

The Team from Information Services

by

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Eddy slapped the brochure on the tea room table. ‘That’s where we’re going for our next holiday. Blue, beautiful and most importantly, hot.’

Ginny and I stared at the glossy photos of the resort. ‘Fat chance on what they pay us here,’ said Ginny.

I picked up my cup of tea and resumed warming my fingers. ‘They’re never as good as the pictures.’

Eddy slumped into the chair. ‘You two are depressing. There must be some way we can earn extra money.’

‘We could start an escort agency,’ said Ginny.

‘You do realise what escorts actually do?’ I asked. ‘It’s not like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.’

Ginny had the best looking body in the library – probably the best looking body in the suburb if not the entire city. She was not quite five foot two – ‘tiny, but perfectly formed’ as she was fond of telling us. Whenever a cute man came into the library she’d grab a pile of books and teeter off on her scarlet stilettos to ask him to help her put a book on the top shelf.

If she didn't come away with his mobile number she wasn't on her game. Rumour had it the head librarian 'Horrible Harriet' caught her having sex in the stacks late one evening. That was some years back when the library still had stacks. It was all lounges and glass tables and Wi-Fi now.

'No, no, you don't want to do that,' Eddy said. 'My friend Gareth tried it once between acting jobs. He said it was awful – just middle aged men with really unpleasant habits. Besides, so many people are giving it away for free on the net, and with Grindr and Tinder anyone who wants to can hook up.'

Eddy's ploy for attracting men was to drape himself artistically over one of the sofas with either a book of poetry or a popular science best-seller in his hand. Between him and Ginny circling like a pair of piranhas it was no wonder the main clientele for the library were school children and elderly ladies. No one else felt safe.

'I suppose it will have to be back to bar work, then,' said Ginny. 'How are you going to get some extra cash, Mia?'

'I don't know. I might try to pick up some cleaning jobs.'

'Don't you have a wealthy Great-Aunt you can hit up for a loan?' Eddy asked.

'She's more likely to give me advice than money. Besides, it's all a bit pointless. "Horrible Harriet" is never going to let the Library's entire Information Services team have a holiday at the same time.'

'As far as I can tell, every day is a holiday for you lot.' Harriet had walked up behind me without anyone noticing. 'Now get back to work before I make it permanent.'

Once Eddy has an idea, he becomes like a battery operated toy repeating the same irritating tune. Eddy was determined the three of us were going on holiday; he wanted to go to an island resort, and we had to get money to fund it somehow. Which was why on Sunday, the three of us ended up on the train heading up to my Great-Aunt's house.

Eddy was bored after fifteen minutes. 'God, why did I come? I hate the suburbs.'

'Yes, why did you come? I'm not sure that turning up with you and Ginny in tow will make my Aunt Agnetha more likely to "invest" in my cleaning scheme.'

'Don't be stupid. Old ladies love me,' said Eddy. 'Is her name really Agnetha, like in ABBA?'

'Yes, but she's even older than them.'

Great Aunt Agnetha peered out from behind purple spectacles. 'Cleaning eh? No, I don't think so. Only people who've been extremely poor know how to clean properly. Like my friend Su Lei, here. She keeps my place looking sparkling, don't you Su Lei?'

Su Lei had been sitting in the dining room drinking tea with Aunt Agnetha when we arrived. She was now wandering about the room wiping a cloth over the furniture in a desultory fashion. She smiled briefly at us.

‘I’ve seen your flat Mia,’ Aunt Agnetha went on, ‘and your mother’s house – not to mention your grandmother – my esteemed sister’s place. Slatterns the lot of you.’ She grinned. ‘Isn’t “slattern” a fabulous term? It was the answer to one of the clues in the crossword this morning.’ She ran her eyes over Ginny and Eddy. ‘I’m sure neither of you have any idea about cleaning either. You look exactly like the sort of people who leave wet towels on the bathroom floor.’

