

A Deadly Secret

The setting is a posh red sandstone tenement property in a side street in Glasgow's West End, just off Byres Road, a tenement close with eight large flats served by an ornate tiled stairway. There are no children in this close and most of the residents are single, reserved, tiptoeing around each other, politely guarding their own secret lives.

The main protagonists in our tale are:

Miss Felicity Arbuckle, a retired head teach of music now in her early seventies, wearing thick spectacles as she has from childhood and becoming increasingly deaf. To the irritation of many, she plays her slightly out of tune piano for up to six hours a day while singing along in a high, screechy soprano voice, reliving her youth when she was a member of several well-known choirs.

She has lived in this tenement close from birth and is considered by the other residents to be slightly batty and rather domineering. Her property is a corner flat with an open aspect making all her rooms bright and airy.

Kirstin and Duncan Blacker have been married for five years and are very career-minded, driven. Both are Glasgow born and bred, well educated, kindly but self-absorbed. Kirstin was a 'Hillhead girl', Duncan from Bearsden Academy.

Duncan works for the Post Office Engineering Department, joining straight from university. He is recently a fully qualified Chartered Engineer, making his way, rising quickly through the ranks, heading for the very top.

Kirstin is an Occupational Therapist, softly spoken but determined, already promoted to Assistant Regional Supervisor. She too is destined for the higher echelons of the NHS and will one day become a Professor and Deputy Principal of a University in London.

The Blackers live directly below Miss Arbuckle and are in the process of improving the property which was run down when they bought it six months earlier. This is their third flat, each grander than its predecessor.

They will remain childless by choice and, over the years to come, they will be promoted and move around the UK, improving larger and grander houses while climbing the ladder of success. In a few years, when they move into their first villa on the outskirts of Falkirk, half-way between Glasgow and Edinburgh by fast train, they will start breeding Siamese cats as a money-spinning interest-hobby, and, in time, become leading lights in The Siamese Cat Society of the British Empire, an august organisation founded in 1928.

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We join our tale at 5.50 am on a Monday morning in June of 1976, at the start of the long hot British summer etched in the memories of all who lived through it.

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There are no mobile phones, no internet. When people are on the move or on holiday, communications are slow and rather hit or miss.

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'Well, my dear boys, I want you to behave while I'm in Rothesay at Cousin Jean's place. Can I trust you to be good, for a whole month? And remember, whatever you do, do not upset the clever young couple downstairs. They both live busy lives and we are very, very lucky they have agreed to look after you, aren't we?'

The slightly larger of the two goldfish, the one called Reginald (after her father), is a common red-gold shade with a white tail. The smaller goldfish is called Edwin (after her brother who had died of scarlet fever, aged fifteen). Edwin is a most unusual goldfish with a mottled blue-black body and larger vee-shaped tail and a bright red snout.

The tall, slim, wiry and slightly mannish woman with short, tightly-curled permed grey-white hair peered fondly at her goldfish, sprinkled a quarter teaspoonful of food onto the surface of their large goldfish bowl, swirled the speckles into the water, dried the spoon on the special dishtowel she kept for that purpose, wrapped the small cannister of food and the measuring spoon inside the cloth, placed the package into the drawer of the sturdy mahogany table, turned the key in the lock then placed the key in its allocated spot on the saucer behind the matching glass bowl which contained her collection of miniature cacti.

In the dim light, she stood back to check that both bowls were exactly positioned on the table which sat exactly in the centre of the three-window bay. Satisfied, she reached to each pull cord in turn and eased the curtains exactly to the half-open position allowing the early sun to illuminate the room.

Stopping at her baby grand piano, she removed the music from its stand and placed it in the storage recess beneath the hinged seat of the piano stool then covered the piano with a dust sheet.

She was already dressed for her journey in the travelling outfit she had worn each summer for around thirty years, each item still in very fine condition and smelling faintly of moth balls. The outfit comprised: a floral 1940's lemon-yellow frock emblazoned with huge red flowers; an open-necked matching lemon-yellow blouse; a red cashmere cardigan, the colour of which was an exact match to the flowers on her frock.

