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## PORN MALLOW

### SARA CROWLEY

There was another pornographic picture caught up in the branches of her mallow. She tweezed the photo out using her thumb and forefinger, curling her lips in disgust. A shudder of revulsion accompanied her as she quickly fairy stepped her way across the front garden and back inside. A winter chill sliced through the mellow autumn light making it cooler than it appeared. Warm indoors, central heating up to 21, toasty. She pumped liquid soap into her reddened palms. She'd dropped it into her recycling box. It'd been automatic to put it there; it was paper, ergo it had to go in the green box. Now worry puffed its way into her, what if the recycling men thought it was hers? Should she take it out and put it in the food rubbish? Would they even notice? Joyce decided to leave it where it was, loathe to touch it again.

Twisting in the duvet covers tepid thoughts dripped like water torture; it was the man next door leaving the photographs, she really had to get a spare key cut, her

brush was on the floor behind the dressing table, carrots don't help you see in the dark and too many can turn you orange, that nice blonde boy who used to be in the ARGH STOP IT, turn, plump up pillow, jerk out leg, too hot, too lumpy, too...

Sometimes, when she had stayed home for a while, the outside felt scary. It was easy to get grooved into her own routine. Same brekky, same radio show, newspaper delivered. Joyce liked order; she approached her chores blankly, as she did her treats. Supermarket shopping normalised her somewhat. She favoured the smallest trolleys, as did most others, it was upsetting if there weren't any available and she'd hang around the exit until she got one that was just being finished with. The mundane conversations soothed her, price of these mangos, cold outside, excuse me please.

Halloween had just passed, Fireworks night looming, then Christmas, and already the stores were twinkling silverly. The sinister penis pictures seemed a long way from threatening in the illuminated aisles.

Her living room looked out onto the garden. Joyce rolled her sofa over so it was adjacent with the window, determined to be proactive, a good buzzy word that she'd heard said often by women on the telly. She would watch and discover who was leaving the lewd images. And she would do so in comfort.

She leant against the armrest, propped a cushion into the hollow in her back, feet up, legs stretched, a mug of

hot chocolate steaming beside her. Initially she focused on her mallow, untidy but flourishing, its tiny pink blooms a cheery antidote to the rest of the hibernating flowers. And then she watched people passing, coats buttoned, scarves, some hats, chilled air exhaling from chattering mouths. They carried briefcases, satchels, sports bags, carriers, handbags; all transporting things from one place to another. Cars, headlights and motors, occasionally music, cats, a few dogs being walked. As the night ebbed deeper into the morning fewer people passed. Joyce needed the toilet and twice ran bursting to it. On her return she anxiously sought out the plant but both times it remained undisturbed.

'So maybe it blew there.'

'Yes that's what I thought at first, I've found five so far though, now that's far from a coincidence don't you think?'

Marie agreed but wasn't sure what Joyce should do.

'You can't keep on sitting in the dark night after night; it'll do you no good.'

'It's as if he knows I'm watching.'

'You don't think he can see you surely?'

'I don't like it, it gives me the creeps.'

'I'm not surprised love.'

Once the thought that it was Bert entered her head it stayed there like a puzzle piece satisfyingly inserted. He lived two doors away, a widow with dark, stained trousers. The scent of pipe tobacco stalely surrounded him,

and now Joyce supposed the aura of masturbation to cling to him too. She couldn't decide whether he was terrorising her or sexually propositioning her. Mucky bastard.

She had three bookcases, each lined with books higgledy piggledy stacked sideways and lengthways. Yellowing musty pages of church bazaar novels and publisher's seconds and art books from boot fairs, bargains because their printed value was far more than she had paid. They had been untouched for years, papery dust gatherers silent despite all their words. She sat in the centre of her floor, flicking leisurely, knowing only that she would recognise it when she found it.

