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Opening Extract from...

True Things About Me

Written by Deborah Kay Davies

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TRUE
THINGS
ABOUT
ME

DEBORAH KAY DAVIES



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For Norman,
with love

I Go Underground

I PRESSED THE buzzer for the next claimant. This old woman started telling me about her neighbour. As she spoke she kept tapping the glass barrier between us. That girl is on the game, she said, living off immoral earnings. It's disgusting. Someone ought to come round and investigate. I suggested she get in touch with the police. She pursed her lips and made a spitty sound. Probably half the police force are involved, she said, I wouldn't be surprised. Boys coming and going at all hours. And not only boys. Men too. Men old enough to be her granddad. She stood back and pointed with her thumb to her chest. I have seen men *my* age going in there.

I tried to take control of the interview, but she wasn't going to be put off. I could see a man with curly blond hair sitting behind and to the left of her. He had his arms crossed and his eyes closed. She leaned forward. And another thing, she said, there's always a lot of commotion; she's forever revving the engine of her fancy car outside my window, slam-

ming doors, living like she doesn't have a care in the world. It shouldn't be allowed.

Every time the old woman banged the window she called me miss. I let her go on a bit while I looked over her shoulder at the other people waiting. I could see the big guy was reading the paper now. Broad shoulders. His legs were long, stretched out in front of him, clad in faded, nicely tight jeans. I said to the woman, You leave this with me, we'll check it out, and scribbled down the address. She gave me a look. Thank you now, I said. I have to see the next claimant, and pressed my buzzer.

He sat down and leaned back in the chair. Name? I said, and wrote it down. I read his paperwork. He'd just come out of prison. Nothing serious, he said, and stretched. Just having a laugh with an articulated lorry and a lamp post. He settled back in the seat and grinned. I grinned back. I don't know why. It wasn't at all appropriate. Address? I said. He leaned near the barrier. Why d'you want to know? he said, his breath briefly etching an oval on the glass. I told him I was just doing my job. Nothing personal. Pity, he said. I leafed through his papers and picked up my pen. Married or single? I said. Single. Very, he said, and laid his hands palm down on the surface. Good hands, nice nails and what could have been a wedding ring.

I looked up from the forms. He winked. I told him he would have to wait about a week while someone processed his claim. No probs, he said. Is it your lunch-time soon? His

shirt was open at the neck. His throat was kissable. No, I said, tidying up, I don't have time for lunch. Pity, he said again, and stood up. Everyone should have a break. You look as if you could do with a long one. I could feel myself starting to blush. I made a fuss of gathering up his paperwork. I couldn't bring myself to look up again. I pressed my buzzer and waited. Then he wasn't there.

Alison and I worked late. It was getting dark as we left the building, the air slightly chilly still. He was standing opposite the entrance. There's that man, I said to Alison. He was walking towards us. Which man? she said, peering around. Suddenly he was right in front of us. Hi, he said to me, ignoring her. Coming? Alison stood still and looked from him to me. Bye, I said and shrugged my shoulders. Alison held onto my arm. What about the film? she said quietly. He took hold of my hand and pulled me gently. I just went. Alison called out, Are you sure you're all right? I tried to answer but we were walking too fast, we were too far away, already going underground.

I Don't Value My Possessions

HE TOOK ME down the steps into the car park, and led me to a dark area. I could smell damp concrete, oil, exhaust fumes. He backed me up against a pillar. Take your underwear off, he said, and grinned, showing his teeth. Stand on me. I mean, stand on my shoes. You mustn't get your feet dirty. He supported me while I struggled out of my tights and knickers. My mind had stretched and blanked, like a washed sheet on a clothes line. He had one arm round my waist. He put his hand up between my legs and pressed his fingers inside. I love the way that feels, he said. Then he unzipped his trousers and pushed his penis into my hand. It tapped heavily against my palm.

I'm so ready, he said. Are you? Yes, I said, and opened my legs for him. Say fuck me, he said, so I did. He grunted as he pushed himself in. I locked my arms round his neck. He sucked my bottom lip. I licked his teeth with my tongue. I felt his shoelaces under the arches of my feet. As he came I whacked

the back of my head hard against the pillar. Afterwards I heard car doors slamming, and my legs gave way.

