Down The Tubes

by

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for all those struggling with addiction

ADDICTION

1

Cheryl's all points and angles. You can see it in the crisp cut of her red lapel, the black cube of her heel, the sharp corners of her handbag, shining like rain. She splashed out on the suit especially for the interview and now she waits for her Surrey-bound train to rock her home. She pulls a couple of hairgrips from her tight bun, lets it unwind. But *drugs*. What was she thinking? It's hardly what you'd call a glamorous job, but when you haven't worked for years you have to take what's going. She smiles the thorny smile. Glorified secretary she'd call it, no matter how they dressed it up with the Team Assistant name.

The doors slam, the train lurches. It's getting too dark to see out unless she presses her face up close to the window, beneath the No Smoking sign, and sees beyond her faded lipstick. But if she lets her head roll back in her seat she can only see the dim reflections of other passengers. Over on the other side of the train is a mother with a little boy sleeping up against her. They've got a table on their side, with half a mushy biscuit on it. That's just what Michael would have done as a boy, sucked at some of his biscuit and then just left it there. Michael will be twenty now, wherever he is.

One day Michael might turn up and surprise her. In a suit or something. Nah, she can't ever imagine him in a suit. She can't see him in anything but the vague mid-teen clothes she last saw him in, his body thin and stooping, hunched in a chair like a shell. But she won't dwell on that, she must not.

She looks further down the carriage at the businessmen and women in their suits. She wants some of what they're having. She wants to feel zonked after a hard day's work, to fall asleep on her hand or keel over sideways into the aisles or pull out files on tables or fold her newspaper into four so she can attempt a couple of crossword clues and look like an executive.

The train bellows as it speeds along, and she turns her mind to the interview at the drugs project. It was in an old narrow building, that 484 place – both the name of the centre and the number of the road. The interviews were running late so she sat in the waiting area pretending to read a magazine.

"Nicola Stack? " the secretary called.

A pretty girl with bottle-blond hair and a leather jacket – some neolithic stones painted on the back - went to the desk. "It's *Nicky*. Got my wee in here." Nicky unzipped pockets inside her jacket and pulled out a specimen jar, full of golden liquid. "Here it is. It's been warming me baccy and chewie."

The secretary looked unimpressed. "You'll have to do another one, here on the premises."

"What's wrong with this then?"

"It's standard procedure. People have been known to bring in someone else's specimen."

"That's taking the fuckin' piss." Nicky seemed wholly unaware of her double entendre. "I can't pee to order."

Another member of staff with a more conciliatory tone offered Nicky a drink of water and escorted her off to a private cubicle. Without Nicky's protests to mask it, the sounds of a gruff male voice could be heard leaking through flimsy walls – something about *cooking it up.* Cooking what up? Cheryl stared through pages of mouth-watering recipes. He must mean *drugs*. Her thoughts spun. Shit, am I really cut out for this caper, even if it is only office work? Drug addicts are a frightening, aggressive bunch, aren't they? They're weak people too and she isn't very tolerant of human weakness. She was seriously thinking of walking out but then they called her in for her interview.

In fact, the interview panel looked favourably on her Life Experience and rusty secretarial experience. They seemed confident in her ability to Refresh Existing Skills and learn new ones: database, computer, statistics, and any other opportunities that might arise.

It's over four years since she last lived in London, south of the river. That's why she stood outside Camden Town tube, before her interview, waving her photocopied map at passers-by who said, Sorry, I'm only a visitor too, or Sorry, I speak not much English. That's the moment she might have turned back, because she felt this little shiver. Not just the December wind, but the draughty space all around her where family have always been, crowding her out. Family, kids, clutter.

Kids. How do they come about anyway? By default, usually. It was Andrew who wanted them in the first place, wasn't it? Or, rather, he didn't not want them. Children are the next progression after your wedding, aren't they?

It was Diana, her nextdoor neighbour in Tooting, who started her on this whole baby thing. She can still picture Diana's baby, fresh from hospital, its miniature fingers curling round her own tentative trunk of finger. Fingers so cold. "I thought babies were meant to be piping hot," Cheryl said, and Diana parcelled up the baby Viola and handed her over. "You better get some practise in, Cheryl. It'll be your turn next."

