**The Delivery**

It arrived by DHL one winter's afternoon. I hadn’t been expecting anything, as packages only arrive on birthdays and Christmas. On those occasions, I normally have prior warning.

‘Hope you like it Dad,’ is the usual run of the mill.

‘If it doesn't fit, send it back and I’ll change it.’ So it’s a fair bet it’s a t-shirt or a shirt but the kids’ messages are always full of wonderful updates on grandkids, plus loads of kisses and exploding bottles of Bolly, which lift my spirits no end.

I’d lost my wife eight months ago, after thirty-two years of happy marriage and I’ve found the transition hard to handle.

Ann and I had sat in the doctor's office holding hands in total disbelief. It had been our third visit in only a few days, due to her blood tests being fast-tracked. But the following day she’d suffered a brain embolism and fell into a deep coma.

I make regular visits to the hospital, where I go through periods of weeping followed by anger because I feel so inadequate— then mope around the house feeling hollow and alone. My beautiful Anne was never ill. The odd cold now and again but within a few days from feeling under the weather, she’d vanished, leaving behind an unresponsive shell.

Gazing at my surprise package, I wonder what it could be and who is it from. With its foreign stamps and no return address, only adds to the intrigue.

Sat in my armchair next to a blazing log fire, I sip my wine and ponder, then smile as realize I’m enjoying the anticipation. You old fart— what are you thinking? But deep down— I do hope it’s not a disappointment.

Suddenly, a gust of wind makes a roaring noise in the chimney. I glance towards the French windows. The heavy rain is travelling at right angles to the ground, making me shiver.

Snuggling back into my chair remembering the days I’d had to battle that sort of weather, but now, I’m retired. A few years early, but with just me now, I thought bugger it, life’s shorter than you think. A moment later, I succumb to temptation and open the padded envelope.

It contains a spool from an old tape-recorder and a handwritten note that is brief and to the point.

*‘Listen, Enjoy, Savour, and at the conclusion, make up your own mind. I’ll be in touch.’*

The opaque plastic spool is badly chipped and has a large crack on one side, which is held together by a well-weathered faded label with a scribbled notation, ‘This Way Up’.

Fifty years ago, my parents had given me a tape recorder for my twelfth birthday. Amazingly, I still have it but it’s hidden among mountains of other belongings in my lockup.

The following day, after reading several chapters to my sleeping beauty, I headed for my Aladdin’s cave.

I arrived home three hours later, with a take away for dinner and me, in desperate need of a shower.

With the old recorder cleaned. I thread the audiotape through its workings before activating a small start lever. I smile inwardly. No push buttons in those days. Seconds later crackles resonated from the speakers, proving things were good to go. I quickly turned the old girl off and headed to the kitchen, to sort out my pizza.

The open fire looks very welcoming, due to another wet and windy night, and I’m filled with anticipation. I have a white linen napkin spread across my lap; my pepperoni special sits the coffee table, accompanied by a suitable bottle of refreshment.

Sipping my wine, Beethoven's 5th symphony glides from my antique recorder— I sigh and mellow inwardly.

Forty-odd years ago, I’d watched ‘Clockwork Orange’, a futuristic movie by Stanley Kubrick. And it was this movie that introduced me to the music of Ludwig van Beethoven and from that moment on, I enjoyed the majority of his works.

Thirty-five minutes later, the music faded and finished. I open my eyes and picked up the handwritten note. The intriguing part was who knew? Most of our group had lost touch years ago, in fact, some were already dead, meaning there might only be three left, including me. So I had no idea who and where but more importantly, why had this arrived now?

That thought was interrupted by a male voice resonating from the speakers. I’d guess an educated man, late in years. From his accent, I’d have placed him in or around Scotland. The face that came to mind was Sean Connery. Pronunciation was crisp, clear, and well-projected, making me wonder if this man was a trained orator.

“Beethoven stirs the emotions,” he said. “I hope this message finds you in good health and that you’ll have the courage and fortitude to finish a task I am unable to complete. My name is Joseph Frank and the information I’m about to reveal came into my possession after the death of Aunty. I stumbled across the documents purely by chance while organising the clearing of her house. The papers and notes in her keeping were written by her older brother a long time ago.” He paused and there was a faint rustling as though the microphone was being adjusted.

“The name Quentin Heseltine will mean more to you than mine. I met the dear boy years ago in Switzerland and we became lovers.”

That familiar name made me switch off the tape, before heading towards a large cupboard in the dining room.

Moments later I was back turning pages of an old photo album and suddenly there he was.

Quentin, fifteen years old, on a kid’s merry-go-round with the rest of us trying to look like a trendy pop group. Not one of us could play a note and we all looked extremely young and unprepared for life in the real world.

Quentin had been the quiet one. A deep thinker, who wanted to go on the stage and do Shakespeare, ended up at university studying geology.

I topped up my glass before re-started the recorder.