‘And before you open your mouth to protest, young man, or to compliment me yet again on another piece of fine china, shut up and let me think.’ She beamed a wicked smile at Eddy. ‘I’ll have to introduce you to my friend Antony, the antique dealer. He likes pretty, useless, things too.’

Aunt Agnetha sat tapping her teeth for a moment. ‘Cleaning’s obviously out of the question. And you may be functionally stupid, Mia, like all my sister’s progeny, but you’re not unintelligent. There must be something you can do. Why don’t you play to your strength? You’re librarians, aren’t you?’

‘But that’s the point,’ said Ginny. ‘Being a librarian barely gives us enough to live on. We need money for a holiday.’

‘Functionally stupid, like all young people,’ said Agnetha. ‘Why don’t you ask Su Lei about getting by on “barely enough to live on”?’ Su Lei was in the kitchen loudly banging plates together as she washed up. ‘Come back to me after you’ve grown up in a war zone and moved to another country, married an abusive alcoholic, and now have to clean the houses of cranky old women to make a living. Then you can talk to me about how hard your life is.’

Aunt Agnetha paused, and then went on. ‘Actually, that gives me an idea about how you could be useful.’ She threw back her head and shouted, ‘Su Lei. Come here!’ Eddy jumped at the noise and bumped Ginny’s elbow making her slop tea onto the mahogany side table. ‘And bring something to mop up a mess with you,’ Agnetha roared.

‘Well,’ continued Aunt Agnetha once the spill had been cleaned up. ‘Tell them your story Su Lei.’

‘My husband is a bad man,’ Su Lei began.

‘A very bad man,’ interrupted Aunt Agnetha. ‘He used to beat her. She lost two teeth and had three broken ribs. We had to get her into the local refuge.’

‘I leave him, maybe two, three years and then one day he gets shot and die. His will say money goes to his wife. We never divorce. The police say it was suicide. But now his son say I kill him and he wants money. But Harold never see his son for thirty years. Why should he get money? The police come and ask me questions, but I say nothing.’

Aunt Agnetha and Su Lei stared at us expectantly. ‘Well?’ said Agnetha

‘That’s very interesting...’ I said slowly, but I’m not sure what...’

My great aunt gave an exasperated snort. ‘We need to prove Su Lei didn’t kill Harold. It’s always the innocent who suffer. She’ll probably get deported and then who would clean my house? Not you three. I’m not as mobile as I was so I need someone to do the research. Find out what happened.’

Isn't that what librarians do?'

'Well, actually librarians organise information...' I began.

Agnetha ignored me. 'Find out who shot Harold and I'll fund your little trip.'

'Really?' Eddy sat up as abruptly as a meerkat on lookout duty. 'Tell us all about it, Su Lei, and then we'd better see the scene of the crime.'

It turned out Harold had been a hoarder. After Su Lei left him, it had only gotten worse. It looked as if the police had left the place pretty much as they found it. We picked our way across a front yard crammed with old car parts, several steel washing basins, an old bath and a pile of black garden pots twisted in a tangle of overgrown grass and weeds. The plastic police tape hanging loose from the door shifted slightly in the breeze and stirred up dust whirls on the doorstep.

Su Lei had given us the key, but wouldn't come inside. Eddy was not so keen on the idea either. 'My trousers might get dirty. Maybe someone should stay outside and keep watch in case the real killer comes back.' I grabbed the back of his neck and pushed him through the door in front of me.

It was not like in the movies. There was no chalk outline, but that might just have been because it was almost impossible to find the floor. Magazines and newspapers were stacked in piles almost to head height on either side of the hall. Ginny tried the door to the lounge room but couldn't get it open wide enough to squeeze inside. We shuffled sideways between newspapers into the kitchen.

'Oh my God!' shouted Eddy. Ginny and I jostled one another to see over his shoulder. 'Would you look at the state of this kitchen!'

The notion of washing-up had obviously escaped Harold. It looked as if he just kept using things until they ran out. Plates and cups and saucepans stuck with congealed bits of food filled the sink, the bench, and overflowed into a stack on the floor. In the corner was a teetering tower of empty packets of microwave meals for one, but so many things were stacked in front of the microwave door I can't imagine that anyone was able to use it. There was rat and cockroach poo everywhere.

