Hilary Mantel (London: Fourth Estate, 2003.)

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'Sick?' said the doctor, down at the Student Health Service. 'Throw up? I'm hardly surprised. You do know that taking six aspirin is no more effective than taking three?'

I didn't. As it was double any ordinary pain, I'd thought I could double the aspirin. We weren't very sophisticated in those days. I don't think we even had paracetamol. I had a big bottle of a hundred aspirin, and I used to take whatever number I thought would get me through the day.

'Well, Miss—' said the doctor. He glanced down at his file, and a little jolt shot through him, as if he were electrified. Mrs?' he said. '*Mrs*? You've got married? Pregnant, are you?'

I hope not, I thought. If so, I've overdone it with the aspirin. It'll have fins. Or feathers. Three extra aspirin, three extra heads. I'll exhibit it. It will keep us in luxury.

'I'm on the Pill,' I said. An urge rose in me, to say, we are sexually very keen so I take three pills a day, do you think that's enough? But then a stronger urge rose in me, to be sick on his shoes.

I can see him, now that the years have flown; his crinkly fairish hair sheared short, his rimless glasses, his highly polished brogues. He was a nervous man, and when I bowed my head towards his feet he shifted

them under his desk. I wasn't sick, not there and then. I put my hand across my mouth, and went outside, and threw up in the Student Health Service lavatories. It was quite a luxurious vomit, private and well-lit. At Roebuck Road, our facility was shared with next door, and you had to plough down their garden to get to it, so that at night dogs barked and householders with their torches came out shouting 'What's all this?' and you were caught in the cross beams, your loo roll in your hand.

I went home. 'What did the doctor say?' my husband asked.

'He said, don't take so many aspirin. I said my legs ached and he said it was accounted for by no known disease. Except one called idiopathic something-something.'

I didn't say how I had grinned, when he said 'idiopathic.' I knew it meant, disease about which we doctors have no bloody idea. So he had bridled, and swallowed the rest of the medical term; he wasn't, anyway, entertaining it as a possibility, he was just boasting, showing he remembered his textbooks. And my smile called his bluff; I shouldn't have smiled it. He was not on my side now. I thought that probably he never had been.

Go back, said my mister, grimly. You haven't really told him. How tired you are. And how upset.

I was upset, it was true. I couldn't bear my smashed

relationship with my family. That my brothers should think badly of me. That I should have no money to buy a present for Father's Day, only a bag of toffee, and nothing to give for Christmas but a box of biscuits and a bottle of wine.

That I had money to give even these was because of the intervention of a bureaucrat at County Hall in Chester, where lived the authority who paid (or not) my maintenance grant. For my visit I composed myself into pliant, pleading mode. We went to Chester by way of the grumbling, grunting, plastic-padded car. I went to see him in his office, the necessary man, the bureaucrat who was on my case. I explained that my father hadn't signed my forms to testify to his income. So therefore, he said, I could get no grant, not even the fifty pounds that every student got, even the rich ones: for those were the rules. I know this, I said, but you see I shall just have to sit here till the rules are amended in my favour, because if I don't get some money from you I'm out of house and home.

I don't remember his face, only his office, his desk, his chair, the slant of the light. He left the room. I studied his carpet, on which I had sworn I would be sleeping: unless I slept on his desk. It was a warm, blossoming, summer day: perhaps I could sleep in a flower bed? Sunlight rippled on magnolia walls. He came back smiling. I have got you fifty, he said, and let's see, hereafter, maybe

it can be worked – there are always some strange circumstances . . .

Perhaps he was an angel. Perhaps a mortal, but one of the elect. I'm praying for him still, in a wild agnostic fashion. Hoping he wins the national lottery: I pray some irregular prayer like that. Or that he'd come to see me and I could make him a pie or a cake.

Go back, said my husband; tell them how you really are. Here you go, said the doctor, scribbling me a prescription; I think what you need is some anti-depressants. I was depressed, so I knew it made a kind of sense. Twenty-four hours later, I found I couldn't read; print blurred before my eyes. I went to the university library and tried to look up the side effects of the drug, but I was labouring under the obvious handicap. In those days, pills didn't come with a patient information leaflet. Your doctor had all the information you needed, and whether you could get it depended on whether you had pull, face and cunning. I had none of these.

