Corn Dolls

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Extract

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The boy was tall, with almond-shaped eyes.

In summer, his school had a tour of a hangar-shaped building named The Hall of Soviet Achievement. The young comrades saw a cosmonaut's spacesuit, a plan for new housing, and a row of farm tractors produced by the machinery factory in their city. Then the group moved on to view the statistics for wheat production.

The boy held back from the others, preferring to stay with the tractors. He had a reason. She was the leader of the Socialist Girls' Pioneers, and she was three years older than him.

The hangar was warm with the grainy heat of Russian summer, dust in the air between them. She put a finger to his lips and smiled. She loosened his collar. It was quiet, just his heart thumping. He held her against the huge rubber wheel of a Soviet tractor, and put his hands around her waist. There was the tang of the new tyre, engine oil, the clean scent of her hair.

He thought: my life will be good.

Monday Morning

Tom Fletcher loosened his tie. His neck felt damp, due partly to the summer heat. He watched the photographer take another shot, using flash despite the sunlight streaming through glass panels in the roof. The photographer stood back and turned to him.

'Is that the worst you've seen?'

Fletcher nodded. In eight years with the Cambridge police, it was the nastiest death he'd encountered. He brushed a fly away from his face.

He was standing in a large hangar-type building used as a showroom for farm machinery. In front of him was a line of yellow tape set up by the accident investigators, then a half-circle of tractors for sale. The pairs of headlamps all seemed to be watching something.

There was a different machine in the centre of the group. It was a heavy-duty mechanical shredder, designed for cutting up tree branches – really just a set of blades inside a chute that a man could fit into. A man had. A pair of legs was projecting from it, the feet twisted at unnatural angles. Fletcher noticed something puzzling.

The shoes. He studied the shoes.

The legs belonged to a young guy named Jake Skerrit, aged twenty-two and fresh out of university. Jake had worked as a management trainee for Breakman Machinery, a farm equipment dealer in the fenland north of Cambridge. The staff all agreed that Jake was a hard worker who did paperwork in the depot on Sunday nights. They added that he liked fooling around with dangerous machines. Today being Monday, his corpse had been found by the security man who unlocked the building in the morning.

The body wasn't completely shredded, because a safety system had kicked in when the blades finally reached his shoulders. So the face, wedged up against the steel intake, was still partially intact – but the blades had destroyed his arms and taken a big chunk from the side of his skull. The floor on the other side of the chute, where the machine would normally spit out its wood chips, was spattered with human debris: hair, bits of bone, two complete fingers, a shirt cuff and something that looked to Fletcher like an earlobe. Under the shredder itself, a circle of blood was in the final stage of thickening, like road tar. The flies were really gathering.

Fletcher was fascinated by Jake's shoes.

He guessed the Health and Safety people would try to prosecute, because the Breakman staff habitually left machines with keys in the ignition. Still, the death seemed like a genuine accident – one to add to the sixty other deaths involving farm machinery that happen each year in Britain. A police surgeon had attended as a formality, and a post-mortem was

booked. Fletcher had other cases pending, and maybe he should have left this alone – maybe his presence should have been just another formality – but the shoes wouldn't let him.

He watched as the investigators in their white paper suits rolled up the tape, and the photographer began packing away his kit. Two morose-looking individuals came into the hangar, men known to the police as the Glum Reapers: specialised operatives from an undertaker in Cambridge. One was carrying a body bag, and the other was swinging a shovel.

Fletcher turned away, still thinking about the shoes. He glanced up at the CCTV camera bolted to the wall, perfectly placed to record the death, its red light blinking.

Breakman Machinery had closed for the day, and the staff had been interviewed and sent home, white-faced. The only employee still present was waiting in the security office, one of the simple rooms along the front of the hangar. Fletcher watched him for a second through the glass door panel.

He was a florid, overweight man in his sixties, wearing a checked sports jacket. He was sitting hunched over, with one hand caressing his bald forehead and the other hand dangling a cigarette. He was talking to himself and shaking his head. Fletcher opened the door slightly, and the man didn't notice. He was saying, repeatedly, 'Too bloody close.'

