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Opening Extract from...

Beneath the Skin

Written by Sandra Ireland

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Beneath the Skin

Sandra Ireland

Polygon

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West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

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To my mum, Ella Forbes Redfern

1

The girl hands him a mask. It has the colour and texture of an eggshell, carefully blank, with two slits for eyes. He can't take his eyes off the eyes.

'Don't worry.' The girl smiles at him. Her badge says 'Melissa'. 'Take your time getting started. Don't think in terms of creating a finished product – it's the symbolism that's important.'

She's pretty. Earnest. Pretty earnest. What makes a lass like that get involved with a bunch of damaged squaddies, handing out stuff like it's a children's art class? What was she trying to achieve? Walt didn't buy it, all this art therapy bullshit, but his doctor had referred him. He was supposed to be grateful.

He sits and looks at the mask. *You haven't a clue, mate. You haven't a clue what goes on in my head.* You can walk away from the war but the demons walk with you, every step of the fucking way.

'Any ideas? No?' Melissa tilts her head to one side. She has a sweet face. 'There are examples around the walls from my last class, if you want to take a look.' It's as good an excuse as any to get up from the desk, to keep moving. The guy opposite is really getting stuck in, mixing a palette of tomato-ketchup red. Walt shivers. *Too close to the bone, man.*

He begins to slowly circle the room. This trendy arts complex is on the outskirts of Newcastle. Steven and Natalie dropped him off and have gone to the Metrocentre for a couple of hours, leaving the wee ones with Mam and Dad. He has the feeling it had all been orchestrated before he'd even decided to do this.

The place has a print studio for kiddies and pensioners with nothing better to do. Now it's full of wounded soldiers mixing paint and dabbing with thoughtful brush strokes.

'Have a look at the walls,' Melissa reminds him.

The masks on the walls are horrendous. If that's what people are carrying around in their heads they're seriously fucked up. He remembers that painting he'd seen once when he was on R&R in Oslo. *The Scream*. He remembers the round 'O' of the mouth, the bulging eyes. The nose reduced to two slits in a jaundiced mask of a face. He'd been whole, back then, not really on speaking terms with anguish.

Some of these masks are split in two, asymmetrical horrors with bleeding eye sockets and black words carved into the cheeks, the skulls. REMORSE. GRIEF. GUILT. PAIN. HATE. Some are painted bone-white, others yellow, sulphurous like the devil. They have stitches for mouths. They seem to close in on him like a screaming gallery of the dead and dying. They are the faces he sees in the night, the demons that live in his breast pocket. His knees weaken and the sweat begins to pool in his lower back.

Oh God. No, not now, not here. His heartbeat thumps in his throat, strangling him. He turns to Melissa. 'I can't do this,' he says. 'I can't do it.'

And she says, 'It's okay. Take all the time you need.'

He finds himself outside in the cool air. There's a café bar with patio tables. He wants to sink down onto one of the cast-iron chairs and light up a fag, but instead he walks unsteadily through an archway and across a timber bridge. He can't control it: the panic, the flashbacks. It's happening a lot. No one ever speaks of it, the way you go off to war cocky and reckless and come back all messed up. They haven't come up with a therapy that can give you back your innocence.

The arts centre is set in its own landscaped grounds, with a

rippling stream and a woodland walk for the school kids. He moves into the cool drabness of the trees. Stopping beside a weathered oak, he lays a hand on it. The tough bark grows warm under his skin. The tree reminds him of his mam's garden.

He's not sure how long he's been gone, but Melissa looks relieved to see him. His hands are full and he drops his collection of twigs and bark onto the worktable and smiles for the first time that day.

'Got any glue?'

