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## TUESDAY

THERE WAS NOTHING OF NOTE ABOUT THE GENTLEMAN AT MY FRONT DOOR that evening to suggest he would drop dead in little over an hour.

My instinct had been to ignore the doorbell altogether. All I really wanted was to be left to my own devices.

‘Be a pal, would you, Ron?’ the gentleman said. In one hand he rocked a tartan Thermos side to side. With the other he pinched the collar of his mackintosh tight as an icy wind whipped along the street, sweeping newly spread salt to the kerb. Late March, but not yet a whiff of spring. ‘Been three days without the electric,’ he told me. ‘Would you believe it? If you’d be so kind, Ron?’

I held the door open no more than was necessary, my head sandwiched between it and the jamb. ‘Some hot water?’ I asked. I should have taken this opportunity to mention that my name is in fact Ray, not *Ron*, but I let the matter lie, accepting that—chance missed—I’d be misnamed for the duration. He and I had known each other, in passing, for twenty years or more. His name was Barry Detmer. He lived not-quite-opposite in the ground-floor flat with the gaffer-taped letterbox and the budgerigar cage in the window. We exchanged pleasantries here and there and had spoken a couple of times at greater length: once about an abandoned van, on another occasion about the proliferation of

smaller dog breeds. These conversations all felt as though they'd happened within the last year or two, but on closer scrutiny of my memory were more than a decade ago.

'Council said it'd be fixed yesterday,' Barry told me. 'Then it was this morning. Then it was by the end of today. Drive you mad, don't they, Ron?'

'Let me guess, electronic ignition boiler?'

'You got it. No leccy, no heating neither.' We shared an ironic chuckle at *progress*.

'Three days? You must be bloody frozen.'

Barry searched the ground at his feet, as people tend to, for the point to which my stare kept returning. I've never been a natural eye contactor; when I *do* try I feel invasive and find my gaze wandering south entirely of its own accord, causing unease and a shifting of clothing, most especially when addressing a female.

'I'm sure I've a Primus stove *somewhere*,' I said. 'Whether I have a gas bottle, well that's another matter.'

'Just a kettle full, Ron—that'll do me. Enough for a brew and a wash.'

'I think I should probably have you in, really,' I said, slackening my hold on the front door.

'I don't want to be a nuisance.' He gritted his teeth as another gust snapped his trousers round narrow legs.

'No. I really should.'

'You're a pal, Ron,' he said as I led us down the one-person-wide path along the hallway, between the books and boxes stacked to one side, the many local papers and periodicals that I've not yet got around to, on the other. The topmost was a garish red promotion from an appliance store, emblazoned *Special Offers for Ray Thorns*. I turned it over to spare Barry's blushes at misremembering my name.

‘Steady on. Steady on,’ I said as we squeezed into the darkened lounge, where we stood too close in the square of available floor.

‘My word,’ Barry said. ‘You have some bits and pieces.’

‘You know how it is. One tends to . . . accrue.’

‘Well, you have *accrued* all right, old pal,’ he chuckled.

It was odd how the house looked so suddenly different, knowing it was being viewed for the first time by someone. The slack woodchip, the blues records stacked haphazardly to waist height, the many binbags stuffed full of unsorted charity shop purchases, the sheer weight of the shelving leaving the television set somewhat askew: things I’ve barely ever noticed, far less *thought about*, in years. I switched on the second and third bars of the fire. The stench of burnt dust rose from the glow.

Barry warmed his palms. ‘For the grandkids?’ he asked, eyeing the model Mercedes-Benz racing car lying stripped to every last screw and rivet on a tea tray.

‘Yes. Yes, of course. Ready for paint, now. And a little chrome plating here and there.’

‘That’s some collection you’ve got, Ron,’ he said, looking at the many completed projects parked around the room and on the furniture. He studied a couple up close: a desert pink de Havilland bomber I restored from a car boot sale, a somewhat unloved mobile cinema truck now gleaming in its white and blue livery and with all new glass.

‘Something to keep me out of trouble. It’s not so much about the finished products, it’s the search and rescue that I rather like.’

‘How old?’ Barry asked.

‘Oh, quite varied. 1950s are something of a golden age. Some much newer, eighties and even nineties. I’ve a few pre-war Schuco models about too.’

‘No,’ Barry laughed. ‘The grandkids! How old?’

‘Yes, right. Twelve and . . . nine.’

‘Nice ages.’ He didn’t ask for names or genders.

‘And yours?’

He looked a little warmer at the thought. ‘In their twenties now. All five of them.’

‘Blimey.’

‘Just the two for you?’

‘That’s right.’ I busied myself clearing an armchair of dinner plates (unused) and folded clothes. ‘I should make that tea. You must be gasping.’

‘Been doing me in, I don’t mind telling you. That new family two doors up—you think *they’d* have to wait three days?’

I smiled at the floor. I’d no wish to encourage him, nor seem impolite. I was quite aware which family he meant. They’ve certainly caused *me* no bother.

‘What are they, Ron? Albanians?’

‘Ukrainian I believe.’

‘Should’ve given some foreign name, shouldn’t I? Council be right around, make sure I’m in the lap of luxury.’

‘Perhaps so,’ I mumbled.

‘Always us last in the queue, isn’t it, Ron?’

‘Go a little easy on this old thing,’ I said, dusting down the cushion. ‘It’s of quite some age. Would you believe that my own mother was breast fed on this very chair? I turned some new bun feet for it a while back from a little salvaged walnut, though. Good for another century of service.’

‘Yes. Right. Thanks,’ he said, looking a touch jarred but taking the weight off his feet all the same.

