

Job

An Inspector McLean Story

by

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‘Tell me again where they found him?’

Detective Inspector McLean risked a sideways glance with the question. In the passenger seat beside him, DS ‘Grumpy Bob’ Laird flicked open his notebook and peered at the scrawled black biro, trying to make it out in the orange glow of the street lights.

‘Greyfriar’s Kirkyard. The minister was doing the rounds, checking the place was empty before he locked up.’

‘In this weather?’ McLean leant forward over the steering wheel and peered through the windscreen. Snow swirled down from the black sky in great lumps, whipped into a frenzy by the wind bouncing between the cold stone buildings. The little red screen in the dashboard said -5°C and flashed irritatingly, but the heater worked, and the windscreen wipers too. McLean missed his old Alfa, but he could see why most people drove cars that weren’t forty years old.

‘He’s a man of the cloth,’ Bob said. ‘I guess he takes his work seriously.’

Traffic was light in the run-up to Hogmanay. Normally the city would be heaving with shoppers keen to snap up whatever bargains might be in the sales; as if Christmas itself hadn’t been enough of an orgy of consumerism. This year the weather had kept them indoors, and whilst the shopkeepers might grumble, McLean was grateful for the slump in street crime. Deaths

from exposure were up, though. And it looked like they might be dealing with one more.

They managed to park at the top end of Chambers Street; it might have been a double yellow line, but there was no way of telling through the thick off-white slush that merged the pavements with the road. A very cold-looking uniform stood at the gates to the kirkyard. He stopped stamping his feet and clapping his hands as they approached, trying without much success to stand to attention.

‘Miserable out here, isn’t constable,’ McLean said, trying to put the man at ease.

‘Brass monkeys, sir. No wonder the old geezer croaked.’

‘Old?’ McLean asked. ‘I just heard he was a tramp. You know who we’re dealing with here?’

‘You’d better see for yourself, sir.’

They stepped into the kirkyard, following the trample of footprints fast disappearing in the falling snow. A huddle of people clustered around the grave of John Gray, keeping close for warmth. McLean had to nudge his way into the circle; no-one had heard their approach over the muffled moan of the wind.

‘Who was here first?’ McLean asked. A frozen WPC nodded at him.

‘Minister phoned it in. I was nearest when they made the call,’ she said. ‘He’s deed,’ she added, as if that was necessary.

McLean hunkered down on his heels and looked at the figure slumped against the gravestone. His head was tilted back, as if he were gazing at the sky, and snow had settled on his face, riming the sunken ridges of his cheeks and making his eyebrows look like some strange parody of Father Christmas. His heavy tweed coat was pulled tight around him, blanketed with white, and his arms were hugged across his chest like he was protecting something, mittened fingers clenched into tight fists.

‘Is the coroner on his way?’ McLean asked.

Grumpy Bob nodded. ‘Knowing Angus he’ll be walking up. It’s no’ far,’ he said. ‘Any idea who we’re dealing with here?’

‘Oh yes,’ McLean leant forward and brushed away the snow to reveal a strangely calm and happy expression on the dead tramp’s face. ‘I know him.’

Everybody knew Job. He was an institution.

McLean remembered his first year on the force, pounding the beat with Guthrie McManus. Fast-tracked from university and expected to pick up the rudiments of policing in a year rather than three, he had been given to McManus by someone with a fine sense of humour. Guthrie did things the old way, always had done and always would.

Soor Plooms the lads had called the old sergeant behind his back; partly because of his pinched face and caustic manner, but mostly because of an unfortunate incident in the ’65 George Street riots where he’d ruptured both testicles. Coppers could be harsh that way.

In the end the joke had played to McLean’s advantage. He’d learnt more with Guthrie McManus in six months than most rookies learnt in their whole careers. He’d been given the unique opportunity to see how policing had been done before the invention of targets, overtime bills and streamlining, back in a time when kids still asked policemen for directions.

And he’d met Job.

The man never stopped moving.

He walked down the street opening shop doors, looking in, never entering. At every bin he would peer inside, but not rummage around like the other tramps. Occasionally he might accost a passer-by, but generally he left the other people alone.

