

## Goth Challenge

"Glynis, look what I've found in the attic!" said Niles. He waved something in his hand. A brown envelope. Small, but deadly.

*Oh no... My secret!*

Niles had to win. Always. Whatever the game. I knew that from the start, put it down to insecurity. I was careful and managed to avoid trouble, hoped it would go away with time. I knew his reputation for it at work but didn't realise how deep it went until we moved in together. Monday nights were a holy ritual to him.

We watched "University Challenge" with score cards and pens. *Separated chairs to avoid cheating. Accidental or not. Answers in ink. No pencil. Pencil marks can be erased!*

So we did the show and compared our totals. I naively thought it would bring us closer together. The first time I beat his score he *harrumphed* and let it go. But the second time he didn't talk to me for a week. After that I was careful to lose. When I saw his little smirk of satisfaction denoting answer to a question, I wrote nothing down. Even if I knew the answer. I didn't let it bother me. So the years rolled by.

And all the time my packet was hidden upstairs. Ticking like a time bomb. Nostalgia stopped me throwing it away. Now he had found it. What was he doing in the attic? Did he suspect? I saw right away what would happen.

I clutched at straws: *It was an obsolete format... He's away in the States for 2 weeks... I'll destroy it... He hasn't mentioned it lately - He's lost interest.*

But when I got home that night...

"Trip cancelled!" he beamed. "Got as far as the hall. But never mind. This will be more fun. What? The Vintage Show of course! I can't wait!"

My heart froze. I said I must do dinner. He kissed me and said, "Done it." He pulled me into the sitting room where smoked salmon sandwiches and champagne glasses were laid out on an innocent side table. And there was a new box under the TV. A new old box.

Salmon turned to ashes. Champagne to vinegar. For me.

He gave me my pen and pad and we took our seats.

I prayed: *Let his junk shop VHS player not work. Please...*

But the screen flickered. And there, a bit fuzzy, was that familiar terrible music.

I didn't recognise myself.

I was a Goth back then. (I'm not saying exactly *when*.) A long jet-black wig hugged my face. My black gown fitted me like a sack. The rings of kohl round my eyes were thicker than a bank manager's glasses. (Banks still had managers back then). But I knew Me from my bird-quick glances side to side. Where I came from Goths needed to be super-alert rather than blithely serene. Luckily my 19 year old voice didn't sound like me either.

Niles said, "This will be a hoot. Let's do these provincial prats. We'll win by miles."

It was nice of him to say *We* instead of *I*. But I knew he didn't mean it.

After 15 minutes he stopped the tape and said he needed to replace the remote battery. He left the champagne but I heard the sound of a cork popping and then the raking of a kitchen drawer.

My team was up at 155. Our opponents still at 10. Now I could feel sorry for them. Back then it was another matter. I wondered how Niles was doing. The popping cork said very badly. But he'd taken his score card with him so I couldn't peek.

But he sneaked a look at mine as he poured me another glass of bubbly. I had cheated negatively all the way up to that point.

"What does she think she looks like?" he nodded at the screen, where I was frozen with an unflattering expression. "Are those Elton John's glasses she's wearing?"

We had got right his nose. He couldn't stop

"A Captain dressed up like a bag lady witch? It's disgusting and disrespectful! How did she ever get to be on the Team, let alone Captain it? Over three men as well."

"But she's doing all right," I ventured.

"I know how," he said, ignoring me to answer his own question. "She had it off with the Selectors, *and* her team mates, that's how."

"Even though she looks such a fright?"

"Women have their ways," he said, sounding irredeemably middle-aged for the first time.

"And if she's doing well it's because she must have *done* the entire Production team to blag the answers. Just look at her smirk."

*Smirk? Moi?*

After that I just let him have it. I muttered answers at first. Gradually getting louder and clearer with each question. Every question. I'm not even sure he heard me with his head sunk into his shoulders. Then it was over. There was the cheering and the Chair saying, "A record score! Well done Bleasdale Teacher Training College."

Niles scrunched up his score sheet and went out to open another bottle. I slipped my own sheet into his jacket pocket for him to find later. I definitely knew what was going to happen now.

"I've lost all faith in that show," he said. "The cheating, the fixing, the downright..."

"You didn't so well, then?"

He ignored me.

"And that stupid girl with her stupid voice. They expect us to believe she got there fair and square? Like I said, she must have..."

"I heard what you said," I told him. "And I happen to know that she didn't cheat. Nor have it off with the Selectors. Or the entire Production team. But back in the hotel she certainly did celebrate with her team mates in the old fashioned way. Though not with Marcus, of course. He was a very earnest gay. And envious with it. Which is a dangerous sin, according to St Augustine. Though I prefer to think of Envy as cheap and unworthy of the one who feels it."

Doors slammed in rapid succession. The sitting room's. The hall's. The car's. Too rapid? No. Niles had left his packed bag in the hall.

I never saw him again.

Luckily the house was in my name.

Well, if I'm honest, luck had nothing to do with it.

I still have the tape.