

Unsupervised Dead Women

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There wasn't much of a fuss when the first one died. There was even less when she came back. Truth be told, we all thought Mrs Jackson had probably been seeing things. She hasn't been the same since Mr Jackson suddenly decided the world was going to end and he ought to get ahead of the matter. Now he mostly sits in his basement counting tinned goods while Mrs Jackson paces back and forth upstairs in the kitchen, wondering what to do about it. She said that's what she was doing that Wednesday evening when she saw the woman with no face and no clothes dancing in the back garden. She said all the woman had on was a thin red scarf that she waved above her head as she tap-danced on the bell heather. And we all thought, well, poor Mrs Jackson. There's clearly only so much fear one house can take, even the big, detached ones with the floor-to-ceiling windows that aren't to everyone's taste. Time to call a doctor, we thought.

But then, the next day, Mr Henshaw who runs the new chippy in town, the one with the home-made sauces that are a bit on the pricey side, well, he said he had a woman come in that Thursday and order a portion of Whitby scampi and a battered sausage to take away – even though it's the new black pudding fritters that have everybody talking, he said – and she had no face and no clothes and, apparently, no intention of paying. Scared the life out of the other customers, he said, as if it wasn't hard enough to make a restaurant work in its first year. Anyway, Mr Henshaw said, he didn't want to make it all about business, but he did think it was a nonsense going to all that trouble of coming back from the dead and then not even considering giving the black pudding fritters a whirl, not even in a butty.

It was Mr Simmons the bookseller who finally realised who she was. He said he saw her hovering around the new releases and thought, that's a bit odd, fancy coming into town with no face and no clothes. And then it clicked, he said. He became nervous after that. Shy. It was a bit like spotting a celebrity, someone proper off the telly. He was worried his childhood stammer would come back and he'd forget all his words. So, he hid behind the gift vouchers and pretended to scan things, watching as she wandered around the fiction tables. It looked like she was 'just browsing', he said, until suddenly she stopped and scooped up a pile of books, turned, and threw them all on the floor. She continued like this, apparently, moving from one table to the next, throwing stacks of books on the floor. Not with any huge sense of urgency or violence, he said, just in a way that suggested she preferred them that way; strewn across the floor where they could easily be trod on, rather than in neat stacks, organised by genre and author. Anyway, he said later, it was the red scarf that did it. That's how he recognised her. It was the same red scarf that had been used to strangle her.

The second woman didn't turn up until the following week and by that point we'd almost forgotten about the one with the red scarf. It was Nurse Ahmed from Oncology who spotted her. She'd just finished her shift, she said, and was sat at a red light thinking about dinner options, when a woman with no face and no clothes started doing cartwheels down the middle of the road. But then Nurse Ahmed remembered she'd been on back-to-back nights for longer than she ought to have been, so who's to say what she was seeing. What will it be tomorrow, she thought, a talking giraffe? A mouse on wheels? So, it was only when the woman with no face and no clothes reached the dual carriageway and started turning all the road signs the wrong way round, almost causing a pile up of twelve cars and a lorry no less, that someone finally had the good sense to call the police.

This one, the second one, didn't have a scarf. Mr Simmons the bookseller – who, by this stage was developing a bit of a theory – said this was because she was probably killed via

a different means. Nurse Ahmed said ah, in that case it was probably a stabbing then, on account of the massive gash wounds that covered the woman's chest and back. We all thought that sounded about right and wasn't it a good job a medical professional was on-hand to confirm these things.

The third woman appeared a week later, and everybody noticed this woman because she looked like she was only half a woman. It seemed as though she had been very untidily severed down the middle of her body, vertically, such that one arm and leg would stride forward with purpose while the other arm and leg dragged behind, begrudgingly. Well, everybody had a theory on this one, didn't they? Some thought she must have been attacked by one of those vicious dogs, the ones you're not allowed to keep anymore. They said the dog had obviously tried to tear off one arm and then one leg, with enough force to almost split the poor woman's body in two, and that ultimately, she must have bled to death. It can happen, Mr McCalmont the dentist said. Read about a case in Bournemouth. The owners had forgotten to feed it.

Others thought it was probably just a traffic accident, probably on that dangerous slip road. It doesn't need to be any more complicated than that, said Jenny from the Council, and we've been on at them for money to fix that for years. No, Nurse Ahmed said, it was much more likely a plane crash, with injuries like those. Or a shark attack, someone else said, or a house fire or a falling tree or an angry husband. Could have been an angry wife, Mrs Jackson said. Don't be daft, they said, it was either an angry husband, or a case of being mangled by outdated machinery in a factory somewhere. That will be in the lowlands then, said Mr Gallagher the dairy farmer, with a surprising degree of confidence.

Whatever the cause of death, Jenny from the Council said, it's the third dead woman to appear in as many weeks, and that's three more than this popular coastal town that relies

heavily on tourism needs. That's when the big meeting was called. A Cobra meeting! Mr Simmons cried. No, just a meeting, Jenny from the Council said. No need to make things any more exciting than they already are.

We met in the library the following evening and it was quite the event. Mr Henshaw did the catering – very generous – and everyone agreed that the black pudding fritters were the best we'd ever tasted and definitely worth bashing your way out of a coffin for. Mr McCalmont the dentist did the minutes, Ben from Bonnyrigg bought his guitar along even though no-one asked him to, and Always Pregnant Claire delivered on enthusiasm, stretching her Good Vibes vest over her swelling belly and seal clapping at regular intervals.

So, who *are* they? Someone shouted, kicking things off.

Yeah, and what do they want? Someone else.

Revenge! It must be revenge, for their horrible deaths?

Well, you would, wouldn't you? If you were deliberately mangled by outdated machinery.

Fancy being deliberately mangled by outdated machinery.

