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The early morning call meant a prime corpse to negotiate. Vic sat on the Jubilee Line passing through Bermondsey.

With his tongue he worked on a crumb lodged in a molar. The woman opposite looked up and wondered at the strange face he was pulling. Vic glanced at the newspaper on her lap, a London free-sheet. No headline for the West Brom game. No joy there. He returned to his crumb.

You'd always get a seat at this hour. Some comfort at least to compensate for the early start. To Vic's right a swollen, sweaty woman revealed a pastry from a greasy paper bag. The processed meat smell hit Vic's delicate stomach like a taste of the night before. Not this morning, please. Don't spill your pastry flakes on me.

He picked up an abandoned copy of the *Mirror* to provide a barrier against the debris. Flicking through the pages he read about a singer, originally from Manchester but now based in LA, who had agreed to perform for a wealthy St Louis property tycoon at his son's bar mitzvah. Agreed for a fee of a cool million dollars.

A million for a night's work. The line the report took, how proud we should be, one of our own transforming herself into a global star capable of pulling down such a fee. When only three years ago she was doing extra shifts at the launderette to pay her way through music school. There's a lesson for the rest of us.

A million for a night's work. Not even a full set list, just a run

through her five or six hits to date. Maybe an embarrassing smacker to plant on the cheek of the boy coming into manhood. Another for the father who made this happen, a photo-op for the man with the cheque-book. And there's a revenue equal to that of her first album, a sum you could retire on, won through a rich man's folly. You could swallow a servant girl's shame, surely, for one night only.

The woman opposite stared at Vic again. What is it? Something hanging from my nose? He had dressed in a hurry so anything was possible. He lifted his glasses to rub his eyes. A glasses day today, no time to insert the contacts. In this state he'd probably have poked his eye out.

Vic was thinking of a million for a night's work and of Hendrick at the obits desk, no doubt waiting there already. Waiting to carve the cadaver, plotting a line from pelvis to sternum. Coming from Earlsfield Vic would always arrive last to the summons. He took an overland train to Waterloo, swapping to the tube there. Whenever the call came – a worthy case – Vic would hit the table late, picking up the scraps. He realised he was yawning and covered his mouth.

Vic scanned the rest of the paper for news of the West Brom game. The scoreline, 3-1 to the Baggies – but what else? The minutes of the goals, the red and yellow cards, likewise of no concern to him today. So what was he expecting, that they'd print the number of corners in the match report? He'd have to wait to find out.

Stepping onto the platform a man shambled towards Vic and asked him for the price of a cup of tea. The guards normally caught them before they got this far past the ticket gates. Vic dug around last night's receipts in his pocket, conscious of the obstruction he

was causing, and pulled out twenty pence. That would do.

The man took the money without a word and moved on to the next passenger coming off the train. Vic watched him at work while he rose to the station concourse, heading towards the light, the wide bank of escalators that would bring Vic out at Canary Wharf.

‘This dog’s breakfast of a life. There’s a tale here somewhere.’

Bruce Hendrick propped himself on the edge of Jason’s regulation office desk, his full backside straining the fibreboard. Jason himself sat back to watch the self-professed master at work. This could be the last time. He spotted Vic stepping out of the lift, breathing heavily, and nodded gently. Jason chuckled, knowing he’d soon be shot of all this. Hendrick followed Jason’s gaze.

‘Afternoon Victor. We had to start without you.’ Hendrick pulled his tie straight and refused to acknowledge Vic’s plaintive stare.

The newsroom was still more than three-quarters empty. A few political correspondents Vic knew reasonably well were holding an impromptu meeting around a desk on the far side of the hall, drinking from large paper cups. Beneath a wall of screens carrying news feeds from every corner of the globe, they formed a more dynamic mirror to the meeting Hendrick had called to discuss Lloyd Parks.

‘We wouldn’t usually hold any truck with suicides. Or lottery winners for that matter. Our staple diet is achievement, the merit of lofty ambition fulfilled. Such is the narrative of a notable person’s life – in youth a vision formed, becoming reality in age, with a procession of obstacles overcome along the way. And yet,

in this sad case, this man to all degrees hopeless...’

