



Blog Tour

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by
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PROLOGUE

As a funeral, it was nothing much. Only four people were present; one of them was dead and none of the others gave a fuck. And there were one or two omissions from the service. Flowers. Music. Mourners. A priest. And, oh – a coffin.

The body was badly wrapped in a polythene sheet, the kind used as a damp-proof membrane by builders, laid under concrete floors. From the size of the feet sticking out one end and the sad straggle of matted blonde hair at the other, you would probably have guessed it was a young woman.

“Grab fucking end each, dickheads.” Built like a tank and with a shaved skull, his words, in heavily accented and broken English, carried a low but effective menace that made his two companions, of lesser *bulk but almost as intimidating, jump to comply.

The hole was no more than a foot deep, but it had been scraped out of the only level piece of ground in the immediate vicinity. All around the solitary flat patch, mountains of rubble, of various grades, crowded the small burial party and hid them from the houses to the north and west, and from the river to the south. A sludge barge sounded its horn as it made its way slowly down-river.

“Hurry it up, for fuck’s sake. We’ve not got lot time; it will be soon dark.”

Neither of the two subordinates, both born-and-bred Fulham hard men, would have dared to mock the Albanian’s diction.

“Don’t you think we should tie the ends up?” the taller of the two reluctant gravediggers asked, struggling to grip the polythene, slippery and damp in the drizzle of the grey evening.

“No, put fucking thing in fucking hole and get the fuck out of here, before get seen by some cunt.”

Grunting and stumbling, they managed to get the plastic-wrapped corpse into the shallow depression, but the feet wouldn’t quite fit, protruding above the level of the surrounding packed earth.

“You couple useless lazy cunts.” He picked up the spade and made as if he was going to take a swing

at his two assistants, who cowered from his advance. Instead, he used the spade to loosen a little of the gravelly soil around the feet in an attempt to lower them, but the ground had been heavily compacted by the lorries and heavy plant that had run over it for years and it was hard going. He began to appreciate why his two companions had dug the minimum depth they could get away with and he regretted not having used a small excavator, even though it would have been difficult to get it into this corner of the yard.

His efforts had allowed the legs to sink further into the hole, but he could see that the toes were still going to protrude when it was filled in. He lifted the spade above his head and swung it hard down on to the corpse’s left ankle, shattering it with a sickening thud. A piece of flesh flew off and hit him on the side of the face and he irritably wiped his cheek with the back of his hand and spat a mouthful of saliva on to the ground, in case any of it had gone in his mouth.

He swung the spade again, at the other ankle; this time it took a couple of blows before it was severed enough to allow the foot to lie flat and to the side like the first one.

He stuck the spade into the ground a couple of times to clean it then threw it towards his helpers, who had to move sharply to avoid it.

"Always end up do it fucking self," he swore at them. "Fill fucker in and get fuck out this shithole."

He watched as the pair filled the hole, one shovelling and the other using the sides of his feet to level off the thin layer of soil on top of the body. Finally, they stamped around on the surface to compact it down, kicking some of the looser stuff on top to hide the footmarks.

"That looks OK, boss, doesn't it?"

"No thanks to you two phidi, but is going OK. It not matter anyway after tomorrow; no cunt will find," he replied. It felt good to curse in his native tongue, even if his audience didn't get it.

The wires grumbled as the grab line bucket lifted a tonne and a half of material from the pit where it had been tipped by the last of a steady line of trucks that had filed into the yard since first light. The crane operator swung the massive boom around and released its load on top of the nearest pile, causing a minor avalanche down the back of the mound. A rivulet of rubble trickled down on to the unmarked grave below and each subsequent release of the bucket caused the small space to shrink, until it had disappeared entirely. By lunchtime there was no sign that there had ever been a flat bit of ground there at all and when the edge of the mound reached the perimeter, the shallow grave that had been hastily excavated was buried under seven feet of rubble and dust.

CHAPTER 1 - Bill

Bill Ingram tried to ring his daughter's mobile just before he left the house at six o'clock, to see if her train was running on time, but her voicemail message told him that her number was unavailable. She must be in a tunnel, or something, he thought. He headed for the station, always a stickler for leaving himself plenty time to spare for everything he did, especially when meeting Carol. Everything was ready, so there was no point hanging around at home.

She'd sent him a text around the beginning of December informing him that she'd be travelling up from London on Christmas Eve, and giving him the time her train was due in.

He parked in the multi-storey in Mitchell Street and strolled the short distance to Central Station. It had a real Christmas buzz about it, with families being reunited, last-minute shoppers laden with bags rushing for trains, and revellers heading home after boozy office Christmas parties. Even the obligatory policemen looked quite cheery; as if they expected the seasonal goodwill to moderate the drunken carnage they'd normally have to deal with on a Friday night.

He was nearly half an hour early and on checking the arrivals board he saw that Carol's train was due in ten minutes late, so he decided to nip into Costa Coffee to treat himself to a latte and a muffin. He watched the flow of passengers to and from the trains as he waited for the late arrival of the 14.23 from Euston.

He was back at the arrivals board five minutes before the train glided in, marvelling, as he always did, at the effortless elegance of such a mechanical leviathan coming to rest so gracefully.

He scanned the platform as all the doors simultaneously opened, spilling their human cargo; a river of faces flooded towards him.

At first he watched only with interest, observing the usual rich tapestry of humankind, knowing that he wouldn't miss her, or she him, but as the mass of people dwindled, a prickling anxiety crept up on him, and when the last few stragglers walked down the platform without her appearing, he turned around to see if she'd somehow passed him by.