2

He had arrived in Edinburgh without any clear notion of what he was going to do next and ended up in Stockbridge, of all places. He'd had an aunt in Stockbridge, and recalled dutiful visits to a grim tenement with a horsehair sofa and a teapot shaped like a crinolined old lady. The place now had the feel of a bustling but trendy village. An entire basement culture seemed to be going on – bars, coffee shops and designer boutiques sitting snugly below pavement level. There was no plan. He, who had coordinated incisive military manoeuvres, was flying blind. The train from North Berwick had terminated in Edinburgh, so he'd got off, hitched his rucksack higher and wandered out into the city. Its heavy brewery smell left him longing for a beer, but it was too early, even for him. Tossing a pound to the tired piper at the junction of Waverley Bridge and Princes Street, he'd headed north, slantwise across the New Town. Down and across, down and across, like a board game; pushing his luck at the pedestrian crossings, finding himself looking up at St Stephen's Church. It sat at the junction of two roads, where the cobbles made the walking hard.

From there, he'd carried on into Stockbridge, not quite sure where he was going, what he was doing. At least it was dry; he could sit in the park, make a plan. In this tourist city it wouldn't be hard to find a cheap hostel for the night.

He shared the pavement with smartly dressed professionals grasping to-go coffee cups, dog walkers, elderly shoppers with

bags of groceries, young parents with prams. They all looked busy, content. He kept to one side, head down, slipping past them all. He fingered the loose change in his pocket, counting the coins. It wasn't a lot, but he had a few notes tucked into the bottom of his bag.

At the next corner, he turned left, and came to a sudden stop when he spotted a sign lashed to some basement railings: 'Wanted: Assistant. Must be STRONG and not SQUEAMISH.

Stone steps led into an abyss, and as he speculated about what was down there, in the dark, the weight of his rucksack threatened to yank him off balance. The straps were digging into his shoulders, squeezing his chest and stopping his breath. He shrugged off the pack and wedged it in the sharp turn of the stair. Down below, he found a dusty window and a closed door; the sign above read, simply, 'Stuff It'.

He pressed his face to the window, scrubbing at the grime with the cuff of his jacket. Yellow eyes stared back at him and he shied away, almost stumbling over an antelope's head on a wooden shield leaning against the door jamb. Then he spotted a grey cat curled up in a basket. He prodded the creature gingerly with the toe of his sneaker. Nothing.

A bell jangled as he opened the door. Floor-to-ceiling shelves of sparrows and magpies and rooks dominated the space, and there were tiny, delicate things too – butterflies pinned to beams, a sharp-nosed shrew beside the till. The cold air smelled of death, but clinically so, as if all the decay had been leached out.

A golden eagle dominated the single window, a chink of daylight accentuating the curved beak and the subtle crest of the wings. He'd never been so close to such a creature before. It was huge, magnificent, its power preserved in death. He stroked its feathers, dared it to blink, to tilt its head, just a fraction. The hollowness inside him grew deeper.

Turning to face the counter, he found himself looking at a

beheaded stag. Wasn't there a joke about how fast the beast was going when he hit the wall? It didn't seem that funny now. The counter was an old-fashioned jeweller's cabinet with a glass front, but in place of diamond rings lay a grinning crocodile on a bed of green velvet.

'Yes?' A woman emerged through a curtained doorway, revealing herself almost magically. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but she'd taken him by surprise. She seemed too bright, too young, too fragile to be in a place of so much death. His eyes lingered on the fine detail: long hair the colour of wheat, birdlike bones in her wrist as she tucked a strand behind her ear. She was wearing a stained white jumper and high leather boots. The only bit of shape about her that Walt could see was a slice of denim-clad thigh. He struggled to remember why he was there. Ah, yes. The sign. She looked like the sort of person who would write in those jagged creative strokes.

'You want an assistant?' he asked.

She looked surprised. 'Do I?'

'The sign.' He made a slight turn towards the door. 'On the railings? I was just passing. I–'

'Oh, the *sign*.' She nodded quickly a couple of times. 'Are you strong?'

He was over six foot. What did she think?

