

Hobart at Home

Peter Barns

Published by Boddaert Books at Smashwords

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to Sheree

.... with love

Chapter 1

SLEEPING WITH THE FISHES

I was standing by the edge of the cliff, gazing out over the turbulent sea pounding at the rocks below. The frothy waves seemed hungry as they clawed their way up the cliff-face towards me. Tentacles of cold spray wrapped themselves around my legs and I shivered, hunching my shoulders against the wind as I walked back towards the graveyard.

The last sleek limousine waited with its back door agape. Bending forward, I slid into its warm interior beside Uncle Hobart. He was huddled into the corner of the brown leather seat and glanced over at me as I settled back with a sigh.

"They've gone on," he said.

"Right." I nodded, my thoughts still back with the sea. A shiver ran down my spine. "God, I think someone's just walked over my grave!"

Uncle Hobart threw me a guarded look and my face reddened. I sniffed, looking out of the window to hide my embarrassment. The rows of gravestones I saw didn't help my composure any.

"So, yer staying fer long then?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm going back tomorrow." Rubbing condensation from the window with my sleeve, I stared out at the light-dappled grass, adding quietly, "I only came up for the funeral."

As the limousine moved out of the church grounds and into the narrow country lane, we sat silently, both preoccupied with our thoughts. The wind eased and the sun broke through the clouds, flickering between the trees. I felt a headache building-up behind my left eye. Uncle Hobart fidgeted himself into a more comfortable position.

"Didn't know 'im too well, did yer?" he asked.

I turned and studied him for a moment. His hands twisted back and forth on the carved handle of his walking stick. They were hard, strong hands; a farmer's hands. He was well into his seventies and still worked the farm. Removing a cloth-cap, he scratched his balding head and clicked his dentures - a habit that annoyed me intensely.

"Funny old bugger 'e were," he said.

I raised my gaze to his faded blue eyes, arching my eyebrows.

"They used ter call 'im Jonah. Be'ind 'is back, like."

"That right?" I asked, only half listening.

He glanced out the window, nodding slowly, as though trying to remember something.

"And why did they call him Jonah, then?" It was more politeness than interest on my part.

Uncle Hobart turned his weathered face towards me, pursing his lips.

"No, really," I insisted. "Do tell."

As soon as the words slipped from my mouth I kicked myself. I should know better, bitter experience having taught me that once Uncle Hobart started in on one of his stories, there was no respite. At least, not until he'd rung every last drop from it.

After considering my request for a moment, he leant forward to rap the handle of his walking stick on the partition separating us from the chauffeur. The driver reached back over his shoulder and slid it open.

"Yes sir?" a pretentious voice enquired.

"Turn the car around. I want ter go back."

The driver's tone abruptly changed to an indignant squeak. "But I'm only being paid to drive you to the..."

"Stop yer bleedin' arguing man!" Uncle Hobart interrupted. "We've just passed a pub and the youngster 'ere wants ter stop fer a wet."

"But..."

"What's the matter with yer? Don't yer know we've just been ter a funeral? Fer God's sake man, I fought a war fer the likes o' yer."

The driver held up a hand in submission. "Okay, okay. I'll go back to the pub, granddad. But it's going to cost you a drink!"

The chauffeur struggled to turn the limousine around in the narrow country lane, keeping up a steady flow of profanities. Uncle Hobart just sat back in the tooled leather seat with a smile on his thin lips.

A little later we glided to a stop outside the pub and when I trotted around to open the car door, I was met with a withering look and muttered comments about the bloody impudence of young people these days.

Shrugging at the driver I followed my uncle's disappearing back into the dim interior of the pub. So much for being helpful, I thought.

Uncle Hobart slipped the chauffeur a five-pound note and pointed at the bar. "Ere, get yerself a drink," he instructed, "and wait fer us 'ere. We'll be through the back. in the snug."

The barmaid looked up and smiled as we approached. "Yes luv?"

"Two whiskeys, with chasers," Uncle Hobart ordered, slapping down some loose change on the counter.

Not waiting to be served, he headed for a table beside the roaring log fire. I shrugged at the barmaid and followed him like a loyal puppy. After poking at the fire, Uncle Hobart sat back in his seat, ignoring the obnoxious smell now wafting across the room as the rubber feral on the end of his walking stick began to smoulder. The barmaid came over and placed a bent metal tray on the table between us, giving Uncle Hobart a withering look.

"Thanks," I acknowledged, smiling broadly. Uncle Hobart just grunted.

Hooking the still smoking walking stick onto the back of his chair, Uncle Hobart took a hefty pull at his beer, then downed the whisky in one gulp. Sighing contentedly, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, belching loudly. "God, I needed that." Cocking his head to one side, he gave me a quizzical look. "Yer've no idea 'ow much I 'ate bleedin' funerals. It ain't right ter 'ave ter go ter them things at my age, yer know."

I sipped at my drink, studying the barmaid's swinging hips as she sauntered between the tables, clearing the glasses.

"Talkative bugger, ain't yer?"

I shrugged, finishing my beer with a flourish. "So why did they call him Jonah, then?" I asked, stumped for something to say.

Uncle Hobart settled back in his chair and I could tell I was in for a long session.

"It were right queer, that," he began. "It goes back ter when 'e were in the navy."

"I thought he was in the army," I interrupted. Not that I was that interested, I just enjoyed winding him up whenever I got the chance.

"Yer don't know nothin' about 'im, so 'ow come yer think 'e were in the bleedin' army!" He gulped at his beer and shook his head. "Nah, he were in the navy. Midshipman far as I remember. Any'ow, 'e got sunk like."

"Sunk?"

Uncle Hobart nodded, eyes glazing as his mind drifted back through the years. "Aye, torpedoed 'e were."

"That must have..."

"And bombed. And run aground."

"What, all at the same time?"

