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Translating Vivienne Cleven's Aboriginal English in *Bitin' Back*

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Vivienne Cleven is an Australian writer and a member of the Kamilaroi Aboriginal group, whose land spans Southern Queensland and Northern New South Wales. *Bitin' Back* is her first novel; it was published in 2001 after it won the David Unaipon Award for unpublished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) authors.

The novel broaches a number of societal issues, including racial prejudice and gender identification, while painting readers a true to life picture of what small-town living in rural Australia looks like for people identifying as Aboriginal. The narrator is a forty-year-old Aboriginal woman named Mavis, and the story revolves around her twenty-one-year-old son Nevil, who wakes up one morning asking to be called Jean Rhys and gendered as a woman. This triggers a series of events that upsets Mavis's uneventful existence and challenges her conventional mindset. The overall tone of the novel is humorous, which is largely due to its narrator's use of language: Cleven chose to have her main character speak in Aboriginal English (hereafter AbE), a term which encompasses "overlapping varieties of the dialect(s) of English spoken by Aboriginal people" (Eades 3) across various groups and geographical areas in Australia. The primarily oral nature of this vernacular renders Cleven's protagonist more vivacious, and the fact that she uses her own individual variety of it creates a feeling of realism. Anita Heiss, an Aboriginal author and renowned scholar, praised the richness and uniqueness of that language, which she humorously dubbed "Mavis-speak". Cleven's choice of language can be regarded as a twofold ideological statement: by choosing to write in AbE, she positions herself against mainstream beliefs that this variety is not fit for literary purposes; and by having her "idiomatic narrator" (Nolan 44) appropriate the language and turn it into her own singular variety, she takes a stand for individual linguistic and artistic expression among Aboriginal people, especially women – who have historically had an even harder time than men making their voices heard, having had to challenge sexist and paternalist representations as well as colonialist ones (Ferrier 37).

The variety of AbE used in Cleven's novel shares a number of linguistic features with other non-standard varieties¹ of English, mainly at the grammatical level, while non-standard features located at the lexical, phonological and pragmatic levels are mostly specific to AbE (Butcher 626). The passage I selected is the beginning of the first chapter of *Bitin' Back*; it sets the tone for the rest of the story, and contains examples of most of the non-standard features used by Cleven throughout the book. Among these are grammatical ones, such as the lack of 's' in the third person singular of certain verbs ("the room stink", Cleven 1), the deletion of the 'be' copula ("she too white for the others", 6), the use of perfective 'done' – both in its standard ("She done tell everyone", *ibid.*) and its non-standard form ("Biggest load a goona a woman doned ever heard", 4), and the use of the contraction 'ain't' as a marker of negation ("Ain't no one gonna let the man...", 5), which are all characteristics that AbE shares with African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Lappin-Fortin 460-461). Cleven also borrows lexical items from her traditional language ("womba", 1; "yarndi", 3 "goona", 4) and a certain number of terms belonging to Standard Australian English (hereafter SAE), but which are etymologically related to a traditional language, or which refer strictly to Aboriginal cultural realities ("myall", 1). At the level of pragmatics, AbE relexifies concepts which existed at first

¹ I use the term "non-standard" to refer to varieties of a language which have not locally been established as the standard variety at the institutional level.

only in traditional languages; in this excerpt, for instance, “yarnin” (13) refers to the action of exchanging information, telling stories (Harkins 73). Lastly, Cleven’s language presents spelling alterations that reflect the manner in which speakers of AbE may talk, in terms of phonology: certain long vowels and diphthongs are shortened (“black fella”, 3), the final ‘d’ in some words tends to disappear (“that ol girl”, 6), and the spelling of conjunctions “of” and “and” is reduced to a single letter to mimic a non-standard pronunciation (“one a those”, “good n proper”, *ibid*). Aside from other similar alterations, one very noticeable characteristic of “Mavis-speak” is her tendency to slur some of her words, resulting in ellipses of whole syllables (“spose”, 5; “spectable”, 7).

In addition to the abovementioned features, some traits of Cleven’s writing are specific to her main character’s idiom; in particular, lexical creativity and a profusion of imagery add to the novel’s liveliness. The very first sentence of the first chapter is a good example of the kind of images that Cleven frequently summons up, when she compares Nevil to “a skinny black question mark” because of the position he sleeps in. Further down in the chapter, Mavis demonstrates her creative abilities by wondering at the “cockadoodle name” (3) that Nevil has chosen for himself.

My position as a non-Aboriginal researcher translating into a language holding more cultural and literary prestige than Aboriginal English in the global market necessarily entails a reflection of an ethical nature, because “the flow of translations continues to actively promote the power of First World cultures” (Simon 16). Issues relating to ethics have grown to become a major subject for debate in the field of Translation Studies and the world of translation more broadly, as marginalized literary voices strive for better representation and recognition. Brownlie states that “there has thus been a politically motivated revival of prescriptive approaches towards translation, based on the recognition of unfair power differentials in and between cultures and languages”, and dubs these “committed approaches” (79). This revival can be viewed as a reaction to the decades-long tendency of translated texts to standardize the varieties found in source texts, effectively erasing markers of cultural and linguistic identity. However, such a change in paradigm also comes with its own challenges: as the academic world increasingly moves towards a postcolonial framework when dealing with marginalized texts and authors, translators must take great care not to slide back into a homogenizing view. Gayatri Spivak, an Indian scholar known for asserting her status as a member of what she calls a subaltern culture, warns that “depth of commitment to correct cultural politics [...] is sometimes not enough” (318), and that in order to produce an ethical translation, one must become intimate with the text, its history, the history of the language used and of the author themselves. This, she argues, reduces the risk of translating all marginalized languages into a sort of generic tongue which Spivak dubs “translatese” (315). My aim in translating *Bitin’ Back* as part of a doctoral thesis is to avoid this homogenizing tendency; the research I am conducting parallel to the translation process is intended to provide me with the linguistic, cultural, historical, political and ideological information needed for my translation to qualify as an ethical one. Of course, academic knowledge cannot replace first-hand experience of a language and its cultural history, but in this specific case, the object of my study being a literary representation of Aboriginal English, a committed translation approach backed by proper contextual information and an in-depth theoretical reflection should allow my translation to establish an ethical foundation for the literary translation of Aboriginal English into French.

Venuti is a proponent of committed translation, and advocates for a “minoritizing” strategy (93) when translating minority languages, in the view of avoiding homogenization, and promoting cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. This strategy is relevant to my case study, and I strived to preserve the “minority elements” (94) of Cleven’s novel; however, as Cronin points out, any systematic approach runs the risk of undermining local specificities (171); Tymoczko also declares that “no single strategy of translation has a privileged position in the

exercise of power or resistance” (*Enlarging Translation*, 45). Foreignization might be appropriate as a form of cultural resistance in certain contexts, but less so in others: a text translated using a systematic foreignizing strategy carries a heavy load of cultural and linguistic information, which the receiving audience might have a hard time assimilating, especially if the audience in question is unfamiliar with the source culture and language (Tymoczko, “Postcolonial writing”, 22-23). In such a case, the risk is high of losing readers’ engagement with the text, which would defeat the purpose of a committed approach. Depending on the particulars of a situation, translating a marginalized variety using a conscious domesticating strategy and proper justification may allow the translated text to be more easily accepted by the intended readership – which then makes it easier for similar marginalized works to make their way into the dominant literary system. This is how Tymoczko describes the origins of the 19th century Irish literary revival in her widely circulated work *Translating in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation* (173), and a fitting example of how domestication can, in the right context, be a resistant strategy.

