

Frank Dineen – Be Sure Your Sins

‘Sergeant, we have a body.’

‘Just what we needed on a Monday morning, sir.’

Inspector Hall grinned.

‘This one has been dead for some considerable time. It’s on the old Roxy site. Take our new DC with you and look into it.’

‘Looking in to bodies is not my job. For that you require a pathologist, sir.’

‘Plonker. Just get on with it.’

DS Palmer laughed. It was typical of the banter the two friends had enjoyed for the best part of ten years. When Jim Hall retired next year much of the fun of policing would have gone and he had wondered whether to take early retirement himself but the thought of a much slimmer pension had made him see sense.

‘Astonishing’

The site foreman nodded. ‘Must have been here for sixty years at least, you would have thought that in that time the flesh would have rotted away.’

‘Any ID on her?’ Palmer asked.

‘As it happens, yes. Wartime, folk carried their ID cards all the time and her handbag was still on the body.’

‘You say on her body, not with.’ WDC Maud Cross interposed.

‘Yes.’

She looked askance at her superior.

‘Good point Maud, so possibly thrown in afterwards. Anyway, thank you Mr Collins we will take it from here. I take it you have not disturbed the body in any way?’

‘Other than in opening her handbag for identification, no.’

‘Shouldn’t have done that.’ Palmer said.

‘No, force of habit, always remove the dog tags.’

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‘You were in the army?’

‘Engineers. Twenty years. You get to see a lot of dead bodies in that time.’

‘I know the feeling,’ said Maud. ‘My father was an undertaker.’

‘Was?’ queried Palmer.

‘Yeah, the business got to him in the end.’

‘What about your mother?’

‘She promised him she would follow later. She’s in no hurry, but then he always had to wait for her. She was half an hour late for the wedding and her timing never has got any better.’

The men laughed.

‘Come on Maud let us see what SOCO have got for us.’

‘Female, early teens, slender build with long black hair, wearing hand sewn cotton frock, M&S bra knickers and petticoat. Nylons and a pair of high heel court shoes which I suspect were a little too big for her.’

Judging by the contents of her handbag she was quite an expensive little lady. Chanel perfume, powder and lipstick, plus three pound fifteen shillings and sixpence in cash. Name, Irene Jackson. Address 42 Lawn Avenue. Oh, and the handbag. Quality leather, Dickens & Jones label.’

‘Cause of death?’

The scene of crime officer laughed.

‘Your guess is as good as mine, but this was no accident. Someone had decided that this little lady was past her sell by date.’

‘What makes you so sure?’ asked Maud .

‘You do not fall in to a sewer and then pull the lid on yourself.’

DS Palmer nodded agreement.

‘Odd that the body has lain here all these years without being discovered.’ he commented.

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‘Not really,’ replied the officer ‘this bit of sewer was blocked off at both ends, probably when they built the Roxy and the railway station in 1936 and later the manhole was tarmaced over and forgotten. Only a JCB breaking into it brought it to light. The survival of the body in such a condition was almost certainly due to the chamber being effectively sealed off from the outside air. The perpetrator must have known that this was not a sewer in use.’

‘You mean whoever it was had done a risk assessment?’ Maud enquired po faced.

Palmer laughed.

‘Can you imagine a murderer being charged for failure to carry out a proper risk assessment prior to the disposal of the body? Risk to public health. Improper waste management. Potential damage to the environment. Burial contrary to the Burial Act. Bugger would be so deep in the shit that a murder charge would come as something of a relief but enough frivolity, time to get the show on the road.’

Maud, take a hike down to Lawn Avenue and try to locate the oldest inhabitant. See if they can shed any light on the deceased, unlikely I know but worth a try.’

‘OK, what will you be doing?’

‘It’s a long shot after all these years but I would like to find out if a missing persons report was made and if so what enquiries were made at the time. I’ll leave my mobile on so keep in touch.’

‘Will do boss.’

‘I’m surprised to find you still here Mrs Jackson.’

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'You're surprised? I'm 98, I'm bloody amazed. Anyway come in young lady. Tell me what all this is about. Don't get the police here very often. Don't get visitors of any kind come to that. Tea, coffee, gin, Pym's?'

Maud smiled.

'Now that's what I call a welcome, tea will be fine.'

As the old lady pottered in the kitchen Maud took stock of her surroundings. The room was large and very much a mix of periods from the 1930's sideboard to the widescreen telly, state-of-art sound system and computer. It was tidy, clean but clearly lived in.

'You use the computer' enquired Maud

'Of course,' said the old lady putting the tray down. 'Milk, sugar?'

'Milk, no sugar.'

'I may take the Telegraph but I move with the times.' said the old lady as she handed Maud a mug only slightly smaller than a pint glass, 'Now what have I done to attract the attention of the constabulary?'

