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Opening Extract from...

The Ghost Fields

Written by Elly Griffiths

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I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
And Echo there, whatever is ask'd her, answers 'Death.'

Alfred Tennyson, *Maud*

PROLOGUE

July 2013

It is the hottest summer for years. A proper heatwave, the papers say. But Barry West doesn't pay much attention to weather forecasts. He wears the same clothes winter and summer, jeans and an England t-shirt. It's sweaty in the cab of the digger, but he doesn't really mind. Being a man is all about sweat; anyone who washes too much is either foreign or worse. It doesn't occur to him that women don't exactly find his odour enticing. He's forty and he hasn't had a girlfriend for years.

But he's content, this July day. The Norfolk sky is a hot, hard blue and the earth, when exposed in the jaws of the digger, is pale, almost white. The yellow vehicle moves steadily to and fro, churning up the stones and coarse grass. Barry doesn't know, and he certainly doesn't care, that people have fought hard over this patch of land, now scheduled for development by Edward Spens and Co. In fact the Romans battled the Iceni on these same fields and, nearly two thousand years later,

Royalist forces engaged in bitter hand-to-hand combat with Cromwell's army. But today, Barry and his digger are alone under the blazing sun, their only companions the seagulls that follow their progress, swooping down on the freshly turned soil.

It's hard work. The land is uneven – which is why it has lain waste for so long – pitted with craters and gullies. In the winter, these fissures fill with water and the field becomes almost a lake interspersed with islands of grass. But now, after a month of good weather, it's a lunar landscape, dry and desolate. Barry manoeuvres the digger up and down, singing tunelessly.

It's at the bottom of one of these craters that the digger scrapes against metal. Barry swears and goes into reverse. The seagulls swirl above him. Their cries sound caustic, as if they are laughing. Barry gets out of the cab.

The sun is hotter than ever. It beats down on his baseball cap and he wipes the sweat from his eyes. An object is protruding from the ground, something grey and somehow threatening, like a shark's fin. Barry stares at the obstacle. It has a look of permanence, as if it has lain in the earth for a very long time. He bends down and scrapes some soil away with his hands. He sees that the fin is part of a larger object, far bigger than he imagined at first. The more earth he removes, the more metal is revealed. It gleams dully in the sun.

Barry stands back. Edward Spens wants this field cleared. Barry's foreman stressed that the work needs to be done as soon as possible, 'before the crazies get wind of it'. If he

carries on, his digger will tear and crush the metal object. Or the unseen enemy will defeat him and the digger (property of Edward Spens and Co) will be damaged. Suddenly, unexpectedly, Barry remembers a book that was read to him at school about a vast man made of iron who is found in a junk yard. Just for a second he imagines that lying beneath the soil there is a sleeping metal giant who will rise up and crush him in its digger-like jaws. But wasn't the Iron Man in the story a goodie? He can't remember. Barry climbs into the cab and gets a spade. The ground is hard but the earth moves fairly easily. Barry labours away, his t-shirt sticking to his back, until he reaches something else, something even bigger. Breathing heavily, he puts the spade down and wipes away soil with his hands. Then he encounters something that isn't metal. It's glass, clogged with dirt and almost opaque. But Barry, driven by something which he doesn't quite understand, clears a space so that he can peer through.

A scream makes the seagulls rise into the air. It is a few seconds before Barry realises that he was the one who had screamed. And he almost does so again as he stumbles away from the buried giant.

Because, when he looked through the window, someone was looking back at him.

Not far away, across the fields where the Romans marched in orderly lines and the Royalist troops fled in disarray, Ruth Galloway is also digging. But this is altogether a more organised process. Teams of students labour over neatly dug trenches, marked out with string and measuring tape. Ruth

moves from trench to trench, offering advice, dusting soil away from an object that might be a fragment of pottery or even a bone. She is happy. When she started this summer dig for her students, she was aware of the area's history, of course. She expected to find something, some Roman pottery maybe or even a coin or two. But, two days into the excavation, they made a really significant discovery. A body, which Ruth thinks might date from the Bronze Age, some two thousand years before the Romans.

The skeleton, buried in the chalky ground, isn't preserved as bodies found in peat are preserved. Five years ago, Ruth found the body of an Iron Age girl buried in the marshy soil near her house. That body had been almost perfect, suspended in time, hands bound with mistletoe rope, head partly shaved. Ruth had been able to look at that girl and know her story. This body is different and Ruth can't be sure of its age (she has sent samples for carbon-14 testing, though even that can be skewed by as many as a hundred years) but the skeleton is in the crouched position typical of Bronze Age burials and there are fragments of pottery nearby which look like examples of so-called Beaker ware. Beaker burials, which date back about four thousand years, are often distinguished by rounded barrows but there have been examples of flat grave sites too. Besides, the mound could easily have been destroyed by ploughing.

