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Tufnell Park

Back in the summer I'd made the mistake of telling my mum what I did for a living. Not the police bit, which of course she already knew about having been at my graduation from Hendon, but the stuff about me working for the branch of the Met that dealt with the supernatural. My mum translated this in her head to 'witchfinder', which was good because my mum, like most West Africans, considered witchfinding a more respectable profession than policeman. Struck by an unanticipated burst of maternal pride she proceeded to outline my new career path to her friends and relatives, a body I estimate to comprise at least twenty per cent of the expatriate Sierra Leonean community currently resident in the UK. This included Alfred Kamara who lived on the same estate as my mum and through him his thirteen-year-old daughter Abigail. Who decided, on the last Sunday before Christmas, that she wanted me to go look at this ghost she'd found. She got my attention by pestering my mum to the point where she gave in and rang me on my mobile.

I wasn't best pleased because Sunday is one of the few days I don't have morning practice on the firing

range and I was planning a nice lie-in followed by football in the pub.

'So where's this ghost?' I asked when Abigail opened her front door.

'How come there's two of you?' asked Abigail. She was a short skinny mixed-race girl with light skin that had gone winter sallow.

'This is my colleague Lesley May,' I said.

Abigail stared suspiciously at Lesley. 'Why are you wearing a mask?' she asked.

'Because my face fell off,' said Lesley.

Abigail considered this for a moment and then nodded. 'Okay,' she said.

'So where is it?' I asked.

'It's a he,' said Abigail. 'He's up at the school.'

'Come on then,' I said.

'What, now?' she said. 'But it's freezing.'

'We know,' I said. It was one of those dull grey winter days with the sort of sinister cold wind that keeps on finding ways through the gaps in your clothes. 'You coming or not?'

She gave me the patented stare of the belligerent thirteen-year-old but I wasn't her mother or a teacher. I didn't want her to do something, I wanted to go home and watch the football.

'Suit yourself,' I said and turned away.

'Wait up,' she said. 'I'm coming.'

I turned back in time for the door to be slammed in my face.

'She didn't invite us in,' said Lesley. Not being invited in is one of the boxes on the 'suspicious behaviour'

bingo form that every copper carries around in their head along with 'stupidly overpowerful dog' and being too fast to supply an alibi. Fill all the boxes and you too could win an all-expenses-paid visit to your local police station.

'It's Sunday morning,' I said. 'Her dad's probably still in bed.'

We decided to wait for Abigail downstairs in the car where we passed the time by rooting through the various stake-out supply bags that had accumulated over the year. We found a whole tube of fruit pastilles and Lesley had just made me look away so she could lift her mask to eat one when Abigail tapped on the window.

Abigail, like me, had inherited her hair from the 'wrong' parent but, being a boy, mine just got shaved down to fuzz while Abigail's dad used to troop her over to a succession of hair salons, relatives and enthusiastic neighbours in an attempt to get it under control. Right from the start Abigail used to moan and fidget as her hair was relaxed or braided or thermally reconditioned but her dad was determined that his child wasn't going to embarrass him in public. That all stopped when Abigail turned eleven and calmly announced that she had ChildLine on speed-dial and the next person who came near her with a hair extension, chemical straightener or, god forbid, a hot comb was going to end up explaining their actions to Social Services. Since then she wore her growing afro pulled into a puffball at the back of her head. It was too big to fit into the hood of her pink winter jacket so she wore an outsized Rasta cap that made her look like a racist stereotype from the

1970s. My mum says that Abigail's hair is a shameful scandal but I couldn't help noticing that her hat was keeping the drizzle off her face.

'What happened to the Jag?' asked Abigail when I let her in the back.

My governor had a proper Mark 2 Jaguar with a straight line 3.8 litre engine that had, because I'd parked it up in the estate on occasion, passed into local folklore. A vintage Jag like that was considered cool even by 3G kids while the bright orange Focus ST I was currently driving was just another Ford Asbo amongst many.

'He's been banned,' said Lesley. 'Until he passes the advanced driver's course.'

'Is that because you crashed that ambulance into the river?' asked Abigail.