‘Do we know that now?’ Vic asked, sitting at his desk and turning over a notepad. ‘He definitely offed himself?’

‘His people have put it out as an accidental overdose.’ Hendrick smiled, flashing sharp, irregular teeth. ‘You can make of that what you will.’

Jason shot Vic two thumbs up behind the boss’s back. Vic had told him of the corners coup last night, before they had stuck into the cocktails in earnest, and Jason had lumped on, minutes before kick-off. He’d said it could provide a handy going-away kitty. But what did two thumbs mean? A good result, for sure, but just how high had the bet settled? Vic asked Jason with his eyebrows.

‘We’re not often given to writing parables, yet here we must. The story not the story of this man, not this one feeble lost soul, but rather a cautionary tale that embraces us all.’ Hendrick checked himself, looking down at Jason. ‘That is, all of them, eh Mr Conder? The captivated masses, our dear readers. Clutching their tickets and their paltry dreams to their empty chests.’

Jason cupped his jaw, showing Vic two fingers and then five. Shit, 25 corners in one game – can’t be. Jason confirmed with a small nod and grinned, rubbing his fingers together. Vic returned to the land of the living. Having bought at ten, a make-up of 15 to a hundred quid unit stake. That’s a grand and a half waiting in Vic’s account.

‘Maggie will prepare the copy for tomorrow’s printed edition. With the convenient time of death we’ve got a fair run at it, so I’m expecting a decent job. Jason, well – it’s too late in your tenure as shuffle-monkey for you to contribute anything worthwhile. Sort your desk out. Vic will do the legwork. Prove to me that one shuffle-monkey can do the work of two. Bring me something by

three.’

Hendrick rose and strode back to his office in the corner behind their desks. Passing Vic he said, ‘You’ve been sleeping with the derelicts again? I should give you a raise.’ As he disappeared through his doorway he added, ‘Either that or the boot.’

Maggie, the senior obituary writer, called to Vic without turning from her monitor. ‘I’m going to need cuttings on Lloyd Parks from the lottery win, the album release, anything about the record label. Anything else of interest you can find.’

Vic knew what was coming next. What always came next. If it wasn’t to be Jason then it had to be Vic.

‘And I’m going to need you to visit the widow.’

What could Vic do with a grand and a half? That’s over two months’ rent. Or he could blow it on a 40-inch telly, with enough left by for a week in Rome. He could do with a new bike too.

Either that or feed it back into the stake fund and give himself a better return next time. Just think, if he had a bigger pot he could have really cleaned up last night. When you know the result in advance you’ve got to give it everything you have. That’s just the law.

The word had come from Tony on the sports desk. The Baggies’ centre-half, Jim McCulloch, was having trouble making maintenance payments to his ex-wife and the club had told him they wouldn’t be renewing his contract. He was going to use an end-of-season dead rubber for a spot of private enterprise. Tony said McCulloch had arranged a string of spread bets under false names, buying the total number of corners in the game. All he had to do was put the ball out of play every time it came near.

Twenty-five, though. You can't do that without arousing suspicion. Vic pictured McCulloch, unchallenged, heading the ball past the outstretched arms of his keeper for the tenth time in succession, the manager going spare on the touchline, fans swearing and ripping up their tickets. He wished he'd seen it.

Jason had followed him in all guns blazing, purely on Vic's word, for the sheer reckless hell of it. He must be looking at near-on three grand himself. See, that's what you can do when you've got a pot.

Vic was sitting on a low wall in a leafy part of Epsom, staring at a large, detached Edwardian house. He let the rare May sun bear down on him while he gathered the courage to approach the front door.

This was the worst part of the job. There were some shitty parts to it but this was the shittiest by far. Knocking on the doors of the newly bereaved to ask them for any extra facts or anecdotes that might spice up the obituary. You could write the piece without any such help – indeed, you wouldn't want the loved ones to dictate a hagiography – but Hendrick felt some eyeball contact was a necessary part of the process. To gauge the life by the sense of loss. Hendrick never had to pay the call himself though, did he?

Jason could handle it. He would flatter the bereaved with patrician charm, the easy manners of the well bred. He would make them feel honoured in a way Vic could never quite manage. Vic was always too conscious of the fresh stench of the corpse in the back room.

