

Spadework

An Inspector George Rough Story

by

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Published on behalf of the author by Bickering on Sea

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Inspector George Rough smiled indulgently at his daughter and accepted the proffered imaginary cup of tea she had made for his breakfast. “Ooohhh, lovely,” he said, winking at his stepson, Darren. Darren looked hurriedly down at the table. I might be a Police Inspector, George thought, but I’m not sure I’m ever going to work that lad out. “Dou’re welcome, Daddy,” his petite hostess exclaimed. “Dawwen, dou want a cuppa tea?” She looked pleadingly at her brother. A change came over the teenage boy, as it always did when relating to his not yet four-year-old sibling. He beamed encouragingly at her. “Go on then.” Delighted, she rushed to her play table and carefully poured him a fictional cup of tea, carrying it steadily back to the kitchen table. He took it gratefully, pretended to sip it and proclaimed, “Delicious.”

George tried smiling conspiratorially at the boy, who initially returned a half smile, before turning away, as if embarrassed at having caught himself fraternising with – with what, precisely? How did the boy see him these days? Not the enemy exactly but, perhaps, the interloper. Darren had been only seven when George first met Debbie. Mother and son had been a close-knit pair. He supposed that they had had to be, since the disappearance of the boy’s father some four months earlier. That was, of course, how he had come to meet Debbie. The man had been reported missing by his employer, and George had been sent from Branchester, where he was on secondment from the Met, to ask all the right questions.

Later, he realised that the close bond between mother and son hugely predated the missing person’s case; born of necessity as well as affection. Roger Craven had not been a pleasant man, by most accounts. He hadn’t exactly beaten his wife; one, because she was not actually his wife; and two, because he hadn’t actually struck her. But he had certainly brow-beaten her, and their son. At least, that was the history according to Debbie’s mother; not the only person who hadn’t seemed sorry to see the back of him. George could still remember the first time he had ever lost his temper in front of Debbie; was still haunted by the cowed look on her face that it had elicited. He

had worked hard on counting to ten ever since. Probably just as well he'd never managed to track down Roger Craven.

According to Mrs Fiona Grey, for whose daughter, George suspected, no-one could ever be good enough, Roger was a thoroughly bad lot and always had been. The only saving grace that she could see, it had turned out, was that Deborah, as Fiona always insisted on calling her, was not shackled to that monster legally. When Debbie had moved in with Roger, already pregnant, Mrs Grey had found it mortifyingly embarrassing that they were not married. Now, she thanked her lucky stars.

So did George. That's how come she had been free to marry him. He had waited for a decent interval after the official investigation had been properly closed before courting her, of course. But he had known he was struck the moment he set eyes on her.

For six fairly intense weeks, he had dutifully tried to track the man down – all to no avail. There was simply no sign. As if he had vanished into thin air. Craven had been a sales rep for a boiler manufacturer, often away for several days at a time. Which was why it was his employer that had reported him missing when he failed to turn up. Enquiries had revealed that Debbie was not the only woman on whom he had bestowed his questionable favours. He had another family, the other side of Branchester. Was actually married to that poor woman, unbeknown to Debbie. He remembered vividly the evening that he had broken the news. She had sighed resignedly and nodded. “Explains a lot,” was all she said, before breaking down and crying. It had taken all his self-control not to put his arms around her to comfort her at that moment.

He'd confessed that to her, later, during their courtship. At the time, she hadn't known whether to feel sad or relieved, she had confided in reply.

His mother in law was clearly not impressed with his attempts to woo her daughter. No doubt she had hoped that, finally unencumbered with that brute of a partner, Deborah, who was still young and very pretty, could yet make a dazzling match and do far better for herself than a plodding policeman. Some women were like that, he supposed, living vicariously through their children.

He had tried very hard to win Darren's confidence, giving Fiona's up as something of a lost cause, but that too had been hard going. There were odd moments when he seemed to be getting somewhere. Getting him into Cubs, Scouts, and then Explorer Scouts, had been George's idea, and Darren had loved it. Debbie and George had watched him blossom.

