

THE WASTE PAPER BASKET

Malcolm was overjoyed when he found the flat. He could not believe his luck and had he been asked to describe the way he felt, he would have said he was over the moon, beside himself, and on cloud nine, all at the same time. It all seemed too good to be true. There it was, nestling in the miscellaneous advertisements in the Edinburgh newspaper. A furnished single bedroom flat with a kitchen and sitting room. The bathroom was shared, but who worried about that? Not he!

His excitement and anticipation were not diminished in the least when the woman who answered the telephone said that it had not been taken and was still available. The terms were "reasonable". Would he like to come and see it? Just let someone try to stop him!

The house was large and rambling, dark, and clearly very old, standing elevated and alone in damp, laurel-filled, grounds. "Parts of it date back to Stuart times, or even earlier," the woman confided in him once he was inside the stained glass front door and following her to the rear of the house and up a gloomy, narrow, winding staircase. "It was converted into flats whilst my husband was still alive."

She addressed him over her shoulder as they went higher and higher. "I am afraid that your flat is at the top. I should also explain before you see it that it is a wee bit dilapidated. It needs one or two things done to it to make yourself really comfortable. I expect my tenants to do those small jobs - my tenants seem happy to do that and the rent reflects this. I canna say more than that."

And the rent was low, Malcolm had to admit to himself. As he stepped on the threadbare stair carpet and passed the dingy walls which had been last papered in some ancient time, he tried to brace himself for a disappointment. There must be something dreadfully wrong with it: wall paper and plaster peeling off, or floor boards missing, or fungi sprouting everywhere. But he would not listen to himself. This was the flat, his flat! He knew it! "Do mind the stair carpet," she added. "Especially near the top. There's one or two holes in it. We are nearly there."

She was old, clearly very old, Malcolm thought. He had been taught that it was indelicate to guess or speculate as to a woman's age, but when they were this old..... She might even be as old as the wall paper. None of that mattered, just so long as the flat had a reasonably comfortable bed and somewhere he could sit and work. And even that was not essential. He could always go to the University and work there. "Here we are," she announced, producing a large key to undo the mortise lock. "You'll note that's there's no landing," she said as the lock clicked open. "This used to be the maid's quarters, but that was long, long ago. At least up here you are all alone and away from it, if you like that sort of thing. That's what I tell my tenants. And you have a bonny view. Do come in."

Malcolm was surprised by the shaft of light that drove through the facing dusty window and illuminated the tatty carpet. This was the living room from which opposing doors led to the bedroom and the small kitchen. Above his head was a hatch leading to the loft. Before him the windows were framed by dark maroon curtains which reached down the floor. A once polished wood table and three uncomfortable chairs stood to the right of the facing window and two what might have once been comfortable armchairs surrounded the gas fire. Next to the kitchen door was a cupboard which, he was told, housed a water cylinder.

The floor boards creaked under foot as Malcolm made his inspection, sitting on the edge of the bed and pressing his hand into the mattress. He crossed and re-crossed the room, looking in drawers, opening the kitchen cupboards, but he knew it was a pretense, this visual inspection. His mind had been made up before he crossed the threshold. "I'll take it," he said.

He gave the woman a month's rent in advance for which she handed him two keys and muttered something about a rent book. No, he did not have a car. He had come up by coach and all his luggage and personal belonging, such as they were, were, he hoped, still at the small,

friendless, commercial hotel where, he had been forced, by circumstances, to stay at great expense. He would go and collect them straight away.

Malcolm was not only anxious to recover his possessions, he was anxious to make another telephone call. There was little purpose in 'phoning home. His stepfather would not be interested in knowing where he was, and if he was not, his mother would not be either. But there was one person who would be, though he had desisted from making the call during the three weeks he had been in the hotel in Edinburgh because he was not certain what her reaction would be. But now he had the flat, things might be all right. Perhaps his luck would hold. Had a man answered, he would have hung up straight away.

"Hello?" said a woman's voice.

"Samantha? Is that you?" he whispered as if someone might overhear the conversation. His heart was pounding.

"Yes. Who is this?" she asked coldly.

"Its me - Malcolm!"

There was a brief pause before she answered brightly, "Malcolm!" Then she repeated his name, but with more reserve.

"Is it all right to talk?" he said hastily. "I'm in a phone box."

"Yes! Give me your number and I'll call you back." A minute later she was back on the line. "This is an Edinburgh number, surely? Where are you?"

"I am up here, at the University. And I've got a flat."

"A flat?"

"A flat! Its almost self contained and most discrete. I am moving in today. Can we meet? Would you like to come and see it?"

