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King of the Badgers

Written by Philip Hensher

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**KING
OF THE
BADGERS**

**PHILIP
HENSHER**

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NOTHING TO FEAR

BOOK ONE

NOTHING TO HIDE

That bowler-hatted major, his face is twitching,
He's been in captivity too long.
He needs a new war and a tank in the desert.
The fat legs of the typists are getting ready
For the boys and the babies. At the back of my mind
An ant stands up and defies a steam-roller.

GAVIN EWART, 'Serious Matters'

1.

Last year, at the hot end of spring, in the small town of Hanmouth on the Hain estuary, a rowing boat floated in the middle of the muddy stream. Its stern pointed inland, where the guilty huddle in cities, its prow towards the ocean, five miles down the steady current. There, all our sins, at the end of all the days and weeks, will be washed away. The boatman dipped his oars deep. There was something thoughtful in the repeated movement. The current was running quickly, and his instructions were to keep the boat where it lay, in the centre of the slow flood, the colour of beer and milk.

‘Most of my customers,’ he said to his single passenger, ‘want to go to the same place. They want to be rowed across the estuary to the pub.’

‘What pub would that be, then?’ his passenger said, with a touch of irritation. He was a man fat in rolls about the middle, the top of his bald head wet and beaded. His gingery-white hair shocked out to either side, weeks away from a respectable haircut. A life of taxis, expense-account drink, and hot greasy lunches had marked him. Bachelor; or divorced more like; let themselves go in the circumstances.

‘It’s the Loose Cannon,’ the boatman said. ‘It’s over there, behind you. You can see the lights. On the spit of land where the river Loose meets the Hain estuary. It’s a joke, a sort of joke, the name of it.’

The man did not turn round to look. Never been in a boat before. Thinks he can drown in two yards deep. His right hand gripped the boat; the left was on the camera about his neck. At

his feet, a black case, halfway between a briefcase and a suitcase in size, was laid carefully flat.

‘Easier to get there this way,’ the boatman went on, between his strokes. ‘At the end of the spit. Between the estuary and the Loose. Car park’s near a mile off. Easier to get me to row them across from Hanmouth jetty.’

‘Nice pub, is it?’ his passenger said. Taking an interest at last.

‘Old pub,’ the boatman said. ‘Very. Just that and the lock-keeper’s house over there. Not called the Loose Cannon properly. Someone’s joke. On the licence, it’s the Cannons of Devonshire. Been called the Loose Cannon as long as anyone knows. As long as I’ve been here. Because of the river, there, the one joining the estuary.’

On the ramshackle jetty, ten feet long, the girl with the cropped hair stood where they had left her. Two more heavy cases were at her feet. In the mid-evening light, her features were indistinct. She was an outlined shape, a black silhouette in the deepening blue, a watching upright shadow.

‘You want to go there?’ the boatman asked.

‘?’

‘To the pub. To the Loose Cannon. Most of my customers – I go back and forth like a shuttle in a loom, most of the summer.’

‘No.’

‘There’s nowhere else to go, if you’re crossing the estuary.’

The passenger gave the boatman a brief, city, impatient look. ‘Just what I asked for,’ he said. ‘I want you to row out into the middle of the estuary and keep the boat as steady as you can for twenty minutes while I take some photographs. That’s all.’

‘You’d get some nice snaps from the Loose Cannon lawn,’ the boatman said.

‘Wrong angle. Too high.’

‘That’s a lot of trouble to go to just to get a nice holiday snap or two,’ the boatman said.

The passenger said nothing. The boatman paused, and let the boat float a little downstream, swinging as it went. This was the time of day he most admired. A daylight wash at one end of

the sky, behind the far hills, and at the other, the beginning of a warm blue night. The moon was like a fingernail paring, hung above the church, flat on its back. In the half-light, the blossom of the fruit trees in the gardens shone out; the stiff little white flowers on the horse-chestnuts in the churchyard were like bright candles; over a wall, a white-flowering clematis poured and mounted like whipped cream. The disorganized up and down of the town's gables, house-ends, extensions and rooftops started to be punctuated by the lighting of windows. Here and there curtains were being drawn. The lights of a town like Hanmouth shone out across water for miles at night.

