

THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES

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Can I remember my first day at school? No, not anymore. I've slept since then. I've drank, or should I say drunk, an awful lot since then too. Jesus, my liver's seen better days.

Can I remember meeting my husband? Of course I can, everybody can remember when they met life their partner, can't they?

Do I regret getting married? I work in media, television to be precise. It's a place where nothing is off the record. At 36-ish I'm beginning to regret not having had children, well, I mean, children of my own. My husband came with . . . luggage. At the time I looked at it as a blessing, you know rather her figure get wrecked than mine but . . .

Did you notice that? It's called '*the swerve*'. The only profession in which that technique is used more frequently than in this one, politics. Those politicians manage never to answer anything. Celebrities do quite well in politics, Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Glenda Jackson. And of course there was Kilroy, then again he could never seem to make up his mind. Right now everything was still holding up. But you never know, when gravity takes hold and it all begins to go south, Politics would be an option. Although orange is such a ghastly colour. I'd probably go for red. Red is decidedly more vivid and youthful than blue. I couldn't wear blue all of the time, definitely not.

As for my first day here in production with ET2, that event is burned into my cerebral cortex for all eternity. It was that look he gave me. His tired eyes were dead and dark, a symptom of the loss of enthusiasm for life, no doubt. I'd been through five years of university, three years as an editing junior, and a good few carpet burns, I can tell you. I even remember an occasion involving bamboo splinters and a fractured coccyx, but that's another story.

Anyway, with a singular look of disparagement, 66-year-old Jamaican born Cedric Lucas impressed upon me that I was a fool. I, Carol Fox, was an idiot. I'd been nowhere and done nothing, and I should be appreciative that he'd granted an audience to one as unworldly as I.

"The woman, she is in your office," said the receptionist.

"Thank you, Olga," I replied.

"Mrs Fox, I keep tell you, my name is Vanessa. My name is not Olga."

We'd been having this battle since day one. Vanessa, little miss iron draws, came from Bosnia. She sounded like an 'Olga', so I called her Olga. The little cow retaliated by calling me Mrs Fox, she knew it made me feel old.

"Thank you, Vanessa."

"Please, Carol, the woman she is waiting."

"I'm coming."

"Oh, and package arrive, so I sign and put in your office."

"Thank you."

"I never know you play golf."

"I don't."

"So why you need 'golf ball cleaner'."

"It's a present," I snapped.

I had potential guests to interview, candidates for John Brooke's show. (I still call them contestants.) The show was a slightly more conservative version of 'Jerry Springer' or 'Jeremy Kyle', you know the format. Now that I was part of the production team, I felt like the show was *my* show, the Carol Fox show. I was awarded assistant executive status from *Season six, week one*. We launched the season with my own personal brainchild, "The Best Years of Our Lives." A show about those sad people with no self-esteem who felt they'd given their best years to their partners. The guest's common ground was they felt they were returned goods, long past their respective 'best before' dates, so to speak.

Ten-fifteen, first in-line for interview, waiting in my office was Shirley, a large big-busted woman from Essex. I'm not actually sure that she was from Essex. She just looked the Essex type. Those breasts could have fed the world and cost Bob Geldorf his knight-hood. No single word could describe them, humongous, ginormous, one applied to each. If she'd been with Jesus on that day, there would have been no need of loaves and fishes to feed the five-thousand. My first thought was that my own husband would leave me if I ever expanded to half her size. Although, over time, I reconsidered my initial summary. It takes all sorts to make a world. And whatever Shirley attributes Essex Shirley had, she made her best attempts to present them, all of them, well. Good packaging sells products, and Shirley was aware of this fact. The short peroxide-fed hair. The oversized earrings. The exposed sun-burned, freckled, slightly wrinkled cleavage. It was all for sale, or rent, I didn't know her well enough to judge. (Not that that's ever stopped me before). Put all these things together with the lavishings of jewellery and juvenile, sprightly make-up. Shirley cared about her appearance. I bet she knew how to decorate the community Christmas tree, perhaps she'd always been a woman of size, who could tell?

"Please, take a seat it." I gestured to toward a chair. As I watched her manoeuvre her posterior into a guest chair. It dawned on me how small those chairs actually were.

"Sandra," she stated in a matter of fact way. Her earrings jangling as she moved her head.

My mind shot over to my mother's conservatory and those awful tacky wind-chimes. My eyes first checked the air-conditioning and then the window. "Sandra, sorry, what?" This woman had taken me completely off guard. I hadn't yet taken my seat. "Carol Fox." I extended a hand and flattened the back of my skirt with the other before I sat down. "Give me one moment." I said, flicking through my files looking for her name, trying to ignore the clattering of bangles and chains as she checked the time on her obviously fake gold watch. I visually checked the window again. "You were saying?" I prompted her, whilst organising myself.

