

Exercises in Abstraction

Jeremy decided to murder Great Aunt Laura from the purest of motives. She was rich. He was not and Laski was asking £500 to exhibit his paintings.

‘Stop being so bloody materialistic. Give fresh talent a chance,’ he said.

‘But Jeremy, you’re not fresh talent. You’ve been around longer than God.’

The rush of blood to Jeremy’s head made Laski’s voice seem as if it was coming down a long corridor. He forced his face into a smile. ‘Why don’t you waive the £500 and take 20% instead of 10% on the sales?’

‘You’re assuming there will be sales. Abstracts are not as popular as they were, even good ones.’

‘Don’t you ever do anything for artistic reasons?’

‘If I did that, I wouldn’t have a business.’

Jeremy marched out of the gallery, hoping the two mile walk home would calm him down. He slammed the front door. Angela, who had just turned over to a clean sheet of the A4 drawing pad she used for lesson planning, jumped, sending a wild red squiggle over the page.

‘Do you have to clatter round the place like a six year old?’

He stood with his head bowed, surreptitiously polishing each shoe on the back of the other trouser leg.

‘It’s Lasky,’ he muttered. ‘He wants £500 up front.’

‘Oh dear.’ She turned over to a fresh page. ‘Dinner’s in the oven.’

When Jeremy opened the oven door, he discovered that Angela had not put a cover over the plate, so what had been a juicy casserole now looked like one of the burial offerings from an Egyptian tomb. He held the plate at an angle of 90 degrees. The food did not even wobble. He scraped the mess into the bin and made a cheese sandwich. Angela came into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

‘Great Aunt Laura rang today.’

‘What did she want?’

‘To know if you’d found a proper job yet.’

Jeremy felt his teeth clench, but he kept his voice calm. Angela was impervious to temper tantrums. ‘What did you say?’

‘I said you were hoping to mount an exhibition soon.’

‘What did she say to that?’

‘That you’ve as much chance of mounting Everest.’

‘Sarky cow. What does she know about art?’

‘Probably more than you do.’

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Jeremy thanked providence he was not holding the carving knife. He managed to keep his temper. Angela was the breadwinner.

‘She has a point, doesn’t she?’ Angela said. ‘When you began this painting farce, we agreed two years was a reasonable trial period. That was up six months ago.’

‘I just need this chance at Laski’s.’

‘Well you’ll have to beg, borrow or steal £500 then, Jeremy, because the bank of Angela is closed.’ She marched out of the kitchen with her mug of tea.

He pulled a face. ‘Yes, miss.’ He noticed that she had not made him any tea.

It was then that the idea hit him. Much as he would have loved to plunge a knife into what passed for Angela’s heart, it would be much more profitable to do away with Aunt Laura. He was her only relative and Uncle Roddy had left her stacks of money. She lived in that massive Victorian mausoleum all by herself, with only Mrs Wilkins coming in every day. Yes, he would murder Laura, borrow money on his expectations and earn a fortune at the exhibition. Jeremy grinned and made another sandwich only to find there was no more cheese.

The next morning, instead of going into his studio, which Angela still insisted on calling the spare room, Jeremy sat at the kitchen table and thought about how to commit the perfect murder. He needed to concentrate on his victim. On Angela’s pad, he wrote down the word “rich”. Well, of course Laura was rich. There was no point in knocking the old hag off if she wasn’t. She was lucky on the stock market, too. It had to be luck because Jeremy knew that the miserable witch did not have two brain cells to rub together.

He stared at the words “rich” and “lucky”. Useless. He needed to know about her daily life. The only way to find that out was to beard the dragon in her lair. Bugger. He would have to take her something. Chocolates?

That was it. He would put something in her favourite chocolate. What, though? Even if Laura was about a hundred and forty, her unexpected death would have the pathologist paying her more attention than any man ever had, even Uncle Roddy.

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He headed for Angela's computer, but even though the world wide web was a fund of knowledge, it did not tell Jeremy how to get the daft bat to actually take poison or which poison to use.

His eyes lit on the laburnum in the garden. He looked it up. Result. Laburnum is poisonous to cattle, it said. Should work well on Laura, then, he thought. He could grind up the seeds and put them in the chocolates. It was five minutes before he realised that it was the wrong time of year for seeds. Bugger.

Foxgloves? According to the Internet, the leaves could be confused with comfrey. Everyone knew the health-giving properties of comfrey. He found foxgloves in the garden, donned Angela's rubber gloves and diced up the leaves with an old penknife. Putting them in a small plastic medicine bottle, Jeremy headed for the local health-food shop. Armed with the tea, chocolates and medicine bottle, he presented himself at the front door of "The Laurels". The housekeeper was less than welcoming.

'Oh look. Picasso's gracing us with his presence.'

'Dear Mrs Wilkins. Shall I throw a stick for you to chase? You could fetch it on your broomstick.'

Laura sat by the fire, squinting at her cross-stitch. Jeremy walked over and kissed her, adjusting his voice to her level of deafness. 'Still refusing to wear glasses, darling?'