'A body has been found which has been identified as Irene Jackson.'

There was a long period of silence, then.

'You're sure?'

'As far as we can be. Small build, long dark hair.'

The old woman nodded. This time the silence seemed to stretch to an eternity and Maud became aware of the steady ticking of the long case clock in the hall. How many ticks were there in 98 years she wondered.

'I wasn't a very good mother. 1944. The war seemed likely to drag on for years.' Mrs Jackson took a cigarette from a silver box, lit it and dragged at it long and hard.

'I was working for MI5, undercover as a hostess in West End club popular among senior officer of all nations. I speak German, French, Polish and Russian.'

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My job, to overhear conversations that might be prejudicial to the war effort. Mothering a somewhat wayward daughter was not my first priority.

When she disappeared I reported it to my superiors. A clamp was put on it and I was told to say that we had had a blazing row and she had gone to live with my sister in Wokingham. An investigation was immediately put in hand as it was thought that my cover had been blown and unfriendly persons had taken her with a view to putting pressure on me but nothing was discovered. Where did you find her?

Maud explained.

‘So someone with local knowledge. Someone with a grudge.’

‘Seem like it. Any ideas?’

The old lady snorted.

‘There would have been a queue. She was what your generation would call a prick teaser.’

‘School friends?’

‘The ABC gang. Avril Biggs. Charlie Davis, Ellen Fowler, George Harper, Irene, Ken Lowther. They started school together in 1935 and stayed together until work, or in Avril’s case higher education pulled them apart.

‘Are any of them still around?’

‘Avril and Charlie eventually married, then emigrated when Avril took up the post of Professor of Higher Mathematics at a Canadian University. Ellen Fowler and George married. Ellen had lost her right leg in the Blitz. She was a very pretty girl who grew into a truly beautiful woman. Such a tragedy, George was her support throughout her life both emotionally and physically. Their daughter Pat still lives at No.44. Ken Lowther was called up for the army and was killed in Korea.’

‘Out of that crew?’

‘Ellen would have definitely have had a motive and possibly the means. Her father was manager of the Public Health Department. Ellen doted on

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George and there was no question of his devotion to her, but my bitch of a daughter did everything possible to come between them ably abetted by George's mother.'

'What had George's mother got against her?'

'Ellen was Jewish.'

'I see. I take it that Ellen is dead?'

'Yes, last year, cancer. George followed her three weeks later peacefully in his sleep'

'Do you think Ellen could have killed your daughter?'

'Unlikely. I don't see how she could have managed it physically but they had been involved in a blazing row only a week before. Ellen had tried to hit Irene with her crutch but lost her balance. My daughter laughed at her, said George needed a proper girl not a useless cripple who couldn't even stand up without holding on to a piece of wood..'

'How did you know about that?'

'My darling daughter told me.'

'What a delightful child you reared. Tell me is Pat Harper likely to be at home?'

'No, Mrs Hepworth as she is now and her husband are on holiday in Spain. Won't be back until next Monday.'

OK, I think that is all for now, I will let you know how we get on.'

'Will you want me to identify the body.'

'Would you?'

'I would like to say good bye.'

'I'll let you know. By the way, what happened to your husband?'

'He went to France in 1939 and never came back. That's why my job was so important to me. It was my way of hitting back at the enemy.'

'Did anyone in the road know what you did in the war?'

Mrs Jackson laughed.

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‘No they all thought I was a posh tart.’

‘Even after the war?’

‘Even after the war, but what of it? I had been doing for duty what half the women in the road were doing for nylons. I got the nylons plus a good salary, plus other perks and I wasn’t cheating on a husband fighting for his life on the battlefield or being starved and beaten in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. I knew I held the moral high ground and that was enough for me.

Maud stood up.

‘You are quite a woman Mrs Jackson. Have you ever thought of writing your memoirs?’

The old woman smiled.

‘Yes, they are due to be published sometime next month. I’ll see you get a copy.’

‘Thank you. I look forward to reading them but I must get a move on. My boss will be wondering where I’ve got to.’

‘When I asked you to find the oldest inhabitant I never guessed you would come up with the girl’s mother. What a piece of luck. Do you think she was telling the truth?’

‘Why shouldn’t she? Anyway she was pretty shocked and she did not strike me as someone who would go around bumping off errant daughters and lifting manhole covers.’

‘So at the moment the only likely suspects are a one legged girl and her boyfriend both of whom are dead anyway. Personally I can’t see the sense of pursuing this business any further.

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‘I disagree. Her mother is still alive. We owe it to her to do our best to put the blame where it belongs, and if my knowledge of the law is correct there is no time limit on murder.’

DS Palmer sighed.

‘Let’s see what the Inspector says. I’m starving and I do not think well on an empty stomach. Beer and burger at Weatherspoons suit you?’

