

## Simon

Simon was furniture.

In the office Simon was a desk. A rolling platform for the keyboard. Sometimes he was a plush easy-chair with wheels and a swivel. At home Simon was a battered and abused floral armchair, blending in beautifully with the wife's three-piece. If the wife had ever let him go down the pub, Simon would have been a barstool.

Today Simon is an elegant but inexpensive pine trunk. His lid is raised in a lacquered salute and dark velvet swathes his innards. Brass bar handles follow the longer lines of his rectangle and lilies are scattered carefully about his perimeter

He is a trunk.

He is a coffin.

In death he lies within his own walls, as in life he lay inside himself.

An elegant black-clad woman weeps gently over the casket. Her thick foundation and waterproof mascara speak of youth dissolved and adulthood postponed. A child of perhaps three years runs volatile around the small room in a suit of expensive black. He fights robots with a swooning lily, swiped from his father's coffin. No one attempts to control him. Another child, six or so, sits bored and confused. No one attempts to console him. The room is otherwise empty but for two or three well-cut suits talking nonchalantly but *respectfully* down thought-free hands-free headsets.

In the back-right hand corner of the room, a tall stereotype, swaddled in shadows. This man is not so much swathed or suited, as interred in black. His longcoat surrounds his body and brushes ground, fading slightly at the root from frequent contact with the soil. Against the nighttime of his coat, his face transcends pale, past white to an almost luminous green tinge. An undersized top hat slides threateningly around his skull. Even for an undertaker this seems over the top — and of course this man is an undertaker. If you squint hard enough you can almost see the label from a child's dictionary hanging in the air at his feet — UNDERTAKER.

The undertaker steps forward towards the coffin. The coat ripples around his feet, short flash of white leather, red light from the heel.

As the woman withdraws, this man gently lowers the casket lid, covering the veiled face below, hidden in cloth, too broken to show. One of the faceless men interrupts his hushed conversation to make a farewell speech, opening and closing his mouth to allow words to slip out over his teeth and dribble down his chin, clichés and ready-mades from Eulogies For Idiots.

*'Super chap...much missed...around the office he...with us today...rum old world eh...,' man in black suit says.*

Farewells complete, Top Hat pulls a lever beneath his fibrous fingers. The conveyor belt below the coffin kicks itself awake with an abused grinding and twin steel doors swing halting open at the belt's far end. Flames lap beyond, excreting sudden light

into the room. Simon trundles into the furnace and the room becomes once again clinical as the doors swing home.

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Simon Andrews is a desk. Or is he a chair? A plush easy-chair. Wheels. Swivel. Welcome to the office. First things first: introductions. It would, I think, be fair to say that Simon is not blessed aesthetically. Large watery eyes trickle out from the bridge of his nose, just slightly too far from the peak of his overlarge forehead. Powdery orange hair escapes his crown to be dragged back, greased to cover the dome. Below his thin lips, Andrews' chin hides under his teeth, the jut of the bone just visible below a cascade of neck swooping from jaw to collar bone. The man is not fat, however, quite the opposite. The whites of tendon and bone flick beneath the permanently wind-reddened skin of hands that swoop and jab at the keyboard.

'Good evening sir, is Mr Stembridge available please?'

'No. Out.'

'May I confirm that you are not the householder?'

'No. He's out.'

'Are you over the age of eighteen?'

'He's out.'

Pause for a thought.

'He's out is he?'

'Yeah he's out like I...'

'Where is he? Is he having a good time? When was the last time you heard from him? What exactly is your relationship with Mr.Stembridge?'

'What...I, he's my...'

'Babysitter? Lover? Parole Officer?'

'Listen...you can't...'

'Here at Cont's Kitchens we offer a wide range of fully fitted lifestyle options as well as comprehensive guides to the often tricky world of kitchen installations. May I ask if you have recently considered having your kitchen refurbished?'

'Listen mate, I'm going to say this once and then and then I am going to fuc....'

'You know I don't want to sell you a kitchen. Not really I don't. It pays the bills you know but...well it's just, I never saw myself as a kitchen salesman you know, I had dreams as well, still do. Take yourself, sir. When you were a kid, what was it you saw in the future? I don't mean space travel or anything, I mean on a personal level. What did you want to be?'

'.....'

'Thank you for your time sir. Good evening.'

Andrews fishes the coiled earpiece from his temple and sits for a moment, rearranging his features until once again vague and serene.

Night shift at Cont's Kitchens. Here, light is something altogether. Bounces and reflects off of, or sometimes sluggish and. Casts no shadows save the ones beneath the eyes. The dirty windows in the computer moan tinnitus.

'Simon was a free spirit. No man could tie him down. One of the bes... I'm sorry,' man in black suit says.

Simon was a free spirit, was born for the road. Simon has been passing through Cont's Kitchens for the past eight years. No one buys kitchens at one in the am. Do people buy kitchens over the phone, ever? Maybe. Not at one in the morning.

'Prime time Andrews, prime time. The rich, the beautiful people, they don't sleep, you don't make millions by sleeping, is it?' Mr Jenkins assured him.

Simon reaches for his jacket.

The world outside the office is as artificial as the previous. Yellow light drips from the lampposts, swelling around bollards and sticking to the paving slabs. The city night is carved from it. Simon's battered Peugeot smells of children and tree shaped air freshner. Bottlespapershairgrit clogs the upholstery and foot wells. A drunk hastily ceases his game of pissing circles around the wheel-arch as Simon climbs in and kicks the engine awake. And home.

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Circus. Latin. Definition: circle or oval.

In 1768 Philip Astley staged a show of live music and horseback riding. A circus. The first English circus.

The world-renowned Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus travels on average approximately thirty-five thousand miles a year. It is the last to travel by train.

