

STYGIAN FAYE

Very dark fairy

SANDRA JACKIE BROWN TUGWELL

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'Sabbatical'

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For my diamonds - Rocco and Kelly

Prelude

'Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me,' I softly mumbled so that Faye couldn't hear me. It took me tons of effort to drag myself out of bed. My sudden movement caused the pain to resurface, and it felt as though a double-decker bus had hit me. The jabbing pulsating sensation in my back continued as I slowly paced across my room and opened the door. Faye's first period was a good reason for me to think 'fuck the pain' and attempt to stand up. There is no way in this life that you can ignore the peril of a young girl's first period, for it is one of the most important changes in a young girl's life. Apart from physical changes, it brings forth great emotion. It is the day that girlhood is abruptly and most cruelly left behind, flinging you into womanhood. I needed to be there for her. Comfort her and tell her about the ins and outs of becoming a woman. It was the only reason for me to get up out of bed, walk and somehow withstand the pain. The lights on either end of the left-wing passageway were on, as they had always been since we moved into the grand manor house. Their dim glow supplied the passageway with sufficient light. The enormous chandelier lit up the entire hallway. Such a large house needed light at night and besides that, a manor house is not the place to walk around in complete darkness. We felt at home and safe in the manor, but we just felt safer keeping those three lights on. The lights on the front porch automatically lit up at dusk, just like the lamps in the driveway and back garden. My eyes were adjusting to the dimmed light when I noticed that Faye was standing in her doorway with the door wide open. As my vision became less blurred, I noticed the puddle at her feet. 'What the heck,' I said looking back up at her. 'You can't be bleeding that badly. You should be spotting to start with.' Her face carried no emotion. She just stood there silent with the crimson puddle at her feet. The dim light was bright enough for me to notice the dark colour. I took one step towards her when I stopped and froze in my tread. I looked up at her face. Did her

eyes just turn black? Just for a fraction of a second? No way, I was seeing things. The pain in my back and the lack of sleep were playing a cruel trick on my mind. Having no reason to fear Faye, I outstretched my hand intending to lead her into the bathroom so she could freshen up. 'Come, let's get you to the bathroom, you poor soul.' As I reached for her hand, she growled, forcing me to step back. Faye growling? A woman's monthly issues can bring on grumpiness, but growling? This shit was new.

Grandness

I had always lived a grand life, but don't get me wrong - I wasn't rich or anything like that. I just knew how to make my life grand. You can be poor and still live a grand life, and in fact, living a grand life has nothing at all to do with money. Even though money helps to pay the bills and put food on the table. My life was grand because from a young age onward I had learned to appreciate the smaller things in life. I was happy when the sun shone and if anyone wanted to see me at my happiest; they need only permit me to dash off to the nearest park, common or woods.

I spent countless days and hours of my youthful life walking or playing in nature. My admiration for all of that luscious green and brown in every single imaginable shade and texture was enough to dissolve the everyday trials that the concrete jungle offered me. I would breathe in and absorb her beauty, and my imagination just did the rest. The green jungles, or so I named them as a kid, comforted me in a way that nothing in my life had or could. Though I was no nature freak. I detested camping or sleeping in nature. I mean it's one thing to wake up to the sweet chirping of birds, but who wants to wake up to a grand party of insects, spiders and fat brown slugs? I once woke

up to that, and that was my first and last camping trip ever.

I came from a middle-class family and had a good upbringing. My parents fed me English etiquette with a wooden spoon, yet I had a few great encounters with blue-blooded people who had their etiquette served from a silver spoon. For some strange reason, they took to me and introduced me to the path to grandness. Being wealthy didn't mean that they splashed money around, on the contrary. These people had money without end, and more than sufficient resources, but one thing the blue-blooded did not do was splash money around.

A handed down Royce or a small old banger is what many of them drove around in, but they did so with great pride. A country house, tennis court, or swimming pool could also be part of the inheritance. The old rich loved nature, culture, good conversation and above all, they loved to keep a certain amount of simplicity in their lives. They were the ones that taught me that grandness came from having grace and not from being wealthy.

I did not have a perfect life, but it was a grand life and I am quite sure that I would have become terribly bored had it been a perfectly styled and choreographed life. I looked like I had money because, with little to nothing to spare, I still knew

how to hold myself, decorate my house and dress grand.

Not that I always did though. On certain days, I needed to let myself go and just be wild and carefree. You could say that their lessons had blessed me and had turned me into a free spirit. Deep down inside, I always felt like one of those 'blue-blooded' people. Their ways had rubbed off on me, but maybe, just maybe that feeling had always been there, visible to them only and all that they had done was help me scratch off the surface.