He didn't like the way she was looking at him. Women usually responded to him in a certain way. He seemed to tick the right boxes; not too thin, muscular. He had longer-than-regulation, thick dark hair and a nose that had been broken once or twice. He sported a bit of stubble but was otherwise clean. He changed his socks, smelled of soap, and he knew how to slant his smile and crinkle his eyes for maximum effect. But this woman was looking at him like none of that registered, like she was seeing underneath, to the bits you're not supposed to see.

'I'm strong,' he said. Her cool grey eyes were peeling back his skin, counting his ribs. His stomach clenched.

'Are you squeamish?'

He glanced around at her dead animals. 'I'm here, aren't I?'

'Name?'

'Walton. Robert Walton. But you can call me Walt. Everyone does.' He shot her his best grin and stuck out a hand, but she only looked at it with interest.

'Walter? Walter Potter is my favourite Victorian taxidermist. He was a genius at creating anthropomorphic dioramas. Taxidermy isn't for wimps.'

He didn't know what she'd just said but he felt vaguely irritated. 'It's Walt, not Walter, and do I look like a wimp?'

'I'm Alys,' she said. 'You'll do.'

3

The first thing he encountered on entering Alys's house was a massive polar bear. Stuffed, naturally. It stood guard at the bottom of the staircase, upright like a man, teeth bared, paws extended, claws like daggers. It had a faraway look in its eye. Resigned, Walt thought. He asked Alys if it was one of hers, but she'd just looked at him blankly. 'We call him Shackleton.'

He'd been invited in for coffee, to seal the job deal. He hadn't been sure whether that would entail coffee, beer or the slightly darker something that Alys's eyes hinted at when she looked at him. Did she want to shag him or stuff him? Anyway, they came up out of the basement and into the house above, an old Victorian building with red-brick edges.

The kitchen was large, high-ceilinged, with an L-shape of shiny units taking up one corner and a table in the centre, a big old farmhouse one with six chairs. It was piled high with boxes, newspapers, unopened bills; the usual kind of kitchen crap that no one ever bothers to shift. They had a drawer for it at home, in the pine kitchen dresser. His mother used to scoop the accumulated junk into that drawer and if you lost anything you'd have to empty out the whole shebang.

Alys made him coffee. He'd have liked a beer. She told him her sister lived with her. Maura, her name was, but everyone called her Mouse. She didn't say who everyone was, or how she'd got the nickname, just that Mouse had a little boy of eight, William, and they lived in the attic. He was trying to listen like

he gave a shit, but mention of the attic did bring to mind an image of a batty old dame in a moth-eaten wedding dress.

'We call it the attic, but actually it used to be the servants' quarters,' Alys was saying, adding, 'We don't have servants now. Unless you count Mouse.' He just looked at her, trying to read her expression.

Alys went off to find the sister, leaving him standing in the kitchen, but that was okay; he was better standing. He could see the foot of the grand staircase from there, and a portion of the hall. It was good to be within sight of an exit route.

The coffee was rank. Leaving his post briefly, he upended it down the sink, which was full of dirty plates. On the drainer a stack of cold, sweaty foil containers suggested someone had a late-night takeaway habit; he noticed the menus beside the phone. His life had become so disciplined he wasn't sure how to cope with this kind of human frailty. On the far wall stood a Scandinavian bookcase crammed with a smörgåsbord of titles: *An Artist's Guide to Anatomy*; *Thomas the Tank Engine*; *Hollywood Wives*. Three cat bowls sat in a row beside the bookcase. He preferred dogs himself.

He thought of Scoff, the dog he'd adopted on his last tour: a proper old mutt, part collie, part terrier. Loved a game of football and the chocolate they got from home. He remembered one of the lads saying you shouldn't give them chocolate, because of the theobromine. It kills dogs, theobromine. But Walt had laughed and said there was more chance of the mutt stepping on an IED than getting chocolate poisoning. Poor old Scoff. He should have given the dog more chocolate.