As the concourse emptied of its recent influx, the number of passengers milling around thinned out to a few solitary souls. If she'd been there, he would have spotted her within seconds. He checked both exits and hurried back to the platform.

He tried her mobile again but she didn't answer. He realised that he had her landline number on his mobile and he stood in the centre of the almost deserted station and tried it. Her voice answered but it had the hollow echo that identified it as the recording on her answering machine. He waited until the long tone had sounded and left a message telling her to contact him as soon as she got in.

He asked one of the Network Rail employees, standing talking to the train's driver, if he could check the train to see if his daughter had fallen asleep on it. He felt stupid even asking, but when the man told him to go ahead, he hurried up the platform, peering through each window as he did for any sign of her.

The guard had just stepped down from the rear of the train when Bill reached the last carriage, and he asked him if he'd lost something.

"My daughter," said Bill, "she was supposed to be on this train. I wondered if she'd fallen asleep."

The guard looked at him sceptically.

"There's definitely no one remaining, sir. I've just walked the length of the train, clearing up litter and checking for stuff folk have left. I think I would have noticed a girl."

"Yes, sorry. I just thought ..."

The guard wasn't unsympathetic. "She could have caught a later train, sir. There's another two due in from London tonight."

"She would have phoned me to let me know, she's very good that way."

"These phones aren't always all they're cracked up to be. Maybe her battery's gone."

"I suppose that's possible. Listen, thanks, I'll just wait for the next one. Do you know when it's due in?"

"One gets in at 21.38, the other at 23.54." He looked at Bill again and felt sorry for him. He had a couple of daughters himself and he knew what it was like to worry about them. "Come with me. I'll ask my manager if you can sit in our office until then."

He guided Bill to a doorway at the side of the concourse and climbed the stairs inside, motioning for Bill to follow. After talking briefly to a smartly dressed older woman, he directed Bill to sit in one of the chairs in what looked like a staffroom, with a low table in the centre and a hot beverage vending machine in the corner.

The woman, who introduced herself as Sheila but whose badge told him she was Mrs S. Crainey, Operations Manager, Virgin Trains, looked after him once the guard had signed off and headed homewards with a last “good luck” aimed at Bill on his way out.

She fetched them both a cup of tea and sat down opposite him.

“How old is your daughter, Bill?”

“She’s twenty-five.” Bill thought it must have sounded premature to be so worried about an adult who had effectively missed a train.

“What does she do for a living?”

“She’s a trainee journalist with The Times. She has a degree in journalism.” Bill couldn’t keep the pride out of his voice.

“That’s fantastic. One of my boys wanted to be a sports writer, but he didn’t get the grades. Kids, eh.”

Bill wasn’t really in the mood for polite conversation, but it wasn’t in his nature to be impolite.

“What does he do now?”

“He works in a bank. It’s a good job, but it’s not what he wanted. The money’s good, though.”

“Carol was always good at school and through university. She finished as one of the top students in her year. That’s why she got a job at The Times.”

“You and your wife must be very proud of her. Do you have any other children?”

Bill’s face clouded over. “My wife died earlier this year. We had no children other than Carol. It’s been a bad year for us.”

The rail manageress apologised. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise.”

“No, you weren’t to know. It’s probably why I’m so worried about Carol.”

He looked at the woman sitting across from him. Concern was written all over her face, but he could see that she didn’t know what to say.

“She died of breast cancer in August,” Bill said, to spare the woman from any awkwardness. “She was diagnosed in April and, despite treatment, she didn’t even get a small respite from it. They did a mastectomy and gave her chemotherapy, but it was too far gone. I think she hid it for a while. Maybe if she’d gone to the doctor earlier ...” His voice tailed off.

“That’s awful. It’s a horrible thing, cancer. It must have been hard on your daughter, too.”

“It hit Carol hard, but she was great. She came up from London every weekend from when her mother told her about the cancer, taking her to clinics,

visiting her in hospital during her treatment and in the hospice towards the end.”

“She sounds like a marvellous daughter. She must be a comfort to you.”

“She is. She stayed with me for a week after the funeral, sorting all Alison’s things out and helping me with the paperwork, and all the formalities that come with a death.”

Sheila Crainey could see that Bill was happy to talk, and she was a good listener. It was part of her role to deal patiently with her customers’ problems and although it wouldn’t have appeared in her job description, she considered it her duty to do what she could to look after Bill’s wellbeing.

There may have been a degree of him off-loading some of his cares on to a stranger because Bill, who normally kept himself to himself, felt comfortable talking to the friendly and sympathetic woman who had time to spare for him.

After descending to the platform with Bill to meet the next train, still with no sign of Alison, she sent him back upstairs while she sorted out a few minor issues resulting from the latest arrival, then followed him back up to sit with him until the last train arrived.

Bill told her how he'd made a special effort with the Christmas tree because he knew that was what his wife, Alison, would have wanted, but he'd booked a nice local restaurant for Christmas dinner, figuring that the two of them sitting at the family table without Alison might be a little too morbid.

Sensing that Bill had unburdened himself enough, she told him a little about her own family, and it seemed to help the time pass for Bill, listening to the stories of the exploits of her three boys. He even managed an odd smile, reflecting that they'd had a much easier time bringing up Carol than Mrs Crainey had dragging up her tribe.

When it was time to meet the last train, she went down to the platform with him again and waited until it had emptied. Her heart went out to him when it became obvious that his daughter hadn't been on it. Her shift finished, she reluctantly advised him to go home and try to contact Carol again in the morning.

Alan Jones was born in Glasgow in 1960 and now lives on the Ayrshire coast.

He started writing in 2003. He works for the health industry and in his spare time he reads, sails, makes furniture and watches football and movies.

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