. That was wonderful." There was an implied intimacy in his voice that was at once thrilling and scary.

"Glad you liked it. Well, I've got to talk to the Captain. Can you find your own way back?"

"Oh, I think I can manage that. See you later."

By the time the plane was making its final descent through the 500-foot cloud base above west London six hours later, Debbie had decided she'd imagined the atmosphere in the cockpit. She hadn't spoken to Jeff again, as her duties called for her to attend to the needs of the Club Class passengers. A couple of times she stole a quick glance through dividing curtain. Jeff was either reading a music magazine, listening to his

portable CD player, or both. He didn't seem to sleep at all. During her one-hour rest period she considered chatting with him, but decided against it. Company policy encouraged friendliness but frowned upon fraternisation.

She took her seat opposite Jeff again for landing. They chatted briefly. She felt a compulsion to talk about Brian on the pretext that his work, like Jeff's, had some involvement with electronics. She was aware that she was trying to detect any minute change in Jeff's attitude when she mentioned having a partner. She couldn't, but then like a lot of the female flight attendants she wore a ring on her wedding finger to try to minimise unwanted advances, so he would have inferred Brian's existence anyway.

As Jeff joined the shuffle of passengers making their way to the exit at the front of the plane, he smiled warmly at Debbie and said, "Thanks again."

"That's all right. Maybe I'll see you on the way back. Take care."

"You too." He paused a though he was going to say something else, but was propelled by a bulky, impatient passenger from behind, and instead gazed directly and fleetingly into Debbie's eyes. Then he was gone.

*Monday 31 July 1989*

*If you want to give God a laugh, tell him your plans. Or write them in your diary. What a disaster. Why do I bother? Venice, city of romance. The canals, the gondolas, the smell of rotting refuse on barges. St. Mark's was good, nice view from the campanile. Competed with Trafalgar Square on the pigeon (and pigeon shit) front. Thursday night at Lisa's. Slept on the sofa. Didn't mind that, she's only got a single bed, anyway. Had to tell her where we were going. She seemed thrilled, if a little suspicious. Had a nice dinner at home of spag. bol. (to get into the spirit of things!) Early night because of the early start.*

*No problems with the London traffic at 5.30 AM, though I did manage to turn the wrong way down a one-way street at one stage. Lisa didn't take it too badly. Flight OK, mediocre charter- airline food. Bus from the tiny airport to Venice, found the hotel just off the Grand Canal, no problems. Moment of truth when Lisa saw the double bed. She didn't ask, so I didn't tell her I could have got two singles. Knackered after the journey so I rubbed her back for a while, which relaxed us both. Slightly concerned by the ridiculously ostentatious Venetian glass chandelier that hung sword of Damocles-like over the bed, but comforted by the thought that it would land on Lisa's side rather than mine if it fell!*

*Did the tourist bit: St. Mark's, Vaporetto up the G. Canal, Bridge of Sighs, the Doge's Palace. All a bit overwhelming, really. So much beautiful architecture, red brick and white stone crumbling away. Venetians being typically Italian, shouting and embracing, suddenly all appearing at once on the street dead on 5 PM to drink coffee and eat pastries in the cafes that alternate with the gift shops.*

*Friday night felt too tired to do anything about the fact that Lisa, my one true desire (on and off, and apart for the others) for five years was lying next to me. Relieved that she didn't snore. Certainly makes a change. Maybe I've just been unlucky with snorers?*

*Took it as a good omen.*

*Saturday, more tourism. Got taken on a boat to the glass-blowing island of Murano by a swarthy man who looked like he had Mafia connections. Very interesting, but major catch – they wanted us to buy something. Like a set of deep blue glasses for only several billion lira (“Put on your credit card, sir!” No thanks!) I thought they weren’t going to let us go until we coughed up. Eventually Lisa bought the cheapest thing she could find: a pair of ear-rings for about 20,000 lira. It occurred to me too late I should have bought them for her. Oh well.*

*Dinner in a tiny place miles from the hotel. Famished because we walked for miles and kept getting lost. Best lasagne I’ve ever tasted, and I’m not just saying that. Decided it was time to tell Lisa how I felt about her. Not that I mentioned “love” or anything. I just told her I felt closer to her than ever and I really wanted to take the relationship further. Or words to that effect. I was just staring at the flickering yellow candle flame through its ruby red cut glass holder and letting the words slip from me.*

