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I *The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones*

Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 06.27 hours on 1 January 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel, hoping the judgement would not be too heavy upon him. He lay forward in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist he held his army service medals (left) and his marriage licence (right), for he had decided to take his mistakes with him. A little green light flashed in his eye, signalling a right turn he had resolved never to make. He was resigned to it. He was prepared for it. He had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. This was a decided-upon suicide. In fact it was a New Year's resolution.

But even as his breathing became spasmodic and his lights dimmed, Archie was aware that Cricklewood Broadway would seem a strange choice. Strange to the first person to notice his slumped figure through the windscreen, strange to the policemen who would file the report, to the local journalist called upon to write fifty words, to the next of kin who would read them. Squeezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other, Cricklewood was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came in order to go other places via the A41. But Archie Jones didn't want to die in some pleasant, distant woodland, or on a cliff edge fringed with delicate heather. The way Archie saw it, country people should die in the country and city people should die in the city. Only proper. *In death as he was in life* and all that. It made sense that Archibald should die on this nasty

urban street where he had ended up, living alone at the age of forty-seven, in a one-bedroom flat above a deserted chip shop. He wasn't the type to make elaborate plans – suicide notes and funeral instructions – he wasn't the type for anything fancy. All he asked for was a bit of silence, a bit of *shush* so he could concentrate. He wanted it to be perfectly quiet and still, like the inside of an empty confessional box or the moment in the brain between thought and speech. He wanted to do it before the shops opened.

Overhead, a gang of the local flying vermin took off from some unseen perch, swooped, and seemed to be zeroing in on Archie's car roof – only to perform, at the last moment, an impressive U-turn, moving as one with the elegance of a curve ball and landing on the Hussein-Ishmael, a celebrated halal butchers. Archie was too far gone to make a big noise about it, but he watched them with a warm internal smile as they deposited their load, streaking white walls purple. He watched them stretch their peering bird heads over the Hussein-Ishmael gutter; he watched them watch the slow and steady draining of blood from the dead things – chickens, cows, sheep – hanging on their hooks like coats around the shop. The Unlucky. These pigeons had an instinct for the Unlucky, and so they passed Archie by. For, though he did not know it, and despite the Hoover tube that lay on the passenger seat pumping from the exhaust pipe into his lungs, luck was with him that morning. The thinnest covering of luck was on him like fresh dew. Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live.

The Hussein-Ishmael was owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, a great bull of a man with hair that rose and fell in a quiff, then a ducktail. Mo believed that with pigeons you have to get to the root of the problem: not the excretions but the pigeon itself. *The shit is not the shit* (this was Mo's mantra), *the pigeon is the shit*. So the morning of Archie's almost-death began as every morning in the Hussein-Ishmael, with Mo resting his huge belly on the windowsill, leaning out and swinging a meat cleaver in an attempt to halt the flow of dribbling purple.

'Get out of it! Get away, you shit-making bastards! Yes! SIX!'

It was cricket, basically – the Englishman's game adapted by the immigrant, and six was the most pigeons you could get at one swipe.

'Varin!' said Mo, calling down to the street, holding the bloodied cleaver up in triumph. 'You're in to bat, my boy. Ready?'

Below him on the pavement stood Varin – a massively overweight Hindu boy on misjudged work experience from the school round the corner, looking up like a big dejected blob underneath Mo's question mark. It was Varin's job to struggle up a ladder and gather spliced bits of pigeon into a small Kwik Save carrier bag, tie the bag up, and dispose of it in the bins at the other end of the street.

'Come on, Mr Fatty-man,' yelled one of Mo's kitchen staff, poking Varin up the arse with a broom as punctuation for each word. 'Get-your-fat-Ganesh-Hindu-backside-up-there-Elephant-Boy-and-bring-some-of-that-mashed-pigeon-stuff-with-you.'

Mo wiped the sweat off his forehead, snorted, and looked out over Cricklewood, surveying the discarded armchairs and strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot-machine emporiums, the greasy spoons and the minicabs – all covered in shit. One day, so Mo believed, Cricklewood and its residents would have cause to thank him for his daily massacre; one day no man, woman or child in the Broadway would ever again have to mix one part detergent to four parts vinegar to

clean up the crap that falls on the world. *The shit is not the shit*, he repeated solemnly, *the pigeon is the shit*. Mo was the only man in the community who truly understood. He was feeling really very Zen about this – very goodwill-to-all-men – until he spotted Archie's car.

