

Wetlands

Charlotte Roche

Translated by Tim Mohr

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Please note that this extract contains scenes of an adult nature

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I place a lot of importance on the care of the elderly within a family. I'm also a child of divorce, and like all children of divorce I want to see my parents back together. When my parents eventually need to be taken care of, all I have to do is stick their new partners in nursing homes and then I'll look after the two of them myself—at home. I'll put them together in their matrimonial bed until they die.

As far back as I can remember, I've had hemorrhoids. For many, many years I thought I couldn't tell anyone. After all, only grandfathers get hemorrhoids. I always thought they were very unladylike. I've been to Dr. Fiddel, my proctologist, about them so many times. But he always said to leave them there as long as they didn't hurt. And they didn't. They just itched. And for that he gave me a zinc salve.

For exterior itching, you squeeze a hazelnut-sized dollop from the tube onto your finger with the shortest nail and rub it onto your rosette. The tube's also got a pointed attachment with lots of holes in it that allows you to shove it up your ass and squeeze salve out to quell the itchiness inside.

Before I had the salve I would scratch at my butthole in my sleep so much that I'd wake up in the morning with a brown stain in my underwear the size of the top of a cork. That's how much it itched, and that's how deep I'd stick my finger in. So yes, I'd say it's very unladylike.

My hemorrhoids look strange. Over the years they've worked their way farther and farther out. All around the rosette now there are cloud-shaped lobes of skin that

almost look like the arms of a sea anemone. Dr. Fiddel calls it cauliflower.

He says removing it would be strictly an aesthetic move. He'll only take it off if someone is really burdened by it. A good reason for removing it would be if my lover didn't like it, or if the cauliflower gave me anxiety during sex. But I'd never admit that.

If somebody loves me or is even just hot for me, something like the cauliflower shouldn't make a difference. And anyway, I've had very successful anal sex for many years—from the age of fifteen up to now, at eighteen—despite the ever-expanding cauliflower. By very successful I mean that I can come with just a cock up my ass, not being touched anywhere else. Yep, I'm proud of that.

It's also a good way to test whether someone is serious about me. During one of the first few times I have sex with somebody new, I get us into my favorite position: doggy-style, me on all fours with my face down, him behind me with his tongue in my pussy and his nose in my ass. He's got to work his way in there, because the hole is covered with the vegetable. I call this position "stuff your face," and so far nobody has complained.

When you've got something like that on an organ that's so important for sex (is the bum even an organ?), you have to train yourself to relax. This in turn helps enable you to let yourself go and loosen up during, for instance, anal sex.

And since the ass is obviously part of sex for me, it's also subject to the modern shaving regime, along with my pussy, my legs, my underarms, the upper lip, both big toes, and the top of my feet as well. Of course, the upper lip doesn't get shaved but rather plucked, because we all know you'll develop a mustache if you shave it. As a girl you don't want that. I used to be happy enough without all the shaving, but then I started with that crap and now I can't quit.

Back to shaving my ass. Unlike other people, I know exactly what my butthole looks like. I look at it every day in the bathroom. Standing with my bum facing the mirror, legs spread, my hands holding my ass cheeks apart, and my head practically on the floor, I look back between my legs. I shave my ass exactly the same way. Except that I have to let one cheek go in order to hold the razor. The wet blade is put against the cauliflower and then pulled bravely in a straight line outward from the center. Right on out to the middle of the cheek, occasionally leaving behind a stray hair. Since I'm always conflicted about the idea of shaving, I always rush it and end up pressing too hard. Which is exactly how I caused the anal lesion that's the reason I'm lying here in the hospital now. Blame it all on lady-shaving. Feel like Venus. Be a goddess.

Perhaps not everyone knows what an anal lesion is. It's a hairline rip or cut in the skin of your rosette. And if this small open wound gets infected as well—which down there is

highly likely—then it hurts like hell. Like with me right now. Turns out your asshole is always in motion. When you talk, laugh, cough, walk, sleep, and, above all else, when you go to the bathroom. But I only realized this once it started to hurt.

