

# Patiently Waiting For Fred

by

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The grinding drone of the machine was maddening. Working back and forth across the floor, devouring dirt. Dirt which he knew to be comprised of hair and dead skin. He watched the filth whizz round and round inside its belly, the strands and flakes gathering together into a grey candyfloss.

*Maddening...*

He couldn't even take a shit under his own steam. Needed Fred to recognise the signs and help him into the bathroom. Humiliating as Fred held him over the bowl making sure the unhealthy spatter from his launch chamber hit the target. A depressing sight. The consistency of peanut butter. The crunchy variety. He shifted on the sofa hoping to ease the pain in his guts.

Dying was particularly maddening.

Yet the most maddening thing of all was the man pushing and pulling the machine over the beige carpet. Which matched his beige trousers. Which matched his beige cardigan. Which matched his beige fucking brain. This was all Fred's fault. Entirely. Fred and his 60-a-day habit. A Superking habit.

Fred smoked indoors because, ever since the unfortunate incident in the lift, Fred refused to go outside unless absolutely necessary. Fred had everything delivered; groceries, newspapers, ointments and of course, his cigarettes. Foreign brands purchased for a pittance on the internet. To make matters worse Fred never opened the windows. Oh, he'd clean the windows until the double-glazing gleamed, but he'd never open the fucking things! Fred had many attributes but above all, Fred was a selfish twat.

*For the love of God will you please open a fucking window!*

So here he was, ten floors up, suffocating in a permanent nicotine fug like the goldfish slowly going belly up in a bowl of its own Cream of Excreta soup. Beyond the sparkling panes lay a tantalising vista of vast open skies animated with white scudding clouds and swooping birds. He wished he could steal their wings and glide through that drifting panorama and soak himself in its honeyed scents and crisp freshness. The flowers, the grass, the rain... He lifted his nose and sniffed. But all he could smell was layer after layer of tobacco smoke which shifted in thick grey eddies whenever Fred moved.

*Maddening...*

He was being punished. Punished for sins committed in a previous incarnation. There could be no other reason for this obscenity of an existence. And it was only 10:17 a.m.

*Maddening...*

The vacuum cleaner gurned louder as Fred bumped the thing repeatedly against the skirting boards. Fred was very thorough. Aside from his filthy addiction he took the whole cleanliness is next to godliness thing very much to heart. Left every surface spotless. In all the years they'd lived together he couldn't recall Fred ever letting a day go by without subjecting the flat to a thorough dusting, polishing and vacuuming. If only he cared as much for the air they breathed as he did for the solid surfaces they shared. *Breathed?* Wrong description. *Breathed* implied a certain ease of passage. Not so. Every inhalation had to be thoroughly chewed into a manageable paste before his damaged lungs could free the precious jewels of oxygen from the seam of coal.

*Damaged...*

His heart tightened into a fist of frustration, threatening to punch clean through his chest. A knot of claws gripped around those three little words. Branded as they were into his every

waking thought, they could not be shifted, erased or sent packing for a weekend break somewhere far away.

*'It is hopeless.'*

The words were delivered by a young woman in a white coat with a sad face and a finger directing Fred's attention to the shadow on the X-ray. He remembered the look on Fred's face when she added two more:

*'He's dying...'*

The words filled Fred's eyes with tears and filled Fred's mouth with promises. Fred would not let his best friend die in some anonymous clinic. Fred would look after him. Fred would take him home and care for his every need. Fred would allow him to die with dignity. Fred would be there to the end.

And then Fred lit a cigarette.

*Dignity? I have no dignity thanks to you, you monstrous wank stain! Too weak to move. Too weak to eat. Hurts to swallow. Hurts to speak. So fucking angry I can't think straight. Why didn't you let them put me out of my misery? I don't want to die in this shithole with you, you massive spunking, flange-faced bollock! This is your fault Fred. You complete cock splash!*

He coughed. A rasp of sore fury. Enough to dislodge the gunk coating the back of his throat. He swallowed the lump. Mercifully, the grotesque buzzing ceased.

'Oh, you're awake. How are you feeling today?' Fred asked, parking the Dyson back in the closet.

*Like I could dance the cha-cha-fucking-cha, you staggeringly stupid fuckwit!*

Fred patted him on the head.

*Don't fucking touch me!*

The rage, so loud and forthright in his head, became a pathetic whimper when transferred to his impotent throat. Fred misread the reedy noise as a request for further sympathy.

‘Let me plump your pillows, make you comfy.’

*I don't want my pillows plumped. Fuck off!*

Fred fussed with the pillows and the blanket. Satisfied, Fred retreated to sink his big beige arse into his big beige armchair.

‘Shall we watch TV? Decorators To The Rescue is on.’

