

OLD DOGS

The notice on the door said simply ‘UCOS’. There just wasn’t enough room for the seven words of the full title of *The Unsolved Crime and Cold Case Squad* on the rather small rectangle of plywood screwed to the heavy door. The door was in the basement of a former government building in a Westminster side street. The UCOS office was cold and bleak; the furniture sparse, just a couple of tables and chairs. On the floor was a very large cardboard box. The tables were littered with manila folders curling at the edges. Detective Inspector Richard Marsh, sitting at the larger table, was also cold, rubbing his hands together to generate some warmth. A bit like the folders, he gave the impression of being past his sell by date. He was old school: non-politically correct; rude; crude; and sexist. He had a reputation for getting things done, often cutting corners and never worrying about stamping on eggshells that other officers carefully avoided.

Detective Sergeant Daisy Lynton on the other hand, who was seated at the second table, was a play-it-by-the-book neat and tidy detective. Her clothing was neat; her hair was neat; her make-up was neat; her notebook was neat. She, like the DI, was waiting for their next cold case.

The two officers made an odd couple. Had they been married, you would have wondered how on earth they had managed to stay together for so long because stay together they had. Daisy was a couple of years younger than Richard but they had come up through the ranks together, worked in uniform on the beat together and then in various departments from vice to drugs to murder. There were times when senior officers had tried to separate them and even now, as they neared retirement, and had been assigned to what some cynics referred to as ‘the care home for the ageing awkward squad’ Richard had managed to keep Daisy by his side.

Side by side was how the pair worked. Although Richard outranked his partner, he rarely used his seniority, knowing that she effectively reined him in when he would have galloped ahead down some unpromising side track. For his part, he drew ideas from her still active brain, which other officers would not have attempted to elicit. Side by side they worked together well. The UCOS assignment, although in its early stages, looked as though it would produce results. Cases which had baffled other detectives; cases which had been abandoned by less meticulous officers; cases which no one seemed to bother about any more – all would now stand a chance of being solved.

The silence was broken by the DI: “So what is this new case we’ve been given?”

“The new girl’s got all the details” replied the DS.

“She’s not another of these jumped up university types is she?”

“Very bright by all accounts. A whiz with I.T.”

“That’s all we need”, came the barked reply.

“Shall I fetch her in?” asked DS Lynton

“I guess so.”

Daisy Lynton stood up, straightened her clothing, carefully put a hand through her hair and walked to the door.

“Constable, can you bring in the evidence, please?”

A few seconds later, Detective Constable Amanda Painter entered the room carrying a laptop and a memory stick which she waved at the DI whilst greeting him with “Morning, sir.”

Amanda was young, pretty and definitely a whiz with I.T. Yes, she had been to university, Cambridge to be precise. She had always been top in whatever class she had found herself, from cycling proficiency to her GCSE sets, through ‘A’ level French, Spanish and Computer Studies to her degree course in Computer Science. On showing interest in a career with the police, she had been fast-tracked to where she now found herself, as a bag carrier at UCOS. She would not have chosen that particular route but was intelligent enough to realise that it could lead to greater things.

“That’s enough of all that formality – I’m not a teacher – you can call me boss,” responded the DI, “and it’s milk and two sugars and a couple of chocolate digestives, if we’ve got any, and if we haven’t you’d better go and buy some. Got it?”

“Yes, sir I mean, boss.”

“And you are?” snapped the DI.

Maigret – had his pipe rammed down his throat

Foyle – suffocated with his trilby hat
Stanhope – run over by her Landrover
Lewis – clouted with a bottle of Newcastle Brown.”

She turned proudly to face the two senior detectives. The DI was the first to respond.

“Gosh! They’re all different – not like the usual mass murders. That’s going to make things difficult. Do you think we’ve got nine separate killers, in one location. Highly unusual. Highly unusual indeed?”

The DS chipped in at this point: “Anything else unusual?”

“Well, yes” the DC said scratching her chin, deep in thought, “it’s the victims. Some of them are foreign.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, they’re all detectives, sarge.”

The inspector turned to his sergeant, whispering: “She is bright!”

Constable Painter suddenly burst in: “And not only that, most of them are dead!”

The inspector whispered again but somewhat louder: “Maybe not that bright.”

“And also, most of them have been dead a long time.”

The inspector responded gleefully: “Guess they’ll pong a bit then.” At which point the women groaned loudly.

Undeterred, the constable continued: “I mean, when was Sherlock Holmes alive? When did Morse die? He was succeeded by Lewis and then by Hathaway. And Foyle was a detective before the Second World War – see what I mean?”

