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Dead Simple

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Extract

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So far, apart from just a couple of hitches, Plan A was working out fine. Which was fortunate, since they didn't really have a Plan B.

At 8.30 on a late May evening, they'd banked on having some daylight. There had been plenty of the stuff this time yesterday, when four of them had made the same journey, taking with them an empty coffin and four shovels. But now, as the green Transit van sped along the Sussex country road, misty rain was falling from a sky the colour of a fogged negative.

'Are we nearly there yet?' said Josh in the back, mimicking a child.

'The great Um Ga says, "Wherever I go there I am," responded Robbo, who was driving, and was slightly less drunk than the rest of them. With three pubs notched up already in the past hour and a half, and four more on the itinerary, he was sticking to shandy. At least, that had been his intention; but he'd managed to slip down a couple of pints of pure Harvey's bitter – to clear his head for the task of driving, he'd said.

'So we are there!' said Josh.

'Always have been.'

A deer warning sign flitted from the darkness then was gone, as the headlights skimmed glossy black-top macadam stretching ahead into the forested distance. Then they passed a small white cottage.

Michael, lolling on a tartan rug on the floor in the back

of the van, head wedged between the arms of a wheel-wrench for a pillow, was feeling very pleasantly woozy. 'I sh'ink I need another a drink,' he slurred.

If he'd had his wits about him, he might have sensed, from the expressions of his friends, that something was not quite right. Never usually much of a heavy drinker, tonight he'd parked his brains in the dregs of more empty pint glasses and vodka chasers than he could remember downing, in more pubs than had been sensible to visit.

Of the six of them who had been muckers together since way back into their early teens, Michael Harrison had always been the natural leader. If, as they say, the secret of life is to choose your parents wisely, Michael had ticked plenty of the right boxes. He had inherited his mother's fair good looks and his father's charm and entrepreneurial spirit, but without any of the self-destruct genes that had eventually ruined the man.

From the age of twelve, when Tom Harrison had gassed himself in the garage of the family home, leaving behind a trail of debtors, Michael had grown up fast, helping his mother make ends meet by doing a paper round, then when he was older by taking labouring jobs in his holidays. He grew up with an appreciation of how hard it was to make money – and how easy to fritter it.

Now, at twenty-eight, he was smart, a decent human being, and a natural leader of the pack. If he had flaws, it was that he was too trusting and on occasions, too much of a prankster. And tonight that latter chicken was coming home to roost. Big time.

But at this moment he had no idea of that.

He drifted back again into a blissful stupor, thinking only happy thoughts, mostly about his fiancée, Ashley. Life was good. His mother was dating a nice guy, his kid brother

had just got into university, his kid sister Carly was backpacking in Australia on a gap year, and his business was going incredibly well. But best of all, in three days time he was going to be marrying the woman he loved. And adored. His soul mate.

Ashley.

He hadn't noticed the shovel that rattled on every bump in the road, as the wheels drummed below on the sodden tarmac, and the rain pattered down above him on the roof. And he didn't clock a thing in the expressions of his two friends riding along with him in the back, who were swaying and singing tunelessly to an oldie, Rod Stewart's 'Sailing', on the crackly radio up front. A leaky fuel can filled the van with the stench of petrol.

'I love her,' Michael slurred. 'I sh'love Ashley.'

'She's a great lady,' Robbo said, turning his head from the wheel, sucking up to him as he always did. That was in his nature. Awkward with women, a bit clumsy, a florid face, lank hair, beer belly straining the weave of his T-shirt, Robbo hung to the coat tails of this bunch by always trying to make himself needed. And tonight, for a change, he actually *was* needed.

'She is.'

'Coming up,' warned Luke.

Robbo braked as they approached the turn-off and winked in the darkness of the cab at Luke seated next to him. The wipers clumped steadily, smearing the rain across the windscreen.

'I mean, like I really love her. Sh'now what I mean?'

