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The Disappeared

Written by M. R. Hall

Published by Pan Books

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M. R. HALL

THE DISAPPEARED

PAN BOOKS



First published in Great Britain 2010 by Macmillan

This edition published 2010 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-45837-5

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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*Veil not thy mirror, sweet Amine,
Till night shall also veil each star,
Thou seest a twofold marvel there:
The only face so fair as thine,
The only eyes that, near or far,
Can gaze on thine without despair.*

James Clarence Mangan

ONE

DURING HER SIX MONTHS AS coroner for the Severn Vale District, Jenny Cooper had known only a handful of corpses remain unidentified for more than a day or two. Jane Doe, or JD0110, had been wrapped in her white plastic shroud in the refrigerator at the Vale hospital's mortuary for a little over a week. Owing to the large backlog of bodies awaiting post-mortem, she remained unopened and unexamined.

She had been washed up on the English side of the Severn estuary at the mouth of the Avon; sucked in with the tide and deposited naked on a mudbank a little downstream from where the M5 motorway thundered across the river. She was blonde, five feet eight inches tall, had no body hair and had been partially eaten by gulls. There was little left of the soft tissue of her abdomen and breasts, and in common with all corpses left open to the elements for any length of time there were empty sockets where her eyes had once been. For the purposes of identification Jenny had insisted that glass ones be fitted. An unnatural blue, they gave her face a dumb, doll-like quality.

Alison Trent, the coroner's officer, had arranged for a number of potential identifiers to attend the mortuary late on a Friday afternoon, but at the last minute she had been called to a supermarket depot, where the bodies of three young African men had been discovered in a refrigerated

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trailer amongst a cargo of beef carcasses imported from France. Rather than leave the families in suspense, Jenny reluctantly left the office early to preside at the mortuary herself.

It was the final week of January; freezing sleet slanted from a gunmetal sky. It was not yet four o'clock and daylight had all but bled away. Jenny arrived to find a group of a dozen or so waiting in the unmanned reception area of the mortuary building at the rear of the hospital. The antique radiators were either not switched on or were broken. As the couples amongst them whispered to one another their breath emerged in wispy clouds. Most were middle-aged parents who wore expressions of dread masking deeper feelings of guilt and shame. *How did it come to this?* their grim, lined faces seemed to say.

Since there was no assistant available to help conduct the viewings, Jenny was forced to address the group in the manner of a schoolteacher, instructing them to take it in turns to pass through the slap doors and along the corridor to the refrigerator at the far end. She warned them that the body might not be instantly recognizable and provided the details of a private laboratory which would take their DNA samples and compare them with that of the Jane Doe: it entailed a modest expense but not one her meagre budget would extend to. They dutifully noted down the company's email address and phone number, but one of them, Jenny noticed, did not. Nor did he enter his details onto the list of those wishing to be informed in the event that other unidentified bodies surfaced. Instead, the tall, lean man, somewhere in his mid-fifties, stood away from the huddle, his slender, sun-weathered face expressionless, his only sign of anxiety the occasional raising of his hand to smooth his short black hair streaked with grey. Jenny noticed his arresting green eyes

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and hoped he wasn't the one whose tears would spill onto the tiled floor.

There were always tears.

The building was arranged to maximize the visitors' trauma. Their twenty-yard journey through the mortuary required them to pass an extended row of gurneys, each bearing a corpse wrapped in an envelope of shiny white polythene. The stale air was heavy with the smell of decay, disinfectant and an illicit hint of cigarette smoke. One after another, three separate couples made the walk along the corridor and steeled themselves to look down on the bare head and shoulders of the Jane Doe, her skin now starting to yellow and take on a papery texture. And one after another they shook their heads, their expressions of relief mixed with uncertainty and the fear of similar ordeals to follow.

The man with green eyes did not carry himself like the others. His footsteps approached briskly, his manner was abrupt and businesslike, yet somehow seemed to cover a sadness or uncertainty that Jenny read as regret. Without flinching, he looked down at the Jane Doe's face, studied her for a moment, then shook his head decisively. Curious, Jenny asked him who he was looking for. In a cultured transatlantic accent he explained briefly that his stepdaughter had been travelling in the UK and had failed to make contact for several weeks. Her last email was sent from an internet cafe in Bristol. The police had told him about the body. Before Jenny could find a pretext to extend the conversation, he turned and left as quickly as he had come.

