

Post Mortem by Frank Hibberd

The stained glass angels smiled. Jesus remained impassive.

The coffin disappeared; the doors closed.

'I don't care what the vicar says – he was a miserable bastard.' Bill Tribble was muttering under cover of the last hymn, 'Love divine, all loves excelling'.

John Blake nodded.

'Can't disagree with you there, Bill. But I think we made it pretty clear what we thought of him, before he died.'

'Not much point in doing it afterwards.'

John grinned.

'I'd like the chance. But, as the believer amongst us, don't you have a direct line to God? Couldn't you get Him to pass on the message?'

The organist was playing his dismissal music, and they joined the sparse gathering, mostly ex-employees of the deceased, as they left the church.

'Going to the wake?'

Bill nodded.

'There's something laid on for the workers. I think we should go.'

'Huh! Jam sandwich and a cup of tea, probably. OK. Let's go and see.'

There was meat in the sandwiches, and a certain amount of beer available. At the end of the hall was a cinema screen, which displayed the words 'A message from your employer as was.'

Eventually Quentin Grindle called for quiet.

'We're now going to play my dad's last message. Please be respectful towards the dead.'

'Huh!' John whispered. 'I'll keep quiet - but no respect.'

The conversations died down, and as the lights dimmed the group turned towards the screen, which flickered into life. There were some gasps as old Mr. Grindle was revealed sitting up in bed, staring aggressively at the camera.

'Well,' he said, 'you're watching this because I'm dead, and I was damned annoyed about that – especially as you miserable lot are still alive. But I have a last gesture for you all. I have left the company to the workers – all those on the company's books today.'

There were gasps of amazement.

'Yes – I thought you'd be surprised,' the old man continued. 'But there you are. Make the most of it while you've got the chance. Goodbye.'

'Well!' Bill raised his eyebrows. 'Perhaps he wasn't such a bad bloke after all.'

'So it seems,' replied John. 'I'm waiting for the sting in the tail.'

A few in the village hall appeared to share John's misgivings. Unmoved, they matter-of-factly continued eating and drinking. Others were laughing and joking. Some raised their glasses to toast 'old Jacob'. Suddenly the lights went out, leaving the room in complete darkness. There were cries of consternation, and some laughter.

'So the old man's still around,' said a voice.

Then a figure appeared, dimly seen. It was hard to tell whether it was in the hall or on the screen.

The apparition wore a shroud-like cloth, and waved a claw-like hand. It hovered, and seemed to draw closer. There were some cries of horror and a few screams.

It spoke.

'I hope you enjoyed my gift.'

It gave a cackle of laughter.

'Just to let you know that I sacked you all as from yesterday. The only workers left today are my son and daughter. They inherit the business. He-he-he-.....' The cackle died away as the figure faded.

'Your notices of dismissal are on the table,' said Quentin from the doorway. 'You are at liberty to reapply for your jobs. Can't guarantee the same salaries.'

He quickly disappeared.

'The old bastard,' said John.

There were murmurs of agreement. Some protested more loudly, and urged the group to confront Quentin and his sister.

‘Let’s not be too hasty,’ said Bill. ‘We need to consider carefully what to do. Excuse me for a moment while I go to the loo.’

Bill sat in a toilet cubicle and dialled GOD on his mobile phone (on most phones that is 46663; but you have to be a registered user of the service).

‘YES?’

‘Did you see what just happened?’

‘I SHOULDN’T HAVE TO REMIND YOU THAT I AM OMNISCIENT.’

‘He’s always been a nasty man. Isn’t there anything to be done?’

‘WHAT? DO YOU WANT HIM TO SUFFER THE FIRES OF HELL FOR ETERNITY?’

‘Oh no! I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.’

‘JUST AS WELL. THAT’S NEVER BEEN AN OPTION. PURGATORY IS MORE A GUIDANCE TOWARDS REMORSE AND UNDERSTANDING.’

‘I mean, can’t something be done about our situation?’

‘I CREATE, BUT I DON’T INTERVENE.’

‘So we’re stuck with it, are we?’

‘I DON’T *PHYSICALLY* INTERVENE. BUT I WILL SAY THIS. CAN AN EMPLOYER SACK EMPLOYEES POST MORTEM?’

Bill thought about that, and light began to dawn. Meanwhile, there were sounds of disturbance coming over the phone.

‘What’s going on?’

‘DON’T WORRY. THAT WAS JACOB MAKING A FUSS. HIS PURGING HASN’T GOT VERY FAR YET.’

‘I see. Give him my best wishes. Thank you, God. Sorry to bother you.’

‘NO BOTHER. I’M JUST ONE OF TRILLIONS OF INTERCONNECTED BRAINS. CALL ME ANY TIME. BYE FOR NOW.’

Bill switched off his phone, returned to the hall and sought out John.

‘John, could I see your notice of dismissal?’

‘Sure. It’ll be the same as yours.’

‘I didn’t pick mine up. Had to go to the loo.’

Bill studied the document and pointed to the date – the previous day’s date. Then he pointed to the signature – Jacob’s signature.

‘A post mortem signature,’ he said.

‘Haha!’ John laughed. ‘That can’t be right.’

He called to the others and told them the news.

‘As the owners of the business, let’s have a meeting.’

After the discussion, John went to call Quentin and Jemima Grindle. Initially they were suspicious, but John assured them that the workers bore them no ill will.

Back in the hall, John explained.

‘If you want to contest this, it could take years to sort out, impoverish the company, and enrich the lawyers. I suggest you accept it. You are also part owners.’

Quentin and Jemima briefly talked together.

‘OK,’ said Quentin. ‘I assume I’ll be managing director.’

John coughed politely.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘in your absence we had a meeting, and unanimously decided that you both should be sacked.’

Quentin and Jemima protested vigorously.

John waved calming hands.

‘You can, of course, reapply for your jobs. We would all welcome you back on board.’

He turned to the gathering with raised eyebrows, and they responded with murmurs of agreement.

‘But,’ he added, ‘we can’t guarantee the same salaries.’