

Sorry Trudy

A gothic tale for Halloween 2020, told in 10,230 words. A story of ghosts, ancient forces and evil entities in rural Britain. Definitely not a tale for the squeamish, or those who are easily disturbed.....

'There is a PDF version in the download area.'

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The offices of the once great Ipswich Clarion were still a comfortable place to work. Don Peters didn't have a private office, but he was used to working in a quiet corner of the open plan. A couple of screens protected him a bit from the noise of the copier and he was close enough to the water cooler, to pick up on juicy office gossip. Don was middle aged; gaining a couple of love handles and divorced. There was even a grown up son he never saw. But he was still the best reporter at the Clarion. Mainly because he was the only reporter at the Clarion, if you ignored a couple of students who helped with the sports coverage. Feature writers were ten a penny, but Don was the last career reporter on the premises.

"We need to talk about the Wuhl story." Said Kyle.

The open plan wasn't huge; Kyle only had to open his office door to summon him. That was how it was now, no is it convenient, or do you have a moment. Kyle was a favourite nephew of the proprietor and nepotism wasn't a dirty word at the Clarion. Officially Kyle was Editor-in-Chief, but he had his grubby fingers in everything. Don picked up the thin file containing everything he had on the suicide of Lilia Wuhl. A local story with a bizarre twist, the nationals had begun to pick it up and the wire service that fed news to several commercial radio stations.

"Come in Don, have a seat at the table." Said Kyle. "Let's see what you've got."

There wasn't much, Don knew that. He knew people in the local police; he'd been to school with a few of them. Not that they'd given him much. The suicide had been a few days ago and the piece in the Clarion had been printed two days later. A plain vanilla piece on the suicide of a local businesswoman, with no hint of anything strange or unusual. Don had written the hundred or so words and knew it wasn't exactly his best work.

"Sloppy Don, it has to be said. Very sloppy work." Said Kyle. "You even used a stock photo for the scissors."

"The police wouldn't let me photograph the scissors."

"I noticed the Mirror had a picture for their piece."

"The big boys have deeper pockets than us." Said Don.

Kyle was giving him the look again, a mixture of pity and contempt. Kyle had the job he should have had, that was the really annoying thing. Being Editor-in-Chief of the Clarion at forty three was hardly what he'd dreamed about as he'd left college with a middling degree in journalism. Being a punch bag for an idiot half his age was far worse though.

"Come on Don, you went to school with the detective Joe Jorgensen. That's what local papers are all about, cashing in on old friendships and favours owed. We've ended up with ninety six words and a stock photo of some kitchen scissors. It won't do, it simply won't do. No mention of the woman police officer who had the breakdown."

The other side of local journalism was caring about the people in the local community. At that moment, Don wanted to punch Kyle hard on the nose, before kneeling him in the groin.

"Gill Fielden you mean and it wasn't a breakdown." Said Don. "You're really suggesting that we print stories about an upset local copper having a few mild hallucinations?"

"Hmmm touch a nerve did I? Were you at school with Gill."

"No, I was at school with her mother."

"Oh dear."

That look again, Kyle definitely deserved a broken nose. If only he'd been born a nephew of the proprietor. Maybe he wouldn't be forty three and still working at an entry level job.

"I always thought the mother of the deceased knew more than she told the police." Said Don. "Odd bird that one, according to Joe. Then I can use a few of his teenage indiscretions to get Joe to give me a few minutes alone with the those scissors."

"What sort of indiscretions?"

"The usual sort of who screwed who stuff and who fathered what child. I can only use the nuclear option once Kyle. Do you really think a dead businesswoman and a cryptic suicide note are going to go full national media, including TV?"

"I do, and we should be driving the story Don. We've got the local contacts after all. No way should we be picking up the scraps left by the tabloids....Even if they do have deeper pockets. A suicide note with Sorry Trudy on it and those scissors left on the note. It's gothic Don, and the public love anything gothic."

"I'll see the mother today.....If there is a deeper story here, I'll dig it out."

"That's more like the Don my uncle used to tell me about." Said Kyle.

In the old days The Ipswich Clarion had been in a building three times the size and Don had been one of half a dozen journalists. There was even a part time guy who did nothing but write about football. Local journalism wasn't what it had once been, though Kyle wouldn't appreciate been told that, for about the hundredth time. Don had his hand on the door, when Kyle dropped the bombshell.

"You need to bring this story in Don. Enough to at least get the Sundays interested in a human interest piece. We can ride on the back of the tabloids, picking up lots of local advertising revenue. Are you still working with local undertakers to bring in paid for obituaries?"

Crap, that again! Don wasn't proud of himself, but everyone did it. People only died once after all. If you didn't make the most of that one opportunity.....

"Yes, it brings in a surprising amount of income." Said Don.

"And then there's the deal with a few local florists." Said Kyle. "I've never looked too hard at finding out how much kick back you receive. Funerals are good business, if you've got the right connections."

"Everyone does it Kyle..... What are you trying to tell me?"

"It can sometimes be too comfortable in a job you're done for years. A few side hustles that pay for a few of life's little luxuries and you begin to let the main job slide. This Wuhl suicide looks like a job that was allowed to slide."

"It's not like that Kyle."

"I'm sure it isn't, but you need to bring in a solid gold piece on the suicide of Lilia Wuhl. Don't be scared to make the most of the gay angle, if there is one. Rumour has it that she preferred the company of other women. Dig into the story for all it's worth. Otherwise I'm afraid.....I will have to recommend that we let you go."

Don wanted to hit Kyle, or at least come back with a sarcastic one liner. He couldn't though. Kyle might have been a brain dead gerbil, with the charisma of a two week old roadkill, but there was some truth in what he'd said.

"I'll go and see the mother, Cherise Wuhl." He said.

