

Four short pieces by Jo Salmon

HARLOW APHRODITE

So I'm going out tonight and I am on the pull. I have a bath, wash my hair and shave my legs. My hair takes ages to comb and I add serum to make it shine. I like my hair. I'm 29, got 3 kids and I weigh 12 stone but I've got nice hair. It's my best feature. Fucking pain in the arse to comb though. I ponder for a moment on whether to wear it up or down. There's pro's and con's for both ways. Down draws attention away from my face but, last time I wore it down, I puked up when I got home and bits of it went in my hair. It's bad enough waking up with a stonking hangover without having your hair stinking of vomit and laced with diced carrots. That reminds me, I must tidy up and make sure everywhere is clean before I leave, otherwise I'll have all that to deal with tomorrow as well as feeling like I ought to be dead.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow will be bad even though I know that there's no real reason why it has to be. Even though I'm prepared for it, I still won't be prepared. The house will still be disgusting and filthy tomorrow no matter how much I clean it before I go out. There will be sick in my hair and I will feel guilty. Guilty for lying on the sofa all day feeling ill and not looking after the kids properly. Guilty for getting drunk and shagging some pissed bloke who's name I will forget to ask. For going out in the first place. For spending money I can't afford to spend. It's all so shit. I know it's shit but I'm doing it anyway. 29 and 12 stone and I'm going out.

I squeeze into the skimpiest dress that my flab will allow. I take my make-up downstairs. Music and a glass of wine will get me in that Friday night mood. I sing out loud to the tunes from the stereo and drink 2 glasses of wine too fast. When I'm all done I look in the mirror with another glass of wine. I look FUCKING GORGEOUS and I know I'm gonna pull. I no longer look 29 OR 12 stone. No. I look 17 and 9 stone. My make-up has improved my face and my hair is down to attract attention away from it anyway. I know I look good and so I feel more confident. There's fatter slags than me out there wearing sluttier clothes than this. I feel GOOD.

My friend comes and we have a glass of wine while we wait for the taxi. My confidence wanes a little 'cos she looks good too. She's younger than me. And slimmer.

"You on the pull?"

"Definitely!"

The taxi comes. We hurriedly down the last of the wine, grab our jackets and we're out. I try not to worry about the mess. (Maybe I won't drink too much and then I can spend the whole day tomorrow doing the housework.)

"Where are you two lovely ladies off to, then?"

"Town. Oh, sorry, cash machine at Tesco's first."

"Right you are."

I draw out thirty quid, then nip in to the fag counter to get 20 Lambert's. I am self-conscious among the wives with kids in jeans out buying bread and milk and eggs. (If I was doing that instead then I

wouldn't feel guilty and ill tomorrow.)

We enter the pub and have a scan 'round.

"What d'ya want?"

"Pinta lager, cheers."

We're not here really here together because we want to be in each other's company so much as we just don't want to go out on our own. It's so we don't look lonely. We sit down and talk about kids and blokes and we sympathise and we drink more lager. We have a laugh and we get more loud and we drink more lager. We've outlouded this pub and they're calling last orders anyway. Time to move on.

"Come on then, let's go clubbin'"

"Come on then."

We pay a fiver at the door, watched by a gorgeous big black bloke in a suit and bow tie who says "evenin' ladies" as we go in. A bloody fiver to listen to noisy shit we don't even like and to drink piss that costs a fucking fortune. But we pay it and listen to it and drink it all the same. We stand at the bar for a bit with our jackets by our feet on the filthy floor and we drink.

"Fancy a dance then, girl?"

"If ya like."

We dance and we sing out loud 'cos we love this one. We think we look like Charlie's angels but we're not. (29 and 12 stone.) As the night goes on the blokes start to look gorgeous and the music just gets better and better.

"I'm gonna pull 'im"

"which one?"

"That one. Blue shirt. Nice arse."

"Ooh yeah. Who's 'e with?"

"That bloke there."

"Right then."

We dance and we flirt and we think we're Madonna. Then hands from behind me grab my hips and someone is grinding up against my arse. It feels okay so it goes on for a while and then I turn round to see what I've got. It's not the bloke I'd hoped it was but he'll do. More importantly, he looks as if he likes what he's found. He holds me at arm's length around my waist as we dance. He looks me up and down like he wants me. I watch the way his torso moves, not consciously at first because I am overtaken with and fulfilling the desire to dance, feeling the rhythm of the music and the sensation of his hands on my body. But then I realise he's there. From the way he moves, his body looks firm. But is it? It is. But my hands feel the sweat from his skin coming through his shirt. He's hot and sticky and clammy. (Where did I put my drink?) I pull away from him, with some effort, and make my way back to the bar. I check that my jacket is still on the floor. I stand back and watch the people dancing and flirting and I think it looks like some strange and animal courtship fest. They all look ridiculous and I want to go home (must tidy up). I look down into my lager and think for a second that I'm going to cry. I can see my friend across the dance-floor. She smiles and laughs and waves me a signal to go over. I put down my drink and negotiate my way across the floor. She says something hilariously nasty about a girl who's dancing not far from us. I can't stop laughing for a while and my sides start to hurt. The music changes.

