

**WHISKEY AND SUGAR**  
*AND OTHER SHORT STORIES*

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## FINAL OFFER

The sun had long since passed its zenith and would be setting soon. It was the perfect time to head out on my walk through the orchard, a route I loved because it left the city behind and was not yet engulfed by glass and steel. There was a coolness in the air, a respite from the summer heat that lay trapped between the skyscrapers. And it was peaceful, so peaceful that it was almost possible to mistake the distant sound of the motorways for the rustling of leaves in the wind.

As I walked, I remembered the stories my mother had told me as a child. She had grown up in a world with public parks and roadside trees, and vast forests that changed with the seasons. Her tales had always seemed so far-fetched and unimaginable in the city. But

here, walking through this orchard, they gained such substance that I could almost feel them taking shape in front of me, the great pines that had once stood here, their needles glistening in the evening light, their immense height casting long shadows as the sun set.

I gripped the flowers I was holding more firmly, a beautiful bouquet of pink peonies. It was something of an oddity now, to buy real flowers, as most people no longer bothered. Lost in thought I hurried onwards, and reaching the edge of the orchard, crossed back into the borders of the city. The sun was beginning to set, and I knew it would not be long before the natural light started to fade. But no matter where I was, the bright lights of the city would always be there to guide me back home. And though the noise began to get louder once again, the feeling of calm that surrounded me lingered.

Eventually I pushed open a set of wrought iron gates, once beautifully crafted, iron vines and flowers twisting and turning around the pickets. But its former glory was now long gone, the iron rusting, the detail weathered away. A remnant of the past, deeply

out of place among the shiny, the sparkling and the blindingly bright.

Almost immediately, I was overwhelmed by thousands of voices, all talking at once, all as loudly as they could. But I simply walked onwards through the incoherent shouting. I had experienced it many times before, and it no longer fazed me.

“Good evening, Mr Moloby,” I greeted, and the reply was instant.

“Buy SMARThenge Fridge®! It can not only tell you what you *need*, but will order it directly from ...,” but the rest was lost as I carried on walking.

I greeted Mr and Mrs Dottel, Miss Heinrichsen, and of course old Ms Battlebee. The reply was always immediate and always different.

“All new iWaterBottle® can ...”

“The best multi-surface cleaner you have ever ...”

“87% of customers agree that ...” Each one lost in the cacophony of voices as I passed.

I looked across the sea of small, blaring LED screens propped up in neat rows, each one flashing much too brightly in the dimming light,

and finally found the one I was looking for. I knelt down in front of it and took out a rag to wipe away the dust. Then I replaced the old flowers from the previous week with the fresh ones I was holding in my hand, and like I had done many times before, reread the letters on the bright screen.

R.I.P.

Ms Rebecca Smith

Loving mother and friend

Underneath there was a picture of my mother. I looked at the picture, trying to remember the way she spoke and the warmth of her touch. The longer I thought about her, the closer she began to feel, and I started to lose myself in my memories of her until I could no longer hear the clamour coming from the screens next to me. But when the display began to flash, I realised that my time was up. The picture of my mother had been replaced by a smiling man with blinding teeth and unmoving eyes staring straight at me, telling me all about the newest version of Smart door locks to hit the market.

INSTALL YOUR HOME WITH  
**THE LATEST SMARTLOCK®**  
*and never fear a break-in again!*  
WITH ALL NEW SMARTLOCK® YOU CAN  
*immediately secure your home*  
**AGAINST INTRUDERS!**  
*And thanks to our brand-new App,*  
never worry about losing keys again!

**Buy SMARTLOCK®**  
*AND PROTECT YOUR HOME*  
**THE SMART WAY!**

I stood up, the screen above my mother's grave now no different to all those surrounding it, one advert among thousands, and headed back. I knew there was no use waiting, my mother's face would not be shown again for another week. As I walked home the stories of the past seemed as far-fetched as ever, the orchard no longer as calming as I remembered, and I knew that the grey roots of the city were deep and eternal, burying everything beneath them.



