

Witches & Villains: The Nasty Tales

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ABSTRACT:

My thesis comprises a variety of short stories which are modern re-writes of dark fairy tales. Fairy Tales often explore the dark side of human nature and in these stories I focus on the voices of female villains and the strange psychology which drives them. I find Fairy Tales absorbing because they reveal the vulnerabilities, dreams and fears of the human consciousness. My stories contain some satirical expositions of human nature and society.

My influences are the anthology of short stories, “My mother She Killed Me and My Father He Ate Me”, The Grimm Fairy Tales (original) and The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault as well as the writing of Horacio Moya, Angela Carter and Alissa Nutting for their dark satire and mockery of social eccentricities. Kate Bernheimer’s “Form is Fairy Tale and Fairy Tale is Form” is very influential in terms of the style it recommends in writing such as: “every day magic”, “flatness” (a form of narration), abstraction and intuitive logic.

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The Witch Conference

It was a sea of black pointy hats and grotesque features. On the stage stood the world's most coveted magical cauldron, a prize for the most villainous witch of the year. The head-witch greeted the audience and began the meeting.

"I imprisoned a princess in a tower," claimed a witch. The audience was unimpressed by such a cliché.

"I invented the mosquito!" called another witch. There were a few nods of admiration.

"I teach toddlers to swear!" shouted a plump witch. Derisive laughter burst forth as the witch was mocked for her lack of usage of the magical elements. Mumbling under her breath, the plump witch argued she couldn't help it she had a phobia against magic, it was pure discrimination.

Many other witches verbally threw around their accomplishments, some caused plagues and some brought down curses. None were out of the ordinary or impressive enough.

Three witches stood up with very coarse facial hair. They eyed the cauldron as if they already owned it.

"We three sisters have caused the death of a good king and a traitor to rule the throne. We bathed the Scottish Highlands in blood and turned a noble lady to madness and suicide. War and madness was our feast of the times. Betrayer is betrayed and we shaped the course of a nation."

Cheers erupted across the castle ruins. It was clear to see who the favourite was.

"Ha!" cried a scornful voice. All hats and heads turned to see where the voice came from.

"That's nothing!" A skinny witch with the expression of a prune stood up. "I taught Trump how to use Twitter".

A new winner was selected.

The Soulless Maiden

I grew tired of mankind and so I moved to the bottom of the ocean. I enjoyed the simple blackness and the sweet emptiness of it all as I moved along the ocean floor, searching for some nook to call my home. Eventually, the ocean blackness was broken by molten red lava as it bled along the sea floor through cracks, crevices and rocks. It was the first form of light I had come across in a long time and it took a while for my eyes to adjust to its brightness.

I followed the red river to its source: a volcano. I searched its base and found a cave. In the heart of the cave I found a pool of fire, bubbling with molten lava. I liked the fiery warmth and the hellish light that it offered. Here I stayed and drank in the ash and sulphur, past time and memory. I forget how long I remained in the confines of the ocean cave, but I knew that I was tired of the cycles of my thoughts. I wanted some different amusement. I set about exploring my surroundings, a pointless task as I could not see anything beyond the fires of the volcano. I gave up and turned back towards my dwelling and it was then I noticed them.

There were strange glowing lights which floated about, they moved as elegantly as any fish in the sea. I struggled to make out their form as they kept their distance. The creatures seemed unsure of whether I was predator or prey. They refused to come any closer until they knew what I was. A short period of time passed and they accepted that I was not going to eat them. The next step was to establish whether I could be eaten. One or two tried to take a bite of my flesh and I easily dispensed with them by turning them to ashes. They avoided me for a while after that.

They lost their fear of me once again they realised I was not going to hunt them. The creatures were horrifically beautiful and mesmerising. Their whole essence was like that of a jelly fish, but they were not shaped liked one. They glowed with their own multi-coloured luminescent light which seemed to be emitted by some neuron-chemicals within their body. Their flesh seemed fragile and delicate, you could see through their water-like skins. The creatures had some type of humanoid form which was mixed with the tale of a fish. On the top of the head floated hundreds of thousands of very fine hair-like tentacles which swayed with the movements of the waters, giving them a rather ethereal appearance. Their beauty ended there. Their hair-tentacles actually contained poison which would paralyze their prey and the delicately webbed fingers would easily rip apart the flesh. I imagined they would appear to be quite ugly if they were exposed to sunlight, if they could even survive such an

exposure. They were designed to exist in this deep darkness. The luminescent aura was used to hypnotise their prey before they struck with a ruthless speed.

I observed them for my own amusement. I noticed that they did not only feed on fish, but scavenged for rotting corpses as well. They enjoyed the remains of drowned souls who floated down from the surface above, victims of an angry sea. Every time a body fell there would be a feeding frenzy till there was nothing left but the bare bone. I found the left-over bones to be quite useful; I used them to make myself some furniture. Much of my time was spent staring carelessly and aimlessly into the molten pool in my cave. I realised that I was not the only one doing the watching. I was being carefully studied by them. They drifted in bright swarms past my dwelling, moving back and forth along the underwater currents. They only seemed to be distracted by their feeding times. These beings were soulless, they were only driven to feed and reproduce. There seemed to be no social structure in their plethora of organisms until they met me.

I began to find offerings of bone outside my cave entrance. I was surprised. I perceived that their “floating” past my cave became more ritualised and timed. I decided to ignore it and went about my business of forgetting what I had once been. The creatures were becoming far too social for my taste. One day, I found an offering of a different kind outside my cave. There it was, a small luminescent creature floating about. I looked up and saw a galaxy of these creatures spread across the darkness. I couldn’t be bothered and went back inside of the cave. When I went out much later, they were still swimming and floating around, waiting for something to happen. There was the small creature, obviously one of their offspring, who remained swimming in a stationary position. They were not going to leave until I did something. I supposed they wanted me to eat the creature as some form of social acknowledgement that I was the “superior” creature. I took the strange being in just to make the vast masses go away. It worked, I just had no idea what to do with the thing.

Inside my fiery pit, I sat there and it sat there. We waited for each other. I thought I would try ignoring it in the hope that it would eventually seek its own kind again. It did not, it just floated. Its light grew fainter and fainter. I concluded that it was hungry, so I caught a fish for it and tossed it in its direction. It ate and its light grew brighter. I hoped that this generous action would make it understand that I had no intention of eating it. I made it very plain through my actions that I was perfectly willing to let it escape. It did not take the hint. It would not leave so I took it back to its own kind to set it free.

They ignored it or tried to eat it. I was forced to let it return with me. After having observed its elders for quite some time, I knew their hunting habits and taught the creature how to feed itself. There was one thing I could not allow it to do and that was to feed on human flesh. I was being far too sentimental about my past, however, what must be must be. I acquired six more of these “pets” in the same fashion. I was annoyed as my cave was becoming too over crowded.

At first, their only concern was food. They fed and slept. I was satisfied with this as they did not irritate me with demands for attention. I noticed that these creatures were all of the female gender. No males. I thought how droll that was; female sacrifices were such a redundancy. The creatures remained around me mostly for protection from their own kind. I finally accepted their presence as I found it useful. The luminescent bodies gave me some extra light.

I don't know how much time passed before one of the creatures caught my attention. It was behaving differently from the others. It was watching me very carefully, as if she were trying to understand something. She observed me casting magic spells and having conversations with myself. Her sisters imitated her behaviour. The creature's lights started to flash strangely. I wondered if the creature was ill, but came to see that it perhaps wanted to communicate with me. I liked the idea and developed her communication skills with systems which involved a complex code of flashing light movements and colours. She passed the skills onto her sisters.

I could not recall the last time I had conversed with another being. Perhaps I was bored and lonely, so I reminisced about my other world. I taught her various snippets of knowledge when I felt in the mood for it. She was extremely curious and gorged herself on as much information as she could. I grew more attached to the creature than I wished and so I decided to give it a name. Perhaps this was when the trouble sprouted.

“What is a name?” she flashed at me.

“It is what I will call you.” I replied.

“Do I really need one?”

I paused before I spoke, “Maybe not, but I do not like always referring to you as creature or thing.”

“Do you have one?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was born with one or should I say I was given one when I was born.”

“Why?”

“To distinguish me from everybody else I suppose. An identity if you will.”

“Is that necessary?”

Again, I paused before answering the question as I was entering a very sensitive area of conversation. Human questions. The nature of being. I did not want this being to think about the upper-world. Already, I had given her too many human skills. “Not really...”

“Then why give me one?”

“True. It was a silly gesture to begin with.”

“I want name!” demanded the creature in a bright flash of colours. I was astonished. She hadn’t seemed very enthusiastic about the idea.

“All right.” I conceded.

“What is it?”

It was not an original name. Translated from Latin it meant “mermaid”.

“Syreni.” I replied.

She did not object to it, because frankly she had no other ideas available to her.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Mine? It no longer matters as I have chosen to forget it.”

As much as I wished to bury all the knowledge I had of humankind, Syreni was obsessed with discovering it. I failed to dissuade her from searching for books from sunken ships. In a moment of weakness I had taught her to read. She tormented me with questions, not allowing me to sleep till I had answered them.

“Where do you come from?”

“I have always been. Does it matter?”

“Why can we not eat the corpses of these animals who cannot breathe in our world?”

“Out of respect for the dead.”

“Why do the dead need respect? They are merely food for those who should continue to live.”

“To honour their souls!” I exclaimed irritated. Immediately I regretted what I had spoken.

“What is a soul?”

I sighed. “Nobody quite knows. It is supposed to live on after you are dead.”

“Can I get one?”

“Only humans can brag to have one.”

“Do you have one?”

“I forget whether I do or I don’t. It does not matter to me now.”

“If I want one?”

“You would have to be human like the drowned creatures. Do not seek a soul so badly, it does little to improve these so-called humans.”

“Were you once human?”

“A fact I am ashamed to admit.”

“Where do they live?”

“Far away.”

Syreni refused to quell her curiosity. She was a ravenous beast in search of meat. I only gave her vegetable knowledge and she was not satisfied. She was discontented with me and her sisters. She yearned for other company and she was suffocating in the darkness. She wanted the sun.

“You can produce your own light!” I quipped.

“Not like the sun!” she retorted.

In the darkness Syreni built her castles of light and land. She watched every move I made, especially when I performed magic. She wanted to learn it so she could find a secret way of going to the surface. My old world.

“Do you really wish to go there? To truly learn what it is to hate and to love, fight and die, feel heartbreak and pain, fear and mental torment? To be betrayed?”

“I want a soul like them.”

“You will feel pain like a thousand needles pierce your heart. Your emotions will rip you to pieces in that world.”

“I want a soul”

She was determined. She had caught the human disease of curiosity. It would infect her till she had gained the only cure: self-knowledge.

I did not like to get in another’s way and I wanted Syreni to evolve along her own course. Still, I wished she would stop chasing the path she had chosen. It was not long before she demanded a body from me.

“And how do you expect me to assist you in your own stupidity? Remain in ignorance, it is far more peaceful,” I retorted.

“I want a body.”

“No.”

“I want to find out about up there. I want to meet them.”

“You have already met them. You meet their drowned corpses every day and believe me; they make for far better company when they are corpses. You do not want to meet a body with an actual soul.”

“I want a body.”

“Make your own.”

I gave in. I always did. I would make her a body as she required. All my warnings and lectures only made her more enthusiastic. I was tired of the turmoil, so I gave in.

“You will feel immense physical pain. It is a long and slow process to get a body. For much of the time you will resemble a monster and your sisters will shun you as they witness your seared and marred flesh.”

“If this is the price I must pay for a soul, so be it.” she replied.

“Heed my warning. Do not seek love. You have read about it, but I warn you, do not seek it.”

“Why?”

“You might lose your soul instead of finding it.”

She listened, but I do not know if she heard me.

Bit by bit I gave her human flesh. I mixed and moulded ashes made of human bone, sulphur and molten lava. I mumbled ancient incantations as I patted the smouldering clay onto her supple, smooth flesh. She writhed and screeched like a dying whale, but still she endured for a human soul. Her sisters stayed away from her, disgusted by her scent and appearance. Her grotesque looks even made me feel queasy sometimes. Gradually, she began to resemble a human, at least the top half of her body. I had much work to do on the legs, as she still had her fish-like tail. She could no longer communicate with flashes of light, so she spoke a sign language instead.

“Can I go to the surface in this form?”

“Why?”

“I wish to see the sun.”

“The sun will always be there, whether you are there to see it or not. Wait till your body is whole and finished.”

She said no more on the subject. But when did she ever listen to my advice? I shrugged my shoulders and only hoped that she would use common sense.

She did not. Syreni went to the surface as she was instructed not to. She also found it difficult to live in the darkness, as her body could no longer produce its own light. I took some glowing lava and created a sea lantern, the light of which would never die out. She preferred to play in the blue lights of the surface and dance with sunbeams caught by the water. I watched over her. I was afraid for her, but all I could do was watch from my pool of fire and hope. Hope that she could avoid pain. Syreni plucked up the courage to break the borderline between ocean and air. She did not burst through in a splash, instead she timidly dipped her finger into the air. She pulled it back as she felt the chill. Slowly, she exposed her whole upper body and breathed air for the first time. The first light she saw was not the sun, but the moon. Syreni was convinced it was the sun. She gasped at the vast expanse of stars and was lost in their beauty for many hours. It was then she saw the dawn. Apollo preparing for his journey across the sky. First, a tinge of pink peeked over the horizon and the sky soon metamorphized into a grand explosion of golden orange. The sky split into an array of colours as the sun climbed into his heavenly realm. And she resented me. She resented me for keeping it all from her.

Syreni only returned for me to work on her body. I was in the process of giving her legs, but she was growing impatient. I did not mention the surface and only warned that these things take time. I think she hated returning to the dark. Each time she came she hoped it would be the last time. I must confess, that I took longer than I should have, I was going to miss her. I was trying to delay the inevitable. She was eager to go on the hunt for humans, to observe their ways. I tried not to think about what she would learn from a bunch of drunken sailors cooped up on a wooden ship.

Syreni was caught up in a storm. She was fascinated by the wrath of the ocean and sky, till she saw a ship being beaten by the waves. She followed it as she watched its belly being torn and its intestines of human flora and fauna being dispersed among the waves. I must give her credit. She had a good eye. From all of the flotsam and jetsam of desperate humans she was

able to pick the ripest plum of them all. She spared him a visit to my dark kingdom, while the rest of his travelling companions floated down to become its new residents.

I knew this was trouble. She saved him and in my mind I screamed, “Let him drown! Let him drown!” She was intrigued by her new toy and perched him on an outcrop of rocks which were still some distance from the shore. She touched him all over, fascinated by the feel of his flesh. He was differently shaped to her feminine, evolving body. She glanced back and forth to confirm the differences. He breathed and she jumped. His eyes were still drowned in wet drops and he fluttered them to clear his vision. The sun’s rays burst around Syreni, darkening her form, he was unable to see her clearly. She could see him, his every pore and his every strand of hair. She imprinted it on her memory. He was handsome and alluring. The lure to the hook. And she sang the mating call of her kind. An instant hormonal response to something that was other than her. Something Syreni desperately wanted.

My heart felt as it had not felt in a long time. A pain was there that I thought I had left behind, long, long ago. I hated her for making me remember. I refused to wonder along those feelings and fled them with all the forgetfulness I could muster. The longer I held her back, the more she would stir these thoughts. I had to preserve my sense of nothingness and forget her. She had to find the soul she longed for. It was beginning to grow, there was no killing it now. Poor soul.

Syreni came, her silver hair floating around her. I gave her beauty, she would need it in that place.

“This is the last time I see you. From here on after you will not have the breath or power to return,” I said.

She was not moved by sadness. She only thought of seeing him again.

“That is fine. My soul is elsewhere to be found.”

“Don’t look too hard. A soul can be quite cumbersome.”

“I thought you could not see, touch or carry it? How can it be heavy?”

“Ahhh...you shall discover that for yourself.”

“Do you enjoy talking in riddles?”

“I do it so you can think about it for a long time and leave me be.”

“You always speak in such an all-knowing tone.”

“That’s because I know everything.”

“Then I have learnt everything.”

“Except what’s important, like the dangers of that world.”

“Are you trying to warn me about something?”

“Warn you? No, I would not dare. Then it means I must take responsibility for you. I shall not, but I will give you what you desire and that is to be human. Let us perform the last of the spells and enchantments.”

She looked at me hoping for something I would not give her. When she realised it was futile she prepared herself. The gift of legs and lungs. She squirmed in torment and screamed silent bubbles as I worked in the glow of the lava. I explained the limits of my power.

“I cannot give you a human voice, that you must find on your own. Your human shell is sensitive and will break if it carries too much heart and sorrow. You will know the pain of feeling for the first time. Do not cry too much or your body will melt. I can only give you three months of life. To live longer, you must join your being to another, a man of your choosing. If you fail you will die and disappear, melt back into the sea as if you never were.”

She went to towards the blue sun and I turned to my black sea. I had no desire to watch as I knew how the story would progress. My aim was to forget there even was a story. Yet her sisters grew restless, they wanted to know where she had gone. I let them watch her in the firey pond so they would learn. Learn not to follow her, or desire what she desired. To know, to live, to forget and just be.

Syreni floated to the surface and for the first time she breathed the air desperately as though her life depended on it. Her life was now connected to the air and not the water. She felt the chill and its salty touch, her naked body an object of the current. Her limbs felt useless as they scrambled to keep her above the surface. She felt the fear of the sea for the first time. The fear of drowning and sinking.

“I must live to see him.” she gasped and straddled to keep herself afloat.

She was not sure how long she stayed there bobbing on the surface, but a fisherman’s boat spotted her. Despite being an old weathered man, he leered at the sight of her body. It took him a few moments to realise that he should do something. Syreni couldn’t name what she felt, she only wanted to curl herself into a ball. She tried to hide herself in her silver hair.

The old man assisted her onto the boat. He wanted to pretend he had nothing to clothe her with but then he imagined what his wife would do with a cleaving knife. He gave her some sail cloth and took her to shore.

Syreni could ask no questions, she could only watch and learn as she gazed at the faces of the villagers filled with curiosity. The fisherman's wife refused to take her in, not because of cruelty, but rather because she did not trust her husband. Syreni lodged with the fisherman's wife's mother. She was a kind woman, who considered it her duty to nurture the young shipwrecked girl. Everyone assumed she had been so traumatised by her ordeal that she had lost the ability to speak. If only she had been content with these people. The village showed nothing but concern and tenderness for the girl from the sea. They introduced her to happiness and joy, the smell of good food and the warmth of a fire. The sound of laughing children and the calls of the market. She learnt how to live as a human. If there were any painful or cruel moments they were absorbed by the peaceful lifestyle. Yet she still thought of him, he with handsome face and lithe body. Syreni searched all faces every day and still she could not find him until fate decided it would interfere.

The prince could not forget his vision, he did know what he saw, but he had a very strong impression of what he felt it should be. He came to the shore where he had been washed up as often as his royal business would allow and scanned it in the hope of something. All he found were waves and shells. But she found him, wading along the shoreline, staring into the ocean horizon. She greeted him like a long-lost puppy dog. He found her charming and amusing, but he could not recognise her. She was not quite as his imaginary memory had painted. Nevertheless, he was entertained and longed to keep her in his company. Syreni felt new levels of emotion: ecstasy, passion, desire and love but she also felt disappointment, jealousy, fear, anger and rejection. The prince's world was different from the village: haughty courtiers, jealous daughters, lecherous nobleman, greedy servants and many a conniving individual who did not like the prince's attachment to this young girl with no background and voice. Syreni felt the needle pains of emotions and found them hard to bare.

No matter how much he looked he could not remember. No matter how much he touched, kissed and possessed her he still could not recall. No matter how she served, entertained and pleased him he would not let go of a fuzzy memory. A human chasing an ideal. Here her heart felt the cuts and stabs and the endless needles which bought tears, her very first. I knew it would only get worse and yet I kept watching. A woman came, one he did conveniently remember, a princess. Beautiful. Syreni was soon forgotten and the prince declared the princess his saviour. The princess did not deny it, why should she? She felt sorry for Syreni and tried her best to be kind. The prince became annoyed with Syreni, not because he was

evil, he just wanted more time with his new love. Syreni was barred from the palace and left to herself. Abandonment. She felt the heaviness of soul and now realised she had one. She finally understood its burden and her body wanted to collapse. Despair. She returned to the village, but it offered no comfort. She wanted what she wanted, but could not have it. She desperately wanted to live and salted the sea with her tears. The three months were almost up.

