

Well Wishers

by Mike Shevdon



SHEVDON


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WELL WISHERS



Brian pushed through the double doors into the corridor. He noted the way Stuart leant heavily against the wall outside the interview room. It showed he was tired and irritated at being kept waiting. He had ink stains on his fingers, which meant he'd been doing paperwork, and there were bags under his eyes from working too many long shifts. Sometimes Brian wished he could stop being a policeman for ten minutes and see the world through innocent eyes. He slowed as he reached Stuart and nodded a greeting.

Stuart raised his eyebrow. It was the smallest of challenges. "Brian?"

"What have we got?" asked Brian.

"I thought Steve was handling this?"

"It's been passed to me," said Brian

"Why?"

"Because I asked for it. It may be linked to something I'm working on."

Stuart sighed. "I don't think so, mate. This is a one-off.

This guy has no record, no form, nothing. He's clean. If it weren't for the blood, you'd have to wear sunglasses to interview him. Nothing for you here."

"Have you talked to him?"

"Not yet," said Stuart. "We offered him a lawyer, but he refused. The uniforms said he was raving. We've given him half an hour to calm down."

"Good, then we can see him together."

"Can I ask why you're interested? He's not your type."

"You can ask, Stuart, but I don't want to prejudice the interview."

"Like that, is it?"

"Like what, Stuart?"

"Clocking up the performance points, ready for retirement. Go out in a blaze of glory, is that it?"

"Is that it, Sir," Brian reminded him.

"Sir." Stuart stood up straight.

Brian sighed. "Look, you don't have to be like this about it."

"You started it, Sir."

Brian sighed. "Okay. There's a long running case that appears to have some elements in common with this one. That's what I'm hearing. I asked Steve if I could take it as a favour, for old times sake."

"When was the last event in your case?"

"Seven years ago, why?"

“This guy would have been sixteen years old. Does that fit your profile?”

“We shouldn’t have a closed mind about things, Stuart. Wait and see, okay?”

Stuart pressed his ID to the card entry panel and pushed open the door to the interview room. “Very well, Sir. After you.”

The two officers entered the interview room. Brian placed a stack of buff files on the table while Stuart sat to one side. Brian pressed the record button on the recorder and sat down.

“Interview begins at eighteen forty-seven on the twenty-second of September. Interviewing officer Brian Leverton leading with DS Stuart Fellows in attendance. For the record, could you tell us your name and address, please?”

“It’s Gary.” The young man cleared his throat. “I’m Gary Duggan. I live at flat 1b, De Monfort Terrace.” He voice sounded hoarse, as if he’d been shouting.

“Now then Gary, why don’t you tell us what happened?” asked Brian.

“Tell us why you stabbed her,” Stuart prompted.

Brian stared at Stuart, and then said, “Let the lad tell it in his own way, Stuart. Go on, Gary.”

“I don’t know what to say. It was an accident.” Gary spoke softly, glancing at the tape recorder.

“Start from the beginning.”

“It’s like it isn’t real; what happened, I mean.”

“Was there a fight?”

“Yes, but not when it happened. I was trying to save her.”

“What were you fighting about?”

“The usual things; who does all the work around the flat, who pays the bills.”

“Did you hit her?”

“I never hurt Paula. I’m not like that. Not until...” Gary’s voice faded out. He stared at the table.

“So you had a row?” prompted Brian.

“Yeah. She said some things, bad things. Me too. It doesn’t matter now. None of it matters. I walked out. It was claustrophobic in there. She wouldn’t leave me alone...kept prodding me.”

“She prodded you. What with?”

“No, she just...nagged at me, she wouldn’t let me be. I walked out. I had to get some air.”

“Did she say anything?”

“She said something like; go on, walk away from it like you always do. You can’t hide from it.”

“Hide from what, Gary?” asked Stuart.

“From responsibility. She meant responsibility.”

Stuart snorted. “She got that right, then.”

“Stuart, is there somewhere you’d rather be?” asked Brian.

“Sorry, Sir.”

Brian turned back to Gary. “Go on Lad.”

