

Every Body Matters – Chapter One

by Martin JP Green

“You’ve got to understand one thing. People don’t see this place. It might as well not be here. Until they need it, and they all do sooner or later. Then they see it all right. Then they’re on your back. You’ll get used to that.”

One hundred feet above Cemetery Road Malcolm Groom swayed slightly in the steady westerly breeze, his hands resting on the cool sandstone parapet of the clock tower. It was hard to imagine how such an architectural overstatement might achieve invisibility but, two years on, he knew what Brian Staniforth had meant. People didn’t see the General Cemetery because they didn’t want to: the tower, the gates, the columbaria, the walls, the railings, the clock itself remorselessly marking off the minutes and the hours. All combining to remind the people of Cliffeield of something they would rather not be reminded about: the fact that sooner or later they would, figuratively or literally, pass through those gates on their journey to oblivion, the hereafter or whatever version of not being around they were personally, however reluctantly, espoused to.

The bell tower, a flamboyant architectural embellishment, added another twenty off-centre feet to the edifice. From a distance this little-tower-on-top-of-a-big-tower looked authoritative, a spirited thumbs-up, but examined close to it was flawed, the masonry split in many places where rusting supports to the long disused bell had swollen and proved too much for the stone mullions to contain. Deep cracks had developed and Groom’s imagination saw the whole thing shatter into fragments as if struck by lightning and shower the cemetery forecourt with lethal shards. “I’ll get someone in to look at it,” he resolved and then, on considering the potential inconvenience, added, “Next week.”

Brian’s grim words had been well intentioned but disconcerting and coincided with the new manager’s first day at Cemetery Rd, one beginning with cautious optimism but, as it drew to its close and after further well-intentioned cautionary words from just about everyone in his path, taking on a profound aura of foreboding which the experience of subsequent weeks was to bear out. The transfer had been necessitated by the enforced contraction of the library service and the deletion of the post of Principal Librarian at Cliffeield Central Library, one Groom had held without blemish for nearly twenty years. It was marginally too soon for him to retire early so they had to find something for him to do, and there had been a vacancy for the manager’s job up at Cemetery Road, the previous incumbent having left suddenly under a cloud. Among his peers Malcolm Groom was regarded as a ‘decent sort of bloke’ and the world of bereavement seemed appropriate somehow, a terrain where an incongruous streak of decency would fit the bill.

“You’ll be all right up there, tucked out of harm’s way!” his director had proposed from a position of almost total ignorance. “I wouldn’t mind a bit of that myself. No real work to do, just swan about in a grey suit looking po faced while the gravediggers do all the graft!”

Groom allowed himself a snort of bitter laughter at the memory of this exchange. The idea of swanning about had had a certain allure initially, but so far the opportunity to indulge in any of it had entirely eluded him. He had considered packing it in, looking for library work elsewhere, but that would certainly have meant leaving Cliffeield where he had been happy, and in any case library services were being slashed throughout the north, throughout the land in fact, like many of the social and educational enterprises seeded in the era of Victorian philanthropy, coming to fruition in the post war Welfare State and now collapsing into obsolescence and decay with the legacy of the banking crash and its toxic political spawn: 'austerity'.

Looking longingly westwards out towards the moors he could just make out, five miles distant, the mobile phone mast disguised as a conifer surmounting the topmost slope of Silverdale Common, a windswept acreage accommodating rugby playing schoolboys, dog walkers, pony trekkers and kite flyers, and where he had stood the preceding Sunday afternoon, temporarily free from stress, the same prevailing westerly breeze buffeting his back as he faced eastwards and adjusted his focus to pick out the cemetery clock tower, miniscule from this distance but still dominating the ridge where Cemetery Road descended on a steady incline from the ring road and into the centre of Cliffeield. Between him and the tower, cradled in a sweeping parabola, were woods, allotments, factories, warehouses, parks, housing estates, tower blocks: the compendium of northern city life. How insignificant the tower had looked from up there on the periphery of the moors - Lilliputian, innocuous, blending almost indistinguishably into the urban collage.

