

Threesome

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From the moment they touched, she was hooked

They'd collided at the swing door into the restaurant kitchen, he looking for the gents, and she emerging with a platter of oysters bound for a table full of over-rich American tourists. Shells hailed onto the floor. She bent down to examine one, swore when she found the oyster soiled beyond redemption, and threw it angrily to one side. 'Who's going to eat these now?' she demanded.

He cocked his head, gave her the once-over, and smiled. '*We* eat them,' he said, in his smooth, bad English, and he knelt to gather them up.

The Americans never got their oysters. Somehow he managed to persuade her to wrap the shells and their wet, fleshy contents into her waitressing apron, and they fled laughing into the night. They consumed the whole apron-full in greedy haste all over the seats of his sports car. Then, gorged, they sat in oddly comfortable silence for some time, looking at the sea across the sand. He offered to take her home, but they took a scenic detour and ended up fucking on the pier instead. Fran lost her shoes off the edge of the pier wall, so Paolo threw his in too and they walked barefoot back to the car.

He finally drove her home early the next morning and moved into her tiny shared flat straight away. So little did she know of him that she hesitated uncertainly over his name when she introduced him to her flatmate. He smiled encouragingly. 'Paolo,' she said, rolling it around her tongue in satisfaction. Later, as they climbed into her small bed, she told him her full name was Frances, and he spoke it over and over as he kissed her, relishing the sibilance.

Paolo had lively, almond eyes and curly golden-brown hair, like a pre-Raphaelite heroine or a football star. He also had a penchant for cat burglary. He wasn't ashamed to tell Fran about his past, and for some reason, despite the outlandishness of his story, Fran knew it was true. For years he had made his living primarily as a cat burglar in Paris, climbing up the

impossible drainpipes in the old apartment blocks, up to seven storeys high, and making off with the jewellery of Paris's most well-adorned women. He would watch them, sometimes for months in advance, and then seduce them. His skill and success as a toy boy was extremely useful in this regard, allowing him access to the most intimate areas of the house where the treasures often lay. Even the few women who suspected him had no evidence, and he would carry out the deed when the affair was still at its sweetest, so that he could comfort them afterwards. 'Was anything really valuable stolen?' he would ask. 'Yes? That is terrible, too terrible. What exactly was it, *chérie*?' And he'd get a free evaluation of the goods into the bargain.

One such woman, an extremely wealthy German, caught him out, and he became attached to her. Or she to him. She caught him burgling her flat, being a shrewd woman who'd put two and two together after hearing her friends' tales and pinpointing him as the common factor. She promised to keep his secret if she could keep him, and for three years he had been her toy boy, her captive, her slave. It wasn't something he found demeaning – she was nice enough and treated him kindly, and it wasn't that much of a chore to be nice back. She had taken him to live with her and fulfilled her promise to provide him with a life of luxury and excess. He had an opulent apartment, every electronic toy he could wish for, more pocket money than he could spend, and a Mercedes sports car. He picked up bad, expensive habits and soon found that he couldn't leave. In return for all this, he gave her his body on extended loan.

Paolo had come to Cape Town with her on holiday. The season was in full swing and so was he. When he met Fran, he and his keeper had been dining together and, while he realised it was shitty to leave her at the table and to drive off in her hired car, he was not without honour. The next day he parked the sports car in a large multi-storey car park in the middle of town and dropped the keys in the hotel post box for her. His own belongings he never fetched: he had moved on, and she had always understood that his departure was inevitable, that it had always been just a matter of time.

Fran stunned Paolo. She blew him away. She was an unknown quantity, riddled with contradictions – audacious, wilful, fiercely independent, childishly spontaneous, easily hurt. Uncompromising. She was on her own mission. But Paolo stunned Fran too. In her romantic mind, he stood in stark contradiction to any of the men she'd met before – a one-man assault on all that was drab and ordinary and taken for granted. For Fran, Paolo was a living monument to the unexpected.

They rented the outside room in the garden of Mad Mrs Mitvak. Its derelict, secretive hedges, clotted with builder's rubble and sweet wrappers and rampant Black-Eyed Susans, appealed to them. Their room was a cheaply converted servant's quarters, shaded by a sprawling Lucky Bean Tree, which was alight with coral-coloured flowers when they first arrived. Mrs Mitvak resembled her garden. She was a voluptuous, blowsy lush, much despised by her small-minded neighbours, whose own hedges were clipped into submission. When Mrs Mitvak first showed Fran and Paolo the place, the woman next door craned her neck over the fence and shot her a look of undisguised loathing and scorn, her mouth pinching up into a little dog's arse of disapproval. Their future landlady's spirits drooped visibly, anticipating failure. 'We'll take it,' said Fran with an arch smile at the neighbour, and she and Paolo kissed excessively in celebration.

Mrs M liked to sunbathe on her lounge in the garden wearing a great deal of paste jewellery and very little else, paring her corns with a small kitchen knife and occasionally talking listlessly on her cellphone to salesmen. Fran wondered whether there was really anyone on the other end of the line. Not that it mattered. The arrangement suited them all, and an odd sort of kinship developed. When Mrs M went through a phase when she was convinced her late husband was trying to communicate with her through her hairdryer, Fran dutifully put her ear to the warm air to listen and even called Paolo to try. Fran knew she herself was not untouched by the loony brush, and she was fond of Mrs M. She'd watched her own mother's mental crumbling and knew what it was to be damaged goods.

Their landlady asked no questions. She remained unfazed by the shrieks and exclamations of their lovemaking, untroubled by their post-coital joints under the Lucky Bean

Tree. In the beginning, when they were still supplied by funds from Paolo's keeper, they would venture to one of the local restaurants for a meal, inspiring or distressing the locals with their ardent displays of affection and sensuous delight. They ate voluptuously and threw their chicken bones under the tables. "*Para os cachorros*" Paolo said, leading the game, 'For the dogs.'

