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STATEMENT

Baxter, Nicole - November 19th 2012

Taken III

Fear is a strange thing, isn't it? What you're afraid of. For most people, a corpse is at the least unnerving and, for some, outright terrifying. Or maybe it's disgust. They are two very different feelings, aren't they? Though they often bleed into each other, if you'll pardon the pun. I work as a funeral director, so as you can imagine, how I feel about death and the body is a bit more... complicated and more immediately relevant than it is for most people. Dealing with cadavers day in, day out forces you to confront all manner of things about yourself.

Tell me about it

Simply put, I have found that I do not believe in any sort of afterlife. I have seen people cold and lifeless upon the mortician's table who I knew, who I remembered as vibrant and lively. There was no soul that had departed, no special spark that passed on to something else. Simply a body that no longer moved or spoke or thought. It feels odd to consider the fact that you will no longer exist some day, but you didn't exist for billions of years before your birth, so, it doesn't seem unreasonable to conclude that you will not exist afterwards in much the same way. I try to see life as a pleasant holiday from non-existence. It provides some comfort when the truth of my own mortality stares me in the face every day.

Oh good. It's going to be one of THOSE statements

There is one thing about dead bodies that does bother me, though. One thing that... eats at me, as it were, and does give me that sick tightness of fear deep in my gut. It is rot. I don't know why it gets to me so; perhaps it's precisely because I don't think there is anything beyond the body, and even dead and unaware, seeing a person's form begin to putrefy and fester becoming just a home for the crawling, feasting things – is too much for me. Perhaps it's just an unaccountable phobia. Regardless of the reason, the fact is that to see the corpses decaying, to see their flesh corrupted, it is... the one part of this job that I find uncomfortable. So much so that I would describe reconstruction and preservation as my favourite part of the process. Making sure the cadaver looks as peaceful and lifelike as possible. Make them the person they were, or as close as they can be while cold and senseless. Fighting off the rot. The insects. The disease.

I don't know why I wrote disease just then. They're dead, so they can't be diseased in the normal sense, can they? I suppose it's just thinking about what happened at the Ivy Meadows Care Home links them in my head. But it's not just that, is it? That... the fear, the feeling. That tingling, squirming fear at the back of my mind – it feels the same when thinking of the germs that corrupt and twist our bodies, lurking invisibly on any table or surface, or when I saw those swarming flies. How many more moved and buzzed just out of sight? I've never had any mental health issues before, but perhaps after my experience I should consult someone. I read once that OCD can come on later in life, if a severe experience sets it off. I'm rambling. Disregard this first page, I'll start again.

I'd love to, but not an option

I work as a mortician at Baxter and Gordon Funeral Directors in Woodley. By rights it should now just be Baxter Funeral Directors, as William Gordon passed away himself about 5 years ago, leaving my uncle George running the place on his own. He kept the name though, as he always said it was one of the most respected in all of Manchester. God knows there was no sentimental reason to keep it. From the way he talked, he and William Gordon hated each other by the end, to the point where he will expressly stated that the body of William Gordon was to be handled and prepared by Fenchurch and Sons, one of my uncle's great rivals. Maybe that's why Uncle George is so keen to keep it in the family. He hired me and my cousin Josh to help, and now Baxter and Gordon Funeral Directors is entirely run by Baxters.

Manchester mortician drama. Fascinating.

I've been there for almost four years now and have taken over most of the client-side arrangements of the business. My uncle has gotten somewhat brusque in his old age and is now more suited to

organising things with churches and crematoria, rather than handling the recently bereaved. As such, I've gotten to know the various nursing and care homes around Woodley rather well. We generally get a few removals from any given one each year. Maybe as many as a half dozen if the winter is bad. It's certainly our most reliable source of business.

