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While the Light Lasts

by Dan Judd

A rule of thumb has it that a writer should delete their first paragraph. It's normally a stream of conscience. The author setting out their stall and giving too much away. I go a step further and ditch the opening chapter. And I never write the last one until I truly know the end is nigh.

It started off as a piece of whimsy, inspired by the pen name I'd chosen. My agent said Deirdre Crozier was just too ordinary to grab your eye in Smiths while waiting for the 4:50 from Paddington.

Seeing as my chosen genre was detective fiction, I stole from the best and chose the name of Mrs Teresa Neele, the nom de plume Agatha Christie gave when she disappeared, Friday 3rd December 1926.

Some might say it was an arrogant choice. But no, it was pure admiration. I admired her way she could take a simple, basic plot and weave something methodical yet magical. Yet, still manage to pull the wool over the reader's eyes.

A macabre recurring dream, a stolen gemstone, the attraction of an ancient relic, an unexpected visitor from beyond the grave; even her short stories were given the Christie steely eye for detail.

I would never dare boast I was in her league but I have a knack of generating publicity and promoting my brand. The choice of name was just a starting point. It was the checking in at the Old Swan in Harrogate that was a stroke of genius.

Not that it was planned. I initially hit upon the idea of going there while struggling with the tricky second novel. What better way to solve the problem of how to end my latest crime by going to the location of Christie's greatest mystery?



She had checked into the Swan Hydropathic Hotel not to write, although immersed in its world I doubt she could stop herself. Its sweeping driveway, columned frontage and revolving entrance were straight out of one of her books. Miss Marple or, god forbid, a corpse could be lurking in any corner.

With subsequent books, my publicist would announce my visit. That morning before the ink dried. She even provided me with a Morris Cowley to drive me home. The car Agatha abandoned near Guildford the night she decided to disappear.

The press was certain it was a publicity stunt but in later years a nervous breakdown, caused by her husband's affair with a younger woman, was considered the real reason. Perhaps it was both. Sitting here in the vast dining room struggling to come up with an ending, knowing my agent would send a photographer in two days was almost driving me to one.

Unlike Agatha, who had blended in on her visit, I probably stuck out like the prick of my thumb. Ordinarily, I like a view but I like to sit with my back to it for all the meals eaten during my stay. Concentrating on the job at hand, my final edit. All written by hand, as Christie would insist.

I would watch the other guests in the dining room and the reception area just beyond. If Christie was the queen of crime, I was the courtesan of character. Observing and tweaking my text, shaping them until they lived and breathed on the page.

But as the days stacked up, trying to defeat the task at hand, I became aware it was different this time.

During her stay, Christie must have looked up from her breakfast to a sea of headlines announcing her disappearance. She would have witnessed the guests dissecting her private life over their kippers, porridge and full English.

But for me it was more of a shock. My fiancé with a platinum blond, outside the Ivy. A smoking gun going off half-cocked.

But, like my more famous counterpart, my stay demanded I didn't let the outside in. I concentrated on the job at hand until, childlike, I'd finally write the words 'The End'.

I'd then catch the eye of the maître d' who, with a click of his fingers, would summon champagne. The cork would be popped, timed to perfection, as the chosen press photographer jumped out from behind a sad Cypress.

Ordinarily. Not this time. This time the champagne could be sparkling cyanide for all the joy it would bring.

It was, in part, self-inflicted. For three nights I'd stayed awake crossing out, annotating and rewriting until the light had all but disappeared or my physical form just gave up and I fell into a troubled sleep. My characters coming to life and goading me for my failures. Dancing around me casting shards of paper like giant confetti for a wedding that would never happen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Ms Teresa Neele."

I took a sip of champagne as my cast of characters began to stand up and clap. Praising a performance they'd barely witnessed. I stood up all too suddenly to receive the unsurprising bouquet and to give them a clear look, to take photos for social and to send to all.

It was then that I fell.