My translation ethics, in this particular case, is a compromise between two extremes: although I aimed for a predominantly minoritizing translation, the unavoidable linguistic and cultural distance between Aboriginal English and Aboriginal literature on the one hand, and French language and literature on the other, implies that a fully minoritizing translated text would hardly be accessible, not to mention attractive, to a French readership. Since my objective in the long run is to try and publish my translation of *Bitin’ Back*, and given that, in Pym’s words, no translation ethics can be defined without taking into consideration commercial constraints (133), I opted for partial domestication when I deemed it adequate. I thus established a hierarchy between the various non-standard features listed above, and to preserve the specific individual identity of the text and its cultural rooting, I gave priority, whenever possible, to the elements that Cleven’s language does not share with other non-standard varieties of English.

Lexical borrowings are the most conspicuous culturally-bound items in the novel, and the ones which clearly identify the work as belonging to Aboriginal literature. Fortunately, I was able to leave them all untouched in the translation, and to rely on the surrounding context to ensure understandability. The French sentence “Complètement womba, moi, des fois!” comes after a statement by Mavis where she acknowledges she is having crazy thoughts, which gives a sufficient clue to the meaning of the borrowed word; if that is not enough, the adverb “complètement”, which is frequently used in collocation with “fou/folle” (crazy) in French, acts as an additional clue. Similarly, the first occurrence of “yarndi” is preceded by the mention of “weedeatin”, which translates to “la fumette” (a slang word for smoking weed), and this word, albeit a slang word, is explicit enough for the reader to get the meaning of the borrowed term – marijuana. In the following occurrences, readers can appeal to their memory and uncover the meaning again, with or without the explanatory context. The last borrowing, “goona”, is a little less evident than the first two, but the sentence in which it is used should allow an attentive reader to decipher its signification, given that “ramassis” is very often employed in the phrase “un ramassis de conneries” (a load of bullshit). “Goonna” literally refers to excrements (Arthur 97), but similarly to the use that speakers of English make of the word “shit”, it can figuratively refer to lies or unwise words.

If the treatment of lexical borrowings seems relatively straightforward, SAE terms originating from traditional languages or relexified terms are more problematic. It was, for instance, impossible to translate “myall”, whose meaning does not seem to be fixed,² in a way

² Definitions proposed by online dictionaries vary slightly: originating from the Dharuk word “mayal/miyal”, “myall” is defined as “a native Australian living independently from society” (Collins online); “a stranger; an ignorant person” (obsolete) or “an Aborigine living according to tradition” (Wiktionary); “a wild and independent native Australian” (Wordnik); “wild, uncivilized” (Merriam-Webster online).

that conveys the cultural specificity and origin of the word. I chose to use a common slang term, “paumé”, with an approaching signification and which fits the context, so that the register, at least, is accurate. A more satisfactory alternative was possible for “yarnin”, which is used by speakers of AbE and SAE alike: taking an existing French verb (“discuter”) and using it as a noun (“une discute”) creates an effect of unfamiliarity, while still allowing the reader to understand. I applied the same strategy when translating neologisms and lexical inventions, although I sometimes had to find means of compensation: the “cockadadoodle name”, for instance, finds no equivalent in French, as creating a word could risk impeding readers’ comprehension. Instead, lexical creativity can be displaced elsewhere in the text. For instance, the word “confusionné” does not actually exist in French; it is a noun (“confusion”) conjugated as a verb; similarly, “parpillé” is not a French word, but the adjective “éparpillé” in which I removed the first syllable. This peculiar usage is intended to mirror Cleven’s clever and creative use of language.

This is also the strategy I endeavoured to apply when translating non-standard phonological features of Cleven’s language, reflected in spelling alterations. It is, of course, quite difficult to apply the exact same alterations to the French spelling, but what can be attempted is to recreate resembling alterations. Regarding shortened diphthongs and more generally vowel alterations, I operated a few changes in certain words, such as “aujourd’hui” – usually spelled “aujourd’hui” (today); as for ellipses of letters or entire syllables, I tried to replicate them in French, notably by taking out the “r” or “l” in word endings containing a consonant, the letter “r”/“l” and the vowel “e”. This results in “autre” (other) being spelled “aute”, or “table” being spelled “tabe”. It is, in fact, a common way for French people to pronounce such words when speaking in a casual manner, but it is never transcribed on paper, hence an effect of foreignness. In addition, I applied contractions to pronouns and short grammatical words (“j’décide”, “d’porter”).

The abovementioned non-standard elements are preserved as often as possible in the translation, but the features located at the grammatical level, which can for the most part be found in other non-standard dialects of English, have to be toned down somewhat when transferring into French, especially since I seek to avoid representing the characters in the novel as caricatures or as being stupid. However, Mavis does belong to the working class and has received little formal education, which is reflected in her manner of speaking; therefore, ascribing an entirely fluid, grammatically correct variety to her would not do either. The solution I ended up choosing was to use the informal register, occasional profanities, and unusual syntactic structures – “[...] la chambre pue qu’on dirait qu’il a pas ouvert depuis dix ans”; “J’m fais la voix douce” – which add to the impression of incorrectness, without there being actual grammatical errors, except on rare cases.

Vivienne Cleven’s novel is a rich and complex literary object. My translation is an attempt to convey as much as possible its linguistic playfulness and cultural specificity, so that a French readership may get a glimpse of the work of a talented Aboriginal author, and be introduced to a language variety which takes them out of their comfort zone. I intend to submit the manuscript to publishing houses that have already published literary works by Aboriginal writers or authors from other marginalized cultures, and whose readership is likely to be more receptive to non-standard texts than the average reader. However, it is also quite possible that I will have to make alterations to the translation before publication, if the publisher deems it too discomforting. If this is the case, I shall take care that any changes I make remain aligned with my committed approach.

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Bitin' Back by Vivienne Clevon
Extract from chapter one

Jean Arrives

The boy is curled up in his bed like a skinny black question mark. Ain't like he got a lot of time to be layin bout. A woman gotta keep him on his toes. That's me job; to keep the boy goin. Hard but, bein a single mother n all. Be all right if the boy had a father. Arhhh, a woman thinks a lot a shit, eh? A woman's thoughts get mighty womba sometimes!

I pinch me nose closed; the room stink like it been locked up for years. I shake Nevil awake. 'Nev. Nevil, love. Come on wake up. Ya got a interview today, down at the dole office.'

'Wha... What?' He rolls over, the sheet twisted round his sweat-soaked body. He rubs his eyes and looks up at me with sleepy confusion.

'The dole office. Interview. Ya know, today. In bout thirty minutes. Come on, no use layin there like a leech.'

'Who, what?' He struggles up on his bony elbows, givin me a sour gape of bewilderment. *The boy look myall this mornin.*

'On ya bloody feet. Don't want none a ya tomfoolery today.' I look at the beer bottles, the bong and all them books scattered on the floor. I eyeball the titles — *Better Sex, How to Channel, Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway. Yep, was always a mad one for readin, our Nev.*

I turn round. He's still in bed, his arms folded behind his head as he stares up at the ceiling.

'Jesus Christ! Get outta friggin bed will ya! A woman got better things to do than

La Contr'attaque de Vivienne Clevon
Extrait du chapitre un

Traduit par Célestine Denèle

L'arrivée de Jane

Le ptit est tout plié dans son lit comme un point d'interrogation noir maigrichon. C'est pas comme s'il a l'temps pour traînasser comme ça. Faut qu'i se bouge le cul. C'est mon job ça, de lui bouger l'cul. Pas facile, vu que j'suis mère toute seule et tout. Ça serait mieux s'il avait un père, ce ptit. Aarhh, elle s'en fait des réflexions pourries, hein ? Complètement womba, moi, des fois !