'I didn't crash it into the river,' I said. I pulled the Asbo out onto Leighton Road and turned the subject back to the ghost. 'Whereabouts in the school is it?'

'It's not in the school,' she said. 'It's under it – where the train tracks are. And it's a he.'

The school she was talking about was the local comprehensive, Acland Burghley, where countless generations of the Peckwater Estate had been educated, including me and Abigail. Or, as Nightingale insists it should be, Abigail and I. I say countless but actually it had been built in the late Sixties so it couldn't have been more than four generations, tops.

Sited a third of the way up Dartmouth Park Hill, it had obviously been designed by a keen admirer of Albert Speer, particularly his later work on the monumental fortifications of the Atlantic Wall. The school, with its

three towers and thick concrete walls, could have easily dominated the strategic five-way junction of Tufnell Park and prevented any flying column of Islington light infantry from advancing up the main road.

I found a parking space on Ingestre Road at the back of the school grounds and we crunched our way to the footbridge that crossed the railway tracks behind the school.

There were two sets of double tracks, the ones on the south side sunk into a cutting at least two metres lower than those to the north. This meant the old footbridge had two separate flights of slippery steps to navigate before we could look through the chain link.

The school playground and gym had been built on a concrete platform that bridged the two sets of tracks. From the footbridge, and in keeping with the overall design scheme, they looked almost exactly like the entrance to a pair of U-boat pens.

'Down there,' said Abigail and pointed to the left-hand tunnel.

'You went down on the tracks?' asked Lesley.

'I was careful,' said Abigail.

Lesley wasn't happy and neither was I. Railways are lethal. Sixty people a year step out onto the tracks and get themselves killed – the only upside being that when this happens they become the property of the British Transport Police, and not my problem.

Before doing something really stupid, such as walking out onto a railway track, your well trained police officer is required to make a risk assessment.

Proper procedure would have been to call up the BTP and have them send a safety qualified search team who might, or might not, shut the line as a further precaution to allow me and Abigail to go looking for a ghost. The downside of not calling the BTP would be that, should anything happen to Abigail, it would effectively be the end of my career and probably, because her father was an old-fashioned West African patriarch, my life as well.

The downside of calling them would be explaining what I was looking for, and having them laugh at me. Like young men from the dawn of time I decided to choose the risk of death over certain humiliation.

Lesley said we should check the timetables at least.

'It's Sunday,' said Abigail. 'They're doing engineering works all day.'

'How do you know?' asked Lesley.

'Because I checked,' said Abigail. 'Why did your face fall off?'

'Because I opened my mouth too wide,' said Lesley.

'How do we get down there?' I asked quickly.

There were council estates built on the cheap railway land either side of the tracks. Behind the 1950s tower block on the north side was a patch of sodden grass, lined with bushes, and behind these a chain-link fence. A kid-sized tunnel through the bushes led to a hole in the fence and the tracks beyond.

We crouched down and followed Abigail through. Lesley sniggered as a couple of wet branches smacked me in the face. She paused to check the hole in the fence.

'It hasn't been cut,' she said. 'Looks like wear and tear – foxes maybe.'

There was a scattering of damp crisp packets and coke cans that had washed up against the fence line – Lesley pushed them around with the toe of her shoe. 'The junkies haven't found this place yet,' she said. 'No needles.' She looked at Abigail. 'How did you know this was here?'

'You can see the hole from up on the footbridge.'

Keeping as far from the tracks as we could, we made our way under the footbridge and headed for the concrete mouth of the tunnel under the school. Graffiti covered the walls up to head height. Carefully sprayed balloon letters in faded primary colours overlaid by cruder taggers using anything from spray paints to felt tip pens. Despite a couple of swastikas, I didn't think that Admiral Dönitz would have been impressed.

It kept the drizzle off our heads, though. There was a piss smell but too acrid to be human – foxes I thought. The flat ceiling, concrete walls and the sheer width that it covered meant it felt more like an abandoned warehouse than a tunnel.

'Where was it?' I asked.

'In the middle where it's dark,' said Abigail.

Of course, I thought.