The swollen hemorrhoids are also pushing with all their strength against the razor wound, ripping the lesion open even farther and causing the worst pain I've ever experienced. By far. In second place is the pain I felt run down my spine—*ratatatatat*—the time my father accidentally slammed the hatchback door of our car on my back. The third worst pain I've ever felt was when I ripped out my nipple ring taking off a sweater. That's why my right nipple looks like a snake's tongue now.

Back to my bum. In excruciating pain I made my way from school to the hospital and showed my cut to every doctor. Immediately I got a bed in the proctology unit—or do you call it the internal-medicine unit? Internal medicine sounds better than specifying “ass unit.” Don't want to make other people envious. Maybe we can just generalize with internal medicine. I'll ask about it later, when the pain is gone. Anyway, now I'm not allowed to move. I just lie here in the fetal position. With my skirt hiked up and my underpants pulled down, ass toward the door. That way anyone who enters the room immediately knows what the story is. It must look really infected. Everyone who comes in says, “Ooh.”

And they talk about pus and an engorged blister that's hanging out of the wound on my buttock. I picture the blister like the skin on the neck of one of those tropical birds that puffs its throat out when trying to mate. A shimmering, inflated, red-blue sac. The next proctologist who comes in says curtly, "Hello, the name is Dr. Notz."

Then he jams something up my asshole. The pain bores its way up my spine and into my brain. I nearly pass out. After a few seconds of pain I feel a wet squishiness and cry out, "Ow! Give me some warning. What the hell was that?"

His response: "My thumb. You'll have to excuse me, but with that big blister there I couldn't see anything."

What a way to introduce yourself.

"And now? What do you see?"

"We've got to operate immediately. Have you eaten anything today?"

"How could I with this pain?"

"Good. General anesthesia then. It's better given the situation."

I'm happy, too. I don't want to be conscious for something like this.

"What exactly are you going to do during the operation?"

The conversation is already straining me. It's tough to concentrate on anything but the pain.

"We'll make a wedge-shaped incision to cut out the infected tissue."

“I can’t really picture that—wedge-shaped? Can you draw a picture for me?”

Apparently the esteemed Dr. Notz hasn’t often been asked by patients to sketch a diagram right before an operation. He wants to leave, glances at the door, stifles a sigh.

Then he pulls a silver pen out of his chest pocket. It looks heavy. Expensive. He looks around for a piece of paper to draw on. I can’t help him and hope he doesn’t expect me to. Any movement hurts. I close my eyes. There’s rustling and I hear him ripping a piece of paper out of something. I have to open my eyes—I’m anxious to see the drawing. He holds the piece of paper in his palm and scribbles with the pen. Then he presents his creation. I read: savoy cabbage in cream sauce. No way. He’s ripped the paper out of the hospital menu. I turn the paper around. He’s drawn a circle. I figure it’s supposed to be my buttock. And out of the circle a triangular wedge has been cut, as if someone has made off with a piece of cake.

Aha, got it. Thanks, Dr. Notz. Ever thought about putting all that talent into a career as an artist? The sketch doesn’t help me at all. Though I’m still no better informed, I don’t ask any more questions. He isn’t interested in helping enlighten me.

“Surely you could cut out the cauliflower with just a little flick of the wrist?”

“It’ll be done.”

He walks out, leaving me lying in the puddle of water from the blister. I’m alone. And worried about the operation. I think of general anesthesia as something dangerous, as if every second patient never wakes up. I feel courageous for going ahead with it. The anesthesiologist comes in next.

The sandman. He pulls up a low stool and sits down with his face right in front of mine. He speaks softly and has a lot more compassion for my situation than Dr. Notz. He asks how old I am. If I were under eighteen there would have to be a legal guardian here. But I’m not. I tell him I’ve come of legal age this year. He looks incredulously into my eyes. I know. Nobody ever believes it; I look younger. I know this drill. I put on my serious you-can-trust-me face and lock eyes with him. His gaze changes. He believes me. On with the discussion.

