

## DIANA LIVELY IS FALLING DOWN

by  
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Diana Lively is naked under her shiny yellow Mac. Water streams down the plastic raincoat, carrying clouds of lather from her daughter's hair. Eleanor, age four, wails to the shampoo gods, but it's not the soap in her eyes that's making her cry. It's the indignity of having been caught with her brother's new packet of Walking Stick Insect Eggs before she's had time for a proper look. Worse, five of six eggs have gone missing and Mummy's put Bunny in the washing machine.

The raincoat is ludicrous. This Diana knows. Still, better this silly shield than the possibilities that suggest themselves in venomous twigs hatching in unexpected places, for despite her intellectual powers, Diana has an uncommon aversion to insects of any kind. The thought of one, even the childishly drawn Walking Stick Insect on the front of William's packet - much less the two hundred offspring promised - is enough to cause her feet to move of their own accord. And so it is, that here she stands, in this shower, on a late summer afternoon, wearing her raincoat. Diana's heels rise slightly off the ground; her beautiful mouth twitches with each movement of her daughter's head. To put it kindly, she is alert. Highly alert.

Diana's eyes are blue-grey and slightly Asian-looking in their elongated shape, though she is fifteenth-generation English aristocracy, a fact which she ignores and her husband discloses with equal amounts of daily exertion. Even when she's had a full night's sleep, which she hasn't for three days - having stayed up to finish a dollhouse for Mary Colville's daughter's birthday - Diana's eyes have a slightly smudged look. Her mother and eldest son are constantly after her to wear a concealer, or as Humphrey puts it, "Well, at least put on some bright lipstick, Mummy, to distract the eye! If you'd just take the time!" Then he'd tsk, tsk and plead with her to let him just take five minutes each morning. The things he couldn't do.

A knock sounds at the bathroom door and eighteen-year-old Humphrey peeks in, his wet hair slicked back like a blond Elvis. "I'm done, Mum. No cooties. How's Eleanor look?"

At the sound of her name, Eleanor clammers over the side of the tub, dripping water on the hexagonal tiles.

"Eleanor!" Diana's voice carries with it her phobia and exhaustion, and she repeats her daughter's name in a softer tone to reverse the effect. Humphrey swoops his sister back into the tub and kisses her neck until she giggles.

"Come now, I can't do this if she's moving," Diana murmurs but she too is laughing.

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In Arizona, Wally Gold is known as the Ammo King. Here in England, he's just another rough-around-the-edges American tourist, except to a small group of professors in one of the Oxford colleges, who have been told of his visit and the money it might bring their way. Wally is trying to find the Porter's Lodge at this fine college, alma mater to prime ministers, NATO chiefs and Nobel laureates. Part of the problem is that Wally's not sure what a Porter's Lodge is, or for that matter, a porter. He is thinking of a lodge, as in Elks or Moose headquarters, and walks directly past the small stone anteroom next to the yawning arched gates with their Latin inscriptions, that, were he able to read the language, would have told him where he was.

Wally is six feet but he looks taller, with the physiognomy most often associated with

meat carvers and longshoreman. His face is a broad-planed tribute to Slav, Italian and Jewish ancestors, with a wide forehead, high cheekbones, hawk-shaped nose, cupid lips and pointed chin. He's wearing an ill-fitting black suit that his wife had bought four years before, on sale at Barney's in New York.

"Hey, Babe, on sale or not, it doesn't do me much good if it's too small," Wally had said gently. "Now we can't even return it."

"You'll grow into it," Mary Kate had said. "I've already done our New Year's resolutions and we're giving up meat."

Wally laughs; his dark eyes brighten with the hint of tears. He holds his watch out in front of him as far as he can and tilts his head back to read it, before pulling a pair of glasses from his front pocket. The watch is still on Arizona time. Wally mouths the addition. "It's eleven. Plus eight. That's seven," before quickening his step, hurrying in the wrong direction down the busy Oxford street, away from the College gates.

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Ted Lively, Diana's husband, is a professor at St. Marks College. He is an expert in Arthurian Legend. Ted is very handsome, if a little on the thin side, and he wears his brown hair in the same sculpted Prince Valiant cut he's worn since he was an undergraduate here. Ted's office is a suite, with a large study and smaller bedroom off to one side. Ted's desk - a massive eighteenth-century block of ornately carved cherry - is perfectly clean, save his new computer. His black leather jacket is lying on the back of a fine burgundy leather couch. The jacket and the computer are the newest things in the room.

