

Wrapped in Ivy

While fixing his necktie in front of the hallway mirror, Martin glanced up at the oil painting which was framed on the wall at the top of the staircase. He found his view interrupted when Cassie came down the steps in her silk dressing gown.

Martin returned to the kitchen and sat down to stir his coffee. He took it black with no sugar. Cassie followed him into the room.

"Morning honeybun," she said.

"Morning."

"You look tired?"

Martin tightened his mouth into something between a smile and a grimace as he kept stirring the coffee. Cassie drew up behind him, draped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek with a coquetry that was entirely natural, a gift of youth. Her breath smelt sweet; it was coated with the mint of toothpaste.

"Oh, why are you being a sourpuss this morning?"

Martin slid his hand underneath the sleeve and stroked her arm. Her skin was luminous. Fresh ivy wrapped around the trunk of an ageing oak.

"You're up so early this morning, it's quite unlike you," he said.

She rubbed her hands in glee.

"Oh there's a reason for it."

He was half amused by her schoolgirl enthusiasm, half annoyed by the frivolity of her tone. He looked at the shiny surfaces of the new kitchen. They matched the brilliance of Cassie's teeth. For a moment he considered what surprise she could be hiding in the bedsit of her imagination.

"I hope it's not a reason with a huge price tag."

"Oh, you *are* being a sourpuss."

The sharp cut of her bracelet began digging into his chest. Martin slid his fingers under her arm. He clasped her wrist and rubbed his cheek against her palm, but pulled away when her fingers reached out to reciprocate the gesture.

"I have to go to work," he said.

"Today?"

His eyes narrowed.

"It wasn't declared a public holiday the last time I checked."

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"It's your birthday."

"And?"

Cassie puckered her lips and the shrill joy turned dour, flattened by the concrete tone of his voice.

"Nothing," she muttered.

Martin drank the rest of his coffee in silence. Once finished, he stood up and pushed his chair back. The hind legs growled against the floorboards and tested the ageing veneer. He looked around the room. Over the last few weeks he'd grown bemused by Cassie's desperation to impose her will on the house, hauling in her tacky tastes in a bid to stamp her personality on the place. He walked over to the sink and placed the mug in the rack of the dishwasher and then looked out of the kitchen window. A robin flitted across the window and perched on the bird table nailed to the apple tree. Its beak opened and its throat trilled, but the double-glazing muted its morning song.

"Will you come home early, at least?" Cassie asked.

"I'll try my best."

Martin strode out of the room, stopping briefly to plant a dry peck on her cheek.

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The journey to work was like a thousand other journeys. He had the car radio on. A disc jockey with a helium voice promised a phone-in listener a cash prize providing she correctly answered a set of questions relating to the plotline of the previous night's episode of a soap opera. Martin knew only too well how the cogs of the broadcasting industry turned, since he was one of those who worked the machine. Over the years he'd sat in on innumerable board meetings, staring at

spreadsheets, musing with accountants, appeasing the creative minds, trying all the while to find a way to draw in more listeners, searching for profitable partnerships, taking endless lunches with advertising executives in a desperate bid to keep revenue coming in.

Once in his office Martin sat down in his chair. The fleshy leather moulded to the familiar curve of his back, a back that was curling, becoming more foetal with every passing year. He opened his diary and riffled through the pages. He stopped when his office phone rang.

“Hello?”

Martin recognized his daughter's voice.

“Darling, it must be the middle of the night in Texas. Is everything OK?”

His daughter began to sing ‘happy birthday’. Martin didn’t interrupt her, suddenly hostage to the gesture of love. It was lovely to hear his grown-up daughter regress to her girlhood, to a time in their lives when their futures were fertile like a river in spate. Once she finished she reassured him that everyone was fine, her husband was doing well, that little Jack wanted to sing happy birthday to his granddad, but couldn’t stay up and she had to carry him to bed because he fell asleep on the couch.

“Daddy, we’d like you to spend the summer with us,” she announced.

Martin put the phone to his other ear.

“We’ll see,” he replied.

“You always say that,” his daughter reproached. “And whenever you say that, it usually means that you won’t.”

“Darling, you know how it is. Sometimes it’s difficult to get away.”

