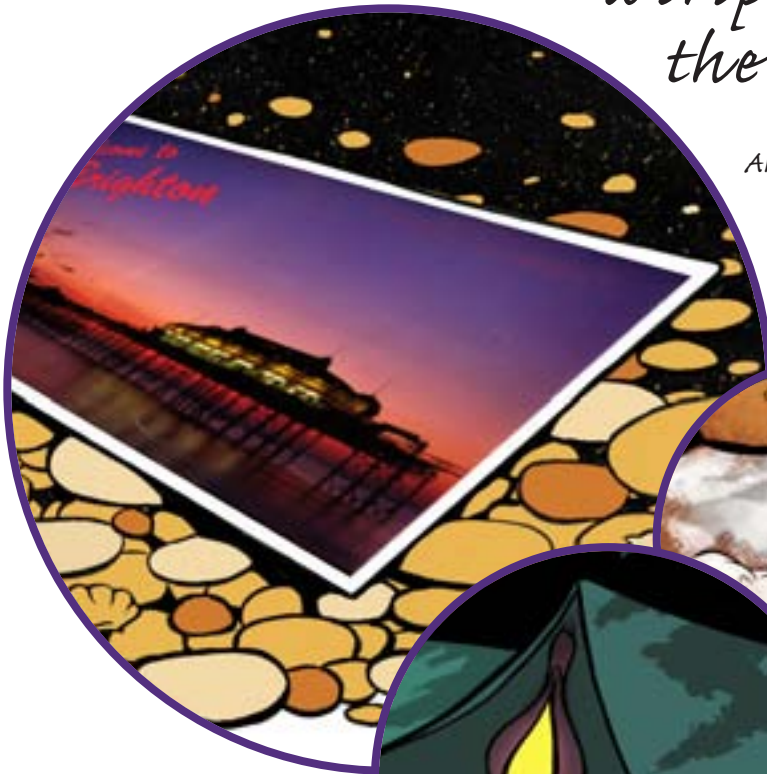


*a triptych on the  
theme of desire*

*by Kay Sexton*

*Artwork by James Wakelin*



*tournesol  
the west pier  
marks & spencer seduction*

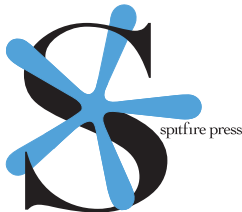
*Spitfire Press, Print Shop Project, Vol. 1, Fall 2004.*

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*The Marks and Spencer seduction*

When I see you sitting opposite me, I don't fall in love, I rise in it like a soufflé. My body inflates inside my skin until every pore is puffed like corn. I'd float, if my Doc Martens didn't tether me. Then I remember. I promised not to do this. I swore in the sacredness of sisterhood that I would surrender my insane predilection for Marks and Spencer women.

But - from your Eden Project tote-bag to your modest eternity ring - you're irresistible. Your sensible shoes, your page-boy haircut, everything compels me. I don't care if I did vow that Cate would never again find a distraught, ex-straight forty-something on our doorstep, demanding my whereabouts in Ophelia-like tones. I want to seduce you.

I will leave the decision to fate. I got on the tube at Gunnersbury, so the next station is Kew. I demand a sign by then, an indication from the universe: should I go for you, or not? The train sighs, an uneasy, ladylike sigh, wheezes, and stops. There is a silence. You clasp and unclasp your freckled hands.

"Blah," says the driver over the intercom, "blah, blah, unexpected delay, blah ..." But I'm not listening. It's the sign. The gods want me to seduce you. They've paused the world so that I can. I smile and you smile back. Why wouldn't you? Apart from the boots, I'm a very personable young woman. You might be evaluating me subconsciously as a potential partner for your grown-up son, if you have one. I smile wider. Sweet M and S lady; there's a surprise on the horizon for you!

