

THE WEDDING FEAST
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For Sue.

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She squatted in the corner, brooding and monstrous in her bloodied wedding dress, as she waited for him to awake.

The room was in darkness, but she had lived her whole life closeted behind shutters and black-out curtains, and her eyes made full and efficient use of the traces of street light that filtered through from Outside. She could watch over him, safe in the knowledge that she would remain shrouded in anonymous shadow if his sleep ever ended. Reassured by this, she felt herself gradually relax, until subconsciously her bloated chest rose and fell to the same rhythm as his.

They had left him there, bruised and naked, chained to the floor by wrist and ankle. Blood clotted his forehead. She knew about blood. She touched the dark stain on her dress, feeling it congealed and sticky on her fingers. Out of habit, she licked them clean. Waste not want not, Mummy always said, as had Nanny before her, and she was a good girl who did as she was told.

She willed him to live. They usually stayed alive for a few hours at least. She would hide in the shadows until then. And wait.

#

Philip was just having a nightmare. A particularly weird and unpleasant one, granted, but a nightmare all the same. He was almost sure of it.

He had been round Mandy's for 3 beers and the X-Factor finals, but she had kicked him out before bedtime. She had to catch a train to attend some weekend bonding session at work, where everyone had to "think outside the box" and hug the elderly middle-manager on their right. She needed her beauty sleep. So it was out the door by ten thirty, without so much as a goodnight "cuddle".

Halfway back to his Ford Focus, he heard a muted sound in the alleyway which flanked her house. Whispering, it sounded like. He wasn't the sort to go exploring passageways after dark (Mandy's excepted), so after a moment's reflection he put the key in the ignition, ready to drive off. But then the unfamiliar Snake of Conscience writhed deep within the furthestmost recesses of his mind. Mandy was alone in there. Maybe she had the window open in her bedroom. She was a good-looking girl. If someone was skulking around in the alleyway and he just drove away and left them to it, he would never forgive himself. More to the point, she would never forgive him either. Besides, if she got molested, she'd most probably go off sex for months, and he'd be packed off home every night for a lonely session with his trusty right hand and a few well-thumbed editions of his "Muff-Diving Dwarfs" magazines. (That wasn't his first choice of porn, by the way. It was just that the models were much smaller, so the magazines were more compact and easier to hide when Mandy was around).

He would need a torch. Maybe, just maybe, if he knocked on the door and asked for one, Mandy would freak out when he mentioned the prowlers and insist on him staying the night to protect her. She would be so grateful, she might even agree to do that thing he liked with the funnel, the lube and a dozen or so Maltesers.

He was back at the door within seconds, ringing the bell. An upstairs light came on, but the love of his life remained stubbornly indoors. He grew impatient. If there were perverts in the alleyway, he wanted her torch before they decided to venture out into her front garden and practise their moves on him. He knocked again, hoping the noise might scare them off.

Mandy appeared at her front bedroom window. She had her dressing gown on already. She did not look happy.

“What? I’ve gotta be in Bromley by eight thirty.”

“There’s someone in the alleyway.”

“You what?”

“In the alley. Round there. Perverts.”

He gestured round the side of the building, indicating helpfully precisely where the perverts were likely to be situated. She did not seem interested, though.

“There’s only one pervert round here, and I’m talking to him. Now fuck off home.”

She slammed the window shut, and the lights went back out. He felt aggrieved. There was he, trying to save her from being molested by total strangers, and she was telling him to fuck off! If she kept this up, they’d all be gone by the time he got the torch off her. Then she’d be sorry.

He knocked again, louder still. No reply. How rude!

“Mandy!” he called through the letter-box. “Throw me down a torch.”

Still no response.

“Fuck you, then,” he said, and made his way back to the car, slamming the door shut so she would know that he was cross. He jammed the key in the ignition, and was just about to twist it when he heard the whispering again. Whatever it was, it was still there.

He toyed with the idea of driving off regardless, but ruled this out, even before the Snake of Conscience started twitching again. He had made the mistake of telling her about the prowlers. “How could you leave me alone?” she would say if he drove away now. “You knew there was someone there! You just fucked off and left them to it, without so much as a backward fucking glance?” She would crucify him. Maybe he should have just driven away the first time, and denied all knowledge if anything happened. He would have been in the clear then.