The room was small, with breeze-block walls painted white. It contained three stacking chairs, a

basic desk and a steel cupboard. When Fletcher opened the door fully, there was a smell of whisky that made him wince. It was a peculiarity of his: he found the smell of alcohol painful. He sat on one of the chairs, far enough away to avoid the man's breath, and he said, 'I'm Detective Inspector Tom Fletcher of the Cambridge police. I understand you found the body.'

'Yes – I'm Ron Teversham, the security. More of a caretaker, really. I just lock up and open up.'

Two unusual things about this security man. First, he wanted to downgrade his own importance. And second, he'd been crying.

'You're very upset, Ron.'

'It's the shock of seeing it. Finding him like that, the state of him.'

'How well did you know him?'

'First-name terms. That's the job.'

'Why do you think he did it? Why start up a dangerous machine?'

Ron tried to laugh. 'Jake loved machines, that was his problem. He was always playing around with them.'

'Just now you were saying he was too bloody close.'

Ron jerked his face up. For a moment, his red eyes filled with tears again.

'To the machine. Too close to the shredder, it drags you in.'

'Tell me about him. Was he a wealthy young man?'

'Wealthy? You're joking. He had debts and stuff, loans and overdrafts.' Teversham stopped himself suddenly. 'Why are you asking? It was a bloody accident. Everyone knows, he was fooling around.'

'What kind of shoes did he wear?'

'Shoes? Just old trainers, he was skint.' Ron's eyes slid over to the hangar, where the Glum Reapers were making long scrapes that echoed around the building. 'It was an accident, right?'

'Nothing to suggest otherwise. But we'll know in a minute.'

'How will we?'

'We'll look at the CCTV.'

Teversham tried to laugh again. He turned and opened the steel cupboard. The recording system consisted of a ten-year-old VCR wired into an even older TV. The slot of the recorder gaped empty, and Teversham put his yellow fingers inside it as he said, 'There isn't always a cassette in there. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.'

'Last night?'

'No. I didn't put one in on Friday. Look, if they sack me, I'm stuffed.'

Fletcher watched him for a while, wondering if he really was that incompetent. Then he said, 'Ron, why isn't the manager *here*? There's been a death on the premises.'

'Breakman? He's away on a freebie. Caterpillar took all the dealers to Jersey to show them a new tractor. Paid for the hotel and everything, Breakman even took his wife. Can you believe that? Money to piss away and they still get free weekends.' That finally made Ron laugh: a violent sound that drowned out the scraping from the hangar. He threw his cigarette on the cement floor and opened the packet for another. 'Smoke?' He

offered. 'No? Stay in shape, use the gym? You look like it. That what the birds like these days?' He lit his fag with unsteady hands. 'I've phoned the Breakmans already. First plane they can get back on is tomorrow morning.'

'What are their names?'

'He's Crispin Breakman. She's Olga. Married four months, isn't that nice?' Ron stopped himself again, and his eyes moved back to the hangar. 'Please, can I go? It was just an accident.'

Fletcher watched him a little while longer.

★

The huge machinery factory in the city of Stavropol was called the Niva Works. Between it and the workers' accommodation there was a water reservoir. In winter, when the temperature dropped to minus thirty, it froze into a block of ice that the kids could slide across. In summer they used it for swimming, and diving off the concrete walls.

The boy grew up that summer, before the winter when his life changed. He began to believe in himself. He'd kissed the leader of the Socialist Girls' Pioneers. He could swim across the reservoir and back. He could somersault off the embankment.

Once, while he was treading water getting his breath, the best friend of the leader of the Socialist Girls' Pioneers swam slowly past him. She was gymnastics champion of the Stavropol schools, and her hair trailed slick on the glare of the water. He felt her foot brush the base of his spine, and when he turned he caught the flash in her violet eyes, half-closed in the sun.

He thought, my whole life will be like this. It's going to get better and better.

He was eleven years old.

★

Jake Skerrit's office was another white-painted space: five metres square, lit by a small window and a strip light, clean and neat. Jake's files along one wall, his desk against the other. The desk held a terminal, a framed degree certificate from Anglia Polytechnic University, and a small pile of paperwork.

The scraping noises from the hangar stopped completely. In the silence, Fletcher turned the papers over. He found invoices and schedules of machinery deliveries. He opened the drawer of the cheap desk. He found more invoices and oddments of stationery. There was a box of matches with the name of some local eating place. Then, right at the back, a small book.

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