

TWO MORE SHORT STORIES

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- 1. The Den**
- 2. Two Many Coincidences**

The Den

Der Velte was a largish house on the main road at the top of at the top of the avenue where Ben lived, but its garden reached down Auckland Avenue and finished opposite his bedroom window at number one's tall wooden fence. There was only a low brick wall onto the road, but behind that, an impenetrable hedge of trees hid the garden so it was a mystery even though he could see the cabbage field beyond and the orchard beyond that. One of the trees just inside the brick wall was an almond tree and Ben collected a good harvest of almonds that fell on the pavement and behind the low wall each year.

One afternoon when Ben got home from school at quarter past four, he saw about eight feet of the brick wall had been knocked down opposite his garden to make an entrance and a pick-up truck was parked just inside. There were a couple of men doing something but Ben couldn't see what. Then they put up a makeshift gate from corrugated iron and left.

Two days later, with no sign of the workmen's return, Ben crossed the road, squeezed through the corrugated gate and started to explore. The workmen had put up a flimsy cord marker fence and the gate, but nothing else. The garden had been a wonderful place with paths, bird baths, small statues and even a sun-dial but all now overgrown, which in Ben's eyes made it even more exciting, a wilderness, a jungle. He set out to get to the cabbage field and when he arrived at the hawthorn hedge, found there were two adjacent enclosures in the corner formed of breeze walls with a concrete floor. He looked around and saw the top of his bedroom window, his parents' and the Jaborski's next door but as he walked back to the makeshift gate, the windows soon disappeared over the horizon of the trees. "This will be my secret den" he said to himself.

While he was eating the sandwiches his Mum had left for him, he imagined life in his new kingdom. Perhaps kingdom was a bit grand, he thought, and remembering the story his teacher had told him about Grace Kelly and Monaco, decided it was a principality, and crowned himself Prince Ben. His sandwiches finished, Ben, his imagination having given way to practical matters, returned to his new domain. On the way, he spotted an old purple umbrella behind the wall and collected it as '*something that might be useful later*'. That afternoon yielded a veritable treasure trove, two old folding chairs, a Formica-topped table with a leg missing, some orange boxes which looked as though they may have been used for growing tomatoes or geraniums and a yard-broom with half a handle. He could see an old bedstead through the hedge and eventually found a place where he could wriggle through on his belly, feet first and into the ditch. He got horribly scratched by the hawthorn and tea-time provided the excuse to not go back through the hedge but walk down the farm track and home via the main road.

(Pen and ink map and other pictures of Ben's den to follow)

When he walked into the kitchen his Mum greeted him with a matter-of-fact "Why are you covered with blood?" She wasn't much concerned as Ben was habitually dirty bruised and bloody. She worried more because he seemed to have few friends and she wished he had more. "I fell in a hawthorn hedge Mother" Ben replied, which was close enough to the truth to prevent him from feeling guilty.

Next day when he left the house, he had a pair of secateurs which he had sneaked out of the green house and went the long way round to the hole in the hedge he'd left by. He lay on the side of the ditch and snipped away at the hedge until he had a hole big enough to slide through quite easily with no thorns to scratch him. He managed to stand the bed frame upright against the hedge and then lift it 'till

it toppled. Ben slid through his new “back gate” dragging a largish branch of hawthorn behind him to camouflage the hole and with some difficulty dragged the bed frame off the top of the hedge. Then he set to work.

All morning he swept, lifted and carried. He banged loose orange box slats onto their nails, found bricks to prop up the table and got the bed frame onto the walls to make a roof which covered a bit more than one ‘room’. By about noon, he had something that was starting to look like a den. He’d got a table, a chair, some orange box bookshelves and a roof. He sat on the one chair which didn’t collapse and surveyed his work. “You could eat your dinner off that floor” he thought “well maybe not if it was mince and onion, but it wouldn’t matter if you dropped a sandwich or even a cream slice”. Like many ‘young men’ Ben didn’t rank high in the fastidiousness stakes. He sat there for quite some time, enjoying the warm sun and day dreaming of courageous battles with huge ants and snug wet afternoons reading about his super-heroes. “I need something to cover the roof for when it rains” but thinking about mince and onions, his reverie was interrupted by his brain which was receiving urgent messages from his belly that the latter was empty. As he ducked out, he looked up at the houses. “Adults never go upstairs during the day, but I’ll go through the hedge just in case someone sees me.

