

Death Kiss Corsage

Penny Goring

Amelia had death in her eyes. And she was focused on you.

In the dimly-lit kitchen she suddenly lunged, grasped your face with both hands and snogged you, long and hard. Accepting her advance with mouth hanging slack and bloodshot eyes wide open, your sozzled thoughts were sluggish – porridge stirred in the pan. Her rolling tongue slid inside your bra and her silver thumb-ring twinkled as she thoroughly worked you over.

From that night on she pursued you relentlessly – paying homage with bottles, showing her best side, eating your burnt pea risotto, until your hand slipped off the greasy knob of control and you let her move in with you. It was a disastrous mistake.

From the top of her head, befuddled with drugs, to the tips of her barnacled toes, she was deliberately dismantling your life. You made many attempts to get rid of her and I watched patiently as you played them all out. Your favourite plan was futile, but still you dragged it out for two years... when she wasn't smacked-up to her eyeballs you poured gallons of booze down her neck.

By the time she had those ballads blasting, hands clasped beseechingly, crooning at her reflection, I was peering in from the Other Side. I felt your mind lurch as she tottered for her drink and your lips framed their usual refrain –

'It's over Amelia, my girlfriend, my addict, my anathema, my love!'

That's when she would start screeching her cruel cornucopia of lies. Hurling pint-glass missiles, she called you a fish and you cried. She yanked a hank of your hair out. It came away with a chunk of your scalp. A square inch of bleeding raw flesh glistened on top of your head. She anointed the wound with a torrent of vomit. It burnt and you formed a small ball. The vile lumpen liquid dripped down your forehead into your screwed-up eyes. Her stomach acids stung as you blinked.

'You don't know how to love me, you clucker!' she bloodcurdled in your ears.

The neighbours banged on the ceiling, fearing for your child, but Prudence was inured to your racket, she was still fast asleep – I checked. She always awoke around midnight, when they were pounding their fists at your door. By then, Amelia had tired of using your face as a punch-bag, and taking a bit of a breather, she had you in a choke-hold embrace, pinned by your throat to the floor.

Letting go of her grip now, she whimpered, as you crawled to the thundering door.

Outraged faces swaddled in fleecy bedtime comforters swam before you, their sober mouths accusing you of crimes they couldn't pronounce.

‘What have you done to her?’

‘Why is she crying?’

They could hear your aggressor dissolving in an acrid puddle of fear. None of them seemed to notice your tragically rearranged boat race.

‘This ain’t a soddin’ soap opera!’ you shrieked, slamming that sturdy door as hard as you could, against their narrowed eyes.

A waft of poo hung on the air.

I murmured an ancient lullaby in Prudence’s small bed.

Phase two of your plan – at six am you shuffled to the sacred fridge, a frozen monument to total excess, jam-packed with nothing to eat, just the essential cut-price alcohol and one swollen black banana, giving off a putrid pong. Retching, then gulping your hair of the dog, you got Prudence ready for nursery. Before you left the landlady rang and screamed her final warning.

When Amelia eventually stomped from the pit, she said she was bogging sick to freaking death of the uglified sight of your polloxing face reminding her of what you’d made her do. You felt compelled to apologise. That was phase three, I think.

Disgusted with you and, perhaps, with herself, by teatime she had moved out. You were left basking blindly in the peaceful days and hours of your release, but it never lasted for long. When the intercom buzzed and it was Amelia, you always let her back in – her washing machine eyes set on rinse and drain, her 1,000 rpm encore on hold.

Yeah, the pissed-up fight plot didn’t work, just meant you had to wear ginormous sunglasses every day and keep on moving house, dodging cold stares in the communal gardens and disapproving comments in Sainsbury’s, as you stacked Pru’s pushchair with booze. Trundling down the long, leafy roads, eyes fixed on the horizon, the unhindered skyscape told you how tiny and troubled you were, your life a PVC gimp mask shrink-wrapped to your skull.

I trailed in your wake through the ankle deep mulch, willing you to try other ways.

When you hatched the arty voodoo project, I admired your inventiveness and it was a wonderful way to distract Pru, truly cathartic, but it only served to show your grasp on the real was tenuous, constant drinking and the regular beatings gradually skew-whiffing your brain.

Perched on the worktop between the microwave and Amelia’s collection of needles, (more meticulously stashed as her priorities became ever blurred), I gasped softly, enthralled, as you fashioned a life-size curse doll out of bits and bobs and sticky tape and vinegar and brown paper.

She had novelty slippers, comedy hair and peculiar Pick ‘n’ Mix lips, her bulging belly a sniffy cushion, Loopy Loo legs just a pair of old tights. Armless, charmless, a coathanger shoved down

her throat (to keep her head on straight), she glared at you both with her chewing gum eyes. You had created a monster.

You slithered Amelia's pubes from the scummings round the bath and arranged them between the limp thighs. You kneaded the buttocks of white sliced bread and spat cider in the crevasse. Prudence dribbled rice pudding over Amelia's big best bra – you stuffed the cups with sopping dishcloths and fastened it to the bucket of her body.

There she sprawled: Amelia Anathema! Your home-made Millie Muck!

A desperate, wonky effigy in those rented rooms of despair.

'Now for the best bit!' you chortled, and chanting farewell ditties with some ferocious joy, you stuck, stuck, stuck her loo roll heart with forty four malevolent pins. You let Pru jab in a special six and that made fifty pricks.

Pushing the window open wide to the dark, you hoisted her up and out.

'Goodbye, rubbish lady!' you yelled with relish, cackling like a loon.