## THE CIRCUS

The lights dimmed. The crinkling of sweet wrappers faded, the conversation died down, and eventually the audience went silent. In the dim light of the tent, only the wooden benches, creaking occasionally under the impatience of the spectators, broke the silence. The longer the audience waited, the more excited it grew; the anticipation weaving its way through the crowd, spreading out to fill the hot, sticky air with its scent. Cotton candy and sweat, buttery popcorn and rancid oil. As it reached its climax, unable to grow further for fear of becoming suffocating, the spotlights turned on.

Brightly illuminated in the centre of the ring, surrounded by the gloom of the seats, stood a tall, slender figure. It stood perfectly still, the sand of the ring around it undisturbed.

A man, dressed in a black tailcoat, adorned with golden epaulettes and golden buttons, wearing a black top hat and holding a leather whip in one hand. His face was handsome, perfect even, but yet not quite right, like that of a wax doll. As if he had tried to imitate a human and had done it too well. And in the few moments before he lifted his hands and the audience began to cheer, there was a glint in the man's eyes. Something cool and unnerving. Something calculating and dangerous. But it was gone in the blink of an eye, every trace removed, and the man smiled and waved.

He began to speak, his voice deep and seductive. And as he spoke, his eyes wandered over the audience, as if trying to memorise each face hidden behind the glare of the lights. His smile was frozen in place, never for a single moment wavering.

*Good day, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,  
Lean back, get comfy and enjoy  
Today's wonderful selection of stories.*

Three figures walked into the ring, the sand around them swirling into the air. They stood in a line, just outside the reach of the spotlights, still indiscernible to the audience, and the Ringmaster gestured to them like a chef presenting his best plate.

*Now let me present to you these fine people,  
Each with a tragic story of madness to tell.  
Which will pique your fancy, which will you hate?*

*But remember, these people are here for our help,  
Do not jeer, be kind, be supportive!  
Make them feel welcome here today in this tent!*

At the whip's command, the first figure stepped forward, finally revealed to the crowd. A teenage boy, only the white of his shirt collar and sleeves peeking out from beneath his otherwise black outfit. He walked with a spring in his step, smiling and waving, just like the man in the tailcoat had done. The spotlights accentuated his handsome features, and the audience cheered. The Ringmaster who had

faded into the background quickly strode forward.

*My dear friends, may I proudly present our first guest,  
Still young, but he's no stranger to hardship.  
Well go on then, don't be shy, tell us your story!*

Dutifully, the boy began to speak of his childhood, of his sickly sister and his ageing mother. Despite his charm, the sincerity in his voice rang true as he spoke of the responsibilities and decisions that fell upon him, and of the pressures he felt. But while the audience oohed and aahed, safe in the knowledge that they themselves would never have to make such sacrifices, the Ringmaster remained unimpressed.

*So the burden fell on you alone, to help your family?  
And despite your best efforts, you feel resentment.  
Is that why you seek our help?*

The boy shook his head and opened his mouth to deny these assertions, but was given no chance to reply.

*There's no justice in the world, is there?  
Your innocent sister, living her life counting sugar,  
And you, forced to live yours paying her bills.*

*It's no surprise that you feel depressed.  
How could you live a fulfilling life,  
With that dark cloud always hanging over you?*

The Ringmaster's smile had begun to widen, his bright teeth glinted in the light, while the boy vehemently shook his head, a look of sudden confusion in his eyes.

*Of course, I see how that could make you angry.  
Make you want to hurt somebody.  
Make you want to take extreme measures.*

Riled by the anticipation of what was to come, the audience had started to cheer again, and the atmosphere became disconcerting, like that of a mob, unpredictable and dangerous. The boy started to speak, but it was too late, his story had already been decided upon, his character already set in stone; these could not be changed. There was nothing the boy could do

but watch helplessly as the Ringmaster finished his speech, his voice ringing clearly from every corner of the tent.

*Have you done something, young man?  
It's okay if you have,  
I'm sure we will not blame you...*

As he finished talking, the Ringmaster stood tall before the crowd, the flaps of his tailcoat billowing, still smiling, as the applause thundered away. And the boy, who only moments before had captivated the crowd's attention, continued to shout and gesture wildly, only to be ignored, unheard over the din of the tent, forgotten beside the Ringmaster.

