

## **Flannelette Sheets and Blinkster – by Kim Clark**

Blinkster's eyes wander over the voluptuously expansive woman next to him. He can't get enough of her and there's so incredibly much of her to get – a mountain of femaleness in the specially constructed bed. Blinkster loves every inch of her, every one of her 658 pounds. He snuggles closer. He feels like a small but necessary stamp on an archaic envelope and likes that idea, wishing they could just mail themselves away to somewhere safer and saner than 2045.

"Flannelette," he whispers, stroking her dimpled shoulder, the gargantuan folds of yeasty flesh beneath the sheet. "Flan".

She remains inert but for the rise and fall of her chest. Blinkster looks past her, toward the clear glass wall – only a couple of watchers at the railing.

Blinkster's voice takes on a little sing-songy lilt. "Fla-an, it's time for in-take."

"Blink?" the woman mumbles sleepily.

"It's me, honey. It's me alright." He rubs his face against her.

Flannelette opens her puffy blue eyes. "Honey?"

"Sorry, Flan. Just a slip of the tongue."

Blinkster shifts uneasily to sit on the edge of the bed, reminds himself to avoid words like honey and flan. Memory-triggers are dangerous, even today, especially ones related to food no longer in existence.

He needs to be especially gentle with her this morning. It's a big day for Flannelette Sheets. The biggest day of her life, in fact. And Blinkster is honoured to have been a part of that precious life. It's not only that Flannelette is the last Natural alive in here, or that her care is his sacred duty or that her need of him keeps Blinkster alive. It's much more.

She had just been a scared kid when Blink found her – on the run from Queen Smiley's posse – when capture became more inevitable than survival out there. Fifteen years, twenty-four-seven, is long enough to forget a lot of things and replace them with others, including love, for example, between a gargantuan woman and a dimple of a man.

More watchers arrive along the strollway – a small intent crowd, thin as rails, gilded and more heavily glitzed than usual – all the same enhanced height, the same induced mocha tint, the same youthfully skewed appearance demanded by Holywould's church, state and permanently-walled country. He spotted a couple of guides in standard issue uniform – their voices amplified – eagerly gesturing toward Flan's observation wall, no doubt embellishing her short history, the Forfeiture ceremony, and soon her final ethereal perpetuity.

He raises the bed to a sitting position. Flan's full-moon face rises to Blinkster's eye-level. The folds of her body and her lungs adjust to the relentless demands of gravity. "Comin' down the pipe," says Blinkster, scooping small boxes from the rectangular opening in the wall opposite the watchers. He opens them by number, pauses. "Wanna shake things up today, Flannelette? We got the mother lode this morning! All your favourites.

"I'm so excited, I don't know if I can eat a thing."

"Now look here, you even get texture today – some crisp and some chunky. Molecular order, be damned. You do as you like."

Flannelette peers into the various boxes as Blinkster arranges them along the bedside table. She smiles and sniffs, and nods at each one, touching the textured food blocks with her finger tip – always the lady – but manages a taste with a dainty finger lick.

"You pick, Blink."

"Alrighty then. Let's go nuts!"

Flannelette admonishes him a wide-eyed gasp.

“Sorry. Sorry, Flan. Uh, let’s get a little wild. How about a bite of each? Then we’ll mix up the order, but good.”

There’s a quake of laughter from under the sheets. Flannelette finally nods. Blinkster breaks up the blocks and spoons bits into Flannelette’s open mouth ever so slowly, letting her savour each one. She grows hesitant after an hour but Blinkster’s no slouch. He urges her on.

“Half an hour now, Flan, and then it’s off to the cleanse room.”

Flannelette yawns, glances finally at the glass wall as though the watchers outside had just made a surprise appearance.

“Lot o’ eyes ‘n glitter out there morning, Blink.”

“Indeed, indeed. I’ll brush out that pretty hair of your now. You need anything before we transfer you?”

“Just the brush.”

Blinkster raises his eyebrow. “You want to do it yourself?”

“You said ‘let’s get wild.’”

He passes her the brush, watches her struggle with the task, jumps in quickly to take over when her breathing quickens.

“You just relax now,” he says. “Save your strength for the shower.”

Blinkster finishes up the short wavy hair with a flourish and begins adjusting the belts, straps, and pulleys he’ll use to move her great suspended bulk along the metal beam.

They are both breathing heavily by the time they enter the shower room –tiled, all but the glass wall. Watchers have repositioned themselves nearby. And, seemingly, multiplied. Maybe fifty.

The two don goggles and Blinkster attaches the various hoses and tubes to the measurement instruments, and notes the number on the digital scale attached to Flan’s suspended pulley system – 661 – up three pounds from yesterday. Good. He adjust the nozzles, swinging her around to the left or right, forward or back to get the water and cleanser to every last inch of her. It’s a marathon, but neither wants it to be over. He finally shuts down the water and dries her with the air-steam vents, maneuvers her back into the bed. The watchers shift position too, pushing

forward for a better view. Their intrusive eyes follow Flan’s naked body. First a massage, Blinkster decides. He notches up the unit-heat.

Flannelette sighs through Blinkster’s first ministrations as his soft sin-song voice and practiced fingers lull her. He rolls her a s best he can, presses and pummels what muscle this is, from her temples to her toes, leaving her skin supple and rosy.

Today is all about you, Flannelette Sheets ... all about you.”

“Me and Queen Smiley.”

