

A Death in the Family

A Novella
By
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Synopsis

Have you ever wondered how many secrets one family maybe hiding? You maybe nodding now, remembering your own secret. Most families have secrets, and the family in this story are no different. They have many secrets, some of them are small and some...

The story begins with a dinner party, a will and a death. An Inspector is sent to investigate. It's a chilling thought that one of them in that very room had killed their father. It makes Alexander – the oldest of the siblings – shiver.

Each of the siblings has a story to tell, and as the inspector quizzes them, we find they all have a motive for killing their father. The Inspector already appears to know their secrets. He knows everything...

After hours of investigation, we find out the truth, and discover who really killed their father.

Word Count: 25,047

A Dinner Party for the Family:

1

“Let me take your coat.” The maid almost hissed at the last guest. By the time Alexander arrived she was shattered. Her dainty little legs – and they were very dainty, no thicker than an empty toilet tube, even at the ankles – simply weren’t designed for all the stair climbing she’d done in the past hour. In any case, the house had far too many steps, and it didn’t help.

“Thanks!” Alexander spoke with a harsh rasp. He was older than the others, more frilled at the edges – and he was only forty. One thing was certain, he took after his father – had the same cheeky smile, and the thick dark eyebrows. His voice was in a worse condition, and he knew if it went again, there was no chance of it coming back. He’d smoked too much, had no exercise, and drank three to the gallon – almost his motto. The maid watched Alexander stepping through the open door – no need to invite him in, for he was no ordinary guest, much like the others. Once upon a time – long before hers – he had lived here, just like the other visitors. She was almost surprised by the likeness before her. If she hadn’t known better, she’d have thought her master had lost weight – and years. He hadn’t changed a bit – and she knew this from the pictures dotted about the place. Even a maid like herself couldn’t resist snooping in her employer’s closet and drawers.

Alexander stepped carefully, his legs failing.

The maid tapped her foot impatiently. She couldn’t wait all day. She had yet to make the beds and correct the rooms, before any of today’s guests could sleep. With a sigh, she helped Alexander take his jacket off, and rushed off, just showing him the way to the others quickly on her way.

“Thanks!” Alexander said again, but the maid was already up the stairs. She didn’t hear him, nor did she care. She didn’t exactly favour this job.

Alexander showed himself into the room. Familiar faces stared straight at him, some friendly, others hostile.

“Good day!” he said, stepping in, and closing the door.

2

“How are we all?” he asked, but the faces continued to stare. None had seen him in a long while. Sure, once they’d all lived together, here, but things had changed. They didn’t really speak anymore – a shame, one might think. You wouldn’t understand. So many things happened.

It had been years since they had spoken.

Molly stood to the left, Patricia sat in the centre with Henry standing tall in the fireplace, smoking his Marlboro lights – as per usual. He seemed to be in his own world, and didn’t even acknowledge his brothers presence. Alexander turned to the final face, shy in the far corner. He didn’t want to be involved in all this messy business – and indeed it would be messy, always had been.

Percy never did like ‘family politics’ and the childish games they all seemed to play. If Alexander hadn’t known Percy was a member of the same family, he’d have sworn blind they weren’t related.

“Hi!” He waved at Percy, the weakest one. The rest discarded him – useless, Molly would call him, or ‘Pointless Percy’ as Patricia liked to say – but they all used him as a pawn in their stupid games. In their eyes, he was good for nothing, but Alexander understood him. He actually thought Percy was better than them, just for keeping out of it.

Percy looked slightly more at ease than usual, as if he'd had a major confidence boost. Whatever, Alexander knew it wouldn't last – and it hardly even lasted to dinner.

There was a face missing, the man that had called them here. Where was their father, Luke? He'd brought them all back here for a reason, and that's why the tension was running slightly high.

His estate was worth millions – literally – and that was the reason for the gathering.