*Well, well, I can see that he's already a favourite,  
But do not be hasty, let us wait and see  
What our next contestant has to offer.*

The second figure to step forward was a middle-aged woman, her mouse-brown hair falling onto her shoulders, her hand nervously playing with the pendant of her necklace. She

was plain-looking and wore a faded floral dress, as inoffensive as it was inconspicuous. Her eyes darted from one side of the tent to the other, as if trying to make out the spectators behind the bright lights pointed at the ring, but of course she could not. Despite her distress, the Ringmaster continued to smile at her, a smile without warmth or sympathy.

*Now, here's another interesting case,  
Abandoned and raised in an orphanage.  
I'm sure she has much to tell us!*

The woman began to speak, her voice thin and brittle, stuttering every now and again. She possessed none of the previous contestant's showmanship, but the crowd listened nonetheless, eager to know the story she was about to reveal. She told them that she had always felt different, like she didn't belong anywhere, unwanted and unseen.

*So you did always know that something was wrong?  
Something that you tried to fix, but never could.  
You were never good enough, always last at everything.*

*No one to turn to, you grew up all alone.  
Oh, I'm sure that was hard, for don't we all know  
Children can be so very cruel sometimes.*

Though his voice dripped with sincerity, none of it reached the eyes on his perfect face. And while he spoke, he circled the woman, eyeing her with keen interest. But she did not move, so that the sand and dust slowly began to settle on her hair and dress.

*Oh my darling, will you not look at me?  
What have I done to earn your distaste?  
Surely, even you can see that we're just trying to help?*

But the woman stood still, becoming almost translucent, like a mere shadow of herself. The crowd grew restless, they had been expecting more. Pity mixed with cruelty, fuelled by a kind of frenzy, took no notice of the common laws of decency.



The woman started to cry, large tears welling up in her eyes, rolling down her cheeks, and finally falling from her face leaving thick, wet streaks behind. Her skin changed from an even, pale colour to a deep, blotchy red. She stood sobbing in the middle of the ring, blinded by the lights of the tent, dissected by the gaze of the spectators. As the Ringmaster steered the woman back to her place, he watched the crowd with a mad glint in his eye, a thirst for adoration that could never be quenched. But it could be eased, at least for today.

*Oh dear, oh dear, today is not going well.  
But allow me to present my final contestant,  
You know I always save the best for last!*

The final contestant was different from the others. Even the crowd seemed to notice this, through the haze of its excitement. As he stepped forward, his face blank with indifference, the noise and commotion died down. The stands creaked as every person in the tent leant forward, holding their breath, not wanting to miss a moment. As the emotions of

the tent swirled around in the air, excitement and rage, exhilaration and hysteria, the Ringmaster began to grin. It was evil and hideous, but impossible to look away from.

*Of all the stories that have been told in this tent,  
This one must surely take the prize.  
I present to you a killer, three dead by his hand!*

*Killed in the cold blood that covers the walls.  
But killed by whom? Which of the many voices  
In his head, took control that time?*

A silence filled the tent with a tension that could barely be contained; a tension that would tear apart the tent at its very seams; a tension into which the last contestant began to speak. His face was still blank, nothing about his facial expression changed as he spoke of the heinous acts he had committed. Torture and murder, mutilation and execution. Sometimes he was in charge, sometimes it was another in his body. He felt no remorse or pity, only the enjoyment that came from the thrill of the chase.

By the time the contestant had finished, the crowd erupted from the benches, its enthusiasm ignited by the mere thought of violence. The air pulsed, and the crowd pushed forward; individual bodies merging into a single organism; arms trying to reach through the gaps in the fence that divided the crowd from the ring. And despite all this, the contestant's face did not change, his blank expression unwavering.

*It seems we have a clear favourite today.  
He kills without reason,  
He hurts simply because he can!*

*I believe that he has quenched our thirst,  
That finally we have found,  
A madman, a maniac, a true freak!*

The longer the shouting lasted, the angrier it got; pure rage filled the air. And the man dressed entirely in black, aside from the golden epaulettes on his shoulders and the golden buttons on his chest, stood in the centre of the ring, his eyes closed, a bead of sweat

running down his forehead, his knuckles white around the leather whip grasped in his hand. He basked in the noise and commotion and admiration of the crowd; its anger and hatred nourishing him.