‘I don’t imagine you’ve eaten?’ I called from the kitchen over the roaring kettle. It had taken some minutes but I’d dug out my favourite of the larger teapots (stout steel, charity shop, five cups with ease).

‘Had something at lunch. Cold, needless to say.’

I felt a faint dread at his answer. Of course, the right thing was to provide the man a hot meal. I’d eaten alone, almost exclusively, in the twenty-something years since my earlier-than-planned retirement. Should I not be glad of the company? I took the menu from the drawer. I usually only treat myself on Christmas Eve; the thought of another takeaway in barely three months sweetened the deal. ‘You eat Chinese, Barry?’

‘Damn right I do!’ He was moseying in the hallway, examining the pictures on the walls, hands clasped behind his back, expression of mild interest on his face, the way a royal surveys a foreign custom. ‘But honestly, Ron, don’t worry yourself.’

‘My treat. Please. They’re very efficient. We’ll have you back home inside an hour, lickety-split, warm and fed.’

‘You’re a true gent.’ He took his tea mug from me with two grey hands.

‘The set menu for two has always stoked my fancy.’

‘Allonby House?’ he said, peering closely at a school photograph hung by the kitchen door. ‘Your kids went there?’ He didn’t disguise his amazement that someone of our standing might educate their children at such a place.

‘No. Not *mine*.’ I replied.

‘The fees must be *frightening*.’

‘I believe they are. No, I was on the staff. Gave thirty-nine years of my life to that school.’

‘Get less for murder,’ Barry said, gulping his tea.

‘I was the caretaker, officially speaking.’

‘Unofficially?’

‘Well, I did all sorts. Built props for plays, coached the chess team. And I taught some classes too, as time went on. Science mostly. English. History sometimes for the older boys—eleven, twelve, thirteen in some cases. I even had my own tutor group

for a while—a scholarship class.’ My tone was braggy. I tamed it before continuing. ‘Things weren’t so *regimented* back then, I suppose.’

‘They must’ve thought very highly of you, Ron.’

‘The boys used to call me Spike. You know, instead of Mr Thorns. You get it? Instead of . . . Thorns.’ I stopped myself saying *Ray* just in time.

‘Spike. I see.’ The nickname didn’t amuse him like it does me. ‘Who’s this bloke with the bright green hair?’ He tapped a shaky finger on the glass over where the masters were seated.

‘Well now that, would you believe, is in fact yours truly.’

‘No!’

‘As God is my witness.’

‘You’re telling me punk made it as far as London’s poshest prep schools?’

I laughed. ‘Something like that.’ I must have in my possession twenty school photographs from my life at Allonby House, but it was this—1982, year of the green hair incident—that I’d given wall space to, hanging there long enough for the fleeting sweep of morning sun to begin washing the colours away.

‘That *is* you,’ Barry said. ‘I can see it now.’

I smiled at those stacked rows of young men, each of whom would be something around fifty now. ‘Yes. I suppose it was.’

‘So you couldn’t have sent yours there, then?’ he asked, as I refilled his mug. He was still wearing his coat, still looking every bit as cold and pale.

‘Sorry, my . . . ?’

‘Your own children.’

‘Yes, right.’

‘Don’t they usually do a deal for teachers? Cheaper fees?’

‘I wasn’t a *teacher* in the strictest sense. Perhaps there was an arrangement in place, I forget. But no, I didn’t . . . take it up.’

‘Don’t suppose it did them any harm.’

‘Tell me about yours,’ I said quickly. He was only too keen—gabbing for some minutes about his son and daughter-in-law’s emigration to the Costa Blanca, their many successful businesses, the achievements and fledgling careers of the grandchildren.

It’s not that I’m in the habit of *inventing* children and grandchildren for myself. More that people assume, and I don’t go out of my way to correct them. This was not the first time I’d found myself head of a fictitious family, through no real fault of my own. The trouble is, people do love to talk about these things. There seems no harm in letting it be imagined that I had a wife, be her dead or divorced, and my quota of two-point-four children; not if that belief leaves someone free to enthuse about them and theirs.

Easier, certainly, than trying to convince someone that I am perfectly content to be a bachelor. It does afford one so many freedoms, after all.

I have, on a few occasions in the past, dared to confess to the fact that I almost *did* marry someone, once upon a time. But it’s a statement that invariably leads to all sorts of questions that I’d, frankly, prefer not to entertain.

‘You’re shivering, Barry,’ I said. His monologue had run its course, during which he had sunk onto the only stool in the kitchen.

‘Yes, I’m not quite feeling a hundred per cent.’ There was a stubble of sweat on his top lip.

‘I think these few days have taken their toll on you, young man,’ I said. My voice was suddenly different, a sound that echoed back to decades ago.

‘Think so,’ he huffed.

‘A nice warm bath? Would that be the thing?’ And still there was, I’m sure of it, no indication that he was seriously unwell.

‘That’s a fine idea,’ Barry said.

I cleared a path up the stairs in order that a foot could be landed on every step. Thankfully, there was a clean towel, one

of the good ones, resting against the cylinder in the airing cupboard and piping hot, perfect for when he was done. I filled the tub to within a whisker of the overflow with a decent glug of bubble bath (used not as an indulgence, but it works wonders in preventing a tidemark after draining). With the towel, I left a choice of talcs, and a good pair of slippers I've yet to wear.

'You go and relax, Barry,' I told him in the hallway as I slipped on my overcoat to go and grab the takeaway, figuring the privacy would be appreciated in addition to the warmth. Finding little cash in my wallet, I left it on the telephone shelf, instead retrieving a couple of twenties from one of my hiding spots inside the 2007 Yellow Pages. 'I'll be back in half an hour or so, armed with a feast!'

'You're a pal, Ron,' he said once more.