

To All Their Dues

Wendy Erskine

Mo

Three types of beauty salon: the pristine Swiss clinic set-up where the staff might as well be in scrubs; tart's boudoir with a job lot of gold leaf and damask; and then the retro parlour with a few framed fifties pin-ups. Mo had tried something different. Tropical. An InvestNI start-up loan and a bit of money she'd saved bought her a tiny shop unit and some second-hand equipment from a liquidation auction. On the two-week start-up course they'd said about how you'd to achieve a total concept with it all working together to create brand synergy—the waiting area, the music, the décor. She had got a mate to do the painting. She had in mind a Caribbean paradise but when he'd finished it looked like a coffee shop off the Damrak. Would you like a quarter with your eyelash tint? Today's double-sell! The lights on dim and it didn't look so bad. The total concept got abandoned. The bowls of sand and shells in the waiting area should have been a good idea but people were always sticking their hands in and making the magazines gritty. After three days of *Classic Reggae: The Soundtrack to Jamaica* on repeat Mo retreated to the usual gentle ambient sounds and filled the bowls with boiled sweets.

What they said on the course didn't matter anyway because it was all about the quality of the treatments. Treatments were reasonably priced—allowing for a careful margin—and methodically executed. Nails, waxing, facials, bit of massage, fake tan. One treatment room. Total reliability: no day-release wee dolls messing things up. She was in the place for 8, ready to start at 9 and she was there for the rest of the day, six days a week. Mo was starting to get regular clients, which was good. When she opened she'd put an advert in the local free paper with a discount voucher (15%: enough to create a positive vibe) and that had got things started well. She wasn't fully booked at this stage—there were gaps in the diary—but she had known that that was how it would be for at least the first six months and she'd factored in that probability.

This morning Mo arrived at the same time as usual. The butcher next door was putting out his sign, a wooden cut-out cow, as Mo put up her metal shutter. Then she went through her routine: kettle on first, switch on the wax pot, light a few of the scented candles (black coconut). You needed to take away the smell of the bleach

that lingered from the night before when the whole place had been washed down because ammonia wasn't very ambient. Switch on the heat: important this, although it was expensive. The place always needed to be warm because people felt awkward enough stripping down to paper pants for a tan and they didn't need to be freezing as well. The electric heater made a racket but no one had ever complained. Listen to the answer machine, turn the sign to open and finally, finally make the cup of tea.

Mo was reaching for the milk when there was a shatter of glass. She came through from the back and saw a hole in the window, a circle about two inches wide, and coming from it silver spokes that were tinkling as they crept further towards the edges of the window. Beside the table with the celeb magazines, a shiny red snooker ball had just come to rest. Mo heard the cracking of the glass, stared down at the ball, then looked at the window. Through the hole the road looked darker. She put the ball on the counter and went next door to the butcher's.

Did you hear that? Mo said. My window's just been put in.

The butcher shook his head, continued moving some meat from one tray to another. Shit, he said. That's not good. Do you need a number? For a glass place?

Yes I do, said Mo. I can't believe that just happened.

Desperate like, he said.

I can't believe that just happened!

A woman came into the shop and he turned his attention away from Mo, did the what can I get for you my darlin?

Waiting at the bus-stop outside the salon were a handful of people.

Did you see what happened there? Mo asked them. My window's just been put in.

An old fella shrugged. A boy in school uniform didn't take out his headphones.

Yeah, a man said. Car pulled up and the window went down and they threw something. Drove off quick. Did anybody get hit?

Nobody got hit, said Mo. It was just the window that got wrecked.

Bad state of affairs, said the man. Nuts.

Mo's first client of the day, in for an eyebrow wax and an eyelash tint, never commented on the window.

Blue black? Mo asked.

Blue black, the woman said.

She had taken her shoes off to lie on the bed and they sat neat in the corner, sad little comfortable shoes. Mo mixed the dye in the glass vial then smeared the Vaseline over her eyelids and under her eyes, positioned the semi-circles of paper under her bottom lashes. That window. Unfair so it was. The woman's eyelids fluttered as the dye went on, cold and wet.

That's us, said Mo. I'm going to leave you for ten minutes to let that take. You warm enough? Mo pressed two cotton wool pads on her eyes.

Oh yes, said the woman, lovely.

Good then, said Mo, and she closed the door on the woman lying blind in the dark.

The man from the glass place said he couldn't come out until tomorrow but Mo supposed that was probably as good as she was going to get; she knew that even with the insurance this was going to work out expensive, one way or another. It wasn't a total surprise it happened, she had been expecting something or other. And shouldn't she be thankful that it wasn't something worse, good it had happened when there weren't any clients around. That fella would call in soon again, she knew it.

