

DOMINIC HOLLAND

THE FRUIT BOWL



An innocuous moment that binds two boys together
and will come to save the lives of two men.

It was one of those mornings; so cold that weather forecasters feel duty bound to offer their advice as well as just the facts; so cold that merely informing listeners that the overnight temperature had plummeted to 'minus fifteen!' and would barely get back to zero all day would somehow feel irresponsible. And so, this morning, even the sober announcer on Radio 4 felt the need to sign off the bulletin with a helpful entreaty to wrap up warm today, should you be brave enough to venture outside.

Beth couldn't hear the radio over the noise of the machine and nor could she feel the cold, standing in her kitchen with its heated marble floor. She eased the plastic plunger into the juicer, which made little fuss, pulverising the large carrot into a thin line of orange juice. In the four years that she'd been making her Fruit Bowls, this was his third and most expensive juicing machine. It gave the impression of working well below capacity and despite its intensive usage; she never ceased to marvel at its efficiency. She decanted another full glass of orange-coloured juice into the crystal jug and turned the machine off. She put the jug in to the enormous American style fridge ready for husband, Tom, who would be in the shower already and for her three boys a few hours later before they all headed off to school. With her first daily chore completed, Beth quickly headed back to bed.

...and at 5.05, Pauline is here with a first look at the business pages... It was nothing personal, but Tom wasn't terribly interested in what Pauline had to say. Built into the wall of his en-suite bathroom were two screens, one with financial data that was collated for him every night and another tuned to a Japanese business channel with English subtitles.

'Morning, darling.' Beth called out as she slunk back in to their warm bed. Tom returned the greeting as best as he could manage 8 Dominic Holland as he finished up brushing his teeth. He wiped his mouth and reentered his bedroom to kiss his wife on his way to their communal dressing room where his clothes for the day had been laid out for him by their housekeeper Naisi.

'There's a Fruit Bowl for you.' Beth added, her head already buried in fine Egyptian cotton and he smiled. The Fruit Bowl was a tradition that Beth had conceived and insisted on continuing on with and in her way. Tom had suggested that Naisi might assume the role of fruit juice extractor but Beth firmly rejected this and also the suggestion of preparing it the night before because don't vitamins and general goodness diminish with time? Beth enjoyed making her fruit concoctions and they were appreciated also by Tom and their boys.

Tom poured himself a full glass of juice which consisted of apples, usually a handful of red grapes, oranges, spinach, carrots and, this morning, by his reckoning a beetroot. Occasionally, Beth liked to surprise the boys with something a little bit left-field: a cucumber or fennel bulb and he imagined them trying to guess as Beth stood over them to make sure they each finished their glass.

Naisi appeared in the kitchen doorway. She had arrived at the Harper household over ten years ago and was still there, graduating from au-pair to live in housekeeper. Originally, she had stayed in the hope that a fourth child might be added to the clan – and hopefully, a the – but Daniel, their eldest boy, announced that further siblings would be environmentally irresponsible. This had seemed radical at the time but now less so with the former Prince Harry agreeing with this sentiment and a part-time school girl from Sweden becoming the world's most deferred to commentator on the fiendishly complex issue of climate. Daniel's hero and all-time

pin up and Tom often wondered if there was any point paying exorbitant school fees for a boy who had set his sights on becoming an eco-warrior and nothing else.

‘Morning, Naisi. You needn’t get up you know.’

‘I know. I go back to bed soon.’

Tom laughed; it was an exchange they had most mornings. He gestured to the jug.

‘Do you want yours now?’ He didn’t wait for an answer and handed her a full glass.

Beth was almost asleep again as he kissed her gently goodbye.

‘Bye, love.’

‘Yeah, I’ll call you after Daniel’s match – or before, if he scores.’

‘It’ll be cancelled I reckon. Apparently, it’s freezing out there.’

Tom skipped down the broad and winding staircase with the usual sense of excitement that he felt as he left for work. He resented the term workaholic because of its negative connotations about dependency; he was just fortunate that he happened to enjoy what he did to make his handsome living. Above and beyond the call of duty, Naisi was waiting for him with his cashmere coat and scarf.

‘Jerry’s here and I’ve given him his cup of tea.’

‘Thanks, Naisi. OK then, see you tonight.’

Tom opened the heavy oak door and was hit by a wall of freezing air that grabbed at him and easily penetrated his various layers of clothing. No matter how much Daniel had protested, the underground heating throughout their newly completed house had been a bloody marvellous idea. He hopped across his frost-covered drive and was upon his waiting Jaguar before his driver could react. A screen in the back of the front passenger seat was tuned to the same Japanese channel as the one in the kitchen, and copies of the Financial Times and The Times were laid on the back seat ready for him.

‘Morning, Jerry. Jesus!’

‘Morning, Tom. Cold enough for you?’

‘Bloody freezing.’ Tom settled into his heated leather seat and loosened his scarf.

‘It’s currently minus nine – twelve when I left,’ Jerry chuckled.

Tom winced, thinking about Daniel’s match this afternoon.

‘Whatever happened to global warming, eh?’

The driver jabbed his foot on the accelerator. ‘Doing my best, sir, honest.’ 10
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‘Yeah, well don’t. Daniel’s probably watching. He’s already on at me about the size of the bloody house.’

Jerry laughed as he looked at the magnificent pile that had taken nearly four years to fully complete.

‘He tells me that under-floor heating is not carbon efficient.’

‘Oh, is that right?’

‘Bloody comfortable though and this car is all wrong, apparently.’

‘What, not electric?’

