Dark Heart

A pair of battered sneakers picked their way through the crowds of morning shoppers, making their way against the tide. Vincent Wells juggled the weight of the rucksack on his shoulder as he nimbly sidestepped a young mother pushing a baby carriage. He glanced down at the diminutive child staring blankly up into the space in front of it, a round, puffy face, a perfect example of infant androgyny. The child was already no different to the mother from whose loins it had come. They were alive, therefore they would die. That was the only truth in the world. Whatever they did, whoever they aspired to be, it made no difference. Whether it was right here and now, in a thousand years hence, whether amid the blissful sleep of the innocent or the tortured agonies of the damned—one day they would both be dead. That was all that separated the world, those who were in fear of the hand of the Reaper and those who accepted his eventual arrival without fear or trepidation. And then there was a smaller grouping still. Those who not only accepted the province of the Reaper but those who embraced it, who took their communion with him and his kin.

The small rusted bell over the door jangled as Wells entered the funeral parlour. He dropped his rucksack to his side and looked around. Waiting. The walls were covered in simple, sombre wallpaper that had begun to fade and peel in places.

The curtains covering a doorway to the rear opened and a short, elderly man walked out. He was dressed smartly but in old

clothes. His small, piggy eyes peered out through the lenses of round, wireframe spectacles.

"May I help you?" Spencer enquired.

"I came to see you yesterday. About the job. I wondered if you'd come to any decision."

Spencer peered at Wells as if trying to see him more clearly. Wells was hardly dressed to impress. Several days' growth of stubble covered his chin. His hair had not been washed for over a week.

"You are Mr.—?"

"Wells. You said you'd know in a day or two."

Spencer put a gnarled finger to his lips and stared off into the distance as if sieving through the memories of the past two days for some relevant information.

"Ah, yes. Wells. That's right. I remember."

Wells had been hoping for a more positive reaction. It had been a long time. He needed this.

"It's just that the place I'm staying...I was going to be moving on today unless there's a place here for me." Christ! Let the sympathy vote play in his favour.

Spencer drew a breath and stared directly at Wells. There was something about the youth...he could sense it. Presentation wise there was nothing to recommend him. The last thing the parlour needed was street trash. That was sufficient pause...enough to unsettle any interviewee. Wells showed no outward sign of anxiety. That was good...appearance was one thing, a new suit and a good scrubbing could take care of that. It was the character beneath the skin that really mattered. In this particular profession he needed solid performers.

"You had worked for a mortician before. Isn't that right? I remember. I tried to call your last employer...the number had been disconnected."

Shit. What was the purpose of fake references if people were actually going to chase them up? Thank God he'd come up with an out of service number.

"That doesn't surprise me. One of the reasons I left was because he used to forget to pay me as well. I told you all that before."

"I see Mr...Wells. It is irregular for me to consider employing someone without being able to check on his references."

Stop playing with me, you old fool. Have I got the job or not? That was all Wells needed to know. If he was wasting his time here then he needed to get out, move on, cover his tracks before he aroused any suspicions or too many prying telephone calls were made on his behalf.

"Like I said. I'm planning to move on if there's no job here. How many other people have you seen?"

"As a matter of fact I must admit...you were my only applicant. It appears the youth of today has little interest in trades such as ours."

Wasn't that the truth? Still, something shone in this young man. He was eager, keen as mustard, that much was obvious, despite all his pretence aloofness. It had been a long time since Spencer had been blessed with a willing pupil. He would need to brush up his teaching skills.

"I'll make you a deal." Wells needed an answer. He didn't need to blow it by coming on too strong but he had to get this sorted. There was a bus leaving in eighteen minutes. He had to be on it if there was nothing for him here.

"Give me the job. I need some place to stay. You can write to my last employer. If the reference comes back and you're not happy with it then we'll go our separate ways. How does that grab you?"

Spencer considered a moment.

"I can most definitely use the help. You do realize that the position involves a lot of domestic duties around the parlour? You'll be little more than a cleaner most of the time...at least to begin with."

"Cleanliness is next to godliness, especially in a place like this." Jeez Louise! Had he really said that? Fuck! You wanna blow it then go right ahead. Spencer ignored the inanity.

