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The Yips

Written by Nicola Barker

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THE YIPS

NICOLA BARKER

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In fond remembrance of Owain 'Oz' Wright;
The Man, The Voice

yips (y ps). pl. n. Nervousness or tension that causes an athlete to fail to perform effectively, especially in missing short putts in golf.

The Free Dictionary

1

Stuart Ransom, professional golfer, is drunkenly reeling off an interminable series of stats about the women's game in Korea (or the Ladies Game, as he is determined to have it): 'Don't scowl at me, beautiful …!' – directed, with his trademark Yorkshire twinkle, at Jen, who lounges, sullenly, behind the hotel bar. 'They *like* to be called ladies. In fact they *demand* it. I mean …' Ransom lobs a well-aimed peanut at her – she ducks – and it strikes a lovely, clear note against a Gordon's Gin bottle. '… they *are* ladies, for Christsakes!'

It's well past midnight on an oppressively hot and muggy Sunday in July and Ransom is the only remaining customer still cheerfully demanding service from the fine vantage point of his squeaking barstool at the Thistle, a clean but generic hotel which flies its five, proud flags hard up against the multi-storey car park and an especially unforgiving slab of Luton's Arndale.

'But *why* did you change your booking from the Leaside?' Jen petulantly demands (as she fishes the stray peanut from its current hidey-hole between the Wild Turkey and the Kahlua). 'The Leaside's pure class.'

'Eh?'

Ransom is momentarily caught off his stride. He was just idly pondering the wonky pathway of spotless scalp which lies – like a seductive trickle of tropical-white sand – between Jen's scruffy, dark-rooted, peroxide-blonde ponytails, and then, as she spins back around (pinching that errant nut, fastidiously,

between her finger and thumb), he ponders the voluptuous outline of her pert, nineteen-year-old breasts beneath her starchy, cream-coloured work blouse (assessing these other – rather more intimate – physical attributes with the keen yet dispassionate eyes of a man who has oft pitted his talents against the merciless dips and mounds of the Old Course at St Andrews).

'I'd give anything to stay at the Leaside,' Jen persists, gazing dreamily up at the light-fitment (where three stray midges are joyriding, frenetically, around the bulb). 'The Leaside's so quaint – perched on its own little hill, right in the heart of town, but just out of all the hubbub …'

Jen's pierced tongue trips on the word hubbub and she frowns –

Hubbub?

Ransom stares around him – tipsy and slightly bewildered – struggling to assess the aesthetic shortcomings of his current environs, then starts, theatrically, at the nightmarish spectre of earth-shattering mediocrity he suddenly – quite unwittingly – finds himself party to. He runs an unsteady hand through his short, brown, fastidiously managed head of hair and then instinctively reaches towards his shirt pocket (groping for his trusty pack of Bensons), but falters, mid-manoeuvre, as he peers, blearily, through the large, plate-glass window directly to his left. Beyond that window a small cluster of shadowy figures may be seen, consorting together, ominously, in the half-light. He debates what his chances are of sneaking a furtive puff inside.

'Hub-bub,' Gene, the replacement barman, parrots to himself, amused, as he polishes a low, glass table in the adjacent snug.

Ransom glances over at Gene, then turns to inspect Jen again, who has momentarily stopped considering the countless, bizarre ramifications of the word hubbub for just long enough to become horribly aware of the proximity of the

front desk (not actually visible from where she's standing). 'Although there's really nothing out there to match our incomparable health and leisure club facilities,' she proclaims loudly, with suitably glassy eyes and a ghoulish smile.
Ransom sighs, squints down at his watch, grimaces, clears his throat, takes out his phone, checks his texts, and then quickly goes on to discuss how there are plenty of successful Korean ladies doing extremely well on the American circuit right now. In fact, he says, draining his glass, there are several whose careers he even takes an active interest in (Aree Song for one, Birdie Kim for another, Inbee Park for a third: 'Aren't their names just completely friggin' brilliant?') and not only because he finds Korean ladies pretty damn hot …

He turns and asks Gene (who is now removing his empty glass and replacing his damp, paper coaster with a clean one) if he finds Korean ladies hot, and as he says so he darts a mischievous glance at Jen again, who neglects to look back because she has been obliged to move to the small, transparent hatch – which connects the bar to the overpass – and calmly inform a persistent individual who is banging on the glass there that they are no longer serving (by dint of a sharp, slicing movement across her taut, milky throat). The individual curses, gesticulates (a deft two-finger salute), then scuttles off.
'Thanks,' Jen snarls after him. '*Charmed.*'

Gene – following a brief moment's thought – politely confesses to Ransom that he's never previously given this issue (about the relative hotness – or notness – of female Koreans) much serious consideration. Ransom appraises Gene, at his leisure, and decides that he is an intensely dull yet profoundly dependable kind of fellow who bears a passing resemblance – the short, swept-back, auburn hair, the square jaw, the calm, hazel eyes – to one of his sporting heroes: a young Tom Watson. His own eyes mist up and he blinks, poignantly (although why the perfectly successful and

functional Watson might be inclined to inspire Ransom's compassion at this juncture is – and will remain – something of a puzzle).

'All work and no play, eh?' Ransom says, pityingly, indicating towards a neighbouring barstool with a benign and inclusive sweep of his arm. Gene frowns. In truth, he feels scant inclination to get involved in a fatuous discussion with the tipsy Yorkshireman (he's on duty and has a certain number of chores to complete before knocking off at one) but then he detects an odd look – almost of desperation – in Ransom's bloodshot eyes and slowly relents.