'Arshad!'

A shifty-looking skinny guy with a handlebar moustache, dressed in four different shades of brown, came out of the shop, with blood on his palms.

'Arshad!' Mo barely restrained himself, stabbed his finger in the direction of the car. 'My boy, I'm going to ask you just once.'

'Yes, Abba?' said Arshad, shifting from foot to foot.

'What the hell is this? What is this doing here? I got delivery at 6.30. I got fifteen dead bovines turning up here at 6.30. I got to get it in the back. That's my job. You see? There's *meat* coming. So, I am *perplexed* . . .' Mo affected a look of innocent confusion. 'Because I thought this was clearly marked "Delivery Area".' He pointed to an ageing wooden crate which bore the legend NO PARKINGS OF ANY VEHICLE ON ANY DAYS. 'Well?'

'I don't know, Abba.'

'You're my son, Arshad. I don't employ you not to know. I employ *him* not to know' – he reached out of the window and slapped Varin, who was negotiating the perilous gutter like a tightrope-walker, giving him a thorough cosh to the back of his head and almost knocking the boy off his perch – 'I employ *you* to know things. To compute information. To bring into the light the great darkness of the creator's unexplainable universe.'

'Abba?'

'Find out what it's doing there and get rid of it.'

Mo disappeared from the window. A minute later Arshad returned with the explanation. 'Abba.'

Mo's head sprang back through the window like a malicious cuckoo from a Swiss clock.

'He's gassing himself, Abba.'

'What?'

Arshad shrugged. 'I shouted through the car window and told the guy to move on and he says, "I am gassing myself, leave me alone." Like that.'

'No one gasses himself on my property,' Mo snapped as he marched downstairs. 'We are not licensed.'

Once in the street, Mo advanced upon Archie's car, pulled out the towels that were sealing the gap in the driver's window, and pushed it down five inches with brute, bullish force.

'Do you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you're going to die round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first.'

Archie dragged his head off the steering wheel. And in the moment between focusing on the sweaty bulk of a brown-skinned Elvis and realizing that life was still his, he had a kind of epiphany. It occurred to him that, for the first time since his birth, Life had said Yes to Archie Jones. Not simply an 'OK' or 'You-might-as-well-carry-on-since-you've-started', but a resounding affirmative. Life wanted Archie. She had jealously grabbed him from the jaws of death, back to her bosom. Although he was not one of her better specimens, Life wanted Archie and Archie, much to his own surprise, wanted Life.

Frantically, he wound down both his windows and gasped for oxygen from the very depths of his lungs. In between gulps he thanked Mo profusely, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hands clinging on to Mo's apron.

'All right, all right,' said the butcher, freeing himself from Archie's fingers and brushing himself clean, 'move along now. I've got meat coming. I'm in the business of bleeding. Not

counselling. You want Lonely Street. This Cricklewood Lane.'

Archie, still choking on thank-yous, reversed, pulled out from the curb, and turned right.



Archie Jones attempted suicide because his wife Ophelia, a violet-eyed Italian with a faint moustache, had recently divorced him. But he had not spent New Year's morning gagging on the tube of a vacuum cleaner because he loved her. It was rather because he had lived with her for so long and had *not* loved her. Archie's marriage felt like buying a pair of shoes, taking them home and finding they don't fit. For the sake of appearances, he put up with them. And then, all of a sudden and after thirty years, the shoes picked themselves up and walked out of the house. She left. Thirty years.

As far as he remembered, just like everybody else they began well. The first spring of 1946, he had stumbled out of the darkness of war and into a Florentine coffee house, where he was served by a waitress truly like the sun: Ophelia Diagilo, dressed all in yellow, spreading warmth and the promise of sex as she passed him a frothy cappuccino. They walked into it blinkered as horses. She was not to know that women never stayed as daylight in Archie's life; that somewhere in him he didn't like them, he didn't trust them, and he was able to love them only if they wore haloes. No one told Archie that lurking in the Diagilo family tree were two hysteric aunts, an uncle who talked to aubergines and a cousin who wore his clothes back to front. So they got married and returned to England, where she realized very quickly her mistake, he drove her very quickly mad, and the halo was packed off to the attic to collect dust with the rest of the bric-a-brac and broken kitchen appliances that Archie promised one day to repair. Amongst that bric-a-brac was a Hoover.



