

Accident Investigation

by Ivor John

They drove together, slowly. The driver looking, half-heartedly, but mostly his concentration was on navigating the narrow, winding country lane. The other man, the passenger was following the hedgerows, looking for any indication of where it had happened. Damage to the verge, skidmarks on the worn, uneven tarmac perhaps. Maybe even a pile of debris. The inevitable human detritus. Scraps of clothing, personal items which had not been spotted by the paramedics and put into the large plastic bag in which they kept the patient's personal possessions. The road surface was a patchwork where the old concrete screed had been patched up. Uneven rectangles of black or red tar-macadam, which had itself been repaired and filled over the years.

Although late afternoon, it was still warm for the end days of summer. No longer though the unambiguous warmth of earlier in the season, June or July. Late August now, it was obvious that Autumn was creeping over the Wiltshire countryside. Only a couple of weeks ago, the warmth had been uncomfortable in their uniforms, even in shirtsleeves. Their anoraks stashed on the back seat, the sleeves of their crisp white cotton shirts, rolled up above their elbows. Both exactly the same. Their rayban sunglasses, essential now, in oblique sunlight.

High, hedgerows of hawthorn and ash, occasionally a patch of brambles limited the view to the road. Periodically, a metal farm gate, allowed a view across fields, some with cows, following each other around. But mostly they were empty, just grass. The soft verges churned up over the months by livestock and farm machinery.

"Hold on, stop, I think there is something by that tree."

The driver switched on the blue light, which strobed on the roof and on the front of the van. Although there really was no need. There were no cars behind them. The observer, opened the door and pulled himself out of the car. Leaving the engine running the driver got out too. Walking together towards a large oaktree. There was something, bright orange, in the hedge below the tree.

"Oh it's only a plastic bag."

Using his foot, he scraped it out from under the hedge, so that it was laying on the side of the road. It was dirty and wet, obviously there for some time. Inside a pork pie, green with mould and a half eaten sandwich. Throwing it back in the hedge and pushing back under.

"Shouldn't we take it up now that we found it, throw it in the bin?"

“Really, do you want that smell in the van?”

The driver flicked off the blue lights, they both got back into the van to continue their slow drive along the lane. Pulling over into a lay-by to allow another car to pass. It was very narrow, and the car scraped against the bushes the other side of the lane. They could see the driver swearing under his breath as he passed but giving a cheerful wave of acknowledgement for their accommodation. Once again they continued their slow progress along the lane.

“Over there, I think we’ve found it!”

Pulling over they put blue on again but this time, the driver turned off the ignition and dropped the keys into his pocket. There was a style gate at the end of a footpath which cut for a short distance through the bramble and hawthorn and then widened out into a grass field. A fingerpost showing it was a public footpath. At the end, the point where it emerged across a steep grass bank onto the side of the road. A single sandal. Small, the sort a child would wear, light brown with a single strap. Patterns cut out in the leather. There were a pair of glasses, broken in the ditch.

Now they could see more closely. There were black tyre marks going back a hundred or so metres from where the patch met the road. Fresh gouges into the bank ripped the rough grass back to expose the soil beneath. A piece of blue plastic, possibly a broken wing mirror. Somehow lodged in a low oak tree further up the road a small bunch of chrysanthemums, still in cellophane supermarket packaging, had been tied to the gate.

“Yes, this is it. What do you think happened?”

“I think he ran out from the path without looking. The driver was going too fast, from the look of those marks. Its very overgrown, neither would have been able to see. It always takes two to make an accident. Probably no one’s fault.”

In silence now, they opened the back of the van to take out the folding metal signs. ‘Accident Investigation’. They walked in opposite directions and set them out into the middle of the lane.