“He was killed in an avalanche several years ago. I was buried for two hours, so was lucky to survive. Unfortunately, my spine was damaged and I’ve been confined to a wheelchair ever since— but due to recent tests on a brain tumour, my doctor’s estimate I may have only twelve months to live. This prompted me to make contact because Quentin spoke highly of you—” He paused as if the words caught in his throat. “The dear boy was my world. So as I have no surviving family, I’d like to pass on this valuable information. I had two Uncles that worked on the Gotthard Rail Tunnel, which links Goschenen to Airolo. Work started in 1872 and the tunnel was opened ten years later. Sadly many workers died, mainly from water inrush and a terrible epidemic of hookworm, bringing work to a halt for two months in early 1875 but prior to this, my uncle Syrus found something odd.

He relays in his journal the following. Over millions of years, water had cut a narrow culvert through the rock. Their tunnelling disturbed this, causing the cave-in that he and his gang had to repair. Due to his concerns about the flow, they fitted a grill to allow water to percolate into the tunnel’s drainage system but there was another reason. After Syrus had crawled into the culvert, he realized he needed more time to investigate.

The rock was worn smooth but also slippery, enabling him to squeeze in some thirty meters. At this point, he could hear a distant sound, which wasn't falling water, more a musical hum. What had excited him was the appearance of tiny fireflies, winged insects, normally found in the tropics but here they were darting around in the water. He reasoned it was the reflection from the lamp, but it wasn’t. And after retreating ten meters, there was no sign of them.

He also says— the water where the creatures swam appeared to have a slightly oily texture.”

This statement was followed by a protracted pause, as though the speaker was deep in thought.

“In the middle of 1875, tunnel building came to a complete standstill due to the workers’ strike. So both uncles decided to take the opportunity to investigate deeper into the culvert. He writes as follows. Two months after first going into the culvert, a number of odd things have happened to me. The large birthmark on my hip has vanished. My badly damaged finger, I sustained while serving in the army several years ago, has almost totally recovered. And the painful ingrown toenail I’ve had has also been fixed. Hubert and I are unsure what we have stumbled upon but we leave tomorrow to investigate. Due to the strike, we should be unhindered. I have the key to unlock the water grill. We will take spare lights and food and I will update on our return.”

There was a short pause. “They were never seen again— A boldly circled notation with no date says: Have I found the mystical fountain of youth?”

Sat silently in my sitting room, those words repeated several times in my head, but a sudden loud clacking noise made me jump. The tape had obviously snapped because I could see the spool whizzing around ten times faster than it should.

As I went to fix it, I stared in disbelief. The tape hadn’t broken, it had finished and that deflated me. It was like reading a great thriller, anticipation bubbling, only to find the last few pages missing.

For the following few days, I didn’t go out. I moped about the house doing chores and odd jobs, stuff I‘d been putting off. Deep down, I didn’t want to miss the follow-up phone call, I was sure would come. I wasn’t anxious ‘per se’ but really wanted to know more.

I’ve always been a conspiracy theorist. I believe we’re kept in the dark about lots of stuff and this new information was both refreshing and intriguing and ignited something in my mind that felt exciting.

Five days later, a letter arrived.

*I hope you found the tape intriguing. If you’d like to discuss things further please meet me at Starbucks at Heathrow Terminal 3 Departures on the 23rd at 3.00 pm. I’m en route to New York for treatment and have a three-hour layover. If you don’t come, I will understand. Regards JF*

I was there 15 minutes early and was shocked to see an old man hunched in a wheelchair being pushed towards me by a young gangly black youth, with two ID cards strung around his neck.

“Mr Franks, I’ll be back in twenty to take you through Departures,” he said before walking off without waiting for a response.

Joseph and I shook hands. “Robert— I presume that means, twenty minutes?” He said with a forced grin.

I gazed into his tired wrinkled face. His eyes looked as though they’d had enough of whatever this guy was going through. The same look my wife had when she got the results of her tests.

“I don’t look good, do I?” he said with a glimmer of a wry smile. “No, you don’t need to apologize; it’s the reaction in everyone's eyes.” He paused and shook his head. “The frightening thing— it’s happening so quickly and—” He broke off for a moment and looked around. “And nobody will know or care, everything will carry on but without me.” That statement made him sit up and grip the brown leather satchel lying on his lap. “But there’s one last adventure and just maybe you can put my mind at rest.”

§

A week later I was walking along a gravel service path into the Gotthard Rail Tunnel. I was extremely nervous, apprehensive and amazed I wasn’t stopped by an official. Deep down, part of me wanted that to happen.

A few days after meeting Joseph, a box had arrived containing used overalls, embellished with a maintenance company logo and a scratched safety helmet, an old primitive key, plus a map and instructions. These gave dates, times and intervals between trains, plus images of markings that indicated distance travelled, allowing me to gauge my nine-kilometre walk. The map showed an isolated layby where I’d find a maintenance ladder, leading down to the entrance of the tunnel.