'Busy this time of year anyway,' the boatman said. 'Always busy. People like to come out for the day. For an afternoon. For an evening. Very historic town. Third most picturesque town in Devon, it won, four years back. Don't know who decides these things. Thomas Hardy came here for a holiday as a boy. You know who Thomas Hardy was?'

'Yes,' the passenger said. 'We did him for O level. I got a B. You're not from round here.'

'No,' the boatman said. 'You never lose a Yorkshire accent. I've been here twenty years. Won't start saying "my lover" to strangers now. And before that on holiday, every year, since I was a boy, almost.'

'Like Thomas Hardy.'

'Like Thomas Hardy. I worked for a steel firm in the north, thirty years. Got laid off. Firm went under. Got a good pay-off first, though. I was a manager. Good job. They said they'd see me all right. Madam says, "Let's move somewhere we want to live. Hanmouth, that's the place we want to be." She was the one who loved it, really loved it. "You can do anything," she said, "turn your hand to anything. Lot of old people in Hanmouth, very glad to have someone change a light bulb for a couple of pound." She died five years later. Cancer. Very sudden. Never get over something like that. She wanted to be buried in the churchyard, but they don't bury anyone there any more. She's in the

city cemetery, like everyone else who's dead. Still go to pay my respects, every Saturday. Is that so strange?

'Just here,' the passenger said. He opened the camera case hanging from his neck. It was a bulky black object, with a black hole where the lens should have been; not like the pocket-sized silver digital jobs people had these days. The boatman pressed against the seaward current and, fifty feet out in the estuary, they were as steady as a rooted waterweed.

The photographer bent down cautiously, and opened the case at his feet. The boatman could smell his perspiration. In the case, there were three lenses, each resting in a carved-out hollow, and there were other devices the boatman could not have named, each in its specific and bespoke place in the charcoal-coloured foam. The photographer lifted the middle-sized lens out, shutting the case with the same care, not making any sudden moves. It was as if there were some unappeased and hungry beast in the boat with them.

'I'm seventy now,' the boatman said. 'You wouldn't think it, people tell me. This keeps me fit.' It was true: his wiry arms had lost flesh, but still pulled firmly; his heart, he considered, beat slowly in his narrow chest. He had kept his hair close-shaven in a way that chimed with the way some young people kept it, though it was white now. 'There was a boatman before me, there was always a boatman. Running them as wanted from Hanmouth pier to the Loose Cannon. The old one, he'd taken it over from his father, forty years back. Had sons, they weren't interested. One's a lawyer in Bristol. Not a full-time job any more, ferryman. Hadn't been for years. I took it on. Keeps me active.'

'You must know everyone in town,' the photographer said.

'Strange lot of people in Hanmouth this week. Don't know them, never seen a one of them before. Never seen it so crowded. That little girl. I don't know what they think they'll see, though. Won't see her. She's missing.'

'Human curiosity,' the passenger said. 'There's no decent limit

to it.' He raised his camera, and quickly, with a series of heavy crunches, fired off some photographs.

'Five pounds over, eight there and back,' the boatman said. 'Could have put up the fare this week, I dare say.'

'I thought we agreed a price,' the passenger said. 'You said thirty.'

'There and back in ten minutes is eight pounds,' the boatman said. 'To the middle and stay there as long as I say is thirty. Have you got permission from Mr Calvin to be taking photographs?'

'We agreed a price,' the passenger said.

'Oh, yes,' the boatman said. 'We agreed a price. I can't do you a receipt, though.'

'That's all right,' the passenger said. 'I can write my own receipt. There's no law that says people need permission to take a photograph of a town. Whatever your Mr Calvin says.'