The photograph was of a Korean couple, at least that was her assumption, she'd always had difficulty with the oriental types and they could be so touchy if you got it wrong. Anyway, they were Korean, or Japanese, definitely not Chinese. A lovely young couple, wholesome and squeaky clean. Both wore dazzling white t shirts and looked smilingly to the distant right. They looked happy but not ecstatic, like ice skaters without the sparkles, anticipating perfect six point zeros forcing joy at their second place five point nines. The girl wore an oversized stripy bow at the back of her head and held two orange flowers, the boy stood with his hands on his hips. Joyce knew that they would be polite. She ripped the page from the book, feeling empowered.

At 4.33 a.m. she left her house. The night was crisp, soft moon shine beaming all around, lighting the crunch

of leaves that littered the pavement. Bert's house was in darkness as she padded through his garden. He didn't care for his plants and they grew strangling each other; a tangle of branches engaging in a Darwinian struggle to survive. She firmly slotted the image between two chunky stems, checking that it was stable enough to withstand autumnal winds by blowing on it with as much puff as she could muster. Then she went home.

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Sara Crowley has had short stories published in Pulp Net, flashquake, and a variety of other lovely places. Her novel in progress was shortlisted for the Faber/Booktokens Not Yet Published Award in 2007. © Sara Crowley, 2008.

## DODIE'S GIFT VANESSA GEBBIE

There is a little blood on the sand, in a hollow in the dunes. There is semen too, although it is hidden in the shadows where sand and grass have been churned. The blood is clear, scarlet, bright; both its colour and its brightness out of place in the soft grey-green and pale straw colours here. It will fade soon, darken until it's almost black, and it will be lost when a herring gull chooses this place to bring the head of a newly dead catfish. He will drop it, stand over it, stabbing at it with his yellow hooked beak, parting skin from muscle, lip from cheek, eye from socket, until all that is left is a mess of reddened bone and one thin sliver of catfish skin with a feeler still attached.

There are tracks leading in different directions. One set, Dodie's, scramble up the side of the dune, the sand puddled and broken where she tried to claw her way out of the hollow, the top slipping further away with every step. The marram grasses are crushed where she slid down towards the field. The barley stubble is also crushed, over, over, over, where Dodie ran crying to the General Stores.

The other footmarks are The Philosopher's, weighted,

regular, the sand only disturbed and uneven in one spot at the base of the slope where he stood to adjust his clothing before striding away towards the caravan site.

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Who is Dodie? Just this: a woman in her forties who works at the Stores. Invisible. She wears a blue nylon overall, and if it is hot she is uncomfortable by the end of the day. Maybe she smells of onions. She sleeps above the Stores in a small room that overlooks the yard. She's worked here as long as the surfers and body boarders who stay at the caravan site can remember. If you find her at the Tinner's Arms in the evening, you'll see she doesn't drink much, makes half a cider last all evening, but Bill at the Tinner's doesn't mind. She's a fixture who has a place here, whereas in a city she would drown.

It is difficult to give a name to what makes Dodie different. There is no lack of intelligence, with her appetite for reading of all sorts, crosswords, number puzzles. But it is as though a membrane separates Dodie from the world. As though she was born covered in a cowl which was never quite stripped away. She looks at you, puzzled, trying to work you out, trying to read you, know you.

What she does know is here, in the Stores. She knows the pastel and black plastic tops of deodorants and the gold, white and green of hairsprays. She knows the sugary smell of Lux soap, the deeper elusive scent of Imperial Leather. She knows the jolly primary colours of perfect cereal bowls on the packets of own brand and Kellogs. She

knows how sticky soap powder feels if it spills out of the box.

Dodie reads everything. Everything that comes in to the Stores in twine-tied bundles brought by the paper van. Newspapers. Women's magazines, white smiles on the cover, *'How to cook for six on a shoestring'*, *'Sex after the menopause? It's great!'* Men's magazines with bottoms and breasts pushing out on the front cover. Children's comics. Puzzle books. She uses the photocopier in the back to copy the puzzles. Fishing periodicals. Surfing magazines. Music magazines. The special stamp-collecting issue that comes in for Mr. Fisher next to the Church Hall. She takes them up to her room and reads them all, careful not to mark them, then pushes them under the mattress to flatten them and puts them on the shelves the next day.

