

The missing potato

By

Jon Fox

PROLOGUE

It started with a missing potato. The smallest thing, a nothing event. Derek thought that, at the age of 80 plus (as most of the residents at the Bardfield Rest and Care Home for the Elderly were), there would be more pressing things to worry about. Not so.

1

Agnes Witby died 14th June 2011. 'Natural causes' is the official verdict. Derek hears, or rather overhears courtesy of the open staffroom door, that an empty bottle of painkillers was found in her room. Derek asks Gary, the only orderly he trusts, if what he heard was true. Gary ignores him and laughs it off. 'Forget it, Del.'

Derek persists. Impatient with the elderly man, Gary says 'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Was there an autopsy?' Derek asks.

'At 89 years old? No man.'

'But...'

'Don't go thinking about it, Del.' Gary leaves with a shrug.

There is a reason that Derek is thinking about death, this death. It is the missing potato. He tries to recall exactly how people managed to fall out with one another because of a vegetable.

Martin has returns from the toilet to the dining table. He goes with increasing frequency these days. They all do. He sits. Everything is silent, as it always is at dinner times, just the gentle click and clack of cutlery on crockery as the old folk navigate their daily mealtime tasks. Every eye is focused (or is attempting to focus) on the plates in front of them that hold the stringy meat, potatoes and vegetables that become colder and less and less appetizing as the minutes pass. Suddenly the silence is broken.

‘I had four potatoes on my plate.’

The statement is cold and factual and everyone ignores Martin, as they often do. Martin is... well, dark. Too morbid, angry. Unpleasant to be around for more than a minute or two.

‘HEY!’

Some of the guests jump with a start. ‘I said I had four potatoes on my plate!’

No one engages. Derek looks to Frankie, the only other man present at the table except Martin, but Frankie won’t catch his eye. The ladies, who outnumber the men by 4-1, briefly look up from their plates, then down again. All except one: Agnes Witby. Derek looks to her and she to him. She coughs, ever so gently. ‘What do you mean, Martin?’ Almost confrontational, but also gentle, trying to diffuse Martin’s rising temper.

‘I mean, *Agnes*, that I’m missing a potato.’ Frankie laughs; he can’t help himself, and is aggressively stared down by Martin.

‘Did you drop the potato?’ Agnes asks.

‘No. I did not drop the fucking potato. Do you see it? Do you see it on the floor anywhere? Do you see it near my chair? Near my foot? Is it ANYWHERE in sight?’ The volume increases.

His curse word is used to great effect as one of the orderlies wanders over casually, but with an air of self-importance. She doesn’t say anything, but Derek knows that she’s wondering if Martin is going to lose control, like he did before.

‘Well, no Martin, I can’t say I can see your missing potato on the floor.’ Agnes suppresses a smile. ‘Are you sure you had...’ she quietly counts the potatoes that remain on Martin’s plate ‘...four?’

‘Yes, Agnes, I am sure I had four. And I’m sure that all four were present when I went to piss and, further still, I’m convinced that some motherfucker has had away with it. What do you think of that?’

Silence again, the humour of the situation is gone.

‘Do you know who that might have been, Agnes? Dear?’

Agnes swallows, although she is not currently eating anything.

‘Everything okay here?’ asks the orderly. Everyone expects Martin to complain, to shout and rage like folk are liable to when waiting to die becomes too frustrating in the Bardfield Rest and Care Home for the Elderly. But he does not, which is somehow more unnerving.

‘Everything is fine. Thank you,’ says Martin. The sentence feels like a threat to Derek and he thinks Martin’s stare remains on Agnes a second longer than it should. Derek doesn’t sleep very well that night and he wonders how everyone else is resting.

After Agnes passes Derek watches Martin like a hawk. The son-of-a-bitch has a spring in his step, there's no doubt. Derek wants to tell Mrs. Ruchmore, the Head of Operations at Bardfield Rest and Care Home for the Elderly, what he thinks but, being an ex-cop, Derek knows there is no value in this. She will think it's his medication or his occasional confusion and ignore him, just like he did himself when mentally ill people admitted to crimes they had not committed. So he continues to watch and learn.

Almost all of the residents that can walk attend the funeral. Agnes was a very popular person – charming, funny, caring. The minister tells them all this, but they already know it. Martin isn't present, which surprises no one. The residents have all talked and arrived at many different theories, Derek included. Even he, with his background of evidence and fact, is convinced of foul play even though he has no proof.

