Wonderful You

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ONE

Exactly two months after her wedding day, Catherine Shaw spent her lunch hour queuing for tickets to see *La Bohème* at the Coliseum. It was to be a surprise for her new husband, an impromptu anniversary present. She bought the last available seats for that evening's performance, high up in the Gods.

Andrew Shaw was cautiously delighted. He had never been to the opera before.

That night they climbed the stairs and crammed themselves into their seats at the top of the huge theatre. Andrew did his best to follow the action on the distant stage, but all he really wanted to do was to turn and look at his wife. No drama could compete with the spectacle of her radiant face as the music swelled up towards them through the darkness.

At the interval they struggled down to the bar.

'Isn't it wonderful?' breathed Catherine, her eyes shining.

Andrew nodded. 'Tell you what, though. Next time, we'll buy seats downstairs.'

'Downstairs?' said Catherine.

'In the stalls, or somewhere. I'm almost getting a nosebleed where we are, it's so high up.' He grinned.

'This isn't about the *seats*, Andrew,' said Catherine. 'It's about the music. The *art*.'

'Yes, I know,' he replied, 'I'm just saying –'

'I realise what you're *saying*. You're more interested in sitting in the right place than in listening to the music.'

'Not at all. I'd just like a better view.'

'It's an *opera*, Andrew. It's not about the *view*.'

'Jesus, Cathy, all right. Sorry I mentioned it.'

She looked up at him, her beautiful face clouded by bewilderment. 'Why can't you just *enjoy* it?' she asked.

Eventually Andrew had persuaded her to return to their seats. She had cried softly for much of the second half, moved beyond words by the tragic beauty of it all. By the time Mimì died in the final act, Catherine's face was streaked with tears. On the way home on the Tube she wept loudly on Andrew's shoulder. He put his arm awkwardly around her, unable to meet his fellow passengers' eyes. He was sure that people thought she was drunk.

That was Catherine, back then. That was her all over.

She was everything that Andrew was not: impulsive, romantic, boiling over with passion. She tore through life, scattering propriety and reserve. She laughed and cried with equal amounts of defiant abandon, oblivious to the more cautious sensibilities of those around her. Often she would do both simultaneously, screeching hysterically while tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her question that night fluttered at the edges of Andrew's consciousness for weeks afterwards: why couldn't he just enjoy the opera? In fact, he *had* enjoyed it – but just not with the dazzling, flamboyant intensity of his new wife. Beside Catherine he felt colourless, sluggishly inadequate. Andrew wished that he could join in the procession of emotions which paraded ceaselessly across her beautiful face. He would

watch her tears fall in quiet wonderment, hating his own dry-eyed dispassion. Happy endings, tragedies, it didn't matter. Catherine was riotously moved by everything.

Catherine often played the piano in the evenings. It was, she said, the best antidote to a day full of egocentric authors and dull-witted publishing executives. A stream of music flew from her elegant fingers, wrapping their sitting room in sound. She played waltzes and sonatas, études and fugues, barcarolles and mazurkas. Every tune had its own tale to tell, and Catherine coaxed these stories from the thickets of black notes on the page in front of her.

She always finished by playing the same, mournfully elegant piece. As the delicate patterns of notes filled the room, Andrew could sense Catherine retreat into herself. Only when the final notes had faded away into silence would she look up from the keys.

Catherine's playing enchanted and perturbed Andrew in equal measures. At the piano she inhabited another world, one that he would never know. He watched as she caressed the keys to life, and wondered whether he would ever be able to keep her.

Then, one day, Catherine stopped playing, and the light which had burned so brightly inside her went out.

Even now, all these years later, Andrew still languished in an agony of ignorance, unsure what had happened. Catherine's spirit had been extinguished along with the music, smothered by the silence. All that remained was a weary indifference. She became unrecognisable from the woman who had burst into tears at the Coliseum. Andrew watched, helpless, as his marriage descended into silence. When he looked at Catherine he no longer saw an irrepressible life-force, but the tired mother of his children, the reluctant co-owner of a shared history. Without the lifebelt of her passion to rescue

them, they had sunk into the treacherous waters of quiet predictability, their lives dulled by pernicious routine.

