

A black and white photograph showing a tent pitched on a boat or a small pier on a body of water. The scene is framed by dark, silhouetted trees in the foreground. The water is calm, and the overall atmosphere is quiet and somewhat somber.

M e t e r M a n  
a s h o r t s t o r y

J u l i e t M c H u g h

# Meter Man

**A rainy day, a retired man, his spend-thrift wife and a gas meter. What's the worst that could happen? He gives his account in his own words.**

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If it hadn't rained, I would never have done it. Had there been sun, my mood would have shone, sparkling and incandescent as the celestial orb itself. Instead it rained like the great deluge of the Old Testament and my spirits were as black and lack-lustre as the clouds above. All day it was torrential, hammering off the roof and streaking the windows with whatever filth and grime it brought down from the atmosphere with it to share with us on earth. It wasn't chilly as such, but it wasn't warm. It was a typical British late summer day in fact. My wife complained she was cold and turned the thermostat up.

"Why don't you just put on a jumper?" I enquired. "Lord knows you have enough of them. Half a wardrobe of jumpers and that's not to mention the cardigans." Her jaw slackened and dropped. "It's coming into autumn now; you can't expect to swan around in summer dresses with impunity." The dress she wore was sleeveless, cotton and thin as though she were fresh off a flight to Spain or the south of France. No doubt she'd demand that at some point in the near future. My private pension is good, but it only stretches so far, especially with a wife accustomed to the finer things in life and unwilling to curtail her fancies. I have always known it wasn't me she married. It was the good money and satisfactory lifestyle. Not lavish as such, but very comfortable. A detached house with an ample garden, a fancy car, the best of food and wine and enough to send her on holiday two or three times a year without me. More than her parents had and that, to her, was the mark of success.

She stood up, glaring, and stormed upstairs, her arms folded tightly across her chest, a scowl on her face to rival a petulant child freshly scolded. I started the countdown in my head the second she left the room. There was hardly any need. The stamp of her feet on each step counted the seconds down just as clearly. As soon as I heard the bedroom door slam shut behind her, I got up. Giving it ten seconds for her to turn around and come screaming back down the stairs at me and confident that the turnaround window had passed, I went noiselessly into the hall and turned the heating down. The TV in the bedroom blared into life, hopped from channel to channel then settled. Soap operas again. Maybe I should have told her that once upon a time they would have been described as melodramas. It would have put her off for certain. She did so hate being referred to as melodramatic, not that I'd ever done so myself but I

had witnessed the rage and mortification when her sister had. She watched every single one of those soap opera things whenever she could and always had the volume turned up far beyond reasonable. She wasn't deaf or even approaching it, and I knew from a basic understanding of people that she did it to avoid conversing. She had it turned up loud enough this time to require an entertainments licence for the street. She wanted me to react, so I ignored it and picked up the paper.

I skimmed through the local news and as usual nothing much was happening. The paper these days is mostly advertising and most of that from estate agents. You can still draw conclusions from that, of course. A town where properties are always for sale is a town where people are quite well off. You can go a bit further and say that the number of smaller or low grade properties for sale means that people are moving up in the world. Of course they might be bailing out and looking for a cheaper rental, but that's unlikely. The recession, despite its double dip, isn't biting too hard in my little part of the country.

Across town some hoodlum had smashed a car window and stolen a handbag, a phone and some perfume. I would think the perfume an odd thing to steal were I not only too aware of just how much money my wife put across the fine fragrance counters. She couldn't, of course then use it sparingly. Instead every day, no matter what, she reeked like a tart's boudoir. The handbags too were constantly swelling in number. Perhaps she saw them as tangible assets. She couldn't leave the money in the bank at any rate and I mean at any rate. If interest had been high, she would have spent that too on the ever increasing store of accessories. Sometimes I wondered if she thought they wouldn't depreciate. Maybe she thought she could sell a used handbag or a half used bottle of perfume for a profit. Some distorted concept of inflation that would be. I haven't even dared contemplate the shoes, makeup, costume jewellery, wardrobe, her 'investments in herself'.

If we'd had children I have no doubt they would have been over indulged and probably not long out of the parental home if not still here thriving like parasites on all I'd worked to achieve. Children simply didn't happen for whatever reason. It's something we never talked about. Perhaps it was in her head that since there was no one to leave it to when we were gone, she might as well spend it all now. She never stopped to think what would happen if I were to go first.