J'me pince le nez ; la chambre pue qu'on dirait qu'il a pas ouvert depuis dix ans. Je secoue Nevil pour le réveiller.

— Nev. Nev, poussin. Allez lève-toi, t'as rendez-vous aujourd'hui à l'agence.

— Hm... Quoi? I se retourne avec le drap enroulé autour de son corps tout suant. I se frotte les yeux et me regarde, tout confusionné de sommeil.

— L'agence. Pour l'emploi. T'as un entretien. Aujourd'hui, tu sais bien. Dans à peu près une demieure. Allez, ça sert à rien d'rester collé à ton lit comme une sangsue.

— Qui ? Quoi ?

I réussit tant bien qu'mal à se mette sur ses coudes pointus et pis i me regarde la bouche ouverte, complètement ahuri. *Il a l'air paumé ce matin, le ptit.*

— Hophop on s'lève nom d'un chien ! Pas de bouffonneries aujourd'hui.

Je regarde les bouteilles de bière, le bang et le tas de bouquins étalés par terre. Je zieute les titres: *Faire mieux l'amour, Comment communiquer avec les esprits. Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway. Ouais, l'a toujours été dingue de bouquins, mon Nev.*

J'me retourne. Il est toujours dans le lit, les mains derrière sa tête, à regarder le plafond.

— Bon sang ! Tu vas sortir de ce foutu lit ! Ta mère elle a mieux à faire que d'enfiler des perles ici toute la journée avec toi ! Allez Nevie, poussin.

piss bout here all day whit you! Come on, Nevie, love.

I soften me voice to a low crawly tone.

‘Mum’s got bingo. Might hit the jackpot, eh?’

‘Who’s Nevil?’ he ask, starin down at his hairy, mole-flecked arms.

‘Wha ...? What’s wrong whit ya? Ya sick?’ I peer at his face.

‘I’m not sick. And don’t call me Nevil!’

He nods his head and his bottom lip drops over, like he’s gonna bawl baby.

‘Yeah, if you’re not Nevil then call me a white woman!’ I sit on the edge of his bed, laughter bubblin in the back of me throat. *Was always a joker, our Nev.*

‘I’m not Nevil, whoever that is!’ He busts his gut in sudden anger, his hands curled into fists.

‘Talk shit,’ I say, waitin for the punchline.

‘How dare you talk to me like that!’ His voice sounds like he really true means it as he glares sharp eye at me.

‘I’ll speak to ya any friggin way I wanna! Now get outta bed before I kick that black arse of yours!’ I stand up, me hands on me hips, foot tappin the floorboards. *Don’t push me, Sonny Boy.*

He pulls the sheet up to his face, his brown eyes peepin out from the cover.

‘Call me Jean,’ he whispers.

‘Jean! Jean!’

The laughter jump out, I double over holdin onto me gut, heehawin and gaspin for breath. ‘Yeah, good one Nev, bloody funny.’ I take control of meself when I suddenly realise how still and quiet he is. *Not like Nevie.*

‘Call me Jean – Jean Rhys, that’s my real name’, he says, droppin the sheet, showin his thick black chest hair.

J’m fais la voix douce et j’lui dis tout bas et tout doucement :

— Mman doit aller au bingo. P’tête que je vais gagner le gros lot, eh ?

— Qui est Nevil? qu’i demande en regardant ses bras poilus parpillés de grains d’beauté.

— Qu... ? Ça va pas ? T’es malade ?

J’examine sa tête de près.

— Je suis pas malade. Et ne m’appelle pas Nevil !

I secoue la tête et sa lève d’en bas tremblote comme s’i va se mette à pleurnicher.

— C’est ça ouais, si t’es pas Nevil moi j’suis blanche !

Je m’assois au bord de son lit, avec un rire qui commence à me chatouiller le fond d’la gorge. *L’a toujours été blagueur, mon Nev.*

— Je ne suis pas Nevil, qui c’est, lui ?! il explose d’un coup de colère, avec ses poings tout serrés.

— Vas-y, balance, je dis en attendant la chute de la blague.

— Comment oses-tu me parler sur ce ton !

Il a sa voix des moments sérieux et i me regarde fixe avec des yeux noir-colère.

— J’t parle comme je veux, nom d’un chien! Matenant tu te lèves avant que j’t botte ton cul de noir !

J’m mets debout, les mains sur les hanches, en tap-tapant du pied sur le plancher. *Me pousse pas à bout, mon ptit gars.*

I tire le drap jusqu’à sa tête, jusqu’à ce que ses yeux marrons sont les seuls trucs qui sortent de la couette.

— Appelle-moi Jane, il chuchote.

— Jane ! Jane !

Le rire fuse et j’m plie en deux en me tenant les côtes, j’arrive pu à respirer tellement j’m bidonne.

— Elle est bonne, Nev, ça oui, sacrément bonne.

J’m reprends et pis je me rends compte qu’il est vachement calme et silencieux. *Ça lui ressemble pas, à Nevie.*

— Appelle-moi Jane. Jane Rhys, c’est mon vrai nom, qu’i dit en lâchant le drap qui cachait ses longs poils de torse noirs.

‘What the fuck ...! Are you on drugs, son? Hard shit, eh?’ I peer at his face, waitin for a confession. *The boy flyin high or what?*

‘Nope. Just call me Jean.’

‘Jean. Right, I get the joke, ha, ha, funny,’ I say, takin a closer look at him but seein nothin outta the ordinary.

‘It’s not funny! I can’t see any humour in my name. How would you like me to make fun of you, huh?’

I walk over to the bed. ‘Somethin real wrong whit ya, Nev?’ I drop me eyeballs down at him. *Too much smokin pot n pissin up all that grog is what does it. How the friggin hell did he come up with a cockadadoodle name like Jean Reece, for God’s sake! A woman’s name!*

‘Just remember I’m Jean Rhys, the famous writer,’ he says, flashin his chompers as he picks at his nails. As though to say: ‘Are you madfucked, Ma? Can’t ya see who I am?’

‘A writer! A woman writer! Jesus Christ Almighty! Next you be tellin me yer white!’ Me hand flies to me chest, as though to stop me thumpin heart. *Weedeatin, that’s what’s wrong whit him. Yarndi messin whit his scone.*

‘Yep, sure am,’ he answers, throwin his legs over the side of the bed.

‘Nevil, stop this rot! You startin to worry poor ol mum here, son. Anythin you wanna talk bout? Girlfriends, football, yarndi?’ *Sometime talkin help clean out the shit.*

‘Nope. Sure appreciate if you’d call me by my right name though,’ he says, one hand scratchin his arse, the other rubbin his stubbly chin.

‘Okay, Nevil. Nevil Arthur Dooley, male, twenty-one years old, black fella from the bush.’ I give the boy a smooth n oily smile. *Gotcha! Take that one!*

— C’est quoi c’bordel ! ... T’as pris de la drogue, fiston ? D’la drogue dure, c’est ça ?

Je regarde bien sa tête en attendant qu’il avoue. *Y’est complètement perché ou quoi ?*

— Non. Je veux juste que tu m’appelles Jane.

— Jane. Ok, j’ai pigé la blague, ha, ha, très marrant, je dis en le regardant de plus près, mais je vois rien de pas normal.

— Ce n’est pas marrant! Je ne vois pas ce qu’il y a de drôle dans mon nom. Tu aimerais, toi, que je me moque de toi ? Hein ?

J’me rapproche du lit.

— T’as vraiment un truc qui va pas, Nev ?

