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Thursday 12th October 1978
St Mary's Church Hall, Sudbury

Peter surveyed the meandering crowd gathering in the hall. The sound of scraping chairs on the parquet flooring was like a jubilant fanfare. Voices reverberated around the vast hall as the audience talked excitedly whilst taking their seats. Curiosity to see Beryl Wallace in the flesh was high, and Peter had certainly judged the book-buying public accurately. Intrigue surrounded the process involved. How did Beryl talk to spirits? People wanted to know. He was confident this PR exercise for her third book was going to be successful as the hall bustled with people. Cyril's first book in his own right was coming together nicely, yet a title seemed elusive, the working title was 'Samuel Preston' but it didn't quite have the right 'hook' to it yet.

Beryl's second book 'Justice for John Johnson' had re-opened John Johnson's case and was now being talked about in the press with much being made of Beryl, both good and bad, with some saying she was a hoax. Peter knew these events were a chance for her to demonstrate that the process was legitimate, especially, as it was going to be her last book. He needed to make sure it generated enough interest to keep this and the first two books selling for as long as possible. He held doubts as to whether Cyril would attain the same highs as Beryl but it was worth a shot, after all he was a talented writer. Deep down Peter didn't really care what people thought, he just wanted to sell more books and he would do almost anything to reach this end.

This was the first night of the tour and he was a little anxious as he watched from the side of the small staged area at one end of the hall. A long table and three chairs were set in readiness with a jug of water and three glasses neatly placed in the middle next to a note pad and pencils.

The audience occasionally glanced at the small stage for the

long anticipated sight of Beryl Wallace. Peter had decided it would be better to have the book-signings afterwards, thinking that people would be keen to buy the books, especially if they could get them autographed. Reluctantly Beryl had courted the press as she was obliged to do, but she couldn't wait for her writing career to end and Cyril to take up the mantle.

Peter reflected back to his first sight of Beryl in her parlour two years previously when he had been talked into visiting her by his dear friend Edward Grace, an effeminate thin-looking man who walked with a cane and had a Panama perched precariously to one side of his head.

She had almost wafted into the room, her bare feet just brushing the thin pile of the jaded brown carpet. Her delicate five foot four inch frame had silenced the intimate gathering. Pulling the shawl, draped around her narrow shoulders tighter, she pinned her long bleached-blond hair to her back. She had cut quite a weak character, nothing like the picture his imagination had painted, her bright brown eyes only just managing to give her pale complexion a brightness it otherwise lacked.

Her nephew, Cyril, a meek looking character with lack-lustre eyes, kept notes of each meeting and would do so for the duration of the tour.

Gathering his thoughts Peter strolled purposefully onto the stage raising his left hand high in the air to quieten the audience. One or two heads turned immediately before, slowly, the remainder caught on and the hall gradually began to tingle with silent anticipation.

Clearing his throat, Peter began quietly "Thank you... mm...thank you...err...ladies and gentlemen, thank you." His authoritative voice had lost its usual confidence and wavered at his discomfort with public speaking. He had run over and over in his mind the opening remarks but suddenly nerves were getting the better of him. Clearing his throat again only made his voice rise sharply, causing the audience to laugh, making him blush. A tremor rattled his first few words. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for your time here tonight. I just wanted to say...to say..." a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead as his mind went blank, everything he'd prepared had vanished temporarily

from his thoughts. He counted silently to two allowing the words to find their way back "...that when I first heard about Beryl Wallace I was intrigued, I had heard through a friend of mine about her particular..." he paused for a nanosecond to emphasize his words "...gift' and was more than pleased when I finally got to witness the incredible scene at first hand." Peter relaxed as the audience became engaged by what he was saying.

Unbuttoning his royal blue pin-striped suit jacket and displaying his matching waistcoat, he took two steps forward, edging closer to the front of the stage.

"There we were...seven of us...all gathered in this tiny room, nothing spectacular about it, just an ordinary room, sparsely decorated, with chairs and a writing desk. Then this woman walked in. At first, I was amazed to see someone so mundane and normal looking." A murmur from the audience signified that he was winning them, he had found his rhythm. "We watched and waited with bated breath. I don't know what I expected that night, maybe fireworks or spirits to suddenly start flying around the room." Peter smiled at his own mockery then let it ebb away. "But when she started, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end."

Peter let the audience picture that for a moment before continuing. "The air in the room was palpable, as a cold sensation engulfed us. Her voice was delicate and shy. Not at all, as I had expected."