As per the instructions, an hour into my walk I located one of many recesses in the tunnel wall. Minutes later everything started to vibrate as a train rushed towards me, I lay back to steady myself and put my hands over my ears. Within seconds, a wall of fast-moving air preceded the speeding train followed by noise, flashing lights, and dust. As the following rush of wind petered out and everything returned to normal, I began to laugh rather nervously. What the hell was I doing here?

A short distance passed the nine-kilometre mark. I spotted the narrow rusting grill and was amazed how the antique lock opened with very little resistance.

Dropping on to my hands and knees I squeezed into the confined space.

Vertigo and claustrophobia are things I can deal with, as long as I stay focused and keep telling myself, it’s only for a short time. This was my mind-set as I made my way along the narrow culvert but due to several tight spots, the thought of getting stuck, never to be found again, crossed my mind several times, making me remove my backpack and push it ahead of me.

The small stream of water that passed beneath me was chilling, on several occasions I had to crawl through it making me realize, this adventure needed to be short.

Twelve minutes into my tunnelling, I arrived at a section that looked impossible to squeeze through.

As I sat there in my cold damp tomb facing defeat, all I could visualise was the disappointment in Joseph’s eyes, when I told him the bad news.

Pulling a chocolate bar from my bag, I took a bite. Then began probing the narrow gap with the flashlight and what I eventually saw made my mind up. So began stripping down to my underwear.

§

I’d arranged to meet Joseph on his return from New York.

I was a few minutes late but as I approached the coffee shop I could see his frail figure and his body language gave the impression of little hope.

“They say I’ve got three months at best, so they’ve sent me home to die,” he said in a shallow husky voice. “So Robert, you’re my only hope. Was your adventure successful?”

After opening my bag, I handed him two large bottles of water, which generated a wry smile that creased his tired face. Holding the containers tight to his chest, his moist eyes glistened.

I smiled reassuringly and patted his shoulder. And thought better of saying, this was a hell of a long shot.

His face brightened, losing a little of that grey death look. “Robert, have you tried it?”

“No, licked some off my hand to taste— that's all.” My comment made him roll his eyes but a moment later he opened a bottle and took a sip before replacing the cap.

I could tell he was swilling the liquid around in his mouth. Then when he swallowed he looked straight at me for several seconds and I was sure he was holding his breath.

Suddenly he released the air. “Well— no miracle.” He grinned and added. “It has a faint lemon taste that lingers. Could that be due to the slight oiliness?”

I smiled and nodded. “Not sure but it activates the taste buds, doesn't it?”

“Indeed, Robert. Now, tell me all about your adventure.”

After a sip of coffee, I relayed what had happened.

“I arrived at a very narrow section in the culvert that almost made me abandon the trip. But after investigating further with my torch, I thought I spotted something. After stripping off most of my clothes, I managed to squeeze through and entered a slightly bigger area that would hold about ten people. The water was overflowing up from a five-foot pool that looked deep but on a raised ledge next to it, I found two sets of boots and a pile of clothes.”

“My uncle’s?”

“I would think so. I examined them and found this in a waistcoat pocket,” I added, handing over a gold pocket watch and chain. “Oh, how wonderful,” he murmured.

After examining it for a few moments, he handed it back. “You must keep this, your reward,” he said, placing it in my palm and closing my fingers around it. “Now please, I’m all ears,” he chuckled.

“As I sat there, the culvert suddenly started to vibrate, I instantly thought the gap I’d squeezed through might close a fraction and I’d be stuck there forever. As the train’s vibration increased, the torch toppled off the ledge and smashed. Claustrophobic situations are not my strong point and being plunged into blackness, pushed those boundaries almost to breaking point,” I paused and sipped my coffee.

“As my mind and eyes adjusted, I realized the tiny cave was slightly illuminated by a distant light source further up the culvert, which must have continued from the bottom of the pool.

Having some light reduced my anxiety a fraction but I needed to get out quickly before another train came hurtling through.” I paused, remembering the horrendous noise and vibration of the speeding train, then the blackness and fear that had almost overwhelmed me, but gazing at the fascination and excitement dancing in Joseph’s eyes, made me realize it was all worthwhile.

“After filling the bottles, I noticed I’d captured several of the tiny winged insects. They spiralled around as though agitated, making me feel that this was not good karma, so I released them.”

Joseph nodded. “Yes, Robert, I think that was very wise. It’s also obvious my uncles continued further, by swimming underwater. I wonder where they went too.” As his voice trailed off, he stared vacantly into the distance, his tired face blank, as I continued.

“From that point Joseph, everything worked out very well. And I can confirm, the scrapes and abrasions on my knuckles and knees, disappeared within a few days.”

A sudden wry smile creased his dry lips. “Robert, thank you, there may be light at the end of my tunnel— or should that be culvert.”

§

I never heard from Joseph again. I thought of trying to make contact but realised I didn’t have his address or phone number.

