

A photograph of a dense forest with tall, thin trees and sunlight filtering through the canopy. The trees are mostly evergreens, and the ground is covered in fallen branches and pine needles. The lighting is bright, creating a dappled effect on the forest floor.

# Terms and Conditions

Louise Barden

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Thirty-something, no-nonsense Melissa has a secret, and when an opportunity arises at work she is faced with a dilemma.

*"Very enjoyable with some effective characterisation. A couple of unexpected twists"* Bedford Writing Competition



**Louise Barden** grew up in Bedfordshire and went to school in Bedford. She is a French teacher who drew on her past experiences for the setting of this story.

She recently completed a creative writing course with the Open University, and this has given her the confidence to start producing her own short stories.

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Melissa slowed down as she approached the gap in the hedge and then turned. She had the feeling that she was being swallowed whole by the row of forbidding conifers and that once she was inside, they would close ranks barring her exit for ever.

She parked outside the boarding house, choosing a spot as far away from the sinister trees as she could find, and started to empty the car. Her feet crunched on the gravel, sounding abnormally loud in the silence. She could see lights on in some of the rooms – girls were back and settling in – but instead of cheering her, the little squares of light underlined her separateness. She picked up her bags, took a deep breath, and walked towards the door.

Once inside, the familiar smell of overheated institution hit her and lowered her mood still further. She looked at the notices on the board: ‘Boys Are Not Welcome’, ‘Do Not Leave The Building Without Signing Out’, ‘Borrowing Without Asking Is Stealing’. A real home from home, she thought wryly.

The door at the end of the corridor opened and the housemistress appeared, dressed in mismatched pyjamas, although it was only seven o’clock. Melissa couldn’t help noticing that Fiona Fanshaw wasn’t wearing a bra. She was holding a bowl of cereal under her chin, eating it as she walked, and with every step her large breasts swayed rhythmically, finally settling on top of her generous stomach like two bean bags about to slide down a hill as Fiona stopped and lowered her bowl.

‘Eh oop, Melissa,’ she said jovially. ‘How’s life oop north?’

Melissa knew the game. ‘Eeh by gum! It were reet parky.’

Fiona smiled. ‘Lovely to be getting back into the swing of a new term, isn’t it?’

Melissa looked at her pityingly. Fiona was as institutionalised as a lifer; everything revolved around the school, the boarding house, and the girls. If Fiona got parole, as Melissa thought of redundancy, she wouldn’t cope. She’d be found in the long jump pit clutching a bottle of pills and a school photo.

Melissa gave a half-smile and said, ‘Good hols, Fi?’

‘Oh, not really,’ Fiona said. ‘You know what I feel about the holidays – this place just isn’t the same without the girls. I rattle around and don’t know what to do with myself. Give me a busy term any time!’

Just then a chorus of high-pitched screams came racing down the corridor; five teenage girls were haring towards them.

‘Miss Fanshaw! Daisy’s put a rice cake in the toaster and it’s on fire! The flames are shooting up to the ceiling!’

As they shouted the fire alarm started and the smell of smoke reached them.

‘Right girls, I’ll deal with this.’ Fiona sprang into action. ‘Evacuate the building immediately – you know the drill. Miss Wilkes, get the register and do roll call on the tennis court.’

She sped off as fast as her bulk would allow towards the kitchen.

Melissa picked up the register, opened the door and noticed that it had started to rain. She trudged out to meet the shivering girls on the tennis court. Welcome back, she thought.

*Dear Mam,*

*I can hardly believe we’ve been back for a week already! So far we’ve had a toaster-induced fire alarm, lost two girls who were found hiding in a wardrobe,*

*and then Jeremy Martindale - he's the one who left the exam papers in the cricket pavilion last year and no one could find them. Well, this time he crashed the school minibus into a bollard right outside the entrance to Twickenham and a journalist took a picture and it was published in the Daily Mail!*

Melissa chewed the end of her pen thoughtfully. Jeremy Martindale was a pompous prat, but in the Enid Blyton world she had created for her mother, everyone at St Hugh's was one big, happy family.

*So when the article was pinned up on the noticeboard, we all had a jolly good laugh.*

*Got to dash now – prep supervision. Hope today's a good day.*

*Love you Ma,*

*Lissy*

She was chatting in the staff room when Jeremy walked in.

'Ah, Ladies!' he said. 'Putting the world to rights, as usual. Wish I had the time – just off for a game of squash. I need to keep my place in the league.' He smiled wolfishly and rose up on his toes as he spoke, as though subconsciously trying to appear taller than his five feet six inches.

'If you're as lethal with a racket as you are with a minibus, I'm sure you'll soon be top of the league,' Melissa said sweetly.

