



## **Quaid's Millions**

Pete Clark

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I first heard of Damien Quaid on the morning of September 18<sup>th</sup> 2008. The post arrived that morning as usual, and was the normal litter of junk mail; offers of loans, credit cards and bank statements; but for one piece. It was a letter, hand-written and upon closer inspection, hurriedly done. It was spotted with ink and a large ring, obviously a coffee stain, sat perfectly in the centre. I carried it into the kitchen, depositing the remainder of the post on the kitchen table. I turned the letter over in my hands as I brewed coffee.

The letter, a note really, nothing more, had been folded and was stained at the crease as if it had lingered in the sweating and mauling hands of its originator before dropping through my letter box. I flattened it out onto the kitchen table and read while I drank my coffee.

*'...Mr Sutherland,*

*I implore you to read this note carefully. I am not a crackpot. I will not terrorise you with further letters if you decide to destroy this one. Unless you wish it? I am simply a man with an offer. You do not know me, and when this business is concluded, you will not remember me....'*

My heart skipped at this last. Business?

*'...My name is Damien Quaid. The name may be familiar, it may not. That is unimportant. What is important is that you trust in the sincerity of what I am about to offer you. You and your lovely wife.*

*I wish to give you £10,000,000.*

*What does that figure mean to you, Mr. Sutherland? Are you already concocting fantasies, wild imaginings of what you could truly do with that money? Perhaps you have already destroyed this letter. I will never know. If, as I suspect, you are still reading, I know I chose well...'*

I chuckled and drank the last of my coffee. I was aware as I refilled my cup, that the laugh wasn't comfortable, wasn't true. Truthfully, I felt slightly unnerved by Quaid's note. And yet I read on.

*'...I wish for us to meet, Mr. Sutherland. I cannot discuss it further in this letter. Tomorrow at noon, at the coffee shop in town. There is only one, I know you know it. I have seen you there on more than one occasion with your lovely wife. How is Tabitha, by the way? Send my warmest regards.*

*Tomorrow at noon, then. I will understand if you are not there. But understand one thing, George. Tell no one. Not your wife, not your friends, not even the milkman. This is between us and us alone. I make this offer once.*

*Leave this note on your doorstep tonight and I will know.*

*Till tomorrow, then.*

*DQ...'*

This abrupt switch from formality to familiarity shook me. I suppose that was his intention, but I felt my blood seething. I read the letter again. A third time. How did he know me? And Tabitha? Was he outside right now? The thought sent shivers of panic through my body. For surely, in spite, or perhaps because of, his denial, this man was surely insane? I crumpled the letter and threw it in the bin. An afterthought really, I told myself, as I had committed its contents to my mind. My thoughts raced suddenly to Tabitha and I slammed my coffee mug on the table, mindless to the liquid that slopped onto my hand. I raced to the telephone and dialled.

The receptionist at Tabby's school answered in a lazy tone that I normally found excruciatingly sexy, but that was now holding up the progress of my enquiry. I halted her mid-sentence.

'Tabby,' I blurted, 'is Tabby there?'

'George, is that you?' Jennie replied. 'What's the matter?'

'Is Tabby there?' I said again.

'Yes, of course. She's in class.' Her obvious concern had hardened to mild irritation.

'This may sound crazy, Jennie, but could you please check in on her?' I felt ridiculous even asking, but I had to.

'Um, yeah, of course. Is there a problem?'

I tried my best not to be melodramatic, but couldn't stop myself.

'I sure as hell hope not.' My words got her moving.

Muzak wafted scratchily down the line at me while I waited. In less than a minute, Jennie was back on the phone, her mood noticeably sweeter.

'She's fine, George, just showing her class the finer art of bread making. She's fine. And I believe congratulations are in order? Pregnant, George! It's so exciting!'

'Yeah, we think so. She hates me worrying so much, but the impending parent in me, I guess.'

'I love kids, but...you know.'

Jennie was forty-three, overweight, and plain despite her sexy phone voice. She hadn't had so much as a date in the twelve years I had known her, and she didn't seem too inclined to try. So yeah, I knew.

'Don't give up yet, Jen, Mr. Right may be just around the corner.' I said.

'George, you're teasing me!' I could almost feel the heat of her blushes.

'Jessie, listen. Will you tell Tabby to be careful? And ask her to hurry home, I need to talk with her.'

'Will do. Take care, George.'

'You too,' I replied and hung up. It wasn't until I let go of the receiver that I realised how hard I had been gripping it. The relief at hearing of Tabby's wellbeing was palpable and washed over me like a warm wind.

I poured more coffee, my only real vice, and sat at the kitchen table, re-visiting the note in my mind. His surety that I would meet him seemed misplaced in the extreme, and yet he saw it as preordained.

'Ten million,' I said. 'OK. He's certifiable. That's all it is.' I laughed again, and was relieved to hear some normality there. I thought suddenly that if I read the note again I may see some underlying joke, perhaps recognise the handwriting. I became so sure that the letter was a prank that I made some excuse to myself that I had to walk across the kitchen *this* way. Of course, *this* way was directly past the dustbin, and I bent to retrieve the crumpled note. I sat again folding and unfolding the thing for ten minutes before I read it again. I didn't recognise the handwriting. I saw no joke, intended or otherwise. What on earth could Quaid want? With a baby on the way, and me out of work, how could I not meet him tomorrow? Would Tabby forgive me if I did? Would she forgive me if I didn't?

'Whoa!' I checked myself. What the hell was I thinking?

How I wish the note had been burned, destroyed. As it was, ten minutes later, still in my hands, the note was as good as on my doorstep, held down by the small rock we used to hide a spare key. I had to meet him, if only to warn him off. Just to see him. Just to see.

