

The background of the cover features three identical purple convertibles stacked vertically. Each car is shown from a side profile, facing left. The top car is the most prominent, with its top down. The middle and bottom cars are slightly faded and positioned behind the others, creating a sense of depth. The overall color palette is a monochromatic purple with varying shades of opacity.

THE CAR POOL

Elaine M. McPherson



THE AUTHOR

The Car Pool is Elaine McPherson's fifth novel.

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by

Elaine M. McPherson



GATTO PUBLISHING

This is an excerpt from *The Car Pool* by Elaine M. McPherson

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ONE

"Michael! Michael! Will you get up? It's half past eight," Sylvia shouted as she stomped upstairs to drag her son from his bed.

She threw the door open, pulled the curtains apart and hauled at the duvet so that Michael's slender, naked body birlled round.

"Mum!" he shouted, putting his hands over his genitals and cowering into the wall.

"Will you get up?!"

"I can't get up with you standing there," he bawled.
"Give me the quilt!"

"No!" Sylvia said, throwing it out into the hall. "Up!"

"Go away!"

"If you're not up and dressed in five minutes, you're in big trouble."

"You and whose army?"

"I'm warning you, Michael, I'm not ..."

"Warning me what? Dad's not here any more. Remember?"

"Right, get up!" Sylvia screamed, slapping Michael's back so that he yelped. "I'm getting sick of this," she said,

turning on her heels and slamming the bedroom door behind her.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply. One of these days she hoped she would stop wincing at every mention of Graeme; though it seemed more likely that hell would freeze over first.

If he'd left her for a younger woman it wouldn't have been so bad, albeit humiliating enough. At least then Sylvia could have dismissed it as just another mid-life crisis, just a fact of life, just further evidence (not that it was needed) of men's inexorable stupidity and their continuing inability to resist a pretty face.

Though, hell, no, it didn't even need to be a pretty face; a tight ass and pert boobs were about as much as it took - or, more realistically, any ass and any boobs so long as they weren't their wives' asses and boobs. So, if Graeme had run off with some young bimbo, or even with some young non-bimbo, Sylvia could have rationalised it away. Hell, she could even have rationalised it away if he had run off with another man. But the fact that he had left her for a fifty five year old ageing hippie four years her senior meant that Sylvia had no option but to look inward and to realise that Graeme

had left not for sex, not for some silly middle-aged attempt at rejuvenation, not to try and block out the fact that he couldn't get it up as he used to, but that he had left simply because he couldn't stand her any more.

The ash which had built up on Sylvia's cigarette fell onto the work surface when the phone rang.

"Hi, mum, it's me!"

"Oh, hello."

"How are you? Okay?" Catriona breezed.

"I'm fine," Sylvia said, resigned to what she was about to be asked.

"Good. And gran? Is she okay?"

"Yes, she's fine too. And so is your brother. Or at least he will be once he gets out of his pit."

"Good," Catriona mused.

"So how much is it this time?"

"Sorry?"

"Don't muck me about, Tri, I'm not in the mood. How much?"

"Well, just fifty quid, if you can manage it. And I'll give you it back next week, I promise."

"Oh, yeah? Why don't you ask your father?"

"Well ..."

"Or have you already?"

"Well, I, uh ..."

"Oh, I see. So I've got him to thank for the fact you're not asking me for a hundred. Is that it?"

"Well ..."

"I'm surprised he had time to speak to you, what with his other commitments."

"Mum, don't..."

"I'll write you a cheque."

"Thanks. And I'll pay you back, honest."

"Yeah, and so will the Pope convert to Islam." And so will I forgive your father, she added silently. "I'll put it in the post today."

"Thanks, mum."

"Tri?"

"Yep?"

"How's your brother?"

"Oh, you know. Same as ever. You know what he's like."

"But he's still working, isn't he?"

"Course. Sure. He's fine, mum. Don't worry. I'm keeping an eye on him."

"Good. And you take care, won't you?"

"Will do. Okay, gotta go. See you!"

