



Salome

**An
Invitation
to the
Dance**

Marcus Johnson

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by
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Chapter 1

“Two thousand years ago, a young girl stepped forward and put her feet on the floor to entertain her stepfather and his guests with a dance. The occasion was his birthday, celebrated in regal style. Neither the girl—nor any of the guests present—could have realized that they were players in an event that would reverberate through history. An event so momentous, that to this day it is re-enacted regularly in word, song, and dance. Indeed, her simple act of entertainment is an act of entertainment still.”

“Her name was Salome, which means Peaceful. It is a variation of the word Salem, a phrase still used in Israel—as Shalom—and throughout the Muslim world as a greeting. Salome was a common name in the first century, and it still is today, although not so much in the west, where the Christian influence has always associated the name of Salome with the untimely death of John the Baptist.

“Manifold are the imaginings that have been fabricated in visual art, poetry, and prose around this girl and her dance. There is little doubt that a good many erotic fantasies were mixed with most of these observations. The noble discipline of exercising psychological probability was not always foremost in the mind of those who wrote about her.

“Indeed, if we look at Salome we must realize that our judgment is weighed down by 2,000 years of bad press.

“Well,” Mr. Bogweasel said, looking up from his writing, “that was the first part of the introduction. What do you think of it so far?”

“Keep on reading, dear,” Mrs. Bogweasel nodded. “It’s okay so far. It’s not literature, but it’s passable.”

It all started on one of those days that can only be described as wet and miserable. Not only the weather, but also Mr. and Mrs. Bogweasel between them were wet and miserable. Mr. Bogweasel was wet, and Mrs. Bogweasel was miserable. Miserable she was, not only because by marrying her husband she had acquired his absurd family name, but mainly because she did not like rain, and this was not a good start to their holiday. On the other hand, she shouldn’t have been too worried about that name; she had been keen enough to shed her maiden name when she married. Her maiden name was not absurd perhaps, but ever since the efforts of Major Hooker during the American civil war, every girl adorned with his surname had suffered.

Mr. Bogweasel was not miserable, but he was wet. He liked walking in the rain, and he had just returned from a long early morning stroll along the lakeside. Indeed, he liked walking in the rain a lot better than mowing the lawn, which—thanks to the rain—he could not be told to do at present. Mrs. Bogweasel knew that, and it made her even more miserable. She liked things that needed doing to be done.

The Bogweasels were very much the odd couple. Mr. Bogweasel was short, fat, and bald. He had a friendly disposition and never worried too much about anything. Mrs. Bogweasel was tall and slender—and not bald. She was a stern but good looking lady with a disapproving stare and a sharp mind. Her thick hair had once been blond, but was now prematurely grey. This was perhaps not

surprising, considering what she had to put up with from her husband and children. Both of the Bogweasels were high school teachers.

Twenty years ago Mr. and Mrs. Bogweasel married after a whirlwind romance during their final year at university. Mrs. Bogweasel—Ms. Hooker then—was a splendid looker in those days, and blessed with long tresses of golden hair. She was also the proto-typical toffee-nosed girl; smart, aloof, and unapproachable. She was keen on study and not keen on anything that could be distracting—particularly romance. She looked down on the opposite sex and was determined never to get involved with it—if it could be helped. Mr. Bogweasel was already short and round, quite as short as he was now actually—but not quite as round. He was a party animal of the highest order, and during one of his numerous bouts of revelry he lost a wager. The ante was a dare; so he was told that he had to put on his best suit and propose to Karin Hooker. All his mates thought it was a huge joke, and they were unobtrusively watching as Mr. Bogweasel set out to do the impossible and approach the unapproachable. While Ms. Hooker was reading a text book on Keats in the university grounds, Mr. Bogweasel walked up to her, sank to one knee—as he had been told to do—and proposed marriage. Quite understandably, Ms. Hooker was somewhat taken by surprise. She looked at this plump little fellow down her pretty nose and her gut reaction was to advise him to get knotted. But Ms. Hooker—who was not devoid of a sense of humor—suspected a dare, and decided it could be fun to turn it on its head. Young Mr. Bogweasel was still down on one knee, so Ms. Hooker remained quiet and kept him there for a while. Then she smiled enticingly and told Mr. Bogweasel that it was perhaps not such a bad idea, and yes, she would. She never intended to go through with it, but then Mr. Bogweasel turned the joke on her and started to act as her true