“He’ll come round. It will take time,” Debbie always said. Maybe at my funeral he’ll crack a smile, thought George. He wondered if the boy resented the fact that he’d never found his father. Kids were odd like that. They could be devoted even to terrible parents; that much he’d seen all too often in his line of work.

Having little Jessica had been a high point. Despite George’s fear that Darren might feel pushed aside by a new baby, he had taken to the big brother role eagerly, and the little girl’s arrival had cemented them into a real family, albeit with Darren still seeming a tad wary of his stepfather. Even Fiona doted on the child and George clearly gained a few brownie points by association.

And now he was investigating another missing person’s case – just as baffling – and another contact with Darren. Young John Smith, a good friend of Darren’s from Explorer Scouts, had disappeared one morning, just as the group was setting off for camp. What was it about Bickering on Sea that made people disappear without trace? Craven had probably chosen to disappear and had simply covered his tracks well, or so George had reluctantly concluded; but there was no indication at all that young John Smith had any reason to do the same.

There was precious little to go on. He had simply left his house to meet his Scoutmaster – or whatever they were called – and had evaporated. Like he’d stepped into nothingness. No coat, no backpack had been found. No sightings. Literally, not a clue.

He sighed. They’d have to look back over all the door to door statements, go back and speak to anyone who was away or not at home when they called. It wasn’t feasible that nobody knew anything. You would think that one of the neighbours would know something.

His mobile rang, breaking his train of thought. The dulcet tones of Sergeant Bill Fuller apologised for calling so early. George told him not to worry, and invited him to spit it out. “We’ve found a body, Sir,” he announced. George’s heart sank. Poor kid. Poor parents. He dreaded going to see them, going to break the news that their only child was never coming home. He nodded to Darren, stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him. “And are we sure that it’s..?”

“It’s not the boy, Sir,” Fuller interrupted him.

“It’s not?”

“No Sir. PC Penn says definitely not. He’s there now. He’s says it’s much too old to be John Smith. Late thirties, maybe early forties, so he reckons. And we have a possible name. Neville Sharp. Known to us in a minor way. Hails from Squabbling on the Wold.”

“Where is he? And who found the body?”

“At the allotments, Sir. It was Miss Patience Todd who called us. She called from the phone box by the old railway station – doesn’t have a mobile, of course; doesn’t hold with them. Seems she went down to the allotments to water her dahlias before the sun gets too hot. At first, she thought an old roll of carpet had been dumped there so she went to investigate and, when she looked more closely, she saw it was a body. He was sprawled along the path next to Major Ridley’s prize roses.”

“That must have been a shock. She’s pretty elderly, isn’t she?” Everyone in Bickering knew about the Miss Todds. “Is she up to talking to us?”

“Made of tough stuff, the Miss Todds. Their father was a doctor. Miss Patience was his receptionist – used to dealing with tricky customers – and Miss Constance kept house after their mother died. PC Penn reckons she’s in her element. She went straight back to keep an eye on the body after she’d called us. Guarding the place, she said, until Jim got there – which wasn’t long, fortunately. I couldn’t persuade her to stay away.”

“Right, I’ll get straight down there,” said George, stepping back into the dining room.

“Righty ho. I’ve called DC Khan and she’s on her way now.” Fuller gave George precise directions, then rang off.

Darren looked at him expectantly, as Debbie made her way downstairs to scoop up their daughter. “It’s not John,” George told them both, observing each relax a little. “I’m sorry, Darren, I’m afraid there’s no news about John yet, but there’s been an incident at the allotments, so I’ll have to go.”

They both nodded. He kissed Debbie and Jess and patted Darren lightly on the shoulder before the lad could think of moving out of reach. Darren opened the door for him as his womenfolk waved him off.