"Bye," Sylvia sighed.

They might be able to get themselves up in the morning once they were over twenty one but that didn't stop them being a worry in other ways. She reflected that her own mother had always said that it wouldn't matter how old Sylvia got, she would still worry about her. Just as well she hadn't lived to see Graeme walk out on her daughter.

Michael appeared in the kitchen, dressed, albeit looking distinctly dishevelled.

"Oh, you made it, did you?"

"I wish you'd stop pulling the quilt off me," he said, slugging from a milk carton.

"Use a glass. You don't have anything that I haven't seen before."

"Mum!" he blushed.

Well, you don't! How do you think I had three children?"

Mum!" he protested, slamming the fridge door.

"You should wear pyjamas if you're so shy."

"Mother!"

"Where are you off to?" Sylvia asked as Michael went from the kitchen.

"School."

"What about your breakfast?"

"I don't want any," he shouted, rushing to the front door. "And you shouldn't smoke, it's disgusting."

"Oh, bugger off," Sylvia said, once the door had closed.

As if she hadn't had enough of pubescent male nonsense being married to Graeme for twenty six years.

She went upstairs and watched from the landing window as Michael lurched self-consciously along the road. Then she went into Nan's room. She could tell by the light snoring that her mother-in-law was dozing. But when Sylvia opened the curtains and blinds, Nan gradually came to.

"Uh-huh," Sylvia shouted, supporting Nan so that she was able to sit up in bed.

"Uh-huh," Nan replied, licking her fingers and flattening her white hair against her forehead.

Sylvia handed Nan her deaf-aid and pulled the blankets down.

"How are you?"

"Oh, not so bad," Nan replied.

"You ready then?"

"Uh-huh."

"Right you are," Sylvia said, helping Nan out of bed and steadying her as they walked slowly along to the bathroom. She pulled Nan's night-gown over her head, then helped her into the bath.

"All right?" Sylvia asked.

"Uh-huh."

"I'll be back in ten minutes then."

"Uh-huh."

Sylvia went back into Nan's room and stripped the bed, throwing the soiled sheets into a pile and putting on fresh ones.

When she went back into the bathroom, Nan was in position to be hauled out of the bath.

"Ready?"

"Uh-huh."

It took about twenty minutes to get Nan dressed. Then, in a well-practised routine, Sylvia helped her downstairs and got her settled in her chair by the window so that she could watch what was going on outside in the street. And once Nan was in position with her cup of tea,

her travelling rug and the TV remote, Sylvia could get on with whatever it was that needed to be getting on with.

"You okay now?" she asked Nan.

"Uh-huh."

"Okay. See you in a wee while then."

"Uh-huh."

"Right."

"Where's Graeme?" Nan asked, just as Sylvia was about to close the lounge door.

"Away on business," she shouted across the room.

"Uh-huh. And does he have a very important job, does he?"

"Yes, very important."

"He was very good at school. Did I ever tell you what his teachers said about him? They said that he ..."

"Yes, you did."

"Oh, I did, did I? When were you saying he'd be back?"

"Next week," said Sylvia, saying what she had been saying to Nan for the past nine months.

"Oh, right you are."

"Okay then?"

"Uh-huh, don't bother about me. I'll be fine. You just do what you have to do."

"Right. See you in a while."

Back in the kitchen, Sylvia opened a drawer and took out the documents she kept hidden under the plastic cutlery holder.

Sitting at the table, nursing a mug of hot chocolate, she unfolded the letters and gazed at the words which finally meant that she and Graeme were divorced.

The decree absolute wasn't as grand as she had imagined such an important document would be and the letter containing final settlement terms was only a few short paragraphs. Still, they were long enough to confirm that she was getting the house and the car, and that Graeme would pay maintenance for Catriona and Paul, as well as for Michael. So, as he had frequently said, she could hardly complain about his not having provided for her. Though she still wondered whether or not it was too high a price to pay for looking after his mother.

