

The Best Scandal Ever

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It was hot in the slate blue classroom, even for California. Sam shifted uncomfortably in his seat, adjusting the blue woollen poncho he habitually wore during his public events at his damp neck. Metal chairs ground against the linoleum floor as his audience prepared to leave, clutching folders and now lukewarm water bottles.

He used a finger to lift a blonde tendril of his long hair over the neckline from where it was sticking to his skin, rubbed his chin, carefully avoiding smearing the coconut oil that concealed the worst of the sun damage and scoped the room. Four, maybe five possibles?

People often commented on his youtube channel that he was clearly feeling the cold because of his vegan diet, but the reality was that Sam the diet expert was fat. He had been even fatter before he had given up food but even on a liquid diet – the fact could not be escaped. Sam, the leonine and now rather eccentric last baby of a plump late mother, was born to be deliciously cuddly.

At school as a teenager, he had been teased mercilessly about his weight and manic inability to stop talking. His short neck made this look worse than it really was. He hid his pain by out-talking and at least trying to out-perform his classmates, and apart from the occasional spiteful exchange with the more popular blue eyed Aryan jock loving girls, managed to escape the worst effects on his self-confidence, enjoying his college years as a musician before the plane crash stymied his post-college career in the uber-masculine world of railway construction. As such, a formerly corpulent and over talkative hippy geek became the internationally famous yippy health guru and motivational expert – Sam Redwood.

“Thank you so much, Sam, you’ve changed our lives forever.” Sam heard this every day.

The elderly couple were quivering slightly as they looked at him, damp eyed as the diminutive wife described how her frail looking, quiet husband had suffered colon cancer and recovered from a terminal diagnosis thanks to Sam’s work. Sam nodded and smiled and noted the thirty five year old blonde behind them.

“I’m so happy to hear that. It’s so nice to meet you both. I’m so glad I helped.” The usual response whilst he waited until today’s prize reached the front of the queue waiting to shake his over-warm hand. He quickly reached for his cold glass of water before the slightly overweight, sweating blonde got to him, beaming and battering eyelashes with unfortunately clogged mascara.

“I’m such a huge fan of yours, Sam.”

“Really? That’s good to hear! Are you rushing off anywhere, or do you have time to wait while I pack up?”

Sam liked girls. Sam liked lots of girls. Girls in every town he spoke in welcomed Sam on the same one night only basis every time he visited. Indeed, Sam would sometimes have to make excuses to avoid some of them, they were so keen. Never in his life previously had he dreamed that one day he would have the pick of quite so many women, and many of his former school mates looked on with envy at his legendary lifestyle and success with women. This one wasn’t on his ‘ten’ list, but she was a little imperfect, which he liked, and extremely keen to get to know him, which he liked even more.

“Is that true, that you’re the richest hippy in the world?”

“How about I tell you about it over some food?” Sam donned his particularly foxy mirrored sunglasses.

Another meal. Poor Sam worried a little, but if he was going to get today’s prize, a meal was necessary to provide the time necessary to close the deal. This one hadn’t been taking his advice for very long – she still had the skin of a conventional eater. A little encouragement, he thought, and soon she would have the glowing skin and bright eyes of the raw vegan.

Two hours later and Sam was dressing after a lengthy shower during which the offending mascara had mercifully been removed.

“Well, thank you, maam.” He smiled at her. She, not believing her luck, smiled back. What a story for her hard drinking ‘normal’ friends when she saw them later for a not-at-all-raw beer and Corn chips. Sam Redwood, who would believe it!

“When will you finish?” Una looked at the heap of bedclothes concealing her daughter, who was trying to hide under her handstitched patchwork quilt in an effort not to be seen slacking.

“I don’t know, mum. Please just go to bed. It will be done in the morning.”

Kira had been painting the narrow tall bathroom for five hours, fifteen minutes at a time, and was having another lie down to regain the strength to continue. A combination of liver disease, exhaustion and grief was making a normally simple job very, very hard.

“I tried to put the ladder up in the bath to get to the corner, but I thought the bath would probably crack under my weight.”

Kira was four hundred pounds. She hadn’t always been this weight, it had gone up and down constantly for fifteen years, between cancer, attempts to give up smoking and continuous bereavement, she had ‘given up, giving up’ and was hoping for a swift death. Painting the bathroom was essential however. Kira was not a girl for giving up on work, even if she had given up on her misbehaving body.

The doorbell rang and Una went to answer it, shaking her head slightly. She knew Kira would finish the job, but the tiredness was worrying. She wasn’t going to let Kira know that, however. It was not the Scottish Presbyterian way to show compassion on a day-to-day basis. Compassion was for very special occasions.