I went to see my tutor in Equity, and said, look, Mr Loath (it wasn't his name, I didn't say it, it was just what the frightened spotty boys called him) look, Loath, I'm coming to your next session, but don't harass me, right? (Really, of course, I spoke to him much more nicely than this.) Loath, please understand

that I've been prescribed some necessary drugs that mean I can't read my books. Blurred vision. Side effects, I said. Under my breath: you must have heard of side-effects? Loath gave me a puzzled look, as if he'd never heard of any such thing.

I tried some other tutors. I was asking for a week's grace, or perhaps a fortnight's, to audit my courses but not take part. Their reaction was all the same: why was I telling them this? The medical textbook (if I'd read it right, squinting, aslant) suggested that the blurred vision would last only a week or two, whereas the course of drugs lasted six weeks. Six weeks, in clinical practice, was the term set to depression; six weeks was a cure. After that, I was sure, I'd be happy. Never mind who was dead and how. Never mind how few the coins in my purse. I'd be up with the lark and rejoicing with the wrens: I'd be skipping up the hills of Sheffield, my pains vanished, my joints springing, swinging my bags of potatoes and self-raising flour as if they were feathers, as if I were self-raised myself; and scattering my careless laughter to the winds. For the time being, though, my spirits had sunk. The drugs seemed to be having an effect, but not the one required. The pangs of bereavement, of estrangement, had given way to a dull apathy. My sleep was broken and the climate of my dreams was autumnal, like the dim leaf-mould interior of a copse; their content was exhausting and yet somehow banal.

A day or two later, Mr Loath presided over his tutorial: the pasty, sweating, spotty boys, one other girl, and me. A small question of criminality was raised, and Mr L got testy: come along, come along, he said, do you know the maximum penalty under the Theft Act, do *you*, boy, or next boy, do *you*? I had to speak up and spare the boys, from their humiliation; oh, Mr Loath, I said, is it not ten years? Mr Loath, fuming with frustration, was just about to snap the arm of his spectacles; his fingers relaxed, and 'Thank goodness!' he said. And just as he replaced his glasses on his head, a pain sliced through me, diagonal, from my right ribs to my left loin. It was a new pain: but not new for long. It stole my life: it stole it for ten years and for a double term, and then for ten years more.

A short time later I was vomiting a good deal. I had finished the course of anti-depressants, but felt no more cheerful, and my GP did what you do when someone says she is vomiting: send her to a psychiatrist. I should like to say I protested, but I was willing enough. I thought perhaps I was a fascinating case. I had been tested for anaemia, but I wasn't iron-deficient. No one seemed to be able to think of another disorder to test me for, and if my body was not the problem it must be my mind that was acting up; I could believe this, and wanted my mind

fixed. 'Psychosomatic' was the buzzword. Properly understood, the term suggests a subtle interaction between mind and body, between the brain and the endocrine system. Improperly understood, it means, 'it's all in the mind' – that is to say, your symptoms are invented. You've nothing better to do with your time. You're seeking attention.

Dr G, the psychiatrist, was remote and bald. He had as much chance of understanding a girl like me as he had of rising from his desk and skimming from the window on silver pinions. He soon diagnosed my problem: stress, caused by overambition. This was a female complaint, one which people believed in, in those years, just as the Greeks believed that women were made ill by their wombs cutting loose and wandering about their bodies. I had told Dr G, in response to his questions about my family, that my mother was a fashion buyer in a large department store; it was true, for at the end of the sixties she had reinvented herself as a blonde, bought herself some new clothes and taken up a career. Oh really, said Dr G: how interesting. Thereafter, he referred to her place of work as 'the dress shop'. If I were honest with myself, he asked, wouldn't I rather have a job in my mother's dress shop than study law? Wouldn't the dress shop, when all's said and done, be more in my line?

I saw Dr G once a week. He must have obtained

reports about me from my tutors, for he said, conscientious, hm, it says you're *very* conscientious.

Was I? I only turned in the work asked for. Didn't other people bother?

'And a *mind for detail*,' Dr G said, 'you have that.' I tried to imagine the other kind of law student, the kind who favoured the broad-brush approach, who took on the law of trusts, for example, with a grand generalist's sweep and dash. 'Tell me,' said Dr G, 'if you were a doctor, what kind would you be?'