In her unusual triangular lobby, she peered at the hallstand mirror to check her hair; she checked her face: she no longer wore make-up or earrings, considering this to be 'common' in older women. With her large suitcase waiting on the landing, she changed from her fluffy slippers into open-toed sandals then exited into the small vestibule, locked the

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inner door, (three locks), set the inner strengthening crossbar on the right-hand storm leaf of the storm door, then slipped its bolts top and bottom, pulled the other leaf closed then locked it, (three further locks) and placed her keys into a zipped pocket in her commodious handbag.

Her father had been a police inspector and very keen on security.

The red colourway of her handbag and sandals matched exactly the colour of the flowers on her frock. All items of her ensemble had been purchased from an exclusive ladies' outfitters in Hyndland, an establishment which no longer existed.

At the door of the identical flat directly below her, she slipped a keyring of spare keys through the letterbox of the door marked "Blacker" then tiptoed down to her waiting taxi which would take her to Glasgow's Central Station for her train to Wemyss Bay where she would board the ferry to the Isle of Bute.

Standing in the bay window directly below the languid Reginald and Edwin, dressed in his pyjamas and sipping from a mug of black coffee, Duncan Blacker watched the black hackney turn the corner and wondered again about Miss Arbuckle and her odd, secretive ways. When she had called to see them the previous weekend, they had been surprised to be asked to care for her goldfish, especially since she was obviously already on good terms with many of the other neighbours.

This assumption, however, was a misconception. Unwittingly, Miss Felicity Arbuckle had long since alienated her other neighbours by passing them 'advisory notes' in her scrawly, almost indecipherable hand, 'instructions and reprimands' about various aspects of living at 'Number 24', reminding them to conform with the rules which her mother had established in her heyday when her brother, Uncle Fergus O'Neil had been the Factor for the property and Mrs Morag Arbuckle had acted as his self-appointed agent.

Indeed, there had been other incidents which had caused tension, incidents which, over time, the young Blackers would uncover.

From the Blacker's triangular hallway, while putting the finishing touches to her make-up, Kirstin said, 'Duncan, dear, that's me off now. I'll be back on Friday, late on. Will you collect me from the airport, please? I'll try to ring ahead from Heathrow to let you know if the flight is on time.'

'Yes, fine. Where is your conference again?'

'Oxford.'

'Ah, I'll be in Oxford on Wednesday, shall we meet for dinner?'

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'No, sorry, dear, that's the night I'm speaking at the gala fundraiser.'

'Right, of course, I remember now. Well, how about I book a meal at Rogano's for Friday night, say 8.00pm?'

'Mmm, what a nice idea, but maybe best to try for Saturday instead? Let's have an early night on Friday as I'm sure I'll be exhausted when I get home.'

'OK, fish and chips then?'

'Mmm, how about a Chinese from that nice place on Byres Road instead?'

'Good idea, yes. Ah, your taxi is here now, dear. Bon Voyage and break a leg on Wednesday!'

'Bye!'

The door closed and he was alone. He checked his appointments diary.

His first meeting was in Edinburgh at 9.30 am, then York by train for a 3.30 pm meeting followed by a Regional Engineers' Social Club games night in Leeds at 7.00 pm. Tuesday was London again, then up to Oxford on Wednesday, and on to Birmingham early on Thursday and back to Glasgow on the last train for a full day of back-to-back meetings on Friday.

When Duncan closed his storm door, he did not notice the bunch of old keys lying on the base of the deep wire basket behind the letter slot. Dressed in a sports jacket and flannels and a pale purple shirt with a pale green tie, his mind was already whirling ahead, thinking of his first meeting and his busy week ahead.

His promise to feed and care for Miss Arbuckle's goldfish had dropped off his agenda.

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It is the following Sunday afternoon.

The Blackers have been busy, steaming and stripping old wallpaper in the second guest bedroom with the windows wide open and sunlight streaming in, dressed in their oldest togs. The heatwave is in its second month. They have been hard at work since breakfast. Tired, hot and sticky, they decide to seek respite by taking camp chairs and a table with cool drinks down to the shady rear garden, a communal area recently landscaped into a sharing space for the nearby tenements under a local government scheme.

While dozing, they are approached by Mrs Edrington, a lady in her late fifties who works at the GPO regional office where she is the Head of Administration. Evelyn Edrington has been a 'widow' for nearly thirty years since her husband eloped with a floozy from Clydebank, a tracer who worked beside him in John Brown's shipyard. Down through the

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ensuing years, in her bitterness, Evelyn has steadfastly refused Bill a divorce. Through Bill's sister Margaret, Evelyn's sister-in-law who also works at the GPO, she knows the bigamist couple now live in Toronto with their six children and seven grandchildren.

