

Dreamgirl

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Thomas reaches out to hook his arm around her waist, but it's too late, she's a ghost, everything is gas. Something lifts the stone off his body, and he wriggles out of his tomb. His pillows are under his feet and the duvet is twisted around his head. Is he late for work? God, Jesus, the Apple IIe presentation, the softwa –

No, that was 1988. Is it too late to be young, to have his whole life to explore opportunities? Thomas checks his head. He thinks he might've retired three years ago, comfortable Suna's income would cover them both, which was 2012 – yes? No... Yes. *Yes*. His life's played out. His ticket's been clipped.

God. Deep, sexual dream. Too deep, too passionate. He picks the gunk out of his eyes and reaches for his glasses, squinting. The hardness of the light means he's overslept, once again. Why does the house feel empty? Why do he and Suna live in a 1.3-million-dollar house with 15 rooms?

'Polly?' he calls. No, you daft fool – Polly's the girl in the dreams. She came into his dreams last week, hauled urges out of his body like a submerged net, gave him sex so powerful it changed his day. He awoke, smelling latex and friction and panicking. 'Suna, I mean?' What used to be a manly teaching voice that turned heads in computing labs has gone brittle and shattered. 'Crumbs, I said I'd drop you at the airport, didn't I?'

'Summit's on the third,' calls Suna's voice from the front door step. Glued to the bed by his sweaty back, Thomas pictures her sweeping her silver-flecked mane of black hair

behind her queenly head, 'And yes, it'd be lovely if you'd drop me,' she finishes. Then the door is firmly shut, and her \$70,000 Citroen rumbles down the \$21,000 tiled driveway.

She's off to a Board of Directors meeting for the deaf children's theatre, followed by the appointment with the headhunter to go over the candidates for the \$120,000 Ministry position she has the say on. Suna always laughs, claims she doesn't have that much power really, ha ha, but that's rubbish. Thomas's wife, once the girl of his dreams, could be an esteemed politician if she didn't have to come home each night and listen to his gripes.

Thomas swings his feet out of bed and grimaces at the erection which is pushing his pyjamas away from his belly button. It's these damn erotic dreams. His old penis, gorged with piss and blood, seems bigger than it's ever been, and dark, too, and without a slot, a cubbyhole, a home. He can't make love to Suna in motel swimming pools like he did 37 years ago. These days, Suna comes home in her leased car, eats the meal he's spent half the day planning, comments on the cleaning he's accomplished since he forced the maid to work just one day a week, emails from 8pm to 11, takes amitriptyline sleeping pills, gets up at dawn and leaves a note for her 65-year-old husband, squirming inside his wet dream straightjacket.

Thomas wobbles away from the ensuite bathroom, past 10 rooms to get to the toilet in one of the guest rooms that no one ever sleeps in. He strokes his moustache, looking in the mirror for any colour left in the crispy hairs, then unzips, urinates for 50 seconds and tries to remember. He was needed in the dream. He had a purpose. Unfortunately, in the light of day, that purpose is gone. Suna achieves resolutions in meetings, hires and fires and talks to boards and government; Thomas watches television and tries to cook meals. The erotic dreams coming out of nowhere are unfair. They make him feel

more wanted than he has any right to be. He caught the girl's name, early in the dream— *Polly, by God, Polly, so skinny her teeth stick out and her eyes bulge like cue balls, pulls him through a wall and her lips grow a coating of lipstick. He sits behind Polly in a fluffy armchair in her parents' rumpus room, licking her neck. Tiger-tongued, strips of her flesh move down his throat, which becomes prickly with blood. His lips have fingerprints, apparently, which are etched into her neck, and she panics — her father is a judge. He's in the lounge in a black room lit up by a TV screen, draped in his black robes with a wig on his head and a gavel instead of a remote control.*

Her father's bound to hear the eruption of heartbeats. There isn't much time. Tommy pulls her hair and Polly's head tips back and steam spills out of her throat and her legs spread and juices gush out as if he's cutting open a roast chicken and God's voice says You can't do this here, Tommy, if you keep prodding beneath the golden button of her Levi's, Polly is going to burst like a watermel —

His snaps out of the daydream. His mobile rings. Thomas stares at it, then plods toward it, disappointed his replay has been interrupted. Suna.

'Just me.'

'Aren't you on your way to work?'

'The painter's coming at 10 to do the gate, remember. Joe's friend.'

'Our son has a lot of friends. Can you be more specific?'

'Joe's friend from the pest trapping course. You don't remember? He does odd jobs.'

