

The Charity Thieves

A Novel

By

Robert Cubitt

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One - The Petulant Pop Princess

“I don’t care. I am not going to be filmed holding a freakin’ ugly baby.” Cherry Versace-Laboutin shrieked at Lionel, the location producer. “You either get me a freakin’ better looking baby or I’m going back to the freakin’ hotel.”

“Andy, love, can you have a word. There must be a better-looking baby somewhere in this godforsaken hole.”

“I’ll see what I can do Lionel. Hold on for a moment. Perhaps it would be best if we got everyone out of the heat for a few minutes.”

“Good idea. Can everyone go back to the cars please and wait in the cool. Thank you all.” The small crowd shuffled off towards the fleet of air-conditioned SUVs that stood just out of camera shot.

I turned to Jacob, my interpreter. “I’m afraid there’s a bit of a problem with the baby they’ve chosen. We need to get a different one.”

“The baby is the grandson of the village headman. He’ll be offended if we don’t use him.”

“Ah, I see the problem. Perhaps he has a granddaughter we could use instead?”

Jacob turned to the representative of the villagers and entered into a lengthy conversation. I glanced over to the cars in which the producer, the film crew, Cherry Versace-Laboutin, and her entourage were now sitting. A trickle of sweat ran down the back of my neck and I hated them with my whole being. The whole shoot had been one problem after another, and Cherry Versace-Laboutin was the root cause of them all.

Jacob and the man walked towards one of the huts and stooped to go inside. That looked promising, unless they had just gone to get out of the heat as well. I was left on my own in the middle of the narrow, filth strewn street. A small group of boys gathered round me, staring up, hopeful of some sweets. I was known to be the custodian of the sweets. I obliged by handing out the remainder of the sticky objects that I had in my shoulder bag. I felt a small pang of guilt about what I might be doing to their teeth, especially as we were so far from a dentist.

It seemed like an age before Jacob and the man came back out of the hut accompanied, I was pleased to see, by a woman carrying a child of about two years of age. The child was naked but for a disposable nappy.

“This is the headman’s great niece. He will accept her being in the film providing his grandson is also in it.” Jacob reported. “He can be shown playing, perhaps.”

“Well done Jacob. Thanks. Look, the disposable nappy will have to go. Can you see if you can find something that looks a bit less “Rich West” and a bit more ‘Poor Africa’.” I left him to deal with that while I walked over to Lionel’s SUV and he lowered the window.

“I think I have a compromise. A rather pretty little girl, as long as we also film the boy. He doesn’t have to be in the final cut of course, just a few seconds of filming with him playing in the muck to keep the village headman happy.”

“OK, I think I can get Cherry to buy into that.” Lionel opened the car door and sauntered over to Cherry’s SUV and held a lengthy conversation. His body language suggested that he was having to do a lot of persuading. That didn’t surprise me, everything that involved

Cherry always involved a lot of persuasion, or arse licking as I preferred to call it. She hadn't even seen the child yet.

An agreement must have been reached, because Lionel roused the film crew from their air-conditioned comfort and they started to set up the shot using the child's mother as a stand-in for Cherry, who remained resolutely inside her car. With everything in position Cherry's presence was finally requested.

We waited a full twenty minutes as Cherry's make-up artist repaired the damage that had already been done by the heat. It was painstaking work, trying to make it look like Cherry wasn't wearing any make-up when she was in fact slathered in the stuff. Natural is a hard look to get right, especially with someone who normally wears more make-up than a Japanese geisha.

At last Cherry left the SUV and stomped over to take her place in front of the camera. Without looking at the mother she held her arms out to take the child, who was now wearing a torn and oversized tee shirt with a Manchester United logo. I sighed. It just wouldn't be a charitable appeal if there was no child in a Man U tee shirt.

The mother slid out of shot and Lionel held the clapper board up in front of the camera. "Action."

A smile lit up Cherry's face and she started to recite her lines.

"Hi, I'm Cherry Versace-Laboutin and I'm here in this African village to ask you to pledge just ten pounds to help children like this." She raised the child and turned her so that the camera could capture the little girl's toothy smile. "Little Angelica here" Where had she got that name? The child had an unpronounceable Tutsi name. "has nowhere to play but in the filth of this street." She paused and turned to indicate the narrow alley with the open sewer running down the middle of it.

