

Sleeping Dogs

By Dan Boylan

Part One

The cottage lay at the end of a winding track, surrounded by poplars and mostly hidden from the main road and the village. It was a two-storey, Victorian redbrick, no frills or architectural beauty, a working man's cottage with a privy at the bottom of the garden.

The ageing policeman had dismounted from his bicycle to avoid the ruts and potholes. He turned to the old man some yards behind him and asked,

"Is this it? Mrs Jenkins's house?"

He nodded and grunted in the affirmative.

"Aye, Belvedere Cottage."

"When was the last time you saw her up and about?"

"Ain't seen her for days but there was smoke coming from the chimney about a week ago. Ain't been no smoke or sign of her for many a day, thought I'd best come an' tell 'e. Ain't goin' inside though."

"Why?"

He shuffled awkwardly,

"Dunno, she was always a bit spooky, a bit weird, some said she was a witch or something, most folk gave her a wide berth. I don't wanna go inside her house. I don't wanna offend her or, you know, stir things up."

"What can you tell me about her?"

He shrugged again.

"Not much, she came here during the war, her husband was away in the army. He died about ten years ago, she's lived alone since then, never went into the village, used to take the bus into town, when she couldn't get to the bus stop, she had groceries delivered to the door,

none of the delivery boys wanted to come here, she was too scary, too creepy.”

“Go on, get out of here you old wuss. I’ve dealt with bigger skeletons in cupboards than this.”

And he turned towards the cottage.

He turned the doorknob, pushed the door open and called, in an authoritative voice, “Anyone home, Police Constable Rutherford here, just come to see that everything is alright.....”

He stood on the door mat, observed, sniffed, listened and made an initial assessment. The cottage was as plain and ordinary inside as it was out. The deal table and chairs and the dresser were homemade, the walls and ceiling distempered and the floor was flag stoned. A York range covered most of the outside wall and he could tell the fire had not been lit for some time. Crockery and bits of food littered the table and there was an air of neglect about the place.

He wandered through to the front room and discovered more untidiness and neglect and a jumble of blankets on the tatty sofa. He called again from the foot of the stairs,

“Anyone home, Constable Rutherford here....” but the house lay silent.

He climbed the stairs, sniffing and listening as he ascended, when he reached the top stair, he pushed the bedroom door open and a slight, musty smell invaded his nostrils.

The bed was another jumble of blankets and he saw a hand, white and wrinkled lying on top of the bedding.

“You alright Missus?” he asked, in an even, untroubled tone, “Police here.” And he stepped forward and held her hand and felt for a pulse. He knew instantly from the coldness that she’s gone and pulled back the blankets to look at her face. Her pasty white skin was drawn and tight and she wore a pained expression. He nipped the underside of her nose but there was no reaction so he pulled the bedding over her head. He glanced around the room taking in the clutter and disorder and saw a small notebook on the bedside cabinet. He pulled on his glasses and opened the note book at the first page. The handwriting was spidery yet

clear as if it had been written with great care, he read aloud, slowly and with great deliberation.

‘My name is Doris Jenkins and I was born and raised in these parts over sixty years ago. When my husband was away at the war, I saw a soldier in the village and said ‘hello’ to him. Without me knowing, he followed me home and as I closed the back door he forced his way in. I could smell the beer on him. He made a grab for me and I pushed him hard and he fell heavily and hit his head on the hearth. He groaned a while, then went quiet, I felt his pulse and I realised he was dead. I know I should have gone to the police but I panicked. After some time, I dragged him outside, across the lawn and buried him in the soft earth at the bottom of the garden and later, planted an apple tree over the grave. I never knew who he was and never mentioned the matter to anyone.’

Rutherford went to the window and gazed across the garden at the gnarled old apple tree and the secrets under its roots. He picked up the notebook again, turned the page and read on. ‘I would like to be buried in my best blue dress beside my husband in the village church yard. I have few possessions and the house belongs to the Southfield Estate. I have never had a bank account but there is a cocoa tin in the dresser with a few pounds in it. It will pay for my funeral. I would like a reading of the twenty-third Psalm and the Hymn, ‘The day thou gavest Lord is ended.’

