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Stratton's War

Laura Wilson

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Extract

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ONE

A child saw her first.

June 1940, Fitzrovia: five o'clock, and the sky overcast. The boy, six years old, had been running half-heartedly up and down the empty street, pretending to be an aeroplane, but it wasn't much good without the others. He'd been delighted when his mother came to take him away from the farm, with its pig-faced owner and the huge smelly animals that still chased him, snorting and steaming, through nightmares. His mother, smothering for the first few days, had soon tired of him under her feet and turned him outdoors to play, and three months on, with most of his friends still evacuated and his old school requisitioned by the ARP, he was bored.

He picked up a stick and ran it up and down the iron railings in front of the tall houses, then turned the corner and, sighing, sat down on the kerb and pulled both his socks up, hard.

Raising his head, he saw a sack of something draped over a set of railings further down. It hadn't been there when he'd run down the road after his dinner, he was sure. He dawdled along for a closer look. It wasn't a sack, but a woman, impaled on the sharp black spikes. He stared at her, uncomprehending. Face down, her dress was caught up round her waist, and he could see her drawers. He extended a finger and poked her shoulder. Under the slippery material, she felt scraggy and bony, like the meat his mother sent him to fetch from the butcher's. She seemed to have two lots of hair, one short, brown and stiff looking, on the back of her head, and the other, longer and yellow. This top hair had slipped forwards, hanging down on either side of her face so that he couldn't see what she looked like. He considered this for a moment, then looked down at the pavement, where a number of little round white

things were scattered. He picked one up and rolled it between his fingers – hard and shiny. A sweet? He put it in his mouth, sucking first, then testing it against his teeth. It felt slightly rough when he bit it, but tasted of nothing. Spitting it into his palm, he squatted down and peered up at the face between the long yellow curls.

In shadow, upside down, one eye stared back at him. The other was closed – a long, lashless slit like a wound, its outer corner pulled upwards, as if by invisible thread. Then, with a groan, the mouth opened, a black, cavernous O, to swallow him whole.

He screamed. Someone else screamed, too, and for a moment he thought it must be the woman, bent on eating him alive. Then feet pounded towards him, and in a confusion of shouts, gasps and police whistles, an unknown hand pressed his head to an alien bosom. Howling and thrashing in terror, he was carried away down the road, pounding at his rescuer, the single pearl still clutched in his left fist.

TWO

The barrage balloons were shining in the evening sun. DI Ted Stratton squinted up at them. He felt, as he always did, comforted by their rotund, silvery serenity. Despite everything, he thought – first Norway and Denmark, then Holland, Belgium, and now France, like dominoes – it was hardly a picture of a country at war. For Stratton, the word conjured up bullet-riddled scarecrows sprawled across the wire in No Man's land, even though the Great War had ended too soon for him to be called up, leaving him unable to tell whether he was glad or sorry. That had been his brothers' war; the eldest had died. It had come as a shock to realise that, at thirty-five, and in a reserved occupation, he'd be too old for this war – for the time being, at least. He was fit enough, strong and muscular, but he certainly looked his age; a broken nose and a great deal of night duty had given him a battered, serviceable appearance. In a way, thought Stratton, this war's everybody's, even the nippers'. Terrible that it should have come to this, but exciting, that sense of something happening, of being poised in history, alone, at the very centre of the map, of the world tilting on its axis: shall we be next?

As he passed the sandbags at the hospital entrance, Stratton thought of the rumours he'd heard about the local authorities stockpiling thousands of papier-mâché coffins, and thought: soon.

Middlesex Hospital, emptied the previous September of most of its patients to make room for as yet non-existent air-raid casualties, was still quiet. Stratton's footsteps echoed on the stone stairs as he descended to Dr Byrne's underworld – the mortuary, lavatory-tiled, harshly lit and smelling of decay and chemicals. The pathologist was seated at his desk, writing notes. 'Is this an official visit?'

Stratton shook his head. 'Curiosity.'

'Won't take long, will it?'

'Just a few minutes.' Stratton neither expected nor received the offer of a seat. He'd met Dr Byrne a couple of times, and the man's manner was as chilly as the corpses he filleted. He even looked dead – not cadaverous, but there was something cold and doughy about his pale skin that suggested a freshly washed corpse.

'It's about Miss Morgan.'

'The suicide? Body's at the police mortuary.' Dr Byrne paused to knock out his pipe before shuffling through a stack of papers. 'What do you want to know?' he asked aggressively.

'Isn't it unusual, a woman throwing herself out of a window?'

'No. Women do it. Didn't she leave a note?'

'No, nothing.'

'Worried about the invasion. I've had a couple of them in the past month. Neurotic types.'

'I was wondering about where the body fell. It was the fourth floor, and the area's not that wide … I was surprised she didn't land further out, in the road.'

Byrne shrugged. 'Depends how she jumped.'

'What about her underclothes?'

'What about them?' Byrne looked at him with distaste.

'Were they clean?'

'I've no idea. She hadn't soiled herself, if that's what you mean.'

'Would you say she took care of herself?'

'She was reasonably clean.' Byrne glanced at his notes. 'Lot of scarring on the face … Burns. She'd had a skin graft. Not a very good job, by the look of it.' He looked up. 'Lot of paint. Prostitute, was she?'

Stratton tried not to sound as annoyed as he felt. 'I imagine she hoped that heavy cosmetics might hide the scars. As a matter of fact, she'd been in films.'