J’baisse mes mirettes vers lui. *Ça, c’est pasqu’i fume trop d’herbe et qu’i s’enfile tout cette gnôle, c’est sûr. Comment il a trouvé un nom aussi abracadabrant que Jane Risse, nom de dieu ! Un nom d’femme !*

— Dis-toi juste que je suis Jane Rhys, la célèbre écrivaine, i dit, et i me fait un sourire plein de chicots en se curant les ongles. Comme si i me disait: ‘T’es pas bien, Mam ? Tu vois pas qui j’suis ?’

— Une écrivaine ! Une écrivaine femme ! Foutu nom de nom ! Et après tu vas m’dire que t’es blanc !

J’m porte la main à la poitrine pour essayer d’arrêter mon palpitant qui bat trop fort. *La fumette, c’est ça qui va pas. C’est la yarndi qui lui tape sur le casque.*

— Ouep, c’est ça, i répond en balançant ses jambes hors du lit.

— Nevil, arrête tes conneries ! Tu commences à faire peur à ta vieille manman là, fiston. Tu veux m’parler de queque chose ? Les filles, le foot, la yarndi ?

Des fois parler ça aide à évacuer tout c’qui va pas.

— Non. Par contre, j’aimerais vraiment bien que tu m’appelles par mon vrai nom, i dit en s’grattant le cul d’une main et son menton mal rasé de l’aute.

— Ok, Nevil. Nevil Arthur Dooley, homme de vingt-et-un ans, noir sorti du bush.

J’lui fais un sourire tout miellé. *J’t’ai eu ! Hein !*

‘Damn you! It’s Jean, Jean Reece! J-E-A-N! RHY-S! Get it!’ he yells. Spit flies across the room and lands on me face.

‘Oh righto, Jean. Is it miss or missus?’ I decide to go along with him, to play out this little joke.

Jean Rhys, eh. Biggest load a goona a woman doned ever heard.

‘Miss’ll do fine, thank you, Mum.’ He smiles, then drops his head n looks down at the rubbish-strewn floor.

‘Well, Miss Jean Rhys, what may I ask have you got in those undies there, huh?’

I throw him a spinner. *Take the bait, boy. Our Nev n his jokes. A regular commeediann.*

‘That’s crass. What do you think’s in there?’ He spins round, grabs the bath towel off the window ledge and winds it round his skinny hips.

‘Well... I really don’t know any more.’

‘Hmmpph, stupid question, Mother. Now where are my clothes?’ he asks in a pissy sorta way, runnin his tongue cross his thick-set lips as he catches a glance a hisself in the mirror.

‘In the wash, Nevil — I mean Jean.’ I walk over and stand behind him as he stares at hisself.

‘Have you ever seen such bewdiful hair, huh?’ he says, his fingers tryin to comb through the baby arse fluff on top of his scone.

‘Yeah,’ I whisper, by this time knowin somethin is very wrong whit me only kid.

I catch his eyes and look into them, wonderin what mischief lays there. I see nothin. His eyes hold no deep secrets. I reach out and touch his shoulder.

‘Tell Mum, Nevil, tell Mum.’

— Merde ! C’est Jane, Jane Risse ! J-A-N-E RHY-S ! T’as compris ! qu’il braille. Des postillons volent à travers la chambre et atterrissent sur ma tête.

— D’ac-o-d’ac, Jane. C’est madame ou mademoiselle ?

J’décide de rentrer dans son jeu et d’le laisser aller jusqu’au bout de sa ptite blague. *Jane Rhys, hein. C’est l’plus gros ramassis de goona que j’ai jamais entendu.*

— Mademoiselle, ça ira très bien, merci Mam.

I sourit pis baisse la tête et regarde le sol plein de trucs qui traînent.

— Et donc, Mâdemôiselle Jane Rhys, puis-je savoir ce qu’il y â dans vos sous-vêtements, hm ?

J’lui tends une perche, là. *Allez, prends-la, mon ptit gars. Sacré Nev et ses blagues. Un vrâai côôômmédien.*

— Tu es dégoûtante. Qu’est-ce qu’il y a à ton avis ?

I se tourne, attrape la serviette de douche sur le bord de la fenêtre et l’enroule autour de ses hanches maigrichonnes.

— Ben... J’suis pu vraiment sûre.

— Pfff, c’est stupide comme question, Maman. Bon, où sont mes fringues ? i demande l’air à moitié énérvé. I passe sa langue sur ses lèvres épaisses et se reluque dans l’miroir.

— Au sale, Nevil... J’veux dire Jane.

J’vais me mette derrière lui pendant qu’i se regarde.

— Tu as déjà vu des cheveux aussi splendides ? i dit en essayant de coiffer avec ses doigts les trois poils de cul d’bébé qu’il a sur le crâne.

— Ouais, je dis tout doucement — matenant j’ai compris qu’y a vraiment queque chose qui tourne pas rond chez mon gamin.

J’croise son regard et je scrute un moment, en m’demandant quelles bêtises il peut bien y avoir au fond. Je vois rien. Y’a pas de grand secret dans ses yeux. Je tends le bras pour lui toucher l’épaule :

— Parle à ta manman, Nevil, allez.

I will him to answer me, to tell me somethin has happened, someone has paid him to pull this stuntin on me. *Ain't like Nev to he aresin bout like this. Talkin mad, sorta like he got that possessin stuff. A manwomanmanwoman. Like the boy mixin his real self up whit another person.*

'I need a frock. A nice one,' he says, pullin faces at hisself.

'A frock! Sweet Jesus, Nev, come on, love!'" I take a wonky step back from him, feelin like as though he's done punched me in the gut. *The boy is deadly serious.*

'You heard me. I can't very well get about in those things there, can I?' He points to a pile of dirty jeans.

'You have before.' I try to smooth him over, 'I can get a fresh pair of the line if ya want.'

I feel somethin grip me like death as I try to imagine me big-muscled, tall hairy son walkin round the town in a dress.

The shock brings vomit up to sit at the back of me throat. I realize with a sick despair that he means to wear a dress right or wrong. *He won't back out even for me. He's mad in the head. He's gone crazy n gay. A woman can't take it.*

Now let me see, yeah, I member that ol girl long time past, this sorta thing happened to her. It make a woman wonder: ya got black fellas sayin they white. Ya got white fellas sayin they black. I just dunno what's racin round in they heads. Cos, when ya black, well, things get a bit tricky like. See now, if ya got a white fella then paint him up black n let the man loose on the world I reckon he won't last long. Yep, be fucked from go. But when ya got a black fella sayin he's a woman — a white woman at that! Well, the ol dice just roll n another direction. Ain't no one gonna let the man... boy, get away whit that! This here is dangerous business.

J'veux qu'i me réponde, qu'i me dise qu'il s'est passé queque chose, que quequ'un l'a payé pour me faire ce sale tour. *Ça lui ressemble pas à Nev de faire le con comme ça, de dire n'importe quoi, un peu comme si y'était possédé, presque. Un hommefemmehomme femme. On dirait qu'i mélange son vrai lui avec quequ'un d'aute.*

— J'ai besoin d'une robe. Une jolie robe, il dit, en s'faisant des grimaces à lui-même.

— Une robe ? Mais bon sang, Nev, poussin !

J'me recule un peu de travers, en m'sentant comme si i m'avait mis un coup dans l'estomac. *Le ptit est archi-sérieux.*

— Je ne rigole pas. Je ne vais quand même pas me promener avec un de ces jeans-là, si ?

I me montre un tas de jeans sales.

— Ça t'a jamais dérangé.

J'essaie de l'amadouer un peu:

— J'peux aller en chercher un propre sur la corde à linge si tu veux.

J'sens queque chose de froid comme la mort m'envelopper en m'imaginant mon grand gars poilu et musclé s'balader en robe dans la ville.