There were footsteps on the stairs. He positioned himself in the doorway, nearly filling the frame. Mouse paused when she saw him, the top of her head level with the polar bear's ears. Light came from somewhere high up, a landing window perhaps, and dust motes danced like fleas in the air above the bear's head. She looked about the same age as her sister – Walt guessed mid-

twenties – but seemed more down to earth than Alys. She was wearing some shapeless woolly sweater and it was hard to get an impression of her figure, but he liked her hair; it was fiery. Alys drifted down the stairs after her sister. They were talking about him, heads together, hands on the banister. He was struck by how similar their hands were; long arty fingers, blunt nails. They were whispering. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but Alys's tone was abrupt. Mouse looked straight at him, once, and the way she looked made him stand up straight. Alys merely glanced at him, her expression untroubled, that of a person used to getting her own way. Their argument had nothing to do with him, he told himself. He was just passing through. Eventually, Mouse threw up her hands and stomped down the remaining stairs.

Alys turned, shooting a little victory smile in Walt's direction as she brushed past him. She cleared a space for herself at the table, pushing aside a bundle of envelopes and multicoloured junk leaflets. Mouse followed.

'Alys, there's William to think about.'

Alys raised a shoulder. 'It's *my* house.' There was a little cold snap between them then, a distinct icy blip. Mouse, still ignoring Walt, stalked to the sink, hauling up her sleeves, and turned the hot tap on full. The water bounced over the grimy cups and plates. Alys, humming softly, began to unwrap something from layers of newspaper. Walt moved to lean silently against the worktop, observing Mouse's profile as she attacked the washing-up: the nipped-in mouth, cold eyes. She turned off the tap with an angry twist and glared at her sister's back.

'You haven't even asked for a reference. He could be an axe murderer . . . or a rapist or a paedophile.'

Alys finished unwrapping. She was holding something across her two hands like an offering. Walt could see a lolling head and a black-tipped tail. Something dripped onto the table, something that may have been blood. He fought down the familiar nausea. Whatever it was, it was very dead. He cleared

his throat and nodded at Alys. 'I'll need a reference too. Your sister could be dangerous.'

His joke fell flat, disappeared without trace. The weight of the house seemed to be settling around him. Just go, he told himself. Just get out. It's a shitty job anyway.

Mouse remained mute. There were tiny lines of strain at the corners of her mouth, as if she spent a lot of time gritting her teeth. Her prickliness was starting to piss him off.

'Look, I'm just a regular guy looking for work. I can get you a reference like that.' He snapped his fingers. 'I'll give you a number and you can contact the MoD.'

'You're in the military?' Mouse looked even more suspicious.

'Was. Rifles. Came out last year.'

Mouse dried her hands on a tea towel and searched amid the debris on the worktop. She found an old biro and a notepad, which she thrust in Walt's direction.

'Write it all down – the number to ring, your full name, rank and all the rest. She won't check you out, but I will. If you've got anything to hide, bugger off and leave us alone.'

Their eyes locked. He took the pen and scribbled on the pad.

4

When the smoke cleared he found himself looking up at the sky, blue as a bairn's blanket. This is heaven, he thought. I've died and gone to heaven. But the blue was so bright it hurt his eyes and when he tried to close them that hurt too, as if the skin of his face had shrunk. The noise phased back in: yelling and gunfire, someone groaning.

He was groaning. It woke him up, and he lay there staring at a plain white ceiling. Breathing hard he counted the cracks around the light fitting. His mouth was dry. He was afraid to swallow in case he tasted blood again. The skin beneath his clothes was damp with that dread sweat that prickles like iced water. Every pore was alert to the contours of the room, the temperature, the sounds; his inner radar scanning for clicks and creaks, sinews taut as tripwires. He couldn't place himself. He was in no man's land, dangerous territory where your oppos can't hear you shout. Reaching for all the things that he couldn't live without; his firearm, his ammo, radio, the clumsy comfort of his helmet. All vaporised. His hands found only jersey and cotton and lightweight civilian things.