He paused again, taking time to look around the audience, as if studying them.

"There have been many stories in the press calling her a phoney, a hoax, a liar. But, I swear to you...that what you hear tonight will be the truth and nothing but the truth, as God is my witness."

"Bullshit!" came a cry from the back of the audience. A young man in his twenties stood up as the audience turned to see who had spoken.

Peter was prepared for this, "you do not believe, sir?" he called.

"You are full of shit," the man growled, kicking his chair across the back of the hall, before heading towards the door.

"Then why did you come tonight, sir?"

“Nothing on TV.” The audience tittered.

“Are you a beer drinker?”

The young man turned to look at Peter, “what if I am?”

“Did you like it the first time you tried it?”

Astounded the man spoke, “what on earth has that got to do with it?”

“Did you like beer the first time you tried it? Or did you feel that it was an...acquired taste?”

“You’re full of shit!” The man had gone red, he knew he had not liked beer the first time he had tried it, in fact not even the second or third time, but it was what his friends were drinking. The audience were staring at him and he felt their pressure.

“All I am asking is for you to open your mind, sir. You have turned up here tonight, haven’t you?”

“Well as I said, I had nothing better to do,” the man mocked, smiling, the audience didn’t share his joviality.

“Very good sir...but, if at the end of the evening you are still a non-believer I will...,” Peter paused.

“Will what?” the young man interjected, trying hard not to let his bravado fade in front of everyone.

“I’ll buy you a party seven.” The audience laughed.

The young man stood contemplating his next move. He didn’t want to look foolish or ignorant but a party seven sounded good.

“Alright. You’re on. What have I got to lose?”

“Thank you, sir.”

After allowing the man to collect his seat, Peter addressed the rest of the audience. “I believe that she will amaze you all tonight. Enthral you. You will get a chance at the end to speak with Miss Wallace and ask her to sign any books you may wish to purchase from the stall at the back of the hall.” A couple of heads turned to locate the trestle table piled high with its wares. “So I will say little more about her.” He paused to take in every pair of eyes in the hall, making sure he had them where he wanted them.

“I think we are ready for Miss Beryl Wallace.”

2

Beryl and Cyril sat in the small room that had been set aside for them to use as a dressing room, she was going through her regular routine whilst Cyril watched his aunt anxiously. She had never held an evening with so many people in attendance and he wondered if any spirits would come. When the tour had first been mooted they had said to Peter that spirits were unpredictable but he had brushed the comment aside with indifference, seeing only pound signs. Unrelenting Peter had pushed on with the idea. Finally, Beryl had agreed on the understanding that Cyril would have his chance at a solo writing career. What had punctuated matters making them worse was that the tour had been mentioned to both Cyril and Beryl at lunch by Edward Grace, and not by Peter.

“Hello Edward. How are you?” Edward was already sitting at a table of a bistro café called ‘Food for Thought’ with a glass of Chardonnay reflecting the dazzling sunlight that shone beyond the plate glass window. He stood up to greet Beryl taking her hand gently in both of his well manicured hands.

“Very well, very well indeed. It’s good to see you again. A shame it is under such circumstances.”

“And you. I am very sorry about my telephone call earlier.”

“Don’t mention it, Cyril,” Edward acknowledged, indicating for him to sit. “I understand. I only wish I had spoken with you before you had signed with Peter for the first book and maybe explained what it could be like. I do so hate mixing business and pleasure. I had only intended for him to come along and relax. He is a dear friend and I know he struggles with trying to live up to his father’s image. I thought it might be something different. Open his mind to the world outside of work.”

“I must admit to seeing a different side to him today,” Cyril imparted.

Edward looked at the young man sitting opposite him, how

he had grown up in the last two years. One thing that hadn't changed was his loyalty to his aunt, he could see that in his eyes.

"Yes, he can be a bit insensitive, but unfortunately that is business and he is trying to make money, like us all, I must say."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken with you about him, he is a friend." Beryl apologised.

Edward stopped her before she could say anymore. "Nonsense, nonsense. I know he has faults and I am sorry that I couldn't advise any different, a contract is a contract."

"I know Edward, I know. I feel so stupid getting myself mixed up in it."

Cyril interjected. "It's my fault really. I talked you into it. I wanted it. I wanted my stories to be more than just empty words on a page, I wanted them to breathe and..."

Beryl placed her hand on Cyril's.

"I could always have said no."

