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A Fool for Truth

HE WASN'T THE ONLY one who felt queasy this afternoon, Alan told himself, sliding a sideways glance at Frank Gill. The little clerk was hunched on the passenger seat, his hands trembling around the eulogy notes that Jack Randolph's sister had handed to him a few days earlier. Maybe Gill should have knocked back a few drinks at lunch as he had, Alan thought. But then, Gill was a teetotaler.

“Thanks for giving me a ride, Mr. Wanless. I appreciate it.”

“Call me Alan. Too bad you couldn't get your wheels back in time for the funeral.”

The hard consonants tied Alan's tongue in knots. Maybe he shouldn't have had that last whisky ... not that he cared what Gill thought. The man had been with Holgers Incorporated long before Jack Randolph had bought the auto parts business two years ago. Maybe that was why Randolph had stipulated in his will that the painfully shy Gill—Randolph used to refer jocularly to him as “Miss Jill”—should give the eulogy. Unless, of course, it represented their deceased boss's final vicious joke. Even the Randolph family had been surprised by the request.

The gothic grandeur of Saint Mary's hove into view. Mrs. Randolph, Alan remembered, had been a leading light at this West Vancouver landmark before her own death a year ago. The black limousines of the funeral directors were lined up near the entrance and the parking lot was filled. Like himself, the majority of the mourners were probably here more by prudence than by any respect for the dead man. In a time of downsizing and businesses moving their head offices to third-world countries, a job was a job.

He suppressed a whisky-flavoured burp as he pulled into a parking spot. Reverend Thompson, chic in a sky-blue cassock, was patting the hand of Margaret Randolph, Randolph's ancient but formidable sister, while the equally formidable new owner of Holgers, Jack Randolph II, smoked a cigarette alongside.

A final pat, and Reverend Thompson turned to greet him. Alan suffered a sensation that the minister was rolling towards them on the hem of his cassock, his smile a concordance of regret for the departure of the deceased, and pleasure that the deceased was now accessing an executive chair in paradise. Alan himself did not believe in the pleasant fable of resurrection and life eternal. His faith lay in the alphabet of tangibles: his BMW, the Rolex gleaming on his wrist as he extended a hand to the minister. "Alan Wanless," he said. "Head of sales at Holgers."

There were too many Ss, and he caught a sharp glance from the minister before the man turned to greet Gill. Noting the minister's enthusiasm, Alan remembered that Gill was some sort of volunteer here.

The minister's left eye had a slight cast. "Jack," he murmured, the faulty eye conveniently addressing both Alan and Gill at the same time, "is in the lounge."

His last whisky roiled suddenly in Alan's stomach. Jack Randolph was in the lounge? He hadn't died of a stroke, then, it had just been another of his sly moves designed to prove his employees' incompetence so that he could reduce yet further the benefits inherited from the firm's previous owners? Then he realized that the minister meant that the coffin had been placed in the lounge, not in the church entrance. Alan's feet threatened to travel sideways, but after a tussle of wills he remained facing the small group.

"We'll use the side door," Reverend Thompson told them. His blue hem flared wide as he turned and led them past a flower bed fronting a brick wall of memorial plaques. The next available space, Alan noted, was near the ground. He suppressed a sudden giggle. Good job Randolph was being buried, not cremated. Randolph had always made sure he was on top, and hadn't cared whom he stepped on in order to get there. He wouldn't have liked a small plaque with its lower edge mixing with the common clay. Near the wall stretched the memorial garden: small rose bushes edging a large area of raked earth, like a vegetable allotment awaiting seed. If Randolph was cremated and his ashes scattered there, Alan thought, he would come up as hemlock or poison ivy.

The minister arrived at a side door opening directly into the lounge, and in spite of the fortification of the whiskies, Alan experienced again the sensation that had crawled up his spine in the funeral home. Three days ago, he had paid the obligatory respects to the deceased, and the funeral director had ushered him into the chapel of rest and left him there. Alan had remained near the door, paralyzed in the chill blue light and the sickly-sweet scent of hothouse flowers. The coffin was sideways to him, a glittering threat of ebonized wood and ornate silver handles resting on a catafalque between two giant candles. The top half of the lid was open and above the

coffin's edge reared Randolph's nose. Scimitar-shaped, its profile cleaved the air, but with a horrible stillness to it, as if it were poised to strike. Alan had laid down his silly wreath—chirpy yellow poker-like things in a green froth of leaves—and slid backwards into the blessed sunlight.