McLean watched him work his way down Nicholson Street, cross over at South Bridge and then wander back the way he’d come, headed for Newington. The man was obviously a tramp - nobody dressed like that if they had any choice in the matter - but he had a sense of purpose about him the other vagrants lacked.

‘What yer lookin’ at?’ Behind him, Sergeant Guthrie McManus stepped out of the cafe, plastic cup of coffee in one hand, doughnut in the other.

‘Tramp.’ McLean pointed to where the man was talking to a young woman pushing a child in a buggy.

‘Ah, that’ll be Job,’ McManus said through a mouthful of sugar and jam. ‘C’mon. I’ll introduce you.’

The woman welcomed their approach with a desperate smile. Her child was fast asleep, oblivious to the world. As McLean drew near he heard the tramp speak.

‘I’ve lost it, you see. It’s around here somewhere. I’m sure. But I just can’t seem to find it.’

His voice was cultured. Not posh like the twits who lived in the West End, but cultured. He’d been privately educated, if McLean was any judge. And close up he could see that the tramp’s clothes were a cut above the average. They were well-tailored but old, stitched and patched where they had worn out. His coat was a heavy dark tweed that came down below his knees, much like the one McLean’s grandfather had worn, a style that had been fashionable in the twenties. No doubt some charity shop cast-off. His shoes had perhaps once been expensively hand-made, but now they were more hole than leather. The bottoms of his trousers were frayed and mud-spattered.

‘Mornin’ Job,’ McManus said, interrupting the tramp. ‘You remember what it is yet?’

McLean saw an old man, at least sixty, possible more. His skin was leathery with exposure to the city’s constant wind, and grey tufted stubble showed where he’d not shaved in a day or two. Unlike most of the local vagrants he didn’t smell of cheap sherry and garbage, didn’t smell much of anything.

‘Inspector, have you found it yet?’ the old man asked. Behind him, the woman took her chance and ran, one wheel of the buggy squeaking in protest as she scarpered.

‘Job, I’d like you to meet Anthony McLean,’ McManus said. ‘He’s my new sidekick.’

‘Has *he* found it?’ The tramp asked. He turned and reached for McLean, grasping his sleeve with a surprisingly strong grip. ‘Do you know where it is?’

‘Where what is?’ McLean asked. ‘What’re you looking for?’

‘I can’t find it, see,’ Job continued as if he hadn’t heard the question. ‘Looked everywhere, but it’s just not here.’

‘Here, Job. Why don’t you try lookin’ up at the castle?’ McManus said. McLean watched as the tramp’s eyes lit up with hope.

‘You reckon it might be up there?’ He asked. ‘Yes, yes, it could be.’ And without another word he set off in the direction of the high street.

‘Was that kind?’ McLean asked. McManus just grinned at him.

‘Job’s nutty as a fruitcase,’ the sergeant said. ‘But he’s harmless. Best way to deal with him. Send him scurrying off somewhere else. Everyone does it.’

‘What happened to him?’ McLean asked. ‘How long’s he been like this?’

‘I dunno,’ McManus said. ‘He was here when I started out.’

‘That tramp’s PM’s scheduled for this afternoon,’ Grumpy Bob said as McLean wandered into the office. ‘And there’s a box of his stuff on your desk. Reckon he’s got any next of kin?’

‘Who knows,’ McLean said. ‘I doubt it.’

He looked at the box for a moment, then opened it up to reveal a familiar, worn, old tweed coat, now wrapped in a clear plastic evidence bag. Beneath it were trousers, shoes, several thick cotton shirts and remarkably clean undergarments. And in a small bag at the bottom of the box, the contents of Job’s pockets.

McLean was surprised to see a wallet in amongst the collection. It was dark leather, worn almost completely through in places. Inside, he found a thin wad of cash: fifteen pounds worth of one pound notes, issued by the Irish Linen Bank. He looked at the dates on them, all of them in the early 1920s. Along with the money, there was a yellowing business card, printed in flowing script and reading ‘Albert Douglas, Attorney at Law’. The

office address was in the West End, a home address in Morningside; the telephone number had only three digits.