There was a further, lengthier, pause. "I think I could," she said, not without a note of hesitation. "My husband is away for a few days, but I'll have to be careful. How about tomorrow afternoon? If you give me your address, I could come over."

He told her.

"That's a nice area," she said.

She could always say that she was his mother, he thought, but he did not say that. "I will have to warn my landlady. Shall I say that you are an aunt?"

Samantha laughed at the other end of the line. "Your aunt? I expect that every nephew wished he had an aunt like me. You may say what ever you like, my sweet. Until tomorrow!" Malcolm heard her lips pressed against the mouthpiece, then the phone went dead. He slowly replaced the receiver and, without thinking, pressed both buttons. Machinery clanked, but no change emerged.

He stepped out into the bright, sunny, street. Now there were things to do, lots of things. He could clean and smarten up the flat, put up pictures, buy some flowers, make it look inviting and more like home. Of course, it would not match Bournemouth. Nothing would match Bournemouth. Back in the tiny kitchen he found that there was no hot water and studied the note that the landlady had left with him setting out all the particulars of the flat and the arrangement. He learnt that there was an immersion heater and the switch was in the cupboard by the kitchen door.

An ornately decorated waste paper basket blocked his way. It was made of metal, painted or enameled red, with oriental markings in gold on the outer faces. The removable cardboard insert which protected the inside appeared to give out traces of a faint sweet aroma. He was about to pick it up when he was distracted by a noise on the stairs outside. When he opened the door he was confronted by a short, pretty, red-haired girl who, he thought, must have been about his age.

"I am sorry," she said wistfully, blinking her pale blue eyes at the sunlight. "I thought I heard a noise and came up to investigate. I didn't realise that Mrs MacPherson had let the flat. What happened to Fleure?"

"Fleure? Who's Fleure?"

"I am sorry," she repeated. "I should have introduced myself. I am June and I've got the flat below this one, down there."

"Would you like to come in for a moment?" he asked, trying for that moment to put Samantha out of his mind. As he opened the door fully he saw her fully bathed in the reflected sunlight. She was attractive! Had it not been for Samantha No! That would all be far too complicated.

"Oh, all right. Just for a moment," she said casually and brushed past him. "I haven't been in this flat all that often, but it has always seemed cold to me, even now. How strange! Do you always keep a waste paper basket in the middle of the floor? And, isn't it unusual? Mine is quite plain in comparison."

"It's in case the roof leaks," he joked, thinking that he could not recall placing it there. "You mentioned someone called Fleure."

"Yes, she was the last occupier - before you, that is. I had no idea that she had left, but, then, no-one appears to stay all that long in this flat. I expect its because its cold. I think Wendy - she was here before Fleure - stayed only a couple of months. And, before her was Jacob! he seemed to be here no time at all! How did you find out about it"

"Malcolm."

"That's a nice name," she said softly. "In fact it will be useful to have a man about here again. You are useful aren't you? If you're not we'll have to make do with old groper."

"Who?"

"Haven't you met him yet? A real lecher - thinks he can get away with it because of his age! Not with me, he doesn't! He lives in one of the ground floor flats and is very thick with Mrs MacP. You will soon meet him. He's a horrid old man! But, do tell me how you found out that the flat was vacant. Did you know Fleure?"

"No!" he said abruptly.

"Of course you didn't. How, then?"

"I saw it advertised in the local paper."

"You did? Are you sure - forgive me, of course you are sure! Only, I didn't see it, and I usually look at the vacancies. Where about was it?"

"In the property ads under flats. I'm sorry. I would show you but I threw the paper away." This was not strictly true but he felt less than enthusiastic about telling her that he had written Samantha's telephone number on it, then left it in the telephone box by mistake.

"I don't know how I could have missed it," she said dis-believingly. "And what are you doing now? Getting settled in?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact an Aunt is coming to visit me tomorrow."

"An aunt? Not from Brazil? I'm sorry, please go on."

"My Aunt, who is not from where the nuts come from, is coming to see me tomorrow afternoon and I was just about to start cleaning and tidying the flat up."

She nodded approvingly. "It needs it, and I expect there's a small list of jobs to be done," she said, but did not offer to help. "If you need anything, just pop down," she added from the doorway. "It is strange. Are you telling the truth that Fleure has gone? You haven't just moved in with her?"

"No," he said laughing and wondering whether Fleure was the kind of girl that he would like to move in with. "Why do you ask?"

"Its just that I thought I caught a whiff of her scent. Just here, by the door. It must have been my imagination. Forget it!"

