

# Beasts Within

A collection of short stories by Clive Gilson

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## The Beast Within

Throughout the dark days of illness when he watched her life being sliced away in thin, almost transparent curls of prosciutto ham in the morbidly sweet smelling delicatessen that served only the finest of cancerous dishes, Richard had never once doubted that he would cope. He thought of the slow unravelling of all that they had assumed and planned for in terms of food because she was, she had been, such a visionary in the kitchen, and ham in particular because of some long-ago account that he had read of island tribesman calling cannibalised victims of ritualistic ante-deluvian warfare Long-Pigs.

Richard cooked dishes for one now using a simple book of recipes probably designed for students. Her own library, a cornucopia of Rhodes, Oliver, Burton-Race, Fearnley-Whittingstall, Stein and David, sat on the bookshelves in his flat untouched,

a small memorial to the days of splendour. More often than not now he grilled chicken breast, opened a bag of salad, and with a nod to past glories, made up his own salad dressing out of the last of her red wine vinegar and walnut oil. When the time came to replenish the cupboards he was sure that he would find something suitably pre-prepared in Waitrose.

After one such meal, with the wine cap unscrewed and never to be reintroduced to the bottle, Richard flicked through the digitally free channels on the television and came up blank once again. Nothing of interest. This did not surprise or annoy him. Richard told himself frequently that he enjoyed being phlegmatic. He had not been able to listen to the Archers since she died. Once it had been an evening ritual or, if they had been busy, a gentle Sunday laze in bed with tea and chocolate biscuits after early morning love-making. It is what it is, he thought, so there's no point in getting upset. By accepting the inevitable passage through the many stages of grief he was as certain as day follows night that he would surface again, would return to something akin to the skin that he had once inhabited.

With nothing on the box but the silence of his now solitary life, Richard got up from his armchair, walked across the open-plan living area of his small flat, picked up a packet of Silk cut from the kitchen worktop and withdrew one cigarette. He did not smoke in the ground floor flat, it being a rented space, a bolt hole that he could shutter against the world, so he opened the patio doors that lead out onto the communal gardens, leaned against the door frame and lit up. It is what it is.

The anti-smoking Nazi at his local Cotswold surgery, one Sister McGovern, had actually told him not to bother about giving up. He should go on holiday, get through the inevitable run of birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas, and then make the ultimate sacrifice with the New Year. He had, she'd said, enough on his plate. Richard inhaled deeply, stifling a rough, moist cough, and decided that he would not beat himself up too much about it. A drink and a smoke were fine and dandy things to indulge in given the unenviable circumstances of his life. He thought of them as strong but forgiving crutches upon which he could hobble towards normality. He mentally raised the rapidly cremating smoke together with his glass of something Tesco red to the evening sky in salutation to Fuhrer McGovern. They're not all bastards, he mumbled to a feral cat that was twitching its behind predatorily beneath his next door neighbour's bird table.

A window slid shut in the flat above his, the owner, a florid, self-employed painter and decorator who made noisy love to his paramour every Saturday morning, evidently declining Richard's invitation to join him in his passive acceptance of the way of things. The first two fingers of Richards already raised and wine bejewelled hand strayed just a little higher than true stoicism demanded.

Richard had managed sexual congress once since she left him to fend for himself, a rather unsatisfactory affair, or shag as he'd referred to her in one of his rare drifts down to the pub with his son-in-law. The physical act was about what he'd expected. The primary assault had been over in a flash, a star-spangled whiz-bang that betrayed the months of unfulfilled marital passion during his wife's final, septic days. Richard smiled at the duality of the memories. He was clearly not as unfit as he'd thought prior to his hotel triste. The second and third waves of his sexual task force had gone in without meeting much resistance and established a strong bridgehead someway inland of the poor girl's own stamina. Physically he'd got his rock offs. It was sex, not lovemaking. What was unsatisfactory about it was the aftermath.

Beyond the sheer messiness of sharing intimate space with another human body, all of which could be resolved by mopping up with man-size tissues, there was

the inherently dirty feeling of betrayal. Ridiculous but true. His wife had been cold in her urn for months, and here he was, his ears ringing with the words of his counsellor about doing things for his own benefit now, still feeling as though he was committing treason. The thought of that night made him shudder on the doorstep. He could hear his wife cocking the firing pins for each member of the firing squad before which he sometimes dreamed that he stood. Emotional compensation; more wine and another fag.

What made it worse were the phone calls. In that moment of self congratulatory euphoria, under the influence of the endorphin rush, he had exchanged phone numbers with the shag. Recently she had started to ring two or three times a day. Richard had added her by name to his contacts list, which meant that he could leave her to make plaintive noises on his voice mail. He instinctively deleted them after the first syllable.

In the old days, before that moment when he had looked into his future wife's eyes and known the absolute truth of his dependence on her, he had remained resolutely single. On more than one occasion he had been the bit on the side, the other man in the cuckold equation, and it had not bothered him one little bit. Now that he was single again, and even though the object of his momentary lust was reaching terminal velocity in the divorce courts, he could not square the circle of his crime. Her breathing in of air that should have been his wife's just made him angry.

It should, therefore, be easy, he thought, as he poured another glass of the dry red and pulled another cigarette from its snugly reassuring and mechanically sorted place in the packet, to answer the woman's calls and tell her that this thing between them was a one off, was done and dusted. The problem, which Richard acknowledged with a flick of his finger on the rough flint of the lighter, was that he had an addictive nature. When things got desperate he would take one of her calls, apologise and say that it was a hard time for him, and they would meet for another dose of something scabrous and itchy. Richard managed a low chuckle. Why, oh why, couldn't he take the great Billy Mac's advice and just get drunk and watch porn?

Questions about Richard's sexual reintegration with the wider world were, he felt, largely a distraction from the more important realisation that this thing, this disease, this inevitably bankrupting game of dice with the beast, was what it was. Acceptance was the key. Richard stepped out into the autumn evening, watching low, grey clouds scud across the tree tops at the far end of the communal garden, and was about to make for a bench over by a massive Copper Beech, when he stopped, turned, and fetched from the flat the bottle and the packet of cigarettes. If he was going to muse, he thought, best to do it professionally.

