



emma milton

office@emmamilton.com

beside the sea

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Elise wearily pushes the side-stand forwards with her left boot and gives it that now reflex additional kick as a dutiful mark of respect to care and certainty. Lowering 'Bitch' onto the prop she breathes a sigh of relief as the weight is taken from her and, pausing only for a moment to take in perhaps the last ever deathly slow rumble of her not-so-faithful steed, hesitantly turns the crooked key and trusts its future life once more to chance.

Her thoughts drift back to just a few weeks previously when she had eagerly handed over almost her entire life savings to the master and creator of all that now lay between her tired aching legs. His last words, as she gradually released the vicious clutch lever and caught his shaky outline in her rear-view mirror, remain with her (as she's certain they always will):

"You won't regret it; she'll never let you down and I guarantee your life together will be one great adventure".

Lying bastard; there's nothing 'she' about *this* iron horse, or if there is then it's the most stubborn of obstinate mules.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Merv ('The Swerve') Suttledge opens the door cautiously; first with suspicion, then with incredulity, as he duly takes in the slight, smartly dressed and very definitely middle-aged woman who has supposedly come to buy his beloved bike. A folded copy of '*Behind The Scene*' magazine in her left hand suggests confirmation, but clearly she is no biker and his thoughts probe her intentions. Perhaps she works for some film company looking for an authentic prop for their latest flick or, worse still, a glitzy bar that requires the bike just to sit in some corner and add 'atmosphere' while gradually gathering dust. Anyway, it's neither here nor there; he's damned if he's going to let some pretentious, straight, city-slick cow think she can simply use her vulgar cash (no matter how much!) to condemn his pride and joy to some sordid life of crass vanity.

Has she no idea at all?

Even if she has no respect whatsoever for his values or lifestyle, surely she must be able to see that this just 'ain't no motorcycle', nor is he a man to be messed with. He closes the door without saying a word, walks into the living room where his trusty oil-and-dirt clad leather waistcoat lies casually on the sofa and returns to make his point. He knows from experience that those bold patches bearing the name of his club never fail to send the very clearest of statements to people from all walks of life without the need for further explanation. This time he swings the door forcefully back, filling the full frame with his massive bulk and glowers furiously.

Without hesitation Elise seizes the initiative and smiles skilfully, instantly disarming her male opponent. Long before he becomes aware of what's happening, Merv finds himself first bemused, his thoughts drifting in an abstract haze, swiftly sedated and then heavily intoxicated. His prejudices melt as he sees through her expensive designer clothes and becomes blind to her fading youth. Finally, fatally, his gaze helplessly meets hers. Merv is no fool and, though he's become well practiced in the art of feline evasion, he knows when he is beaten, and all is now lost. He is hers to do with as she pleases. Moreover, she has effortlessly stolen his precious bike without so much as a word.

"*Bitch*" he says and Elise subtly raises an eyebrow in rebuke.

"*No, no! ...the bike; that's her name*". Elise's eyebrow relaxes very slightly, but remains in position ready to bring him down should the need arise. Merv clumsily tries to explain: "*It was the handlebars see. They've gotta be right. Gotta make a statement. I was gonna fit 'Apes' but they'd have mes'd up the lines. So I found these bars in the States called 'Beach Bars'; real fuck-off wide and attitudey. So I names the bike 'Beach' ...And then my girlfriend, well...*"

Elise relaxes her expression and then smiles again briefly to reassure him; after all, there's business to be done. She reaches into her ultra-stylish, hand-stitched, bespoke Italian suede handbag and hands over the thick wedge of crisp notes she has been carrying since the bank opened that morning. All reason has long since left Merv's usually cool and very business-like mind and, despite the fact she has completely bypassed the usual drawn-out ritual of viewing, interrogation and haggling, he is un-phased by this strange directness and simply accepts the cash without checking or thanking. He almost instantly tosses the bundle onto the table just inside the door as though discarding a soiled rag. Truth is, his whole world was hers from the moment she smiled that smile and besides, his bike was no whore and money just didn't come into it.

Elise calmly walks over to where Bitch is waiting on the driveway. She takes the grip at one end of the long sleek beach bars in her left hand, kicks off her spotless Gucci heels and swings her right leg over the wafer thin, finely

sculpted, single saddle before lowering herself purposefully onto it. Merv catches the slightest glimpse of exquisite red lace before her charcoal skirt settles elegantly into pristine drapes. She pauses for a moment before reaching for the other grip, a world away on her right.

