

Like Clockwork

The department was quiet, but Miss Dugworth had that disconcerting way of appearing at your elbow, just as you slid your shoes off and subsided gratefully onto the, forbidden, wobbly stool with its split plastic cushion. Spectacles with the thicker left lens magnified pale, colorless eyes and her moustache would bristle above thin, bloodless lips.

“Miss Bennison? Surely, you can remain on your feet to attend to the things undone in this department. The stock in that bin has a film of dust...perhaps you could find the energy ...?” And she would be gone, sensible, flat shoes soundless on the worn linoleum, a trace of lavender left in her sterile wake.

Barbara gritted her teeth and picked up a rag-toy in the passage, its broad, blank grin mocking her frown. She settled it back on its shelf, gently, as though arranging the comfort of a child. Surrounded by family, it smirked over her shoulder at nothing in particular.

Her dulled senses became aware of a silent scrutiny, before it actually registered, her pulse increased and one hand swept up to her hair. He was back again, here, behind the train sets, beside the airplane kits. Standing there between the shelves, watching her, a toy of some sort in his hands. Flushed, she turned away with a show of tidying her cash desk, afraid to glance up at the small mirror above. Her pale skin would be crimson to the ears and her mousey hair in stray wisps across one cheek. At least, she'd put on a better dress this morning, conservative, but with a pretty collar that took longer to iron than the rest of the garment.

Since that breathless day last week, she'd wondered, without real hope, if he'd come back. The lunchtime rush of working mothers and last minute gift seekers had scurried away as if on cue, and, in that place of children's dreams, he'd appeared silently and padded about, pausing here and there to handle a toy in a curiously intent way, holding each one up and turning it this way and that.

“Good afternoon. May I help you?” she'd asked, conscious of the way he looked at her, a fluffy rabbit in one brown hand, fingering the velour of its oversized ears. His eyes were the green of shattered glass and set in a face of such perfection that she could only stare for what seemed minutes. His voice, husky and quiet, ran down her spine like a warm hand. At least, as she imagined a warm hand would feel.

“Thank you. Not really....I'm just looking. You have quite a range here. Is this all your stock?”

“Yes. No! Well...I mean at the moment, yes, but we have more coming next week. The branches rotate their stock. Marketing.” She finished, nodding solemnly. “Is there some kind of toy you particularly want?”

“Well... I love all toys. There’s something rather sad about some of them, don’t you think?” The green stare was penetrating, yet anxious and vulnerable.

“Sad? Err...well, I don’t know. They give a lot of happiness to children.” He was moving away down the shelves, the rabbit head-down, as he reached for a boxed doll. She followed. His straight, fair hair was long, but immaculately styled and cut – like his clothes.

“Are you serious – about loving toys?” She hesitated to question this being, but curiosity elbowed her awe aside. He turned those incredible eyes on her again and smiled, teeth as predictably perfect as the rest of him.

“Oh yes...don’t you?” Perfect brows knitted and graceful hands stilled for the moment. Again, there was that anxious note.

“Well, of course I do. I adore them – any toy. Otherwise I wouldn’t be working here, would I?” The right answer seemed to be important. She hoped it didn’t sound pert. A pleasing answer seemed important.

He looked immensely pleased. “No... I suppose not.” The flaxen head turned to a display of lead farm animals, slender fingers touching, feeling and exploring, in a strangely yearning way.

In the empty department, her lone customer was occupied with the little figures on the shelf. Hands clasped behind her, she watched her feet slow-march down the aisle in his wake. Superfluous, but bound by customer care rules and her own fascination and need.

Lost in her own reverie, she was slow to absorb his softly worded question.

“Would you come out to dinner with me? Tonight?” Still at last, hands thrust into trouser pockets and green eyes hopeful. Fearful of a refusal? From this plain, mousey girl, whose flush was spreading, as realization dawned.

“Aah well...aah...I... ah,” she managed, as she scrambled for dignity. Something whispered about the need not to appear over-eager. The treachery of her own voice answered a strange, light voice she hardly recognized.

“That would be very nice...I mean...you – I don’t know you, really, I mean...” and there, her voice deserted her, along with reason. Because he smiled again and the corners of his perfect eyes crinkled in pleasure.

“I’m so sorry! I’m Ken. Good - thank you for accepting. Where will I find you - Barbara?” Eyes on her lapel badge.

“Aah well, I ...ah” came out before her address and a wish that it was somewhere more salubrious. But his emerald eyes creased again as he whispered acknowledgement and a goodbye, before turning silently on his heel and leaving.

The store closed with the inevitability of huge unfeeling things, and she found herself standing at her bus stop, alone in the press of humanity, separated from the next faceless soul by proximity.

Tonight, the warmth in her kindled a fire in her eyes so that people smiled and rustled their newspapers, glancing again at the slim, plain girl with that indefinable sparkle and eagerness in her.

This was irresponsible. An unknown stranger, albeit devastatingly handsome, had asked her out and like a giddy schoolgirl, she'd accepted. Reckless again, she put away her doubts.

When her doorbell rang, she'd been ready for twenty minutes but she paused before the hall mirror, to pat away imaginary stray hair and check her makeup for the tenth time.

As the door opened, he was there, dispelling her worst fears. His smile was sufficient to make her forget any doubt, flashing across the flowers in his hand and flowing down her body like sunlight on naked skin.

"Are you ready?" as though it was conceivable that she might not be.

The dinner was good, although she hardly tasted it. They shared a bottle of wine and it made her light and found things for her to say. This was what it should be like, she thought. Sharing food, wine, and topics of interest with someone.

It was surprising how swiftly the evening passed, and how soon they were standing outside the little restaurant he'd chosen. He helped her with her coat, buttoning it against the slight chill. She straightened his tie and he caught her hands in his, drew her to him and kissed her urgently. Arms linked, they walked silently back to her flat, and she knew with surprising calm that he was going to spend the night. This magical evening could end no other way.

It seemed natural - an unspoken thing, that they would not turn on the lights. She took his hand and guided him to her bedroom. There, the streetlights outside cast their shadows, huge, across one wall. Detached at first, she watched the silhouettes undressing each other, touching and caressing and kissing. It seemed less intimate than what they were doing and when they sank onto the bed and the shadows disappeared, she closed her eyes and gave in to her body and the moment.

He was gentle, but tireless and yet businesslike. Even in her growing enjoyment, it disturbed her, and then suddenly she was aware that he was slowing. It was as if he had tired himself in his efforts to please her. She kissed him and whispered in his ear "It's all right. Rest a while. There's no need..." He continued for a moment and then rolled away, clearly exhausted, but hardly breathing. She propped herself on an elbow and stroked his hair.

“I didn’t...why is it so hard?” he murmured wearily “I wanted it to be good – like other people. How do **they** manage...? The key...it’s....”

Anxiously, she folded her arms around him, stroking his shoulders, in her inexperience not knowing what to say, helpless to comfort him – to give him strength without expectation. Compared to his confident male passion at the outset, he seemed child-like now.

Faintly, he murmured, almost asleep in her arms “In...my jacket...please fetch it...” “Hush Ken, it doesn’t matter...we don’t need anything - just us...” She hugged him to her breasts and kneaded the taut muscles of his back, where she found the square metal plate between his shoulder blades with its little round opening.

And screamed and screamed while he lay there, motionless, staring at the ceiling with those perfect green glass eyes.

Mike Job