A blonde undergraduate named Fiona Cheswit is sprawled across the sofa, her brown suede hip boots rising confidently from a jewel-toned Uzbekistan carpet. She is slightly intimidated by Ted's bookshelves, the rows of first editions kept gleaming by the College's house staff, and so, opens her long legs just an inch wider, to reverse the power flow.

Ted pretends not to notice that Fiona has neglected to wear her knickers, confirming his hypothesis that her tresses are naturally blonde. He is thinking of offering her a glass of sherry, thinking of the single bed in the adjoining room, thinking of England, when a knock shatters his reverie. Both he and the fair Fiona jump up to meet the president, who has entered without waiting for a response.

Behind President Bernard looms an ox of a man, who looks as ill at ease in the College as he does in his suit. He looks like a butcher, looks as though he should be manning a blood-smeared meat counter in the Covered Market, but Ted has been forewarned. This must be the American. Ted looks at his watch. "Terribly sorry. We were just dissecting Chetrien De Troyes' thirteenth - suffice it to say, I've let the time get away from me. You must be Mr. Gold."

Wally reaches out to shake Ted's hand. "Wally," he says. He turns expectantly toward the young woman, waiting to be introduced. The professors ignore her as she gathers her belongings and saunters off.

Ted opens an old book and lifts it towards Wally with the expectant triumph of someone who's holding the top secret code to next year's NFL draft picks. Mary Kate could have explained what all the fuss was about, Wally thinks, if he'd only come that summer she'd wanted. He straightens his back and grinds his clenched fists deep into his suit pockets.

Wally finds his glasses and forces himself to look at the picture that Ted is holding up for him. "It's 'The Troubadour,'" Ted murmurs, indicating the colorful portrait of a reclining knight, adoring a fair-haired damsel. "A variant of the tale of Gawain, who saves Arthur by marrying a Hag. He kisses her and presto! she's a beauty, with the complication being that she

can be beautiful either by night or by day, but not both. He must choose which. Well, most knights would, of course, choose night, as that is when they see their women most. But Gawain is an impulsive fellow, and he generously tells the woman that she can choose the time herself. By showing compassion, which arises from his natural spontaneity, he releases the hag from her spell and she remains beautiful round the clock. Amusing twist on paradise regained, eh?"

Wally's eyes have a faraway, distracted look. "Kind of about faith, if you think about it," he whispers, almost to himself.

"Oh, Lively, speaking of beauty," President Bernard interrupts. "I saw Diana at Boots this morning. Invited her to dine in tonight."

"Brilliant," says Ted but even Wally can see that he is anything but pleased.

Ted reluctantly closes the book, his hand imperceptibly caressing the colorplate with one hand before he brings the binding together with a snap.

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Humphrey is brushing his mother's hair and working it into a simple French twist. Hair pins protrude, fan-like, from his clenched lips. Diana is trying to do something about her fingernails, which are bitten down to the quick.

"A pity women don't wear gloves to dinner these days," mumbles Humphrey, around the pins. "Your nails are a disgrace."

"I'm shattered they let poor Gordon go. He always made me feel better, one friendly face in that stuffy-"

"So who's the new butler then?"

"I don't know- "

"Eleanor, come back here right this second! I saw you take them. Now bring them back! This instant!" Eleanor steals into the room on all fours, Diana's diamond pendants hanging from her mouth. She slowly makes her way to her mother, who pets her daughter's head before bringing her up to her lap for a smooch.

"Really, Mum, this hoarding business has gone on eons longer than is developmentally appropriate. I wonder if she could use some psychiatric attention."

"Maybe you can get a two-for-one scheme for Eleanor and Humphrey!" laughs William, aged ten, who has entered the kitchen from the back door. William plops down on the chintz-covered cushions of the window seat.

"Out! I just finished washing those," scolds Humphrey, pointing at his cherished Laura Ashley fabric. "Put your trousers by the sink in the washroom and then up to the shower. Mum's off to High Table and you aren't to spoil it for her."

"Who wants to go to High Table?" mutters William, taking a scone from a basket which Humphrey has swaddled with a napkin of the same blue and white fabric as the cushions. William rolls his eyes and leaves the room, trailing crumbs behind him.