I said politely that to be a psychiatrist must be interesting. No, pick something else, he said, something less close to home. I'd often thought, I said, that GPs had a challenging job, the variety of people and problems, the need for quick thinking – but no, I could see by his face that wasn't the answer required. Dr G sat back in his chair. I see you as a medical researcher, he said, one of those quiet invaluable people in the back room, unseen, industrious, unsung – a mind for detail, you see. And wasn't it the same, he asked, with law? If I did go on with my studies, wouldn't the niche for me be in a solicitor's office, conveying clients' houses – wasn't it just what people needed, at such a stressful time in their lives, to have the services of someone *very conscientious*, like me?

I could see her: a clerk very conscientious and quiet and dull, who wore snuff-coloured garb and filed herself in a cabinet every night and whose narrow heart

fluttered when anyone mentioned a flying freehold or an ancient right of way. But you're not *looking* at me, I thought. I was quite thin; nausea was wearing me away. I left G's consulting room and stood on the pavement to consider this new version of myself. I felt as if I had been dealt a dull blow, but I didn't know which part of me ached.

The next time I went to Dr G's office I sat and wept. It was as if a dam had burst. I must have worked through a box of tissues, and no doubt it was his upset-girl ration for the whole month. Dr G spoke gently to me; said gravely he had not known that things were so bad. I had better have some stronger pills. And maybe a spell in the university clinic? I trucked off there, with my textbooks. At least now my husband would be able to study in peace for his finals. I wasn't easy company; I was labouring under a violent sense of injustice that may have seemed unreasonable to the people around me; I was angry, tearful and despairing, and I still had pains in my legs.

I think, in retrospect, that it would have been better if I had denied that I had pains in my legs, if I had taken it all back, or brightly said that I was well now. But because I didn't, the whole business began to spiral out of control. I still believed that honesty was the best policy; but the brute fact was, I was an invalid now, and I wasn't entitled to a policy, not a policy

of my own. I feared that if I didn't tell the strict truth, my integrity would be eroded; I would have nothing then, no place to stand. The more I said that I had a physical illness, the more they said I had a mental illness. The more I questioned the nature, the reality of the mental illness, the more I was found to be in denial, deluded. I was confused; when I spoke of my confusion, my speech turned into a symptom. No one ventured a diagnosis: not out loud. It was in the nature of educated young women, it was believed, to be hysterical, neurotic, difficult, and out of control, and the object was to get them back under control, not by helping them examine their lives, or fix their practical problems – in my case, silverfish, sulking family, poverty, cold – but by giving them drugs which would make them indifferent to their mental pain – and in my case, indifferent to physical pain too.

The first line of medication, in those days, were the group of drugs called tricyclic anti-depressants – which I had already sampled – and also what were then called 'minor tranquillisers'; the pills marketed as Valium were the most famous example of the type. Highly popular in those days among overworked GPs, the minor tranquillisers are central nervous system depressants. They impair mental alertness and physical co-ordination. They dull anxiety. They are habit-forming and addictive.

The anti-depressants didn't seem to be having

much effect on me – or not the wanted effects, anyway, only the effects of making me unable to grapple with the written word, of making print slide sideways and fall out of the book. It didn't seem as if I would be able to sit my finals, Dr G said, but never mind: in view of my good work record, the university would grant me an aegrotat degree. Did I understand *aegrotat*? It meant 'he is sick'.

I muttered 'he, not she?' It would have been much healthier for me if I had stopped muttering, and kept smiling.

Valium, however, did work; it worked to damage me. Some people, given tranquillisers of this type, experience what is called a 'paradoxical reaction'. Instead of being soothed, they are enraged. One day I sat by the hearth at Roebuck Road and imagined myself starting fires – not in my own chimney, but fires in the houses of strangers, fires in the streets. Somewhere along the line, I seemed to have been damaged; I imagined myself doing damage, in my turn. I knew these thoughts were not rational, but I was obliged to entertain them; day by day I smouldered in a sullen fury, and when I saw a carving knife I looked at it with a new interest. I agreed to the clinic because I thought that, if I were to act on my impulses, someone would see me and stop me – before, at least, it got to arson and stabbing, and the deaths of strangers who had never harmed me at all.

After a day or two in the clinic I felt a little calmer. No one saw me as a danger; the danger was all in my own head. At first I came and went; I would go back to Roebuck Road during the day and do the cleaning. One day I went down to town to buy myself a nightdress. But because my vision was blurred, I misread the label, and came back with a size 16 instead of a size 10. 'Look at this monster garment!' I cried gaily to the nurses; I was having one of my less murderous days, and trying to lighten the tone. 'Look what I bought!'

