

ALL OVER THE PLACE

by Linda McVeigh

At first, I barely notice the beige lump that's heading my way, and then I realise... it's me, reflected in the mirrored cladding of an office block. I admit I've never been willowy, but the woman walking towards me is positively squat. It's the type of glass they use, I tell myself, wishing it was true. Geoffrey says I'm cuddly, making me sound softly rounded and desirable, but that's not what comes to my mind right now. I look square and solid. A word my grandmother would use jumps into my head. Stout.

Granny Hamilton could never remember anyone's name. 'The plain one,' she'd say, or 'that buck-toothed girl whose uncle works at the butchers.' She's been dead since nineteen sixty-two – and I was only a skinny little girl then – but I know that if she could see me now, and if she wasn't my granny, she'd describe me as 'that stout woman. The one with the bald husband.' Isn't it

funny? You hardly think about dead people for years and years, but when you do the stab of loss comes straight back to you.

I look at my reflection once more, even though I really don't want to, and hear Granny's voice again... 'The one that looks like she's got a pile of frayed rope on her head.'

The weather's done that to me. It's cleared up a bit now, but it was drizzling when I got off the train this morning and I'd left my broly at home. That's me all over. Geoffrey says I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on.

The suit isn't very flattering either. It looked nice on the hanger in Country Casuals, but I can see now that oatmeal really isn't my colour. I could perk it up with a nice scarf, I suppose, but I know I won't. I'll never wear it again: not now I've seen the horrible truth. It'll end up hanging in the wardrobe for donkeys' years, rebuking me every time I look at it. A hundred and sixty-five pounds it will taunt. Money down the drain.

I look at the pavement. I don't want to see myself any more. I know what Geoffrey would say. He'd go into one of his rants about modern architects, saying they all need shooting, or, better still, made to live next door to one of their monstrosities. See how they like it. Bless him. He's the only person I know who actually stops to read those planning notices you find attached to lamp posts, and he's even written to the relevant authorities once or twice. Somebody has to take a

stand, he says, and I agree with him. I mean, who but the young and beautiful wants to be caught unawares in the silvered glass of an office block? It's disconcerting.

I step sideways towards the kerb, but my mirror image doesn't change direction; she just carries on walking towards me, head down, staring at the pavement, swinging her John Lewis carrier bag. She brushes past me, our shoulders briefly touching. A bit rude, if you ask me.

Seeing your doppelganger on the way into Victoria Station isn't pleasant. It shakes you up. I wasn't feeling all that good in the first place, and this has just put the lid on it. I could do with a cup of tea and a sit down.

I make my way across the concourse towards The Lite Bite, but change my mind about going in when I see her inside, stirring sugar into her drink and reading *The Telegraph* with her mouth hanging open. Well, the sugar won't do her any favours, will it? I clap my own mouth shut and sit down outside. There are notices everywhere saying tables are for the exclusive use of patrons, so I choose one that hasn't been cleared yet. If anyone comes out they'll think I've just finished. They should clean up a bit quicker anyway. There are pigeons everywhere. It's not hygienic.

I've just got my breath back when I see her again. She's outside W.H. Smith now, peering up at the departures board with a frown, her eyes all screwed up. Put your glasses on, I mutter. You'll be able to see it

then. I wonder how she got over there so quickly. I didn't see her walk past. And then looking behind me into the café, I notice she's still there, engrossed in the newspaper.

I'm definitely feeling peaky now and the sight of cold tea and leftover sausage roll isn't helping, so I decide to stretch my legs, have a bit of a wander before the train gets in. I wouldn't mind a browse through the magazines in Smiths. The new Good Housekeeping's out and it would give me something to read on the train, but, as she's standing right outside, I decide against it and go into the shop that sells soap and stuff instead. It's empty inside, but then why would anyone have a sudden urge to buy a fizzy bath bomb before getting on their train?