*Lisa seemed surprised, then a bit angry. She thought we were just friends. Close friends, she granted, her closest friend in some ways. She really appreciated the fact she could tell me anything. I meant the world to her, but as a friend. Was that what this was all about? A tacky seduction scene? Getting her away from home, trying to overwhelm her with the romance of the place? No, no, no. I said. Did I mean it? I think so. The idea of a weekend away came first, just because I like spending time with her. The thoughts of romance came later. I plied her with questions. What about the intimacy we have in all but sex? What about the fact that I’m the only person who knows she’s never had an orgasm (I don’t think the waiters’ English was up to them making too much sense of the conversation). She’ll tell me that, but not the lucky, ignorant sods who could actually do something about it. What about the back-rubs, the cuddles, and occasional kisses? That Christmas a couple of years ago when it was more than that? That’s all part of the friendship she said. For her. She enjoyed it but didn’t want anything else because... I pressed her; she was reluctant. Eventually she said “Because I don’t find you physically attractive.” Well you could have knocked me over with a kipper. Thanks Lisa! I suppose I deserved it; I was forcing her to be frank. She tried to soften it, said I was just getting obsessed with her because I was still getting over Mary, that it was a rebound thing. Rebound thing! I’ve known Lisa longer than Mary anyway.*

*Amazingly, the whole thing didn’t have much of an effect on us. Maybe it would have been too dangerous to let it get out of hand so far from home. Maybe having it out in the open just diffused all the tension that had been building since I’ve started to see L again, after I broke up with Mary. Too tired to write any more, so the photos will have to be the “diary” for the Sunday. Not much happened anyway, except we spent the last of our money getting pissed at some dive tavern at the back of the hotel. I think I’ll wait for Lisa to get in touch next time.*

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Debbie paused briefly before entering the World Traveller cabin to take her

landing seat opposite Jeff. He'd been on her mind throughout the flight. Although she'd felt something between them on the previous trip, she soon forgot about it. A week later, she was on a flight to Perth, her favourite route, with another set of passengers to worry about, and all thoughts of the denim-clad, rough-shaven studio owners had receded. Here he was again, though, offering the same calm, confident smile that knocked her every so slightly off balance.

She sat, strapped herself in and smiled. "No Northern Lights this time." Why did she feel compelled to make conversation?

"No, but there was a nice view of Greenland." He glanced out of the porthole as the plane banked to the left on its final approach.

"That's where I'm going; you can drop me out here if you like!"

Beneath them the man-made island with the bulbous shape of East Anglia but on a one hundredth scale announced itself as FOSTER CITY to birds and aeroplanes. The twenty-foot high letter painted on the shorefront could easily be read from the plane's approach altitude.

"There's the studio."

Debbie craned to sea where Jeff was pointing.

"What, the tower block?"

"No, that white building just to the left of it. And those apartments next to the lagoon is where I live."

"Not far to go to work, then?"

"No, though I still drive. It's the American Way, you know?"

"I expect you've got a big American car, too?"

"Not at all. I bought an MGB from a guy in San Mateo, British racing green with the license late MGB BRIT. Shame I didn't leave her at the long stay, otherwise I could have shown her to you."

They fell into silence and soon the plane thudded onto the runway and decelerated rapidly as the roar of reverse thrust kicked in.

As Debbie was releasing her seat belt, Jeff blurted "What about a drink!"

"Sorry?"

"How would you like a drink, later tonight? Or dinner. I could show you the car."

Racing green MGBs didn't hold that much of a thrill for Debbie, but that wasn't why she declined his offer. There was professional and personal protocol to think about.

"I don't think so. Thanks anyway."

Jeff looked disappointed but not crest-fallen.

"OK. Nice to meet you again anyway."

The line for immigration was ridiculous. A United 747 from London and an American DC-10 from Paris had arrived shortly before the BA Jumbo. By the time Jeff picked up his baggage, the shortest queue for immigration was about 45 minutes long. A familiar blue shape impinged on his peripheral vision. He turned and saw Debbie and some other crewmembers from his flight ambling towards the special crew exit. Debbie looked at him. She said something to the striking ebony-skinned friend she was walking with. The friend smiled, and carried on her way. Debbie picked her way through the throng of tired, bedraggled passengers who seemed to represent every European nationality, and finally reached Jeff.

"I'm at the Airport Sheraton. Why don't you come over at about 7.30?"

“OK! Erm, what’s your surname?”

“Oh, Walker.”

“Great. I’ll see you later then.”

“Yes. Bye.”

“Bye.”