He got back out the car, and looked up at the window, in the forlorn hope that Mandy might be up there, beckoning him in. No sign of life there at all. She was probably flossing her teeth by now. He dragged himself towards the passageway to investigate further.

“Hello?” he ventured. “Anyone there?”

No response. Not totally surprising, he told himself. They're bound to be too busy dropping their trousers, ready to roger me senseless the moment I go in after them. What was that film where they wanted to ride that fat bloke like a little piggy? Well no-one was going to be porking him tonight, that was for sure.

It was then that he realised that this must all be just a nightmare. The world swam around him like a flashback scene in a crap made-for-TV film, and all of a sudden he was somewhere else. It was hard to say where, as it was pitch black. He felt something tight around his wrists and ankles, and shivered in the cold. Damp stone numbed his side and his legs, and he knew that he was naked. He had that overwhelming sense of vulnerability you get in your dreams when you are wandering down the dairy aisle in Tesco's wearing nothing but a mortified smile, and praying that the CCTV footage doesn't end up on YouTube. Or Asda; sometimes it was the butchery aisle at Asda. Tesco's was worse though, as he had always forgotten his Clubcard.

He felt convinced that there was something watching him. He could sense it here with him, skulking in the darkness. He could hear it too. The sound of laboured breathing.

"Hello? Is there anyone there?"

He had just said that earlier, he realised, when he was back in the alleyway. It hadn't done him much good then, either. He had still ended up here, naked and alone, tethered to the stone floor like a goat at a Satanist's Christmas party.

He was overcome with nausea, and the world shifted, even though it was too black to actually see it move around him. Then he was back at Mandy's again, fully clothed and staring up at her window, howling for a torch as if his life depended on it.

He stopped for a few seconds, trying to make sense of what was happening here. Was he chained to a floor somewhere, being spied upon by God knows what, or was he at his girlfriend's house, checking for prowlers? Which was worse? The floor, definitely. At least he had his jeans on at Mandy's. It was harder to be brave without pants.

All of this was just a dream anyway. Neither "reality" could hurt him. Check the passageway, get back in the car, and wait for Radio One to wake him up tucked away safely in his own bed.

He went back into the alleyway. He could hear his own voice calling out to him, imploring him to stay on the street, but he paid no attention. His voice got louder, shriller, more hysterical, but still he stepped into the shadows and went in search of whatever was lurking there. He heard a sound behind him, and turned to find a man confronting him, blocking his path back to safety. Six foot plenty, with a face of pasty, badly-chiselled clay. Smiling, but not in a good way. Not in a good way at all.

Then there was something behind him, and the voice in his head cranked up to a slow-motion scream, disorientating him, leaving him in two minds as to whether to run or fight. Instead, he did neither. As the scream cranked up a notch or two at a time, he felt something slip over his head, and then a blow, and then nothing at all.

He woke up back on the stone floor in the black-hole of his nightmare.

#

Again, he sensed that there was someone out there. He couldn't see them. He couldn't even hear them now, above the sound of his own laboured breathing. But he knew they were there, lurking malevolently in the darkness like a spider watching the death-throes of a juicy fly pumped full of paralysing toxins.

"Who's there?" he asked, fighting the urge to soil himself with only partial success.

He paused, dreading a reply.

"I'm Matilda," came the unexpectedly informative response. "What's your name?"

A voice from the darkness. Harsh. Gruff. Halfway between male and female, like a drag-queen in need of Strepsils.

"What the fuck does it matter what my name is? What the fuck am I doing here?"

"You've got to whisper," she pleaded. "He'll come for us if he hears you."

"Who will?" he whispered as quietly as he could, looking about him instinctively even though it was too dark to see anything.

"Daddy," she said.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this response. Daddy was supposed to be a good word. Daddies gave you pocket money, and took you out for pizza and took you to cricket matches at weekends (well, maybe not for ten years or so, but they used to do those things). But the way she said it was just too damn creepy. As if Daddy was the worst thing in the World.

"You've got to be fucking joking!"

"Don't swear. He doesn't like it when people swear."

Philip lost it. He had been abducted, stripped naked, and chained up in a cellar with a transsexual voyeur, and now she was trying to give him a lecture on good manners! He would swear if he wanted to. And right now, he really, really wanted to. As long and as loud as he could.

