

The body in the library

'Please,' said the little girl. 'The lady in the wall wants to get out.'

Gayle had looked at her in blank incomprehension.

'Please,' the girl had persisted. 'I think she's crying.'

She stared up at Gayle, concern etched onto her face.

'We should do something,' she said, solemnly. 'She really, really needs somebody to help.'

'Isn't that just the problem though, with the child imagination,' sniffed Leonore, later, as they moved the chairs back against the walls.

'Foster it, even with the best of intentions, and there's no knowing where it will all end.'

Leonore had never been too keen on the early childhood reading sessions. Messy, she had insisted. Noisy. Cluttered the place up. Tended to become unpredictable.

'But she was – oh I don't know: so *convinced*,' said Gayle. 'And so then, of course – they all were...'

She sighed. The screams and squeals had brought the Mums and assorted carers running alright. 'You could hear them right out to the Plunket Clinic,' Gayle reported. 'Sounded like a full-fledged massacre. I haven't heard anything like it since we tried that game of 'Kill the Pig' for the anniversary of Golding's 'Lord of the Flies.'

Leonore shuddered. There were some things best not remembered.

'Well you can't say we started this one,' she said firmly. 'Not our doing, if some pre-schooler's gone all fanciful. Where did she say this lady was supposed to be, anyway? What was it – voices drifting in from outside, or what?'

'What started it isn't really the problem,' said Gayle. 'It's what's been happening since.'

Calming down a distraught, if insistent, four year old was one thing. Gayle was used to them. There was never any knowing which seemingly harmless picture story book would set them off. They'd gobble up ghosts and ghouls with shrieks of glee – then go off into wails of anguish when Hairy McClary lost his bone, or

couldn't remember the way back to the dairy. You just needed a good distraction. The key question, that reminded them there was always a happy ending in view. 'Who thinks he'll find his own way home?' she would ask – and instant cooperative hands would shoot in the air.

But not this time – for as the little girl had pointed above their heads: had quavered out her story and her request, every child in the pack had seen what she'd seen. And so had Gayle. 'It was almost as if she'd somehow projected it onto the wall,' she told Leonore. 'Printed it on. Incised it. Once you see it, there's no going back. It's - somehow, I don't know – just there.'

Gayle and Leonore gazed up, to where there was, indeed, or seemed to be, the outline of a woman's face, traced into the rough grey concrete render of the library's wall. It was as if she were pushing her face against glass, her mouth half open, one hand thrust forward, fingers splayed.

'The kid was right,' admitted Leonore. 'She really does look like she wants to get out of there.'

Gayle shuddered. 'It fair gives you the creeps,' she said. 'Too much like Munch's *The Scream* for me...'

'The longer you look, the worse it gets,' agreed Leonore. 'I vote we stick a Book Week poster over it asap.'

'Crime Week might be better,' said Gayle, trying to laugh it off, but it somehow didn't seem appropriate. She wondered why she'd said that. Leonore was right: fanciful notions seemed to be contagious.

By lunchtime, everyone had been in to take a look. There'd been all the usual speculation about bodies in the concrete pour – although how anyone could conceive of a corpse in the library's stone work was hard to imagine. Bridge pylons, perhaps. Even airport runways. 'You need organized crime for that sort of stuff,' Mrs Allenby from the chemist had said. She was a rusted-on detective fiction reader – forever requesting the latest true-crime titles into the collection. 'Not the sort of thing that happens in small-town communities – no matter how many murders in Midsomer!'

'Anyway,' added her sister-in-crime Jess, who managed the local Kentucky Fried – 'It's not as if it's an actual body, is it?' She had, it seemed, already called in to the local community police hub, checking out whether there were any missing persons within what she termed 'the right demographics.' 'Nothing doing,' she told Gayle. 'Besides - I don't think we're in urban myth territory here at all. Those are supposed to be connected to real social anxieties: you know – the uncontrol of the distant industrial process? Ready-mix construction, of course. Fast-food horror stories – well I'd know all about those, wouldn't I! 'Kentucky Fried Rat.' 'The Budgie in the Blender'. 'The Baby in the Micro-wave'. And then there's scaring over-independent teenagers. 'The Hitch-Hiker and The Hook.' Classic

stuff. But this is different. More one of those gestalt things – like seeing the Virgin Mary in a slice of toast – you know, you see them all the time on the Net...’

Gayle wondered fleetingly just what sorts of online searches Mrs Allenby’s friend did. She re-hung the poster they’d positioned to try to keep the public gaze averted. The awful thing was, once you’d seen it, it seemed to draw your focus. And somehow, it seemed to be getting clearer. More forceful. If anything, it was worse covered up than exposed. ‘If I didn’t know better,’ Leonore had muttered at lunch, I’d swear those goddamned eyes were following me about.’