The nights were closing in now, the leaves falling with the strengthening breeze that blew in the cold winds from the northern lands, a gift from the Snow Queen of yore. Despite showers earlier in the day that same leaf stripping breeze had dried out the bench seat, leaving streaks of dampness in the wood at the margins and around the rusting screw heads that held his weight as he sat down. It was not yet the full blown season for decay but already the manicured lawn was strewn with wet, black leaves.

Looking back at the block of flats he caught a glimpse of the florid painter caught in the glare of ceiling spot lights as he watched Richard in the garden, no doubt muttering about polluting neighbours and the irony of a survivor of one cancer ineluctably feeding the tumours of his own demise. The ruddy faced little man moved away from the window the instant that he saw Richard look back and wave a misty-blue hand.

After the initial shock of diagnosis, when he and she had sat in the consulting room of the breast surgeon, with the senior nurse on hand to translate medical techspeak into plain English, when the tears had flowed between them like an automaton tableau depicting Victoria Falls, they had, he thought, even then, begun to move through space and time on different paths. His wife had borne the scars of mastectomy and lymph node investigations with bravery and a determination to overcome that awed him. The rolling months of chemo and radio, of Herceptin and consultation had bound their lives into a cycle of three week blocks. Routes to and from hospital wore a groove in their souls, the shape of a tree being passed first in one direction and then another marking out a series of revolving, repeating steps. Nausea. Two days in bed with the curtains closed. Soundless days of untouched food trays and muffled footsteps on the stairs.

He should have sat with her for longer, but he found refuge in his study in between these bouts of impotent caring. Then, when the immediate global poisoning began to wear off she would surface and begin again the process of taking back her life, until the next blood test revealed neutropenia. Hospital walkways and the special care unit. The sound of the nurses voices became a soundtrack that played on a permanent loop during his last glass of comfort while she slept upstairs, worn away by the endless thunder of the chemotherapy cannonade.

She changed. Richard was forty-two when she was diagnosed. Two years later, when the primary had been beaten, she looked fragile, like a Russian Babushka, although very much like a Ukrainian peasant woman, she still packed one hell of a punch. They tried to regain a sense of proportion, a semblance of normality, but despite every appearance of success, neither one of them could really make much headway against that constant fear.

In public they were an ideal couple, she always bright and bubbling, Richard quietly complementary, unflappable and devoted. Their first granddaughter came into the world and his wife made time to greet her by a sheer act of will. It was just a short moment, but it mattered.

Richard worked when the treatments allowed, and loved her as best he found that he could. Behind closed doors he drank ever more and deeply, and somewhere along the line he stopped talking to her. Richard withdrew little by little behind the façade of the perfect foil to the recovering cancer heroine. The truth that he only admitted to her in those final weeks when the friendship of all their years broke through the debilitation, was that he too was mortally afraid. He was terrified of losing her, and with her everything that defined who he thought he was.

The second diagnosis was incurable. Maybe a year, maybe two. She got nine months, by which time a second bout of chemo had been stopped because it was doing more damage than the multiple bloody tumours. Then, with no immune system to speak of, she really did become that little, frail old lady, wracked by pain and sepsis, until, with her family all around her, Richard had asked the doctors to stop the antibiotics. It had been pain relief for every single one of them.

For weeks after her killed her all that Richard could remember was her death face. When the morphine stilled her aching heart and burst his, when his tears fell on her cooling cheek and he spoke soft, sweet nothings to her ghost, she had sagged. The nurses did their best, but that face was simply not hers. The jaundice of enterococcal sepsis and the deflation of pneumothorax coloured his memory of her. She was a foreign body, a simulacrum of what she should have been thirty years hence.

That had been the April shower that lasted all summer, but now, just recently, coinciding with the dulling of the year and the closing in of the nights, and perhaps

with the woman in the hotel bedroom, he could remember laughter and life and fire in his wife's eyes. That was the fundamental problem that he grappled with as he sat on the bench in the communal garden outside his ground floor flat.

He poured another glass of wine and demolished it. He lit and smoked another cigarette. He emptied the last of the bottle and tried to savour it, knowing that, as usual these days, he had bought just the one. Richard was sublimely, drunkenly animated, talking rabidly to himself, the feral cat and the disapproving decorator in number thirty-four. His hands moved through the now low night air as he rehashed moments from these most recent of mourning days.

He found it difficult that the place where he lived, a quiet Cotswold market town, was always full of couples, weekendening parents who had palmed the kids off onto Granny, or lovers sneaking off from a conference, usually middle-aged or older, and he always had to repress the urge to run up to them and ask them why it was they who could walk hand in hand towards a pension and a bus pass and not he and his darling girl.

Then again, he had noticed how often these weekendening lovers found the time to spit and spat in between their lovemaking. He'd lost count of the times that he'd spotted that frosty look or overheard a tell-tale tone of voice, the sort that could lead to a recreation of the blitz or a glorious kindling of first-flush passion, and then he had to fight an urge to run up to them and tell them, implore them, to realise that it was all so fragile and that their time together should never, ever be wasted.

Most of the time Richard restrained these urges. He was in the habit of being unflappable, of being dependable, of being, well, Richard.

But he had one more thought, one more urge, one more moment of realisation. With the coming of memory there came the beast. In his most sanguine moments, when he maintained the façade of getting his shit together, he would remember her smile, would remember sketching her as she walked on a beach on Paros in the shade of a cliff with a small Greek Orthodox chapel at the summit, or he might suddenly feel her hand in his over the dinner table. He caught fragments of her conversation, stock phrases and expressions, her look of smirking, affectionate disapproval when he screwed up the do-it-yourself bodgery that was his household trademark. He smelled her skin in the aftermath of one of their rows, the one where she slept on the sofa and then crawled into bed on the Saturday morning with a mumbled apology because she couldn't remember what she had been so upset about.

