

Mr. Chuckles by Lis Jakobsen

Last evening a comfortably fat marmalade cat plunged from a balcony and landed on Thomas Wu, who now lies, all his certainties numbed, in St. Joseph's Hospital. So far, Mr. Chuckles is still at-large.

The police, with more pressing cases in a rough, but slowly gentrifying neighbourhood, arrived late this morning and are now on the top floor of my apartment building.

I know I'm sole witness to the near fatal encounter, but I didn't answer when the cops knocked on my door. I'm still deciding: Will I tell the truth or offer something more useful?

Built circa 1965, this six story, low-rise is faded and scaly, but the walls remain solid as a King Tut's tomb. I've left the door open to keep track of the investigation.

With Thomas oblivious—a lump on the top of his head, a crack at the front—it's clear the crime solvers have concluded it's a case of workaday assault.

I hear them knock on Audra Bilger's door. She owns Mr. Chuckles as well as a head of confused hair, loyally tinted the same colour as her cat. You're right. At fifty-ish, she's no oil painting.

It's not just her hair I find egregious or that she doesn't clean the lint out of the dryer when she's finished. It's what she said after Thomas wished us a "nice day" and left the two of us in the laundry room.

"Thank God I've got Mr. Chuckles and not a dog," she declared, struggling to fold a *Garfield*-themed fitted sheet. "You know them Chinks. They love to make a nice little stir fry out of Fido."

She waited for a complicit smile or girlfriend giggle. I kept to myself while I folded my sheet—mind you—with the precision of a ritual soldier before he hands the flag to a military widow. Audra's been a bit stiff with me since.

Early this morning the cat's baffling absence sent her everywhere, inside and outside the building, calling—panic rising. I let her carry on. I suspect he's "gone

to ground,” which is cat talk for hiding under porches and bushes until the coast is clear by feline reckoning.

And like him, I’ve gone to ground. Keeping a low profile, re-evaluating my role as an informer, a polite name for someone who rats people out. It’s been a long run, but lately I might’ve gone too far.

Now they’re talking to Leo Bartollini in apartment 605. His curtains are pulled tight no matter the time of day or season. His wife, a devoted balcony gardener, died of cancer a year ago and the untended plants, dried to thirsty ghosts, can’t find peace either.

A few sepia palm fronds hang on. I hear them chitter together in the warm summer air on nights I can’t sleep. Sometimes when the sheets feel serrated and the numbers on the clock don’t move, I review my best and worst work.

The first time I blew the whistle was on my twin sister, Eileen, when we were five. It was the classic kid crime: a cookie jar raid. Can’t remember if I was rewarded or brought up short for tattling, but I do remember the warm narcotic feeling—the pull of it in my bloodstream—as I told the truth.

But even then a subterranean part of me knew the difference between the truth and selling someone out. Simple truth telling doesn’t have the sweet sting in the vein, the jolting high of impure motivation.

No one teaches children to snitch. The fink reflex, born of sibling rivalry, is primal, an atavistic survival drive. You vie for attention, affection, for power over fellow combatants. And there’s rarely any definitive success. Ask most adults if they were the favoured child and likely you’ll get a sad shake of the head or snort of bitter laughter.

I look out at the building across from me. Through a bedroom window, I see a girl, about eleven, jumping on her bed. A regular habit. Last month, I tracked down the apartment she lives in with her single mum. I let the woman know her daughter endangers herself on the bed trampoline, so close to the flimsy, cheap windows, but she slammed the door in my face. The kid shoots me the bird each time she reaches the top of her trajectory.

I'm busted now. She knows I observe—okay, spy on—her. I close the curtains. But I don't want the police to find me in the dark, à la Widower Bartollini and his restless memorial garden. I open them again and let the late August light back in. Without warning the sun's gone behind clouds in what had been a perfect azure sky. I shiver despite the full-throated mugginess. I don't like surprises.

Years ago I warned a friend a surprise baby shower was in the offing. Why isn't it enough to organize some cheese and crackers, uncork insipid pinot gregio and wrap some onesies? Don't kid yourself; a big part of the subterfuge is meant to catch mum-to-be looking her worst, exhausted and puffy. There's a taint of socially accepted sadism in the frivolities.

