

The Viner Dimension



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Graves***

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Where to start?

Weird politics.

Weird plant-things.

Weird battles where nobody dies.

But where do we start? Where *do* we start?

Lawyer's letter

Where to start? With the lawyer's letter, I guess.

At first glance it looked like yet another of those mail-scams - you know, the usual "Please contact us regarding matters to your benefit" garbage. But just before I threw it in the trash-bin, I recognised the name of the law-firm. Maybe worth a follow-up, then.

Yes, it was worth a follow-up. But odd.

Everything about it is odd.

Lawyer says Aunt Kat has died. Or the woman we knew as Aunt Kat, anyway. Not really a blood-relative, more an old family friend since forever who we'd called Aunt Kat because, well, that's what kids do.

To kids stuck at boarding-school, too far away to go back home at half-term, a place away from school with a friendly farmer's wife is a real-lifesaver. That was Aunt Kat, for us. She was always fun, full of weird tales about 'when the world was different'. Mother warned us not to believe a word she said, that her stories were mostly a mess of fibs and falsehoods, but what the heck, it was fun anyway.

Her husband, Uncle George, he wasn't much fun at all, he was often as surly as hell, perhaps because much of the time he would work on the farm only at night. Yeah, weird, I know, but everything's weird and new when you're kids, so we didn't think about it much. As long as we kept out of his way, it was all fine, and they let us loose to play around the place pretty much any way that we liked.

But that was, what, fifty years ago? We'd kept sort-of in touch in a loose way ever since - chatty letters and weird postcards from Aunt Kat to each of us from time to time, Christmas cards and so on, and a letter of condolence we sent to her when Uncle George had died a few years back. But we couldn't really say we *knew* them as such. Not now.

Yet they knew us, it seemed. Remembered us, anyway. Remembered us enough to include us in their will.

Better go find out what this is all about.

Bequest

Odd. We're pretty much the only beneficiaries listed in her will. A few thank-you gifts - mainly tools and stuff - to a few farm-lads who'd given her a hand in the last few years, since Uncle George died. But that's about it.

There's no money. They didn't even have a bank-account. Or pensions, or anything. That's odd, too.

And there's another twist. She's assigned to us the whole of the *contents*, because, she said in the will, she believed we'd be "the only ones who would understand". But there's no beneficiary for the property - the house, the barns, the land. Maybe they were leased or rented, but if so, no-one knows who they belong to. The lawyer says he'll look into it. But again, odd.

I'm the only one of our family that lives over this side of the country now, so it's up to me to sort it out. That's fine.

The lawyer gave me a phone-number for the farm-lads. I got through to them okay, all seems good, I'll probably meet them there somewhen soon.

The only problem is that they don't know how to get into the house. The last time they know it was open was when the ambulance came for Aunt Kat. But since then it's been locked up tight, and no-one seems to know where the keys are.

I hope I don't have to break in - especially as we don't really know who owns the place now.

Awkward.

A good-year house

I've grabbed some time to come visit the place.

Quick skip round the outside. No obvious sign of any break-in, so that's good. Helps that it's a long way from anywhere, I guess. And it's hard to spot if you didn't already know it was here, hidden in the dip behind that huge great oak-tree and the thick thorn hedge.

Always quiet round here - a *deep* quiet, you might call it. Nice. And a lot of weird-looking plants all round the house that I don't recognise at all - but then I'm not much of a gardener, so I probably wouldn't know them anyway.

A bit of an odd place, I suppose, though that's not unusual round here. The core is typical enough, a two-up-two-down with upper rooms gabled into the roof and no real attic. At a guess, it's three centuries old at least, maybe more. Looks it.

As for the rest, well, it's what farmers here call a 'good-year house' - every time you have a good year, you add on another room or annexe, like they've done with that weird conservatory out here, that's a lot newer than the rest. The whole thing is rambling off in all directions, a mish-mash of building-styles and building-materials and god knows what.

And oh joy, it's all external plumbing - the Great British Innovation that guarantees that everything locks up solid every winter. Clearing a frozen down-pipe when it's snowing outside is no fun for anyone. At least they've had the sense to wrap some of it in some kind of wooden cladding. That might make a difference.

