



Miss Karen DeWit occupied a guest apartment in the Old Wing a month or so each year when she did Mama's administration. She was holed up in it - it was quite comfortable, even had its own small kitchenette - working on her laptop and printer. Now and then she visited them in the main house and conversed with Mama over certain finances and insurances, over the yearly plan for the estate and its administration, about her health care and staff.

He remembered vividly the first time he saw her. It was in the Great Hall. When Miss DeWit put her eyes in his he experienced female power as he'd never ever had before, not even from Mama, who was quite a forceful character. It brought out an old feeling, a strangely cool sense of self-destruction that he had no hold over. It was as if an invisible hand steered him where he wouldn't normally venture even in his wildest dreams, like an old and tired thief wanting to be caught. He shook her hand, the grip cool and dry and firm and introduced himself.

'Henry...' he said and for no apparent reason but this strange cool feeling of helplessness added '...etta.'

For a moment Miss DeWit's blue eyes revealed a distant surprise. Then her handsome elderly face creased and a deeply amused smile appeared. 'Hello Henrietta...' she replied, 'well, I'm certainly looking forward to getting to know you...' and with a wink she turned around. In the turning Henry noticed the sharp bulging

of beautiful breasts inside the cream silky blouse she wore. He saw the vague impression of a white bra cup pressed heavily into the thin fabric and gasped without sound. Mama looked at him, her lips pursed, her eyes wondering what was the matter with him. 'No further tomfoolery if you please Henry...' she said. Her old voice sounded tired and disdainful. Her motherliness had drained from it and left it dry and crackled. Henry blushed in shame. 'No Mama...' he whispered.

There had always been a lot of whispering in Sudeley House.

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'Staff' shouldn't be overestimated. It consisted of a gardener, a cook and two local cleaning women called Lisa and Sheila. They were in their forties, about the same age as Henry. They cleansed the rooms in Sudeley that were still in use daily. Occasionally they visited all other rooms to check if everything was in order. Once long ago Henry had overheard them speaking about one such check up, planned in the afternoon. It was before Miss DeWit had entered his life. The Old Wing was deserted at that time. Without really wanting to, as if steered by a force outside of him, he'd sneaked into the apartment that would a few years later become Miss DeWit's and took off his clothes. The atmosphere was mushy. The shutters closed. The chairs were covered in white sheets and he crawled underneath one in a far corner and sat waiting in the dark for the two women to come.

Soon enough he heard their chatter in the local vernacular, the singsong of the West Country, approach in the hall. Henry's heart began to beat faster and sweat broke out on his brow as they entered the room and switched on the light. Together - they did everything together, inseparable as Siamese twins - they started removing the sheets from the chairs one by one. Henry heard the linen covers sliding over the leather chairs. But what made him really excited was the subtle and musical hissing of their taffeta silk uniform skirts. He even imagined hearing the same soft hissing emanating from their well filled black blouses as they bent over and their arms moved united in a sudden grand gesture throwing their breasts into the wind to remove the sheets. He felt an erection coming.

He heard the heels stepping closer and heavier on the carpet, the silk skirts approaching menacingly, and then they stopped in front of him and he heard the women giggle. This fatal event determined their relationship for years to come. Gone were fear and respect for the young master of Sudeley House, their future boss. Whenever the old lady was absent Lisa and Sheila treated him rudely and made humiliating fun of his small posture. They had seen the size of his erection when they tore off the sheet from him in unison and their laughter burst forth full of derision. In the sweetest cloud of taffeta rustling they had sat down on the armrests, one on each side of him, and played a rude game with his lust for their skirts and blouses. They soon discovered that he wasn't merely interested in their content as any normal man would, but in the shapes themselves, gleaming in a dull forbidding black that hissed and rustled in bitter sweet sexual poison, like an opium dream. When they had realized that - his hands couldn't get enough of them - they threw off their white linen aprons and descended a second time on the small naked man like beautiful venomous snakes, hissing and showing their teeth in the

cruelty that lurks behind lower class politeness. In a crude one sided role-play they became the snooty high brows and he, Lord Henry Sudeley, the beggar.

The womanly play Lisa and Sheila performed on him inevitably ended in tears. The effeminate decadence of lonely empty days within the boundary walls of the Sudeley Estate was no match for the villagers. Their mockery became more cruel. They sounded out his unfathomable loneliness and his eerie hunger for their silk skin and without the need to plan they began working on his emotion in earnest, tearing his soul apart with cold angry voices and trampling the shards of his male ego with their black uniform pumps. He cried for his mama over and over but they replied in cruel mockery. And when Henry's tears did finally flow they raised their heads and laughed triumphantly, like they did in the local pub when a vulgar story was told. They found his clothes and shoes neatly stacked behind the chair and threw them after him when he fled into the hall.

Mama never managed to get her finger behind the staff's wordless insolence towards her only son. After a while she let it go, without speaking to them about it. She blamed him for it himself, with his endless interest in female stuff and the eerily polite and restrained sexual innuendo that seeped from his pores like thin milk gone off. But deep in her heart she thought that maybe she herself was to blame for his frustrated demeanor, and that it stemmed from her great sin, performed long ago. And so it festered on like mould beneath the white sheets in mushy rooms with the shutters closed.

Until Miss DeWit threw them open and ripped off the white sheets once again.

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Mama's health was slowly deteriorating. But Henry could never be relied on to take over the reins of the estate. He was much too decadent and frustrated for such a task. In sometime illness and permanent frailty the old lady succumbed to the knowledge that she was to blame for that. She simply hadn't raised him right. In fact, if the truth must be told, she hadn't raised him at all. She had simply assumed that Sudeley House itself would do that, like it had the countless Barons and Baronesses before him. Naturally there had been lesser Barons Sudeley. They could easily be spotted between their peers in paintings hanging in the Great Hall. Decadence, indeed decay, had never been far away in the family tree, strong as its roots were. And now her son Lord Henry would appear to be one, a weakling, a spineless little man. He would fail the family, the estate. He'd never marry a good girl of course. He was probably a latent homosexual anyway with his obsession with taffeta silk. Or if he wasn't he was such a ridiculously useless dandy that no woman who wasn't a blatant gold digger would come near him. The estate would rot to an empty shell. He would sell it to the first bidder and Sudeley would become a hotel, or something equally dreadful, a museum exploited by The National Trust. People from all walks of life fooling around in the chambers, goaded through the Great Hall by red rope cordoning off the paintings and furniture to protect them from sullyng hands. The thought made her sick and depressed.