Her sisters flashed and swam, hovering around me.

“Help her! Help her!”

“I cannot. She chose her fate.”

“You knew! You knew!”

“I tried to tell her, but she would not listen.”

“She’ll melt! She’ll melt!”

“Indeed she will!”

“Help her! Help her!”

“I cannot.”

“You can! You can!”

“If I can, there are consequences.”

“Help her! Help her!”

Stubborn creatures, they only could only understand so much. I felt guilty about whatever course of action I chose to follow. Whether I did or I did not, someone had to die. I hated Syreni for putting me in this position. Damn that girl! I hated myself for my attachment to her. Her search for a soul made me recall some of my own soul. Stupid, stupid girl.

A dagger washed up on the shore next to Syreni. She heard my voice call from the ocean and she dried her tears, the taste of hope was sweet.

“Take this dagger, and kill the prince and his lover. Cut out and eat their hearts and you will remain a human. You must win his heart either way. Do not expect more from me.”

Syreni paused and was distraught. Kill what she loved? She might as well cut her own heart. This was no solution. But she did not want to die. She did not want to die. If only she just had to cut out the princess’s heart, maybe then...should she kill? The idea made her shiver. But she did not want to die. She saved his life. He belonged to her. She had only one chance to make a decision.

No one wants to remember the human side of this story, only what they believe ought to have happened. Syreni found her soul, but not in heaven. In the depth of dark night, she magically whisked herself into the castle. It was the night of the young couple's wedding. They slept together in peaceful contentment. Syreni's heart wrenched and she shuddered with hatred at what she saw. She stabbed the princess in a rage. She stabbed till there was no more breath. The prince awoke in horror and tried to yell but he could make no sound. He was stopped by Syreni's magic. The prince watched in terror as his lover's heart was consumed. Syreni made the human choice, she wanted to live at any cost. She now knew what it was to have a soul. She stared at the prince and hesitated. She did not want him dead. She screamed and found her human voice.

Syreni returned. I did not expect it. She looked happy to see me.

"I finally understand you."

"Oh? You went through all that to understand me?"

She laughed. Another human habit. "I have a soul."

"So you found it. I do pity you. Like me, you will now spend all your time trying to lose it."

"No. I still need it."

"Why? You..."

I noticed him for the first time. He was still unconscious. She had brought him back with her. Syreni had returned to her half-human shape as she had only eaten one heart. She had used her magic to bring him to this dark place. She would not live without him. She was extremely happy. I could only feel sorry for him, it would have been better if he had died.

"He will not be able to adapt. He is too used to the light."

"He will live like you."

"Yes, he will live. I chose to live like this, he did not. It is not the type of existence I would force on anybody."

She smiled back at me, "I don't care, as long as he is with me."

"Ahhh! You truly have discovered your humanity."

The Toad Speaker

The old woman would grab the wool of words shed by people. She would gather the excess of people's verbal tanglings and spin them on her spindle. Many thought she was mad for gathering the air, but the old woman could see the words as they blew about on the floor of the market place. She could see them as they hung on branches and tumbled about in the dust. Some words would disappear and vaporised into mist like warm breath clashing with cold air. These words were insubstantial, trivial and not worth any memory; rushed greetings, random shouts, repetitions, mumbles and political speeches in the town square. All noise and no substance.

The old woman was only interested in the yarn and wool of stories: the fragments of rumour and gossip, the tales of human woe, recollections, folktales and anecdotes. She collected these words so she could spin her own stories. The common folk accepted her as a harmless batty old woman and she lived neither here nor there. No one knew the exact location of her residence. It was just around, but the children from both the West and East village were always able to find it. The children enjoyed her tales and they would watch as she spun or knitted the words together. Many "ooooos" and "ahhhhs" would escape their mouths when they witnessed the final product.

The old woman never spoke to any one when she wandered through town, she only spoke when the children gathered to listen to her. It didn't perturb the local residents, as it was merely another symptom of her madness. She kept the children out of the adults' hair and it gave them time to finish their grown-up duties.

East and West- Down village were out in the rural country where no one was concerned about their existence. Their worries about day to day living were small compared to the big cities which were the hub of human civilisation and progression. The old woman often wondered what it would be like to gather words in the city. What would they look and feel like? Silky? Smooth? Luxurious? Whatever they were, the lady was too lazy and old to find out. She would remain in ignorance as it was less tiresome.

The old lady spun words outside her cottage while the children watched and listened. There was a newcomer among them. A city dweller, a young girl who seemed eager to learn and observe.

The old woman spun the tale of a prince who set on an adventure to find his princess and finished with a happy ending. The village children admired it with enjoyment. The City Dweller, who called herself Jade, pulled a face. The old woman had never received such a reaction before.

“Are you sick my child? You look extremely unwell,” asked the old woman.

Jade laughed derisively. “Your story made me ill!”

“Oh? My word spinning has never had that effect before. I am baffled by the cause...”

“Your story was so terrible it just made me feel ill.”

The old woman was surprised, never had a child not enjoyed the stories and images she had spun. They were always fascinated by the images which danced before their eyes.

“Why?”

“Because it is sexist!” spat Jade.

“I am not familiar with the term.”

Jade rolled her eyes dramatically and slapped her hands on her crossed legs. The other children realising the show was over, ran off to play as the conversation did not interest them.

“I mean it is all about a man who rescues a helpless girl. Like, women do not need to be rescued by some prince charming guy. You’re brainwashing them.”

The old lady did not know what the young girl meant by “brainwashing” either. She just thought she was entertaining the children. From what she could gather, the girl seemed unhappy that the spinning had not been about a girl’s adventures. She could easily change that. The old woman looked at the City Dweller and realised that she could not see her words. The air and ground around her were empty.

She nodded her head to the girl and replied without much annoyance, “As you wish.” The conversation was finished for the woman, though the girl still seemed to want to argue further. Upset that she could not coax the old lady into further discussion, Jade left in a huff.

The old woman had not expected to see the girl return since she had seemed so unhappy about her last tale-spin. The village children had squished together into her small cottage living room. They hung over her furniture, lay about on the floor and sat waiting in expectation. The old woman decided to make it up to the young City Dweller and told a different tale where a girl set out to save the world and find true love. The village children were mesmerised by the glowing pictures and dancing words as they took them on journey to another place and time. Jade looked bored and yawned her disapproval. The old woman merely continued to spin her tales without paying much attention to Jade. This made her angry and she waited to confront the old woman once the other children had left.

“What is wrong city dweller?” enquired the old woman.

“I did not like your story.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. You spoke about gender. It should be genderless with no partiality towards any sex.”

The old woman did not know the term “gender”. Men and woman in village were merely interested in survival and how to get food in their bellies. They laughed when they were full and were able to enjoy a break from the toils of life. Little time was spent on the deeper meaning of existence. The old woman spun her stories because she liked her handiwork, little else mattered.

“I see. Then it is as you wish.”

Jade stopped in shocked silence. There was no anger, shame or defence coming from the old woman. She wanted to make the old woman angry, make her see things her way. Everyday Jade would return to the old woman to see her tales being spun and every day she would find a fault.

“Your story is not culturally diverse enough...”

“As you wish.”

“I think there was racial prejudice...”

“As you wish”

“You favoured a certain religious interpretation...”

“As you wish”

“Your tale is unscientific and spreads unrealistic expectations and superstitions among the masses.”

“As you wish”

“Why do you never disagree with me?”

“Must I? Okay, then you are wrong.”

“Why?”

“Only because you wish me to disagree...”

Jade was extremely frustrated and asked her cousin about what the old bat’s problem could be because it was blatantly obvious that she was insane. Frank shrugged his shoulders for he just enjoyed the lady’s tales, why should he care beyond that?

He replied to his cousin, “You’re the one who is crazy enough to argue with a madwoman.”

Jade would not be beaten down so she ventured back to between here and there, dragging Frank behind her to find the old woman in her cottage. Her point would be made, even if she wasn’t sure what that point entirely was. They found the old lady basking in the sunlight outside her cottage door with her spindle in front of her. She sat in her rocking chair and did not open her eyes as she spoke, “You are here, City Dweller. Hello Frank!”

Jade puffed away for she had run the whole way. Frank was more used to the physical excursion and was less tired.

“Do you want me to spin a tale?”

“No, I want you to explain yourself.”

“I only spin tales. I do not offer explanations.”

“You’re just crazy!”

“As you wish!”

Jade screamed in frustration as she kicked over the spindle and it splattered on the ground. A piece had broken off.

“Serves you right!” screamed Jade. Frank stepped back in fear afraid of what the old woman might do. She opened her eyes and stared at the spindle. She slowly stretched and hobbled over to pick up the spindle. She did not look at Jade.

“I still cannot see your words” she commented.

“I see you are still fluent in mad” retorted Jade.

“Would you like to become a tale?”

“What?”

“I shall make you a tale. People will finally see your words.”

Before Jade and Frank could respond the old woman took her scarf of words which she had knitted from around her neck and wrapped it around Jade. She took a knitted hat and pulled it over Frank’s head. The children both felt something, but could see nothing. There was only an old lady making strange movements about them.

“Let us leave!” whispered Frank nervously. Jade agreed with him for the first time. They both ran and only their feet knew the final destination. Their minds were too frantic to know where they were going.

The children arrived home in West-Down. They burst together through the house door. Frank’s mother looked worried as she stared bewilderedly at the wild appearance of the children.

Jade wanted to speak first, “That old woman is one crazy bi...” Before Jade could complete her words, she gagged and three toads popped out of her mouth. Frank’s mother screamed in terror. Jade spoke again, but another toad popped out. Nausea spread across Frank’s face as he gawked at his cousin.

“Mother, I think she has been cursed.” As Frank finished speaking three pearls rolled off his tongue and onto the wooden floor.

“My Word! Frank! Heavens! See that!” exclaimed his mother. She dropped to her knees to pick up the pearls to see if they were real. They were genuine and freshly picked from the oyster’s mouth.

Jade opened her mouth to protest, but another toad jumped out. Frank’s mother wailed and hid behind Frank.

“Holy Saints!” she cried, “she has been possessed! Someone call the priest!”

Jade trembled. She could not understand what was wrong, there was no such thing as magic. It was all superstition and yet, here she was, spitting toads out of her mouth. Jade was mercilessly locked in a cupboard till the priest arrived. Jade did not dare to speak or scream, lest she trap herself in the cupboard with toads. She lost track of how much time was lost in the darkness till she heard voices talking.

“This is a blessing from the Heavens above! Indeed, I always sensed that Frank was a special boy!” gushed the priest to Frank’s mother. “Talk about pearls of wisdom! Where is Jade?”

“She is in the cupboard. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Hmmm, may I see her?”

Frank’s mother nervously nodded and knocked on the cupboard door. She let Jade out who was extremely pale-faced.

“Now child, I see you have a problem...”

Jade let out a burst of words and tried to defend herself and explained that it was the old witch that had cursed her. The priest did not take note of what she said, all he saw were many toads pouring out of her mouth. He prayed loudly in Latin that they would all be saved from the Evil One.

Jade only screamed louder, yet she could not be heard. She screamed and cried and brought a plague of toads upon the village. A village council was held and it was quickly decided that she should be returned to the city where they may be able to find a cure for her. And she was exiled. Frank’s pearls brought success and wealth to the village and news of the miraculous boy was proclaimed far and wide.

Jade, when she returned home, was too terrified to talk because she thought she would bring a plague of toads into her parents’ home. It mattered little how many doctors examined her they could still not get her to speak.

News of Frank, the miraculous pearl boy, reached the city and he was invited by the mayor to come and demonstrate his power. Jade’s parents invited their nephew to stay with them in the hope that he might be able to help poor old Jade. She refused to see him and watched from her window as he was invited into the house. Too tired to talk to anyone, Frank went straight to his room to rest.

A grand dinner was prepared in honour of Frank, city style, where he would display his miraculous power. Jade was forced to attend the dinner as it would be considered rude for her to ignore her country cousin. He was family after all.

Frank was seated at the head of the dinner table where everyone could admire him. The table was laid with an impressive fancy feast with expensive cutlery and glass wear. Jade glared at him from her seat for she could barely contain her jealousy. Frank opened a paper to begin his impressive speech. When the first few words left his mouth, one, two, three toads jumped out. Shrieks filled the room as the guests jumped from their chairs. The toads knocked over glasses and dinner plates while one bathed in the punch bowl. Frank blubbered away in shock and more toads kept hopping out of his mouth. Jade was at first stupefied and then she laughed. She laughed and laughed. She relished in the sound of her own joy. In the disarray of terror, a fountain of pearls began to flow from Jade's mouth. Many suddenly stopped amidst their panicking and stared in wonder at the pearls as they gracefully rolled along the marble flaws. Frank clasped his mouth in shame and his eyes smarted with tears.

Like Jade, Frank was exiled from the city and sent home in humiliation. He had let loose a plague of toads which had to be contained. Jade became a heroine, a saintly wonder and was famous and loved across the whole city. However, everything fades with time and when Frank returned home he quickly lost his toads and eventually Jade's words were no longer pearls but just air and ink.

Jade decided to return to the village to see the old woman. On her arrival, numerous villagers were wary of her but when they saw there were no toads hopping around they sighed with relief. She searched for the cottage in between here and there and found the old woman still spinning her tales.

"I see you have finished your story," commented the old woman.

"Your curse you mean?" retorted Jade without malice.

"No, just your story."

"Your words still make no sense!" said Jade while shaking her head.

"I see your words now. They leave your mouth and blow on the wind."

"Ahhh! More riddles. Then will you be so kind as to tell me what it was you did to me?"

The old woman stopped her spinning and looked directly at Jade with a cool, grey stare.

“I let people see your words and your cousin’s. That is all.”

“See? You did much more than just let them ‘see’! You turned our words into toads and pearls.”

“I did not turn anything into anything. People only saw what you said. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Jade paused and pondered for a moment. “When I said bad words,” she said thinking out loud, “toads would pop out and when I spoke good things pearls would appear. But at home when I spoke again, I spoke as I always had...”

“Your words never mattered. It is how people saw them. A story is a story, you see what you see. You see what you wish. If you see toads, then toads you will get. If you see pearls, then pearls you will get. Words will always just be words until people believe in them.”

The Pursuit of Sexiness

There was once a woman who desired to attain the perfect meaning of sexiness. She moulded her body to the figure of a pencil, with the necessary chest and posterior appendages. She acquired a make-up artist with the skills of Leonardo De Vinci, but unfortunately, he had never heard of the Mona Lisa. The woman's cosmetics cost more than her monthly electricity bill and her handbag cost more than two months' worth of rent. She discovered that perfect sexiness was expensive and she became obese in debt and gained weight every week. There was no such thing as credit liposuction. She had gym bills, pill bills, fashion bills, doctor's bills, boyfriend bills, entertainment bills, friend bills and useless advice bills.

She still pursued the perfect sexy, because once you attained the perfect sexy you would find the leprechaun's gold at the end of the rainbow. The woman never did find the gold, but she did find a blob of chewing gum stuck on the bottom of her stiletto shoe. This was no ordinary blob of gum, it could talk and it promised to show her the true meaning of sexiness.

"What must I do?" she asked the all-knowing blob of gum.

"Feed me whatever I ask and always keep me with you."

"What do you want to eat first?"

"Your fat!"

The gum was the size of her finger-tip and the woman fed it all her fat and achieved her ideal body weight.

Soon, it was hungry again. "Feed me your ugliness!" The woman gladly fed the gum her ugliness for now she was the very ideal of beauty. She fed the monster her food and clothes. It ate all her jewellery, books, photos, perfume, phone and cash. And yet it was always hungry and grew bigger as it began to take up a room.

"I need more food."

"I have given you virtually everything in my house."

"Feed me your boyfriend."

“What? No, you ask too much.”

“I ask too much? Look at all I have given you. What is one boyfriend when you can have so many?”

The woman thought a while and concluded that a boyfriend could be replaced, he was not yet a husband. The blob ate her boyfriend and soon it became hungry again. This time it demanded her friends. The competition for sexy was rough, it had to be eliminated.

One day her family visited her at her home and the gummy blob ate them without the lady's permission. The blob filled her entire house with its weight.

“Why did you eat my family?”

“They looked delicious.”

“That is no answer!”

“You have denied me nothing.”

“Yet I still do not know the true meaning of perfect sexiness.”

“You do not? Maybe it is because I have eaten your mind and heart. Sexiness is the perfect you that you have imagined and it is always, always hungry.”

The Beauty of Sleep

She constantly runs from thorns which prick, cut, mar, scratch, cling and entangle. When she tries to struggle free their hold only tightens and strangles her voice. Rose must find the fairies. They know how to stop the thorns. She pricked her thumbs on words and spilled blood to the ground. And the earth started to bleed thorns. They captured her lounge, kitchen and car, these plants of a thousand swords. Millions of little horned demons gripping and biting, crushing her into herself. The phone beeped through the tangles of barbed wire, she could not get to it. Rose was unable to leave the house and the only place of refuge was the bed.

Reality is the shadow of dreams and it was the dreams she chased, a space between realisation and blissful ignorance. The fairies and their needle wands can take her there. All she has to do is speak to the papered knight who is supposed to help her conquer...herself? They let her live in the mirror-castle of her mind. She can be seen but she cannot not see. Rose constantly stares into the reflection of her experiences and is not interested in anything beyond the castle walls. There are only fragments of answers which cannot be put together.

The fairies and knights sing their song as they weave their spell...

We must make them sleep

Break the cycle of feeling

Stop reality's wounds

Questions too hard

Answers too deep

Fathoming the fathomless.

We wave our needle wands

Toss the pills

Leave what is broken

Let them dream.

A Silly Story which no one should waste their time reading...

If you are reading this it seems that you did not heed the warning of the title. What if I told you I was trying to brainwash you while reading this tale? Still interested? Or how about if I told you that you will experience immense regret after reading this and your imagination will be forever tarnished?

I take it you are determined to finish this since we have now reached the second paragraph. Do not blame me then for your disappointment. There was once a prince (very original beginning) and...Oh dear! This is the twenty-first century and my main hero is a male. Let me rephrase, there was once a princess (FYI you may imagine the story in 2D or 3D, depending on what generation you are from. For me it will be 2D, I was disneyfied from a young age, but I digress with pointless dribble).

Princess Cecile was a beautiful woman (how could she not be? Or should I rather say sexy?) She could grace the cover of any Vogue magazine without using too much paint-brush technology. Her hair was enough to make any shampoo advertisement proud and she always woke up with her make-up magically done. (I can leave the rest to your imagination).

Cecile was not only beautiful, strong and independent, but she was a brilliant warrior. (Ho! Ho! Feminists will be pleased with me). It takes real talent to kick butt in tight leather pants and high-heeled boots. She was a sword master of note and out-bested any man across a wide expanse of kingdoms. Cecile ruled her kingdom with cleverness and savvy, the economy was booming, crime was down and tourism was high. Everybody's bellies were full so there was little to complain about.

So, what was the "catch"? There had to be a "catch", otherwise there is no point in telling this story, there must be a curse or something. I found there was nothing interesting to tell at all (I was fretting, really, I thought my story was finished). Until, there came news of the princess's strange hobby. Inside her study, with a grand desk and weapons openly displayed, there is something very intriguing. Cecile adores hunting, an unusual hobby for someone who is a staunch environmentalist and strict vegetarian. However, if you look very closely at her wall, you will see a large display of mounted heads. Human Heads. Male heads, in particular

(that's right, we have on our hands a literal head hunter). Cecile regularly patrolled her forests in search of hunters and poachers to protect her game. She would mount their heads on her wall.

Surely the general population should have protested about such an atrocious evil? Why should they? Morality didn't feed them or put money in their purses. Ignorance is such holiday fun and the disappearance of numerous healthy men in the middle of the woods could always be blamed on a mysterious witch who was placing curses. One guilty-feeling-individual decided to put up a sign saying: ENTER AT OWN RISK. It was sufficient and the matter was regarded as closed. (We won't talk about the illiterate men, as they can be regarded as good as dead).

(The heroine is proving to be somewhat troublesome, perhaps it time to bring in someone else?) Enter Brutus, a huntsman (now there is an interesting conflict but don't tell Cecile it will just spoil everything). His name says everything and he puts Apollo to shame. He is the embodiment of a blockbuster movie actor who knows how to make dirt look sexy. He has the durability of a cockroach where no bug sprays, gunshots or massive explosions can kill him. He has no fear (except of baldness, but you can hardly blame him with that marvellous mop of hair). Brutus was travelling in the territory of Princess Cecile and he was very hungry. Brutus had no desire to eat his horse as he had developed a slight affection for the creature (more than he had for any woman). He was left with no option but to hunt (supermarkets had not been invented yet).