Sylvia cast aside the letters and began to flick idly through one of those freebie local shopping guides which was badly printed on low quality paper and had pages of personal columns and lots of adverts for obscure businesses that she never knew existed.

She had always scorned the personal columns and wondered what sort of sad, or perverted, type found themselves trawling through them in search of company; or whatever. But, as she turned the pages and began to read the corny, semi-grammatical messages, she knew.

Scanning through the ads, she thought that she'd give the '*56 year old easy-going cuckolded academic seeking honest loving playful n\|s hen for long-term nesting anywhere*' a wide berth and that, on balance, she'd give the '*virgin, male, 21, over ripe cherry in need of harvest*' a miss. There was only one vaguely normal-sounding person (*'bachelor, mature, educated - writing, reading, gardening, DIY - big softie,*') who had sounded promising until the bit about '*adoring masterful women and encouraging women on top.*'

Sylvia did a double-take, however, when she saw the advert sandwiched between '*Trevor (42) awaits Celia for brief encounter*' and '*Tied male probation officer (45) seeks naughty female for regular supervision.*' It was unusual; not because it was excessively vulgar or tasteless or corny, but because it was for a car.

She read the advert for the Saab 900 again and wondered how it had found its way into the personals.

Although, these freebie papers wouldn't be the best managed or organised in the world so it maybe wasn't all that surprising that things occasionally got misplaced. Which had the potential to be pretty upsetting if you were looking for an undertaker or something and you found an ad for a *'Barking brain surgeon (32) seeking brainless bimbo for sinister experiments.'* But she supposed that finding an ad for a car amidst the personals was pretty harmless. Unless it was a clever ploy from some pervert trying to meet women. That was always a possibility.

Sylvia thought that Saabs were meant to be pretty good cars. They had a reputation for sturdiness and going for years; or, at least, that's what she thought Graeme had once said when he had flirted with them as an alternative to his Volvos. He must have had about ten of them, usually silver, in the past twenty six years. And while there was nothing wrong with their - her - current Volvo, while it was solid and robust and reliable and fast and efficient, it was a bit on the uninspiring side.

She read the advert for the Saab again:

1990 Saab 900i 16v Conv - 37,000 mls, fsh, full elects, alloys, 1 year MOT, white, 1 lady owner, £10,000 ono

for quick sale. Tel - 567441

She would maybe phone to see if she could go and take a look at it if she could get away from Nan. After all, Sylvia had no need to have Volvos any more because there was no Graeme any more. It was as simple as that.

Maybe she could learn to be masterful after all.

They said that you should just carry on regardless after you'd flown around the world to enable your body clock to readjust; but what did they know? They were also the ones who said that you should put brown paper in your shoes to prevent jet lag and that flying was the safest mode of transport. Try telling that to the families of those killed in all the crashes there had been already this year. What did it matter if your probability of being killed in an air crash was one in three trillion flights when that one could be the next journey you took? That was where probability theory fell down in Bel's view.

When she finally awoke, Bel had been sleeping non-stop for thirty hours. Which was hardly surprising having just returned from a six month round the world trip on a twenty five hour flight from Melbourne.

She hauled herself up in bed and slumped against the headboard. The sheets and blankets smelled stale after being cooped up in the cupboard for months and although Mrs Wilson had come in every few weeks or so to freshen the place up, the house, while spotless and tidy, had an air of neglect about it. Still, once Bel had gone round the place, it would look more like a home and she could get it on the market.

The estate agent had told her she could expect a quick sale because houses like hers were in great demand; they were spacious, they had good quality fittings and, most importantly of all, they were in the best location in town. And, as Mr O'Shaunessy had told her, there were three things that sold a house - location, location, location.

He was such a stupid little man, all smarm, moisturiser and hair gel. That was why she hadn't just left him to sell the house when she was away. The thought of O'Shaunessy mincing around the place, prattling a lot of nonsense to prospective buyers would never sell it.

People wanted to know about the practical things, like plumbing and sockets and aerial points, not listen to some charlatan waffle on about stunning vistas and salubrious neighbourhoods.