The whip cracked, and the crowd fell silent.

*Thank you all for attending today.*

*I hope you were entertained,*

*But every show must come to an end.*

*My task for today has been fulfilled.*

*So off you go, hurry up, and move along,*

*You wouldn't want to miss your supper!*

The lights turned back on and the audience rose from its seats, some checking the floor to ensure that nothing had been left behind, others finishing the last of their snacks. The contestants had long since left the ring, returning to their previous lives, forgotten after their moment of fame. And eventually even the last of the stragglers found their way to the exit and silence filled the tent. Not a silence filled

with anticipation and excitement, not a silence filled with fear and rage, just silence.

The Ringmaster opened his eyes in the empty tent. The lights had all been turned off, and the ring in the centre of the tent was now no longer illuminated, but rather fell victim to the same gloom as the surrounding benches. Only a little daylight seeped in from the entrance. Dozens of white roses laid strewn on the floor of the ring, thrown to the Ringmaster by the audience. He picked up a single rose and held it up to his nose, but the flower had no scent. And with one last glance at the wooden benches, the Ringmaster turned around, the rose in one hand, the whip in the other, and walked back into the darkness of the tent.

## AN ERNEST CONFESSION

Ernest woke early that morning. He showered and put on a pair of meticulously ironed grey trousers, a white shirt and a beige cardigan; he combed his hair back, and went to check on his mother, who was still asleep. Then he stepped outside, into the chilly spring air. He shivered slightly, as a cold breeze swept over the hills, causing his carefully groomed hair to revert back to its original state, ruffled and disorderly. As he made his way towards the woodland that surrounded the quaint little English village in which he lived, his slightly hunched, middle-aged figure moved in an ungainly manner, as if it were constantly unsure of the length of its stride or the position of its arms. It stumbled here and there, but years of practice ensured it remained upright.

In a clearing, Ernest found what he was looking for, and awkwardly bent down to inspect a patch of wild flowers. Satisfied, he took out a small leather-bound book from his satchel, into which he made a careful note, and then with a pair of botanical scissors he carefully cut seven flowers, wrapping them in some tissue paper. Taking a few deep breaths, he slowly got back up again. His eyes sparkled with excitement as he looked at the freshly picked flowers. *Today is the day*, he thought to himself, and began to walk back to the village with a spring in his step, and a newfound feeling of youth pulsing through his ageing body.

Standing outside the post office, Ernest's feeling of exhilaration subsided quickly. He awkwardly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to work up some courage. When he saw someone coming towards him, he was finally forced to enter, not wanting to explain why he was lurking outside.

Ding ding. Ernest almost jumped out of his skin when the bell chimed, so lost had he been in thought and worry. He walked between the aisles, his hand fidgeting nervously with the

flowers he held, suddenly regretting his decision to come, when a voice called out:

“Oh, hello Ernest, what can I help you with today?”

Drat, what should he say? He had no reason to be here and had not thought of an excuse, because honestly, he had not expected to get this far. He had never got this far before.

“Oh um..., I uh, just wanted to see if you had any, of those, you know, those uh... postcards... yes, that’s it. I wanted to see if you had any postcards I could send my, um, my niece.” Beads of sweat had begun to form around Ernest’s forehead, and he swallowed nervously, his mouth suddenly very dry.

The woman gave him a strange smile, then she laughed. She had a warm, kind face and dark curly hair, which was flecked with grey strands. Everything she did was with such grace and ease, that Ernest felt all his awkwardness just melt into a puddle of goo and flow right out of him. And he smiled right back, a little nervously.

“Well I’m sorry, we haven’t received any new ones. All we have are the old ones,” and she gestured towards some rather tacky-looking,



touristy postcards of the little village and its surrounding countryside.

“Oh right, well I’ll just buy one of those then, um, yes. Er, thank you, Steph,” he said and picked a card at random. He put down two pounds on the counter, and bought a postcard he did not want. Then he just stood there awkwardly, staring at the beautiful lady behind the counter, at her hair that fell in front of her sparkling eyes. Stephanie, taking pity on him, began to ask him about his mother. Was she doing better, would she like some shepherd’s pie and was there anything else that she, Stephanie, could do to help? She was much the same as ever, some pie would be greatly appreciated if it wasn’t too much trouble and Stephanie had already done more than enough, and he would hate to be a burden, Ernest replied. Again, the awkward silence.

