



OH MANDY!

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Gareth straightened his tie, took a deep breath, and gazed at himself in the mirror.

'Will you marry me?' he said, smiling.

He shook his head. Apart from his face and his voice and everything else he couldn't do much about, he had noticed an unwanted crease in his hair.

'You're looking rather kinky.'

He removed a comb from his jacket, ran it under the tap, and began to tamper down the unruly lock.

'This is the craziest thing you've ever done,' he muttered to himself. 'OK, try again. Will you marry me?'

This second stab at things was said in a more confident voice, although not so loud so that anyone in the restaurant could hear. Before he had entered the toilets, Gareth had checked under the cubicles to see if he could see anybody's feet – *no, they were all empty* – and was pleased to see that no one was standing at the sinks or the urinals. It was a good idea to give himself a minute to practice alone and get his nerves together. He and Elena had just finished their main course – enchiladas and shrimp tacos – and because he had knocked back two pints of lager in addition to the tequila shot he had been offered upon arriving, he had needed to visit the men's room.

Not long to go now! The arrangement with the restaurant was that after he and Elena had finished their dessert, the singers would turn up and sing 'Spanish Eyes', at which point, after a few introductory words, he would drop down on one knee. Gareth had had a soft spot for the song ever since listening to his mum singing it when he was a boy.

Blue Spanish eyes,

Prettiest eyes in all of Mexico.

True Spanish eyes,

Please smile for me once more.



Although, strictly speaking, Elena wasn't of Mexican origin – hailing originally from Putney – like him, she had a mum who was Spanish and, like him, had done an O-level in the language. Moreover, she had inherited her mother's features, distinctive dark blue eyes framed in waves of dark hair, and had got on well with his parents when they had met. She was 'a very attractive and well-mannered girl', according to his mum.

But what would she say in response to his proposal? Most people in his situation would probably have an inkling as to what answer to expect, yet he genuinely had no idea how Elena would react. The idea had come into his head three weeks ago when they had passed a jewellers and she had let slip that she liked a diamond ring in the window.

Why would she say that – to her boyfriend – unless she had an ulterior motive?

The ring, at least to him, had looked like an engagement ring, and he had gone back the next day and bought it with virtually all of his savings. This had been only a week after they had started saying the words, 'I love you'. It was true that they were both young, at 22, and did not live together. (Elena did not like the idea of living with someone before marriage.) Yet the crucial thing was how they felt about each other.

Another factor was that today marked the six-month anniversary of their relationship, the same length of time, coincidentally, his parents had gone out when his dad had proposed to his mum. His and Elena's first date had taken place on Saturday, February 23rd, 1991, and now it was Friday, August 23rd, 1991. In truth, hadn't the thought of spending the rest of his life with Elena occurred on that day six months ago?

He fiddled with his tie once more. For some reason, upon entering the restaurant, he had had misgivings about his plans for the evening. Elena was naturally shy and every table apart from the one he had reserved was occupied. She had also seemed distracted. Perhaps she, too, felt that it was time that their relationship moved onto another level.

'Will you marry me?' he said to his reflection.



Unfortunately – very unfortunately, one might say – Gareth was not, as he had supposed, alone. By chance, when he had bent down to look under the cubicles, the occupant of the nearest cubicle, out of boredom, had decided to stretch his legs to see if they could reach the door. This person, Norman Huggins, a jaded and tipsy insurance lawyer, was ruining his insignificance at an office party. The company had just won a prestigious customer services award and a large group of employees had gone out to celebrate. Norman, in fact, had had little to do with this success, and it seemed to him that the invitation to participate had had more to do with his being in the vicinity when the idea to go out had been mooted. To his disappointment, the evening had quickly descended into a blend of boasting and raucous jokes from the younger male members of their party and he had wanted a break from it all. In short, he was feeling sorry for himself and certainly did not expect to hear – since he hadn't even heard Gareth come in – the words, 'Will you marry me?' This had been followed by 'You're looking rather kinky', which had induced him to look around for holes in walls and upwards at the ceiling to see if anyone was looking at him without his knowledge. He was not even using the toilet for the purpose which it was designed, simply sitting on top of the toilet-seat.

Two more attempts at proposing marriage followed.

'Let's try from the beginning,' said the voice.

Norman bent his ear to the partition, on the other side of which Gareth was standing, and heard him sigh. He was spellbound. Without making a sound, he lifted his feet up so that they were placed on the toilet-seat.

'You can do it,' said the voice. 'You're a tiger. You carry an indefinable aura.'

Norman grinned forlornly. Someone – in fact, that creep Douglas who worked on the second floor – had once labelled him a dormouse.

'It's as if you're wearing the love girdle belonging to Venus.'

Probably most people would not have understood this allusion. However, because Norman had studied classics at university, he knew that the speaker was referring to a passage from Homer's *Illiad* in which a girdle owned by Venus brings its wearer great charm and sexual attraction. How refreshing to hear such an arcane reference from someone who, judging by his voice, sounded quite young! Norman began to sympathize very much with this Young Lochinvar in this pep talk he was giving himself and, still making sure not to make a sound, he hitched up his underpants.



'Mention how we met and the awkward conversation with her dad. Elena, I promise that no one will work as hard as I will to make you happy. In the short time that we've known each other... No, perhaps better not mention the short time we've known each other; she might think that we're rushing into things... Elena, you've won my heart. When I look into your eyes – your beautiful Spanish eyes – I see a reflection of the life that I hope we will share together. Elena, will you marry me?'