But suddenly the solution presented itself to her tired mind as an epiphany. The solution that would safeguard Sudeley from its threatening decay. It had been lying

waiting under her very eyes. Humming under her breath she made a telephone call to her administrator. It would change Henry's life for good.

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A week later Henry got a very pleasant surprise when out of the blue Miss DeWit turned up at the house. She been away for a mere four months and here she was again, greeting him with her mocking eyes and her winning smile. He felt a great joy overwhelm him. Miss DeWit must have noticed it. Nothing that went on inside him ever went unnoticed by her. She quickly glanced down on her perfect silky bosom and vested her eyes in his again. She winked and turned her back to him. During a strange little pause midway she appeared to turn back to him again and Henry's heart skipped a beat. But she thought better of it and continued turning. It was all a trick of course, to allow him to see her breasts from their most favorable angle, from the side, pushing the blouse sharply outward and drawing taut little pleats in the thin silk where it couldn't give more. A preformed cup with lovely white rose leaves shimmered inside. After a few seconds of thought she continued turning, the bra straps on her tanned back shining through a blouse way too transparent for a mere administrator's at work.

Henry blushed in deepest admiration as he watched her walk away from him. He felt deeply in love with her all of a sudden, a painful clarity which made him realize how lonely he was eleven months a year. He yearned for her back. If only she would allow him to love her backside, worship it from the waist up, along the unbending spine, across the shimmering bra straps to the straight shoulders, the head turned sideways, looking over her shoulder to keep an eye on him, the mouth set firmly in a warning to not even dare thinking of her front with its forbidden breasts.

With a soft cry he began to follow her down the Great Hall, gaining on her with quick little passes. Before entering the living room she halted again and turned back to him and watched him cross the last meters hurriedly. An amused little smile hovered around her perfect brick red lips. She stretched out her hand and softly stroked his cheek.

'Henrietta? Are you following me..?' she said with infinite subtlety and uttered a soft laugh sweet as honey. She opened the door and entered. 'Bye little darling. Go play with your little toys...' she said softly and closed the door in his face, locking him out of the living room. A frustrated anger crept through him as he stared at the heavy oak door. Anger and love entwined in a confusing emotion that he would never be able to untangle. She clearly toyed with his heart. Stoking up the anger and watch the love wear it down to a humiliating defeat. He knew his bouts of anger never lasted long, the thin red strand thinnest in the bunch. He wasn't made of sternness. Already he felt the lonely longing creeping up and engulf him once again, anger forgotten, throat choked in coming tears. If she would only open the door again she would see it happen now. Maybe she wouldn't even have to open the door to enjoy her triumph. He had the strange notion she saw right through the oak panel, watched his every move, forced him by sheer will to stay there standing neat and straight and wait for her.

While he waited - and she let him wait a long time, much was to be discussed apparently - Henry sensed that it was he himself that Miss DeWit and Mama were speaking about. He could hear their voices very vaguely, unable to discern the words and their meaning. But he thought he recognized his name a few times amidst the murmur. And every time he did it was her voice that spoke it. The unmistakable music of Miss DeWit's steadfast voice so full of confidence.

During the hour and a half she kept him waiting he became convinced that he was indeed the subject of the conversation. That he was the reason she had returned to Sudeley so strangely out of season.

When finally she opened the door and stood before him she remained silent and looked at him unsmiling, her hands clasped in front of her. There was no surprise whatever to still see him here at the living room door, waiting. She expected to see him, he was sure of it. She radiated certainty and satisfaction. He had done well. Joy shot through him like sweet fire. He took the hands and bending his head forward slightly brought them to his mouth and kissed them to let her know he knew.

Without a word spoken she took him by the hand and led him down the Great Hall and into the Old Wing. She took him into her room, sat him down in the corner chair he was so familiar with and disappeared into the kitchenette. She made coffee, handed him a cup and, after carefully checking her skirt with one hand, sat down on the leather armrest. They drank in silence. After a while she spoke.

'You're a sweet boy Henry. But you need governing. Mama is getting too old to keep you on the straight and narrow any longer. She has asked me to take you under my wing and I have accepted on the condition that I may take any precaution necessary to prevent you from escaping my authority. We have agreed on my coming to live at Sudeley House permanently...'

He looked up at her eyes in astonishment and felt a surge of happiness flow through him again. 'Will you come and live here Miss DeWit..?' he asked incredulous.

Miss DeWit laid an arm around his slender shoulders and slowly pulled him close. She straightened her back. Her bosom in the gleaming blouse stood out firmly and put Henry's face in shadow when she pushed it closer towards her. Crying out softly in shock when a sharp silk breast touched his face he began to kiss its underside with trembling lips. Miss DeWit looked down on it, on Henry's head so caught in rapture, on her beautiful breasts laying in their pretty white cups and vaguely visible through the refined silk blouse. Her eyes filled with amusement. Her lips parted in the seductive smile he loved so much.

'Yes my little darling, I will come and live here and we'll become very close,' she replied. 'Closer than you have ever tried to imagine...'

She pushed his head to the other silk breast, standing out in silk glory. In deepest rapture he began kissing it, crying out her name. His mouth swerved over the smooth thin layer covering the rounding of the white rose leaves covered cups. He dared not venture to the upper side, where the sun tanned flesh rose vaguely visibly from them. He watched it, longed for it, as it was partially carried and guarded by

the lovely white cups, leaving free the forbidden side that was closer to her breath, to her noble jaw and beautiful lips, to her blue lady's eyes so strong and steady. He had never experienced such rich and elegant sensuality before in his life. She resumed speaking softly.

'Despite the rapture you're feeling now you may want to run from me sometimes... but I won't let you... You can never run from me anymore... You see, Mama has offered me your hand... in marriage...'

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The wedding was a quiet private affair held on a warm day in spring in the ancient estate chapel of St Mary, situated in the gardens behind the house. A week after the ceremony the newlyweds changed places with Mama, who had always been very fond of the Old Wing. The apartment was renovated to fit her aging lifestyle and she officially abstained from her title and transferred it to Mrs. Sudeley DeWit. The new Baron and Baroness Sudeley occupied the stately rooms in the New Wing from then on.