J'suis tellement choquée que j'sens du vomi remonter dans ma gorge. J'comprends grise de désespoir qu'il a l'intention d'porter une robe coûte que coûte. *Même pour moi i va pas changer d'avis. Il est devenu fou. Fou et gay. a C'est trop à supporter pour une seule femme.*

Attends, ouais, j'me rappelle cette pauvre fille y'a longtemps qui lui est arrivé pareil. On s'demande, après: t'as des Noirs qui disent qu'i sont blancs. T'as des Blancs qui disent qu'i sont noirs. Franchement j'sais pas ce qui leur court dans l'crâne. Pasque, quand t'es noir, ça peut vite devenir dangereux. Tu vois, si t'as un Blanc et que tu l'peins en noir et qu'tu l'envoies courir les rues m'est avis qu'i va pas tenir longtemps. Ouep, dès l'début il est foutu. Mais alors quand t'as un Noir qui dit qu'c'est une femme... une Blanche en plus ! Alors là c'est encore une aute affaire. Personne va le laisser s'en tirer c't'hom... ce gars-là ! C'est dangereux comme affaire ça.

‘Well... I spose... you’ll... fit into a dress a mine. Tell me, what’s Gracie gonna think, eh?’

I shake me head at him, the idea comin to me as I speak.

‘She won’t like it, Gracie girl, havin a boyfriend walkin bout in women’s clothes. She won’t put up whit it. She’ll leave fer sure!’ I let it all out, jabbin the air whit me finger.

‘Well, too bad ain’t it. Anyway, who’s Gracie?’

Nev turns round to face me.

‘Don’t talk stupid. Gracie’s your girlfriend. Enough of this for once and all. I gotta go to bingo, the others’ll be waitin for me. So get dressed; hurry up.’

He walks toward the bathroom, heavin his shoulders up and down as he sighs and mumbles to himself. There’s somethin wrong whit the way he walks, steppin ballerina like as he goes down the hallway. Suddenly I wonder if our Nev is one a those.

One of em homos. Well, they don’t call em that any more. Gay, that’s the word people use. Jesus Christ! Can ya wake up gay? Must do, Nevil did. But then again some people can con theyselves that they anythin. Thinkin of that ol girl, what was her name? It were Phyllis, Phyllis Swan. If a woman’s recollection is right, she were parted from her own mob by em government wankers; they reckon she too white for the others, eh. Too white, load a goon.

When she growed up a bit more her skin turned up real charcoal like. Yeah, she coloured into a piece a coal. Black as Harry’s arse.

The wankers say: she too black for us, send the girl back. So back she go to her mob.

They didn’t want her.

The whites didn’t want her. She was sorta stuck in the middle like. Piggy in de middle.

Now what she doned?

— Euh... p’tête... P’tête que tu rentes dans une de mes robes. Mais dis donc elle va penser quoi Gracie, eh ?

L’idée m’vient en même temps que j’parle et je secoue la tête.

— Elle va pas aimer ça, la ptite Gracie, de voir son copain se balader habillé comme une fille. Ça, elle va pas le tolérer ! C’est sûr qu’elle va te quitter.

J’lui sors tout ça en agitant mon doigt en l’air.

— Ah, tant pis, hein. Et d’ailleurs, qui est Gracie ?

Nev se tourne pour me regarder.

— Fais pas l’idiot. C’est ta copine. Ça suffit matenant. J’dois aller au bingo, les autes vont m’attende. Alors habille-toi, dépêche.

I va jusqu’à la salle de bain, en haussant-baissant les épaules en même temps qu’i se marmonne des trucs à lui-même. Y’a un truc bizarre dans sa façon d’ marcher, i se met sur la pointe des pieds comme une danseuse pour traverser l’couloir. D’un coup j’me demande si ç’en est un.

Un d’ces homos. ‘fin, on les appelle pu comme ça. Gay, c’est comme ça qu’les gens disent. Nom d’un chien ! C’est possible de s’éveiller gay un jour ? Sans doute que oui vu que Nevil a fait ça. Mais en même temps les gens i zarrivent à se prendre pour n’importe qui. J’m souviens de cette pauve fille, comment elle s’appelait déjà ? Phyllis qu’elle s’appelait, Phyllis Swan. Si j’m souviens bien ces enfoirés du gouvernement l’avaient séparée de sa smala pasqu’i trouvaient qu’elle était trop blanche par rapport aux autes. Trop blanche, mon cul. Après quand elle a grandi sa peau est devenue noire comme la suie. Ouais, un vrai bout d’charbon qu’elle estdevenue, noire comme un cul d’marmite. Ces enfoirés ont dit qu’elle était trop noire pour eux, fallait la renvoyer là d’où elle était venue. Donc elle est retournée dans son bled. Eux, i z’en voulaient pas. Les Blancs en voulaient pas non plus. Elle était coincée au milieu, quoi. La patate chaude.

Alors qu’esse qu’elle a fait ?

Oh yeah, she done tell everyone that she's not Phyllis Swan at all! Oowhhh noooo! She says she really the Queen a England! Conned herself good n proper. The mad thing was, white fellas treated the woman whit respect! Like she truly were the Queen! I swear to God every time I seed that woman she were gettin whiter every day!

White as friggin frost. Like she believed it so much that her skin was believin it too! Funny sorta turnout n all.

Maybe this somethin like Nevil goin through. Conned hisself good n proper like.

Hope he don't start thinkin that he be the friggin Queen! Jeeessuuss.

Now, how I'll tell me brother Booty? He won't like it! He'll kick Nev's arse for sure. Oh geez, what's a woman to do? It's all Davo's fault. Yep, pissin off on the boy just like that. No father to play football whit, play cricket whit, nothin. Spose a woman'll have to try n get Booty to have a yarn to him.

Me boy won't listen to me. Now where the friggin hell did he get a name like Jean Rhys? A white woman writer, geez, couldn't he a picked a black woman writer? Someone spectable like Oodgeroo? Bloody white woman me fat arse!

That's our Nev's problem, got his head stuck in all em books. Brainwashed. Them books have brainwashed him. Yeah, reckon that's bout the strength of it. Ain't no kid ever woked up whit headcrackin shit like this.

I let me thoughts go while I radar Nev's bedroom, lookin for any sign — any gay sign.

In the corner books sit stacked up on each other, some tattered and dog-eared, others brand-new.

Well, spose he does spend his money on other things part from piss n dope.

I kneel down and look closer at the cover pictures and titles. Yeah, some freaky

Eh ouais, elle a dit et redit à tout l'monde qu'elle s'appelait pas Phyllis Swan du tout ! Oooooh noooooôn ! Elle a dit qu'en fait c'était la reine d'Angleterre. Elle s'est bien monté la tête toute seule comme y faut. C'qui est dingue c'est que les Blancs la respectaient comme si elle était reine pour de vrai ! J'vous jure que chaque fois que j'la voyais elle était encore pluss blanche qu'avant. Blanche comme d'la neige, sans déconner. Comme si elle y croyait tellement fort que sa peau y a cru aussi ! Marrant hein, comme histoire. P'tête que c'est c'qui va se passer avec Nevil. P'tête qu'i s'est monté la tête tout seul comme y faut aussi. J'espère qu'i va pas se mette à se prendre pour la foutue reine d'Angleterre. Moooon dieu.

Bon, qu'esse que j'avais dire à mon frangin ? Booty, i va pas aimer, ça non ! I va lui botter l'cul à Nevil, c'est sûr. Qu'esse que j'avais faire, putain ? Tout ça c'est la faute à Davo. Foute le camp comme ça en laissant son gosse. Pas d'père pour jouer au foot, au cricket, rien. J'suppose qu'i faut que je demande à Booty de le discuter un peu. Mon ptit gars i m'écoute pas, moi. Et où il a trouvé un nom comme Jane Rhys, nom d'un chien ! Une écrivaine blanche, putain, i pouvait pas choisir une noire ? Quequ'un de respectabe, Oodgeroo par exempe ? Foutue blanche de mon cul !