The day passed, as days do, and for every thought of Quaid, there were two more following it hotly; thoughts of money, of Tabby, of our unborn baby. I failed to notice that the curtains were still shut long after Tabby had left for work. I failed to notice that I didn't shower or shave.

I hadn't even changed since waking. I didn't eat, instead devouring cup after cup of coffee, until the mere thought of another sent shivers of nausea through my bowels. When the crunch of tyres announced Tabby's return, I was sitting at the kitchen table, still in my dressing gown. The coffee had been replaced by bourbon on ice. I heard and registered the sound of tyres on gravel. I heard the soft sporadic click of the hall clock, but for all the sounds availing me, the world was silent and still. Nothing touched me, nothing came close except the contents of the note.

'What have you got there, love?' she asked me, eyebrows raised, after standing in the kitchen doorway and seeing my dishevelment. 'And why aren't you dressed?' This last a little more than inquisitive.

I was silent, looking at her softly, trying to gauge her reaction to what I knew I had to tell her. It was impossible of course. Over the seven years of our relatively trouble free marriage, all I really know was that I didn't know her at all. Certainly not her mind.

'Show me,' she said, her tone light-hearted even if her eyes betrayed her.

'Oh, it's nothing,' I said, deliberately cryptic, as if to make her drag this from me would absolve me of the guilt I knew would follow.

I resigned of course, long before she did, and handed her the crumpled paper, folded and refolded time and again so that it resembled the thin leathery skin of some long dead creature. I didn't face her. I couldn't. She read it. I saw her eyes widen as she reached the bottom of the text, then rise to read again. Her face, and I knew her mood, blackened visibly.

'What's this, George? Who is this man?' she said. 'How does he know us?'

'I don't know, love. I really don't.....but..' If ever one word should have remained unspoken, it was that last.

'But? There are no buts, George. This goes in the bin after we go to the police!'

'Not a good idea, Tabby.'

I tried to sound as though I had solved this problem easily. 'He knows where we live. He knows where we drink our coffee, for fuck's sake! We cannot ignore this. I'll end it when I meet with him.' I said this lightly, to scale down the dread I was feeling.

'Oh no, George. No way am I letting you meet this man. He's a lunatic, can't you see? Listen to me.'

'He may be crazy, probably is, love, but think of what he's offering us.' I couldn't quite believe I was saying those words, hadn't known until that point that I had decided. 'I'm unemployed. We're having a baby, for Christ's sake. Think about it!'

'But it's all wrong, love, can't you see? You just don't get letters like this. You just *don't!*' She sounded on the verge of tears, and I cursed myself for handling it so badly.

'I agree,' I said in an attempt to diffuse what I knew would come. 'But if I don't meet him, what then? Will he keep coming? If we go to the police then, they'll want to know why. He's hardly likely to cause me harm when he obviously wants something from me. Besides, are you not the slightest bit curious?'

'I'm worried about what he will do if you refuse.'

'He's got no hold over me, Tabby.' As I spoke, I tried to clear my mind of the mental lists I had made, shopping lists essentially, all the hundreds of possibilities I had run through my head throughout the day. He had a hold on me, alright.

She left me then to run a bath. I sat with my bourbon and my sweat. I thought. And thought. I was still thinking when she came downstairs, still pink and moist from the bath, her hair wet and combed back. It wasn't mentioned again that night, the money. She had a look in her eye, however. She knew, almost before I did, that I would meet this man. She knew.

We ate. We talked. We even laughed. We watched TV and we went to bed, meaning to sleep, but making fervent love instead. I revelled in the soft swell of her belly, the fullness of her breasts. For a while, thoughts moved away from money. At two in the morning, when I was sure Tabby was asleep, I crept downstairs. The note lay, accusing, on the kitchen table, crumpled like a well-read love letter. I snatched it up and almost as if I was throwing it away, dismissing the reality of it, I pushed it through the letterbox. In the dead silence of night I could hear the soft hiss of it as it hit the mat outside. I had done it. I had arranged a meeting. In my mind, however, all I had done was throw the letter away.

I slept then, deep and dreamless. But I woke to the thought of money. And by the distance in Tabby's eyes, I guessed she had too.

The morning was terrible for both of us. Unresolved tension played between us like flashes of lightning, and still the note wasn't mentioned.

'Tabby, we need...'

'No, George, we don't.' A brusque kiss on the cheek belied the dark passion of the previous night, and she left for work. It had rained all

night, and showed no abatement this morning. I accompanied Tabby to the door, barely noticing, but noticing nonetheless, that the note had gone from the doorstep. It could just as easily have washed away in the rain, but I knew better. Quaid had come in the night, or sent an ally, and had removed the note, taking with it my assurance that I could meet him today. Suddenly a cold spot appeared in my chest as I thought about Quaid. Would he come back if I refused to show up? Would he come after Tabby?

I had no choice I thought but to meet Quaid and end this ridiculous charade. I walked back to the kitchen, cursing the half empty bourbon bottle. The top lay on the counter and the bitter aroma wafted to my nostrils. I capped it quickly and stashed it in the drinks cabinet like a dirty secret. Two aspirin and several cups of coffee later, I was feeling slightly more human. I could not shift the weight that was pressing on my shoulders however. It had been added to, that weight, with the fate of my wife and unborn.

I rushed to the toilet as a violent urge to vomit overtook me. I stilled the feeling but the face that greeted me in the mirror could have been a stranger. I was unshaven, and the bags under my eyes radiated sickness. As to the eyes themselves, I'd never seen them so bloodshot. I filled the sink with steaming water and shaved carefully. The necessary ablutions complete, I dressed and sat in the living room, TV on to a dull murmur, and waited. Time passed agonisingly slowly, and by ten thirty I was pacing the floor. I wondered if I looked as furtive as I felt. It would take no more than twenty minutes to drive to the shopping centre, but I made up my mind that I would leave by eleven. I would feel more marginally on control if I was the one waiting for *him*.

