

Stewart, Olive and Bob Dylan

This short story was inspired by a dream I once had when I fell asleep while having a bath. If you are thinking of having a bath tonight, the author highly recommends that you do so before reading on.....

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Many interesting anecdotes rely on chance and coincidences; a combination of unexpected events to develop the story and bring the characters to life. This applies to our own lives and to the fictional world alike. The story about to unfold is a prime example of such a set of circumstances. A common day occurrence, one in which we all partake, develops in a particularly interesting manner because of other concurrent events and proceedings. So could this really happen to two ordinary people or is it just too far-fetched? Well, let us read on and see how likely, or not, such a situation may be..... and consider the consequences.

It was a cold and wet December evening as Stewart scurried home from his day of toil at the estate agents office -his last before the Christmas holiday. The rain was not heavy; more of a gentle hugging drizzle falling almost politely on the pavement. Any colder and it would surely turn to sleet. The train had arrived at the station only a few minutes late and spewed its load into the streets before returning to the city for more of the same. Stewart did not have far to walk. After dodging the dirty puddles and rush hour traffic for a few minutes he was soon sauntering up his driveway with door key in hand. He need not have bothered; Olive, his ever dutiful and faithful wife was waiting at the door to welcome him home.

“Hello my love – I’m really glad to be home tonight,” said Stewart, genuinely pleased to see his wife.

“Oh dear – it looks like you’ve had a rough day Stew,” replied Olive in a concerned manner as she gave him a perfunctory hug.

She let her husband take off his coat, hat and shoes before quizzing further. Stewart sank into the sofa with a heavy sigh, loosened the belt on his trousers and then responded.

“Well work has been quiet today – it always is just before Christmas – let’s face it, who wants to buy a house at this time of the year – far more pressing things to do. A few of the lads decided to go for a festive curry at the at the Balti house around the corner from the office at lunchtime. I think it has disagreed with my stomach and I feel all swollen and bloated; a bit of a Balti belly you might say.”

“Of course the lager you had with your meal didn’t have anything to do with it I suppose?” chirped in Olive in her usual cheeky manner. “I think you’ve got a bad case of locked wind there Stew ,“ observing his enlarged mid riff ”– you should change into something looser before you do yourself a mischief – don’t go too close to any sharp objects or you might go pop and make a right mess of the house”

“Well thanks for your kind words of sympathy Ollie – do you have any suggestions for what I can do to sort this out? I feel like a stranded whale – I can hardly move with my balloon of a belly.”

Despite her jollity, Olive was genuinely concerned about her husband’s predicament. Before they married she has been a nurse so was not unacquainted with caring for the sick. Her tone of voice changed slightly.

“What you need are some indigestion tablets but I’m sure I used up the last of them when my father was here last week. Why don’t I pop down to the supermarket and get some – I need a few things anyway, I could get some nice fresh soup for us to eat later. In the meantime, I’ll run you a nice hot bath. I’m sure that will help – you’ll probably float the condition you are in.”

Olive did like her little jokes but as always she meant well. She gave Stew another, more prolonged hug and off she went to busy herself in the bathroom upstairs, running the bath water, lighting the aromatic candles and preparing towels. The bath was a big reclaimed metal affair from Victorian times, cast iron – very sturdy and built to last. “Poor old soul,” she thought and went to find some bath oil in the bedroom. She decided to give Stewart a treat and add some of the expensive stuff that she had bought as a Christmas present for one of her friends – she could always buy another next week. “Let me see now - ‘Languish in a lovely creamy bath with revolutionary ingredients to ease those aches and pains away and prepare you for a restful night’s sleep’. Perfect, that should do the trick – this must be new on the market, we haven’t used this before, let’s see if it does what it say on the tin.” Olive quite often talked to herself, even when there was someone else in the house – she was used to being alone.

Olive added the oil and the bath filled up – the surface now covered with soapy suds and a proliferation of bubbles. The smell was very fragrant – lavender and camomile - perhaps not suited to a man but Stewart wouldn’t care if it took his mind off his painful stomach.

Meanwhile, Stewart was struggling up the stairs – he was in so much pain that he was almost doubled over and resembled a crooked old man who perhaps should have a walking stick to support himself. He finally made it to his bedroom and wriggled out of his clothes as best he could – stopping to stare at his hairy naked figure in the wardrobe mirror. “My word, I look about six months pregnant,” he mused. Although it was a cold evening he could see droplets of sweat on his chest and arms; sniffing up he could distinctly smell the familiar scent that he associated with a hot curry dish, which seemed to be seeping through his skin.

Olive was now getting ready to go to the shop but just before she did, she put a CD on to play for the benefit of her dear husband. Ever the thoughtful one – Olive chose Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits; a favourite of Stewarts since he was a teenager. “That will help to cheer up him up,” she mumbled to herself.

“Bye dear, I’ll be back in half an hour with the tablets – enjoy your bath – see you when I get back” and off she went into the murky evening mist.

