

A Little Luck



Jo Derrick

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Someone has stolen Brian's life savings. Is it his gin-soaked excuse of a mother, who has recently sold all of his beloved books or is it his lover who isn't quite what he seems?

"A tragic tale with a double twist. Very dark."

Bedford Writing Competition



Jo Derrick has been writing seriously since 1990 and has numerous short stories and articles published in a range of publications and anthologies.

Her short stories have also been successful in competitions. Jo is the former publisher of *The Yellow Room Magazine*, a print journal for women writers. She is working on a novel.

A LITTLE LUCK

His mother had sold his books. Not that there were many of them. Brian was angry when she told him the first edition had gone, too. She had no idea how much it was worth. She wouldn't. His mother wasn't a bookish person. If it had been down to her, the only books in the house would be a copy of the Bible and the cookbook she was given as a wedding present.

"Should see us through to the end of the month," she said, counting the cash the books had brought in.

Brian swallowed a lump in his throat and turned to look out of the window so she wouldn't see his tears. He indulged himself for a few seconds, allowing the tears to drip onto his cheek before wiping them away roughly with his sleeve. He took a deep breath and turned to look at her, but she was already on her way to the kitchen to put the kettle on. Brian stared at her stooped shoulders and the rough grey wool of her cardigan.

His eye was drawn to the empty bookshelves in the alcove next to the fireplace. His mother had no idea how much they meant to him.

"Brian? What are you doing, son?" she called and he heard the rattle of cups and saucers. "Time to feed Dad's pigeons, lad."

He walked through to the back yard. The pigeons were cooing and shuffling around the coop. They weren't pretty birds, but he'd warmed to them over the past few months. His dad was away fighting in Egypt. Mother didn't miss him. She missed the money he brought in to the house, that was all. The seven shillings a week she got from the army wasn't enough to keep body and soul together, she claimed. Not enough to keep her in gin, Brian thought to himself.

He fed the pigeons, all the time mourning the books that had gone. Dickens, Trollope, Henry James, Austen, Hardy and Shakespeare. He'd read each one through several times. Brian couldn't quite summon up the courage to enter the Boots lending library in the next street. People would talk. What did Brian Etherington want with books? This would only serve to reinforce their view that he was a lazy lump who wouldn't know a day's hard work if it hit him smack in the face. Hadn't he more important things to worry about such as looking after his poor mother? Or his clerk's job at the town hall? Not fit enough for the foundry or the army. Should have been shipped off to the countryside to work the land.

Guilt had become so much part of his every day life now, that it was almost his closest friend.

"Brian! Come inside now and drink this tea before it stews."

Brian would rather stay out in the back yard, daydreaming to the accompaniment of the pigeon's lullaby. Stray feathers drifted out from the coop and landed on the moss covered cobbles.

"Coming, Mother."

She'd set out the tea things - a plate of bread and marg, a dirty looking cake made with powdered egg, and a few slithers of ham. Brian hadn't any appetite. War food was even worse than the fare his mother usually put before him. The only way he could get through each mealtime was by reading as he ate. He could shut out his mother's nagging once he was immersed in Hardy's Wessex or privately puzzling over one of Henry James's femme fatales.

"What you need, my lad, is a good woman. It's high time you were married and settled. You're a burden to me, lad."

His mother alternated between the desire to see him gone and the need for his weekly wage. She liked the fact that he took over his father's chores, and he knew that if he left, then she would live like a slattern infused with gin.

The neighbours saw her as respectable. A good woman. A pillar of their small back street community. Brian yearned for better things. A house in the suburbs with a drive, a garage and a car. A garden he could tend each evening in spring and summer. A lawn with stripes. Honeysuckle and Honesty growing in abundance. Broom and lavender. A little bit of the countryside to come home to after a day of ledgers and filing.

Brian silently thanked the good lord that he had savings. A stash of money he kept back each week that his mother knew nothing about. He wouldn't buy more books. Not until he moved out anyway. Then he'd have shelves and shelves of them in his sitting room. He would spend every winter evening reading until his eyelids drooped and he was ready for sleep.

Brian thought about marriage for a moment. What a ridiculous suggestion it was. He couldn't tell his mother why he could never marry; that he would be living a lie.

