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It's Different for Girls

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Extract

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Prologue

December, 1979

A pair of outsize pink knickers blew lazily along Hastings pier like a stout flamingo trying to take off. As they came to rest by his wellingtons, Vince looked down and spotted some other party debris – crumpled mistletoe and a lonely, wrinkled condom.

'Bloody brilliant night,' he thought to himself and smiled.

'Oi, pig, what are you smiling at?' said one of his fellow anglers. The grin stayed on Vince's face, for it was not an insult. Vince Pigg knew his name sounded like a farmyard animal in a children's book, but he'd had plenty of years to get used to it.

It was Sunday morning and as he breathed in the smells of ozone and chip fat, despite his hangover, he was glad to be free for the day. As he stood on this rickety finger of iron pushing itself towards France, he was overcome by a sense of freedom; today was a day in which he had no

responsibilities apart from throwing out his fishing line and eating his sandwiches.

Hastings at six-thirty in the morning looked so full of promise, with the half-light constructing a magical seaside town crowded with interesting architecture, clean pavements and the nostalgic shapes of fishing huts and castle. Of course, advancing daylight revealed a rather different story – a shabby façade, victim of many years of neglect and abuse. The East Sussex resort clung to the sea's edge like an old man in need of a good wash.

Flanked on one side by the bigger, more fashionable Brighton, and on the other by Rye – a quaint medieval town which seduced tourists into handing over their money as they trailed through its puzzle of rambling streets and 'olde' hostelries – Hastings decayed on. Its picturesque Old Town was the area of choice for visitors and drinkers, whilst its new town hid a series of social problems that would have trounced the East End of London in a Social Problems competition. Even the town's fame was misplaced, as the Battle of Hastings didn't actually take place there. William the Conqueror had landed further up the coast at Pevensey and had fought the *soi disant* Battle of Hastings at Battle. Therefore 1066 was really all about the Battle of Battle. Perhaps someone had said to William, 'Don't go to Hastings, the beaches are shit.'

As Vince cast his fishing line out onto the waves, he was aware that the sea beneath him sounded a bit different from its usual watery echo; only someone like himself, who had stood in this position for twenty years, would have

noticed. There was a quiet, rhythmic slapping that didn't belong, although it was quite difficult to hear with all the bustle going on around, seagulls calling and Vince's transistor radio broadcasting *Farming Today,* his favourite programme. For a milkman, he was quite interested in milk.

Vince lowered himself to the ground and lay on his stomach peering through the planks of wood down towards the great ornate legs of the pier to see what he could see.

What he could see was a man's corpse gently knocking against one of the iron struts beneath him.

Chapter 1

7 Years Earlier

Saturday night's revelry had thrown up its normal catch of hungover citizens. Walking down George Street in the Old Town on a Sunday morning, there was usually at least one body left over from the night before, slumped in a doorway or on a bench. The Aquarius Nightclub – a dump which dispensed vodka and limes or light and bitters to anyone with a few quid in their pocket, was usually responsible.

On this beautiful August morning there were three bodies – two fishermen called Colin and Les, who did this most weekends, and a student from Eastbourne called Jerry who lay smiling contentedly, his memory of the night before completely wiped. As Vince Pigg wandered down the street towards the paper shop, he coolly assessed the consciousness level of each snoozing body, resisting the temptation to give each layabout a good kick up the arse to get them going.

Vince was usually really glad to get out of the house on a Sunday morning to go fishing and leave his family snoring in their beds. They were his adopted family – wife Terry, whom he had rescued from a violent and destructive marriage when the girls were four, three and one and a half, and now they – Jennifer, Kim and Susan – were in their teens and driving him insane. He feared metamorphosing into a dirty old man. He just couldn't seem to prevent phrases like 'burgeoning womanhood' floating into his head and wished bromide was available in the chemist's at the bottom of their road.

Vince bought a packet of twenty Number Six cigarettes, a *News of the World* and a can of Coke and headed down towards the seafront for a sit-down and a read before he had to get back to the Pigg household. Today, however, there could be no fishing.