Gary paused, looking at one officer, then the other. He glanced down in his lap, but then turned his head away, putting his hands behind his back as if he couldn't bear to look at them. He looked up at the ceiling, and started talking.

"We were arguing, like I said. I just needed some space. I walked down to the little park at the bottom of the hill and sat on the bench by the wishing well. There were people walking across to the bus station, ordinary people. I felt like I was invisible, like they couldn't see me. I just sat there going through it in my head, thinking of things I should have said, playing it through, over and over. I had a coin in my hand and I was just turning it in my fingers. It felt warm. I was still angry at her. Some of the things she said..." He shrugged. "I was turning the coin in my hand. I glanced towards the wishing well, and it just came out. I didn't mean it. I just said it."

"What did you say, Gary?" asked Stuart.

"I didn't mean it. I flipped the coin into the well and...I wished...I wished she was dead."

Stuart leaned forward. "So you wanted to kill her?"

"No!" he protested. "I said I wanted her dead. It's not the same."

"So you made a wish." Brian glanced at Stuart and attempted to restart the flow of words.

Gary turned away from Stuart's intense gaze. "There was this plip sound from the well and...he was there."

"Who was?"

"This bloke. He appeared out of nowhere," said Gary.

“What bloke?” Stuart asked.

“A short guy. Black curly hair, pale skin, really wild looking, like a gypsy or something. He had the most amazing blue eyes, really bright blue. He just appeared, like magic. He said, ‘Granted’.” Then he just walked away towards the bus station. I didn’t know what he was going to do.”

“What was he going to do?” asked Brian.

“I didn’t know. I didn’t take him seriously.” Gary slammed his hands down on the table for emphasis “It was just words!”

“Calm down, lad, take your time.”

Gary stood, pushing the chair back noisily, leaning across the table. “It’s not even a real wishing well! It was built by the council for God’s sake!”

“Take it easy, Gary. Stuart, rustle up some tea for the lad and me, will you? Put some sugar in it.”

“Sure,” said Stuart, rising.

“There, take a breather for a moment. Interview suspended at eighteen fifty-nine.” Brian clicked off the tape. “We can carry on in a minute when Stuart gets back with the tea. Just relax. No need to get excited. We’re here to help.”

Gary paced back and forth across the narrow room. “I didn’t mean it. I was just saying. You have to believe me.”

“Just pause for a moment until the tea’s here. Then we can continue.” Brian’s spoke softly, calming him.

Gary sat down again and his gaze turned inward. When Stuart returned, he had to nudge Gary to tell him that his tea was there.

“Thanks.” He sipped at the tea, holding the mug in both hands as if he needed the warmth.

Brian pressed record on the tape. “Interview with Gary Duggan recommencing at nineteen eleven.” Brian sat down opposite Gary. “So what happened then? Did you go back to the flat?”

“That was later. I decided to walk around; clear my head.”

“Where did you go?”

“I walked up to the High Street. I didn’t know she was going to be there. I thought Paula was still at the flat. She must have popped out for milk or something. I wasn’t really watching where I was going. She was close before I even saw her. She didn’t see me. She was about to cross at the zebra crossing.”

“And what happened then?”

“As she stepped out, I saw him; the guy from the wishing well. He was in a big white van, driving towards her. He wasn’t slowing down. He was heading straight for her. I just reacted. I grabbed her coat and pulled her backwards. She fell on the ground. The van roared past, right where she’d been. It would have knocked her down.”

“So you saved her?” suggested Brian.

“She didn’t see it. She didn’t even seem to know what had happened. She started shouting at me, screaming abuse, crying. People started gathering round us. One guy helped her up. They were being sympathetic, like I’d just attacked her.”

“Did you?” asked Brian.

“No! I saved her. The van would have killed her, no mistake. No-one else saw it. They were behaving like I was some kind of nut-case, pushing me away, getting between me and her. I tried to explain, but they didn’t see it.”

“And?”

“I walked away. What else could I do? They kept treating me like I was some sort of maniac. I went back towards the park, trying to figure it out. It was the guy, do you see? The bloke from the wishing well. He was granting my wish and trying to kill her.”

“Why would he do that, Gary?” asked Brian.