Andrew knew that the old Catherine was still there somewhere, locked away inside the unhappy woman he shared his life with now. That was enough for him. He carried on, doggedly affectionate. When she looked through him as if he weren't there, Andrew stood up all the straighter, and sustained himself with his memories of how it had once been. He wasn't going to give up on his grand romance, the love of his life. What had they told each other all those years ago? For better, for worse – all that stuff. And so he had loyally persisted, perhaps obstinately, perhaps a little heroically, refusing to admit defeat.

Which was why this business with Clara was so disappointing.

TWO

Andrew Shaw watched the Armani-sheathed procession with gloomy resignation.

One by one they filed into the room and moved silently to their places around the table. As they sat down they immersed themselves in useless industry, working hard to ignore their neighbours, like strangers in a slow-moving lift. Pads were repositioned; thick, expensive pens anxiously toyed with. Blinking eyes scrutinised the bespoke cherrywood table top.

Andrew's titanium PowerBook purred quietly in front of him. Florence grinned her gap-toothed, pixilated grin, unaware that the left side of her face was peppered with a rash of gnomic icons. Toby stood next to her, the weight of the world on his seven-year-old shoulders. Andrew looked at his children in silent stupefaction. They were all Catherine – honey-haired, emerald-eyed, implausibly perfect. Every trace of him had been eradicated, as if they were trying to cover their ancestral tracks. Andrew felt his heart creak, overloaded with pride and regret.

When Toby was five months old, Andrew had watched him claw at the cartoon giraffes which were printed on his

play mat. Toby had screamed with rage as he tried to pick them up. He had not yet learned to distinguish between two-dimensional images and three-dimensional objects, and couldn't understand why the smiling giraffes always escaped his tiny fists.

Andrew now knew how his son had felt. He was struggling with his own giraffes.

He idly scratched the silver mouse pad and watched the cursor dance. The black arrow mirrored his wandering fingertip exactly. Andrew was gratified to see every twitch of his digit manifested simultaneously on the screen. He derived quiet solace from this localised display of absolute power. The arrow floated across Toby's face, a sluggish ghost. Andrew had read somewhere that this computer was so powerful it could operate rocket launchers and programme nuclear warheads. He wiggled his forefinger; the cursor shimmied beneath his son's chin.

Toby hated to be tickled. He would struggle away from his father's clumsy hands with a sharp yelp of complaint. But with his laptop, Andrew could perform the remote, electronic version without risk of filial censure. An e-tickle. Rocket launchers could wait.

Joel Flaherty was the last man to sit down. He gave Andrew's shoulders a brief caress before sliding into the adjacent seat with a complicit wink. Andrew smiled at Joel, wishing that he would stop pawing him in public. Joel spent a significant proportion of his day benignly molesting the entire workforce, administering a wide repertoire of hugs, rubs, massages, and general laying-on of hands. He only got away with his incessant fondling because he exuded an aura of profound sexlessness. There was a drably pristine flaccidity about him.

As usual, Joel was dressed in black jeans, which might have been marginally too tight, and a black polo shirt,

buttoned up to the neck and wrists. What little hair he had left was scraped optimistically across his pinkly translucent pate. Joel's vanity had never quite come to terms with the catastrophe of his hair-loss. He had tried to compensate for his premature baldness by cultivating punctiliously topiarised sideburns which tapered to a sharp point in the middle of each cheek. The twin arrows pointed portentously towards his mouth, obliquely (but incorrectly) suggesting a Delphic quality to the pronouncements which issued forth from it. It was all rather embarrassing. Andrew wished that Joel would try to look more like a proper chief executive and less like Ming the Merciless.

Joel cast his eyes up and down the table. 'OK, people, let's begin. The good news is that for the eleventh consecutive month, viewing figures are up. The median figure on the twenty-day period to the end of May is up 1.2% on the equivalent figures for the preceding month, having factored in the relevant QRRs.'

A murmur went around the table. Everyone already knew that the figures were up, because everyone had read the confidential e-mail which Joel's hapless personal assistant had mistakenly forwarded to the whole company two days earlier. But everyone was also pretending that they had deleted the e-mail without reading it.

'Overall market share over the same period has increased by 0.3% to 28.2%,' continued Joel, as if murmuring a sanctified litany. '*Tilly!* remains the most-watched programme on daytime terrestrial television, and it's still growing. The only question is by how much, and of course we won't get a really clear picture of that until we number-crunch the SAFs.'