It was ex number four.

“Kira?” The tall aging punk smiled apologetically.

“She won’t see you if you’ve been drinking, you know that.”

“OK” Harry turned to go. He had never grown out of his fear of Una in the twenty five years since he had started seeing Kira. He knew he was one of a crowd of men who had never got over her, but he still felt the need to try and get her back after a few beers for courage. Kira was special, it didn’t matter what size she was she was still special to him. So special, in fact that took some personal pride

in the fact he had bonked one hundred and twenty pounds off her weight a few years before. Unfortunately, he was well aware that four other exs felt exactly the same way.....

Kira heard the front door close two floors below and sighed. ‘At least I can get the bathroom finished,’ she thought. ‘I promised dad to get the house done, and I’ll be damned if I won’t before I die.’

Kira, a notoriously foul-tempered Scottish academic, had had a hard five years. Losing two relatives and a couple of friends one after another had left her feeling miserable enough, but the lack of work after graduating from two degrees and corruption in the temporary jobs she was able to secure had left her with no confidence in any of the beliefs she had held so dearly before studying. Hard work did not have a reward, and you cannot trust people you stupidly trusted at sixteen when pushing forty. There are no prizes for holding off on having a family or waiting for the right person, and family are not necessarily on your side. Kira’s faith in everything had gone, apart from finishing the house life seemed entirely devoid of a happy horizon.

Over the years, Kira had learned to use art to delay bouts of despair, and two pieces of work were waiting to be finished even after the house had been repaired. The endless stream of exs requiring her attention had long ceased to be a solace and become a major pain, although it was gratifying to still pull at four hundred pounds. How many women would have multiple boyfriends at this size? She allowed herself a portly smirk in the mirror at the folly of her exs. They were all still liars, and all she really wanted was someone honest. The relationship with Harry had failed when he still couldn’t tell her the truth when she asked him to try seeing other people in order to tell her honestly about it. She had thought this would either provide the reassurance to make it work, or break them, and break them it certainly did. Apparently men prefer to lie and pretend monogamy even when totally incapable of it.

Kira struggled to her feet and shuffled back to the bathroom to tape a paintbrush to a broom handle. At least she could avoid breaking the bath.

“So what was this one like, Sam?” Don, Sam’s best friend was on the phone for a chick update. Sam was standing in yet another horrible hotel room with a bottle of water in his other hand.

“Oh ya know, blonde, nice tits – not so hot in the sack, better in the shower, but it wasn’t a busy day.”

Don laughed. Sam’s path to the stars was paved with women just like this. Sam’s life was a lengthy porn movie, punctuated by financial ups and downs and the occasional collapse from tiredness. Sam never seemed to stop – Don admired the energy but was glad he had decided to settle down. He looked at the unsuspecting bison, grazing half a mile away from the ranch house, and thought about his delightfully cuddly and happy girlfriend, asleep in his bed. He could chop some wood and think about dinner later.

“Gotta go, Don, meeting with the new execs.”

“Haha, enjoy that, Sam.”

Sam was off to meet the new investors in his baby, Ragha Health Foods.

Dr Malcolm Swartz shook his head.

“I just don’t understand how they can take it all away?”

Malcolm had just been struck off for over-prescribing medication. All the years he had been an MD, all the lunches, all the holidays, all the meetings. He had always thought giving people what they wanted was all he had to do. What people wanted, sick patients and pharmaceutical salesmen alike, appeared to be as many medications as possible.

“What am I going to do, Celia?”

“Before or after the divorce?” Celia, a well-groomed, well-kept, bejewelled goddess, was not the most sympathetic of women at the best of times. Now she was furious to discover that instead of the spoilt Jewish wife of a major earner, she was the wife of a disgraced MD and would not be attending any more country club lunches. “I’m not kidding, Malcolm.” She dropped her tone to indicate seriousness.

Malcolm briefly visualised his own suicide before retreating to the white yoga room overlooking the ocean. He would have to sell his beloved condo, he knew that. It would all have to go, pretty quickly too. Life based on credit was considered good citizenship in Malibu, he had never been a saver.

Celia had big expectations. How could you just lose everything in one day? He adopted the crocodile pose and as he stretched towards the ceiling, calculated he could possibly hide a few hundred grand. Enough to scratch a living without working, he supposed, but he would have to find another way to really live. As for losing her, she was a good hostess and had been a good mother, but good company she was not. The money was more of a concern, and sleeping in the overwarm minimalist white guestroom in his own house wasn’t Malcolm’s idea of fun at all.