'Where are we supposed to start?' I asked.

'Gloves and masks and possibly white coats. I'm not going to touch a thing without them,' said Eddy.

Once we were kitted up, we began to look through the house. 'Let's each take a room and start there.' I took what had probably been the study, Ginny the back bedroom and Eddy started on the crockery in the kitchen. We'd been going about 45 minutes before the police turned up wanting to know what we were up to. I let Ginny do the talking and they went away happy while she came back purring with the mobile number of one of the officers.

The next interruption came from Harold's son, Ivan. One of the neighbours must have notified both him and the police when we turned up. Ivan introduced himself with a furious banging on the door then pushed his way in past Ginny, practically knocking her over.

He ignored my protestations that we were there with his step-mother's consent, and began shoving at the stuck lounge room door, shouting as he did for us to get out of the way. The door snapped open with a sudden crack and he stumbled into the room. As he did, a large cupboard stuffed with magazines peeled away from the wall and fell on top of him.

It took the three of us to pull the cupboard off Ivan, and even then, we only managed it by shifting most of the magazines out first. Ivan swore and moaned the whole time, calling us idiots and bunglers. Once he was free he limped out of the house as fast as he could, shouting over his shoulder that he was going for the police.

'We've already had the police...' Ginny called, but he was gone.

This time, I dealt with the police. One of them was obviously the one who had given Ginny his number, but the other seemed quite friendly as I explained what had happened.

'You can contact Su Lei, if you want, to confirm that we're here with her consent. I don't know where she lives, but my Great-Aunt Agnetha Stefansson should be able to give you her address.

The policeman blanched. 'Agnetha Stefansson is your Great Aunt? If that's the case we'll take your word for it rather than interrupt your Aunt.'

'Chicken,' I said, and the policeman laughed.

'My name's Tom,' he said. 'You don't seem much like your Great-Aunt.'

'I know,' I said sighing. 'She was supposed to have been a great beauty in her day'

'I meant it as a compliment.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Oh.' So far sleuthing was turning out to be more interesting than either working in the library or cleaning.

Just then there was a large crash and a commotion on the verandah at the back of the house. Ivan had tried to sneak back in and had only succeeded in pulling another cupboard down on top of himself. My new friend Tom and his offsider helped to pull the cupboard which had been filled with saucepans and old board games and empty wine bottles off Ivan. Then they ordered him off the property.

'Don't you just love a man in uniform?' Ginny cooed.

Ivan left, limping again, with a torn sleeve and a cobweb looped over his ear.

Aunt Agnetha had insisted we report back on our progress, so Ginny and I headed off to her place, planning to pick up some lunch for the three of us on the way back. Eddy said that staying at the house with the rats and the cockroaches was way less scary than facing my Aunt again, so he kept on working.

'At least if a rat bit me I'd probably only get tetanus,' he said. 'But that woman is lethal.'

When we arrived, my Aunt opened the door and declared us too dirty to come in the house. ‘Have some respect for Su Lei. She’s just finished cleaning. And, it would be a waste of my money to get her back again so soon.’

Great-Aunt Agnetha made us stand on the doorstep and shout down the hallway while she sat comfortably in an armchair. ‘I’m too old to be standing outside, and it’s so windy. I’d probably catch my death.’

Ginny and I had just begun describing the state of Harold’s house when the phone rang. It was Eddy in a panic. His voice came out in a high, squeaky whisper. ‘Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God! Somebody just tried to shoot me.’

‘What?’

‘Someone took a shot at me.’

‘Have you rung the police?’

‘No. I’m hiding under the sofa. It’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever had to do in my life. You should see what’s under here. You have to come and help me, Mia.’

‘Quick, ring triple O,’ I said to Ginny.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Aunt Agnetha. ‘I have the local constabulary on speed dial. There’s a young fellow named Tom who isn’t quite as stupid as the average policeman. He should be able to help.’

