

THE RESTORATION WIDOW

By Stephanie Jackson

How many women have heard those exciting words, “Hey, darlin’, come and see what I’ve got!” And then he exposes the thing of many a woman’s darkest nightmares. There, in the garage or a derelict shed on some weed choked allotment, stands a rusted heap of metal. She calls it ‘junk’. He dares to call it ‘a restoration project’. “It’ll be worth a fortune,” he confidently claims. “And it didn’t cost much.” “What a waste of money!” she thinks materialistically, not yet having succumbed to the dubious pleasures of car restoration - skinned knuckles, the smell of burning overalls, singed hair, or skin delicately sliced by razor sharp steel. “Why couldn’t you buy a second-hand Datsun, or a Toyota, or even a new dishwasher?” she moans.

For some women, the unwelcomed arrival of an escapee from the breakers yard means a life of celibacy, evenings spent yawning alone in front of the box, oily overalls, grease on the floor, sink and bath, and dismembered components strewn throughout the house and garden. Those enlightened debates on the fate of the universe, the meaning of life, and Mrs Johnson’s latest lover are abandoned, superseded by an unintelligible, alien language.

He relates, enthusiastically, repetitive tales of the pleasures and traumas of fitting recalcitrant components; of testosterone boosted feats of strength as he forced free some part seized with 40 years of corrosion; and of gaskets which refused to seal. “But can’t you use that silicone sealant stuff?” she asks, in a feeble attempt to enter the one sided conversation. The response - annoyance at such obvious ignorance, followed by a detailed discourse on his restoration plans, a bolt by bolt account of how his latest fantasy will shortly become reality.

Each evening becomes an echo of past evenings. He gulps down a cup of coffee, mumbles a few incoherent words, and heads to the garage to caress his new love. “Your dinner’s ready,” she announces, with vaguely concealed annoyance, for the ninth time. “Just a tic luv! ‘Ere, hold this!” he says, thrusting a greasy spanner into her hand. “Hold it on that nut. No! Not there! THAT one!” And she stretches her alabaster white arm down into the wreck’s oily bowels.

Hours later, with the meal ruined, with grease on elegant designer clothes, silken tights snagged on protruding bolts, and once immaculately manicured nails cracked and blackened, she retreats.

She bathes, slips into her most seductive nightgown, and slithers between the satin sheets. Finally, he comes to bed. He reaches lazily out to the bedside drawer which conceals his most treasured literary publications, Playboy, Boobs Galore, and The Oldie. She rolls over, grinning expectantly, hoping he’ll be pleurably aroused. “Oh! Wonderful! Wonderful!” he groans ecstatically. “Yes! Yes! Yes! If I put that on, then I can do it. The brake drum’s connected to the drive shaft, through the hub bearing, and to the gearbox,” he continues to mumble.

She slides deeper beneath the sheets. She dozes in the pale shadow of his workshop manual, trying to ignore the rustle of tattered paper and sensual exclamations of delight at each momentous discovery revealed within the worn and grease stained pages. And slowly, repetitive, he recites lines from the ‘holy book’ like some revered, mystic chant.

“It'll be ready in a year, or maybe two,” he'd said confidently. But the years pass. She, through necessity, becomes more versed in mechanical terminology and expands her vocabulary with words once unspeakable. She acquires a pair of overalls - a birthday gift, and learns to distinguish one screwdriver from another, a steel dolly from a child's toy, and vice grips from pliers. She has learnt to share his affections with his new mistress, the one whose elegant body he tirelessly fondles. She has conceded defeat.

Finally, eight long years after the initial encounter, the heap of rust and bolts has completed its metamorphosis and has emerged from its corroded cocoon. Beside the house, now with flaking paint, ragged curtains, and overgrown, tangled thicket where once a garden grew, stands the newly born nymph, paint and chrome gleaming, awaiting the signal to awaken from her long, almost terminal sleep. “It's worth a fortune,” the wife proudly brags to admiring neighbours. And it's much better than a second-hand Datsun or Toyota.”

“Hey, darlin’,” her husband calls excitedly as he arrives home one evening. “Guess what I've found?” And the wheels of life and restoration begin to turn once again.

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