

Daniel turned off into the service lane of Brighton Road and parked under the peeling white walls of the mansion, its surface dancing in the dappled light filtering in through the sycamores. Getting out, he gazed up at Marjorie Shatin's bedroom window and caught an image of her in his mind's eye. He could see her shrivelled skin and the matted grey threads of her hair, like sleeping serpents uncoiled across her pillow and in the air around her thousands of particles of dust were catching the late-morning light.

He reached over and worried the latch free on the other side of the wooden gate, swung it open until its bottom edge bit into the concrete path and walked crookedly up to the front door, leaning to avoid the overgrowing roses. Ringing the doorbell once, he greeted the familiar characters sitting in the sun along the wall of the front porch: the cobwebbed trowel, the bag of potting mix and the rusty banana lounge. Having spent so many empty minutes waiting here for Marjorie to descend the giant staircase, they had begun to take on rudimentary personalities.

'How's things?' He asked the banana lounge.

'Oh, pretty laid back,' it said in an agreeable voice.

He heard the resounding thuds starting upstairs, the Zimmer frame first and then her feet, descending the stairs, step by step.

'Beautiful day,' he said to the trowel.

'Diggin' it,' the trowel said, street-wise and laconic.

The potting mix was more mysterious. It just seemed to sit there and look on, stuffy and silent, somewhat aloof. He racked his brains for something to say but was beaten by the sound of the lock turning. The door opened and the face of an aged child squinted out, two little eyes and a button nose, the skin pallid from lack of sunlight, her scarlet nightgown hanging half open to reveal a gold crucifix dangling over a pair of deflated breasts; the serpents in her hair looked stirred up.

'What do *you* want?'

'Hi Marjorie, nice to see you,' he replied, using his most falsely enthusiastic voice. 'Just came to do the cleaning.'

She let out a high-pitched and rusty-sounding groan, her lips puckered and she scrunched up her eyes to buy time while she thought of a reason not to let him in. She had refused once before. ‘Not today,’ she had squeaked through a crack in the door which closed before he could get his foot into it. He’d sat himself down on the porch step by the potting mix and called the agency, the agency called some distant nephew and the distant nephew called Marjorie and made thinly-veiled threats about Nursing Homes and that, unsurprisingly, had done the trick ever since.

‘The place is spotless.’ She said now in a weak voice, half pleading and half resigned.

‘Won’t take me long then,’ he said, crossing his arms.

She groaned again but let the door swing open, turned her back and started on the long return journey to bed and as she re-climbed the staircase she expelled shallow, surprised-sounding grunts of air, ‘huh!’, ‘huh!’, huh!’ awakening a far away kind of sadness in him which was a welcome relief from the ingrown anxiety which seemed to inhabit his skin like a colony of parasitic bugs. When she had struggled onto the landing, he had an urge to ring the doorbell once more so he could enjoy the sensation a little longer. Sadness refreshed and relieved him like a cool sea breeze on a hot day.

Instead he walked through the foyer and leaned in the doorway to the living room. It was like staring into a time-warp; thick dark-red carpet and silver striped wall paper that had turned a brownish-yellow, high ceilings with two giant chandeliers hanging down over a cocktail party of mismatched household items which stood there looking embarrassed and uncertain, a Victorian chaise longue sprawled beside a plastic commode and gold framed oil paintings looked down snobbishly over a broken cassette deck and plastic crates filled with old National Geographic’s. Dust covered everything like a grimy second skin, lying thick on the window panes and deep inside the carpet and hanging in the air like perfume.

And along the back wall an opaque sliding glass cabinet, left open to reveal an arrangement of high-end spirits and liqueurs, her husband’s, forty years dead yet here he still was, the levels of each bottle, most likely exactly where he had left them. His screwdrivers, his electric drills and his hammers could likewise be found sprinkled over the house along with his unfinished projects — sanded back skirting boards, patched walls, half-repaired furniture—,his bookshelves stuffed with

specialised medical journals. It had all been preserved, just as he'd left it, as if he were expected back any moment.

'The place is spotless,' he said to himself and he could see her point. All the available space was already taken up, everything in its place, a giant womb for a dusty foetus.

Daniel walked up to the cabinet for a closer look, the brands were well known but the typescripts and icons had changed slightly through the decades. On the top shelf, in between near empty bottles of Beefeater Gin and Benedictine D.O.M., stood the object of his affections, an uncorked bottle of VAT 69.

'A good vintage,' he said to himself with a little reverence. 'A really good vintage.'

He took it down and checked that the seal was still intact, admired the tight fit the bottle made with his palm and fingers. It was an unassuming port-like bottle and was corked rather than capped, Vat 69 was printed across an unadorned white label and its honey-brown insides trapped the light filtering in through the curtains and turned to liquid amber— pure and growing still more so as each day passed. It held him spellbound like an infant with a set of car keys jangling before its eyes.

'Really special,' he muttered, licking his lips. 'Really special.'

The name VAT 69, set off strings of nostalgic associations with the Summer of Love, stroboscopic flashbacks of group sex, body paint and rock n roll, a drawback from compulsive viewings of the Woodstock footage and early Pink Floyd videos. And in fact, moulded into the bottom of this bottle he had found the number 6 and the number 9 locked together in a feedback cycle of sexual ecstasy which looked like this: 69. Having made this discovery a few weeks ago, his interest had quickly tipped over into fascination: The bottle of Vat 69 from the year 1969. It had sat in this dusty cabinet for 40-odd years and, apart from Marjorie Shatin, he was perhaps the only soul who knew it.