The shop girls ignore me. Too busy chatting. That's another thing that would rile Geoffrey, but I don't mind. I'm only killing time, after all. I pick up a chocolate massage bar, wondering exactly what you're meant to do with it, and then rub some avocado moisturiser into my hands. Keep refrigerated, it says. I couldn't be doing with that. You don't want face cream alongside your lettuce. And then I see myself in the mirror. Or rather I see myself and another myself just behind me, sniffing a bar of vanilla soap. I wipe the sweat from my upper lip. I don't know what's got into me today. I seem to be all over the place.

It's only been half an hour or so, but I feel like I've been in this wretched station for an eternity. It's a relief

when my destination finally appears on the departures board. 19.47. Platform 16. Should be home by ten, all going well.

I try to ignore the me that I see eating a croissant at the cappuccino bar at the end of the platform and head straight for the ticket barrier, but I'm already there, fumbling about, trying to feed my ticket into the machine, and then there I am again, on the train, having a nap in carriage two and doing some knitting in carriage four. I make my way to First Class. That should put her off, unless she's made of money. I can't afford it either, but if the ticket inspector comes around I'll tell him I've been feeling out of sorts and offer to pay the extra. What's the worst that can happen?

When my doppelganger comes and sits down next to me, I sigh loudly, hoping she'll get the hint, but she doesn't. She just sits there, oblivious, rummaging through her handbag looking for God knows what. She gives up eventually, zips up her bag and spends the rest of the journey staring out of the window into the darkness. No sign of a ticket collector, which is just as well really, because by the time we get to Arundel there are four more of me in the carriage and I don't think any of us has a valid ticket.

I call out to Geoffrey as I pull the door shut behind me, but there's no response, so I go through to the kitchen, thinking he'll be there. There's a tuna and cucumber sandwich covered with clingfilm on the worktop, and two mugs, each with a teabag in the

bottom. He's even filled the kettle so it just needs switching on. For some reason, the sight of everything waiting for me like that makes me want to cry. But where's Geoffrey? He always waits up for me if I'm late back. Always. And I could do with a bit of a cuddle and a sympathetic ear after the day I've had.

It all becomes clear when I go upstairs. That temptress has lured him into an early night. I can hardly bring myself to say what she's up to, but Geoffrey's clearly enjoying it. She's doing something I normally reserve for his birthday and other special occasions. I can see the shape of her under the duvet, moving up and down, while Geoffrey lies there with a look of bliss on his face. I stand outside the door until they finish and hear him say, 'Well that was a treat. What brought that on?'

Considering what I've just witnessed I feel remarkably calm. I wander down to the conservatory and look out to the garden, thinking how well the hydrangeas have done this year, and I'm not surprised to see myself out there already, sitting on a patio chair, staring balefully at the moon.

I hear Geoffrey call out to me in the morning.

'You in the bathroom, love?'

He tells me he's going to put the kettle on but before he can do it, there's a knock on the door. I stand close to him as he opens it because he'll need my support. The police officer, who looks absurdly young

for this kind of thing, removes his hat and asks if he can come in. I hear Geoffrey tell him he must be mistaken, that I was definitely home last night.

He blushes, bless him. 'I'd nodded off in front of the news,' he says, 'but she woke me up.'

There's an awkward silence for a moment.

Geoffrey stares at the policeman. 'She was definitely here.' But he looks less certain now.

'Why don't you sit down, sir?'

I stand next to his chair and listen to the officer apologising for the delay in informing him, saying there was a problem with making a positive identification because I was a bit of a mess. I watch Geoffrey's face while he listens and I long to help him, to hold him while it all sinks in.

Out in the garden we circle the lawn, wringing our hands. In the hallway we pace back and forwards, and in the dining room we stare at the family photos trying to fix each image in our minds.

In the kitchen Granny Hamilton is consoling us, saying we've got ourselves into a bit of a pickle, but we need to pull ourselves together now, and at the front of the house, just next to the police car, we crumple onto the pavement, howling with the pain of it all.

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Linda McVeigh started writing in 2005. She won the Small Wonder Short Story Festival slam in 2007 and 2011. She is currently writing a novel. 'All Over the Place' was the winner of the 2011 Asham Short Story Award, and was published in the anthology *Something Was There* (Virago, 2011).