

# The Last of the Neanderthals

The Third and Final Book in “The Wedding Feast” Series

By Jonathan Pidduck

Copyright 2013 – Jonathan Pidduck

The sky was bruised purple and funeral-grey, back-lit by the last dying embers of the decaying sun. It weighed heavily on the winter wood below, suffocating the last stubborn pockets of light wherever it found them, pouring cold shadow into the leafless void.

All was silent at first, but then tyres crunched down noisily on narrow tarmac. Two intrusive beams of light were doused suddenly; twin metal doors slammed in rapid succession; a pair of shadowy figures penetrated the watching wood.

A man made his way through the trees, a camera in one hand, a hesitant woman towed along in the other.

“It’s dark,” she said.

“That’s what happens at night,” he told her, and led her further into the shadows, keen to start their game.

She swore as something unseen raked her bare leg, but he pulled her ever onwards, forging a path through the creeping undergrowth.

“It’s *really* dark,” she elaborated. “You should’ve brought a torch or something. Can’t we just do it in the car?”

“I wanna take photos first.”

“You’re not gonna see anything. The sun’ll set in a few minutes. It’s blacker than a witch’s minge out here, and twice as bloody creepy.”

“That’s what the flash is for.”

She dug in her stilettos, and came to a resolute stop. “I’m not going any further, Gary. We do it here, or I’m out of here. Your choice.”

He sighed. He gave her arm an exploratory tug, but she refused to budge. “Just a little further,” he urged. “We’re too close to the road. Someone might see.”

“Keys,” she demanded, handing out her hand. She very much doubted anyone would see anything at all once the sun had set.

He huffed, but she stood her ground. The sun gave up the fight, and disappeared below the horizon. She huffed back at him, refusing to be outdone in the petulance stakes.

This was not how he had imagined their photo session would be. It was supposed to be her draped seductively around tree trunks, all pouting and naked and gorgeous, like some nymphomaniac druid. It wasn’t supposed to be the two of them having a “domestic” whilst ankle-deep in squelchy mud. He would never admit it to her, but he hadn’t realised quite how dark it would be out here in the back of beyond. Maybe she was right about not straying too far from the car. She’d kill him if they got lost, or got murdered in the woods.

“Okay, we’ll do it your way. Get your kit off, then.”

“I’m gonna freeze my tits off.”

“That’s not really the look I’m after. Come on, Debbie. Five minutes. Then back home for a curry to warm you up.”

She took her coat off, not without misgivings. She was naked underneath. She shivered with cold, as she looked around for somewhere to put it. She heard him tutting, but ignored him. She was buggered if she was going to get it all muddy, not when it had cost her sixty quid in the Debenhams sales. Besides, he'd probably complain about his upholstery when she got back in the car, just to add insult to injury!

"Ready?" he asked, with more than a hint of impatience.

She draped her coat over a low branch, and took her position by the tree, her thigh pressed seductively against the rough bark of the trunk.

"Shoot."

"Where are you? I can't see a thing."

"Over here. By the tree."

"That's helpful, in a forest!"

She snatched up her coat. "Right, that's it. If you're gonna be sarky, I'm going home."

"I'm sorry. Okay? It's just that I'm cold, and I'm -"

"*You're* cold?" she snapped. "You've still got your bloody coat on! I'm the one standing here with my tits out – and pretty much everything else besides – while you keep taking the piss out of me every chance you get. Well, if you don't like it, find yourself another model. I'm off."

He homed in on her voice, and gave her an almost-apologetic hug. He coaxed her coat from her frozen fingers, and placed it back on the branch of the tree. "Five

minutes,” he said. “And I won’t say another word. I promise.”

“You’d better not, or you’re gonna get a swift kick in the knackers.”

She took her position again. She pressed against the tree-trunk, feeling it against her right hip, her thigh, her breast. She could just about make out his silhouette, raising the camera, pointing it towards her.

“You’re too far away,” she told him. “The flash won’t work.”

“I’m the photographer,” he grumbled, but moved a few feet closer to her nonetheless.

“I need to pee.” She sensed him tensing up. “Just winding you up. Go on, take your photo. Your five minutes is nearly up.”