“What on earth was I going to do before all that?” he asked himself aloud once he had watched her descend the stairs and closed the door. “Oh yes, the immersion heater.” Once again he picked up the waste paper basket from in front of the cupboard door and looked inside. There was a single piece of paper at the bottom. He could make out the word “ATTENTION” written in large characters, beneath which a note said

“To the new occupier,

Please note that the switch on the immersion heater is faulty and potentially dangerous. I am very sorry but I never got around to getting it fixed,

Fleure”

Malcolm felt somehow comforted by the thought that the flat's previous occupant had taken the trouble to write the note and place it where it could be seen in front of the cupboard door. For a moment he was tempted to take it downstairs to show June, but before he could, there was a sharp rap on the door.

It was June. “Look!” she said, triumphantly. “Here's the local paper and I cannot find a single mention of the flat in it. No mention at all!”

With an air of resigned and assumed patience he took the offered paper and turned to the property page. But now that he looked, he could not find it either. “It must have been a different edition,” he said.

“I didn't think they did different editions of the local paper. And I've looked in last week's, and the week before. It's not in either of those, either!”

Malcolm shook his head. “No, it was definitely this week's. I know I saw it in this week's paper. but it doesn't matter does it? I mean, the flat's here and I'm here. And I have a note from Fleure - look!”

June took the note and read it. “That's just like her and typical of this place,” she said, handing it back to him. “Things to be put right and her not doing it, but leaving a note for someone else to do it. And the wiring is not the only thing wrong with this building. Goodness knows what we would do if there was a fire. Its a long way down to the ground.”

“But the rent is very reasonable. At least, mine is.”

“Yes, there is that,” June said and sniffed, wrinkling her nose. “There it is again! Can't you smell it?”

“No? Smell what?”

“That fragrance.”

“I'd say it was the flowers, only I haven't got them yet!”

“I am sorry,” she said, yet again. “I am taking up all your valuable time. Just watch out for the immersion heater switch!”

When he gingerly opened the cupboard he found an ancient fusebox and isolator at eye level, below which was another switch. On the wall, partly obscured by a large black scorch mark, were the words “Immersion Heater”. He would need tools. A couple of screwdrivers and a pair of pliers ought to suffice. He could buy them, the flowers and other things whilst he was out. And then he could have some hot water.

Given the limited time he had available, he thought the flat looked quite presentable when he decided he had finished. He had put a lot of effort into it, and it would pay dividends, he was sure. Vases of flowers stood in strategic positions. Intense application of a stiff brush and the vacuum cleaner had brought fresh colour into the carpet and curtains. There was new bone

china - Samantha liked bone china. The bed was neatly made and turned down. And he had repaired the immersion heater switch so there was now plenty of hot water. Everything was as good as he could make it and in readiness for the occasion, and for Samantha.

"I met a very strange woman downstairs," she said as he opened the door. "Is she some kind of witch? There was a dirty looking wizard lurking in the background if she is! She asked me if I was the young man's aunt. What did you say to her? Oh this is quite nice! Its not quite Bournemouth and I see you are all ready for me!"

"I'm sorry," he said sheepishly.

"Don't take it so seriously. You become too intense about these matters. It is I who have to be serious and careful. Its one thing romping about on the South Coast, three hundred miles away, and quite another doing it in my own back yard. I don't know what my husband would do about you if he found out, my sweet. And we must not let him as I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. Goodness me, its warm! I'll have to take some of my clothes off!"

"June said she thought it was cold. I'll see if I can open a window."

"I do hope she's not listening! You are not the only one who's aroused. I feel pretty frisky! Don't worry about the window - I'm more agile when I'm warm."

"Would you like something to drink?" he said, tentatively, his mind on the bone china standing, ready, in the kitchen.

"Oh, not until after!" She kicked off her high heeled shoes and slid her hands up her leg. "Let's see the bedroom, then."

Stocking-less, she kissed him and drew him to her as they sat on the bed. It did not creak. He knew that. He had tested it during the night. "Un-zip me," she whispered. Malcolm complied, and she had started to unbutton his shirt when quite suddenly she stopped and froze. "We are being watched!" she hissed.

"Watched?" he gasped, looking around the room. "Who? Where? I'll draw the curtains."

No, no," Samantha said, hastily adjusting her clothing. They're here, watching us. They're all around us. I can feel them! It's no good, Malcolm. We can't do it here. Don't ask me to explain - I cannot. I just cannot stay!"

"Samantha!" he croaked.

She paused in the doorway. "I am sorry, Malcolm. Its not you. Its nothing that you have done. Call me tomorrow - about half past ten. I'll be waiting. We can work something else out." And she was gone.