The boatman lifted his oars and kept them in the air; in a second the boat drifted ten feet seawards.

'Keep the boat where it was, please,' the passenger said.

'Mr Calvin, he's keeping a register of all the press photographers. A lot of them. A hell of a lot. Keeps it nice and tidy, Mr Calvin says. Shame about that little girl.'

'Did you know her?'

'No,' the boatman said. 'I don't know as I even recognized her when I saw her face in the papers. There's twenty thousand live in Hanmouth and surroundings. You don't know everyone.'

He pulled hard at the oars, keeping the boat steady and parallel to the shore. They'd been out twenty minutes, he saw. Over half an hour and he'd start charging an extra pound a minute; it wasn't this bugger's money he'd be paying with. He kept an eye on his watch, worn on the inside of his wrist in good maritime fashion.

'Of course,' he said. 'There's those who won't pay the five pounds. If they run off, I don't chase after them. I phone Mike at the Loose Cannon and he takes the fare out of their change. Not much they can say to that. One lad says to me, last summer, "Five pounds? It's only over there. I can walk that." Thinking

about low tide, he was. The estuary at low tide, I can't row across, but they can't wade across, neither. "No thanks, it's not deep, we'll walk across, doesn't look like much." I said, "Fair enough." Fifteen yards out, he were up to his thighs in mud, couldn't go forward, couldn't go back. The estuary, it's got its own mind. It shrinks and it quivers. The ducks walk on it; they've got webbed feet. He was in his trainers. I was in the window of the Flask, watching him. Come out and chucked him a ladder in the end. Went out making a hell of a din. Come back quiet as church mice. They only do that once. This town needs me.'

In the rich riverine gloom, the photographer held the machine to his face, and fired off more shots, taking no account of the boatman's story. From here, there was a low and extensive view of the Hanmouth estuary front, the lights in the windows shut off against the night. At the jetty, the crop-haired girl had sat down, her knees raised. Her thin body in its tight boyish denim made a geometrical figure. A half-illuminated line of smoke rose from a concealed cigarette beneath the raised knees.

The boatman pulled against the current, and the boat held quite straight. On the jetty, another figure had joined the photographer's assistant. He was talking softly to her. The low voice travelled across the water, and from the sound of it and the narrow-shouldered shape of the man, the boatman recognized Mr Calvin. He'd have something to say to a press photographer who hadn't made himself known.

'This for a newspaper, then?' the boatman said.

'Something like that,' the passenger said, continuing to photograph.

'It's been five days,' the boatman said. 'We've been under siege, it's been like. Everyone being asked, all the time, have you seen the little girl, do you know her mum, what do you know about her dad. Just to go to the butcher's or the bank. I said to one, "If I knew anything, I'd go to the police, I wouldn't be telling you." And you can get photographs of Hanmouth anywhere, on the Internet, lovely sunny day. You won't get much in this light, I wouldn't have thought.'

On the jetty, the small figure of indeterminate sex waved largely, as if she had a full-sized flag at a jamboree. Calvin, if that was who it had been, had gone. The swans and geese, misled by the wave, checked their paths and swam towards her. They were spoilt by feeders here, and took movement for the promise of generosity.

‘That’s enough,’ the passenger said. ‘Take me back.’

‘I can take you over to the Loose Cannon,’ the boatman said. ‘There’s no more to pay.’

‘We’ll be fine,’ the passenger said, and though they seemed to be facing in the correct direction, the boat swung round in the stream, pulled by one oar, in a full circle, facing in turn the city and the roar of the motorway over the estuary, the remote blue hills where the sun was setting, and then seawards, where everything goes in the end. And on the jetty, the small figure knelt, opening up a black-backed computer, the blue light of the screen illuminating what, after all, was the cropped hair and small face of a pretty girl, intent on her digital task.

2.

