

# My dear, dear boys

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*The scene is a posh red sandstone tenement property in a side street in Glasgow's West End, just off Byres Road, with eight large flats served by an ornate tiled stairway. There are no children, 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 eighties, 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 top-floor corner flat with an open aspect making all her rooms bright and airy.*

*Kristine and Duncan Blacker have been married for five years and are very career minded. They are Glasgow born and bred, well educated, kindly but self-absorbed. Kristine, whose parents live in nearby Partick, on the edge of Dowanhill, was a 'Hillhead girl' and Duncan, from Bearsden, was a top student at Bearsden Academy.*

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

*Kristine is an Occupational Therapist, softly spoken but very 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. When they move into their first Victorian semi-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. In time they will become leading lights in The Siamese Cat Society of the British Empire, an august organisation founded in 1928.*

***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, still etched in the memories of all of us who lived through it. In those days of yonder, we had no mobile phones, no internet. When people were on the move on business or on holiday, communications were slow and rather hit or miss.***

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'Well, my dear, 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?'

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*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 died of scarlet fever, aged fifteen). Edwin is a most unusual goldfish with a mottled blue-black body, large vee-shaped tail and a dark 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 a bright '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 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, reversed into the small vestibule, locked the inner door, (three locks), set the inner strengthening crossbar on the right-hand 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 master key pouch into a zipped pocket deep inside her commodious handbag.

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

The red colourway of her handbag and sandals matched exactly the hue and intensity of the flowers on her frock. All items of her ensemble had been purchased from an exclusive ladies' outfitters, located in a quiet side-street off Kilmarnock Road, near Shawlands Cross, on the south side of the city, near her mother's parents' home in the ultra-posh suburb of Newlands.

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This ladies' boutique was an exclusive establishment where clients required a letter of invitation from the owner before they were permitted to call ahead by telephone to make an appointment to visit. Felicity's admission to this select client group had been arranged by her grandmother as a twenty-first birthday present, when a credit balance in her name had been established in the amount of £1,000. Sadly for Miss Arbuckle and her ilk, this establishment had closed in the late 1950s on the death of its owner. As a result, her entire wardrobe had been 'frozen' from that date.

At the door of the identical flat directly below her own, she stopped briefly to drop a ring 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.

Dressed in his pyjamas, sipping from a mug of strong black coffee and standing in the bay window directly below Miss Arbuckle's goldfish Reginald and Edwin, 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 "dear, dear boys" especially since she was obviously already on good terms with many of the other neighbours in their close.

*This 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'.*

*These imperious missives had their origin in an earlier era when even more exacting demands had been issued by Felicity's mother, the high-minded and high-handed Mrs Morag Arbuckle, copperplate epistles delivered by hand, encouraging 'occupiers' to conform with the rules and conventions which Morag had herself concocted. This was at a time when Fergus O'Neil had been their Factor, the managing agent for the Owner. Sadly, and never to be forgotten, Dear Uncle Fergus, Morag's only sibling, younger by a decade, had been 'lost' in the Battle of Britain but his smiling photograph, taken at his passing out parade as a Flight Sergeant, still dominated the wall beside the hallstand.*

*In recent years, these flats had been sold 'unimproved', like the one the Blackers had purchased. However, from the 1930's through to the early 1960s, almost all the flats managed by Fergus O'Neil had been in rental, without secure tenure. In her unofficial role as her brother's self-appointed 'resident agent', Morag had wielded great power over the occupants.*

From the Blacker's identical but much more brightly lit triangular hallway, while putting the finishing touches to her make-up, Kristine 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 Airport to let you know if the flight is on time.'

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

'Oxford.'

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

'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 us for 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. I'm sure I'll be exhausted when I get home.'

'OK, shall we get fish and chips then?'

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

'Good, 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 the base of the deep wire basket behind the letter slot. Wearing Hush Puppies and dressed in a sports jacket and flannels and a pale purple shirt with a bright 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.

