

Shop Until You Drop

‘Sorry, I didn’t get down sooner,’ I apologised to my Aunt Marie at Exeter station.

‘Well, you’re here now,’ she said as we embraced.

Six months ago my uncle disappeared. The search party found nothing. No note, no trail, no clue. No one even remembers seeing him that morning. As though he’d walked out into the Devonshire mist and vanished forever.

‘I just don’t understand it,’ I said to her as we walked to the car. ‘I mean why?’

‘I don’t know,’ she declared. ‘I really don’t know,’ she added weakly as she unlocked the car and got in.

As we drove to the village we talked about the old days. When I used to visit them during the school holidays after my mother had died. When my uncle and I would go fishing or cycling. Eat fish and chips by the sea, play crazy golf at Torquay, or simply walk the bleak moors and threadlike lanes.

I was going to miss him for sure. But not as much as my poor aunt. Who even after six months spent every waking hour wading through endless scenarios trying to find a reason for her husband's disappearance.

On my third day, weary of playing Miss Marple, Inspector Poirot and Lieutenant Columbo all rolled into one, I took myself off on a long walk. I knew Tuesdays was her Bridge afternoon so it seemed as good a day as any.

After nearly five hours of hard walking on Dartmoor, my packed lunch and can of beer long since gone, I came across a large building about three miles out from my aunt's village. A line of crows on the roof watched me as I approached.

I stopped and looked around the makeshift car park: A dozen cars among some old scaffolding poles and rotting timber. Above the door was a sign with the word PARTS written on it.

Weird I thought. I'd walked this route many times before with my uncle but couldn't remember seeing such a place. Something so conspicuous and ugly. It seemed mysterious. But then again Dartmoor was mysterious. Everyone knew that — it was famous for it!

Not too worried by old legends and myths and stories I headed inside half hoping they might have some water or a can of Coke. I was parched. Apart from my can of beer at lunchtime, I hadn't drunk anything all day.

I walked into a large rectangular room illuminated by bright fluorescent strip lights that shone down upon row after row of freezer cabinets. It reminded me of the old Kwik Save supermarket I used to shop at when I was a student in Leeds in the late 1980s: deceptively big, overlit, and completely soulless.

Except the clientele were completely different. Instead of grubby students looking for burgers and pizzas, they were academic types dressed in suits or cords. Peering into the freezer cabinets as though they contained pieces of jewellery or rare museum artefacts.

‘Hello sir, looking for anything in particular?’ A voice came from behind me giving me a start.

I whirled around to see a man dressed in a starched white coat. He wore tiny spectacles and had a large domed head. If it wasn’t for the general queerness of the place he might have looked out of place. But he fitted right in.

‘Oh hi,’ I said. ‘I was wondering if you’ve got any water?’

‘Certainly sir, follow me.’

I followed him down one of the aisles towards a door at the end. Halfway along it occurred to me that perhaps I should get something for tea. I could cook even. Give my aunt a break and me a change from the weak stew and boiled potatoes I'd been eating for the past few nights.

By her own admission she was an appalling cook, always had been. Even joking a few nights ago that it was the reason her husband left her. Then proceeded to sob into her serviette, her stew and potatoes untouched as normal.

I looked into one of the freezer cabinets thinking of perhaps toad-in-the-hole with a thick onion gravy. Followed by one of those sickly desserts full of cream and sugar.

But instead of seeing a sausage or a meringue, I saw a human body. Bent over double wrapped in clear polyethene like a Christmas turkey.

‘Anything grab your fancy, sir?’ the man piped up. ‘Good specimen this one: a six-foot-two farmer’s son, got trapped in a combine last summer. Horrible mess it was.’

I stared at the man in disbelief.

‘Or over here.’ He pointed to an adjacent cabinet. ‘A strong fifty-year-old male, owned a breakers yard down in Paignton, but rather unwisely fell into his own crusher one morning. Wasn’t too badly damaged as a matter of fact. Killed him of course but he managed to keep his shape. Look, the pelvis is almost intact.’ He grabbed the body and twisted the dead man around like he was a doll.

I shifted my terrified gaze back to the cabinet and then back to the man. ‘These aren’t real, are they? I mean they’re models right, dummies, they’re not actual human bodies?’

My voice trailed away.

‘I understand your concern, sir. You’re not the first person to feel uneasy about what happens here.’

‘What does happen here?’ I cut in.

‘We sell bodies,’ said the man blankly

‘Bodies?’

‘The demand is unbelievable in fact. Surgeons looking for body parts, film companies looking for props and stunt doubles, mainly horror films of course.’

‘I just want some water,’ I said. ‘Then I’ll go.’

‘Our main customer, however,’ the man continued. ‘And this may surprise you, is actually the police.’

‘The police?’

‘Yes. There are a few in the Power Tools Accident section over there.’ He pointed to an aisle three rows along.

I looked over and saw three sturdy built policemen in uniform laughing and joking while yanking a large corpse from a freezer as though hauling a sack of spuds out of a cart.

‘What are they doing?’ I said feeling slightly more relaxed at the sight of some authority.

‘They are looking for murder victims,’ confirmed the man. ‘Saves them a lot of time and money if they come here first rather than scouring the landscape or diving into quarries.’

‘So hang on a minute. All these bodies are from people who have been killed, murdered?’

‘No.’ The man shook his head firmly. ‘Only a small portion. Most of our corpses are from normal deaths.’

‘Normal deaths?’

He checked himself. ‘I say normal deaths. I mean deaths from illness, accidents, old age.’

‘Why do they end up here?’

‘They are all from families sir who don’t want to go through the painful, and sometimes expensive ritual of a traditional funeral. Instead they come to us. We simply take them away and within ten days a nice cheque falls through their door. The modern world. Everything has a price. Even dead bodies.’

‘This is absolutely crazy.’

‘Maybe sir. But you’d be surprised how many we get, it’s very popular in fact, as you can see.’ He turned his hands over gesturing to the banks of freezers in the room.

‘You see sir. Funerals can be very expensive, can run into tens of thousands of pounds. And of course it’s never the deceased who pick up the bill. Always the relatives, who, let’s face it, have probably got better things to spend their money on than a wooden box that will only rot in the ground.’

Whether he was telling the truth or not. I wasn’t sure. Yes, I was intrigued, I loved the bizarre and strange, but maybe this was a touch too far. I mean dead bodies in freezers. Even for me, this was a bit too weird.

‘Well,’ I finally said. ‘It’s certainly been an experience. But I probably won’t be buying today, maybe next time.’ I smiled and turned towards the exit.

‘But what about that water sir?’

‘Oh yes.’ My mouth felt like sandpaper. ‘Anything would do, a can of coke, or perhaps something stronger.’ I half laughed.

The man half laughed back. ‘This way sir.’ Showing me to the door at the end of the aisle. ‘There’s a kitchen in there. Help yourself.’

I opened the door and walked in. It smelt horrible. I turned around but the door slammed shut. Then I heard someone locking it.

‘Hey! Hey!’

I desperately searched for a light switch but there was none. I couldn’t even see my hand.

‘Hey!’ I shouted banging on the door. ‘What’s going on? Are you there? Open the door. Help! Help! Police!’

I don’t know how long I cried out for — maybe an hour maybe more. It was only when I stopped banging on the door and dropped to the floor exhausted that I felt the terrible cold.