Mo went back into the room.

All okay?

Yes, just nodded off, said the woman. Can I stay here the rest of the day?

Mo laughed as she cleaned off the dye, firmly and precisely, and then she handed the woman a mirror to look at the transformation. Before: eyes like a rabbit's, pink and fair. After: it's all the blue black. The woman made her mirror face, an ingénue smile even though she hadn't seen sixty in years.

Oh now that's great. That's great.

The eyebrow wax took seconds, a few swift strokes. Mo mentally calculated her pay per second.

As the woman went out, the butcher came in. Here you might be needing this, he said. We had a bit left over. And he held out a length of glass repair film.

He put it on with only a couple of bubbles rising.

Kids, huh? the butcher said.

Kids, said Mo. That's good of you, I appreciate it. That's great.

Just pay it, he said. Ain't really that much, just pay it.

She hadn't spoken to him before beyond hello. She didn't talk much during the day. Alright, if it was nails, you're facing the person and it's ignorant not to, so you have to talk, but people want to keep it light, holidays and work-dos and new shops that have opened in the town. Other treatments, people just need you to shut the fuck up so let them head off to wherever they want as the cotton wool sweeps over them or your hands smooth their skin with cream. Oh there were questions you could ask if you wanted to, bodies that begged for someone to ask why, what's all that about. That long thin scar, running along the inside of your thigh, lady in the grey cashmere, what caused that? Those arms like a box of After Eights, slit slit slit, why you doing that, you with your lovely crooked smile, why you doing that? The woman with the bruises round her neck, her hand fluttering to conceal them. Jeez missus, is your fella strangling you? But you don't ask, why would you?

Mo had done enough talking, done enough listening. The call-centre job she had done at night while getting the beauty qualification had a boss called Eamonn, a man from Donegal in a velvet jacket. The pay was very poor, he had told her, below the minimum wage, but for every thirty seconds you kept people on the phone over ten minutes you got a bonus. Plus you could work all the hours you wanted pretty much, right into the night. Theresa over there, he pointed at a woman drinking tea from a flask, Theresa earns more than I do. There was a choice: either the sex line or the fortune line. Irish angle on both: guys getting off talking to colleens or women having their future decided by Celtic mystics. The other new girl said, what's with the Irish stuff? I'm not telling some fella I'm Irish when I'm not. You'll just be on the phone, the man from Donegal had said. It'll just be the accent. Which for most people is, regardless of your own local distinctions, Irish. But I'm British, she said. I'm from the loyalist community. Eamonn had looked thoughtful. No, he said. No. That's just too niche. Loyalist psychic readings. Loyalist girls wanting to talk to you now. No my sweetheart you are Irish to your fingertips and if you don't like it then that, and he pointed, is the door. She had stayed though and so had Mo. And what would you say, asked Mo, if you were speaking to the fellas? 'Work away there', 'keep working away there' and 'that you finished'? I'm sure you can manage something better Mo, he had said, if you want to earn any money. Mo was put on the fortune telling. No knowledge of anything spiritual required, said Eamonn. Just keep it sensible and lengthy. If anyone is in severe straits give them the number of the Samaritans. But only after a while.

You could feel them sometimes, people's hopes, even though all you wanted to do was just get on with your job. People looking at their faces, seeing a crumpled version staring back at them, hoping that the dermabrasion was going to make them feel like the time when they were thirty and they told that funny story at their sister's party in that restaurant and everybody laughed. For all this stuff you had to work neatly and quickly: people got nervous if you were hesitant or unsure.

Mo rolled the snooker ball in her hand. Not good. She imagined sitting down in the police station, those concerned faces when she explained what was happening, the offer to make her a cup of tea, the feigned surprise, the commitment that they would do something about it, the nothing, maybe the worse than nothing. Just pay it, the butcher had said. Ain't really that much. Well it really wasn't that much: you could recoup it with a late-night opening. But but but that would be just the start of it. You could just see the sorry little tale taking shape: next thing it's a friend of mine's daughter needs a job, lovely girl, very keen, all those qualifications in beauty and you don't need anybody but you have to take her, and then the next thing is she arrives, hard piece, lazy-assed piece, and you are stuck with her loafing about and all her friends coming in for mates' rates. The guys next door were paying the money though and Christ knows who else on the road.