With these memories came a primeval urge to howl, to bay at the moon, to call the pack to grief now that the alpha female had run down her last caribou. Richard downed the final swill of wine, and feeling his head spin under the raucous impulse he climbed up onto the bench, raised his hands to cup the lunar beauty of the now dark and clearing sky, and tilted his head back. The muscles in his chest tightened and from deep in his belly he gathered up years of frustration and loss, knuckling and kneading them into the shape of his anger and his own feral beauty before ejaculating one high, keening shock of wild sound into the damp night air in a body wracking orgasm of total and unadulterated grief. The hairs on Richards neck and arms and legs bristled. He felt his nails sharpen against the palms of his hand. The howling grew, flooding the air with pain. Richard bayed at the revealed moon as if all the worlds in the universe were barren and he, the last wolf yet living, could run no more.

## **Rag Trade Gepetto**

Sleep was a stranger to David. Our gentle friend, that warmth of embrace and soft comfort at the end of a long day, had always seemed to be at one remove from his soul. He tried in vain to count sheep, failing miserably each night to imagine any flock big enough, and through that imagination to will his limbs to slumber. David lay at night amid the intermittent tics and spasms of sagging brickwork and leeching pipes. Minutes might turn into decades of waiting, during which time he focussed on liver spots on the painted ceiling above his dishevelled bed. He always returned to the same theme, and in so doing he inevitably banished all hope of that slow decline into the unconscious world of the dream king. And so, wiping the grit from the corners of his eyes, he would rise, usually around two in the morning, make a pot of tea, and sit in front of the television flicking between the educational and the banal.

On occasions David tried alternative tacks, pouring himself liberal measures of cheap brandy in an effort to knock himself out, and but for the persistent worry that his liver would explode, he might have considered alcoholism as a cure for insomnia. Fridays were his favourite tinkle days, as he generally did not work on a Saturday and then had time to recover before Monday. Even here, though, when sweet oblivion coursed through his veins and he collapsed on the sofa, he couldn't ever say that he slept. Rather he entered a twisted world where the great theme of his life was made real, and the tempting began all over again. In some ways, these weekly diversions seemed more real to David, more full of the visceral sharpness of existence, than did the mundane world of rag trade cutting on Eastcastle Street in London's West End.

David's inability to enter the altered state of mind that brings mental recharge and balance was caused directly by his chosen trade. David worked the cutting benches for those 'B' list designers who stitch their way through one financial crisis after another at the back of Oxford Street. He spent his days surrounded by fittings, by models, and by the spike-tongued hopefuls trampling their way towards the catwalk, and all of them, the girls, the boys, the madames, the couturiers, only ever saw him as a pair of sharp blades.

David, however, saw beyond the chalk line and the pattern book. David saw girls and women. He watched them move and twist within their fabric shrouds, and surrounded by skin and bone and muscle and the imposing beauty of the fashionista, he wept internally. Summer was the worst time of all with acres of breast exposed to draw his gaze down into the realm of the lascivious. David was one of life's luckless men. He smiled and made a threat of it. He laughed and drew fingernails across a blackboard. He held a woman's hand for just a moment too long. He tried too hard.

He was barely thirty years old, skilled and adept at his trade, but he was already balding, noticeably overweight, had crooked teeth and one eye that stared manically out of its socket. He knew instinctively that he was never noticed for who he might be, but only ever for what he could do. Those paragons of perfection who employed him would not see the man because his flesh offended them.

At night, David thought about one thing; his ideal woman. In spending his sleepless nights imagining perfection, and then in the morning looking at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror, he committed himself to a cycle of despair that he was convinced would only ever end when he put out the lights...permanently. It wasn't as though David wanted too much of the world. He recognised in the sea of fake perfection that ebbed and flowed around his salt bleached rock, that beyond the make-over shores, where bleary eyed beauties awoke in their raw state, there might be a little nook or tight cranny where he could find happiness. All he wanted was a cuddle, was warmth other than his own in bed on a cold night, and in the throes of such thinking, when the alcohol finally bit, his dreams took him into strange

encounters with girls made of glass and wax, girls who beckoned to him and then shattered at his touch. He dreamed of feminine peacocks, creatures of fan and feather and piercing shrillness. He dreamed of the hunting tigress with cubs mewling in the undergrowth and he knew the bite of her rancid fangs. David also dreamed of a man, who sat at the edge of the disillusionarium that his drunken world inevitably became, a man who never spoke, who never moved, but watched and waited, and waited and watched, a man dressed in the threads of deep, black time, threads woven into a riverboat gambler's brocaded frock and embroidered waistcoat.

It was on one such Friday amid the high heat and low cut bosom of June that David forsook the usual Fundador and splashed out on two bottles of Grouse. He never drank Scotch. It made him unduly maudlin, but, he decided while wandering disconsolately down the drinks aisle at his local Tesco Metro, that it had been a fucking maudlin day, and the cause of his melancholy was the new girl on reception.

During a quick introduction by the owner of the salon, David had let his gaze linger too long on the new girl's breasts and rather than the usual snort of disgust he'd received a round, heavy slap in the face. The sound of her palm on his cheek filled the air with thunder, rattling across the downstairs showroom, and he had fled in horror to the workshop on the first floor. No matter how large the stone he overturned, he found no place to hide, and blushing crimson the day long he'd chalked and cut and made one ham-fisted, embarrassed mistake after another, until *She Who Must Be Obeyed* had waved her finely manicured hand at him and told him to go home. The fact that she added words like creepy and weird and skin-crawling to the usual terms of abuse that he periodically suffered was, he felt, a little gratuitous. He had never actually touched a girl's breast, nor would he dare to do so, but sometimes he just couldn't help where he looked, afflicted as he was with the blow of the birthing ugly-stick.

"It isn't weird or creepy", he told himself repeatedly as he stared at the rack full of spirits in Tesco. "I just lose track of where I am looking sometimes. For God's sake!"

David caught sight of another shopper looking at him as if he were the nutter on the bus, so he picked up the two bottles of scotch, bowed his head, and walked quickly to the check-out counter.

Slumped on the sofa, with the world drifting into an amber haze fuelled by an empty bottle of the blend, David closed his eyes and fell asleep immediately. All he wanted on this night of all nights was the blackness of absolute torpor, but even in his befuddled state he still staggered into the kingdom of impossible dreams. David stood on a beach watching the waves crash in, swaying in drunken rhythm with the surf.

