
These Foolish Things

Deborah Moggach

Part One

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The Truth will set you free.
(Swami Purna)

Muriel Donnelly, an old girl in her seventies, was left in a hospital cubicle for forty-eight hours. She had taken a tumble in Peckham High Street and was admitted with cuts, bruises and suspected concussion. Two days she lay in A & E, untended, the blood stiffening on her clothes.

It made the headlines. TWO DAYS! screamed the tabloids. Two days on a trolley, old, neglected, alone. St Jude's was besieged by reporters, waylaying nurses and shouting into their mobiles, didn't they know the things were forbidden? Photos showed her lolling grey head and black eye. Plucky pensioner, she had survived the Blitz for this? Her image was beamed around the country: Muriel Donnelly, the latest victim of the collapsing NHS, the latest shocking statistic showing that the British health system, once the best in the world, was disintegrating in a welter of under-funding, staff shortages and collapsing morale.

A hand-wringing why-oh-why piece appeared in the Daily Mail, an internal investigation was ordered. Dr Ravi Kapoor was interviewed. He was weary but polite. He said Mrs Donnelly had received the appropriate care and that she was waiting for a bed. He didn't mention that he would kill for an hour's sleep. He didn't mention that since the closure of the Casualty department at the neighbouring hospital his own, St Jude's, had to cope with twice the number of drunks, drug overdoses and victims of pointless violence; that St Jude's would soon be closing because its site, in the centre of Lewisham, was deemed too valuable for sick people; that the private consortium that had taken it over had sold the land to Safeways who were planning to build a superstore.

Exhausted, Ravi drove home to Dulwich. Walking up his path, he paused to breathe deeply. It was seven in the evening; somewhere a bird sang. Beside the path, daffodil blooms had shrivelled into tissue paper. Spring had come and gone without his noticing.

In the kitchen Pauline was reading the Evening Standard. The story had gathered momentum; other cases were printed, outraged relatives told their tales.

Ravi opened a carton of apple juice. 'Thing is, I didn't mention the real reason the old bat wasn't treated.'

Pauline fetched him a glass. 'Why?'

'She wouldn't let any darkies touch her.'

Pauline burst out laughing. At another time - another lifetime, it seemed - Ravi would have laughed too. Nowadays that place was unreachable, a golden land where, refreshed and rested, he could have the energy to find things funny.

Upstairs the lavatory flushed.

'Who's that?' Ravi's head reared up.

There was a silence.

'I was going to tell you,' said Pauline.

'Who is it?'

Footsteps creaked overhead.

'He won't be here for long, honestly, not this time,' she babbled. 'I've told him he's got to behave himself -'

'Who is it?'

He knew, of course.

Pauline looked at him. 'It's my father.'

Ravi was a man of compassion. He was a doctor; he tended the sick, he mended the broken. Those who were felled by accident, violence or even self-mutilation found in him a grave and reassuring presence. He bandaged up the wounds of those who lay at the wayside, unloved and unlovable; he staunched the bleeding. Nobody was turned away, ever. To do the job, of course, required detachment. He had long ago learnt a sort of numbed empathy. Bodies were problems to be solved. To heal them he had to violate them by invading their privacy, delving into them with his skilled fingers. These people were frightened. They were utterly alone, for sickness is the loneliest place on earth.

Work sealed him from the world which delivered him its casualties, the doors sighing open and surrendering them up to him; he was suspended from the life to which he would return at the end of his shift. Once home, however, he showered off the hospital smell and became a normal person. Volatile, fastidious, a lover of choral music and computer games, sympathetic enough but somewhat drained. Of course he was compassionate, but no more or less than anybody else. After all, the

Hippocratic Oath need not apply on home territory. And especially not to a disgusting old sod like Norman.