Now the coffin rested near a fireplace, and the lid, thank God, was closed. Gill was bobbing humbly through a collection of black-clad men and women bearing the Randolph trademarks—the nose, plus thick black eyebrows above hostile dark eyes and a belligerent chin—and went down on his knees beside it. Gill's eyes were shut, his lips moved fervently. Alan's own lips tightened. He had known Gill was a wimp the minute his gaze had met those blinking, watery eyes, just as when he had first met Randolph's black stare he had known the man was your ultimate stereotypical bastard of a boss. Gill was probably praying not so much for Randolph's soul as for himself, a prayer to Christ to get him through the eulogy.

Remembering the minister's suspicious glance, he moved carefully among the family members, aiming his breath at a forty-five degree angle away from whomever he addressed. Not for nothing had he passed the last two years in sales: the platitudes came easily and he made sure he acknowledged Jack Randolph II and the sister. When they queried the whereabouts of his wife, Marge, his much-rehearsed response was carefully casual. "Oh, we called it a day some time ago, you know how it is . . ." Marge had discovered he was having an affair with a girl at the office, a stupid, greedy betrayal that had cut her to the heart and was not worth the destruction of his marriage. Every day now he woke up to another empty day. Thank God there were no children.

It was almost time for the service, and he joined Gill and several others who were making their way into the nave. The Randolph family and the minister would follow in a few minutes with the coffin.

The nave was already crowded, organ music droned softly, and an usher was handing out an Order of Service. Gill's face, Alan noted, was as white as the proverbial sheet. He followed the clerk's bowed figure up the aisle. His sales force was here en masse, in their white shirts and black suits resembling a group of reverent penguins, and the altar steps were aflame with exotic flowers done up like crucifixes or splaying from big woven baskets with soaring arched handles resembling those he had seen carried by the girls in a certain downtown strip joint. At the foot of the altar steps a wrought-iron catafalque waited to receive the coffin, its head end raised higher than the foot.

The front pew on the left was reserved for the Randolph family. Alan moved to join other Holger executives in the row behind them, while Gill moved to the front row on the right and once again went down on his

knees. Then Alan caught his heel in the crimson carpet runner. He fell into the second pew, and as soon as his bottom slapped against the wood, he experienced a violent urge to urinate. Sorting out the time on his Rolex—the numerals swimming around the face like little goldfish—he made out that there were some six minutes to go before the service started. Leaving the Order of Service on his seat, he stood up, and Gill turned panic-stricken eyes towards him, as if he feared Alan was deserting him. Alan mouthed “washroom” before scuttling in what he hoped was a reverent crouch past the altar area and through some swing doors. A long passage lay before him and wouldn’t you know it, the Gents was located at the far end.

He seemed to have been urinating forever when he heard the distant organ music change in note, and then it ceased altogether and he heard the voice of the minister raised in prayer. Hell!

He was forced to wait outside the swing doors while the minister informed the congregation that God had called our friend Jack home. No, not God, Alan thought. It was Mother Nature who had called the alcoholic Jack Randolph home ... but then, maybe Mother Nature was only God in drag. Then the prayer was over and Reverend Thompson announced that it was time for the solo, and Brian Wong, tenor, would sing Jack’s favourite song, “My Way.” In the ensuing pause, Alan slipped through the swing doors and hurried to his seat. From the corner of his eye he saw that Randolph’s coffin was now resting on the catafalque.

As the unrepentant self-congratulatory verses assaulted the nave, Alan thought it wiser not to look at his sales force. Even so, he knew what they were thinking. Oh yes, Jack Randolph had done it his way, alright!