'Don't shout, Jeremy. I am not deaf and I do not need glasses. Look, you made me jump. I've pricked my finger.'

'That means that you will sleep for a hundred years and a handsome prince will kiss you awake.'

'No it doesn't, you fathead. It means I shall have a sore finger. What do you want? Oh, Belgian chocolates. Goody.'

'I've brought you some comfrey tea, darling. It's supposed to be good for all kinds of ailments.'

'Ailments? I don't have any ailments, just a bit of rheumatics.'

'Well, it says on the packet that it's good for bones and joints.'

'Let me see.'

Mrs Wilkins received the news that she was supposed to make comfrey tea with a snort and a shake of her head. Jeremy heard her say "herbal muck" on her way to the door. She turned round, her eyes narrowed.

'Are you having some of this, too, Mr Burgess?'

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‘Oh, yes.’ Jeremy, way ahead of the suspicious old trout, bared his teeth at her. His hand was already in his pocket unscrewing the cap on the bottle, or trying to. He had forgotten that all such bottles were fitted with child proof lids. Jeremy swore. His Aunt lifted her head from her needle-work.

‘What did you say, dear?’

‘I need the loo, Aunt Laura.’

When Jeremy came back, the lid was unscrewed, the bottle back in his pocket.

Mrs Wilkins smiled at him. ‘If you’re drinking such healthy tea, you won’t be wanting any Dundee cake, will you?’ she said and stalked out.

Jeremy handed the chocolates to Laura and bent over the tray. He slid his hand out of his pocket and shook some of the chopped foxglove into her cup.

When he took his first sip, he thought for one horrible second that he had mixed up the cups. It tasted worse than the stuff the other boys made him drink during the initiation test for the ping-pong club. He stayed for another hour, listening to her drone on about her childhood and her early marriage to Roddy, then went home and waited. For two days. In the end, he telephoned.

‘Hello,’ Laura answered in a bright tone. ‘Why are you ringing so soon?’

‘Because.....I enjoyed my visit. How are you, Aunt Laura? Finished the chocolates, yet?’

‘No, dear. But I have asked Mrs Wilkins to throw out that dreadful tea. I only took a couple of mouthfuls. It made me feel so sick and giddy. But it was a nice thought. Thank you, my boy.’

‘I’m sorry it made you feel like that, darling,’ replied Jeremy, clenching his free fist and shaking it at the banisters.

‘I’ve been thinking a lot about you, Jeremy. You need some direction in your life. I’ve been reading the newspaper about some new initiatives by the government to get people back to work. Why don’t you try one of those?’

‘Because I’m a painter, Aunt Laura.’

‘That’s precisely my point, dear. Apparently, they are crying out for painters. I can’t get anyone to come and do my outside. It hasn’t been done for years.’

‘I’m not that sort of painter.’

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‘Nonsense. Now, I’ve sent Mrs Wilkins down to that P&Q place for supplies. The weather forecast is good, so I shall expect you early tomorrow. Bye, dear.’

Jeremy stomped round the house for several minutes before realising that he now had the perfect excuse to be at Laura’s house. Which meant that he could try again. Back to the Internet.

Jeremy arrived bright and early at nine-thirty the next morning, wearing his painting smock to protect his clothes. Mrs Wilkins opened the door, looked at her watch and then back at him. His initial enthusiasm dwindled. This was going to be awful. His degradation was complete, when he discovered that he was terrified of heights. Four rungs up his knees buckled, his eyes shut and he wrapped both arms round the ladder, shouting ‘Oh, my God. Oh, my God.’. Laura told him to stop behaving like a wilting lily.

He began on the downstairs window frames and the front porch, estimating that by the time he was halfway through, the obstacle to his wealth would have been cremated. Against his will, he found he enjoyed himself. Laura was pleased and even crabby Wilkins brought him out a slice of her fruit cake.

The next day, he put on the second coat. He had designated the day after as D-Day. He knew that Mrs Wilkins filled the kettle before going home so that Laura only had to switch it on when she wanted a drink. Jeremy, due to what he considered was sheer brilliant planning, happened to be rubbing down the kitchen window when Mrs Wilkins left.

He called out to Laura that he was packing up and cleaning his hands. She came through to see him just as his hand reached for the kettle. Damn the woman.

‘Do you want a cup of tea before you go?’

‘No thanks, Aunt Laura. I’ll just clean everything. I’ll come through to say goodbye.’

She nodded and wandered back to the sitting room. He used the gas hob to melt the insulation of the live and earth wires in the plug making sure the earth was disconnected. Once the earth and live wires crossed, it would be goodnight Vienna for poor dear Auntie and lots of lovely dosh for him. He went to kiss the old harpy goodnight.

‘I’m really proud of you, Jeremy,’ she said. ‘You’re working very hard. Are you walking home?’

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‘Yes. I like the fresh air.’

‘You must be tired. Look here’s twenty pence for your bus fare. Go on, dear. Take it.’

It was not even enough to buy sweets on his way home.

At nine-thirty that night, the telephone rang. Jeremy bounced into the hall, making Angela jump again. It was Laura.

‘Jeremy?’

