**Henry**

Jez Patterson

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Jez Patterson’s fiction often exudes an air of nostalgia, or takes ordinary world settings and makes them a little less ordinary in unusual ways - like the sort of small British communities that always keep calm and carry on, no matter what unexpected thing might crop up today. Or every day.

If you worked at the bank’s Head Office, then large financial transactions were what gave variety to your life. If you worked in a town branch—behind glass and with a smile you practised until it sat instinctively and didn’t make your jaw ache by the end of the day—then you looked to your customers to break the monotony.

The glass only saved you from bullets.

“Here she comes, Bala. Your number one fan.” Darshan’s aftershave enveloped her. *Why did boys always think they had to apply it like elephant musk?* Bala’s nose ran at the assault, and she picked up a wad of paying-in slips to waft it aside.

The customer already waiting before her window coughed.

“Gives me the creeps,” Darshan added behind her, oblivious.

“Yes, madam? How may I help you?” Bala asked the customer. Then, out the side of her mouth, “Haven’t you got mortgages to foreclose on, Darshan?”

“Be careful, Bala. ‘Fan’ comes from *fanatic*. Look for the twitch in one eye, always gives them away.” Darshan left her to do her job, or to irritate another cashier. The junior managers all thought they were the cat’s whiskers or the dog’s bollocks.

*More like the horse’s arse*, Bala thought.

Mrs Jacobson was strange, admittedly, but she was harmless. At least that was what Bala kept telling herself every day the woman came into the bank and began her game in the queue—letting others go before her, begging others to let her go in front. All so she could end up at Bala’s window at precisely 10.17am.

Not just thereabouts—but *precisely.*

Like today.

“I’d like to withdraw one hundred and fifty pounds, please.”

“Certainly, madam. How would you like that?”

If Bala said anything else, asked anything, deviated from the set script in any way, Mrs Jacobson wouldn’t respond. Well, that wasn’t strictly true. One time, back when all this had started, the woman had said, “No, no, no. That’s not what you’re supposed to say. You say ‘Certainly, madam, how would you like that?’ That’s what you say. You mustn’t ever change it.” And after a worried, shaky nod, Bala had repeated the fed line.

Since then, the only problems had been with others in the queue not cooperating with Mrs Jacobson’s nerve-wracking 10.17 game. She always dressed the same, always asked for it in tens (their other scripted exchange), and left without taking a receipt or acknowledging anyone else in the bank.

But that wasn’t the strangest part.

The strangest part that was every afternoon she came back to deposit the hundred and fifty. And on those occasions, it was as if an entirely different Mrs Jacobson had walked in.

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“Maybe she just gets her fix of meds for lunch and they sort her out,” Darshan said, returning to the favourite theme of Mrs Jacobson during their lunch break. “Imagine if she didn’t get them? *Hnn, Hnn, Hnn.”* He made the *Psycho* violin sound as he stabbed the air with his fork.

“Right…” Bala said.

“She’s got an obsessive compulsive disorder,” Yasmin decided. “My aunt had it. Always washing her hands and checking doors were locked. She had to wear gloves in the end.”

“What did you do about the doors?”

“Dunno. Don’t remember. She lives in Wolverhampton.” As if this was an explanation. Or another part of her condition.

“I thought about that,” Bala said. “But why does Mrs Jacobson only do it for certain things? And why only in the mornings?”

“My aunt didn’t give two hoots about washing her hair,” Yasmin said. “*Auntie Nits* we called her behind her back.”

Bala shrugged and went back to her sandwich.

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The day of Mrs Jacobson’s own gloves changed everything.

It was an otherwise normal day, the hundred and fifty in tens had been withdrawn, bagged, and Mrs Jacobson had just walked out the bank when a customer Yasmin had just served stooped and picked something up off the floor.

“Here. I think someone must have dropped them.”

He placed the small, creased, black leather gloves on Bala’s counter.

“Thank you, I… erm…” The idea happened in an instant. Curiosity and not benevolence behind it. “Mrs Sang, a customer has left their gloves behind.” Her boss’s face said, *‘So what?*’ and so Bala added, “It was Mrs Jacobson. I could catch her. She’s only just left.”

Mrs Sang liked rules because they ensured a smooth running of her bank. The likes of Mrs Jacobson could upset that over something as tiny as missing gloves.

“Okay. Go catch her. But be quick.”

“Thank you.”

Bala raced round, snatched up the gloves, hurriedly apologised to customers as she moved through them, and was out the doors.

There. Down the street. Walking like the world was trying to rain on her but she had come greased in advance. Bala ran.

“Mrs Jacobson! Mrs Jacobson!” Bala wasn’t shouting, but the urgency and her diction were clear. The woman didn’t turn around and Bala knew from the tensing of Mrs Jacobson’s shoulders she was being deliberately ignored.

Bala had had enough. She jogged up until she could hold the gloves directly under Mrs Jacobson’s nose.

“You dropped these in the bank, Mrs Jacobson. Your gloves.”

The woman’s face was like a child’s: pursing its lips to prevent a fork of greens being steered into it. Bala stepped in to block the woman’s path.

“Woah!” she said as Mrs Jacobson seemed intent on barging into her. She had youth on her side though, and for all her belligerence it seemed Mrs Jacobson had her limits.