The delay means I can take my time. I devour you with my eyes, tasting all your inches visually. You have milk skin, with the blue undertone of Gaelic blood. Your hair was probably fiery in youth, but now gleams with toffee and chestnut shades. I know that when I get close enough, you will smell of talcum powder and bath salts. I make a guess. You'll be ... lily of the valley. Violet is too cloying for you and lavender too commonplace. Rose would seem childish to your delicate olfactory apparatus, so you'll have chosen lily of the valley as your signature.

You run your finger round your neckline. It's getting hot in this sunny carriage. Madras check cotton— Marks and Spencer for certain, the dress you're wearing. You look like the kind of woman who'd call it a frock. It's apple green with tangerine and chilli red squares to liven it. Inside the cotton your flesh is pale

and soft, like half-made bread; risen but ready to be kneaded again.

I will take your pale floury surfaces and work them into elastic joy. I will ease and stretch your contours with mine until you are supple and leavened with pleasure. I will feed on you until you swell and double, every fold and contour will rise to my touch.

Cate says I'm looking for a mother figure, when I leave you sleeping, sated, on your bed of afternoon surprises, and open your wardrobes. When I inventory your cupboards and fridge, and investigate your address book, I'm looking, she says, for a mother substitute.

She's wrong.

I'm looking for myself. When I measure your secrets against my body; your old knickers for 'the time of the month'; the family slab of Dairy Milk in the bedside cabinet and the Lean Cuisine in the freezer, I'm trying you out for size, for taste, for wearability. Can I fit into this life? Do I have the right ingredients to be an M and S woman?

I don't want to love you, or possess you. I want to timeshare your life. I want Women's Institute membership and Christmas shopping at Selfridges. I want a husband with a beard and a hobby like model railways or bird-watching. I want two kids off at Uni., a civil service pension when I retire, and a nice circle of friends. I want cheese and wine evenings; church on Sunday; a West Highland White Terrier named after a Dickens character.

I want to be you.

I want hold inside my cotton frock the secret of a strange girl with extraordinary boots and powers of persuasion, who turned one hot July afternoon into a feast of pleasures. For a few seconds I watch the dust rising gently from the seats and dancing in the sluggish air currents. "Isn't it hot?" I say, leaning towards you. I promised not to do this, but I can't help myself. The gods have given me a sign; and on the exhausted breeze in this ancient carriage, I can smell lily of the valley.



*Tournesol*

Sophie remembered her first view of the tent for the rest of her life - because it wasn't what she'd expected. She'd imagined the kind of olive-green, triangular object that she was sharing with Karen and Janice. This was an orange and blue bell, like an immense carnival decoration that had been abandoned in the field.

Jamie was outside it. Looking cool, being an impossible seventeen to her gauche, nearly sixteen years. If he hadn't been there, she might have cycled away again, but because he'd seen her the love rose up in her throat, making it hard to breath, and clamoured in her ribcage as though she'd swallowed a baby bird. She was glad to have hold of the bike as she approached; the heat between her thighs had melted the sinews of her legs and it would have been impossible to walk naturally. If he'd looked excited or happy she might have thought better of things, but because he looked so calm, so totally confident, she found a way to dismount and walk up to him, her fingers tight to the handlebars, showing white bone through her dark tan.

And he smiled. That slow grin was reward enough for any effort. For nearly a year she'd watched him at school, hugging her crush to her heart. Now she would spend the next six nights with him, in this gaudy canvas nest. He was supposed to be camping with mates from school, and she and her friends were helping out for a week at Janice's uncle's pick-your-own fruit farm. The two campsites were a couple of miles apart and between them, in this meadow approached by a bridleway, Jamie had pitched the secret tent.

He took the bike from her and leaned it against a hawthorn bush. Then he kissed her.

He'd kissed her before, of course. You didn't get to organise a week of nights in a tent without a lot of kissing. She knew it would make her liquid from heart to groin, and that her whole body would want to be closer to his than was possible. She knew the heavy thudding of her heart would pull her into him, like gravity, until they were sweat-slick with the aching pleasure of it. And then she remembered they didn't have to stop this time.