"Are you having a fucking laugh?" he enquired. "This has got to be a wind-up, right? You lock me up in what feels like a fucking freezer, stark bollock naked, and you have a go at me for using the fucking F-word!"

He paused between profanities to give her the chance to apologise before he moved on to the C-word. She was silent for a few seconds. Somehow, he could sense she was listening.

"He's coming," she said. "Daddy's coming!"

That didn't sound good.

He heard her scrabbling around in the darkness, searching frantically for a place to hide. Everything was silent for a few seconds, and then he made out the sound of footsteps outside, getting louder, getting nearer. He tried to flee, but the manacles cut into his wrists and ankles, pinning him to the spot, making escape impossible. The footsteps stopped, and his bowels noisily imploded in terrified anticipation of what was to come.

The door was thrown open with such force that it almost rebounded shut again. A large man stood in the doorway, candle in hand. The flame writhed, as if it too was trying to flee, in a futile struggle to free itself from its waxen prison. The flickering candle made the man's face distorted and troll-like. It was Clay-Man, from the alleyway. It was "Daddy".

Again, Philip tried to back away, but his bonds held him as tight as the tethered goat in his own Satanist metaphor. The troll strode over to him, kicking him hard to the face. He felt his teeth crack, and blood flow down his throat. Shock engulfed him.

"You don't talk," the man said. "You don't shit unless I tell you to. You don't do nothing, you got me?"

And then he was gone, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Double negative", Philip muttered, when he was sure he was out of earshot. "If I don't do nothing, I must do some-"

"Are you all right?" Matilda asked.

"Never fucking better," he replied, relishing the sound of the swear word on his tongue.

"I'm sorry. He's a pig. I'm bleeding too."

Philip started to cry. Not for her: he couldn't give a toss whether she was bleeding or not, and she probably deserved it anyway. He was crying for himself. Great big sobs of grief and fear and self-pity, stifled so as not to bring Clay-Man crashing back into the room.

He felt a weighty arm around his bare shoulder, but drew away in revulsion, as far as his bonds would permit. He didn't want her touching him.

"Don't cry" she implored, her voice heavy with empathy. "It's going to be all right, I just know it will."

He hesitated, searching for the right reply, determined that it should contain at least one swear-word to shock and offend her.

"Matilda, my Darling," he said. "You must be out of your tiny fucking mind."

#

Mandy was perplexed.

From her front bedroom window, she had seen Philip being bundled into a white transit van by two hulking shadow-men. They must have been fucking builders or something: who else would ride around in a crappy old “no tools are kept in this van overnight” shit-heap like that? But why were builders kidnapping her boyfriend on a weekday? And what could she do to stop them?

No way was she going out there. She was fucking gorgeous (everyone said so), and once they saw how pretty she was they were bound to chuck Philip out their van and bundle her in there instead. It was bad enough having to put up with them wolf-whistling at her when she wore her tartan mini-skirt past the building site (on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and sometimes on Fridays if she could make it), but she was bugged if she was going to let them gang-bang her as well. It was Philip they were after anyway. If he was stupid enough to get in the van with them, then he should take the consequences. Take one for the team, so to speak.

This was a nightmare. She had to be up early for Bromley tomorrow. She felt crap when she was tired. How could she think outside the box, if she was too tired to even find the box in the first fucking place? Why did these things always happen to her? She was a good person, she gave three pounds a month to Oxfam by direct debit to save all the little African children Madonna and her friends had not yet adopted.

The back doors of the van slammed shut, with one of the men in the driving seat and the other in the back with Philip. They would be driving off any minute. Philip needed her. But what could she do, especially in her Wallace and Grommet slippers?

The engine clanked reluctantly into life, and the van pulled uncertainly from the kerb, heading God knew where. Now! She had to act now, or it would be too late.

She threw open the window in one last desperate effort to save the life of the man she loved a bit.

“Oi, you fuckers!” she screamed after his kidnappers. “You bring that bastard back here now!”

#

Just when he thought things could get no worse, Matilda shared her escape plan with him. It had sounded quite plausible at first, but tailed off pretty rapidly after a sentence or two.

“I’ve stolen the key,” she told him. “To your manacles. I can get them off.”

Ordinarily, the thought of her getting anything off would have held no appeal for him at all. But in the particular circumstances, he was willing to make an exception.