"Oh blimey, I wouldn't be seen dead up the spout, me." Besides, she didn't have the knack of holding babies. This one was wriggling about with all her tiny might, howling her head off.

Terrified she was too, that first time she had to babysit Viola. She couldn't settle to Diana's television with its different picture and knobs. Or to that slightly skewed view from the window – streetlamp and silver birch all shunted to the left, or to that uninspiring decor, all plain and muted. Then there were the pictures on the wall painted by Diana's husband, Iain. The bookshelves stuffed with textbooks and files and paperbacks by unknown authors. Well, she hadn't heard of them, anyway. She preferred her own bright house, all new and spirally with its modern lights and electric rings and snazzy wallpaper. Its blue hatch. Even Andrew's gun hanging over the grey-brick fireplace looked more homely. It was only an ornament, that gun. Because Andrew was a gentle, nervous sort who blinked a lot and hummed tunes to cover silences.

Where was all Diana's ruby nail polish, the spidery eyelashes in their plastic boxes, the 15 denier nylons that your nails sometimes snagged as you bunched them together for each partying foot? Diana didn't know anything about the bitter after-taste of Silvikrin hairspray on her way out to singing bluesy songs at the club with Peter de Cruz. Diana was a bit strange with her college ideas and loopy stare and enormous feet. That journal said it all. Cheryl fell upon it accidentally, creeping about the house as you do when you're babysitting, trying not to disturb the baby, thinking of things to do. She opened that diary with the sticker on the front saying 'Viola's Book' and started reading.

Iain planted the seed. I imagine the slow swelling, like apples plumping on the branch, round and luscious. The full-term dome of my belly. Firm, bronzed, fat as a pumpkin.

Now I'm always unalone. There is someone with me. We are one but two.

And then came those three immortal words – It's a girl. A beautiful daughter! I knew it. Womb of my womb. So big inside and so very tiny out here on my chest. Face all crinkled and stained with plum juice and little mouth all bubbles and gum or open-wide in a quivered cry. All wrapped up and snug in mounds of violet-white blanket with only her purple womb-moist head visible. And she's all mine! A beautiful girl, what else? We're floating off like an island, Viola and I. There's a pink mist all around us and I don't even hear Iain half the time.

Skylight eyes open up wide on the world each day like flowers. Viola. Named after your great grandmother, your maternal one. Then came mum, then me - now you. Together we're sowing the divine seed from age to age.

Just you and me, Viola. Us. We. Please don't interrupt us Iain with boring work talk because there's nothing more exciting and creative as the craft of motherhood. We rock together. When I rock, you rock. We have our own words. And if you fall ill, Mummy will take care of you. She'll take care of your nasty coughs and splutters because Mummy is magic. All mummies are magic. Mummies will come with cloths to wipe your face. Mummies will tuck in blankets and provide sweet blobs of milk for you to suck out with those little snorty noises. You gurgle. Pleasurable gurgles. You cry. Oh-so-pitiful cries. There there my petal, is it cuddles you want? I know, I know. It's nasty isn't it, being horizontal and alone and cooped up in darkness, even if it is a nice cradle that rocks. But it's not the same, is it? Not the same as company. Iain and I wouldn't sleep alone, would we? Though we're fully grown we still need each other and yet we expect you, a tiny baby, to sleep alone. Well, we'll make a space right between us, Daddy and I. A space for you in our bed. And by day I'll carry you upright in your new baby-sling where you can hold your sleepy sticky-thatch head against this side of my body-wall and listen to those now-faint sounds coming from the other side. Familiar sounds that soothe you …

Cheryl thought it all peculiar. She couldn't ever imagine feeling like that about a baby, and then Viola started to cry. Cheryl shut the journal and froze. She thought babies slept once they were down. She peeped in and tried to make nice gurgly noises but it made matters worse, so she scooped Viola from the cot and carried her slowly down one stair at a time. Not continuous walking, but bringing her feet together on each stair before progressing on to the next, the way small children do, and it was just as well Diana returned when she did because Cheryl didn't have a clue how to decode the different cries of Viola.