Time passes; a thousand stationary miles.

On returning she looks over at Merv and, as though obeying a silent order, he promptly hands her a single bent key, with rusty metal loop and tatty skull-embossed fob. She glances up and down each side of the perfectly formed, jet-black, teardrop tank and jiggles the crude, twisted, complete-joke-of-a-security-device home effortlessly and eases it slowly clockwise, as though she's done it countless times before. She pulls out the kick-start, places her bare foot on its bicycle-like pedal and, with the bike still supported firmly on its stand, elevates herself above it.

“WAIT!” Merv’s deep voice penetrates the moment urgently; “Allow me”

That smile again, followed by her first words since arriving; *“The perfect gentleman!”*

She dismounts and retreats slightly as Merv moves ever-so respectfully into position alongside a thing of such immense beauty; a thing that until so very recently he could have called his own. He pauses, as though offering a prayer of worship to his formidable creation, seizes the throttle firmly in his enormous right hand and places his heavy steel toe-capped boot decisively on the incongruous kick pedal. Stalling for what seems an age; just contemplating (though he knows not what). Then, without straddling the beast, he raises his mighty frame on that single outstretched limb and comes down with the full force of his nearly twenty-one stones. A huge roaring explosion shatters the stillness and violently shakes the earth beneath as though a hundred landmines have simultaneously detonated; followed by a strong, slow, thud... curr-thud... curr-thud from the short, open exhausts. Merv pauses once more; this time in silent gratitude and relief; before standing back.

As Elise once more takes her position on the now living, breathing masterpiece, Merv can't help but ask *“What are your plans for her?”*

He thinks he catches the softly spoken word *“Faro”* through the deafening rumble, and with that she is away.

“You won’t regret it; she’ll never let you down and I guarantee your life together will be one great adventure”. Merv shouts after Elise, but his thundering voice is drowned by the far greater thundering Bitch.

He stands staring at the empty road in front of his house for a good long time and bravely fights the inevitable emptiness as his bike is gone and world implodes. So surreal; had it all just been a dream? Nothing left now; no bike, no mysterious woman. He turns towards his front door and stumbles. Looking down he sees the immaculate red shoes Elise had so casually cast aside and, as he gently retrieves them, Cinderella briefly flashes through his exhausted mind, and an intense loneliness pierces his aching heart.

He composes himself quickly “God; am I going soft” he mutters to himself, but then suddenly laughs out loud as the realisation dawns that he has actually sold that useless heap of unreliable junk so effortlessly and for absolutely stupid money too (“*and no doubt those shoes will be worth a few quid online!*”). As he approaches the door he notices the ‘grumpy old git’ next door, staring down from his bedroom window and grimacing at Merv “*Get a life you ignorant bastard*” he thinks to himself.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Mr Kendrick smiles affectionately as he peers through the grubby glass at his neighbour re-entering the adjoining house. He loves Merv much as a father loves his son; however, there is much, much more to it than that.

Although Merv doesn’t really know Mr Kendrick, the latter knows the former intimately and he alone can see past those cold, black, emotionless eyes and sense the delicate soft mist of a million uncried tears.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Pause; Breathe; Let go

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

She hasn’t set her alarm, intentionally. Since Alan had left she has been making a real conscious effort not to let *anything* be her master; time, money, others’ opinions could all take a running jump. She knows there is somehow much more to life, she’s certain she is supposed to be happy and she suspects that somewhere inside she instinctively knows how. OK, she has her doubts, lots of doubts, but whenever she remembers to ignore the incessant protests of her never-satisfied mind and to feel her true self, ‘in the moment’; she can sense a sort of ‘inner guidance’. Despite appearances, she is in control.

5am

Her bleary eyes seek out the clock and immediately she feels angry. It’s telling her that she’s woken too early and should go back to sleep. “*To hell with you*”

she says out-loud, and in the privacy of her mind finishes the rant: “It’s *my* life; I’ll wake when I want, do what I like! ...Who’s to say when’s ‘too early’? ...What’s ‘should’ anyway? ...I decide: ME!”

