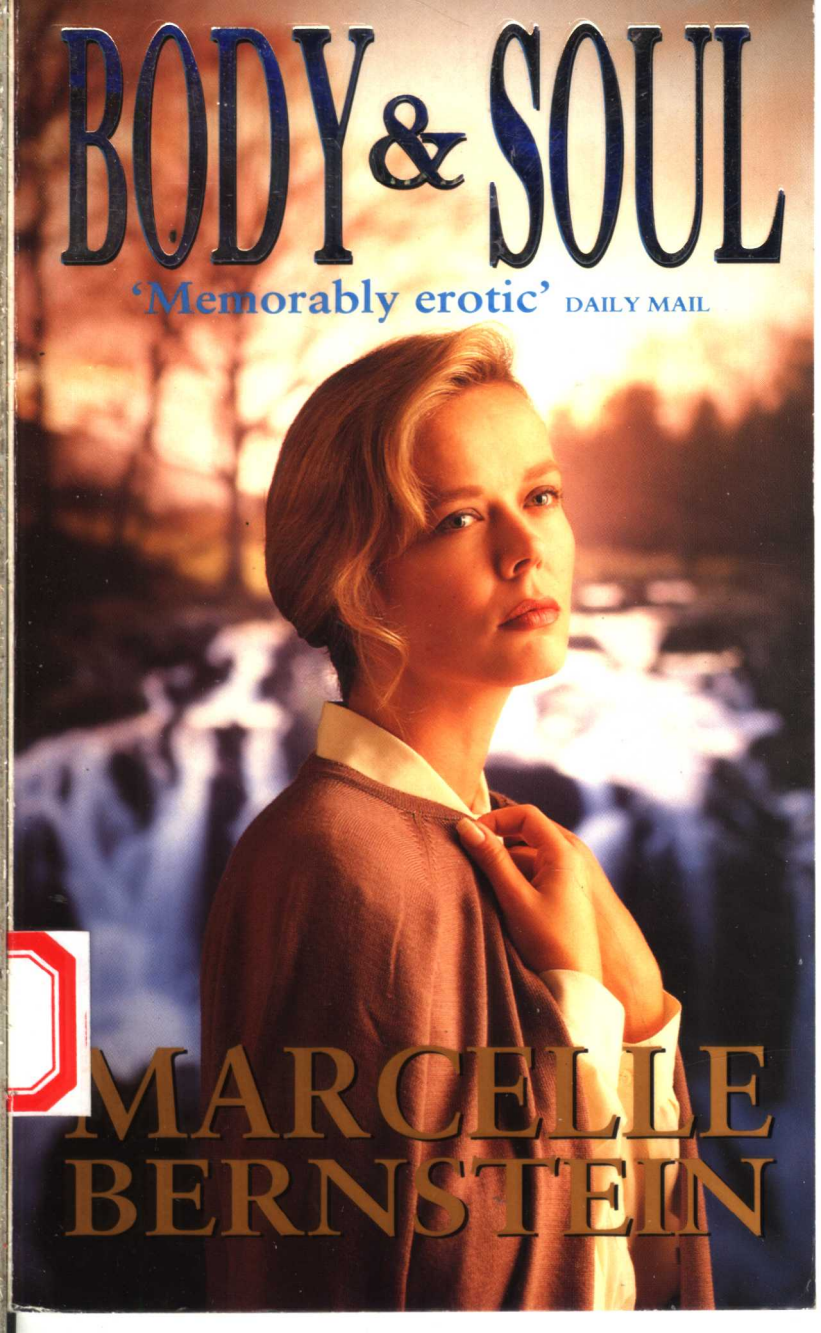
BODY & SOUL

'Memorably erotic' DAILY MAIL



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For thirteen convent years she had fed her mind and denied her body. Like a trained seal, it had been obedient because it knew no different. The nuns lived under the glance of God in an austerity few could match, confining the body in order to free the spirit. Normal urges had stirred it, when nature had rebelled at the sterile rule the vows imposed. But however strong the desire, it had been impersonal: the ache was for something never known, the longing for someone never seen.

