

The Beneficiary

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It was very late in the evening, or very early in the morning.

He couldn't tell the difference.

It was way past his bedtime and no proper time at all to be contemplating ghosts.

All his life he had been tormented by ghosts; ghosts of a mother and father he never knew and the ghosts of relatives who pretended to care.

He might otherwise have appreciated the irony. Wrapped as he was in the safety of his large, valuable house, whatever was happening outside in the city could not touch him. His problems had always been, and still were, inside the four walls.

The dark city streets, still gleaming with the overnight rain, conspired with the assorted flotsam and jetsam of Edinburgh who preferred to sneak through the shadows. Petty thieves with bulging pockets. Shagged out lovers smirking over their guilty secrets. Ordinary people who hadn't the sense to be home at a decent time. A milkman, still making old style deliveries to front steps, whistled through his upside-down day, waking some residents with the deathly rattle of his milk crates.

Martin smiled to himself. He might even have licked his lips, and not just to scrape up the whisky which was drying strong upon his lips. He wasn't a prolific drinker, but the whisky had helped to rinse away the sour taste of funereal piety. The Irish knew how to send people off. Not his family. Joyless, silent, wordy, solemn, po-faced. So much faff and hypocrisy just to lay one old woman to rest. How could he be sad when his aunt's death had opened a whole new vista of opportunity while he was young enough to appreciate it?

Jessie, *poor* Jessie. Not so much of the 'dear' and more of the 'departed' with a touch of 'good riddance' sprinkled on for good measure, like Parmesan on his favourite pasta. Martin was buzzing. Finally, he had been able to put the old witch into the ground. He had waited long enough for the opportunity and his legacy.

His final goodbye was also directed at her scrounging friends who had gorged on the free food and booze. They wouldn't be invited back. He drew the heavy curtains closed and settled into the old armchair, its purple velvet covering faded by many years in the sun. It was just one of many relics of a bygone era which filled the old house. Raising his heavy crystal tumbler to heaven, he toasted himself as he drained the glass.

Here's to you, lucky bastard.

The whisky had made him quite drunk, but he was completely pissed on the heady brew of freedom and independent wealth. He intended to get completely out of his tree when the full extent of the Jessie's bounty was revealed to him.

Sole beneficiary. It had such a nice ring to it.

Jessie hadn't kept a dog and hated cats almost as much as she hated Liberal Democrats, Monty Python and hawkers at the front door. He was confident that she wouldn't have made a spiteful donation to a stray animal shelter or a lame duck political party. Put like that, they sounded the same. He chuckled to himself. A little bit of good cheer to help himself through the night. He poured himself another whisky and chuckled at a remark made by one of the mourners over the buffet.

"Funny how she went so quick in the end."

Not funny at all. Just life in all its bounty. Some people might look at the bequest when it was published in The Scotsman and cry 'foul'. Jealousy was such a bummer. Behind closed doors, over a pot of weak Earl Grey tea and an Abernethy biscuit, they would gossip, to no avail. His three nearest relatives seen off in less than a decade. One he had 'managed'; the other two, including Jessie, had been pure luck.

He could have done it. There was no-one better qualified.

He had the will. *(They had the wills, he giggled.)*

He had all his bad memories for motivation.

He had the expertise but had studiously avoided being involved in any of their treatments over the years. Occasionally the nurses who home-visited remarked how lucky the old lovelies were to have a doctor in the family. True. He was a *good* doctor.

Ask any of his patients with a verucca or ear wax. Ask any of the teenage mums with baby-puke dribbling down his freshly ironed shirt. Ask any of the incontinent old bastards pissing on his shoes when the cold stethoscope touched a withered, wrinkly nipple. Ask any of the head-cases who came to the surgery seeking drugs when the street denied them. His Gladstone bag was worth a small fortune to a junkie.

A little risk? It had been worth his big gain.