On Boxing Day morning, six days before he parked outside Mo's halal butchers, Archie had returned to their semi-detached in Hendon in search of that Hoover. It was his fourth trip to the attic in so many days, ferrying out the odds and ends of a marriage to his new flat, and the Hoover was amongst the very last items he reclaimed – one of the most broken things, most ugly things, the things you demand out of sheer bloody-mindedness because you have lost the house. This is what divorce is: taking things you no longer want from people you no longer love.

'So you again,' said the Spanish home-help at the door, Santa-Maria or Maria-Santa or something. 'Meester Jones, what now? Kitchen sink, sí?'

'Hoover,' said Archie, grimly. 'Vacuum.'

She cut her eyes at him and spat on the doormat inches from his shoes. 'Welcome, señor.'

The place had become a haven for people who hated him. Apart from the home-help, he had to contend with Ophelia's extended Italian family, her mental-health nurse, the woman from the council, and of course Ophelia herself, who was to be found in the kernel of this nuthouse, curled up in a foetal ball on the sofa, making lowing sounds into a bottle of Bailey's. It took him an hour and a quarter just to get through enemy lines – and for what? A perverse Hoover, discarded months earlier because it was determined to perform the opposite of every vacuum's objective: spewing out dust instead of sucking it in.

'Meester Jones, why do you come here when it make you so unhappy? Be *reasonable*. What can you want with it?' The home-help was following him up the attic stairs, armed with some kind of cleaning fluid: 'It's broken. You don't *need* this. See? See?' She plugged it into a socket and demonstrated the dead switch. Archie took the plug out and silently wound the cord round the Hoover. If it was broken, it was coming with him. All broken things were coming with him. He was going to fix every

damn broken thing in this house, if only to show that he was good for something.

'You good for nothing!' Santa whoever chased him back down the stairs. 'Your wife is ill in her head, and this is all you can do!'

Archie hugged the Hoover to his chest and took it into the crowded living room, where, under several pairs of reproachful eyes, he got out his toolbox and started work on it.

'Look at him,' said one of the Italian grandmothers, the more glamorous one with the big scarves and fewer moles, 'he take everything, capisce? He take-a her mind, he take-a the blender, he take-a the old stereo – he take-a everything except the floorboards. It make-a you sick . . .'

The woman from the council, who even on dry days resembled a long-haired cat soaked to the skin, shook her skinny head in agreement. 'It's disgusting, you don't have to tell me, it's disgusting . . . and naturally, we're the ones left to sort out the mess; it's *muggins* here who has to –'

Which was overlapped by the nurse: 'She can't stay here alone, can she . . . now *he's* buggered off, poor woman . . . she needs a proper home, she needs . . .'

I'm here, Archie felt like saying, I'm right here you know, I'm bloody right here. And it was my blender.

But he wasn't one for confrontation, Archie. He listened to them all for another fifteen minutes, mute as he tested the Hoover's suction against pieces of newspaper, until he was overcome by the sensation that Life was an enormous rucksack so impossibly heavy that, even though it meant losing everything, it was infinitely easier to leave all baggage here on the roadside and walk on into the blackness. *You don't need the blender, Archie-boy, you don't need the Hoover. This stuff's all dead weight. Just lay down the rucksack, Arch, and join the happy campers in the sky.* Was that wrong? To Archie – ex-wife and ex-wife's relatives in one ear, spluttering vacuum in the other – it just seemed that The End was unavoidably nigh. Nothing personal to God or whatever.

It just felt like the end of the world. And he was going to need more than poor whisky, novelty crackers and a paltry box of Quality Street – all the strawberry ones already scoffed – to justify entering another annum.

Patiently he fixed the Hoover, and vacuumed the living room with a strange methodical finality, shoving the nozzle into the most difficult corners. Solemnly he flipped a coin (heads, life, tails, death) and felt nothing in particular when he found himself staring at the dancing lion. Quietly he detached the Hoover tube, put it in a suitcase, and left the house for the last time.

