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**SINCERE MALE SEEKS LOVE
AND SOMEONE TO WASH
HIS UNDERPANTS**

By Christopher Wood

ONE

Colin Fisher jerked awake for the third time and turned his head towards the illuminated digits of the bedside clock. The effort cost him mild pain in the region of the neck and right shoulder but he was used to that. Pain hopped around his body like a cricket. The price for being a highly trained athlete, or at least if not exactly highly trained, one who had always enjoyed playing games and knew that this was good for you; one capable of seeing the world through the falcon eyes of a highly trained athlete.

Filtered through the substandard double-glazing, the main purpose of which seemed to be to turn anyone wishing to open a window into an amputee, the traffic noises on the nearby Red Route were mounting to a sullen, grinding roar. A great city going to work - with a vengeance. As an auditory experience it reminded him of the sound track of 'Death Race 2000', a film he had enjoyed whilst at university. He could see it now: quivering bonnets, white-knuckled revving, hate-filled glances, an explosion of sound as squealing tyres streaked from pools of smoking rubber. In the film, he recalled, it had been rather less intense.

It had been a fairly normal night. Instant sleep after drinking slightly too much - well, in fact, probably quite a lot too much. One, possibly two, trips to the bathroom. Snatches of unfocussed dreams such as might have greeted Sisyphus when he pushed his stone into the twenty-first century - running for buses that always pulled away at the last moment, trying to leave a building that seemed to have no doors to the outside - a few naps; general nebulosity brightened only by a cheering sexual image that could well have resulted in masturbation had he not drifted off into exhausted sleep.

Jogged by the memory of the memory, the old girlfriend swam again before his eyes, on her knees performing a favourite sexual act, and he was pleased to find that he had an erection. Instinctively, he reached out for the Jeffrey Archer paperback beside the bed and pushed down the bedclothes. Colin had never finished 'First Amongst Equals' - an experience he suspected he shared with millions of readers - but it had become useful in a way that even the unchallenged imagination of its author might never have conceived. Whilst waiting to be diagnosed as having a minor sexual disease Colin had filled his time in the doctor's waiting room by reading a daunting article which stated that men's penises shrunk as they got older. Since this doubly unpleasant occasion he had been consistently - or as consistently as nature and the social situation in which tumescence occurred - checking that, in his case, this was not true.

With the now slightly buckled Archer oeuvre pressed against his pelvis at the base of his penis, the tip of his glans was obliged to reach just beyond the bottom of the first 'r' of 'Archer' inscribed on the spine to achieve its anticipated aroused length. Colin pressed harder and strained a little. Yes! Everything was within a hair's breadth of being normal. Nothing there to frighten the

horses but perfectly adequate for a still virile male thrusting into his sixties.

He replaced the book on the bedside table and swung his legs from the bed feeling more cheerful, despite the familiar twinges in the small of his back. Once he was on his feet any residue of bad stuff normally dropped away as if shaken from his shoulders like spiritual dandruff. He was on the move and movement dictated response. Was it Von Clausewitz who had said that? It should have been.

In the bathroom he pissed and pressed the lever on the accumulation of the night's visits. For some reason that he did not completely understand he never flushed the lavatory during the hours of darkness. It was not a sop to bionomics. Nor was he concerned about protecting his neighbours from noise - when had they ever thought of him? No, in the main it was because he enjoyed the pungent, acrid smell of the night's urine harvest. He realised that there was probably something decidedly animal about this but Colin Fisher was not a man who strove to distance himself from his loping, feral ancestors. His uninformed physical responses were amongst the things he trusted and appreciated most about himself. Were we not being a trifle smug when we imagined that we had ventured a thousand leagues from the slime? Colin had no difficulty in accepting that he was existential. Not an existentialist. He had looked this up and it seemed rather more complicated.

He cleaned his teeth absent-mindedly and spat into the wash basin. Brown. Panic seized him. Blackwater fever. No doubt a legacy of the dodgy Indian takeaway he had consumed two nights before - always a bad sign if they gave you too many poppadoms.

Relief. Yesterday he had used his tooth brush to clean his suede shoes. He had been meaning to replace it for weeks. Now there was brown foam around his mouth.

Thank God he hadn't gone out like that. He rinsed copiously and wiped his face on what he at first thought was a beach towel designed by a manic depressive. It was amazing how filthy the place got - and how quickly. Fortunately, Chita, the cleaning woman, was due back from the Philippines soon. He had better have a clean-up before she arrived. On her last visit he had stumbled upon her muttering darkly in Tagalog as she rained what looked like an industrial-sized container of Harpic into the lavatory bowl.

