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One Final Nail In The Coffin

by Stuart Carruthers

The stove fire in the sung of the Red Lion emitted a loving heat as my old friend joined me for the afternoon. I could sense Pat had some unfinished business to discuss.

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“I hope they were clean, I’d be mortified if they weren’t, then again I suppose it doesn’t really matter when you’ve gone, if they are clean or not?”

“Sean...SEAN, two pints when you’re ready please, I’m sure he’s deaf!” barked Pat as he closed the glass doors to the hatch and parked his backside on the leather couch opposite me.

“What colour were they?”

“Colour of what?” I replied.

“I bet she got some bloody shock, her old man ran away with the bus driver years ago, maybe she’s taken a fancy to you Casey?” Pat couldn’t stop laughing at the thought of Judith Brownfield standing there gazing at me, his oldest and only friend, in his underpants.

“SEAN, Jesus Bloody Christ I’m better of serving myself, SEAN.”

“Were they clean?”

“Was what clean?”

“Your pants?”

“Everyday my old friend,” I replied, “Tuesday’s are blue, Friday’s are yellow,” and with that we howled with laughter like the old days as runaway teenagers on the train to Clonmel.

The hatch doors swung open and two pints of black velvet emerged into view. Stone-deaf Sean looked on in bemusement as my old friend and me roared with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” he enquired.

“Yellow Underpants on a Fridays Sean,” explained Pat as the tears rolled down his face.

“Sorry?”

“Underpants, what colour are yours?” I enquired.

“Youse two are off your heads and I’m not deaf either, I just choose whom I listen to, you idiots.”

“WHAT?”

Sean slammed the hatch doors shut and left me and Pat to our business.

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There is something strange about the house – I can feel it.

I first noticed it last week over dinner. Jean arrived home from work with a large brown box and when I asked her what it was she looked flustered and scurried away upstairs without answering. She never came down for dinner that evening.

Then on Wednesday morning about eleven, there was a knock on the door. I was upstairs fixing the broken light in Michael’s bedroom and couldn’t be bothered answering. But whoever it was, they were persistent. By the time I answered they had disappeared down the street and I just caught a glimpse of their long brown hair. Later that evening I waited until I knew everyone was having dinner.

Entering the room unnoticed, I tried but failed to ask if anyone was expecting a caller today. But I couldn't get a word in edgewise. Joe was animated. Jean avoided eye contact and the others were talking at such a high pitch I couldn't hear myself think. I gave up and left them to it.

The problem with the houses on the East Wall is they have no acoustic insulation. So next door knows what we are having for dinner and we know everything about them. From upstairs I heard every word they said. I retreated to the shed.

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The rain hadn't stopped for what seemed like weeks. Stepping into the Red Lion the first thing I noticed was the heat from the roaring fire in the far corner, then I hear Pat's dulcet tones.

"So are you serious about this, you basically buy a ticket to Switzerland and they do the business?"

"Jesus tell everyone why don't you."

I told my friend what he didn't want to hear. As the fire burned and drink was taken I explained in detail my plans for the coming months.

June 28th was approaching fast.

As Pat listened carefully, I slid a folded piece of paper across the table.

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I was going to tell them about my plans after Michael's birthday, but the following morning an almighty row broke out when Jean discovered her bag had gone missing and I found the box she had brought home a few weeks before. Five A3 envelopes carefully placed inside, with my children's names on each one. It was by accident that I found it. Joe had flooded the bathroom in a drunken state the previous night and when I investigated the problem it led me to the hot press in Jean's room.

Hidden behind a pile of unwashed clothes was the box that would unravel the bond we had as a family. Each envelope contained a single piece of A4 paper. Handwritten in bold black ink their plans for the house and the fortune that I thought only I knew about. It was then I realised they didn't love me.

