

MURDER IN THE ~~CATHEDRAL~~ PARISH CHURCH

John Page turned his car off Church Street into the entrance of The Bell Inn. As he did so, he was thinking of the many changes there had been in the village recently: the renovation of the shop; the new wild-life area; the car park alongside it; and now the car wash at the back of the pub. All improvements, he thought, but not universally popular with local residents.

He drove the car towards the lads who he hoped were going to clean it. His car was absolutely filthy. It was impossible to live in the countryside and have a clean car, especially in the winter. So many tractors and all so huge. They churned up the verges, caking the lanes with mud. Maybe the worst time of year was when the maize was being cut. For some reason the tractors brought half the field with them to deposit on the road surface. But the farmers had to make a living so he wasn't really complaining. After all, most of his relatives were farmers. Anyway, his car would soon be gleaming and he would drive it home and house it in his garage. Goodness knows when he would next drive it. Stay at home was the instruction and he tried to comply with the regulations. He'd had the car serviced just before Christmas and had been told: "Give me a call in a month's time because you'll need a couple of new tyres." At the rate things were going he wouldn't need new tyres until his next annual service.

The two lads indicated where he should park and he got out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition. He had got into the habit of having a pint, take-away of course, whilst the car was being cleaned and sometimes, when he was feeling generous, he would buy the lads a drink to take to them when he collected the car. His wife chided him when she heard what he was doing. He wasn't sure what annoyed her most: having the car cleaned "waste of time and money at this time of the year"; having a pint whilst waiting "can't you find something better to do – I could give you a list and you could go to the shop"; or buying the lads a drink "jolly expensive car wash that is."

John enjoyed a chat with the lads. They were Eastern Europeans but he wasn't sure whether Polish, Romanian or Albanian. Chatting to them reminded him of the many times he had been to Romania. He had actually been on the very first trip that the local charity, Project Romania, had made to Seica Mare. They had visited an orphanage in a small village called Boarta. The plan was to dig a pipeline from a disused well to the main building so that the staff did not have to carry buckets full of water from the stream in the village up to the orphanage. Then it was a case of digging holes for three hundred fence posts and fitting chain link fencing in order to stop the local Roma population from disposing of their rubbish in the well.

He had been back many times since but that first time had been a real eye opener: travelling in a school minibus; escorted by a lorry loaded with the posts and fencing; camping with very few facilities; held at the border for twenty three hours; and working in the blistering heat. The last couple of visits he had travelled by air. He had been there for the official twinning of Seica Mare with Chard and also when the now president of Romania had opened the Community Centre, funded by Project Romania.

When his car had been cleaned, instead of "Thank you" he always said "Multumesc" in the hope that the response would be "Cu placere" (with pleasure or you're welcome) but it never was so he assumed that they were not Romanian. He had been very thrilled when his dentist had given the correct response.

In addition to the two lads who cleaned the cars, there was a young woman, who always seemed to wear the same pink T-shirt. Her main job was to collect the money, although she also helped with the polishing when they were particularly busy. Having handed over the money for the car wash, John drove back towards Church Street and spotted his friend Eddie Froome standing by the lych gate. He slowed the car and lowered the window.

"Hi Eddie, how are things going? Still enjoying lockdown, lots of jigsaw puzzles?"

"Can you spare a minute, John? There's something I'd like to show you."

John pulled the car to the side of the road, fixed his mask and got out. Eddie led him through the church gate, down the path towards the vestry. John fiddled with his mobile phone to access the NHS app & directed the camera in order to scan the QR code.

“I’ve just been into St Stephen’s to check that all’s well. I try to do so every couple of weeks to make sure the roof’s not leaking or that the mice haven’t chewed the hymn books. But come in and see what you make of this,” said Eddie. He led John through the porch and into the main body of the church. “What strikes you?” Eddie said.

“The smell,” was John’s reply “it smells as though someone’s been cooking in here.”

“That’s exactly what I thought. We haven’t even had permission from the Diocese for the servery yet.”