Cherise Wuhl had a house in one of the nicer parts of town, his old Volvo looked out of place among the BMWs as he parked in the street. No cars on her driveway, but it felt wrong to park there, especially as he'd arrived unannounced. Everyone in the police he talked to had used the phrase 'an odd bird,' to describe the old lady. Not that he had an exact idea of her age. Widowed and Lilia Wuhl had been thirty five when she'd left that provocative note, before killing herself. A messy death, which had definitely helped draw the attention of the red tops, the London based tabloids. Lilia had slashed her wrists and then her throat, after taking enough pills to kill a horse.

"Keep an open mind; the odd bird might be alright." He muttered.

His calculation of her age based on her daughter's age had been somewhere between sixty and sixty five. He revised that upwards by about ten years, as Cherise Wuhl opened the door. A small lady with dark hair and a slightly Asian look about her features. Where did the name Wuhl originate ? Don had no idea, though he was going to make sure he knew before he spoke to Kyle again.

"Hello Mrs Wuhl, my name is Don Peters and I'm with the Ipswich Clarion."

He offered her a card, which she accepted without reading.

"She said you were coming." Said Cherise Wuhl. "I can see why she likes you.....You've good bone structure Don..... May I call you Don ?"

"Yes of course."

"Good, you can call me Cherise."

"Who told you I was coming to see you ?"

"She's waiting to see you Don, we're in the kitchen."

Cherise wasn't alright, she was a genuine twenty two carat head case. There was no one in the kitchen when they arrived, just two cups of something that looked like tea.

"Oh, she must have slipped out." Said Cherise. "You must try my tea. It's an acquired taste I'm told, but full of antioxidants."

"I wanted to talk to you about your daughter's suicide." He said.

"Sit..... Sit at the table while I make the tea."

"May I take notes ?" He asked.

Don always said he hated recorders and preferred to write everything out longhand. The truth was that every time he'd put in a request for a recorder it had been refused by Kyle.

"Yes, just spell my name right.....As they say."

There was something a bit too over the top about her grin, but at least Mrs Wuhl was being friendly.

"Did you have any idea your daughter might be considering taking her own life ?"

"Don't be silly, my daughter didn't kill herself. She was killed and.....Well, she only had herself to blame."

Don was beginning to understand why the police had begun to call Cherise the odd bird. Joe hadn't told him what to expect though, no hint that Mrs Wuhl thought her daughter had been murdered.

"Are you saying your daughter was murdered ?" He asked.

"Tea !" Shouted Cherise, in a loud strident voice.

She poured from a tiny pot into two tiny cups. A green tea, there were twiggy bits at the bottom of his cup. It smelled like tea, though he wasn't sure if he was brave enough to taste it.

"I'll let it cool down a little." He said. "Now.....This she you keep mentioning, would that be the Trudy mentioned in the note your daughter left under the scissors ?"

Anger now, a smile to a snarl of hatred and all in half a second.

“Call yourself a journalist do you ?” Shouted Cherise.

Don had worn a suit, his best suit. Mrs Wuhl was prodding at it, hard enough to feel she might be leaving bruises on his skin. He hoped a little self-deprecation might ease the tension.

“Well... maybe on a good day.” He joked.

The smile was back, though it looked a bit of a crazy smile, rather than a friendly smile.

“Nowhere was it mentioned in any of the media.” Said Cherise. “Trudy was the name of my daughter’s dog. She killed the dog to teach her a lesson.....But of course Lilia took no notice. As I said.... only herself to blame.”

“Who is this woman Cherise, the one who killed Trudy ?”

“As if I’d tell you....I’m completely loyal to her. There’s no way I want her coming after my skin. Don’t let your tea get cold.”

If only Kyle had agreed to the expense of that recorder. Don looked at his notes and they looked like word salad. Was the old lady crazy ? If her daughter had never owned a dog, he’d have his answer. He sipped the tea and it tasted like cough medicine.

“Nice ?”

“Yes, very nice.” He lied.

“Pictures, that’s what we need.” Said Cherise. “I’ll get the photograph album.....I won’t be long.”

The tea wasn’t that bad, though he didn’t fancy drinking a whole cup of it. Don went to the sink and emptied out the cup. He filled it with water from the tap, using it to rinse out his mouth.

“You’re a pro buddy, you know the rules.” He muttered. “If they’re a bit weird, never eat or drink anything they give you.”

The evidence of his ingratitude was there in the sink, the green tea, complete with twiggly bits. He used the cup under a running tap to rinse the sink. Something he hadn’t noticed before. It looked like a small moth on the edge of the sink. But moths didn’t stay put if you drenched them in several cups of cold water.

“That’s impossible.” He muttered.

It moved, a wing had definitely fluttered. Don emptied the cup over it, expecting it to fly away. No, the moth looked like a dark stain on the side of the sink again.

“I know I’m not crazy.”

He reached forward, the tip of his right index finger attempted to touch the mark on the sink. It became a moth again, fluttering up the side of the tap. It flew onto the wall and began to fly slowly up the kitchen tiles. More moths appeared from nowhere, all flying towards the same spot in the centre of the tiles. They were merging together, forming something that looked like...

“Oh, you didn’t like my tea.”

Crap, her cup was falling out of his hands and it was probably worth a fortune. A little impromptu juggling and the cup was safely in his hands again. As he looked back the sink was empty, not one moth shaped stain. The tiles too were clean and free of moths. Had he imagined it all ? Everything had felt so real, so vivid.

“The tea was nice. I just needed a drink of water.”

“Would you like more tea.”

Oh what a tangled web we weave and all that. Cherise was grinning at him, knowing he was lying.

“One cup was enough.”

“I have the album.”

The album was a huge thing with a brown leather cover. Mrs Wuhl opened it up at a page of baby pictures, all lovingly fixed in place. Someone must have spent hours, using sticky backed corners to fix hundreds of pictures in place.

"Is there a picture of the scissors?" He asked.

"No, don't be silly. I'd never put a picture of those in here. More like shears than scissors really and very old. Skinning shears, her skinning shears. Made for one purpose, maybe a thousand years ago."

"What were they made to skin?" He asked.

"People of course."

Her words sounded serious, but there was that grin again. She was ignoring him and flicking through the pages of the album.