As if she'd heard my disparaging and somewhat despairing thoughts of her, in she came, via the thermostat. I heard the central heating instantly fire up again. She

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had evidently decided to abandon her beloved soap operas for the sake of making a point. She thumped herself down in the armchair, arms still folded, frown still in place, legs out in front of her and crossed at the ankle. If she'd ever wanted to earn a bit of her own money, which she most certainly never did, she could have offered master classes in how to adopt postures of closed body language. This was meant to elicit an apology from me.

Instead I stood up without speaking, put down the paper without a sound, went noiselessly into the hall, put on my rain jacket and went to the pub. On my way down the drive, I paused by the gas meter and took the reading. I was willing to wager that by the time I returned, it would have ticked round several units. I meant to then illustrate to her the cost of half a wardrobe of unworn woollens. Perhaps if I put it in terms of what she couldn't have because she refused to dress appropriately for the time of year, I might make some progress, if only temporary.

I drank a few pints of good ale and ate a passable pie and peas. If she argued this later I would tell her we couldn't afford gas to both cook and heat the house before the winter. Some acquaintances of mine invited me to play a game of darts and I joined them for an hour or two. I don't think I need to explain what I imagined on the board as I threw the darts. Someone asked after my wife and I gave the standard answer of very well. I didn't say to bloody well, bleeding me dry and incapable of common sense. I didn't say she's growing fat on the blood she sucks from me daily. I didn't say she's still my wife because I still have an income but that could change at any moment.

It's probably true that I never said or did enough to curtail her inconsiderate habits. It's probably true that until I retired, I'd never really noticed. I worked hard to keep her in the manner to which she only too easily became accustomed and I was at the office seven days a week. Perhaps she resented my being there every day now as much as I resented her draining my funds as fast as they came in. She might have hated me as much as I hated her. None of these people who lived around us and met up with us all over town had any idea that beneath the veneer of contented life, there was a deep and unstoppable rot at work.

When I arrived home, I checked the meter reading and sure enough, exactly as I'd predicted, it had ticked round five whole units. It was time to make her look at how she haemorrhaged money on a twenty-four hour a day basis. I knew I had to seem to have backed down. I called her outside in such a congenial manner she'd

think I'd chanced upon some delightful curiosity. She appeared at the door, and she actually had on a cardigan from her vast collection. I tried not to look pleased or let it show that I'd even noticed. She'd evidently calmed down as well - she no longer frowned and her arms were not folded but she wasn't coming outside. I said "No, come here, look closely." She stooped as she walked to lower her eyes to the meter and just as I was about to launch into my sermon, she slipped on the wet ground and fell face first onto the meter cabinet. At first I thought she was knocked out. When I couldn't revive her, I realised she was dead.

The meter bore a bloodstain where it had broken her nose and driven the bone through her frontal lobe. From what I know of these things, I think she died instantly and wouldn't have known a thing about it.

Now, no-one could see what happened, no-one knew from me about the unpleasantness earlier in the evening and still I felt certain no-one would believe it was an accident. You may have noticed, if you're reading this, that I have only spoken of my wife in the past tense. Now you know why that is and would you believe I hadn't wanted her gone?

I paused. I just looked at her where she lay. I felt nothing, which I admit surprised me somewhat. After more than forty years of marriage, you would think I'd feel at least a tinge of remorse or regret, but I didn't. I still don't. For the best part of those forty years, I had barely seen my wife only to discover when I retired that the person I'd married was long gone and had been usurped by a selfish, foul-tempered spending machine. Had it been my fault? I didn't think so. On the rare occasion that I hadn't gone to the office, either through illness or a will to not spend all of my life in that place, she would tell me to think about the money I would lose and all but drag me there herself. If anything, she had driven me out of my home so that she could have all of the 'tangible assets' she desired. She might have had other men - I would never have known. As far as I can tell, I was cuckolded only by money.

I had to come up with a plan that didn't involve an ambulance, the police, or any detailed explanations. I live near enough the river that it was easy to dispose of the body. I had to, you see. I had no doubt at all in my mind that she would have telephoned her sister immediately I was out of the house and blowing all things out of proportion told her about our differences. I would tell the sister I thought she was staying there on account of her sulk. That I'd come home to find her gone and no note so I'd naturally assumed she was trying to teach me a lesson. Whatever

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happened I had to maintain the appearance that she had simply gone away for a time. I am clearly not distraught, but shock does funny things to a man, does it not? The river would carry her remains far enough away that by the time of discovery, it should be difficult to identify who it was let alone what had happened. Gathering up her body and disposing of it was more than decided.