They both chuckled. The Parochial Church Council had been debating for some years the need for a toilet and the provision of a kitchen area at the back of the church. Coffee was always served at the back of the church after the Sunday morning service – well, until lockdown came, of course. With no running water or sink, coffee making was not easy and hence the need for a kitchen area.

They decided to have a good search of the church and were shocked at what they found. In the chancel there were some sleeping bags rolled up under one of the pews.

“Someone’s been sleeping in here,” exclaimed Eddie.

“And look what I’ve found!” exclaimed John as he appeared from the choir stalls holding aloft some women’s underclothes. “I think you’re right.”

A further search in the nave revealed a small cooking stove and saucepan. Some of the hassocks had been piled up to make seats and others had been used for a makeshift table.

“No wonder it smells of cooking, someone’s living in here.”

“But how did they get in?”

Their next discovery shocked them to the core: a woman’s pink T-shirt had been stuffed into one of the boxes of books at the back of the church. Even more shocking: it had cuts in it; and it was covered in blood. But perhaps the worst discovery, there was a blood-stained knife alongside the T-shirt.

“This is not looking good. Are we going to find a body next?” joked Eddie

“It’s not a laughing matter, Eddie. No one could have that many cuts, lost so much blood and survived,” John replied.

“We’d better call the police.”

“Hang on a minute, Eddie.” His face suddenly took on a look of suppressed excitement. “Do you remember that book you lent me? The one you had for Christmas?”

“The Richard Osman one? A good read was that – what was it called again?”

“*The Thursday Murder Club*. It was serialized on Radio 4 recently. It’s about four people living in a Retirement Village who solved a murder without involving the police. Well I reckon we could do a bit of investigating on our own. There were four of them in the book, all ancient like us. We could have a go – something to occupy us during lockdown. We could always contact the police if we aren’t getting anywhere or if we need expert help.”

“What sort of expert help?” asked Eddie.

“Well DNA testing, criminal records, finger printing, that sort of thing. We could get that attractive PCSO to pop out to see us if necessary.”

“I’m not sure about that, John. Remember what happened when the shop folk were suspicious about that couple they saw wandering about. Weren’t they doing something odd behind the phone box? Didn’t you trail them down to the church?”

“Oh yes and to the cemetery. We all thought they were casing the joint for a burglary. Peggy from the shop dialled 999 and the PCSO and another guy turned up. It turned out that the couple were on a Treasure Hunt – how embarrassing. I’d think twice before involving the police again.”

“Ok, so how do we proceed?” asked Eddie. “Do we need to involve anyone else?”

“I think not at this stage. We’ll do some investigating of our own first.”

“Ok, so how do we proceed? Let’s sit in the car and draw up a plan.”

The two men, with an air of boyish enthusiasm, made their way back to John's car where they sat for quite some time jotting down ideas on a notepad that they found in the glove compartment. After a lot of discussion, but not argument, and a couple of visits to The Bell for takeaway ale, they had their plan. They then made their way home agreeing to meet up that evening.

And so it was that later that day they drove their cars to different locations: John to a position just opposite the lych gate in Church Street; and Eddie, after turning his car by the entrance to the cemetery, on the grass verge next to the school field in Pooles Lane. Between them they had a good view of the eastern, western and southern sides of the church. The only part not visible was the northern wall but they had agreed that there was no means of access on that side.

The plan was to observe from their cars in order to see how the 'campers' were getting into the church. They agreed to meet every hour to compare notes. When 2am came and neither of them had anything to report they decided to give it another couple of hours. If they had seen nothing by then, they would call it a night and head home.

Meeting up at 4am with nothing to report, Eddie proclaimed: "Well that's it, nothing doing. Nobody has appeared."

"No sign of a light inside and when I walked past the vestry just now, there was no smell of cooking."

"Would you have smelled it, John? After all, I only detected it when I was inside the church."

"Good point. Should we just take a look inside or shall we leave it 'til the morning?"

"I think we'll wait until it's light." Eddie replied.

So they returned to their cars, trying not to make too much noise. After all, they didn't want villagers phoning the police and reporting two men behaving suspiciously.