Okay, Gene confides (backing into the stool and perching a single, taut buttock on it), so yes, if put on the spot he will admit that he does think Korean woman are quite beautiful. They have a certain measure of … of poise, a certain … a certain understated … uh … *grace* …

Ransom scowls when Gene uses the word 'grace'. The word 'grace' has no place – no place at all – in the kind of conversation he was angling for. Gene (as luck would have it) is also scowling now (and rapidly backtracking), saying that, on reflection, he hasn't actually met that many Korean women in his life, apart from a couple who work in local restaurants. He says he therefore supposes that his assessment of the virtues of Korean women – as a unified class – is based entirely on a series of ill-considered – even stereotypical – ideas he has about Eastern women, and he is sure that this is a little stupid – even patronizing – of him because Korean women are doubtless very idiosyncratic, with their own distinct features and dreams and ideas and habits.

'I'll grant you that,' Ransom concurs with a sage nod (informing Jen of his need for another drink with an imperiously raised finger). 'They've got much fuller tits than the Japanese.'

Gene draws back, dismayed, uncertain whether Ransom is joking or not. Ransom collapses forward on to the bar,

shaking his head (apparently experiencing this same problem, first-hand). '*Fuuuuck*,' he groans, 'I honestly can't believe I just said that.'

Gene peers over at Jen (who has chosen to ignore Ransom's request and is now cleaning out the coffee machine). He stands up and goes to fetch Ransom the drink himself (thereby symbolically re-emphasizing the wide emotional, intellectual and psychological distance between them by dint of the happy barrier that is the bar).

As Ransom continues to groan (banging his forehead, gently, on the bar top), Gene goes on to say how he once watched a fascinating documentary about a Japanese girl who was kidnapped by the North Korean government – quite randomly – as she walked home from school one day. The girl was called Nagumi … no … no, *Me*-gumi, he corrects himself. Apparently (he continues) the North Koreans kidnapped many such young Japanese during this particular historical timeframe (the mid- to late 1970s) to study their behaviour so that their spies could pretend to be Japanese while undertaking terrorist attacks abroad. It transpires that the cultural differences between the North Koreans and the Japanese are very marked (Gene quickly warms to his theme), the way they wash their faces, for example, is very different (he impersonates the two styles: one a lazy splash, the other a more frenetic rub). The way they excuse themselves after sneezing. The way they say hello. The way they blow their noses or position their napkins. All tiny but vital cultural differences.

'Michelle Wie,' Stuart Ransom suddenly butts in (having taken a long draught of his new drink, straight from the bottle), 'has *massive* feet. Whenever I watch her play I just keep staring at her feet. They're friggin' *huge* …'
Gene frowns.
'But I still find her pretty damn tasty all the same,' Ransom avows, glancing down at his phone again and noticing, as he

does so, that his hand is shaking. He grimaces, clenches his fingers into a tight fist and then shoves his hand, scowling furiously, into his trouser pocket.

'*Merde!* This is useless! My hand just keeps shaking!' her mother grumbles – in her strange, heavily accented English – awkwardly adjusting a toothbrush between her fingers.
'Because you're holding it all wrong,' Valentine explains. 'You're holding it like you'd hold a pen. Why not try and hold it like you'd hold a … a …' – she thinks hard for a second – 'a *hair*brush?'

As she speaks, Valentine lifts a warm, bare foot from the bathroom linoleum (producing a tiny, glutinous, farting sound) and then dreamily inspects the steamy imprint that remains. She imagines her neat heel as the nose (or jaw) of a cartoon reindeer, and her toes as its modest, five-pronged crown of truncated horns.

'I DON'T FUCKING REMEMBER!' her mother suddenly yells, hurling the offending toothbrush into the toilet bowl.

'Bloody hell, Mum!' Valentine retrieves the toothbrush, runs it under the hot tap, squeezes on some more paste and then patiently proffers it back to her.

'I CAN'T USE THAT FILTHY THING NOW!' her mother bellows. 'ARE YOU COMPLETELY INSANE?!'
'*Shhhh!*' Valentine whispers, pointing to the door. 'It's after twelve. You'll wake Nessa.'

'But *how* do I hold a hairbrush?'
Her mother begins hunting around the bathroom for a hairbrush.
'Like this …' Valentine neatly demonstrates exactly how to hold the toothbrush.

'But that's a *tooth*brush and I want a *hair*brush,' her mother snaps. 'I want to know how I'd hold a *hair*brush.'

Valentine opens the bathroom cabinet. 'Here's a comb,' she says, removing an old nit comb from behind a medicated shampoo bottle.
She passes it over.

Her mother takes the comb. She holds it correctly, instinctively. She stares at it for a moment, blinks, and then: 'Why the hell have you given me a fucking nit comb?' she demands.

'For some reason I always thought Michelle Wie was part-Hawaiian,' Gene muses – half to himself – as he polishes a glass.
'Nah-*ah*. You're confusing her with Tiger Woods, mate.' Ransom shrugs.

