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Cat O'Nine Tales

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The Man Who Robbed His Own Post Office


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The Beginning

MR JUSTICE GRAY STARED down at the two defendants in the dock. Chris and Sue Haskins had pleaded guilty to the theft of £250,000, being the property of the Post Office, and to falsifying four passports.

Mr and Mrs Haskins looked about the same age, which was hardly surprising as they had been at school together some forty years before. You could have passed them in the street without giving either of them a second look. Chris was about five foot nine, his dark wavy hair turning grey, and he was at least a stone overweight. He stood upright in the dock, and although his suit was well worn, his shirt was clean and his striped tie suggested that he was a member of a club. His black shoes looked as if they had been spit-and-polished every morning. His wife Sue stood by his side. Her neat floral dress and sensible shoes hinted at an organized and tidy woman, but then they were both wearing the clothes that they would normally have worn to church. After all, they considered the law to be nothing less than an extension of the Almighty.

Mr Justice Gray turned his attention to Mr and Mrs Haskins's barrister, a young man who had been selected on the grounds of cost, rather than experience.

'No doubt you wish to suggest there are mitigating circumstances in this case, Mr Rodgers,' prompted the judge helpfully.

'Yes, m'lord,' admitted the newly qualified barrister as he rose from his place. He would like to have told his lordship that this was

only his second case, but he felt his lordship would be unlikely to consider that a mitigating circumstance.

Mr Justice Gray settled back as he prepared to listen to how poor Mr Haskins had been thrashed by a ruthless stepfather, night after night, and Mrs Haskins had been raped by an evil uncle at an impressionable age, but no; Mr Rodgers assured the court that the Haskins came from happy, well-balanced backgrounds and had in fact been at school together. Their only child, Tracey, a graduate of Bristol University, was now working as an estate agent in Ashford. A model family.

Mr Rodgers glanced down at his brief before going on to explain how the Haskins had ended up in the dock that morning. Mr Justice Gray became more and more intrigued by their tale, and by the time the barrister had resumed his place the judge felt he needed a little more time to consider the length of the sentence. He ordered the two defendants to appear before him the following Monday at ten o'clock in the forenoon, by which time he would have come to a decision.

Mr Rodgers rose a second time.

'You were no doubt hoping that I would grant your clients bail, Mr Rodgers?' enquired the judge, raising an eyebrow, and before the surprised young barrister could respond Mr Justice Gray said, 'Granted.'

Jasper Gray told his wife about the plight of Mr and Mrs Haskins over lunch on Sunday. Long before the judge had devoured his rack of lamb, Vanessa Gray had offered her opinion.

'Sentence them both to an hour of community service, and then issue a court order instructing the Post Office to return their original investment in full,' she declared, revealing a common sense not always bestowed on the male of the species. To do him justice, the judge agreed with his spouse, although he told her that he would never get away with it.

'Why not?' she asked.

'Because of the four passports.'

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Mr Justice Gray was not surprised to find Mr and Mrs Haskins standing dutifully in the dock at ten o'clock the following morning. After all, they were not criminals.

The judge raised his head, stared down at them and tried to look grave. 'You have both pleaded guilty to the crimes of theft from a post office and of falsifying four passports.' He didn't bother to add any adjectives such as evil, heinous or even disgraceful, as he didn't consider them appropriate on this occasion. 'You have therefore left me with no choice,' he continued, 'but to send you both to prison.' The judge turned his attention to Chris Haskins. 'You were obviously the instigator of this crime, and with that in mind, I sentence you to three years' imprisonment.' Chris Haskins was unable

to hide his surprise: his barrister had warned him to expect at least five years. Chris had to stop himself from saying, thank you, my lord.

The judge then looked across at Mrs Haskins. 'I accept that your part in this conspiracy was possibly no more than an act of loyalty to your husband. However, you are well aware of the difference between right and wrong, and therefore I shall send you to prison for one year.'

'My lord,' protested Chris Haskins.

Mr Justice Gray frowned for the first time. He was not in the habit of being interrupted while passing sentence. 'Mr Haskins, if it is your intention to appeal against my judgement—'

'Certainly not, my lord,' said Chris Haskins, interrupting the judge for a second time. 'I was just wondering if you would allow me to serve my wife's sentence.'

Mr Justice Gray was so taken aback by the request that he couldn't think of a suitable reply to a question he had never been asked before. He banged his hammer, stood up and quickly left the courtroom. An usher hurriedly shouted, 'All rise.'