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*Wednesday 16 August 1989*

*Funny how things look different after a while. I was thinking about Lisa today, and how stupid I’d been over her, confusing friendship and love. I still fancy her though. Ho hum. Spoke to her at the weekend. She’s seeing someone, a guy from BMW who she had to call to arrange some photos for a campaign her agency are doing for them. She asked him out. On the phone, sight unseen! Of course he turned out to be a stud. Dunno how she does it. Anyway, we chatted for ages and she still seems to be confiding in me, so I suppose the friendship’s intact.*

*The main reason for this entry though is that I met someone noteworthy today. In the big George’s in Park Street. I was looking for something for dad for his birthday, “The Boy’s Own Book of Bird spotting” or some other ornithological tome, when I saw a flash of long blonde hair in the reference section. Couldn’t place her at first. Felt a bit of a twit going up and saying “Hello, don’t I know you from somewhere.” Bit of an obvious one that. Then it came to me, so I glided up smooth as silk and said “Hi. How’s the travel business?” Her expression looked as though she was going to be sick. Always a bad sign, that. Luckily it turned out to be her job rather than me that was making her feel ill; she was in the book shop trying to get inspiration for a career move. I suggested thinking up some ideas over coffee, and amazingly she said, “OK.” We chatted, not much about careers as it turned out, but life and loves and stuff. She really easy to talk to. Maybe it’s from having to deal with anxious holidaymakers all the time. Anyway, we’re going to see *The Blue Aeroplanes* at the Cavern on Saturday. I’m not sure if she’d ever heard of them, but she seemed keen. I must admit I’m quite excited. Oh yeah, her name’s Debbie.*

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In the bathroom room 204 of the San Francisco Airport Sheraton, Debbie put on a little make-up. She didn’t need much, a hint of eyeliner and some subtle pink lipstick. The eye liner brought out the blue of her eyes and the lipstick... well, it made her lips look slightly fuller and perhaps more kissable, but that wasn’t why she wore it, she told herself.

Debbie’s thoughts had been on two levels since she’d told Amy she’d see her later and told Jeff she would have a drink with him after all. Consciously she rationalised it by telling herself it would be a nice change from spending the evening with the usual crowd; she might even get to see some new parts of San Francisco. Underneath though, in the part of her mind she ignored because she couldn’t lie to it, she knew that this was more than a casual drink with a nice guy. Nothing was certain about the outcome, which was part of the thrill. She told herself “I love Brian” over and over, until it became a mental mantra. It was true, too.

The phone in the bedroom rang, jolting her out of her reverie. She realised she'd been staring at the mirror for minutes, not seeing. It was Jeff, down in the lobby. He sounded relaxed; she couldn't tell if she did. As Debbie closed the bedroom door, she noticed the ring she usually wore on her wedding finger lying on the bedside table. She didn't put it back on.

Jeff had changed into expensive black slacks, a dark blue Italian shirt and brown leather jacket. He had shaved and tied his long hair into a pony tail. He looked younger than on the plane, but still older than Debbie; she guessed around 28. Debbie had put on jeans and a light blue shirt, but still managed to look elegant. She carried a lambs wool wrap on her arm; the March evenings were pretty cool.

He placed his hands gently at her side and kissed her decorously on the cheek.

"Hi!"

"Hi!"

"So, do you like pizza?"

"Yes..."

"Good, because Foster City's other claim to fame, apart from London Sound..."

"London Sound?"

"My studio..."

"Oh, yes."

"...is The Pacific Gourmet Pizza Company. They do *the* most amazing pizzas. There's one that has smoked salmon on it. You'll love it."

"Sounds good!"

Somewhere in the distance Debbie thought she could hear an alarm bell ringing, but decided it was just her imagination.

The MGB was noisy and windy with the top down. Conversation was hard and Debbie was convinced it made a mockery of the careful brushing she'd given to her hair earlier. She loved it though. The thought of having an open top car in the West of England with its drizzle and cold and unexpected showers was laughable, but here it seemed natural. Occasionally they would pass a Mazda Miata (Jeff seemed to stick to British speed limits, so passed most cars) and Jeff scowled and said something about Japanese rubbish, but it was lost in the wind. She sensed he quite enjoyed being the bolshie ex-pat.

The Pacific Gourmet lived up to its billing. It was located in a dingy shopping centre across from a dance studio where they could see pre-pubescent girls trying to emulate Janet Jackson's backing dancers.

"Everyone wants to be on MTV," was Jeff's comment.

Their waiter appeared to be on some kind of drugs. He laughed uproariously at everything he, or they, said, and called Jeff "dude". He was so young and good-humoured that Debbie couldn't help but like him. He asked them if they were Australian, and when they told him they were from England he said "In Europe, right?"

"Yes."

"All right!"

He took their order (half of which was the Alaskan, the one with smoked salmon) and Jeff said "Thanks, Brian."

Debbie glanced up.

"That's his name."

“Oh. It’s just that I know a Brian.”

“Yes, your boyfriend, you told me last time.”

There was a pause.

“So, what exotic places have you flight attended to recently?”

They talked about life in the air, life on the road (Jeff was a drummer in a reasonably unsuccessful London band before he decided he was a better recording engineer than musician), life in England (“I miss some things: the sense of humour, the irreverence towards sacred cows that’s tolerated, not the weather, and definitely not the whining.”