Mr and Mrs Crosby arrived after the main group. He was in his late fifties and dressed in the business suit that befitted a high-level professional or businessman; she was several years younger and had the well-preserved features and softer manner of a woman who had not been ground down by life

in the workplace. With them came a young man in his late twenties, also dressed formally in a suit and tie. Mr Crosby introduced him stiffly as Michael Stevens, his daughter's boyfriend. The term seemed to embarrass him: a father not yet ready to surrender the affections of his grown-up daughter. Jenny offered a sympathetic smile and watched them gaze down at the body, take in the contours of the staring, lifeless face, exchange glances and shake their heads.

'No, it's not Anna Rose,' Mrs Crosby said with a trace of doubt. 'Her hair isn't that long.'

The statement seemed to satisfy her husband, but the young man was stealing another glance, wise enough to know, Jenny could tell, that the dead can look deceptively different from the living.

'The eyes are glass,' she said, 'so the colour could be different. There are no distinguishing marks and the body was completely depilated.'

Mr Crosby's eyes flitted questioningly towards her.

'She has no body hair,' his wife explained.

He gave a dismissive grunt.

'It's not her,' Michael Stevens said finally. 'No, it's definitely not her.'

'If you're at all unsure I'd advise you to take a DNA test,' Jenny said to the parents.

'We adopted Anna Rose,' Mrs Crosby said, 'but I expect we can find something of hers. A hairbrush would do, wouldn't it?'

'A hair sample would be fine.'

Mr Crosby offered a terse thank you and placed a hand in the small of his wife's back, but as he made to lead her away she turned to Jenny.

'Anna Rose has been missing for ten days. She's a physics graduate – she works at Maybury with Mike. She didn't have any problems, she seemed perfectly happy with life.' Mrs

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Crosby paused briefly to collect herself. ‘Do you ever come across that?’

Mr Crosby, embarrassed at his wife’s naivety, lowered his eyes to the floor. Mike Stevens glanced uncertainly between his missing girlfriend’s parents. There was alarm in his eyes. He was out of his depth.

‘No. Not often,’ Jenny said. ‘In my experience, suicide – if that is what’s in your mind – is invariably preceded by depression. If you were close to the person, I think you would know.’

‘Thank you,’ Mrs Crosby said. ‘Thank you.’

Her husband steered her away.

Mike Stevens glanced briefly at Jenny in such a way that she assumed he had a question of his own, but whether from shyness or family protocol, he kept it to himself and followed the Crosbys out.

As they disappeared from view, Jenny vaguely recalled an item she had heard on the radio about a young woman who had gone missing from her home in Bristol – a trainee at Maybury, the decommissioned nuclear power station that sat three miles east of the Severn Bridge. Maybury and the other three retired stations on the estuary had been much discussed in the local media lately: a new generation of scientists was being recruited to decommission the fifty-year-old reactors and build the new ones that had been given the go-ahead by the government. Listening to the heated phone-in debates, Jenny had felt a stirring of her teenage idealism, evoking memories of weekend trips with fellow students to peace camps outside American airbases. It seemed strange to her that a generation later a young woman would embark on a career in an industry which she had spent her formative years believing represented all that was corrupt and dangerous in the world.

Jenny slipped on a latex glove, pulled the fold of plastic over the Jane Doe’s face and pushed the heavy drawer shut.

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After five months of the mortuary being staffed exclusively by a string of unreliable locums, a new full-time pathologist was arriving on Monday. Jenny looked forward to prompt post-mortem reports and not having to waste her afternoons with tasks that his staff should have been assigned to. Professional dignity had been hard to maintain in a cash-strapped coroner's office and, though she had now seen many hundreds of corpses in every conceivable state of dismemberment and decay, being close to dead bodies still terrified her.

She disposed of the spent glove and hurried as quickly as she could on her narrow heels out into the sharp air. She had an appointment to keep.

Death, and her uneasy relationship with it, occupied most of the time she had spent with Dr Allen. In the consulting room at Chepstow hospital during their fortnightly early evening meetings progress had been slow and insights limited, but Jenny had managed to keep to the regime of anti-depressants and beta blockers, and had largely respected his injunction forbidding alcohol and tranquillizers. Though by no means cured, her generalized anxiety disorder had, for the previous five months, been chemically contained.