The hour arrived. I left the house, drove my car along the winding streets and along two junctions of the silent motorway and arrived at the shopping centre at eighteen minutes past eleven. There were plenty of parking spaces and I chose one near the main entrance. The centre was quiet as I, and presumably Quaid, expected it to be. It was almost as if shoppers had, upon waking, sensed the showdown and had decided to stay away. I walked to the coffee shop slowly, and settled in a corner with a cup of black. It was immensely bitter, and stronger than I would ever have drunk, but it suited my mood at that moment.

An immediate problem struck me, and I was amazed it hadn't struck me before. How on earth would I recognise Quaid. I knew, and upon thinking this, a chill raced down my spine, I would have to rely on him knowing me as he claimed to do. The thought that I would be the one in

control today vanished as surely as my first cup of coffee did. After a second cup, and a wholly over priced and over spiced doughnut, my nerves seem to settle and I listened very consciously to the music playing overhead from the hidden speakers. It was the Beatles playing. Nowhere man. Of course, I thought. How appropriate. How fucking appropriate. I glanced at my watch, and my palms felt newly greased and my stomach fluttered. Eleven fifty four. Whatever or whoever Quaid was, I'd know in about six minutes.

It was actually thirteen minutes. I was about to leave, cursing myself for falling for this fool's joke, when the music abruptly stopped. A heavy silence seemed to settle over the coffee shop. I had my back to the door, but had the strongest sense of being scrutinised. I turned slowly, casually, knotting my hands like an old woman in an effort to stop them shaking. A man I knew instinctively to be Quaid stood in the doorway. All light seemed to leach away from him, and left an impression of a sickly grey halo around his body. I blinked hard, and clutched my hands tighter. I nodded almost imperceptibly to him.

He looked like he had stepped straight from the dusty and crumpled pages of a western novel, and seemed to work hard at the look. He wasn't tall, maybe five feet eight or nine, although the long coat he wore, coated with a film of dust and stains, gave him false height. A hat, possibly once a fedora but now nothing more than a scrap of sloppy cloth, hung low over his brow, covering his eyes, covering all but the merest hint of a hooked nose and a cruel mouth that looked incapable of smiling. Tabby had often joked that my observational skills were as developed as those of a man blind from birth, but something about Quaid held my gaze firmly so that I drank in every tiny detail, from the colour of his hat to the thin ginger-grey stubble on his chin. He smoked, no, *chewed* the butt of a cigar, and in one sudden fluid movement, he had flipped the hat high on his head and rested the cigar behind an ear. That gave me my first look at his eyes, and what I found there was as black as ink and about as lifeless. My hands knotted tightly.

He reached into the pocket of his coat, and for one moment I saw it all end here, as he drew a gun and left me watching the smoke drift lazily from the barrel as my blood leaked from the hole in my forehead. He drew from his pocket, not a gun, but the letter that I had left of the front doorstep the night before. I started at the sight of it, and he chuckled softly. Still his mouth refused humour. He walked to my table in five

easy strides, dragging a chair with him, so that by the time he reached me, he was already sitting with the backrest against his chest. He smelt like old cloth, rotting leaves. I did nothing to disguise my cough of revulsion. He extended a slim white hand, by far the cleanest part of him. In fact as the hand drew nearer I saw perfectly manicured nails, not a scratch or sign of labour on the smooth palm. He was a man of paradox.

'Damien Quaid.' It was simply said, no trace of malice or threat as I had expected. Presumably he relied on his appearance to threaten. Its undertones were not lost on me, however. He had said

*Damien Quaid*

but he had meant

*I am in control. Of this conversation. And of you.*

I shook his hand simply because I had no idea what else to do. It was limp and chilled, like a boned fish, yet I felt strength beneath the skin. Strength and cruelty. Two coffees arrived at our table, although neither of us had ordered. Quaid nodded his thanks to the waitress, who kept her eyes averted throughout. I couldn't help but notice a slight flush on her cheeks as she turned to leave.

'So, to begin,' he started. His voice was disappointingly ordinary after the build up, slightly nasal and several tones higher than my own. 'Your letter, George?' He held up the scrap of paper. 'You will be taking me up on my offer.'

It could have been question or statement, and it seemed he chose the latter. My anger started to rise.

'Now hold on a minute!' I blurted, my voice more desperate and scared than I would have liked. 'I came here to listen. No more!'

'Of course, George. They all do.' He sighed wearily, and it seemed a performance. 'So be it. Listen if you want. Listen well.'

'Fisrt thing, Quaid. How the hell do you know me?!'

Quiad sat back a little, a look of satisfaction on his face. I knew I was falling into his trap. Listen, I had said, and then I was the one talking. I wanted to punch that smug look from his face as much as I have ever wanted anything.

'Simple luck. A phone book and a pin. You won this week. I came to visit once I had picked you. Nice neighbourhood, George. Nice house, and you out of work, too.' He was infuriatingly conversational.

'You don't know me,' I said, aware that I sounded like a sulky child, but unable to stop it.

'True, true,' he said, feigning sadness. 'But I want that to change. I really do.' At last a smile touched his lips and it was the most unnatural thing I had ever seen.

'Just who are you?' I asked.

He appeared genuinely confused.

'Why, you read my note? I'm Damien Quaid. I realise this may all be slightly unnerving, but I know you are right for this. I just know it. Unemployed, baby on the way, *demanding* wife.'