Flan turns her head to the glass wall, the urgent dazzling crowd outside – a hundred faces, expectant hard-eyed. She finally speaks, her voice sweet and silken as always. “Did you ever see her, Blink?”

“Nope, not me, but my mother was an idolizer even then she did see her once. Can’t remember where.”

They both imagine. Different things. A moment. A word. A heartbeat.

“How will it be, Blink?”

“Well, Cupcake, I don’t rightly know but I have an idea. You’ll be a queen in your own right.” He smiles just a little. Flannelette doesn’t bother to scold him.

“And you’re my prince?”

“No, Sweetie, not even close.”

"But you'll be there?" She turns to Blinkster.

"For the ceremony? I'll be there."

"For everything."

"I believe so, yes."

"Will I feel it?"

"Well now, let's not worry about that. Just think about ... "

"They'll whittle me away to nothing."

"Toasting you the whole night."

That's a bad joke, Blink."

Blinkster cringes. "With spirits, I mean." There is no right thing to say, but he continues, with his arm raised, "Here's to Flannelette Sheets! A real star! Forever!"

"And then I'll be dead."

"But first, you'll be thin."

"When?"

"About an hour 'til they take you up." He lets it sink in. "Anything you'd like, Sweetie? Anything at all?"

"Would you tell me a story Blink?"

"I'd love to Sugar."

Blinkster pulls a stool up to the bed. He looks out at the watchers. There must be a hundred, a hundred and fifty. To hell with them. Let them feast their eyes on her – his queen for a day. He nudges the stool away and nuggles in next to Flannelette. Blinkster strokes her hair and begins, "Once upon a time ..."

"Before I was born ..." she prompts.

Blinkster wraps his arm around as much of Flan as he can, pulling himself to her.

"Before you were born, Flan, things were mighty different. Oh yes. People were really spread out, around the whole globe, pretty much. And there were a lot more of them. –billions, and they looked different. Different colours and sizes, and there were even some really old-looking ones, some hairless and wrinkled and all very very wise. And all different ages lived together, like a family, in cozy little houses all separate from each other, or, I think, sometimes in complexes."

"Like units?"

"Something like that, only better 'cuz they had each other."

"Like it or not." Blinkster smiles. "But mostly like. Because this is a happy story."

"Tell me about the food, Blink. Happy food. Let's break some more rules."

"Well now, happy food – there was a lot of it, all around Holywould when it was part of a bigger country. Food grew right here – apples and oranges and peanuts and potatoes. And people used to make a hundred different meals out of one or the other or maybe a combination for special occasions."

"Every day wasn't a special occasion?"

"Oh, no, Flan. Occasions only happened once in a long while. So it was a treat and if it was your occasion, well, it would be a long time of excitement and preparation and saving-up beforehand and then the occasion and then a long time of paying off and recuperating until the next occasion."

"Just the food, please."

"The people had coffee for breakfast ..."

"Every day?"

"While it lasted. And bananas ..."

"Did you ever taste one, Blink?"

"Indeed, I did, but that's another story, though I will say, it was almost as sweet as you."

Flannelette smiles a tiny smile. Blinkster is peripherally aware of movement outside, jostling near the glass, growing numbers, but refuses to raise his sights.

"And they ate juicy beefsteak and honey from the bees, thick and golden. And berries, red and blue and purple sweet and tart like you dainty lips."

As Blinkster carries on, Flannelette grows so quiet he thinks she's dozed off. He glances at the time. Ten minutes.

Flannelette stirs, whispers his name, "Blink."

"Yes, Flan."

"Tell me."

"That's exactly what I'm doing, Sweetcakes."

"I mean about the ceremony, the ... feast."

Blinkster hesitates, suddenly wishing time would accelerate rather than slow. He could lie.

"Blink, tell me. Please. I'm ready. I've been ready most of my life."

"I guess you have."

"Because I'm special."

"Indeed you are. And chosen by Queen herself."

Flannelette frowns ever so slightly. "I was just a kid, Blink."

"Right, Flan, right. A plentiful, pudgy, dimpled, bee-autiful kiddle. The cream o' the crop." Blinkster gave a little laugh. "You sure could pack it away ... a-a-and it turned out you were the best ... and the last ... Natural. Now that's something!"

"For sacrifice."

"For fame."

"Forfeiture," they both say, finding neutrality. Agreement. Holding it.

"About tonight ..." says Flan, breaking the silence.

"Well." He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, meets her gaze. "I don't know much but what I do know, I'll tell you."

Blinkster takes her pudgy hand. "Queen Smiley's crew will carry you through the streets to the Big Hall that'll be all decorated for royal Quarter-life Birthday and folks will adore you every bit of the way."

She smiles. "And?"

"You'll share the million tasty morsels that are you with Smiley and her Specials."

"Will I feel it? The slicers?"

"Not a twinge," he lies. "And Flannelette Sheets will be a Holywould household word. And they'll name that star after you." Blinkster knows what she wants to hear. "And you'll weigh next to nothing when they're done."

"Imagine. Thin."

Blinkster squeezes her hands, looks outside to the mob of watchers, tightly packed and swelling – pushing closer, reaching with those slender golden arms, their breath now against the glass – frantic for spectacle. The minutes are running out.

“Folks are willing to give up a lot, Flan, for a little what they want.”

“Give ‘n get.”

“You’ll be famous, Flannelette Sheets. Famous.”

“Beautiful?”

“You’ve never been anything but.”