Rutherford replaced the notebook and slowly descended the narrow staircase. He strolled pensively through the kitchen and into the back garden and sat on a log in the late afternoon sunlight. He unfastened the hook and eye of his choker collar, withdrew his tobacco pouch and began to fill his pipe.

He recalled his time as a young constable during the war years and the case of the missing soldier. He remembered the Military Police investigation and their underlying implication that the soldier had a good service record and was not the sort who would go absent. He recalled the army’s demands for a full scale Police investigation on an already overworked force. He further recalled that despite their best efforts the case was eventually shelved to the ‘unsolved’ file.

He puffed on his pipe, deep in thought and gazed pensively into the distance. His years of police work had taught him the due process of the law and he quickly envisaged an internment and autopsy of the soldier followed by an inquest. There would be hours of police investigation, long periods of court time, legions of barristers, all engaged in intricate points of law. It would all be at great cost to the tax payer and ultimately, would serve little purpose.

He sat for some time mulling over all aspects of the case, then tapped his pipe out on the log, strolled back indoors and re-read the note book. He then carefully removed the page relating to the old woman's funeral and neatly folded it into his tunic pocket and placed the remainder of the book in the grate and set fire to it.

He stood by the back door and looked towards the bedroom window,

'Sleeping dogs , Doris, sleeping dogs,' he muttered, "and what the judiciary don't know won't harm 'em!"

And he mounted his bicycle and set off back along the lane, whistling a jaunty tune.

Part Two

Constable Rutherford stood patiently at ease in the corridor outside the Inspector's office. After some time, the tall, blond, incredibly young Inspector James opened the door and beckoned him enter.

"Have a seat, Cyril, I just want to go over your report again."

"Sir." He obeyed.

He sat, straight backed, feet apart, hands on knees. His immediate thoughts of 'never trust the bastards when they start off on first name terms' was not reflected in his facial expressions, his voice or his demeanour, but it had turned on his inbuilt alarm and put him onto amber alert.

The Inspector read the report through again and carefully laid it in the top drawer of his desk.

"Very concise, to the point and covering all angles, Cyril, the sort of report I'd expect

from someone with twenty five years on the force. Is there anything you missed out?"

"No sir, I covered all relevant points."

"Nothing about a notebook?"

"Notebook, sir?" he queried, with a nonchalant air.

The Inspector held up the single page which contained the old woman's funeral wishes.

"See the rounded page corners Cyril, the page is taken from a small notebook, the type which includes a small pencil in the spine. We wondered if you'd come across such a notebook."

And he cocked an eye, inquisitively, questioningly.

"No sir, didn't see a note book." he replied, his voice confident and even.

"Did you search the house thoroughly?"

"No sir, just a cursory inspection. The note was lying on her bed-side cabinet."

"Alongside the pencil, which, presumably she wrote the note?"

"Ah," and for the first time, he faltered, "no sir, I didn't see a pencil."

"I'm guessing that she'd be close to death when she wrote her funeral note, I'm guessing she'd be virtually bedridden. I can't imagine she'd write the note, then haul herself out of bed then get rid of the pencil and notebook, doesn't add up somehow," and he paused for effect, "does it?"

Rutherford recovered his composure and came back in a trice.

"I'd made the assumption that the note had been written some time, somewhere else in the house when she was more agile and she simply left by her bedside. I didn't see anything sinister, out of place or untoward, sir. Over the years, I've come to think of death as unplanned, disorganised, and impromptu. People seem to do strange, out of character things in their final hours, I'm sure Mrs Jenkins was no different, sir."

The Inspector rubbed his cheek and Rutherford remained calm and still, his face completely at ease, reassured, no doubt, that after being cornered, he'd recovered himself rather well.

“There are other unanswered questions here Rutherford.” the Inspector said, his tone changed.

“Sir?” said the old Bobby, with a hint of innocence.

The Inspector opened his drawer and took out a small piece of paper. “This is a copy of the old woman’s funeral note; close inspection reveals indentations of what was written on the previous pages. It is possible, even with the naked eye to make out a couple of words....soldier...and dead. The original note is with forensics, we are waiting a full translation. I am expecting a call from them with their findings anytime soon.” And he sat back and looked Rutherford squarely in the eye.

