

The Occasional Gardener

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Wordandnote Publishing 2018

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ISBN 978-1-9997848-2-9

A CIP catalogue reference for this book
is available from the British Library

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by 4edge Limited

Cover design by Sonja Burniston

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*To Tim Pears for all the help he has given me with my
various creative projects over the years*

6 am Wednesday 16th September

My life is full of unfinished cups of tea, and it happens again this morning as I prepare to go on a dawn raid in The Avenues. I really don't like going to The Avenues. There's something I can't quite put my finger on, something that makes me shiver every time I go near that part of town. On the face of it, it's a perfectly nice area – safe as houses, and the houses are worth a bomb, I can tell you. I don't think I've ever been on a dawn raid there in all my time here. It's not the sort of area where you'd expect to find drugs. Burglaries yes, but it's the wrong part of town for drug dealers.

Anyway, I'm very reluctant to go there so I've been slow to get up, which is why there isn't time to drink up my tea without scalding my mouth.

“We've had intel that there are drugs at a house in The Avenues,” said Ben our new intel officer.

“We'll get a warrant,” said Burt, my boss. “But go gently, it's owned by a rich Saudi family and we don't want to cause a diplomatic incident.”

I don't want to cause any kind of incident, not if I can help it.

“It's probably a hoax,” I said to Burt. “Dodgy intel if you ask me.”

Burt sighed. “You may well be right, but we have to follow it up.”

So that’s it. A waste of time. A waste of a cup of tea. And I’m up and off on a drugs raid on one of the poshest houses in town.

I arrive in time to join my team and I park my car on the gravel drive behind the others. I meet Peggy and we walk up the carriage sweep to this large Victorian house.

Peggy is my right-hand man. We’re a team, Peggy and I. She’s young and fit and intelligent, and I’m old and not as fast as I was, but I’ve still got a nose for crime and working things out. Wish I could work things out in my personal life though. I’m supposed to be married to someone called Betty, but it doesn’t feel like it. Feels more like I’m married to Peggy, and to be honest, sometimes I wish I was. I can talk to Peggy. We’re close. We’re buddies.

We walk through an elegant conservatory to the front door and ring the bell.

No response. With all this crunching gravel I should have thought we would have woken up the whole neighbourhood. Maybe the son, who I am told is the sole occupant, is drugged up to the eyeballs.

Give it another go. This time a longer ring – no longer polite – and a big bang with the impressive door knocker.

There’s a stirring inside, and the door swings open to reveal a young Arabic man neatly clad in jeans, golfing sweater, and a leather jacket. Not pyjamas, I note – he looks very alert, very awake.

“Mr Said?” I ask, holding up my warrant card. I can’t remember his first name, and probably couldn’t pronounce it anyway.

He stares at me, as though trying to make up his mind, and then tries to close the door, but I’ve already got my

foot in it. Heavy door though, and I'm glad that Peggy takes the initiative and pushes the door open.

"Mr Said," she says. "We have a warrant to search these premises and..." She reads out the warrant and his rights etc...

He backs silently into the house and we file in.

"Sir, we'll have to search you," says Peggy. He makes as though he's going to resist and then sees Martin, our biggest officer who's come in behind me, and changes his mind.

Martin pats him down and turns to me. "Nothing sir."

"Ok, I'll stay with Mr Said," I say, and the team go off to search the house leaving me to follow the young man, who turns and heads off to what I guess will be the sitting room.

It's an impressive house. The owners have taken from the original Victorian décor, which already had a Middle Eastern flavour, and made it more Islamic. No pictures of people or animals anywhere. Instead there are beautiful intricate designs in blacks and golds. The polished marble floor, too, takes my mind to the temples of the East.

At first glance the sitting room seems to be laid out in a similar way with simple, expensive-looking sofas and armchairs, but as I turn the corner into the room my attention is immediately drawn to a painting that is completely out of place. It's by Seurat, and it's of a woman powdering herself. Last time I saw it, it was hanging in a gallery in London. But that was a long time ago when I was an art student, before I changed tack and became a policeman. I wonder how it came to be here. From what I can remember when I saw all those years ago, it looks genuine to me, and if I'm right it must be worth millions.

But in a Muslim house a picture of a woman doing such a personal thing as powdering her cleavage? It doesn't fit.

I turn to look at the son, who sits carefully down on a sofa without taking his eyes off me.

The painting takes my attention again, and I go up to it and look closely at the brushwork. A masterpiece of small brushstrokes making a soft, and slightly fairylike whole. I can't decide whether I like the lady or am repulsed by her. Oddly, she reminds me of my wife Betty – double chin, well endowed, a self-satisfied expression on her face.

There's a shuffling clicking sound behind me and I turn to see the son staring at the ground.