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Though Humphrey couldn't have known it, and would have been crushed if he had, William's pants are full of mud because a Year Eight boy has pushed William down on the football field. It is his first term at middle school, and William wants desperately to fit in with all the other Year Five students. But Marcus Graves, whose older brother, Spencer, had lost last year's fencing competition to Humphrey, tripped William and held him down. "Your brother's gay. Must be gay too."

"Is not!" William had shouted, tackling the older boy's legs and pulling him down with

him. "He pummeled your brother!"

"Only 'cause Spencer didn't want to touch him!"

At this, William had seen red and kneed Marcus in the testicles, hitting Marcus' cup. The pain in his knee brought tears to William's eyes.

"Bloody unnatural family," shouted Marcus, for the rest of the team to hear. "Brother crochets doilies, sister nicks everything and father is some fag at University!"

As he makes his way up the stairs, William lets the tears come, giving into them, and prays for something, anything, to save him from this year at school.

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In the kitchen, Diana has been transformed. She has let Humphrey work his magic with hairbrush, concealer, lipstick and a "spot of color" under her cheekbones. She wears a deep blue shimmery dress that whispers as she moves, sheer black stockings and a pair of slim black leather slippers. She moves with the natural grace of a dancer, though it's been years since she's had the time for ballet.

Her eldest son has prostrated himself at her feet as she heads out the door holding her bicycle helmet.

"Take a taxi! Your hair will be ruined!"

"It's not far and I'm late. This will get-"

"We're not into the overdraft again, Mum?"

"I'll get the cheque for the dollhouse next week. And I've another commission next week. Really, I prefer to cycle, darling."

"While Ted takes cabs and buys himself a new computer?"

Diana sighs. "That's his money, from lecturing. I'm late, darling."

"Mum, what's his is his and what's yours is ours?"

"Humphrey," Diana says sternly. "We all do what we feel we can. He needs the computer for work."

"Then why did he interrogate you about the blueprint you bought the other day?"

"Because I've never practiced my architecture, Humphrey. This is enough. I appreciate your concern, but these things are between Ted and me. I've told you before: marriage doesn't tolerate mathematical analysis. If it makes you feel any better, I'm looking forward to the exercise and fresh air before I settle down for the evening next to some bloody old bore bursting with the effects of pre-Raphaelite syntax on postmodern diction among Bolivian expatriates who wear feathers to bed on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Humphrey snorts out an involuntary laugh. "Promise you'll fix your hair?"

Diana holds her palm up to her first-born in a solemn finger-matching ceremony before Humphrey slips a small comb into her evening bag and kisses his mother goodbye.

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President Bernard opens the door to the Senior Commons room after he and Ted have donned long black robes. They usher Wally through the door ceremoniously. The room is palatial, with two-story ceilings, fifteenth-century tapestries, seventeenth-century chairs and paintings of stern-looking men wearing historically-appropriate black garments. Something about the setting invites reverence, or in Wally's case, intimidation. He lowers his voice to match the hushed tones of the rest of the room's occupants. At the same time, he represses a cliff-jumping urge to yell out a Southern football cheer. President Bernard pours three small sherries and

offers one to Wally. Wally has never in his life tasted sherry, but as it looks like the only alcohol available, he takes the tiny glass and sips it, shuddering at its unexpectedly sweet taste. Paul Bernard looks at his watch. "As soon as the rest of our group arrives, we'll process to High Table." He inflects the verb so that it sounds like procession.

"I'd better use the men's room then," says Wally, feeling like he's back in first grade raising one finger at old Mrs. Humberside.

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Diana stands in front of a huge gilt-framed mirror, around the corner from the College Senior Commons room, where she is expected to join the College Fellows and their guests for sherry. She has set her bicycle helmet on the floor and is frantically trying to get her hair back into a smooth roll before one of her husband's colleagues come round the corner. When Wally lumbers into view of the mirror, she jumps, startled. Her hair falls out of the bun she's worked so hard to create and she frowns, ignoring Wally completely.

Wally wants to ask her where the Men's room is, wants to ask her where he can find a real drink. He wants to tell her that she's the first beautiful woman he's seen in England. Instead, he says "Sorry."

"That's alright. I thought you were one of the Fellows, 's all. Look, sorry to ask you this on your first day, but could you possibly find a place to stow my helmet? I tried to get into my husband's office, but it's locked. And he'll be disgraced if I walk in as though I haven't alighted from a golden chariot, manned by footmen- " At this point Diana smiles at Wally before she puts three hair pins in her mouth and whips the comb through her thick black hair, getting snagged almost immediately on a batch of tangles.