*Why aren't you dead Fred? You impervious penile wart!*

Fred liked watching television. Fred had always liked watching television. Fred spent hour after pointless hour fixated on that fucking rectangle. Fred particularly enjoyed watching shite television. He never understood this fascination. Truth be told there was very little he understood about Fred. They used to enjoy long walks together. They used to enjoy kicking a ball around in the park. They used to enjoy socialising with others in the neighbourhood. Until the incident in the lift put an end to those happy excursions.

*Coward!*

He adjusted his aching carcass so he could watch the screen. The presenters smiled eagerly. All shiny teeth and lustrous hair. Outside, in the open. Enjoying great globbing lungfuls of fresh air. They positively glowed with health.

*Cunts!*

‘You know,’ said Fred, peeling the cellophane from a fresh pack of twenty. ‘I reckon this place could look really nice with a bit of freshening up. What do you think?’

He swivelled his eyes to the walls. Nothing wrong with them.

*Fucking home improvement programmes! No amount of decorating is going to add value to this compost heap, you gullible twat rash!*

Since the diagnosis Fred had redone the bathroom, the kitchen, the bedrooms. Fred had bought new carpets, new curtains, new fucking everything. Fred enjoyed wasting money. Fred enjoyed typing his credit card details into his computer. Fred enjoyed clicking ‘Add To Basket’. Fred enjoyed signing the postman’s little gadget in exchange for a package. Fred enjoyed opening those deliveries. Fred enjoyed admiring his purchases and finding a special place to display them.

He returned his gaze to the screen. A happy pair of obesities gushed over some hideous new wallpaper, coving and dado rails. Now they wanted to further “enhance” their South London dungheap with an extension, skylights and other such shite.

Fred pursed his lips around a cigarette and lit up. The bold black text of the Government health warning on the pack, a waste of ink in his hands. The Government had tried so hard over the years to dissuade him with all manner of doom laden portents. All of them dismissed with a smirk and a quip:

*- Don't let children breathe your smoke -*

‘Quite right. Not unless they pay for it first.’

*- Smoking can damage the sperm and decreases fertility -*

‘Where’s the downside in that? Too many folk in this world as it is.’

*- Smoking when pregnant harms your baby –*

To which Fred would lift up his shirt, stick a fag deep into the button of his spacehopper gut and gleefully joke: ‘Rubbish! My baby loves a puff!’

*- Smoking causes cancer -*

*Not for Fred it fucking doesn't! Fucker is immune!*

He watched Fred tap an inch of grey into the ashtray. Fred’s beige socks waggled happily on the coffee table while the bloated homeowners beamed at the alterations the ‘experts’ had

carried out in the bathroom. Still a dungheap. With added chrome. Fred looked at him with his trademark dozy smile and set off on another interminable jaunt of unsolicited wittering.

‘I reckon a good mix of japonicas and cyclamens would cheer this place right up. I’ll order some online. Maybe a couple begonias here and there. My Joyce used to love begonias. What do you think?’

*You can paint the fucking place with your own arse paste and tile it with dried puke you odious donkey fart! I don’t care. Just open the fucking window!*

The muted rage peeled a fresh coat of mucous from his throat. He swallowed. Phlegm for breakfast. Phlegm for lunch. Phlegm for dinner. His aching guts rumbled in complaint.

*Okay God, you win. I concede. Take me now. Let me go.*

He felt a sudden, crushing sadness. Never again would he enjoy a walk in the park with the sun on his back or the rain on his face. Never enjoy the company of his friends again. Proper friends, not like Fred. How long had they known each other? Must be ten fucking years. What a mismatch. He yearned to meet up with his pals in the park. Bit of footie. Bit of frisbee. Bit of banter. Check out the ladies. He used to love life. The joy of it. So many wonders out there to explore and uncover. So many pleasures. Now everything was pain.

He sighed, deep and woeful. Enough for Fred to look at him with a small frown.

‘Don’t be depressed, Buddy. Those science boffins will find a cure. You mark my words. I know things look bleak but we’ll tough it out. We’re a team. Me and you, together. I for one will never give up on you. I’ll be here, by your side, every step of the way. Don’t you forget that,’ said Fred. Then, satisfied he’d delivered the mother of all pep talks, he returned to his TV viewing.

*“Things look bleak”? I’m fucking dying here you thumping great scrotal scabcake! And what’s all this “me and you” bollocks? Look at you, sat on your fat arse with yet another fag in your fat fucking exhaust pipe! Dear God, let me die! Condemn me to eternal damnation if*

*you must. Anything! As long as I never have to encounter this insufferable spunk-bubble ever again. Please, take me now... Please... Please open the window...*

He closed his eyes.