But all of it will need a fair bit of TLC, I'd say. And I wouldn't mind betting there'll be a whole load of asbestos and worse hidden away in that lot. Whoever takes it on is going to have a whole heap of pain with that. Glad it's not us, now.

The barns. They're decrepit, but they always were.
It hasn't changed around here in fifty years. Memories...

It was a small mixed-farm, enough to live on and not much more. But a bit different than most round here. No livestock, no cattle, no sheep, no horses, just arable and orchard.

Never could understand how he ploughed his fields, though. No tractor, no horse, no heavy implements like a harrow or a plough. We never saw him do it. Half-term was always at the wrong season, maybe.

I remember there were those great big logs, lying out lengthways, out in the fields. They'd be somewhere out at the edge, still with some of their roots sticking sideways into the ground, but with leaves and spiky branches, like a giant insect.

And there were those large wooden rack-things, about the size of an old-fashioned wagon, four legs either side, sometimes parked beside a field-gate, sometimes back by the barn. No idea how he moved them around, though, because he had nothing that could do that.

Odd.

What?

What the heck is *this* doing here, round the far side of the house?

And what's happened to it?

It's someone's quad-bike. Not is. *Was*.

Was almost brand-new, by the look of it. It isn't now.

Stolen, I presume. Someone's idea of fun, wrecking it out here.

They've ripped the wheels off. Thrown them in all directions, left them tangled up in these - ow! - these vines, whatever they are. Dammit, they're sharp, I'd better get back to the path.

And the body of the quad, they must have laid into it with sledgehammers or something, it's just squashed flat.

Idiots. I do despair of the world sometimes, I really do...

Let's get inside.

Into the kitchen

It's a farmer's house, so the main door goes straight into the kitchen. The kitchen itself is kind of stuck on the side of the original main building, as they often are in these old places.

The lads were wrong, the door's not locked at all. That makes things a whole lot easier. Good.

Going through the door into the house, there's that smell. Not the smell you might expect. Sure, there's the smell of must and dust - no surprise about that, after a house out here has been left empty for a few weeks. But no damp, no mould. No rats.

Instead, it's more the scent of flowers. Delicate. Sweet. Welcoming. Everywhere.

More memories...

The smell of a farmhouse kitchen in full swing. A loaf fresh out of the oven. The dough for another, rising on the warm-plate above the stove. A vegetable stew bubbling away. Kitchen-table laid for lunch. And the scent of flowers all mixed in with it. When you're nine years old, a long way from home, there's nothing like that smell.

No electric light, I remember. Not that unusual back then, perhaps, in a place this far out from the main line. But it wasn't gas-lights, and it wasn't oil-lights either - again, I can remember the smell, and there wasn't that sickly stench of oil that I'd known from other

places like this. No. The light came from those bulb-like blobs, that looked like pot-plants. Except they couldn't have been, of course.

But there's some of those here still, on the windowsills in the kitchen. And they *do* look like pot-plants.

That old map of the farm, up on the back wall: yeah, that's one item I'd like to keep. Set it aside to take with me - I don't want to forget that.

There was no electricity here when we were kids. Again, not all that unusual this far out in the sticks, back in those days. But there's still none now; no gas, either. How does this place work? No idea: there's nothing modern here that I recognise as doing *this* or *that*. It must have made sense to them, I guess, but it sure as heck doesn't make sense to me.

Glad I brought that little camping-stove with me. Could do with a cuppa before I get going on this.

Water. Where do I get water?

Viner Codex

Water.

Oh, that's right. This hasn't changed, either. There's a water-pipe that looks like a tree-root, coming sideways along the kitchen wall. Ends in a simple spigot thing over the sink. No tap, you just wave the pot or whatever underneath it and it starts running. If you got it wrong, you got sprayed with water right in the face. Did that quite often when we were here. On purpose, sometimes. Aunt Kat never yelled about it, though, which was good of her.

I used to think that the pipe was just a weird bit of decoration, but I can see now that it actually *is* made of a tree-root. Or a vine-tendrill. Something like that, anyway. I knew they were frugal and all that, but doesn't that seem to be carrying thrift just a weird bit too far? And if it *is* a tree-root, how on earth did they bore it to get the water through?