Norman, much moved, rose from his sitting position, stood on the toilet, and stuck his head over the partition.

'Yes! A thousand times yes!'

Gareth stared in horror at the round face beaming at him as embarrassment flushed his face. He began walking or, more accurately, staggering towards the door. Of all the toe-curling, humiliating experiences! What had gone wrong? He was sure that he had checked that no one was in the toilets.

'Go get her, tiger,' encouraged the man. 'And take my advice: don't mention the girdle.'

Gareth re-entered the large dining area, stepping in-between the tables, the man's words ringing in his ears. All his self-assurance had gone and the tension he had felt before visiting the men's room had increased tenfold.

'What have you been doing?' greeted Elena, as he resumed his chair. 'Your face is all red and your hair is wet on one side.'

'The taps in the toilets were a bit erratic.'

Her lips compacted, accentuating the dimples. Even though he had only left her for a few minutes, it never ceased to amaze him how beautiful she looked.

'Gareth, I'd like to talk about our relationship – about where it's going.'

He opened his mouth, then shut it, overawed by the coincidence. She was actually bringing up the discussion herself.

'I think,' she said slowly and gravely, 'that we should stop seeing each other.'

He understood the meaning of her words, even if they made little sense.

'You're saying that we should split up?'



'Yes. It's not anything in particular. It's just that I've been thinking lately that I need time to myself. Things have been getting more serious between us lately and I'm not sure that's what I want.'

Instinctively, he reached into his pocket, feeling the box in which the ring was enclosed. In his naivety he had interpreted the seriousness she had alluded to as a growing seriousness about them as a couple.

'I'm sorry,' she continued, applying a mallet to the stake. 'I was thinking of putting things off because of the meal tonight, but I think it's better to get everything out of the way and be totally upfront. We've had some nice times, obviously, over the last three or four months.'

It was six months exactly. Not three or four. Out of the corner of his eye, Gareth could see a portly, middle-aged man wending his way back to his place from the men's room. He appeared to be part of a large gathering on a neighbouring table.

'Do you feel OK about this?' she asked. 'Not too upset?'

'I wasn't sure how you felt,' he mumbled. 'You have been growing a bit distant lately.'

Even at this moment, the most tragic in his life, Gareth could not help noticing that the man from the toilets had spotted him and was nudging his neighbour. He was officially a laughing-stock. And yet, if everything had worked out as he had hoped, his overheard ramblings might even, in retrospect, have been amusing.

'I have to say,' Elena went on, 'that Reece has been an issue. I thought that when we split up, I could put the past behind me. But it's been very difficult with the two of you living together. I think in some ways that you're more in love with each other than with anyone else.'

Everything was unravelling. Just as Gareth had anticipated, one or two people on the other table were laughing and pointing.

'I'm not in love with Reece,' he said.

Word of his situation was spreading. People were gazing at them, trying to read the signs on his face, and one man even gave him the thumbs-up. Although Elena had smashed his heart into a million pieces, Gareth felt he had to take issue with her reasons. Why hadn't they discussed this before? It probably wouldn't have mattered, but he could at least have corrected certain assumptions.

He was about to pass another comment when someone shouted, 'Get your claws into her, tiger!'



A sprinkling of laughter ensued, and then someone said, 'Shhh!'

Was he undergoing a form of hell? The one positive thing was that the audience of jackals and baying hounds were behind Elena and thus, unless she turned round, hidden from her view.

'And then there's us,' she continued. 'You're too nice, somehow. You're not – what's the right word? – dominant, perhaps, in a way I expect a man to be. You kowtow to me all the time.'

'Is that so bad?'

His mind was drifting, unable to handle the stress. And yet, in spite of everything, he knew he would remember every word of the conversation.

'In moderation, no. But "nice" isn't necessarily "sexy". It's the same with your job. Occupational therapy is obviously worthwhile, but in terms of prospects... well, you know what I mean.'

Actually, he didn't. Occupational therapy was a well-paid profession and, if he ever made it to the level of consultant, he would be reasonably well off. It was hard to believe how badly everything had turned out. He was just trying to absorb all the implications when, to his side, he noticed three men garbed in traditional Mexican dress approaching. Were they heading for another table? No, they were coming straight towards them in spite of specific instructions not to show up until after the dessert course. Gareth did not even have time to ward them off because they were already virtually beside them. The leader, a short, fat man replete with sombrero, Emiliano Zapata moustache and outsized guitar, was accompanied by two henchmen brandishing a trumpet and violin.

A cheer rang forth from Gareth's self-appointed fan club.

'What's going on?' whispered Elena.

'Nothing,' he muttered. 'They must have got the wrong couple.'

The troupe of musicians gathered around their table.

'*Buenas noches*, Gareth and Elena,' said the spokesman. 'We have a special request, yes, to play from the *señor* to the *señorita*?'

'What is he talking about?' said Elena.

'I think his English...' he murmured.

The serenaders launched into their routine. Two or three people on the long table were standing up and clapping in time with the music while others were waving their hands in the air and



swaying in time to the music.

Elena said something under her breath, but he couldn't hear her properly, and had to lean closer.

'Stop them,' she hissed. Her face looked pale and furious.

'Perdóname, señor!' He waved his hands. 'Gracias, pero mi novia está un poco cansada.'

There was a groan of dismay from behind Elena as the clapping petered out. She turned around to face the backing group. Something about her expression must have registered disapproval because the carnival atmosphere became subdued.

'Shall we go?' she addressed him.

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