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A Spot of Bother

Mark Haddon

I

It began when George was trying on a black suit in Allders the week before Bob Green's funeral.

It was not the prospect of the funeral that had unsettled him. Nor Bob dying.To be honest he had always found Bob's locker-room bonhomie slightly tiring and he was secretly relieved that they would not be playing squash again. Moreover, the manner in which Bob had died (a heart attack while watching the Boat Race on television) was oddly reassuring. Susan had come back from her sister's and found him lying on his back in the centre of the room with one hand over his eyes, looking so peaceful she thought initially that he was taking a nap.

It would have been painful, obviously. But one could cope with pain.And the endorphins would have kicked in soon enough, followed by that sensation of one's life rushing before one's eyes which George himself had experienced several years ago when he had fallen from a stepladder, broken his elbow on the rockery and passed out, a sensation which he remembered as being not unpleasant (a view from the Tamar Bridge in Plymouth had figured prominently for some reason). The same probably went for that tunnel of bright light as the eyes died, given the number of people who heard the angels calling them home and woke to find a junior doctor standing over them with a defibrillator.

Then . . . nothing. It would have been over.

It was too early, of course. Bob was sixty-one. And it was going to be hard for Susan and the boys, even if Susan did blossom now that she was able to finish her own sentences. But all in all it seemed a good way to go.

No, it was the lesion which had thrown him.

He had removed his trousers and was putting on the bottom half of the suit when he noticed a small oval of puffed flesh on his hip, darker than the surrounding skin and flaking slightly. His stomach rose and he was forced to swallow a small amount of vomit which appeared at the back of his mouth.

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Cancer.

He had not felt like this since John Zinewski's Fireball had capsized several years ago and he had found himself trapped underwater with his ankle knotted in a loop of rope. But that had lasted for three or four seconds at most. And this time there was no one to help him right the boat.

He would have to kill himself.

It was not a comforting thought but it was something he could do, and this made him feel a little more in control of the situation.

The only question was how.

Jumping from a tall building was a terrifying idea, easing your centre of gravity out over the edge of the parapet, the possibility that you might change your mind halfway down. And the last thing he needed at this point was more fear.

Hanging needed equipment and he possessed no gun.

If he drank enough whisky he might be able to summon the courage to crash the car.There was a big stone gateway on the A16 this side of Stamford. He could hit it doing 90 m.p.h. with no difficulty whatsoever.

But what if his nerve failed? What if he were too drunk to control the car? What if someone pulled out of the drive? What if he killed them, paralysed himself and died of cancer in a wheelchair in prison?

'Sir . . . ? Would you mind accompanying me back into the store?'

A young man of eighteen or thereabouts was staring down at George. He had ginger sideburns and a navy-blue uniform several sizes too large for him.

George realised that he was crouching on the tiled threshold outside the shop.

'Sir . . . ?'

George got to his feet. 'I'm terribly sorry.'

'Would you mind accompanying me . . . ?'

George looked down and saw that he was still wearing the suit trousers with the fly undone. He buttoned it rapidly. 'Of course.'

He walked back through the doors then made his way between the handbags and the perfumes towards the menswear department with the security guard at his shoulder. 'I appear to have had some kind of turn.'

'You'll have to discuss that with the manager, I'm afraid, sir.'

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The black thoughts which had filled his mind only seconds before seemed to have occurred a very long time ago. True, he was a little unsure on his feet, the way you were after slicing your thumb with a chisel, for example, but he felt surprisingly good given the circumstances.

The manager of the menswear department was standing beside a rack of slippers with his hands crossed over his groin. 'Thank you, John.'

The security guard gave him a deferential little nod, turned on his heels and walked away.

'Now, Mr . . .'

'Hall. George Hall. My apologies. I . . .'

'Perhaps we should have a word in my office,' said the manager.

A woman appeared carrying George's trousers.'He left these in the changing room. His wallet's in the pocket.'

George pressed on. 'I think I had some kind of blackout. I really didn't mean to cause any trouble.'

How good it was to be talking to other people. Them saying something. Him saying something in return. The steady tick-tock of conversation. He could have carried on like this all afternoon.

'Are you all right, sir?'

The woman cupped a hand beneath his elbow and he slid downwards and sideways onto a chair which felt more solid, more comfortable and more supportive than he remembered any chair ever feeling.

Things became slightly vague for a few minutes.

Then a cup of tea was placed into his hands.

'Thank you.' He sipped. It was not good tea but it was hot, it was in a proper china mug and holding it was a comfort.

'Perhaps we should call you a taxi.'

It was probably best, he thought, to head back to the village and buy the suit another day.

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