"So many baby pictures....Look, here.....See. I wasn't making it up."

A picture of Lilia Wuhl with a dog. One of those small snappy things, Don thought they were called Pomeranians. Underneath the picture were a few words to say it was a picture of Lilia with Trudy, taken the previous Easter.

"Could I borrow this picture?"

"Do you promise to return it?"

"Yes."

Cherise carefully removed the photograph and handed it to him. He hated himself for asking, but Kyle was right. The world wasn't that broad minded, especially in Ipswich. Everyone loved a story about sexuality that was different to their own, even if they'd never admit it.

"Was the picture taken by someone close to her?" He asked.

The anger in Mrs Wuhl's eyes should have been a warning, but he'd already passed the mental point of no return.

"A boyfriend perhaps..... Was there a man in her life?"

"Not that I was aware of."

Come on Cherise, your daughter is thirty five and there are no pictures of men friends in your album. Any mother would have wondered about it, even if it was never talked about.

"Was there a woman friend in her life? Someone special?" He asked.

The lady who'd been grinning at him so nicely, became the image of an angry fury. She was on her feet, finger pointed towards her front door.

"Get out..... Get out..... Get out." She yelled.

A severe reaction to being asked if her daughter was gay, even for Ipswich. Don had the front door open when Cherise spoke again.

"She doesn't like you anymore." She yelled at him.

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"You're still saying no one in the Suffolk Constabulary worked out that the suicide note referred to a dead Pomeranian." Said Don.

"Come on, be fair." Said Joe. "If there'd been empty food bowls on the floor, or a dog basket in the corner, someone would have asked her mother about her daughter owning a dog. We didn't have a clue, though that's strictly between us. Put that in print and you'll never get another invite to the Jorgensen New Year's Eve hootenanny."

Joe Jorgensen, his best friend since primary school. Now detective Jorgensen of the Ipswich police and Don still had no idea how a kid from Suffolk had acquired a Viking sounding surname. They'd been through everything together over the years. They'd even caught the same embarrassing disease from the same girl, while on a school journey to Llandudno.

"I need your help Joe. Kyle is talking about getting rid of me again and I think he means it this time."

"I'd help you if I could, but I can hardly threaten to lock him up for being an asshole."

After school they'd both bought fairly crappy second hand motorbikes. They'd become friends with other bikers and before realising what was going on, they were fully paid up greasers. It was probably the closest civilians can get to the bonding and camaraderie in the armed forces. They even had their own wounded and a fatality. A few friends had needed pins in broken bones following accidents and poor Martin.....He never lived to see his twentieth birthday. Don had come off his bike a few times, but he bounced fairly well.

"I need five minutes with the scissors." He said. "Enough time to examine them and take a few pictures."

They'd been talking in the doorway of the local cop shop. Joe half dragged him into the relative privacy of a staircase that led down to the car park.

"Pictures.....Oh come on, that could cost me my career." Said Joe.

"No one seemed to worry about careers when the Mirror got their chequebook out."

"That was the uniformed lads, nothing to do with me."

Time to use the nuke. Don didn't think it would end their friendship, there'd been few a few fights and rows in the past. Joe had loosened two of his teeth in a fight about a girl at school. Strangely the fight had been over Maria, who Joe had eventually married.

"How is Maria ?" Asked Don.

A slow shot over the bows, but Joe knew what was coming.

"Fine, just fine Don."

"Did you ever tell her Joe ?"

"Fuck.... Are you really going that far over a stupid picture ?"

"I'm too young to retire and too old to retrain for the wonderful world of retail." Said Don. "Or burger flipping, or anything in the gig economy. I need my job."

"You wouldn't tell her, not after everything we've been through."

"I've fifteen years left on the mortgage for my crappy flat.... Don't push me old buddy."

Joe was bigger than him, always had been. More muscled too, he really lived up to his Viking sounding surname. There was a chance his old buddy might snap him in two, or simply beat him into a soggy mess. Luckily it didn't work out that way.

"Alright, but this is it.....No more favours.....Agreed ?"

"Agreed."

Joe took him into the bowels of the building and into an office with a desk in the corner. Not just a desk, it looked like a dumping ground for unwanted and broken pieces of office furniture. Grubby too, somewhere the cleaners rarely visited.

"Wait here, I'll get the scissors." Said Joe.

Don found two chairs that looked badly damaged, but would do at a pinch. It didn't seem that long until Joe was back, carrying a briefcase. An evidence bag was in the case, a sealed evidence bag. Joe did the deed that might cost him his career. He ripped open the bag and pulled out the scissors.

"I can see why Cherise Wuhl calls them shears." Said Don.

"Yes, a bit big and heavy. The first officer on the premises wrote them up as scissors, so scissors they'll remain, forever."

Joe placed the empty evidence bag on the table and put the scissors on top of the bag.

"I'll go away and give you ten minutes."

"Actually I need you to stay here Joe. I need to know about Gill Fielden."

“You bastard, you can’t print any of that. Her career is over already, do you know that ? The last thing she needs is a parasite like you feeding it to the national press.”

“It’ll just be hinted at to give a little background Joe. I heard this, or they said that. Nothing directly attributed to anyone. I’ll never ask you for another favour if we both live to be a hundred.”

“Mention Gill’s name and you won’t need to worry about living to be a hundred.”

Don nodded and a line in the sand had officially been put in place. He picked up the heavy pair of shears, which looked to be a little rusty in places.

“This looks like rust.....But....Did forensics look these over ?” Asked Don.

“No, of course not. They’re just part of the home of the deceased, nothing but a paperweight for the suicide note.”

“Bronze doesn’t rust Joe. This looks like blood, old blood that’s been on these shears for years.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve been listening to the odd bird.”

Joe grabbed the shears, turning them to make the best use of the single fluorescent tube in the room. Don could see that like it or not, Joe could see the stain wasn’t rust.

“Alright smart arse..... I’ll get them tested. Ten to one it’ll be cow blood, or pigs.”