'Have you ever heard of privacy, Quaid. About a person's right to privacy? How DARE you come snooping around me and my family!'

He held his hands up. 'Just a few well placed questions with your neighbours, George. I'm surprised they didn't mention it.'

Suddenly I wasn't surprised. I thought that a man like Quaid could very easily make you forget you had ever met him. I felt a cold stone sitting in my belly and I wondered just what the hell I had gotten myself into.

'I'm not surprised,' I said. 'And nobody knows about the baby. That explanation just will not do, Quaid.' I fumbled for my phone, determined as I had been determined about nothing else that I was going to ring the police. I didn't press a single button on my phone.

'Jessie knows.' Quaid said.

My throat dried and my next words were rasped, dry things like dead leaves on a grave.

'You went to the school?'

'Just the once, George. Don't worry yourself. Nobody will remember me. I made certain of that. And it's hardly surprising that a family comprising of a pregnant teacher and an unemployed husband will have money troubles. Especially living in the affluent area in which I found you. I didn't need to be a genius to work that one out. Everyone has money troubles, George.'

'Everyone except you,' I snapped.

'Oh. Don't misunderstand me. I won't be *giving* you this money. Consider it payment. I will want something in return.'

*And so here it is*, I thought.

'Tell me.'

He chuckled again.

'I have always been interested in the desires and needs of people. I love to know what lengths people will go to. I *need* to know. I...push people. Or rather I...pull people into their true selves with the promise,

which I will keep by the way, every time, of money. It is my hobby, if you like.'

I simply stared.

'I simply want to know how far you will go, George. What will you do for my money?'

'That's it, Quaid. I will not break the law for you.' I stood, knocking the table, spilling coffee on to the crumpled letter that now sat between us.

'You haven't been listening, George. You will not be breaking the law for me. You will be breaking it for the money. There is quite a difference.'

'So it is illegal, then?' I asked, rather stupidly.

Quaid looked confused again. 'But, of course. How would it not be? You thought I wanted you to do my shopping?' He laughed loudly at his joke. I didn't.

'You have no shame, Quaid, have you?'

Why was I not leaving? Why, WHY?

'I grew out of shame a long time ago, George.'

'I won't do this, Quaid. I won't.'

'Really?' he replied, infuriatingly smug. 'I'm not so sure.'

He sat, impassive, and his eyes seemed to glaze over, black and lifeless; showing nothing, giving nothing away. I turned my own gaze to the surface of the table, where the spilt coffee lay like a pool of oil. There was enough of it to reflect my face. I didn't like what I saw. It was resignation. That is what I saw in my eyes, and though I stood to leave, I hesitated, just waiting for the word from Quaid, and I would sit back down. It came. I sat.

'Curb your anger, and your judgement, George. Really. Just hear me out.'

I nodded slowly.

'Speak. Tell me what your game is, Quaid.' The word had less confidence than I would have liked, but it still had more than I felt. Quaid was fooled even less than I fooled myself.

'This is no game, George. No game,' he hissed.

I said nothing.

'It is very simple. I will give you ten million pounds, to be deposited in your bank account, first day of next month. Cash, or cheque if you prefer.' He gave me a conspiratorial wink at this, as if he knew I could never have this money going through my bank account. 'You just have to do one thing for me. Can you do that?'

I still held my silence, hoping it would prompt him to leave. I had sat and listened, despite Tabby's warnings, despite my own.

Suddenly, shockingly, he lunged across the table, spilling the remainder of our coffees, and grabbed at the lapels of my coat. I was too slow, too surprised to stop him. In truth, I barely moved. I cried out. He leaned in close to my ear and breathed hot, sick breath at me.

'I want you to kill someone, George.'

After all the build up and the terror of it, the answer to it was so obvious, so animal, that it disgusted and relieved me in equal measure. I prised myself loose from his grip, rushed to the toilet and vomited.

I waited a full minute before straightening and looking at my reflection. What I saw bore no resemblance to the face I thought I knew. I looked old, tired, full of regret, and a hundred other downtrodden and degrading traits disgraced my features. I gave up the scrutiny and returned to my table.

A fresh cup of coffee with a neatly folded letter leaning against it, were the table only occupants. Quaid was gone. I sat and took up the letter. It was as long, if not longer, than the first letter, I'm sure of it, and I knew that it must have been pre-written. He couldn't have penned it in the minute or so I was absent from the table. I drank deeply of the hot coffee, if only to clear the vile taste from my mouth. It worked to a degree. I read the letter.

*'...George*

*So now you know.*

*I suspect you are wondering why I asked this of you? I know I would be.*

*It is simply my job, George. I need to know how far you will go for my money. Ten million is a lot of money; I think you'll agree. Would it remove the worries from your mind? Would you worry about your job, about the health and well being of your unborn? One life for the lives of your family, set up in wealth for the rest of your lives.*

*Money has always been the oil that lubricates the cogs of humanity. Forgive the crass metaphor, George. One of my failings. I need to know that the man I choose has the strongest of morals, of values. I need to know that that man will drop those morals and values like so much dead weight (pardon the pun!) for my money. I need to prove that that man will do what they find most abhorrent, if the dangling carrot looks juicy enough.*

*I leave the decision entirely in your hands. If you decline, you will not hear from me again, and I can assure you that come next month, you will have*

*trouble remembering my name. By the month after you will scarcely remember our meeting. But, on the other hand if you agree, we must discuss the terms.*

*Do NOT concern yourself with the problems of murder. Don't even consider this to be murder. It is simply a job for money. A lot of money. No one will suspect you. The police will not be involved with you, I can assure you of that. I will pick the victim. It will be someone you do not know, nor were ever likely to know. By your hand, they will die. By mine, you will become rich. There. We've discussed. Agree or not. Your choice, George.*

*Meet me here in one week, and we will talk.*

*Till then*

*DQ ☺...'*

Infuriatingly, he signed it with a tiny smiley face, as if we were friends. I hated him.