“How was your trip up here?” Molly asked, blowing the smoke from Henry's Marlboro. She hated her brother smoking – and always had. It was so insensitive. She hated Alexander for smoking too. They were killing themselves, but that didn't seem to change a thing. Alexander looked thoughtfully at the packet in his hand. He sighed and sat, scrunching the packet.

“I gave up.” Alexander started, examining the scrunched up packet, and feeling the craving growing. “It's almost killed me.” And he laughed, but Molly did not approve of this joke. She looked at him with scornful eyes, and waited for an answer to her question. Alexander stopped laughing. “It was okay, I suppose.” He smiled wryly. “I took a wrong turning at the McMillan farm.” Molly laughed at this. She didn't understand how he could do such a thing. He'd lived here for the first eighteen years of his life, how could he take the wrong route. “How long have you been here?”

“Half an hour.” Molly answered, speaking for everyone, and then added, “Percy was first, as always.” Her brother was such a brown nose, and she hated it. She knew he'd been trying to make a good impression, sucking up to their father. She

just couldn't stand for it. She knew Percy would get more than the rest, if not most of it.

"Hey!" he shouted angrily, objected greatly. His time keeping was superb, always had been. For that, you couldn't knock him.

"Shut your whining Pointless!" Patricia hissed. It wasn't unusual for her to join in. She hated her brother's attitude, if not more than Molly. Surprised, you wouldn't be, if you knew her nickname at school was 'little miss bitch.' It suited, as many nicknames did. She started most of the bitching in the family, although Molly had a damned good try at it.

Percy fell silent, and began to mutter to himself in the corner. Alexander gave Patricia an evil look, but of course, she could stare for England. Alexander caved in, and turned away.

"What you been up to?" Alexander directed this at Henry. He'd just put out his first Marlboro, and was lighting a second. He was a real chain smoker, and always had been. He packed away more than Alexander ever did – or could, for that matter.

Alexander started to twitch. He'd only just given up a few days before, and the effects were obvious. He threw the scrunched packet from his hands, and watched it land in the fireplace. The fire wasn't lit, but he didn't suppose it'd matter.

Henry couldn't be without his darlings for more than an hour.

"Usual." He said smugly. "I see you've given up...*again*." Now he smiled, but only between drags. Alexander tried quitting at least five or six times before, but it never quite managed to stick. He was always on them again within a week, but this time he planned it to be different. This had to last forever. It was hard, he'd say, and it was – just as any smoker will tell you. Henry used to work at an estate agent, but that had been a long time ago, and Alexander knew very little about his brother's life.

They'd lost touch. All of them had. "Doing lots of business recently." The smile didn't fade.

"As dodgy as normal!" Alexander commented with an old mans sneer. Henry looked wounded, but he'd live, Alexander was sure of that. He didn't ask what he did now. "What you being doing with yourself?"

"You know Regency Corner?" he asked, and Alexander nodded. "I own that now."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I bought it a few years ago. Makes a lot of money you know?"

"I'll bet." Alexander said quietly out of the corner of his mouth. We sat in silence for a few moments, just nodding, as men doing. Say nothing, just nod, and somehow we seem to understand. Strange but true. Patricia broke the silence.

"Why has father brought us all together tonight?" She seemed confused. It sounded like she really didn't have a clue. As soon as Alexander spotted that, he decided to explain – as the elder, it was his duty.

We'd all been expecting this for sometime, but it seemed no one had informed Patricia – maybe she didn't get the memo. Their father wouldn't live forever, and they all knew it. That's why Henry chuckled at Patricia's dumb ignorance.

"Father won't live forever." He rasped, like an old man who'd fallen short of breath. "Tomorrow he's paying a visit to the solicitors. Its that time..." Alexander wasn't sure if it needed any more explanation. From the blank look on her face, he realised it did. "Father will be making his final will and testament. He just wants us to know beforehand."

"I bet Percy swipes it all!" Molly started digging her well-adapted claws. She couldn't stand all this chitchat. It was pointless, and pathetic, just like her brother.