“I bet it isn’t. Let me get my pictures before you run off with them.”

Don used his fairly old iPhone to take half a dozen pictures. He only noticed the characters etched onto the blade, when he opened the blades.

“These look interesting.” He said, as he took another three pictures.

“One of the uniformed guys looked that up on the internet.” Said Joe. “It’s not any known language.....complete Gibberish.”

“I’ll send it to some of my contacts. Obviously if I find out anything I’ll make sure you know.”

Joe put his hand out again, to reclaim the shears and the bag. Don grabbed his hand.

“Now you can tell me what happened to Gill.” He said.

“You really want to push things that far ?”

“Tell me, I won’t use her name. You have my word.”

The anger seemed to go from Joe and it was his old school friend looking at him again.

“She saw things and heard voices.” Said Joe. “A classic case of schizophrenia according to the therapist they sent to look after her. Nothing to do with the suicide case and probably nothing to do with the job. No one needs the press going on about Gill being driven crazy by a high workload....You get my drift ?”

“Yes of course I do..... What did she see ?”

“Insects mainly, moths in the beginning. She had one really bad episode here, in the women’s washroom. Gill said there were moths all over the wall, grouping together to form a female face.”

“Who’s face ?” Asked Don.

“She’s mentally unwell, it was no one’s face Don. After the moths she began to see things in her flat. One morning she woke up and saw her bedroom walls covered in green slime. Things were crawling over her furniture and feeding on the slime.”

“It’s important..... What sort of things did she see ?”

“Snails I believe, large snails. Other bugs too, huge beetles that scuttled up her curtains. All crazy stuff, like a waking nightmare. Have you seen something ?”

“Just the moths....So far.”

“Fuck.....No job is worth losing your mind over. Tell Kyle there’s nothing more to the story. Let him sack you, there are other jobs.”

“Doing what ? The Clarion doesn’t pay me a fortune, but it pays the bills. There is that novel I’ve been planning to write since I was nineteen, but the world is already full of starving authors.”

“I’ll help you as much as I can.” Said Joe. “Just don’t pester Gill, alright ?”

“I won’t.”

Don got up to go, before something Joe had said earlier filtered into his consciousness.

“You mentioned voices. What did they say to her ?”

“A woman’s voice, who kept telling Gill that she liked her. All in Gill’s head of course.....Crazy stuff.”

“Yes, crazy stuff.” Said Don.

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Despite lots of promises to himself and his doctor, Don still tended to survive on takeaway meals and alcohol. His blood sugar levels were nudging scary numbers, full on type two diabetes if he wasn’t careful.

“Vary your diet and cut out the fatty foods.” His doctor had told him. “Try a little fruit occasionally, you never know, you might like it.”

Don was trying to vary his diet, mainly by varying where he bought his lamb korma or rogan josh. He arrived home and put the six pack of beer in the fridge, knowing he’d get through the lot before going to sleep at about one in the morning.

“Shit !”

He noticed the five messages on his machine and knew that all of them were probably from Kyle. A boss who demanded to be kept in the loop, was far worse than an angry ex-wife. Don knew, there had been a while when they seemed to take it in turns to make his life a living hell.

“After I’ve eaten.” He muttered.

Chicken Jalfrezi for tonight, he’d decided to try a new place in the high street. A little pilau rice and two of the large bread things that looked like small pillows. After surviving to over forty, on a diet of takeaway Indian food, he still got confused between naan bread and poppadoms. But as he loved both of them, it had never been a serious issue.

“HmMMM smells wonderful.”

The phone rang after his third mouthful.

“You did promise to call me.” Said Kyle. “Did your police buddy have anything new to tell you ?”

Don tried to never promise something he couldn’t deliver, or at least not when he was completely sober. He was tired though and just wanted to watch an old movie on DVD, while drinking too much beer.

“There are exciting new angles to the case.” He said. “I will be writing a new piece on the Wuhl suicide very soon.”

“Will it be ready for our next issue ?”

A huge sensible inner voice was shrieking at him, but he ignored it.

“Yes, definitely.”

“Good work, I knew I could rely on you.”

That’s was it, he was going to be sacked. He could do a crap piece based on Lilia Wuhl being gay, while adding on Gill Fielden, the psycho woman police officer. Just the sort of story the public would love, he could almost see Kyle salivating over it. He’d never write it that way of course.

“There is always that dark fiction sci-fi book I’ve been meaning to write.” He muttered.

His hand trembled, as he popped the ring pull on his first can of high strength lager. Twenty minutes later, his Indian meal was eaten and another dirty plate had joined the others on the draining board. A full stomach and most of the contents of a can of lager had restored a little cautious sanity. As the

phone rang again, he decided to be honest with Kyle. Get it over with, tell him there might be a really good back story to the Lilia Wuhl suicide, but he needed time to work on it.

"Hi Kyle, I was just about to call you." He lied.

"Don ? This is Ken, Ken Greenslade."

"Sorry Ken, I've been suffering from crappyboss-itus lately."

"Oh, we all get the occasional dose of that. I found out about the engraved words you sent me.

Don't you ever look at your Twitter account ? I sent you a private message hours ago."

Ken was his academic equivalent of the guy, who knows a guy, who knows a guy.....A professor no less at The University of London. Mainly an anthropologist, though Ken had dabbled in sociology for a while. As far as Don could make out, Ken's academic fame had come from writing a long report on an Amazonian tribe few people had ever heard of.

"You know my feelings about social media." Said Don. "You need a spare life to keep up to date with all the crap you never wanted to read anyway, maybe two spare lives. My digital profile is just for show."

Actually Kyle had insisted that he had accounts on Twitter, Facebook and something called Instagram, though Don hadn't mastered logging onto that one yet. He wasn't a technophobe, just quite selective about how he spent his waking hours.

"Well use the app, log on, or whatever you do Don." Said Ken. "I found someone who could break the code to translate the words. It appears you've got something that belongs to the Reaper of Souls.....A lady you don't want to upset."

