

## Percival Swift

Mrs. Martha Anastasia Connelly passed away on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October. It was no less than three weeks from her 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday; not that there would have been many people at the party to celebrate. Mrs. Connelly was a loner. She had been ever since her husband Stanley had left her his fortune 25 years earlier.

She was a loner, but did not live alone. Some said that she had her own private circus in her mansion, but in reality it was just a bunch of pets to keep her occupied. The papers reported that at the time of her death, when the supermarket delivery boy found her body, she had a total of 13 animals; 3 dogs, 5 birds, a cat, a ferret, 2 monkeys, a potbellied pig, and not to mention a few tanks of tropical fish.

I am Richard (Ricky) Watson, her 4<sup>th</sup> cousin's nephew twice removed, and thusly nowhere near to being the heir of the Connelly fortune. However, three days ago I received the notice of her death. It was an oversized cream envelope with large embossed calligraphy lettering on the front. The inside was lined with red and revealed several pages with a law firm's letterhead on each that was at least six names long. The letter read that it was with deepest regrets that they had to inform me of blah blah Mrs. Connelly, blah a better place, blah de blah blah, please attend the execution of the will. A curious P.S. was tacked onto the bottom. It requested that if I had any knowledge of a Percival Langston Swift, I was to bring him with me. I knew no one by that name, so I ignored it.

I could only remember meeting the woman maybe once or twice in my life. I'm 35 so I'd say we were hardly even acquaintances. I'm even surprised that I still remember her at all.

I must have been only 11 or 12 on the day that my parents packed my sister and I into our rusted out Buick Skylark. Black scuffmarks and dents from wayward baseballs and Frisbees littered the faded plastic wood paneling of the car -- It was all we could afford at the time. Our parents told us we were going on a vacation to visit our auntie Martha. We were young, but not completely unaware; we knew the real reason for our impromptu trip. We were going to beg for money from a rich relative none of us had ever seen, let alone spoken to. I'm sure my parents had spent the last week justifying what they were doing as anything but begging, but that's really what it was. We needed things like a new car, and clothing, and food, and other necessities of our suburban lives.

The drive was a long one, but unlike any other we'd ever taken before. It was silent from start to finish. No music was played, no one asked if we were there yet, no one had to go to the bathroom, and both my sister and I kept our hands to our own sides of the car. It was a miracle of child rearing. My sister and I shared frightened looks every twenty minutes or so, her blue eyes shimmering under straight dark bangs that had been cut with the aid of a ruler. I remember staring out the window wondering if I would have to go live in an orphanage.

When we turned off of highway 83, the roads quickly went from straight flat pavement to rolling hills of colorfully green grass. We drove through small roads hedged on both sides by corn that was probably as high as an elephant's eye but no one got out to measure. The fields stretched out and faded into the distance seemingly without end.

We arrived at our destination sometime in the late afternoon just as the sun was beginning its plunge toward the horizon. As we started up the driveway, we were suddenly affronted by a huge wrought iron gate that must have been 15 feet tall. It

loomed in front of our car and cast a long shadow upon us creating a zebra of the automotive world. The bars were thick and black with sharp points at the top of each. The gate was covered with snaking ivy that seemed to curl outward towards the car, inviting us to come in and become entwined. Probably poison I thought to myself.

We stared at the enormous gate, still not saying anything. Each side peaked in the center where they met and sloped down to the sides to brick columns topped with white marble. On top of each marble column sat gruesome black granite gargoyles. Their wings were partly spread, indicating that they could fly off and attack at any second if the need arose. A snarl with many vicious looking teeth had been chiseled into the face of each guardian. Although the sky was cloudless, it felt as if the sun suddenly went behind a massive cloud never to come out again. I saw my sister shiver.

Our attention was abruptly shaken from the horrible statues by a distorted voice from a small speaker box on a pedestal to the left of our car.

“State your business,” it crackled. My father jumped at the sudden callous sound.