Johanna showed up looking splendid. Hair done, make-up impeccable, fresh maternity dress and a look of surprise that would've given Meryl Streep a run for her money. Her son graduated from med school last year—well, that's what I've heard.

Goes to show: even if people welcome the info, they tend to revile the messenger or snitch, depending on your point of view. Take Linda Tripp, for example, the consummate stool pigeon, the one who shone a light on the liaison between a certain president and intern. Linda got death threats, not medals.

I hear the officers knock at apartment 603. It's vacant. They'll get to my door in a few minutes, but this won't be my first interview with the cops.

At work I narcked on a guy who perused kiddie porn at the office. Vince gave me a knowing look as the security guard walked him out, a banker's box of personal crap in front of his substantial middle. He died of an overdose a few months later. That was five years ago, just before company downsizing forced my retirement at sixty.

I lean into the hallway to hear the police talk to Jenny What's-her-name. She's somewhere in her mid-twenties. Pretty in a vapid sort of way. She once regaled me in the elevator, near tears, about the state of her nails. When Thomas

met his furry anvil, she was at a backyard barbeque, no doubt restricting herself to carrot sticks.

I don't have anything substantial on Jenny and I'll likely leave her alone given my new reticence. I'm tempted though. She's a poor recycler. Leaves caps on her empty pop bottles. From what I see in the bins, she lives on Diet Coke and rye crisps, which could explain the state of her nails. But this isn't enough to out her. By habit, I'll inventory her transgressions, mostly because she bugs my ass. I hear her tee-hee-hee flirt with one of the cops. But, like I say, I'm trying to reform.

It's not the bed jumper, kiddie porn Vince, Johanna or any of the rest of them that's got me re-thinking my stoolie bent. It's that none of my family is speaking to me.

Things between my sister and me have never been good. Even in the womb, I have a sense we fought for the best spot, with Eileen triumphant. But by the time we graduated high school, we'd established a fragile truce of unreliable tolerance.

As adults, this allowed occasional bouts of commiseration. Sharing stories about our troubled mother—divorce, followed by alcohol and vague parenting—was as close as we got to a level playing field.

Mum died in a fancy nursing home, aged eighty-eight, in a state of advanced dementia. The bill for the four-star accommodation was footed entirely by Eileen. When I visited, usually three times a week and every day near the end, Mum would introduce me to staff as her sister, Kirsten. Eileen was never there to hear that. She lives in California, her hacienda style home surrounded by redwoods that shade a blue Bentley in the driveway.

Each time I went to see my mother, I'd bring a Caramilk bar. "Kirsten" slowly placed syrupy chocolate in Mum's toothless mouth, one piece at a time. I did that for three years.

My sister used to fly in, stop off in town for a few days and pay our mother a daily visit before heading to her Muskoka cottage for the summer. The one time I went with her to the nursing home Mum sat up elated in her wheelchair, chanting their cozy rhyme. "Eileen. Eileen. She's my treat. My little Eileen-so-sweet."

If you ask me, my sister's got sweet horseshoes up her ass. Even in kindergarten boys lost their hearts to her. In high school, she was model-tall with long, wheat blond hair and cornflower blue eyes. Guys phoned stammering for a date on a regular basis.

As for me, a cleft palate yielded few admirers. A series of childhood surgeries concluded with a scar on my upper lip beside a rucked bump. When I said my name—*Grathe* for Grace—titters could be counted on. Head down, dishwater blond hair hiding my face. Needless to say I wasn't the prom queen. That tiara went to Eileen.

Horseshoes served her well if not completely. She married a real estate developer who died short of his fifty-fifth birthday. Car accident. Rob left her with three tow-headed teenage children and God-knows-how-many millions.

Back in June during one of our infrequent get-togethers—fueled by Mexican beer—naturally the conversation turned to marriage. My divorce. Her widowhood.

Rob was cremated, followed by internment in a Catholic cemetery. Some ashes were kept aside in a cardboard box, about the same size as those little cereal cartons you get at hotel breakfasts.

Eileen snapped the cap off another beer. "The plan was to scatter the last of his ashes at the cottage, maybe into Lake Rosseau." She shrugged.