\*

‘Wake up Buddy! You’re missing Antique Hunters. Your favourite.’

Buddy opened his eyes.

Being a spiteful bastard, God had chosen to ignore his pleas.

His chest throbbed. Why wouldn’t Fred let him sleep. Fucking *Antique Hunters!* Fuckwits buying shite to sell to other fuckwits. Look at the cunts, haggling over a fucking chipped Clarice Cliff vase that no self-respecting flower would ever want to be seen dead in.

*Dead...*

Death would be a blessed relief from daytime TV. He felt so tired. Painfully so. He needed sleep. Eternal sleep. He heard himself emit a feeble, sad little whimper.

Brow furrowed with concern, Fred placed his steaming mug of beige tea on the table and joined Buddy on the sofa. ‘Jesus. You look worse than ever.’

Buddy felt the cushions sink. Fred was heavy. Dangerously so. Sixteen stones and then some. Big enough to crush Buddy’s scrawny arse if he ever sat down without looking. He placed a hand on Buddy’s head and stroked it tenderly.

‘I’m here for you, Buddy. Don’t you fret. When the time comes I’ll sort everything out. I’m gonna have you cremated and put your ashes on the mantelpiece next to my darling Joyce. That way you’ll both be at my side. Always.’

Buddy stared at the disgusting ceramic urn above the electric fire. A beige monstrosity adorned with cherubs and doves.

*Oh sweet Jesus...*

Fred lit another cigarette and blew a cloud to kiss the ceiling.

*- Nine milligrams of tar. Nought point seven milligrams of nicotine. –*

The perfect blend.

Fred gave Buddy a perfunctory little pat on the head. ‘I’ll just watch the News then I’ll whip us up some lunch.’

Fucker. Fred hadn’t made a decent meal for years. Fred’s cookbook contained one recipe:

OPEN TIN.

SCOOP CONTENTS ON TO PLATE.

SERVE.

Fred slurped his tea. A habit he’d perfected over the years in order to provide maximum irritation. Buddy felt his hackles rise. It sounded like bathwater spiralling into a plughole clogged with pubic hair and soap scum.

*Maddening...*

*Resist. Resist...*

‘North Korea’s at it again I see. It will end in war I tell you. Prepare for Armageddon.’

Fred was an expert on World Affairs.

Fred had an expert opinion on everything.

On immigration: ‘Benefit scroungers the lot.’

On global warming: ‘Nonsense. It’s bloody freezing in here!’

On Brexit: ‘EU’s nothing but a bunch of corrupt frogs and krauts! Good riddance!’

Fred liked Boris Johnson: ‘Strong. Focused. Principled.’

Fred liked Donald Trump: ‘More guns. More golf. More walls. What’s the problem?’

Fred liked The Royal Family: ‘Rule Britannia!’

Fred liked cricket.

*Maddening...*

The News infuriated Buddy. The politicians with their endlessly flapping mouths spewing lie after bilious lie, had a particular knack for bringing him to the point of spontaneous combustion. It didn't matter what colour the rosette was. They all peddled the same atrophied promises. What hope did the electorate have? Should they vote for the clementine, the tangerine or the satsuma?

He glared at Fred.

*Armageddon? Its called Karma, mate. Kiss goodbye to the Human Race. Fuck you all.*

Fred summed up the whole useless species in one gormless face. Belching pollution into the air. Poisoning it with ignorance, deceit and hypocrisy.

Fred's voice made Buddy's ears itch.

*Listen to him, chuntering on and on, moaning about the fucking weather. Never fucking happy. It's either too hot, too cold, too wet, too humid or too fucking windy. Twatty meatball!*

*Resist... Resist...*

Fred slurped. Buddy ground his teeth. What a way to end. What a pathetic fucking waste. Ten floors up in some stinking brutalist nightmare watching an endless parade of wankers on the fucking telly. Unable to walk, unable to escape, just generally fucking *unable*. Fucking cancer. Fucking Fred.

Buddy watched Fred's idiotic face and wondered what it would be like to sink his teeth into the flesh and tear it clean from the skull. To savour the flow and flavour of warm blood collecting in his mouth. To bite so hard the bones would split and release their marrow.

A drop of drool abseiled from the corner of his smile. Oh! how much fun would it be to eat as nature intended? Not out of a fucking tin or a fucking sachet but direct from the source. With teeth and claws his knives and forks. Oh! to cherish the primal horror in Fred's bulging eyes when he realised his best friend was devouring him. Buddy's stomach twitched...

Hunter and prey.

*Resist... Resist...*

His sore lungs stuttered. It hurt even to be excited. He tried to calm himself. Soft shallow breaths...