"Nah, o' course not, yer silly bugger!" Finishing his beer, he rattled his glass on the table to attract the barmaid's attention. "Same again luv," he shouted. "And one fer the youngster 'ere. Turning back he frowned. "Now where were I? Oh aye, yer Uncle Fred. 'E were sunk six times altergether." Leaning forward he gazed into my eyes with an intensity that made me feel uncomfortable. "And yer know what?" I blinked rapidly and shook my head. "Every bleedin' time it 'appened, 'e were the only survivor. 'Ow about that!"

Having finished his story, Uncle Hobart leant back in his chair in obvious satisfaction, a large smile creasing his weathered face.

"Oh yeah! Sure." My tone left no doubt as to what I thought of that story.

"But it's true! True as I sit 'ere. 'E showed me all the noospaper cuttings 'e'd saved."

I took a sip of my whisky. "Six times, eh?"

The barmaid brought fresh drinks and gave me a half-smile as she bent over to place them on the table. Over the edge of her gaping top I could see that she was wearing a frilly black brassiere. Uncle Hobart took a deep swallow of his beer and winked at me as she wound her way back to the bar.

"Won't do yer no good that," he said. "Anyway, that weren't all. The last time 'e were sunk, only 'im and the captain got off the ship. Adrift in a lifeboat fer three weeks they were, afore they was picked up." He took another deep pull at his beer and burped loudly. "And all that were left when they found 'im, were 'im and one tatty looking leg."

I threw him a look but he ignored it.

"Anyway, after the war Fred took up fishing, and that went fine. At least it did fer awhile. But suddenly every ship 'e went on..." Uncle Hobart stared pointedly at the floor, shaking his head. "Well no bugger'd sail with 'im in the end, so 'e 'ad to buy 'is own boat."

I raised an eyebrow at the barmaid, who was listening to our conversation. "Well that's hardly surprising," I said standing up. The barmaid smiled and I winked at her. "Come on, let's get back - I think you've tried to wind me up enough for one day."

"Think yer know it all, yer young 'uns, don't yer?"

I handed him his walking stick and chuckled. "Well I know enough not to be taken in by any of your stories."

*

We had driven about half a mile when the sound of a loud explosion cut through the balmy afternoon.

"What the hell was that?" the chauffeur asked, pulling the limousine into the side of the road.

"Probably dynamiting in the quarry," Uncle Hobart replied. "Come on, never mind that. Let's get back to the 'ouse afore they scoff all the bleedin' sandwiches!"

*

The next day our local newspaper carried an interesting piece. An underground gas main had blown up, causing the cliff-face at the back of the churchyard to collapse into the sea, taking a large part of the graveyard and dozens of coffins with it. The article went on to say that only one coffin had been recovered.

Uncle Hobart muttered something about cremating old Fred next time round.

Chapter 2

SOGGY SANDWICHES

As usual I was playing the invisible man, waving my ten pound note in the air to no avail, so I shouted above the noise. "Er, excuse me. Excuse me can...?" The barman walked right passed me as though I didn't exist. Sighing heavily I pushed my way nearer to the bar.

A rough voice exploded in my ear, "Oy! You berk!"

My heart sank as I felt beer slop over my arm. The owner of the now half-empty glass looked down at me with a scowl. He was big, very big.

"Sorry," I apologised quickly. "Here, let me buy you another one."

Turning away, he held up a finger to attract the barman's attention. The barman instantly homed in on him, ready to take his order.

"A pint," he rumbled. "He's paying."

I nodded eagerly, trying to figure out how the big lug had done it, while handing over my money. "And I'll have a pint for myself and a whisky as well please."

Picking up the drinks I headed out of the crush, being extra careful not to jostle anyone else on the way.

"Yer always were a cack 'anded bugger, weren't yer?" Uncle Hobart greeted me as I lowered myself into a seat.

Forcing a smile I pushed his drink across the table at him, wondering why everybody seemed so intent on upsetting me today.

"Thanks for the show of solidarity," I replied sardonically.

Uncle Hobart just grunted, taking a long pull at his beer.

"Ah," he sighed, "that's 'it the spot just right." Then, with another long gulp, he finished his drink and held up his glass. "Ow about another one, then?"

Before I got the chance to point out that I'd not even started mine yet, Uncle Hobart was out of his chair, heading for the bar at a fast trot. Head down, elbows out, he disappeared into the crowd, the image of a demented ferret I'd once seen at a side-show. The only way I could follow his progress was by the angry comments being shouted at him from all sides.

"Oy watch out!"

"What the...?"

"Hey that's my foot!"

"What the hell! Oh sorry granddad, didn't see you there. Come on, I'll give you a hand."

The Neanderthal who'd cost me an extra pint of beer was now escorting Uncle Hobart to the bar. Raising my eyes to the ceiling, I shook my head in disbelief.

"Marvellous, isn't it?" I muttered under my breath. "When I try getting a drink, not only does the barman ignore me, I end up buying the Incredible Hulk one as well. But him..." I snorted at the unfairness of the world.

Emerging from the melee with a pint clutched in each hand, Uncle Hobart headed back. "Come on Peter boy," he called, trotting straight passed our table, "don't just sit there looking bleedin' glum!"

Before I could answer, he'd gone, disappearing through a doorway at the back of the bar. Sighing in resignation, I picked up my glass, following at a more leisurely pace. I found him sitting in a pleasantly shaded area, set out with tables and chairs.

"There, that's better, ain't it?" he asked as I settled down.

"How'd you find out about this, then?"

"Geezer in the bar told me. Built like a gorilla 'e were. Asked if I were with the pillock what spilt his beer. When I said I were, 'e suggested we come out 'ere ter the kiddies garden. Right embarrassing it were!"

"Yeah, I can imagine," I mumbled under my breath.

We sat in silence for a time, listening to the ducks on a nearby pond assail us for having no bread.

Finally Uncle Hobart smacked his lips and clicked his dentures. "Made out me will yesterday," he informed me in a chirpy voice.