'Michelle *who*?' Jen suddenly interjects after a five-second hiatus (Jen is generally a bright, engaging conversationalist, but she's just completing an exhausting, twelve-hour shift and also has a small – yet resilient – raft of 'subsidiary' issues to contend with, which Ransom can't possibly have any inkling of, i.e. a) the tail-end of a painful dose of conjunctivitis – caught from her cat, Wookey, a magnificent, pedigree Maine Coon – combined with a prodigious pair of false eyelashes which are so long and audacious that they tickle both her cheeks, distractingly, every time she blinks, b) a ludicrously handsome, lusty and untrustworthy Irish boyfriend – by the name of Sinclair – who is currently living it up for a week on a lads-only break in Tangier, and c) the frightful responsibility of three E grade A-levels to re-sit over the summer. Jen longs to become a vet and is obsessed by Australian marsupials; their fluffy tails, their tiny hands, their huge, saucer-like eyes. Her favourite kind of marsupial is the sugar-glider. She even invented her own cocktail of the same name – a sickly combination of cold espresso, coconut milk and Malibu – which they sell at the bar simply to indulge her).

'Michelle Wie,' Gene says, politely glancing over at Ransom for confirmation, 'is a young, female golfer who ruffled a few feathers a while back by insisting on competing professionally alongside the males –'

'Why can't women play golf?' Ransom jovially interrupts him, with a leer.

Pause.

'I don't know,' Gene answers, cautiously, 'why can't women play golf?'

'Because they're good with an iron …' Ransom's voice cracks with ill-suppressed hilarity, 'but they can't drive! *Boom Boom!*'

Gene smiles, thinly.

'Sorry,' Ransom apologizes, simulating embarrassment, 'that one's old as the friggin' hills.'

'Michelle *Wee*?!' Jen snorts (totally ignoring Ransom's attempted quip). 'That's brilliant!'

'She's a perfectly good little athlete,' Ransom allows, 'but she's ruined her game by over-swinging. Fact is she *can't* compete with the men. Not possible. She simply hasn't got the power in her upper torso.'

'Although I imagine the huge advances in club technology over the last decade or so –' Gene interjects.

'*Phooey*,' Ransom slaps him down, irritated, 'because when club technology improves, the male players automatically hit that much further themselves.'

'*God*,' Jen groans, rolling her eyes, boredly, 'what *is* this fatal attraction between footballers and bloody golf, eh?'

'Huh?' Ransom's head snaps around. He frowns. He looks a little confused.

'I just don't get it,' Jen persists (ignoring a pointed look that Gene is now darting at her), 'because golf's so unbelievably *dull*. I mean why rattle on endlessly about golf all night when there's so much other great stuff to talk about, like … I dunno …' She throws up her hands.

'Basket-weaving,' Gene suggests, wryly.

'Topiary,' Ransom helpfully volunteers.
'The comic novels of Saki,' Gene effortlessly parries.
'UFOs.' Ransom grins.
'The worst services on the M4,' Gene deftly volleys, 'between Reading and Newport.'
'The *best* services on the M1,' Ransom vigorously retaliates, 'between Watford and Leeds.'

'I've never been to the North,' Jen confesses (with cheerful candour), at exactly the same moment as Gene hollers, '*Leicester Forest East!*' (then blushes).
'I favour Shovel myself.' Ransom shrugs.

'Although I *have* been to Norfolk,' Jen concedes.
'Norfolk?' Ransom echoes, bewildered. 'Norfolk isn't *in* the North, you bloomin' half-wit!'
'I *know* that!' Jen snaps.

'Crop circles!' Gene promptly endeavours to divert them.
'The Chinese Horoscope!' (Ransom's easily distracted.)
'The current export price of British beef,' Gene casually raises him.

'Which is the luckier number' – Ransom plucks at his unshaven chin with comedic thoughtfulness – 'three or seven?'
'Stones versus Beatles!' Gene's starting to sweat a little.
'Leeches!' Ransom whoops (slamming down his beer bottle – for extra emphasis – then cursing as it foams up, over and on to the bar top).
Leeches?

'But I *love* leeches!' Jen squeals, baby-clapping delightedly. 'Let's talk about leeches! Let's! Let's! Oh, *do* let's!'
Ransom recoils slightly at the unexpected violence of Jen's reaction.

'Jen's into nature,' Gene explains (with an avuncular smile), 'she's hoping to become a vet when she eventually grows up.'
Jen shoots Gene a *faux*-filthy/*faux*-flirty look.

'Okay …' Ransom tosses a quick peanut into his mouth and then launches, vaingloriously, into the requisite anecdote.

‘So I was playing this shonky tournament in Japan once,’ he starts off, ‘and I sliced a shot on the fourth which landed just to the right of the green in this really tricky area of rough –’
‘Hang on a minute,’ Jen interrupts, holding up her hand, exasperated. ‘Please, please, *please* tell me we’re not back to talking about sodding *golf* again?!’

‘Did you hear that?’ Valentine asks, cocking her head and listening intently.

‘What?’ Her mother stops brushing. She’s been brushing so diligently that her gums are bleeding and the white foam in her mouth has turned pink.
‘A squeak … this tiny squeak and then a sharp kind of … of scratching sound.’

Her mother also listens. A cat pads into the bathroom, sits down and commences licking its paws. There are now three cats in the room: one on the windowsill, one in the bath (where it’s just squatting to defecate over the plug-hole) and one sitting by the door.

‘This house is full of stinking cats,’ her mother grumbles. ‘How can we have rats in a house full of stinking cats?’
Valentine doesn’t answer. She closes her eyes. She places a finger to her lips.

Her mother ignores her. ‘Bobby’s *sur le point de chier énormément*,’ she announces.