He despised their cramped two-bedroomed house. The outdoor privy with squares of newspaper hanging on a nail. The whitewashed walls. The coal house with the door hanging off its hinges. The dusty parlour which his mother only used on special occasions. The torn curtains at the kitchen window and the smell of grease.

That day Tony insisted on coming back here. Brian remembered the shame and embarrassment as if it were yesterday. Mrs Riley next door had given him a filthy look when he met her in the street the next day, as well she might. She'd no doubt heard the creaking bed springs and the hammering of the headboard against their shared wall, not to mention Tony's grunts, moans and loud sighs. It made Brian blush to think of it now, but at the time he was lost in a different world and was deaf to everything. He was too busy drowning in Tony's pleasure and his own.

He went up to his bedroom now and lifted the loose floorboard to check on the money. It wasn't there.

"Jesus Bloody Christ!" he yelled and slammed the floorboard back down. "The bitch! First my books, now this."

The vision of the suburban house, the beautiful lawn and well stocked garden vanished from view. He had been so damn close. Brian marched down the uncarpeted stairs and back into the kitchen where he caught his mother swigging from the gin bottle.

"Where is it? I can just about tolerate you selling my books, but stealing my money.... that's a different kettle of fish."

She turned towards him, her face flushed and her eyes glazed. "I don't know what you're talking about, son," she slurred, replacing the cork in the bottle and stashing it under the sink.

"You've been in my room! You've taken my money!" The room began to spin and Brian had to sit down. "Where is it? You can't have spent it already."

Brian studied his mother's face. She'd once been pretty, but now her cheeks were covered in tiny thread veins and her nose was red and pitted. She didn't show the slightest bit of remorse. She didn't even look guilty.

"Brian. Son. I honestly don't know what you're talking about. What money? We ain't got none, have we? That's why I had to sell your books. To get by."

Brian shook his head, then slammed his fist down on the sticky table. "I don't believe you. No one else has been in this house apart from you and I. You must have taken it."

As he was speaking a slimy worm of thought snaked up from the pit of his stomach and into his head.

Tony.

Surely not?

He flounced out of the kitchen, knowing that as soon as he had left the room, she'd take the gin bottle back out from the cupboard and carry on swigging. He'd find her spark out on the battered horsehair sofa when he came back downstairs.

Back in his bedroom, Brian felt down under the floorboard once more, stretching his arm as far as he could and feeling around amongst the dust and dirt for the money he'd been saving for the past five years. Nothing.

Was Tony capable of stealing from him? This man he loved with all his heart and soul. The man all this was for. Brian began to weep. He was easily moved to tears these days. An emotional fool. What did he really know about Tony and his lifestyle? They'd met in a bar on Old Compton Street. For Brian it was love at first sight. Tony was tall with baby blond hair and vivid blue eyes. He could have been a film star. It was only his shabby jacket which had become shiny with wear and his greying shirt with the frayed collar that spoiled the look, but Brian could see beyond the clothes. The first time they met he couldn't wait to see Tony naked and knew he'd have the most perfect physique. For someone who was too poor to dress nicely, Tony was in good physical shape. He told Brian he used to be a gymnast. Brian could believe it, too. He loved stroking his taut, flat stomach and strong, firm thighs.

How Tony had managed to avoid being called up, he could only guess at. Tony had hinted he had friends in high places; government ministers and the like. If that was the case, then why didn't he dress the part? Brian tried not to let jealousy consume him. He hated the thought of Tony being with anyone else.

Brian walked out of the house with renewed resolve. He'd confront Tony. Ask him up front about the money. He was certain there was a reasonable explanation. Perhaps Tony had borrowed it? Or hidden it as a joke? Brian's head was reeling by the time he reached the dingy pub down by the canal. It was Tony's favourite haunt. He'd told Brian early on in their relationship that he felt drawn to backstreet boozers; spit and sawdust with barrels behind the bar. It was only now that Brian began to wonder why that was. Bit of rough. How he hated those three words. They jarred against his craving for respectability. Yet, how could he be considered respectable living in a dirty house with a mother who loved alcohol more than she loved him? Brian shuddered and brushed imaginary hairs from his jacket.

When Brian opened the battered wooden door into the public bar, the first person he saw was Tony. He leant against a pillar chatting to a good looking young man wearing a donkey jacket. Brian stood for a few moments and took in the scene. Tony was animated, chatting easily and his distinctive laugh drifted across the smoke-filled room to where Brian stood.