“Mr Said?”

Silence.

“Mr Said, can you tell us where the drugs are?”

No response. He just sits rigidly looking at the floor in front of him as if I don't exist. Well we'll get something out of him down at the station, no doubt.

I turn back to the painting. If this raid's a waste of time, at least I've had a chance to have a close look at a masterpiece. I walk round to the side to try and catch the early morning light from the windows reflecting on the tiny raised brushstrokes, and I notice that the painting is slightly proud of the wall. There's something behind it. I lift the painting off the wall carefully with my gloved hands, and there, set into the wall, is a safe.

I look down at the son sitting on the sofa, his eyes are staring up at me now with such hostility. If looks could kill.

“Mr Said, can you open the safe please?” He looks down at the floor in front of him. Silent.

I put the painting down gently and get my mobile out to ring the station.

“Is George in yet?... great... can you send her up? We've got a safe here, and the son doesn't seem to know the combination.”

The son moves as though he's about to get up. I don't want him to make a run for it so I shout for Martin who is six-foot-six and can block any doorway.

The son slumps back down, staring fixedly at the floor as though there's an escape route through the carpet.

I kneel down and look at the painting again. My nose tells me there's something very odd about this – it's so out of place.

Martin blocks the doorway. The son sits perfectly still, and we all wait for George.

It's only five minutes before there's the scrunch of gravel and George appears with a bag full of gizmos, looking slightly flushed from the exertion.

"Open the safe, George," I say. "I don't think Mr Said knows the combination."

George looks at the safe rather like I looked at the Seurat.

"A Phoenix." This is obviously a welcome challenge. "Should be interesting."

As she gets to work with her computer and various bits and pieces, I notice the son getting increasingly fidgety.

"Mr Said," I say. "Can you tell us what is in the safe?"

He doesn't answer but pulls himself forward on the sofa into an almost squatting position, as if ready to pounce on George at any moment. I look at Martin, and he makes to come forward but I shake my head slightly. I want him blocking the door.

I look back down at the Seurat. It's unbelievable that I should be in the company of such a masterpiece. And I'm sure it is – every bit of my early training as an artist screams 'genuine'. I'm just crouching down to have another close look, when I hear a whirr and a click and the door of the safe opens.

George recoils in disgust as the room is filled with an aroma that I normally associate with the mortuary, and, as I drag my eyes from the Seurat and stand up to look inside the safe, there, sitting in pride of place as though it's the most valuable museum exhibit in the room, is a glass jar containing a severed hand preserved in formaldehyde.

I could draw you that pudgy hand with its thick square fingers, and the gold signet ring still on its third finger. The little finger is missing, and there are bits of stringy stuff hanging from the amputation and clouding the liquid the hand floats in.

I could draw you Martin's eyes looking up to the ceiling as he falls over in a dead faint. We never take Martin to the morgue – he always keels over at the sight of something dead preserved in formaldehyde.

I could draw you the 'oooohh fuck' expression on the son's face as he jumps up from the sofa. He looks at us like a startled cat for a moment and then legs it out of the room, jumping over Martin's recumbent body. I run after him into the hall shouting to the others, but I am much too slow to catch up – an old knee injury, and fifty-eight years on the planet are against me. George isn't much better either, being built for safe-cracking, not running.

Fortunately, Peggy is outside on the front drive putting a plastic bag in the van as he whizzes past her. She drops it onto the gravel and runs after him. He turns right, out of the gate, and into The Avenues. I run out and jump into my car hoping to cut him off further down the road. Turning out of the drive I see Peggy gaining ground. She's in training for the police charity marathon, and she can run like the wind. It's quite a sight as she flies down the road – her long fair hair, tied back in a pony-tail, streaming out behind. She's catching up with him and I'm driving down the wrong side of the road to cut him off, the trouble being

that I am hampered by the trees that line The Avenues, and I can't see where to pull in.

Then two things happen at once: a car coming in the opposite direction hoots its horn, flashes me and swerves to the other side of the road as I jam on my brakes. At the same time I see the son stop, turn round, and take something out of his jacket pocket. I hear the report of a gun as Peggy falls to the ground in front of him clutching her stomach. Everything stops except the son, who turns and runs down a side path round the back of a block of flats, and disappears.

I wrench the car door open, banging it on a tree, and run over to Peggy shouting for help. Others run in the direction that the son disappeared, but I know it is hopeless. Nobody is armed – it's too risky to go near him.

Where the fuck did that gun come from? We were totally unprepared for this. This is my home town for God's sake, the place where I was born – we don't have gun crime here.

I kneel down by Peggy, who is crumpled up in agony.

“Sir,” she gasps, looking up at me.

I can't say anything, I just hold her hand and wait for the ambulance.