Gayle had reported Mrs KFC’s comment about the Virgin Mary. ‘Oh Jesus,’ Leonore had groaned. ‘Next thing we’ll have Father Nuttley’s little troupe around, candle-light vigilling in the Lion’s Club Playground and promising miraculous cures...’ Father Nuttley might have one of the smaller congregations, but what they lacked in size, they made up for with evangelical fervour. ‘This sort of things right up their aisle,’ Leonore predicted. ‘They’ll be here with bells on. And candles. And incense.’ She raised her coffee cup in mock salute to the place on the wall. ‘Just stay where you are, darlin’’, she advised. ‘Trust us. We’re librarians. We’ll sort it out for you - eventually.’

It didn’t help that Gayle’s poster promptly fell off its pin.

When Gayle came in next morning, Leonore was already there, flicking through a screen on the Circulation Desk computer. She tried to look nonchalant, but Gayle was too quick, and tracked the search bar before Leonore could clear it. ‘Poltergeists?’ she demanded – ‘now what’s up?’

‘Hadn’t wanted to tell you,’ Leonore admitted. ‘Thought I’d just tidy it up before you got here, and keep schtum.’

‘Tidy what up?’ Gayle demanded. Leonore pointed to a trolley, jammed with unsorted books. ‘Crime section,’ she said, pointing across to the ‘Thrillers, Mysteries and Detective Fiction’ shelf. It was entirely empty.

‘Found them all on the floor,’ she said. ‘Lying about, in heaps’.

‘Just... that one shelf?’ asked Gayle.

They gazed at one another.

‘Well whatever it was, I don’t seriously think it was poltergeists,’ Gayle said, carefully.

Leonore snorted. ‘Oh for God’s sake ‘ she said – ‘Neither do I! Of course not. But it did occur to me that someone might want us to think that it is.’

They pondered that for a while. The morning sun played across the wall where the poster had been, and showed them the face, and the hand, and now, the suggestion of some clothing, draped across one shoulder and the neck.

Gayle moved up closer, and turned her head to the left and to the right. 'It looks to me,' she said, 'as if she's got a brooch, pinned to the shoulder of her... whatever the garment is – you can't quite tell, but it certainly looks like a brooch to me.'

'Good,' said Leonore. 'At least that'll put paid to the Virgin Mary hypothesis. Not to mention the Archangel Gabriel. Don't recall either of them wearing neck-brooches on their cardies.'

They got on with re-shelving the crime novels, and opened up for the day.

Mrs Allenby was one of the first in. 'Jess and I were wondering,' she began, rather too matter-of-factly, 'whether you'd either of you ever seen... this!'

She thrust a small blue-covered book at them, holding it open to a photographic double-page spread. Gayle checked the spine, which innocently proclaimed '*Tahunanui: The History of a Beachside Community*'. She vaguely remembered seeing it on the reference shelf. This didn't seem to be a library copy – but then Mrs Allenby had been here a long time. She probably had her own. Gayle wondered fleetingly if there'd been any particularly spicy murders, to have attracted her attention.

'We sort of thought,' confided Mrs Allenby, 'that we'd... well... that she' – her head lifted towards the place on the wall – 'looked a bit... familiar.'

Gayle and Leonore looked at her, in silence.

'Well I mean, you'd know this,' continued Mrs Allenby. 'You develop a sort of... special memory, don't you. In our game. With the public.'

They kept looking at her.

'A kind of association thing, isn't it,' Mrs Allenby persisted. 'For customers. Jess calls it 'who-what-when'. Who comes in, on which days, what they want, what they don't like – that sort of thing.'

Leonore and Gayle looked at one another. And down at the book, its double page spread showing a large black and white photograph. It looked like the 1950s – or maybe earlier, a woman with an ornate perm, in a v-necked black frock, an elaborate pearl brooch pinned to one shoulder.

'Now we're not saying,' Mrs Allenby assured them, 'that it IS her. But it – reminded us of her. And with her being... you know, so much – part of this...'

Even her ever-confident tones trailed off. Gayle looked at Leonore.

“Part of this Library, you mean,” said Leonore, in the voice which Gayle recognised as the one she used with especially recalcitrant overdue users who didn’t want to pay their fines. ‘Because,’ Leonore spelled it out, ‘she’s our – founder. Benefactor. Benefactrix. Whatever.’

‘Because,’ said Gayle, ‘she’s Nellie Nightingale’.

‘Well yes, it’s far-fetched,’ said Mrs Allenby weakly. ‘And I’m not saying for a minute that she’s IN the wall, you understand... Just that it’s an odd... well ... coincidence. That it... whatever it is ... looks so much like her.’