‘Sounds good to me boss. See you there in about ten minutes.’

‘So that’s the situation sir.’

‘You’re sure it’s murder and not a simple case of *sewercide*?’

‘Only if you think further investigation would be an unnecessary *drain* on police resources sir.’ replied Palmer with a smile.

The Inspector laughed.

‘Point taken.’ he said. ‘So we continue the investigation. Now as it will be some days before you can contact the Harper woman I would suggest that you spend time looking into the actual circumstances on the day. Mrs Jackson should be able to give a pointer to the date and time when her daughter disappeared. If we know that then perhaps we can discover how this murder was carried out without anyone seeing it happen, but first thing first. Get on to the path lab and arrange for Mrs Jackson to view the body because a chance still exists that it is not that of her daughter. Now bugger off because the smell of your breath is making me hungry.’

‘One question before we leave sir. What story are we selling to the press?’

‘The body of an unidentified victim of the wartime blitz was discovered on a building site in the centre of the town. I think that covers it for the moment don’t you sergeant?’

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Palmer laughed.

‘Good thinking Batman’ he said.

‘Good Afternoon Mrs Jackson, DC Maud Cross here again, arrangements have been made for you to view the body of your daughter at the mortuary of the Royal Hospital at 11 am tomorrow if that is convenient for you.’

‘Perfectly constable. I would normally be in town at about that time anyway.’

‘Excellent. Now while I am on, can you remember the date on which your daughter disappeared and the time you last saw her and when you expected her to return?’

‘It was Wednesday, the last week in November 1944. I left for town on the 4.25pm train so I must have left the house about 3.40. Irene had a date at the pictures, who with I don’t know and it wouldn’t have been worth asking but she was very excited. She did ask if she could borrow my best pair of black courts and I agreed. I would have expected her to have been home by 11.00pm.’

‘When did you realise she was missing? Mrs Jackson’

‘Not until 10 o’clock the following morning when she failed to appear for breakfast.

‘Thank you Mrs Jackson you really have been a great help. I look forward to seeing you in the morning. Good bye.’

‘The old girl’s got a damned good memory Maud.’

‘If you had lost a child sergeant, I would think the occasion would be carved in stone in your memory.’

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'I have, and his mother. Eight years ago and one day I might be lucky enough, to catch the bastard who killed them. Hit and run and never a clue. The colour year and make of the car. Even the tyre patterns, but no witnesses. However, that was then but this now. Next stop the County Library. We have a date and a rough area of time so let us go forth and see what was happening in the town around then.

'The newspapers you need are The County Times and the Marchester Daily Reporter'. Unfortunately, although we do have the originals they all in a very poor state. Wartime newsprint was of a very cheap quality, so I'm afraid you will have to make do with our microfiche records.'

'I'm sure they will suffice Mrs Bruce.' Palmer replied.

'In which case please follow me.'

'Delighted,' he muttered, his gaze resting on the easy sway of a superb pair of hips atop a truly elegant pair of legs.'

'Down Rover.' whispered Maud elbowing him in the ribs.

'Jealousy will get you nowhere constable.' he said

'You haven't seen my legs yet.' Maud replied, eyes twinkling.

'Is that an offer?' he asked.

Maud grinned.

'We're here on business remember?'

'So the murder, if murder it was, took place on the Wednesday and most likely in the evening. The Daily Reporter informs us that the Roxy was hit by a V2 the following Friday evening with appalling casualties. The cinema and the railway goods yard being totally destroyed. If the body had been

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found it would have been put down as just another casualty. Something bothering you Maud ?’

‘Yes boss. Why that particular spot?’

‘The lane was the service road to the cinema and was a dead end. It was flanked on the left by the cinema and on the right by the wall of the goods yard.

That wall was about four metres high. Except when the cinema was turning out the lane would have been empty.’

‘What about lovers?’

‘Plenty of more salubrious places in the town than there, that is according to my grandfather who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the dodgier parts of this burg and ladies who were willing.’

‘So how was Irene lured down it?’

‘Apparently it was common practice for the lad to buy one ticket. As soon as the lights dimmed he would slip away to through the door which led to the toilets and the side exit. Here his girl would be waiting, letting her in he would hand over the stub of his ticket just in case she got caught. She would then hide in the ladies until he had time to regain his seat. Two for the price of one and almost certainly for the most expensive seats.’

‘What if they got caught?’

‘The old man said that as long as there was no trouble a blind eye was generally turned.’

‘That puts George well into the frame. If he had invited her to a movie Irene would have leaped at the opportunity to wipe Ellen’s face in it. That would explain the perfume. She probably ‘borrowed’ it from her mother along with the high heels.’

Palmer nodded.

