

MORTAL END



TOULA MAVRIDOU-MESSER

Mortal End

A Simmering Pit of
Jiggery Pokery

By

Toula Mavridou-Messer

This book is based on a true story. All names have been changed to protect the innocent.

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Published by 100 Percent Publishing

ISBN-13: 978-1500669829

ISBN-10: 1500669822

www.100percentpublishing.com

Ogress Of Reading

The old baby farmer, the wretched Miss Dyer
At the Old Bailey her wages is paid
In times long ago, we'd a made a big fy-er
And roasted so nicely that wicked old jade.

Prologue

The oak panelled courtroom was teeming with ferocious citizens seeking ugly justice. Row upon row of worn timbered pews housed more bodies than ever before or that they were ever intended to. The atmosphere was fiery and the air was opaque and acrid all the way up to the discoloured ceiling. To make matters worse, the County was suffering a life threatening heat wave and the solitary ceiling fan whined pitifully as it turned, bestowing only a woefully inadequate stirring of sticky stale air.

As people tried to make themselves more comfortable, lifting a buttock at a time to alleviate the squashed numbness, the fitful creaking of the old wooden benches created a requiem together with the whining of the fan and the hum and hue of ugly raised voices. The noises were as desperate as the assembled's hearts.

Suddenly, all light was sucked out of the room as the jury rose and made a lead-footed exit to consider their verdict. Mildew smelling heavy black drapes fell from ceiling to floor, masking the tall windows and bringing an immediate and overwhelming claustrophobia that caught shallowly in each and every person's throat.

The overly ornate, copper faced chroniker tick-tocked.

Minutes passed seemingly without end. Only four and a half of them to be exact, as the resolute jury swiftly reappeared, having come to a quick and damning decision.

"Guilty, your Honour."

The Beginning

The somnolent village of Mortal End is situated between the oozing Hamlet of Stifle and the newer town of Little Napoo. Within their orbits are a great number of smaller villages and townships that have been sucked into a way of life that soon became their own.

Seeping out of the round about hills and acting as a thoroughfare between the homesteads, weeps the River Viscous, bleeding its way along Mortal End in a pulsing current of red liquid, reflecting the pigment of the clay struggling for slimy life beneath it.

Mortal End had developed like a scab over the freezing gash of the River Viscous thousands of years before, when tired from their journeying from one abundant city to the next, traders exhausted and heavy, fell by its barren shoreline to rest their weary souls and water their beasts.

As if awakening from a coma, the traders with fuggy heads and dry, stale mouths felt unable to remount their animals and instead, set to refuelling their weak forms by devouring local foodstuffs and a rested a mite more, beneath flimsy and fragile canopies made from the fallen branches of storm whipped Yew trees.

Days and then weeks passed.

The traders inert and lethargic, spent spiritless hours together slowly erecting domiciles in which to hibernate until the spring came and lifted them from their winter malignancy.

Rising from the mists and depths of the River Viscous, which runs from North to South, is the cemetery – built in the form of a cross, with the steeple of the small stone, cold village church ascending from its heart.

Oftentimes, the weekly sermon is accompanied by the

sounds of the River Viscous bubbling and spluttering savagely on its way through Mortal End, adding an eeriness to the proceedings that can no longer be felt by the villagers who are numb to its cloying presence.

To the West of the village, rising up the craggy walls of the crater can be found the food stores.

Right across the breadth of the village, to the East are the tradesmen.

Holding the villagers steady with his onerous sermons and lead laden outpourings is Ænus P. Wordsworth - Mortal End's Rector. And as often as not, standing beside him are the eyes and ears of Mortal End, Wordsworth's warden and grave digger – Savant Poe.

Guilt for this small community hangs heavy like offal in a stew, and it seems only a matter of time before the material that weaves together these people will shred like gossamer.

Chapter One

Fumbling with the buttons, Ænus P. Wordsworth attempted to do up his fly with sclerotic and gnarled up fingers, as he made his way to the Rectory door.

