The Majesties

by Linda Hanley Finigan

I needed a job and this one sounded pretty good from the ad in the paper. *Baron and Baroness, expatriates from Europe, seek Ladies Maid for summer home. Neat appearance, excellent manners. Will train.*

I'd been working at the Jiffy Mart since high school, but after the robbery, I didn't want to do that work any more. I never wanted to, tell the truth. There was always something gross they had me doing down there, scraping chewing gum off snack booths, changing roach motels under the toilets. Working for the Majesties all summer out on the lake didn't sound too bad to me.

People in town started calling them The Majesties as soon as they heard foreigners with titles had rented the old Cobb place on Shore Road. The lake was where all the rich people used to live back when Fuller City was still a big deal, which it hadn't been for some time. First the hot springs ran cold and then the interstate got built somewhere else and now it's just an old boring town where people sleep when they're not working.

The houses on the lake are sort of rundown now, but the Cobb place still looked kind of nice, at least from the outside, which for the Baroness, I learned, was pretty much all that mattered.

The first thing I noticed when I went out there to interview was how dolled up she was, what with wearing a suit made out of some kind of fuzzy fabric that looked like it came off a stuffed animal, blue eye shadow to match, false eyelashes, manicured nails painted a bright bubble gum pink. The Baroness's hair was that shade of red just before it turns orange, all teased up into a shellacked helmet. A gigantic piece of gold jewelry clung to her right breast. I couldn't understand, however rich you were, why anyone would want a fourteen-karat lizard climbing up her chest.

The afternoon of our interview, the Baroness set herself down behind a big empty desk of shiny wood. "Why do you want to

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work for me?" she asked as though I should have some important answer ready, which you can probably guess I didn't.

I told her about the robbery and she looked a little freaked, especially the part about the guy with the smooshed- up nose beneath the stupid panty hose mask and how bad his hand shook when he pointed the gun in my face.

She let me know right off that she and the Baron lived in a penthouse in the city year round, but this year they'd come to the country for the summer on account of the air and the Baron's health. She made no bones about it; the guy was in what you'd call delicate health, although I never could figure out exactly what his problem was.

I never in a million years thought she'd call me for the job, but she did, the Baron in the background interrupting, "Tell her to come around the gate, tell her to come around the gate," saying it over and over until I thought maybe his problem was he was a little mental or something, before the Baroness must have put her hand over the phone and spoke to him like she meant business. "*Shut* up, will you?" she snapped and he did.

"You'll have a uniform, of course," she told me when I showed up for work the next day. "I'll provide it." The big jeweled ring on her right hand dug into my fingers when we shook hands, but I didn't say a thing. "You'll do the cleaning, preparation of a light lunch, answering the door and the telephone. Some ironing." She looked me up and down. I was wearing my longest skirt, which reached just above my knees. The way she was staring at my sweater you'd think something had made a nest there. "You do know how to iron?"

I nodded that I did.

"Seven dollars an hour."

That was fifty cents more than I'd been earning at the Jiffy Mart, so I said, "Sure."

"'Yes, ma'am,'" she corrected me.

"I'm sorry. Yes, ma'am."

"You may go now, JoLee."

I turned to leave.

"And JoLee?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I may have to call you something else."

She changed the spelling to *Jolie,* which she said was the French way. I didn't get that either, seeing as they weren't French. I never knew what country the Majesties came from exactly. The one time I asked her, the Baroness's face clouded over and she said it was a painful topic, seeing as their native land no longer existed.

They fed me two meals, lunch and dinner, although never the same food as they were eating. After the first couple weeks, they didn't pay me neither, but that was okay. The Baroness talked me into a plan to hold my salary in something she called a crow's account. That way, at the end of summer, I'd come out ahead, she said, what with the two-fifty a week they were paying me, plus interest.

"Interest adds up." The way she lectured me about it kind of gave me a warm glow, like she was taking me under her wing. Flashing a set of numbers on her calculator, she made it seem like you'd have to be a real dope not to agree. "Doesn't that make sense, Jolie, a lump sum payment at the end of summer?"

I didn't know much about money, so I said sure.

I still had a little bit left over from the hundred the owner gave me after the hold-up. I was living at home, no real expenses, and as far as entertainment goes, like I said, here in Fuller City there's not exactly a lot you can do.