Once installed in the beautiful living quarters of her new abode, Baroness Sudeley began to change. She became more aloof towards her young husband and treated him with noticeable coolness. She had always treated staff with a kind of equality and grace - all being Mama's employees after all - and it was typical of her that nothing changed in her attitude towards them. If anything her cordiality grew, especially towards the cleaning ladies Lisa and Sheila. They exchanged jokes freely now the old aristocratic Baroness had left the playing field to the middleclass younger and there was much laughter and storytelling between the women. They retained their gleaming black taffeta uniform dresses but the aprons were discarded as too old fashioned. 'A new wind is going to blow in Sudeley...' the Baroness said. 'Much of the old aristocratic ways have become useless and burdensome. I still have some feministic ideas left from my more rebellious younger days. One of them is that women need to unite to tackle class difference and gender disadvantage. In Sudeley House the Baroness will be firmly in control of that change. And we'll see how the Baron deals with that. What do you think Lisa, Sheila? Does he stand a chance against me? Against us..?'

The two women looked at each other smiling, singing 'nooooo...' in unison and burst out laughing. 'Good, for neither do I...' Mrs. Sudeley DeWit said grinning.

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Despite this warming up in the hallways and chambers of Sudeley House soon a grievance arose and the women took at to their employer. With the old lady living in the Old Wing their workload had increased considerably. Checking out the rooms once a year obviously wasn't enough now they were inhabited again. There was more vacuuming, more dusting, and considerably more windows cleaning, Sudeley House being Elizabethan Tudor and extremely rich in windows. They complained to the Baroness and with administrative astuteness she opened her laptop to look for the solution.

Three days later Henry was taking a walk through the old oaks at the end of the park and having a chat with the gardener in the rose garden when his cell phone rang. It was his wife and she asked him if he could return to the house immediately and meet her in the living room.

When he entered the living room he saw to his surprise that the Baroness was having a conversation with the two cleaning ladies. They were all seated in the chairs near the terrace doors. They were wide open. He walked over to them with some hesitation and sat down.

'Have I asked you to sit down with us..?' his wife said in a cool voice. 'No dear...'
Henry answered blushing.

'Well then..?' He got up quickly and stood waiting hesitantly. The two women had their legs crossed in relaxed leisure and they looked at him with insolence in their eyes. The way their mouths were set betrayed confidence and amusement. They had enjoyed their conversation with the Baroness, which had dealt with alleviating their work load, and they expected more enjoyment to follow now that another bout of humiliation was to befall the little creep they had loathed for years.

'This is the deal my dear...' his wife began, her blue eyes vested in his with calm confidence. 'With Mama living in the Old Wing now Miss Lisa and Miss Sheila have a lot more on their hands. In fact their work has increased by a third. I could hire someone from the village to come and help them out... but I won't.'

Henry blinked his eyes nervously, suspecting disaster to strike down on him. 'What do you mean dear..?' he asked stammering.

'Can't you guess..?'

'N-no dear... no, I can't...'

But he could. He knew what was coming and he knew the two cleaning women knew he knew. They giggled softly and he was about to turn on them in angry frustration when his wife's voice tore through him cold as ice. 'Don't you dare speak up to these ladies in my house you little mouse. From now on you shall refer to them as Miss Lisa and Miss Sheila, do you understand..?'

Henry stared at her in shock. His eyelids blinked wildly as she continued her tormenting. 'Miss Lisa and Miss Sheila will take you under their wings and teach you the ins and outs of house cleaning. You've hung around here doing bloody nothing long enough. It's high time you were put to work properly. Anything either Miss Sheila or Miss Lisa tells you to do you do with proper obedience and vigor. And if I hear even the smallest complaint from either of them you'll have another thing coming...'

She beckoned to a plastic bag that stood next to a chair and one of the women stood up and handed it to her. She shook its content in her lap and unfolded it and held it up. It was an apron of gleaming pink silk, the edges adorned with white lace. Henry cried out as soon as he understood what it meant. He stood gaping at his wife. She got up from the chair and walked towards him and put the silk apron over his clothes. She knotted the straps at his back. When she was done she turned him around with her hands on his shoulders.

'The tables are turned little Henrietta,' she said, 'the ladies in black silk no longer do as you tell them. You do as the ladies in black silk tell you...'

She pushed him forward until he stood before Lisa and Sheila. The grinning had ceased and they looked down on him with cold amusement on their faces.

'Miss Lisa, Miss Sheila, I present to you your new assistant, my husband Henrietta. He has a lot to learn and I expect you ladies to teach him in a sufficiently thorough way. I give you both full authority over him. You'll be his superiors. I suggest you try and reach a situation in which you'll be able to transfer a large part of your workload on my husband's narrow shoulders and acquire more of a controlling position yourselves. I promise you a substantial rise in salary once you have reached that station. Higher positions merit higher paychecks. Women have a right to good payment for their labors and I intend to be an excellent employer. So, tutor my husband well in house cleaning and drive him hard as well as you can, and you'll both benefit considerably...'

Sheila and Lisa took Henry between them and led him out of the living room, their black skirts gleaming and swaying against his trouser legs. And during the rest of the afternoon the Baroness heard more than a few agonized cries coming from different parts of the house, accompanied by two angry voices. Even the old Baroness heard them. She appeared in her old living room and asked her daughter in law about it. When Mrs. Sudeley DeWit explained the new situation to her, the old lady smiled sadly, a hidden grief aching inside like heartburn.

'He had this coming to him. He's such a ne'er-do-well, such a lost boy. He never managed to grow up properly. It is indeed high time that female rein should have fully taken over in Sudeley...'

The Baroness poured them each a glass of sherry and told the old lady of her further plans with her husband. Old Lady Sudeley shook her head in mock surprise. 'Never in my life have I imagined Sudeley to become a nest of feminism...' she said and her old cracked voice broke out in frail and joyless laughter.

Yet, after the merriment had died down and they sat sipping in silence, Karen couldn't help but wonder if Mama kept something from her. For looking sideways at her she saw a deep sadness in the expression on the wrinkled face. And she wondered if the old lady would ever be able to open up her heart to her. She hoped she would for this embittered sadness had a deathlike quality and should not be taken to the grave.

