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The Lady of the House

By Matthew Sean McLachlan

I. SUMMONED

He sat facing the two men sitting across from him at the other wall. They were laughing at him and made no point in concealing it from him, though they cupped their white gloved hands to each other's ears like two school girls snickering one to the other on the playground.

All present, the three of them were dressed in nearly identical penguin tuxedos; attire fit for that Study Room and its refined taste, with its fireplace and lanterns lit for wall fixtures. In these ways, and many more, the house was like a time capsule from a more sophisticated era. Outside, miles away, fossil fueled engines hummed down winding roads, and beyond that, the super interstate highways droned on and on, but in this house, only the hearth sputtered and cracked and hissed with smoke.

Their laughing had become intolerable to the young man. He called out to them, "What is so funny..." It was not a question, but a statement sealed in a waxing red threat.

"We are laughing, my dear boy, if it is not obvious, *at you*," said one of the old men.

Infuriated by their brazenness, he shot back, "And why, pray tell, are you laughing at me?"

"Because," said the old man, even more amused, "you are funny to look at."

This made young man fumed. His nostrils flared, his eyes blazed full of the hearth's firelight and he wished to rise up from his seat and confront the old men snorting and mocking him across the room and knock them to the floor. But the other man spoke recovering from his guffaw and said, "Peace, peace. Tell us your name."

"And why should I tell you my name?" Benton growled between his teeth.

"Fine, fine. Have it your way," said the old man, already bored with his stoicisms. The other whispered something in the old man's ear; he agreed of its notion then said to

Benton, "You must tell us something. We have slept in the West Wing, the North Wing and the South Wing, but never the East. Tell us, has she ever let you sleep with her in that wing of the house, my dear boy?" The brewing in Benton's face had bubbled, foamed, and now boiled over, seething with rage. "Well," said the old man on the brink of tears, "has she ever stayed with you there?"

"No," he said under his breath, and the other man burst into tears falling upon the first man.

But the first man maintained his demeanor and pressed Benton again, his lips quivering as he tried to contain his self, "I see. May I ask, what room has she stayed with you in?"

Benton did not answer, but quickly stared into the hearth bitterly, like a defeated knight after a tournament. This was answer enough for both old men to fall upon each other, their wet cheeks clinging to the other's shoulder, hooting in loud, obnoxious hilarity. Then, when the joke had settled, the old man asked directly, "You have never been with The Lady of the House, have you, my boy?"

Benton's eyes squinted hard into the smoldering core of the embers. His upper lip rose baring his perfect top row of teeth. Something in his palm made a crinkling sound as his fist tightened over it. "No," said Benton, slow and methodic, "No, I have not."

"We know this my boy," said the old man, still beaming but now, beneath his smile, a sentiment of camaraderie, "It's written all over your face. 'Tis alright. There's a first for everything. But would you like some friendly advice?" Benton reluctantly turned away from the flame and gave him an ear. "The prophylactic- in your hand-, lose it. You have paid good money to see her; she is clean and discrete. You should throw it into the fire and save yourself the embarrassment."

"Yes, throw it into the fire," blurted the other, crudely, "Don't be an idiot."

He received a scolding glare from Benton, but then the first man continued, "She will not disappoint. Look at us: we are old and feeble, wealthy as I am sure you are, and made even wealthier, in heart and pocket, by having been with her."

"If you're trying to convince me of something, you have only succeeded in disgusting me," replied Benton. His voice echoed in the room, feral and smooth, an exotic thing in the company of the gray hairs' grizzly throats. "You men are old, tasteless, wrinkled-up-prunes; if she is as beautiful as she is said to be, why she would have anything to do with your withered carcasses?"

"You are, of course, right," said the old man, speaking out of turn. "with everything you say. She can make a meal out of us, but with you..."

The old man paused, looking Benton over, "You clearly have so much more to give than we. But even still, I implore you: save yourself the embarrassment and pitch the thing in your hand into the fire. I am a gentleman, so I shan't speak of things such as yours or mine

experience in matters pertaining to the bedchamber, but I will say this bit in passing: *experience* is always preferred, my boy. Just a word of wisdom from one silver haired fool, but do as you may.”

