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Silk Purse

by Lou Beckerman

'You old devil you!' she had drawled teasingly, looking up at him through her slightly askew fake caked lashes. They'd been playing at flirting, and – well - she liked to sometimes imagine he had seduction in mind. It made her feel outrageously young and giddy, and what was the harm.

Her make-up hadn't absorbed properly into her tightened skin and was prone to sliding off her face as the day wore on. She had hoped for a natural look and was, in fact, about to get just that. Hoping he might perhaps kiss her on the lips (she knew with cutting certainty he never would, though the forever-young girl inside could dream...), she tissue-blotted and dabbed in case of smudging. As if to mock any modicum of precision, her ruby-red LadyBeBad gloss slipped, spread and bled into time-etched cracks and crevices, bringing them into sharp relief.

In the mirror she saw herself through cataract-clouded lenses. Candice (*never 'Candy' if you don't mind darling...*) would pass over the haze, favouring 'smoky' or 'dreamy', as in the classic Hollywood screen glamour of the stars. Like Heddy Lamar or Vivien Leigh. Not that they needed soft focus – the clichéd blurring merely heightened romance and mystery.

Their initial encounter was quite charming. About five years ago. Hampstead, North London. He stood before her in the queue while the Waitrose coffee dispenser was replenished. Worth the wait. She noted how their respective re-usable mugs were pink and blue, and to pass the time she said gaily 'We don't break with gender conformity I see'. Stirred so suddenly from his distant reverie, for a second or two he was poised mid-way between it and this moment. He looked round to find a pleasing, stylish, older lady, her eyes awash with merriment. Whether the amusement was caused by her own proclamation or his slightly befuddled response he wasn't sure. Anyhow, they'd connected. He courteously offered to sort the drinks; she found two nearby seats and together they drank their Americanos.

Their conversation, surface-skimming and stranger-civil, soon fast-tracked to less superficial past histories, albeit abridged. An ease of exchange belied their having only just met. Had she been furniture, he mused, though elegant, she might have been described as 'shabby-chic' - a look he rather enjoyed. She reminded him of his grandmother.

Simon, late forties, dark-skinned (the Portuguese inheritance), was her idea of handsome-as-hell, even with the darkened circles she noted under his eyes. He told her how it had taken many years and sustained endeavour to become recognised as one of Europe's foremost couturiers. How he was now weary of the guru status given to him, and the demands on his *Devil May Care* label, by the industry and public alike. He was bored by the skin-deep, sycophantic types with money but little sensibility; drained by the necessity to live up to his in-trade moniker of 'Devil'. Worn-out, he'd retreated to his London flat to reflect.

There are things you can tell a stranger who you'll never meet again. She told briefly of her life as wife and PA to an overbearing company director. Widowed now for three years, she confided how she felt an increasing sense of emancipation - something she'd only just admitted to herself. After years of being controlled she was gradually finding her voice, 'becoming her own person' - whoever that might turn out to be - and was hungry for experiences previously denied her. She stopped short of saying she hoped her seventy-eight year-old body - as well-preserved as it was - would keep pace.

They became friends who met in Waitrose's coffee shop. It was a refreshing, no-pressure distraction for them both. When Candice sometimes, only half-jokingly, referred to herself citing 'silk purse' and 'sow's ear' he would fail to agree. He said the already-made silk purse could only become silkier. He saw beauty in the crinkles and creases. When he flirted with her it was simply because he knew she felt uplifted. He could never exploit her. They played the game. He also knew his designs could empower a woman with low self-image, of any age, without her resorting to extreme or costly procedures.

Later that year at the Milan Fashion Week two stylists were in conversation bemoaning Simon's absence. 'Hadn't you heard?...The Devil's out of fashion now.'

In truth, Simon's new label, *Purses of Silk*, was only just beginning to take shape, courtesy of his new muse.