"There's a small room upstairs you can have. The wages are low and do not include food. You'll also have to get yourself some kind of suit. We must look respectable at all times when dealing with our customers. Perhaps I can find an old one upstairs just to get you started." Oh shit! He was in.

"Would you like to put your bag in your room? Then I can show you the parlour." Spencer was already turning away. The deal was struck. He wouldn't have any problem with this one. "If you'd like to follow me." Spencer held aside the curtains. Wells picked up his rucksack. He could feel the erectile tissue beginning to gorge. Touchdown!

The room in which Wells was to make himself at home was small, dark. Spencer crossed to the window and pulled back the curtains to let in some light.

Wells stood in the doorway, rucksack in hand. The insanguination was under control; excitement had just got the better of him, that was all.

"The room is a little small." Spencer ran his finger along the edge of a chest of drawers. "And a little dusty. It hasn't been occupied in some time."

"Looks okay to me."

Wells crossed to the bed and set down his rucksack. He looked around, turning full circle, then sat on the bed. It creaked under his weight.

"This will do just fine."

"I'm glad." Spencer smiled. He moved to the door but paused and turned back before leaving.

"I shall be having a little supper at about nine o'clock. Perhaps you would like to join me?"

"I'd like that. Thank-you." Spencer left the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

Wells lay back on the bed. He put his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling.

The only intrusion into the serenity of the darkened room was faint residual light from the street. The door squeaked as it was slowly opened. A little more light entered the parlour, spilling across the floor. The coffins appeared as black shapes in the gloom.

Wells stood looking round the edge of the door. He pushed the door gently closed and stepped forward, his bare feet making no sound on the carpeted floor. He approached the first of the coffins, running his hand slowly along the lid, following the curved edge of the casket.

Moving cautiously through the darkness, Wells crossed to the far side of the room. He had watched Spencer at work all day

while he had toiled over his menial duties. Patience had been rewarded, now it was his turn. He stood beside the coffin on its pedestal and ran both hands along the lid from the centre towards the end. His hands slipped around to the lip of the lid. He braced himself. The casket lid was stiff. The hinges creaked but it did not open. Wells braced himself again. He pulled harder. This time the lid moved, jerking off suddenly. Wells froze, looking around to ensure that no one heard the noise.

He tensed his muscles and lifted the lid from the casket and placed it on the floor, leaning it against an empty casket behind him.

Wells pulled his faithful old Zippo lighter from his pocket and held it inside the casket. He flipped the lid. The flame flared, an orange glow lighting on the passive face of Marilyn Higginson as she lay in the coffin. Wells stared down at the motionless corpse. His breath was becoming more laboured as his chest began to tighten. Rising up onto his toes, Wells leant over the coffin. He bent his head. Moving closer...until his lips brushed delicately across the cold, waxen surface of Marilyn's cheek. Wells raised his head, breathless. Trickles of tears ran down his cheeks, reflecting the flame of the Zippo.

"My God. I'm home!"

The following morning Wells was up early, refreshed by a night of deep, restful sleep. After a cold shower, he made himself breakfast in the small kitchen at the rear of the parlour then collected his cleaning utensils ready to begin a second day's work. As he pushed aside the curtain, which hung over the door to the parlour, Wells' heart leapt into his mouth. Spencer was standing beside Marilyn Higginson's coffin. He checked along the edges of the casket to make sure the lid was properly sealed. Spencer looked up, staring directly at Wells.

"You've been busy." Spencer's voice was expertly monotone, giving away nothing.

"I... I'm sorry?" Wells' voice quavered nervously.

Spencer slowly rounded the casket; gently running his hand

along finely polished the lid.

"Polished to perfection. Ms. Higginson would have approved." Spencer stared at his reflection in the dark wood. Wells waited, fearing discovery.

"It's beautiful craftsmanship." Spencer continued. "Top of the line. So few people seem prepared to make the effort these days." Spencer looked up from the casket and walked towards Wells.

"What with the price of such finery and the lack of burial space, so many are content to have their loved ones burnt to ashes. It's a shame, don't you think? The noble art of the mortician reduced to cinders."

Spencer put his hand on Wells' shoulder. A delicate, fatherly gesture.

"Time for a nice cup of tea."