It does sound like that, yes

Of them all, Ivy Meadows was my favourite. For a funeral director to say she has a favourite nursing home probably sounds a bit like the Grim Reaper talking about his favourite hospital, but it's true. Ivy Meadows Care Home was on the outskirts of Woodley, where the suburbs gave way to pockets of green countryside. It wasn't remote, exactly, but it was removed enough from main road that it stood alone, surrounded by rather lovely gardens on three sides, and a long, open field behind it. It had been a country house once, I believe, but not much of the original structure remains, having been modified and expanded to provide accessible accommodation for about thirty residents. It was an odd building, with modern glass and concrete sections sprouting from old turreted brickwork, like blocky stone tumours.

The look of the place wasn't why I liked it, though. No, that was the residents. Ivy Meadows was almost entirely populated by those elderly who were entirely supported by the state. Most pensioners have some savings or property or family to support them, which means if they're unable to live alone they can at least afford to pay for their own care or some of it. It's rare for a person to reach that age and have literally nothing to pay for their care, but it does happen. In these cases, the state pays for them, but they have little choice in where they end up. Ivy Meadows was almost entirely populated by these. Old people without money or family, sent to be looked after by strangers. You'd have expected the atmosphere to be unpleasant, some morbid combination of prison and hospice, but it was quite the opposite. Something about the mutual loneliness seemed to lead them to create a real sense of community. It was the only place I ever went where the residents still gave me a smile. Hannah Ramirez, who ran the place, would always tell me a bit about the deceased and their time there, and I was inevitably shocked by tales of drugs, sexual escapades and other gossip that sounded more like a high school than a nursing home. I think Hannah enjoyed trying to get a reaction out of me when I was trying to be solemn. It was just a happy place, even if I was only there to do a sad duty.

I suppose they don't have much else to do

It all started to change about three months ago, after Hannah left. I don't know exactly when she left her post or why; we hadn't had a call from Ivy Meadows for a couple of months, so it must have happened during that period. I don't know where she moved to, either. It certainly wasn't any of the other care homes around Woodley, and it wasn't like I knew her personally. I'd gotten a call from one of the nurses, Alenka Kozel, who said that one of their residents had taken ill and passed away, a man by the name of Bertrand Miller. I asked her for a few more details; she started to say something else, but the call was cut off almost abruptly. I didn't really think too much about it, most of the details could be worked out when we arrived, so I called Josh and loaded up the car for a removal.

Naturally. Perfect weather for corpses.

It was a hot mid-August day, and the air was thick and humid, making everything feel sticky, like the whole world was running a fever. The sky was overcast, though, an orangey-grey that cast muted shadows and seemed to muffle the world. It was about a ten minute drive to Ivy Meadows, and neither of us said a word. I don't know why, at that point we had no idea that there was anything wrong, but looking back it seems like we both felt there was something off about it. Or maybe we were just too hot for conversation and hindsight is colouring my memories.

When we arrived the place was silent. There were no cars in the parking area, which was not unusual, but I couldn't see a soul anywhere on the grounds. Maybe they were simply staying out of the heat. Josh

and I got out of the car and approached the door. I pressed the buzzer, as I had done so many times before, expecting the cheery voice of one of the receptionists. Instead there was just dead air, followed by the clunk of the door being remotely unlocked. I looked at Josh, who shrugged, and we went inside.

Ivy Meadows Care Home was usually much as you would find any other – air conditioned, and smelling faintly of cleaning products and cheap potpourri. This time it was different. The smell now was just as faint, but seemed... rancid, while the air itself was close and damp. The beige walls seemed dirtier than before, with dark marks at roughly hand-height. There was a faint buzzing, like a fly, but I couldn't see any source for it.

Issue with the cleaners?

None of it was so bad as to make us turn back, however, and we headed towards the reception desk. There was nobody behind it, and I rang the bell. I always wore gloves when on a removal, and was glad of that fact now, as I noticed a greasy residue on top of the small brass bell. The door to the reception opened, and a tall man stepped out. He was rail thin and wore a faded brown suit that seemed to have been cut for a much fatter man. His eyes were a watery blue and his dark hair stood on top of his head in an unruly mess. He must have been around forty, but had a nervous sort of energy to him. He was quite a surprise, to say the least.

