

*Press Cutting ~ The Brightland Argos ~
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MYSTERY OF HUMAN REMAINS DISCOVERED AT WHITE CLIFF HOUSE

Unidentified human remains have been found at a house near Cuckham Sands. Formerly used in Edwardian times as a base for creating silent films, a purpose-built studio in the grounds was completely destroyed when a fire broke out on the night of the discovery.

Initial pathology reports suggest that the body parts are male, most probably in middle age. However, officials are yet to establish why and when the death occurred.

A second body found that night has been named as Leda Grey, an elderly woman who is said to have lived at the house for sixty years.

The police are still waiting to interview a man in his late twenties who was also present at the scene. He is currently recovering from fire-related injuries at the Brightland General hospital.

THE DEAD ARE BUT AS PICTURES

The slightest thing can take me back to that early August afternoon. It's almost like running a film in reverse, until the frame is frozen and ready to set in play again. And it would have been in colour, but I always remember in monochrome. The scorched white glare of skies above. Black shadows in the cobbled Lanes. How I bought a postcard from a rack that showed the pier lit up at night in faded loops of silver. How I stared at bleached geraniums that drooped in baskets either side of the open doors to the Bath Arms bar – and something yet more mournful in the silhouettes that I could see through the gloomy dinge inside that pub. Two lovers rocking back and forth, locked in a sort of languid dance while a tinny radio blared out the hypnotic chords of skank guitars. The Eagles. 'Hotel California'.

At least I could have sworn it was. Time and memory confused. The warm air. The sweet smell of colitas...

I had no weed, but reached instead for the pack of Woodbines always kept in the back pocket of my jeans. The brand my mother always smoked, and I liked the rough cheap taste of them. I liked the smell of sulphur in the moments when I lit one up, when a match was scraped across the strip of sandpaper that edged the box.

Sucking deep on the acrid nicotine I felt it prickle through my scalp, through the fug of last night's hangover, as I wandered further on into the warren of the Brightland Lanes where the radio's fading melody was replaced by the sudden high-pitched bark of a small black terrier running past.

Turning to watch it disappear into the shimmering of haze where the passage opened up again onto the wider promenade,

I must have spun around too fast, feeling dizzy and dropping my cigarette as I stumbled against a window front.

Beneath a lowered awning, the glass was darkly shadowed, almost obsidian opaque. But my vision soon acclimatised to see the items on display. All the watered-down dregs of the hippy age, and the staples of Brightland's tourist trade in a faded pack of tarot cards, a crystal ball, some small brass bells, and the crackle-glazed porcelain head of a man, adorned with spidery black scrawls of *Caution. Despair. Ambition. Love. Hope. Destruction. Misery.*

The warnings were all there to see.

Less ubiquitous were the postcards of Hollywood legends from the past. Charlie Chaplin. Greta Garbo. Douglas Fairbanks in one of his swashbuckling roles. Valentino, holding a cigarette, with much of his face seductively obscured by trailing wisps of smoke. And then there was Bette Davis, always a favourite with my mum who'd sit for hours and hours on end before our television set, with the front room curtains closed to keep the light and outside world away while she lost herself in old film noirs like *Dangerous*, or *A Stolen Life*.

On a whim, I decided to go inside and buy that photograph of Bette – though I almost stopped when my palm was pressed on the mullioned panes of the shop's front door. Five fingers reaching out for mine. A lean brown arm extending from the white of a cotton T-shirt. The golden glint of stubble below two sharply angled cheeks. A pair of staring anxious eyes beneath fair curls turned dark with sweat.

I hardly recognised myself. So much gaunter than the glam-rock boy whose photograph and byline were displayed on the 'Hip and Happening' page of London's *City* magazine. My mornings spent in Fleet Street with the clatter and bash of typewriters, writing reviews on rising stars promoted on the London scene. Longer lazy afternoons with all the other boozed-up hacks who lushed in antiquated bars, until the evenings spent at gigs, or films, or parties after shows – before it all began again, when

I dragged myself from the crumpled beds of faceless, nameless strangers. Fucked into oblivion.

