

I Know Where the Bodies are Buried

by Oliver Clarke, 1973-

Published: 2012



"I know where the bodies are buried," is what he said to me as soon as he was sitting down. That was the line that hooked me. It would hook any journalist. A dozen questions instantly formed themselves in my head, all of them jostling with each other to be the first one out of my mouth. "Which bodies?", "Where?", "How did he know?" I didn't ask any of them though; I just sat there in silence and waited to see what he said next. You sometimes get a lot more that way, letting people fill the silence. Talking until they trip over themselves and tell you something they didn't mean to. It was a struggle, with all the questions I had queuing up, but I stuck with it. Looking back the one that didn't make it into that disorderly line in my head was the most critical one of all. Why was he telling me this? Or rather why was he telling ME this? There were plenty of other journos he could have gone to. Ones actually attached to papers rather than failing freelancers like me. Ones who would definitely be able to get his story into print, which was presumably what he wanted.

I know where all the bodies are buried. It's a phrase that gets used a lot in my line of work. It means, well you know what it means, it's not literal. At least it shouldn't be. This guy though, something about him made me sure he was talking about corpses in the ground rather than dubious tax records or compromising photographs. He was a bit older than me. Somewhere in his 40s, although his ruddy, weather beaten face made it hard to pinpoint exactly where. His hair and fingers and teeth were stained yellow from years of smoking and his nose and cheeks had the red pinpricks and threads of an alcoholic. Not that I was in a position to judge, in the last year or so I'd taken to not looking at myself for too long in the mirror in case I saw the same evidence on my own face.

The weird thing was examining his face then I couldn't help feeling I'd met him before. I couldn't place him, had no clear memory of him, but there was something there. That feeling, a little like *deja vu*, nagged away at me as I watched him speak. It was another question to add to the list I already had.

He'd called me out of the blue. When I picked up the phone he'd launched straight into a spiel that sounded like he'd been reading it from a card. Meeting him now I wondered if that hadn't actually been the case. He was so jittery that it seemed he'd be incapable of stringing a coherent sentence together. I had no idea how he'd got my number. Enough people knew it though and this was exactly the kind of the thing that was supposed to happen. The anonymous tip off. Only in this case the tipster had insisted on meeting face to face.

What he'd said on the phone was that he needed to meet me, that he had something to tell me that I needed to know. There had been an urgency in his voice that made me ask him if he wanted to meet right away. Not now, not after dark, was what he'd said back to me. We'd made arrangements to meet in a local cafe the next day. I'd suggested the location, wanting to make sure it was somewhere I wouldn't bump into any other journos. Something told me this might be big.

"Can you give me any idea of what the story is?" I had said.

"Story?" He'd laughed at that and then hung up.

So here I was the following morning, late morning because I'd wanted to be alert for this and I rarely get to sleep much before 2am. His hands were shaking as he lifted up the cup of coffee I'd bought him. Not enough that you'd notice it normally but enough that you could see the coffee sloshing dangerously close to the lip of the cup.

I sat there quietly sipping my own coffee and waiting to see if he'd carry on. He stared back at me over his shaking cup. His eyes red from lack of sleep or crying, I wasn't sure which.

"Tell me what you know," I said. "What bodies?"

"All the bodies. All the people who he took to be close to him."

"Who?" I said.

He laughed again and shook his head. "I can't tell you his name." He looked around the cafe and then leaned into me. "I can't even say his name." He stressed the word *say*. His face cracked like he might start laughing again so I pressed on. Wanting to keep him focused and most importantly quiet. He'd got us enough suspicious stares as it was. This was a pretty upmarket place and the other customers didn't want their £4 cappuccinos ruined by a random lunatic.

"Where are they?" I said. "The bodies."

"Out of the city." He paused and then his eyes lit up. "I can show you. Yes. I'll show you."

I was starting to think that this was all a waste of time. That the guy was simply deranged and then he said something that hooked me again.

"Joan Mabey is there."

"How do you know about her?"

"Because..." he started and then shook his head and stopped. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"When I show you the graves." Then he got up and walked out. I wanted to run after him, grab him and shake him until he answered my questions. All my questions. That'd really piss off the politely chattering coffee house crowd. Instead I found I couldn't move, hearing that name again after all these years had brought back too much. Too much pain and shit that I'd thought I'd buried.