“Those are pretty.” Stephanie pointed at the yellow wildflowers Ernest held in his hand.

“They’re wild tulips,” he replied, avoiding eye contact, “*Tulipa sylvestris*, they grow in almost any sunny location. I found them in the woods.”

Ernest decided at that moment that he was a coward, because he reached clumsily for the postcard and quickly walked out of the shop, mumbling a goodbye as he left. He got as far as the bakery, when he turned around, strode determinedly back into the post office, put the yellow flowers on the counter and said: “for you.” Then, his newfound courage already failing him, he turned around and fled for the second time that day, leaving a much bewildered Stephanie behind.

Ernest walked home quickly, his eyes fixed on the ground, his face burning. When he made it back safely, he went to check on his mother, who was still asleep, her frail body swamped in the giant bed. After that, he went back downstairs, and paced nervously back and forth in the hallway, playing back every scenario in his mind. Then he sat and stared at the postcard he had bought. It was a picture of the church, with the text: “I’m having so much fun here!” in bright red letters. Deflatedly, Ernest wondered if after today this tacky postcard would be the only thing he would have to remember Stephanie by.

Eventually he gave up tormenting himself, and went out into the garden, deciding instead to continue carefully cataloguing his flowers. And there he stayed, contentedly measuring and sketching as the hours passed, his mind only occasionally wandering back to the car crash that had been this morning.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” a voice asked from behind him. Ernest turned around, surprised to see Stephanie standing at the edge of his garden.

“Oh no, not-not at all,” he stuttered. “W-would you like to, er, come in?” and he gestured helplessly towards a small bench at one end of the garden.

Stephanie nodded, and so it happened that Ernest was sitting next to the girl of his dreams on a bench in his very own garden, telling her about the carnations he expected to bloom quite soon. But even Ernest could not talk about his garden forever, and so after a while an awkward silence once again nestled itself between them.

“I brought some pie,” Stephanie finally said, holding up a bag.

“Oh, well, thank you very much.”

“Again, I’m sorry about the postcards.”

“Er, it’s quite alright.”

Ernest had his gaze firmly planted on the ground below him, and was intently studying the weeds sprouting out from around the paving stones. He did not see Stephanie lean forward, and looked up surprised, when she put her hand on his shoulder.

“And thank you for the flowers, they were lovely.” The afternoon light illuminated Stephanie's face, and Ernest could not help but stare at her, his heart doing a funny little jiggle in his chest.

“They um, well in some cultures they signify, what I mean to say is, they symbolise love and, er, of course, friendship. And well, I gave them to you, because I uh... because really um... really like you. You’ve been, um, a great friend, Stephanie.” Ernest swallowed and willed himself out of existence. But after it became clear that his existence would not listen, he turned to look at Stephanie. For the first time in his life Ernest knew that he had done the right thing, because Stephanie was sitting there next to him, smiling at him, and all the butterflies in

Ernest's stomach erupted, making him feel quite giddy.

“I-I-I love you,” he whispered.

Stephanie reached for his hand, and gave him a soft peck on the cheek. “Well, it took you long enough.”

## WHISKEY AND SUGAR

The tea tasted like wet paper. But that was not the tea's fault. Ever since his banishment, even the simple pleasure of a good cuppa had been taken from him. His taste buds had never been the same again. But it could not be helped. Lucifer pulled out a small, silver hip flask and added a generous helping of whiskey to the tea. If it was not going to taste good, he might as well get drunk. For good measure, he also helped himself to a mouthful straight from the flask, before returning it to the depths of his stained overcoat. Funnily enough, the taste of whiskey had remained the same, possibly to serve as a nasty reminder of all that he had lost.

Through the curtain of greasy, black strands of hair, Lucifer saw a figure walking towards him. It elegantly avoided the customers

wandering around, and despite its massive feathery white wings, did not knock anybody over. Bloody angels, he thought to himself. Lucifer had knocked over four people on his way to the table, and *he* had not even had *his* wings unfolded.