‘Huh?’
Valentine is still listening out, intently, for another squeak.
‘Bobby. The stinking cat. He’s shitting on the plug.’
Valentine’s eyes fly open. She turns. She does a quick double-take.
‘No! *Bobby!*’ she yells. ‘STOP!’

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

'Football's bad enough,' Jen grumbles, attacking the coffee machine with a renewed ferocity, 'but golf? *Urgh!* You just can't get away from it. It's everywhere – like a contagious *disease*.'

'"A good walk, spoiled," I believe the saying goes.'

As he speaks, Gene reaches under the counter and withdraws a small, black notepad (with a broken, red Bic shoved into its metal binder). He opens the book, removes the pen, jots down a quick reminder about the squeaking barstool, then turns to the back page and in large, block letters writes:

IT'S STUART RANSOM – THE FAMOUS PRO GOLFER, STUPID!

He then casually leans back and proffers Jen the pad.

'In fact this really lovely friend of mine called Candy Rose, who I first met at jazz/tap classes when I was nine …' Jen pauses, ruminatively, pointedly ignoring the pad. 'Although – strictly speaking – we already knew each other, by sight, from nursery school …'

Ransom yawns and glances down at his phone.

'*Anyhow*,' Jen blithely continues, 'Candy works for this animal refuge near Wandon End, and they were desperate to expand their workspace into some adjacent farmland. The farmer seemed perfectly happy to rent it out to them, but for some strange reason the council kept raising all these petty objections to their planning application. Then the next thing we know, this huge, twenty-five-acre plot –'

'The yamabiru.' Ransom suddenly turns, quite deliberately, and addresses himself directly to Gene. 'The Japanese land leech. The mountains are their natural habitat, but over recent years they've taken to hitching a ride down on to the flatlands with packs of roaming boar and deer. They've become a real pest in the towns where they enjoy slithering into people's socks and quietly ingesting a quick takeaway meal …'

'*Jesus!*' Gene is revolted. 'How big?'

'Small. Around half an inch to begin with, but they can swell to almost ten times that size. I had one gnawing away at my ankle but I didn't have a clue about it till I felt this nasty twinge by the fourth and yanked off my shoe. At first I thought it was just a thorn or a thistle, but then I realized my sock was totally soaked …' he pauses, dramatically,
'… saturated with my own blood.'

'Wow!' Jen is clearly impressed. 'A *land* leech? That's wild!'
'A yamabiru.' Ransom nods. 'I swear I nearly shat myself.'

'Spell that out for me …' Jen snatches the pad from Gene.
'I'm gonna look it up on the internet.'
'Did it hurt?' Gene wonders.
'*Nah*. It was more the shock of it than anything. I mean the sheer *volume* of …'

'*Wow!*' Jen repeats. 'So what did you do with it? Did you kill it? Did you stamp on it? *SPLAT!*'
Jen stamps her foot, violently. 'Did it explode like a water-bomb? I *bet* you did. I *bet* you killed it.'

'Damn, fuckin' right I would've!' Ransom exclaims, indignant. 'But I never got the chance. The little swine'd drunk its fill and scarpered.'
'So how …?' Gene looks mystified.
'The course quack. He identified the wound. Said it was a pretty common problem on golf courses in those parts.'

'*Yik!*' Jen is mesmerized. She is still holding the pad.
'Did you quit the match?' Gene wonders.
'*Quit?*' Ransom looks astounded. 'Whadd'ya take me for?! I poured a small bottle of iced water over my head, smoked a quick fag, downed a quart of Scotch and finished in a perfectly respectable five over par.'

A short silence follows. Ransom takes a long swig of his beer.
'Although the leeches were the least of my problems in Japan.' He hiccups. '*Oops*.' He places his hand over his mouth. 'It turns out the tournament had been arranged by the Yakuza …'

'The Japanese mafia?' Gene's eyes widen.
'Yep. They were extorting cash from local businessmen by forcing them to take part and then charging them huge entry fees. I kept wondering at the time why all the course officials seemed so jittery …'

'Bloody *golf*!' Jen exclaims, slapping the pad down, forcefully. 'Even the *word* is ridiculous – like a cat vomiting up a giant hair-ball: *GOLLUFF!*' she huskily intones, rolling her eyes while making an alarming retching motion with her throat. Both men turn to stare at her, alarmed. 'Just name me any game,' Jen challenges them, 'I mean *any* sport on the planet more selfish than golf is.'
Silence.

'Formula One,' Gene finally responds.
'Shooting,' Ransom suggests, cocking and aiming an imaginary gun at her.

'Yeah …' Jen's plainly not convinced. 'But could you really call that a sport, as such?'
'*KA-BOOM!*'
Ransom fires. It's a clean shot.

'They have an Olympic team,' Gene says, snatching up the pad again, opening it and proffering it to her.

'It's not only golf, though.' Jen waves the pad away. 'I can't stand tennis, either. I *hate* tennis. To my way of thinking it's just a game invented *by* idiots, *for* idiots. Simple as.'

Before Jen can further substantiate this hypothesis, Gene has grabbed her by the arm and spun her around to face the back wall of the bar. 'What's got into you tonight?' he hisses. Jen gazes up at him, wide-eyed. 'I hate tennis, Gene.' She shrugs (raising both hands, limp-wristedly, like a world-weary Jewish dowager). 'Is that suddenly such a crime?'

Gene studies her face for a second, grimaces, releases her arm, then slaps the black notebook shut and tosses it – defeated – back under the counter.

