**Mateus**

All his life Mateus had felt on the outside looking in and being a window cleaner didn’t help in the

least.

Whatever the time of year he would peer intently at life on the other side of the glass, Christmas

time was the worst, seeing families preparing for the celebrations, gifts piled up by the tree, a time of

loving and sharing, only he had no one to give to.

Some days his imagination ran riot and he pictured himself, feet up, lounging on a sumptuous sofa,

surrounded by books and glossy magazines, with a brandy in his hand, surveying his wealth like

the man at number forty two. He had seen him sitting at his bureau rifling through documents with a

disdainful look on his face, seemingly screwing up every third sheet of paper and hurling it at the

wastepaper basket but invariably missing the target on other occasions he was relaxing, drinking

coffee , reading the paper.

Not all the houses where he cleaned the windows were occupied by happy clients, the girl at

number seventeen with her two snotty nosed children certainly didn’t have a charmed life. The net

curtains were torn and grubby and as he gazed into her flat he was aware of the squalor and poverty

that surrounded her. The sink was always full of dirty dishes, and soiled nappies overflowed out of a

bucket but he had noticed that recently she seemed to be getting a grip on things and that the children

looked happier in the last couple of months.

Kate was different she lived at number forty six, she always had a smile on her face and

always took the time to wave a cheery hello not just to Mateus but to anyone who crossed her path.

As he polished the windows he felt a warmth just looking into her house. The lounge was

filled with lots of unusual ornaments and trinkets, cupboards that she had decorated with decoupage

and bright paint. Even the curtains in that room were cheerful, she had made patchwork ones

using scraps of vintage cotton which gave the room a bohemian feel.

He wondered what she did for a job, perhaps she was a teacher or an artist, as he continued cleaning

her windows he looked into the other rooms for clues. The bedroom was minimalistic in muted shades

of grey a complete contrast to the lounge this room having its clean simple lines and just three black

and white photos on the wall above the bed as the only decoration. A pile of books on the bedside cabinet

was enormous.

The bathroom was small, with a nautical look and a vast array of shampoo’s and lotions and

potions on the shelf amongst the shells and driftwood.

Lastly the kitchen diner was a fine example of shabby chic with its chalky finish furniture, painted

table and chairs, and a polka dotted tablecloth. Numerous cookery books spilled out of the shelves

and onto every available space, two were lying open on the table.

Mateus pondered on what her name was perhaps Phoebe or Flora, something pretty, arty.

The final house on his round belonged to Betty an older lady who seemed vague and forgetful.

She was usually sitting in her conservatory when he came, looking out onto her back garden with its

fruit trees and regimented planting in spring of red and white tulips under planted with blue grape

hyacinths and forget me nots, followed by red salvias and blue and white petunias in summer.

Betty could never remember where her purse was when it came time to pay and he noticed as time

passed that she found it increasingly difficult to give him the right change. She seemed contented and

always offered him a coffee and custard cream biscuits. He enjoyed sitting with her in the

conservatory and chatting about this and that. He loved her wide vocabulary and the way she used

words so expressively. It was a nice way to end the day before he headed home to his grim bedsit in

on the outskirts of town.

The next day was commercial cleaning, the shops in the high street, the museum and lastly the

library.

Mateus enjoyed washing the shop windows almost as much as he did the houses, it left him less

room for his fertile imagination but nevertheless there was much to see.

In The Sewing Box haberdashery shop a pretty woman of about thirty was rifling through a box of

ribbons, turning them over in her hands and having selected a roll of purple ribbon she moved onto

the button section.

The guy from number forty two was in the off licence buying some brandy.

Mateus spotted Betty in the supermarket, she was meandering around the aisles popping various

items into her basket, two packets of custard creams were swiftly followed by a brown wholemeal

loaf not the cheap stuff but an artisan crafted one. The best butter, an assortment of cheeses, not

mousetrap cheddar, but camembert, stilton, boursin. She wandered through the home baking section

pausing to look at the food colourings and dainty cake decorations.

As she walked down the biscuit aisle she hesitated by the custard creams and picked up another two

packets, oblivious to the fact that she they had been her first purchase of the day.

It really was fascinating watching people, getting to know their idiosyncrasies.

Betty was the epitome of the happy shopper. She smiled widely as she approached the meat

counter. Money was not a problem for her, she was comfortably well off, having retired from her

job as a head teacher her pension was more than adequate and she had lived with her parents until

their deaths and inherited the house from them. Her retirement present to herself was the

conservatory which she had built, a luxury, but one that gave her great pleasure. Most evenings she

would have a glass of wine and her supper sitting on the rattan sofa. Then she would get out her

laptop and work on it for an hour or so.

Mateus continued his observations as he made his way along the high street peering in through the

shop windows and observing the customers as he washed, wiped and polished the windows.