In the distance he saw his alter ego, Mister Darcy on a white charger, galloping along the shore line with whipping hair and muscular abandon. Unlike his previous dream incarnations, however, there was no immediate object of the chase, no impossibly fragile maiden to save. Instead, his imagined avatar turned the horse to face a rocky spur at one end of the beach, and there he saw the man in black. Again, breaking with all tradition, the usually passive and silent man stood, climbed down from the rocks and started to walk towards the Darcy figure, who dismounted with a jump and a flourish. The two figures met in the curl of receding water at the shore line. They stared at each other for a moment before Darcy spoke.

"Are you the Devil?" he asked. "Have you come to make a pact? Is this my Faustian temptation?"

The man in black looked down at the wet sand and shook his head. "Nothing to do with me, mate, all that Devil nonsense".

He looked up and pointed back along the beach to where the true-to-life form of the dreaming David stood watching them. “There’s no magic can make him any less ugly than he is.”

“We know,” replied Darcy, “but we’ll do anything for just one chance. Souls aren’t much use when you’re as disappointed and as lonely as we are.”

“That’s true enough,” said the man in black as he kicked at a pebble embedded in the soft, wet sand. “But it won’t change anything. When he wakes up he’ll be just as unattractive as he was yesterday. More so, given how much he’s put away tonight. Anyway, I’m not in the soul business. I’m just a gambling man.”

Darcy moved in a little closer and looked hard and long at his companion on the beach. “So what are you doing here? Why are you always in our dreams?”

The gambling man shrugged his shoulders. “Waiting for the moment when you get off the horse and ask that very question. I feel sorry for you, for him.”

“But according to you there’s nothing that will change our life?” asked Darcy, looking confused.

In the dream David and Darcy started to merge together, so that, as the man in black watched and smiled sweetly under the towering blue sky, the impeccable and imposing rider of the white steed twisted and decayed back to his sad and depressive core component part.

The man in black waited for the metamorphosis to complete before speaking again. “I didn’t say that. I said you’d still be ugly in the morning. I never said anything about not being able to change your life.”

With that the man in black took David’s hands in his and turned them over as if inspecting for warts and calluses. “Hands of a craftsman, mate. I don’t think you have any idea just how skilled you are. Think about it. Tomorrow, when you wake up I’ll give you this – no hangover, nothing but the fresh breeze of a summer morning, and you’ll feel great. Think about what you can really do with these hands.” He paused. “And with what’s in your heart.”

The man in black smiled and let David’s hands fall to his sides. “As I said, I’m not looking for a soul. Not looking for anything of yours. You live your life, mate. If there’s anything to collect it’ll be done long after you’ve stopped shuffling through this mortal soil.”

With that he turned on his heel and walked back towards the rocks. David felt tears stinging his eyes as they welled up and then fell upon his ruddy cheeks, and as his vision blurred so did the image of the walking man. David wiped away the tears with the back of his hands, but when he finally saw clearly again, there was no gambler, no Darcy and no white charger on the beach. There were no fantastic images of women, no wheeling gulls, nor was there the reassuring sound of surf. Slowly a dusky darkness fell, and for the first time in years David slept truly, like an innocent child.

Despite the evidence around him, the empty bottle of scotch, an overturned tumbler, the crick in his neck and the taste of deep sleep in his mouth, David had never felt quite so bright and alive of a morning. It was still early, the clock hands reading just seven o’clock, and already the summer sun streamed in through windows against which no curtains were drawn. He stretched out on the sofa, yawned, considered his options and realised that he was hungry, as if he had been walking in coastal air all night.

He remembered nothing of the dream, but he felt a tingle in his fingers, as though they were trying speak to him. David made himself a cup of tea, sipping the

hot drink slowly, and all the while he basked in the warming sunlight that flooded his meagre little flat. He had an idea, but first he must shower and then, rather than hunt for a dry crust in the bread bin, he would walk down to the coffee bar on the corner of the street and eat Danish pastries. For some reason it seemed to him that this was a good day to be alive. To Hell with the bloody women and their bloody dresses, he thought.

The rest of the weekend saw David working to liberate himself from the squalid mediocrity that had coloured so much of his life to date. He cleared the flat of rubbish. He swept and dusted and hoovered. The bathroom gleamed as never before and the whole place bloomed like a summer flower bed bursting through mulch. He washed clothes, bagged up old items for the charity shop, and without quite knowing why he put aside the best cuts of collected redundant cloth for some future use.

During Sunday afternoon he started to move the furniture around so that he could create a working space, and there he placed the tools of his trade, his scissors, his needles, his threads, his bodkins, together with his one pride and joy, an antique hand-cranked Singer sewing machine. Finally, come Sunday evening, when all was set and clean and fair, he took himself off to the bathroom and scrubbed himself with a vim and vigour that suggested in no uncertain terms that David wanted to scour away the stain of disappointment that had soiled his life so far.

Although the previous working week had ended in personal embarrassment for David, the one saving grace in all this was his skill and his craft. He might have been ridiculed the previous Friday, but he had not been sacked. As he walked up the stairs at Oxford Circus station and headed along towards Eastcastle Street, he felt serene and relaxed.

He bought flowers from a stand by the old Post Office. The morning girls, all bright and rouged and clad in their summer skimpies, simply didn't interest him. He entered the building where he worked, handed the flowers to the receptionist and apologised for his previous indiscretion. He skipped up the stairs in the full knowledge that mouths hung open behind his back, and when the Madame appeared to ask what was going on he simply smiled at her and told her that he had thought long and hard about life and that he was now a changed man. David couldn't quite tell what they believed and what they disbelieved, but then he didn't care. A plan was forming, a scheme of divine proportion, that would take away the edge of his physical and emotional hunger forever.