My nightdress, I found, was viewed in a grave light. Why had I bought it? It was a mistake, I said, you see I . . . Didn't you hold it up? they asked me. Well, no, I, I just liked the pattern, I . . . Didn't you remember what size you were? Did you feel you didn't know? Yes, I know my size, but you see, my eyesight, it's misty, it's because of the drugs I . . . oh, never mind.

But they wouldn't drop the topic. It was obviously characteristic of mad girls to buy big nightdresses. Every time I spoke I dug myself into a deeper hole.

Dr G came to see me. Well, and what was I doing with myself now that I was free from my struggles with my textbooks? I have written a story, I offered brightly. It was a long story – that is to say, a short story, but long as these things go. Short but long, said Dr G. Hm. And what was it about? A changeling, I said. A woman who believes her baby has been taken away, and a substitute provided in its place. I see,

said Dr G, and where and when did this occur? In rural Wales, I said, funnily enough. (I'd never been to Wales.) I don't have to say the date, but it feels like the early 1920s. I mean, judging by their furniture and clothes. Does it? said Dr G. It's a time well before social insurance, anyway, I said. The doctor won't come up the mountain to see them because they can't pay. I see, said Dr G. And how does it end? Oh, badly.

If you didn't respond to the first wave of drugs – if they didn't fix you, or you wouldn't take them – the possibility arose that you were not simply neurotic, hypochondriacal and a bloody nuisance, but heading for a psychotic breakdown, for the badlands of schizophrenia, a career on a back ward. To head off this disaster, doctors would prescribe what were then called the major tranquillisers, a group of drugs intended to combat thought disorder and banish hallucinations and delusions.

The next time I saw Dr G he forbade me to write: or – more precisely – he said, 'I don't *want* you writing.' He put more energy into this statement than any I had heard him make. He seemed as remote as ever, and yet inexpressibly angry. 'Because –' he added; and broke off. He was not going to impart to me what came after 'because'.

I said to myself, if I think of another story I will write it. In fact, I didn't think of another story for quite

some years – not a story of the long but short type – and when I did I sent it to *Punch* and what I got back was not a malediction but a cheque. The changeling too paid off, in time, in a novel published in 1985; the setting was not rural Wales, nor the 1920s, but the present day in a prosperous and dull Midlands town. The novel contained mad people, but no one suggested its author was mad. It's different, somehow, when you've received money for your efforts; once you've got an agent, and professionalised the whole thing.

The first drug I was given was called Fentazine. That would do the job, Dr G thought.

Do you know about akathisia? It is a condition that develops as a side-effect of anti-psychotic medication, and the cunning thing about it is that it looks, and it feels, exactly like madness. The patient paces. She is unable to stay still. She wears a look of agitation and terror. She wrings her hands; she says she is in hell.

And from the inside, how does it feel? Akathisia is the worst thing I have ever experienced, the worst single, defined episode of my entire life – if I discount my meeting in the secret garden. No physical pain has ever matched that morning's uprush of killing fear, the hammering heart. You are impelled to move, to pace in a small room. You force yourself down into a chair, only to jump out of it. You choke; pressure rises inside your skull. Your hands pull at your clothing and tear at your arms. Your breathing becomes ragged. Your

voice is like a bird's cry and your hands flutter like wings. You want to hurl yourself against the windows and the walls. Every fibre of your being is possessed by panic. Every moment endures for an age and yet you are transfixed by the present moment, stabbed by it; there is no sense of time passing, therefore no prospect of deliverance. A desperate feeling of urgency – a need to act – but to do what, and how? – throbs through your whole body, like the pulses of an electric shock.

You run out into the corridor. A man is standing there, gazing dolefully towards you. It is your GP, the man at the Student Health Service, the man with the rimless glasses and the polished brogues. The tension rises in your throat. Speech is dragged and jerked out of you, your ribs heaving. You think you are screaming but you are only whispering. You whisper that you are dying, you are damned, you are already being dipped into hell and you can feel the flames on your face.

And the answer to this? Another anti-psychotic. An injection of Largactil knocked me into insensibility. I lay with my face in the pillow as the drug took effect, and sank into darkness; as I ceased to panic and fight, the hospital sheets dampened, and wrapped around me like ropes.

After I woke up, I was maintained on Largactil, to combat my madness. It was not a friendly drug; it made my throat jump and close, as if someone were

hanging me. This is how a mad person appears to the world – lips trembling, speech fumbling and jerky. You can say, this is the drugs you know, this is not me; I am quite all right, inside myself. They say, yes dear, of course you are; have you taken your pill?