The fresh-faced Dr Allen, as punctilious as ever, reached for the thick black notebook he reserved exclusively for her sessions. He turned to the previous entry and carefully read it through. Jenny waited patiently, prepared with polite replies to the questions about her son, Ross, with which he usually opened. After a short while she began to sense that something was different today. Dr Allen seemed engrossed, distracted.

'Dreams . . .' he said. 'I don't often put a lot of store by them. They're usually just reprocessed garbage from the day, but I confess I've been doing some reading on the subject.' His eyes remained firmly on the book.

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‘Really?’

‘Yes. I dabbled in Jungian analysis when I was at college, but it wasn’t really encouraged; something of a cul-de-sac, I remember my professor saying. Never known a patient who’d been cured by understanding the meaning of his dreams.’

‘Does this mean I’ve driven you to despair?’

‘Not at all.’ He flicked back through his notes, searching for an earlier entry. ‘It’s just I remember that before the medication you used to have some quite vivid ones. Yes . . .’ He found what he was looking for. ‘An ominous crack opening in the wall of your childhood bedroom to a dark forbidding space beyond. A terrifying presence lurking in there that you could never see or even fully visualize . . . an unspeakable horror of some description.’

Jenny felt the vessels of her heart enlarge, a pulse of heat cross her face, a flutter of anxiety in her solar plexus. She tried to keep her voice steady. *Act calm, stay calm*, she repeated silently to herself.

‘You’re right. I used to have those dreams.’

‘How old were you when you first had them?’ He turned back to a blank page, ready and alert.

‘I was in my early thirties, I suppose.’

‘A time of stress, juggling work and motherhood?’

‘Yes.’

‘And how old are you, as the dreamer, in your dream?’

‘I’m a child.’

‘You’re certain about that?’

‘I don’t ever *see* myself . . . I suppose I just assume.’

‘And as a child you feel helpless? Terrified of a threat you have no power to control?’

She nodded. ‘And I think I know what you’re going to say next.’

‘What’s that?’

‘That it’s nothing to do with childhood. That the dream merely reflects my state of fear and paralysis.’

‘That’s one interpretation.’ His face fell slightly at having his theory anticipated so easily.

‘I agree. But I still have no memory between the ages of four and five. And don’t tell me I’ve imagined that.’ She fixed him with a look that gave him pause.

‘There is one school of thought which says that a memory gap is a subconscious defence mechanism,’ he said, ‘a buffer if you like, a void into which the conscious mind can project a credible reason, a logical explanation for its distress. An intelligent, rational mind like yours – so the theory goes – would head for the answer most likely to satisfy it: hence while the pain persists, your mind has to satisfy itself with the notion that the cause remains undiscovered—’

She interrupted. ‘It does.’

‘But what if we’re looking for the wrong cause? What if the cause is utterly simple and straightforward – mere stress, for example?’

Jenny allowed herself to consider the possibility, though she remained aware that he might merely be attempting to blindside her, to distract her with one novel thought before firing the penetrating question while she was off guard. She waited for his follow-up, but it didn’t come.

‘So what do you think?’ he said, his eyes alight with the ingenious simplicity of his diagnosis.

‘You’ll be telling me to take a long holiday next, or to change my job.’

A sterner note entered his voice. ‘To be fair, you have stubbornly resisted trying either of those tried and tested methods.’

Jenny smoothed out the creases in her skirt as a way of hiding her despondency. ‘Is this a polite way of telling me we’ve exhausted what you can usefully do for me?’

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‘I’m only trying to rule out the obvious.’

‘And having done so?’

‘An extended holiday, at least—’

‘I’ll tell you what happens to me on holidays: everything comes flooding back. The anxiety, the unwanted thoughts, irrational fears, dreams . . .’ She paused, her tongue feeling thick in her mouth – a recent addition to her ever-increasing palette of symptoms.

‘What, Jenny?’

She saw the tears land in her lap even before she felt them flood her eyes.

‘What’s making you cry?’

There was no immediate reason, just a vague, familiar sense of dread that was slowly tightening its grip, like vast, suffocating hands around her mind. ‘I don’t know—’

‘The last word you said was *dreams*.’