Wally obediently picks up the helmet, thinking that even Mary Kate hadn't been so bossy to complete strangers.

Diana eyes tear up but she continues to yank the comb through her hair, ripping it and scowling at herself in the mirror. Wally hides Diana's helmet behind a potted plant and strides over to her, taking the comb in one meaty hand and enveloping her tresses with the other, gently working the comb through to the ends.

Diana's face has gone several shades of pink as she tries to think of the correct response to the new butler's extreme familiarity.

Wally speaks first. "You need to start at the ends and work your way slowly backwards toward the scalp. I used to do this with my daughter."

The man's American accent stops Diana in her tracks. This one's not long for the job, not here. Too bad, really. There's something in the ease with which he untangles her mane that makes her feel as Gordon did, at home in this unwelcoming place.

"You have children?" Diana asks kindly, already imagining this man thrown out on the street with his family.

"Just one. She's seventeen."

"And how is she liking Oxford?"

"Oh, she couldn't come. She's got school."

"Oh! You must miss her terribly!"

Wally is glad to have someone read his mind. "God! I do. But she insisted I come and do this for her mom."

Now Diana truly pities the man. "Are butlering positions so scarce in the United States?"

Wally looks puzzled. "I- Oh!" His laugh is low and ragged. Diana is suddenly put to

mind of a large Kodiak bear she saw a few weeks earlier on the BBC. Wally catches his breath and picks up the comb from where he's dropped it. A glint comes into his eyes as he takes Diana's hair and twists it expertly into a pretty close approximation of Humphrey's handiwork. He sets the comb on the table and places a trembling palm in front of her for the pins. "I used to do hair before they hired me to wait on the Oxford Dons. Might Madam hand me the pins, please?" he asks, shaky with the effort of trying not to laugh.

Diana senses a sudden change in his demeanor. The man appears unstable. She can see his hand is beginning to shake. What if he's not the new butler after all? What if he's just wandered in off the street?

"I've got it," she says, commandeering her bun as she spins away, out of reach. "Thank you," she adds, as she edges backwards towards the opposite wall, knocking over an ivory stag umbrella stand. She sticks the pins in quickly, so that only one side of her hair is secured, the other half falling in a Dutch Girl wave against her shoulder, as she uses the outside of her foot to lever the white stag replica upright. It teeters gently before penduluming back to the ground.

Wally moves instinctively towards her, his arm coming up to help her fix her hair, but Diana ducks out of his reach and runs toward the Senior Commons door.

"Your purse!" offers Wally, now nearly dancing with his need to find the men's room. He jogs manfully towards her holding her small beaded bag.

"Keep it! You'll find I've got no money!" cries Diana, vaulting through the large oak doors and into the room, where a dozen esteemed professors are drinking sherry and quietly chatting. They all turn to gasp at Diana, who - having loudly pronounced to the world the universal truth of being an academic's wife in Oxford - stumbles through doors that were in the process of being opened from the other side. In her struggle to regain her balance, Diana grasps at the nearest grey-flanneled knee in her vain attempt to stay upright.

The pants she's yanked are those of the new College butler, Joseph, who is carrying a small tray of sherry glasses. Though Joseph's pants are pulled past the Calvin Klein waistband of his boxers, he manages to keep his tray and its contents in teetering balance, proving his stripes in the brotherhood of English butlering. He helps Diana up and tucks his head down towards her with a patronizing bow.

"So sorry," offers Diana, to the group of black-robed Fellows, whose spines have registered her Venusian one-sided hairdo with the slightest of readjustments towards Heaven, "but there's a man out there!"

The President's wife, who is far more clever than anyone credits her with, is the first to offer Diana her hand as she chuckles, "That would give one a turn, dear, in these halls."

Celia Bernard's barb is wasted on Ted, who is strenuously shepherding Diana towards the stairs to the women's powder room door, hissing, "What in God's name have you done with your hair?"

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Humphrey needn't have bothered with the "spot of color." Throughout the evening, Diana can be observed, her head turned with unswerving, focused interest toward the sub-Saharan linguist on her right, or at table turn, to the physicist on her left. Her cheeks are emblazoned with the scarlet patches of a woman who has been slapped. And, metaphorically speaking, she has. This man, whom first she's taken for the butler, and second, a thief off the High Street, is seated between her husband and President Bernard.

