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Eeny Meeny

Written by M. J. Arlidge

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Eeny Meeny

M. J. ARLIDGE



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I

Sam is asleep. I could kill him now. His face is turned from me – it wouldn't be hard. Would he stir if I moved? Try and stop me? Or would he just be *glad* that this nightmare was over?

I can't think like that. I must try to remember what is real, what is good. But when you're a prisoner, the days seem endless and hope is the first thing to die.

I rack my brains for happy memories to hold off the dark thoughts, but they are harder and harder to summon.

We've only been here ten days (or is it eleven?), yet normal life already seems like a distant memory. We were hitching back from a gig in London when it happened. It was pouring with rain and a succession of cars had sailed past without a second look. We were soaked to the skin and about to turn back, when finally a van pulled over. Inside, it was warm and dry. We were offered coffee from a flask. Just the smell of it was enough to cheer us up. The taste was even better. We didn't realize that it would be our last taste of freedom.

When I came to, my head was pounding. Blood coated my mouth. I wasn't in the warm van any more. I

was in a cold, dark space. Was I dreaming? A noise behind me made me start. But it was only Sam stumbling to his feet.

We'd been robbed. Robbed and dumped. I scrambled forward, clawing at the walls that enclosed us. Cold, hard tiles. I crashed into Sam and for a brief moment held him, breathing in that smell I love so much. Then the moment passed and we realized the horror of our situation.

We were in a disused diving pool. Derelict, unloved, it had been stripped of the boards, signs and even the steps. Everything that could be salvaged had been. Leaving a deep smooth tank that was impossible to climb out of.

Was that evil shit listening to our screams? Probably. Because when we finally stopped, it happened. We heard a mobile phone ringing and for a brief, glorious moment thought it was someone coming to rescue us. But then we saw the phone's face glowing on the pool floor beside us. Sam didn't move, so I ran. Why did it have to be me? Why does it *always* have to be me?

'Hello, Amy.'

The voice on the other end was distorted, inhuman. I wanted to beg for mercy, explain that they'd made a terrible mistake, but the fact that they knew my name seemed to rob me of all conviction. I said nothing, so the voice continued, relentless and dispassionate:

'Do you want to live?'

'Who are you? What have you done to u—'

'Do you want to live?'

For a minute, I can't reply. My tongue won't move. But then:

'Yes.'

'On the floor by the phone you'll find a gun. It has one bullet in it. For Sam or for yourself. That is the price of your freedom. You must kill to live. Do you want to live, Amy?'

I can't speak. I want to vomit.

'Well, do you?'

And then the phone goes dead. Which is when Sam asks:

'What did they say?'

Sam is asleep beside me. I could do it now.

2

The woman cried out in pain. And then was silent. Across her back, livid lines were forming. Jake raised the crop again and brought it down with a snap. The woman bucked, cried out, then said:

'Again.'

She seldom said anything else. She wasn't the talkative type. Not like some of his clients. The administrators, accountants and clerks stuck in sexless relationships were *desperate* to talk – desperate to be liked by the man who beat them up for money. She was different – a closed book. She never mentioned where she'd found him. Or why she came. She issued her instructions – her needs – clearly and crisply, then asked him to get on with it.

They always started by securing her wrists. Two studded leather straps pulled taut, so that her arms were tethered to the wall. Iron ankle fetters secured her feet to the floor. Her clothes would be neatly stowed on the chair provided, so there she'd stand, chained, in her underwear, awaiting punishment.

There was no roleplay. No 'Please don't hurt me, Daddy' or 'I'm a bad, bad girl.' She just wanted him to hurt her. In some ways it was a relief. Every job becomes

routine after a while and sometimes it was nice not to have to pander to the fantasies of sad, wannabe victims. At the same time it was frustrating, her refusal to strike up a proper relationship with him. The most important element of any S&M encounter is trust. The submissive needs to know that they are in safe hands, that their dominator knows their personality and their needs and can give them a fulfilling experience on terms that are comfortable for both parties. If you don't have that, then it swiftly becomes assault or even abuse – and that was most definitely *not* Jake's bag.