The iron bolt screeched like a bird of prey as it was drawn home making him wince and set his decaying teeth on edge. Pulling the heavy, creaking portal towards himself, using only a fraying leather cord, Ænus was altogether blinded by a flash of lightning against the midnight black sky as he opened the door a suspicious fraction. The jagged bolt was forking energetically off the crooked crucifix atop the steeple of the Mortal End village church, only feet from where he was standing.

Ænus jumped with the shock and in doing so he let go of the solid wooden door, which swung heavily back into his home letting all the heat from the lively fire escape around him as he stepped out towards the source of his consternation. Initially it was a shrill yelp that had managed to get his attention away from the task in hand, which had now led him out amongst the Shields of Death – the headstones of those who had passed from the beginning of Mortal End’s conception to this day’s damp morn, when ol’ Grand-Pappy Joyner had been lowered in a carton fit only for a pig.

“Who’s there?” he asked impatiently, his voice a reedy whine. Ænus P Wordsworth was not a man to be frightened by shadows. He had faced the dark side of life and had come out scathed but alive. Cupping his hands around his lipless mouth, he shouted out, “Who’s there,” once more, but this time defiantly.

Silence.

A rumble of thunder picked up to the east of Mortal End, smothering all local sounds and drenching Ænus to the bone. His once red and buoyant hair was now plastered to his elongated head; taking inches off his already curtailed development, bringing him now to his full height of only four feet and eleven inches. Normally, his stovepipe hat would have ameliorated this lack of growth - in his own misshapen head if nowhere else.

Abruptly turning his drooping back on the tombs and pits, Ænus leaned with all his strength against the heavy oak door which had silently and heavily closed shut behind him and fell once more into the devilish heat of his abode.

Ænus sat soddenly down on his crumpled divan and began to poach from the incinerating blaze that was emitting from his fireplace. Sour perspiration and tart steam peeled upwards in yeasty ribbons from his lean being and wafted heavenward whilst he planked and fell into a malodourous slumber from the lack of oxygen in the air.

Suddenly, there came an excited rap on the door.

“Rector-so-sorry-to-disturb.”

Ænus was now in a middle-aged sloom and it would take more than his grave digger’s rapping to awaken him.

“Sir, please, Sir – there’s a great fire and it’s headed this way.” No response. “Rector, it is I, Savant Poe. There is a great fire and it is headed this way,” he repeated getting more and more high pitched with each word rapidly uttered.

As if he had all the time in the world Ænus P. Wordsworth leisurely gathered himself and sat up.

Using gravity to propel him forwards off the bed, Ænus arthritically shuffled to the great door once more and with an effort let his grave digger into the rectory.

“What IS this great fire, Poe? Surely it is only a small blaze caused by the lightning striking brushwood in the

forest? The rain will smother it, soon enough.”

Chapter Two

“Look, Sir.” Savant dramatically stepped back and gestured like a concert pianist bowing to the inferno that was lighting up the night sky.

“Upon my soul. God have mercy upon us.”

Reflecting the flames, Ænus’s glassy face appeared to glow a vivid red, as he gaped and gasped open mouthed at the vision he saw before him.

“Get the Watch, Poe! Get the Watch,” he spluttered flustered.

Panicked, Ænus instructed his manservant to raise the village forces, before the fire razed the village.

“I, myself shall knock up my neighbours and shew them to safety,” he said.

Poe rushed off on his gangly legs, as fast as they would take him, first out of the cemetery and then left towards the North side of the village, shouting at the top of his rasping voice, “Fire! Wake up! There’s a fire!”

Within moments the villagers began to stir and open their doors, taking in the sight before them. The flames were so bright that the village was all lit up, and the heat they expelled, was as if it was radiating from the centre of the earth.

“The rain’ll put it out,” said Cesame Raw nonchalantly, Mortal End’s Burgher, known for his sedentary ways.

Savant Poe stopped in his tracks and stared into Cesame Raw’s bloated face. “It’s coming this way and fast. We need all the help we can get to gather water from the river. If we can’t put it out then the least we should do is protect our property from being cremated.”

‘Property’ was the magic word for Cesame Raw. He needed no more urging.