"Mrs Foster, don't you worry about a thing," he had said. "You go off and enjoy your trip and when you come back your house will be sold and I'll have a file stuffed full of suitable properties for you to look at."

"Mr O'Shaunessy," Bel had replied, "don't waste your time and mine by collecting details of unsuitable properties. For that is what they will undoubtedly be. When Mrs Wilson was looking for her little bungalow, they sent her details of six-bedroomed detached villas and Victorian mansions."

"Ah, yes, but sometimes ..."

"Mr O'Shaunessy. While some of your clients might have no idea of what they are looking for and may need your, well, assistance, I suppose you would call it, I know exactly what I am looking for and I am not about to suddenly change my mind and want something which is completely contrary to that. I know exactly what I want and I will know it the instant I see it. If, at that time, I need your assistance, I will ask for it."

"Righty-ho, Mrs Foster!" he had said. "I'll finish taking the photos and we'll have the brochures waiting for you when you get back."

"I should hope you will. And I don't expect there to be any errors. You've got six months to check and recheck the spelling. And Mrs Wilson will be coming in every few weeks if you need to come back and measure anything."

"Righty-ho!"

That would be the brochures in the big brown envelope Bel had spotted on top of the pile of mail left by Mrs Wilson on the dining-room table.

That should be the first thing she should do, go through the letters. The business ones, that was. The others could wait. After all, she had gone round the world to get away from Dick's death so coming back to a load of letters of consolation would hardly be sensible. And, whatever else, she had to be sensible. That was what the minister and the doctor had both told her when they'd called round, uninvited, to see her: the doctor had offered her something to help her sleep and advised her not to make any hasty decisions; the minister had offered her his wearily inattentive ear and advised her not to make

any hasty decisions. But the only thing both men had helped her do was make up her mind that she had to get away, if only from the do-gooding ghouls who crawled out of the woodwork at perfectly ordinary tragic events to indulge their passion for other people's misery.

It was the same with the selling-the-house business. The doctor and the minister both gave her the script about how it was often difficult for people of her age to uproot themselves, that they'd seen so many people regretting decisions made in hasty - though understandable (of course) - desperation, that it was best to stay in familiar surroundings at least until things had settled down. And that could take a while.

"Young man," Bel had been prompted to say to each in response to their ludicrous solemnity, "I have lost my parents, my brothers, my sisters, several aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, pets, hopes and dreams in the last seventy five years, so you do not have to lecture me about loss."

That was the only good thing she could say about O'Shaunessy: he hadn't tried to dissuade her from selling the house, nor had he insulted her with platitudes about taking time to think about things; he had just said,

"Righty-ho, Mrs Foster," no doubt the prospect of one and half percent commission on two hundred odd thousand pounds appealing to him more than any undue worry about her state of mind. Which was fine by Bel, who didn't mind any such indifference so long as it was honest and earnest indifference.

So while the minister and the doctor had been shown the door with, *"Now if you don't mind, I have tickets to buy and cases to pack. Thank you for calling but don't call again,"* O'Shaunessy had been invited in.

Bel leafed through the pile of envelopes, sorting them into categories (government bills; other bills; travel brochures; local free sheet newspapers; book clubs; fashion catalogues; speculative insurance, investment and savings literature; Readers' Digest; miscellaneous junk mail; letters of condolence) and then prioritised within the separate piles.

The first letter she opened was from the Inland Revenue - something or other about her tax code. There were some letters in a column which were meant to refer to some notes in the explanatory leaflet but Bel didn't bother consulting it. There was little point; firstly because she wouldn't understand it, but mainly because they were

never wrong at the Inland Revenue. In fifty years of Dick's tax returns, they had never once been wrong. And if they were, it would surely sort itself out. That's what they paid tax inspectors for, after all.

