**The Chrysalis Wore Lipstick**

*By Rod Davis*

She looked around the flat expecting it to look just a little better than it was 20 minutes ago, before she’d tidied up a bit. But it didn’t. The fridge was still half blocking the wobbly sliding door to the bathroom; it was new and lockable like those she remembered in hotel rooms. It still bore a sticker that described it as ‘A Table-Top model, an efficient undercounter refrigerator that offered the organisation and capacity you are looking for’. Its stupidity annoyed her and the question of whether the copywriter knew it was an oxymoron or was just plain illiterate rang through her head.

Anyway, it was on the floor and would have to stay there. The worktop was occupied by a new microwave, a double burner halogen hotplate, a retro toaster and a lime green plastic plate rack, leaving just about enough room to make a salad. The only thing in the alcove that didn’t look new was an old ironing board, jammed between the countertop and a shallow vestibule that housed the entrance door which led to junk heap of a yard. The door had bubble glass windows, one of which was cracked, and was about as burglar and wind proof as an open window. Such unwelcome visitors didn’t concern her as the whole rambling property of which it was a part was secured by a rusty but sturdy chain link fencing, padlocks and the odd patch of barbed wire that the landlords – landladies actually – had put up years ago.

The decor reflected the rest of the flat; she wanted to describe it as ‘a bit ragged around the edges’ in the imaginary letters she wrote to her imaginary friends. In truth, shabby and falling apart. She was sitting in the only armchair, a once handsome 1950’s green velour high back badly in need of re-springing. Two wooden wicker-seated dining chairs were tucked under a chrome-legged Formica kitchen table, discoloured in the middle but sturdy enough, and behind her a dark striped cotton curtain separated the bedroom alcove from the living area. A bedroom, that is, which served her also as a studio while she prepared for an exhibition as an artist reborn. Her last exhibition had been of dark landscapes, bereft of sunlight; her new work would blossom with a magical light that only spring could illustrate.

For the time being the flat was what she wanted, and she was happy. It was somewhat spartan, but it was her home for a while; she felt safe – secure and hidden while her transformation took its time. She hadn’t arrived with much, just a suitcase and a few boxes of her new clothes and carefully chosen toiletries, creams and a great many lipsticks. She had searched for the one that made her feel special and was surprised to find that a perfect shade could light up her whole face. Charlotte Tilbury Pillow Talk Intense, it was called. She hadn’t unpacked them all yet; there was no hurry and they could stay fresh, locked away securely in the fridge. In a few months she would adorn herself with her new glamorous outfits and her perfect lipstick, but until then she would wear the unremarkable selection she had found in charity shops.

Those shops had been a haunt of hers since her youth. When she was a schoolchild they had been a magnet drawing her in, ostensibly to touch the few battered toys dotted around here and there. In reality, to brush against the racks of no-longer wanted dresses to experience the unexplained tingle that ran through her veins. As she got a little older and earned a few pounds through paper rounds and helping out on farms, she started to buy the occasional item ‘for her older sister’, she would say. There was no older sister, or any sister or brother; just her, Mum and Dad. Even though as an only child she had the undivided love of them both, she had become expert in hiding whatever was private and valuable to her, including her feelings. Her school results were excellent, but reports were littered with remarks she thought unhelpful; ‘A withdrawn child, lack of attention, doesn’t make friends easily’. She found studying a diversion to avoid having to mix with other kids and would have much preferred to go to a mixed co-ed rather than for Dad to waste his money on the private school which was, at best, second rate. Instead, to her it was a private hell. She was a complete misfit and couldn’t stand the comradery, the bullying and the jealousies that were fostered in the playground; as a young teenager she was well read and the words of Elizabeth Bowen would echo in her head – ‘Jealousy is no more than feeling alone against smiling enemies.’