But then it was the end of term, the end of the year. My course of studies was over. The university's responsibility was ended. I was discharged from the clinic. I went home, and was sane. The drugs wore off; I no longer twitched and jumped. I could have passed for normal in any company. My legs didn't seem to ache so much; I had more abdominal pain, but I knew better than to mention it. For a time I claimed to be well.

But it was not so easy to shake off the events of the last year. The problem was the names of those drugs I had 'needed', spelled out like evil charms in my medical notes. Fentazine, Largactil, Stelazine. If I set foot in a GP's surgery – as I did, when I grew increasingly sick – I ran the risk of being prescribed a dose of them that would knock an elephant off its feet. Then there was my old friend Valium, which I knew I shouldn't go near: not unless I wanted to be arrested.

So when in time I went back to a doctor, I said I had backache, nausea, vomiting, that I was too tired to move. My GPs – to a man, and a woman – suggested a test to see if I was anaemic. I never was. They had no

other suggestions; except perhaps some Valium: and a little spell away might do me good? By the time I was twenty-four I had learned the hard way that whatever my mental distress – and it does distress one, to be ignored, invalidated, and humiliated – I must never, ever go near a psychiatrist or take a psychotropic drug. My vision blurred, in those days, entirely without the help of the anti-depressants. Sometimes there were gaps in the world: I complained one day that the front door had been left open, but the truth was that I just couldn't see the door. Sometimes it seemed that some rustling, suspicious activity was going on, at the left side of my head, but I couldn't put a name to what it was. I couldn't put a name to lots of things, my speech came out muddled: I called a clock's hands its fingers, and a chair's arms its sleeves.

I was all right if I stuck with abstractions, ideas, images. And some days I was half well. I had a job, but I needed a pursuit, I thought. I went to the library and got out a lot of books about the French Revolution. I made some notes and some charts. I went to a bigger library and got more books and began to break down the events of 1789–94 so that I could put them into a card index. I was *very conscientious* and with *a mind for detail*. If you had been having a revolution you would certainly – at such a stressful time in your life – have needed the services of someone as conscientious as me. I began to read about

the old regime, its casual cruelties, its heartless style. I thought, but I know this stuff. By nature, I knew about despotism: the unratified decisions, handed down from the top, arbitrarily enforced: the face of strength when it moves in on the weak.

One day, on an escalator in a department store, a man put a hand up my skirt. Enough, enough, I thought. I turned around and punched him in the eye. I got off at the top of the escalator and walked away.

I didn't like the world I was living in. It didn't seem too keen on me.

I was too sick to do a responsible job, a professional job. I got a job as a saleswoman, and I thumbed my nose at Dr G; I started to write a book. I wrote and wrote it. Time passed. I moved to another country, another continent. Still I wrote it and wrote it.

Christmas week 1979. I was twenty-seven years old. I was in St George's Hospital in London having my fertility confiscated and my insides rearranged. When I was admitted, I knew I was very ill, but I didn't know quite how bad things might be, and for a time there was no agreement on the nature of what ailed me. Only that it was physical; only that I had a pain and it was real: only that it was a disease Valium wouldn't cure.

My life had moved on by then, far from its early confines. We had wanted to travel, to see the world;

my husband had exchanged carboniferous limestone for the sands of the Kalahari, fossils for diamonds. For three years we had lived in a small town in Botswana, a railway line settlement, where geologists and agriculture specialists rumbled over the unmade roads in four-wheel drives, where ticks and mosquitoes bit, where the days were short and hot and monotonous, and I sat behind the insect mesh of my veranda frowning over my card index, documenting the fall of the French monarchy, the rise of the Committee of Public Safety. I had pressed the juice of meaning from every scrap of paper I had brought with me, every note on every source. The book was finished now. But so, it seemed, was I. When we came home to England on leave, my book went to a publisher who offered to look at it. I went to a consultant who offered to look at me.

