

Prey

By Mike Waugh

The vicar was reading a terrible news article, tutting all the while. She shook her head as she thought about the poor victims of a ruthless confidence trickster terrorising the Cotswolds. She sighed as she found out about the levels of duplicity he would go to just to snare his victims. And then she agonised on the problems the trickster must have encountered in his own life to turn to such a wicked way of living.

But all of this was suddenly broken by a peculiar sound. She stopped, and cocked her head to one side. It was a man's voice, but tinny, like it was coming from a radio. A rogue mobile phone maybe? A car radio from outside? Or could it be another homeless man? Oh, but how she wished it wasn't one of them. Not another. She flushed with guilt, recognising her uncharitable thought. There would be the fusty smell, the obligatory cup of tea, and the hour-long negotiation to get them to shuffle off. She buried the thought deep and remembered that compassion must trump all. So much pain in the world, yet so little time to cure it. She adjusted her cassock, and sauntered from the vestry into the church.

It was a beautiful morning. Light streamed in through gothic-arched windows, bathing the pews in a soft golden glow. All the seats were empty bar one. A huge hulk of a man, almost as wide as tall, was knelt down in prayer. The vicar scanned him for clues. Shaved head, hand tattoos, and jeans. She was always aware of her first impressions, and challenged them every time. It was no use preaching the word of Jesus if she didn't follow it in spirit.

Although in all fairness, her belief in the sanctity of Christ was virtually non-existent. She had joined the church in the innocence of her youth, when her belief was the size of an acorn, expecting it to grow into a mighty oak. Instead, it got crushed under the heels of logic and reason. But she had been swept away with the community and goodwill around her. She quickly rose through the Diocesan ranks, revelling in the countless opportunities to relieve the pain of others. And the appeal of the free house didn't hurt her desire to see out her days at the pulpit either.

She sidled up a few metres away from the man, her hands clasped behind her back. She was careful to judge the distance, close enough he would know her presence, but far enough away he could ignore her if he wished. He sensed the same, stopped praying and turned to her. She was struck by his face, a good man she thought. A good man but one that had seen a lot, experienced a lot of pain. Her eyes locked into his, and she gave him a kindly, gentle smile.

“Lovely day isn’t it? I love how the colours bounce off the walls”, she said, nodding towards the stained glass.

“I guess so”, said the man, his face ashen, a picture of sadness. “I hadn’t really noticed. Lot on my mind, see”.

It was with words like these that the vicar knew she could work her magic. She saw it like an opening door into their pain, but also a release of their suffering. And if life wasn’t about helping others, what else could it be about? A few questions and moments later, he had opened up about his own private pain. He was evasive about the cause, but clearly appreciated the conversation.

She studied him. So much pain. So much.

“You know, I was about to go back for a spot of tea at the Vicarage, would you care to join me?”

The man’s face broke into such a beautiful smile as he agreed readily, and she felt herself warming from the insides. It was always a risk inviting strangers into her house, as she had been warned many times before by the Archbishop, but this was a gentle soul; one that was suffering.

“I’ll just lock up, grab my coat and then we’ll head off”, said the vicar. As she mentioned her coat, the man had noticed her nodding at a cloakroom which he’d missed on the way in. There was only one big winter coat hanging up that must be hers.

The vicar trundled off to lock up the vestry. It was lovely to see the man praying, she thought, even if she didn’t hold much weight in it herself. She smiled as she remembered her days as a young woman, earnestly beckoning a sign from the heavens. The vicar’s reminiscing came to an abrupt end as she stumbled slightly over a ventilation grill. She chuckled to herself - a sign from heaven indeed.

The man waited until she was out of sight and then walked over to the cloakroom at the entrance of the church. He moved her jacket and saw the handbag behind it. Interesting. Either she was very trusting or this area was incredibly safe.

The vicar returned, looking around like a lost chicken 'til the man waved at her from the front of the church.

“Oh there you are! I thought for one moment you might have left.”

“No, I would never do that vicar. Bad manners”, he grinned.

The man admired the magnificent exterior of the stone Vicarage, with its carvings and ornamental trusses. This place must be worth a fortune. He had once heard that the Church of England was the biggest landowner in the country, which while he knew that wasn't actually true, was a useful way of shutting down religious nuts. Most of these God-botherers weren't so bad but he couldn't be doing with the pomp and ceremony of these places. It all seemed faintly ridiculous in this day and age. As for the existence or not of some higher power, he really didn't know. There probably was, he reckoned, just based on pure probabilities alone. But he doubted that it'd be some bearded chap sat on a cloud-based throne. Maybe more like something that operated above the levels of our awareness.

