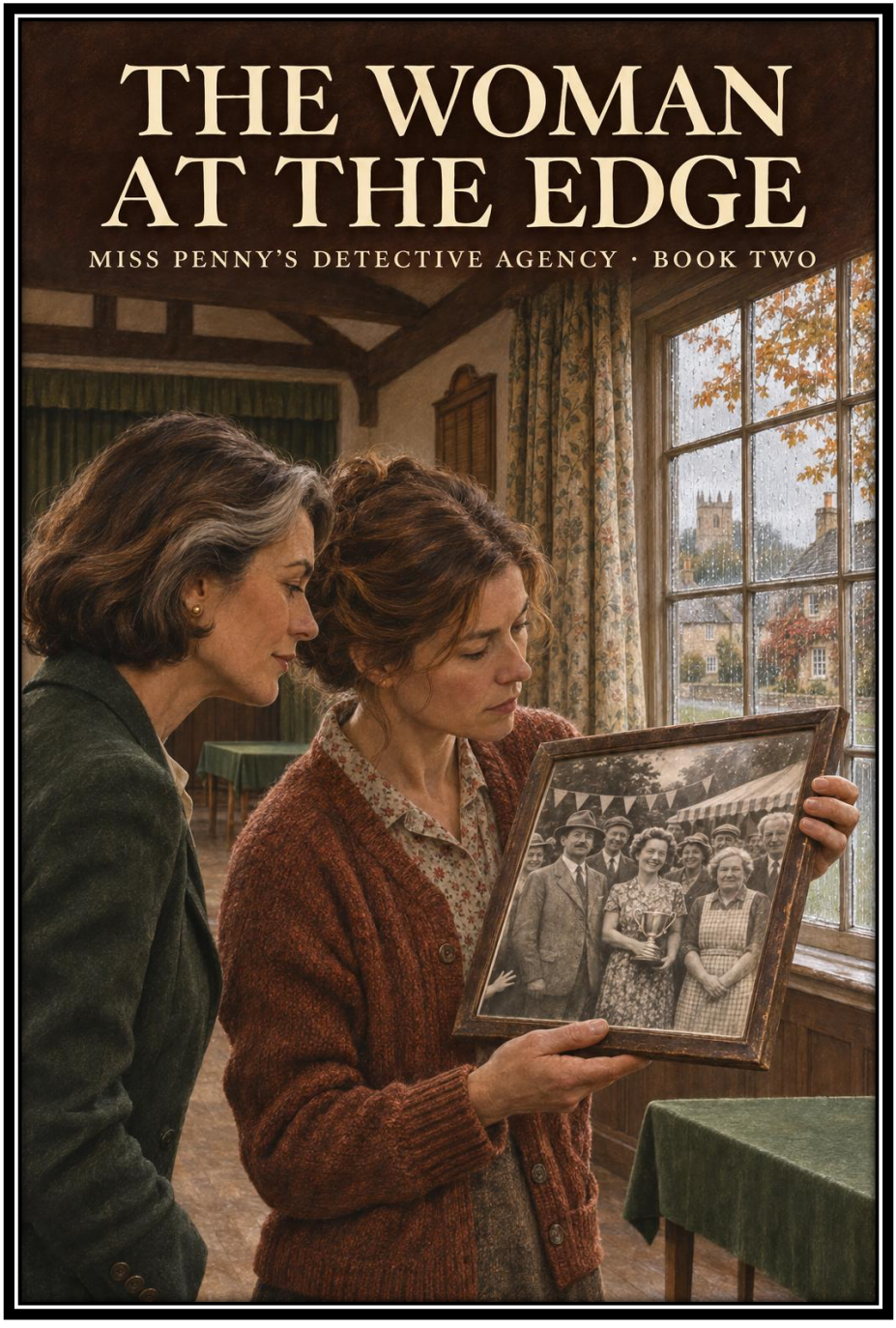

THE WOMAN AT THE EDGE
MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY · BOOK TWO

The woman in the tea towel

On wet afternoons in Guiting Power the stone houses darkened from the ground up. From the agency window Penny could see which neighbours had started lighting their fires and which still opened a window when the kitchen steamed up. She and Watson had been there long enough to recognise most of the dogs. Their owners were taking longer.