'Bastard,' I hissed.

I paid for my drink and left. The letter, I had torn into a hundred tiny pieces and flushed down the coffee shop toilet. I felt numb. My throat clicked audibly as I swallowed, and I searched desperately for things to occupy my mind on the drive home. But everywhere I looked, I saw strangers' faces, and thought,

Will they be the one? Or they?

I had dismissed Quaid earlier as a harmless lunatic. Now I cursed my misjudgement. What kind of freak makes this offer, even in jest? And why did I still think of it as an offer? Was I that far gone into my decision? Indeed had I already decided? He wanted me to kill someone for him. In return for a huge amount of money. Somehow I knew I was in too deep now to ever forget. My return home strengthened that thought.

There was a piece of paper tacked to the front door. Two words only. And a smiley face.

*Don't forget! ☺*

The jaunty face and exclamation marks made me want to cry. I would never forget. He would make sure of that.

My evening was desolate and lonely, and passed slowly, more slowly than I could ever have imagined. Tabby was out with Jessie for a non-alcoholic binge. Tabby for obvious reasons; Jessie, because alcohol was only one of half a hundred other vices she was not slave to. I felt drunk

and swollen with grief and anger, and the simple act of boiling the kettle for coffee seemed to me a Herculean task that took fifteen minutes.

It was done eventually, and as I sat with coffee so strong I could almost feel the caffeine in its aroma, I felt a migraine approaching. As the light passed from the world, it seemed that all light had been extinguished from me also.

I thought back to earlier this morning, when Quaid had seemed a charmless fool. Crazy, and intimidating, yes, but a fool nonetheless. Now his face loomed large in my mind, dead, black eyes, and cold lips that never truly smiled. He appeared an alien to me then, for what rational human being would ever make such an offer as his? But then, what rational human being would consider said offer. What did it make me, that here I was, actually *considering* it? I bowed my head and held it tight in my hands, trying to soothe the approaching pain that felt like rusty nails thrust into the delicate joints of my skull bones. It helped a little, but all thoughts of Quaid, his money, his offer, served as a hammer to drive the nails deeper still. I saw my life as a black hole. All my life I had been able to walk to the edge of that hole, look into its inky depth, and walk away. Now, after my meeting with Quaid, I could feel the earth around the edge of the hole loosen and with it, my sanity. How long before the ground gave way completely and I was cast into its dark, slimy depths?

I thought of other things; Tabby's hair in the sunshine, the sound I knew our child would make upon his or her entry to this world. Clichéd things that bore no real connection with my feelings. Things to utterly dissociate myself from them. All my thoughts, eventually, irrevocably led to the same thing. Tabby's hair was so beautiful because she visited the hairdresser's twice a month. The money to pay for it? More than I could afford, but a mere drop in the ocean of Quaid's fortune. The money to sculpt and school our child, to forge greatness in its tiny brain? The interest alone would pay for that, and more. I cried again. I cried because I knew what Quaid had said was true. If I agreed to his proposal, I would be rich. I *knew* that. I didn't trust Quaid, of course not, but somehow I felt that his words were true. I knew, for a fact, that I would never be imprisoned for my act. It was just knowledge that was *there*. All I would have was the money and the guilt. And I could live with that, couldn't I?

I didn't know.

Tabby arrived home to find me pouring over the jobs section of the local paper, partly to cover my tracks, partly, and this part was the

greater of the two I think, to find another way out of my mess, without resorting to Quaid. She kissed me, we talked for a couple of minutes about nothing and she went to bed. I followed Tabby to bed some time later; time enough, in all honesty, so I knew she would be asleep when I finally retired. Sleep came, eventually.

I woke and left the house early. As I turned to lock the front door, I saw a note pinned to it. *Tomorrow, at noon* it said. No smiley face this time. So, he had yet again floored me. I was hoping for a week to think, but no. He gave me a day and a night. The day and night stretched and dragged like they only ever do when you least want them to. I had stuffed the note into my pocket and kept fingering it, folding and refolding as if I would go for the pocket and this time, *this* time, the note would be gone, never there, and I'd realise how foolish I had been. I would welcome temporary insanity over this.

The next morning came eventually.

The sun shone, and although it was mid-November, jeans and a shirt were quite enough. The walk to the shopping centre took fifteen minutes, such was the nervous lightness to my step, and as I sat down for the first of my two coffees, I waited for Quaid more with anticipation than fear.

It was as I closed my eyes to draw a lungful of bitter coffee aroma that I sensed him, then heard the muted sigh as he slumped into the chair opposite. The chairs were those fake leather things that are inevitably ripped and faded. A low wooden table sat between them like a referee at a boxing match.

His smell, bitter and diseased, overpowered the coffee smell of this place, so much so that I was forced to raise the cup a few inches nearer my nostrils.

'Well,' he said, and no more.

I knew I would say no, I *had* to say no, but what came out was,

'Yes. Fuck you, Quaid. Yes.'

I bent my head, closed my eyes tight and by degrees the hot black smell of coffee filled me again. He left the table, brushing past me. I flinched and I heard the soft chuckle of his laugh as he left.

'Fuck you,' I whispered again.

When I raised my head, the place was empty. A strange orange light filtered in through the windows, and I drank the coffee quickly. On the table there was an envelope, folded but not sealed and I shook out its contents with the tips of finger and thumb, as though they were contaminated. It was a photograph. On it was a woman, attractive, mid-thirties, with a shock of red hair that framed her face like flames around

porcelain. I felt I knew her, and looked further. The memory stayed maddeningly out of reach.