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Not a single day went by without Henry being humiliated and beaten by his two mischievous superiors. He became a very frightened and high strung man, eager to please his tormentors and worked in fervor on every assignment they gave him. And they drove him with brutal intensity. At the end of a long working day he was quite spent. Sitting with his wife in the living room after Lisa and Sheila had gone home he was mostly too tired to do anything but sit with a glass of burgundy and answer Karen's questions in as short a sentence as possible without being impolite. He cried easily and often. Whenever his wife said something critical or teasing the tears

would come and she made some sort of effort to console him. Gradually he got the impression that she was still playing a game with him. He was too weak and tired however to act on this knowledge. As a consequence just like his days were tainted at least once with tears of humiliation at the hand of the cleaning women, his evenings were with Karen subtly manipulating him into tears of grief. He adored his lady, the strong willed and firmly balanced Karen and was no match for her mental superiority and intelligence.

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One day Karen needed to do a survey of articles stored in the attic to update an insurance policy. With her laptop and cell phone in her leather shoulder bag she climbed the stairs and entered the attic. It was very long and intersected with rafters and had a roof beam of heavy oak along its full length. The place smelled of burned heating oil. The smell seemed to emanate from rows of chimneys against the wall closest to the staircase. Old furniture, cupboards, carpets, writing desks, pieces of art and children's toys from days long gone by were stacked between the rafters and left a narrow walking path across the dusty planks from one end to the other. Slowly and methodically she made her way through the objects, her laptop opened in her arms, ticking off the objects one by one. Nothing much had changed since the last time she did a survey here as the old Baroness' administrator. Some stuff from her own former apartment in the Old Wing had been added. Vice versa a few pieces of fine old furniture had been removed from the attic since the swap and now adorned Mama's new living quarters.

After less than an hour she reached the other side. She shut her laptop and put it back in her bag and she was about to walk back to the staircase when footsteps in the dust caught her eye. They came from between a very delicately inlaid Victorian cabinet and a very plain looking linen cabinet, both with their backs against the end wall. A rolled up carpet lay on top of the two. They were the last objects she had ticked off.

Curious to what her discovery meant Karen fished out her cell phone from her leather bag. She pushed a button on the side and after a second or so a fierce white light shone from the top. She pointed it to the footsteps on the floor. It appeared they were coming from a doorway. Only there was no door, no stiles or threshold. The whole wall was covered in a dull grey wallpaper. She shone the light behind the cabinet and then behind the linen cabinet. And there hidden behind them she saw the outlines of a doorway casing that was almost flush with the wall. Its top was hidden by the rolled up carpet. If the footsteps hadn't betrayed it, she would never have discovered it.

She took her laptop out again, opened it and googled images for Sudeley House, Gloucestershire, UK. She opened a large frontal image of the house and marveled at the beautiful yellow limestone all houses great and small in the Cotswolds are made of. She pictured where she was standing at the end of the attic. It was the New Wing attic, covered by a slate rooftop with a multitude of chimney stacks sticking out at one side. At the other side a lower roof covered a narrow mid wing adjacent to the Old Wing. The Old Wing itself was much higher, the square medieval ivy covered

Tower Keep connected to the mid wing on one side and extended with outbuildings on the other was clearly recognizable. So, Karen thought with a thrill, there has to be a door here that gives out to the mid wing. She had been on the keep's top floors a few times and couldn't remember ever seeing a door that led to the mid wing. So, someone had tried to cover up the only entry to that part of the house, at least to its small low attic.

Searching behind the left cabinet she found a small wooden knob and twisted it carefully. The door creaked open and she edged in sideways through the narrow space between the cabinets. Her breasts touched the Victorian cabinet's side panel as she slid through. A fat person could never enter here. Whomever had created the deception had to have had about her posture or was more slim. Or didn't have her proud bosom. She was quite convinced it had been Henry and smiled when she stood on the threshold of the hidden room. She felt very excited now that she was about to disclose a secret her husband had gone out of his way to hide from the world. The two cabinets so close together and the carpet on top, Karen had to admit it was a very clever device and she admired Henry's cunning. Lisa and Sheila never came here as the attic wasn't on the list of unused rooms for the yearly check. Maybe the hidden entrance was created before they were even employed. Karen herself had helped the two women shift the pieces of furniture up and down the stairs for the apartment swap. None of them had paid the least attention to the far side of the attic that lay in semi darkness even with the few light bulbs hanging from the roof beam switched on. Probably the only person who would know there used to be a door here was Mama.

The secret room was hidden in darkness. Shining her cell phone light on the inside wall next to the doorway she searched for a light switch but didn't find any. Whomever had installed the electrical lights here hadn't bothered to extend it to the mid wing attic. Shining her light around she didn't see any fixtures or pipes for gas light either. In all probability the room had not been used for a very long time. If ever. She thought of romantic novels she'd read about old mansions with secret rooms. They had mostly been ghost and murder stories with titles like *Minuet at Midnight* or *Cemented Love*. This was another story she thought with grim amusement. She shone the light down on the floor. Three wooden steps led down to the rough wooden floor and when she pointed the light beam to the far wall she discerned the rough eight hundred years old stones of the Tower Keep, the oldest building on the site of Sudeley Estate. There was no door in it. The reason for this transitional mid wing between the Keep and the New Wing extensions was obvious, to provide a smooth passage from one to the other on the lower floors. But they just hadn't bothered to include this small room between the rafters in their plan. It was merely empty space underneath the roof.

She ascended the three steps carefully, shining her light around with curiosity. The first thing she saw was a leather lounge chair. She recognized it from an old set of five she had seen less than an hour ago during the survey. She smiled in the dark when she thought of a wonderful story Lisa and Sheila had told her a few months ago. It seems many years ago they had discovered Henry sitting in a chair in the Old Wing, sitting naked under the white cover. His tiny erection had given him

away and they'd made rather crude fun of him, calling him a dirty little wanker. He'd run off in tears. Karen couldn't help laughing out loud and a vague feeling of fondness of her silly little husband presented itself to the front of her mind. A fondness that had begun the very moment he introduced himself to her so fatally as Henry-etta. He was such a lonely, brave decadent, so fully directed at self destruction. So totally and fatally in love with her.

