

Thirty years later and I still wasn't prepared when Dean Williams came in.

It wasn't as if I didn't have any warning. Frank told me just after my meeting with the Timmins family, they of the 'just a shell' school of thought.

Do you dress up your shell of a child to go to school, go to the gym to tone your outer husk and love your wife's carapace I asked Mr Timmins and his daughters? Is that all it is? Honestly. Christians. They're the worst because they're so utterly soul-obsessed. The way they see things the body's just a messy inconvenience. Maybe I'm being too harsh. Maybe they're just trying to save money.

Usually I begin by asking them whether they think Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for 'just' the shell of Christ? Not that I'm a believer but one thing I am sure of after all these years is that you care for the living by caring for the dead.

The thing is - no matter how often I tiptoe my way through this I always end up feeling like some huckster priest, morally threadbare and righteous at the same time. You'd think I would have got used to it by now having shared an office with death for almost 20 years.

The Timmins family had left and I was in the office rubbing my temples, trying to oust my inner drum meister when Frank filled the doorway. "Deady just come in. Can you do it? I have to meet Gail at an open home."

Then he caught my curdled appearance. "Ahhhh. The old body talk. Merelyn Merelyn." He looked at me hopelessly. "I'll try to be quick but you know our Gail. Shouldn't be too bad though. Young. Ish. About your age."

"How?" I said.

"Fire." Seeing my eyes snap open he added quickly "Don't worry. He's not a crispy critter. This one's smoked. Candles and curtains I think. Wife's name is Louise but she won't be here till later. She was overseas at the time of the fire. Deady's name is Dean. Dean Williams."

Something turned over in me there and then. Dean Williams. Really? Not that Dean Williams surely? Suddenly I was grateful for the masking effect of a headache. I took the paperwork Frank had left on my desk. The age was right, and I remember he'd married a Louise. His third wife I think. First Helena, then Diane. Now Louise. I remember. I'd read it.

In fact if the truth were known I'd been following his progress since, well, since the day I first saw him at Melford High. He arrived halfway through the fifth form and god what a genetic delight he was. His mother was Italian and she'd thrown him the sort of hang-dog dark looks that can look sappy on the wrong person and just plain sexy on the right one. Floppy black hair, big smudgey

eyes, long feminine eyelashes and a mouth with a mid-line drip just short of wet. But on Dean Williams - sensational. Like an old-fashioned movie star sighed my friend Jasmine. Or a FIFA football hero I thought.

Following his life via the media I saw that even age and a yo-yo life hadn't damaged him. He'd married young, taken on his father-in-law's tyre business, lost that along with all their money, started a coffee cart franchise when it was still novel, sold it, invested in a laundromat franchise, sold that on amidst talk of dodgy dealings and reappeared again as a mortgage broker. Apparently successful though always trailing a whiff of bad odour. As for his personal life, Dean tended to marry the wrong women, be seen with the right ones and was now freshly married to a woman 20 years his junior. Had a baby I believe.

He didn't know me. No really. I'm not being modest. He didn't. The only time I got within 50 feet of Dean Williams was once about ten years ago when he happened to sit next to me on a flight home from Sydney. Normally I'm quite shy but I'd just finished one of those personal development management courses and they talked about the value of one-to-one interactions.

"Hi," I said, my heart racing. "Dean Williams?"

His head didn't even so much as turn, as if this happened all the time, small-town superstar that he was.

"Merelyn Jones. Jasmine McNally's best friend?" Now his head pivoted on its axis.

"Really? I never .."

"Well we were only best friends at high school."

"Melford," he smiled, curious, remembering.

"You used to hang out with Vaughan Pinkerton and Greg Armstrong and all their mates."

"Oh yeah I still see Vaughan but Greg went to Australia I think." He looked at me more intensely now, brow furrowed.

"You don't remember me do you?"

"Yes. Yes of course. No. Well maybe," He tapped his head and grinned. "Memory's not what it used to be."

"It's okay. You never talked to me. Just Jasmine."

He nodded, embarrassed and then indicated with a nod the papers in his hand. "Sorry, got to get this done before I land otherwise my lawyer will never forgive me."

"Sure," I nodded. "Go ahead."

See. He didn't know me. But you do. You know me. I'm the plain puddin'y friend of the popular drop-dead-gorgeous girl. You know the sort. They're in most classrooms, every school. The best friend who is evidence that she's a decent sort despite the killer looks.

I watched the bags while she danced, sat through movies while she toyed with a boy and observed the party from a mattress against the wall waiting for her to finish and tell me everything on the drive home. It was my notes she copied when she bunked school and me who understudied her for the lead role in the school play. I was the girl parents liked. I was her alibi.