Ice tea and sandwiches are served for the guests and residents afterwards and only then does Martin join the mourners. He consumes the food with such intensity, it's as if he's not eaten for days. There's an atmosphere between the residents, which Martin either ignores or is simply unaware of. Derek feels anger, bile rising in his throat, so he decides to leave. Back in his room he drops down heavily on his bed and begins to think. He refuses to let the thought go. He decides that this will be his last case and that justice will be done.

The following day he wakes early. He takes breakfast and waits until Martin, typically late, arrives in the dining hall. This is when he begins watching, waiting. He was good at doing this when he was a cop. He's even better at it now.

He's been waiting for years for something to happen in the Bardfield Rest and Care Home for the Elderly.

Martin does nothing out of the usual and it chills Derek to his core. He is positive Martin was involved with Agnes's untimely death, yet he remains cold and calculated, as if nothing had happened. Martin suddenly looks up from his newspaper and reflects Derek's gaze right back at him. Derek flushes crimson, but holds his stare for a moment longer. Still looking over at Derek, Martin calls one of the orderlies over and, without dropping his gaze, politely asks the orderly: 'Could I have the hash browns for my breakfast this morning please? You know how I love my potatoes.' He winks at Derek.

Derek hurries back to his room. He loses his toast and marmalade in the toilet bowl. He doesn't remember having a weak stomach for the job when he was on the force, but that was a long time ago.

Derek doesn't sleep the night before the room search. It's impossible. He visits the toilet seven times in all – three more than he normally would. He doesn't know what he's looking for exactly. Extra drugs that Martin might have stolen from the infirmary (or, more likely, coerced a fellow resident into handing over)? Extra prescriptions? Or something else? He doesn't know. His mind is more muddled than it used to be, but he's positive things will become clearer. He just needs his first clue.

Derek has to wait until lunchtime to make his move. He was planning to do it during breakfast, but, unusually, Martin remained in his room. At midday he gets to the dining room before everyone else, to make sure he bags the table closest to the door. He's already finishing his lamb chops and mash potato (potato again) by the time Martin enters. Gary the orderly was kind enough to bring him his food early, Derek feigning tiredness as an excuse to finish and get back to bed.

The table he sits at is nicely hidden from the eye line of the residents as they enter the hall, so Martin never sees Derek as he slips out. He makes his way down the corridor as quickly as possible, his legs giving him enough pain to remind him that detective work is work for a younger man. Meal times are busy and no orderlies challenge him as he arrives at Martin's door. There are no locks (House policy – all valuables are kept in a main vault behind the front desk and must be specifically requested) so Derek has no trouble gaining entry. Martin's room has an aroma which, although not offensive, is both unusual and unnerving. Something 'organic' Derek thinks.

The layout is similar to Derek's room, most of the rooms. He checks the bedside cabinet first. There are pills for prostate 'trouble' (which Derek recognizes from his own bedside cabinet), but not many. There is a pornographic magazine, which is well thumbed and Derek wonders how he smuggled it in. Personally, he'd long stopped worrying about such things, although he still prefers the company of the female guests to... well, Martin and Frank. An orange, unpeeled, some boiled sweets (one of which Derek takes to make sure it is a boiled sweet and nothing more sinister), a blank notepad and, surprisingly, a bible. Derek leafs through the bible and confirms it is, indeed, just a bible. Nothing more.

He moves onto the chest of draws, which, much like his own, consist mainly of underwear (which the Bardfield Rest and Care Home for the Elderly recommend you have plenty of because of accidents). The bookcase is totally void of books. There are some pictures, but not many. This doesn't surprise Derek, as he thinks Martin is unlikely to have much family who would care about him and, he also suspects, vice versa.

Then, next to the television, Derek discovers a book. It's called 'The Power of Persuasion.' He scans the back and realizes it is a book about the tricks that marketing companies and advertising agencies use to increase desire for the things that they sell. Derek notices the chapter entitled 'Hypnotism in the Everyday' is ear marked.

The time is getting away from him and the elderly ex-detective leaves the room. He thinks the muddle in his mind is beginning to clear. It's the best he's felt since Agnes died.