But today, beneath his tired feet, the tower felt portentous and brooding, the monolithic guardian of the huge undulating burial ground to his rear which stirred endlessly, the evidence of movement everywhere as gravestones tilted a millimetre a month and kerbs keeled over infinitesimally slowly, the rumpling, unquiet ground beneath pregnant with dark organic life as well as history, grief, anger and guilt. The cemetery needed locking up securely every night for all sorts of sound reasons.

"It's so peaceful here!" his mother had said on her one and only visit, understandable when you considered the short journey she had to travel towards tenancy. "All the trees, grass, flowers and wildlife – like being in a park. Except for the graves and everything."

Yes, the graves made a difference – all the difference. He walked from the front of the tower to the rear to survey the cemetery grounds, to face the memorials as a general might survey the field and the mustering enemy forces from a ridge on the eve of battle. The stones stood before him on the grassy bank, rising rank upon rank up to the crematorium (one of the first ever built in Britain), disappearing into the distance in their thousands and poised as if waiting for the order to advance. Sometimes, seated by the window in his office, he thought he saw them out of the corner of his eye moving glacially forwards. Maybe one day they would take the hall of remembrance, the columbaria and the offices, claiming them on behalf of the dead and banishing the living forever.

He shuddered as a gust delivered with an extra run up from the moors cuffed him between the shoulder blades. It was time to get back below, to confront the inevitable string of emails and field the chorus of phone calls. But a subconscious impulse drew him back to the front of the tower and, rather than opening the trapdoor to the clock room and the spiral staircase below he stepped past it. Cemetery Road stretched southwards up the hill to his left (he always found this confusing: surely south should be downhill!). A cortege was making its way down, the vehicles signalling right to come directly beneath him through the tower archway. He recognised the black Daimlers in the phalanx with the 'SW' prefix on each registration plate. 'SW' stood for Samuel Wraith, the oldest family firm operating in the City. The hearse at the head of the column was Wraith's flagship, a 1960's Rolls Royce in immaculate nick, the polish of its black lacquer so deeply worked in that it reflected the cemetery railings and wrought iron gates in perfect detail.

The 'roller' made only occasional excursions so the supine passenger was clearly a person of some prominence. This suspicion was confirmed as Groom recognised the occupant of the passenger seat. Instead of one of Wraith's interchangeable, lugubrious drones it was the man himself, Alastair Wraith, sole heir to the Wraith dynasty, superlatively aquiline in profile even when viewed from this height. As the hearse turned into the cemetery gateway Wraith looked upwards, perhaps impelled by a subconscious impulse parallel to the one that had drawn Groom to the parapet, and spotted the cemetery manager, his public sector peer, squinting back down at him. In characteristic fashion he tilted his head ever so slightly and raised the index finger of his gloved right hand in salute. It wouldn't do for the mourners to witness anything more demonstrative.

"Mr Groom surveying his domain!" Wraith remarked quietly to his driver, eliciting a silent chuckle. Mr Wraith, while accorded due respect by his long serving staff, was also acknowledged to be a bit of a 'card'. Mr Groom on the other hand, while liked (or at least amiably indulged) by most of the staff at Cemetery Rd, was widely felt to be a bit of a wet blanket, spending most of his time either fretting about something awful that had happened or panicking about something else which hadn't but still might. One of his many nicknames was 'The Prophet', the concluding words 'of Doom' implied rather than spelt out.

Currently, the issue causing The Prophet the most concern was the state of the business. The fact was everyone was living longer, and that this had an inevitable impact on income. The former government could take some credit. Since the introduction of winter heating allowances for the elderly there had been a lot fewer deaths during the winter. Add this to improved diet and lifestyle generally and the statistically verifiable outcome was that the national death rate was falling. A cause for celebration, surely! But for those whose business was running cemeteries and crematoria this meant a drop in revenue, less to pay for keeping things looking nice, more of a strain on budgets, and in the town hall things were getting very tight on the budget front and executive directors were demanding solutions. Called before his own, Malcolm Groom squirmed as income projections were appraised.

"I don't want to hear the death rate thing again!"

“But it’s a fact. It’s a national trend!”

“Well.....what are you going to do about it?”