In the early nineteen hundreds, Antoinette Concello won fame as the first woman to regularly perform triple somersault on trapeze.

Oval. Circle.

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The house is a box. Storage space. Redbrick. Net curtains. Porcelain Bo Peep. Light bulb candlebra. Out the kitchen window Derek's car creeps away with headlights down. The lumpy Jack Russell barks milk-eyed from the couch before returning to sleep. 1:24.

Upstairs, Simon steps around the unfamiliar yellow on the bathroom tiles, brushes his tombstone teeth and retires to his or the wife's room. In the bedroom Simon uprights a photograph on the bedside table and reaches under the bed to retrieve the fat gold bracelet kicked there previously. This he places by the photograph before climbing into the fresh made bed. Simon doesn't wear jewellery, it snags on the ropes.

'Derek come round again Darling?' Quiet, bored.

'Mmn?' From the bundle of bedclothes, 'Oh, Derek, yes a few repairs, cup of tea, you know'.

'Mmn'.

Simon has known about the wife's affair for some time. The realisation formed gradually and without drama, just leaked through. She doesn't know he knows, of course. He'd have said they were staying together for the children but he hasn't seen the boys in days. They haven't noticed.

'Good night Dear.'

‘Mmn’.

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Lilian Leitzel span to glory. Lilian Leitzel twisted to fame.  
High.  
In the air by  
wrist and rope she  
turned, shimmered for  
the eyes below.  
Without safety net she  
span  
to  
the  
ground.  
Twisted to fame.

In the air a family becomes more than.  
On wires, on the trapeze a family becomes structural, solid but.  
Between the air and the ground a family becomes.  
Became.

Four of the death-defying Wallenda family fell to their death, one more was  
paralysed.

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Downstairs with the lights off. Peace does not come easy for Simon. Tonight not at  
all. The chittering of the clock slackens the eyes’ orbits, more so with each click until  
surely the whites must collapse, the lids sink into the cheeks and the cheeks. The face.  
What of the face? Perhaps already too far beyond repair but such thoughts are  
frivolous at six. Simon winches his hand to his face to examine it closer. Without light  
he watches the lines the cuts the chipped nails, rotating the hand and flexing the  
extremities as if following an internal blueprint. Simon turns the hand in order that  
palm should face table, and moves it to the surface, fingers as legs to a spider, to a  
table, poles to a tent. Beneath the canopy and in to it moves a body of people, out  
from it flows a body of air, no not a body, too fluid or gaseous, too real or unreal.  
With this air comes colours — some bright and primary, others dark and organic, each  
carrying with it a smell, an association. Dampwoodwetstrawbloodsoilshit  
sweetnesssweat.

Light?

Fever?

Heat?

Moisture?

Space?

Enclosure?

Fear

These spread, multiply and grow, seeping out from the palm as drops of oil through  
water until the walls are coloured and distant and finally not at all, canvas flickering  
in their place. Ropes swings platforms poles and walkways subdivide the divided air

above Simon's head, below Simon's feet, lacerating space until the room is a net of negative shapes and strands. Simon grasps the bar and swings.

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'It's risky. I'm not saying it's not risky,' Simon says.

'It's risky alright Not easy either.' A familiar face.

Winston removes his black long coat and discards it over a rack of shovels.

T-shirt: white, sentimental painted kitten on face.

Trousers: corduroy. Pink or faded red.

Footwear: Trainers. White plastic leather. Motion powered red lights.

He seats himself on a coffin covered by a floral cloth.

'Where'd you get the shoes? Didn't think they came in men's.'

'Get anything on ebay', replies Winston, gesturing to the hippo-shaped wall clock, hanging above a tray of serrated and hooked embalming implements. The hippo is pink and shifts its plastic gaze in pendulum time. 'Sandwich?'

'It's possible though isn't it. You should know, you're a...'

'Mortician. Ham.' Winston re-extends the foiled bundle.

'No-one would question a mortician. Thanks.'

'It's believable I suppose. It's believable.' Reclines Winston thoughtfully.

'All that height and that, wouldn't be the first time.'

'It's got to be official though doesn't it. What about all that, certificates and that? What about witnesses?' Simon tips forward in his seat.

'Well, yes. But there's ways. Around it, know what I mean. It's believable,' almost talking to himself now. 'A man that's spilled off a high wire, no-one wants to see that, is it? Do terrible things to a man, fall like that, no one would want to look on that...' Eyes refocus. 'Set a date Simon.'

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If we've any rights at all, we've the right to die. It should be easy.  
But it's not easy. There are certificates, and witnesses and that.

Simon died fourth of November 2005. It wasn't easy but he had help. The thing about these dangerous pastimes is that sooner or later, accidents are inevitable, it's all about timing. When the time comes are you five feet from the ground on a wire, or forty feet above a construction yard? It was two in the morning when he came down; the body was already long cold when they found it. The face was broken beyond recognition and the body was identified by wallet. Drivers license, performer's card. After brief checks and an even briefer identification from the wife (she identified brown brogues, grey corduroy, drab ginger, couldn't look at the face) the corpse was sent to a local mortuary for preparation and burial.

Mortuaries of course are full of corpses. Lined and stacked in stainless-steel baking trays. Simon was luckily, identified and almost grieved for. Others pile up like Lego bricks, anonymous shells. No one would grieve over these; no one would be able to tell one from the other, especially the faceless, the broken, the distorted.

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Simon is a trunk? Somebody is.

The black and white mortuary man is a locked door, smiling through his keyhole as the coffin meets the flames.

The weeping woman is a television and dabs her cyclopic eye, already flickering to different channels and speaking static.

Simon is nothing.

Miguel is rope. Miguel is sweat and fast-moving air.

Miguel is canvas, wet straw, dung and sugar.

Miguel is earthmotionfingerslightscolour.