Ben’s Sister called when he went in the back door. “Mum said to have banana sandwiches. They’re going black and won’t keep. You can have all of them.” Ben got a knife from the drawer, marge from the fridge and made himself sandwiches and a mug of milk, While he munched his lunch, his mind was occupied with the roof of his den. He needed to go scavenging for something rainproof: Horton Lane. As soon as he’d finished lunch and remembering to rinse the dishes, he got his bike out and raced to Horton Lane. Horton Lane had been a real country lane when he’d started school, but now it was used by lorries taking gravel from the gravel pit to the the airport so it was dirty and muddy and people dumped stuff in the ditches and over the broken hedges. It was where Ben came if he wanted bits for his bike – in fact his entire bike was now made from bits he had rescued from Horton Lane. He parked his bike and wandered along the hedge.

There was loads of good stuff, enough to build a complete den, but he couldn’t get it home. He decided against putting three pieces of corrugated iron on his bike and pushing it. After an hour or so he’d got a large piece of blue and white striped plastic sheet, three more broken umbrellas, some metal rods, a considerable length, in pieces, of polythene string, an old carpet and a piece of lino. The carpet was not unlike his own bedroom carpet except it was inhabited by a colony of snails which he picked off one by one. He also found several other items which *'might be useful later'* and these he secreted under a broken pallet camouflaged with rubble and branches. Ben got all his plunder tied on his bike, the rug on the handlebars, the folded plastic sheet and lino on the crossbar and other bits on the carrier at the back. It was not easy to ride with his legs out to miss the sheet and lino and put his feet on the pedals and he wobbled a bit. He rode back pretending he was a French onion seller like the ones who came hawking door to door every year. He never could work out why everyone talked about Spanish onions but only French people came to the door to sell his Mother onions.

The next day and the day after, Ben spent working on his den and making occasional forays to Horton Lane for various choice findings. His den was quite swish now with carpet on the floor in his main room, and a secure roof. He’d used the fabric from the old umbrellas to cover the half roof of his other room, the two large black men’s umbrellas at each end and the purple one in the middle “stitched” together with a stapling machine. This was his sitting out and cooking area. The things which *'might be useful later'* included a frying pan with no plastic on the handle and an old meths burner. He had time

for reading and model-making, occasionally cooking sausages or boiling eggs safe from the attentions of his older sister. She was a nosey parker and told his mother everything. She thought she was better than him because she went to the big school. When school started after Easter, Ben thought it was safe enough to leave some comics in his den, even Rovers and Eagles.

As the days got longer, Ben's Mother got curious about Ben's whereabouts. He'd even been late for tea once, and for Ben to miss food was completely out of character, akin to cats running indoors, terrified, when a sparrow landed on the grass nearby. Ben was a bit concerned about his Mothers gentle prying when he'd been late for tea. Keeping a secret was one thing, but he didn't like lying. Then he had a brainwave.

The day after he'd been late for tea, he arrived at Christine's gate just as she came out to go to school. Christine lived about half a mile away. She had flame red hair and freckles and Ben counted her as a friend even though some other kids made fun of her hair. She was also foolish enough to be near the top of the class, even though she was clever, and knew plenty of wrong answers. This resulted in being called 'teacher's pet'.

"Hello Ben" she greeted him and Ben made his decision.

"Tina, can you keep a secret?"

"Yes why?"

"I've got a great den. Do you want to see it?"

"Where is it?"

"Opposite my house. I can show you after school."

So after school. Tina left her satchel at home and Ben waited for her at the end of the track. "I thought it was opposite your house?" Tina said. "It is, but I go in this way in case somebody sees me." So they went down the track. Ben cleared away the camouflage straw and hawthorn and crawled through the hole. Tina followed and Ben showed her his den.

"Do you like it?"

"It's great!" Tina said. "Much better than I expected. Is it dry?"

"Yes."

Ben showed her the cooking area and his comics and models. "You won't tell anyone will you? You're the only one who knows. Do you want to share it?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Well if my Mother asks me where I've been, I can say I've been with you and I won't have to lie, and you're my friend and I like you, and your parents don't know my parents."

"All right. When can I use it?"

