

THE (DIS)ASSEMBLY
by Paul Watson
For and starring Sophie

"Ok. This isn't too bad." Sophie says, as she sits back at the table.

"Says you. I'm not used to being this...short. And that dress cost, so he'd better restore it."

"Yeah, suffer like us little people, you gangly giant."

"Do you have any clothes that will fit?"

"No, but we'll think of..." she knocks the glass over as she reaches for it, "...shit. Ok, maybe it will take some getting used to. But, you know, better than being a pair of tits in a box while their supposed best friend let's them get groped."

"I apologised for that! But you've got a point. I quite like having something more..substantial up there."

"What?" she looks down at her t-shirt on Nat's body, "Oh, shit."

"You hadn't noticed?"

"I was too happy to be in one piece!"

"Well, bad news, for you, sweetie, it's not the only thing we've swapped."

Sophie's eyes bulge, "Oh, nonononono."

"It's for a week, Soph. Even I can hold off for that long. Probably. Mostly."

"Don't you dare do...that with my..."

"Mine until it's swapped back."

"Bitch."

"Hey, I'm only in this position thanks to you dragging me along."

"You're right, you're right. It's for a week. Just give me the tickets and..."

"What do you mean? I thought you had them."

They look at each other for a moment. "Shiiiiit!"

"Maybe he just..."

"...forgot? Not a chance. He's up to something." she stands up.

"What are you going to do?"

"Beat it out of him."

"Hey, wait up!"

Sophie reaches the door leading backstage, where the bouncer very determinedly stands in her way.

"No customers in the backstage area, madam."

"I'm not...I just need to see the magician."

"Well, that would be difficult. He's already left."

"What?! When's he coming back?"

"No idea. That was his last booking with us."

"WHAT?!!"

"Madam, I think you'd better return to your seat."

"But..." she feels Nat's arm on her shoulder.

"Come on, Soph."

"This can't be happening..."

"It probably isn't. Like you said, he's up to something with this."

"Oh, sure he is, ruining my life is what he's up to. How am I, how are we, going to teach like this?"

"Baggy clothes? Like, really baggy."

"Really?"

"Well, it's cope or scream. And he doesn't get that satisfaction. Not here, anyway. When we get home, cover your ears."

"Right" Sophie replies morosely.

"Until then, let's get drunk."

"That won't help."

"Not a bit. But I really need it"

“Yeah, I can go along with that.”

Tomorrow dawns to blurred vision, sore heads and one piercing scream that makes both things worse. “Gaaaah...what...? Where...? Who...? What....?”

“I’ve got piercings!!! How drunk...? When...? Why did...?”

Nat flops back into her pillow. “They’re mine!” she shouts to be heard across the flat,

“Remember?!!”

“Remember...”

“We got swapped all about, and you got my piercings as part of the package deal!”

“But...”

“Deal with it till we find the magician and get turned back! I’ll help with caring for them! Once the room stops spinning.”

Later, after much coffee has been consumed, “So...”

“Magaluf. Last gasp teenage rebellion before teacher training college. Got my tongue, bits and belly pierced. And caught merry hell for it off my dad. And, no I never told you because it would have been weird.”

“Whereas this way isn’t?”

“I didn’t think it was that important in the grand scheme of things yesterday. And you were so mad you didn’t even notice I had your boobs until I told you. When would have been a good time?”

“ugh. I am going to kill him.”

“So you said. After he’s put us back together properly.”

“Yeah, after that. Then he’s dead.”

“Right on. And I’m going to need to borrow some bras off you. None of mine fit these.”

“What about...” she looks down.

“I can manage a week commando. Just won’t wear skirts.”

“Sure, sure. Wait, none of our trousers will fit. They’re too short or too long now that we each have half each other’s legs. And the wrong hips. This week is going to be so weird.”

“Yeah, I guess. Fine. When you’re done killing him, can I take over?”

“Sure. What are friends for?”

Monday arrives, and getting ready takes twice as long as both try to find something they can wear and then try to actually put it on when their bodies are mismatched to their memories. With much cursing, they’re dressed and ready. “They’ll notice something’s wrong.”

“Kids will. Teachers won’t care less.”

“I bow to your greater experience. So, oh wise one, what do we tell them?”

“The truth.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s worked so far.”

“Got it. ‘Miss Jones’ magician...”

“He is not my magician!”

“...put us in a trick and swapped us around and left us like this.”

“Exactly.”

“And when they ask if we’ll be all right?”

“Tell them the magician is going to fix us up the next time we see him.”