Andrew frowned. The man on his left, an associate producer called Damian, scribbled something on his yellow pad and nudged it towards him. Andrew peered at the pad

out of the corner of his eye. On it were the words SEASONALLY ADJUSTED FIGURES! Andrew pulled his mouth into a half-yawn and blinked in a bored way to show that he knew very well what SAFs were. But that exclamation mark, thought Andrew darkly.

Joel was still analysing the latest statistics. 'The new demographics aren't showing as much of a move as we would like away from our core audience.' Like every television programme which started at 10 o'clock in the morning, *Tilly!*'s audience was divided into two principal groups: students who wouldn't get off the sofa, and pensioners who couldn't. 'Until we can demonstrate a significant shift towards the ABC1s, then the network is stuck in a rut with the advertisers. During Q1 we did make some inroads, but that seems to have fallen off again during Q2. As you might imagine, our Swedish friends are keen to see an improvement.'

Q1, Q2. SAFs. QRRs. Andrew hated all the snappy corporate acronyms, those flashy agglomerations of randomly clustered letters. They were just empty spells, incanted to obscure dreary actuality with illusory punch and pizzazz.

JKMN. Just Kill Me Now.

Andrew's mind drifted away, tuning out Joel's voice. A typhoon of bored antipathy churned inside him as he surveyed the sharp-suited herd in front of him. Look at these self-satisfied idiots, he thought. My friends and colleagues. Good Christ. Suddenly Andrew remembered that he and Catherine were going to a concert at the Union Chapel this evening. Fauré's *Requiem*. Annabel Sulzman, God help them all, was singing a *solo*. Afterwards he would be expected to spend hours agreeing politely how fantastic it had all been. And of course Richard would be there too. Andrew's spirits took another dive.

Joel was still talking. 'Now. On to other matters. Esme?'

The girl sitting next to Damian cleared her throat. 'As

you know,' she said, 'we're looking to roll out webcasts of the show over the internet, and that process continues next month with the next round of beta testing.' Esme had a gap between her front teeth, something which Andrew had always found very sexy – although she wasn't in the same league as Clara. But then very few were.

At the thought of Clara, a fresh wave of bewildered disquiet crashed through him.

'We anticipate that by Christmas the webcasts will be downloadable by anyone in the world, from anywhere in the world,' continued Esme. 'It will give us an immediate, pan-global presence.'

Joel nodded in approval. 'This web thing is exactly what we need,' he said. 'It sends out all the right messages. It says we're up-to-date, we're contemporary. It says we're *now*. Because we don't just cater for students and the blue-rinse brigade, right?' Half of the people in the room nodded in agreement; the remaining half shook their heads, also in agreement. After a moment, the nodders stopped nodding and began to shake their heads; at the same time, the shakers stopped shaking and began to nod. Quiet confusion reigned.

Joel looked down the table at the show's star. 'How will that feel, Tilly? Knowing you're being watched in Guadalajara?'

The queen of daytime television smiled back at Joel, but not so hard as to pose any serious threat to her make-up.

Tilly Tyler had been stranded on the tundra of late middle age for years. On screen she still exuded a certain desiccated glamour, but Andrew knew the effort required to preserve her from the cruel talons of time. Every day her skin was slathered in layer upon layer of unguents, dripping with toxins and foul-smelling chemicals. Her wrinkles were then grouted with several applications of beige powder, and on top of that, a garish kaleidoscope of make-up was thickly

applied. By the end of the process, she was more efficiently preserved than a sheep's brain pickled in formaldehyde.

'Joel,' said Tilly glacially, 'I go to bed every night *dreaming* of Guadalajara.'

Joel's face fell, causing his sideburns to point slightly downwards.

Catherine Shaw stood in front of the cooker, stirring butter and chocolate together in a saucepan, missing her children.

She watched the glistening squares of yellow and brown as they collapsed warmly into each other. It was at this point in the afternoon when she began to feel an ache in her heart, an unbridled physical longing to see Toby and Florence again. The last hour before their return dragged by impossibly slowly. She wanted to touch their small hands and smell their hair, witness afresh the tiny miracles she had wrought. Their simple embrace was a haven. Catherine wanted to cling to them and never let go.

