

Linden Tree Service Apartments Saturday 03:13 - Max

'I don't know why it reeks of cat piss up here, we're not even allowed to have pets' I thought as I hung from the railings of the fourth floor landing. I don't remember how I got here, but the make-shift noose had started to itch. *Thousand thread count my arse.* I hope someone would find me soon my only view was two floors down and the shadow cast by my suspended body. I watched my feet pointing north, north east, east, south east; like an indecisive compass. I wondered what time it was, there were no windows but dawn must've been approaching.

Bzzz! The main door swung open bringing the gusts of chilly Oxford air, riddled with smell of smoke and lard from the kebab shop next door. Boots stomped out the snow caught in their ridges on the front mat, and proceeded up the stairs onto the first landing, weary not to wake the other residents. Up and up onto the third flight of stairs, they trod, a phlegmy cough muffled by wooly gloves, occasionally cutting through the rhythmic footsteps. They stopped abruptly as they reached the third landing.

"Oh Max... you're fuckin' kiddin' me," Felix said as he looked at my limp body hanging from a noose like a quirky rear view mirror accessory.

Linden Tree Service Apartments Saturday 04:36 - Felix

"'Bout three, was comin' back from my last drop off in Witney, and came home to find him like that," Felix told Superintendent Andrews. "That's when I went downstairs to wake up Constable Monty; thought he'd know what to do,"

“Other than being your neighbour, did you have any personal relations to the deceased?” Constable Andrews asked.

“Had a drink now and then, we’d talk about work and that, but he never spoke to me about being upset or anything,” Felix replied.

Max was wheeled out on a gurney; a crisp white sheet lay over him like a snow capped mountain. Felix’s eyes followed him until the doors of the ambulance had shut.

“We’re gonna need you to come down to the station around noon to finalise your statement Mr Holt,” Superintendent Andrews said, placing the pen cap back on its tip. “Thank you once again for your time,”.

As Felix retired back into the apartment block, the image of Max’s suspended body returned to him; a persistent summer fly. There was something odd about it all.

Linden Tree Service Apartments Saturday 14:03 - Myrtle

The overbearing scent of sage and cinnamon filled the second floor of Linden Tree, wafting up and down the staircases. The mystery concoction being brewed in the kitchen of number four, crept under doors and seeped inside unopened mail.

Myrtle stood in a robe tied tight around her waist, as she hunched over her stove. Her Senegalese twists were secured by a lilac satin cap, and her round tortoiseshell glasses sat on the bridge of her nose. She looked over the frames, to read a recipe she had scrawled onto crumpled paper as she stirred the pot; its steam marking her sterling rings with condensation. Nearby, a bundle of sage burned in a ceramic bowl, mingling with the aroma of the orange rinds and lemongrass.

A long-haired ginger cat slinked between Myrtle's legs, softly meowing up at her.

"Oh Meryl, you've got to start watching your figure baby," she scooped up the feline built like a bowling ball and took her to the window overlooking Sycamore Street.

"Why don't you go for a walk, and when you get back you can have a slice of ethically sourced salmon?" She cooed as she undid the latch for the window and placed Meryl out onto the fire escape.

Myrtle watched as her cat lugged her round belly down the mesh stairs, spots of snow falling through the tiny holes; her paws cautiously stepping, as to remain steady. She prodded across the street and sat on the window of Hassan's Deli, peering in.

Myrtle tutted; Hassan was always giving Meryl treats.

"No customers today then?" a voice called up to Myrtle.

Felix, consumed by a parka, stood at base of Linden Tree squinting up at Myrtle.

"Not until six, come in for a cuppa," she called back, before shutting her window and changing out of her gown.

Linden Tree Service Apartments Saturday 14:15 - Felix

As Felix sat on Myrtle's olive green sofa, surrounded by shelves of books dedicated to the art of spiritual connection, crystal balls and tarot decks, he wondered if anyone else bought into this shit.

"What else they ask you at the station?" Myrtle said. She set down a silver tray on the oak stump coffee table and poured a cup of her brew for each of them.