Turning back to face the camera she continued her lines and completed them, blessedly, in a single take. As soon as Lionel shouted 'cut' the smile vanished from her face. Thrusting the child back into its mother's arms she stalked off back to her SUV, which immediately whisked her away towards the city. Lionel and the crew took some background shots of the running gutters, including the promised footage of the grandson, before packing the gear away and also returning to the city.

Jacob and I were the last to leave, after shaking the hands of the villagers and watching them get into their pick-up trucks to go back to the new, modern bungalows that they really lived in, just over two kilometres away. This run-down village had been their previous home, but thanks to MOF and other charities they had been able to move into more salubrious dwellings.

As our own SUV whipped up a cloud of dust in the rear-view mirror, I spared a glance back towards the abandoned huts which the weeds and scrub were already starting to reclaim.

That is how a charity fund raising film appeal is made. After dealing with Cherry the next most difficult task was getting the villagers to dress down. People won't pay money to a charity where the 'poor' look better dressed than they are themselves. Getting the women to take off their jewellery had been a major sticking point and had drastically increased the shoot's budget in 'compensation' payments.

Now I'm not knocking charity appeals. I work for a charity and without the money that is raised, an awful lot of people would starve, or die of disease, or go blind or, well you get the

picture. The problem is that the places where the money is actually being spent are often hard to get to. Some of them are hundreds of miles from the nearest hotel, let alone airport. It had been hard enough getting Cherry Versace-Laboutin out of her five-star suite without having to take her five hundred miles through the bush before we could even start filming.

So, we cheat a little.

Yes, it came as a bit of a surprise to me as well.

Two - The Elegant Executive

Perhaps I had better start at the beginning. Well what counts as the beginning of my involvement with this project, at least.

My name is Andy Mirren, I'm twenty seven years old, born in Essex to Scottish parents. I went to my local comprehensive school, attended a university not far from my home and graduated with a 2.2 in Humanitarian Studies. I had always wanted to work with a charity so I applied for suitable posts. After a couple of years of temping, I eventually got a place with the Moses Odama Foundation, hereafter referred to as MOF or simply 'the charity'. You probably haven't heard of us by that name, but we're actually the outfit behind the annual 'Cuddly Toy Day' telethon that takes place every July. I don't know why I'm telling you that because you must know about it. It's the biggest fund raiser on the planet, well maybe the third biggest. Not to be confused, of course, with other similar telethons.

The MOF was named after a boy that the charity's founder, Jim Sawyer, found lying outside the five star hotel he was staying at in Kampala, Uganda, back in the bad old days. He was dying of malnutrition or maybe of half a dozen endemic diseases, take your pick. The only possession the child had was a ragged cuddly toy, its stuffing all gone, its eyes missing, but it was the only thing that the child had to remind him of his dead mother. Jim Sawyer couldn't save the life of Moses, who died two days later despite the efforts of the best doctors that Jim could pay for, but he decided that day to try to put a stop to the suffering of children like him and to prevent their parents from dying and leaving their children orphaned. Although now retired from active involvement he is still one of the charity's trustees. He lives in quiet retirement and declined the offer of a knighthood for his charitable work, saying that it would give out the wrong message. Having seen the sort of people who now involve themselves in the charity's fundraising, I have to say I agree with him.

How I got this gig was a bit of an accident. It came about from the previous year's fundraiser, when my boss at MOF went into a panic because one of the presenters was stuck in Dublin, with no scheduled flight that would get her back to London in time for the show. A show in which she had several pivotal parts to play. Well, I'd gone to school with a guy who was now working for one of those budget airlines, so I gave him a call to see if he knew anyone that could help us out. An hour later the presenter was the sole passenger on a BudgFly aircraft speeding towards a small airfield in Kent, where a motor bike and rider was waiting to take her the final few miles to the TV studio.

The airline, of course, received a lot of free publicity, live on air and in the popular press. Everyone agreed that they probably ended up in profit. I, for my part, was given the 'opportunity' to take on the role of Liaison Manager between the charity and the TV company for this year's fund raiser.

It wasn't until much later that I discovered that the reason the post was vacant was because the previous incumbent was currently 'resting' at a well-known clinic where she spends a lot of her time crying, especially when shown pictures of Africa. I'm starting to understand why, and it has nothing to do with all the poverty and disease she witnessed.

So, on the Monday after the latest fundraising telethon, I found myself sitting in the offices of Metro TV waiting to meet the bloke I'm supposed to liaise with for the next twelve

months. That's how long it takes to make a telethon happen. Longer in fact, as the charity itself started working on the programme several weeks before the last telethon went to air.