The plan was nothing more than a vague shape in the early moments of Monday morning, but by degrees, as he worked through the day, smiling and whistling to himself, the bones of the thing began to form. He surveyed the fabrics in the workshop and saw in lycra and toile and cotton the shapes of limbs. In taffetas and satins and wools he saw skin tones and contours. The mannequins upon which hung Madame's latest creations gave form to the coagulation of shape and sinew, and in his hands he held the means, held the tools that might bring life to the ideas floating dimly in his head. By the end of that first working day after the disaster and the dream, he was resolved to act. He would borrow a mannequin and, at the end of each day working the cloth, he would take home off-cuts. David would fill his evenings with the sound of the Singer.

Over the next few weeks there appeared in David's flat a succession of patchwork skins, each one crafted on the old singer and fitted over the mannequin like a Lycra glove. Colours and shades entwined, with gold and silver threads catching the light, but none of the textures and the patterns, made up from off-cuts as they were,

could ever quite conform to David's aesthetic. Her skin had to be perfect before he would consider the next steps.

Days merged into nights and back into the rising light of late summer and then early autumn. David worked all day at his trade, a changed man, happy and discrete and gentle. At night, with his latest captures from the cutting room floor, he became a fevered creature, bending over his old sewing machine for hours in an effort to sew the smallest and the finest seams. David never drank now, but the hours and the days spent spinning the sewing machine wheel in both directions inevitably took its toll on the man.

Towards the end of September, just as the Devil spat on the bramble bushes in the courtyard behind David's flat and the Hawthorn in the local park hung heavy with blackening sloes, David began to realise that something had to give. His search for perfection was driving him towards the madness of insomnia again, and he had either to finish his dream project or abandon happiness for all time. On the last Friday of the month, as he yawned over his scissors and counted the minutes down until lunch time's sweetly fresh air, the Madame entered the cutting room. Across her arm she held a bolt of the finest golden Escorial, which she laid gently on David's table.

"For that singer, you know, hot little arse but slight nasal whine on the high notes...touring at Christmas and wants this ready for dress rehearsals next month." she said, smoothing out a crease in the material. "I'll send the drawings up later. Usual stuff, patterns and cuts, and I know you'll do your best. Beautiful isn't it?"

David simply stared at the sheer brilliance and the tight but elastic weave of the Escorial. It was, indeed, beautiful. He nodded his agreement as Madame turned and headed back down to the lower floor. The Escorial was perfect.

True to her word Madame sent up the relevant drawings, a design for a light and skimpy halter neck dress, cut low at the front and back. It was all so depressing, he thought. Here he was, staring at the most stunning bolt of cloth just when he needed it, but judging by the drawings he would have to be profligate with the material. While the line was simple, there were so many flourishes and twists and hints to be cut for the associated dancers that there would nothing serviceable left of the Escorial, nothing worth taking home for his darling girl. It would be a tragedy, but, as he turned the design round in his hand, desperately trying to find economies within the pattern, David decided that it was time to sink or swim. He had to finish his dream girl, and only the golden Escorial could possibly do. The entire bolt of cloth would be required, but from it he could cut a perfect skin, and then he could really begin to make his dreams come true.

David spent his entire lunch break walking the diesel fumed streets that ran around the John Lewis store at Oxford Circus in a vain attempt to clear his mind. This would be the last straw as far as Madame was concerned. David tried to talk himself back towards a land of common sense, but he was, he knew, already too far gone with his new enterprise. Eventually a grimly determined David returned to his cutting room, gathered up the golden skin, stuffed it under his arm, and, taking one last look around his place of work for so many years, he boldly marched out of the building and took the first train home.

Never in any folk or fairy tale did a man work as hard and with such concentration as David did that Friday night. No elves, no pixies, no faeries, not a single creature, not even *Tom Tit Tom*, could have sewn and measured and cut with such care and deliberation. David could feel a fever brewing up in his blood, but it was, he knew, a fever of the heart. This skin would become flesh and blood in his hands. He was a chalice filled to the brim with love, and he alone possessed the skill

to make that love real. By Saturday morning the skin atop the mannequin was complete and without blemish. He ran his hands over the perfect material, sensing the warp of the fibres as though they were pores, and David shivered with delight. The skin fitted every contour perfectly, revealing a proportioned ideal of womankind, full of breast and slim of waist. He could not rest yet, however. As perfect as the skin might be it was still many hours and days away from being his darling girl.

Where before David might have sought out alcoholic remedies for his nocturnal restlessness now he revelled in the fever of work. The only time that he left the flat was to buy threads and cottons. He spent nearly twenty-four hours embroidering just one eyebrow. She would take time and effort and skill to complete, all of which David devoted to her making without care or thought for his own state. He embroidered full lips of ruby red, eyes of a deep, longing brown, toes that were flawless, fingers that were slender and golden, and ears that were faultless and delicate. He spent days bent over an embroidery hoop, barely remembering to drink the meanest cup of water or to eat even the most frugal morsel. Every ounce of David's energy, every luminescent molecule of his soul, fed this unbridled passion. He was determined, come Hell or high-water, that he would create the perfect woman, the ultimate partner in life.

It took almost three weeks of the most painstaking work to complete the embroidery, to carefully add elements to the skin that would enhance her beauty, and finally to make the perfect little black dress for her to wear. By the end of his labours, David was blindly in love with his fabulously fake creation, seeing in her weave and in every stitch the embodiment of everything that he could never be close to in the flesh of real life.

He spoke with her about love and truth and timeless bliss, imagining her voice as a soft and sultry summer night's whisper. He sat at her feet, gazing up into her embroidered mannequin eyes, and wept quiet tears for such beauty. In his heart he also wept because he knew that there was no such thing as a fairy god mother, no matter how much he wished it, no matter how loudly he wailed and pleaded. He suddenly remembered the words of the gambling man in his dream, a dream that seemed to exist in another lifetime. There was no soul. There would be no miracle. He would never meet his own Jiminy Cricket, nor would his darling girl ever come to life. For weeks David had denied this one simple fact while lost in the fever of creation, but now that this simulacrum of love stood rigid above him, he had to admit the truth, and with that admission the last of his strength began to drip away.