I stood and slipped the photo into my jeans pocket. The appearance of the gun there didn't alarm me so much as the deadly heft of it, the sleek black design, as though it knew of its purpose, and of my desire. I assumed Quaid had slipped it into my pocket as he left. But into my jeans pocket? I smiled as I felt the weight of it, smelled its oily blackness, its readiness.

I saw her almost as soon as I crossed the shopping centre car park. As in her photograph, she was beautiful, and like the photo her eyes caught mine and followed me. Unlike the photo she was deliciously three dimensional. Her hair was as deep a red as I'd ever seen, flowing like liquid fire. She looked deep into my eyes and smiled. I raised the gun with no more thought than I would have given to raising a drink, and I shot her. The three shots were exquisitely loud in the quiet of the car park.

The first shot her in the chest. As she fell, silently, bonelessly, the second and third shots hit her in the neck and the face. Bone and blood sprayed like the inside of a watermelon and she hit the floor face down, with a sickening crunch. Her feet twitched once and then she stilled. I walked calmly to her, fingering the photo in my pocket, and as I got closer, I saw a note pinned to her back. The first bullet had exited her back, creating a rude gaping hole, and the note was splattered with her fluids. I shook it off, and studied it. It was actually a cheque. Folded, and a single word printed on the back.

*Thanks*

'No, thank *you*,' I replied, my voice sounding strangely distant.

I turned her body over so I could better see her face. Morbid curiosity and some misplaced desire to dignify her corpse with some recognition made me turn her over.

I stopped breathing. I dropped the cheque into the slowly spreading pool of blood. It swam like a child's boat in the flood.

I was looking into Tabby's face. Her sweet, beautiful, ruined face. The third shot had taken away most of her lower jaw. It had stripped away her right ear and left a seductive glimpse of her brain through the broken skull. I dropped to my knees in the blood, and as tears fell from my eyes, it began to rain, so that her streaked face seemed to be crying with me; red tears. I screamed and the thick bitter smell of coffee filled my head.

I was jerked awake by the sound of screaming. My own. Fragments of the dream dripped and clung to my mind like rain on a windowpane. Coffee was being brewed downstairs, and I heard the smash of china as Tabby dropped her cup, and then the thump of feet on stairs as she shifted her ever-growing body up the stairs to our bedroom. The door burst open, knocking our wedding photograph to the floor.

'George, what is it? Are you ok? What happened?'

She sat down heavily on the bed, and it wasn't until that morning, that *moment* in fact, that I realised just how large she was getting. I drew her to me and clung to her like a lost child. This was the first intimacy we had shared since that other night, and I welcomed it like a drink of water after a trek through a desert. I pulled away eventually and laid my hands on her chest, neck and face, all the places where the bullets had savaged her. I kissed those places. She laughed and hugged me hard.

'Bad dream?'

I nodded. How could I tell her that I had dreamed of shooting her? Of murdering her? 'Tabby, listen to me.' Her face grew grave suddenly.

'Promise you'll never leave, you'll never die.'

'I can't promise the second, love, but the first, yeah. You never need to ask.' She kissed me lightly on each temple, and then on the mouth, her hot coffee-laced tongue probing. When we parted she was flushed, and the thoughts of my dream were, if not forgotten, at least diminished.

While she showered, I thought about Quaid, of course. No amount of questioning and re-questioning could change the fact that I felt powerless to refuse his offer. I kept thinking of my family, denied everything they should have because I was penniless, unemployed. I loved them too much to refuse it. The money would save all our lives. I could control the guilt, push it back into some unused portion of my mind, and if I had to relive it every night in my dreams? So be it. They were only dreams.

I joined Tabby in the shower, my mood inexplicably lighter, decision made. I delighted in soaping her swelling body, stroking the lump that contained my child. We dried and dressed, and as we ate breakfast, she questioned my improved mood.

I admit I lied shamelessly.

'I have a job interview, this afternoon.'

'That's wonderful, love. Why didn't you tell me? I'm so proud of you.'

I just shrugged, content to say nothing rather than compound the lie further. But she asked me about the job, of course, and as I made up all manner of lie upon lie, I almost began to believe myself that it was real, that *it* was the reason for my sleepless nights, my almost constant banging headache nowadays. Who was I fooling? If Tabby, then most definitely not myself. What had I been thinking?

We kissed and she left for work. I began my out of work routine, starting with another cup of coffee, which I promised myself I would cut down on soon. The day went almost normally. I searched for work, I tidied the house, and I ate lunch. I did all the normal things I could think of, and I almost, *almost*, began to believe that the whole thing had been a dream. Until the parcel arrived. There was a thump on the front doorstep, and I just knew it was from Quaid. I opened the front door cautiously, as if it might be a smoking bomb lying there, instead of the very ordinary looking box. It wasn't very big, perhaps a small shoebox, but it felt heavy and as I picked it up, the contents shifted and I almost dropped the thing. It was tied sloppily, the knots almost loosening themselves as I set it down on the kitchen table.

I opened it.

The note there said

*Tomorrow, at noon*

as I knew it would, and the dream came back to me with such sickening clarity that I actually dry heaved a couple of times. I tipped the box and watched with despair as the small black gun clattered to the tabletop. It was identical to the dream-gun, down to the oil smell and its deadly heft. Without checking (I had no idea how) I knew it was loaded. The last item in the box caught my eye and I felt a cold stab in my stomach. It was a photograph. As I turned it over, I almost expected to see Tabby's smiling face, but I was saved that.