"Sandra Patterson," she repeated, wrapping her over-long, one-and-a-half-sizes-too-small cardigan, a little tighter.

"Sandra Patterson?"

"Yes, and I knew that woman was going to be trouble the second I met her."

"Which woman?"

"*That* woman."

"Okay," I agreed, my tone implying she should expand this revelation.

"I were bloody ridiculous. How could they give my husband a PA like that? You know one of those bra-less, bottled-water-drinking, electric-car-driving types. Ron was forty-six, for Christ's sake, she was just twenty-eight. It was only a matter of time before she was personally assisting him."

"So, Mrs Harley . . ."

"Shirley, call me Shirley."

"So, Shirley." My mouth made one of those involuntary, insincere, so-fast-it's-almost-undetectable smiles. (I'm actually having therapy to stop me doing it; apparently it makes me seem, false). "You blame the company for putting your husband in a position of temptation?"

"Not really." She sighed with resignation. "It was a case of six-of-one, half-a-dozen of the other, and ten-of-the-rest."

"Right, I see." I did the damned smile thing again, and made a conscious decision to look down at my clipboard if I ever felt that wince of a smile coming back.

"Ron, should have resisted, kept Sergeant Marzipan in his pants, he should have. That there company should review its policy with those bloody team building bonding thingys. And I know." She gestured dismissively with her hand setting the jangles off again. "I should have worked harder, I suppose. Marriage isn't a box of roses. You know, *lean and keen* doesn't work forever. Why would the donkey keep following the carrot if he'd forgotten what it tasted like?" Her whole chest wobbled as she released a massive sigh."

I realised, I'd never actually had a use for the word 'shimmy', not until now. "Okay, Mrs Harley . . ."

"Shirley."

"Okay, Shirley. You're losing me. Let's break this up, go piece by piece." I started to scribble some notes, but I stopped. I had to ask her, not knowing was playing havoc with my powers of concentration. "Sergeant Marzipan?" The words flew out of my mouth whilst still in preparatory draft. The word 'marzipan' emerged a full two octaves higher than the word 'sergeant'.

"Oh, Ron was a wonderful cook; cakes, puddings, that sort of thing. He used to make this pudding mix with marzipan in it. When he'd finished, I couldn't resist. I'd always wipe the bowl. You know, wipe my finger round it. I'd get as much as I could on the end, and then." She placed the end of her index finger into her mouth sucking it enthusiastically, before withdrawing it rather sharply to produce a 'pop' sound. "Bliss," she exclaimed, letting out a little moan followed by her trademarked shimmy. "The pleasure of licking . . ."

"Mrs Harley, please!" I snapped.

She stopped mid-sentence, open mouthed.

I felt uncomfortable, as in damp all-to-quickly turned-on by the actions of a fat woman - uncomfortable. I adjusted my position on my seat to lean on the armrest at the same time. As I lowered my elbow I realised Shirley's arse was wedged in the only chair possessing armrests. Did you forget? My name's Fox, never doubt the reflexes. I saved the potentially embarrassing moment by reaching down and retrieving the pen that I hadn't actually dropped. My main concern was as to why I felt so faint, breathless and damp at the mention of marzipan.

"Mrs Harley." I felt the wince-smile coming, so I quickly looked down. "If you do make it onto the show. Mr Marzipan is not to be mentioned. Do you understand?" I cleared my throat.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked *me*.

Shock! Horror! I wasn't actually prepared for this question. I was supposed to asking the questions, not *her*. "I don't think Mr Marzipan fits comfortably into my particular type of slot," I blurted out. My brain paused, rewound and played back to me what my mouth had just said. This woman had infected me with some sort of smutual innuendo. My whole future career flashed in front of me '*Welcome to Smut AM, with ET2's very own foxy queen of the den . . .*' No, I wasn't having it. It would be fine until the first wrinkles began to appear, then I'd be shunted over to QVC, the presenters' graveyard.

"Yes," she agreed reluctantly. "But it's Sergeant Marzipan not Mr."

"Fine."

"Bu why. . . Why doesn't it fit?"

"BECAUSE! IT JUST DOESN'T!!" I screamed at the very top of my lungs. The scream eventually echoed to an embarrassing silence. And not for the first time during my career, the entire building, and the good citizens of postcodes NW1 and W1 knew my period was due.

Shirley passed me a knowing smile. "Are you on your monthlies?"

"Right."

"Ha! I knew it. I can tell. I can always tell."