"Fuckin' love this. Got the album."
"Oh, YES INDEED!"

And I'm into it again. 29 and 12 stone and I'm such a sexy dancer. I must be 'cos I've attracted the attention of the most GORGEOUS bloke I've ever seen in my life. He leans towards me and shouts something.
"YOU WHAT?"

"I SAID I THINK YOU'VE GOT LUVVLY 'AIR."

I think what a nice thing to say that was. This bloke isn't too sticky. In fact, he smells quite nice. He's not too clingy either 'cos he lets me go to the bar to get a vodka and coke without me having to wrestle with him. Yep. I'm gonna have him. We dance until the club closes. I see my friend now and again and we exchange knowing glances and giggles.

"I'm goin' 'ome with 'im."

"You dirty slag! Your house or 'is?"

"His. You'll be alright with 'im?"

"Yeah, I'm sorted."

"Have fun then. Give yer a bell tomorrow."

"See yer later."

She gives me the thumbs up and a wink.

"You want a coffee then?"

"Might as well. Where d'ya live?"

"Not far."

He gets us a taxi without me really noticing. I just have some vague awareness that some complicated business that I can't be doing with is going on. I don't really know what I'm thinking about (where are you, Ngaire?)

I get in a taxi to I don't know where. It has one of those tree shaped air fresheners dangling from the rear-view mirror. I think it must be new 'cos the smell is more than I can bear and it's really hot and there's no air in here...

"How d'ya open this window?"

The air is cold and refreshing on my face. (Coffee.) The bloke and the taxi driver have a conversation. Fuck knows what about. He's been busy tonight I think is the gist of it. I can't be bothered to listen. I concentrate on the fresh air and on not being sick and the houses with all the lights off as we pass. Houses in which Mums and Dads and kids are tucked up warm and safe in clean beds (must tidy up). A road that usually takes me five minutes to walk down has become five hundred miles long and I'm sure there weren't this many corners. (Coffee).

I make the journey without being sick. I breathe deeply while he pays the driver. It's freezing out here in the normal street with normal houses. Quiet. Not like in the club. I can't stop shivering. It's so cold that my teeth are chattering. My teeth don't normally chatter. Why can't I control it?

He unlocks the front door and flicks on the light. It feels too bright. I see that he has a cat because there is a tray of half eaten cat food in the hallway, just outside the kitchen door. I can smell the bolognese he had for his tea. The tea he ate before he came out on a Friday night. The tea he made when he got home from work, that he ate before he shoved all the washing up on the draining board, got out of his work clothes and went and had a shower. I bet he took clean

underwear off of that rack-thing on the radiator there with all those hard-dried pants and socks on it. This is what his life looks like when it isn't Friday night. (I wanna go home!)

"Hang on. Back in a sec."

I sit on the edge of his sofa with my jacket on while he goes and faffs about upstairs. (Sleep. Coffee.) I try not to shiver and I take a sneaky feel of the radiator to see if it's hot. Of course it isn't. It's nearly 3 in the morning, the heating would have gone off hours ago. This makes me feel colder still but I think that the coffee will wake, warm and sober me up a bit.

He comes into the living room and sits down next to me.

"Private rented, this house?"

"How the fuck did you know that?"

"Magnolia paint, green sofa."

He looks at me like I'm a nutter. He doesn't understand what I'm talking about. He doesn't understand at all.

Suddenly, his lips are on mine, taking. The force pushes me backwards a little and his tongue goes in my mouth. Over his shoulder I see a large black spider in the corner. There's a spider in here and it's cold. Cold and magnolia and smelling of bolognese. A huge wave of nausea and vertigo washes over me.

"Sorry, must use your loo."

"Top of the stairs."

The vibrating hum of the extractor fan makes me feel worse and I lean over the toilet and throw up. (Shit! My hair!) When I've finished, I flush the chain and take a few seconds to splash water on my face. I realise he's not going to make a cup of coffee and that I'm not going to ask him to get rid of the spider.