My life became grander when I learned how to deal with the tons of shit that life often deals out. A woman doing a peacock's strut in high heels while going through complete chaos is a grand woman. You don't have to have blue blood to be a grand woman. If you can get through life's dark tornados in heels while holding a certain grace, then you are a grand woman. Not a prissy princess because grand women need to ventilate, which from time to time will lead them to swear. Grandness is something that some women naturally possess. It is a powerful queen-like manner in their behavior and how they hold themselves. A certain boldness and the ability to tell naïve people 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the sordid truth' whatever the consequences.

I earned well, but the choice of being a deliberate single parent meant that my purse was only full for the first two weeks after payday and maybe, just

maybe if I was lucky there might be some extra dough left in the third week. To be honest, that hardly occurred. Straight after payday, I paid bills and worst of all, debts too. Yes, debts! The burden of nearly every modern single parent, because it didn't matter how much I put aside or how much I thought I'd have leftover. Before the end of every month, something would just pop up that needed paying. Like the day trip that my kids forgot to tell me about and leaving me to fork out twenty pounds or more. That was just the fee to get into wherever they were going without adding up their burgers, chips, fizzy drinks, and candy bars. I am so sorry, but do parents honestly think that the neatly packed sandwiches, apples, bananas, and other healthy goods are up for edible debate during a day trip? The moment that those teens spotted a burger joint, their lovingly homemade sandwiches got tossed into the nearest bin. I remember keeping some of my packed lunch as a kid and I am quite sure that many kids do too. Even if it was to silence the hunger pangs on the long trip back home.

My purse was frequently milked out. Like the times that Austin's coats or pants got ripped to near shreds from climbing trees and barricaded barbed-wire walls. Like really? Yep boys do that kind of shit. The turtles had made him believe that he was invincible and so he was. How that child never broke a bone is a great mystery to me.

Like the phone that my daughter Dani saw shatter to pieces before her very eyes, bringing her entire teenage life to an abrupt halt. For many teenagers, a phone is their second heart. I could almost imagine the ambulance personnel busting through the door and giving her a heart massage on the living room floor. Unluckily for her, the warrant had just ended so the poor purse needed milking - again. The list went on and on, and every month would deliver a new surprise to my poor purse.

I once heard someone say that kids do not cost that much money because they eat from the same pot of food. Pardon me? As if eating is the only thing that children do and need. Some people should pop their brains into a washing machine and centrifuge on the highest level to get rid of surplus idiot cells. Thus replenishing the old grey mass with logic cells.

Kids cost tons of money and hidden bills just kept on coming. If a new computer, a laptop or bike was in need, then mum was always there. Not to forget the many birthday presents that had to be purchased annually. Thank goodness for grandparents though. They would sometimes help when the kids were really in need. They helped me from drowning in Debtors Ocean. If a purse had feelings, then mine definitely felt like an over milked cow. These are modern times, so you need certain products to get your children ahead in life. You cannot just say, 'I'm not buying a computer so tell your teacher to piss off.'

You cannot deprive or deny your children the necessities to help them get them ahead in life. These are modern times, modern family and a modern purse to suit the situation.

Eventually, the kids grew up and to my great delight; they both found Saturday jobs, relieving my wallet from the horrendous pain that it had long been suffering from. I could finally spend some of my hard-earned money on myself. The sale and thrift shops had become my means of looking great. My motto had become; *'It's not what you're wearing - It's how you wear it.'*

My life was quite grand. A bottle of wine with French bread and cheeses in the park was grandness to me, but the same went for good conversation and the sun warming my skin. I had many good acquaintances who I would stop and chat with and on rare occasions, we would stop to drink a coffee, but I only had two very good friends and they were all that I needed. One hand full of real friends is all a girl really needs.

Austin's flight

My son Austin had already left home many years ago and his departure went well. By 'went well' I mean that compared to the tales from other parents, whose children left home kicking and screaming in their desperate attempt to cling on to the remaining apparitions of their youthful days. Adolescents who hated living under the strict regime of their parents, but as soon as the time came for them to depart, they somehow became panic-stricken. Suddenly, the world was too big, too evil and scary for them to handle. Right on the verge of leaving many considered home a warm and cuddly nest. Maybe mum was not that bad after all. Maybe mum was now quite cool. No more laundry services, no more dinners on demand and perhaps the thing that frightened them the most was the fact that they would now have to orchestrate their own life. The voices that had been telling them what to and what not to do were about to cease.