"Anytime you like and you can leave things here."

"Umm, Ben."

"What's wrong Tina?"

"Where do you go to the toilet?"

Ben coloured a bit "If it is just a wee, I go in those nettles in the corner, otherwise I go home."

"I can't go in the nettles. I'll get stung"

"I can make a screen somewhere for you to wee, and you can use my house. Mum won't say anything."

"What about your Dad?"

"He always agrees with Mum, and he works in Saudi."

“Right said Christine.” And that was another problem solved.

One Thursday afternoon, as Tina approached the hedge, she heard voices. She crouched in the ditch and listened. “Looks like a tramp’s been living rough here.”

“Yes! Made himself very comfortable though ”

“I don’t think it’s a tramp. There’s no sign of sleeping.”

“Its kids. Look there’s comics and a Barbie doll.”

“They’ve done a good job. Shame they’re going to lose it.”

Christine watched for Ben coming back from his piano lesson to tell him what she’d heard. “... and they said we were going to lose it. ”

“Were they angry?”

“N no. I don’t think so. They said it was a shame.”

“It’s not fair. We haven’t done any harm. I’ll go tell them it was me.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No point us both getting into trouble Tina. They may not even be there.”

“You shared it with me so I’m going with you.”

Right after school the next day, they rushed back to the den, this time through the corrugated gate opposite Ben’s house. Almost as soon as they got in, a voice said “Hey you kids you can’t come in here. This is private.”

Ben and Christine looked at each other and Christine said “C’mon” and they walked up to the man.

“I heard you say yesterday we were going to lose our den.”

“And we haven’t done any harm.”

“Steve” called the man and another man appeared from behind a yellow container.

“These are the kids that built the Wendy house.”

“It is not a Wendy house” said Tina scornfully.

“and we didn’t do any damage or steal anything” added Ben. Steve smiled and said to the other man

“It’s a den Martin and to Ben “OK OK! You haven’t done anything wrong, don’t worry, but we are building flats on this site, so you are going to lose it. There will be 12 garages where your den is.”

“When will you build the garages?” asked Ben, who looked quite upset.

“We start tomorrow.” Said Martin, “but the garages won’t go up until August or September.”

“Can we use it until then?” asked Christine.

“Where do you kids go to the toilet?” asked Steve.

“We use my house.” Replied Ben pointing across the street.

“Oh!” Said Steve, “Our toilet won’t be here until tomorrow afternoon

“If you want the toilet now, you can use my house.”

“Thank you. I’m desperate.”

When Ben and Steve came back, Tina was showing Martin the den, and the spirit stove and all the things they’d collected *‘that might be useful later’*.

“If the site Manager says its all right, maybe they could carry on using it until the garages go up Steve.”

“I don’t know” said Steve. “People will see them going in and out.”

“We can go in and out the back way.” said Tina and showed them the hole in the hedge. “I was there yesterday when you found our den.”

“I’ll have to ask the site manager for you.” Said Martin, frowning.

“What do you think Steve?”

“I think it will be OK if you keep away from the workmen and machines.”

“We will!” said Ben and Tina together and Tina added “Who is the site manager?”
“I am.” Said Steve.

So they carried on using their den all through term and the long summer holidays. It was great and they became very popular with the builders and learnt all sorts of things about constructing houses. Just before the August Bank Holiday, Steve found Ben and asked if he could use his toilet as the one on site was being repaired. “Of course. I’ll go with you because Mother is home on Saturday and she doesn’t know you.” Steve was only in the toilet a second and when he came out, asked Ben where his Mother was. Ben led him into the garden.

“Ben has a den in the corner of the building site over the road and he’s just let me use your loo.”

“He hasn’t been in trouble has he?”

Steve smiled. “No. He and Tina have been very helpful, actually.”

“I dreaded those flats going up. But they are not as ugly as I thought they’d be.”

“Come and have a look inside” said Steve and of course Mother couldn’t resist.

That evening, Ben and Tina had tea at Ben’s, sausage and beans on toast, a favourite. His Mum had taken quite a shine to Christine.

“That Steve is such a nice man” his Mum remarked

“Esh. Eesh a shite manasher” mumbled Ben through a mouthful of beans.