‘Bob, get on to Missing Persons. Albert Douglas. I reckon they might have to go back a few years.’

‘How far?’ Bob asked.

‘Tell them to start in 1920 and move forwards from there.’

‘They’ll not be happy about that,’ Bob said. ‘That’s goin’ down to the basement work. Dusty archives and stuff.’

‘So tell them I ordered it,’ McLean said. ‘They can blame me if they like.’

‘On it,’ Bob smiled and picked up the phone. McLean turned back to the wallet, but it yielded only a faded piece of newspaper, folded up tight. By the style of the typesetting, it was as old as everything else the tramp had been carrying; an advertisement for a circus and freak show, on the Meadows, from August 7th 1923, for two weeks. Scribbled across the bottom in ink that had spidered into the cheap paper, the words ‘meet me at the fortune teller.’

McLean put the scrap down on his desk along with the notes and business card, then took a look at the other things in the bag. They weren’t what you might have expected a tramp to carry around with him: a spectacle case containing a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses, the lenses scratched with years of cleaning; a pocket watch, it’s chain broken into two pieces, still telling the correct time and with the inscription ‘To my darling Albert, forever yours, Madeline’; a gold-plated ink pen; a small snuff box, still full of pungent black powder; and strangest of all, in a separate bag, there was a smooth polished love-heart, carved from some dark, close-grained wood. A note in the bag read: ‘subject was found to be clasping this item to his chest at time of death.’

His first day in Plain Clothes. Detective Constable Anthony McLean stepped out of the tenement door and slipped his notebook back into his suit pocket. No great murder investigation to get his career off to a flying start; he had to try and find out who had been stealing ladies underwear from the clothes

lines of many a Newington back garden. So far there had been a dozen complaints, all within a few hundred yards of each other. And the morning's interviews suggested the thief had been busier even than that. At least he could be fairly sure he wasn't dealing with a potential child molester; none of the garments so far reported stolen were anything less than a size sixteen.

A commotion further down the street cut through his musings. A pair of uniforms were questioning a lone man who seemed to be in some distress. For an instant, McLean thought they might have caught their man; the investigation wrapped up in his first day on the case. Closer, he realised there was still a long way to go.

'I can't help you if you don't tell me what it is you're looking for,' one of the constables said as McLean approached.

'Are you harassing my officers, Job?' He asked. The two uniforms looked relieved at his arrival, someone else to deal with the nut-job.

'Ah, Sir...' one of them began.

'It's alright,' McLean said, irritated that he couldn't remember the man's name. He was new. Both of them were, obviously, or they would have known who they were dealing with, and how to get rid of him.

'Inspector,' Job said. 'Do *you* know where it is? I can't seem to find it, you see.'

'Have you tried Waverley Station?' McLean asked, wondering why he did it, and yet somehow unable to stop. It was the same every time you met Job; you sent him on his way. It was like hating Maggie Thatcher or going to the pub on a Friday night. It was just something you did.

'No, no. I don't think I have, Inspector,' Job said, his face thoughtful. 'Thankyou. Yes. Thankyou. I shall go there straight away.' And without another word he turned and left.

'They said they'd look after him, give him a square meal, sort him out,' McLean said. 'That was two days ago.'

‘Yeah, well you know what those places are like at this time of year,’ Grumpy Bob said. ‘Even if they could cope with the numbers, they can’t stop people from leaving if they want to.’

They were making their way down the Cowgate on foot. It had stopped snowing, but the streets were still a lethal mixture of snow and ice. The city mortuary was, by an unhappy coincidence, only a few tens of yards from the homeless shelter and McLean reckoned he could kill two birds with one stone. Shelter first, to talk to anyone who might have been in there the night before, then the mortuary to witness the final indignity of the post mortem.

The shelter was packed with vagrants and smelled like a mixture of rotten garbage and hearty soup. Most of the incumbents looked at the two policemen with a mixture of fear and hostility, but the ladies on the soup tables were more helpful.