So I sat there and finished my own coffee then went straight from the cafe to a pub and spent lunchtime and the afternoon there, slowly but steadily drinking myself into a pleasant oblivion that blotted out the memory of all the things I'd lost.

I kept expecting my mobile to ring and the jittery voice at the other end to tell me what was going to happen next. It didn't though, it just sat silently on the table in front of me as I sunk pint after pint. He hadn't left me a number of course, hadn't even told me his name, so all I could do was wait.

Joan Mabey was the person who had ruined my career, even if she hadn't meant to. Five years ago she had disappeared from her home in South London. One day she had been there, living her life quite happily and the next she was nowhere to be found. Missing people weren't necessarily news, not when they were adults who weren't celebrities anyway. But there were things about Joan and her disappearance though that made me think it was worth my time. She was happy, successful, recently married. She worked at a hospital, a newly qualified junior doctor and that gave the story an edge. Maybe she'd flipped from the long hours and stress. Maybe one of her colleagues had and had bumped her off. I'd spent two weeks of my life on the damn story, interviewing friends and relatives and people who worked at the same hospital as she did. No matter who I spoke to though I found nothing, no leads, no suggestions of foul play, no reason she might have run away not a damn thing.

And then one day my editor had called me and told me to come into the office. When I got there he fired me. He didn't need to tell me why, I knew. I'd spent two weeks on a story and had nothing to show for it. That wasn't how he ran his paper.

At first I wasn't too concerned. My reputation was well known in the business and I was sure I'd find something else. I didn't though. What I found was that no-one else wanted me to work for them either. I was suddenly a pariah. I started working freelance, getting jobs here and there, jobs that only paid when I actually wrote something. They didn't pay well and within six months my fiancée had walked out the door.

And now five years later I'd heard her name again. Joan Mabey. The one that got away. The story that had snared me and which I'd never found the truth behind.

I left the pub as night started to fall, much to the relief of the barman who'd started to give me worried looks. I caught a cab home and fell into bed fully clothed. My phone was next to me on the pillow and it woke me early the next morning but not before I'd dreamt. The dream was vivid, a stark contrast from the drunken dreamless oblivion I was used to. I was alone in it, at first at least, walking through the countryside. The sky was getting dark, faster than was natural, changing from daylight to night within the space of a minute. The area around me grew quiet and still, the birds fell silent, the breeze dropped to nothing. I looked down at my hand and saw a torch in it, the light streaming from it was pointing to the nearest small cluster of trees. I felt myself following the beam, unable to stop myself walking towards the trees. It was when I walked into the copse that I heard the sound of breathing behind me. I spun around and saw a figure, a slightly darker shape against the unnatural night. I swung the torch beam around at it but the bulb flickered and dimmed to almost nothing before it reached the man. I don't know how but I knew it was a man, a man I knew. I stepped back, my heel hit a tree root and I felt myself go backwards. My arms span as I tried to keep myself upright and then I was on the ground. The hard earth knocked the wind out of me and a shard of pain shot through my head as it hit another root. I lay there, looking to the side, unable to move, unable to do anything. The torch was beside me, working again now. The beam lighting the ground in front of me. I saw the legs of the man as he walked towards me. I felt like if I had another minute I'd remember who the man was. Even thirty seconds would be enough for me to place him. Then I saw the shovel in his hand, hanging at his side. The blade was dirty with mud and I realised that behind him the ground fell away. He had dug a grave with that spade. My grave. He swung it, that filthy blade rising up until it was above his head. I could see the light of the torch glint off it; see his two hands gripping the wooden shaft of the spade. His face was hidden in the darkness though. The shape of it just visible but none of the detail. I heard a swish as he swung the spade down at me, stepping forward as he did it. I caught a glint of torchlight shining off one of his eyes as he did it and I realised it was wet with tears. When I saw that eye I knew who he was and the knowledge filled me with terror. And then three things happened. I felt the blade hit my throat, the edge of it striking and crushing my Adam's apple. My phone rang, the shrill ringtone cutting through the dream just as the shovel blade started cutting through my flesh. I woke up choking and coughing, my hands going to my neck, expecting to feel the hot pulse of blood and the wetness of torn flesh. They didn't of course, felt instead just the rough stubble and my familiar soft jowls. Relief flooded through me as I realised two things. It had just been a dream. I couldn't remember who the man was. I knew that I had known but where that thought had been was now nothing. A blank space. An emptiness.