"Beryl is stronger than you think." Edward smiled. "But look at it this way, and as much as it pains me to say it, you only have the third book to do and then you can walk away from it all. Fade back into anonymity. You will still have the royalty cheques coming in for the rest of your lives so you can still do good with the money. This publicity circus will be over soon enough. I have seen it time and time again."

"Thank you," Beryl said. "Shall we order? This is my treat."

"Nonsense," Edward exclaimed heartily.

"Now, Edward, please let me do this, you have been a godsend and I would like to offer you my thanks."

"One objection is considered good manners, two would be rude. Thank you," Edward replied.

"Now, where is the waitress?" Beryl said aloud.

As if on cue a short plump lady waddled over, "what can I get you?" her quiet polite voice enquired.

"Another Chardonnay for my friend here," Edward tipped his glass in thanks. "Cyril?"

"Beer, please."

"Campari and soda for me. What are the specials today?"

The waitress ran through the specials and then remembered that she hadn't actually brought over the menus and rushed away

to fetch them.

“So, Beryl, when can I expect your usual Wednesday evenings to start up again? I do miss them.”

“Yes, I have been neglecting my regulars.”

“It’s quite alright under the circumstances, I’m sure.”

“Yes, but I do miss the intimacy and hate having to try and cram twenty people into my little parlour. I always think everyone is so uncomfortable. A part of me is wondering who is there because of the books and who is there for what the evenings are about.”

“I liked it when there were fewer people.” Cyril added.

From nowhere a man and woman approached the table. There was a brief awkward silence as neither would be the first to speak, taking it in turn to nudge each other.

“May we help you?” Edward offered politely.

“Are you Beryl Wallace?” The young woman asked her voice trembling with nerves, her face turning crimson.

“Yes, this is my Aunt, Why?” Cyril’s words came out rather harshly.

“Could we get your autograph?” Beryl stared at them incredulously and slightly embarrassed as other diners started to take notice.

“It is considered rude to interrupt someone’s private lun...”

“Thank you, Edward.” Beryl placed a placating hand on his forearm. “Of course I would, just this once though. Would you like my nephew’s as he writes the books?”

“Really?” The woman turned her attention to Cyril and started to go all doey eyed.

“Of course,” Cyril said uneasily as the woman continued to stare at him. “Have you got something for us to sign?”

The man fumbled around in a cotton bag he had been carrying, pulling out a copy of ‘Justice for John Johnson’, handing it to Cyril who then passed it to Beryl.

Almost gushing, they left excited at their reward for being brave.

“I’m sorry about that Edward. See that’s what I have grown to dislike. I am just an ordinary person. I don’t understand this fascination people have with celebrity. Surely it’s the books they want. The stories?”

“Unfortunately, they want a little bit of you as well.”

The waitress reappeared with the drinks.

“Are you ready to order?”

“Sorry, no. Can we have a few more minutes?” Cyril answered.

They all sat in silence perusing the menu.

“What did you think of Peter’s idea for the third book?”

Edward asked guardedly.

“What idea?” Cyril said hurt. Edward instantly realised that Peter hadn’t spoken to them about the third book.

“I should not have said anything.”

“I thought we would be doing the one I am working on at the moment, about the mobster,” Cyril added firmly.

Edward, feeling torn, wanted say more but did not want to betray Peter.

“Maybe you are.” Beryl and Cyril stared at Edward who uncomfortably sipped his wine. “He wants to do a tour, a writing tour,” he finally gave in.

“How would that work?” Beryl asked curiously, amazed at such an idea.

“I don’t know to be quite honest.” Edward decided that he ought to play dumb. “Maybe it would be best if you ask him yourself.”

Beryl sensed Edward’s unease and, not wanting to upset him, changed the subject. “So what are you having Edward?” Her mind was curious as to Peter’s plans and no longer on the meal.

“Well the soup of the day for starter sounds nice.”

“Yes it does. I’ll have the same,” Beryl agreed distracted. “Cyril?”

“Prawn cocktail, I think, followed by a fillet steak.”

“I think the chicken cordon bleu for me please, Beryl.”

“Yes, that does sound good, but lamb for me. Now where’s that waitress?”