Benton looked down at his hand and opened it in his palm; the condom unwrinkled like a bizarre aluminum blossom by the firelight. The impression of a perfect ringlet bulged against the packaging. He then looked at the logs in the fire and made his way to the hearth.

Benton gave one last look at the condom he had bought from the store eight days ago in preparation of tonight. He remembered that evening vividly, how meticulous he had inspected each brand, each kind. It was fourteen minutes later when he realized he had been standing in the grocery store aisle just staring at a wall full of rubbers. In the end, he just took the box that had caught his eye in the first place. The packaging was deep evening violet and silver-gray. He thought it looked effeminate and masculine. “*Thoughtful of her;*” that was the impression he wanted to make. Benton threw the condom into the fire and watched the flames devour the packaging, and then liquefy the rubber down the bark of the log, dripping like hot milky syrup into the glowing embers.

He then turned to the men, but they were now silently sitting, staring up at the ceiling; their veined necks outstretched and contorted, with the tips of their chins touching. He wondered what on earth they were doing; contorting themselves into such a painful pose, but the concern of inquiry quickly vanished like a wisp of mist when there appeared, standing at the hall’s entrance, a towering faceless thing. Sensing Benton’s gaze, it lifted its hand to him, entreating him towards it.

II. DOWN THE CORRIDOR

Affluence. The hall that Benton was directed towards led into a narrow corridor, wallpapered in thickly textured red velvet, inset with beige and gold fleur delis symbols and other decadent iconographies. Down the long hall Benton travelled, wandering its narrow passage, always aware of the faceless man following behind him, silently stalking his every footstep. He turned back to his guide, and gazed up at the ominous thing from within its colossal shadow, and it abruptly halted.

The massive thing’s wide dimensions nearly took up the entire breadth of the hall; the cuffs of its blazer scathed the velvet wallpaper when it walked, but it was the bald thing’s face, or lack thereof, that was the most bizarre of its oddities. Where there should have been eyes, a nose and a mouth was a silver covering; not a mask, for there were no leather straps or harness to keep it in place. It was as if the covering had been grafted to its face. It should also be said the covering did not follow the contours of a human face, which would allow for a brow line or the bridge of a nose, but was as smooth as its hairless massive head. The only other additional feature on the reflective metal’s surface was in its center, where there may have been perhaps a nose beneath, a small simple silver ring jutted out. Benton stared at the ring and wondered at its purpose, but could conclude nothing, except that he had more questions now and was frightened. He tried to look back to The Study Room

adjacent to the hall, where he had left the two old men, but the thing standing in front of him was too much a giant to see past.

“Who... what is it,” Benton remembered asking the old men, petrified as he stared at the thing summoning him to the hall’s entrance.

“He’s still here,” said the irritable one, whose head was turned away from Benton.

“Yes, he is,” replied the other, rolling his eyes up to him, “Go now, my dear boy. Follow her servant.”

Benton looked down at the two old men, spraining their necks to join their chins upward towards the ceiling. The posture looked painful. They were holding each other’s hands in their laps and grinding their teeth with an intense kind of pain- or fear- on their faces.

“Why are you sitting like that?” Benton asked.

“Too many questions, my boy,” said the old man anxiously through his teeth, “None of which are the reason you came! The Lady of the House is waiting. Now hurry on, if you please.”

Benton looked over the blazer of thing in front of him in the hall now; not a single gray fuzzy lint on its immaculate black wide frame. “I think I might want to go back,” Benton implored up to it, but thing only waited; its head slightly hunched down between its bouldering shoulders. Benton thought of pushing the giant as if he were a misplaced piece of luggage, but gasped quietly with panic when he saw its massive white gloved hands curl into tightening knotted fists, as if it could read his very thoughts. Immediately, he turned back down the corridor and hurried on, the house’s servant advancing once again behind him.

The corridor finally came to a T and when his guide caught up with him, it merely stopped and waited, offering no inclination as to which direction he should take.

“Well,” said Benton, at last, “which way?”

