

Title: Cleaning Assumptions

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Congeaed blood on a silk carpet is what I live for.

Waiting outside the mock Tudor mansion in Sunningdale, I could already imagine the furnishings inside. Bound to be several white sofas, always a challenge, and scattered rugs, clearly new money with very little taste by the look of the faux beams outside, painted white and black in a pathetic nod to the great houses of another era. I mused about the inhabitants. He was probably something in the city and she was a trophy wife, had to be blonde, high maintenance and demanding. The pale blue Mercedes convertible parked outside was sitting prettily beside his black Porche Cayenne. A perfect match of poseurs. Clearly, they had enjoyed presenting their perfect life to the outside world. You must understand I wasn't judging or jealous. Money and status don't mean anything when you are dead. Bartender or banker, we all carry the same blood, bone, and tissue.

The waiting was getting tedious so I sat down on a low garden wall and carried on watching the busy scene in front of me. Several cars were parked at odd angles across the wide drive and numerous ghost-like figures were moving slowly but purposefully carrying clear plastic bags between the house and various vehicles. A uniformed police officer, standing at the doorway, clipboard in hand, was looking a little green. I smiled, this was going to be a good job, I could feel it in my bones.

My team arrived with Annie, as usual, driving the van. Tough, tenacious, and yet tender when required, Annie was born and raised in Essex, wore her hair in a tight ponytail known as an Essex facelift, and sported trademark tattooed eyebrows and carefully manicured nails. She had designed and patented rubber gloves with protective nail inserts. Nobody would ever guess what she did for a living. Climbing out of the passenger seat was Stella, stubborn, strong and with a steel emotional core that belied her sheltered Catholic upbringing. She could make grown men gag simply by describing her day., Stella was unfazed by any scenario and could scrub a stain into submission.

'Hello Boss. What have we got this time?' Stella was already unscrewing the lid of her coffee thermos and I didn't have to taste it to know there would be a shot of two of whiskey in there.

Annie jumped in, surveying the scene, and shaking her head in disbelief. 'This is going to take hours. They are nowhere near ready for us. We might as well find the nearest pub and wait.'

Stella perked up at this suggestion but looking at my face realised that was off the agenda. We were totally professional and experience told me that this was not a one-day job, we needed to pace ourselves. The sun was shining and clouds were being chased away by a gentle breeze. All in all, a lovely day for murder.

A man looking young enough to be my son dressed for Halloween in head to toe white, including shoe covers, walked towards me.

'Excuse me, are you the cleaners? Are you here just to tidy up the scene?'

I stood up and stretched my five feet two inches of solid no nonsense body, giving him a look that deepened his red cheeks, which still failed to hide recent signs of teenage acne.

'Listen, son. Some muppet called us in way too early. Your SOCO's are still all over the house and I bet my pension you aren't the Senior Investigating Officer as you are barely out of nappies. Am I right?'

The young officer was struggling to hold his nerve and his iPad and clearly hadn't read Crime Scene for Dummies. It was probably his first week on the job. Regretting my tone, I suddenly felt sorry for him and decided not to carry on dressing him down as Stella or Annie would have done. I had time. I could be kind.

'Let me fill you in. We are not the detectives who swoop in and prance around solving the case and trying not to disturb anything or be sick; we are not the scenes of crime officers who note, bag and double check everything; we are not the forensic scientists who piece together the clues for the coroner; we are not the undertakers who pick the bodies or body parts up and bag them ready to be cut up and reassembled by the forensic pathologists. What we do lad, is clean up everybody else's mess: the congealing blood once the bodies have been removed; the dirt and destruction left by the assailants; and often vomit from the coppers if it's a particularly brutal scene. With those we just hope they've made it outside before everyone can see what they had for dinner last night. Yes, you're right, we tidy everything up. Our objective is to make it look like nothing happened here today.' I took a breath.

'Try to imagine for a moment if a family member walked in on whatever happened inside. They could never walk in to that house again without seeing that. We remove that picture before it becomes embedded in their memory. They will be told people they loved have died but details will be withheld at this stage. They haven't actually seen the congealed blood on the floor, the blood spatter on the walls or brain matter, grey and runny, lying on the kitchen counter. Otherwise, they would never be able to make another panini in that kitchen.'