But there was yet one decision that David had to make. He understood that if he were to die for love, he would leave the girl standing as cold as stone in his flat, and that would never do. He had to find a way for them to be together, if not in this mortal world, then together in spirit, as one being within the eternal flame. Slowly David rose to his feet and, with the world swimming in black spots, he reached out and leaned on his work chair. Gradually the close horizons of his little working world steadied and he managed to focus. Where would they go, he asked himself? Where could they go? David was so tired and so run down and so exhausted of life that he really couldn't think clearly. Every spin of the cog wheels in his brain drained him of precious energy, so he took a decision. They would trust to Lady Luck.

Although rigid, the mannequin body was light. Without putting on shoes or coat, David picked up his darling girl, manoeuvred her down the stairs to the street door, and stepped out into a foreign world. When last he'd been out it was autumn and blustery but still warm. The world around him now was white and thick and diamond

clear. Snow had come to blanket the world outside, marking the end of living time for another year with the coming of the sterile freeze.

David felt the cold for just a moment as the snow underfoot melted into his socks and the cold air scratched at his throat. The only question in David's mind was where should they go. A church? A bar? None of the obvious places for seeking happy oblivion seemed appropriate. Instead, David and his perfect woman set off towards the south, heading slowly down from the smothered heights of the city towards the equally hidden river valley below. It was early in the morning, judging by the sense of quiet slumber that emanated from under the snow covered duvet that lay snug upon the streets, something for which David was rather grateful. Even in his befuddled state he still remembered the tattered edges of reason that came with ridicule.

After a mile or so, David began to lose all feeling in his feet and hands. He nearly dropped his perfect girl while negotiating kerbs, and he cursed the fates that might yet ruin his work. To make the river meant another mile or so of heavy trudge through the soft snow, and David began to doubt whether he had the strength to make it. He forced himself to take another step, and another, until, rounding the corner of some municipally grey building, David saw the flicker of bright red and yellow flames in a brazier at the end of an otherwise isolated and dark alley.

"Oh, yes," he whispered to his love. "Forgive me my dear, but I need to spend a minute or two by the fire."

There was a pause, as though she was answering him, and then he replied, "I know, but the river will take us down to the eternal sea. Just a moment of warmth, my love, just one minute, and then we'll be on our way again."

David dragged both his own shattered body and his frigid lover towards the brazier. There was no one in sight, although signs of itinerant occupation remained; an abandoned overcoat, an overturned mug next to a half full bottle of cider, cans and cigarette butts, a ravaged pizza box, and what looked like a used condom. David shuddered and told his darling girl not to look. He spread the overcoat out onto the bare snow and lay down in front of the brazier, letting the feeble flames work their magic, but magic, as David had already surmised, does not exist for people like us. Slowly as the effects of hyperthermia set in and the cold and the fatigue settled into the unconscious descent to coma and death, David muttered one last word; "Soon."

Without strength and without a word from his one true love, he slipped away towards the great sea of eternity, sailing towards his death just as he had always navigated the oceans of his life; alone.

The world was silent for a moment but then there came a footstep in the snow, followed by another and another. The footsteps were slow and measured. Slowly, taking shape in the feeble fire light from the brazier, the form of a man dressed in a black frock-coat and waistcoat appeared. He knelt down where David lay next to the perfect mannequin, and placed a hand on David's forehead and then at his neck. He held his hand there for a moment and then with a shake of his head he turned his attention to the mannequin. In running his fingers along her seams, in tracing the contours of the plastic body under her dress, and in touching her fantastically embroidered lips and eyes, he marvelled at the workmanship. She was truly the most beautiful creature that he had ever seen.

He turned back towards David's body and said, "I knew you could do it. If anybody could do it, it was always you." He patted David's cold leg. "And I meant what I said. No souls. It's like Michaelangelo, you know, that one great work, the one that uses up your life. Still, it's worth it, isn't it, mate. She's stunning."

The man in black turned back to the mannequin, took both of her rigid cloth covered hands in his, and to her he whispered that simple phrase that brings life to the world; “Love you, babe”.

The air suddenly grew warm and tropical around the brazier, melting snow and ice in an instant. The golden cloth shimmered in the fire light. Every stitch and every thread strained and writhed as the inner plastic of the shop-window mannequin twisted and buckled and then snapped back into place. Textures mingled and changed, and the world suspended belief for just one second, during which the man in black stood up and helped a gorgeous young woman to her feet. She wore a simple black dress over olive-golden skin, her dark hair falling in long cascades about her shoulders.

He looked into her eyes and smiled. “Been a long time waiting for you, babe.” He bent forward and kissed her on her ruby-red lips.

She smiled too and then looked down at the crumpled body of the cloth cutter. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Long story, babe. I’ll tell you sometime. Right now I’d wager you’re just a wee bit hungry. What do you say we head down to the river where I know a great all night café?”

The girl prodded the body with the toe of her bare right foot and shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah”, she said, “I am a bit peckish, now you come to mention it.”

## **The Marchese’s Gift**

Love’s young dream made even more perfect by the setting; candle light, sparklers in the ice creams, chilled wine, the warm glow of a Cretan evening laced with hints of Basil, Marjoram and Honeysuckle, and all set off perfectly by the warming sight of fingers entwined across a crumbed tablecloth. They whispered and giggled, whistling away at the last splinters of another wonderful day that would inevitably and gleefully merge into the solid mahogany of another steamy night. She, the young bride, sat back in her chair, slowly trailing her hand away from that of her newly beloved husband, teasing him in her withdrawal from physical contact. She flicked her shoulder length blonde hair, flashed a brilliant white smile at him and asked him to take her home with one flash of her radiant blue eyes.

Shared laughter. He twisted round in his chair, caught the attention of one of the waiters, and made the universal scribble motion that means the bill and fruit. True to form the dish arrived with two forks, watermelon and grapes. The waiter presented the bill in a black plastic wallet and with that delightful hint of gravel in the Greek voice, asked, “I hope everything was good for you tonight?”

The young bride could hardly contain herself, bubbling fit to burst with happiness as she was. “Oh yes, it was lovely. Everything’s lovely. We’re on honeymoon!”