He pushed himself up from Jessie's armchair and tottered on stiff knees to the writing desk. The house was eerily still now, the party over. It had always been a house full of strange noises which had un-nerved the young Martin. Trees in the garden, blown by strong winds, knocked against the upstairs window casements. A basement he had been in only twice. Both times he had fled on hearing the scrambling claws of furry things scurrying between the piles of old newspapers and un-opened toys. For the first time, he was truly alone in the old house, and it settled heavily on him. He hadn't expected that.

Nor did he expect that somewhere in the house a toilet would flush.

Impossible.

Martin stopped in his tracks, listening.

Silence.

Imagination playing tricks he decided. His foot caught in an object on the floor. It was his black jacket discarded earlier. He lashed out with his foot and propelled the object across the room where it settled over the desk and Jessie's favourite photo; the one in which a much younger woman was standing next to the Queen and Edward Heath. He couldn't remember the occasion. The incongruity of the moment tickled him, and he laughed out loud, a hollow, echoing

laugh which to his own ears sounded quite lonely and forlorn. The antique carriage clock on the mantelpiece chimed six times.

Friday already and almost breakfast time. Twenty hours since the coffin had come to rest at the bottom of the deep, pre-prepared hole in the ground.

Yep. People might be suspicious. But they would never guess what had been done, or why. *Money wasn't everything...*

Martin pulled back his shoulders to ease the ache in his muscles. He must have imagined the toilet flush.

He was tired, in need of sleep. Martin switched off the standard lamp, plunging the room into darkness but for the streetlamp shining weakly through the thick curtains. He shuffled forward towards the dark, hardwood door, presently sitting ajar.

A door slammed.

Fuck. **No!!!**

He stopped just inside the door, using the heavy barrier for protection. He waited and listened.

Nothing. Silence.

To be sure, he waited a bit longer.

Still nothing. Not even outside. In the quiet, leafy street just off the main Murrayfield Road there was next to no passing traffic. Martin felt his right hand begin to tremble. The way it used to do when he lay in his bed listening as he waited for his uncle to visit him, *to tuck him in*. It was a sure sign he was spooked.

Martin stepped out into the dark hallway and looked upstairs into the darkness. He could walk around the house in darkness and never bump into furniture. In thirty odd years none of it had moved position once. Some was too heavy to move.

Upstairs was not a place he wished to be, but his room and its ghosts lay there.

The ghost of an uncle who like to snuggle through the night.

The ghost of an auntie who beat him with a cane for not clearing his plate of food.

The ghosts of a mother and father who left him there to rot. Jessie maintained he had been orphaned at six weeks old. He was sure she really meant 'abandoned.' The child had been gathered up in a smothering embrace by an auntie fuelled by a family guilt she never explained. Fed and clothed but starved of affection. He had hoped that with Jessie finally laid to rest those ghosts would disappear but as he stared up into the darkness, he knew they were there still. Waiting.

It should have been 'goodnight and goodbye'.

It felt more like *auf wiedersehen*.

Martin climbed slowly on the balls of his stockinged feet, listening the whole way. At the top of the stairs, he could turn left to his own room or turn right to the collection of rooms which had been occupied by his uncle and aunts. On the top step he waited and was rewarded by the faintest of sounds from the direction of Jessie's room.

Fuck no.

There had to be someone there. The house was full of small and valuable objects worth stealing. He intended to sell them all, but in the meantime perhaps someone had managed to sneak in. Martin crept along the landing and peeked round the edge of Jessie's door. He wasn't at all prepared for what he saw. He stared for a few moments, unsure of what to say. Then,

"Would you like a dressing gown? It must be cold like that, down there."

'*Like that*' meant '*completely naked*'. '*Down there*' meant her naked backside was sticking up in the air and the rest of her was burrowing underneath the bed. He might have been half-blind with whisky, but he could tell the difference between a naked woman and bedroom furniture. Her constant movement to and fro and up and down was making him cross-eyed.

She crawled backwards, put her hands on the bed and stood, placing her fists on her hips. He didn't offer to help in her search. He didn't appreciate strangers (even naked ones) wandering around his house as if they belonged. He especially didn't appreciate that the stranger was trespassing in Jessie's room.