“How do I know? I’ve never seen him before in my life. All I know was that he was there when I tossed the coin in the well, and again when I saved her from the van. Maybe he’s a sicko or something. Maybe he’s escaped from the asylum.”

Stuart folded his arms. “How do you know it was the same man?”

“It was him. I’m sure of it. Those eyes - I’d recognise them anywhere.”

“He was inside a speeding van and you had time to notice the colour of his eyes?” asked Stuart.

The sarcasm was lost on Gary. “You couldn’t miss them, they’re what stand out about him. So intense...”

“So where did you go after that?” asked Brian.

“I walked around town, trying to think it through. It didn’t make any sense. Why was he doing this? What kind of maniac takes a wishing well seriously? I had to try and find him, see? I

had to tell him it was all a mistake and he should leave her alone. I went back towards the park. That was the only other place I'd seen him, but before I got there, he was there again."

"Where?"

"Up on the scaffolding where they're doing the repairs on the old town hall. He was up on the walkways, shifting sacks. He must be some sort of builder."

"You recognised him?"

"He recognised me. He called down to me across the road, Hey Gary; like that."

"He knew your name?"

"He called down to me. I waved to him to come down, trying to get his attention, but he's waving for me to come up. I needed to talk to him, to explain. I climbed up. He wasn't coming down to see me and there was no other way to talk to him."

"So you climbed the scaffolding?" said Brian.

"Yeah, up three or four levels. He was up on the end, looking down over the side. I tried to speak to him but he wasn't listening."

"What was he doing?"

"He was watching over the side and then he just hefted one of the sacks of cement over the edge."

"It fell over the edge?"

"No, he waited and dropped it deliberately. I heard the scream from below. I recognised it. I rushed to the end of the

scaffolding to see. She was down there.”

“Who was?”

“Paula. She was looking up, the sack split open at her feet. It must have missed her by inches. When she realised it was me looking down at her she sort of stepped back, like she couldn’t believe it. I tried to shout down to her that it wasn’t me, but she didn’t wait. She ran off towards home. When I turned around the bloke was gone. I was going to ask him what he was playing at, but he wasn’t there. I looked back down at where the sack was split open on the pavement and he walked past. The bloke, the one who dropped the sack. He was following Paula.”

“How did he get down so quickly, Gary? You said you were three or four levels up?” Brian asked him.

“I don’t know! Maybe he had a quick way down, like a rope or something. Maybe he jumped.”

“From thirty feet up?” asked Stuart.

“I don’t know.” Gary shrugged, opening his hands, palms up, then looked at them and closed them again. “It was him, I’m sure it was.”

“Let’s try and get back to what happened, Gary. What did you do then?”

“I climbed down using the ladders. It took me longer than it did him. I ran back to the flat. I had to tell Paula that she was in danger. I had to get him to leave her alone.”

“You expected this blue-eyed man to be there?” asked Brian.

“He was following her. He was going to try again. I had to warn her. I still had my key. I ran all the way. When I got there I could hear Paula through the door, talking. She was still upset and someone was making calming noises. I didn’t want to alarm her, so I didn’t ring the bell or knock. I let myself in quietly. I could hear them. They were in the kitchen. It’s only small. When I stood in the doorway, she turned to me and he was standing behind her.”

“Who was?”

“The bloke. He must have talked his way in. He was in the kitchen with her. Her expression was something I’d never seen before. She looked terrified - of me, not him.

“What did you say?” asked Brian.

“I didn’t get chance to say anything. As soon as I showed myself he picked up the kitchen knife. He was going to stab her in the back. I jumped forward. It was tight, but I managed to grab his arm.”

“Did he fight you?”

“For a little guy he was wickedly strong. He started twisting his wrist, trying to get his arm free. Paula was screaming the place down. She’d realised by that time that he had the knife. I was shouting at her to get away, to run for help, but there was no room. She couldn’t get clear. We wrestled for the knife. I managed to grab the blade and twist it out of his hand; he was so strong. I had to tear it away from him. Then he shoved me.”

“What do you mean he shoved you?” asked Brian quietly.

