

The Mower

There were two and a half minutes in which Inspector O'Neill knew what had happened to the lady from Cape Town. And the others.

She was perhaps the most recent of many. People had gone missing from various parts of the world. A tourist from Alaska. A hill-walker from Edinburgh. An oil executive from Kazakhstan. Maybe there were others. All they had in common was that none of them was from anywhere near Dublin. And that Dublin was where they were last known to be alive. Having arrived alive they had all made their way to the delightful little seaside town of Skerries, some miles north of Dublin. The lady from Cape Town might be the latest in what might be a pattern, and Inspector O'Neill had been given the case.

He sat on a white metal chair in the garden, an open beer and a thin, half-opened book on the metal table in front of him, as he half dozed in the summer afternoon. O'Neill had checked into this house just outside town via one of those on-line apps. He'd been given a code for his phone to unlock the door. There was nobody at the house.

It was a bright shimmery, bee-drowsy, July afternoon. The sky was mainly blue, with some small slow-moving clouds. The smooth, well-kept lawn sloped gently down to a neatly trimmed box hedge, a quiet country lane, some grassy dunes and the sea beyond. The grass was a rich, deep green. Butterflies flapped and flittered around flowers and bushes. A bumble bee was quietly exploring some bright purple geraniums. There was the gentle summer afternoon sound of a lawnmower, occasionally coming into sight and then going back up the lawn behind him. It was one of those robot mowers.

O'Neill had spent the last few days around Skerries, showing photos of the lady and others, checking railway station ticket sales, asking taxi firms if anyone remembered or recognised any of the people on his list. One or two of them had taken the train into Dublin, and some at least had come back.

The garden was perfectly kept, more flowers than O'Neill knew the names of neatly arranged in beds. As well as the geraniums there were some little yellow tubular flowers, a whole range of brightly varied red and yellow and orange tulipy things, some bushes with pointy pyramids of mauve and white flowers, a shrub with variegated leaves and red berries, beds of flowers in all shapes and colours. Along each side of the garden were perfectly manicured dense hedges of some conifer or leylandii or something. Each plant and flower was perfectly placed, every bush and shrub pruned to centimeter perfection.

At least two of the missing people had been to one of the pubs. The lady from Cape Town had dined at a nice restaurant one night two weeks ago. There was nothing to indicate where any of them had gone. Uber drivers had picked up some at the station, taken others back there or to various places in town. Some of the cab drivers remembered bringing people to this very house.

He could see how the word 'well manicured' might be applied to a lawn like this. The mower came into view again, making its way down the lawn, turning and coming back up. It had some hatches and various devices and accoutrements sticking out.

A breeze came from the sea, ruffling bushes and some big grassy things. O'Neill gazed vacantly past the sharp-edged lawn into a well-dug flower bed. There was something white sticking up, curved like bone.

Between the Ubers and the mini-cabs, more of them remembered bringing people to this house than taking them away again.

The lawnmower stopped, making a silence like crickets.

The lawnmower. He looked again at the half-open volume on the garden table. He'd found it in one of the drawers in the house. It was the user manual for the mower. Or the Autonomous Gardening Assistant, as it preferred to be styled. An artificial intelligence, it said, with advanced neural learning, semantics and reasoning capabilities. Whatever that was. It had Internet access and could apparently look up articles and stuff using that semantics whatever to figure out the meanings of the words, learn new knowledge to co-ordinate planting so there was always something in bloom, understand when to dig around, prune or otherwise cultivate things using shovels and cutting implements that sat inside those various hatches. Presumably it could even go online and order up fertilizer; how else would you explain just how well-nourished these plants were looking?

He wondered what the technical people meant by reasoning? In his job you had abduction, induction and deduction – start from specifics, abstract up to generalities and draw inferences. He looked at that bone again. What if it found a dead rabbit or something? Could it go on-line, understand the words in an article, draw inferences like how it might be used as fertilizer? What about cutting it up? The neatly trimmed hedges were evidence that it had the means.

O'Neill began to connect ideas in his mind. How far might the AI in the mower go in pursuit of its motivation, the cultivation of this garden? Surely it too worked by connecting ideas. It was all links: fertilizer fixes nitrogen. Animals are fertilizer. Meat is animals. Meat can be ordered online. People order themselves online, come to the house and let themselves in. People are animals. Link, link, link...

There was means, there was motive...

There was a 'snick!' just behind his left ear. Inspector O'Neill's two and a half minutes of knowing had begun.