“Oh God, please, yes. You’ve got to get me out of here.”

She shuffled around him, and dropped to her hands and knees in front of him, their faces just inches apart. He could feel her hot breath on his cheek, but it was not this that bothered him. It was more the fact that she looked like a troll.

Involuntarily, he pulled away. She repulsed him. Her nose was lumpy and bulbous, her lips like two fat slugs copulating at both ends. She had a wart on her chin, the size and shape of the kidneys they always insist on putting into steak pies to ruin them. It sprouted thick black hair which almost brushed against his face. And all this set in a large lardy face, resting atop multiple chins which spilled muffin-top-like over the fussy lace collar of her off-white dress.

Her hair appeared to have been cut using a badly chipped pudding basin; spirit-level straight around most of the circumference, but with a small V cut into the centre of the fringe for no apparent reason. It was not an attractive look.

But her eyes disturbed him most of all. They were beautiful! The purest blue, a swirling mass of destructive emotions trapped inside them, like a galaxy of pain. Philip was not known for his empathy – he had once cried during a Children in Need appeal, but Vodka always affected him that way – but even he could see the shyness, the fear, the need, the hurt locked within. One emotion dominated all the others, though. Self-loathing. It riddled her.

He shrank away from her, and her eyes died. All that turbulent emotion drained away, leaving behind a soul both desiccated and barren. And as he drew away from her, he realised something else for the first time, something which shocked him even more. She was wearing a blood-encrusted wedding dress. Unless she was marrying “Daddy”, he appeared to be the only remaining candidate for bride-groom. The fact that he was chained to the ground, butt-naked, with his arse raised provocatively in the air, did nothing to ease his sudden and overwhelming feeling of vulnerability.

Despite all of this, she was his only way out of this, the only person (in the loosest sense of the word) who could set him free. He had to be nice to her. Not *too* nice, of course.

“Matilda?”

“Yes?”

“You said you’d help me.”

She shuffled uncomfortably, refusing to make eye-contact like a child with a guilty secret.

“I thought- thought that we might- that you might agree to – ”

“What?”

“But we can’t, can we? You wouldn’t want to. Not with me. I disgust you.”

“Can’t what?”

She looked up at him, and the spark was back in her eyes. Longing. It was the look that Mandy had when she was in an expensive shoe shop.

Oh my God, he thought. She wants to shag me. He wasn’t even sure that she had the right biological equipment, yet alone precisely how she planned to use it on him. For the second time that evening, he thought back to “Deliverance”.

“I’m not a little piggy,” he told her, in a tiny little voice.

“I know,” she replied, mystified. “You’re an Outsider. Little Piggies are what Nanny used to eat in sandwiches before Daddy brought her here. They taste totally different.”

He relaxed, as far as is possible when you’re chained up with a troll-like creature in a bloodied wedding dress whose intentions remain uncertain. Fortunately, it didn’t occur to him to ask how she knew the difference in taste between ham sandwiches and grown men.

“You’re not going to ride me round the room like a little piggy, then?” he enquired, desperate for her solemn promise on this issue.

“No!” she recoiled, her shock at this suggestion catching him by surprise. “I would never do such a thing! What sort of animal do you think I am?”

He back-tracked, terrified that her raised voice might bring the wrath of Clay-Man crashing down upon him again.

“I’m sorry,” he grovelled in a whisper. “I’m really sorry. You just seemed to be the sort who – look, I’m sorry, okay?”

They lapsed into guarded silence. He could hear her breathing again, great noisy lungfuls like an asthmatic bulldog running a marathon. He had offended her. But she had still not told him what she wanted from him. What was the price of his freedom? He left the question unspoken, for fear of upsetting her again. Besides, he did not really think he could cope with the answer.

A noisy hack of a cough from an adjoining corridor reminded him of the urgency of the situation. He would have to press her, whatever the consequences.

“What is it?” he enquired with trepidation. “What do I have to do to get out of here?”

It was her turn to lapse into silence. Eventually, though, she seemed to come to a decision, and squatted back in front of him. Again, the hair from her kidney-shaped wart brushed his cheek, but he made a conscious effort not to recoil from her. Shivering and vulnerable, crouching on all fours, he looked back into the eyes of the creature who was lurking just a monstrous kiss away.

“I want you to love me.”

