

## The Photographer

It was the socks that first made Ted realise the size of the task he had set himself. Should he photograph them individually or as a collection? He laid them out on the bed while he contemplated the dilemma. They looked like a fishmonger's display; the exotic and colourful next to grey sea bass.

Of course, it wasn't a simple binary choice; there were intermediate positions that he could take. He could group the socks a number of ways. Work socks; casual socks. Black socks; coloured socks. Plain socks; patterned socks. Or he could photograph them simply in pairs. But then what would he do with the orphaned socks? On principle he felt that he should capture them individually, it wouldn't be that much of a task, he had counted twenty-six pairs, and five orphans, so that was only fifty-seven pictures. He could do that quite easily. But – and this was the point that troubled him – if he did the socks one by one what would he do with the paper-clips in the saucer that sat on his desk? Would he have to photograph them individually as well?

Leaving the socks Ted went downstairs to the kitchen to make a cup of tea while he decided what to do. After taking a teabag he counted the number remaining and realised that practicality had to win out over principle. Otherwise when it came to the kitchen he would have to capture every teabag, every biscuit, every potato, and that would just be silly. Or mad.

That's what Louise had called him the night she left.

'Please Ted, promise me you'll see someone about this.' He could still see her standing in the hallway, wearing her wool coat and a fine scarf round her neck. It had been a cold November night. The taxi driver impatiently sounding his horn. 'I worry about you, you know?'

Ted finished making the tea and took it back upstairs. He had decided on a compromise. He would group the socks into dark, coloured and others (the patterned socks that are dark to some people, coloured to others). It was the only sensible thing to do. With the socks arranged on the bed in three groups he picked up his camera from the dressing table, turned on both bedside lamps to give a bit more light, and then photographed them. He checked that the pictures were OK and then turned the camera off and put it down. Enough for one evening. Before the socks he had done his shoes (individually, he didn't have that many) and coats. Tomorrow he could finish the rest of his clothes and the bedroom furniture. That would be another room ticked off.

Room by room had been his plan from the start. It was the only way he could be certain to get everything. Of course it depended on items staying in their allocated rooms otherwise some things might be missed, others duplicated, and that's how the arguments with Louise had started.

'What are you doing with that vase?' she had asked.

'It belongs in the dining room.'

'I thought it would look good in here.'

'Perhaps, but I've already done this room.'

'Done this room?'

'I've photographed everything in this room. If you move something into here from another room without me knowing I might miss it.'

'Why?' she asked. 'Why have you photographed everything in the room?'

His explanation resulted in a momentary silence followed by laughter.

'You're not serious are you?'

'Of course. Why wouldn't I be? Let's face it, I've nothing else to do these days.'

Ted had never told Louise that he'd overheard her father's dismissive reaction to their engagement. '*He'll never amount to anything,*' Geoffrey had said. Years later Ted could still hear the contempt with which his future prospects had been so summarily dismissed. Ted would prove him wrong and Geoffrey would have to admit that perhaps Ted was worth something after all. That he had made something of his life.

The following morning Ted opened the bedroom wardrobe and took out a pair of casual slacks on a coat-hanger. He hesitated for a moment. Should he do the trousers and the hanger together or separately? Separately. He removed the trousers from the hanger, laid both on the bed and photographed them before putting them back on the rail. He continued in this way for the rest of the morning. Trousers, shirts and jackets from the wardrobe. Sweaters, T-shirts and underwear from the chest of drawers. He enjoyed the rhythm of the work. At one level it was mindless and yet at the same time required care and attention to detail. He found it quite therapeutic and absorbed in his work he was able to forget. When Ted was done with his clothes – making sure that he hadn't overlooked those he was wearing – it was a simple matter to finish the room by doing the furniture, though he almost forgot the old pair of slippers that were hiding under the bed. It constantly worried him that he might accidentally miss something no matter how much care he took.

Attention to detail, doing things carefully. He had always thought that they were his strengths but his line manager saw it differently. He only wanted things done quickly, rushed in Ted's opinion, not done properly. Too slow was the official reason for letting him go. He hadn't told Louise that. She might have agreed. Ted remembered the bookshelves incident.

'What are you doing?' she had asked when Ted was measuring the thickness of a number of different books with a ruler.

'I want to know the average thickness of our books.'

'Why?'

'I've counted how many books we have, so if I know the average thickness I'll know the length of shelving we need.'

'Why can't you just put up some shelves?'

'But how do I know how many to put up or how long they should be? We might have too many or not enough.'

'Can't you - just for once - do as I ask?'

Room by room Ted progressed through the house until he had finished. It was the thought of his father-in-law that had kept Ted going and gave him the strength to complete a task that at times had threatened to overwhelm him. He smiled to himself at the thought of Geoffrey opening the letter and finding the memory stick. In his imagination Louise would be there as well. They would be sitting at the breakfast table applying a thick layer of marmalade to their toast while they puzzled over what was on it.

After breakfast they will go into Geoffrey's office and turn on his computer. Louise will understand first, she would remember their conversations, and together they will laugh at him, and how right she had been to leave him.

Six thousand four hundred and twenty three images. Every single item that Ted owns. The sum total of his existence.

He hoped they will look through all the pictures so that they find the final two. Will they still be laughing then?

Ted took great care over those final images. He wanted them to be perfect. He made sure that the lighting was correct, that the camera was correctly focussed with nothing else in the frame, before photographing – separately of course - the gun and a single bullet.