Too young for a resident, then

Josh recovered faster than I did and asked the man, a bit rudely, who he was, where we could find Hannah. The man shook his head at this and said that Ms. Ramirez had left the position, and he was now Director of Ivy Meadows. He introduced himself as John Amherst, and held a hand out for Josh to shake. My cousin stood there for some time, staring at the thick, sweaty hand of this strange man, clearly not wanting to shake it. Mr Amherst just stood there, arm outstretched, apparently unconcerned. A fly landed on his face, and if he noticed, he didn't give any sign of it, not even when it walked across his eye. Eventually, the now clearly shaken Josh stuttered out some semi-polite excuse and backed away.

I personally would not hire this man to run a nursing home

At this John Amherst lowered his hand and turned to me. He asked why we were here. This took me rather by surprise, as there's generally only one reason undertakers show up in such a place. We told him we had received a call and been told Mr. Miller had passed away. Amherst asked who had called us, but with such a sharpness in his voice that I lied and said the caller hadn't given their name. He paused, clearly considering what to say next very carefully. Finally, he nodded, and said that yes, Bertrand Miller was dead. And we could have him. Then he gestured for us to follow and began to walk back into the main building.

As we walked, he began listing the details for Mr. Miller's funeral, such as they were. No family or friends, no savings or insurance, simple cremation, as soon as possible. No service to be held at the crematorium. Ashes to be returned to Ivy Meadows in whatever the cheapest option was for an urn made of brass. At this I asked what he wanted the ashes for, and he simply waved his hand in a vague dismissal and said they'd be wanting to have a "private remembrance service".

Very private, I imagine

By now, we'd been walking for a few minutes, and I hadn't seen another soul in the corridors. I thought I spotted one of the nurses at one point, but they had turned and walked away as soon as they saw us. We arrived at a room bearing a small plaque. It read 'Bertrand Miller'. John Amherst opened it without hesitation and went inside.

The smell was what hit me first. I've smelled plenty of corpses in my time. I'd almost say I'm used to the smell. This was different, there was some deeper taint there than simply putrefying flesh, and it made me gag. By the look on his face, Josh smelled it as well. Then I got a good look at the body on the

bed, and almost turned and ran.

Based on the colour of those sections of skin still whole and unblemished, Mr. Miller couldn't have been dead for more than a few hours, half a day at most. You wouldn't have known, though. Large sections of his body were covered in a wet, creamy yellow rash, which... I'm not a doctor, so describing exactly what it did to the flesh it touched would serve no purpose except to start me having the nightmares again. Let us just say that it gave a plentiful home for the flies that swarmed around his body.

Not sure I believe him

We looked at John Amherst, utterly appalled. He said not to worry, that the disease that had claimed poor Mr. Miller wasn't contagious. Even produced the recently signed death certificate, though it was stained with some dark grey fluid, so I did not examine it too closely. He then apologised that the air conditioning had broken. "I'm sure you know all about what heat does to cadavers," he said.

I just wanted to get out of there, and have never been more grateful to whoever designed care home beds so that we could remove the body with as little contact as possible. Even then, on the way out I felt a sudden tickling pain on the back of my left hand, and looked down to see the thick leather glove in contact with one of the patches of yellow. I nearly screamed and dropped the body, but did neither. Ivy Meadows did not feel then like a safe place to do either of those things. In fact, I kept my composure through the whole of the drive home. *impressive, considering*

As soon as we arrived, I ran into the bathroom, throwing my gloves into the medical waste bin. I scrubbed the patch of skin that still felt like it was crawling. I could see nothing wrong with it, but I kept scrubbing until it was bloody, then poured disinfectant over it until it went numb.

When I finally left the bathroom, I found Josh arguing loudly with his father. Apparently Uncle George was not satisfied with the explanation given for the state of Mr. Miller's body. He turned to me, and asked what had happened. I told him the same thing Josh had, the same thing I've told you. We went over it slowly, point by point until finally he stood there silently, looking worried, but determined. He had us tell it to him one more time, before he nodded, told us to stay away from the corpse of Bertrand Miller, and left, telling us he had to make a few calls. I have never seen a cremation done with such a quick turnaround, and he was burned before the end of the day. I asked Uncle George about returning the ashes in a brass urn, but he shook his head, and said he'd already had them disposed of.

smart man

I knew my uncle wasn't one to share his thoughts when he didn't want to, and that seemed to be the end of it, save for those times throughout the day I would feel that tickling in my hand and run to scrub it away. I went on a couple of other jobs, and it seemed like we were expected to forget it. Josh didn't talk about what happened, and I got the impression he was trying to ignore what he had seen. He always was a practical soul.