I remember the day when I left home as though it were yesterday. To me, freedom could not have felt better than it did then, and I remember savouring the sweet feeling for a long time. There was no kicking and screaming in my case, but a wilful sprinting. Yes,

I ran, and I vowed never to go back and I never did. I was happy for Austin and this well-chosen new beginning in his life. One bird had spread its wings and had soared out of the nest. It did not bother me until some weeks later when I decided to clean up his former room. Somehow, I could not bring myself to get the job done and endless excuses fluttered through my mind. I was too busy working and socializing with good friends. Without knowing that I was giving myself a good excuse for not getting the job done.

Now in that large empty room - it fully dawned on me that the small boy had long grown up. Somewhere along the way the young man had become a man. Yep, the minute he left home, to me, and in my mind he had become a man, overnight! Visions of him running around in the park and kicking his football in the garden or on the pavement, reeled by as clear as crystal. It was as if tomorrow just happened all over again. I remembered him standing at the front door with his skinny matchstick legs and a broad grin. Not because he wanted to, because if it were up to him he would run all day long until he collapsed. The only reason that he came home was to get a drink and a sandwich, after which he would dash back outdoor as if the wonders of the world were about to unravel in his presence. His face full of wonder and childlike joy. Waiting for permission to dash back off into the wonderful world of ecstatic freedom that playing outdoors seemed to bring him. His face was always lit

up with excitement. He always seemed tortured by the thought of the day ending, because it meant that he would have to take a shower and stay indoors for the rest of the evening. How he plead for me to let him play outside for another hour before coming in to take a shower. Visions of us laughing also came to mind, because he was such a happy child, but one that loved to get up to mischief. Those sweet memories surged through my mind, leaving a smile on my face, which faded as I realised how time had flown by.

Where did time go? I mean seriously. Like the batting of eyelids, years had just rolled by. It seemed as though time had just played an evil trick on me. Time had just robbed a large part of my life from me. I peered over to a medium-sized black chest of draws in his old room. On it, I spotted a small picture of him as a young child with podgy cheeks and the brightest sweetest smile that he had ever displayed in a photograph. Why had he not taken this picture along with him, I wondered? Why leave it behind? Overcome by an unexpected surge of loss and great sorrow, the tears surfaced and continued to flow. This was what others called the empty nest syndrome. I did not think that it would feel like this. Right now, time was not my best friend. Time was being the cruellest bitch. It took me two long hours to get the room clean.

A few weeks later, I plucked up the courage to visit him. The male members of the family and a couple of his good friends had helped him move into the spacious apartment, but he decided that he wanted to decorate it on his own. I honestly understood why. The family members meant well, but they loved to nag, fuss and stir up drama and he did not want or need any of that. His close friends helped him move and decorate the new apartment and my help wasn't wanted, but I did not mind, because this was just his way of telling me that he was becoming a man. Why worry anyway? His girlfriend stayed a few nights a week and together they would work it out. Yes, it was time for me to let go.

Austin opened the front door wearing a grey tank top and baggy black gym pants. He had a large grin on his face, and he looked at me with great pride.

'Come on in mum,' he said with the same grin still shining from ear to ear. We hugged each other, and I looked up at him with a genuine motherly smile. The kind of smile that can only a mother can make. He had definitely been working out at the gym because his athletic body had become more pumped up. His fine features made him resemble a masculine model, and he could easily have made it on to the cover of a sports magazine. He looked well and I could tell that he had gained more weight, which of course was a good thing. The apartment was just how a man's apartment would look. It was tidy, but

without plants or fuss on the walls and just the necessary furniture in the living room, being the settee, coffee table, and the television. The television played a leading role as he also used it for gaming.

We talked and laughed for some time over a coffee just before 'the time to go' had arrived. I always knew when 'the time to go' was at hand and made sure that I left way before it. That moment when others politely yawn, look away, stare at their feet, around them or at a clock. The moment that people fidget or sigh. Honestly, it would be much easier if people just said, 'Hey you need to piss off, because I have things to do,' or 'it's time for you to leave I need my space back.' Why are most of us so over-polite? I would just straight out say, 'Hey love, it was grand having you over, but I'm tired,' or 'I loved having you visit me, but I need to do my thing.' While some of us can speak up for ourselves, we are not all blessed with a sweet and sharpened tongue.

I said goodbye, hugged him and his girlfriend and told him that I would pop in now and then. I waved as they stood in the doorway both happily waving back. His girlfriend Samantha stood there with one arm tucked around his side. Armed with a genuine smile, I stared at the two of them before walking off. Her posture was short and slightly chubby, but she was quite pretty, almost like a female cherub with her long blond curly hair. While waving back at me she swept it aside so that she could lean against Austin.

