

*BEN SAMUEL*

*Hardcote Hall*

Arthur Durst made his way down the steps through the door and into the main house. It was a cool crisp morning. Oblique shafts of light fell through the large windows of the dining room and cast distorted shadows across the polished floor. The grand piano contracted slightly in the heat and a faint note sounded in the silence and hung profoundly in the air. Arthur took a cloth from his trolley and passed it along the smooth brown surface of the table. The bright yellow cloth slid along the surface without resistance lifting the dust away from it and leaving a pristine polished surface behind. He shook off the cloth and then returned it to the table passing it along the table again and sliding it along until he reached the other side. This he continued to do until the table shone a dim reflection of the ceiling through the nut-brown wood grain. Then he replaced the cloth back on its hook and continued to the oil paintings on the wall above the walnut cabinets. He took a long handled feather duster from the trolley and extended it to its full length. The soft brown feathers fluttered like a bird in a threat display as they extended. Then with deft precision he ran it around the gilt frame removing any cobwebs without touching the canvas. The frame contained an image of exquisite proportions a biblical scene of intense emotion and sorrowful tragedy. It was one of Arthur's favorites. He put on a white glove and extended a finger. He placed it on top of one the ceramic statues on the mantle and ran his finger along the smooth undulant

surface. The finger was clean. He moved on through the house, next, the library. This was his favorite room. He placed his arthritic fingers on the dustpan handle and the other hand on the brush and made short brushing movements, the silence in the room broken by the susurrus of the bristles on the polished floor. The house echoed with a profound emptiness a total absence of human activity. Hardcote Hall had many rooms and each stood empty. Arthur was the only inhabitant. He made his way along the rows of books. Each book leather-bound and gilt letters, many of the great works of history standing unread on the shelves. Many times Arthur had contemplated reading one of the volumes. Conrad or perhaps Chekov? He had contemplated slipping one of the volumes from the shelf and sitting alone in one of the reading chairs by the window. He could sit and read all day staring out on the gardens, what better way to spend a day? But should the master return and find him, it would be a disaster. Instead he contented himself that he was preserving the books for their true owner Mr Hattingly. Keeping these beautiful volumes at their best for whomever may wish to read them.

After dusting the books, he polished the glass fronted display cabinets and cleaned the windows. Then he pulled the shutters closed and the library fell into pall blackness a mausoleum like hush fell over the room and the books were sealed away for another day. The trolley wheels screeched quietly as they turned and pivoted through the doorways and corridors. He passed the silent busts of noble men frozen in thoughtful poses. Their pale alabaster skin and dull sightless eyes stared forwards past and through him as he made his way along the corridors. He moved in a bubble of sound, his own feet on the cold stone and the wheels of the trolley caroming the empty hallways and echoing back on him and somehow making

more profound the solitude in which he dwelt. He watched his own reflection moving between the glass cabinets, a multitude of Arthurs either side of him as he passed between two display cabinets. He found warped and distorted simulacrum of him in the beady eyes of the taxidermy that augmented the walls of Hardcote Hall. His cooked knees cracked as he walked. He found his rounds took him longer now and he frequently stopped to mop his wrinkled brow with his handkerchief. He felt oddly ashamed of perspiring even though he did so out of sight of anyone who might think less of him. He kept a dignified appearance as he did his rounds, black trousers and jacket, waistcoat and bowtie. He wore a pair of Pince-nez glasses that sat on the ridge of his nose. They made him wrinkle his nose and eyebrows as he peered through them and might have been comical had there been anyone to see him. The only people he did see were the delivery people, the milkman, the flower girl and the grocer. Hardcote Hall was to be maintained at all times, clean and ready for any visit by Mr Hattingly. He had visited once in two years. But the fact was that the hall must be ready for a visit if one occurred. Arthur did his rounds dutifully each day, each day the pressure to maintain the Hall grew greater. If Mr Hattingly was to arrive and one thing was out of place then it would all be for nothing. The longer between visits the more pressure to maintain the Hall in its stately manner. Each day Mr Hattingly did not attend the longer he had kept the hall in its state of permanent magnificence. If he had kept the hall clean for 6 months and then decided to take a day off and Mr Hattingly arrived unannounced he would have wasted his time for 6 months, the previous 6 months would have been for nothing. The longer the time between visits the more diligently he had to work. Mr Hattingly never phoned ahead to let him know if he

