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## The Last Thing He Wanted

by Stuart Carruthers

He knew this wasn't going to be another typical day.

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The hotel manager was under pressure. On a Saturday morning a clear blue sky welcomed his guests. His nervousness was evident. Crooked tie. Hands and forehead covered in sweat. His tongue-tied words heralded howls of laughter from his newly arrived guests. Within no time the bar was full. It was going to be a long weekend.

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Downstairs someone shouted "The kettle's boiled," while half-naked women moved confidently between the numerous rooms of Number 78. In the sitting room a teenage boy sat transfixed at sights he had only dreamed about. The embarrassment of the situation tightened the cravat around his neck. He desperately wanted to be elsewhere. Between howls of laughter and tears, a lifetime of friendship was played out on this important day.

Maria sat motionless staring into the mirror. Her hair a tangled web of red curlers, clips and glue-like hair spray.

"Your stepfather phoned me yesterday," mumbled Clare with a mouthful of hair clips.

"Did he?"

"Bless him, he asked if I could check his speech. He must have been as thick as you know what at school, his spelling was dreadful. Wasn't his sister the head teach at St Paul's, she was a hard bitch."

"What did it say?"

“What?”

“Me Dad’s speech.”

“Do you see him as your real dad?”

“Might as well, the other one got off one day and never came back.”

“Can you imagine if he turned up today? Jesus wept, there would be murders.”

“Here pass that bottle, I need another drink.”

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John was having second thoughts. The bedroom floor was covered in crumpled pieces of paper. He never wanted to be best man. Seated at the kitchen table his best friend hadn’t a care in the world. The radio drowned out the racket from the high street outside. In his mind all he had to do was turn up, say yes and his future was secure.

“Are you taking this seriously Michael?” screamed John as he walked into the kitchen all flustered and in desperate need of a drink.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?”

“You’re sat here, reading the racing post and you’re a few hours away from losing any freedom you ever had.”

“Nothing is going to change, every bloke says that, but she knows the rules mate, I’m me own man John” said Michael as he leaned back and placed his arms behind his head.

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The old man dressed immaculately in his red dressing gown, stands motionless in the centre of the room surrounded by the classical voice of Maria Callas.

Eyes closed; a smile covers his face.

She enters the room without saying a word. His eyes follow her.

“Ann, Ann.”

Suddenly a fear engulfs him, unsure if it’s her.

On the wall behind him a black and white photo tells a story of yesterday.

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Emerging onto the awaiting platform the man in the dull overcoat pulled his cap down over his eyes. The leather bag slung over his shoulder held within it words that would change everything.

Before leaving the concourse he checked the times of the return trains. The hotel was a twenty-minute walk and giving he only had to hand over a letter, he would easily make the early evening train.

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Despite his earlier reservations the day had so far passed without incident. His guests were packed onto the terrace enjoying the late afternoon winter sunshine and the band were setting up downstairs.

Stepping into the foyer the receptionist welcomed her newly arrived guest. After a brief conversation, she walked him up the stairs into the dining room and introduced him to the married couple sitting in the bay window.

Politely thanking the receptionist he removed his cap and quietly engaged the couple in conversation. After a few minutes he removed from his bag a crisp white envelope and placed it in the bride's hand. Stepping back, he lowered his head as he said goodbye and walked briskly towards the reception.

"What does it say?"

"I can't read it, can you?" she said placing the unfolded letter into her husband's hand.

After what seemed like an age Michael dropped the letter to the floor, grabbed his wife by the wrist and leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

Her facial expressions said it all.

"You know what this means?"

"Yes."

"Don't tell her, it will destroy her."

"This certainly will put the cat amongst the pigeons."