He had always liked out west, property was cheaper there. He could sit and think for a while, plan his next move. For years, contemplating a bleak future with Celia, he had been concealing small works of Art from promising artists in his fishing lodge. He also had a rather extensive bonsai collection he could dispose of – she would probably sneer at that too. Celia wouldn’t be seen dead in a fishing lodge, and so at least that was safe. Yes, he figured, she could take her (several) million dollarsworth of flesh and leave him with enough to start over. It wouldn’t be a rich living, but he was sure something would come up. He concentrated on his breathing as he stretched his spine towards the heavens.

Joseph was hungover. He had been out partying all night with his friends from his college football team, and had just cancelled his usual Saturday workout with the guys. He put his stinking football gear into the washing machine and sprayed the bag with some horrible smelling fabric freshener before opening his narrow apartment window and sticking it as close to the draught as possible.

He wasn’t sure what was making him feel quite so bad, but whatever it was he thought he had better stay exactly where he was until work started on Monday. Large shrieking women in an enclosed space doing dull, dull office work. He groaned at the mere thought. His mother may be very proud but city living since college didn’t suit Joseph at all, and he was tired of pretending he was something he wasn’t. He flicked on the computer on the small desk. There must be something else he could do.

He randomly searched, eyes still hurting from the smoke and flashing lights from the night before. Might as well get wasted, he thought, and rolled a small fat joint.

By evening, Joseph, by now rather unkempt and smelly, was lying on the floor staring at the ceiling. He had found the answer, not only to his hangover, but to his feelings of impending doom in regard to post-college city life. Tomorrow he would empty the cupboards into the garbage and start his new life. His mother wouldn't be happy, he knew that, but in a few months he would be his own boss!

He got up, ran a bath and deftly rolled another fat one.

Peter the fruitarian got off his bike with some relief.

“Fuck that, for a game of soldiers.” Lovely, his ravishing but noticeably thin girlfriend, took the bike from him and handed him a towel. She sat down and watched him rub the mud and sweat from his legs.

“No money though, what are we going to do?”

“It's Ok, we can sleep at Toni's and I'm sure she'll have a few bananas in, eh? We can use some of the youtube money until next month. The website is paying for itself now.”

Peter had just quit the race before the end. Lovely knew that this was a considerably better option for his temper than losing, but sponsorship wasn't going to appear at this rate and they had nowhere to live. Not that this was too serious in Western Australia, there seemed to be an endless procession of friends with fruit and beds to stay with, but something had to change. Lovely was well used to uncertainty, but sometimes it would be nice if he would just finish a race so they could have some sort of actual living.

“I feel like making a video, what do you reckon?” Peter grinned at Lovely. “A real nice one, too. Got your bikini, love? We can take down Sam Redwood again, that's always fun.”

“**R**edwood will do as he's told, you can see that just by looking at him.” Richard White, a tall distinguished east coaster, cast a gimlet eye across the breakfast table at his errant nephew. A younger member of the most evil family business in North America, he had just invested heavily in health food in the form of buying most of Ragma Health. He still needed guidance in the family ways, nevertheless.

“I wouldn't count on it, he's a stupid hippy. Stupid hippies have principles.” His neatly attired nephew pursed his lips.

“Haven't you seen his background? He's a very rich stupid hippy, and you don't become a very rich stupid hippy without being corruptible. Go ahead with Ragma, and make sure he knows exactly what he has to do or get rid of him.”

“OK, Uncle Richard, but I'm pretty sure we're gonna have to lose him. We can't risk it.”

“Don't worry about it, as long as his face is on the labels he can't do or say much about it.”

Kira looked at the consultant in some disbelief.

“Sorry?”

“You’re deaf because you’re fat. I’m very surprised at your blood pressure, you obviously weren’t always so fat.”

“What exactly is the connection between being fat and going deaf? And I may well be fat, but I’m not stationary you know. I’ve been renovating a house for the last two years, and looking after 4 elderly people.”

“I’m advising antacids for indigestion. I think there must be fluid build-up behind your ears, you certainly aren’t conventionally deaf. But you are very fat.”

How very observant. Kira realised there was no point whatsoever in talking to this person. Kira was now gaining weight on orange juice and rice cakes, and could see no real reason for a 7lb gain per week, never mind the increasing skin problems or deafness. Her doctor had simply said “Stop eating.” As this evidently meant completely, Kira could see no way of avoiding eating herself to death.