I picked up the phone, still coughing, and pressed the button to answer it. I was unable to speak but raised it to my ear and coughed into it.

"Meet me in ten minutes," it was the man from yesterday. The jittery man. Who else would it be?

I managed to stop coughing and found my voice. "Okay. Where?"

"I'll be outside." He hung up.

Five minutes later I was pulling open my front door. I hadn't washed or shaved. Just pissed, splashed cold water on my face and mixed a dessert spoonful of coffee granules with water from the hot tap. I stared at myself in the hallway mirror as I drank the foul brew. The nightmare was starting to fade from my memory and I was thankful for that because I suspected that if it hadn't been I might have decided not to go wherever it was he was taking me.

I had to go though didn't I? Because if I didn't I'd never know.

What I saw when opened the door wasn't what I'd expected. I thought he'd just be standing there but instead he was sitting. Sitting in a Range Rover. It wasn't new, was probably 12 or 13 years old but it was still several thousand pounds worth of car. I hadn't expected him to be driving at all, let alone something like this.

He saw my surprise and spoke up. "Can't bring myself to get rid of it," he said. "It's all I have left of my life. My life before."

I climbed into the passenger seat. "Before what?"

"Before I met him."

I was getting angry. My tiredness and hangover weren't helping but I suspected his deliberate obtuseness would have wound me up however I felt. My job, my vocation, was finding out the truth about things and all he ever did was skirt around the edges of things. He never gave you it all.

"Who?" My voice was ripe with anger but if he noticed it didn't faze him.

"I've told you," he said, starting to laugh, "I can't say his name. Sometimes it hurts just to think it." That second thought stopped his laughing. We sat there in silence as he turned the ignition and started driving.

He might have been unable to let the car go but it didn't seem like he could afford to maintain it. The engine spluttered, sounding as unhealthy and erratic as its owner. He either didn't notice or didn't care as he didn't react at all to the coughs and lurches. As we drove on and it didn't get any better I started to worry that wherever we were going we might not make it back.

15 minutes later despite the noises and my concerns the Range Rover was still going strong. Neither of us had spoken since we'd set off. My hangover was getting worse rather than better. The sway of the country lanes we were now driving down was shaking my brain in my skull, banging the aching flesh against my skull. Worse still that rancid coffee was sloshing around in my stomach. Every bend we went round made me think it might force its way back up my throat along with the remnants of last night's beer. I rolled my window down and sucked in some fresh air. It helped. A little.

I turned to him and spoke. "Where are you taking me?"

He looked at me and grunted. "Open the glove compartment."

I did. Inside was the normal crap, tissues, half a roll of Polos, an AA Handbook and one thing that stood out. A photo album. His eyes flicked away from the road to watch me.

"Look at it," he said.

I pulled the album out. It was the cheap sort you'd buy in Boots or somewhere similar. The cover was red plastic, textured to look like leather, with a gold border that was flaking off in places. Across the middle in a flowery script was the legend *Happy Memories*.

I flipped it open. Inside were photographs of people, you wouldn't call them portraits because that suggests a degree of professionalism and these were just snaps. There were four of them on the first page, neatly arranged. Each photo was of a different person. The only thing they had in common was that the backdrop in each picture was green. Rolling fields in some of the pics, trees in one. Always green though. Always the countryside.

I looked at him and saw that he'd taken his eyes off the road to watch me. He wanted to see my reaction but all I had at the moment was confusion. Why was he showing me this? I looked back at the album and examined the pictures more closely. They had something else in common; I just hadn't noticed it the first time because you expect it in this kind of snap. Each of the four people looked blissfully happy. It hit me then and I felt sick.

"Is this them?" I said. "Are these the dead people?"

