

Sloth

The physical appearance of Throgmorton, Simons and Cay should be in direct proportion to the length of their names, said my logic, but that was the weed talking. It was still talking to me when I got into the lift at their downtown office block and had difficulty choosing between 11th floor and 21st floor. I mean, a 2 is just a 1 with spinal scoliosis, isn't it?

Anyway, I must have guessed right, because the doors sighed open at a neat reception area where a neat receptionist rose from her neat console and came forward to greet me.

"Mr Sarstedt? I'm Megan, and you're right on time for the reading of the will. The partners will see you in a moment." She retired behind her desk - like a real-life, human cuckoo popping back into the clock - the kind that we all remember from way back. I sat there in one of the reception chairs, wishing it would stay still, and watched her field a couple of calls. I wasn't used to being on time for anything, so this was a first. Maybe I was in line for some sort of life-changing bequest, a windfall that would allow me to drop out and cultivate my own weed, instead of relying on Larry the Hump to remember to include me in his weekly rounds.

I was marginally disappointed to be joined by Bethany, Gilbert, Guillaume, and Raul over the next five minutes, their perusal of waiting-room reading matter as perfunctory as mine had been. I had a chance to study them, categorise them and calculate my chance of being the favoured nephew. It wasn't good. Uncle James had not married any of their mothers, but at least they could claim to be of his blood, while I was purely a constantly fascinated child in the background when he came back from one of his trips to outstay his welcome with Mother.

As his only sister, I dare say she felt responsible and put up with his eccentricities. Not to mention the overwhelming quantity of botanical matter he brought back with him to be classified, preserved and catalogued in her greenhouse. I think that's where his income came from. Generous grants and funding to take him off yet again to some remote and unpronounceable place that nobody else wanted to explore.

I'd found him much more interesting than the ordinary members of the family, perhaps because I saw him so infrequently. He must have taken note of the pale, shy child that hovered about, watching him, because he eventually allowed me to help him at his work. So, that might be why I had been singled out to be part of this auspicious occasion. The others would have been included to ease his conscience, I told myself.

The partners filed into the small boardroom after we'd been seated, and before cups of tepid tea and age-desiccated, chocolate digestive biscuits were served. While they didn't live up to my initial expectations, they were close enough. Throgmorton rustled documents self-importantly before greeting us and asking us to identify ourselves. 'Nephew' didn't sound too competitive against 'daughter', 'son', 'son' and 'son', but as it turned out, they

were awarded comfortable but relatively minor shares of his estate when later compared with the grand dollop of wealth he left me. It involved enough ready money to dispense with the inconvenience of having to work for a living. I sat there, stunned, avoiding the glares of the others, dimly aware of their babble of protest. The weed had largely worn off by then, but I took a couple more chocolate biscuits to bring me down quicker.

The others were quick to pay avid attention when Throgmorton produced a further sheet of paper and announced a codicil to the will. It made a condition to my inheritance. Quite a significant condition, I was to learn. Once the terms had sunk in, it seemed I would be initially limited to the same share as my illegitimate relations and inherit the rest when I had discharged my duty of care for Uncle James' long-time companion, Sybil, seeing to her needs and comfort until her death.

My mood and the expressions of the others changed dramatically at this. Me, wondering why Fate should have dealt me this diabolical hand, while they were clearly elated to have scored so well in this game. In fact, they started gathering up their things to leave, clearly anxious to avoid any further surprises that might affect their own windfalls. Cay saw them out and I slumped in my chair.

Throgmorton must have had some vestiges of warm blood in his veins, because he took up a chair beside me, and patted my knee.

"There is some relief in sight, young man. It appears that Sybil is sufficiently advanced in years for the arrangement to be of relatively short duration. While her health is currently sound, she may well be gone in, say, another year."

"A year? I squawked, "That's 365 days! Twelve months! Why me?"

"Clearly, your uncle thought a great deal of you. Enough to bequeath you more than half of his total estate. As I understand it, you need never work again. Certainly not after Sybil passes on – and in the meantime, you should manage very well." In my misery, I hardly noticed that he refrained from adding ... ""for someone currently unemployed."

"When...when does this start?" I whispered, my head in my hands.

"Aah, if the travel arrangements are on track, she should arrive at your residence tomorrow mid-morning. I imagine you'll be wanting to tidy up a little – if I know young bachelors." And here he laughed, although I glanced at him quickly to make sure he wasn't choking on something.