I... couldn't let it go, though. It just kept playing in my mind. So when the phone rang two weeks later and I heard Alenka's voice on the other end, my heart skipped several beats. What she said did nothing to allay my fears. The line was bad, very bad, but I could have sworn she said, "Come quickly. We've taken ill. We've passed away." The words repeated, as though on a recorded loop, though they were no easier to make out than the first time. Finally, I put the phone down. I was technically off duty at that point, having just finished my shift, so I could have ignored it. I could have walked away. Instead, I put on my normal clothes, grabbed three pairs of gloves and got in my car.

SHOULD have ignored it

The drive there was dreadful. Still hot. I kept looking at turnings and junctions, and imagining where

unnatural accumulation of dirt or psychological effect?

I would go if I turned away from Ivy Meadows and just drove off. But I didn't. I kept taking those old familiar turnings, moving inevitably towards that sick, old building. When I arrived, it was quiet. The whole building looked filthy now, even from the outside, and the plants that bordered it had started to take on an unhealthy whitish colour. There was one other car in the parking area, a faded white Transit van I didn't recognise. I got out and started to walk towards the front door. The smell was noticeable even from out here, and by the time I got close enough to reach the buzzer, it had become so strong as to be unbearable. I tried to bring myself to press the button. But instead I turned and half-sprinted back to my car, desperate to breath clean air again.

I stood there, torn between wanting to flee and needing to know. Then in the silence, I heard it. Tap, tap, tap. Someone banging rhythmically on a window. I scanned all the ones I could see, but they were dark. Tap, tap, tap. It showed no sign of stopping. I began to make a wide circuit of the building. It was on the other side that I saw it. A large, ground floor window showed what I think would once have been the lounge. The walls were dark, stained and smeared to almost black, but the windows were clear. Stood the other side of the glass, weakly banging her fist against it, was Alenka Kozel. Her skin was mottled, covered with that leaking yellow rash. She saw me, and as her eyes locked with mine she opened her mouth, and the buzzing of the flies that spewed out was almost as loud as her scream.

'Taken ill' indeed

I turned and began to sprint back towards my car. I had to get away, to get out. Then, without warning, I felt something heavy hit me in the side and I lost my footing, falling to the ground. I looked up to see an old man pinning me to the ground, his long, white beard matted and filthy. I screamed and tried to escape, but his age seemed to have done nothing to diminish his strength, and he kept his grip easily.

Investigators, perhaps? Something familiar about them.

Then he spoke in a thick Mancunian accent and told me to keep my voice down. I noticed that his skin was unblemished pink, and behind him stood a young woman, tall and lean with close-cropped hair and a deep scar over her right eye. She carried a large canvas bag, and was shaking her head, telling the old man to leave me alone. After a few suspicious glances, he got up. I could swear I recognised him from somewhere, but when I asked the two of them who they were, they just shook their heads and told me to leave. I asked them what was going on, and the old man looked at his companion, as if asking permission, said something about knowledge being a good defence here. She shook her head and said that leaving quickly was a better one. I didn't need to be told a third time.

I got in my car, and I left them to their work. I didn't turn around even when I saw the smoke start to rise behind me. And that was the last time I went there. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go wash my hands.

The Ivy Meadows care home in Woodley was officially decommissioned in July 2011, a month before the first of these alleged calls came in. It burned down on the 4th of September that same year after a leaking gas main caught fire. If the gas was already leaking, this might have resulted in hallucinations or other problems during their initial visit. There is no record of the body of Bertrand Miller being processed, or cremated, by Baxter and Gordon Funeral Directors, but based on this statement that's not necessarily a point of incredulity. Bertrand Miller was a resident at Ivy Meadows, but according to his death certificate he passed away on 19th July, a week before the home was decommissioned. There's no record of any funeral arrangements or disposal of the body.