The family were not, in fact, all snoring in their beds. Susan, the youngest, had been awake for ages. It was her thirteenth birthday – 15 August 1972. She was thinking about being called Susan Pigg and how much of a trial it had been so far. Ironically, it was her real dad who should have been called 'Pigg' because that's what he was, given that Wanker or Bastard weren't popular as surnames. And it was Vince who should have had the neutral name. Then again, she thought, serial killers usually had normal names until they were rechristened 'The Panther' or 'The Wolf'.

Her old surname used to be Evans which, unlike Pigg, was not a name to be comically bandied about in the playground. Susan had thought of reverting to it, but realising

how much it would upset her mum, she put up with all the snorting and references to troughs and pork scratchings. What's more, Vince didn't knock her mum about and he gave her housekeeping money – a concept alien to Susan's real father Malcolm Evans, who could not have lived with himself unless he had spent any cash at the bookies or pissed it away in the pub.

Susan's first thirteen years had not exactly gone smoothly, her mother's marriage to Vince being the most traumatic thing that had ever happened to her. She had been eighteen months old when her dad left, and Vince hadn't married Terry until two years later, by which time Susan was right in the middle of toddlerhood. It had been a very grumpy day. Susan hadn't wanted to wear her bridesmaid's dress, and had deliberately covered it in tomato sauce. Then, seeing the ring left momentarily unattended on the hall table by Vince, she had dropped it into the cat's litter tray and sat back and watched the household go bananas. She was questioned several times about her involvement in the disappearance of this most essential of accessories for a wedding, but after half an hour genuinely could not remember what she had done with it.

Eventually, a substitute was found and the wedding went ahead, with most of the major players looking very surly. Susan put the finishing touches to everyone's temper at the reception when she pulled the tablecloth off the top table, bringing the wedding cake and other vol-au-venty delights cascading to the floor and giving Vince a reason to dislike her pretty much for the rest of her life. This

destructive tendency never left Susan who, despite being both pretty and fairly bright, when given some big advantages, always saw to it that she pressed the FUCK IT UP button each time.

Other traumas in Susan's short life included being held under the water in the local swimming pool by a boy with a personality disorder and being bullied by a teacher at primary school – a sour-faced woman who had taken against her elfin face and carefree manner.

Apart from these incidents, the girl had arrived at her teenage years relatively unscathed.

Susan had planned a fantastic birthday for herself in her head but doubted it would happen. Vince, of course, had temporarily forgotten but Terry hadn't, although she had deliberately not reminded Vince of it today, because after ten years or so together, one of her few pleasures was winding him up.

Although Vince didn't actually know it yet, Terry had promised Susan she could have a small party on her own while she and Vince went out.

He'll go fucking mad, she thought to herself with relish, savouring the image in her head and considering when and how she would tell him. Vince was houseproud and borderline obsessional, and his brain would torture him all night as he conjured up images of coleslaw and cheesy footballs being trodden into carpets, pubescent couples snogging each other's faces off on his and Terry's bed, and his precious home-made beer being discovered in the garage and drunk or sprayed over the wallpaper he had so painstakingly stuck

up in the lounge a year ago to the very day. Yes, it was the wallpaper's birthday as well, but only Vince remembered that.

'Ow!' The birthday girl was seized upon by her two sisters. 'Piss off,' she objected as they started the well-worn birthday ritual of dragging her very slowly out of bed by her feet,

'Piss off' didn't work so she tried hitting out wildly and caught Jenny in the chest.

'Christ, you silly cow!' shouted Jenny. 'I'll get breast cancer now.'

No one was really sure where the idea came from that a thump in the chest caused breast cancer, but it was certainly a widely-held belief among Jenny's teen-magazine-devouring friends.

'Come on,' said Kim. 'It's your birthday. Get up, do birthday things. Here you are.' She tossed a badly-wrapped present onto the bed. Kim was a fan of the Sweet and wished she'd got inside their dressing-room at the local nightclub where, it was rumoured, Karen Timson in Jenny's class had given the lead singer a blow job while he did his accounts.