Tidying up consisted of throwing everything into black bags and schlepping it down to the laundry on the corner. That, and finding some bedding for the spare bed. That evening, I drank too much and was still asleep when the doorbell rang next morning at nine on the dot. The courier company man held out a clipboard and pointed to where I was to sign. I peered behind him and down the stairs after him. "Just going to fetch her things...." floated

up the stairwell in his wake. A few minutes later, he reappeared - backwards and dragging a trolley backwards, stair by stair, in a succession of thumps. There seemed to be a barrel of some sort, from which a fair-sized tree protruded. A dead tree actually. Without leaves.

I had supposed that anyone associated with Uncle James would have some odd possessions but it was all the two of us could do to wrestle this through the door and into the spare room. The courier plunged down the stairs again and this time brought up two stout cardboard cartons, one bigger than the other, grabbed his signed clipboard and left with what seemed undue haste.

I stood there uncertainly, realising that I had no idea how to address Sybil. Aunt Sybil was too formal and Sybil the opposite. She was certainly taking her time about making an entrance, maybe at her age; the stairs were too much for her. I moved the smaller box and went down to look for her. There was nobody on the pavement. Perhaps she was senile and had wandered off. For a moment, the evil that is in all of us suggested that a street accident could resolve this on Day One. But then, the possibility intruded - of her just being maimed - and that panicked me.

I went back upstairs, and carried the smaller box inside. It was very light. The other one was considerably heavier and then I noticed the holes punched in the lid, I also became aware of a warmth to the cardboard and a faint, feral odour from the box. I set it down in the middle of the sitting room floor and studied it. Then fetched a knife from the kitchen and slit the packaging tape. There was no movement, but a faint snore caused me to flip the flaps apart.

As I was to learn, Sybil, at rest, was not much less active than Sybil in movement. Right now, she represented peace, as we would all love it to be. Her enormous fore-claws were crossed over a corpulent belly that might have belonged to any city alderman after a particularly sumptuous Rotary lunch and a generous passing of the sherry flagon and humidior. But in this case it was a domesticated, Third World, tropical jungle denizen that Fate had deposited on my doorstep and into my care. Care of an unspecified duration.

An envelope stuck to the side of the smaller carton yielded 2 pages covered in my late uncle's spidery writing.

My dear Steven,

If you are reading this, you will have made the acquaintance of Sybil, a very dear and constant friend to me for many years. Her presence lightened the loneliness of a life given to research in the Americas, away from humankind and the comforts of society. Uncomplaining and making no demands, she was the perfect companion.

With great patience and despite information to the contrary, her diet has been converted and adapted over time to vegetable matter obtainable at any local supermarket. I urge you to read up on the Two-toed Sloth to discover how trouble-free their management and care

can be. The delicate matter of her ablutions is to some extent resolved by the fact that sloths excrete only about once weekly, so you will learn to adapt to accommodate this.

Enjoy her company as much as I have.

The malady that is shortly to remove me from this world will soon affect my mind, so I have made peace with what is to be, and instructed my solicitors accordingly – and while I can. My trust in you will not be amiss, I know.

Enjoy your inheritance. It should more than amply compensate you for the effort to come.

James

Thinking of the other heirs, it occurred to me that Uncle James had been unfaithful to Sybil at least four times, but the last two sentences reminded me of my own promised reward to come. I can do this, I thought, rallying my thoughts and resolve.

I sat down on a chair and studied Sybil. She, in turn, opened her eyes and studied me. Large, dark, glistening eyes. Under a blunt, patent leather muzzle, a wide mouth that seemed to be perpetually smiling. Turning her head, she took in the room, item by item – in slow motion. Tentatively, I reached out a hand. Sybil looked at it and slowly reached out one formidably armed forelimb. It was a special moment that was ruined by a knock at the door.

Larry was proud of himself – you could see that. He'd remembered that Tuesday was delivery day for Steve Sarstedt – and that the man always paid in cash – no IOUs or promises. He stood there in the doorway, stoned as always, wagging a transparent plastic bank bag of weed between yellowed thumb and forefinger and adjusting his Scotch-taped specs with the other hand. I turned to get my wallet off the sideboard. It afforded Larry a full view of Sybil sitting in her courier-branded carton, arms extended along the sides as though in a bath. He peered short-sightedly at her, as I clawed notes out of my wallet, anxious to be rid of him.

“Shoo wow, bro! Mail-order brides. That's a real bummer! I mean you couldn't know, could you? Like, you just trust the people don' you?” He was still commiserating when I slammed the door.

Sybil had by now laboriously clambered out and was full length on the linoleum, arms outstretched and huge claws seeking purchase on the smooth surface. I was relieved to see she was heading for the spare room, but hovered over her, not sure how one picked up a sloth. If at all. As it turned out, she made her way confidently to the barrel, and from the floor, hoisted herself up the dead tree in an impressive display of fluid power. One limb jutted out of the trunk at right angles and there, she settled, suspended upside down, and with a moist sigh, promptly fell asleep again. Part of me was relieved.