Detective Constable Aleena Khan was already at the allotments, deep in conversation with PC Jim Penn. As officer first on the scene he had secured the entire western side of the allotments and turned back several disgruntled

allotment owners; including his own grandparents, who were keen vegetable growers and members of the allotments committee. Both officers looked up as George strode down the footpath formed from the disused railway line, and turned in at the smart blue gate to the west side allotments. The gate to the east side allotments was a dusky green and in need of a lick of paint.

“Sir,” they both greeted him.

“First impressions?” he asked.

Aleena, as the detective, spoke first. “Man, in his forties. Jim reckons it’s a local layabout, one Neville Sharp. Lives at Squabbling, but often drinks at the Anne of Cleves. Apparently, Miss Todd recognised him as soon as she got a look at his face.”

“So, in effect, she moved him,” George mused with a disapproving frown. The young Detective Constable nodded. “Where was he when she found him, then?”

“Oh, he was roughly there. She reckons she just turned him over to see if he was breathing.”

“Coroner not here yet?”

“On his way from Branchester,” supplied PC Penn.

“Pathologist?”

Penn nodded. “She should be here any minute.”

“Okay. Well let’s take care not to disturb anything, but let’s take a closer look.”

The three advanced on the former alleged ne’er do well, who was lying flat on his back between two long raised beds, in full view of the risen sun. His face still displayed a pinkish tinge. He was pale, but looked for all the world as if he were simply sleeping off the overindulgence of the night before.

“Well, I’m no pathologist, but he doesn’t look long dead to me. You couldn’t detect a pulse when you got here?” This was directed to PC Jim Penn, who shook his head.

“Nope, there was nothing doing. Miss Todd had also called Dr Renwick from the telephone box. She popped over and just had a very quick look, but she was certain, so I secured the scene and waited for you and DC Khan. She said she had to get to surgery, but she’ll make herself available to speak to you

later.”

Dr Sarah Renwick, George knew, was one of the town’s GPs, and lived a mere stone’s throw away in a town house on the Austen Estate – he forgot which road – possibly Fitzwilliam Gardens. She worked at the new medical centre where Debbie always went, and took the children. She was fairly new to the town, but had got stuck into community life and was already building a good reputation. “Did she offer any insights?”

Jim shook his head. “Just agreed that life was extinct.”

The pathologist, Dr Michelle Benson, arrived a few minutes later and got to work examining the body. HM Coroner, in the person of Mr Colin Possett, followed soon after.

George waited patiently until the pathologist had made her initial examination, then he and Possett conferred with Dr Benson. “He hasn’t been dead long,” she declared. “Perhaps two or three hours, that’s all. There are the first signs of rigour in the jaw, but I’d say Miss Todd was lucky not to arrive any earlier. She might have met the same fate.”

“Which was?” asked George.

“Death.”

“Most amusing,” said Possett, rolling his eyes. “And more specifically?”

“Looks like blunt force trauma. Back of the head. He may have caught the wooden edge of the raised bed as he fell. I can’t yet say for sure if it was accidental or not.”

“So why might Miss Todd have met the same fate?” enquired George.

“Well, she might have tripped over him in the poor light – the sun was barely up when she raised the alarm. However, my gut instinct is that this may be foul play.”

“Miss Todd says the deceased was laying on his front when she found him,” said George.

Michelle Benson frowned. “Interesting. I wondered if he might have been moved. And the wound isn’t as clear and pronounced as it should be from a backward fall impact on that wooden edging. There’s more bruising than I would expect. Depends when it was inflicted. I need a better look at him back at the lab.”

“Fair enough,” said George.

“Shall we say two this afternoon for the PM?” The two men nodded agreement.

The next hour or so were taken up with the removal of the body and further crime scene photography. Inspector Rough left PC Penn to supervise and ensure crime scene security, while he and DC Khan made their way to the home of the Todd sisters.