Jeremy came down from his tiptoes, gave her a hard stare and left.

'The world would need much less putting to rights without the likes of Jeremy the Geriatric Studmuffin ... not!' The others laughed as Melissa pulled a face.

'Seriously though, Mel,' Suzy said. 'Wouldn't you like a fling? You're only thirty-five, it's a bit young to be such a determined spinster.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Melissa tried not to sound evasive. 'A mardy cow like me's better off on her own, I reckon. And it cuts down the competition – now there are only three of you to fight over Jeremy!'

Melissa thought back to that conversation later, as she sat in her flat with a large glass of wine. Why didn't she just tell them? She closed the lid very firmly on those thoughts and went to bed.

*Dear Mam*

*Very exciting news – Suzy's getting married next summer! Gareth proposed yesterday and they're making plans already. She wants to know when I'll get myself a man, but I've told her I'm mother to seventy teenage girls already – and enough's enough! And don't you be mythering neither. 'Busy girls are happy girls', as Miss Morse always told us.*

The bell rang for afternoon lessons; she'd finish the letter after school. She hurried down the corridor and saw Fiona, who was wearing a vast, saggy mohair jumper with what looked like a moose's head on the front, and a pair of bright blue trousers, slightly too short, that showed off her Homer Simpson socks. Not for the first time, Melissa wondered if Fiona owned a mirror.

'Can we have a conflag later?' Fiona called over her shoulder as she and the moose disappeared into the library. 'There's something I want to tell you.'

Fiona handed her a cup of tea, and Melissa tried to ignore the dog hair floating on the top.

‘So, surprise me!’ Melissa said, as she sat down. ‘Are you planning to run off with Jeremy and start a dynasty of little Martindales? I know hormones speak louder than taste sometimes when a woman gets to a certain age.’

Fiona gave a bark of laughter, sounding not unlike one of her cherished terriers. ‘I think I’ve still got enough of my marbles left to resist his charms! No, I wanted to tell you, before it’s announced publicly, that I applied to run the new junior boarding house and I’ve got the job.’

‘Well, bugger me!’ Melissa was astonished. She had always viewed Fiona as a fixture of Russell House, like the stains on the ceiling under the bathroom, and the dodgy door that had to be kicked in just the right spot before it would open. Surely Russell couldn’t exist without Fiona in charge?

‘So, Russell will need a new housemistress,’ Fiona went on.

Melissa had been so busy picturing Jeremy and the headmaster chiselling Fiona off the threadbare carpet before transporting her across to the new house and cementing her into position that she hadn’t thought of this.

‘I suppose so,’ she agreed.

‘And I’ve recommended you for the job,’ Fiona finished.

‘Me?’ Melissa was dumbfounded. ‘Why me?’

‘I know you pretend to hate the place,’ Fiona said. ‘You and Suzy with your plans to escape – but that’s just a front. Really, you’re dedicated and hardworking, and I respect that.’

‘What do you mean it’s “just a front”?’ Melissa was indignant.

‘Come on!’ Fiona said. ‘If you really wanted to escape you’d be off adventuring every holiday. But what do you do? Go and stay with your mother! Actions speak louder than words, Melissa. Look, you’d have a ten-year contract and more money – so, as the girls might say, what’s not to like?’

Ten years! What could she say? She decided on honesty. ‘You know, Fi, for once in my life I’m absolutely speechless. Can I think about it for a few days?’

Lying in bed, her mind went back, as she knew it would, to the waiting room where she and her mother had sat, both pretending to read a magazine as they waited. She heard again the mechanical clicking of her mother’s tongue, and remembered the heavy weight of fear that pressed down on her chest.

‘Kathleen Wilkes, please.’

They were shown into the Consultant’s room and Melissa focused on the scar across his cheek as he spoke, wondering what had happened to him. Whatever it was, it would heal eventually and even the memory of the scar would fade. She couldn’t remember his exact words, but the fact sheet, bald and uncompromising, turned their personal tragedy into a statistic.

*Huntington’s disease affects 5-10 people per 100,000 in the UK. It is a degenerative, genetic condition affecting the brain and the nervous system. At present there is no cure. For each child that you have there is a 50:50 chance that they will also have HD.*

HD they called it. This new jargon would soon become as familiar to Melissa as the other acronyms where deadly diseases are reduced to an unthreatening string of initials.

*Physical symptoms usually begin between 35 and 44 years of age. The disease may develop earlier in each successive generation.*

Her mother had silent tears running down her face. Her tongue still moved involuntarily and her whole body was leaning unnaturally to the left, giving her a grotesque, almost comic appearance. Melissa knew why her mother was crying, not for herself, but for Melissa. What parent can cope with the knowledge that they have handed down such a legacy to their only child?