As Jessie's room possessed an en-suite, Martin assumed he was looking at the mystery toilet flusher. He was conflicted, intrigued and angry. One thing was for certain. Shame and embarrassment were two words that were missing from her vocabulary. Since he couldn't recall a naked guest wandering around amongst the post-funeral hors oeuvres, he assumed that she must have left her clothes somewhere. Martin tried to look away, several times, but his eyes kept bouncing back to this Gibson girl, and why not? Even Scottish funerals didn't normally end in a naked floor show. To find that kind of thing in Edinburgh a premium price was charged. Not that he visited such places. Not unless he had Sam for company. Sam would try anything. Martin filed the thought away to bring up with his friend later.

Finally, she turned round to face him, acknowledging his presence. Auburn haired, but a natural blonde from other angles, she pushed long slender fingers tipped by scarlet nails that could have sliced through sheet aluminium through her unruly hair. If she was surprised by his sudden arrival, or upset by his ogling presence, it didn't show.

" Martin? God, I could do with a coffee."

"Nice of you to remember." Martin was not a sarcastic man by nature. Jessie had managed to beat that out of him at an early age, but now he resented her nonchalant dismissal of him. "Who the hell are you?"

She crossed her arms over the crucifix which nestled between her bare breasts, the index finger of her hand poised lightly under her graceful chin. She birlled on the spot, like a skater cutting a perfect circle on ice. Suddenly it was as if a light went 'ping' in her head and she made a

beeline for the wardrobe. Opening the right-hand door, she ducked into the darkness and emerged with a handful of black clothes.

"Here we are. I remember now. Before I fall asleep, I always put my clothes away. Usually, it's my wardrobe of course. I'm not family, if that's what you are asking. Not in the strict sense of the word, though my mother often says that she and your aunt were as close as sisters for many years."

Christ almighty, not even family? He looked at the bed. Discounting Goldilocks, it had been slept in by someone and given the circumstances, not by Jessie.

Jessie's bed? On the day of the funeral?

The bedrooms had been closed to the guests but not locked. Martin had expected them to respect his privacy and grief. And if she *had* used it, had she been alone? The anger within was barely contained. He stepped further into the room, taking the risk that she might feel a wee bit intimidated.

"Did you sleep in here? And what do you mean, not strictly family? Who are you, and what have you done in here?"

"There they are!" she announced triumphantly, stepping past him as she retrieved a pair of black lacy knickers from behind the bedroom door. He tried to avert his gaze when she bent forward again but he wasn't quick enough. The lacy item dangling from her left hand swung back and forward gently, hypnotising the man. She stared right back into his eyes, not afraid to return his attentions. He didn't flinch but felt a small muscle twitch in his cheek.

"I am Jennifer Harding's cousin. Her mother is Eloise Harding, Jessie's friend. I stayed in the background during the funeral and after. Not being family."

Jessie's friend? True to a point. He remembered shaking hands with Jennifer and Eloise at the graveside but hadn't registered the cousin.

"My name is Luella," she explained, popping a long leg through the right-hand pantie leg. "I think I had a little too much sherry. Or it may have been that very good wine the fat bloke was passing round. It may even have been the Scotch. Hard to tell. Luella and her mum left quite early and I said I would take a taxi home. I was chatting to a nice bloke, tall with red hair."

"Gregor. We did our medical degrees together. He's single."

"I know. He said he was on early at A and E and left before nine thirty. One drink led to another and as I couldn't drive home, I found a bed to flop in. I would have asked you first, but it just sort of happened. You understand."

"I understand that this is Jessie's bed and you've been sleeping in it. The bloody woman isn't cold in her grave for Christ's sake."

"Oh!" She glanced around. "Oops. Sorry. No disrespect meant, honest. Her name wasn't on the door."

"And how many adults do you know have their names on their bedroom doors?"

"I do," she replied, unfazed. "The bed looked looked comfy and I thought, why not. Sorry sorry sorry."