Stewart now meandered into the bathroom and sat on the toilet to try to relieve himself. After a few minutes of discomfort and zero output he climbed gingerly into the bath water. It was hot, deep and ever so luxuriant – he gradually lowered himself into the soapy depths until all but his head was submerged. He heaved a huge sigh of contentment and the water made his whole body tingle with pleasure. “Ah, this is heavenly – I could stay in here forever.”

After a few minutes in the bath, Stewart began to feel drowsy. A mixture of the fragrant bath oil and candles along with the activities of the day finally caught up with him. He could faintly hear the words ‘the answer my friend is blowing in the wind, the answer is blowing in the wind,’ as he inexorably fell into a deep and sweet sleep.

The house was eerily foreboding – all that could be heard were the voice and harmonica of Bob Dylan and the water lapping around Stewart’s body. A car beeped its horn outside, the song finished and then there was, for a few moments, silence.

One of the less expected benefits of the hot bath water was that Stewart’s stomach muscles relaxed considerably, and as a consequence unlocked the gases in his belly in a most precipitous way. Bubbles gurgled to the surface of the bath to supplement those that had been produced by the oil. Stewart neither saw the gas bubbles nor smelled the resultant stink that permeated the room, overpowering the candles in no time. He was oblivious to all – relieved and fast asleep. Bob Dylan was now declaring that ‘one day I shall be released’ to a subconsciously appreciative but unhearing audience.

Stewart was now snoring loudly and was incapable of noticing anything. He did not register the strange itchiness that was beginning to pervade his submerged body. He did not see the fizzy-like foam that formed all over his skin. He did not witness that one by one, the hairs on his body began to become detached - floating to the surface and forming a covering like a dark soapy coconut mat. Unaware of these strange developments, Stewart unconsciously adjusted his position – the gentle agitation of the water seeming to increase the rate at which his body shed its hair. In only a few more minutes Stewart’s torso was as hair free as the day he had his first ever baby bath.

Still he slept on. Outside, the mist grew thicker and all the vehicles had their fog lights switched on. The pubs and restaurants became crowded with Christmas revellers and Olive searched the supermarket shelves for soup – “Perhaps a vegetable hot pot,” she thought. Bob Dylan pronounced that ‘a hard rains’s a gonna fall’.

And so Stewart did not feel or observe the next developments below the surface. His skin was becoming red, very red in fact with blotches here and there. He was beginning to resemble a boiled lobster or someone who really should have applied a stronger sun cream. The demarcation between his body and head was very apparent – bald and red below the water line, white and hairy above it. Similarly, while his fingers were now a crimson red, his nails were a bleached white. They fizzed away like soluble aspirin tablets as if they were....dissolving. Firstly, the small finger nail on his right hand (or what was left of it) became loose and freed itself. After a few moments of swirling around in the soapy depths it further disintegrated, sank to the bottom of the bath and disappeared entirely. Soon to be followed in its murky descent by the same nail on his left hand, his small toe nails etc. etc. Each nail leaving behind a prune like tip of the finger or toe which quickly became as red as the rest of the body. The final nails to disperse were those on his big toes – these took a long time to dissolve and gave off a cloudy residue before they eventually became nothing.

You better start swimming or you’ll sink like a stone for the times they are a changing.

Stewart became rather restless in his sleep – perhaps he was having a bad dream. His eyelids were twitching and he was silently mouthing a plea to someone, possibly asking the question – why?

Olive finally reached the supermarket checkout to pay for her goods. She rustled them into a plastic bag, took her receipt and set her direction home like an orderly rolling stone.

And now, Stewart became quite disturbed – in his slumber he felt a great itchiness down his left hand side. He did what anyone would have done – asleep or awake; he went to scratch the itch with the finger nails of his right hand

The searing pain shot from his withered finger tips, up his arm and enveloped his entire frame. He shuddered deeply to the core of his stomach – in the shaking motion of his body he could not focus on the source of this terrible throbbing. The water became more agitated with his sharp movements. It took several more seconds for Stewart to clearly observe and recognise his surroundings and stare in a state of shock and disbelief as he sat up in the bath. His blotchy and scorched, red body. The bath water carpeted with hair. The fingers that were shrivelling up before him – was this a dream? The smarting pain returned to convince him that it was not. He screamed a long, loud and despairing scream.

Olive was only just out of earshot as she greeted a friend along the street and passed a few jokey moments at the expense of Stewart and his ailment. If only she knew that his condition had taken a decided turn for the worse.

Stewart now did the one thing he shouldn't have, but can hardly be blamed for doing so. He panicked; he flung himself around in the bath; he caused a tremendous agitation of the water which now resembled a Jacuzzi of cream and tomato soup. He lurched from side to side, convulsively splashing and causing the candles to hiss and expire.

The violent stirring speeded up the waters attack on his throbbing and blistering torso. In his horror stricken state, Stewart no longer had the ability to control his limbs - he could not get out of the bath. And Bob Dylan decreed that 'you ain't going nowhere,' in a sad lament.