He scanned her face again. The puffiness, the multiple chins, the hair-cut; the Want, the Hurt, the Self-Loathing. And those eyes, flickering back into life again, pleading with him for some shred of acceptance as if her life depended upon it as much as did his.

“Love you?” he asked, taken aback. “Love *you*?”

She nodded miserably, the ember in her eye snuffed out again as hope died within her.

Philip closed his eyes, and counted silently to ten. He could do this. If he tried really hard to mask his abhorrence of her, he could convince her that what he really felt for her was Love rather than repugnance.

“Of course I love you. Who wouldn’t?”

Deep down inside, though, he would almost have preferred it if she had just wanted to ride him like a little piggy and get it over with.

#

It had taken nearly an hour and a half, but Mandy’s mobile was finally topped up and ready for action.

She hated those menus you get. Press one to use a voucher, press two for something fucking else. What a load of bollocks. She was in a hurry, but did that matter to O-fucking-2? Did it Fuck! And every time she tried to key in her number, her phone-lock went on, and she lost her place. Nightmare! Worse still, she’d lost out on the triple points she could have got if she’d topped up at Boots the following morning!

She dialled the number, and waited impatiently for the ring-tone. Four rings, five rings, six rings. Eventually, the answer-phone kicked in. Time for action.

“Hello?” said Mandy, in her best telephone voice. “It’s me, Amanda. Amanda Attwood, from Delta Insurance in Canterbury. I’m afraid I can’t make your course in Bromley tomorrow. My boyfriend is very poorly, and I need to stay at home to look after him. Thank you. ‘Bye.’”

She hung up, and snapped the phone shut. Time for bed. She needed her sleep. Tomorrow, she was off to find her Man.

#

Matilda opened the door, and sniffed the corridor outside. Philip peered around her, but the darkness was absolute. Clay-Man may have been standing right in front of them, for all he knew.

“Is it safe?” he whispered.

“No,” she replied. “It’s never safe when Daddy’s Home.”

She took his hand, and took a silent step forwards into the hall-way.

“They’re in that room there. On the left.”

Philip involuntarily shrank to the right.

“And that room there. To the right.”

He shrank back towards the middle again (or where he guessed the middle might be).

“Maybe we should stay here, Matilda. Until they’re asleep.”

“They won’t sleep until the other Families have arrived. You don’t want to be here for that.”

She took another step forwards, pulling him along behind her. Her hand clenched his, almost engulfing it in her great paw.

“What other families?”

She ignored him, taking another stride into the blackness, towing him along like a tug pulling a dinghy. One step at a time towards the relative safety of whatever it was that lay outside.

They were halfway along the passageway, when she froze. She clamped her free hand over his mouth, squeezing his hand with the other one in a futile attempt to reassure them both.

“Stop,” she commanded. “Say nothing.”

For a second, she sounded like her father. “You don’t talk,” he had said. “You don’t do nothing” (double negative). And now he was trying to sneak past Clay-Man’s living quarters in pitch blackness, with a crazed and bloodied bride as a guide.

They waited, and then they waited some more. He could hear nothing at all at first, but then a floor-board creaked close by. He fought back the urge to flee back to the room with the manacles in it. She would not even let him turn his head, though, yet alone turn and run, as she kept his face clenched between her fingers.

“Do-not-move!” she whispered, so quietly that he was not sure whether he had imagined it.

Eventually, she released his face. If he had finger-print-shaped bruises on his cheeks in the morning, she would have a lot of explaining to do! Mandy wouldn’t be too impressed either!

She took another step forwards into the darkness. It was then that a side-door opened, and a bulky shadow stepped out in front of them, blocking their path to freedom.

“Tilly!” whispered the shadow. “What are you doing?”

“The same as Nanny,” she replied, her voice scared but defiant. “I’m going to live on the Outside.”

“He’ll kill you!”

“I will not!” protested Philip.

Matilda’s hand clamped his mouth closed again. He strained to make out the features of this new monster. This one was even larger than his would-be rescuer. He thought he caught a glimpse of blue eyes, like hers but without the fear and self-loathing, but it was so dark that he could not have done. He stood stock still, frightened and helpless, as she tried to negotiate their escape.

“Please, Vincent. Let me go.”

“He’ll hurt you. He’ll kill you! Like he killed Nanny.”