Oblivion. The perfect word. When had it all stopped being fun, leaving me lonely, restless, bored? And the odd electric charge I'd felt all through that summer's endless heat. Like insects buzzing through my veins.

It was with me then, a thrumming itch, vibrating to the jangling of the bell that rang above my head when I made my way into the shop – and seemingly stepped back in time, to see an imposing mahogany counter, and on top of that an old brass till, its gleaming sides embossed with shapes of flowers, leaves and curling scrolls. Next to the till, a small black dog was sitting on a wooden plinth, and if not for the grey around its snout it struck me as identical to the one that I'd just seen outside. Except that this was motionless. A silver crown upon its head.

I've never liked stuffed animals. Averting my gaze I looked instead at racks crammed full of vintage clothes, all giving off a musty smell. Something like roses, but dank as well, like washing that hadn't quite been dried and had then gone mildewed with the damp. My nose began to tickle. I couldn't stop a violent sneeze, which must have alerted the shopkeeper. I heard some creaks from overhead. The slow but steady beat of feet descending on some nearby stairs, and then a beaded curtain's hush...

He looked like an ancient game show host. A pinstriped suit with wide lapels that in another day and age could well have been considered sharp. Something Cagney might have worn in 1930s gangster films, when he'd pull a gun, or flick a knife. But this suit was too baggy. The cuffs were frayed. There were greasy stains across the front. And its owner fared no better. Whatever his hair had been before, all that now remained of it were a few white strands grown long on top in a Bobby Charlton comb-over, although this bobby-dazzler failed to hide the sores that marred his scalp. Slack jowls drooped round a pair of lips, so red I couldn't help but think he must be wearing lipstick. Above, two pale and rheumy eyes were large and almost childlike, magnified

behind the rims of a pair of black-framed spectacles – though the old man’s gaze grew keener as his steepled fingers lifted, the tips of them then burrowed in the flesh that sagged beneath his chin.

His voice was surprisingly youthful, being mellifluous and deep, just the slightest cracking quality when he asked, ‘Can I be of assistance? Is there anything particular...’

‘There’s a picture, in the window front. I wondered if...’

Every thought of Bette was swept aside when I saw some other photographs hung on the wall behind his head. Turn of the century perhaps, all with a slightly faded charm.

A fierce-looking woman with both arms raised as if to show the draping sleeves of a medieval-looking gown; the fabric lustrous, shimmering in peacock shades of blues and greens. But the other prints were monochrome. A smiling woman, head inclined, her eyes and nose quite hidden by the roses stuck around the brim of the hat that she was wearing. At her side there was a little girl who couldn’t be much more than six. Eyes glittering like jewels of jet as they filled a narrow elfin face. Coiling black ringlets that fell to her shoulders, on top of which she wore what might have been the very same garland of flowers now hooked on a corner of the frame, where the once fresh blooms had dried to brown, like scraps of creased-up tissue paper.

There was the girl in another frame, alone, and some years older, and something different on her head. Something more elaborate in those twists of metal leaves – and snakes? The skin around her eyes was smudged. Was she tired, or was that make-up? When sunlight dazzled on the glass it gave her the look of a living skull. It was such an odd illusion, and it lasted no more than a moment or so but I felt a prickling jolt of fear; a sense that if I stepped too close that girl might reach out through the frame and try to drag me into it.

I shook my head and closed my eyes, and when I looked back up again the natural features were restored, so perfect and alluring that before I knew it I’d enquired, ‘How much do you

want for that ... that girl, with the snakes around her head? Who is she? Do you know her name?’

‘Ah ...’ The old man gave a sigh. A reek of sour beery breath, and a smile that quite unnerved me. The way the scarlet of his lips bled into wrinkled fissures, and the deeper grooves that etched two lines from his nose down to the chin below. Like the hinges on mouths of ventriloquist’s dummies.