I investigated the other carton. There were 3 badly knitted pullovers, some jars of cream and an assortment of dried leaves separated into different bags. Another envelope contained instructions for each. I grasped that a winter away from her steamy jungles might require warm clothing. And that certain symptoms might indicate a need for natural supplements, but the uses for the creams had me praying that Sybil suffered none of the conditions described. But I made a note to get some rubber gloves. And a good stock of the substitute vegetables Uncle James' note prescribed.

There followed a couple of days that I wouldn't have believed, if I'd been told about it as an experience in someone else's life. It coincided with Sybil's weekly 'ablution' as Uncle James so delicately phrased it. An hour later, on my third roll of kitchen towel, I'd been inducted into the company of those who, at any trying stage in their lives, claimed to have cleaned Augean Stables, and realised that I could look forward to this as a regular exercise. Which is why I left Sybil to her own devices just long enough to dash out for disposable nappies.

"What size?" Asked the assistant "What age is the child? So we can give you the right size."

"I don't know." I said, making vague cradling gestures with my hands.

"That looks more like a small adult." She said, adding kindly "Is it for an incontinent relative?"

"Yes!" I lied, my face flushed with embarrassment. She tsk tsked and said "No need to be shy about it. I think it's wonderful that you should be looking after the aged. I'll give you small adult size – the adhesive tapes are adjustable. Try these."

I mumbled my thanks and paid. I forgot to ask for rubber gloves.

Back home it took a stapler and masking tape to accommodate Sybil's lower regions, so I resolved to go for "large infant" on my next purchase. Munching stolidly on a cabbage leaf, Sybil endured all this with surprising good humour, clearly unfazed by the ridiculous figure she cut in my clumsy attempts at couture.

Over the next few days and this mishap aside, Sybil turned out to be rather easier to live with than most people, sleeping most of the day and night and not snoring loudly. I became convinced that I was a natural. A few other disasters with pets left in my care were not my fault, I told myself.

So it was that I accepted an invitation to next-door-Vinny's going-away party. His destination didn't seem important after half a bottle of Russian Bear and a joint, and I was enjoying the mood and the music, relaxing at my first outing for some time. But through the haze, I surfaced enough to wonder if the music was disturbing Sybil. The thought persisted, until I made it to my feet and announced that I was going to check my flat.

“Whoa bro’...! What for! It’s right there – what could be wrong? “Vinny fixed me with a suspicious, but owlish stare, “You planning to fade on us? I’m going away tomorrow an’ I won’ see you okes for like years... an’, an’ an’...”. His voice failed him at the prospect and I thought he was going to cry. He’d had more Russian Bear than I had. I clapped him on the shoulder.

“Nooit, Vinny! That’s not it...” I lowered my voice, “fact is... I’ve got someone staying with me an’ I jus’ wanna check on them...back in a minute - I promise!”

“Hey man! Whyn’t you say so? Izzit a chick? Now whyn’t you bring her with? Lemme come’n meet her!”

“NO!” I cried, loudly enough for nearby guests to look our way. Those who could still focus the smoke-filled length of Vinny’s crowded sitting room.

“Tell you what, Vinny. Lemme make sure she’s decent and I’ll bring her across.” At the time, given my condition, it seemed perfectly reasonable. Vinny beamed lopsidedly.

“I KNEW it! It IS a chick...you sly dog. So hurry up and do it – we’re all waiting!”

It was a chilly evening and I fumbled Sybil into one of her jerseys without mishap. I looked at her. She looked at me, blinking. In my state, and under Vinny’s dim lighting, I thought she might pass muster as the Sarstedt family embarrassment.

It was too late to shave her face, so I found a baseball cap with a large peak that shaded most of it. The foreclaws were another matter entirely. A pair of socks without holes seemed to conceal most of the peculiarity, and I hoisted her unsteadily onto one hip and set out with all the confidence of the truly inebriated with Larry the Hump’s finest kicking in big-time.

When I went back, Vinny was mingling, if you could call it that, but a very large, bespectacled girl spotted Sybil, pushed her way through the throng and opened her arms wide.

“A BABY!” she intoned reverently “Come to ME!” enveloping both Sybil and me in a sweaty, vice-like embrace. Somewhere amongst the meters of chains, beads and material, I managed to turn my face up for air and croak “Wait, wait, you’ll scare her! She’s not used ...” before I was engulfed again. Claustrophobia won, and as I broke free, Sybil’s grip was torn from my arm, affected I suppose, by the socks. By the time, I emerged, panting; my face glittering from whatever Mother Earth sprinkled on her mountainous bosoms at party-time, Sybil was the centre of a small circle of attention.