That afternoon Watson had come back from the shop with brown bread, a packet of tea and the news that the village exhibition had closed. A man at the counter had complained that the photographs made the old fête look better attended than it really was. The shopkeeper told him that was because he had spent most of it in the Farmers Arms.

Penny was slicing the bread when a woman came up the path carrying a picture wrapped in a tea towel.



“Someone’s taken my sister,” she said.

Penny reached for the appointment book. Watson moved the tea tray to make room.

“Out of the photograph,” the woman added. “I expect I should have said that first.”

“Are you really Miss Moneypenny?”

“Distant cousin,” said Penny.

The woman considered asking the next question. Then she looked down at the tea towel and apparently decided that Sir James Bond could wait.

“Now,” said Penny, “how can I be of service?”

Her name was Agnes Fry. Until her knees began to trouble her she had delivered the parish magazine, and she still judged how well she knew a person by whether she could remember where they liked it left. She had dressed for the visit in the coat she wore to funerals. When Watson offered to take it, Agnes said she’d keep it on. By the time she unwrapped the picture, she had undone all the buttons.

It was in a dark wooden frame with a scratch that ran the length of one side. The black-and-white photograph showed a village fête. A man was holding a marrow by its stalk. Behind him a row of women had been caught in various stages of deciding whether to smile. At the left edge, just above the grass, were three small white marks. Penny took them for damage at first.

“Those are fingers,” Agnes said. “They belong to the little girl who was holding my sister’s hand. You used to be able to see both of them.”

“Is this your frame?”

“My husband made it. He used a nail too long on that side. It came through when he knocked it in and made that scratch. It’s been there longer than some of the people on the exhibition committee.”

The committee had borrowed the picture for a show at the village hall. It had come back the previous evening in the same tea towel. Agnes had put it on the mantelpiece and sat down. Then she had stood straight back up.

“Did your sister know the girl?” asked Penny.

“Jean knew all the children. She did the games.”

Agnes looked at the row of women for a while. “It was the only picture I had of her laughing. I know that sounds a small thing to come in for.”

Penny took down the particulars. Watson found a square of tissue for the glass. Before she wrapped the picture, she tipped it towards the light and looked again at the child's fingers.

The white mark

Agnes walked over with them. She went the long way round the green because the short way crossed wet grass. At the corner she pointed out a wall her husband had mended. He had put one stone back with the pale side out so he’d know where his work began. Agnes touched it as she walked past.

Two men outside the hall stood back to let them in. One said it had been a very good exhibition. The other said he had lent a photograph of his father and been told it was his uncle. By the following morning, three people had explained to him why the committee was right.

“Was it your uncle?” Watson asked.

“Yes,” the man said. “But I knew my father.”

The village hall smelt of floor polish and damp cardboard. Most of the photographs had gone home. A few stood in envelopes on a baize table, waiting for people who had promised to collect them.

Ellen Shaw, who had mounted the show, was there to fold the tables. She was in her mid-thirties and had brought a small screwdriver to take out the screws somebody had put in after a leg started to wobble.

“Mrs Fry says someone has changed the photograph,” Penny said.

Ellen put the screwdriver down. “There was an awful muddle when we took it all down. I can ask about.”

“How many people were here?”

“Three of us. Four if you count Mrs Dobbs, but she only brought the biscuits. If you count her, you have to count me twice. I came back for the car keys.”

On the windowsill Watson found three enlargements spread out to dry after the glass above them had leaked. Each had a white crescent in the upper right corner. On a photograph of the school football team it sat in the sky. On the brass band it took a bite out of a bandsman’s hat.

“May I?” she asked Agnes, and lifted the tabs on the back of the frame. The print inside was cut to fit the mount. There was the same crescent on the upper right. It had been hidden under the card.



Ellen said the enlargements were made from copies she had taken on her camera. She’d tried several views of each photograph to see what would fit the display boards. The processing shop had pointed out the fault on the prints. The camera had been dropped the previous Christmas.