Ça c'est son problème à Nev, c'est qu'il a tout l'temps la tête dans un bouquin. Ça lui a lavé l'cerveau, tous ces bouquins. Ouais, j'me dis qu'c'est sans doute ça la raison. Y'a jamais eu d'aute gosse qui s'est réveillé un matin avec des idées à la mords-moi-le-nœud comme ça.

J'laisse mes pensées vadrouiller en passant la chambre de Nev au radar pour chercher un signe – un signe de gay-itude. Dans un coin, y'a des bouquins empilés les uns sur les autres, y'en a qui sont déchirés, cornés, d'autres qui sont tout neufs. Bon, ben c'est qu'i doit quand même dépenser son argent dans aute chose que d'la pissette et d'la drogue.

J'me mets à genoux pour regarder les couvertures et les titres. Ouais, y'a des trucs

stuff here all right. I look for anything that might have the name Jean R-h-y-s. Unstackin the books, I run me eyes over each one. There must be somethin here. Some clue.

Then I do notice somethin, five books by the same writer. *An Ideal Husband, Salome, The Importance of Being Earnest, Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance.* I take in the writer's name: Oscar Wilde. A playwright, the cover says. What the hell's a playwright?

I flick the cover open but there seems nothin outta place, nothin that would brainwash a man into thinkin hisself a woman. Just writin. Me eyes flick back to the other book, *A Woman Of No Importance.* *Now that sounds a bit suss. Maybe the boy don't think he important? A Woman Of No Importance? Hhhmmm.*

Sighin, I get up to me feet decidin I've had enough of this Nevil wantin to be a woman shit. *There's only one person who can talk some sense into the boy and I'll have to go and find him. Yep, can't have Nevil walkin down the main street in a dress. Geez.*

I walk past the bathroom. Nevil's voice sings out loud and deep. 'I am woman, hear me roar!'

'Bloody wake up to yerself, Nevil!' I yell as I open the front door and step out onto the street. *Watch me roar, Jeesus Christ! What's he now, a lion?*

'He woke up like that.' I look at Booty from across the kitchen table.

'Mave, men don't wake up bein poofers. Look at me, you don't see me wantin to wear women's clothes, eh?' He sips his beer.

'I'm tellin ya, Booty, he wasn't like that yesterday. He wake up like that! Sorta like... um, whatever it is, just stayed hidin in him n jumped out this morning,' I say, flappin me arms out to prove me point.

bien bizarres là-dedans. Je cherche queque chose où y'a écrit Jane Rhys dessus. J'prends les lives un par un et je zieute chacun. Y'a forcément un truc. Un indice.

Et pis je remarque queque chose: cinq lives avec le même auteur. *Un mari idéal, Salomé, L'importance d'être Constant, L'Éventail de Lady Windermere, Une Femme sans importance.* Je regarde le nom de l'auteur : Oscar Wilde. Un dramaturge, ça dit sur la couverture. *Qu'esse que c'est que ça, un dramaturge, nom de nom ?*

J'ouve le bouquin mais y'a rien de pas normal, rien qui ferait laver le cerveau d'un gars pour qu'i se prenne pour une femme. Juste des mots. J'porte mon regard sur l'aute bouquin, *Une Femme sans importance.* *Ça, ça a l'air un peu suspi. P'tête que mon ptit gars s'dit qu'il est pas important ? Une Femme sans importance ? Hhhmmm...*

J'soupire et j'me lève après avoir décidé que j'en ai marre de ces conneries de Nevil qui veut être une fille. *Y'a qu'une personne qui peut réussir à lui remettre la tête à l'endroit et faut que j'aïlle le chercher. Y'a pas moyen que j'laisse Nevil se balader dans l'centre-ville en robe. Bordel.*

J'passe à côté d'la salle de bain et j'entends la voix grave de Nevil qui chante bien fort: "I am woman, hear me roar !"¹

— Putain mais réveille-toi, Nevil ! j'lui crie en même temps que j'ouve la porte pour sortir de la maison. *Hear me roar, nom d'un chien ! I se prend pour un lion matenant ?*

— I s'est réveillé comme ça.

J'regarde Booty de l'aute côté de la tabe en face de moi.

— Mave, les hommes ça s'éveille pas pédé. Regarde-moi, j'ai pas envie d'mette des fringues de femme, nan ?

I sirote sa bière.

— Mais j'te dis, Booty, il était pas comme ça hier ! I s'est réveillé comme ça. Un peu comme si, euh... le truc, je sais pas quoi, c'est resté caché à l'intérieur de lui et pis c'est sorti d'un coup c'matin, je dis, en faisant un grand geste de bras pour expliquer mieux.

¹ Lyrics from the song "I am woman" by Helen Reddy (1971).

‘Jumped out, my black arse. He was always like that, Mave, you jus never saw it is all. Women’s clothes, Jesus!’ Booty shakes his head, disgust washin over his fat face.

‘Yeah, what bout Gracie, eh? Tell me that?’

‘A cover. He’s just using her as a cover. Ya hear bout all these movie stars n such, tellin the world they’re queer. “Comin outta the closet”, they call it. Yep, I seen all that sorta shit on Ricki Lake. Women wantin to be men and men wantin to be girls. Yeah, Mave, the boy’s been watchin too much a that American shit on TV. Seems to a man that kids don’t know who they are. They all wussies I reckon. Black wantin to be white; white wantin to be black. That’s where all these ideas come from — TV. Like he shamed a who he is or somethin.’

‘Booty, he don’t hardly watch TV. Nope, all he does is read them books a his. It’s them books puttin ideas into his head. Brainwashin him, Booty.’ I slump me shoulders wearily.

‘Well, what can a man do, eh? He won’t listen to his ol uncle here,’ Booty gets up from his chair and walks over to the window, shrugging his broad shoulders.

‘Yeah, but it’s not only that. He thinks he’s a writer! A white woman writer. Thinks his name is Rhys!’

‘What the ...?’ Booty croaks, swinging round on his heels, mouth agape, a stunned look on his dial.

‘Jean Rhys. J-e-a-n R-h-y-s. That’s his new name, so he reckons. She sposed to be a writer. Can’t say I heard a the woman. Don’t read books meself. Must go n ask Lizzy at the library there. She’d know bout this woman, I betcha.’

I watch Booty’s face turn a faint shade of grey, the veins stickin out on his thick neck. ‘What the hell’s wrong with that boy! Jean Rhys, eh. He needs a good throttlin, that’s what he needs. And I’m just the man to do it! Ain’t no bloody nephew a mine gonna go

— Sorti, ouais, mon cul de noir. Ça fait longtemps qu’il est comme ça mais t’avais juste pas vu avant, Mave, c’est tout. Des fringues de femme, putain !

Booty secoue sa grosse tête, dégoûté.

— Ouais, et Gracie alors ? Esplique-moi ça.

— Une couverture. Il l’utilise comme couverture. I font tous ça les stars de ciné là, de dire aux gens qu’i sont homo. “Sortir du placard” qu’i disent. Ouep, j’ai déjà vu ce genre de conneries dans l’émission d’Ricki Lake. Des filles qui veulent devenir des mecs et des mecs qui veulent devenir des filles. Ouais, le ptit a trop regardé des merdes américaines à la télé. Moi j’ai l’impression qu’les jeunes i savent pu qui i sont. Tous des baltringues, à mon avis. Des Noirs qui veulent être blancs, des Blancs qui veulent être noirs; tout ça, ça vient d’la télé. Comme si qu’il avait honte de lui-même ou queque chose.