In a bowl Catherine beat together four eggs, some vanilla extract, and caster sugar. Brownies for tea: she was hoping to delay Toby's inevitable flight to his bedroom when he returned from school, which meant competing with his electronic games and magic tricks. Toby treated Catherine with cagey politeness, as if she were a distant aunt who might be charmed into dispensing a present or two. She added walnuts and flour to the other ingredients and carefully poured the mixture into a baking tray. As she slid the tray into the oven, the telephone began to ring. Catherine quickly crossed the kitchen. An afternoon call was a sinister herald of unscheduled news, an ominous portent of something gone wrong.

'Hello?'

'Cathy, it's me.'

'Annabel, how lovely.' Catherine closed her eyes. The dreaded telephone call, the one she would remember for

ever, wasn't upon her, not yet. 'How are you? Ready for tonight?'

There was a heavy sigh. 'I've been sitting here all afternoon wondering what on earth I've got myself into.'

Catherine sat down at the kitchen table and began to read the front page of the newspaper. 'Why don't you get your mat out?'

'This is no time for yoga. What I need is a stiff drink. Several, actually. But I daren't.'

'You'll be fine. You know you will.'

'I don't know. I mean, I must be mad. My solo is supposed to be sung by a prepubescent boy, not some woman in her mid-thirties.'

Catherine pulled a face. Annabel was thirty-nine. 'Is Richard looking forward to tonight?' she asked.

'Richard? I suppose so. He's exhausted, actually. Just got back from the States. Yet another book tour. Sixteen cities in fourteen days.'

'Yikes. That sounds horrendous,' said Catherine, glancing at the kitchen clock. 'Anyway, look, you'll both come for a drink afterwards, won't you? To celebrate.'

'Try and stop me,' said Annabel.

Catherine kept her tone light. 'And the great traveller?'

'Don't worry. He'll come, jet-lagged or not. As if he could ever stay away from you!'

The two friends laughed.

Catherine put down the telephone. On the granite worktop was a knife. She picked it up and peered at her reflection in the steel blade. Her large green eyes gazed uncertainly back. She turned and looked through the French windows at the strip of unmown grass between the flowerbeds. It had been a lawn once, before the children were born, an elegant venue for evening drinks and *al fresco* dining. Now it was a rumpled quilt of mysterious hillocks and dark-bellied

divots of turf, occupied by an army of abandoned toys. In the middle of the grass stood a yellow and blue climbing frame. Its asymmetrical angles reminded Catherine of a giant Cyrillic letter. A red slide emerged from one side like a lasciviously unfurled tongue. Andrew had wrestled with the component parts of the climbing frame for an entire weekend, grimly refusing all offers of help. The assembly instructions had been in German. Catherine still couldn't bear to watch Toby clamber through the matrix of poles as he took command of his imaginary castles and tanks. All she could see were the metal joints creaking beneath his weight. Andrew had never been one for practical things.

Beyond the climbing frame lay Catherine's greenhouse. The afternoon sun dazzled hotly in the panes. She considered tidying up the rainbow of plastic scattered across the garden, but decided not to waste her energy. All efforts at containment were ultimately futile.

Instead, Catherine went upstairs to the bedroom. She climbed on to a chair and removed a shoe box from its hiding place on top of the wardrobe. She sat down on the bed and took off the lid.

The box was filled with things which Catherine Shaw had stolen.

She silently surveyed her booty. After a moment she pulled out a slim bracelet of white gold and slipped it on to her wrist. Catherine had taken it from Annabel's jewellery box about six months ago, while she was waiting for Richard to finish in the shower.

Catherine wasn't a proper thief. She didn't shoplift luxury goods, or burglarise strangers' homes, or siphon off bank funds with elegant computer fraud. Her criminal career was strictly small-time. She had no interest in big-value items. Still, she did like to look through her loot. Fingering the evidence of her crimes gave Catherine the proof she needed

that she was not the person that other people believed her to be. The box, brimming with bald culpability, quietly reassured her that she was still alive. Its sweetly stinging shame drew her into sharper focus, but it was the wild purple rush of danger which pushed her on to each new theft. The risk of being caught – of gambling so much for a meaningless private thrill – was necessary ballast, a critical counterweight which prevented her from capsizing into the ocean of disaffected boredom which surrounded her. With each new transgression came fresh exposure to the incalculable risks of the mundane; it was not fingerprints or brilliant detective work which would undo her, but a poorly-timed trip to the lavatory, an unscheduled return for a forgotten book. Each time she survived, Catherine felt a little more in control. The nearer towards the precipice of disgrace she edged, the easier it became to step back again on to the solid ground of bland respectability.

