

Dressing Up

Milly was ironing in the kitchen in her underwear when the telephone rang. Bugger! She paused for a second, iron held up like a weapon, wondering how it was that she could sit alone for hours at a time with nothing but a cup of coffee and a chocolate digestive between her and her thoughts, and then as soon as she started doing something really involving or really tricky, people would start ringing up. She'd just got to the awkward bit too, the fiddly pleating around the skirt, just reached a pleasing rhythm, the iron seeming to dance in and out, in and out and over, like those country reels she'd learned at school. It was probably the Water Board again... let the machine pick it up.

"Milly? Oh blast, you're not in. Sod. Well, it's Philip. Yes, Philip here. We're meeting tonight? At the Black Swan? Just thought I'd give you a quick bell, find out what you'll be wearing...? Oh, not that it matters, of course... no, not at all.. it was just..."

Milly smiled and lay down the iron, but didn't pick up the phone. Let him wonder. It would be far better if he didn't recognise her; she wanted to be able to take a look at him first when she arrived, see what he looked like. She'd seen a picture, obviously; she wouldn't have committed herself to this evening otherwise, and he'd looked very nice, but, well, pictures could be deceiving, couldn't they? If it turned out that he looked horrible then she could always head home and he'd never know she'd even see him, which would spare them both from humiliation. She could always phone him afterwards, tell him she'd been struck down by a bug and hadn't been able to make it.

But then...her social life was so sparse that he'd have to look spectacularly dreadful for that to be the case. Just as long as he wasn't wearing anything nylon or Lycra, she thought, didn't dress as though he was sixteen when she knew perfectly well that he was the other side of forty. After all, it only had to be for tonight, didn't it? Unless things went really well, and if they did, then... who knew?

In a daze of expectation she finished ironing the blue dress and slipped it over her shoulders. She'd bought it especially for tonight; the assistant in the exclusive little 'boutique' had been most complimentary about the colour bringing out the blue of her eyes and the tawny highlights in her hair and she'd been so overawed by the exquisite little woman she'd seen in the mirror as she'd tried it on, that she couldn't *not* buy it.

And then the doubts set in, as she smoothed the fabric down over her thighs. Was it all just too much? Was the flared pleating, the ruched bodice too 'historical heroine'? Was the row of tiny covered buttons which ran down her cleavage just screaming 'reformed tart'? Which she wasn't, of course. Either a tart, or reformed. A twenty-year marriage hadn't given much opportunity for tarding or doing anything to reform from; she and Michael had led a blamelessly parochial life, which had left her feeling empty when he'd left, and curiously hungry for new experiences

Well, tonight should be an experience, if nothing else.

She walked into the private function room at the Black Swan feeling tall and elegant in her new high-heeled sandals, the blue skirt swirling around her calves and giving

her a frisson of sensation, as though she was being lightly tickled with silk. She stood just inside the doorway, hesitant and yet excited, and smiled around her at the collection of dresses being worn. Some were plain, some outrageously patterned like an hallucinogenic nightmare; chiffon and lace mixing with tweed and Crimplene, heels ranging from court shoes to stilettos, the room perfumed with various clashing scents cut through with the chemical smell of hairspray. She needn't have worried about the blue dress, it fitted in perfectly.

She looked around to see if she could see Philip, but there were so many people in the room... what if he saw her first? She squared her shoulders. Did it matter? Whatever he looked like, she was sure that everything would be fine; she'd taken the first step and nothing would ever be this hard again.

"Milly? You look fantastic!" It was Philip, appearing beside her. "Thank you so much for coming.." he took her arm and led her deeper into the throng. "Not sure what was going to happen... what it would be like ... you know, first time and all..."

"My pleasure." Milly suddenly felt the feeling she'd been missing all these years, the feeling of finally being a 'woman of the world'. "Isn't that Dior that you're wearing?"

Philip looked down at himself. "Yes, it is, how clever of you! Mind you, it took ages to get the shoes to match."

She took in all of him. From the tip of his blonde wig to the toes of his black and white slingbacks, her old friend was immaculate; the checkered black-and-white cocktail frock might have been made for him, and he'd teamed it perfectly, and tastefully, with pale cream stockings. "And I'm delighted you wore that blue dress. I was worried for a while that we might end up clashing, you see."

Milly smiled and hooked her arm through his. She almost felt as though she should light a cigarette and smoke it through an ivory holder; she'd never smoked, but that was how this made her feel. "No, Philip," she said, "I can't imagine ever clashing with you. And I think... for your first time out dressed up, that you look fantastic too."