'I wish Joe would do odd jobs. Did you know his student loan's topped forty thousand? All spent on backpacker hostels, mostly. Did you know that's his ritual? Guides girls up some mountain under the pretence of working as a nature guide, strokes a fern frond and tells some German nymph the ancient myths and legends of the bush, then before you know it he's... consummating things. Lucky for some, eh.'

There's the noise of people filing into a meeting behind Suna. 'I don't have time for this, Thomas. Are you saying you'll do it yourself? Reckon you can keep up with a 30-year-old, do you? You'll be home. You're not going out anywhere, surely?'

Thomas sighs. 'Ten it is.'

*

Thomas spends the morning on the internet looking at pictures of slim older women. Somebody said something at a soiree about Suna being a "silver fox," and the comment puzzled and worried and excited him, and he's glad the comment's stirred him into action. He needs things to do over the 3650 days before he becomes decrepit. His mission, today, is to uncover how other people see her. If Suna is indeed a "fox," she certainly isn't up for anything quick or sneaky. Thomas hasn't seen the pink, wrinkly petals of his wife's labia in, God... there was that time in 2011 she needed cheering up after she didn't get hired for that management job at that private school, and that was pretty much it.

David the painter arrives on time. Thomas has been practising how quickly he can hit the Shut Down button and get the silver labia off his screen. Three seconds til shutdown; another thirty seconds to the door.

Just looking at the painter's body makes Thomas feels exhausted. The man is slim with straps of tattooed muscle holding his bones together, like a mummy's bandages. His handshake presses spiky callouses into Thomas' soft soap-coloured palms, and Thomas momentarily pictures the virile man grinding someone on a bed.

'Thanks for coming to do the gate. You're a touch older than Joe – how'd you two meet?'

‘Aw, just one of the boys, y’know. Play a bitta sport with him. We rooted, ah, went out with some of the same girls. You’re still wanting me to do a double coat today? Yous got me to stain it not that long ago. Shit though, if you got the money to spend... .’

‘Double, yes please, if it’s not too much trouble. How is Joe, tell me.’

David takes off his cap and scratches his head and his diamond earring jiggles. ‘Ahhhhmmm... Last contact was this pxt come through from him. Could show you if you want?’ He cups a hand over his iPhone and shoves a picture in front of Thomas’ face. ‘Now that’s some sideboob, am I right?’

Thomas hands the phone back, wondering if he owes David some money for what he’s just seen. ‘Sexy indeed. Is she... this comes from a website, presumably?’

‘Nah boss, she’s one of Joe’s roots. The man’s got about three on the go, as ya do.’

David hauls down a huge bucket of stain which Thomas is pleased to see is the correct one he ordered. David is hauling it suspiciously easily. Thomas could never lift a thing like that.

‘Sorry. Shouldn’ta showed you that. Unprofesh.’

‘It’s honestly no trouble.’

‘Anyway, boss, should be just be a half-a-dayer.’

‘You don’t have to call me boss.’

‘It’s just a habit I do when people are respectable, y’know?’

‘I’m not “respectable.”’

Thomas tries to help his son’s friend haul his stuff down from the truck, but he hasn’t lifted something which required a struggle since his classroom days, and after he drops a bucket on its side, David sends him to make the coffees.

‘Cheers, ears,’ says David, lifting his coffee with one hand while painting with the other hand, barely looking at the surface as it glistens.

David drains the coffee and makes the biscuit disappear. Thomas tries the same, and burns his throat and spits it out and runs the garden hose and washes the burning out of his mouth.

It takes David a swift 90 minutes to complete 60 per cent of the gate. Thomas observes, sitting low in a Cape Cod chair made of real oak, then senses the man will leave soon enough, so he clears his throat and closes his *Following Sea* magazine. ‘Can I ask you something?’

‘What’s up, Tommy?’

‘Tommy, God. I was Tommy when I first got together with Suna.’ *I was Tommy in my dream.*

‘That your wife? I seen her when I come round to look at the gate the other day. She’s a silver fox, boss, you done well.’

‘I wanted to ask you – how does one maintain a girlfriend, or “goomah” as you put it?’

David finally rests his paintbrush, takes off his cap, wipes his brow with the crinkly brown hairs on his forearm. ‘Mate, I didn’t fall into the marriage trap, for one – not sayin it’s a bad trap. Probly the best trap you could getcha self. S’just, hell. You see these people havin affairs on TV, but truth be told: if you’re married and you think people’s gonna shag ya, you gotta be dreaming.’ He clinks his cup against Thomas’s, and Thomas jerks back, checking that no splashes have landed on his shoes.