Once, when I was very young, my mum – what was she thinking of? – had let me stay up late to watch a horror film called *Dead of Night*. A collection of different ghost stories, with the last about a ventriloquist who believed his dummy was possessed by the spirit of a murderer, with all the other characters convinced the man had gone insane. Until the end, and the horrible twist, when—

Recalling the dummy’s wide round eyes and the awful malevolence of its smile brought every childhood terror back, starting with genuine alarm when I heard the banshee wails of gulls that gathered in the Lane outside, and through that din the old man’s voice:

‘Well, I don’t often have the pleasure of a handsome young man inside my shop ... and I hope you won’t mind me saying this, but you have quite a shine about you. Such a lovely golden light it is! I’ve only seen it once before. A coincidence for those of us who might be prone to, well ... what shall we call it? To superstitious tendencies?’

He paused. When he started up again it was almost like a riddle. ‘The light of attraction between lost souls. Do *you* also see between the veils? I sense a shared affinity.’

I was wondering if I should leave, presuming the man was drunk, or mad. Or worse, about to make a pass, like the mincing queens in West End bars, who always seemed to think that if they smiled and winked and bought me drinks then I might well be up for it.

Was it me? Misleading signals?

A relief to see his trembling hand had not been raised to touch my arm, but to point on past and indicate a painted sign

propped on a shelf, where a large black eye had been designed in a mystical Egyptian style, and arched above were words that read:

PROFESSOR MYSTERIO
PALM READING, TAROT CARDS,
MYSTICAL COMMUNE
Ask and you shall receive advice

His voice was remorseful, reedier, when explaining, ‘Mysterio was me. A trade I used to ply before the medicines I have to take blocked off those natural instincts. I’m an epileptic, you see, and the doctors say another fit would finish me entirely. So they dose me up with all these drugs to suppress “excitement” in the brain.’

My answer may have been too curt. ‘I don’t believe that psychic stuff.’

‘Ah yes.’ His gaze was doleful. ‘You may well have a point. Most any fraud can read the “signs”. The movements and the random words that hint at our most inner thoughts. Those things we never dare to tell. But perhaps it’s only fair to say...’ the coarse white hair above one eye had skewed to twist his furrowed brow, ‘I think I still see more than most, even if my mind is slowing up... whether that’s due to the medicines or this cursed blight of aging. The cruellest thief of all is Time.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, and really was, though I found it hard to understand why the sadness in the old man’s voice should affect me quite so deeply.

‘Oh, the years have been kind in many ways. Too generous, you might well say. I’m one of the last Victorians. Born in the 1880s! And I know you young folk think we’re prudes, all frills around piano legs... what was it that John Lennon said? I heard him just the other day when he was on the radio. About getting old and missing it?’

He gave a sudden snorting laugh, after which he cleared his throat of phlegm and carried on more breathlessly. ‘Well, we

didn't miss so very much. The good old days are aptly named! What wonders we achieved back then. I'm crippled with arthritis now, but once I had a gift for art, creating all the backdrops for my father's photography studio. And later, sets for moving films.'

His eyes grew brighter, dreamier. 'If you could see the magic that we captured on those silent screens.' His head was shaking sadly. 'All gone, all gone. And now...'

Was she gone as well? I found my eyes drawn back to the girl with intense black eyes, who might be dead and in her grave. But her picture was vibrantly alive. Such a sexy, vampish air she had. Why, add a safety pin or two and that face could pass as easily for a singer I'd met the other night at a gig in a shabby East End pub.