"That right then?" I commented forlornly. We'd been down this road before.

"Aye. Left everything ter the Green Meadow 'Ome Fer Orphan Lambs."

"That right?"

"Nothing worse than a poor wee lamb that ain't got no mum."

"That right?"

"True as I sit 'ere." Tapping his nose with the side of his finger, he nodded sagely. "Worse than orphaned kids, that is."

"That right?" I repeated again, trying to figure out how anyone could believe an orphaned lamb was worse off than a motherless child.

Taking another quaff of beer, Uncle Hobart raised his leg. I turned my head aside as the smell of reconstituted alcohol wafted passed.

"Well", he mused, "with kids yer see, yer usually wants ter put 'em down at birth, don't yer?"

I concentrated on the ducks, doing my best to ignore Uncle Hobart's inane remarks. They were making more sense than he was, even though it was only, "Quack. Quack!"

"Unless they're nannies o' course," Uncle Hobart continued. "Then yer might want ter keep one I suppose. Yer know, ter breed with another goat, like."

Shaking my head, I wondered how we had got onto the subject of goats. I'd obviously missed something along the way.

"And what's all this got to do with your will, then?" I countered, not sure which direction the conversation was going.

"Nowt! And fer Christ's sake, will yer pay attention. It's right irritating trying ter talk ter yer sometimes. It really is."

Picking up a stone, I threw it into the water, making the ducks quack in ill humour. One, with its big red beak and beady little eyes, reminded me of Uncle Hobart, so I threw another stone, which missed. And that summed up my luck with life so far.

"So how's Aunt Gertrude?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Dead!"

The bald statement caught me by surprise. I dabbed at the beer that now soaked my trousers, swearing. "For Christ sake, Uncle Hobart, you could have given me some warning. At this rate I'll be carrying the bloody brewery home with me."

He smiled, raising his glass. "It's better if yer drink it, not bathe in it, Peter boy."

Shaking my head, I did my best not to rise to his baiting.

"I knew Aunt Gertrude was ill, but I didn't realise it was that serious. What an earth happened?" I asked, wringing out my handkerchief.

Scratching the back of his neck, Uncle Hobart frowned at the floor. "Don't rightly know. I went up ter visit 'er as usual but she weren't there. So I asked the old biddy in the next bed where she were. She told me that they'd carted 'er off in the middle o' the night. Stiff as a board, she reckoned. Anyway, I left the daffs with the old biddy and came 'ome. Couldn't see much point in wasting 'em."

I nodded. "No, I suppose not."

"Ate the grapes meself, though."

"So when's the funeral going to be?" Uncle Hobart shook his head and shrugged. "Surely you know?" I persisted.

Shaking his head again, he frowned. "Fergot ter ask, didn't I?"

I silently prayed that when the time came for my funeral, somebody would be thoughtful enough to ask when it was going to be.

*

I was sitting on the dilapidated sofa in Uncle Hobart's front parlour - he always insisted on calling it the front parlour - watching various members of his family, most clutching cracked plates piled high with sandwiches of dubious origin. I turned to him, his nose was stuck deep in a pint glass as usual. Smacking his lips, he belched and threw me a quizzical look.

"Who's the old girl then?" I enquired, nodding towards a tall, thin woman stooping over a rickety table.

She was studying some gently curling sandwiches with a look of distaste, her long, painfully thin nose jerking this way and that as she patiently removed the top slice from each sandwich before poking the filling with a stick-like finger. Every movement was angular and twitchy, the overall effect that of a nervous bird. Uncle Hobart studied her for a moment, then grinned broadly, his upper set falling into his glass with a muted chink.

"Oh pith, I knew I thouldn't 'ave worn me new teeth," he lisped.

Plunging his dirty fingers into his glass, he extracted his teeth, wiped them on his cardigan and stuffed them back into his mouth. When they were firmly in place, he called out to the bird-woman. "Martha, come over 'ere and meet my nephew, young Peter."

Martha twisted her head jerkily in our direction, zooming in on us with her prodigious nose, and for one awful moment, I thought she might impale me with it and carry me off to some secret eerie. Then, with a

ramrod straight back, she picked her way across the room towards us. Uncle Hobart smiled at her, this time managing to hold onto his teeth. She frowned at him.

"What?" he asked, eyebrows arched above pale blue eyes.

"Your teeth," she replied, tapping her own with a long, lacquered fingernail.

"Aye, they're me new set. Like 'em?"

"Are they supposed to be that colour?"

"Blue fluff," I whispered. "From your cardy."

Hastily removing his dentures, Uncle Hobart picked off the offending piece of fluff, swirled them in his drink and fumbled them back in his mouth again. I looked at Aunt Martha with fond helplessness, shrugging my shoulders.

Trying to act the gentleman, Uncle Hobart struggled to stand up, but rather than put his glass and plate down first, he held onto them and in the ensuing struggle managed to knock Aunt Martha's plate sideways, shooting her sandwich straight into the punch bowl.

"Martha," he said, ignoring the mess that was now sinking slowly to the bottom of the mixture. "'Ere 'e is, me nephew, Peter - and Peter, this 'ere's Martha, my dear departed Gertrude's sister."

Suddenly Martha gave a kind of choked squeak, her cheeks turning red. My eyebrows rose when I realised that Uncle Hobart had just goosed her. She stepped forward, placing the heel of her shoe on Uncle Hobart's instep, then offering me her hand with a broad smile, she leant forward, bearing down with her full weight. Uncle Hobart's mouth began working frantically but no sound came out.

"Oops, sorry Hobart!" Aunt Martha apologised. "Did I stand on your foot? Goodness, how clumsy of me!"

Clenching his jaws, Uncle Hobart hobbled off towards the toilet and I returned Aunt Martha's smile, shaking her hand warming.

How careless of you to step on his foot!" I observed with a grin.