Could this question really have been meant to be taken seriously? The ensuing expectant silence suggested it could. ‘What are you going to do about it?’ What was he supposed to do about it? Go round bumping old folk off like Harold Shipman?

Reinstalled in his office, Groom settled into the leather armchair which had cradled the backsides of generations of his forbears. A dark figure emerged from the shadows.

“Hello, Malcolm.”

“Bloody hell, Cynthia!”

Curling into the chair on the other side of the desk and drawing her feet up under her slender rear, Cynthia Selman, long serving Registrar, cast her critical eye over the man opposite. Groom shrank a bit then went on the offensive.

“How long have you been lurking?”

He looked nervously round the room, intuitively checking for booby traps or arcane talismans.

“I do not lurk! Where have you been anyway? And what’s that on your jacket?”

As usual, Selman had managed to turn the line of inquisition through one hundred and eighty degrees.

“Eh? What? Where?”

“There. It looks like bird shit.”

She was pointing at his shoulder.

“Oh Christ! Those pigeons got in when the trap door blew off in that gale last autumn. It’s all over the rafters.”

Selman rolled her eyes.

“You’ve been up in that clock tower again! I’ve told you, it’s not safe. The floorboards are all rotten.”

“No they’re not. There’s only that room where the header tank burst last winter and brought the ceiling down. The rest of it’s safe enough”

Selman’s blood red fingernails were subjected to pointed scrutiny.

“It doesn’t strike me as a particularly safe environment given the way the elements sport with it, not to mention the pigeons.”

“I’ll take my chances!”

“You’ll get struck by lightning up there one day. You give off enough static electricity as it is.”

Groom took a deep breath, preferring this tactic to more sparring where he knew he’d come off worse. Instead he appraised his adversary warily. Selman did not meet his eye although she knew she was being looked at. She would have felt affronted had this not been the case.

“And what did you spy from your minaret today, O Grand Vizier?”

“I will always defer to you on occult matters, Cynthia. I’m not in your league.”

She gave him the kind of look a female leopard might to a playful cub who had been nibbling her tail a bit too hard. Groom contemplated his feet and thought of Alistair Wraith’s handmade Oxfords in contrast to his own, weather beaten Hushpuppies. It was time for a tactical non sequitur.

“How come Wraith’s are keeping their numbers up? Everyone else is struggling. God knows we are!”

“They’ve got their niche, the traditionalists, the ones who go for the kitsch. Plus it helps if you’ve got the local mafia on your books. As long as the underworld keep bumping each other off Wraiths are quids in!”

Selman’s grasp on local subculture was a constant source of amazement to Groom. Nothing seemed to escape her radar. It wouldn’t have surprised him if she’d admitted being on Wraiths’ books herself.

“Have you got something on them? Can you prove it?”

Selman allowed herself a dry laugh.

“Don’t be silly, Malcolm. There’s no evidence. Nobody writes anything down. It’s not like us. We’ll drown in a welter of our own electronic verbiage at the rate we’re going.”

Selman’s abhorrence of emails was well known to her boss and he had long ago abandoned any hope of getting her to play ball. She rarely replied to any, least of all to his. To be fair he sympathised, but recognised there was no future in defying electronic communication and its seemingly insatiable appetite to feed on itself. Selman on the other hand was happy to defy anything rash enough to challenge her world view and had recently taken to sending people hand written memos to level the score a bit. They had a curiously profound impact on the receiver, often triggering the desired action immediately on receipt, an outcome which was equally gratifying to Selman as it was exasperating to Groom.

He sullenly picked up a month-end financial report, all the bits one least wanted to look at highlighted in red, and gave it a listless once over. Selman folded her arms and

observed with ironic interest. Despite the efforts software designers had put into making this information as accessible as possible (and which, despite her prejudices, she was so adept at interpreting) Selman knew the boss needed guiding through the figures like a bullock on a rope. By contrast she could make numbers dance. It had been a gift since primary school. She had found what many smart alics have found, that numerical virtuosity is a clinching attribute in any number of situations. It was a perpetual source of satisfaction to her that she was able with equal facility to make Groom feel either despondent or euphoric simply by putting a subjective slant on budgetary projections and then being competent enough mathematically to make the numbers appear to justify any apparent contradictions. And he never seemed to remember from one month to the next what she'd said a mere four weeks earlier. It was like telling a toddler the tooth fairy was coming and then the bogeyman. Groom always wanted a 'surprise', a rabbit out of the hat. It was part of the deal and Selman was only too happy to oblige. The oversized toddler looked up from the page morosely and Selman stepped up to view the figures over his shoulder, her long black hair brushing the shoulder without pigeon shit on it. Today she felt inclined to be a bit softer than usual. He looked like he could do with it. Meanwhile, Groom steeled himself