'If only it had been 69 years,' he thought wistfully.

He could imagine a summer's evening, early '69—the husband sets his briefcase down by the front door, removes the bottle from its paper bag and places it lovingly on the top shelf, then he falls over. Twenty minutes later the white walls of the mansion reel with red and blue light and Marjorie

Shatin's face is a waking nightmare as paramedics work on the body for far too long. And he can see the bottle sitting there while days, months and years pass by, waiting.

The toilet flushed upstairs and he suddenly remembered why he was here. He put the VAT 69 back on the top shelf and clambered up the stairs. On the landing, he peered into her bedroom and saw that she was already tucked back into the bed whose sheets he was supposed to change, only her grey/brown hair was visible, sprawled out over the pillow, the snakes lulled by the soft light coming in through the window.

'How are you Marjorie?' He asked

One eye poked out from the bedcovers, stared at him, then disappeared again.

'I'm just dandy, Randy!'

The bed was supposed to be changed, needed to be, she spent perhaps 22 out of 24 hours in there each day, soiling those sheets with her moulting surfaces and leaky plumbing. It was his job. But he was mildly hung over and really didn't feel like it.

'Do you want to get out of bed so I can change your sheets?' He asked.

'No?' She answered, child-like, as if giving information back, rather than declining a request.

She was clever, wilful and slightly unhinged, a retired music teacher at one of Melbourne's Lady's Colleges, she had an image of herself as highly cultured and intellectually superior and this lent a fig leaf of dignity to the filth and disorder that surrounded her. She did exactly as she pleased, which, nowadays meant lying in bed for marathon stretches. She wasn't into polite conversation, shredded it with frankness (How are you, Marjorie? Terrible) or twisted it with mirth. She expected others to play along or disappear and he felt very much like disappearing.

Being of 'artistic temperament,' what she said was never predictable, her sentences were not constructed with other people's thoughts or feelings in mind, they were rather plucked from the dusty beads of a private universe and to respond, one needed a quick wit and a thick skin. He had neither and as a consequence she made him uncomfortable.

Around the bed, toppled up against the walls were layers of clothing, and heaped up on every cabinet, drawer and bedside table, amongst old newspapers, pens and jewellery were a series of

identical hairdryers, alarm clock radios and hair clogged brushes. It seemed she had a flourish for collecting identical items in sets of three and using all of them at once.

The enamel tiles in her en suite bathroom were a kind of corpse grey. The labels on the ‘spray n wipe,’ carried a picture of a woman with a 70’s hair-roller perm. Domestic order, it seemed, had ended long ago, or perhaps had never got its foot in the door.

It was hard to imagine Marjorie Shatin cleaning for anybody or for any reason. She had a sort of regal aloofness, which mixed with a hardnosed independence to create something unpliant and very intimidating. He remembered the first day he had met her.

‘Marjorie Shatin?’ He had enquired, pronouncing the first syllable of her last name ‘shat.’

‘*Shai*-tin,’ she had corrected, fixing a hawk-like eye on him. There was, apparently, an invisible ‘i’ in her last name.

If her husband had ever complained about the toothpaste marks in the sink or the flecks of...*shait* in the toilet bowl, she would have employed the same stare.

‘What are you, a prince!?’ He could hear her screeching. ‘If you want things sparkling, you go and *scrub* them until they sparkle!’

And that would have been the end of the argument. In this context, the husband’s ill-timed death now seemed quite logical. And, he reassured himself that even if he wanted to, there was no arguing her out of bed now, so he said, ‘well Marjorie, I’m off to do the vacuuming.’

‘You don’t look off,’ she shot back and he smiled politely and walked back to the landing, pulled the 1970’s Hoover out and started vacuuming. After that he washed a couple of dishes, did the toilets and then went back down to the living room and sprawled himself out on the chaise lounge to kill the remaining half hour of his allotted time. He tucked his hands under his head, let his feet dangle over the arm rest and gazed at the liquor cabinet.

‘Vat 69,’ he said to himself. ‘Whiskey...old whiskey...good whiskey.’

It had never been touched in 40 years and probably never would be. Except, he realised, when they took her away, either to the mortuary or to the nursing home, then, someone, the nephew most likely, would re-discover that bottle, and it would sit inside a new cabinet perhaps for another 40 years, rising in value with each passing decade until it became *simply priceless*, a collector’s item, it

would need to be insured and, nothing is more certain, one day it would appear on *Antique Roadshow*, where a bunch of overly-cerebral culture vultures would stand around gasping and tittering at its sexy secrets. And he could imagine the bottle, his bottle, sitting inside a series of ever more ornate and well secured cabinets until; five or so billion years from now, the sun begins to swell and expand enveloping the earth with a flick of its fiery tongue like a lizard slurping down a fly in mid-flight. The bottle, his bottle, would dematerialise in a flash of light as though it had never existed.

‘No!’ he shouted and sprung out of the chaise lounge, marched over to the cabinet, snatched it down, rescued it, turned and walked out into the foyer.

‘Seeya Marjorie!’ He shouted up the stairs. ‘I’m off!’ And he slammed the door shut.

As he skipped down over porch step, the potting mix had finally spoken, it mumbled something from deep inside its plastic coating, but he was too knotted up with fear and excitement to make any sense out of it. Later, driving home, he realised what it was.

‘You dirty bastard,’ it had said.

END