

# The Old Shed

It arrived in Thursday's post.

Just another flyer—“house clearance, waste disposal—discounts for pensioners”, followed by a company name and mobile number. Probably done on a home printer, sandwiched between adverts for funeral plans, equity release, and other assaults by the greedy on the old.

Okay, I'm cynical. I've seen too many scams in my time. I've been the target of a few. I suppose that was an occupational hazard. My occupation—let's say I was a craftsman, even an artist. However you frame it, I was the best.

No longer. Arthritis has turned my hands into useless claws. I spend my life watching daytime TV and remembering better times. It's not been the same since Nancy died. This lonely house is falling apart as fast as me.

That flyer? I chucked it into the bin with the rest of the junk mail, made a cup of tea, and settled down to watch *Homes under the Hammer*. You know the programme—people buy a run-down dump at auction, spend a few quid, and allegedly double their money when they sell. They never mention lawyers, estate agents, surveyors, and all the other vultures who rip you off in the process.

That episode featured a house like mine, with a long narrow back garden and rotting shed. The so-called expert recommended they removed the outbuilding, and that got me thinking. I'd get more space and light at the back if I got rid of mine. I once worked in my shed, but it was now full of rubbish, of interest only to rats and other vermin.

I retrieved the flyer. The offer sounded dodgy, so I searched for the firm on the Internet. They sounded just right for the job. I'm getting good with computers after my daughter Susan bought me the laptop. Who says us old folk aren't IT literate? Mind you, I won't do banking or buy stuff online—too many clever criminals around.

Good girl, my Susan, unlike her lazy sod of a brother. Decent son would've helped me dismantle the shed, not make me pay some stranger to do it.

I called the number and left a message.

He called back straightaway—local accent, mumbled a bit. I explained I was too old to sort out the shed myself. He promised me a good deal, said he'd come round the next day.

Sure enough, he turned up first thing Friday morning. His name was Wayne. Tattoos, earrings, gold chain around his neck. He seemed pleasant enough—lots of young people look like that now.

He wandered round the shed, poked it a few times, kicked the decaying wood round the bottom, opened the door, shone a torch inside. Finally, he shook his head and tutted. Asbestos, he said. Cost a lot to remove—forms to fill in, protective clothing, that sort of nonsense. Because I was a pensioner, he'd drop the price to two grand. I hesitated, but then he said he'd a legal duty to notify the council. If they discovered he knew about the asbestos and not told them, he'd lose his licence. They'd use their own contractors—cost at twice as much.

No way I was paying four thousand. I needed to get the job done quickly. So I agreed. I wasn't sure about the asbestos. I built the shed and thought I'd only used wood, metal and glass. Still, it was thirty years ago. Memory's not what it was.

He wanted half the money up front. I stated I wouldn't pay until the job was done. He grumbled, said okay, he'd return that afternoon. I phoned Susan—she got cross, said he was trying to con me. Nonsense, I told her. I knew what I was doing. I pride myself I'm a good judge of character. I was sure I could rely on Wayne.

At one o'clock, Wayne and another bloke covered in tattoos arrived. I didn't see any protective clothing, not even a face mask. They proceeded to smash up the shed using sledgehammers and crowbars, dust and splinters flying everywhere. I decided I was going to get my money's worth and chucked some unwanted items into their pickup during one of their many breaks.

They finished at four o'clock. The garden was a right mess: small jagged bits of wood, broken glass. Wayne declared tidying up was my responsibility and demanded his cash. I wasn't going to argue with those two. I told him I needed to get the money out of the bank, wouldn't be able to get a bus till Monday. He said he'd drive me into town.

I went into the house to collect a carrier bag and other stuff I needed, before we headed for the High Street, me squashed between them, listening to horrendous modern music, them talking football and women. They stank of unwashed sweat and cigarettes.

We arrived at twenty past four. Wayne dropped his mate outside the bookies and parked in a disabled space. He placed a blue badge on the dashboard—I couldn't see whose name was on it, but it wasn't his.

We walked in silence to the bank. He stood outside, watching me through the window as I collected the money and dropped it into the bag.