I don't want to have sex any more. I've been sick and I'm tired and I'm so cold that I don't even want to take my jacket off, let alone the rest of my clothes. But sex is what I was brought here for and I came voluntarily and I ain't no prick-tease so sex is what we're going to have. If I get him off quick I could be home and tucked up warm in my bed within an hour.

"You took yer time. Been sick?"

"Nah, just bin hangin' on for ages. Can you put some music on and turn the lights down a bit?"

There may be a spider in here but that's not as off-putting as the thought of what my stretch marks and cellulite look like in bright light. The first few bars of whatever music this is jerks me back to a reasonable level of alertness. I think I might be able to cope.

We fuck. He takes ages 'cos of the drink and I get bored and sore. We fuck. He comes. And then I get dressed.

"I've got to go. Can I ring a taxi?"

"Yeah, sure."

I phone a taxi and then I ask him for a glass of water. He goes into the kitchen still naked. His shrivelled cock looks repulsive and I wish

he'd get dressed. I drink the water by sipping it slowly, keeping the glass up to my lips so that I don't have to talk to him. I stand in his kitchen and while I look out of the window, desperate for the taxi to hurry up, I notice that the plug-hole is blocked with spaghetti bolognese. A few hours ago I met a bloke and now my tits hurt where he bit them and there will be bruises coming that will be there for days and I'm staring at the remains of his tea in his sink. The tea that he ate before I knew he existed.

"Taxi's here."

"Right."

He gives me a kiss on the cheek by way of a thank you, I suppose. I don't ask for his name and he doesn't ask for my number.

In the taxi home I think about tomorrow. I'll tidy the house and clean it and pretend to myself once again that this didn't happen.

ABSOLUTE NONSENSE

"All rise. Silence in court. Stand up, sit down, keep moving, we'll all be merry and bright. Quiet please.

Now, then," says the Judge, "I have decided that the result of this trial will be that the defendant shall be found guilty. He was, therefore, executed early this morning and so, as trial by jury is necessary by law, the part of the defendant will be played by the famous actor, Mr. Philip Larkin. Mr. Larkin is well known for his Oscar-winning performance in the 1920's version of the film 'A Bridge Over the River Kwai', A part he was chosen for because of his renowned good looks. A round of applause, please."

The audience applaud.

"How was he executed?" shouts a member of the jury.

"Firstly, he was kicked to death by mothers. He was then electrocuted in a chair, drawn, disembowelled and cut into quarters and then hung by the neck until he was dead. This was carried out in the public area known as 'The Children's Playground', situated not one hundred miles from this theatre. Now, if we may proceed, the audience and jury will pass around these pieces of paper on which the evidence is written. You will then print your name next to your signature to say that you have read them. In order to save time, your signatures have already been printed for your convenience."

"Shall we sign this bit here, where it says that he is guilty, your Honour?"

"Not until the trial is over, OBVIOUSLY." Says the Judge, rather impatiently.

Computer generated reams of paper pass from person to person through the auditorium and jury box.

"Come on! Come on!" Says the Judge as he collects all the paper.
"Wonderful! Wonderful! Now that the defendant has been found guilty, we may pass the papers around again and sign that this is so. Are we all agreed?"

"YES!" Shouts the audience and reams of computer generated paper pass from person to person around the auditorium and jury box and are returned to the Judge.

"The defendant has been found guilty. Do you have anything to say, Mr. Larkin?"

"I do, your Honour. I would like to thank my agent, the director, my wife and children, my secretary as well as the cast and crew without whom my life would not have been a success."

"Fine words, young man." Says the Judge and the audience and jury mumble in agreement.

The Judge dons a black cloth on his head and says; "Mr. Phillip Larkin, you have been found guilty as charged. I condemn you to death."

"Thank you, your Honour. And may I say what an honour it has been?"

"Humph." Says the Judge.

"Arse-licker." Comes a solitary voice from the theatre.

"A point of order, Mr. Speaker, sir, your Honour!" Comes another voice.

"Go on then." Sighs the Judge.

"The lady next to me appears to have lost her shoes."

"What shoes?" Enquired the Judge.

"If I may, your honour, they were pink linen court shoes, sir, thank you."

"Then they must be found! Who are you, good woman?"

"I am the defendant's wife, if you please."

"This court is in recess and I order that while this is so, you shall all look for a pair of pink court shoes, size six. and return them to the widow. Off you go, then. Back by three, tea at four."

The jury, witnesses, barristers, solicitors and the audience all walk around, drive around in cars or on bicycles and skateboards and return to the court at half-past two.

