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THE FACTORY MADE BOY

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THE FACTORY MADE BOY

Mrs Bertie Bartolotti was sitting in her rocking chair having breakfast. She had four cups of coffee for breakfast, three rolls with butter and honey, two soft-boiled eggs, a slice of brown bread with ham and cheese, and a slice of white bread with goose-liver paté. Since Mrs Bartolotti rocked back and forth as she ate – after all, rocking-chairs are meant for rocking in – she got brown coffee stains and yellow egg stains on her light-blue dressing gown. A lot of breadcrumbs fell down the neck of her dressing gown too.

Mrs Bartolotti stood up and hopped round her living room on one foot until all the crumbs inside her dressing gown had fallen right down to the floor. Then she licked the honey off her sticky fingers. 'Well, my dear,' she

told herself, 'get washed and dressed like a good girl, will you, and then you'd better start work. And get a move on!'

Mrs Bartolotti always called herself 'my dear' when she was talking to herself. Her mother had always called her 'my dear' as a child. *'Do your homework now, my dear! Do the drying up now, my dear! Hold your tongue now, my dear!'*

Later on, when Mrs Bartolotti was grown up, her husband, Mr Bartolotti, was always telling her, *'Cook the lunch now, my dear! Do sew that button on my trousers now, my dear! For goodness' sake sweep that floor now, my dear!'*

So Mrs Bartolotti was used to getting things done and obeying orders if someone called her 'my dear', but not otherwise. Her mother had died a long time ago, and Mr Bartolotti had left a long time ago (never mind why; that was their own business). At all events, Mrs Bartolotti had no one but herself to call her 'my dear'.

Mrs Bartolotti went into the bathroom. She felt like having a nice hot bath, but unfortunately the goldfish were swimming about in the bath tub. There were seven little goldfish and four big goldfish, and Mrs Bartolotti had taken them out

of their bowl and put them in the bath the day before, to give them a change of scene. After all, thought Mrs Bartolotti, other people go away on holiday, but those poor fish have to spend their whole time swimming round and round and round in a circular goldfish bowl.

Mrs Bartolotti decided to make do with a nice warm shower. (She had a special shower cubicle in her bathroom.) Unfortunately the folding door of the shower cubicle was sticking. At least, it was not really sticking, but you couldn't get it open because Mrs Bartolotti had rigged up a washing line crossing from the window to the shower cubicle four times, and hung her jeans and cotton T-shirts on it to dry. And the jeans and T-shirts she had not washed yet were soaking in the washbasin.

'Well, my dear, you'll just have to be dry-cleaned instead,' she told her reflection in the mirror, getting a piece of cotton wool and a large bottle out of the bathroom cupboard. She put some pink lotion from the big bottle on the cotton wool, and then she rubbed the cotton wool all over her face. The cotton wool went all sorts of colours: it went pink with her foundation

and red with her lipstick and black with her mascara and brown with her eyebrow pencil and green with her eye-shadow and dark blue with her eye-liner.

'How pretty!' said Mrs Bartolotti to the piece of cotton wool. She threw it away, and it landed right beside the waste-paper basket under the basin. Then she took several tubes and several little bottles and pencils out of the bathroom cupboard, and painted her face pink and red and black and brown and green and dark blue again. She discovered that the little bottle of mascara was almost empty, so she wrote herself a message in lipstick on the white tiles of the bathroom wall: BUY MASCARA!!!

And she picked up her sponge and wiped another message in lipstick, saying BUY LAVATORY PAPER, off the tiles, because she had gone out and bought lavatory paper yesterday.

Before she left the bathroom Mrs Bartolotti looked in the mirror over the basin, because she wanted to see if she looked young or old. Some days she was young, some days she was old. This was one of Mrs Bartolotti's young days, and she was pleased with her face. 'I do look young! Really

young and pretty!' she told herself appreciatively. The pink foundation hid all the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth.