“He said if I don’t mind, he’d move your den over to the bottom of our garden. He says it will be easy to knock the breeze blocks down and move them. Take his men just a couple of hours free of charge.”

“Oh yes yes yes!” said Ben then stopped. “What about Tina, Mother?”

“Well if Christine doesn’t mind of course.”

“But can she still use it?”

“Of course” said his Mum.

“Oh thank you Mrs Ayres.

“Christine’s one of the family, AND she doesn’t talk with her mouth full and spray baked beans everywhere.”

Two Many Coincidences

Everybody's heard a ghost story but few of us admit to ever having seen a ghost. But what if we have met a ghost and we didn't know? We didn't know because they were just like any other ordinary person.

“Well that's it Rosemary Jane. You'll be on your own next week; and so will I.”

“It's been really good being shown the ropes by you Bert. You're a lovely man. Everyone will miss you.”

“I'll miss everybody too. I'm not lookin' forward to retirement much since I lost the missus.

You know the walk now. No need to go back the same way. We'll carry on down here and I'll show you the quick way back to the sorting office. That's the old Spectre night club on the right. It's actually the last address on the walk, but it's empty now. The last business moved out eighteen months since. Nobody wanted to go near the place after the fire”

“It was horrible” said Rosemary Jane. “I don't want to think about it.”

They walked for a while in silence. Rosemary Jane staring at her three-wheeled trolley until Bert broke the silence.

“You know where I live Rosy. Pop round any time for a cuppa. I'll be pleased to see you. Moving to a new town isn't easy.”

“I will Bert. Thanks. And you keep in touch with your step-son and his children. I'm sure they think the World of you.”

As they walked in to the office, a loud cheer went up. Bert was solid as a rock and well liked by everyone in the Post Office. Although they were celebrating Bert's retirement they all knew they would miss him. As the good-natured banter subsided, Rosemary Jane went to clock out. The supervisor and Bert stood together watching her walk down the aisle between the sorting machines as did not a few of their workmates.

“She's a really nice girl.” Said Bert. “I ain't known her long but I'll miss 'er.”

“Gorgeous.” replied Mick. “Shame about her face.”

“Burns I think, but when you start chatting to her you just don't notice.”

“I suppose. I thought acid. See you at your do tonight, Bert.”

* * *

Chris Penny felt a bit lost.. It was only her third day on “active service” as a Detective Constable and the partner she was teamed with, DS Dave Cooper, had had a domestic crisis and taken a few days compassionate leave. Actually Chris knew what the “domestic crisis” was as Dave had rapidly become a friend and had e-mailed her to brief her. Fresh out of Police Training, she was feeling out of her depth. But not for long though.

“DC Penny? My office please.”

Rising with the calm dignity of a chorister who had just deposited his posterior on a drawing pin, Chris propelled herself towards Detective Inspector Kent's door.

“Yes Inspector?”

“Your lucky day Chris, someone's just dropped these letters in. Found them when they were pulling down the old Spectre Disco. They seem to be about that nightclub fire and it's probably just hate mail, but check it out.”

“What do you want me to find out Inspector?”

“I don’t know. Investigate! And you can call me Jim in this office. I’m busy with this County Hall Paedo business – just use your initiative until Dave gets back.”

“When should I get it done by?”

“Yesterday Chris. Everything’s yesterday. You’re not in university now. Get on with it.”

Chris returned to her desk clutching a small bundle of letters and the suspicion that she had been given something just to keep her occupied and out of DI Kent's greying hair. That idea was dispelled when she read the first letter which was nothing less than an accusation of arson manslaughter and conceivably murder. She read it again.

Sarah,

Several of us saw you squirt that lighter fuel on the curtain round Andy's deck and smelt it. You think that because we died, you got away with it. Andy didn't have anyone else. He finished with you because you were selfish and flirty.

You think you've made a new start, but you will never forget. We won't let you.

Rachel - 2nd January 2004

“It's 2011” Chris exclaimed aloud.

“Oh well done! Easy to see why you'll be an asset to CID” Quipped a uniformed officer who happened to be passing her desk. “I bet you know May has 31 days too.” But Chris didn't notice.

Every letter said basically the same thing, but they were all clearly in different writing and gave no suggestion of being fake. The only anomaly was the dates, which matched but were seven years earlier than the postmark on the envelope. Chris reached for her phone.