“You promised Jack last Christmas.”

Martin blinked slowly. The memory flashed before his eyes, the sacredness of making that promise to his grandson. At the time he could hardly deny the four-year-old boy who had clambered onto his lap with eyes imploring him to say yes. He knew his daughter had put the child up to it, but it was Christmas and family surrounded him: the season of snuggling into sofas, carrying full bellies and warming the feet by gleaming log fires. It was perfect apart from those moments when his wife’s absence was keenly felt, moments when he would look into his daughter’s face and see the happiness drain; for both it was the realisation that

things could never go back to how they once were. The pause on the line was enough to reveal the pain of loss, still raw one year on.

“Daddy, we all miss mum terribly.”

Martin bit his top lip.

“Did Jack get the parcel I sent?”

“Yes, he loved it.”

“Good.”

There was another pause.

“Are you OK, Dad?”

“Of course I am, darling.”

“Are you sure?”

His daughter had good reason to ask. After losing her mother in a motoring accident ten months ago, her father had hit the skids that lasted a whole three months before he finally agreed to see a therapist. In these sessions only once did he reveal the true extent of the pain, which shone in his wet eyes as he spoke of the plans they had made for retirement and how the indelibility of these promises seemed to disappear as if they'd been written in water. Of course, all this was before he had met Cassie at a corporate function, the attractive PR girl, who went on to become his girlfriend and then drew him out of his bereavement by appealing to what remained of his primal nature. It was the easiest way to get over the shock of his wife's death. Most of his colleagues were relieved that he'd finally decided to move on, look to the future rather than remain morbidly fixated on the rearview mirror of his life where there was nothing but a smoking wreckage.

“Dad?”

Martin's grip on the phone tightened. His lips parted. He thought he would say something but the words weren't there. Somewhere in the back of his mind there was just a pile-up of thoughts, all mangled and confused.

“Dad?”

“I'm fine,” he asserted. “Cassie's planned a birthday party.”

There was a short hiss on the line. It was his daughter's breath.

“Dad, we can come to see you in the summer.”

There was a knock on Martin's glass door. The clerk was standing on the other side, leaning his head into the glass.

"Darling, I have to go now. I'll call you in the next couple of days."

"I love you, dad."

"Love you too, darling."

Martin put the phone down and gave the man at the door the slightest of nods. The man came in, hunched and languorous.

"Yes?"

"Can you sign these expenses forms please?"

Martin took the envelope from the clerk and turned it over in his hand.

"Whose are they?"

"Carl's."

The man waited with his pale arms crossed over his soft bulk. He'd been a long-serving member of the company, with a bovine placidity that everyone else found sweet and disarming. He'd been doing the same job for over ten years now, somehow remaining impassive to its lowbrow sameness, and only really came to Martin's attention by outstaying all his contemporaries, most of whom had moved on to better roles elsewhere.

"Is that it?" Martin asked.

"Yes," the clerk said. He turned to leave.

"You OK?"

The man turned back round, quivering with an animal timidity.

"Yes, Mr Porter?"

"You OK?"

"Sure."

"Come, sit down for a minute."

The man sat down at the table opposite his boss. His face was fat and freckled, which made his features appear small, insubstantial.

"How's the family?"

"They're fine."

"The kids?"

He was a little taken aback by this unusual interest in him.

"They're good."

“Don’t you have two girls?”

“Yes.”

“How old are they?”

“Six and nine.”

There was a pause.

“You know, they grow up so quickly. Now you’re walking them to the school gates. Next thing you know, you’ll be walking them up the aisle.”

Martin stared right through his employee with a blade-sharp intensity. He wasn’t interested in the man at all, but in something more profound, as if against the weight of his disillusionment, all he wanted was to release the distilled wisdom of a lifetime’s existence which had been showered with mistakes. Martin got up and walked around the desk. He placed his palm on the clerk’s shoulder, like a clergyman. He smiled and the skin around his eyes crimped up, the cheeks flushed drawing out the spidery veins under the skin.

“You’re a good man.”

The clerk looked back at Martin unsure of what to say. He smarted his nostrils wondering whether his boss had indulged in a morning tippie. All he smelt was stale coffee. All he sensed was a stone cold sobriety.

