

Foreclosure

A short story by
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I couldn't help but groan as I turned over. My cocoon was warm and cosy because I had put extra covers on the bed. I don't just like to feel warm, I like to feel the *weight* of warmth. I like my bed. It's my friend. I share my dreams, thoughts, fantasies and lusts with it. I can discuss ideas with myself without fear of contradiction or ridicule. Why leave it?

I picked up the phone - that's what I use as an alarm clock, my mobile phone. I got it at a car boot sale for five euros. Works alright.

I knew I had to get up, a thought that made me sigh. I was doing more of that these days. Eleven fifty-two. Jesus, it was late. Where had the time gone?

Yes, where had it gone? I put the phone down and rolled over. A fart escaped. 'Bugger!' I hate the fact that when I am horizontal I fart. Plays havoc with my love life. *What love life?* A single guy in his sixties is about as welcome as a turd in a pool. A lone wolf: a threat to all those retired old farts I meet when camping. The sixties' hippies in their camper vans. They are all well over retirement age and had never been hippies in the nineteen-sixties. No free love, wacky backy or groovy chicks. Probably civil servants and the like. Now they have prejudice and opinion: old farts' defense against common sense.

I could lie a few more minutes, soak up the pleasure, so I did. I rolled over and fell asleep. Funny how I remember it all so clearly now. But it was a raggedy sleep. Damned conscience nagged at me so I got up at 12.34. I remember I groaned as if facing an enormous trial. Don't know why.

The sun was streaming in through the slats of the blinds and I knew I should get up. I was reluctant but there were things to do so I swung my legs over the bed, took a deep breath and stood up. The icy cold, tiled floor was a bit of a shock and the desire to pee was

instantaneous. I scuttled off to the bathroom, which is situated on the terrace, outside in the cold. Silly place to put a bathroom.

Friends had loaned me their house in Spain, an Andalucian village house. A great nest in which to recover from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Things might have been outrageous but there was no fortune attached. Yes they had been outrageous alright! Suddenly found myself in the divorce courts, broke and alone. Not what you expect aged sixty-five but then, what *do* you expect? She wanted out, she said. Out of what? I asked. You! She had screamed.

My life has been spinning in cartwheels for a year now. No focus, no plan, no idea where I am going or why. Getting older is no picnic. I am not even sure I want to continue. I have achieved nothing, am worth nothing and have nothing. A baby boomer gone bust. Bankrupt in every department. I knew things had gone wrong but I couldn't work out exactly why. At times I think my next meal will be a bowl of rat poison. Funny the thoughts you have when life treats you like a doormat.

I boiled a kettle and poured the water into the teapot, a strange, green, ornate affair. I think they bought it at a flea market. Should have left it where they found it.

Someone on the radio was bleating on about how bad the situation was, how Africa was still starving, oil prices were continuing to rise and yet another Arab country was going up in flames. Frankly, who cares? Where is the good news in the world? There must be some so why do they only report the bad? Is it because people are actually born pessimistic? Do they need bad news as some sort of antidote for their happy thoughts?

I cracked two eggs into the frying pan and the phone rang. 'Yeah?' I half yelled into it. We do that don't we when people catch us on the hop; you know when we're busy.

'Is that Robert Bruno?'

'Who wants to know?' I said stirring the tea.

‘Meet me at the bar Rincon at one thirty.’ The phone went dead.

‘Cheeky bugger!’ I flipped my eggs in the pan.

One thirty came and went. I was re-reading a Tom Sharpe book in an effort to cheer myself up. It was only partially successful so I poured myself a glass of wine; it’s on special at the supermarket, and settled back to try and coax a laugh. At 1.37 the phone rang. ‘Robert Bruno?’ Oh-oh, it was the nutter again.

‘Yeah.’

‘I waited for you.’

‘Listen chum, I don’t need insurance, double-glazing or a new garage door. Thanks all the same.’ I hung up. The phone rang back immediately.

‘Mr. Bruno you misunderstand me. Please be at the bar at two o’clock.’ He hung up.

I had been ordered to appear by an unknown mystery man. Jesus! I would be there alright! But first I had to poop. Advancing years leave no room for doubt. If you get a twinge you go or the very next thing to appear in your shorts is ...well, you know what I mean.

I got to the bar on time; my curiosity had gotten the better of me. I ordered a beer and sat by the window watching the door. A small man of very strange appearance approached. ‘Mr. Bruno?’

‘Yeah.’

He was wearing a smart suit, a crisp white shirt and a red tie. His shoes were polished to a mirror finish and he wore, what looked like, an orange wig. It was eighty degrees but he wasn’t sweating. ‘Glad you could come,’ he said and sat. He smelled: a bit like mothballs but not quite as nice. I noticed his orange wig was slightly crooked.