‘Yes, that makes sense it would also explain why her handbag was thrown in after the act. George would want to make sure that any note, and

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I'm sure it would have been a note, was not found. Of course there was still the risk that she had left it at home.

Maud shook her head.

'Very small risk, she would want to flaunt that note in front of her rival. I doubt if she really fancied George, to her it was just another chance to humiliate Ellen.'

'Sounds good Maud , but as Sherlock Holmes put it, we are theorising ahead of our data and I'm far from confident that a fourteen year old boy would have the nous to think up, or the guts to carry out something like this. Teenage boys can be violent, but it is almost always violence of the moment. My money is on an adult. Was Irene having an affair with an older man?

'A very good question boss, but if she was this was the first date.

'Why do you say that?' he asked.

'The obvious excitement. The need to look grown up and sexy.

Palmer looked at his watch.

'4 o'clock. Time we got back to the station. We can write up what we have. Give the boss something to ruminate on and keep him off our backs. Tomorrow is another day. I think I will arrange to be present when Mrs Jackson identifies the body. I need to see the pathologist anyway, with luck she will have come up with something.'

'And what do I do?' Maud asked.

'Get on to Records and ask them to find out if there were any other unexplained deaths at about that time. Then I would like you to visit Mrs Hepworth.

I know Mrs Jackson has said she is away but the more I think about it the more I'm disinclined to trust her. Her replies to your questions seem to me to be far too pat.'

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Number 44 was as different from Mrs Jackson's residence at 24 as chalk is from cheese. 24 was a four bedroom detached house with a generous amount of space around it, 44 was the middle property in a terrace of five.

Maud rang the bell. The door was opened by a very attractive, rather plump woman in her fifties. She didn't say anything but raised an enquiring eyebrow.

Maud smiled. 'Detective Constable Maud Cross. You, I hope are Mrs Pat Hepworth.'

'That's me,' she laughed. 'What have I done that brings the long arm of the law to my doorstep?'

'Does the name Irene Jackson mean anything to you?'

'I think officer that you had better come in.' replied Mrs Hepworth.

Once inside Maud discovered the house to be much larger than it appeared from the outside.'

As though reading her mind, Mrs Hepworth explained.

'Dad and his mum lived here and Mum and her parents lived next door. When Granny Harper died it made sense to combine the two properties. Now what's all this about Irene Jackson?'

Maud told her about the find and what they knew whilst keeping her interview of Mrs Jackson close to her chest. She now had suspicions of her own. Was her mistake of the date that the Hepworths would return a simple error, or deliberate obfuscation?

'When all this happened, constable I wasn't even born so anything I could tell you would be second hand. It would help if you had a clue to when this supposed murder occurred.'

'Why?' Asked Maud .

Mrs Hepworth waved her hand at an untidy pile of leather bound books on a side table.

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‘Mum’s diaries. She started writing her daily report when she was just seven years old. They are complete up to a week before she died. We only returned from Spain yesterday where we had arranged to have them bound. Reading them is like living her life all over again.’

‘Try Wednesday, third week in November 1944.’

Mrs Hepworth shuffled through the pile of volumes until she came to the right one.

‘Here we are.’ She said and handed it to Maud .

Maud soon found the place and began to read:

‘Crocheting a collar for Linda Stewart’s wedding dress. Fingers freezing.

Very short of coal so dare not light fire.

One o’clock and Mum’s home from work. Says things must be going well as they are not making so many parachutes and have started making suits for our troops when they are demobbed. Fire alight at last and we have tea and some toast.

Mum starts to prepare dinner for when Dad gets home.

Linda and her fiancé came in this evening. They had been to the pictures to see

In Which We Serve. Linda tells us that they met Doris Jackson walking home from the Railway Station. Linda says she was rather dishevelled. Doris said she had fallen over in the dark. Apparently she had been saying goodbye to Irene who has gone to stay with an aunt at a place called Wokingham, think it’s in Surrey. Feel sorry for aunt.

George is here. We play cards. Dad wins as always.’

‘Bloody Hell’ thought Maud .

‘Mrs Hepworth, do you mind if I ‘phone my boss?’

‘Not at all, I’ll leave you to it. Call me when you’ve finished.’

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‘Boss, Maud here. Have I got news for you.’ she read out the Ellen’s diary page.’

‘Bit late Maud, Mrs Jackson committed suicide at the mortuary, Cyanide pill. But considering what you have just told me it seems to be the best thing that could have happened taking things all round. Though why she killed her daughter remains a mystery. Maybe we will find out when we go through her things. Daresay the Inspector will be a bit unhappy with time spent and no result but that’s they way it goes.’

Inspector Hall leaned back in his chair smiling

‘First class job. Corpse identified. Likely perp committed suicide. No case.

Just as I like ‘em.

Now bugger off both of you and have a beer. Oh, and I have a nice juicy one for you when you get back.’