Then I had to deal with the minor matter of the meter. Someone would be along soon enough to notice it. There was blood and there was a slight dint in the casing. She must have fallen pretty hard to cause that, but as I'd checked it on my way out earlier, I knew there's been no damage until now. It was probably easy enough to explain away. I could have said she'd done it on her way out to wherever she'd gone. In a macabre way that was true. It would be another story that I had to maintain and the more stories I added, the more likely that someone would catch me out. I decided it would be far more expedient to remove the thing altogether.

In the dead of night, I went out with a crowbar and wrenched the thing from the wall. I was quite pleased with my forethought of placing layers of camping mattress below it so there was barely a sound and if you'd heard it, you would not have imagined it was a gas meter falling from a height. The camping mattresses were another purchase of my wife's that I had never understood. We had never been and never would have gone camping. It lacked the facilities she required. I can only imagine they were a bargain. That was another thing she simply could not compute. A bargain is only a bargain if it is of some value to you after you've paid. I suppose it's a moot point now since they have proved very useful. The meter had to come off and I had to remove it as silently as possible. You see, I know bleach doesn't destroy blood evidence, so I had to get rid of the contraption completely. I did so eventually and it turns out with somewhat more difficulty than the body of my late wife.

She fit quite neatly in the boot of the car once rigor mortis had worn off. I folded her into the foetal position, a blanket pulled over her just in case anyone should see. The meter fit in nicely behind her bended knees. Of course, starting the engine and driving out of the street at this hour might attract some unwanted attention, but I could always say I was going to look for her and returning soon afterward that I'd changed my mind and decided to let her stew. As it happened, not a curtain twitched as I pulled off the drive and drove down to the main road.

The way down to the river was deserted as I'd thought it would be. The onset of cooler nights and the rain still clinging to the ground and undergrowth had done

their best to dissuade night fishing enthusiasts and dog walkers alike. I turned off the headlights as I neared the unpopulated area all the same and stayed clear of the main routes to the waterside.

Circumnavigating in this way paid off more nicely than I would have imagined. As fortune would have it, turning a corner I'd never seen before and am unlikely to again, I encountered an abandoned car on wheel arch deep in long grass at the side of the road. It had obviously been there a while and neither reclaimed nor impounded. I pulled over and waited a little while. There was no sign of movement from any direction, either animal vegetable or mineral. I got out of my car and checked the abandoned wreck. A shove at the metal carcass told me the tank was full, the hollow sloshing sound quite clear in the surrounding silence. The doors were unlocked. Whoever had left it here had clearly not anticipated it being driven away. I bet they'd not anticipated my intentions either. The meter fit perfectly inside and setting the fire was the simplest part of the whole affair. I made sure the blaze was well under way before I drove off. If it burned itself out before it had completely destroyed the meter, it would still have already destroyed the blood evidence and any identifying or incriminating features.

A little further down the road, I found a small boat moored. It was the perfect size for one man to manage even with a dead weight in the bottom and it had a small roof-like canopy stretched over one end. There could have been no more perfect discovery. I didn't row out far enough to be seen from either shore and kept in the shadows from the bank. I only needed to be far enough away from the edge to make sure the body was caught in the full current and carried as far downriver as possible. Already I was referring to it as the body. It had never occurred to me until then just how I'd come to regard my wife as a thing and not the woman I married. I was not going to take the risk now of it becoming entangled in plant growth from the embankment and discovered such a short distance from the burnt out car. I managed to manoeuvre it over the side and into the water with more of a satisfying plop than a splash and seated myself to watch it. It was tugged into the flow of the river and sank as the water no doubt filled up the lungs and whatever else it could find. Eventually, the tiny bubbles were too far off to be seen. I resisted the urge to shout out "See how cold you feel now!" Sound carries on the river at night and I might have been heard. I rowed as quietly as possible back to shore feeling a glorious sense of relief and



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moored the boat exactly as I'd found it. No-one would ever know it had been taken out.

The drive home was far less tense than the drive out. I still didn't engage the headlights until I reached those roads where I was more likely to encounter someone. But that was it. Done and dusted. I got home and no-one stirred. The advantage of a high-end virtually silent car; something else my wife had insisted upon. Perhaps she wasn't always wrong.

It wasn't until the meter reader called this morning that the missing unit became an issue. I said "Well it was there yesterday". There was quite a hoo-ha about it. The police were called and all the neighbours now know about it. Some called the paper and now the bally things in the papers. I've taken the time since they all went away at last to write it all down so that should anything happen to me, unless of course I get caught, the story is straight. If my wife ever surfaces, quite literally, the game may be up. However, in the meantime, the heat, in more ways than one, is off.