“Who collected the prints?” asked Watson.

“I did. They were my prints.”

“And the originals?”

“Everyone fetched their own. I wrapped up Mrs Fry’s because I was going past her house.”

Ellen picked up the screwdriver again. Watson laid the cropped print flat and looked at the fingers.

“Your husband’s nail,” she said to Agnes later, “gave us the frame. That mark gave us the print.”

“The committee argued about Jean’s caption before the show,” Agnes said. “Ask Mr Fenn. He’s very particular about who gets named.”

“Did he want her name taken off?”

“He wanted his put on. He said she hadn’t run the games on her own.”

“Did she?”

“Of course she didn’t. He went to fetch the potatoes for the potato race. He’s been waiting thirty years for somebody to put it in writing.”

“Then where is Jean?” Agnes asked.

Watson put the print back under the glass. She didn’t yet have an answer to that.

The man with the potatoes

Mr Fenn kept a stack of the exhibition programmes on his table at the Farmers Arms. He had a pair of spectacles for reading and another pair for finding the first pair. Both were out when Penny and Watson sat down.

“You’re here about the caption,” he said.

“Which one?” asked Watson.

He found the page without his glasses. On the printed list, Agnes’s picture was described as *The fête committee, 1966*. Fenn had drawn a line through *committee* and written *games*. He pointed to the man with the marrow.

“That’s me. I only held it because somebody wanted to pin a number on it. Now every time I go in the shop somebody asks me how my marrows are doing.”

“Mrs Fry says you wanted your name added.”

“I wanted everybody’s name added. We had three people in the hall who could have named the entire row. The chap from the paper was going to run the picture under ‘Recognise Anyone?’ as if the last of us had just been dug out of a ditch.”

“Did you take the frame down?”

“I did. It wobbled. I put a folded card behind it.”

Watson slid the frame across the table. Fenn turned it over. The backing board was held with four little metal tabs, each flattened in a slightly different direction.

“I never touched those.” He lifted a corner of the wire and showed them the wedge of yellow card still jammed under it. “That’s off the back of my programme. Have a look.”

The rear cover of his programme had a corner missing. Watson took the wedge out and set it against the torn edge. It fitted. The card proved what he had done at the exhibition. He might have done more, but they now knew why he’d handled the frame.

“Who else asked about that picture?” Penny said.

“The newspaper chap. He wanted to know if the little one was somebody’s daughter. I said she must have been.” Fenn turned his programme over. “I said Jean had charge of her that day. That’s all I knew.”

Penny was putting her gloves back on when Fenn asked if Agnes had noticed what had gone missing straight away.

“She did.”

“I thought she would. She used to take that picture into the kitchen when she had dough rising. Said her sister could make her laugh even when the bread went wrong.”

In the lane outside, Watson took out her notebook.

“Did you believe him?”

“About his marrows, certainly.”

“About the photograph.”

Penny took another step before answering. “I think he’d have asked us to write him into the caption if he’d wanted credit. He asked whether Agnes had noticed. I’d like to know what the newspaper man asked Ellen.”

The other end of the hand

On their way back from the Farmers Arms, Watson slowed to look in the shop window. The grey car across the green had been outside when they went into the pub. A strip of trim was missing above the back wheel. Its driver had left the lights off. When Penny and Watson crossed the road separately to let a van through, the man in the car turned his head to follow Penny.

“Do you know him?” Watson asked when they reached the agency.

“I couldn't see his face.”

“I could see his hands. He'd had the engine running long enough to clear his side of the windscreen.”

Penny went in first. From the sitting room she watched the car pull away. The driver used the indicator, although there was nobody behind him.

Watson stayed on the doorstep. In the light from the shop window she caught the registration as the car turned. She still had her notebook out. She wrote the number beneath her notes about Mr Fenn, then looked up to see whether the car had stopped farther down the road. It had gone.



Back inside, Watson found the newspaper's number in one of the programmes and rang. The reporter remembered that Ellen had asked him to hold off using a fête photograph while she checked a name. He'd said he would call in again on Friday. Watson asked whether he'd taken anything away from the hall.