She stood there, half defiant, half abashed.

There was another longish pause.

‘Well she’d have had trouble getting herself in, wouldn’t she’ said Leonore. ‘Seeing she was well dead before they finally got around to building the place.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Allenby. Gayle wondered if she’d actually read the *History of a Beachside Community*. Right through.

‘Too busy with murder, bloody murder,’ Leonore had said later. ‘Sometimes I think we should just stop altogether catering to that little set of genre-ghouls.’

‘Not sure censorship is the answer,’ Gayle had said. ‘But it’s certainly time I had a chat – a serious one – to the Board, and the Chief Librarian. Before this whole thing gets totally out of hand.’

It was certainly true that rumours were spreading – and sending out ever more speculative branches. Some of them made Mrs Allenby look quite scientific. Father Nuttley had invitations to a weeknight slide show up on the Noticeboard outside his little wooden church, and was threatening to show yet again his collection of videos of Medugorje, and Lourdes, and Fatima.

On Wednesday the Council Maintenance Manager had turned up, along with their building foreman and the Town Planner – although he appeared just to be along for the ride. ‘It’ll be one for next year’s conference,’ he’d admitted, with a grin. ‘Not often we get miraculous apparitions. Not even sure we’ve got a page for them in the LIM Report.’

The consensus seemed to be that the best thing to do was not, as Gayle had expected, to re-plaster the wall and rearrange a bit of shelving to conceal the place and confuse the eyes of any who might want to ‘see where It had been’, but to bash it down altogether. ‘Best place for installing the new electronic book-return scanner,’ the maintenance manager had told them. ‘We were holding back on this branch till next financial year – but the Chief Librarian has had the

Council bring forward the budget. We'll be onto it early next week. Let you know when.'

'So that's that then,' Leonore had said.

But it wasn't.

That Thursday, Mr Van Geysen had arrived, as usual, on his mobility scooter, the front basket filled with all the books to be changed for his cluster of pensioner units. 'What a good neighbor you are,' Gayle said, as usual, printing out the list of possible titles she had selected for his weekly visit.

'That's ess maybe,' Mr van Geysen had said, his accent a little more obvious than usual. 'Now I hev to tell you Kayle – I hev a bone for picking at with you!'

He pulled the latest Janet Evanovich out of the pile.

'Mrs Collingwood was not well pleased,' he said sternly – and opened the pages at a large floral bookmark. 'Look!' he said, riffling through. 'Nothink! Nothink at all! End chust where the big explanation should be!'

The final pages of the second to last chapter were, apart from their page numbers, entirely blank. 'Chust where Stephanie the bounty hunter solves everythink!' said Mr Van Geysen. 'What a frustration! I'm afraid Mrs Collingwood threw it across the room. Thankfully it hezzn't broken the spine, but even so...'

'Well I can understand why she'd do that,' Gayle told him. 'It's something that doesn't happen very often – but I'll certainly send it back to the publisher. It'll be some kind of printing error, I'm sure. I'll phone and see if I can get the City copy down here for Mrs Collingwood...'

'It's a long time,' she told Leonore, 'since I've seen a printing issue that bad. Maybe a repeat paragraph, or one page missing – but never a whole blank section like that. Curious. Somebody's asleep on the quality control desk, that's for sure.'

'Um,' said Leonore. 'Was meaning to tell you...'

She trailed off. 'What?' asked Gayle.

'Well,' said Leonore, 'it's just that it's not the first. In fact, it's becoming something of a trend'.

She placed the book on a pile, each with a yellow post-it note sticking out.

'It's only the detective fiction,' she said. 'Nothing else. Well, nothing that anyone's complained about, anyway.'

Gayle began to giggle, albeit rather desperately. 'Maybe romance readers just don't notice,' she suggested. 'Gives them more space for their own visions of Mr Right.' She opened up each of the deficit sections, and read back a little to assess what was missing. 'Oh dear,' she said. 'Right in the summary moment. No wonder Mrs Collingwood was cross.'

'I checked that one with Mrs Allenby,' Leonore told her. 'Now here's the creepy bit. Her friend Jess swears it was all intact when she read it last week. And I reckon we could rely on her to have zipped it straight back if there was a problem.'

'If,' argued Gayle, 'she actually does finish them. She's just the sort to tell you that she solved the crime by chapter two... Maybe she never in fact, reads that far.'

Lots of their older readers complained that crime fiction had no real resolution any more. There'd been no true justice, Mrs Allenby had told her once, since that Ruth Rendell had started letting her killers off... Even Henning Mankell had reached a stage where his characters acknowledged that you could stop the criminal, but not the social issues that produced the crimes.

Then, of course, he'd stopped writing crime fiction altogether. Had retired his detective, and run off to Africa to be a theatre director.