The song was almost over when Alan glanced, almost casually, at the coffin. His breath caught in his throat. Someone—some sadist—had opened the top half of the lid. Heat roared through him, as if some malignant spirit had doused him in gasoline and put a match to it. The frail protection of the whiskies passed away. A yellow turnip wearing Randolph’s bushy black eyebrows and slicked black hair lay against the incongruity of white satin frills. The mouth was an iron bar below the two flaring black caves of the nostrils, the eyes! ... Acid rose in Alan’s throat. Randolph’s right eye was closed, a shadowed hollow sunk beneath the thick eruption of the eyebrow—but the left eye, the left eye! It was half-open, the whites and lower part of the iris co-operating with the yellow eyelid to manufacture a sardonic wink seemingly aimed straight at Alan. *Yes, I did it my way*, the wink confirmed.

Alan tore his gaze away as the solo ended and Reverend Thompson took over. Gill, he noticed, must also have seen that one-eyed leer. His gaze was transfixed on Randolph’s dead face and he seemed about to be sick. Alan

riveted his own attention on Reverend Thompson's confident assertion that eternal life comes to those who truly repent of their sins—my God, hadn't the minister listened to the solo at all?—and then the minister asked the congregation to follow the printed Confession of Faith. Automatically, Alan mouthed the responses that claimed all things worked together for men's salvation (but not women's salvation, he could hear Marge objecting) and when it was over Reverend Thompson called for everyone to sit down and Mr. Frank Gill to come up.

The minister retired to a throne-like chair near the altar. Alan watched as Gill made his way to the pulpit, the sister's notes clutched against his chest. The clerk's head was sunk into his shoulders; he seemed afraid to look at the congregation, and he took too long fishing for his glasses. At one point he reached out and whispered something as he touched a small figure of the crucified Christ that decorated the front of the pulpit—it seemed to fit right into the middle of Gill's chest—and then he lifted the first sheet of the sister's notes and coughed. His hands were visibly trembling.

"Friends . . ." Gill's voice shook as much as his hands, "we are gathered here today to honour the memory of our beloved friend, Jonathon David Randolph, known to us as Jack." He paused and drank from a glass of water placed nearby. Alan slid a glance towards his salesman. Beloved friend—ha! He and his staff had borne the brunt of Randolph's sarcasm—but the faces raised to Gill were politely expressionless, the hands unmoving on knees or around the Order of Service, patiently waiting until it was all over and they could decently escape.

Gill's voice trembled on, "I first met Jack two years ago when he took over Holgers International, and I was struck at once by his tremendous energy and drive. Jack was a hard worker, dedicated to excellence, and he expected the same dedication from those around him. His enthusiasm for life, for the job, inspired all who knew him. He was a worthy role model for young men in our organization who wish to aspire to the highest . . . to the highest . . ."

Gill's voice petered out. Slowly, he lowered the notes, took off his glasses and stood staring at them as they lay in his hand.

The church was silent while the mourners waited for Gill to continue. Alan waited along with the others. And yet . . . and yet . . . something about Gill's transfixed stare . . . hair began prickling up the nape of his neck, as if from somewhere there approached a danger which his grosser senses could not yet define. The silence continued. A few people began shifting their feet. Then the congregation seemed to realize that something was up. The silence changed; it tightened; a tension slid into the air, as if the mourners

were holding their collective breath. A salesman sitting near Alan suddenly leaned forward and stared intently at Gill.

At last, Gill turned and Alan saw the clerk's gaze widening on that leering dead face. Not taking his gaze away, Gill pulled out a large blue handkerchief from a pocket and mopped his forehead. Randolph's sister was sitting almost in front of Alan, and he saw her frown at Randolph II before turning a suspicious stare on Gill.

For the first time, Gill turned to look directly on the congregation. As simply as a child, he said, "I cannot speak these words in a House of God." He tucked the glasses into a breast pocket and his hand reached out to the crucified Christ and touched it. "Ye shall know the truth," Gill said clearly, "and the truth shall make you free."

The silence was a living thing. Several mourners, Alan saw, were staring at Gill in horrified hope. Gill said, "It is not true that Jack Randolph was a worthy role model for our young employees. Jack Randolph took eager, hopeful young men and completely destroyed their confidence in themselves. Jack Randolph was a cruel and destructive individual. As the song says, he did it his way."