The library would be the last port of call, a large job that usually took a good couple of hours, it

was a modern building, light and airy with vast expanses of glass to be cleaned. Although it seemed a

daunting task for one man Mateus enjoyed the challenge and the sense of satisfaction when the job

was done.

Inside the library there were comfy armchairs and sofas, gone were the days of being silent, now it

was a place of bustle and noise, the children’s area was a hive of activity, Mums were chatting and

drinking coffee and the librarian sat on the floor reading stories to those who had ears to hear.

Wellbeing was the theme of the library and a myriad groups met there, sessions were run to help

with housing support, employment and financial advice.

Alongside these individual interventions were support groups to help those who wanted to give up

smoking, or drinking or get control of their weight and then there were the social interaction groups

with reminiscence and creative writing sessions.

Mateus wondered what would be going on today. He knew that there was a support group that met

regularly on a Wednesday for the would be skinnies, where they would talk about food and sometimes

they shared some too. It looked fun and he looked at his expanding waistline and wondered if he

should join in.

As he started washing the windows he looked into the play area and noticed the twins belonging to

the girl at number seventeen had clean faces and were being read to by an older woman.

They looked much better here than they had at home, the dinginess of their home surroundings had

been shed like a caterpillars chrysalis and here they seemed more alert and attractive than he had

previously noticed.

A poster on the inside of the glass advertised a creative writing group, Mateus looked at his watch

and saw that it had begun ten minutes ago, he wondered who would go to such a thing.

The automatic doors opened and Betty walked in clutching an A4 file and the obligatory custard

creams. She looked slightly harassed, her shoulders stooped but when she saw the rest of the regulars

she relaxed and took her seat amongst them.

Mateus climbed up his ladder a little higher so he could see who else was there. It looked a mixed

bag, the girl from number forty six had opened her note book and looked particularly bohemian, he

wondered if she always dressed like that or whether it was part of a writers persona, she certainly

looked like Millais ‘The bridesmaid’. Her waterfalling auburn hair was swept back

revealing a broad forehead and an aquiline nose. Mateus loved pre-Raphaelite paintings and here was

a girl who would have made a fine muse. It saddened him that having got a degree in art history that

he couldn’t find a job to match his qualification, but at least window cleaning was interesting and

meant he had a steady wage.

His attention was then drawn to the chap from number forty two. He had on a Harris tweed jacket

that had seen better days and corn coloured corduroy trousers. The Paisley cravat around his neck

gave him a raffish charm. Leaning back in the chair with his hands behind his head he oozed

confidence and calm, which wasn’t how he had always seemed when Mateus had observed him

screwing up balls of paper and throwing them into the waste paper basket.

Curiosity about his customers was burning within him. Normally he would only clean the outside

of the windows but he felt compelled to offer to clean them on the inside at no extra charge, just so he

could quench his nosiness and eavesdrop on the writing group.

Once inside the library he leant his ladder against the wall, climbed up it and hovered like a buzzard

facing into the wind eyeing up its prey. He could now see over the bookshelves and there at a

large table sat the gathered throng.

Interestingly the girl from number seventeen appeared to be in charge. On her Ipad she was noting

the names of the attendees.

Christopher Soames the man from number forty two nodded as she mentioned his name. Kate Blunt

with her smile as wide as ever laughed as it reminded her of registration time at school.

Betty Sidebottom cringed at the mention of her name you would have thought at seventy two she

would have been immune to it, but no it still bothered her. She had thought of changing it via deed

poll to something more acceptable like Harvey or Jones, but it was too much effort.

Polly the mother of the twins looked up from her IPad, leant forward and drew her chair in closer to

the table, ‘Well how did we all get on with last week’s homework?’

Kate smiled, she was never bothered what others thought about her. Even here in the library, where

she was chief librarian she stood out as different and being part of the writing group wasn’t a required

part of her job description but she found such joy in belonging to it.

‘I found it exhilarating to write about passers-by, I went to the park and I loved writing outdoors in the sun it was such a good

choice Polly, the sun even came out while I was sitting in the park and the long shadows filled me

with delight. I knew that even when the sun had set that its influence was still making its mark’

Inclining her head toward Chris she waited for his response to the question. He shuffled in his seat,

hunched his shoulders, and looked awkward, more awkward than usual, he wondered why he put

himself through this agony every week ’Well to be honest I didn’t know where to begin, ‘I’m not

very good at this stuff, you know,’ he paused and grimaced ‘letting people see what I really think,

my feminine side, ‘I feel confused about being emotional, I spend hours trying to write something

meaningful but I spend as much time screwing the sheet of paper into a ball and aiming it at the

wastepaper basket, and I can’t even get that right and get it in the bin first go.’