Lesley asked Abigail what she thought she was doing coming down here in the first place.

'I wanted to see the Hogwarts Express,' she said.

Not the real one, Abigail was quick to point out. Because it's a fictional train innit? So obviously it's not going to be the real Hogwarts Express. But her friend

Kara who lived in a flat that overlooked the tracks said that every once in a while she saw a steam locomotive – because that's what you're supposed to call them – which she thought was the train they used for the Hogwarts Express.

'You know?' she said. 'In the movies.'

'And you couldn't watch this from the bridge?' asked Lesley.

'Goes past too fast,' she said. 'I need to count the wheels because in the movies it's a GWR 4900 Class 5972 which is 4–6–0 configuration.'

'I didn't know you're a trainspotter,' I said.

'I'm not,' said Abigail and punched me in the arm. 'That's about collecting numbers while this was about verifying a theory.'

'Did you see the train?' asked Lesley.

'No,' she said. 'I saw a ghost. Which is why I came looking for Peter.'

I asked where she'd seen the ghost and she showed us the chalk lines she'd drawn.

'And you're sure this is where it appeared?' I asked.

'*He* appeared,' said Abigail. 'I keep telling you it's a he.'

'He's not here now,' I said.

'Course he isn't,' said Abigail. 'If he were here all the time then someone else would have reported him by now.'

It was a good point and I made a mental note to check the reports when I got back to the Folly. I'd found a service room off the mundane library that contained filing cabinets full of papers from before World War

Two. Amongst them, notebooks filled with handwritten ghost sightings – as far as I could tell ghost-spotting had been the hobby of choice amongst adolescent wizards-to-be.

'Did you take a picture?' asked Lesley.

'I had my phone ready and everything for the train,' said Abigail. 'But by the time I thought of taking a picture he'd gone.'

'Feel anything?' Lesley asked me.

There'd been a chill when I'd stepped into the spot where the ghost had stood, a whiff of butane that cut through the fox urine and wet concrete, a Muttley-the-dog snigger and the hollow chest roar of a really big diesel engine.

Magic leaves an imprint on its surroundings. The technical term we use is *vestigia*. Stone absorbs it best and living things the least. Concrete's almost as good as stone but even so the traces can be faint and almost indistinguishable from the artefacts of your own imagination. Learning which is which is a key skill if you want to practise magic. The chill was probably the weather and the snigger, real or imagined, originated with Abigail. The smell of propane and the diesel roar hinted at a familiar tragedy.

'Well?' asked Lesley. I'm better at *vestigium* than she is and not just because I've been apprenticed longer than her.

'Something's here,' I said. 'You want to make a light?'

Lesley pulled the battery out of her mobile and told Abigail to follow suit.

'Because,' I said when the girl hesitated, 'the magic

will destroy the chips if they're connected up. You don't have to if you don't want to. It's your phone.'

Abigail pulled out last year's Ericsson, cracked it open with practised ease and removed the battery. I nodded at Lesley – my phone has a manual switch I'd retrofitted with the help of one of my cousins who's been cracking mobiles since he was twelve.

Lesley held out her hand, said the magic word and conjured a golf-ball-sized globe of light that hovered above her open palm. The magic word in this case was *Lux* and the colloquial name for the spell is a *werelight* – it's the first spell you ever learn. Lesley's werelight cast a pearly light that threw soft-edged shadows against the tunnel's concrete walls.

'Whoa!' said Abigail. 'You guys can do magic.'

'There he is,' said Lesley.

A young man appeared by the wall. He was white, in his late teens or early twenties with a shock of unnaturally blond hair gelled into spikes. He was dressed in cheap white trainers, jeans and a donkey jacket. He was holding a can of spray paint in his hand and was using it to carefully describe an arc on the concrete. The hiss was barely audible and there was no sign of fresh paint being laid down. When he paused to shake the can the rattling sound was muffled.

Lesley's werelight dimmed and reddened in colour.

'Give it some more,' I told her.

She concentrated and her werelight flared before dimming again. The hiss grew louder and now I could see what it was he was spraying. He'd been ambitious – writing a sentence that started up near the entrance.

