

Mrs. McGinty And The Man in the Sphere

A Mrs. McGinty Mystery

Chapter 1 The Colonel Makes a Call

We were sat in the kitchen talking about killing ourselves.

“What about an overdose?” I asked.

“Rubbish,” said my aunt. “At best it’s a cry for help, at worst a stupid accident.”

“What about car exhaust fumes?”

“Tart’s way out. Put Classic FM on the stereo, shove a hose pipe through the window, drink half a bottle of cooking sherry and sleep forever.”

“It’s ironic,” chipped in Rogers, my aunt’s butler. “If they could have got a good night’s sleep in the first place, they probably wouldn’t have wanted to commit suicide in the first place.”

Despite it being first thing in the morning, my aunt was already on her third bottle of brown ale and she belched noisily. She was dressed in an old dressing gown that was definitely in need of a wash and a pair of slippers that didn’t match. Rogers, as always wore neatly pressed trousers and tails jacket, but when we’re alone in the house, he only has a string vest under it. I was wearing an old sweatshirt, jogging bottoms and a pair of slippers in the shape of Homer Simpson’s head.

Courtesy of Rogers, we always started the day with a full cooked breakfast, even if we didn’t eat later in the day.

“And I’ll tell you something else,” my aunt said. “Because of health and safety these days, there isn’t much chance of pushing someone off a cliff, you’d get nowhere near. The same with high buildings. There’s barriers, fences and locked doors, not to mention CCTV. In the old days, you could just lure someone up there, wait for them to turn their backs and *whammo!* Push them off”

“What about poisons?” I asked, looking at the lump of black pudding swimming in a lake of grease.

“You can’t get hold of any of the good ones any more, I mean, where can you buy rat poison? When I was a lass you could get hold of all sorts of things, strychnine, cyanide, arsenic. There’s chuff all left. Do you know what’s toxic enough in the average kitchen to finish you off? I don’t, and I’m in this line of work. Plus, if it was something like bleach, you’d have to mix it with something else just to get it down your neck.”

She paused to finish off yet another bottle of brown ale. She did this in such a fashioned that made me think that she’d probably have no problem drinking anything, let alone bleach. Rogers handed her another bottle and she took the top off with her teeth.

“There’s just no good way of doing it any more,” said my aunt. “It’s just about impossible to get access to any firearms.

“You could probably get hold of a shotgun,” I said.

“I’d have to nick it from somewhere, and that’s not easy. I’d probably get caught that would be an end to it.”

“You can apply for a license.”

“Yeah, but you need two referees who are reasonable and upstanding. If you’d got two friends like that, you probably wouldn’t be the kind of sad bugger who’d put a gun in their mouth anyway.”

“You could do it if you were in the military. They let them have guns.”

“If you’re in the military, there’s plenty of other ways that you could commit suicide. You could crash a plane into a mountain or run naked through Basra shouting ‘Osama Bin Laden is a Girl’. Beside, that’s not the point. We’re not really talking about committing suicide; we’re talking about committing murder and making it look like a suicide. In the old days, you just shot somebody, wiped off the gun and stuck it in the victim’s hand.”

“Making sure you got the right hand,” said Rogers.

“Or the left hand if it was a left handed person,” I added.

My aunt mimed pushing someone off a cliff with an inappropriate amount of glee.

“There’s still the problem of the note,” I said.

“I’ve got that sussed,” said my aunt, taking another swig of brown ale. “Text message.”

“What?”

“Send a text message. It’s not going to be long before some sad bugger does it.”

“I’ll write that down. I can use it in a story¹.”

“You do. But do you see what I mean about the murder? It’s just not the same.”

“Actually, I remember you telling me how you would commit suicide.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yes, it was years ago. You said you’d accidentally drink two litres of petrol out of an unmarked lemonade bottle.”

“Did I? How odd.”

At that moment, Killer, my aunt’s cat, came dashing through the cat flap and leapt onto my aunt’s lap. This usually meant one of two things; either he’d annoyed Mrs. Carpenter’s dog, Bunty, or there was someone coming up the path.

Sure enough, there was a sharp rap on the door followed by the ringing of the door bell. We looked towards the monitor that showed pictures from a camera carefully hidden above the front door. It was Colonel Ephraim Pikeaway.