“I’ve broken Philip’s chains. He’ll see that. He’ll *know* what I’ve done even if I stay here. There’s no going back. I run or I die.”

“We get more chains. And it’s not “Philip”; it’s the Wedding Feast.”

Something stirred in the room to their left. Philip felt his flesh creep. He could sense his two companions tense up, too. If they were scared of whatever was in that room, then it must be the man they were discussing. The man who would kill Matilda without a second thought.

“Vincent!” a voice bellowed. Philip recognised it immediately. Clay-Man.

“Run or die,” Matilda repeated urgently. “It’s up to you. Help me. Please.”

Vincent snorted, exasperated.

“Running won’t save you. Put him back. We’ll get more chains. Talk our way out of it. We’ve fooled him before.”

“I’m not leaving him here.”

“Vincent!” shouted Clay-Man again. “Get in here, now!”

Vincent visibly sagged. Philip was uncertain why. Maybe it was down to Clay-man’s ominous presence so close by, or maybe he had just resigned himself to losing his sister. Either way, he seemed somehow diminished. He stepped aside, allowing them to pass.

“Watch your back,” he told her. “And your front. Watch *everything*! He **will** come for you.”

Vincent’s shadow converged with Matilda’s for a second, and then he faded back into Clay-Man’s room again.

Again, Matilda and Vincent began to inch their way to safety. Eventually, they reached the front door, and Matilda eased it open. Light shone in from the street-lamp outside. Light! They stood on the door-step, exchanging glances. Now they had gained their freedom, both seemed too frightened to take it.

“I’ve never been out before,” Matilda said, regarding the street outside with a mixture of hope and terror. “Not even for a second. I’ve been here all my life. But Nanny’s told me so much about it.”

Philip had problems of his own. One, he could finally see her clearly, in all her glory, and if anything she was even uglier in the light than she had been when skulking around in the shadows. And two, he was stark-bollock naked. How was he going to make it home like this? It was like the Tesco’s dream all over again!

A door opened in the passageway behind them.

Fuck it, he thought. I'm off!

Without a word, he legged it down the street, his pale white bottom blazing the trail for the frightened troll in the blood-stained wedding dress who loped along behind him.

#

Nanny had been telling the truth, then. All the things she said they had on the Outside really existed. There were "cars", which Outsiders sat in and moved around without walking (some of which beeped their horns when they saw Philip running along the pavement). There were lights at the end of huge poles, which were bent over at the top, holding back the night. But above all, there was the Moon.

The Moon fascinated her. It hung bright and luminous in the sky, smiling down on her. It was round and white and suspended there as if by magic. There were no strings holding it up, no nails that she could see, no giant props even. It just floated above her, cool but friendly, as she trotted along behind her Beloved.

Vincent didn't remember all of Nanny's stories; he'd only been little when she died. But she remembered them, every one of them. Nanny would sit on the floor beside her and Vincent as they were nodding off in the morning, telling them stories of the Outside in a whisper so Daddy wouldn't hear. Fairy-tales, she thought at the time. But now she knew they were all true.

Daddy had caught Nanny telling these tales once. He hadn't been happy; Vincent wasn't supposed to know about the Outside until he was old enough to go there himself. And Matilda was never supposed to know. She was a girl. There was no need for her ever to leave the House, unless she was given to another Family for marriage and mating.

She hadn't liked it when Daddy hit Nanny. Matilda was used to violence; he beat her on an almost daily basis, and Vincent even more so. But Nanny was old. And she wasn't like the rest of them. Nanny used to be an Outsider before she married Grand-Daddy. She was delicate. Her legs snapped too easily.

Matilda stopped running, and looked up at the Moon. If she concentrated really hard, she could pretend it was Nanny's face looking down at her, smiling encouragement as she escaped from Daddy, leaving the Family behind her as she went in search of the life that Nanny had left behind her when they took her all those years ago.

She felt the tears welling up inside her. She missed Nanny, she missed her a lot. Nanny was nice, and Nanny was pretty, and Nanny told her stories which now turned out to be true. She felt guilty that she had not believed her at the time. She hoped Nanny would forgive her, wherever she had gone since she died.

She glanced around, and saw her Beloved disappearing round a corner some distance ahead of her. Poor Philip was so frightened of Daddy that he had forgotten to wait for her. She gave the Moon one last rueful smile and set off after him. They were going to have a beautiful future together. As long as he couldn't outrun her first.