“Aah no, shame, hey! Ah lookitit!

“S’jus so sweeeet, I could eat him up! An’ so like chilled, hey?”

“Whoozkidizzit, anyway? An’ whyzzit got...like... socks on its hands...”

I’d recovered enough by now to snatch Sybil up and she settled happily enough onto my hip, I doubt my scent would have registered with her in that atmosphere, although it was Brut. Anyway, I backed against a wall and faced the semi-circle of faces, my head clearing enough to realise this hadn’t been a good idea. Somebody had given Sybil a cookie and she was chomping away as I addressed them.

“Listen, you can see Sybil’s got special needs. Arthritis.” I wagged my fingers to explain the socks. “I’m, like...her guardian. Yeah, my niece...She’s got to go back now. I only brought her to show you why I haven’t been out lately.”

“Ja...now you mention it – you can see the family likeness,” said one face. Another two faces agreed. Sybil belched.

“Whyn’t you let her have jus’ one lil’ dance, before...” was followed a chorus of approval and support. I started to protest before the scrum enveloped me and Sybil was swept away, leaving a piece of soggy cookie stuck to my shirt. Distractedly, I picked it off and put it in my mouth. Yeah, right ! I told myself, as realisation dawned with the taste. Nobody here would have cookies that weren’t liberally laced with weed – for the non-smokers.

Which explained why, out in the centre of an enraptured circle, Sybil was really getting down to it. Not down, flat on the floor and crawling as usual, but upright on her little back legs, long arms spread wide for balance and gyrating. Her cap had slipped to a jaunty angle, but my alterations to her nappy seemed to be holding up, the sweater not quite covering the lower part so that she might well have been a toddler with furry leggings. Well, in these befuddled surroundings and bad lighting, anyway.

I don’t remember how I managed to find the door, let alone get out of there. With Sybil, I stumbled out and escaped with my last shreds of intelligence. Sybil had retired to her tree by the time I collapsed face down, across my own bed.

At about 11am I was still lying there, but right side up, staring at the ceiling and thinking muddled thoughts, when I became aware of something pulling at the duvet. I looked down and met the soulful gaze of my flat-mate, defeated by the smoothness of the sheets. I reached down and scooped her up and she settled into the crook of my neck with a contented sigh. A deep sense of peace descended on me and I dropped off again.

It was late afternoon when I surfaced again, this time because Sybil was coughing. Not loud and racking, but enough to remind me that she very rarely uttered any sound. I sat up and studied her, and she coughed again, her eyes fixed on me. Thirty minutes later, I was sitting in the empty waiting room at the veterinary clinic, cradling Sybil in my arms and watching the surgery door as if it was the door to a bank vault. Which it was - in a way.

At first sight, Dr Beverley Sanders wasn't every man's dream. A blood-spattered dustcoat, dirty fingernails and hair escaping from its Alice-band will distract attention from green eyes, a full mouth and flawless skin, but I wasn't looking for romance right then. The green eyes widened when she saw Sybil and she breathed in disbelief..." I don't believe it – here in the city.... Come, come – bring it in!" backing into the surgery. I followed.

"This is Sybil, she's a sl..."

"*Choloepus Hoffmanni* – yes, yes I know, but how, why...?" She'd taken Sybil and laid her on her back on the table, not a position Sybil favoured, and she turned over, coughing with the effort.

Beverley Sanders fixed me with those amazing eyes and said accusingly, "You've not kept her warm enough - away from infection, she's picked up some sort of respiratory bug..." She sniffed at Sybil, "and why does she smell of tobacco smoke, and, and other stuff?"

I don't know why my natural instinct to lie didn't prevail. Probably lack of inspiration. I resorted instead to the guilty but remorseful hangdog look that sometimes swings it. And then someone using my voice, blurted out the whole story. It included the condition set out in Uncle James' will.

Beverley continued with her examination, briskly, efficiently, seemingly oblivious to the monologue behind her.

"I'll give her an anti-biotic shot that should clear it up, but it's formulated for domestic dogs, not a creature as unusual and specialised as this – everything about it is unique in the animal world! I want to see her every second day until I'm satisfied. Are you listening?"

With a guilty start, I came back to the present, nodding vigorously. I'd been savouring the words '*see her every second day until I'm satisfied.*'

"Yes, yes, quite understood Doctor - I will – make sure..."

And then she smiled and said, "By the way, I applaud your efforts thus far... before...*this*. And please call me Beverley." And I was lost.

Back home, I started listing things that Steven Sarstedt would be giving up, habits he would be changing, at least for the next year or so - but longer if need be.

That was all of eighteen months ago, and I still call her Beverley. Sybil just smiles that shy, quiet smile that splits her greying muzzle.

Mike Job