"Two stale biscuits," he said. "You can have them back."

In the agency, Penny made a list of the people Agnes could remember standing beside the games tent. The landlord knocked once and waited. He had a sewing tin on his lap and wondered if anyone had lost a button. Watson told him they were looking for someone who hadn't quite made it into a photograph.

"A photographer once told me to move to the end of the row," he said. "I spent the next forty years being described as absent."

"Did you mind?"

"Depends who was asking."

He left the sewing tin on the table. It contained buttons of every conceivable size and one paper clip. Watson took the paper clip for the photograph's notes.

“The question we’ve been asking is who wanted Jean out,” she said. “Who wanted the girl out?”

Agnes had supplied the original caption as it was written in pencil on the back of the mounted print. Penny turned to the relevant page in the appointment book.

Jean and little Nell, before the three-legged race.

“Ellen,” said Watson.

“Perhaps. But I’d like to hear that from her.”

They telephoned Ellen and arranged to meet after the hall had closed. She was at the door with the keys. Penny told her they’d found the mark from her camera on the substitute. She asked whether Ellen would like to talk inside.

Ellen let them in. She switched on one of the two rows of ceiling lights. The trestles were stacked against the wall. The baize table was still standing, with a box of unused mounts tucked underneath.



“Did anyone else see the caption?” Ellen asked.

“Mrs Fry remembers it,” Penny said. “She thinks Jean was taking charge of the games.”

“That’s what she was doing.” Ellen sat on the edge of the stage. “She was always taking charge of something. My mother said that was her trouble.”

“Your mother?”

“The woman who brought me up. Mrs Shaw. She lived two villages over. Jean used to mind her children before I came along. I was told Jean was a friend of the family, so when somebody said she’d taken me round the fête, I thought that was all there was to it.”

Ellen looked towards the box beneath the table. “I was five that summer. Jean had been dead for years by the time Mrs Shaw told me she was my mother. She said there was a photograph somewhere, but she couldn’t remember who’d taken it. When Mrs Fry gave me the frame, I saw my face and then I saw Jean’s. I’d never seen her look at me. Then the man from the local paper asked if he could print it. He wanted to know who little Nell was. I said I’d find out. I had no idea what I’d say if he asked me again.”

“I’d taken the old print out of the frame to photograph it for the display,” Ellen said. “I tried a tighter shot for the narrow board. That one left Jean out and took out most of me as well. After the reporter asked, I trimmed the enlargement of that shot to fit the mount and slipped it into Mrs Fry’s frame. I put the original in the lab envelope so it wouldn’t get bent.”

“Did Jean ever say why she kept it from her sister?” asked Penny.

“If she did, Mrs Shaw never told me.” Ellen looked down at her hands. “I did ask her why Jean never came to see me. She said, ‘You’ve just told me she took you to the fête.’ I hadn’t thought of that.”

She slid the box out with her foot. The original was between two pieces of mounting card, inside the envelope the processing shop had given her with the copies. Watson checked the photograph against the frame. At the left stood a young woman laughing with her eyes closed. A little girl held her hand and watched her, as if she were waiting to find out what was so funny.

“Mrs Fry can have it back,” Ellen said. “Will you tell her why?”

“I’ll tell her you’d like to speak to her, if you would,” Penny said.

Ellen put both hands flat on the stage. “I’ll have to decide what to call her.”

“Mrs Fry will do for a start.”

Watson put the picture back in its sleeve. Ellen had been watching her hands all the time she was doing it.

“Would you like a copy of the whole thing?” Watson asked.

“I’d like to ask her if I may have one,” Ellen said.

Two names

Agnes came to the agency at four. Watson fitted the original into its frame. Agnes ran her thumb over the scratch before she looked at the photograph.

“There she is,” she said.

Ellen had been waiting in the next room. Penny asked Agnes whether she’d like to hear how the photograph came to be taken out. Agnes said yes, and Watson put a second cup on the tray. She and Penny went out to buy a packet of biscuits. There were biscuits in the agency, but the shop was at the other end of the green.