The next brown envelope from the state was from the DVLA in Swansea. Bel slipped her sharp nail under the fold and slit the envelope, reflecting that it must be pretty miserable coming from a town whose best known feature, possibly its only known feature, among the philistines who made up the majority of the British population had made it the butt of the generous raft of weak jokes which had developed over the years. It must be so tedious for people, who when every time they were asked where they were from, got a response like, at best, 'Oh, that reminds me, I must get my car tax,' and at worst, verbal or physical assault; or, at the very worst, some feeble attempt at humour. Because Bel was firmly of the view that humour should only be attempted by those skilled in carrying it off, which, of course, made the majority of the British population ineligible.

Mind you, it probably wouldn't be long until the partnership of Swansea and vehicle licensing was a thing of the past, what with all the developments these days in

satellites and the Internet and all those things. For instance, when she had been in Bangkok and had telephoned ahead for tickets for Sydney Opera House, her call had been taken in Ireland of all places. And she'd heard that a lot of those pornographic phone lines were operated out of the Caribbean and places like that, where labour was cheap and people were willing to work without health and safety legislation, union restrictions and equal opportunities, all of which were major irritations and inconveniences which inhibited the growth and prosperity of business. (Or at least that's what Dick had always said, though Bel had been less interested in the intricacies of his business than in its proceeds, which had contributed to the lifestyle she had very much become accustomed over the years to enjoying.) So it wouldn't be long until the Government shipped the DVLA out of Swansea and into God only knew which developing country. And then what would Swansea be famous for?

Bel pulled out the piece of paper to see that it was a Vehicle Licence Application Form for Dick. The disc for his car had run out two months earlier and if Bel wanted to drive or keep it on a public road she had to apply for a

new licence disc. According to the Notes on the back of the form, there seemed to be some procedure that she should have followed given the licence had been due to expire when she was abroad. However, in her rush to flee the country, Bel hadn't bothered with any of that business (no doubt the doctor and minister would have been looking smug had they been able to see her) so she would need to take a trip down to the post office.

She put the Application Form to one side, and leaned back in her chair. Dick's car had been his pride and joy, though Bel had never much cared for it, with its leather seats and its automatic gear box and its air-conditioning.

He had taken it to have it valeted on the day he had died and Bel had had to get the little firm down the road to tow it back to the house afterwards. She assumed it was still in the garage, although she hadn't actually gone to check. She had just told them to tow it back, lock it in the garage and put the key through the front door. But, presumably, if it had been stolen, Mrs Wilson would have left her a note or something.

Bel opened a few more letters, but the thought that the car just might not be in the garage was rankling her. She got up and went through to the hall, where she found the

garage key hanging, carefully labelled with the rest of them, on the hooks on the back of the cupboard door. Dick's distinctive neat faded fountain-pen script told her which was the key to the side door and which was the one to the up-and-over door. He'd talked about getting those automatic ones that were operated by laser beam from your car so that as you drove up to the garage the door opened and you could just drive straight in. But, like so many other things, he never got round to it.

Outside it was a cool, calm, dull, grey spring day, something Bel had almost forgotten existed in her six months' globe-trot.

The street looked strange but familiar, with its oaks, its hedges, its rose bushes and its BMWs. Bel noticed that Angela, next door, seemed to have acquired a new runaround, one of those jeep things; and that Jack, two doors up, had swapped his black Porsche for a large family saloon (she believed they were called people movers, or so the in-flight magazine had said) which would accommodate the baby, which, Bel assumed, must have been born by now since Susie had been about seven months pregnant when Dick had died.

Bel put the garage key in the lock, switched on the light and slowly opened the side door. Just as she'd anticipated, there was the Lexus, polished and gleaming. When the button on the key ring was pressed, the car sprang to life, indicators lighting up as the alarm was deactivated and door locks springing to attention.

Bel walked round the car, lightly touching the wing mirrors and the bumpers. She assumed the battery would be flat, not that she knew anything about cars, but if it hadn't been run for all that time, it was bound to be a bit rusty. She took a deep breath, then opened the passenger door and lowered herself into the big leather seat.

There was a faint, though not unpleasant, smell of polish left over from the valeting and the interior was as pristine as Bel had ever seen it. She opened the glove compartment, unthinkingly, then gasped as she saw Dick's wallet, the case for his glasses and the rolled up spare silk tie that he kept in the car in case of emergencies.

