

The Studio
by
Maria P. Frino

Stories become legends over time. Like Chinese whispers the truth becomes stretched until no one knows the truth. An innocent man is accused of a crime he doesn't understand, nor how or why he is even accused? People don't understand because he's different, they place guilt before they even know him.

EMILY

I found the perfect solution to our problem. Jake and I need a place to stay whilst our house is being renovated, and Raymond has a spare room at his place. "We can rent Raymond's spare room," I yell from our bed. Jake is shaving.

"That old place gives me the creeps, and so does Raymond." Jake is wiping his face as he walks back into the bedroom. "I know he's your friend, but he creeps me out even more than the house. Besides, we can live in our own house whilst we renovate, it will require us to be extra organised, that's all."

"You don't believe all those stories about that old house, do you? They're just urban myths."

"Myths or not, the place is creepy."

Agreeing with Jake that Raymond is eccentric, as an old friend of my late brother Thomas, I'm used to him and his quirks. I remember having a crush on him when I was eight years old. His chiseled good looks, similar to Thomas', were the talk of the schoolyard. By the time I was a teenager I realised Raymond was not interested in girls. In fact, he wasn't interested in socialising with people in general. As teenagers, we all thought that was strange.

"Oh, Raymond's harmless Jake. Besides we can't afford much else. As for staying here whilst the building goes on, sorry I'm not living in dust and chaos for months on end. Working with premature babies, I have to be careful. Imagine me going to work with my nurse's uniform filled with reno dust?"

The house is a twenty-minute drive from the semi-detached house we bought in Dee Why. He is allowing us to stay rent free for six months, how could Jake refuse? Living in Sydney rent free? This is unheard of!

Reluctantly Jake agrees and two weeks later we move into Raymond's spare room. It is on the bottom floor of the sprawling Victorian-era home, which weirds Jake out even more. I choose to ignore him. This is temporary. Our life goes on without too much trouble. Raymond keeps to himself staying out of our way. Jake has nothing to worry about, Raymond is harmless.

The house does have a creepy feel, I do agree with Jake on this; with old timber battens, windows with rotting panes needing more than just a lick of fresh paint, as does the old picket fence and gate. Everything has fallen into disrepair. The kitchen appliances need replacing; the cooker is fifty years old. All this does not seem to bother Raymond. He bought the house in this condition with no immediate plans to fix it.

“What exactly did Thomas see in Raymond? How could they have been friends?” Jake asks me over a take away dinner.

Jake new of Thomas at school. Thomas and Raymond were two years ahead. They all attended St Josephs College at Potts Point, although only Raymond boarded. Thomas was definitely the popular one. Jake is not the first to ask about their friendship.

We have our renovation plans sprawled out over the huge mahogany table in the formal dining room. The burgundy walls, well-worn floral and dark trellis carpet along with the deep burnt-gold chairs, deep and sunken, all added to the dreariness of this room despite its size.

“Raymond is shy and a bit quirky. I guess you could call him a geek. The way he hoards things and his intense interest in film and film equipment makes some people uncomfortable. Thomas was a good listener; he didn't mind Raymond talking incessantly about his interests. Raymond trusted Thomas and that's not something he does easily with people.”

I have known Raymond for a long time. As a friend of my late older brother, he was part of my family. Our mother practically adopted him when his parents died in a plane crash, ironically their first flight to visit him at school. Born on a cattle stud in the Northern Territory, he has not worried about money since their death. Nor does he ever speak of them. I understand not everyone

gets Raymond. However, our stay in this house is only temporary, Jake can just live with his uncomfortable feelings for a bit.

RAYMOND

He keeps away from them as much as possible. He is not comfortable around people, which includes Emily. He is happy to have helped them by renting the room, but he does not want to interact with them. People in general make him uncomfortable and he prefers to tinker with film equipment and old machines. He does not have to talk; he does what he wants and answers to no one. All he wants is to work on his special interests and go to work at JB Hi Fi keeping the website up to date. Computers and machines, this is what makes him comfortable.