suitor. He became unbelievably polite and agreeable, hastening to fulfill her every need, seeking her company in and out of season. Eventually Karin Hooker started to quite like the little fat fellow, so she became more pleasant herself. As a result of that, Mr. Bogweasel started to like her really well. What they had started as a joke became serious. They did eventually marry, and neither of them ever looked back.

Mrs. Bogweasel's family held the title to a holiday cottage at the lakeside owned in trust and available to all relatives. Originally this little dwelling had been known as 'Hooker's Hut', but ever since Grandma Hooker and her two daughters—one of whom was now Mrs. Bogweasel—had united in the quest for a name change there had been confusion. Mrs. Bogweasel's father—Grandpa Hooker—stubbornly stuck to the original name. Mr. Bogweasel called the place 'Waterside Lodge', which was so unoriginal that Mrs. Bogweasel cringed each time she heard it. She preferred 'Heaven on Water'—as opposed to heaven on earth. Their daughter, Stella, tended to take her father's suggestion a little further and talked about the 'Waterlogged Lodge'. With that she was referring not only to the frequent rain, but also to the fact that the southerly—if combined with rain in the hills—would occasionally drive the waters of the lake in through the front door. Lloyd—the Bogweasel's son—called it the 'Gates of Hell', since the existence of this cottage automatically excluded most other ways of spending the holidays. Little Berenike was more positively inclined and called it 'Frog Palace'. This name was the one now used most often, but certainly not exclusively. Some of the cousins still stuck to their own names, such as 'Outhouse', 'Creaky Dungeon', and 'Pest Pit'. Yet the fact remained that none of the members of the extended Hooker family was—or was ever likely to be—wealthy enough to afford a place like it on their own. Therefore, this cottage allowed them to spend their vacations in

a fashion that would normally be well outside their financial reach.

The other holiday homes around the lake were on the whole owned by rich people. Since all the land around the lake had been made into a national park, new construction was effectively barred. The existing buildings could be altered though, and that is exactly what had happened to most of them over the years. Actually, some of them had grown into massive glass monstrosities, numbering several stories. Frog Palace, on the other hand, had stubbornly remained unaltered, primarily because of financial restraints. It comprised a living room—in which one could find a worn out sofa and two comfortable chairs, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. The dining area was on the kitchen side of the living room. There was also a separate boat house where the sailing boat was kept in the off-season. The outfit was void of a water closet, but there was an outhouse somewhere in between the main dwelling and the boathouse. This may not have been a true house, but it was definitely out. Visiting the outhouse on a cold, wet and windy night called for determination and commitment—a good torch was also quite helpful.

Once the boat was in the water, the boathouse would usually be promoted to an extra bedroom. The yacht—when not in use—would remain moored at the small jetty during the summer months. The boat was called *Rainbow*, and she was a 24ft fixed-keel design of venerable age and wooden construction—a beautiful and well maintained masterpiece of boatbuilding. The *Rainbow* was gaff-rigged and was void of any mechanical propulsion device. There was a paddle on board to make it possible to arrive back home—eventually—in the case of an absolute absence of wind. This did not happen often, but if it did it was usually around four in the afternoon. Over the years the Bogweasels had been caught out thus-wise on a number of occasions, and each time they had not arrived back till after eight. Having late meals tended to make

the children moody, and these experiences had only decreased their already limited appreciation of the place. Being caught without wind would not normally have been a big deal; there were always numerous motor boats about willing to offer a tow. Unfortunately Mr. Bogweasel was a stubborn little fellow and steadfastly refused any proffered assistance—a stance that had become a well known tradition around the lake. Offers for a tow were, therefore, no longer forthcoming, even when Mr. Bogweasel himself was not on board the Rainbow.