She had become fascinated by the Bloomsbury Group of which Bowen was a follower, an interest that grew stronger as her capabilities in art developed. But perhaps the woman who fascinated her most was Lili Elbe, the second recipient of transgender surgery in the 1920s and 30s who died a year after her fourth operation to transplant a uterus and construct a vaginal canal. At the turn of the century she read and re-read *The Danish Girl* based on the life of Lili Elbe and was delighted by the film fifteen years later.

It was Lili’s story that first gave rise to her dream, and the possibility, of becoming who she always knew she was. She held it close while she worked her way through university, built a promising career as an art restorer and, after a spell of living in shoe-box flats, started to build a home in the Hockley area of Nottingham, a buzzing creative corner adjacent to the once renowned lace market. Or so the estate agent had said.

It was this process, in building a home, that had brought finality to her thoughts; she could not bear the prospect of easing herself into an interesting close-knit community as one personality, then having to rebuild it again as another. No, she would do it now, before she made new friends. Meanwhile she would let it, to help pay the expenses she knew she would have to face. It was a massive shock for her parents when she outed, although not entirely unexpected by her erstwhile friends in respectable Cornwall, even though they then largely abandoned her. She could see why – she had been asked frequently to a boozy lunch or a ghastly tennis match quite clearly as a potential match for a lonely girl. And they were embarrassed to think that they had been asking a gay as a potential suiter and some had pointedly said so – something she found extraordinary in the tolerant society we have become. However she wasn’t going to risk it again; she wasn’t gay, she was a girl in a male body and as far back as she could remember she had identified herself as such.

But now she was no longer a misfit girl; she was a woman on the path of rebirth. True, the procedures and transgender operations were to be done under the NHS, but she knew there would still be costs. She didn’t balk at any of it - sex reassignment surgery including orchiectomy, penectomy and vaginoplasty were hardly reversable. She wouldn’t have to bother much with body feminisation – the hormones were rounding her quite well. She never had had a man’s strong profile and her voice could easily be gentle and sensual, breathed through lips that were a special gift from her mulatto mother.

But she thought her greatest gift was to be able to fool psychotherapists, several of which she was visiting privately so that she could learn how to hide her fury. In her new flat she could hide whatever she wanted, physical or otherwise, as she had learned to do many years ago – no-one would be there to disturb her. It was her cocoon, from which she could rise afresh. But in a corner of her mind she felt that always, on her return from shopping, the air smelled different and a back-of-the-neck feeling troubled her.

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“What do you think, Dotty? She seemed very keen to take it.” Dotty had answered her with a slight raise of her eyebrows and the usual downward purse of her tight, thin lips. So, question unanswered, but there wasn’t anything new about that – Dotty hadn’t uttered a word in the past eight or nine years. More, probably. But Gladdy kept the conversation going on her own.

“Yes, you liked her well enough, I could see that. She’s just the sort we need, isn’t she? Seems quiet, don’t you think? And doesn’t want any friends calling round either, so that’s a bonus isn’t it? Yes, I knew you’d agree. So much better than that awful Mr Bashford. I’m glad he’s gone. No! I don’t mean I’m happy he’s dead.” Dotty had pursed her lips again and straightened her back, exaggerating even more her usual upright posture – a gesture that Gladys had learned to read.

“No, don’t say that. You don’t mean it. You used to like him when he first came. You talked in those days so you knew all his little secrets, whatever they were. You spent so much time tidying up when he was out. ‘Gone down the boozer’ you used to say, with your little laugh at using his language. But he wasn’t a tidy man, was he?

“But I’m happy that we’ve had the chance to get the cottage up-to-date. We’ll still have to keep an eye on it though, won’t we?” Dotty answered with another gesture. Unsaid was the eagerness to rummage and explore as they had done for so many years.

“We have to learn their secrets, don’t we Dotty?” And there was one secret that Gladdy already believed she knew. Their new lodger wasn’t *quite right*; something about her was a lie. And all those explanations that she would be away for quite long spells; they had to know more about why.