— Booty, i regarde presque jamais la télé. Tout c’qu’i fait c’est lire des bouquins. C’est ses bouquins qui lui mettent des idées dans le crâne. Ça lui retourne le cerveau, Booty.

Je m’avachis, fatiguée.

— Et qu’esse tu veux que je fasse, hein ? I va pas écouter son vieux zoncle.

Booty se lève, va à la fenêtre et hausse ses larges épaules.

— Mais y’a pas qu’ça ! I pense qu’il est écrivain ! Enfin, écrivaine, pis blanche. I dit qu’i s’appelle Rhys !

— Hein ? Booty croasse en s’retournant d’un coup, la bouche grande ouverte, avec un air ahuri sur sa bobine.

— Jane Rhys. J-a-n-e R-h-y-s. I pense que c’est son nouveau nom. Censée être une écrivaine. J’peux pas dire que j’la connais. Moi-même je lis pas de bouquins. Faut que j’aille demander à Lizzy d’la bibiothèque, j’parie qu’elle la connaît, elle.

J’vois le visage de Booty devenir grisouille et les veines ressortir de son coup de taureau.

— Mais qu’esse qui va pas chez c’gamin ! Jane Rhys, hein. C’qui lui faut c’est une bonne baffe. Et j’suis le mieux placé pour le faire !

dancin round the town callin hisself a woman!”

Booty busts his guts, pullin out a chair with such force that the can a beer topples to the floor.

‘Righto, don’t go givin yerself a heart condition, Brother. All I’m askin is for you to have a good talk to him. I blame it on Davo. The way he upped and pissed off on us. That’s half the trouble, I betcha,’ I say, feelin me heart start to gallop as the memory of Davo comes back. *Davo, friggin scourin off like that. No wonder Nev don’t know hisself.*

‘Bullshit! Never worried him all these years. Why would it worry him now? Nah, the boy’s got a screw loose upstairs. Only thing you can do is get him to Doctor Chin. Take a good look at that head a his. I heard a people doin some sicko things — but this! Well, this really is somethin. Bad, fuckin bad business.’

Booty gives me a serious, this-is-gone-too-far look.

‘Maybe yer right. Can you come over n talk to him first? See, I’m thinkin he’ll listen to you.’

‘Righto, Mave. Gotta stop him from gettin outside in that friggin frock. Imagine his mates n the others, specially the footie team! They’d tear him to pieces for sure! You know what this town’s like, Mave. They’d pick him to death.’

Booty gets to his feet.

‘Ready?’

‘Yeah. But I’ll warn ya, it’s not a pretty sight. When I left him he was singin in the bathroom bout bein a woman n roarin.’ I shake me head, me own words seem unreal to me own ears.

Booty strides out in front of me. Each step he takes drives into the footpath. His shoulders hunch forward as though he’s ready to tackle somebody, ready to put em into the ground.

C’est pas mon neveu qui va aller dansotter en ville en se croyant pour une femme !

Booty pète une durite et attrape une chaise avec tellement d’force que sa canette de bière se casse la figure par terre.

— ‘Tention, tu vas t’choper une crise cardiaque, frérot. Tout c’que je te demande c’est de lui parler. C’est la faute à Davo, comment i s’est barré en nous laissant tomber. J’té parie que c’est à cause de ça, je dis avec mon cœur qui commence à tambouriner quand j’mé remets à penser à Davo. *Davo qui s’est tiré comme ça, pas étonnant que Nev save pas qui il est.*

— N’importe quoi ! Depuis l’temps, ça l’a pas dérangé. Pourquoi ça l’dérangerait matenant, hein ? Nan, i lui manque une case là-haut. Tout c’que tu peux faire c’est de l’amener au docteur Chin. Qu’i lui regarde bien dans son crâne. J’avais déjà entendu parler d’gens qui font des trucs de cinglé, mais ça ! Ah ça c’est queque chose. Une foutue sale histoire.

Booty me regarde l’air grave, l’air de dire que tout ça va trop loin.

— P’tête que t’as raison. Tu peux venir lui parler d’abord? Moi, je pense qu’i t’écouterà.

— Ça marche, Mave. Faut l’empêcher d’sortir dans cette putain d’robe. T’imagines qu’esse qu’i vont dire ses copains, et les autes ! Surtout ceux du foot ! I vont lui refaire le portrait, c’est sûr ! Tu sais bien comment i sont les gens dans cette ville, Mave. I vont l’cogner jusqu’à la mort.

Booty se lève.

— Prête ?

— Ouais. Mais j’té préviens, c’est pas joli à voir. Quand j’suis partie il était dans la salle de bain à chanter une chanson qui parlait d’ête une femme et de rugir.

J’secoue la tête: mes propres paroles m’paraissent complètement loufoques.

Booty fait des grands pas devant moi. Chaque pas qu’i fait laisse une trace dans la poussière du trottoir. I carre ses épaules en avant comme s’i se prépare à plaquer quequ’un au sol et à l’enfoncer dedans.

Nevil sits on the edge of his bed, a book in one hand, a beer in the other. A joint hangin outta his slack gob. The room smells like it's full a horseshit; Mary Jane floatin out the window.

'Nev, Uncle's here to see ya.' I notice the way his legs are crossed over each other like one of em Buddah people. He ignores me. 'Nev love, lovey, Uncle Booty's waitin in the kitchen for ya.'

'What? Who?'" He asks, bringin his head up to gaze at me with bloodshot eyes.

'Uncle. He's here right now.'

'Why?'

He takes a drag.

'To talk. Um... he was just goin by, wanted to see ya is all,' I take a step into the room.

'Is this about Jean, eh? Cos if it is then I'm not talking to anyone,' he answers.

'Jean? Who's Jean?' I try.

'Don't start this again, Mother. You know very well who Jean is.' A touch of anger to his voice.

'Oh yeah, I forgot.'

I give him a sour I've-had-enough-of-you look.

'Nevil, what is that on your face?' I peer at him.

'Nothing much.'

He reaches over and stubs out the smoke.

'Make-up? Nevil Dooley, is that woman paint on that face a yours!' I walk right into the room.

'So? And don't call me Nevil!' He's all pissed off n riled like.

'It's make-up! Where the hell did you get that!' I slit me eyes at him. *Face paint. Clown colourin.*

'Oh, somewhere.'

He takes a sip of beer.

'Nevil Dooley! What the hell's goin on here, Sonny Jim!'

Nevil est assis au bord de son lit, un livre dans la main, une bière dans l'aute. Un joint pendouille à sa lippe flasque. La chambre sent l'fumier, la fumée d'Marie Jeanne s'envole par la fenêtre.

— Nev, ton oncle veut te voir.

J'note comment ses jambes sont croisées l'une sur l'aute comme les Bouddhas. Il m'ignore.

— Nev, poussin, chéri, Tonton Booty t'attend dans la cuisine.

— Quoi ? Qui ? i demande, en levant ses yeux rougis vers moi.

— Ton oncle. Il est là.

— Pourquoi ?

I tire une taffe.

— Pour te parler. Il, euh... i passait par là, pour te voir, c'est tout.

J'fais un pas à l'intérieur de la chambre.

— C'est à propos de Jane, c'est ça ? Parce que si c'est ça, je ne veux parler à personne, i répond.

— Jane ? C'est qui Jane ? je tente.

— Ne recommence pas avec ça, *Maman*. Tu sais très bien qui est Jane.

Un poil de colère dans sa voix.

— Ah, ouais, j'avais oublié.

J'lui jette un regard aigri de j'en-ai-ma-claque-de-ton-cirque.

