

Life before death

by Pete Claisse

Sam ate his meal slowly and enjoyed the large glass of sherry they gave him to follow. Making his way carefully to his favourite chair by the gas fire he was distracted as the door opened. It was a newcomer. They had been waiting since Mrs Grey had died. He examined the man. They looked reasonable enough, possibly mid-seventies, apparently quite fit for it. But the face, he looked again. The man was looking back now, possibly disconcerted by his welcome. There was a spark of recognition and, for Sam, it lit the fire that burned inside him.

After his brief appearance the man was ushered away to be shown his room. Sam sat restlessly, unable to take his normal afternoon sleep. Eventually the man reappeared and Sam stood up to meet him.

"Hello, I never forget a name. It's Charles is it?"

"Yes. Charles Hobson. It must have been some time ago. Things go by so quickly these days."

"Yes, you bought one of the Churchill street flats didn't you? I saw you at the sales seminar and then a few times at the flats. I remember that seminar so clearly. The salesman with all his clever talk. All their pictures of the flats. Artists impressions, that's what they said they were."

"Did they? I forget. I'd rather like to sit down. Is that your chair?"

Sam sat down and Charles dragged up a chair next to him. Few of the other residents were awake. The assistant who had escorted Charles into the room looked satisfied and left.

"Yes. I can't believe how they conned me." Sam continued leaning forward. "All their smart talk and clever projections about the rental income. They must have known about the problems. Crooks they were. Just common criminals."

"Were they?" Charles sat back and looked briefly around the room. "I only really bought it because I thought Bob, my son that is, might want to live there."

"Your son? He couldn't have lived there. They were a disgrace. Unfit for habitation. That's what our barrister said. Totally unfit."

"No he didn't as it happened, we let it. He met Cynthia. She really is a lovely girl. So good for him. Really kind. You'll meet her when they visit."

"I remember when I first looked in our flat after we had bought it." Sam was looking intently ahead. "It looked smart, very modern, all the latest gadgets. But even then it smelled damp. I can remember talking about it at the time but the agents, the crooks, said that it was just that they were new. Still drying out they said. So we got tenants in anyway but they soon complained. The first damp patch was on the wall next to the bath."

"Yes now you say. There was a problem. I think we got a plumber in. It cost rather a lot but we were so busy. I guess they fixed it; don't remember hearing any more about it from the agents."

"You fixed it yourself? But it should have been fixed by the builder. Didn't you go to the meeting? We all had the same problems. It was such a good meeting. The start of the residents association. We all exchanged email addresses, appointed a Chair and a secretary. We all agreed that we should force the builders to fix it all."

"We were preparing for the wedding. I didn't have time for anything. All the details.

The hotel, the photographers, the cars. It took ages but it was worth it. What a day.” He fell silent.

Sam noticed the flowers in the vase on the table against the wall was looking faded. They might be past their prime but they were flowers. That was what he paid for, the privilege of a private care home with little extras that counted, and the rent from the flat made it possible. They had fresh flowers every week and also in the vase in the hall. He checked them every time they were done and complained if he felt they looked cheap.

“We managed to get one of the salesmen to the next meeting.” He was looking at Charles in earnest. Was he older than he looked? “We gave him a really hard time. You should have been there. We told him what we would do. Even then we told him we would take them to court, however long it took. He went away promising they would fix it all. They always did that. Promise everything and do nothing.”

Charles looked up. “Yes – I think I did get lots of emails. But I was so busy helping them get the house sorted out. Young George was on the way by them. I say young; he’s not so young now. A fine young man with such a future ahead of him”.

“We had monthly meetings.” Sam could remember them all. One of the owners had a restaurant and he let them have an upstairs room. He even laid on jugs of fruit juice for them. The solicitor had started coming once they had all paid into the association’s fighting fund. He had told them all about the tribunal. “We got a massive case together for the tribunal. There were details of everything. It was bad workmanship, all of it. The plumbers must have been hopeless and badly supervised at that. It’s all about supervision and that’s what the builders should have done.” He wondered for a moment if Charles was still listening, but, after a moment, he looked up. “It was such a waste. The tribunal said that they couldn’t adjudicate. I never did understand it. Such a waste of time.” He remembered the meeting after the decision had been sent. But they were determined to fight on. The solicitor said they should go to court. It would be slow and expensive but worth it. All Sam could think about was how to tell his wife. She had nagged him endlessly about risking his money buying the flat, almost up to the day she died.

The assistant came back and asked if they would like some tea. This seemed to wake Charles up and he agreed immediately. Sam was lost in thought about the meeting. The assistant had to ask again before he replied.

“We were all really angry.” Sam continued. “The idea that those criminals should get away with it. We had lost lots of money. Some of the tenants had moved out and the repairs to the damp walls had been very expensive. All the re-decorating; it all added up. So we agreed. We all had to put in three hundred pounds each just to get it started.” He remembered how he had paid in cash so his wife wouldn’t know.

“Yes I think I remember the email asking for that. I was so busy.” Charles replied. “We were pricing this massive job in Saudi. It was really exciting, but we all had to work long hours to get it off in time. And then when we got it I had to go out for weeks. It went really well. When I got back they made me a director. We were all so proud. You can imagine how it was, all the family around.” Sam showed no response.

The tea arrived in simple white china cups with two small biscuits on the tray with them.

“How did the court case go?” Charles asked. “I expect it was in one of the emails but you know how it is.”

“Didn’t you hear?” Sam leaned further forward and snatched up a biscuit. “It was in all the papers. We won. We got our revenge. It was brilliant. They had to pay for

everything. And didn't you hear the rest? They went bust. The whole company. You must have seen the pictures we took. We emailed them all to everybody. We went round to their offices as soon as it was announced and jeered at them. There they are. Standing outside their offices with little boxes of things from their desks. Even the director. The one who had told us that they weren't liable and it was all our fault for not maintaining the flats. Standing there in his suit."

"I must have missed them. The grandchildren were a lot of work." Charles was smiling now. "But what wonderful kids. Three of them now. And Cynthia's so sweet. We always took them when we could. Just to give her a bit of a break."