

Mortimer's Gift

By

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A brass table lamp with its yellowed shade is asleep for the night atop a stack of catalogs. Shadows dance and flicker throughout the shoebox-sized room as snow consumes the 13-inch screen of the late 80s television. Half eaten Chinese takeout containers overflow the waste pail beside the stained royal blue 3-seat couch. Pictures of smiling and laughing people dot the many cluttered surfaces. A very soft ticking, perhaps the watch of one of the two men, is the only sound in the apartment.

“Are you sure about this, Mortimer?”

“Very much so.”

“Well, damn.”

They couldn't be more different. Where Todd was tall and skinny, Mortimer was the height of a Japanese capsule hotel suite. He also resembled a garden gnome. Aside from being quite squat, he was also barrel-shaped and the scruffy beard plastered upon his long, ruddy face didn't do him any favors. Todd wasn't that great to look at either, what with his Snape-ish nose, mousy brown hair, and poor complexion. But, between the two, he was definitely the Bradley Cooper. Not the overly tanned War Dogs Bradley Cooper but rather the Silver Linings Playbook Bradley Cooper.

Mortimer was also challenged when it came to fashion. Todd was... fair in that department. Despite shopping exclusively in Goodwill's 50% off bin, he still managed a pair of decent jeans and a Lacoste knock-off shirt with a dragon instead of a crocodile. Mortimer, on the

other hand, wore a hideous pink and white beanie you'd give to an ugly baby to help them look cute. He wore his brown Sansabelt slacks closer to his armpits than his waist where a checkered button-down shirt was unevenly tucked. The Gaucho black leather belt, though completely redundant, was cinched tight enough to make his pants look like a burlap sack lashed at the top. His orange and yellow geodesic-patterned tie, improperly knotted so that the back was nearly twice as long as the front, rounded out his Tim Gunn fashion don't.

Crossing his arms, Todd continues to stare into the room. "Are you REALLY sure?" he asks, turning his gaze to meet Mortimer's which wasn't there to meet his.

"Yes, Todd," says Mortimer. "Unfortunately, nothing can be done at this point in time."

"Time. Such a funny thing, isn't it, Mortimer?"

"There's never enough when you have it and never enough when you don't," Mortimer says, looking at his vintage Mickey Mouse watch. "Shall we go?" he asks Todd, who's lost in thought.

"What?" responds Todd as if brought out of a dream. "Oh, right. Mortimer... could I have a moment or two longer?" Mortimer nods and takes a few steps away.

After he conquered addiction and survived the halfway house, he never thought he'd live alone. He was thankful for it, but also hated it here. Even so, leaving seems wrong, unnatural in some way. Call it guilt, sadness, or buyer's remorse, he's made his bed and now has to vacate. He tries to remember every detail and file it away for whenever he needs a reminder of what life – good and bad – can do to a person.

The wallpaper is a hideous quatrefoil pattern of peach and silver but regardless of how awful it is, he may miss it the most. The saggy old couch he called a bed most nights won't be missed. This is the safest he's ever felt but he knew the rules and, when you leave, everything

stays behind. He wanted the photographs of his parents but smiles, remembering he'll be seeing them soon. The smile fades as his gaze lowers to an empty cat house. "Scratcher," he says, sighing. "You were my only friend," says Todd to himself, absorbing the sadness. With one last deep sigh he cleanses himself of that sadness. "Okay, Mortimer. I'm ready."

Mortimer nods and motions for him to go first. Todd, standing renewed, moves toward the door. "Oh, Todd?" asks Mortimer.

"Yeah?"

"Stop calling me Mortimer, please. My name is Death."

Todd nods, phasing through the door with Mortimer close behind. Silence. A bell, soft and faint, rings its gentle song as a black cat, with a single speck of white on its head, emerges from the cathouse. It looks at the door a moment before turning to the worn couch where Todd lays facedown in his own sick. A pill bottle rests on the floor out of reach of his outstretched fingers. Scratchers lets out a soft, mournful meow before trotting away and vanishing through the door.