"Not *right* to that. I meant *right* as in . . . just forget it! I continued, referring back to my notes. "Right, Ron should have resisted - elaborate?"

"If he'd more backbone, yes, he should have. But I really *do* understand his dilemma. You see, I should resist chocolate, but I don't. If it's there, I have to indulge myself and then the indulgence becomes a binge, and I become the fifteen-stones that I am."

"I can see your point," I agreed, noting that this woman was well above her stated weight.

"But that's where I hold her, that woman, responsible."

"Sorry, you've lost me."

"You see, I may have a slight indiscipline when it comes to chocolate but." She cast her eye to the '*Walnut whip*' in her open bag. "You see, I wouldn't resort to stealing chocolate, ever. It's just – wrong! I'll binge on my own chocolate, nine-'til five twenty-four-seven. But you have my word, your chocolate is safe in my company, even if I was gagging for a bit."

"Of chocolate?" I felt a need to confirm her statement.

"Oh yes, you can trust me with your chocolate." She made one of those annoying gestures, you know, when people kind of twist their heads and wink. It annoyed me because she didn't, or couldn't, wink. So the result was just a rather pathetic looking, stand-alone, head-rock.

"You're saying, this Sandra Patterson woman stole your chocolate?"

"Yes!" She pulled the cardigan together again. "And she's not really a woman. She's just a wee slip of a girl. If she turned sideways, she'd vanish. I think it's because she's a vegetarian. I hate to think what she feeds my Ron. Ron and me both eat meat. Ron loves his meat."

"Maybe they're living on the fruits of love?" I said it. I spoke with my mouth in gear. I felt the wince-smile coming so I held my breath and looked down at my notes.

"That's another thing," she sneered, "That bloody organic crap they sell in the supermarket nowadays, *fruits of love*. I ask you." I released the breath I'd been holding.

"Thank you God," I mouthed before firing off another question. "How does Ron feel about all of this?"

"I don't care. The skinny bitch can keep him. I were once slim, you know. You wait till she's had as many kids as I have, and eaten as much chocolate."

There it was again, shimmy.

"How many kids do you have?"

"Six." Shimmy. "And I think they're all Ron's, more importantly *he believes* they're all his." Shimmy, jangle, head-rock.

Fortunately, she couldn't see the bemused expression on my face. She was off, staring into space, reminiscing.

"You know Carol, I think that's when things started to go wrong. When Ron were working away. You see, he'd pop home. We'd pop upstairs. Nine months later another sprog would pop out. You know what they say. Once you pop you just can't stop."

"Apparently so," I mused. "Did you not use birth control?" My bloody wince-smile came and went. It used stealth. I didn't realise until after the fact. Probably because the shimmying was distracting me.

"Raised Catholic, wasn't supposed to do it. Besides, I tried once but me blood pressure shot up and me ankles ballooned. Anyway, during my last pregnancy, I developed an insatiable desire for marzipan . . ."

"Ahem." I rolled my eyes at her.

She shimmied back at me.

I launched another question. "How did the company's team building strategy affect your relationship?"

"They went away on one of those stupid bonding weekend things."

"Yes, they have them here." I agreed. "We went on an assault course just last week."

"Well." She leaned forward, leaned back and waved her arm in some sort of dismissive gesture.

I raised my eyebrows expectantly.

She took so long to speak I felt like an idiot. I was stuck, eyebrows raised, probably looking like some sort of deranged lunatic. Protocol dictated I couldn't really change my expression until she *said*, or did, *something*. It was like playing facial twister. I couldn't change my expression until it was my move. I don't know why, that's just the way it is when you're having a conversation. For some reason, I felt peckish all of a sudden. Did supermarkets sell ready-made blancmange or do you have to make it yourself? Do they still even sell blancmange? I hadn't seen any for ages. Come to think of it, not since I was about five.

"Paint-balling!" she eventually blurted out.

My eyebrows felt relieved to be allowed home. "Yes, we've done that here at ET2, it's fun."

"Bloody waste of time," she spat. "Grown people chasing each other around the woods squirting fluids over each other, willy-nilly - it's daft if you ask me."

'*Well nobody did bloody ask, you silly cow,*' I snapped, but fortunately my mouth was disengaged at the time. My mouth took it upon itself to supply a more suitable answer. (Another trick of my industry. PVR – Programmed Verbal Reflex. It's really handy. PVR enables you to partake in pleasantries and pointless discussions without actually engaging your brain, and thus wasting valuable brainpower). It's a good thing too, my mind was reminiscing in the time when I got those bamboo splinters. Harper was such animal, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Actually, no. There was no sheep's clothing, he was as bald as a coot.

"Why's that?" my mouth asked her.