The place had been packed to the ceilings, with the sweat from hot bodies condensing there and dripping on our heads like rain, dribbling through the purple spikes she'd fashioned from her short black hair. Her cat-like eyes blinked back the sting while jet-black lips had mouthed some words I didn't have a hope to hear. But I'd followed the liquorice sway of hips beneath her leather bondage gear to find her alone on a fire escape where she'd snatched the fag out of my mouth, taking a long slow draw on that before telling me about her band, and how Malcolm McLaren had fixed a gig at the 100 Club on Oxford Street. I'd said I'd like to be there, hoping to impress her more by offering to write it up in the pages of the magazine. But she'd only looked contemptuous. 'You work for *City* magazine? That pile of capitalist crap! If it's hip, then it's *not* happening.'

I hadn't tried to disagree. Why would I? Every word was true.

The femme fatale in sepia had eyes far less accusing, and a chance to look more closely came when the old man turned his back on me, shuffling towards her and grunting with the effort as he raised his arms to clutch the frame. Setting it down on the countertop, he used the cloth of his jacket sleeve to lovingly dust across the glass. When that was done his eyes met mine.

He smiled and said, 'Now, first things first. I think we should be introduced.'

'I'm Ed... Ed Peters,' I answered while offering to shake his hand, though that formal gesture was ignored as he turned his head away again, looking back at the beaded curtain through which he had at first emerged, the strands of which were rattling and parting slightly in a breeze.

A long dark passageway behind. A narrow run of wooden stairs. Beyond, another spacious room where a dome of glass in the ceiling space was covered with moss and sea gull shit. Any sun that could still penetrate created the eeriest atmosphere, like a bubble underneath the sea. And in that murky shimmering I saw a dark-red velvet chaise. Some painted backdrops on the walls. A stylised Brightland Pavilion. A jungle scene with ancient ruins – and then the curtain fell again, and my gaze returned to the black-eyed girl, asking more urgently than I'd intended, 'Won't you tell me about her... who she was?'

'Not who she *was*, Mr Peters.' The answer was slow and serious. 'It's more a case of who she *is*... still very much alive today.' He stopped, as if to let that news sink in before continuing. 'That is, if you call it living. The way she hides herself away like a doomed princess in a fairy tale. I used to visit, every month, as regular as clockwork. But my health, and these drugs I have to take, they mean I can no longer drive. Even if I could, the cliff-side road has grown too perilous. They've closed it off. The path's still there, but I'd never manage such a trek.' He was breathing very heavily, as if simply the thought of the exercise had been enough to wind him. 'I should write, but I doubt the post gets through. I wish she had a telephone. There's no such thing at White Cliff House. No electricity. No water mains. Not that it seems to bother her. She is a fly in amber. In stasis. In inertia.'

'Has she always lived that way?' I asked, still staring at the photograph.

'Oh no. She once lived here with me, when we managed our father's photography shop... before we met with Charles Beauvois and became involved with all his films.'

I felt excitement stirring. I asked, 'Was she an actress, then? I see she has that glamour.'

Seeming in better spirits now, the old man nodded earnestly while reaching beneath the countertop and pulling out a large square book that made a very solid thump when he dropped it down between the dog and the frame that held his sister's face.

'I saved this book of cuttings from a skip only the other week!' He made the proud announcement while he drew the marbled cover back. Inside, his swollen fingers fumbled, lifting flimsy tissue sheets, revealing prints that he then claimed to be a record of some films made in the Brightland area. All stills from work created there in the years before the First World War.

Listening with interest, I leaned a little closer, seeing men with elaborate facial hair, wearing bowler hats or flat tweed caps as they stood in roads, or fields, or woods with cameras perched on tripod stands. Cameras very much like those displayed on the shelves around us. Big wooden boxes with long metal lenses, like toilet rolls stuck on the front of them.

In one of the pictures – a close-up shot – a kitten was cradled in a lap, being fed some milk from a metal spoon. In another, a buxom woman wore nothing but a corset, giving the viewer a saucy smile while standing in front of an old tin bath. Was this some historical striptease? A quaintly pornographic film?

As each new page was turned my curiosity grew deeper, and I asked with some passion, 'These are genuine stills from early films ... all made right here in Brightland?'