was coming. He might arrive any min. If he was not there or a mess was found then Arthur would look as though he was not doing his job. Arthur was good at his job. He had worked at Hardcote Hall his entire adult life. He had an intimate knowledge of the walls, carpets and rugs, the ornaments, books, passageways and statues. Nothing went on in the house that he did not know about. The house itself felt like a part of his body or he was a part of the house. He cleaned, scrubbed and polished everything in the house at one time or another. He had an intimate schedule, a rotation of duties that he carried out each day, planned out over the year. Not everything in the house needed cleaning everyday of course. Lots of things only needed cleaning periodically. But he knew the schedule by heart. Every two weeks he polished the silver. Every week he scrubbed the baths and remade the beds. Dust and cobwebs were his eternal adversary. Empty house wage a war against vermin and Hardcote Hall was no exception. He set traps and set out poison religiously.

He finished wiping the marble banister on the main staircase just the grand clock in the tower struck lunchtime. He put his things away in the trolley and then wheeled it away down to the corridor to the secret doorway by the side of the main fireplace. Once inside he left his trolley by the closed door and travelled through the passageway to the kitchen. Once there he went to the fridge and found a piece of cheese from his own supply butter and bread from the dish and bread bin respectively and made himself a sandwich. Then he sat in silence at the servant's table and ate his lunch. He washed it down with a cup of freshly brewed tea. When at lunch he never spoke. He simply listened to the sounds of the old house. The summer was slowly turning to autumn and he could hear the dry rattle of the

leaves blowing along the back passageway. The passageway led to the kitchen door where deliveries were to be received. The leaves rattled along and gathered against the door. He would have to sweep the path later. He heard a jay somewhere in the grounds releasing its antagonistic screeches. The house itself made very little noise. The heating was turned off and for the most part the lights remained off. There was very little heat in the house to contract the pipes or woodwork. Occasionally he could hear the floorboards creaking in the upstairs bedrooms but his was due to a draft coming through the broken tile on the roof. The tile was in a place he could not reach and needed to be attended to by a roofer. The roofer was to come in next week to fix the hole. Arthur ate his sandwich to the crust and then he ate these turning each one round in his hands like a squirrel as he did so until there was nothing left of his meal. He watched the tops of the trees sway outside the kitchen window. The kitchen was below ground and it was only by looking over the ground level that he could just see the tops of the trees swirling back and forth losing leaves as they did so. The ferruginous hue of the trees stood in sharp relief against the grey sky. One crow passed over the treetops flapping its wings against the sudden burst of wind and steadying its flight pinions spread and tail wide. He took a final swig of his now cold tea and took the cup and plate to the sink where he washed them out with hot water and swift motion of his hand in each to clean them. Then he dried them and replaced them in the kitchen cabinet. He hobbled down the secret passageway to the trolley. His arthritic knees cracked painfully as he made his way back. He took the trolley and pushed it against the secret door and back out towards the stairs whereupon he continued his work.

Mrs Durst had at one time helped him but in the last few years he had been alone. Mrs Durst had been a wonderful cleaner, cook and wife. They had had many happy years together at Hardcote Hall. They had had lunch and dinner together everyday for most of their adult lives. Arthur and Silvie had kept the Hall in its state of permanent magnificence and had done it together. Two years ago Silvie had died in the Hall. She had been cleaning the silverware and had suffered a stroke and died. He had found her at dinnertime lying dead amongst the scattered plates and knives and spoons. She had polished them to a fine shine but then collapsed amongst them scattering them around the room. The polished surfaces shone beams of light around the room coruscating in small pools that shimmered like light on water. As he waited for the ambulance he tidied them away stacking them back by size. Ordering the knives, forks and spoons and placing them neatly on their sides in their right place. His dead wife lay under a sheet by the cutlery dresser. He left her head exposed but closed her eyes. She looked so strange lying on the floor like that as though she were sleeping. He cleaned away the silverware to make sure no one thought that she hadn't done her job; he didn't want them to think ill of her, think she'd made a mess of the dinning room. When the ambulance came they carried her outside in the sheet in the most undignified manner, wrapped in it and swinging like a child in a bath towel, as they placed her on the gurney. Since then he had been alone in the Hall.