“We’re here to see Mr. and Mrs. Connelly.” His voice sounded like he was speaking through a straw. He coughed to clear his throat and repeated his answer.

“Are they expecting you?” The voice asked coldly.

“Yes,” My father replied directly. The voice didn’t respond. Instead, only static filtered through the metal screen of the box. My father turned to my mother, eyebrows raised. She hadn’t an answer for him, but before she could speak, a monstrous grinding sound came from the gate. The two sides opened slowly inward, creaking and protesting the whole way. Once they stopped, my father put the car into gear and we drove the rest of the way up the drive. We passed intricate fountains and neatly trimmed gardens. The

mansion came into view and dwarfed everything around it. We pulled into the crescent shaped driveway and were met by four butlers dressed in tuxedos with tails.

We parked behind two gleaming Rolls Royces, one was silver, the other gold, and each butler opened a door for us to get out. I could have done it myself, but didn't say so. My mother whispered a quiet thank you to which no one responded. The doors were shut and the four men fell into a single file formation.

"Walk this way," said the one in the lead over his nose. They walked stiffly into the house. I began to follow, exaggerating their movements better than Bugs Bunny could have. I was promptly swatted by both of my parents. Their eyes and scrunched lips told me to get in line behind my sister and if I didn't behave I'd be walking home. The four of us timidly entered the house. I thought we resembled a safari of hunters going into the depths of a vast jungle in search of the great white tiger.

The door we walked through was covered with engravings and had enormous knockers in the shapes of wolves' heads. I was thankful that we didn't have to touch them to get inside. Upon entering the main house, I was almost knocked backwards by the smell of fetid vegetables or possibly rotting diapers. I pinched my nose and tried not to pass out. Inside was much darker than outside and my eyes took a long time to adjust. I could hardly see my sister's dim outline, but managed to follow until my vision got better. When it did, I glanced about the gigantic entrance hall.

In front of our small party were two red velvet covered staircases that met at a landing and became one that came down towards us. Above I saw a crystal chandelier that must have been six feet wide. The stones glittered every so often when the light hit them just right. All around were huge paintings of forlorn and very serious looking

people. Most were men either holding or chomping on pipes, but a few were of sitting women wearing poofy dresses and holding fans.

My sister unexpectedly stopped walking and I crushed my nose into the small of her back. I recoiled, backpedaled and landed with a *thwump!* The sound echoed about the room. “Get up!” My mother whispered sternly. As I did, two very regal looking people approached us. They seemed to float over the polished wooden floor. Actually they only approached my parents. Once they neared our family line, the people whom I could only guess were Auntie Martha and Uncle Stanley took my father and mother aside, leaving my sister and I to wait for them. We watched them move to the other side of the enormous hall and strained our ears to hear the whispered tones. I could only catch intermittent words like, please and help, nothing of actual substance. But, my distant Aunt and Uncle’s faces could clearly be seen.

His was stern and like the gargoyles outside, immobile, but hers softened more and more as the words unraveled from my parents’ mouths. When my parents seemed to have said all they could think of, Martha and Stanley stepped away for a bit of a conference. Our father flashed the thumbs-up sign at my sister and I. The conference was short and Stanley and Martha approached my parents with outstretched arms. There was a bunch of hugging and handshaking, and then the four adults walked back over to us. The conversation had become the usual “Goodbye, we’ll call,” etc all the way back to the front door. Just before we left my parents suddenly remembered to introduce their children. Auntie Martha and Uncle Stanley seemed less than thrilled, but obligingly squeezed my sister’s cheeks and patted me on the head.

When we left that day I had no idea of the deal that had been made, but I soon found out. When my Father died ten years later, it suddenly became my overwhelming responsibility to pay back the enormous sum that had been borrowed, plus interest. I had actually been late in my payment the last couple of months so when I received the notice with all the lawyers' names on it I got nervous. My parents' agreement with the Connelly's had never been actually documented so the news of her death was enough to make me do a small dance of joy in my tiny overcrowded studio apartment.

