

HUMAN INTEREST

The old chapel waited ahead of us, the sky typically overcast for a British summer, and don't get me started on what a joke that combination of words is. The air was hushed and still, the grey walls choked in ivy, grime covered windows piercing the thick greenery. And apparently I'm a fucking poet. Sadly, neither's been true for too long. I really hate it when I get stuck on the 'human interest' stories. Especially when there's nothing interesting in them. And getting paired up with Ardelle the Bossy was making the day even better, if that was possible.

Oh, introductions, I guess. I'm Paul. I was the photographer. The kitbag over my shoulder, filled with the tools of my disreputable trade, was as heavy as it looked and the fact that I looked weary was personally directed at everyone around me. I hadn't shaved in a few days and I was stomping across an expanse of grass that needed cutting already to take photos of some abandoned house of worship because, for some godforsaken reason, it attracted Ardelle's interest and she wanted to write about it. Yay me.

Now, from what little I remember of her spiel, a few years earlier the lord of the manor needed money, don't they always, and decided to turn the old family chapel into some sort of venue. Didn't work, but no-one knows why. Me, I'm betting on the fact that he probably overcharged and forgot that you can't have a venue without booze, but Ardelle's mystery sense had been kicked off so there I was. Sorry, there we were.

Ardelle? Oh, she was the journalist. Although given we had a circulation that only just outnumbered the staff that might be too fancy a title for her. Right then, she was busy complaining about the dew soaking through her boots. I tended to tune her out when she got like that. All she had to lug around is her fiddly little PDA and a tiny little recorder shoved into one jacket pocket. Lucky cow.

We reached the chapel, hardly looked big enough to host a meeting of the local Green Party let alone be a venue, which I guess, as it closed, might be true. Ardelle gave the potted history that I probably should have paid attention to, but really couldn't be arsed. Something about it being built during the reign of Henry the something or other. Probably the Eighth. He got all the good stuff. And it shut down over a decade ago but no one knows why. Now me, that suggests that people didn't care enough to make a note of it, but Ardelle insisted it was 'significant'. Which means it should be interesting but won't be.

There was a heavy padlock holding what looks like a VERY solid door VERY firmly shut. Oh, well time to go home, I figured. Except Ardelle had got a key off 'Is Lordship. Even 27 generations of inbreeding couldn't stand up to her it seemed. And, click, there it went. Except the door wasn't just locked, well, it's not locked anymore, but you know what I meant, it's stuck fast. Which earned me a 'well? What are you waiting for?' look. It was one of Ardelle's specialities was that look, along with 'this is all your fault, you know.' and 'well, don't look at me.'. Fine, fine, keep your hair on. Took me a few minutes to put down the bag, and then put my shoulder into the door. Which opened but, Christ on a bike, that hurt!

A pint for me, thanks. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. Opening the damn door. Well, the place was covered in dust. Really thick stuff. No one'd been in there for donkey's years. Anyway, the pews were all arranged to focus on, well, a stage of sorts. And on the stage was a weird contraption. One of those things they've got in magic acts. Brightly coloured under all the dust, a couple of handcranks on the side. Anyway, the place was totally empty. Smelled of dust sand age and all that stuff. So naturally Ardelle just walks in, kicking up clouds of dust and wants me to follow. Well, a bit of effort later and I'm in. She's looking at something on the stage while I'm trying to get my gear through the old, short, narrow doorway. So she calls me over so I dump the gear, and get over to her. And I see what she's pointing at. On the stage, just by the cabinet are two piles of clothes, like the people in them just, I don't know, vanished or something. Granted they're dusty but they've held up pretty well. One's spangly and, well, small. A bikini with sparkles, the other's a full fancy suit, tails on the jacket, the whole lot. No top hat, though. And a wand. Well, it looked like a wand under the dust. So I pick it up and yeah, it's a wand, just a bit of black wood with white paint around the end. Felt pretty heavy. And cold, though. Anyway, Ardelle gets me to set things up,

while she looks around. Doesn't find anything, so I'm taking snaps of the walls and the dust and the stage when suddenly I suggest she gets dolled up so there's something vaguely interesting to photo. Now, don't ask me why I said it. I still don't know, and I didn't know then. It just seemed like the right thing to say. Now, you got to understand that Ardelle's not a bad looking woman, but if I had to say who I'd like to see in a tiny bikini she wouldn't be first on my list, but she was still alright. And the last time someone gave her a smack on the bum as a compliment she was furious so, you know, this was probably not a smart thing to say. And then she just says ok. Which makes no sense. I swear she was going to lamp me and instead... 'ok'.

Anyway, she went out back to change. Guess the doors inside weren't as gummed up as the ones outside. So I got things set up and eventually, well, you know how long it takes women to get dressed, even if they're only dressed in about 5 square inches of spangly cloth, she comes out. Got to say, she filled that thing out far nicer than I figured she would. Anyway, then she started posing. Didn't have to say nothing. She was good at that, too, draping herself over the box like she was really some sort of professional.

Took a few shots like that. Then I said she should get in. Again, no idea why and no clue why she just did it, shimmying her way in. I tell you, professional detachment only goes so far. So, a couple more shots. And then she invites me up on the stage, and to put her through the trick. Well, ok, I set the camera to filming and get up. Now, I don't know this thing from Adam, but as I get on stage, I just know what to do. Really freaky that was, but it seemed right at the time. Secure her in the stocks, head and feet showing. Pull that roller blind down on the front, the one that's marked off at regular intervals to show how tall she is. You know the trick. Anyway, then I just grab one of the crank wheels and start to turn it and her head starts coming down the box. Now, I know it's a trick because that sort of thing doesn't really happen, but, well, I just keep turning the crank around and her head just keeps getting lower and lower until it gets right down to the middle of the box and the crank won't turn anymore. So I just move around to the other side and get turning, watching as her feet climb up and up until they're just below her head. Then I step behind it and look out above and below. I can see the camera easy, but I can't see how the hell it's done. Not even from right up there. Just looked like she was a head and feet and everything between gone.

So, I went back to the camera, just to check it was recording. Of course it was. Modern technology's wonderful for shit like that. Only Ardelle wasn't on the stage on her own. There was something, I don't know what, with her. Ok, ok, I'll try, it was a blur. Like a grease smear on the lens, only it was movin', an' hoverin' around her. Well, I tell you that was enough to snap me out of whatever I'd been in, especially when I couldn't see it 'cept through the camera. At that point all the hairs on my neck were standin' on end and I did the only sensible thing: I legged it. Left over a grand's worth of equipment behind. Yeah, and Ardelle. Well, no, it wasn't the nicest thing I coulda done for her, but when you're outta your mind on terror you don't really give a shit about anyone else.

Yeah, yeah, I went back for her. Place was locked up tight again. Went to the police, who thought I was a nutter or a drunk or possibly both but they got it open. Nothing. As much dust as there'd been when we got in. The box sitting there all empty. No sign of my gear. No sign of Ardelle. Absolutely no sign of anything. I only just missed wastin' police time.

So, what do you make of that, then? Oh, you do, do you? You'd be the first. Oh, just one question, huh? Well, ok, Columbo, what do you want to know?

Where's what?

The wand?

Well, yeah, I still had it in my hand when I ran. So where is it? Why do you want to know?

You want it back? What d'ya mean 'back'? Ohhhh, shiiiiii...