Derek now understands what happened. Some might say it would be unlikely, but Derek never discounts anything. Never. He knows that Agnes overdosed. He knows that Agnes would never intentionally do such a thing. He knows that Agnes was very bright, sharp and being so, would be unlikely to do such a thing unintentionally either. He thinks that she was unconsciously persuaded. He thinks it was by Martin. He thinks how he might prove it.

He's lost in these thoughts as he stares at the television. He's not paying any attention to the quiz show that flickers on the neon screen. Martin is not watching the television either. He is watching Derek.

‘What were you doing in my room, Derek?’

Martin is addressing Derek as Derek lies in his bed. It’s dark, so Derek knows it must be the middle of the night. He is still in the sub-conscious world of his dream about Agnes and he has to spend some moments deciphering dream from reality. Martin waits patiently by his bedside as Derek does this.

The moment Derek does realise that Martin is real and is really sitting by his bedside he is terrified.

‘What were you doing in my room, Derek?’ repeats Martin.

‘I...’ Derek has no response.

‘Every room is private, Derek. Those are the rules.’

Derek can feel his heart pounding. It feels like it’s beating at a dangerously rapid rate. Martin leans closer. Derek is still frozen and he is now terrified of Martin because he knows Martin is capable of murder. He’d faced threatening people in his previous life, but then he was younger, stronger.

‘I bet it was you who stole my fucking potato, wasn’t it?’ Martin grins.

Derek closes his eyes. It acts as a barrier.

‘Stay out of my room Derek. And leave me alone.’ Martin leaves the room.

Derek lets himself calm for a moment. He can still smell the stale breath that Martin had blown into his face. He’s disappointed in himself when he realizes he’s let his bladder go. He begins to sob.

Derek chooses to stay in his room for most of the following day. His mind feels confused again. Eventually, however, he manages to concentrate. He knows what he must do.

Derek did not steal Martin's potato. He does, however, steal a potato from the kitchen. Security here is so lack, he thinks to himself. When this is all over, he will talk to Mrs. Ruchmore about it. He thinks that perhaps he can help out. He used to be in the police, after all.

He puts the potato in his pocket. It feels about the right size, shape. He doesn't want to risk putting the potato in his room in case it is found by one of the orderlies or, worse still, Martin, so he carries it in his pocket all day. No one notices. No one ever really notices anything around here, Derek thinks. Except for him, of course.

Derek sets an alarm and goes to bed with the potato under his pillow. He sleeps well for the few hours before he is awoken.

Derek has never been so quiet in his life. He thinks that it must be because he's skinnier now, much lighter on his feet. Martin's door doesn't squeak. He's checked that already.

He hears snoring, which is a good sign. It means his mouth must be slightly open.

Before Martin is fully awake, the potato is in his mouth and being forced down his throat. The fingers that are pushing the potato further and further down are relentless. The person who is doing it is strong, Martin realizes. It's because of the anger that Derek has within him. Revenge, humiliation and fear have fuelled his fury. Martin's physical protests are useless.

Martin's heart gives out before the choking can kill him. Derek has made short work of the job in hand. Justice is swift.

Derek is shaking as he returns to his room.

'There's your fucking potato,' he whispers to himself.

He sleeps well and is awake early. Derek makes his way into the dining room. He feels he will eat well this morning. He wants to be present when they find Martin. He wants to see how pleased everyone will be with his work.

Derek sees Gary pushing the patients' meds down the corridor, on his daily delivery route. Derek asks if he can have his now. He wants to be on top of his game when the big discovery is made.

'Sure, Del. What do you take again?'

'The blood thinners... and the blood pressure pills.'

'Oh yeah. Here you are. What about your painkillers? These are yours, right?'

'Oh, I've stopped taking them. You know... after Agnes and all that.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, I heard you all gossiping... that Agnes had taken an overdose.'

'Don't know what you're talking about, man. Agnes didn't take any pills. Against her religion or something.'

'But wasn't there an empty bottle of tablets next to her bed? You know, when they discovered her?'

'Someone's feeding you the wrong information, Del. She died of a heart attack.'

Gary walks on before Derek can respond. His mind is muddled again. He looks out across the empty dining room and wonders if he's made a mistake. A terrible mistake. He sits still as the dining room slowly fills up. He thinks he overhears someone ask 'Where's Martin?'

Derek puts his head down and looks at his untouched breakfast of eggs,
bacon and fried potatoes.

June 2016