He enters the room and fixes a few things that were bothering him. The old film projector requires repairing but he needs more parts. Turning on his laptop, he browses for old projector parts. Hearing muffled voices from the next room, he ignores them. What Emily and Jake are doing is none of his business. His interest is with his machines and how to fix them. This is his focus.

He remembers his friend Thomas, Emily's brother, who died of heart disease a year ago. Thomas had been Raymond's only friend. Emily had cried a lot and had hugged Raymond for what seemed ages saying how much she missed Thomas. He felt sad when Thomas died but he hadn't known what to say or do to stop Emily crying.

She cried also when his parents died, as did her mother, Mrs Lennox. Yes, it is sad when people die, but what is the point of crying? What does it achieve? For Raymond he prefers to lock those memories away and keep them private. His mum and dad provided for him, so he does not have to worry. He misses them sometimes, and also Thomas. Crying though? What for? It all seems like a lot of wasted energy.

Machines are much easier to deal with than people. Machines are predictable.

JAKE

“You’re staying at the old mansion on the hill?”

“Believe me it wasn’t my idea,” Jake is telling his friend Adam. He works with Jake at the design studio. They have been friends since high school, and both know of Raymond.

They discuss the urban myths surrounding the house; how the original owner had kept his mad wife in a room for years, then the next family had a son who committed suicide in one of the garden sheds, and now the latest tenant, Raymond, is filling the house with so much junk it is a fire hazard.

“It seems anyone who’s lived in the house has come to grief and I don’t think Raymond will be an exception,” says Jake.

“Careful Jake, you and Emily are included in people who have lived there.”

Jake looks at Adam despairingly and decides to push the renovations through as quickly as possible. He never wanted to move into the house on the hill, and now his feeling of unease has just increased.

“Did you hear that?”

“No, what?” replies Jake sleepily.

“I heard a clicking noise.”

“Go back to sleep Emily,” yawned Jake, “it’s probably Raymond working on one of his machines.”

“Jake, I heard something. I won’t sleep until I find out what it is! It’s not Raymond, he’s away

for work.”

It had been three months since moving into this room and it's not the first time I have heard this noise. Moving around in the dimness I try not to disturb Jake any further. There is a small window high up near the ceiling, shadowy light spills eerily into their room. Then she sees it and screams, “Jake come here!”

With astonished looks we both take in the scene. I had stumbled into a soundproof room with dusty video and ancient film recording equipment. There are shelves full of videos and film reels. The equipment looks too old to be working, but for someone who knows how to fix this equipment, how old it is does not matter. Raymond is the perfect person to keep all this equipment working.

“This seems to be a fully working studio. Look, some of the equipment has been left on,” says Jake, “Did you know Raymond had his own recording studio.”

“It's not surprising considering his interests but the cameras point into our room?”

My stomach lurches, had Raymond filmed us? My head reels. What did all the other videos contain and how long had this been going on?

Jake proceeds to put a video into a recorder and presses play. We both place our hands over our mouths. Images of our own lovemaking fills the screens. He looks at my face as tears spill down my cheeks, “No, this can't be Raymond? There is no way he would tape people?” Dropping his eyes, he doesn't answer me.

He removes the video slamming his fist onto the console, “Where is Raymond? He has to explain himself.”

I am horrified, the same as Jake, but there has to be another explanation. The Raymond I know would never do something like this, “Umm, there are many more videos here, maybe they're all different?”

He looks at me with his face contorted in anger and disbelief, “I don't know what difference it makes Emily, he has watched us making love!” He rants on whilst placing another video in the recorder.

Again, more sex. This time a threesome.

“This is sick. How many others have rented this room Emily? He has only owned this dump for three years and there are at least fifty videos here.”

“I don’t know Jake. The first time I heard he had a spare room was when I spoke to him about our renovations. I thought he only offered because he knows me. This stuff... it’s very out of character.” I gag spitting out my last words.

Jake storms out of the studio, “I’m going to the police. This is an invasion of our privacy.”

“No, please Jake wait! We should speak to him first, there has to be an explanation for this.”