Just across the road from the Bickering on Sea Heritage Museum, Samphire Cottage was one of the town’s oldest buildings, and had once also served as old Dr Todd’s surgery. On their father’s death, it had passed to Miss Patience and Miss Constance, as they were known throughout the town. Set back from the rest of the street, Samphire Cottage was enclosed with waist high, smartly painted black iron railings, with a set of iron gates wide enough to accommodate a modest motor car. There was also a smaller, more central garden gate, which opened onto a paved path, leading to the front door. The cottage was meticulously well kept and quaint, with white washed walls and an ancient wisteria which bloomed every June. DC Aleena Khan often wondered, as she passed by, if she had seen it on a jigsaw puzzle box somewhere.

On either side of the garden path was a carefully cultivated rockery, which Debbie had once told him always seemed to be under construction. Apparently, in the old doctor’s time, it had been very small, but it now occupied a large proportion of the front garden, especially on the side nearest the small detached garage. The sisters, since their father’s death more than twenty years earlier, had set about creating an alpine landscape crammed with every species of rockery plant known to mankind.

At the allotments, they were known to favour show flowers such as dahlias, chrysanthemums and roses; but at home, there was most definitely a nod to their favourite musical, The Sound of Music.

Rumour had it that the ladies had once yearned to be allowed a summer in the Alps, but their stern father had forbidden it. Clearly, they had worked ever since on the mountain coming to Mohammed principle. The Matterhorn, in this case, perhaps. George smiled wryly to himself and rang the bell.

To his surprise, Miss Patience herself opened the door. “Good morning, Inspector,” she said with a steady voice. She was neatly dressed; her hair elegantly arranged, cherry red lipstick applied with precision, nose

carefully powdered and looking very composed for a woman who had recently discovered a dead body. “Do please come in,” she smiled winsomely. “I expect you will wish to ask me about this morning’s terrible event.” George felt a little as though he were being invited for an audience with the Queen.

He nodded, returned her good morning politely, introduced DC Aleena Khan, and stepped into the hall; possibly into a different time zone. It was not, as he had anticipated, Victorian in style, but distinctly 1950s. He took in the teak telephone seat with garish mustard-yellow vinyl seat cushion, and the spotless dark red circular rug with squashed black Venn diagram pattern. At the small side window, which afforded a view of approaching callers, hung bright Sputnik-patterned curtains. On the many pronged coat rack, which featured a variety of different coloured plastic spheres on the end of the unoccupied hooks, hung a number of matching hats and coats.

Below these was an equally retro umbrella stand, supporting one tightly wrapped black umbrella with a carved wooden handle. Meanwhile, on a shelf beside the front door, there were a selection of ladies’ gloves laid out in pairs; a dish containing car keys with a Windsor Castle key fob; a letter rack containing the day’s post; and two handbags; all lined up in quasi-military ranks. It was like something from a Miss Marple TV mystery. He half expected Joan Hickson to appear. Aleena met his look with a quizzical lifted eyebrow. Clearly, she was similarly impressed.

“Do please come through to the sitting room. Can I offer you some tea, or some coffee?” She pronounced ‘coffee’ as if it was something modern and a little daring. Her grey green eyes twinkled slightly. George suddenly felt quite fond of Miss Patience Todd, who he supposed must be pushing eighty and who had discovered a body in the cold light of dawn, just a few hours ago, and yet was now asking him solicitously if he would care for some tea. She seemed a little disappointed when they both politely refused her offer.

She pushed open a side door and there, resplendent on a ‘50s style red leatherette chaise-longue, was a near carbon copy of herself, although with rather darker hair and brown eyes. “My sister, Constance,” Miss Patience announced. She made formal introductions, then invited them to sit.

“Of course, I blame myself,” began Miss Constance. “Were I not indisposed with this wretched head cold, Patience would not have dreamt of going to the allotments alone at such an hour. Such a dreadful shock for you, dear. And anything could have happened. Such ruffians about these days.”

Patience patted her hand. “No harm done,” she assured her sister, “– to me at least,” she added hurriedly.