Back at the GP, still shuffling in her late father’s slippers, Kira finally got an appointment for the new Obesity Specialist centre. She couldn’t quite understand the logic of her doctor, she had lost a hundred and twenty pounds in the previous few years low carbing at his suggestion, so her doctor evidently knew she had some degree of willpower, but she assumed that it was because of her desperate request for surgery and this was some new procedure of the NHS. He appeared to think her tiredness was simply grief and she would require some sort of support system to lose it all again. Kira had once been a hundred and forty pounds, and now she was four hundred. It didn’t actually change her life at all, same faces, same demands, a few more inadequate suitors actually when she was big. The only difference was that now her hair was falling out, she was conscious of the dying process. All she had to do was outlive her mother, that was all that was required and then nothing would matter anymore. The prospect of dying wasn’t nearly as worrying as the mystery illness that was getting worse every day. She worried about not outliving her mother, and about not fulfilling her promise to her late father of making sure everything was OK with the house. The dying bit, however, was not much of a concern. Kira had had enough.

Hilary measured her waist again.

“I’m tiny!”

“Yep, I told you. Just keep doing it and you will stay that way too.” Nina smiled as she swiped the apple out of her son’s hand. “Apples are for Saturdays, Colin. It isn’t Saturday. What else would you like to eat?”

Colin, a small blonde boy, decided to try the salt option instead. “Liquid aminos and lamb’s lettuce?” He hoped that this would be the correct answer. He knew from experience that this varied.

“Better, yes you can have that.” Nina reached for the bottle and handed it to Colin. “How is the book going?”

“Nearly done and the TV company said next week for filming.” Hilary leaned against the cluttered kitchen counter.

“Good, you’ll be a great asset. You look even more sensible with those glasses, wear them. And make sure you have that really huge picture of you handy.” She picked up some shallots. “No, you can’t have Liquid Aminos and Celtic Salt together, Colin, pick one.”

Johan plunged the nettles into the cold stream and shook them. If anything had been on them, it had no chance in the fast moving stream water. His elderly father shook his head. A small, thick set man in his late 70s, he was at a loss to understand the cycle of knowledge that had led his family to stake a claim on the land and conquer it only to have this son of his fall head over heels with the weeds they had tried so hard to eradicate.

“We grow all this great stuff, and you won’t touch any of it, and you don’t want to be a farmer. What’s going to happen to the land?” His father looked at him witheringly.

“I’ve told you dad, this is the real food. Look how well I am now.” Johan had been a skinny and frequently ill child, teenager and then young man before taking up a ‘clean’ natural diet in his late twenties.

“That stupid film on the roller skates just makes you look like an overgrown teenager. Why don’t you see the light, son and earn a real living with me?”

“I am earning a real living, and it helps people, dad.”

“I don’t know who you think you’re helping telling them to eat weeds. This is the stuff your grandmother was trying to get away from. This great country, all these doctors and all that training and you want to eat weeds we tried to forget about.” Johan’s father shook his head again. “I’m always proud of you son, you know that, but all that money we spent on your filmmaking training and you keep making films about weeds.” Life had been hard on the small ranch for decades. They were now supposed to be reaping the rewards, but life had apparently come full circle.

Anastasia woke up and scowled at herself in the mirror. She looked perfect, as always, but the thought of another day at the gym, fanning her face to protect her botox, followed by experimentation with makeup rather than dinner, did not please her today. What she needed was a day off from being the most famous human doll in the world. Choosing to make your living by achieving impossible perfection had not been an easy choice.

“What you need is a proper job.” Her mother worried.

“There are no proper jobs, and besides, I am creative, I cannot live like that. I’m doing fine.”

The reality was that Anastasia’s lengthy classes in mysticism, held in the local school, would take up most of the week’s evenings. People were starting to pay to listen to her classes in out of body

travelling and meditation, and Anastasia knew that the more famous she got, the more money she would be able to attract, eventually paying her far more than she could ever have hoped to earn as a town planner. The ultimate aim had to be her own cult following, and this, whilst slow largely due to her gender, was not impossible in the Ukraine.

She used her mobile phone to take another couple of pictures of her impossibly slender waist and uploaded them to her youtube account before turning towards the blender to make her food for the day. Broccoli and avocado today, for her skin. She knew her career as a human doll could not continue too far past her 30th birthday, which loomed surprisingly soon, and lying about her age wasn't really a long term option when so much of her life was online already. Anastasia, a formerly hard drinking, hardworking and hard living Ukrainian, determined to use her work ethic to amass as many followers as possible before gravity would take its inevitable effect. She would know when the time was right for her move to America, where she could make far more money than she was bringing in here. The videos were bringing in a trickle, the classes a little more, but by far the most lucrative angle she could see was an American cult. California was full of people prepared to pay big money for her enlightenment, she thought. It was just a matter of picking the right time.