"Who ?"

"It's late Don. Log on, read the message....Actually I'll send it again just in case. Call me back, because you will have queries, I guarantee it. Not tonight though, call me tomorrow. We're not all high flying reporters with expense accounts. I'm about to eat a rogan josh and down a few lagers."

"Will do.... Thanks Ken."

"No problem."

Another can of beer was called for, as Don waited for his rather elderly desk top PC to boot up and do all the disc thrashing it insisted on doing. There didn't seem to be a limit on the size of private messages on Twitter, Ken's message was long and complex.

"I need a pee anyway."

Before heading for the loo, he sent the message to the printer and hoped the ink cartridge didn't run out. By the time he got back it was there, waiting in the printer tray. A lot of gobbledegook, but Don was good at cutting through that to get to the important facts, most reporters were.

"Reaper of Souls." He muttered. "What the hell have I got myself into ?"

Someone called Diggory had worked on the engravings on the blade of the shears. It appeared the characters weren't nonsense, they were in a language called Aramaic. A simple code had then been used to make the Aramaic look like random characters.

'Aramaic is obscure enough. Add on a simple cipher and it should be indecipherable. Luckily I'm one of the few people who've studied dead languages and cryptography.'

Said one of the line notes from Diggory.

"Good for you Diggory." Muttered Don. "I just hope you're not expecting to send me a bill for all this work."

The estimated age of the coded text had been given by Diggory at somewhere between two thousand and two thousand five hundred years old. Never one to sell himself short, Diggory had said he was one of a very tiny number who could have accurately aged that particular form of Aramaic.

Lots of flannel and more posturing by Diggory, until the big ending, the huge finale. There was obviously a bit of P T Barnum in Diggory.

'...to close, this is my fourth attempt at translating the decoded Aramaic into modern English. In all modesty I have to say that few.....'

"Yeah ok Diggory, I bet you never get invited to the best parties." Muttered Don.

Diggory thought the translation was as good as it was likely to get, though he had added a full disclaimer at the bottom of the notes. There was a problem with turning a dead language into modern English, too few common hooks or something. Don took a few pictures of the printed translation, mainly to send to Joe and Kyle. Joe needed to know, even if he didn't believe it, and as for Kyle.....It might be shaping up to be the sort of viral story Kyle was hoping for.

"I might get to keep my job after all."

Don wasn't panicking as he read the translation at least six times, but his hands were shaking. If he hadn't seen the moths he'd have put it all down to anxiety and an over active imagination. He had seen the moths though and the beginning of a female face they'd been merging together to create.

'Sanjunai, child of Oganutha, oldest of all the Gods. Sanjunai, Reaper of Souls, taker of skins. Sanjunai, the brutal, the merciless, the unstoppable.'

Don looked up Diggory on Google and his self-aggrandisement wasn't a pile of crap. He really was the top man in his field, with lines of letters after his name to prove it.

"Fuck.....The odd bird said Sanjunai doesn't like me anymore." He muttered.

Normally Don was good at pacing out his beers, but the movie had only just started when he popped the ring pull on the fourth tin. Not good, he'd get drunk too fast and that brought a danger of vomiting and the room spinning about all night. There was also the frequent need to pee problem.

"Calm down you fool.....It'll all be a load of bollocks." He muttered. "Sanjunai.....made up nonsense by some idiot who died a very long time ago....Come on, you're not even religious."

Beer brought bravery, anger at the mindless bureaucracy that seemed to blight every reporter's life, and it brought the belief that he was the smartest person on the planet. There was still the need to pee though. Don paused the DVD and headed for his grubby, but useable bathroom.

"Your place isn't too bad....The kitchen is clean.....Alright for a guy on his own."

His ex had told him during a brief period when hostilities had been placed on hold. If she thought his flat looked alright, he could live with a little dust and a few worrying stains on the sofa. Don sat to pee, his prostate sometime hurt if he peed standing up. Another thing he'd been hiding from his doctor to avoid yet another lifestyle lecture.

"No, it's the beer.....It's all nonsense."

There was a mark on the tiles in his shower that looked for all the world, like a small moth. Don looked elsewhere as he stood up and did up his trousers. No good, when he looked again there were two moths and both of them were ever so slightly, fluttering their wings.

"Why me, what do you want?" He shouted.

Unperturbed by his shouting, the moths became four, then eight.....Quite quickly the tiles in his shower cubicle were covered in a carpet of fluttering moths. Small dark coloured moths, the sort he was always worried had come to feast on his best suit, or the rugs. Don closed his eyes and counted to twenty before opening them.

"Crap!"

The moths hadn't gone, there were more of them, lots more. He put his hand out to touch them. They were moths after all, not venomous vipers. As far as he knew, no one had ever been killed by a swarm of angry moths. They tickled, as part of the swarm briefly covered the back of his hand. They had something more important to do than tickling his hand. As one, the swarm moved in a clockwise direction, reforming, merging, creating an image.

"My damn phone is in the lounge."

Was there time to get it and take a few pictures ? He doubted it, a face was forming quickly. If the face was Sanjunai, she didn't look brutal, merciless, or unstoppable. The female face was pleasant, with a hint of the Mediterranean nations in her features. Full lips, good high cheekbones. Actually rather attractive. The full lips opened.

"You asked what I wanted from you Don Peters."

Don had fainted once as a child. Too much excitement at a school sports day or something, no one had been certain of the cause. He felt the warning signs again. A tingle at the back of his neck, a slight feeling of unreality. The voice was a match to the face. It was pleasant, the English perfect, flawless. An expert might have noticed the trace of an accent, but he didn't.

"Yes, why me ? What do you want from me ?"

"I want your soul Don..... And your skin."

The voice had changed, as had the face. It was no longer pleasant, it looked evil. Beyond evil, the face became something inhuman, but vaguely recognisable. Somewhere deep inside Don, a race memory was triggered. He recognised her, he knew Sanjunai, or at least his distant ancestors had known her. Recognition brought fear, panic and unconsciousness, as Don fainted. Luckily his head missed the edge of the sink as he fell.

