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Opening Extract from...

Down Among the Dead Men

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Down Among the Dead Men

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PROLOGUE

Never in a million years did I think I would end up in a job like this. Although I had worked in the NHS for over a decade, it had been as a carer for people with learning disabilities, a very different life. For the last few months I had been feeling bored and had come to realize that I was never going to make a career out of it. The NHS is a good organization to work for, though; I did not want to leave the pension scheme that I had been paying into for so long and that was mounting up nicely by the year. While I was scanning the intranet pages at work one day, a job caught my eye. It was intriguing and I had to reread it again and again. The vacancy was for a trainee MTO – Medical Technical Officer – at a local Gloucestershire hospital, and I thought that the title alone sounded interesting. It involved working in the hospital mortuary. It did not go into too much detail but the word ‘cadaver’ was used a lot. Despite having no experience of working with dead people and no real thought about how I would cope, I decided that I had nothing to lose and would give it a go and apply. I like things that are different, not run of the mill, and this job certainly seemed to fit that bill.

A few weeks passed and I pressed on with my job, putting the MTO (incidentally, MTOs are now called Anatomical Pathology

Technicians, or APTs) post to the back of my mind, all the while thinking I'd have no chance because I had no experience whatsoever. I was educated above the standard required, but I've always thought that knowledge is nothing over experience. To my surprise, though, I eventually received an invitation to attend one of the mortuaries in Gloucestershire for an informal interview. I figured this would be for a look around while it was quiet to see how I felt in a mortuary environment, but how wrong I was.

On arriving at the pathology department at the hospital, I was asked to take a seat in the reception waiting area as several candidates were attending and we would all be shown around together: this job was obviously more popular than I had thought. On entering the waiting area, I saw a woman dressed from head to toe in black gothic clothing with very long curly straw-like ginger hair, who was one of the other applicants. She greeted me cautiously; I smiled faintly at her and decided to sit on the other side of the room. She asked me if I was here for the MTO post and I replied, 'Yes,' wondering what her next question would be. And then she asked me if I had had any breakfast. I thought this was a very bizarre question to ask someone you did not know, but what the invitation letter had failed to tell me was that I was about to witness a real post-mortem on a dead person, there and then. As the other candidates arrived, it turned out that around half of us had not been told what we were in for. Two people decided to walk out on the spot, and I have to admit I thought twice, but curiosity got the better of me.

Within ten minutes we were in the mortuary and being welcomed, given over-gowns, over-shoes, disposable hats and

masks and asked if anyone knew, or was related to, a Mr Bentley of Pear Tree Close, Gloucestershire. Strange question, I thought, but it turned out that the post-mortem we were about to witness was on Mr Bentley and it would be neither appropriate nor pleasant to see someone you know being cut from clavicle to pubis for your first experience of dissection. We were handed over to the senior technician, Clive Wilson. All I could see were his eyes under his protective clothing, but they sparkled and looked welcoming. He talked us through the whole post-mortem, stopping often to ask how everyone was doing and advising us, 'There are no heroes in the mortuary. If anyone feels they cannot cope, then they must leave.' Anyway, to my surprise I found it all absolutely fascinating and spoke to Clive as if we were old friends, and although Clive had clearly been doing it for years, I thought it didn't actually look that difficult a job.

Meanwhile, I was also aware of what was going on around us. Apart from the other candidates for the job, some of whom had obviously just wanted to see a post-mortem and nothing else, the atmosphere in the post-mortem room was relaxed: two juniors and one senior MTO were busy removing the organs from other bodies (a process which I later learned was called 'eviscerating') and chatting away with the pathologist about daily topics, while weighing body organs and cleaning floors and surfaces around the room, keeping it as clean as possible. I decided then and there that this was definitely the career for me; I wanted to do what they were doing.

A few days later, to my surprise, I was called back for the formal interview and waffled my way through it. I was quite honest when explaining why I wanted the job, as I had no other reason. I replied that I really did not know, but that it just felt right and

that the urge to be part of the mortuary team and be able to do such an exclusive, fascinating job was very strong. It paid off, and that afternoon the phone call came through offering me the post; I didn't really believe it; not until written confirmation arrived a day later.

What I didn't realize then, was that I was about to start one of the most amazing jobs you can do.

ONE

My first day as a mortuary technician began on a bright, clear but cold morning in early March. Thirty years of age, until now with no clear idea of what I wanted to do with my life, I had fallen into working with people who were no longer breathing. I was to start work at the other of the two mortuaries in Gloucestershire, the one that I had never before even known existed; because of this, I spent ages just trying to find out where I was supposed to report for work, because hospitals tend not to advertise where mortuaries and body stores are, for obvious reasons (and other reasons that are perhaps not so obvious until you become familiar with life in the mortuary).

I walked around the hospital at least twice looking for it. I eventually went into A&E reception and introduced myself to the receptionist, who looked at me blankly when I asked for directions. After shuffling off, he returned and said someone would be over to collect me. Now I felt that I'd made completely the wrong move. What had I done? I had never felt so unwanted or out of place. I stood around like a spare part for ten minutes, looking at the people waiting to be seen in A&E, until the double doors to the waiting room opened and in walked a silver-haired man in his fifties dressed in a long white lab coat. Heading straight

for me, he announced my name, shook my hand firmly and said, 'Welcome to the hospital.' I recognized his eyes and realized this was the same man – Clive – who had demonstrated the post-mortem a couple of weeks ago at my first interview. It was a relief to see a familiar face.