Though no longer remotely religious, I shuddered. Catholic faith specifies ashes stay in one place. Otherwise the body can't resurrect to find final repose, at peace in the mercy of God. Rob, an irregular churchgoer, was nevertheless a believer.

Squeezing lime into her fifth Corona, she told me how shortly after the funeral she discovered his devotion to somebody named Marilyn. The love-sodden emails, the credit card tallies.

"Hotel rooms. Flowers galore. Enough jewelry to hear her rattling like a fat little piggy bank—ka-ching, ka-ching—all the way home." She slammed the bottle down hard. "Christ!"

I flinched, suddenly sober. An angry Eileen still terrified me.

"So." She leaned, a hint unsteadily, across the table. "Know what I did?"

“No.” I swallowed hard. *Please don't tell me. “Tell me.”*

“I grabbed that box.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Oh yes. Didn't I just grab that box.”

I waited while she picked at her nail polish like it was a stain that could be erased chip by chip.

I put my hand on hers. “Go on.”

“And those ashes?” She squeezed her eyes shut, the lids flickering slightly as if the air were filled with fine sand. “Flushed 'em right down the toilet.”

I pulled my hand back slowly and put it in my lap.

I licked my lip, but couldn't feel the bump.

Eileen, favoured with a full and perfect mouth. Always known to me. Who are you? Ancient religious and secular codes—jettisoned. Bad karma. Willful desecration. Hell to pay. Take your pick.

With each beat of silence, Eileen's look grew darker. Her glassy eyes narrowed. The cornflowers gone, turned to hard slits. A flashback to childhood. Her vice-grip pinch on the fleshy part of my arm. A hank of my hair in her fist. Her hissing whisper, “Grace, Grace, ugly face. Shit for lips. Keep them zipped.”

The familiar cogs of childhood machinery—appease or run—ground and meshed until I found my voice. “Well . . . you're certainly in interesting company.”

Her shoulders relaxed, but her gaze stayed hard.

“You know.” I forced a conspirator's smile. “Keith Richards, for example, (*as if there were other examples*) claims to have snorted a pinch of his dad's ashes.”

She brightened. I followed through. “Sifted into a line of tribute coke, mind you.”

That put me back in her full blue beam, glittery, seductively innocent. “To Keith and Papa Keith then!” she toasted, laughing and clinking bottles with me.

I struggled to swallow. The tang of lime hurt my tongue. It's hard to say if Keith's was an act of bizarre bravura or a reflection of his mixed feelings. But it didn't smack of punitive rage—of contempt for ceremony, for his humanness or his father's.

The confession roiled in me, as sickening as the thought of Corona beer. Haven't touched the stuff since. I tried to forget, but it was like I needed an exorcism. Instead, I fell back on the old remedy.

In an email to her children, now adults with important jobs and young ones of their own, I wrote, "Ask you mother where your father's ashes are. Remember, if we dishonour the dead, we dishonour ourselves." Then as delicately as possible, I let them know she'd thrown their dad's ashes down the crapper.

For sure Eileen reminded them the box was lost long ago. Still, they must've sensed some truth. That mercurial cornflower, terrifying to any child, imprinted on them.

And for certain, she ended the conversation pronto with something like, "Don't forget. Your crazy, twisted Aunt *Grathe* has always been the mean one."

There's a polite, but official knock on my door. A fist of stage fright lodges behind my rib cage. I breath through it and realize: I can't say racist Audra threw "something, not sure what" onto Thomas' head. I've been too in love with the justice of my mission to see my performance won't pass the sniff test. A rookie mistake.

I tell them the truth. Mr. Chuckles padded across the balcony railing, swatted at a butterfly and fell. The impact caused Thomas to lose his balance and sprawl skull-first onto the parking lot. I called 911, claiming ignorance of events. Neighbourhood-weary Sherlocks worked an assault case—looking for malice not fate—instead of asking me first. I got off with a warning. Case closed.

I'll get Audra some other way.

It's now two weeks later. Thomas is wobbly, but improving.

Mr. Chuckles has been found. After the crash he dragged himself under a parked car, where he expired from his injuries. Not my ideal reckoning, but it'll do.

Audra has ordered an amulet necklace designed to hold a pinch of his ashes in lovingly embrace. She swears she'll never take it off.