

The Frozen Princess

Clara opened her eyes to find a very different world from the day before when life had been replete with promise and anticipation of their sumptuously romantic ritual. The perfect couple. Neo-Gothic castle. Merchant Ivory dream sequence in glorious technicolour. Perfectly planned. Notably attended. All joyously wrapped in the giddy promise of midsummer. No expense spared by the father of the bride for his 'Princess'.

Princess. How the innocent childish authority of the noun made her shrink with embarrassment and shame. How utterly blindsided she had been by this silly trope. The presumptuous birthright of every well-bred young girl.

She gazed heartbrokenly at her wedding dress over the armchair where she had left it. Folded too reverently and self-consciously as though for the absent deceased at a funeral, not in a customary heap on the floor as she had expected of their first hungry 'legal' coupling. A chilling reminder of the moment last night when the first throes of doubt had gate-crashed her dream and frozen her heart; transforming the radiance of momentousness into something prosaic, dirty, and cheap. Pretence. Deceit. Betrayal.

'You belong to me now', he had said with a gleefully supercilious half-smile, before drunkenly turning over and switching off his bedside lamp and falling asleep almost instantly.

Clara had hardly slept at all. The small hours stretched ahead of her like a purgatorial torture. Monotonous, interminable, no new dawn. Each terrible thought had added chilling credence to the stark realisation that she had made the biggest mistake of her life.

She wanted to shift her body to relieve the excruciating stiffness in her shoulders and neck, but dared not, for fear it might wake him to expose the full sordid horror of their mismatch in the cold light of this midsummer's day.

'Snow in June', she thought. A bloom untimely frozen. The beautiful face of death. Her life now antithetically shaped by tragic poetical opposition.

The cloying sickly sweet scent of stale champagne from her untouched glass on the bedside table offended her. A symbolic schadenfreude, goading her lofty expectations. Had she really been duped by a violent liar? Could he have convinced her of their absolute suitability so successfully if he wasn't sincere? A vestige of hope encouraged her to turn and gaze at him in the half-light. There it was. His noble beauty. Lightly snoring, manfully blissful.

She remembered the first time he had told her that he loved her, surprising her with the best seats in the house for a must-see performance of *Hamlet* at the Barbican with Benedict Cumberbatch. She hadn't had the heart to tell him that she had hated it. He had seemed so completely taken-in that she hadn't wanted to burst his bubble by pointing out that the emperor had been disappointingly naked. She found herself drifting from the play, turning instead to surreptitiously watch him being enthralled in the shadowy spillage of the stage-lighting.

'Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown', the actress playing Ophelia had said about Hamlet. Oh how she had thought it a most fitting description of her Richard's compassionate reverie. A beautiful man. Tears welling in his eyes. Honourable and virtuous.

As the play ended, he was first to his feet, breaking the reverential silence with an overwhelmed 'Bravo!', leading the public outpouring. All she could think of was, 'He loves me. He loves *me!*!', her euphoric exultation fittingly matched and masked by the audience's shared appreciation.

How could *that* man be the same terrifying person who accused her of looking covetously at his best friend? His best man! She had never, ever, had even the slightest attraction for Daniel. Yet he was absolutely convinced of it. Found her genuine attempts to placate him provoking and antagonising. Yet more than this, infinitely more heart-breaking than the wicked insults that had spewed from his mouth once they were alone, was the realisation that he could not possibly know her as she had believed when she accepted that they would be together forever. *That* Richard would see the impossibility. *This* Richard was more than convinced. He was insistent. She had even tried to make a joke of it to lighten the increasingly unsettling mood, and that's when he went berserk, smashing his glass and the vase against the hotel wall, yelling at her with a look of such hatred, his pungent breath more offensive than she had ever imagined as he grabbed her by the throat and looked down his exquisitely aquiline nose at her –

‘Don't you ever take that fucking tone with me or I will wipe that smug smile off your fucking face *forever!*'.

The princess-myth left shattered by the shards of broken enchanted mirror that now pierced his sight and revealed to her his darker self.