In fact, it seems the records from the closure of Ivy Meadows are... well, according to Sasha, calling them 'patchy' would be very generous. There are only transfer records for seven residents, whereas at last official count the home held twenty-nine. The others seem to have been lost in the system somewhere. The majority of the workforce also appears to be undocumented, and I can find no record of any 'Alenka Kozel' on the system. Martin's research would seem to indicate the place employed a reasonable number of international staff they preferred to keep off the books, but it doesn't explain why none of the officially-listed staff can be located for followup, except for Hannah Ramirez, whose brief interview simply established she moved to Brighton shortly before the closure of Ivy Meadows and hadn't heard anything about it since. John Amherst, as best we can tell, doesn't exist. We're unable to locate anyone fitting that description anywhere within the care or medical sector, and he certainly never ran any nursing homes.

Another tale full of dead ends. We did contact the Baxters. Joshua Baxter repeated the first part of the above statement. George Baxter told us not to listen to tall tales. Nicole Baxter said she stands by her account, but aside from losing her left hand in what she calls 'a workplace accident', there have been no further developments.

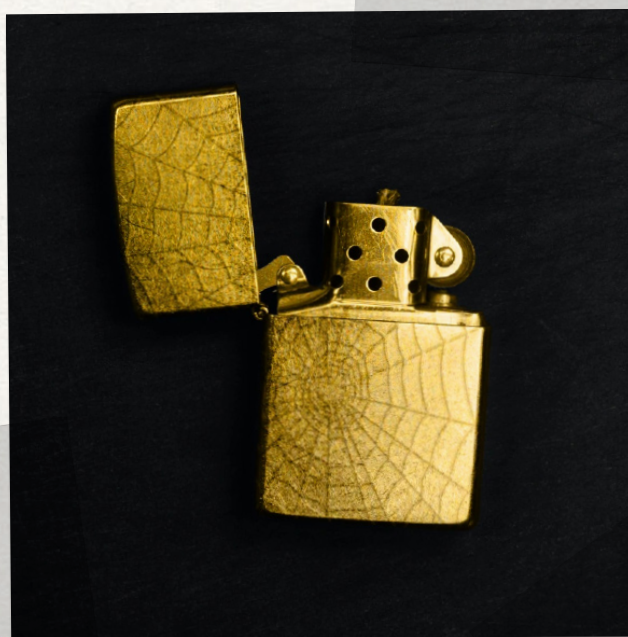
Still, there's a lot here that puts me in mind of other statements. Something in the way Ms. Baxter talks about fear. I can't help but be reminded of statement 0142302, how Jane

Prentiss talks about her own fears. And the old man and his companion... who does that remind me of? If he wasn't dead I'd think it might have been Trevor...



Ivy Meadows Care Home (decommissioned)
(Estate Agent's photograph, August 2011)

Photograph of
Spider-web Lighter



Notes

As I was finishing the statement, Tim came in with questions from Elias concerning the delivery of a couple of items that Martin received on my behalf last week.

I'd forgotten about them completely, but when Tim reminded me, I remembered that Martin had put one of them in my desk drawer. When I opened the package, it turned out to be an old Zippo lighter. Tim asked if I smoked, and I told him that I don't, nor do I allow ignition sources in my archive. The lighter has a sort of spider-web design on the front, which means nothing to either Tim or me. I gave it to him to show to the others to see what they think of it.

I asked him about the other item, which he said was a table of some sort that had been sent straight to Artefact Storage. He said it looks old, but quite pretty, with a fascinating design on it.

I wondered if it could have been the table from statement 0070107, so I asked him whether it had a hole in it, about six inches square.

He said he didn't really notice - it was quite hypnotic, which confirmed my suspicions.

I asked him who made the delivery, and if they signed in, but he didn't know.

I need to talk to Martin.