Before his own eyes he was watching his body dissolve and he was completely powerless to do anything about it. Skin peeled from his body, veins were exposed, only quickly to burst and ooze their contents into the bath. His knee bones became visible, his ribs briefly poked above the surface and then nothing. Stewart was dead. The bath smoked like a tropical swamp. Little by little the remainder of Stewart's body sank into the now crimson liquid. His neck, chin, nose, ears and terrified staring eyes slipped from sight. The last evidence of a human body was a clump of hair which curled up, swirled for a second and then sank below.

Bob Dylan sang on cue, "I'm going, I'm going, I'm gone."

And now Olive tripped into the house, took off her damp coat and shouted up the stairs. "I'm home darling – you're not still in that bath are you? Get a move on and I'll fix a drink for you to take with these tablets. I've bought some lovely vegetable stew for you to eat."

She heated up the soup, made some milky coffee and laid the table for two. On sensing no movement from the bathroom Olive decided to pop up the stairs and hurry Stewart along.

It is strange that in circumstances like this you can sometimes develop an impression that something isn't quite right. Olive had this sensation and hesitated at the bathroom door – but quickly shook off the feeling and burst into the room. Again, sometimes you can see an unexpected sight and it will take a short while to register properly. "Oh look, the bath is full of red water – I wonder why?" Then she saw the remnants of hair, skin and bone just floating below the surface. Was it this realisation?

Was it the now pungent stench pervading the room? Was it the fact that she suddenly felt like vomiting? Whatever the reason, she staggered – not to the left, not to the right, but straight ahead and fainted – falling directly into the bath and cracking her skull on the side with a heavy thud. She splashed into the water head first coming to rest where her husband had been a little earlier.

Bob Dylan and his merry band struck up the tune, ‘Tonight I’ll be staying here with you.’

By this time the mixture in the bath was very potent – unlike Stewart who had had a tortuously slow and painful death, Olive very quickly began to disappear as if she had been set upon by a swarm of piranha fish. No thrashing of arms and legs, no screams of terror – just a rapid, relentless, decomposition of body tissue and in her case – clothes. The surface of the liquid foamed and steamed during its corrosive onslaught and pretty soon, only the metal zip and buttons on her jeans remained intact – everything else was an oily and ghastly shade of yellowy red in the iron bath. A million miles from the fragrant lavender bath oil that Olive had poured into the clean warm water less than an hour before. “She aches just like a woman but she breaks just like a little girl.”

The music ended, Bob Dylan stopped singing and the house was deathly quiet for several days, save for the occasional unanswered telephone calls and ringing of the doorbell.

The contents of the bath gradually calmed down and little by little turned to a semi solid, gelatinous mass. The texture and colour might have made some think of the base of a luxuriant sherry trifle but in this case that is perhaps not an appetising thought? In particular, the scent emanating from the bath grew more rank with each passing hour until the neighbours began to notice and wonder where that stench was coming from. But they were preparing for Christmas and had other more important things on their minds.

It was not until Christmas Eve that friends and relatives of Stewart and Olive became concerned that their attempts at making contact had been to no avail. What could have happened to them? Where could they be? There was due to be a big family gathering on the afternoon and when the couple did not show up, apprehension increased. It was time to find out what was going on.

To this end, Olives’ father and brother drove over to the house and knocked firmly on the door. No answer? Peeping through the letter box the father saw no sign of occupancy – but his nostrils were so startled by the stench that he fell back onto the ground, covered his nose and trembled with panic.

Frightened into action the two men broke down the door, ran into the house and were quickly drawn to the source of the mystery. Not the most pleasant of sights to behold during the festive period ... and there we shall leave this sorry tale and consider what conclusions we can draw and lessons we might learn.

Epilogue

Two healthy people now dead and knocking on heaven's door. An hour or so earlier they had both been alive and anticipating the joys of Christmas. Nobody else had been in the house during this period. There were no obvious suspects. What would the police make of this – assuming they were eventually able to identify the 'bodies'.

So where does the blame rest for this shocking episode?

The newly launched bath oil seems a possibility? But this had been tested on hundreds of animals and human guinea pigs with no ill effects and there were no reports of problems from the thousands of buyers of the product across the country.

But had the manufacturer's chemists tested the oil in an unusual combination of circumstances. For example, when used in a room lit up by a particular brand of aromatic candle? Or in an iron bath – they are very few and far between these days. Or had one of the test guinea pigs eaten a curry just beforehand and was, as a result, emanating curry flavoured sweat? Perhaps the infusion of methane, which Stewart had produced in large quantities, into a bath mixture was the last thing on their minds to check? Possibly there was an unforeseen reaction to the mishmash of ingredients in the bath?

Or was it, as Bob Dylan would suggest, all just a "Simple twist of fate?"

Stewart and Olive will never know what caused their untimely demise. Perhaps no one ever will. Whatever the reason, the bath oil is still available for sale in shops today.

Would you buy a bottle?

The End.