

Pelagia's Healing Therapies
by Carol Major
(Sample pages)

A woman is falsely told her baby daughter is dead because she wouldn't give it up for adoption. She is left to believe she may have smothered the child at birth.

Pelagia's Healing Therapies is story about two girls from different sides of the tracks who are separated after the traumatic birth and supposed death of a baby. They meet twenty-seven years later, and it is discovered the child could be alive. A conflicted Anglican nun provides clues that assist the search.

This is a story about finding self-redemption through the correction of historical lies. It is also a tale about religious beliefs, the artificial divide between sex and motherhood, and who deserves to care for a child.

*A line has been drawn and on the other side of it is the
past, both darker and more brightly intense than the present.*

Margaret Atwood,
“True Trash”, Wilderness Tips

*Shameless, they call me.
Hardened
As the sea monsters.
But it was for shame—not shamelessness—
That I committed
This great and complicated sin.*

Alice Major,
“A Great and Complicated Sin”, No Monster

Prologue: March 2000

Charlie lay naked on his stomach, looking strangely luminous, like a great rubber doll. The curtains in the cubicle were drawn and in the dim light the pink sheet on the massage table took on a bloody hue. Vikki stepped out of her black baby-doll nightgown and leaned over him with her back to the mirrored wall. "See." She shook her bottom until the flesh wobbled. "He can watch my arse while I'm working him over. Lots of men like that."

Meredith stood close to the door. She was dressed in a sheer top and G-string. She was here to learn the ropes.

"Are you paying attention?" Vikki snapped. "Get closer." She turned Charlie's arm at a right angle and rubbed her thumb around the protruding shoulder. "This is where you start. Nothing too sexy, just getting out knots." Vikki was close to fifty. Her legs were short and stubby and she had tiny little teeth. You'd expect prostitutes to be attractive or at least young. Meredith glanced down at her own body, the puffy stomach, although it was less puffy now. She often worried that she might have cancer, the aching, the cramps, but she'd refused to have pap tests. Just the thought of a doctor prodding down there made her feel faint.

"Get closer," Vikki snapped again. Her voice reminded Meredith of Miss Lewis. She'd been the Year Eleven home science teacher all those years ago. There'd been a class on how to bathe a baby using a doll, all the awkward twisting of those plastic arms and legs to get it into the tub. Vikki grunted a little as she kneaded Charlie's back, then turned to deliver more instructions.

"If this was a half-hour client you'd work on a three up, three down basis. That means you start with the top half of the man, rubbing up from his waist to his

neck firmly and then leaning over him as you stroke down. Let your boobs drag behind.” She rubbed the heel of her oiled hand hard up Charlie’s back, folded herself over him and stroked down with an open palm. Her breasts fell on his skin like mottled salamanders. Charlie shivered and tried to grab between her legs.

“That’s called body to body,” said Vikki, slapping his hand away. “All of the clients ask for that when they ring. ‘Do you do body to body?’ That’s what they always ask.” She put more oil on her hands and began rubbing Charlie again.

“So three strokes up and down each side of his back and then you do the same for the top and bottom of his legs. That works out to about twelve minutes and gives you time to work on his toes, his bum and his other parts.”

Meredith remembered Miss Lewis using the same tone when she was giving instructions on how to time a soft-boiled egg. Charlie looked like a boiled egg, a big one floating in hot water. Had he been cooking for three minutes? She could almost see Miss Lewis standing over him, her face shiny with the steam.

Vikki rested her bottom on the side of the massage table and began to suck Charlie’s toe. He pulled his foot away and she laughed.

“That’s one of the reasons you want them cleaned up. Some men love it but Charlie says it tickles.” She scurried her nails up his thighs and began stroking gently. “But all men love this.” She slipped her fingers between his legs and spread them slightly. Charlie’s hips started to rise. She pushed them down. “Not now Charlie, you’ll have to wait.”

She turned to Meredith. “Your nails are a bit short but keep teasing them up his thighs just the way I was doing and then tickle his balls. Often you don’t need to touch his cock and he comes. That’s what you call hand relief. Half an hour all up

and you don't even need to look at the clock. Blokes don't want to see you looking at a clock."

Meredith did look at the clock. It was five fifteen.

Vikki handed her the bottle of baby oil. "Your turn. Move in."

Meredith came closer to the table. She felt cold, as if someone had slipped a needle filled with anaesthetic in her arm. She couldn't even feel Charlie's flesh as she slid her hand up his back, although she could see her bottom in the mirror, the borrowed G-string, the spider line of veins on her thighs.