Mrs Bartolotti never told anyone how old she was, so no one knew, and that meant she was several different ages.

Old Mrs Miller who lived next door called her 'Young Mrs Bartolotti' when she mentioned her. Little Micky, old Mrs Miller's grandson, called her 'Old Mrs Bartolotti'. Mr Thomas, who sold powders and pills and ointments in his chemist's shop, and had two deep lines on his forehead from reading so many prescriptions, said, 'Bertie Bartolotti – she's a woman in the prime of life!' Mr Thomas was in the prime of life too. He was fifty-five-years old, and he and Mrs Bartolotti used to meet twice a week. Once a week he visited her, and once a week she visited him. They would go to the theatre or the cinema, and then they went out for a meal, and then they went somewhere else for a glass of wine, and then they went to a coffee bar. Twice a week Mr Thomas called Mrs Bartolotti 'Bertie, dear', and twice a week Mrs Bartolotti called Mr Thomas 'Tommy, dear'. But when they met

in the street on any other day of the week, or when Mrs Bartolotti went to the chemist's to buy cough mixture, she called him 'Mr Thomas' and he called her 'Mrs Bartolotti' or 'madam'. Apart from that, they did not speak to each other on other days of the week. The two days when they were friends were always Saturday and Tuesday.

When she had looked at herself in the mirror long enough, Mrs Bartolotti went back to the living room, sat down in her rocking chair again and wondered whether to start work now, or go shopping, or perhaps go back to bed. Just as she had made up her mind to go back to bed there was a ring at the doorbell of her flat. A very long, loud ring. Mrs Bartolotti jumped, nervously. That was the kind of way postmen and telegram boys and the fire brigade ring the doorbell. She hoped the person ringing the bell so loud and so long was the postman delivering a letter with money in it. Mrs Bartolotti was always expecting the postman to deliver letters with money in them, and every now and then he actually did. Ten pounds or twenty pounds or even fifty pounds, depending what size of rug Mrs Bartolotti had sold.

When the cheques arrived they were made out to:

BARTOLOTTI AND CO.
HAND WEAVING – HAND-MADE RUGS

Bartolotti and Co. was really Mrs Bertie Bartolotti. She had put in the 'and Co.' bit to look good on her business cards.

Mrs Bartolotti made the most beautiful, brightly coloured rugs in the whole city. The carpet dealers and furnishing stores that sold her rugs used to tell their customers, 'Ah, Mrs Bartolotti is a real artist! Her rugs are little masterpieces! That's what makes them so expensive!'

(The carpet dealers and furnishing stores asked their customers three times the price they paid Mrs Bartolotti for her rugs; that was what really made them so expensive.)

Sure enough, it was the postman standing outside the door ringing the bell so loud and so long, but he was not delivering a letter with money in it. He was delivering a parcel. He was puffing and panting, and he wiped his brow. 'Weighs a ton!' he said, pointing to a large

parcel wrapped in white paper. 'Well, at least twenty kilos!' He dragged the parcel through the hall and into the kitchen, and Mrs Bartolotti signed a delivery note and gave him a tip. The postman said, 'Goodbye,' and Mrs Bartolotti said, 'Goodbye,' and went to the door to see him out.

Then she sat down on a kitchen chair in front of the big white parcel. She plunged her hands into her hair, which was dyed blonde, and sat there running her fingers, whose nails were varnished sky-blue, through her stiffly lacquered locks, and thinking.

Wool? she thought. *No, it can't be wool! Wool doesn't weigh nearly so much. No, she thought, a parcel of wool this size wouldn't weigh more than five or six kilos.*

Mrs Bartolotti stood up and walked round the parcel, looking for the name and address of whoever had sent it. She didn't find any name and address, not even when she tipped the parcel over carefully and looked underneath.

'Now then, my dear!' Mrs Bartolotti told herself sternly. 'Now then, my dear, search your conscience!'