



A (very) short story
by
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The hours stretched ahead - an empty horizon of tedium. Relentless boredom. An endless, living hell. Sapping the pitiful puddle of resolve that remained.

The cell walls crowded in, squeezing what little oxygen seeped between the dust motes.

The guards hovered, scowling, matched sets of pure intimidation in their foreboding black uniforms.

I closed my eyes and counted my breaths. In through the nose until my lungs filled. Out between my lips. The mantra of meditation. One. Two. Three. It didn't work any better than every other time.

How much longer must I suffer? Praying for release. Yearning for fresh air, blue skies. A few precious moments of freedom.

"How about this one?"

"What?"

"For goodness sake."

She turned through a staccato pirouette, hands on hips, flaring the skirt.

It looked exactly the same as all the others. *Hell's teeth.*

“Err, it looks great.” I grinned.

She scowled.

Oh no, too many teeth in the smile? Too much eagerness in the affirmative?

“I shouldn’t have brought you. You’re always like this. We’ve only been shopping for an hour.”

Rubbish. It had to be at least a year.

She huffed, withered me with another glare that cut to the ribs, then stalked back to the changing rooms.

The stormtroopers in the Myer tee-shirts took up the baleful examination of the prisoner where my wife left off.

I couldn’t meet their eyes. Jeez, sorry they didn’t get a sale. Hardly my fault. I did my best. I said every one of them looked great. What’s a bloke supposed to do when he’s lost the will to live?

I checked my phone. We’d done the shoe shop. I thought that one would never end. Then earrings in the jewellers. What the hell were sleepers anyway? Now the frocks. No way it had only been — *Bloody hell!* Four pm. Ninety minutes. Good god. Einstein must have been doing the department stores with his missus when he discovered relativity. No wonder he looked so old — poor sod.

I let her drive home. I could barely raise the energy to doze in the passenger seat. Shopping centres had a weird, hypnotic effect. They should rush out-of-control meth-crazed loonies to Carousel. They’d be docile as a baby lamb in twenty minutes.

The car bumped up onto a verge and stopped by a tree.

A tree?

No tree at our place. What the ...?

I blinked, trying to get myself back to the present.

My beloved huffed an accusation. “It’s your son’s house. Remember? We’re having dinner with them tonight.”

Really? I did have a vague memory ... Aaah, a flash of inspiration, a tiny window for redemption. I stole a glance at the date on my phone. “Of course,” I said, “it’s Tina’s birthday. How could I forget that?”

Pause for whack around the skull.

None.

Phew, I got that one right then.

My spirits lifted, a bit of energy came back. A couple of wines, a few cuddles with the grandies. *Wonderful*. I might make it through the night after all.

The front door flew open, and two tiny balls of frantic energy burst out together, jumping up and down with delight. “Grandma. Grandad.”

Nothing like granddaughters to melt your heart.

“Come in, come in, Grandad.” Tina tugged my sleeve. “Come with us. Mummy says we can watch *Frozen!*”

Noooooooooooooooooooo!

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