

Fidelis - a short story

Harry Nolan reached for another Fig Roll. The old woman was still breathing but had finally stopped trying to call his name. Her colour was changing too. He looked irritably at his watch; such slow frustrating progress but he could wait. Something mauve caught his eye by the sitting room door. A petite, faded slipper with a flowery lining lay upturned by a broken tea plate. It must have come off when she tripped.

Mrs Gilchrist always served finest Darjeeling with Waitrose biscuits during Harry's weekly visits. It was a lovely excuse to take her and Ted's wedding china out of the oak sideboard, and to simply make a fuss of someone. When Ted died, grief had been quickly joined by a suffocating loneliness. But to her delight, this loneliness lifted soon after she met the kind young man in the Post Office queue. She often happened upon him during the weeks that followed. They'd chat and share a welcome laugh. Rose Gilchrist counted her blessings. Living in rural Wells 'the smallest city in England', she was sure of bumping into her new friend.

Soon Harry was a regular visitor to the tidy white bungalow. She came to rely on him. He fixed dripping taps, replaced light bulbs, and carried recycling boxes down the short, concrete drive. He was a great listener.

Ten months after they met, Rose turned seventy-six and updated her Will. She'd married late and had no surviving children. Aged thirty-nine, she and Ted had joyfully cradled baby

Sarah in their arms. She was small and soft, pink and perfect. But Sarah had died unexpectedly at just eleven weeks, their first and only child. In her purse, Rose carried the faded photograph of a beaming Ted holding a tiny infant.

A low whine came from behind the dralon recliner where she'd fallen. Harry had almost forgotten about the bloody dog. When he'd arrived at the bungalow, he'd had to kick the small, hairy creature half a dozen times to get it to leave the old biddy's side. But it had crept back and was now lying with its chin resting on Rose's outstretched hand. Finally, she was dead.

Harry rang for an ambulance and told them he'd just found her lifeless body. The Coroner later concluded it was an accident. Harry agreed. He'd discovered Mrs Gilchrist after she'd fallen, and failing to call for medical help did not make him a murderer. Nolan had gambled much time and energy on his self-styled befriending project. Up until that final afternoon when he'd ignored her repeated pleas and booted the dog, she actually thought their friendship was genuine, convinced that they'd first met and had kept meeting entirely by accident. Silly old bitch. He couldn't resist a smile as he thought how very clever and lucky he'd been. The Gilchrist's bungalow and savings were worth a fair bit.

Harry was to receive the bulk of Rose's estate. It irked him to learn that the remainder was gifted to Wells Cathedral where she'd worked as a volunteer, devotedly cleaning its precious relics and ornamental stonework. The only other impediment to his happiness was Arthur, her beloved mutt. The creature had loathed him on sight and the feeling was

mutual. Arthur was a ginger rescue dog with questionable parentage and manners. He was originally found wandering the nearby Glastonbury Festival with a fractured leg and cigarette burns on his back. He absolutely knew what bad men were capable of, and was fearful in Harry's presence. The five year old dog adored Rose but she mistook his warning growls for jealousy. Harry's dislike of Arthur was interpreted as a slight fear of dogs that would be overcome in time. And so Arthur had been included in Rose's bequest to her friend.

Seven months later, a showroom-perfect Mercedes pulled into St Andrews Street, at the side of Wells Cathedral. A thin, rust coloured dog looked anxiously out of the back as Harry grabbed the last remaining parking space, in a disabled bay. On the rear seat a dirty garden spade lay wrapped in plastic, to protect the car's cream leather interior. Harry flipped the mirrored sun visor to admire his newly veneered front teeth and caught sight of Arthur's judgmental and monobrowed stare. It was almost as if the dog had worked out what was going to happen to him. The man looked quickly away, removing a thin strand of tomato skin from an incisor, with a neat swipe of his little finger.

Shifting towards the passenger seat he picked up two envelopes containing legacy cheques, one addressed to 'Mr Nolan', the other to 'The Dean & Chancellor, Wells Cathedral'. His tanned face was sweating slightly and his hands shook with excitement. On the strength of Rose's Will, Nolan's bank had extended him credit with which he'd bought the car and a few other trifles. But greed had made him eager for his full inheritance and he'd come directly from her Solicitors. They acted as Rose's Executors, seemingly charging the estate a hundred pounds for every small transaction, letter and paper clip. This infuriated him, and in an

attempt to prevent further unnecessary expense claims, he'd offered to hand deliver the cathedral's cheque himself. It was, he said 'What Rose would have wanted'.

Harry checked his watch, which showed a quarter to two. He'd rung ahead and spoken with the Dean's secretary, who said she recalled Mrs Gilchrist from her volunteering days.

Despite the lack of notice and his rather impatient tone, she kindly agreed to meet at two o'clock inside the North Transept.

Nolan's pink polo shirt stuck to his back as he stepped out of the car. He eased on his Prada sunglasses. They were fake, just like 'Harry'. Gary Marcus Nolan, born 15th March 1986, was a petty thief and a chancer. Since his schooldays he'd been a lazy bully, protected by precocious charm and innocent good looks. Drifting through a series of dead end jobs and toxic relationships he'd scammed friends and 'borrowed' money from his elderly grandfather. An angry cousin had eventually forced his swift relocation to Somerset. Here he'd determined to target another aged victim but this time, one without family ties.