The flash went off, illuminating her for a second. He had to run his thumb around the edge of the camera to find the button to check out the photograph he had just taken, as it was too dark to see it. It was not a good picture; he was still too far away for the flash to work, and it was pretty hard to tell from the photo what was tree and what was naked (but stroppy) woman. He would have liked to have taken the picture again, but there were other angles he wanted to capture, and the way she was moaning about the cold he might run out of time if he tried to be a perfectionist. Best just move on to the next photo, and hope for the best when he Photo-shopped it (or whatever

you call it when you bugger around with the colour and the contrast on the computer).

“Turn round,” he instructed, shuffling a few steps forward to put her in effective range of the flash.

“Do what?” she enquired, mystified.

“I wanna get one of your bottom.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. Go on, then, I’m there. One more picture after this one.”

“Two.”

“One. Did the flash turn out okay?”

“Perfect,” he lied. “Okay, stop talking. I want you looking sultry. It’ll spoil it if your gob’s open.”

“Charming!”

The flash went off a second time. Again, he inspected the photograph he had taken. As promised, she had turned her back to him, and was looking back at him over her shoulder. Her bottom was very much on display. It would have been a good picture, but for the fact that he was now too close with the flash, and her whole body was bathed in spectral white.

“Happy?” she asked.

“Your mouth’s open,” he lied. “You were talking. I’ll have to take it again.”

“Tough. You’ve got one more photo.”

“Debbie! That’s not fair!”

“No, what’s not fair is that I’m standing in the middle of a pitch-black wood, stark-bloody naked, shaking with cold,

while you play at being David Bailey on Viagra! Where do you want me? Last photo.”

“Couldn’t I just take another couple after - ”

“Where’s my coat?”

“Okay, okay, keep your knickers on.”

“Chance would be a fine thing.”

He pretended to think for a few moments, partly because he didn’t want to make it too obvious that he had pre-meditated the last pose, and partly to make her shiver for just a little while longer in retaliation for turning what should have been a real turn-on into a domestic row.

“Can you pole-dance against the tree?”

“Do what? Define pole-dance.”

“Hang on to the trunk with both your legs off the ground. Upside down if you can.”

“Upside-down!”

“Well, the right way up, if you can’t manage that. With your head thrown back, but looking at me all the time. All sexy-like.”

“How can I look at you when I can’t even see you?”

“I’m over here.”

“That doesn’t help.” There was a scrabbling noise as she tried to jump up against the trunk and clasp it between her thighs. “Ow! That hurts. You so owe me for this! I’m gonna want Peshwari naan and Bombay potatoes with my curry, for a start. This is impossible.”

“Can’t you sort of shinny up it, like you’re climbing a rope, and then lean backwards when you get there?”



“You’re gonna get a slap in a minute!”

He waited impatiently. After a couple of minutes of scraping, swearing and exaggerated huffing, she was there.

“I can hold this pose for about five seconds, max.”

“Stop calling me Max.”

“Funny.”

“Are you smiling?”

“Fuck off.”

The flash went off. She dropped back down to the ground, and groped around for her coat as he checked the photograph. She saw his face illuminated by the light from the camera as he inspected his handiwork. He looked really startled; the picture must have been pretty bad for him to look like that! And then he stuffed the camera in her hands and was gone, crashing from tree to tree in the darkness, like a panicky human pinball. Surely she couldn’t have taken that bad a photo?

She pressed a couple of buttons on the camera, trying to find the one which would reveal his awful picture. “Programme”? No, better come out of that. “Set picture size”. No, not that one either. And then she had the photo in front of her on the screen, and she was screaming for all she was worth. And maybe a couple of dozen yards away, Gary was screaming, too, and howling and weeping and begging for his sorry life.

The picture was a bad one. He had cut off her head, so that you could only see her from the neck down, but maybe that was deliberate (as it wasn’t really her face he

had wanted to see). Too much flash, so her flesh was luminous-moon-white. And far from being erotic, her attempts at vertically straddling a tree-trunk were bordering on the ridiculous. She looked more like a plucked koala than the wood-nymph pole-dancer he had wanted her to be.