#

Philip was finally home.

Having to jog through Ramsgate at 3 o'clock in the morning, freezing his bollocks off, and risking God knows what sort of attention on the way, would have made this comfortably the worst day of his life when taken in isolation. But bearing in mind that he had been kidnapped, kicked in the face, and chased home by something last seen lurking under a bridge in the "Three Billy Goats Gruff", then "worse day of my life" didn't even come close. It was a total fucking nightmare!

All the way back home, he'd been thinking of what to do when he got back here. The most appealing option was to slam the door in her face, hide under the bed, and hope everything would be okay when he woke up in the morning. But he had reluctantly dismissed the idea. She would either sit outside, pining for him like that ridiculous Greyfriars dog in Edinburgh or Glasgow (or wherever it was!); she would go home and tell "Daddy" where he lived; or worse still she would kick the door down there and then, and sort him out. The idea of being "sorted out" by Matilda held no appeal whatsoever, whatever it might involve. It was a bit worrying that she had spent the last quarter of an hour with a perfect view of his arse, too.

He found the spare key under the flower-pot, and opened the front door. He walked inside, resisting the urge to slam the door in her face. She followed him in, tensing as he flicked on the lights.

"Fire?" she asked, nervously.

"Light bulb," he replied. "Light-bulb is *good*," he added in a deliberately patronising way. "Light bulb gives us light, a little heat maybe, and a bill for a hundred bastard quid a month."

A light went on in the lounge.

"Fuck," wailed Philip. "They've found us already."

He took a step towards the door, but she gripped his arm, her meaty fingers encircling his bicep with room to spare.

"It's not Daddy."

"How do you know?"

"Daddy would have killed you in the dark."

He was not sure whether to be re-assured by this or not. He wailed again to cover his bets. He didn't want to die like this. He'd always pictured himself having a heart attack after a marathon sex session with six blondes when he was eighty three years old.

Just as he thought his life could get no worse, Mandy appeared from the lounge. By the look on her face, she was not at all happy.

"Mandy! Oh thank God it's you!"

He went to hug her, but she pushed him away icily. She was not a happy bunny at all. She turned her attention to Matilda, looking her up and down as if she was a flasher at a children's tea-party.

“What the fuck is this?”

“I was round yours, and there was someone in the alley, and I wasn't about to leave you alone so I confronted them for you, and they shoved a sack over my head and took me away in their van. And-”

Mandy's glare intensified, and she held up a hand to stop him in mid-sentence. It was always a bad sign when she did that. She usually tried to smack him in the face soon afterwards.

“I'll ask you again. What the fuck is *this*?”

She gestured aggressively at Matilda, who loomed uncomfortably above them both on the doormat behind him. Mandy was a petite size 10, and Matilda must have weighed twice as much as her, if not more. He would have still backed Mandy in a fight though, any day. She fought dirty (but then she did everything dirty, which is why he put up with it!)

“This is Matilda,” he replied weakly, not sure how else he could respond if she wouldn't let him tell her about Clay-Man, the van, the house-

“And who the fuck is Matilda?”

“Don't swear,” said Matilda. “Daddy doesn't like it.”

“Do I look like I give a flying fuck what your Daddy likes?” Mandy railed.

“You would if you met him,” Philip assured her.

She looked exasperated, which was never a good sign. She could get very aggressive indeed when she was cross. Philip was almost relieved that Matilda was standing behind him so that she could even the odds if it came to a fight. They could probably take Mandy between them.

“What is that *thing* doing in your house?”

“It's a long story.”

“Tell me you're not shagging her! God knows what diseases you've picked up! It could be anything from herpes, to foot and mouth!”

“No!” interjected Philip, genuinely shocked that she could think such a thing. If ever he strayed – sorry, if ever he strayed *again* – it would be with a glamour model, a hot lap-dancer, a sexy Britney Spears (pre-baby) if his prayers were answered. It would most definitely not be with Frankenstein's ugly sister. How could she say that? He had dumped girlfriends for less. Maybe he would dump her if she wasn't quite so damn scary when she was provoked!

“Look,” he said, “I would rather eat my own testicles than put them anywhere near her – her – well, you know what I’m saying. No offence, Matilda.”

“None taken.”