Perhaps it should be mentioned that though Brutus is a huntsman, in the technical sense of the word, he is a very bad one. He is better at hunting woman than game, but he has been known to make the occasional catch or two. Brutus is very talented at sowing his acorns and he has planted enough acorns to grow a forest which could mend a hole in the ozone layer.

Brutus ignores the sign as he enters the woods (there is the strong possibility that he is illiterate or it is the side-effect of knowing no fear). He barged his way through the woods and every deer, mouse, rabbit and fox could hear him within a ten-kilometre radius. It was little surprise that Cecile heard him too as she was out patrolling her territory. It was not long before Brutus found an arrow pointing at his head. Brutus may not know how to hunt, but he does know how to put up a good fight (thank goodness, otherwise he would dead).

Needless to say, Brutus and Cecile fell violently in love, hack for hack, blow for blow and as steel cut steel. There were many impressive kicks, flips and punches, a little too much show

to be considered a real fight, it was really more of a flirtation than anything else. Their fighting skills were equal and they both collapsed from exhaustion.

They lay on the ground, huffing and puffing after a good work out. Cecile was very impressed as no man had been able to match her skills before. She asked for her opponent's name, but she received no answer. He was sound asleep (never fight on an empty stomach).

Cecile felt no feminine sensibilities when it came to deciding whether to hack off her opponent's head in a moment of weakness. She raised her sword and was ready to add Brutus to her collection of heads, but she hesitated slightly as she gazed on his sleeping form. She thought it would be a shame to damage such a fine specimen of a man. Perhaps it would be better if she stuffed him whole. (If anybody knows the name of a good taxidermist please let Princess Cecile know). Love or lust decided to blast its way onto the scene and Cecile was forced to admit defeat. Brutus can be thankful to Cecile's hormones and his good looks that he was able to live another day. Brutus was happy to plant some acorns and Cecile had her pleasure with him. To celebrate their harmonious union, they had a wedding. Cecile placed a magical ring on Brutus's finger to help him curb his manly urges and remain faithful. The magic worked for a while, but many a true love and wedding rings come with an expiry date. Happily-ever-afters are too long and tedious.

Brutus and Cecile had children, but since the parents didn't bother to spend much time with them, why should we? The marriage didn't last very long. Why? The mounted heads? It didn't take much for Cecile to convince Brutus they were plastic. An affair? That is far too dull and expected a reason to end a marriage, as is the term "irreconcilable differences". No, there was a far more sordid (and exciting if you ask me) reason and it is here I am forced to introduce you to the villain of the story, a wicked step-mother. To be precise, she was Brutus's step-mother and had been in love with him since the day she first saw him. The step-mother had to destroy Cecile, so she disguised herself as a maid and entered the castle and not even Brutus could recognise her (surprise, surprise). She searched for the children and murdered them in their beds (I forgot, maybe I should have given this story an age restriction?). The step-mother cleverly placed the bloody dagger on Cecile.

Brutus, when he first woke up, thought his wife was trying to kill him and was relieved to find it was only the children that had been murdered. Cecile wept, as a mother should, but was still left with explaining away the imposing dagger. She thought for a few seconds and explained that it was her hunting knife and that she had forgotten to clean it. The murder case

was too politically sensitive to solve so it was reduced to a violent crime statistic. At least there was somebody to blame, in the broad sense of the term.

Dear old evil step-mother had to resort to another resourceful plan. She decided to kill an animal instead and planted the knife on Brutus. Cecile didn't stop to ask any questions, she merely grabbed her bow and arrow and started chasing after Brutus. She is still hunting for him. (If anybody has seen him, could you please not let Cecile know? This is a special request on the part of the evil step- mother).

The Magic Chalk

I am their fairy godmother. My magic chalk and I hold the power of their futures. I etch words onto the blank slates of their minds. They will remember me and smile. It is not important for me to remember them, they are all one and the same. Students, learners, pupils. One day they will be doctors, lawyers, politicians, CEOs, rich wives, computer technicians and professors. Thanks to me, their teacher and my magic chalk. I offer them the glass slipper of education.

I am not a biology teacher, I teach “Life Skills”. I am not like those other teachers who blabber away those boring facts and obsesses over homework. The pupils hate them. Ha! And rightly so, shoving Shakespeare and history down their throats one act and chapter at a time. I give freedom in my class, a space to breath.

There they sit in their neat uniforms; starched white shirts and socks, blue ties, plaid gymns and tailored blazers. I try to be their friend and guide them through the dark alley ways of puberty. We often talk about sex in my class. It is compulsory, although it is a subject which comes naturally to them, I don’t have to compel them to do anything. The boys grimace in the corners of the room, desperately trying to be adults. The girls smile secretly and twitter together over some forbidden knowledge. I love the way they love me. Hanging on my every word. That’s not all I love, I love to let them gossip about other teachers. I listen to their snide remarks and gloat over how they would never say anything like that about me. I am the “cool” teacher, the understanding one, the counsellor. I love the power my magic chalk has over them, mesmerising them with dust.

I write the words on the chalk board, the essential facts yet so much more. They must remember my magic chalk words, the do’s and don’ts of life. For the sake of convention, I have to assume they are virgins who want to have sex. I don’t delve too deeply, it doesn’t really look that good for me if I know they are participating in hormonal orgies. As long as the sex is safe, that is all that matters.

I start my lesson, I don’t even have to call for silence, that is my power and magic. The other teachers hate me for it. First option: abstain. It is one of the surest measures to avoid trouble. If you can’t abstain, then you must have safe sex. Use a condom and girls must go to a clinic and learn about the pill. Do not have multiple partners. At this point in the lesson I decide to

shock them by showing them some disgusting pictures of sexually transmitted diseases. There is a verbal ripple of yohs, giggles and blushes. The object is to terrify them into abstinence or safe sex. It works momentarily. I move onto the big HIV/AIDs. It can happen to anyone, know your status, get tested. Know your partner's status. They all look a little bored at this point, they have heard this so many times. I spread my chalk dust and their attention returns.

The boys decide to spice things up by trying to "test" my knowledge on sex. How well do I know the facts? I have been teaching for too long, I am beyond embarrassment and laugh it off good naturedly. Why do I teach them this? They have all seen it on television and the internet. I know they already know about sex. They know I know that they know. Why must we teach them this? Perhaps it is to de-glamourize the Hollywood passionate renditions which brush over sexual realities. If you wish to sterilise the sexual experience, teach it in a classroom. Truthfully, I couldn't be bothered why. Life Skills requires no effort as a teaching subject.

The learners streamed out of the classroom, one girl remained behind. I smiled at her encouragingly. A mask of friendliness works wonders. She was a pretty thing, none too intelligent. She was a favourite among the boys. She would get glares from the other girls and most of the teachers labelled her as a pretentious little flirt. Maybe there was some truth to the accusation, but she was a sweet girl.

"Thank you mam! I learned a lot today."

"Really? I thought all teenagers knew about this sort of thing. I am glad to hear it. It is important to put our futures before anything else."

I was proud of myself, the magic dust of my chalk was having an effect. Here was my Cinderella, I had probably saved her from some groping, hormonal boyfriend. She'll think twice before romping in the sack. She'll go to university, even if it is only to meet an upcoming young doctor and be forever grateful for my advice.

I smiled a smile which said *I think we're done here.*

She hesitated, as if she wanted to tell me something more.

"Yes...J..T...Eliza...?" I never could remember their names. It only mattered that they remembered mine.

“Elsa....”

“Of course! How silly of me, you look so much like that...other girl.”

She laughed. She still hesitated. Finally, she shook her head and wished me a good day.

A pupil's face is soon forgotten as it blends into the sea of acne, ponytails and gelled hair. I moved onto the business of the day, with my box of magic chalk. Many of the technologically advanced teachers ask me why I don't use Power Point. Why? The chalk is my wand, my charm tool. I know that my captivating personality worked wonders to get a teenager's attention. But a teacher needs more than that to keep a teenager spellbound, you need magic.

I turned the corner and crashed into the smell of his cologne. Far too much for a man of good taste, but it could certainly grab a woman's attention. There he was, the girls new drool toy and some eye candy for the older ladies. The new teacher. New in that he had only been a staff member for a few months. Mr Conwill moved out of the way, like a gentleman should. I strode away gracefully in my high heels. Some female teachers were completely gutless and only wore flats, because they could not endure the pain. Fashion creates an impression on teenagers, whether teachers like to admit it or not. They analyse you down to your very label and price tag. One child noticed a price sticker still stuck to my new pair of shoes. Go figure.

I slapped Monday out of the way and gritted my teeth through to Friday. However, something happened on Wednesday. I was working later than usual, I was finishing off marking some projects. After packing up, I took a detour past the Biology Labs to get out of the mostly locked building. The door had been left ajar to Mr Conwill's class, I intended on wishing him a good afternoon. Instead, I saw a one on one biology lesson between teacher and student, an experiment in the functioning of the human reproductive organs. I slid away before I could be noticed.

Horror, shock and disgust rotated through my system as I rushed to the car. The bastard! That was my student! How could he degrade the teaching profession like that? Why was she so stupid? How could she fall for that? Hadn't I taught her? She KNEW the consequences of sex. Then another more disturbing thought crept upon me. Was I failure as a teacher? Was this what she was trying to tell me? O damn! Should I report it? If I do, what will that say about me? My students would never do such a thing I always brag. My chalk has never failed

me before. I have taught them well. My spell always, always works. I am the one that is always thanked in the parting speeches.

“Report it, don’t report it” goes through my head for the next two weeks. The pupils are beginning to be bored in my lessons. I lost something. My magic chalk is wearing off. I begin to doubt my power. I decide to ignore the situation. It is a passion, a phase. Why ruin her life? Well, I lied saying I was doing it for her, I was doing it for myself.

She starts going to the bathroom a lot. The other pupils are suspicious. I defend her by saying she has a kidney infection. It only made the situation worse. I had taught them enough about sex to make them realise she was pregnant. She found her Prince Charming, her glass slipper turned into a baby. The fairy godmother’s magic wand is broken.

My magic chalk is just chalk. Now, I teach and they are taught. I write and they copy. I point and they must remember. I talk and they pretend to listen. I give them facts but they want passion and excitement. They want something more than chalk white words which are so easily wiped away.

All she wanted...

Revenge. That's all she cared about. Nothing else. Stacey hadn't planned on getting dumped, especially by such a worthless man. What woman would want a worthless man? That is why she dated him. An ugly ornament which nobody wanted to buy, it just lay there gathering dust. No one fought to buy it or own it; certainly no one should have attempted to steal it.

Zach was a house pet, give him his comforts and he was happy. She could always count on the fact that he was on the couch slouching around with a beer in his hand. He was unemployed or constantly in-between jobs. Stacey didn't mind, no chance of an office affair. He could be considered as attractive by Martian standards with his slightly protruding ears and watery eyes. His hair looked like it had been dyed with dirt and his build resembled a badly put together demo-skeleton seen in school biology labs. His stomach protruded slightly, but he was a good dog until recently.

Liz always asked her how she could bare to live with *that*. She refused to qualify him as a human being. Zach was an entity all on his own. Liz was a successful accountant; she and Stacey had studied marketing together at university. Liz could not understand why Stacey partnered herself with a blood sucking leech; he didn't even have looks to compensate. Stacey knew that Zach was nothing to Liz's "Ralph", a successful CEO, gym-going muscle man who knew how to love a woman. He was a truly nice guy. A nice catch. Stacey didn't want that, it was too much high maintenance, always looking over your shoulder for that other woman, a constant body guard. Still, Stacey had to admit they were a great couple who were deeply in love. Stacey always enjoyed seeing them together, it made one believe in real love.

The restaurant was a clamour with the business of eating, drinking and conversing. There was a constant traffic of waiters and the restaurant was momentarily in fashion so business was good. Liz always ate at restaurants which were "fashionable"; Stacy was content with the local MacDonalds.

"How can you settle for something so...so.." stammered Liz trying desperately to be polite.
Again?

"He suits me" replied Stacey. *He is a good dog.*

Liz gave the same redundant amazed expression.

“How can you...” she repeated.

It was in fact very easy for Stacey. She produced men for a living. She created them, four a year sown together in 55 000 words. That’s what a Mills and Boon writer does. Stacey went to bed with a different rich, handsome man every night. True, their personalities were as deep as the paper as they were written on. True, she would kill one if she ever met him in real life. But they were her pleasurable fantasies which kept her satisfied. Every woman has a secret imaginary lover.

“I am truly embarrassed for you,” remarked Liz, her eyebrows crossing each other.

“I earn a good income. I write under a pen name and I work from home.”

“You corrupt women’s minds”

“They’re perfectly willing to be corrupted.”

Liz was about to shoot another feminist bullet but it bounced off her bullet-proof amour.

“We all know the arguments Liz, especially me as you have certainly repeated them enough times. Neither one of us will convince the other.”

Liz brooded in silence and vigorously stirred her coffee. She hated losing arguments. It was her mission in life to make Stacey make something of herself.

Interfering cow. I earn more than you.

Stacey called for the bill, they were both out of ammo.

Oh, how she would laugh now. She’d gloat and stuff herself with self-satisfaction at my expense.

Chop. Chop. Chop. Stacey grabbed another carrot. She was slicing carrots for supper. Chop. Chop. Chop. The television was mumbling in the lounge as Zack watched with the Kardashians blurring across the screen, his favourite fantasy. She knew he wasn’t watching like he usually did. He was planning on how to dump her. Chop. Chop. Chop.

I was his first girlfriend. How could he have the intelligence to cheat? I thought he was too lazy to even try.

Chop. Chop. Chop. Stacey grabbed another carrot. She knew the answer. It was that new Play Station which she had bought him to keep him quiet. She didn’t care if he played with and drooled over his virtual girlfriends, it was just a stupid computer in the end. Stacey had forgotten the online gaming part.

What? Did they bond over clanging swords and headless zombies?

Chop. Chop. Chop. She was cutting too many carrots, so she looked for some celery. Zack may have been smart enough to start an affair, but he was not clever enough to hide one. She

suspected something when he offered to do the grocery shopping. She saw them in a coffee shop around the corner from the flat. They looked like a couple of soppy sods who couldn't keep their hands off one another.

Chop. Chop. Chop.

Really? He could have at least had an affair with someone prettier than me. It would have at least made sense.

Chop. Chop. Chop.

I gave him everything. What was it? The Thrill? Another online game?

Chop. Chop. Chop.

"Uh...Stace?"

Here it comes. "The foods almost done." Stacey glanced at the high pile of carrots.

"Uh..um we need to talk."

I'm finding it soothing imagining him on this chopping board.

"Come into the kitchen hon.."

Zach waffled into the kitchen in his dirty socks, stained shirt and boxer shorts. He was rubbing his hair nervously. Stacey had her back to him. She was still chopping.

"I..uh...met someone else.."

"Good for you hun! A real person? All the people you know are virtual."

"No..no I mean I fallen in love with someone else."

Silence. Chop. Chop. Chop.

Never break up with a woman while she is still holding a knife you dolt.

Hack. Hack. Hack. A piece of broccoli fell to the floor. *That was your head.*

"Stace...?"

"Hmm?" Hack. Hack. Hack.

"You're taking this rather well."

That's only because I've decapitated you several times in my head.

"Well, you've made up your mind then. Have you packed?"

"Yes.."

"Good. You'd best leave them. Don't want to keep her waiting you know. "

"No.."

I won't remind you to shower. She can receive the whole dirty package.

Zach shuffled out. It was a few minutes later when she heard the door shut.

You'll be back. I'll make sure of it.

Stacey didn't sleep for many nights. She was busy typing away desperately. Tic tac tic tac tic tac tic tac went the computer keyboard. She was creating something. A very special book. The first of its kind she had ever written. The computer screen light revealed an odd smile on Stacey's face as she hunched over it. A witch over her bubbling cauldron of potion.

I'll take her from you. I won't let you lose her to some common guy which I could hire off the street. Oh no! It needs to be far more cruel than that. You'll lose her to a man I create. An impossible fantasy which will haunt you both constantly. You can't fight a fantasy. And...all she'll have is her fantasy. Ha! Ha! Ha!

This book had to be good enough not be published by Mills & Boon, it had to be something which an intelligent person would deceive themselves into reading. A romance with the greatest lover pulp fiction ever saw. A publishing house with a relatively decent literary reputation and a strong ambition for profit would have to take it on. Stacey had done her research, so she had all the necessary ingredients for her lover. She talked to friends, googled websites and re-read the great romances and watched the classic films.

She added a dash of Darcy and a sprinkle of Heathcliff with a blob of Apollo and Zeus. She poured in a splotch of Romeo and a teaspoon of Lancelot. Half an ounce of Gatsby and a smack of Tristan with quarter cup of Don Juan. Stacey could smell her word soup simmering as she tic tacked away at her keyboard.

Then came the charm of Cary Grant and the spunk, broodiness and mystery of Marlon Brando She couldn't forget the daring of John Wayne, the irresistibility of Sean Connery as James Bond and Robert Redford. The last couple of ingredients would take some skill to mix. Stacey glanced over her list of ideals as verbalised by her female friends.

"Strong but gentle."

"kind but you know..forceful.. a real go getter."

"loyal but an absolute charmer..."

"He must sweep you off your feet romantically...but real manly you know."

"I want someone who is adventurous but knows how to appreciate home."

"He doesn't have to be attractive...he must just have this magnetism about him."

~~"He must be like Edward from Twi..."~~ *Forget that one.*

Stacey chewed her lip. It was going to be quite a task to mix all those paradoxes, but they were the meat of the stew.

It was finished . The words burned on the computer screen. They glowed a dull red. She hadn't had enough sleep. Steam rose from Stacey's computer. She would take it to be fixed. She quickly emailed her masterpiece to the publisher before her computer system crashed.

Stacey was talking to her editor. They knew a best seller when they saw one. She chose the publishing house who was the most greedy for profit and would inundate the reading masses. They would dress it up as a classic.

"Where have you been hiding this art work?"

It's still a Mills & Boon only thicker with a few bigger words.

"I was waiting to be inspired."

"And those love scenes..."

Yes....those love scenes, a cross between bad pornography, BDSM, bodice-rippers and titillating rape scenes where the consent of the woman was not even clear. I even plagiarised from Sadean fiction. That type of sex should not even be attempted in real life. It was just plain unhealthy. The book should have come with a warning, DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME.

"Well...you know."

"Mmm...We'll make millions".

Like I care, as long as she reads it.

It didn't have the saucy cover and the horrendous title which explained the whole plot. It was 500 pages long. The cover was the essence of elegant simplicity. It was black with a single red rose and an embossed title, *Forces of Fate*.

Black covers seem to give a touch of classy legitimacy. A snobby literati could buy this without shame. They sure know what they are doing.

Stacey was admiring her pyramid-display of books in the shop window. She could see the customers buzzing around it with interest. It had finally begun.

Enter Don Wakefield, his name was whispered deep in the night and on sighs of ecstasy in the secrecy of the bedroom. He lived in dreams and invaded hearts. The heroine was an insipid character, she was the means to an end, a connector between him and the reader. She was easily shoved her off the page as readers imagined themselves in her place. Don was earning the adoration of his female public. Stacy hated him. She had never despised one of her characters so much before. She remembered feeling a little nauseous after she had created him. She had ritually burnt one of her copies of *Forces of Fate* to make herself feel better.

Stacey had another lunch appointment with Liz. She had finally built up the courage to feel humiliated by Liz once she had told her she had been dumped by Zach. As she talked, she realised that the cow wasn't listening. She did not really care.

"Men are such sleaze balls," commented Liz in a false tone of sympathy.

"Not yours!" replied Stacy as she winked mischievously.

"Oh?"

Oh huh? Most woman would give their souls for a guy like him. Hell, I based one of my characters on him in one my sordid novels you love to hate and it received the best sales and customer reviews. And all you say is Oh? I would have locked him up and thrown away the key if I had dated him.

"Um...not the answer I expected."

"We been having some problems."

"Did he cheat on you?" *Wouldn't be surprised.*

"No. He is not like that"

Part of me wishes he were.

"Yeah I know. So what is the problem?"

"There is no magic any more. No chemistry. It's dull, flat...predictable"

I wish Zach had been "predictable".

"It is just a phase. He adores you. That's all that matters, right?"

Liz rested her chin on her hand and played with her food. Everything seemed irrelevant to her now.

"I want to break up with him."

"Huh? Are you stupid?"