It was a glorious August afternoon as Harry strolled to his appointment. Wells Cathedral Green lay to his left, basking in front of the ancient stone edifice. Its neat turf had sizzled to a light brown over the summer months. Picnicking families and dozing tourists dotted its surface, the coarse grass marking their bare limbs. He followed the path and walked towards the cathedral's West Front, envelope in hand. Harry glanced up to see scores of medieval carvings and statues peering out of their ornate niches; groups of angels, saints, prophets and warriors. As he reached the arched entrance he was swept inside by a tide of

visiting Americans. Freshly delivered from a Heathrow tour bus, their excited chatter gave way to silent awe as they entered the cool, sacred interior.

Harry was still a little early and took a seat in a quiet corner of the nave. Churches made him uneasy and he was keen to move things on. After all, there was the dog to attend to. For appearances sake he'd chosen to keep the animal alive whilst Rose's estate went through Probate. He was still playing the part of her kind and thoughtful young friend. Arthur was paraded movingly at the funeral and on occasional outings to more high profile gatherings. His weight loss and lethargy were attributed to canine grief rather than neglect. The dog had however scored an occasional victory against the man he'd come to hate. A turd appeared in a shoe overnight and yellow vomit had ruined more than one carpet. But for the last nine weeks, barring staged public appearances, Arthur had been locked in Nolan's garage to prevent further crimes.

Harry used this tranquil pause in the nave to reflect upon his modus operandi. The spade in the car would be employed to both dispatch and bury the dog. Perhaps tying the animal to a tree first might make things easier? Nolan's fastidious nature was resentful of having to engage in this dirty process. He felt aggrieved by the task in hand but welcomed its outcome. Soon the dog would be gone and a large cheque sitting in his account.

Just before two o'clock, a short elderly fellow dressed in light brown robes and sandals appeared in the North Transept. He stepped towards the man in pink who was staring at an ecclesiastical clock, and tapped him on the back.

“Mr Nolan”

Harry turned, confused by what he saw.

“Yes. But I was actually expecting...”

‘A delay, there’s been a small delay’

‘Oh. And you are?’

‘Call me Francis. I’m with the Cathedral’

The old chap offered his hand. It rasped Harry’s soft palm and the dry grip was painfully strong. Harry looked down in surprise, then quickly pulled his arm away. The man had several fingers missing.

Francis countered Nolan’s obvious disgust with a grin.

‘Old age’ he explained. Then, lifting his robe slightly to reveal three absent toes added, ‘and frostbite’.

Regretfully citing the constraints of his job description, Francis declined to accept the envelope. Instead he pointed to a dark wooden door and insisted that Harry join him for a brief tour of the upper cathedral, whilst they waited for the secretary. With very bad grace Nolan followed the odd man up the steps after being promised ‘a rather splendid view from the triforium’. Only after navigating several further narrow passages did they stop.

Francis looked lovingly ahead at the elegant curved structure which spanned the cathedral's high walls and ceiling. "These beautiful Scissor Arches were built following an earthquake to stop our tower from sinking". Then he chuckled, "But some say they look like an angry owl with two enormous stone eyes and a long miserable beak. Owls are marvellous animals you know".

Francis peered at Harry. "Do you like animals Mr Nolan?"

The guy was clearly a nutter and Harry's patience was wearing thin.

"OK, I need to get on. Please just take me downstairs so I can meet the woman and give her the damn envelope. I've got plans for later this afternoon and I'm not changing them.

'Really?' Francis's slight frame sagged with disappointment.

He paused for a moment. 'I understand. If you'd like to follow me'

As Harry tagged along, he saw the man had faint streaks of bird shit on both shoulders. This so revolted him that he barely noticed they'd stepped from the open gallery into a windowless side room.

Francis remained at the threshold, his worn face lit with regret. 'I'm so sorry you wouldn't change your plans Gary'. Then he slammed shut the thick, iron door. It's hard to say

whether Nolan's violent screams were out of fear or anger. They continued for three days and nights but nobody heard them.

That evening at dusk, when the tourists and worshippers had left for home, a small robed man appeared at the foot of the cathedral. He raised his arms. Out of the shadows above, two stone figures stepped from their alcoves. They climbed stiffly down the West Front and reached for their friend with the missing fingers. Francis was gently helped back to his niche, where he took care not to disturb a roosting pigeon. He stood still, remembered Rose and smiled.

A traffic warden had spotted Arthur earlier, locked inside the hot Mercedes. Some passing Hells Angels were drafted to help smash the back window, and so the dog was pulled out by a large hairy biker with a ginger beard. It was love at first sight. As the owner of the car was never found, Arthur eventually went to live with Big Dave and his Harley Davidson near Torquay. Weekends would see them out on the road together, Arthur strapped snugly into a pet carrier, his little ears flapping happily in the breeze.