'Later, Millie, later...' Prudence chirped along with your wild refrain.

Amelia Anathema made a spectacular squiffy starfish shape in the black belly of the sky, before falling to pieces, scattering all her shoddy bits over the frosty grass below. I could see the half century of hate pins winking from her taped-on ticker and fifty years of dregs contaminating your thirsty soul.

Later that night, when she came home unscathed, still rattling her heavy, cold baggage, you were defeated, deflated, struck dumb...even I was disappointed, and Prudence seemed resigned – an awful thing to witness in one so very young.

The 'phone trilled in the unusual silence. It was yet another landlord giving you one month's notice to move out.

Frozen days set in – a bed-sit Christmas loomed. Ice lay down hard and dogged your moves but you never gave up scheming. It was a giant stride forwards when you took the 'S' from curse and decided to call it a cure.

Convincing Amelia she was sicker than you was easier than you'd imagined. With ardent promises of a clean, serene future, you got her into a rehab. You made sure it was a six-month, Twelve Step, regimented type in Weston-super-Nightmare, which meant Prudence could ride a donkey on the beach if you ever risked a visit.

Missing Amelia's shaggy, feral presence, you took Prudence to the pet shop and bought a hairy dog. He was loving and licky and better behaved – you didn't care when he gnawed the furniture – and at last, Prudence had a best friend.

Finding money for drink was easier now you were only buying for one. The fridge wobbled with bottles of bulk buy white wine, litres of vodka lay snug in the freezer and there were mixers left over for Pru. Cutting out the dirt cheap booze stopped your liver kicking so hard but the blackouts came out of the blue. Prudence became your oblivion detective, helping you suss out what went on. How did you knock out your front teeth? Who came round last night? I never dropped any clues.

Meanwhile, Amelia survived her ten-day detox, and the drudgery of Steps 1, 2 and 3, but after thirteen clean weeks they chucked her out. She got caught smooching with some crack head bird behind the tea urn at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. She had broken the 'No Fraternalizing' rule, which was, of all the very many brutally enforced rules (always sit your coffee cup on a coaster, don't wear your slippers in the dining-room, never cry out in your sleep), written on high in gilded Gothic and polished daily by shaky, recovering hands.

The counsellors called an emergency group where grim warnings were issued to all. Then they hand-picked a dry-drunk delegation who gleefully marched Amelia straight to the station. Tucking a photocopy of the Serenity Prayer in her hastily packed bag, they shoved her on the first fast train back to London, back to the gloom of their constantly invoked: chaos, depravity and doom. Out There.

She rang you from the train. She rang you from Piccadilly. When she rang from your dodgiest local, slurring about scoring a ten bag, you told her to get herself home. Putting the 'phone down, it dawned on you... Clean for three long months? Rat-arsed? On her way round for a fix? The mutant peach of your sour love was about to fly face first into the killing hammer of an OD. The cure was about to implode. You lost your bottle, grabbed Pru by the soft of her hand and bolted for the street. Dumping her at your mum's, you went on a six-day bender, avoiding the flat at all costs.

Nowadays, you stand alone in cold playgrounds. You are a totem of grief. I shift restlessly at your numbed feet and Amelia hovers at your shoulder. You will never forget what was waiting for you when you plucked up the guts to return.

She lay stiff and still on the sepulchral sofa – a waxwork junkie at rest, but as you crept closer the horror bit hard – she didn't have a face.

Amelia's head was a gruesome chew toy, clogged with the remains of her ruined features, veiled by her slimy hair, lolling at an impossible angle. She had no lips or a tongue, not even her two dead eyes. All that was left was a gory maw with a lopsided leer on a pedestal of gristle.

The dog you'd never bothered to name, slobbered your fingers and thrust his wet nose, probing your nether regions, tail thwacking, barking madly, as you slipped on the slops of his best ever meal, and crashed to your boney knees, demented and howling beside her.

They won't let you have Prudence back – you're completely off the rails. And no matter how much you drink, where you go, who you talk to, what you try not to think, Amelia is with you for as long as you live.

Her shadow is roving your walls, her fiery soles are scorching the carpet, neon flashing from her eye sockets slices the gloomy bedroom. She's parting your musty curtains, brushing against your damp blankets, she's entwined in your gusset, has her hand in your pocket, her knee between your thighs, she's lipping the old porky-pies in your shell-like – now she's getting frisky.

She's nibbling your lobes, fingering your globes, tweaking your nips, grazing your hips, asking if you fancy a role-play. What's she doing with her hands? She's itching, twitching, stroking, scratching, praying, marking time – rubbing the days on your slick old bean, inching you to the clincher. You cry leaden pellets and there is no relief and no such thing as respite. Her doggy-mauled head bleeds on your breasts every night, and her needle pokes deep in your petrified hole, as you sweat buckets of booze on the sheets.

This morning you faced me for the first time and begged me to help you escape. Clutching me to your heart like a death kiss corsage, together we made our pact.

There will be no flowers, you shall have butterflies, in all those colours you wore – bruised blue, blooded red, bright jaundiced yellow and tender, aching green... a rainbow of butterflies.

They'll flutter their way down the apples and pears, in The Nag's Head, out The White Swan, up the roiling river in a pulsating host, all the way to Greenwich – the home of time – where you will be lounging on methadone clouds, eating valium and strawberries, wearing black wings three feet high with so many feathers and ribbons.

I can hear canned laughter and scattered applause, a piano plinking from posh, plushy rooms, ice chinking in polite crystal glasses – they've all turned up for your wake.

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