The Consultant was gentle. 'If you want to be tested, Melissa, I'd strongly recommend genetic counselling first. Think about it, and ring me if there's anything you want to discuss.'

'No, thank you.' Melissa knew immediately what to say. 'I feel fine at the moment, and I need to concentrate on Mam now, and not worry about the future.'

That was why the job at St Hugh's had seemed such a gift; Assistant Housemistress meant free accommodation, so Melissa could use her salary to help fund the residential care. And in her lucid moments, her mother was very proud, 'Our Melissa, working in a posh school – whoever would have thought it!'

As the days passed she could see Fiona looking at her in a puzzled way, obviously wondering why the chance of promotion required so much thought on Melissa's part.

Then Jeremy swaggered up and treated her to his wolfish grin. 'A little bird tells me that you're not quite the career girl you make out,' he said, pleased to have the upper hand for once. 'Whoever would have thought that a self-proclaimed, ambitious woman would turn down a promotion?'

'I haven't turned anything down!' Melissa snapped. 'But I hear that you're now in charge of half the swimming pool.'

He looked confused.

'The shallow end!' She finished, and shot him a look of contempt.

But Jeremy's needling brought home to her that she couldn't keep avoiding the issue, so she went to find Fiona.

'Can we have a chat, Fi? There's something I need to tell you.'

'Good news, I hope? Sit down and I'll make some tea.' Fiona said.

Melissa repressed a shudder as she wondered how many dog hairs she'd have in her mug this time, but Fiona was so well-meaning, she couldn't possibly refuse.

'Thanks, I'd love a brew,' she said.

'You're quite right, you know,' Melissa began, as they sat down. 'My grand plans to escape are just a front – I didn't realise it was quite so obvious.'

'I've spent sixteen years listening to girls embellishing the truth, being economical with the truth or telling me downright lies, so I think I'm something of an expert now,' Fiona said.

Melissa gave a faint smile and hurried on. 'You see, Mam's in a home. It's called high-dependency, but it's more like total dependency. She can't speak or move any more – I don't even know if she recognises me.'

Melissa has spoken very matter-of-factly, but when she saw the shock and concern on Fiona's face, she felt the tears sting her eyes.

'Mam has Huntington's Disease, you see. It's –'

'I know what it is,' Fiona interrupted her. 'I am a biology teacher, remember.'

'Of course,' said Melissa. 'So there I was, twenty-three years old and resentful as hell. I know I'm a selfish cow, but I wanted to teach abroad and see the world. Then when she needed full time care, I did the sums and realised that if I came to work here,

we could just afford it with my salary and her pension – so no treats or holidays for Melissa!’ She gave a bitter, little laugh.

‘It’s genetic, isn’t it?’ Fiona said slowly. ‘Are you – I mean, have you ...’ her voice trailed away.

‘Have I been tested, you mean? The consultant offered and I refused. I wanted Mam to know that it wasn’t the be-all and end-all of my life. If I’d been handed out the same death sentence, I didn’t want her to know.’

‘So you can accept the job here with a clear conscience, then?’ Fiona asked.

Melissa hesitated. ‘When Mam went into the home, I decided to have the test – nothing to lose by then.’

‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell us!’ Fiona said reproachfully.

‘If nobody knows, I can be an arsy mare and everyone else will give as good as they get. I don’t want kid gloves and understanding looks.’

They were silent for a moment and then Melissa said, ‘You want to know the result, don’t you?’

‘Well, you have left me with a bit of a nail-biting cliff-hanger.’ Fiona was sitting right on the edge of the sofa, gripping her mug hard as she took in the whole story.

‘The tests were negative.’ Melissa looked directly at Fiona as she spoke. ‘But what the tests also showed is that I’m not my mother’s child. So who am I? I can’t ask Mam, that’s for sure.’

Fiona stared at her in shock. ‘But your birth certificate –’

‘States that I am the daughter of Kathleen Wilkes and Father Unnamed. That’s what she always told me – that they split up before I was born, and then he was killed in a motorbike accident. I don’t even know his name, she said it wasn’t important!’

Melissa could hear her voice rising as she burst out, ‘When we found out HD is hereditary, Mam started to cry. I thought it was because she might have passed it on to me, but it must have been because she thought I’d find out that she wasn’t really my mother. If only I’d had the test straightaway, I could have asked her!’

‘So what are you going to do - I mean about Russell House and your future and everything?’ Fiona asked with concern in her voice.

‘I’ll do what I’ve always done, I suppose,’ Melissa replied. ‘I’ll be led, kicking and screaming, by my bloody sense of duty.’

As she spoke she looked past Fiona and through the window, to where the tall row of conifers seemed to be moving in on her.