

# BLACK WEDDING AND FIVE MORE FUNERALS

## FELICITY SAVAGE

*A collection of stories of the occult, the supernatural, and the plain ol' weird.*



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## BLACK WEDDING

To Jess's secret delight, the English weather forecast had proved inaccurate. Rain bucketed down on the grounds of Kilbore House, on the angular walks and the stone urns full of carnations dyed purple and yellow which had been cunningly insinuated amidst the native ferns for the occasion. The wedding guests were directed indoors.

Jess, arriving from the Plymouth registry office in a Land Rover full of Garnett cousins, stood at the back of the ballroom and watched it fill up with suits and taffeta froth. Posh, she thought, savoring the word, laughing a little at herself. *Ranther* posh, dahling!

When Jess and Sophie had lived together in college, Sophie had scorned any function that required her to wear heels. Now she was getting married in Veronica Wang.

But in one respect, perhaps, Sophie had not changed at all.

Jess had gotten her first look at the groom at the registry office. Tall and leonine with a head of parti-bleached straw, tanned like a mountaineer, Dhaka Huddingsley had exceeded Jess's expectations. She had feared that Sophie was about to marry some awful dweeb with a surgically attached briefcase. A barrister Dhaka might be; a dweeb he clearly was not. And it was not the PR professional with gleaming hair, now proceeding into the ballroom under full satin sail, who had fallen in love with him (Jess thought, clapping her hands sore); it was the scruffy little English hippie who'd spent four years getting stoned with Jess at Bennington and travelling on all-night magic carpet rides through the archipelagic possibilities of the future, shooting emotional rapids as deep as the gulfs between the stars. Jess had once been scared for Sophie. Now she felt proud of her.

A woman minister conducted the ceremony on the dais. ("What a pram-face," muttered a man near Jess, startling her into a giggle.) A Huddingsley uncle and Sophie's mother contributed readings from e.e. cummings and Tennyson. Beneath an arch of braided flowers Sophie and Dhaka took their vows. Camera flashes hailed on them, the wedding photographer did the splits, and Jess, having snapped her own pictures, surreptitiously hiked up her hose.

### *Three Things About Tom Fairweather (Only Two of Which are True)*

*Tom cannot swim*

*Tom once met the late General Ceaucescu of Roumania*

*Tom is a murderer*

"Oh, now I get it," Jess said. She looked around the table. A heavy crossfire of conversation had already started up, the woman on Jess's right lobbing grenades of laughter. "Who's Tom Fairweather?"

"I am, I'm afraid," said the man on her left. "Friend of the family. The Garnetts, that is." His fine, straight blond hair was receding slightly from his temples. He gave an impression of solidity and calm. He glanced at the obverse of his own placecard. "Would you be Jessica Brentwood? Sophie's friend from university?"

"Yeah, but everyone calls me Jess. Well, then, we've got each other's."

"Hmm, well, in the spirit of the game, I'll guess it's untrue that you... once won a trophy for Jello wrestling."

Jess laughed. "No! That's actually one of the true things! It was on spring break ten years ago... totally out of character. I mean, I've never even been back to Florida since."

"Jello," Tom mused. "What we call jelly."

“And for us, the stuff you spread on your toast is jelly.”

“Don’t you eat it with peanut butter?”

“Not me. I’m actually allergic to peanuts.” With her fork Jess touched the brick of quivering green-spotted substance framed amidst the leaves and shrimp of her appetizer. “Jelly.”

“I think that’s actually a sort of seaweed mousse,” Tom said. Jess tasted it and made a face: so-so. He smiled. “OK, now I’m genuinely curious. Is it untrue that you’re a teacher?”

“Two strikes and you’re out,” Jess crowed. “I’m a special education teacher in the New York public school system.” She rolled her eyes. “Obviously, I do it for love.”

“You certainly wouldn’t do it for the money,” Tom agreed.

“No, it’s a total scandal... anyway. Don’t get me started on politics. No, but I do love it: my kids are great. The smallest victory makes such a difference to them. Actually, they teach me as much as I teach them, you know? The importance of the little things in life.” Jess smiled, and thought: Stop it, he’s not interested. Around English people, with the great exception of Sophie, she always seemed to talk more about herself than she meant to. Their reserve and natural politeness drew her out, helplessly. “So tell me about meeting Ceaucescu,” she said.

“I was only about eight. My father was a diplomat... no, quite boring, really. One international school is much the same as another. Anyway, there was a Christmas party at the palace. They used to invite all the children of the ambassadors and high-level apparatchiks; there was a Santa with amazing presents. But was I grateful? Not a bit. I was introduced to the General and I looked up at him – he was remarkably ugly, he looked as if he wasn’t human at all, really – and I said, ‘My mother says you’re a tyrant.’” Tom burst into laughter. Jess joined in.

“No way! What did he say?”

“I can’t remember; I think I was hustled off the scene in a hurry.” Tom’s blue eyes shone nostalgically. “Funnily enough, my parents divorced the year after that.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“And a few years after *that*, of course, the General was deadibones.”