Luella slipped her other leg through the panties and drew them smoothly over slim legs and narrow hips in one fluid, silky movement. Martin registered every detail, every movement. The silkies were a perfect fit even if they barely covered her modesty. Continuing as if Martin weren't there, she dressed in the remainder of her clothes. Black to the last stitch, and to a traditionalist like Martin, as sexy as hell.

"Give me a few minutes to finish dressing and I'll be on my way."

Martin smiled and shook his head ruefully, the last dregs of energy flooding from him. It had been a tiring and emotional few days preparing for the funeral and co-ordinating the event. If only Sam had been around it wouldn't have been half as bad, but his friend had disappeared to

Corfu of all places. Martin really was too tired to be properly angry and pursue it further with this cuckoo.

"Look, I forget my manners." Jessie and Eloise had been friends after all. "There's no rush. Have a shower if you want. You'll find coffee on the go in the kitchen downstairs. Help yourself. I haven't slept. I'm off to bed. See yourself out, will you? You can put the snib down and pull the door closed. "

"Oh, okay, thanks."

Martin left her to finish dressing while his thoughts, and his trousers, reacted to her semi-nakedness far quicker than they had done to the woman in a full state of undress. Back in his own room he stripped quickly, throwing his clothes carelessly into a heap in a far corner. His shorts went onto the bedroom chair and he almost dived beneath the duvet. As he closed his eyes, he heard her go downstairs.

He was asleep before Luella reached the kitchen.

* * * *

He slept soundly for a short time.

He awoke at the tail end of breakfast as sun was pouring in through the open drapes. The light was sliced and diced through the prism which hung in the bay window. Slatted bands of colour overlay the dark blue carpet like a geometric oil slick upon the ocean. He stretched one arm to the ceiling, feeling a good deal fresher than he had before falling into bed. As a young GP his biorhythms had adjusted to regular irregularity. He could survive on a meagre ration of sleep provided he was in his own bed. Martin rubbed his fingers up and down his face. Rough. Scrapy.

In need of a shave. He stretched his arms out to the side. His left forearm made contact with bare skin.

Someone else's bare skin.

"Hello again," a voice said, bright as a button.

Focusing wasn't necessary. He recognised the voice. He pushed up onto his elbows and turned his head to his left, squinting at his visitor.

"Luella? I thought you were having coffee and leaving?"

He had trouble keeping his eyes off her left breast, a perky little thing that was directly in his line of sight, if he deliberately stared down at a certain angle. She wasn't in the least bit embarrassed.

"I had coffee, but I thought I would hang on a little longer. Do you know how long it takes for alcohol to clear from your system?" she asked.

He might have said, *yes, I do know, I am a doctor*. He could deliver a lecture on milligrams alcohol per millilitre of blood and the determination of the Edinburgh police to harass motorists but that would have been smart-arsed and gratuitous.

"Ages," Luella said, supplying her own answer. "That's bad news in this city. I thought an hour or two asleep would clear my bloodstream. Don't want the police stopping me, do I? Imagine having to call Eloise or Jennifer out to spring me from jail."

"So, you climbed into my bed," he groaned, excited by her presence in one obvious way, but at the same time irritated.

"I couldn't very well go back to Jessie's bed, could I, not after what you said. Besides, your bed is very warm. A proper radiator, that's what you are. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't know that." He had never encountered a woman with, so few inhibitions and he had no strategy to deal with her. He was defenceless, naked and in his own bed.

"Look, Luella, don't think me rude, again, but I have to be moving." An unfortunate phrase to choose since bits of him were already in motion. "I have a visitor coming."

"He's here. Rather, he's been and gone again. Sam isn't it? He dropped off his bag and went out."

"You saw him? He saw you?" Martin jumped up in the bed, and the covers fell away.

"Don't panic. I was dressed. Totally un-naked. Oh God. I didn't realise." Her eyes almost popped. "Will he be jealous?"

"No," Martin answered too sharply. "What are you thinking... Jesus...he's not my *boyfriend.*"

"Oh, well, that's alright then. I thought for a moment I had complicated things for you." As if walking around naked and crawling uninvited into his already occupied bed weren't complications. "I was downstairs when he arrived. He said he would be back after lunch. I think he imagined something was happening between us and was being discrete." Her smile was beguiling, that he couldn't deny. In other circumstances...