“One second he’s fighting me for the knife and the next

he's pushing me away. It spun me around. I wasn't expecting it to come so easy." Gary swallowed. "I felt it stop, sudden like. I wasn't even looking. The knife just flew around in my hand. I only looked when it stopped."

"And what did you see?"

"It was Paula. She was in the way. The knife was in her chest. She sort of coughed and looked down, and then she said 'Gary?' She couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it either." Gary brushed the back of his hand across his eyes. "She had her hand around mine and was holding my hand onto it. I couldn't let go. All that blood...."

"You stabbed her?" asked Stuart.

"I didn't mean to. I was trying to get the knife."

"What did you do then?" asked Brian.

"She sort of collapsed. There was no space to move. She pulled me down with her until we were both on our knees. She was looking into my eyes the whole time, her hand locked around mine. She wouldn't let go. I screamed at the bloke, 'Dial emergency, get an ambulance!'. He just squeezed past me and stood in the doorway, watching."

"What did you do?"

"I shouted at him; for God's sake, get an ambulance. She's dying!" He just looked at me, calm as you like and said, you got your wish, and walked out. He didn't call the emergency number, he didn't help at all. He just walked away."

"What did you do?"

"You know what I did. I called the ambulance. I rang for

help. I sat there with my hand pressed over the wound until they arrived. There was blood coming through my fingers. I stayed with her.”

“She was dead when they got there, Gary.” said Stuart.

Gary sniffed and rubbed his eyes again. “Yeah...I know.”

“You’ve just admitted to stabbing your girlfriend with a kitchen knife, you do realise that, don’t you?” said Stuart.

Brian sat back, letting Stuart take the lead now that the story was told.

“I didn’t stab her. It was an accident. It happened like I told you.” said Gary.

“There were no fingerprints other than yours and hers on the knife.”

“I’m telling you the bloke had it. He was going to kill her.”

“But he didn’t. You did,” said Stuart.

“It was an accident. They were just words,” Gary protested.

“This other guy? There’s no sign of forced entry into the flat,” said Stuart.

“I told you, she must have let him in.”

“Why would she allow a complete stranger into the flat?”

“I don’t know. He was already inside when I got there.”

“There nothing to indicate that there was anyone in the flat but you and Paula.”

“He was with her,” said Gary, but there was resignation in his voice.

“Is this some kind of insanity plea, Gary?” Stuart shook his

head in disbelief.

“He was there! It happened just like I said. Why would I lie to you?”

“That’s a good question, Gary. Why would you lie to us?”

“I’m not lying. It’s the truth.”

Brian checked his notes. “Gary, you were saying all this in the police car. To corroborate the evidence, I called the council about the wishing well. They told us it was locked up after a child nearly fell down it, trying to get the pennies out, years ago.”

“It’s open. I saw it.”

“I had a constable go down there to check whether anyone had tampered with it. The well is covered by a metal plate with a large padlock on it. The padlock hasn’t been opened in years.”

“That can’t be true.” Gary shook his head.

“I talked to the constable myself,” said Brian.

“But I’ve seen down the well. There are bricks all the way down to the water. I’ve seen it.”

“The well hasn’t been accessed in years, Gary. In the light of that information, would you like to revise your statement?” asked Brian.

“I don’t understand....”

“There is no wishing well, Gary, and no bloke either,” said Stuart.

“He was there. Why would I make it up?”

Brain shifted the stack of files in front of him. "Does then name Jim Smythe mean anything to you, Gary?"

"No, should it?"

"What about Terry Broadbent?"

"No. Who's he?" asked Gary.

"Thomas Jacobs? Geoffrey Priestley?"

"I don't know any of these people. What have they got to do with this?" Gary's expression confirmed his puzzlement.

"Are you trying to fit me up for something?"

"You've never heard the names before?" asked Brian.

"I don't think so. I'd remember."

Brian glanced at Stuart, who shook his head. "Gary, I'm going to ask a constable to take you back to the cells. I want you to think carefully about what you've told us. Later, we'll bring you back up again and we're going to ask you to make a statement. I want you to think about what you want to say in that statement; what you want to go before the court. Do you understand?"