Betty leant forward and patted him on the arm. ‘It’s not about how well we do it Chris, it’s about

enjoying ourselves.’

He recoiled at her touch and withdrew further into himself like a tortoise into its shell, ‘I know,

Betty I know that, it’s just that I find being retired so difficult, it takes a lot of adjustment. In my job I

accomplished so much and I miss the constant challenge of making people comfortable in

uncomfortable circumstances. Success was what I aimed for and now I can’t even get it together to

write a half decent short story or a poem.’

Kate smiled at him, not just with her lips but with her eyes too, ‘I’ve always wondered Chris

what you did for a job?’

Christopher looked apprehensive, he never talked to anyone about his career, he had even moved

towns to have a fresh start. Kate meant well and appreciated her concern, but he wasn’t sure he

wanted to divulge his occupation.

Undertaking wasn’t the most glamorous or exciting career choice.

Shuffling in his chair he crossed then uncrossed his legs, ‘Er, well,’

Polly decided to take charge at this point and said ‘That’s Ok Chris whatever you did I am sure

you did it well. Shall we just get on with the task in hand? Last week’s homework was to write about

a poem or short story about someone you passed in the street. Kate who did you choose to write

about?’

Kate breathed out and in her usual gentle laid back way began to tell the group about her story.

‘Last week I saw this guy in Burton Park, all tattoos and a number one haircut, stocky, with a face like

a pit bull terrier who had swallowed a wasp and you’ll never guess what sort of dog he had, a

Chihuahua I wondered what his back story was!

I have called the story’ ‘Storm in a teacup’.’

The group laughed as she regaled them with the tale about the minute dog called Storm and his

interactions with the guy she had named Jeremy. Even Chris managed a weak smile.

Mateus finished off the window he had started and moved onto the next one even nearer than the

group than before. He ascended the ladder and with bucket in hand resumed his buzzard like pose.

‘O.K. so who’s up next?’ Chris debated whether to go next and get it over and done with or to hang

on and be last, in the hope that they might forget about his contribution.

There was no response, ‘I’ll go next then, I was wandering down the High Street when I noticed an

old woman, stooped and looking burdened by life’s cares. She was shabbily dressed and was talking

to herself. I have written a monologue about her one sided conversation.

Mateus finished off the window he had started after all he couldn’t spend all day on one window and

moved onto the next one even nearer than the group than before. He ascended the ladder and with his

squeegee and scrim in hand he made a superficial attempt at washing the window.

Betty’s face brightened as she took her turn, ‘I have written about my wonderful window cleaner

Mateus, he’s such a nice lad, always makes time to have a chat with me and we enjoy a cup of coffee

# and a biscuit. Oh yes, would anyone like a custard cream?’

There was the sound of a ladder falling and the clatter of a bucket as Mateus overreached himself.

Everyone looked up and wondered what the commotion was, they saw a librarian running from

one direction and a student from another. Betty craned her neck and peered between the crime shelves

and the biographies and true stories section where much to her amazement Mateus was now sitting on

the floor, looking embarrassed with the squeegee still in his hand.

‘Oh Mateus, are you alright?’ she enquired still trying to make sense of the scene before her.

Mateus nodded grinning sheepishly, his heart beating rapidly, and with a flush of embarrassment

on his cheeks.

A librarian and the student helped him up and Betty invited him to join them at the table.

‘What a coincidence that you should be in the library just as I was about to read my story about

you. Would you like to hear it?’

He wasn’t too sure that he would, but he didn’t want to offend Betty so he nodded and rubbing his

bruised knee he tried to make himself as comfortable as he could under the circumstances.

Betty cleared her throat and launched into the story. It was a tale of triumph over adversity, of a

lonely homesick young Portuguese boy who had come as a student to England to get a degree

knowing no one and how he struck up an unlikely friendship with a seventy eight year old widow.

The qualities that she so admired in him were his ability to draw alongside people and make he made

her feel confident and worthy of respect.

He never interrupted her when she stumbled over a word or commented that she had lost her purse

for the umpteenth time. She felt affirmed by him and strangely strengthened, giving her greater

confidence, to be able to live life to the full.

For the second time that day he felt humbled, and he twisted the hem of his T-shirt round and round

his finger in a distracted way, wanting the ground to swallow him up.

As the story drew to a close she patted his arm, what a charming lad he was, he would make

someone a wonderful husband someday. She put the papers down on the table and picked up the

custard creams, biting into one of them, she hoped that Polly or Kate might be inspired to get to

know him as more than just the window cleaner.

Chris on the other hand felt relieved that he hadn’t had to share his yarn about the footballer who

never scored a goal. As he rose from his seat Polly called after him. ‘Oh yes Chris, next weeks

homework is to write a story or poem about an undertaker.’

Strangely comforted he left the library knowing this time he really would have something to say.

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