Hands clasped once more on the tablecloth. The young man’s foot shifted under the table, seeking out the bare calf of his now life-long lover. He nodded to the waiter and smiled.

“Yeah, just right, mate. Spot on.”

The waiter hovered over the table. The young couple sat oblivious for a moment, wrapped up in each other’s lustfully loving stare, but even they couldn’t ignore the fidgeting and nervous presence just to their side.

“Scuse. I sorry, but I have some advice”, said the waiter.

He squatted down next to the young man so as not to be overheard. His olive tan and dark lidded eyes made the words sound dark and brooding. "Please, don't tell people you are honeymooning. Is not such a good idea."

The young man twitched his head slightly as if to say; you're mad, but he thought better of it. The young couple exchanged a quick glance before he replied. "Sorry, mate, but I don't understand. There's loads of people come here on honeymoon. You know, sun, sea and sex."

The young bride giggled and then bubbled into the conversation once more. "We're so happy. I want to shout it from the rooftops." She jumped out of her chair, spread her arms wide in glorious welcome and shouted, "We're on honeymoon!"

The waiter stood bolt upright and put his fingers to his lips, a look of genuine alarm in his eyes now. "Please, not so loud. Enjoy everything, yes, but quietly or else the gentleman will get to hear. He has many friends, many ears in the walls."

The other diners had all stopped their conversations and were staring at the girl, who suddenly felt very sheepish. She sat down with an apologetic look on her face. One or two glasses were raised towards the young couple as she said, "Sorry, I just feel so full of it"

The young man fished out a fifty Euro note and slid it into the plastic wallet. "Keep the change", he said quietly and then added, "What gentleman?"

The waiter simply rolled his eyes and said, "Thank you very much. Please I don't want to worry you. You think I am mad, yes? Just be careful." With that he gave a weak and thin smile, turned on his heels and walked back towards the bar shaking his head.

The young man stood and held out his hand for his new bride to take. "Weird or what?"

She joined him, took the offered hand and planted a soft, ruby lipped kiss on his cheek. "Forget it, Dan, who cares about silly old waiters and mysterious gentlemen. I know just how to take your mind off it."

She giggled and squeezed his hand as she led him out of the taverna and into the sweet smelling night.

A week passed in what seemed like a day. The couple woke late, always missing breakfast in their hotel, although they felt no need for food on waking. They fed on each other until late each morning before drifting down to the pool snack bar for a gyros platter. They lazed through the afternoons until, at around four, when the shadows started to creep across the sun loungers, with the sky still a brilliant blue, they made their slow and relaxed way up to their room for a siesta. Each evening they emerged from their slumbering afternoon exertions to greet the reddening sky of dusk with a glass of wine from the chilled bottle that they kept in the little fridge in their room. As the night air grew heavy on the scent of herbs and ripening lemons they showered, dressed and wandered out into the warm and welcoming darkness to find another taverna and another souvlaki.

Saturday night. The start of their final week. They were at that delicious point in a holiday when everything is relaxed and lethargic. Even their lovemaking had slowed just a little, not through any lack of passion, but rather assuming a Greek manner of time and fervour. They had forgotten about the waiter and the warning. There were no signs of any mysterious gentlemen, and the couple could hardly be described as discreet. They had forgotten the brooding warning, believing in modernity rather than the traditions of old wives tales and silly Greek flummery.

With that night's taverna chosen for its beach view and cooling sea breeze, the couple settled down for another meal under the stars, Kleftiko this time for each of them with a half-litre of house red. The lamb was soft and succulent and the potatoes roasted with the meat juices were divine, melting in the mouth so sweetly. If a meal could summon up the succulent nature of their relationship, then this might just do the trick. Everything was perfect. They were perfect, in tune and braising nicely under the Greek sun.

Towards the end of the meal, with hands and fingers entwined as ever, and with eyes locked in their own soul-deep and soundless embrace, the couple began to think about the slow walk home and the long lustrous night ahead, their bodies defined by the contours and ripples of a thin white sheet. As cocooned as they were in their own little world, they could hardly be blamed for missing the commotion taking place by the road frontage of the taverna.

Under the same star spangled sky that gave the lovers such simple satisfaction there came a darkness, one single patch that moved in synchronicity with the black leviathan of a Mercedes limousine. The immense mass of the vehicle swept along the coast road, leaving eddies of paper and plastic in its wake, before slowing and then pulling up outside the taverna. From the driver's seat a tall, almost black skinned driver climbed out and walked round the rear of the car, where he opened one of the huge, slab-like doors, into which he bent so that he could give his arm to a frail old man sitting on the back seat.

The old man's uncurling of himself was almost snake like, an impression reinforced by the sound made by his linen suit trousers as they rubbed over his rough, corrugated skin. From within the taverna the owner and his two senior waiters came bustling out to form a welcoming committee, a gathering of nerves and sweat on brows.

On the arm of his Moor, the old man straightened his cuffs, walked to the taverna entrance and exchanged a brief word with the proprietor. His usual table. His usual dry Martini. A dish of black olives. The two senior waiters were despatched and the Moor together with the proprietor of the taverna assisted the older gentleman to a quiet area at the back of the bar where a coffee table, sofa and two armchairs were always reserved. The same would be done in any one of the tavernas that the old man might visit, but he came here frequently enough to have a permanent place set aside.

The old man settled back on the sofa, debonairly crisp and clean in cream linen and white cotton. He held himself firmly, although a little shrunken now and but for the tell-tale liver spotting upon his sagging hands he clearly had once been a broad beamed specimen of a man. From his jacket pocket he took a small cigarette holder and a packet of Sigaro Toscano, fitted the holder onto the butt of his cigar and the Moor offered him a light. When the Martini arrived together with a dish of black olives, the old man sipped, nodded his approval, and then beckoned to the proprietor. They exchanged a few words after which the old man pointed to a young couple sitting at a table overlooking the sea. The proprietor looked over to them and nodded. As he walked to the bar to fulfil his patron's wish he sighed once and made the sign of the cross three times.

