



THE Y INCISION

Maxwell Jay

I wake up and scratch my chest. It's sore. I pull back the duvet and look at myself. There's a crudely stitched up Y incision. I get out of bed. Carefully. I don't want the Y incision to break or snap and for everything to fall out.

I go to the bathroom to look at it in the mirror. There it is. A "Y" shape of bunched up flesh and coarse black thread. And deep scarlet running through the joins. It starts at my navel then splits off at my breastbone, ending just below the collarbone on both sides. It's horrific.

I'm afraid to shower so I wash everything by hand over the sink, each movement a gamble as to whether it would all tear open and that would be that. I pull down my Lycra pants and wash my dick. Then I wash my arsehole and underneath my armpits. Although there's no pain, it itches when I wash under my armpits. I finish washing. Brush my teeth. Make the best of my hair. Shave away the stubble and cut myself a few times because I'm not looking at my face, I'm looking at the Y incision.

All I can find is an old, sweaty shirt that smells of cigarettes, but it's the only dark shirt I have. I don't want to be late for work again. I button up the shirt, pulling the material away from me as I do so; I don't want to touch it. I have ten minutes to catch my bus. I take a bruised apple from the fruit bowl, pull the door shut and walk to the bus stop.

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The cold air makes the wound tighten and itch a bit more. But, like I say, no pain. And there's the short, fat lady with her short, fat dog trotting slowly along behind.

'Come on then,' she says, as the dog crouches frozen on a verge and squeezes out a turd. The lady picks it up with her hand inside a plastic bag. The dog trots off ahead. The lady trots slowly along behind with a small bag of shit in her hands.

I light a cigarette. I'm one cigarette away from the bus stop. I can feel the cigarette smoke stinging through the Y incision and I can see it coming through my shirt. A stinking mist. Or maybe it's my breath, loaded with nicotine, carbon monoxide and tar.

There are always three or four people already at the bus stop and there they are, puffing in the cold. Indifferent. I hear the bus coming and I start to run. My chest starts itching even more and then burning, as though I've splashed hot tea down myself. But I make it to the bus. A single decker. There are the four people, all sitting in their own special seats. I sit down as the bus shudders, then moves off.

As we rumble closer to town, more and more people appear on the street. They fly past the bus window looking grotesque, disenchanting. Lost. One of the four passengers has a Walkman or a radio and it's saying something, but I'm not listening until I catch, "One in ten people will require a post-mortem after their death." I rummage in my bag for my own Walkman and push my earphones in. I watch the babies in their prams, the corpse-like mothers staring vacantly ahead, mouthing

inaudible words, devoid of expression. One in ten of these people will require a post-mortem after their death.

I watch the young, frowning office types playing with their mobiles. One in ten office types will require a post-mortem after their death. I watch the older women in their first jobs after the third mortgage; one in ten older women in their first jobs after their third mortgage will require a post-mortem after their death. I rub the condensation from the window and see my face, an apparition in front of the speeding street. One in ten people will require a post-mortem after their death.

The bus door hisses open. I step off and head towards the hangar that is my workplace.

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‘Morning Russell,’ they say.

‘Morning,’ I say.

And I work with a new enthusiasm. I work like a lunatic. Does anyone notice?

I feel a burning in my bladder, so I leave my desk.

*44321 diverts all my telephone calls.

CTRL+Alt+Delete then K locks my PC.

I lock myself into a cubicle. I unbutton my trousers. A rush of goodness beginning at my neck, then melting my shoulders, out through my bladder, into the toilet and flushed away forever. I tuck myself in and feel something on my chest. Then I remember. I unbutton my shirt. It is still there. It hasn’t healed much since the morning. It looks dead, like it will never heal, never ever. I resist the urge to touch it. So I button myself up again and a stray whisker of thread brushes the palm of my hand as I do so. I shudder.

#4 activates my phone. I enter my password and carry on working. Someone in the office is singing ‘why, why oh why oh why...’