“I must get back to my desk.”

After the man left the office Martin tossed the envelope into his work tray. He looked at the pictures on the wall, the shards of morning light glancing off each glass frame. The wall was clad with photographs of awards and corporate events staged in the great cities of the world: London, Paris, LA and New York, a few early ones from a stint on local radio where his profile rose to prominence. It was a record of the people who came and went through the revolving door of his professional life. Arms around Betty Wills: a one hit wonder. There was Terrence Kapowski, who made millions managing a girl band to exhaustion, and had been spending the loot guiltlessly ever since. The mogul Don Bridgeman, fat fingers dipped in every media pie, a boorish man who had always confused wealth with charm. James Elliot, aka "DJ Chunes", who sought critical acclaim after popular success, but seven years on was still tinkering somewhere in a recording studio, trying in vain to compose real music for real music lovers. Suzie Dean: the rumour ran that she’d converted to Buddhism. Man-eating, gold-digging Suzie –

wondrous to think a spiritual soul fluttered underneath all that plastic. As Martin came to the final picture, he suffered a twinge of dissatisfaction, aghast by his automatism, realising that he had occupied the same leather seat for the last forty years. The blood beneath the skin of his face began to heat up. What he saw on the wall was a tapestry of false memories, a montage of Martin in his monkey suit left to posterity.

Martin buzzed his secretary on the intercom and asked her to cancel the day's meetings. He kept his voice flat, clipped of any inflection, denying her the opportunity to irk him with her whine of concern. He left the briefcase under his desk and vacated the office building, his overcoat cradled in the crook of his arms.

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Outside Martin looked up at the sky, the May sun casting its impersonal light on a myopic world running busily from pillar to post. The light clouded his eyes. He looked away. The smell of traffic polluted the air. It left a metallic taste in the mouth. He walked past the line of trendy coffee houses, went into one and bought a regular latte. He sat on a stool by a window.

As he drank from the plastic cup, Martin pulled out his Blackberry. He worked down the list of numbers. He stopped at Anna's number.

Two years had passed since Martin last saw Anna. They were old friends, one-time lovers. They'd met each other in the back room of a London pub during the mid-seventies to watch an up-and-coming band. He was a talent scout working for a record label while she was fresh out of university, carrying a hunk of anger, and finding a vent in the pissed-off voices fronted by new bands like the Sex Pistols and The Clash. It wasn't love at first sight, but a mutual understanding. They were together for two volatile years, fighting, cheating, fighting because of the cheating, and then cheating because of the fighting. When Anna finally realised the reason why the relationship wasn't working and told him in her calmest voice that the problem lay with her, not him, he cringed at the corny line and left, slamming the door on his way out. Gradually, they came to realise that a friendship could be salvaged out of their union, the passion

softened into affection, and the passing of time arbitrated the relationship into a sibling-like bond.

His decision to call her was impulsive. It took three rings for Anna to answer with a bright, sibilant 'hello'. She seemed happy to hear from him.

"It's been such a long time. What are you up to?"

"Oh, you know, the usual."

"Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine."

Martin was a little disappointed that Anna hadn't remembered his birthday.

"Are you around?"

"What for?"

"Nothing really, just a catch up."

"Would you like to come over?"

"Sure."

"Still living at the same address?"

"Yes."

*

Martin pulled up to the cottage set in the bucolic countryside, the building flanked by two deciduous trees. He sat in the car for a few minutes, a little nervous. He got out and walked up to the house, the sloping path to the door tweaking the arthritis in his ankles. A wind blew, bringing out the musk in the trees, and the afternoon sun glared through the cloak of blue. He rapped the knocker tentatively. He stood there rigid trying to recall the last time he had seen Anna, trying to remember her face. He rubbed his hands to rid the tremor of apprehension and then practised a few smiles. He reached for the knocker a second time when the door opened with a whine. Anna stood before him, her green eyes flecked in delight.

"Hey Martin, it's great to see you."

They embraced. Although in her 50s, she was still slim as a needle. A small rock of amethyst graced her clavicular neckline. She had tied back her copper-

coloured hair, which brought out the length of her neck. She had retained the angularity of her younger years, the pay-off from remaining childless.