Sitting down a bumpy object lying in the seat drew her attention. She grasped behind her with one hand and pulled out a crumpled dishcloth. She held it in the torch light. There were hardened creases in it and when she held it to her nose she smelled the odor of stale semen. She put it in her lap and shone the light around the little attic. With a little shock she saw a woman standing a short distance away. Looking more closely she saw it was an old tailor's dummy, dressed in a beautiful tea length dress of shining baby blue taffeta. She got up and felt the fabric between her fingers. It was of the finest silk and must have been very expensive in its day. Judging the age and cut it was Mama's or granny's. When had tea length dresses come into fashion? Wasn't it about a century ago when formal Victorian dress became too bothersome for modernist inclined ladies? The roaring twenties demanded a looser and sexier dress code. This one fell somewhere just below the knee, putting it a little later in time still. That definitely made it Mama's. The women's story had mentioned Henry's quaint interest in their silk uniforms rather than their nude bodies. He'd shamelessly felt their silk tits, and stroked the full rustling skirts rather than what was inside, as they'd related it to her. And they had severely punished the little pervert for it.

Still there was something anachronistic about the blue dress. The breasts seemed too pointed, too pert and sexy for a costume that old. She felt them and with a pleasant thrill she noticed their firm softness. They felt life like. Squeezing them again carefully she thought they must be the silicone one read about on the internet. She stepped around the tailor's dummy and unzipped the dress. Shining her light on the bosom the turned down bodice revealed a beautiful flesh tone bra of modern make, a perky preformed C cup. The cups were indeed filled with silicone prosthetics. Zipping the dress up again she sat down in the lounge chair. She opened the laptop and the screen lit up her face as she searched the hard disk for storage files containing a tailor's dummy. If it had been stored in the attic it might perhaps be on old lists. She remembered one of the first things she did when she took on the task of modernizing the estate administration was scanning the available handwritten lists of all items in possession. Among them were very old ones of items stored in the attic. She opened several files and searched them. It didn't take her long to find a tailor's dummy on one of them. Looking at all of them she discovered the item had disappeared suddenly more than twenty five years ago. Vanished, gone up in smoke. Obviously the thing had stood here in the dark far longer than she'd thought, wearing this beautiful silk dress. Why? Why had it been standing here in the dark for decades? Wasting its beauty on a timeless void.

On the same list she found a set of six leather lounge chairs. Flipping through the later lists she found them on a list dating twenty two years back. Only now there were five of them. There was a tiny question mark written in parentheses.

She closed the laptop, switched the cell phone light off and sat in the dark for a long time, thinking of her husband with sudden sadness and compassion. She pictured young Henry making bare as bones love to his secret dress. He had persisted the foolish love making, for three years later he had dragged a chair into his love hole. Had his adolescent obsession ripened into sitting down and contemplate his foolish addiction? Had his visits increased and become longer and longer when the dress was the only love he knew he would ever have?

Henry's life in the stifling seclusion of Sudeley had come to a standstill. Not being able any longer to relate to and communicate with real persons, real women, he'd created himself a secret hideaway and furnished it with a headless dummy woman with silicone breasts, a tasteful bra and a silk dress to worship. Instinctively Karen felt it had to do with the old lady's incurable sadness. Something tragic had occurred between them, creating a deep rift.

Marrying her, Karen, hadn't changed a thing. With a pang of conscious she thought that maybe she'd been too harsh on her lonely husband. Showing him what he couldn't get was about all she'd given him. When she realized he'd probably been up here to masturbate in front of Mama's dress and feeling up her breasts even after the wedding put a little dagger of jealousy and sadness through her heart. She had failed him.

She lifted the cloth to her nose again and smelled. She held it to her cheek and a tear rolled down from her eyelid. And what about her own life? She'd made it from an ambitious young London bookkeeper to professional administrator to Baroness Sudeley DeWit and it had all been for the money. What had it brought her really? Here she was sitting in the dark scheming to manipulate her lonesome husband. Was that love? Was that even life? Had she come to a standstill too now her goal had been reached? Hadn't she better scheme to pull them both free from the quagmire?

She sat crying for a while. Then she dried her eyes and cheeks with Henry's dishcloth. She had made up her mind. Being a strong woman she had great responsibility for a weak but lovable husband. In Sudeley House it literally came with the territory. Well, she would kick start his life in motion again. And there was every chance that there lay happiness to some degree in their shared future.

Through the Great Hall with all of its paintings, into and past the old Keep of ancient glory into the outhouses, there was the washing room. Sudeley had never boasted simplicity. In the naked and rather neglected room at the very end of the great manor house TL lights hummed from the ceiling. The rusted carcass of a giant industrial age washing machine stood in a corner, overshadowed by two splendidly gleaming automats with their hungry round beaks open. At the far end two big white kitchen sinks stood on wooden pedestals. They got hot and cold water from a huge geyser mounted on the wall above them.

Sheila, in her black silk dress now without apron, stood watching Henry working at the sinks. Lisa, dressed in a more business like costume nowadays, smiled at her colleague. 'I'll be at the office, I'm going to order new dish cloths...' she said and winked.

'Alright.' Sheila replied. 'Oh... when you're at it online, I could do with an extra set of black shoes. Make them a little higher than these okay... A bit more ladylike.'

'Certainly milady,' Lisa answered, 'anything else for your ladyship, a mink stole perhaps..?' She turned to Henry. 'You could do with a neat pair of black uniform pumps Henrietta...' she said to him and Henry blushed beet red.

'Yeah... Why am I the only one wearing a uniform..?' Sheila cried. 'We do the same work after all...'

'I'll put it to the Baroness. She decides in matters of uniform...'

After hand washing some satin blouses and hanging them on the clothes line behind the house, Henry returned to Sheila. She ordered him to put the laundry in the machines, separated into white and colored and sat down on an old lounge chair with her silk dress rustling sweetly. The sound put Henry in a romantic mood. He longed for the touch of the silicone breasts in the beautiful dress in his secret room up in the attic. Maybe in the evening he could sneak up there and have a quick encounter, he thought. Just then he got a terrible shock as he watched in horror the sullied dish cloth in his hand. In silent panic he threw it into the washing machine as if was a poisonous object. Behind him Sheila crossed her legs and a cloud of silky rustling engulfed him. He cried out with sudden fear and to tease him she crossed her legs the other way, making her black dress hiss as loud as she could.

'Stop it Miss Sheila...' Henry cried but it was in vain. Sheila got up and began dancing through the washing room, swirling her skirt loudly and looking at him in a mock seductive way. She twisted and turned her upper body, showing Henry her gleaming black breasts from all sides. Finally she stepped over to him and took him by hand and waist and danced him around with a lecherous grin on her face. The wide silk skirt thrashed his trouser legs and sometimes seemed to encompass him in its sweet black rustling altogether.