It's not a bad role. Honestly. You can get away with more if you are easy on the eye. But the commonplace has value too. People automatically assume you're kind and reliable.

Besides which I don't want you to think I am as plain as milk and in need of pity. I'm not so unattractive that I didn't get some cast-offs from the queen bees. Not that I wanted Graham Hanson pawing me with his scaly hands or Dirk Thomson's neediness. I'm not that desperate.

In those days Jasmine and I used to list our best and worst features like accountants. I indulged her when she included on her debit sheet short waist and eyelashes stiff as a doll's. My list was much longer but she always wrote off a few items. Dark hairy legs for instance. You can shave them she said. Skin like a corpse. There's blusher. Funny I should have written that actually. Anyway if I did those accounts now the list would be quite different to the one I wrote all those years ago.

Worst features in descending order then were hair - milkchocolate, straight and thin. Eyes, even then hidden amongst folds of flesh. Elephant's eyes. Skin pallid. Body shapeless but not like a flattened washerboard, more risen dough.

Best features then were my nose mouth region. Mouth is truly bow-shaped and teeth square and white. Nice ridges from nose to lip area too.

Now my hair, well the grey hairs could all have names and compared with my peers I find I have few wrinkles. My body has trimmed up considerably since getting a dog. Eyes still lost in reptilian pouches but mascara and concealer go a long way. Nose and mouth fine though teeth a little stained from too much red wine.

However nothing but nothing will stop my legs from looking like they belong to an Albanian peasant. Absolute worst feature without a doubt.

Actually I think I should put skin as my best feature. See what I mean about change.

Appearance doesn't rate at work mind you partly because of the business we are in and partly because Frank has made size a virtue. He's so tall and overweight he looks like a series of cartons stacked one top of the other. Boxy shoulders, square-shaped head, hands like shovels, and even a moustache shaped like half a rectangle.

Technically I suppose he's obese but he doesn't care, not even a little bit, and as it happens our clients find his bulk coupled with his booming voice reassuring. At least he looks so ... so present I guess they're thinking. Subconsciously. By contrast his partner, Gail, is so pale and stringy she looks like a white Kenyan runner but they laugh lustily and you can tell there is much enjoyed between them.

"Did you live down Colman Ave?"

He'd put his papers down and turned his gaze on me.

"Yes. You do remember."

"Not really but I do recall picking up and dropping off Jaz at your place."

"Mmm so her parents would think she'd spent the day with me."

"She loved you," said Dean. "She used to refer to you as my lovely spaniel."

"Did she?" A hollow opened up in my stomach, a hollow the size of a fist. "No no she had a spaniel. That's Lolly, not me."

Dean Williams laughed and the seams of his face deepened. He'd be great cast as the sexy Welsh coalminer in a movie. Grimy and delicious. "That's the joke. Lolly was a little toerag. Always nipping and growling. But you, you were so kind and loyal. Her lovely spaniel."

Usually I take care but you never know when you have to guard your heart.

"She married that guy you know. And had umpteen kids with him I heard. What's his name? Brian Trotman. The guy she dropped me for. First time I'd ever been dumped. Last time too. I was gutted you know. Could not for the life of me understand why."

"Oh that's easy," I said. "Dependability."

"She was 16 for chrissakes" said Dean.

"She had two children by the time she was 22. Two more in her thirties. Dependability is critical when women are looking for a father for their children."

"Maybe that's why I've never had any children," laughed Dean.

I think about telling him that he'd been cuckolded for a full eight months while Jasmine tried to make up her mind which one to choose but I hold back. What if he ever saw Jasmine again? What if she told him why?

I pick up the airline magazine that's been lying on my lap unread, its riches just waiting to be unfolded. A parade of hard diamonds, steely watches and panther-sleek cars flicks by. Wealth porn. Just think- all this to adorn our 'shell.'

Children get it way more than adults. I must have been about 12, walking my little sister Allie to school, when we came across a dead cat smeared across the road. I tried to drag her quickly past the mutilated fur bundle but Allie pulled on my arm. She wanted to stop and look at the animal, really look. "What happened to it?" she asked me, tears puddling in her eyes, her hand squeezing mine hard. "He died and went to heaven" I said. At this she wrinkled her brow crossly "Why did God throw it back down then?" she asked. "Didn't he like it?"

Dean shifts in his seat. "What about you?" he asks. "Married, children?"

"No," I say. "No it just never happened."

"Oh?" He is surprised. "You seem like the sort of person who would like a tribe. Still, what do I know? I never thought Jasmine would be a breeder. Shows how wrong you can be. So what are you doing here, I mean now?" The question is loaded. Well I am in business class.

"I'm an undertaker. Or funeral director if you prefer."

"No shit. What dead bodies and stuff?" Interested. Newly. "So do you, I mean I hope you don't mind me asking, handle the bodies?"

