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Handbags and Halos

Bernadette Strachan

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Extract

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One

Her big mistake, that rat-coloured dawn, was to spend so long on the note. Nell wanted it to say everything that was in her head, to translate the flounderings of her heart. Somehow she'd spent the small hours distilling two poetic sides of A4 into 'I don't love you any more. Sorry. And please don't sleep with that permed girl from the off-licence for revenge.'

It would have to do. Daylight was rudely insinuating itself through the wonky Ikea blind. As she crept about the Arctic bedroom, she endeavoured to be stealthy. She was not designed for stealth, and the room wouldn't co-operate. The floorboards creaked a jaunty tune under her clumsy feet and the cupboard doors squealed like persecuted cats.

At every squeak, Nell threw a paranoid glance at the figure in the bed. Spreadeagled in the rumpled sheets, Gareth remained asleep but was eerily quiet. He could usually be relied on to snore the 'Hallelujah Chorus', but this morning he slept like a vestal virgin. His silence added considerably to the tension of dismantling three years of her life.

If Nell was honest Gareth was already firmly in the past. Long ago her heart had fled this stuffy flat, shoehorned into the eaves. Now her less impulsive, far noisier body was following. Clutching an archive of greying knickers to her chest, she gazed down at the face that had once fascinated her. Frowning and purplish, it radiated anger even in sleep. A rugby-player's mug, it bore the stud marks of every boot that had trodden it into the mud, and was attached to a rugby-player's body without the customary conduit of a neck.

Suddenly Gareth shuddered, and smacked his lips like a

camel. Nell panicked and dropped her knickers – hardly a first. Gareth's eyelids creased and he dragged a leaden hand across his brow.

Nell willed him not to wake up. She badly needed a few hours' start. His anger could only be dealt with at a distance. During arguments he had two volumes, Loud and Even Louder, and a habit of positioning his face an inch from hers. He was opinionated, lacked emotional brakes, and fighting with him made Nell feel as if she'd been run over by a tank.

He nestled further into the duvet. Nell's lungs rebooted.

For somebody who never had anything to wear, Nell had an awful lot of clothes. Disregarding time-consuming niceties like folding, she waded through the multicoloured swamp of her wardrobe and had soon filled a rucksack.

Underfoot a tiny white teddy, holding a scarlet heart embroidered with 'I LOVE YOU!' in gold thread, stared up at her, accusation shining from its button eyes. She was paralysed. She didn't want it: she *knew* that Gareth had bought it at a garage on St Valentine's Day, despite his insistence that he'd sent away for it and had it specially embroidered. To leave it behind seemed callous, though . . . She tutted and stuffed it head-first into the rucksack.

A faint whir from the bedside table sent her tiptoeing crazily across the floorboards to slap the clock radio before it burst into life. A wilful creature, it woke them when it wanted to. Despite much fiddling with its innards, they'd grown used to being startled into yelping wakefulness by Fat Boy Slim at all hours.

Under the covers Gareth muttered something and farted extravagantly. He was coming to. Nell dragged on her jean jacket, wincing at the noise as it slid over her bangles. Then she propped up the flimsy note in front of the bedside photo of their Cretan holiday, with the kind of care usually afforded to fragments of nuclear waste.

Two sunburned foreheads peeped over the top of the note and unexpected pain sang through her. Once, those foreheads

had been happy together. She shook herself. The room was brightening and so was Gareth. It was time to go before the knocking of her heart woke him up.

She stole over to the door like a jewel thief, picked up her bag and slunk out. No lingering last looks, no tearful kiss on the brow. Nell didn't feel like a romantic figure in a touching scene, more like a lifer who had stumbled on the keys to the main gate.

She negotiated the stairs silently and efficiently, executing the turns on the landings like a figure-skater. At the front door she stood with her hand on the latch, her mind speeding. She was almost free. Still as a waxwork, she frowned at the greasy cord carpet the landlord had promised to replace. 'I really am sorry, Gareth,' she whispered.