Around me the open plan office was a hive of activity. Most of it was taking place round the water coolers or in the minuscule kitchen area. Ringing phones went unanswered until they were picked up by the automated voicemail systems. Computer screens blinked and scrolled unattended as the staff of Metro TV swapped their stories of the previous weekend's celebrity parties that are the inevitable follow-on from any sort of TV event, whether it be an award ceremony, a reality TV show finale or a charity telethon.

The staff were mainly young creative types. When I say young please remember that it is a comparison and I am only twenty seven. It was easy to see that they were creative from the range of on-trend clothing, make-up and hairstyles that were on display. The staff were so creative that they had managed to create a type of conformity all of their own.

I had been told to arrive by 9 a.m. and it was already 10.15 with no sign of the executive that I was supposed to be meeting. Eventually the lift doors slid open to reveal Igor Kasnisky, the Executive Producer. I knew it was he from the A4 sized portrait that topped the organisation chart mounted opposite the lift's doors.

Unlike his staff he was more stylishly dressed. It would have taken more than a month of my pay to shop for the chinos, cashmere polo neck sweater, haircut and sun glasses that he sported. The sun glasses rested raffishly on the top of his head, though carefully placed so as not to disturb the coiffure. I couldn't see his wrist watch under the sleeve of the sweater but I would bet good money on it being gold and very expensive.

One of the trendy young girls broke away from a water cooler group and rushed to her desk to pick up a note-pad. She didn't need to wear a sign for me to know that her job title was something like 'executive assistant'. She followed Igor into one of the few enclosed offices, securing the door behind her. It was thirty minutes before she re-emerged.

"Igor will see you now, Mr. Mirren." She spoke with a coolness that suggested that she didn't care whether Igor wanted to see me or not, looking me over and passing judgement on my off-the-peg-chain-store suit and polyester tie.

She turned back to walk the short distance to her desk, not concerned about whether or not I knew where to go. I knocked on the office door and a languid voice instructed me to enter. Igor was the sort of person who drawled and he did it in a way that suggested he was just so bored that he was surprised he was still awake. Even on show-day with divas throwing tantrums and boy scouts being sick on the studio floor, he never raised his voice or varied its pitch. He was reclining in a Captain Kirk style executive office chair. His feet were propped up on his desk as he casually flipped through some sort of document.

He ignored me until he had turned the last page, though I knew he wasn't reading the document. No one can read that fast. It was merely a pretence designed to show me how important, or unimportant, I really was.

I introduced myself and was told to help myself to coffee and to take a seat. The office was furnished in the latest trend-setting style, as was everything about Metro TV. Primary colours dominated, as did shiny surfaces. The lighting was suitably subdued. Anything brighter would have been reflected so brilliantly that it would have been a severe threat to my retinas. It probably cost a fortune. I was just thankful that the TV Licence payers weren't paying for this level of indulgence. I vowed never to buy shares in the company if they were

prepared to spend shareholder funds in such a lavish style. Mind you, with my salary that was a moot point. Little did I know, at that early stage, just how both Igor's office and his wardrobe were really being funded.

"Now, Andy. May I call you Andy?" He continued without waiting for my reply. "What do you think an Executive Producer does?"

"I guess you're the man responsible for putting the show together and making sure it gets to air."

"That's about right. Anything to do with the TV side of this little shin-dig is down to me. I find the celebs, I talk them into appearing, not that it's difficult, I organise the studios, the make-up, the costumes, the props, and any outside broadcasts or filming that needs doing. I appoint the producers for the different elements, as well as the directors and other senior creative staff. So, if that is what I do, what do you think the charity does?"

I was ready for the question, having already spoken to the fund raising team. "They organise the corporate sponsors, identify the locations from which to do the celebrity appeals, provide the facts and figures that are used as part of the appeal and then collect the money that's pledged. I spent Friday night answering a phone and taking pledges."

"I'm so pleased for you." Igor drawled, clearly uninterested in the seven hours of unpaid overtime that I had put in. "In which case, what do you see as the responsibilities of the Liaison Manager? That's you, by the way."

"Well, I make the travel arrangements for the celebs and the film crew, book flights, hotels, cars, all that sort of thing. I communicate with the charity workers on the ground so that they know when to expect us, what we want to film and what facilities we need when we get to the location."

"Very good. Just one thing you missed out. You also pay the bills."

I looked a little bit nonplussed. "How do you mean, pay the bills?"