Ransom downs the remainder of his beer in a single gulp, then burps, majestically, from the other side of the bar. Jen snorts, ribaldly. Gene shoots her a warning look.

Her mother swallows the paste and then gently belches.
'You really shouldn't swallow it,' Valentine mutters. She's just flushed the cat mess down the toilet and is now washing her hands, fastidiously, under the hot tap.
'I've always swallowed it,' her mother maintains.

'Well, you taught *me* not to swallow it.' Valentine turns the tap off.
Her mother inspects her teeth, critically, in the bathroom mirror.

'You're not meant to swallow it,' Valentine persists, 'you're meant to spit it out.'
'Really? *Il dit ça sur le tube?*'
'Pardon?'
'Does it say that on the tube?'

Valentine shrugs. 'I don't know.'
'Have a look.'
Her mother grabs the tube and proffers it to Valentine.
Valentine shakes the water off her hands, takes the tube and inspects it.

'Does it say you shouldn't swallow?'
Her mother peers at the tube over Valentine's shoulder.
'No.' Valentine frowns. 'But that doesn't necessarily …'

Her mother recommences brushing again. Valentine places the tube back into the tooth mug. She watches her mother for a while and then: 'I think you've probably been brushing for long enough now,' she says.

'Really?' Her mother stops brushing. 'How long is "enough"?'
Valentine shrugs. 'Two minutes?'
'And how long have I …?'

‘About four.’
Her mother stares at her, blankly.

‘Four minutes. One, two, three, *four* …’
Valentine slowly counts the digits out on to her fingers. ‘So you’ve basically been brushing for almost double the amount of time you need to.’
Valentine illustrates this point, visually, by dividing the four fingers into two.

Her mother stares at Valentine’s fingers, intrigued. ‘If two twos are double,’ she wonders, ‘then what about three threes? Are three threes double?’
‘Uh … no.’ Valentine shakes her head. ‘Three times three is nine. That’s triple. Two times three is double.’
‘Two threes are six,’ her mother says.
‘Exactly.’ Valentine nods, encouragingly. ‘Two times three is six. Well done.’

She holds up six fingers and divides them in half.
‘Okay’ – her mother is now concentrating extremely hard – ‘and twice times fifty-fivety?’
‘Two times fifty-five is one hundred and ten.’ Valentine nods again. ‘Well done. That’s double, too.’
‘And twice times –’
‘You generally say two times,’ Valentine interrupts, ‘and it’s always double. Two of anything is always double. That’s the rule.’
She turns to dry her hands on a towel.

‘My teeth still feel furry, though,’ her mother murmurs, taking a small step forward and staring, fixedly, into the mirror again. ‘I want them to feel clean. I want them to feel *toutes lisses*.’
‘We’ve talked about this before.’ Valentine gently takes the toothbrush from her. ‘You just *think* they aren’t clean, but they are. Remember how the dentist …?’

‘You’re being unbelievably patronizing,’ her mother exclaims, suddenly irritable.

She pauses.
'*Condescendant!* And by the way,' she continues, 'I find it really disgusting that you flushed the cat mess down the loo.'

She goes and peers into the toilet bowl.
'*Je n'ai pas t'élevée comme ça! Ça fait trop commun.*'

Valentine is inspecting her own, clear complexion in the bathroom mirror. The cat sitting closest to the doorway commences scratching itself, vigorously.

'The toilet bowl is filthy! It's disgusting,' her mother grumbles. She turns to inspect the cat. 'And these cats are disgusting, too. So many of them, *et tellement poilus*! In fact this entire room is disgusting. All the fitments are disgusting. The light-fitment, the blind, even the colour is disgusting. *Especially* the colour.'

'You used to adore these tiles,' Valentine tells her. 'The bathroom was one of the main reasons why you and Dad first fell in love with this house.'
'*Please!*' her mother snorts. '*Impossible!* I don't believe you! This shade of pink? Taramasalata pink? Vomit pink? It's vile! Disgusting!'

'You're finding an awful lot to be disgusted about tonight,' Valentine observes, dryly.
Her mother considers this notion for a moment, and then, 'Because there's a lot to be disgusted *by*, I suppose,' she sighs.

'You know it's always struck me as ridiculous,' Gene says, removing a large jar of salted cashews from under the counter, unscrewing the lid and then carefully topping up Ransom's bar-snacks, 'that golf doesn't have the status of an Olympic sport yet.'

'I do quite enjoy the odd match of ping-pong,' Jen quietly ruminates from the rear, 'but then it's a completely different order of game to proper tennis.'

'Well there's the *table* part, for starters,' Gene mutters (although his voice is pretty much obliterated as Jen commences flushing a clean jug of water through the coffee machine).

'Golf,' Ransom is sullenly addressing his beer bottle. '*Goll-oll-llolf*.'

He frowns. 'It isn't stupid,' he protests. 'What's so bloody stupid about it?'

He turns to Gene. 'Do *you* think it's stupid?'

Gene shrugs, helplessly.

'*Goll-lluf*,' Ransom repeats, exploring each individual letter with his tongue and his teeth.

'Although I *do* find snooker quite selfish,' Jen suddenly interjects (as the water finally completes its noisy cycle), 'and snooker's a table sport, so it can't be entirely about the furniture, can it?'

Gene opens his mouth to respond and then closes it again, stumped.

'I don't even understand what you *mean* by selfish,' Ransom grumbles, checking his phone and sending a quick text.