But the monolith stood deaf and dumb as a statue. Benton looked down both the opposing halls, both being a mirror image of the other. Benton motioned to the left with one eye on the thing, then out of curiosity motioned to the right, but it did not stir. Finally, Benton committed to going to the left and the thing began to walk again following after him. This happened many times after. He would come to a T make a turn and it would follow after. After a while, Benton began to think there was no sense to it and made a right at every T he came to, expecting to come to the original corridor and escape this velvet labyrinth and its faceless centaur and be done with this house and its Lady, when upon coming to the end of his third right he raced unassumingly into a large empty room and on its opposing wall an entrance. Dancing on its walls like a spider approached the shadow of the Lady of The House.

III.

MATA

Mata. Her name is Mata and she appeared in a smoking white ball gown that floated around her as she swam through its cloud of satin. It was how she moved from across the far side of the room towards him; fluidic and light and effortless in the candlelight. Her long curls of raven hair, a shroud of twisted shadows around her face.

“So you have come to be a Master Lover?” she said, her voice as delicate and cutting as a broken piece of stained cathedral glass.

“Yes,” he said shaken, made further uneasy by the faceless thing that posted itself, even then, at the bed chamber’s door, but the sound of her dark angelic voice and the surreal quality of her terrible yet enthralling beauty had drawn out from his heart the more carnal reason of why he had come to her house. “Yes,” he now groaned thirstily watching her, a servant to its desire. A log in the fireplace crumbled in the hearth, and a burst of flying embers escaped up the flute like some hellish pestilence in a sudden hot swirling gust. The brute did not move and the woman’s eyes waited for the startled Benton to return to her. He licked his dry lips anxious and fearful.

“Come,” she said and stretched out one hand in invitation.

He came, his footfalls echoing in that room; the *clits* and *clats* of the loafers on the floor stifling the rhythm of his breathing, as if it were the pecking taps from his imprisoned conscience petitioning emancipation from out of the fathomless lust of his soul.

He stared wildly at her, full of dread, awe and want, subservient to every subtle nuance and small gesture of her form. She did not smile, but stared into him, her green irises a thousand shattered pieces of jade placed in a wreath around her pupil. They dilated then with such haste and immediacy Benton could hardly believe what he was seeing. She was enraptured with him.

“Yes,” she echoed his sentiment now, “You shall have me and my secret.” The brute appeared then beside them both, startling Benton who jumped back. It collapsed to its knees and, in an ungodly feat, arched back letting its massive arms swing lifelessly under its shoulders, ‘til its head was level with the horizon and the silver ring on the plate covering its face stood erect.

She floated over beside the thing, letting her hand hover over the ring like it were a lid to a silver platter and said, “Come,” but he did not. When she turned to him, and he saw the paleness of her chest and neck, he was so intoxicated by her flesh; he thought it glowed as moonlight and came obediently to her.

“The seduction of women is not found in men,” she said to the silver covering beneath her hand, “It is the *want* of other women. She wants he who is wanted by another woman, taken by another, and then he has been found worthy of possessing. It is not a matter of jealousy, nor the desire of a suitable mate, but the desire of *the* suitable mate; the perfect seed, the perfect breeder.”

She grasped the ring on the silver covering and removed it to reveal a dark cavity where the thing's face would have been. Slithers of mist issued forth from the edges of the opening. Benton thought to run, but the thing's hand grabbed him by the ankle in a steely grip. His eyes shot up to the woman and her face lit up with an unnatural, contrived allure that felt forceful and oppressive, meant to draw his attention to her eyes. Their fractured spectrums of emerald and jade spun alive in her irises, like the hypnotic rearranging shapes at the end of a kaleidoscope's tube.

"If you cannot resist me, think what woman could not resist you Benton," the lady entreated. "Have me and you shall have any woman like me. They will desire you, because I desire you. Have me and they shall all be yours. Will you have me?"

"I could say no." The words came into his head, from where he felt he could not take credit for, but regardless, there they were, telling him what he had not in that moment been piecing together. She was asking him, asking with a choice. Then another thought came to mind, a word, *Amelia*, and suddenly he looked down to see he had already taken his hand into the cavity of the thing's face, his fingers searching in the shadows for a bottom inside its hollow rib cage for the Lady of the House.

