The Inheritance

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Mary’s insides wobbled. Her thoughts became hyperactive, as she considered the consequences of opening the door. She had never been allowed inside the shed, but now her dad was dead and it belonged to her.

Tommy Miller lived to the age of ninety-six. The coroner confirmed that the old man died late on a Tuesday afternoon in July. The day had been sunny, echoing with sounds of children’s play, sticky with the scent of sweat and sun cream. No one was with him when he passed but Tommy must have known his boat was being called in because he was found clutching a letter to his daughter in one hand and the key to the shed in another. The note read, "Mary, the job is yours, if you want it. Dad."

The shed was a rickety building dating back to the Sixties, painted once a year with hardwearing wood varnish and maintained to prevent the roof from leaking. The door was secured with a large lock that had long since succumbed to rust.

A rapid pumping of blood and adrenalin throughout her body caused her to stumble. She grabbed the solid shed wall and steeling her body and mind, took out a key from the pocket of her thin, cotton jacket and turned it in the lock. Despite the rust, it opened without resistance.

"All right then, Dad. What's inside your old shed?"

As she pushed the door open her nose met with a waft of burning logs and the scent of pinecones. She swore she could hear high-pitched giggling but her eyes, still acclimatizing themselves to the dim light of the outbuilding couldn’t see where the tiny sound was coming. She shrugged it off, blaming her vivid imagination and her still unshakeable grief at the loss of a parent.

With a flicker of light the shed's interior brightened. Mary peered around, eyes accustoming themselves to another change of light.

“How?” she asked. Her fingers had failed to find any sort of switch.

In front of her lay a large desk trimmed with paper chains she recalled making as a child. They had faded with time. He’d never been one for Christmas her dad, always escaping to his shed whenever possible, yet he’d kept this simple decoration, a remnant of her early years. A tear formed in her eye, but she brushed it away with her sleeve and continued to survey the shed.

The walls of the room were lined, not with racks of tools, stacks of nails and bolts or half finished projects, but with grey and green, metal filing cabinets that looked to Mary like furniture refugees from an office refit.

What was this all about? Who was this man she had called Dad?

She moved towards the cabinets. Each drawer was labelled in unfamiliar but uniform handwriting. Mary retrieved her spectacles from the depths of her crowded handbag. She focused on the top drawer of the cabinet. It read, "Nice." Adjacent to it were identical drawers tagged as “Naughty” and the remaining sections of the cabinet were titled “chimneys”, “windows”, and “secret entrances”.

 Mary slid open the first drawer and withdrew a faded A4 folder. She took one from each drawer at random, returned to the desk and sat down on the plush red chair.

The folder at the top of the pile was printed in old fashioned type with the name Mark Taylor and was stamped in red ink with the word, "naughty". On further investigation, she discovered that Mark was an eight-year-old boy who lived in Boston - the one in America not the one in Lincolnshire, England. The notes section of each page included a long list of misdemeanors, from sticking chewing gum in the hair of a girl in his class to pushing pins in the next door neighbours' tyres. There was nothing in his file after his ninth birthday.

She skipped to the next folder wondering why her father would have such detailed accounts of small children. It felt wrong, untoward and out of keeping with his nature. Tommy rarely spoke, smiled and was happiest in the company of adults. And where was the smell of pinecones coming from?

The second folder came from one of the “nice” cabinets. It was a vibrant green and looked to Mary to be emitting a subtle glow, although by now she was beginning to distrust her senses. The subject of this file was Abebe Toure, a girl of impeccable manners, who took care of her brothers and sisters and did her homework. The third page contained a list of items, all ticked bar one: skipping rope, bicycle, Girls World make-up head, Lego. There was a large cross in thick pen against the last item on the list, making it impossible to read. Mary began to giggle at the absurdity of the situation.

A phone rang filling the shed with the seasonally inappropriate sound of *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*. It wasn't Mary's ringtone, but it was emanating from her mobile. The screen claimed not to know who was calling, but she speculated it must be someone sitting in a far off call centre, intent on selling her insurance.

"Hello?" she said.

"Ho ho ho hello," said a deep voice.

"Err, hello. Who is this?" Mary was tempted to hang up. Here she was in the middle of a forbidden shed that smelled of winter, contained mysterious files and now there was a weird man on the phone who thought it was Christmas.

"Claus of course."

Mary put her finger on the screen, firmly pressing ‘End’. To make doubly sure the stranger couldn't ring back she turned the phone off.

“That’s enough of that,” she said.