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"Is this the first time you've fallen over ?" Asked his doctor.

"Not so much falling over, really a dizzy spell." Said Don.

Just where Don didn't want to be, an emergency appointment with Doctor Thornton. The side of his face had been badly bruised though and his left eye was going purple. Seeing the Doc would mean all the usual tests though, blood tests for everything. After that the bullying would start again, about his lifestyle. Doc Thornton was a good guy and he meant well. It was his body though and if his personal road to hell was via booze and takeaways, then that was his choice. Not that he'd ever had the courage to say that to the Doc.

"You woke up on the floor, your face badly bruised. I call that a fall Don. Has it happened before ?"

"I really came in to get something to help me sleep." Said Don. "I haven't had a proper night's sleep for a while. The Clarion is still going through a rough patch."

The Doc was a friend really, even if he did tend to behave like a one man intervention. Leaning back in his chair and smiling at him, was the Doc's way of telling him he didn't want to be the bad guy.

"I can prescribe something to help you sleep Don. I need to know though... Have you woken up on the floor before."

"No."

A lie, but waking up on the floor was fairly normal if you drank too much on a Friday night. The Doc began to tap into his computer, quite a lot of tapping. Never a good sign all that tapping, it usually meant lots more tests.

"Been a while since you did the glucose take up test."

Crap ! The Doc pounded away on his keyboard and the printer spewed out pages of appointment requests and notes to the local hospital. By the time Don left the surgery, he had letters for blood

tests, yet more tests for diabetes and an urgent request for someone to take a look at his battered left eye. It was bad, the largest number of tests he'd ever been given. He had the sleeping pills though, or would have once he picked them up from the local chemists. He hadn't slept well since Kyle had begun hinting at more cuts. There was only one cut left, him. Don was the only journalist left, everything else was pulled straight off a news service.

"That's not journalism." He muttered. "They don't add or subtract a single damn word."

Yes, sleep was what he needed, a lot of it. Then he'd stop seeing moths and....Other things. Yes, sleep would put him right, Don was sure of it. He might cut back on the booze too, at least for a while. By the time he had his pills and was driving over to see Cherise Wuhl again, he was feeling quite optimistic about the future.

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Journalists tend not to make appointments, unless someone is rich, important or royalty. Telling people you're coming tends to mean them not being there, or at least that had been Don's experience. Like the bailiffs and door to door salesmen, Don had found the best bet was to simply turn up unannounced. His beaten up appearance had already made a few people flinch that morning. As he rang her doorbell, he wondered how Cherise Wuhl would react.

"I was in the area and had a few more questions." He said. "And I'd love another cup of your tea of course."

Never invite a negative reply, he'd learned that from a salesman somewhere early in his career. Never ask if it's a convenient time, or if they have a moment to see you. That just gave them an invitation to say no and send you on your way. Cherise smiled at him, which as he'd already discovered, meant nothing at all.

"Don, your poor face." Said Cherise. "She told me about it of course. Come in, you've caught us having tea in the kitchen again. You must think I do nothing except drink tea all day."

There was something in the kitchen, something sat at the table. Don grabbed the doorframe and willed himself not to pass out. Not a definite shape at the table, but something about it shouted feminine. It swirled out of the chair, like a chiffon dress caught in the wind. The vague hint of perfume was the last part to vanish, a subtle hint of lavender, or maybe jasmine.

"You saw her..... She said you'd be able to." Said Cherise.

"Just a trick of the light and a light breeze through the window, nothing more."

Lying to himself as well as her, his knuckles were white from grasping the doorframe so hard.

"There is no breeze, all the windows are closed Don. Sit.....I'll make some tea... She likes you again by the way.... After last night. You didn't run away."

The recently vacated chair was the obvious place to sit, it was in the best spot to see the whole kitchen. Don avoided it and sat at the far end of the table and took out his notebook. It was time to use the information received from Diggory.

"Are you a follower of Sanjunai?" He asked. "Or was that just something your daughter was into?"

The smile made sense now, it was her default response to anything and everything. More of a smug grin than a smile, it covered any genuine emotional response. He thought she'd probably have the same smile on her face if a dinosaur walked into the room.

"Oh, I'm a worshipper of Oganutha and a devoted follower of his daughter, the mighty Sanjunai. It was me who brought my daughter into the faith, rather than the other way around."

"Did Sanjunai have anything to do with the death of your daughter?" He asked.

“Of course she did. My daughter agreed to be the next. It was a great honour, people were travelling great distances to attend the ceremony. Lilia changed her mind at the last minute and refused to honour her promise. Such an insult to our beloved Sanjunai.....It couldn't go unpunished.”

There it was, an admission that her daughter had died by murder, rather than suicide. Only him there to hear it though and he wasn't recording the conversation. He'd learned from bitter experience that the police tend to look dubiously on the uncorroborated testimony of reporters. Plus everyone knew that Cherise Wuhl was famous for being an odd bird. What value did her statement really have ?

“The next for what Cherise ?” He asked.

“To be sacrificed of course, there have to be sacrifices. The sacrifice to Oganutha and their skin to Sanjunai, that's the way it's always been. Enough skins in the right period of time and Sanjunai can be corporeal in our world, for a time. Such times are the cause of great rejoicing and feasting.”

Cherise was in a mood to talk, so he took notes. Even if the solicitors stopped him attributing the words to Cherise Wuhl, it was useful background for a long article about religious cults in modern day England.

“How many are there in the cult of Sanjunai ?” He asked.

“Not a cult, we're a religion. Not that many of us, but we're from all over the world. Having some members who can see her helps of course. People claim faith is everything, especially the Christians. The truth is that catching even one glance of Sanjunai in her true form is worth a lifetime of blind faith. Don't you agree Don ?”

“I don't know what you mean.”

“Yes you do, you've seen her. She likes you Don, she likes you a lot. Tea !!.....It should be brewed by now.”