The cold marble floors echoed as he went out his routine. The house lacked all vitality, dead stone, dead statues and lifeless taxidermy. He pushed the trolley along to the trophy room and there he stood in the middle of the room admiring the dead animals, the antlers and the cold black eyes. The birds stultified in

motionless attitudes that they displayed in life. They peered on him with their still lifeless eyes. They did not turn their heads to meet his gaze nor did they fly away at his approach. Of the many creatures in the trophy room his favorite was the peacock. Stuffed and mounted on a plinth with its tail fanned. He took out his beeswax polish and applied a small amount to a clean rag that he kept for the purpose of polishing the plinth. The peacock stood tall on its fluted plinth, the iridescent feathers shining in the sunlight streaming in from the sash window. He ran the cream into the wood the highly scented beeswax smeared into the walnut wood grain. He smoothed the feathers into place and ran his arthritic hand along the head and down the tail feathers that flowed like a bridal train down to the floor. The eye feathers trembled. He blew dust away from the eyes and beak. Then he replaced his rag in its container and gave the peacock one last look before moving on. He pushed his squeaking trolley through the bedrooms passing his practiced eyes over the objects and furniture, noting the bed linen and the dust seeing if anything was out of place. The afternoon and early morning were best to see dust. The light was just right to see the dust in the air. The fading light that shone through the windows revealed the otherwise invisible motes that filled the air. He could see more clearly where it was landing. By the vanity table he could see the scintillating afternoon light catching on the mirrors and for a moment the aureate glow spilled into the room in an incandescent ball that filled the room with a life beyond itself. Like the room was suddenly bright with vitality. He found himself peering through a gap in the door as though someone was inside. The room flooded with the transitory glow of late evening sunlight. Pigeons purred on the window ledge in a contended manner and Arthur waited patiently for the light to

fade as it did most days. There seemed within it the taste of past as though the room contained the memory of the past lives of those who had inhabited the Hall. He entered the room only as the light faded. He ran his hand over his head and glanced about the room as though to check if anyone had been there. Then he closed the shutter and latched it tightly.

The next room he came to was the last on his rounds. The garage. He opened the door on the ground floor and entered. The lights blinked on and off and then the room was fully illuminated. The strip lights hummed and glowed above filling the dark dry room with an anemic light. Below the cars stood gleaming like jewels, metal and glass sinuous and smooth. Mr Hattingly loved his cars. Arthur kept each one in tiptop condition. He would not let a speck of dirty on any surface and he waxed them regularly. There were several cars here. Merely a small part of Mr Hattingly's collection the others were housed in his other homes. But there was a fine collection at Hardcote Hall. He had cleaned them all yesterday so as his final chore he was checking them before turning into his own room. Crossing the garage he moved between the cars sleek surfaces. Then left his trolley in its usual place. He threw any rubbish into the bins to be put out tomorrow. Then he locked the wheels of the trolley and re-crossed the garage to a door towards the back of the room. This was his flat, up a small flight of stairs above the garage. The small flat furnished to his liking, a small kitchenette and seating area a fold out bed and a bathroom with bath. He removed his tie and jacket, then his shoes, trousers and waistcoat. He took a long hot bath. His body ached from his chores. He felt the strain of the days more and more. His bowed legs didn't work as well as they once did. He massaged his crooked fingers, feeling



the bulging joints rubbing them for comfort. After bathing he pulled on some boxer shorts and thought about getting dressed for the evening. But decided not to. He stood in his boxers and poured himself a whiskey. Another day finished he thought. Another day the house is clean. Mr Hattingly didn't visit today, but he might tomorrow. He took a quick swig of his whiskey. Then poured another. He glanced around the room. The remnants of Silvie were still here. He hadn't taken out her clothes or taken her hat away from the hat stand. Her nightie still hung from the wall by the fold down bed. It hung there pale pink the diaphanous material moving slightly every time he opened the door. He kept it there for a reason, he knew why. Every time he entered the room for a second and only for a split second out of the corner of his eye he thought she was standing there. He would feel that he saw her. For that split second she was still with him. It was worth it just for that split second. He poured another whiskey confused where the last one had gone. Then he pulled down the fold down bed and pulled himself into the stinking covers. He hadn't changed the sheets for a bit too long. A yellow stain ringed the pillow in the center. He sat there in bed and drank his whiskey and started to nod off the half empty glass in his hand nearly falling onto the duvet. Tomorrow was the day he had to polish the silver again. The beds would need changing in the guest's room. The whiskey swirled in his glass. Maybe Mr Hattingly would visit tomorrow?