Her mind quietens as she realises that no-one is actually telling her what to do. She is indeed free to do as she pleases. She fights the overwhelming sense of fatigue and, with a super-human effort, throws back the duvet. As she leaves the warm security of her bed she reaches across and pushes the nearby clock to face the wall. It’s still 5am. She stumbles across to the curtains and pulls one back. There is little difference to the room; the pale half-light wanders aimlessly through the opening, but lacks the energy to define or colour. She realises she is quite naked and, blushing, moves discretely away from the twilight’s gaze. Pulling on her robe she collapses, exhausted, onto the bed. A few minutes pass and she once again forces herself to her feet. “Coffee; I need coffee”

She makes her way over to the door with only a brief detour to peep at the hidden clock-face: 5am. Nothing registers and she continues her semiconscious kitchen-ward journey. She waits patiently for her trusty kettle to awaken and fulfil its sole, simple duty; her mind drifting through an abstract fog (later, her feminine intuition will sense the problem and she will instinctively flick the switch to ‘on’, thinking “Thank God women can multi-task”). She opens the cupboard and reaches for a non-existent mug; why did the dishwasher so jealously possess everything? Undeterred, she bravely turns her attention to the adjacent cupboard and lifts down the jar of strong Indonesian Java; “Good old faithful coffee, always there when you need it”. Next to the fridge; milk... “Milk: DAM!” and she bursts into tears.

A few moments later, as if telepathic to her hopeless grief, her neighbour’s aging ginger tom, Kendrick, enters through the open kitchen window and brushes against her leg. She is comforted in the knowledge that she is not alone and feels a strange sense that although she can’t even fathom herself, somehow this friend understands perfectly. Had it not been for this visit she would no doubt have sobbed for a good while longer before eventually abandoning her efforts and returning to bed defeated. However, she has renewed purpose now and will not let him down “Don’t worry Kenny dear; I’ll pop down the twenty-four seven and get you some milk”

The kind Asian shopkeeper is not in the least surprised when the dishevelled woman enters his shop dressed only in her robe and unmatched shoes. He is used to the big city life and knows that the usual social conventions are veiled through the small hours. Besides, his culture has taught him to be blind to outward appearances and he welcomes her warmly with a smile. He is a shrewd businessman, but grateful more for the company than the trade. “Can I be of assistance?” he offers politely.

Her mind has gone quite blank and she’s completely forgotten what she came in for. She returns the friendly man’s smile, but says nothing and simply shrugs

her shoulders. He is used to this too. People who come into his shop at this hour frequently have ulterior motives, but usually end up buying something anyway. Although an experienced and very good judge of character, he is more importantly sensitive and trusting and so he excuses himself, returning to the magazines he was arranging and allows her to browse freely.

She proceeds to explore the shelves and aisles, marvelling at the curious assortment of this, that and the other. She walks straight past the refrigerator with no recollection of why she had come there. Eventually she makes the final turn and heads along the very last aisle towards the checkout and door. She has touched nothing; only looked and thought and thought and looked. The shopkeeper is engrossed in his work and as she softly approaches he is momentarily startled. A magazine slips from his hand and falls to the floor. She instinctively picks it up to hand back to him, but it fails to complete the journey. She stares at the cover of *'Behind The Scene'* in wonder and, still clutching it tightly, makes her way to the till. "A very good choice madam", the kind Asian smiles as he takes her money; but although she smiles back her mind is elsewhere, as she looks over his shoulder at the clock: 5am

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kendrick licks his paw as he settles onto the cushion. It is not milk he is thinking of, but the struggling spirit of one who is yearning to be freed; impatient for life.

He purrs in contentment.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jane awakes with a start. The half-open curtains the only clue to another restless night. She turns the clock to face her and makes yet another mental note to remember to put batteries on one of her many lists. Reaching for her mobile she recalls why it is switched off. It has been three days now and the last thing she wants is a barrage of texts and overloaded voicemail wanting to know if she is alright and why she hasn't been at work. She knows her boss is a reasonable man and would be very understanding if he knew ("*Don't worry yourself at all; we can manage just fine; take as much time as you need*"), but she doesn't want him, or anyone else for that matter, to know.

She dresses carefully in a fine choice of even finer clothes, as though she will shortly be making her usual way to the office, although deep-down she's not fooled. Nevertheless, for the time-being she will continue with the pretence and there is breakfast to be hastily prepared. As she enters the kitchen, sure enough; there it is, exactly where she had left it, in the middle of the cottage-style table.

She knows the contents without opening it. She has read it countless times for her professional clients as she has advised them on the best response and proceeding course of action. This time, however, it is addressed to *her*, and no matter how she tries, she cannot bring herself to deal with it. When Alan left she had simply continued with her life as usual. With the exception of the odd curtain-twitcher (who would already know *all* her business intimately, but have no-one to tell), neither friends nor family; colleagues nor clients, suspected a thing. Indeed; she was the model of perfect respectability, admired and loved by all. This letter threatened to change everything for good. She would be exposed with her laundry.