Strangely he trusted her not to poison him or give him bad guts with her weird green tea. Her God liked him, so she was hardly likely to do him any harm, intentionally or unintentionally. He drank his tea and made notes as Cherise talked and talked. Names, dates, even who had taken part in past sacrifices to their God and his daughter. She claimed that a serving member of the government had helped skin a trainee chef in Andover.

“Your daughter was never skinned.” He said.

“No, by rejecting our God, she made herself unworthy.”

“You're telling me so much Cherise. Aren't you worried I'll print every word and expose your cult.....Sorry religion, to the entire world.”

“No.....She likes you Don. You have the honour of being the next sacrifice.”

Once he'd have treated such statements as great lines for a story in the Clarion. He'd been there, seen it all and bought the T shirt. Was he becoming a believer ? He had seen something in the odd bird's kitchen and the perfume was still stuck somewhere in his sinuses. Don found himself taking her comment very seriously.

“I thought sacrifices were volunteers ?” He asked. “You talked about your daughter changing her mind.”

“You're not a member of our faith Don. Outsiders can be sacrificed if she thinks they're worthy. She likes you Don..... Sanjunai likes you a lot. You will be the next offering.”

“Supposing I reject your God and all his works ?”

She was laughing at him now and the laugh felt more sincere than her constant smile.

“She will know why you're saying it Don. It's too late, accept your fate. The ceremony will take place tonight at my daughter's house. Come if you like, or stay away, the choice is yours. No matter where

you might run to, she will find you. Once the ceremony is complete, Sanjunai will come to claim your life and your skin.”

“What time is the ceremony ?”

“About eleven..... She likes you Don....Accept your place in the ritual.”

Don didn't run out of her house, or get in a panic. He called his old buddy Joe Jorgensen as soon as he was back in his car.

“Do you remember that time in Colchester Joe ?.....When some skin heads had you trapped on the one way system. Who was it who came hurtling in on his bike to save you ?”

“I remember it a little differently Don, but yes.....I suppose you did save my arse that night.”

“I need to call in the favour. I need your help tonight.”

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A little after ten thirty and they were sat in Joe's car, parked less than fifty yards from Lilia Wuhl's house. Or more accurately the house that had been hers until she'd either committed suicide or been murdered. After a few hours Don felt less certain if he'd seen anything in Cherise's kitchen. Joe was partly to blame for his doubts. His old school friend's presence was comforting in a way and grounding.

“Thank you for coming with me Joe, it means a lot.” Said Don.

“I brought the keys, but I'm here unofficially.” Said Joe. “Personally I'm hoping we find an empty house with no sign of any cult waiting to carry out a weird ceremony.”

“Did you bring a gun ?”

“Christ Don, I'm a copper in Ipswich, not the strike team in an American cop show. I brought a baton and I'm hoping I don't need to use that.”

They'd already discussed the blood on the shears. Deb Mitchell in forensics was good at her job, but she couldn't work miracles. DNA results took time, though she had told them the blood was definitely human. Joe thought that was probably the only reason Joe had agreed to come with him.

“I did some digging on the name Wuhl.” Said Don. “Nothing sinister, no links to castles in the Carpathian mountains or anything like that. Quite disappointing really, it has German roots and means people who came from Italy.”

“The police database has nothing on them either, not even a speeding ticket or an unpaid parking fine. Too squeaky clean and I'd be digging deeper if this was London. But Ipswich.....Squeaky clean is almost our town motto.”

“It's still odd though, isn't it ?” Asked Don.

“Oh yes, it's odd alright. Most people can't get through their teen years without getting some kind of mention in police records, usually for something minor. Cautions for weed are still quite big in this part of town.”

“Did you bring them ?” Asked Don.

Joe sighed a little, as he opened the glove compartment and brought out a plastic evidence bag. Another sealed bag with the skinning shears inside. Don could see a sticker on the bag with Deb Mitchell's name on it.

“Are you sure these are important ?” Asked Joe.

“Yes, I know the shears are the key to everything. I need to have them on me, I've never been more certain about anything.”

“Don't take them out of the bag. I can say one bag was ripped by accident, but not a second. As it is, a smart arse solicitor could stop them being used as evidence.”

“They're going straight into my pocket.” Said Don.

It was a cool night, they were both wearing thick jackets. Don placed Sanjunai's skinning shears into an inside pocket. He'd asked Joe to bring them out of the simple logic that if they were in his pocket, they couldn't be used against him.

"It's time." Said Joe. "Remember to let me go first and do the talking. If there are a group of people in the house it all becomes official. I'll call for backup. No heroics from you Don.....Understood?"

"Yes of course....You're the one with the badge."

"Warrant card Don, this is Ipswich, not Chicago. Cherise Wuhl is elderly and her friends are probably elderly too. The last thing we need to be the next story in the Clarion is about police brutality against a harmless group of old ladies....Even if they are members of a cult."

"Alright I promise..... No rough stuff."

A short walk to the house and it was still a couple of minutes before eleven. No lights downstairs, but the top floor seemed to be lit by candles or oil lamps. The lighting had that yellow tinge to it, as the light flickered against the net curtains.

"Someone's home." Said Joe.

Joe extended his baton as they walked up the front steps.

"Do I get one of those?"

"No way, not in a million years."

Joe carefully unlocked and opened the outside door and they stepped into the house. The sound of music was coming from upstairs, pan pipes playing a strange discordant melody. There was an umbrella stand in the hallway and something in it seemed to call out to Don. A large gnarly stick made of dark hardwood. One end was thicker than the other and it almost begged to be picked up. Don felt much more confident with the stick held in his hand. Joe sighed and rolled his eyes, but said nothing. The stairs creaked, though the music from above was probably loud enough to hide the noise. Once they reached the landing, the smell of incense was strong enough to make his nose tingle.

"There, the room on the left." Whispered Joe. "I go first and if you hit anyone with that cudgel.....I will arrest you."

"It's just in my hand to intimidate anyone.....Unpleasant."