— Nevil, c'est quoi que t'as sur le visage ? je dis en le scrutant.

— Pas grand-chose.

I se penche pour écraser son mégot fumant.

— Du *maquillage* ? Nevil Dooley, c'est du fard de fille que t'as sur la figure ?!

J'rente pour de bon dans la chambre.

— Et alors ? Et arrête de m'appeler Nevil ! Il est tout énervé et vexé, presque.

— C'est du maquillage ! Oûesque t'as trouvé ça, nom de dieu ! j'le regarde en plissant les yeux.

D'la peinture. D'la peinture de clown.

— Oh, quelque part.

I prend une gorgée d'bière.

— Nevil Dooley ! Qu'esse qui se passe ici, mon ptit gars ?

I tum to the doorway. Booty blocks the exit with his large frame, his hands on his hips as he glares in at Nevil.

‘Hello, Uncle. I ain’t doing nothing.’
Nevil gives him a wide, yarndi grin.

‘Son, what the fuck is that on ya face?’
Booty strides into the room, gut swingin from side to side, eyes narrowed and mouth twisted. *He gonna take a hunk a flesh.*

‘Lipstick, eyeshadow, eyeliner. Reckon it looks okay?’

Nevil uncurls his legs, arches his eyebrows, puckers his mouth.

‘Look here, son, you can’t go gettin bout like that! What are ya, a fuckin woman!’

Booty tightens his mouth, a small quiver shaking his frame.

‘My business. I’m not hurting anyone, am I?’ Nevil reaches down by the bed and picks up a small floral-print bag.

‘You got this shit from TV, didn’t ya? Watchin too much American sicko shit, eh? Ricki Lake, is that it?’ Booty yells, his fat arms choppin the air.

‘Nope. I’m Jean Rhys, in case Mother hasn’t already told you.’ Nevil pulls out a tube of lipstick.

‘Seductive Pink’ is written large and posh like on the side a it.

‘Shit. Bullshit! You a poofter now, son?’ Booty walks to the edge of the bed, shoulders hunched, ready to fly.

‘Don’t be stupid. What’s wrong with people in this house? It’s as though a girl’s committed some heinous offence, like murdered someone or something.’

Nevil puckers up his mouth an smears lipstick cross his tyre-tread lips.

‘That’s it! That’s it!’ Booty explodes; sweat poppin out on his forehead, his veins

J’me tourne vers la porte. Booty bloque la sortie avec sa grande carcasse, mains sur les hanches, un regard noir pour Nevil.

— Salut, Tonton. J’ai rien fait.

Nevil lui fait un grand sourire embrumé par la yarndi.

— Gamin, c’est quoi cette merde sur ton visage ?

Booty ente dans la chambre à grands pas, avec son bide qui s’balance à droite à gauche, ses yeux plissés et sa bouche tordue. *I va le morde.*

— Du rouge à lèvres, du fard à paupières, de l’eyeliner. Tu trouves ça joli ?

Nevil décroise ses jambes, hausse les sourcils, fait la moue.

— Écoute, fiston, tu peux pas te balader comme ça ! T’es quoi, une foutue gonzesse !

Booty serre les mâchoires et un ptit tremblement lui traverse la carcasse.

— C’est mes oignons. Je ne fais de mal à personne, si ?

Nevil se baisse et attrape un ptit sac à fleurs au pied du lit.

— T’as vu ça à la télé, hein ? Tu regardes trop d’merdes américaines ! Ricki Lake, c’est ça ? Booty braille en brassant l’air avec ses gros bras grassouillets.

— Non. Je m’appelle Jane Rhys, au cas où Maman ne te l’ait pas déjà dit.

Nevil sort un tube de rouge à lèvres. Y’a écrit ‘Rose Séduction’ en grosses lettres snob dessus.

— Bordel de merde. N’importe quoi ! T’es devenu une fiotte, gamin ?

Booty s’approche du bord du lit, les épaules tendues, prêt à exploser.

— Ne sois pas bête. Qu’est-ce qui vous prend dans cette maison ? On dirait que vous me prenez pour une criminelle, comme si j’avais tué quelqu’un ou quelque chose comme ça.

Nevil fait un cul-de-poule avec sa bouche et étale du rouge sur ses lèvres striées comme des pneus.

— C’est bon ! Y’en a marre ! Booty explose ; des gouttes de sueur apparaissent sur son front, ses veines ressortent tellement sur

stickin up like they ready to jump outta the man's arms as he grabs Nevil by the singlet.

'Fucken ratbag! What's got into ya? Causin ya mother all this grief! Now get into that bathroom an take that shit off ya face!'

Booty shakes a crunched fist in Nevil's face.

'Leave me alone, leave me alone,' Nevil bawlbaby.

'Now you cut this crap out, son. And lay off the fuckin drugs too. Your heads fucked enough already.'

Booty pulls Nevil up to his wonky feet.

'Listen to your uncle, Nev, he knows best,' I say softly.

'Yeah, yeah. Let go of me, Uncle,' whisperin weak, Nevil looks up into Booty's angry sweat slicked dial.

'Fucken no more a this shit, Nevil! Ya gotta pull that head a yours in, right?'

'Hmm, yeah, spouse,'

But Nevil's voice don't sound like he means it.

'Anyway, I gotta go to the dole office. So you can leave now, I gotta get dressed.'

'Now, sonny, if ya wanna have a man talk or somethin, come over ta me.' Booty pauses for a minute then says, 'But if ya gonna be keepin on at this shit, then a man's gonna have to settle ya down, n pretty fucken soon.'

He wrinkles his brow, his bottom lip twitchin.

'Yeah, yeah, okay Uncle.'

'Right then, that's that. How bout a cup a tea, Mave?' Booty asks over his shoulder as he leaves the room.

'Righto.' I look behind me. *That'll sort him over. That was all the boy needed, a good yarnin to.*

ses bras qu'on dirait qu'elles vont carrément sortir, et il empoigne Nevil par son t-shirt.

— Putain de ptit merdeux ! Qu'esse qui t'prend de faire tout ce chagrin à ta mère ! Matenant tu vas dans la salle de bain et t'enlèves toute cette merde de ta tête !

Booty agite son poing devant le visage de Nevil.

— Laisse-moi tranquille, lâche-moi, pleurniche Nevil.

— Alors t'arrêtes tes conneries, fiston. Et t'arrêtes la drogue aussi, putain. T'as déjà l'cerveau assez défoncé comme ça.

Booty relève Nevil, qui tient moyen bien sur ses pieds.

— Écoute ton oncle, Nev, il a raison, je dis doucement.

— Ouais, ouais. Lâche-moi, Tonton, Nev murmure tout bas, en regardant la face colère et luisante de sueur de Booty.

— T'arrêtes tes satanées conneries matenant Nevil ! Tu t'remets la tête à l'endroit, ok ?

— Hm, ouais, c'est bon...

Mais la voix de Nevil donne pas l'impression qu'il est sincère.

— De toute façon, je dois aller à l'agence pour l'emploi. Donc vous pouvez partir maintenant, il faut que je m'habille.

— Bon, fiston, si tu veux parler d'homme à homme ou queque chose, tu viens m'voir.

Booty fait une pause puis dit :

— Mais si tu continues tes foutaises, j'te préviens que je vais devoir te remettre à ta place et vite fait.

I fronce les sourcils, la lippe frémissante.

— Ouais, ouais, ok Tonton.

— Bon, eh ben voilà. Tu nous fais une tasse de thé, Mave ? Booty demande par-dessus son épaule en sortant d'la chambre.

— Ouep.

Je regarde derrière moi. Ça va l'calmer. C'est tout ce qu'il avait besoin, une bonne discute.