Six weeks later I received a call from an Inspector Rhinebeck. He said he was investigating the disappearance of Joseph Frank and as he’d found my address on Mr Frank’s desk he’d managed to acquire my phone number. What he told me next made me sit down rather abruptly but I was grinning from ear to ear.

To everyone’s surprise, Joseph found new life. He’d begun to walk with the aid of sticks but just as people thought he was going to make a miraculous recovery, he disappeared.

“Mr Wilson, I know this is a long shot, but do you have any information that could help our investigation?” asked the officer.

“Inspector, he corresponded a few times about a mutual friend and I met him twice in London. This is the first news I’ve heard in several weeks. I’m amazed and delighted about his health but I’ve no idea what could have happened to him.”

“We wondered whether Mr Frank could’ve committed suicide. His abandoned vehicle was in a layby, not far from the Gotthard Rail Tunnel.”

As the officer rang off, I heard Anne’s tentative footsteps on the stairs. I glanced at the hall clock and smiled, time for our walk in the park.

**Killer Message**

Placing the stool close to my balcony railings, I stood on it motionless.

Far below in the brightly lit street, people scurried past unaware I was watching or what I was about to do. But if they had, would they have been bothered or concerned?

They appeared blinkered and self-absorbed, dashing and hurrying, unaware of others doing the same. Legs propelling, hearts pumping, minds racing, all working in tandem, as they rushed to fulfil their desires and demands. But among this haphazard throng, there were several that appeared to have more urgency and need, as though on a tighter schedule.

I imagined one thinking, *‘She said, pick up wine and tomatoes.’*

Another thought, *‘That bastard at work has it in for me.’*

Suddenly the wine guy tripped, bringing an angry rebuke, *‘My God*— *as if I didn’t have enough to do. Did she say onions as well?’*

A woman who sidestepped a speeding taxi was on a roll. *‘Would sleeping with my boss give advantages? Pay rent, pick up Jimmy, drop off at Gran’s, then to the gym. Probably not.’*

Dozens and dozens of people, generating endless thoughts and inner dialogue, all heading to predetermined locations, where they would settle for a segment of time before rushing to the next. But for me, defined segments of time were something I didn’t have. I’d been thrown off that fast-moving treadmill and that abrupt separation felt like a mini death. I was awkward, unnerved, and vulnerable, not part of what was going on down there, out there— or anywhere. I was sealed alone in a claustrophobic bubble— instinct told me to separate myself from this.

I needed to stand back, see and feel the bigger picture but for reasons unknown; mind and body couldn’t find the drive or willpower.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to look at the stars one more time but felt unsafe and wobbly— but surely that shouldn’t have mattered?

§

Cindy and I had argued six days, four hours and thirty-five minutes ago. Of course, she said, it was all my fault, I never listened or learned and the world didn’t and hadn’t ever revolved around me.

I’d been too outspoken at work and someone desperate for my job had stuck the knife in. Alec had goaded and taunted me at a sales meeting, then unceremoniously pulled the rug from under me. I’d noticed several of my team had feigned shock but their eyes and body language had transmitted a different story, as my jubilant persecutor had revelled in my discomfort. I’d been oversensitive the whole time and with my mind flooded with a dense red haze, I’d reacted without thinking.

Fifteen minutes later I was in the boss’s office being told I was being moved sideways and Alec— smart-arsed, greased hair, pinstripe-suited Alec— was taking my place.

My boss’s face had remained totally emotionless as he turned the screw further. He’d paused to look at his gold Rolex watch, as though it was something I’d never attain, then stated coldly. “As of— ten forty-five, Alec is now your boss!”

I’d spluttered, “This is totally unacceptable. The man is incapable of doing the job— my job. He needs constant supervision. His people skills are dubious, to put it mildly. I’m certainly not prepared to support someone—” At that point, the world, my world, took on a high-speed spinning sensation with an odd irritating whining noise in the background that could only have been me, as my boss appeared to take pleasure in metaphorically disembowelling me.

Within seconds of his call, two oversized security guards arrived champing at the bit. At this point he’d stood and thrust out a hand, demanding my keys and security pass, before the bully boys frog-marched me back to my office. In what seemed like a few minutes, I was stood on the street holding the contents of my desk in a cardboard box that was quickly disintegrating due to the pouring rain.

When I finally arrived home, Cindy, my partner, climbed onto her high horse and didn’t dismount. One topic she’d emphasized was the car. “We are now car-less,” she said, no, screamed. “How the hell can we arrive at the Rutherford’s barbeque in a bloody taxi?”

I stood there dumbstruck, trying to catch my breath. I knew all along I’d been too easy with this woman but had been captivated and so had routinely pandered to her needs and trivialities. The problem was she’d become accustomed to using my company Mercedes, with its dark windows and low profile tyres— the one that we no longer had.

With my head swirling, I yelled something back but my migraine was so intense I went to our bedroom, slammed the door and didn’t come out for two days.

I was greeted by a note attached to the fridge.