Mrs Edrington lives directly below them and over their first few months, aping the approach of Miss Arbuckle but in a neatly typed 'official-looking' style has sent them several notes complaining of their 'banging and thumping', asking them to 'desist'. In an attempt to placate her, over the months they have sent several 'floral arrays' from an expensive shop on Byres Road and the flow of advisory notes has been stemmed.

'Ah, there you are. I just wonder if I might ask you to switch off your radio or close your windows, **please**. I have a rather persistent migraine and the din of that so-called music you are playing is distracting and irritating in the extreme. However, I suppose we should at least be thankful that our resident Paderewski is away to Rothesay for her annual holiday. I suppose you have been landed with 'her dear boys' to feed? Well, good luck with that one, is all I can say!'

Without waiting for a reply, Evelyn threw her head in the air and strode off on her short, stumpy legs, leaving them looking guiltily at each other.

'Oh, Duncan, have you fed her goldfish?'

'Eh, no. Did she leave the keys as she said she would?'

'Yes, of course she did. I found them behind the storm door when I cleared the mail on Friday night and hung them in the cloakroom beside the others, did you not see them?'

'Eh, no. Can you remember what she said about feeding them?'

'Yes, "very, very little and only every third day", don't you remember?'

'Did she not say she would write everything down, in a note?'

'Yes, that's right but she must have forgotten. I checked every piece of mail but there was no note. Do you think they will have survived?'

'Yes, probably do them good, a bit of starvation. Come on, let's check. Give them an extra big spoonful, eh? And, well, it's a good chance to have a nosy, isn't it?'

Together they approached Miss Arbuckle's fortress. By trial and error they managed to open two of the three locks on the outer door but none of the other four keys would turn the upper lock. Duncan even sprayed the lock with WD40, the latest miracle loosening oil from the USA.

'Oh, for goodness sake, this is madness. It looks as if we will need to find a locksmith.'

'Duncan, let me try, you know, a woman's 'gentle touch?'

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After many tries, Kirstin too admitted defeat.

The door across the landing opened and a small, bald man in his late seventies stepped out and smiled, dipping his head in greeting, revealing a black yarmulke balanced precariously on his pate.

'Gute afternoon, I am Nathan Gurivetch. Pleased to meeche. I have jewellery workshop in St Enoch Square, you know, beside the Subway? You need help wid that sticky lock? I do it. Tricky. I say many times to Miss Ardbuooke she needs new lock but she stubborn lady.'

'Oh, hello, Mr Gurivetch.'

Duncan held out his hand but the old man just nodded again holding an open palm to receive the keys.

'I'm Duncan and this is my wife Kirstin. We are authorised to enter, to feed Miss Arbuckle's goldfish.'

'I wish you gute luck wid that. Now, I show you. This key, push in very hard, twisting now, three each way, then pull back and UEREEKAH.'

'Oh, thank you so very much,' said Kirstin but as she turned, Nathan Gurivetch had already scuttled back to his wife who had been listening behind the partially open door.

Safely back in their front room, Beatti said, 'You think they find dead fish? What yu think they do? You shoodah tell them where to go to get new ones, yes?'

'No, Beatti, they smart cookies, they figure themselves, best not get involved, yes?. No more Beatti, no more, please.'

'Yes, Nathan Gurivetch, you right, just as you always right.'

In response, her husband removed his hearing aids, picked up his book, flipped down his thick spectacles down and returned to his Alistair Mclean best-seller.

Duncan and Kirsten eyed the goldfish bowl from the lounge doorway and were at first relieved to see the two fish hovering just above the seashells which were placed with ornamental precision on the base of the bowl.

'As I said, a few days without food has done them no harm at all.'

'No, look, Duncan, that mottled one has a grey fungus on its tail. Surely that's not right. And look, the water has evaporated to only half full, see the rimmed mark of the sludge. It needs a good clean, does that bowl. Actually, I'm sure these fish have been parboiled standing here in full sun for most of the day. I'll phone Ian Brodie, one of the OTs at

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Gartnavel Royal. We have a tropical fish tank for the residents and Ian's in charge of it. I'll go down to ours and phone him. Back in a bit.'