They didn't sleep at all, that first night. Drowsed maybe. She knew she woke five times or more, to find the caterpillar stirring of his body had roused hers before her eyes and mind were awake - so that each new penetration began in a drowsy stupor and ended in the panting arch of her body towards a sky only held away by a layer of cloth.

When the dawn began to lighten the fabric, showing the contours of their linked bodies, she took stock. Her thighs and lower back throbbed. The knobs of her hipbones felt as if they'd been ground to powder under his weight. Her nipples sang a deep song of soreness and her mouth was bruised by kisses she had matched with equal strength. She was happy.

She watched the grey light creep and brighten, moving across the canvas and giving back reality to the few items inside; the crumpled sleeping bag, her jeans – legs twisted around like mating snakes, his rucksack in the corner like a hunched animal.

“In France, they grow sunflowers that turn round all day to face the sun. You’ve been doing the same thing,” his voice caught her unawares – there had been no change in his breathing to suggest he was awake. “I was there last year, student exchange. They call them tournesol; it means turn to the sun.”

She buried his words in her throat, swallowing his satiated drawl along with his breath which tasted of sweet, dry exhaustion, like hay. They kissed until the tent glowed with heat, and she couldn't judge whether it came from the friction of their bodies, or the growing sun.

The next night - after a day spent on her haunches picking glowing strawberries from under papery leaves - she cycled fast, not to waste a minute. That night, the second night, she rode him, her haunches rising and falling over his hipbones as she plunged him deeper than imagination could take her. She pressed her fingers into her taut abdomen and felt the rounded head of his penis pressing against the wall of her stomach.

The third night they moved outside. They rolled in coarse long grass that tore at their skin, as they thrust at each other's flesh, and the summer moon declined over them like a collapsing balloon. She fed him strawberries – pressing the sun-ripened fruit into his mouth and then licking the spilt juice from the corners of his mouth, from the hollow of his neck, and down, and down ... until his juice and strawberries blended in her mouth. He hissed to the moon as she swallowed him.

*The fourth night they slept more than they were awake. Exhausted bodies wrapped in heat and stupefied by the heavy scent of grass turning to straw.*

*The fifth night he didn't come to the tent. She stayed awake, but she wasn't waiting for him. Somehow she'd known he wasn't going to turn up. The vigil she kept wasn't for his arrival, but for herself.*

*She measured her body against its new knowledge and found she was pleased Jamie had failed to arrive. She wanted a night alone, a celebration of freedom. She imagined how other boys might look, and men too; dark bodies, fair bodies, hot eyes, cold eyes. She wondered how it was going to be for her, with those other men, and felt a hot squirm of excitement at the years ahead and the chances she would take.*

*As the grey light began to filter through the tent, she mounted her bike and rode away. She didn't look back.*





*The West Pier*

Today I bought a photograph of the pier, back when it was a pier, not a tangled pile of girders. In the photograph it has a roof with curlicues, doors, windows, even fragments of shattered glass that were once window-panes. Now the pier is the exoskeleton of a extinct sea creature, resisting the waves with gaunt aplomb, still showing off in decay; like everything else in Brighton. I sit on the seafront, gazing at the pier as it is today, wishing I wasn't so good at metaphors because the pier and me—we're worryingly in tandem.

In 2000, when the photo was taken, I was thirty-eight. The Twin Towers still stood. That's how we measure time now isn't it? From when the West realised it was vulnerable. The pier was decaying gently; unused, unsafe, but well-loved. The man I am thinking of taking as my lover was just finishing university. To me, four years have eye-blinked past. To him, they have been a long process of establishing himself in his career. Time, like gravity, is relative.

I don't want to think about this. Instead I want to concentrate on the hot squirm that descends from my mind to my pubic bone whenever I think of Miles's body.

Miles says he is 'nearly, almost' twenty-seven. Nothing he can do to stretch his age upwards will disguise the fact that in some cultures I am old enough to be his mother.

He blushes when he sees me. Not an embarrassed blush. It's a sex-blush, a hectic colour that tints his face, just as tumescence heats his groin. One good thing about being older is I know this stuff. I don't guess; I'm certain. He doesn't know why he wants me, but he does—badly.