She picked up the black leather wallet and touched the little silver initials which were embossed on it. There was seventy pounds cash in it, as well as all Dick's credit cards. Bel held the wallet to her lips and kissed it.

Despite the valeting, and the fact that the wallet had been cooped up in the glove compartment for six months, it still smelled of Dick's cigars.

She put the wallet down, closed her eyes and picked up the tie, running her fingers along its length. She automatically raised it to her lips and was stunned to catch a hint of Dick's aftershave. She crumpled the tie into a ball and covered her nose, breathing in as hard as she could so that, for a moment, he was almost back with her.

Feeling tears begin to well up in her eyes, Bel threw the tie back into the glove compartment and got out of the car, resolving that not only would she need to sell the house as soon as possible but that she'd also need to get rid of that car.

She rushed into the house and picked up the local paper. Turning quickly to the cars for sale section, one advert immediately caught her eye:

*1990 Saab 900i 16v Conv - 37,000 mls, fsh, full
elecs, alloys, 1 year MOT, white, 1 lady owner,
£10,000 ono for quick sale. Tel – 567441*

It sounded just perfect. And it would certainly show them - the minister, the doctor, O'Shaunessy, all of them. Who was to say that a seventy five year old shouldn't drive around in a convertible?

Dick for one, which was all the more reason to do it.

"You know that irritability's part of all this?"

Len snorted and didn't look up.

"How's it going with the drinking?"

"Fine," she replied, flatly.

"Is it?"

"Yes," she snapped.

After a while, realising that Dr Harrison hadn't said anything, Len glanced up from under her fringe to find her wearing that familiar look of rephension and sympathy that she took on when Len was being difficult.

"Sorry," Len said, sighing and lunging back in the hard wooden chair. "I just can't stop myself. If only I could get a grip of myself."

"It's not a question of getting a grip of yourself. If you were able to get a grip of yourself, you would have done it by now, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose so."

"So, have you thought about what I suggested?"

"Yes. But I don't know. I don't want to ..."

"It's not as if we've rushed into it, is it?"

Len shook her head and looked at the floor, feeling the tears about to come again; those tears which had never been far from her eyes for the past four months and which, these days, were coming at a greater frequency than ever before at the merest suggestion.

"God," she said, in frustration and embarrassment, covering her eyes as they welled up.

Dr Harrison reached over for the strategically-placed box of Kleenex.

"Thanks," Len said, snatching one of the orange tissues.

"Are you sleeping any better?" Len shook her head. "What time are you waking?"

"Four. Half three."

"And what do you think about then?"

Len pulled out another orange tissue and held her head in her hands.

"What about work? Is it still difficult?"

"Sorry," Len snivelled.

"Okay. Right, look. What about trying the pills? They're very good and there are hardly any side effects."

"I had them before and they didn't work. I was on them for ages, over a year, and they didn't work."

"That was ten years ago. The ones I'm suggesting are different from the ones you were on when you were with Dr Braxton."

"They're not *Prozac*, are they?"

"No, but they're the same kind. Anyway, a lot of rubbish was talked about *Prozac*. They're very effective. And they're very safe. You can't overdose on them."

Len looked at Dr Harrison and grinned, despite herself.

"Well, that's nice to know. Although overdosing wouldn't be my style. You know, the thought of getting my stomach pumped does not fill my heart with joy."

And neither it did. It was far too messy for someone of Len's delicate disposition. She was the type for whom the word squeamish had been invented: she was the one

in the biology class who'd had to stand by the open window when the bull's eyes were being dissected; she was the one who couldn't go near a fish market without gagging; she was the one who couldn't sit next to anyone who was eating eggs. So, overdosing and stomach pumps were not for her.