*I’m leaving you, you heartless bastard, how dare you scream abusive words at me. I thought you loved and adored me, would do anything I asked. Like all men of your age, you promised so much but gave so little. Once you were exciting and thoughtful but have turned into a selfish person, with an excessive gas problem that I find disgusting. I now see older men can’t give what I truly need. I will arrange to have my remaining clothes picked up.*

She’d moved in with Tristram, a very artistic gay friend of ours who travels a great deal. He drives a brand new Mini Cooper with every conceivable upgrade and he always insists it's a far more exhilarating drive than his bright yellow sixteen cylinder Bugatti Veyron. Then when anyone reacts with, ‘Omigod, you have one of those?’ he reels off the McLaren F1 and whatever else is jammed into his garage gathering dust. It's bloody tiresome, but his parties are always attended by those trying to uplift. If you get my drift?

A sudden urge to pee made me step down from the stool.

On the way back I picked up a photo of Cindy and slumped on the couch. She was so perfect. I could look at her for hours. Her graceful feminine curves and those wonderful long slender legs and—

§

Earlier this afternoon, I’d pretended to go for a run but only managed to motivate myself into my tracksuit, then I’d walked and jogged for a few minutes. My heart wasn’t in it.

I sat on a park bench for over an hour, visualizing Cindy showering in the fountain’s cascading waters. Her lithe curvaceous body glistening in the fading light. Her long dark hair, a gossamer mane that followed the gentle seductive curve of her back.

She was like an illicit drug I craved and she knew it, and so she taunted me, heightening my libido until I agreed to whatever fanciful whim she desired. Long weekends in Paris and London, staying at beautiful hotels, dining in chic restaurants followed by nights of passion. Knowing she’d left my life tortured every fibre of my mind and body. I closed my eyes and within seconds I could see her captivating image stood before me. I reached out—

Sadly, my dream state was erased by a person who smelt like a pigsty. He’d plonked himself upwind and began picking his nose with a filthy claw-like fingernail.

Wandering home I spotted Cindy sitting in a restaurant window. I stood behind a tree and gazed at her. She was opposite a young Italian-looking man, black greased hair, large mouth full of perfect white teeth, cream open-necked shirt with chest hair protruding, oversized gold chain around his neck. You get the type.

Cindy was wearing a small black number I’d not seen before. Short-sleeved with a plunging front. Her breasts were almost falling into her plate as she leaned forward and gave a raucous laugh. Their eyes were enthralled with each other, brimming over with anticipation and longing. If I’d stayed there longer, I’m sure they’d have consummated their evening across the dining table, her long slender legs wrapped around—

That instant, I’d seen and felt my worst nightmare. Her obvious need and wanting— her feminine desires intoxicating someone other than me. Suddenly my mind was engulfed with lurid pictures of their intertwined bodies but what turned my stomach was not her look of satisfaction but her animal drive to get more of him.

I ran, I ran, I had to— but as I moved to escape, she turned— our eyes met for a split second, her face changed to one of concern and something that gave me hope— I thought.

§

Sat on the couch gazing at her image, I sighed inwardly, then glanced towards the balcony stool. It would take seconds and the pain would be gone, freeing me from the anxiety and turmoil of a life falling apart.

Taking the photo with me would devastate Cindy, my reprisal for being so heartless and cruel. Knowing she’d pushed me over the edge would live with her for the rest of her life, but then I would lose those wonderful memories and amazing images, the excitement and—

My phone suddenly beeped for the first time in days.

It was Cindy for sure. That brief contact earlier had changed her mind. Made her realize how much she wanted and needed me. It was the cemetery that had brought us together. A deep need to share our forbidden thoughts and feelings without ridicule. To express our needs and explore the possibilities. Deep down she knew I was the only man who could deliver the pleasure she craved— Why else would she be calling?

I picked my phone as it beeped again. Yes, she was sorry and would cry. Would want forgiveness for the things she had said and need to feel my arms around her. She’d realized she had made a terrible mistake and needed to come home— and the guy in the restaurant— it was probably only her brother.

Reading the message made me catch my breath, as I slumped on to the stool.

‘I’m here for you,’ it read.

My light-headedness passed in seconds, as I appraised her change of heart.

Cindy’s messages were always short and to the point. She imagined her words evolving in the recipient’s mind. Planting a thought, then relishing the reaction it generated.

‘I can still feel you,’ she’d sent once, while out shopping. It did wonders for my day, so I bought champagne on the way home.

Thankfully, the alcohol took the sting out of the eight hundred dollars she’d paid for a handbag, but now, things were changing fast. I sensed the proverbial shoe was firmly on the other foot.

‘I’m here for you’, she’d said. ‘Yes, I’m sure you are, girl, but you’ll have to do a lot better than that!’ I muttered. ‘So my receding hairline and expanding paunch don’t appear to be an issue anymore.’