The skinny redhead was slowly drawing her tongue up his inner thigh whilst the sagging brunette was, as instructed, dragging her rather inadequate breasts slowly across Sam Redwood's chest. He had had a rotten day. The hotel room was pretty lame too, but at least he had company.

"That's really amazing, Carrie, carry on as long as you want. Hey Honey, you're so sweet." They all smiled vacantly at Sam's little joke. Sam's mind started to drift towards the pruning in his Hawaiian garden. His mobile rang. Carrie and Honey snuggled alongside Sam whilst he took the call:

"Hi, Don, they took the whole goddamn company." Even the four hands and two pairs of lips on his thighs and stomach weren't a sufficient distraction to prevent the loss of Sam's wood.

"You're shitting me."

"No, they want me off the board, they've taken the whole lot. I don't know what I'm gonna do."

"How did they manage that?"

"Aw I dunno, I'll have to talk to you later." Sam's disappointment was starting to make the girls show more interest in each other than him, which didn't suit him at all.

"Yeah sure, I guess I'll talk to ya later."

"I guess."

Sam returned to his comforting angels, whilst Don looked at his girlfriend, confused. "He's been kicked out of Raha Foods?"

Lucy's eyebrows shot up. "How do they think they will keep the profile without him?" She heated her hands behind her as she stood in front of the fireplace, logs crackling comfortably.

"The books are already written – He would have to recall them all. He's stuck with permanently advertising them. That's a real shitty thing to do."

“Well, Sam’s no angel, how come he couldn’t have wriggled out of that one?”

“Yeah well, Sam’s naughty but he isn’t evil enough to keep up I guess, who knows? If he isn’t winning, he won’t tell me, that’s for sure.”

Malcolm sat in his favourite old chair at the varnish deprived, ramshackle fishing lodge. The trees dripped on the roof, and he enjoyed the sound as he sat contemplating his future. Celia had been as good as her word. He was a free man. Free to do whatever he wanted, but what did he want? Right now he wanted only to talk to someone, anyone, and at the lodge he was as far away from anyone as he could get. He sought solace in his yoga books and leafed through some of the old hippy stuff from his college days. Some of those guys made a living from talking about spirituality, but where was God when they struck him off?

He looked at the pictures of smiling crowds of well-dressed American hippies enjoying mutual assurance of worthiness and smiled to himself. Idealism lends itself to a peculiar form of group contentment, even if the cause is futile and out-of-step with cold, hard reality, a reason for belonging. Malcolm reflected that he had never felt fully part of the medical fraternity and had just spent decades doing what he was told. Life in the strict hierarchy was not fun. He didn’t have to do that anymore, at least that was some cause for celebration.

Several very dark weeks and much meditation later, Malcolm started seeing spirituality in the water, the trees and the dead fish he was still eating and realised how he was to make his living now that he was a disgraced MD. As an alternative health practitioner he could not only help the sick, but wreak revenge on the system that had lost him his wealth and social position. Also his wife, but he wasn’t so bothered about that. He packed up the artworks, the yoga books, and what was left of his belongings and headed out in his old campervan to find his new home. A compound in the desert, he thought, where he could set up some sort of communal arrangement and live the life he had dreamed of in college. First, he thought, he would head to the world famous Stoic Health Centre, offer his services and see if he couldn’t pick up some tips.

Joseph hurled the last plastic bag filled with convenience foods into the graffiti covered trashcan before sauntering down the street to pick up some more liquorice papers. He was already a little pale but he felt he was free of his mother’s cooking and that felt good already. Not that he disliked her at all, quite the reverse, he loved being smothered, but he had a strong feeling that growing up meant growing out of anything she had predetermined as suitable for him.

It was cold in NYC that day, and he huddled inside his sheepskin as he went down the street to source some fresh food and the papers to get him wasted once again. A cute little hippy chick passed him, her hair flicking him in the stiff breeze. He took this as a good omen and resolved to investigate the local health food store on his way back.

Hilary was slightly appalled when she saw the London news. “Nutty diet? I feel a bit misrepresented.” She twitched at her embroidered cardigan and screwed up her nose.

“Don’t worry about it, you should have seen what they did to me, it still brings you more attention, and you can use the footage to imply fame when you hit the US market. Is that ebook ready yet? Have you set up some subscription options on your website?” Nina barely looked at her as she chopped the tomatoes for the raw kelp noodles.

“Yes, but I’m not sure who is going to pay me to look at a website.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be surprised. You need to start looking around to see who you can network with.”

“I don’t care what your precious Dr Degnan says, I don’t want to go cycling today, that’s all.”

Lovely was not enjoying the prospect of another hundred kilometres, even if Peter was.