As the months wore on, Fran and Paolo barely noticed anything but each other. They began to believe that they were untouchable, invisible. Like a child who puts her hand over her eyes, they believed that since they saw no one, no one could see them. They clung closer and closer, their room a hot, musky den, inaccessible to anyone but them, clogged with junk and books and takeaway cartons which they brought back to feed the double-backed beast they'd created in their lair. Even in their sleep their bodies sought each other out, as if their nerve endings were suddenly exposed and their bodies were putting out fronds like ferns, searching. They talked little. She learnt the essentials in Portuguese – coffee, joint, bed, water – and they developed their own fuck-focused fanagalo. He called her baby. He called her *querida*, and darling, and even once *schatzi*, though the German endearment smacked of his former keeper and she bit him for that, till it bled.

One day Paolo brought home a visitor – a car guard he had found working nearby on Camps Bay's main road. Paolo had rejoiced in being able to speak to the man in Portuguese, and in his enthusiasm he brought him home to their retreat. He left the man at the door, silhouetted against the bright outside light, and called Fran's name. She was dressed, at least, sitting with her back to them on the bed. She turned to look. The visitor hesitated on the doorstep of their room until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The air was redolent of sex and McDonald's, and he sniffed it.

The three of them drank tea in the warm, cramped space, the couple seated next to each other on the edge of the bed and the man opposite them on their only chair. Fran and the visitor sized each other up with wary glances. The Portuguese conversation which had brought the visitor to them in the first place had long since dried up. Paolo reached his hand out to Fran, touching her neck to reassure her, and she leant the back of her head into his

touch like a cat, softening, stroking his hand with her hair. He cupped his other hand around her head and pulled her to him, kissing her neck, grazing her with his teeth until she let out a small cry and pulled herself astride him. Paolo swivelled around to lie her back on the bed, kissing down her body, a hand on each of her splayed thighs. The visitor got up from his chair and stood silently next to them, aroused by what he saw and uncertain of his role in it all. He touched Fran lightly on her stomach, but she flinched and Paolo shook his head and gently pushed his hand away. The man dropped his hands to his sides and watched.

When it was over, the visitor left without saying anything. Fran never knew his name, and she never saw him again. She nursed another cup of tea, warming her hands on it, although the day was hot. She blinked in surprise at what had just happened, as though she'd been in the middle of a particularly vivid and intense dream and someone had ripped open the curtain, letting in the glare. She'd lost herself, and was startled to find herself again. At first, Paolo was anxious that he'd taken things too far, that she was traumatised. He watched her drink her tea, her back to him on the other side of the bed. When her shoulders began to heave he ran to her, kneeling at her side, fearful and solicitous. But she was laughing. Then they were both laughing. Lazily, playfully, they started all over again.

Then one day Fran got sad. She found that the only things that could cheer her up were Melrose cheese and lemon-curd sandwiches, or pasta covered in tuna fish and honey. She dispatched Paolo to the local supermarket with lists of increasingly unlikely ingredients to buy. At first, he shook his head, smiling indulgently. At some point she began secretly to pick the paint off the wall behind the bedstead and eat it. Eventually Paolo caught her at it. She was scratching frantically and licking her fingers like a rabid rodent, her mouth, when she turned to him, flecked with white specks. He inhaled sharply in shock and, without thinking, took a step back, away from her. As the days went by and the crazes continued, he became frightened. Although she denied it even to herself at first, Fran found she didn't want Paolo near her. When he returned from the shops, she'd send him straight back out so she could pick away at the walls in peace.

Fran soon began to find the smell of Mrs Mitvak's room insufferable. 'Why does it stink in here?' she raged, raking savagely over the contents of their nest to search for the source of the odour. But Paolo couldn't smell anything different. One day, when he was out buying her bananas and condensed milk and bubble-gum flavoured lip balm, she took against the furniture and threw it all out onto the lawn, convinced that something inside the sofa was causing the stench. When he returned, Paolo could barely look at her. 'We have to go to the doctor,' he said.

Of course the doctor only confirmed what they already knew, and in that moment they came unstuck. The scan revealed that it was a boy. Fran put her fingers to the ultrasound screen and moved her face right up to the shifting, flickering image which pulsed and blurred like iron filings drawn by a magnet. Afterwards, they walked home in divided silence. As Fran's belly swelled, Paolo seemed to shrink and recede, his presence waning as the new one waxed. When Paolo went out, which happened more and more, Fran lay still on the bed, her hand on her belly, smiling to feel the kicks and flutters. 'Baby,' she called him. Just Baby.

Paolo was crowded out. Money was getting scarce, and he moved from drinking in the local bars to hanging out in dark dives a taxi ride away. He made new friends without Fran and gave up telling her where he'd been. She never asked anyway. On the rare occasions they were both awake in their tiny room, they moved wordlessly around each other in their own separate orbits.

He finally left, unexpectedly even to him, one Saturday night, with a crowd of Italians bound for a trance party – or so said one of the waitresses from the restaurant where Fran had worked. The baby came the next week, a month early, signalled by a rush of blood. Mrs Mitvak took Fran to the hospital in her ancient Ford Cortina and sat with her until she was hurried into theatre.

Then it was a babel of medical terms, a flurry of masked faces and rustling green clothing and needles and machines and alarming numbness and glimpses of blood over the barrier they erected on her belly. She was a human sleeping bag being rummaged through by numerous urgent and insistent hands. And then the cry, the strange, sharp bleat as he emerged,

telling her he was outside her now, alive. They lifted him and held him aloft: a livid, mottled-red astronaut against the circular space-ship lights.

From the moment they touched, she was hooked. And this time she knew it was for keeps.