This topic had surfaced a few weeks ago when she’d advised about going to the gym and said that maybe a toupee would be a good idea. All too often, her tongue had a razor’s edge and her barbed nit-picking about my gas issue cut deep. But she persisted in feeding me wholesome natural foods— stuff you’d give to a bloody rabbit— inflaming my problem.

I took several deep breaths to still my mind, then gloated at this golden opportunity. I needed to think quickly before milking this for all it was worth, reasoning that this wasn’t the time to be brutal. Time to be magnanimous, chivalrous, pander to her needs a little, but with a fatherly firmness.

‘Oh! Thank you,’ I typed. ‘I’ve been going through a tough time as you can imagine and I really needed to hear that.’

As I pushed send— an odd chill made me shiver.

Was her name on the message?

I quickly checked— my heart leaped to my throat. There was no name, only numbers. Obviously she’d lost her phone and was using a friend's—

But her response was slow in coming.

‘Sorry,’ I typed hurriedly, ‘Had problems with my phone, ***who is this*?’**

‘I’m your Uber driver. I’m here to pick you up.’

§

Early news reports stated: A middle-aged man fell from the nineteenth floor of a downtown apartment building early this evening, in an apparent suicide. He landed on a yellow Bugatti. Fortunately, both vehicle occupants were unhurt as they were unloading suitcases. The body is yet to be identified.

**It's Under My Bed**

My bedroom is smaller than my parent's room, which is a pain if I’m trying to play games with friends. But when my Dad commands me to clean my space, I find it's just the right size.

Because the roof is part of one wall, I have wooden beams to hang kits and aeroplanes from. So with my small cupboard, chest of drawers and a bit of shelving for all my other stuff, we fit together really well, but it does mean my small double bed is pushed tight into one corner.

The wall it's up against conceals a boarded-up attic entrance that’s been papered over but there's still a tiny gap under the door. We didn’t know the entrance was there when we bought the house and only found out when I started hearing things. Not ordinary things— creepy spooky things. Noises that woke me three times in the night.

Dad said not to be so silly but because I made a fuss, I was told I could move into Monica’s room. After thinking about sharing with my older sister, I suddenly realized it was probably the wind, as my Dad had said.

Mum, found me a night-light, a tiny gadget that fits into the power socket I use for my race car track. But it has a cracked plastic shade, which casts spooky shadows across the sloped ceiling and if the moon is out, the shadows move together in creepy ways. When this happens, I curl up into a ball and pull the covers over my head.

But— whatever slithers under the old attic door and hides under my bed— isn't afraid of the night-light or the shadows.

I can hear it breathing but not like a human. Sometimes it breathes every few minutes, while I lie there sweating and motionless, my eyes glued to a small mark on the ceiling, waiting for the creature to do it again.

Other times, it breaths every few seconds, like faint panting before it stops altogether. I think when that happens, it’s decided I know it’s there, so slithers back to where it came from.

I’m brave enough to look under my bed during the day. If the sun is bright I can see the gap easily and the marks in the dust made by the creature’s claws. At night I’m too scared but if Mum comes to hang up my clean clothes before tucking me in, I’ll take a quick look then. I’ve thought about asking Dad to seal the gap but he’d make a fuss and probably call me a sissy again— so I haven’t.

Stanley’s my best mate, from three doors up the road. He’s seven years old the same as me. He reckons it's a Bogeyman. And he says the way you get rid of them, is to use talcum powder.

I laughed like a drain when he first said it. Not sure how a drain does that, but my Dad often says it, usually when his friends come over to play cards. It's always very rowdy, as my Mum says, so she goes next door while they’re playing.

But when Stanley told me the whole story about the powder, his face was so serious and his eyes were so big, I just sat there and gawked.

“Its right, Jerry. God's truth,” he gushed. “When I was small I got frightened by a Bogeyman, but my Mum said, she knew how to solve the problem. So after giving me a bath the next night, she powdered me with extra, then told me why.

Said— the fine powder gets into their eyes, ears, and noses, which itches like billio. It’s so terrible, they have to run away and find loads of ice.”

I screwed up my face and was going to laugh or say something but Stan’s eyes were so big and serious looking, I decided to wait, cos, I didn’t know what to say. Then Stanley told me the rest of what his Mum had said.

“Where does Daddy get our ice from? My Mum asked. I said the 7-11 shop. Good boy, she said, and where’s that shop? I thought for a moment, then said, it’s in Hampton. How far is that from here? She asked. Gosh, that’s miles away, Mum. She grinned and ruffled my hair, then said, remember this Stanley Pepper. Bogeymen have very short little legs, they couldn’t run eight miles, then come all the way back, could they?”

I sat there for a bit, thinking about what Stan had said.

“But Stanley, I don’t think mine’s a Bogeyman. Mine’s something horrible and gruesome that wriggles its way under that door.”