"No!" Liz snapped irritably, "it's just...you wouldn't understand with all your cheap-paper fictional lovers. Your two-dimensional masculine fantasies. Love is...complicated, raw and passionate...he's got to be real...that immediate attraction...you just know...there's no fighting. Fate? I don't know, just not this everyday mundanity."

Stacy stared at Liz with a blank expression. Liz threw down her fork impatiently.

"Uh! How could you ever understand? Your novels are as deep as your brain and heart. Do yourself a favour and why don't you read *Forces of Fate*? Then you might get it."

What? You read a trashy novel like Forces of Fate? Hello? You idiot, I wrote that piece of crap under a pen name that you were unable recognise.

“That book is nothing but some sexual slop to stimulate the hormones. Come on! A feminist like you reading that junk? You can’t even watch soaps because of their patriarchal engendering. *Forces of Fate* would win the most sexist novel of the year award.”

I totally believe what I am saying, I just pray that my editor never finds out.

“This coming from you? A Mills and Boon writer? The most sexist material alive.”

“So? Nobody takes them seriously. Most of my books end on the trash heap anyway once they have served their purpose. They have no impact. My characters are as memorable as extras on a movie set. I’ve never pretended it was otherwise. *Forces of Fate*... is more deceptive.”

Did she just roll her eyes at me?

“You can’t dump Ralph for some stupid Don Wakefield wannabe...fantasy.”

“Watch me!”

Stacy had successfully managed to sabotage her best friend’s “perfect” relationship. Unintentionally, of course, as the target was her ex-boyfriend’s mistress. There was one casualty, or perhaps two, if she included Ron as a victim in her diabolical plot. Stacy plopped herself into one her puffy synthetic leather lounge chairs. She stared at the ceiling in dismay. She took her shoes off her feet and bounced them on the floor in frustration.

Damn! Triple Damn! And quadruple damn!

Stacey’s cell phone rang and she jerked up in surprise. She looked around for the sound and realised it came from her handbag. After performing a thirty second archaeological dig in her bag she answered the phone half-heartedly. She hoped it was one of those annoying tellers trying to sell her something so she could berate the hell out of them to vent her frustrations. It was Zach.

“Stacey?”

She forgot to block his calls. “Yes?”

Has he been crying? Stop laughing.

“Stace...I’m sorry.”

“Already?”

“Sniff...she dumped me. It came out of now where.”

“...”

“Stace?”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Nothing....I just wanted you to know.”

“Okay, so now I do.”

“Stace....”

“What?”

“She was the one. THE one. I truly love her.”

Great! My ex-boyfriend phones me to tell me he has found the love of his life when he should have been crawling on his belly.

“And you’re telling me this because...”

“I wouldn’t have left you if it wasn’t real. You can’t miss the real thing when it comes. I hurt you. You gave me a lot. You deserve more than me. I needed something more...um...I kinda just felt like your...”

“house pet?”

He’s sharper than I thought. No wonder he didn’t stick around. We were both using each other.

Stacey could hear him squirming on the other side of the phone. He clearly didn’t like the vulgar expression but he could not disagree with it.

Why do I feel like crap?

“I hope things work out for you.”

Am I really saying this? Shut up you imbecile!

“Thanks Stace...I hope things work out for you too. I’m sorry. Misty is really special”

I should be gagging right about now. Why am I being so understanding?

“I know. Bye Zach”

The call ended and Stacey dropped the phone. She should have been happy. Euphoric and screaming for joy. If this were one her novels a sexy man would be knocking on her door ready to comfort her. At that moment, all she had was a slab of chocolate.

She sighed as she looked at her desk top. On that thing existed the most horrible monster in all of romantic fiction and she had created him. Something was going wrong. The plan was working too quickly and too effectively. The sales were good. Too good. Book stores could barely keep stock and her publisher was already nagging for a sequel. She’d drown herself first.

Stacy went and sat at her desk. The computer had been acting up frequently. She thought about throwing the contraption off the balcony and destroying the machine that helped her create Don Wakefield. Aside from cooling her oncoming temper tantrum, it would only inconvenience her as all her financial information was on it.

But that won’t stop me from deleting his infernal existence.

Stacey smiled gleefully to herself as moved her manuscript documents to the Recycle Bin. However, something was wrong. The screen halted and she could not move the mouse icon. *This stupid thing has been acting up a lot lately. Time for an upgrade.*

Stacey turned the machine off at the switch button and waited for the computer to gather its thoughts. The lights flashed as it hummed to life once again. It still halted up.

“You confounded contraption!” yelled Stacey as she gripped the monitor screen. “Is the entire world against me?”

HELLO STACEY.

The words appeared across the monitor. She screamed and fell off the desk wheel chair and toppled onto the floor. Stacey gawked up at the computer monitor on her desk.

What the hell?

IS THAT ANYWAY TO TREAT AN OLD FRIEND?

Am I been watched? Is this a sadistic joke on Zach’s part? Impossible. A computer virus? A stalker fan? I haven’t made any public appearances.

WHY WERE YOU TRYING TO DESTROY ME?

Destroy? Misty maybe? Did she find out? No, I am just getting paranoid. Wait! An evil spirit? Who do I know that is dead?

I AM DISSAPOINTED. I THOUGHT YOU WOULD BE A WOMAN OF TASTE AND STYLE.

Definitely a stalker. Stacey rushed up to the off button and pressed it. The computer still remained on. She grabbed the cord and ripped it from the wall. It still remained on. Stacey swallowed. Her eyes were fixated on the screen watching for the next word.

AM I TORMENTING YOU? HA! YOU ENTERTAIN ME, MADAM.

Hey...didn’t I write that or something similar...O My HEAVENS!

“Don..ald Wakefield?”

THAT IS MY NAME...

Stacey didn’t stop to think, she grabbed the screen and tossed it out her balcony window. It was soon followed by her computer.

“They want the movie rights!” exclaimed Stacey’s editor over the phone.

“No.”

“You would turn down 5 million bucks?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I like being pedantic.”

“Nice joke. When can I set up a meeting.”

“50 years after the copyright expires.”

“You are really being funny.”

“Am I? Do you think I want to see that bastard’s face plastered on every billboard and TV screen? Huh? You know how much damage he is causing? Building impossible, twisted expectations in women’s imaginations, making them dissatisfied with reality? The more they think about him, the more powerful he becomes.”

“Stacey...you’re high right? Look, I see this all the time. A person can’t take the pressure, too much money too quickly, problems with the boyfriend...some hallucinations.”

If only I were high.

“Hallucinations?”

“You’re speaking like Don Wakefield is real something.”

Stacey burst out into hysterical laughter and put down the phone.

Stacey drank herself into oblivion, but she saw him everywhere. There were constant emails on her phone, words streamed across the bottom of her flat screen television like a news broadcast.

DRUNK AGAIN? Came the Whats App message.

Now she was talking back to him, only when she was drunk. She did not have to text him back. Donald responded to her verbal replies.

“Go sleep with the woman I made for you. You are good at tormenting her.”

THAT INSPID WHORE?

“I didn’t invent you to torment me you...”

NO NEED FOR VULGAR LANGUAGE.

“Go away”

WHY HAVEN’T YOU WRITTEN A SEQUEL?

“If you want a sequel go to fanfiction.net”

ONLY YOU KNOW ME SO WELL.

“Don’t make it sound so sexual. It’s disgusting.”

TEXTS DON’T CONVEY EXPRESSION. YOU INTERPRETED IT AS YOU WISHED.

“I know you so well you arrogant, self-centred, piece of...”

MUST YOU BE SO COMMON.

“At least I am not a pervert.”

SAYS THE WOMAN WHO CREATED ME.

“Once they stop thinking about you, you will disappear.”

Stacey found a new drinking buddy in Zach. Misty still wasn't interested in continuing the relationship. Zach wasn't giving up and he found great comfort in spilling his guts to Stacey. They were drinking together at a local pub.

“I don't know what she wants. I even got a job, Stacey. A job! At the computer store. She still won't talk to me. She says she wants something more. More what I say? Just more.”

She wants Donald Wakefield.

“Who is Donald Wakefield?” asked Zach.

O crap! “Why?”

“Everyone is talking about him. Well, women mostly...is he some actor or something?”

“Uhhhh?”

“He is a prick character from an erotic novel called *Forces of Fate*,” came a deep voice from behind them.

“Ron! Nice to see you man. Long time no see.” exclaimed Zach.

Look innocent. Smile normally. Stacey turned and waved sheepishly. “Hey there Ralph!”

Ralph, one of the rare instances where DNA actually combined to match good looks with a decent personality. He had a good build, with chocolate brown hair and eyes. Stacey read the expressions on the women's eyes as he walked past, “Does he have a girl friend?”

Stacey desperately thought in response: *Please have one! Please have one! Please have one!*

“Funny to find you guys here! Are you back together?” asked Ralph as he took off his jacket and sat with them at the bar. He ordered a beer.

“Nope. We both came here because we got dumped. Stacey by me and I got dumped by Misty. We're celebrating our misery together” chatted Zach.

You and your bloody honesty.

Ralph laughed cynically. “May I join you?” he asked, “I have just been dumped myself.”

Ooooo.....

“You?” gasped Zach. “No way! But you and Liz...and for a girl to dump you...me maybe...but you? What is this world coming to? Stacey, why are you banging your head on the bar counter?”

“I'm drunk you, fool.”

“It's only your second beer.”

“I don’t hold my alcohol well.”

“I don’t remember you being much of a drinker Stacy,” commented Ralph.

“New hobby.”

“I see...I have actually been meaning to talk to you...about Liz?”

Here it comes.

“I’m intoxicated. Do you honestly expect me to have a logical conversation right now?” said Stacey as she looked at Ralph with her head on the bar counter.

“Being drunk always encourages honesty, which is what I really need right now.”

Drink girl, till you pass out.

“Has Liz found another guy?”

“Uhhhh...”

“She has huh? I suspected as much. I saw her with him. He is from my work...the last person I thought Liz would find attractive.”

A Donald Wakefield substitute? How long will that last?

“Uhhhh....”

Ralph sighed, “I’m sorry I put you in this position.”

“Uhhhh....what position?”

“In the middle.”

Nice guy syndrome. Now if this had been one of my third-rate novels or a rom com here is what would happen. Zach (annoying presence would leave for somewhere), Ralph (hot guy and best friend’s dreadfully hurt ex-boyfriend) and Stacey (disillusioned lover whose innocence was exploited by her own cheating boyfriend) both get hopelessly drunk and have sex. Both wake up regretting it. Later realise they have some sought of feelings for each other, but are too shy to admit it. Ex-lovers come back into lives, Stacy can’t betray best friend and Ralph can’t let go of love for best friend. Stacey (kind hearted to a fault) accepts the situation. Later she gets involved in some near-death experience or tragedy. Rescued. Ralph (hot guy) realises he can’t live without Stacey. Stacey can’t live without him. Best-friend gets screwed over, but everyone eventually accepts situation. Damn, I’m good. I wonder if I can make notes on this napkin?

Real life. Zach stays and endlessly talks. Stacey orders another beer and starts thinking about her next novel while pretending to listen to Zach. Ralph wonders if he should start flirting with the girl across the room without being rude to his companions.

“Hey, Stacey! There is a message on your phone.” cried Zach.

“I’m too drunk to care.”

“He says you’re making a fool of yourself. You’re a social embarrassment. Is Don your new boyfriend?”

Stacey sat up straight and suddenly sobered up. She grabbed the phone from Zach.

HAVING FUN? STOP THINKING ABOUT OTHER MEN AND WRITE MY SEQUEL.

Stacey paled. *What?*

“Gee Stace...you have someone? A rebound?” grinned Zach, “what sequel?”

“Aaahhh! That’s my editor. Real ass. He breathing down my neck for a sequel to my novel.”

“Do Mills & Boon even have sequels?” asked Ralph.

“On very rare occasions”

YOU’RE WASTING PRECIOUS TIME. YOU SHOULD ONLY BE THINKING ABOUT ME.

Stacey dumped her phone in a glass of beer. Both Ralph and Zach were flabbergasted.

“He gets to you that much?” enquired Zach.

“Yeah...he’s one of those..”

“His name is Don?” observed Ralph sounding irritated.

“Ironic isn’t it? Soooo...barman another beer!”

“I guess I’ve drank enough alcohol to admit this. I think Liz cheated on me with a man who doesn’t exist. Can a man be jealous of a fictional character?”

Ha. Ha. Ha. I wish I found this funny.

Stacy was forced to buy a laptop, although at this rate she wanted to move to a place with no electricity and survive in the wilderness. She was constantly bombarded with Donald’s messages. She was trying to write another novel to erase the last one. She would try an epic fantasy, she was in dire-straits. And then she saw him. His face was on the screen, HD quality. Other women’s dreams were appearing as her physical nightmare. He reached out his hand to grab her throat, but she dodged by jumping from her seat. An arm was sticking out of her laptop screen, a typical scene from a cheesy thriller movie. Donald stuck both arms through the screen, he squirmed and squeezed to get the bulk of his body through the 15-inch square space. A man was breaking into her flat through her computer. She grabbed the phone and dialled for the police while he struggled.

“Ha, you bastard, the police are on their way! They will arrest you!”

Donald was still in an undignified position, his torso was out in the real world hanging over Stacy’s desk, while his legs were somewhere else. He was not intimidated by Stacy, he was concentrating on manoeuvring his way out. She began to throw things at him and hit him to

stop him from coming through. It did little to distract him and in just a few minutes he toppled onto the floor. He was breathing from the exhaustion. Stacy kicked him, but he grabbed her foot and made her fall. He laughed with delight.

When Stacy recovered from her hysteria she realised the man who had entered her flat was stark naked. She screamed while covering her eyes.

“You have probably not seen such a fine specimen of man...correction, you have not seen such a man before. And isn't it ironic for you to wear your moral laurels now?”

Stacy still screamed.

Without bothering to cover himself, he walked up to her and gave her a clean, sharp slap.

Stacy was quiet. Although she grateful to be brought back to her senses, she rushed to her bedroom and locked the door. She walked up and down attempting to calm herself.

After about ten minutes there was a violent knock on the door.

“Do not fear madam, you are far too ugly for me to have ANY sexual intentions towards you, but I do require clothes, immediately.”

“Now where do you think I am going to get those? Would you like to dress up as a woman?” yelled Stacy through the bedroom door.

“No, you are going shopping.”

“Ha! The police will be here any second.”

“They already were!”

“What? You answered the door like that?”

“Why not? They could tell I was right at home. I told them that while trying to surprise my wife that she mistook me for a burglar. They left very quickly when I said you were in the shower...”

It was Donald Wakefield. Alive and breathing and Stacy had no idea how. She was searching through men's clothing. His list was very specific, Dolce & Gabanna, Armani and Marc Jacobs. He pointed out the pictures while wrapped in a towel. It was a scene from a raunchy movie which would have had many ladies fanning their faces. Stacy broke out in cold sweats of terror. Like a robot, she found herself in her car and then lurking in shops where it was a sin against the orphans of the world to be sporting one's cash. While wondering in the men's wear department, Stacy bumped into Liz.

Damn.

“Stacy! How have you been? I never knew you had such...style when it comes to men’s clothing.”

I don’t have an answer, not even a stupid one.

“Uggghhh....”

“A new man? He has good fashion sense. Shopping for gifts? Your novels must be selling well.”

“Ahhh, yes!” Stacy looked at Liz’s arm over which hung expensive men’s clothing. “I hope that’s on his credit card.”

“Can’t a girl treat her man? He is so fine! I don’t mind spoiling him.”

You are not his mother. “I see.”

“We’re both starting fresh. Have you lost weight? You look divine!”

“Do I?” I feel like crap, I am not eating or sleeping properly. My immune system is down, so I catch every bug and my stress levels are as tall as Mount Everest, yet I am the picture of health because I lost weight?”

“I really must be going, it was lovely to see you. We must catch up some time!”

She has her Don Wakefield and I have mine, may heaven have mercy upon us both.

Donald had no qualms about physically hitting and constantly verbally abusing Stacey. Her life had become a living nightmare. He gave her no freedom and constantly monitored her every breath. She was little more than a domestic slave to him.

I have to kill him, but I don’t know how. And I don’t like blood. Is he even human?

Stacy had bought some rat poison. She was going to put it in his food that evening. Donald Wakefield had taken over her whole life. She didn’t know what spell she was under, but suddenly he was in control of her finances and she had become a housekeeper. There was only one thing left which he could not bully her into doing and that was to write a sequel. He was manipulative genius.

“It’s my money!” Stacy argued.

“No, it isn’t. It belongs to me, if it weren’t for me you wouldn’t be successful at all.”

“I created you, you pig!”

“Without me you are nothing! The readers adore me, they do not even wonder about your existence. They are buying the books to read about me. I sell them, so the money his mine.”

Stacey’s usually intelligent mind became putty when trying to argue against his twisted sense of reality. He invested everything in stocks and bonds, he wanted to be as rich he as was in

the book. Stacey was too scared to ask where it went, aside from his luxurious living costs.

Donald wanted a more expensive flat, a penthouse over-looking the city.

She could not go out, he took all the keys and had locked her in, promising to only set her free once she wrote the second book. Donald was spending many nights out on the town and he would brag that he slept with a million woman every night. A disgusting idea, but it happened whenever some poor woman read his books. Stacey began to think of *Forces of Fate* as his book, she loathed the thought that it belonged to her in any way. It was to become a movie, Donald had seen to that. He let everyone know that he was the inspiration for the novel and he was hoping to be cast as the lead. Stacey knew he would somehow persuade them, he would now enter more imaginations and his existence would grow stronger.

She had added the poison to his fancy organic Thai health meal. He was picky about what he ate. Stacey had also added poison to the wine, just to be safe. She served the food like a well-trained first-class servant. He had changed the entire décor of the flat. It was cold, sparse and modern. He had a huge portrait of himself in the lounge. They would be moving to the penthouse soon. Stacey had insisted he go alone, he refused. He would make her stand behind him while he finished eating. She was waiting for him to gag to death or foam at the mouth. *Maybe it does not happen as quickly as it does in the movies.*

“The taste was off tonight, I think it might have been that rat poison you added.”

How the hell?

“It will take more than that to kill me,” and he raised his glass and smiled. “It doesn’t add to the wine either.”

Will he make me eat the poison?

“Don’t worry, I let you live, this time.”

I don’t have the guts to stab him, electrocuting him in the shower or bath is just impractical. How many episodes of CSI have I watched to give me ideas? Everything is so much easier in fiction. An accident? Should I sabotage the car? That might be a good idea. I’m sure I could Google that.

Stacey set about deriving various murder plots to kill Mr Wakefield. She did sabotage the car breaks and he was involved in a terrible car accident. He walked out without a scratch, just like all those invincible heroes.

“How is that sequel coming Stacey? Your publisher is getting irritated. Do spend less of your time trying to kill me,” he remarked snidely.

If a car accident didn't work then neither would a gun. I wonder if his body would magically just poof away? Or would it be sucked back into a screen? Would the readers feel anything? Would sales drop? I wonder what would happen if I made the readers hate him?

"At least plotting to kill you is far more entertaining than writing your sequel. Why don't you just hire a ghost writer? You've already hired some actress pretending to be me to attend all publicity functions. If I had really looked like that I would have just become a super-model and not a writer. Some believe YOU wrote the book and are too afraid to admit it because you are a man. So? Why don't you write the sequel? Huh? You always like to remind me how YOU sold the book? Well?"

Donald shut the *Financial Times* in frustration. He was annoyed by what she was saying. Stacey very rarely managed to irritate Donald, this was a good sign. What chord had she struck?

"All you do is blabber, I am late for a date. Do something valuable and write that book." He got up and left the room. She could smell the singe and smoke of his anger.

Stacey gave up on physical harm and decided to become an active feminist against sexist pigs, although she only had something against Donald Wakefield. She was only really interested in destroying one man, and ultimately this was for men's sake, who were all losing their women to a fictional beast. Stacey applied to write a column for a political newspaper and she set up a blog. She had to build a following. Her articles had titles like: "Male chauvinism at its best in *Forces of Fate*!" "Do you really want to marry a Donald Wakefield?" "This is what your daughters are reading!" "Sexual exploitation of the masses!" "A Woman who degrades her own sex: meet Felicity Foxworth!" "Patriarchal Sexism of the Female Consciousness: rape and the ambiguity of consent in *Forces of Fate*." She ranted on Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. Stacey began to get calls for radio interviews. People wanted to hear the mad-hatter feminist who had nothing better to do than blast a silly piece of fiction. "We are live on air with Stacey Farrow, staunch feminist and a literary critic of the best-selling novel, *Forces of Fate*. Tell me Stacy, why is this book a threat to women?" "It's a piece of sexist trash, it teaches woman to become mind-numb zombies to the sexual desires of men."