Susan flew at it like a hyena and tore it apart. Some glittery nail varnish fell out onto the bed.

Terry put her head round the door. 'Happy birthday, love,' she said.

'Cheers, Mum,' said Susan.

'Come on – I've made you some breakfast,' said Terry. 'Are you coming down? Your dad'll be back with the paper in a minute.'

Susan resented the 'your dad'. Her real dad, whom none of them had seen since they left eleven years ago, was still her proper dad, despite everything.

Vince himself was a milkman who tolerated with good cheer the expectations of a general public who categorised him as barely able to control his libido when faced with a housewife clad in a Brentford's Nylons nightie. However, Vince was far too embarrassed to tell anyone that he had never actually once been propositioned on his rounds – a first, surely, in the twilight world of *doubles entendres* and nudge-nudge that milkmen share with vicars and nuns.

Susan went down and ate bacon and eggs, a rare treat and a change from the usual cereal and toast. Jenny, who was a Ryvita away from an eating disorder, looked on in barely disguised horror as what she assessed to be well over fifteen hundred calories slid down her little sister's throat. Susan was glad when Jenny left the room to go to the toilet so she could enjoy eating for once. Looking round the shabby room, with its crappy Vince wallpaper, she wished some people would magically turn up and redecorate it for her birthday.

Just then, Vince appeared at the door. 'Hello,' he said. 'What's going on here?'

'It's Susan's birthday,' said Terry, gloating.

'I know. Happy Birthday, love,' said Vince, barely missing a beat, kissing the girl and leaving the faint smell of fags, toothpaste, hair cream and Old Spice aftershave on her.

'Thanks,' Susan said, as ever studiously avoiding calling him Dad. It made life difficult, as it meant she could

never directly address Vince and had to get his attention by other methods, like coughing or trying to catch his eye. She didn't like to call him by his Christian name either because she hated it. Only once had she been in a situation where she required him sharpish, on holiday in Devon when, as a nine year old, she had started to wobble and fall backwards off a five-bar gate. She needed a hand to pull her back, and Vince was nearest. Even in that split second, she could not bring herself to address him as 'Dad' but 'Vince' – which got her into trouble immediately afterwards, as only middle-class parents and hippies allowed their children to call them by their first names.

Susan often fantasised that her real dad was now a good man who, having fucked up his wife's and daughters' lives, had repented and gone abroad to work as a missionary. She hadn't quite managed to justify in her head why, after this Damascene conversion, he hadn't come back immediately to England to throw himself at their feet and beg their forgiveness, but maybe the authorities had prevented him leaving whichever South American country he was in because they needed him so badly and were worried he might never come back.

The sad facts were that he had ended up running a miserable pub in Hull with a woman called Tracey, more to fulfil their own drinking needs than anyone else's. Various half-hearted attempts by the brewery to shut it down had so far been unsuccessful, and Mal Evans and his girlfriend sank a little lower each day.

'So, Mum,' said Susan, as she sat at the breakfast table, 'is it all right for my party tonight?'

'What party?' asked Vince, turning from the telly.

'I said she could have a little party tonight,' Terry told him, affecting an air of nonchalance.

'What!' shouted Vince at a decibel level well above what Mr and Mrs Sanford, the elderly neighbours, could tolerate.

'You heard,' said Terry. 'Come on, misery guts, let her have a party.'

'They'll wreck the bloody place,' said Vince.

'Oh, come on, spoilsport,' said his wife. 'It'll be fine. You'll keep an eye, won't you, Jenny?' she asked her eldest.

'Course,' promised Jenny, who was thinking about taking her new bloke, Paul, into the garden shed and offering him rather more of herself than he'd been offered before.

'Course,' she said again. 'Don't worry, Dad.'

This was a tactical 'Dad' guaranteed to make Vince feel part of the family, and it had the required effect.