She excavated the bones yesterday, after photographing the skeleton, drawing it in plan and filling in a skeleton sheet for every bone. From the pelvic bones she thinks that the body is female but she hopes to be able to extract enough

DNA to make sure of this. Isotopic testing will indicate the woman's diet; her bones and teeth will tell the story of any disease or periods of malnutrition. Soon Ruth will know some of the answers, but she already feels a link with the woman who died so long ago. Standing in the field with the air shimmering in the heat, she allows herself a moment's satisfaction. It's a good job this and not a bad life, digging up the past under this high clear sky. It could be a lot worse. Her parents had wanted her to be an accountant.

'Ruth!' Ruth recognises the voice but she's in a good enough mood for it not to be dented by the appearance of her boss, Phil Trent. Even though he's wearing safari shorts.

'Hallo, Phil.'

'Found anything else?'

Honestly, isn't one Bronze Age body enough for him? It's one more than he has ever discovered. But, despite her irritation, Ruth secretly shares his hope that there might be more bodies buried under this soil. The position of the skeleton and the presence of beaker pottery indicate that this was a formal ritual burial. Could this be a barrow cemetery? If so, there will be others.

'Not yet,' says Ruth. She takes a swig from her water bottle. She can't remember a hotter day in Norfolk. Her cotton trousers are sticking to her legs and she is sure that her face is bright red.

'Anyway,' says Phil, 'I've had a thought.'

'Yes?' Ruth tries not to look too excited at this news.

'You know the English Heritage DNA project?'

'Yes.'

'Well, why not get them to include our body? We could test all the locals to see if they're any relation to him.'

'Her.'

'What?'

'Remember I said I thought it was a woman's skeleton?'

'Oh yes. Anyway, what do you think? It could really put UNN on the map.'

Putting UNN, the University of North Norfolk, on the map is an obsession with Phil. Privately, Ruth thinks that it would take more than a bit of Bronze Age DNA. But it's not a bad idea. The DNA project has been set up to discover if there are any links between prehistoric bodies and the local population. Norfolk, where the rural population is remarkably stable, would be an ideal testing ground.

'It's a thought,' says Ruth. 'Do you think they'd be interested?'

'Well, I spoke to someone from English Heritage this afternoon and they seemed keen.'

It is typical of Phil that, while ostensibly asking Ruth's advice, he has already set the plan in motion. Still, a hunger for publicity is not a bad attribute in a head of department.

'Do you want to have a look at today's finds?' asks Ruth. Although she excavated the skeleton yesterday and bagged up the bones herself, there are still a few interesting objects emerging from the trench.

Phil pulls a face. 'It's awfully hot,' he says, as if the weather is Ruth's fault.

'Is it?' says Ruth, pushing back her damp hair 'I hadn't noticed.'

Phil looks at her quizzically. He doesn't always get irony unless he's concentrating. Ruth is saved from elaborating by the buzz of her phone.

'Excuse me.'

When she sees 'Nelson' on the screen, her heart beats slightly faster. It's because I'm worried that it'll be about Kate, she tells herself. You can believe anything if you try hard enough. But, of course, it's a police matter. Ruth is seconded to North Norfolk's Serious Crimes Unit as a forensic archaeologist. It makes Phil very jealous.

'Ruth.' Typically Nelson does not waste time on the niceties. 'Where are you?'

'Near Hunstanton.'

'Oh good. You're in the area. That's handy.'

For whom? thinks Ruth but Nelson is still talking.

'Some builder has found a plane buried in a field near there.'

'A plane?'

'Yes. Probably from the Second World War. There are a few old RAF bases around here.'

'Well, you don't need me to dig out a plane.'

'The thing is, the pilot's still inside.'

A few minutes later Ruth is driving along the Hunstanton road with Phil at her side. She can't remember asking her head of department to join her but, somehow, there he is, wincing when Radio 4 blares out from the radio and asking her why she can't afford a new car. 'After all, your book was quite a success. Haven't you got a contract for another one?'

Ruth's book, about a dig in Lancashire, came out last year and has indeed attracted some praise in the scholarly journals. It was very far from being a best-seller though, and – after the advance has been earned out – her royalties will hardly contribute anything to her income. The book has made her mother proud, though, which is a miracle in itself.

'I like this car,' she says.

'It's a rust bucket,' says Phil. 'Why don't you buy one of those cool Fiat 500s? Shona's got one in ice blue.'

Ruth grinds her teeth. Fiat 500s are undoubtedly cool and Shona probably has one to match every one of her retro Boden frocks. Shona, Phil's partner and another university lecturer, is probably Ruth's best friend in Norfolk but that doesn't mean that Ruth wants to hear how cool and chic she is. She's quite happy with her old Renault, thank you very much. Who asked Phil to sit in it anyway?