"Yes, wasn't it?" she agreed, settling down next to me on the sofa. "Do you know, that impudent man was just the same when poor Gertrude was alive. The fact that I'm his sister-in-law has never put him off one bit."

I took a pull at my beer, then pursed my lips. I was growing to like this newly discovered relative of mine.

"Allow me to get you a drink," I suggested, standing up.

"Well thank you very much, young man. Yes, I'd like that. A glass of punch if you will."

I raised an eyebrow, nodding at the sandwich which had risen to the surface of the bowl and was now soggily floating amongst the pieces of fruit. "Well perhaps not," she agreed. "Do you think there might be any port about the place?"

I tapped my nose. "Oh, I think I might be able to find you some from somewhere."

I finally tracked it down, hidden under Uncle Hobart's bed in an old shoebox. The whiff from an half-filled chamber pot made me glad to get back to the relative fresh-air of the parlour. As I handed Aunt Martha a glass of his very expensive Fine Old Ruby, Uncle Hobart frowned at me.

"What's that?" he growled.

"Port," we answered in unison.

"But I've been saving that fer a special occasion!"

"I'd have thought your wife's funeral was a special occasion, Hobart," Aunt Martha snapped, turning a smouldering look on him.

Clicking his teeth, he snorted and walked off in a huff.

Oh yes, I was beginning to be very glad that I'd found this wonderful addition to the family.

Chapter 3

THE ELASTICATED BAND

"What's this?" I asked Uncle Hobart as he plonked himself down beside me on the bale of hay and held out a sheet of paper.

Wiping the muck from its crumpled surface, I smoothed it out and could tell from the smell that it had spent some time in the back pocket of his overalls. He scrabbled about down the side of the bale for a moment, then produced two cans of beer.

"Ere," he said, tossing a can at me.

I hissed it open and took a long pull. "So what's this then?" I repeated, shaking the paper at him.

"It's me sponsoring form, ain't it? Must 'ave dropped it in somethin'," he added, when he saw me wiping it down the side of the bale.

I grinned. "And what're you being sponsored for, then? The most obnoxious behaviour ever witnessed in a seventy year old? No wait, I know, it's for the longest amount of time that anyone's ever gone without washing, isn't it? Christ, you're bound to win that!"

"It's a bungee jump, ain't it?"

It took some pounding on my back before I managed to cough up the last of the beer from my lungs. I pushed him away, running my hand through my hair. "A bloody bungee jump!" I shouted. "At your age! You'll kill yourself, you stupid old bugger!"

"Aye, that's what the young whipper-snapper running it said. But I soon put 'im right. Fought a war fer the likes o' you, I told 'im, and if yer think yer can stop me from bouncing about on yon elasticated band, then yer can bleedin' well think again!"

"And what did he say to that?"

"Told me ter sod off, didn't 'e?" I sighed in relief but Uncle Hobart leant across, tapping and the form with a dirt-encrusted fingernail. "Then 'e gave me this, didn't 'e?"

"He agreed? I breathed in disbelief.

"Didn't 'ave much choice, did 'e? Threatened ter tell 'is missis what 'e gets up ter on Saturday nights if 'e didn't."

"And what might that be?"

Uncle Hobart clicked his dentures and smiled. "That's between me and 'im!" he retorted, crushing the empty can in his gnarled fingers. "And one legged Lill, o' course!"

*

It was the day of the Great Bungee Jump, and as I wound my way around the puddles in Uncle Hobart's front yard, I wondered if I was doing the right thing in letting him go. Before I reached the farm house door, it opened, and I looked on in amazement as he walked out, his best bowler hat perched on his head at a jaunty angle. Under a colourful blue checked suit, he sported a maroon shirt and a set of bright yellow braces. On his feet, a pair of highly polished brown boots.

"Well, howdy doody!" I greeted him. "Haven't seen you looking so ... er ... well, so ... smart, in a long time." I just about managed to keep a straight face. He threw me a glare, then headed towards the car. "Won't be a tick," I called after him, "Just want to use the loo before we go."

Heading down the hall, I made my way into the toilet, hunted around under the bath for the broken seat, dropped my strides, and sat down with a grunt of pleasure. As I did so, I caught a movement from the corner of my eye. A large hairy spider was trapped in the bottom of the bath and I watched it try to climb up the smooth enamel, only to fall back down again. It repeated this pointless manoeuvre time after time and the old story about Robert the Bruce popped into my mind. Finishing my ablutions, I pulled the last of the toilet paper from the roll and draped it over the edge of the bath so that the spider could climb out. When I arrived back in the front yard, Uncle Hobart was struggling out of the car.

"What's up?" I asked him.

"Yer going ter the loo 'as started me off now," he complained, heading towards the house at a stumbling trot.

I shouted after him that I'd used all the toilet paper, but I don't think he heard me. Sliding into the car, I sat tapping the steering wheel, wondering how long he was he going to be.

A short while later I heard a muffled shout, quickly followed by a torrent of foul language. Jumping from the car I ran for the house, speculating on what the silly old git had managed to do to himself this time. Throwing the front door open, I raced down the long hall, skidded around the corner at the end and did all I could not to

collapse into a heap of helpless laughter. Uncle Hobart's head was sticking through the flimsy bathroom door, the crown of his now brimless bowler jammed tightly on his skull, his ears sticking out sideways. His head looked like an inverted black bowl with two white handles.

"What ... what happened? I managed.

"Don't just bleedin' stand there! Get me out!" he almost screamed at me.

I tried pushing on his head but his ears kept catching on the jagged edges of the plywood door. "Your ears are in the way," I complained.

"I know that, yer stupid bugger! That's why I asked yer ter 'elp me, ain't it?" he wailed.

"Hang on a mo." I squeezed passed him into the bathroom, tutting when I saw that his trousers were still around his ankles. "Just a minute, I'll pull your strides up for you." I began tugging on his trousers, then stopped, staring in fascination at the object hanging from one of his scrawny buttocks. It was large and hairy, and it looked pretty familiar!

