

BAD NEWS?

by
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Tram slowly eased the cork from the bottle, listening and watching as his wrinkled hands deftly completed the ceremony. Quickly dipping his head for the introductory whiff, he inhaled deeply as the Claret exhaled for the first time in thirty three years.

He eyed the plain white envelope that lay on his teak desk. Bad news? Her writing was still the same. Of course it would be, fool, he growled at himself. She'd called a year, well, thirteen months ago. But he hadn't received a letter since the one she'd written on her birthday. Her thirtieth. It'd been almost three years.

After examining the cork he poured a little of the precious grape juice into his crystal goblet. He chuckled. His casual attitude had made Jupa crazy. The more so because she knew he knew.

Together they'd cruised the vineyards of France, then California. Yes, she knew he knew. But how he hated profiling and imaging.

"You take pleasure in embarrassing me!" she'd stormed. But that fellow she'd brought home was such a soulless peacock. Rich and travelled and educated and empty. She'd been only eighteen then.

Must be bad news. He slowly slit the end with the silver and turquoise letter opener she'd brought him from the Navajo school she'd visited in Arizona. English stamps. Why was she still there?

His mouth watered as he lifted the glass, swirled the wine below his nose. Holding it up toward the window so the sunlight danced in the cut of the crystal and rich red color of its content, he toasted, "To Jupa and life!"

She had no idea how often he thought of her. He carried no illusions. He entered her consciousness on occasion, but not daily. Human nature. Her nature. So like himself. But with her mother's temperament and beauty. The curly ginger hair they so hated but he so loved.

Smiling, he took the first sip. “Your mother never appreciated the finer things in life, but you do. That’s why you’ve gone exploring.” He emptied the glass in a gulp.

“With my blessing.”

Tram filled the goblet to just over half before removing the letter. Plain notebook paper. Good. She’s too busy to bother with stationery. In her early twenties, taking the identity of a young business woman, briefcase and all, she’d commenced promoting struggling artists. The stationery had been elegant, the profile impressive, the profits minimal. He hadn’t liked her much during that phase.

‘Hello Daddy,’ he read, then laid the letter down, lifted his glass. No fountain pen. Bad news for sure. She’d not written with anything less since her sixteenth birthday when he’d given her a gold Cross pen with sea green ink. She’d tried every colour ink available since, but no pen of lesser quality. He’d never asked if she still had the Cross. Perhaps it was in one of the trunks she’d stored in his basement.

He refilled the glass before continuing.

‘Haven’t meant to worry you, but haven’t really had much to report. Was just sitting here watching the Blue Tits pig-out on the bread crumbs I put on the window sill for them. The one must be male. He’s so busy being competitive, trying to chase the others off, that he’s hardly eaten anything. He reminds me of the guy you fired. You tried to pawn the ‘brilliant and promising young lawyer’ off on me when you first hired him. I tried to warn you he was too ambitious.’

Tram nodded, chuckled, “Too right. And I thought it was just because he tried to get you into bed too quickly. No, you were right. Lost me some good clients.”

‘Actually, you wouldn’t believe how often I think of you. Especially of late. You see, I’m totally incapable of lying to you, that’s why I haven’t written. Why don’t you open a bottle of wine, one of those full-bodied reds you’ve got in the basement. Then finish reading.’

Bad news for sure. He took a deep breath, stroked his medium long grey hair, sipped the Claret. She knew him so well. It had never occurred to him that she ‘couldn’t’ lie to him, he’d just assumed she wouldn’t except when little ones made

life run more smoothly. He felt guilt slipping in for all those he'd told her since she was a baby.

'First I'll assure you I'm healthy and balanced. I'm studying English literature through Open University and just finished Shakespeare. Whew! Actually, one can never 'finish' with him, but I've completed that sector of the course. You see, Daddy, I'm in prison.'

Paragraphs. Good thing we have those neat divisions. Take a break, have a drink. If I'd not opened this wine I'd probably go pour a scotch right now. His fingers drummed on the table. That gesture had always prompted an, "Okay, tell me about it," from Jupa.

'I'd meant to tell you when I called last year, but just couldn't. Didn't want to upset you, to disappoint you. It was just cannabis. But they're even more backwards in their laws here than in the States. I know what you're thinking. No, bringing in my father, the big-time Yank lawyer, would not have been the right move.'

He was having trouble reading, realized the pages were shaking. He put them down, locked his hands. "She's strong. She's being punished for a mistake. She's fine." He'd defended some quality women who had made mistakes, or been wrongly convicted, and were spending time inside. It was that type his daughter would have befriended. Inside.

The lump in his throat caused the wine to seem less velvety. Before his eyes was the pale face of his little girl. He'd told her the waves were too strong, to wait on the beach. After swimming out a ways he'd headed back. He'd kept lifting his head but couldn't see her. When he'd pulled her limp body from the surf his heart entered a void, the pain too great to endure. Massaging her tiny chest and back, he breathed into that delicate face. Only when she'd gasped and coughed had life returned to his soul.

'Anyway, prison is an ashram for me. I've grown spiritually. The plight of most in here has made me aware of how lucky I am. I've a lot to be thankful for...you in particular. Hey, my appeal's coming up. I'll ring you to chat and give you the latest.'

The date she'd scribbled in the corner was from nine days before. Had she lost the appeal? Was it against conviction or sentence? Damned prisons. They checked everything so mail was often delayed going in and out.

Turning to his PC he called up his address file and began scanning England. There were a couple of barristers with whom he'd dealt. Certainly one of them would be able to locate her for him.

"Gonna drink that whole bottle single-handed?"

He turned quickly, the glass sliding from his hand to shatter on the tiled floor. Both were crying as they embraced, then laughing as they looked at each other, the emotions overpowering words.

When finally they tried to speak each overran the other. Taking Jupa's hand, he led her to a chair in the sun on the patio. He was quite composed when he returned with two claret glasses and the nearly empty bottle as well as another of the same year he'd kept stashed.

"It's my last Claret."

"It wasn't so bad inside."

"I've told you to be careful."

"I'm a grown woman."

"You don't act it."

"Did you open it before or after you read my letter?"

"Before."

"Chicken."

"I knew it was bad news."

"The good news is I won my appeal."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't escape."

They sat in silence as he opened the second bottle, neither able to voice their intense feelings, just the fact of being together sufficient.

Tram's toast was simple and from the heart, "To good news."

finish