"So, give me the worst! Burials?"

"Down. But it's seasonal. They're always low this time of the year."

Groom experienced a sudden adrenal boost which almost lifted him from his chair

"They are? Yes, that's right, they are! What about cremations?"

Opportunity for a theatrical pause here, during which Selman studied the rows and columns and for a couple of seconds, unable to resist the temptation to test the bounds of his gullibility, turned the spread sheet upside down and squinted at it from an oblique angle. Inspecting his reaction out of the corner of her eye she was gratified to note that he appeared entirely taken in. It really was as if she were involved in some form of necromancy which he could challenge only at his peril.

"Down."

"Down?"

"Down. But the trend is still up."

"Up?"

"Up."

"But that's good isn't it? Up is good?"

Something in the back of his grammar school educated mind said 'How can down be up?' but he quelled the niggle with well-practised flair. 'Up' meant he could enter the Director's office next week with a firm step, a set jaw and bowels with something left inside them. As far as Groom was concerned this short exchange with Cynthia Selman constituted

all he required from a financial briefing. He didn't want any more, didn't want to think, worry, speculate, interrogate. He reserved that sort of anguished self-examination for when he woke up at three o'clock in the morning, the demons dancing around his bed and no one there to magic him out of the nightmare. His legs stretched out under the desk and put his hands behind his head, extending his torso luxuriantly and making the chair leather creak.

Freed (temporarily at least) from financial preoccupations his mind turned again to the Wraith conundrum. There were a couple of dozen funeral directors in the city and they were all laying off staff and hanging on to vehicles for longer than usual. Times were tough all right. But Wraith's had replaced half of their fleet, taken on another funeral home in the west of Cliffeield and bought out a couple of prominent local monumental masons. While other operators were backed by bigger, nationwide concerns Wraith's remained a 'family firm'. It was their great boast. And yet the absence of backers made the apparent prosperity even more difficult to fathom. He put the issue to Selman for comment.

"Maybe we could pick a tip or two up off them," she suggested satirically. Irony was lost on her colleague, even in his current temporary amnesty from panic.

"Do you think so? What though?"

"They're obviously doing something right, aren't they?"

"Or something *wrong*!"

The image of Shipman loomed once more in his mind. But the good doctor had enjoyed access to vulnerable people, people who trusted him unquestioningly, and critically also to lethal drugs. No, it was too absurd to contemplate!

"Maybe I should pop out and meet Alastair Wraith some time. I never get out of this bloody office. I'm like the Prisoner of Chillon!" Groom stroked his chin, got out of his chair and strode to the window, surveying the ranks of inexorably advancing gravestones with an air of Byronic resignation. " *'Consigned to fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom!'* "

Selman chuckled. Groom was a plonker but at least he was a plonker with a shred of culture. His three predecessors, whose tenancy she had endured before they had each capitulated either to the pressures of the role or the weaknesses of their own characters, had been variously insufferably pious, borderline alcoholic and sexually predatory. Groom lacked plenty of qualities in her exacting estimation, but he did at least have a degree of finish. He was a bit of a 'gent' in fact, something of a rarity these days. Maybe it was this refinement, this selflessness that had consigned him to the stewardship of the city's cemeteries and crematoria. Who else would have put up with all the hassle when all was said and done? She looked him over and was infused with an unfamiliar surge of indulgence.

"You've got your tower."

"And my pigeons!"

One of Groom's many dilemmas was that, within the corridors of power, the thoroughfares prowled by his boss and other corporate mandarins, cemeteries weren't deemed to be 'sexy'. A discussion with the recently elected councillor responsible for them (along with other environmental concerns) had involved a misguided direct closing question at the end of his one and only visit to the General Cemetery.