The train slows as it approaches her stop. As she leaves the train station and heads back to her new home, she's glad she made the break. She's glad to have been refurbished and assumed her stage name: Cheryl West. Now, she's Cheryl the woman, not Cheryl the mother and drudge.

Her new Surrey home, Tea Rose Cottage, is not actually a cottage at all, but a pebble-dash dormer bungalow with the upper window peeping out from red tiles, like an eye from her past, keeping watch. It's set back from the other bungalows, well-hidden from the road, and reached by a long, straight drive, flanked by sculptured hedges and various stone animals, some decorative, some functional like the three penguins collecting rainwater in the bird bath on their heads. Not that she can see them properly in the winter dark, except those picked out by the garden lights. It's not really her style of place at all, but it belongs to a friend of Diana's, a dentist's widow who's gone off travelling to India for a year or two with Diana. The name of Tea Rose Cottage is carved into the

oval of polished wood just to the right of the porchway where, in the glare of the security light, she catches sight of a figure huddled on the doorstep.

"Christ, Elaine, you nearly gave me a fright! What the hell are you doing here anyway?"

"Oh that's nice, that is…I've been freezing my butt off out here."

Elaine is full of the row she's had with some boyfriend or other.

Cheryl's heart drops as she unlocks the door and switches on lights. She really isn't ready to have her old life coinciding with the new.

"Smart suit that, mum. Where d'you get to anyway?"

"Job interview."

Cheryl puts her feet up and lights a cigarette.

"Did you get it?"

Cheryl shrugs. "I think so."

"When d'you start then?"

"It'll be after Christmas if I get it."

"Can I bum one off you, mum? Just smoked my last."

Elaine helps herself anyway, slides the ashtray over and perpetually taps her ash-free cigarette.

"Hey mum, when I was on the train I saw this bloke. Looked just like Michael. Well, from the back. I was willing him to turn round, then I got up and went to the loo so I could get a better look, and of course it wasn't him, was it? Do you ever do that?"

"What?"

"See Michael in everyone."

"Sometimes," she says, though she doesn't want to linger too long on Michael: where he is, whether he's come to any harm after so long with no word. You hear about bodies turning up years later, so badly decomposed that identification is well-nigh impossible. You hear about people assuming new identities. You hear all sorts. She supposes that Michael makes her feel – not guilt exactly – but some sense of failure. As a mother. That's why she's now Cheryl, the woman.

And then there was that time Andrew-

There was another woman, he said-

She blinks it away.

"Mum, can I stay here the weekend?" Elaine holds back her mousy hair into a ponytail, before letting it drop again. "*Please*. I've brought all I need."

"Go on then."

But Cheryl feels uncomfortable as Elaine pulls tufts in the fluffy animal doorstops, or rattles her nail file down the Venetian blinds, or pulls faces at the pictures of twee kittens and Home Sweet Home tapestries, left by the dentist's widow.

It wasn't always like this. She got pregnant at twenty-one, the age Elaine is now, and it gave her a big kick, as it did Diana. Those first few kicks blew her mind. "Quick Diana," she would say. "He's doing it again."

But it was a girl. All through her pregnancy she'd sworn blind it was a boy, but it was Elaine, and that was an even bigger miracle. She remembered Diana's words, womb of my womb, and she sort of knew what she meant. It was like a miniature version of yourself who could also have a miniature version of herself one day, and so on and so on. Like Russian dolls.

All wrapped up in a pink mist of bubbles and sticky hair, just as Diana had written. Lying in her good-as-new cradle, given by Diana. Soft as fondant and good enough to eat.

All hers to rock and dab and die for.

Oh what a buzz! She felt like a rock star, the most popular person on earth, like royalty. Cards piled in from everywhere offering congratulations, because everyone loves a baby, especially a new one, especially a first one, and people came to bill-and-coo and hand over little matinée jackets threaded with pink ribbon. And bonnets. And bootees. Especially for Baby. Elaine was like the baby Jesus, or something. Everyone's baby. The community's baby. The most photographed baby. People reached into the pram for just a stroke, just a tickle of baby cheek or finger, and she never thought it could happen to her but she was hooked on Diana's pink mist...