'Be excellent to …' read Abigail. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

I put my fingers to my lips and glanced at Lesley, who tilted her head to show she could keep up the magic all day if need be – not that I was going to let her. I pulled out my standard-issue police notebook and got my pen ready.

'Excuse me,' I said in my best policeman voice. 'Could I have a word?' They actually teach you how to do the voice at Hendon. The aim is to achieve a tone that cuts through whatever fog of alcohol, belligerence or randomised guilt the member of the public is floating in.

The young man ignored me. He pulled a second spray can from his jacket pocket and began shading the edges of a capital E. I tried a couple more times but he seemed intent on finishing the word EACH.

'Oi sunshine,' said Lesley. 'Put that down, turn round and talk to us.'

The hissing stopped, the spray cans went back in the pockets and the young man turned. His face was pale and angular and his eyes were hidden behind a pair of smoked Ozzy Osbourne specs.

'I'm busy,' he said.

'We can see that,' I said and showed him my warrant card. 'What's your name?'

'Macky,' he said and turned back to his work. 'I'm busy.'

'What you doing?' asked Lesley.

'I'm making the world a better place,' said Macky.

'It's a ghost,' said Abigail incredulously.

'You brought us here,' I said.

'Yeah, but when I saw him he was thinner,' said Abigail. 'Much thinner.'

I explained that he was feeding off the magic Lesley was generating, which led to the question I always dread.

'So what's magic, then?' asked Abigail.

'We don't know,' I said. 'It's not any form of electromagnetic radiation. That I do know.'

'Maybe it's brainwaves,' said Abigail.

'Probably not,' I said. 'Because that would be electrochemical and it would still have to involve some kind of physical manifestation if it was going to be projected out of your head.' So just chalk it up to pixie dust or quantum entanglement, which was the same thing as pixie dust except with the word quantum in it.

'Are we going to talk to this guy or not?' asked Lesley. 'Because otherwise I'm going to turn this off.' Her werelight bobbed over her palm.

'Oi Macky,' I called. 'A word in your shell-like.'

Macky had returned to his art – finishing up the shading on the H in EACH.

'I'm busy,' he said. 'I'm making the world a better place.'

'How are you planning to do that?' I asked.

Macky finished the H to his satisfaction and stepped back to admire his handiwork. We'd all been careful to stay as far from the tracks as possible but either Macky was taking a risk or, most likely, he'd just forgotten. I saw Abigail mouth *Oh shit* as she realised what was going to happen.

'Because,' said Macky and then he was hit by the ghost train.

It went past us invisible and silent but for a blast of heat and the smell of diesel. Macky was swatted off the track to land in a crumple just the below the X in EXCELLENT. There was a gurgling sound and his leg twitched for a couple of seconds before he went quite still. Then he faded, and with him his graffiti.

'Can I stop now?' asked Lesley. The werelight remained dim – Macky was still drawing its power.

'Just a little bit longer,' I said.

I heard a faint rattle and looking back towards the mouth of the tunnel I saw a dim and transparent figure start spraying the outline of a balloon B.

Cyclical, I wrote in my notebook, *repeating – insentient?*

I told Lesley she could shut down her werelight and Macky vanished. Abigail, who had cautiously flattened herself against the wall of the tunnel, watched as me and Lesley did a quick search along the strip of ground beside the track. Halfway back towards the entrance I pulled the dusty and cracked remains of Macky's spectacles from amongst the sand and scattered ballast. I held them in my hand and closed my eyes. When it comes to *vestigia*, metal and glass are both unpredictable but I caught, faintly, a couple of bars of a rock guitar solo.

I made a note of the glasses – physical confirmation of the ghost's existence – and wondered whether to take them home. Would removing something that integral to the ghost from the location have an effect on it? And

if removing it did damage or destroy the ghost, did it matter? Was a ghost a person?

I haven't read even ten per cent of the books in the mundane library about ghosts. In fact I've mostly only read the textbooks that Nightingale has assigned me and stuff, like Wolfe and Polidori, that I've come across during an investigation. From what I have read it is clear that attitudes towards ghosts, amongst official wizards, have changed over time.