He went to the head of the stairs and listened to her steps as she descended the soft carpet then clattered across the stone floor in the hallway. The front door clicked and closed quietly but distinctly. She was gone. For a moment the large house seemed still, quiet, almost like a mausoleum. Then a door opened below him, shedding a shaft of light onto the landing. June appeared and looked up at him. "Your aunt didn't stay very long," she said.

"She had - an appointment to go to."

Her eyes flashed a knowing look which made Malcolm feel uncomfortable. Feeling dejected he returned to his flat and slowly closed the door. All that work for such a bitter reward! What was it Samantha had said, that they were being watched? Who could have been watching them?

The bedroom was not overlooked and it would have taken someone with a powerful pair of binoculars to have spied upon them from the nearest high ground. Could she have meant that they were being watched by someone engaged by her husband? How would he know - unless Samantha had already aroused his suspicions by seeing someone else? Or could it be that June was watching them? It was an old house. There could be secret passages, boarded up sections of rooms, those kinds of things. He had once seen a spy film where a couple had been watched and

filmed through a two-way mirror. There was no mirror in the bedroom, but there might be spy holes.

He found nothing. Nothing in the walls or the floor. Nothing in the ceiling. The loft hatch was in his flat. There might be another, of course..... A periscope at the window! That was it! June had a periscope and had been watching them from her flat!. He went swiftly to the window intent on opening it and all but fell over the waste paper basket which was sent scurrying across the room. As it rolled away, he picked up the piece of paper that fell out.

Malcolm assumed that this was the note left by Fleure. It was not. He read

“Dear New Occupier

Just to let you know that the window sash cords are broken and if you are not careful the sash will drop just like a guillotine. They need to be propped, but do be careful because the frames and ledges are rotten and the glass could drop out.

Wendy”

“How nice,” he thought. “A note now from Wendy!” It seemed to be the done thing to leave notes for successive occupants, telling them what jobs needed to be done. Perhaps he could have left the immersion heater switch? Whatever, he would do the same and keep up the tradition when his time to leave came. And Wendy's advice was sound as far as the bedroom window was concerned. The sash would not stay up on its own for any length of time and parts of the frame were so rotten he was surprised that the panes had not fallen out. And as for having potted plants on the ledges - forget it!

Gingerly he lowered the sash and lost interest in investigating the periscope theory.

He 'phoned Samantha from the University. She sounded terse and upset. “I didn't sleep at all well last night,” she said tearfully. “And now my husband is coming home tomorrow, several days early. I'll have to pull myself together by then. I think its best that we don't meet - not for several weeks - not whilst he's home.”

“Can't you come to the flat? I mean, I couldn't find any way that anyone could be watching”

“Your flat? Goodness, no! I never want to set foot in there again.”

“A hotel, then?”

“No, Malcolm. I am sorry. I've been thinking about it, about us, and our relationship. I think we should think very carefully about what we are doing. Give me a month or two, then call me if you are still interested. You might have found someone else, someone your own age, by then. This June girl, for instance. If I do not hear from you, I will understand.”

“But, Samantha” he began. It was no use. She had gone. Sadly he returned to the lecture but he did not hear a single word that was said for the remainder of that academic day. He had only a gruff word for June when she passed him on the stairs as he went up to the flat. Fancy Samantha suggesting he should find someone else. And June, even if she were available, or prepared to make herself so, would be of no comfort now if she was, as she had just said, away for the weekend.

A wave of heat struck him as he opened the door. The first thing he saw, standing in the sunlight in the middle of the room, was the waste paper basket. It appeared to be an ideal prop for the window. He picked it up and inverted it and as he did so, another piece of paper fell out and landed at his feet. Obviously it was from either Fleure or Wendy. He wondered what they were like and whether they had enjoyed a stable love life. Why had he to go and get involved

with a married woman? And one who was old enough to be his mother? But, to be fair to Samantha, she had not acted like his mother. What had changed her? He looked around the flat. There was nothing there. Perhaps she would change her mind after a couple of weeks and return.

Still clutching the piece of paper he went into the bedroom. It looked an ordinary room. It could have been improved by redecoration, but there was nothing, no clue or hint, to explain Samantha's attitude. He lifted up the sash and carefully inserted the waste paper basket below it. To his relief sash, frame and glass remained intact and an integral whole. Then he looked at the piece of paper and his heart leapt. It was signed by someone called Jacob! There seemed no rational reason why he should find a note left by someone who had occupied the flat before Wendy and who must have left months ago. Perhaps it had been caught up in the lining and only fell out when he turned it upside down. And what did it say?

