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## Sidebar of Shame by Martel Maxwell

Within seconds, he is snoring. Quiet rhythmic snorts that build to a crescendo.

I don't feel cheated after the few minutes of thrashing perfunctoriness; just relieved.

Slowly, I inch away from the flung arm, which traps me across my chest as he lies unconscious.

I pull on my white bikini and cotton dress.

In bare feet so as not to make a sound, I creep on ivory marble mottled with grey, flip flops looped over my finger, as I smell the sun and anticipate it soaking into my bones.

By the infinity pool that stretches to the sparkling silvers and blues of the Indian Ocean, they are there, the group of girls who are always having fun.

The one I like most, with brunette bob, freckles and fringe, cocks her head quizzically when she catches my eye and I smile before quickly looking away, cheeks aflame.

One of the group suggests making a list of pros and cons about an ex – she saw it in a movie and it's 'cafartic'.

'I 'aint facking Bridget Jones,' the girl with freckles replies in an East London accent and they laugh some more.

You know that girl you see on holiday – on the beach, by the pool, at the bar – and envy?

You'll always find her on the Sidebar of Shame.

You know the sidebar I mean – The Daily Mail does it best On the right hand side, a neat column of women showcased for your viewing pleasure.

Each one makes you feel a certain way.

The bikini-clad star 'showing off her curves'/'letting it all hang out'/'looking healthy', when the writer always means 'fat'.

And the supermodel or rich guy's girlfriend you want to be – with the 'stunning figure'/'gym-honed body' surfacing from the sea.

When you imagine her life, it is perfect with rows of shoes in a walk-in wardrobe; she attends the parties you wish you could, that look such fun. She can never feel life is passing her by.

That's me. The Facebook photo album of my life is without defect. Drinking champagne on a yacht, laughing on a beach, catwalk perfect at that premiere you read about. The edited highlights for your viewing pleasure. A showcase of half-truths and lies.

A shadow looms as I rub lotion into my calves, blocking the sun. Heart quickening, I squint up and see the girl with freckles.

'Hey.'

'Oh, hullo,' I say, glad it is not him.

'Listen, it's happy hour. You wanna join us for a drink?'

I push my shades on top of my head, not wanting to seem rude and to meet her twinkling blue eyes with matching tripod creases at the sides.

The girl hops from foot to foot on the baking hot ground and she says, 'Cheers ears,' as I hand her my flip-flops.

Then: 'It looks like Sal's got them in.'

She hands me a huge glass of gloopy, yellow liquid with a cherry and umbrella on top and sits on the empty sun longer between me and her group of four.

'Been to any of the beach parties? Should do. Koh Samui's famous for 'em. You staying here?' I sip the drink, which tastes of coconut, pineapple and danger. It is delicious. 'Lucky you. We're at a cheap-er place along the beach. Pay the daily rate to use the pool here. Zoe and Suze over there, they're on the look-out for a millionaire to whisk them away. Me? I'm not so fussy, any cock'll doodle doo.'

Her laugh is dirty, contagious and cackling from the Marlboro Lights she chain-smokes.

'I'm Annie by the way.'

I tell her my name is Lucy.

'Oi,' Sal says as she swings her legs round to face me.

Her hair is fine, straight and strawberry blonde; shoulders a little burnt, pale eyes finely glazed from afternoon drinks. 'Hope you don't mind me saying but we're all like, "Look at her. Look at her figure. Look at 'er clothes. Must be loaded to stay here. And beautiful." Make me a bit sick, you lucky cow.'

I too used to look at that perfect woman and want to be her so badly it hurt.

I had a vision of my future self, cruising down the King's Road in a shiny four-by-four wearing a headscarf and oversized shades like the leading lady in an old Hollywood movie. I guess the image came true.

In my own way, I thought I would be flying the flag for feminism, emancipated by this money that had come without graft.

I was never in love, but I was ready to be and told myself this was it. A man who could provide for our family; give me the lifestyle I desperately desired. A fairy tale for The X Factor generation entitled to that shortcut. An easy life.

In the room, I tell him I popped out for a swim, needed to cool down after our afternoon antics and the corners of his mouth lift.

At dinner, I watch people over his shoulder as he inhales his platter of lobster, head bent down to reveal a thinning pate, buttery sauce smearing his stubble and lips.

There are no walls in the restaurant and the vast, black ocean is beautiful and terrifying. I imagine walking into it, the cool water above my head.

Above, an awning is studded with twinkling stars.

A stone Buddha keeps watch as candles flicker in the gentle sea breeze.

The couple behind stare adoringly into each other's eyes, her fork held to his mouth to taste her food and I wonder how that must feel – to be somewhere so beautiful with someone you love.

When her boyfriend goes to the toilet, I feel her eyes on me, elevating to my face inch by inch.

Shoes that cost two grand, impossibly glossed legs, dusky pink satin dress worn by that actress in her magazine, salon-perfect hair falling in tumbles of expensive, honeyed blondes.

This is what she sees when she clicks on me.

Everything has a price, but at what cost?

I look down and trace the string of diamonds on my wrist.

Click on the thumbnail image of me in the bath until my body prunes in the water, which has long turned cold, too afraid to get out.

Look closely to see the loneliness that clings to my skin.

'I want to go to bed,' he tells me. 'Early start tomorrow.'

In the bedroom, which is huge, pristine and white, peppered with gold fixtures – taps that glisten in the bathroom, a chandelier at the foot of the bed – I wait for sleep.

I think of the caravan holidays we had as kids, giggling with my sister in a single berth that smelled of damp, where the dinner table doubled up as a bed for my little brother. Only years later did I hate the experience because it marked us out as poor.

In the morning, it takes a moment to realise I am alone, the sheets twisted and crumpled where he has been.

He left early for Bangkok on business. I have three days here by myself before my flight to London.

On the bedside table is a small grey box tied in a neat bow with a ribbon of pastel pink. Inside is the ring lined with tiny rubies from the jewellery shop downstairs. A brown paper envelope is stuffed with Thai Bhat.

Quickly, I dress, mind racing and dizzy-drunk with liberation.

I can't stop thinking about her. The girl with freckles and mousy hair.

Opening the balcony doors, I see her by the pool, head thrown back in laughter revealing the horseshoe of her teeth. Her face flickers and blurs in the heat of the sun. I wonder if she'll think it too early for a drink.

Racing down the stairs, two at a time, I cannot wait.

Mismatched bikini, cheap sunglasses, cocktails, friends, hangover, regrettable drunken sex, shitty bedsit, job, authenticity, filthy jokes, college, pros and cons, bring it on, be alone; free and alive, know what it means; look for love, get it wrong, get it right, 'get a room', get a life.

You are the woman I see and desperately want to be.

### **About the Author**

Martel Maxwell is a redhead who hails from Dundee in Scotland. After training to be a criminal lawyer, she opted for a career in journalism, becoming the Sun's first graduate trainee. Spotting her love of party-ing, she became the paper's showbiz reporter and lost a few years to free bars and canapés. Martel drew on her experiences to write her debut novel SCANDALOUS, published by Michael Joseph (Penguin), about a showbiz reporter called Max who drinks too much and her posh half-sister Lucy who falls for Brit-ain's most eligible bachelor. It was named Book of the Week by Heat and Piers Morgan described it as 'a brilliantly waspish insight into the mad world of showbiz.' Martel is a freelance presenter on television shows including Lorraine and The One Show and is writing her second novel. She is currently three stones heavier than the picture you see – and eight months pregnant, after marrying the first boy she kissed (it took him two decades to ask her out). She splits her time between Dundee and London.

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