It was a man. Middle-aged, balding, slightly over weight. His glasses gave him the look of a lecturer, possibly a research scientist. It was a headshot only, but he didn't seem more than five feet eight or nine. I knew that the tatty tweed jacket he was wearing would be mismatched to a pair of brown or grey corduroy trousers that had seen both wedding and funeral. The victim. *My* victim. I had never felt so low in my life.

The phone rang and I almost cried out in panic. My first thought was the police, although I gave no thought as to why they would be ringing me. I picked it up, and from the first intake of dry, rasping breath, I knew.

'What do you want, Quaid?'

'Going to be...busy...tomorrow, George, so I thought I'd make a little delivery. Save you a wasted trip.'

'Kind of you, you bastard. I have not agreed to your ridiculous plan, have you considered that!' I nearly screamed down the phone.

He chuckled, and it was all I could do not to smash the receiver through my forehead to shut out the noise. It was like hearing death come for you.

'I knew, is all. I knew I'd picked well.'

I began a protest, even began to make the sounds that should have been words, but what came out was meaningless slush, and the phone clicked dead. I slammed the receiver down, hot, angry tears springing from my eyes. I looked through the hallway and saw the gun on the table, waiting. It would wait forever. It knew, you see, as Quaid did. As I did. It could happen the way Quaid said. It really could. No one would know. He would see to it.

As the sun rose on the day I was to become a murderer, I made every effort to make it as normal as possible. After seeing Tabby out of the door and on her way, I made breakfast, and ate slowly, like a condemned man. I had hidden the gun and photograph under the stairs in the hall, and now I retrieved them, not really looking, not seeing. The gun I stuck into the waistband of my jeans, feeling like a cowboy, looking absurd. I left for the shopping centre (on the back of the photograph, when I studied it, Quaid had written a time and place for the deed) in the car, less for speed, and more so my legs would not betray me and run as far as they could in the opposite direction. I was unnaturally calm. The heavy scent of gun oil accompanied me, comforted me, if the truth be known

I selected the same table at the same coffee shop as when I'd first met Quaid, having to wait for a couple to finish their drinks. For once, the thought of drinking coffee was gone. I sat and waited, my back to the door.

I didn't have to wait long. It seemed Quaid was as accurate in guessing peoples' movements as he was in everything else. The man stood at the counter. He was taller than I'd expected, but not much. The tweed suit was now a smart black two-piece, with a white shirt and red tie. The glasses were gone, perhaps replaced by contact lenses, and in a further nod to his vanity, he wore a toupee. I studied him as he ordered and sat

down, disliking his pinched, mean face, his small hands, the way he wiped the rim of his cup after every mouthful. There was nothing about him that I identified with, nothing I could become familiar with, and I liked that.

Suddenly he stood, and my heart leapt. Was I to lose my chance?

It seemed not, as he turned and made for the toilets at the back of the coffee shop. I left an appropriate gap, and followed him, my heart beating so hard I felt sure all the people around me would hear it.

He stood at a urinal, one of those men who like to urinate without the use of hands, as if the thought of touching themselves is abhorrent. I selected the urinal next to him, mimed opening my fly, and nodded as his eyes met mine. My right hand reached into the waistband of my jeans and I pulled out death. I held the gun to his temple.

It took a few seconds for him to register. When he finally did, his eyes widened, and he made a small mewling noise at the back of his throat.

'Shh...'

I whispered, and pulled the trigger.

I turned my head at that moment, and so saw nothing of the waste his head must have become. I heard the lifeless thump as his body hit the floor, heard the ghastly tap of his shoes and the quiet splatter of his blood. I stayed until the noises stopped and the only sound was the sound of slowly dripping water, cisterns filling. If somebody had walked in at that moment, I would have let them take me away. No one did.

I pocketed the gun, washed my hands although I had no blood on them. Through all this, I don't remember hearing the crack of the gun as it fired, but now, as reality set in, the sound strained into my ears, numbing them with its sharp, cracking resonance. I vomited into the sink, hard. Thus lightened, I left. No one questioned me. No one looked at me with anything in their eyes other than normal mild curiosity.

The traffic was busy by the time I joined it. The lunchtime rush was well and truly in and it took forty-five minutes to drive home. All the way I kept stealing glances into the rear view mirror. Did I see murderer there? Did I see cold killer? The truth of it, the horrible deadly truth was that no, I didn't. I saw a man, a familiar man, scared and alone, and (this sickened me), slightly exhilarated. I felt starving. I turned on the car stereo and blasted noise in to the car.

As I got home I felt agonised. But it wasn't how I imagined. Agonised only for the fact that my back felt inflamed and my fingers were cold and stiff. There was a pin point of a headache beginning between my eyes,

but that was all. I had no regrets. Not then, anyway. No revulsion, no compulsion to turn myself in. I had no fear.

Of course, I knew the body would have been discovered by now. It had to have been. How could a steadily draining corpse of a man not be discovered in the toilet block of a busy coffee shop? Even the most inattentive assistant could not fail to notice that the man who walked in there an hour ago had failed to come out.

And would the crime be traced back to me. My lack of fear, my *instinctive* lack of fear told me not. I prayed then, the second of my firsts that day, and I am ashamed to admit that I prayed for two things. One, that the murder would remain unsolved. Second? I prayed that I would be paid for my work.

I hoisted my aching body from my car and heard the approaching whoop of police sirens. Two and then three police cars sped past my house, heading in the direction of the shopping centre. Coincidence? I thought not. It was discovered, then. I calmly closed the car door and entered my house.