“Lettuce, stir yourself, “ he called to his wife in his deep baritone voice that made his heavily bearded jowls quiver, “There is a fire in Phooka Wood. The wind is blowing it towards the village. Bring pails. We need to douse everything or else it’ll burn. Quick! Fetch a pail of water.”

Mrs Raw was up in no time, her over-abundant wig skewed on her head making her look more like the back end of a poodle than the first lady of Mortal End.

Within no time at all the commotion had sprung the community from their warm beds, forming a snake that slithered and slid along the riverbank as they drew the night black water from the Viscous, to douse the infernal heat.

Chapter Three

From her shaded hiding place, she had watched the two young moppets dart like wild animals suddenly released from captivity, into the dense wood. Completely preoccupied with their activity they didn't see her. She was a vision of all dark woman, dressed from head to toe in ragged male garb, that had obviously seen far better days, terrifying even by the merest glimpse.

The children, a young boy and girl, "most probably brother and sister," she thought to herself, rocketed from the honey trap. And in her own nonchalant way, the woman had been neither surprised by their sudden reappearance, nor otherwise. "Although," she noted to herself, "it was the first time she had ever seen innocents reappear from that place."

Umbra, the name she was given by the rare few who were aware of her existence, clung to the shadows darkly, shuffling heavily on fortified feet across the forest. Like Pan or a mature Danish Blue, Umbra had a stagnant, rancid aroma, that had matured pungently, over the many years that she had been placing one flattened foot in front of the other. Being a social outcast had given Umbra very little incentive to bathe or to dull down her spiced up bodily aroma, which the truth be told, she had utterly no perception of.

It was initially believed, by those who had truly seen 'her' in the wood, that her swarthy mass was a ghost ship sailing through the black sea of night, a portent of impending evil. Horror stories, narrated by harassed mothers to their naughty children, proclaimed that Umbra was the Bogy man, and would gobble them up if they didn't behave. Many a child feared venturing into the wood for only a

few paces, as they had been duly trained, in case they were never seen again.

Apocryphal tales were abundant of children having disappeared into the forest never to be beheld at their mother's heaving bosoms or heard of ever again. Although, no one in Mortal End had experienced this at first hand, only having heard it from a friend of a friend of a friend... so, that as children became adults, they put the tales they had heard down to frustrated parenting or to the existence of Umbra, the Bogy man.

Umbra had absconded into self-imposed exile from her home in Little Napoo more than thirty years earlier. Her family had arrived on a spice ship from the Africas. As they had docked in port, she stumbled scared and almost naked, down the jetty was bought for a pittance by an extremely wealthy and doughy merchant.

From that moment on, as she was wrenched from the safety of her their ebony arms and bundled onto a cart, she had no knowledge of what became of her parents and siblings. Responding to a swift crack of a savage whip, the horse dragging her buggy, started up and lurched erratically off into the distant countryside.

Upon her arrival at the Manor, Umbra, tall, lean and as black as pitch so terrified the rest of the house-staff, that she was given the grandiose job of being Lady's Maid. A job she was more than capable of doing single-handedly.

Unfortunately, her patron was no lady and soon Umbra found herself involved in sapphic duties, which were before long, no duty at all.

Catering generously to her Lady's every whim was the greatest joy Umbra could ever dream of. Sailing around the mansion with a constant smile on her face, Umbra, glided from room to room, bequeathing behind her a fragrant trail

of heavenly perfumes, that had been massaged into her firm young flesh.

This naive behaviour - Umbra was totally unaware that fondling her forewoman was unacceptable conduct - soon pissed off her peers, who had quickly guessed at the disgraceful feminine activity taking place around them. And for the most part, were envious, wishing it had been them.

In no time at all, a situation whereby the portly Master of the house would discover what his zesty wife was up to, was engineered by the people below stairs, who gleefully rubbed their palms excitedly together, counting off the seconds.

But it took many more seconds than they had anticipated.

In fact it wasn't until the early hours of the following morning that the saucy stable boy and his scrubber girlfriend were witness to the sight of Umbra, oddly clothed in a groom's outfit, scurrying sheepishly away.

Eventually, after many night shifts spent with servants holding tumblers to ears and skulking in hallways, some of the truth of that night emerged.