“Oh, I don’t think I could live anywhere else.”), life in the States (“There’s a lot more money floating around; that gives you the freedom to do things,”

“I find the people a bit much sometimes.”) They talked about love and relationships. Debbie talked about how she met Brian, how kind and gentle he was, how romantic he could be. She alluded to some feelings of frustration, of not knowing if he was as truly committed to it as she was, but she didn’t want to run him down to this relative stranger, so she restricted her negative comments to saying he’d forgotten to buy the toilet paper.

“And you found out when it was too late, right?”

“Uh huh.” Debbie felt as though she was blushing, as though the easy intimacy of the conversation wasn’t becoming. She took another sip of wine.

Jeff spoke about his many old girlfriends. None of them seemed to last long, either because he’d moved on or they’d got bored waiting for his band to make it big.

“So, no true loves then?”

“No, not really. I’m not sure if I’m cut out for that, you know, temperamentally. Domestication, responsibility, er... monogamy. God, I sound like an adolescent. That’s the problem: to quote Spinal Tap, I think rock music keeps you in a state of arrested development.”

Debbie looked blank.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a thing from a movie.”

Recognition dawned. “Oh, I know, that film about the rock group and their disastrous tour. Brian’s always quoting from that too. It’s a shame you two can’t meet; you’d get on really well.”

“Yes, well...”

*Sunday 24 December 1989, Christmas Eve*

*Merry Christmas, Mr. Diary! Well, nearly. It’s all very exciting. Spending tomorrow with mum and dad, then on Boxing Day we’re going up to Debbie’s parents in Stratford. Christmas with the in-laws! I met her folks in October. They seem nice enough. Had to buy presents for them and her two little sisters. Actually, she bought them and I’m supposed to be giving her the money. Shame I couldn’t get her to buy her own. I hate trying to think of presents. In the end I got her a really nice Walkman (It’s a Sony, as they say), some Rive Gauche, and a teddy (no, not of the bear variety). Actually that was a hint from her. She’s pretty sexy, actually. I suppose I’d only had experience with Mary, if you ignore the near misses with Lisa, and I think we will. I’m pretty sure Mary enjoyed it,*

*and so did Debbie at first, but then she suddenly started really enjoying it. Weird, but I'm not complaining. I wonder if I should put the teddy with the presents under the tree at mum and dad's tomorrow. No, I think I'll give it to her separately.*

*Well, the big news is that I'm going to ask her to move in. It's daft commuting between flats, and she practically lives at mine anyway. I think she'll go for it. Then I just have to try to curb her bathroom occupancy a bit. She says Dan-Air like their stewardesses looking nice, but I mean, 45 minutes!*

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The technology of recording studio meant nothing to Debbie but it was clearly Jeff's pride and joy, so she tried to seem enthused when he pointed out the myriad knobs and how they could affect the sounds that come out. He showed her how a computer hooked up to a pile of black boxes could play a song all by itself, drums, keyboards, bass, everything except vocals.

"So where does the group come in?"

"Ah, well you need someone to program all this stuff up, of course. It may not seem as skilful as playing it live, but it's still a creative process. Then there's the vocals; they haven't been computerised yet. Actually, most bands do play live in the studio, this lot is just to muck around with."

"Have you had anyone famous in here?"

"World Party came over when they played the Warfield last year. Actually Karl Wallinger's and old mate from my London days. Apart from that it's been mostly local bands. That's another reason why I was in England, trying to spread the word that I'm here. It looked quite promising."

He was sensitive to her techno-indifference so stopped short of suggesting a quick bash on the drum kit that was set up in the room behind the mixing room's glass window. Instead he suggested a nightcap at his apartment.

"Actually, do you mind if we go for a little walk. It's a bit stuffy in here and I need to clear my head."

"Sure. We can walk round the lagoon to the flat. It'll kill two birds with one stone."

Jeff's hand lay gently on Debbie's hip, a finger inserted into the belt loop of her jeans. As they walked, their bodies touched. Debbie waited for the pang of guilt, which never came. The waters of the man-made lake looked cold and dark. They were still except for the occasional disturbance as though something was breaking the surface of the water.

"What's that?"

"Jellyfish. Not poisonous ones, the nice freshwater kind. Sometimes you see them splattered out on the boardwalk here. I'm not sure how they get there."

There was a small wooden hut halfway round the lagoon. On the far side, reflections from apartment complex's lights rippled on the water. The moon was nearly full, and its reflection was a silver streak gashing the dark mirror of the lake.

"Want to sit for a while?"