"I guess." He sagged. All the energy had leached from him.

"We'd recommend you talk to a solicitor. You need someone to put your case," said Brian.

"She's dead because of me," said Gary. "If I hadn't made the wish..."

"It'll have to be a damed good lawyer if you want that to fly," said Stuart.

"Stuart, would you ask someone to come and escort Mr

Duggan back down to the cells?” They waited until an officer came to collect Gary. He went quietly, without protest. He was still shaking his head as he went through the door.

“That’s straightforward enough,” said Stuart, “He’s distancing himself from what he’s done, but they won’t cop for an insanity plea on the basis of that claptrap. He’s going down.”

“He’s not the first.”

“And he won’t be the last, that’s for sure,” said Stuart.

“That’s not what I meant. He’s not the first to tell a story like that.”

“What?”

Brian took a manilla folder from the top of the pile and began reading. “This was in eighty-seven. Terry Broadbent, sixty-three years old. Poisoned his wife who was terminally ill and for whom he was the sole carer. Said he had dropped a coin in the well by the bus station and wished his wife would finally die. He said that a man with vivid blue eyes offered to grant him his wish. He saw the same man swapping the pills for his wife’s medication. He swapped them back. She was killed by an overdose of her own medication, mixed up by him on his own admission. No trace of the blue-eyed intruder was ever found.”

“Coincidence, surely?” said Stuart.

Brian took a second folder. “Nineteen ninety-four, seven years later; Jim Smythe, forty-one years old. Manslaughter.”

“What’s unusual about that?”

“Jim was a van driver working on contract security for a bank. Due to staff shortages he was driving the security van that the bank used to deliver coins. He shouldn’t have been driving the van but, as I say, there were staff shortages.”

“So?”

“He claimed that on the High Street a blue-eyed man stepped out in front of the van. It was heavily loaded and he swerved out of control, crashing into the front of a shop where his wife worked. She was killed in the impact.”

“He ran into his own wife? How bizarre is that?”

“He claimed that he’d seen the man before in the little park by the bus station. He said he’d tossed a coin into the well and said that he wished he could surprise his wife with a ton of money. The blue-eyed man had appeared and said the single word, ‘Granted’.”

“Like Gary.”

“Exactly like Gary,” said Brian.

“Is this some sort of local custom? You murder your nearest and dearest and then blame it on a strange bloke? It won’t stand up in court.”

“Nor has it in any of these cases,” said Brian. “They’ve all been punished for their crimes. In most cases they’ve accepted their punishment without complaint.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I went forward another seven years, looking for the blue-eyed man.”

“Did you find him?”

“No.”

“There you go,” said Stuart.

“But there was a murder. A woman pushed her husband off a roof. To begin with she claimed it had been an accident but then changed her plea to guilty.”

“Did she say why?”

“She said she deserved it. She said she was guilty in her heart; that she should have been more careful what she wished for.”

“What does that mean?”

“There was no mention of anyone with blue eyes,” said Brian.

“So maybe it wasn’t related.”

“Maybe. They’re exactly seven years apart, though.”

“You said the first one was nineteen eighty-six.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Eighty-six was the first one you mentioned,” said Stuart.

“Indeed it was. It wasn’t the first, though.”

“There were more?”

“Potentially two together, seven years earlier. Thomas Jacobs, a property developer, local government support, private investment opportunities.”

“He was murdered?”

“He was found in his jacuzzi, drowned, alcohol in the bloodstream. He was alone; there were no suspects.”

“So what makes you think this has anything to do with any

of the others?"

"He was the developer that put together the shopping centre, the park and the amenities, including the wishing well."

"You said there were two." said Stuart.

"Add in Councillor Geoffrey Priestley, upstanding citizen, leader of the Conservative Council, pillar of the community and chairman of the planning committee."

"What has he got to do with it?"

"He was found dead on the same night. It was his committee that approved the shopping centre, and the wishing well. It came down to a split vote, and as chairman he gave it the nod."

"What makes you think they've got anything to do with the other deaths?"

"Nothing. There's no blue-eyed man and no wish. There's nothing tying them together apart from the day they died... until you get into the detail."