I want too. I ache from front to back, to feel him inside me. I really don't much care about the preliminaries—like, how does he kiss? Who cares! I know he smells good, a young man's smell of cologne, testosterone, and hay-sweat. I know he has large warm hands that shake with lust if he has to touch me. I know if I breathe on his neck when we're air-kissing hello, he'll swallow convulsively, blush, swell in his hipster jeans. What else do you need to know, at forty-two?

I suspect, though I can't be sure, that he'll be uncircumcised. I am confident he will have a florid, thick, up-curving penis, although I have only intuition and experience to help make that guess. I feel sure he will

*view sex with me as an enlightening, respectful experience and he will think of me happily ever after.*

*And there's the problem. Miles is not my toy-boy - he is Miles, brown-eyed, sensual, inarticulate; unique. I see him as himself, not a category. But does he see me clearly? No. I'm 'the older woman', the 'keeper of the mysteries'. And I'm vain enough to want to be me.*

*Like the pier, I'm past my prime, but I aim to be gorgeous in my waning. The pier is perfect in its place, a testament to itself and nothing else. Nobody suggests it is a monument to Victorian engineering, or an example of flawed funding priorities in heritage restoration. It's just our pier, fucking lovely, Brighton's glory.*

*I want to be Miles's glory. I want him to see me clearly, regardless of my age and decay - the slightly pouching belly, the less than buoyant breasts. I don't want to be an icon - some Catherine Deneuve or Sigourney Weaver place-holder. I want to be just me.*

*I've got more to offer than an archetype. I've got humour and responsiveness and total confidence in my body's ability to ride the fresh wave that is Miles, right through the rip-curl and out the other side. I have the ability to listen to him without filtering his words through my ego. I've got nearly three decades of learning my way round my own damn architecture until I can prime my own pump and wire my own lights—damn it all, I'm good at this by now.*

*I only want him to see me—really see me—not care for me, or love me. I just want him to open his warm, brown eyes and look into mine and see a real flesh and blood woman, not a bloodless avatar of his last remaining adolescent dream. See me. Accept I'm sinking into my own sea. Nothing graceful about it though, I'm fighting every step of the way.*

*When you're young you want the whole world to love you. As you age you just need one person to love you, really love you, in the way that you know, deep down, you could never love anybody yourself. But there's no logic to need. And then, when all those wants are worn tissue-thin by life, you just wish to be seen as yourself.*

*I stare at the photograph of the pier, lovely and fading then, and at the pier itself now; bones of beauty, lashed by a cold sea. And it all suddenly makes sense. Let Miles see whatever he likes. I can see myself. I will see myself, as I really am.*

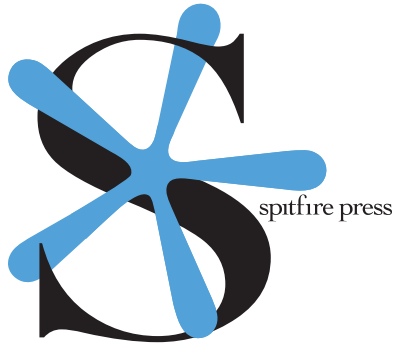
*I pick up my mobile and punch in his number.*

*"Miles," I say. "How about a walk to the pier?"*



*Kay Sexton has an overdeveloped work ethic and a fig tree in her garden. She finds it hard to reconcile the two. She is a Jerry Jazz Fiction Award winner, with a column at [www.moonanddance.org](http://www.moonanddance.org) and another at [www.facsimilation.com](http://www.facsimilation.com). Her short-short story Domestic Violence made the final five of the Guardian fiction contest, Beltane and Samhain has placed third in the Bookjobber.com Science Fiction Contest and her work appears in five anthologies in 2004. Her website [www.charybdis.freemove.co.uk](http://www.charybdis.freemove.co.uk) gives details of her current and forthcoming publications. The fig tree is also flourishing.*

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