Debbie didn't answer but took Jeff's proffered hand and followed him to the

bench-lined hut. He sat at the end of the bench and she stretched her legs along its length, leaning back against him and allowing his thick drummer's arms to envelop her upper body. The whole thing was so improbably romantic it bordered on cliché. The lake, the moon, the cool breeze blowing wisps of hair across her warm cheeks, even the gently bobbing jellyfish. She closed her eyes and held on to Jeff's forearm which was pressed gently onto her breasts. Somehow, it had all become a foregone conclusion, without a decision ever having been made. She was surprised that she hadn't had to ask herself the question "What about Brian?" Brian didn't matter. Oh, of course he mattered, but not here, not now. It was a different world. It wasn't the physical distance, but a mental one. She felt as though she was living in a parallel universe to the one she normally inhabited. They existed quite independently, and as long as their paths never intersected everything would be all right.

Jeff kissed the crown of her head gently and whispered, "Let's go."

*Monday 22 June 1992*

*First day back. Bit of a relief really. Two weeks in Paris sounds better than it is. Or maybe it's just me. Bloody French. Not one of them could understand a word of my French, or they pretended not to, but they all understood Debbie perfectly. Funny that. I wouldn't mind but I got a better grade than her at "O" level. Three days of vomiting and diarrhoea (sp?) didn't help much either. I know they say you shouldn't drink the water, but surely you can allow the odd drop to go down your throat when you brush your teeth? Peasants. Deb was in "commitment" mode for the second week. I think her mum's been getting at her again. What is it with this marriage thing? We're happy, we get on well, mostly, and we love each other, as far as I can tell. Sex is good, ditto. What does a marriage certificate prove? I suppose if I'm being totally honest there's the lurking thought that "What if I meet someone else tomorrow?" What if she does, come to that. How can you swear, in all honesty, that you'll never waver? Maybe it's just me, maybe it's a sign I don't really love her. I feel as though I do though.*

*There were good parts though. The Louvre. Bloody massive, hard on the feet. Mona Lisa, bit of a disappointment really, small and dingy. Pompidou Centre, pretty amusing architecture, dodgy street entertainers not appearing to do anything for their money (there was one guy who kept lighting torches and blowing them out, and picking up knives and putting them down, but never actually did anything, then some old dear who looked like his granny came round with a hat for money. Great). Eiffel Tower, good view. All the bridges, some of the restaurants (the ones where we got served in less than 45 minutes). I rediscovered I don't like "crudités", which makes me sound like my mum (she's always saying she doesn't like crudity on TV).*

*At work today Frank said I might be on for another trip, this time to Vancouver. I thought the last one was a one-off, but I didn't complain 'cos it was quite fun. Haven't told Debbie yet; I'll wait till I know it's for sure.*

“Can I just use the loo?”

“Sure. I think there’s loo paper in there.”

“What? Oh, yeah.”

Debbie closed the door behind her. She was pretty sure she was clean after the shower at the hotel, but it wouldn’t harm to make sure. That wasn’t really why she needed the bathroom though. She just needed to make sure she could look herself in the mirror, knowing what she was going to do. Did she look evil, a cheat, a harlot? No, she looked like the same woman that gazed out from the mirror every day, the one that she’d seen this morning. She realised she’d gone over 24 hours with no sleep except for an hour on the plane and a couple at the hotel. It was the excitement that was keeping her going. Yes, she was excited all right. She hadn’t felt this churning for how long? Since she’d met Brian.

She flushed the toilet for effect, then ran the tap for effect, lest he though she had dirty habits. He was still standing, waiting.

“Music?”

“Why not?”

“The stereo’s in the bedroom, I’m afraid.” Sly grin, but not wolfish. More “hand in the candy jar but knows he’ll get away with it.”

He turned the upright lamp on half brightness and put Suzanne Vega’s first album on the CD player.

“You’re extraordinarily lovely.”

“Thank you. You’re quite nice too” Smile. Nervous.

He stood facing her, his mouth level with her forehead, which he brushed his soft lips against. He cocooned her in his arms; she felt warmth from his chest against hers, or was the heat emanating from her? His finger traced a line down the back of her head and stopped at the nape of her neck. It moved in small circles, each revolution causing a gentle shiver to run down her spine. It continued on its downward journey, following the shivers, pausing almost imperceptibly at the bump of her bra strap.

Leaving his hand resting on the small of her back, he bent his knees slightly to level his head with hers. Their eyes closed in reflex action as their mouths met. Barely parted, his lips barely touched hers at first. She slid the tip of her tongue out to meet his. They danced. She tasted his saliva, tasted the mint he’d just had, and the trace of the coffee that he’d accepted and she’d decline in the restaurant. She felt her heart in her chest and a warmth kindling between her legs.

They fell onto the bed gently, in slow motion. They lay side-by-side. Her breast ached to have him cup it in his large hand and squeeze it through the thick cotton shirt. She moved it there; they kissed again. Without her having realised, he’d undone the buttons down the front of her shirt. She helped him untuck it from her jeans by undoing the solitary gold button and pulling the zip down half way. Her white panties were visible. She breathed deep with excitement and thought she could detect the fragrance of the juices that were even now starting to seep from her. Jeff gazed down at her milky white breasts. Was the phrase “small but perfectly formed” ever more aptly applied? The smooth silken cup of her bra was interrupted by the contours of her stiff nipples.