'Well' – Jen carefully adjusts an eyelash (which has briefly become unglued) – 'by selfish I suppose I mean …' She gnaws on her lower lip, thoughtfully. 'I dunno. Selfish … Self-centred. Self-obsessed. Self-indulgent. Self-absorbed …'

'I think we might best summarize Jen's position,' Gene quickly interjects, 'as a borderline-irrational hatred of all so-called "individual" sports.'

'*Ahhh*.' Ransom finally starts to make sense of things.

'Although I do quite like bowling,' Jen demurs.

'People generally bowl in a team.' Gene shrugs.

'And gymnastics. I like gymnastics.'

'*Ditto*.'

'And I've always liked the javelin,' Jen presses on. 'In fact I *love* the javelin. There's something really … really basic and primeval about the javelin.'

To illustrate her point, Jen lobs an imaginary javelin towards Eugene's head.

'Okay. So the theory's not entirely watertight,' Gene concedes, flinching.

'And surfing …' Jen persists. 'I really, *really* –'

'I USED TO BE A SURFER!' Ransom suddenly yells, tossing down his phone and leaping up from his stool. 'I USED TO BE A BLOODY SURFER! *EVERYBODY* KNOWS THAT!'

'Uh … Could you just …?' Jen raises a sardonic hand to her ear.

'I did! I DID!' Ransom is bouncing, hyperactively, from foot to foot. '*Everybody* knows that. Ask anybody! Ask … Ask *him* …' Ransom points at Gene. 'Surfing was my *life*. I was a total, surfing freak. I loved it. I *lived* it. I had the tan, the boarding shorts, the flip-flops, the bleached hair …'

'The hair was pretty extravagant,' Gene concurs.

'All the way down to there, it was …' Ransom lightly touches his chest with his free hand. 'I kept it that length for years. It was like my talisman, my trademark, my *signature* …'

'Didn't you insure it at one point for some inordinately huge amount?' Gene asks.

'Half a million squid.' Ransom nods. 'Although it was just some cheap publicity stunt dreamed up by my ex-manager.'

'Ah …' Gene affects nonchalance.

'But I was in all the fashion mags,' Ransom persists. 'Started my own clothing line. Had lucrative contracts with two types of styling gels. Modelled for Westwood in London, McQueen in New York, Gaultier in Paris – which is where I first met Karma …'

He stares at Jen, expectantly.

'Karma,' he repeats, 'Karma Dean? The model? The muse? Come *on*! You *must've* heard of Karma Dean!'
'*Hmmn?*'
Jen just gazes back at him, blankly.

Her mother is perched on the edge of the bed, her slight but curvaceous frame encased in a delicate, apricot-coloured silk nightdress. She is staring at Valentine, expectantly. Valentine is standing close by, looking puzzled. She is holding a small, black vibrator in her hand.

'I'm really sorry, Mum,' she eventually murmurs, 'but the battery's completely dead.'
Her mother's mouth starts to quiver. Her eyes fill with tears.
'I'm really, really sorry, Mum,' Valentine repeats.

'Can't we just take one from the video?' her mother wheedles. 'We've done that before, remember? Just take one from the remote control!'

'I don't think that would work.' Valentine speaks softly and in measured tones. 'It's a different size battery.'
'No! No it's *not*!' Her mother stamps her foot. 'You're lying! You're just fobbing me off again, same as always!'

'I'm not lying, Mum. In fact I'm pretty certain –'
'Stop calling me that!' her mother snaps.
'Sorry?'
'I'm not your "mum". How many times do I have to tell you? I'm a person! I have a name! My name is *Frédérique*!'

'Like I was saying,' Valentine persists, ignoring this last interjection, 'I'm pretty certain that the ones in the remote are several sizes smaller …'

Her mother hurls herself on to her back. 'JESUS CHRIST!' she hollers. 'IS THIS WHAT I'M TO BE REDUCED TO?'

'*Shhh!*'

Valentine glances over towards the door. Her mother clenches both hands into fists and *boffs* them, repeatedly, against the counterpane.

'I'd go to the shops, Mum,' Valentine struggles to mollify her, 'but Nessa's in bed and –'

'THEN ASK A FUCKING NEIGHBOUR!' her mother bellows.

Valentine closes her eyes and draws a deep breath. 'Why don't we try some of those breathing exercises you learned at the day centre the other day?' she suggests, her voice artificially bright. 'Or I can fetch you your crochet …'

Hostile silence.

'I can't ask a neighbour, Mum. It's way after twelve …' She pauses, grimacing. 'And anyway, the doctor –'

'Ah-*ha!*'

Her mother sits bolt upright again. She has a victorious look on her face.

'*Maintenant nous arrivons au coeur de la question!*'

'He just thinks it's advisable for you to try and lay off …'

'Number one' – her mother lifts a single, accusing digit – 'you're too damn *scared* to go out on your own, Nessa or *no* Nessa. Number blue' – she lifts a second finger – 'you've swapped the live batteries with dead ones – on the doctor's instructions – simply to spite me and stop me from having a bit of fun. Number tree' – she lifts a third finger – 'I'm a gorgeous, healthy –'

'… because this thing is much too hard,' Valentine interrupts her, 'and you're rubbing yourself *raw* with it.'

Her mother lifts her nightie, opens her legs and shows Valentine her vagina.

'*C'est belle!* And you should know! You've seen enough of the damn things over the years!'

'*Mum* …'

Valentine is upset.