“It’s raining,” Mr. Bogweasel said, as he wriggled in through the front door. Frog Palace was not provided with any corridors of whatever kind. The front door was in the dining-cum-living room, and the back door led straight into the kitchen.

“Oh, really?” Mrs. Bogweasel—still in her pink satin dressing gown and her fluffy Mickey Mouse slippers—frowned. “And you had to leave the house to figure that out, did you?”

“I like rain,” Mr. Bogweasel smiled. He sat down on the nearest chair and proceeded to take his gumboots off. “There’s no need to be sarcastic, Honeybee. It’s just a weakness of mine, that’s all. Why not make your loving husband a nice cup of coffee—there’s a good girl!”

Mrs. Bogweasel did not move and continued with her game of patience, sitting at the table.

“Make your own coffee,” she grumbled eventually, “my loving husband indeed.”

“Aw, Honeybee, how can you be so cruel to your very own protector?” Mr. Bogweasel inquired. “Have you no heart? See you not how I suffer? I’m drenched to the bone. I’m cold. I’m in discomfort. I’m longing for a cup of coffee such as only your fair hand could make! Desert me not, I plead. Stand by me in my hour of need, and I shall yet be of service to you!”

“Lawns tomorrow?” Mrs. Bogweasel asked curtly.

“But of course, Honeybee,” Mr. Bogweasel assured her. “Why, I’d do them today—pity it’s raining.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Mrs. Bogweasel said, standing up. “I’m too nice, you know; it’s going to be my downfall one day.”

“If we fall, we fall together,” Mr. Bogweasel assured her. “Which reminds me; where are the kiddies?”

“Think,” Mrs. Bogweasel encouraged her husband as she shuffled toward the kitchen. “It’s holidays, it’s raining, and it’s not even nine o’clock yet. Where would you expect the children to be?”

“I suppose we shall have to entertain them today,” Mr. Bogweasel sighed, “one way or another.”

“Not quite, Honeybear,” Mrs. Bogweasel said from the kitchen. “We do not have to entertain them; you will have to entertain them. It’s your turn.”

By now Mr. Bogweasel had managed to rid himself of his gumboots. He put them outside in the porch and hung his raincoat out there also. Then he came back inside and sat at the table. A few moments later, Mrs. Bogweasel returned from the kitchen with two cups of hot coffee and sat down opposite him.

“You’re a little angel,” Mr. Bogweasel assured his wife, taking his steaming cup. “Without you I’d be but half the man I’m now. The world would forever wait with unrelieved anxiety for the revelation of my full being. But now, this raw potential shall soon be seen. I have presently hatched a brilliant scheme to keep the children engaged!”

“Just don’t forget the lawn.” Mrs. Bogweasel—who was much more prosaic than her husband—reminded him. “It’s growing like anything.”

“Not quite, Honeybee,” Mr. Bogweasel said shaking his head. “The lawn is just as big as it has always been. It does not grow—only the grass in it grows.”

“You’re being pedantic.”

At this moment the door of the second bedroom opened, and Berenike became visible. The two bedrooms of Frog Palace opened straight into the living room. The nearer—or first one—was habitually used by Mr. and Mrs. Bogweasel; the one closer to the kitchen was for the two girls. Berenike was only ten, but she was tall for her age. She had a sweet oval face and soft blue eyes that completely obscured the fact that she was about as pliable as a block of concrete.

“Good morning, Honeybees,” Berenike said sleepily upon seeing her mother. “Up early today, aren’t we? Getting ready to catch the worms, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“Don’t call your mother ‘Honeybee’,” Mr. Bogweasel snapped. “You know very well I don’t like it. I told you often enough! It’s my exclusive privilege—mine and no-one else’s!”