'It somehow seems quite worrying, Leonore had said at the time, 'that there's no longer any future, even in crime.'

That Friday morning they arrived to find a large canvas-covered hole in the wall.

Leonore was gazing at it when Gayle came in. 'I know this seems odd,' she said, staring fixedly at it, 'but I sort of miss whatever it was, now it's gone. I kind of liked watching it take up more space. Give itself more definition.' She handed Gayle a first coffee of the day. 'Now we'll never know,' she told her, 'what it might have become.'

'A bigger nuisance than ever,' Gayle had insisted. 'Did you see Father Nuttley's Noticeboard this morning? "Faith Revives! A Miracle for Today!" You know he'd applied to use the Library over the weekend to conduct some sort of rite?'

'It's all the floral tributes on the doorstep that get me,' said Leonore. 'I keep taking them up to the hospital, but they just keep bringing more.'

'I'd better phone the maintenance guy,' said Gayle, 'and find out when they'll be finished installing the new scanner. Sure don't want the place wrapped up in plastic like this - not over the weekend. God knows what we'd find, come Monday. I can do without any more of these little ... surprises...'

It was not so much a surprise, as a major shock, when the maintenance manager finally answered her call.

She'd asked him how long before he'd come back to attend to the hole in the wall – and he had replied with a stunned silence. 'What hole?' he'd finally ventured. 'Wasn't us. We're not scheduled to be there till next week.'

He'd scrambled to check around, in case some contractor had got ahead of themselves – but no. Nothing doing. Well, as he backtracked it – nothing yet done.

Gayle put the phone down, and thought about what to do next – only to find Leonore already there, with a cup of hot tea. 'I've put in plenty of sugar,' she said – knowing full well Gayle never took it. 'You're going to need to sit down.'

'I know,' said Gayle. 'I was just coming to tell you.'

'No need,' replied Leonore, pushing her into a chair. 'It's front page in *The Evening Mail*.'

Gayle took the paper, and spread it out on the desk. 'Drink your tea first,' warned Leonore. 'It's pretty damned weird.'

Father Nuttley, it was reported, had been found dead in his chapel the previous night. 'Lying on his back,' Mrs Allenby told them with great relish when she hurried across – 'right in front of the alter.'

The reporter hadn't had much time yet to background the case, and the Police weren't saying much – but there was mention of 'a growing popular movement', and 'no comment from the local diocese, in regard to reports of miraculous apparitions in the community.' 'There is a time-honoured apparatus for dealing with such matters,' the Bishop had said firmly. 'We have not seen fit to implement it.'

'So was it him?' Gayle had speculated. 'Father Nuttley. Was he – I know it sounds daft, but then this whole thing is daft... Was he stealing our miracle? If you see what I mean. Setting up to claim it for himself?'

'What,' snorted Leonore – 'mattocked it out of the wall in the middle of the night, and wheelbarrowed it down the main road? I find that about as likely as those mad myths of flying grottoes and Joseph of Arimathea taking Jesus tin-mining in Cornwall. I'm with the maintenance guy on this one, Gayle: some subby has done the deed, and not yet put in his time sheets.'

But it was harder it seemed to retract a myth, than to set it up in the first place.

Come Monday, the locals were in even more of a buzz. The Community Policeman, according to Mrs Allenby, had told her friend Jess that the CSI crew – a phrase that now tripped easily off everyone's tongue – had indeed found a trail

of grey cement grit up the aisle of the chapel... grit crushed underfoot with Father Nuttley's sturdy black brogues, and matching to a T the render and the grout from the Library wall.

'So that's that,' Mrs Allenby announced, with all the smugness of the satisfied sleuth. 'It was him alright. He chopped up the wall to remove the image, and then died from the exertion. Heart attack. Just desserts, I'd say. Thou shalt not steal.'

'Neither shalt thou worship graven images, if I remember rightly', Leonore had said. 'Anyway,' she'd added, for my part, it would be so much more satisfying, if the lady in the wall had taken herself off. Climbed right out of the stonework, and tootled along for a chat with Father N. Trailing clouds of cement render, in place of glory. And he died from the shock.'

As you would, Gayle had thought.

All day she'd been wondering what to tell Leonore, about her latest discovery.

That the books they had set aside to be returned to the publishers: the ones with the missing pages; the lost solutions - were now once more fully texted. As if they had done some sort of auto-reprint, overnight, all by themselves. Definitely their copies: the originals, still stamped and barcoded. Just complete, where before they had been... seemed to be... part emptied.

'I wonder,' she had asked Leonore, as she gathered them up and replaced them on the shelf, 'whether it's time for another of your computer searches'.

'See what you can find', she suggested, 'on 'Collective hysteria.'"