From the left-hand corner, furthest from the door came a rattling noise. She sat still, raising her feet from the floor in case it was a mouse, or worse, a rat. She turned her head in the direction of the sound to discover it coming from a large cloth sack. It must be some kind of rodent. How else could it have got in? She wondered. The shed had been locked for at least the two weeks since her dad died.

She picked up a long metal pole from the floor next to the desk. It was the type of stick you might use to open as dormer window but painted white with a fresh green spiral from top to bottom. She was sure rats couldn't jump.

Mary poked the bag with her weapon of choice. She expected a shriek or whatever noise rats make when poked with a pole but instead her ears met the sound of rustling, like trees on a stormy day. She edged the pole upwards and into the top inside rim of the bag. Unable to see anything she shuffled nearer, angling the pole so it lifted the bag into the air.

Just as she was about to peer inside the laden sack it toppled downwards threatening to pull her with it. She fumbled for the arm of the chair and lost her grip on the pole. Cascading onto the wooden floor of the shed came a waterfall of paper, some loose sheets and others in envelopes, all bearing child-like writing and addressed to Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Papa Noel, in languages from across the globe.

"What?" said Mary slapping herself in the face to check she hadn’t nodded off on the sofa.

*Santa Claus Is Coming To Town*, emanated from her phone. What was happening? She knew that opening the shed had been a bad idea. The phone continued to ring.

"Who is this?" she asked, frowning at her mobile.

"Santa, just like I said before," said the same loud, friendly voice.

"But..."

"But what? You don't believe in dear old Santa Claus? I somehow doubt that," he said.

 Mary looked around the room, her mouth open, waiting for words that wouldn't come.

Santa continued, unfazed by her silence. "I suppose it's all a bit of a shock. Tell you what, you go to the third green filing cabinet and look in the second drawer in the section for 1961."

She did as instructed. Either this was an elaborate practical joke set up by her dad before his death or she was going mad. She needed explanations. Inside she located a glittering gold folder, with small intricate paper cut out snowflakes glued to it. Mary recognised it as one she had made at primary school and given to her father for Christmas. He'd smiled a rare smile, saying it was just what he always wanted. She'd never believed him; after all who wanted a piece of cardboard for a present? She flipped open its cover to find sheets of yellowing paper emblazoned with the word “nice” and bearing her name, Mary Miller.

"Are you still there?" she said into her phone, half hoping that the unhinged Christmas imposter had gone.

"You found your file?"

"Yes, but…" She hesitated.

The Santa claimant chuckled. "But it doesn't prove anything, does it? Quite true, but I can tell you the status of every child in every folder in the sorting shed. Try me out."

Mary pulled out a child's details at random from the stack on the desk. "Kevin Polanski," she said firmly, convinced this would bring an end to the nonsense.

"From New York State, status “nice” from age one to nine but had a wobble at ten and then stopped believing. Happens frequently."

Mouth open and eyebrows raised, she picked up another folder.

"Debbie Carter," she said.

"Oh, Debs, definitely on the good list but she only ever asked for a Mr Frosty. Everyone asks for a Mr Frosty, but no one ever gets one."

 "I always wanted a Mr Frosty," said Mary.

"You never got one because they are terrible quality and parents hate them. Bad for my reputation. I much preferred it when toys were made out of wood and dolls of china,"

"The thing is,” said Mary. “If you are Santa and I say ‘if’, because I'm not convinced, then what's all this got to do with my dad?" asked Mary.

There was a pause before the man declaring himself the father of Christmas continued.

"Why, he was a sorter, of course," he said. "Did he never tell you?”

She heard what she thought was the sound of a thick beard being scratched.

 "No, what didn't he tell me?" Mary's grip tightened around her phone as she tried to cling onto something real.

“We always say don't tell anyone but I thought everyone ignored it," Santa chuckled. "Well I'm a busy man, what with supervising the elves, ensuring presents are manufactured - so many children these days - and then there's the reindeer, but don't get me started on them."

"No," said Mary. She could do without reindeer. She could do without all of it.

"Over the years the number of letters I received got larger and larger until back in the seventies I admitted defeat and advertised for help."

"So my dad became your helper?" asked Mary.

"There were a lot of applicants, but I needed someone quiet who I could trust, someone with a strong sense of right and wrong. Your father was the perfect candidate."

"Oh," said Mary, sinking back into the safety of the desk chair.

"Now the job is yours if you want it. You sort the letters into naughty or nice, and then mark down whether or not there’s a chimney - not so many of them these days, or whether I'm going to need a skeleton key to get into the house. Most important of all, you decide if children get their presents."

“Errr, can I think about it?” asked Mary.

“Of course you can my dear. I’ll call you tomorrow – same time, in the shed and don’t worry about the noise,” said Santa. “That’s just the elves.”