Sometimes she dreamed of being caught. She imagined her cool confession, detailing every sin, enumerating her crimes for the shocked consideration of all. She wondered whether Andrew would ever be able to forgive her.

Perhaps there was altogether too much to be sorry for.

Catherine took Annabel's bracelet off her wrist and held it up to the afternoon sunlight which fell through the bedroom window. She decided to wear it to the concert that evening.

The oven's timer buzzed. Catherine put the shoe box back on top of the wardrobe and hurried downstairs to the kitchen. When she opened the oven door, a small black cloud of smoke escaped. She extracted the tray and examined its charred contents. She prodded sadly at the unyielding surface of the brownies.

There was the brittle click of a key in the front door. Moments later the house filled with Florence's excited cries, and Catherine's yearning to see her children evaporated at

once. Instead she was swamped by wordless anxiety. Toby and Florence represented indefinable, and therefore illimitable, risk. Their small, unpredictable existences were always poised for chaos, constantly threatening to destabilise everything they touched. Now that they were here, back within Catherine's orbit, she craved the worry-free calm which their arrival had shattered, seemingly for ever.

Toby was the first to appear at the kitchen door. 'What's that smell?' he asked.

She looked at him and smiled. 'I've baked some brownies for you.'

'Oh, yum,' said Toby politely, not moving from the doorway.

'How was school?'

Toby looked at his shoes. 'I got into a fight with Henry Rosenthal at lunch.'

'Oh dear. What happened?'

'He called me a quiff.'

Catherine frowned. 'A quiff? Are you sure?'

Toby nodded. 'He said, "Shut up, *quiff*".'

'What had you done to make him say that?'

'Well, I called him a yid,' explained Toby.

Catherine's hand went up to her mouth. 'Oh, Toby. That's awful. *Why*?'

'James Macintyre told me to.'

'Toby, do you know what a yid *is*?'

After a moment Toby shook his head.

'Did it not occur to you to find out before calling – who was it?'

'Henry Rosenthal.'

Catherine closed her eyes. '– before calling Henry Rosenthal one?'

'But James Macintyre *told* me to,' said Toby again.

'So you just did what he said,' said Catherine flatly.

Toby looked away. 'He's the leader.'

'Oh, he is, is he? And why's that?'

'Because he's got a *gun*.'

Oh damn, thought Catherine.

'A toy gun,' she said.

'Well, yes, obviously a *toy* gun,' sighed Toby.

'Lucky old James Macintyre, then.'

'If I had a gun,' said Toby, blinking, 'then maybe *I* could be the leader.'

'No, Toby. The answer is no. No guns.'

'But I haven't even –'

'And promise me you won't *ever* say things to people unless you understand what you're saying. Otherwise you'll get into all sorts of trouble.'

Toby sighed the heavy sigh of the perpetually misunderstood.

'Now, stop hovering by the door,' said Catherine. 'Come in and have a brownie. Then it's time for your piano practice.'

'Oh, Mummy. Do I *have* to?'

'Most certainly you do.' It was the usual battleground for their afternoon skirmish: guns and pianos, pianos and guns.

'James Macintyre doesn't have to practise the piano,' mumbled Toby.

Catherine said nothing.

'His dad says that playing the piano is for *girls*.' The word hung in the air, a single horrified syllable, dripping with wounded accusation.

Before Catherine could reply, Florence raced past her brother and wrapped herself tightly around her mother's legs. 'Mummy!' she sighed.

A few moments later Sinead peered around the kitchen door. 'Everything all right, Sinead?' asked Catherine.

'Yes, thanks, Mrs S,' answered Sinead.

Catherine loathed the Mrs S business.