‘Take a break, David. I’d love it if you’d share some more photos. Stories, even?’

‘Aw, Tommy, I can’t afford to have unpaid breaks.’

‘It’s a paid break. Just tell me. Tell me about Joe.’

‘Joe?’

‘Joe’s sexually active, from what I gather?’

David looks around for predators about to ambush him, decides he can handle this old man, wraps his brush in plastic and puts one foot up on a stool – not sitting, but not standing, either. ‘Well, alright. I mean, we done the ET one time. Y’get it? It’s a type of three-way...’

‘Continue.’

David checks his watch, looks at the gate, looks at his tins and buckets and sighs. ‘Short version is – and this was back in school – you can root all night when you’re school age, y’know?’

‘I suppose.’ Thomas fingers his wedding ring. In terms of sex, he’s been with Suna, back when her hair and eyebrows were entirely black, and before her, at polytech, there’d been Colleen and Carol, although in sleeping with Carol, all he’d done that night was sleep. That was it.

‘And we had these stupid moustaches, you know how when you’re real fresh you don’t realise how pervy moustaches look? Aw – no offense.’

‘None taken. Continue.’

‘Anyway, we were out on this school night. Dunno what Joe told his Rentals. This woman at the pub was gaggin for it – and she was a *woman*-woman, with a real bossy sorta haircut, and I think she’d had a bad day selling houses, she still had on a red suit-jacket and a name tag, and, like, old lady pearls. Anyway, it was epic-late, we’re talkin almost five in the morning and the karaoke was goin hard. This woman, right, she had a chap stick in her hand honestly the whole night cause her lips kept dryin out. She was a smoker, but I think she was on crack, too, like to help her sell houses extra-good? Anyway, Joe whispers to me, ‘Check out the crocs on this bitch.’ By crocs, he meant them gross scales crack-smokers get around their lips when the skin dries out and dies? So we get to her mansion but we don’t even make it up the stairs, she’s pullin down our pants and Joe starts doin her mouth, and I

was holdin her bum cheeks apart with my hands and, boss, we got so deep inside her, our dicks practically touched, like two fingertips touching, y'know. That's why they call it The E.T.' He picks up his coffee cup, finds nothing in it, puts it down and picks up his paint brush instead.

'I see. Please tell me more.'

David folds his arms one way, then refolds them. 'Listen, unless you're not a fan of little blue pills, best advice I ever heard for spicing up your marriage is to hire her one of them male entertainers – that is, if you've got the money.'

'Tell me. Tell me what I must do.'

*

Suna comes up the driveway and Thomas shuts down the Wikipedia entry on youth culture and the How to Rekindle Your Marriage webpage. Suna meets Thomas at the island in the middle of their kitchen.

She tugs the bill of Thomas's cap without kissing him. 'What happened to your moustache? Why is the sink full of hair?' She looks down at whatever he's put on his feet, then fingers his black tank top. 'How much was this?'

He hands her a chardonnay. '\$59.99. It was on special.'

'A pension's for spending, I suppose. God knows you could use a little pocket money. Goodness gracious, we got through a lot today – tonight's dining pleasure is...?'

'I didn't cook.'

'Okay, time out. D'you want to just stop a moment and tell me why you're wearing a silly cap? And you haven't prepared supper? And sandals?'

'Jandals. There's a distinction.'

'Are you trying to look ridiculous, or succeeding without trying? Seriously, have you not cooked? You have bugger-all to do each day. It's not as if the University of Third Age is especially onerous, is it now.'

‘Don’t diss U3A, Suna.’

‘Diss? No dinner? I’ve had a hard day, by anyone’s measure, and you’re doing this to me?’

Thomas takes his weight off the kitchen island, moves a \$90 copper-bottomed pan out of his face and puts his hands on Suna’s waist. ‘I want to show you something, it’s, I mean, something in the bedroom, I mean, something downstairs.’

Suna withdraws her hips from his advancing crotch, grabs his wrists, leans her brow against his, grits her teeth and makes a vampirish face. ‘You are aware I’m flying out first thing for the summit?’

‘But – but I thought that was on the third?’

‘Tomorrow *is* the third. This is what happens when you don’t have a schedule in your life. There are two frozen meals in the freezer. You can operate a microwave in board shorts and – what is this – a Tapout singlet? And whatever that thing is under your belt that’s poking me? Get rid of it.’