“No wonder it’s a cold case,” said Marsh, “bet the New Tricks team couldn’t crack this one.”

“Constable, were there any suspects?” asked Daisy.

“Yes”, she replied “they are all on the memory stick and just a click away. I’ll clear the screen and bring up images of the suspects. As before, with a click the names will appear and with another click, some further information about them. So, let’s get started.”

“Clickety click and tickety boo” joked the inspector as the first image appeared.

“These are all local residents. Ok. First up we have Peter Saunders.”

“Looks innocent enough. What do we know about him?” asked the inspector.

“On the face of it an upstanding member of the community – churchwarden – wife’s the church organist.”

“Why is he a suspect, then?”

“Ex-military.”

“Do we need to look any further, Wayne? Natural born killer.”

“I don’t think so, he was in The Royal Corps of Transport – hardly the SAS.”

“Who else have we got?” asked the inspector wanting to appear in charge and anxious to keep things moving.”

“Next we’ve got Peter Pye – a retired chemist.”

“Say no more – quite capable of producing a nerve agent like the one the Russians used in Salisbury. Was he ever pulled in for questioning during that case? Any communist sympathies?”

At this point Sergeant Lynton, feeling somewhat on the sidelines, decided to make a contribution.

“We need to remember the MOs, boss.”

Constable Painter made another click and announced: “Next we have Keith Fowler – captain of the bell ringers.”

“That’s him, bring him in. He’d have access to ropes, the perfect weapon.”

“Hold on, boss, we’ve more yet. Next up is Elaine Willis. Mother of three boys. She’s a physiotherapist.”

“Well, they’re all nutters,” shouted the DI.

“That’s psychotherapists, boss,” explained Daisy, “do we have any more, Amanda?”

“Next there’s Tony Laws-Spindler, ex-landlord of the local pub, The Bell. He’s a West Ham supporter.”

“Well he has got to be suspect” said the DI who was a life-long Spurs fan.

“There’s one more, boss. A Robert Shearer. Retired surgeon.”

“I’m thinking scalpels and anaesthetic.”

“Just one more thing, boss.”

“What’s that, constable?” asked the other two in unison.

“All the victims are fictional.”

“Gosh!” they chorused again, “and the killer’s still out there” added the inspector, “Should we arrange protection for Barnaby?”

“And Lynley” added the sergeant.

“Both of them – not to mention Wallender and” he was interrupted by the sergeant.

“Probably George Gentley has passed on by now so we don’t need to think about him.”

“Were there any witnesses, constable?”

“Just the one, M’am, a Mrs Betty Jeffrey. She was employed by Cricket St Stephen as a welcome host on the weekend of the massacre. She found the bodies.”

At this, the inspector appeared restless and suddenly blurted out “Poor woman. I can’t take any more of this, sarge. Time for a drink. Let’s nip to the pub around the corner. We’ll leave Wayne to tie up the loose ends with her stick thingy. I suggest, Wayne, that you rummage through this cardboard box, if there’s nothing more of use on your memory bar. See if there are any papers that might be of use, blow the dust off the witness statement and look for that pattern you mentioned. We’ll be back just after lunch and if you want to make your way up the greasy pole of promotion, see if you can crack the case by the time we come back. Let’s see what you are made of, eh.”

With that, the two senior detectives grabbed their coats and hurried out of the office laughing to themselves leaving Detective Constable Painter in their wake looking somewhat bemused and not a little annoyed. She wouldn’t have minded a drink in the pub round the corner but on the other hand, she might have preferred different drinking companions. With this thought in mind, she set about attacking the contents of the dilapidated, dusty and disintegrating box.

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The pub was located in a narrow alley parallel to Whitehall. When the smoking ban came in, the landlord had put a couple of small tables outside for his customers to sit and have a cigarette but the alley was so narrow and dark that no one ever did. The pub was quite quiet and after ordering their drinks at the bar, real ale for Richard Marsh and cider for Daisy Lynton, they made their way to a table in the window where they looked through the menu.

“What do you fancy, Sarge?” asked the DI, “Think I’ll have a pasty, quite appropriate don’t you think in light of the case?”

“How do you mean?” asked Daisy.

“Well the case is in Somerset, isn’t that where pasties come from?”

“No, that’s Cornwall. The tin miners’ wives used to make them for their men folk when they went off to work down the mines. It was supposed to be a full meal: meat; onion; potato; carrot; and swede – with the pastry crimped to make a handle to hold it by. Very clever – and tasty too. My cider’s from Somerset, though. That’s why I chose it.”