Who is The Philosopher? Just this: a man in late middle age, like a million others, greying, spreading, unremarkable. Invisible too. He came into the General Stores towards the end of a day in mid-September, and stood by the bread racks. He put one hand up to a Mother's Pride plastic wrapper, and just stood there, head bowed, his rucksack making it difficult for other shoppers to pass easily. Dodie waited for a while before coming out from behind the counter.

'What are you doing?' she said, glancing at his face, then away.

The man looked up at the bread, then at her.

'I'm thinking,' he said. 'I'm thinking about bread.'

'OK, but could you think over there?'

The man did not smile, although his eyes narrowed a little and it could have been a smile coming. Dodie had read that smiles start with the eyes. But if she had looked closer, there were no laughter lines. He took a loaf of bread and moved to the till. Dodie took his money without a word. From then on he was, to her at any rate, The Philosopher.

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They know little about each other after a few days of him appearing in the Stores, standing there, thinking. He chooses his times. Chooses times when the Stores isn't too busy, so he can stand and think. Because he knows it intrigues her.

She has no idea who he is. Just a man, slightly overweight, staying on the caravan site (she asked), cheap deal, last minute. Caravan sleeping four, but he's only one. He goes for long walks, alone. She's seen him in The Tinner's, drinking beer out of a bottle like a teenager. She asked his name 'Mr ...can't remember,' someone said.

She imagines him shaving in the morning in pyjama bottoms, peering into a speckled mirror that spots his face. He has a mouth that might have turned up once, now it is pinched. His hair is faded, was reddish. Thinning. His eyebrows are a straggle of too-long hairs. He looks wild, energetic. But that may be just illusion.

Now Dodie's thinking too. She's thinking she's never

met anyone like this. He stands there in the Stores at different times, day after day, where she can see him, but she's sure he hasn't stood there deliberately. By the bread one day, the tinned food, the next. He sat on the floor once with his head in hands. He is so deep, she thinks. So lost in thought. He was thinking about bread that first time. *Bread*. What about bread? A fundamental of life? Biblical? What, Mother's Pride? Then *tinned food*? Thinking about tinned food? Time, that must be it, with tinned food. Preserving time. Keeping things unspoiled, but in the dark where you can't see them, and they can't see you. Baked beans, own brand cheaper than Heinz. Tomatoes, dented tins cut price. It must all mean something.

Dodie thinks this must have been coming for a long time. She hasn't exactly been waiting for it, more it has been waiting to happen. She knows she's clever, because they told her, years ago at school, she won prizes. Books, with stickers in. Bookmarks. A painted plate.

The Philosopher has been coming for a long, long time. It's been in her horoscope. Over and over she's read it: *'Virgo: With the moon in Mercury, you're going through a difficult time in your love life. But your time will come. Your even temperament will please someone who needs you.'*

Dodie the *Virgo*. She knows, because she's read it so many times... *'Only 5% of females are still virgins at the age of forty five.'*

She's forty five before Christmas.

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Today The Philosopher stands by the washing powders, fabric conditioner and Fairy Liquid. It's nearly closing time, and Dodie needs to mark some unsold goods with today's sell-by date at half price. She needs to walk past him to collect two Mother's Prides and some malt loaf, some wedges of 'Farmer's Own Choice' cheese and a four pack of cherry yogurt. He says nothing as she passes him. But when she comes back, he's blocking the aisle.

'Excuse me,' she says.

He says nothing but moves back. Then, when Dodie is touching him with her arms, holding the goods close to her breasts, because he has not moved quite far enough, he says, his voice so close to her ear that she jumps,

'I'm still thinking.'

'What about?'

'Guess.'