If he expected a reaction from the constable, a gasp, a hand to the mouth, a wide eyed stare, then he would be disappointed. But neither was he going to let go of the initiative, “I understand you were here in ’44 when a young soldier went missing.”

“Yes sir.” came the simple response.

“You remember what happened?”

“Just that sir, the soldier had been in the White Hart, he was last seen walking along West Street. He was never seen again. The Army demanded a full investigation, several searches were carried out but no trace of him was ever found. The case was wound down and consigned to the unsolved file.”

There followed a long pause before the Inspector announced,

“He disappeared somewhere between West Street and the end of the village, somewhere around Belvedere Cottage. Mrs Jenkins’s note might hold the answer, the notebook most surely would. A dedicated search team from H.Q. turned the place over yesterday.”

Rutherford looked him squarely in the eye, without a flicker of emotion.

“They found the lead from a small pencil in the ash in the grate.”

Rutherford remained deadpan.

“And what might prove to be the spine of a small notebook, also with Forensics.”

No response.

“They also found what appears to be a spent Swan Vestas matchstick in the grate. Mrs Jenkins had a box of Bryant and May matches in the mantle-shelf. Odd that a smoker’s match should be found in the grate, we are having it tested for....”

“Don’t bother sir, it’ll be mine, I had a pipe whilst I was making an entry in my Police notebook. I tossed the spent match into the grate.” he said, quite unruffled.

“Is that all you tossed into the grate?”

“Sir? What are you implying?”

“There’s a great deal of unanswered questions in this case Rutherford. A case that has lain dormant for twenty five years and suddenly brought back to life. Did the woman kill the soldier? If so, how did she dispose of his body? Did she make a deathbed confession? Did she then change her mind and destroy it? Or did someone else destroy it? If so, why?”

“I can’t answer any of those questions, sir. First time I ever saw Mrs Jenkins was when I entered her bedroom and discovered her body. There was a good deal of speculation about the disappearance of the missing soldier in 1944. It was rumoured that he’d stolen and sold some Army equipment and was about to be arrested, though the Army denied it. Others said he’d had an affair with a married woman and an enraged husband was looking for him. He reputedly had connections with Southern Ireland and the same day he vanished, a bicycle was stolen from a farm outhouse just outside the village. Cooperation between the Army and the Civilian Police were quite poor. Numerous searches of the village, farms, ponds, woodland sometimes using sniffer dogs, yielded nothing. Some senior police officers thought we were being sent on wild goose chases as the Army wanted to defend its reputation, or prevent it looking inefficient. The suggestion that a strapping, trained soldier was murdered by a seven stone woman, who then disposed of his body is little more than clutching at straws, if you’ll forgive my bluntness, sir.”

The Inspector gritted his teeth and the air was brittle with anticipation. The wall clock ticked solemnly and punctured the silence with a doleful monotony. The Inspector rose from his seat and paced the floor, his face contorted into a scowl as if all his attempts to extract an

admission of guilt from the old copper had been thwarted. He glanced occasionally at the telephone, willing it to ring, wishing Forensics would confirm his suspicions. The old Policemen retained his position, straight backed, head held high, seemingly unruffled by the prospect of a brief telephone call which could end his career, snatch his pension.

The telephone rang just once before the Inspector turned and snatched the receiver, "Inspector James." he snapped, impatiently as Rutherford stared straight ahead.

"I see, yes, I see. Thankyou, let me have a full, written report please, good bye."

He took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair,

"Forensics are unable to confirm that any of the indentations on the note can be construed as a confession. Therefore case is closed, Rutherford. Dismiss ." And he turned to the window.

Rutherford rose and allowed himself a ghost of a grin.

The End

Dan Boylan bio: Dan Boylan is an ageing Yorkshireman, a well-traveled army veteran and ex prison guard. He has been writing articles and travel features for a series of magazines and publications for some 25 years. His favourite genre is short fiction, usually liberally sprinkled with intrigue, humour and a twist in the tale/tail. He has been a member of Fareham Writers for over seven years which has produced over sixty short stories, dramas and rattling good yarns.