"Careful, my love," the lady said softly as Benton stared up at her, "Careful with me." He nodded and continued to explore the hollow of the thing's body for what he did not know, only that now he was searching for it, for her, and then suddenly, he felt something pulpy, bulbous and wet caress his fingertips. He grabbed its delicate sides and carefully lifted his arm out from the thing's face to produce a small, smoky, white translucent spherical glob.

"Swallow me whole, my love," the lady said. "Let me be inside you and I will make you the perfect lover. Irresistible. Will you have me? Will you have them all, all those women, wanting you, desiring you, Benton?"

When Benton swallowed the egg, he thought again of the name "Amelia," like the act were a birthday wish he was making. After a small moment had passed, when he was sure the ovum was at the bottom of his gullet, he was going to ask if she wanted to go with him to the bed.

"You never asked me my name, Benton," the lady said as she placed the silver lid back on the thing's face. "Most female names will be useless to you now, but mine, you will find sustenance in its name for you."

"Sustenance," Benton said confused, "Like food?" And the irony of his question was that it was the stomach wrenching pain in his lower abdomen which dropped him to his knees right then, but the tearing agony not stopping there, but going lower still, lower down between his pelvis into the cradle of his testicles. Benton reached out for something to hold onto before crashing to the floor and his hand clasped to the thing's palm, the thing holding him in a firm but responsive grip, like a friend saving a friend from falling into a ravine, or a husband aiding a wife through labor.

“Mata,” the lady said softly as she floated around the thing to where Benton cowered, “My name is Mata, Daughter of Ochatta.”

The pain was so excruciating in his testes, not unlike getting kicked in there, but this sensation was far more unique, more superior; the pain pulsing out like black poison through his circulatory system. Benton let go of the thing’s hand and it obliged him letting him fall to the floor and curl up into a fetal position shaking and sweating like a wet leaf during a thunder shower.

“You are my lover now, my mate,” the lady said over him, “You will find other lovers, and have nights of love none the like your body has ever known, but you shall always return to me, for sustenance. The egg gives life, gives power, but when it diminishes you shall return for more of its power, or quickly shrivel and wither away into old age, until you are dead.”

The pain had not lessened, but Benton found he was able to look around the room and for a brief moment the hem of the lady’s fabric lifted revealing thin black spidery legs where two human feet in stockings should have been, before the fabric went back down, and then the pain magnified in Benton’s mouth foamed white and his body moved in uncontrollable convulsions.

“The eggs do more than give you sustenance: they spawn new life. My new life,” the lady said, stretching out her long fingers over Benton like he were stew she was brewing. “The egg goes into your seed and impregnates it, and creates a new seed. My seed.” Excitement rose in her voice, “Where thereupon, I send you forth, out into the urban jungles to find suitable mates, warm-clumps-of-wet-mud-wearing-blush-and-short-skirts, to have your way with and put my seed inside. Oh Benton, my love, the nights will be unending for you; you will become a mindless nocturnal creature; limitless will be your carnal craving. You shan’t be able to refuse their desire and they will be powerless to refuse you. How could they, my love?”

Benton rose to his knees before the lady and lifted his countenance to her reveal his eyes had rolled back into his head, appearing like two of those smoky white eggs he had swallowed. “And then,” the Daughter of Ochatta continued, her voice tremulous with power as she stared down at her new servant, Benton, “Three hundred years from now, on a hot, misty night, when the temperature and humidity and the time are correct, and the worms have long eaten away at your face, after my seed has made generation after generation after generation, my offspring will hatch in the houses and city streets of the world, *and feed*, and they come back to their mother. Me.”

“Now,” Mata said with sudden stern conviction, “What is my name?!”

“Mata-,” the young man began, paused then said with total adulation looking up at her, “You are the... The Lady of the House.”

IV. PROLOGUE

Amelia. She was the only woman he saw in that bar. He would go there to watch her, just to watch her laugh with her friends, the way her blonde locks washed down her back, or how her rosy lipstick spread across her perfect smile. Benton watched her for months and nothing else.