Jeff turned her over to lie on her front. He used the tips of his fingers to trace the shape of her scapulae and, pausing briefly to unhook her bra, trace a line down her vertebrae as though counting them. Each touch tingled and fizzled and she gently moved

her hips, using the friction of the thick denim material in her jeans' crotch to excite her more. His hands moved over her buttocks and squeezed them, more firmly and urgently now.

"God yes," she whispered.

A finger traced the line between her cheeks and ended its journey at the centre of her sex. He massaged her clitoral area though the hard material and she pushed back hard to increase the pressure. A wave of warmth swept over her, a pre-echo of what was to come. He pulled her shoes off and with a gently hand invited her to lie on her back again. Together they removed her shirt and bra and pulled her jeans off over her flat stomach, wide hips and curved bottom. He almost tore his shirt off and lay next to her once more. She closed her eyes and put her hand on the top of his head and applied gentle pressure.

"Please..." she said.

She felt his mouth close around the hard pinkness of her nipple. His tongue traced a circle around the areola as a hand brushed lightly over the soft mounds of her other breast. He sucked hard; Debbie felt a pinch of pain and pleasure. She inhaled sharply.

"Sorry."

"No... it's OK."

Jeff's head began a long slow journey south. His fingertips explored the impression of Debbie's ribs and returned once more to cup the perfect geometric roundness of her breasts. She felt a shivery almost-ticklishness as his fingers and palms stroked and explored. Jeff's tongue drew a circle around her navel and his finger pressed it gently.

"Ooh, an outy!"

Debbie giggled and stroked the top of his head with the back of her fingers.

Wisps of blonde pubic hair poked over the top of the lacy top of Debbie's panties. Jeff stroked her pubis through the delicate cotton material, working his way down, and stopping to apply slight pressure to her clit. Debbie bucked her hips in response and moaned gently. She parted her legs, and Jeff could see a small damp patch in the centre of the panties' crotch. He inhaled and filled his senses with the sweet nectar.

He planted delicate kisses on each of her thighs, moving ever closer to the still hidden place where they met. With each kiss Debbie pushed her hips forward slightly, urging him to reach his target more quickly. She experienced a tremulous yearning centred on her moist pussy. Unable to wait any longer, she pulled her panties aside and offered her impatient cunt to Jeff. Her large labia were rufescent and swollen with excitement. Jeff parted them delicately and dipped his tongue into the deep slit between them, lapping up her copious juices. The taste of her womanhood was at once totally familiar and entirely unique. His world was filled with her musk.

"Put a finger in and lick my clit!"

Jeff was surprised and excited by Debbie's assertiveness. He complied, slipping two fingers into her silkily lubricated hole. With the other hand he pulled the back the hood covering her swollen clitoris and flicked it quickly with his tongue. His saliva provided more lubrication as he squeezed the clit between two fingers licked in long strokes her super-sensitised sex. Each lingual caress sent waves of ecstasy rippling through Debbie's body. She pressed the small of her back hard onto the bed to magnify the sensations.

The fingers deep inside her pressed up and out towards her pubic bone, creating a sensation as though she wanted to pee. The feeling was a sharp, steely thrill,

complementing and enhancing the melted-butter pleasure from her tongue-massaged clit. Jeff moved his fingers from her clitoris but kept licking and squeezing it between his lips. Debbie felt a tactful, probing finger touch her anus. She moved her bottom away in a reflex but slowly relaxed back. The finger remained stationary for a moment and Debbie accepted its presence. Slowly, lubricated by her own trickling juices, the finger slid into her most private entrance, a quarter inch, a half in, one inch.

Debbie gasped. Nerve endings in hitherto unknown places sent electric signals of pleasure charging through her body. She felt the first familiar pulsings of an orgasm. They built, quickly, urgently. Her vaginal muscles contracted, squeezing Jeff's fingers as they thrust deep in and out of her soaking cunt. His tongue pressed hard down on her clit, almost burning it with friction. Debbie thrust her hips in unison with Jeff's urgent, no longer gently attentions. A fiery glow filled her, spreading from her groin, inflaming her body and reddening her cheeks. The dam burst. A cry, more animal than human, escaped from her tingling lips. Coming, coming, coming. Came. She pushed Jeff's hands away, suddenly too sensitive to bear to be touched. She breathed deep and hard, made a sound that could have been a whimper. Jeff rested his head on her thigh, he too breathing hard. He moved the gusset of her panties back in place and kiss her gently though it. She moaned, still tender, the echoes of the orgasm pulsating dully between her legs.

Jeff moved up the bed and held her.

"That was nice," he said.