"Silence in court!" Shouts the Judge. "Now. Have we located the shoes?"

"Yes m'Lud." Pipes up one. "I have found pink linen court shoes, size six, in the vicinity of the traffic lights just past the sorting office, if you please, sir, thank you."

"By the traffic lights? Were you in a car?"

"Yes, m'Lud."

"Then I find you guilty of driving without insurance and you shall be tried by this court and sentenced to death. I also find you guilty of being in possession of a pair of pink linen court shoes, size six, with intent and I sentence you to death for that too. How does the court find the defendant?"

"GUILTY!" Shouts the court.

MARY WALKED ONE MILE TO CHURCH

Mary walked one mile to church, stopping twice in doorways in order to defecate.

No vehicles were permitted to enter or leave the city. It made no difference, the roads were impassable now, anyway. The road blocks where, until recently, masked, armed and suspicious soldiers stood, or fell, abandoned. Most of the remaining population were past the point of attempting to reach far-away relatives or friends.

The streets were almost deserted, the looting over. Litter, broken glass and the contents of stomachs covered the pavements and roads. There were sounds, memories of life. A cacophony of car-alarms. Ringtones whenever one still living attempted to reach the dead. From an upstairs open window, Moonlight Serenade flowed peacefully into the remains of anarchy.

It wasn't cold, but Mary, without thinking, pulled her coat tightly around her on leaving the flat. Maybe it was because she was afraid. Or maybe she thought that it would keep out the stink of sickness and bleach that carried on the breeze.

It was when Marcus had finally passed the point of ever regaining consciousness that Mary decided to go to the church. The nature of the gas meant that Marcus had at least two days yet, so Mary would still be able to be with him at his point of death, even though she was aware that she herself may no longer be conscious by then. She didn't know why it was important to go. She hadn't been to church in years, believing that God could hear her prayers just as clearly when she was at home. Somehow, it wasn't enough now. She had to be there to hear mass, be heard in confession, given the last rites. Yes, it was important that she go.

She was surprised by the number of others who had made it there. Some were now dead, some close. Those alive were moaning and puking, with red, watering eyes, burning skin and throats. An unholy stench of shit, death and disinfectant made breathing more difficult and retching easier.

As she always did, in any church, she remembered her mother pointing out the likeness of Mary Magdalene, telling her that this was from whom she had got her name. But the Sacred Prostitute was not to be seen in the stained glass windows or icons of this building.

The priest vomited before completing the Mass, helped to move the most recently deceased onto the pile near the organ, gave the last rites to those about to die and vomited again before beginning another Mass.

Mary sat down at last on a pew at the back. She placed a hand on the shoulder of an older woman in front of her who was crying copiously. The once neat, expensively dressed lady turned to face her; "I don't want to die. Not like this. Not like this. I don't want to die like this."
"It's alright." said Mary. "You're not alone."

"But I know that I'm going to Hell." explained the woman. "I always said my confession but I wasn't really sorry. I've tried, but I can't be sorry. Not as sorry as I should be, as I want to be. I can never be sorry enough. And now, in the hour of my death, I don't want to die. I had put Hell in the back of my mind and somehow believed my time would never come. But it has. I'm afraid. I tried to be a clean woman. Always tried to be a clean woman. And now I can see my own filth. I'm covered in my own filth. I don't want to die. Not without feeling sorry. Not like this. I don't want to die like this."

The woman stopped talking and searched the eyes of Mary for an answer.

"I'm sorry." Said Mary and decided to walk the one mile home to go and pray for Marcus.

PLAYING WITH DOLLIES

I sat just in the middle seat of the middle row of the studio. I heard none of the questions or comments put forward either by the tart of a host or the rest of the audience. I was only vaguely aware when the idiots clapped or cheered or booed or made that sickly collective "aahh" noise, egged on into the desired reaction by the host. The host, an overweight pink thing, had recently been voted 'The Nation's Number One Choice To Have A Cup Of Tea And A Cuddle With' in a leading crappy woman's magazine's 'Best Of 1999 Awards'. She made me wanna puke.

This was the programme that all those people in their homes at 9.30 in the morning set their value clocks by, checked and up-dated their moral-ometers and used to adjust their feeble brains to ethic-mean-time. Yes, the viewers at home would be as taken in by this shit as the studio audience were on this particular day.

When Madeline was presented, the audience gave the obligatory collective "aahh". She was a beautiful child victim. Her baby-blond ringlets tied in a baby-pink ribbon that perfectly matched the baby-pink sash on her Persil-white dress. With Persil-white socks pulled neatly up to her knees, she looked like one of the china dolls that the well meaning morons of the public had been sending her since the 'horrific incident' had happened.