Cyril had been sure they would be publishing Samuel Preston’s story, but Peter has pushed through with this writing tour, although he had conceded that Cyril could use ‘Samuel Preston’s’ story for his first book, which had placated him. Cyril continued to watch his aunt as she proceeded with her prayer for guidance

and protection from evil spirits, followed by a short meditation to enhance communication with her three spirit guides, her Great Grandmother Irene, Matthew - a farmer from the 17th Century, and Graeme, a vagrant who had died on the streets of Victorian London. It was a routine she had followed ever since he could remember, it opened a connection, formalized events.

"Are you ready Auntie?" Cyril asked as they listened to Peter's voice growing in stature, his confidence growing, his opening comments capturing the audience.

"Yes, I think so. Although a little nervous. I don't know why, it is not something that is new to me."

"I suppose it's just different from the parlour."

"Yes, you are probably right. But as long as my guides are here, then everything will be fine."

"Come on, that was Peter introducing you."

Reluctantly Beryl rose, remembering her first meeting with Peter in her parlour; he had been a non-believer and had been caught off guard when the first spirit was for him.

"I am getting the name Maria...and a dog, does that mean anything to anyone?"

Fred, another regular of Beryl's, dipped his head wearily, he so wanted to have contact with his wife, who had died from cancer. Everyone else glanced questioningly at each other waiting for someone to acknowledge.

"Ah... might be Mariana and a ca...no definitely a little dog, he is standing here now." Beryl turned to face the door she had entered through and bent down. "Lovely patchwork brown and white King Charles Spaniel."

"Judy". All eyes turned to Peter who had put his hand to his mouth too late to stop the words escaping. "Oh my god," Edward stared curiously at his friend, surprised and pleased by the sudden outburst.

3

Beryl looked at Peter. "This spirit belongs to you?" she paused. "There is a man with the dog. A short stocky man with thin grey hair."

"That's Uncle George," Peter stammered, hating to be in the spotlight, especially when it wasn't expected.

"He is nodding. It is your Uncle George. He says..." Beryl listened carefully. "He says you need to tread carefully. There are many things you don't understand and you must leave well alone. Oh!" Beryl stopped, shocked. "He warns you not to be like your father. The dog is barking. He is going. He sends his love."

"But I don't understand. Ask him what he means?" Peter's voice rose impatiently.

Beryl paused, "I'm sorry, he has gone."

"Gone. What do you mean gone?"

"I'm sorry but spirits will only come as they see fit, I cannot control them, I am merely a channel."

Peter sank back into his chair, his mind racing back to a childhood he had long since left behind.

"You're honoured Peter, I have been coming for nearly two years and no one has spoken to me," Edward whispered.

"I don't...I can't believe it. Not Uncle George, I thought he hated me." The words faded as more thoughts cascaded through Peter's head. "Judy chewed up my uncle's copy of the book, 'Mariana', which was a gift to my aunt just before she di...passed away."

Edward smiled half-heartedly at his friend.

"Are you alright auntie?"

"Yes I was just thinking of that first evening when we met Peter."

"It's seems a long way away now."

"Yes," Beryl replied, missing the intimate gatherings.

The odd uneasy clap resonated around the hall as Beryl walked out from the wings, accompanied by Cyril, whose shoes clicked on the wooden stage, making him self-conscious, whilst Beryl's bare feet made no sound. Beryl took centre stage and Cyril sat on the chair nearest to where they'd entered, leaving Peter to take the one furthest away.

Beryl stood for all to see, her hands at her side, trembling slightly with nerves. She took a long slow breath, searching her mind, trying to focus it, finding it hard to hear her guides as the pressure of expectant eyes watched her, hampering her normally fluid connection.

Murmurs could be heard from the audience.

"What's going on?" an old gentleman asked of his friend.

"Don't know Bert. But isn't she meant to be doing something?"

"Well I think it's a load of rubbish," one woman stated, a little louder than she expected.

"Then why did you come, and why did you drag me down too, Sarah?"

"Shush," a stern looking woman commanded the husband and wife.

Two minutes turned into five. Beryl became uncomfortable as people started to fidget. She fought to stay calm but nerves were getting the better of her. She was only doing what she did normally, but tonight it felt so different, so much more difficult.

Peter looked at Cyril, who watched his aunt anxiously, pencil poised.

Beryl finally felt her spirit guides close to her again and relaxed. Her soft voice broke through the quiet chatter of the audience, now pleased that something was happening, although they strained to hear her.