But dying's no easy trick. And suicide can't be put on a list of Things to Do in between cleaning the grill pan and levelling the sofa leg with a brick. It is the decision not to do, to un-do; a kiss blown at oblivion. No matter what anyone says, suicide takes guts. It's for heroes and martyrs, truly vainglorious men. Archie was none of these. He was a man whose significance in the Greater Scheme of Things could be figured along familiar ratios:

Pebble: Beach.

Raindrop: Ocean.

Needle: Haystack.

So for a few days he ignored the decision of the coin and just drove around with the Hoover tube. At nights he looked out through the windscreen into the monstropolous sky and had the old realization of his universal proportions, feeling what it was to be tiny and rootless. He thought about the dent he might make on the world if he disappeared, and it seemed negligible, too small to calculate. He squandered spare minutes wondering whether 'Hoover' had become a generic term for vacuum cleaners or whether it was, as others have argued, just a brand name. And all the time the Hoover tube lay like a great flaccid cock on his back seat, mocking his quiet fear, laughing at his pigeon-steps as he approached the executioner, sneering at his impotent indecision.

Then, on the 29th of December, he went to see his old friend Samad Miah Iqbal. An unlikely compadre possibly, but still the oldest friend he had – a Bengali Muslim he had fought alongside back when the fighting had to be done, who reminded him of that war; that war that reminded some people of fatty bacon and painted-on-stockings but recalled in Archie gunshots and card games and the taste of a sharp, foreign alcohol.

'Archie, my dear friend,' Samad had said, in his warm, hearty tones. 'You must forget all this wife-trouble. Try a new life. That is what you need. Now, enough of all this: I will match your five bob and raise you five.'

They were sitting in their new haunt, O'Connell's Pool House, playing poker with only three hands, two of Archie's and one of Samad's – Samad's right hand being a broken thing, grey-skinned and unmoving, dead in every way bar the blood that ran through it. The place they sat in, where they met each evening for dinner, was half café, half gambling den, owned by an Iraqi family, the many members of which shared a bad skin condition.

'Look at me. Marrying Alsana has given me this new lease on living, you understand? She opens up for me the new possibilities. She's so young, so vital – like a breath of fresh air. You come to me for advice? Here it is. Don't live this old life – it's a sick life, Archibald. It does you no good. No good whatsoever.'

Samad had looked at him with a great sympathy, for he felt very tenderly for Archie. Their wartime friendship had been severed by thirty years of separation across continents, but in the spring of 1973 Samad had come to England, a middle-aged man seeking a new life with his twenty-year-old new bride, the diminutive, moon-faced Alsana Begum with her shrewd eyes. In a fit of nostalgia, and because he was the only man Samad knew on this little island, Samad had sought Archie out, moved into the same London borough. And slowly but surely a kind of friendship was being rekindled between the two men.

'You play like a faggot,' said Samad, laying down the winning

queens back to back. He flicked them with the thumb of his left hand in one elegant move, making them fall to the table in a fan shape.

'I'm old,' said Archie, throwing his cards in, 'I'm old. Who'd have me now? It was hard enough convincing anybody the first time.'

'That is nonsense, Archibald. You have not even met the right one yet. This Ophelia, Archie, she is not the right one. From what you leave me to understand she is not even for this time –'

He referred to Ophelia's madness, which led her to believe, half of the time, that she was the maid of the celebrated fifteenth-century art lover Cosimo de' Medici.

'She is born, she lives, simply in the wrong time! This is just not her day! Maybe not her millennium. Modern life has caught that woman completely unawares and up the arse. Her mind is gone. Bugged. And you? You have picked up the wrong life in the cloakroom and you must return it. Besides, she has not blessed you with children . . . and life without children, Archie, what is it for? But there are second chances; oh yes, there are second chances in life. Believe me, I know. You,' he continued, raking in the top's with the side of his bad hand, 'should never have married her.'

Bloody hindsight, thought Archie. It's always 20/20.

Finally, two days after this discussion, early on New Year's morning, the pain had reached such a piercing level that Archie was no longer able to cling to Samad's advice. He had decided instead to mortify his own flesh, to take his own life, to free himself from a life path that had taken him down numerous wrong turnings, led him deep into the wilderness and finally petered out completely, its breadcrumb course gobbled up by the birds.



Once the car started to fill with gas, he had experienced the obligatory flashback of his life to date. It turned out to be a short,