He noticed the other men and the bachelors come in from the street, all smooth and so suave, as they made their advances on her, each one, offering his own special reason, of why she, Amelia, should come home with them, but at the end of the night, she would refuse and leave with her friends, or by herself, and her refusal made her all the more enticing to Benton. He began to realize that he no longer wanted Amelia, but had fallen in love with her, truly. She was of a higher standard than what any of them, the boys or even her friends were; she was looking for something special, something unique: a real honest man to call all her own, and she would not settle. Benton had thought hard about it, what he would say to her, and thought he had finally found the right combination of words, the accurate feel he wanted to give when he approached when he would make his introduction. Then, *he* showed up.

It was like watching a pig feed in a sty. This man, this devil in a suit, would approach a girl, say a few words, the woman would laugh, or sometimes not laugh at all and just stare at him, and moments later, the two of them would leave, her arm wrapped around his, until the following Saturday evening, where he would show up and do it all over again: a new woman, but the same brief exchange. Benton saw all this with mild interest, which then grew into absorbed fascination, until the man's advances brought him closer and closer to Amelia sitting at the bar. Benton began to become uneasy and nervous, until the following weekend he felt a hand fall upon his shoulder and he turned in his seat to the man, staring down at him smiling.

"Hello. You don't mind if I..." he began, as he took the seat facing Benton. Benton watched him unable to speak. The man, too, at first did not speak, but only stared at Benton smiling, and thinking of how to put something and then-, "You don't know what to say. *To her*, I mean."

"I'm sorry?" said Benton, embarrassed. He could feel his warm cheeks turn to apples.

"I've seen you," the man continued slipping a cigarette into his mouth, "You're a regular here. So which lucky lady is it, waiting for you to make your big move?"

Benton briefly looked behind the man to Amelia sitting at the bar, but it was for him to turn. He laughed, "Ah, and a pretty one she is! Have you figured out your approach, what you will say when you finally build up the confidence to go over there and talk to her?" He didn't wait for a response but leaned in and entreated Benton to do the same, then said in a low voice, "You can have her you know. You could have anyone of them tonight if you wanted."

"Have her?" Benton repeated the words hesitantly and took a sip of his gin.

The man leaned back and blew smoke up into the air, "Sure, why not. That is, if you know what they are looking for. Do you know what they are looking for?"

"And what is that?" asked Benton.

The man cushioned out his cigarette, "Look, its simple, all women want the same thing, and if you got it, you get it, from any, and as many, of them you like. I know this woman that if you spend one night with her, you can have any girl. Get what I'm saying? She can make you into a *real man*, irresistible to them."

Benton smirked and took a generous swig of his drink and looked around the bar.

"I'm serious. This is no Spanish fly, Casanova bullshit," the man assured. "I'm gonna prove it to you."

"Oh, yeah," said Benton as he waved the waitress for a refill, "How're going to do that?"

"By taking that girl at the bar home right now," the man said plainly. Benton's face became tense and he sat up in his seat. Benton gave the man a cross look, but then remembering the kind of girl Amelia was, laughed and said, "Good luck."

"Oh, I won't need it," the man replied standing up. He fixed the collar of his suit then said before leaving, "Just be here next Saturday evening and look for me, because that girl at the bar sure won't be." With that, the man left Benton presence and walked directly up to Amelia.

He stood behind her, saying nothing but staring directly at Benton. It only took a few moments, but then Amelia's laughter with her friends slowly subdued and her face became very tense like she was missing something very badly. When she turned and stared at the man behind her, she had found what she had been looking for. The man looked down at Amelia and she melted in his gaze. Moments later, she grabbed her things, and went out the door with her arm wrapped around mysterious figure's arm. But before they left, the man gave one last to look to Benton and smiled, then they were both gone.

Benton watched them go until their city night silhouettes disappeared from behind the wall of glass. He was alone, sitting at his table with his drink, staring at her empty barstool and thinking about what the man had said to him, and of the mysterious Lady of the House.

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