The indoctrination had been so thorough that even when she was among people in the world, she experienced everything at one remove. She had always been a watcher, always apart. For all those years she'd hidden her body beneath draperies, her spirit behind bars. She had neutralised herself and her emotions, taken a perverse pride in the denial of human needs and satisfactions.

Even when Hal kissed her on the moor, even when they danced and she had noticed the solid triangle of wide shoulders and narrow hips – still she had felt remote: his youth and his strength were not for her.

All that had changed. They lay facing each other, laced together. *Look at me with the eyes of your heart.*

For Eric,
Rachael, Charlotte and Daniel

BODY & SOUL

I

She woke as always long before dawn. In the suspended space before full awareness she allowed herself a few moments of luxury, savouring the warmth of her body, protected from the day which lay in wait. The call would come soon, anyway.

As sleep slid away, she felt the ache in her back. They said the cold brought on arthritis but surely she was too young. And the thin horsehair mattress provided only scant protection against the slats of the bed. She shifted slightly and the narrow sides—it had not been built with comfort in mind—confined her movements. As she turned, the harsh wool blanket scratched her neck. In all these years she had never managed to accustom herself to them, nor the thick sheets which were washed once in twelve months. She realised further sleep would be impossible.

She opened her eyes. Skimpy cotton curtains stirred and lifted so she could make out the bars at the window. Some people had fitted cardboard shutters to keep out the worst draughts, only she hated the dense darkness that brought. Though even in pitch black she knew every inch of the cell she had occupied now for thirteen years. She could pace it out blindfold on the bare stone floor. Ten paces from door to window, seven across. Put out a hand and the washbasin was on her left. Put the other hand to the ugly bedside table with its stubby lamp, the dark orange shade faded from long use.

It was against the rules to switch on the lamp after nine o'clock, though she would have liked to read. Through the walls she caught the rumble of faint, familiar snoring. In the past the sound had soothed when she could not sleep, the reassurance of someone nearby when insomnia unlocked devils she could subdue in daylight. Now the

uneven snuffles irritated. She sighed. Unkind thoughts were as heartless as cruel words.

Across the far end of the cell she had strung a makeshift washing line, so she could rinse out her own underwear. A sudden gust of wind jiggled the feet of her long wool stockings in a lunatic dance. She had spun the wool for them herself, and knitted them. They were warm, even with the open sandals they wore summer and winter alike. But they itched. She had said so once, and been told firmly that discomfort was not to be avoided.

And things used to be much worse. It was only five years ago that they had been permitted to use soap for laundering. They had to make it themselves but it was infinitely better than washing soda. She winced at the memory of her hands raw from water and cold. That was during the winter when they had painted their cells. Under the washbasin was a leftover Snowcem tin she used as a waste-bin. She had painted it white, but it was still an old tin.

In the last year or two she had become more and more conscious of the bleakness of her surroundings. For ten years she had accepted without question uncarpeted corridors, the stone-flagged kitchens and outhouses where they worked, upright chairs and rough wood tables. Then one day she had gathered a bunch of flowers from the garden—bluebells in March, their blithe colour and scent making her ache for something she couldn't name—and looked for a vase. In the end she had used a jamjar, her efforts reduced to a child's attempt at beauty. It had brought home how much she missed the small pleasure of looking at something which was more than functional, something decorative and unnecessary. She longed to see a picture or an ornament.

An agonised squealing jagged the darkness outside. Then it was sliced by silence. Sometimes, when she couldn't sleep, she would sit by her window and watch for the barn-owl to drop on invisible prey. Wide speckled wings beating slow, cruel pale angel bringing a thousand tiny deaths. The quiet pressed against her ears: she could sense little bodies crouched flat with fright. She had been told there were two owls in the church tower of the village less than a mile away. She had never been there. She could never go now.