"So, Malcolm. What would you like me to do for you, down at the town hall I mean?"

Groom fixed this superficially affable politician with a fixed and hopeful eye, albeit one used to having a finger poked in it. Was this to be someone who would finally listen?

"I'd like you to give us a bit of a boost, talk us up, tell people about the good things we're trying to do up here."

The eye that met Groom's narrowed then disengaged. Prosing on about cemeteries in cabinet meetings had never been on Councillor Eldon Mills' agenda. Cemeteries were best left alone, best left to themselves. They got people thinking about gloomy things, about getting old and ill, about dying, things that you wouldn't want to be associated with when voters were hovering irresolutely over the ballot paper. Fun, holidays, youth, colour, glamour – these were the commodities that garnered the votes, not mourning, duty, age, shadow, solemnity.

"I'll do what I can, Malcolm, but the thing is.....the thing is cemeteries aren't really *sexy*, are they?"

Recollection of the solitary interview always stung Groom to the core. Not sexy? We'll see about that! He had made a mental resolution from that day forward that, whatever else he did in this job for however long he held on to it, he would one day succeed in making the man eat his words. He would make cemeteries sexy! He would get a photo on the front page of the *Cliffefield Courier* with Councillor Mills and additional, markedly more attractive personages conveying unequivocal sexiness.

Maybe Cynthia would be up for it? She'd got the looks all right, although always artfully ducked the camera, pushing other members of staff ahead of her into the limelight when some sort of photographic record was required – the 'open day' at the crem last year for example, or dedicating the new gateway into the adjacent, recently upgraded park (Why did parks get all the money?), far less photogenic junior colleagues fulfilling the role in the main: chubby ones, bald ones, short ones, shy ones. Selman was slender, tall and supremely self-possessed but evaporated from the scene whenever a camera materialised, despite manifestly possessing 'the goods' in superabundance. In the right pose she might even have got Eldon Mills to reconsider his views. What was the issue with photographs then? Maybe she was a vampire, he speculated semi seriously. Had he ever seen her reflection in a mirror or a window, now he came to think about it? There was without question something ineffably nocturnal about her. 'Don't be so bloody daft!' an inner voice told him. And yet.....

One icy morning the previous winter Groom had come early into the cemetery buildings. He had to finish off a report to deliver to councillors that afternoon about arrangements being put in place better to meet the burial needs of the local Muslim community. Brian Staniforth was usually first in the building, shuffling burial papers from seven onwards and bellowing into his phone at his two supervisors in the field, one responsible for the north and the other for the south of the city. But even he was still at home at this hour, walking the dog in all probability or making his wife a morning cuppa. Groom unshackled the padlock on the huge iron gates under the tower arch and pushed them open with ease. They had been wrought and hung by skilled craftsman one hundred and twenty years ago and, thanks to regular painting and greasing still more than adequately fulfilled their purpose. The next lock to negotiate was on the north columbarium door. The smell of damp and dying lilies that met him as he entered had become familiar, even friendly over the last two years. The 'colum' walls were made up of niches in which were kept urns containing cremated remains some even dating back to the opening of the crematorium, one of the first to be established at the beginning of the twentieth century. Another block rising to a height of eight feet took up the centre of the room along its full length and made up of niches set back to back and at both ends. Vases full of drooping blooms occupied every window ledge and plenty of floor space besides. It was a jumble, but the staff were careful not to rearrange people's floral tributes insensitively and so the confusion prevailed. Groom had once dropped a set of car keys in amongst the blooms and had never seen them again.

The heavy oak door from the columbarium to the offices proper was alarmed and he had thirty seconds to get to the panel under the stairs and punch in the correct numbers before it activated, always a nervy experience in the dark. Then, avoiding the general office where all the daily business took place - the bookings, the enquiries, the grave searches - it was up the broad staircase to his own office, once upon a time the bedroom belonging to the original 'sexton' and his wife. A photograph taken over one hundred years previously hung on the wall capturing the family in their black Sunday best, assembled in a stiff, starched clump outside the north colum, whose mullions in those distant days were festooned with Virginia creeper.