'What?'

Her mother is unrepentant.

'Will you just …?'

'What?'

'That's not really …'

'*WHAT?!*'

'That's just not really *acceptable*, Mum.'

Her mother drops the nightie. 'But it's acceptable to interfere with my toy and then stand there, bold as brass, and lie to my face about it?'

'I didn't …' Valentine begins.

'God!' Her mother collapses back on to her bed again. 'You *bore* me! This is so *boring*! I'm so fucking *bored*!'

Valentine turns to leave.

'*Menteuse!*' her mother mewls. 'Imbecile! Prude!'

'But of course I've heard of Karma Dean!' Jen scoffs. 'Are you crazy?! I mean who *hasn't* heard of Karma Dean? She's huge!'

'Well we were an item for about eighteen months.' Ransom shrugs, nonchalant. 'She was still married at the time – to some pig-ugly old French actor … I forget his name. The tabloids had a fuckin' *field*-day. It was totally insane.'

Ransom takes a long swig of his beer. He seems understandably smug at the sheer magnitude of this revelation. *Silence.*

'But Karma Dean's really famous,' Jen eventually murmurs.

'Yeah. I know.' Ransom scowls.

'I'm serious!'

Jen pulls her 'serious' face.

'Yes, I *know*.' Ransom struggles to hide his irritation.

'But I don't think you *do*,' Jen enunciates slowly and clearly (as if describing something new-fangled to a deaf octogenarian), 'Karma Dean's really, *really* …'

'FAMOUS! YES! I *KNOW*!' Ransom barks.

'Here.' Gene chucks Jen her cleaning cloth. She catches it. He points at the machine, and then (when she shows no inclination to get on with the job) he gently but firmly angles her towards it. Jen finally gives in to him (with a cheeky, half-smile) and commences cleaning again.

'I remember how you always used to wear it in those two, scruffy plaits …' Gene gamely returns to their former subject. 'Hiawatha-style.'

'*Huh?*'

Ransom's still gazing over at Jen, scowling.

'Your hair?'

'My …? Oh, *yeah* …' Ransom finally catches up. 'I was the original golf punk. *Man*. D'you remember all the fuckin' stick I got for that?'

'Absolutely.' Gene nods.

'An' Ian Poulter suddenly thinks *he's* the latest wrinkle just 'cos he's got himself a couple of measly highlights!' Ransom snorts.

'The latest *wrinkle*?!' Jen sniggers.

'I still miss the old goatee, though.' Ransom fondly strokes his chin (doing his utmost to ignore her).

'It was pretty demonic,' Gene agrees. 'I believe you grew that around about the time the tabloids first coined …'

'"The Devil's Ransom." Yeah …' Ransom grimaces. 'But I loved that goatee. Shaved it off for charity just before my big comeback in 2004 – my new manager's idea. That twatty comedian did it, live, during *Children in Need*.' Ransom scowls. 'The bald one with the fat collars and all the –'

'D'you remember that brilliant campaign she did for Burberry?' Jen turns from the coffee machine.

'Huh?' Ransom looks blank.

'Karma. Karma Dean. That amazing …?'

'*Urgh*. Don't tell me …' He rolls his eyes, bored. 'Nude, on a beach, with the teacup chihuahua slung over her shoulder inside a Burberry rucksack? I was there when they took that

shot. The dead of winter in San Tropez. She got a mild case of hypothermia – lost all sensation in her feet. Believe it or not, journos still pester me about it now, a whole seven years later …'

'What a drag,' Jen smirks, tipping a pile of damp coffee grounds into a brown, paper bag.

'Yeah,' Ransom sighs, glancing down at his phone (seemingly oblivious to the irony in Jen's tone). 'It's dog eat dog out there, kid.'

'Weren't you banned from the Spanish Open or something?' Gene quickly interjects.

'Huh?'

Ransom looks up, confused.

'The Spanish Open. Weren't you banned from that at one stage?'

'*Bingo!*' Ransom snaps his fingers. 'The German Open. They tried to ban me! It was all over the papers. Because of the plaits. They couldn't accept the plaits. Everybody remembers the friggin' plaits! *C'mon!* Who doesn't remember the plaits?! The plaits are *legendary* …'

As Ransom holds forth, Jen passes Gene the bag of grounds to dispose of. Gene takes the bag and then curses as it drips cold coffee on to his loafers.

'Although the point I'm actually trying to make here' – Ransom ignores Gene's muted oaths – 'is that I was a professional surfer – a *successful* surfer – on the international circuit for two, solid years before I was wiped out in South Africa, so I'm in the perfect position to know, first-hand, how unbelievably *selfish* surfing is …'

'Are they real suede?' Jen crouches down and dabs at Gene's shoes with a used napkin.

'Yeah,' Gene mutters. 'My wife got me them for Christmas.'

'Oops.'

Jen grimaces, apologetically.

'… *way* more selfish than golf,' Ransom stubbornly persists, '*infinitely* more selfish.'

'Well, I can't pretend to be much of an expert on the matter,' Jen avers, screwing the damp napkin into a ball and rising to her feet again, 'but I generally find the most efficient way to delineate between a so-called "normal" sport and a "selfish" one' – she paints four, ironic speech marks into the air with her fingers – 'is by employing the handy axiom of sex *versus* masturbation' – she flings the ball, carelessly, towards the bin – 'and then sorting them into categories under similar lines.'

