

To Err Isn't Human

It wasn't a noise, as such, that pulled Edgar out of his dream. It was an intuition. He sensed the intruder in his house.

And he had been deep, deep inside the bosom of his dream. He was on stage, his arm aching from holding up the inexplicably heavy skull. "Alas poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio." His voice boomed across the sea of captivated faces. His own echo irritated him with its constant interruption. Quashing any pleasure from finally getting the lead role. But the source of his deep unease, was somewhere in the back of the auditorium, hidden. The darkness shrouded the figure, but offered Edgar no protection from the discomfort, deep in the pit of his stomach. Not unlike the beginnings of food poisoning he had suffered the previous month.

Edgar jolted awake in his bed and yelped. He wiped drool off his cheek and whispered "Honey, I think there's someone downstairs. You call the-". Dispassionate crumpled bed-sheets stared back. Panic subsided as he remembered where his wife and the bump were. Safe.

Edgar held his breath as he crept down the stairs. Thinking about the two grand he had evidently wasted on the new house alarm system. He pictured the face of that smug, pushy salesman, with his over-gelled hair and snakeskin shoes, which he didn't have the courtesy to take off before coming into the living room. Edgar slapped himself in the face to dislodge the thought. He needed to focus.

He tiptoed through the hall, passed the large framed picture of his in-laws, with their inane grins; the only time they had looked anything but miserable. He peered into the kitchen, his heart thundering. The silhouette of a huge, hooded figure was bent over the granite worktop. The intruder was facing away, but Edgar could see he was holding up a small object and staring at it.

To his own disbelief, Edgar had taken out a large kitchen knife and crept behind the figure. He felt a rush of exhilaration. Not fear or even anger. But with having the upper hand. Outsmarting this crook. He wished he could freeze time and bask in this moment.

He saw that the burglar was holding up a pack of Wagon Wheels, with bright white shimmering fingers. No skin, no flesh. Bones. Adrenaline surged through Edgar as he thrust the knife hard into the intruder's back. The blade slid right up to the hilt, effortlessly. Edgar shrieked, more effeminately than he had intended, and stabbed repeatedly.

The figure spun around and stood up. It loomed, well over seven foot tall. A skull stared down at Edgar, its eye-sockets seeming to widen. Edgar yelled again. His own voice irritated him, sparking a momentary flashback of his dream. Terror commandeered his arms as he frantically thrust the knife into the intruder's chest. The blade clanged against ribs but found no solid flesh.

"Please do desist. This robe is very expensive." The skeleton's voice was incongruously soothing.

Edgar tried to speak but his brain proffered no sensible words. He spluttered some gibberish and then with all the might he could muster, plunged the knife into an eye socket.

"How rude," said the skeleton. A bony finger touched the blade, which disintegrated into dust.

"How are you still alive?" Edgar muttered meekly.

"Me? How are *you* still alive?"

Edgar only then noticed how incensed he was. Strongly-worded protestations formed in his mind. But instead he fainted.

When he came round, slumped in the corner of the kitchen, Edgar was transfixed by ghastly wisps dancing through air. He thought that it was his soul leaving his body, until he spotted his favourite Kathy Kitson mug, steaming next to him. Edgar felt a soporific equanimity, a hangover from the previous adrenaline surge. Across the room, the huge skeleton sat on a bar-stool, examining a Wagon Wheel closely.

"You're Death, aren't you?"

"Please call me Morty."

"But are you Death?"

The skeleton nodded slowly. He lifted up the Wagon Wheel. "I thought they'd ceased producing these. Do you mind...?"

Edgar shrugged.

With bony fingers Morty shoved the whole round biscuit, with the wrapper, into his mouth and masticated fervently.

Edgar cleared his throat. "Why are you here?"

Crumbs fell through Morty's ribcage and cascaded onto the tiled linoleum kitchen floor. He pushed some debris aside with a bony foot. "I'm terribly sorry. I lack a digestive system, you see."

"Why are you here?" Edgar shouted. His voice echoed across the kitchen.

Morty held up a finger and finished chewing, creating another pile of crumbs. "Usual reason, I'm afraid. How are you feeling, my boy?"

Edgar got up and sat on a stool. He frowned, crossed and then uncrossed his arms. "A bit freaked out I guess. But physically... fine."

"No headaches? Stomach cramps? Organ failure?"

"Well, I'm not sure what organ f-... Hang on. I'm not dead!"

"Evidently not."

Moonlight spilt in from the velux window. Edgar looked around the kitchen, wondering if he had ever seen it in the dark. He jolted forward, and held up a spoon and a pen, in a cross.

"Be-gone demon! I curse you... er... in the name of Jesus!"

Morty chuckled and slapped his gigantic white femur. "That's vampires. They're not real. Also, Jesus is a friend of mine. Decent bloke. Bit shabby."

Edgar held his makeshift cross up a little longer, then sighed and discarded it. He picked up his mug, blew on it, and took a huge gulp. He retched and spat it back into the mug.

"Apologies, my boy. Never made tea before. It's got milk and two salts. Is that not how you take it?"

Edgar put down the mug. "Look, if I'm not dead, then..."

Morty held up a Wagon Wheel.

"No thanks. Why are you here, Death?"

"That's the 60 million drachma question. It's Thursday the twelfth, right?"

"Erm ... yes. Perhaps you made a mistake?"

Morty's face contorted, looking menacing for the first time. "Preposterous. I don't make mistakes."

"Never?" asked Edgar, looking at the tea.

"Unequivocally not. You must have made a mistake."

