THE bouncer was cute. I gave him a wicked smile, he frowned, looked us up and down slowly, and let us in. I knew he would. We looked good, our clothes were right, we were young and pretty. Me more so than my sister Annie, who’s younger than me, everybody says so, about being prettier, but she doesn’t mind, I look after her, and make sure she’s dressed properly. That’s my career, clothes, or will be, and she’s going to help me.

And then it’s not that big a deal. It’s a new in place, but hardly crowded with celebrities. I thought I saw Lara Bingle with some hunk, and maybe that was Miranda Kerr, but no, just someone with the same eyes-too-wide-apart face. Of course it was very dark, hard to see anything at all. The lighting cast strange flaring shadows, you wouldn’t have known your own family.

Annie and I usually go out on Friday nights. We allow ourselves one cocktail, the most glamorous and extravagant they’ve got, and leave it at that. We don’t binge drink, and don’t waste money, either. We rather like the kind in big round glasses with cream in them as well as exotic liqueurs, then it’s as though you are having dessert as well. We make the drink last, taking small luxurious sips, and see what happens. Sometimes we dance with one another, sometimes
some guy asks us, it’s nice sitting over an amazing cocktail and wondering what will happen next.

Annie saw the guy first, standing against the bar, with a head of curls and a tiny goatee beard. I looked at him, and he came over. Would you ladies permit me to join you, he asked, in a posh voice, and we said, Why not.

It all started from there. He wanted to buy us another cocktail, but we said we only ever had the one, and he said, How elegant. He did have a rather funny way of talking, old-fashioned, as if he belonged to another era. He gave us his card, and said he would like to see us for coffee the next day, so we arranged to meet at Caph’s, late in the morning after we’d been shopping. In the bright light of day he was very colourful, with his reddish curls and beard, his bright blue eyes, his pale clothes. We knew from his card that his name was Frederick Barbour. We used to have an uncle Fred who was lovely, so that seemed a good omen, somehow.

He was very polite and not at all pushy. His manners were lovely. At first we didn’t know which of us he was interested in, he included both in any suggestions he made, but gradually it became clear that it was me he cared most about. It’s you, Cat, of course it is, said Annie, and I did feel pleased. But at first the three of us went around together. He was an IT specialist, he said, had his own business, but he was more interested in talking about his family history than in his present circumstances. He told us he was descended from Frederick the Holy Roman Emperor, that Frederick called Barbarossa, which you know, he said, means red beard, and you can see it persists til this day. He pinched his little red goatee. Got excommunicated by the pope and walked barefoot to Canossa, and waited in the snow until the pope relented. Do you have a title, I asked. Oh, mobs, he said, King of Germany, King of Burgundy, King of Arles, not to mention Duke of this and that and Holy Roman et cetera, but what’s the point, these days. They’re all out of date. Plain Frederick Barbour does me.

HE WAS REALLY very handsome. And very romantic. And kind. After a good while he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. We planned it for the end of the year, when I would have finished my
fashion course. I didn’t have anybody to talk to about it. No parents. There was a stepmother somewhere, but we hadn’t seen anything of her since our father died. She was the worst kind. Didn’t quite dress us in rags and put us to work in the ashes, but just about. Favoured her own horrible children. When she was little, Annie called her that stepwoman, which I thought was marvellous, and we always thought of her like that. We escaped when we were sent to boarding school, a good one, we flourished there. That was the good thing our father did for us.

Frederick gave me great wads of notes and told me to buy a wedding dress and a trousseau. He didn’t actually say so but I could tell from his attitude that he always had plenty of money, that’s IT for you, I suppose. But I wasn’t going to buy the dress, I was going to design and make it for myself. For a graduation project we had to do a cocktail dress, and that’s what it would be, I didn’t want the full meringue. And I’d design something for Annie too. I wasn’t going to have the usual hideous bridesmaid business, as though the mean bride thinks she will look better if her attendants have ugly dresses. Annie was also interested in fashion, she was at the beginning of the course, and we were going to go into business together. I’d be the designer, mainly, she’d do the books, she’s clever like that. She was an excellent seamstress, too, we both were, we were famous for our exquisite handsewing. We were going to sell our clothes under the label Annicat; Annie’s idea, and brilliant I thought. She said she was sorry her name had to come first, but that was the only way to put them together.

