

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

A short story

By

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Jackson Pythe wasn't bothered about going out. He'd had a pretty tough couple of weeks, what with his Mother getting engaged again. She'd done this five or more times in the last few years, always to men Jackson thought she could have bettered. He wasn't sure why she made a habit of engagement; some people grew and showed flowers, some did ballroom dancing. No, not for Petra Pythe; engagement was it! She'd only been married once, to Jackson's Dad, Jerry who'd been killed when his plane went down flying back from business in South America three years earlier. Small parts of the aircraft had floated to the surface in the Atlantic Ocean north of Bermuda but the water was far too deep to mount a full scale investigation; the middle of nowhere with the bottom unfathomable. There was no way even the best dad in the world was coming home after that.

So Petra had taken on, to Jackson, what seemed to be a hobby; collecting men. He knew she was lonely after losing Dad but couldn't understand how she could readily get involved with her husband hardly cold! Strangely, the relationships never seemed to last.

Jackson informed his Mother he was attending night school and studying "precise science" which meant absolutely nothing to his Mother, herself engaged in the science of engagement. Jackson went with the flow because he worshipped the ground his Mother walked on; loved her unconditionally to pieces. She would never be able to do anything wrong; his world was worshipping her and, following the loss of Dad, making generous allowances for her words and actions; all forgiving, all loving, all mother's son.

But, Jackson was studying and becoming a useful human being. He was an avid student but loved girls and football. Manchester City were top of the tree but his best mate Limmy supported Liverpool, both teams way above Jackson's beloved Fulham a league below and on a downward spiral. It was though, only small talk and the conversation over drinks was for the benefit for those within earshot. Nice boy, that JP, everybody thought.

Jackson made sure the first bullet from his silenced handgun pierced the ankle of his victim, rendering him unable to get more than a few feet away. The injured party crouched, clutching his bloodied and obviously painful wound unable to offer further defence. Jackson waited until the sobbing died down and the injured party, known locally for a series of attacks on elderly victims, had returned to a mood of less hysteria. "Been a bad boy, Wilkins. They've sent me round". The injured guy stared up at Jackson totally bewildered.

“Sent you round. Who? Why?”

“You’ve been found out, Wilkins. You have been abusing the old folk at Giant Pines and it’s taking unfair advantage, Wilkins. They’re not having it anymore.

They have sons and daughters, nephews, nieces and grandchildren who’ve looked after them, respected them. They’ve earned their right to protection from scum like you. You’ve gone the wrong way and they’ve asked me to take care of things, put the record straight.”

Wilkins looked at him, disbelieving.

“What do you mean, take care of things?”

“Before you play the game, it’s best you understand the rules of engagement”.

It gives me no pleasure but, in this case, I am those rules. Put your hand flat against the table”, which Wilkins did. The axe was fast, very fast.

Wilkins screamed as he lost the fingers of his left hand.

“I’m presuming you’re right handed”, Jackson said as he witnessed the blood pumping itself from Wilkins’ body. His gloved hand placed the axe out of reach.

Wilkins looked up at him, the pain too much to scream. Jackson looked back impassively, pulled a stiletto from his breast pocket and held it up, bringing fearful tears from the wounded man’s eyes.

“Yes. You’re right. This is the painful bit. They asked me to see that you suffer shall we say, some discomfort”. He took the knife and held it close to Wilkins’ left eye. The victim shook with terror, a successful fear tactic. After ten seconds, when Wilkins’ bowel movements had completed their purpose, he withdrew the blade and pocketed it.

Wilkins was paling as the blood oozed from his fingerless hand, his head spinning with increasing weakness.

“You could have got round this. You could have done something *for* them but you took, only took. They’ve collectively more than enough resource to ensure people who abuse them receive the message, which is, respect the old folks. Shame you won’t be able to tell your friends.

JP had chosen a venue frequented by those foul of the law and known as a villain’s haunt. Wilkins was losing consciousness, his blood soaked clothes sponging up the pumping fluid. It wouldn’t be long now. Jackson left it at that; there was little need for more. He’d completed the task and the camera in his baseball cap had recorded the event in glorious Technicolor! His clients would be pleased with his work and the crime would go down in Police records as just another gangland crime, nothing more.

“Jackson, that’s incredible. I can’t believe you wrote that”, his Mother proudly beamed as he stood there, his face slightly pink behind a wide smile of satisfaction.