"They went, the place on the corner I think it was. They went on the Sunday. In the evening Ron brought her home with him. They'd only just finished, you could tell."

"How?"

"You knew, you could tell they were still at it right up until five minutes before they came in. She were still damp and dripping." Shirley spoke in a casual, uncaring way. "He were hot and sweaty and out of breath."

I couldn't hold my laughter. I was going to explode. Help. I reached over and poured myself a glass of water. If I could focus on a distraction? Think about something else, perhaps. While I took a moment to compose myself, I stretched over, offering her the jug, whilst I drank from my glass. She didn't even notice. She was looking out of the window.

"You could tell, he'd won," she added. "He'd shot a load right into her ear."

The mouthful of water I'd taken, found freedom. The droplets headed for every corner of the office. Thankfully, gravity came to my rescue! None of it projected more than two or three feet.

"He'd squirted her good and proper, it were all over her, it were all nasty and sticky. In her hair and everything."

It was all too much for me. I lost my motor skills all down my left side. The jug of water left my hand, crashing to the carpet. I should have been roaring with laughter but no sound would come out. To Shirley it must have looked like I was going to throw up.

"And it were bright blue!" she added.

That was the final, most cruellest shot of all. I felt dizzy, I reached back to trying to locate my chair but my entire left arm was still on a work-to-rule. My hand missed the chair. I ended up on the floor, laying on the soaking wet carpet.

"Are you alright petal?" she asked. "You seem to have taken a turn. Have you just been out gallivanting too much lately or do you think you might be pregnant? Oh, you can't be pregnant, can you? I forgot. It must be the other thingy. Our Glenda suffers badly with her monthlies. . ."

"I'm fine." I sat up, slowly recovering my faculties. "It's just been a long day." I didn't want to get up so I just sat there in the puddle. "Mrs Harley, the production team will be in touch with you." I gasped with suppressed laughter, gesturing in the direction of the door.

"Well if you have him, Ron, on the show. Tell him, I know that pearl necklace he gave her were meant for me." With that she closed the door behind her.

I just lay on the floor, rolling, squelching and banging the carpet with my open palm. I knew we couldn't have that woman on the show, we'd get sued. She didn't mean it, she just couldn't help it.

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

"That evil woman, Sue. She stole my prime. She took the best part of my manhood, the best part of me. She sucked it all out of me. That woman wouldn't stop sucking until I was dry, nothing left." He stared into the floor.

I'm a professional. I pursed my lips and closed my eyes. Images tried to manifest themselves but I resisted. I could have the giggles. I didn't get the giggles. It just wasn't me. A rustling sound refocused me.

"Cherry?" He held open a bag of sweets.

"Damn! I think I left the iron on!" I screamed as I ran from the office.

In the privacy of a toilet cubicle, I laughed hysterically, then cried a little. I was officially afflicted. That woman had done to me. But I was a professional, and I was strong, and I would live to fight another day. Twenty minutes with Mrs Harley could not do this to me! After five minutes of self-therapy. - *Said therapy involved physically abusing a previously perfectly serviceable cubicle door whilst cackling like a demented witch.* I hitched up my skirt and leaned against the hand dryer for a full fifteen minutes, even though my skirt was dry after ten. Suffice to say, after the experience with the hand-dryer, I realised chocolate is just so over rated.

As I returned to the office, shoes in hand. I had a new found confidence. It's amazing how a dry bottom, an aerated kazoo and the ability to walk squelch-free can give you such a boost.

"Sorry," I apologised to Mr Williams. "That may have seemed a little odd, my behaviour I mean. My running out like that. Iron on, transfers, logos, sweatshirts, cameramen, production crew. I didn't want to burn down the entire building."

"Not a problem, my love." He sucked on whatever was in his mouth.

I really hate it when they call you 'love'. I'm not their 'love', I'm my husband's 'love', and my family's 'love'. Why do these people think they have some God-given right to familiarity? I realised, I'd done the wince-smile thing by way of a response, but I didn't care, I welcomed it. It proved I was back to my old self and oozing with confidence. I blatantly attempted to see if I was cured. "So, What were you saying about your wife and her cherry?" I concocted the question for maximum innuendo.

"No love, my wife weren't keen on cherries. She'd suck for hours, but the one time she accidentally swallowed, she said it was a nasty experience, put her off for life."

"Really!" I enthused, I knew I was cured.

"Yes, a stone got stuck in her throat as a child."

"Children, cherries and sucking, do not make for a healthy recipe." I agreed. "So." I relaxed, scanning his information from his file. "Tell me about your ex-wife."

"She's not my ex-wife, we're still married, and these aren't real cherries, they're just boiled sweets." There seemed to be a degree of pride in his statement. I didn't know if the pride related to the cherries or his marital status.