Barely a week had passed and already Ravi wanted to murder his father-in-law. Norman was a retired structural engineer, a monumental bore and a man of repulsive habits. He had been thrown out of his latest residential home for putting his hand up a nurse's skirt. 'Inappropriate sexual behaviour', they called it, though Ravi could not imagine what appropriate behaviour could possibly be, where Norman was concerned. His amorous anecdotes, like a loop of musak, reappeared with monotonous regularity. Already Ravi had heard, twice this week, the one about catching the clap in Bulawayo. Being a doctor, Ravi was treated to Norman's more risqué reminiscences in a hoarse whisper.

'Get me some Viagra, old pal,' he said, when Pauline was out of the room. 'Bet you've got some upstairs.'

The man cut his toenails in the lounge! Horrible yellowing shards of rock. Ravi had never liked him and age had deepened this into loathing of the old goat with his phoney regimental tie and stained trousers. Ruthlessly selfish, Norman had neglected his daughter all her life; ten years earlier, however, pancreatic cancer had put his long-suffering wife out of her misery and he had batted on to Pauline. Once, on safari in Kenya, Ravi had watched a warthog muscling its way to a water-hole, barging aside any animal that got in its way. He retained, for some reason, a vivid image of its mud-caked arse.

'I can't stand much more of this,' he hissed. Nowadays he and Pauline had to whisper like children. Despite his general dilapidation, Norman's hearing was surprisingly sharp.

'I'm doing my best, Ravi, I'm seeing another place tomorrow, but it's difficult to find anywhere else to take him. Word gets around, you know.'

'Can't we just send him away somewhere?'

'Yes, but where?' she asked.

'Somewhere far, far away?'

'Ravi, that's not nice. He is my father.'

Ravi looked at his wife. She changed when her father was around. She became more docile, in fact goody-goody, the dutiful daughter anxious that the two men in her life would get along. She laughed shrilly at her father's terrible jokes, willing Ravi to join in. There was a glazed artificiality to her.

Worse still, with her father in the house he noticed the similarity between them. Pauline had her father's square, heavy jaw and small eyes. On him they looked porcine, but one could still see the resemblance.

Norman had stayed with them several times during the past year - whenever he was kicked out of a Home, in fact. The stays were lengthening as establishments that hadn't heard of him became harder to find. The man's a menace,' said the manager of the last one, 'straight out of Benny Hill. We lost a lovely girl from Nova Scotia.'

'Thing is, he's frightened of women,' said Ravi. 'That's why he has to jump them all the time.'

Pauline looked at him. 'At least someone does.'

There was a silence. They were preparing Sunday lunch. Ravi yanked open the oven door and pulled out the roasting tin.

'I'm so tired,' he said.

It was true. He was always exhausted. He needed time to revive himself, to restore himself. He needed a good night's sleep. He needed to lie on the sofa and listen to Mozart's Requiem. Only then could he become a husband again - a human being, even. The house was so small, with her father in it. Ravi's body was in a permanent state of tension. Every room he went into, Norman was there. Just at the Lacrimosa he would blunder in, the transistor hanging on a string around his neck burbling the cricket commentary from Sri Lanka.

'He uses my computer.'

'Don't change the subject,' said Pauline.

The place stank of Norman's cigarettes. When they banished him outside, the patio became littered with butts like the Outpatients doorway at St Jude's.

'He downloads pornographic sites.' When Ravi entered his study the chair was skewed from the desk, the room felt violated. Fag-ends lay drowned in the saucer underneath his maidenhair fern.

Pauline slit open a packet of beans. They both knew what they were talking about.

'I'm sorry.' Ravi stroked her hair. 'I want to really. It's just, the walls are so thin.'

It was true. At night, when they lay in bed, Ravi could almost feel her father a few inches away, lying in the pigsty that had once been the spare bedroom.

'But he's asleep,' said Pauline.

'Yes, I can hear that, all too distinctly.'

'He is amazing,' she replied. 'I've never known anybody who can snore and fart at the same time.'

Ravi laughed. Suddenly they were conspirators. Pauline put the beans on the counter and turned to her husband. Ravi put his arms around her and kissed her - truly kissed her, the first time in weeks. Her mouth opened against his; her tongue, pressing against his own, gave him an electric jolt.