"You said it yourself: Hotels, flights, cars. Add to that meals, drinks and sundries and it all racks up. The celebs give their time for free, but they don't pay out a penny. That comes from the charity, and you're the man who pays the bills. I assume they've given you a credit card?"

"No. Not yet anyway."

"Well make sure they do. You'll probably have to start spending money before the week is out. I've got my staff contacting agents now to start recruiting this year's crop of celebrities, and they will need tickets and hotel bookings made for when they attend their meetings with me. Now, any questions?"

"A few. I know it isn't really my side of the operation, but how do you recruit the celebrities?"

"Actually it's probably more a case of them recruiting us. There are basically three groups of celebs. First there's the wannabees. They'll turn up to the opening of an envelope if it gets their face on TV. So they're the ones that came fourth on some TV talent show or got slung out of the Big Brother House after the first week and so on. They're great for doing regional OB's, that's outside broadcasts by the way, surrounded by crowds of loonies dressed as giant chickens or whatever.

The next group are the pluggers. These are the ones with the new film, CD, DVD, play or whatever that needs to be plugged. We have the PR people practically begging us to get them

on air with a clip or a performance. The most desperate can usually be persuaded to record the charity single as well.

The final group are the established celebs who want to have the word ‘charity’ on their CV. They feel it gives them credibility, or increases their chances of getting a gong. They’re usually the ones we get to do the location shoots. There’s nothing quite like standing over a dying baby with tears streaming down the face to give the old credibility a boost. Of course we have our regulars. Names we can count on. I wouldn’t really put them into any of the groups. They’ve attached themselves to the cause and if they don’t appear people will wonder why, so they keep doing it.”

“What about the group events, you know, like the soap stars or newsreaders doing routines from musicals and the like.”

“We hardly have to do anything. One of the cast will usually be from one of the groups I’ve already described and they’ll talk the other cast members into doing it. Once we’ve got that buy-in we can go to the show’s producers and sell it to them as a ratings booster. They organise the script and the shooting and all we have to do is show it on the night, along with a live appearance by the cast members. We can usually get a whole ten, maybe fifteen minutes of air-time out of it. It never fails.”

I was flabbergasted by the level of cynicism that Igor was displaying. It sounded to me like no one really cared about the charity and what it was doing. I plucked up my courage and said as much. Igor was un-phased by the implied criticism.

“I know it sounds like that.” He replied, “but many of the celebs do genuinely care. Look at the ones who do the big stunts: The treks across polar ice caps; Swimming the River Nile or whatever. They don’t do that just for publicity. It’s far too much work and far too much of a time commitment. No, they’re the genuine ones, and they come back year after year, either doing more stunts or as presenters on the night. I think we’re running at half a dozen MBEs, a couple of OBEs and a CBE now. Anything else?”

“Only one more question, I think. Where do I work?”

“Oh yes. Well I assume that you have your own desk at the charity’s offices in Southwark. But we’ve got a desk for you that you can use when you’re over here. Sonia will show you where, and she’ll arrange computer access for you as well.”

The meeting was clearly over so I rose to leave.

“One last thing.” I turned back at the sound of Igor’s voice, expecting a good luck wish or a welcome speech perhaps. “Don’t forget to get that credit card sorted.”

I felt my shoulders slump and slunk towards the young woman that I assumed was Sonia.

“Igor says you’ve got a desk for me.” She looked at me as though I had just suggested having a threesome with Jimmy Savile, before wafting an emerald green tipped hand towards the far side of the office.

“And he said you would arrange computer access.”

She let out a long sigh of impatience and turned towards me with a pad of post-it notes. As I looked towards her I couldn’t help but notice the important work I was interrupting. On her computer screen I could see it was a video clip of a kitten playing with a ball of wool. I was surprised that I had been able to attract her attention at all with such fierce competition.

“Write what you want your username to be, and an e-mail address where IT can send a password. They’ll set you up a Metro TV e-mail address and give you access to the systems you’ll be using.”

“How do I get access to my e-mail if I can’t access a PC?” I asked, knowing full well I could use my smart phone to open my personal e-mail account. She was annoying me so I felt justified in annoying her.

“Oh, go and see Martin. He’ll let you use his PC.”

I noted that she firstly didn’t tell me where I could find Martin and secondly that she assumed Martin would comply. The use of Sonia’s name would apparently act as the magic word.

I wrote down the username as she requested and handed the pad back to her. She placed it at the rear most edge of her desk where it was almost certain to fall down between her desk and her neighbour’s and get lost. I didn’t anticipate getting computer access in the immediate future.

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