Aleena Khan interjected quickly, “Yes, Miss Todd, about the er., gentleman, that you discovered this morning...” Miss Constance snorted. “Not a description one would have used about Neville Sharp. Or any of that family. ‘Reprobate’ would be nearer the mark.” She hesitated. “Although, one shouldn’t speak ill of the dead. At least, that’s what Mother would have said.” The sisters exchanged somewhat shamefaced glances.

“You knew him,” suggested Aleena.

“Only too well,” agreed Miss Patience. “When he was younger, he and his crowd used to hang about on the sea front, drinking, and I’m afraid that they often threw their empty beer cans into our garden on their way home. We had to have quite stiff words with them on several occasions. We had hoped he would grow out of his rather loutish ways. Some of those boys improved with time, but it seems he never did.”

“We used to have a nice girl who came to help with the laundry,” chipped in Miss Constance, “Father didn’t approve of washing machines. Of course, we purchased one after he had died, but Jayne was so helpful before that. But she had to leave us. He, Neville Sharp that is, got her in the – the family way.” She uttered this last in a lowered, slightly scandalised tone.

George tried to look suitably sympathetic.

“I knew it was him straight away, as soon as I turned him over,” Miss Patience declared.

“Yes, why did you turn him?” asked Aleena.

“To see if he was still breathing. Father was a doctor, you know, so we have a little medical training.”

Aleena nodded. “I see, but you could tell he was dead?”

“No rise and fall to the chest, no discernible pulse, and I held my compact mirror up to his face to see if he was breathing. Nothing. He was deceased alright.”

Constance nodded, as if to affirm her sister’s expertise.

“And did you see anyone else at the allotments?” Aleena pursued.

“No. I did look around me, but nobody was about. So, I left him, and went

to the phone box to summon the Police, and your nice Sergeant Fuller answered. His mother was such a dear girl – we taught her in Sunday School, though the Sergeant himself never attended, even as a small child...”

“Yes, I see.” Aleena was trying hard to keep Miss Patience on topic, thought George. “And you also telephoned Doctor Renwick before returning to the body.”

“Yes.”

“That was quite a risky thing to do, Miss Todd,” George scolded gently. “Didn’t Sergeant Fuller ask you to stay in the phone box?”

“Well he did, but I thought it was my duty to stand guard until your officer arrived. Such a nice young man and he only took a few minutes.”

“Quite. And you still saw nobody about?”

“Not until the constable was there. He suggested that I come home and wait for you, which was kind of him. Then, just as I was leaving, Mr and Mrs Penn arrived, but I think he turned them away.”

Aleena picked up the thread again, “So between your arriving at,” she consulted her notebook, “6:35am was it?”

For the first time, Miss Patience looked a little hesitant. “I think it was thereabouts. I’m afraid I forgot to look at my watch. That’s just a rough estimate, based on how long it usually takes me to walk to the allotments from here, and I pottered about the allotments a bit before I spied – Mr Sharp. But I did stop briefly on the way to the allotments this morning to admire Miss Ellison’s Ceanothus – that’s Californian Lilac – absolutely glorious this year,” she explained.

“So between about 6:35,” Aleena repeated, “and 7:07 when PC Penn arrived, you saw nobody else?”

“Not a soul.”

They asked a few further questions, Aleena made careful notes, and Miss Patience agreed to visit the station that afternoon to give a full statement to Sergeant Fuller. Miss Patience rose to show them out.

“Next time anything like this happens, if there ever is a next time, Miss Patience,” pleaded George, “...and I sincerely hope that there won’t be a next time; I want you to promise me that you will not return to the scene of a crime,

but will get away from it to safety as quickly as you can.”

She frowned. “I have never been one to shirk my civic duty, Inspector,” she assured him. Curiously, it was George who was left feeling as if he’d been gently scolded.

The post mortem revealed little more than confirming Dr Benson’s initial impressions. “Time of death roughly between 5am and 6:30, and it was definitely blunt force trauma. He was struck repeatedly with something that left him bruised and probably stunned. Some sort of stick, or bunch of sticks, probably. Maybe even something like – well, a bit like a broomstick, perhaps.”