It must be almost four. Accustomed as she was to living one hour at a time, she had learnt to estimate it accurately without a watch. She had worn her neat Tissot on its lizard strap when she came here, but

surrendered it along with all her other possessions: handbag and purse, lipstick and compact, the jeans and fringed leather jacket she'd worn to travel.

She thought with distaste of the clothes she would soon put on, the coarse wool garments. When she had worn them first they had seemed honourable, won by her own efforts. But lately she had caught herself thinking wistfully of something pretty. A ribbon. A touch of silk. Frivolities she would never enjoy again.

Such things were petty distractions, of course. They didn't matter. The clothes she wore now were the same as they had been a hundred years ago, as they would be in a hundred years' time. They were meant to be simple, stark and sexless, without artifice or adornment. They did not even have safety pins—she had been shown how to collect berries and keep them in a tin till they hardened. Then she would soak them in water, string them onto cords and knot them firmly into her garments.

She had described this once in a letter home. They were permitted to write each month now, instead of two or three times a year, but the letters were censored. It had been spotted and that page had arrived with the offending lines neatly scissored out. And to tell such things on visiting days was unthinkable. The double set of bars, the brief time allowed, made idle chatter impossible.

Over the years she'd found it best to keep to herself the wry amusement she felt at so much here. Everyone talked a lot about a sense of humour being important to survive, but it did not extend to discussing their lives with outsiders. This had the effect—as was surely intended—of distancing her from her family, cutting her off even more completely than stone walls and heavy wood doors, massive locks and keys, had already done. It was as if her previous existence belonged to someone else. Even her name had been taken away from her: she was Anna now only to herself and her family on those rare permitted occasions.

Her old name, her old identity. How eagerly she had relinquished them all those years ago. How willingly she had taken the leap into the unknown. And how traumatic the surrender had proved to be.

Blind obedience was exacted, fierce discipline exerted. She had been taught to carry her hands in a special way, clasped together at waist level, to walk on the ball of her foot. She must not speak without need and even then she should not look at the person she was addressing

but keep her eyes carefully lowered. She was trained to respond with deference to those in authority, to move on the instant when a bell rang. If she was ordered to brush a corridor in a certain manner, that was how it must be done; any improvement was forbidden. If she broke a glass she had to admit to it, if she wanted an aspirin she must seek permission. Once she dropped a plate during a meal and had to kiss the ground.

As time went by, she became aware that she no longer possessed tastes or held opinions. It was as if her personality had been shrunk. There was scarcely anything about her, now, to mark her out from all the others. This painful piece of self-knowledge depressed her deeply: she felt diminished, destroyed, less than whole. For a long time—for years—she could not come to terms with it. She felt like a fly she'd seen once, trapped in a beautiful piece of amber, stifled and stilled by its surroundings.

Anna had told herself this would pass. She looked around and saw that her companions were either going through the same thing or had experienced it already. She had been down on her knees scrubbing the hall, her hands raw and smarting from the pure ammonia they poured into the water, when the woman beside her had whispered, "Hope you're not wearing your Dior tights."

"As it happens," she'd muttered back, for they were forbidden to speak, "I've left them tucked into my Guccis."

They had continued to rub the floor in sweating silence, but Anna's spirits lifted. She was able to see the absurdity of her situation. She understood well enough what they were about, she realised that it was intended for her own good, that the words they had read to her were meant.

The victim must be consumed.

Dreadful words. Worse, perhaps, than the reality. And then the next week she had been told to sweep up leaves from the courtyard. It was March and a rain-laden gale rampaged outside. She had stared in genuine bewilderment, biting back the protests. Quietly she had put on wellingtons and gone outside with the unwieldy broom of twigs she had made herself, to stand helplessly as the leaves spun round her. It was too much to ask. It was impossible, ridiculous.