She can see the field from a long way away. The digger perches precariously on a slope and next to it stand three men, one of whom is, unmistakably even from a distance, Nelson. Ruth parks the rust bucket by the gate and walks across the baked earth towards the group. Phil follows, complaining about the heat and people who are selfish enough to have cars without air conditioning.

Nelson sees her first. 'Here she is. Why have you brought Phil with you?'

Ruth loves the way he puts this. Phil would undoubtedly believe that he brought Ruth with him.

'He didn't want to miss the fun. Is this it?'

Her question is superfluous. Three-quarters of a wing

and half a cockpit lie exposed at the bottom of the shallow pit.

'American,' says Nelson. 'I can tell by the markings.'

Ruth shoots him a look. She thinks that Nelson would have been just the sort of boy to collect models of Second World War fighter planes.

'There was an American airbase near here,' says one of the other men. 'At Lockwell Heath.' Ruth recognises him as Edward Spens, a local property developer whom she encountered on an earlier case. Spens is tall and good-looking; his air of authority is only slightly dented by the fact that he's wearing tennis clothes. The third man, dressed in jeans and a filthy football top, stands slightly aside as if to imply that none of this is *his* fault. Ruth guesses that he must be the digger driver.

She looks at the exposed soil. It has a faintly blue tinge. She kneels down and scoops some earth in her hand, giving it a surreptitious sniff.

'What are you doing?' asks Phil. Clearly he's terrified that she's going to embarrass him.

'Fuel,' she says. 'Can't you smell it? And look at the blue marks on the soil. That's corroded aluminium. Did you have any idea that this plane was here?'

It is Edward Spens who answers. 'Some children found some engine parts in the field long ago, I believe. But no one had any idea that *this* was buried here, almost intact.'

Ruth looks at the cockpit. Although dented and corroded it looks remarkably undamaged, lying almost horizontally at the foot of the crater. She's no geometry expert but wouldn't

you expect the prow of a crashed plane to be at a steeper angle?

'Where's the body?' she asks.

'Sitting in the cockpit,' says Edward Spens. 'It gave Barry here quite a turn, I can tell you.'

'Still got his bloody cap on,' Barry mutters.

Ruth kneels down and peers through the cockpit window. She can see exactly why Barry had such a shock. Sitting in the pilot's seat is a ghastly leathery figure, still dressed in the remnants of uniform, like some terrible joke about a delayed flight. Perched on the skull is a cap; the material has almost rotted away but the peak remains.

Ruth sits back on her heels.

'It's odd,' she says, almost to herself.

'What's odd?' asks Nelson. Alone of the men he doesn't seem to be suffering from the heat, though he is wearing his usual working clothes of blue open-neck shirt and dark trousers. Ruth, who hasn't seen him for a few weeks, thinks that he looks almost insultingly well, as if finding a body entombed in a plane is the ideal way to spend a summer day. She wonders if he's going away on holiday this year. That's the other part of his life; the part she can never really know.

'The soil is loose,' says Ruth. 'As if it's been disturbed recently.'

'Of course it's been disturbed,' says the driver. 'I drove a bloody digger through it, didn't I?' Spens makes a move as if to disassociate himself from the bad language but it takes more than that to offend Ruth when she's in her professional mode.

'The layers have been disturbed lower down,' she says. 'It's hot, not much rain; you'd expect the particles to be packed close together. And that's another thing. The topsoil is clay but there are chalk layers below. Chalk preserves bone but this body still has some skin on it. Look.'

Nelson leans forward. 'It's like that other body you found. The one on the Saltmarsh.'

Ruth looks at him. 'Yes. The skin preservation's typical of bodies found in bogs, not in chalky soil like this. The way the pilot's sitting too, hands on the joystick, it's almost as if he's been posed.'

Ruth leans in closer. She doesn't want to touch anything until they can do a proper excavation. Behind her, she can hear Nelson telling Spens that the field is now a crime scene.

'The thing is,' says Spens in his most confidential voice, 'we're rather up against it here. There's been a bit of ill-feeling about this location and I'd like to get the land cleared as quickly as possible.'

'I can't help that,' says Nelson. 'I have to get a SOCO team here and Doctor Galloway will need at least a day to excavate the body. Isn't that right, Ruth?'

'Scene of the Crime team?' says Spens. 'Isn't that going a bit far? I mean the poor chap obviously crashed his plane into this field during the war, seventy years ago. Must have landed in the chalk pit and been covered by a landslide or something. It's not as if there's been a crime or anything.'

'I'm afraid you're wrong,' says Ruth, standing up.

'What do you mean?' says Spens, sounding offended.

'I think a crime may have taken place.'

'What makes you think that, Ruth?' asks Phil implying, by his tone, that he is likely to side with the local captain of industry rather than his colleague.

'There's a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead,' says Ruth.