“Aaahh, thanks Mum. It’s a great boost to hear it from you. I think I’m getting there and I hope to have it finished in a month or so”.

“You’re doing well, JP, keep it up. Your Mum’s really proud of you and your Dad would have been too”. She leaned over and planted a juicy kiss on his forehead, making him turn pinker.

“Jeremy’s buying me dinner tonight; I think he might ask”, she smiled.

“Mum, what is it with you and getting engaged? How many is it since we lost Dad? Six, seven!”

His mother smiled and stroked his cheek. “Some people go to bingo love. Not me, I prefer the company. Nice meals, free drinks and a bit of, well, you know, comfort. It helps me JP, you know, through the lonely times. I loved your father with everything I had but he’s gone and we both have to find ways of dealing with the loss. Personally, I think we’re both doing very well, all things considered”. She bent his way and gave him another kiss; her smile assuring him his Mother loved him beyond, beyond, well, to bits at least.

Wilkins bled to death, not a particularly painful way to go. Before that he became drowsy then light headed and went into a comatose painless euphoria, ranting quietly, almost under his breath, just how unfair it was. Everybody took advantage of the old people. Why help them across the road when you could help yourself to their purse or wallet. Easy money, they had no need of it; taking sweets from babies. They’d served their time, outlived their use to society and were fair game, no! He slipped away without knowing how much of an asshole he’d become. The final image in his mind was Jackson standing over him, saying “I am those rules”.

“JP, are you there? JP! I’ve got some amazing news, JP.” No response. She went into the lounge; empty. She needed to share the fabulous news with her son but he wasn’t there. OK, he had things to do but she’d hoped he would have been there when she needed to tell him, before the world. Disappointment would reign but not for long as the front door creaked open and her beloved JP came into view.

“Hi Mum, you ok?”

“JP, guess what. Fantastic news. Jeremy asked me to marry him and guess what?”

“ No go on, Mum”

“I said.....I said..... what do you think I said?”

“Well, going by your past track record, I’d say you said yes”

Jackson had a nondescript look on his face as he popped the answer to the question which had been popped .

“You’re so clever, so intuitive for one so young but you’re absolutely right. I said yes”.

“We’ve discussed things and want to marry in three months. You’re alright with that aren’t you, JP?”

“Mum, haven’t we had this conversation before?”

“No. He only asked me yesterday. JP, why are you complicating things?”

“Mum, I’m not. Really, I’m not. I just don’t understand why you keep doing this”.

“Doing what, JP?”

“You know. Mum, you know!”

“JP, are you becoming difficult. I’m trying to give us a home and security. All you seem to do is question me. Don’t you trust me, JP? I need to know if you trust me because what I’m doing is not for me; it’s for us, JP. For us! So, do you trust me to make it work for us?”

“Mum! We’re fine. We have no financial worries; Dad’s insurance took care of that. I’m happy as we are but I guess you have to live your life.”

“Be happy for me, JP. Please.”

JP smiled; Jeremy popped the question and she said yes; ring number six or was it seven, nice!

Jackson had received the next assignment. He was to remove Alan Batty, head night nurse at the Giant Pines care home. Apparently, eleven counts of inappropriate behaviour had been recorded and a decision taken by the consortium. Batty was on borrowed time and Jackson had been entrusted with the task of disposal. After all, Wilkins had been despatched nicely so Jackson had earned his spurs. Until he messed up, which he had no intention of doing, he was going to be first choice enforcer, champion of the grey berets. He would have to think about reviewing his rates; success would need to be rewarded!

Jackson hadn’t met Jeremy but that changed suddenly one evening when the latest suitor arrived at the house to collect his Mother.

“Hi, I’m Jeremy.”

“And, what can I do for you, sir?”

“I’ve come to pick up your Mother. Well, I presume Petra’s your Mother.”

“Oh, *that* Jeremy! Best come in. Mum”, JP called up the stairs.

It gave him the opportunity to read his temporary future stepfather and he was unconvinced the guy was right for his Mother, let alone for himself.

“What do you do then, Jeremy?” JP asked boldly.

“I’m chief administrator at the Giant Pines nursing home. It’s in Brompton, a few miles away. And you, JP isn’t it?”

“Student; current affairs!”

Jeremy appeared impressed but JP saw through him. Jeremy held out his hand which JP shook.

“It’s nice to meet you, JP and good luck with your course.”