“Come in.”

Martin followed her into the house. The hallway and living room housed a cornucopia of life drawings that were on the walls; sculptures were dotted about the place. In the conservatory adjoining the living room, a dustsheet covered a work-in-progress. Martin's curious eyes lingered over the abstract shape underneath the covering.

“What's that?”

“Oh, my latest project.”

“A sculpture?”

“Yes.”

“Of what?”

Anne narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“You're interested?”

“Yes.”

“It's a human form denoting that we are all a composite of many selves. We are in constant flux, an entity governed by the changes that happen around us.”

“You're saying all that in a sculpture?”

“It never ceases to amaze me how a philistine like you has managed to work in the broadcasting industry all his life.”

“It says more about the industry.”

“You sounded a bit... off on the phone?”

She stared at him intensely as if she were trying to read his thoughts. Martin ran his hand through his thinning hair self-consciously, suddenly aware of his loose skin, his torso that was weighed down by a preposterous paunch. The crippling shame that the ageing process had sped up in the last two years. He was relieved to be rescued by the ring of the house telephone.

Anna took the call. It was her partner. The pair discussed the evening's plan to go to the cinema. Martin fastened his attention on one of the paintings hanging on the wall. Anna's conversation reflected in the glass frame before him. He waited for Anna to put the phone down.

“What are you going to see tonight?”

"It's Bergman season at the repertory."

"How cultured."

"It's lunchtime. You hungry?" Anna asked.

"A little."

"I'll fix you a sandwich."

Anna went to the kitchen.

"Cheese and pickle?" she called out from behind the partition.

"Fine."

Martin sat down slackly on the sofa and listened to the knife slicing the chopping board. He wondered why he was here.

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During lunch Martin ate with his head close to the plate, like a child worried about dropping crumbs. Anna asked all the questions. She knew about his wife's death and the meltdown Martin had suffered. Three weeks after the tragedy Martin's daughter called her late one night asking for help. Anna had tried to get in touch with Martin by phone at first, but he refused to answer any of her calls. She then sent him a card but Martin never wrote back, perhaps angered by the fact that his daughter and his one-time lover had been discussing his fragile emotional state, crowding in on his personal grief. The last thing Anna wanted to do now was dredge up his painful past. She sensed that his charisma had been blunted, turned on the lathe of his misfortunes. The gravitas was no longer there. She couldn't decide whether it was exhaustion or defeat.

"How's Vicky?"

"She's fine. I spoke to her this morning. She's insisting I go to visit her this summer."

"You should do."

"It's finding the time. I don't think it's possible."

"That's a pity."

Anna rose and picked up the empty plate she'd served Martin his sandwich and took it back to the kitchen. She returned with a new energy in her voice.

"I hear you've got yourself a new girlfriend?"

Martin could not look up to meet the test of her eyes, yet wasn't about to let her words force him into a shell.

"Yeah, I couldn't deny my caveman instincts."

"What's she like?"

"Cassie's an absolute doll. I'm a very lucky man to have found someone like her, you know, at my age."

"Don't be silly."

"What do you mean?"

"You're Martin Porter."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Age is irrelevant to people like you."

"And is that what you think this is?"

"Well?"

"Cass isn't meant to be some kind of escapism."

"I never said that."

"You thought it."

There was a pause.

"I just think you could have waited a while."

"For what?"

"You should have considered Vicky's feelings."

"Vicky has her own family. She lives thousands of miles away with her husband and little Jack."

"Martin, you don't exist in isolation."

"You make it sound as if I'd planned the course of events."

They stopped, both surprised at how their voices had risen. It was a measure of their friendship that they could speak to each other with such frankness, despite having not exchanged a word in the last two years. Anna reached for her cigarettes on the mantelpiece. She rolled one between her fingers.

"Do you have light?"

"I quit smoking a while back," Martin replied.

"Well done, you."

Anna paused to think, then looked at Martin.

"I shouldn't be so judgmental."

“No you shouldn’t.”

“I’m really happy for you.”

“How’s Judith?” Martin asked.

“She’s fine.”

