

## Wendy W - Continuation

Fred was very quiet in the taxi all the way home, while Connie almost fizzed with triumph and anticipation. 'A day, a whole day, with my own slave! The girls will be so jealous. And my goodness, did you see those gorgeous abs?' Fred was seething with the thought of further humiliations. He had begged her, begged her, hadn't he, to give the raffle prize back: a Roman slave for the day! Marcus! Ridiculous!

'No,' he fumed, 'when was the last time *she'd* ever listened to me?' Would she and the girls be laughing at him behind his back? Comparing his drooping paunch to the ironing board of *that* man's belly, his comfortable cardigan-wrapped arms, to Marcus's glistening biceps?

They went to bed as they always did, following predictable, methodical routine and with their own private ruminations. 'Swathed in a hair covering and voluminous layers of frothy nightwear, she almost looks like a Roman matron,' Fred sneered bitterly. 'Well,' he muttered, 'She has never really appreciated it but *I've* been her personal slave for far too long. I never wash up to *her* exacting standards, my clothes are *so* M& S, my programme choices *so* are boring. I never show any initiative. Well, I have had enough! I've had it with being any sort of slave. I'm now crossing the Rubicon.'

While Fred considered his strategy for war, if not extremely unlikely success, he became aware of Connie's quiet joy. Simple plans for the day: breakfast brought to her in bed by Marcus, coffee at the high-class bistro with Marcus as escort, a soirée with her girlfriends while Marcus waiting on the hand and foot. It all started to seriously niggle.

Then growing jealousy fuelled his determination further to get even, and he decided he needed some allies before he could decide on his final plans. He wasn't going to be humiliated any longer.

'Midsummer murders' was the highlight that evening, supper had been cleared up (by Fred) and the kitchen scrutinised (by Connie), and Connie waited expectantly for Fred to settle down. When Fred finally appeared in his second-best jacket, shirt and cords to announce that he was going out with the lads, Connie looked stunned. To Fred's satisfaction, she appeared somewhat anxious. 'There's life in the old dog yet', he sang to himself, as he slammed the door with childish satisfaction, and strode with renewed vigour to the pub.

Bill and Pete were ready for Fred and celebrated his rare appearance with pints, cheers, and hearty back slaps. 'Great to see you, mate. It's been too long.' And it wasn't long before the conversation turned to the Rotary event ...and Marcus. To Fred's surprise the ribbing was mixed with admiration and a few winks. 'Your missis is a cracker. If anyone can handle Marcus, it's her,' 'Most men would be spitting. Fred, you've got some balls to let her accept her prize. Shows you've nothing to fear.'

The evening was a resounding success, and Fred reflected it had indeed been too long. He also brooded that he was in a rut; he *was* lucky to have such a gorgeous wife; he admitted that he was shamefully jealous. He didn't feel ready to declare: 'Make love, not war' but he was aware how little happiness there had been in both their lives. Some of the snipes and sneers directed to him, he admitted, were because he had become a slob.

As Connie continued to happily and innocently plan for her day: an appointment at the hairdressers, some new finger food to serve at the soiree, rearranging the seating, ordering celebratory flowers, all small delights, Fred became more subdued. He realised that he didn't really want revenge, or even a civil war. He wanted a truce, or even a reconciliation.

He loved Connie deeply, and debated whether his behaviour was in fact as much to blame as hers. Her accusations about his drinking, or his leering over Janice Thompson's cleavage still smarted, and he defended himself: 'Doesn't every man gets a little worse for wear sometimes, well, doesn't he?'

He felt strongly too that in today's modern society men always got the blame but he was still willing to examine his own culpability. He looked back with regret at his slump into retirement lethargy and non-engagement, and wondered how had he lost himself so readily? Could he lose her too?

The 'day of Marcus' arrived with sunshine and birdsong, and Marcus paraded his minute leather garments like he was in a victory parade. He was sunny, affable and totally unembarrassed. Connie kept peering at Fred out of the corner of her eye to assess his reaction, totally non plussed.

Surprisingly Fred was totally unfazed, even helping Marcus negotiate the kitchen, and assisting him in setting Connie's breakfast tray. He advised Marcus on Connie's favourite pastries, and assured Marcus he would set the tables for the soiree. Marcus in turn proved to be outrageously funny and promised to help Fred anytime he needed some support.

Later Fred kissed Connie affectionately on her cheek and wished her a most successful soiree, as he went out. Again. Her feathers were ruffled, her nerves were shredding slowly one fibre at a time. 'What is he up to?' More importantly, she asked herself, 'what *has* got into him?'

Later as Connie got ready for bed, though triumphant and exhausted after her social success, she felt the stirring familiar irritation she always experienced of the mundane familiarity of her monochrome life. Her glorious day was over and now she felt deflated, depressed even. Back to nothing, just hollowed out disappointment and resignation.

Fred quietly climbed into bed next to her, and asked about her day with such genuine interest, her mood unexpectedly softened, and they ended up sharing amusement at Marcus's ridiculous costume and antics. Reluctantly, she acknowledged all the help

Fred had given Marcus and in unusual humility, asked why he'd been so kind. She also remained not a little suspicious.

Fred shrugged, not one to wear his heart on his sleeve, just muttered that she deserved the odd day off, or unexpected treat. Switching the light off, he felt protected and emboldened by the shielding darkness and quietly whispered; 'I love you, Con., that's all'. Connie laughed with relief. 'I'm so glad to hear it. You'd spent so much time with Marcus that I was beginning to think that you fancied him!' Reaching out for his hand, Connie squeezed it lovingly. 'Besides Marcus is going out with a Legionnaire, and everyone knows that leather is *so passé*'.

Fred almost choked with surprise. Turning over, ready for sleep and hopefully, a brand-new marital chapter, he checked that he had Marcus' number in his phone. Marcus had given it to him with a grin and wink, just in case he'd need some more tutelage in the romantic department. He'd promised mischievously as he hugged Fred goodbye, that he would even throw in his Roman costume for free.