Dodie looks round, sees a Fairy Liquid bottle. 'Recycling?' she says, 'Reincarnation?'

The Philosopher smiles, kind of. 'How clever,' he says. 'We are on the same wavelength.'

'Are we?' says Dodie, nonplussed, putting half-price stickers on the malt loaf. The Philosopher puts a hand on the loaf, catching two of her fingers under his. She jumps again. His breath smells sweet-heavy.

'I'll have this,' he says. 'And that,' he nods his head at the bread and cheese, 'when you've finished.' He waits.

Dodie adds the prices up wrong. Blushes.

'When you've finished...' he repeats.

'Sorry...'

'...we could talk about thinking. At the pub.'

'Sorry?'

'Well?'

She was right. It was coming. He was always coming, and she should have been ready. He'd seen something in her that she hasn't met herself yet, and she didn't see it. '*... your time will come. Your even temperament...*'

'Yes please.' Dodie says. And knowing she smells of onions, 'Half an hour?'

And Dodie starts to make herself ready. Not just herself, although this is unconscious. Her room is as tired as she is. The bed slumps; what was bright pink candlewick is faded, uneven, the fringe pulled, trailing on the rug. There is a framed print above the bed of the sea crashing against rocks; someone, a long time back, pencilled a boat in one corner. She tried to rub it out but it's still there, a stick man waving through the ocean at her. Dodie takes down the unlined cotton curtains and takes off the bedspread, bundles them together and puts them in the downstairs washing machine. That makes her feel better.

Later, in The Tinnerns, they sit together in Dodie's corner, on sagging burgundy plush cushions. He has bought her a cider, he drinks beer from the bottle. They talk. Dodie is half listening, looking at the scratches through the varnish on the table...the number four among the scratches.

Bill calls over. 'Dodie? You OK, love?'

The Philosopher answers, before she does, 'She's fine.' Dodie just looks up and smiles.

'Look,' Dodie says, tracing the scratches with her finger. 'Number four.'

'It will mean something,' he says 'You wait...'

And Dodie waits, breathlessly, drinking in instances of the number four the next day. Four silver cars in a row outside the General Stores. Four stamps on a letter from New Zealand awaiting collection under the counter of the post office shelf. Four brown moles on her left thigh. Four packets of condoms sold to the driver of the paper van.

She's picking up some apples that have fallen onto the floor. A voice close to her ear, a hand on her shoulder...'So what did the number mean?' Dodie drops the apples. Four of them.

'I don't know...' she breathes.

'Yes you do,' he says. 'You have the gift.'

Dodie straightens up, the apples in her hands. 'Have I?' she says, eyes bright.

And so it goes on. Dodie's curtains are rehung. She cleans her room over and over, getting down on her knees to wipe the skirting board with a blue cloth. She buys herself some hair colour, first time ever. Chestnut lights, it says, and it splashes in the sink, works its way into the cracks round the plughole. Leaves her hairline looking dark, dark. She tries the lipsticks, buys a chalky pink one, *Moonflower*.

Bill at the pub keeps asking if she's OK. She smiles every time.

Four days. They've been 'going out' for four days, and people are smiling at Dodie, not at The Philosopher, and she thinks they mind about something. Maybe they are jealous because not everyone can think so deeply. Today, today, today and today. Four of them. He's so clever. He thinks about hedges, drainage ditches, yellow diggers, dead crows, sheep's wool, and seaweed. He says there is so much to think about in this life.

Dodie breathes faster. She searches for things, finds them, throws things out for him to think about.

'What about beer mats? Darts? Chipped pint mugs? Alcopops? Boiled eggs? Coffee?'

The Philosopher smiles and pats her hand. She doesn't jump any more. 'Some things are deeper than others,' he says. 'I'll teach you.'

And she listens looking through him, her lower *Moonflower* lip hanging loose as he thinks in streams about newspapers, printing ink and trees, the 'circle' as he calls it of capitalism (where, he says, lots of people work in a circle, or a spiral, doing things made necessary by the 'work' done by the person before, but take them all out, and the world wouldn't suffer). Sometimes he bangs the table with his fist and her cider jumps and Bill looks over and raises an eyebrow.