Rather than being dismayed by his wife's continental bedroom tastes, the Master had been overjoyed and had wholeheartedly joined in. Sending Umbra innocently off, with secret instructions to fetch a selection of uniforms to their salon, the Master had a plan all of his very own. He had wasted absolutely no time at all upon her laden arrival, in dressing and making up like a maid and forcing both women into donning male attire.

Same sex activity was one thing but being shagged by a hairy, hoary bloke in a maid's outfit and scarlet lipstick, was another. Umbra was so disgusted with herself and her possessor's violations that she fled into the woods and had

been there ever since, roaming ungroomed, in her groom's array.

Umbra, the fantasy Bogy man was still suffering deeply from having faced her real Bogy man.

Chapter Four

By dawn all that could be seen of last night's blaze were the glowing embers at its heart, pulsating steadily as the morning breeze gently stoked them.

An alopecia of black ash sat in the middle of the forest, creating a tonsure of sprightly green pines that had been saved from the pyre, and grew as far as the eye could see.

Ænus, Mortal End's self-assigned custodian of morality and mores, had taken it upon himself, whilst supervising from a distance the sousing of the fire, to elevate himself to National Enquirer.

Going completely on a hunch, gut -wise rather than with his upper spine, which as we know, had seen more planate days, felt that there was something in the air that 'just does not smell veracious.'

Previous experience had taught Ænus P. Wordsworth that if there was to be any kind of investigation, even if only to satisfy his own curtain-twitching curiosity, then he must take charge immediately, giving no one else a chance to get their noses in first.

He knew enough about the unsavoury undercurrents of this small village, through his tutoring, harking and evangelising, to soon piece together the puzzle.

Or so he thought.

At least he could count on a finely tuned Savant Poe to provide him with a surplus of senses, especially as his were sometimes a little the worse for absinthe.

In the early hours, the heavens had finally unbolted and sent down a sodden blanket, which had successfully asphyxiated the flames.

But something was definitely amiss.

Wafting from the sticky nucleus was a peculiar smell.

“Toffee, Sir,” said Savant Poe, his flared nostrils held high. “I can definitely smell toffee.”

Ænus sneering down his own roman beak, laughed disdainfully at Poe and stated, “Don’t be so silly, man. How on earth can it be toffee?”

Poe actually had a point – the aroma of burnt sugar was as astounding as it was acrid, and it was definitely there, as if it had been nailed on the air.

“You!” Ænus pointed at Ire Carcass, the village butcher. “Get your boys. I want to take a closer look.” And as an aside to Savant Poe, “Send the rest back to their homes, I have a feeling that there is something erroneous about this combustion and I intend to find out what it is. Carcass and his boys will act as sentry until I have a clearer idea of what is to be done.”

Wearily trekking across the scarred earth, the motley congregation made their way towards the smouldering mound, holding their hands across their faces as the stench of burned sugar seared their flesh.

All of a sudden, as if telepathic felines, all five men ceased to move at precisely the same instant, their follicles arisen.

In horrified wonderment each man gaped at the scene before him, unable to believe his eyes. In one synchronised movement, each and every man dropped his hands from his face and rubbed at his eyes.

“It can’t be,” said Rage, the butcher’s eldest son. “It just can’t be.” He turned to his younger brother Crasse for confirmation.

Crasse appeared to have disappeared.

“Buh uh uh!”

Painting with the ground with amber emulsion, Crasse was on his knees and erupting with revulsion.

Apparently, Crasse had also seen whatever it was that Rage had thought he'd seen.

“It must be a trick of the light, surely?” thought Ænus.

Chapter Five

Whilst the dwellers of Mortal End were up to their jutting necks in smoke and vapours, discussing the probability of storm damage versus arson versus auto ignition, as the cause of last night's fire, Verrye Brutall a lowly but absurdly handsome woodcutter was busily digging a hole in his back yard.

It was a very deep hole - at least six foot - and it was about as long as the body of his second wife, who seemed to have come to an unnatural end, only days before.