Hanmouth, that well-known town on the Hain estuary on the north coast of Devon, formed a stratified appearance whichever way you looked at it. The four streets of the place ran between and parallel to the railway line to the coast and the estuary itself. Less stately thoroughfares – alleyways, gennels, cut-throughs, set-back squares of white-painted nineteenth-century almshouses and 1930s suburban ‘closes’ with front gardens made out of a bare foot or two of leftover land – squiggled more liberally across the four vertical and distinguished avenues. The first of those verticals ran seamlessly from Ferry Road in the north to the Strand in the south, knotting around the quay and rising to three historic pubs, a plaque commemorating the birthplace of a centuries-dead attorney general and, at its most expensive, unfettered views of the estuary and the

hills beyond, crested with a remote and ducal folly-tower. On this first street lived newsreaders, property magnates, people who had made their money in computers and telecommunications. The first house in Hanmouth to sell for a million pounds was here, and pointed out by the innocent locals; but that had been seven years ago, and the figure was losing its lustre, and had long lost its uniqueness. The pinnacle of envy for miles around, for half a county, the Strand in the south was a series of Dutch-gabled houses, pink, cream, terracotta-red-fronted, and everyone, it was said, lived there, meaning that everyone, of course, did not.

Only an odd few lived in the second avenue, the shopping street; the Brigadier and his wife in a wide, flat, shallow eighteenth-century one-house terrace of brick, facing the wrong direction as if it had turned its back on the commerce. The Fore street was holding up well; the community centre, built in municipal interbellum brick, was celebrating its eightieth birthday next year with a Hanmouth Players production of *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, among other things. Outside the community centre was a bronze statue of a boy fishing on his haunches, with an elbow on either knee and an expression of great concentration. The statue had been commissioned for the hall's fiftieth anniversary, which had coincided with the Queen's silver jubilee in 1977. It had been unveiled at the height of a street party, trestle tables snaking down the whole length of the Fore street, and was instantly and universally known, even in the hand-printed guide to Hanmouth the second-hand bookshop sold, as the Crapping Juvenile. As for the rest of the Fore street: the new Tesco out of town had had no effect on the excellent butcher, the fair-to-middling greengrocer. Had no power, either, over the knick-knack shops, the amateur jewellers making a go of it, or the Oriental emporium run by the two retired sisters, stocked by bi-annual trips to the markets of south India; they returned from Madurai with triumphant rolls of bright silk, hand-made soap, and encrusted, elaborate, tarnished silver trinket boxes to be sold at twelve times the purchase price.

On the other side of the Fore street, as the railway line grew more apparent, the bohemians, the aspiring many who had escaped only so far from Barnstaple, lived in polite and tidy houses, designed for eighteenth-century churchwardens or pre-war shopkeepers. Here, their view was of their neighbours' windows, principally. In the town, there was one school, supposed to be very good, one fortnightly French-style market, twelve antiques shops and a junk market, a fishmonger with an almost daily van and seven churches, ranging from those that turned to the east during the Creed with hats on, to one that frankly and openly prostrated itself before spiritual emanations, this last in a converted bike shed with a corrugated-iron roof. Miranda Kenyon, who taught at the university and lived in a Dutch house on the Strand, often announced that she had promised herself she would go into that last, mad church one of these Sundays.

That was the part of Hanmouth people thought of when they aspired to live there. It was the part that pronounced their town *Hammuth*. The bright upward side of leisurely high-fronted Dutch houses, their glass-punctured façades big and shining with the sun setting over the westward hills, its inhabitants pouring a first drink of the evening behind leaded, curving windows, occupying themselves by counting the long-legged wading birds in the shining estuary. They thought of the square Protestant white-washed houses in the streets behind, or at worst the Edwardian villas further back, towards the railway line. The railway, bearing only the trundling little train to the coastal stretch around Heycombe, was charming in final effect, rather than a noisy interruption of Hanmouth's postcard qualities. The flowerbeds at the station were well kept, with 'HANMOUTH' in topiary, and a level crossing at which widows with woven wicker shopping baskets lined in gingham always seemed to be waiting patiently. A couple of hundred yards down from the station, a white wicket gate and a footpath across the track showed that this was a rare surviving branch line of the sort that was supposed to have been eradicated decades ago. It was quite charming, and harmless.