For many years the cottage had been more home to them than the big house. Father was away most of the time in the 40’s, Mother was always busy with a lot of women who paid sparse attention to two rather mouse-like little girls, other than the occasional pat on their heads. Cook lived in the cottage and it was she who made a fuss of them, reading them stories that fired their imaginations; and mysterious Mr Percy the head gardener who had just moved himself in – married her, he said – and who always seemed to have nuts or berries that the bushes in the fruit cages “did’na want no more”.

“Wipe you’s little lips, my preciouses,” he would say, “or Mis’ess will have my’s guts fa’ garters.” And when the Percys had been moved on there was a succession of other maids and domestics, mostly with less than perfect skills, who had made a fuss of the girls; but factories and offices paid more than their parents could afford and the stream of home help dwindled away. So slowly the place crumbled, with the main wing of the cottage eventually demolished and depriving the sisters of the excitement of balancing on rotting floorboards, pretending to be shipwrecked. But they saw it still as ‘the cottage’, not ‘a flat’; it had shadows and for them, even if for no-one else, an undefinable friendliness. So the old maids entered and poked and pried to their continuous enjoyment, discovering and rediscovering anything they could see and touch; and they had the keys, all of them.

It was the lipsticks in the fridge that shocked them into joy and dismay in equal measure.   
So very many.

“Where’s *my* lipstick?” Gladys cried. Her tears flowed freely. She let them spill, expecting a sense of relief, but it did not come. How long ago was it that she had she looked for a lipstick that she thought would please *him*? But there was never this much choice, this mountain of sunrise and sunset colours. She pulled the top off a golden plastic tube and looked at the subtle smoky rose emulsion that was supposed to lend youth. *Pillow Talk*, it was called on the box, *Intense*. “This isn’t it. It’s brown. Horrid,” she whispered. She did the same with all the others, littering the sparse space on the worktop and spilling them into the sink.

Grey thoughts that were not quite memories fluttered by in Gladdy’s mind, and vanished. A boy, handsome in uniform, briefly wandered through her senses on its way to oblivion. He hadn’t come back, like countless others. “Where’s *mine*?” she thought as she glanced up to where the photograph always was of mother and father, him with an elbow on the tyre strapped to the side of his Alvis Speed 25, chin on hand, proud. Their mother, looking slightly down with eyes to the left to avoid the boldness of a stare directly at the camera, with their house and its attached cottage in the background. She held her sister close now, almost but not quite a hug. “Where’s mine,” she whispered again, not knowing if she meant a happiness she never was able to share, or something more tangible in a golden tube.

“They had the happiness we never discovered,” she whispered to no one as she looked again at the photograph. “All these lipsticks; we tried all these to find … what?” A memory? There wasn’t one. No man ever replaced the one her heart had died for. *She* didn’t deserve them anyway; ‘Crumbly old spinsters’ Gladdy had heard her murmur.” *He* had murmured, she thought.

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Her rage ate into her soul. “Damn them, they’ve been at it again…” muttered in half speech, half sobs. She knew exactly what had happened; it was the same pantomime whenever she was away for one of her treatments.

Each one had all been put back neatly, but they had all been used. Blunted. Worst of all was the one she always placed in the front, her one magical colour, flattened, useless now in forming the slightly pouted look she liked to give her lips. In rational moments she knew she could just buy a new one. The thought passed momentarily through her mind, but the feeling of ignominy at the teenage assistant in the nail bar yet again flashing a look at her with slightly raised eyebrows was too much for her to bare. Everyone seemed to know, and she shut her eyes and mind in surrender.

She couldn’t bear either the thought of the sisters’ sniggers as they smeared her colour on their too-thin lips; a couple of miserable souls, cackling with pleasure in humiliating her for the change that had introduced herself to the real *her*. They had invaded her space like a couple of parasitoid wasps injecting their own continuation into her cocoon, eating away completely the last hold she had on reality.

The wasps had done their work; the green high back dissolved into whiteness, the walls faded into gentle lace and at last she could transmute.

Everything that had shackled her inside the chrysalis of her former self had shaken loose and gone. She could unfold now, to rise and fly with joy into the soft colours of her new exhibition of spring, of rebirth.