“Well, I guess that’s not exactly a lie.”

The class accepts the explanation for why Miss Jones is now taller and a little skinnier. They’re well used to tales of the magician by now. But it would be impossible to deny that a pair of mixed up teachers is much less exciting than a teacher who comes apart so they soon return to normal.

At the end of the school day, the head calls Sophie into her office, to find Nat already there. “What

did you do?"

"Nothing!"

"You're not in trouble. Either of you. Unless there's something one of you want to tell me about?"

"No, nothing."

"Good." he spreads his hands on the table, "We have a...special guest for our assembly Friday. And he's asked for you two to be present to assist him in some things."

Sophie and Nat turn to look at each other. "Oh, has he now?"

"Did he specifically say assist? Not help?"

"What? Oh, yes, yes, he did. He wants to keep it under wraps..."

"I bet he does."

"And he specifically requested the two of us to assist?"

"Yes. That did seem odd. Do you know him?"

"Kinda." The head waits for her to continue, "We saw his show last week."

"I see."

"And he got us on stage to help. Guess we did a good job."

"Do you have any objections?"

They exchange looks again. "No, I think we're both happy to help."

"Excellent, excellent"

The week passes. No major incidents, just growing frustration and anticipation as Friday looms on the horizon. They arrive and are hustled into the main hall by the magician's regular assistants. They notice two weird cabinets. Each looks vaguely like a spread-eagled figure made of boxes. They're mismatched black and gold, and white and gold, Sophie notes sourly just like the boxes used last week. Sectioned into eight separate boxes: arms and legs in long rectangular boxes; the head as a trapezoid; chest and stomach in squat boxes that look pretty tight; and a triangle for the hips.

"Where is he?"

"He's getting himself ready for the show."

"Uh-huh."

"And he's going to put us back together normally afterwards?"

She smiles sympathetically, but shrugs, "Who knows? He doesn't usually use a volunteer quite as often."

"Told you he was into you."

"Shut up!"

"But, probably? I mean, we're leaving town on tour after this so..."

"So what you're saying is we'd better make sure he does."

"Good luck with that."

"What does he want to do with us?"

She looks at the boxes. "Right." Sophie walks up to the two cabinets, noting they're mounted on a black metal stand with a large column behind them and a mixture of joints, arms and ratchets she can't quite make sense of but it's clear aren't going to be good for whoever's inside the cabinets.

Like, for example, her.

"Any ideas?"

"We're going to be taken apart and, hopefully, put back together again. Even more hopefully, properly. I figure a kids show means it will be fairly safe. Or at least, plausibly deniable. He also won't pull any stunts involving stripping us naked like you said he did to you."

"Thank Heaven for small mercies."

"True. I guess we're supposed to wait backstage until they call us?"

"I guess so. It's not like I've been involved in his shows by planning before."

"I'm going to miss your girls when they go back, I must admit."

"What?!"

"Just saying. It's...nice to have something up there."

"Ask the magician if he'll give you a boob job."

"Nuh-uh. I'd probably be left as just a sentient pair of tits to manage for a week."

"Like I was in that box."

"Yeah."

"Like you left me in that box."

"I had you as a head most of that week!"

"Yeah."

"But, yeah, no trusting strange magicians, even if they are cute."

"Even if they're cute."

"Aha, you do think he's cute!"

"I said 'if! 'If!'"

"But you do think he's cute."

"Maybe. He'd be cuter if he wasn't always leaving me in embarrassing pieces."

"Would he?"

"I think it would be good to try."

"Aha!"

"Don't you 'aha' me."

"'ahem' Ladies, could you pick a Barbie box and push it on stage. The crowd is ready for you."

"Got to be our own propsmen, too? Cheapskate."

They each find the handles on the column and wheel them on stage. Their classes cheer and wave as they follow the directions to get them arranged on stage.

"And here are my familiar assistants, Miss Jones..." a cheer, "...and Miss Patterson." another cheer from a different class. Sophie's scowl melts into her 'reassuring smile'.

The assistants, the real ones, open the cabinets and Sophie and Nat step backwards into them, Nat waving to the children, Sophie deliberately not setting anyone on fire with her glare as the doors to all but the head box are closed, leaving their hands, feet and face visible.

"How are you doing in there?"

"Oh, just wonderfully."

"Come on, happy face. You don't want to upset the children, do you?"

Sophie smiles, kinda, "Them being here is the only reason you still have teeth. And if we're not back to normal when you finish, I can't promise anything." she hisses around her teeth.