It is the linguist who explains his identity: a rich American who is dedicating a small library of texts on Arthurian legend to his late wife's memory. The wife, it seems, was an enthu-

siast of Camelot, and Wallace Gold is being cultivated to endow a chair in Arthurian Studies. "Which," Victor Lesh adds, with a leer, "would of course benefit your mate, considerably. Not that you need it, being royalty and that."

"I'm afraid my royalty has as much to do with legend as any of the tales of King Arthur," Diana says, distracted by the hiccup of annoyance she feels at her husband, who continually puts her in the awful position of having to choose between carrying on the inflation of her bloodlines or contradicting him publicly. She shakes her head and doesn't notice Wally, who is trying to catch her glance, in between trying to figure out which fork to use and wondering what that grey gelatinous mass is that Ted has heaped on his plate.

"You see, as we know it," Ted continues on Wally's right, "the Legend of the Grail first appeared at the end of the twelfth century. Most people associate it with swordplay and gore, but it is very much about the quasi-mystical exaltation of Woman. This myth countered the Church's stranglehold on the definition of woman as the temptress Eve, who'd caused so many problems with her apple. But of course, in these tales, I argue, Woman isn't really woman at all, she's the Earth goddess, she's Fertility, she's a way to reclaim barren lands decimated by the Crusades."

"Sounds like you dons could use a dose of that."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Where's all the women?" Wally asks, spreading his hand out to indicate the splendid eating hall studded with Renaissance portraits, the luxurious candlelit tables, the wines, the food, the tapestries, the glorious architecture of the room, the rows of black-robed professors. "And where's your wife? I thought the President said she'd be here."

"You didn't meet Diana?" asks Ted, ignoring Wally's larger question, as he flicks his pinky towards the linguist and the physicist, who are leaning forward, speaking around Diana, obscuring all but a patch of blue sleeve and a set of tapping nail-bitten fingers. "Of course, some know her as Lady . . . but you can see how that might have caused confusion when the Princess was alive."

"I'd like to meet her. After losing my wife, I find I'm ... well, women, they just cheer me up."

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The travel agent has booked the largest suite at the Old Parsonage Hotel, but Wally's presence still overwhelms the sweetly decorated room.

It is one a.m. and the lights are off. French doors admit the milky moonlight of the garden. Wally wears blue and white striped pajamas and kneels to the side of the bed, hands folded on its coverlet. He is praying, something he's come to only recently. Outside, in the garden, a sudden brightness appears and recedes so swiftly, Wally can't be sure if he really sees it or not.

It is in that slip of moment, between the knowledge and the question, that Wally understands what it is he must do.

The next morning, he calls Arizona, waking Guy, his best friend and Chief Financial Officer, who tries to change his mind. After reminding Guy that he's the boss and the boss always right, Wally hangs up the phone and heads to the College to have lunch with President Bernard.

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Diana is wearing headphones and singing along with the Captain and Tenille as she hangs microscopic voile curtains in the upstairs bath of her latest creation, a miniature French

country house of yellow stucco with tiny granite sills inset across the Provencal facade. She is crouching and singing and shaking her booty every time the Captain hits a high note and thus does not hear the doorbell. Eleanor is only too happy to usher the friendly giant into the house, only too happy to relieve him of his passport while he moons at her mummy like Jack in the Beanstalk the first time that goose laid its golden egg.

Wally leans over awkwardly to tap Diana on the shoulder. She jumps up, yelping, swiping at the creepy crawly that has landed on her shoulder while stamping at the ground in a way that is completely involuntary, so that as her face registers the presence of a human, her body is still hopping away from the horde of huge jumping Malaysian cockroaches that have attached themselves to her twitching carcass. Wally is so empathetic that he steps back too, right over the spot that previously held a miniscule, perfectly-fashioned French Provencal sofa, but now holds a crushed scarlet velvet blob punctured by broken wooden splints. The Captain and Tenille are now crooning in the general vicinity of Diana's collarbones, and she looks at Wally like he is some bill for which she is being unfairly charged at a rate that was exorbitant in the first place.

"I guess this isn't the time to tell you that Captain and Tenille went out with Earth Shoes and were last sighted at the Peoria Dinner Theatre, opening for Englebert Humperdink and the Lennon Sisters?" asks Wally, reaching for his wallet.