Ellen had rehearsed what to say standing up. Now that she was sitting down she found she couldn’t remember the first sentence. Agnes poured tea for both of them.



“I’m the little girl at the edge, Mrs Fry.”

Agnes looked at the picture. She reached for her glasses, wiped one lens with the corner of the tea towel, and put them on.

“I can see it now,” she said. “You had your hair cut straight across. I remember thinking someone had done it with the kitchen scissors.”

“They had.”

Agnes took her glasses off again. “Did she ever tell you?”

“No. Mrs Shaw told me last year. I don’t think she knew how to start either.”

Ellen waited for Agnes to ask about her father. It was the question everybody seemed to ask when a woman stood up and said she had a mother. Agnes turned the frame a little so they could both see it.

“Do you remember what she was laughing at?”

“No,” said Ellen. “Do you?”

“I can almost hear it. I can’t remember a thing about the joke.”

Ellen moved her cup away from the edge of the table. “Did you think she’d never had a child?”

Agnes considered this. “I thought my sister would tell me if she had.”

Penny and Watson came back with the biscuits. Agnes asked if they would mind making another pot. Ellen had asked whether she could have a copy, and Agnes was trying to persuade her to take the original home for a few days. When Ellen said she’d bring it back on Sunday, Agnes asked whether she liked roast potatoes.

The following morning Penny took the bus to see Ruth Bell. In the villages it stopped to collect people by name. By the time it reached Cheltenham, people were pressing the bell and getting off without a word.

“Diana rang yesterday,” Ruth said. “I thought she might ask what was in the diary. All she wanted to know was whether you’d managed to get me on the telephone. I said my bell only rings in the hall and I can’t hear it in the kitchen.”

“She’ll remember that,” said Penny. She remembered Diana once ringing three times in an evening because Penny had said she was coming down with a cold. By the third call Diana had admitted she wanted somebody to talk to as well.

Ruth had marked a page with blotting paper. On the bus Penny had made a list of questions she would ask if this were somebody else’s case. Now she could remember only the one about the name.

“I wrote names down in case I had to type them again,” Ruth said. Her finger came to rest beside two entries. *Vale* and, below it, *Arden*.



“Which one did you type?”

“I thought I’d remember when I saw it. I can hear the man saying ‘Arden, with an e.’ I can’t tell if he was correcting the name in the letter or giving me his own.”

Penny looked at the lower entry. Ruth had done everything she said she would.

“May I copy the whole page?” Penny asked.

“You can take it. Bring it back when you’ve made a copy.”

Outside Ruth’s house, Penny had to wait for a cyclist before she crossed. A grey car was parked opposite. She recognised it by the pale patch where a strip of trim had come away above the back wheel. The driver had been able to watch Ruth open her front door. Penny had left by the same door with the diary under her arm.



When the bus drew in, she let two people go ahead of her and boarded behind a woman who was having trouble with her shopping. Once they were moving, she wrote down what she could remember of the car's registration. She put that piece of paper in her coat pocket and kept the diary in her bag.

On the bus home Penny opened the diary. She'd almost asked Ruth to say the name again. She was glad she'd let her tell it once and leave it there.

In the appointment book Watson wrote *Original recovered. On loan to Ellen Shaw until Sunday.* Penny laid the slip with the registration beside it. Watson read the first three characters.

"That's the beginning of the one I wrote down outside the Farmers Arms," she said.

Penny closed the curtains and put the kettle on. She set the diary beside the telephone, ready to take back to Ruth on Monday.

Agnes came round later with the tea towel. She'd left the photograph with Ellen.

"She's coming for dinner," Agnes said. "I put a photograph of Jean in the kitchen once, before my husband made that frame. I've been

thinking I might put this one there too. Ellen can see it whenever she likes."

CASE FILE 01

BELL, Ruth. Two names on the diary page for the day the notice was typed. VALE. ARDEN. Order of entry confirmed. The capacity in which either name was given remains uncertain.

A slip found between earlier pages, undated.

Arden was checked before. Find the earlier reply.

The earlier reply is absent.

The Diana and Crown-service storyline is fictional.

To be continued…