A sigh blew around the nave, as if someone had punctured a giant balloon. Alan's first reaction was shock, but then there arrived a great and gleeful exultation. Jack Randolph II's mouth, he noted, had sagged open. Yes, yes, yes! he shouted silently at the son's small, open hole of a mouth, so reminiscent of Randolph Senior. That's how your old man was! Right on! And don't think we don't know what you are ... like father, like son, asshole!

Reverend Thompson had leaped to his feet, his face bright red. Many of the Randolph clan seemed too stunned to react. They were turning to one another with the confused stares of children who have just been told they are adopted. "But we must not condemn him," Gill continued. "Once, he told me a little about himself. His own father was a monster of cruelty. In my opinion, Jack Randolph was a victim who never stood a chance of being other than he was—"

And then the paralysis that had gripped the Randolphs shattered. Randolph II, aided by another man sporting the Randolph eyebrows, sprang towards the pulpit, and the sister and others in the front pew rose to their feet, gesticulating and calling for Reverend Thompson to act. "Drunk!" the sister was shouting passionately, "blind drunk!"

Gill saw the Randolph men storming towards him; he grasped the pulpit rail with both hands and called strongly, "But we must forgive Jack Randolph, as we ourselves ask for forgiveness—" then the men reached him. Gill was gripped on either side and frog-marched down the steps to

where Reverend Thompson was holding open the swing doors. The group bunched into the passage, the doors banged shut and furious voices travelled back to the congregation. In the resulting hubbub the sister turned to face Alan. “Disgusting!” she cried. “And to think Jack once told me that Frank Gill was the only man he could trust!” Someone behind Alan tapped him on the shoulder—he turned—and an elderly stranger asked indignantly, “If you can’t tell the truth in the House of the Lord, where can you tell it?” Then the Randolph men were back and Reverend Thompson ran towards the pulpit, his arms raised so that he flew up the steps like a demented bluebird. Alan caught, “Cruel . . . stupid—” before the minister faced them all and cried, “Please, please! My friends, let us remember where we are! Let us pray! Our father, who art in Heaven. . .”

Alan stumbled over the words he had not spoken since childhood and compulsory school prayers. A terrible elation was perking within him, he could scarcely get the words out because of it. Again and again his gaze hopscotched from the silent yellow turnip in its black box, reduced now to impotence, to the bright expressions of his staff who were enthusiastically trumpeting the Lord’s prayer. Their thoughts were palpable, travelling sweet and heady on the air . . . the truth had been made known, their suffering vindicated, the world returned to equilibrium! Then the minister gave the final blessing, and the pallbearers moved towards Randolph’s coffin.

Just before a pallbearer closed the lid, Alan stared for the last time at the face that had plagued him for the past two years. And then it came to him that it was not the half-open eye that was dominant; it was the larger look of remoteness on Randolph’s dead face, a signal that Randolph was now an enigma, unreadable, gone far beyond the reach of either their condemnation or their praise, their faith or their atheism. Randolph had travelled into eternal night, taking with him that part of himself that he had revealed only to Frank Gill. Alan’s fingers convulsed about the Order of Service and a ceiling lamp sucked a spasm of Lilliputian stars from the Rolex. Then the coffin was hoisted and borne down the aisle, the Randolphs following behind, their faces still working with outrage.

Row by row, mourners left their pews to join the procession moving slowly towards the main entrance. Alan joined them, his heart sinking at the thought that he must now return to the barren wasteland that was life without Marge.

Just as he reached the swing doors, they opened, and Frank Gill appeared, his anguished gaze beseeching the crowd shuffling past. Every mourner’s gaze remained welded straight ahead, including Alan’s. However, that did not silence the small still voice that suddenly opened within him. Some folks were fools for love, this unwanted voice informed him, but

Frank Gill had been a fool for truth, and that truth would set him free in the worst possible way in a weak economy ... Gill would be looking for another job tomorrow. But even with all that, the voice went on, *even with all that*, unlike himself, Frank Gill had found something to live and die for.