"Why don't you turn the page and see," he said and while I couldn't now take my eyes off the page I could hear the smile in his voice. He was enjoying this. It seemed to me that he had steadily grown in confidence throughout the short time that I'd know him. Grown surer of himself. Surer of the course of action he was taking. That thought made me question for the first time why he was doing this. What he was getting out of it other than making me feel increasingly uncomfortable.

I turned the page.

There were four photos on the second page too. Four photos of the same four people who had looked so happy just a page turn before. Now they were all dead.

In each of the photos the corpse looked strangely at peace. As if the final moments had been welcomed rather than a source of fear or pain or distress. The same look of joy was painted on the dead faces as had been on the living ones. Again the setting of each picture was rural. The bodies all seemed to be laid amid a cluster of trees. In a couple of the photos I could see bluebells in the background. The place looked familiar, but then it could have been any one of a thousand or more such copses dotted across the English landscape.

"Is this where you're taking me?" I said at last, knowing the answer.

"Yes."

"Do you know who killed them?"

"Yes." I'd known the answer to that one too.

"Was it you?"

I was sure he was going to answer straight away. That I'd get another instant yes from him. He stayed silent for a moment though. Eyes pointing forward but not on the road. "It's more complicated than that," he said at last. He turned to look at me then. "But yes, it was my hands."

My hangover had been abating but now it came back. My head pounded at the confirmation of my fears and I felt like I might puke at any moment.

"Stop the car," I said. I could feel a wave of nausea building. The contents of my stomach were bubbling up inside me, desperate to escape. I lowered the window and leaned out, getting my head clear of the car just in time. The coffee and last night's beer spewed out of my mouth in a foul brown torrent.

I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. "Would have been easier if you'd stopped."

He spoke slowly and clearly then, without the jitter in his voice that had characterised his speech when I met him in the cafe.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Quite the opposite. But for this to work you have to see. You have to understand."

I sat back in my chair. Would I have bolted if he had stopped the car? Almost certainly. Would I now? I didn't know. There was something about all of this that kept pulling me forward with him. Something inside me that needed to know what it was he wanted to tell me, no matter how horrible it was.

"Okay," I said, "so explain."

"It'll be easier if you just keep turning the pages," he said.

I looked back down at the album. The second of the two pages facing me, the one that didn't have corpses on it, was similar to the very first page of the album. On it were photos of four blissfully happy looking people with the same rural backdrop. Looking at this second set of smiles I realised they reminded me of people in some kind of religious ecstasy. They all looked like people who thought they'd seen the face of God.

I didn't want to turn the page because I thought I knew what I was going to see those faces transformed into but I did. The next double page was the same as the previous one had been: death on one side, smiles on the other.

I turned the pages, seeing the same thing again and again. And then on the third page turn I stopped because suddenly it was starting to make sense. Some sense anyway. Smiling back at me from the book open on my lap was Joan Mabey.

I felt sick again and sucked in a deep breath of the air that was streaming in through the open window. My head was suddenly full of things I'd been trying to forget for years. The frustration and the anger that had accompanied the disintegration of my career.

I looked at the driver again and realised that at last I knew who he was. That I'd met him before.

"I interviewed you didn't I?" I said. "Back then."

"Yes you did," he said.

"You worked at the hospital. What were you? A surgeon?"

"Yes. It was the end of my career too, you know. Not just yours. There's no smoke without fire, as they say." He didn't sound angry when he said it. Just like for me the pain of it had faded over the years.

"Why did you do it? Why do you do it?" I realised that he was almost certainly still killing. That I was probably his next victim.

He stopped the car. My eyes had been fixed on either him or the book for minutes but now I looked out of the car. We were pulled off a quiet country road into a small lay-by with a footpath leading away from it to a copse of trees about fifty yards from the road. Before I could say anything he climbed out of the car and

went to the boot, opening it and pulling out a shovel. Then he turned and started walking up the path.

I pulled my door open and followed him, running to catch him up.

“Why did you kill them?” I said again when I reached him.

“I didn’t,” he said, still walking. “I helped them to die. He spoke through me and they were happy to die for him. That isn’t what you should be asking though. You should be asking why I’ve brought you here.”

“Why?” I said.