I soon figured out that besides the Baron's health, there was another reason the Majesties were summering at the lake, which was to throw a big party they called the Harvest Dance for a Cure, a fundraiser they used to put on for their big shot friends in New York. This year they thought it would be fun for everyone to come out to the country. The Baroness always talked about being in "the country" in this tone of voice that made you picture cows wandering loose across a dirt road.

After the first week, she told me to get the chores out of the way in the morning so we could spend most afternoons driving around the five towns lining up donations and invites for her auction. Riding shotgun beside the Baroness, street directories balanced on my lap, my job was to check off addresses while she cruised up and down the better neighborhoods in her rumbling old Mercedes. The Baroness had a sharp eye for the kind of household that might be a good bet for a party. Two nice cars, landscaped lawn, no plastic toys out front. I wondered what she'd make of my block with kids' bikes left where they dropped and the cars without license plates holding a rusted junk reunion in the yard.

We drove by a lot of businesses, too, making notes on which would be a likely bet to part with a donation. The Baroness drove like a pro with one hand on the wheel, the other clutching a silver cigarette holder, blowing smoke out the open window. I'd never ridden in a Mercedes before, and I guess I was surprised how much a classy car like that sounded as loud as a tractor.

I loved listening to her accent, though. Driving around, I used to wish I was the Baroness' daughter instead of her maid, and I wondered if I did a good job, maybe she would keep me. I'd study her features, comparing them to my own, wondering if anyone seeing us together would think maybe we were related. Her hair was kind of orange, like I said, and mine was plain old brown, straight and short in no particular style, but sometimes we had the same color eyes. Mine were gray mostly, but turned a different shade depending on what I was wearing. The Baroness's eyes were a real bright blue. Later I wondered if maybe she wore contacts or something to give them that color. Maybe her eyes weren't her eyes at all.

The Baron I tried to avoid. He was about seventy, still a handsome man but the kind of guy who always looked at you sideways like he was also checking out something else. Even in summer, he wore a wool suit with the collars of his opened shirts overlapping wide lapels. Once or twice, I swear he even wore a neck scarf or whatever it is those stuck-up British guys on sitcoms wear. He spent a lot of

time by himself out in a shed he called his workshop, where he kept a sleeper sofa that was always pulled out as a bed. Even though it was covered with books and stuff, it still gave me the creeps.

Things did get a little weird one day early on, when he had me bring his afternoon tea out there. I knocked on the door even though it was wide open, and the Baron told me to come on in. I set the tray down beside him and his hand darted out at me real sudden. Before I knew what he was doing, there was the Baron stroking my arm like I was a dog or something. When he spoke my name, it sounded different coming through his accent. He did have a beautiful voice, like some famous European actor.

"Yes sir?" I said.

"You don't have to go, Jolie."

"But the Baroness -"

"She won't know."

"Know what?"

I felt his big hand coming around my butt and I knew then what he was after. I didn't waste any time scooting out of his reach.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said. "I thought you might enjoy that."

"I have to go now," I said, backing out the door.

"Pity you can't stay.” He smiled. “So many interesting things I might show you."

After that, the Baron was somebody I did not want to see. He kept to himself most days, and that was okay by me. For the most part, I tried to stick close to the Baroness.

Just about every afternoon we drove around, visiting shops, asking for donations. I soon figured out the reason she had me come along was so I could act like her assistant. The main thing I did, as far as I could tell, was to lug around her scrapbook and brochures. The first time we did this, she turned to me as we went through the swinging door of a gourmet cheese shop. She laid a hand on her lips, fixing me with a real stern look. "Don't say a word," she said.

The Baroness marched straight up to the guy behind the counter like he had just ruined her state dinner or something, her high heels clicking along the floor like she was going to take his head off before her face broke into this wide brittle smile.

"Permit me to introduce myself," she said, extending a jeweled hand. "Baroness Freida von Lichtenberg, Chairwoman of this fall's Harvest Dance for a Cure. We would so appreciate your tax-deductible gift, helping defray the expenses of this very special charity event."

A brochure slid across the counter and the Baroness cracked open a slim gold case engraved with her initials and some kind of crest I never got close enough to read.

"My card."

Before she was through, the guy had agreed to cough up a few pounds of cheese and whatnot, but the second shop we entered knocked her off her stride. A teenage girl chatted on her cell phone behind the register and she barely glanced up when we came in.