She takes a deep breath and psyches herself up; it's now or never. Picking up the white envelope with the words '*Deveraux, Shanklin and Fitch*' stamped purposefully across the top in order to intimidate submission before it is even opened, she presses firmly with her right foot and condemns it to the depths of the pedal-bin. "*Don't look back; don't look back; don't look back*" she recites to herself, but something has come to mind and it is not going to go away. Slowly, cautiously, she once more depresses the small stainless lever of the kitchen waste bin and, reaching inside, retrieves the copy of '*Behind The Scene*'. It is as Jane suspected; she will not be going to work today.

She prepares a mug of strong, black Java (she's never understood how anyone could ruin the divine taste with milk or cream) and, sitting herself at the kitchen table, examines the magazine's cover. '*July 2006*'. *Why do magazines do that? – it's barely June*. She starts reading the headline '*Life's A Beach...*' and then realises that, true to her experience of human nature, she is subconsciously avoiding the obvious dilemma. Two intertwined characters dominate the main cover image; each fighting for her attention; each trying to assert their supremacy in an otherwise perfectly balanced juxtaposition. Should she contemplate the scantily clad woman or, alternatively, is it her duty to first consider the motorcycle that is either the obvious star of the piece, or perhaps just a prop? She tries to imagine what a typical reader of the magazine would do when confronted monthly in this way. Her mind travels way back through time and arrives at the occasion she last saw a copy of this niche publication:

She's just seventeen and her then boyfriend, Sam, has returned from the newsagent after nipping out for some cigarettes and chocolate. Huge cheeky grin on his spectacularly beautiful face, he exclaims; "*Wow; just look at that bike!*"; his bright eyes firmly fixed on the semi-naked female draped precariously across some weird piece of machinery filling the cover of a fresh-off-the-print magazine, gripped firmly in his hands. There is a deep and open relationship and her feminine intuition tells her that what he's really saying is that he wishes to make love with his treasured girlfriend; so naturally she is filled with absolute delight.

She remembers the first time they had made love. He had taken her back to his bed-sit from the nightclub where they had just met. The small room was lovingly decorated in bold Rasta colours; mountains, palm trees and elegant spiky leaved plants adorned the walls, creating a secluded, secret dream world, separated only by a single matt-black door from the seemingly bland reality of an everyday life outside. He led her directly over to the vast inviting bed without a word and as they sat together, just looking and gently touching, she became aware of her own inner dream world softly awakening. Although not technically a virgin, she knew that she had never made love before; that previous encounter, in the back of an old clapped-out Mini, with someone who's name she could hardly remember, was another thing altogether.

Her senses had overwhelmed her; or were they *his* senses; she could no longer tell. She hadn't noticed him put on the music. Maybe he hadn't, perhaps it was *her*; or possibly she was just imagining it. Anyway, it made no difference; whether him, her, real or imagined; there was simply no 'just' about it. She felt herself drifting and delicately dissipating. They were slowly becoming one. All was becoming one.

Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson accompanied her as she entered a vast ocean of emotion; her dreams floating serenely amongst the crashing waves:

*Time has come again
And love is in the wind
Like some music in a dream
You made them all come true
When you came inside of my life
Now I'm lost
Inside of you
Lost in the music
And lost in your eyes
I could spend all of my time
Hearing songs you sing
Feeling love you bring
Darling being close to you
Made all my dreams come true
When you came inside my life
Now I'm lost inside of you*

She was transcending the physical; transcending reality; transcending time itself. Indeed she could no longer tell when whatever it was had started. Surely it had no beginning and surely it had no end. It always had been; always would be.

Jane has fallen deep into someone's eyes, never to be seen again.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Elise eases herself from the saddle and slowly dismounts from the slouching, exhausted Bitch. She lowers herself to the ground, just sitting for a moment, and then releases her sore, hot feet from the captivity of their boots. She crawls the last few yards across the promenade and hauls herself up onto the low stone wall. Turning her back on the slumbering beast and the countless miles past, she faces the vast ocean; her dreams are ahead of her, having already crossed the scorching sand, and are now floating serenely amongst the crashing waves.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The sea is unmoved.

All things come from the sea; all things return to the sea. The sea has no beginning; no end. Her waters pass through everything and from her nothing is hidden. She knows all intimately, but reveals nothing. She is the silent witness of a million un-cried tears.

There is nothing beside the sea.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

emma milton publishing
www.emmamilton.com