I borrowed a car and made the trip back to the estate. As I drove the winding driveway, the gate suddenly presented itself. It looked exactly as I had remembered it, but now it had even more clambering ivy. This time though, the gate was already wide open and I drove right through. Numerous cars of all types were parked around the crescent driveway. I pulled in behind a red Toyota Camery and shut the engine down. This time no butlers stood awaiting my arrival. The gate had been open, but the front door was now shut. The horrible doorknockers now confronted me. They seemed to actually snarl in their frozen state. Gingerly I lifted one by the nose, imagining that it would bite my hand at any second. I brought it good and high so as not to have to touch it again, and then let it go. It hit the door with a *WHAP* that I could hear echo inside. I waited. Just as I thought I would have to lift the snarling wolf's head again, the door swung open. I was greeted not by a butler, but by a man in a three-piece suit; he was obviously one of the lawyers from the letterhead.

“Your name?” He asked inquisitively.

“Richard Watson,” I answered, waving my summons for clarity.

“Yes,” the man looked down his nose at me. “The others are waiting in the drawing room. You are the last to arrive.” *What’s new*, I thought to myself.

We walked swiftly through the entry hall that looked exactly as it had when I was a boy, save for a lot more dust. I nodded to the portraits as we walked past. The squawks of bids could be heard from somewhere off in the bowels of the house. The lawyer who never introduced himself led me through a carpeted hall and to a set of large double doors. He thrust them open, to reveal a large meeting room with a solid dark mahogany table in the middle that had to have been at least fifteen feet long. Bookshelves lined the walls with relics that had to be centuries old. I bet myself that several first editions of my favorite novels were hidden among those stacks. People of varying ages sat around the table and their attention was suddenly focused on me. A horrible silence hung in the room. Even the children playing on the floor were frozen in mid tussle. The cat they had trapped between them however had its chance for escape and scampered off. My face began to flush and my mouth dried instantly. I tried to speak, to say hi, or even my name, but the only sound was of my flapping jaw.

Fortunately another man in a three-piece suit sitting at the head of the table, possibly the lawyer with his name first on the letterhead, said, “Come in already, we haven’t all day.” An empty seat at the far end of the table was pointed out to me and I hurried to it. I could feel each and every eye in the room slithering about on my skin. I sat and the attention returned to the head lawyer who seemed to begin again. He introduced himself as Reginald Ware, head of Ware, Shylock, Crick, Stein, Oswald, and Johnson, the firm that represented the Connelly estate. We explained that we were all called here to settle the last will and testament of Mrs. Martha...

At about this point I began to lose interest and my attention wandered. I figured that if they needed me someone would say my name or something else to get my direct attention. My eyes scanned the bookshelves for titles such as *Treasure Island*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Secret Garden*. I saw nothing of the sort though; only leather bound books on things like parliament and 18<sup>th</sup> editions of Gray's anatomy. All at once I was alarmed to find something rubbing at my leg. I thought perhaps it was one of the children I had seen playing on the floor when I entered, but when I looked to investigate, I established that it was a small Siamese cat who was using my calf as a scratching post for its face. Its pointed face looked up at me with brilliant blue eyes and uttered a small *mew*, then continued to rub the rest of its body on my leg. Apparently this cat was a bit attention starved. I slowly lowered my hands so that it could smell me. Cautiously it darted its masked face all around my fingers until it felt it had a good sense of me, and then rammed the top of its head against my outstretched fingers. I stroked its long body and admired its sheen. I carefully picked up the little guy and placed him on my lap. The gold tags around his neck jingled softly as I sat him between my legs on the leather chair. I watched him deftly curl his dark tail around his body then felt as his internal motor began to turn. Stroking the cat in my leather chair gave me the feeling of being some sort of evil nemesis to James bond, and I chuckled a bit.