When we got to the house there were three police cars outside. Eddy was sitting in the back of one waving his hands about and talking earnestly to a young policeman.

‘From the look on Eddy’s face all three of us might be getting invitations to the Policeman’s Ball this year,’ whispered Ginny.

My new friend Tom and Ginny’s police friend both hurried over to talk to us. ‘We don’t think your mate was shot at. We think something in the front room fell over and gave him a fright. But you should be careful if you go back in there.’

Eddy was indignant about not being believed. ‘I’ve watched enough Quentin Tarentino movies to know a gunshot when I hear it.’

Once the police had gone again, Eddy began walking around the kitchen ‘reconstructing the crime’.

‘I’d just managed to prise the window open to let out some of the stink. I was over here near the sink. I crouched down to try to open this drawer when the shot went over my head.’ He put a hand to his chest. ‘Thank God I bent over at the right moment or you’d be planning my funeral right now. And I haven’t even told you what music and flowers I want.’ He stared into the middle distance. ‘Blue Iris. Do you think Irises? Or are they too obvious?’

‘Well, that’s going to be our new byword,’ said Ginny. ‘Thank God Eddy bent over.’

‘Believe me, you’re not the first to say that,’ said Eddy. ‘Now about the music...’

To distract Eddy from planning a full-blown funeral production, I put on my best CSI manner and began to look

around the kitchen 'If you were standing here, and the shot went over your head then the bullet should be in the wall about here.'

Of course on CSI they have fancy laser lights to trace the trajectory of the bullet, and I've never seen an episode which involves a room so packed with rubbish and chaos that it's impossible to find a hole in a wall. They don't make a show called *CSI Extreme Hoarding*, but perhaps they should.

'So,' I said, continuing in my best detective mode. 'Harold was supposed to have shot himself, but Su Lei said it was extremely unlikely that'd he'd try to suicide. What if he was shot by the same person who went after you, Eddy?'

'What if?' said Eddy. 'What if? Of course it would be the same person. Just how many killers do you think are out there? I bet it was Ivan going after the inheritance. He didn't know until afterwards that Harold had left his money to Su Lei. And now Ivan thinks we're going to find something incriminating so he's taking pot shots at us.'

'I don't know, I wouldn't put it past your Great-Aunt to do it if she thought it might get her a cheap house cleaner,' muttered Ginny.

'Harsh,' I said. 'That's a little harsh.'

It took us about two hours of careful unstacking and cleaning to find the bullet. It had gone through a cupboard door, into a pack of weevilly flour, then a bag of rice, bounced off the broken toaster stacked behind the rice and into the side of the cupboard before lodging in an old recipe book.

Suddenly everything became serious. I rushed over to Eddy and gave him a big hug. 'You could have been killed!'

'Finally someone believes me.' Eddy had gone a strange green colour. Up until that moment I don't think even he had really thought it was true.

'We need to get out of here as quickly as possible in case they come back.' I said.

'Not the front way, not the front way. I think I can hear someone there,' said Ginny frantically.

'Keep low, keep low,' said Eddy. The three of us crouched down. Eddy first, Ginny second, and me bringing up the rear. We half waddled in a line down the hall towards the back door like a gaggle of awkward ducklings.

Eddy was reaching out for the door handle when I noticed something. 'Stop,' I yelled. 'Look.'

A thin wire was attached to the top of the door. It led up the wall and across the ceiling to the handle of a giant suitcase perched on top of a bookcase. It was rigged like something in a bad Road Runner cartoon. As soon as someone opened the door, the wire would swing the suitcase down in an arc that was intended to hit them in the head.

We turned around and waddled back to the kitchen.

'I don't think we have to keep crouching down,' I said. 'I think I know how Harold got shot. But we need to get out of here without touching anything else.'

We went back to Aunt Agnetha's and this time she let us in the house, but only after we'd taken our shoes off and dusted each other down. She shook her head. 'I can see I'm going to have to get Su Lei back to clean again tomorrow.'