He smacked his forehead against the wall. ‘Yes, darling. Is anything the matter?’

Out came the story. Laura had felt unwell because of the paint fumes, although how on earth she managed to smell them from the sitting room, only God knew. She had rung Mrs Wilkins to tell her how unwell she felt. Mrs Wilkins had come back. Mrs Wilkins had gone to make a cup of tea. End of Mrs Wilkins. Bugger.

Jeremy drove Angela’s car to the house. The police were tutting over the condition of various things, notably the kettle, the leaking tap from the upstairs bathroom dripping water through the hall ceiling round the light fitting and the general decay.

The Sergeant took him to one side. ‘It was only a matter of time, Mr Burgess. The whole house is a death trap. Look at the state of the carpets. I mean, just look at that stair carpet.’

Jeremy examined the stair carpet with interest. He stayed the night on the lumpy daybed in what had been Uncle Roddy’s study, counselling himself to patience.

The next day was Saturday. Jeremy finished rubbing down the kitchen window. Aunt Laura was fiddling about tying rose stems to the struts on the pergola.

‘Jeremy, dear, do you think you could just mend this cross-member for me?’

He walked over. ‘Yes, I’ll do it later, Aunt Laura. Look, just for the moment, I’ll wedge it. It needs a new piece of wood.’

Jeremy had no time to bother about bits of rotten wood. He had seen the coil of black twine Laura was using. He checked the front pocket of his smock, impaling his hand on one of the drawing pins he used in the studio. Bingo, he thought, sucking his finger. Laura went indoors. He saw her climbing the stairs. Quick as a pouncing cat, he grabbed the coil of wire and the pliers, sliding them into his front pocket and crept upstairs.

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He wound the wire round the banisters on one side and fixed the other with the drawing pin, then rushed into the bathroom and waited. It felt like years, but was only about five minutes before he heard her coming along the landing and past the bathroom door. Moments later, he heard a few cries and a lot of thuds. He walked slowly out of the door and peered over the banister.

Laura was lying at the bottom of the stairs, not moving. Jeremy undid his handiwork, walked down the stairs and picked up the phone.

‘Your Aunt is extremely lucky, Mr Burgess,’ the doctor in A&E told him. ‘A fall like that would normally kill someone of her years, but she tells me that for her fortieth birthday she asked her husband for something exciting and he gave her a parachute jump. The instructor taught her how to fall.’ He shook his head again. ‘She really is a very lucky lady.’

At that moment, Jeremy finally accepted that Laura was immortal. Nothing would kill her. At the same time, he admitted that he did not want to any more. She was a game old girl and, if truth be known, she had been right about the painting. It was something he enjoyed and could earn money doing. Except that he would have to stick to bungalows, of course.

‘Darling, you gave me such a fright,’ he said, taking her hand.

‘I know. I shall have to sell that great house and get something smaller.’

‘It will never sell in that condition, Aunt Laura. At least let me finish painting the downstairs. You’ll have to get someone to do the upstairs, though.’

‘You’re a good boy. They say I should be able to come home tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Shall I come and fetch you?’

‘No, dear. I’ll get a taxi.’

The next morning, Jeremy was up early and eating breakfast by seven. Angela yawned her way into the kitchen.

‘You’re not going out are you?’

‘I want to crack on and finish the porch. Laura’s putting the house on the market.’

‘Honest toil, Jeremy? That’s not like you.’

‘I feel sorry for her, that’s all. She only has me.’

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‘You surprise me. The way you’ve been talking about her lately, I thought you couldn’t wait for her to pop her clogs.’

‘Rubbish. I’ve discovered she’s rather special.’

To his surprise, Angela gave him a hug and kissed him.

By the time Laura’s taxi arrived, Jeremy had worked for eight concentrated hours and the front porch looked wonderful. He helped her inside. She patted his arm.

‘Roddy was wrong about you,’ she said. ‘I shall go and see my solicitor first thing tomorrow. You’ll have no need to worry when I’m gone.’

Jeremy went hot and then cold. It had never occurred to him that she might have left her money elsewhere. ‘I hope that won’t be for a very long time,’ he said, giving her a hug.

The phone call came just after seven the next morning. It was the police.

‘The paper boy found her, Mr Burgess. She’d obviously been out to tie up the roses. The crossbeam on the pergola gave way. The doctor says she died immediately. Mr Burgess? Are you there, Mr Burgess?’

Jeremy put the phone down without replying and turned to Angela. She looked up frowning slightly. ‘What is it?’

He told her. She shook her head.

‘I’m sorry, Jeremy. Look, I’ve been saving this piece of good news. I didn’t want to say anything just yet, but now seems as good a time as any to tell you. I had to go into the spare room last week. I looked at some of your pictures.’

Jeremy forgot Laura, his interest quickened by Angela’s tone of voice. ‘Yes?’

‘Then I remembered the day you slammed into the house after seeing Mr Laski. You made me jump and my red pen squiggled all over the page. So, after looking at your pictures, I added a green squiggle going in the other direction. I’ve framed it. It’s called “Futility”. Mr Laski thinks I might get £1000 for it.’