As she slipped through the front door, like a ghost, Nell took a last view of the 1920s semis opposite and breathed in the west London early-morning air for the last time. Then she eased the rusty garden gate shut behind her.

She was out.

Across the way, she saw the tousled mongrel from two doors down, his raggedy ears pricked. She was used to his attentions – she was the kind of girl who always had a square of chocolate in her handbag. She blew him a kiss and he darted across the street to greet her, blind to the milk float lumbering round the corner.

As Nell bent to tighten the strap on her rucksack, the mongrel speeded up, the milkman's life flashed before his eyes, and the float careered into Gareth's garden wall. Four hundred milk bottles leaped into the air. The ones that didn't break made as much noise as the ones that did. Even without the hollering of the milkman and the ecstatic barking of the dog, it was easily the noisiest event Nell had witnessed outside a surround-sound Multiplex.

With dread she peered at the tiny window high under the roof. The blind flew up. Gareth glowered down. She watched as he took in the irate milkie, his partly demolished wall, the

Gold Top tidal wave and his runaway girlfriend, who was as white as the milk that lapped at her feet.

Gareth's considerable jaw dropped. Then he disappeared. Nell reckoned she had two minutes. He would scan the note, locate something to throw on, then take the stairs in a series of leaps.

Two minutes tops. She sank, dejected, on to what was left of the wall to await the inevitable scene, then did the traditional thing and burst into tears.

Luckily for Nell, the milkman was an unusual man. 'I don't like to see a woman cry,' he said firmly, then asked her what was wrong.

When he heard her gurgled, damp reply, his overall and peaked cap transformed into shining armour. 'Hop on.' He started up the milk float. 'I'll get you out of here. No big bully's having a go at you if I've got anything to do with it.'

So on Nell hopped, tears stemmed by the surrealism of making her escape in a milk float. The battered vehicle coughed, then reversed bumpily over the remains of the wall. The milkman's eyes were two slivers of blue steel as he set his chin towards the high street. Testosterone rolled off him in waves: this was how Clint Eastwood would deliver yoghurt.

The front door burst open.

'It's him!' squeaked Nell – a signal for her getaway driver to put his foot down and burn rubber.

But he was already burning rubber. Nell felt . . . Stupid is the best word to describe how it feels to flee for one's life in a vehicle with a top speed of eight miles an hour.

Burly legs akimbo, Gareth stood at the gate, radiating rage and confusion. He had on one of Nell's extensive collection of short cheap dressing-gowns (a particularly short cheap fuchsia nylon one) and it wasn't quite up to the job.

Nell saw him bend down to retrieve something from the milky rubble, then turned to stare resolutely ahead. She willed him, just this once, to decide against confrontation.

Beside her, the milkman was hunched over the wheel, his face a poem of determination. Behind her she heard the slap-thwap-thwap of large flat feet running through milk.

Gareth drew level with Nell, who was perched in the tiny cab. It was vaguely humiliating that he was walking only moderately fast to keep up but, worse, he was silent. He simply glared at her as he kept pace with the milk float, pink garment flapping pornographically.

Her gaze fixed ahead, Nell's face crumpled. This was so much more painful than it had to be.

The pounding of Gareth's feet slowed and stopped. The milk float turned the corner of the street and the milkman uttered a triumphant 'Ha!'

It was safe for Nell to risk a peek over her shoulder.

Gareth stood in the middle of the road. Now she could she what he'd picked up from the pavement. That wretched little bear, still insisting 'I LOVE YOU!', was in his hand. As she watched he brought it to his face.

In the three years they'd spent together, Nell had never seen Gareth make a gesture like that.

Nell was bad at planning. She was bad at lots of things – maths, lying, icing cakes – but this failing was particularly relevant on that early morning. It was obvious now: she should have called her grandmother to check that she could stay with her *before* she'd left Gareth.