Inside the Vicarage was a wholly different sight. The filthy stained carpets were one thing, but the rancid smell of decay from the chairs was quite another. The man tried not to heave and instead got up and wandered around the room as if in thought. The vicar laid down two cups of tea, in ornamental cups with delicate little saucers. In the middle were three shortbread fingers that looked like they'd been cryogenically preserved since the '70s.

The man studied the two plants by the window, with their enormous green spiky clams open just enough to show their velvet red insides. “Wow, are these Venus...”

“Don't touch!”, she shrieked. The man stepped back, startled.

“I'm sorry to be so curt with you dear, yes they're Venus flytraps, but you know if you set them off without any flies, it takes such a lot of energy for them to re-open that it can kill them.”

“Fascinating”, mused the man. “And are they easy to take care of?”

“Well”, said the vicar, her face lighting up with his interest. “You’d be amazed!”. She told him about how mineral water kills them because it was too nutritious, how tap water killed them because it was too chlorinated and how it had to be ‘just right’. He wished he’d never asked.

“And you need to give them equal amounts of light too, so I rotate them every couple of weeks. Which reminds me”. The vicar got up and switched the pots around and sat back down again. She looked at him, and noticed his fading interest.

“Oh goodness, I’m so sorry for going on. I can be such a bore. I just don’t get so many visitors you see. Now, look, tell me dear what is it that brought you here today? I know there’s something.”

The man wracked his brain for something sad. It was important to choose something real. Embellish all you like, but lying was an art form. A grain of truth was the foundation of the best of yarns. His mother had died five years ago, so he turned the years into weeks, and found himself tapping into the misery like it was a fresh wound. He told the vicar about his love for his mother growing up, and the enormous void she’d left when she’d died. He told the vicar of his mother’s kindness to him as a child, then of the sadness when he realised that the memories were all he had.

“Did it hurt? Did you feel it? Where did you feel it?”, she asked, her eyes brimming over with thought of the love and loss.

He pointed to his heart, his stomach, and she nodded. So often the case. She longed to heal his pain, and knew there was only one way that could happen. In a move she had perfected over the years, she looked at the man, holding his gaze. Such lovely eyes.

“You know, I have something that may help you. Drink your tea, and please, take your jacket off. I’ll be down a few minutes”.

The vicar left the room, and the man got up to stretch his legs again, trying not to inhale the gathering dust on the mantelpiece. He fiddled under his jacket and double checked the radio to make sure it was still off. It had crackled into life in the church, something which nearly put an end to his disguise as a man in the depths of grief.

He pulled out his phone and texted his Sargent, "The vicar did it with a candlestick in the conservatory". The pair had been working on a string of disappearances in the area for some time now. That morning, the detective had decided to try something different and visit the local church for clues. His workmates had taken the mick something chronic, but it was only an hour out of his day and you just never knew where these things could lead to. When he entered the church, he'd intended to announce who he was, but out of superstition more than anything else, he'd kneeled down and made the sign of the cross when she happened to walk in. Everything else had just taken its course.

"Always thought you were Professor Plum", came the text reply within seconds, followed by a series of emoji plums that kept on coming and coming. He switched his phone onto silent. The jokes were about the only bright spark in this case. And his colleagues were right, this was a ginormous waste of time.

The detective looked around the room, taking in the Venus flytraps once more. He frowned, then turned to stare at the tea cups. Listening carefully for the vicar, he slowly slid the tea cups across the table, switching his with the vicar's. Moments later, the vicar came downstairs with a swinging incense holder, smiling.

It was smoking and she swung it around the room, wafting it everywhere.

"Very soothing. Helps you let go of the pain you know? I know how it is dear."

The vicar sat down opposite him, and they both sipped their tea. She studied his face intently, and then unexpectedly reached out to his hands.

"You must let go of the pain, you can always let go. Let go." Her eyes searched his face and he felt distinctly awkward, unsure of where to look.

"Come on!", she implored. He was wondering whether he should let go of her hands when her eyes started to flicker. Slowly at first, then faster and faster as if signalling semaphore. Then her speech slowed down, the words gradually drowning inside her mouth until she slumped forward, silent, motionless. A small bubble of saliva formed at the corners of her lips. The detective jumped up and checked her pulse. Nothing.

He switched on his radio. "Sierra Oscar 3-1-4... I need medical assistance immediately." The detective looked over at the Venus Flytraps and then the cups of tea, his mind whirring.

"And bring the Hazmat team. There's something here I want you to test .".