Sir Isaac Newton, founder of modern magic, seemed to regard them as an irritating distraction from the beauty of his nice clean universe. There was a mad rush during the seventeenth century to classify them in the manner of plants or animals and during the Enlightenment there was a lot of earnest discussion about free will. The Victorians divided neatly into those who regarded ghosts as souls to be saved and those who thought them a form of spiritual pollution – to be exorcised. In the 1930s, as relativity and quantum theory arrived to unsettle the leather upholstery of the Folly, the speculation got a bit excitable and the poor old spirits of the departed were seized upon as convenient test subjects for all manner of magical experiments. The consensus being that they were little more than gramophone recordings of past lives and therefore occupied the same ethical status as fruit flies in a genetics lab.

I'd asked Nightingale about this, since he'd been there, but he said hadn't spent a lot of time at the Folly in those days. Out and about in the Empire and beyond, he'd said. I asked him what he'd been doing.

'I remember writing a great many reports. But to what purpose I was never entirely sure.'

I didn't think they were 'souls' but until I knew what they were, I was going to err on the side of ethical conduct. I scrapped out a shallow depression in the ballast just where Abigail had made her mark and buried the glasses there. I made a note of time and location for transfer to the files back at the Folly. Lesley made a note of the location of the hole in the fence but it was me that had to call in to the British Transport Police on account of her still, officially, being on medical leave.

We bought Abigail a Twix and a can of coke and extracted a promise that she'd stay off the railway tracks, Hogwarts Express or no Hogwarts Express. I was hoping that Macky's ghostly demise would be enough to keep her away on its own. Then we dropped her off back at the flats and headed back to Russell Square.

'That coat was too small for her,' said Lesley. 'And what kind of teenage girl goes looking for steam trains?'

'You think there's trouble at home?' I asked.

Lesley jammed her index finger under the bottom edge of her mask and scratched. 'This is not fucking hypoallergenic,' she said.

'You could take it off,' I said. 'We're nearly back.'

'I think you should register your concern with Social Services,' said Lesley.

'Have you logged your minutes yet?'

'Just because you know her family,' said Lesley, 'doesn't mean you'll be doing her any favours if you ignore the problem.'

'I'll talk to my mum,' I said. 'How many minutes?'

'Five,' she said.

'More like ten.'

Lesley's only supposed to do so much magic per day. It's one of the conditions laid down by Dr Walid when he signed off on her apprenticeship. Plus she has to keep a log on what magic she does do and once a week she has to schlep over to the UCH and stick her head in an MRI while Dr Walid checks her brain for the lesions that are the early signs of hyperthaumaturgical degradation. The price of using too much magic is a massive stroke, if you're lucky, or a fatal brain aneurysm, if you're not. The fact that, prior to the advent of magnetic resonance imaging, the first warning sign of overuse was dropping dead is one of the many reasons why magic has never really taken off as a hobby.

'Five minutes,' she said.

We compromised and called it six.

Detective Inspector Thomas Nightingale is my boss, my governor and my master – purely in the teacher–pupil teacher sense of the term, you understand – and on Sundays we generally have an early dinner in the so-called private dining room. He's a shade shorter than me, slim, brown hair, grey eyes, looks forty but is much, much older. While he doesn't routinely dress for dinner he always gives me the strong impression that he only holds back out of a courtesy to me.

We were having pork in plum sauce, although for some reason Molly felt that the ideal side dish was Yorkshire pudding and cabbage sautéed with sugar. As

usual Lesley chose to eat in her room – I didn't blame her; it's hard to eat a Yorkshire pud with dignity.

'I've got a little jaunt into the countryside for you tomorrow,' said Nightingale.

'Oh yeah?' I asked. 'Where to this time?'

'Henley-on-Thames,' said Nightingale.

'What's in Henley?' I asked.

'A possible Little Crocodile,' said Nightingale. 'Professor Postmartin did a bit of digging for us and uncovered some additional members.'

'Everybody wants to be a detective,' I said.