I showered immediately, and though there was blood on my face, all over it in fact, and on my clothes, I appeared to have gone through the shopping centre and car park unnoticed. How was such a thing possible? Suddenly I knew that if I forwent the shower, forgot about burning my clothes, Tabby would not see either. It would be my little secret. Mine and Quaid's alone.

But burn my clothes I did. I repackaged the gun in its original box and left it on the doorstep for Quaid. I knew he would come for it. In exchange he would leave me my money. I realised that I had no idea what that amount of money would look like? Would I possibly be able to hide it? And what if, after all this, was this just some sick game of Quaid's? That he was playing me all along to rid him of someone he needed to be rid of? Somehow I found that unlikely, no, impossible.

I quelled my hunger then, eating huge quantities of bread, cheese, anything I could find. It all tasted stale and the milk that washed it down, sour. I sat in the living room, a husk, the reality of it washing over me suddenly. I raced to the bathroom and was violently sick. My stomach muscles felt abused, such was the strength of my cramps. Crawling back to my chair like a man with a hangover, I flicked on the TV.

The news reported the killing on every channel. The camers all showed the coffee shop, juxtaposed with a photo of the man; more recent than the one I had been given. David, his name was. *Had* been. The last

few seconds of the report was taken by a long close up of the toilet door, and then a glimpse at the blood stained tiled floor within.

So they had found him. Of course they would, I knew that. Next would come angry knocks on my door, louder and louder as they crashed through. First to the police station, and then prison. It would be over in a flash.

But none of that ever happened.

Tabby arrived home earlier than usual. She had begun to feel unwell, and I enjoyed the distraction of looking after her. As I supplied tea and toast, warmth and love, I forgot, actually *forgot* about my day, and Tabby didn't ask. It was as if it had never happened. The story of the murdered businessman made the headlines at six. He left a wife, four children, and two mistresses. The news didn't chill me as it had earlier, and for that I was grateful and disturbed in equal measure. I remembered the killing, of course, but it was distant, like a childhood memory; hazy and indistinct. We went to bed happy for the first time in days, and the sleep I had deep and restful. Until the dream. It was identical to the first dream, except in this one I kept firing, emptying a never ending clip of ammunition into Tabby's prone body, reducing it to pulp and splinters of bone.

Tabby shook me awake roughly. The scream stayed on my lips as the murky purple of dawn filtered through the curtains.

'George, love, what's wrong?' She was actually crying and I had the impression she had been trying to wake me for some time.

I don't know what made me say it, but the words were out before I could stop them.

'I did it. I did it.'

'Did what, George?' she said, stroking my clammy forehead. 'Did what?'

'Quaid,' was all I could manage.

Her eyes grew wide, and she backed away from me on the bed. Her head began to shake and she started muttering.

'no..no..no.no..' The mutterings turned to moans and then to screams and she shook her head back and forth. Shame, regret and fear overtook me at last and I collapsed on the bed, wracked, and on the heels of those

emotions, threatening to override them all, was the guilt. At last, the guilt came.

'I had no choice,' I started.

'Tell me you didn't,' she whispered. I nodded. That was when she slapped me. The look of shock on her face did nothing to assuage the emotions, but it cleared my head. I started talking.

With each word I spoke, I could see her pushing further and further away. Each sentence was another mile of distance between us, and when I was finished, her eyes were like dead pools, all the glistening hope and love beaten away.

All through the packing, all through the leaving, I tried to shut out the noise of her tears. I failed. I felt, rather than heard the thud of the front door slamming, the squeal of tyres as her car tore away. She was gone.

I cried then, and slept again. It was fully morning when I awoke, and for all the previous night's activities, I felt somehow refreshed. Had it been a dream? The scattered clothes and missing suitcases belied that notion. The reflection I saw that morning was blood stained. I closed my eyes and counted to one hundred before opening them. My face was devoid of blood, thankfully, but none the better for that. I was old, haggard, and the regret and fear had started showing in my eyes. This, then, was the true face of murder. I drove my fist into the mirror and the sound of it smashing almost drowned out my sobs.

I ran downstairs, insane, and wrenched open the front door, screaming Quaid's name over and over, as if I expected him to show himself. It was vain hope. I did find, however, my spoils. Had the bastard watched as my life drove away that early morning? The box was larger than the previous one, and the scrawled handwriting on its lid was unmistakable.

*George, thank you. I knew you could do it! ☺*  
it said.

I emptied it onto the living room floor. Hundreds upon thousands of fifty-pound notes fluttered down. Ten million pounds in my hands and I wanted none of it. Under them all, at the very bottom of the box, was the gun. It seemed still warm from its work yesterday, although I knew that had to be my imagination. I poured a large glass of bourbon and closed the curtains. The money lay all around me like some obscene carpet of wealth.

That was my life then. The money remained unspent although I had the good taste to clear the floor of it. The news of the murder went from front page, to page two, and eventually out of the news altogether. It remained unresolved, although it was assumed a drug addict had killed him for money. Nothing from the scene was ever connected to me. Quaid was true to his filthy, stinking words. I hated him as much, if not more, than I loved Tabby. God, I missed her, her warmth, her smile. I longed to cradle her again in my arms, to feel the kick and swell of her stomach, to feel her kiss.

Months passed in this way. She came home eventually. In her arms was the tiny body of our daughter. She let me hold her for five minutes, and then pulled her away from me. She kissed the top of my head.

'Never again, George. Never again.'

I nodded. She left. Two hours later, I got the gun from its hiding place and resolved to kill myself.

*I am still waiting. My finger is itching to pull the trigger, but my mind clings to the futile notion that Tabby will return. She won't, I know. I'll give her another hour. Till seven, I think. The clock is chiming in the hall.*

*One....two....three....*

*I have lost count, and...five...six...*

*Or was that seven?*

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