Short and sweet, he said, as he sorted my clothes out. He picked me up and carried me to the taxi rank. We didn't speak. He helped me into a cab and paid the driver. You might want these some time, he said, and threw the screwed-up knot of tights and knickers inside. See you around. All right, mate, he said to the taxi driver and banged the roof of the car. I sat on the seat with my underwear in my hands. I investigated the bruise on my head with my fingers; it felt tacky. Semen seeped out of me and pooled onto the lining of my skirt. When I got home I saw that the back of my new leather coat was scratched and scored. I bundled it up and chucked it in the bottom of my cupboard. I'd only had it for a week.

I Get Reflective

THAT NIGHT I began to be afraid; I couldn't remember things like how to do my job. I switched on the bedside lamp and made notes. I tried to jot down some tasks I needed to do in the morning, but in the end I just wrote: turn on computer; make coffee; file answered paperwork in alphabetical order. Then I wrote a new list and put the first, draft list in alphabetical order. It seemed like a complicated task. The period of time after I'd left work was incomprehensible. I knew I should think about it. The easiest way would be in terms of colour. Mid-blue was coming out of work with Alison. Suddenly yellow. Then apricot. Down into red, streaked with something else. At the bottom a sediment of khaki.

The next morning I decided to ring Alison and ask her to tell our boss I was sick. I avoided the big mirror in the bedroom, and walked through the quiet house down the stairs to the kitchen. Everything was in place. I could barely lift the phone to my ear. The lead was kinked into snarled-up

shapes. Alison answered eventually. Hang on, she said, before I'd spoken a word. Then I heard her shouting something about lunch boxes, and the sounds of running up and down stairs. Then a door slammed.

Right, she said, they've gone. How are you this morning? I, before you ask, have never been fabber. I just live for school-day mornings. Oh, the joy of tuna and mayo sarnies. The giddy search for bloody swimming cossies. Suddenly I couldn't remember what I'd rung for. Go on, I said. Alison's voice was like a cool hand on my forehead. Let me see, she said. You want me to tell old fridge-baps you're sick. Is that it? If you would, I said. My voice was unfamiliar. All in a day's work, she said. Are you all right? I've been so worried about you. 'Course, I said. Why shouldn't I be? Duh, ooh, I can't think why, she said with what I thought was unnecessary sarcasm. Well, I'll be speaking to you in depth very soon, young lady. Can't wait, I said.

I made myself coffee. Sunlight pulsed in the kitchen, bouncing off the kettle and the utensils in the rack. I had some chocolate left, so I carried that and the coffee upstairs. Finally I stood in front of the mirror and let my robe fall off my shoulders. Would you look at yourself, I said to my reflection in a take-the-piss Irish accent. My face was the same, but not the same. It looked slyly back at me, the eyes smaller, paler maybe. I felt afraid again. I reached up to touch the back of my head. The hair felt like a small, painful nest. I looked at myself properly. You're filthy, I said. How could

you do those things? But I couldn't keep the accent up. My smiling mouth in the mirror shocked me.

In the bathroom I ran a bath. It hurt to pee. I didn't recognise the smell of myself. Each time I thought about the car park, something winced in the pit of my stomach and a fluttering sensation rose up from around my heart and drifted out through my scalp. I felt appalled. In the bath the water swam over me. I sank under and worked the dried blood out of my hair. As I did, the fluttering sensation changed. Now it felt like something was shrivelling inside. I remembered banging my head. Tears slid into my ears. I scrambled out of the bath and dried myself.

The house was profoundly silent, every room empty. It felt like an out-of-season holiday home. I couldn't spend time there, so I put on some clothes, slammed the front door and got in my car. At the traffic lights I avoided my reflection in the rear-view mirror while I sent a text to Alison: Will be entering the building ASAP. Thank god 4 flexitime. Luv u.

I worked like a maniac all day and skipped lunch. I ignored Alison's concerned glances, organised some leave and left my desk tidy. Lastly I made a note of his address and phone number, just in case.