A jet of steam whistled from the spout of the kettle as it sat on the stove. Spencer, his hand wrapped in a tea towel, picked up the kettle and carried it across to the table where Wells was sitting.

Spencer poured the boiling water from the kettle into a china teapot. He swilled the water around the teapot and then pulled on a knitted tea cosy. He carried the kettle back to the stove.

Masticating a piece of buttered toast, Wells leant across the table, trying to read the closely spaced handwriting on a letter.

"A letter to your former employer." Spencer turned round. He sat back down, picked up the letter and slid it into the envelope.

"Let's see what he has to say about you, shall we?"

"Only good things, I'm sure." Wells tried an unconvincing smile.

"I'm sure." Spencer put the envelope down beside his cup then reached across and picked up the teapot.

"Shall I be mother?"

Wells couldn't take his eyes off the letter as he pushed his cup and saucer across to Spencer.

"I could mail that for you," Wells offered hopefully.

"That's very kind. But I have to go past the post office this morning."

"It's no trouble. The sooner it's gone the sooner you'll hear." Wells was already sounding over eager, reaching across the table, almost snatching the envelope.

"If you're sure that it's no trouble."

"No. It's no trouble at all." Spencer took a long, slow sip from his cup.

Wells lay in bed. In the faint light he stared up at the ceiling. He turned his head to look at the alarm clock on the bedside table. He reached out and turned it towards him. The clock showed 11:05pm.

He sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. He ran his hands over his face then looked at the bedside cabinet. Lying beside the alarm clock was Spencer's letter. Wells picked up the envelope and tore it in half. He dropped the pieces of the letter into his waste bin then, barefoot, crossed to the door and opened it slowly.

Wells came out of his room and pulled the door closed behind him. He paused for a moment, checking that he was alone. His bare feet padded quietly down the stairs and through into the parlour.

As he stood in the midst of the neatly laid out caskets, there was the sound of knocking at the door. Wells' head snapped round in the direction of the sound. It came again, a firm, deliberate knock. From upstairs, Wells could hear Spencer moving in his room. Wells moved quietly to beside the curtains, listening as Spencer descended the stairs.

Spencer unlocked the door and pulled it open. All he saw were the familiar uniforms of two police officers. Their faces were masked in shadow.

"Can I help you?"

"We're sorry to disturb you. We were wondering if we could ask you a few questions." The taller of the two officers spoke.

"It is rather late."

"We appreciate that but this is rather important." The officer's voice was calm but insistent.

"Could you at least tell what this is about?"

The officer reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. He unfolded it and showed it to Spencer. The paper showed a computer identikit picture of a young man. It could have easily been anyone of a hundred thousand people but to Spencer it was quite clearly a picture of Wells.

"We'd like to interview this man." The officer tried his best penetrating stare but Spencer was more than capable of dealing with him.

"What about?"

"He was working at a funeral parlour a few weeks ago. We would just like to ask him a few questions about an incident."

"Why ask me? I don't recognise him." Spencer replied curtly.

"We believe he may have tried to find work at other businesses in the area."

"I don't recognise him at all. Would it be possible for you to come back at a more civilised time?" Spencer stared at the rookie. He'd show him how to deal with people.

"We're sorry to disturb you. Perhaps you'd like to keep hold of the picture. If you see anything suspicious, please call."

Wells stood frozen behind the curtain, listening as Spencer concluded the conversation.

"Of course. If you'll excuse me I would like to get back to my bed."

Wells heard the officers mumble their thanks for his assistance then the door was closed and locked. Spencer paused at the door to the parlour then continued on his way back up to his room.

Wells had risen early, unable to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time. His face looked drawn, there were bags under his eyes. He had tried to read the morning paper but was unable to concentrate on the blur of words. Spencer arrived, prompt as usual, at eight o'clock.

"I heard some kind of commotion last night. Was it anything serious?"

Spencer carried the freshly boiled teapot across to the table and sat.

"That would have been our friendly local police."

It was the news Wells had been fearing. There was a past that would catch up with him one day. Was that today?

"What did they want?"

Spencer poured himself a cup of tea. He showed no more concern than if he had been discussing the weather.

"They were looking for someone."

Wells regarded him carefully, watching every move as Spencer spooned a measure of clear honey into his cup and began to stir. "Anyone we know?"