“Fine, fine just stay in and have a few clicks on the vids then.” Peter wasn’t used to insurrection from Lovely, but if she felt that strongly about it – strewth!

After Peter left, Lovely took another look at the video of her wriggling provocatively in her bikini for the delighted fans whilst reminding them of their duty to their animal friends. She looked fat, fat, fat. Cycling was all very well, but if it meant fatter thighs she was staying in and staying off the bananas today. An old hand at vomiting, she locked the door of the bathroom in relief. A full morning on her own, away from the kind, attentive and hyperactive Peter. A full morning to indulge her secret passion. To hell with her teeth and throat, she wasn’t going to have big thighs.

Kira had told the improbably young adviser at the weight loss centre to get knotted. Having two sisters, she was well used to people who know nothing about weight problems attempting to give advice. The assumption was always that your day revolved around food, and never positive. It is amazing when people who have a weight problem are so often dumped with responsibilities that their ‘healthy’ associates simply refuse to take on, that the assumption is that they are the lazy ones. Kira idly wondered if this particular idiot had ever worked a nineteen hour day in order to return home and lift someone that didn’t particularly want to be lifted.

The crunch had come after being led to a special ‘fat’ chair. This chair, built for someone of 600lb or more, dwarfed her. She was then told of all the people the twenty something year old had helped, including someone in their sixties who had apparently never known how to eat.

“I’m an ex chef and can you tell me how often you have dealt with a weight problem of your own, please?”

“Um, never.”

“I’ve lost your entire bodyweight 3 or 4 times. Do you really think you have any advice to offer me?”

“Um, I don’t think you’re suitable for our programme.”

“I agree.”

This led to Kira turning to her late father for advice. Kira's father, an artist, had spent a small fortune on his health, massive toolboxes of pills were produced at every meal. Kira resolved to keep looking at alternatives until she found a permanent solution.

Thus the first book was started. Kira figured she might as well database the lot.

Anastasia delicately stepped off the plane in Tokyo to be greeted by a small group of smiling Japanese people with cameras and a sign with her name on it. The appearance was alongside a famous Japanese anime doll today. It was by no means a huge fee, but the free trip was nice. Anastasia, resolved that all appearances were worthwhile, enjoyed the attention if nothing else.

A few shots were taken of her with the other doll, then she was offered sushi, which she could not eat, then, after a rather uncomfortable night in a very small hotel room, she was put back on a plane to the Ukraine. Glamour is so often not very glamorous, but at least it would raise her profile in Japan.

Anastasia was very hungry when she got back. 72 hours without food or water was good, she supposed, and well in keeping with the Eastern European tradition of dry fasting, but getting too hungry when you are restricted to vegetables and water is never a good idea. She 'binged' on half a carrot whilst blending her spinach, fennel and raspberry smoothie and felt quite sick after it.

“You've put me in a tent? At a festival? What the hell?” Sam Redwood was not a happy man. His agent hadn't thought about Sam getting his female 'rewards' at the Goddess festival. He was forced to content himself with a public footrub of a free sample of magnesium oxide from a fan. His performance had been exemplary, even by his own standards. Smooth and as usual treading the fine line that comes just before smarmy, he had delighted a young and overexcited crowd with vague references to the 'mother' and had sold a few thousands worth of goods in addition to his usual hefty fee, but what use was money without the pussy?

Sam's agent was stifling tears after the exchange on the phone. Years of doing what she was told and one mistake had led to thirty minutes of punishment by telephone. The little boy with the curl on his forehead, she thought, when he was good, he was very, very good, etc. He would still expect to play with her next time he was in town, of that you could be sure.

“But how much money did you make, Sam?” Don was used to bringing Sam down from his tantrums. He had made a good bit of money himself at the event.

“Only about twenty G turnover, not a good result for three days really, and those bastards at Ragha are still selling shit with my face all over it.” Sam was petulant but at least calmer.

“Well you can't withdraw the books either – you'll just have to wait until the print run dries up.”

“No shit, Sherlock. Look at that Don, even the old bald guys are getting laid and I'm stuck in a tent.” Don was relieved to see Sam was starting to laugh. Traditionally the 'old bald guys' would turn up to soak up Sam's leavings, amusing him greatly. Such is the life of an American speaker, attract the chicks and the dudes will follow to pick up the sad ones at the back.

“He’s filming the weeds again.”

“Just let him do it, he’s happy.”

“What’s to happen to the farm?”

“Maybe he will create a market for organic weeds or something, either way – he’s well, he’s happy and he does seem to be making some sort of living. Stop worrying.”

“I can’t. Three generations worked to make this place, and look at him.”