Maybe it wasn't any different to insurance. That's what the fella was implying. When he had come in before he had introduced himself and he had shaken her hand. Kyle, he said his name was. There was something about him that let her know that he was not some bloke coming in for a voucher for his missus, the only reason men came to Mo's place. She wasn't doing male treatments, no thank you, she was not doing back sack and crack, not when she was working by herself, no way. The way he stood there, cock of the walk, like he owned the place, suggested to her that he wasn't after a voucher.

With this situation there was no a), b) and c). It was difficult to know what to do. That was what was wrong with the phone-line, idiots wanting advice from spirits or the runes or the stars and yet it was obvious what option they should take. Kick him out! Get out of the flat! Go to a gym! Go to the doctor! Tell her the truth! Give in your notice and look for another job! Can you not understand?

One woman had phoned up about her new dream fella who just didn't get on with her ten-year-old son, had hit him quite hard one time, although fair's fair, the son had been bad, beyond cheeky. Her fella had said that the son was gonna be a problem big time before too long and she was just so worried about the situation and wondered if she should put the son into temporary foster-care, you know just temporary. Couldn't go back to being on her own again.

Pretty obvious what you should do love isn't it?

What? the woman had said.

I said if you aren't thick as shit it is pretty obvious what you need to do, huh?

Silence on the end of the line.

People like you don't deserve to have kids, you tool. You hear that? The stars are saying that, and all the spirits in the spirit world, I can hear them coming through very clearly and they're saying you're a fuckin tool.

Mo didn't need the job any more anyway. She'd got the beauty qualification and the money saved and she was all set: a), b) and c).

The next client was a full body spray tan. Mo showed her into the cubicle where she had laid out the paper pants. White—if it was Marilyn-white, dense and creamy—was beautiful. But people weren't ever Marilyn-white, they were lumpy and mottled. Tan helped but everyone wanted it too brown; never mind the different calibrations Mo offered, they always went for the top intensity. Mo liked doing the spray tan. You needed skill. It wasn't just point and go.

What happened your window? the woman asked, shivering a little as the tan spray moved across her tits.

Mo shrugged, concentrating on progressing to the woman's shoulder blades. Not entirely sure, she said. Young ones messing. It'll be sorted tomorrow. Hopefully anyway.

Terrible, the woman said. A place was burgled the other week.

The man, Kyle, held the door open for the woman on the way out. It gave Mo a shock to see him standing there. He wore a leather suit jacket and held a briefcase that could have come from a game show, the prize bundles inside.

He put the briefcase on the table and rested on the counter.

Problem? he asked, nodding towards the window.

It'll be fixed by tomorrow, said Mo, and she started fussing at one of the shelves, aligning moisturisers.

Kyle sighed slowly, shook his head. Not good, he said. This road isn't what it used to be.

Yeah, said Mo.

The other week, he said, I was only trying to help. Seriously. This situation is just what you are trying to avoid.

Through the broken glass and the cellophane Mo could just about see a man outside, leaning against a car. She said nothing but put her hands by her sides because shit they were shaking.

You live round here? he asked. I said, you live round here?

No, said Mo. Well not that near, she said.

Yeah you do, said Kyle. House with the white door, number 32.

Is there any point in being stupid? he said.

Any point in being stupid?

Mo thought of her white door.

He spread himself out in one of the seats. You see, it's like this, he began. It's all about community. Communities don't run themselves. Businesses like yours, they're vulnerable, you see what I mean? There's a lot of people out there who are not nice people and all we are really doing here, you know, if I'm being honest, is offering you our help. As a member of the community.

I know what community means, said Mo.

You do? said Kyle.

I know exactly what community means, said Mo.

On the shelf by the window there was a line of OPI nail varnishes, running the range of colours of the spectrum, twenty of them. Mo watched as he used the back of his little finger to push from the left so that the varnishes fell slowly on to the tiles, one at a time. All twenty of them, one at a time.

Only two actually smashed, a coral and a hot red.

You need to watch it, he said.

Mo swallowed. That leather jacket would be wipe-clean.

It'll need to be in an envelope, Kyle said. And it'll be a Friday.

On his way out he turned round. And you'll also be giving me a Christmas and Easter extra. Plus something over the holiday.

I'm talking money, he said. Fuck sake don't flatter yourself love.

Hey, she shouted after him, when she knew he couldn't hear. Hey, big man! You left your ball!

Another late night it would have to be then. Nothing else for it. In the appointments book she ruled the line for Tuesday down to the bottom of the page.

To All Their Dues © Wendy Erskine

First Published in the Stinging Fly Magazine 2016; later in *Sweet Home*, Stinging Fly Press 2018; *Sweet Home*, Picador 2019.