She could just see Percy swiping the rug from beneath them all, but no one else could – or at least if they did, they did not voice their concerns. She could picture it all. Father would announce that his estate belonged to his favoured son. No one else would get the slightest look-in. She hated the idea, and growled.

Slowly the anger drained and she retracted her claws.

“Don’t start now!” Alexander said as the maid stepped into the cloudy lounge. The smoke dissipated with the door open, but the bad odour was here to stay.

“Come this way!” She said, stepping back out into the grand hallway.

Outside, the sun had gone and the wind had picked up. There was a small draft from the door. It blew the leaves on the potted plants lined the hallway. Recently, their father had gotten right into potted plants. They held some sort of fascination – something which the maid didn’t understand. He loved watching them grow, and grew them in his little green house out the back. The garden had been transformed into paradise. A small path led down to the bottom, where the pagoda stood. Wooden decking took you from the back door onto a small veranda and bridge across the small brook. It was pure paradise.

Sometimes Luke would go out and just sit there, even in the rain. He loved watching the plants grow, over time. It was fascinating. The whole area fascinated him. He was like a mesmerized school child, who’d spotted the magnificent transformation of the caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly.

They all followed the maid up the elegant winding stairs.

Alexander stole a quick look over the side of the well-polished banister. The whole house looked just as magnificent as it had done ten years ago. He looked at the chandelier hanging low from the ceiling. Big brass fittings protruded from the roof,

and could support about maybe up to two hundred pounds, but he didn't want to try it. He guessed the chandelier weighed almost that much on its own.

As a kid, he'd always fantasised doing *Indiana Jones* style swinging on it. His father had caught him, on his one and only attempt. Alexander had stepped onto the chandelier; ready to swing when his father had returned from work. Alexander had been punished badly for it. From that day on Alexander understood that fantasies are always better as fantasies, and are never as good in real life.

"Your room sir!" the maid said opening the first door. Henry stepped in, and blinked, perplexed. He couldn't believe his father – that tight fisted old fester of a man had gone to all this trouble. He had spent more money for this evening than he had done in his life, he bet. Henry closed the door as the others moved on. The maid was sweating badly.

"And yours madam!" she opened the second door and let Molly in, and so it went on. One by one, they were shown to their rooms.

Percy was the last of the bunch, and got the room closest to his father's. That he did like. He had always been the closest to his father, so he thought of it as a symbol. It may have been because he was the youngest of them all or something, but he didn't care, as long as he got something from his father's death. He may be nice to him, but under his cool shy exterior was a cruel, calculated son-of-a-whore.

Everyone found a set of garments to wear for the evening. The women got dresses and healed shoes, even the earrings and makeup was supplied. All the men got a plain black suit, no tie, and a pair of shiny, black shoes. Each was to the exact requirements of the user. Luke had planned everything out. He didn't want to leave anything that night to chance, but as plans always go...

Lest to say, they never go the way you want them too. You can plan and plan, but in the end, a great deal is always unplanned. It is called fate. That night, fate would play a major part in the lives of those in the house. The plans were about to be disposed of, in the worst way possible.

3

Alexander looked around the room. He knew the room so well. Slowly it dawned upon him. Once upon a time, this had been *his* room. Childhood memories flooded back to him in a cascade – a tidal wave of remembered thoughts, echoes of what once was. He looked at all the objects – *his* things. Everything was a reminder of the past. For instance, there was the clock hanging from the far wall. An eighteenth century clock his father had been proud of. Now it was nothing more than wood, cogs, and springs.

Alexander broke the mechanism when he was ten, and it had never been fixed – his father said it would alter its true value if anyone played about with it, but Alexander wasn't quite so sure.

It was raining outside, and Alexander couldn't go out to play. His father hated wet clothes, and banned any such behaviour that resulted in this. Alexander, being the genius he was, decided it would be a fine idea to play football in his room – Henry was the goalkeeper. On many occasions, had their father expressed his dissatisfaction at such things, but Alexander was never quite the one keeping the rules. He took the football, and walloped it one. Henry wasn't the keeper he liked to think he was, and missed. The ball bounced off the clock, sending it cascading to the floor. As soon as it was down, Alexander was down also. He knew what he had done, and the punishment it deserved, but his father never handed it out. When he finally found out, Luke was so mad; he couldn't speak to either of them for a week.