“Because I need you. He needs you.”

My heart was pounding now. Pumping my blood fast through me and filling me with a sick fear that was making my head spin. He started walking towards the trees and I felt myself follow him.

“I had to photograph them before they died,” he said as he walked. “It’s only right that the sacrifice they made is recorded. Remember that.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, my voice sounding small and desperate even to my own ears.

“You’ll feel him in a minute,” he said. “Then I think you will.”

We were near the trees and I could hear them now. Hear their branches and leaves swaying in the slight breeze.

“I first came here ten years ago,” he said. “Me and an old school friend just out for a walk in the countryside. We walked into the trees, those trees, and I felt him immediately. Felt his presence. He spoke to me and told me what I needed to do. What he needed. I served him since then.”

We were at the edge of the trees now. I half expected him to stop. To pause dramatically and continue his story but he didn’t, he walked straight in. I followed.

The light was different in there. The summer sun was diffused through the roof of green leaves above our heads and that was part of it but there was something else too. Something like a heat haze in the air, although it was actually cooler here than it had been outside. Everything I looked at had a slight distortion to it that made it seem almost supernatural. The sound of the trees was louder here, a white noise that felt like it would blot everything else out.

“Do you feel him?” said the man and I was surprised I could hear him at all above the trees.

All of a sudden I felt it. A presence that filled the whole copse. I felt like I was standing on a crowded tube platform, claustrophobic from all the people around me. I could see that only the two of us were there but my body was telling me different, telling me that I was surrounded.

“He’s very ancient. Impossibly so. I don’t know how many of us have served him over the centuries.”

“Us?” I said. This was all too much for me, my mind was reeling.

“Humans. Those humans who he has chosen to serve him.”

He had been facing away from me but he turned then and I could see a sadness on his face. “I’ve done it for a decade. Done it well. Brought him fresh sacrifices whenever he needs.”

I looked down at the ground and saw the graves then, so many of them amid the tree roots and the patches of bluebells.

He carried on speaking. “And now you’re here with me.”

That feeling of claustrophobia was getting worse, pushing in on me from all sides. The sound of the leaves in the breeze was rising, covering everything and starting to drown his voice out.

"I remembered you from all those years ago" he was saying. "I knew I could get you to come up here. Here where I needed you. I knew you wouldn't be able to resist."

"You're going to kill me," I said and realised that I didn't care. That I could turn and run but I had nothing to go back to.

He shook his head. "No," he said and then the noise of the trees blotted him out completely. I could see his mouth moving but couldn't hear the words coming out of it.

Through the shushing of the leaves rose another voice. One that was so totally familiar it felt like I had been hearing it my whole life. It wasn't speaking in English or any language I recognised but I knew what it was saying. It was telling me to open myself to it. I didn't want to but I couldn't resist. My soul felt impossibly small next to the force that was surrounding me. Small and powerless.

I felt it fill me up, take me over. My mouth opened and rather than my own voice I heard the other speak through me. The sound of it was musical and I saw the jittery man's face change as he realised what was happening.

He fell to his knees in front of me, his face tilted up towards me like that of a child or someone staring up at the priest as they took communion.

I heard a voice. A voice that was partly mine and partly that of the being that was surrounding me, flowing through me. The voice said, "Your time is now."

I still couldn't hear him but when his lips moved this time I knew he was saying thank you. I'm not sure if it was me that understood what he wanted or the ancient thing that was now part of me. He wanted to die. He wanted to make the ultimate sacrifice for me as he had helped so many others to do. I bent and picked up the spade from where it had fallen to the ground next to him. One swing was all it took. Not to the throat like in the dream but down on the top of his head, the dirty blade smashing through his skull and burying itself in his brain. He died with a smile on his face. That same beatific smile that I'd seen on the corpses in his album. I realised then what he'd been trying to say to me earlier, the sentence I hadn't heard over the noise of the trees. He hadn't just needed me to kill him, he'd needed me to replace him.

With some effort I pulled the spade out of his head and started to work. I whistled as I did, a tune that felt as old as the ground I was digging. I was smiling too. Smiling because now I knew where the bodies were buried. And because I knew there would be more of them.