‘He was here ‘til about four,’ one of them said when McLean asked her. ‘Least, that’s the last time I saw him. Very happy he was, too.’

‘Happy?’ He asked. He had only ever known Job to be anxious, but he had been smiling when he died.

‘Oh yes. He started annoying some of the others here with it. Going on and on about how he’d found it at last. He said something about an Inspector showing him where it was. Lovely old man, he was. Well spoken and kept himself clean. Not like some of the people we get in here.’

Christmas day had been cold and clear, bright sun glinting off the icy stone buildings. With almost all the shops closed, the city had been quiet - just a few hardy pedestrians battling with the arctic chill. Then, with the darkness, the promised weather front had moved in, bringing wind and thick, thick snow.

McLean drove carefully through almost empty city streets, headed for the station. Technically he shouldn’t have been using the unmarked police car for personal business, but no-one seemed to mind. His own beloved Alfa Romeo was still locked away after a student had fallen three storeys onto its

roof - he still couldn't decide what to do with it. And having the use of an almost brand-new pool car didn't help his indecision.

The wind blew ferocious flurries across North Bridge, blotting the city from view so that he could almost have been in the middle of some bleak moor. Only the faint orange globes of the streetlights, hanging like giant hovering fireflies, gave any hint that there was civilisation out there at all.

He had been at his Gran's house; a vast detached pile of a place in the expensive part of town. Technically it was his house now, along with the sizeable collection of valuable antiques and paintings in it, and everything else that had belonged to the old lady. All told, his newfound wealth was significantly greater than he would ever earn on the force, but instead of feeling liberated by it, he felt oddly constrained.

At first, McLean didn't notice the figure, huddled against the cold and battling the wind as it made its way up the street. Even when he did finally register it, he didn't think it was important until he drew alongside. Seeing the car for the first time, the figure turned. Job.

McLean stopped, winding down the window as the tramp shuffled over towards the car.

'Inspector!' He said. 'How nice it is to see you. Have you seen it anywhere?' His voice was edged with tremors of cold, his face blue-white, but his eyes still burned with that same passion McLean remembered from his very first encounter with the tramp. What was it that kept the man going? He had to have been pushing eighty at the very least, and yet here he was out in the worst the weather had to throw at him, still continuing his helpless quest.

He wondered where he could send Job off to this time. He wasn't far from the railway station, which would at least be warm and sheltered. Or he could suggest heading down to Holyrood and the parliament, which were out of the worst of the wind. Or maybe he could send him in back into the town centre; there'd be other coppers out there who could pass him along the way.

But what was he thinking? This was an old man, older than his gran had been when she'd died. He was out in the cold and snow with no place to

go. He was mad, true, but that was no reason to mock him. Why had he done that before? Why did everyone mock Job?

‘Get in Job,’ McLean said, leaning across and pulling the door latch. The old man just looked at him, showing neither surprise nor alarm. ‘I’ll take you to where I think it might be,’ he added.

It was slow going, fighting through the snow. At one point McLean thought he might have lost control, skidding over snow-greased cobbles on the way down to the Cowgate. Luckily there was no traffic about and his sliding turn at the bottom of the hill was slowed by the pavement.

Down here, the wind died to a whisper and the snow fell in great lumps from the darkness overhead. The buildings rose into the gloom as if they were driving along the bottom of some narrow gorge. It seemed to go on far longer than it should have done; time and space left behind in the all-enveloping storm. Job said nothing; it was, McLean thought, the first time he’d ever known the man not to speak constantly. Instead he sat rigid in his seat, hands grasping the roll of the dashboard as if he’d never been in a car before. Perhaps he never had.

The snow was so thick, splatting against the windscreen like an explosion in the white section of a paint factory, that McLean almost missed the poorly-lit entrance to the refuge. He abandoned the car in the road, not really caring where the pavement was, and went around to the passenger door to help Job out.

‘Is it here?’ the tramp asked, staring all around as if he’d never seen the place before.