"Just about relatives an that," Felix replied reaching for an arrowroot biscuit. The thought of Max returned to him in intervals. He thought about the two of them at the pub less than twenty-four hours ago.

"Game on Sunday then?" Felix asked as Max buttoned his coat

"I'd off myself before I missed it," Max said, as he turned up the collar of his coat and left the bar.

"So sad, he was still so young," Myrtle said interrupting his memory. Her voice drowned out as Felix's conscience repeated the word; *Sunday. Sunday*, as if repeating it would make it sound important.

"Sunday," The word fell out of his mouth and onto the table for inspection. Mystery surrounded it like fog; thick, menacing, and disconcerting.

"The game- on Sunday- we'd been following it all season-," Felix's words entangled.

"I'd rather off myself than miss it' those were his words," Felix said. His eyes narrowed as the morbidity of it registered.

“Well that doesn’t sit right,” Myrtle said as she cocked her head to the side, and chewed on the inside of her cheek.

“No Myrtle, enchiladas don’t sit right, this is goin straight through me,” Felix continued “What happened in the five hours after he left the bar? Who else could’ve seen him?”

Felix thought for a moment. The walk home from the pub was ten minutes. Six, if you were to cut through the park but hardly anyone did that because of Shooters Shack; the makeshift cubby near the life-sized noughts and crosses riddled with heroin hopheads.

“Well, you should just ask him,” Myrtle said.

The phrase tore Felix out of thought.

He hadn’t noticed Myrtle had moved toward one of the many shelves by the window; she held a beige box whose frayed edges had seen better days. On the front, spelled in big, bold letters; OUIJA BOARD.

Linden Tree Service Apartments Saturday 14:47 - Max

“Max, are you with us?” Myrtle asked.

I watched the pair; both had their eyes shut as their index fingers grazed the planchette. It stood stagnant in the middle of the board. I figured I was supposed to do something here; the movies never really let on the protocols of using a ouija board in the afterlife.

I took my best guess and placed my finger on the planchette, dragging it to the 'YES' marking on the board. It was cool to the touch and heavy to move.

Felix's eyes flew open, "You're takin' the fuckin' piss," he glared at Myrtle. She still had her eyes closed.

"Max, am I 'takin the fuckin piss'?" She mimicked Felix's northern accent.

I shifted the planchette to 'NO'. It felt lighter with each move.

"Bollocks, how do I know it's really him?" Felix said, ever the sceptic.

"Ask him something only he would know the answer to," Myrtle said.

"Okay, why did you kill yourself?"

"That's counter-productive,"

I dragged the planchette to 'YES'.

"Yes you killed yourself or yes this is counter productive?" Felix asked, the question dripping with snark.

'T.W.A.T.', I spelled out with the planchette. I was moving the token with ease now.

He rolled his eyes, "Yeah, that's him,".

“Ask him what you will,” Myrtle prompted.

Felix thought for a while. I knew he wanted to ask the right question.

Finally; “*Did* you kill yourself?” he let the question hang, a heavy grey cloud dampening the atmosphere in the room.

‘NO’

“Do you know who did?”

The planchette remained on ‘NO’. I was never good at filling in the blanks after a night out.

“Where’s your... body?” he said the word cautiously, like he was trying to decipher if it was offensive or not.

‘F.U.N.E.R.A.L.T.O.M.O.R.R.O.W’ I spelled. The pair repeated each letter as the planchette landed on it.

“Funeral tomorrow,” Myrtle said, “He must be at the morgue then- Max are you at the morgue at the moment?”

‘YES’

Knock Knock Knock

Myrtle’s and Felix’s heads whipped in unison towards the door.

“Hands on the planchette Holt,” Myrtle said in a low voice, “We’re going to find out who did this to you Max,”.

“Hang in there mate,” Felix said.

I knew he didn’t mean it like that.

“Goodbye Max,” Myrtle said as she guided the planchette over the ‘GOODBYE’ marking on the Ouija board. I felt myself drift away from the tangible world as I faded back into the astrophysical plane.