Duncan went through to the kitchen and returned with a sponge, a large pot, a ladle and kettle of fresh water. Taking great care not to disturb his charges, he removed most of the remaining water, then gently sponged the inner surface of the bowl before topping up slowly with fresh water using the kettle.

Kirsten returned:

'I got his mother, Ian's off with his bicycle on a camping holiday, somewhere up North, near Glencoe she thinks. Mrs Brodie looked for his book on goldfish but she couldn't find it. She says to try Franks Aquarium Supplies on London Road, near the Barras. She said Ian says they are very helpful. I looked them up in the phone book but there was no reply. Oh, well done Duncan, you cleaned them out and topped them up. Did you find their food?'

'No, not yet. I've no idea where she has hidden it. It may be in this drawer but it's locked and there is no sign of the key, I've looked everywhere. The good news is I'm in Glasgow all day tomorrow. I'll pay Frank's place a visit, see what he recommends.'

'Yes, that's the best we can do for them just now. I suggest we close the curtains and ease the windows to let a little air in, do you agree?'

'Yes. Well, drama over for now. Lets try to get that last wall stripped before we clean up. Shall we walk down Byre's Road to the University Café after we eat and get ice creams?'

'Oh Duncan, you do have the best ideas!'

The following lunchtime Duncan had a long chat with Frank and learned there was much more to keeping goldfish healthy than he had realised. As he listened to the fish guru, they wandered along dozens of long narrow corridors with aquarium tanks on both sides, all filled with healthy fish in many sizes and colours.

After their evening meal, armed with advice and a tiny eyedropper bottle of combined sterilising fungicide treatment and a large drum of expensive 'balanced nutrients for larger tropicals' they headed upstairs to check on their charges. After a struggle with the sticky lock on the storm door, Duncan and Kirstin approached the goldfish bowl with trepidation. To their horror, both fish were floating on the surface, dead. The fungus had spread to both residents and the water was fetid.

'OH GAWD, Duncan, what on earth will we do?'

'Mmm. Well, it might seem a bit offbeat but why don't I wrap these two corpses in baking paper and seal them to make them airtight, put them in a Tupperware and pop them in the freezer compartment of our fridge. Then, we will completely sterilise this bowl and

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let it stand in the full sun to complete the cleansing process. Then, finally, we take the two fish from storage and visit Frank's and try to find matching replacements for the dear departed, bring them here and plop them into their new home. Probably best if we try to time this swap for a week on Saturday, the day before Miss Arbuckle returns.'

'Duncan, where did you get that brilliant idea from?'

'Mum was an avid Peoples' Friend reader. Every few months or so there would be a flurry of letters describing this sleight of hand.'

'Well, let's hope Miss Arbuckle is not a Peoples' Friend reader.'

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The black cab taxi from the railway station arrived mid-afternoon. Kirstin, who was scraping old varnish from the lounge window saw Miss Arbuckle 'alight'.

Duncan and Kirstin gently closed and barred their outer door.

They heard the taxi driver muttering curses as he lugged the huge suitcase to her door.

Suitably rewarded, he retreated and drove off.

They waited in the kitchen drinking tea, expecting a sharp knock at their door.

When the piano began thumping and the screechy voice joined in, they fled downstairs and walked smartly to the new restaurant on Byres Road where they were lucky enough to get an early table. Later they wandered the streets until it was dark enough to sneak back into their home without detection.

Miss Arbuckle was still playing and singing.

'Dunc, can you make out that one.'

'Not sure, really. Could it be "Abide with me?'

Midweek, Duncan trudged up the final flight to his second floor flat. He had been in London at a conference and had sneaked off at lunchtime.

'Ah, Duncan, there you are at last. Sadly, I have a problem. My goldfish have died. One minute they were fine then, when I checked later, they were gone, floating upside down. I'm not good with dead things. Could you remove them please? In fact, could you take the entire apparatus and do something with it, give it to charity perhaps? Really, this is a mercy to be rid of them at last. It was my mother who bought them for me when I was ten, would you believe. Do you know, every time I come home from holiday, I keep hoping they might have died and now at last they have. Oh, and this fruit loaf is for you and Kirsten. The baker in Rothesay is famed for them. Too rich for me. But his Empire Biscuits are a delight so I got you six of those too.'

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Duncan, flabbergasted, tried to do the arithmetic. Then it dawned on him that he had not been the first to supply replacements.