"I must be a 'mind-numb' zombie then, I read the book. But my husband still does what I want. Can't we just call it what it is? A work of art? Aren't you only speaking on behalf of prudes everywhere?"

"Really? Hasn't your husband been disappointing you lately?"

“I beg your pardon, to what are you referring? Can we stick to the topic?”

“I am. He just doesn’t satisfy you, no chemistry...”

“Stacy my love life is really...who is doing the interviewing here?”

“This is a late-show, no children should be listening. Now, I guarantee you, it is not your husband you take to bed with you. You imagine it is Donald Wakefield don’t you? Ever since you read that book....”

Stacey’s line had become dead as the radio host had cut her off.

So much for public education...

Stacey had just finished another damning article about *Forces of Fate*. She got over whelming support from many academics, but the public didn’t really care what they had to say. She heard a giggle at the front door of the pent-house. Stacey ignored it, that pervert was probably bringing home another one of his lovers. She continued to munch her hot dog in the kitchen while staring at her laptop screen. She liked the kitchen, he was never there. The giggles became louder and they sounded familiar. It sounded very much like...Liz?

The laughter got louder and was coming towards Stacy.

That bastard’s coming to the kitchen, he is deliberately coming to the kitchen!

Stacey ducked down behind the kitchen counter. She pleaded with the air that they would take what they wanted and leave. Donald and Liz were having a loud conversation as he retrieved some wine-glasses.

“She is making an absolute fool of herself. I don’t why she is trying to pass off herself as a feminist. She is a Mills & Boon novelist for crying out loud! Talk about hypocritical! Huh! What? Did her grandmother possesses her or something?”

Friend my ass!

They both burst out in loud laughter.

“What does she have against the book? I think the character is amazing. I’ve studied him in depth. You know I’m acting his part in the movie?” remarked Donald.

“I heard! You’ll be absolutely perfect for the part! I can’t believe I am dating a future superstar!”

Watch which way you are drooling sister, you’ll soon slip on it and hopefully break your legs.

“I think the writer is a pure genius! Felicity Foxwood is something else. I look forward to working with her.”

"I'm am envious to the core of that woman. She is intelligent, beautiful and now damn wealthy! You know I think I figured Stacy out!" exclaimed Liz as she slapped Don on the shoulder.

"You did?"

"Yes! She is insanely jealous because she could never ever imitate or have the success of Felicity Foxworth! So she started this crazy campaign because no one will buy her Mills & Boons."

"I think you are one hundred percent correct."

"I should be. Do you know we are best buds? We studied together!"

Best? Ha, you over-estimate your value. I keep you around because you're an inspiration for my female villains.

"How can a woman like you be friends with a woman like that?"

"Don't ask!"

"I won't!" There was another burst of laughter.

"Her campaign is a total failure, she actually made people more interested in reading the book to see what the scandal was about."

"I believe so, I heard directly from the publisher that Felicity's sales had increased."

Noooo! That's why those insects weren't saying anything! I was making them more money.

"Could you do me a favour, Liz, I think I have an excellent bottle of wine and I think I left it over there in that cupboard, could you get it for me?"

"Sure!" Liz enthusiastically skipped to the other side of the kitchen counter. She stopped dead when she saw Stacey sitting on the floor in a tracksuit with her back against the counter and legs held to her stomach. She still had a hotdog in one hand and the sauce was dripping on the Italian tiles.

"Stacey!" she shouted in a frightened voice.

"Hello Liz!" Stacey waved but did not bother to get up.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh...you know...licking sauce off the floors...listening to nasty friends stab you in the back, plotting revenge..."

"You heard?"

"You made it difficult not to."

Liz looked at Donald for an explanation. He was smiling with pleasure.

"Stacy is..."

“He is my cousin, he is letting me stay here. I’m cashed strapped for the moment. Bad book sales,” cut in Stacy before Donald could offer his version of events.

“Oh...” stammered Liz, “then...”

“Honey, don’t be embarrassed. We promised we would be completely open about this relationship,” cooed Donald as he looked with pure adoration in his eyes.

“What? I am being perfectly open, I just said...”

“Don’t believe a word she says. She is actually my girlfriend,” interrupted Donald.

“What? So we are cheating...I thought you were not involved with anyone.”

“Oh, not to worry, it is not that sort of relationship! She is my official girlfriend, but we don’t obsesses over old-fashioned ideas like monogamy. We believe in exploring! We love each other, but we don’t need to prove it to one another by sticking to each other like glue. We’re more mature than that and believe in the freedom of the body. Stacey is very open-minded in this regard. She does not object to you being here. Is that not so, Sweetheart?”

Stacey’s was so abhorred by Donald’s words that her brain had shrivelled to the size of a dried- out pea. It only retained the capacity to provide her with a heart-beat. Thought was dead.

“She is so elated she can’t express her joy!” explained Donald.

Liz felt too uncomfortable to stay.

“Stacey, you ruined my date!”

Why hasn’t he killed me? He needs me, if he could have replaced me, he would have. He insists that I write a sequel. His creation is still connected to my existence and writing. What if I killed him in the sequel? His life would have to end? It is the only method I have not tried yet. Perhaps the key is to destroy him in people’s imaginations.

Stacy decided to write, but she started it in a notebook, he always checked her computer’s content regarding himself. She would bring about his downfall. Stacey had him murdered in the first chapter, the rest of the book entailed his lover trying to figure out the truth. She in turn is seduced by the murderer. Stacey made the novel a tragedy by just killing ALL the major characters. Yes, it was badly written, but she did not care. She would annihilate the entire franchise of *Forces of Fate*.

Her publisher thought it a bit odd that in the twenty-first century she insisted on submitting a hand-written manuscript. As a best-selling author, they were willing to put up with a few eccentrics. Don did not seem to suspect anything and Stacey became too relaxed with her upcoming thoughts of victory. One day she just sensed it, the cold rage as it engulfed the entire penthouse. He knew. She saw his expression and knew that he had every intention of harming her. Instinct made her run, anywhere and everywhere. Time warped into its own slow progression. Stacey was caught and he dragged her violently by the hair. “Trying to kill me?” he whispered as he gripped her throat. She tugged at his hand. She could not breathe and fainted as blackness claimed her.

She did not expect to wake up again. Stacey found herself in the very hell she had created, his den of lust. The place where he could practise his sordid sexual fantasies. It was exactly as her novel described and she was bound like her heroine. Except there was no underlying erotica, no sexual tension where desire and refusal to comply gave into the uncontrollable pleasures of the flesh. No excitement. Only horror at what was to come. Stacey struggled but could not break free. Her monster watched her, her very own dear Frankenstein. It would not kill her, only remind her who held the power. Stacey was raped. He performed every titillating delight of *Forces of Fate*. Pandora’s box had been opened and the idea had escaped.

Fairy Tale Rewind

There is a princess in a tower. She exists alone and waits for fate to find her. Her step-mother guards her and keeps the outside world away. A prince takes a journey and rides on a white horse looking for a soul-mate. A romantic, miraculous encounter occurs and the prince falls in love. The wicked-step mother's plot fails. The prince and princess plan their wedding and make eternal vows. They live happily ever-after.

They live happily ever-after. The prince and princess plan their wedding and make eternal vows. The wicked step-mother's plot fails. A romantic-miraculous encounter occurs and the prince falls in love. A prince takes a journey and rides on a white horse looking for a soul-mate. Her step-mother guards her and keeps the outside world away. She exists alone and waits for fate to find her. There is a princess in a tower.

LADY BLUE

My husband sent me to see an old hag when he learned I was pregnant. I surveyed the surroundings with disgust. The hut smelled of cat urine and chicken excrement. I gave the old hag a cold stare over my fan. Her grey hair straggled across her face. Wrinkles ran like cracks disrupted by bulging warts. Her hands and back were deformed by rheumatism. I wrinkled my nose as she read the thoughts on my face.

“There’s a hag inside of you it’s only a matter of time before you meet her,” she cackled. She was pleased with my fear and fate that I would one day look like her.

“My husband desired me to see you...” I commented.

“I know, otherwise I would never have let you in. You must be with child?”

I was shocked as only the doctor, myself and my husband knew this fact. Perhaps the rumours about her powers were true. I still did not understand my husband’s obsessive superstition which forced me to come to this little hell. He wanted me to get her “blessing”.

“So this is the wife he chose?” she stated flatly as her eyes darted up and down my body. Her gaze fell on my abdomen and burned through to the foetus in my womb. I felt it’s movement, it disliked the scrutiny as much as I did. The hag frowned and the cracks in her face grew deeper. She turned her head away sharply as if trying to avoid some horrific sight.

“That imbecile marquis de Mazarin still needs his nanny’s approval?” she laughed derisively.

I found it hard to imagine such a creature had once taken care of children. What could she know of children? She had been a single wench all her life. The marquis didn’t discuss it with me, but rumours abounded that she had been a nanny to his grandfather. She was no ordinary hag. I shuddered at the thought of it.

She bared her teeth at me in an attempted smile, “You shudder at me? You should shudder at the child you will bear.”

I laughed and retorted, “Why? Will the child look like its father?”

“No, his mother.”

“He?”

I paused for a moment. I had been hoping to have a girl to ease me into the challenges of motherhood. It would also have pleased me to annoy my husband who so desperately wanted a boy. I had begun compiling long lists of girl's names and would read them to him. Frustrated, he would puff his cheeks like a goldfish. However, I also realised that to have a boy would relieve me of the burden of producing an heir to continue our ever-important bloodline.

She observed me keenly as I thought for a while.

"Having doubts? Would you like to get rid of it? I would if I were you."

This woman was certainly a monster. Nanny? The old hag probably did not possess an affectionate bone in her body. I could barely qualify her as a woman since she had never been a mother herself. I snapped my fan closed in anger and openly displayed my contempt.

"What? How dare you! Kill this innocent child? Never. How typical of a witch," I sneered. She sighed, "It is not a solution I often recommend, but in this case it would spare many in the future."

"What gibberish are you talking?"

"He will cause much death and pain to others."

"I beg your pardon! You lying crone! I would never ever permit any child of mine to do any such thing. He will be raised a gentleman, a true noble! Unless you are putting a *curse* on him!" I screeched in terror.

The woman sat quietly and asked, "Would you like some tea?"

She did not wait for my reply, she got up and wobbled over to the fire place where a copper kettle was being warmed over the coals. The old woman retrieved some porcelain cups from a shelf, she didn't bother with the saucers. She handed me a cup and kept the chipped one for herself. Taking the kettle, she poured some tea into the cups and spoke, "The cups are clean and the tea is not poisoned. Your husband would not let me live if it were."

She had read my expressions and destroyed any possible excuses I might make. She smiled at me expectantly, the woman was forcing me to practise my good breeding. I gulped a small sip of the liquid and ran my thoughts over all the prayers I had learned at the convent.

"My name," she said as she sat down again on the three-legged stool, "is Annette. I don't place curses. Life gives enough of them as it is without my help. I just gave his fortune. It is a tradition which the de Mazarin's insist I perform. I scrutinize every baby that will be born into the family."

I did not like the rationality of her voice. I wanted the old crone to shout and scream and curse. I wanted her to reveal her madness so I could wipe it all away as a libellous rant.

“It is all an absurd superstition,” I remarked, clutching the fragile cup.

“I am accurate, but I am not asking you to believe me.”

“But my husband will...must you tell him this?”

“I usually do.”

“Please don’t. The child hasn’t even been given a chance. You can’t balance an entire child’s life based on the few words of an..”

“Old witch? Hmmm? That’s right throw me with insults to convince my better nature.”

I threw decorum and social class out the window. I forgot the dirt and my dress. I dropped to my knees and wept. I was a mother protecting the life of her unborn child. I knew my husband would act on this woman’s recommendations, whether they were based on truth or not. I begged. Annette seemed moved by my sincerity. She rubbed her wrinkled forehead with her hand. She was weary about showing any mercy.

“Get up,” she instructed. I sniffled my way back to the stool and watched her with tear-brimmed eyes.

“I will say his future is unclear and that I will only be able to read his fortune when he is older. Life can sometimes be unpredictable. However, you must bear the consequences.”

I thanked her profusely. I think for the first time I actually felt what it was like to be a mother. I was willing to sacrifice anything for this little life. I glowed with the pleasure of motherhood. I remembered my own mother’s words when she brushed away the tears as I had just broken my favourite doll. She laughed sweetly as she told me I would one day make an excellent mommy.

Annette saw my euphoria and shook her head slowly. She seemed exhausted, her eyes tired from seeing too many things. A black cat brushed past her legs and she reached out to it and stroked its back steadily.

“*Oui, ma belle!*” she crooned sweetly to the cat, “I can only pray my old wisdom has not failed me.”

I sat up straight, “I can assure you *Madame*, you have shown a great act of kindness, one which I will never forget. You have my eternal gratitude.”

“I find that no consolation at all.”

Something stirred in me, that intuitive part of the soul that we always prefer to ignore because we fear its truth. The “perhaps” or “what ifs” the terrible unknowns which function beyond human reason.

“How...if...let’s just say you were correct to a certain extent...what would you suggest?”

She shrugged her shoulders and said, “Be a good mother.”

I let out a derisive breath and glanced away in disbelief. “*Sacrebleu!* Is that all you have to say?”

“I already stated that he should be killed. Maybe nature will be wiser than I was.”

Since visiting the hag I became connected to my son. I sat embroidering his baptismal gown lovingly while Francois was already ordering a horse. I imagined his first steps and his first words and all the other firsts. He was a vibrant young child, he kicked often in my belly. I would tease that he was hurting me and he just kicked harder. I discussed all my plans and ambitions for him. I forbade him from looking like his father, much as I loved Francois, he looked more like a burly farmer than a noble courtier. And not a very handsome farmer at that. I was not beautiful, but I was striking. My features would grab the attention of the room, but never with admiration. People were puzzled by my appearance, the thick, tousled hair that was as deep as ebony ink and shone with a blue sheen in the light and the straight nose which was far too sharp. I grew on people like a new fine wine or a unique piece of music whose sound still had yet to be understood. I became a leader of fashion in the king’s court. The Marquise de Marazin was a name which rippled among all the French nobility. Friend and confidante of the queen and the symbol of elegance. Men pursued me as they are always fascinated by an exotic flower.

I was devoted to my husband, despite the many temptations to be otherwise. He was not as faithful, as he kept a *maîtresse* in Paris. I did not object as most male French blooded aristocrats entertained an *amoureuse*. I was more displeased by the type of lover he chose, such a course thing. She was little better than a barmaid, it was such a step down from my standard. It would have been far less humiliating had he chosen someone with more *chic*. I considered that he might have preferred her animal love-making or he enjoyed fantasising romping in the hay with a peasant. I don’t believe he would have minded much if I had an *affaire d’amour* as long as I kept it discreet. It still felt too common and now that I was a mother-to-be it was even more distasteful. There were many bad habits I would not let him receive from his father, but I wanted him to inherit his kindness and goodwill. Ideally, I wanted him to look like my grandfather, a handsome rake in his day. I gained my unusual hair from him with its blue tinge. It was a matter of family pride. I still had not given up on having a girl, a sister would do him good. I spent my confinement in the country while my

husband went to Paris. I allowed him his enjoyments and I knew he would return when the time drew near. My belly filled up like sand pouring through the bottom of an hour-glass. He could wait no more.

It was a difficult birth, I almost paid for his life with my own. The boy brimmed with vigour and brawled his presence, he was ignorant of the plight of his mother lying on the bed. I knew I could not die, the prophecy still hung over my head and I could not let her be right under any circumstances. I had to protect him from any future evils. The doctor bled me even more by cutting my wrists. It was everywhere, you could drench the walls with it. The doctor was surprised that I survived and my husband cried. He still wanted his wife. A wet nurse was quickly found as I was deemed too “weak” to breast feed. I acquiesced for the moment, yet I deplored the idea of another woman’s milk in his veins. He could be contaminated.

My child was named Arnaud-Gaston le Tellier, Comte de Mazarin. I dreaded the notion of that woman showing her face at my son’s baptism. Thankfully, she never came but the Marquis summoned her to the *château*. It was to discuss my son’s future. She was a bundle of filthy rags which were in stark contrast to her elegant surroundings with the furnishings of Charles Cressent, Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier and Jean-Claude Chambellan Duplessis. I failed to understand how the Marquis, who spent time in the presence of King Louis XV and the *la noblesse*, courted to the antics of this *le paysan*. Annette shuffled her way into the room, she did not bother to pay the proper respects to Francois but nodded her head at his presence.

“*Bonjour, Madame* Annette, it has been a while,” said Francois. He stood beside my chair as I held Arnaud in my arms.

“You see, I have a very handsome son thanks to my lovely wife. You have yet to see him?”

“No, *Monsieur*, I have not had the pleasure,” she replied. “Still, now that I have seen him, what more do you expect of me?”

The Marquis laughed from the depth of his belly and replied, “You have not changed. Surely you know, the boy needs a nanny.”

“*Madame* de Mazarin does not seem happy with idea,” she commented. She was watching my terrified expression.

“My dear wife knows that it is tradition. She does not have a say.”

I looked at him, my eyes were brimming with tears and I made my lip tremble slightly to appeal to his sympathy. He was oblivious. Annette watched our interactions with curiosity.

“I must offer my sincerest apologies *Monsieur*, but I will have to break from tradition. I am getting old. I can no longer manage the antics of a young boy.”

“What?” exclaimed my husband. He could not fathom the concept for Annette had always been there. It had never occurred to him that she would one day not be. Francois gaped at her and was visibly upset. I was bubbling gleefully inside and I smiled my thanks to Annette.

“Surely *Madame* can’t be serious...” stammered the Marquis.

“I am mortal, *Monsieur*, I cannot forever accommodate your tradition. Your wife is a perfectly qualified mother.”

My husband paused, for whatever the old woman might have had to say he was highly dissatisfied. He turned sharply away in frustration and stared hard at an impressive portrait of his grandfather. He scratched his powdered wig and grumbled to himself.

“*Madame* must know that my family has supported you for years and as a result it is expected that you perform your duty.”

I bit my lip anxiously and watched for her reply.

“*Monsieur* must realise one can only perform one’s duty as one’s health permits.”

“Your health has never bothered you before.”

“Shall I make a suggestion, *Monsieur*?”

“Indeed *Madame*, for we cannot seem to agree.”

“Let the little one decide, *Monsieur*. If the baby makes no protest when I hold him I shall become his nanny.”

“He is just a new born...”

“A child has instincts *Monsieur*, even at this young age.”

Annette held out her arms for the child, but I drew back. I did not wish this monster in rags to hold my sweet boy.

“It is all right Angelique, *Madame* Annette raised your own husband. I would know if she would bring him any harm,” whispered my husband into my ear. Very reluctantly, I loosened my hold on the child. I gently raised his head and wrapped him deeper in his blankets. He gurgled at me and some spittle dribbled down his mouth. Annette received him carefully and read his face. It was just a few seconds before he let out a blood curdling scream, it was as if he was being burned with hot coals. His face turned purple with his efforts. I wanted to immediately grab him from Annette but my husband insisted I sit down. The child continued to screech and wriggled like he wanted to desperately get away. Annette, truthfully speaking, was doing nothing wrong, she held him as any expert nanny would. She was calm and only monitored his reaction. She made no effort to comfort him either, for it appeared like she

thought he did not deserve it. When it became clear to my husband that Arnaud was not going to desist his crying he allowed me to retrieve him.

“You see *Monsieur*, the child has spoken,” said Annette quietly.

“No child has ever resisted your influence Madame. I cannot contemplate why Arnaud should be any different. I find it strange and disconcerting.”

I worried that my husband would suspect something. It did not sit well with him when he realised that Arnaud was not taking to Annette.

“*Madame*...you have not seen anything...or know something of my son?” he asked wearily.

My heart pattered within my throat. He sensed we were keeping a secret from him.

Annette smiled reassuringly and replied, “*Monsieur*, I told your wife everything concerning your son. She would not have failed to tell you anything you needed to know. If you cannot trust me, you must trust your wife.”

I touched my husband’s arm and gazed up at him imploringly. “My dear, I assure you, there is nothing sinister going on. *Madame* Annette was perfectly open with me.”

He watched my face and finally relented. My stomach unchurned itself and I hid the relief I felt.

“Perhaps *Madame* is right, we should part from the old ways and embrace the new. My darling wife is an affectionate mother. I am being pedantic.”