The Baroness lost no time waiting for her to wind up her call. "May I speak to the proprietor of this establishment?" she demanded.

"The who?"

"The *owner*." When she used that tone on me, the Baroness usually rolled her eyes, but I knew she wouldn't do that now.

"Clive Deveau." the girl said. "He ain't here."

"Jolie," her Majesty turned to me. "Make a note."

"On what, your Excellency?"

"Didn't you bring any paper?"

The girl offered a paper napkin but before I could jot down the owner's name, the Baroness was out the door. I didn't know what to do. I smiled back like a dummie. The cashier cracked her gum and laughed as I trailed after the Baroness, already striding down the sidewalk in her black pumps, surveying store windows. She stopped before the jeweler's, a shop run by an old German woman whose

husband had been the watchmaker when I was growing up, but he was long dead.

I wondered what Frau Ditmar would think of the Baroness with the fourteen-karat lizard inching up her chest.

It was summer, but Frau Ditmar wore a long navy blue sweater and a scarf knotted at her throat. "The cure?" she said after the Baroness' had finished her spiel. "What cure?"

The Baroness snapped the brochure from my hand and purred, "Perhaps I might leave you some literature."

The jeweler spread the brochure flat and looked it over. Both sides. In a thick German accent she said, "I haven't heard of this group. Is this a new organization?"

"The Cause for the Cure is a non-profit umbrella group, Frau Ditmar, the nucleus of a world-wide web facilitating cutting edge twenty-first century research in the multi-faceted causes of disease. Human stress," the Baroness said, "for example." She laid a scrapbook of clippings on the counter and began flipping pages. "Last fall's event. At the Ritz Carlton."

Frau Ditmar examined a photo closely, the Baroness sandwiched between two Princes. The jeweler peered above tiny glasses balanced at the end of her nose that made her look like a bird.

The Baroness leaned across the counter, addressing her eye to eye. "May we count you among those making a sizable donation, a lead gift perhaps?"

Frau Ditmar's gaze narrowed and she said nothing for a long moment before she shut the scrapbook firmly, pushing it aside. "I don't think so."

The Baroness blinked a few times like something had stabbed her in the eye. I thought she was going to bounce back with a reply, but then she just flashed her ice smile and gathered the scrapbook to her breast like a wounded child.

Outside she turned to me with a real steamed look as though I'd been the one who turned her down.

"Tell me that is not the only jeweler in this town."

"There's the Music Box, a few blocks down,” I offered. “They've got some jewelry, I think." I was glad for the chance to make the Baroness feel better. I figured maybe that was the first time anyone had ever refused her.

We had better luck at the second shop, although even I could see what with all the gold chains and Disney music boxes for sale, this was an establishment not exactly up to royal standards.

"Will there be an auction catalogue?" the owner asked. I couldn't help but notice he was wearing a gold chain or two himself, settled in a little nest of chest hair.

The Baroness produced one from the Ritz Carlton dance and the jeweler glanced through it quickly.

"I'll take a full page ad, four color."

"Is there a donation you had in mind?" the Baroness asked. "A string of pearls, perhaps?" She leaned over the case, laying a manicured finger on the glass. "These are very nice."

We had worked up quite a thirst by the time we left the Music Box and trooped back to the car. "We need ice water," the Baroness announced and where did she pull in to get it, but the parking lot of the Jiffy Mart? The old Mercedes idled like a dump truck, belching exhaust. She handed me a crumbled dollar bill and I came back with a bottle of Fuller Falls, which is what most people bought when I worked there so I figured it must be good.

The Baroness took one look and said, "Take it back. See if they have any Evian."

"Yes, ma'am."

I exchanged the water and paid the new cashier the extra fifty cents out of my own pocket, knowing already the Baroness probably wouldn't remember to pay me back, not even my crow's account.

In the parking lot, I ran into a couple of landscaping guys I knew from high school. They were bare-chested, T-shirts wrapped around their heads like turbans, leaning against a pick-up truck. I

had to walk right past them to get to the Mercedes. As soon as they spotted me, they fell all over each other laughing and making wolf whistles, curtseying and carrying on.

"Hey, Jo-Lee," the boys jeered. "What's it like being a *lady's maid?"*

It hadn't taken long before everyone in town knew about the Majesties and the Dance for a Cure and all the celebrities that would be coming, including a lot of miscellaneous royalty like that Japanese princess, the one who went to Harvard.