In the beds around me were women with complications of pregnancy, who were trying to hang on to their babies; women having abortions; women having their fertility ended by choice. The latter group were two cheerful middle-aged Londoners, a little worn and raddled by life, who complained at the routine discomforts, the marching up and down corridors and waiting in a draught to have blood samples taken; even their complaints were cheerful, and they really amounted to grumbling about the fact that for a couple of days they weren't in charge, because they

were used to a situation where what they say, goes. They had taken this decision, they, for themselves: another baby, no thank you! They called the surgery 'having my tubes tied'; I pictured the surgeon hauling ropes, shouting 'heave-ho!' and consulting a book of knots. On my right there was a silent Turkish girl in her early twenties, having a termination which she was not, I suppose, discussing with her family; she wanted a cigarette, she said, just a little draw would soothe her. After the operation she appeared to have greenish-dark bruises around her eyes, as if someone had undertaken to knock sense into her. The bruises deepened to caverns, then lightened to a jaundiced tan. Then she was gone, discharged. When she climbed out of bed you saw her vitality, her dark bandy legs, her strength. She would have, you thought, just as many children as she liked.

Her fellow abortionee was opposite me, a tow-headed sixteen-year-old on her second termination. We hopped from bed to bed, Kirsty and I, sitting each at the foot of the other. She told me about her life. She went out to dance and to shoplift a little and if anyone looked at the boy she happened to be with she would belt them around the head; isn't that right, she said, and we agreed that yes, it was the only thing to do. More perplexed than malicious, she called the nurses by whistling for them; she didn't understand their genteel nursey euphemisms, and when

they handed her a flask and asked her to pass water she came across to ask if I knew what the fuck they were talking about.

Kirsty was taken to theatre to have her termination; believing that she had no chance of looking after her body, of regulating her future fertility, the surgeon fitted an IUD while she was under anaesthetic. But then the device fell out, one night when she was in the bathroom; she haemorrhaged, fainted with shock, and cracked her head open on the washbasin. Her life, you felt, would always be like this – the handing out of attrition, without regard to justice; fate would overreact to an ungoverned temper and the impulses of a generous heart. She had adopted me on my first day on the ward; I wasn't, she thought, getting my due. Until some time after I was admitted, the nurses could not manage to get a doctor up to the ward to organise pain relief for me. The strong pills I had brought with me were taken away, and I was given a Panadol, an over-the-counter remedy for everyday discomfort. A hot bath was promoted as the remedy for my pain; I laughed. That first night, I lay on the bed, my knees drawn up. Kirsty shouted at the nurses. 'Look at her, look at her,' she roared. 'Give her sumfin.' And they did – a rare opportunity – they told me it was my turn to push around the cocoa trolley. My turn, though I'd only just arrived! So I rolled off the bed and did it. 'Cocoa? Horlicks? Sugar with

that?' I was not quite able to stand up straight: some inflamed growth inside me was bending me at the waist, pulling my abdomen, knotted with pain, down towards my knees. Silliness, I suspect, had set in; some endocrinological compassion-centre was flooding my brain with substances that suggested nothing now mattered very much.

I had been admitted without any certain diagnosis. The professor in charge of gynaecology had, in a civil way for which I remain grateful, found me a bed at short notice. Provided I didn't mind being in hospital for Christmas, he said, they could have me in about the 20th and operate before the feast. I had felt bleak, on the journey down the motorway – not afraid, but feeling in a childish way that there was nothing to look forward to. After two Christmases in Africa, when I'd missed my family badly, this was not what I had planned. When the professor had examined me at Outpatients, a week or two earlier, I'd bled everywhere, on to his latex hands and the sheet beneath me. I thought he'd have been hardened to that, but he said, 'I am afraid I am hurting you. I am sorry. I will stop now.' I would have liked it if curiosity would have propelled him onwards: pushing into the unseen, smoking meat of my body, and finding out its truth.

How can I write this, I wonder? I am a woman with a delicate mouth; I say nothing gross. I can write it,

it seems; perhaps because I can pretend it is somebody else, bleeding on the table.

But at the time, I came to the vertical, sickly swaying. I mopped myself up and got into my clothes. I sat in a chair: black vinyl, splayed legs, the ridge of its back hard against my spine. You say you think it's endometriosis, he said. There's a good chance you're right. But he didn't look a happy man. Could it be anything else? I asked. How we conspire, not to speak the word 'cancer.' His eyes slid away. Oh well, he said, if not endometriosis, then pelvic inflammatory disease, it is a thing to consider. I said, no I don't think so really. He nodded. He didn't think so, either. He said by the way, is it, should I, am I speaking to Doctor McEwen? I looked up to see if he was being sarcastic. No, I said, I'm not a doctor, why would you think that? Only, he said, your terminology is precise. Ah well, I thought. If only you knew me: *conscientious*, with a *mind for detail.* Little Miss Neverwell had graduated at last.