On 'axiom' Gene's jaw slackens. On 'sex' his eyes bulge. On 'masturbation' his grip involuntarily loosens and he almost drops the grounds. Stuart Ransom is struck dumb for a second and then, 'MASTURBATION *IS* SEX!' he explodes. '*Exactly*,' Jen confirms, with a broad grin (like a seasoned fisherman reeling in a prize-winning carp), 'but selfish sex.'

'Mum?'

Valentine tentatively pushes open the bedroom door and peers inside. The room is dark. Her mother appears to be asleep in bed with the coverlet pulled over her head.

'Mum?' Valentine repeats.

Her mother begins to stir.

'Mum?'

'*Huh?*' Her mother slowly pushes back the coverlet and yawns.

Valentine slowly moves her hand towards the light.

'NOT THE LIGHT!' her mother yells.

'*Shhh!*' Valentine frantically tries to quieten her. 'Nessa's asleep next door, remember?'

Her mother sits up.

'What is it?' she demands.

'Did you take the remote by any chance?' Valentine enquires.
'The what?!'
'The remote. The video remote. It's gone missing.'
'You think *I* took the remote?' Her mother looks astonished.
Pause.
'Yes.'
'You woke me up when I was fast asleep to find out if *I* took the remote?!'
'Yes.'
'*Vraiment?!*'
'Pardon?'
'*Seriously?*'
'Yes.'
Longer pause.
'Oh. *Fine*.' Her mother crosses her arms, defiant. 'Well I didn't.'
'I see …'
Valentine nervously pushes her fringe from her eyes. 'Then I guess you wouldn't mind if I just …?'
She slowly inches her way into the room.
'Good *Christ*!' her mother exclaims, drawing the coverlet up to her chin like an imperilled starlet in an exploitation movie. 'What *is* this?! Who the hell *are* you?! The fucking *remote* Gestapo?!'

'I hardly think it's fair to compare –' Gene slowly starts off, shaking his head, evidently bewildered.
'But what about match-play?' Ransom interrupts him. 'What about the Ryder Cup? That's *team* golf, right there!'
Pause.
'Good point,' Jen concedes, then returns her full attention back to the coffee machine.

Ransom is initially gratified, then oddly deflated, by Jen's sudden *volte face*.

'I was selected for Sam Torrance's team in 2002,' he blusters, 'and we fuckin' *stormed* it. Pretty much left the Yanks for dead that year …'

'That must've been an incredible feeling …' Gene tries his best to buoy him up.

'It was,' Ransom confirms.

'To be perfectly honest with you' – Jen peers over her shoulder – 'I don't even know what the Ryder Cup *is* …' She pauses for a moment, thoughtfully. 'Although when Andy Murray exaggerated the severity of his piddling *knee* injury to pike out of playing in the Davis Cup the other year … *Urgh!*' She shakes her head, appalled.

Ransom gazes at Gene, befuddled. 'Is she always like this?' he demands, hoarsely.

'We had Jon Snow in here the other week,' Gene confirms, 'and Jen spent the whole night labouring under the misapprehension that he was her old science teacher from Middle School …'

'Mr Spencer,' Jen interjects, helpfully, 'from Mill Vale.'

'… which was pretty embarrassing in itself,' Gene continues, 'but then she swans off to the kitchens …'

'I just kept asking if he'd kept in contact with Miss Bartholomew – my Year Seven form teacher,' Jen butts in, 'and he was *totally* polite about it, bless him. He kept saying, "I'm not really sure that I have." Which I thought at the time was kinda *weird* … I mean you either keep up with someone or you don't.'

'So she heads over to the kitchens,' Gene repeats, 'and one of the waitresses mentions having served Mr Snow for dinner. Jen puts two and two together, makes five, and then sprints back to the bar to apologize: "I thought you were my old science teacher," she says, "I had no idea you were a famous weatherman."'

'*SHIIIT!*' Ransom covers his face with his hands.

'That was Lenny's fault!' Jen shrieks. 'It was Len who said –'

'Lenny's still struggling to come to terms with the trauma of decimalization,' Gene snorts. 'Is he really the best person to be taking direction from on these matters?'

'Jon Snow's a fuckin' *news*reader, you *dick*!' Ransom gloats. '*Everybody* knows that.'

'I never watch the news' – Jen shrugs, unabashed – 'although when Carol Smillie came in just before Christmas,' she sighs, dreamily, 'I was totally star-struck …'

'If I remember correctly,' Gene takes up the story, 'you served her with a chilled glass of Pinot Grigio and then said, "I think you're amazing, Carol. I'm addicted to *Countdown*. I've never missed a single show."'

'And?!' Jen demands, haughtily.

'Carol *Vorderman* presented *Countdown*, you friggin' dildo!' Ransom crows.

'Oh.' Jen scowls as Ransom exchanges a celebratory high-five with her benighted co-worker before he turns on his heel (with an apologetic shrug) and departs for the kitchens. Ransom – brimming with a sudden, almost overwhelming exuberance – taps out a gleeful tattoo with his index fingers on to the bar top.

'She was a real class act,' Jen mutters, distractedly (her eyes still fixed on the retreating Gene), 'beautiful skin, immaculate teeth, and perfectly happy to sign an autograph for my dad …'

As soon as Gene's safely out of earshot, however, she abruptly interrupts her eulogy, places both hands flat on to the bar top, leans forward, conspiratorially, and whispers, 'I know *exactly* who you are, by the way.'

★ ★ ★