"I don't think so. I'm sure they'll be able to find whoever they are looking for without bothering us again. More tea?" Spencer held the teapot over Wells' empty cup. Wells shook his head.

"Are you busy today?" Spencer asked, picking up the newspaper.

"Not especially. Is something interesting happening?"

Spencer flicked the paper open and buried his head, speaking from behind a wall of newsprint.

"One of the young men I use is feeling a little poorly. I was wondering if you would like to help me on a job."

Wells' eyes lit up. This could be the chance he had been waiting for. Time to move on up.

"If you think I can do it."

"Oh I think you can manage. It's Abigail Leakey. A dear old soul. She's been laid out at the family home. All we need to do is pick her up and take her to the service."

"You can count me in." Wells found it difficult to disguise his obvious pleasure at being offered such an opportunity.

"Good." Spencer smiled as he lowered the newspaper and took a mouthful of tea.

Several cars were parked outside the row of terraced houses. Splitting the line of vehicles was an immaculately polished hearse. Three young men in dark, sombre suits were huddled in the doorway of No. 18 out of the light rain, smoking hand rolled cigarettes.

The small lounge of No. 18 was filled with people dressed in black or dark colours. Women sobbed into handkerchiefs. Men looked sombre. Spencer, wearing an immaculate black suit, stood by the window—looking out into the rain—a half-

concealed smile on his face. Out in the porch, an elderly man approached the three smokers and gently tapped one on the arm. The elderly man pulled a gold watch on a chain from his waistcoat pocket.

Spencer moved away to the back room.

The curtains were half drawn, the light on. Set on the dining table was an open coffin. Lying in the casket was the body of Abigail Leakey. Wells stood over the coffin. He reached inside and delicately ran the back of his finger across the cold, taut skin of Abigail's cheek.

From somewhere behind him a polite cough sounded. Wells snatched his hand away as if it had been in a fire. He looked round.

Spencer stood in the doorway.

Wells stepped back from the coffin as Spencer pushed the door closed and approached.

Moving with surprising strength for a man of his age, Spencer picked up the lid and held it over the coffin.

"Time to go, Abigail."

Wells flushed red as he took the opposite side of the lid and between them they lowered it onto the casket. Spencer looked at Wells—who was avoiding his eyes.

"There is a time and a place for everything, Mr. Wells."

The three smokers entered the room and took their positions around the casket. Spencer supervised the placing of the coffin in the car.

Not so much as a look passed between Wells and Spencer until later that evening.

Wells came out of his room, heading for the bathroom; a towel draped over his bare shoulder.

The door of Spencer's room opened and the familiar bespectacled face peered out.

"A word if I may, Mr. Wells."

Spencer sat in an armchair. A small radio on the table beside him played classical music. Wells entered. He hovered nervously in the doorway until Spencer waved a hand towards a plain wooden chair. Wells sat. "Is this about..." Wells stumbled over his words.

Spencer reached forward and turned the radio so low as to be almost inaudible.

"I quite understand."

"I don't know what you think you saw." Wells was already sweating. He could feel the chilled water running down his back.

"I know exactly what I saw, Mr. Wells. Please. There's no need to be so hostile." Spencer's tone was calm, placatory.

"So what d'you want to do about it?" Wells' mouth was dry.

"I didn't say I was going to do anything about it. I just want you to know that you're safe here."

Wells' heart was racing. His face was glowing crimson. His stomach turned somersaults. His mind raced. What was going on? Was this a test?

"What d'you mean?"

Spencer was a study in poker face.

"Just what I said. This is my business. It is my life. Respect it and respect me and you'll have no trouble." He reached across the table and turned up the radio. Classical music swept into the room.

Wells rose from his chair, his body bathed in a chilling sweat. He still wasn't sure what he had heard. Had Spencer been serious? Had he really seen? What had he thought he saw? Did he know?

Spencer sat at the table, eyes closed, lost in the music.

His mind a cascade of confusion, Wells sought solace in the parlour, sitting on the floor in the dark, surrounded by the paraphernalia of the dead. His breathing began to slow, his heart rate dropped, slowed to its normal resting rate then dipped beyond that. The confusion in his head was gradually replaced by a calming green light that bathed his entire body, taking the weight of his physical self. He felt as if he were floating in the air.