Sinead had joined the Shaws under the apparent misapprehension that life as a north London au pair in the twenty-first century was similar to that of a scullery maid in Edwardian England. Her craven subservience – the *us* and *them* of it all – sat ill with Catherine's liberal credentials. She felt put-upon by this poor Irish girl. She had done everything she could to persuade Sinead to call her Catherine, without success. Mrs S was the reluctantly agreed compromise. Not very PC, this Mrs S.

When she was not looking after the children or performing her other domestic chores, Sinead usually stayed in her bedroom at the top of the house, although sometimes she would float through the rooms, a furtive presence, silently observing the Shaw family as they loudly pursued their lives. Catherine resented this sporadic surveillance, sure that Sinead was totting up their transgressions and calculating their collective atonement. Catholics had always given Catherine a crippling moral inferiority complex. Still, she did her best to be friendly. *Noblesse oblige*, and all that. She had tried everything to get Sinead to talk, from polite enquiries about life back in Ireland to soap opera gossip. She had even abandoned Radio 3 and instead pretended to jig around the kitchen to Capital FM. Sinead had responded insipidly to all these overtures, refusing to reciprocate with the nuggets of intimacy which would make them friends. Their relationship had remained obdurately business-like. Catherine still knew nothing about Sinead except that she went out with a boy in Kilburn twice a week. Catherine always lay awake, waiting for her return, listening for a second pair of footsteps on the staircase.

Catherine bent down to kiss the top of her daughter's head. '*Dog!*' shouted Florence. The Shaws did not have a dog. She escaped Catherine's clutches and ran into the garden, gurgling with unexplained laughter.

'I don't see why *I* can't have a gun if everyone else has one,' complained Toby, finally approaching the kitchen table.

'Oh Toby, I've explained it all before. Guns are bad, you know that.'

'But I don't want a *real* one,' said Toby.

Catherine tried to pierce the top of the brownies with a knife. 'What do you want a gun for, anyway?' she asked. 'Why do you want to kill each other all the time?' Finally she broke through the brownies' tough exoskeleton and began to hack away at the disintegrating biscuit beneath.

Toby shrugged. 'It's what boys do, isn't it?'

And therein lay Catherine's problem. Toby was right. It was what boys did. She knew that she was trying to stem the irrepressible tide of nature. There was something hard-wired into boys' psyches which made them go around pretending to shoot each other, just as girls liked to play with dolls. Catherine knew that Toby wouldn't turn into a sociopath just because he played with plastic guns. If anything, he was more likely to be irreparably damaged if he *didn't* play with them: he would be ostracised by his peers and become a loner. He would start wearing black. Then he would start dismembering small animals in his bedroom.

Catherine could no longer remember why she had imposed the embargo on weaponry, but it didn't matter any more: right or wrong, she wasn't going to back down now. She refused to compromise her principles, whatever they were.

'It might be what other boys do,' she replied, aware of Sinead's silent scrutiny from the kitchen door, 'but not you.'

Toby folded his arms across his chest. 'Anyway,' he said, 'James Macintyre's dad says that guns don't kill people. *People* kill people.'

Catherine stared at her son. 'What utter rot,' she declared. 'James Macintyre's dad sounds like a prize idiot.' She put a plate down on the table in front of him.

Toby looked at the two unevenly hewn slabs of burnt biscuit which were stacked one on top of the other. 'I'm not really hungry,' he said after a moment.

'Of course you are,' said Catherine briskly. 'And the next time James Macintyre tells you to do something, you stand your ground. Even if he has got a gun.' She walked around the table and put her hands on his shoulders.

Toby reached up and squeezed her fingers. He twisted around and looked at her with worried eyes. 'Mum?'

'Yes, sweetheart?'

'What *is* a quiff?' he whispered.

Finally, it was Andrew's turn to address the meeting. He stood up and looked along the table. Nobody met his eye. He cleared his throat.