Vic rang the doorbell. It was certainly a nice house, nicer than any house Vic could ever imagine owning, but a couple with £13 million in the bank should be living in a mansion, shouldn't they? While he waited for an answer he took off his glasses. He wasn't

sure why.

The door opened and Vic knew this was the widow herself, no staff or well-meaning friends to handle doorstep enquirers. He recognised her from the publicity photo, eight years younger, her and Lloyd holding opposite ends of an oversized cheque. He had unearthed the article before leaving the office.

‘Good morning... Mrs Parks? My name is Vic Skipworth. I’m with the *Post*.’

Vic was an old geezer’s name, he thought. He didn’t like it, didn’t think it suited him, but then Victor sounded too brash and not at all friendly. He used Victor Skipworth for his byline, not that he had a byline any more. On the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* his copy had carried a byline, before he had moved up in the world.

‘That’s very nice for you. And?’ The face of the widow implacable, a face that weathered storms with dignity, unchanging. His hasty research had said that she was 38, and Vic thought she looked fine for her age.

‘And I was hoping I could ask you a few questions about your husband. You see, I’m working on his obituary.’ He couldn’t say he was writing the obituary, that was Maggie’s job, but he could say he was working on it.

‘The man from the *Times* offered his condolences first.’

Vic flashed angry at the man from the *Times*, angry at himself for rushing in.

‘Of course, Mrs Parks, I’m very sorry for your loss.’ And now he sounded like a train announcement. He hated every second.

Mrs Parks waited for Vic to speak again. Vic thought he could see the merest trace of a smile, as if she was laughing to herself, laughing as he wriggled on the pin.

‘And I’m sorry to take up your time at this difficult... time. I

only thought... you might have something, some way you would like your husband to be remembered.'

'Tell me something.'

She waited again. 'Yes,' Vic said.

'How do you decide who gets an obituary and who doesn't?'

'That's, er, that's an editorial decision.'

'Yes, and how is that decision made?'

Vic thought back to meetings with Hendrick, the Hendrick philosophy: we find the story within the life. If there isn't a story it's not going in. We're in the business of entertaining readers, that simple. We owe no duty to posterity or the grieving family. We tell the story that catches the imagination.

'It's a matter of weighing achievements,' Vic offered. 'That and the subject's... visibility in public life. In truth there's a whole mess of factors – notoriety, personality, notable events, a narrative thread.' Vic saw the widow's eyebrows rise at the last phrase.

'And would my husband have merited an obituary before he bought a winning lottery ticket?'

'To be honest with you, Mrs Parks, no he wouldn't. But it's fair to say that his achievements since have set him apart from the merely fortunate.'

'And what did he achieve?'

'The music. The albums. He was an accomplished man in his own right.' Vic felt bad saying that. What authority had he to pronounce on the dead man's life? And anyway, he knew it was a lie. Without the money behind him what would Lloyd Parks have achieved? A mid-level career in marketing with hidden dreams of musical stardom.

The widow considered Vic from the ground up, from scuffed shoes to scarecrow hair. 'It's OK Mr Skipworth, I know the story.'

A tragic tale of untold riches failing to bring happiness. And now, the final act played out to order.’

Vic couldn’t reply. She had nailed it.

‘Would you like to come in?’

Vic sat in Lloyd Parks’ living room, looking out at Lloyd Parks’ roses and petunias thriving in the sun, waiting for Lloyd Parks’ wife to bring him a cup of tea. The room was neat and well appointed, heavy velvet curtains drawn back on a sturdy oak rail, a yawning fireplace set into one wall, but it wasn’t exactly what he’d expected. What had he expected? Thrones and carved cherubim?

He remembered Lloyd of course, particularly from around the time of the album, the publicity machine shoving his face at you from every media angle in the effort to drive sales, but he had to refresh his mind on the detail. That was the case with so many of their subjects, people whose days of prominence had long since passed, for whom death provokes one last brief public remembrance.

Lloyd first hit the public’s attention when he won £13 million on the lottery. This middle-class hero, thrown into luxury – a thoroughly decent and deserving winner. Vic had discovered this morning that before the big win Lloyd had worked for a major confectioner. One of his interviews made reference to the UK launch of a new chocolate bar which Lloyd had managed. He had risen steadily through the ranks, with all the rewards that entails, but now, Lloyd said, he could take a leap into the unknown.