Greetings over, he led me in the direction of the mortuary. He asked how I was feeling, to which the answer was that I wasn't sure. Nervous, nauseous, frightened and a whole other bunch of emotions that I suppose everyone experiences on their first day at a new job. But this isn't your normal nine-to-five job, is it? I did wonder why they had offered me the post in the first place. I had found the post-mortem fascinating, but never before that had I seen a dead person, let alone spent all day with one. I still didn't really know what made me apply for the job and could only suppose that I had felt I could do it.

While I was walking with Clive over to the mortuary (which to my surprise was actually very close – you could see it from A&E if you knew where it was), I wondered what the department would look like. I had seen the post-mortem in the mortuary in the sister hospital, which was only around seven-years-old. Big, light and with lots of room, the whole place was shiny stainless steel and smelt of a strong disinfectant. I wondered if this mortuary would be the same, or if it would be like the mortuaries you see on old horror films, water dripping down the walls, rats scampering in the gutters and a hunchbacked man hovering in the corner holding an eleven-inch blade.

Clive led me to a pair of large red double doors under a corrugated blue steel canopy, which hides the main entrance to the mortuary so that the patients and public don't see bodies being loaded into hearses. He told me that it was on the ground floor of

the pathology block, at the far end from reception. It was quite understated and not at all obviously a place where you would come across corpses, but easy enough to find. With a single key, Clive opened one of the doors.

As I entered the roomy vestibule, the smell that hit me was a mix of cleaning fluid, musty clothes and an odour I had never smelt before, which I could not even begin to describe but which for some reason reminded me of how my little brother used to smell when he came home from junior school, a sort of stale canteenish smell.

Clive led me into a small office that housed two desks. Sitting at the smaller of these was another silver-haired man, with rosy cheeks and glasses. Clive introduced Graham to me. Graham stood up and he, too, firmly shook my hand. 'Hello, lovey,' was his greeting, and he had a strong Gloucestershire accent which suited his appearance to a T. I vaguely recognized him and it turned out that I, too, struck a chord with him. We chatted and eventually concluded that he must know my father; Dad, being an ex-publican, has met a lot of people in Gloucestershire and, growing up in a pub, I, too, came across many faces.

I was offered a chair and a hot drink. Graham bent down from his chair to flick on the kettle, which was on the floor by his desk, and grabbed three cups off a bookshelf behind his head. A carton of milk was fetched from outside the double doors. Clive told me cheerfully that, until a few years ago, they would keep the milk in the bottom of the same fridge that held the bodies, but health and safety had put a stop to this. I decided then and there that I would stick with black coffee.

The office I was sitting in had seen better days. Standard hospital cream and blue paint was peeling off the walls, and the

damp was rising at the bottom around the electrical socket. The furniture was dated, as if it had been dumped in the mortuary, out of the way of the main hospital which was being modernized all the time. The desks had no varnish left on them and the vinyl covering on each of the chairs was slightly torn. While Graham was in charge of making the beverages, Clive began to tell me about my predecessor who had fallen into dispute with the senior technician at the sister hospital and decided to leave. He did not go on to say what the dispute was, and I could see he wanted me to ask but I wasn't going to, not on my first day. Lots of small talk followed and I wondered if this was it for mortuary life. Did we sit all day waiting for something to happen? Did sirens ring when someone died in the hospital? Did the police barge in through a secret door with a disfigured body when somebody got hit by a bus? I found the courage to ask Clive about this and he laughed. Not in a nasty way, but in an 'Oh bless' way.

Clive had been doing this job for twenty-six years. He had begun his career in theatre as a scrub assistant, and knew the importance of infection control throughout the hospital, mortuary included. From the way he spoke, he took no prisoners when it came to the cleanliness of the mortuary. It soon became clear, too, that you name a mode of death and Clive had seen it; nothing could shock him any more.

So, there I was, my first day, ready and eager for action, but all I had been offered was coffee because things had gone quiet, and there were to be no post-mortems that day. Clive knew how precious days like this were. Because there was no post-mortem work, only a few bodies in the body store and all the paperwork was up to date, Clive had a chance to relax and de-stress. You

would not realize how busy the dead can make you, and at that moment I certainly had no idea.

We all spent the whole day chatting while Clive taught me the correct method for releasing bodies as well as other important procedures. I was introduced to a lot of people, including porters, undertakers and the lab manager, and given a tour of the huge hospital that was now my new workplace. I arrived home to my two dogs, Harvey and Oscar, mentally exhausted without knowing why, but excited at what tomorrow might bring. I rang my Gramp that evening to tell him about my day. I had kept him up to date on all the events and he was as excited as me about my new job. It was important for me that he knew about my life. I knew a lot about his, and he worshipped me as the only granddaughter in a male-dominated family, so it was only right he knew. And, of course, he was interested.