"The spirits are with us now. Just..." Beryl leaned to one side as if listening to someone who was shorter than her. "...I am getting a woman by the name of Nancy, does this mean anything to anyone?" Silence engulfed the hall. "She does not belong to..." Beryl stopped abruptly her face turning pale. Cyril tensed as the audience gasped in unison. Beryl visibly relaxed. "You are welcome here. I have another spirit who wants to tell

his story. Please, use me as your instrument,” she sensed the spirits aura, “to guide me through your life. Help me to assist your passing over... I can feel you, your presence. Do not be afraid, these people want to know your story, please tell us.”

“This is such bullshit,” came a call from a lone voice in the audience.

Beryl ignored it and carried on. “Please tell us how and why. We will not judge you. Please tell us your name...” Beryl hesitated. “You seem distressed, anguished. You are amongst friends here...please. I want to help you. We want to know.”

The audience sat forward intrigued.

Beryl’s face and voice slowly changed, her soft pleasant features took on a hard edge, her eyes darkening, her voice growing deeper much to the amazement of the audience.

What’s to tell?

Beryl questioned, although the voice was not hers.

“Booo,” yelled the same audience member, yet he didn’t move to go.

“Shush,” called another couple of people.

Beryl was back, her voice normal, her tone sympathetic. “Please tell us, it will help you move on. Sometimes it unlocks the shackles that bind you to this mortal place, allowing you to...”

Maybe I don’t want to move on. Maybe I don’t deserve to.

Instantaneously her demeanour changed, the audience rocked back in their seats, incredulous. The air around them chilled, making a couple of women pull there coats tighter.

Peter smiled as he saw the audience react, it meant they were being drawn in. Pound signs flickered up in his mind.

“What is your name?” Beryl’s tone was soft and tender again making Peter remember the night he had first seen her, how inexplicably he had been caught under her spell, despite the fact that he didn’t want to believe.

Beryl’s voice changed immediately as the spirit communicated through her.

It’s not important anymore.

“What do we call you?” Beryl’s voice was rough and angry.

It doesn’t matter.

“Don’t go...” Beryl pleaded, “...stay...tell us about yourself.”
There was a long pause as she walked to the edge of the stage.
For a moment Beryl seemed to have lost whatever connection she’d had, but slowly the spirit started to talk freely through her.
The voice lost its sharpness as the words tumbled out.

I used to work days.

The spirit paused.

I used to have a wife. I used to have kids.

A minute passed as Beryl stared off to the back of the hall.

“Is that...?” Someone started to say.

That was a long time ago. They are gone now... along with any sense of pride I had. And I was proud.

Adding more softly.

A proud father. A proud husband. A proud home-owner until I had the sap sucked clean out of me and I sank to depths I never thought possible.

I live...lived on the Shelbourne Estate, not a very nice place to raise a family or attempt to live in peace. I knew of people on this estate who had died from starvation because they were too scared to go out.

Too scared!

Beryl’s voice reverberated around the hall. Tears started to run from her eyes as the anguish the spirit felt cloaked her.

How can a thirty-five year old man be too scared, of a seven year old, but that’s how it became?

I saw grandmothers out walking with their grandchildren, grandmothers before they’re thirty.

Beryl’s voice became tormented.

It’s a joke; they smoked, they drank, they couldn’t speak the Queen’s English. Half of them were too stoned to know what day of the week it was unless it was benefit day.

I watched the estate decline for four years. Four years!

Beryl sat, legs dangling over the edge of the stage.

It was a nice place once, when I moved there, it was full of promise and community spirit. The old and the young living contentedly side by side. It’s astonishing how quickly things can change, how quickly depravity takes a hold, how sick people could really be.

I was happy. Then I joined the other side, pushed too far. That’s when I took action. I wanted to see the estate back as it was, a nice

place to be, a nice place to live.

I'd lost so much that was dear to me, my wife, my kids, my job, my dignity.

The spirit paused.

My self worth. I wanted them back and I was going to take them.

I couldn't remember most of the time, who or what I used to be.

It would have been my son's eighth birthday. That was the day that changed my future, my destiny and set it on the course that led to my demise. I stopped being afraid, I stopped caring anymore. Another car was in flames, barely thirty feet from my front garden.

Slowly the venom in Beryl's voice grew.

A stolen car! Someone's hard earned money, taken by mindless arrogant yobs with nothing better to do. I wanted to turn the tables. I wanted them to be afraid. I wanted to show them what it felt like.

The hall went quiet and Beryl's head lolled to one side before her body started to roll backwards allowing her head to bang on the stage floor, breaking Cyril from his note-taking. For a split second Peter and Cyril looked at each other in astonishment.