“You’re lying!” screamed Amanda, taking a threatening step towards the two of them. “You bastard!”

“Why would you possibly think that I’d want to shag *her*?” asked Philip incredulously.

“None taken,” repeated Matilda, even though he had not actually said “no offence” this time. She was sure he didn’t mean any. Outsiders had perfect manners, Nanny had assured her.

“Okay, one, you’re a cheating bastard. Two, you’ve brought her back to your house at three in the morning.”

“She had nowhere else to go.”

“Three, you’re all flushed and out of breath.”

“I’ve been running.”

“Most people wear track-suit bottoms, Philip, when they jog. Or at least a pair of pants! Which brings us on to four. Four is, you’re stark bollock naked!”

She waited for him to say something in defence of Count Four. He shifted around uncomfortably, Matilda mirroring his actions behind him.

“Okay,” he finally announced. “That one’s a bit harder to explain.”

#

Two hours later, Mandy had calmed down a little.

The three of them were sitting on the corner sofa, Mandy and Philip both as far away from Matilda as they could manage. Philip had served tea in china-cups, but Matilda had accidentally crushed two of them, so they had given her a saucepan of cold water instead.

Philip had cried when he told Mandy what he had been through. Matilda cried when she saw how upset she had made Philip. She tried to put a comforting arm around him, but he shrugged her off in revulsion, which made her weep even more. Mandy had come close to crying herself, but only when Matilda broke the bone china (which was an engagement present from Philip’s mother and would cost about two hundred quid to replace).

Matilda would have been much happier on the floor. She had never sat on a sofa before, and it felt strange, precarious and unnatural. She tried squatting on the floor, but climbed back on to the sofa when she saw the smirks that Philip and Mandy exchanged. And then, when she was on the sofa with them, Mandy accused her of getting blood on the cushions, so it didn’t seem that she could win either way! She expected one of them to give her a beating for

making the sofa dirty, but both seemed unwilling to get near enough to her to strike her (Philip sitting so far away from her that he nearly fell off the far side).

She tried to squat on the sofa, but it was too soft and spongy, and Mandy started trying to catch Philip's eye with that gloating look again, so she eventually gave up and sat there in the same straight-backed way as them. How people could feel comfortable without squatting was beyond her. And quite what was she supposed to do with the cushions? She wasn't sure whether to sit on them or eat them.

She wanted to take off her wedding dress, but they both looked panic-stricken and insisted that she keep it on. She cried again. All the while she was in this dress, Philip would remember that she was going to marry someone else, and how would he ever start loving her for real when he was constantly reminded of this rival Beloved?

They wanted her to explain what was going on. Part of her wanted to tell Philip everything; they were betrothed, and should have no secrets. Besides, once it sunk in what she had rescued him from, he might be a bit more grateful and a little less disgusted. On the other hand, what if it freaked him out completely? What if he looked even more appalled than he did now? How could she bear it, especially with Mandy in the room to rub her nose in it?

She took a deep breath, and started talking, avoiding all eye contact with everyone. The next few minutes would determine the course of her life. Either he would hug her and thank her and want to be with her always, or he would beat her and lock her in the cellar to starve.

"Where I live," she explained carefully, as if telling the facts of life to small children, "we have a custom. It's called the Wedding Feast. I was – I was getting married tonight. To Victor, one of my cousins from one of the other Families."

She risked a quick glance at Philip's face to gauge his reaction. Did he look hurt? Angry, maybe? Jealous, even, jealous would be good. She could not tell. He was avoiding eye contact, too. Mandy seemed only too happy to stare at her, but she looked so aggressive that Matilda looked away. She composed herself for a few seconds, and then pressed on, her voice small and hesitant.

"Philip was my Wedding Feast."

He shot her an incredulous look, but she could not bear to look back up again. If she stopped now, she would never find the strength to tell him what he needed to know. Her voice shook, but she carried on. She had no choice.

"It's traditional at weddings to give the guests something to eat before the ceremony. It keeps them happy, and stops them fighting the groom or making love to the bride."

She blushed. Mandy jumped in.

"Making love to the bride? You've got to be fucking kidding!"

"She wouldn't want them making love to her," Matilda replied, imploring them to understand. "That would be the last thing she'd want. But if you have 5 or 6 guests and only one husband to protect you, they can make you do things you're not comfortable with."

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