'Oh, all right then,' he said, 'but you must be finished by ten at the latest.'

This brought a chorus of protest.

'No point having a party if it's going to stop at ten,' said Susan sulkily.

'You're thirteen years old, for Chrissakes,' Vince snapped.

'Mum told us eleven,' said Kim, always pushing.

Terry hadn't said anything of the sort, but she supported this statement and it was agreed that she and Vince would go out for a meal, then a drink, and be back at eleven o'clock.

The rest of the day was spent in Sunday mode until at six o'clock Susan decided it was time to get ready for the party. She had invited a few friends from school who would do their best to rustle up some boys who could hold their drink and not collapse in an acnefied giggling heap as soon as a girl looked at them.

Susan had told Terry and Vince she would wear the dress they had bought her for her birthday, even though she hated it. Obviously Terry had nodded towards Vince's taste in the purchase of this dress, which would have looked much better on a ten year old. Or even a poodle. How on earth was she supposed to attract Marc Bolan lookalike Steve wearing *that*, she wondered gloomily.

Susan pretended as much enthusiasm as she could manage but her parents knew she didn't like it.

'But you'll wear it tonight just for me, won't you, sweetheart?' said Vince in a manner that both Terry and Susan thought came across as ever so slightly pervy, although Vince had intended it to sound manly and loving.

Terry and Vince set off out at about 7.30 p.m. They were going to a local Italian and had given the girls the telephone number, should they need it.

As soon as the car had disappeared round the corner, Susan ran up to her bedroom and ripped off Bo Peep's standby party dress which, apart from anything else, would have suffocated her on this muggy August night. She began to wind a piece of gorgeous Moroccan silk round herself.

'Kim!' she shouted. 'Give us a hand with pinning this, will you?'

'You're not wearing that, are you?' said Kim in a horrified voice, which disguised the fact that Susan looked amazing in it and several years older than she was.

Unfortunately, the Pigg girls' make-up routine was not the most professional, nor the most experienced. Jenny, who had plucked her eyebrows defiantly into a single line some weeks before ('You'll regret it when you're twenty-five and Denis Healey eyebrows are in,' said Terry), looked like a constantly surprised Joan Collins. Kim had overdone the ivory foundation and looked as though she had recently died, and Susan's eyelids bore the weight of so much glittery eye-shadow she looked like she'd had a stroke.

Various children began to arrive; the parents who stood on the doorstep expectantly waiting to see if a responsible adult was around dropped them off the earliest. Jenny was wheeled out for this purpose, having donned a grey school cardigan to cover the lack of true clothing over her chest area and some NHS glasses. The parents were impressed.

'Don't worry,' she would say soothingly, as three or four sets of slightly worried couples handed over their offspring who were about to be filled up with as much cheap alcohol as they could tolerate without dying. 'I have a direct line to my parents who will be home at nine thirty,' she told them reassuringly.

In all, roughly thirty kids had been invited but with the benefit of hearsay, by nine o'clock this number had swelled to fifty. Thankfully, Hastings's finest greasers were occupied elsewhere, although a couple of older teenage boys had sneaked in to check out the talent.

Any parent in any century who wonders whether they should give their teenage children a free rein in their house without them in it, knows what the ghastly truth is, and they should *never*, under *any* circumstances, indulge their offspring in this way. But parents like to hope and every opportunity taken by a parent is an opportunity trashed, as each child will set about laying waste to the trust and respect of his or her mum and dad.

And so it was with Susan, Jennifer and Kim. Although they didn't start the evening wanting to make their parents cry, that was the end result. It all started so well, too.

The parents were all gone by eight o'clock, although Alison Moor's parents lingered in the car outside in the road for half an hour to check whether the boy they suspected was penetrating their daughter at regular intervals had turned up at the party to do it again. Satisfied that he wasn't there, they drove home for a cup of tea for three-quarters of an hour until they went to pick her up again, little knowing that at that very moment their dearest daughter was lying on Terry and Vince's bed with her legs high in the air, laughing her head off underneath the very offender himself.