"I don't suppose this is the time to tell you that I don't follow fashion when it comes to music," retorts Diana. "If you're looking for my husband, you've missed him. He's meeting with Paul at the College."

"I was just there and they told me he was here," says Wally, distracted by the fact that his large wallet seems different somehow. He pulls out a fifty pound note and clumsily offers it to her. "Sorry about the doll furniture. Can we get another?"

"No, we can't. It's alright," Diana sighs. "To tell you the truth, I wasn't too happy with the rucking on that settee. It must be a sign from God."

"Don't laugh. I believe in those."

"Oh, so do I. But if He's truly involved himself in the rucking on settee, this is a deity with too much time on his hands."

"I'm serious."

"So'm I. Quite serious. I barely find the time to floss. And He's got an entire universe to maintain."

"Do you ever feel like it's not God talking, but maybe ... someone you ... knew?"

At this, Diana meets Wally's eyes.

She softens, taking his hand and gently rolls his fingers over his currency, as though to say, Take your money, it's alright.

"I lost my first husband, twelve years ago."

It's all she has to say.

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When Humphrey and William return to the house, they find a large man sitting at their mother's kitchen table, a pair of reading glasses leaning off of his nose. Wally is examining a splinter he's pulled from his thumb, remnant of his futile attempt to fix the tiny settee he's crushed.

"Hullo?" asks Humphrey, dropping his knapsack and edging William back towards the still open door.

"I'm Wally. Your mom'll be right back. You guys hungry? I could make you a sand-

wich."

Humphrey warily begins emptying his pack onto the kitchen counter: pine cones, purple dried flowers, scarlet leaves. "That's very kind of you, Mr. ... eh ... Mr. Wally. But we're not hungry."

"I am!" says William. "But there's nothing in the pantry - Mum's dollhouse lady's coming soon-"

"William," warns Humphrey, pinching his brother beneath the elbow.

"Hey. Tell you what," offers Wally. "I saw a Pizza Hut downtown. You guys ever had pizza? Gimme the phone."

Wally has dialed 192, but in a heartbeat, Humphrey has leapt across the floor and pressed down the reset button. "It's very expensive in this country to call Directory Enquiries," pants Humphrey, his cheeks reddening. "We-"

"It's not that we're cheap," volunteers William. "But Daddy tweaks Mum if he finds one on the bill. He wants her to walk to the public call box, on the corner, where Directory inquiries are free. It's awright though, I can dial their number."

Wally looks back and forth from Humphrey to William a few times, as if to digest these nuggets of information. "I guess you have had Pizza Hut," he laughs.

"It's numbers," says Humphrey. "William's got a part of his brain that's dead on with numbers. We've never ordered take-away pizza, but if William says he knows the number, he does."

William punches in the telephone number, his brother's praise and the prospect of real food pulling his lips into an upside-down smile.

Wally takes the receiver and is ordering as Diana comes into the house. "Hello? Pizza Hut? You deliver? Okay. How about one cheese, one pepperoni? The biggest you got. And how about some Cokes? I'm gonna hand the phone to my friend, William. He'll tell you where the hell we live."

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"You must be joking! I shall be the laughingstock of Oxford! I won't do it," shouts Ted.

"Could you not use the money?" asks the president. "I know the College can."

"You know I desperately need the money! But why not ask me to dance naked through France for it? You know I'm shortlisted for the Fletcher Prize! If they hear of this, I'll be out! I've worked too hard to have it snatched out of my fingers at the final moment by a sentiment-driven Neanderthal from North America!"

"The consulting fee is ten times what you'd get from Fletcher, Ted."

"The King Arthur Theme Park and Museum! In Lake Havasu, Arizona! Where in God's name is that?"

"Three hours by car from Phoenix. A short plane ride. Where the London Bridge is, Lively. You've seen the pictures."

"No, I can't say I have, Paul. I'm not a masochist who delights in the Americans' appropriation of our culture. And you're asking me to help the man create another abomination, a theme park in the desert, but it's not just any theme park. It's one that takes what I consider to be one of our national treasures, my field of study, and turns it into a technicolor nightmare!"