So he chipped away – the odd question here, the odd comment there. And over time he'd divined the basics: that she wasn't from Southampton originally, that she had no family, that she was closing in on forty and didn't mind. He also knew from their sessions together that pain was her thing. Sex didn't come into it. She didn't want to be teased or titillated. She wanted to be punished. The beatings never went too far, but they were hard and unremitting. She had the body to take it – she was tall, muscular and seriously toned – and the traces of ancient scars suggested she was not new to the S&M scene.

And yet for all his probing, all his carefully worded questions, there was only one thing that Jake knew about her for sure. Once, when she was getting dressed, her photo ID slipped from her jacket pocket on to the floor. She snatched it up in a heartbeat – thought he

hadn't seen, but he had. He thought he knew a bit about people, but this one had taken him by surprise. If he hadn't seen her ID, he'd never have guessed that she was a policewoman.

3

Amy is squatting a few feet away from me. There's no awkwardness now and she urinates on the floor without embarrassment. I watch as the thin sliver of piss hits the tiles, tiny droplets of it bouncing back up to settle on her dirty knickers. A few weeks ago I would have turned away at the sight, but not now.

Her urine snakes its way slowly down the slope to join the stagnant puddle of waste that has built up at the deeper end. I'm glued to its progress but finally the last drops disappear and the entertainment is over. She retreats to her corner. No words of apology, no acknowledgement. We have become animals – careless of ourselves and of each other.

It wasn't always like this. At the beginning, we were furious, defiant. We were determined that we would not die here, that together we would survive. Amy stood on my shoulders, her nails cracking as she clawed the tiles, straining to reach the lip of the pool. When that didn't work, she tried jumping up from my shoulders. But the pool is fifteen feet deep, maybe more, and salvation seems forever just out of reach.

We tried the phone but it was pin-locked and after we'd tried a few combinations it ran out of power. We

shouted and screamed until our throats raged. All we heard in response was our echo, mocking us. Sometimes it feels like we are on another planet, with not another human being for miles around. Christmas is approaching, there must be people out looking for us, but it's hard to believe that here, surrounded by this terrible, enduring silence.

Escape is not an option, so now we simply survive. We chewed our nails until our fingers bled, then sucked up the blood greedily. We licked the condensation from the tiles at dawn, but still our stomachs ached. We talked about eating our clothes . . . but thought better of it. It's freezing at night and all that keeps us from dying of hypothermia is our scant clothing and the heat we glean from each other.

Is it my imagination or have our embraces become less warm? Less secure? Since it happened, we have clung to each other day and night, willing each other to survive, desperate not to be left alone in this awful place. We play games to pass the time, imagining what we will do after the cavalry arrive – what we will eat, what we will say to our families, what we will get for Christmas. But slowly these games have tailed off as we realize that we were brought here for a purpose and that there will be no happy ending for us.

'Amy?'

Silence.

'Amy, please say something.'

She doesn't look at me. She doesn't talk to me. Have I lost her for good? I try to imagine what she's thinking, but I can't.

Perhaps there is nothing left to say. We have tried everything, explored every inch of our prison, looking for a means of escape. The only thing we haven't touched is the gun. It sits there still, calling to us.

I raise my head and catch Amy looking at it. She meets my eye and drops hers. Could she pick it up? A fortnight ago, I'd have said no way. But now? Trust is a fragile thing – hard to earn, easy to lose. I'm not sure of anything any more.

All I do know is that one of us is going to die.

4

Stepping out into the crisp, evening air, Helen Grace felt relaxed and happy. Slowing her pace, she savoured this moment of peace, casting an amused eye over the throng of shoppers that surrounded her.

She was heading for Southampton's Christmas market. Ranged along the southern flank of the WestQuay shopping centre, the market was an annual event – an opportunity to buy original, hand-crafted presents that weren't on any Amazon wishlist. Helen hated Christmas, but every year without fail she bought something for Anna and Marie. It was her one festive indulgence and she always made the most of it. She bought jewellery, scented candles and other trinkets but didn't stint on the comestibles either, snapping up dates, chocolates, an obscenely expensive Christmas pudding and a pretty packet of peppermint creams – Marie was particularly partial to those.