'You probably should get Su Lei back anyway,' I said. 'I think she's going to want to hear this. And we ought to go to the Police Station and tell them what we've found.'

'Nonsense,' said Agnetha. 'They can come here and listen to what you have to say. According to the propaganda they send out they're a Police Service, not a Police Force, these days. Well, they can come and serve us here.' My Great-Aunt-picked up the phone and hit speed dial. 'Tom? Is that you Tom?' She roared. 'It's Agnetha Stefansson. Come over immediately. My Grand-Niece needs to see you.'

So, the police were called for the fourth time today.

I met Tom at the door. 'I hear you've summoned me?' he said. 'Perhaps you're more like your Great Aunt than I thought?'

I blushed. 'I don't suppose it would be any use telling you I wanted to come down to the Police station?'

He laughed at me 'I don't imagine you had any say in the matter at all.'

Once Su Lei and the police were inside, I told everyone my theory. 'I think Harold got more and more paranoid after Su Lei left. Collecting all that stuff was just a symptom. He had the whole place rigged up with booby-traps and tripwires to stop people stealing his things.'

'That explains the cupboards falling on Ivan,' said Ginny.'

'Yes and the shot at Eddy. Harold had something he valued in that drawer, and when you went to open it, it set off the trigger. The shot was probably even closer than you thought. You were lucky. If you were slightly taller...'

Eddy shuddered and then made eyes at one of the police.

'But how does that explain who shot Harold?' Ginny asked. 'Was it suicide after all?'

'No, I think he just forgot. There were so many traps in the house he probably just got careless one day and opened the wrong drawer without thinking about it, and "Kaboom".'

I turned to Su Lei. 'He was found in the bedroom, wasn't he?' She nodded. 'So there's a gun there and one in the kitchen. Who knows if there are any others? Not to mention a web of trip wires and other traps. He fought in Vietnam, didn't he? He'd know what he was doing.'

'Yes,' said Su Lei. 'The American War. In my country.'

The police went back to Harold's to check the place over. 'Be careful,' I said to Tom as I let him out the door. He just smiled, but he rang me the next day to tell me my theory was correct. I guess he must have asked Aunt Agnetha for my number. That boy deserves a medal for bravery.

So that's how the Library Information Services team ended up with a two week holiday on a tropical island.

Aunt Agnetha rang Horrible Harriet to tell her that we were heroes and of course we could all go on leave at the

same time. I could hear her shouting down the phone line. 'It's a simple matter of logistics. Get an intern in, or someone from another branch to cover it. Or you could staff the Information Desk yourself. I'm a close friend of the Chief Librarian. We play scrabble on-line every Tuesday. I can put in a word.'

Harriet approved the leave and has been much nicer to the three of us ever since. We even sent a postcard saying 'Wish you were here.' We had a nice laugh over cocktails about that.

Ginny and Eddy each had at least two holiday romances, but I just lay around in the sun reading and flopping into the pool every time I got too hot. I don't quite have Tom on speed-dial yet, like my Aunt Agnetha, but it's getting there.

I even persuaded Eddy to send my Great Aunt a postcard as a thank-you for paying for the trip. The next time I went to visit her it was propped on the mantelpiece against a vase of Blue Iris. I was going to tell Eddy about it, but when I turned it over, Aunt Agnetha had corrected his spelling in neat red ink.

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Catherine Moffat lives on the NSW Central Coast and has been published in literary magazines including *Australian Book Review* and *Australian Short Stories*, on Radio National, and in a number of anthologies. She has won the Katharine Susannah Prichard Speculative Fiction competition and the Wyong Short Story award, and been shortlisted or commended for other prizes including the Newcastle Short story prize, the Elizabeth Jolley Short Story competition and the Margaret River Short Story prize. Catherine recently won the inaugural Brotherhood of St Laurence Hope prize, and the last time she entered the Scarlet Stiletto, in 2007, Catherine was commended for her story, "Dark Drive.