The parlour curtains parted and Spencer entered. Wells, resting his back against one of the casket plinths, fingers laced behind the back of his head, opened his eyes and was startled to see the old man standing over him.

"I... I'm sorry...I must have fallen asleep."

"So I see." Spencer looked down on him. "We have visitors. Keep yourself out of sight."

Spencer was already on his way back out through the curtains. Wells got to his feet and silently jogged toward the drapes.

Spencer stood behind the counter, faced by the two police officers from the other night.

"And what is it that I can do for you two gentlemen?"

"It's about the man we came to see you about the other evening. We were wondering if there was anything you might have remembered." Standing in the light of the parlour, the two policemen looked far less threatening. They were far too young to be taken seriously.

"Ah, yes. You left me some kind of picture of someone, didn't you?"

Spencer made pretence of looking beneath the counter. He pulled out the identikit picture and handed it back to the younger of the young looking officers.

"Have you seen this person since we were last here?"

"I'm sure I would have called you if I had."

"I'm sure you would too. We do need to speak to him. Would it be possible for us to take a look around?" The apparently older of the two policemen, who had until now remained silent, decided the time had arrived for him to interject.

"There's a connection between this person and several funeral homes in the district." Spencer noticed the officer peering over his shoulder towards the curtains.

"Connection?" Spencer tried his best baffled expression. What could these young men be inferring?

"We'd rather not say any more until we can speak to this person. Could we take a look around?" The best form of defence. Spencer crossed to the curtains and drew them back quickly. All that can be seen in the gloom beyond are the outlines of several coffins. Spencer looked back at the officers.

"As you can see, there's nothing back here that would be of interest to you."

"If we could just take a look round." The younger, more eager of the two officers took a step forward. Spencer immediately cut off the path to the parlour.

"I'm sorry. But I would lose the faith of my clients if I could not ensure their dignity and privacy. I'm sure you understand." "We'd like..." The younger man was not to be put off.

"I'm sure there's nothing back there that would be of interest to us." It was the older of the two men coming to Spencer's aide. He handed the identikit picture back to Spencer.

"Perhaps you'd be good enough to hold onto the picture. If you see or hear of anything out of the ordinary just give us a call."

"I'll be sure to be at my most vigilant." Spencer flashed his most placatory smile.

Wells' leg had gone numb as he hunkered down behind one of the caskets. He listened out for the reassuring ring of the bell above the door as the two policemen left the funeral parlour.

As Spencer entered the kitchen the kettle was already starting to whistle on the stove. Wells looked round.

"I was making tea. Would you like some?"

"Thank-you." Spencer sat at the table. Wells carried the kettle to the table and filled the teapot. He sat opposite Spencer.

"Why?" Wells broke the awkward silence between them.

"Why what?" Spencer couldn't resist toying with him.

"You know what I'm talking about. The police. You know they're after me. Why didn't you give me away?"

"Give you away!" Spencer's face was a perfect study in mock bafflement. "You're not mine to give away. I told you you're safe here. Can you still not see?"

No...Wells couldn't see.

"We're one and the same you and I. Birds of a feather?"

"I don't get you." Wells struggled to grasp the nettle.

"Did you really think yourself so special that there couldn't be another?"

Realisation dawned across Wells' face, then trepidation. Was this a carefully laid trap? A snare waiting for the heedless to step into? Surely not. Could he have become so complacent, so lacking in judgment in such a short space of time?

"But...how..."

"I can answer that no better than you can. Age doesn't bring any answers. We just are."

Questions...only questions. Every answer doing nothing but throwing up more questions.

"But what about...I mean the two of us... Why did you take me in?"

Spencer savoured a mouthful of warm, sweet tea.

"Because you'll be safe here. There is all of the opportunity but none of the danger." Spencer smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, you've nothing to fear from me. That's another of age's unfortunate side effects. It does tend to...lessen one's ardour, shall we say."

Wells couldn't move. He couldn't believe his ears. He would have pinched himself but meant running the risk of discovering all this to be nothing more than an elaborately plotted dream.

Wells carried his mop and water bucket out into the small yard at the back of the funeral parlour. His breath showed as clouds in the chill autumnal air. He squeezed out the mop then tipped the water from the bucket down the drain.

The door opened and Spencer looked out.