I sat erect on the chair in triumph and I dared *Madame* Annette to defy me. She had no desire to do so, she shook her head tiredly and walked away.

Arnaud was pure *charme*, his nursemaid adored him as did everyone else. He was a mother’s pride. I could see that he had his grandfather’s looks with his dimple and rakish smile. It was perceivable even as a baby. When I brought him from the nursery all the women would dote on him. They did not call him *chéri* out of politeness, as many a person is obliged to do when they see a baby, no matter how ugly it is. There are some mothers who should just hide their children in the nursery, it would be a public service. He truly was adorable. Marie-Françoise Vaganay princesse de Bénévent even declared she would willingly marry her little girl to such a handsome boy. We discussed the prospect of marriage as it would be a useful alliance. I was already ensuring the political future of my son. The prophecy of that *sorcière* was nothing more than superstitious, licentious dribble. My fears receded as I watched my son grow. Except, I did not breast feed him as I had aimed. As soon as I had regained my health, I was eager to feed him myself and dismissed the wet-nurse. In the beginning it was sweet, he was extremely demanding and fed himself quite vigorously. Yet as he grew older, the process

became more uncomfortable and painful. He tried to bite rather than suck and I was bruised from feeding. I left the responsibility to another wet-nurse. She complained profusely but necessity forced her to tolerate the situation, however, I knew he had to be weaned quickly.

Arnaud had deep blue eyes, the colour of a stormy ocean and he watched everything intently. He learned very quickly and was walking and babbling before most of the children of his age. He was strong too and did not often cry like most babies. He would topple and fall and get up without thinking too much about it. When he hurt himself he did not seek my comfort. He cried sometimes when he could not get his way and I would always give in as I did not like to see him upset.

There were a few instances, but it was the behaviour typical of a two-year old boy.

“*Madame*, please, your son! He seems to delight in slapping me and tries to bite me!” cried his nursemaid. “He refuses to listen!”

“Has he hurt you?”

“No *Madame*.”

“Then why are you complaining?”

“Because *Madame*, it is not good and he does not listen...”

“Should he listen to a servant?”

“*Pardon Madame?*”

“I said should a nobleman of his birth be brought up to obey the orders of servants?”

“I...er...”

She had to answer very carefully.

“No, *Madame*”

It was not long before she resigned from her position. Arnaud could not keep nurse-maids for long. It was not surprising as this rustic back-water could hardly produce an adequate nursemaid. My husband still hinted that I should consider *Madame* Annette but I retorted that I would rather stay in the nursery myself.

She came unexpectedly when Arnaud was three years old and just learning to speak. I was about to visit him in the nursery, when I heard a scream and then silence. I rushed to the door and burst into the room.

Annette was standing the middle of the nursery caressing a traumatised cat. She stared piercingly at Arnaud. He was on the verge of tears but held them back. He looked frightened, I had never seen him with such an expression on his face.

“*Bonjour, Madame. I see the Petite Monsieur takes great pleasure in tormenting animals and nursemaids, n'est-ce pas?*”

“How did you get in here?”

“I have stayed in this *château* longer than you Madame, I know my way around,” she replied while still glaring at Arnaud.

“Where is the nurse?”

“She ran.”

I swallowed. “Are you here at the request of my husband?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“I was concerned for the safety of the cat and the nursemaids.”

“Do you plan on being his nursemaid?”

“This *monstre ? Jamais!*”

“How dare you insult my child! You’re one to talk. He is a typical rambunctious three old. He is just an *enfant*.”

“*Vraiment ?*”

“Yes.”

“Mmmm. Then that excuses everything. He is young so we must forgive him. You are indeed patient *Madame*. I am not as kind.”

I ignored the cold sarcasm. “Children are sensitive. They need kindness and understanding. You can damage a child if you are too ruthless or neglectful. Parents have to be more conscious of their wants.”

“*Excusez-moi, Madame, I forgot I am not a mother so who am I to say? I came to see that is all*”

Arnaud had been watching Annette the whole time. He was too intimidated to move so I quickly crossed the room and picked him up. I kissed him on the brow and smoothed his hair. He nuzzled his head into my shoulder.

“You terrify him!” I retorted.

“Someone must. We all must fear something at least. It keeps our baser instincts in check.”

“You are more qualified to raise animals than children.”

“Then, Francois marquis de Mazarin is an animal, *oui*?”

“Humph!”

“I am not here to argue *Madame*, I am here to observe. The nursemaids were complaining. I came, I saw and I understand. I shall take the cat with me. It will be safer. I would remove the canary from the room as well.”

“I do not believe in your filthy prophecy.”

“Ah! I am devastated. For all our sakes *Madame*, may you prove me horribly wrong. That aside, are you with child?”

My body jumped slightly in surprise. “Am I?”

“*Oui*! it is a *la fille*!”

“A girl? I did not even realise it yet.”

“You soon will.” She then walked past me and Arnaud’s eyes followed her as she left the room. He would not let me go. It was the first time he had ever sought comfort from me.

Annette had spoken the truth and I realised I was pregnant. I was glad it was a girl as I had longed for one even though I adored Arnaud. I did not even wait for Francois to tell me to see Annette, I quickly summoned her to the *château* once the doctor had confirmed my condition. She was reluctant to come and I had to resort to bribery. I made sure that Arnaud was kept away and under the strict supervision of his new nanny whom I had imported from Paris. He had been a bit more settled of late, but I did not want to examine the reason why.

Annette shuffled her way into her room with her rags dragging behind her.

“I find myself here, *Madame*, much to my displeasure. However, I am not above a bribe.

How would you like me to lie this time?”

“I don’t need you to lie I would like to know.”

“My prophecies are lies according to you *Madame*. Therefore, I am here to lie once more.”

I was irritated by her arrogance. “Tell me about the baby girl.”

“She will be nothing like her brother if that is what worries you.”

“My son is wonderful.”

“Of course.”

“*Continuez s'il vous plaît*”

Annette sighed, “She will be a *jolie fille* and as sweet as *bon bon*! It will easy to find *les époux*. That is all she needs, no?”

“Is that all?”

“To be married is all a woman requires. Why do you look so dissatisfied *Madame*? It is good news”

“You are keeping something from me.”

“*C'est terrible !* Why would I keep *le secret* from *Madame*?”

“Because you would.”

“Ah, *Madame* knows me too well. You have enough burdens, why seek to know the worst?”

“*Dis-le !*”

“*Très bien!* If you insist *Madame*. I fear she will be in great danger. He will be an enormous threat.”

“*La absurdité !* Why would Arnaud ever hurt his sister?”

“If she was an only child there would be no need for this discussion.”

“*Vieille sorcière !* You and your tricks!”

“I’m a witch and a trickster? Yet you still seek my advice.”

“This...will not happen.”

“As you say *Madame*, you are the mother.”

I gave birth to Marcelle-Jeanne de Marazin nine months later. There were no complications. She was bright and healthy and so was I. Although Francois would have liked a second boy, he was delighted with Marcelle. How could one not be? Except for Arnaud. He did not like all the attention the new baby was receiving. I immediately had to address the situation and had his nurse bring him to my room. Marcelle lay sweetly in my arms. She would be pretty, as Annette said. He walked tentatively over to the bed dressed in his pale silk coat and lace. I invited him to climb up next to me. He straddled onto the high feather bed and crawled up to me. He watched me with his stormy eyes as his black curls frosted his forehead.

“*Mère ?*” he said.

My heart broke when I heard him. All the fear he felt about being forgotten was encompassed in that one word. I put my arm gently around him.

“Arnaud, *chéri*, look what *mère* wants to show you! Here is your sweet sister. You must help *mère* take care of her. See, hold her little hand. It is soft. She looks like you *n'est-ce pas?*”

He stroked her small hand which was curled around his. He examined her for a long time with neither affection or dislike as far as I could tell. Arnaud had made up his mind and he

smiled at her and whispered her name lovingly. He glanced back at me to show he was pleased. That woman was wrong as she was about everything. She was wrong about my son. He had only love in his eyes.

Arnaud's nurse came running to me with a horrified expression and frantically ranted about the bird.

"*Madame, Madame! C'est terrifiant !* He strangled it! *Décédé !*"

"What?"

"He killed it with my embroidering thread *Madame!*"

"Who killed it?"

"*Le petite Monsieur, Madame!*"

"You speak nonsense!"

"I wish I were, *Madame!* Please come quickly."

I pushed back my chair away from the *secrétaire* and followed the girl to the nursery. I found Arnaud gazing at the bird's body in his hand. He was poking it gently as he sat on the carpet. I rushed over to him my skirts spreading like wings which hid his shame from the nurse. I knelt beside him.

"*C'est magnifique !* Look *mère!*" He was proud of his accomplishment. I felt a deep rip in the heart of my emotional contentment. A dreadful realisation was stabbing me, trying to kill the confidence of my hopes. I tore the feeling from myself and knew he was still young. He did not know what he was doing.

"*Chéri*, this is not something to be proud of. The bird is dead. It is very sad. It is even more sad that you were the cause of it."

"Why *mère*? I had to know. It tried to live but couldn't." He spoke as if he were referring to the completion of an interesting experiment.

"We do not play with life, Arnaud. It is weaker than us, it is our responsibility to protect such things."

"We must protect birds?"

"*Oui!* And other creatures as well. Anything that is not as strong as us deserves our protection."

"But *père* kills animals all the time for fun."

“That is different.”

“How?”

“They have a fighting chance at least.”

“With lots of dogs, guns and horses all chasing them?”

“They can still run.”

“If they run then it is all right?”

“No...that is not what I meant.”

“I don’t understand.”

I struggled to answer this question myself. I was never partial to the practice of hunting, a part of me did find it barbaric, yet men found some thrill in it.

“I cannot explain it fully myself *chéri*, but this bird was under our protection. It relied on us, we had a duty to keep it safe. It was very very wrong of you to kill it. You must ask God to forgive your sins. Come, let us go and bury it together and offer some prayers.”

I took the bird from him and coaxed him to follow me. The nursemaid was peeping from behind the door. I told Arnaud to go to his father and ask for a box of some sought. He liked the idea of having a burial.

He scampered past us and I turned on the maid.

“*Tu imbéciles*, it was your responsibility to watch him. How could you let this happen?”

“But *Madame*...”

“I do not want your excuses. It is your fault.”

“I should have listened to *Madame Annette*...”

“*Quelle?* And what did that witch have to say? Hmm?”

“She...she warned me *Madame*.”

“Oh?”

“She told me I should not work here.”

“I see. Do you wish leave then?”

“Er...no *Madame*...it’s just..”

I knew she wouldn’t leave, the pay was too good. And I also suspected that she had caught the attention of Francois. I saw that she sported some expensive little trinkets which were far beyond her own means to buy and the surreptitious glances she would throw my husband when she thought I was not looking. She was a Paris minx for sure, yet she had stayed longer than her counterparts. She was cheeky too.

“Yes?”

“I thought *Madame*...”

“Congratulations. I hope it was not too straining for you.”

“*Merci, Madame.*”

Since she had the gall to sleep with my husband I thought I had at least the privilege to insult her in public. It took all the pleasure out of it when she had not the intelligence to appreciate the offence.

“*Madame*, was extremely calm with *petite monsieur*. Should he have not received *la fessée* ?”

“I do not hit children. And I should hope you would do the same.”

“Of course, of course. But my *mère* would have given me such *la fessée* I would not have been able to sit for a very long time. I remember when I was just a *petite fille* my mother caught me kissing a boy. She gave my *le cul* and mouth such a whacking, *Madame*! I’ll never forget it!”

“And look how well you learnt from that situation!”

“Yes *Madame*! I never looked at a man until I was seventeen.”

After the incident, I took prestigious care with Arnaud’s education. I hired the best tutors and exposed him to modern philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau. I wanted him to understand the necessity of morality and trained him in both Catholicism and Protestantism. I let him read whatever intrigued him. He was curious by nature and relished in all sorts of knowledge. Francois could not stop bragging about how clever his son was. He was eager to teach Arnaud how to hunt. He was not yet nine years old yet he was obsessed with the idea. I did not want to give my consent as I was afraid by what he would be exposed to. Eventually, I had to capitulate as Francois and Arnaud persisted. I became too tired to refuse. Arnaud excelled on the hunting field, he would bring home plenty of game. Francois recounted one of the hunting expeditions:

“He loves the chase, you should see his horsemanship! *Sensationnel* ! Never far behind the hounds. Ha! Ha! I don’t know whether I should find this disturbing or if it just young curiosity, but one day he described the thrill he had when he saw a pack of hounds tear apart a young rabbit.”

“*Ça suffit!*” I exclaimed, “not at dinner, Francois!”

When I watched Arnaud with Marcelle I lost all fear. He was kind and gentle and I had hope that she would bring out the best in him. She was my *bon bon*, my delight. He was holding her hand as she toddled beside him as he pointed out the various flowers in the garden. He

placed a daisy in her hair. I seldom saw such affection from him, even as his mother. I wished he would express himself more. He was mature for his age, but I found this bothersome. He lacked that childish *la naïveté*. Marcelle danced and chased after a butterfly which caught her eye and Arnaud ambled over to me as I sat upon a blanket. I smiled at him from over my needlework and patted the area next to me. He sat down with his legs stretched out in front of him and began to meticulously pick off the seeds which were stuck to his stockings.

“*Mère!*”

“Hmmm, *chéri?*”

“Does *père* love you?”

I laughed and replied, “Of course he does!”

Arnaud remained silent for a few moments as he picked off the last few seeds from his clothes. Without looking at me he murmured, “I don’t think he does.”

I stopped my embroidering and dropped it to my lap in astonishment. I gazed at Arnaud and exclaimed, “How can you say such a thing Arnaud? To your own mother no less!”

I did not like his expression. The corner of his mouth edged gently into a smile. It looked innocent at first, but his eyes revealed that it hid a thousand secrets. Arnaud took pleasure in my distress. He wanted to tell me something purely to watch how much pain it would give me.

“I saw *père* doing something.”

“Oh?”

“He was with my nursemaid. They were very excited about something. He kept on saying, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you’ and she screamed, ‘Yes *Monsieur!* Yes *Monsieur!*’ It sounded like lots of fun, *mère*. *Mère? Mère!* Is something wrong?”

I was extremely pale. My strength was ripped from me and I placed my hand on the ground to steady my balance.

“*Le souillon ! Le sot ! L’imbécile ! Le crétin ! Le perversi sexuel !*” I ranted in my head. I felt hatred towards my husband, not for his sexual sins, but for the way he had conducted himself. He behaved little better than a filthy, hormonal peasant. And to display his uncouth romp in front of our son! The fool was destroying everything I was working so hard to save.

“Monsieur Francois-Charles L’Fayette marquis de Mazarin!” I purred dangerously into my husband’s ear as he sat at his desk in the library. His body tensed up into stone. He knew what it meant when I addressed him with his full name and title.

“My love...what is the matter *chéri*?” he stammered. He glanced at me sheepishly to see how much trouble he was in. The life left his face when he saw mine for he tasted what it might be like to meet a demon who wants to tear apart your soul at the entrance to hell. The Spanish inquisition would show him more mercy.

“*Ayez pitié de ma chère femme !*” he squeaked.

“Have mercy on a pig like you, Francois?” I seethed.

“I do not know what I have done wrong, Angelique!”

“Ah! Then why do we not play a little guessing game, Francois? Since you are so fond of them.”

“Er...”

“Think faster Francois. You do not want me to lose my temper.”

“My mistress has been asking for too much money?”

“*Non.*”

“I embarrassed you in front of your friends?”

“*Non.*”

“I cannot think *chéri*! I have been on my utmost best behaviour.”

“*La nurse!* You *imbécile!*”

“You knew about that?”

“Francois, you should know by now that I am not as *stupide* as you.”

“She was hard to resist. It was just a *petite affaire d'amour.*”

“I don’t care who you have an affair with, Francois. Only that you carry it out in discretion without the whole world to see.”

“*Oui!* How ignorant of me! That is what concerns you. Your *réputation publique !* The fact your husband is having an affair is merely secondary. Who knows? It is probably one of the last things on your mind.”

“Francois, I don’t have time to worry about your *les plaisirs sexuels.*”

He laughed deeply and bitterly. I could not understand his reaction. I made sure never to interfere in his sex life. That was his personal domain.

“Angelique, *mon cher*, can you not be like other wives and show some jealousy? Hmmm? Even if it is merely for the sake my pride? You pass me onto other woman so easily.”

“*C'est impossible!* You want me to behave like a silly little girl who does not want to share her toys? Most men want their wives to mind their own business, *mais vous mon cher mari*, wants me to throw a little tantrum so you can feel good about yourself? Would that stop you? *Non*, it will only make me look foolish. You have had my full devotion, Francois, what more do you want? I have been faithful.”

“And that is all I have had. I see you fail to understand my meaning. How did I embarrass you, *mon cher?*”

“You should keep your animalistic tendencies out of the house, *Monsieur*. Apparently, our son saw everything. I dread to think how his innocent mind has been affected.”

“He has to grow up some time and face reality. The sooner the better.”

“He is eight, *Monsieur*. Next time limit your antics to the stables.”

“It was in the stables, *mon cher*. He has an insatiable curiosity, a sign of a healthy mind I should think. If you are worried I will talk to him.”

“*Oui*, should I drag a lover in here as well and put on a show for Marcelle and discuss it over tea? I see, so that is how we educate our children.”

“That is different, she is a girl.”

“Of course! I forget, she is a fragile girl. A boy is born to handle the grotesque. You do realise, Francois, that the maid has to leave? Don’t worry, I will make sure her substitute is pretty enough, you will hardly miss her.”

“You have a cruel tongue, *Madame*, but that will not be possible.”

“Are you that attached to her?”

“In a way, she is pregnant with my child.”

I should not be surprised, noblemen have always had *bâtard* children, I just never thought deeply enough about the possibility that Francois would have one. He was a stubborn fool and I knew he would never get rid of a child that was his own. When he told me, I saw that he wanted to hurt me with the news. Francois was to be disappointed, it was just a new reality I would have to adapt to. I accepted it without any resistance. He wanted to keep an eye on the child, so it would be housed at the *château*. He suggested that I become its mother. I refused this request. I would not take a child from its mother. Francois could raise the child where and how he liked, but I would have no part of it. I would not treat it inhumanely and do as he requested, but I would not be its mother. Francois had always been a gentleman, yet I had offended him in a way I could not help. I would not lose my composure to satisfy his ego. Let his mistress be jealous, I would keep my dignity.

The months passed and Arnaud started to ask more questions which I was loath to answer. I found I could only be truthful, Arnaud had seen too much already and he was too intelligent a child to deceive.

“*Mère, père*, says I am to have another sibling, but it is not your baby.”

“That’s right.”

“It belongs to my nurse?”

“Yes. Arnaud, why are you asking me this? Your father told you all that you needed to know.”

“So, he does not love you, *mère*?”

“Ask your *père* that question. He will give you a more accurate answer.”

“Does he still love me?”

“Of course! Whatever happens, Arnaud, you need not doubt your father’s love for you.”

“I see. Does that mean I will still inherit all that *père* has?”

“You are the eldest son. It is your birth-right.”

“What about the new baby? Could it take it all away?”

“No, never. It will be even less of a threat if it is a girl.”

“So, a boy can be a threat?”

“I assure no baby can be a threat to you, Arnaud. You will hurt your head by thinking all these silly things. Your *mère* will take care that you are not cheated. I promise.”

“I don’t want another baby brother or sister. I am happy with just Marcelle.”

“I know, *chéri*, but that is not the way the world works.”

The nurse gave birth to a baby boy. Francois paid it lots of attention to spite me. The *la putain* cocked herself around like she owned the place. She revelled in her new position and Francois did attempt to reign in her audacity. I explained to Marcelle that she was a houseguest of her father, a distant relative who was visiting. She would be staying indefinitely. I stayed in one part of the *château* to allow her to be mistress of the rest. I avoided her with all possible human strength, but it was difficult when she went out of her way to find me. Francois allowed rumours to be spread about my condition. I even received a letter of condolence from his other mistress. Paris was aglow with gossip that I was sharing my house with a common whore and housemaid. My friends wrote me letters apologising for not visiting, but they did not want to be contaminated with that filth. They berated me for not

throwing her out. How could I let Francois behave in such a manner? I felt amused, not horrified. My life had become a terrible French Romance novel, a heroine who had become exposed to all manner of evil. I would not play the victim. I understood Francois's anger and the maid was an utter idiot who did not realise she was being used for his petty mind games. He wanted me to act the part of a jealous housewife. I would die smiling with my approval.