It had to happen at just the wrong moment, life was like that. A reflex he could do nothing about. As they listened and looked through a small opening in the door, Don sneezed. He never sneezed just once, never, ever. After the second sneeze the music stopped and people were shouting.

"Come on, it's now or never." Said Joe.

Don followed Joe into the room, which looked like something that belonged to a past age. Besides Cherise Wuhl, there were another six or seven people attending the ceremony. All of them wearing masks, the sort pretty girls wore to masked balls. Sequins, pearls and expensive clothing seemed to be de rigueur for the cult. Expensive but old fashioned clothing, the kind of style that wouldn't have looked out of place in the throne room of Louis the fourteenth. One man looked out of place, merely because of his size. He had to be close to eight feet tall and broad with it.

"Put that knife down, I'm a police officer." Shouted Joe.

Not everyone was elderly, not judging by the speed the woman had moved at. Joe swiped her across the wrist with his baton, sending the knife flying across the room. Joe went back to the door, slamming it and leaning back on it.

"No one leaves!" He yelled. "I'm calling for transport to take you all to the station."

He twirled the baton for good measure, though no one seemed to want to try and get past him.

Don's attention was taken by the smoking incense burner in the centre of the room. A large silver

burner fixed to a tripod, the heavily perfumed smoke was swirling about, occasionally forming a face he now recognised.

"It's her, it's Sanjunai." He yelled.

His cudgel had work to do after all. He swung it at the tripod and swung it again and again, until the incense burner fell to the ground. As the face vanished, it briefly became the evil face he'd seen on the tiles in his bathroom.

"No ! No!" Yelled the huge man.

Panic ensued, Don could hear Joe trying to stop the cult members from leaving the room. The huge bull of a man was running at him and there was no chance of any help from Joe. Don stood his ground and swung the gnarly stick with all his strength. A good hard swing that completely missed its target. The giant of a man didn't miss. The huge fist hit Don on his neck, just below his left ear. Such a mighty blow that it took him off his feet. Don rolled over several times, before coming back reasonably upright. He was on his knees though, watching his opponent come towards him like a runaway train. Don was giddy as well as being on his knees and pain told him the blow might have broken his jaw.

"No more messing about, I'm going to kill you." Don shouted.

Brave words, but as the massive man lifted his fist, Don thought he might not survive the next blow. The man stopped though and starred at the ground. It was the shears, they'd fallen out of his pocket. The giant of a man seemed mesmerised by the ancient skinning shears. Don was a firm believer that if you came anywhere expecting a fair fight, you were an idiot.

"Fuck you." He shouted.

Down came the heavy stick, right across the top of the man's head. His opponent blinked a little, but his gaze was still firmly on the shears. Don brought the cudgel back as far as he could. No restraint, no holding back. If the blow killed the brute, so be it. Don was sure he heard something break, as the stick landed on the man's head. Down went the giant, ending up in a crumpled heap on the floor. There was a scream and Don turned, just in time to see uniformed police pouring into the room. There was the tingling at the back of his head again, as Don passed out.

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"Of course, you're really lucky he didn't die." Said Joe. "Huge brute...Must have a thick skull. It took four paramedics to get him down the stairs."

The medic was still fussing about, trying to get Don to go into one of the ambulances.

"No way." Don had told him. "If I get admitted to Accident and Emergency, my doc will have me taking tests every day until I'm eighty."

The shears that had probably saved his life were on his lap. Don put them back in his pocket, just in case they were lost in the current chaos in the room. There seemed to be half of the Suffolk Constabulary digging through the entire house. A crime had been committed, a search warrant wasn't required.

"We've got them, no wriggling out of this one." Said Joe.

Joe had a thing about smart solicitors enabling clients to wriggle out of thing, but Don thought most coppers probably suffered from the same brand of paranoia.

"I've got the story I needed." Said Don. "Crap....This will go international."

There had been evidence in the house, locked away in cases and cabin trunks. Not just dried skins that looked disturbingly human, the Wuhls had kept hand written journals. It appeared that their God had a thing for the souls of the innocent. Joe had refused to tell him about what the cult had done to several missing children.

“They’ll throw away the keys for this lot.” Said Joe. “The woman who tried to skewer me with a knife is an area manager for a large bank. Why Don ? Why would they get involved in this evil crap ?”

“I have no idea old buddy.” Said Don. “It’s now....Christ, it’s half three in the morning. Could you get one of your guys to run me home ?”

“You should be going to the hospital.”

“Oh, no.....You know what my doctor is like.”

Joe came closer and looked at him, before talking to the medic.

“Is he alright to go home ?”

“The way A&E will be at this hour.....A good long sleep in his own bed will probably do him the most good. As long as he promises to see his own GP tomorrow.”

“I will, I will..... Scouts fucking honour.” Said Don.

“Alright, I’ll get a car to take you home.”

“I need to pee first, or my bladder will burst.”

Don felt a little unsteady on his feet, though the feeling passed after half a dozen steps.

“Wow, what a story this will be.” He muttered. “I might even get a job offer from one of the big boys in London.”

He had to ask where there was a toilet. A young woman constable pointed him towards the en suite bathroom in Lilia Wuhl’s bedroom.

“Wow, how the other half live.”

Opulent was the word to describe the bedroom. Not that Don was in the mood to look around. As usual he sat down to pee and enjoyed the relief, as his bladder emptied. As he stood up, he saw the moths beginning to gather on the back of the bathroom door.

“Oh, fuck.”

He felt the shears being pulled from his pocket by unseen hands, as his clothes were removed. The female face he now knew too well, was smiling at him. The same fixed smile he’d seen too often on the face of Cherise Wuhl.

“I really like you Don.....Such soft skin.”

Don wanted to scream as the shears entered the flesh at the base of his neck, but for some reason he couldn’t. Sanjunai was good at what she did, a real expert. Don could see most of his skin lying on the tiled floor before he died. She’d managed to get nearly all of it off in one piece.

“I really like you Don.”

~ ~

~ The End ~