Another river of tears and the inchoate fear became sharper; a shudder passed through her body and left her hands trembling as she reached for the ever-ready box of tissues.

‘Tell me about your dreams.’

She began to shake her head – the medication had blocked, or saved, her from dreams – but then the image flashed behind her eyes, a single frame that connected with her fear, causing a further tremor, like a dull electric shock, to pass through her.

‘You’ve had a dream?’

‘I had one . . . the same one—’ Her words stuttered out between stifled sobs.

‘When?’

‘Years ago . . . I was nineteen, twenty . . .’

‘Tell me.’

‘It’s a garden.’ The image held fast in her mind. ‘There are lots of children, young girls in skirts and pigtails . . . They’re

following each other in groups of three, holding each others' hands and skipping, it's joyful. And then . . .' She pressed the soggy Kleenex to her eyes. 'They stop. And in their groups of three two girls hold a skipping rope and the third jumps . . . and as the ropes pass over their heads, they *vanish*.'

'Who vanishes?'

'The girls in the middle.'

Dr Allen wrote in his notebook. 'Where do they go?'

'Where? I don't . . . I don't know . . . It's just *nothingness*.'

'And the girls left behind?'

'They don't seem to notice.'

'And that's it?'

'Yes.' Jenny sucked in a breath, the tide of fear slowly washing out, leaving her beached and numb. She stared out of the window at the sodium light catching the rain falling on the barren patch of garden.

'How old were you when you had this dream?'

'I was at university . . . It kept coming. I remember it lingering on throughout days that should have been carefree.'

'What does it represent to you?'

She shook her head, pretending to herself that she didn't know, but words were forming by themselves and spilled out almost against her conscious will. 'For every something there is a nothing. For every object an absence . . . It's not death I'm afraid of, it's *emptiness*.'

'You fear being disappeared?'

'No . . .' She struggled to put her mental state into words. 'It's of being where there is nothing . . . and of not being where there is everything.'

Dr Allen's face registered his struggle to understand. 'Like being trapped on the wrong side of the looking glass? Out of time, out of place, out of context.'

'I suppose.'

There was silence as the doctor scanned his notes, then

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rubbed his eyes, straining with a thought his expression said he found troublesome but necessary to express. He looked up and studied her face for a moment before deciding to voice it. 'Are you a woman of faith, Mrs Cooper?' His use of her surname confirmed his unease.

'Why do you ask?'

'The trinity is a powerful Christian symbol. Father, Son and Holy Ghost . . .'

'Lots of things come in threes: mother, father, child. Good, bad, indifferent. Heaven, earth, hell.'

'An apt example. You were brought up in faith, as I remember. The concepts are vivid to you.'

'We were sort of Anglican, I suppose. And there was Sunday school.'

Dr Allen looked thoughtful. 'You know, I think you're right. There is a piece missing – the girl, the space beyond the room. Whether it is emotional, or physical, or spiritual I couldn't yet say. But sometimes what we fear most is what we need. The most powerful stories are often those about strange saviours, demons who become an inspiration . . . like St Paul, or—'

'Darth Vader?'

He smiled. 'Why not?'

'This is sounding like a good old-fashioned diagnosis of suppression. Believe me, I've tried letting it all hang out; it wasn't a happy experience.'

'Would you do one thing for me?' He was suddenly earnest. 'I really would like to have one big push to crack this open.'

'Fire away.'

'For the next fortnight, keep a journal. Write down your feelings, your impulses, your extremes, no matter how bizarre or irrational.'

'In the hope of finding what, exactly?'

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‘We’ll know when we see it.’

‘You can be honest. Is this a last throw of the dice?’

He shook his head and smiled gently. ‘I wouldn’t still be here if I didn’t think I could help you.’

Jenny pretended to be comforted, but couldn’t help feeling that psychiatry was a slow road to nowhere. She had a small grain of faith that somehow, some day she would look up into a clear sky and feel nothing but undiluted happiness, but how that would come to pass was something she couldn’t yet begin to answer. Perhaps her discussions with Dr Allen were worthwhile; at the very least he stirred her up from time to time, made her look into the corners she would otherwise avoid.

Later, as she drove home through the starless night, a single phrase of his kept repeating itself: *strange saviours*. It was a new idea to her. She liked it.