No, siree, of that she was certain: because she had pondered it on many occasions over the previous ten years and she was resolute; if she was going to commit suicide, it would be by driving into a tree at ninety miles an hour. Not only would that be quick, but it would also have the added advantage of being ambiguous, which would save her family enormous guilt. Because that was the trouble with locking yourself in the garage and putting a hosepipe in your exhaust, or with hanging yourself, or with jumping off a bridge or with slashing your wrists - everyone would know that it was suicide and start asking what they could have done, or what they had done, or what they hadn't done, or what they should have done or what they should have known. And Len didn't want any of that for them.

So although driving into a tree would undoubtedly be messy, it would be quick and, most importantly of all, it

would be ambiguous. And there was, Len thought, a lot to be said for ambiguity. Was it a slippery patch on the road? Did some wild creature run out in front of her? Was there a fatal fault in the car? Did she simply lose concentration?

Certainly, it would be another tragedy, but at least there would no guilt.

Another thing about slashing your wrists, of course, was that it was probably painful and you'd be at risk of cutting the tendons. And she wasn't very tolerant of pain, physical or psychological, Len. That was why she drank.

Well, that, and because she enjoyed the taste. But most of all because she enjoyed the sensation. The sensation of everything gradually loosening, of her whole being gradually letting go, of, if only for a little while, finally being able to be who she really was.

She sometimes thought that drinking herself to death might be preferable to driving into a tree at ninety miles an hour, but the thought of choking in her own vomit did not particularly appeal. Because one thing she couldn't stand was feeling nauseous, and you couldn't get anything more nauseous than choking in your own vomit.

"So how's work?"

"Work is ..." Len hesitated, "well, it's kind of, uh ..."

"Pretty difficult, eh?"

Len appreciated Dr Harrison's uncanny ability to suggest exactly the right words in these situations.

"Yep, pretty difficult. I haven't been in this week," she admitted. "I told them I had a virus," she mused, reflecting, as she fidgeted with the blood pressure gauge on Dr Harrison's desk, how solicitous Christian had been when she had called him. All caring and concerned, all *"you take care of yourself and don't worry about things here,"* not even remotely suspecting what she was going through. Because that was what Len was good at - doing a good job, building up a reputation for professionalism and excellence. So that when it finally all became too much, as it seemed that, despite her best efforts, it inevitably always would, they would never suspect, never even consider that what was ailing her was a hole blacker and deeper than they could ever imagine.

And it disgusted her, the way she had conspired with Christian, with family and friends, with colleagues, with strangers, with all of them over the years, in the great cover up that meant that she always had to hide the truth of who she was.

"I feel like jacking it in," she said.

But Dr Harrison was looking sceptical.

"I really do. I can't stand it any more, none of it."

"Well, don't make any rash decisions that you might regret when you're feeling better."

"Huh."

"D'you want me to sign you off for a while? Maybe...?"

"No! I'll be back on Monday."

"Okay, but remember it's an option if things are getting too much."

"Hhmn."

"Now what about these pills? It looks to me that you need them and I think they would help you."

"But I don't want to be on them forever."

"You'd be on them for a minimum of four months. Nine's the norm..."

"Nine?!"

"We'd see. It would all depend."

"What about side effects?"

"Very few. Maybe a headache for a few days, maybe a bit of nausea ..."

"I'm not good with nausea."

"Not many people get it and it would only be very mild..."

"I'm not good even with mild nausea."

"... and you might get a bit of a dry mouth but that would probably be it."

"Dr Braxton gave me some that brought me out in a rash. So I stopped taking them and that was it. I didn't notice any difference."

"The ones now are very different. They've a good success rate. Even with the more, um, intransigent cases," Dr Harrison added, with only a trace of sarcasm

Len's eyes smiled. She liked Dr Harrison's style, the way she could be so straightforward about things other people, other doctors, weren't comfortable with. Even Dr Braxton. And he had been a shrink as well as a GP. Not that it had seemed to have done her any good ten years ago.

"If there was nothing wrong with you and you took them, they wouldn't have any effect," Dr Harrison continued.

"Is that so?" asked Len, reflecting that, if nothing else, Dr Harrison persevered. "And what about drinking? I suppose I can't drink on these."