When the dancing stopped Henry stood before her panting. An imbecile gleam shone in his eyes. His right arme rose up, the hand shaking a bit as it slid across Sheila's abdomen and laid it trembling on one of her black silk breasts. Sweat broke out on his forehead and he began to mumble 'Mama... Mama...'

Sheila slapped his face. 'You want me to go and fetch your mama and tell her you tried to grab my tits, you wanker..?' she yelled. Crying hysterically he fled from the washing room. Through his tears, as an automaton, he found his way up to his little attic, his soul torn between a bottomless longing for emptiness and a hot hunger for the silk. He opened the door behind the cabinets and slid in. He found his chair in the dark and sat down. He knew his dish cloth wouldn't be there

anymore but his hands searched nonetheless. He stood up and awkwardly found his way to the doll and cried in desperation when he found it empty. Everything was taken from him. The only thing they left him was a naked tailor's dummy with slightly bulging stuffed cloth where his living silicone breasts had been. He slid to the floor and felt the hunger for emptiness engulf him in darkness.

*

The distant voices of angels calling him 'Henrietta... Henrietta...'

He heard them through the floor, lying in the dark. He pushed his ear to the plank to hear them better. The house was a vast space beneath him and he could hear its emptiness as a soft airless whispering.

'Henrietta... Henrietta, where are you..?' It was as if the voices wanted to entice him, lure him towards them, the angelic sound full of the promise of heaven. They seemed to float through the house. Now he heard them far away, and then closer and from another room. Then drifting away from him again.

He knew they must find him in the end. One of them must know where he was hiding. And suddenly he knew with absolute clarity that he wanted them to find him. Find him, liberate him from the blackness, comfort him and allow the sun to shine on his naked body. It was all in the angelic voices coming from beneath the floor. In the way they sang out his name, his true name. 'Henrietta...'

Finally he heard their footsteps approaching slowly on the attic, searching for him in discarded cabinets and cupboards, behind stacks of furniture. His heart stopped beating when he heard them standing before the hidden door. He heard silk hissing softly through the wall.

'He's gone, vanished...' he heard Miss Sheila say. 'We've looked everywhere...'

'Poor thing. You must have really hurt him...' Miss Lisa replied.

They looked inside the two cabinets, closed the doors again and began walking back towards the staircase, still calling out to him now and then against better judgment. Then the house grew silent again beneath him.

But although they had retreated he remembered the promise that was in their angelic voices. They hadn't been angry voices at all. They had been full of sweetness, as seductive as honey, and genuinely disappointed when they had stopped searching any further. They had so much wanted to find him, embrace him in sweet silk femininity and take him away between them to a place in heaven.

And thunderstruck he realized there was now only one way left to reach that place. It was to the only person on earth who knew where he was. He must go to his wife, the only true angel in his life. The angel who could and would save him.

He put his ear to the floor again, trying to locate her calm breath in the house. In his mind he traveled to the living room and saw her sitting by the terrace doors. The cream white sun curtains were drawn shut and they billowed slowly in the summer

breeze. On her lap lay the baby blue silk dress he'd once long ago stolen from Mama's wardrobe and made love to for so many years. And lying on top of it he saw her hands playing thoughtlessly with the flesh tone bra he'd bought in the village a few years ago. Its cups pointed upwards with perky arrogance.

Baroness DeWit raised her head when the antennas in her mind felt his glance on her. She looked him in the eyes and smiled.

'Come to Karen my little darling...' she said to him. 'Didn't I once tell you that you'll never escape me, ever..? Well, you can't because I know where you are. I know exactly where you are. There's nothing beyond it. So come to me now. Because I long for you to share my place in the sun. Please Henrietta... come and save me...'

*

He laid the apron across the armrest and undressed in the dark. He put all of his clothes neatly stacked on the chair, his shoes on the floor in front of it. He laid his hand on the soft stack in a melancholy farewell gesture. Then he put the apron back on and left the secret room.

Karen and Mama were sitting by the terrace doors engaged in soft conversation when the door opened and Henry stepped inside. The dress was hanging on a hanger hooked on a cabinet that stood next to the terrace doors. Despite his new found courage he felt himself blushing again as he crossed the large room and saw the ladies smile at his appearance. 'I gather this is the way your servants are going to look like in future..?' Mama said dryly. Karen giggled. 'Don't you feel it's appropriate for a nest of feminists..?' she replied.

'A bit too bohemian for my taste,' the old baroness said, 'I've always felt a lackey's uniform should reflect the fact that we aristocrats contrary to the rumors spread among the lower classes like being clothed. We've got a sensitive skin you know. Must be all the inbreeding...'

Karen looked at Henry standing shyly beside her chair. 'You do look a little bit inbred darling...' she said to him and winked. Henry struggled to find words but couldn't find any. 'You're not the incestuous type I hope...' she continued teasing him. 'I'd hate to have bought a cat in the bag...'

'I wouldn't be so sure...' Mama said. She sat staring up at her son. A cruel gleam shone in her watery eyes. She patted the seat next to her on the sofa. 'Be a good boy and come sit with your mother dear...' she said. 'It seems the clothes have come off. Now is the proper time to reveal all...'

With a soft cry Henry turned around and began running towards the door. But his wife intervened in a strong voice and commanded him to return and sit down on the sofa. Sullenly Henry came back and sat down beside Mama, staring at the floor in front of him. He felt his mother's old hand searching his. They sat hand in hand in silence. Karen looked on when the old baroness began her tale, seemingly addressing the room instead of her daughter in law. It was high time Sudeley revealed its innermost secrets.

*

'From the moment I bought the dress he seemed in love with it,' the old frail voice began. 'He was six year old boy, a real angel, my angel for he saved my life from foundering in hatred. Whenever he had the chance he put his cheek to the silk and stroked it with his little hands. His eyes lit up when he felt how smooth the taffeta silk was, how weightless it was and how its luster seemed to radiate the sweetest light. It was baby blue and cost a fortune. My husband had disagreed at first but I soon put an end to that. That spineless excuse of a man, when he died I merely stopped thinking about him and focused on my little angel. I was so in love with him that I forgot to raise him. I must admit I regretted it when he grew up, but grow up he did, albeit not to the manly size worthy of the barony.'