Endometriosis is a gynaecological condition with a dazzling variety of systemic effects. It is not rare, though mercifully it is rare for the disease to run on, unrecognised, for as long as it did in me, and it is rare for it to do such damage. Because of the number of symptoms it throws up it is sometimes hard to diagnose. It is always hard to diagnose, for a doctor who doesn't listen and doesn't look. It is

comparatively easy if you are the patient, and get into your hands a good textbook with a comprehensive account of its effects.

A few months earlier – in the remoteness of my small town on the fringes of the bush – I had thought, once again: enough's enough. My doctor (his dusty downtown surgery darkened by eucalyptus trees) seemed disinclined to investigate, though happy to prescribe me stronger and stronger pain relief. Whatever he gave me (and however much alcohol I knocked back to accompany it) the pain grew over the top. So one day I went up to the capital, to the university library, and combed through the medical books. I found a textbook of surgery, with a female figure, her organs clearly depicted, and black lines – like the long pins with which they used to stick witches – striking through her hips and ribcage, carrying a name for each organ. For each organ, there was a pain, and of each pain, I had a sample.

I learned next how the disease process worked. The endometrium is the lining of the womb. It is made of special cells which shed each month by bleeding. In endometriosis, these cells are found in other parts of the body. (How they get there is a matter of dispute.) Typically, they are found in the pelvis, in the bladder, the bowel. More rarely, they are found in the chest wall, the heart, the head. Wherever they are found, they obey their essential nature and bleed.

Scar tissue is formed, in the body's inner spaces and small cavities. It builds up. It presses on nerves and causes pain, sometimes at distant sites. The scar tissue forms an evil stitching which attaches one organ to another. Infertility is a distinct possibility, as the organs of the pelvis are ensnared and tugged out of shape. Endometriosis in the intestines make you vomit and gives you pains in the gut. Pressure in the pelvis makes your back ache, your legs ache. You are too tired to move. The pain, which in the early stages invades you when you menstruate, begins to take over your whole month. Lately I had known days of my life when everything hurt, everything from my collarbone down to my knees. But hey! There was nothing wrong with my ankles. My feet were performing nicely. And I could still think, and depress the typewriter keys. Stop complaining! I thought. Look where complaining gets you! In the madhouse.

Along with endometriosis goes, not infrequently, a hormonal disarrangement that shows itself as a severe premenstrual syndrome. In my case, it manifested in the prodromal aura of migraine headaches. Migraine, I had to learn, was not just a sick headache. It was a series of linked neurological phenomena of remarkable diversity. It was within the migraine aura that my words came out wrong, that the door disappeared into a black space: it was within the aura that I heard the dull hum and the muttering on the left-hand side

of my head. Migraine stirred the air in dull shifts and eddies, charged it with invisible presences and the echoes of strangers' voices; it gave me morbid visions, like visitations, premonitions of dissolution. For a time, when I was eight years old, my field of vision was filled with a constant, moving backdrop of tiny skulls. As a student, I had told Dr G about them, in a burst of frightened confidence. 'Black on a white ground, skulls skulls skulls, the size of my little fingernail, unrolling,' I said. 'Unrolling, like a satanist's wallpaper.'

Dr G smiled a wintry smile. 'Ah well,' he said. At this stage, I was only a neurotic, not the full-fledged madwoman I would become when he upped my dosage. 'Ah well.' His voice was soothing. 'We all have our little metaphysical fancies.'

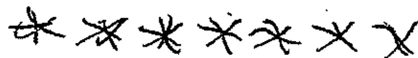
1979: I must admit that the very act of climbing into the hospital bed had brought me a kind of relief. I could stop pretending to be well. The odd thing, though, as I had already observed, was that the staff were inclined to treat the patients as malingerers. We could see them huddled at their nurses' station, flicking through our notes and discussing our body parts. Young girls with flaky cervixes were probably no better than they should be, and anything in the pelvic inflammatory line attested to a vibrant sex

life. Pregnant women weren't sick, women wanting abortions weren't sick, and as for the sterilisation brigade, they should probably be up and scrubbing the latrines. (That wouldn't have come amiss.) And as for me – I soon got a jolly diagnosis. The Senior Registrar examined me and thought I was pregnant. He winked at me. That's a baby in there, he said, confidently patting my swollen abdomen. He ran off to get a foetal heart monitor.

But there was no baby. Not Catriona, not Modestine: not anyone, only the ghost of my own heartbeat, amplified to the outside world. Oh well, the registrar said. Looks like I was wrong, eh?

