

GIVING BACK

The old man studied the cheque, shook his head then tore it into pieces.

‘Dad! What the hell are you doing? Stop!’

He stared in disbelief as the old man piled the shredded paper onto the table, some of the pieces falling into the rings of spilt beer.

Ranting, swearing, gathered in his throat, but he could see there was little point. The old man had fallen into the habit of shredding things, forming mouse-nest piles which he fumbled or forgot, depending on his mood.

Jack reached for the papers, hoping he might retrieve something, but as his fingers touched the fragments, he felt the papery skin of his father’s hand on his.

‘You don’t want that, son,’ he said, for the first time looking into Jack’s eyes. ‘Never wanted anything to do with him – always bad news,’ he said, pointing to the shreds. ‘Family’s what you want – look after your own, I say.’

That’s all well and good, Jack wanted to snap, if your family had anything to look after each other with. His father had long since retreated to that childlike place where things should be available for a wistful look or a pocketful of buttons. The cheque had been the pathway to the dream Jack had nurtured for years – his own company, the ideas he’d had since childhood, not answering to some anonymous someone a million miles from the real world. He’d smarmed his way through countless calls and late-night drinking sessions to get the ear of the man who could come up with the goods, probably selling his soul to get within touching distance of the star he was determined to follow. Now, the entirety of his dream was nothing but shreds on a bar-room table.

Jack managed to collect the pieces while his dad was distracted by someone at the bar, disagreeing their tab, angling at something for nothing. He stuffed the papers into his pocket, then patiently fought to get his dad into a too-tight anorak, for a fourth then a fifth time talking him through the actions needed to get themselves back to the old man’s flat.

He was exhausted by the time he slumped into his own armchair. Hardly bothered with his nightly shot of whisky, despite every inch of him feeling like an exposed tooth, too sensitive to be touched, too angry to be soothed. Jack awoke next morning still slumped in the chair, back aching, legs protesting at the impossible angles into which they’d been folded for the few hours he’d dozed. For a moment he couldn’t fathom why he wasn’t within the comfortable folds of his bed, but then the vision of the cheque and his prospects, both in shreds, jumped into his thumping head. He swore, pulling himself upright, reaching for the jacket he’d abandoned on the sofa.

The pieces were surprisingly legible. He went to the table, moving aside newspapers, spreading the fragments out, reaching for Sellotape and scissors. An hour of impatient attempts produced a cheque with most of the details intact. In the bathroom, Jack splashed

water on his face, stared at the mirror to see if yesterday's shirt would do – decided it wouldn't and changed. Making himself as presentable as his blariness would allow, he drove into town.

'I'm really sorry Mr Jenkins. I sympathise with what's happened,' the girl in the red suit was saying. 'But we simply can't accept it.' She pointed at the cheque, which, under the bank's fluorescent lighting, looked embarrassingly amateur. 'Perhaps you could speak to the issuer – ask for a duplicate? I'm sure they'd oblige – it's not as if you've cashed this one already, is it?'

But Jack knew there was no way Max Venables would even discuss the matter. You got one chance with him, and there'd be no sympathy for an old man losing his marbles. He must have looked bereft, for the young woman repeated her words.

'I really am sorry Mr Jenkins . . .'

And before he could say anything his mobile rang. He was about to cancel the call – couldn't bear to speak to anyone – but saw his father's number. Sighing, he made his way to the door.

'Yes Dad – what's up?'

But it wasn't his father. It was a voice trying hard to be sympathetic, failing. 'Mr Jenkins? I'm afraid I've got . . .'

But the bad news was already in Jack's head – as soon as he'd heard the unfamiliar voice on his father's phone. 'It would have been quick . . .' – he heard that much. 'Would you be able to come . . .' He heard that too. But he needed to sit down. He slumped onto a bench in the pedestrian precinct; watched the passing feet; observed a dog peeing against a café sign. He might have sat for an hour or a minute.

A young woman came up, holding his phone. 'I think you dropped this . . .' she was saying. 'Are you okay? Can I get you something?'

He must have looked hideous, for she continued. 'You're very pale – I could call . . .'

'No – I'm okay. Just had a bit of a shock that's all. I'll be alright – you get on.'

'Well, if you're sure . . .' She took a few paces, looked back, then continued on her way.

It was the nicest anyone had been to him in a lifetime. Several lifetimes he thought, as he dragged himself up and tried to remember where he'd left the car. Reluctantly he drove to his father's flat, not wanting to see whatever there might be to see, hoping he had already been taken away.

The young policeman had presumably been instructed to stay until the premises could be handed over. Jack thanked him – assuming he'd been the one to call from his father's phone, thinking him too young for that world-weary voice – and closed the door. He was aware of

the world going on outside, but the quietness within pressed into his ears. The clock ticking on the mantelshelf. The whirring of the fridge in the tiny kitchen. For want of anything better, Jack began opening cupboards and drawers, noticing the plastic containers of lentils and dried peas which had been there since before his mother had gone; the aged flour bags given away by their outdated prices. The only recent items were packets of budget biscuits. Absentmindedly, Jack opened the fig rolls and fed three, one after another, into his mouth. He hadn't eaten since yesterday. In the drawer to the side of the cooker was a jumble of implements – peelers and ice cream scoops and a plastic rolling pin he remembered his mother filling with ice cubes. 'Ice cold – that's what you need for good pastry Jack.' He picked it up, expecting cheap lightness, but it was heavier than it looked. He shook it. Something inside, sliding solidly.

He took off the end, peered in. It was stuffed with paper. He tugged at the contents, knowing this wasn't important - other things he should be doing. He scrabbled in the drawer, finding a metal skewer. He scooped it round inside the plastic tube and gradually the paper squirmed its way to the entrance; with more encouragement it fell out.

A roll of twenty-pound notes. Then another. He couldn't help himself. He counted them. Five hundred pounds – in each.

Something had started within him. He felt there would be more. He knew. He looked around. Where would you put money in this small space? Tins and boxes seemed too obvious. But the Bird's Custard Powder tin looked older even than the lentils and the peas. It yielded another grand. The freezer. He'd heard of all sorts being hidden in freezers. But there was nothing amongst the anaemic sausages and economy ice cream.

There had to be more. The cutlery tray in the sideboard, with the best knives and forks; he lifted it out, finding beneath a life insurance policy. Ridiculously small amounts paid week after week to the Prudential man, but nevertheless . . . Jack stuffed it in his pocket. He remembered, as he scanned the overcrowded room, that there'd been something about the dining chairs, something he'd discovered as a child, thinking only he knew. He turned one over, peeled back the lining, revealed more cash. Another chair. Cushions. The tea caddy. The Quality Street tin with the crinoline lady and the soldier.

An hour, two, had gone by. Jack slumped at the table, over-dosed on biscuit sugar and his findings. He surveyed the haul. Counted roughly in his head. Stopped when he reached the equivalent of the torn cheque, still in his pocket. He hadn't even started on the bedroom yet. Had there been some logic – some small ray of clarity amongst the fog of his father's dwindling mind? Had he actually known what he was doing when he'd ripped up the dubious cheque?

'I hope so.' Jack's smile was creased by his tears as he opened the bedroom door. 'I really bloody hope so.'