"Oh, sorry, my notes are incorrect," I lied, I'd just assumed from the dates in the notes he'd be divorced by now.

"No we're separated, nearly ten years now."

It took a while for his words to register. I was pre-occupied with his hair. I decided he used one of those dyes that men use when they start go grey. I concluded that he'd obviously mistaken *minutes* for *hours* when reading the instructions, and left the dye on overnight. Terrance Williams' hair was black, as in black, black. The devil's heart was magnolia by comparison.

"Have you considered divorce?" I asked him.

"No," he replied flatly.

"Do you see her often?"

"No."

"Do you have any contact with your wife?"

"No."

"Is she actually alive?" I asked, he nodded his head vigorously.

Until this point, I'd been exploring the possibility that the super-black hair was really a polyester wig. The extreme vigour of his head movements caused me to sniff the air for traces of Araldite or similar epoxy resin. If he was wearing a wig, it was stuck fast. All I could detect was 'cherry odour', briefly I wondered as to its suitability as a fragrance for men. I concluded 'Cherry Spice' would be quite pleasant as deodorant, however the risks of wasps nesting in people's armpits may be detrimental to sales and therefore reduce its financial viability. "Did she move away? What happened to her?"

He'd sort of clammed up, this was going to be hard work, it wouldn't do for the show.

"Her personal trainer advised me to leave, ten years ago a week next Thursday." His quiet period was hopefully over.

"Leave where?"

"The house."

"Which house?"

"My house."

"Why?"

"He said the three of us living together was getting a bit awkward."

"You lived with your personal trainer?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She wanted him to move in?"

"What on earth . . .?"

"She said she needed regular sessions."

"I bet she did."

"After six months, I said I didn't think it was doing any good, and she was perhaps over doing it. She was always tired. So I said we should call it a day on the arrangement."

"Really?" I had cause for real celebration I felt a wince-smile coming on and I succeeded in stopping it. "What happened next?"

"He broke my nose. Look, you can see the bump." He turned his head sideways to show me his profile.

"People get sued for that sort of thing." I gasped.

"I know." He smiled at me. "But the wife talked him out of it."

"Talked him out of what?"

"Suing me. She convinced him to settle for a £10,000 cash settlement."

"I'm confused, you paid - him?"

"Yes, he sprained his finger. He's a personal trainer. It was loss of income."

"I can't see how a finger would make any difference whatsoever."

"Funny, that's what I said to the wife but she said I didn't know the routine, and his finger was used extensively in the warm-up sessions."

"I bet it was."

"Do you have a personal trainer?"

"No, I just know the routine. I can work-out on my own, thank you very much, I do it regularly."

My thoughts drifted to the time I'd gotten drunk at the office party. I glanced at the suede chaise longue in the office where I'd slept that night. I could still see the stains. It was the night when in my drunken state I decided to test the theory. 'A finger of Fudge is just enough to give a girl a treat.' Anyway, the vending machine in the cafeteria did sell Fudges, so I used a Cadbury's flake and it was really really messy. I had to bribe the early morning cleaners and call my sister, get her to bring me over some of her clothes. My sister understood my situation. She told me in confidence, she'd tried it too. She was actually relieved when the doctor told her she didn't have a venereal disease. It turned out, a finger of fudge wasn't enough for her. So she developed a passion for the Snickers bar. All the redness and swelling was due to a simple nut allergy.

"That's what I suggested, she could work out on her own," he interrupted.

His voice brought me back from my mental excursion. "£10,000 for a sprained finger. That's ridiculous."

"No, it was £2,000 for the finger, £8,000 for the nail," he explained.

"The nail?"

"Yes, the nail."

"What nail?"

"His fingernail, it went black. He's a male model, loss of earnings. You see."

"Mr Williams, has it ever occurred to you that you're being taken for a ride?"

"That's what I said, but the wife assured me she was on top of the situation, and if there was any riding to be done she'd be doing it."

Seeing as I've admitted the flake thing, I may well confess something else. If Terrance Williams hadn't been such a complete wet wanker. I probably would have cheated on my husband and agreed to a quickie right there and then. I couldn't stop thinking about Sergeant Marzipan, and that was making me horny. If I got caught, I'd have blamed Mrs Harley, the hand-drier, and the Cadbury's flake.

You see, Mr Williams had a big thick bush of a moustache, and as he spoke it wiggled around, almost taking on a life of its own. In my head, a random thought just snuck in. I wondered if it tickled. No, not tickled *him*. I wondered if the moustache would tickle *me*. As the thought became complex and unmanageable, it was joined by another, and the issue subsequently debated between the two. In conclusion, both my thoughts agreed. If his moustache actually tickled me as much as the thought of his moustache tickling me, tickled me - It'd have been game on! Fortunately a third thought told me he was a pratt, and fourth threw cold water over the whole idea by reminding me when my nephew got chewing gum in his hair and had to have it cut out.