“Jerry, if it works for you know who, maybe it’ll work for what you've got too—” Suddenly he stopped talking and quickly looked under my bed. “I’ve just had a brill idea, how to get rid of it.” He stood with his hands behind his back with a serious look on his face, like Mr Roper, our school teacher. “We go into the attic and find the other side of that door,” he said pointing at the wall. “Then we stuff loads of talcum-powder around the bottom of it— that’ll fix it for sure.”

I snorted and burst out laughing. “You want to go into our attic?” I spluttered. “You’re crazy. It's dark, it’s creepy, it’s filled with cobwebs and there’s so many spooky, scary hiding places.”

I gawked at him trying to think of how to make it sound more frightening. So I whispered very slowly, “Even my Mum don’t go up there.”

Stanley folded his arms and nodded his head just like our teacher does. “We could wear protective stuff,” he said rather official-like. “Like what?” I scoffed. He thought for a while, then his hands went behind his back again. “Wellies with the tops taped shut. Gardening gloves taped to our long sleeves. Hoodies with the drawstring pulled tight and balaclavas— and, just for good measure— goggles.”

I shook my head and made a face but it didn't stop him going on. “Jerry, nothing could get us then but we’ll need loads of powder.” He was now tapping his hands together behind his back, official-like again, and if there had been walking space, he’d have paced back and forth too, but there wasn’t. It had crossed my mind to open the bedroom door so he could, then he’d really look like Mr Roper but that thought disappeared when he added, “My Mum’s got a big cartoon of powder under her sink, I could bring that— what does your Mum have?” I shrugged. My mind was back on the balaclava and goggles. “Look, Jerry, we’ll be like Ghostbusters but without the car. We can do this, I know we can.”

§

Two days later, all our equipment was stuffed under my bed, plus two cricket stumps for added protection. My Mum had just come back from the supermarket, so Monica could now go visit her friends further down the street. Stanley and I were never allowed to be left alone. We’d been playing with our boats once and over-filled the bath, while Dad had popped to the corner shop to buy cigarettes.

I was grounded for a week and had to do extra chores.

My Mum suddenly arrived at my open bedroom door.

“It's a beautiful day,” she said, “You guys should be outside getting some fresh air in your lungs, not stuck in here,” then gave a disapproving look at all the mess. “I’ve just put my groceries away and now I need to finish a few jobs in my office, which will take about an hour. Then I’ll make us sandwiches for lunch, so behave yourselves,” she warned before heading downstairs to her office, which is part of the garage, so she’d be out of hearing range if we were quiet.

Once we had most of our gear on, the tape was used to seal up our wellies and gloves. But when Stanley pulled on his balaclava and goggles, I couldn’t stop laughing. He looked like a cartoon Minion. Then I nearly wet myself, because he’d turned and looked in the mirror. First, he’d jumped in fright, then couldn’t stop giggling.

But things got serious once we headed down the hallway to the attic door, with my wooden stool. We needed this to stand on, the attic key lay on the top of the door frame for safekeeping. It was a brown old-fashioned key with a loop of knotted fluffy string tied at the end.

As the lock turned and clicked we looked at each other. Stanley adjusted his goggles but as he slowly opened the door, it creaked spookily. Even through my balaclava, the draft that came down the narrow stairs smelt of bird poop and something else that wasn’t clean, making me step back. Looking up the dark stairs, I was hoping Stanley would change his mind or start having one of his breathing fits.

“Jerry, where’s the light switch?” I shrugged, then paddled down the hallway to some switches. I say paddled, I was wearing my Mum’s big wellies. We could only find one of mine and that had been ripped to bits by Jasper our dog.

As I flicked each switch on and off, Stan stood there shaking his head as he glanced back and forth at me. When I arrived back at his side, I whispered hopefully in his ear. “As there’s no light, maybe we should plan for another day.”

Stan mulled this over. I could tell he was having second thoughts because his eyes were blinking a lot. “We’ve come this far,” he mumbled. “We keep close together and get this job done— I think.”

“Should we sprinkle powder on each other for added protection?” He looked at me for a moment through his lopsided goggles. “It'll make a hell of a mess out here, it’ll fly everywhere.”

I was hoping my Mum would suddenly dash out of her office and we’d scuttle back to my bedroom but downstairs was as quiet as the cemetery.

“Ok we go up together,” Stan suddenly muttered.

With cricket stumps held out in front of us, we slowly edged our way up the stairs. There must have been a small window because it wasn’t as dark as I’d expected. It didn’t make me feel safer but at least it wasn’t pitch-black.

As we reached the top step, Stanley sat down and got out his asthma medication. “OK,” he said after a quick puff. “We make this step our base camp.” With that, he started to unload all his equipment: a small torch, water pistol filled with soapy water, duct tape *( just in case we needed an emergency reseal )* and his large box of powder.

I’d brought my plastic catapult and a few stones from our gravel drive and two small unused cartons of baby powder.