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It's late on the fourth day. She's going for a walk with

The Philosopher today. He's coming for her soon, half an hour after closing time he said, seven thirty they close. Eight he'll come. They'll walk down the lane towards the beach, and they will think as they go about bungalows, lamp posts, telegraph poles maybe. *Communication*. That's it. Tarmac, double yellow lines and crows flying high up above the bent fir trees. Wind. She'll ask him what wind is, because you can feel it, but can't see it, and that must be like God. Or is it the world turning faster and faster and faster so in the end everyone will fall over? She laughs at the thought and feels the power of it.

Dodie remakes her bed and buys herself some freesias from the bucket outside the door of the Stores. Yellow like slab cheddar. And lilac. She cuts the stems, puts them in a handleless mug painted with a boat flying the Cornish flag, and the freesias splay out on the chest of drawers, hanging in her room like aliens. She showers, using a new shower gel the girl surfers buy, which smells of lemons and limes. She puts on a flowered skirt she hasn't worn for years, a white blouse. *Moonflower*.

The lane is quiet. They pass the bungalows, and just as she knew they would they think about bungalows. About old people, zimmer frames and holiday-makers, buckets of dead whelks. They pass the telegraph poles, wires, and she was right, they think about the buzz of conversation, and she brings in God then, about how God can differentiate between prayers and ordinary conversation. About whether whispering is a better way to com-

municate than shouting, about letters from new Zealand that no-one picks up, and she's sure it's a woman's writing.

They pass the barley field and think about the razored stalks, about harvest mice displaced, and she feels the sadness of it.

They walk on to the beach, the sea pounding to their left, the dunes on their right. They pass three herring gulls tearing at a dead catfish, and they think about predation, food chains, starving and feasting. The beach is empty, and it's getting cold. The sun is still up there, just.

The Philosopher has been holding her hand. His grip tightens a little and she starts to think about her room, the curtains, how the sun will come through the curtains early in the morning, the freesias. The stick man in his boat. She wants to tell The Philosopher about the stick man, because it must mean something, and he says, 'Let's sit down here,' pulling her towards the dunes. But Dodie doesn't want to go there. She wants to go back to her room, because her horoscope did say, '*... your time will come. Your even temperament will please someone who needs you.*'

But he doesn't listen. He's not saying what he's thinking any more, and their footsteps, which had left regular tracks in the damp sand, flat flat sand right to where the waves are beating, become crossed, muddled, fast.

Dodie stumbles on the dry sand of the dunes as he

pulls her up the side. 'Why?' she says. 'Why are we going here?' and she says something about freesias and stick men and The Philosopher says nothing, just pulls, pushes, doesn't even look at her face, pulls, pushes, pulls, pushes and hurts her.

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He doesn't come in to the General Stores the next day.

At the end of that day, Dodie walks down the lane, waiting for the thoughts to come. She passes the bungalows, and they are just bungalows, their windows blank. The telegraph poles carry wires that hum in the wind. The barley stalks have cut her legs. She walks along the beach, looking to see if the tide has left any footsteps. They are there, somewhere, she thinks, even though their shape has gone.

She sees a young couple walking, the girl's hair blowing over her face like a veil, and she feels the sadness of that.

She waits for them to pass and climbs slowly up the dune, searching. The grasses are still flat, but the breeze has softened the shadows in the sand. The place is healing itself. But there, at the bottom of the hollow, a gull has had a meal, and the sand holds white bone, red bone, skin, and Dodie doesn't want to see it.

She tries to make something out of yesterday's incident that is not hopeless. She won't allow herself to name the act that happened here, and will wonder, if someone takes something you were going to give them anyway, is

that stealing? She will think. In time her thoughts will become memories, and she will recall a little kindness where in fact there was little, and some meaning where there was none at all.