'We know what you mean,' Pete said.

Josh, leaning back against the driver's seat, one arm around Pete, swigged some beer, then passed the bottle

down to Michael. Froth rose from the neck as the van braked sharply. He belched. "Scuse me.'

'What the hell does Ashley see in you?' Josh said.

'My dick.'

'So it's not your money? Or your looks? Or your charm?'

'That too, Josh, but mostly my dick.'

The van lurched as it made the sharp right turn, rattling over a cattle grid, almost immediately followed by a second one, and onto the dirt track. Robbo, peering through the misted glass, picking out the deep ruts, swung the wheel. A rabbit sprinted ahead of them, then shot into some undergrowth. The headlights veered right then left, fleetingly colouring the dense conifers that lined the track, before they vanished into darkness in the rear-view mirror. As Robbo changed down a gear, Michael's voice changed, his bravado suddenly tinged, very faintly, with anxiety.

'Where we going?'

'To another pub.'

'OK. Great.' Then a moment later, 'Promished Ashley I shwouldn't – wouldn't – drink too much.'

'See,' Pete said, 'you're not even married and she's laying down rules. You're still a free man. For just three more days.'

'Three and a half,' Robbo added, helpfully.

'You haven't arranged any girls?' Michael said.

'Feeling horny?' Robbo asked.

'I'm staying faithful.'

'We're making sure of that.'

'Bastards!'

The van lurched to a halt, reversed a short distance, then made another right turn. Then it stopped again, and Robbo killed the engine – and Rod Stewart with it. '*Arrivé!*' he said. 'Next watering hole! The Undertaker's Arms!'

'I'd prefer the Naked Thai Girl's Legs,' Michael said.

'She's here too.'

Someone opened the rear door of the van, Michael wasn't sure who. Invisible hands took hold of his ankles. Robbo took one of his arms, and Luke the other.

'Hey!'

'You're a heavy bastard!' Luke said.

Moments later Michael thumped down, in his favourite sports jacket and best jeans (not the wisest choice for your stag night, a dim voice in his head was telling him) onto sodden earth, in pitch darkness which was pricked only by the red tail lights of the van and the white beam of a flashlight. Hardening rain stung his eyes and matted his hair to his forehead.

'My – closhes—'

Moments later, his arms yanked almost clear of their sockets, he was hoisted in the air, then dumped down into something dry and lined with white satin that pressed in on either side of him.

'Hey!' he said again.

Four drunken, grinning shadowy faces leered down at him. A magazine was pushed into his hands. In the beam of the flashlight he caught a blurry glimpse of a naked redhead with gargantuan breasts. A bottle of whisky, a small flashlight, switched on, and a walkie-talkie were placed on his stomach.

'What's—?'

A piece of foul-tasting rubber tubing was pushing into his mouth. As Michael spat it out, he heard a scraping sound, then suddenly something blotted the faces out. And blotted all the sound out. His nostrils filled with smells of wood, new cloth and glue. For an instant he felt warm and snug. Then a flash of panic.

'Hey, guys – what—'

Robbo picked up a screwdriver, as Pete shone the flashlight down on the teak coffin.

'You're not screwing it down?' Luke said.

'Absolutely!' Pete said.

'Do you think we should?'

'He'll be fine,' Robbo said. 'He's got the breathing tube!'

'I really don't think we should screw it down!'

''Course we do – otherwise he'll be able to get out!'

'Hey—' Michael said.

But no one could hear him now. And he could hear nothing except a faint scratching sound above him.

Robbo worked on each of the four screws in turn. It was a top-of-the-range hand-tooled teak coffin with embossed brass handles, borrowed from his uncle's funeral parlour, where, after a couple of career U-turns, he was now employed as an apprentice embalmer. Good, solid brass screws. They went in easily.

Michael looked upwards, his nose almost touching the lid. In the beam of the flashlight, ivory-white satin encased him. He kicked out with his legs, but they had nowhere to travel. He tried to push his arms out. But they had nowhere to go, either.

