

## ***Peeling (Excerpt)***

By Kaite O'Reilly

Coral, Alfa and Beaty are three performers, 'the ticked boxes on an equal opportunities form', members of the chorus in a large post-modern production of *The Trojan Women*, shoved at the back, unlit, on-stage. The following excerpt is during the interval, where, owing to access issues, the characters are still stuck in their ridiculous crinoline costumes on stage, hidden behind a screen. Alfa is making soup and Beaty is customising her X-rated underwear.

Coral: Make do and mend.

(New thought) Preferably with cat gut.

My body is criss-crossed with scars like a railway track. Like Crewe station, seen from the air: Single tracks, with no apparent destination; major interlocking junctions, where intercity, sleepers and local lines all connect. Puckering scar tissue, hand-sewn with careless, clumsy stitches. I like to finger it, trace the journeys. That unborn skin: smooth, intimate - the coral-pink colour of mice feet.

It's beautiful.

I love it.

Given the choice, I'd never have it any other way, now.

(pause) Are you listening, Mother?

(pause) Do you hear me, Mother?

Several beats. Alfa, preparing her soup, uses her blender as punctuation during the following:

Alfa: Mine used to warn me about men. (as her Mother) "You keep your hand on your ha'penny. You'll have to if you want any kind of chance with a man. It's bad enough you being damaged goods. He'll not want you if you're second-hand, thumbed through and used already."

Couch: Ouch!

Alfa: I didn't pay any attention, though. You wouldn't, either, if you saw the cardigans she wore. .... But bless...I love my Mum....

Coral: (A.D) Beaty and Coral exchange a look of....

Beaty/Coral: (A.D) Envy.

Beaty: (as her mother) "You have to entice; you have to beguile. Put it all in the shop window Beatrice, though god knows you have little enough. Put yourself on special offer, dear."

Coral: Mothers...who'd be one, eh?

Beaty: They love to maim.

Alfa: But they think it's for our own good. Tough love. They're trying to help.

Beaty: Absolutely. Because we don't want to get too big for our boots, do we?

Coral: And we mustn't aspire for other things... We have to be kept in our places.

Beaty: (as her mother) "Keep your aim low and you'll never be disappointed... You have a short shelf life, Beatrice, though you'd never know by looking at you. So keep smiling dear, and remember, it's quality of life, not quantity."

Coral: She's got a way with words, your mother.

Beaty: When they buried her, I had the greatest temptation to laugh down into that hole they were putting her in: "So who was it survived the longest, then?" She was convinced she'd see me out.

Coral: Was it sudden, then?

Beaty: For her, yes. Had no idea she was going. But I knew. To the tick. It's a talent I have - I've been thoroughly trained in it - to sense time passing and my old mate, the grim reaper, stalking close behind. All my life, thanks to my mum, I've felt the tip of his scythe touching the nape of my neck. My mother was so focused on that, waiting for me to croak, she didn't

notice the big fingers come to snuff her out. So I buried her. There's not many with "reduced life expectancy" can say that. It's an achievement. There's not many like me can press the earth down on their mother's face. Stamp on the grave. Put a layer of concrete over so she can't rise again. I joke of course.

Coral: Of course.

Beaty: Though she was the joker in our family.

She'd call me into the bathroom and make me stare at her face. She was getting deep crow's feet around her eyes - she hated it - and the skin around her jaw line was beginning to soften - sag a bit - her face covered in fine hairs, like the fur of a peach. And she'd cradle her face in her hands and stretch back the skin so the wrinkles would disappear and she'd say 'That's what I looked like when I was 16. You're lucky, Beatrice. Just think, you'll never have lines on your face like me - you'll never see your features blurring, you'll never suffer from the ravages of age. You're so lucky, Beatrice. You're so lucky you'll die when you're young. You're so lucky you'll never live to be old.'

The characters have been watching the main action through a spy-hole in the screen

Coral: In a performance, when it's happening, do you ever watch the audience watching the show?

Beaty: Yes. I make a mental note of who yawned and who forgot to switch off their mobile phone, then I have a contract taken out on them.

Alfa: The magic of theatre. Live performance as a collaborative act, the dynamic created by the relationship between the spectacle and the spectators. That's why no two performances are the same.

It's symbiotic.

Beaty: Exactly. And if the audience don't respect that, they're asking for their legs to be broken... (A.D) We look out at the audience expectantly.

Several beats as they stare at the audience expectantly.

Beaty: (A.D) Slowly the expectation turns to boredom and disappointment. Only

Coral remains staring

Coral: I watch them - the audience - their heads sleek in the dark - furtive - secretive, with their little habits, tics, inappropriate coughs, gaze. I watch them - but it's transgressive - I'm to be stared at, not them. But I look and I want to ask who are you? why are you here? what do you think of me? As you sit there in your rows in the dark rubbing shoulders with strangers, looking, listening - what do you think of me? Am I just another performer? What am I? My Mother could never find the exact word for me - even though she's still searching - (as Mother) 'what are you like Coral? I'll tell you what you're like: A disappointment. A let-down. And after all my sacrifices....'

(to audience as self) I'm watching you.

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