The houseman came, to take a history. He was very new and young, with a starter moustache, which could be studied bristle by bristle; some bristles stuck out at a right angle to his skin. I kept my eye on it, and the movements of his mouth. You are very young, he said, and I am going to ask the professor, yes yes (he got up his resolve) I am going to talk to the professor, I am going to ask him if he can make a neat low incision, so that afterwards, you will be able to wear a bikini. He looked almost tearful. I nodded. I knew he would not be able to effect this, but I liked it that he cared so much. It is strange, to expose your soft girlish body to a man of your own age, who has not yet acquired dispassion but wears a white coat. In fact, I said, I never wear a bikini because I am too – I wanted to say, modest. But what

modesty was left? I'd had more gynaecologists than I'd had lovers; alien fists in my guts. I said, you see, I am too white for a bikini. Too pale. I burn. Of course, he said. But all the same. He got up, flustered, his clipboard almost spilling his notes. At the bed's end, he turned and smiled, and winked at me.



When I was half awake, a day later, they came to tell me what they had done. After a general anaesthetic, you dip in and out of consciousness: sitting up and smiling, you may be the picture of alertness, but your attention has faded. They should have told me again, I think, when I was properly awake. They should have told me once or twice. They should have written me a letter, they should have written me an essay or maybe a small book.

Certain things were over for me now. I sensed it would not be easy to shore up my collapsing marriage. When women apes have their wombs removed, and are returned by keepers to the community, their mates sense it, and desert them. It is a fact of base biology; there is little kindness in the animal kingdom, and I had been down there with the animals, grunting and bleeding on the porter's trolley. There would be no daughter, no Catriona; not that I could claim I had wanted her too hard; at twenty-seven I hadn't ever tried to have a baby. We seemed fine as we were, the two of us. 'The children of lovers are orphans,' said

Robert Louis Stevenson. That would have been a sad fate for her, little Miss Cat. She would never be born now, and we were no longer lovers.

I was missing a few bits of me, besides my womb and ovaries, my reproductive apparatus. A few lengths of bowel: but you've plenty to spare.

Do you know what worries me most about this memoir? That I'm always the smart one. Always the one with the last word. Always the one with the heartless quip, the derisive bon mot.

But now I had to reckon with this: I hadn't been smart at all. Like a cretin, like some dumb little angel, I had believed what I was told. I believed that the pains which ran through my body each month were part of the burden of womanhood. I didn't say to my doctors, by the way, my menstrual periods are agony. I thought they would say, get away, you, little Miss Neverwell! And when I had, timidly, approached the topic, they'd said robustly, whoah, now, you don't want to worry! Period pains? That'll clear up, my dear, after you have your first baby. Just you wait and see!

I was brought up as a Catholic and it's not easy to throw over the faith. I believed that, short of crucifixion, you shouldn't really complain.

I am not writing to solicit any special sympathy. People survive much worse and never put pen to paper. I am writing in order to take charge of the story of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, if not within a body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are. Spirit needs a house and lodges where it can; you don't kill yourself, just because you need loose covers rather than frocks. There are other people who, like me, have had the roots of their personality torn up. You need to find yourself, in the maze of social expectation, the thickets of memory: just which bits of you are left intact? I have been so mauled by medical procedures, so sabotaged and made over, so thin and so fat, that sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being – even if the writing is aimless doodling that no one will ever read, or the diary that no one can see till I'm dead. When you have committed enough words to paper you feel you have a spine stiff

enough to stand up in the wind. But when you stop writing you find that's all you are, a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen.

When you were a child you had to create yourself from whatever was to hand. You had to construct yourself and make yourself into a person, fitting somehow into the niche that in your family has been always vacant, or into a vacancy left by someone dead. Sometimes you looked towards dead man's shoes, seeing how, in time, you would replace your grandmother, or her elder sister, or someone who no one really remembered but who ought to have been there: someone's miscarriage, someone's dead child. Much of what happened to you, in your early life, was constructed inside your head. You were a passive observer, you were the done-to, you were the not-explained-to; you had to listen at doors for information, or sometimes it was what you overheard; but just as often it was disinformation, or half a tale, and much of the time you probably put the wrong construction on what you picked up. How then can you create a narrative of your own life? Janet Frame compares the process to finding a bunch of old rags, and trying to make a dress. A party dress, I'd say: something fit to be seen in. Something to go out in and face the world.