"It doesn't have to be that, Ted! The man wants to create a monument to his wife. Why not use your influence to prevent the nightmare? Create a real tribute, that educates visitors--"

"Paul, have you taken leave of your senses? What sort of person drives through a desert to look at a bridge that belongs to another country? Americans on vacation don't want to learn. They want Mac-xperience. I can see it now, sand, plastic, and fat Yanks covered with sand."

"You don't have to live there, Ted. You can live in Phoenix."

"Stop! Don't you think it's bad enough that one rich American steals our bridge? Do we have to add to the insult by allowing another to erect a monstrosity--"

"Look, he didn't steal it. The London Bridge was sinking into the Thames and our government sold it to him."

"Paul, that bridge is our history."

"Lively, why are we arguing? You will have leave of teaching, you can write your next book living in -- I'm certain -- a beautiful house in Phoenix that he's providing, free of charge."

"Paul, you can't force me to do this. I won't do it. The King Arthur Theme Park? Just a hop, skip and jump from the London Bridge! If I weren't so insulted, I'd get a good snigger out of this! Paul, you can't force me to do this. I won't do it."

"Think of the money. Think of your family. And he's willing to pay, whether the project is completed or not. For all you know, the Americans Against Amusement Parks are banding together right now, to bring this down around his ears. Still, he's so eager to construct this monument to his wife that he's willing to pay you a generous consulting fee and endow the chair in Arthurian Studies. All this even if something unforeseen prevents him from actually building his park. The Arthurians at Edinburgh were chomping at the bit for this endowment and we won it away from them. I'd think you'd be delighted."

"If you're so happy about it, why don't you do it?"

"Believe me, if I were an Arthurian scholar, I would. I could think of many ways to spend the money whilst enjoying the sunshine. But he's insisting on you. Think of it, man! All expenses, for you, Diana and the children, six thousand pounds a month for consulting that won't take the sweat off your brow. Think of it as an adventure for the family. The chance to live in America!"

"You are actually managing to keep a straight face as you suggest I sacrifice the education and manners of my children so that I can help to bequeath the universally-acknowledged sphincter muscle of Western Civilization with yet another blistering pustule of popular culture?"

Paul Bernard shifts his weight from the balls of his feet to his heels and back again. He clears his throat. "Your mortgage, with which the University helped. That balloon payment coming due."

The President clears his throat again.

Ted bangs his fist down on his desk and sits in the chair, defeated. He delicately places his brow in the cradle of his slender fingers and ruminates, Rodin-like. "And I'm to be paid whether the park is built or not? I'd have to have that in the contract, you know."

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Diana sprays more Fairy Washing-up Liquid on her sponge. She scrubs at the plates. "William," she calls. "Time to get started on your homework!"

"It's not due 'till Thursday," says William, who is sitting on the floor, re-lacing his shoes in an intricate double-cross pattern that Andrew Macmillian started two days ago and now the whole Year Five is imitating.

"I want homework!" Four year old Eleanor cries mournfully, as though she is being deliberately neglected, as though what is being handed around is a tray of chocolates.

"I know just the thing," says Humphrey. He sets a sprig of dried flowers next to his gold-painted foam wreath and hops up to pull out an old Vogue from the kitchen junk drawer. "Where are your safety scissors, Eleanor?" Humphrey answers his question by extracting the scissors and some pink construction paper from the drawer. "Now! Here's your assignment.

Barbie has been invited to the Savoy for tea with Fergie. What's a girl to wear? Find me three outfits that wouldn't cause the Queen to drop her teeth you-know-where, and I'll give you a special glitter Spice Girl sticker! Awright?"

"William," repeats Diana. "Tomorrow is Thursday. What's the assignment?"

"I have to write something important that happened when I was little. I was thinking maybe of Johnny."

Humphrey stops all construction on the Harvest festival wreath. He stands watching his younger brother, his Adonis-like body completely still.

Diana creases the folds of the Pizza Hut box, pressing down on the square's sides. Her voice is gentle as she fixes her gaze at her younger son. "Darling, you weren't born then."

"Well, I was somewhere, wasn't I? And I wouldn't exist if he hadn't been so brave. I don't have any stories like that. Tell me again?"

"You know, I remember something wonderful that happened when you were little," says Diana, leaving the box on the counter where she's folded it. She sits next to William on the window seat. "When I brought you home from the hospital, your father didn't know what to do with you. You were so tiny and he was so awed, he was afraid to hold you. Afraid to change your diapers, for fear of hurting you. I'll never forget; Humphrey was only eight and he showed your father how to do it. No one could believe that an eight year old boy knew how."