"And?"

"Both men drowned. Jacobs drowned in his Jacuzzi and Priestley in the boating lake in the park. Apparently Priestley went out to meet someone after dark, not an unusual occurrence according to his family."

"Gay?"

"Possibly. More likely he was meeting someone from his Lodge."

"He was a Freemason?"

“Hard to tell. There was certainly no way of proving it after his death. Jacobs was fairly open about it, went on Masonic retreats, the whole deal.”

“So you think there’s a Masonic connection?”

“No. I think there’s a drowning connection,” said Brian.

“Sorry?”

“Priestley and Jacobs had three things in common. They were both involved in the planning for the shopping centre and park amenity, and they were both found drowned on the same night.”

“That’s not such a coincidence. What was the other thing?”

“In both cases, the water in their lungs was not the water they were found in.”

“Oh, so the bodies were moved?”

The investigating officer concluded that both men had been killed somewhere else. The water they were drowned in was as pure as God could make it, pH7 neutral, no contaminants, no additives, no trace of pollution. The water they were found in was nowhere near that pure, in either case.”

“Where do you find water that pure?”

“I had the council dig out the health and safety report on the well. It’s a natural deep water spring. The water’s pure; no pollution, no additives, no drain-off and pH7. Unusual for this area.”

“So they were drowned in the well?”

“Why would you drown someone ten foot down a well, then winch them up and move them elsewhere, in one case

miles away into a Jacuzzi?"

"To disguise the link between them?" suggested Stuart.

"There was no signs that the bodies had been moved post mortem - no rope marks, no abrasion. What's the date Stuart?"

"It's the twenty-second of September, why?"

"Take a look at the dates on all those files."

"Jesus! They're all within a day or so of each other. Is this some kind of serial killer?"

"Perhaps. The date is significant, though," said Brian.

"Why?"

"It's the equinox. It's the day when the day and night are the same length. The reason the date varies is because the true equinox is sometimes on different dates."

"The Equinox Killer. Oh God, the press are going to have a field day if they get hold of this. Hang on, surely there's another equinox in the spring?"

"Yes, but there are no murders then, and as far as I can tell he hasn't actually killed anyone. He just causes it to happen. You heard how he works. He gets close to his victims, learns all about them without them being aware that they're being watched. He gets them to drop money in the well and then engineers a killing. It must take months of preparation. Gary Duggan's yours, by the way. You can have the collar."

"Oh, cheers, Boss. You still think he did it?"

"Sure. He admitted it on tape. You'll get a conviction as long as you don't let his lawyer run for diminished

responsibility.”

“What’s this, Brian?” Stuart pulled a flimsy scrap of newspaper from the file.

“That? Oh, it’s a cutting from a local newspaper.”

“Sacred Spring is a Summer Saviour? Sounds like silly season.”

“Local kids were using the spring for swimming in the summer of ‘52 during the drought. When they were challenged, they said they had permission from the owner, a blue eyed gypsy who said they could drink their fill and wash away their cares.”

“Who owns the spring?” asked Stuart.

“The council took over the ownership when the landowner couldn’t be traced. Then they developed the land.”

“Have you had the cutting analysed?” Stuart peered at the grainy photo.

“No, why?” asked Brian.

“Come on, there’s a scanner in the office. We’ll scan it.”

Stuart led the way through to the office and mounted the cutting on the scanner while Brian looked on sceptically.

“You want to tell me what you’re doing?”

Stuart smiled. “Give me a sec and I’ll show you. You’re going to like this.”

The scanner whirred and the light tracked across. The image of the cutting slowly dropped down the screen in front of Stuart.

“Okay, zoom in to the kids, looking good?”

“They’re kids, Stuart. You’re saying it’s one of them?”

“Okay zoom out, what do you see behind them?”

“Looks like there might be someone in the trees. It could be just shadows.”

“Okay, I’m going to pull up the brightness and turn up the contrast. There.”

“There’s someone in the trees?”

“I can push it a bit more, but the original isn’t great. You see it now?”

“Can you print that out, Stuart? Just him, not the rest of it?”