'The highest rated show of the last quarter was *My Lesbian Mother Stole my Girlfriend*. Not *Secrets of a Successful Soufflé*. Not *My Third Nipple Hell*. But *My Lesbian Mother Stole my Girlfriend*.' There was an indifferent silence. 'Let me remind you all what happened in that particular show,' said Andrew. 'Adrian was a milkman from Bromley. Nice boy, still living with his parents. He was going out with a hairdresser's apprentice called Kelly-Anne. They'd been together for about three months, happily enough by all accounts, until one evening, Adrian came back from the pub to discover Kelly-Anne in bed with his mother, Dawn. Dawn and Kelly-Anne declared that they had fallen in love and Dawn said that her marriage of twenty-seven years had been a sham. She promptly kicked Adrian and his father, Dan, out of the house, and Kelly-Anne moved in. Now, Kelly-Anne's mother, Cindy, was furious. She didn't much like Adrian, but Adrian's mother was *far* worse. Anyway, we got them all together to talk about it.' Andrew paused. 'It was after this show, you may remember, that we began insisting

that our guests sign legal disclaimers before going on set. As it is, we eventually managed to settle everything out of court.'

The room was silent. Damian had started scribbling notes on his pad and passing them to Esme.

'Now, who knows?' said Andrew. 'Maybe their sordid little problem could have been peacefully resolved if they had been left to sort things out in private. But because *we* got involved, that's a matter of pure speculation.' He looked around the room. 'After his mother humiliated him on the show, Adrian, our milkman, vowed never to talk to Dawn again. Dawn and Dan are getting a divorce, which I understand is proving acrimonious. Kelly-Anne was so angry with Dawn for calling Cindy a slag on national television that she promptly fell out of love again, announced that she was, in fact, heterosexual after all, and moved out. Adrian, not unreasonably, wouldn't speak to Kelly-Anne, and her mother refused to let her move back in. As a result, Kelly-Anne shacked up with *Dan*, and so now Adrian isn't talking to his father either. The last I heard, he's given up his milk round and has gone to a religious retreat on the Isle of Sheppey.' Andrew stuck his hands into his pockets, struggling against the tsunami of apathy which was threatening to overwhelm him. 'I'm appalled to tell you that Freddie is absolutely delighted. I spoke to him this morning, and he is one *happy* Scandinavian.' Freddie Larssen was the Overseas Corporate Development Officer of the Swedish multinational media conglomerate which had purchased the share capital of Andrew and Joel's small television production company three years previously. The deal had simultaneously made them both millionaires and indentured slaves. Whilst they still in theory exercised executive control over the company's operations, Andrew and Joel now spent most of their time glancing anxiously over their shoulders to check that Freddie Larssen was happy.

'Freddie loved *My Lesbian Mother*,' continued Andrew. 'He said that it was a fabulous example of what we do best. He said it showed why *Tilly!* is the most popular show on daytime television.' He paused. 'No matter that we ruined half a dozen lives to do it, because that's *what we do*, isn't it? People watch *Tilly!* because they like to be reminded that there are people out there who are more miserable than them. It doesn't matter how depressed you are, you're bound to feel better if someone admits on national television that, I don't know, *My Wife Sleeps with Men for Money Because I'm Poor and my Cock is the Size of a Peanut*.'

More silence.

'Anyway,' sighed Andrew, 'the word from Stockholm is that they want more of the same. No more inspirational stories of survival against the odds. No more warm-hearted celebrity interviews. No more slimming tips, no more novelty talent contests. What we are looking for is more insults, more threats of bodily violence, that kind of thing. Here's a new principle to guide you all: from now on, the sweetest sound on our show will be the swear beep.' At one point during the *Lesbian Mother* show Kelly-Anne's mother had delivered a diatribe of such mesmerising and unremitting vulgarity that viewers were treated to an uninterrupted whine of electronic disapproval which lasted eighteen seconds. 'With immediate effect, that machine has to go into overdrive. Freddie wants *half the show* to be drowned out by the bloody swear beep.'

'Beep,' said Joel.

Andrew ignored him. He pointed at the floor. 'There is only one direction for this show, and it's *down*. They want us in the gutter, as deep as we can go. They want us to plumb new depths of exploitation, tastelessness, and tackiness. Ideas on my desk by Wednesday morning. The more degrading the better.' Andrew sat down.

'Actually,' said Tilly Tyler, 'I have *one* idea.'

'Tilly,' sighed Andrew. 'Please. Do tell.'

Tilly waited until all eyes were upon her. 'I thought that we could combine two old features,' she said. She held up one jewel-encrusted hand. 'We have the regular *Precious Pet* slot.' She held up her other hand. 'And we have the regular *Marvellous Makeover* slot.' Tilly brought her hands together with a dry slap. 'Why not put them together?'