"Would you come out front, we could use some help."

The hearse was parked in front of the parlour, the three young smokers huddled in a group, enjoying the minimal warmth offered by their cigarettes. They eyed Wells suspiciously as he stepped out into the street, followed closely by Spencer. Stories, rumours were already circulating about the friendship that had been struck between the two men. It hadn't taken long for the whispered tales to spread from one town to another. Tales that could scarcely be believed. Tales that couldn't be true.

Between them the four men carried the coffin into the warmth of the parlour.

Spencer paid off the hired help, allowing Wells a moment alone inside. Wells looked at the coffin. He ran his hand along the edge of the casket lid. He grabbed hold and lifted.

"My God!" Wells stared, open-mouthed.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Spencer appeared at Wells' shoulder.

"Who is she?" Wells couldn't tear his eyes away from the sleeping beauty laid out before him.

"A tragedy. Helena Lindhaven. I know her family well."

"How did she die?"

"That is the tragedy. No one knows. She was in perfect health. She went to bed complaining of a headache...and never woke up."

"I feel like I've won the lottery." Wells felt a hand on his arm. The grip firm, restraining.

"No!" It was the first time since Wells had known him that Spencer had raised his voice. Confusion.

"What are you talking about? I thought you said you understood!"

"I do, only too well. But there are exceptions. She was...is my godchild." Wells' mouth practically hit the floor. He turned on Spencer, half expecting to see the old man break out into a broad smile...a joke...

"I don't believe it! What hypocritical bullshit!"

There was to be no debate. This was not an issue that needed any consideration.

"Whatever. That is how I want it to be."

Spencer was already closing the lid of the casket.

"You can't be serious."

Wells placed himself directly in Spencer's path.

"I am extremely serious. I have offered you a good home here. Please don't insult my hospitality."

Wells was rooted to the spot as Spencer turned and disappeared through the curtains.

The clock showed 12:18am. Wells lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He looked across at the alarm clock.

"The old bastard! I don't care if she's his fucking daughter! God-daughter...whatever...shit!"

Wells leapt from the bed. An itch that had to be scratched. He opened the bedroom door and stepped out onto the darkened landing. Spencer was there.

"It's a little late for you to be up, isn't it?" Wells was in no mood for conversation. He failed to see the deathly pallor of Spencer's face.

"I have to go. There's been a death in the family. My sister."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Wells was in no mood to be sympathetic. Maybe it would be better if Spencer wasn't around for a while.

"I have to go. I shan't ask you to come with me but I will ask you to remember what I said earlier...that you respect my wishes."

Wells nodded sagely. Whatever you say, boss man.

Spencer turned towards the door. He hesitated as he got to the door and turned back to look at Wells.

"It's taken me a long time to build this business. If you don't destroy it by being careless, it will serve you well...long after I'm gone."

Spencer closed the door behind him, leaving Wells alone to consider what had been said.

3:09am. The only light in the room came in through the windows. Wells lay naked on the bed, eyes open, staring at the ceiling. It didn't matter how responsible the old man wanted him to be. An itch needed to be scratched. He could only deny his true nature for so long.

The curtains over the parlour door parted as Wells stood between them, holding the material away from his naked body. The curtains fell back into place behind him as he crossed to the far side of the parlour.

Standing around the coffin were a number of tall candleholders. Lying on the lid was a box of matches. Wells stood beside the coffin; he picked up the box and struck a match. It flared brightly in the darkness. One by one, Wells touched the match to each of the candles in turn. Flickering orange light filled the room.

The spent match fell to the floor. Wells rested his cheek against the wood. He removed the lid of the casket and rested it against the wall behind him.

Helena lay in the coffin, dressed in a flowing white gown. Her thick black hair framed the ivory paleness of her face. She looked peaceful, serene, and beautiful in the orange glow of the candles.

Wells felt his engorged penis pressing against the side of the casket. His pulse raced. Unable to hold back any longer he leant forward and delicately kissed her on the lips. He lingered there, his eyes open, staring at her face.

Standing upright he reached into the coffin, pushing his hands beneath her body, feeling her weight. Straining, he braced his legs against the side of the casket then stood straight, lifting her from the coffin. He took an undignified step back and gently lowered her to the floor.

