

THE PERFECT MARRIAGE

William Shakespeare regretted being named after the Bard. At the time he had been decanted from his glass womb, his parents, both academics of considerable eminence, were optimistically convinced they had produced a genius. But their expectations were never realised – the genetic engineering hadn't worked quite as well as planned. His current employment was with a publishing house, translating technical language into plainspeak.

He was now in his fortieth year, unmarried and balding in a manner reminiscent of his famous namesake. His courtly manner and air of slightly agitated helplessness inspired only mild passion in his sixteen ex-girl friends, now scattered throughout the solar system.

Will lived in a bed-sit on Aurora, a smallish space colony of about two-million mixed-ability persons. Every month he travelled on the Space Shuttle to Central Communications Satellite, which transmitted the results of his labours to robot teachers. In happier days he had continued by shuttle after his stint of work was complete to visit one of his girl friends. But as he settled into middle age he had begun to lead a lonely monkish existence. He was acutely aware that biological obsolescence the modern euphemism for old age, was steadily creeping up on him.

Central Communications Satellite was an industrial slum, plastered with dish aerials like giant mushrooms. All the staff lived in a low-gravity space station called Dandelion only a hundred-thousand kilometres away.

Beamed down from the shuttle, Will Shakespeare made his way through corridors littered with writhing cables. Entering the outer door of the Director, he noticed a new secretary, a pale, unremarkable girl wearing a shapeless rust-coloured boiler suit. She gave him a shy smile that seemed to imply some shared secret. Noticing that the Director had recently changed his name on the door from Ackroyd to 7654321, Will smiled back. She was obviously agreeing with him that the recent change from good oldfashioned names to numbers represented the worst kind of toadying to the authorities. He had, in fact, at one time toyed with the idea of becoming a number as a way of losing his unwelcome name. But he had changed his mind out of disgust on learning that all prime, consecutive and otherwise memorable numbers were being traded for considerable sums of money,

When they had concluded their business, the director, 7654321, put Will's documents in a drawer and said jocularly: 'By John Stuart Mill! you've met your match today, Will.'

Will looked puzzled.

‘My new secretary – her name is Ann Hathaway- Shakespeare’s wife. Got it?’

‘Quite a coincidence,’ Will agreed politely.

On his way out, he introduced himself: ‘Ann Hathaway- I’m Will Shakespeare.’

She replied: ‘I know. That’s why I smiled at you when you came in.’

‘Can you trace your ancestry back to Stratford-on-Avon?’ Will asked her.

‘No, I’m from bottle stock. My parents foisted that name on me.’

He managed to extract the story of her life while they drank a relaxing glass of Coca-bev in the staff canteen and later as they sat in her bed-sit on Dandelion.

‘It’s so unfair, really,’ she said resignedly – they were sitting in front of a large tank of tropical fish, to which Ann had become very attached. ‘My parents had great ambitions for me. They wanted me to become a galactic movie star and look at me!’

Will said uncomfortably: ‘You have a very warm personality.’

A giant guppy, leering through the plate glass mocked his clumsy attempt at flattery.

Ann continued breathlessly: ‘And do you know the full name they entered on the registry: Ann Hath-a-way-with-men!’

‘My name has given me problems as well,’ Will confessed, glumly. ‘I’m an unsuccess. If I had been given a number, I’d be a total, repetitious bore – in fact I’d be a recurring decimal’

‘Oh, you poor man,’ Ann cried out.

Impulsively, in a gesture of sympathy, she held out her hand and patted his cheek. Will instinctively grasped it. He found himself kissing her palm, then her fingers. In no time at all he had unzipped the rust-coloured boiler suit.

‘By John Stuart Mill!’ he exclaimed, gazing at her shapely white body. ‘How beautifully they have packaged your soul!’

Ann shrugged modestly. ‘I only look good here on Dandelion in pink artificial light and with zero gravity.’

With newly-awakened fervour, Will exclaimed: ‘You shall be my Dandelion maid – a famous movie star that only I shall be privileged to see perform!’

He had never before made love to such a highly-sexed girl on such a low-gravity planet. He stayed two extra days, floating ecstatically around the fish tank, and proposing marriage before beaming himself up to the shuttle ship.

At first he was unable to accept that she refused to take him seriously. It appeared that she was intensely superstitious about the amazing coincidence that had brought them together. He eventually

persuaded her to take some advice from a rather sloppy old matrimonial computer. To his great surprise the computer advised them to pay a visit to Genesis House, Kenya, Earth.

‘What do you think?’ Will asked as they strap-hung on the space bus that was taking Ann back to work.

‘Earth- ugh! I hate the idea- the gravity is so awful and they say the people are dwarfish and self-important.’

‘We ought to give it a try,’ Will said solemnly. ‘We might even find time to visit Stratford-on-Avon.’