Not that there's much flow from it now. More like a dribble. But it's enough for a kettle. Eventually. And there's no bad smell from the water, and nothing floating in it, so should be safe enough to drink once I've boiled it.

I could do with that tea.

There's nothing in the sink - still the same wooden sink as back then, I notice. But it's clean and dry. And dishes all put away. She must have done the last washing-up before she died. Or the guys tidied up after they found her. Was kind of them, if so. Need to find out who to thank for that.

Took a quick look in the pantry. Almost bare, apart from a couple of ancient tins and a box of breakfast-cereal. Looks like what she let us have for breakfast, as something known, back when we were kids.

Hey, yeah, it really *is* that old. It could well be the same darn box. The last made food-thing they'd bought? Fifty years ago?

Talk about living off the land...

The kitchen table's bare, other than for this old book.

Leather-bound. Green leather. Well-used, by the look of it. 'Viner Codex. Volume III. London, 1832. Commonwealth Institute of Vinery.' Whatever the heck that is. Or was.

Flick through it; open it at the bookmark. Page-headline is 'Knot-work for to grow a pumpe for a single household in deep loam'. Then this:

To Beginn by Fruite of the Vine, to the Third Degree.
Return ye to the Grand Arche, and thence to the Knot
of Greene.
Turn ye toward the Sunn by Two.
Raise Second over Third, Northe by Three.
Converse to the Third Starr, to raise Two and Two in
the Small Beast.
Greet the Flouwere of Greye.
Open ye the Throate of Bullocke at One by Two.
Set Throate to Throate for Throate.
Close by Close.
Greet ye the Red Draggon, in the Third Parte.
Walk past the Blacke Draggon of the Hartes Hornes.
Seven by Seventh.
There finde the great Springge.

One by Halfe by One.
Extende ye the Small Beast to greet the Springge.
Bind same to the Red Draggon.
Advise to the Heade of Hydra the Number so Desired.
Amende ye the Hue of Skin of Draggon to that of the
Quiet Jade.

More and more of this stuff, all in some flowery old script, except where someone's pencilled in a '3' inside a small circle, pointing to the word 'Number' in that line about 'Hydra'.

No doubt it all meant something to someone once, but to me right now it just looks like some kind of crazy magic spell. No idea at all.

Spinning-wheel

Into the first room off the kitchen - the first room in the downstairs of the main building.

Back when I remember it, this had been a dining-room or something like that, with a great big table in the middle, where we all spread round at mealtime. The old kitchen, maybe, before the newer kitchen here was added on? I suppose that somewhere long ago there must have been a stove or range in what's now the fireplace here on the left, though it had already gone by the time we were here.

Quite a bit of difference now, though. The table's not here any more, and there's a bed in the corner instead, over there beneath the front window. Looks like she must have moved in here full-time after Uncle George died. Getting old, I guess - couldn't manage the stairs any more. A small armchair now, a bedside-table, a footstool and other stuff, with a clothes-rack up against the back wall.

And the spinning-wheel. Oh yes, the spinning-wheel...

The spinning-wheel. That's one of the few things that I remember Uncle George saying to me: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman? Always remember that, boy. Don't you forget that, ever, that, when you're out in that world out there."

"When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?" Didn't mean a darn thing to me back then - I was nine, after all. Seen all too much of the sense of it since then, though.

And Uncle George and Aunt Kat, they lived it, too, didn't they? He delved, on the farm, and she spun her thread on that spinning-wheel. Adam and Eve, sort-of.

Except I never really knew who they were. Still don't.

Newspapers and title

Past the hallway, that opens out at the back end of these two downstairs rooms here in the original house. Worked as a kind of a wind-and-weather trap, I'd guess. Though I don't remember them ever using that doorway: they always used the kitchen door instead. Front door was for weddings and funerals, was the old country tradition round here - maybe they thought the same?

Into the other room here, in the old living-room - the parlour, as they called it.

And, ah, okay, the dining table has ended up in here. Along with piles upon piles of newspapers, opened out across the table, and in neat stacks spread out all over the floor. Spread out over several years, by the look of it, and spread out all over the country, too - but all local papers only, it seems. Maybe Aunt Kat was searching for someone, or something - too small and unimportant to catch anyone's notice at a national level? No idea what that was about.

Stairs are over on the far wall, but I don't have time to go up there just yet.