"Did you know you've got a bloody great spider hanging off your arse?" I asked.

"That's 'ow I got me bleedin' 'ead stuck in the door!" he yelled at me. "That's what made me jump, weren't it? It were in the bleedin' toilet paper. Yer try wiping yer backside on a big hairy bugger like that and see what 'appens to yer."

"Okay, okay," I placated him. "Take it easy."

Hooking the spider onto a finger, I gently lowered the poor traumatised creature into a dark corner, then started to pull Uncle Hobart's trousers up again. I stopped as a sudden thought struck me. "Hang on a sec," I said.

"What now?" he answered.

"You haven't got any underpants on!"

"Fer God's sake, I know that, don't I? They're all bleedin' dirty, ain't they? Now do yer think we can 'old this conversation some other time? Me 'eads starting ter swell up!"

Extracting Uncle Hobart's head from the door was proving no easy task, because no matter how hard I struggled, there was no way it was coming out without first removing his ears. And as attractive as that idea was, I reluctantly pushed it from my mind.

"It's no good, I'll have to cut you out," I finally decided. "Have you got any tools anywhere?"

"In the cow shed," he managed in a strangled voice.

I came back with a screwdriver, a jigsaw, and half the contents of the cowshed stuck to my expensive shoes. A short while later the hinges were unscrewed and the door placed on the backs of two chairs, with Uncle Hobart kneeling on the floor between them, his head, poking through, looking for all the world as though it were a trophy. More wishful thinking on my part. I walked towards him, the jigsaw buzzing merrily away, a huge grin splitting my face.

"What the 'ell are yer going ter do with that?" he demanded with a worried look.

"Cut your bloody head off!" I cried with delight. "Look out, here comes Norman Bates. Scree-scree! Scree-scree!"

Uncle Hobart began struggling frantically. "Don't you come near me with that bleedin' thing. You'll 'ave me bloody ears off!" he protested.

"Oh shut up and act your age, will you?" I was quickly becoming impatient. "I'll only cut close enough to free you. Just trust me, okay?" He stopped struggling, nodding dubiously.

Cutting through the edge of the door was a piece of cake and that should have warned me of the problems to come, which started when I reached the middle section. Being hollow, it set up a nasty vibration, rattling Uncle Hobart's teeth like a set of demented castanets. Before I realised what was happening, his top set shot out right in front of the jigsaw, and you can guess what happened next.

After a long struggle, I managed to free Uncle Hobart from the door, find his spare set of dentures, remove the battered brim of his bowler from around his neck, fortify him with half a bottle of Old Grouse, and finally get him down to the park where the Great Bungee Jump was taking place. No mean feat in the circumstances, I can assure you.

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Erected in the middle of the park was a tall tower, fitted with a lift. Next to this was a large yellow mobile crane, with a long bungee rope hanging from its jib. They both looked very high and pretty unstable to me.

"You going up there?" I asked, pointing at the tower.

"Well 'ow the 'ell else do yer think I'm going ter get 'igh enough ter jump, yer cretin?"

"Ah, there you are granddad," a young man called heartily as we arrived at the base of the tower.

"Less o' the granddad, if yer don't mind," Uncle Hobart admonished him.

The man held out a harness. "Now I want you to put this on and climb into the lift, okay? When you get to the top, the guy up there'll hook you up and you can jump in your own time." As Uncle Hobart stepped towards the lift, the young man placed a hand on his shoulder. "Oh one thing. No jumping headfirst. Not at your age, okay?"

Uncle Hobart's attention was elsewhere. "What're all them cameras fer?" he asked.

Looking around I noticed the television cameras for the first time. The young man appeared a bit flustered at Uncle Hobart's question. "Well I thought it was interesting. You know, a man of your age and all that. Well I just thought..." his voice trailed off into an embarrassed silence.

"Just thought yer'd make yerself some bleedin' money, more like. How much they paying yer then?"

"Look granddad, do you want to make this jump or not? Because there's plenty of others waiting, if you're too chicken."

"Chicken! Chicken!" Uncle Hobart's voice rose to a crescendo. "I'll show yer bleedin' chicken, yer young whipper-snapper!"

Shrugging off the young man's hand, he climbed into the lift and punched the 'up' button angrily. I tilted my head way back as I watched his rapid ascent to the top of the rickety tower, worrying all the way about what might go wrong.

*

At this point I should mention the fact that Uncle Hobart has been suffering with that male nocturnal complaint, a dodgy prostate, for a number of years. This has led to a dripping of the works so to speak, and rather than spend hours each week washing piles of soiled underpants, he had hit upon his own novel solution to the problem. This was the wearing of a condom, but being the age he is, he found it far too embarrassing to ask the female assistant at the local chemist to serve him, so he opted for sidling into the shop when no one was looking, throwing some money on the counter, grabbing the nearest box and rushing out again. He didn't care whether they were lightweight, heavyweight, featherweight, or edible. Just so long as they fitted and were waterproof; that's all he wanted. These regular sneaky purchases of condoms by a seventy year old widower started all sorts of rumours in the village, but that's another story.

*

A sudden silence fell over the crowd. Uncle Hobart was now strapped into the harness, ready to make his big jump. We both took a deep breath, and I raised up onto the balls of my feet as he stepped off the platform.

He plummeted earthwards with a scream that sounded for all the world like, "Shiiiiit!", and reaching the farthest stretch of the bungee rope, started back up again. Unfortunately for Uncle Hobart, his trousers didn't. The bright yellow braces expanded alarmingly, and as he continued upwards, his trousers continued downwards.

The crowd was in an uproar, shouting, "Ole," each time Uncle Hobart's trousers reached the bottom of their trajectory, laying bare his shrivelled manhood, and the fact that it was encased in a lurid Day-Glo green condom, which also sported a pair of large floppy ears, only added to the crowd's delight.