He pushed his wife against the kitchen unit. She was hot from cooking. He thrust his hand down her slippery cleavage, down beneath her blouse and her stiff butcher's apron. He felt her nipple; her legs buckled.

'Sweetheart,' he said. She moved her body against his. He slid his hand into the small of her back to cushion her from the cupboard knobs.

'Let's go upstairs,' she whispered.

There was a sound. They swung round. Norman came in, zipping up his trousers.

'Just had the most monumental dump. Must be those chick peas last night.' Norman rubbed his hands. 'Something smells good.'

Norman Purse was a vigorous man. Never any problem in that department. His work, building bridges, had taken him all over - Malaysia, Nigeria. He had sampled the fleshpots of Bangkok and Ibadan and was proud of his linguistic fluency; in six African languages he could say 'Show me your pussy'. Oh yes, he had plenty of lead in his pencil.

His wife Rosemary hadn't put up a fuss. She had been a pretty girl once, nicely turned ankles, a bloom to her. That was the trouble: she was too bloody nice. There were certain things a chap couldn't do with a well-bred English rose. Besides, she was his wife. After a few years, like all roses, she was past her best. She had grown into a mousy, middle-aged person who cooked his meals and scuttled around doing whatever women did, hardly a peep from her. To be perfectly honest, the woman wasn't a barrel of laughs. The only time he heard her giggle was behind closed doors with their daughter Pauline. 'What's so funny?' he would ask, opening the door. They would jump like rabbits. Then, when he went away, they would start all over again. Women were strange creatures.

And now Rosemary was long since dead and his own daughter had become a middle-aged matron herself. Pushing fifty, if he remembered it right. One of these career girls, travel agent, never seen her way to give him a grandchild. But a damn good cook, like her mother, better than that slop at The Beeches. Ravi could rustle up some decent grub too, he said it helped him relax. Norman liked teasing his son-in-law. 'Fancy a takeaway?' he would ask, wandering into the kitchen and rubbing his stomach. 'I could murder an Indian.'

Norman had been living with them for a month now and very comfortable it was too. He couldn't go back to the bungalow, of course, because it had burnt down. All the fault of that damned electrician, what a cowboy. They blamed Norman, said he must have nodded off with a fag in his hand but that was a lie and a slander. What were they suggesting, that he was losing his marbles? He might have a dicky heart

and an occasional problem with the waterworks but at least he had kept his wits unlike some people in the various penal institutions, a.k.a. Homes, in which he had been incarcerated. Stark raving bonkers, most of them, wandering around in their nighties muttering to themselves. His daughter had a heart of stone, sending him there. The Dettol-smelling corridors, the tap-tapping of Zimmers, the rows of chairs facing the rain-lashed sea, those ghastly prison warders who couldn't handle a red-blooded male, the miserable old hags. Lesbians, the lot of them.

And they called these places Homes. Somebody had a sense of humour. Home was with his daughter in Plender Street. It was her duty to look after her old Dad. And it wasn't as if it were a one-way thing. He made himself useful looking after the place when they were at work. Plenty of burglars around, even in Dulwich.

It was a gloriously sunny morning in May. Norman filled the saucepan, squirted in some Fairy Liquid and put his hankies on to boil. He was in a good mood. He'd had his morning wank, he had emptied his bowels and had thoroughly cleared his nasal passages. What with one thing and another, he got through a lot of handkerchiefs. He had eaten a hearty breakfast - Bran Fibre and three slices of toast with Cooper's Old English and that blithering low-cholesterol spread Pauline bought for him. The transistor around his neck - he hung it there to keep his hands free - burred the morning news. 'The pensions time bomb', it said, 'is a disaster waiting to happen.' The water came to the boil; grey scum rose to the surface. 'Over the next thirty years the elderly population will grow by two-thirds.' Norman turned down the gas and let himself out of the house.