Then came Michael. Her longed-for boy. But he turned out to be his daddy's boy.

Then came Stephen. He was hers.

And fourteen years later – with her new lover – along came Juliet.

2

Dodo puts his foot down now they're on the motorway. He'd rather be driving a car as old as himself. A Triumph Herald or Hillman Minx or Vauxhall Cresta – each with its distinct grille and rear lights like tears or frowns or exclamation marks, or so he'd thought as a small boy. Instead he's driving a rusty black heap of Datsun, which isn't even his. He borrowed it off Judd. Well, Judd doesn't use the Datsun hardly – Judd drives that tinpot Ford most of the time.

Dodo loves driving. Loves reckless speed and danger and going beyond limits. Without getting caught. He never bothered with a driving test, though he's been able to drive since the age of twelve or thirteen.

"Stop at the next services." Nicky belches. "I'm gonna phone Judd."

It's already dark. Dodo remembers services by night. Looming like great ships with red and yellow lights right across the carriageway, and they'd get all excited in the back of the car at the thought of a fish and chip stop on their way to or from a seaside holiday. And then there was daytime on the motorway when his brother and sister quarrelled or played while he let his eyes track the lines of pylons and wires and poles as they dipped and rose. By the window. Always by the window. He only remembers bits, islands, because his memory isn't what it was. It's dark like a loft and he's scared to go up there.

"Getting out, Dodo?"

"Yeah. Need to stretch my legs."

"You look spaced out."

"All them lights. Red ones in front, white ones on the other side."

"Want something to eat?"

"Get us a veggie burger if we've got enough." He digs deep into his pockets. "Here's thirty pence more."

Nicky isn't his girlfriend, not really, though he's known her two or three years. They met on the streets, both runaway Londoners who knew the streets weren't paved with gold. They were fated to stick together from the start, him and Nicky. They've queued for soup and giros. They've shared doorways and sleeping-bags and Stonehenge, but they haven't shared much of their pasts. That's what he likes about Nicky, she never asks him personal questions and now he lives in the happy adult land of evasion and half-truths.

He knows all he needs to know about Nicky. She ran away from her last foster parents, she just couldn't hack it any more she said so she left. In true style. She made off with a china cat, one of a pair, made out of that thin, expensive china. She called it Sasha, and they used to take Sasha wherever they went – friend's floor, tent, back of a van – before Sasha had her accident which Nicky doesn't know about.

They've been camping in the middle of nowhere, him and Nicky.

"Did you know we were in the Cotswolds, Dodo?" Nicky said, coming back from the village store on that first morning, while he got into acid-mode so that he could hear the colour of the trees and smell their vapours, so that he could see the silver-birch lung when he looked in the lake. And when the acid was gone, Nicky still had her smack and they both had a bit of dope, which they smoked round the edges of the day to eke it out a bit longer. Man, I'm in orbit, Nicky would say, her eyes stinging and smarting from the evening campfire.

They coasted along, snuggling up together like winter nights, though it never goes any further. It's the heroin in Nicky's case. Takes away her need for sex and that's fine by him.

By day, they stomped on the ground and brought up the worms, they collected firewood, and got out the camping stove. This is the life, he thought. No one chasing them, just the wind fanning their hair: his dark brown ponytail, her blond hair, long enough to tie back now, only she doesn't.

Coasting along.

Until he saw the grains of fried rice on the stove jumping about like the maggots used to in his father's fishing box. Ugh.

Until he saw two fat tailor-made fags hanging like chalk from Nicky's mouth and knew they were running out of stores. She lit them both. Handed one across. "We've ran out of baccy and skins. And wacky baccy. We've ran out of everything."

No silver-birch lung, but his unshaved stubble in the rear-view mirror. "We've gotta get back, Dodo. There's not enough here for a proper hit and I've gotta get my script."

He doesn't care for the smack like she does. Once he's back in the Smoke, he'll revert to the fast stuff because it makes him feel real and alive.

He looks up. Sees her returning with one square of styrofoam.

"Got through to Judd," she says, as they sit on the bonnet, sharing the veggie burger.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Says we can share his new flat. Told you something would turn up, didn't I?"