'Posh,' the cab driver had commented, when she'd asked him to take her to Hans Place, Knightsbridge. Nell had squirmed. Claudette de Montrachet was indeed posh: she was wealthy, elegant, cultured, and she considered the Queen to be Teutonic trailer-trash.

Nell had run speedily through the options open to her, and discounted her mother immediately. The tiny terraced house in Fulham was already bursting with half-brothers and -sister, not to mention a stepfather with a belly for every day of the week. Nell had struck out on her own ten years ago, and

didn't feel able to go back. It was as if the family had healed round the tiny hole she had left.

A trawl through her friends had ruled them out too. It's one thing to turn up expectedly, quite another to knock on the door at sunrise, asking to monopolise the sofa-bed for the foreseeable future.

Obviously, her Official Best Friend would take her in without hesitation, but Nell could imagine the look on Tina's boyfriend's face when he was confronted before breakfast with a lovelorn refugee and it didn't translate as 'Do come in'.

As for a hotel, Nell's purse ruled that out. Rather firmly.

So, Claudette's it would have to be.

It was a tiny round brass doorbell. It would take little or no effort to push it, but Nell hesitated on the wide stone step.

It shouldn't be like this, she thought. It's a known fact that a grandmother is a plump apron-wearer with bad legs, a bingo habit, flour on the end of her nose and a noisy welcome for any passing prodigal grandchild.

But there was no guarantee of a welcome from Claudette. Her sense of family loyalty was as slender as her waist. How Nell envied her friends their cosy, dumpy grans, who could be relied upon to go about their business in M&S separates, the ensemble daringly complemented with Clarks slip-ons. She felt underprivileged to have a grandmother who wore Chanel to defrost the fridge and was on first-name terms with Manolo Blahnik ('*Darling* Mano!').

To be fair to Claudette, this description was unjust – she would never have been caught dead defrosting a fridge.

The red-brick mansion block gleamed damply in the drizzle, perfect, smug, expensive. It made Nell want to run off and set up home in a cardboard box. She pressed the bell marked 'de Montrachet'.

With disconcerting speed a faintly aggrieved male voice wafted out of the grille. 'Yes?'

'Hi, Fergus. It's Nell.'

The slightest pause, like a hummingbird missing a beat, then, 'Nell who, Miss?'

Fergus was the only butler Nell had ever encountered outside the pages of P. G. Wodehouse. If they were all like him she wasn't surprised they were an endangered species. '*Nell*, Fergus. Nell Fitzgerald.' He'd known her since she was a teenager and still opened the door to her on the first Sunday of every month when she paid a dutiful visit to her grandmother.

'Good morning, Miss. Are we expecting you?'

'No. Just a spur-of-the-moment thing.' Another pause. Fergus was good at them. 'Is it OK if I come in? It's ever so slightly raining on me down here.'

Fergus watched impassively as Nell manhandled her unwieldy rucksack across the threshold of the penthouse. He was immaculate in pinstripe trousers and a frock coat. To Nell, who always dressed as if she were fleeing from a burning building, he was abnormally neat. It just wasn't right.

'A pleasant surprise, Miss.' Fergus's all-purpose monotone might as easily have conveyed, 'Your hair is on fire' or 'I have two hours to live'. He was displaying neither pleasure nor surprise.

Uncomfortably aware that her Reeboks – surely the first ever to enter this address – were seeping proletarian crud into the Wilton, Nell asked, 'Is my grandmother up?'

'Madame does not rise until eight.' Then, with an eloquent glance at an ormolu clock on an inlaid side-table, Fergus pointed out, as if to a slow-on-the-uptake toddler, 'It is now six twenty, Miss.'

Nell itched to pick up the clock and beat Fergus insensible, but she explained evenly, 'I need somewhere to crash. *Stay*, I mean. Just for a while. Could I dump my stuff in a spare room and work it out with Grand – Madame when I get back from work?'

