

jar

We're all on edge. Tight little questions packed into chairs at the latex lounge. Off every corner of the circle rowdy nerves chatter. No heating. Predictable tropisms crane towards the single-bar radiator perched just above the door.

This is head-fuck hour.

'How do you feel today?' Mallard's voice skids across the neural bitumen. She shifts a thick thigh across a knee. Recomposes her blue skirt and rests her left hand on the straining fabric. Our fitful eyes stare at the floor to avoid her tone grazing the geometry. It toggles across our angled details. Arcs back. Settles on the new woman.

'Hurry up,' we faintly urge, in case she hears us thinking. We know Mallard likes a fresh surface. Can see her twitchy dilatation.

'Hi, and welcome,' she says, smiling with her mouth closed.

Mallard's face is about forty-five. Heavy with the cosmetics of modern scripted living. Chins strut the full cheeks and broad jaw, lodging on the billow seams that lace her neck. Compressed to strike. Her tortured bleach hair is thin and full of salon plump and lacquer. Split ends match the weak nails and slack connective tissue. She told us she takes a gel preparation of mineral silica in a highly dispersed form twice a day. Probably to get on top of the electro-static anti-petrification sass her anatomy suicides on. She's a vain laboratory and it's not working. Her other features are strange windswept artefacts half-buried in crust. Nostrils bend under sculpted cartilage; green-brown clefts slump into knotty scores; tool lines scrape her brow. Under it all is the dungeon latch. Painted Summer Tango orange, not hausfrau red.

Still smiling.

We know what the new woman sees. A crinkling quiche-loving knick-knack type that wants to be her friend, but is just a little stretched for time. Mallard stirs her body to more fully address intention. The bifocals anchored on a chain like an innocent sash weight around her neck are pinched at the arm. Lifted. Slipped. Put. The right hand clasps a metal clipboard. The wrist is supported by the

overhanging lap. Her lap. Bound in cotton cut to chafe. That awful filthy imagery that lies between. We sag even further into protoplasm.

Mallard takes a dose of air. Gapes at the new woman.

'You must be Freja,' she says. The new woman nods. Feels acknowledged. Grateful waif in Christmas land.

'Hello, Freja. Would you like to tell the group a little about yourself?'

Freja's smile slips onto the floor. Gnaws on the corner of a grey linoleum square trying to find a way underground. We watch it fail. The sad flagellum makes another effort on a white square not meant for desperation. Tries again at random points around our feet. We can almost hear its salmon-slap. There is a straight pursing lip where it used to live.

Not exactly happy clam.

Freja thought we would spill our guts first. Decided she might raise a leg against her body and cradle it with both her arms as if she were a theatre major. Play the pseudo-indolent and follow our piss fault fractures as if we're subcutaneous collectibles. Only then would she talk, in guarded ego lines.

But Mallard waits.

Moments climb the walls. Careful carabiners lock their pitch. Quickdraw anchors hold to steady. Flex. Heave. Raspy nipple rock sport. Mallard measures her. Mid-step up the incline softly speaks.

'It's okay Freja. Take your time. I know how hard and strange this is.'

We don't exist. We never really did. Except as overdosing traffic in a system numb with gridlock. Kerbside drowning gut-pump rescue. Lithium half-life tidal marks. Mute sadistic bitches.

This is an arctic tundra postcard. We wish Freja would just submit to Mallard's antiseptic come on. Get stripped and circulate some entertainment. Scorch the ice like Auschwitz lab rats fucking in the snow.

Jesus.

Anything to get a decent head of steam up. But Freja has hers bent. Mouse brown shoulder-length bolt-straight hair drips over. Torso hunched in a spinal knuckle camber. Sitting on her hands, she coughs. A double dry dog crunch. Snaps the

still. We look over. Her blue eyes throw a deep jab at our punchy inclinations. Classic twitch and cut. Shadow boxer instinct. We give her nothing. We've been in the ring. Now it's her turn to go down.

Mallard.

She's creeping over Freja's neck. Squatting. The standard issue cotton drill is gaping like a kitty collar asking for a notch. She slithers underneath it. Freckled tattoo junkie pelt. Belly ripple tour. Down the back around the front she coils. Hypnotic helix sexing bones. Toying with necropolis. She's patting. Squeezing. Fondling under over organs. Thrilling at the prospect. Her face is flushing neon cream as she drops the metal clipboard and it clatters to the floor.

We've been watching Mallard work. The slappy see-me sound is hardly unexpected. Designed to get attention. Jerk the senses. Freja looks to find the source. Fight or flight, Mallard knows her absolutely: inside flipside topside out. Their eyes fix upon each other. Clutch the gap. Mallard eases forward in her chair. She opens up her legs. A wide, itchy invitation.

'Sorry about the bang, ladies.' She pauses. 'Okay. Maybe it might be good for the rest of you to introduce yourselves. Give Freja a sense of what we do. Who wants to start?'

We almost laugh.

What we do started years ago for all of us, including Mallard. Especially her. Victim theory action-plan. Crowded bell jar patch up cult. She is the tender well-read upright that got slowly downright jaded. Jagged. Bored. She can't touch or change us, never really could. So she plays in tiny habits and invents her own recidivism for an hour every day. Of course Mallard wants Freja for herself. Resents our presence. She deftly repositions tension back on us. Is quite open with her privacy delusion. Freja feels completely safe. Completely loose. On the end of Beg Me's leash.

The room is full of body clamour. Spasmodic gastric engines squeal. Earwax shovels thump as skin flakes rip. Mallard listens. It's feeble mortal flutter to her soul.

She lurches sideways. Extends her tubby arm aiming to retrieve the clipboard lying on the floor. She underestimates the limits of her reach and knows she can't quite pick it up. Gravity humiliates.

Freja stands.

Goes down in front of Mallard. Sweeps. Bestows. Fingers meet to read a knowledge print as their first transaction is completed. Freja resumes her smug exclusion zone amongst the damned. Minute muscles around our faces spasm. Gums ache. Eyes shoot an electric Judas glint. We muffle the jaw hinge staccato when Mallard rotates her pen checking the confessions on the pages of her clipboard. Our histories float like maggots treading puddles. Swamps of causal links. Our violations neatly written. She threatens with impression, patience wearing thin. Ready to report our non-compliance and recommend a med review.

Cunt.

That's what Mallard is. She keeps us moist and wanting. Inside this hole it's easy.

We need her ugly love.

Gabrielle Fletcher