Maybe they just want to come back and do all the things they never got to do? Because of the mangling?

Yes, maybe. The mangling would definitely have made things tricky.

Yes, maybe they just want to do nice things?

Quite right Gill, like go to the cinema in the afternoon.

Oooh shall we book? Gill said. That *would* be nice. At which point Ben from Bonnyrigg launched into a song featuring lots of things that rhymed with 'nice', Always

Pregnant Claire started cheering, and Mr McCalmont looked confused as to how much of this should be going into the minutes.

Well, they've certainly picked their timing, I'll give them that. Mr Gallagher the dairy farmer said. Won't be selling ice cream this summer if all the tourists have been scared off.

You're not wrong there. We're on our knees as it is. We can't take another rough summer!

I'll not be having a bunch of dead women wanting to do nice things ruin my chip shop!

And who's to say there won't be more?

There could be hundreds!

We should set traps!

Yes, traps! Set them around the whole town!

And poison. We should consider poison.

Traps and poison! Traps and poison!

They're not rats, Claire! Jenny from the Council said. Always Pregnant Claire adjusted her Good Vibes vest and muttered something about digging a moat full of acid, at which point Jenny from the Council did a very loud sigh. Let's everybody just calm down. Mr McDougall, you looked like you had something to say.

Mr McDougall shuffled in his seat. Mr McDougall is the fancy author who's on all the posters at the bus stops. He lives in one of the expensive new houses on the sea front, with the long driveways and the ocean views. Mr McDougall has a lot of experience in talking

confidently at book festivals, so we were all a bit puzzled as to why he now appeared to be quite shy, and muttering into his paper cup.

Mr McDougall? – Jenny from the Council.

Well, these women... Mr McDougall said, somewhat sheepishly. They seem to have taken a bit of an interest in me. Following me around the town, that sort of thing. I was out to dinner at Shipley's –

– ooh did you try the Salmon? With the samphire?

Oh yes, top notch. But I was halfway through it, you see, and I looked up and that half-mangled woman standing outside the restaurant window, just... *watching* me! And then, well, *then*, she started mimicking me, as I was eating... I think she was *mocking* me!

Oh, how strange – Jenny from the Council.

And then the next day, I was running in the park – training, you see, for a triathlon –

Of course.

– and it's that half-mangled woman again. She just jumps out from behind the bushes and starts throwing bags of dog poo at me! Mr McDougall's speaking confidence had returned. Well, I assumed it was just a bit of light pestering, he said, like the fans that come up from London, they can be *very* serious, you see, they know *all* my works –

Of course.

– but they're mostly harmless, just want a picture usually. But then –

Yes, Mr McDougall?

But then she turned up at my house – at my *house*! – and she put a Molotov cocktail through my letterbox!

Gasps.

I put the fire out of course, and I'm mostly fine, as you can see, but still!

That must have been terrifying, Mr McDougall.

But why you?

Silence.

Okay, he said, taking a big breath. I know this will sound odd but hear me out. I wrote a novel in which I killed a woman on page seven by mangling half her body in the propeller of a speed boat off the coast of Oban and I fear she has now come back for revenge. Or at least some light pestering and a bit of arson. Either way, it's a bit of a pickle, as I'm sure you can see.

And have you killed off many women, Jenny from the Council asked. Needlessly, and an in an overtly violent manner? A woman with a red scarf perhaps? Mr McDougall answered the question with pinked cheeks and a shuffle of his feet.

Seventy-two, Mr Simmons the bookseller interjected. He's killed off seventy-two women. That one with the red scarf, she was killed off on page three! Didn't even get a name or occupation!

Fancy being killed off on page three, sighed Gill. With no name, no job...

Jenny from the Council called time on the big meeting and deferred to a smaller meeting to talk contingency planning. This meeting consisted of Jenny herself, who promised herself a long holiday at the end of all this – the South of France perhaps, oh the French Riveria! – and Mr McDougall, half the town's police force, and Mr and Mrs Jackson, who had kindly offered to host the meeting in their reinforced basement, given the obvious need to 'take cover'. Mr McDougall said he didn't know exactly what the women wanted, but he was

sure they would be open to reason, and that everything would probably be fine. He thanked Mr Jackson for the kind offer of staying in his well-stocked basement, and said he'd feel better heading home.

It was a clear night, with a bright white moon, much like in one of my novels, Mr McDougall thought as he drove his nice car back to the nice part of town and up his very long driveway. It was as he was getting out of his car that he noticed the movement. It was only minor, and just out of the corner of his eye. He spun round and reached for the torch on his phone. He shone it into the bushes. Who's there? He shouted. A crackle of dry twigs underfoot. A whisper of the wind through leaves. The waves crashed from the other side of his house. Mr McDougall hurried into his house, feeling silly as he tried to lock the door behind him with hands that were shaking, and slippery with sweat.

That's how we imagine it. Trembling, sobbing, and praying for forgiveness as the seventy-two women dance in the dark of his garden every night and cackle into his ear as he gets closer to sleep. They'd go in his house and hide books, steal odd shoes, and swap sugar for salt. They'd make up rumours online and delete his photos and files. It wasn't bad, any of it, not really, but it was pestering by attrition. That's what Jenny from the Council said after. There's only so much pestering a man can take, she said, and seventy-two days was what Mr McDougall could take. On the seventy third day, Mr McDougall jumped into the sea from a very great height. He died on impact, and his body was fished out shortly after.

There was mild hysteria in the immediate aftermath, but this soon gave way to relative calm, a well-attended funeral, and an ice-cream themed wake, proudly sponsored by Mr Gallagher the dairy farmer. Of course, sales have never been better. Especially the one set in Oban, with that half-mangled woman, the one who pushed him over the edge, so they say. And the film version, says Gill, that'll be good won't it.