

MARGARET ELIOT

BODY TRICKS

He snapped his fingers under her nose.

"Come back, you're a hundred miles away."

"Sorry, what did you say?"

She hadn't known him long so she wasn't familiar with his range of tones and the subtle ones would puzzle her. She'd be thinking about something he'd said ten minutes earlier and miss the words of the moment.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, it wasn't important."

Nothing subtle about that tone. It meant that he found her too busy with her own thoughts to listen to him, imagining maybe that her head was already at the place where her body would be tomorrow.

He moved the sleeve of his T-shirt away from his arm and fanned his skin with it.

"Sore?"

"A bit, when anything touches it. But it's more itchy than sore now."

He'd had a tattoo done a few days earlier, a swallowtail butterfly. She'd been disappointed when she'd first seen it. She hadn't expected to see red flesh swelling around it and a scabby brown layer covering the shape. She'd thought she would see glistening colour and a clear outline, moving and rippling with his skin. He had looked disappointed too but had shrugged and made jokes about dirty needles.

"Looking forward to going away?"

"Mmm, I feel stale. I want to be out of town, near the sea."

That was true and had been so for a couple of months but right at that moment she wanted him to say 'don't go' or 'I'll come too'. She felt tempted to show him how much he meant to her by saying that she'd stay in town to be near him. But he hadn't asked for that. And if she did say it, she'd be expecting him to show his pleasure and to understand the significance of her offer. She had no reason to expect anything of the kind and she didn't really want to play that kind of moral politics. You know, when you speak simply, from the heart and kid yourself

that this simple spontaneous expression of feeling doesn't exert a pressure on the other to respond. No, she didn't want to feed him his lines, she wanted him to write his own.

But he was talking again in that flat dispassionate tone she understood least.

"Summer always brings a mixed harvest, doesn't it? Full of promise and the possibility of change. And sometimes that's all there is: promises and possibilities."

She nodded and felt apprehensive.

"I was dumped last summer," he said. "She went off with another bloke, drove off to Adelaide. Not a word, she just went."

"But she came back, didn't she?"

"Yes, about six weeks later, brown, plump and contented."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing. I stayed out of her way."

"Didn't you talk with her, didn't you tell her how you felt?"

"What was the point?" His voice echoed with a remembered melancholy, his eyes looked far away.

Oh no, she thought, not one of these numbers. There's only one thing worse than talking about past lovers over dinner. That's talking about past lovers in bed.

"How do you feel about it now?"

"I'm not sure. A bit unresolved, I suppose. It sits there in my memory, undigested."

She wrinkled her nose at the faint odour of musty rose petals that floated between them. She hated pressed flowers of sentiment. She didn't give a stuff about his embalmed memories, she thought fiercely. But she couldn't leave it there. Her duty was plain.

"Well, why don't you talk about it with her now. Maybe it's you she wants to go driving with to Adelaide this year."

Her voice had betrayed her. He'd heard its sharpened edge and quickly looked at her. He smiled a little and shook his head. He thought he'd caught her out, that was plain; caught her out being jealous then ashamed of it and trying to cover it up by being generous and self-effacing. It would be hopeless to explain that it was irritation with his harking back and suspicion of his motives that had honed her voice and tightened her lips. He may as well think that, anyway. Nothing in her response was much to her credit. She looked at the tablecloth, played with her fork and said nothing.

“We’d better eat,” he said, “that’s what we’re here for.”

She’d never seen such a disgusting plate of food: a gross piece of oozing meat, edged with yellow fat, encircled by a moat of steamed vegetables of various muddy colours.

She toyed with the food for ten minutes, eating little and saying nothing. He ate his determinedly and efficiently, clearing his plate.

“Finished?” he asked, looking at her full plate. She nodded.

The waiter came to take the plates. He picked up her plate and started eating from it.

“Don’t want to hurt the cook’s feelings,” he said by way of explanation.

He pulled out a chair and invited the waiter to sit down and finish off the meal. At least he didn’t rub it in too much by asking her if she minded. But the waiter declined. Too much to do, he said, he’d finish it off on his way to the kitchen.

They walked back to his place in silence, a silence that was by now heavy and full blown. She couldn’t think of anything to say that would even build a flimsy bridge between them, let alone something that would carry them up river to where they’d been before, to where they’d started.

The silence continued in his room. She lay sprawled on his bed, poking her fingers through the holes in a crocheted rug, hoping she didn’t look sulky. He sat on the only chair, picked up his guitar and plucked short, discontinuous ripples of sound from it. It seemed to soothe him, his body relaxed, his face softened as he played. The sounds flowed together into a whole.

She was soothed too. She sat up and watched him, admiring the dexterity of his long spidery fingers. Suddenly something changed. She felt it. So did he. He looked up and smiled at her. His smile had a pleasing, flashing brilliance that melted the melancholy lines on his face.

She sprang off the bed and went across to him. She carefully lifted the sleeve of his shirt and looked at the tattoo. The swelling had disappeared. The scab had fallen away. The butterfly had come out of its chrysalis: its shape was now clearly outlined, its colours had been oiled by his skin into lustrous blue and black.

She stroked its outline with one finger. He bent his head and gently kissed her cheek.

“It’s beautiful now. I was too impatient. The skin had to heal first.”

He nodded, then flexed his muscle, up and down, until the butterfly seemed to be taking wing.

She sat on her heels and watched its flight. She loved body tricks. She wanted to do some. Maybe later on she could make her shadow rabbit on the wall. Perhaps she could remember how to do the wolf too.

Her stomach rumbled. She rubbed her belly and was suddenly aware of how flat and empty it was.

"You'll laugh," she said, "but now I'm hungry. Is it OK if I go and fossick in your kitchen?"

"Sure," he said. "But better than that, let me cook you something. I'll bring it in here."

She climbed onto his bed and settled herself in a nest of cushions. She carefully crooked her fingers against the light and wagged the long ears of the rabbit that sprang to life on the wall.

JOHN HANDS

STANBOROUGH LAKES

This is not how I fancied it would be: I had
the usual romantic dreams, house — car — kids, a man
who would know how to turn me on. But now
as you stumble by my side your leg in irons, the
off-side of your face strained in a permanent wince
the dog frisking around our feet I marvel
at my sense of obligation

Nothing else is left.

Parents — friends — family, nothing is what it was
nothing is what it was meant to be. I stand stock-still
your stick in my hand, waiting for the dog to
scramble out of the water. Alone on your seat you stare
at the yacht and its vigorous helmsman.
Beyond the lake a train clatters over the embankment
Whisking other people to unknown, perhaps exciting destinations.