'Here, or the near vicinity, and most some years before our own involvement in the industry. There was Friese-Greene, and Darling. Esmé Collings, and James Williamson. Each one of them a pioneer. Why, one of my earliest memories is of my parents taking me to St Ann's Well Gardens up in Hove, where G. A. Smith once showed his films ... with a fortune teller in the grounds. Even a hermit in a cave. I'm sure there are some photographs of that somewhere inside this book.'

'Why don't we know of this today? I'd always assumed the silent films first started in America.'

‘America, and Europe too. But, it’s safe enough to say that those who worked right here in Brightland were involved at the very dawn of things ... although it’s almost more than I can bear to think of, all the treasures lost. The celluloid is fragile, you see. Not so unlike our mortal flesh ... melting, crumbling to dust.’

Questions tumbled through my mind. *How many of these people might still be alive in the present day? How many films had been preserved?* I asked, ‘Do you think there’s any chance that I could meet your sister too? I’m a journalist, and I really think there might be quite a story here.’

Again, the old man raised a brow. ‘A story more intriguing than you’d ever dare imagine. My sister keeps many secrets. Many skeletons in her closets, and ...’ A frown of confusion filled his face as if not knowing whether he should stop or carry on with this – until his eyes fixed hard on mine. ‘Those ghosts may rise to harm us all.’

Us all? Did he mean himself and his sister, or was he including me as well? I pushed such nonsense from my mind, asking as my fingers stroked around the picture’s chipped gilt frame, ‘How old was she, in this photograph?’

‘Our father took this picture. Quite the David Bailey of his time. She was always his favourite subject ... at least, after our mother died. And I know she might look older here, but I think she would have been fourteen. About the time when Charles Beauvois first showed his face here in the town. His first appearance. Not his last.’

He paused. His body stiffened. All at once he looked exhausted, as if his whole physique had shrunk within the creases of his suit. ‘Ah well, what’s done is done. Too late for us to change things now. And Charles Beauvois is surely dead. He was older than us by quite some years when he disappeared from White Cliff House ... leaving misery behind.’

That stare. So terribly intense as he struggled to keep his dignity, to control the emotions clearly felt when beneath the weight of crepey lids his eyes grew blurred and watery. When

he blinked a single drop splashed down across a photo in the book. The photo with the kitten. The spoon which now appeared to spill the milk contained within its bowl.

A magical illusion, and hard to drag my gaze away, while the old man carried on to say, 'If you have a genuine interest – and yes, I do believe you do – then I'll sell you my sister's photograph, and I'll let you have this book as well. Shall we say the sum of twenty pounds? Would that be agreeable?'

It was an extortionate price to pay, but before I'd even answered he was wrapping the frame in newspaper, and muttering beneath his breath, 'This may well be a can of worms you'll wish you never opened up. Are you sure you want to take these things?'

What a strange exchange of goods it was. What could he be afraid of? For myself, I would have paid much more, such a rush of excitement in my blood as I reached for the wallet in my jeans from which I pulled two ten-pound notes.

While placing them down on the countertop my fingers brushed against his hand, and I felt the heat of swollen joints, and the oddest sense of pity when, in any other circumstance, I'd probably have been repulsed. Not to mention losing patience during the small eternity before the cash was in the till, after which he picked a biro up to scrawl some details underneath the words emblazoned at the top of a flimsy sheet of paper:

THEO WILLIAMS ESQUIRE.
STAGE AND FILM MEMORABILIA

Barely giving that a second glance I stuffed it in my wallet. With the package held beneath one arm I made my way towards the door, where my eyes were almost dazzled by the shock of light on the other side, while behind I heard the old man call:

'Oh, Mr Peters, before you go ... I don't think you asked my sister's name. Her name is Leda. Leda Grey. You'll see it, on

the sales receipt. And if you do decide to go and find her up at White Cliff House, will you tell her Theo sent you?

‘Will you tell her Theo thinks it’s time to tell the truth ... to show her light?’