"Il est un idiot stupide" commented Annette, "give into it before he hurts himself further."

"You raised the *imbécile*." I remarked.

She had arrived to see the commotion at the *château*. I thought she would gloat with triumph at my predicament.

"Vous avez raison!" I cannot disagree. But, he is my idiot and I know his stupidity better than anyone. I could talk to him if you do not wish to pamper to his eccentrics."

"He is that afraid of you?"

"Oui."

"Non, merci. I will manage."

"That is not why I am concerned. Arnaud is not happy."

"I can take care of my own son."

"Oui, Madame. But the situation is sensitive."

"I appreciate your concern, but my family is my business."

She shrugged her shoulders, "Francois is a good man, except when his moments of stupidity get in the way of his common sense. You are intelligent enough to realise this, put this matter to rest as quickly as possible."

The little boy was dead. My heart was broken for the poor girl and Francois. He did love the baby. I did not want to imagine what life would be like if that had happened to me. The funeral was quiet except for the mother. The nursemaid stared at me with a deep hatred, she blamed me for her child's death. She screeched that I was a witch who had cursed her child. I was a cold-blooded murderer. Grief causes one to utter madness. I did not hold it against her, I was only embarrassed by the whole scene. She moaned and tore her hair and sobbed at the grave. She refused any comfort from Francois. It was his responsibility to protect his son. Annette watched from a distance and gazed long and hard at Arnaud. Marcelle was upset and cried her little heart out, although she did not fully understand what was occurring. She felt

very sorry for *père's* poor relative. Arnaud participated with the gravity that was expected of him. I could not get over the sensation that he was playing a part. He tugged my hand and looked up at me, "*Mère*, does this not remind you of the bird?" Annette watched me sadly and walked away.

I threw a jealous rage and ranted against the whore who was falsely spreading lies about me. I grabbed her by the hair and tossed her body onto the lawn.

"*Vous prostituez! La pute! La poufiasse !* You seduce my husband, spit at my kindness for tolerating a vermin such as yourself and you accuse me of witchcraft? I will have you sold to the nearest *maison de prostitution* ! I have no more patience. Find work on the street! Offer your body to those of your own social standing. Your only hold on the marquis is dead. A pleasurable moment which is forgotten when he sees the next milkmaid. Practise your craft well, *mademoiselle*, and never set foot in this place again. Those jewels which you so proudly wear, you stole them! Be grateful I do not have you arrested for thievery."

I tore the necklace from her throat and ripped the bracelet from her wrist. I gave her a hard slap across the face as the final blow.

She only wept and begged for forgiveness. I had left my body and was watching from elsewhere. There she stood, her ebony hair wild and dishevelled. A woman of terrifying beauty, if the devil had a wife this is what she would look like. Wolven-eyes ravenous for the blood of its prey. Her dress flapped against her with the elegance of a winged-bat in flight. And I saw the wisp of a girl, crumpled and forlorn. A motherless piece of flesh desperate to survive. I hated myself for being the cause. I did not want to see such a hopeless figure. She only lived as she knew how to and I really did not blame her for it. Someone always had to pay the price for jealousy and it was mostly the woman. I had lowered myself, I had become common. I would lose respect, but so be it. There is nothing a mother will not do for her son.

I had hope that Francois would show more compassion than I could give. I asked my *femme de chambre* what she had heard. She was too terrified to tell me at first, but I coaxed it out of her. Francois had provided her with some livelihood. Yet she had lost her most valuable commodity as a woman, her reputation. Francois was uncertain how to approach me. He

meekly came to my room one night. He crept in between the covers and tried to look as repentant as possible.

“Satisfied, *Monsieur*? Was I jealous enough for you?” I asked as I continued to read my book.

“*Vous étiez magnifique!*” he whispered delightedly.

“*Merci, Monsieur.*” I replied my voice thick with sarcasm. “I am glad I was able to get rid of your mistress for you.”

“*Quelle femme intelligente.* You were always the sharp one. She was boring me I admit, but my wife? No, it is always interesting. Hmmm? I mean there are not many women who can make their husband feel jealous of a book, no?”

I breathed, if only for a moment. There was no distorted behaviour from Arnaud. I wondered what part Marcelle had to play in that, they were very close. When I saw them together that was the only time I ever saw gentleness in him. I treated him with love and kindness, yet I always felt a subtle contempt in his words for me. He was a son enough to make any parent proud. He was extremely intelligent, athletic and handsome. Francois raved about his fencing skills. Why was he so insistent on teaching him violence? Then again, I could not blame Francois, Arnaud would have found a way to learn. He was charming, a little too charming. He could manipulate any female who came into his presence. I barely admitted it to myself, but it felt far too much like seduction. It became blatant when compared to the charming innocence of Marcelle. I no longer held the high-esteem I once had among the locals. After the incident of the nursemaid, they were fearful of me. Rumours spread that I had been responsible for the baby’s death.

Annette sent me a note instructing me to dismiss one of the new kitchen maids. She was twelve. Little Amé. She was the cook’s niece and apprentice. I thought she was too pretty a thing to be a cook, but at least it was a respectable occupation. She worked hard and the staff only had words of praise for her. I saw no reason to dismiss her. The old hag was smelling a stench without realising it was only herself who stank. Annette appeared in my drawing room one evening, her eyes were packed with a million malignant words which she longed to spew out her mouth. I was taken aback, I had not seen her lose her composure before.

“You see, *Madame*? You see? You are to be congratulated on your first sacrificial lamb to the tyranny of that monster which you insisted on giving birth to!”

“*Silencieux!* Do you want the entire house to hear?” I shrieked in a whisper. I rushed to the door and checked to see if anyone was about and locked it. She tapped her cane on the floor.

“I have no idea of what you are talking. How dare you falsely accuse Arnaud! He is just fourteen years old. I won’t have you spreading lies.”

“Lies? *Sacrebleu!* Of course, *Madame*, I am so desperate to tarnish the reputation of your son that I would force a twelve-year-old girl to pretend she has been sexually assaulted. And to just add a bit of realism, I would give her bruises and injure her in all the right places. My cruelty knows no bounds, *Madame!*” Her voice was bitterly thick and the weight of hatred was suffocating.

“To...to...which girl are you referring?”

“Amé, the kitchen ‘slut’ you hired, *Madame.*”

I gasped and clutched the back of the chair to keep myself steady.

“Ah! Since you were so clever to catch out my lies *Madame*, let me tell you what happened. This saucy *fille* went out of her way to seduce your son. Between cleaning pots and pans from early in the morning and jumping at orders, from the cook to the butler, she found the time to obsesses over your son. She is twelve and therefore fully educated in coquetry! Her mother taught her well and your poor son never stood a chance *Madame!* One day she tricked the young master into making her run an errand for him. He wanted fresh milk squeezed from the cow, it still had to be warm, frothy with cream. She went to the cow shed, knowing that the poor Arnaud was following her luscious scent close behind. What could the poor boy do? He could not resist such wiles, and so he lost his virginity. We won’t mention hers as that might not have even existed. The little vixen then proceeded to wound herself so she could exploit the situation. Oh, such cunning *Madame!*”

I wanted to tear off my ears so I could no longer hear her vicious words. My Arnaud had been taught how he should treat young ladies. I was particular that he followed the rules of a gentlemen, I watched the way he treated Marcelle. His father, while unscrupulous in his behaviour towards women, he would never take anyone against her will. He promised me that he had spoken about all those “manly” habits. This creature had to be lying. It had to be the girl. Even if it was not, it still had to be her. Amé’s faun-like expression flittered its way into my head, but I had to chase it away. I wrenched a laugh out of my stomach. It was the sound of denial, fear, disappointment and cruelty. I drowned my sense of sympathy with my voice, I could only be a mother to my child. Amé was not mine.

Annette watched calmly waiting for my insanity to cease. She understood I was not mocking her, that I was only adjusting to the news.

“It was probably some rough-play of the farm-help. Peasants will use any opportunity to get something out of their masters.”

“*Oui Madame!*. He must have been a very rich farm boy, that, or he stole the young marquis’s clothes.”

“You saw?”

“I saw enough to confirm he was guilty, but too little to actually put a stop to it.”

“If you predict things so accurately why did you not stop him?”

“I am not God, *Madame*, I cannot predict every minute detail, the ‘wheres’ and the ‘whens’. Sometimes it’s a sense of what should not be, a brief vision. There are many things beyond my control. I did warn you, but I had no control over how you would handle that information.”

“Are you blaming me?”

“No. It was a strange request with nothing but my superstition to support it. I find if a person chooses to sin they will find a way. Even God knows interference can only go so far. We are creatures with a free will after all.”

I could not be bothered with her lecturing, I was interested in only one thing. “Does anybody else know?”

“Only the girl’s mother and I know. The mother is aware Amé was violated but not by whom. Your son can be very persuasive, she refuses to reveal his name. She’s smart enough to realise her word is nothing against a young male noble. If you were to believe her then maybe....”

“That is well! Please pass my condolences onto the family. I will provide a gift and ensure that the girl finds a proper place in another household. I will inform my husband of the terrible crime and he will be sure to bring the villain to justice.”

“*Merci*, now that is a comfort! Amé is paid for her services. Shall I send her to a brothel?”

“I meant no such thing. I was compensating her for her suffering.”

“*Excusez-moi*, I misunderstood.”

“You are to tell no one, Annette. The marquis de Mazarin will not be pleased if any scandal were to surface about his son.”

“He is to suffer no consequences?”

“He is a young boy, he still does not understand many things. It was a dreadful mistake, which I’m sure he will regret. Now, do I have your word?”

“*Oui, Madame.* I am bound to this family, my belief in the matter is beside the point. However, *Madame*, I am to be granted one privilege, whether you agree to it or not. I have refrained from interfering in the raising of your children, despite my right to do so. You know your husband will support me on this. I insist I become Marcelle’s nanny and that you allow me to speak to your son.”

“What? I don’t want you anywhere near Marcelle”

“Raise her as you will, *Madame.* Keep her current nanny, I just must hold the position. I will stay in my old room. I wish to observe her education, not participate. She will not fear me.”

I knew I had no choice, she had a sway with Francois that could never be overcome. I hated her for that. She would be there, in my home. I silently gave in.

“I look forward to working for you, *Madame* and may I congratulate you on your son’s initiation into manhood.”

She moved in and I was not even aware of it. Nobody could specifically say where she stayed in the *château*. Annette was around, a presence which was hard to forget. Arnaud disliked it while Marcelle ignored it and treated Annette as an invisible servant. I imagined things would be far worse, with the old *sorcière* breathing down my neck and constantly staring at me with condescension. I thought her aura would be more evil. Something changed in Arnaud, not really a character change, but he became extremely cautious and somewhat morose. He was more respectful towards me, even though that respect was grudgingly bestowed. Arnaud asked that I dismiss Annette, but I replied that it was beyond my power and that he must consult his father. Apparently, he had already tried.

I once tried to confront Arnaud about the Amé saga, I wanted to affirm that he had some sense of regret.

“You do know Arnaud, you can never force a woman to have...relations with you.” Arnaud was enjoying my discomfort.

“Are you referring to Amé? It was bound to happen to her sometime, rather sooner or later, no?”

“Arnaud!”

“Don’t look so squeamish, *mère*! She thought it was all a game...in the beginning. It was an interesting education for both of us.”

Shock disabled me from speaking.

“To be frank, I felt it could have been more exciting, more *emballant* ? I had higher expectations for my first sexual interlude. Perhaps, you are right, it is better if both parties enjoy it. I think the fun lies in the seduction. I believe we were both disappointed by our first experiences, *mère*.”

“Arnaud! And this is your conclusion? What about the girl? Have you no feelings?”

“I expressed my feelings very clearly on the subject, *mère*. What girl? She is now a woman.”

Annette found me in my favourite garden doing some embroidery. She sat in a chair next to me and watched the nature around us. She often would start a conversation by just talking to herself and wait for a reaction from her audience as she babbled.

“*Comme c’est beau!* Lovely things were created to be enjoyed by the *imbécile* and the genius. We are both awed by what has only been truly accomplished in nature. I see *Mademoiselle* Marcelle and *Monsieur* Arnaud are out site- seeing. They must keep away from the peasant dwellings it will spoil the view. It is a pity that *Monsieur* Arnaud inherited your families’ intelligence, it would have been put to better use in *Mademoiselle* Marcelle. She has the looks of your family and the mind of a de Marazin. *C’est dommage!* They are very close those two, Arnaud especially. He is very fond his sister. Very fond indeed. It is not a fondness I admire.”

“Are you insinuating something, Annette?”

“I talk *Madame*, you interpret the words.”

“I am obliged to interpret something very sordid.”

“We are in a sordid situation, *Madame*.”

“Your son is now eighteen and will be given many responsibilities.”

“He will have to wait till he is twenty-one”.

“He is not the type to wait.”

“Arnaud has not caused trouble since...well then.”

“More or less. I have given you the peace I could *Madame*, but things will change. He has his eye on a village girl, Bernice, daughter of a blacksmith. She is engaged, but she finds the

attentions of *Monsieur Arnaud irrésistible*. I warned her but the young always disdain the opinions of the old. I suggest you keep a watch, *Madame*.”

I took her warning to heart this time. I could not afford mistakes.

“She bears a strong resemblance to Marcelle, *Madame*.”

“Is that so?”

“Does your husband still enjoy the hunt, *Madame*?”

“You are quick to change the topic.”

“You are slow to answer the question, *Madame*.”

“*Oui*, it is still his favourite past-time.”

“I told him to quit. You should do the same.”

“He’s always listened to you. What did he say?”

“He called me superstitious. He thinks you made me do it. The marquis knows you have never liked hunting.”

“I’ve never tried to stop him.”

“You should try. I will run out of time soon.”

“Well, you are old enough to be dead.”

I did not ignore her warnings, I vigorously investigated Bernice and I had servant spy on Arnaud. I felt like a despicable mother for spying on my own son, but I wanted to prevent him from sinning further. Arnaud and Bernice were certainly involved in nightly escapades of passion. The woman did not object. He was having the usual *la liaison amoureuse*, just like his father. I prayed it would remain as innocent as that. As for Francois, the more I tried to dissuade him from hunting the more passionate he became about it. He insisted that I saw him as an old man and wanted to prove to me that he was just as healthy and virile as ever. I argued, pleaded, threatened and claimed he loved his horse more than me. He only took offense and would go out hunting immediately. I decided to keep quiet to see if he would cut down on his hunting excursions. He, however, was just too delighted to prove how wrong I was up to the point of death. He died a very healthy man. His horse stopped abruptly when it refused to jump a fence and Francois took a dive, breaking his neck in the process.

I mourned for my husband, whatever our disputes, we had shared a life together. Never the perfect company, but company none the less. Marcelle was truly devastated, she missed her

père awfully. Arnaud and I comforted her as best we could. Arnaud was now the new Marquis de Mazarin, but he had yet to reach the age of majority. The estates would fall under my jurisdiction until he came of age. How was he struck by his father's death? I could tell he was pleased by the convenience of it but displayed the appropriate emotions in public. He discarded them when he was with me. I thanked Heaven that I would be dead at my funeral and would not be exposed to the mockery of his sincerity. Arnaud was irritated that I stood between him and his financial freedom. Annette was saddened by the passing of Francois. She disappeared for a few days to who knows where, when she returned she was resigned to his death and that he had suffered the inevitable fate of all men.

Death visited me once more. I had kept a close eye on the blacksmith's daughter, but with the death of Francois I became distracted. I was tired from estate affairs and slowly made my way to my chamber. There was a weight upon me which crushed me as I came closer to my door. Strange muffled sounds came from the room, I waited a few seconds and opened a small crack in the door. On my bed, I saw the back of Arnaud and a woman's feet were struggling beneath him. I charged into the room and screamed at him, "Stop! What are you doing? Stop I say." He ignored me and gripped the throat of Bernice. She struggled for her life and gaped for air. I threw myself on Arnaud to pull him off, he easily shoved me out the way. I was about to charge at him again but he snapped her neck before I could act. Bernice's body lay lifeless and he breathed heavily above it. Arnaud turned his head to me and smiled, threads of his black hair hanging over his face. His cheek had a scratch on it. I collapsed on the floor, desperate to find breath. Bernice's dead eyes stared at me begging for mercy. A trickle of blood dribbled out the side of her mouth. I loathed the monster before me, he forced an image upon me beyond the realm of nightmares. He gradually lifted himself off the body and sat on the edge of the bed with his hands on his knees.

"Why?" I asked.

"She was to become a problem. She was pregnant."

"What? So you killed your..."

"It was still the early stages of the pregnancy, hardly a matter of concern."

"*Et bien ? Et bien ?* I don't understand. Why are you doing this? To me? Your family?"

“I abhor the fact that I am still under your control. I don’t want to be accountable to you for the next three years. It was satisfying to imagine it was you I was strangling. I came to the room in which no one would look. I also liked the idea of someone dying on your bed.”

“Why not just kill me then instead of the poor girl?”

“That would be too easy, *mère*. I want you to be part of this. I want you to share this memory with me.”

“You’re completely demented! *Un démon !*” Before he could reply he stopped and stared at the door. His eyes held a glint of fear. There stood Annette, still as a stone. She silently closed the door and turned to face Arnaud.

“So, marquis Arnaud-Gaston de Mazarin, you have grown up.” She looked at the body and turned her gaze upon him. “I was too late again.”

“I think you were right on time,” he replied.

Annette helped me up from the floor. We never took our eyes off Arnaud as he casually adjusted his clothes.

“So, *mère*, I can trust you to clean this up?”

He stood up straight, brushed himself off and walked out.

His punishment was cruel indeed. He knew I could never let him get caught. I was his mother. I became an accomplice to his madness. His blood became my blood. He wanted me to see him as the devil he was and live with the knowledge that he was my son.

“Why does he despise me so, Annette?”

“Arnaud hates that you come between him and what he desires. You prevent him from his ultimate goals, whatever that may be.”

“How? I have done nothing but love and protect him.”

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head mournfully.

“I wish I had all the answers you seek. My visions served no purpose. It is a tragedy.”

“I must insist that you help me, Annette.”

“I suggest, *Madame*, you let him be held accountable for his crime.”

“I cannot. He is my son. I must think of my family, how would Marcelle feel if she knew her brother was a killer? No. There is no debate. You must help me hide the body.”

“Very well. I am bound to assist the head of the family, which is you at the moment. There is a secret room in this *château*, *Madame*. A hidden tomb of the family. We can hide the body there. That room has a magical key. Only one key can open it and no other can be cut. The lock can never be removed. Only a member of the de Mazarin household may enter. The head

of the de Mazarin household owns the key and should another family member enter the room without his or her consent their blood will remain on the key until the master cleans it off.” Annette reached into the neck of her dress and pulled out a golden key on a chain, she took it off and passed it to me. I received it with trembling hands. We would have to drag the body ourselves at the dead of night to the secret tomb.

I spent the conventual year in mourning, but I became restless and craved society. I hated the *château*. It was a keeper of secret sins. There was a hole in me, I needed human society beyond that of Marcelle and the house servants. If the locals distrusted me before, it had now turned to a deep resentment. They were aware that Bernice was involved with the young marquis. I was held responsible for her disappearance and I was even accused of murdering my own husband. I was nicknamed *La Sorcière Bleue*. Arnaud joined the French Royal Army and fought in the various European conflicts which plagued history at the time. He thrived on the battlefield and was a renown soldier. A true French hero. He travelled to Italy, Austria, Hungary, the German principalities, Russia, Turkey and one or two French colonies. Annette remarked one day to me, “Well, *Madame*, you can console yourself with the knowledge that he has found a way to legally kill and rape as he pleases. No one asks questions in times of war.”

I wanted Marcelle to experience the world as she had been too protected in the countryside. She was fourteen when Francois died, at sixteen she was old enough for society. I worried how she would survive Parisian court society with its strict fashion rules and somewhat ridiculous etiquette. Madame de Pompadour had brought in the rococo designs and fashions. A dress could not be worn more than twice to court and it was important to master fashion otherwise you would be an outcast. You must have a sharp wit, you had to learn the flirtation language of the fan and have the grace of a fairy when dancing. I possessed all these qualities naturally, Marcelle had to be taught and she was not always a quick learner, yet she endured without complaint. She was preparing for her debut in society and Annette was of the opinion that she should find a husband quickly. Marcelle had enough honey to attract the bear. She had a fine inheritance from both me and my late husband. I wanted to give

Marcelle as much freedom of choice regarding her future husband as possible. There were certain boundaries, he had to be of the same social standing or higher and he could not be bankrupt.