Thought Five, reminded me I hadn't waxed for weeks.

Six, wondered how sticky boiled cherry sweets actually were.

Seven, spoke. "Mr Williams, would you like some coffee?"

"No thanks," he replied.

"Give me just one second." I rushed out of the office and into reception to gather myself.

"Olga," I called to the receptionist. "Please, it's quiet, nip across the road and get me a latte."

She pressed the mute button on the switchboard. "Yes, Mrs Fox. I have nothing to do here. These phones can answer themselves. I am your personal slave."

"Let the automated system handle it. Nobody can understand a word you say anyway." I proceeded to the wash-room to refresh up.

Vanessa continued the call she was on. "No madam, this is not call centre in Moscow . . . No, I do not know how much this call is costing you. . . No madam, if you want to speak to somebody English you must telephone the BBC. This is European Television Centre . . . goodbye."

Upon my return Vanessa looked up. "Mrs Fox, you want for me to call them for maintenances?"

"What for?" I asked.

"Is probably need new element," she said. "I can't believe is gone again, they only come to change it last month."

"What are you talking about?"

"The heating element in the hand dryer. Is must be broken again."

"No," I assured her.

"Very strange." She pursed her lips. "I hear it running fully, for at least fifteen minutes, and your hands they are still wet."

Busted. "Whatever!" I snapped. The wince-smile resurfaced. I wiped my hands on my skirt and took a step towards my office.

"Carol," she called me back. "Your are forgetting your latte. Here . . ." She passed it to me. "Is present, from your own personal slave.

"Thanks." Another wince-smile appeared before I removed the lid and inhaled the aroma. "Vanessa, this smells heavenly, what flavour is it?"

"I'm not so sure," she replied. "Flavour of the day. I think it has almonds in it. There's many lot of women queuing up for it over there. The manager he says some woman give him secret recipe earlier today, and ever since, people have been going nuts. Is yummy! While you were in the wash-room, I had a cup myself and gulped it down. It couldn't touch the sides. It smells." She sniffed the air. "Just like . . . how you say?"

"Marzipan!" I joined her in a one word chorus.

"I'll be buggered." I voiced singly, before taking a sip. I swirled the warm frothy liquid around my mouth for a few seconds before I eventually swallowed. "Hmm, it's delicious, there's something missing though. What is it?" I sucked my tongue for the last remnants of taste.

"Salt!" we both sang out in unison.

Back in my office with Terrence Williams, I made my apologies for the second interruption. It was obvious to me, his wife was taking the living piss.

"Terrance," I said to him earnestly. "I think maybe you should cut your losses. Take it from me, a woman. She's milking you for all she can get."

"I can't yet, too expensive," he replied. "I'm on a good deal at the moment."

"How so?" I asked, intrigued.

"At the moment, I only have to pay for the household bills and child maintenance."

I rifled through his application trying to find the right section. I was so sure he'd said they had no children.

"How many children do you have?" I frowned as I asked the question. I quickly swapped the frown for a grin, rubbing my forehead. Bugger, hope that doesn't wrinkle in later years, I thought.

"None," he said.

This man was determined to give me wrinkles on my forehead. How the hell does one express confusion without doing a forehead wrinkle thing? I needed this pratt to stop confusing me. How was I ever going to get a spot presenting breakfast TV if I had wrinkles? "No children, but you pay child maintenance?"

"Yup."

He was confusing me again. My breakfast spot . . . Spot! I rubbed my forehead. Wrinkle . . . spot . . . period . . . concealer; my chain of thought for anybody interested. I found one! It was probably only a little one but it was bang in the middle of my forehead. My inflammatory imagination immediately magnified the spot to an eyesore the size of one my husband's balls.

Sorry for another tangent but on the subject of golf. I remember when we, my husband and I, that is, had our first argument. Trust me, the hand dryer in the toilets is a mere toy when compared to the mother of all stimulations provided by - the portable mini-bidet. The device is a godsend! Our honeymoon was a chore when compared to this ingenious device. I was indebted to whosoever bought it for me as a wedding present. I spent an entire weekend, completely zonked! I didn't care about my life. I left the housework. I couldn't even be bothered to answer the phone. I'm no saint, I've done a few lines of coke here and there, but that all stopped years ago. When it comes to getting high, this thing was the new black, the dog's bollocks. My husband was furious! Apparently there's no such thing as a portable mini-bidet. He shouted at me because I'd worn out the batteries in his solar rechargeable electric golf ball cleaner. Boys and their toys, how are us girls supposed to know? He didn't speak to me for a week because I'd invalidated the lifetime guarantee according to some small-print 'fair-usage' clause.