“He believes in what he’s doing. Something will work out.” Johan’s mother wasn’t sure exactly what would work out, but her beloved son sure did look happy. He had been such a sickly young man, and now here he was, strong, healthy and apparently very young at fifty. “Maybe he’s right and we’re wrong?” The small seventy –something white-haired fireball of a woman gave her husband a stern look.

“I sure hope so for the sake of the farm.” Johan’s father shook his head. “Otherwise you’d better start eating some of these magic weeds and have a miracle baby.” They smiled at one another naughtily and carried on eating their chicken.

Joseph had thrown out his football gear, grown his hair, set up his shop online, written his first ebook and was marketing via the sparse network of contacts in the world of alternative nutrition. He was fairly confident by now that he could give up the day job and make his way in the world without any further support. His speaking engagements were picking up, and making his daily videos wasn’t a huge chore for the response rate of people seeking solutions and remedies from his store. Plenty of people seemed to want to go to a new vendor, and he found his colleagues in this small industry very helpful. Indeed, Sam Redwood himself had become a good, if not close friend, and had invited him along as a speaker to several minor events. All in all, his future did look pretty bright, and Joseph was reasonably content apart from the seemingly endless emails from people asking everything from when to eat fruit, to how to cure cancer. Soon, he reckoned, he could afford someone to take care of all that. In the meantime, he opened an email from one Hilary Yardley.

Dear Mr Moth,

I have written an ebook on my journey with health food, and wonder if you might stock it in your shop? I have enclosed some pictures.

Hilary Yardley

His eyes widened when he saw the pictures.

Kira was still up. It was 5am but she was dealing with her staff member in Russia, who seemed to keep extremely odd hours for a Russian. Running a twenty four hour business, even for fun, is not easy. She laughed as she passed the youtube video on to her friend, Ghost.

“Get a load of this guy, he is so full of shit.”

Sam Redwood, full throttle. This went on for some months. Kira wasn't even sure why she was still listening to him. Her passing interest in rhetoric and linguistics told her he was a remarkable speaker despite almost constant 'winging it,' and she did quite like the positive reinforcement angle he favoured, a result, she later learned, of the use of NLP, but she was only half hearing anything he said whilst working on her virtual business. He spoke about a lot of stuff she was quite familiar with from her father, whom she missed, but why she would choose to listen to this guy when a lot of what he said was laughably corny was a mystery even to her. One of her parent's favourite jokes was to advise reading Dale Carnegie in response to any problem, she supposed that had something to do with it. In any case, she found it entertaining to let him ramble on as she worked, and frequently passed the funnier ones on to Ghost, who laughed at a lot of the same things she did.

“Am I just watching him because he's cute?”

“Is he cute?”

“Well not really, to be honest he looks a little bit like me, and I actually don't look at him that often either. You can see the little cogs turning. Why am I still listening to him?”

Kira eventually took to shouting at the computer in the studio while she worked “I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M WAITING FOR YOU TO SAY BUT HURRY UP AND SAY IT!”

It wasn't until one unusually vicious video, taken by someone who had long since gone off Sam, in which he made an error and allowed his smile to drop, that Kira finally relented. He was a real person. A gloriously imperfect, real person. It might be worth surviving after all. Maybe there was a point. She climbed the ladder leading from the studio and proceeded to the kitchen to make a salad, the first of the rest of her life.

Dr Swartz, who, freed from his formerly respectable life as a Malibu MD, had taken to wearing amusing hats and a monocle, was listening at the door as Barry Crispin fired Robin Swayze. He didn't like the sound of it at all.

“We just can't have you making religious statements at work, especially not about homosexuality. I'm sorry.”

Robin ranted for a while, about religious freedom and his principles, then Malcolm heard him get up to leave. He quickly dived down the corridor before he heard the door of Crispin's office open and close. He guessed he wouldn't be seeing Robin again then.

Crispin was a dour man, rarely took his own health advice and appeared to concentrate on his alarmingly tall coiffure and neatly trimmed moustache rather than his business, on a day to day basis at any rate. Rumour had it that some skulduggery had been involved in his takeover at Stoic, but no

one seemed to know if it was true. Malcolm didn't like him all that much, but he was here for information on the business so he was prepared to tolerate him for a year or so whilst he located his future home. In the meantime, several kind baby boomer ladies had taken pity on him. All in all things were looking up for Malcolm since Celia's departure.

Kira liked to shock Aldous.

"I'm thinking of getting married, Aldous." They had just been shooting. Kira had decided, to balance her raw non-meat diet, she would take up clay pigeon shooting. She had lost a hundred and twenty pounds by this time, and was feeling a little better.