*It is the following Sunday afternoon. Dressed in their oldest togs, the Blackers have been busy, stripping old wallpaper with a steam machine in the second guest bedroom, the windows wide open, the sunlight streaming in. The heatwave is in its second month. They have been hard at work since breakfast and, tired, hot and sticky, they seek respite by taking a camp table and chairs with cool drinks down to the shady rear garden, a communal area recently landscaped into a 'sharing space' for the quadrant of overlooking tenements, an initiative funded under a local government scheme.*

*While dozing, they are approached by Mrs Edrington, a lady in her late fifties who works in 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 these years as a solitary lady, in her bitterness, Evelyn has steadfastly refused Bill a divorce. Evelyn's estranged sister-in-law, Margaret Edrington, Bill's sister, also works at the GPO. Over these ensuing years Evelyn has learned, one overheard snippet at a time, that the bigamist couple now live in Toronto*

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*with their six children and seven grandchildren. Over the years, on many, many occasions, Evelyn has drafted versions of an exposé letter to the Toronto office of Births, Deaths and Marriages but each time when she had these letters ready to fly, she ripped them up, thinking of the innocent children involved.*

*Mrs Edrington lives directly below the Blackers and over recent weeks, aping Miss Arbuckle's 'notification of displeasure' approach, she has issued hand deposited neatly typed letters drafted in a terse official style complaining of their 'banging and thumping', asking them to 'desist forthwith'. To placate her, the Blackers have sent several 'large floral arrays' from an expensive shop on nearby Great Western Road, a strategy which has stemmed the flow of complaints from two or three per week to about one per month.*

'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 "My dear, 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 up in the cloakroom beside the others, did you not see them?'

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

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

'Ah, yes, of course but 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 unlock 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.

Exasperated, he said, '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, Kristine also admitted defeat.

'No, it's jammed. Where shall we get a locksmith on a Sunday afternoon?'

'Are you not in London first thing tomorrow?'

'No, I'm on the first train to Doncaster, back on Tuesday night.'

'Well, I'm in Oban tomorrow then over to Mull on Tuesday.'

'Ah, so it looks like "My dear, dear boys" will have to tough it out until Wednesday.'

'How about, "Sorry, but they died. We think they must have been pining for you Miss Arbuckle. Perhaps they were missing your piano and singing?"'

'Oh Duncan, how did we get involved in this situation? What if they die, what can we say?'

'Oh Duncan, we should have said "no", politely but firmly.'

'That's the trouble with pets, isn't it? They do tie you down.'

The door across the landing opened and a small, bald man in his late seventies stepped out, smiling. Shuffling forward in his oversized slippers, dipping his head in greeting, he revealed a black yarmulke balanced precariously on his pate.

'Gute, affdernoon, I am Nathan Gurivetch. Please-to-meecha.'

*By day, Nathan worked for his cousin Rachel's son in a busy wholesale jewellery manufacturing workshop in St Enoch Square, beside the Subway. In his free time, he was the Almoner at Garnethill Synagogue and a voracious reader of crime and thriller novels.*

'Oh, hello, Mr Gurivetch.' Duncan offered a handshake but the old man just dipped his head once more while holding an open palm to receive the keys.

'You need-ah help widdah that sticky lock? Is tricky, I do it. Or maybe jam up gute? I say many times to Miss Ardbookle she need-ah new lock but she one stubrin lady.'

'I'm Duncan and this is my wife Kristine.'

The old man was wearing hearing aids but perhaps they were turned off, Kristin thought.

'Mr Gurivetch,' said Kristine, raising her voice, 'just to be *absolutely* clear about this situation, did Miss Arbuckle say we are authorised to enter? We're here to feed her goldfish.'

'I wish you gute luck wid that! Letta me show-ah you, yes? Too use key, push-ah hard, twist-ah till feel-ah click, then pull-ah and, YULEEKA!'

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'Oh, thank you so very much,' said Kristine, peering at the inner door; but when 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, Beata said, 'You think they find-ah dead fish? What you think-ah they do, Nathan? You tell-ah them where to getta new ones, yes?'

'No, Beata, they smart cookies, letta figure themselves, best not getta involved, yes?'

'Butta Nathan, itta no easy find right kind, you gotta tell-ah them!'

'No more Beata, no more, please. Leave them to solve-ah themselves, yes? They no wantta us tell them whatta to do, yes?'

'Oh yes, Nathan Gurivetch, you right, of 'course you right, you always right. Silly man.'

In response, her husband removed his hearing aids, picked up his book, settled his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose and dived back into his Alistair Mclean best-seller.

From the lounge doorway, Duncan and Kirsten eyed the goldfish bowl. Their initial reaction was relief when they saw two fish hovering just above the seashells at the base of the bowl.

*During the events which unfolded they did not notice these shells had been arranged with ornamental precision to form the initials a "R" and "E".*

Duncan was the first to speak. 'As I said, a few days without food has done them no harm at all.'

'No, *look, Duncan!* See, that mottled black one has a grey fungus on its tail. Surely that's not right. And look, the water has evaporated to only half full. Look, see the rimmed mark of the sludge? That bowl needs a good clean-out. I imagine it hasn't been cleaned for years. It's disgusting! No wonder the fish has a fungal infection. And I'm sure these poor "dear, dear boys" have been parboiled standing here in full sun for most of the day.'