I Talk to the Animals

I DECIDED TO visit my grandmother. Magazines were always saying that if you were feeling down the best plan was to do something for someone else. I couldn't find her in the ward. All the old ladies looked the same to me. My gran had been the busty, blue rinse, costume jewellery sort of gran. She used to make me little crisp golden tarts with strawberry jam in the centre. Each one was decorated with a pastry letter from my name. The molten jam was lethal. We sewed clothes for my doll, Valerie. Gran said we should concentrate on evening wear for Valerie. Val's that type of girl, she said, winking. We winked at each other a lot. We spent rainy days colouring in together. Never you mind, she said, when I went outside the lines. Nobody's perfect, my darling. Least of all your granny.

I walked round the ward and looked at each old lady. They all seemed like half-inflated balloons. Finally I found her and sat down on the shiny armchair beside her bed. I picked up her hand. I didn't recognise the rings she was wearing. Gran?

I said. She turned her head to look at me. We stared at each other. Are you my gran? I asked. The nurse came in. Yours is over there, she said, picking up a chart that was hooked over the end of the bed. She had to help me extricate my hand. The old lady had a strong grip. As we struggled with her she made a sort of keening sound.

I found myself in the toilet. For God's sake, I said in the cubicle. For goddy God's sake. I sat on the loo with the lid down and started to laugh. My laugh had a shake in it. In the echoing toilet it sounded eerie. That made me laugh even more. Then I cried. Someone used the loo next to me so I cried silently. There was a sound of rustling, and I stopped to listen. Then a genteel fart. Excuse me, a voice said, as the flush went. I giggled feebly until my sobbing stopped, and went out to wash my hands and repair my face. There was a hand written sign over the basin: Beware. Dangerously hot water. The ink had run so it was like some spooky warning from a mirror in a horror film. I used the cold tap. Right, I said. Now for my gran.

I kissed her forehead. She used to smell of Coty face powder and polo mints. She patted my cheek. How are you, my little love? she said. Her eyes were like tiny chocolatey berries. I told her all about the blond man. I described him in detail. She gazed at me and faintly smiled. When I told her about the car park and the taxi, her eyebrows moved. I thought she might have winked. Gran, I said, I feel really bad. But nobody's perfect, are they? Right? She squeezed my fists with her warm hands. I felt calmer.

I told her it seemed like some sort of turning point. What do you think? I asked. What should I do now? Not see him again? Her nightdress was trimmed around the neckline with rosebuds, and a plastic slide held her hair away from her face. I waited. She opened her lips and began to make the sounds of a chicken, quietly at first. I dropped her hands. Then she threw her head back and started crowing like a cockerel. She had little claws that plucked the bedclothes. I couldn't move. The nurse appeared and touched my shoulder. You should go now, she said, and gave me a shake. It's

I Am Abandoned By My Mother

AFTER MY VISIT to the nursing home I couldn't sleep. Poor old Gran, she would have hated to be herself now. I remembered the sound of her high heels clacking around her kitchen. She wouldn't have been seen dead wearing slippers, let alone a hair clip. All night my eyelids were stretched round my bulging eyeballs. In the morning I felt as if I'd aged five years in the dark, so I decided to go to the surgery.

My usual doctor was away. I saw a locum instead, a gorgeous-looking Asian woman. It was difficult to tell how old she was. I imagined she must be somewhere between twelve and forty-five. Not twelve, of course, that was ridiculous. But still, she might have been. She didn't take her eyes off her computer screen. Yes? she said. Problems? No, I said. I'm really, really, really great. How are you? She finally looked at me. What can I do to help? she asked flatly. I told her I needed something to make me sleep. She frowned. Have you had sleeping pills before? she asked, and

returned to the computer. Finally she gave me a prescription.

I busied myself around the house for the rest of the day. I had an old film on DVD I'd been meaning to see, so in the afternoon I sat down to watch it. Things start off with this very beautiful woman, who seems normal; innocent and good. But soon you realise she's crazy. Her husband writes plays and she stalked him into agreeing to marry her by pretending to be mad about the theatre. It was one of those films where the viewer knows things long before the people in the film do. Eventually she drowns her trusting new husband's sweet, crippled brother and destroys her own unborn child, because she's jealous of any attention her beloved gives to anyone else. Then, after plotting to incriminate him in her death, she kills herself because he's found out what she's done, and is going to leave her. As she dies of poisoning, lying there against the pillows like a dark angel, she tells him, *I'll never let you go, never, never*. God, she was evil. But you had to sympathise with her somehow; she definitely knew what she wanted. Although I couldn't understand what she saw in him; he was a complete drip, and he had improbably groomed eyebrows.