And then she thought, of *course* it's ridiculous. That's the point. She had smiled. If that's what they want, they can have it. I've nothing

else to do. She had started to brush the leaves into a heap, not caring that they were instantly scattered, humming to herself. She had understood then that to question orders was useless. They existed not so much to be carried out as to be given: their purpose was to break the will. The process was intended to be destructive, it was hardship at some deep psychological level.

And in some strange way she couldn't define, it had made her stronger. Daily she discovered she could endure a little more. She found possibilities within herself and there was no going back to the soft girl she had been before.

In the veiled pre-dawn light, Anna stared round her cell. The single bookshelf, the stool, the piece of sacking she used each morning as a bathmat when she washed, for there was only one bathroom for them all. The small cross of palm she had pinned to the wall.

Odd to think how happy she had once been in this confined space. How contented. The primitive labour, the petty restrictions—in her own cell these things ceased to chafe. The day was divided by bells into half-hour intervals and for each half-hour she was allotted a task. The relief of letting herself in here at night was immense.

She had never imagined how difficult it would be to live so closely with so many. She listened to the snores from beyond her wall, waiting for the rise and fall, the gurgle, the uneven pause. The rise and fall, the gurgle . . . she groaned. Damn, damn, damn. It was an intrusion, an infringement of the only privacy she had, a reminder that she was bound to these people, that nothing she used or wore or touched was hers alone. Even the food she ate was decided by others and there was no choice, ever. You ate what was put in front of you, like it or not. Better if you didn't, better if it tasted of gall and vinegar.

The thought of food made her long for a cup of tea. She wouldn't get one till she'd been up for over an hour. And lucky to have that. Until quite recently—only a few years before she'd arrived—tea was unknown and the only hot drink they ever tasted was sugared water. They still were not permitted coffee. She often thought if she'd known that, she'd have had another cup of the awful stuff they served at the station buffet on her way here. Was that really thirteen years ago?

When she had first arrived, puffing away on a last cigarette, she thought she had never been anywhere so remote. Those early impressions were still vivid: the grey stone lodge spouting smoke beside

the gate, the winding drive overhung with dark trees and then the ugly, solid house standing high in its overgrown acres, surrounded by a ramble of rhododendrons. At one side of the house the ground fell away to reveal the plain below and distant mountains, humped misshapen Welsh giants.

She had over-tipped an appreciative taxi-driver without noticing, her eyes already fixed on the view. She had stood there for a long time, her bag on the gravel beside her, staring out across the valley where three rivers snaked silver through fields of jade. There was no sound but the dry clapping of leaves in the soft wind and the call of a reeling bird. Silence had belled around her, enveloping as a cloak.

Anna was accustomed to the aural assaults of a busy city: buses and pounding lorries, shouts and sirens, bursts of music from passing cars, whistling workmen, stammer of drills on building sites. Nothing in her life had prepared her for such deep peace.

Silence was the rule. Except for brief specified times, it was stringently observed. Day in, day out. Enforcing it became a fetish, so that even the accidental slamming of a door was an infringement and had to be reported on your knees.

Even that hadn't bothered her. For the first few years here she had loved it all: this was what she had chosen. There had been tremendous relief that her future was settled, a great security. When she was working the garden, hacking down undergrowth with a bill-hook, she would straighten up with a hand on the small of her back, and the vision of her valley would be as refreshing as cool water.

She had not minded the hard physical labour for she was young and strong. Gradually it had changed her, transforming the eighteen-year-old with a hint of puppy fat lingering round hips and thighs into a lean-bodied woman with a narrow waist and small breasts. She reflected ruefully that the food certainly didn't contribute to excess weight: many evenings she got up from the long tables still hungry. Last night it had been soup, cold fish with oil followed by a plate of cabbage, and a piece of gingerbread. You received enough food to get a certain amount of work from your body. She could have eaten twice the amount she was allotted. And she'd give anything to taste red meat. Funny, at home she'd almost become a vegetarian, so little did she like the idea of eating flesh, and here she was yearning for a steak. And chips.