“Sure. Hold on.” The printer at the far side of the office whirred.

Brian snatched the picture from the printer and went through the door. Stuart locked the computer screen and followed him down the stairs to the cells.

“I want a word with Gary Duggan,” he said to the officer in charge of the holding cells.

The officer led them to a door and opened it, revealing Gary, sat on a simple cot.

Without speaking, Brian held up the picture.

Gary’s face lit up. “That’s him! That’s the man from the well. I’d recognise him anywhere. Those eyes....”

“The picture’s black and white, Gary,” Stuart pointed out.

“Yeah, but you don’t forget. You wouldn’t either.”

“You’re sure this is the man?” Asked Brian.

“Definite,” said Gary.

“The same hair, same age?”

“Absolutely. It’s him.”

Brian folded the picture and tucked it into his jacket.

“Gary, that picture was taken sixty years ago. It’s from a newspaper cutting. The man in this picture is probably in his eighties by now.”

“Oh.” Gary’s face fell. “It really looks like him.”

Brian shook his head. “Think about that statement,” he said.

They heard the door slam shut behind them as they walked back up to the office in silence. Brian recovered the clipping from the scanner.

“Could it be a relative?” asked Stuart. “Some sort of family vendetta?”

“Why? Where’s the motive?” Brian studied the clipping under the lamp. “The more I look at this, the more there’s nothing there.”

“It’s only a news clipping. It’s impossible to do more at that quality. Even if we had the original, there’s probably not much we could do with it after all this time.”

“So I’m back to a set of dates and stories.”

“Brian?”

“Hmm?”

“What if it isn’t a person?” asked Stuart.

“What do you mean, not a person?”

“Just thinking out loud. The deaths started when they built the shopping centre?”

“Those are the first ones I’ve found. There aren’t any suspicious deaths on the equinox before that date, as far as I’m aware.”

“Have you spoken to the original investigating officer?” asked Stuart.

“He retired in ninety-one, died in ninety-two.” The look Brian gave Stuart dared him to comment on that.

“What if the cutting was left in the file for a reason. The clipping says it was a sacred spring. It’s been there for hundreds of years - thousands maybe? Then two guys built over the spring and were later both found drowned in spring-water, killed on the same day.”

“You think it’s some sort of eco-movement?” asked Brian.

“What if the spring really is sacred? What if there’s a spirit of the place, protecting the spring?”

“You’re not serious? You start pushing theories like that around in this place and you’ll end up having sessions with the psychologist. You can kiss goodbye to promotion.”

“I’m not pushing anything, but we shouldn’t be closed-minded about things, that’s what you said.”

“This isn’t some spectral gypsy, Stuart. This guy is engineering people’s deaths. He’s got to be caught.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“What if I am? There’s no way to prove a theory like that.”

“Oh, but there is,” said Stuart

“Like what?” Brian stood up and pulled together his files, tucking the cutting back into the folder and holding the bundle close to his chest.

“You wait seven years until the equinox, then toss a coin into the well and make a wish. You’d get to meet him, first hand.” Stuart leaned back in the chair.

“I want to catch this bastard before I retire.”

“And if you don’t?”

“If your theory is right, it’d be a hell of a risk. Any wish I made would be turned against me. Think of the guy who wished for a ton of money.”

“So what would you wish for?” asked Stuart.

“You’re assuming I’m not going to catch him.”

“But if you don’t?”

“Then I’ve got seven years to think about it, haven’t I?”

Brian took his files and pushed through the door, leaving Stuart to ponder the image scanned onto his screen. After a while he clicked the close button for the image. The program asked him, Do you want to save this image? The mouse pointer hovered over the button marked Yes, and then moved to the No.

The image cleared from the screen, and Stuart shook his head and collected together the paperwork for Gary. There was still work to do before he could go home and forget all about sacred springs and the equinox killer. He stared at the ID photo

of Gary. He didn't look like a murderer, but then most of them didn't. They were just people pushed to the edge.

Still, he couldn't help wondering, if he found the wishing well open, whether he would drop in a coin and make a wish.

THE END



Also by Mike Shevdon

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