These were her very first impressions, taken in automatically, with the practised eye of a keen amateur photographer. But what really, really disturbed her was the figure in the background, stalking towards the camera, just within the compass of the flash.

Man or woman, it was hard to tell. It was big, whatever it was, with a lumpy bulbous head and shaggy hair. It was just a few feet behind her, and to her right in the photo, heading straight towards Gary as he snapped away obliviously. It could have reached out and grabbed her, ripped her from her precarious perch on the tree, but it seemed intent on accosting her boyfriend instead.

Gary was still screaming. It had hold of him, somewhere close by in the wood, and assuming that he had run in the right direction then the two of them were now blocking her escape-route back to the car.

She tried to fight back the panic. The more noise she made, the more likely that the creature – it hardly looked human enough to be called anything else – would track her down. What to do? Go to Gary's rescue? Hide amongst the trees, and hope that she survived until daylight? Or make a

circuitous break for the car, in the hope that she could find it and seek sanctuary inside?

Gary stopped screeching. She was relieved for just a second, but then the full implications of this hit her. There was only one reason for him to have gone quiet. He must be dead.

Pulling her unbuttoned coat tightly closed with one hand (it made her feel slightly less vulnerable somehow), she scurried forwards, waving her free hand in front of her like a blind-man's white-stick. Every time she encountered a tree, she felt her way round it, and then ran on again, heading for where she hoped the car would be.

She heard something moving to her left. The creature must have finished with Gary, and was trying to intercept her. She quickened her pace, bouncing painfully off a tree-trunk (she prayed it was just a tree-trunk) and hurrying on.

And then there was the sound of her stilettos on tarmac. She had found the road. The car was close by. Which way, left or right? She picked a direction at random. No trees now. She ran along the road at full pelt, wincing at how much noise her shoes was making. She ignored the urge to stop to take them off. No time. She could sense the creature nearby, closing in on her, ready to tear her limb from limb. Whether she lived or died depended entirely on whether she made it to the car before it set upon her.

And then she was there. Cold metal beneath her fingers. That must be the bonnet, on the driver's side. She skirted the car, cursing herself halfway round for panicking and

heading for the passenger's side when she could have dived through the driver's door instead. Old habits died hard. She prayed out loud that she wouldn't die with them.

She reached the passenger door. Convinced that the creature would seize her and pull her back into the wood at any second, she tugged at the handle. The door stayed resolutely shut. She pulled again for all she was worth, but all to no avail. The stupid bastard had locked it!

She screamed in frustration, again and again. And then she felt a big meaty paw on her arm, pulling her away from the car, back into the trees. She screamed louder, and shriller, and when that didn't work she swore for all she was worth.

"Please don't swear." A gruff, female voice, full of reproach. "Daddy hated swearing."

And then there was nothing but blackness.

#

She woke to the sound of slurping and gnawing. It was still too dark to see anything at all. She was lying on the grass, she could feel it beneath her; the creature must have pulled her back into the trees after she had fainted. Her coat had ridden up round her waist as she had been dragged through the undergrowth, and she pulled it down to cover up as much of herself as possible, buttoning it tightly against the cold and the horror of her situation.

“Good night,” said the creature. It giggled. “That sounds wrong. It makes it sound like you’re going to bed. But it’s too early to say good morning.”

She didn’t answer. She felt nauseous. She huddled in her coat, and prayed that the creature would spare her from further conversation.

“My name’s Matilda,” it said. “What’s yours?”

“Beth,” Debbie lied. She didn’t want this “woman” to know her real name. Knowledge is power, and she had more than enough power already.

More slurping.

“What are you eating?” she asked sharply. “Where’s Gary?”

“I’m sorry,” Matilda replied. “I’ve been living out here for a long time now. I’m rubbish at catching rabbits. I was starving, and I saw the two of you, and – a girl’s got to eat. Do you want some? I’ve saved you an arm, just in case.”

Debbie vomited on the grass.

“No,” said Matilda. “I thought not. But it would have been rude not to offer.”

“Are you going to kill me, too?”

Silence. She half-wished she could see Matilda’s face, to see whether there were any signs of compassion or doubt. But the other half was glad that she could not. Presumably, she had part of Gary’s body stuck in her mouth, chomping away on it as if it was a giant turkey-leg. Some things were better left unseen.