"Well, you can have a glass of wine or so. But you really shouldn't drink too much."

"Great. Nausea, headaches, dry mouth and all I can have is a glass of wine." Dr Harrison was looking at Len expectantly. "Okay, okay, I'll try them. Let's see how it goes," Len said, still not sure whether or not she would take them.

"Good," Dr Harrison said, writing out a prescription at some speed, lest her stubborn patient changed her mind. At least that was what Len assumed she was thinking because Dr Harrison had a tendency not to give much away. "Get them right away when you leave here and start taking them today," she added.

"Hhmm," Len said, interpreting the exhortation as a further ploy to convince a reluctant pill-taker.

"And make an appointment to come and see me in a week's time."

"If I make it till then."

"Make it on your way out."

"Yeah."

"Of course if you want to see me before then, just come in."

"Yeah," Len said, getting up and going to the door.

"Thanks. See you."

"Take care."

"Yeah."

And so Len's weekly ritual of humiliation ended. Though at least for a moment she'd felt better, thought that maybe somebody else really did have an inkling of how she was feeling.

But then as soon as she stepped out of the surgery and into her car, with all the papers strewn on the back seat and all the tapes strewn on the front seat, it was as if nothing had changed. As if nothing had been said, and as if the prescription she was clutching would do no more than any other scrawled piece of paper that she screwed up and threw into the bin day in and day out.

However, desperation, an unstinting desire for relief and a cynical need to believe in something, made Len go dutifully to the pharmacy to discover whether alchemy could succeed where determination, strong-will and self-castigation had singularly failed.

The acceptable face of the drug sertraline was an innocuous-looking little white tablet called *Lustral*. Which made Len smile. Because they were always called

something uplifting or earnest. And, at their worst, they were called something which was intended to be both, but which turned out to be neither.

Len scraped the accompanying leaflet out of the box and began to scour it, searching for reasons not to take the pills. And so to the side-effects.

"Jesus," said Len. "*Dry mouth, feeling sick, upset stomach, diarrhoea, tremor, sweating, change in sex drive or function e.g. ejaculatory delay, dizziness, not being able to sleep, excessive sleepiness – Jesus - indigestion, a vague feeling of being unwell, allergic reactions, convulsions, mania/hypomania, abnormalities in liver function tests, lower sodium content of the blood.* Huh. That all?"

Len frowned at the mixed bag of side-effects, reflecting that if *Lustral* really did promote ejaculatory delay then it could improve women's sex lives at a stroke by being added to the water supply. After all, Dr Harrison had said that if there was nothing wrong with you and you took these pills, nothing would happen. So why not add it to the water supply?

And another thing - how were you meant to be able to tell if the sodium content in your blood was lowered or if there were abnormalities in your liver function tests?

Whichever way you looked at it, there were always trade-offs, always pros and cons. Such was life. From the poets to the philosophers to the economists, they'd all said that misery was the price you paid for happiness. Or in Len's case, being a blotchy, tremulous, convulsing, narcoleptic insomniac with gastroenteritis was the price you paid for no longer being depressed.

God, it was enough to make her stick her head in the oven. Or it would have been if she hadn't had a microwave. The only good thing was that the batch of tablets didn't expire for a few years so she had a long time to think about whether or not to take them, although only a week in which to think up suitable excuses for Dr Harrison.

Len folded up the leaflet and carefully placed it back in the box of pills before leaving the pharmacy. Stopping at the newsagent's next door to buy the local paper, she glanced at the noticeboard. A card with gold writing caught her eye:

*1990 Saab 900i 16v Conv - 37,000 mls, fsh, full elec,
alloys, 1 year MOT, white, 1 lady owner, £10,000 ono
for quick sale. Tel - 567441*

Thoughts of speeding along country lanes, the wind in her hair, temporarily lifted Len. But uppermost in her mind, and the most uplifting thing that she had felt in months, was the thought that a Saab 900i 16v convertible would be a fine car to drive into a tree at ninety miles an hour.