The figure sat down next to him and gave him a nervous smile. Gabriel was always nervous. It was an occupational hazard that came from having an omniscient employer. Lucifer watched as he fidgeted, first with his wings, then with the contents of the table, aligning and realigning the pepper grinder, the salt shaker, the bowl of sugar cubes. Finally, he reached for the flowers. To be fair, they had looked a bit mangy when Lucifer had first walked in, so it was not entirely his fault that they were now rotting. But with a simple wave of Gabriel's hand, they quickly sprang back to life, flowering cheerfully in the dingy cafe, fully rejuvenated.

"How was your week?" Lucifer asked, taking pity on the fidgeting angel sitting opposite him.

This was the only prompt Gabriel needed because he immediately launched into a full

account of everything that had happened since they had last met. There had been meetings to organise His wrath on a small, unsuspecting, suburban town in New Mexico, a heated argument about whether dressing up as a ghost should be considered blasphemy, a petition to make Christian rock the eighth deadly sin...

“I know I have asked you this before, but don’t you ever get tired of it all?”

“Tired?” Gabriel's eye twitched, “why would I get tired?”

Lucifer raised an eyebrow. “Well, I don’t know, the constant meetings? The knowledge that if you mess up, you will be banished to Hell for all eternity? The lousy health insurance?”

“My job is terrific,” Gabriel’s eye twitched again, “and as long as I make sure that everything is perfect, all of the time, I won't be burnt alive in the pits of damnation. Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy!”

Lucifer took another gulp of tea. He was not surprised when Gabriel started eating the sugar. To be honest, he was impressed he had been able to restrain himself for so long. Lucifer was grateful at times like this that he was his own boss. Sure, torturing the souls of the evil



could get tedious, but at least he did not have to worry if his dental work was covered. Luckily, Hell was awash with dentists, the consequence of all those extortionate fees charged for shoddy fillings.

Mid-way through crunching on a sugar cube, Gabriel asked: “*You* are part of the *J4J* movement? Why?”

Lucifer glanced down at the purple badge with the inscription *Justice 4 Jesus*, which had become visible. What had started out as a joke between mortals had quickly become a movement within the heavens. Because of it, unions had been formed, which were fighting for fair pay, fewer working hours, and most radically of all, the removal of God from his dictatorial position and the implementation of, say, a parliament. How they planned to overthrow someone all-powerful was something Lucifer had not yet figured out, and as it would seem, neither had they. But Lucifer did not wear his badge for its political symbolism, he just liked to be controversial. Not that he would ever admit it.

“I don’t see why you are surprised, dear Gabriel. I have long since thought that He is not

as *good* as He claims to be. Allowing your own son to be crucified? I mean Michael I would understand, he is a self-righteous prick, but *Jesus*? He gave food to the starving. He didn't deserve to die for humanity's sins."

"God is all things pure and light," squeaked Gabriel, loudly enough to receive some curious glances. "Even *you* should be careful about insulting Him."

"Why, what's he going to do? Send me to Hell?" Lucifer took an unimpressed gulp of tea, as Gabriel opened his mouth to make a suitably cutting retort, but coming up empty, was forced to silently glower. Eventually though, he went back to eating sugar.

"Raphael came to work one day with a badge. Said it was time things changed. Never saw him again." Gabriel gave Lucifer a questioning glance, who only shrugged his shoulders.

"He's not in Hell, if that's what you're wondering."

"Didn't think so," Gabriel sighed. Absent-mindedly he reached for the sugar, missed the bowl and instead picked up the flowers, which were still blooming without a

care in the world. "I should probably get going," he said miserably, stuffing the flowers into his mouth.

Lucifer nodded sympathetically. "You do know if it ever gets too much, you can always come and work for me. It would be far less stressful and the dentists are free."

Gabriel nodded, bits of daisy protruding from his mouth.

"See you next week," he mumbled, and standing up, walked back towards the door.

As he left the dingy, run-down cafe, Lucifer wondered if he too would have ended up eating weeds, had he not been banished to Hell.