"Mum, let me get this right. You want me to tell my whole class about me, wearing "nappies"? Are you completely off your head?"

"Oh. Well-

"Mum, what's the use? I can't think of anything. I ate too much pizza. Are we really moving to America?"

"Of course not! We can't possibly- "

"Why not? It's fantastic!" says William.

"Well, for one thing, it's halfway around the world. Two, the schools are - you may not miss school. Third, my work is here. Fourth, this house. Fifth, rattlesnakes, sixth, black widows, seven, scorpions." Diana presses vigorously at the edges of the pizza box.

"Fantastic!"

Diana shivers.

"I hear the front gate," says Humphrey.

"Daddy's home," sings Eleanor, cutting out a green fake-fur mini skirt. William quickly opens his knapsack and retrieves his pencil case and paper. When Ted enters the room, each member of the family is busily working. "Hullo, darling," says Diana, using tweezers to stuff cotton into the red velvet backing of the new miniature sofa.

"Eleanor, how many times do I have to tell you not to leave your Wellingtons by the front door? I'm going to kill myself tripping over your things. I work hard all day. All I ask is safe passage through the front hall when I return."

Eleanor resolutely looks away from her father and cuts off the feet of a Ken-like model wearing corduroys and brogues.

"Bad day at work?" asks Diana sympathetically.

"You might say that," mutters Ted. He has suddenly noticed the Pizza Hut box on the counter. He counts to ten while he pours a glass of vodka and tilts it back in one swoop. "You know," he says, in a deadly quiet near-whisper. "It astounds me, the colossal stupidity of short-term solutions. Those advertisements are your siren-song, Diana. It's been a few years, but you were once educated. Just yesterday, I was being pleaded with for twenty pounds to get you through the week and-" Ted sweeps his hand towards the Pizza Hut box. "Why not just sauté the money with a few capers and feed that to the children? That's why we're in the trouble

we're in and that's why I am being forced to throw my career down the loo, so my children can grow pudgy on fast food?"

"Ted."

"Don't you dare shush me in my own kitchen. Well, the College's kitchen, but I'm the serf they've assigned it to, for the next month, at least."

"What is the matter?" asks Diana. "We didn't pay-"

"I know that. You never pay. I do. You're all doing arts and crafts while I-"

"What Mum's trying to tell-"

"You know, Humphrey, have I given you the impression that I'm interested in your input? Is there something in my demeanor that shouts Oh please, tell me your every thought, I'm so interested? Because-"

Diana has risen and gone to stand beside Humphrey, taking his hand. "That's enough, Ted. I can see you've had a very bad day. But you won't take it out on the children. Or me." Forcing a smile on her face and a lilt in her tone, she chirps, "Time for baths, children! Chop-chop! Last one up is a beastly Tory!"

"I'll do it, Mum," says Humphrey. As he leaves the room, he turns to Ted. "In answer to your question: not to worry. You haven't given me the impression that you're interested in me at all."

Humphrey turns, his eyes bright with angry tears, before leading Eleanor upstairs to the bath.

They are followed by William, who brings his homework sheet with him. William's handwritten essay reads I was five years old when my father was killed, by a stray bullet from a shooting party in the woods near our house. My mum and I would have surely died as well if Daddy hadn't jumped in front of us.

Ted pours another vodka and quickly drains it. He pours a third and caresses his finger along the outside of the Waterford glass, as if measuring the level.

Diana stands and faces him, her hands gripping the counter behind her.

"I hope you have an explanation for your behavior, Ted. I really do."

"I. What would you like to hear first? The bit where Paul holds the mortgage over my head as a cleaver to force me out? The bit where the Fletcher Committee dies of laughter at their near-miss in awarding the book prize to hired-help for an American theme park? The bit where Humphrey decides not to take his university spot at Cambridge next year because he's six thousand miles from any hint of civilization? Just stop me when you feel the urge, as I tend to bubble over with the good news of the day. Oh! The bit where we've rented the house to a visiting Fellow from India, who will, no doubt, build cooking fires in the middle of the parlour, fueled by my now-worthless manuscript."

"But how could you rent the house without consulting me! I don't understand any of this."

"Well, that gives us something in common. And I didn't rent the house. Paul, who holds the note, arranged for that between executions."

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