“Greetings – Constabulary Fairytale Filing Services”

“Funny Yuk Puke Dan. It’s Chris Penny on the third floor. You'll get into trouble with your wisecracks one day.”

“Breaks the monotony Chris. What can I do for you?”

“I want to look at the file on a fire seven years ago at The Spectre nightclub in town. Can I fetch it up here, or do I need to look at it down there?”

“I don’t know. I’ll dig it out and have a look.”

“OK. I’ll come down now anyway just in case. See you in a few minutes.”

Dan had left the file open on table when she got to the archive library.

“D' you want to have a look here before I go through the rigmarole of signing it out to you. What are you looking for?”

Chris explained about the letters and that she didn't really know what she was looking for. The DI had inferred the letters were a hoax. All she could do was read the file and see if there were any connections.

“Can I work here Dan? I'm working on my own and its quiet and maybe I can ask you for help.”

Feeling a bit more confident with the file in front of her, Chris checked the summary and status first, then started to list facts like witnesses, victims and dates. After a while of seemingly fruitless note taking, she realised she had stopped thinking about the letters, which were, after all, the reason for her efforts. She started to list the people and dates from the letters and almost immediately it struck her.

The names on the letters matched some of the victims of the fire. Seven people died from burns at various times during the six weeks after the fire and the dates on the letters matched the date each victim died – with the exception of the last. For the second time that day, Chris made a sudden vertical take-off. but Dan was booking out a file to another officer. She waited impatiently and collared him as soon as he was free. She showed him the surprising coincidences.

“Do you think the person who died last is the guy who wrote the letters, Chris?”

“It can't be Dan. Dead people don't write letters. Anyway, it was a woman not a guy. The handwriting is all different as well.”

“What caused the fire?”

“According to the report, probably a cigarette or an electrical fault. The seat of the fire was just behind the DJ's deck.”

“Well the letters and report agree about the place, if not the cause. Do you know who the DJ was, Chris?”

“Yes Dan. It was Andy Sutherland but I don't know if it was the same Andy as the Andy in the letters.”

“Was he one of the victims?”

“No. He wasn't! He was interviewed and he said he had had no electrical problems.”

“Your right. It is an unusual set of coincidences. What are you going to do?”

“Well, I will check the papers, radio and TV to see how much was public knowledge, check with the Post Office and whoever handed in the letters and I'd like to talk to the two Sarahs and the DJ mentioned in the case file. I wish Dave was here. I don't know if I should speak to Jim first. What do you think Dan?”

“I don't think you should speak to anyone outside the station without checking with the DI. Oh and just a tip. DI Kent tells everyone to call him Jim, but it's actually better to call him DI.

Next day, DC Penny dutifully smiled good morning with everybody else when DI Kent arrived, and gave him time to check the important correspondence and messages awaiting him, which she astutely observed, almost exactly matched the time it took for him to consume the coffee and chocolate digestives which coincidentally had arrived at precisely the same moment he did. She knocked on his open door.

“You don't need to knock DC. Come in. What have you got for me?”

“Can you spare me a few minutes DI Kent?”

“That's why I asked you to come in, and you can call me Jim.”

“Sorry DI. I investigated the letters you gave me, but I still don't know if they are a hoax or hate mail. They do throw up an unusual set of coincidences when compared with the case file though.”

Chris outlined the coincidences between names, dates and postmarks and content, the fact that there was no letter from the last victim and that every letter seemed to have been written in a different hand.

“I want to speak to whoever handed the letters in and the Post Office to check they really were delivered, and I'd like to speak to the two people named Sarah noted in the original investigation Sir. I also want to speak to the DJ, but as Dave is not here I wanted to clear it with you first.”

“I read one. I want to know who wrote them? Its almost certainly a hoax or hate mail – if not, well ... You can speak to the people concerned, but be tactful. Make it clear it's just some admin items we want to tie up to close the file.” Understand? We don't want to make work. Dave will be back in a day or two. You can help him. Oh! And speak to the PO sorting office too.”

DC Penny was about to say she had listed the Post Office but she thought better of it and just said “Thank you DI Kent.”

“Good Chris. Go on then – get on with it.”