Duncan dipped his hand into the water. 'Wow, it's as warm as a swimming pool, definitely far too hot, I would say.'

Taking charge, as she liked to do in a crisis, Kristine replied: 'Leave this to me, dear. I'll phone young Ian Brodie, one of the OTs assistants at Gartnavel Royal. We have a tropical fish tank for the residents in the closed ward and Ian's in charge. Give that bowl a good clean out while I go down to ours and phone him. Back in a bit.'

Duncan returned from Miss Arbuckle's kitchen with a sponge, a large pot, a soup ladle and kettle of freshly drawn cold water. Taking great care not to disturb his charges, he

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removed most of the remaining water, then gently sponged the inner surface of the bowl before topping up slowly with water from the kettle, refilling it six times to restore the water level to the original height.

Kristine breezed in.

'I got his home number from the ward but then I got his mother, not Ian. She said he's away on a camping holiday with some friends on their bicycles, somewhere up North, near Glencoe she thinks. I had to wait for ages, listening to her two budgies chattering away in the background while Mrs Brodie looked for his book on goldfish but then she remembered it was probably a library book. She suggested we try *Franks Aquarium Supplies* on London Road, near the Barras. Ian told her Derek at *Franks* is very helpful. I looked them up in the telephone book but when I rang, there was no reply.'

'Maybe it was just stress and with this change of water and a good feed they will recover?'

'Oh, *well done* Duncan, you cleaned them out and topped them up. Where did you find the fish food?'

'Ah, well, I fed them with crushed *Ruskoline*, you know, those orange breadcrumbs for coating fish for frying? Miss Arbuckle has six boxes of it in her larder so I'm sure that what she uses. Evidently, "My dear, dear boys" seem to like it. They gobbled it down in seconds, so I gave them two more heaped spoonful. My cousin Archie had five goldfish in a big aquarium and he used to feed them on *Ruskoline*.'

'But what about that fungus, surely that will need treated.'

'Look, Kristine, the best I can promise is to try to get along to this *Franks'* place on Wednesday. Surely "My dear, dear boys" should be all right until then. Don't they say that a *feeding* fish is a *healthy* fish, just look at them gobbling that stuff down. I'll crush another spoonful, for them, shall I?'

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

'Yes. Good. There we are. Settled. Well, I declare this episode of Emergency Ward 10 to be over. Now, what do you say dear, shall we try to get that last wall stripped before we clean up. And, after we eat, shall we walk down Byre's Road to the University Café and get ice creams?'

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

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On Wednesday, during his lunch break, Duncan had a long chat with Derek Franks, a wizen barrel gnome of a man from whom he learned there was much more to keeping goldfish fit and healthy than he had realised. Derek revelled in the opportunity to impress the novice and, although Duncan was tight for time. Derek insisted he his new acolyte the full tour, chattering as he led them through a maze of narrow corridors filled with huge aquarium tanks on both sides, stacked in racks, three tanks high. At a quick estimate Duncan thought Derek Franks must have around half a million fish in all shapes, sizes and colours.

Repeatedly during his visit, Duncan heard Derek the fish guru repeat his mantra:

*"Feed them very, very little and only every three days. Over-feeding is one of the worst things anyone can do for fish kept as pets."*

Driving back to his office, Duncan began to feel a rising tide of unease over the amount of *Ruskoline* he had already fed to "My dear, dear boys".

After their evening meal, armed with Derek Franks' advice and a tiny eyedropper bottle of 'combined sterilising and fungicide treatment' and a large drum of expensive 'balanced nutrients for larger tropicals', the Blackers decided to face the music together.

After a struggle with the sticky lock on the storm door, Duncan and Kristine approached the goldfish bowl with trepidation.

To their horror, both fish were floating on the surface, obviously dead.

The fungus had spread to both fish and the water was fetid.

'OH-MY-GAWD, Duncan, what on *earth* will we do now?'

Duncan, who had been half-expecting this outcome, had his plan ready.

'Ah. . . Well, hear me out, please. Now this might sound a bit bizarre but why don't I wrap these two corpses in that new plastic see-through food wrapping film and put them in a *Tupperware* tub and pop them in our 'fridge until we can find replacements. I'm sure Derek at Franks' will have passable lookalikes. Did you see how thick Miss Arbuckle's specs are?'

'NO Duncan, not in *my* refrigerator. Absolutely not, thank you very much! Put them in Miss Arbuckle's and use one of her *Tupperwares*, she got dozens of them.'