With a tilt of his Brylcreemed head, Fergus agreed. He was

a professional and emitted only the tiniest mew of distaste as he picked up the rucksack with a white-gloved hand. 'Follow me to the Heliotrope Room, Miss,' he whispered, and sashayed – he was the only person Nell knew who really did sashay – down the endless hall ahead of her.

The Heliotrope Room was large and luxurious, with lavender walls. Later the office dictionary would enlighten Nell: 'heliotrope' meant 'lavender' – she'd half expected to find an Edwardian time-machine by the bed.

'Ring if you need anything, Miss.' Fergus closed the door noiselessly behind him. He did everything noiselessly, as if his personal soundtrack had been muted. It was almost as disconcerting as the Brylcreem.

Marooned on a Persian rug worth more than a Barratt starter home, Nell felt overwhelmed by the style in which Claudette chose to live. Silk curtains draped the windows and crystal scent bottles glittered in strict formation on the antique dressing-table. The taste displayed was faultless but, as usual in this penthouse, Claudette's granddaughter felt as if she'd ordered a bacon sarnie but was being force-fed *pâté de foie gras*.

In her unironed, milk-splattered combats Nell was a blot on the elegant landscape. She decided to shower and change before she went into the office. She was trembling, she noticed. It had been a big day already and she wasn't usually up yet.

As she tugged at the rucksack's recalcitrant zip, Nell tried to imagine what her mother would say when she heard where her eldest child was staying. There would be a sustained blast of Dublin-style bad language, followed by an eloquent attempt to talk her out of it.

Nell was the fragile link between the two sides of her family. When Patsy Fitzgerald – freckled, lively and with legs that might have made a pope reconsider – had stepped off the ferry into Philippe de Montrachet's life thirty years ago, she had been catnip to the bored, spoilt young man raised on a bland diet of debs.

With hindsight, maybe he should have introduced his girlfriend to his mother *before* he realised she was pregnant. He was cut out of Claudette's life – and purse – on the spot. It was only later, after Philippe had released himself into the wild and Patsy was struggling as a single parent to bring up Nell, that Claudette had reappeared.

Now, as Nell pulled the first of her tangled clothes out of her rucksack, she felt a reprise of the feelings she'd had as a teenager when she'd visited her grandmother. Guilt at leaving her overworked, exhausted mum at home in their bare flat had always floated in the scented air of this apartment. The two women never spoke: Claudette had always sent her chauffeur to Patsy's door. Nell cringed at the memory, then squashed it by piling her current woes on top. They covered it nicely.

She continued to unpack her things. And, by gum, what things they were. As useless crumpled item followed useless crumpled item on to the satin eiderdown, Nell despaired of finding two useless crumpled items that went together. A sarong in March? And as for this floppy jumper, it had been sitting in its H&M bag, waiting patiently to go back to the shop since Gareth had mentioned casually that it made her look ever so slightly pregnant. Did she really need eighteen thongs? Bras were mysteriously absent but at least she'd remembered to pack her fabulous green suede boots.

Well, one of them.

Showering in the en-suite bathroom, which was large enough to host a bar mitzvah, Nell basted her bottom with Dior shower gel. Later, when she was dressed, the mirror confirmed she looked every bit as dishevelled as usual, but underneath the sarong and the pregnancy jumper her skin was as smooth as a (very wealthy) newborn baby's.

Fergus held open the front door for her as she bustled out of the apartment. 'Might I enquire what time you intend to return, Miss?' he asked.

'I'm going for a drink after work, so lateish. What time does Claudette go to bed?'

'Madame retires at ten.' Fergus always made Nell feel that she'd chosen her words clumsily. 'Might I suggest that you breakfast with her tomorrow morning? I'm sure she will be most interested to hear your plans.'

The subtitles were clear. She'd only just arrived but this smarmy throwback was rabid to know when she was leaving. 'Me too,' she muttered.