She looked at him through sleepy eyes, the long day having suddenly caught up with her. She smiled languorously.

"Nice for me. What about you?"

"I enjoyed it too. A lot."

"Good. But don't you want to... you know." She felt terrible for hoping he'd say "No." She really was very tired.

"No, it's all right. I'll erm... no, don't worry. It's probably best anyway. I haven't got any condoms. Safe sex etc."

Debbie wondered how safe what they just did was.

"Well, I could, you know." She unconsciously clasped an invisible phallus in her hand.

"Erm, actually I'd prefer to do it myself. If that's all right."

She nodded.

"There is something you could do though. I'd like, er, see you while I'm doing it."

She put her hands behind her head, pushed her breasts out and smiled coquettishly.

"But you can see me."

"No, I mean..."

"Oh, I see. OK. Like this?"

She turned her body to face him, lay back and with a swift movement whipped her knickers off. She raised her knees and spread her legs. She closed her eyes and imagined Jeff's eyes fixed on her. She felt Jeff's hand move hers towards her vagina. She smiled, and started rubbing herself gently, dipping a finger into her still moist pussy to wet her clitoris. Suzanne Vega sang about the Queen and the Soldier, and the firm mattress undulated gently in times with Jeff's manual labours.

It was pleasant to lie back, lulled by Jeff's exertions and gently caress herself. Occasionally she parted her lips and became aware of an added vigour in Jeff's exertion.

His movements became quicker and when she heard his guttural cry she looked up to see his creamy white fluid baptise his smooth chest and stomach.

He thanked her again, took some tissues from the box by the bed and wiped himself.

“I don’t know why you thank me; you’re the one who’s been doing all the work!”

He laughed, but didn’t say anything.

Spent, they lay in each other’s arms until, inevitably, they became uncomfortable and drifted apart in the bed.

In the morning, Debbie felt not sad or regretful, but slightly subdued. The first grains in the hourglass of her guilt had started to fall. Jeff too was relaxed but quiet. They walked holding hands around the lagoon back to where Jeff had left the car. The jellyfish that infested the lake were easily visible: their slowly undulating viscous bodies seemed to reflect the lazy detachment that Debbie felt from Jeff and what had happened between them.

On the drive up highway 280 to the airport, Jeff asked, “Are you going to tell Brian?”

His directness surprised her. She didn’t reply at first. She didn’t know the answer.

“I can’t say yet. I don’t know how he’d take it. He seems so laid back sometimes it’s as if I could tell him anything. I’ve told him about people that have asked me out before, and he just seems amused or flattered. This is a bit different though.”

She paused. She had to make sure Jeff knew this was a one off, something she’d never done before and would probably never do again.

“I know this sounds like a cliché, but about last night...”

“It’s OK, I know what you’re going to say. I went into it knowing how you feel about Brian. I was ready for you to back out at any time. Actually, I was amazed it happened at all. And glad, of course. It’s a shame though.”

“Why?”

“Well, I decided a while ago that I wasn’t settling down material. I’d had too many disastrous break ups. But last night I was thinking that if there was anyone I’d like to try with, it’d be you. During the meal, just talking to you. The sex was good too, of course.”

“Yes, it was. I suppose if Brian wasn’t there already, I’d say the same thing. Except I don’t think I could live in the States, I’m afraid.”

“Well, there you go; we’re obviously totally incompatible, then.”

She laughed, relieved that there was no misunderstanding between them.

He walked her to the lobby of the hotel.

“I’m trying to think of something witty and epigrammatical to say, but I’m only a stupid drummer. Take care. Shall I give you my phone number?”

“You’d better not. Actually, I don’t know how many more trips I’ll be making here. They’re changing to 767s on this route, and I’m not trained on them.”

Jeff laughed. “You kept that pretty quiet! Well, I dare say if you ever need to get hold of me you’ll manage. Shall I write to BA and tell them what a wonderful service you provide?”

“Don’t you dare! They’d court-martial me!”

She looked serious, squeezed her arms around his neck and whispered “Bye,” and disappeared through the revolving doors into the hotel lobby.

Jeff strolled to the car, wondering if he was walking away from something worth sacrificing some of his beloved independence for. It would be a long time before he met anyone else who made him ask himself the same question.