The mob cheered, the cameras rolled, and I shrank back to the car park, praying to God that Uncle Hobart's big jump wasn't going to make the ten o'clock news.

Chapter 4

INKY WINKY SPIDER

"A referee?" I spluttered into the telephone. "You've got to be kidding!"

Uncle Hobart's tinny voice sounded in my ear again. "Look, I'm just doing me mate a favour. 'E's broke 'is leg. 'E can't do it, so I am."

I took a deep breath before exhaling loudly. "But you don't like football. You always moan about it when it's on the telly. Anyway, how the hell do you expect to keep up with all that running about at your age?"

"It's not football yer silly bugger. I'm too old fer that, ain't I?"

I bit back the caustic reply by clenching my teeth.

"Nah. It's a fight, ain't it?"

I sat down on the chair with a thump. "A what?" I whispered in disbelief.

"A fight," he repeated. "A fight! Yer do know what a bleedin' fight is, don't yer?" But before I could answer he hurried on. "Look, I got ter go. Just tell me if yer going ter 'elp me out or not."

"Well ... er ...yes." It was all I could manage in the circumstances.

"Good," he acknowledged. "Eight Saturday night then, and don't be late."

"Right," I answered in a dazed voice, to a dead telephone line.

I looked at my watch for what seemed like the thousandth time, tapping my foot impatiently because the Casualty Department was quieter now and I was getting bored. The most exciting thing to have happened in the past couple of hours was the duty nurse trapping a patient's finger in the hinge-side of the swing-doors. By the time the maintenance men managed to unscrew all the hinges to release him, he had come over all faint and took a nose-dive through a glass partition. I began to wonder if the poor sod was going to get out of the hospital in one piece. Having another sip of the murky, semi-warm liquid that masqueraded as coffee, I leant back and gave a despondent sigh.

"You okay?" A pleasant voice asked from my left.

"Oh sorry," I said, turning towards the woman who was slumped beside me. "I'm just feeling a bit bored, that's all."

She nodded, closing the tatty magazine she was reading. "Yes, all this waiting around does get to you after a while, doesn't it?" She tutted. "I've been here for three hours already."

"Yeah, it sure does," I agreed with feeling.

Removing her glasses, she massaged the bridge of her nose. "Waiting for someone?"

"My Uncle," I replied.

"Nothing serious I hope?"

"A spider bite."

She started to nod, then stopped. Replacing her glasses on her nose, she stared at me with a quizzical look.

"I know, I know," I said with an embarrassed grin.

The woman frowned, throwing the magazine onto an untidy pile already precariously balanced on a low table. It skidded across the top and the whole lot landed on the foot of an old lady sitting opposite. The woman smiled a quick apology, then turned back to me.

"Shouldn't keep things like spiders as pets," she stated. "Bound to have an accident sooner or later. My friend's, sister's, husband kept snakes once." She gave a slight shudder at the memory. "Hundreds he had. 'You mark my words', I told her. 'One day that sister of yours will rue the day.' And she did. One of them boa things got out of its tank during the night and wriggled into the bedroom." She shuddered again, pulling her coat tightly around her thin body. "She woke up thinking her husband was getting a bit, well you know. But she soon found out different, I can tell you! Took her years of counselling before she got over it." She leant closer, so she could whisper in my ear. "And even now she's only got to see a hose-pipe and she goes into a fit of hysterics!"

"No, it wasn't anything like that." I answered with a grin. "It wasn't a pet that bit him."

"Got bitten in the zoo then?" She prodded me with a bony finger. "That's good. If the zoo's let one of their spidery things bite him, he'll be able to sue them for hundreds of thousands of pounds. You tell him that!"

Pursing my lips, I dropped my white plastic cup into an overflowing red plastic bin. I could see that the woman wasn't going to shut up until I told her how Uncle Hobart had got bitten by a spider.

"Well," I began, "it all started with this telephone call."

*

I picked up Uncle Hobart at eight and we headed off into South London. He was very cagey, not telling me where we were going, or why. Finally he guided me into a car park, just off the Elephant and Castle.

"Come on," Uncle Hobart called, struggling out of the car. "It's this way."

Leading me to the front of a nearby pub, he threw open the doors and waded in. The place was packed to bursting, the noise overwhelming, which made walking through the heat an almost physical experience. As Uncle Hobart burrowed his way through the packed bodies, I did my best to keep up, trying to placate the people he shoved aside. Finally we squeezed our way through a door at the back of the bar, where a small, red-faced man waited for us.

His cheeks wobbled as he spoke. "Cut it a bit tight, haven't you?"

Uncle Hobart cocked a thumb in my direction. "Blame 'im. It were 'im that were driving."

The fat man looked at me with an expression of contempt before turning back to Uncle Hobart, who he poked with a chubby finger. "Well if we're late starting, you can take the hassle," he complained. Jerking his head for us to follow, he stomped off. "Come on then, this way, this way," he called when we didn't move.

We followed him down a long, dingy corridor into a large room. The walls were covered in flaky paint and the place smelt damp.

"Better get set up," the fat man ordered. "We're starting in ten minutes."

"Any chance of a quick 'alf?" Uncle Hobart called as the rotund figure approached the door, but the man just waved a hand over his shoulder and disappeared into the corridor.

I looked around. "Where's the ring then?"

"What ring?" Uncle Hobart asked, eyebrows raised.

"For the fight. You know, the boxing ring."

All I could see was a large table in the centre of the room, with a glass tank standing on it, and a bank of racking covering one wall.

"What we want a ring fer?" Uncle Hobart asked. "It ain't a bleedin' boxing match is it, yer cretin!"

"Well what the bloody hell are you refereeing then!" I was quickly loosing my temper.

Uncle Hobart walked to the racking, beckoning me over, pointing at some transparent plastic boxes stacked on the shelves.

I leant closer. "Spiders?" I muttered in a sceptical voice.

