**Death by Photograph**

It was worse on rainy days like this one. There was so little he could do. He had long since given up the television as a source of distraction. He was hard of hearing and hated wearing the aid. The radio was also pointless. He preferred going out, looking at things, shops, people, hoping for something interesting to happen. When it did, the excitement would linger for days. As he reflected, he remembered the arrest in the High Street, the policeman giving chase, the hue and cry, the young man caught and held, firmly, no escape, pleading that it had been a joke, that he hadn't done anything, too out of breath to lie properly. Perhaps the handcuffs had seemed melodramatic at the time, but they stuck in the mind, contributed to the memorableness of the event, now so many weeks later. “If you haven’t done anything why did you run away?” the constable had asked somewhat conclusively.

So little to do. He began to feel afraid already, as he knew he would have to do it. Martha was moving around upstairs, and this reminded him. The photograph was there safe in his inside pocket, and if he was wise today he would leave it there.

But on days like this, the rain heavy and the wind cold and hard, he knew he could not go out. His doctor had warned him.

" People of your age do not go out in dreadful weather. You must keep warm and dry. And above all else you must avoid excitement! The ticker you know!"

He can remember when he first came to hate the word "ticker". When very young, he had wanted to play with his father in the garden, football or catch or some such lost delight. "'Fraid not, ol’ boy. Ticker, you know!" He resented "Ticker", whom he had long assumed to be someone who forbade garden games, or fun generally. When he learned the truth, with the death one dreadful summer of his father, it did not make the loss lighter.

And now here was, Ticker again, spoiling his fun. Perhaps he was a being somewhere, a malign spirit whose sole purpose was to limit people, to slow them, to clip their wings. It was a pity that that wasn't all there was to his weakness. His body pained him so much. His limbs, his joints, his eyes...... he would be hard pressed to name a part of his body that did not give him pain or discomfort or unhappiness. Perhaps it was all down to Ticker.

"Stop dwelling!"

The words were shouted at him from the doorway. Martha had come downstairs and he had not noticed, so lost had he been in his "dwelling".

"You're always dwelling on something. It's bad for you. It'll drive you to an early grave!"

"It won't be that early. I'm seventy-five as you well know and I've already overstayed my time!"

He was fond of saying this, and it used to worry Martha. He would say that as soon as a body started causing more pain than pleasure, then that was the time to get out. He didn't get out, though she used to fear that he would.

"I'm going round to see Freda. She won't be able to go out on a day like this. I dare say she'll need some shopping."

Martha at seventy-two was almost without ailment. She never seemed to be ill, was full of energy, and seemed to have avoided Ticker's attention altogether. Ray looked at her. He churned inside. The photograph came to his mind and he felt the anger welling up inside him.

"I'll be back round tea-time," she shouted as she banged the door shut.

Ray sighed. The anger rolled back a little as his hand moved involuntarily to his inside pocket. He had to take out the photograph, he just had to.

He recalled, as he stared through the rainy striations on the window pane, the difficulty he had had obtaining the photo in the first place. And he shuddered to think that it was now nearly fifty years to the day that he had taken it. Should he blame the fifty years rather than Martha? Why did he feel so angry towards her?

They had at the time been married a year or so, and lived in a single room flat. Not too dear, and sparsely planted with objects. He had taken up photography at Martha's insistence. "You must have something to do in your spare moments. After all we don't want to be tripping over eachother do we?"

What was her hobby, then? He scratched his head, and still could not recall.

At first he was content to photograph places near their home. The market made a good topic, and he gathered quite a collection of different market scenes. And the railway station, now demolished, and the town-hall, and .... well almost every large and public building in town.

Then he became more interested in secret places, he could not tell why. Places that were not meant for the gazes and attention of large numbers of people, places where people did not expect to be photographed. Alley ways, backs of houses, the tow path, the underpass that led to the railway station, where gathered a strange variety of humans for all sorts of purpose. Sometimes this pursuit would cause him trouble, and he still could not recall how he had escaped the menaces of a large and hideous man whose house he had photographed from the back alley, and who swore that Ray was photographing his wife in the bath. As if, he pondered as he ran, ran, ran!

After a few weeks he made an arrangement with a workmate, who processed his photographs for a small fraction of the price he had been paying at the local chemist. And within a year he had a large collection, carefully stored in specially bought albums, numbered, dated, titled...... methodically.

Martha was, at this time, a beautiful young woman, in Ray's eyes, though she, more realistically, denied it. She had her charms, as all young women do, and she had her ways, as all young women have, and the two fitted together just nicely. Undoubtedly, Ray was all the things he believed a young husband should be, infatuated, jealous, possessive, domineering, lustful.

