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## Austerity

by Fiona Dennis

Austerity pleased her – it gave her the comfort of sacrifice. Dear Margaret had discovered to appear humble and modest makes you unassailable. The rich and the powerful can't compete for a moment, they can't get a grip on your small, dull surface. In such a role she would never be lacking, never tedious, never behind the times. She represented the plain honest truth – life how it was for the silent majority, life of the 'ordinary man' – the housewife in the market and the poor man at the end of the queue. Everyone was humbled by Dear Margaret's austere life and always left her company with a slight sense of shame at their own good fortune.

But Alec had been absolutely right – you believe the things you needed to – At the time she had needed to believe her sacrifices were greater than mere poverty, that her early squalid life was somehow morally superior to the those better off than her. Her shelves had been empty but she was no glutton, her stockings darned for she was thrifty, her life dull but essentially, she kept regular hours and had a comfortable routine. She held her head high and was the very model of respectability.

Of course now, life was a very different game; she had a discrete prosperity, very discrete. She really had not needed to worry about the bills, large or small, for some time. She could, if she chose, present a very different picture of herself but she chose, not to. There were no dinner party invitations ensuing from her home, no need for a new wardrobe each season and no large presents at Christmas. Not so modest people appreciated her modest lifestyle and enriched it, generously, from their own. Their nagging sense of guilt at her proud chin and slender means touched them and their bank accounts, everyone helped, discreetly and Dear Margaret was gratifyingly grateful.

Moral superiority always won out over wealth, as long as you had a bank balance like Margarets, tucked away quietly, discretely, visited on holidays and trips but otherwise, swelling with the warmth of her friends and benefactors. With such a long gestation, her nest egg was really quite substantial. Perhaps, she mused, the time to hatch was approaching, the time when Dear Margaret would spread her wings and head for warmer climes sporting far more brilliant plumage.