Dressed in blue jeans - it was a vicious calumny to say that men over fifty should not wear jeans; Sidney Pollock in jeans and dark tweed jacket had been the only redeeming feature of an otherwise undistinguished Woody Allen film he had seen in the early nineties - and a dark green Marks and Spencer pullover with the label removed he slipped on a battered Loewe leather jacket - relic of more affluent days - and donned his black velour fedora, the brim pulled down to visor his eyes into channels of brooding intensity. Now, life-weathered to a notch below rakish, he was ready to fetch the paper before breakfast.

Nimble of step, he descended the stairs and opened the door leading to the communal entrance hall. At the same instant, his neighbour's door that was also opening snapped shut with the speed of a gin trap closing on an unfortunate rat. For some reason, Megan was avoiding him. Rather than uttering a perfunctory greeting, she preferred to wait until he had left the building before emerging to take Gascoyne, or Galveston, or Ganymede - or whatever the child's ridiculous name was - to school. Perhaps what he had recently perceived as the break-up of her marriage had turned her against all men. Sad.

The front door had not been double locked - again. He must talk to Megan about that, even if she had things on

her mind. In this condition, any of the legion of local thieves, criminals and derelicts could saunter in merely by using one of their deck of stolen credit cards.

Outside, it was overcast and threatening to rain. So what else was new? A used contraceptive, hostage to a spiteful breeze, twitched unpleasantly as it dangled from a spike of the railings and the tagging on the house opposite that had been painted over clumsily had been tagged again. At least there was no sign of the doddering old man with the mongrel on the lead that extended just far enough for the pooch to be able to crap in every porch along the street. Even if the aforesaid dodderer had been seen in his perambulations, Colin would have said nothing. The area was what the estate agents described as 'being on the cusp' and residents of long-standing e.g. those who had been here when the place was still a slum took ill to remonstrance. Objects too unpleasant to think about could accumulate on your front door mat. Your car could be keyed, glued or merely have it's windows broken. And the young were the worst. Along with 'it wasn't me,' 'I never touched it,' the dreaded phrase was 'You don't want to meet my dad,' an experience, Colin used to think, probably reserved for no more than a handful of the miserable little sods uttering the threat.

He cast a wary eye about him but there was only a McDonald's carton and a few cigarette ends nestling against his feet. It was the basement well that attracted most of the refuse. Any market researcher interested in the eating habits of the local youth needed only to don a tin helmet and sit at the bottom of the steps with a pocket calculator. Cartons, cans, wrappers and bottles would rain down on him until the batteries ran out. There seemed to be about another dozen items since yesterday. The carcass of a bike foolishly chained to the official mooring had now been stripped down to its frame and around the

stunted, smog-choked, black-leafed trees that abutted the Red Route was a huddle of bursting dustbin bags and the remains of a pram. Also, several turds, mostly, thankfully, canine. Rubbish was only supposed to be put out on the eve of collection but nearly everyone in the neighbourhood seemed to dump it wherever and whenever they felt like it. Prime suspect: the young, chain-smoking slattern with the perm like petrified candy floss who lived in the basement flat opposite. Surely she realised that it only needed one bag left on the pavement before another thousand sprang up around it like poison toadstools? Plus everything that the drugged and inebriated still possessed of a smidgen of social conscience could heave towards it. He could understand Australians thinking that anybody who avoided the dishes when they pissed in the sink was a control freak but - for Christ's sake! This was England. Surely some kind of standards still prevailed?

Stepping over a pile of soggy, abandoned fly sheets and skirting a crystal field of shattered windscreen glass he skirted the corner and approached the newsagents. Opposite, the large black man who did something with cars - steal them was Colin's first surmise - regarded him warily.

"Morning!" Colin's brisk, upbeat tone beamed out a message of cheer and goodwill to all creeds and races in every corner of the globe, but Welch - that was the name on the small white van that seemed to have no speed between seventy miles an hour and stationary - merely nodded without warmth and tapped the number plate he was holding against a railing. He appeared to have something on his mind. Jesus Christ. Lighten up, bro'. Anybody would think that he, Colin, had intended to back into the fellow's car - or one of his cars. A little more thought on his neighbour's part when appropriating one

and a half parking spaces with one souped up Ford Escort and the incident would never have arisen.