They were a very loving and active couple, and very open to each other. Martha never sought to hide her body from him, and the early years of their love were happy and often energetic. Ray was very fit, proud of his body, strong as an ox. Often he would lie looking at her as she dried after taking a bath, hoping to touch her, and loving the movements she made with her slender limbs, amazed when she turned face-on to him, with her large breasts rolling and the small triangle of black hair seeming to move with a life of its own. She would open her legs to dry herself, and he felt let in on the greatest secret of the universe, him alone.

It was on such a day that he had the idea. He looked at Martha, so slim and lovely, relaxed before his eyes, standing before the coal fire drying her long hair, her legs slightly apart, and said: "I'm going to take a photograph of you just like that!"

"What?" shrieked Martha and grabbed a large towel lying nearby. "No you're bloody not. I'm not having any of that sort of stuff."

For a moment Ray was stunned, and wondered what she meant. "Don't be daft. I want to remember you as you are now. You won't be Greta Garbo forever

you know."

"You've got lots of photos of me. They'll do!"

But Ray knew they would not do. None of them captured the special bond he had with Martha. This was the only way he could do it, with her showing him her secrets, including him in her private moments. He even used these words and was proud to have articulated what he felt in such a clear way.

It took weeks. Why Martha suddenly agreed, Ray never knew. Nor had he ever cared to know. She allowed one photograph. She would stand upright, hands by her side, and that would be it. He tried to get her to lie on the bed, to move her limbs slightly, to smile, but she would not. He accepted the constraints, and one Saturday evening, with a coal fire blazing in the background, Ray photographed Martha, standing naked, mouth tight shut, eyes fixed on the camera.

She read many years later of a tribe of natives in some less civilised country, who were afraid of being photographed, as they felt their spirit was captured inside the camera. She recalled that she had felt much like this, that she had lost something. But then she forgot all about the photo.

Ray's next problem was the processing. His workmate would do it, of that he had no doubt, but would he really want him sharing his private delight? There was only one thing for it. He had to learn how to do it himself. And during the evenings that followed, of trial and error on some less important negatives, and of expense which he could ill afford, he did wonder whether he would not have been better off to have asked his friend after all.

When it was done, it was a marvellous thing. For months afterwards Ray took not a single photograph. He would often gaze at the one he had of Martha, even then consigned to that inside pocket. He would look at it when in a bus, or on a train, or in the back of the shop where he worked when he had a tea-break. No one else was allowed to know of its existence.

Martha saw it when it was developed. She was pleased Ray had developed it himself. She did not like the photo, and never asked to see it again.

Ray was pulled out of his little piece of personal history by a heavy knock at the door. He put the photo away. It took him some time to reach the door, and when he arrived and opened it, there was no one there. He looked down the street and saw a sales woman at a neighbour's house. He quickly ducked in and closed the door.

One of the things Ticker did to him was to tire him. He sat in his armchair by the gas fire and took out the photograph again. The edges were ragged and torn. He had only made one copy, and the negative had been lost in a small fire he had caused with a lighted cigarette. He looked at the body before him, young and full of promises, round and slender at the same time. From the photo he fancied he could smell the smells that roused him so in his youth, that would rouse him still if only.

The anger seemed to burst through him. He began to gasp and cough, losing breath as he leaned back in the chair to ease the pain in his chest.

No, there was more to it than that, he thought, as he looked up at the ceiling, still hoping for more breath in his lungs. The early candour between them had not waned. Martha would still not seek to hide her nakedness from him. Naturally they had a bathroom now, and Martha no longer bathed before him. She would dry herself in the bedroom, and sometimes Ray would be there, more so now as his body wore out and he needed more rest.

He would gaze at her as she dried. Where once her breasts would sway it seemed her whole body wanted to sway. There were folds where once there had been plateaux of beauty. The skin was crumbling and cracked where once it had been so smooth. The hair, cropped short now for convenience, had thinned. It was as if her flesh was melting.

He had begun to hate this Martha with as much passion as he had loved the Martha of the photograph. The hatred would not go away, and the anger made it worse. He blamed her, only her, for growing old.

He looked down again at the photo, his lungs a little easier, and the eyes which had reproached him then for taking the picture seemed now to reproach him for looking at it. He longed for the beauty he saw and felt rage when he realised that he would never have her. The thought entered his mind, that had he not taken the photograph in the first place, he would not now be having these ideas. But it did not last, and the blood began to rise again, the pain returned to his chest, he gasped for air, his eyes closed and he called out: "Martha! I want....."

He lunged forward and died with a cry of "Ticker!" on his lips, sloped over the arm of the chair, the photograph nestling lightly on his twisted hand that hung down beside him.

When Martha returned, she did not panic. She had been expecting this for some time. But she had not been expecting the photograph. She looked at it for fully half an hour before she called the doctor. Occasionally she would glance at Ray and a tear fell from her eye as she tore up the photograph into tiny pieces. She walked to the back yard and flung the tiny shreds into the bin just a moment before the doctor knocked on the door.