When I emerged, Wayne pulled me into the lane running down the side. He hopped from side to side like he needed a pee, eyes darting back and forward from the bag to the lane entrance. I handed over bundles of notes and he flicked through them. As if I'd palm him off with bits of paper. He grunted an unsmiling okay when he'd finished.

The bastard didn't even take me home. Lucky I had enough for a cab.

I phoned Susan when I got home. She didn't believe the asbestos claim either and ranted on about how crooks preyed on vulnerable old folk like me. She told me to call the police. So I did.

Only I didn't leave my name.

They came round anyway—first thing Monday morning. An inspector with a woman sergeant in tow. I welcomed them in, offered them a cup of tea, which they declined. I'm always ready to help the police with their enquiries.

'Mr Devlin,' said the inspector. 'We've arrested a man calling himself Wayne Rodgers. We think that's a false name. Description fits someone we've been looking at for some time. Cowboy builder. Cons retired people like yourself by overcharging for unnecessary work. He says you employed him to dismantle a shed last Friday. Is that correct?'

'That's right. He seemed quite respectable. He said there was asbestos in the shed. That's why he charged so much. Was he lying?'

The inspector exchanged a smile with his companion, as if they shared some private joke.

'How much did you pay him?' she asked. 'And what denomination of notes?'

'Two thousand,' I said. 'All in twenties. I got it out of the bank the same day. The cashier will remember.'

He wrote something down in a notebook, then asked about the bank.

'Lloyds in town. The lady behind the counter asked what I needed the money for, so I told her it was to pay a builder. Her name was Muna.' All true. I like a little chat when it's convenient.

'Mr Rodgers claimed you paid him in tenners,' said the inspector.

'No way. Ask the cashier.'

'Mind if we look round?' asked the sergeant. 'We could get a warrant, but I'm sure you want us out of your hair as soon as possible.'

'I wish I had some,' I joked. 'No, please have a good look. What's the problem, anyway?'

The inspector waited for the woman to disappear. ‘When we arrested Mr Rodgers, he was in possession of a large quantity of counterfeit notes. What did you do before you retired?’

He already knew the answer. ‘I was a jeweller’s assistant. I worked in Thompson’s for ten years.’

‘You were an engraver, right?’

‘I did some. Bit of this and that.’

He looked round the room. ‘Nice house. Big for a jeweller’s assistant.’

‘I was careful with my money. Nancy and I worked hard to buy this.’

‘Made a lot of money, did you?’

I should have said it was none of his business—only I knew it was.

‘I worked hard.’

‘You still in contact with Harry Taylor?’

Good old Harry—the sort of man you could trust, someone who wouldn’t rat on his mates. ‘I haven’t seen him in years. Didn’t he go to prison?’

‘He’s still there,’ said the inspector. ‘Fifteen years for extortion, living on immoral earnings, and, of course, forgery. Weren’t you involved in that investigation?’

‘I was arrested,’ I said, ‘but I was innocent. I’d met Harry a couple of times and me being an engraver, well I can see why you were suspicious.’

‘We arrested Mr Rodgers after an anonymous tip-off made from an unlisted mobile, and we’ve tracked it back to half a mile from here. Any comment?’

‘Someone must have seen him working at my house. I’d imagine he has a lot of enemies.’

He lapsed into small talk before the sergeant returned, shaking her head. They thanked me for my assistance before leaving.

Poor Wayne’s going down. There’ll be a queue of pensioners waiting to tell how he invented problems, lied, carried out a shoddy job, just to trick them out of their life savings. The prosecution could add fly tipping, assuming they’ve found his flyer I placed inside the wreckage of my shed as it lay at the back of his truck.

The jury will have no problem finding Wayne guilty of forgery, particularly as the police will find the plates used to churn out the fakes under the front seat. No use to me now, with the new plastic notes coming out.

The twenties? I posted them to Susan with the rest of my home-made tenners before I boarded the taxi. She lives in Aberdeen, and I can’t see the cops checking up there.

Like I told her, I was right to rely on Wayne. I'm a very good judge of character.