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Beth's Takings

by Zoe Carroll

The shop was small, and so was the house. The Penalunas led a simple life and earned a modest living from their greengrocery. Pauline could weigh fruit and vegetables by hand as accurately as any scales and twirled the paper bags closed with a well-practiced flick of her wrists. Peter drove to the markets at unsociable hours to get the freshest produce and they had a host of regular customers from the grandest hotels to the poorest families. The till in the small shop jangled open and closed all day, hundreds of small cash transactions going through the shop with its piles of potatoes and racks of carrots. Each rack had a mirror above it, angled so that you could look into them to choose the items you wanted, even if you couldn't see up into the shelf itself. Pauline used these to check her wares were well stocked and looked as appealing as she could. They knew everyone in the small town, but they kept themselves to themselves, the Penalunas.

At the end of each day they climbed the stairs from the shop up into the small house that sat above it, a modest house with worn and tired furnishings. They didn't like extravagance or show. Their small bedroom was in the eaves of the house and it was drafty and creaked. The bedspread was shabby and threadbare in places, everything had a heavy weight of age to it. At the back of the built-in wardrobe was a secret door, which opened up into a hiding place where the Penaluas stored hundreds of thousands of pounds in used notes, carefully stowed in ageing suitcases over the decades that they had owned the shop. They skimmed off a few pounds from each day's takings and Pauline's careful pricing strategy meant that those who could afford it always paid a little extra and those who couldn't paid a little less. It wasn't an exact science but it kept her conscience clear about her financial strategy and she didn't see any harm in keeping a bit back for a rainy day.

Their assistant Beth came to help when the shop was busy, and once she had proved her ability, the Penalunas told her about Peter's sick mother who they had to go and attend to regularly.

"Mother is terribly sick," they told her, "we have to go and see her for a week every couple of months to make sure that she is managing." Beth agreed to look after the shop whenever they needed her to and so every few weeks the Penalunas packed a small case and set off in their ageing, sensible car. Beth watched them leave. "Such lovely people" she thought, it was a shame that they didn't seem to make much money out of this busy little shop. Beth remembered Pauline undercharging her mother for her vegetables when money was tight and always admired her for her selflessness but it was no wonder their earnings were meagre.

Peter and Pauline drove to a storage unit outside the city where they left their small case and swapped it for their large green suitcase containing all of their holiday clothes, their passports, Pauline's bikinis and their sunglasses, before heading to the airport. Sometimes it was Spain, other times Italy, Greece, or one of their favourite islands. While they were there they ate in the finest restaurants, drank brightly coloured cocktails and danced late into the night. They booked the most opulent hotel rooms and spared no expense. This was the time for extravagance and show.

Beth was always pleased to see them return, it seemed to cheer them up, looking after his mother. They were such lovely people she thought, but the shop always took more money in the weeks that she was in charge.