He was puzzled when Ann gave a convulsive shudder. Then he remembered that an atomic bomb had obliterated Shakespear’s birth-place during the previous century, creating a huge crater which had since been turned into a fish farm. Knowing Ann’s rapport with fish, he remonstrated with himself for his lack of sensitivity.

They both found the gravity onerous in Nairobi. Even after performing the prescribed exercises to improve his circulation, Will’s trousers felt uncomfortably tight and Ann detested having to wear a bra for the first time in her life. It was extremely hot, they felt too heavy to make love and were somewhat nervous about the forthcoming interview.

A black, moon-faced marriage counsellor tried to put them at ease. Her mountainous bosom, enclosed in a specially-designed air-con-

ditioned flowered dress, rose and fell as tubes sprayed cooling air around her vast bulk.

She said happily: ‘You have both demonstrated a sensible, down-to-earth attitude towards marriage. Excuse my pun. Incidentally, this building is sited on the very spot where human beings first came into being ... Now let us have a look at your personal files.’

A view-data screen of Will’s curriculum vitae appeared illuminated on the wall. She pressed another button and Ann’s appeared on another. Mrs. Juko scrutinised them in turn, tut-tutting and shaking her head. Still shaking her head, she addressed them both:

<The fact is, my dears, that you are totally unsuitable to each other. You couldn’t stay married for longer than three months, if you tried. You have opposing electro-magnetic destiny polarity. In a short space of time You would soon inevitably bounce apart.’

‘But why?’ Ann asked, indignantly.

‘It is just the chemicals that were used when you were made.’

‘But we love each other,’ Will protested. ‘Don’t we, darling.’

Ann nodded, dumbly.

The view-data screens faded. A green lizard slithered down one white-washed wall. A huge brown spider scuttled up the other. A gleam of moisture appeared in Mrs Juko’s bulging brown eyes, as she declared: ‘There is absolutely nothing to be done. You cannot possibly marry.’

‘How is it then,’ Will demanded, ‘that we have been so successful in our love-making?’

‘That is because you have been programmed for a brief affair.’

‘Programmed?’ Will started at the dread word.

‘I’m afraid so. Pair bonding on a permanent basis is very complicated. There are certain controls exercised by the Government. The inescapable fact is that your internal discs and sensors have a built-in predestination imbalance.’

‘But it states in the Solar System Bill of Rights that we have a God-given right to Free Will guaranteed by John Stuart Mill.’

Mrs Juko chuckled softly at his naiveté.

‘You are free,’ I assure you. ‘In everything *except* marriage. Unhappy marriages can lead to maladjusted children, violence, mahem and war. We don't want mad politicians dropping atom bombs anymore, do we? So where marriage is concerned, the Government has introduced a specific measure of predestination.’

‘And that absolutely precludes marriage in our case?’

‘I’m afraid so. Now please don’t get upset. As they say, there are plenty more fish in the sea.’

This last remark caused Ann to dissolve into a flood of tears,

Mrs Juko rang a bell and ordered three cups of Coca-bev. When Ann had recovered her composure, Mrs. Juko said benignly: ‘Don't worry. You will both find happiness with others soon.’

She touched an illuminated button and a shimmering globe floated eerily out of a shaded corner of the room and hovered above her desk.

‘What is that?’ Will enquired.

‘This is a Time and Chance machine. It can accurately forecast an enormous number of permutations of suitably matched partners within our solar system. If you like, for a small extra fee, I can tell you both precisely where and when you will eventually meet up with your partners.’

Will made up his mind to spurn this electronic trickery. He looked at Ann. Her air of gentle resignation touched him deeply.

Staring coldly at Mrs Juko, he said: ‘You mentioned predestination imbalance.’

‘Yes, my dear.’

‘Couldn't our hard discs and sensors be changed?’

Mrs. Juko looked slightly alarmed.

‘In that case you would have no memory of your past life. You would no longer be you.’

‘I'm not all that sure that I like being me. I'm prepared to accept that. How about you, darling?’

Ann eagerly nodded assent.

‘And, of course,’ Will added, ‘we would be happy to pay that extra fee.’

Mrs Joko resumed her motherly, good-humoured air.

‘There are certain formalities to be completed. Do you wish to retain your present names in your new life or would you prefer numbers?’

Grateful for a heaven-sent opportunity to change his name, Will said, without a moment’s hesitation: ‘Francis Bacon. How about you, darling?’

Ann, immersed in a dream of her own, murmured: ‘I think I should like to be called Ann Egg.’

Mrs Joko gave a deep, contented chuckle. ‘Bacon and Egg. Now isn’t that just the perfect marriage.’

She surreptitiously touched another of the multifarious buttons on her console. Before her smile had time to fade, two enormous shining robots, clutching knobkerries, stole out of the shadows and dashed out the electronic brains of the romantic couple.

A deep, romantic sigh escaped from the integral air-conditioning buried deep inside Mrs. Joko's flowered dress.

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