"You're not doing it properly." Vikki slapped her behind. "You need to push your fingers in harder. What's the matter? Haven't you ever touched a naked man before?"

Meredith swallowed. Someone else had asked her that question, wanted to know how many times she'd had sex and where. Had that person been asking about the kind of sex that goes on in a brothel or something much worse—something cloyingly embarrassing, like not knowing where to put it or finding it doesn't fit? She was sure that it was a woman who had asked those questions—a woman with a cardigan over her shoulders who kept tapping her pen. It wasn't Miss Lewis. It was someone else.

Charlie raised his head. "And take off your top. I want to see your tits."

Meredith glanced down at her breasts. They were small. It was the only part of her body that hadn't gained weight over the years, two hard apples that never turned ripe.

"Go on," said Vikki. She was grinning, those tiny little teeth.

Meredith slid her top off, crossed her hands over her breasts. Vikki gave her a nudge. "C'mon. Lean over him. Let your tits touch his back."

Meredith released her arms and slowly lowered herself over Charlie until her nipples brushed his oily skin but then she bolted back. She'd felt an electric shock and then a fullness, as if her breasts were swelling. She had the oddest desire to tug her nipples, to have anything tug on them, even Vikki's teeth. She touched one gingerly.

Charlie cranked his head around to see what she was doing. "Jesus, woman. This will never do." He leaned out to grab her hands and shoved one between his thighs, the other on his buttock. "Like Vikki said. Work me up."

His thigh felt damp and warm, the rough strands of hair. Meredith had felt something similar but the memory of it was between her legs, a growing mound stretching her vagina and then the awful pain in her back rising across her stomach, rising, rising. She began to feel it now, a twinge that turned into a cramp. She started to knead Charlie's thigh in time to each wave, harder and harder as they grew. Vikki began to laugh or was it crying Meredith heard?

Charlie moaned. "That's it. Move up further. I'm getting ready to come."

She reached higher. She couldn't see the next bit of flesh but she could feel it, the strained rubbery veins and with it with the most murderous thunder in her ears. It was as if she were tumbling in the ocean, desperately holding this encouraged cord so tight. Charlie shuddered. The flesh in her hand turned soft and sticky, and a salty seaweed smell seeped into the room. With that odour she imagined a beach and something tossed on the shore. Had she tossed it? She shut her eyes. Yes, there it was but the tiny face was waxen and the petal lips closed. She wanted to reach for that face but her hand was trapped beneath Charlie's belly and her eyes were too blurred with tears.

Stray Dogs: chapter one

Three weeks earlier...

Jack had been coughing most of the night. Finally, in the grey hours before dawn, he fell asleep, his nose plugged green and his mouth gaping in sour little gasps. By then Zoe was completely awake, partly because Jack had disturbed her once too often and partly because she was angry about having to mind him again. His mother had forgotten all about him when she ran out on her loser boyfriend and it had been Zoe who had to go back and rescue the kid. She'd found the boyfriend lying on the sofa flicking through TV stations—Lizzie's television set of course and Lizzie's remote control. Jack was crouched on the floor licking the inside of an empty chip packet and rubbing an action man toy down the front of his dirty shorts.

“Jesus,” she shouted, barging in. “Didn't you give the kid anything decent to eat or drink?”

The boyfriend raised his fist. “Get the fuck out. Where's Texas?” All of Lizzie's boyfriends thought her name was Texas and she never told them that she was a mother and that Jack belonged to her. She claimed he was her sister's kid and was forever telling Jack never to call her mum. “Call me Texas. I'm Texas.”

Zoe wasn't frightened by the boyfriend. She'd learned long ago how to handle herself around angry men. She grabbed Jack's hand and walked out the door—had done the same favour for Lizzie only two months before. That time she'd hired Mike to track the arse hole down and get Lizzie's stuff back. Mike had been in Vietnam; he was good at tracking things down and Zoe didn't mind forking out the cash. Lizzie was her best little earner. Last night she'd turned over three clients by the time Zoe

brought Jack back. Of course there was the usual fuss about having her baby boy in her arms again but it was all for show. Five minutes later and she was putting on the lipstick to go down to the pub. By then Jack had fallen asleep on the office couch.

“Just for an hour,” Lizzie wheedled. “And you’re still here for a bit.” But she didn’t return and hadn’t answered her mobile either. Zoe gave up and took Jack home to her flat. He was starving by then, so she grilled a couple of lamb cutlets and later tried to get him out of his filthy clothes and into a bath. He’d shoved the food down all right but wouldn’t have a bar of getting himself wet. Instead he’d jumped up and down on her mattress, shouting that it was his action man that was dirty, then ran into the bathroom and pushed the figurine’s face into a bar of soap. In the end she’d let him crawl under her sheets with dry tomato sauce all over his face.