She retrieved her Kawasaki from WestQuay car park and blasted through the city centre traffic, heading south-east towards Weston. She was speeding away from excitement and affluence and towards deprivation and despair, drawn inexorably towards the five monolithic tower blocks that dominate the skyline there. For

years they've greeted those approaching Southampton by sea and in the past they were worthy of such an honour, being imposing, futuristic and optimistic. But it was a very different story now.

Melbourne Tower was by far the most dilapidated. Four years ago, an illegal drugs factory had exploded on the sixth floor. The damage was extensive, the heart ripped out of the building. The council promised to rebuild it, but the recession put paid to their plans. It was still technically scheduled for renovation but no one believed it would happen now. So the building remained as it was, wounded and unloved, abandoned by the vast majority of the families who used to live there. Now it was the terrain of junkies, squatters and those with nowhere else to go. It was a nasty, forgotten place.

Helen parked her motorbike a safe distance from the towers, and continued on foot. Women generally didn't walk the estate alone at night, but Helen never felt concerned for her safety. She was known here and people tended to steer clear, which suited her fine. All was quiet tonight, apart from some dogs sniffing around a burnt-out car, so Helen picked her way past the needles and condoms and stepped inside Melbourne Tower.

On the fourth floor, she paused outside flat 408. It had once been a nice, comfortable council flat, but now it looked like Fort Knox. The front door was riddled with deadlocks, but more striking were the metal grilles

– padlocked firmly shut – that reinforced the main entrance. The vile graffiti – *flid, retard, mong* – that covered the exterior gave a clue as to why the flat was so protected.

It was the home of Marie and Anna Storey. Anna was severely disabled, unable to speak, feed herself or go to the toilet. Anna (now fourteen) needed her middle-aged mother to do everything for her, so her mum did the best she could. Living on benefits and handouts, buying food from Lidl, being sparing with the heating. They would have been ok like that – these were the cards they'd been dealt and Marie was not one to be bitter – had it not been for the local yobs. The fact that they had nothing to do and were from broken homes was no excuse. These kids were just nasty thugs who enjoyed belittling, bullying and attacking a vulnerable woman and child.

Helen knew all this because she'd taken a special interest in them. One of the scrotes – a vicious acne-covered dropout called Steven Green – had attempted to burn out their flat. The fire crew had got there in time and the damage was contained to the hallway and front room, but the effect on Marie and Anna had been devastating. They were utterly terrified when Helen interviewed them. This was attempted murder and someone needed to be called to account for it. She did her best, but the case never went to court for lack of witnesses. Helen urged her to move, but Marie was

stubborn. The flat was their family home and had been kitted out specially to deal with Anna's mobility limitations – why should they have to move? Marie sold what valuables she still possessed to fortify the flat. Four years later, the drugs factory blew up. Before that, the lift had worked fine and flat 408 was basically a happy home. Now it was a prison.

The Social Services were supposed to call round, to keep an eye on them, but they avoided this place like the plague and visits were fleeting at best. And so Helen, who had little to keep her home at night, would pop in. Which is why she'd been there when Steven Green and company returned to finish the job. He was high as usual and clutching a petrol can that he was trying to light with a home-made fuse. He didn't get the chance. Helen's baton caught him on the elbow, then across the neck, sending him sprawling to the floor. The others were caught off guard by the sudden appearance of a copper and dropped their petrol bombs to flee. Some of them made it, some of them didn't. Helen had been well trained in how to take the legs out from under fleeing suspects. She foiled the attack and not long after had the distinct pleasure of watching Steven Green and three of his closest friends get a substantial prison sentence. Some days the job really did give back.

Helen suppressed a shiver. The dingy corridors, the broken lives, the graffiti and filth were too redolent of

her own upbringing not to provoke a reaction. It conjured up memories she'd fought hard to suppress and which she forced back down now. She was here for Marie and Anna – she refused to let anything darken her mood today.

She knocked on the door three times – their special code – and after much unlocking the door swung open.

'Meals on wheels?' Helen ventured.

'Piss off,' came the predictable reply.

Helen smiled as Marie opened the outer grille for her to enter. Already her dark thoughts were receding – Marie's 'warm' welcome always had that effect on her. Once inside, Helen doled out her gifts, received hers and felt utterly at peace. For a brief moment, flat 408 was her sanctuary from a dark and violent world.