Plender Street was a pleasant street of Victorian villas - quiet; leafy; Neighbourhood Watch stickers in the windows. Ravi had done well for himself and Pauline must bring in a few shekels too. TWINKIES, they called them: Two Incomes and Something or Other.

A comely housewife pushed a buggy along the pavement; Norman doffed his hat to her as he walked past. She looked startled; good manners were a rarity nowadays, of course. He gazed after her as she quickened her pace; nice arse. Probably wasn't getting much rumpy-pumpy, not with a little kid around. He whistled cheerfully; another thing you didn't hear nowadays, whistling. This place suited him, it was his home, for God's sake. Nice room, meals on tap. No, they weren't going to get rid of him this time. He knew Pauline was searching for another penitentiary, she was doing it on the internet, but no luck so far.

Norman was having too much fun. Ravi was such a fusspot; he had grown worse with the passing years. Everything had to be just so. Norman knew just how to tease him - flicking his fag-ends into the gas-log fire, removing his bottom teeth when he watched TV. He enjoyed his son-in-law's sharp intake of breath. Just that far, no further. Norman had a well-developed sense of survival.

And the man was such a prude. Funny, that, considering he was a doctor, plunging his hands God-knows-where. Norman had told him his joke about the gynaecologist's wife, 'Had a good day at the orifice?' Not a titter. A while ago he had asked him to get him some Viagra. 'I'm afraid that's impossible,' Ravi had said. What

a goody-goody! Once, on a train, Norman had seen his son-in-law reading the safety leaflet. On a train. The safety leaflet. He hadn't let Ravi forget that.

Norman pushed open the door of Casablanca Food and Wine. A dusky maiden stood behind the counter. He had never seen her before.

'Good morning, my dear.' He raised his hat. 'What's a lovely girl like you doing in a place like this?'

'My Dad owns it,' she said.

'Ah. And what's your name?'

'Sultana.'

Norman spluttered. 'Sultana! Fancy a date then?'

The girl gazed at him, coolly. Oh well, he thought, never mind. He bought his packet of fags and two cans of Tennants. Sultana was doing that text thing on her mobile, thumb skittering. Even so, she could see him. Norman gazed longingly at the rack of magazines. Just for a moment he felt that rare thing: embarrassment. He couldn't, not with this lovely creature here, so young and dewy.

There was nothing for it but to go down to the high street. It took him a good ten minutes, his back was playing up. Finally, however, he reached its welcome anonymity, cars thundering past, and went into a newsagent's.

'Morning,' he said to the man behind the counter. He scanned the top shelf of magazines. Lifting his walking-stick, he dislodged a copy of Asian Babes. It fell to the floor.

Norman bent to pick it up. A spasm shot up his spine. He froze. Bent double, he waited for the pain to pass.

'Here, Grandad.' The man came over and picked it up for him.

'It's for my son-in-law,' Norman muttered at the floor. 'He's Indian.'

'I'm sure he is.' The man grinned. 'I expect he'll be wanting it in a bag, too.'

Clutching the carrier, Norman hobbled back along the road. A siren screamed. He jumped. A fire engine rushed past. Suddenly he wanted to be home, safely ensconced on the sofa. Today the world seemed more than usually hostile - the traffic, the heed-less passers-by, the newsagent with his insolence. Somebody unloaded a crate of bottles. Norman jumped again. He wanted his daughter to be home, instead of miles away in some office or other. She would bring him a cup of tea. She would rub Ibuleve into his back and tell him he wasn't that old, it was all right, he wasn't going to die. Everything was going to be all right.

Norman paused, leaning on his stick. Suddenly he saw himself as others must see him. Just for a moment, like the clouds parting. Then they closed again.

He thought: I miss my wife. Rosemary would understand.

This surprised him so much that he didn't notice what was happening at the end of the street. Something was up. What looked like a fire engine seemed to be parked outside his daughter's house. A crowd of people stood watching.

Norman hobbled closer. He stopped and stared. At 18 Plender Street, black smoke was billowing out of the side window.