At first, the children had gathered nervously downstairs, girls in one room and boys in another, giggling and eyeing each other up even though they all knew each other very well. But with the benefit of alcohol, the great socialiser, things soon became more relaxed. The groups merged and the antics of the pre-adults began to spiral out of control in direct relation to the amount they had drunk.

Jennifer, because of her low weight and low tolerance for alcohol, normally managed to get virtually unconscious on a couple of glasses of wine. She didn't do that often though, because there were ninety calories in a glass of wine. However, she had decided to give herself a bit of a treat and sat as seductively on the arm of the settee as she could, chatting to a young man called Tel Townley who was desperately trying to work out whether she would snap in half if he lay on top of her. He didn't realise he was being played off against her new boyfriend, Paul, who was quietly fuming in the corner and planning violence should snogging start to occur.

Susan was upstairs in her room with her three best friends. She knew this was a contradiction because in theory you should really only have one best friend, a trusty companion who stuck to you like an amiable leech and tolerated all your flaws until you expired in their arms at the age of ninety, because your husband never made it past seventy-three. Susan really wanted a best friend, but the trio with whom she spent most of her time were like a best friend collectively but not individually. Each one had an element of best friend-ness but not the entire package.

For example, Marie was kind and tolerant, but she was also quiet and slightly dull, not someone Susan could imagine swimming naked with in the moonlight when they were pissed.

Bev was a really good laugh and up for anything, but unfortunately she was someone who would crap on you from a great height if she thought it would imrpove her

own situation, and therefore Susan felt very insecure with her. She knew that once they all started going out with boys, she wouldn't be able to trust Bev one little bit.

Annette was fiercely loyal and supportive of Susan, and had been there for most of the difficult moments in her relatively young life. But she charged her a high price for this, being given to cursory wrist-slashing on occasions and much high-expressed emotion.

So Susan was still looking and rather absentmindedly jogging along with what she'd got before finding what she really wanted. It wouldn't be long, she knew, before they were all competing for boyfriends. Personally, she wasn't ready to go through that door just yet and had been holding off, much to the relief of her parents. Terry and Vince constantly looked for telltale signs of sexual activity in their youngest daughter and would have been so much happier if they had known that Susan was doing her best to delay the whole process.

Some very loud Tamla Motown struck the walls downstairs.

'Come on,' said Susan to the three of them. 'Let's go down and see what's happening and have a dance.'

Downstairs was starting to look like a party, with a few bodies strewn around, a slightly smoky atmosphere and a bit of dancing going on.

Jennifer had got fed up with flirting with the boring one and had taken Paul out to the garden shed where, earlier in the day, she had strategically placed a small bottle of vodka and some ribbed condoms. Paul saw the packet of Durex as

soon as they got into the shed and got very hopeful, but he shouldn't have done. Jennifer was like her mum in that she really enjoyed winding people up, and she hadn't decided yet whether she was actually going to do it with Paul or not.

Kim was in the kitchen leading a breakaway group of intellectuals who, despite the fact that they were only fourteen and a half, felt vastly superior to the children with whom they were having to spend their party. They were smoking Gauloises, which they all hated, and wished they could have a Number Six. Kim had discovered an extraordinary thing to do with cigarettes for asthmatics. She had made a pot of tea with six cigarettes, which the group were just about to try.

In the shed Paul realised he had come rather earlier than expected – in fact, even before he and Jennifer had touched each other – and he wondered desperately how he could get away to sort himself out and how long it would be before he was ready to have another bash.

Jennifer, who was building up to stroking his trouser zip area, had absolutely no idea this had happened, despite his constipated expression, and was quite surprised when Paul said he had to pop back to the house.

'What for?' she asked petulantly.

He didn't know why he said it but he did and couldn't believe it as the words came out of his mouth.

'Feeling a bit peckish.'

Jennifer glowered at him. It wasn't the best thing to say to someone with an eating disorder who spent her entire life being hungry.