George raised his eyebrows. “We’re a good way off Hallowe’en.”

“Yes, I know. I’m just telling you what I found. Then we believe he was dealt a deciding blow with this,” she held up a photo of a short wooden plank, bearing the traces of faded lettering and well-seasoned by the sea air.

“What is it?”

“It used to be a sign for the allotments, used to hang on the gate, apparently, but it was replaced with a newer one about five years ago. They tell me that this has been kicking around the place ever since. No one had the heart to throw it out. Usually it’s propped up on the outside of one of the sheds, but it moves about when the local kids come in and steal strawberries. The salt in the sea air seems to have hardened it, so it would deliver quite a hefty whack, especially if he was already incapacitated. Your forensics people are looking at it now, but I’m pretty confident that it will match the fatal wound.”

“Fingerprints?” mused George, hopefully.

“Very unlikely. I saw it at the scene. It looked a very rough, uneven surface to me. They have to process it, of course, but I doubt you’ll get any prints off that.”

She was to be proved right.

George sighed for the umpteenth time. Real life detection wasn’t like the TV or books. House to house canvassing of the local residents yielded very little. The only person anyone had seen that morning was Miss Patience Todd, ambling along in her summer straw hat, basket in hand. And only three people had spied her, including the milkman. Nobody had looked at their watch, but they all agreed that her estimate of arriving at the allotments at about 6:35am would be about right.

“The old lady narrowly avoided being on the scene at the time of the murder,” declared Aleena. “She’s probably lucky to be alive.”

George sighed again. A murder with very few clues and a disappearance with nothing to go on whatsoever. It wasn’t going to be a good summer. He could just imagine being summoned to Branchester to explain himself to the Chief Super.

A week later his prophetic thought turned to reality. “There’s really nothing more than that?” exclaimed the Chief Super. “No rows with former girlfriends, or jealous husbands? No fist-fight with a drinking partner that night? No debts, or run-ins with drug dealers?”

George shifted his weight on the thick piled, but densely trodden, carpet. “I’m happy to report that there’s very little problem with drugs in Bickering, Sir.”

“Oh, you’re happy, are you?” bellowed the Chief Super. “Because I’m bloody not! And neither is the Chief Constable.”

“No, Sir.”

“No.”

George endured a few more minutes of scorn and disappointment before being dismissed. He beat a hasty retreat out to the car.

By the following weekend, Miss Constance’s cold had cleared up and the Todd sisters resumed their early morning trips to the allotments to water their dahlias.

George and Aleena had returned to the matter of the disappearance of John Smith, attempting to balance that with ongoing enquiries into Neville Sharp’s sudden and violent demise. Both cases were proving equally unrewarding. The canvassing of neighbours was repeated, asking about both cases, and took up most of the next Monday and Tuesday.

Miss Patience closed the door on nice DC Khan, who had called again to go over any small details which might have occurred to them. “I don’t think they have any clue, do they?” she asked her sister. Miss Constance shook her head, thoughtfully. “Now that I am fully recovered,” she said, “you must promise me not to go out alone for a while. There are some rough people about.”

“One fewer now,” retorted Miss Patience, taking her trusty parasol out of its hiding place in the hall cupboard and placing it back in the umbrella stand. The unpleasant mark had washed out of it completely, and it had dried without a stain, she noted with satisfaction.

“You know you have quite a temper when roused,” chided Miss Constance.

“I know. I did rather see red. But, dear, that scoundrel was urinating on Major Ridley’s roses!”

Miss Constance’s brow wrinkled. “And he’s no loss to anyone, I suppose. But you ran a huge risk. I wasn’t there to help you move him this time.”

“No, dear. But it does leave room in the rockery for others.”

“That’s very true. Now, shall we have coffee and shortbread?”

Miss Patience dimpled with pleasure. “Oh yes, do let’s.”