Other than that, a small sofa and a few chairs down here, and a couple of bookshelves, mostly old novels from the 1930s. Nothing newer than that, anyway.

Nothing of interest here, to be honest.

All of this? Just the ordinary detritus of a life well-lived, I'd say. Okay, a bit odd, some of it, maybe, but nothing special, really.

Though wait, yes, that one *is* a bit special - to me, at least. The old title-deed, still here, in the same old frame, up on the wall

in the hallway. Beautiful piece of work, though it's in one of the old cursive scripts that's really hard to read. She was always really proud of it, said it went 'all the way back to the beginning of the Commonwealth', so I'd guess it must be as old as the house itself.

That's another item I need to bring back with me from this trip - it won't be safe to leave it here.

For the rest, I'll pile all the newspapers into a sack - they'll go straight out for recycling when I get back home. The books can go to a charity-shop, I guess.

Aunt Kat was adamant about keeping waste to a minimum, so that'll respect her wishes there.

Two photographs

Two framed photographs on the windowsill beside the bed, back in the living-room.

One is of Uncle George, standing beside his motor-bike, somewhere in the Lake District, at a guess. He's much younger than I remember him, of course, a young man back then, but I do recognise that it *is* him. No doubt about it.

Yet it's *wrong*: it *has* to be. It just doesn't make sense...

I mean, *look* at it! Look at the motor-bike; look at the guy he's talking to, how he's dressed? Okay, if you don't know your history of motor-bikes, or you don't know fashions in men's clothing, fair enough, you might miss it. But if you *do* know either of those, you'd see straight away that that photo would have to have been taken just before the Great War.

That's over a hundred years ago. And he was a full-grown young man in the photo - around twenty, maybe. Which means he would have been something like a hundred and twenty years old when he died.

But that's not possible; that's just *not* possible. *Can't* be...

That other photo beside her bed, it's in a silver photo-frame. Nice piece of work: floral, smooth but slightly stylised, kind of early Art Nouveau, at a guess.

The picture's of a young woman, looking somewhat like Aunt Kat herself might have been in her younger days, but from an earlier era again - 1880s, perhaps, which would match up with the style

of the frame. Her mother, maybe? Grandmother? Either way, it's a typical portrait of the time, kind of half sideways-on, looking to the left, and shown from perhaps a bit above the waist. No big surprise there, as such.

But whoever this is, what she was wearing is like the jacket of a military uniform. Very much in a men's military style, yet cut for a woman - not as a fashion item, but seemingly as for proper military wear. A woman, in *soldier's uniform*? In the 1880s?

I'd better take a closer look...

As I pick up the picture-frame, the photo falls out. The picture's not just upper-body only - it's a full-body portrait that's been folded over to fit into the frame. And yes, it is indeed a woman in full military uniform - in exactly the same overall style as men's uniforms of that era. And not with skirt, but *trousers*. In Victorian England? For a woman? That should have been an absolute scandal back then. And yet the style and pose seem routine, ordinary, everyday, just like those I'd seen in so many soldier's portraits from that time.

There's an old magnifying-glass on one of the bookshelves on the far side of the room, so I use that to take a closer look at whatever it is that she's wearing. No question about it, it *is* a military uniform - the overall style is exactly right for that period, other than that necessary difference in cut to fit a woman's body. There's some arm-insignia - a braided knot at the wrist, and a rank-badge of some kind - though none of it makes sense for any rank from that time that I know. There's also a shoulder-lapel, a unit-identifier that looks a bit like an engineer's, but actually reads 'Viner'. What kind of unit was that? - I've never heard of it. Perhaps some kind of connection with that 'Viner Codex' book I found in the kitchen?

Not a clue.

Diggers

Stop for now. Chuck the newspapers and the 1930s books into the back of the car. Then pack up those main things that I've found - the spinning-wheel, those two photos, the Viner-Codex book, the map and the title - and get back home.

I've made a good start on this, but there's a long way more to go. And before I go much further, I need to find out what's going on with the house itself.

What the heck are those two diggers doing there, down in the far field? Looks like they're ripping out the hedges - got a right old bonfire going down there already. Do they have any right to be doing that? What's going on?

Yes, I *definitely* need to find out what's happening about the house and land. Right now.