## GUILT

The door slams shut. Martha did not even say goodbye. I see she is still upset with me. Ever since I ate Lucy the guinea pig (long story), Martha has not been the same. It is really quite a downer, her being upset with me, because I am now constantly being haunted by this new feeling I have never come across before. It makes my tummy hurt, it means I do not sleep well (which is quite concerning since napping is one of my finest skills), and it makes me want to constantly go up to Martha and beg for forgiveness in loud, pathetic meeps. I think the feeling is known as guilt. Ugh, it is terrible.

But I do not think that it is just the loss of Lucy that is upsetting Martha. Ever since the other human left, she seems sadder than ever. Personally I cannot see why. He was always

shouting about something (disturbing my Zen), and he was obviously making Martha unhappy, so of course I had to get rid of him. Personally, I think I make a much better snuggle partner; also I am not noisy or smelly. And of course, I did not want to share Martha's affection with an imbecile.

A week of finding damp boots and furballs cleverly stuffed between the sheets was enough. And while I certainly prefer life without him, it seems that Martha does not. Now, ordinarily, this would not bother me (I try not to take notice of the feelings of others), but since this means that Martha keeps forgetting to feed me, or clean out my litter box, I know something must be done. I have been racking my brain for a solution for ages, but I seem to have reached a dead end. So for the rest of the day I go about my business (widdling on the neighbour's lawn, chasing small children and dogs, disrupting traffic, and so forth), all the while trying to come up with a plan.

Then I run out of things to do, so I go home. Martha is still not back, which means I am left to flail helplessly in my self-made pit of guilt. I go and sit in the corner of the room that

Martha has nicknamed the “corner of shame”, and I think it is quite fitting that I should wait for her there. Not of course, that I am saying that *everything* is my fault. I was quite innocent when Martha dropped a full pan of pasta the other day, and I had nothing to do with the fact that the male human took all the towels when he left. It was my fault though, I admit, that I shredded the remaining ones.

I look around the living room for a cushion, but to my disappointment I find that everything in the room is either stuck, tied, stapled or strapped down, or extremely heavy; aside from some white lilies that Martha got as a gift, and that are systematically stinking the entire house out. She looked so happy putting them out on display, while I, the practical one, had wanted to remind her that there was no point having them since:

- a. they would just die anyway
- b. no one comes around so no one will notice them and
- c. that was one of my favourite napping spots.

But despite my irritated looks, Martha had arranged the lilies anyway. I will never

understand humans. If a few flowers made her that happy, who am I to complain? But just imagine what a whole pile would do! *Hallelujah*, I want to cry! Hope is a wondrous thing.

I dart to the door, too busy even to glare at the demeaning contraption known as a cat flap, that I am forced to use. I race onto the neighbour's lawn, the one who had planted all the colourful flowers. I have to say, they are not quite as fresh as they had been a few weeks ago, the petals a bit brown and shrivelled in places, but never mind that. I do not think that Martha will care. I dig and dig and dig, and after I have decapitated enough blossoms, I grab them between my teeth (taking care not to swallow any icky dirt), and set off back home.

Martha has just arrived and the front door is wide open, so I proudly stride into the living room, depositing the mixture of flowers, weeds and dirt in the middle of the floor. I thought she would be happy. She is not. Instead, she just stares at me. You see, I have never done anything like this before, so in hindsight I should not have been surprised. But this time, I really am acting out of the goodness of my heart, and also I really want Martha to forgive

me so that I can go back to *not* feeling guilty. As she continues to look at me, it becomes clear that she is not going to put two and two together, so I will have to spell it out for her. I climb up to the white lilies, miaowing loudly, and then back to my beautiful bouquet of flowers, and then I look at her meaningfully. Eventually, understanding dawns on Martha's face.

“Fluffy, did you bring me flowers?” she asks, and I miaow in agreement.

And that is how I made it up to Martha. Now she feeds me regularly and I have a clean litter box and it seems that all is forgiven and forgotten. *Thank goodness*. Looking back, I think I should have been given a medal for my genius thinking, and of course for all the effort that I went to, digging up weeds and whatnot. So now, it is just Martha and I, and I think she is coming to see the error of her ways, and the fact that I am an overall superior companion to any other human. That evening though, when I come home after a long, happy day hunting baby birds, I am totally unimpressed to find a pair of ugly black boots at the door.