Nodding slowly, Uncle Hobart licked his lips. "But not just any old spiders, mind," he confided with relish. "Them's poisonous ones, ain't they?"

I backed off, shaking my head, my stomach shrinking. "You're not expecting me to believe that you're going to referee a fight between two poisonous spiders, are you?"

He nodded again, his smile broadening.

The fat man bustled back into the room and placed a tray holding six pints of beer on the table. He threw a glare at Uncle Hobart. "You can do this, can't you?" he asked.

Uncle Hobart picked up a beer, half-emptying the glass with one swallow. "No trouble mate," he replied smacking his lips.

"Three, three minute rounds. Then get them out quick. Okay?", the fat man ordered.

Uncle Hobart finished his drink, burped, then picked up another glass. "No trouble."

The fat man left and Uncle Hobart saluted the closing door with his glass. "This is going ter be the easiest twenty quid I've ever made," he said, turning to me. "'Ere." Holding out his hand, he drooped a stopwatch into mine. "Yer be the timekeeper," he said, then quickly downed another pint.

*

The third fight was nearing a close when disaster struck. Uncle Hobart, having imbibed all night, was a touch wobbly on his feet, constantly buffeted by the throng that filled the room to overflowing. Whenever the spiders fought, the crowd stamped and roared, shoving each other, trying to place bets with a tough looking character standing by the door. I checked the stopwatch, rapping my glass on the table to signal the end of the another round. Uncle Hobart leant over the tank to separate the spiders with a long stick and as he did so, someone pushed forward, forcing Uncle Hobart's stomach up against the table. He let loose a long, loud, belch that filled the tank with beer fumes, whereupon the spiders stopped fighting, twitched a couple of times, keeled over and lay still. The whole room looked on in a stunned silence.

"Sod me, the silly old codger's pickled 'em!" a voice called from the back of the room.

Uncle Hobart leant over the tank. "No, 'ang on a bit," he said. "I think this 'un's moving"

I made a grab for his arm but was far too late because he was already poking one of the spiders with his finger. Unfortunately for him the comatose creature made a quick recovery and I watched in horror as it leapt onto his hand. Uncle Hobart jerked his arm from the tank, with a large and very vicious looking spider still

attached to his digit. Glancing at me, he gave a sickly smile, clicked his dentures, mouthed two unintelligible words, then collapsed onto the floor.

Uncle Hobart's fall started a domino effect in the packed room, which swiftly rippled outwards towards the walls. The last man to go down made a grab at the shelving, bringing the whole lot crashing down on top of us. The plastic containers bounced about the floor, popping open, allowing the spiders to scuttle free amongst the writhing bodies. The ensuing panic caused twenty-three broken legs, two changes of underwear, and three heart attacks.

*

As a white-coated figure approached me along the corridor, I struggled to my feet.

"How is he, doctor?" I asked.

"We're keeping him in for observation," I was informed, "but that's only because of his age. Don't worry, he's got the constitution of an ox. Should live for years yet."

"Mores the pity!" I muttered, heading for the lift.

Chapter 5

THE GREAT HOLIDAY CAPER

"Mr Barns?" The voice on the telephone sounded very officious.

"Yes," I answered, tentatively.

"You have an Uncle, a Mr Hobart Tuttershed." It was a statement not a question.

"Yes," I agreed with a sinking sensation.

"This is Detective Inspector Hives speaking. I'm a specialist in hostage situations."

"My God!" I gasped, feeling the room wheel around my head. "What's happened? Is my uncle all right? Has he been taken hostage? He's an old-age pensioner for Christ's sake! Don't they realise the shock could kill him?"

"Look Mr Barns, would you meet me outside your uncle's farm? Tell the policeman on the road block your name and he'll let you through."

"Road block? My God! What's going on?"

"I haven't time to explain right now, Mr Barns. Just get yourself down here as quickly as possible."

The telephone line went dead, along with my heart.

*

Detective Inspector Hives was sitting in the passenger's seat of a large lorry, a mobile phone clamped to one ear, a short wave radio-set to the other. As I climbed onto the runningboard to stick my head through the open window, he waved me away.

"But..." I tried.

Dropping the radio-set onto the seat, he pushed me off the runningboard and wound up the window. Just before it closed, I caught the words: "... the SAS can take him out if necessary."

I began to jig from foot to foot, crooning softly to myself; a childhood habit I reverted to under stress. Any minute now and I'd be sucking my old teddy bear's ear!

Hives slammed out of the lorry, glowering down at me, arms akimbo. "Is he mad, or is this the way all the members of your family behave?"

Licking dry lips, I grabbed Hives by his lapels. "What's going on?" I shouted, shaking him violently. "Where's my uncle?"

Slapping my hands away, he straightened his lapels, looking me up and down as though I were some kind of demented lunatic. "Any more of that old son and I'll get the plods to lock you up for the night. Now calm down." Nodding at the farmhouse, he continued, "Your uncle's taken a hostage. He's threatening to shoot him."

As the seconds ticked by I continued to stare at Hives in bewilderment, until slowly realisation dawned and my face split into a huge grin. "Oh right, I get it," I said, relief flooding over me. "Clever!" Dropping onto my hands and knees, I began searching under the lorry. "Okay, where is it?" I demanded. "Where have you hidden it, then?"

"What on earth are you doing, you silly little man?" Hives grabbed my shoulder, pulling me to my feet.

I looked up into his face and winked. "Right, that's cool, that's good," I acknowledged, "You really had me going there for awhile."

Sprinting round to the back of the lorry, I threw the heavy tarpaulin aside. Six black clothed figures glared out at me.

"Mr Beadle, you in there?" I demanded. "Come on, you can come out now."

A large hand grabbed my shirt collar, dragging me clear of the lorry. Hives thrust his face right down into mine so I could see the patchwork of silver hairs he'd missed shaving that morning. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he bellowed.