“Oh bugger,” said my aunt. “Looks like it’s Showtime.”

My aunt and I headed for the stairs while Rogers quickly tidied himself up. He kept a number of cardboard shirt fronts in the kitchen and he quickly put one over his string vest. There was a cardboard collar that went with it which already had a neat black tie attached. He smoothed back his receding dyed black hair and within seconds he looked every inch the gentleman’s gentleman.

¹ Mrs McGinty and the Suspicious Suicide.

To the world in general my aunt is a sweet little old lady and the job of transforming her into that takes slightly more effort. First, her long grey hair needs to be brought under control and tied up into a neat bun. Then she requires corsetry, her waist is hosed into a girdle and her not inconsiderable bosom requires a brassiere that she refers to as “The Sheepdog” because it “rounds them up and points them in the right direction”. On top of this she wears a full length Edwardian dress in grey or black, trimmed in white lace. The net result is that she looks like Whistler’s mother but slightly older. She makes this effort because it’s what people expect.

My transformation is quicker. In the house, it’s expected that I’ll be wearing a T-shirt, jeans and trainers. The T-shirt had to have some geekish message on it.

Due to a mistake in ordering, today’s T-shirt said “Insert Text Here”.

By the time I got back downstairs, Rogers had allowed the Inspector into the house.

A gruff voice from somewhere in the parlour answered her.

“You’re a temptress Mrs. McGinty and no mistake.”

The voice belonged to Colonel Ephraim Pikeaway. He was a man of the old school who believed that all that it was impossible to be good at anything without a short haircut and clean fingernails. He was tall and immaculately dressed. He had short cut, greying hair and an anachronistic, thin moustache which he thought made him look distinguished². He was wearing a twill suit and a tartan waistcoat. I saw this as a vain attempt to impress my aunt that he had a more relaxed side to his nature.

My aunt and I had worked with him before and on our first meeting he had taken an immediate dislike to me which made things easy, for I had taken an intense dislike to him. He tolerated me because of my aunt who he accorded the kind of respect reserved for royalty. This was because on their first meeting she had immediately charmed the socks off him.

He was the public front of some sort of nebulous governmental organisation that dealt with top secret research and the wholesale gathering of information. This was how we had met him. There had been a murder and an abandoned child at a top secret establishment investigating time travel. Colonel Pikeaway had not wanted to involve the conventional police force so had brought my aunt in to work on the case.

Rogers was serving him with sherry when I entered. The dosage could in no way be described as “wee”. He appeared to be pouring half a pint into a small glass bucket.

If Pikeaway was impeccable then Rogers was immaculate. I was amazed at the transformation that he had worked in such a short period of time.

“Ah,” said Pikeaway as I entered. “There you are, young Sidney. Still not got that hair cut then?”

Pikeaway always said this, despite the fact that I was over thirty, called Nigel and slightly balding. I was about to point this out but Rogers rescued me from the inevitable argument that would have resulted.

“Would the young master enjoy a beverage?”

² It made him look old.

"Yep," I replied, "I could murder a cuppa," playing my part as the idiot nephew. Rogers disappeared off to the kitchen.

"Mr Pikeaway has a job for us," said my aunt putting down her knitting needles. "He wants us to do some top secret work for the Ministry of Defence."

"Well," said Pikeaway. "I'm none to sure whether I'll be able to get security clearance for young Sidney here. I know it will be difficult getting clearance for Rogers."

"Och," said Mrs McGinty. "I'm no sure I can work without young *Nigel* here, he's my right hand man."

Pikeaway looked less than impressed.

"I'm sure something can be arranged," he agreed. "He'll just have to lay off the ... well, you know."

My aunt nodded knowingly.

"After our success at the LTTL Research Centre the Colonel wants us to check the security on very secure establishment."

Pikeaway nodded.

"Not just very secure," he said. "But the most secure in the country, possibly the most secure in the world. The Sphere is to be the home for all the most secret research that has ever been carried out by the boffins of her majesties civil service. Everything you've never heard of is going to end up there."

He suddenly looked very pleased with himself.

"I've been given the task of testing security and to be honest, I can find nothing wrong with it, but then I thought 'two heads are better than one'."

He nodded towards Mrs McGinty and for a short while I pictured Colonel Pikeaway with two heads. It was not a pleasant image.