The next we knew of Lloyd he was releasing a single, then an album. Vic could recall a snatch of a melody, something about the

wind blowing his way. The single hit the top 20 on the back of the dream-come-true publicity but the album sank. It failed to recover the production costs, never mind the advertising, all of which Lloyd had paid for himself. Shunning the need for record company backing – all those A&R men who had rejected his teenage demos – he had set up his own label.

The failure of the album hit Lloyd hard, according to articles from that time. He sought insight from focus groups, each time the answer coming back the same. Where's the conflict? Where's the triumph? Why should we award this lucky man even more success? We're happy for him, we don't begrudge him the lottery cash, but he really shouldn't overstep the bounds.

Lloyd reimagined himself as Phil Spector, took refuge in the studio. He discovered new acts and wrote and produced their material, scraped the upper reaches of the charts a few more times. Once he appeared on *Top of the Pops* playing keyboards in the background of a performance by Wavemaker, a new wave guitar band on his roster, Lloyd hovering at the edge of frame in dark glasses and a tall hat, but otherwise he played the part of the recluse, the mighty mogul.

Vic thought of him in recent years as an eccentric figure, working on secret projects out of the public eye, recoiling from the glare of the spotlight. Just a couple of months ago, however, there was talk of a relaunch, a new album. Lloyd gave a TV interview in which he came across as troubled, erratic. There was talk that this 'difficult' new persona could strike a chord with the public.

Mrs Parks put a mug on the table beside Vic.

'If you don't mind me asking,' Vic began. 'Why didn't you move house when you came into money?'

The widow sat down, smoothing her skirt beneath her in one

controlled movement. Vic glanced at the hard line of her calves.

‘You have to remember,’ she said, ‘this house was always our dream, our ambition, before we had the money. The day Lloyd asked me to marry him he brought me here, told me our offer had been accepted. We never wanted to move anywhere else. We thought we could stay here and improve the house around us. Lloyd built his studio, we added the spa. But the neighbours – we had always got on well but now, well I guess they thought we should be off somewhere in line with our new means, not rubbing their noses in it. There were complaints about the construction work.’

She rolled her eyes and smiled. Vic wondered whether she’d been crying earlier in the day. If she had there was no trace. Her make-up was immaculate.

‘But what do you really want to know, Mr Skipworth? What’s going to give your story the edge over all the others?’

Was she teasing him now? Vic gave the question due attention. ‘I think... I imagine what our readers really want to read is, well, was it worth it? The happy couple and the hand of fate. How did the money change them?’

The widow sighed a little and Vic felt disappointed that this was the best he could do. He rushed to fill the silence. ‘I’m sorry if it’s all too soon.’

‘No, don’t be sorry.’ She waved a hand across her face and waited. ‘It would be a cliché to say we were happier before we had the money, and of course we loved having it, but we had something else before.’

Vic reached in his pocket for his notepad. ‘Can I quote you on that?’

‘If you must.’ The widow let out a little laugh. ‘But Mr

Skipworth. This isn't a conversation if I don't get to ask you something.'

'Please. Ask me something.'

'Here's something.' The widow stared hard at Vic. 'How do you reconcile yourself to working for the *Post*?'

Vic rocked back in his chair. 'What's to reconcile? We're read by two million people every day. One of the oldest papers still in circulation.'

'Two million spiteful, reactionary people, hateful of anything they cannot understand.'

'There's the history.'

'And will history absolve *you*, Mr Skipworth?'

Vic flicked through the pages of his notebook.

'You don't look like a spiteful man, Mr Skipworth. So why do you write for a spiteful newspaper?'

'It's a career, Mrs Parks. For seven years I was at the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* and the best I ever earned was 18 grand. You've got to work for a national if you want to make it in this business.'

'And were you happy in Wolverhampton?'

'With the greatest respect, Mrs Parks, that's easy for you to say.'

What was he saying? You don't argue with the bereaved. But how could the woman remain so calm, her husband barely twelve hours dead?

'Do you remember the last headline your paper printed about my husband?'

'I'm sorry Mrs Parks, no I don't.'