I looked over to Mr Williams and wondered about the polyester wig again. It was then that I noticed him shuffling his feet on the carpet. I was about to open my mouth to ask a question but I closed it again because I noticed the fly. It kind of hypnotised me. That's when the music started – that music from that shark film. What's it called again? Jaws, that's it. Anyway, it was almost in slow motion.

The fly flew.

His feet shuffled.

The music played. The procedure repeated itself continually. The tempo ever increasing.

The fly flew.

His feet shuffled.

The music played.

Eventually the music stopped.

ZAPP! The fly landed on his head and a miniature flash of lightning lit up the office.

The fly lay on the carpet, dead. A lock of Mr Williams's hair pointed skyward as if directing the fly's spirit to heaven. And in a eureka moment I realised how those blue light thingys in take-aways worked. My brain pre-occupied, PVR kicked in again.

"Mr Williams," my mouth said. "This isn't gonna work out, polyester, studio lights, public liability insurance. I'm sorry but the legal department upstairs will never sanction it." I thanked him for his application and bid him farewell.

This situation left me a problem. Out of the three short-listed applications, one had cancelled, that left two. Out of the two, I'd expected to find a suitable candidate.

How can you be addicted after just doing it the once? God! I licked my lips. I'd gotten a taste for frothy latte marzipan and I desperately needed to try it with a touch of salt. That was it, I'd concocted a plan. I'd send out for more latte, scan the applications, and contact some more potential show guests. My clipboard and notes were soaked. I hadn't a clue what was going on. I needed to take a break.

"Vanessa, Another marzipan latte thingy from the place across the street, and pick up a couple of those little sachets of salt. Actually, make that a large handful."

"I know." She licked her lips whilst picking up her bag. "I need, too."

"Thank you." I gave her a thumbs up sign.

"Is a man for you." She pointed as she exited the doors.

Behind me, the next candidate was already waiting. I thought he'd cancelled. I was gagging for the marzipan rush, so I proceeded in my most expedient and business-like fashion. Get this interview out of the way.

"Come, come!" I beckoned the seated gentleman. Stepping aside from the office door I ushered him inside. "Take a seat Mr. . . I can't remember your name and my paperwork is *paper-mache*. Sorry, but it got a little damp."

The way he looked at me scared me a little. Or was I becoming paranoid? I could feel his mind focus on my *damp patch*. - That is, the *damp patch* on the carpet caused by that jangling head-rock woman, not my other, you know, as in . . . That damp patch, actually wasn't damp, but now was becoming so because he'd given a look, and licked his lips like a dog waiting as its master scoops its food into the doggie bowl. – Jesus Christ, either, the force was strong with this one, or I was afflicted and gagging for it – and my sister was right.

To avoid confusion; If I use the word 'damp' I'm referring to my person. The 'wet patch' is the area of carpet on which I spilled the water – I hope that clears things up for you.

"Lucas, my name is Lucas," he replied in a thick Jamaican accent.

"Well Lucas. . ." I started, but the second his foot hit my wet patch, the embarrassing loud squelch unbalanced me.

He stood there in the puddle of water.

I started apologising, "sorry about that, I had little accident earlier . . ." - Why didn't I just can it? Everything I said was making matters worse.

"It's alright my precious. In my line work you come across all sorts." He gave me a knowing look whilst rubbing his chin.

"No, it wasn't that sort of accident. . ."

"Precious, you don't need to explain to me. I'm not your daddy, your husband, or your boss." He momentarily took my wrist.

I felt relaxed and I hadn't even thought about asking God to make him burn in hell for referring to me as 'precious'. I concluded I must have been suffering from a version of marzipan withdrawal syndrome, and prayed for the receptionist to hurry.

Lucas removed his flat-cap before taking his seat. He smiled at me revealing a gleaming gold tooth in amongst the yellowing ivory.

"Right!" I pulled my feet in, ankles and knees together to adopt a prim and proper stance appropriate to my role. I looked down at my clipboard only to be reminded that I didn't actually have a clipboard. The thing was dripping on a radiator somewhere. All I could see were my knees, which were trembling. And they were covered in goose-pimples. Where was that useless receptionist? "Lucas. . ." I started.

"Cedric," he interrupted.

"Sorry?" I questioned.

"My name is Cedric."

"Oh." I pulled my blouse together, without my clipboard I felt naked and exposed.

"Cedric Lucas."