Chris spoke to the demolition crew who handed in the letters who were still in the city, working on a derelict hosiery factory. They had “found” them in an old bank of mail boxes, strangely in the only one with a padlock. The building they were demolishing had housed the Spectre Disco. The foreman had read one, but Chris didn't gain any information which seemed relevant. Then she spoke to one of the Sarahs who still lived locally, on the telephone. She had left the Disco early to be with her Son and only found out about the fire the next morning so she couldn't offer anything useful. Chris's next call was to the Post Office to arrange to see the sorting office supervisor.

Mick Baxter, the sorting office supervisor was taking care of a roster issue when Chris arrived. It was fascinating watching the combination of man and machine, perhaps humans and robots would be more accurate. People still needed to walk the streets and push letters through letter boxes though, she

mused. Mick returned, she showed her warrant card and introduced herself.

“How can I help, DC?”

“These letters have come into our hands, and we just want to see if they were actually delivered by the Post Office. We think they are a bit “odd” or maybe a hoax.”

He took the letters and shuffled through them.

“There is nothing unusual about them. The stamps have all been cancelled by our machine and the addresses are all legible and have a post code. Just looking at the envelopes, I would say they were delivered by our staff, unless there is something you know and I don't.”

“The address where they were found has been empty for the last eighteen months. Would it be possible to speak to the postman who does that route?”

“Of course. LE1 5LS, January. Oh!”

“Something wrong?”

“That is odd. You can't speak to her. It was Miss Jane and she left, suddenly.

“When?”

“Valentines Day. She was everyone's pin up – except for her face. So I can't forget.”

“What was wrong with her face?”

“Horribly scarred, as though someone had thrown acid at her.”

“Or burned?”

“Yes. I thought of that too.”

“Can you give me her address?”

“Like I said, it's odd. I can't. HR misplaced her file and asked for my copy. When I went to get it, my copy was missing as well. It wasn't too important as she was still on probation, but embarrassing never-the-less. Until you asked that is.. It's as though she never existed.”

“What about her colleagues?”

“Have a word with Bert. He's retired but I can give you his address. Miss Jane took over from him and he showed her the ropes. Why are you looking for her? What's she done?”

“She hasn't done anything. It's just a mystery that's all. ... Rosemary Jane. I'll speak to Bert, but if her file turns up, can you let me know?”

“Most definitely!”

Back in her car, Chris sat for a few minutes to gather her thoughts. There were too many coincidences, too many “odd” events, but no real leads. She was curious about the vanishing post lady, who clearly had a striking appearance, and she wondered what she looked like. She made a note in her book to ask and got on the phone to archives. It was Dan who answered her call and she couldn't resist giving him

some of his own medicine.

“CID here. We are looking for some good fairy-tales.”

“Ha bloody ha Chris. What can I do you for?”

“This gets more like a fairy tale every minute. The post-lady who delivered the letters has vanished. I'm going to see her colleague if he's in but. I can't remember if there's a photo of the victim who died last?”

“I can't remember. I'll have to look.”

“If there is, can you send it to me – and her bio data?”

“OK – if you haven't got it in 30 minutes, I can't send it.”

Chris didn't have a scrap of evidence to connect the missing post lady with the letters or the fire. The demolition workers or the postman who emptied the pillar-box were just as involved, but her disappearing was very mysterious. She was looking forward to talking to Bert with more than professional curiosity. She dialled the number Mick Baxter had given her and a friendly man's voice greeted her.

“I'm DC Chris Penny. Mr Baxter at the sorting office gave me your number.”

“I know! Mick already called and told me you might be in touch.”

“I wonder when it would be possible to see you Mr. Baxter?”

“More or less any time. I'm mostly at home.”

“Would it be convenient now? I'm only about five minutes from you.”

“That's fine. I'm not going anywhere.”

When she pulled up outside Bert's house, she was immediately struck by how well kept it was. It had the ubiquitous double glazing and satellite dish, but it still had a wooden door and cast iron gutters and the paintwork, curtains, everything, was immaculate. Bert seemed a healthy outgoing looking gentleman and insisted on getting her a “cuppa” first. Chris declined politely even though it was just what she wanted, and when it arrived, it was accompanied by buttered scones and raspberry jam. Ordinarily, she would have attempted to be professionally distant, but Bert was the type who seemed genuinely WYSIWYG.

