

A MINUTE MISCALCULATION

“So, what started the blood feud between your families, anyway?” he asked, idly sipping on a cream-filled coffee, imbibing the blasphemous mixture blithely.

“It’s a bit of a strange tale,” I exhaled, wondering if I really felt like telling it. “Much as anything to do with anything around here, I suppose.” I glanced around the ancient walls of The Manor, which, had they possessed the power of speech, could surely have told tales most macabre about what had transpired within their bounds over the centuries they had stood. But those were long, drawn-out affairs and this was a comparatively quick anecdote. I decided to humour his curiosity.

“It was a slight against one of the branch families, actually,” I elaborated a little, sipping my clear, bitter, *unsullied* tea.

“A slight?” He asked, smirking slightly. “Let me guess, they got called *French* instead of English, and took offence.”

I wrinkled my nose in irritation. “Look, you,” I chided sternly, “My family name is all the fault of an ancestor who was far too eager to get in the good graces of Stephen of Blois. And no one gives a shit about how it sounds.”

“So why are you so upset, then?” he needled, sipping his sickeningly sweet coffee, affecting the slightest sanctimonious smile - thinking he had somehow scored a point of some kind in the eternal contest that was our interpersonal relationship.

“Because I’m here about to tell you an unnerving tale of the macabre and you’re sitting here indulging in American stereotypes of *what get English people cross*. Being mistaken for being French was not the *causus belli* that led to our family being out for their blood.”

“Then what was it?” he pressed, presumably still assuming I was going to respond with a silly anecdote about someone getting slapped in the face with a glove back in 1612 or something.

“This is all secondhand, mind,” I replied with a dismissive air. “It happened back in the late 70’s about ten years or so before I was born.”

“1970s?” He asked sadly, his hopes of hearing some fantastical gothic tale of supernatural terror dashed in an instant.

“Oh yes, you might have been alive then,” I replied cuttingly, knowing he was sensitive about his advanced age. “Just.”

A frown crossed his face and he put his coffee cup down, doing his best not to look displeased. Inwardly, I beamed. The sense of self-satisfaction was quite intoxicating. It took all my self-control not to grin.

Eventually, I continued after watching him delightfully fume a bit.

“Back in the 1970’s, my cousin was caring for his mother, who was getting on in age. She was aged about ninety-five or so and had been plenty spry for decades – indeed, she was living on her own in a flat, but her body and memory were finally beginning to betray her. Medical science, being what it was, could only do so much, and he had resigned himself to the fact that he would soon have to say good-bye to her once and for all.

“But then a miracle happened. A woman named Sylvia _____, who claimed to be from _____, moved into the same building as his mum, and desperate to find work after emigrating, offered to be her carer.

“After a few weeks in her care the physical transformation was nothing short of miraculous. She went from barely being able to walk to confidently moving about and being able to tend the small planters on the building’s veranda. Only her mind was still failing. It was like

watching a piece of her vanish every day. Still, my cousin reasoned, with life, there was always hope. And Sylvia's help was extending that hope."

My companion continued to listen politely, but I could tell he was humouring me at this point, just waiting for me to end my so-far mundane tale.

Well.

"Things took a bit of a turn," I went on, "when he walked into the apartment one day to find his mother stung up from the ceiling like a marionette, with half her face reconstructed, seemingly composed of a fleshy thread that had been expertly sewn on with filament so fine you could not see the seams."

The choking sound he made at *that* turn of events heartened me greatly and it took the utmost self-control on my part to avoid grinning like Carroll's Cheshire Cat on the spot. But it was no lie told for a mere jumpscare.

"So that's what started it?" he asked, wide-eyed, staring at me whilst reaching for his cup of coffee and almost missing it in the depths of his surprise.

I shook my head sincerely. "Shockingly not," I replied.

"What?" he asked incredulously. Reasonably so, considering.

"When he found her, apparently his mum had said 'Please make her stop, it hurts,' which had discomfited him, but upon actually examining whatever macabre tapestry was being grafted to her flesh, he found that it was making her body stronger, more durable.

"Sylvia came upon him examining the state of his mother, and explained she was employing a mystical treatment from the Old Country that only she and a select few of her bloodline were privy to. She convinced him the pain of the procedure was merely temporary,

and a small price to pay for a body that would be so strong, even he as a young man would be envious.

“That’s not sketchy at all,” he mused, still paying rapt attention. “Even with all the occult madness that surrounds your family, you’d think he would have shut things down right there.”

I shrugged. “He loved his mum,” I replied simply. “He was desperate to save her, so he latched on to whatever strand of hope presented itself. And it wasn’t like his decision seemed incorrect. The next day there she was, again walking about under her own power, happy as you please. Over the course of a month, her body was wholly replaced with this youthful shell of fabricated flesh, with only her memories still betraying her--”

--Let me guess, that’s where things go wrong,” my faithful friend interjected.

“Am I telling this story, or are you?” I snapped crossly, flicking a Smartie at him, smacking it off his glasses. “No, things went wrong when one day, my cousin went to his Mum’s flat looking for her, but all he could find, resting on a chair in her sitting room was a doll about the size of Paddington Bear that looked just like her. Well, a child-sized puffed up parody of her, at any rate.

“As he looked at the doll, which stared back at him with button-like beady eyes, it weakly spoke to him in his mother’s voice:

Don’t let her take me away.

“He immediately went to seize the doll, but was suddenly confronted by Sylvia, who had burst into the apartment claiming the doll was hers, coldly pretending not to know anything about my cousin

or his mum. She threatened to prosecute him for theft if he didn't hand over the doll right away.

“Desperate to save his mum, my cousin desperately pled to purchase the doll from her. Money was no object.”

Hearing this, my friend nodded grimly. I knew what he was thinking. *Surely this base extortion was the seminal event.* I steeled myself, and pressing on, I continued to the conclusion of the tale.

“Eventually, Syliva agreed, and for a not wholly-unreasonable price (considering who she was dealing with) - the cost of a good house out in Tutt's Clump - she wrote out a receipt and transferred the doll to him, taking her leave.

“But try as he might, my cousin could not make the doll speak to him or move ever again. For while Slyvia had sold him its body... she had *kept its soul.*”

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