Her round freckled face and blue-rimmed glasses made her such a sweet sight to see. I waved again just before stepping into the elevator and muttered to myself; 'Pfff, why worry? He is going to be all right.' And he most definitely was.

Dani's wedding

My daughter was soon to marry the love of her life, Scott. Unlike many daughters who leave home at a younger age, she had left home a year after Austin had. She too was a remarkable sight and both of my children were of slim build. Her face was like that of a porcelain dolly with great skin and fine bone structure and she could have been a model, but that just was not her thing. She worked as an assistant manager for a string of trendy boutiques filled with an array of overpriced stock. The kind of boutique that brought chauffeur-driven homemakers, high earning females, and celebrities to its doors. Dani had an excellent nose for fashion and she knew how to advise the customers on their wardrobe, which always led them to buy more than they had planned to do. The boutiques thrived well under her iron rule during the absence of the manager who was often off to Paris or Milan for the latest fashion, leaving Dani in charge of quite a few management tasks. This frail-looking young woman with her sweet face would transform into a merciless bitch if her co-workers ignored her directions. In her workflow, she was a force to reckon with. For her to climb the company ladder, she had to be, and climb that ladder she did. Dani and Scott had carefully planned and saved up

for the wedding years before. The great event, as they both called it, had now finally arrived.

I arrived at the spacious manor an hour before the guests did. Just to check if the wedding planner had executed every detail to Dani's expectation. Two large black doors formed the grand entrance of the imposing white manor. I entered the larger-than-life hallway with its black and white chequered floor. The mere sight of the double stairway with polished granite steps and wrought iron bannisters immediately took my breath away. A broad balcony joined both stairways together. Opposite the entrance and all the way across the large hallway, I could make out two white French doors. Large glass panels surrounded them on either side. From where I stood, the beautiful conservatory was visible, and it led into an imposing garden. I took an immediate right turn, as Dani had formerly instructed towards the blue room.

The door stood slightly ajar, and I slowly pushed it open. As I entered the spacious room, it lured my sight to every detail of beauty within it. The crisp white linen tablecloths that lay immaculately draped on round tables like a flock of graceful swans floating on a golden pond. Normally a long larger-than-life table fit for entertaining kings and queens stood in here or so Dani had told me, but for the occasion, they had removed it. The grand oak floor had been waxed and preserved throughout the years, yet the past and

its ghosts were imprinted on it, and if you turned your imagination up a notch, you could almost hear them.

Golden candelabra centerpieces with golden candles stood lavishly draped with flowers in pink and white tones. They left only the top of the arms and bases of the centerpieces free of clutter to show off some gold and maximize the majestic scenery and atmosphere of the room. The finest crockery, cutlery, and crystal did the finishing touch.

Royal blue walls were tastefully decorated with paintings in ornate gold frames, and here and there, a golden ornament or white cameo graced a space of the wall. The chalky white ceiling had fine antique ornaments at every corner and displayed a large white medallion in the center. From it hung an impressive crystal and copper chandelier. These walls displayed royalty, and they somehow brought a delightfully comforting warmth to my soul. This room had the power to bring all the madness of the modern outside world to an abrupt halt. It was as though time just ceased to exist. The past lingered on in the beautiful room where peace and tranquility overcame me. The sound of several footsteps pacing up and down the hallway made me snap out of my Zen moment. I hastily crossed the hallway half bumping into the busy personnel who were now scurrying through the hallway in large numbers. I entered the opposite red room, which would be the

bar and disco for the remainder of the evening. It took time to walk from one side to the other and inspect the decorations in these colossal rooms, but after insuring myself that everything was well up to standard and in place, I made my way back outside where I lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

One by one, the guests arrived. I had instructed them to wait on the right side of the cul-de-sac driveway, but as some people are some people do. While the majority had gathered to the right as required, a small group stood at the beginning of the driveway just behind the gate, cheerfully puffing away at their cigarettes while engaging in small talk. Two sturdy well-tailored men stood to the left. Their conversation was hardly audible and very private as they continued to engage in their business related conversation. Apart from an occasional polite nod to a passer-by, their stern facial expressions made it obvious to others that this joyful occasion would not entirely disrupt their brief yet necessary meeting.

A large Oak tree graced the center of the gravel driveway, forcing the driveway to split up into two separate driveways forming a broad 'cul-de-sac' at the entrance of the grand manor house. The tree hid the top of the manor making it just about visible from the road. Shrubs of dark pink roses surrounded the rim of earth around the tree and a ring of royal purple campanula boldly rested at their feet as a decorative ribbon.