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*Tuesday 1 March 1994*

*Committed the mortal sin of not buying the bog paper yesterday, and Debbie went off into one. Told her about the impending trip. Surprisingly, it didn't help. Got me thinking, though. Every time we argue about these trips or Deb brings up marriage, I get more worried about her pulling away. I talked to Mark about it at lunch. He reckoned if marriage is important to her, and I want to keep her, I should go for it. I can't even remember what my objections are now. Something to do with freedom? I'm not going to fall for someone else. I love her more than ever. So I decided. When she gets back, candlelight dinner, romantic music, down on one knee, pop the question. I'll even see if I can cancel that San Antonio trip. Suddenly it feels right, doing things for her instead of me. It feel odd too. Maybe I've suddenly got mature! Now I've decided I want to tell her quickly, but I'll have to wait till Thurs. Thought about her when I woke up this morning. She would have been in bed after the long flight. I wonder if she dreamt about me?*

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Debbie's sense of calm wore off as the California sunshine melted away the early fog. As the feelings of guilt and betrayal grew, so did the realisation that there was no way she could lie to Brian. It was too massive a thing. How could she ever think she could act that way and shrug it off as though it didn't signify something very wrong with their relationship? She fought to forget the feelings of intimacy and ecstasy she'd shared with Jeff, bury them never to be exhumed. Now she could afford to think only of Brian and how he would react to what she was compelled to tell him.

The flight back to London was dreamlike. Seat 26B was occupied by an old German woman who didn't speak English, so Debbie didn't have to make conversation during take-off and landing. Club Class was half empty and she performed her duties on autopilot, to coin a phrase. The Northern Lights were visible, with fluttering, pinkish hues, but Debbie didn't invite any passengers to see them this time.

She drove to Bristol in a trance. More than once she had to brake hard to avoid colliding with the car in front. Her mind was filled with imagined conversations. What would she say? How would he reply? Would she say to *that*? It was pointless, she knew. She would know nothing until it happened. The traffic after Hungerford was sluggish. She'd hoped to get home before Brian got in from work, but that was looking unlikely now. In a way it would be better. She wouldn't have to sit alone in the flat, their flat, playing the movie of her confession in her head.

A faint flickering glow could be discerned through the living room curtains. She wondered why Brian would be burning candles. She paused at the front door and tried to set her face into a mask of composure, of neutral innocence. She wasn't a gifted dissembler at the best of times, and her efforts were less than successful. There was a sickness in her stomach and her heart seemed to be fibrillating. For a moment she

doubted if she had the strength to turn the key.

The kitchen was at the end of the hall and she saw Brian standing by the stove wearing a plastic-covered apron decorated with a topless woman's torso (a present from one of his less sound college friends), stirring a pan of mince. He turned and smiled a wide, open, innocent smile. Debbie felt dreadful. She dropped her flight bag and ran towards Brian, the tears already staining her cheeks. She held him tight, tighter than ever, fearing this would be the last time.

“What is it, babe? What's the matter?”

Through choking sobs and tear-stained apologies, she told him, more in concept than in detail. He didn't want to know the details. Her mental rehearsals hadn't prepared her for his reaction. He was stricken. There was no sign of his former laissez-faire attitude. Grief gave way to anger, deeply suppressed and manifested as biting sarcasm. Dinner was spoiled. She talked, diminishing the fling's importance with every utterance. He listened, or appeared to. She became defensive, implying some culpability on his part. He lashed out, angered by the recognition of truth, and flayed her with the news that he had planned to suggest over dinner that they get married. They cried, sometimes separately, sometimes together. He told her he hated her.

Debbie woke up. She was still fully dressed, lying on the sofa, Brian's arms encircling her, his breath warming the back of her neck. Reluctant dawn filtered through the living room curtains. She stroked Brian's hand, habitual tenderness overriding any tentativeness she felt. He squeezed her body and kissed the back of her neck. She wondered if the love she felt emanating from him was real or nothing more than just a hopeful artefact of her own desire for forgiveness and healing.

*Monday 12 September 1994*

*Who have thought it? Sunburn. In Scotland. In September! Well, I managed to get it, anyway. Good excuse to stay indoors, out of the sun. Glad I'm not going back to work till Wednesday. It'll be nice to spend a couple of days in the flat together. The wife's out buying thank-you cards for the presents. She said we must get them done straight away or they'll get forgotten. Bless her.*

*Funny, I was thinking about that day in March, how I never thought I'd be happy again. Talk about the bottom falling out of your world. I kept thinking about that guy in the States, how he must have been having a good old laugh at me, getting off with my bird (that sounds suitably "rock 'n' roll"). Deb said he wasn't like that, that he was nice. Ha! But then, I started to realise it hadn't changed anything. I still loved her, probably more than ever. I only had to look at her poor distraught face to see what she was feeling. I guess I see the whole thing as a catalyst now, a way of sparking the final chemical reaction between us. I know I'd made up my mind about marriage anyway, but that was just "Well, why not?" But when she told me, it was "Yes, this is right, this is what I want." If I'd had my way we'd have gone and got hitched about a week later, but what with having to invite Aunty Flo and Grandma Bess etc. etc...*

*My radiant wife has just come in. If the honeymoon was anything to go by, I'll be too*

Pete Cockerell

The Itch

*busy in the evenings to write much for a while, so see you at Christmas, Mr. Diary!*