'They called him "Loony Lloyd". That's what you wrote. "Loony Lloyd's Comeback Flops at the First Fence."'

'It wasn't me, Mrs Parks.'

‘They never forgave him for not signing with Flagship.’

‘Flagship Records?’

‘It’s all part of the same MediaNet empire isn’t it? He wanted success as an independent, but you boys never forget a slight, do you? They trashed him in the *Post* from that day forward. It’s like a vendetta for you lot. A Mafia grudge that can never be paid off.’

‘I’m sorry Mrs Parks. No one ever said anything to me.’

‘Above your head, eh?’

‘I guess so. Yes.’

‘Let me show you something.’ The widow rose and left the room, Vic wondering how quickly he could wrap up the interview. Why couldn’t Maggie come down to Epsom and face the iron gaze of the widow? As Hendrick’s lapdog she got to file the copy and order Vic around, but on the *Chronicle* he had won awards. He had written sports reports, crime stories, human interest, investigative pieces on local government contracts, comment columns. Some days he had filed nearly half the copy in the paper. All of which he had mentioned in the job interview for the *Post*’s obit desk. When the call came through – congratulations, you’re in – he had popped a bottle of champagne and imagined the London high life. That was five years ago now.

Vic was draining his mug of tea when the widow returned holding a leather folder. She put the folder on Vic’s lap and stood over him.

‘I wonder if this would add colour to your story. Another of Lloyd’s apparent quirks.’

Vic opened the folder and turned a few heavy card pages. It was a stamp collection. Without his glasses Vic squinted at the designs. Each page was devoted to a different stamp, three or more copies of the same stamp mounted in clear plastic sleeves, either

in rows or in still-attached blocks, intact from the printing press. He recognised they were all British, old but not ancient with vivid colours. He guessed they were from the sixties – certainly pre-decimal. He saw one design of whizzy sports cars, another of the Post Office Tower.

‘Why the multiple copies? Why are they all the same?’

‘They’re not the same. Look again.’

Vic focused on the page in front of him. The stamp had an orange background with red and black cars in the foreground, ‘6d’ in the top-left corner and a large queen’s head to the right. Three of the four stamps were identical, but in the fourth the black sports car was missing.

‘They’re errors. Misprints. The press was loaded with three inks and one of the inks ran out, but nobody spotted the mistake before the stamps entered circulation.’

‘And Lloyd collected these?’ Vic carried on turning the pages.

‘He adored them. He loved the idea that a simple error could result in something unique. To him they proved the true value of the misfit.’

‘So the mistakes are worth as much as the real thing?’

‘As much? A hundred times as much. You’ve got an instant rarity. That one there, Lloyd bought it for 13 thousand.’

Vic was looking at a strip of three dark-green stamps with a design of the Houses of Parliament. From the first stamp a young Queen Elizabeth II stared forth, printed in blue. In the second her face was cut down the middle. In the third she had vanished completely, leaving only a blank white box.

‘This is worth 13 grand?’

‘That’s nothing. Lloyd’s passion was to buy a Swedish misprint from 1850-something that last sold for two million dollars.’

Vic closed the folder and handed it back to the widow.
'He would have, too, if I hadn't stopped him.'

In the hallway Mrs Parks asked Vic, 'Will you mention the way Lloyd went?'

Vic put his notepad away and tried to compose a tactful answer.

'We don't want to encourage... What I mean is, nobody ever warrants an obituary just because of the manner of their passing. And where there's a post-mortem to come we won't make it an issue. In cases like this we don't have to, Mrs Parks. People generally know.'

'You mean he makes the front page too.'

Vic put out his hand. 'I really am very grateful for this. For you speaking to me...'

The widow smiled and took his hand. 'At this difficult time?'

Vic shrugged gently. 'That's how we put it.'

'The language of condolence.'

'One last thing and I'll leave you alone. Only for the record, can I confirm your age?'

'You're not afraid to ask a woman her age, Mr Skipworth?'

'Just so we don't print a mistake.'

'Don't worry Vic. I'm 38.'

The widow laughed to herself and opened the front door. 'All the way back to school,' she said, 'I was a year younger than Lloyd. I guess I'll have to start catching him up now.'