The innards of the clock were left hanging out, like a gutted fish for weeks, until Luke finally got round to clearing it up. He couldn't do much with it, and it had been left that way ever since.

Alexander looked at the clock, remembering how angry his father had been. He'd been so sorry after, but he had never really apologised to their father. He thought it might be time for such a thing. Luke wasn't going to last forever.

His eyes drifted across the room to where a picture hung – almost adjacent to the clock. The picture was of a sunset, one he remembered all too vividly. He'd been out with some girl he'd met, and they sat up on the Creek – as they called it back then. Things were going well, until the girl asked him for something he didn't feel ready to give. She wanted them to fuck right there and then. He remembered looking into the distance, and seeing the sunset. He watched He had painted that back in college. He studied art and painted it for his father. It didn't fit in with the décor downstairs so had to be banished to his own bedroom. It was a good painting; his father didn't deny him that. It just didn't fit in with anything. Alexander didn't care what his father thought of it anyway. His art teacher had loved it, and that was all he cared about.

Oh, so many memories in this room. He broke down onto his knees and began to cry. He was so happy to be here and remember all that had happened to him. All his childhood was recorded in this room; right from the wiener of a kid he had once been, right up until the man he was now. Everything was catalogued.

Everyone lay in his or her own rooms, at the exact same time. Every one of them was in tears. Luke was a crafty old beggar. He knew what he was doing and that was why all this planning and positioning had been no accident. That clock, for example. That had been placed in Alexander's room for an exact purpose. Luke was

trying to provoke a reaction, to bring back the memories. The clock had been placed there in Alexander's room, just to bring back that harsh memory. Alexander had paid through the nose to have that clock repaired and restored. In Henry's room, a special edition plate was hung on the wall. Close up, you could hardly see the cracks from where Henry had dropped it. That had been his lesson. Everything was placed with a reason in mind. There was a reaction that Luke wanted to provoke.

Luke wanted to show everyone how shallow they were. He wanted to show them what they were all like. Luke had lived with his children long enough, and knew that one of them would kill him. That was why he planned. He wanted to hold a mirror up and show them all how shallow they were. He wanted them all to suffer, as he had suffered.

Dinner would be served at six that evening. They all had direct instructions to be ready for the gong, which would be bonged at six. That would knell the served food, but it would also knell something else significant. It would knell the death of Luke. It was no accident, as you will find out. It was all planned, and Luke knew...

4

Alexander sat in the room, waiting for the gong to go. He kept glancing at the gold watch his father had bought him to wear for that evening (and there was a reason behind that too. Their father, as crafty as he was, was trying to shower them in gifts. Again, he was trying to provoke a reaction). He shook the watch, and held it to his ear. Either it was running fast or the maid had forgotten to serve the food and bong the gong. He began to grow impatient.

Everyone in his or her rooms sat waiting for the gong to go. All of them looking at the watches their father had bought. (Little did they know, all of the watches were indeed set fast, and as always with Luke, it was by no act of accident).

At three minutes past six (according to the watches their father had bought) a loud, sharp, shrill scream arose. Percy was the most terrified. It came from the room next door to him. It was his father's room.

Everyone was already making their way out of the rooms, in a tremendously curious rush, when the gong began to chime. (It ran on electronic motors. There was no need for it to be bonged, as they had already been summoned by the screaming).

The Gong chimed twice.

"What the hell was that?" Percy asked stepping into the hallway. He was just in time to see the rest of the family gathering in the hall. They were coming his way. "That was from father's room!" he cried almost in tears.