Martin looked around the room. The house was filled with feats of imagination, liberty, courage, and fuck-the-world attitude framed in each canvass.

“I admire you. How you’ve always run with your convictions. This morning I was studying that painting you gave us as a present. It’s on the wall at the top of the stairs. It’s been up there ever since we moved into the house thirty years ago. I was trying to make sense of all those abstract patterns of light and shadow. They’ve always looked like ghosts soaring out of the canvas. But today they looked like bright lights, nothing more. And yet it suddenly made sense... if that makes any sense. Do you know it was Jo’s idea to hang it up there.”

“Joanne appreciated my paintings more than you ever did,” Anna said.

“But that one has grown on me. Maybe if you have something around you for long enough, it begins to grow on you no matter what it is. I think that’s what Jo thought about me.”

Anna was caught up in the reverie. The day Martin introduced her to Joanne she knew that the two would get married. Over the years they had all become good friends. They once went on holiday together. During that memorable summer they had rented a villa in the Cote d’Azur, drank expensive wine, ate cold meats and cheese, chatted under starry nights, while marvelling at the sight of bougainvillea that the stone walls of the house were dressed in.

“Martin, it will get easier,” Anna suddenly said, her voice a tender touch.

“It sure will.”

“But you have to give yourself the time to mourn.”

Martin cringed at Anna’s cloying words, at her grand supposition that he was an animal still writhing in its suffering. He’d done all his mourning, traversed the labyrinth of his innermost grief and come out into the cold light, still intact, still wanting to live. Most of all he was annoyed that she’d reduced his new lover to a ruse. He wanted to announce that Cass was the new jewel in his life, but kept himself from making the rash inference. He wasn’t sure of anything these days.

“The two of you were soul mates,” Anna said. “I’m sorry,” she added, her eyes kindly, sopping with sympathy.

Martin heaved a sigh, the bones of his ears tightening against the mew of sympathy.

“Please don’t apologise.”

*

Driving back through the night Martin felt every bit his sixty-two years, his own body now creased up, surrounded by the leather trim and the smell of the new car, the affluence he’d spent a lifetime trying to acquire. He had loved his wife so deeply and even now felt betrayed by her, although none of it was her fault. He pushed hard on the accelerator and gripped the steering wheel hard. But regardless of how fast he travelled along the road, beyond the windshield there was the stretch of night, headlights illuminating the car’s approach, marking the time-space continuum that he felt incarcerated in. When he pulled up to the house, he broke hard and yanked the handbrake on and switched the engine off.

The house was lifeless, filled with the cruel indifference of ordinary objects, their static silhouettes. He felt awry, and couldn’t bear to turn on the lights. Martin wasn’t sure where Cassie was or when she would return. He threw his car keys on the granite worktop in the kitchen where it skidded to a halt. He yearned for a smoke although it had been over five years since any tobacco smoke had passed his lips. He sat on a stool at the breakfast table in the dark, his face stamped heavy with a disappointment he couldn’t explain.

Martin heard the click of heels, and saw a flicker of light heralding a celebration. Cassie had leapt out of nowhere with a cake, the flame of a single candle burning assuredly on top, like a blessing. She set the cake down on the table and took Martin’s clammy hand into her warm one. The couple were framed in the nimbus of light, excluded from all else in the house.

“Happy birthday, Martin,” Cassie said, her smile revealing her beautiful white teeth and the optimism of youth. Her eyes were warm and restful, a palliative to his soul.

“What are you doing sitting in the dark?” she asked.

A change took place in Martin. Delight charged through him.

“Sorry about this morning. I was being obnoxious.”

“You’re such a silly man.”

Martin threw his arms around Cassie and hugged her passionately, clung to her. Her flesh felt soft and solid at once. Beautifully perfumed. The remainder of his life gathered into this clinch. He was grateful that a woman’s warmth could weave itself into the threadbare fabric of his final years. It didn’t matter how long it would last. The only thing that mattered was that it wrapped him now.

“Aren’t you going to blow out the candle?” Cassie asked.

Martin turned to look at the cake.

“And don’t forget to make a wish,” she added.

Martin took a deep breath and, balloon-cheeked, doused the flame. But there was no wish to make. It had already been granted.