Wells knelt beside Helena. He reached out a hand and tentatively touched her. She felt cool. He felt the skin on his arms rising into gooseflesh. Tenderly he stroked her cheek. With his finger he traced the line of her cheek, brushing aside the hair where it had fallen across her face. He then leant forward, hands on either side of her head and kissed her again. Moving slowly, delicately, like the most sensitive of lovers, Wells ran his hand down the gentle curve of her neck to the lace bow that secured the front of the gown. With the faintest of tugs

the bow came undone. Wells slowly moved his hand inside the gown and pushed the material aside, revealing the pale mounds of her breasts. Positioning himself on top of her, Wells lowered his head and touched her cool flesh with his lips. He extended his tongue and drew the tip of it slowly up towards her neck.

Already he could feel his seed bubbling inside him, threatening to erupt. He checked himself and raised his hips to break the contact between their bodies. Wells supported himself on his hands, positioned over Helena's body.

Wells kissed Helena's shoulder. He moved his face into the curve of her neck and proceeded to kiss and gently bite the lobe of her ear.

Suddenly Helena's eyes snapped open. She gasped, inhaled deeply. Her head was filled with exploding images. Harsh assaulted her nostrils. scents She remembered...pain...voices...smothering...darkness...She looked around, bewildered. Her vision was filled with Wells' visage. Helena's lungs filled with air...and she screamed.

Wells sat up...shocked.

Helena's eyes darted around the room, trying to focus, to adjust to the candlelight. She sucked in deep lungfuls of air. Pins and needles screamed through her hands and feet. Her limbs moved at a different speed to her thoughts, uncoordinated, clumsy. Her legs gave way, refused to take her weight. Her mouth opened and closed but no sound emerged.

Flailing her arms and legs in the hope of gaining some momentum from the movement she scuttled backwards like a crab.

Wells sat back on his haunches, his heart trip-hammering in his chest. His throat constricted with fear. He tried to speak but shock had numbed his system, rendering him temporarily paralysed.

Helena crashed against one of the candleholders, knocking it to the floor. The candle went out. Wells could do nothing but watch as she hit the wall and sat there, pulling her legs up beneath her chin, hugging herself in a ball.

There was complete silence in the prison cell.

"What could I do? It was the last thing I'd ever expected." Ross stared at his new cellmate—still unsure whether he could believe what he had just heard. Who was this guy Wells...What could he say? Where did he begin? Where the fuck had they put him? Wells was grinning, a mischievous, impish smile on his face.

"They found out that she had a rare form of catalepsy. It could take her into a trance that was indistinguishable from death. Who was to know?" Wells seemed completely oblivious to the horror.

"Jesus Christ! That's supposed to make people believe you're an innocent man?" Ross suddenly found his voice.

Wells slipped down from the bunk and stood in front of Ross.

"I've never protested my innocence because as you can certainly tell from my little tale...innocent is something that I'm not."

"You can say that again. Shit! What is this place, psycho ward ten?" Ross moved towards the door, trying to put as much distance between them as the confines of the cell would allow.

"This place is an education."

"You're out of your fucking mind!"

Wells' eyes were fixed on Ross, following his every move.

"They'll put you away and throw away the key." Ross glanced towards the door, trying to peer out through the small spy hole. When he turned back Wells was standing right in front of him. Ross could feel his breath on him.

Fuck! All this for breaking a man's jaw in a fair fight.

"Is that what you think? That's why you're so lucky to be here. This is your chance to learn..." Wells' eyes were stone cold.

"I don't have to listen to this shit!" Ross spun round and hammered on the door. Enough. He had to get out. What had started as idle conversation between strangers forced to share a police cell while they awaited the arrival of their counsel had rapidly turned into a pissing contest for the criminally insane.

"Open this door. You've got to let me out of here. Open this door." Ross cried out at the top of his lungs—someone had to hear him.

Eventually the sound of feet approaching in the corridor outside could be heard.

"All right, all right. Keep it quiet in there. Step away from the door."

Ross lowered his fists and stepped back. The cell door slowly swung open.

"That's enough noise from in here! Wells. There's someone here to see you." The police officer stepped aside to reveal a short, middle-aged gentleman in a dapper, pinstriped suit.

Wells jumped to his feet, wiped his hand on his shirt and extended it towards Graysmark, who shook it eagerly.