"Of course." What did he think? "With gloves on."

"Yeah. Right. But do you like gut them? No I mean, oh what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Embalm. I embalm them. Not so much gutting as preventing the fluids leaking out. Most of the body is fluid."

"Wow," he looks away and then back at me. He is obscenely, almost sexually, fascinated. Not, I have to say, an uncommon reaction. "Tell me, how you do it?"

"Well," He sees me hesitate.

“Sorry. You must get asked that all the time.”

“No. Well yes I do. And I don’t mind answering. It’s just that people usually have something specific in mind. What do you exactly want to know?”

“I don’t know really. Just what do you do? What’s the point?”

“Embalming preserves the remains. Without it they’d be pretty unsightly within a matter of hours.”

“Oh and how do you do that?”

I skip the first bit where we massage the limbs to stop rigor mortis setting in. In my experience that information is too intimate and creepy for most people.

So I start by telling him what we do with after that. “First we make an incision in the right side of the lower neck. That’s where two of the largest circulatory vessels in the body are – the carotid artery and the jugular vein. We pump a formaldehyde-based solution into the carotid and drain blood from the jugular.”

“Does it ever go wrong?”

“Well yes if there are clots or something else which stops the flow of fluid we inject at other points in the body. Mostly it’s fine though.”

“Is that all?”

“No no we also cavity embalm. Basically the same process but this time we remove blood and other fluids through suction and replace it with full strength fluid. We then suture all the incisions closed.”

“Right. Right.” He is thoughtful. “What about the face?”

“Oh we make sure the mouth is closed in a natural way. Also we shave their facial hair and do their hair and makeup which is tricky. You don’t want them to look too made up, like a circus clown say, or too underdone and cadaverous. Then we place the body carefully in the casket. Often this part takes the longest, making sure everything is just so.”

“Do you ever look at people and imagine what they’d look like as a corpse?”

I laugh. “Never. Occasionally I try and guess what kind of coffin they’d choose though.”

Dean’s eyes are shiny. “What about me? What would I pick do you think?”

I look at him thinking. "Hmmm well there's the Guernsey in a midnight blue. No no the Rutherford painted pewter with silver handles is more you."

"Because?"

"Modern, masculine, yet slightly edgy."

"Sounds okay I guess."

He is not convinced.

"What do you drive?"

"1969 Jaguar XJS soft top"

"There is a company in Africa that specializes in coffins that look like favourite objects of the deceased. You might like one in the shape of your car."

Dean grins. "I could get that?"

"Well we'd have to order it in and it might take a while but it's possible someone here could copy that concept for you."

He nodded. "That's more me. Definitely. But I doubt my wife would like it. You're good." He thought for a minute. "I do remember you now. I rang you once."

I nod. "To ask about Jasmine."

At school people said I was perceptive. It became who I was eventually. Quiet but perceptive. All that meant was that the popular kids felt they could come to me with their boyfriend, and occasionally girlfriend, troubles. What made them think I liked this role I don't know. I would have liked some of those problems of my own. Obviously they were not perceptive.

"Yeah I was really upset when Jaz left me for that guy. I needed to talk to someone and you always looked like the kind of person I could talk to without it getting round the school. Also I knew Jasmine would have confided in you."

"You asked me whether you still had a chance."

A corner of his mouth lifted. Wry. As if he'd ever do that again.

"Yeah and you said no, don't look back. Just move on. You even suggested a replacement remember? Jenna Collins. I met my first wife through her. I have you to thank for that I suppose."

Is he being ironic? But no, there's not a trace of malice in his eyes which gaze back at me with open and clear appreciation.

"You were good to talk to. Really good. I'll bet they love you at work. The families, that is."

"They used to. And some cultures, some people still do. But a lot of others now think you're giving them a sales pitch, hustling for the most expensive option."

"You wouldn't do that," he said and returned to his papers. We didn't speak again until the plane landed. As he stood up to leave Dean turned to me briefly and said "Well I guess this is it. Nice talking to you again Marianne. All the best."

"Merely," I said but he was already looking ahead, moving on.

Thinking about this I went into the mortuary and saw Dean Williams' prostrate body waiting for me. I stood in front of him for a while holding my breath and then gently pulled back the sheet. The air hissed out of me. Dean Williams. Here. Now. He didn't look a lot different actually. Older of course. Full head of hair still and only a little grey. Skin slightly sallow but with that bone structure, handsome all the same. A gorgeously addled shell not unlike a ravaged Anthony Bourdain.

You want to know what I was thinking then, at that moment? What really terrible thing went through my mind as I held the sheet and gazed down at my old high school crush. It wasn't nice. Or kind. Or generous.

I thought good. At last. I've got you.