They eat on the couch, which Suna usually doesn’t allow, and Thomas listens to her scoffing noises and gets a flash of the sad mature realtor woman’s mouth sucking and gagging on Joe’s wet balls and Thomas puts his plastic dish of Quiche In A Minute on the coffee table and shifts away from Suna.

‘My moustache: do you think it’s stupid?’

‘Oh honey,’ she says, without looking away from the TV, ‘Not that I have time for questions as inconsequential as this, but no. It’s part of you.’

‘I’m going to bed. You should come.’

Suna has *Mysteries of the Lakes* going on the TV and she’s responding to emails on her iPhone at the same time.

‘Suun? Come to bed. I’d like to... show you. Something.’

‘Don’t be silly. Love you. G’night.’

Thomas finds the handbasin crowded with Suna’s foundation, her Bio-Oil, lipstick, mascara, bee-venom face mask, hair spray, sleeping pills, foundation, more lipstick –

and tiny stainless steel scissors, in her cosmetics chest: good. He stares at the mirror hard and goes to work on his dirt-coloured moustache, chopping out the grey and white bits firstly, listening to Suna's TV show playing distantly in his ears. The sink becomes cluttered with tufts. Excellent. He pulls his Tapout singlet off hurriedly, hoping it'll rip on his shoulders, if they're sturdy enough. He tenses his arm as hard as he can and kisses his fingers. He draws a tribal tattoo around his bicep with green eye shadow.

He sneaks a couple of Suna's sleeping pills down his throat then digs out an Emirates airline sleep mask and covers his eyes and lies down on the California Superking bed with the 800-thread-count silver sheets

'We have to get away.' Some God-like voice narrating tells him it's Polly. He looks up – posters of planets, volcanoes. Science class. Her collar bone barely holds up a head swooning with desire. Her body is browner than ever, truly tropical. There must be two hundred seats between the lovers and the front of the class, where a teacher's voice makes faraway sounds. The gap between the teacher and him and Polly is so far that the horizon curves. The blackboard is receding, and Polly is tugging him into the shadows at the back, past tubs of chemicals, past beakers and a Bunsen burner that's aflame and he thinks: I have to tell someone.

He watches Polly – agile, fluid, a child, a gazelle – move between towers of textbooks which start to topple on them. She pulls him into a closet stuffed with coats. They lose their way, quickly, and find themselves mashed amongst polyester and fur and she is sucking his nectar out. Her fingers are claws and she's scratching his shoulder blades. One of her legs pushes between his; the other slides up his thigh, up over his hip, climbs his ribs, keeps rising.

'We have to hump,' she says, struggling for air, hardly even looking at him, *'I'm so itchy, you have to cum inside me.'*

The padding behind his back isn't a coat room, it's cushions on a 1970s couch, brown with an orange tartan pattern, but they're sitting upright, backs straight, squeezing each other so tightly it's as if their chests meld, and her dad's coming home, they have to hurry, he has to slurp another litre of her saliva, this is the only time he'll get to do this in his life, there is an electric eel doing cartwheels in his stomach and she's saying Tommy, he'll be here in 30 seconds, and tilting back she pulls a beige polo shirt over her head, but there aren't nipples and flesh the colour of crisp unused cardboard underneath, there's another shirt, and Tommy's yanking shirt after shirt over her head, but the walls drip regret, there is no time for him to get out of the house, she's sorry, Tommy, she's his true love, this is the sexual sanctuary in the globe where she exists, but there's just no time. Her dad's pulling up the driveway and Tommy's sprinting toward the source of all passion in all the universe, located in the dim brown recesses of this warehouse-sized cupboard of coats and Suna's looking unimpressed and placing the breakfast tray on his chest more firmly than she needs to, to hurt him just a little bit, and the duvet looks like it's been in a car wreck, and all of his pyjama buttons have come undone.

And he has a thick, painful erection, tugging his blood away from his body.

'Thanks for the lift to the airport, sleepyhead,' Suna says, 'My taxi's here. Enjoy... whatever it is you're doing today.'

'Wait – you have to wait, Pol – Suna, I'll drive you.' He points his feet over the edge of the huge bed, waits for the ceiling to stop spinning. 'A man can drop his wife at the airport, can't he?'

'Most men can, yes,' she says, and disappears.

