

A Suitable Arrangement

The room was small but pleasantly appointed, quite appropriate for a wedding with so few guests. Apart from the bride and groom and the officiating officer, there was only a handful of friends and colleagues present. As for family – well there was just me; his father refused to come. There were flowers everywhere. I think they were actually real though it's hard to tell these days. Their mingled, heady scents added another surreal quality to this extraordinary wedding. Mind you, perhaps it wasn't so extraordinary - perhaps I'm just old-fashioned.

I watched my son gaze lovingly into the eyes of his diminutive but flawlessly beautiful bride and, I confess, I felt the tears well up. Who would have imagined our studious but socially inept son marrying such a stunner? I couldn't help but feel concerned though - it was all so sudden. *Marry in haste; repent at leisure* they used to say. I furtively dabbed my eyes and tried to put on a happy face and quash my nagging doubts. After all, it's traditionally the mother of the *bride*, not the groom who is supposed to weep at weddings isn't it?

The bride was given away by the Managing Director of The Lunar Research and Trading Company for whom they both worked. I must say I have always found the expression *given away* rather distasteful - a bride regarded as disposable property; a prize or a merchandising free gift perhaps. I suppose in past centuries this was indeed the case, and even today there may be an element of truth to it. But so long as both parties are agreeable, perhaps it doesn't really matter.

The ceremony finished and the room filled with music in a triumphal crescendo. The bride bestowed her enchanting smile equally on each guest and then on her new husband. He gazed back, his delight and adoration so palpable it made my heart lurch. The poor boy was obviously

besotted, but surely he could see that it was one-way traffic. Making their way through the small group of congratulatory friends, they eventually came to me.

‘Mum,’ Justin said, ‘Brilliant that you got here in time. I’m sorry it’s all been such a rush, but we *have* to leave tonight with all our equipment, and these days, seats on the Lunar Shuttle are like rocking-horse shit.’

‘*Darling!*’ interrupted the bride in pseudo-shocked admonishing tones.

It was subtly done – so apparently affectionate, but so controlling. I gritted my teeth.

‘Sorry Angel,’ my son said, looking ridiculously chastened for what was, to my mind, the very minor crime of bringing the word ‘shit’ into the conversation. Turning to me he added with unashamed pride, ‘Mum, I’d like you to meet Liana ... my wife.’

His proud yet bashful grin reminded me so much of the time when, as an eight-year-old he had been presented with the school science prize. On that occasion, his father and I had watched him with joy and pride. Now my emotions were so jangled I found it extremely hard to respond. Liana stepped forward.

‘It’s such a pleasure to meet you at last,’ she said, ‘I’ve heard so much about you, I feel I know you already Mother. May I call you that?’

I tried to respond but choked on it. How dare she? Such a trite little speech, I thought, and totally false. I was seething and yet unwilling to cause a scene for Justin’s sake. I forced a half smile. It was then that she took my hand and, leaning forward, gave me a brief kiss on the cheek. I hope I didn’t flinch, or if I did, that she didn’t notice. Her touch was surprisingly warm and gentle and her kiss as light as a butterfly. I suppose I must have muttered something suitable in reply – don’t ask me what. Fortunately, friends gathered round at that point so the awkward moment passed.

There were speeches of course, but none of any great merit. Poor Justin blushed and stammered his way through something he must have downloaded from the internet. The Managing Director and the best man probably sourced theirs in the same way. The general impression seemed to be that they were keen to get the business over with as quickly as possible. The forced jollity was painful and I almost wished I had stayed away. Oh Justin!

‘Ha, this really will be a *honeymoon*,’ said some wag with an over-bright, self-conscious laugh, ‘quite a long one too. How long will you be marooned at that lunar outpost Justin – three years is it? Rather you than me. But of course you’ll have your delightful bride at your side...’

The appalling, little man gave a coyly suggestive smirk which Justin chose to disregard – or more likely, just didn’t see.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘three years, with the option to stay on if the research programme takes longer than we expect and well, apart from the regular trading convoys, it will be just the two of us.’

Did I detect a flicker of uncertainty there? Had he only just realized the enormity of what he was about to undertake, and with a wife who, no matter how deeply in love he might imagine himself to be, he really hardly knew? It was quite possible. For a highly intelligent man he was extremely slow in some areas of understanding. But it was a done deal. There was no point in making a fuss now. I wished I could share my concerns with his father, but he had already made his opinion abundantly clear, insisting that, if Justin went through with it, he would never speak to him again. I clenched my teeth and tried hard to hide my feelings, but clearly I wasn’t doing a great job. I felt a light touch on my arm.

‘Don’t worry,’ Liana said quietly, ‘I’ll take good care of him and try to make him happy. We’ve worked together on this project right from the start, so I can help him in his work as well as fulfilling his ... you know ... his *other* needs.’

‘Can you?’ I said vaguely, all the while thinking it was a singularly odd choice of phrase for a new bride. But then, of course, this was a singularly odd wedding one way and another.

There was one thing I knew she *couldn't* do, but didn't like to mention it. It had been one of my first objections - Justin was, after all, our only child.

Perhaps I was being unfair. She was trying to be nice, but this was all too much. I looked around for Justin, but he was in earnest conversation at the far side of the room. I was stuck with Liana. I'm not a great drinker, but I suddenly thought that alcohol might go some way towards stiffening the sinews. Liana must have had the same idea.

‘Here,’ she said, would you like this? Someone just handed it to me, but I don't drink.’

‘Thanks,’ I said tersely, taking the offered brandy glass and downing its contents in one, unladylike gulp.

It brought tears to my eyes and nearly choked me, but I have to admit it had a certain mellowing after effect. We sat in fairly companionable silence for a while, until another thought occurred to me.

‘What happens in the future when he gets old and wrinkled and cranky?’ I said.

Liana shrugged, ‘Perhaps I shall get old and cranky too – who knows? Anyway, if things get too sticky there's always divorce. Really you know, this marriage is no more of a gamble than any other.’

I searched her face, looking for falsehood and artifice. Maybe I wasn't seeing too clearly after that brandy, but she looked sincere enough to me.

‘Please be happy for us ... Mum,’ she said with a wistful smile, and left before I could respond.

I sat thinking for a long while. Poor Justin, he was so keen on his lunar research project that even when that skin-flint company told him the three-year funding could only be for one, it hadn't put him off. He would have gone out there alone, if necessary. Personally I think they were hoping he'd give up the whole, ridiculously expensive project. When he was still determined to go, rather than have him go stir-crazy all by himself and wreck the place, they came up with a plan. They must have suspected Justin's feelings for Liana and put her up to it; he certainly would never have made the first move. No, he would have simply hugged his guilty longings to himself and worshipped her chastely from afar. Shy and awkward, Justin had never had much success with girls, yet here he was, looking so happy with his beautiful new wife. Surely I should be pleased for him. Under the circumstances, apart of course from the fact that there would be no grand-children for us, perhaps Justin's marriage to an artificial humanoid was really the only sensible option.

end