The next day they walked into the centre of the village, picked up a takeaway coffee from the shop and made their way to St Stephen's church. Eddie unlocked the door and they made their way into the nave, sanitising their hands on the way. They couldn't believe their eyes, or their noses for that matter. There was no smell of cooking; the sleeping bags had gone, as had the cooking stove; and the hassocks were all neatly hanging from the back of the pews.

"I can't believe it" said John.

"Did we dream it?" was Eddie's response.

"No, we didn't dream it. Look, the T-shirt and the knife are still here, tucked into the cardboard box."

In one way, that was reassuring to think that they hadn't been hallucinating but on the other hand it meant that there had been a vicious attack on a young woman right here in St Stephen's church.

"So, our investigation continues. We need to see if there is any more blood."

It looked as though someone had scrubbed the floor in the area where the cooking stove had been. In fact, the whole church had been cleaned and tidied. Any member of the church cleaning team would have been proud of the clean-up. However, when the friends made their way back to the entrance, they both spotted some specks of blood. They were able to follow a faint trail through the porch, down the church path towards Pooles Lane.

"I think we need to come back and follow the trail when we have more time," said Eddie "I promised to take my wife's car to the car wash this morning."

"Ok. Why don't I join you and we could pick up a pint at The Bell while we are waiting."

"Good plan, John. You amble across to the pub while I go and get the car."

John took his time, stopping to admire the flower beds in the churchyard and to pull some ivy from one of the gravestones. It was while he was doing this that he discovered the knife. It was of similar design to the one in the box of books in the church but this one didn't have blood on it. At least he thought it didn't but when he adjusted his spectacles he could see that the blade had been wiped clean leaving just the odd smear of blood. With a feeling of excitement he wrapped the knife in a handkerchief and made his way to meet Eddie.

They both arrived at the pub at the same time and could not believe their eyes: there were no lads waiting to clean the car; no hosepipe; no buckets; no notice board giving the prices; and no pink-topped girl ready to collect the money.

“Well this is a turn up,” said Eddie. At this point the landlady popped her head out of the kitchen window.

“Were you hoping to get a car wash?”

“Well, yes we were. What’s happened? Where are the lads?”

“You tell me,” she replied, “they’ve just disappeared. They finished off last night, tidied up and left. Then this morning I noticed everything had gone. I will say this for them, they know how to clean a place up.”

John and Eddie exchanged knowing looks.

“Where were they living?” John asked pointedly.

“I don’t know. When they first arrived, they asked if there was a room in the pub where they could stay. I said I was afraid that there wasn’t. They said ‘not to worry, we’ll find somewhere’. I think they must have found somewhere fairly local.”

John and Eddie exchanged more knowing looks.

Eddie enquired: “Did they have a row yesterday... or the day before? Is that why they left?”

“Now you come to mention it they did have a barney a couple of days ago – with the girl actually. There was a lot of shouting and in the end the girl stormed off. No idea what it was about. Well, you don’t do you? They jabber away in their own language. I think it’s rude. Immigrants should be made to speak English when they come to live in our country.”

John had an inner chuckle at her remark. He remembered all the times in Romania when the folk from Chard had asked the Romanians a question in English & had repeated it over and over, shouting louder each time when the only response had been a shrug of the shoulders and raised hands. One or two of the Chard lads had such strong Somerset accents, and related grammar, that even he had to shrug his shoulders at times.

John and Eddie decided that they would have to drive in to Chard to get the car cleaned. John sat in the back, wearing his mask and trying to keep the required distance from Eddie. They had a lot to discuss. Had the car washers been ‘living’ in the church? The idea that they had cleaned both pub yard and church could indicate that. Had the row with the girl led to an attack on her? The blood stained T-shirt and the knife – was that evidence for that? John realised that he hadn’t, as yet, told Eddie about the second knife.