“I wondered why you’d done that. I’ve never known you drink cider before.”

“Thought it might help me get my head round the case. What do you think of Amanda, then? Think she’ll make the grade.”

Richard took a long drink of ale before replying. “She’s not as bright as all that. Quite a looker though”, using his sleeve to wipe the froth from his mouth. “Guess she’ll make somebody a good wife. Don’t know what her cooking is like but expect in time she’ll be a good mum too.”

“That’s all you think we’re fit for isn’t it, boss. I don’t know why you’ve tolerated me all these years when you clearly think I should be at home in the kitchen.”

“No, you’re the exception, Daisy. You keep me on the straight and narrow. And you come up with the occasional bright idea. Look at the Boris Trump case. It was you who thought it could have been the butler who killed the au pair.”

“Well you were obsessed with the golf-playing husband and I couldn’t shift the idea from your mind. But what about this case? It’s so complex isn’t it? What do you think Amanda will be up to now?”

“Well I think she will be muttering to herself – at police college we were taught to concentrate on means, method and motive and”

“Let me stop you there, boss. We have the method, well methods, because they are all different. But what possible motive could there have been?”

“Oh drink up, Daisy; I’m sure little Miss Memory Stick will have solved it by the time we get back.”

“I’m pleased you remember that it is called a memory stick – there’s hope for you yet,” she teased.

They lingered longer than they should have done over another couple of drinks and the pasty and the sandwich that Daisy had finally decided on. Daisy found it hard to make choices in life and although choosing something from a rather limited menu was hardly life changing, she still found it difficult. Had her husband been there, she would probably have chosen whatever he was having, as long as it wasn't a pasty and a pint.

Eventually they rose from the table, called a cheery farewell to the barman and slowly made for the door. It was a little warmer outside than it had been earlier and they ambled back to the office, enjoying the weak winter sunshine.

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Going down the steps to the basement, DI Richard Marsh wondered whether he should have had that final pint. He stumbled several times, finding it necessary to grab the handrail. DS Daisy Lynton giggled and it wasn't entirely clear whether it was because she thought the incident rather amusing or whether it was a result of the sherry she'd had after the cider.

They pushed open the heavy door.

"Cracked it then, Wayne?" asked the DI. Had he taken more notice of Amanda and not been occupied with dusting crumbs from his clothing, he would have noticed two things: one that she was beaming from ear to ear; and two that she was waving a very creased flyer at him.

"What's that, constable," stuttered Daisy.

Alerted by the question, the DI looked at Amanda. "What've you got there, Wayne?" he asked.

"It's a flyer, sir sorry, boss."

"Oh, going out on the lash tonight are you? Who's the lucky bloke?"

"Or lass" chortled the DS, "you've got to be careful what you say these days, boss."

"Always careful, me" the DI replied.

"No, sir. This is relevant to the case – in fact I think I've solved it" she exclaimed triumphantly.

"Oh, sure you have. A little upstart like you solved a case that's baffled the best police brains for years? I don't think so. What is that anyway? It just looks like a crumpled piece of paper. Where did you find?"

"It was screwed up in the bottom of that cardboard box and it throws light on the whole thing."

"I told you the answer would be in that box and on paper. Can't beat it. So what is it, then. Spit it out, Wayne."

"Well, sir, it's a flyer advertising something special taking place at Cricket St Stephen that weekend."

"What was it, a Stand-up Comic Convention? Or Strictly Come Dancing? Or a Singles Weekend?"

"No, sir", and I think you may need to sit down to hear this.

The DI did what she suggested, pleased to have something firm beneath him that would stop him swaying.

"Right, I'm all ears. Let me have it with both barrels."

Amanda spoke loudly and slowly, whilst holding the flyer aloft: "It was a Murder Mystery weekend!"

The DI & the DS leapt into the air shouting: "No, really. So it wasn't a massacre after all!"

The DI continued: "Well, you really have cracked it, Wayne. Well done. Superb. Mind you, I thought it was something like that all along."

All three of them started shaking each other's hands, almost dancing round the office.

"Well, on the strength of that, let's see what the next case is," said the DI scrabbling in the cardboard box.

"What about this one? A body, dragged from the river Cherwell in Oxford" the rest of the sentence was drowned out by the two women shouting: "Oh no, ARE YOU SURE THAT'S NOT FICTION TOO?"