"Oh?" Aldous knew from the tone that Kira was about to say something utterly ridiculous. He had known her a long time. He never quite knew how seriously to take her, but he knew the 'incoming ridiculous statement' tone when he heard it.

"Yes, I think I'll marry Sam Redwood." She stroked the dusty dashboard of the now filthy blue Subaru.

"Who is he?"

"Oh just some Yank author, looks a bit like me, vain, bit of a slapper." Kira was on a roll now but tried to keep a straight face.

"Why would he want to marry you? He's famous for something?"

"You don't get it, do you Aldous." Kira was always astonished at the lack of confidence in her friends. It never occurred to her that there was any division between her and anyone. "Famous people are just normal people minus the sense of shame." Kira wasn't quite this staggeringly self-confident, but she loved making Aldous think. "Why do you think famous people are automatically different?"

"Well, I quite fancy Elizabeth Hurley, but I don't think shed want to date me any more than she would date a gas fitter from Burnley."

"I don't particularly fancy him, apart from obviously I'm delighted that other people do and he happens to look a bit like me. I don't even imagine I would spend any time with him. I could just see it working out. He probably isn't even a very nice person. I just think I would suit him." Kira remained nonchalant and absurdly upbeat.

"Why would you want to marry him then?" Evidently Aldous believed in love. Not that depressed then, Kira noted. She had been yanking Aldous' elusive cheerful chain for years, with varying degrees of success.

"It's a bit strange, it just kind of feels right. I can see exactly how it could work, and I can see where I fit in. I'm writing the book for him now. Besides which Aldous, you don't get it at all. It isn't about who you are, it's about your level of cheek. That's why celebrities are celebrities, because they understood that in the first place." She maintained her cheeky spoilt brat tone.

"I never thought about it like that."

"You never do."

Later that afternoon, Aldous read over Kira's initial notes for the book. "Is he likely to understand this?"

"According to his qualifications, he is actually very clever, although he appears to think cleverness is unpopular. You know what Yanks are like, he probably thinks he would be considered a 'dweeb' or a 'dork' or some such if anyone thought he actually had a brain. I calculate that this should springboard him way beyond anything he has time to do with his workload. Should take me seven years or so and then that rather ramshackle, seat-of-the-pants empire he is building could look rather beautiful."

"You're really serious about this? How old is he?"

"A few days older than me. Not about the marrying bit, Aldous, I'm not that crazy. Love isn't about possession; it's about achieving great things. I wouldn't want to cramp his style. Like I said, my twin is a bit of a slapper, and he's made far too many mistakes to pull off anything like this by himself. I'm not sure I even want to meet him, to be honest. He would have to want to meet me."

They watched one of Sam's videos.

"You see what I mean now? How long do you think that would last with me?"

"About twenty seconds." Aldous was still confused. This guy was a plonker. Not only that, he was a vegan. Kira didn't like vegans. She liked the countryside. She liked lichen, moss and insects, wool and the wild lands of her not-suitable-for-crops homeland.

"Exactly, but in my hands..."

"A lethal weapon for mass-cultural change." Aldous saw the light at last and pumped a fist in front of him, trying to look Stalinesque and triumphant, whilst trying to imagine the tall blonde playboy party animal rejecting a bunch of bikini wearing airheads and being cheerily henpecked by a short fat Scottish woman who liked economics and embroidery and rarely left the house. She was right though, Sam Redwood did look horrifyingly like her. Same eyes, same hair, same irritating, self-satisfied smile even. Oh god, not two of them. Like the drama masks in theatres, one happy, one sad. Carrot and Stick. What hope for mass consumer capitalism and thoughtless consumption? He pushed back his glasses.

"You're catching on, Aldous. And as long as we keep him in girls, all I have to do is sit at home and pat the fluffy white cat. Or the leopard, or the ginger. As I've said, love isn't all about kisses and flowers. Sometimes it's a bit more important, not just for you but everyone else. He's only really interested in work and girls anyway. I can see Redwood's dream quite clearly, and it's entirely compatible with mine, which is all that really matters. With that gob, I can take over the world!" Aldous and Kira chuckled at this surreal but hugely amusing vision. Kira dropped her tone back to sanity. "And even if I can't, at least I will have written this. Who cares why, as long as I get it done. You have to use what's in front of you."

"I hesitate to point this out Kira, but he's a vegan."

"Oh, no, he's a raw vegan. I'm one too, most of the time, it's slightly different. He wears wool, for example, and probably likes native African drums. Vegan on health grounds, rather than boring the pants off everyone at dinner about their dreadfully inferior morals. Raw vegans bore on about herbal supplements, organics and how marvellous they look and feel instead."

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