'I had forgotten his love for my baby blue silk dress. He was a shy little teenager idling his time away, reading books from the library now and then. But mostly he seemed to be doing nothing at all really. More and more I recognized his father's weak features and sometimes it put me off. After a few years I had all but forgotten about his angelic face and his sweet and bubbly nature. Running the Estate seemed to take up all of my time and attention now the Baron wasn't among us anymore. For years I plodded on, wasting the best years of my life in the dreary job of managing Sudeley. I wasn't meant to be an estate manager you know. I was put into the world to achieve higher goals. I could sing and act. I had quite a striking body. I could have become someone famous in opera or film. I don't know why it took me so many years before I had the brilliant idea of hiring a professional to do it all for me, Karen. I clung to my task, however I loathed it. I really hated my life before you appeared and modernized the administration.'

The voice grew silent and the old lady looked the room up and down. Her hand still held Henry's as if she'd forgotten about it. 'No, I can't cry anymore...' she resumed. 'No tears left in me. Oh how I wish I could... how I wish I could. For it tears me apart how much I... I began loathing my only son...'

Again she fell silent. Henry lifted her weightless hand and held it to his lips. 'Mummy, please... You don't have to do this...' he said softly.

'But I must,' she replied without looking at him. 'I have deliberately marred your unspoilt soul and it has eaten me alive ever since. I must tell all or I'll die a ghost and come haunting the two of you...' She laughed bitterly like a weak old dog barking with its last strength.

'Sheila and Lisa aren't the only ones that abused him,' she continued. 'One day I saw my magnificent dress hanging at the back of my wardrobe. I hadn't worn it for years, the feistiness completely having deserted me. I mostly wore grey during that time, before I switched to black completely. I remember being overwhelmed by nostalgia. So I put it on once again and pictured his enraptured face seeing his mama all shiny and smooth and sexy, wanting to touch the silk and put his cheek against it. But instead of saving me the dress turned my heart to stone. As I looked in the mirror I saw a silk queen, the personification of taffeta silk itself, beautiful

and cold. I saw a woman's face bereft of all tenderness. I kept it on for the day, just to see my son's reaction.

'And his reaction was remarkable. Back was the rapture. Of course he couldn't very well touch me, like he used to when he was a child. But he was in my direct vicinity all day. Horses couldn't have dragged him away from me. I sent him on small errands and he complied with a feverish rush, hurrying back to me as if I were a long lost lover. Which I was naturally. He'd once adored me as much as any young boy can adore his mum. To me he'd been a replacement lover for his father, and in my arms as often as was possible. We used to almost live together as man and wife, especially when I wore silk dresses, and most certainly when I wore my beautiful baby blue one. Only my lover was six and I was forty two.

'That day he almost became my lover again. His rapture alighted a new flame in my heart. To toy with him I hung the dress back at the end of the day and wore grey wool for a week and dull blouses and skirts, the uniform of the upper class. I saw his frustration mount, having been so close to heaven and seeing the gate shut in his face. Then came the worst day in my life, morally speaking. I seduced my own son.'

'Mama... please...' Henry moaned.

'Oh hush boy. Let me finish my confession...' she replied. 'That day I put on my beautiful dress again. The situation was a bit like in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He was sixteen and I fifty two. I had begun to appreciate the help of solid underwear. With my wonderful breasts bulging youthfully in the shining silk I looked like a goddess. But inside I felt ugly like Dorian's picture showing his inward corruption.

'Again Henry was like a puppy dog following me around all day. And I was - how is it called these days? - a shameless flirt. I was all smiles and silly jokes and cheap innuendo but inside I felt corrupted. I wanted desperately to hurt him, like I had hurt his father. He still hadn't touched me but you could almost smell how much he wanted to. Things were really cooking inside him. So the last vestige of shame gave in. I took his hand and led him to my bedroom. As if in a dream he followed me, floating like balloon on a string. I laid down on the bed, rustling heavenly and leaned on an elbow, and he crept close to me, underneath me almost. I bent down and kissed his ruby lips. He had a girl's lips. And I told him. I whispered it in his ear. Sensing his shame I asked him with a seductive smile to undress for me, so that I could look at his slender girlish body.

'Having been a rather gorgeous girl myself I'd had ample opportunity to make men feel insignificant. I was very good at it, even before honing it to perfection on my darling little husband. There is great pleasure in humiliating a grown man. Seeing his confidence melt away like snow in the spring sun, exacerbating the process with deeply amused smiles and well placed comment, it is a wonderful little pastime for beautiful girls. But when you do it to a sixteen year old shy boy it acquires a heightened quality. The quality of sin. The pleasure is of a higher level, the cruelty much fiercer felt. Then there is the possibility of inflicting permanent mental damage. Maim the young man for life. That puts it in the realm of the sadistic, the

games played in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, a French novel I had read to shreds as a debutant. The fact that he was my own son made it all the more exciting. It would be an investment into a lifetime of secret pleasure, watching him grow older and trying to deal with his unhappiness, imprisoned in Sudeley. Many years of silent cruelty would be mine to enjoy. To alleviate my own unhappiness...'

The room was silent. Henry was close to tears. His eyes stared unseeing. Karen felt strangely melancholy. She had felt her employer's unhappiness from the beginning, building the Baroness' life story with snippets of information gathered during many conversations. She knew how the Baroness had felt about her son, about her dead husband. The tale the old lady told them felt weirdly congruent with the picture she had drawn herself. The incestuous seduction of young Henry was new to her, but instinctively she had known something like that had happened. She understood the dangers of the abyss between men and women. The happiness that gets sucked inside the bottomless divide. What lifted her up was her resolution to save her husband's soul. She knew she was strong enough for it. She wanted it badly enough. That's what set her apart from old Lady Sudeley.

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'He stood there naked, deeply shy. And suddenly I became the young debutante again, playing with boy's hearts and minds, giddy with silky power. An infinitely experienced and weathered debutante. A female Dorian Gray. A veritable Marquise de Merteuil. I lay on the bed propped up on an elbow, looking at his boy's body. He was too nervous to get excited so I decided to help him on his way. I started to stroke my baby blue thighs, making sure the taffeta hissed and rustled. He looked at my hand, at my shining blue skirt and a soft little cry escaped his mouth. I saw movement in his member. So I let my hand slide over my waist and slowly up to my silk breasts, standing out in their wonderfully pre-shaped cups. I let my hand follow their shape, making soft seductive little groans as a girl in heat. With trembling limbs he crawled on the bed beside me again and I plied the blue skirt over his legs.