“Oh, no! I was doing so well today! So, *so* well. Today might have been the day it worked. Now… Oh, they’re just gloves! Just a pair of silly gloves. They don’t matter.” But Mrs Jacobson took them, stuffed them into her bag, sighed heavily.

“I’m sorry if I’ve done something wrong. I just thought…”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. The day’s wasted now. Shot to pieces.” Then Mrs Jacobson’s eyes brightened, looked up into Bala’s, and suddenly it was the afternoon-Mrs Jacobson standing before her. “I’m so sorry, my dear. You must think I’m quite mad. It’s not your fault. The gloves! It’s my own fault: it was me who left them behind, so that ruined things anyway.”

“Er… ruined what?” The question was out before Bala remembered the golden rule, of not asking any customer anything beyond what they wanted the bank to do with their money. Not to respect their privacy, but because if you did you might never get onto the next customer. She felt the pull of her chair, the queue, Mrs Sang’s tight-lipped impatience behind her.

“The constants. The variables. Making the variables constants. If I can just get everything to happen exactly the way it did on that day, then I can make it happen again. That’s how it works. I read all about it. It’s how you get an experiment to repeat the same result. It’s like following a recipe and having the cake turn out exactly as the previous time. But there’re so many variables you don’t consider the first time around. The temperature of the milk, how long you beat the eggs, the brand of sugar, flour, butter.”

“This is why you come to the bank and always do everything exactly the same?” Bala asked, burning the rule now, intrigue having its head once again.

“Uh-huh. I get up, eat the same breakfast, wear the same clothes. Oh, don’t worry, I clean them—I’m not that far gone. The same walk into town with the exact same route. First the bank. Then I buy the paper—Mr Hadik is very obliging, even though he must think I’m as mad as you do. Then a walk through the park, back home, and a video of *Singing In The Rain*. I must have watched it two hundred times by now. At least I get the weekends off—the bank’s closed then.”

“You don’t have the same routines in the afternoon though…”

“No. It’s happened by then, you see. Well, it *will* happen when I get the details exactly right. Henry comes calling at my door and asks to come in. Only this time, *this* time I say yes and let him in.”

This last bit threw Bala. She’d been following the strange logic of the explanation up until then, helped by remembering Yasmin’s aunt and the hand washing and the doors. There was always reason behind every action, even if it wasn’t logically attached.

“Henry?” she asked.

“My late husband.”

*You had to ask*, Bala thought.

“He came to the door once before, you see. While I was watching *Singing In The Rain*. But I was scared, seeing him there again. I mean, he was dead. Or I thought he was. I was scared and so I didn’t let him in. I was stupid, weak. Scared.” The repetition of this word was one Bala could suddenly appreciate. “But it showed me miracles *can* happen. When the conditions are right. So then I knew what I had to do: repeat them all, absolutely perfectly, for the miracle to happen again.”

Bala found she had nothing to say, tried a shaky smile.

“Thank you, my dear. I knew I could count on your cooperation.”

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Bala returned to work knowing she’d been coerced into performing a ritual she hadn’t agreed to. Everyone was entitled to their own madness. What wasn’t fair was roping others into the act.

She told no one about the conversation with Mrs Jacobson. She couldn’t think how she could relate it without it sounding, well, exactly like it was.

The next morning Mrs Jacobson came in as if it hadn’t happened and Bala played along because she was expected to keep things running smoothly, the way Mrs Sang liked them.

That perception changed when she did an internet search for *Henry Jacobson* and discovered another reason why Mrs Jacobson might have been scared to see him on her doorstep. One the woman hadn’t mentioned when they’d talked. And it wasn’t because Henry had somehow risen from the dead. It was because of the things Henry had done when alive.

Bad things.

Horrible things.

Things that could have accounted for an entire queueful of mad victims, not just his poor wife. If the others had lived long enough to come to the bank and tell their side of the story.

The newspapers knew all these things because he had been arrested, convicted, sentenced to life imprisonment—which had amounted to fourteen days before he’d hung himself in his cell. His widow had moved here, kept quiet about her past for obvious reasons.

Mrs Jacobson undoubtedly needed help, but not in any endeavour to bring Henry back.

But it was the woman’s crusade that disturbed Bala more than anything she’d read in the articles. Not because Mrs Jacobson was a broken survivor of atrocities all of Henry’s other victims hadn’t survived to relate. Not that at all. It was the terrible, insane thought that *Mrs Jacobson’s mad plan might actually work*. That the thing that had knocked on her door would be successfully invited back in. Back, that was, from where it had deservedly been sent.

Mrs Sang wouldn’t let her change windows, Bala knew. Not without good reason. And a transfer to another department, another bank, was a long way off yet.

*Variables*, Bala thought.

If everything had to be like it was that day, then she could spoil the broth. Not by deviating from the script, because Mrs Jacobson would see that. But by turning one of the tens the wrong way around, by counting from a different corner of the notes, by passing them over with her left hand and not her right. Doing things under the counter she hadn’t done that day that Mrs Jacobson was trying to recreate.

Obsessively, compulsively different, each and every time.

After all, *someone* had to stop Henry.

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