She changed tack. “Are you on the run? From the Police?”

“Sort of. They’ve eaten Crow, but someone else will be after me now. There’s always someone after me.”

“Eaten Crow?”

“And Father. And a fat boy. I’m not sure who he was. He cried a lot.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not sure I do either. Are you sure you don’t want some meat? It’ll make you feel better. It tastes a lot like chicken.”

Debbie vomited copiously, which Matilda must have taken as a “no”, as she did not offer again.

#

Dr Read was uncomfortable. Partly because he had huge reservations about discharging his favourite patient from the psychiatric hospital, but also because he had bolted down his dinner and now had a nasty case of acid indigestion.

Georgia Richardson sat opposite him. His colleagues were unanimously of the opinion that she was no longer a threat to society, however much he had argued against this. He had arranged this one final session with her, on the pretext of it being a debriefing/appraisal (he suspected that there were quite a few of his colleagues who would be only too happy to debrief her if professional ethics had

permitted it, which infuriated him as he wanted to have exclusive rights in this respect). But his real motive for this consultation, though, was to see if he could obtain anything from her which might enable him to cancel her discharge, and keep her here with him for as long as he possibly could.

He looked at her file on the laptop on the desk in front of him, still trying to compose himself. This was such an important meeting. He had to get it right, or she would be gone, and he would lose her forever.

“You’re all ready for tomorrow?” he asked. “No last minute qualms about facing the great big outside world after all this time safe and sound in here?”

She nodded, a confident smile but with the tiniest hint of wariness in her eyes. He loved that grin of hers, even when it was suspicious at the corners. Young ladies (she was in her early thirties, but he was twice that, so she was still young to him) often had silly, inconsequential smiles, he always thought, but not hers. With a tight twist of jealousy which momentarily swamped his indigestion, he speculated that his colleagues may have only certified her fit for release because she had shared her smile with them. But they were idiots; they should have realised that if they liked her that much, it was better to keep her here, where she could flash those perfect white teeth at them all day long.

“You’re happy being in accommodation all on your own? You wouldn’t prefer to be here, where we can look after you?”

She shook her head, he assumed in response to his second question. She did not appear to be in the mood to talk. She knew that all she had to do was keep quiet, and she’d been free in the morning. Talking was dangerous. Talking would risk everything, especially with him sitting here ready to take notes. She had been here for ten years (the last three of which were under his watchful eye) and she had had enough. She wanted to go home.

He scrolled through her admission notes on his laptop.

“What happened to Michael Crow?”

She shrugged. This was starting to get a little irritating. Didn’t she know that he was trying to keep her here for her own good?

“According to your file, you were an animal rights activist. You turned up at the house of one Maurice Bailey, accusing him of kidnapping a friend of yours, and making serious threats against him and his elderly wife. He called the Police, and you were escorted off the premises by Officer Crow. You were later found handcuffed in Crow’s car in Ramsgate, screaming your head off. When asked about his whereabouts, you claimed that he had gone to capture trolls in a deserted terraced house nearby. Does any of this ring any bells with you?”

“I was confused. It was all nonsense.”



“You went on to say that you and two friends of yours had earlier liberated a troll from a research facility in Maidstone, left her in a caravan, and that you had last seen her running out of the deserted house into which Officer Crow had disappeared. When that house was later searched, there was no sign of Crow or anyone else, save that there was blood all over the place. Which was found to belong to Crow, his son, and one other as yet unidentified person.”

She shuddered.

“You knew the son, didn’t you?”

“You know I did.”

“Dexter.”

“Dexter.”

“The Police speculated that you had lured Crow there, possibly with the promise of sex.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“And then you killed him, possibly with the aid of accomplices. You handcuffed yourself up in his car. And you would have gone to prison for life, but for the court taking the view that you were criminally insane, with all this talk of trolls.”

“I know better now.”

“In what way?”

“I was clearly deluded. I’ve had ten years of treatment. I’m better now. I’m ready to go home.”

He studied her, trying unsuccessfully to make her squirm under his gaze. He liked making people uncomfortable, it

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