"Good news, Mr. Wells."

Ross could contain himself no longer. He pushed Wells aside, forcing himself in front of the officer.

"I want this fucking psychopath out of here right now. You can't expect me to put up with..." Ross suddenly couldn't think what to say...Put up with what? That was the problem. Cons talking about their crimes. If you couldn't take that there wasn't going to much joy for you in the big house. Graysmark smiled smugly at Ross.

"Mr. Wells is free to go."

"What?" Ross said incredulously.

Wells causally rose to his feet.

"Don't look so surprised." Wells pushed past Ross, heading for freedom.

"But...but he's a fucking necrophiliac!"

The smile immediately dropped from Graysmark's face...this was a serious business and that was a serious allegation.

"I would advise you not to make unsubstantiated accusations against my client."

Ross' jaw almost hit the floor.

"Jesus Christ! He's admitted it himself! I just had to sit here listening to him..." What could he say? The whole world had gone mad.

"Whatever you may or may not have heard, the facts of the matter are that my client is a free man and is leaving here right now." Graysmark stepped aside as Wells walked through the door.

"But the girl! He was caught..." As Ross stood there incredulous, Wells shook Graysmark's hand warmly.

"It's true my client was caught in a rather embarrassing predicament...but you have to look at the bigger picture. According to medical science, the girl was dead and as such was to have been buried the next day. Had it not been for my client's...intervention..."

"Without me they'd have stuck her in the ground. I saved her life," Wells explained through a sickeningly smug grin.

"Okay...okay. So what about rape? He's a fucking rapist...it's gotta be sexual assault at the least!" Ross was clutching at straws. A man with a list of petty convictions longer than he could remember was fighting legal semantics with one of the sharpest minds in the city. Graysmark was having none of it.

"What about it? The girl's family was understandably distressed by my client's actions but they agreed that without him their daughter would have been dead and buried so to speak. As a measure of their gratitude they have decided not to press charges. Fortunately neither have the police."

Wells watched from outside the cell.

"I don't fucking believe it!" Ross' head dropped. If this was justice...

"Fucking believe it, Mr. Ross." Hearing expletives from the cultured mouth of someone like Graysmark only served to heighten their impact.

"Come on, boys. We don't have all day to stand around here." The police officer had listened with no small amount of enjoyment to the verbal cut and thrust but there were things to do. He took hold of the cell door and began to pull it closed.

Ross raced to the door and hammered loudly on it.

"Open this door! You're not leaving me in here! I have to see someone...!"

Ross' voice soon faded into the general hubbub of the police station. Wells smiled broadly as he followed Graysmark and the police officer towards the Duty Sergeant's desk where he could collect his belongings before being discharged. Through the windows he could see people going about their business, could feel the warmth of the sun on his face.

It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day.

Author's Note: Dark Heart

Dark Heart, as you might have guessed if you've read the author's note to "Skin Deep" was part of the movie script "Dark Heart" that I wrote.

The origin of the story was real life. I know...I could write about dragons or monsters or vampires or stuff like that but when you get down to it...there's just so many fucked up people and things out there in the world that you're never going to be able to imagine anything darker or more depraved or funnier or more weird than people are already doing or have done.

So...if this were a movie it would have to have the little, "based on true events" disclaimer at the front of it.

It seems some guy did actually work in a morgue and did actually like interfering with the dead bodies...not anything unusual about that.

Wait...

Did I say nothing unusual about that?

You're right...I did.

Come on...necrophilia is hardly something I just made up and it's not nearly as uncommon as you might like to think.

Anyway...this guy in a morgue—I think it was in Romania—he started to work his mojo with the corpse of this young girl they'd brought in, when surprise of surprises...she woke up.

Seems she'd been subject to some kind of catatonia.

Of course...you'd expect such a character as our morgue attendant to be doing fifteen to life down at the local penitentiary. Well it makes sense...but so unfortunately does the actual outcome.

You see...despite how freaked out and annoyed the girl's family were by what this guy had done to their beloved...there was just no getting around the fact that if he hadn't done it...she could quite easily have been chopped up during an autopsy and/or incinerated. Which meant that they actually owed her life to this guy and his strange sexual fetish. So they refused to press charges.

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