“Mick told me you were asking about Rosemary Jane. Seems she's a bit of a mystery.”

“Yes. It's as though she doesn't exist. What can you tell me about her.”

“Not a lot really, but I liked her. She seemed kind and honest.”

“Where did she come from? What was her previous job, was she married, anything like that?”

“She was one of those people who made you talk, but didn't tell you much. Private like. I know she'd been at university and I know she had lodgings off Saffron Lane, 35 Sycamore Street. That's about it.”

“Nothing odd or unusual? Did she say what happened to her face?”

“She never mentioned it. And I wouldn't ask. I liked her. She worked hard.”

“Sorry it's the office. Just let me see what it is?” It was the picture of the last victim and some bio.

“Tell me Bert, do you recognise this person?”

“No. Well, it looks sort of familiar. Do you think it could be Rosemary Jane?”

“I've never seen her Bert. Is it?”

Bert wouldn't be drawn on the picture. “Oh well, it will all come out in the wash. I'll let you get on. Thanks for your time Bert.”

Bert saw Chris out. As she was opening the car door, he called to her. “There was one thing struck me as a bit odd.”

Yes?

“I saw her in the street about the end of January and she said Sid at the Spectre asked to be remembered to me.”

“What's odd about that?”

“Well it is eighteen months since I delivered anything to the Spectre. The building's been empty. I didn't even include it in Rosemary Jane's walk. I wouldn't think she'd know Sid. He was the caretaker there. Worked for Night'nDay Security.”

“Thanks Bert. You've been a great help.”

Back in her office, Chris called Night'nDay, asked about Sid and to be put through to the HR department. The voice on the other end was less than welcoming.

“I'm the HR Department, and Accounts, and Logistics. PR, Transport and Purchasing. “Is there a problem? Sid is as straight as a die.” Chris hastily put her mind at rest. “E's 'ere now. Do you want to speak to 'im?”

Chris accepted the offer gratefully and explained to Sid that she wanted to know about recent deliveries. He was loquacious in the extreme, and claimed to be on the most friendly terms with the “new post lady after Bert,” but he was willing to look at a photograph of someone who may have called at the Spectre. Chris arranged to meet him at the security company at about 10, the next day.

When she got to work, she was delighted to see Dave at his desk.

“Is everything OK?” She asked.

“Fine,” he answered with a broad grin. “I’ll tell you later. What have you been doing?”

Chris gave him the broad details and told him about her planned meeting with Sid.

“The mysterious missing post lady. Sounds like Sherlock Homes or Miss Marple.”

“It’s driving me nuts Dave. So many people saw her – and she just vanishes without trace.

“Well people do you know, ask missing persons.”

“Yes, but they existed before they disappeared. Rosemary Jane just appeared and then disappeared – like a – a – like a ghost.”

“Don’t say that to the boss Chris. He’ll have a stroke.”

“I spoke to her landlady, and she was happy because she’d been paid for the month and wasn’t asked for a rebate. She said she didn’t bring much and took everything with her”.

“Anything else Chris?”

“Oh I forgot the DJ. He lives in Leeds and it was the first time he’d been to the Spectre. He was a last minute stand-in. There isn’t anyone else.”

“She certainly seems a bit of a Houdini.”

“The only lead I have left now is the other Sarah, Sarah Plat and she’s in Portsmouth. At least that was plain sailing as she works for a bank now. I’ll phone her after lunch.

“Can I do that for you while you go and see Sid? Then when you get back we can have a late lunch put our two heads together.”

“And get five?” They both laughed

Chris’s meeting with Sid was not very illuminating but she was not surprised. He seemed to know very little about the post lady, except that she had a “phenominous mem’ry” about how many letters she delivered and on which day. Chris showed him the “alleged picture” of “Rosemary Jane” which he scrutinised at some length.

“She seems very familiar, but I don’t think I’ve seen her before.”

“It’s not anything like the post-lady?” Said DC Penny.

“Well, er without the scars. Well; no it couldn’t be.”

“Oh. You can’t think of anything else Sid? She didn’t tell you about her family or holidays or anything.”

“Erm; no.”

“Well you've been a big help anyway, Sid. Thank you ever so much.

When she got back to her desk, her partner was staring out the window, oblivious. “Did you speak to Sarah 2?”