“Yes, and good riddance,” Jess said. “I remember the pictures in the papers.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes. The appetizers had been replaced by plates of lamb, basmati rice, and a selection of vaguely Middle Eastern salads. At the head table, Sophie glowed beside Dhaka, and Jess wondered when she would get to catch up with her properly. She had only flown in this morning, on the red-eye from JFK. *Deadibones*... English slang was such a rich trove of oddities, like an antique shop where the mangles and fire irons walked and talked. The laughing-grenade woman said to her other seatmate, “So I told Arthur, I know they’re very nice people, but I simply can’t have them in our home again...”

“What I’ve been wondering,” Jess said, “is, what kind of parents name their child after the capital of Bangladesh?”

At exactly the same time, Tom said, “So I’m assuming it’s not true that you’re married?”

They both laughed. Jess said, “No, I’m divorced, actually.” Tom gave her what she thought of as The Look, eyes widening in a combination of surprise and belated understanding. Jess had once reveled in her status as a divorcee. Parents, for instance, talked freely and confidentially to her, as they did not talk to her never-married and presumably less worldly-wise colleagues. But more recently she felt as if she had been sprayed with a coat of faux-aging patina, her bloom prematurely tarnished. Almost crossly, she said, “It was years ago. I was married at twenty-one, divorced at twenty-three... just a normal bad relationship. Except that we happened to tie the knot, so then we had to untie it again.”

“A normal bad relationship,” Tom said. “Is there any other kind?”

“Is that the voice of experience I hear?”

“No, no, just my usual—“ He made a deprecating gesture. “Pop psychology.”

At the head table a glass chimed. The Huddingsley uncle rose, a weathered yeti in a bowtie. Did Dhaka have no other family here? Jess could not see anyone who looked as if they might have named their child after the capital of Bangladesh, no greying hippies or intellectuals in Birkenstocks. “My nephew has a history of making mistakes,” blared the uncle. “Especially in love. When he introduced me to Sophie – this beautiful, accomplished young woman – I knew he’d done it again. ‘Dhaka,’ I demanded, ‘why haven’t you married her already?’”

Laughter rolled through the room.

“It *was* a whirlwind romance, though,” Jess whispered to Tom. “I hadn’t heard from her in six months – she’d said nothing about a boyfriend – and then suddenly it was like, ‘I’ve met The One and we’re getting married next month!’ I had to basically go on my knees to get the time off.”

Tom’s eyes slewed around to her. “I believe it runs in the family.”

“Whirlwind romances?”

“No – I suppose a sort of self-sufficiency... it can feel like indifference. Rather terrifying really. They’re very rooted here in South Devon, you know.”

**E**ight miles from Plymouth, the Garnett family home lay on and virtually across a narrow lane that ran down to a stony cove. Today the rain had kept away the tourists who were known to brazenly park their cars in the front yard. The trees stooped low, dripping.

Additions jutted out of the house at odd angles, trikes and toy trucks cluttered the hall, and in the conservatory the families and friends of the newlyweds mingled amidst aloes and trays of seedlings while the rain pounded ceaselessly above their heads. Sophie’s mother, Louise, came and talked to Jess, trailing a toddler. From Sophie, Jess had the impression that Louise entertained a neverending succession of men friends and had never stopped having babies, although this one was more likely to be a grandchild at Louise’s age, she thought.

Still pink and blonde, if worn thinner than the last time they had met, Louise pressed Jess’s arm with a cold hand. “Thank you for coming, Jess. You’ll be staying with us, of course. Has anyone shown you where you’ll be sleeping?”

“Not yet,” said Jess, stifling a jetlagged yawn. “I’m having so much fun.” This was one of those lies that made her fear she was turning into her own mother. “Sophie looks absolutely incredible.” Wistfully, she gazed across the conservatory at Sophie, who had managed to give her one brief hug before being surrounded by her London-based bridesmaids and their loud escorts.

Tom Fairweather caught her eye and jerked his head. She rose and went to stand beside him on the fringe of the group, feeling slightly awkward.

“I’m not advocating social Darwinism,” Dhaka said. His eyes were as pink as the champagne at lunch, a left-over bottle of which he gripped by the neck. “I’m only saying people have got to be held accountable to their communities. Christ, we can’t leave the law in the hands of the *lanyers!*”

“You’d know,” shrieked a bridesmaid. Dhaka smiled edgily.

“Jess,” Sophie exclaimed, shoving her face forward for more kisses. The introductions halted the conversation. To fill the silence, Jess asked her foolish question about Dhaka’s name.

“Oh, I was conceived there. Speaking of social Darwinism...”

“Those are Dhaka’s parents,” Tom said quietly, nodding at a couple in the far corner whom Jess had already crossed off her list of possibles: she in Laura Ashley, he in a cowboy hat, both balancing coffee cups on their elbows, not talking to anyone. Jess thought they looked frightened.