The ceremony had already taken place in a nearby church, but the couple had retreated for a few of hours to rest, freshen up and change garments for the dinner and following reception.

They finally made their grand entrance with the white Rolls, which slowly came to a halt on the crunching gravel. Their stunning change of wardrobe took the guests by surprise, and gasps of oohs and aahs came from all directions. Dani wore a close-fitted, pearly pink silk chiffon gown and the groom a light greyish/blue well-fitted silk suit. He removed his jacket while displaying a broad grin as he casually slung it over his left shoulder. With his right hand, he clasped the palm of the bride. They gazed at each other with deep compassion and an overload of sweetness and their lips finally met. This was the moment that the guests had waited for and like a flock of vultures on the brink of starvation, they fluttered around the couple. Greedily snapping away like professional paparazzi attempting to get the best pictures.

The couple were a welcome sight. It was not just the clothing making the man as people often quote, because these two had all the features to make great garments look even better. Scott was athletically built, and Dani had the petite structure of a model. They were both graced with well-sculpted, fine to look at faces. I was quite sure that I was not the only one standing there gasping at them during those lovely

moments. Loud confetti canons exploded, filling the air with fluttering golden flakes. The couple laughed out loud and proceeded into the venue. As the photographer and other guests clicked away, I took pride in the fact that I had given birth to this beautiful creature. I felt successful as a mother, and it did me good to see that both of my children had done well. Still it was difficult letting go. Even though you do not entirely let go, and your kids - no matter what age, will always be your kids. Yet in some kind of mean and heartless way, you do entirely let go. The moment that your children close the door for the final time and wander off to live together or get married, is the moment that they cut the final string. The thought overwhelmed me, but I rapidly put everything back in to perspective. Holidays together, short visits or parental advice over cups of tea would bring us together. My children were my children, but no longer children. The irony of it all is that every mother, no matter how much she loves her children, can't wait for the day that her kids grow up, stand on their own feet and leave home. After years of no more me time and puberty came the time for me to reclaim my life. Yet when that day finally comes the loudness of the silence becomes overbearing. I relieved myself with the thought that I would find nice hobbies. No knitting or any of that old-fashioned stuff, but maybe painting or sightseeing throughout Europe. I would figure it out as I always did.

A large team of waiters made sure that we were all served in time. They brought us succulent dishes and various delightful courses. Just as soon as they laid a course down, which they did with great elegance and haste, they hurriedly made their way out of the room. This well-choreographed, almost simultaneous coming and going of the waiters was a delightful sight to see, and I enjoyed this march of the penguins. They all wore crisp white shirts with black waistcoats and black bow ties. Ankle length white aprons, black trousers, and shiny black shoes. What if? I wondered with a large grin on my face. What if I lived here and owned this manor? I would not want for anything more in life if I could own such a grand home. While daydreaming away, I was abruptly interrupted by the mother of the groom.

‘Isn’t it grand Marie?’ Mel asked from behind me.

‘I love every single minute of this,’ she paused and gazed around the room with her right hand parked on my shoulder while leaning over to my left.

‘Don’t they look good together, aye?’

I politely nodded.

‘Yes, they do. If any couple looks good together, it is these two here, that is for darn sure.’

It suddenly dawned on me that she might consider me rude for staying seated while she had made an effort to walk over to my table. I wiped the corners of my mouth with the linen napkin, pushed my chair back and stood up to give her a warm hug followed by a peck on the cheek.

‘Congratulations Mel,’ I said with a genuine smile.

Mel was quite like me. She was a woman who took care of her appearance and always looked great. We were blessed with the ability to know how to look the part, regardless of whether we had money or not. Mix and matching, the sales and thrift shop bargains kept us looking great. We were the embodiment of the saying, *‘It’s not what you wear - it’s how you wear it.’*

‘I am so over the moon happy for them, don’t they look good together Mel?’

‘Yes they most certainly do,’ she said with a large grin on her face. She then smiled at me with a sparkling glow of delight in her eyes and returned the hug.

‘We both did our best here,’ Mel remarked giving me a slight pat on the back. She smiled again, and her face seemed to light up the room.

‘I have to greet so many people so forgive me, but I’m off.’ She grabbed my head, gave me a fat kiss on the cheek and off she dashed leaving me with dark plumb purple no. 37 on my cheek. She knew quite well that she would need to greet everyone as quickly as she possibly could, and way before the march of the penguins resumed to serve the following course.

During the entire dinner, I sat next to my bestie Glenda yet we both found more than enough time to converse with the other table guests and with each other. We had all gone out of our way that day to