Linden Tree Service Apartments Saturday 15:00 - Hassan

The bell tinkled as Hassan’s last customer for the day left his deli with a leg of lamb. Meryl sat, legs tightly tucked beneath her body, peering in at the raw, ground beef. Separated by only a thick glass, she mewed at Hassan, pleading for a snack.

As he turned off the lights in the deli, Meryl perked up, hopping off the window’s ledge, and loitering near the door.

“Hi sweetheart,” he said as he knelt down and extended his hand to Meryl.

She sniffed it before nuzzling his fingers; an invitation for a neck scratch. Hassan reached into the plastic bag he carried and pulled out a parcel. Unwrapping the paper, Meryl’s eyes followed it until it was placed down, in front of her. Chicken drumsticks! She devoured the treat, tearing flesh from bone as Hassan began his short journey back to Linden Tree.

A small 'meow' at his feet. Meryl weaved in and out of Hassan's strides, like a complex crochet. Letting out a sigh, Hassan scooped up the feline and enveloped her in his coat, shielding her from the harsh elements of December.

"Let's get you home," he said.

Together, the two arrived back at Linden Tree.

As Hassan buzzed himself in, warmth greeted him, and the outside ice remained by the door waiting to be invited in.

Meryl squirmed inside his coat as the pair reached Myrtle's door.

Knock Knock Knock

Hassan's fist left three sharp raps on the door. He heard shuffling inside.

Myrtle had lived across Hassan since he and his wife moved in to Linden Tree. She often invited them over for tea and always offered to read their palms or tea leaves or tarot cards but the couple didn't really care for 'pseudo-spiritualism'.

As Hassan raised his fist to knock again, the door swung open, a frazzled Myrtle standing in the doorway.

“Hassan! Love, what can I do you for?” she said slightly out of breath. She leaned against the door frame, her arms folded.

Hassan looked past her, into the apartment and spotted Felix.

“Sorry, I can come back another time if you prefer...” he began.

“Oh...oh no, Felix was just leaving,” Myrtle cut him off, “He just stopped by to tell me how things went at the station,”

Felix mustered a little wave as he coiled his scarf back around his neck.

Hassan’s eyes shifted from Felix back to Myrtle.

“Well I just came by to drop something off,” he began.

Meryl poked her head out of his coat.

“Oh, Baby! I was wondering where you’d gotten to!” Myrtle cooed, her arms waited expectantly as Hassan handed her back her companion.

“Sorry she’s been giving you all this trouble Hassan, I’ve put her on a diet so she can watch her weight but she's always finding a way to scab food from people,” Myrtle said.

“She’s not fat Myrtle, she’s pregnant!” Hassan said smiling. “Due any day now by the looks of it!”

Myrtle took a moment to piece together the new information. The silence among the three of them was slightly too long to remain comfortable. Hassan's smile faltered, he wondered if this was good news or bad news for Myrtle.

Finally; "Do you dismember the animals yourself?" she asked "The cows and sheep, I mean,"

Hassan was sure this was a trick question, perhaps another cue for Myrtle to launch into her thesis of veganism.

"Yes..." he said slowly, "I can't perform a C section on your cat though, Myrtle, best take her to a vet if you're very concerned" he said steering the conversation cautiously. Hassan began to inch toward his apartment, too polite and too uncertain as to how he should end their odd exchange.

"I suppose I'll do that," she replied absently. She was oblivious to Hassan's subtle social evacuation scheme.

Felix stood at the door, a shadow to Myrtle.

"I'll be off then," he said as he squeezed through the narrow doorway.

"Yeah, me too, should start cooking before the missus gets home," Hassan added, the keys to his apartment jingled as he took them out of the inner breast pocket of his coat.

"Of course dears, don't let me keep you," Myrtle said. She stared into space as Meryl dozed off in her arms.

Hassan watched her from the peephole in his door as she stood there; absently present.

'Curious woman' he thought.