I turned the TV off and began to think about the car park again. I saw myself slipping out of my shoes. Taking off my underwear. He had helped me. I remembered the cold air moving up inside my skirt, the feel of his muscular back and the way he sort of stooped over to grab my mouth with his.

I thought about holding him in my hand. I took some of the tablets and went to bed. I couldn't stop going over it all. When I thought about how he'd grunted as he pushed his penis inside me I felt a buzzing sensation between my legs, accompanied by a delicious little flip.

In bed I kept trying to find cool places on my pillows. Then I fell asleep. I dreamed I was out with my mother. I was a child; she loomed over me as we walked. She was singing a hymn to herself in time with the rhythm of our steps. We passed a dark alley, its entrance partially obscured by trails of ivy blowing in a non-existent wind. My mother pushed me into the alley. I could still hear her singing. There was a line of rubbish bins along the wall. In slow motion a huge black bear with blood on its teeth reared up out of one of the bins. The bin lid stayed on its head like a stiff flat cap. It lunged at me and scooped out my stomach with its curved claws.

I heard my spine snap. Splat went all my organs on the floor. My middle was crimson and empty. I felt the cold air playing on the raw, hot flesh. I screamed for my mother, but she didn't answer. She just went on singing and swinging her handbag out in the sunlit street. I woke up half out of bed, breathless and covered in a film of perspiration. I stood under the shower and then wrapped myself in an old towelling robe. Downstairs I poured some apple juice and sat at the kitchen table until it got light.

I Serve Unusual Nibbles

I BEGAN TO hover near the cupboard where I'd slung my damaged leather jacket. You've got to deal with stuff like this, you silly girl, I said out loud. I had been reading a magazine article called 'Moving On, Moving Up'. I knew it was all crap, but somehow I couldn't stop thinking about my jacket. I lay on the bed and talked to myself. What was the matter with me, anyway? There were lots of perfectly nice, normal girls who did stuff in underground car parks all the time. Nobody judged them. They had a giggle about it with their mates around the photocopier for God's sake.

But I thought about my jacket. I remembered how long it had taken to save the money. The soft, butterscotch-coloured skin. How it felt light and cool, though it protected me perfectly from the cold wind. Its intoxicating smell. I thought about the knobby wooden buttons with their metal shanks. Everything's ruined now, I said, into the hand mirror by my bed.

When I opened the cupboard door, the wholesome, throaty smell of leather poured out. I stepped back and breathed in deeply. The smell was peaceful. It reminded me of the school satchel my cousin Daniel had handed down to me. There were strange bits of writing on the strap; ragged, scratched-in symbols. They were the things Daniel had done. So it was new to me, but not new; it had been to school before. The leather was soft and shiny in the places Daniel had worn it. I remembered my school beret being snatched off my head as I'd walked up the drive for the first time. But no one had wanted the old satchel that I loved. That little girl wouldn't have gone down into an underground car park when she grew up. She was not the sort of girl who would spoil a valuable coat for nothing.

I looked at the sleeping tablets on the bedside table. I'd emptied them out of their plastic strips and put them in a little bowl. It was funny how they looked like the courtesy mints you get offered in some restaurants. I picked up the bowl and offered it to my reflection. Do have some, won't you? I said in the voice of Judith Chalmers, my gran's favourite travel presenter. Take a handful, feel free! I promised myself that after I'd looked at my poor coat properly I'd take some and sleep for days. I walked round the room, and read my magazine for a bit. I'd bought it because of the caption on the front cover, announcing an article about a woman who'd been knocked out by a frozen oven chip.

There were other discarded things in the bottom of the

cupboard, so I rummaged until I felt the jacket. The lining was slippery and chill to the touch. It wasn't as heavy as I'd thought. I spent some time arranging it on the crumpled duvet. It seemed too small for me to wear. More like a little girl's coat. Or the flying jacket of a tiny, old-fashioned, aerostunt pilot. I felt it with my hands, like a blind girl might do, and thought how I would never wear it again. I flipped it over, and pushed my fingers inside the cuts. I heard someone sobbing. The lacerations looked as if they'd been inflicted by an animal.