"Come on!" Alexander snapped. He couldn't stand all this artsy fartsy chat. Something was wrong. He moved his aching bones, and his sore body. He wanted to know what the fuck was going on. Something was not right here, and he could smell it, more than a dead carcass that had been left in the sun for over a week and a half. He could imagine the maggots crawling. He shook the thought out of his mind, and marched with the rest of them.

Alexander had not heard such shrill shouting since...since. Oh, it was too painful for him to say. He had a feeling though, that he would have to say by the end of this night. That sent a cold chill flying up and down his spine.

They all followed to their father's door. Alexander led, closely followed by Molly and Percy. Percy might be shy, but when his father was involved, he wanted to be the first one there. This time he lost out. Alexander was first.

“He’s dead!” the maid exclaimed as the rest of them stepped into the room. Alexander stepped forward, Percy gagged and Patricia began to cry. His hand reached out to touch his father’s neck. He was dead. There was no protest about that one. He was stone cold dead. He had not felt anything as cold as his father’s neck since the death of his dog – Sam – almost twelve years ago. Sam has died in his sleep, at the grand age of fifteen. Sam suffered a massive heart attack. Alexander didn’t even know about it, until the morning. He woke up, his feet cold. Sam was lying on him. Alexander had gotten up and touched Sam. Then he realised why his feet were cold. Sam was as cold as a winter’s day.

Sam was buried in the garden that same day. Alexander had never cried so much since he had lost his one and only friend in his harsh world. Nothing prepares you for death.

Alexander turned to them all, and began to cry. The way he felt right now, he was going to cry more than he had done when Sam had died, but he didn’t. The tears dried up in seconds.

“Oh, God!” Henry said rolling his eyes. At first, Alexander thought he was tutting, but then he realised he’d fainted. Molly caught him, gagging again. She wasn’t alone Percy began to gag too. He’d just caught the first glance of the red puddle staining the silk white carpets.

“Call an ambulance!” Alexander directed at the group, but none moved. They all stood with their eyes wide and mouths open. They reminded him of fish needing to be put back in water. “Oh hell!” he said, “I’ll do it myself.”

The maid stood up and rushed to the toilet. Alexander caught the first sounds of her throwing up as he raced for the phone in the hallway. He dialled 999, and explained the situation. Quite how the woman on the other end understood, he didn’t

know. He was in such a state; he was having trouble understanding anyhow. Once the ambulance was on its way, he hung up the receiver – the woman wanted to stay on the line, but Alexander couldn't. The rest of them were useless in situations like this, as was being proved.

“The ambulance will be here in a few minutes.” Alexander said, entering the room once again. He knew from the bottom of his heart, his father was already dead. Nothing him, or anyone else could do. He was dead, gone.

This worried him slightly, but something else worried him. He could see no entry point, no exit point in the room. That meant whoever killed him was inside the house. Now, call him stupid, but he knew for a fact no one else was in the house. That left him chilled.

One of them here had killed him. *How could they?* He accused them in his head. *How dare they do such a thing!* He turned round, and threw up in the corner of the room.

5

The wait seemed way too long, but at last the ambulance arrived. Alexander showed them in, and took them up to the room. Alexander was the only one still able to stand and speak. Everyone was weak at the knees. They couldn't believe their father had been murdered – or maybe it was the guilt that they'd killed him. One of them was so greedy they'd killed their father.

Two paramedics came up, and looked at their father. The woman hunched over him, checked his airways, and pulse. Nothing.

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“He’s stone cold!” she exclaimed with her hands against his neck. She shook her head. “I don’t think there is anything we can do.” She said. “Better wait for the police.” This was precisely what they did.

Molly had been talking hysterically, until the police arrived. As soon as they entered, she fell silent – a stunned silence, maybe the fact had just hit home.

Alexander just couldn’t tell if she was putting on a brave face. After all she was an actor, and they tend to *act*.

After an hour, the police had photographed the body, and the surroundings. Everything had been checked. The paramedics were given the all clear, and they took the body – to the mortuary, I suppose.

An Inspector was on his way.