My dress was very classical, with a scooped neckline and tiny sleeves, a fitted waist and a bell-shaped skirt. Plain, plain, just my figure and the ivory silk taffeta perfectly cut. I don’t care for strapless dresses on brides. They make their flesh look ugly, either too bulgy or too skinny. Annie’s was similar, in silver grey, very flattering. I am fair, she is dark. I spent money on shoes, and silk underwear, a pashmina shawl and some honeymoon outfits.

I could tell Frederick liked my dress by the way he looked at me, his gaze somehow moist, and yearning, and a bit breathtaking. He put his hand out and reverently brushed my shoulder, and I knew he liked the modesty and the understated sexiness of my appearance. We went
to Port Douglas for our honeymoon, and I was so glad we had waited to be together, we had a suite and hardly came out of it except to swim in the pool sometimes. We flew back to Sydney and moved into his apartment in Elizabeth Bay. Annie and I had had a tiny flat in Potts Point, and Annie stayed on there.

EARLY IN THE new year, Frederick said we would be moving to Melbourne. I wasn’t happy at leaving my sister behind but he said we would take her with us, he had a house there, quite big, we could all live together and she could transfer her fashion course to Melbourne. I suppose most new brides feel like me, that life with this new husband is just wonderful, that he makes everything so clear and easy and such a delight. Annie was quite keen on going to Melbourne, but she found a tiny place to live near the college, and came to us mainly for weekends. I was back to designing, mainly drawing, but I was turning some designs into actual clothes. I was working on a collection for the next summer, that would keep me busy enough. Frederick suggested we rent a shop and sell them through that but I thought that was too big an enterprise for this moment, it would be better to sell into some boutiques and get a name first, and then when Annie was ready we could think about a shop. It’s a big job, a shop is.

Frederick’s working hours were erratic, sometimes he was off for long days and I only saw him at night, sometimes he had time to spare and we lived a life that was another sort of honeymoon, going to galleries and out for lunch and shopping. He loved shopping, loved buying us things. His house was a ’30s mansion in Toorak, with towers and crenellations and a row of machicolations across the front, a kind of castle really, but it wasn’t furnished in period style, thank goodness, but with wonderful timeless modern pieces. He said he wanted me to feel that it was mine, that I should buy things for it. He’d given me a credit card instead of the wads of notes, it had a $50,000 limit on it. I didn’t expect to get anywhere near that. Sometimes we bought paintings, always choosing them together, and he paid. There were a lot of walls in the house, plenty of room to display them.

One day Annie said, You know, I think this house is a kind of reverse TARDIS. Bigger on the outside than the inside.
What?

She took me outside. Look, she said, how much house there is. I’m sure there are more rooms than we have been into on the inside.

The keys to the house were kept in a small mirrored cupboard in the hall. Not all of the rooms were locked. Frederick had pointed out the keys to me and said I could go wherever I liked. Annie and I wandered around, sometimes unlocking doors. There were bedrooms and sitting rooms, far more than we could use. Annie had a suite to herself. There was a nursery, decorated in lemon colours, everything was tidy and clean, a couple came in every morning and kept it like that. As far as I could see, we had been in every room. It just looks as though there should be more of them, said Annie. Optical illusion, I laughed, and she did too.

Annie liked to tease me about the titles. She’d call me your majesty, and say things like, which country are you queen of this week? Burgundy? Arles? I think you should be living in your palace in Arles, that would be good. It was a bit unfair to Frederick, who didn’t ever boast of his family background. He liked it, yes, was proud of it, but in a tucked-away, taken-for-granted manner.

There was a framed picture in the house, a sheet of vellum from a medieval illuminated manuscript, of Frederick Barbarossa. Astonishingly like my Frederick. The pale heart-shaped face, the slender figure, the red-gold curls, the bright blue eyes.