The hole was being scooped out of muddy fertile soil, running in a north-southerly direction. The chasm was at the far end of his land, beside a stone wall that he had built as a visible sign of his small holdings perimeter. Verrye Brutall needed all the help he could get in maintaining his boundaries.

Adjacent to this quarry, if inspected closely, one would be able to make out the outline of a very similar shaped cavity, one in which his first wife and mother of his two small children, would have fitted like a glove, or indeed, a cadaver. Sadly, she was unable to experience the couture aspects of the mausoleum, he had made her to measure. Well, not in any animated way having come to an untimely death four summers earlier.

Verrye Brutall was used to hard manual labour, as his broad shoulders could verify. The blisters and calluses on his large hands were also testament to his daily labours.

But a hard life hadn't always been the way for this young man.

However, right now, with his mind set firmly on his chores, Verrye concentrated heavily on shifting soil. Within twenty minutes or so, he had created an organic

smelling pyramid of sticky earth, to the side of the long home that was rapidly developing.

Unafraid of being interrupted, Verrye was enjoying his work, whistling tunes as his spade sliced repeatedly through the cake of earth. It wasn't every day a man could let his wife rest soundly, without getting under her feet.

Rays were slowly rising from the horizon and the heat of the day rested seductively upon his sinewy back, bringing with them a strangely astringent smell of sweet sourness.

The new trench was soon complete and awaiting its charge. Leaning his heavy tool against the wall, Verrye turned around and made toward his refuge.

Stomping his booted feet at the door to shake off all the mud, Verrye entered his home with pride. He had first moved out here years ago when he had decided to settle down with Merit, a parochial cobblers daughter.

The place then, was nothing like it was now. Verrye had created a veritable palace out of the shack they had first shackled up in. All the furniture had been fashioned and constructed by Verrye from the hard wood trees round about; the tables, chairs, beds, doors, window frames and shutters - even the oak floorboards. Verrye definitely had a way with his large dextrous hands.

Satisfied that he was mud-free, Verrye purposefully made his way across the shiny wooden floor, which he polished religiously, through the plush living room and on to the kitchen. His destination was the larder, or cool room as it was known here in Cut-n-Thrust

Verrye didn't like it when things went off.

Chapter Six

Unafraid and indifferent to the sight ahead, Ænus motioned with his ebony cane to the group to stand back. He needn't have worried – they were each fixed rigidly to the spot.

Like a black widow spider, Ænus set one pointed toe in front of the other and deftly sidled his way towards the mordant fondant.

As he approached the stinking sweetmeat, Ænus was shocked to find that the morning light had no part whatsoever to play in the vision that was laid out before him. Neither did his dancing with the green fairy the night before.

From twelve feet away, which was as close as he could get without burning from the roasting heat, Ænus could now see what appeared to his now smarting eyes to be; a pile of bones sticking out like a game of jacks. Femurs, tibias, patellae - all manner of vertebrae - were emerging from the melted metal that looked like it had once, most probably, have been a stove.

“It’s a body,” said Ænus, making the sign of the cross in the air, “God rest their soul.”

“Who was it, Sir?” asked Savant Poe, assuming that his boss Ænus, had the answer to everything.

“I don’t know, Poe,” said Ænus, “but I intend to find out.” Hoisting his hat, he slowly scratched his head for a minute. “Ire, have you any idea of who lived out here? Your family have been in the area for generations, haven’t they?”

Ire looked puzzled and replied, “Aye, Sir, they have, but I’ve never heard mention of anyone living this deep into the woods. Well, not for real, like. My mother, God rest

her soul, used to tell us young ‘uns not to stray far in case the wicked witch got us. She’d point across the forest to here. But we never saw a living soul.”

“Pah,” spat Ænus, turning on his heel and making as if to head back to Mortal End. He stopped in his tracks and turned once more to face the men.

“Until I have thought about what is to be done, I want this place kept safe. No one, and I mean no one, is to come anywhere near. Do you hear me?” Ænus P. Wordsworth looked at each man individually, as if assessing their capabilities, “There may be clues hereabouts of who this person, “ he gestured across at the big bony bonbon, “might once have been. It is only then that I shall know whether or not to give them a decent burial. Come, Poe!”

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