'What a beautiful skirt you're wearing Lady Henry...' I said and stroked his thighs beneath the silk. When my fingers felt his member coming to life again I laughed amusedly, my best silvery laughter that has haunted men's minds for years. 'Is that all, little Henry..?' I asked with a voice husky as gall and sweet as honey. 'I need you to grow bigger darling... much much bigger...' There was just the tiniest reproach in my voice. I looked a touch disappointed. Already I appeared to be drawing back from him. I put a measure of ersatz in my husky words, pouring the honey on a little stronger, but clearly fake. Again I began stroking my baby blue silk breasts, calling him softly closer. He pressed against me with shaking legs and with trembling fingers explored my breasts, his hungry eyes nosing up to them, his ruby lips opened in ecstasy. I've never felt more polite fingers than my son's. He was obviously more interested in softly caressing the silky fullness than in making an impression on me. 'A little kneading is allowed in the marital bed Lady Henry...' I said, sounding clearly disappointed. 'You make love like a girl... Correction, I know girls with more vigor than you...'

Frustration began spreading on his face and I smiled down on him sweetly, maybe a little bored. 'If it is my dress you want to fuck you should have told me. I'd have brought a book,' I said and with loud rustling turned my back to him. He cried out, torn I guess between the lovely rustling and the rejection. 'Mama...' he cried with desperation in his voice and at the same time he began bumping against my back side. The last chance he must have felt he would ever get to be up close and personal with a taffeta silk dress gave his desperation a strong sexual compound. The Marquise would have loved it. It was she that burst out laughing when she felt the pitiful bumping against the multitude of silk, failing even to push through to the mother flesh. I laughed the silvery laugh as silvery as I could, feeling for a moment the Marquise's untroubled joy the cruel game gave her. He began to cry at my back, calling 'Mama... Mama...' in a deeply unhappy voice. Then the crying changed to a girlish huffing and puffing, a sound so unmanly that it made me laugh harder. And when I heard him slink away from me I had never felt his erected member at all. Only my dress had had the pleasure. I heard the door open and close softly, as a pupil does when taught a life's lesson by his teacher.

'I never cleansed the dress. I felt too dreadful to wash the little blob of my son's semen off and hung the dress back in the deepest recess of my wardrobe. I've never seen it again until this afternoon...'

She pointed to the cabinet beside the terrace doors, the blue dress hanging from it gleaming silkily in the sunlight.

'It must have been this occasion, my greatest sin, that burned a black cross into my son's unspoilt soul, saying No Further. A witch's curse that transformed Sudeley into a Freudian haunted house. A house where happiness and peace of mind have come to a dreadful standstill, a swamp of bleak and loveless emotion simmering in an ivy covered stone carcass like eel crawling around in a slaughtered bull's decaying head. You were a breath of fresh air. We both loved you from the first step you set into our haunted castle. We implore you darling Karen - she grasped Henry's hand with new vigor - to restore firm ground to Sudeley...'

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Miss Sheila was sent to Mama's apartment in the Old Wing to fetch one of her old flesh tone corsets and a pair of blue debutante's pumps she had kept. Miss Lisa took the dress from the cabinet's edge and draped it on an empty chair. She opened the cabinet and took out the two prosthetics and put them on the chair too. When all was ready the misses took off Henry's apron and began to dress him into his new persona Miss Henrietta. He stood blushing deeply as usual when surrounded by women. His eyes stared at the terrace doors as if they had a vision. His ruby lips trembled as a girl's who's on the verge of crying. He'd always felt vulnerable and weak, but now he felt he was allowed to, even supposed to. The thought exhilarated him profoundly. When Sheila discovered the ancient trace of his downfall on the back of the skirt he cried out and tried to turn around to see it for himself, grabbing a handful of blue silk in panic. 'Hold on, I'll take care of it Miss...' Sheila said giggling. She went to get a wet tissue and left Henry standing with the slip of silk in

his hands, looking at the dried and hardened spot as if it was a filthy blemish on his pristine silk purity. He looked up at his wife, standing tall and strong. Bursting into tears he ran towards her and with upturned face offered himself to be comforted and kissed like a six year old girl.

'Hush baby... hush now, Miss Sheila will soon fix your pretty dress,' Karen soothed him. She marveled at her husband's demeanor. So strong was the blue dress' magic that it changed his personality in an instant. She made a second resolution that day. She herself would wear taffeta silk far more often than was her habit. Not because she was Baroness Sudeley, not to please Henry's sensitive sense of fashion, but because she longed for the magic of it herself. She would let the silk transpose her to a higher degree of femininity, moving further away from the world of men. Henrietta would show her the way.

When the semen had been carefully removed by Sheila Karen addressed the ladies.

'Miss Lisa, Miss Sheila, I want you to forget the bad blood that has existed between you and my husband. His is a very tender soul. He has had the courage to embrace a brave new life entirely, and contrary to what you may think he has done it of his own accord. He has heard you calling him knowing full well what would happen if he answered your call. He also knew it would be the last time a woman would come calling him. And so he very bravely made his decision to descend from his dark tower so to speak and step into the sun. I want you to treat my husband with the respect he deserves. For he has become one of us, nay, can teach us even to become more of ourselves.

'More Catholic than the Pope...' the old lady mumbled and grinned sheepishly.

Baroness Sudeley DeWit laughed happily and Lisa and Sheila joined her. At last Henrietta laughed too. Karen took Henrietta by the hand and led him through the doors unto the terrace. They stood together in the sunlight, Henrietta's dress gleaming prettily. The gardener saw them from afar and waved. They waved back and Henrietta burst into tears again, trembling as a virgin debutante. He turned to his wife.

'I love you...' he said and Karen smiled at him. She hugged him and kissed him.

'You're not so bad yourself honey...' she said. They stepped off the terrace and strolled down the garden path hand in hand. Soon they reached the old oaks. The air became huskier, earthlier. The smell of reality.

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Time has an elastic quality as Einstein has taught us. It can become slow and fast at the same time. Henry's lonely life had seemed an eternity, yet Henrietta's life among the twitter and chirping of assorted birds in Sudeley Estate became rich in emotional detail. Like a newly born child's it acquired for a time the magic of true perception in which time freezes to a frame of happiness and presents.

In the secret attic it has come to a total stand still. Henry's old clothes are lying neatly stacked on the chair in the dark, the shoes in front of it gathering dust. Spiders nests cover the stack with a veil of dusty grey. Soon it will be forgotten entirely.

By Castre