

## New Ancient Husband

I married an old man, agreed to a cold love, for all the not-good reasons. With this drenching I quench you, he vowed, emptying over my head the bucket of chilled holy water and ice cubes. Ow, I replied, sorry. I am quenched. Our celebrant hugged me, warm-breasted under her polar bear costume. Then I returned with my new ancient husband to his boxy house. Me with expectations of disappointment, so I wasn't much. Wrenching away the quilt, he rolled himself up and snored. I'm fond of him, I'd told myself and friends, unable to say love even on social media. Naked as a pig hung in a commercial freezer, deprived of my heart and lungs, I tried still to believe 'he's kind'.

My brother Lo was the official photographer at our wedding, but he forgot to put film in his camera. When he confessed I felt relieved, hoping no photos equalled no marriage. It was 6am. The boiler trilled into life, sparked by its eternal flame. Did my husband's service contract for household appliances cover me too, I wondered. Lo interrupted: It's time you left. He clipped a charm bracelet round my wrist. I laughed by mistake, thinking how typical of him to steal half a pair of handcuffs. Thanks, it's pretty, I said, meaning useless. He snapped his fingers and a little dog jumped down from my bracelet, to paw at a cupboard and whine. The bracelet's tiny 3D printer made a key and I unlocked the cupboard; inside I found my World Traveller rucksack, which fitted me like a skin.

Andrew woke and shouted through the ceiling. Buzz off, I whispered to my grinning brother, who straightway turned into a fly (not helpful, in fact very annoying, but so Lo-typical) and zoomed into our lounge-with-dining-area.

My husband thumped downstairs in his stripy old-man pyjamas. He frowned: Remove it. I can't was my truthful answer, whereupon he violently de-rucksacked me and stripped my cotton wrap. I lay weeping amid musty socks and hiking equipment. Who gave that to you – spotting my bracelet – the pervert? A reference to my brother's eight years as a woman, the longest he's ever stuck at anything without getting bored. And he spent most of her time milking cows.

Andrew tried to pull the bracelet off my wrist: the dog bit him. Shouting unnatural and wrong, he hurried to the medicine cabinet for an Elastoplast. Meanwhile I fled half-naked into the lounge, crying for protection – Brother, do something! The fly buzzed in my ear and

I tried to swat it, but as I did so my arm grew heavy and solid. My other arm modestly curved. I became bronze, Art Deco. Andrew was on the point of flogging me, but I appeared in the auction catalogue as lot withdrawn. Instead he installed me in the back garden, where my tears supply a small pond. I guess a temple would've been too much to ask.

Memory 1: We had visitors coming for supper. I didn't know what to cook, so I asked Andrew's advice. Pasta, he said decisively. I queried: but pasta gives you indigestion? Never mind, he said, they'll like it. Remember to warm the plates. I spent hours in the kitchen preparing food and getting anxious. Would it all be ready in time? The doorbell's sprightly tune alarmed me – some talk of Alexander and some of Hercules – and my whiskers vibrated. I reminded myself you're a married woman, you don't have whiskers. Step up to the plate, oh god the plates.

Wiping my hands on my apron in a hostessly way, I greeted our visitors, a man and a woman, colleagues of Andrew's from the place where they give scientific lectures on unscientific subjects. But really they're a cult. They insisted I was Leo, not Virgo, and my husband agreed, saying he'd noticed my bright eyes. I felt like leaping at them and tearing them to pieces, but held in my claws and served dinner.

The pasta was so overboiled it dripped through our forks. The raspberry sauce was an experiment too far. At least the plates were warm, except Andrew's. His pork chop lay under a cold grill, potatoes dry in their saucepan, I also forgot the apple sauce and the vegetable medley. That night he lay awake moaning you gave me pasta! On a cold plate!

Memory 2: We daytripped to Dungeness, which sticks out from Kent into the Channel and has a nuclear power station and a lighthouse. Also a tarred shack, a place of pilgrimage, home to an artist who made a garden in the shingle. At the café I tucked into battered hake and triple-cooked chips. Trying to ignore my husband's loudly expressed views, e.g. that the UK government had shown a profound misunderstanding of the nature of marriage by opening it up to non-heterosexuals, I focused instead on a stripy-shirted waiter, his dark curly hair and neat bottom, platters held high as he wiggled between tables. Andrew, who believed himself to be an expert on spiritual matters, went on to comment on a newspaper story about an abducted child: that little boy must have done something very wrong in a previous life...

The piratical waiter sashayed to our table. Everything OK? As my husband began to complain about something or other, stripy shirt turned towards me and winked. A cheering memory during a long afternoon spent birdwatching on the windy nature reserve.

Memory 3: As soon as Andrew began to snore I'd creep from our marital bedroom to the spare room, where my true love waited. He folded me in a deep embrace, carried me into the night. He was older even than my husband, but so kind to me. Broken-sprunged, therefore soft. One day I overslept and Andrew found us together. He said nothing, but in revenge nailed boards under the mattress – to make the bed firm, he said.

Still is the skill. At first it felt odd then natural, the non-activity of my unself while life rioted, e.g. two crows fight/mated on a chimney pot. Tears kept falling from bronze eyes into upturned palm and dripping into the pool. Bees hummed in leggy lavender. A few years on, I noticed Andrew's absence from the garden. Next I saw people like scavenging insects. Carer and I assumed carer's hubby. She summoned him: Look what's out here! They tried to uproot me – a mistake. I am she who watches and decides they have no right. Brambles consumed their unsightly remains.

Curiosity unfixing my limbs and screeching like a rusty hinge, I re-entered the dormer bungalow. 'Home' smelled of musty neglect. Growth patches indicated slow leaks. Who'd help me fix stuff? Peering through my bracelet's tiny telescope, I saw Lo sunning himself on a white beach. Got the message, no postcard.

I found Andrew collapsed in the hallway. His whispered It's you! sprang real tears from me, not pool fillers.

We convalesced on rusty fold-outs in the glass lean-to: me a recovering metallic, he left all a-tremble by corpse-pickers. We laughed at the dog's tricks – briskly shaking off Art Deco, turning shiny silver. We gathered fungi spored in muddy corners. He apologised for the shoddy affair of our wedding, proposed a renewal of vows. No grubby hire-shop polar bear, for our rov rev he'd go full walrus. On his fold-out deathbed, thinking I was his second wife Matilda, he talked of our long and happy love. So my advice to girls is, marry an old ram turned sweet lamb.

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