Berenike entered the room and peered around her mother so that she could see where the disapproving noise came from. She had obviously just crawled out of bed; her thick blond hair was tied up in untidy plaits. The top of her striped flannelette pajamas was crumpled and the bottom button was undone, the pants had slipped to halfway down her hips exposing a strip of bare Berenike about the belly button.

“Morning, Pops,” she smiled, totally unimpressed by his outburst. Berenike was the youngest, and she was the apple of her parents’ eyes; a situation she was fully aware of and had every intention of milking till the last drop. “Sorry, Poppy, but I didn’t actually call my mother ‘Honeybee’; I called her ‘Honeybees’. You never ever told me I wasn’t allowed to say that.”

“You know very well what I mean,” Mr. Bogweasel said sharply. “Don’t try to be smart with me, young lady! And don’t come in here like that either—go and get dressed.”

“But I am dressed,” Berenike pointed out, hoisting up her

pajama pants as high as they would go—and making herself look quite ridiculous in the process. “What’s your problem, Pops? It’s not as if I’m naked or something.”

Berenike moved past her parents toward the front door. Immediately her pants returned to their original position.

“I’m not getting up yet, anyway,” Berenike explained as she opened the front door. “I’m just going to the outhouse. Why do you people call it an outhouse anyway? It’s hardly a house; standing room only—well just about.” The front door was now fully open and Berenike suddenly became aware of the weather. “Aw yuck, it’s raining!” she cried. Hastily she slipped out and disappeared from view.

“She’s trying you out,” Mrs. Bogweasel said after Berenike had disappeared. “She’s finding out exactly how far she can go.”

“Oh, I know,” Mr. Bogweasel sighed. “Why can’t she be like a normal child, for Pete’s sake, and wait till she’s a teenager before putting her parents to the test?”

“You must be firm with her—let her know where the boundaries lie,” Mrs. Bogweasel advised. “Quite frankly, I don’t like it much either when she calls me ‘Honeybee’. If she does it again you must punish her. Dock her pocket money or ground her or something like that.”

“But she didn’t say ‘Honeybee’; she said . . .”

“You’re no better than she is,” Mrs. Bogweasel snapped. “Just don’t let her walk all over you, that’s all.”

“Yes, dear, fine, dear, anything you say, dear,” Mr. Bogweasel said soothingly. “When she does it again I shall slap her hand.”

“The last time you did that she was giggling throughout the exercise. You better think of something that actually is a deterrent—something that really hurts her. Your slapping is a joke. Besides, she’s getting too old for slapping.”

Mr. Bogweasel sighed and continued to drink his coffee. Mrs.

Bogweasel got up to prepare breakfast, hoping against hope that within the next hour or so at least some of her offspring would turn up. Not turn up like Berenike had done, but turn up in a fashion indicating that they were prepared to face the day. Presently, Berenike returned from her trip to the outhouse, firmly holding onto her now rain-sodden pajama pants. Hastily she slipped past her father and disappeared into the girl's bedroom. A few seconds later she came back out, minus her pajamas but clad in Stella's stand-by dressing gown—a bright red affair with golden dragons printed on it. Stella herself would only wear this monstrosity in a case of a dire emergency.

“I want you to get dressed,” Mr. Bogweasel said sternly. “I will not have you swagger around like that all day.”

“Stella told me to get out,” Berenike told him. “She's getting dressed herself.”

Mr. Bogweasel nodded. Stella was his oldest child. She was seventeen now, and she was very prudish. She had always been like that, but now that she was a teenager it was almost becoming a joke. It was a pain too, for Stella was a vain girl, and even on holidays the act of dressing for the day could not be hurried. Many an hour the family had spent in annoyed silence waiting for Stella to appear from her bedroom. But when she did turn up it was usually worth the wait, for Stella knew how to dress. She was of average height, and she had the figure of a Parisian mannequin. Stella was pretty; people called her longish face angelic, but not in Stella's presence. If they did, she was bound to ask them how many angels they had actually seen and where. If they had not seen any—as was commonly the case—she demanded to know how they could compare her with something they had no knowledge of. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Stella's tongue was as sharp as her fingernails—and those were like red daggers.