‘Hope the postman comes today. I’m down to my last pack of smokes and I really don’t fancy going to the shop. It’s a long way down those bloomin’ stairs and I’m not using that lift, not after... you know what. Besides, I don’t like going out on my own anymore. Soon as you get your strength back we’ll go for a walk. Me and you, together. I promise. A bracing walk in the fresh air will do us a power of good. Speaking of fresh air, why don’t I open the window?’

Buddy glared at Fred with disbelief in his jaundiced eyes. *At fucking last!* The window jerked open and a bank of grey fog rushed out.

Buddy recalled the last time he set foot outside. A trip with Fred to the newsagent on the corner of Church Street. Fred waiting patiently to purchase a packet of B&H, while the old woman who ran the store spent an age ‘oohing’ and ‘ahhing’ over a photo of a cat belonging to an equally bubble-brained friend of hers. The longer they talked the more he wanted to howl over the irritating bluebottle buzz of their voices.

‘Aw bless. How did she die?’

‘Old age the vet said. Her heart just gave out in the end,’ the cat lover snivelled.

‘Aw. How old was she?’

‘Twenty-three.’

‘Ooh that’s a grand age for a cat isn’t it?’

‘Oh yes, it’s the equivalent of us living to be a hundred and twenty.’

‘Oh! Is it really? We should be so lucky! Ha, ha.’

‘I buried her in a shoebox under her favourite flower bed.’

‘Aw. That’s nice.’

‘I shall miss her though.’

‘Of course you will’

‘My Jessie was such a sweet little thing. Never bit or scratched anyone.’

‘Not like my Toby. He’s forever getting into scrapes that one. Do you like cats, sir?’

*No, I fucking hate the things! Now, before I bury you two hags in multiple shoeboxes under the same fucking flower bed as Jessie, stop comparing pussies and give Fred his fucking fags so I can get out of this fuckhole!*

Buddy’s chest throbbed. He never used to be this angry. Angry at everything and everyone. Where did this rage come from? This burning knot of fury?

*So tired...*

Eyelids drooping his gaze fell on the picture lying on the coffee table. An X-ray. Lungs. A shadow.

*Not Fucking Fair...*

How come Jessie the cat was allowed to die of old age?

*Fucking cats. Smug bastards. Sanctimonious, supercilious fuck-turds.*

Fred sat back down, coughing. A hacking dry cheese grater of a cough. ‘Ooh, that was sore. Maybe I should cut down on the fags eh?’ he grinned.

*Resist... Res...*

Buddy flung himself at Fred. He clamped his jaws around Fred’s neck, teeth puncturing hard and deep. Hot blood gushed freely over his tongue and pooled at the back of his throat. A blissful sensation. Raw...

Fred struggled uselessly, beating and kicking, fingers desperately trying to prise the vice apart. Fred’s larynx cracked, silencing the screams. The frantic limbs sagged and fell. A final breath flowed into Buddy’s ear and over his snout. It reeked of smoke and terror.

He dropped to the floor and hauled his dead owner to the carpet.

*'Owner' - how fucking dare you! Fucking human. Who owns who now, uh?*

Where to start? Suddenly so hungry. And so much meat! He clawed at the packaging until he exposed Fred's ample belly. He plunged his snarl into the navel and pulled and pulled until he ripped a chunk free. He swallowed the lump whole. Infused with a new strength, he ate his fill.

With a bellyful of Fred, he padded wearily to the television. According to the weatherman the country could look forward to a period of glorious sunshine.

*I forecast fucking rain for you my friend.*

Buddy cocked his leg and pissed all over the screen.

*Fuck you!*

His stomach spasmed and gurgled alarmingly. Buddy threw up a fatty morsel of Fred over the rug. Revenge tasted bitter after all. Fun while it lasted though.

Lifting his tail clear of the mess he walked unsteadily to the leaking corpse. The expression on what remained of Fred's face was a joy to behold. He vomited another mouthful into the gaping, silent scream.

He turned to the open window, propped himself up on his hind legs and peered out. The street far below crawled with busy dots.

*Fucking idiot human meatballs!*

He saw one big meatball tug hard on a leash. A spaniel he recognised from the park fell into line to trot faithfully at his 'owners' side. Charlie followed his meatball across the zebra crossing to the pavement directly below. Pulling Charlie to heel with a harsh yank, the meatball stopped abruptly. Charlie sat on his haunches dutifully waiting for the meatball to finish jabbering into his phone.

Buddy clambered on to the sill. He absorbed a sweet lungful of untainted air and, after allowing himself a brief moment to enjoy the sun's warmth on his blood wet nose and bristling whiskers, he took aim... and leapt.

Ears flattened and eyes narrowed against the roaring updraught, he watched the meatball swell larger and larger.

Charlie looked up and stepped aside.