It's been a shit day. I walk down the street to get the train to London, where my girlfriend lives. Cold etches into the wound and into my ears and my fingers and my nose. The train is busy. One in ten of these people will require a post-mortem after their death. But only twenty-five minutes to Paddington, then the Underground; people's arms, legs, breath and hair filling the fummy Tube. Twenty-five minutes to Limehouse.

My phone beeps.

Hello Baby. Shall we go to Thai place near me? Where R U?

I send one back.

I'm 10 mins from ur door

The DLR clatters towards Shadwell.

I muscle off the train at Limehouse. Arms, legs, hair. Breath freezing as it escapes everyone's lungs.

...

I throw my bag over my shoulder. The strap pulls tightly across my chest. It's heavy with clothes for the weekend. I feel a few of the coarse threads snap. I take the bag from around my shoulder and carry it by the handle.

I stop at Costcutter for some cotton wool swabs. I feel something cool on me, not dripping or leaking but just there. Like a patch of piss in your pants. I pay for the cotton wool, walk back out onto the hysterical street and towards Ulyana's dorm.

She's waiting on the corner, dressed in turquoise top and bottoms. Smiling a pure white in coffee cream. Her hair auburn, setting the dead evening alive. A girl and a pit-bull terrier stand on the opposite corner taking no notice of one another. The pit-bull sniffs at me, milky funnels of frozen air pump out of its snout and are lost in the early evening chaos.

I follow her up to her dorm room. She pushes the door open and throws herself onto the bed, smiling, laughing. I dump my bag underneath her painting, as I always do, and join her. I lay on my belly so she can't touch me there. I can feel the bunched up flesh and coarse thread press up between me and the bed. It sickens me, but I keep smiling. She smiles at me.

'How are you baby?' she says.

She gets changed. We don't talk very much, if at all.

We sit in the Thai restaurant and eat our meal. Ulyana disapproves of smoking and drinking. I light a cigarette and sip at my Guinness. My belly becomes bloated, the incision feels worse. I remember my Granddad, his belly so bloated that his shirt strained against him, the buttons barely holding it all closed. I think this but still drink the whole Guinness down. She wants to go, so we walk back to her dorm. On the way there she asks me why I smoke and drink.

'I don't know, it's something to do I suppose. I do it to relax. Or to think, I'll usually drink to relax and smoke to think.'

I'm not fooling her, though; she's disgusted.

We sleep with our backs to one another.

I wake up and it's like some hands are playing with it, with the threads. I look down; two of Ulyana's fingers have worked themselves into the wound. I look at her in the hazy glow of the fish tank and her eyes aren't completely shut. A frightening, broad smile. I let the fingers stay inside me, although they're unbearably uncomfortable.

In the morning she's gone and her fish are thin. I brush my teeth and see her toothbrush. There is blood on the handle, in the sink.

Monday night and I am at home. I'm looking at it. It still hasn't changed. It's still horrifying. I open the Whiskey I got for my birthday and mix it with Tango. It's disgusting, but I become quite drunk quite soon. I decide to phone Ulyana.

'Hallo!' she says.

'Hello,' I say.

'Hallo baby, how are you?' she says.

'I'm fine. I was just calling to see how you were...'

'I'm okay.'

'I was worried about you.'

'Why?'

'Because I care about you.'

'...Really...' she says.

That's it. The conversation buckles under its own weight; like a sick, pregnant sow with scratched-up knees, lying down in the mud, legs jerking.

'You don't care about anything. You've been dead a long time,' she says.

And I can feel the Y incision. It seems to swell or tingle. A sick moon hangs desperately on the dirty night.

I'm playing Russian roulette with a cordless phone. I stand there in the dark, colourless garden; feet soaked, chest burning. I can feel it coming now, I can feel it coming. I listen as she vents her spleen at me. I'm yanking on the threads. The first one takes some effort. After that it becomes easier. Slowly, I'm coming undone. I feel the air creep inside the widening wound. It burns like ice. I feel an odd slackness in my chest, then my stomach. My heart slops out onto the grass, a black ball in a growing shadow.

'I'm living Russell,' she says, 'And you act like you're already dead.'

Bang.



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