I sat just in the middle seat of the middle row of the studio, facing the six year old little girl who was curled up in her grandmother's lap, thumb in mouth. Madeline said nothing all the time that she was in the studio. Grandma spoke for her and on her behalf. The audience were apparently concerned for Madeline's mental welfare, although I suspected the usual hideous curiosity and a longing for the shocking and gory details.

A 'leading child psychologist' had been invited onto the show to give an outline of the extensive, intensive counselling and therapy that Madeline was going to need in order to overcome her trauma. This was the same 'leading child psychologist' who had commented on the case in

all the newspapers. In her opinion, Madeline's progress was being hampered because the 'monster' who had committed this 'evil' had not yet been caught.

Stupid, stupid bitch. A stupid bitch with a whole stack of letters after her name, who spent all her time studying the inner workings of Little Girls' minds was just as hypnotised by Madeline as the rest of the country. For Christ's sake, Madeline knew more about Little Girl psychology than she ever would. My disgust at her, though, was nothing to the thick, black hatred that I felt for Madeline. For the only unspeakable, depraved evil that Madeline had experienced was within Madeline herself. That same unspeakable, depraved evil that ALL Little Girls contain within themselves. Please, Dearest God, let there be one other person not to have been taken in by Madeline.

I sat just in the middle seat of the middle row of the studio and stared at Madeline. Madeline's eyes, large and deep, deep blue, met mine. Big doe-eyes, seemingly close to tears, batted their long lashes at me and attempted to convey innocence. I stared right back at those eyes. I pierced and stared into those eyes and saw right through them and into her cunning, twisted, Little Girl mind.

This Little Girl was not a product of bad parenting. She had no 'moment of madness'. She had not been 'led'. The acts she had 'witnessed' were those to be expected from one possessed by demons. But Madeline wasn't possessed. The evil was all hers. She was every bit a Little Girl.

I forced my hatred and revulsion right across the studio and into her. Madeline felt it and realised her defeat. I had seen right through her in the same way that I see through all Little Girls and this was something Madeline could not stand. The thought, the anger, that even one person was not susceptible to her pretty, Little Girl, sweet, sweet charm was too much for her to bear. Predictably, she turned on the tears and hid her face in Granny's chest. The Old Bag apologised and took Madeline out of the studio. The fat, pink host led the audience in their sympathy and the fat, pink host led the audience in their sympathetic noises, "aahh".

The stupid bitch psychologist explained to the audience that being in the studio had forced Madeline to relive her traumatic ordeal and that it was too much for a Little Girl to be able to cope with.

For a moment I couldn't move. For a moment I had a vision of the inside of Madeline's mind and I fantasised that I was smashing in that pretty Little Girl's face with a hammer before slicing open her throat. Red, red rage spread fast through my body and filled my brain. This rage wanted venting. I wanted to scream out my rage, my fear, my hatred of a Little Girl capable of such things so cold and calculated. And then for her to be able to manipulate and seduce so many people so that she not only gets away with it but also invokes the sympathy of the whole nation.

Most of all I wanted to scream to wake all these people up to the realisation that they had, yet again, been tricked into believing that a Little Girl was an innocent even though I knew that to do that would

make them hate me in a way that they should hate her.

I left the studio.

What is the most evil, twisted, disgusting thing that one person could do to another?

Think about it.

Look deep into the bowels of your imagination no matter how repulsed at yourself you become.

Stop for a moment. Create the scenario and follow it through, right through to it's revolting, warm, sticky, blood soaked end. Do this no matter how sick to the stomach this makes you feel.

Imagine it. Imagine the pain of torture, long and endless torture.

See it. See the look of terror on the victim's face.

Smell it. Smell the fear and the dark, metallic blood. There's so much blood.

Taste it. Taste the blood and the salt of cold, cold sweat.

Watch. Watch the torture, the pain and the blood and the misery. Watch and wait. Prolong the moment.

Now connect these thoughts with a blonde ringlet-haired, pink-ribboned, Persil-white dressed, blue-eyed Little Girl. A Little Girl who knows what she's thinking, enjoying it. Who understands power and pain and the pleasure they bring. A Little Girl who understands how to twist and charm the minds of the most 'intelligent' of adults into sending her china-dolls and sweeties in sympathy. Understand? Maybe not. maybe I am the only one who does. But I was there, in that audience and I saw her.

I left the studio and went to find Madeline.

To let her know what torture is.