Colin was trying to chivvy more uplifting thoughts into his mind as a middle-aged woman, approaching with a little girl, quickly took the child's hand and sped across the street. Her eyes had darted towards his crotch upon recognition. An unpleasant thought invaded Colin's mind. This had happened a number of times lately: local women glancing towards his private parts. At first he had put this down to the natural interest that any normal, warm-blooded female might feel in the presence of an attractive, mature experienced male but maybe there was more to it than that. Furtively he darted a verifying hand towards his fly. At that second, a middle-aged woman coming out of the newsagents - he vaguely remembered having seen her before somewhere - checked her stride, shuddered, and then brushed past him with her head turned so far to one side that it was practically resting on her shoulder. What was wrong with these people?

A brisk step took him across the threshold, where Mrs Patel reluctantly dragged her unlovely face away from the copy of Popular Mechanics she was studying and responded to his greeting with a virtually imperceptible movement of the head. Had she made a conscious effort to avoid conforming to the hackneyed stereotype of eastern womanhood - and it was quite likely that she had - her achievement was beyond praise. No doe-eyed reverence for the male being suffused with an aura of inner peace and harmony here; rather, sturdy, self-sufficient indifference bordering on truculence. Even her sari was worn without conviction, as if she had been dragooned into a walk on role in an amateur theatrical production of 'Conduct Unbecoming'. And Patel Junior had been assimilated too. Overweight, shifty and bellicose. Just like the rest of the local children. Mr Patel

was a gentler, more amenable soul - or he had been until the unfortunate incident.

Colin still cursed the day that his basic good nature had made him take pity on Mr Patel, struggling single-handed to attribute the dozens of supplements that came with the Sunday newspapers, and help himself to those appropriate to his choice of reading. It was obvious, blatantly obvious, that Asian Housewives on the Job had become dislodged from the shelf it shared with Spanking International, Milky Shakers and other publications of that ilk and had dropped on to the newspaper stand. In the circumstances, it was hardly surprising, given its plastic sleeve, that he had inadvertently swept it up with the Style and Culture sections of The Sunday Times.

It was hawk-eyed Mrs Patel who had pursued him out into the street and extrapolated the confusion into unpleasantness. An exchange conducted before most of his neighbours, who in moments of difficulty possessed the gift of springing up en masse like the chorus of an American musical. In the end he had banged both The Sunday Times and the graphic photographic images of well-nourished Asian ladies performing their household chores down on the counter and stormed out but the damage had been done. Mr Patel no longer called him 'Sir' and hurried past him in the street. Mrs Patel merely treated him like a robotic money dispenser and deposited his change on the counter between them, studiously avoiding any contact with his flesh.

Having bought The Times, not without first agitating the paper in front of an expressionless Mrs Patel to indicate that there was nothing concealed within its pages, he stalked from the shop and strode purposely back towards the flat. As he rounded the corner the faux blonde opposite, fluffy-slipped, housecoated, curled - he had never realised that women not resident in back-to-

backs in the north of England still used them - was returning, fag in mouth, to her lair. There were now two more dustbin bags and a carton of empty wine bottles around the asphyxiated trees. Clearly the work of Slutarella but there was no proof and Colin did not feel like confrontation. This woman, too, now glanced towards his crotch. Not with an expression of fear nor awe, but rather of contempt. What did this mean? He let himself into the flat and paused. It was here that he had last bestowed an ingratiating smile on abandoned Megan and that she had pushed her child - Gavin, he now recalled - back behind her into the flat and closed the door loudly behind the two of them. Since then, no contact. Another ugly thought occurred. He had recently taken to peeing in the wash basin whilst he shaved. It saved time and with the tap turned on the conjunction of two streams of running water achieved a soothing spiritual, physical and visual serendipity. Apparently, W.H.Auden had ignored the existence of any other form of urinal. What was standard practice for one of England's most percussive minds - and professor of poetry at Oxford University - was obviously good enough for humble Colin Fisher. But Wystan Hugh had probably remembered to button up afterwards. Oh dear. Could it have been possible that he had not only faced Megan and her little one with todger dangling but had ventured abroad in the same condition? How could he not have sensed something? It wasn't normally the Bahamas out there. Could the deadening aftermath of alcohol have played a part in the equation? Very possibly.

He thought back to the toothbrush incident and shuddered. How reminiscent of Greek tragedy that a few trivial misunderstandings might have resulted in a thoroughly decent human being becoming branded as a porno-shop-lifting, coprophagous flasher

Thank God he was going to get married and would soon be able to put all this behind him.

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