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Vanessa Gebbie's short fiction has won many awards and has been published around the world (and appears in issues 1 and 18 of LITRO). This story is taken from her recent collection, *Words from a Glass Bubble* (Salt Publishing, 2008) – see [www.saltpublishing.com](http://www.saltpublishing.com) for more info. © Vanessa Gebbie, 2008.

## THE WAKE ZOË GREEN

It is four o'clock on a warm August afternoon in Farley Green and I am sitting on my balcony with a cup of Ceylon and one of those apricot biscuits Mina bakes me, and I am planning my funeral on the back of an envelope. 6.30pm, I scrawl on the smudged brown paper. Dusk is fitting for the fifth act, the birds carolling forth my requiem beneath the dying sun, and the audience hunched in winter coats beneath the naked trees, awed and tearful at the symbolism of the set. *Where?* I settled on burial some time ago, the noise of the crematorium conveyor belt being too reminiscent of the MRI scanner, but it would be hypocritical to have it in a church, and all the best churchyards are booked up anyway. Mina, my Macmillan nurse, says it's positive I'm planning the funeral; I suppose she thinks it demonstrates acceptance.

The girl who lives in the bottom half of the house – Hester – is in the garden watering courgettes and her black lab bounces in and out between them brandishing a stick. I watch Hester often; today she is talking to the dog as she waters, and her blue and white cheesecloth top looks Greek. The garden is built on three levels and tum-

bles down to the river where the dog likes to swim. When he swims he makes a honking noise and the hair on his head sinks flat like a seal's. Afterwards he stumbles out and shakes his shoulders so droplets fly everywhere and his fur sticks up in quills.

I'd like to say that I don't want anything big, but I'd be lying. The audience will require one last bow, a final curtain-call. Perhaps, at the very end, I shall convert; I've always fancied Catholicism, and I'm fond of the place at the end of the road with its perpendicular-style windows and the old Romanesque chancel. The acoustics are good, the choir is not bad, and the churchyard is of the briar and ivy variety; I think I would fit in. *St Peter's?* I scrawl. *Incense? Verdi? Find priest.*

I retired here from London five years ago just before Hester arrived to take up the post of Radford estate manager. Radford is the castle at the top of the hill. I saw her in the early mornings, sitting on a low bough at the bottom of the garden, staring out over the river. She had a boyfriend, a married teacher at the local college. Laurence held her not by her hand but by the arse and, in the evenings, their arguments brewed and boiled, hissing and fizzling under the dying sun. She – this dark-haired dryad – chucked stuff, plant pots mostly, and when they broke up she troughed her way from eight to twelve stone in less than a year. Like me, a person of appetites.

The family I shall not invite to the funeral: they are either dead or disapproving. I daresay there will be enough

glamour to whip up a smattering of media interest – though I shall only invite those who won't upstage me, which rules out the West End contingent. But Ferdi – here's the question – shall I invite Ferdi? Will *Debrett's* instruct me that, as at weddings, ex-lovers are *personae non gratae* at funerals?

Hester is slicing away at the courgettes which, with their frilled yellow heads, remind me of the lanterns they hang in Soho at Chinese New Year. She saws at the stalks with a large blunt knife, muscles glowing in the sandy light. The dog has his muzzle underneath the hedge; his hind legs strain forwards while his forelegs crouch and scrabble; his tail whips back and forth, slashing at sunflower stalks. He is burying something. Or digging it up.

When she bought the dog, the four stone slid away. She called him Laurence, after the teacher. I heard her calling him in the evenings: "Si-i-it. Good boy. Lie, Laurie! Good dog." She walked him four times a day and he developed the contours of a racer. Her dark hair became shiny like his and I wondered if she realized her own capacity for Mediterranean glamour. It was at this time that they told me I was dying.

