The Victoria Vanishes

Christopher Fowler

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Extract

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PECULIAR CRIMES UNIT

1b Hampstead Rd
London NW1 0JP

DUTY ROSTER FOR MONDAY 26th FEBRUARY

Raymond Land, *Acting Temporary Unit Chief*

Arthur Bryant, *Senior Detective*

John May, *Senior Detective*

Janice Longbright, *Detective Sergeant*

Dan Banbury, *Crime Scene Manager/Information Technology*

Giles Kershaw, *Forensics/Pathology*

Meera Mangeshkar, *Detective Constable*

Colin Bimsley, *Detective Constable*

April May, *Office Manager/Liaison*

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE OFFICE WILL BE CLOSING AT 4.00 P.M. TODAY, IN ORDER TO ALLOW STAFF TO ATTEND THE FUNERAL OF OUR PATHOLOGIST, OSWALD ELIAS FINCH.

A NON-DENOMINATIONAL SERVICE WILL BE CONDUCTED AT ST PANCRAS OLD CHURCH AT 4.30 P.M.

DRINKS WILL BE SERVED UPSTAIRS AT THE DEVEREUX PUB, OFF ESSEX STREET, THE STRAND, FROM 6.00 P.M.

IN ACCORDANCE WITH MR FINCH'S WISHES, PLEASE DO NOT SEND FLOWERS TO THE CHURCH. INSTEAD, YOU CAN MAKE CONTRIBUTIONS TO:

C/O NHS Trust Ward ES
Psychiatric Unit
Broadhampton Hospital
Lavender Hill
London
SE5 8AZ

STAFF BULLETINS

We are in the process of clearing out the Bayham Street Morgue and refitting it as a Grade 4 'Secure Hygiene' area, so personal items may no longer be kept here. This notice especially applies to the person who left a box of Maynard's 'Olde Tyme' wine gums and a jar of Branston Pickle in one of the cadaver drawers.

Next Monday the PCU Film Club will be showing *It Always Rains on Sunday* with Googie Withers. This was Sergeant Longbright's choice, so all those who were expecting a screening of the new Martin Scorsese film should address their complaints to her.

Please read the new recommended guidelines on suspect searches and confiscation of property. Suspects have rights, apparently, even if you think they might have cut off someone's head and left it in their fridge. Don't blame me, I don't make the rules.

This Thursday's evening class, to be given by Raymond Land on 'Policework and the Power of Positive Thinking', has been cancelled due to lack of interest.

Please note that sardines in sunflower oil do not agree with Crippen, as the person who stacked their outgoing mail near his litter tray will discover to their disadvantage.

I

ASLEEP IN THE STARS

She had four and a half minutes left to live.

She sat alone at the cramped bar of the Seven Stars and stared forlornly into her third empty glass of the evening, feeling invisible.

The four-hundred-year-old public house was tucked behind the Royal Courts of Justice. It had been simply furnished with a few small tables, wooden settles and framed posters of old British courtroom movies. Miss Curtis had been coming here for years, ever since she had first become a legal secretary, but every time she walked through the door, she imagined her father's disapproval of her drinking alone in a London pub. It wasn't something a vicar's daughter should do.

Hemmed in by barristers and clerks, she could not help wondering if this was all that would be left for her now. She wanted to remain in employment, but companies had grown clever about making women of a certain age redundant. After her last pay-off, she had spent time

working for a philosophical society instead of heading back into another large firm. Now she was waiting for – what exactly? Someone to surprise her, someone to appreciate her, someone –

She stared back into the melting ice cubes.

Her name was Naomi, but her colleagues called her Miss Curtis. What was the point of having an exotic name if nobody used it? She was sturdy-beamed and rather plain, with thick arms and a straight fringe of greying hair, so perhaps Curtis suited her better. If she had married, perhaps she would have gained a more appealing surname. She regretted having nothing to show for the past except the passing marks of time.

She checked the message on her mobile again. It was brief and unsigned, but casual acquaintances sometimes called and suggested a drink, then failed to turn up; the legal profession was like that. Looking around the bar, she saw no one she recognized. Friends usually knew where to find her.

'Give me another Gordon's, darling. Better make it a double.'