*

Jerking like robots under the black and white strobe light, Joe and David rub the bartender's scalp and combine strange alcohols and rub powder on their gums and fiddle with their cigarette packets and it all seems normal to them, but Joe's dad feels like he's wearing a straightjacket, and his earplugs barely minimise the hammer-blows striking his skull. Thomas is hypnotised by the dancers in the nightclub, and he hardly moves, one hand always gripping the bar. Thomas feels like half of him is missing. He opens a browser on his phone, sends Suna a Gmail Hangouts invitation for eleven o'clock Wednesday night, Singapore time. Her conference runs during the day, only. At night she'll be racing to complete all the tasks in her organiser, finishing around 10pm. She'll shower, she'll use that scrub of hers to take a little bit of exhaustion out of her jowls. Then, if he's lucky, she'll be available for some quick face time on her laptop before she realises she's forgotten her sleeping pills and admits she's exhausted.

After half an hour of ignoring Thomas and yakking with Joe, David turns his back on the clubbers and shouts in Thomas' ear, 'YOU SURE YOU CAN HEAR OKAY? NOT TOO LOUD FOR YA?'

'COME AGAIN?'

Thomas feels elbows stab his stomach, feels his toes stood on, smells a nearby heat lamp cooking someone's hair. He watches the liquid in his so-called Jägerbomb shaking as the speakers boom. He tries to make sure he's touching David's sleeve at all times. Hazards are everywhere. There's a gigantic Oriental man with a ponytail. Unattainable Girls with their chests squashed flat with tank tops tight as Glad Wrap.

'DAVE! D'YOU THINK A MAN WOULD BE HAPPY IF HE WAS IN A COMA? AND HE COULD EXPERIENCE DREAM SENSATIONS WITHOUT END?'

David nudges Joe towards his dad. Joe pretends he hasn't been cringing the whole time. 'SUP DAD. YOU COME HERE OFTEN?'

'PARDON?'

'LOVE YA THREADS, DAD.'

Thomas checks his shorts for loose threads and finds none. Joe must be mistaken about the threads. Nice to hear his son speak, though. Thomas has been collecting everything Joe's ever said since he was born.

'C'MERE. WE'LL GO OUTSIDE.'

He drags his father out onto a wet deck. Everyone is crowded under heat lamps, shielding cigarettes with their fingers. Joe notices a trio of Irish-looking girls with backpacks and shorts as tiny as knickers. One of the girls isn't smoking, so Joe is putting a cigarette in front of her face and holding a lighter up, and she's laughing and saying no, but then she's craning her neck and sucking and smoke is coming out of her teeth and she's stroking Joe's arm. 'Back later,' Joe's saying to the girl, 'Gotta take care of the old man for a bit.' Joe bows exaggeratedly and walks backwards, sliding perfectly into position on a bar stool by his father.

'Did you know that girl?'

'Nope, but that ain't stopping me from trying. You look retarded, truth be told, dad. Who let you buy these, anyhow?'

'I went to Boardwalk Empire. Surfing apparel. I suppose you know of it. I've been reading an article by Nazreen Ali in National Geographic – a magnificent science journal – anyway, look, many flower petals have a yellow or orange hue, because orange stands out in the visible spectrum of 84% of species.'

Joe exhales smoke and finally makes eye contact. 'Okay, you got me interested, dad, I love me some ginger girls, fuckin', Scottish, Irish, fuckin'... from Dublin, or whatever. Couch surfers, backpackers, whatnot – berserk in the sack, all

of them. Bonkers. 'They root like there's no tomorrow.' Joe puts a fresh smoke in his mouth, winks at the Irish girl, turns back to his dad, but doesn't light up. 'Easy come, easy go, though. I'd give anything for a decent wife, eh. Kinda thought about marrying this Thai chick from the internet at one point, tell you the truth. Don't reckon I'll ever get married, though.'

'Can I have one of those?'

'A smoke? Nuh-uh. You got too much to live for.'

'Look: my marriage to your mother has cooled, I shan't live much longer – I don't care if it kills me, I'd like to try a cigarette. Just one.'

'How do you know? Did something bad actually happen with mum?'

'Well... Your friend David here advised me to organise a male escort to satisfy her, and I think that's best for all parties.'

'Just buy her some chocolates and pork her in front of the fireplace, dad, Jesus. She's your true love, man.'

'It just sort of came to a stop, of its own inertia. The sex, I mean. It's been years.'

'Well start it again.'

'And what if my true love is someone else, hmm?'

'You're dreaming. Honestly.'