YOU KNOW, SAID Annie, you know more about his twelfth century background than about the present one. What about his parents? Brothers and sisters? Where was he born?

He might be an orphan, like us, I said. I couldn’t see that any of these things mattered much. I was very happy, married to Frederick. He was sweet tempered. Some people might think he was rather controlling, but it gave me pleasure to fit in with his wishes. He was so gentle and loving, there seemed no point in being self-willed or foolishly independent. He indulged me in everything I wanted. I was designing and making my clothes, they were much in demand, and I was employing some people to help me sew them. Think of opening that shop, said Frederick, who was very proud of me, maybe not
immediately, but keep it in mind. Frederick set me up a website, and the clothes were photographed and displayed on that. Perhaps that’s the way to go, I said. Could be, said Frederick.

I sold some of my clothes through a small boutique round the corner. Annie was on the point of finishing her course and was thinking what to do next. She managed to get a job in this boutique, so she could learn the trade at first hand; it seemed a good idea. She wasn’t as keen on designing as I was, and learning management skills would come in handy when we opened the shop.

At about this time Frederick had to go to New York on a business trip. I thought he might have taken me but he said it would be too rushed, he wouldn’t have time to look after me, I wouldn’t enjoy it. When he came back we would go to Paris. I liked the idea of Paris. I’d never been out of Australia, and Paris was a dream of mine. Before he went he took the keys out of the mirrored cupboard. You know about these, he said, and now there’s this – he showed me a small lacquered oval, with a series of numbers and letters engraved on it, not making any sense. This is the password to the big computer, he said, but I don’t want you to use it. It’s here, and it’s safe, but you must never key it in.

So why leave it, said Annie when I told her, why not just hide it in a drawer somewhere?

Maybe it’s a test, I said, like Pandora, or Eve. To see if he can trust me.

Huh, said Annie. Of course she is not the focus of Frederick’s affection, the way I am, she is inclined to be a bit more critical, even though he has always been so good to her.

Still passing the test? she’d say, when she came to visit. It irritated me, rather. When Frederick came back he hugged me and we went to bed for the afternoon, as we sometimes did, it was lovely.

We booked our tickets for Paris, we weren’t taking Annie, I thought she should make her own life, but before we went he had to make a quick business trip to Sydney. I took the rings of keys out of the cupboard and looked at the small lacquered oval. I wondered what would happen if I typed it in. I put the keys back.

Several times I did this, and then I thought, Why don’t I just look. I always thought what Eve and Pandora did was important,
it had immediate disastrous consequences but the result was finally immensely significant, bringing free will to the world and that. And there was no way Frederick would ever find out. I’d go in, look, and come out again. I was curious to see what he didn’t want me to see.

I typed in the code and straightaway up came a film. Or maybe it was a video clip. Anyway, it seemed to be some sort of narrative. A beautiful pale woman lying naked on satin sheets, with fair curls tumbling about her shoulders. She smiled in a bewitching manner. Then a man came in. You couldn’t see his face, but there was a flash of reddish hair, and that elegant white bottom, I’d have known it anywhere. He began to make love to the woman. That I recognised too, Frederick’s loving foreplay, it was disturbing to see it on a screen before me, something that I thought belonged to me alone, and here was this other woman, luxuriating in his caresses. He entered her, and she threw her head back in ecstasy, then there was a faint pause and he put his arms around her throat and began to strangle her. Her eyes flew open and she choked, the music reached a crescendo, and as he came to orgasm she did too, in a kind of way, she convulsed and then went very still, her face twisted in an ugly mask. He walked away and left her dead on the couch.

I SAT STUNNED for a moment. I had heard of snuff movies, of course I had, although people said they were fake, people didn’t really die in them. But this woman was dead, I was sure of it, the ugly details of the soiled bed and her gaping face made that clear. I exited from the clip but that didn’t work, it started playing over again. The more I tried to get rid of it the more frenzied it became, and then the screen started to flash as other women, but always the same man, went through similar motions, but with all sorts of variations. They cut back and forwards in a kind of frenzied fashion, and nothing I did could get rid of them. I looked for the cord to unplug it but it was fixed through the wall, I wondered about cutting it but thought maybe it would electrocute me. And how would I explain that to Frederick? I tried to do a force quit, tried to turn it off at the back. Nothing worked. I stared at this flashing screen in a panic. Telling myself to think, it was a computer, it must be possible to turn it off.
Now there was blood, red washes of it, and worse, I couldn’t look any longer. And always the nipped waist and shapely buttocks of Frederick.