He turns to look at me. He must have been moved by my pleading face, “Ok, we confront him the moment he returns from his *business trip*, where he is probably selling these videos.” He gestures with air-quotes as he storms away back to bed.

There are tears in my eyes as two uniformed police officers take Raymond away into the paddy wagon. The third officer, a plain-clothed detective remains with Jake and I taking notes.

“Raymond has an interest in film equipment, not in filming people. Especially not the images portrayed in these videos,” I inform him choking on my words, “He isn’t that interested in people.” She proceeds to explain to the police how Raymond prefers machines and only allows a few trusted people into his life. He is a quiet, shy man.

As soon as I say those words I realise how incriminating they are. I’ve portrayed Raymond as a recluse, someone with a lot of time on his hands. Time to take and edit all those videos.

Detective Schibella nods and writes more notes, “there are finger prints all over the studio. Until forensics test everything Raymond will only be held for a few hours. We’ll have him home by lunch time. In the meantime, the studio is a crime scene, no one is to enter without my permission.

We will make this clear to Raymond and would appreciate you enforcing this rule.”

Jake, who had remained quiet throughout this whole ordeal, sneers loudly, “What? Now we have to look after him... he’s an adult detective.”

My face blushes fuchsia as I turn to Jake mouthing “shut-up”. Our lack of sleep over the last two days and this early morning meeting with the police have taken a toll on our relationship. Jake is ready to throw Raymond in goal, I on the other hand am hoping for another explanation. Tonight Jake is playing tennis, this will be an opportunity for me to speak with Raymond on my own.

He nods towards me with a sheepish, childlike grin as I enter the kitchen. “Hi, did you manage to make it to work today?”

“I did. When I told them why I was late, they all looked at me funny and told me to leave. Mrs Jackson my supervisor walked me out to the bus stop telling me maybe I should take a leave of absence. I don’t want to leave work.”

This anguish on his face tore at my heart strings. Surely the police can see he is telling the truth. It is obvious to me. I then ask him why he had not told us about the studio, especially as it is right next to the room we are using.

“Oh, that is Georgie’s special room. He allows me to fix the equipment as long as I tell noone about the room. Anyway, why did I need to tell anyone? There are plenty of other rooms in this house, enough for all my special stuff.”

“Raymond, who’s Georgie?”

“He is the man I bought this house from Emily, every part of it except the studio, Georgie’s special room. That’s what he calls it and I believe everyone needs something special.”

A flicker of relief washes over me, “This is great. You told the police about Georgie right?”

He nods his head innocently... no.

“Raymond, why didn’t you tell the police about Georgie and his special room?”

“Georgie wouldn’t let me fix his film equipment anymore if I told them.”

Raymond proceeds to tell me how Georgie had been happy to sell him the house especially when he found out Raymond’s special interest in film equipment. He had not cared that Georgie wanted to keep the studio. He helped Georgie and Georgie helped Raymond to find equipment. He was Raymond’s friend just like Thomas had been.

I am close to tears as I realise Raymond could not possibly have anything to do with the disgusting videos and films.

“Raymond, have you watched any of these videos?”

“No, I’m only interested in fixing the equipment. Anyway, Georgie told me not to, he said they were none of my business.”

I give Raymond a hug, which he shrugs away from. “Can I go now, I’m sleepy.”

“Sure Raymond, good night.”

As he walks away, I turn the kettle on. It whistles as Jake walks in placing his racquet on the bench and a kiss on my lips. The anger of this morning obviously taken out on the poor tennis ball. “Did you speak to Raymond?”

“I did, he only went to bed a few minutes before you came in. He seems calm about what is happening. In fact, he is more disturbed about not being able to go to work. They asked him to take time off until this is cleared up. And, he told me about Georgie.”

“Who?”

I make us both a tea and we sit down as I fill him in on tonight’s revelation.

“Hmm, ok. Until I see this Georgie character I’m still not convinced,” He pads off to have a shower, “see you in bed.”

I check my roster. I have an afternoon shift tomorrow so I’ll have time to visit Detective Schibella and tell him about this creep named Georgie. Unlike Jake, I believe Raymond. He does not lie.