Joe patiently holds his cigarette, unlit, as rain paints his neck. Joe has put his own pleasure to the side for the first time in 12 years to listen to his dad explain what's upsetting him. Thomas has the podium. He wants to say he's discovered in the underground river of sleep a current of the purest, strongest sensations in the universe, wants to say he's found true love deep inside his own brain, wants to say that just when he thought his body may as well be hauled off to the dump, he's discovered the most responsive, most passionate sexual partner imaginable, a female who actually craves him, but it would sound stupid, so he thanks Joe and Dave for a

truly novel experience, tries to bow, clonks his head on an umbrella, scuttles to a taxi, drives to a vast, empty, climate-controlled house populated with vases and swallows every last sleeping pill.

*

Thomas is wheeling a chair down a hospital corridor, being passed by large male nurses. In the chair is a woman with huge Bambi eyes and his cock points to her but she's cradling two newborn babies, the word WRONG is painted on the No Smoking signs. She is a child. All these encounters, she's been a child. You should not have come back here. Too many sweet things are bad for you.

She is the embodiment of wrong, she is a golem made from his faults and she's birthed little bastards and now he's doomed to wheel her embarrassing, depleted body through his community, breathing shame, and the corridor keeps stretching longer and whiter, the unwanted babies are mewling and a word painted on the floor says DIRTY and a nurse leans toward Thomas and says plainly, 'Open your eyes, boss,' and she's lying there in his California Superking bed with one foot pressed against the east wall and one foot on the west wall and her, her core, her vortex is inviting him in and it's too easy and what did the nurse mean by Open your –

Beem-beem-boom-boom-beem.

Beem-beem-boom-boom-beem.

'Who's there?'

He doesn't recognise the light – something grey-violet, and the air is muggy. His ceiling fan is on. What year is it? Does he have work today? Anything to exist for?

He stumbles through to the study, hating his floor-to-ceiling shelves of *Star Trek* and *TekWar* books, his cabinet

with the Bat'leth, his Yes posters. The objects that used to excite him.

On the desk where he's been trying to write a novel, his laptop is ringing loudly and behind the telephone icon is Suna's impatient face. This is just another meeting to her.

He presses the Accept Call button. 'Is this real? I's having the worst dream – I can't express how it feels to see you. You're really real? Sorry to quibble, it's just – '

'Today we achieved breakthroughs in terms of knowledge acquisition and forged important relationships which were rather challenging, thanks so much for asking.' Suna takes out her second earring. She's already slipped into a black silk nightgown that matches her shiny black hair. She just has to wipe clear the whiteboard he can see behind her, on which she's made presentation notes surrounding a graph, and then she can go to bed. Singapore's a busy centre. It's a place of hurried business. Suna belongs there. She'll have no need for him.

'If you're busy, I can – '

'It was you who made this appointment. Quickly now, Thomas: what's this about? It's four in the morning where you are. My sleeping pills have gone walkabout – have you seen them?'

He sighs, sucks back in the air he's just spat out. His walls aren't going to be broken down by the police when he does this. David's not lurking out by the gate, waiting to mock him. Joe hasn't installed secret cameras. Thomas is alone with his portal in a house that stinks of success.

He stands so his waist is pointing toward the webcam, then tilts the camera until it perfectly captures the crinkly grey bits beneath his belly button. *NaturalMarital.com* said he needs to surprise her, said sparks won't fly if he moves slowly, said if he shaves his pubic hair, his penis will appear more prominent, and he won't have to spend a cent on surgery.

Suna's hypnotised, he hopes. The laptop screen is tilted down and his penis is occupying the camera, so he can't see what's happening down there, really, and with the screen busy capturing his penis as it inflates, Thomas can't see Suna's face react.

Squeezing the laptop screen to keep his balance while his fist beats against his tummy, he can't see whether she's terminated the call, can't see if she's hurled herself out the window, mortified that she ever married this beast, but his contentment, his expression of himself, his usefulness, his life is resting on this succeeding. He can't see if Suna is looking around the room, checking that her door's locked, pressing her eye against the peephole. He can't see if she's muttering prayers to herself, pressing her eyes, cringing. He can't see if she's moving away from the camera or closer to it.

When he's close to finishing he pauses, leaving his penis hanging there, pulsing, twitching. He tilts the screen back until he sees Suna put her fingers on her nightie, pulling it down, revealing a single mauve nipple which he hasn't seen in over a year. It is the rarest, most precious thing in existence. No one else in the galaxy will ever get to see Sunarshan Jagga, of the Board of Directors, stripped.

'Tommy,' she gasps, drinking air, 'Continue.'