*Ferdi*, I write, question mark. And, in brackets, *Marco*, question mark. *I* was never glamorous. A director prefers to watch from behind the scenes, though Ferdi accused me of showiness in buying the yellow coat that made me look like Marlon in *Last Tango*. Ferdi wasn't so much glamorous as coiffed, and his Givenchy glasses stud-

ied me from atop his straight marble nose. Shut away in his literary agency on Piccadilly, he was surrounded by an aura of mystery, and I determined to peel off his skin and scoop out everything inside. I wanted to know him better than he knew himself; I wanted to live him and I wanted him to want to know and live me. I should rather have desired contentment for us both, but I didn't. I thought that to be in love was to fuck and to be discontented.

Hester is walking up towards the house, a bunch of courgettes under one arm, the dog galumphing behind her, its jaw dangling open and its rasping pant audible from where I sit. A yellowed nub of dried-out bone lies on the lawn by the hedge. It was January last year when she started on the garden: cutting back great swathes of hogweed and thistle, digging and weeding and raking and hoeing and sowing. She was, I thought, trying to bury herself. Nightly, I saw and smelt the orange glow of a cigarette on her patio, and I wished there was someone I could introduce her to, some young man of means and wit, but I knew nobody like that who was straight.

It was at an olive market in Provence ten years ago that Ferdi slid the green rosemary-barbed picholine into my mouth, and told me he loved me. How long had I waited to hear these words! How often had I dreamed them? But instead of echoing them, I chewed around the stone and spat it into my palm. When he trudged back to his hole in Piccadilly and I to my perch at Wyndham's, I

ignored his calls, stood him up for dinner and, when I did see him, serrated my conversation with references to exes. Exes who were better looking, better in bed, more amusing, more famous, more extraordinary. I was testing him; he did not know and, when I found the note under the empty cafetière, I felt vindicated. He couldn't possibly have loved me: he had lied. He had tried to make me love him; he was vain, an attention-seeker, *needy*. He had betrayed me: he was going to Italy with Marco. With Marco, that silent wonder, that gawking nonentity, that glaikit clothes horse with his ridiculous bow ties, silly Edwardian moustache, and tiny pervert's hands. Marco, to whom *I* had introduced him, who was *my* friend, and *my* find.

The bell goes downstairs and the dog lets out a dominoes of barks. Garlic rubs itself against the evening air; Hester must have guests. I have little appetite myself – the drugs have subdued it – but I go inside to pour a sherry. When I emerge, Hester is standing in front of the sunflowers, holding hands with a man. He is taller, older, and his pinstripes out him as a servant of the City. Hester is explaining something, drawing pictures in the air with her fingers, and he gazes at her, rapt. Then he cups her head and covers her mouth with his. I watch; surely I can be excused this, now, at this time. It helps with the memories.

Ferdi doesn't know I'm ill. A perverse, bitter part of me believes that if he really cared he would. I want to

have Spender's *Farewell* at the service and I think of the Irish river of Ferdi's voice, and of how he would have been the natural choice to read. Hester and the man are still kissing – kissing and smiling secrets. I know that nobody will ever put their mouth on mine like that again. Pain, weakness, reliance – these traits of the disease are not attractive. When I crumple up the envelope, Hester and the man break apart.

She waves a braceleted hand at me and leads him inside. The door shuts and laughter trickles from within. The noise of furniture moving, then silence. It is cold out here now: the sun has dropped below the trees and my hands look ghostly pale in the half light. For the first time in weeks, I feel the nudge of hunger – but I know there is nothing in the fridge apart from Mina's biscuits and some year old cheddar. I smooth the envelope flat on the table, and add his name. There: it is done. To host one's own prehumous wake is, I know, unorthodox; but it is the only way I'll ever find out if he comes. I don't add Marco to the list.

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Zoë Green is Writer in Residence at Charterhouse School. Born in Scotland, she read English at Oxford and did the University of East Anglia Creative Writing MA. She won the Orange Prize for Short Fiction in 2004 and is represented by Euan Thorneycroft at A.M. Heath. © Zoë Green,

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