

## Spring Picture

A raw spring wind made his eyes smart as he squinted at the photographer, gritted his teeth and smiled. There they were, all lined up with their litter-pickers and their black bin sacks, ready to Go Forth and Do Good. It was enough to make you puke, thought Alan.

Although the annual village clean-up was publicised to make you feel like a complete hypocrite if you didn't join in, Alan had managed to avoid it until now. Yes, he wanted to live in a clean environment. Yes, he wanted to protect the local wildlife. No, he did not want to spend a whole day picking up the litter that thoughtless people who would be home drinking beer and watching the match had dropped.

If only his wife hadn't heard him laughing at last year's report in the local paper. He remembered the rosy-cheeked organisers standing in front of a wall of bulging black bags. They announced that they exceeded last year's total by five sacks. "And next year we hope to do even better!" They dimpled at the camera, unaware of the irony that had Alan choking on his breakfast coffee.

Of course, Alan, being a retired policeman, had a different perspective on the issue. He would like to collect the litter, have it forensically examined, trace the perpetrators and reintroduce their discarded lager cans to them in a way that they would never forget. Then maybe they would think twice before dropping anything again. Problem sorted. These fluffy-bunny ladies with their happy smiles, padded coats and tracksuit bottoms grated on his nerves. How would litterlouts ever learn better ways when there were people like this, all shiny-faced and eager to clean up after them?

They made him feel like shoving van-loads of litter into every hedgerow just to watch them fish it all out again and boast about how many sacks they had filled. He grinned surreptitiously at that thought, which he would never share with anyone. Inside every policeman was a carefully restrained criminal.

So, here he was, rubber gloves on, bin bag ready, being punished for making fun of the whole event. His wife could be a force of nature sometimes.

The organiser allocated streets, thanked them for wearing hi-vis vests and reminded them of the collection points for full sacks. The wind whipped at the incongruously childish pink bow in her hair.

Alan was allocated Tanner's Walk: a narrow passage that ran between a hedgerow, and the back garden fences of Tanner's Way. You sidled through it, avoiding the brambles until it opened out into a country path rising gently to a stile at the edge of a field. His cut-off point was the stile.

It was a popular path in the summer, but in the raw spring, it was heavy going. The ground was slippery with mud. Alan grunted in disgust, watching his step carefully. Had every dog walker in the village allowed their animal to use the track as a toilet without cleaning up? What baffled him were the dog owners who picked up after their animals, then discarded the used bag. Where was the logic in that?

Methodically, he probed the vegetation with his litter picker, and his bag began to fill up. Sweet wrappers, cigarette packets, cans, trainers, and a child's plastic necklace. Alan's detective senses began to stir. He knew it was probably nothing, but still began to look more deeply. The hairs on the back of his neck were rising, and he was searching like a policeman now, quartering the ground for clues. Clues to what? He shook his head, impatient with himself, but the feeling would not go away.

He searched his feelings and his memory as he forced himself to relax into the slow, repetitive task. There was a case, a year ago that he never solved.

It all started with a box left at the police station, containing the kind of tat you might find in a junk shop. There was a plastic brooch, a single earring, a braided bracelet and a small notebook with daisies on the cover. What else? Ah yes. A packet of mini crayons, a fancy hairclip with a butterfly on it, and a tiny pink doll.

Seven small, insignificant items, and each one was a human life. This is how it would happen. They would get a tip-off: a phone call from a burner, or a note through the post telling them where to find the body. Sure enough, in some remote woodland would be the murdered woman, and on her body would be a duplicate of one of the items in the box. The killer taunted them. You have all the clues, he said. I gave you all the clues before we even started this game. Game! Alan tamped down the remembered fury. So, asked this psychopath, just how good are you? Can you catch me or not?

The victims were carefully chosen. The notebook was found on the body of a reporter. The earring adorned a jeweller. The crayons were in the pocket of an artist specialising in children's portraits. She was well-connected, having painted the children of several MPs. In a blaze of publicity, the investigation stalled, and the murders appeared to stop. The bracelet, the butterfly hairclip, the brooch and the tiny doll. Alan prayed that these represented murders not committed, but who knew?

He deliberately calmed his mind, stood still and looked around him. He recognised this sensation. Something had triggered a memory. Something subliminal was calling to him. He had to be quiet now and let it declare itself. The lane was peaceful. He was sheltered from the wind. The weak spring sunshine was almost warm. He listened to the sparrows flitting in and out of the hawthorn. Rooks cawed and squabbled in the nearby copse. Underlying everything was the distant dull roar of motorway traffic.

It was too early for many flowers, especially in this trodden down place, but there was a flush of early celandines and anemones. Here and there were the dark heads of bluebells just emerging. White, yellow and blue were the colours of early spring. He remembered that from years back – a nature study class at school. You didn't get pink and purple until early summer, and red, barely at all. Red was a winter colour. Red berries on the holly and the hawthorn, and on that old tin lying on its side under the brambles over there.

Red for Christmas wishes, like that gift left at his police station. The gift-wrapped tin had a sprig of holly and a robin on it. It had contained toffees, until a psychopathic serial killer used it to keep the bizarre little trophies that advertised his crimes. They realised that there had to be two tins: one kept in the evidence locker, and one kept by the killer himself. Just like that old tin. Lying on its side. Under the brambles. Over there.

Alan's chest constricted. Barely able to breathe, he reached into the thicket with his litter-picker and gently extracted it.

It was rusted at the edges, but eventually he got it open. A piece of paper covered the contents. Alan knew what they would be as soon as he read what was written there. Seven women's names. Three were neatly ticked off. As for the rest?

Using his bin bag and litter picker to mark the site, Alan got out his phone, rang his former colleagues and strode back to the village centre with the tin in his gloved hand.

A woman barred his way. He noted irritably that she was the chief fluffy-bunny organiser. The bow in her hair drooped, but she was still smiling.

“Have you had enough already dear? Where’s your bag? Oh!”

She reached out for the tin. “Where did you find that? Oh my!”

“Is it yours?” Alan took a step back and did not offer her the tin. She frowned at him, puzzled by his hostility.

“It belongs to my son. He’ll be so pleased to get it back. We were burgled, you know, nearly a year ago. They never caught them, and I lost all my jewellery. The police found some of our possessions just tossed away as though they were worth nothing. I suppose they weren’t but that was almost worse than losing the valuable things. That picture of my parents, just stamped into the mud. Well, Bobby was so horribly angry when he realised his tin was missing. I suppose the thieves must have thrown it away too when they realised it was worthless. Please give it back to me. I must tell him it’s been found.”

“Just a moment. I have a quick phone call to make, and then we’ll both go and see your Bobby.”

They walked up the hill towards her cottage in silence. Out of the corner of his eye, Alan sensed the lightning flicker of blue lights on the distant motorway.

They were coming.