‘So here we are.’ I said nothing. ‘You are no doubt wondering why you are here.’ I still said nothing. ‘Mrs. Shirley Thompson. Ring any bells?’

‘Shirley. Yeah...so?’

‘We were rather...well *upset* by what you did.’

‘Which was what?’

‘Oh come, come now Bob. May I call you Bob?’ I sat quiet as the grave. ‘You talked her into it.’

‘Into what?’

‘Dying. She took your advice and gave up.’

You could have bowled me over with a feather. How did he know that? Shirley, a lovely woman but not wanted at home. Badly disabled by her fall and destined for a care facility. Cut down in her prime and her husband was a swine, wanted rid of her. I suggested that if she really was that unhappy maybe now was the time to step off the merry-go-round.

‘My life,’ she had said, ‘is...’ She had paused. ‘Know what I feel like?’ I remember I shook my head. ‘My life is like a dying swan looking out over a sun-kissed river for the last time. Seeing all the other birds with their chicks, all happy and content. And me...’ She had started to cry. I tried to comfort her.

‘Listen,’ I said holding her tight, ‘this life is not all we have. If it gives you too much pain just...move on.’ She stroked my face and smiled. She knew what I meant. We sat like that for quite a while.

When the news came two weeks later I wasn’t surprised. Sad, but not surprised. That’s when I came out here.

I turned to face the man sitting beside me. ‘Listen chum, she did what she did. Her life was not something she wanted anymore. It was hers to give up.’

‘Ah but that’s not quite how it works I’m afraid. You see she made a contract.’ Stupid little man. He was a bit like a Partick Thistle supporter, you know, someone you couldn’t really

take seriously.

‘A what?’

‘She made a contract. She was a dancer, an average dancer but she wanted to be better!’ He smiled. ‘To do that she needed help.’ He was still smiling. It was a pleasant enough smile yet there was something not nice about him.

‘So she got help. What’s the big deal? Did she owe you money?’

‘No. She owed us her life.’

‘Sorry?’ I said quite taken aback.

‘We gave her more talent and she profited by having it. She had a good career until her fall. The deal was we got her soul. You see, *you*,’ he said tapping my arm, ‘messed things up when you convinced her to give up prematurely. She owed us ten more years. So here I am.’

I stared at the little fellow not sure whether to laugh, throw my beer over him or just tell him to piss off. ‘Look chum, whatever she did she had her reasons. I don’t get all this, she owed us claptrap. So now we’ve met how about we part.’ I said it as a statement. He smiled even wider and patted my arm again, a gesture that was beginning to annoy me.

‘If only it were that simple!’ He almost laughed. ‘Since you are the party who officially took over her debt, it falls to you to repay it.’ I started to laugh. ‘Oh I assure you this is no laughing matter. The debt remains and I am here to collect.’ This foul little man was beginning to get up my nose.

‘Really? And how exactly do you propose to do that?’ I laughed again.

‘We take the ten years from you. You are genetically programmed to die,’ he pulled out a small notebook and leafed through it, ‘in ten years, three months, five days and ten hours from now. We deduct the ten years, three months, four days and three hours that Mrs Thompson owed us, which leaves you one day and seven hours to live, give or take a few minutes.’

I stared at him in disbelief. ‘Are you *entirely* off your noodle?’

‘Not at all. I suggest you enjoy the beer then get your affairs in order.’ He plonked a folded paper on the table. ‘Notice of foreclosure,’ he announced. ‘Duly served.’

I took a swig of my beer as he left. Foreclosure on my life? Bloody nutter! But it had been an uneasy meeting all the same. Foreclosure on my life! I started to laugh.

As it transpired the following day I felt perfectly well. I’m not denying I didn’t have an uneasy night. Let’s face it you don’t come face to face with a complete fruit loop every day, despite Mrs Thatcher’s Care in the Community programme.

My day passed well and I spent a bit more time than I had intended in the library looking up how to make the perfect paella. Turns out there’s lots of different varieties so I was a bit late in getting home but I had bought fish the day before and really it needed cooking so I had it with some rice.

I sat down to eat about half past nine on the terrace; well in Spain they eat that bit later don’t they. And it was a lovely meal until the fish bone got stuck. But that’s not what did it. What did it was the fact that in my panic, when I stood up coughing and spluttering, I caught the leg of the table with my foot, which sent me arse-over-tit which brought about a meeting of my head with the wall. That’s what did it. Polished me off.

So here I am, in a sort of transit area waiting for my name to be called. I’m not sad. Glad it’s over really but talk about surprise! What happens now I have no idea it’s all a bit...well confusing.

Still, I might meet Shirley. I hope so.