Stella snorted and I was pulled back into the here and now. The kid in front of me in his white, unblemished protective suit hadn't lived long enough to understand. But I had. It may

have been thirty years ago but walking into my parent's house to see their bodies after the break in, after their murders, was as fresh today as back then. I can never erase those images that occupy rent free space as a revolving loop my head. I can never unsee their contorted bloodstained bodies and the horrific nature of their deaths and my childhood home had become a nightmare, a gift that kept on giving.

After the undertakers had carted off the bodies in zip up bags, when I had made statements repeatedly; when the sympathetically smiling police finally departed, leaving a business card 'in case you think of anything else 'and when the gawping neighbours outside had dispersed, I was alone in my horror. I can remember listlessly pushing a wet mop in a futile attempt to clean the blood from the black and white tiled kitchen floor that had been my mother's pride and joy. She had always been so houseproud looking after her family with love. She would have hated the red stains that now coloured the grouting between the tiles, she would have hated that it was her blood that wrecked them. I poured bleach over the floors until my eyes stung and I couldn't tell if I was crying for me or them. I screamed into the silence at the unfairness of it all. I howled and threw sheets, cushions, paper, anything to cover stains but it just made everything look more like a crime scene. I felt helpless in the face of the mess.

At the time it was impossible to find a company willing to help me forensically clean the place. I couldn't live there anymore and estate agents shrank away muttering about 'kerb appeal' but it needed to be sold. So, I bought steam cleaning equipment, I researched chemical and organic cleaning solutions and did my best. Blood splatter across white walls were wiped but tiny particles could be missed so I put up wallpaper. I ripped up carpets and replaced. My simple comfortable childhood home, laced with thousands of happy memories was cleaned, tidied, and transformed into an unrecognisable and unremarkable house. And whilst it never erased the reality of finding my parents, the practicalities helped me move on. I formed a specialist cleaning company. We went into those jobs' others didn't want to touch. I wanted to make a difference and erase those memories. The more blood, guts, and horror I witnessed, the less room my personal memories had to replay.

'What's your name?' I asked the young officer whose face now matched his white protective overall.

'Thomas, Tom' he muttered.

'Tom you are doing a tough job and you will, I hope, continue to learn as you climb the greasy pole that is modern day policing. But if I can just ask one thing of you. Please remember that we are all in the business of dealing with humanity. People, Tom, people. There are things you can't learn on a course at the College of Policing; or Google, or, heaven forbid, read in an actual book. Everybody is different and so making assumptions will put you on a negative trajectory right away. So, we are not just cleaners and we don't just tidy up a few blood splatters. We are part of a huge team whose job today is defined by what went on in that house and to make it better for those who are left behind. Now who's your SIO?'

'That would be me' said DCI Jones appearing like a Wesh wizard near my right elbow.

'Hello Taff. Lovely to see you again. I was just educating young Tom here. Let me guess, you know I like to solve your cases for you, even before we go in. Up to you to find the evidence to support my assumptions. Wealthy couple – he found out she was cheating, big row ensued and defending herself, she killed him with a kitchen knife before turning the knife on herself. Loads of pooled blood limited to the kitchen and maybe the hall where one of them managed to crawl before succumbing to injuries, but not before spreading the blood to the expensive rugs?'

Stella let out a low whistle. 'No assumptions there, boss!'

Taff Jones shook his head 'Well, we can't prove cheating was the cause of the row at this stage but you are spot on with the knives. It's a bloody mess in there, literally. Kitchen and hallway look like a Pollock original. You are correct in that there was no third-party involvement as far as we can see. I'm not convinced he attacked her first and we might never know. It's very sad, as these things always are, especially for the families. Next of Kin are being notified now.'

'One saving grace.' I offered. 'No kids involved. I hate jobs involving kids.'

'They had a baby, asleep upstairs. Totally unaware of everything, a tragedy to lose both parents but the poor little mite will have absolutely no memories of the events of today.'

'Just a tidy up then Taff.' I smiled at young Thomas. Whatever the baby's future, at least its memories will always be clean. Lucky baby.