‘He asked me why it’s got two exhaust pipes. Any answers for that one?’

‘Er, how about because his dad is a very important man and one exhaust pipe is just not enough?’

Tom scoffed and tried to imagine using such logic on his defiant son. In fact, maybe it was time and he should get with the programme and buy something more eco and sustainable.

‘Jaguar do an electric car, now, right?’

‘Yeah, the E Pace. Much more cramped than this, mind.’

‘But is it embarrassingly conspicuous?’ Tom asked.

‘You what?’

Tom chuckled. ‘According to Daniel, this car is “embarrassingly conspicuous”.’

Jerry grinned. ‘Blimey. How old is he?’

‘Fifteen,’ Tom answered proudly.

They passed the old stable yard, which had been retained with a view to converting it into a studio of some kind, but for now housed Beth’s bright orange Smart car. The thirsty Jag waited impatiently for the electric gates to open, like a powerful sprinter crouching for the gun, its two exhausts billowing out smoke. The back wheels crunched on the frozen gravel as the car pulled through and onto the road. Destination – the City of London.

As usual, Tom waited until they had got out of Gerrard’s Cross and onto the M40 before he opened his work files or consulted any of his screens. He had realised that he didn’t want to be a chartered accountant long before he had qualified as one and founded his telecommunications company, Tel-Com, just ahead of 11 The Fruit Bowl his twenty-fifth birthday. But, since taking the business back into private ownership almost eight years ago, the firm had diversified and expanded into many different areas, and most successfully, into the murky world of financial services. This morning, as usual, the motorway was empty, but each year he was forced out of bed a little bit earlier in order to enjoy a clear run. The Jag flew by the famous graffitied wall, running at ninety degrees to the motorway just outside the M25 border, and it always made him smile. Over the years, the wording had changed as the farmer or the council painted over the scrawl, but the message was always reassuringly anti-car or antiestablishment. This morning was a new and simple message: What is the Point? Tom shrugged at the question and surmised that none of his answers would have been very satisfactory. He enjoyed what he did, his company employed over two thousand people in eighteen different countries and with that comes a certain responsibility, not to mention pride. He reasoned that the question was aimed more at the later motorists caught in the inevitable gridlock each morning and evening of the week. But such misery didn’t apply to him as he whizzed by at speed – and, if ever congestion reached such levels that not even the earliest start time could ensure him a free run, then he would reach for the helicopter brochure along with the other captains of industry and masters of the universe. Predictably, Daniel had explained that taking the train to London was the only responsible mode of transport and it did prick his conscience because he had fleetingly considered the idea, even if he hadn’t actually tried it. He would rather lose an hour in bed than stand on a wet platform and hope for a seat. And of course, it wouldn’t be fair on Jerry either, which was the reason he actually gave.

Forty minutes after leaving home, Tom was delivered at the front door of his office on Lombard Street at the heart of one of the busiest cities in the world. The streets were deserted with no parked cars at all and not just because it was so early. Heavy red lines daubed the city’s streets and concrete bollards had appeared overnight like spring daffodils, only these were permanent and part of the world war against terrorism.

He pushed his way through the heavy, revolving glass doors. 12 Dominic Holland

'Morning,' he greeted the two security guards on duty. 'Another quiet night?'

'Yep. We slept straight through.' They joked. Tom hadn't given much thought to which careers he would encourage his sons to pursue, but security was not one of them. A job where literally nothing happened constituted a good day? Tom shuddered at the thought as he pushed open the fire door to the stairwell. At forty-eight, he had a growing awareness of his mortality. He had managed to reduce his alcohol intake to what was officially considered safe but hadn't managed to increase his physical activity, a source of increased guilt because he now had a gym at his home as well as the one in his office. Lack of time was his constant excuse but as one of his few New Year's resolutions, he had started to use the staircase at work instead of the lift. Three hundred and seventythree steps each morning had to be a good thing?

Although the ascent was becoming easier, it was fortunate that Tom was always the first to arrive because he still looked grim when he finally reached his office, gasping for breath and holding his chest. He laid his hands on the reception desk of Tel-Com and bent over at the waist, breathing heavily. He might well have been getting fitter but he was still exhausted each morning because he was ascending the stairs in less time; and so, he reminded himself that he needed to start timing himself as he headed through the open-plan workspace to his own private office. He sighed at the number of computer monitors left on standby overnight and immediately heard Daniel's voice in his head.

'If all the computer terminals and televisions in the world that were left on standby were switched off, the electricity saved would be enough...'

Naturally, Tom had the corner office with its views of St Paul's and the modern buildings huddled around it. He turned on his computer, congratulated himself for his smaller carbon footprint and sat down rather heavily. Family photos of Beth and the kids playing in the snow last year in France competed for attention with the photo of himself and Tiger Woods on the first tee at Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia. A photo that held mixed emotions 13 The Fruit Bowl for him, not just because of how badly he'd played, hardly bothering with a fairway as the golfing maestro smiled as politely as he could, but more at how he had acquired the right to play in such a golf match. Against his better instincts, at a city awards ceremony, he had become embroiled in a bidding war for the star lot and ended up outbidding a tax exile famed for his grandiose benevolence. The eye-watering cost would probably make it one of the most expensive rounds of golf ever played, and that was without the cost of keeping his name out of the trade press. It was a few years ago now and Tom looked at the picture and reflected on what lay ahead for Tiger: a plethora of trophies but a whole heap of pain also and then his miraculous and heralded comeback. For all his talents and achievements, Tom was glad that he wasn't Tiger Woods.