"Now listen here! You come into my house, uninvited, eat my Wagon Wheels and..."

"Delicious!"

"And you tell me I've..."

"May I?"

"May you what?"

"Have another one?"

"Will you go away if I give you the whole pack?"

"No. I'm obliged I'm afraid. Let's start from the beginning," Morty said, helping himself to another rotund chocolaty indulgence. "You are Edgar Solomon Johnson, 38 years old. Your wife has just given birth and you just got fired."

Edgar scoffed. "Totally, totally wrong. My wife is heavily pregnant, but she hasn't given birth."

Morty leant forward and scratched his skull. "You're certain?" His chewing jaw bounced zealously, reminding Edgar of his mother's old sewing machine.

"Yes, I'm certain! She's at her mother's. She goes there a lot."

Morty looked up.

"It's the pregnancy. She's very ... hormonal," Edgar added quietly.

"She hates you, Edgar."

"No! It's the pregnancy, she's very ... you know."

"You've been growing apart for a few years, at least. I think her coloured baby proves it."

Edgar's shoulders slumped. He looked away. "Hang on, what does that mean?"

"What?"

"You said coloured baby."

"Quite."

"What does that mean?"

"You know people of colour? Usually of African or Caribbean descent?"

"Yes."

"Like that. But babies."

"But Catherine and I are Caucasian."

"Indeed."

"We don't even know any black people."

"You sound pleased."

"God, no! Sorry. I just meant you must have made a mistake."

"I think not."

"I mean, there's our new neighbour, whats-his-name. Moved in about a year ago. Nice enough chap. Catherine knows him better."

"Much better"

"Hey! What are you saying?"

"You're certain it's Thursday the twelfth?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Edgar looked over at the calendar on the wall, with the picture of puppies frolicking. Those doe-eyed sweet, innocent puppies, who paradoxically irritated him. "I know, because Monday the sixteenth is a big date for me. I'm presenting a bid to win a tender. You see I work in the acquisitions department of a major pharmaceutical company called..."

"Glaxo-Care Limited, I know."

Out of habit, Edgar momentarily looked around for his wallet for a business card. "Anyway, I've put a bid together for..."

"A revolutionary cancer drug. You've already messed it up, Edgar. They fired you."

"Fired me? I could potentially make Glaxo-Care millions."

"You miscalculated. That's why you undercut Sicillia by half a mil."

Edgar stood up and clenched his fists. "I spent *months* on those figures. They're correct!"

"And what's more, you were hung-over for the presentation and bumbled all the questions. Totally embarrassed yourself."

"Hung-over? What are you talking about? I wouldn't drink the night before..."

“Your friend from university called at the very last minute, saying he is in town for one night only. Dunky”

Edgar began to feel light-headed. He gripped the worktop. Damian Dunkirk hadn't drifted into his mind in many, many years. Images flooded in. Playing football in the park. Dunky, topless and buff, with his pasty skin shimmering with sweat. Another windy day, in the pub together, roaring with laughter, from doing impressions of their economics professor. Bunking off lectures, smoking spliffs in the afternoon, watching Countdown. With feigned nonchalance, feebly masking their super-competitiveness.

A potent memory bulldozed through two decades. Yet it remained untarnished. The flat party had ended and everybody had gone home or passed out. He and Dunky were lying on a couch, intoxicated. Dunky's aftershave overpowered the smell of weed. He could smell it now. Edgar had smiled and leaned forward.

“You were flat-mates at uni.” Morty's voice decimated the image. “You did the same degree, but he got a first. He's the only man you've had a homo-.”

“I know who he is! There's no need to...”

“He's dying, Edgar. Cancer. He flew in from Melbourne to see you one last time.”

Edgar jumped up, suddenly very alert. Like the whole experience with Morty had been a dream that he had only *now* woken from. He rubbed his temples, marched into the bathroom, and grabbed a packet of Paracetamol from the medicine cabinet. Shutting the cabinet, he yelped at Morty's huge face, in the mirror, hovering behind him.

“Is that all the Paracetamol you have? Just one pack?”

“I only need two tablets for a headache.”

“But if you wanted to commit... And you're *absolutely* sure it's Thursday the twelfth?”

“Stop asking me that!” Edgar found himself stricken with something between discombobulation and rage. Unsure if he was more upset about Dunky's imminent demise or that he had suppressed those feelings so dispassionately for so long. He grabbed Morty's arm and could feel knobbly bones under his robe. He yanked him towards the kitchen, finding him unexpectedly light. As Edgar passed the large framed picture of his grinning in-laws, he

ripped it down from the wall and flung it into the corner, where all his shoes were so neatly lined up.

He grabbed the calendar off the wall, and thrust it at Morty's gleaming white skull. "See! Thursday twelfth February!"

Morty's mandible dropped. Bony fingers rose up to his mouth "Not March?" he croaked.

Edgar looked around the kitchen again. More moonlight was spilling in, giving the room an ethereal glow. The puppies looked up at him from the calendar, still frolicking, still irritating. Edgar didn't even notice his breathing quicken and deepen, but it took several minutes to bring it back down to normal.

He pulled his bid papers out of a file and stared at them. The figures refused to un-blur. He threw the papers across the tiled linoleum floor and glared at Morty. "Can you stop it? His death."

Morty turned away slowly. "It would be extremely unconventional for me to--"

"Can you do it?" Edgar yelled, his face contorted, looking menacing for the first time.

"I'm not sure," Morty said softly. After several moments, his huge frame started rotating back towards Edgar. "May I have another Wagon Wheel while I think about it?"