“To whoever it may concern

I should warn you that the cap-thingy is missing from the gas pipe to the fire in the living room and the wooden plug sometimes works loose. It needs to be checked and tapped in from time to time.

Jacob.”

Malcolm went to the door and studied the gas fire, focusing on the pipe. There was a piece of wood rammed in one end. He was not sure whether it was loose or not, but he used the pair of pliers to tap it in just the same.

A loud crack of thunder woke him from his troubled dreams. The flat bathed in an incandescent glow and periodically illuminated by a dazzling flash of lightning. He could hear the rain beating down outside and immediately thought of the waste paper basket. And the open casement.

He had to take it into the kitchen to empty the water out of it. Crossing the living room, he found the carpet wet under his feet. Water was coming, slowly but relentlessly through the ceiling close to the cupboard that housed the immersion heater and its newly repaired switch. There was only one thing to do. He placed the waste paper basket in the middle of the spreading dark stain, strategically under the leak, and went back to bed.

Very soon the “ping” of each drop that descended into the waste paper basket became a “plop”. And although he closed his bedroom door and placed the pillow over his head, he could still hear it, mechanical, incessant, a distant heart beating.

Malcolm got up again but could think of no way to stop the noise or even reducing it. He eyed the loft hatch. Perhaps, if he could get up there, he could do something. It might be no more than a loose tile or a slate which could be slid back into place. But although he found he could reach the hatch by standing on a chair, he was still too low to haul himself up into the pitch black void. So he dragged the table under the opening and stood the chair on top of it. It seemed to be very precarious. “I had better be careful,” he thought to himself, “because if I fall off, June is not here to hear me.”

It was rickety and the chair did wobble alarmingly, but he balanced and pulled himself up, sitting for a moment with his feet dangling down into the room. He could not see a thing but he was aware of a sweet aromatic smell. And when a sudden flash of lightning ripped across the night sky, the loft was briefly illuminated through a small rectangular hole in the roof. “Got you,” he thought and went down to find the matches.

“I should have bought a torch,” he told the darkness as he once again hoisted himself up and paused, sitting again on the edge of the hatch. When he lit one and held it out he gave a little start, withdrawing his free outstretched hand as if there were a snake there, about to strike. It had

been within inches of some electric wiring the exposed conductor of which now glistened in the dim light. "Goodness," he hissed. "I hope there's no gas pipes up here. This place is a death trap."

Gingerly, tentatively, Malcolm edged his way across the rafters, lighting match after match. Who knew whether they were infested with worm or death watch beetle? Any one of them might give way under his weight. Or there could be dry rot. Could that be the sweet smell? When he arrived at the location of the hole and found that he could reach up and touch the slates he felt almost triumphant, but when he did so, instead of the hole closing, several slates became dislodged. The hole became bigger as he heard them slide away, either coming to rest in the guttering or being dashed on the ground below. Now the rain was beating on him. If he left it like this it could bring the ceiling down. Of course, no-one need know his part in it. He could go back to bed and let events take their course.

No! He had to do something, but what. Desperate, he struck another match and started to scour the dimly lit loft to see if there was anything that could be temporarily placed over the hole. As he looked down, in the eerie light he caught a brief glimpse of something, a shape, a form, he was not sure what, below him. The match was extinguished by a sudden gust of wind.

When the next bolt ripped across the sky and bathed the loft in light he looked down again and saw far more than he wanted to see, far more than he ever wanted to see. From a deep, dark, closed, closet, boarded off from the flat, at least three mummified, sightless, faces were turned upwards towards him. "Oh my God!" he gasped. "They are here!"

Malcolm dropped the matches and leapt from rafter to rafter. By some miracle he did not put a foot through the ceiling and break his ankle or a leg. By some marvel, in the dark he avoided all the snaking loops of cabling anyone of which would have electrocuted him or sent him headlong, breaking his neck. It was a wonder that the chair remained firmly erect on the table as he dropped down from the loft. Still clad in his pyjamas, he opened the door and fled from the flat.

"Don't worry about the damp patch on the ceiling," said the old woman. "We had a wee leak in the roof during the recent storms, but we've cured that. the plaster should dry out soon."

"Oh, I'm not worried by things like that," said the young woman as she surveyed the living room ceiling. "I'll take it. It will suit me down to the ground! When may I move in? And I like this waste paper basket. Pretty isn't it?"

She stooped and picked up the waste paper basket which was standing like a beacon in the middle of the floor, and took out the sole piece of paper that was lying inside it. "That's nice," she said after a moment. "Someone's left me a note."

It read -

"Dear Successor,

Do watch out for the hole in the carpet on the third stair down. It can be positively lethal!

Malcolm."

THE END

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