Chris and Sue first met in the playground of their local primary school in Cleethorpes, a seaside town on the east coast of England. Chris was standing in a queue waiting for his third of a pint of milk – government regulation for all schoolchildren under the age of sixteen. Sue was the milk monitor. Her job was to make sure everyone received their correct allocation. As she handed over the little bottle to Chris, neither of them gave the other a second look. Sue was in the class above Chris, so they rarely came across each other during the day, except when Chris was standing in the milk queue. At the end of the year Sue passed her eleven-plus and took up a place at the local grammar school. Chris was appointed the new milk monitor. The following September he also passed his eleven-plus, and joined Sue at Cleethorpes Grammar.

They remained oblivious to each other throughout their school days until Sue became head girl. After that, Chris couldn't help but notice her because at the end of morning assembly she would read out the school notices for the day. Bossy was the adjective most often trotted out by the lads whenever Sue's name came up in conversation (strange how women in positions of authority so often acquire the sobriquet *bossy*, while a man holding the same rank is somehow invested with qualities of leadership).

When Sue left at the end of the year Chris once again forgot all about her. He did not follow in her illustrious footsteps and become head boy, although he had a successful – by his standards – if somewhat uneventful year. He played for the school's second eleven cricket team, came fifth in the cross-country match against Grimsby Grammar, and did well enough in his final exams for them to be unworthy of mention either way.

No sooner had Chris left school than he received a letter from the Ministry of Defence, instructing him to report to his local recruiting office to sign up for a spell of National Service – a two-year compulsory period for all boys at the age of eighteen, when they had to serve in the armed forces. Chris's only choice in the matter was between the Army, the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force.

He selected the RAF, and even spent a fleeting moment wondering what it might be like to be a jet pilot. Once Chris had passed his medical and filled in all the necessary forms at the local recruiting office, the duty sergeant handed him a rail pass to somewhere called Mablethorpe; he was to report to the guardhouse by eight o'clock on the first of the month.

Chris spent the next twelve weeks being put through basic training, along with a hundred and twenty other raw recruits. He quickly discovered that only one applicant in a thousand was selected to be a pilot. Chris was not one in a thousand. At the end of the twelve weeks he was given the choice of working in the canteen, the officers' mess, the quartermaster's stores or flight operations. He opted for flight operations, and was allocated a job in the stores.

It was when he reported for duty the following Monday that he once again met up with Sue, or to be more accurate Corporal Sue Smart. She was inevitably standing at the head of the line; this time giving out job instructions. Chris didn't immediately recognize her, dressed in her smart blue uniform with her hair almost hidden under a cap. In any case, he was admiring her shapely legs when she said, 'Haskins, report to the quartermaster's stores.' Chris raised his head. It was that voice he could never forget.

'Sue?' he ventured tentatively. Corporal Smart looked up from her clipboard and glared at the recruit who dared to address her by her first name. She recognized the face, but couldn't place him.

'Chris Haskins,' he volunteered.

'Ah, yes, Haskins,' she said, and hesitated before adding, 'report to Sergeant Travis in the stores, and he'll brief you on your duties.'

'Yes, Corp,' Chris replied and quickly disappeared off in the direction of the quartermaster's stores. As he walked away, Chris didn't notice that Sue was taking a second look.

Chris didn't come across Corporal Smart again until his first weekend leave. He spotted her sitting at the other end of a railway carriage on the journey back to Cleethorpes. He made no attempt to join her, even pretending not to see her. However, he did find himself looking up from time to time, admiring her slim figure – he didn't remember her being as pretty as that.

When the train pulled into Cleethorpes station, Chris spotted his mother chatting to another woman. He knew immediately who she must be – the same red hair, the same trim figure, the same . . .

'Hello, Chris,' Mrs Smart greeted him as he joined his mother on the platform. 'Was Sue on the train with you?'

'I didn't notice,' said Chris, as Sue walked up to join them.

'I expect you see a lot of each other now you're based at the same camp,' suggested Chris's mother.

'No, not really,' said Sue, trying to sound disinterested.

'Well, we'd better be off,' said Mrs Haskins. 'I have to give Chris

and his dad dinner before they go off to watch the football,' she explained.

'Do you remember him?' asked Mrs Smart as Chris and his mother walked along the platform towards the exit.

'Snotty Haskins?' Sue hesitated. 'Can't say I do.'

'Oh, you like him that much, do you?' said Sue's mother with a smile.

When Chris boarded the train that Sunday evening, Sue was already sitting in her place at the end of the carriage. Chris was about to walk straight past her and find a seat in the next carriage, when he heard her say, 'Hi, Chris, did you have a nice weekend?'

'Not bad, Corp,' said Chris, stopping to look down at her. 'Grimsby beat Lincoln three–one, and I'd forgotten how good the fish and chips are in Cleethorpes compared to camp.'