Andrew closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He could feel the twitching tail of a migraine at the back of his neck, the first stirrings of the monstrous beast. 'Together?' he said.

'*Marvellous Makeovers of Precious Pets*.'

Andrew knew at once that *Marvellous Makeovers of Precious Pets* was a good idea. (The concept of a good idea in the context of *Tilly!* was a highly refined and rarefied thing. All good ideas were – this was how highly refined and rarefied the concept was – terrible.) *Marvellous Makeovers of Precious Pets* was as brilliantly terrible as anything they had done. It couldn't have been more nauseatingly bland, more gut-wrenchingly naff. It would, Andrew knew, be a dreadful success. But still. Orders were orders. 'Sorry, Tilly,' he said. 'It's not really what Freddie has in mind.'

Tilly Tyler's mouth puckered into a petulant *moue*. 'Why ever not?'

Andrew threw his hands into the air. 'Where's the pain?' he demanded. 'Where's the degradation?'

Beside him, Joel shifted carefully in his seat. 'Andrew –'

'Giving a red setter a French pedicure is not going to set our viewers' black hearts racing, is it?' said Andrew.

There was a moment's silence.

Andrew sighed. 'Look. You all know the rules. What Freddie wants, Freddie gets. And he does *not* want legions of contented pet owners.'

'What if animal activists stormed the stage half-way through?' suggested Damian.

'Activists?' said Andrew.

'Let's say you're giving a golden retriever a bikini wax. That would constitute cruel and unusual treatment, surely.'

Esme leaned forward. 'They could kidnap the dog. In the name of, you know, animal liberation. We could have a hostage situation, live on air.'

'For God's sake,' said Andrew. 'We produce a mid-morning chat-show, not *Animal Hospital* meets *Die Hard*.'

The others ignored him.

'Think of the coverage we'd get,' said Damian. 'Every other media outlet would be forced to run the story. And we could do a deal with the activists so we can deliver a happy ending just in time for the next morning's papers.'

'Perhaps,' said Tilly modestly, 'I could negotiate the dog's release.'

'Brilliant,' said Esme. 'Save a dog – instant sainthood.'

'I know someone who's an animal rights campaigner,' said Damian.

Andrew looked at him. 'You *do*?'

'Well,' said Damian, 'she's a vegan.'

'Good enough,' said Tilly briskly.

'Perhaps we should just hire actors,' said Esme. 'It might be simpler if we didn't have to bother with *real* activists. You know. They might object.'

Esme had a point, thought Andrew. Apart from anything else, if real activists had any idea how many defenceless animals had been sacrificed in laboratories on the altar of Tilly Tyler's cosmetic vanity, they would be more likely to kidnap her than the damn dog. He took a deep breath. 'This is all very interesting, but it's really not what Freddie wants.'

Tilly turned towards him, her eyes granite. '*Bugger* Freddie,' she said loudly.

Andrew coughed. 'Alluring though your suggestion is, Tilly, I'm not in a position, either literally or metaphorically, to –'

'Can't you at least *ask* him?'

Andrew's eyes met Tilly's across the table. They gazed at each other for several seconds.

'No,' said Andrew eventually. 'I can't.'

Tilly leaned back in her seat. The corners of her mouth twitched fractionally upwards. 'Oh, that's right,' she said. 'I forgot. I'm talking to Andrew Shaw, the man who's never faced up to a single challenge in his life.'

There was a collective intake of breath from around the table.

Andrew blinked. 'Excuse me?'

'If you're really too spineless to talk to Freddie,' said Tilly, 'then I'll call him myself.' Her gaze danced with mockery and threat. Andrew knew the game was up.

He held up his hands. 'All right, all right. I give in. I'll talk to him and make him understand. *Marvellous Makeovers of Precious Pets* it is. But can we *please* forget the pet hostage scenario?'

Damian and Esme exchanged disappointed looks.

'Right then,' said Joel, standing up. 'I think we're done. See you all next week.' At this everyone began to make their way to the door. Andrew did not move. He stared fiercely at his laptop, his cheeks nuclear. Florence grinned back at him, her guileless smile compounding his gloom.

When he was the only one left in the room, he put his head in his hands.

It was never supposed to be like this.