'There you are, then. Artistic type. Highly strung. As I said, the injuries were quite consistent with the manner of death. Now, if there's nothing else …'

Stratton marched back upstairs, irritated at the man's way of reducing everyone to a type. Just as well he didn't have to deal with living patients. Stratton wondered if Dr Byrne was married, and then, firmly suppressing an image of him in fumbling coitus atop an equally corpse-like wife, went out into the street.

As he strolled back along Savile Row – even after years out of uniform, his internal pacemaker was still set at the regulation 2½mph – Stratton thought about his first suicide, a young man who'd put the muzzle of a gun under his chin and blown most of his head into the walls of his outdoor lav. He remembered the drops of blood falling from the wooden ceiling onto his back and neck as he'd bent over to look, and a larger one on his hand that turned out to be a piece of brain. There'd been chips of skull embedded in the boards all round the toilet, pink and white, like almonds on an iced cake. Stratton had been twenty-five then, the same age as the poor bastard who'd killed himself. They'd found a note saying he was suffering from an incurable disease. Turned out he was homosexual – he'd gone for treatment, but it hadn't worked. Stratton remembered what one of the older coppers had said about it being unusual for a nancy to use a gun. 'They normally do it like women: gas or pills, and clean underwear.' The same officer had told him that the most violent way women did it was with carbolic – 'bloody painful, burns your insides out'. Everything Stratton had seen since had confirmed these rules, until yesterday. Clearly, female jumpers weren't as uncommon as he'd thought, and the underwear was inconclusive … Nevertheless, the feeling that something wasn't quite right continued to nag at him. Not that there was much he could do, it wasn't his case. It wasn't anybody's. As far as his superiors were concerned, the thing was over and done with.

Stratton breathed in the familiar station smell of soap, disinfectant and typewriter ribbons. Ballard, the young PC who'd dealt with Miss Morgan, was by the desk, admonishing Freddie the Flasher. 'I've got a weak bladder, there's nothing they can do for it, on my life …' Stratton grinned to himself: there was one in every district. Female exhibitionists, as well – there'd been one at his first posting who'd never closed her curtains when she undressed for bed. Every night at 11.30. Good looking woman, too. He'd watched her several times, a few of them had. Not that he was proud of it, but …

He waited until Ballard was finished, then nodded at Freddie's retreating back. 'Poor old sod. He can't be having much fun in the blackout.'

'No, sir.' Ballard suppressed a grin.

'You found Miss Morgan, didn't you?'

'Yes, sir.' Ballard grimaced. 'I won't forget her in a hurry, I can tell you.'

'Who was with you?'

'PC 29, sir. Arliss.'

'I see.' Fred Arliss, one of the old, horse-drawn brigade, was so incompetent that 'Arlissing around' had become station slang for ballsing something up. Stratton wondered if Ballard knew this yet, but decided not to enlighten him.

'Did either of you notice anything unusual about her?'

Ballard frowned. 'I don't know if you'd say it was unusual, but there was one thing that did strike me when we moved her – she didn't have her teeth in.'

'Didn't she?'

'No sir. Made me wonder if it wasn't some kind of accident. The window was wide open, not much of a ledge, and if she'd been leaning out … It's only a thought, sir. It just seemed to me a shame if the coroner said it was a suicide when it wasn't.'

'Certainly rough on the family.'

'She didn't have any relatives, and her husband's dead. Died in a fire. That's how she got the scars on her face. The young chap she lived with told us.'

'Young chap?' Stratton raised his eyebrows.

'Nothing like that, sir.' Ballard reddened. 'He wasn't … well … he wasn't normal.'

'A kiss not a handshake, you mean?'

Ballard looked grateful. 'Something like that, sir. It was like talking to a girl.'

'Oh, well …' Stratton shrugged. 'It takes all sorts. How are you finding it at Beak Street?' Ballard, like most of the young policemen, lived in the section house. Stratton had lived there himself years ago, when he had his first posting at Vine Street. Tiny cubicles, and never enough blankets in the winter. 'Don't suppose it's changed much, has it?'

'I shouldn't think so, sir. Do you remember her, in the films?'

'Can't say I do.'

Stratton thanked Ballard and returned to his desk to shake his head at a heap of paperwork about the Italians they were supposed to be helping to round up for internment. Bloody ridiculous, he

thought, staring at the list of names. It came from MI5, and they hadn't screened anybody so, basically, every Gino, Maria and Mario who'd come to Britain after 1919 was for it, even if they had sons or brothers serving in the army. Not to mention attacks on Italian businesses … Admittedly, it was an easy way to get rid of some of the gangs, although, with the Sabini Brothers safely out of the way, the Yiddishers and the Malts would have the run of Soho, which would mean shifting alliances – accompanied by a fair bit of violence – until everyone settled down again. Not that the Jews were having an easy time of it, either. Stratton sighed. It wasn't the criminals he felt sorry for, it was the poor bastards who were trying to make an honest living and getting bricks chucked through their windows. Not to mention all the stories in the papers about Jews profiteering and evading the call up.

He tried to concentrate, but the missing teeth bothered him. Byrne hadn't thought to mention it. But if Mabel Morgan had painted her face, why hadn't she put in her teeth? Surely that would come first. Stratton had his own teeth, and he'd never tried applying lipstick, but it had to be easier with them than without them. He tried to shrug the problem away, but it kept coming back. On the way home, he made a mental note to ask his wife if she remembered Mabel Morgan. Women were better at things like that.