“Thank you but I never depend on luck.”

Petra entered the room looking as good as JP had seen her in a long time; shame Jeremy would never get to tie the knot with her, JP thought.

It was six thirty in the morning when Alan Batty came out of the Giant Pines reception area and walked to his car. He was a burly man, five feet eleven JP guessed and not the sort one would idly mess with. He drove off and JP’s car followed at a discrete distance. JP noticed he hadn’t buckled up, silly man. Batty made one stop at a twenty four hour filling station and purchased what JP thought to be a bottle of red wine. His car travelled down the long hill with a sharp right hand bend at the bottom. Five minutes later, he pulled up outside an end of terrace house and was soon inside. JP noted the address and drove away.

At two o clock in the afternoon, JP watched as Batty left his home on foot and lumbered off towards the local pub. JP parked his car and entered the establishment, ordering a soft drink and finding a seat in a corner, where he could observe the target. Batty sank three pints of beer as he devoured ham, egg and chips with far too much ketchup before leaving for the return journey. JP noticed he didn’t appear to have any friends which, for JP, registered as a bonus.

He followed Batty’s car round the sharp left hand bend and up the long hill towards Giant Pines but turned off and parked for a few minutes; it was getting dark so he waited for cover of the night.

The information was always verbal; precise but verbal. This way, all bets were covered and there would never be a link to the man in the grey suit who commissioned JP. He was obviously related to one of those who had formed the PTA (Protect the Aged) but no names, no pack drill. JP was happy with the arrangement as was the PTA.

JP was at home watching TV with his Mum when Batty’s car left Giant Pines and gathered speed going down the long hill, missing the bend and smashing into a stone wall. Batty’s injuries could well have been less had he been wearing his seat belt. The fire service had to cut him from his vehicle; apparently his brakes had failed. He suffered two broken legs and a punctured lung as well as facial bruising as the air bag exploded into his face. He would be out of action for some time and, being a zero hours contracted employee, wouldn’t receive any benefits

from the care home. Times were going to be hard for him from here on in. A forensics report said the brake line had a hairline fracture and the fluid had escaped, leaving the brakes not functioning; just one of those things. The victim should have serviced his car; his fault alone.

“I hear one of your staff had a car accident. In a bad way!”

Jeremy was unimpressed. “It happens. No shortage of replacements”.

“That’s not really right is it, Jeremy?”

Petra kicked in. “JP, how do you know things like this?”

“Thing is, Mum. Jeremy’s not interested in an employee who’s lost his job through no fault of his own”.

“JP, Jeremy’s not like that”, she said looking at her new fiancé.

“It’s unfortunate but these things happen. I have a business to run”.

“Dad would never have thought that way, Mum. He’d have been the first person at the hospital. Think about it, Mum”, JP added.

Petra instantly pondered on what a fair and good person her husband had been. She missed him dreadfully. Jeremy was not the answer; none of them had been since he’d gone. Jackson had made her realise this important fact. He rammed it home.

“And, I hear charges of abuse and neglect are coming your way, Jeremy. Giant Pines will be history within weeks once the allegations go to the press, which they will soon. You’ll be out of a job, arrested and held to account on criminal charges relating to maltreatment of your paying customers. Not good on your CV, Jeremy”.

“JP, how do you know all this?” Petra asked.

“I study Mum. Jeremy knows too. Why not ask him and, while you’re at it, ask him if he still fancies being my step father.”

Petra had been blinded by the loss of her husband, thinking almost any man could replace him. JP had restored her clarity!

“He won’t be. Goodnight and goodbye, Jeremy”. Petra pulled the ring off her finger, tossed it to Jeremy and pointed to the door.

JP came down for breakfast smiling. Petra put bread in the toaster.

“Morning ,love. Thanks for last night. You made me see things as I should have been seeing them. You’re an angel, JP. Listen, I’m intrigued. You appear to know everything. What exactly is it you’re studying?”

“Life, Mum and learning the art of protecting it, one way or another. Simple as that really, no big deal.”

“Maybe not to you, JP but I’d be lost without you. So, no more engagements for a while.”

Petra smiled and planted a huge kiss on JP’s cheek.

“Not for you, Mum but Sally and I are going to, when I finish my studies”.

“Really! I’m so pleased for you both. She’s a gorgeous girl, JP and you are my beautiful, kind, harmless little treasure and always will be.”