'Ah, yes, of course. Not our fridge, silly me. Slip of the tongue.'

'Are you sure this Derek chap will be able to help us?'

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'Yes, we can pay him a visit at the weekend.'

'Duncan, did I ever tell you that you are an absolute genius!'

'Mmm. "*Well, now, and surely the truth will always out, as they say in Glocamora*".'

*(Although Duncan's father Eddie was not Irish, he loved real and made-up blarney, delivered in a pretend Irish accent, a habit Duncan had picked up.)*

Kristine, taking charge again, added, 'Oh, and of course before we bring our new "My dear, dear boys" back here, we will completely sterilise this bowl, dry it and let it stand in full sun to complete the cleansing process. You make a start and I'll get the cling film.'

"*Sure an' all an' I will, so I will!*"

The following day, a postcard arrived from Miss Arbuckle saying she would be staying for a further week to take advantage of the wonderful weather, advising her anticipated return would be on the first Sunday in July, around noon.

The Blackers relaxed, they had plenty time to find replacement fish and re-home them to Number 24 before the return of their neighbour.

On the Saturday morning before Miss Arbuckle's scheduled return, they went upstairs to reclaim the *Tupperware* and take the long-gone Reginald and Edwin to *Franks Aquarium Supplies*.

Unfortunately, the sticky lock defeated them and after half an hour of exasperation, Duncan pulled on the *Gurivetchs'* shiny brass knob to sound the doorbell. The door flew open immediately and they were faced with a short, very corpulent lady wearing a bright green ankle-length smock, holding a yellow duster in one hand and a tin of *Brasso* liquid metal polish in the other.

'Hello, Mrs Gurivetch, I'm Duncan Blacker and this is my wife Kristine. Is Mr Gurivetch at home, please.'

'No. No, my-ah Nathan no home. This Sabbath, he visit parent's grave, then Schule. Me, no go to Schule no more-ah. I no trust to God, notta aftta Belsen and Auschwitz.'

Kristine began to explain but 'Ah, well, you see. . .'

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'You need, door fix, open? Wait, I get my keys, for you. Secret keys. You no tell nobuddy, OK?'

A minute later Beata returned with a set of keys which looked identical to the ones Miss Arbuckle had provided for the Blackers. With her version of the appropriate key the lock turned with ease.

'Thank you *so, so* much, Mrs Gurivetch', gushed Kristine. 'It's *so, so* important we get inside to, eh, eh, ...to, to *'attend'* to Miss Arbuckle's goldfish. She is due home tomorrow and we thought we would. . . eh, well, just check on them.'

'The gold-ah-fish is dead. Both-ah them.'

'Ah, well, actually, eh, yes,' said Duncan. 'How did you know?'

Mrs Gurivetch gave a tight-lipped impish smile while tapping the side of her nose with a finger and jiggling her spare set of keys with the other hand.

'Oh, I *see*,' said Kristine.

'Where you go for getta new "My dear-ah, dear-ah boys?"'

'Have you heard of *Franks Aquarium Supplies?*' said Duncan.

'Is my bruddar's place. I know, he say is "Derak" but heessa real name is *Daniel*. Stupid boy. Our Mamma she be angry, *God rest her soul!* You tella *Daniel* his Beata send-ah you, tella him Beata say he give-ah best price to you, OK?'

'Oh, thank you very much,' said Kristine, who had no desire to call on her tenuous friendship with Mrs Gurivetch to grovel for a discount. 'That is *most* kind of you.'

'OK, but you keep-ah my secret, 'boutta the keys?'

'Of course, *we* would never tell a soul, would we Duncan?'

'No, of course not, dear.'

'We make-ah gute deal, eh? I tell-ah you-ah 'nother secret 'boutta Miss Arbuckle, she hassa bad heart, most her life. So, she give-ah me her gute spare keys so I check into her, yes? Then she getta angry 'boutta me wash-ah my ownna windows, say I "common skivvy woman". I tell-ah her "GO TO HELL!" So, we no speak-ah no more. So, she forget-ah I have-ah her keys. Silly woman. So, I keep in case. So, I no change-ah my heart to her. So, I watch to her, every day, every day, in case she need-ah me. This my secret, OK?'

'That is *very* kind of you, Mrs Gurivetch,' said Kristine, this time with genuine feeling. 'You are very kind-hearted.'

