The murder investigation

Oxford, England AD 1832 (alternate)

 The forensic department was downstairs in what used to be one of the wine vaults. The arching brick walls and ceiling had been cleaned and painted a uniform white, with utility tube lights running the length of every section. White-coated technicians sat quietly at long benches, working away on tests involving an inordinate amount of chemistry lab glassware.

 Rebecca Raleigh Stothard, the family’s chief forensic scientist, came out of her office to greet me. Well into her second century, and a handsome woman, her chestnut hair was only just starting to lighten towards grey.

 ‘We received the last shipment of samples from the Oxford police this morning,’ she said. ‘I’ve allocated our best people to analyse them.’

 ‘Thank you.’

 ‘Has there been any progress?’

 ‘The police are doing their damnedest, but they’ve still got very little to go on at this point. That’s why I’m hoping your laboratory can come up with something for me, something they missed.’

 I put my attaché case on my knees, and flicked the locks back. ‘I may have something for you.’ I pulled the bag containing the cigar butt from its compartment. ‘I found this in the Westhay Club, I think it’s Antony Caesar Pitt’s. Is there any way you can tell me for sure?’

 ‘Pitt’s? I thought his alibi had been confirmed?’

 ‘The police interviewed three people, including the manager of the Westhay, who all swear he was in there playing cards with them.’

 ‘And you don’t believe them?’

 ‘I’ve been to the Westhay, I’ve seen the manager and the other players. They’re not the most reliable people in the world, and they were under a lot of pressure to confirm whether he was there or not. My problem is that if he was there that evening the police will thank them for their statement and their honesty and let them go. If he wasn’t, there could be consequences they’d rather avoid. I know that sounds somewhat paranoid, but he really is the only one of the friends who had anything like a motive. In his case, the proof has to be absolute. I’d be betraying my responsibility if I accepted anything less.’

 She took the bag from me, and squinted at the remains of the cigar which it contained.

 ‘It was still damp with saliva the following morning,’ I told her. ‘If it is his, then I’m prepared to accept he was in that club.’

 ‘I’m sorry, Edward, we have no test that can produce those sort of results. I can’t even give you a blood type from a saliva sample.’

 ‘Damn!’

 ‘Not yet, but one of my people is already confident he can determine if someone has been drinking from a chemical reaction with their breath. It should deter those wretched cab drivers from having one over the eight before they take to the roads if they know the police can prove they were drunk on the spot. Ever seen a carriage accident? It’s not nice. I imagine a car crash is even worse.’

 ‘I’m being slow this morning. The relevance being?’

 ‘You won’t give up. None of us will, because Justin was a Raleigh, and he deserves to rest with the knowledge that we will not forget him, no matter how much things change. And change they surely do. Come with me.’

 I followed her along the length of the forensic department. The end wall was hidden behind a large freestanding chamber made from a dulled metal. A single door was set in the middle, fastened with a heavy latch mechanism. As we drew closer I could hear an electrical engine thrumming incessantly. Other harmonics infiltrated the air, betraying the presence of pumps and gears.

 ‘Our freezer,’ Rebecca announced with chirpy amusement.

 She took a thick fur coat from a peg on the wall outside the chamber, and handed me another.

 ‘You’ll need it,’ she told me. ‘It’s colder than these fridges which the big grocery stores are starting to use. A lot colder.’

 Rebecca told the truth. A curtain of freezing white fog tumbled out when she opened the door. The interior was given over to dozens of shelves, with every square inch covered in a skin of hard white ice. A variety of jars, bags, and sealed glass dishes were stacked up. I peered at their contents with mild curiosity before hurriedly looking away. Somehow, scientific slivers of human organs are even more repellent than the entirety of flesh.

 ‘What is this?’ I asked.

 ‘Our family’s insurance policy. Forensic pathology shares this freezer with the medical division. Every biological unknown we’ve encountered is in here. One day we’ll have answers for all of it.’

 ‘And one day the Borgias will leave the Vatican,’ I said automatically.

 Rebecca placed the bag on a high shelf, and gave me a confident smile. ‘You’ll be back.’

Portions extracted from “Watching Trees Grow” by Peter F. Hamilton, 2000, in the short story collection ‘Manhattan in Reverse’, 2011, Macmillan, p38-40