"I see," I said. But I didn't and couldn't see. I looked down again hoping either my clipboard had magically re-appeared, or my knees had stopped trembling. I was satisfied on neither count. On the subject of satisfaction. Where the hell was my latte? A wince-smile came and went.

"Right, Mr Cedric Lucas." I exclaimed with falsified jolliness. "What woman changed your life?"

"If I knew then what I know now." He shook his head in a resigned fashion.

"Tell me." I grabbed some loose paper from the printer, and a pen from the pot.

"I left my friends and family for that damned woman. I sailed half way around the world for her."

"Really?" I began scribbling frantically. This was sounding promising, and Cedric didn't seem to be a weirdo.

"Yes, I was going to marry Claudette, but that woman told me, I must come. I kissed my family, my little nieces and nephews goodbye. I tried to explain to Claudette that I had to go but she couldn't understand me, man."

"Oh Bless." I felt quite touched watching him tell his story, his eyes clearly focused on the past.

"The fourth day of horgust nineteen sixty-tree. I left out from Kingston and come to Hingland."

"Pardon?" I interrupted him.

He frowned.

"Oh right, the fourth of August nineteen-sixty three you came to England?"

"That is what I said, you fool-woman!" His tone made me feel foolish for my condescending attitude. And his little snap gave me a little tingling sensation. I like masterful men.

"All the things that woman promised me. She lied to me, man. She mek me make a damn fool of myself."

"How? What happened?" I asked.

"Do you know how many other men she made that same promise to? Some men left their wives and family for what this woman promised."

"Well, what happened to her?"

"She never cared about me. She lived in London with her husband. She never give me no welcome, no sorry, no nuttin'. The damn woman just deserted me to rot in this cold nasty place. She never even say, kiss my white ass."

"Oh my goodness, this was a white woman?" I needed to get my facts straight.

Cedric didn't directly reply he simply kissed his teeth.

"The damn woman is a witch. Mek me come to this cold country of hostility, and she desert me. I got myself a likkle room to share in Birmingham. Find myself a likkle job cleaning in a factory. If you knew how many times I thought to find that woman to beg her my fare home." He sighed and turned away from me, rubbing his eyes. "I still want to go home," he added, speaking to the puddle on the carpet.

I couldn't believe how emotional I was becoming. I was welling up inside.

"Cedric," I blurted out. "Bless you. You poor man. After the show, ET2 will write you a cheque large enough to send you home. What that woman did to you was evil."

"That's just how Elizabeth is with her superior self - What show?" He frowned at me again.

"*The Best Years of our Lives*. I want to put you on next Friday's show." I was so excited; this show would be the best ever. It would make my career.

Cedric kissed his teeth, frowned at me, and shook his head. "If you think I'm broadcasting my business on the television, think again. It's not my thing, precious."

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm from City Cleaning. I am supposed to contact a Mrs Fox. Something about a chaise longue needs steam cleaning."

A knock at the door delayed the onset of my mental breakdown. "Two lattes," announced Vanessa. "I thought your guest, he might enjoy the experience."

After she'd departed Cedric sniffed the air. "Not for me, smells like a girlie drink, definitely not a man's drink." He took a flask from his pocket.

I wasn't really listening. This marzipan stuff could be the ruin of any respectable woman. I was gagging for it. I caught myself eyeing Cedric whilst moistening my lips, thinking of opportunity. The chaise lounge hadn't actually been cleaned - yet. Why not take advantage? When the fact that Charlie Chaplain fathered children well in to his eighties led me to perform a risk assessment on Cedric's robustness, I knew I was at the edge of an abyss. I was resourceful and made of stern stuff, I resisted! Okay I'm lying! I just didn't fancy the idea of old Cedric having a heart attack on top of me. . . .Ah, but if I was on top of him. Would that work?

"Carol, no." I spoke the words out loud. Hearing myself, was a good as a slap. It gave me an idea though. The words *body* and *double* lead me to a potential solution.

"Cedric, could we tell the story if we used an actor to play you?"

"I suppose, if you don't use my real name."

"Done!" I leaned forward and shook his hand. "Now, we won't broadcast it, but I'm going to need Elizabeth's surname for reference, and legal reasons."

That's when he gave me that look. The look that almost destroyed me. The look came exactly as he shrugged, paused and said. . .

"The second - you stupid woman."

Anyway, I told you. I work in television. I'm a presenter now, so I'll say; *that's all we've got time for*. As for Cedric Lucas, we're good friends now. Maybe I'll tell you all about him next week. Marzipan and nutmeg, a deadly combination. This has been Carol Fox on the best years of *my* life. Stay tuned to European Television 2 for our movie of the week, Nuclear Deterrent II.