I quickly scanned our dim-lit surroundings. Even through my steamed up goggles, I could still see loads and loads of spooky hidey- holes but worse was to come. The old house was built in an L shape, so we’d have to turn a corner to get to my room, which meant we’d lose sight of our escape route. There was a draft up here and you could hear stuff too, which was odd. Cars going down the road sounded louder and I could hear two people talking in next door’s garden. Then I noticed Stan was pointing up at the roof.

Hanging from the beams were huge black cobwebs, swaying from side to side and I’m positive the hairy spiders were bigger than my hand, even with a glove on. “Thank goodness we don’t have to go any higher,” I said.

Stanley was rubbing a finger inside his goggles, so he must have been steaming up too. “Right, Jerry, we need to check things out. We don’t want to get surprised by anything,” he said. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Let's just do what we came for and get out of here.”

Just then a gust of wind blew dust towards us. “See, told you wearing goggles was a good idea.” But the dust hung in the air like a scary ghost, making me shiver. “Stan, my bedroom’s around that corner over there,” I uttered, pointing to the darker part.

As we inched our way around the corner, a bird on the roof above us let out a shriek as if it was being murdered. We grabbed each other in fright which stopped us running away.

Then Stan put his goggles on the top of his head and started giggling. “I almost wet my pants,” he said before taking another puff of his medication.

Moments later we arrived at the black hole. This was where the other stairs went down to the boarded up door in my bedroom. Peering into the blackness made me shiver again. I didn’t like the look of this at all. Stanley's flashlight wasn't that bright. It was his sister’s ‘My Little Pony’ torch but it was enough to see all the horrible cobwebs and other dirty scary stuff. “I’m not going down there, Stanley.” He stood there looking into the black pit shaking his head. “Looks creepy, don’t it? Do you think the creature lives down there?” I shrugged. “There aren't any marks on the steps, so it must do.”

Stanley turned. I suddenly thought he’d changed his mind but he stepped backwards on to the first step. “Let's go down this way, then we can't see all that creepy horrid stuff and it won’t get in our faces. If we need to escape quickly, we're facing the right direction.” I didn’t like the smell or the look and I suddenly wanted to go to the toilet. “Jerry, let's get the powder ready and just go down one step at a time.” Just then another gust of wind blew more dust towards us, making the air all hazy.

Halfway down I could hear faint music coming from Monica's room. So her bedroom must be linked to these stairs somehow but that didn’t matter, because all of a sudden we’d reached the bottom and I could feel the boarded-up door behind me, as Stan muttered. “See, told you we could do this.”

As we started sprinkling the powder Stanley was braver than me cos he turned around and tipped loads of powder around our feet.

Then we moved up one step at a time and scattered more. With his big carton and my two smaller ones, we managed to lay loads on every step but as we turned to admire our work, a gust of wind slammed the attic door shut.

“Shit,” I blurted, then waddled forward as quickly as I could and shouted. “Stanley, was there a door handle on our side?” As the last word left my mouth, he overtook me as he puffed on his medication.

He was at the bottom of the stairs by the time I reached the top step. Gosh! I was so relieved when he opened the door and gave a thumbs-up.

§

The following morning, the TV newsman said we’d been very very lucky. A small tornado that had suddenly sprung up overnight had missed our town by a cat’s whisker. The only damage we’d sustained from the high winds had been a few toppled trees on Main street and Dad quickly added, “And, the Willmore residence lost several roof tiles.”

That night, I had been woken by a terrifying shrieking sound. I jumped outta bed and went to dash to my Mum’s room but was petrified by a white ghost that was jumping up and down on the landing. It was screaming at the top of its voice, just like my sister does. Then another ghost burst out of my Mum’s room flapping its arms about, which made it look huge!

§

Sat in the kitchen ten minutes later, I owned up to our Ghostbusters’ experiment.

My Dad then explained with an amused look on his face, what had happened.

With the roof tiles missing, the wind had blasted all the powder into my sister and Mum’s room, like a blizzard in the middle of winter. My sister’s white hair was stuck up straight and her face looked like a circus clown.

The pictures Dad took of Monica are still on the fridge door and they won first prize in her school’s photographic competition.

Later that day I was in the attic with Dad and a vacuum, sucking up the last of the powder.

Being there with him, things didn’t seem so scary and once we’d finished we sat on a couple of boxes and had a man chat. Well, that's what he called it.

He said that now I was growing into a big boy, he’d planned to convert the attic into a bedroom and play area— if I wanted. It wouldn't look anything like it did now and it would have a big dormer-window. Not sure what that is, but he said the room would be big enough to put my full racetrack down.

I asked if I could help with the building. He said probably not, as he wouldn’t be doing the work, as we did with the garden shed that we’d built together. Then he whispered, “There’s also a special secret why I want to do this and it's about your Mum. If you can keep the secret to yourself, I’ll take you to the big toy shop in town and you can buy those new race cars you’ve been looking at.”

Stanley knows I’m getting a huge new bedroom with a dormer-window but has no idea why I have new race cars— cos, it’s a secret.

But I do like the idea of what's coming.