Sue smiled. 'Why don't you join me?' she said, patting the seat beside her. 'And I think it will be all right to call me Sue when we're not in barracks.'

On the journey back to Mablethorpe, Sue did most of the talking, partly because Chris was so smitten with her – could this be the same skinny little girl who had handed out the milk each morning? – and partly because he realized the bubble would burst the moment they set foot back in camp. Non-commissioned officers just don't fraternize with the ranks.

The two of them parted at the camp gates and went their separate ways. Chris walked back to the barracks, while Sue headed off for the NCO quarters. When Chris strolled into his Nissen hut to join his fellow conscripts, one of them was bragging about the WRAF he'd had it off with. He even went into graphic detail, describing what RAF knickers look like. 'A dark shade of blue held up by thick elastic,' he assured the mesmerized onlookers. Chris lay on his bed and stopped listening to the unlikely tale, as his thoughts returned to Sue. He wondered how long it would be before he saw her again.

Not as long as he feared because when Chris went to the canteen for lunch the following day he spotted Sue sitting in the corner with a group of girls from the ops room. He wanted to stroll across to her table and, like David Niven, casually ask her out on a date. There was a Doris Day film showing at the Odeon that he thought she might enjoy, but he'd sooner have walked across a minefield than interrupt her while his mates were watching.

Chris selected his lunch from the counter – a bowl of vegetable soup, sausage and chips, and custard pie. He carried his tray across to a table on the other side of the room and joined a group of his fellow conscripts. He was tucking into the custard pie, while discussing Grimsby's chances against Blackpool, when he felt a hand touch his shoulder. He looked round to see Sue smiling down at him. Everyone else at the table stopped talking. Chris turned a bright shade of red.

'Doing anything on Saturday night?' Sue asked. The red deepened to crimson as he shook his head. 'I was thinking of going to see *Calamity Jane*.' She paused. 'Care to join me?' Chris nodded. 'Why don't we meet outside the camp gates at six?' Another nod. Sue smiled. 'See you then.' Chris turned back to find his friends staring at him in awe.

Chris didn't remember much about the film because he spent most of his time trying to summon up enough courage to put his arm round Sue's shoulder. He didn't even manage it when Howard Keel kissed Doris Day. However, after they left the cinema and walked back towards the waiting bus, Sue took his hand.

'What are you going to do once you've finished your National Service?' Sue asked as the last bus took them back to camp.

'Join my dad on the buses, I suppose,' said Chris. 'How about you?'

'Once I've served three years, I have to decide if I want to become an officer, and make the RAF my career.'

'I hope you come back and work in Cleethorpes,' Chris blurted out.

Chris and Sue Haskins were married a year later in St Aidan's parish church.

After the wedding, the bride and groom set off for Newhaven in a hired car, intending to spend their honeymoon on the south coast of Portugal. After only a few days on the Algarve, they ran out of money. Chris drove them back to Cleethorpes, but vowed that they would return to Albufeira just as soon as he could afford it.

Chris and Sue began married life by renting three rooms on the ground floor of a semi-detached in Jubilee Road. The two milk monitors were unable to hide their contentment from anyone who came into contact with them.

Chris joined his father on the buses and became a conductor with the Green Line Municipal Coach Company, while Sue was employed as a trainee with a local insurance company. A year later Sue gave birth to Tracey and left her job to bring up their daughter. This spurred Chris on to work even harder and seek promotion. With the occasional prod from Sue, Chris began to study for the company's promotion exam. Four years later Chris was appointed an inspector. All boded well in the Haskins household.

When Tracey informed her father that she wanted a pony for Christmas, he had to point out that they didn't have a garden. Chris compromised, and on Tracey's seventh birthday presented her with a Labrador puppy, which they christened Corp. The Haskins family wanted for nothing, and that might have been the end of this tale if Chris hadn't got the sack. It happened thus.



The Green Line Municipal Coach Company was taken over by the Hull Carriage Bus Company. With the merger of the two firms, job losses became inevitable, and Chris was among those offered a redundancy package. The only alternative the new management came up with was the reinstatement of Chris as a conductor. Chris turned his nose up at the offer. He felt confident of finding another job, and therefore accepted the settlement.

It wasn't long before the redundancy money ran out, and despite Ted Heath's promise of a brave new world, Chris quickly discovered that alternative employment wasn't that easy to find in Cleethorpes. Sue never once complained and, now that Tracey was going to school, took on a part-time job at Parsons', a local fish-and-chip shop. Not only did this bring in a weekly wage, supplemented by the occasional tip, but it also allowed Chris to enjoy a large plate of cod and chips every lunchtime.