“Emily we already know it wasn’t Raymond, there are fingerprints all over the studio. Most of Raymond’s are on the film equipment. There are none of his fingerprints on any of the videos or film reels. He told us he has never touched them. Someone else is watching what is being filmed and producing some type of weird sex tapes with the footage,” informs Detective Schibella.

“So, do you think Georgie might have something to do with all this?”

“As the previous owner of the house he is the likely suspect, but no one seems to know where he is. Besides, the other couples who were filmed also want the perpetrator behind bars. At this stage, they all believe Raymond is the culprit.”

“When are you going to tell them it’s not true? I don’t want anyone hassling Raymond, he is anxious enough with all this unwanted attention.”

Placing his palms in the air, calming me he continues explaining footprints were found in the block nearby on the day of the investigation. They had discovered a secret entrance into the studio. It was for this reason that she and Jake had never seen someone else enter or leave the premises. In fact, no one that had rented the room had ever suspected anyone other than Raymond was ever in the house.

“We are going to have to ask Raymond if he can help us to find Georgie, he was the only one who ever saw him.”

“Oh, Raymond will help I’m sure, especially if it means you’re going to find his ‘friend’. Georgie is Raymond’s only friend. His only other friend was my brother who passed away last

year.” I am relieved to hear the police have things under control.

“Hmmm, this time he didn’t choose his friend very well, I think this Georgie person is one sick individual.”

I’m waiting with the detective outside the shed. Raymond insisted I was with him. This is the only time he asked for something specific during this month of turmoil. He has amazed me, I know anxiety has plagued him but he controls his emotions with some type of force. Always calm and composed, I was surprised when he needed me. Frightened as I was there was no way I was letting him down.

“Georgie you have to come with me.” He is calmly coaxing Georgie from the shed where he has been hiding since the police visited the studio. Both he and Raymond walk out and the first thing that hits me is his age.

Georgie Padados, 76 of Dee Why, was today arrested with allegedly filming people without permission whilst they rented a room in his home. Police will allege he was filming during the evenings without the occupants’ consent. Police have taken Mr Padados into custody ...

Jake and I listen to the television report with mixed feelings knowing we were a part of this sick individual’s scheme. We feel violated but vindicated at the same time. Raymond was cleared of all charges. He had helped the police with everything they needed, especially with finding Georgie. I am grateful because Raymond is childlike and would never think of doing anything wrong, let alone spy on people. If he had not confided in me this may not have been the outcome. Had he been arrested it would have been a huge injustice. Raymond was innocent from the beginning and I knew this all along.

Jake remains silent. He is intent on having our place finished as soon as possible. He told me he wants nothing to do with this place, nor Raymond in the future. I do not understand why he is

intimidated by Raymond, to me he is a gentle soul. Deciding not to argue further I turn my attention back to the news story.

The report does not make any mention of Raymond being the current owner of the house. I asked the police to keep his name out of the media report fearing he would not have been able to handle the media scrutiny.

The news story goes on to tell Georgie's sad story...

After Georgie's brother committed suicide his bereaved parents moved to Greece and left him to look after their home in Australia. For forty years Georgie was rarely seen but locals did see couples coming and going from the house.

True to his word, Jake completes our renovations before the six months is up. We move back home in time for long summer days after the strangest winter of our young marriage. Before we left, Raymond confided in me that after purchasing the house, he rented the room at Georgie's request and had given the rent money to Georgie. He wasn't interested in either the money or the people. When I suggested he sell the house if he felt uncomfortable about what Georgie had done, he answered in a very *Raymond-like* way...

"Why would I do that Emily? This is my home with all my special stuff. I know Georgie did something bad, but the police have taken all his videos and films. Now I can keep looking after the equipment because it doesn't matter who I tell about the studio. The cameras looking into the room have been disabled."

Why he wants to look after equipment that has no use is beyond me, but I smile affectionately at Raymond's innocent way of looking at life.

- THE END -

First published in 2019.

This is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

© Maria P. Frino, April 2019

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the Australian Copyright Act 1968 (for example, a fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review), no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission.