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John Tyler returned to his room, trembling with jealousy and rage. He felt sick at the thought of some boy with his daughter; she was his little girl. He sat on the edge of his bed trying to control himself, still shaking at the realisation that he was no longer in control of his daughter. The confused emotions that he felt for Christine spun around his head – love, anger and an overwhelming feeling of self-loathing.

What am I going to do now? He thought the whole world would know what he had done and what he was.

Fear of the impending humiliation struck at him. His future was out of his hands and at the mercy of a sixteen-year-old girl – he was out of his depth. He had never considered a day when Christine would no longer be compliant, but now, after tonight, he knew that not only could she do as she wanted, but she had the power to inflict pain he would be unable to recover from.

She would expose him for what he had become, and there was no reason for her to hold back. He had witnessed the venom and the hatred which she had poured on him; he could hear her laughing at him through the tears.

He sat motionless on his bed contemplating the result of everyone knowing what had been going on for so long; the neighbours, the people at work – what would they say and think of the reliable council accountant? When the gossip got around – ‘What kind of man behaves like that?’ – life would be unbearable.

He was beginning to fix in his mind what he had been

doing – the damage to his daughter. He had chosen to ignore the pleading, the tears; he knew it was time to pay, but he also knew he was not up to public humiliation, incarceration and the beatings in prison his sort would be given – beaten up, stabbed or killed in the worst possible way.

His own acknowledgement of himself pierced his consciousness; the truth was that he was an emotional coward, weak, only capable of seducing young girls, and unable to handle mature women.

John remained on the bed, the past years rushing through his mind, trying to appease his conscience. He blamed Christine and then blamed his wife Sarah for not being a proper wife – not the way he wanted. She was weak and he could manipulate her to do anything he wanted, except in the most important way.

It was 3.37 in the morning and it was raining outside. John looked around the dimly lit room at the floral wallpaper darkened by age, the late fifties-style dressing table they had bought a week before they had got married.

God! It's depressing in here, he thought. Rising from the bed, he walked to the dressing table and looked down at the array of trinket boxes and make-up paraphernalia. He lifted the lid of a silver-plated box covered with fish-shaped designs and raised shell formations on each corner. He fingered the bits of jewellery inside, picking out a silver locket, the first item of jewellery he had bought Sarah.

Where had it all gone wrong? Where had he gone wrong?

He had never felt equal to women his age, and found it difficult to communicate with women he particularly liked. Sarah presented no challenge to him, because he did not particularly fancy her, so it was easier to talk. The rest was a drift into marriage as it was comfortable and she was probably the best he could hope for.

Although John was not bad-looking – his dark brown hair

and 5-foot-11 presence should have been enough – he never developed the art of presenting himself how he wanted. That low feeling inside showed in the way he stooped to walk and how he could not look his friends and work colleagues in the eye when talking to them. Confidence always deserted him when he needed it most, and an apologetic demeanour hung around him like a lead weight.

He had spent his whole youth studying to become qualified to compensate for his inability to enjoy himself and be the man he desperately wanted to be.

What a bloody mess. He repeated the thought over and over as he pulled the locket chain to pieces and threw the fragments at the wall.

His emotions were becoming overpowering. He looked up and came face to face with himself. The reflection he saw in the dressing table mirror showed the truth; it was written all over his face.

He rushed downstairs to the drinks cabinet in the dining room. He took a glass from the cabinet and a full bottle of whisky. He poured himself a large drink and swallowed it without hesitation, the whisky stinging the back of his throat on the way down. He refilled the glass and put the bottle back on the cabinet. The whisky started to deaden his raw edges. He downed the second glass, picked up the bottle and headed for the stairs, hoping to numb his feelings some more.

John placed the whisky on the bedside table and undressed, shedding his clothes in a pile on the floor. He climbed into bed and refilled his glass, cupping it in his hands.

He stared into the golden liquid, searching for a way out of the mess he was in. Drinking more of the contents of the glass seemed to help, but it made him feel emotional and apt to dwell on major events in the past – happy times when Christine was a baby. She would never be a baby again; that time had gone, all the memories corrupted by him.

ONE MAN'S POISON

John and Sarah had been married seven years before Christine had come along. His marriage to Sarah was not a natural match, and it had been difficult to keep it together. Sarah had suggested the idea of a family but it had taken some time for her to conceive. John was not overly fertile and they had sought medical help – a course of tablets to increase fertility and cycle monitoring to help with conception – though sex was not always achieved; conception and the act itself were both matters for disharmony between them.

Christine had been born in the spring of 1963, and for the next eleven years a kind of happiness evolved. Although they had been busy with work and raising their child, they had not noticed the sustained decline of their relationship. John had paid much attention to Christine and none to Sarah, and he had been the perfect dad.

Christine had developed into a bright, outgoing girl with a friendly nature and was very popular with her friends at school. But then all of that changed.

Sarah had gone to a WI meeting – a once-a-month treat for her, a chance to get out of the house and have a bit of a life other than her husband. John was only too pleased to babysit; he could put Christine to bed and read her a story, or she could read him the stories she had written for school, which she enjoyed – she loved to show off her scholastic skills, especially to her father.

John remembered how happy she was that first night. The school netball team had been selected, and she was chosen to play in the first game for the new girls at the start of senior school.

Christine had given her father a hug before going upstairs to get ready for bed. John waited till he heard the door close before he climbed the stairs to follow her into her bedroom.

That night was different to any other night. What happened

left Christine frightened, withdrawn, and not sure what had happened to her. She was too young to comprehend why the man she loved could hurt her so.

John remembered his remorse and guilt, guilt he was unable to shed or share.

Still sitting up in bed, he poured himself another drink. He wanted to sleep to forget, but couldn't. His mind was still in turmoil, renewing the scars on his conscience; despite the whisky his past misdeeds were imprinted with remorseless clarity.

What could he do? He needed to rid himself of his guilt and his impending humiliation. In John's mind there was only one answer; there seemed to be nowhere else to go, no future that did not involve pain.

I will ring Jane at the office first thing in the morning, John thought, and get her to do an updated balance of the daily accounts; must get things straight.

John poured another drink. The council's finances were a complicated set of juggling tricks and he wanted no loose ends that could be attributed to him.

The effect of the whisky had slowed him down. He proceeded to plan his exit from his predicament in a semi-daze; he had drunk half of the bottle and was not used to so much alcohol. The clock was ticking. It was 4.11; he knew he had four and a half hours before Christine left for school. Enough time to get the remnants of his life and belongings in order.

John got out of bed and put on his underpants. He struggled to balance and get the second leg into the right hole. He picked up his glass and tossed the contents down his throat, then walked unsteadily over to his wardrobe and emptied it completely, placing everything on the bed. He then folded every item and placed them back on their shelves; jumpers, underwear, socks stacked in order. He lined up his shirts on their hangers all facing the same way,

along with his three suits, hung with the left sleeve placed in the jacket pocket and smoothed them out; they looked like headless soldiers. The intensity of the reality of his impending fate was steadily taking over his whole being.

John laid out his shoes at the foot of the bed; he still had the pair he had worn when he got married, and they were the last pair of lace-ups he had bought.

He straightened the blankets on the bed, paying more attention than usual to the smoothness of the covers. He picked up the bottle of whisky and poured more liquid into the glass; he needed more courage than he had, to do what he had to do. He sat back on the bed, crumpling his smoothing efforts, sipping at his drink and surveying the wardrobe. It was now the tidiest it had ever been, in total contrast to his life. *All I can control are inanimate objects*, he thought. *People in my life are a mess, I am a mess.*

He caught sight of the old clothes boxes on top of the wardrobe, full of Sarah's and Christine's shoes that they wanted to keep – all the shoes Christine had grown out of, but that Sarah did not have the heart to throw away. He could not face going through those items; it was hard enough getting the remnants of his own wardrobe in order.

The bathroom door slammed and John woke out of his daze; the clock on the bedside table showed that three hours had passed while he was tidying the vestiges of his wardrobe. Christine would be off to school in an hour. He could not face her. The memory of the look of hatred on Christine's face – there would only be more of the same. It had been enough.

Finishing his drink, he rose from the bed, not very steady on his feet, walked to the window and pulled the curtains apart. He looked out. It was a fresh morning, it had stopped raining, and the light hurt his eyes. He could see the beach and the silver haze on the sea. He looked across the rooftops

of the village houses, which he could see from his high vantage point; each house was now a place to fear.

They would be talking about him, gossiping and judging, passing on all the details, expanded by every conversation. If the gossip was sordid, the more the people of this place enjoyed it.

God, it's sordid – I am sordid. He moaned as the feeling of disgust and self-hatred overcame him again. He wanted to escape from himself and to be free, free of the pain he had caused. The realisation of what he was hit him again, his thoughts reminding him constantly of the inescapable truth. He couldn't even put a name to what he was.

He continued staring out at the bright day, trying to sort out in his mind what to do next. John knew he had to settle his affairs and try to get every aspect of his life in order. He stayed staring out of the window and watched the village wake up.

The phone on the bedside table started to ring and his stomach tightened as he walked to answer it.

'John, is that you?' Sarah asked.