I pointed at the lorry. "It's a wind-up, right?" When Hives just stared at me, I nodded eagerly. "Yeah, you're really from Candid Camera, aren't you? Come on, admit it." Hives' stare grew more pronounced and I experienced a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. "You mean all this is for real? You're serious? My uncle's really taken someone hostage?"

"Never been more serious in my life, laddie. Your uncle kidnapped an employee of Hoover-Mac earlier today and at this very moment is holding him hostage. And in case you're in any doubt, let me assure you this isn't a joke." Hives ran a hand through his hair. "And what's more, the idiot took a pop at the police when they arrived! He's in serious trouble laddie. You'd better believe it."

I wilted, hyperventilating.

Hives' eyes bored into mine as he nodded. "With a shotgun," he stressed. "And it was only because he's such a lousy shot that no-one's been hurt. Mind you, I don't think he'll be using that in any great hurry."

I followed the direction of Hives' pointing finger, to where Uncle Hobart's car rested at an odd angle. Beside a flat tyre, its bodywork was liberally peppered with small holes, a trickle of oil wound its way from beneath the engine, evoking images of haemorrhaging blood.

I swallowed noisily. "What's he want a bloody hostage for?" I asked, my mind numb.

Hives gave a long sigh, nodding at the house. "As far as I can make out, it's because of some competition he's won." I was dumbfounded, my raised eyebrows mirroring my complete loss of words. Hives tried to explain: "It seems that your uncle bought a television set recently and the company, this Hoover-Mac crowd, are running a competition. The prize is a Canadian holiday." I nodded, recalling the adverts on the television. "Well it appears that your uncle won, but when he applied for the prize, they told him he was too old. Apparently the cut-off age is seventy and he's older than that. It's got something to do with the insurance I believe."

I shook my head. "But he doesn't like going abroad," I reasoned, "he never has done. Not since serving in France during the war."

"Well I can assure you, he's taken great offence at being told he can't have his holiday, laddie, even if he doesn't want it." Hives sounded like a man close to the edge.

I nodded. "Yes, that sounds like him. Well thanks for the explanation, Inspector." I turned away.

A hand halted my escape. "Not so fast, Mr Barns, if you don't mind."

Turning back, I read the look on Hives' face, knowing exactly what he had in mind. "You want me to go in there and talk him out, don't you?"

For the first time Hives' face broke into a smile. "Well now, that's very astute of you, laddie."

Swallowing hard, I closed my eyes, trying to shut out the nightmare that was rapidly overtaking me. "Yes, that's what I was afraid you were going to say."

*

Detective Inspector Hives' voice echoed around the front-yard, amid the electronic shrieks and howls of his hand-held amplifier: "Tuttershed I have your nephew out here. He's coming in to talk to you and I strongly recommend that you listen to him." Turning towards me, Inspector Hives gave an impatient gesture with the megaphone. "Go on then, get on with it, laddie!"

I looked at the gathering crowd, wondering where they'd all come from. A small group of technicians was setting up a television camera, while a woman reporter was trying to interview the black clad men in the back of the lorry. This looked deadly serious to me and my stomach was sending out its usual signals.

*

"Er, hello. Hello ... Uncle Hobart?" I swung wide the partially open front door. "Are you in there?"

"Course I am, yer silly bugger," his voice floated down the hall to me. "I'm in the kitchen."

He was sitting at the big pine table, supping beer, and as I entered the room, he pushed a can across to me, nodding towards a fat man sitting opposite him. "This 'ere's John."

John smiled at me, I nodded back. Emblazoned across the pocket of John's boiler suit were the words, 'Hoover-Mac Ltd'. I noted the new portable television set resting on the worktop by the window. The volume was muted, but the picture, standing out in sharp colour, showed a view of Uncle Hobart's farmhouse. I groaned softly as I studied it.

"Looks like they got 'alf the bleedin' police force out there," Uncle Hobart observed. Opening my can, I poured the contents into a dirty cup. "Silly buggers," he continued, "what's up with 'em?"

Crashing the cup down onto the table, I slopped beer over its surface. "What's up with them?" I asked, through clenched teeth. "What up with them? I'll tell you what's bloody up with them. For some strange reason they've got the idea that you're a bloody maniac about to blow the head off an innocent man. That's what's bloody up with them!"

Uncle Hobart winked at John, chuckling delightedly. "Wouldn't do that now, would I, John?" John shook his head. "See, John agrees with me, don't yer, John?" John nodded his head. "John's decided ter 'elp me out, ain't yer, John?" John nodded his head again. I was beginning to wonder if John could talk.

We sat in silence for awhile, finishing our beers. Then, after a long pause, Uncle Hobart passed more cans around. "So how long do you intend keeping this up for, then?" I asked, pointing at the television set, which now showed a dark-clothed figure sitting astride the apex of the farmhouse roof, busily engaged in lowering something down the chimney pot. "They're not going to go away, you know."

A voice suddenly issued from the Aga, "Hello in there. This is Detective Inspector Hives here. Can you hear me?"

Opening the Aga door, I stuck my head inside. "Yes, we can hear you," I shouted back.

I was greeted by a loud electronic squawk, then, "For goodness sake, laddie! Not so loud. This mike's really sensitive. You nearly blew my ruddy ears off!"

"Sorry," I said in a quieter voice.

"Right, now listen up. Hoover-Mac has agreed to honour your uncle's holiday, so I want him to throw out the shotgun and exit by the front door with his hands in the air. Have you got all that?"

Pushing his chair away from the table, Uncle Hobart jumped to his feet, letting loose a wild cheer. I swore, making a grab for the shotgun resting against the back of his chair, but of course, I was far too late to stop the inevitable. The gun hit the floor with a thwack, firing buckshot straight into the interior of the Aga. The unholy noise set my ears ringing, and in the silence that followed, I distinctly heard Detective Inspector Hives give a long, loud, very anguished scream. I could picture the poor man clutching at his blood-filled ears and wincing.

That was just before the first stun grenade came crashing through the kitchen window!

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