He explains how the anesthesia works. I’ll count and then just fall asleep at some point without even noticing. He’ll sit by my head throughout the operation, monitor my breathing, and check that the anesthesia is agreeing with me. Aha. So this sitting-too-close-to-my-face thing is an occupational hazard. Most people don’t notice anyway—they’re knocked out. And he’s probably supposed to be as unobtrusive as possible and hunker down close to the patient’s head so as not to disturb the real doctors. Poor guy. The standard position while practicing his trade? Squatting.

He's brought a contract that I'm supposed to sign. It says the operation could result in incontinence. I ask how it could affect my pissing. He grins and says this refers to anal incontinence. Never heard of it. But suddenly I realize what this means: "You mean I might lose control of my sphincter muscles and then I could just crap myself anytime and anyplace and would need a diaper and stink all the time?"

The sandman: "Yes, but that rarely happens. Sign here, please."

I sign it. What else am I supposed to do? If that's what it takes to have the surgery. I can't exactly go home and operate on myself.

Oh, man. Please, dear nonexistent God, don't let this happen. I'd be wearing a diaper at age eighteen. You're not supposed to need those until you're eighty. It would also mean I'd only have managed to live fourteen years of my life without diapers. And you certainly don't look cool in them.

"Dear anesthesiologist, would it be possible for me to see what they cut away during the operation? I don't like the idea that a part of me could end up in the trash along with aborted fetuses and appendixes without my being able to picture it. I want to hold it in my hand and examine it."

"If that's what you want, then sure."

"Thanks." He sticks a catheter into my arm and secures everything with surgical tape. This is where they'll pump

in the anesthesia later. He says that in a few minutes a nurse will come to take me to surgery. Now the anesthesiologist too leaves me lying in the puddle of moisture from my blister and walks out.

The thought of anal incontinence worries me.

Dear nonexistent God, if I manage to get out of here without anal incontinence, I'll stop doing all the things that give me a bad conscience. Like the game I play with my friend Corinna where we run through the city drunk and grab people's eyeglasses, break them, and then chuck them into the street.

We have to run quickly—some people get so pissed off that they come after us really fast even without their glasses.

The game is stupid anyway because we always sober up from all the excitement and adrenaline. Big waste of money. Afterward we always have to start from scratch again getting drunk.

Actually, I'd like to give that game up anyway—sometimes at night I dream of the faces of the people whose glasses we've just plucked off. It's as if we've ripped off a body part.

I'll give that one up right now, and I'll try to come up with a list of some other things.

Maybe if it's absolutely necessary I'll give up the hookers. That would be a major sacrifice, though. It would be great if giving up the glasses game would suffice.

I've decided to be the best patient this hospital has ever had. I'm going to be extra nice to the overworked nurses and doctors. I'll clean up my own messes. Like the fluid from my blister. There's an open box of rubber gloves on the windowsill. Obviously for examinations. Did Notz have one on when he popped the blister on my ass? Shit, I didn't notice. Next to the carton of rubber gloves is a big translucent-plastic container. Tupperware for a giant. Maybe there's something in there I can use to clean myself up. My bed is up against the window. Slowly, gingerly, I stretch myself out a little without moving my infected bum and manage to grab it. I pull the container onto my bed. Ouch. Lifting it and pulling it tenses my stomach muscles, sending a knife of pain into the infection. I pause. Close my eyes. Breathe deeply. Lie still. Wait for the pain to subside. Eyes open. Okay.

Now I can open the container. What excitement. It's filled to the brim with giant hygienic wipes, adult diapers, disposable underwear, toweling, and bed covers that are plastic on one side and cloth on the other.

I would like to have had one of those under me when Notz came in. Then the bed wouldn't be all wet. Not very comfortable. I need two of them now. One, cloth side down over the puddle. It'll soak it up. But then I'd be laying on plastic. Don't like that. So another one with its plastic side

down—plastic on plastic—and the cloth side up. Well done, Helen. Despite the hellish pain, you are your own best nurse.

Anyone who can take care of herself so well will definitely recuperate quickly. I'll have to be a bit more hygienic here in the hospital than I am outside in my normal life.