Brian's heart danced when he saw that Tony was wearing a new suit. He'd also had a hair cut. He looked even more handsome than usual. Then Brian remembered the missing money and felt sick.

Tony approached the bar waving a ten pound note for all to see, telling the barman, "The drinks are on me!"

Brian felt his face flush. He began to shake with anger. So, Tony had stolen his money. It was obvious. A part of him felt pleased that Tony had done it this way. It was far more open to steal like that than to resort to blackmail. To think he'd been saving hard so that the two of them could have a better life together away from these backstreets and dingy public houses. He'd visualised mowing the lawn on a summer's evening while Tony lounged in a deckchair drinking posh wine.

A hurricane of fury blew up and out of him so suddenly, it took him by surprise.

Brian forgot that he was a clerk at the town hall for a moment, put two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. Everyone in the pub looked round, including Tony, whose face drained of colour.

"Brian! Come over here, old chap and have a drink!"

Tony forgot that he was supposed to be 'one of them' for a moment, his cut-glass public schoolboy accent slicing across the room like a blade.

Brian noticed a few of the regular customers muttering to each other over their dimpled tankards. Someone coughed and the landlord looking ready to give Brian his marching orders.

Brian stood his ground and beckoned Tony over towards him.

"I'm just about to get a round in, old chap. What's the problem?" Tony asked, carefully folding the note and putting it in his trouser pocket.

"Where did you get that money?" Brian asked. "You owe it to me to be straight with me."

His hands shook and he badly needed a drink, but that could wait.

"Hang on, Brian. Don't be like that. I had a win on the gee-gees, didn't I? Had a little luck. Haven't you always said that's what you needed?"

Tony winked and Brian felt a flood of love and forgiveness wash over him. He'd been stupid. Fancy believing Tony took his money. What had he been thinking?

"How much?" Brian asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Two hundred, old man. Two hundred! Can you believe it? Enough to buy some of your books back."

Brian was torn. Should he believe him? He desperately wanted to, but something niggled. Something didn't feel right and then as if to confirm this, the young man Tony had been talking to by the pillar came over.

"Everything all right, Tone? It's just I 'aven't got much time, mate. Forget the drinks. I know somewhere we can go. Got to be quick, mind."

The lad tried to whisper, but Brian heard every word. So that was Tony's game, was it?

To think he had trusted him completely! Was ready to give up his family, his whole life for him and here he was propositioning other men in backstreet boozers.

Brian had never felt anything like it. It was as if a storm had broken out inside him and flashes of lightning surged through his veins. His temple was throbbing and he felt too choked to speak. Instead he simply grabbed Tony by the collar and shoved him outside. He'd never considered himself a violent man before and was shocked by his own strength.

"Fuck me, Brian! What's got into you? A right little navvy on the quiet, aren't we?"

It wasn't just the mocking tone of his voice that got to Brian. It wasn't even that he'd called him a 'navvy'. No, it was the look in Tony's eyes. It took Brian back to the school playground. It was the same taunting stare which had accompanied the bullies' shoves. It was almost a challenge. 'Come and have a go, if you dare!' Well, Brian did dare. He'd had enough of being pushed around by Tony, by his mother, his employer and every one else in his life.

"Enough!" Brian barely recognised his own voice as he approached Tony. "Enough! Enough! Enough!"

With each word Brian pushed Tony a little closer to the edge of the murky water behind him. Tony glared at him in disbelief. Then he laughed.

Brian had expected a bigger splash - something more spectacular to mark the end of Tony's life on earth. He turned round expecting to see a crowd all set to dive in and save Tony, but there was no one. The heavy oak door of the pub remained closed.

He didn't even stay to watch Tony's fight to remain above water. He knew he couldn't swim. How many times had he suggested they go to the lido and Tony refusing each and every time?

Brian walked slowly back home. There was no hurry. He had nothing to hurry for anymore. He didn't care what happened to him now. He would simply carry on as usual and wait for them to come for him.

The scene that greeted him when he walked into the house was as he expected. His mother was sprawled across the sofa like a rag doll, snoring loudly and a trail of dribble snaking down her chin. The empty gin bottle lay on the floor beside her.

Brian could see something sticking out of the pocket of her floral pinny. As he got closer, he recognised the brown paper bag in which he kept his savings.