'Yeah, it's me, what do you want?' he snapped, his tone showing his disinterest. The last person he wanted to speak to was Sarah. His mind was made up to end his torment and he didn't want any distractions.

Sarah ignored his curt reply; she was used to it. 'Mum is no better, so I am taking her to see the doctor,' Sarah stated, trying to sound unaffected by his tone. 'So I won't be home till late.'

'About what time?' John asked – he wanted to know so he could plan things right.

'About seven, I should think. I want to make sure Mum's okay and get her settled after seeing the doctor. Get Christine to make you something to eat tonight.'

'Ok, goodbye!' John put the phone down, relieved that he would be free to do what he needed to do uninterrupted.

ONE MAN'S POISON

Tonight, he said to himself, *there will be no tonight.*

He pushed the telephone to the back of the table with an unconscious gesture, going back to the spot beside the bed where his pile of discarded clothes still lay. They were surprisingly crease-free, so he proceeded to complete his dressing with automaton familiarity. He put his tie on, ignoring the slightly soiled collar on his shirt, and then stepped into one of the lined-up pairs of shoes at the end of the bed.

He stood still and listened; the house was quiet. It was five minutes to nine. Christine had left for school unnoticed; he had wanted to say goodbye, but now it was too late.

John opened the bedroom door and went downstairs, listening to make sure there was no one there. He plucked his tweed jacket from the hallstand on his way to the bureau in the dining room. He searched the top shelves for his cheque book and rummaged through the pile of envelopes and papers for the unpaid household bills.

He found all the bills and laid them out on the bureau top, then continued to search for the cheque book. It was not in the bureau. A sense of panic came over him; he needed to find it.

The car, he thought. He went to the garage and looked in the glove compartment. It was another place he kept it for safety and convenience.

The buff-coloured book lay there and seemed to hold extraordinary significance, as though the search had been a lifelong quest. He picked up the book and went back to the dining room. He pulled a chair from the table and placed it in front of the bureau. John sat down and wrote out cheques for all the bills he could find. He looked again through the pile of papers to find the bank statement he had noticed on his first search.

There was £342.49 left in the account. He added the bills together; there would be £138 to spare.

John placed each bill and its cheque in an envelope and wrote on the front the name and address of the service it was for. He put the envelopes on top of the bureau and slammed the writing top shut.

As the effects of the whisky wore off, his momentum increased towards the objectives he had set himself; a self-assigned list of personal trivia. John knew he was well insured, his policy had run long enough for his demise not to have been planned and he had made a new will only a few months ago – almost everything was left to Sarah, but there was a lump sum for Christine.

He picked up the phone on the hall table and dialled his office number.

‘Good morning, town hall,’ an officious voice answered.

‘It’s John Tyler here, can I speak to my secretary, please? It’s extension two four two, accounts.’

‘Putting you through, Mr Tyler.’

‘Rosemary, I won’t be in today,’ John said, trying not to deviate from the usual efficient, superior accountant demeanour which he had adopted for the job, a projected persona that had never rung true for him.

‘I have something urgent to do, so I want you to make sure that all the ledgers are up to date and logged. I don’t want any mistakes.’

‘But the accounts are not due in till the end of the month and we have not received all the invoices in yet.’

‘Just do all you can, it’s all got to be done today. I want things tidy.’

‘Yes, Mr Tyler.’ Rosemary heard the click as the phone went down. She held the phone away from her ear and looked at it in surprise at the shortness of the message. John Tyler usually fussed more to get his point across.

Rosemary had worked for John Tyler for two and a half years and hated every minute. She needed the job and the money, so she kept her mouth shut and did what he said.

His diffident manner made her feel excluded, to the point of being unnecessary, and she was not allowed to think for herself.

John put the telephone receiver back on its cradle and took his car keys out of his pocket, the urgency now mounting. He could not afford to lose his nerve. Christine was out there – at school, anywhere – she could be telling the whole world right now, she now had the power. The hateful look from last night came back into view. The thought of people knowing made him perspire with fear.

John closed the door noisily and went to his car; he backed out of the garage with unusual haste and into the road without noticing the small red car screeching to a halt to avoid a collision.

He headed for Exeter town centre without acknowledging the car behind. The journey to the shopping precinct went by in a blur; he was in mission mode and nothing could distract him. The walk from his car to the Halfords store was a test of nerve; he was conscious that anyone he met might know him for what he was.

Determined to purchase the equipment he needed, John walked urgently up and down the rows of shelves of motoring gadgetry. He had covered the whole store twice before he found the nylon tow rope he was looking for. It looked very small, too thin to tow a car, but it said on the wrapping it would pull up to one and a quarter tons, which was more than enough for his purpose.