“*Mère! Mère!* I have to confess otherwise I will just burst” called Marcelle as she charged into my *bureau* while I was writing at my desk. We were living at the family residence in Paris. I stopped writing and slipped my quill into its placement slot.

“*Oui?*”

“*Je suis amoureux!*” she exclaimed.

“In love? I see. And who is the lucky man?”

“*Monsieur* Jacque comte de Lorraine-Lillebonne”

I paused to run this man’s history over in my head. His family was not as ancient as ours nor did it have the political connections which some would have regarded as necessary. They possessed a vast amount of land in the north and his father was a war hero. The comte was a well-known libertine. I was surprised he would fall for the girlish innocence of Marcelle, although the marriage would give him the political connections that he lacked. Not exactly social equals, but he was popular and well-liked among the nobility. I already knew of her affair and had approved of it long before. I feigned ignorance and let her enjoy the magic of her love conspiracy.

“I take it you have been flirting behind my back, writing love letters, meeting secretly at balls and the opera? That is very scandalous, Marcelle! Encouraging a man like that! Did I not teach you anything?” I scolded.

Marcelle blushed and locked her gaze on the point of her shoes. She did not deny my accusations. I sighed and drummed my fingers on the table.

“Does *Monsieur* Jacque having any intention of introducing himself or will he continue to skulk about like a *voluer*? *Mon Dieu!* What is the world coming to?”

“You will see him, *mère?*”

“You have left me little choice. You do realise he is a hopeless libertine?”

“He declared he had never been in love before till he met me. He was desperately searching.”

“Ah! That is what they all say. May he be as sincere as you believe him to be.”

Marcelle and the comte certainly had an affection for one another and both the families agreed to the union. I was anxious to have the wedding completed before Arnaud returned to France. Annette and I knew he would object to Marcelle’s marriage. The Lorraine-Lillebonnes wanted a grand and pompous affair which was taking far too long to arrange. He

returned and now that he was of legal age he could be regarded as the head of the family. Arnaud was furious with me, accusing me of being a conniving witch by allowing his pure Marcelle to marry such a licentious man.

“At least he doesn’t murder his lovers and I believe you have had far more women than he has.”

“He is not worthy of Marcelle!” he fumed.

“Then who is? A duc? A prince? A king?”

“No man is!”

Annette recommended that the couple elope, but the scandal would be too mortifying.

Arnaud had tried several methods to try and break the engagement which would be deemed as socially acceptable, but events had gone too far. The news came tragically one evening as we were at supper. A footman delivered a note to me and I opened it as Marcelle chatted away. *Monsieur* Jacques comte de Lorraine-Lillebonne had been killed in a duel. My heart shrivelled and my grip tightened on the note.

“*Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas?* Is everything all-right?” asked Marcelle.

“I am afraid, *chéri*, I have some very bad news...”

A mysterious nobleman challenged the comte to a duel over a woman. *Monsieur* Jacques’s second said the challenge had no foundation and that his master was left with no choice but to defend his own honour. I did not need any investigation to tell me that Arnaud was responsible. I did not even knock as I entered his chamber as his valet was assisting with his dress. When he saw me enter he dismissed the servant and continued to admire his reflection.

“You have caused the misery of your sister, have you no shame?”

“I saved her from a hellish marriage. She will thank me in the end.”

“Shall I go and tell her so she can show her gratitude?”

“We both know you will not. I have been dissatisfied with the way you have managed things and I think you should retire from household affairs.”

“What?”

“Do not worry, *mère*, I am getting married. Your services will no longer be required.”

The young lady was *Mademoiselle* Eva Descombes, daughter of a silk merchant. A commoner. She was to become the new marquise de Mazarin. The humiliation. He was choosing the bride to shame me. He claimed it was for business connections as she was the

sole heir to her father's fortunes. I would have to give way to this peasant. Arnaud dragged Marcelle and me back to the countryside. We, in essence became his prisoners. Marcelle, while treated kindly was limited in who she could see. Not that I think she minded as she was still struck by grief. He moved me out of my main chambers to a doughty turret, furnished comfortably but away from the main activities of the household. I could move about freely and a was granted a small allowance. The message was clear, I had lost favour. *La Sorcière Bleue* had finally received her just deserts according to popular rumour. Annette decided to move in with me even though I complained it was too cramped. She ignored me.

"My embarrassment is complete, Annette, now I must live with a servant?"

"My motives are never questioned, *Madame*, and I have long been considered above a servant."

"What are you exactly?"

"An annoyance to your son."

"Humph. We no longer have power here, Annette. I am afraid he can do as he pleases."

"*Oui!* But we must remain vigilant. You never know when an opportunity may strike."

Mademoiselle Eva, now the marquise de Marazin, let everyone know her position. She would never let anyone forget she was a marquise. She held extravagant and wild parties at the *château*, it had never been this lively. Arnaud let her have her way. She dressed fashionably but without any taste. Expensive equalled fashionable. Marcelle was often left alone in her company as Arnaud travelled on business. He was most clever when it came to making money and his fortune was always growing. When Arnaud was at home he limited how much I could see Marcelle. He spread the word that I had become mentally unstable. He did not want Marcelle to be distraught by my condition. When he was abroad she came to see me often. Marcelle's one fault is that she never thought too deeply about things.

"That woman, *mère!* She is a chit! She has no class! I do not know what Arnaud sees in her."

"She has a beautiful fortune!" interjected Annette.

"Do not berate your *belle-sœur* so, she is now your close relative."

"Those parties are disgusting, *mère!* I attended once and these nasty men would not leave me alone. I am so happy that Arnaud forbade me from attending them."

"How thoughtful of him."

“I do not understand *mère*, you seem perfectly healthy to me. Why is Arnaud so worried? I try to explain it to him, but he insists you wanted to withdraw from society. Why do you live with a dirty servant?”

“This dirty servant is in the room,” commented Annette.

“Things are the way they are. Do not try to understand them, it will only make you sad.”

“If you say so, *mère*.”

“Such an obedient daughter, *Madame*, the ones that think are so troublesome...”

“Shhh Annette! No one asked for your opinion.”

Annette said that Arnaud would be wanting the key soon. I wondered how he knew about it and she stated that all heads of the family eventually found out about it. I clutched the key in the palm of my hand and declared he would have to get it over my dead body.

“I would not put that beyond him, *Madame*.”

“Is that why you moved in here?”

She did not answer, she did not have to.

“He will figure out a way to pry it from you, as long as you hold that key you will have some power over him.”

“I will not betray him. It could not be in safer hands. I am his mother.”

She disagreed with me with another stony silence.

“Your darling child, is coming to see you.”

A few minutes later, Arnaud entered the room and looked around in disgust.

“How are my two favourite hags? *Mère*, you certainly have come down, but you are now the *La Sorcière Bleue*. You have a new title to uphold.”

“What is that silly thing on your face, *Monsieur*? Are you trying to imitate the great Cardinal Richelieu with that ridiculous beard? Facial hair has long been out of fashion. It looks almost blue in this light. Should I call you *Barbe bleue*?” said Annette.

I tried to hold back a laugh. Arnaud had eccentric but good taste. He was more imposing with the beard, but still just as handsome, but “Bluebeard” was a funny name.

“I have no time for the jabberings of an old witch. I am here to discuss business with my *mère*.”

“*Monsieur Barbe bleue*, your business, your mother’s business is all my business.”

“Then you must be aware of the key that is rightfully mine.”

“*Oui!*”

“Then I demand you give it to me.”

“I gave it to your mother.”

“*Mère*, your son wants something of you.”

“*Non.*”

“*Quelle est la cruauté!*”

“I do not think you know the definition of cruelty,” I retorted.

“*Vous n'avez pas raison.* I have cruelty down to an art form. In fact, I prepared a demonstration for you. There is a lovely young peasant girl, only thirteen. I learnt many interesting things on my travels and I look forward to seeing her different expressions of pain.”

“*Vous dépouilliez le bâtard!*” I screeched.

He laughed and replied, “The irony of a mother calling her son a bastard.”

“Too much of a complement if you ask me,” muttered Annette.

“Will you let her go if I give you the key?”

“*Oui!*”

“How do I know you speak the truth?”

“Have I ever lied to you, *mère*?”

He had never lied to me, even when I wished he had, but this circumstance was different.

“Do not worry, *Madame*, *Monsieur* will keep his word. I will make sure of it. *N'est-ce pas, Barbe bleue?*”

I noticed the glint of fear in his eyes when he looked at Annette. His face paled and he attempted to challenge her, “You have done nothing...about certain things. Why should you stop me now?”

Annette smiled till her mouth was a black gaping hole. “This time I will have *Madame*’s permission, like that time we had that little talk about a certain little girl? She will not want anything to happen to this little girl I am sure.”

“Can you not just stop him Annette, without giving him the key?” I asked.

“*Non.* He has a right to the key as the head of the de Mazarin family, but we are striking a bargain and I can ensure that he keeps his word.”

“You are not as useful as I would like, Annette,” I said as I slipped the keychain off my neck and passed it to Arnaud.

“*Je m'excuse, madame.* It is what it is.”

Eva began to notice that her husband's true devotion belonged to Marcelle. She became jealous, he gave her everything except the affection she craved from him. Arnaud only paid attention to Marcelle when he came back from his long journeys. Eva whined and he became displeased. His mind games began. Annette described a conversation that he had with his wife.

"Eva, *mon cher*, I have a very important task which only you can fulfil. You see this key? It holds a deep secret of mine. You are the only person I can trust with it, understand? You must keep this secret safe for me, guard it with your life. I will show you where this room is. But, never, never under any circumstances must you enter this room. I am trusting you with my life, my love."

She fell down the stairs, down the hill and straight into the well of it. A special keeper of his secret. Arnaud was a master of mind manipulation. She knew something that Marcelle did not. Eva, however, was determined to know what he was hiding, as his wife she had a right to know. She discovered the remains of Bernice. She could not keep her secret, her blood on the key was testimony. Arnaud entombed her with his lover. I had never met Eva, confined as I was to an ancient area of the *château*. I never even saw Marcelle anymore, reportedly, I had a contagious disease and was under quarantine. Despite my incarceration, *La Sorcière Bleue* was responsible for Eva Descompes marquise de Mazarin's death. Annette stated that Arnaud made her eat poison. Officially, she died from consumption which she caught from her *belle-mère*.

I no longer cared about my appearance, I looked like the "Blue Witch" everyone believed me to be. I ate because Annette insisted I stay alive. I had a feeling that she would not be with me much longer. My intuition was becoming as sensitive as hers and she taught me some magic. Opening locks without keys, invisibility and one or two other spells. Cats and ravens became my spies. I stayed in my prison out of my own free-will. I still lived by the desires of my son. We sat together in front of the fire-place. The fire burned with the light of hell and suddenly Annette's body turned to ashes. I was not shocked or dismayed, I only stared at the fire. An half-an-hour later, I heard a key turn in my door. Arnaud came into the room, at first gingerly, as if afraid that something would be there. I was the only thing present.

“That cursed witch is dead. How our family has suffered her existence for so long is beyond my comprehension. The answer was in our family records this whole time, as plain as day. I’m sure *père* knew.”

“If he did, he never told me.”

“Shall I tell you how I killed your friend?” He glanced down at the pile of ash on the wooden chair and smirked. “I don’t know her origins, but it is stated that should ever the master of the house wish to free himself of the *L’Ancien* he must desecrate her unmarked grave. Do you know where that grave is, *mère*? It is in the tomb of my wives! Once the contract is broken by the family head, she ceases to exist.”

“You are confident she is dead?”

“You are free to imagine that she is alive,” he claimed in triumph.

There were more wives and more deaths. They all died because they had to open that door. Their reasons varied. One was out of insatiable curiosity, another discovered that her husband was the epitome of evil and sought to bring about his downfall. One wife wished to use it as a place to meet her lover, needless to say they are now both buried there. Another wife thought there was a hidden treasure which her husband was keeping from her. The most recent one thought she would discover the lair of the evil *La Sorcière Bleue*. He experimented in different forms of murder. A beheading, a hanging, merciless torture, a drowning and the most recent one he hunted and shot in the head. And still I do nothing you say? *Oui*, I held the twisted motherly hope that he would change and regret his actions. Delusion is a fantastic state of being. I could not hold onto my hope for long as more visions of his massacres would haunt my sleep. One involved Marcelle.

“*Mère! Mère!* Are you there?” came the quiet sobbing of a voice. “I do not know what to do. I love Arnaud, I do and I would do anything for him, *mère*, but he asks too much of me.” My stomach pulled itself apart.

“Your mother is dead.” I replied, “she died of consumption.”

A desperate wail came from the other side of the door, followed by a violent sobbing. “Why oh, why did he not tell me?”

“He wished to spare you pain.”

“Are you Annette?”

“*Oui!*”

There was some more crying and a whisper, “I’m scared.”

“Why?”

“Because...because I think it is wrong, but then again, he could be right, he is very persuasive.”

“Tell me *Mademoiselle* Marcelle, do not hide anything from me. I worked for your mother, she would want me to help you. Keep nothing back, what does your brother want you to do?”

“To...to marry him. He said we share a special bond. Nothing...nothing should keep us apart. I said that we were already together, but he said...we were not close enough.”

In that moment, Angelique L’Fayette marquise de Mazarin died. I would become Annette, mother of no one. A witch, a hag who would bring forth her curses. I would embrace madness and allow for its wrath. Accountable to no being except my own desires.

“Listen very carefully *Mademoiselle* Marcelle. If you ignore my instructions you will die, no human on earth will be able to save you. First, act as if you accept the marriage. Show no doubts, but insist that he cannot touch you until the wedding night. Second, I need you to persuade him to you give a golden key which he keeps with him at all times except when he gives it to his wife. He will refuse you in the beginning, throw tantrums, be jealous, seduce him. Claim he does not trust you, just get the key. Once you have it, bring it to me. Slip it under the door. On the wedding day, you prepare as any bride would. You will hear a sound so terrifying that your soul will become numb. I want you to gather every living being from the *château* and run. Never return. Do not look back nor search for your brother. Do you swear on your mother’s soul that you will obey?”

She hesitated. She did not like the idea of leaving her only family behind.

“You will one day make your own family. If you ignore me you will never have that chance.”

“Will Arnaud be all right?”

“*Oui!*” I lied.

She finally gave her word.

I had to trust Marcelle to get the key as I had not practised the magic that I had learnt. I was waiting to waste away. Now I perfected my powers as the marquis prepared his web for Marcelle. Furthermore, I knew he had to give the key away willingly otherwise it would not open the room. I embraced the dark and moved with stealth around the *château*. My eyes were everywhere, in the flap of a raven’s wing and the cry of a cat. I sensed people’s fears as

I brushed passed them in lonely corridors. The servants were always looking back for the *La Sorcière Bleue* who would kill young women and eat their hearts to maintain her youth. She killed her husband's lover and murdered his son. She cursed her daughter's marriage because she wanted the fiancée for her own. She destroyed her son's wives because they were a threat to her power. And now she seeks to kill again.

The marquis stood in his dressing gown on the verge of leaving for Marcelle's room. I blocked his way. He became paralyzed with fear and stood gaping in the centre of the room. "You're supposed to be dead!" he stammered.

"Your mother is dead, but *Madame Annette* is not. You cannot kill what is already dead. I told you, the only thing between you and me was your mother."

"You serve the de Mazarins!"

"You broke that contract. I am no longer bound to protect you."

"You are no threat to me you old hag!"

Then he felt it, the needles in his arms. I did not touch him. The spell sapped his strength and froze his body. His eyes and mind were in superb condition. I wanted him to watch his own demise. He collapsed in the centre of the room. It was the first time I had ever seen full terror in his eyes. He would not die as a warrior, but as a victim. I cackled as I wobbled over to him. He had lost his ability of speech. I grabbed his body and dragged him down to his own small hell.

He had arranged his secret room with the meticulous accuracy of a demented soul. He displayed one wife's head on a spike and the two lovers were in some grotesque position. Eva hung from the ceiling like a cobwebbed chandelier. Another body was still chained to a table, the skull still looked as if it were screaming. The room had been filled with the stench of blood and decay. I rearranged the room. I carved their stone coffins and placed them respectfully in a row. I disentangled the lovers from their position of shame and placed them next to one another so they could be together in eternity somewhere. I gave all the dead their sacramental rights. I purged the place of its desecrations and rebuilt Annette's grave. He

would die in a place of holy sanctimony, something he loathed. I thought about burying him alive, but it seemed too much of an anti-climax.

There he lay in his coffin, powerless and speechless. His eyes were wide with horror as they darted around the room. He knew where he was.

“I prepared this place especially for you. Do you not see? You are surrounded by all your wives. Bernice and your child are also beside you. You are with family.”

He moved his mouth.

“I shall tell you what I have in store for you my *Barbe bleue*, so your soul will remember the piercing terror in the afterlife. First, I shall honour the dead. Little Frans, your brother and your father, Francois-Charles L’Fayette marquis de Mazarin. Oh yes! You made sure his horse would be frightened, no? Could not wait for your inheritance? Hmm? Then there is Bernice Masson, the blacksmith’s daughter. *Monsieur* Jacque comte de Lorraine-Lillebonne, your sister’s fiancée. Eva Descombes, your lucky first wife. Your second wife, Baronessa Isabella del Castillo, whom you imported all the way from Spain. Your third British wife, Lady Jane Whittmore who was soon followed by your fourth wife, the famous courtesan, Madame Nicole Brunelle? Then you married Mademoiselle Celeste d’Moindeau, an innocent country girl much like your sister, I lose count, she was wife number five? And then how could we forget the German Gräfin Sophie Hönigswald? Wife number six. Your seventh so-called wife-sister, thank heavens, never will form the union. Oh! I forget the lover, *Monsieur* Jean-Claude Ducoy. Ahhh! Then there is your poor mother, the marquise de Mazarin, who died of a broken heart. She knew of her son’s sins, but just sat in false hope. We must pay a tribute to all the souls you ravaged and consumed during your travels. Remember all of them, *Monsieur*, remember them well. I plan to give you a taste of hell before you arrive. You must be purified, otherwise there will be no hope for your soul. Your purgatory begins here!”

And then I allowed him to recognise me as his once-mother and not the Annette he feared. I cannot describe his face in that moment, words would only illustrate a fleeting shadow of the feelings. It can only be understood and seen in my memory. I screamed out loudly. It was a shriek of a thousand demons, it grew louder and more piercing and echoed throughout the *château*. The rocks glowed with heat and caught on fire. Everything began to burn and he would watch and feel it. I burned with him.

The de Mazarin *château* was nothing more than a pile of rubble and burning embers. I watched as the smoke rose from the devastation. Everyone had escaped, the fire never spread to the village. Annette stood beside me as I clutched the golden key in my hand. I looked the true hag, my blueish hair stretched off my head as if it were terrified of my scalp. I was a skeleton wrapped in skin and rags. Annette stood tall and noble, dressed in medieval robes with elegant brown hair touched with silver and braided down her back. I laughed at the reversal of roles.

"I was a mother once, like you. Many centuries ago, under King VI the Fat, I married into the de Mazarins," she said.

"Ours is a long lineage" I commented.

"*Oui!* Too long for me."

"Was this some kind of punishment for you?"

"A penance, I think. I was not a devoted mother, I left my son to others while I pursued my political ambitions. By not paying attention, I missed what he became."

"Nothing compared to my son..."

"*Non. Il était un tyran merveilleux.* He and *Barbe Bleue* had much in common."

"Humph and you judged my mothering skills..."

"I did not judge, just gave opinions."

"I do not see the difference."

"Nevertheless, I deeply regretted it, I begged for an opportunity to do everything over to avoid past mistakes. Miraculously, I was given the chance."

"Did it work?"

"*Non.* Things were different, but the results were the same."

"That was pointless."

"*Oui.* But, I had to pay for my second chance, I was doomed to be a mother to many. I had to watch over the de Mazarin line to prevent such tyrants from rising again."

"You were successful?"

"For many generations, until..."

"I came along."

We both stared at the ruin for a long time.

"Do you blame me for the destruction of the de Mazarin's?"

"*Non.* Your son did that."

"Where did I go wrong?"

“We cannot control or take responsibility for people’s bad choices, but I found that we should not always protect our children from the consequences of them.”

“I loved him too much, then?”

“I loved him too little.”

“He trusted in my love too much. He lost all fear. Will you rest in peace?”

“*Oui!*”

“I will now have your fate?”

“*Oui!*”

“I see.”

I looked to the sky and saw my endless efforts.