"Indeed," said Mrs. McGinty. "He's asking us to give the place the once over and see if we can spot any gaps."

"If anyone can do it, you can," said Pikeaway. He almost purred.

"There's just one wee problem," said my aunt, looking at me. "We've got to leave almost immediately. The Colonel wants to send a car for us within the hour.

What do you say?"

I was sure my aunt would know my answer.

"I say we do it," I answered immediately. My aunt nodded. She knew it was exactly the kind of problem I loved. Pikeaway seemed surprised by my decisive response and I quickly returned to my role of the idiot nephew.

"Just as long as I don't miss match on Sat'day," I said and just for good measure, I added, "By 'eck."

"Then it's all arranged, I'll send a car round for you in two hours. That should give you enough time to get a few things together." Pikeaway drained the last of his sherry and stood up. Rogers seemed to find the Colonel's coat from somewhere and helped him into it.

"Remember, two hours," he said and with a small wave he headed towards the door.

"Och, I'll look forward to it Chief Inspector."

Pikeaway smiled weakly and left.

As soon as he'd gone, My aunt pulled herself out of her chair and drew herself up to her full height.

"What a tosser," she said, immediately dropping the squeaky Scottish accent and returning to her gruff northern voice. "Did you see that waistcoat? He looked like a cheap box of shortbread."

She broke wind noisily.

"Sorry about that," she said. "I shouldn't have run up the stairs. It always makes me fart."

"Breathing always makes you fart."

I looked over to Rogers. He had taken off his white gloves and torn off his cardboard fronted shirt. He was busy picking his nose.

"You were laying it on a bit thick," said my aunt. "'By 'eck lad sithee,' or whatever it was. You sounded like the Tetley Tea Folk on Benzedrine."

"Pikeaway wouldn't have noticed. He wouldn't have thought it odd if I'd said 'Ee By Gum, Ecky Thump,' and hit him over the head with a black pudding.

"Beside," I added. "I know you're supposed to be Scottish, but when did you start saying 'Och Aye'?"

"I never," she said. "But we need to calm it down a bit. Well not be able to keep it up and Pikey's not that stupid."

She reached into her knitting bag and pulled out a bottle of Newcastle Brown. She pulled off the bottle top by smacking it on the edge of the table. The last time I'd attempted this, I'd broken my wrist.

"How you do that without getting carpal tunnel syndrome and repetitive strain injury." I said.

"Practice." She winked and took a good swig, downing half the bottle.

"Got it!" said Rogers. He held up his index finger, showing the lump of solidified mucus that had been the cause of his rhinal investigation. He flicked it into the fire where it burned with a light blue flame.

"What do you make of the job?" he asked.

"Sounds like a belter," said my aunt. "Mysterious top secret establishment, fate of the nation all that stuff."

Rogers was picking his nose again.

"Should be worth a few bob as well," he said.

"Especially if that ponce Pikey going to be signing the expenses," said my aunt.

"I, for one, am looking forward to the intellectual challenge," I interjected, hoping for the moral high ground.

"Well you would be," said my aunt, giving a very theatrical yawn

"I'll tell you something, I nearly burst out laughing when Pikey said he'd been put in charge of testing security. I'm surprised they let him into the place."

"Perhaps they didn't. Perhaps that's what they want us for."

"While we're on the subject of what Pikey said, what did he mean by 'he'll be alright if he lays off the ...you know?'"

"That's my fault," said Rogers. "When we were a bit slow answering the door, Pikey had a scout round and Pikey spotted your aunt's empties. It's hard to miss two-hundred-and-seventy-two empty bottles of Newcastle Brown. He even

spotted the two litre bottles of Shandy Bass. So I told him that the Shandy was for her and that you were an alcoholic.”

“Oh, great. Thanks a lot. I’m sure that’s made his impression of me far better. I wouldn’t mind, but it was my Shandy Bass.”

“How long do you think we’ll be gone?” asked Rogers.

“A couple of days at the most.”

“And Pikey’s already sending round a car.”

“We’d better be ready then,” said my Aunt. “Nigel, you’d better nip and pack a bag. “

“Rogers, you need to get yourself sorted out, but one thing before you go.”

“Yes?”

“Get me another bottle of Brown.”