The heating had just kicked in and the pipes and radiators were expanding with seasoned gurgles and groans. But up here on the first floor he sensed something else, not a sound, but a presence and instinctively went over to try the door to Selman's office next to his. Unusually it was unlocked and he went in and switched on the light, initially failing to notice the occupant cocooned in her tall backed swivel chair, the dark wool of her suit blending into its charcoal grey upholstery. She watched him with amused eyes as he peered about the office before registering her presence and leaping a foot in the air.

"When did you come in? Hang on, the alarms were set. How come.....?"

"If you stay still they don't go off."

"So how long have you been.....*staying still*?"

Selman cast a languid eye in the direction of the wall clock then shrugged in non-committal fashion. The truth dawned slowly.

“You’ve been here all night!”

“So?”

“In the dark? Are you mad or what, Cynthia?”

“I had to work late. There were a lot of memorial applications to sort through.”

Groom was incredulous. Cliffefield General Cemetery was not only located in a pretty dodgy neighbourhood but was draughty, single glazed and stuck half way up a very windy hill; added to which it was a proving to be a singularly harsh January.

“Weren’t you cold?”

“No.”

What ran through her veins? Embalming fluid? And then there were the ghost stories, the unexplained slamming door the staff had commented on, the curtains in the hall of remembrance room that shut themselves. Didn’t any of that bother her?

“It’s a load of bollocks. This place isn’t haunted. In any case why should it always be cobwebby old places like this that are supposed to be haunted? Why not petrol stations or public toilets or - I don’t know - branches of MacDonald’s or KFC?”

This was an exasperatingly engaging contention and Groom forgot the main issue and followed Selman up yet another blind alley.

“Aren’t cobwebby old places more likely to have had people pop their clogs in them? They’ve been around longer. Maybe someone snuffed it in this room once, someone from that photo in my office. They did a lot at home in those days - gave birth, made bread, did the laundry, got ill, died. And then there’s the ashes of all those former citizens, you know, down in the colums.”

Selman snorted contemptuously. This line of logic didn’t synchronise with her personal world view. But as ever she felt playful.

“Former citizens or perpetual ones?”

Groom chuckled.

“But minus the voting rights.”

“Or council tax.”

She was more than a match for him when it came to trading wits and, looking back on it, Groom realised Selman should have handled the interview with Councillor Mills. At least then his cabinet member might have conceded cemeteries had one sexy thing going for them.

But hadn't she adroitly talked Groom into doing it? The meeting should, she had said with compelling conviction, be about men coming to a manly understanding; about taciturn consensus and gruff handshakes. In the end it had just been about two faltering, self-doubting males with conflicting agendas coming to an awkward stand-off, an agreement to differ – perhaps permanently.

So then, a double challenge – but perhaps one connected at root: how to make cemeteries sexy and how to balance to books. If he had been put here for any reason perhaps it was to achieve these objectives. They felt like something worth pitching in for, not just swanning around out of everyone's way looking solemn and letting the gravediggers do all the hard graft. He could be advancing the interests of the service, getting it on the political radar, making people finally take notice of that pile of stone half way up Cemetery Rd. Selman prodded him in the arm and out of his reveries.

“So, how about it?”

“How about what?”

“Wraiths!”

The phone on his desk rang and a light next to one of the speed-dial numbers indicated that the call was from the office downstairs. Groom looked appealingly in Selman's direction. Whenever possible he preferred to delegate practicalities, operational matters, discussions with the staff and the public at large, anything likely to importune him to anyone rash enough to be handy. Selman happened to be handy but was also alive to her colleague's back-heeling proclivities. She didn't need to say anything, just smile sardonically and shake her head. In response to the rebuff Groom scowled and picked up the phone, pausing for a split second before committing his ear to it. He mouthed the name 'Amanda' and rolled his eyes at Selman who rolled her own back at him and made to leave. He held up a hand to delay her. Someone else was on the line. She cocked her head one side interrogatively.

“It's Alastair Wraith!” Groom whispered, eyes wide, as if Fate had dealt a trump card.

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