"I wonder why," Martin ventured. "When there isn't a happening, I mean."

"Not then, no, but that doesn't mean now, does it," she said, reaching under the covers and grasping him tightly in her warm, soft hand. His body was way ahead of him and response was as swift as it was unmistakable.

"Perhaps not," he replied, closing his eyes, and sliding down into the covers.

She smiled, unable to keep her amusement totally in check.

Men were so easy to deal with.

And this one was an absolute pushover.

* * *

The temptation to sleep after sex was strong but Martin fought it. He didn't want to throw her out but would appreciate her taking the hint. When he opened his eyes, she was fully dressed and it seemed, in a hurry to make tracks.

"You are off?" he asked, stating the obvious.

"I am. Didn't realise the time. I am meeting friends for brunch and they do not approve of waiting. I showered while you were asleep. Thanks. Look, I am sorry about last night. It was a mistake."

"And this morning?"

She leaned in and kissed him.

"That wasn't a mistake. Shall we meet up again?"

"I'd like to. I'll be busy for a few days with all the post funeral stuff."

"Okay. Let's give it a week and then meet up. I'll leave my number on the phone stand downstairs. Give me a call."

"I will." They exchanged pecks on the cheek and then like a ghost in daylight, she was gone. Martin showered in his own en suite and emerged from the bathroom with a steam cloud billowing in his wake. He dressed, made up the bed and left the room. Walking along the landing he spotted the door to Auggie's library standing ajar. Odd. Some of the books were valuable. He looked inside, scanned the shelves and all seemed well. He closed the door and this time he locked it and pocketed the key. He continued downstairs and in passing, checked the phone stand. Nothing with a phone number on it. He felt uneasy without knowing why. Automatically, he opened Jessie's old-fashioned Rolodex and located Eloise's number. He dialled and waited. It rang out seven times before an answer came.

"Hello," said a female voice.

"Hello, may I speak with Eloise Harding please?"

"Speaking. Is that Martin?"

"Yes, it is."

“Oh Martin, I am sorry I didn’t get a chance to chat with you properly before I left. I hope you had a chance to chat properly with Jennifer.”

“Not really. I did chat with her cousin, later.”

“Cousin? I don’t think so. I think you must be mixed up. Jennifer accompanied me to the funeral and came home with me. Such a lovely send off for Jessie, I must say. You did her proud. Perhaps you and Jennifer can do lunch when she next comes to Edinburgh. She will be home for Christmas.”

“Yes, that would be interesting. Thanks for coming yesterday. Sorry to have disturbed you Mrs Harding. Good day.”

He replaced the receiver.

Fuck.

* * *

Two streets away ‘Luella’ climbed into her little Mazda roadster and checked her lipstick in the rear-view mirror. Damn, she was good. It had been worth all the trouble (and boredom) sticking with the Harding’s all evening at the funeral tea. Pompous arse of a mother and stuck-up cow of a daughter. At the least she hoped Martin might see them connected but she had a story prepared for all eventualities. The best con artists always have reserve strategies. She had watched him drink and drink and knew before long he would be dozing. Hiding away as the guests left was easy peasy. Then when he fell asleep in his chair, she used the time to locate the library. Her targets were pre-ordained thanks to a recent Sunday supplement which re-ran an article featuring Martin’s uncle, the book collector, before he died. Such a mangenue, he had preened about and been photographed with two first editions which he suggested would bring upwards of twenty grand each at auction. That meant they could be worth thirty apiece on the black market. Small, compact, easy to spirit away with a decent sized handbag. Easy prey.

As was Martin.

'Luella' engaged gear and drove off up the hill, intending to loop back through Corstorphine and return over the bridge through Fife, home to Perth.

She doubted that he would spot the substitutions for a long time, if ever. Her copies were good from the outside and rubbish inside.

It made her feel good to be the beneficiary of his warm hospitality.

He wasn't bad in bed either.

Win-win all round – for her.

It takes a thief they say.

How very true.

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