By the time they had finished their discussion, they had arrived at the car wash in Furnham Road. To their utter amazement, who should be working there but the two lads and the pink T-shirted girl. They weren’t sure whether the Eastern Europeans recognised them but all three of them worked vigorously on the car. At the end, Eddie paid the girl. They were so preoccupied that John forgot to say “Multumesc.”

“Should we say anything to them?” Eddie asked.

“Not yet. Let’s finish our investigation in Winsham first.”

On the way back, they tried to sift through what they knew: people had been living in the church; those people had cleaned the church; but they had left behind a knife and a blood-stained pink T-shirt; the carwash people had disappeared from Winsham without any explanation; one of these always wore a pink T-shirt.

“So what do we think may have happened?” asked John.

Slowly, Eddie replied. “Well, the car washers have been living in the church. They had a row earlier in the week and one or both of the lads stabbed the girl. They decided they’d better get out of Winsham, so cleaned up the church and the back of The Bell and pushed off.”

“But how do you explain the fact that the girl looked perfectly OK this morning and all three of them were chatting amiably? Is there more than one girl? Are we sure that the one we saw today is the one whose blood is on the T-shirt and knife?”

“Knives,” said Eddie. “Now if we were Richard Osman’s amateurs, we would at least have a police connection and she would take the knives and T-shirt for forensic examination. Maybe we should phone the police now. I think we are getting out of our depth.”

“Indulge me, Eddie. When we get back to Winsham, let’s see if we can follow that trail of blood. Then if we can’t get any further, we either phone the police or forget about the whole thing. What do you say?”
“I can live with that, John.”

Shortly afterwards, they arrived in Winsham, parked the car in Pooles Lane and resumed their search for dried blood. This proved more difficult than they had anticipated. There was evidence of dried blood but the spots became fewer and farther between. If anyone had been watching them, they would have wondered what on earth was going on as these two old men made their way towards the cemetery, heads bowed and every so often letting out a little whoop of joy. Although difficult to be certain, it did look as though the trail led to the field alongside the cemetery.

“What’s that?” shouted Eddie, pointing at something metallic hiding in the long grass.
“It looks like some sort of trap” replied John.

At that moment they became aware of someone approaching them. It was an elderly woman from Davies Close who was walking her dog.

“Morning!” was her greeting.

“Oh hello. Didn’t see you coming. Lovely morning for a walk,” said Eddie. “What’s your dog’s name?” he asked as he patted it.

“Bouncer,” was the reply. “You’re back again, then. Caught anything this time?”

Both men looked bemused. “Back again?” said Eddie. “Caught anything?” said John.

“Yes, I saw you the other night, although I thought you were younger. It was dark though. You’d caught a couple of rabbits that night. No such luck today by the look of it. Can’t stop to chat, got to get back to get my husband’s dinner. Bye – better luck next time” and with that she was gone.

John and Eddie made their way back to the car, still trying to make sense of what they’d seen and heard. “Let’s just take another look in the churchyard” said Eddie “show me where you found the second knife.” So John led Eddie to the gravestone where he’d found the knife. They decided to have a good look round and after a few minutes they came across another trap. They looked at each other and just smiled.

They agreed that they didn’t know which tree they’d been barking up, but it certainly wasn’t the right one. How pleased they were that they had not involved the police. Another embarrassing visit from the PCSO would not have been good for morale or the relationship between the villagers of Winsham and the local constabulary. They also agreed on their plan of campaign and set about putting it into action.

A little while later they jumped into John’s car and made their way back to the carwash in Chard. The three washers were still on site but since there were no cars left to be cleaned, they were sitting on a wall chatting and laughing together. John and Eddie got out of the car and made their way across to speak to them. Eddie was carrying a cardboard box which he handed to the girl, as he did so saying: “We think these belong to you and you might be needing them.” As he was speaking, the girl opened the box and took out in turn: two blood-stained knives; and the pink T-shirt.

Eddie continued: “You may need them when you catch your next rabbits.” Eddie went on to tell them what he and John thought had happened in the church.

The three young people started laughing and the girl, pointing at the cardboard box, said: “you’re very kind. Multumesc.”

To which a beaming John replied: “Cu placere!”