For Dan and Jen, the evening was drawing towards its inevitable close and they were anxious to be off. Hailing a waiter right now seemed to be a little difficult and Dan had almost got to the point of whistling one over when, to his obvious relief, the owner of the place made a bee-line for their table carrying two brandy bowls liberally dosed with the finest seven star Metaxa. He bowed slightly as he reached their table and delivered the drinks with a flourish.

“With the complements of the Marchese, and he asks will you join him for a few moments as he wishes to offer you his congratulations?”

Raised eyebrows. Neither Dan nor Jen could think of anything to say but yes. Everyone had been so kind on this, their first trip to the Greek islands, and now this?

“We should get married more often”, quipped Dan as he nodded his agreement to the proposal, stood and, hand in hand with his wife, manoeuvred through the tables and made his way to where the Marchese sat.

An awkward moment followed. With the Marchese sat on the sofa the young lovebirds would have to separate. The choice would be whether one of them joined the Marchese on the sofa or not, and neither of them were quite sure what the etiquette might be. The word Marchese certainly sounded posh. The problem was solved by a simple flourish of the hand and a softly spoken word.

“Please, forgive me. Move the chairs, Antonio”.

The Moor stepped out of the shadows, filling the air with masculinity. He moved both armchairs so that the couple could sit opposite the Marchese.

“Again, please forgive my intrusion into your evening”, the old man began, his voice remaining solid but light. There was the merest hint of something Italianate in his speech, but of the most urbane and metropolitan variety. “They tell me you are on honeymoon. Bella. Such a wonderful thing. It is many years sadly since my first luna di liele.”

Queer, thought Jen, but sweet. Such a nice thing to do. “It is wonderful. Everyone’s been so kind. Thank you for the drink.”

She and Dan both raised their brandy bowls, sniffed the perfume of seven stars and took a sip, feeling the smooth warmth of the liquid coating their throats and gullets.

“Mmm, thanks”, Dan mumbled, slightly embarrassed by the whole thing.

“Ah, I see it in your eyes. It is strange. What are you supposed to do? What is a polite moment to spend with an old man before you rush off to make love?”

Dan and Jen floundered.

“No matter. Just a few minutes. So, you are very much in love?”

What an odd question, thought Dan. “Well, yes... obviously. We’ve just got married.”

“You would think so”, said the Marchese leaning forward a little, “but not always. There are many reasons to get married. In my time I have seen people marry for love, but I have also seen them marry for money and power, sometimes even for spite. Ah! But, the eyes again. It is love.”

With that he raised his own glass and toasted the young English couple.

“I will tell you something that might help. I am an old man, much older than you might think. I am the lost son of the House of Montolfini. There are those who say that it was I who taught Cesare Borgia his charm, but that is not true. Cesare was always charming, but they were difficult times, and in such times we men must be sometimes savage. I once met Il Duce. Now, he was, forgive me, a pompous prick, but then so are many people who seek power. What do such things mean for you? Well, it means that I have seen much of the world and with it many, many marriages. What I tell you now was true then and is true for you today. Tell me, what are your jobs?”

Dan sat back in his chair, still holding Jen’s hand. He swilled the brandy round the bowl and thought for a moment. They’re always selling something. Still, the brandy was good and there could be little harm in a conversation that ends with the word no, even if the old boy did reek of cologne and ancient leather handbags.

“I work in a garage, mechanic, Toyota’s mainly.” He said, and paused, letting Jen speak.

She smiled sweetly at the old duffer. “Thomas Cook. I’m a travel agent.”

The old man returned Jen’s smile, revealing tobacco stained teeth. “Good jobs, honest work, but the money is not always so good. It can be a bit of a struggle, I suppose. And that is the point. Love does not last forever, not as you know it now. The lucky ones discover friendship and when you are true friends then love can last. But with a hard working life it can be difficult to keep together. You struggle, you work, you get tired, you make mistakes, all changes and you wake up one day and you don’t know why you are together. It is life. What is also true is that too much money, too much of anything brings unhappiness as well. Look at me. I smoke like a chimney, no?”

The Marchese downed the last of his Martini and nodded to the boy behind the bar for a refill. He looked at Dan and then Jen, but both declined a further drink.

“I know. You are eager to be off and when I was your age I was the same. Such a long time ago, I think.”

Dan was intrigued. Just how old was the man. “If it’s not rude to ask, how old are you?”

“Some might think it rude. Not I. I prefer not to say exactly, but I will tell you that my age needs three figures. It is safe to say that I am over one hundred years old. I should have quit the cigars, but I think now they can do no more harm.”

He paused to say thank you to the waiter who put a new glass down on the table and cleared away the Marchese’s spent tumbler.

“So, my young lovers, this is my proposal.”

Here it comes, thought Dan, and he squeezed Jen’s hand tightly for a moment before he swilled down the remains of his brandy. She put her half full glass on the table. This was going to be the time-share moment.

The old man uncrossed his legs and leaned forward across the coffee table. A whiff of stale tobacco and wet earth followed him. The lights above his head seemed to shimmer, as if a small black cloud had just floated past. As Dan and Jen shivered slightly, their teeth inexplicably on edge, the old man spoke once more in a soft voice that yet carried diamond sharp edges.

“I am rich. Very rich. For just one thing I will give you a monthly income for the rest of your lives together, enough for you not to struggle, but not too much so that you are spoiled. I will take away your hardships and your worries so that you can find the friendship that makes love last forever. It is a promise. For this I want a simple thing. I want to watch you make love for one night before you leave Crete. I am an old man. One more time before I die I want to remember what love is. There, that is it.”

He sat back, took a sip of his Martini, placed a new cigar in the cigar holder and, after the Moor had provided a match, the Marchese waited, wreathed in blue curls of smoke.

In his surprise and disgust Dan nearly crushed the empty brandy balloon that he was still holding in his left hand. Jen, too, sat back with wide eyes and an open mouth. Neither one of them could believe what the old pervert had just asked.

Before Dan could summon the words to describe his absolute horror at the suggestion, the old man beckoned the Moor out from the shadows.

“You don’t decide now. Think it over. Antonio will return here in two nights, that is Monday. Meanwhile, as a token of honesty, I give you this whether you say yes or no.”

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