Sobering for a few moments, he suddenly realized what he was lying in.

'Hey, hey, listen, you know – hey – I'm claustrophobic – this is not funny! Hey!' His voice came back at him, strangely muffled.

Pete opened the door, leaned into the cab, and switched on the headlights. A couple of metres in front of them was the grave they had dug yesterday, the earth piled to one side, tapes already in place. A large sheet of corru-

gated iron and two of the spades they had used lay close by.

The four friends walked to the edge and peered down. All of them were suddenly aware that nothing in life is ever quite as it seems when you are planning it. This hole right now looked deeper, darker, more like – well – a grave, actually.

The beam of the flashlight shimmered at the bottom.

'There's water,' Josh said.

'Just a bit of rainwater,' Robbo said.

Josh frowned. 'There's too much, that's not rainwater. We must have hit the water table.'

'Shit,' Pete said. A BMW salesman, he always looked the part, on duty or off. Spiky haircut, sharp suit, always confident. But not quite so confident now.

'It's nothing,' Robbo said. 'Just a couple of inches.'

'Did we really dig it this deep?' said Luke, a freshly qualified solicitor, recently married, not quite ready to shrug off his youth, but starting to accept life's responsibilities.

'It's a grave, isn't it?' said Robbo. 'We decided on a grave.'

Josh squinted up at the worsening rain. 'What if the water rises?

'Shit, man,' Robbo said. 'We dug it yesterday, it's taken twenty-four hours for just a couple of inches. Nothing to worry about.'

Josh nodded, thoughtfully. 'But what if we can't get him back out?'

'Course we can get him out,' Robbo said. 'We just unscrew the lid.'

'Let's just get on with it,' Luke said. 'OK?'

'He bloody deserves it,' Pete reassured his mates. 'Remember what he did on your stag night, Luke?'

Luke would never forget. Waking from an alcoholic stupor to find himself on a bunk on the overnight sleeper to Edinburgh. Arriving forty minutes late at the altar the next afternoon as a result.

Pete would never forget, either. The weekend before his wedding, he'd found himself in frilly lace underwear, a dildo strapped to his waist, manacled to the Clifton Gorge suspension bridge, before being rescued by the fire brigade. Both pranks had been Michael's idea.

'Typical of Mark,' Pete said. 'Jammy bastard. He's the one who organized this and now he isn't bloody here . . .'

'He's coming. He'll be at the next pub, he knows the itinerary.'

'Oh yes?'

'He rang, he's on his way.'

'Fogbound in Leeds. Great!' Robbo said.

'He'll be at the Royal Oak by the time we get there.'

'Jammy bastard,' Luke said. 'He's missing out on all the hard work.'

'And the *fun*!' Pete reminded him.

'This is fun?' Luke said. 'Standing in the middle of a sodding forest in the pissing rain? Fun? God, you're sad! He'd fucking better turn up to help us get Michael back out.'

They hefted the coffin up in the air, staggered forward with it to the edge of the grave and dumped it down, hard, over the tapes. Then giggled at the muffled 'Ouch!' from within it.

There was a loud thump.

Michael banged his fist against the lid. 'Hey! Enough!'

Pete, who had the walkie-talkie in his coat pocket, pulled it out and switched it on. 'Testing!' he said. 'Testing!'

Inside the coffin, Pete's voice boomed out. 'Testing! Testing!'

'Joke over!'

'Relax, Michael!' Pete said. 'Enjoy!'

'You bastards! Let me out! I need a piss!'

Pete switched the walkie-talkie off and jammed it into the pocket of his Barbour jacket. 'So how does this work, exactly?'

'We lift the tapes,' Robbo said. 'One each end.'

Pete dug the walkie-talkie out and switched it on. 'We're getting this taped, Michael!' Then he switched it off again.

The four of them laughed. Then each picked up an end of tape and took up the slack.