‘Inside,’ McLean smelled the warm, welcoming tang of soup as it wafted through the doorway. ‘I think it could well be inside.’

McLean hated the mortuary. Or to be more accurate, he hated the feel of the place - so much death, so much finality. And he hated that he had to witness post mortems.

Job was laid out on the slab when he and Bob arrived. Without his layers of shirts and heavy tweed coat, the man was stick thin, his bones showing beneath pasty-white skin that looked like it might split open at any moment.

‘Good of you gentlemen to show up,’ Angus Cadwallader, duty pathologist, said as they shuffled into the room. ‘I was about to start without you.’

‘I wish you had,’ McLean mumbled. ‘You know how I feel about these things.’

‘Quite, Inspector,’ Cadwallader said. ‘So I won’t keep you waiting.’ He clicked on his microphone and began speaking while his delicate gloved fingers caressed the pale, dead flesh as lightly as a lover at play.

Shaking his head to try and dislodge the image, McLean felt the vibration of his phone in his pocket. Pulling it out, he nudged Grumpy Bob.

‘Won’t be a minute,’ he said, holding up the vibrating phone as an explanation. ‘Keep an eye on things won’t you.’

The call was from Missing Persons.

‘We do have a record of a missing person by that name,’ the lady at the end of the phone said. She had a Morningside accent. ‘But I had to go to the old paper archives to find it. Down in the basement, you know. It’s awful dusty down there.’

‘Let me guess, he went missing in August 1923,’ McLean said. As he heard the details of the case, he wondered how Job had come across the man’s coat, and why he had never used the money or even pawned off the other items. One piece of information stuck: Albert Douglas had been forty-one when he went missing, born in 1882. So there was no way that he and Job could be the same man. No one could live to over a hundred and twenty wandering the streets, could they?

Back in the mortuary, the post mortem was in full swing. Doctor Cadwallader had opened Job from his neck down to his crotch and was even now cranking apart his ribs to get at his lungs and lights. McLean watched

with increasing disquiet as, one by one, Jobs internal organs were removed, inspected, weighed and placed in a series of containers. All the while, the doctor kept up a running commentary in a quiet but distinct tone for the microphone hanging over head.

‘Subject appears to be in remarkably good condition, considering his age. Lungs show no signs of disease, liver is unmarked, spleen looks to be in remarkably good shape, heart...’ He stopped, stood up and looked at the table of organs, pointing at them one by one as if counting them. Then he turned back to the opened cadaver, peering inside, pushing his hands into the cavity and searching around like a desperate woman searching for her car keys in an overlarge handbag.

‘What’s the problem?’ McLean asked, stepping forward though he really didn’t want to see any more than he had to. Cadwallader looked up at him, eyes wide.

‘This man has no heart,’ he said.

The missing person report was hand-written, in beautiful copperplate writing. Albert Douglas had been meant to meet his twenty-one year old fiancé, Madeline Robertson, at the circus. But when she had arrived at their arranged meeting place, the fortune teller’s tent, he had been nowhere to be seen. She had waited awhile, but was harangued by the old fortune teller, who told her that she was doomed, and that her lover would never be free until he found his heart.

When Albert missed work the next day, and was not to be found at home, the police were informed. In the course of their investigations, they discovered that he already had a wife and three children, living in Dundee. The investigating officer, a Superintendent Jack Flanagan, had wanted very much to interview members of the circus, but it had left town before he had the chance, returning to Eastern Europe whence it had come. The investigation had concluded that Douglas, a serial philanderer and perhaps bigamist, had feared he was about to be discovered and fled, assuming a new identity elsewhere. A footnote, with a reference number to another

case file, stated that Madeline Robertson had committed suicide in December of 1923.

McLean folded the stiff sheets of the ancient report, slipping them back into their archive folder. The box of Job's possessions sat on a chair beside his desk. They too would be archived, stored away until someone decided they could be destroyed, or auctioned off. He held the wooden heart in his hand, rolling its smooth surface around with his fingers. It felt warm to the touch, almost alive.

Sighing, he pulled forward his laptop and started typing up his report.

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