Without further explanation, Berenike walked to the table,

swiped away her mother's half finished game of patience and sat down.

"Breakfast ready?"

"Breakfast ready—what?" her father snapped.

"Breakfast ready—Honeybear," she corrected herself, looking her father straight in the eye.

Mr. Bogweasel remained silent for a while, studiously observing the now empty coffee cup in his hand. He was a teacher; he knew that getting angry was not going to be in his interest.

"Berenike," he said finally.

"Yes, Popsy?"

"You have gone too far. Yes, you have gone too far indeed. I will no longer stand for your insolence, do you understand that?"

"What does insolence mean, Pops?"

"Insolence is what you see each time you look in a mirror," Mr. Bogweasel told her. "But your mother and I will no longer stand for it. You are grounded, young lady—grounded for five weeks; and no pocket money for five weeks either!"

Berenike remained silent upon hearing this rather unwelcome news. There was nowhere she could run off to and cry, but she was not that type anyway.

"Five weeks?" she then said with a small voice, "that's rather a long time isn't it? Five days would be fairer don't you think, Popsy? Being grounded in the holidays—that's awful; I would never do that to anyone!"

Mr. Bogweasel stood up. He saw the tears in his daughter's eyes, and he felt terrible about himself. Silently he walked to the kitchen where Mrs. Bogweasel waited for him with a disapproving glare. She obviously considered the punishment over the top, but she remained silent as Berenike would hear every word her mother might say. There was no wall between the kitchen and the living area.

“I’m going to get Lloyd up,” Mr. Bogweasel said, as he left through the front door. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Lloyd—who was fifteen—slept on a stretcher in the boathouse. He had the roomiest bedroom of them all, but certainly not the coziest. The walls of the boathouse were not lined. Looking up, one would see the rafters and the corrugated roof. Tools were hung from the walls, while ropes and all sorts of other nautical gear dangled from the rafters. In the far corner was a large stack of ‘useful’ wood. There were no windows—only a few skylights in the roof—and whole place smelled of creosote. Lloyd’s stretcher stood right in the middle of the shed. Mr. Bogweasel found his son awake and rather surprised. Lloyd had never before seen his father come in at this time of the day. Lloyd was not normally in a hurry to get out of bed in the holidays, and his parents never seemed to be worried about that.

“Get up,” Mr. Bogweasel snapped, “breakfast is almost ready.”

“What’s the point?” Lloyd moaned. “It’s raining! I think I’ll stay here for the day.”

The rain was noisily clattering on the tin roof of the boat shed.

“No, you will not,” Mr. Bogweasel told him. “We’re going to do something exciting. I’ve got an idea.”

“The old man has an ingenious plan to beat the weather, eh?” Lloyd yawned. “Okay then, I’ll be up in a minute.”

Somewhat surprised by his son’s lack of resistance, Mr. Bogweasel returned to the main dwelling. He hung his raincoat up again, hurried in through the front door, walked over to the girls’ bedroom door and banged it hard.

“Hurry up, for Pete’s sake!”

There was no audible answer from inside—Stella rarely lowered herself to raising her voice. Mr. Bogweasel sat down at the table again. Berenike was still there, looking at him with accusing eyes; eyes that spoke of a pitiable little girl—innocent

and victimized. Mr. Bogweasel looked the other way. Presently Lloyd entered through the front door. Getting dressed took him no time at all; throughout the holidays he would only wear his black and green striped togs. Washing himself was basically no more than a superficial glance at the tap next to the boat shed as he walked past. More often than not, even that got overlooked. Lloyd was even blonder than Berenike, his hair was almost white. Combing it was a bi-annual event that traditionally coincided with a visit to the barber.

“Morning,” Lloyd grumbled, somewhat annoyed about having to get up so early. “Where’s Stella? Why didn’t you make her get up?”

“Stella’s getting dressed,” Mrs. Bogweasel explained.