I kept on walking, my head held high. "You guys are just a buncha losers," I called back as I reached the car door.

"Ooooh, ooooh," they hooted. "Whassup your highness?"

I got in the passenger side and the Baroness pressed the power locks with a loud click, shooting an evil glance over her shoulder. "Riff-raff," she hissed and we sped out of there quickly, trailing exhaust.

The next stop was the florist and I knew right away he'd be a pushover for the cure. When the scrapbook came out this time, I noticed a photo I hadn't seen before, the Baroness with her arm around the waist of Princess Diana. A lavish display of blooms towered behind them.

"Did you know her?" the florist asked.

"Only socially," the Baroness said.

"Terrible accident."

The Baroness nodded. "Those beautiful boys."

The florist looked up and said, "Oh yes."

"Sarah the Duchess of York, you know, we're expecting she'll attend."

"The Dance for a Cure?"

"She loves to dance," the Baroness said. "Whatever her troubles, so light on her feet." She motioned me to her side with a flick of her wrist and I stepped forward clutching the leather portfolio. "May I put you down for a table of six?"

The florist produced a ledger size checkbook. "Make it eight."

Back in the Mercedes, I glanced up at the Baroness in awe. "Wow," I said, “He bought a whole table! What's next?”

The Baroness looked at me as though I'd thrown up all over her car. "What do you think is next?” she sighed. “More donations."

We must have driven that stinking, rumbling old Mercedes station wagon up and down Liberty Avenue a hundred times that summer. I got so sick of standing in stores listening to the Baroness yak to managers that I almost could have passed out every time I stood next to her as she lined up someone else in her sights. After the first few times watching her finagle a donation, the whole thing got pretty boring. Some days, I even missed the Jiffy Mart.

One time the Baron came along for the ride. I was glad I always rode up front beside the Baroness. They bickered the whole way down from the lake until I thought she was going to turn around and whack him. That was the last day we went out hunting up names for the invitation list. The following Monday when I came to work, she had me helping at the dining room table, stuffing envelopes.

I told her what I'd heard on Jerry Springer once, about the woman who got roach eggs growing under her tongue from licking envelopes and she looked at me like I had two heads, but then she rose from her chair, real regal like, went into the kitchen and came back with a clean sponge.

That afternoon when we went out to do errands, she double-parked in front of the hotel arcade. Reaching around into the backseat, she handed me an elegant gold shopping bag and a receipt.

"Return this for me, Jolie. Calliope on the Green. It's a dress shop, about halfway down the arcade."

"What if they ask me a reason?" I faltered.

The Baroness sighed. "'Say 'Madam finds it doesn't suit her.' Say anything. Go on now and don't dawdle in there. I'm double parked."

I was a little scared, all right, to march into a store like that, what with the thick beige wall to wall carpeting and the help all dressed to the nines, giving me the once over as soon as I came through the door.

I picked the only guy standing behind a counter, since I thought maybe he wouldn't give me a hard time. When I told him the Baroness's reason for returning the suit, he tweaked his eyebrows at me and practically sneered, "Of course."

When he whisked the item out of the bag, I thought I recognized the blue fuzz of that stuffed animal suit she was wearing the day I first went for my interview.

As soon as we got home after all our errands, the Baroness went to lie down with a cup of tea up in her bedroom, and I gathered the dirty clothes from the hamper. When I came around the corner into the laundry room, I found the Baron bent over something. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what he was doing back there. I knew it wouldn't be the laundry. Startled, he turned around quickly and I saw he had the contents of the Baroness's big leather handbag spread out over the washer top. A flushed look swept his features before he put back his stuck-up face.

"I'd like a Guinness with a plate of cheese and crackers, Miss. In my workshop. Thank you very much."

I brought it out to him, and he motioned me inside the door. When he took the tray from my hands, I thought maybe he was going to put the moves on me again, but he ushered me over to his desk and whispered.

"Has she told you how many acceptances?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't know that."

He flashed me this sly kind of smile, laying on the charm, and I could see how maybe this was the way he operated back in the old country, schmoozing it up with the other royals. "Do me a favor, my dear. See if you can find out."

He shook my hand, which I thought was an odd way of telling me to go, but I was glad to get out of there. When I drew mine away, a twenty-dollar bill was stuck to my palm.