Chris continued to try and find a job. He visited the employment exchange every morning, except on Friday, when he stood in a long line, waiting to collect his meagre unemployment benefit. After twelve months of failed interviews, and sorry-you-don't-seem-to-have-the-necessary-qualifications, Chris became anxious enough to seriously consider returning to his old job as a bus conductor. Sue assured him that it wouldn't be long before he was once again promoted to inspector.

Meanwhile, Sue took on more responsibility at the fish-and-chip shop and a year later was made assistant manager. Once again, this tale might have reached its natural conclusion, except this time it was Sue who was given her notice.

She warned Chris over a fish supper that Mr and Mrs Parsons were considering early retirement and planning to put the shop up for sale.

'How much are they expecting it to fetch?'

'I heard Mr Parsons mention the figure of five thousand pounds.'

'Then let's hope the new owners know a good thing when they see it,' said Chris, forking another chip.

'The new owners are far more likely to come with their own staff. Don't forget what happened to you when the bus company was taken over.'

Chris thought about it.

At eight thirty the following morning, Sue left the house to take Tracey to school, before going on to work. Once the two of them had departed, Chris and Corp set out for their morning constitutional. The dog was puzzled when his master didn't head for the beach, where he could enjoy his usual frolic in the waves, but instead marched off in the opposite direction, towards the centre of the town. Corp loyally bounded after him, and ended up being tied to a railing outside the Midland Bank in the High Street.

The manager of the bank could not hide his surprise when Mr Haskins requested an interview to discuss a business venture. He quickly checked Mr and Mrs Haskins' joint bank account, to find that they were seventeen pounds and twelve shillings in credit. He was pleased to note that they had never run up an overdraft, despite Mr Haskins being out of work for over a year.

The manager listened sympathetically to his client's proposal, but sadly shook his head even before Chris had come to the end of his well-rehearsed presentation.

'The bank couldn't consider such a risk,' the manager explained, 'at least not while you have so little security to offer as collateral. You don't even own your own home,' the banker pointed out. Chris thanked him, shook him by the hand and left undaunted.

He crossed the High Street, tied Corp to another railing and entered Martins Bank. Chris had to wait for quite some time before the manager was able to see him. He was greeted with the same response, but at least on this occasion the manager recommended that Chris should approach Britannia Finance, who, he explained, were a new company specializing in start-up loans for small businesses. Chris thanked him, left the bank, untied Corp and jogged

back to Jubilee Road, arriving only moments before Sue returned home with his lunch: cod and chips.

After lunch, Chris left the house and headed for the nearest phone box. He put four pennies in the box and pressed button A. The conversation lasted for less than a minute. He then returned home, but didn't tell Sue who he had an appointment with the following day.

The next day Chris waited for Sue to take Tracey off to school before he slipped back upstairs to their bedroom. He took off his jeans and sweater, and replaced them with the suit he'd worn at his wedding, a cream shirt he only put on for church on Sundays, and a tie his mother-in-law had given him for Christmas, which he thought he'd never wear. He then shone his shoes until even his old drill sergeant would have agreed that they passed muster. He checked himself in the mirror, hoping he looked like the potential manager of a new business venture. He left the dog in the back garden, and headed into town.

Chris was fifteen minutes early for his meeting with a Mr Tremaine, the loans manager with Britannia Finance Company. He was asked to take a seat in the waiting room. Chris picked up a copy of the *Financial Times* for the first time in his life. He couldn't find the sports pages. Fifteen minutes later a secretary ushered him through to Mr Tremaine's office.

The loans executive listened with sympathy to Chris's ambitious proposal, and then enquired, just as the two bank managers had, 'What security do you have to offer?'

'Nothing,' replied Chris without guile, 'other than the fact that my wife and I will work all the hours we're awake, and she already knows the business backwards.' Chris waited to hear the many reasons why Britannia couldn't consider his request.

Instead Mr Tremaine asked, 'As your wife would constitute half of our investment, what does she think about this whole enterprise?'

'I haven't even discussed it with her yet,' Chris blurted out.

'Then I suggest you do so,' said Mr Tremaine, 'and fairly quickly, because before we would consider investing in Mr and Mrs Haskins, we will need to meet Mrs Haskins in order to find out if she's half as good as you claim.'

Chris broke the news to his wife over supper that evening. Sue was speechless. A problem Chris had not come up against all that often in the past.

Once Mr Tremaine had met Mrs Haskins, it was only a matter of filling in countless forms before Britannia Finance advanced them a loan of £5,000. A month later Mr and Mrs Haskins moved from their three rooms in Jubilee Road to a fish-and-chip shop on Beach Street.