Lloyd just nodded—further explanation was not needed.

“Dad’s grounded me for five weeks and docked my pocket money, too.” Berenike announced.

“Aw, that’s harsh! What did you do? Murder both your parents?” Lloyd was not really worried about Berenike’s misfortune. She was clearly his parent’s favorite, and he was jealous about that. On the other hand, Berenike was a useful slave—especially during the holidays. Her being grounded would reduce her efficacy, but already he knew how to get around that. Lloyd sat down at the table next to his father and patted him on the shoulder in a comradely fashion.

“Well done, old man,” he said. “Keep the little brat in her place, that’s what I say! So where’s this breakfast you were blabbing about? It may be me, but I don’t see any.”

“Berenike was grounded for being impolite,” Mr. Bogweasel frowned. “You’d better be careful, Lloyd, if you don’t want to share her fate.”

The door of the girls’ bedroom opened, and Stella came into view. She was dressed in a knee-length navy blue frock and a

white blouse. Stella never wore slacks, not even in the holidays. It was her ‘obstinate teenager’ form of protest against her mother, who never wore anything else. As always she looked stunning; albeit not vacation-like. Her hair was longish and thick like Berenike’s, but darker. Habitually, Stella wore it in a single plait that seemed to sprout out of the back of her head. Her hair always looked as if every strand was carefully laid in place, even when she was swimming. Her eyes were dark blue and fitted with beautiful lashes. For a while she stood in the doorway, so that her presence could be fully appreciated.

“What’s this ‘hurry up’ business?” she demanded. “I was hurrying up—of course I was. After all, we do have a plane to catch, don’t we?”

“Your father has big plans for today,” Mrs. Bogweasel explained. “Sit down at the table, sweetheart. He was waiting for you to come out because he wants us all here.”

Without a word, Stella sat down next to Berenike. Mrs. Bogweasel also joined them.

“Dad’s grounded me,” Berenike told Stella. “He has grounded me for . . .”

“Not now, Berenike,” Mr. Bogweasel interrupted. “We have other things to discuss.” He paused for a moment, and then continued. “Now, it is raining today.”

“Very observant, Dad,” Stella nodded.

“Please don’t interrupt, Stella,” Mr. Bogweasel said impatiently. “So—as I said—it’s raining, and the forecast predicts no change. Therefore, I have been thinking about a way of entertaining you lot, and I have come up with a brilliant idea.”

“Oh no,” Lloyd moaned.

“Oh yes,” Mr. Bogweasel assured him. “This is my idea; we shall all band together and do some research!”

There was a stunned silence—four pairs of eyes stared at him in utter disbelief.

“That . . . er . . . sounds really exciting,” Stella finally said. “I’m so sorry, but you may have to count me out, Dad. Barry will be coming today—we’ll entertain ourselves.”

“What?” Mrs. Bogweasel frowned. “I thought you said Barry would not be here till tomorrow?”

“Today, tomorrow, what’s the difference?” Stella muttered.

“Aren’t we supposed to celebrate the holidays?” Lloyd asked. “This sounds like schoolwork to me! Something to be avoided at all cost!”

“Research can be—is—fun,” Mr. Bogweasel assured his doubting audience. “Proper research which leads to discovering new insights is very rewarding.”

“Convince us,” Stella suggested.

“It’s not fair!” Berenike moaned. “First I’m being grounded, and now this.”

“Do you remember the movie we saw last night?” Mr. Bogweasel asked, ignoring his offspring’s blatant lack of fervor.

“Salome,” Lloyd nodded. “It was certainly boring, but probably breathtakingly exciting compared to what you seem to have in mind.”

Frog Palace was fitted with a video cassette player, specially provided for rainy days. Over the years, different lodgers had brought and left behind all sorts of videos. Unfortunately, the good movies tended to be taken back home; those that remained were not always endowed with high entertainment value.

“Just bear with me,” Mr. Bogweasel said patiently, “and all things relating to my splendid plan shall be explained.”

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