The head lawyer brought his fist down on the table with a large *bang!* My new friend scuttled back under the table but stopped only a few feet from me and began to wash its ears. I wasn't quite sure why the lawyer had slammed his fist on the table, but it had created pandemonium among the guests. The din soon became unbearable and it took all six lawyers to quiet the room.

“People please,” Mr. Ware pleaded. “That is all it says. We are as confused as the rest of you.” I leaned over to a man to my right and asked what all the fuss was about. He scoffed at my impudent question but said, “the will leaves *everything* to Percival Swift.”

“Oh,” I replied. “Then where is he?” The man looked at me like I had just asked the teacher a question that had just been explained thoroughly.

“That’s the problem, no one has ever heard of him.”

“That sucks.” Was all I could think to say. The man oozed back to his original position. People were now standing and shouting again, and no effort of the lawyers could quiet them. I glanced about, to see if I could find my friend. I did and was dismayed to see that one of the children; a small girl in a white dress with a flower pattern on it had him by the top half and was swinging him back and forth. I ran to his aid and snatched the feline from its ghastly position. The girl bust into tears and the room fell silent. Once again all eyes were on me. The cat let out another small sound as if to explain. However, the girl’s cries drowned it out. A woman who could only have been the girl’s mother stampeded out of the crowd and grabbed her daughter by the wrist. She dragged the girl over to me and thrust the child’s arm at me while she reprimanded.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Well, I...” I started. The whole room seemed to lean in.

“Yes?” The mother said, digging her fists into her ribs along with the girl’s limp hand.

“You see, she was torturing this cat,” I held out my friend to illustrate. No one seemed to care. They all must have been dog people.

“People please,” the Mr. Ware attempted to regain control of the room. “We haven’t any more answers than we did before we all gathered here. I am going to suggest that you all go home and if the heir is not found within say, a month, something will have to be done. Of course my firm will have to check the books on what happens to unclaimed fortunes,” A wry smile formed on his lips, “but rest assured we are on top of things.”

Hands smacked foreheads around the room and people milled in circles because they didn’t know what else to do. I made my way to the front and attempted to talk to Mr. Ware. “Excuse me,” I tried. The lawyer had sunk back into his seat and was tapping his fingers together rhythmically. “Excuse me,” I said louder. This time he looked up at me.

“Yes, Mr. Child Molester I presume?”

“No, Watson,” I said and stuck out a hand from under the cat. Ware looked at it disdainfully and lightly shook the tip of my index finger.

“What may do for you, a mister, Watson?”

“I was just wondering what happens to the animals?”

He quickly rifled through the mountain of paper in front of him and answered, “The will makes no mention of the animals, they will probably be sent to a shelter later this week. Why?” He asked.

“Well, if it isn’t breaking any laws, I’d like to take this animal home with me.” The man sighed and glanced around the room as if he were about to make some sort of dirty exchange. His head lowered and he motioned for me to do the same.

“Alright,” he said, “but I could get fired for this.” Then he broke out into laughter. Some small tears rose at the corners of his eyes then were instantly absorbed again.

Happy enough with that answer, I turned to leave but was met with a sharp pain in my left shin. It was painful enough that I almost dropped the cat to grab at my attacker. It was the little girl in flowered dress. She had her mother by the hand and was screaming again. “Mommy, I saw him first!” The woman was unresponsive for she was caught in a very close conversation with the lawyer who had brought me in. She licked her lips and adjusted a strand of hair behind her ear. He swallowed hard. “MOMMY!” The girl brayed and tugged at her mother’s pantsuit.

The woman bent to her imp and snapped, “What is it now? Mummy is busy!”

“I saw him first!” She caterwauled.

“Whom are you talking about?” The mother was growing impatient and turned whom into two long syllables. The little monster pointed to my cat. “Percy!” The room froze again. This time all eyes were not on me, but on the outstretched finger of the child. A few seconds of silence followed as gazes followed the path of the tiny finger to my Siamese friend. Another small eruption from his tiny mouth broke the silence and I swear I could hear beads of sweat form on Mr. Ware’s brow.