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'OK. So, I tella my other **big** secret. You no **only** one kill "My dear, dear boys". Mrs Edlington, she kill too. And Mr Prentice on ground floor and Miss Nicholls next close too. They all killa the fish, same ways you kill. My Nathan. No, he nevv-ah kill-ah fish. No, he **so** perfect, so he thinks. You give-ah too much-ah food, yes?

'Well, actually, we think it might have been the heat, it's been so hot, hasn't it?' said Kristine.

'OK. OK. You say-ah heat. I say-ah too much-ah food. Butta we have-ah deal, yes? You no tell 'boutta my keys to Nathan? So, he no go mad on me!'

'Of course not, Mrs Gurivetch, your secret is safe with us.'

'So, we have-ah deal. Gute!'

'And again, thank you **so, so** much for all your help *and* for sharing with us.'

Late on the following afternoon, the original but re-wired door push chimed the new electric bell in the Blackers' kitchen where the couple were preparing their evening meal, crooning along with ABBA playing quietly in the background while sipping chilled Liebfraumilch from crystal Champagne flutes.

Duncan who had been expecting this visit, immediately turned off the radio-cassette player.

In a whisper, Kristine said, 'It will be Miss Arbuckle, about the fish. I mean, they were *quite* a good match but not as good as I had hoped for, especially the Edwin lookalike. The vee of its tail wasn't quite right, and the nose was the wrong colour - too pink, not dark red. She must have realised, surely. Let's pretend we are out. Maybe she'll get used to them, given time.'

'OK, scaredy cat, you hide in here and I'll face the music alone.'

Duncan Blacker opened the door and smiled, 'Oh, hello Miss Arbuckle, so you're home safe and sound then?'

'Mr Blacker, please will you come upstairs with me. There is something dreadfully amiss. Very, very odd indeed. I would value your opinion, at once, please, if it is convenient?'

Duncan and Miss Arbuckle stood side by side in front of the two large, identical bowls.

Miss Arbuckle pointed vertically downwards into the fishbowl and said, 'Just look what these two rascals have done while I was on holiday. They have **completely** destroyed my ornamental array of seashells. Did you notice I had cunningly arranged the shells to spell

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out their initials? It is almost as if these two scallywags have decided they no longer wish to be called Reginald and Edwin. Imagine! In more than twenty years they have never, ever before behaved like this while I was away. Inexplicable. Do you agree?'

'Yes Miss Arbuckle, very strange behaviour indeed. Perhaps they were missing you?'

'Perhaps. Yes, perhaps my dear, dear boys did indeed miss me. How *sweet* to be wanted like that. It was probably that extra week without my piano playing for them. I think the music stimulates them, don't you? And before you ask, *yes of course* I missed them too. But allow me to share a secret with you. But not here. Come!'

In the hallway, with the exit door pointedly open signalling the interview was about to end, in a low voice Miss Arbuckle said: 'You see, after all these years of living cheek by jowl with them, I have become convinced my dear, dear boys have learned to lip-read. *Actually*, it is most disturbing, intrusive, don't you agree? I have had to move my telephone into the hallway to make sure I can keep my affairs private. Mr Blacker, do *you* have any idea how long goldfish last? Beata next door says forty years or more and if so, they are sure to outlive me. Let us hope they go first, and sooner rather than later. *Actually*, when they finally float away to fishy heaven, I will *not* replace them. I will use their bowl to expand my cacti collection. You see, the great thing about cacti is the more one ignores them the better they like it, unlike these two rogues and their constant demands. To put it bluntly, Mr Blacker, I am quite fed up with them! There you are - my secret is out at last. But not a word to a soul, please. I would not like anyone to think I was inattentive about their care.'

Miss Arbuckle looked furtively over her shoulder in the direction of the goldfish safely out of lip-reading range behind the closed door and seemed lost in thought. When she returned her gaze to Duncan, she seemed surprised to see him.

'Ah, yes, well, Miss Arbuckle, did you have a nice time in Rothesay?'

'Yes, thanks but *honestly*, some of these young women in their bikinis, exposing themselves like well, well, no, no, the word will not pass my lips, but I am sure you get my drift. Right, then, I will let you flutter back down to your delightful wife. Goodbye.'

The months ticked by and the Blackers continued with their renovations and improvements.

Miss Arbuckle resumed her piano playing and singing.

Occasionally, Mrs Edrington sent them notes of complaint prompting the Blackers to respond with bouquets of flowers.

## *My dear, dear boys*

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According to regular updates from Beata Gurivetch, the Blackers learned the new Reginald and Edwin were thriving on Miss Arbuckle's neglect.

In May 1977, Duncan and Kristine Blacker moved to Falkirk and were no longer available to care for "My dear, dear boys".