"Gotcha. Say goodbye to Miss Jones." he flips the lid down, "and Miss Patterson." and then hides Nat's face the same way. "Now, let's get the real fun started, right, kids?" Sophie hears the traitorous clapping inside her box as the magician takes hold of her hand and pulls. She feels a strain in her shoulder, building, building and then there's the worryingly nice-feeling snap as she feels it separate. Dividers flap into place, hiding the join on both sides. The supports ratchet out and her arms hang there. She hears the screams of worry and the squeals of delight from the audience and wiggles her fingers to reassure everyone that she's fine. The magician repeats this on her other arm and then moves over to Nat so that they match.

There's another squealscream but she doesn't know why until he comes back to her and lifts her head a foot above her shoulders, opening the door to let her see down on the audience.

"Uh...hi?"

"Now, apparently I don't have time to do this properly one at a time, so we're going to need to speed things up."

"Wait? What?!"

He reaches behind the column, machinery whirrs and Sophie feels a stretch under her ribs as her torso raises until it's free, her head maintaining the foot distance. And then in her waist, and finally in her thighs as the machine pulls her painlessly apart, Nat following suit a few seconds after. Sophie looks down, the childish audience, and especially the adults, speechless as she realises the top of the windows need dusting. She looks over at Nat to get an idea of what strange shape her body's currently in. Nat's legs are in their normal place, but there's a gap to where her hips rest with her waist where her ribs ought to be. Her arms are a foot away from the sides of her stomach, her chest floats above where her head used to be and her head crowns the whole thing several feet

higher than it should be and looking a little queasy.

She hears a cart trundle on stage behind them, "Hey! What's going on down there?"

"Just packing the props up!" the magician calls back before he and his assistants proceed to unclip the separated arms and legs and stack them on the cart.

"Hey! We are not your f..." she stops, remembering the audience, "...your props!"

The magician ignores her, the columns pulling her pieces down as each section is removed and added to the cart, a jumble of black and white boxes with gold trim and stars.

"You promised..." she hisses.

"You threatened. I never promised." he turns back to the audience, "Headmaster, could Miss Jones' and Miss Patterson's classes stay behind to help me put their teachers back together?"

"Well, I..." the two classes are squealing and shouting and begging and cheering. He looks over at the actual teachers for the class whose shrugs make it clear they're not taking responsibility for the decision, "...I suppose they can be spared for a little while."

The assembly is ended, the two classes vibrating with energy as they wait to see how they'll be helping. The cart is brought into the middle of the hall. The magician takes the two head boxes out of the pile and sets them on the table. He opens the flaps.

"Ok, children, Miss Jones, Miss Patterson, here's the game. This is like two big jigsaws mixed up. Half belong to Miss Jones, Half to Miss Patterson. And you kids need to get them divided correctly so I can put them back together properly. And...go!"

Chaos is unleashed upon the land. Sixty plus children, 14 boxes of assorted sizes and two severed heads each yelling different instructions at once. Boxes appear and disappear from the two groups, the groups merge and fall apart. Children squabble over which box is their teacher and who found it first. But eventually, two piles are created, one white, the other black. The magician and his assistants swiftly assemble the two piles back into the Barbie boxes and Sophie and Nat step out to cheers.

"All back to normal."

"And our clothes?"

"Honestly, you're never..." he looks down at 63 pairs of big innocent eyes, "...more right. They'll be fixed."

"Promise?" Shawna asks seriously.

"I promise, darling."

"Ok." she goes back as the assistants are packing things away, making sure no 'extras' have snuck into the boxes.

Sophie finishes checking her self out to make sure everything is where it should be, which it appears to be.

From there, the magician leaves, before he finds himself dangerously alone with Sophie's temper. Trying to control the classes is more of a nightmare than usual for the rest of the day, but eventually they make it home.

"Ahhhhhh. So nice to be normal!"

"Soph, you are not normal."

She swats vaguely. "You know what I meant."

"Of course I..."

"What? Why did you..." she stares at the envelope on the table, "...oh, no." she rips it open.

'Thanks for being my assistants that last few weeks.

Enclosed are two tickets for when we return to town.

Hope to see you there.'

"Like Hell!"

"Sounds about right."

'P.S. Enjoy my surprise for you.'

"Surprise? What surprise? What did he...?" she scratches at her shoulder and her arm falls into her lap. "Ahhhhhhh!!!"

“He didn't?! He wouldn't!”

“He would and he bloody did.” Sophie snarls as she presses her arm back onto her shoulder.