

Mr Patchouli

Some days she wonders what names the others have for her. Not those who know her with clothes on, a life outside the pool, but the swimmers who turn up, same time as her each morning.

She's got names for some regulars. Mr Wet Fish whose arm slaps like a fillet on a marble slab, spraying water into the dry faces of timid swimmers. Miss White Cap, only happy if she's got the fast lane to herself. Mr Ibiza, easily identified by the glow of his shoulders.

And what do they call her? Mrs Green Goggles? Mrs Wasn't Here for a Long Time and Now She's Back?

She doesn't know, or care. All she wants is to wake up in the winter dark, pull on clothes, stick feet in boots and walk to the pool. Then strip down to her black swimsuit, adjust her goggles and kick into the artificial blue.

Some swimmers count lengths, squinting at gadgets on wrists or adding up in their heads. She just swims until she's ready to leave, head out into the rest of the day.

There are open showers by the pool, but she always uses the cubicles. Since she came back, she's noticed not all showers are the same temperature. The last two are hotter and as one is marked accessible, with a seat and adjustable shower, she always tries to get the cubicle opposite, on the right. There's a button on the wall which supplies water in 10 second blasts. She's learned how to wash with her back pressed against it, creating a continuous flow.

Next year, the pool will be closing, part of council cutbacks, so things are becoming run-down.

Which is why, on this November morning, when she glances up - black swimsuit still on as usual - she realises the partition between the next cubicle is loose and she can see a back covered with

foam, a pair of checked trunks. Mr Patchouli.

It took weeks before she warmed to the idea of swimming in the same water as him. Stupid really. Long hair didn't bother her, but somehow a beard seemed different. Despite fearing crumbs floating towards her, none ever appeared.

Even swimming freestyle, head underwater, she can taste when he arrives. His fragrance sweetens the air gasped in when she tilts her head to the side, reminding her of long-ago college and dances.

Now her shower cubicle is filled with the same heady smell. The gap she's looking through is quite small but even so, she's worried he'll see her watching. She rinses her hair quickly, snaps bottles shut. By the time Mr Patchouli is heading for the lockers, she's dry and dressed.

It would be wrong to change showers, settle for cooler water, she tells herself the next morning. Another screw in the flimsy partition appears to be coming loose. Should she report it? Others are so quick to tell staff when mould appears on grouting or a lock jams. Someone will be on the case. No need for her to do anything.

She closes her eyes to guard against shampoo trickling down her face, opens them only when she feels something against the top of her leg. She blinks, tries to focus. Did an arm jerk back through the gap?

The air is heavily scented again and she can see vigorous rubbing, movement of foamy limbs through the gap, tells herself she must have imagined the body contact

These days she walks to and from the pool, but at the beginning she'd drive, not enough time to swim and get back home to put two mugs on a tray, get breakfast ready. Always watching the clock. Not like now when the whole day stretches ahead. Mr Patchouli used to get a lift from a

man in a red Mini, but now he waits for the bus. She tells herself she's not really watching as she stands at the crossing, but he's hard to miss, with his striped scarf, leather bag. She wonders where he is taking his clean, freshly exercised body. Her own limbs don't feel tired. There's an exhilaration running through her which disappears when she returns to her empty home, a breakfast with no-one to talk to.

One day in the pool, she heard two women speaking, picked up bits of conversation each time she turned in the shallow end. It was very sudden, one said. Heartbreaking. But nice to see him back again after all this time. They wondered how he's managing on his own. She thinks that on another day, a version of that conversation would have been about her, just a few details changed.

It's Friday morning when she next sees Mr Patchouli's soapy body in the neighbouring cubicle.

The gap seems to be getting bigger. She can't understand why no-one's reported it.

Bending down to wash her feet, she feels a hand touching her back. It's exciting, strange, familiar. She turns. The arm is still outstretched.

She raises her arm. Hands touch. She looks at his face, but with no glasses and soap stinging her eyes, it's difficult to make out an expression.

They're not holding hands. Wet fingers are pushed together so it looks as if they're joined in prayer. No words are spoken. He runs his other hand up her arm, back down again, then the contact ends, his back turns and the washing begins again.

Walking home, she thinks how daring he is, yet it doesn't feel like a threat. It's as if her loneliness has seeped out, been found, recognised.

She never swims at weekends, the first hour reserved for clubs, then too busy with families.

Instead makes breakfast, stands by the kitchen window eating, wonders whether Mr Patchouli is

in the pool. When Monday comes, she wakes early.

This time she's bold. Maybe being so much older than him gives her confidence to squeeze her arm through the gap. She watches his body still, the soapy sponge stop mid-air. When he turns to face her, she's sure he's smiling.

We have created another world, she thinks, as the two of them stand at the hair dryers, not speaking. She likes that there's no poolside chat, no attempt to speak when they're dressed. She's picked up from others' conversations that he's an architect, lives in a house designed by him and his partner, who died from a heart attack while taking part in a charity run. She could go online, find out his name, a death notice and tributes, but has no desire to discover more.

She meets a friend, also on her own now, who tells of weekly body massages, lying in a darkened room with soft hands moving over her back. Bliss. Says the touch of another, that's what skin hungers for.

Yes, she thinks, when she is in the cubicle again, feeling the hand on her shoulder. We're tactile creatures. She turns, squeezes her arm through the gap, reciprocates.

Next morning she's running late. Not that she operates to a strict timetable, but she can tell from the scent as she walks into the shower block that Mr Patchouli's already there. She squints. There is a hand-written sign on the door of the end cubicle, too small to read without her glasses. She tries the shower button. Hot water as usual. Picking up shampoo and shower gel, she goes in, locks the door.

Now she understands. The panel is hanging on one hinge and as she enters, Mr Patchouli squeezes through the gap, embraces her. She is held close, rests her head on his wet shoulders.

The water stops and instantly aware of what they're doing, she pulls back, but Mr Patchouli leans against the button and the flow starts up again. She relaxes against him.

She is a small child in her mother's arms, now bigger and back from school with a bloody knee, her father comforting her. Now reliving her husband's embrace after they signed the wedding register, the sweet warmth of holding her new-born daughter.

She remembers embracing paper-thin skin that held together the one she spent two thirds of her life with, feeling his last breath leaving, head grow too heavy.

Hot water runs down Mr Patchouli's shoulders onto hers. It is sealing them together in this wet embrace. She feels a juddering, him or her crying - it doesn't matter. Tears trickle over skin, disappear into the flow.