He quickly paid for the rope at the checkout and left without waiting for his change. He hurried back to his car, his hand shaking as he put the key in the lock. Flinging the rope on the passenger seat, he started the car.

On the drive home his mind was filled with the impending finality. It had occurred to him that no one would actually miss him. Christine loathed him. And Sarah? Too much muddy water under the matrimonial bed. He had only one

regret; he could never make things right for Christine. At this, his self-loathing caught up with him again.

John pulled into his drive and parked in front of the open garage. He grabbed the rope and, pausing only to close the garage door, strode into the house clutching the tow rope tightly. He hurried into the kitchen, plucking the pen from the memo pad on the wall; he tried to write a note. Words failed him. WORDS! They always failed him. He could not describe the way he felt or what he wanted to say on a memo pad on the wall or anywhere else. Without conscious intent, he wrote 'Sorry! Sorry!', and signed the note 'Dad'.

He rushed out of the back door, heading almost at a run up the garden path to his shed, his footsteps echoing on the paving slabs.

He yanked opened the shed door and looked for a piece of wood amongst the DIY debris that was strong enough to take his weight. The piece he found was too long but it was 3 inches square so that would do; he put the piece of wood under his arm, then selected a couple of nails from a rusty tin just inside the door.

On his return to the garage he noted the lifetime of collected junk stacked against the wall. Sarah had nagged him so many times about the mess, 'Why don't you throw that rubbish away?' she had chided. *Not any more*, he thought with satisfaction.

He reached across to the small window at the back of the garage, opening it as far as possible. Grabbing a hammer, he took the wood and nails and went back outside, where he nailed the piece of wood across the open window with remarkable ease, the nails going into the sandy pointing with little resistance.

Returning inside, he unwrapped the tow rope, climbed onto a chair and looped the rope around the piece of wood. He pulled it tight, checking it would hold and do the job

in hand. Standing up on the chair, he threaded the loose end of the rope over the timber joist of the sloping garage roof, then jumped off the chair and pulled the rope free.

It was too long. At a stretch, he just managed to fling it over the next, slightly higher roof joist. He pulled the rope tight, and tied a slip knot at the end.

Stepping back he thought it looked about right, but he thought he'd better check to make sure. He rummaged in a tool box for his tape measure, but in amongst so much junk he couldn't find it. He started to panic. *Where the fuck is it?* He dashed into the kitchen and hurriedly searched the drawer which contained all the miscellaneous household tools. There it was – at the back, as usual.

Returning to the garage, John measured the height of the loop from the ground and then measured his height to his chin. He adjusted the knot until its height above the ground was just right.

He threw the tape measure on the floor and lifted himself onto the chair. He put the loop end around his neck, pulling the knot to the side of his head.

John Tyler had once seen a documentary on television about Albert Pierrepoint, the crown executioner until the House of Commons abolished capital punishment. The programme showed the meticulous attention to detail and care he took in fulfilling his job. He felt it was his duty to be respectful to his client, and to carry out his task with as little anxiety to his victim as possible.

John remembered that from the time he opened the door to the execution cell and led the condemned to the gallows, within nine seconds they would be dead. The fastest unofficially recorded execution time by Albert Pierrepoint was just seven seconds. John hoped this was true.

He removed his tie, wrapped it around his wrists, pulled the end as tight as he could and tied a double knot at the end. He held the knot in the palm of his hand and stood

motionless on the chair. His mind was in turmoil and a feeling of the ridiculous came over him.

His life was passing by him in recollection; the good times, the bad, all welling up in him like photographic images, timeless in slow motion. His past emotions, what he had felt for Sarah, then Christine. *Oh, God! Christine!*

He jumped off the chair, forcing it to fall sideways, and felt his shoe tips touch the garage floor. The rope had taken up the slack and he was dangling there over the bare concrete. He'd hoped for instant oblivion, but he was slowly choking.

He could feel his breathing restricted as the rope tightened around his neck, his face swelling as a blue hue coloured his face. His feet desperately searched for purchase on the ground for some relief from the pain; he needed air, some air to relieve the gasping for life. He tried to breathe in, and he tugged at his tie to free his hands. He had tied it tight. His hands were expanding through restricted blood flow. No air could pass the rope tight around his neck, and his contorted features were soon unrecognisable.

This was not how it was supposed to be. The more he struggled, the tighter the rope became. He begged in his head for the promised seven seconds to pass.

It took four minutes and twenty-seven seconds for the life to be wrung out of John Tyler. His last thoughts were of Christine and the justice of this self-induced punishment. This was the last struggle! The last before he reached the black abyss of unconsciousness, and the sanctuary of death and freedom.