It was the work, of course, which produced the appetite, repetitive tasks deliberately chosen to be performed mechanically. She not only did much of the gardening, she also looked after the hens, cleaning out the shed and feeding them as well as collecting eggs. The task she could not bear, that brought her awake in the night with apprehension, was to wring the necks of the old birds when they ceased laying. She tried to do it with closed eyes, like the owls at the moment of kill, but she hated the desperate last struggle, the wrench of tearing gristle, the glazed stare. Terrible to do that with her bare hands.

She inspected her fingers. Even in the half-light she could see ingrained dirt no amount of washing would remove, dark lines ridging her nails, feel callouses on her palms. They were the hands of a good workman, not a woman just over thirty.

They had been pretty hands when she first arrived here, with scarlet varnish on her nails. Estée Lauder, the most expensive she could buy, a rare and final gesture of extravagance. She'd painted it on with infinite care before she left home. On her second day they'd politely requested that she remove it, gave her cottonwool and a bottle of acetone and that had been that. The varnish had remained in its elaborate bottle in her washbag. She had returned to her cell one evening to find the bag gone. She never asked why, nor was she ever told. The scented soap from her brother, the skin tonic she liked, talcum powder—all had been taken. Only her toothbrush remained and the tube of toothpaste. When that was finished, she used salt like everyone else.

It must be time for the call, surely. She lay snug, her nose just under the blanket so she didn't inhale the sharp air. Only September and she could see frost flowers on the glass from her breath. They were so high here, sometimes she would find summer plants withered by night frosts even after warm days. She had turned towards the window and the fastening of the soft bonnet they all wore at night pulled against her throat. She undid the knot and took it off, rubbing her hand over her head; it felt as curly and rough as the coat of the Welsh collie they used for herding the small flock of sheep.

She still remembered the afternoon when her brother had been allowed to bring his two little boys to see her. When she first arrived here, visitors were permitted only rarely. Exceptions would be made for emergencies such as illness or if some close relative died. A

chaperone was always present. Now family members could apply once a month in writing for appointments. Other places, she'd learned, were far less strict. But she had wanted this.

Too oppressed by their surroundings to do more than mutter answers to her questions, the children had sucked their thumbs and leaned fidgety against Simon. As he led them away after an hour, Anna heard Jamie ask in his piercing treble, "Have they cut off all her hair, Dad?"

Simon had hurried them out but she had felt terrible, some sort of monster. The truth was they *had* cut her hair. She had always worn it long, held back with a tortoiseshell slide or a velvet band. It had suited her, given her an even more youthful look with her shy smile and immature features. She'd once found a picture in a book about unicorns of a medieval princess who looked like her: pale skin, high rounded forehead, straight nose and oddly complicated mouth, the lower lip full and tremulous, the upper sharply cut, precise and almost prim.

She had brushed and brushed the golden-brown bush of her hair that last time, before she braided it into a long plait down her back and knotted it with an elastic band. They had cut it off in public and put it in a little rush basket: it had looked like a glossy animal coiled in sleep and she had been unable to resist touching it. Warm it felt, alive, and she had been seized by a terrible pang of anger and anguish. How primitive, how senseless, to make her do this.

But that was nothing to what she'd felt later when they ran a pair of clippers over her head, nipping her scalp as they shaved. She had known they were going to do it, of course, only she had not really thought it through. Chunks of hair falling on the white sheet round her shoulders, the realisation of how hideous she must look, shorn like a tennis ball, the strange chill of her head without its warm mane, the funny weightless feeling. She'd been grateful that she couldn't see herself.

Some of the women kept their hair like that, running a razor over their skin every three or four weeks. It was convenient, they said, and cool. Others, like Anna, just cut the ends, snipping at random with nail scissors when it felt uncomfortable. She had no mirror—none of them did—and she hadn't even seen one in thirteen years, so she had no idea what she looked like. Terrible, probably.

Anna smoothed what would have been a fringe if she'd let it, and wondered what colour it was now. Going grey for all she knew, though the bits she cut off were still dark enough. Darker than it used to be,