I took out my phone and called Annie, she’s better at computers than I am. She didn’t answer, I had to leave a message. I’m not sure what I said. Sex and death, maybe; did I use the word snuff? Something garbled and panicky. I put the phone back in my pocket and tried again to turn the infernal machine off.

Cat, what are you doing? It was Frederick, home early. I sat with tears pouring out of my eyes. Oh silly Cat, he said fondly, why? You make me so sad, I didn’t think you would succumb, I didn’t think you’d be like the others, oh, I am so sorry. He pressed some combination of keys, and the screen went dark. Come, he said. And took me to the bedroom, tucked me up under the doona, soothed me, but I was still panicking. He brought me a sweetish drink, and I must have gone to sleep. When I woke up he was lying beside me. I felt quite at peace, the images seemed a long way away, vaguely disquieting but somehow not immediately concerning. Frederick was naked, and so was I. He took me in his arms, his dear soothing self, and gently pulled away the doona. Something was worrying me. He stretched me out on the piled up pillows. A part of the panelling slid open, it seemed to be a door into a room I hadn’t known was there. A man came out, carrying a large video camera. Frederick began to make love to me.

WELL, YOU’VE GATHERED I lived to tell my tale. I did not become the unwitting star of my own snuff movie. When Frederick began to caress my drugged and languid flesh I could hardly move, but after a moment I was repulsed by his touch. That other woman’s tormented face filled my mind. I couldn’t move, hardly, but I could scream, and I did. Frederick put his hand over my mouth, and I bit him. I screamed again. But he was stronger than me, his slenderness was iron hard, underneath. I was helpless, and I thought I was doomed.

Annie had got my message, finally. She’d been at a party in the north west of the state, at the home of a girl she went to school with. One of those country places with no telephone reception. She came as soon as she heard it, driving down with the brother of the girl. He
A CASTLE IN TOORAK

was a handsome brown farmery type called Sean. She let herself into the house and looked for me, running round the passages with Sean’s hand in hers. It was very quiet, she said, I knew there was something wrong. Near my bedroom she saw a door hidden in the wall, leading into the room the cameraman had come from. It had been left open. She glanced in, through into the bedroom, and was transfixed by what she saw. By this time Frederick was trying to put a pillow over my face. My legs moved like a zombie’s, she said. She dialled the emergency number on her mobile. Sean ran in and punched Frederick. He rose in the air and fell flat to the ground, his face pale, the hair on his head, face and groin shining golden red, his limbs splayed like a puppet. Apparently the cameraman said, Hey, watch it, mate, this camera’s worth a fortune. He did his best to run away, but stopping to pack up his equipment. The police came, quite quickly, I don’t know what Annie said but it got them moving.

Frederick had deleted all the stuff from his own computer, but there was another hidden room, in one of the towers, a kind of fortress, with a bank of computers. Lists of names of customers, the business was huge, international. Mainly online, but there were also some DVDs to be posted out. All in the trade name of Snuff/Love. Frederick was tried for various murders, and convicted. All the money sort of disappeared, being proceeds of crime, but he had put the house in my name so I had that. I sold it and we opened a dress shop in Armadale. Our Annicat label. It did well. Annie proved a great businesswoman, and I was a good designer. The scandal could have helped. People came to stare, and stayed to buy.

Marion Halligan writes novels, short stories and essays, and regularly reviews books. She has received an AM for her services to literature. She has been shortlisted for most of the prizes on offer, and has won some. Valley of Grace (Allen & Unwin, 2009) won the ACT Book of the Year and was long-listed for the IMPAC Prize. Her latest is a collection of short stories, Shooting the Fox (Allen & Unwin, 2011). She is a frequent contributor to Griffith REVIEW.

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