Dave started. “No. I didn't. Nobody can speak to Sarah 2.”

“Has she moved Dave? Don't tell me she's vanished as well.”

“She hasn't vanished Chris. She's dead.”

“Dead! When? How? Why?” Tell me.”

“I telephoned Santander, and was put straight through to the manager, who asked me if I was a relation of her's. When I told him who I was, he told me she was dead, and suggested I speak to the local police.

“And?”

“Apparently she committed suicide. Took an electric fire in the bath with her. Because she worked at a bank, the manager notified the police when she didn't come to work or report sick. They gained entry and found her.”

“Are they sure it was suicide Dave?”

“Certain. Sarah 2 lived in a flat with a secure entry system and cctv. They know what time it happened because it tripped the circuit breaker and all the gadget clocks stopped. Cooker, microwave and so on, and nobody entered or left her flat between then and the police arriving. In fact she hadn't had a visitor for at least a week.”

“Was there ... ?”

“There was a note on a bed-side table which just said *Sorry. I don't want to see any of you again. I can't face it.*”

“Is that it?”

“Not quite Chris. There was a letter like the ones you are investigating. Portsmouth police are sending it to us.”

“What was the date on the letter, and the postmark?”

“The date on the letter was 14th February 2005. There was no envelope so they couldn't tell me the postmark.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I think nothing. Let's go for lunch and talk it over. Then we'll run it by the boss, but I think he'll tell us to do the paperwork, file it and *Now go and get on with something important you two.*”

DI Kent was not available when they got back from lunch but he saw them right after his coffee and digestives the following morning. He listened to DC Penny attentively.

“Right DC Penny. You have an invisible post lady called Rosemary Jane who by coincidence has the same initials as the name of the last victim of the Spectre nightclub fire, to die.”

“Not invisible sir. Dozens of people saw her. Bert, the Supervisor at the Post Office, her colleagues, her landlady ... “

“OK not invisible – vanishing. You have someone who committed suicide in Portsmouth, perhaps, only perhaps, because of a letter written five years ago, perhaps, by Rosemary Jane, our vanishing post lady, accusing her of arson. You have six other letters *allegedly* written by victims of the *alleged* arson, on the Day each died.”

“Yes Sir, but all of this is too much to be coincidence.”

“I'm inclined to agree with Chris, DI”

“Yes! But DS Cooper, DC Penny. Dave, Chris; nobody has complained about hate mail. There is no evidence, EVIDENCE that the fire was arson. There is no complaint against the vanishing post lady, not from the defunct night club, the demolition company, her landlady, even by her employers our illustrious Royal Mail.”

“If we had the envelope that Sarah Platt's letter was in with the postmark ...” DC Penny stopped.

“We don't have that envelope DC Penny!”

“No Sir.”

“Dave, what do you think of DC Penny's reasoning?”

“I agree with Chris 100% Jim, er DI. But I agree with you too.”

“Very Chivalrous Dave. Can you see anything from the top of that fence?”

“Oh come on Chris. I am being tough on you I know, and it is an amazing string of coincidences. But if it is not a hoax, an elaborate hoax, but a hoax never-the-less, either Your post lady Rosemary Jane did not die in the fire, or she is a ghost. So I go with the hoax Chris.”

“Yes Sir”

Listen both of you. When the magician cuts the lady in half, it looks really convincing and we don't know how it is done, but we know the lady is not cut in half. Don't be so down. I don't know how it was done either.

“No Sir. But the magician doesn't lose the lady.”

“Chris! Write the report Chris – a complex hoax. Put everything you have told me in the report to show we have done a thorough job. Put it in the case file and forget it. Now go and get on with something important you two.”

Back at their desks, Chris suggested they go across the road for a coffee.

“I feel guilty; no small; no stupid. Thanks for backing me up Dave.”

“I agree with you Chris, I really do. But the DI is right you know. There is no evidence of anybody doing anything wrong. The DI did tell you you'd done a thorough job and I'm glad you're my partner.”

As they headed for the door, the Desk Sergeant called to them.

“Hey Chris. There was a lady in here asking for you just now.”

“Who was it?”

“She didn't leave her name. She just asked me to tell you “Thank you”. She said you'd know who she was. Absolutely cracking looker, shame about her face.”

The pair looked at each other and fled for the exit.