The flat still smelled of grilled lamb. Zoe padded into the kitchen to open the window. Two floors below a neighbour climbed into a Volvo. She’d never spoken to the prick, didn’t speak to anyone in this posh part of the neighbourhood and knew that her girls thought she was crazy for renting here. Vikki pointed out that she could have found a cheaper place within walking distance of the brothel and just as close to the beach. But it wasn’t Vikki who was paying the rent and she was too thick-headed to understand that there were other things at stake, like wanting to prove you could live anywhere you liked.

“New century,” Zoe said.

Vikki snorted. “Not that bloody rubbish again.” Although Vikki had been the one who’d stocked up on tinned food and worried that her computer would crash. Zoe had lain on her bed on New Years Eve watching her digital clock turn over, half expecting God to look down. But he didn’t, and midnight came and went. She thought

he might have used the moment to make an appearance—all that crap about vengeance being his. Well, he'd been a long time getting round to it when it came to all the people who'd screwed her, so she took his no-show as a clear sign she could take matters into her own hands. She was on a mission to expose their lies and erase all of the fraudulent selves they'd forced her to be. There were lots of names to search under: Zoe Benson, Zoe Stoddard, Zoe Brittleham, Zoe Lowe. Lowe had been the worst. She wanted to find that girl and rub her out completely. Setting up a brothel in the old beachside suburb was one way of turning the tables, made her feel as if she owned some of the beach too, as well as those caves in the headland where she used to hide. It was so good to see her real name on the business purchase form: *Zoe Fortune*. She had a right to claim it too.

Straight after the signing she'd headed for the house near the railway track where she'd once been Zoe Lowe, so ready to tell the arse holes inside just where to get off, but the house had been knocked down and the land behind turned into a car wash. That would have been God getting *His* rocks off. Shit sense of humour. She half expected the rest of her past to be bulldozed as well—the caves on the headland and the street where her best friend Merry had lived. Merry's mother was another person Zoe wanted to give the finger. She'd blamed Zoe when Merry got pregnant, said it was Zoe's fault. Shit, as if she had a dick. But the house was still there. Zoe stood outside and stared at it, willing Joan to come out and then figured the old cow was probably dead. Afterwards she followed the bus route up to the old high school, a sign saying you couldn't come in without permission. That irked her but it would be about paedophiles. The oval beyond was empty, the kids in class. Instead she wandered up to the nearby church, where she'd gone to scripture class. What a joke. It was still sitting on the same hill looking down on the beach below, the swing still

there. She'd sat on that swing with Merry waiting to see God's face on the waters but he never showed up then either. She chucked a stone in that direction and then took the path down to the beach. There was a new plaza so she poked round the shops. Bought a cushion in a soft furnishings shop because Vikki was always telling her to make the flat look more homey.

"Looks like you're squatting. You have to have more than a portable TV and a mattress." Zoe glanced at the cushion in the corner, a polka-dot print. She snorted. Home decorating always felt a bit like lying too. The only real keepsake she moved with her was a cardboard box filled with bits and pieces: a post card of the Big Banana and a velvet mask from the time she worked in the Cross.

Jack moaned and she padded back to the bedroom. His arm had fallen off the mattress and when he moved again the action man rolled onto the floor. His eyes opened immediately and he snatched for it, hugging it hard to his chest. He was a funny little kid; would turn five next year and be old enough to start school, although Lizzie said they might not take him. She said he was retarded just like his father. She said that right in front of Jack's face.

Zoe thought he'd come good once he started mixing with kids his own age and as she watched him rolling around in her sheets hugging his toy, she had an overwhelming desire to show him real kids right now. Maybe she could take him over to the school oval, take him to the oval. That could do him good. "C'mon," she said, holding out her hand. "Let's comb your hair and go find Texas. I'll take you to see some big boys playing footy on the way."

Jack curled into a ball then jumped up and flew the action figure towards her face. "Zoom, zoom."

She ducked. "Yeah, right. We can show plastic man the big boys too."

He squatted on the mattress and made the figurine hop over the sheets. It meant he might be more accommodating this morning, might even agree to getting out of the car and walking through that oval. Truth was, it gave her an excuse to walk through the schoolyard as well. Nobody would say anything if she was holding the hand of a little boy.