After an eternity of two seconds he realised where he was, lifting his head from the soft pillows. He felt groggy and disorientated, his heart thudding painfully.

Real life was happening outside the window. It was open a crack and the nets were shifting; he could hear endlessly shrieking seagulls and the ripped-rubber roar of taxis on cobbles.

He swung his legs to the floor; he hadn't even removed his shoes, not intending to fall asleep, just to lie down for a second and process this new twist his life had taken. He limped to the window, cursing a new sore spot that had sprung up on his knee. He'd have to check that out later. Beyond the window, everything was grey: the street, the tenements, the light. A thin mist was hanging over the place. If he pressed his burning forehead to the glass he could just see the top of the flaky railings that led down to Alys's basement studio. As his body began to settle he thought over the series of events that had led him here; just a few days before, though it felt like longer.

It had been so easy. No references, nothing; he couldn't quite believe his luck, if luck was the right word. Screw that. He didn't believe in luck any more; it was all about surviving, and doing what it takes to survive. So here he was, getting paid cash in hand by the most unlikely taxidermist he'd ever met. Come to think of it, he'd never met a taxidermist before, and Alys had been quick to point out that she was so much more. She was an *artist*.

There was an intimacy about the dim studio, the way they were, a man and a woman, standing alone among the lifeless. It was only natural that they would eye each other up, all casual, picking up on the little sexual clues. By the end of their first conversation, he had felt that she'd warmed to him. She'd even offered him accommodation, a room in her house, above the studio. Though he still didn't like the way she looked at him. He pulled back a little from the window. The paint on the sill was white, glossy and squeaky clean. His fingers brushed against some trinket on the ledge. It was a piece of artwork, obviously created by Alys. An old bird's nest, a lovely piece of architecture, round and solid, the dip in the centre lined with down and moss. Alys had reimagined it, adding a rat nibbling on a broken egg. Another three pearly eggs nestled in the crook of its tail. It was surreal and slightly repulsive. He supposed he'd better get used to it.

Alys's house was squeezed between student tenements on one side and a low-roofed dance studio on the other. Standing on the pavement in front of it, you'd think it was a doll's house: the six steps up to the glossy green door, the sash windows and the dull red brickwork. Walt imagined taking the front off, exposing all the rooms and their dark little secrets. You'd see Mouse reading in the attic, William building Lego; Alys's plain white bedroom. The first-floor bathroom, big enough to dance in, with the claw-foot bath tub and the heavy showerhead in its cradle. You'd be able to hear the burbling of the old boiler, the purring of the four cats in the airing cupboard and the faint creaky respiration of the house itself.

It was the sort of house that breathed a sigh of relief after dark. You could imagine the rafters sagging like Victorian ladies loosening their stays. Already Walt was learning the sounds of the place. The letter box shivered in the wind; the seventh and ninth steps dipped and groaned as he walked up the stairs. His bedroom door had a worn brass knob that never quite caught, causing the door to fly open in the middle of the night.

There were cold spots on the landing, cracked panes, flaking paint and cobwebs that no one could reach. If Alys's house were a doll's house, you'd probably just replace the front and tiptoe away.

Alys had four cats. Five, if you counted the stuffed grey one in the basket down in the basement. He'd been formally introduced to *that* cat on his first day, when they were locking up for the night. Though he had since learned that Alys never really shut up shop, but roamed around the building like a ghost.

'This is Hector. I put him outside during daylight but I bring him in at night,' she had said, cradling the basket under her arm.

Walt had tickled the oblivious feline chin. 'So is he . . . glued to the basket?'

'Certainly not.' She had snatched the basket away. 'I would never glue him into place. He's free to . . . be.'

'Be?'

'Hector *is*.' The cat had continued to gaze at some distant horizon. Almost like a regular cat, but for the dust on its eyeballs. Walt's shudder had taken him right back to the desert, to open-eyed corpses half buried in sand. Why the fuck was he putting himself through this? He must be crazy, getting caught up with someone who found dead things so appealing.