'One . . . two . . . three!' Robbo counted.

'Fuck, this is heavy!' Luke said, taking the strain and lifting.

Slowly, jerkily, listing like a stricken ship, the coffin sank down into the deep hole.

When it reached the bottom they could barely see it in the darkness.

Pete held the flashlight. In the beam they could make out the breathing tube sticking limply out of the drinking-straw-sized hole that had been cut in the lid.

Robbo grabbed the walkie-talkie. 'Hey, Michael, your dick's sticking out. Are you enjoying the magazine?'

'OK, joke over. Now let me out!'

'We're off to a pole-dancing club. Too bad you can't join us!' Robbo switched off the radio before Michael could reply. Then, pocketing it, he picked up a spade and began

shovelling earth over the edge of the grave and roared with laughter as it rattled down on the roof of the coffin.

With a loud *whoop* Pete grabbed another shovel and joined in. For some moments both of them worked hard until only a few bald patches of coffin showed through the earth. Then these were covered. Both of them continued, the drink fuelling their work into a frenzy, until there was a good couple of feet of earth piled on top of the coffin. The breathing tube barely showed above it.

'Hey!' Luke said. 'Hey, stop that! The more you shovel on the more we're going to have to dig back out again in two hours' time.'

'It's a grave!' Robbo said. 'That's what you do with a grave, you cover the coffin!'

Luke grabbed the spade from him. 'Enough!' he said, firmly. 'I want to spend the evening drinking, not bloody digging, OK?'

Robbo nodded, never wanting to upset anyone in the group. Pete, sweating heavily, threw his spade down. 'Don't think I'll take this up as a career,' he said.

They pulled the corrugated iron sheet over the top, then stood back in silence for some moments. Rain pinged on the metal.

'OK,' Pete said. 'We're outta here.'

Luke dug his hands into his coat pocket, dubiously. 'Are we really sure about this?'

'We agreed we were going to teach him a lesson,' Robbo said.

'What if he chokes on his vomit, or something?'

'He'll be fine, he's not that drunk,' Josh said. 'Let's go.'

Josh climbed into the rear of the van, and Luke shut the doors. Then Pete, Luke and Robbo squeezed into the front, and Robbo started the engine. They drove back down the

track for half a mile, then made a right turn onto the main road.

Then he switched on the walkie-talkie. 'How you doing, Michael?'

'Guys, listen, I'm really not enjoying this joke.'

'Really?' Robbo said. 'We are!'

Luke took the radio. 'This is what's known as pure vanilla revenge, Michael!'

All four of them in the van roared with laughter. Now it was Josh's turn. 'Hey, Michael, we're going to this fantastic club, they have the most beautiful women, butt naked, sliding their bodies up and down poles. You're going to be really pissed you're missing out on this!'

Michael's voice slurred back, just a tad plaintive. 'Can we stop this now, please? I'm really not enjoying this.'

Through the windscreen Robbo could see roadworks ahead, with a green light. He accelerated.

Luke shouted over Josh's shoulder, 'Hey, Michael, just relax, we'll be back in a couple of hours!'

'What do you mean, *a couple of hours*?'

The light turned red. Not enough time to stop. Robbo accelerated even harder and shot through. 'Gimme the thing,' he said, grabbing the radio and steering one-handed around a long curve. He peered down in the ambient glow of the dash and hit the *talk* button.

'Hey, Michael—'

'ROBBO!' Luke's voice, screaming.

Headlights above them, coming straight at them.

Blinding them.

Then the blare of a horn, deep, heavy duty, ferocious.

'ROBBBBBBBBOOOOOOO!' screamed Luke.

Robbo stamped in panic on the brake pedal and dropped the walkie-talkie. The wheel yawed in his hands

as he looked, desperately, for somewhere to go. Trees to his right, a JCB to his left, headlights burning through the windscreen, searing his eyes, coming at him out of the teeming rain, like a train.