Although Postmartin, as keeper of the archives and old Oxford hand himself, was uniquely suited to tracking down those students we thought might have been illegally taught magic. At least two of these had graduated to total bastard evil magician status, one active back in the 1960s and one who was alive and well and had tried to knock me off a roof back in the summer. We'd been five storeys up so I took it personally.

'I believe Postmartin has always fancied himself as an amateur sleuth,' said Nightingale. 'Particularly if it's largely a matter of gathering university gossip. He thinks he's found one in Henley and another residing in our fair city – at the Barbican no less. I want you to drive up to Henley tomorrow and have a sniff around, see if he's a practitioner. You know the drill. Lesley and I shall visit the other.'

I mopped up the plum sauce with the last of my Yorkshire pudding. 'Henley's a bit off my patch,' I said.

'All the more reason for you to expand your horizons,' said Nightingale, 'I did think you might combine it

with a "pastoral" visit to Beverley Brook. I believe she's currently living on that stretch of the Thames.'

On the Thames, or in it? I wondered.

'I'd like that,' I said.

'I thought you might,' said Nightingale.

For some inexplicable reason the Metropolitan Police don't have a standard form for ghosts so I had to bodge one together on an Excel spreadsheet. In the old days every police station used to have a collator – an officer whose job it was to maintain boxes of card files full of information on local criminals, old cases, gossip and anything else that might allow the blue-uniformed champions of justice to kick down the right door. Or at least a door in the right neighbourhood. There's actually a collator's office preserved at Hendon College, a dusty room lined wall to wall and top to bottom with index-card boxes. Cadets are shown this room and told, in hushed terms, of the far-off days of the last century, when all the information was written down on pieces of paper. These days, provided you have the right access, you log into your AWARE terminal to access CRIS, for crime reports, Crimint+, for criminal intelligence, NCALT, for training programmes, or MERLIN, which deals with crimes against or involving children, and get your information within seconds.

The Folly, being the official repository of the stuff that right-thinking police officers don't want to talk about and, least of all, have floating around the electronic reporting system for any Tom, Dick or *Daily Mail* reporter to get hold of, gets its information the old-

fashioned way – by word of mouth. Most of it goes to Nightingale, who writes it out, in a very legible hand I might add, on paper which I then file after transferring the basics to a 5x3 card which goes into the appropriate section of the mundane library's index-card catalogue.

Unlike Nightingale, I type up my reports on my laptop, using my spreadsheet form, print them and then file them in the library. I estimate that the mundane library has over three thousand files, not counting all the ghost-spotting books left uncollated in the 1930s. One day I was going to get it all onto a database – possibly by teaching Molly to type.

Paperwork done, I did half an hour, all I could stand, of Pliny the Elder, whose lasting claim to fame is for writing the first encyclopaedia and sailing a tad too close to Vesuvius on its big day. Then I took Toby for a walk round Russell Square, popped in for a pint in the Marquis and then back to the Folly and bed.

In a unit consisting of one chief inspector and one constable it is not the chief inspector who is on call in the middle of the night. After accidentally burning out three mobiles I'd taken to leaving mine turned off while inside the Folly. But this meant that in the event of a work-related call Molly would answer the phone downstairs and then inform me by silently standing in my bedroom doorway until I woke up out of sheer creepiness. Leaving a 'please knock' sign on my door had no effect, nor did locking it firmly and wedging a chair under the doorknob. Now, I love Molly's cooking but she nearly ate me once. So the thought of her gliding into my room uninvited while I was kipping meant

I found myself getting very little in the way of useful sleep. So by dint of a couple of days of hard work and with the assistance of a curator from the Science Museum I ran a coaxial extension up into my bedroom.

Now when the mighty army for justice that is the Metropolitan Police needs my specialist services it sends a signal up a jacketed copper wire and sets off an electromagnetic bell in a bakelite phone that was manufactured five years before my dad was born. It's like being woken up by a musical jackhammer but it's better than the alternative.

Lesley calls it the bat phone.

It woke me up just past three o'clock in the morning.

'Get up, Peter,' said Detective Inspector Stephanopoulos. 'It's time for you to do some proper policing.'