Walt stepped away from the window and stretched out his stiff leg, noting the dull ache around his knee. The days so far had been uneventful. He spent a lot of time doing admin. Alys never seemed to answer the phone or reply to emails. He had busied himself wading through a backlog of enquiries, chuckling at the odder requests – 'How much would it cost to mount a pine marten?' – and contacting potential clients who were either used to Alys's eccentric business style or had given up and gone elsewhere.

In the evenings, when he had the chance to review the day, he thought about Alys a lot. He supposed she was eccentric, although some might have a different word for it. Her attention was on a timer; her eyes would slide away as you talked to her, her thoughts already on a different loop. People seemed to bore her, including her sister and nephew. She yawned when things got emotional, like she couldn't be arsed with complicated stuff. Hunger, cold, boredom – these were the things that preoccupied her. Anything heavier, like William crying over some playground spat, or Mouse stressing over an unpaid bill, had her heading for the hills – or rather, the basement. Even the cats weren't petted like regular cats. She stroked them as a chiropractor might, fingertips second-guessing their internal workings. And the cats were passive with her, draping themselves over her arms, wiping their chins against her face. It made his skin crawl, the way she clutched them to her body, letting their tiny paws knead her flesh like the hands of a suckling baby.

The cats were a ragbag of colours; black, two tortoiseshell and a fat white one, called Alaska, who was deaf. The other three

had old women's names which Walt couldn't quite recall; Abigail or Enid or something. They all responded to a generic 'Cats!' and a toe up the backside when Alys wasn't looking. Mouse, on one of the few occasions their paths had crossed, said primly, 'I take it you're not a cat person, Robert?' No, he'd said, he was a dog person. Definitely dogs.

Mouse was always so formal with him. He'd told her twice to call him Walt, that everyone did, apart from his mother. Maybe, being a mother herself, it was all she could manage.

He wanted to know why Mouse was called Mouse, but it didn't seem the sort of thing you could ask without having some kind of dialogue first, and Mouse made it obvious she didn't want to start a conversation. She did her best to stay out of his way and the child, William, was ushered quickly up the stairs between spells of school or whatever. Mouse worked in a pharmacy, so sometimes the lad was looked after by the dance teacher from next door. Alys wasn't babysitter material, Mouse said.

The way Mouse hustled William past him in the hallway was the way his sister-in-law, Natalie, had been at the end. His niece and a nephew were younger than William, and he loved them both in a vague sort of way. It was pointless trying to remember birthdays, he was always away, but he made sure he bought them huge presents when he got back: giant teddies, Scalextric, computer games. Like Mouse, Natalie had subtle ways of letting you know you'd messed up: a tightening of the mouth, maybe, or a clipped word or two. When the wheels really started to come off, he'd seen her whispering to Steven. After that, Steven would put on a certain face when Walt offered to babysit. 'It's okay, man. We don't have the money to go out anyway this week,' he'd say, or, 'No worries, kid, Natalie's mum's already offered.' Stuff like that. And Natalie would squeeze the kids closer, as if he might infect them with the crazy bug.

Anyway, the cats ignored him, unless he had a can opener in his hand. They prowled every surface, lurked under the table

and raided the bins. Every bin in the house seemed to contain a collection of feathers and unclassified bits of gore – fur, claws, tiny bones as sharp as needles and endless streamers of bloodied kitchen roll on which Alys had wiped her hands. Mouse had told him that part of the taxidermist's skill lay in stripping the skin from the carcass, never opening the body cavity. Someone should have told Alys.

Mouse had also revealed, with a certain pride, that Alys had sold a piece to a famous American collector. She'd told him all this breathlessly, as she scrubbed the downstairs cloakroom sink with bleach. Walt watched dried-on smears of blood disappear beneath her cloth, and realised that Alys paid her sister to clean. How convenient, he thought, having someone there to clean up your mess.