The people of Hanmouth were conscious of their pleasant, attractive, functioning little town, and they protected it. A police station with a square blue lamp and a miniature fire station added to the miniaturized, clockwork impression. Its one nuisance was represented by the twelve pubs of the town; there was a sport among the students of the university to embark on the Hanmouth Twelve, a mammoth holiday pub-crawl, which sometimes ended with drunken manly widdling off the jetty, as gay Sam put it, late-night vomit on the station platform to greet you with your early-morning train, and once, a smashed window in the florist's shop at the quay end of the Fore street. These small-town irritations, the responsibility of outsiders, were talked over in the newsagent's and in the streets. Mr Calvin, to everyone's approval, took the sort of initiative only newcomers were likely to take, and formed a Neighbourhood Watch. There was some nervous joshing that you'd have to join in a prayer circle before the meetings got going, but in the end they'd been a great success, as everyone agreed. In the last couple of years, security cameras had been put up over the station in both directions, and at the quay where people waited for buses into Barnstaple. Then a little more lobbying secured six more, and as John Calvin said he had explained to Neighbourhood Watch, and Neighbourhood Watch would explain in turn to everyone they knew, now you could walk from one end of the Fore street to the other at any time of the day or night without fear, watched by CCTV. Even quite old ladies knew to say 'CCTV' now. 'You've got nothing to fear if you've done nothing wrong,' John Calvin said. 'Nothing to hide: nothing to fear,' he added, quoting a government slogan of the day, and in the open-faced and street-fronting houses of Hanmouth, often wanting to boast about the elegant opulence of their private lives, the rich of Hanmouth tended to agree.

The security and handsomeness of the estuary town drew outsiders. It also, less admirably, persuaded those outside its historic boundaries to appropriate its name. Some way up the A-road towards more urban settlements, there were lines of

yellow-brick suburban houses, a golf club, a vast pub on a round-about offering Carvery Meals to the passing traffic on a board outside. In its car park feral children romped, and, fuelled on brought-out Cokes and glowing orangeades, ran up and over the pedestrian bridge across the A-road. They had been known to shy a half-brick at lorries passing below. There was an extensive and spreading council estate on either side of the traffic artery, surrounding the Hanmouth Rugby Club grounds; it provided a flushed and awkward audience to the field's gentlemanly battles, over a leather egg, mounted for an afternoon, a drama bounded between two dementedly outsized aspirates.

All these things, encouraged in the first instance by estate agents, had taken to calling themselves Hanmouth too. They, however, called it Han-mouth, to Hanmouth's formal scorn and comedy. It was one of Miranda Kenyon's conversational set-pieces, the speculating about where the boundaries of Hanmouth would end. On the whole, Hanmouth thought little of the despoiling and misspeaking suburbs that surrounded it and had taken on its name. Though they poured right up to the gates of Hanmouth, they were obviously the city's, Barnstaple's, suburbs, not Hanmouth's. Hanmouth could never have suburbs.

In these suburbs and estates, men washed their cars on a Sunday morning; kitchens faced the front, the better for wives doing the washing-up to watch the events in the street; children kicked footballs against the side of parked cars until bawled out; support for local or national football teams was made evident in displayed scarves, emblems stuck in windows, flags flown from the back of cars; and, at seven thirty or eight o'clock on weekdays, a ghostly unanimous chorus of the theme tune to a London soap opera floated through the open windows of the entire suburb. There was no reason to go there, and Hanmouth knew nothing much of these hundred streets. It was in the early summer of 2008 that an event in these suburbs, whatever settlement they could be said to belong to, rose up and attached itself to Hanmouth, and could not be detached.