Adorable boy, she thought. The barman was impossibly slim, probably not much older than twenty-one, and didn't regard her with pity, just gave her the same friendly smile he bestowed on everyone else. Probably Polish; the ones who worked in bars now were quick to show pleasure, and had a rather old-fashioned politeness about them that she admired.

She touched her hair back into place and watched him at work. She would never eat alone in a restaurant, but taking a drink by herself in a pub was different. Nobody knew her past here, or cared. There were no tourists in for

once, just the Friday-night after-office crowd jammed into the tiny narrow rooms and spread out across the pavement on an unnaturally warm winter night. It would have to be a lot colder than this to stop the city boys from drinking outside.

When she noticed him, it seemed he had been standing at her side for a while, trying to get served. 'Here,' she said, pushing back her stool. 'Get in while you can.'

'Thanks.' He had a nice profile, but quickly turned his head from her, probably through shyness. He was a lot younger than she was, slightly built, with long brown hair that fell across his face. There was something distantly recognizable about him. 'Can I get you one while I'm here?' he asked.

Rather a common voice, she thought. *South London. But familiar in the way that certain men belong in pubs. Someone I've talked to after a few gins?*

'Go on, then, I'll have another Gordon's, plenty of ice.'

He slid the drink over to her, looking around. 'I wonder if it's always this crowded.'

'Pretty much. Don't even think about finding your way to the toilets, they're up those stairs.' She pointed to the steep wooden passageway where a pair of tall prosecutors were making a meal out of having to squeeze past each other.

He muttered something, but it was lost in a burst of raucous laughter behind them.

'I'm sorry, what did you say?' she asked.

'I said it feels like home in here.' He turned to her. She tried not to stare.

'My home was never like this.'

'You know what I mean. Cosy. Warm. Sort of friendly.'

Is he just being friendly, she thought, *or is it something else?* He was standing rather too close to her, and even though it was nice to feel the heat of his arm against her shoulder, it was not what she wanted. In a pub like this everyone's space was invaded; trespass was part of the attraction. But she did not want – was not looking for – anything else, other than another drink, and then another.

He showed no inclination to move away. Perhaps he was lonely, a stranger in town. He liked the pubs around here, he told her – Penderel's Oak, the Old Mitre, the Punch Tavern, the Crown and Sugarloaf.

'Seen the displays in the window outside this place?' he asked.

She turned and saw the swinging pub sign above the door: seven gold-painted stars arranged in a circle. The wind was rising. In the windows below, legal paraphernalia had been arranged in dusty tableaux.

'Wigs and gowns, dock briefs. All that stuff for defending criminals, nonces and grasses.' He spoke quickly, almost angrily. She couldn't help wondering if he'd had trouble with the police. 'I used to meet my girlfriend in pubs like this. After she left me I got depressed, thought of topping myself. That's why I keep this.' He dug in his pocket and showed her a slender alloy capsule, a shiny bullet with his name etched on to the side. 'A mate smuggled it in for me as a reminder. It's live ammunition. If things get too much I'd use it on myself, no problem. Only I haven't got a gun.' He'd soon finished his beer. 'Get you another?'

She wanted more gin but demurred, protested, pushing her stool back several inches. He seemed dangerous, unpredictable, in the wrong pub. He took her right arm by

the elbow and guided it back on to the bar with a smile, but gripped so firmly that she had no choice. She looked around; most of the standing men and women had their backs to her, and were lost in their own conversations. Even the barman was facing away. A tiny, crowded pub, the safest place she could imagine, and yet she suddenly felt trapped.

'I really don't want another drink. In fact I think I have to – ' Was she raising her voice to him? If so, no one had noticed.

'This is a good place. Nice and busy. I think you should stay. I want you to stay.'

'Then you have to let go – ' But his grip tightened. She reached out with her left hand to attract the attention of the barman but he was moving further away.

'You have to let go – '

It was ridiculous, she was surrounded by people but the noise of laughter and conversation was drowning her out. The crush of customers made her even more invisible. He was hurting her now. She tried to squirm out of his grip.

Something stung her face hard. She brought her free hand to her cheek, but there was nothing. It felt like an angry wasp, trapped and maddened in the crowded room. Wasn't it too early in the year for such insects?

And then he released her arm, and she was dropping, through the beery friendship of the bar, away from the laughter and yeasty warmth of life, into a place of icy, infinite starlight.

Into death.