The next morning when Her Majesty and me were out running errands, I thought I'd slip it into the conversation, sort of casual.

"Do you know how many will be coming to your party?"

She smiled and said, "Absolutely hundreds, Jolie. "

The Baron seemed pretty pleased when I told him the news. He gave me another twenty and a pinch on the cheek as I went out the door. "Auf wiedersehen, fraulein Jolie," he called. I knew he was talking German, but I'm not quite sure why he was speaking it, since as far as I knew, the two of them weren't from there either.

Well, I guess you've probably guessed how it all ends up. I hadn't seen that much excitement in Fuller City since the chief of police ran off with the day care lady. The afternoon before the dance you couldn't get a hair appointment anywhere in the five towns and all the white stretch limos were rented just like it was the prom, though not the old clunky black ones. With all the excitement leading up to the big event, I wondered whether I'd be allowed to go or not, but at the last minute the Baroness gave me one of her old ball gowns.

"You do have shoes?" she asked as I was leaving and for just a quick second I thought what do I look like, Cinderella?

"Oh yes ma'am, I do. Thank you."

She'd given me a final list of errands to complete the next morning and money for a cab. The Baroness would spend the day having a facial at the spa, followed by her hair appointment.

I was kind of ready for it all to be over, to tell you the truth. Those last couple weeks she'd been running me like a dog, rounding up the plates, the flowers, picking up donations, you name it. Back at the house that last morning, I staggered out of the taxi with an armful of tablecloths. The Baroness had talked the hotel delivery guy into loaning her twelve dozen white sheets, not linen exactly but a respectable fabric, she said, when you figure there'd be flowers and dishes and candlelight, the old ballroom of the Cobb

place decked out for a party like it hadn't seen since the fifties or maybe even before.

My arms were already aching when I tried the kitchen door. For once, I was relieved to find it unlocked. The Majesties never left anything unlocked. Even postage stamps they kept under lock. I pushed open the door to find the kitchen furniture gone. My first thought was oh no, jeez, they've been robbed and I wondered if she'd find a way to blame me. I was always telling her nobody out here ever locked their doors.

I put down the load of tablecloths and went on to the next room to discover the same thing. Even the shades were gone. The only thing left was a calendar on the wall. The entire place cleaned out. I said to myself, hold on, what kind of thief steals window shades?

That's right, you got it, they stole all the stuff for the auction. Even the rented dinnerware and they took my money, too. They never paid me the whole summer, the crooks. The Baroness and her big interest plan.

My ma says serves me right, thinking I was so special just to be working for people like that. Some folks got to learn things the hard way, she says, and if any good might come of it, maybe I learned a lesson, but I don't see it that way myself.

People around here still talk about the Baron and Baroness as *The Majesties* and I figure they will for a long time, even though I don't think anyone really believes they were all that royal. I figure it's hard to break old habits.

I was on the news when it happened and boring old Fuller City was a big deal again for a day. When I got interviewed on TV, the reporter showed me the real photo of the two Princes with the Queen of Belgium, not the Baroness, between them. I went down to Colonial Drugstore to watch myself on TV and everyone cheered when I came on.

"So JoLee, how does that make you feel?" the reporter asked, shoving a big Eyewitness News microphone in my face and I said, "Kind of crummy, I guess," but now that it's all over, I don't know if that's really true. Aside from the money they still owe me, I

mean. Anyhow, now I've got that nice ball gown. That must be worth something, if I wanted to sell it on eBay, which I don't know that I do.

Now that the fun's ended and it's back to your regularly scheduled programming, I need to find myself another job, but I tell you this much, it won't be at the Jiffy Mart. If I never see another hopped-up guy with his face all squished beneath a panty hose mask, that'd be fine with me.

People around town know me after that TV interview, so I'm thinking maybe someone might hire me kind of like a celebrity.

I know what you're thinking. Some people never learn, right? Sure, I know there were a couple of phonies, but you got to admire them in a way, too, that's the way I feel. Not every person you meet has that kind of nerve, and who knows? Maybe a little rubbed off on me. I got to say, for all her faults, the Baroness taught me a thing or two. Like all those donors who coughed up a fourteen-karat doodad, all those five-towners forking over fifty bucks for an auction ticket, how did she swing that? I'll tell you how, because I think I figured it out. People want to believe, you know? Everybody wants to be royal for a day.